

# ***Chapter One***

**"Pleasure, Honored Visitor. How may we serve you?"**

**During his first few weeks on Deliyas, Geoff had occasionally wandered through this vast market square on his way to the Federation Complex merely on whim; but now he did so every day with a sense of keeping his contempt fresh.**

**"Pleasure," the vendors appealed to him, "we will supply Joy or Pain—you have but to speak!"**

**Deliyas was a planet boasting a peculiar blend of modernity and medieval quaintness. Sophisticated transportation, architecture and intersystem trade abounded here. But Deliyas was equally versatile as a mart pandering to every sensuous appetite, and this, its capital city, happily strutted the part of entrepreneur to the idle rich of a dozen stellar systems.**

**Geoff avoided the clutching hands of a more persistent merchant of degeneracy and somehow kept the loathing from showing in his face. Despite his revulsion, he had to admit the marketplace played its part well. It sprawled over several hectares, a noisy feast of sight, sound and color, a mingling of numerous species and costumes and mannerisms. Tourists from nearly every civilization in this sector had come to sample the wares of Deliyas.**

**And the Deliyen merchants did their best to satisfy them. Geoff had seen uncountable instances of bartering and haggling over every conceivable item. Neither merchant nor purchaser went unsatisfied.**

**Tain, Honored Visitor? For a pittance you may grant or receive excruciating agony..."**

**Deliyas' visitors sought to escape the ennui or the pressures of their hundred thousand existences, and here it was willingly accepted that one such escape was violence. Geoff eyed the pain merchant with amused bitterness. The display of psychowhips**

and hypnotorture devices cluttered the entrance of his "shop." Painful pleasures, yes, but the pain and violence of artificiality. Such experiences were vivid and indeed agonizing—and completely temporary, totally imaginary. In every category Deliyas proudly offered limitless, decadent satiation, but only for the moment. The entire planet was a study in sham.

As he strolled along the plaza Geoff was constantly forced to shake his head to inventive and bizarre pleas or propositions. A corpulent merchant entreated him and thrust out handfuls of immense black-velvet flowerets which trembled in the faint breeze and gave off a seductive tinkling noise: the fabled bell flowers of Deliyas.

Deliyas had not always been so degenerate. Survey's study tapes had painted for him an earlier picture of this Level-5 world—cruel, but honest in its struggle toward the light of higher civilization. The Terran Federation's arrival had introduced Deliyas to a swifter path, had shown the planet a way to convert its sensuous talents into interstellar profits, rather than settle for mere intrasystem domination. The young world had sold its honor for a mess of glittering pottage.

"A servant, Honored Visitor?"

Geoff paused for the first time since he had entered the market and coldly regarded the swarthy hawker of flesh. Indeed, Deliyas had most profitably learned the advantages to be gained with alien gold. And of all the planet's pandering to the baser desires of sentient beings, this was the one trade which disgusted Geoff the most. If he could in some way help to end this injustice, he would feel any pain and sacrifice well spent.

"A servant to please you, Sir?" It was considered poor taste to refer to such men as slave merchants, but Deliyas distinction between indenture and slavery often seemed negligible. The "servants" the trader offered varied from humanoid females and youths to the grotesque and assorted species of a dozen other planets. Among the humanoid selection he saw some large-eyed, pale-haired Pa-Lünans. In his few short weeks on Deliyas, Geoff had seen relatively few Pa-Lünans, those tiny,

fragile people from the "pro-ectorate" sister world of Deliyas. Protectorate: which in this case meant Deliyas managed the world, controlled it, and used it as a fief to milk dry, to use as a slave farm if they so chose—and the Federation's hands were tied. The little people standing in the slaver's stall blinked and shielded their dark, lemur-like eyes against the sun, and their nearly albino skins and slit nostrils set them distinctively apart from the other humanoids in the group.

The slaver's voice rose as Geoff passed by, and at the same time the sales pitch descended in taste through the myriad possibilities inherent in full title to another being. Geoff was about to turn and deliver a blistering opinion on the spiel when he was stopped by the shock of something bumping into him quite violently.

Two men were struggling furiously, oblivious to the crowds, which were hastily moving back out of their way. A third man, a Terran, muttered something sounding like, "He won't fall for it, Jim," then disappeared into the surrounding throng.

The remaining two men continued to scuffle. One was dressed in the blue and white tunic of Deliyian nobility, and the other wore the gray semi-uniform affected by Terran merchants on a hundred worlds.

Onlookers stared, and their faces were a study in shocked reaction, for this violence was unmistakably real, not the counterfeit so familiar to these soft seekers of divertissement who made up the crowd. Geoff noted their expressions briefly with bitter amusement; he himself was intimately acquainted with violence, and seeing realism jarring the dissolute sensualists gave him a moment of perverse enjoyment.

Then he began to edge away, for the fight threatened to develop into far more than a pushing contest. Off to his left someone had set up a shout for the local police, and he had no desire to be drafted as a witness to this brawl.

But before he could escape, the Terran pulled free of his attacker and caught Geoff's sleeve. "Please! Help me! This madman..."

**"Leech of the Mother Ocean!" the Deliyan shrieked, trying to wrap his pale, immaculate hands about the other's throat. "You swore you would sell—"**

**Then both of them were clumsily bumping each other and Geoff as well. Try as he might he could not disengage himself, especially from the Terran; the man still clung desperately to Geoff's arm, despite the fact that it put him at a disadvantage in dealing with his assailant.**

**"Sir, I can see you're with the Federation—Ethnic Protection Division, is it?" the man babbled, making an effort to smite and *licking his Zips* nervously. "You must help... let *go* of me, you son of a filth-eater! You must help. I don't know what's possessed this lunatic."**

**"The same which has possessed you! Deliver it now, and at the price you swore!" The Deliyan beat upon his opponent's back, and with a burst of panic-charged strength the hard-pressed Terran flung his tormentor away from him.**

**Annoyed, anxious to be rid of both men, Geoff gave a determined twist and wrenched away from the Terran, feeling the fabric of his sleeve part. As he stumbled back the Terran stared stupidly at the fragment of cloth in his hand, then started toward Geoff. There was some anger but more fear in his face.**

**Fear? Over a matter of price haggling? The entire situation was so incongruous that Geoff was briefly beset with curiosity. What could the Terran merchant offer that the Deliyan native could not as easily purchase elsewhere in this interstellar treasure house?**

**But he had no time to question either of them, for the Deliyan, seeing his opponent about to elude him, suddenly produced a dagger from a hidden pocket in his tunic. The Terran took a precious second to once more grasp at Geoff and plead for his assistance. "He's mad, I tell you..."**

**"Look out," Geoff warned, simultaneously trying to shove the man out of harm's way and seeing the Deliyan lunging toward**

**them with dagger outthrust and eyes feral-bright.**

**The knife disappeared from Geoff's view behind the Ter-ran's back and the eyes of the man facing him widened in pained disbelief. A cry of incredulous protest assaulted Geoff's ears, and then those clutching hands at last lost their grip as the Terran collapsed at Geoff's feet.**

**Geoff had seen death and violence in quantities sufficient to blunt his senses, but the crowd erupted with a cacophony of horrified outcry as the Deliyian pawed through the clothing of the wounded merchant. The little native muttered to himself, seemingly deaf to the angry murmurs surrounding him and the whoops of an approaching patrol vehicle.**

**The Deliyian flung aside the bloodied knife he had clumsily grasped all during his search and held his discovery in both hands. Eyes brightly feverish, he gazed in hypnotic rapture at a small piece of opalescent stone. And with unbelievable rapidity his mood shifted from the murderous rage of moments before to a crooning pleasure as he stroked and fondled the rock.**

**"Sing! Sing, Eye of the Wind," the Deliyian invoked. "Sing beauty to me. Sing!"**

**The rapture as rapidly dissolved from his manner and he went rigid, regarding the milky stone with suspicion and outrage. The crowd had been edging forward, but now it stopped and once more retreated from this fresh evidence of insanity. The little man dropped the bloodily-bought stone to the paving blocks of the marketplace and it shattered as if it were made of fragile crystal.**

**The now pitiful Deliyian launched himself toward the body of his victim and shook the limp form. "Deceiver! Spawn of the Cursed Sea! Where is it? Where is the Stone of Song?"**

**Boots clicked on the pavement and a three man patrol of the local prince's militia surrounded the little man. As the patrolmen bent over the Deliyian, dragging him away from his prey, he began sobbing in the tones of one bereft of his dearest possession. "Not the true music, not real! He lied. Do you**

understand? He lied! It is not a Stone of Song."

"Yes, of course, Honored Lord. Will you favor us with your name, please?" the ranking patrolman asked with excessive politeness. Such deference implied this was more than an ordinary member of the Deliyian nobility. Had Geoff seen that face in newscasts of recent palace functions? It was impossible to tell now, so distorted was it by rage and grief.

A slender bloody hand pointed toward the body, and the Deliyian noble swung his wild gaze from one guard to another. "He *promised*. He swore, understand me, that he would deliver a true stone. And for a fair price, Sirs..."

"Yes, yes," the guards soothed.

"A fair price..." and the nobleman's eyes were suddenly filled with tears. "Ah, what would be a fair price for a Stone of Song? No price!"

"Honored Lord," one of the guards tried to interrupt. He had been kneeling beside the body of the Terran, examining it at some length, and Geoff knew the verdict before the man announced it. "You have ended this man's existence."

"*No price!* Not even that!" The Deliyian noble pulled free of the startled militiamen and dived toward the pavement, his hands scraping over the surface toward the discarded knife. And before the patrolmen could reach and restrain him, he seized the weapon and plunged it into his own throat.

The shocked guards hesitated a stunned second before they tried to raise up the wounded man, and in the crowd many turned their faces away in horror, unable to look on this ghastly final realism. A froth of blood stained the white and blue tunic and splattered from his lips as the suicidal murderer tried to speak. But the violence he had done himself had robbed him of his voice, and he collapsed into the supporting arms of the patrolmen, spouting choking sounds and blood.

Geoff seized the opportunity of the resultant chaos to ease out of sight into the milling crowd. He certainly had no

**intention of being delayed further by a lengthy hearing at a local militia headquarters. No blame would devolve on him at such a hearing, but the time could not be spared. And there were plenty of other spectators who would probably relish this chance to be questioned about some real violence.**

**The very size of the throng made his progress difficult, but he was careful not to attract attention to himself by any undue speed. He looked for openings, ducked between stalls and down alleyways, threading a maze through the many blocks of the marketplace.**

**Geoff made no speed until he had put considerable distance between himself and the site of that unhappy incident. Word moved with him, and even more rapidly. Even as he reached a distant area of the market the conversation was about nothing but the events of the last few minutes behind him, and typically, rumor had already blown the occurrence to a full-scale riot and the dead to the dozens.**

**At last he reached the Great Staircase of the Avenue of the Mother Ocean, the simplest route to the Federation Complex on the cliffs above. Geoff paused before that seemingly endless ascension carved into the living rock of the planet. There was a slide stair, of course, and most Federation employees chose that. But for now Geoff found himself sick of ease and decadence and determined to do his own climbing.**

**After a moment's searching in his pocket he found the little vial Medical Central had given him and shook out one of the little gels. It dissolved on his tongue into a bittersweet, somewhat gagging, liquid, and he began to feel the now familiar numbness in his fingers, a sensation of his entire metabolism chilling, nerve endings deadening.**

**Slowly, at first, he began to ascend the stairs. As the drug took effect he kept pace with it, increasing his rate of climb until an onlooker, he hoped, would think him perfectly normal and healthy. It was a most effective medicine they'd prescribed. They couldn't cure, but they could alleviate, he thought grimly, trying to ignore the burning constriction that grew in his throat.**

**As he finally reached the top he sought a railing and perch there, gazing out and enjoying the beautiful view of the In-das, the Mother Ocean of Deliyen folklore.**

**He could not rest too long. Sorenson had a short temper, and that business in the marketplace had already cut into the appointment time. Geoff glanced at his chronometer, then irritably shrugged away any urge to hurry. It was serving Sorenson and Ethnic Protection Division that had cost him the fiery agony he now suffered. Let them wait.**

**After long moments, when the pain had lulled to a dull soreness, Geoff headed toward the arcaded terrace that was the entrance to the Federation Complex. It was a magnificent and impressive sub-city overlooking both the ocean and the heart of Langarua-City; but at the moment Geoff was too sour to feel any Terran pride for this architectural accomplishment. The contrast of brilliant sea, cloudless blue sky and dazzling stone hurt his eyes, even though he understood it awed the native population to obeisance.**

**But then, aving the native population was the whole point of the Federation's existence, wasn't it, he wryly asked himself. Geoff swallowed the ache at the back of his tongue and moved under the shadow of the arcade leading to the administration building, a towering, blinding white edifice with its own private shuttle landing strip flanking the building.**

**He paused just inside the cool interior, involuntarily remembering younger days when he'd rushed to each new assignment with eagerness rather than the foot dragging tiredness that racked him today. In his own way, and for his own reasons, he was as jaded as the mindless tourists in that marketplace.**

**Making his way to Sorenson's office, he halted there for a second to regard the softly glowing panel embedded in the wall. Viewed casually, it was merely a lighting device, but close examination revealed a perfectly concealed door.**

**Sorenson didn't even look up as Geoff entered. The Director was sprawled in a convertolounger, facing the room vid-unit. A**



**stream of drama-dancers tangled with all the colors the medium could reproduce flowed across the panel screen covering one wall.**

**Still feeling acid, Geoff seated himself at the refreshment bar. There he inhaled deeply the gentian-amethyst mist produced by the dispenser, and almost immediately a comforting euphoria flowed to all parts of his tired body, interacting with the drugs he'd taken earlier and blunting the pain in his throat.**

**Cheered, he gazed at Sorenson with less hostility and even tried to take a polite interest in the vid. He leaned back and let the moving wall assault his senses. After several immeasurable minutes the drama ended with one final burst of eye-wrenching color and sound that covered the range of human hearing.**

**The wall went dark and Sorenson swiveled his lounge to face Geoff. There was a hint of anger in those pale eyes that quite belied a sigh of contentment over the drama. And then Geoff became aware Sorenson was staring at the torn sleeve. He glanced down and fingered the remnant of material, estimating possible cost of replacement. "Memento."**

**"Of what?"**

**"A man now dead."**

**Sorenson's lounge jackknifed him upright and the Director's expression became intent.**

**"Some brawl down in the marketplace. Don't -trouble yourself. I wasn't involved, except as an innocent bystander who got his sleeve ripped. One of the participants made the mistake of thinking I'd take his part."**

**Sorenson got to his feet and walked slowly toward the bar. He was a beefy man past middle age, and his former hardness and capability were being eroded by Deliyas' soporific climate and easy morality. Sorenson took careful pains pouring a goblet of good wine, the purplish mist from the dispenser swirling about his hands giving him the air of a sorcerer. "Who was killed? A Deliyas?"**

**"No and yes, I'm not sure of..."**

**They did not hear the door open but they heard the burst of conversation from the sub-lobby. The newcomer paused just inside the room and waited as the door once more sealed them off from the outside bustle. Formally, the new arrival bowed, the hem of his pale orange cloak brushing the carpet. "Honored Director Sorenson, my apologies for my late arrival."**

**Sorenson waved his goblet, gesturing the speaker forward. "As it turns out, you're not late at all. If you'd been much earlier, we'd have had to wait for Geoff. This is Geoff Lat-imer, the man I mentioned earlier. Geoff, Tahn-pa-Nyala, Citizen of Pa-Lüna."**

**Enormous dark eyes, almost devoid of any encircling white, blinked solemnly several times as their possessor studied him. "My pleasure to be in your presence, Honored Sir."**

**"Citizen Tahn."**

**Pa-Lünan indeed: the newcomer was a distillation of the "Typical Pa-Lünan, male" section of the tapes Survey had obtained from Deliyian sources. The frame was smaller, even more delicate than that of a Deliyian; and his other features—white hair gathered in tiny plaits, lemur-like eyes, curling four-fingered paws, almost-albino skin—all marked him a pure-blooded native of Deliyas' protectorate sister world.**

**On an inviting wave from Sorenson, Citizen Tahn came to the refresher bar and cupped his tiny fingers about the mist exuded by the dispenser. He brought the trapped cloud to his slit nostrils and inhaled deeply before speaking. "I am chagrined to suspect I interrupted your conversation, Honored Sirs. Please continue." His speech and physique were pure Pa-Lünan, but there was a great deal of Terra in Tahn-pa-Nyala's mannerisms.**

**There was no reply from Sorenson, who was busy fiddling with the controls on the vid-unit, seeking a particular channel. Without looking at Geoff he muttered, "How long ago was this brawl?"**

**"Less than half a Deliyen hour, I'd guess."**

**"... repeat we have no official confirmation," the vid suddenly blared. An immense closeup of the speaking commentator sprawled across the wall panel, and as Sorenson modulated the volume both Geoff and Citizen Tahn turned their attention to the broadcast. Geoff was struck by the fact that the Deliyen newscaster's usual bland smile, an almost obligatory item of Deliyen dress, was missing. "Unimpeachable sources have informed us the murdered citizen was Honored Sir James Adrian. The alleged assailant was removed to Medical Central in critical condition... and there his existence ended. Patrol Central has graciously granted us permission to state the deceased was Prince Kisyan den Ferla of the house of. . ."**

**The image shimmered a moment, tore up, and was replaced by a panoramic view of the marketplace. While the speaker's voice-over droned on regarding the dead Deliyen's pedigree, the cameras tightened on the scene of milling merchants and tourists, with patrolmen busily questioning witnesses while eager news media personnel scampered about the fringes.**

**"Probably the first genuine murder they've seen in quite some time," Geoff snorted. "I see they didn't catch the third party yet, or aren't talking if they have."**

**Sorenson looked up sharply and tapped down the volume until only the video remained. "Third party?"**

**"Another Terran. He made a break for it about the time this Prince Kisyan and Adrian began mixing it up." Geoff paused and met Sorenson's eyes. "The James Adrian?"**

**"I'm assuming so, from the nature of the events. Whole thing sounds rather shady, just what Adrian would have a finger in. Contraband, arms smuggling, illegal drugs, post-Level-5 material shipped to planets classified pre-Level-5; you name it."**

**"This time it would seem Mr. Adrian's appetite for profit has cost him his existence," Tahn put in. Geoff was gratified to see the Pa-Lünan lacked the Deliyen habit of effusive and time-consuming meaningless courtesies; wherever he'd**

acquired the Terran speech patterns, Geoff liked the alien for his directness.

Sorenson was staring at the vid again. "Apparently Adrian took a Deliyian nobleman with him. This Prince Kisyan..."

"Suicide," Geoff supplied. "Put a dagger through his throat, the same one he used on Adrian. The whole thing was senseless. They were bickering over a stone. Kisyan claimed Adrian jacked up the price or wouldn't sell, something of the sort. Adrian claimed the Deliyian was insane and apparently expected me to bail him out somehow. Not that I even had a chance to try."

"And the stone, the cause of this quarrel?"

"Kisyan found a stone on Adrian's body, but said it wasn't the right one. He dropped it and it shattered to smithereens on the pavement. I doubt that Patrol crew will find much trace of it."

"A stone." Tahn reached beneath his cloak and took out a pouch made of some alien animal's hide; the purse was slung from his shoulder by a carrying strap in such a way it was well concealed, and now Tahn carefully opened the pouch. Without touching its surface, he eased out onto the bar's top a seeming twin to the opalescent stone which had brought the men in the marketplace to such grief. "A stone which resembled this?"

Geoff nodded, and Tahn glanced triumphantly at Director Sorenson. "There is your graphic proof of Terran involvement—on your very doorstep. Now you can add theft to your list."

Puzzled, Geoff reached out and fingered the milky rock. It was not much larger than a small eggshell, and while it was truly a beautiful object it hardly seemed worth such spirited haggling, let alone dying for.

But as he touched it, a thrill coursed through him and he felt as though the very bone of his skull vibrated. He was aware of no sound, and yet there was music. No, not precisely music, but the essence of music. A tremendous sensation welled within his brain, bringing with it an overwhelming impression of peace

and well-being. No euphoric mist or alcoholic or drug could remotely complete with the reaction.

Then, abruptly, the music stopped. Pained, immediately aware of the familiar hurt in his throat, Geoff tried to concentrate. He had been completely transported by the alien music within his head.

And when he realized the music had ceased because Tahn had lifted his hand from the opalescent stone he was enraged. He half-rose from his seat, reaching for the dark-eyed Pa-Lünan facing him.

"Geoff 1" Sorenson shouted him back to sanity.

Stunned by his own reactions, Geoff slumped back into his seat, staring at the stone. "Would you have ended my existence then, Mr. Latimer?" Tahn asked gently.

"Yes. Yes, at that moment I would have," Geoff admitted unwillingly. "To hear it... continue."

"To hear it sing."

"Prince Kisyan called it... a Stone of Song. He was furious with the rock he *did* find on Adrian's body. He said it wasn't a true stone."

Tahn pointed to the beautiful rock. "We suspect this is what he referred to, that this is apparently the True Stone."

"I don't recall the files saying anything about..."

"They didn't." Sorenson sighed deeply and leaned his elbows on the bar. "Oh, they mentioned the presence of certain opal-like stones, treated as objects of beauty and value by the Pa-Lünans. Non-crystalline, formed of special silicics found only on..."

"You've been reading up."

"Indeed I have. Because the survey we received from Deliyas

didn't describe this—this Stone of Song at all. The initial tapes said the stones produced a pleasing musical tone when lightly struck, and being of some commercial resale value."

"I didn't strike it," Geoff protested, "I merely touched it."

"And experienced a momentary paradise of the senses."

Tahn finished. "I too am puzzled by the properties of this stone. It is a new phenomenon."

"How did Adrian..."

"I'm not certain, though I know some of the matter." The little alien looked at the stone, not at Geoff, and despite that rather inscrutable face the Terran could see that Tahn was quite disturbed. "I admit I am somewhat out of touch with matters on Pa-Lüna, but a development such as this is quite incomprehensible. You see, I have been on Norant V for the past three years, at a Federation university. When I returned to Pa-Lüna some eight months ago, I was aware of a subtle change in the culture, but I attributed it to my absence. Five months ago this beautiful stone held a place of honor in my own estate on Pa-Lüna." Tahn picked up a small spoon from the bar and indicated a series of scratches on the rock's surface, scratches Geoff interpreted as the equivalent of a Pa-Lünan family crest.

"I see, and Adrian stole it from you?"

"No, it was stolen by a member of my own household, a Pa-Lünan, not a Terran."

"Then Adrian must have..."

Sorenson leaned forward, stabbing a forefinger emphatically at Geoff. "Get this straight. Adrian has a record from here to Proxima Centauri, and nobody weeps for him."

"I wasn't..."

"But we do find out what the hell's going on. The slavery business was bad enough, but now we have a new element,

obviously."

Watching Tahn, using the spoon, carefully scoop the stone back into its carrying pouch Geoff was silent for several moments. He turned over a number of possibilities, a number of unspoken, unfinished statements. "Sometime between the time your servant stole this and you stole it back from Adrian, something fantastic has happened to it."

Tahn drew himself up and there was a flicker of emotional pain in his immense dark eyes. "I *repossessed* it."

"I'm not questioning your legality, Tahn. Forgive my terminology." Thoughts busy, Geoff regarded the revealing lump in the animal hide pouch. "Just where did the change happen, and who made it happen?"

"The change was made on Pa-Lüna," Sorenson said. "Of that we're almost positive." He punched some file buttons on the wall and a slot spat out a viewer and tape dossier. After a few second's spinning to locate what he wanted, he passed the viewer across to Geoff. "Arch Domatian: three months ago we picked him up at the Deliyian terminus from the Pa-Lüna run. We were really hoping to catch him on a flagrant slave abuse, but as it turned out, we caught him with illegal drugs instead. Along with the drugs he had a stone in his possession, apparently acquired third hand from Pa-Lünan or Deliyian sources on the planet itself. And the one Domatian had was already in the condition of the stone Tahn just showed you. We tried to probe, but Deliyas got huffy and threw that old 'protectorate' label up in our faces."

"Protectorate," Geoff repeated derisively.

Sorenson shrugged and leaned back. "Deliyas earned the right, under the Federation charter. They figure they've bought Pa-Lüna with Deliyian blood and money. Remember, Deliyas has only had interplanetary travel a couple of generations. As recently as twenty orbits ago they were still losing everything from lox driven to ion drive ships regularly enough to make a trip to Pa-Lüna a genuine risk."

**"I can recall such incidents, crashes, from my childhood," Tahn confirmed.**

**"They could have left Pa-Lüna alone," Geoff said, and Tahn nodded as though conceding an argument but not finding it an important loss. Geoff forced his thoughts back to the matter of the stones. "Then you think more than one stone is involved?"**

**"We have to assume so since this is the second such we've encountered. But just try and get some cooperation out of the Deliyans. One part stubbornness, one part blindness, and I suspect at least some greed. A small segment of the Deliyian aristocracy has found exploiting Pa-Lüna profitable, and they're powerful enough to slow down the diplomatic channel communication to almost nothing." Geoff handed back the viewer and Sorenson absentmindedly deposited it in the computer slot. "We *do* know there are some Terrans on Pa-Lüna despite the protectorate status, and a hefty percentage of them are the sort we don't want there or anywhere in the Federation, truth be told."**

**"Send in the big guns."**

**"Pa-Lüna's Level-2, Geoff. And a protectorate of a Level-5 planet. Do you think the Federation could stand another Kanrak scandal at this time? They move in the armament and we are once more smashing helpless primitives."**

**Tahn glanced at Sorenson with mingled irritation and amusement and Geoff smothered a smile. For a Director of Ethnic Protection Sorenson had a lousy sense of tact.**

**"All right, then you quietly send in a team..."**

**"We tried that, too. Baleman and five others," Sorenson said glumly. "We sent them to Pa-Lüna half a year ago to investigate the slave running. They poked around for two months and couldn't find a thing we could use for ammunition—and you know we need a lot to punch through the 'protectorate' status of Deliyas. A team is too conspicuous. Further, Deliyas got very resentful when they were tipped off. They've clamped the lid on further Terran entrants, except for certain privileged**



**characters who have pull with a" rather nasty class of Deliyian nobility. And the Terrans chosen aren't exactly attractive representatives of the species."**

**"Adrian, Domatian... no, I wouldn't say so. And now you want me to try a single, very quietly," Geoff said. "And you want to push a little harder, have me stick my neck out a lot further than Baleman's crew would dare."**

**"Agreed. Because you'll be less conspicuous..."**

**"And because I'm expendable in spades."**

**The silence fell with a leaden thump, and for one of the few times since Geoff had known the man Sorenson looked guilty. Irritably, Geoff got to his feet and paced across the thick carpet, Sorenson's uncomfortable voice apologizing, "Look, Geoff, if I could take it back..."**

**"You can't. That assignment's old water under the bridge—drop it." Geoff reached the outside wall and touched a stud; polarized panes swiveled and let cool, non-glare light into the room and Geoff stared for some minutes at the expanse of ocean below.**

**Clearing his throat uneasily, Sorenson extracted papers from the wall computer and spread them on the bar top. "Citizen Tahn's volunteered to serve as personal liaison, so we'll get the two of you down there unobtrusively. We were too polite with Baleman's group. We want you to work on the slave trade and the source of these rocks. We can't get the straight story from here, but if you can tie them in with the slave trade, fine—get us something meaty we can use before a Federation council, push aside Deliyas' protectorate rating."**

**Tahn added, "I am afraid some of my fellow citizens may be cooperating with people like Adrian and Domatian. There is a strange unrest on my world, Mr. Latimer, the beginnings of upheaval, perhaps political chaos. And everywhere and in the most unlikely places there were Terrans, such as Adrian. Perhaps there will be civil war..."**

**"A Deliyian protectorate manipulated by a few professional Terran slavers. Not attractive. And if the stones are involved.**

**... are they addictive perhaps? I can see a man selling his soul for such paradise as I experienced when I touched that thing. They could be hellishly profitable." Involuntarily his hand went to his throat. He vividly remembered those moments of bliss, and that instant of insane anger when Tahn had removed his hands. With that sort of inverted weapon a few men from a higher technology could make themselves virtual rulers of a primitive world like Pa-Lüna.**

**Sorenson was all business now, as though he had talked Geoff into the matter, as though it were not all cut and dried: I order and you go. "We'll outfit according to Division rules, and Tahn will accompany you as guide and body servant. We'll work out some kind of cover story. Say you're the scion of a bored Terran noble family from Alde-baran or someplace," Sorenson offered vaguely, sifting through the papers. "You got fed up with the ultra-modern and came to this simple, primitive world seeking peace."**

**The word was a visceral blow, and Geoff viciously closed the polarized panes and turned back toward the bar to discuss the details of this living lie they were plotting.**

## ***Chapter Two***

**"This is ten kilometers north-northwest of the location Tahn picked out," the pilot confirmed as he tossed down the last of the small amount of luggage to Geoff. Then he added wryly, "But it would have been a lot simpler to put you down at the port."**

**"Miguel, you always give me the same arguments," Geoff said, briefly amused. "Now shove off, don't get spotted by the port's tracking radar—and give my unprintable regards to Sorenson."**

**The wiry little man looked around from dogging the cargo hatch of his sophisticated little planet-jumper. Dark concern flickered across his bony face and he stabbed an accusing finger at Geoff. "The *last* time we did this, I picked you up half dead."**

**"Only half?"**

**Miguel's lips thinned in exasperation. "You got your com?"**

**Okay, I'll be up there, and I'd better hear something from you in about a month or sooner." He finished securing the vessel and waved cheerily as Geoff and Tahn dragged their gear back into the rocks. Sealed off from them, Miguel waved, and then the nearly silent whine of the planet-jumper lifted the tiny craft out of the valley.**

**"The superiority of Terran hardware still impresses me," Tahn remarked. "The dust was hardly stirred."**

**"Miguel's a good man," Geoff said, staring after the vanishing speck. "I wish they hadn't assigned him, though."**

**"It will be dangerous for us, too."**

**For an instant, Geoff was angered, then shrugged it off. "He almost got killed for me once. That's enough." He knelt beside the equipment, sorting: two small Pa-Lünan valises with carrying straps and one back-pack, such as a Terran adventurer might bear on a primitive world. He buried the sturdy com unit in the shade of a large, and distinctive rock and began shrugging the straps of the back-pack on; Tahn moved to help, quietly and without comment. Geoff felt guilty for his short temper. "Thanks."**

**"But I am your servant, Honored Lord." Tahn's huge eyes twinkled and Geoff shook his head, chuckling.**

**The valley was heavily screened by trees and blocked by sharp rising hills, one of the prime reasons Miguel had picked this landing site. Once loaded with gear, they slowly trudged southward toward an opening in the trees and hills. A brush-lined stream meandered its way out of the little cul-de-sac. "This is the Kai-Andra section of Prince Meigan's territory," Tahn volunteered.**

**As they came out of the brush the land leveled off into a series of gently rolling slopes and valleys rippling with grasses.**

The land was sweetly beautiful, and so far as Geoff could see, completely uninhabited. "Prince Meigan, eh? Not a very prosperous fief he operates."

"Not for the peasants, no," Tahn commented dryly. While Geoff watched, Tahn carefully extracted a worn map from his cloak pocket. "Now here is our approximate position."

"Wish we could have brought a more detailed map from Survey," Geoff grumbled, memorizing the location of their landing site. The painted hide was an artistic joy, but it was both vague and distorted, and bore all too frequently the Pa-Lünan equivalent of "Here There Be Dragons."

"Which direction from here?"

Tahn glanced around and pointed southeast. He checked his observation against the map, spanned a certain area on it with his tiny clawed fingers. "I followed the thief that far before I lost his trail."

Geoff studied the chart, then once more eyed the terrain. "If you were he, where would you have gone?"

"The only city of any size—or any concentration of population—in this area is Meigan's provincial capital: Bai-Shan. Meigan has not been much seen at court this year. Though I never spoke to him, I found him cold and unattractive when I saw him at court before I left for school. I know that my family's Stone of Song was altered somewhere in this province and that most of the 'indentured servants' seen on Deliyas come from this general area."

"Bai-Shan it is... until we can discover a more likely prospect."

As they followed the tiny sparkling stream and Tahn pocketed the map, Geoff soaked in the scent and sight of Pa-Lüna. Like most primitive worlds, Pa-Lüna had a certain brutal, unspoiled beauty. The sun was low on the hills to their left, drenching the meadows and the few copses of trees with warm golden radiance. "Is your own province, your estate, like

**this?"**

**"Even more lovely, I believe."**

**"I'm surprised you left it, for school *or* to track a thief."**

**They continued to follow the stream around the foot of a low hill, moving steadily down a grade. "Look about you, Geoff. All you see belongs to Meigan, and the culture stagnates. The lower nobility and the peasants are almost helpless, especially the peasants. Their life is hard, very hard. It is not surprising they believe the slavers' promises. And the stone? We are overwhelmed by the glory of Deliyas, *their* riches, *their* culture—but the Stones of Song are indisputably Pa-Lünan. I don't believe you can understand their value to a Pa-Lünan family..."**

**"Perhaps I can," Geoff said gently. "Yet, despite Pa-Lünan pride, you traveled off-world and came back. It isn't impossible."**

**"I—I have a small title," Tahn said with some embarrassment. "Not large, but enough to give me some independence. My province is less tyranted than this one. And, I had a Deli-yan patron—one of the few Deliyans who did not regard Pa-Lüna solely as a colony ripe for exploitation."**

**"Oh?"**

**"He's dead now," and something in Tahn's face warned Geoff not to question further along that line.**

**They halted, for the stream broke into a trickle of sparkling pure rapids and fell over a sharp incline just beyond their feet; and several hundred meters below a crude road, little more than a wide path worn through the grass, lay across the scenery, west to east. Heading east, there was a procession.**

**"Should have studied my "pocket ecology better," he remarked, gazing at the strange beasts pulling a creaking cart.**

**"We call them Guyan," Tahn filled in. "Beast of burden of the**

poor. Strange to see them out here so far from the farms of the fief."

"Sturdy but stubborn; I remember the survey tapes now," Geoff said, smiling at the sight of a number of Pa-Lünan peasants alternately pulling and pushing at the animals. The peasants wore rough homespun garments and their white hair was clipped close, as Tahn's now was. And like Tahn most had the hoods of their cloaks raised against the sun, shielding their nocturnally-adapted eyes.

Tahn stepped onto a small rock outcropping, staring down at the road. "It can't be a market caravan, not at this time. And just one cart and so many peasants... ?"

"Let's wait and see," Geoff cautioned. The two of them were partially sheltered by trees, and it was doubtful anyone below had yet seen them. Geoff was startled to observe something he'd missed earlier: One of those pushing the cart from behind was far too large to be a Pa-Lünan. There were heavy-soled boots and a hooded cloak, true, but the hood was thrown back to reveal a wealth of flowing dark hair and a pale, pretty face. An Earthwoman? If not, there was at least plenty of Terran in her ancestry. Yet she stood with a group of Pa-Lünan peasants, out in the middle of a peasant-exploiting province, helping push a cart. Her windblown cloak exposed her slender arms, and they were pale, but not the albino of the little people around her. Geoff fumbled in his satchel for a primitive spyglass.

"Look!"

Geoff followed Tahn's point, squinted through a break in the leaves. "What is it—hawks?"

"No, Wind-Eaters, and coming fast."

Survey had informed him about Pa-Lüna's flying mammals, and Tahn had told him more, enough so Geoff knew the beasts were expensive and rare. "Local noblemen out hunting, perhaps?"

"No," Tahn said positively, staring at the rapidly approaching

winged bodies. "There's no game worth the candle in this area. They're from Meigan perhaps, but for no legitimate reason."

Geoff abandoned the spyglass and sought the one sophisticated weapon Ethnic Protection Division had allowed him to bring. As he flipped out the arms of the collapsible crossbow his attention was at least half on the approaching sky creatures and their riders. They now appeared as large as the team of Guyans hauling the cart. "Brigands?"

Eyeing Geoff's crossbow, Tahn shook his head. "Not likely. They wouldn't bother with, peasants. Nothing worth taking.

His words were cut off by screams of terror. One of the peasants had caught sight of the menace in the sky and his cry of discovery led to immediate pandemonium. Many of the little people abandoned the cart and ran toward the trees overhanging the road some distance to the east. But a few stayed with the cart, as though trying to protect whatever it carried.

"It seems I was wrong."

The Terran woman left her pushing chores at the rear of the cart and ran toward the animals, and there she helped two peasants tug at the bits of the recalcitrant beasts. She didn't flee, Geoff noted, approving.

And then the Pa-Lünan peasant beside her stiffened and shrieked and dropped to the path, clutching an arrow in his chest.

Tahn turned to him, pleading in his eyes, and Geoff nodded, pointing downhill. "Try to help the Terran woman," he ordered as they both leaped out from the protection of the trees.

While Tahn, defenseless and exposed, pelted down the slope toward the road, Geoff knelt and aimed, selecting a target. There were three of the mounted creatures, reminding him vividly of edu-vids of circling buzzards on old Terra. Astride the withers, just forward the long wings, their riders concentrated on the scene below them, and one of the mounted bowmen was

**drawing his weapon for a second shot at the cart.**

**Almost laughing, Geoff aligned the crosshairs on the sight, remembering the skepticism of the lab when he'd demanded that additional refinement. The bowman was being hard put to control his swooping mount and aim accurately, and his arms lacked the power of a gear drawn bowstring and a heavy, deadly quarrel. The beast turned straight on toward Geoff for long seconds, its head down and the bowman's chest centered in the sight.**

**There was a brief lapse after he pressed the release before he could be sure. Then the flying mammal's head came up abruptly as its agonized rider sawed at the reins. Something fell, a slender, slightly curved object bouncing on the road several meters in front of the cart—the bow.**

**Confused and panicked, the great winged beast flapped about in the air, its huge muscular chest heaving, its scream sounding like a hysterical woman's. The Other two animals reacted, and their riders had their hands full for precious seconds while Geoff reloaded.**

**He focused on one of the other riders as his first target lost balance and slipped from the now-rampaging air steed. Geoff paused an instant and glanced aside, watching the wounded man clinging desperately to the dangling reins, suspended in mid-air, his weight pulling down the long fragile head of his mount and costing the beast altitude. When the tortured reins parted, the archer was still an unpleasant distance from Pa-Lima's surface, and Geoff could hear his screams for a second or so while he once more tried to draw a bead on a second target.**

**This rider was no bowman, but he was imperiously gesturing in the third attacker, another archer. Meanwhile, Tahn had reached the cart and several of the peasants had come back from the shelter of the trees. Their efforts combined with the terrified screams of the circling Wind-Eater and the stubborn cart animals at last moved. Given time, the peasants could get the cart under the concealing trees.**



The archer was too busy controlling his mount to get a clear shot, and Geoff suspected if the Bowman shot at anything it would be the man who had brought down his companion. Which meant Geoff didn't have much time himself.

Then the third rider, the one apparently in command: the scope picked out rich vestments, a short sword at the belt, and no bow or quiver in sight. Geoff raised his aim and focused briefly as the target plunged past his line of the sight, and the scope.

A Terran—another Terran.

But the man was too small a target, Geoff decided. With the Wind-Eaters now alert and moving rapidly he'd never get another clean shot like that first one. He aimed instead for the broad left wing of the Terran's mount, just inside the tiny vestigial claw.

An instant later the Wind-Eater spiraled to the ground like a skimmer with a broken stabilizer; the remaining archer, as Geoff had wagered, steered off and aimed for the southern horizon at full speed. His orders did not press him beyond common sense.

Geoff was already skidding down the hill toward the probable landing site of the wounded sky beast.

But he wasn't the only one doing so. The frightened peasants materialized once more, running angrily past the halted cart and converging on the falling Wind-Eater.

"Unhand me, you filth eaters! Pash-kya!" The rider had held his sword, but two expertly wielded walking staffs had chopped that off at the source, and the Terran now writhed in the grasp of half a dozen furious Pa-Lünans. As Geoff walked up the man alternated between clutching his probably broken right forearm and offering fabulous sums for his release. Then he saw Geoff. "You—you're Terran!"

Grinning, Geoff reloaded the crossbow and pointed it at the rider's midriff. "Some ancestor of mine was born there, yes."

The peasants looked at Geoff with suspicion that relaxed into happy gratitude as they connected the weapon in his hands with their rescue.

"This is my Honored Lord, Geoff Latimer," Tahn said. He had come up almost noiselessly on Geoff's heels and now spoke in Pa-Lünan, in a carefully down-caste accent. Geoff pretended not to understand the chatter between the natives but continued to smilingly worry the captured Terran.

But behind his smile there were relays clicking. The face, fear-drawn and bruised, was still familiar. He tracked down the interesting Terran faces in his memory from the past few weeks; there weren't many. But there was one—a man in a marketplace, running, leaving his partner to face an outraged and cheated Deliyian prince.

"We are most indebted to you, Honored Sir." The tones were brightly feminine, the words precise Terran Basic, and Geoff was gratified to see the woman move around to where he could speak to her without taking his eyes from the captive.

"My pleasure. The whole thing didn't seem very sporting." Her frown was momentary, then replaced with an understanding smile. The thrown-back hood gathered her long, dark reddish hair into a shining cowl behind her pale face. "You are a sportsman, Sir?"

"I've gambled, yes."

"Nedra!" The captured Terran stared at the girl with mingled shock and disbelief chasing each other across his face. "You..." and he made a fresh effort to free him-self. The Pa-Lünans pinned him back roughly, and the man gasped in agony as one of his captors closed clawed fingers around that injured right forearm.

For the moment, the girl's attention was entirely on the captive, and Geoff took the opportunity to appraise her. She had a proud carriage and manner, and whatever her former relationship with the man, she did not fear him. Her parted cloak revealed a bronze-colored garment, heavy, luxurious, and

falling to her ankles in the Pa-Lünan fashion. Not the dress of a peasant, nor yet of a Terran tourist, nor a slaver's woman. "You've found a new trade, Lynch. Is this more to your taste than slave trading?" she asked, a triumphant, almost gloating lilt to her voice.

"You little..." An open-clawed peasant's hand slashed across his mouth, cutting off Lynch's expletive. Scratches joined the bruises on his face.

One of the Pa-Lünans turned to the girl and addressed her respectfully: "Shall we kill him, Priestess?"

They spoke Pa-Lünan, of course, and Geoff was trained enough to keep his face blank, but he could not miss Lynch's look of incredulity.

"Priestess?"

She turned away, not deigning to answer. Casually, she gave an order to bind the captive and throw him in the cart, a command that seemed to amuse and please the peasants.

"Honored Sir..." Terran Basic again. Geoff bowed his head slightly, courteously, unstringing the bow. "That is an ingenious weapon, Mr. Latimer."

He notched back the collapsible arms of the crossbow and restrung it to his belt. "I'm not a swordsman or an archer, but Tahn warned me there might be dangers on Pa-Lüna, and I wanted a weapon. Something effective but sporting."

"There are indeed dangers on Pa-Lüna, Sir," she said. She was fair, with an attractive face and eyes the clear blue of an oxygen-rich sky. But Terran or not, she moved and spoke like native royalty. Geoff was immensely intrigued.

"Priestess," one of the peasants said, bowing deferentially. He had fully raised his hood to guard his eyes against the morning sun, and Geoff noticed Tahn too was squinting in the increasingly bright light. "If we wait too long..."

**"Of course. Move out, please, Yaedy, and take the Wind-Eater along. It is not too badly wounded and it may prove valuable." Geoff glanced at the sky, and decided the riderless Wind-Eater had probably followed its fleeing stablemate.**

**As the peasants scurried to carry out the girl's orders, she spoke to Geoff again in Terran Basic: "We must not linger here. It's imperative we reach the Citadel soon. We would consider it an honor if you would join our party."**

**Geoff looked at Tahn and read there equal curiosity and a willingness to follow this new, oblique lead. "My pleasure, My Lady..."**

**"Nedra," she supplied.**

**He fell in step with her long, graceful stride. A tall girl, and young, and yet she was obviously someone of diverse background, and certainly someone with great power over the peasants. They followed the groaning cart under the trees along a pleasant, light-dappled lane.**

**"The breeze is dying," he remarked conversationally.**

**"Yes, for the moment. It comes early today..." And Nedra quickened her pace until they were directly behind the cart.**

**There, bound and gagged and glaring hatred, Lynch bounced painfully atop the vehicle's cargo. Whatever it was barely covered the bottom of the cart, and was safely hemmed in by the planking at the sides. Rough, woven cloths had been thrown over the floor of the wagon, but an earlier breeze had twitched the material aside. A stray beam of sunlight stabbed through the leaves and sparked a dull red and green fire from something.**

**A stone. A wagon load of stones.**

**Going where?**

**"How long before the wind starts rising?"**

**"Ah, you have the air of a stranger, but I see you are familiar**

with our climate," she said.

"Hardly familiar. Tahn warned me about the winds of the Interior, but I haven't been long on Pa-Lüna."

Nedra didn't pause, but he saw calculation enter her expression. "Few Terrans venture out here. Few are permitted.

"I'm not a collector of indentured servants, if that's what you fear, Lady."

"Oh?" One auburn eyebrow arched sharply. "Then you are aware that most Terrans who Tionor' us with their presence *are* slavers?"

"Yes, but one can pretend, if he has reasons. An excuse, if you will," Geoff murmured, trying to gauge this lovely woman. "Your pardon, Lady, but I heard that man"—he pointed to the cart's jouncing burden—"refer to slavery. And he seemed to know you—"

"We will discuss it later," she said curtly, breaking into a run. The formerly lethargic Guyans had quickened their walk to a trot, and the leaves above the path now moved in a rapidly rising wind. Bipedes and quadrupeds hastened forward through the small wood and out the other side, still following the rutted lane. Two peasants tugged along the Wind-Eater by its bridle, and it ambled forward ungracefully on its huge hind legs, dragging its injured wing.

The instant the group emerged from the woods the full force of the wind struck. It was no longer a breeze, but a gale, hot and moisture-laden. Geoff turned and saw a boiling mass of evil gray-black cloud climbing up the southwestern sky with frightening speed.

"It is the season," Tahn said, suddenly by his side. The girl had moved up ahead of the cart, urging on the peasants, calling encouragements. "I would have recommended a wait of a few months..."

"But we hadn't the time. Have we the time now?" Geoff asked,

glancing back once more at the black face of the southwestern sky.

"If we don't dawdle." They ran quickly after the bumping cart, and now not far off they could see the low, grayish outcropping of a structure of some kind.

Tahn's hood had been laced tight, but now the upper part of it battered against his temples. Point clouds, riding ahead of the storm, were blotting out the sunlight. Soon the light would be bearable even for Pa-Lünan eyes, Geoff thought. The wind pushed at their backs, shoving them toward the squat, stone building.

"I wonder what Lynch would have done with that cartful of stones if he'd captured it."

"No matter. He made a mistake in timing..." Before Tahn could enlarge on his cryptic remark there was a shout up ahead and they all broke into a run, dog-trotting ahead of the growing wind.

Looming up from the meadow, well away from any trees, was the Citadel. Survey had taught Geoff the name and the purpose. The stone structure poked its gray head up from an overgrowth of brush and grass. Less than ten meters high, it seemed half-carved from the rock, and Geoff could detect no individual stones in its makeup. Several of the peasants were clearing blown straw from a ramp that led nearly to the top of the hump of stone. Awkwardly, they lifted the doors.

A cool, lightless maw opened, as though a buried stone idol had parted its lips. Anxiously, the peasants struck at the Guyans, drove them forward, down into the opening.

The evil clouds now dominated the sky to the zenith, and the wind was building to a roar. Geoff paused at the lip of the ramp, looking back. Far to the southwest there was a break in the intense black of the clouds, and in the gap lightnings played. Near the center of that opening a pale patch of sky was daubed with a yellow-red tinge that sent an instinctual shiver down Geoff's spine.

**"Come—quickly," Tahn pleaded, pulling at his arm. "They must dog the doors well before it gets here."**

**Geoff had tasted danger on a hundred worlds, the malice of dozens of aliens, the weapons of uncounted greedy Ter-rans. But in this moment he was overwhelmingly aware of the puniness of humanoids in the face of this mindless thermal collision of gigantic air masses. Without any argument, he turned and followed Tahn down the ramp into the building's interior. Behind them the cautious Pa-Lünans who guarded the double sets of wooden doors pulled them tightly shut and barred them securely, then pattered after Geoff and Tahn with fear-spurred feet.**

### ***Chapter Three***

**The interior seemed pitch-black, and Geoff stopped and waited uncertainly after the doors closed off the last of the light. Then Tahn's small fingers grasped his arm and tugged him along. Geoff stumbled over a rough, steadily downward inclining surface, and despite Tahn's reassuring guidance he felt the gnaw of unease. All around them now there was an undercurrent of sound, the low moaning of the wind filtering through the cracks in the storm doors.**

**Then ahead there was a faint glow, and Geoff relaxed somewhat. It took some moments for his eyes to adjust, though his Pa-Lünan companions moved about with the confidence of a nocturnal-eyed species. Finally, Geoff saw they were in a low-ceilinged room of some size, a rocky, underground nest that resembled an overturned bowl supported by columns.**

**Curious, Geoff went to one of the supporting pillars and examined it. It was difficult to be sure in the dim light, but he estimated that the column was connected without seam to the ceiling, that patient labor had hollowed out the room itself from rock, many generations ago.**

**"You behave as though you have never been in a Citadel before, Mr. Larimer." It was the Priestess, Nedra.**

**"Not... not in one quite like this," Geoff temporized.**

**Nedra gestured and a Pa-Lünan peasant woman approached, carrying a rude clay drinking bowl which she extended toward Geoff. He accepted it, careful to thank the woman in Pa-Lünan that was calculatedly broken and inept. The old woman grinned, then shyly scurried away.**

**"They are grateful to you," Nedra said, smiling after the retreating peasant; "her man might well have been the archer's next target. We are all grateful to you, Sir. Will you share the light?" And she gestured toward the center of the gloomy room.**

**"It might be better. At least then I could see what I'm drinking."**

**Nedra's laughter echoed back from the recesses of the room. How far did the blackness extend? Squint as he might, Geoff could not decide. "Terran eyes will never fully adapt to such light. But then, we have no trouble in full sunlight, as the Pa-Lünans do," she said, kneeling.**

**A large stone cup, a meter across, rested directly on the earthen floor, and within it lay a glowing rock. Geoff could think of no other definition. It looked like a gigantic gem stone, shining feebly with a light of its own.**

**"You are surprised?"**

**"Y-yes, I am." He tentatively extended his hand toward the object, then canceled the gesture. "It can't be a form of electricity, not here on Pa-Lüna. Deliyas forbids it."**

**"No, it is not electricity," Nedra agreed, amusement in her voice. The women were placing clay bowls snug against the base of the stone. "But it has many uses, heat among them. It will take some time," but soon there will be food—hot food for the noon meal."**

**Geoff sipped at the contents of the bowl the woman had given him. It was cold water laced with something sweet and palatable, and it felt good on the raw spot at the back of his throat.**



**Nedra touched his arm, then pointed toward a corner of the room. Geoff stared in that direction and finally discerned an extremely dim light. "Come."**

**He placed his empty bowl beside the glowing stone, then got to his feet and accompanied her. His eyes were adjusting, though it was still like walking through a moonless night. As they drew further from the fire, he could distinguish several sources of the faint light, far dimmer than the soft glow given by the mysterious stone.**

**"Ventilation," he speculated, his fingers on the sill of the slit that extended completely to the outside of the rocky structure. What he could see through the opening was a landscape of queer, yellowish-gray cast, trees fury-bent by the wind. And then Geoff realized the moaning sound that rose to a whistle all around them was the wind, sucking at these slits—openings on the northeast side of the artificial cave. "No... air pressure compensation."**

**"Of course. When the Whirling-Wind strikes, who knows if even a Citadel of rock could withstand the vacuum? The Pa-Lünans who built the Citadel didn't know anything about vacuums, but they built well, nevertheless, don't you think?"**

**"Equalizing pressure. Yes, I see..."**

**"Where have you come from?" For the first time her voice was sharp, and as Geoff faced her he could see, dimly, Tahn standing off to one side. He could vividly imagine the Pa-Lünan's apprehension, experiencing his own at the moment.**

**"Terra, among other places. You mean most recently?" Geoff forced a smile. "Near the coast."**

**"That's impossible! No one..."**

**"I said near, not on," Geoff assured her. "I told you, I'm an adventurer. The tides of a multi-mooned planet fascinated me, as many things do. I wanted to observe them firsthand." He could see her suspicion fading to doubt and curiosity. "Just as I wanted to see the Whirling-Wind of the Interior." As they**

walked back toward the glow-stone, the moaning noise increased, and Geoff suspected the full fury of the storm would hit them soon. "When I first heard of the Whirling-Wind, I wondered what would force a people to try to live here. But after seeing the coastal tides..."

"Pa-Lüna is a hard world to understand, Mr. Latimer." Nedra held her pale hands over the glow-stone, and she very much looked the priestess, invoking some god from this arcane rock that gave heat and light. "But an easy one to admire."

"Yes, and a world to love—a people to love." It was not long after that the women announced the food was ready and passed around clay bowls full of native stew and a hot, crumbly breadstuff. Geoff sat by Tahn, filling his belly and blotting out for the time being the future and the past. To be among primitive people pleased him, always had. It was one of the major reasons he served Ethnic Protection Division. But in a case such as this, where Level-5 Deliyas "protected" Level-2 Pa-Lüna, Ethnic Protection was helpless. Unless he could find a loophole. ...

Suddenly, his throat hurt, and he swallowed a gel to soothe the pain there. Undoubtedly his concern for the plight of the Pa-Lünans added psychosomatic ills to his other troubles.

"Ai-thain! To the walls!" Geoff mentally translated the shout in Pa-Lünan and joined the rest of the group moving away from the glowing-stone light. The peasants left it with reluctance, as though it were an object of reverence as well as comfort.

Near the entranceway there was banging and thumping as the fingers of the wind pried at the heavy double-barred doors, its frustration rushing between the cracks of the wood in an angry scream. Wind swept through the Citadel now, muffled and cut by the curved entranceway and the doors, but strong enough to billow robes and tousle hair.

There was a great hulk of something against the northeast wall where all were now gathering. Geoff saw one of the peasants stroke a long, thin snout and whisper soothingly to the frightened Wind-Eater. The injured wing was bound to its body

to help it heal. Geoff regretted the necessity that had forced him to wound the beast rather than the man.

And the man was right there, he suddenly learned as someone moved out of the way and the wan light of the rock fell on a hard Terran face. Lynch had seen him, too. "You interfering... if I could get one hand on you..."

Geoff knelt before him, chuckling. They'd parked the slaver amid the animals, and the Guyans, still hitched to their cart and munching fodder, flanked Lynch on the other side.

"Ah, but it would have to be *one* hand, wouldn't it? How bad did they cave you in?" and he reached out. Lynch shrank back against the wall, eyes wide with fear, snarling a warning. "Bad enough, eh? Well, risks of the slaving game."

"You fool!" Lynch shuffled his unbound feet and edged away from the cart animals. "I wasn't slaving."

"I'm not that much of a fool," Geoff countered. Had to play this carefully, not betray his own knowledge just yet. "I've been around enough to know your look."

Lynch admitted grudgingly, "I slave for the Deliyans and Meigan sometimes, yes. Rut that wasn't my purpose this time. If you hadn't butted in..."

"Perhaps I'm noble-minded." Lynch had been Adrian's partner, and they'd lost the stone they meant to sell when Tahn had somehow "repossessed" it. On a hunch, Geoff extracted a small plasticene box of food concentrates from his tunic pocket and began flipping it idly in his palm. Lynch's eyes took on a feral, greedy glitter. "And perhaps I'm not. Didn't feed you, did they? Well, considering your man killed one of theirs..."

"Look, I can make things worth your while," Lynch interrupted, his eyes still on the concentrates.

"Things?" Careful, he warned himself. The wind whistled, drowning out nearly all speech. Half a meter further away and Geoff couldn't have heard Lynch at all. Tahn was over by the

Wind-Eater, helping soothe the injured animal but probably doing more eavesdropping than soothing. Nedra was nowhere within Geoff's admittedly limited sight, and she was the only other one present who could understand Terran, so far as he knew.

"Prince Meigan," Lynch began persuasively, "will pay well if you help me."

"The two of us capture this many peasants? You're insane."

"No! I tell you I'm not a slaver any longer..."

"She said..."

Lynch spat out a short stream of obscenities. "That little... yes! I *did* run a slave route, and you might ask your pretty little friend how she knows I did."

"I may. But if not slaving, what?"

Lynch looked greedily at the cart behind the stamping Guyans, and the wind howled louder. Geoff followed his glance. "A cartful of rocks? As I remarked earlier, you're insane."

"You'd find them useless to you, Lynch," Nedra cut in. Both men started at her voice and turned to look. The dim light caught the side of her face and wind-whipped bronze gown, and she spoke just loudly enough for them to hear. "You miscalculated badly. We were on our way to the source of the stones, not returning. And now *you* are on the way, too. You will accompany us, too, Mr. Latimer, you and your servant who speaks Terran. Come here... Tahn, is it? Come to hear me better." Hesitantly, Tahn moved up by Geoff's side. "You saved our lives, and we are grateful. But forgive me if I challenge your reasons."

Geoff displayed the box of concentrates. "You didn't feed him, and I thought I could coax some answers out of him with these."

He could see the white flash of her smile. "An interesting non sequitur, but not much of an argument. No, don't try anything,

**please. We do not wish to harm you or your servant. If the Goddess is kind, you will be rewarded—if your reasons are good."**

**"Goddess? What...?"**

**The wind rose to a howl and some of the women whimpered and flung tiny hands over their heads. Abruptly the noise died and there was a wrenching sensation deep in Geoff's gut. In the next instant he instinctively swallowed and felt his ears pop as the vacuum hovered over the Citadel.**

**As the wind shrieked on again after the brief silence, Nedra continued, "Whatever your reasons, it is the Goddess who will choose. Please do not be foolish. The Pa-Lünans have been alerted, and I should not like to force you to make the rest of the journey trussed up on the cart like Lynch."**

**She moved back into the dark windy cavern like a beautiful wraith and Geoff was intently aware of those unseen presences, her peasant followers, their eyes unhindered by the dark.**

**"Latimer . . ." Lynch slumped, seeming contrite. "Please, one of the concentrates."**

**"We didn't get to finish our talk. Besides, I might need them myself," Geoff said, replacing the box in his pocket. He was unmoved; sympathy was better spent on the Pa-Lünans who'd suffered at the hands of Lynch and others.**

**"Geoff..." Tahn motioned him to a corner.**

**"Our disguise hasn't been overwhelmingly effective, has it?"**

**"No, it was a gamble, but I think we are better for our present position," Tahn said, peering into the dark. Geoff wondered what those lemur eyes could see and was grateful for Tahn's friendship. "But there is something else..."**

**"The stones: they looked like the one you showed me."**

**"They seem to be Stones of Song, yes, more than I have ever**

seen in one place—the first I've ever seen guarded by peasants. But they lack the properties of the stone you saw on Deliyas." Geoff eyed him admiringly; he hadn't had the nerve to go poking about in the cart. "These stones are, for all intents and purposes, just like the handsome piece of inert jewelry that was stolen from my home here on Pa-Lüna five months ago."

"The Priestess said they were on their way."

"She said something else," and so softly did Tahn speak that Geoff had to strain to hear him against the wind. "*Goddess*. To my knowledge the religions of this region include no female deities beyond the rank of wood-nymph. Certainly none that would be addressed as 'Goddess.' "

"There's one now, apparently," Geoff countered. "We've seen her priestess, and we've been promised a judgment."

Six of the peasants unbarred and opened the doors, then stood aside while the others climbed up the ramp and out of the Citadel. Geoff and Tahn were allowed to walk at their own pace, but Geoff noticed several of the sturdiest-looking Pa-Lünans always kept near them.

It was night, a cloud and star-strewn sky overhead, and three of Pa-Lüna's five moons juggled their various orbits along the ecliptic. The wind had died to a breeze, and now it came from the north and was cool. Geoff shrugged his cloak more tightly about himself, tossed up the hood and secured it.

"This is *my* Pa-Lüna," Tahn said, pride in his voice. Tahn too wore a cloak, but the hood was thrown back and his eyes were iridescent in the faint moonlight.

Out of the darkness, as out of the nightmares of Geoff's childhood, swam an eerie green light. It was feebler than a flashlight and it shifted alternately from greenish-white to a darker green tinged with red. Above it was a woman's face, highlighted from below in a way calculated to raise the hair on the back of Geoff's neck. He had thought his superstitions dead with the innocence of his youth, but Ned-ra had brought them all back.

**"You will accompany me, Mr. Latimer?" Polite, requesting, but he did not let himself toy with a refusal. "The torch is for the benefit of human eyes. The people do not need it."**

**"Lynch?"**

**"He won't need to watch his footing," she said shortly. Then she spoke in fluent Pa-Lünan, commanding the procession to move out. Geoff hoped Tahn was close at hand as they began to walk. Anything outside the cold light of the "torch" was so much ink to Geoff.**

**"The stone in the Citadel..."**

**"This is a smaller sister."**

**"Yes, the other one would be a trifle hard to carry."**

**There was genuine surprise in her voice. "But the Citadel stone is for all who need to use its shelter. It is a gift of the Goddess."**

**"I have never heard of a goddess worshiped in Meigan's territory," Geoff said carefully.**

**"Meigan has. Or at least he has heard rumors. He doesn't know the how of it, but he knows the results. Or didn't you come to steal the Stones of Song?"**

**Geoff managed to keep his voice perfectly level. "I didn't come to steal anything, whether you believe me or not."**

**"For the moment, I do." Unlike Geoff, Nedra had not raised the hood of her cloak, and the green glow of the torch cast weird dancing highlights on her dark hair as it flowed with her stride and the teasing breeze. They were walking east again, though Geoff could feel no path beneath his feet. Sometimes the ground was uneven, and Nedra would shine her torch directly on the grass so that they could both guide their steps more easily.**

**There was a certain discomfiture in walking with a group which seemed to know so definitely where it was going. Geoff's**

world was limited to the tiny arena of the green torch, and he was not cheered to realize that Tahn as well was a virtual stranger to this terrain.

How long would the journey be? Geoff was grateful for those hours of sleep he'd snatched back in the Citadel, waiting for the storm to die. It would upset his biological timetable for several days until he adjusted to the Pa-Lünan cycle, but it wouldn't be the first time he'd made such adaptations.

"Do we go far?"

"You really don't know?" There was undisguised hope in her question, a hope that seemed to reflect a silent wish for his innocence.

"I honestly haven't the faintest idea where we are or why."

After a pause, Nedra said, "I will pray you speak the truth. I don't think you're a slaver, but if you are..."

"I'm not," he answered flatly with a hint of vehemence.

"The Goddess reads truth and lies clearly."

"I'd like to know more about this Goddess."

"You will," Nedra promised. She quickened her step, and the creaking of the cart increased in volume. There was some Terran cursing from that direction and the girl spoke Pa-Lünan to someone on her left. In a few moments the cursing was muffled, then silenced. "We lost time in the storm. We must hurry. The people don't enjoy traveling in the daylight."

"Any more than I enjoy stumbling along in the dark," Geoff grumbled, but he lengthened his stride to match her pace.

The tiny moons chased each other across the sky. One set and another rose to take its place. Survey had painted the pattern clearly for Geoff: days dawning hot, and the unusual terrain causing almost daily collisions of moist hot and cold air masses, leading to afternoon and sometimes evening storms of great



violence. It didn't trouble the Pa-Lüans. They worked their fields at night, grazed their herds at night, and holed up by day. Geoff wondered if a Terran could ever completely adjust to the cycle. But then Tahn had spent several years on a Terrene planet; must superior technology mean the adaptation could only go one way?

He swallowed a gel for the growing pain in his throat and realized unhappily that he was being forced to use them more and more frequently. Sooner or later the drugs wouldn't be able to keep down the pain; and then...

"Are you ill, Mr. Latimer?" Nedra asked with feminine concern.

"A vitamin supplement," Geoff lied, short-tempered.

"We're almost there."

Geoff squinted beyond the green glow of the torch, trying to determine where "there" might be. They were presently in the middle of a woods or forest—he felt the brush and branches rake at him. He couldn't be certain, but it seemed as though the sky ahead held the first tinge of dawn. He'd brought no chronometer with him—nothing beyond the capabilities of a Level-2 technology, Legal Division had warned—so he couldn't be sure when they had emerged from the Citadel, or how long they had been walking. He only knew he was tired, and if that was dawn ahead, it would mean the Pa-Lünans would be seeking their destination rapidly; they wouldn't want to be out, when the sun rose to sting their eyes.

They began heading down again. Another Citadel?

The green light was replaced with a different greenish glow from the sides of something that hemmed them in. A hallway? Yes, a dark stone hallway, with green glowing stones embedded in the walls every five or ten meters, now surrounded them. It was a comforting amount of light, not too strong for the Pa-Lünans but still sufficient for Terran eyes..

They were heading down, down along a rampway. No doors

**this time, or at least Geoff hadn't been able to hear any commotion about opening or closing doors or gates. Still behind them he could hear the animals and the soothing of the Pa-Lünans leading the beasts, and the noise of the cart.**

**The hallway gradually widened into a cave or man-made cavern.**

**When Geoff ran his hand along the glass-smooth wall, he was puzzled. No tools made on a Level-2 planet could have constructed this wall. It had the technology of a higher-level civilization written all over it, a very high level civilization.**

**The Pa-Lünans were murmuring adorations and the peasants handling the cart urged the beasts forward toward the center of the hall.**

**The cavern was a temple, entirely lit by a white-green glow. A number of the Pa-Lünans ran forward and prostrated themselves, and Nedra's already graceful carriage grew almost queenly as she moved toward the temple's center. Geoff followed her closely, Tahn a step or two to his left, both of them alert for any trouble.**

**But then, it didn't look like trouble, exactly.**

**It didn't look like anything Geoff had ever seen before, and he was too stunned to contemplate any action whatsoever. His feet carried him forward, and he was vaguely aware his mouth was gaping.**

**Nedra moved elegantly between the bodies of the worshipers, her cloak thrown back and her white arms lifted in greeting. As she reached the foot of an altar she knelt, gazing upward. Nearby, the cart with its silent burdens waited, the Pa-Lünan handlers soothing and shushing the now only slightly restless Guyans.**

**A throne of sorts sat against the back of the cavern, and the same signs of advanced technology as had shown on the wall were displayed in its manufacture. The entire room was a living slice from a Level-5 or 6 culture.**

Seated on the throne was a giantess. Perhaps six or more meters tall, the gargantuan female wore the same bronze cloth Nedra did. But not only the gown was bronze: the flesh, if it *was* flesh, was also bronze. She seemed nothing less than a tremendous statue which had begun breathing: a Pa-Lünan statue, with the same lemur eyes, slit nostrils and thin wispy hair clinging to temples and nape that characterized the peasants worshiping her.

Goddess? *Something*. At the moment, Geoff couldn't begin to guess what.

And then it—she—moved. Slowly, majestically, extending her hands, she blessed the humanoid mice clustered about her huge bare feet. The Pa-Lünans sighed happily and Nedra gestured to the cart.

Lynch lay helpless, gagged, his eyes wide with hysteria and disbelief, trapped atop the Stones of Song he'd come to steal.

The movements of the giantess were slow and precise. Geoff debated the possibilities of android or a being with a different metabolic rate. Then he caught himself up short. Nedra was no Level-2 peasant, and yet she was serving this monstrous bronze female willingly. But her connection with Lynch? He reminded himself she'd admitted she knew the man, and Lynch had implied more.

"Faithful ones." The giantess spoke, and it was not the computerized pronunciation Geoff had expected. If it was a mechanical device, it was far more sophisticated than any machine Geoff had yet encountered, and that had been many. The tones were warm and sincere, and, he realized with a jolt, semi-telepathic. He had understood them, and at the same time grasped he had understood them in both Terran and Pa-Lünan.

"Geoff, can you..." Tahn looked as though the ground had been shot out from under his feet.

"Explain? I can't explain anything, particularly how I happen to be here at this particular moment."

**"She's going to speak again!"**

**Geoff didn't know how Tahn could be certain, but he was equally certain of the same fact, and apprehensively fastened his gaze on the mammoth face. What else would this living apparition say, and what would it lead to?**

**His instincts, or telepathic reception, hadn't deceived him. The great bronze lips parted.**

***"And unfaithful ones."***

## ***Chapter Four***

**The head of the giantess turned and she focused her large eyes on them penetratingly. Geoff did his best to wipe his mind clean of everything except surprise and curiosity. Eventually, after interminable seconds, the huge female figure once more gave her attention to Nedra and the Pa-Lünans. As a chorus of praise rose from the peasants, Tahn leaned close to him and whispered, "Do you think she—it-is a robot?"**

**"I don't know. I can't imagine how..." The back walls of the temple suddenly swiveled open on either side of the throne, and other Pa-Lünans marched out of an inner recess. All of them were dressed in the same bronze-colored material Nedra and the Goddess wore, and they were pushing or carrying numerous objects. One item in particular drew Geoff's interest; it was a vat several meters across, constructed of some strange metal he had never seen before. Startled, he realized the Pa-Lünans touching the vessel were not pushing it, but merely guiding, while the vat itself seemed suspended a few centimeters from the temple's floor.**

**"Anti-gravs?" Tahn breathed. "*Here?*"**

**Geoff mentally echoed Tahn's astonishment, watching the new arrivals carefully maneuver the vessel into a depression in the altar's surface directly in front of the throne. Satisfied with its positioning, they stepped back, and with a smooth quietness betraying well-engineered machinery the altar and vessel began**

to rise. Geoff stared, but the workmanship was too excellent to reveal the seams of what must be a telescoping base. The vessel, supported on a seemingly solid column, came to a noiseless stop level with the knees of the Goddess, and immediately some of the acolytes put into place a series of portable steps mounting to the altar.

As Nedra mounted the steps, a panel slid out of the throne arm beneath the right hand of the Goddess. The giant female lifted out of a compartment a large transparent bottle containing a glowing amber liquid that slapped against the sides of the immense beaker. The Pa-Lünan peasants cried in joyful expectation at the sight. Still moving with majestic languor, the Goddess emptied the container's contents into the vat, then bestowed a large smile on her adoring public. Several of the peasants ran to the cart and roughly tossed Lynch out; the slaver's muffled moans of pain gained him not so much as a glance. Eagerly, the Pa-Lünans tore aside the cloth covering the stones and began removing the rocks carefully, as if each one were something precious and fragile. "How did they get so many, and where?" Tahn asked. "The mine fields are far to the northeast, and the stones are far too expensive for a peasant ever to purchase."

"It wouldn't be the first time a Stone of Song had been stolen, would it?" Geoff said, and Tahn shot him a thoughtful glance.

The first peasant carrying one of the stones reached the top of the steps and handed the stone to Nedra, and she in turn deposited the opalescent rock in the upturned right palm of the Goddess. Slowly and dramatically, the Goddess immersed the mineral offering in the vat, held it there several moments, then withdrew it, dripping. When the amber liquid ceased to trickle from the stone the Goddess placed the rock on a strip of shiny plastic and returned the offering to Nedra. Geoff puzzled over the stack of squares of plastic resting on the left arm of the throne; when had the Goddess brought *those* out? Events were happening too fast for him to catalog.

Nedra accepted the stone, murmuring thanks, and handed the gift to the eager peasant waiting on the steps beside her. He

cautiously descended and a second Pa-Lünan took his place. The ritual repeated while the happy line of peasants edged forward one notch.

Tahn nudged him and pointed to the peasant who had been first in line; he was now sitting by one wall of the temple, the plastic square and the stone it cradled on the floor in front of him. For long moments he stared unblinkingly at his treasure, smiling like a child savoring a delicacy in advance; then he extended one hand and touched the stone. Geoff had rarely seen such transport on any face, Terran or alien. He could all but taste the indescribable joy clear across the room, and unwillingly Geoff remembered that moment back in Sorenson's office when he'd briefly experienced peace and delight beyond the capabilities of any drug or euphoric he'd yet encountered.

"Look!" Tahn exclaimed softly. "He withdraws from it himself."

It was true. The tiny hands were now back at the Pa-Lünan's side, and he was once more regarding his prize with a fond smile. He had taken his taste of the stone, and yet he was willing to break contact.

"I'm not sure I could have done that," Geoff confessed.

"Certainly not so quickly." Tahn looked faintly embarrassed and said, "I too sampled the stone. And while I was able to remove my hand, it was not for quite some minutes, and then with great reluctance. That one withdrew almost as quickly as you—as I forced you to."

"I was almost sure they were addictive," Geoff said uneasily, as much to himself as to Tahn, remembering again that exquisite essence of music and envying the peasant. He glanced back at the ceremony at the altar. Half of the worshipers had received the transformed stones and now had scattered about the cavern, each to his or her individual sanctuary, admiring their treasures. They touched, then withdrew, and all displayed the same beatific smile of satisfaction. Most of them seemed content with that one touch, as though it had been more of a reassurance than a pouncing on a long-absent drug.

**This alone made Geoff stop and reassess his ideas on the qualities of the stones and their probable effects.**

**As the last of the peasants descended the steps, Nedra followed him, and the acolytes scampered forward and removed the steps. The column elevating the vat sank back level with the floor and they collected this as well and moved it off the flattened pedestal, guiding it toward the doorway to the left of the Goddess. Geoff's height advantage enabled him to see that the vat was now as empty as it had been when they had first brought it out. Whatever the amber liquid was, he had to assume it had been completely absorbed by the stones.**

**One by one, those who had sampled the rapture of the transformed rocks rose, still holding their mineral treasures, and approached the throne. "Can you understand them, Geoff?" Tahn asked. The crowd was babbling in a rapid and slangy Pa-Lünan dialect.**

**"Enough." Geoff listened a moment, then said, "Gratitude for *renewing* the Stones of Song?"**

**"Obviously the ritual is familiar to them. They expressed no surprise..."**

**"No, they knew exactly what to expect. But Lynch obviously didn't." The slaver still lay on the floor beside the cart, staring in undisguised stupefaction at the mammoth figure dominating the cavern.**

**Geoff was once more aware the Goddess was going to speak, and he felt before he heard, "My children, rejoice and treat the True Stones with the reverence and frugality they deserve. It pleases me to renew their song."**

**The *acolytes* reappeared from the doorways, and this time they were guiding long sheets of anti-gravs. Geoff had seen similar devices before, but these had a special quality; he half-suspected that if he examined one closely he would find "Made in Pa-Lüna" stamped somewhere on the surface, even though such technology was supposed to be far beyond Pa-Lüna's Level-2 culture. Food, flowers and bowls of potables**

were arranged on the anti-grav sheets, and the acolytes began distributing these freely. In moments a celebration was in noisy swing.

Geoff debated the possibilities of escaping with the knowl-edge he had gained so far, even though a part of him still ached with curiosity.

"Mr. Latimer, the Goddess would speak to you."

It was Nedra. She moved as quietly as her Goddess, but far more swiftly, and while her tone was polite and invitational, Geoff immediately abandoned any thoughts of trying for the temple's entrance. Nedra gestured him toward the throne, though her gaze remained on him. "Tahn, you will accompany us?"

"Assuredly, Priestess." No hesitation there at all; some of Tahn's off-world veneer had slipped.

They walked past the reveling throng toward the throne, but Geoff had a strange sensation they would never get there. Then he realized his eyes weren't playing tricks on him after all. The throne did not merely seem to be receding from them—it *was* receding, sliding back on tracks or anti-gravs while the back of the temple soundlessly opened to receive all of them.

"Private audience?" Geoff inquired, then regretted his flippancy when Nedra looked at him in disapproval.

"The Goddess wishes to test your truth, and she would not disturb her believers if she finds you in falsehood."

"That has an unpleasant and ominous ring to it." They were still following the retreat of the throne at a leisurely pace. They had gone back from the main hall of the temple a good fifty meters, and now were in an anteroom of the cavern, a huge, dome-roofed alcove. The sound of the rejoicing peasants behind them had stopped, and Geoff guessed without looking around that a door had sealed them off from the celebrants. "What about Lynch?"



**"I shall question him later." For the first time there was no telepathic warning as the Goddess spoke. Her throne no longer moved, and the three of them halted facing her.**

**"How—how may I serve you, Goddess?" Geoff said with formal uncertainty.**

**A mammoth smile creased the face above him, and in this light and at this distance he discovered what he'd missed earlier: the strange metallic garments were genuinely flecked with glimmering bronze thread, but the bronze flesh and hair seemed to be nothing more than exotic cosmetics.**

**"It is not a question of serving, Mr. Latimer. Nedra has told me how you already helped my people, brought to ground a Wind-Eater and enabled us to capture Lynch. In that sense, you have already served me, and I would not ask more of you until I determine your motives."**

**Then Geoff felt something he had experienced before. This was far from the first time he had encountered a telepath, and while their methods differed subtly the general effect of probing by such a being was that of invisible fingers riffling through the large protein cells of his brain. In this case, the impression was heightened by the sensation that the unseen mental fingers doing the searching were proportionately huge. If previous mental investigations had been unpleasant, this was downright repugnant. He half-felt, half-glimpsed out of the corner of his eye, that Tahn was shuddering, and abruptly Geoff realized his own ordeal had ended.**

**Or at least one part of his ordeal. It remained to be seen what the Goddess would choose to do with the information she had extracted from them.**

**Nedra was watching them closely, a trace of concern in her expression, as though she hoped they would pass the test. What test? They didn't even know what was expected of them. He was almost certain that despite Nedra's sympathy and Terran heredity she would cheerfully acquiesce to whatever the Goddess decreed for their fate.**

**"We were not aware other Terrans might have concern for Pa-Lima, particularly an employee of the Federation," the Goddess finally said. "You, I can understand, Citizen Tahn. But I must confess that Mr. Latimer is a surprise. I had thought Nedra alone in her altruism." The girl smiled, and Geoff tried to work up a cheerful facial response of his own; he hadn't planned on having his identity laid quite so bare so soon.**

**"If we have answered your questions, might we hope you would answer some of ours?"**

**"Hardly all of my questions have been answered, Mr. Latimer," the Goddess countered, "because I did not choose to be brutal in my probing. However—what is it you wish to know?"**

**After a careful pause, Geoff said, "Your origin, for a start: your powers, this technology, those stones..."**

**A gargantuan contralto chuckle greeted his words. "Ah, patience! You ask a great deal for one not yet—ascertained."**

**"You probed my mind, and Tahn's. You must know we mean no harm... to you."**

**Enormous lemur-type eyes peered down at him, glittering in the faint light of the sanctuary. "You did not even know of my existence before you entered this temple."**

**"Y-yes, but we don't doubt it now, and we *are* curious."**

**"Indeed? You shall remain so, I fear."**

**Geoff risked a glance at Tahn, but the Pa-Ljinan was staring up at the Goddess in openmouthed awe. "May I at least know the source of the liquid which caused the change in the stones? I am concerned with contraband products, and if this was introduced from off-world, my superior should be informed. How does this miraculous substance operate?"**

**"As you observed, it is taken up by the stones themselves, Mr. Latimer; Pa-Lünan opals are a most absorbent mineral. As for**

**the effect, you already know that. You and Citizen Tahn have both sampled a Stone of Song."**

**"What it does, yes," Geoff admitted with desperation, "but not how." He gestured around the alcove. "And this temple, this anteroom—who built them? You? Where did you get the materials, the technology?" He noticed with irritation that Nedra was smiling at him, a Terran model of the smile of the Goddess.**

**"It is enough that the Stones of Song produce the effect which they do. It pleases the faithful," the Goddess said.**

**"And brings them back for more."**

**"You think the stones addictive? You have much to learn! And if you are not impertinent or traitorous, you shall learn, in time. I offer you sanctuary among my faithful. Your wants will be attended to. Watch and listen—and you may change your opinions."**

**"We're prisoners?"**

**"If you choose to be so. Consider your act in defeating one of Prince Meigan's valued Terran slavers, and you would be wise to accept my hospitality. Nedra..."**

**The Terran girl genuflected to the giantess, then turned toward the front of the temple. Once more there was that unspoken invitation-command to her manner. "Mr. Latimer, Citizen Tahn."**

**Geoff wondered if he should bow, and whether the telepathic powers extended to stopping him if he should try to go further back in the rocky sanctuary. He finally backed a few steps, nodding his head respectfully, then turned to follow Nedra and Tahn back to the silently opening doorway into the main temple.**

**As they stepped through, the wall panel closed again, sealing them off from the Goddess. Geoff studied the dividing wall of the temple and wondered if the huge female had embedded**

view panels there, to watch her "faithful." Nedra was watching him with ill-concealed impatience, and he tried to smooth matters. "She's quite impressive, and seems benevolent. I have the feeling she could have killed us if she'd wanted to."

"Perhaps. I am pleased she found you truthful; if you lied, she would have known."

"As I said earlier," Geoff muttered, taking in the fact that sometime during their absence Lynch and the cart had been removed, "I'm not a slaver." The peasants were enjoying a well-behaved festival, some eating, some animatedly talking, others singing and dancing. "If I were, I'd say this group would be well worth selling. I've rarely seen such, a healthy-looking bunch."

Nedra went to one of the anti-grav sheets and selected two luscious specimens of Pa-Lüna's *varna* fruit. As she handed these to Geoff and Tahn she asked, "And have you seen many Pa-Lünans, Mr. Latimer?"

"A fair number, yes. And plenty of primitives on similar worlds. Believe me, these are exceptional."

A few of the worshipers still sat in little groups about the temple, happily contemplating the transformed opalescent stones; but most of the peasants had made a sort of purse for their talismans and wore them suspended from a thong as a necklace or tied to their belts, or in the under-the-arm knapsack most male Pa-Lünans carried.

"Exceptional in many ways," Tahn agreed. "They withstand light better than average, and all seem... taller, more muscular than ordinary."

Nedra selected a *varna* for herself and said with a simplicity that belied her Terran background, "Health, too, is a gift of the Goddess."

The festival continued for hours, and Geoff continued to be puzzled and intrigued. He did not dare try to examine one of the miraculously changed stones closely; possessors of religious

treasures were likely to be suspicious of anything remotely suggesting confiscation or theft. He couldn't afford to irritate the peasants now. There was still far too much to learn.

The peasants brought Geoff and Tahn food, drink and flowers, insisting they join the proceedings. These were outsiders who had helped, outsiders who were to be humored because they did not yet understand the rituals.

At one point Tahn, after cautiously noting that Nedra's attention was elsewhere for the moment, spoke softly to Geoff. "Yes, healthier in every way. Not only above average physically, but mentally as well. Not at all like the Pa-Lünan peasants I'm familiar with..."

"They accept you?"

"So far, yes. They probably suspect I'm not what I pretend, but still..." A young Pa-Lünan female came up and offered a trayful of roasted meat to the two guests. Tahn and Geoff took portions and thanked her, and she favored Tahn with a glowing smile.

As she trotted off to serve other celebrants Geoff grinned and commented, "Yes, I'd say they're accepting you." Tahn proved that a blush was quite spectacular against a humanoid skin as pale as a Pa-Lünan's. Then Geoff said more seriously, "Apparently your servant brought the stone here to have it altered, before Adrian stole it from him. But if the Goddess is telepathic, how did your servant disguise his thoughts from her? Or didn't she care that he stole it?"

Tahn looked uneasy. "Unless the little thief convinced her that I was a despot and theft against me no crime." He was silent a few moments, then went on, "But I would say bringing a stone *to* the Goddess is exceptional. None of these peasants could purchase a Stone of Song in a lifetime of toil."

"Then where..."

"Didn't you see the stone polishers at work further back in the alcove where we talked to the Goddess?" Geoff smiled

weakly and shook his head, pointing to his Terran eyes. "Ah, well, trust my eyesight. It was so. The Goddess possesses the stones and presumably distributes them, with apparent exceptions."

"If the opportunity ever comes, we'll have to ask her how..." Geoff broke off as Nedra approached them again.

For several hours Geoff had to be content to learn with his eyes and ears what he could not discover through questioning. The peasants, for example, were indeed healthy; but the temple acolytes were almost perfect physical specimens. Since they apparently remained at the temple most of the time, did this imply something in the area imparted this unique glow of health? Or was it merely their constant proximity to the mysterious liquid or the Stones of Song? Was it only temporary, like the effect of the stones themselves, or was it something permanent? And how was it all done? He was torn between admiration for the technology and fear that the process was a gentle enslavement, less cruel than that employed by the Deliyans exploiting this primitive world, but one equally negating the Pa-Lünans' freedom in the end.

"Do you not wish to rest, Mr. Latimer?" Nedra inquired. Geoff gauged it had been five or six hours since they had first entered the temple. It must be nearly noon. Since the Pa-Lünan sleep cycle fell during the day, the acolytes had provided bedding, and some of the celebrants were napping, though others were loath to abandon the party.

"I'm not very tired, no," Geoff said, then admitted to himself that he was fatigued, though not ready to sleep.

"Perhaps some fresh air, then? It will not pain *out* eyes to venture into the sunlight. The acolytes tell me the storms are quiet today."

"You trust me outside the temple?"

Her charming laugh echoed in the high-ceilinged room. "Oh yes! The Goddess watches, remember?"

**Chagrined at the idea of a continuing mind probe, Geoff shrugged and nodded his acceptance. Nedra led the way to the temple entrance, where the ramp angled upward in a steady leftward spiral. The faintly greenish glow-stones embedded in the walls gave a comforting amount of light.**

**Then they came to an abrupt right turn and he discovered the green glow was not very bright after all. Pure sunlight shone ahead.**

**Nedra slowed her steps to match his, and Geoff realized he had almost stopped in reaction to the sudden light, and to the pain in his throat. The pain had been dormant for several hours, but apparently the sudden activity and some involuntary tensing of facial muscles when he'd seen the sunlight had triggered a fresh spasm. He fumbled for the vial of gels and hastily swallowed one; Nedra moved ahead of him slowly, discreetly, not questioning. Either she was being exceptionally kind or the Goddess had probed his mind back to that last assignment, then revealed the facts to the girl. But when?**

**The drug swept into his system and slaked the fire in his throat, and he caught up with her. In a moment they faced a green network that almost blocked the passageway, a latticework of leaves and branches. Nedra brushed it aside and they entered a small copse. Overhead, Pa-Lüna's sun neared its zenith, and Geoff winced unashamedly, then looked back at the darkened entrance to the temple: even from a few meters away, it was almost undetectable.**

**"Very effective."**

**They walked along a path barely wide enough for a native cart—certainly nothing larger could follow the trail without wrecking the foliage. Then the trees and bushes thinned and the copse became a rolling meadow and the warm, moist breeze of Pa-Lüna's interior plains pushed gently against them..**

**Geoff nervously glanced to the southwest. Only a hint of distant gray clouds hanging on the horizon. The air was hot and sticky, and Geoff led the way to the shade of a nearby tree, an aged and bent deciduous variety common to the Pa-Lünan**

landscape. He noted the trunk bent toward the northeast, mute testimony to the fury of the Whirling-Wind.

Nedra seated herself on the tall grass, and here in the cool shelter of the tree he found the time to admire her beauty and poise openly, and to wonder once more what a Terran woman was doing in this strange environment and occupation.

"What branch of the Federation do you serve?" Her long bronze skirts fanned out around her on the green carpet and she tossed her head to free a loose strand of reddish hair the breeze had teased across her face.

After a pause he said, "Ethnic Protection." This girl would resent being lied to, and he was certain she would know, eventually, if he lied. Nedra had an almost imperious manner, even away from her Goddess, as though the aura of her idol clung to her and gave her confidence.

"That... would explain much."

"Don't you believe me?"

She looked uncomfortable. "Most Terrans here seem to be out to take the Pa-Lünans for everything they have."

"If it was only money I wanted, I wouldn't be working for the Federation," Geoff said with bitter humor. "You're not out to take the Pa-Lünans, and yet you're acquainted with Lynch. He wasn't lying about that, was he?"

"No," reluctantly.

"Yet he's a slaver—Prince Meigan's man."

"When I knew him, he was a slaver, but his own man. If he's Meigan's creature now, it would only be because a nobleman's protection is more profitable." Nedra drew up her knees and clasped her pale arms about them. Her blue eyes sparkled angrily. "Months—ages—ago, Lynch hired me as a secretary, and fool that I was, I even believed that's what I was, for a while. A trading corporation, he said—selling trinkets to the natives,



something about an exclusive franchise with a high-born Deliyans. I—I was very naive, but it didn't take long for my eyes to be opened."

"And now you don't believe anything a Terran tells you."

She favored him with a faint smile. "I still hope, but I no longer trust. And if the Goddess hadn't assured me you could be trusted, I wouldn't be out here with you."

He tucked away the warning for future reference. "Goddess? You spoke of yourself as naive, but you're no primitive, fawning at the feet of..."

"What would you call her?"

"I don't know her name. Honored Lady? Esteemed..."

"Don't make fun of her!"

"I wasn't. It's just that I can't accept this 'Goddess' business—yet. Perhaps because I've dealt with frauds on so many worlds."

Nedra plucked a blade of grass and twirled it between her long fingers. "She's no fraud. When I discovered Lynch was slaving, my whole universe fell apart—with guilt that I'd helped him, I suppose. I couldn't stay with him, and I had no power to stop him. I couldn't even get off-world. Oh, he made very sure of that! The Deliyans at the port wouldn't even look at me. And the Terrans I met were just like..." "There must have been *someone*."

"Perhaps. Perhaps I was too stricken to realize that. I simply took off on my own. At first, I nearly died. But the Pa-Lünans were kind, very kind; especially when you consider what they've suffered from Terrans. I learned to love them, to love Pa-Lüna. And when I met her..."

"Here?"

Nedra started to speak, and then her eyes widened. Nerves

suddenly on edge, Geoff followed her startled gaze and there against the sky and low on the horizon to the south he could see winged forms. They got to their feet, and Geoff felt a knot of tense fear grab his chest. "Wind-Eaters?"

"Yes. They must be searching for Lynch and the other..." He caught her arm and they ran across the little open space between the old tree and the copse shading the hidden path. Once within the shelter Geoff paused to look back. The flight of Wind-Eaters looked like a flock of gigantic birds of prey moving slowly westward, as though to rendezvous near the point where Lynch had been captured the day before. Geoff thought of the heavy cartful of stones and the ruts it might have left. He knew how clearly things could appear from the air. "Will they be able to track us?"

Nedra shaded her eyes, intently watching the specks against the bright blue sky. "We disposed of the archer's body, and the worshipers always cover the tracks of the cart well. Most of our route is under trees... no, I do not think they will be able to follow us." She turned and led the way toward the temple entrance and added in a voice which sounded less sure, "At least—they haven't so far."

## *Chapter Five*

This time Geoff's eyes adjusted to the dim light much more quickly. As they hurried down the spiraling rampway Nedra paused to touch certain rocks along the wall, and the glowing green panels behind them winked out. It was a precaution that made Geoff marvel further on the Goddess' foresight. "Hurry," Nedra urged, starting across the main temple. By now nearly everyone was sleeping, with only one small group quietly chatting. Tahn gave a polite nod to his Pa-Lünan companions in this group, then got up and joined the two Terrans. Nedra looked worried and muttered, "We must tell her at once."

"Won't she already know?"

Nedra thumbed a recessed switch in the wall paneling to the altar's left and as the door opened she gestured them through.

**This time they went much further back into the inner temple than they had gone before, well over a hundred meters. The throne had moved again, and they found the Goddess seated before a wall full of far-from primitive machinery and surrounded by half a dozen acolytes.**

**Geoff surreptitiously studied the equipment in the greenly luminescent light. It all bore the strange Pa-Lünan stamp, and his frustration increased. There *was* no such technology on Pa-Lüna; the culture was simply not capable of it.**

**"Goddess..."**

**The great head slowly turned. "We are discovered?" Geoff could detect no apprehension in her words, nor could he hear much surprise. "I see: Wind-Eaters. But they do not turn this way."**

**Then the Goddess spoke in a strange patois, part Pa-Lünan, part Deliyán, a little Terran Basic and something else entirely alien to Geoff's ears; it took him several seconds to realize she was addressing the cluster of acolytes, but he could make little sense of the etymological hash. While he was still puzzling, the temple servants scampered off into the bowels of the sanctuary.**

**"I do not think they saw us, Goddess," Nedra said with the air of a small girl whistling in the dark.**

**Abruptly, Geoff winced at the familiar annoyance of telepathic fingers probing inside his skull. Then the unpleasantness ended and the eyes of the Goddess became glassily unfocused, as though she had turned her attention elsewhere. Nedra leaned forward, her lips slightly parted, anxiously watching, and Geoff and Tahn drew a little away from the two in mutual uneasiness.**

**"No," the Goddess said at last. "I do not believe they saw yoji."**

**Nedra slumped with relief, but only for an instant. She straightened as noises echoed out of the darkness of the cavern, and the Goddess languidly gazed downward, her eyes losing**

**that abstract stare. The acolytes had returned, dragging someone with them.**

**"Lynch..." Geoff began, surprised to see the man alive.**

**A stentorian voice said above him, "Yes, he is alive. You misjudge me, Geoff Latimer. He will be treated far more kindly than he would have dealt with one of my faithful had one fallen into his hands."**

**Lynch tried to pull free of the many clawed hands restraining him, and one of the acolytes clamped a firm grip on the slaver's injured arm. Gasping, Lynch glared first at the Pa-Lünan, then at Geoff. "Are you going to just stand there?"**

**"Lynch, as far as I'm concerned, the Pa-Lünans can use you for target practice. I won't shed any tears for you."**

**"Don't be a fool! Look around you and think what...™"**

**The Goddess' voice cut in, flatly, uninterested in Terran squabbles. "We will learn Prince Meigan's..."**

**With startling suddenness, Lynch broke free of the acolytes' restraining grasp and hurled one surprised native in Geoff's direction. As the Pa-Lünan bowled into him, Geoff saw Lynch moving forward rapidly, purposefully, his good left hand scooping down toward his boot and cold rage in his eyes.**

**Geoff made no effort to thrust the Pa-Lünan aside. Instead he grasped the loose fabric of the acolyte's garment and pulled, letting them both fall and roll, cushioning the impact and getting well out of the way of Lynch's charge.**

**As they struck the hard floor he continued to roll, disengaging himself from the uncomprehending Pa-Lünan. Geoff slid over on his shoulder and tumbled until he was braced on one knee, warily facing the slaver.**

**Give Lynch credit; he was no amateur. Seeing Geoff alert, Lynch instantly shifted his attack, lunging for Nedra, something glittering in his fist.**

**Geoff put out a foot and hand, catching the slaver's wrist and tripping him all in one movement. They struggled, with Lynch desperately trying to wrench free his hand and Geoff prying at his fingers. Obviously, Lynch's useless right arm was going to tell, to cancel out his greater weight. But the look of determination in the slaver's eyes warned Geoff to take no chances.**

**Exerting all the muscle he could, Geoff half dragged Lynch to his feet and propelled both of them against the wall, the slaver first. As Lynch's head struck the glass-smooth surface his hand tightened, then fell open limply. Geoff stepped back and let Lynch slump to the floor like a sack of grain.**

**"You should not have done that," the Goddess commented, sounding annoyed.**

**Geoff whirled, displaying the small shiny piece of metal in his hand. "Do you know what this is?"**

**There was a moment's silence, and Geoff irritably shook his head as the pawing through his head came again. "It looks like a mere decoration, but I understand it is a weapon."**

**"And quite a vicious one. It's designed to look like some sort of jeweled stud so it can be worn on a belt or boot, just as Lynch wore it. It's an assassin's weapon—not too accurate, but at close range it doesn't need to be."**

**"I would have stopped him..."**

**"In time to save your Priestess? Or is she expendable?"**

**Nedra gasped, and Geoff suspected he had been too impertinent. Arguing with a giantess, and a telepathic one at that, could be as dangerous as arguing with Lynch's mini-disruptor.**

**"Give me the weapon, please."**

**Geoff handed up the disruptor into her large palm. As her fingers closed about it, she stared at Lynch's sprawled form and**

sighed. One of the acolytes was prodding the slaver halfheartedly, shaking him to no result.

"You have cost us valuable information, Mr. Latimer," the Goddess chided him. "His mind is useless to me at the moment. He is unconscious, perhaps dying."

"I doubt that. He'll take a lot of killing."

"Your motives were sincere—but a trifle ill-timed." She spoke again in the patois that was evidently the temple dialect, and the acolytes picked up Lynch and carried him away into the darkness. "With care, perhaps he will regain consciousness and I may probe his mind. There is much he could tell us about Meigan."

Geoff thought to himself that Lynch might have expected as much, and his almost suicidal effort to escape might have been fear-driven by that possibility.

"But this is Prince Meigan's province. I should think you would know him well, Goddess," Tahn said.

"Meigan's court is some distance," the Goddess said, and for the first time there was embarrassed uncertainty in her voice. "It is... difficult to read things *clearly* over such a distance."

She had at last admitted a weakness! Geoff almost exulted at this discovery of telepathic limitation, and then his thoughts were shattered in a burst of fiery torment that swept up from his throat and all but engulfed him. He doubled over, coughing uncontrollably, lights dancing in his vision and his ears ringing from the effort.

Tahn was at his elbow, trying to support him, and in the pain-racked background of his consciousness Geoff heard voices and dimly saw bodies move. A clay bowl was thrust into his hands and someone urged the vessel up to his lips. Between spasms of choking, he sipped at the cool liquid and slowly the agony began to subside.

Then, as rationality began to return, Geoff stared at the bowl

**with watering eyes and horrified suspicion.**

**From well over his head came the reassurance, "It is only chilled wine, Mr. Latimer."**

**Weak and shaking, Geoff sat down on the floor, cupping the bowl in his hands, panting.**

**"It is strange you chose to come here, suffering such an affliction." He looked up at the Goddess with something close to anger, then quickly put the emotion aside, fearful of another adrenal-triggered attack from within. "A price for serving Ethnic Protection, I believe. Is that not correct?"**

**"That's my job," Geoff said huskily, surprised his throat was not too raw to speak. "Serving those peoples unable to defend themselves against others—like Terrans, and Deli-yans." He remembered Tahn's remark about a patron and amended, "*Some Deliyans.*"**

**"And you did so on a planet called—Arinas, not long ago," the Goddess finished for him. "That world is freer now, but you are not."**

**His hand went to his throat, trying to smooth away the lances of fire still lingering there, and he determined not to yield to the medicine again so quickly. The more he took, the more he'd have to depend on it. Slowly and cautiously he said, "If you learned that much, you also know my opinion of Terran exploitation of the Annans, and how seven of our men died there for that primitive people..."**

**"Died from wounds caused by the Sieatyls—the blue-fangs, as you think of them. A tiny poisonous reptile used as a living weapon by the Arinan and Terran mercenaries on that planet. Ugly beasts, but interesting; so you thought, even as one struck you. The venom is generally fatal—if I interpret your thoughts correctly—but you were lucky."**

**"Yes," Geoff admitted sarcastically, rubbing his throat.**

**"The effect lingers, and shall continue to do so." The Goddess**

paused, then said with audible compassion, "You should not have come here."

"He chose to, Goddess," Nedra suddenly put in, and Geoff forgave her earlier annoyances. "He wants to help us."

The pain had dulled, and the Goddess seemed aware of the fact almost as soon as Geoff. "Yes, you could help us. You are skilled, experienced, and your motives are the same as ours: the well-being of Pa-Lüna. It is unfortunate you do not trust me. Were you of the mind abilities..."

"I don't need to be telepathic." Geoff wondered if it was bad form to interrupt a Goddess, then went on, "What I have seen here is benevolent. I can't deny that. But I came here knowing Pa-Lüna is being mercilessly looted of her people and her wealth."

"Her people *are* her wealth," Nedra insisted.

"True of any primitive world. And from off-world, the signs seemed to indicate that this province was the source of greatest exploitation. Forgive me for jumping to conclusions, but I see now that you, at least, leave the Pa-Lünans their world. I haven't decided..."

"They are my faithful ones." Geoff met the great dark eyes and read warnings. Whatever his private thoughts about Pa-Lünans trading their freedom for the intoxication of the Stones of Song, it was unwise to push that line of reasoning in front of the creator of those stones.

"Indeed, and they seem well and happy. I can't say the Pa-Lünans I saw on Deliyas did."

"They call them 'indentured servants,' " Tahn said, "and their owners would not allow me to speak to them. But I could overhear their sad words, and I saw their bitterness, their pain. The largest number of them spoke the dialect of this region, of Prince Meigan—who sold them into that 'indenture.' "

Nedra said, her voice tight with suppressed anger, "Meigan



**believes the people are his to do with as he wishes. After all, he's only half Pa-Lünan: the son of a Deliyan noble and a Pa-Lünan concubine. Why should he care?"**

**"He has a duty to his people!" Tahn exploded. "He should help those who serve him, and he has not."**

**"As you have. You do not need to pretend to be a peasant here, Citizen."**

**"I came to help my people," Tahn argued, and the Goddess' lips parted in an approving smile. "As Meigan does not. He is an open sore on the face of Pa-Lüna, and the more evil for dealing with men like Lynch."**

**"They hate him, but the Pa-Lünans give their love to you," Geoff came in, bolstering Tahn's words, eyeing the Goddess speculatively. "You could move against his capital and destroy him. The Federation would not interfere."**

**"My faithful would have me remain here, in the temple. I must be here to comfort them." There was a defensive quickness to the words, like a prepared argument. Evasion? After a bit the Goddess continued in an explanatory, almost coaxing tone, "Meigan is everything you of the Federation abhor: trafficking with evil Terrans, selling his own people away from their world—never again to see the wet dark and the racing moons."**

**Her anguish seemed very genuine, and it was a moment before she could speak again, and when she did there was unconcealed wrath in her voice. "And now he plunders further. He sent men like Lynch to trouble my faithful ones, and to steal the Stones of Song. Worse, I fear he removes them from Pa-Lüna and takes them to the hands of wicked, unfeeling people!"**

**"The 'Goddess has dealt in peace, not war," Nedra said defensively. "She should not trouble herself with such things."**

**"I have not much considered the ways of violence. They are new to me, but I see you view them with familiarity," the Goddess said.**

**"Almost too much," Geoff admitted ruefully. The Goddess opened her hand and gazed at the mini-disruptor a moment. "This is not for my people. It is too deadly. They would harm themselves."**

**"I doubt Meigan has many of those. Probably it's Lynch's personal weapon. That sort of thing is dynamite on a primitive world. Even his Deliyen partners might think a mini-disruptor was a bit too much. It's too likely to bring the Federation in despite Pa-Lüna's protectorate status."**

**"Yet you have brought a weapon not known by Pa-Lüna. Mav I see this thing with which you crippled the Wind-Eater?"**

**With misgivings, Geoff slipped the strap on the crossbow and placed it into the mammoth palm. The Goddess stared at it intently a moment, then, to his relief, returned it to him. "Interesting, and within the capabilities of my people. The Federation does not object that you brought such a weapon with you?"**

**"No, and precisely for the reason you stated: it is within the capabilities of the Pa-Lünans. It's something they may soon discover themselves. I brought this rather than a disruptor because I would not harm Pa-Lüna. You must know I would not, by now."**

**"Indeed, I have found both you and Citizen Tahn would risk your lives for the Pa-Lünans, even though you do not yet fully trust me, or accept me. I believe, if convinced, you would challenge even Prince Meigan."**

**"I can't take on Meigan's forces with one crossbow."**

**"Nor would I ask you to." After a thoughtful pause the Goddess added, "But perhaps you should visit Meigan, and determine for yourself which form of 'servitude' least harms the Pa-Lünans, his or mine."**

**"Goddess!" Nedra exclaimed, outraged. "What we give you is not servitude!"**

**Geoff still had his own reservations about that matter, but kept his silence. He let himself consider the matter, wondering if the Goddess were probing his mind now, resenting the possibility. "As a matter of fact, our original intention was to head for Bai-Shan, to try to find out what went on there. Tahn filled me in on the general situation, but I have to make my own decisions about Meigan..."**

**"The man is a leech! Slaves, oppressive taxes," Nedra said. She paced toward the banks of machinery, then turned, her long skirts swirling with the violence of her action. She had dismissed Lynch as beneath contempt, but Meigan still had the power to infuriate her, and Geoff found this intriguing. Meigan might be something worth seeing, like an especially loathsome predator.**

**"He is the lawful ruler," Tahn volunteered.**

**"If you mean he paid good money for the throne, yes. It's no accident his predecessor fell to assassins."**

***KT***

**"I understood that to be the normal form of succession in this region," and Tahn's bland tone put Geoff's thoughts back on a professional track.**

**"Time's might be ripe for a successor to Meigan, a successor of the right kind." The great dark eyes of the Goddess gleamed with quiet approval. Geoff went on, "Then have I your permission to leave here? Your trust?"**

**"Have I yours?" she countered. "I do not believe you would help Meigan, but neither am I sure you will help me."**

**"We understand each other. If you are convinced of the right of your actions, you should have no fear."**

**Nedra faced him, disbelieving. "You can't doubt her motives!"**

**"I don't doubt Meigan's, either. But I may be presented with a choice between the lesser of two evils."**

**"We will provide you with a guide if you need one," the Goddess decided.**

**"To the Al-Laedur River," Tahn suggested. "From that point I shall be on familiar ground."**

**"This we shall do." The bronze painted head tilted forward and the Goddess stared down at Geoff and Tahn. "I ask only that you keep fresh eyes, and your concern for my faithful, for all Pa-Lünans. If you truly consider their welfare, I am in no doubt as to your decision."**

**One of the acolytes woke him with a soft, "It is time, Mr. Latimer."**

**Geoff and Tahn had slept close to the spiraling rampway, and as they collected their few belongings Geoff saw the temple was empty. All the signs of the joyous festival had vanished, the floor swept clean of crushed flowers and the back wall of the temple bare.**

**"Where are the faithful, and the Goddess?" The acolyte did not answer, but gestured toward the rampway. Geoff doubted the Goddess and Nedra had left, but apparently for their own reasons they did not plan to see them off. They both strapped on small satchels, then followed the temple servant up past the once more glowing green stones. They stepped out into a moist, dark blanket, and Geoff strained to see. He silently cursed the regulations that denied him even a small light: a good and efficient hand light was Level-4.**

**Neither Tahn nor the Pa-Lünan acolyte needed artificial light to see, and they pushed out confidently into the concealing copse. Geoff winced with irritation as branches scratched his face and put up his hands protectively. His fingers touched Tahn's sleeve and he unashamedly grasped that, keeping out one hand to fend off trailing foliage.**

**The copse ended and they came out into the cool, damp night. There was some faint illumination from the small moon but hardly enough to benefit Geoff. "Follow," the acolyte said, and Tahn caught Geoff's arm, leading him.**

Squinting through the darkness and wishing his eyes would adjust, he could tell enough to be certain they were not going back the way they'd come the night before. His sense of direction had been honed to a fine edge on a hundred primitive worlds, and he knew without seeing clearly that while they had approached the temple from almost due west they were leaving it by a route leading nearly straight south.

And going downhill, very gradually. They crossed wet grass, and low bushes occasionally raked at his boots. His eyes were adapting, and he could make out an occasional tree or, when they were in a depression, rises surrounding them, cutting off the paler open sky.

The day's hot moist breeze had been replaced by a cold and clammy night wind. Things crunched wetly underfoot, and Geoff was frustrated because he could not see the terrain. Ever since the blue-fang had sunk its filthy teeth a centimeter from his jugular he'd been driven by a nightmare of time; there might be very few more primitive worlds for him to view, to enjoy before he ended up confined to some Federation medical center—and those all had a sterile sameness. The increasing frequency of the attacks warned him the nightmare was drawing to a climax, time running out. Whatever he accomplished on Pa-Lüna, it would have to be done soon. Sorenson might well expect him to fail, and not exactly a large loss if he did; the Director would trust him to die well, leaving no trace of his origin, nothing to provide the Deliyans with a complaint hook for the violation of their protectorate.

Of course, Sorenson would *hope* that he'd pull off a miracle, but from past experience Geoff guessed the cynical Director was not likely to place that hope very high. He'd be satisfied with a report with a little meat in it rather than a revolution.

Abruptly Tahn tugged at Geoff, pulling him down into the wet grass. "Lie still!"

"What is it?" Geoff whispered.

"Wind-Eaters," Tahn breathed into his ear. "Probably a searching party."

**They waited, and Geoff endured the discomfort of the wet grass drenching his clothes and the loss of time, unable even to see the menace in the skies.**

**Finally Tahn got to his feet, and Geoff eagerly imitated him.**

**The acolyte rattled off something in the soft, slurred Pa-Lünan dialect, and Tahn interpreted, "It will not be necessary to hide after we reach the Al-Laedur. Now we must, because we are too close to the temple."**

**As they started off again, Geoff mulled this. Despite her seeming omnipotence, the Goddess hid from visitors. Afraid?. Or did she just value her privacy?**

**Moons arced across the sky and sank out of sight and were replaced with new satellites. All of them were quite small, visually barely larger than the most prominent stars, and the albedoes of such tiny moons provided so little light Geoff felt more and more like cursing.**

**Blind and silent, Geoff was led on for what he estimated was a good hour and a half, always on a steady downhill route. The descent was gradual, but considerable, and he didn't like to think of climbing it again. The slow-acting, non-fatal venom in his bloodstream would punish him when and if he did make such an ascent.**

**Once or twice he saw far off to the southeast the dim flare of an interplanetary vessel lumbering its way from or into the Deliyian port, and once they felt that shattering heave of noise that told of a ship passing not too far over their heads.**

**Abruptly the acolyte ordered a halt. Geoff stood waiting, wondering, and suddenly there was a soft green glow to his left. It was a torch-rock, such as Nedra had carried between the Citadel and the temple. In its eerie light he saw the acolyte closing the belt pouch in which he had carried the stone. Geoff silently raged that this source of light had been with them all the way, tucked away where it was useless to his eyes. He respected the prudence of the Goddess, but his discomfort still annoyed him.**

The acolyte handed the stone to him, wished them good luck in the Goddess' name, then moved back into the surrounding darkness.

He waited to be certain the acolyte was out of hearing, then softly asked, "Do you think you could find our way back, if we have to?"

"Probably." Tahn sounded a trifle unsure.

Geoff looked southward. The faint glow of the torch-stone reflected off the river Tahn had spoken of.

"It's good to have light again."

"I'm sorry, Geoff," Tahn said, laughing guiltily. "It seems unfair that I have no difficulty seeing at all."

"I'm a burden, I know. It's a pity *you* aren't the Federation representative." Geoff played the green light downward and Tahn led the way along a path slanting down sharply toward the reflective surface. In a few minutes Geoff could clearly see the river, and they turned and started walking westward along the bank. At their backs the sky was beginning to glow, gradually lifting the inky curtains beyond the glow of the stone. "Tahn, if the light starts to bother your eyes..."

"I'll let you know." Tahn glanced over his shoulder and smiled, tiny, slightly pointed teeth glistening in the erratic light of the torch. "Thank you for thinking of that. Most Terrans wouldn't."

"Incidentally, what do you make of the Deliyian and Ter-ran in that language the acolytes use with the Goddess?"

Tahn pushed aside a bush that almost blocked the path. "Terran because of Nedra, I think. Deliyian... I don't know. There weren't any Deliyans there."

"Unless the Goddess introduced it."

"She certainly isn't Deliyian," Tahn protested a bit shortly.

**"Perhaps not, but she's—shall we say—pretty damned advanced for a Pa-Lünan, and Deliyān culture is closer to her than Terran would be," Geoff pointed out. "There's another thing: we don't just have Stones of Song here," and he held out his hand, cradling the glow-stone.**

**"One of them called it 'The Nedra Light,' " Tahn said softly. "I suspect it's a special toy the Goddess whipped up for the benefit of her Priestess only."**

**"Quite a magician, isn't she?"**

**"Geoff, please try to see the good she's doing. I think she may have a good argument in her favor..."**

**"Possibly. The fact remains we know the source of the stones, and we don't. We know how they're created, and we don't. We're no better off than we were after that inconclusive analysis Lab Central ran on your Stone of Song."**

**"Perhaps because it was a Terran analysis."**

**Geoff detected the warning temper in Tahn's voice and temporarily dropped the subject back into a mental pigeonhole.**

**It seemed they were going faster now than when they were stumbling along in the dark, but that might be only illusion.**

**The sky lightened until Geoff could see things plainly enough to no longer need the glow-stone. He saw that the river to their left was barely more than a stream, rushing along the same direction they walked, breaking white here and there around rocks and dead trees that trapped the water and forced it to eddy or escape.**

**Trees lined the banks, and they all bent eastward like the old soldier outside the temple, but on a slighter angle. The sight encouraged Geoff, promising the river valley was somewhat immune to the Whirling-Wind.**

**"How far? Can you make an estimate?"**



**"We shall not reach Bai-Shan until late tonight. My fault, I'm afraid. I know you could travel all day, but I shall have to seek shelter from the sun very soon." The path was wider now, and Tahn dropped back to walk at Geoff's side.**

**The rising sun was making shadows now, and Geoff said, I don't think a day in the sack is *going* to hurt me. These past hours have been *pretty wild*, and I want to be in top *condition when we reach Bai-Shan*. Ready for anything...**

**"*And that* may be exactly what we will encounter," Tahn warned.**

## ***Chapter Six***

**"Not much further," Tahn assured him. "Around that next large bend in the river, I believe."**

**They had buried the green stone under a clump of bushes far upriver, long kilometers back if Geoff's feet were any indication. That layoff in the hospital had softened him disgustingly. He regretted leaving the light, but for the moment they would play along with the Goddess; the acolyte had asked Tahn not to carry the torch into the city, or even close to it. The light-stone was not for the unproven.**

**Tahn had selected a good shelter up under the bank, and they had waited out the roar of the wind and rain. The shelter itself had fascinated Geoff; it had been a crude structure of stone, wood, and what looked very much like the fire-scarred remnants of a wrecked spaceship—more mute evidence of the price Deliyas had paid to acquire Pa-Lüna as a fief.**

**A full day's sleep, even with windy interruptions, had felt good, and Geoff awakened refreshed, early enough to watch the sun set, check the map and get his bearings in case they had to make a hasty withdrawal. Not until night fell was Tahn eager to continue their journey. They'd made a spartan meal from concentrates and purified river water, then started downriver again.**

How long ago? Probably not as long as it felt like, Geoff mused. He was not so much tired as bored. The crude torch he'd fashioned from the branches of an oily bush threw enough light to guide his footing, but not much more. He might as well have been walking through a cave, with Pa-Lüna's unspoiled countryside still a secret.

"There." Tahn pointed, and now downstream Geoff saw the feeble flicker of torches. "There's a bridge across the Al-Laedur there, the only crossing for quite a distance. Bai-Shan is just south of the river."

They trudged a little quicker now, and Geoff asked, "Did you get this far before, when you were following the thief?"

"No: I reached the Lai-Andra, the southern section of the province, before I lost the trail." Tahn paused, then went on, "When I again heard of him, it was that he'd been to Bai-Shan and back, and that he'd met a Terran named Adrian. I never saw my servant again, but I learned Adrian had the stone; and I followed him from the edge of the province to the Deliyian port, and from there to Deliyas."

"And we know that somehow it arrived at the temple. Apparently before Lynch and Adrian saw it, or Lynch wouldn't have been so plainly surprised by the Goddess." Geoff ran the possibilities through his head. "We have to assume your servant not only had the stone converted to a True Stone—as they call it—by the Goddess, but got himself killed before he revealed the source to Lynch or Adrian."

"He always was too greedy, I'm afraid."

They began climbing the bank. The bridge loomed above them, a heavy wooden span with glowing torches mounted on its railings. The slope was slippery, and Geoff pulled himself up by handholds on the clumpy bushes dotting the bank.

"I still admire the neat job you did stealing that stone back from Adrian. With his reputation, it wouldn't have been easy to snatch." -

**"I *repossessed* it," Tahn repeated, sounding pained. "I showed you the crest of my family. It was mine."**

**They reached the top of the bank and rested a moment, panting. Then Geoff said, "Yes, it was yours; so stop sounding guilty."**

**"But... if I had not stolen it, Adrian would not have been slain, nor would Prince Kisyan have ended his existence."**

**"*If*: you can't live your life on that. You told me that servant was somebody you'd trusted, cared for—a dog of a beggar who'd have died but for your generosity. And Adrian..."**

**"Would not have ended existence if he had been able to sell that Stone of Song to Kisyan," Tahn finished, starting across the bridge. Geoff caught up with him and grasped the Pa-Lünan's arm; depression and guilt were poor companions for venturing into probable enemy territory.**

**"How did Adrian get the stone in the first place?"**

**After a hesitation, Tahn admitted, "He undoubtedly killed my servant."**

**Geoff walked across the bridge, his boots thumping hollowly against the heavy planking; he let Tahn's own words rattle in the Pa-Lünan's ears. On the opposite bank he saw the earthen hummocks that were the underground homes of Bai-Shan's citizenry, and a narrow, snaking pathway trailing off into a dimly-lighted central area of the primitive metropolis.**

**"Perhaps... perhaps you're right." Tahn was beside him now, walking briskly to match Geoff's longer stride as they started down the meandering dirt road. "Adrian was hardly a prime specimen of any species."**

**"I wouldn't shed any tears for him, no. Save your concern for the Pa-Lünans Meigan wants to indenture."**

**The road took a little dip and a massive mud puddle nearly filled the path. Geoff and Tahn detoured around it, heading for**

the concentration of lights. To their right a Pa-Lünan female and several youngsters emerged from the open doorway of an earthen dwelling. Then an adult male joined his family and they all started down the widening path. Each of the Pa-Lünans, even the children, carried baskets.

"Market night?" Geoff speculated.

"I doubt it's a special night. Most likely they're taking the results of their day's work to sell to the farmers from the palace farms. They'll be in the market up ahead."

The path widened and disappeared, buried by a cluster of crude booths and milling customers. The Pa-Lünan family which had preceded Geoff and Tahn down the dirt road sought an unoccupied spot and spread a cloth, setting out the wares of their home factory—pottery—for possible purchase.

"I'd keep an eye out for Meigan's militia," Tahn cautioned.

It was a typical open-air market, except that the only illumination came from a series of oily torches mounted on poles surrounding the area. These cast eerie, wavering shadows and gave a very feeble light, though quite enough for Pa-Lünan eyes.

"They've noticed you," Tahn said, nudging Geoff. He'd expected to be noticed; Terrans who weren't known slavers wouldn't be too common. But a surreptitious survey told him the peasants had taken his presence without even looking up, and Geoff was a bit at a loss. "Who?"

"You probably can't see them. On the far side of the market—it's a little group of Terrans and half-breed Deliyans."

"Unless they have unusual eyes, I doubt the Terrans can see me."

"The Deliyans can, to fudge from their expressions," Tahn assured him. "Their Pa-Lünan blood gives them a bit of extra night vision."

**"Convenient." Geoff sauntered along, pretending to take an interest in first one peasant's merchandise, then another's, talking out of the corner of his mouth, "Keep me posted. Remember, as far as anyone here is concerned, I don't speak much Pa-Lünan."**

**He let his nonchalant tour take him close to the area Tahn had mentioned, and now he could see the group plainly. The market was somewhat crowded, but his Terran height enabled him to see over the heads of the Pa-Lünans easily. Two Terrans seemed to be managing things, assisted by four Deliyans with abnormally large eyes and squashed noses indicating partial Pa-Lünan ancestry. The Terrans were trying not to notice him, but Geoff recognized the under-the-brows sidelong glances and smiled to himself. One of the Deliyans was giving a sales talk to some interested Pa-Lünans; the audience looked dirt poor, with patched and threadbare clothing, unbooted feet and dismayingly gaunt faces. Geoff had an urge to send out a call for emergency relief from Ethnic Protection Division. These people looked more than half-starved, and racked by disease.**

**Seeming to take an interest in a display of native metal-work, Geoff listened. The Deliyian salesman knew all the angles.**

**Honored Friends, this is a lawful service, no disgrace whatever. For a service of only one season, you will receive thirty ishkari. Think of it! Think what that will buy for you, for your Treasured Ones. And what must you do *to* earn this princely sum? *No more than you would perform during your* monthly tax to the palace labor force. You will be servants to some rich off-wo rider, fetch his clothes, run his errands— and if you plan things well, you may even receive a bonus in addition to those thirty ishkari, eh? We all know how wealthy the off-worlders are." The Deliyian conspiratorially nudged a young, thin Pa-Lünan male in his prominent ribs. The adolescent feebly smiled back, as though determined to mask his ignorance of off-worlders by seeming to agree; he had a hungry look Geoff had seen before—a hunger for more than food.**

**"You may agree to whatever terms you wish, Honored**

**Friends. I will be more than fair. If it's just a trifle you require, we can arrange for that thirty ishkari season I spoke of. But for you with no attachments, nothing to bind you here immediately"—the salesman glanced meaningfully around his more youthful listeners—"just think how much you can store up in four or five seasons!"**

**"I wonder," Tahn muttered for Geoff's ears only, "why someone doesn't question him about the ones who have gone before, why they've never come back?"**

**"Look at them," Geoff whispered. "If that golden promise he makes them were true, would you blame a friend or relative for not returning?"**

**"But it isn't true! Someone should tell them that. Perhaps I should." Geoff met Tahn's eyes and knew the little nobleman wasn't joking. Even though it might get him torn apart by the Terran-Deliyan group, he'd be willing to risk it.**

**"What would you accomplish? No, we—"**

**"Honored Sir, you are Terran?" The pronunciation was tortured, produced by a tongue that normally dealt with the slurred dialect of Pa-Lima's Interior. Geoff turned to face the speaker, and looked down at a squad wearing uniforms decorated with Meigan's coat of arms. The one who had spoken had that terribly earnest and proud bearing of a young officer on the way up—a mannerism that was the same no matter what the culture or the Level.**

**"Yes, I'm Terran. Something wrong with that? I see other Terrans over there," Geoff responded glibly, waving at the continuing sales pitch. One of the Terrans standing behind the Deliyian spiel-giver was staring at him openly.**

**"Honored Sir, are you with that group?" the Pa-Lünan officer asked, his politeness a kind of verbal veil that poorly concealed his suspicion.**

**"No, not at all. I'm just shopping around. Okay?" The officer glanced uncertainly at Tahn, jabbered something in Pa-Lünan,**

and Geoff realized the military spokesman had exhausted his supply of Terran Basic. Tahn assured the militia that his honored master was merely a sportsman and the Pa-Lünan officer returned his attention to Geoff. "Honored Sir, you will come with us?"

"Why should I?"

Tahn plucked at his sleeve. "They're from Meigan. Standard procedure: you're not one of Meigan's Terrans, so the palace guards know they'd better bring you in for Meigan to look over. It could be rather unpleasant for them if it's discovered there was a strange Terran in the village and they didn't bring him in for inspection."

"We wouldn't want things to be unpleasant for them, would we?" Geoff said, plastering on a broad smile and trying to ignore the fact that saving the guards unpleasantness might be the cause of even more unpleasantness for Geoff and Tahn. "Tell the little corporal to lead on."

The route led slightly uphill, and Geoff shook out a gel and hastily swallowed it. This would be a very poor time to have his throat act up.

A structure loomed up out of the foggy darkness before them. Above-ground structures in this area were notable for their rarity; but this one was a pretty squatty affair. It was not over thirty meters tall at its greatest height, and its greatest height was, like the border of the marketplace, marked by guttering torches.

Meigan's palace? Ironic that the Whirling-Wind forced a princeling to keep his splendor underground. The exterior of his pleasure dome resembled nothing so much as a stone and earthen turtle with candles on its back.

Light streamed out of the door, filtering through bars. A portcullis sat across the yawning mouth-door of the turtle, and at their approach a guard walked up and peered through at them suspiciously. Their career-minded officer snapped orders, but the guard studied them all adequately before he shouted

orders toward the gatehouse. Slowly, the bars lifted, but only about a meter and a half. The guards and Tahn easily cleared the jagged teeth, but Geoff had to bend almost double to enter.

Like most dwellings in Pa-Lüna's Interior plains, the entrance angled downward. Geoff wondered if the upper story, exposed to the wind, was strictly for enlisted men or disciplinary cases. As they descended a long staircase, Geoff kept his eyes open, alert to a lot of chilling possibilities and not eager for surprises.

Gradually the worn stone steps were replaced with metal. Careful not to show his interest, Geoff followed the Pa-Lünan martinet downward. Metal steps? The walls were no longer rough stone facing, but were covered with something that looked very much like the plasticene sheeting fronting walls and hallways in public buildings on Deliyas.

They passed through a narrow archway, and Geoff had to force himself not to look back. A few guards at the bottom of that staircase could do a good job of holding off anybody who'd breached the outer gate. The numbers attacking would have to be large, and their commander would have to be willing to lose quite a few men.

At the end of the hallway the officer held up a clawed hand and spoke through a grille set in a massive metal door. Things were looking less and less like a court and more and more like a bastion on the edge of nowhere.

Another pair of Pa-Lünan eyes peered narrowly at them, and then there was the sound of metal scraping against metal and the door swiveled open on well-oiled hinges.

Beyond the door the walls swept back to reveal an ante-court hung with typical primitive tapestries. This much at least seemed in keeping with the Level-2 world Pa-Lüna was supposed to be. The guard snapped his fingers imperiously, gesturing at Geoff's under-the-arm satchel. The search was, by Level-2 standards, thorough, but did not disclose the false side in the back-pack that concealed the collapsible crossbow; Supply Division had assured him no one but Level-6 or high



customs inspectors would notice the compartment, and they seemed to be right.

Their belongings restored to them, Geoff and Tahn followed the guard contingent through a series of interconnecting hallways and doors and down small flights of steps. Sounds of laughter and soft tinkling music had been filtering toward them for several seconds, and now they arrived at the source of both sounds. There were more guards at the door, and while their own personal would-be Napoleon whisperingly conferred with these Geoff snatched the opportunity to stare.

"Looks rather a normal provincial court—with a few notable exceptions."

"The lighting?" Tahn, too, had noticed the shaded glow-panels along the walls. The torches had been replaced by something blatantly off-world.

"Benefit of his Deliyian contacts, probably. The lights don't interest me as much as what that guard's wearing at his belt." He waited while Tahn made his own survey of the laser clipped to the guard's waist.

"That's not..." Tahn began in a shocked whisper. "Not at all. Very contraband. Lynch had a mini-disruptor, remember, and I wouldn't be surprised if..."

"The Prince will see you now," the officer interrupted. Geoff straightened his tunic and slapped on a smile that would indicate the polite boredom of a typical tourist-sportsman, then led off across the tiled floor after their uniformed conductor.

Three long tables arranged in a triangle dominated the room, and in the space bordered by the tables a small group of native musicians formed a centerpiece. Their instruments were a collection of reeds and low-toned drums, and their music the muted sort designed to serve as background for conversation, not exactly the typical function of music on a primitive world. The musicians were not so much entertainment as part of the furniture—audible status symbols.

**There were only a few persons seated on the cushioned benches, and all were clustered near one angle' of the table setting. In contrast to the benches, the chair on the dais at the squared-off corner of that angle was a throne, and its occupant lolled in a manner that clearly indicated authority. Further, the chair-throne was backed by a solid wall, and guards stood behind either arm.**

**The officer stepped forward, stamped his feet exaggeratedly and bowed stiffly from the waist. Meigan nodded slightly and the officer rattled off a hasty explanation for his interruption.**

**Halfway through the explanation Meigan shifted his attention to Geoff and Tahn, but quite subtly. If Geoff had not been trained to the mannerisms and techniques of nobility on backward planets he might have missed the barely noticeable alteration in Meigan's glance. The prince was heftier than his subjects, but that was typical, too: the aristocracy generally ate better than the peasantry.**

**"Will you favor me with your name, Honored Traveler?" Meigan deigned to speak directly to him in Terran Basic, and his voice had a sharper quality than the usual Pa-Lünan slur. The undercurrent of Deliyian influence was quite apparent there.**

**"I am Geoff Latimer, citizen of the Terran Federation, Es-teemed Prince," and Geoff threw in a slight bow, with the careful courtesy of a seasoned planet-hopper.**

**"If you are not offended, Honored Sir Latimer, may I trouble you for proof of your identity?"**

**Geoff made a show of fumbling for the papers before he found them in one of his tunic pockets, then handed them to the waiting officer, who carried the idents around the table to his prince.**

**All the while the musicians played quietly and several of those seated at the tables continued their conversations, ignoring the exchange between Geoff and Meigan. They were a strange assortment of pure Pa-Lünan, Deliyian, mixed bloods of**

the sister worlds, and a couple of dissipated Terrans. A servant entered from a door to their left, carrying a tray that looked very much like more plasticene.

Meigan flipped through the ident-cards casually, but Geoff was not fooled. This local overlord was skillfully running his thumb over the embossings, and his eyes, behind that mask of ennui, were alert for counterfeiting. Finally, he languidly handed the closed idents back to the guard and waved him away with ring-heavy fingers. "Forgive us for our suspicion, Honored Sir Latimer, but we have had difficulties with brigands. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, Esteemed Prince."

"Will you take wine, Honored Sir?"

Geoff accepted the invitation. A Pa-Lünan majordomo appeared out of the plastic woodwork and waved him toward the empty side of the triangular table, facing Meigan's apex. As Geoff sat down a painfully thin youth scurried forward and placed a goblet on the table in front of Geoff and shakingly filled it from a decanter. The boy bowed himself away from the table and the majordomo followed, turning to smile over his shoulder as he went.

Geoff politely sipped the contents of the goblet and complimented Meigan on his sophisticated palate.

"Yes, despite our isolation here in these filthy provinces, we have much of culture and luxury. Are you surprised, Honored Sir?" Meigan actually appeared eager for Geoff's approval. A serving girl entered and refilled the glasses of the courtiers, and Geoff could hardly miss the fact that she was submitting unwillingly to their attentions. The girl, like the wineboy, was unnaturally thin; Tahn was, in Pa-Lünan terms, muscle-bound in comparison.

"I—I did not expect such... comfort... here, so far from the capital." Geoff confessed.

"We have tried to—" Meigan broke off as the serving girl cried

out, flinching away from the cruel hands of one of the courtiers. The prince gave Geoff an indulgent smile, an unspoken apology—not for his subordinate's maltreatment of a servant, but for the man's crudity. "We have attempted to make our court a bright spot amid much barbarity."

"You have succeeded admirably, Esteemed Prince." Geoff politely sipped the wine, wishing he could discuss the situation with Tahn; but it would be bad form even to turn and look at his "servant." He was comforted, at least, that he had a Pa-Lünan friend guarding his back in this decadent court.

"Have you been to many other worlds, Honored Sir?"

"I have traveled extensively, Lord Meigan, and I may freely say your court is notable for its unexpected luxuries."

Meigan smiled slyly and added, "For a court located on such a backward planet. We have been fortunate to secure the services of generous off-worlders, and, of course, I have connections on Deliyas. You have been to Deliyas, I trust?"

Loaded question, and Geoff wondered if he looked naive enough to fall into that trap. "Oh yes, Lord Meigan. Anterbas in particular is an exciting city."

"And did you lift ship from there?"

"No, I left from Langaroa." It would take Meigan's connections some time to confirm or deny that part of his story, anyway, and with luck Geoff and Tahn would be long out of reach before anyone got suspicious.

As Meigan politely interrogated him, Geoff's eyes took in a subsidiary detail. From a shadowed entrance came a small bearded humanoid carrying what looked like a doctor's equipment case. The physician seemed a mixture of several racial types, neither Pa-Lünan nor Deliyian, and he paused at the side of one of the courtiers. With a casualness that betrayed over-familiarity with the ritual, the doctor took an autohypo from his kit and swiftly injected a drug into the courtier's arm. The courtier, who had been looking not ill but bored, braced

**and came alert. His expression told of fleeting shock replaced by euphoria, a physical and emotional reaction Geoff had seen on other, sophisticated worlds, but never in a Level-2 culture. In fact the autohypo and narcotic drugs were not even permitted to be imported to Level-2 worlds.**

**If Meigan was displeased that the courtier chose to feed his habit in the presence of a stranger, he gave no sign. "We hope you find Bai-Shan pleasant, Honored Sir."**

**"A very intriguing city indeed. I've only just arrived: we came across country." Meigan's fair eyebrows went up. "Oh,**

**I've trekked on many primitive worlds, Lord Meigan. I find it quite stimulating."**

**"In Pa-Lüna's Interior, you may also find it dangerous. You are welcome to seek the shelter of our city should the Whirling-Wind strike."**

**"Thank you."**

**"We give you the liberty of the city, Mr. Latimer, and should you find it difficult securing quarters, please feel free to take advantage of my hospitality. I shall so instruct the gate guards to admit you."**

**"You are most generous, Lord," Geoff murmured, impressed and suspicious.**

**Meigan waved a deprecating hand and went on, "If you have valuables, I would be honored if you would trust my vaults for the duration of your stay."**

**Oddly, Geoff felt this last offer was genuine; it was precisely the gesture an ambitious nobleman would make, as evidence of his power and solvency. "Thank you, Lord, but I carry little of value. I find it more sporting to live according to the customs of the land."**

**Meigan smiled indulgently, understandingly, a comprehension between fellow sophisticates: Geoff was**

slumming. "Of course, and you prefer now to rejoin the peasant market."

As Geoff pushed his bench back, the officer bowed most courteously, almost toadying. Geoff made polite leavetakings and *followed his* escort back the way they'd come.

Away from the palace now, Geoff remarked to Tahn, "Meigan speaks excellent Terran Basic for someone in the provinces, wouldn't you say?"

"Excellent. And what did you think of his court?"

Geoff did not answer, but led the way back to the marketplace. Once more he pretended to survey the native wares, and arranged his tour to remain within easy viewing distance of the continuing recruitment of indentured servants. The Terrans were nowhere in sight, but the Deliyans were still busy.

"Can you act against Meigan's court, against that?" Tahn insisted, nodding toward the Deliyian speaker, and Geoff sighed.

"I need more than that."

Tahn's slit nostrils flared and he faced Geoff squarely. "We both saw the contraband drugs in Meigan's court, and we both see that despicable business over there."

"But so far, we have seen it operates with Meigan's approval and control," Geoff said gently. He sympathized with Tahn's indignation, knowing private citizens too often had the idea that moral wrong was legal wrong. "Contraband is frowned on, but if Deliyas and Meigan permit it, that's their business. I'd accomplish no more than Baleman's crew did if I go back with only what we've seen tonight. You notice the Terrans are carefully letting their Deliyian partners do the actual recruiting?"

"Lynch..."

"Lynch can say it's my word against his. You know Federation

law better than that," Geoff chided.

"Meigan's court," Tahn said stubbornly, -his large eyes bright in the glow of the torches, "is a decadent sore on the face of this province. You saw the cruelty, the poverty of his servants... drugs, illegal weapons..."

"Hardly decadent, not on a Level-2 world. Cruel, yes, but no worse than I've seen on a hundred other primitive worlds. You've had a taste of enlightenment, and what you saw sickened you back there. But can you honestly say such conditions are grossly abnormal or unexpected, given this culture?" Tahn was staring at him in dismay, but Geoff went on, making his point as gently as possible. "Compared to the aristocracy on some Level-2 world, Meigan is a model ruler; I've seen comparable situations where that girl would have been killed.

In the background they could hear the Deliyian recruiter still painting a glowing picture of life as an indentured servant off-world. "Slavery!" Tahn said bitterly in a low voice.

"That's not what they call it; the humanoid making the speech is Deliyian, and Pa-Lüna is a Deliyian protectorate. I just can't..."

"I can!" Tahn announced, and he hurried across the muddy soil to the little group of peasants listening to the Deliyian. Tahn began speaking loudly in Pa-Lünan, his words impassioned, and Geoff almost groaned.

"You who live away from light: do not listen to this off-worlder! He speaks words as sweet as cold water and dark sky, but he lies. I have been off-world, and I have seen our people who trusted such as this dust-clinger. They suffer, and they are not free, and they never see the racing moons again!"

"Do they eat well?" It was the thin adolescent the Deliyian had pitched most of his sales-talk to. The youth was staring intently at Tahn, hanging on his words. The Deliyians were furious but at a loss; such a thing had never happened before and they did not know whether to manhandle Tahn out of the way or try to shout him. More and more of the crowd at the stalls collected around the little knot of Pa-Lünans near the

recruiters, and this was attention neither the Deliyans nor Geoff wanted at the moment.

"Most do not," Tahn insisted, lying only slightly. "Most eat as poorly as they do here..."

"Shut up, son of a leech!" one of the Deliyans warned. Grimacing, Geoff started toward the group. He could not fault Tahn's idealism, but it had picked an extremely unfortunate time to rear its stubborn head. He elbowed in between Tahn and the Deliyans, whispering angrily, "Break it off and let's get out of here."

Tahn looked at him with desperate pleading. "Geoff, I must."

"This isn't the time."

The crowd was milling about excitedly, asking itself noisy questions while the Deliyans shouted themselves hoarse, trying to regain control of their audience without resorting to violence. Geoff started to edge Tahn away from the questioning listeners, and then he heard an unmistakably Terran voice behind him.

"Hey, you!"

Deliberately, Geoff did not turn. But the river of confused Pa-Lünans pushed them around involuntarily so that he faced the speaker. A hard-faced, slender Terran was shoving his way past the Deliyans and pointing at Geoff and Tahn, recognition plain in his eyes.

"That's them! They're the ones who broke up Lynch's raiding party!"

## *Chapter Seven*

Geoff cursed the man's long sight; he didn't think the second archer in Lynch's party had seen them that clearly. The Deliyans stared for precious seconds, digesting the accusation, and the enraged Terran was hindered by the bewildered crowd.



**"Now," Geoff said fiercely in Tahn's ear, "before it's too late."**

**Obediently, Tahn turned and led the way directly into the mass of Pa-Lünans away from the slavers, and Geoff staved right at his heels. Tahn slithered between the pressing bodies, murmuring a formula, "Make way for the blind," in Pa-Lüna and the peasants reacted without thinking, moving apart to let them pass.**

**Behind them Geoff heard a shout for guards, and curses and screams from Pa-Lünan throats. Their pursuers were forcing their way through the throng, and were meeting with far less cooperation than Geoff and Tahn.**

**"Well make it," Tahn assured him, then repeated his request to the mob ahead of them.**

**"We'd better. I counted at least five Terrans behind that bowman with the good memory."**

**"This way," a new voice instructed them in Pa-Lünan. The tone was cultured, much like Tahn's normal speech, and Geoff saw a tall native in clothing richer and better than the average surrounding them.**

**"Who?" Geoff demanded, then realized with mixed feelings that Tahn had instantly accepted the invitation of the stranger.**

**Repeating Tahn's "Make way for the blind," and enabling them to make even better time, the stranger veered sharply to their right, and in a few seconds they were clear of the crowd. Their benefactor pointed ahead into the dark, then said in quick explanation, "I am an enemy of Meigan!"**

**It would have to do for now. Geoff galloped after the two Pa-Lünans, loosening his knife in its sheath as he went. It could be exchanging one peril for another, but they were in no position to argue.**

**The shouting behind them faded and the dark closed in around Geoff like a blanket. They ran down an ink-paved lane between rows of Pa-Lünan hummock homes. No windows cast**

light, no doors stood open, and if Pa-Lüna's moons were celestial candles to his companions they were useless to Geoff. He stumbled and nearly sprawled headlong, catching himself at the last moment. As he regained his balance a small clawed hand caught at his arm, urging him forward through the blackness.

"Bend over," Tahn advised him. "The doorway is low." Geoff obeyed and felt something brush past his hair directly overhead. The cool damp of Pa-Lüna's night vanished and a muggy closeness surrounded them. Tahn dragged him along, cautioning him about low ceilings and narrow passageways.

He could faintly see figures moving across the distant light, silhouetted briefly.

The burning rose to the back of Geoff's tongue. Even dead the lizard struck him, and he had to force himself to be still, not to tremble or clutch at his throat.

"It's all right," Tahn said at last. "They didn't see us."

Geoff tugged at the pocket in his tunic. Furious with his traitorous body, he took two of the gels, gambling the additional respite from pain would not be purchased at the cost of mental dullness.

"Geoff?" Tahn sounded solicitous, so perhaps he was beginning to forgive Geoff's refusal to act against the slavers. The gel spread warm soothing fingers against the lingering venom, but it was several seconds before Geoff could move to nod his head without severe pain.

Their guide said something to Tahn, and with growing alertness Geoff was able to roughly translate: "Does your Terran understand Pa-Lünan?" The speaker put "Terran" in a grammatical form reserved for those one hates but obeys.

"I understand it very well," Geoff responded. In the faint light the eyes of the two Pa-Lünans shimmered eerily; and Geoff remembered Survey's dissertation on, among other things, the tapetum lucidum in Pa-Lünan eyes which gave them a

**glow-in-the-dark quality and reminded him forcibly he was dealing with non-anthropoid humanoids. Visually, he was helpless, and if they were feeling particularly bitter toward Terrans...**

**"He is not my master," Tahn said softly. "He is my friend, and a Terran you can trust."**

**After a long hesitation, there was an uncertain, "Very well." Then they were warned, "Stay close to me, and do not speak until I tell you it is safe. Trust me, please. We are all enemies of Meigan."**

**Heeding the caution, Geoff followed as silently as he was able, trying unsuccessfully to keep track of directions. The tunnels they went through twisted confusingly and were crossed frequently by intersections. Occasionally their guide would quietly order them into the deepest shadows to wait breathlessly, waiting for other Pa-Lünans to pass nearby.**

**Geoff could see almost nothing beyond a few meters from the scattered torches set in wall brackets, but everything he saw was crude and primitive, from the catch pools full of foul-smelling water to the often shaky and inadequate props and shoring.**

**The tunnels seemed to go on endlessly. Geoff gave up trying to estimate direction and shifted his attention to distance. They had walked a kilometer at least since they had entered this network; he formed a mental picture of Bai-Shan as an anthill inversely crowned with Meigan's underground fortress.**

**Finally they stopped at one of many identical wooden doors. A small pile of painted rocks formed a neat pyramid to the right of the entrance, and their guide picked up the top stone and rapped gently on the door in what sounded like a code or prearranged signal.**

**There was a scratching noise within, and then words too muffled by the door for Geoff to distinguish. "Kehl," their Pa-Lünan benefactor replied, and after more scraping noises the door opened and they hurried inside.**

The room was, to Geoff's tired eyes, almost brilliantly lit by a fire in a stone pit in its center. A smoke hole directly over the pit helped some, but the haze in the room was still heavy. Geoff looked around hastily and catalogued the wooden beds, a few low tables, and the hangings on the walls; crude, but hardly a peasant's quarters. Two Pa-Lünans, apparently master and servant, stared suspiciously at Geoff and Tahn.

"You may speak now," their guide assured them. "It shall take those foolish guards a while to collect their wits."

Speaking Pa-Lünan, Geoff said carefully, "May we know your name, Honored Sir?"

Tahn, too, was studying the stranger warily, even though he early had accepted his help with alacrity. Both their guide and the master of this home wore the plaited long white hair favored by Pa-Lünan nobility, and both were dressed in what appeared to be badly-made velvet. "I have seen you before!" Tahn exclaimed.

Geoff fingered his knife. No time to get at the crossbow, and poor sort of a situation for that weapon, anyway.

"Perhaps you have. I am Kehl-pa-Vernya. And this is Dai-tan-pa-Seigan, and his man, Parl."

"Yes, of course!" Tahn said, nodding. "You were both at court earlier this year. I doubt we met, but I remember your petition well. You pleaded for help against the Terrans."

"Uselessly. It only served to put me out of favor with Meigan. At court? You were there? I do not remember..."

Tahn seemed pleased he had successfully passed for a peasant. "Tahn-pa-Nyala, of the Eithado Region. And this is Geoff Latimer, a Terran friend. He wants to help us."

"Us?" Daitan asked suspiciously.

"Pa-Lüna. He is not like the other Terrans, and if he could, he would remove all other Terrans from our land..."

**"Take the Deliyans with you also!" Kehl insisted. "They are both leeches, and Meigan the worst of the lot. He consorts with those who bleed us dry and spits on his Pa-Lünan blood."**

**"What is the line of your mother's father, may I ask?" Tahn said, and Kehl and Daitan both launched into a complicated recital of local bloodlines. Geoff resigned himself to hearing the intricate pattern of intermarriage and cross-relationships common among the nobility on most primitive worlds. Undoubtedly Tahn, Kehl and Daitan were all cousins if they traced family trees back only a generation or two, and Geoff knew he would have to temper with logical caution Tahn's urge to honor kinship above common sense.**

**The servant brought them all steaming bowls of stew and cups of wine, and when Geoff had eaten, the servant returned *to his side*.**

**"Honored Sir," the servant murmured, taking the empty bowl and cup from Geoff, "do you wish to rest? Oh, do not fear the guards. I keep close watch for my master. They are searching on the other side of Bai-Shan now. If they come close, I will warn you."**

**Tahn nodded his assurance, and uneasily Geoff let himself be persuaded to lie down on one of the beds.**

**It seemed only seconds later that Tahn shook him awake, but he suspected he'd slept several hours. "Trouble?"**

**"They approach. Kehl will lead us to another place of safety. Daitan will stay here to allay the guards' suspicions."**

**Feeling fuzzy-mouthed and unfocused, Geoff got to his feet and followed Tahn and Kehl; he was too groggy to keep track of their route and knew he would be helpless in these, the true streets of Bai-Shan, without Pa-Lünan help. He would simply have to trust Tahn's judgment implicitly.**

**They stopped perhaps another kilometer away, entered a slightly larger rabbit hole, of a dwelling inhabited by a noble family and four servants. Geoff was vouched for by Kehl and**

Tahn, met Rahl-pa-Thoreigan and wife and family, nodded to the servants and braced himself to be a silent spectator at another long chat between Pa-Lünan cousins. He knew he could not earn the confidence of these local malcontents without letting them become familiar with him. Eventually they might accept him and his advice. Peasants might be the most hardly used of Meigan's subjects, but if revolt came, it would have to come from the at least semi-educated nobility, those with a valid claim to the throne. Pa-Lüna's semi-feudal culture could not be reformed overnight, and Geoff was realistic enough to settle for a small change for the better, or merely for the planting of an idea.

Twice more they moved, met other nobility and families. At one dwelling the wife of a nobleman asked him sweetly, "You say you traveled across open country to reach Bai-Shan? Honored Sir, in your journey did you encounter peasants with Stones of Song, or... did you hear of a... Goddess?"

As Geoff hesitated, meeting Tahn's glance, the husband chided his wife for being discourteously nosy. "Not at all," Geoff soothed. "I've heard of the Stones of Song, of course. But, a Goddess?"

"We have heard a Goddess had appeared, and that she is good, that she offers happiness," the woman went on, looking at him hopefully with large, unblinking eyes. "Meigan discounts the rumor, but it persists, and I thought..."

"Tales to amuse children," her husband snorted. "Meigan probably concocted such stories himself, as an excuse for further annoying the countryside and collecting even more taxes from the peasantry. He'll tax the poor dust-clingers to death, and *then* we'll see how he supports his little army..." Then conversation turned back to local politics and away from rumors of the Goddess.

But Geoff saw the curiosity and wishful thinking on the Pa-Lünans' faces. The thought of a kind and powerful deity who would help rid the region of Meigan and his hangers-on had made a definite impression on the local population.

Again they moved, and again. After three days, they came back to Rahl-pa-Thoreigan's subterranean manor once more. By now Kehl was beginning to treat Tahn and Geoff as old friends, and Geoff was quite familiar with the names and personalities of the pale sea of tiny white faces and lemur eyes around him. Better, the Pa-Lünans were starting to be casual with him, addressing him as Geoff rather than Honored Sir; it would take time, but perhaps he was getting there. He had almost three weeks before he had to contact Miguel, and that just might be enough.

Geoff was sipping wine when a servant approached Rahl-pa-Thoreigan. He announced that a Terran was at the door, one he was sure was no slave.

As Rahl-pa-Thoreigan moved toward the door, Geoff followed him, hand on knife. Rahl-pa-Thoreigan straightened his robes and put on a noncommittal expression, then nodded to his servant. As the door opened, Geoff braced himself, prepared for anything.

But not quite.

"I was told you'd be here, Geoff."

He stared for long seconds before he became aware his jaw was agape. And as the door closed behind the little party he finally found his voice. "Nedra!"

"We were concerned about you, but I see we needn't have been," she said casually. Her long gown had been replaced by a sleeveless form-fitting jumpsuit, the style favored by most Terran women. He had almost forgotten how confident Nedra could look, and how attractive. The Pa-Lünans stared at her openly, too surprised to react. Nedra turned and faced the gathering, her arms out and palms up in Pa-Lünan greeting: "We bring you blessings from the Goddess, she who brings peace and happiness."

A shocked murmur rippled through the small room, and Kehl finally said in a stunned voice, "Goddess? A Terran Goddess?"

"Ah no! She is Pa-Lünan, and good. I bring you proof of her goodness." Nedra gestured to her companions, and Geoff recognized three of the temple's acolytes. They came forward and opened the cloth packs they carried. Geoff felt a surge of apprehension, and the onlookers gasped as the pack's contents were revealed: dozens of Pa-Lünan opals.

Kehl knelt and held a hand over the stones, awed. "So many! Where did you...?"

One of the acolytes handed Nedra a stack of the familiar strips of plastic and small tongs. "You are mistaken, Honored Friends. These are not ordinary Stones of Song. These are what you may call True Stones. A gift." She used the tongs to place the topmost stone on a piece of plastic and gave it to Kehl. "Touch it," she ordered, "and remember—this comes from the Goddess."

Geoff felt betrayed. He had worked at his own brand of diplomacy for three solid days, and now the Goddess could gain a far greater degree of trust with one gift. Worse, she could buy their souls.

That familiar ecstasy bloomed in Kehl's face, and then Nedra gently removed his small clawed hand from the stone. A split second of outrage flared Kehl's nostrils, but Nedra soothed him. "Touch it again any time you wish—it is yours. But please tell the others what you felt. The giver of the gift requests it."

The glassy-eyed rapture faded from Kehl's eyes, and he turned and eagerly began describing the sensations he had felt. Fascinated, the group moved closer.

Nedra interrupted their questions, addressing Kehl. "You have tasted the joys of a True Stone. Will you help your friends to know this gift, as you have?" Kehl stared down at the opal resting on the square of plastic, gazed at the pile of waiting stones and nodded dumbly. "Will you distribute the True Stones, one at a time? And: it is important that this joy be sipped delicately, as the night bird sucks the *varna* flower. It is difficult, I know, but you must help each one to do no more than taste the stone at first, as I helped you. Do you understand?"



Kehl murmured his comprehension, and satisfied Kehl would follow her instructions, Nedra turned to Geoff. "We *were* worried about you," she said in Terran Basic. "You caused quite a stir when you interrupted the slaver. Word is all over the region." Tahn looked embarrassed and sheepish. Nedra went on more soberly, "Even though we were pleased with your attempt, it caused much difficulty. Meigan's soldiers are not only searching Bai-Shan, but the outlying farmlands as well."

"The temple?" Geoff asked.

"No—not yet." Her expression told him he had touched a sore point.

"You came here to take the heat off, I gather. Stir up a little excitement so Meigan's men will concentrate on the search in the city?"

Nedra eyed the roomful of Pa-Lünans. By now every nobleman and servant had a precious transformed opal, and they were taking turns helping each other do no more than sample the True Stones, lifting reluctant hands from the rapture-inducing gems. "I do not think I shall need to create more excitement, as you put it. From what I have heard, even without my presence, Meigan's days are numbered. The Bai-Shan populace only needs a little encouragement, and the Goddess has generously supplied that." She paused and looked at Geoff with wide-eyed dedication.

"How did you find us?"

"First she probed for you, to find if you were still alive. She... she could not reach you, Geoff. Possibly because you're Terran."

Or because of the distance, Geoff speculated. Another chink in the infallibility of that gargantuan android or mutant, whichever she was.

"But she found Tahn, and was able to tell you both lived.

Some of our faithful lived in Bai-Shan formerly, and they led me here."

**"What do you intend to do here, besides distribute goodies?"**

**"Meigan..." and Nedra finished with a descriptive Pa-Lünan verb that cast the noun into utter ruins.**

**Kehl turned and exclaimed, "Yes! He must be overthrown!" Agreement ran through the room in rising mutters: the tyrant must die.**

**"Wait!" Geoff cried, switching to Pa-Lünan himself. "Meigan is not alone; he has many guards, trained soldiers. You go against him and you'll throw away your lives. Worse, you may trade Meigan for one of his officers and a military dictatorship."**

**"How would *you* go about it, Geoff?" Nedra asked. There was a tinge of false sweetness in her voice, perhaps because he did not trust the Goddess.**

**"You need to know more about Bai-Shan, the location of the barracks, Meigan's armaments..."**

**Suddenly seeming more alive and vibrant than he had ever seen her, Nedra whirled and faced the Pa-Lünans. "Listen to him! He is a Terran who will help you, and he knows the ways of evil ones such as Meigan." The room was respectfully quiet as she turned back to him eagerly. "Go on. I can tell you—a little about the court fortifications. Lynch was conscious for a short while and the Goddess learned something."**

**"This is our chance to do it your way, Geoff, a natural social upheaval, as the books call it," Tahn urged. "I can see now I was too impulsive. I couldn't change the culture all by myself."**

**"I won't be a strong man for the Pa-Lünans," Geoff warned him.**

**"No, but you can advise a local leader, can't you?" Nedra this time, and Geoff wished he hadn't taken a gel quite so recently. He felt too mentally vague to cope with this double assault.**

**"Yes!" Tahn chimed in enthusiastically. "Would you help a legitimate claimant to the throne—someone more progressive**

than Meigan, more oriented toward Pa-Lüna than Deliyān and Terran lawbreakers?"

"Who would that be?"

Tahn's thin arm swept around in an inclusive gesture. "You've got a roomful of possibilities. The cream of Bai-Shan aristocracy is here. Meigan is something of a usurper anyway; you certainly wouldn't be tampering with local customs."

"Geoff?" Nedra pleaded. And he conceded to himself he'd engineered the same sort of revolt several times before. Resignedly he shrugged assent.

Tahn and the other Pa-Lünans immediately began to debate candidates. After several moments there was unanimous approval. Kehl turned to Geoff and Nedra, who had sat apart from the group during the discussion.

"My cousins agree my claim is best, my contacts at court longest. The government in the capital are unlikely to object; the Deliyān tyrants will think me another complaisant lordling like Meigan. They will find they are mistaken."

"Don't award yourself the title, yet, Kehl. Meigan has a fortress and a competent small army, from what you've told me."

"I am not without resources," Kehl said a trifle smugly. "But, I shall welcome help. Tahn has told us you have helped others to find their own new candles. And I... I have never overthrown a prince before."

"I think you ought to move cautiously, take time to collect an army..."

"No! Now! We have suffered Meigan's foot on our throats long enough. Will you help us? If you will not, do not stand in our way."

Geoff recognized the signs of runaway patriotism and knew better than to argue. "We'll do what we can. You may have a

**chance, but it'd be better if you'd move slowly..."**

**"No!"**

**"Very well. Have you any armed men here in Bai-Shan, men loyal to you?"**

**"Two hands of my personal service."**

**"You may have my five," Daitan volunteered.**

**"And mine," another offered. Others added their meager troops to the inventory and Geoff counted twenty-eight armed men available to them. Geoff grimaced; Meigan would have a sizable force, he was sure. He could only pray these fragmentary personal guards of the noblemen would be trained mercenaries and professionals, with skills in weaponry to match Meigan's soldiers.**

**"It'll have to do." Geoff insisted they waste no time, and servants were sent out to gather the scattered groups of personal bodyguards. It wouldn't be a crack fighting outfit, but it would be better than the suicide promised if the aristocrats and peasants went against Meigan's troops by themselves.**

**"You must hit Meigan in as many places as possible at the same time, and hit him where it hurts," Geoff explained.**

**"*His Wind-Eaters/*" someone proposed, and Geoff approved.**

**"The quarters where they keep those who have signed to indenture off-world," Tahn added. "If they can be convinced our way, now that they have had a taste of Deliyen treatment..."**

**"All right. But if Meigan's true to form, he has a healthy contingent in the court for his personal protection. And the moment he suspects something's up in Bai-Shan, he'll send for reinforcements and—"**

**"Not if he's dead." Nedra stated this so calmly everyone stared at her. and hope glittered in Kehl's round eyes.**

**"Honored Lady, can you help us?"**

**"Meigan will admit me." She opened her hand and displayed a small ident-disc bearing the name "Lynch."**

**"The Goddess learned he never mentioned me in conversations with the tyrant, never mentioned my defection. I will tell the guards at the gate that I am the woman of the slaver, and they will permit me to enter the court. I am a Terran, and I can sound like a slaver's woman, believe me. Then—" She touched a bronze annlet above her left elbow and extracted a knife with a needle-thin four-inch blade.**

**Kehl was positively entranced, but Geoff shook his head. "How do you expect to get out, assuming you're successful in assassinating Meigan? They won't just let you walk back out the gate."**

**"The acolytes will go with me, as my servants. We are all armed—subtly. And Gaeli"—she gestured to one of the acolytes—"once served in the palace. He knows other means of exit besides the gate." Nedra looked calm and regal, as she had when she was near the Goddess, and Geoff sensed he was once more up against that brick wall of overwhelming confidence.**

**"You're underestimating Meigan," he warned. "He won't let you get close enough to use that thing."**

**"Perhaps." Nedra did not look in the slightest convinced. "If I cannot assassinate him, I shall distract him from noticing that there is rebellious activity in the city—until he is shorn of his Wind-Eaters and the indentured peasants."**

**"And we shall capture the weapons of the guards in the city," Kehl added, eager with planning.**

**"Meigan..." Geoff tried to interject.**

**"Has a weakness for Terran women," Nedra finished. "The Goddess learned that from Lynch during one of his brief periods of consciousness. Meigan will let this gam-vixen approach him, and when he does, I shall bury my fang in his**

throat."

Geoff gave up. Kehl and Nedra were so convinced of their various causes that neither could be reasoned with. But the scheme was just insane enough to have an outside chance of success. If he and Tahn went along, their off-world experience might enable them to keep Kehl's feet out of the more prominent pitfalls.

Nedra was another problem. Her adoration of the Goddess seemed to cancel out her Terran sophistication and replace it with primitive, foolhardy courage. Priestess and rebel in one package, but Terran, too, and human, and more vulnerable than she thought. Abruptly Geoff knew he didn't like the plan of battle at all, and he suspected at least partly for dismayingly personal reasons.

## *Chapter Eight*

"Give me enough time," Nedra cautioned. "I may have to wait before I am given an audience."

"Meigan generally holds court at midnight," Kehl assured her while Geoff squinted through the darkness toward the palace. They were all sheltered by the rain awning guarding one of the many entrances to Bai-Shan's underground streets.

"We may give you too *much* time, unintentionally, of course," he warned her. "It's a pity we don't have chronometers."

"Neither do they," Nedra said airily, dismissing the problem.

A group of noisy, seemingly drunken peasants made their way past their hiding spot, on cue. While the carousers attracted the attention of the gate guards, Nedra and the three acolytes left the shelter, and marched boldly toward the palace. It would seem that they had come through the marketplace and had simply escaped the guards' attention until that moment.

"Well, they look convincing," Geoff said with a sigh.

**Nedra wore the Terran jumpsuit and an ordinary Pa-Lünan cloak, and the acolytes were dressed in threadbare peasant garb. They appeared to be merely a wealthy Terran woman and her personal bodyguard.**

**Intently, Geoff watched the group approach the portcullis. He could see an exchange of gestures, but could hear nothing at this distance. Nedra held out her hand as though displaying something. The guards whispered among themselves, then raised the bars.**

**Kehl heaved a sigh of relief and rubbed his hands together. "It is working perfectly!"**

**"It hasn't worked at all, yet. All they've done is let her in. They may throw her in the dungeons."**

**"Not a Terran female, not carrying Lynch's bloody name," Kehl retorted. "Now, we must hurry to carry out our part of the plan." He turned and muttered instructions to several volunteers, servants of the aristocrats, and with their own stake in the success of this venture. They nodded and scurried off into the dark. Kehl gestured to the others and said a little too loudly for Geoff's taste, "To the Deliyans now."**

**Geoff and Tahn took care to stay close to Kehl as they ducked back inside the tunnels. As they entered, figures materialized out of the shadows; Geoff had accepted these too on the words of their employers—leathery and capable Pa-Lünan mercenaries armed with small swords, knives, cudgels and an assortment of other weaponry, including bows. There was something grotesque about these round-eyed little professionals, as though a basically gentle and inoffensive people were playing at the cruel games of their more "advanced" planetary neighbors.**

**Only one of the waiting group lacked the proper military bearing: a scrawny little informer, who was forever looking around nervously and shuddering at the slightest sound.**

**"Swordsman Aitar?" Kehl demanded.**

**A sturdy mercenary wearing a cut-scarred leather helmet**

stepped forward and saluted. "Honored Lord, we are with you." The combined forces of bodyguards and mercenaries had elected Aitar as their leader and spokesman, and Geoff rather approved of the choice.

As Kehl led the way through the tunnels, Geoff was grateful for the long stride his Terran height gave him. The Pa-Lünans were fired with dedication and moving rapidly. As they drew near their destination Kehl waved a hand and they all stopped. Cautiously, the nobleman peered around a corner of the tunnel, then gestured to Tahn. They walked out into the main tunnel noisily and Geoff edged close to the corner to watch. With Tahn masquerading as his body servant,

Kehl approached a pair of Pa-Lünan guards standing at either side of a heavy wooden double door.

Kehl theatrically pulled an expensive ring from his thumb and held it out to the guard. The soldier took it, staring dumbly. "Do you know the female, Isada? The foolish girl has signed with the Deliyans and... well, I would like one more opportunity to persuade her to..." Kehl nudged the guard and snickered nastily.

Grinning, the guard turned the ring, offered it for the inspection of his partner. The other debated a moment, then eloquently shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose it would be all right, Honored Sir. The Deliyans won't mind; with what they've promised the signers, you'll have to offer the female many a pretty plaything to compete," the guard warned Kehl, chuckling with the understanding of one lusty male to another. Then he turned to open the door and the other guard moved to help him lift the heavy latch.

Kehl and Tahn were both of the aristocracy, well-fed and quick-witted. It was adequate compensation for their lack of training as ordinary thugs. A few solid hits with the hilts of their daggers sent both guards slumping to the floor.

As the others came up to join them Swordsman Aitar grunted to no one in particular: "Better to cut their throats and have



them out of the way."

Kehl overheard and glanced angrily at the mercenary. "No one is to be slain if we can avoid it. Only Meigan *must* die. We will give the others an opportunity to surrender, even the Deliyans and Terrans; our friend Geoff Latimer will take the off-worlders away. It will prove our good faith and advancement to those in power..."

"If we aren't overheard and stopped right now," Geoff said dryly.

"There is a little room," said the informer at Kehl's side. "Then beyond that there is another room where a few of the Deliyans and Terrans sleep and keep watch." Geoff was still uncertain they should trust this errand boy for the slavers, but he could see no alternative.

Cautiously, Geoff and Aitar eased the doors open, then gestured the men inside. There were only four off-worlders, three Deliyans and a bored Terran, gambling at an expensive imported table. Aitar and his men swarmed over the Deliyans with quiet efficiency while Geoff ran forward and kicked the Terran's chair from beneath him.

"What... ?" the man managed to exclaim, sprawling to the floor. The next moment Geoff's boot connected with his chin and he did no more than groan feebly before losing consciousness.

As a few of the mercenaries quickly bound and gagged the captives, others dragged the disabled guards inside and took their places beside the door.

"Quickly," Tahn urged, and they threw open the inner doors. Cool air hit their faces; the room had no roof, and it was far too small for the number of peasants it contained. In the torchlight Geoff could see the indentured servants almost shoulder to shoulder, unable to lie down, gazing at the intruders in bewilderment. They seemed dazed, drugged, murmuring softly like a nest of disturbed, sick animals. "The roof..." Geoff said, puzzled.

Tahn replied bitterly, "To accustom them to sunlight, before they're shipped off-world."

"The Bai-Shaners must have heard some outcry from here, some complaint."

Kehl pointed overhead. "The slavers keep guards up there so that no one may approach and see what is down here. We are the first from Bai-Shan to observe the painful truth."

Geoff glanced up at the open ceiling, and Swordsman Aitar said, "My men are taking care of the guards up there, though I don't know if they'll follow my Lord Kehl's command about no killing."

"I saw some *xesha* out in the other room. Bring them some quickly," Tahn insisted. As they moved among the confused crowd, ladling out portions of the stimulant, Tahn spoke: "They promised you much wealth and luxury, escape from pain and hardship. You have had a sample of their promises. Do you want more?"

One of those who had taken a drink of the *xesha* pushed forward. "But the money; do they not give money for our services, the off-worlders?"

"Ah yes, but it goes to the Deliyans, the Terrans. You? You will receive work and more work, and you will be expected to work in the light of the day."

The youth winced and some of the others gasped in shock. "Food—do they feed us?" the boy pleaded hopefully.

"Enough to keep you alive," Tahn answered. "Enough to make sure you will do your work—no more. They have no patience for you. You are a *slave*. Do you understand? You will never see the money, never return—you will *die* on another world, a world so bright with day that your eyes will scream and give you no peace!"

A concerted groan rose from the listeners, but the young male looked furious, betrayed. He caught at Tahn's tunic.

**"Meigan knows this—he *must* know!"**

**"Yes, he knows. The Deliyans and Terrans pay him well and bring him off-world gifts. Why should he care? You are dust."**

**"Not to me," Kehl put in. "Your wrongs will be heard, your walls mended, and my guards shall spend their time capturing the brigands on the land, not cracking heads of those who are honest." If they did not know his face, they knew his vestments, and a coat of arms on his breast proclaimed Kehl's identity even to the illiterate peasants.**

**"Do—do the other great lords go with you?" the youth asked timidly.**

**"I am Lord Daitan's man," Swordsman Aitar said simply. "Does that tell you, youngling?"**

**A cry of assent and relief went up, and the slaves began to push forward. Kehl threw up his hands and they froze. "Help us. Tonight we end Meigan's existence, lift his cruel foot from Bai-Shan's neck. We will throw open the gates."**

**"How can we help?"**

**"Harass them, set fires, block their alleys, strike them down if you see the chance! Meigan no more!"**

**"Yes, yes—Meigan no more. The Goddess will help us," the boy shouted as the prisoners trampled out of the slave pens. The mercenaries pressed back against the walls, letting them go. Geoff frowned over the boy's parting words; the rumor of the Goddess had spread farther than he'd expected.**

**Kehl looked eagerly at Geoff. "Did I do well?"**

**"I think so. They're too much a rabble to do us much good, but they can cause a lot of minor trouble, a lot of confusion that will work to our benefit."**

**"Now the Wind-Eaters," Kehl said enthusiastically.**

**"Wise: if you can capture Meigan's aerial cavalry, you'll cripple him." Geoff hesitated, then added anxiously, "I think we should have heard from the palace by now, if Nedra had been successful."**

**Swordsman Aitar stepped to the center of the empty slave room and whistled. A figure appeared at the edge of the opening in the ceiling and peered down, gesturing victoriously, indicating the removal of the topside guards had been accomplished without hitch. "The palace?" Aitar demanded.**

**"All quiet there—not a sound."**

**"I didn't like it in the first place," Geoff grumbled. "It's too much for one woman and three natives to handle."**

**"She was not to be dissuaded," Kehl reminded him. "Still, it did seem a small party to carry out such a task. The Terran woman was so confident, though..."**

**"Her Goddess gives her confidence," Geoff said, "but her Goddess isn't here right now. She may need help."**

**"I can lead you there." It was the informer. "The palace is old, so old the tale-tellers cannot recall its building. There are ways to enter besides the gate, and the guards are not everywhere."**

**"You should have told me earlier," Kehl scolded.**

**Cringing, the peasant apologized with, "Honored Lord, you did not ask..."**

**"Can you lead several of us there?" Geoff asked brusquely.**

**The informer hesitated, then held up one hand with fingers spread wide and two fingers on his other hand displayed. "The passages are narrow."**

**"All right. Kehl, can you spare five men? Bowmen, cutthroat specialists, if possible."**

**"*Four* men," Tahn corrected. "I'll go with you." Geoff**

understood that now the slaves had been released, some of the edge had been taken off Tahn's passion. The evils of indenturing had obsessed him, and now he was back to the larger scheme of things.

Brandishing a few grandiose slogans, Kehl led the main body of his mercenaries back out of the double doors to join the miniscule army for an assault on the Wind-Eater pens.

"Lead the way!" Geoff told the informer, as he and his small group followed down the corridor outside the double doors. The passageway grew increasingly narrow, scaling down from a fairly generous tunnel to a tiny walkway barely big enough to admit Geoff's alien bulk.

He was beginning to worry about getting wedged or trapped in the tunnel when cool air struck their faces as they emerged topside. Geoff hardly had time to enjoy the sensation, for they trotted rapidly across a grassy meadow toward some trees. Distant torches threw enough light for Geoff to gauge his footing, but little more. To their right he could see the looming shadow of Meigan's palace; the portcullis and the torches decorating the turtle's back were not visible at all. They were approaching a back door to Meigan's fortress.

Geoff was surprised by the comparative brightness of everything, and put it down to his tunnel-adapted vision. Then he noticed the flicker and glow of numerous small fires between the hummock homes of Bai-Shan. Obviously the released slaves had wasted no time following Kehl's instructions.

"They'll be busy," Tahn said softly. "Good."

"The busier the better," Geoff agreed. He took a deep breath and the cool air scratched against his raw throat. It wasn't bad yet and he put aside the urge to take a gel. It would take time he couldn't spare.

Their guide moved beneath the trees and began pulling at some brush and rubble. Geoff moved to help him, beginning to feel that all Pa-Lüna was a vast network of hidden entrances to underground passageways. As they exposed an unattractive

**black maw, the informer cautioned them, "We must move quietly. Once inside we will be in the palace itself. I will lead you to the court, but I will not stay with you. Please understand..."**

**It could mean a trap, but it probably meant their guide was hedging his bets. He wished them well, but if they lost, he wanted to keep his job. He'd been careful to stay out of the sight of the Deliyen slavers, too.**

**Geoff had to crawl, but once inside he found he could stand up if he watched the low ceiling. Moving along as silently as possible, weapons drawn, they went steadily downward along a gentle slope. Occasionally there were steps, but more often just a well-worn stone incline. Twice they had to wait until palace servants passed them at an intersection, but otherwise they made good time.**

**The passage descended almost in a straight line to the heart of the palace. Geoff thought of some ancient engineer designing this well-concealed exit and wondered if an earlier Meigan had planned this as an escape route to flee rebellious subjects or a military coup. Ironic they should use the same route to attack Meigan.**

**"Soon now," their guide whispered. Geoff paused briefly to ready and arm his crossbow, then slapped the informer on the back to urge him on. They heard voices, music, loud laughter—it didn't sound like the scene of an assassination.**

**"There." The informer pointed directly ahead and Geoff saw light filtering under a tapestry three meters beyond their position.**

**"Where will we come out?"**

**"To the right of the table—Meigan's right." Geoff remembered the court layout and nodded.**

**"How far?" one of the mercenaries put in warily.**

**"Twenty paces." The mercenary licked his thumb and nocked**

**an arrow in the string of his gaudily decorated bow.**

**"Do not tell them about me, please," the informer begged, then ducked back into the passageway. They could hear the soft padding of his feet as he quickly put alibi time between himself and the court.**

**"Watch the corridor, and be ready to move fast." Geoff edged up to the tapestry and pulled it away from the wall a tiny fraction. "No," he said tiredly, "I'd say she wasn't successful."**

**The acolytes were nowhere in sight, and the court behaved as though nothing had happened. No, not quite nothing. Meigan lolled back in his chair-throne and two muscular Deliyian guards stood to his left. They were restraining, with some difficulty, Nedra. Her auburn hair was tousled and trailing over her cheeks, and she was red with anger and frustration.**

**Something glittered on the table in front of Meigan, and Geoff recognized the dainty stiletto Nedra had so confidently worn, and next to it Lynch's idents. One of Meigan's bejeweled hands reached out to stroke at Nedra's face, and she made an effort to bite him, an action that delighted Meigan and sent the courtiers into gales of laughter.**

**"We can't waste much time," Tahn said. He had plucked aside the tapestry at the opposite door frame, and now returned to Geoff's side. "He finds her amusing—now. But eventually he'll want some answers, and he won't care how he gets them."**

**Geoff glanced down at his crossbow, double-checking its readiness. "Did you see any of the acolytes?"**

**"No; I doubt they lasted long. A Terran female would interest Meigan, but he'd dispose of her assistants. I saw four guards stationed at the door off that way, the way we came in before."**

**"Mmm, and two with Nedra and two more behind the throne. It looks suspiciously like they have lasers. They're Deliyans, big and tough."**

**"More evidence for the Federation."**

**"We'll discuss that later. Right now I want to get us out in one piece." Geoff spoke softly to the Pa-Lünan mercenaries. "We get Meigan if we can, but first we get the guards. They're armed—he isn't. And if things get hot, we retreat. Understood?" They nodded, grinning, displaying an assortment of sharply pointed and broken teeth. "We want to get the Terran female free, and her Pa-Lünan servants if they're handy. If not, we create what confusion we can, grab her and run. Ready?"**

**Geoff reached up and yanked down the tapestry and they rushed out into the room, picking targets. Meigan had advanced from chin-chucking to bolder ideas, and the explosive entrance of Geoff and the others startled him in the act of trying to embrace a furiously resisting Nedra.**

**One of the mercenary's arrows took the guard to Nedra's left squarely in the throat. Cursing the man's audacity and admiring his aim, Geoff sought a target and shouted at Nedra, "Over here!"**

**Colorful pandemonium convulsed the room as the courtiers jumped up screaming, unintentionally blocking any more clear shots at the tableau around Meigan's throne. The prince's guards were even more hampered than the mercenaries, hesitating to risk hitting one of the aristocratic panickers. The guards at the door were pushing through the melee, and the mercenaries released more arrows in that direction. Tahn threw the short spear he carried and managed to make one of the guards go through contortions to avoid being skewered.**

**Geoff's attention was on the dais. Sooner or later those laser-armed guards would get a clear shot. He didn't want to waste a crossbow quarrel on a courtier, but when one of the Deliyen guards obliging pushed aside an interposing nobleman, Geoff planted the dart in the man's chest before he could lift his laser to fire.**

**Levering back the string and transferring a second bolt from dart to fingers, Geoff snouted again: "Nedra!"**

**The intervening crowd cleared for a split second, and he saw Nedra shove a Deliyen guard back against the throne, cracking**



his head with enough force to make Geoff cringe clear across the room. Meigan had left his chair and was trying to escape to the left, lunging for Nedra, a long blade in his hand.

"Geoff! More guards coming!" Tahn shouted to his right.

"Nedra! *Get out of there!*"

As Meigan reached for her, the Terran girl avoided his knife and jammed a sharp elbow into the Prince's windpipe. He collapsed, gasping, and Nedra made an effort to get the knife out of his hands. Geoff wished he were close enough to shake her.

To his relief, she saw the approach of another Deliyian guard and changed her mind none too soon. She climbed over the tables and began running toward Geoff.

"Tod many!" one of the mercenaries cried. "Hai-yan's hit. We can't hold any longer."

"Pull.back," Geoff ordered.

A piercing scream overrode the other sounds in the room, and one of the courtiers staggered, clutching one side of his head. No blood seeped between his fingers, but the flesh beneath was blackened. The unfortunate fellow had made the mistake of getting between one of Meigan's laser-armed guards and Nedra, and the Deliyian bodyguard was still coldbloodedly aiming. Geoff loosed his second quarrel and distracted the guard a precious second.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see one of the Pa-Lünan mercenaries helping an injured comrade while the other two backed away from the charge of six newly arrived guards. The court had seemed small when he and Tahn had seen it earlier, but now it was vast, and Nedra's approach painfully slow.

Another courtier shrieked at the impact of the Deliyian guard's laser, and Geoff saw Meigan chop at the wrist of the trigger-happy guard and reach out to take the weapon himself.

**Nedra rushed up to them, panting. "They killed the acolytes!"**

**"Back this way—hurry!"**

**He had no time to reload the crossbow, and the guards weren't close enough to knife. Geoff backpedaled hastily as Nedra went past him through the kitchen door. Across the room Meigan leveled the laser and fired as Geoff and Tahn backed through the door. In the sudden darkness Geoff heard Tahn gasp, and put out an arm to steady his friend.**

**"Tahn?"**

**"Close. Not bad. Hurry."**

**The rod which had supported the ruined tapestry lay at their feet, and Geoff scooped it up and used his Terran strength to hurl the whole curtain over the closest guards as they rushed up to the door.**

**Geoff leaped back out of the way as three arrows and a spear buried themselves in the struggling mass of trapped guards. Resolving to give the faithful mercenaries a bonus if he got the chance, Geoff caught Tahn's arm and helped him along. Two of the mercenaries brought up the rear, notching fresh arrows. Ahead, panting up the passageway, the third unwounded soldier helped his injured partner, as Geoff was helping Tahn.**

**"I'll help Tahn," Nedra said. "You should be using your weapon."**

**He didn't argue as she put an arm around the now-staggering Tahn. Geoff let her move ahead of him, irritably swallowing the increasing pain in his throat, loading the cross-bow. The two rear guards joined Yüm, always keeping their attention behind them. "They're staying out of range," one grumbled.**

**Geoff lifted the crossbow. The scope picked up the light from better illuminated corridors and silhouetted a helmeted guard peeking around a corner. The focus was sharp, and a split second after he pulled the trigger Geoff heard the satisfying yelp from his target.**

**Taking turns as rear guards, Geoff and the two mercenaries mounted the incline. Geoff had unpleasant thoughts of a possible ambush awaiting them at the hidden entrance.**

**The exit wasn't guarded, and the mercenaries shoved the loose brush and rubble into the hole, stuffing the junk tight enough to delay pursuit from that direction for long, messy minutes. Geoff took a quick inventory. The wounded mercenary had a bleeding arm but was waving aside help and rigging a makeshift sling from his own tunic.**

**"Tahn?"**

**Deliberately straightening and pulling away from Nedra's supporting arm, Tahn said, "I'm a little shaky, but I'll be all right." Geoff was not very convinced, but it would have to do.**

**"Honored Sir..." one of the soldiers began.**

**"The Wind-Eater pens?"**

**"I know where they are."**

**"Good. Lord Kehl's going to need us: Meigan isn't dead or distracted, and his men will be itching to get even."**

**He waved the guards on. They were a disgustingly strung-out group as they circled through the back streets of Bai-Shan, but as yet the village was reasonably free of Meigan's guards. A wooden structure was burning, and as they ran past the peasants saw their mercenaries' uniforms and cheered encouragement.**

**They crossed Bai-Shan east to west and briefly, to their left, Geoff saw the marketplace. He cursed the geography that put the Wind-Eater pens as far as possible from the secret exit, thankful they had at least one man who knew where they were going.**

**Abruptly the hummock homes vanished and the ground opened out before them. Another building was burning nearby, and its bright flames made the Pa-Lünans squint. Straight**

ahead Geoff saw an engagement between Pa-Lünans, some wearing the uniforms of Meigan's guards. Their opponents were a colorful mixture of mercenaries, peasants and nobles, with Kehl screaming on his supporters. At the moment the rebels were winning.

Just beyond the tiny battlefield the glow from the fire flickered across a giant cage made of lashed poles, nearly twenty meters high. Several teams of Guyans had been hitched to the structure and were lunging forward under the whips of their drivers, trying to rip off the gates. Within the enclosure the pale-colored Wind-Eaters milled and bleated and stared out with huge shining eyes.

Geoff's uninjured mercenaries rushed to join their comrades while the soldier with a bad arm began helping the Guyan drivers; Kehl withdrew from the fracas and rushed over to Geoff.

"Did you... *T*

"No," and Kehl's face crumpled. "Meigan's alive. You can look for more trouble and palace guards. It will take him a while to get organized, but you haven't much time."

Kehl glanced around in dismay. "What shall we..."

"You can't make it this time," Geoff said quickly. "Attar: clean out as much of the arsenal as you can... Kehl, pull out while you can. You've got the beginnings of armament for your rebels. Come back when you're organized, regroup now."

Aitar silently agreed, and the rebels were clustering around, whispering, the bad news running through the group. The motley collection was armed with clubs and a few confiscated weapons: Meigan had plenty of opposition, but almost all of it was badly organized.

"He's right, Honored Lord," Aitar said. "We can't do much now."

"The Wind-Eaters!" Kehl cried. "We can get *them*. Quickly,

**smash open the pens!"**

**"It'll take time to get those beasts airborne," Geoff objected. "That's one thing we don't have. Throw out a line to hold back the first assault—it'll be here any moment."**

**"We'll do it!" It was the youth from the slave pens, his eyes bright with dedication and lust for enemy blood. The boy spoke to Kehl earnestly, "Escape, Honored Lord.. Gather an army—bring the Goddess—and help us! Come back to wear Meigan's crown, and we'll help you hew off his head!"**

**"I *will*, faithful ones. Now, hurry, hurry..."**

**Shouting, the ragtag little army tore off to meet the expected attack; a second shout went up from the pens, and the mercenaries and drivers began racing through the gate, snatching at the beasts' halters and dragging saddles.**

**In the direction of the palace Geoff heard an ominous low rumbling and the distant clink of metal: the sound of armed men approaching. Geoff urged Kehl, "Don't wait. Get on the first Wind-Eater your men get saddled and get out of here."**

**"Where will I go?" Kehl said dejectedly. He had lost his spirit of moments before, now that his audience had vanished. "Meigan will raze my home, and I would not endanger my friends..."**

**"The Goddess will welcome you," Nedra broke in. "There is sanctuary for all good Pa-Lünans there. Please trust me, Lord Kehl. I failed you with Meigan, but I shall not fail you now."**

**The mercenaries were leading out the Wind-Eaters, and the fire and excitement did not make their task any easier. The terrified screams of the flying mammals joined the rising noise of the battle. A many-throated cry arose, signaling the collision of peasants, rebels, and palace guards. "The Goddess? I know not..."**

**"I will lead you. Give me a Wind-Eater to ride!"**

**"Daitan!" Kehl exclaimed tearfully, clasping hands with his noble friend. "Come with me. I see the wisdom of their council. Swordsman Aitar: gather what you can and flee to the Valley of the Two Wells. I'll meet you... somehow."**

**"An emissary from the Goddess will greet you there and bring you to safety," Nedra promised. "Very well..."**

**"Hurry!" Geoff repeated. The roar of battle was louder and closer, and the light reflected off metal not far to their left.**

**"Now, Honored Lords," Swordsman Aitar urged. He waved forward his men leading the Wind-Eaters. Geoff counted: twelve. Not bad.**

**"I'll take Tahn," he suggested.**

**Tahn shoved himself away from the wall and walked boldly toward the nearest animal. "It can't support a Terran and me too. Mount up, Geoff."**

**Resigned, Geoff ran to another Wind-Eater. The mercenary at its head held it nearly steady as Geoff poked a toe into the strap crossing the Wind-Eater's tremendous muscular chest. With difficulty he got his leg over the long neck and settled into the high cantled saddle above the beast's wings. It was awkward and uncomfortable, and he was unsure he could handle the beast, but it wasn't the first time he'd ridden an alien animal with no preparations.**

**Kehl leaned down to thump Aitar's shoulder. "Mount as many as you can before they break through. And yourself. I need that sword of yours."**

**A wolfish grin creased the broken-toothed face and Aitar waved them on. "Right behind you, Honored Lord. Away now, to this Goddess. May she be as kind as the Lady says »**

**Kehl loosened his reins and kicked his beast lightly at the side of its neck. The Wind-Eater ran forward, spreading its immense wings, and in its wake came Nedra's animal, and Tahn's. Then Geoff's Wind-Eater responded to the gentle kick**

he'd given it.

With a heavy, jolting stride the winged mammal started forward into the night, away from the welcome fire. The saddle slammed Geoff back and forth with each stride of the biped, and he gritted his teeth. The entire animal became a straining mass of flesh and bone as the unbelievable chest muscles heaved to agitate that huge spread of wings.

Then the one-two jolt of the feet ceased, though the air continued to rush against Geoff's face. On either side the long wings still flapped up and down, driving them forward.

Geoff turned to stare back, and behind and below him he could see the tableau at the fire, with Wind-Eaters still taking to the air and ant-like figures struggling to hold Meigan's guards until the last possible moment.

In *less time* than he had expected, the scene faded, and the Pa-Lünan night closed in around Geoff. Ahead, he hoped, there were other Wind-Eaters, and Tahn and Nedra.

But he could not be certain. He was for all practical purposes blind, and well above the surface of a planet that would become most inhospitable if he for one second lost his balance.

## *Chapter Nine*

After several minutes Geoff's eyes adjusted to the Pa-Lünan night and he could make out a few objects. Directly ahead of him bobbed the dark, thin bulk of the Wind-Eater's long head, its crest flailing back toward him; at each side its wings stretched out. Sometimes the Wind-Eater rode up-drafts, drifting for long, peaceful moments. Then it would lose altitude and go into a frenzy of flapping.

Kehl had ordered Swordsman Aitar to take any survivors to the Valley of the Twin Wells. With luck running the way it had been, that would be located impossibly far from the temple. But Nedra surely would have said something if the rendezvous point had been inaccessible. What was the matter with his

memory, anyway?

He couldn't think as clearly any more, when with every passing minute it became more important that his thoughts be sharp, alert. As he fought to regain control of his brain, the pain swept over him in fiery spasms. How much space beneath him, how great the risk of dropping the precious vial of gels? He was almost doubled over the wooden saddle now, the Wind-Eater's crest lashing gently against his head. Forcing himself to move cautiously, he waited for the beast to drift with an updraft, then extracted two of the gels and swallowed them.

Relief was slow coming, but was even more precious when it did. Slowly, he straightened, shook his head carefully, tried to focus his eyes. The Wind-Eater was flapping its wings frequently now, and Geoff realized they were losing altitude.

Then his beast settled toward its own rump. Geoff grabbed for support, clutching the saddle and the loose reins. There was a tremendous jolt, and again the one-two pounding stride of the Wind-Eater's hind feet against the ground. It was all over in less than ten strides.

"Quickly..." Nedra reached up out of the darkness, tugging at his cloak. Clumsily, he got down. Nedra was speaking in Pa-Lünan, and there was a low murmur of native voices all around them, punctuated by the occasional snorts and whistles of the Wind-Eaters.

"This way," Nedra said. He stumbled after her for thirty paces or so, and there was a rustling sound, the soft padding of feet, both humanoid and bestial, as though the entire group were moving in concert. Then Nedra stopped and pulled him down. There was a soft green glow, and he saw her pale fingers cradling one of the torch stones.

"Is that you, Geoff?" came a familiar voice, blurred with shock. Tahn lay on the ground beside them.

Nedra lifted the tiny light, shielding it with her body. "I think he's badly hurt. He didn't say anything, but we had to help him off the Wind-Eater, and then he collapsed."



**Geoff bent over his Pa-Lünan friend anxiously. He stripped off his cloak and threw it over the small shivering form. "Relax, Tahn. Almost there." He paused and glanced up at Nedra's eerily lighted face. "Aren't we?"**

**Her green-tinged bare arm pointed ahead of them and up. "We're at the base of the hill. The copse is straight up there, and the acolytes have led all the others and the Wind-Eaters inside. I told them to bring back a litter."**

**"How many?"**

**"Nine. They said no one else got away on a Wind-Eater."**

**"We can't wait for a litter. We've got to get out of sight." Geoff knelt and lifted Tahn in his arms. The Pa-Lünan was as lightweight as he looked, and even in his tired and drugged condition Geoff found the burden easy.**

**The torch stone guided his footing as Geoff labored up the incline, less taxed by Tahn's weight than by his own poor physical condition. The lacy network of the copse branches scraped at his sleeves, and he turned sideways, offering as little of Tahn's body as he could to the raking limbs.**

**Then they were inside and going down the spiraling ramp-way. The temple was crowded with the escapees and the Wind-Eaters, and temple assistants were beginning to lead the nervous animals back into the inner recesses. Kehl and the other Pa-Lünan refugees were gaping in awed wonder at the bronze-clad figure on the throne. The Goddess was greeting the rebels: "You are all welcome here, as are all those who would not harm Pa-Lüna..."**

**Geoff ignored her and snapped an order to the acolytes who had brought the litter. They put it on the floor and ran to get blankets while Geoff knelt and carefully placed Tahn on the stretcher. Tahn moved his head back and forth restlessly, his large eyes half closed and his albino skin glistening with sweat—cold sweat, Geoff discovered when he touched Tahn's forehead. He gently removed the cloak he'd thrown over Tahn, seeking the injury.**

While the Pa-Lünans were still murmuring in astonishment at sight of the Goddess, Geoff learned the worst. The "not bad" wound Tahn had dismissed so lightly was actually a massive burn covering most of the alien's left side. He heard Nedra gasp in sympathy as she saw the injured area.

"Try to pull his clothing free and what's left of the skin will come with it," Geoff said with distracted anger.

"Some..." and he bent close to hear Tahn, waited until the glassily moist eyes focused. "Something to drink, please, Geoff. Water, wine, anything..."

"Shock," Geoff muttered, and he thought bitterly that in all probability the only samples of off-world medicines to be found on the planet would be available solely in Meigan's palace. And they might as well be on another world for all the good they would do Tahn.

"Tahn, drink this," Nedra offered. Geoff had not even been aware she'd left.

Then he caught the girl's hand, staring at the metal cup and its clear amber contents. "That's the stuff you used to transform the opals."

Nedra met his gaze fiercely, and he felt the fine muscles in her wrist tense, trying to pull free. "He needs it! He's dying, and you know it. I've nursed Pa-Lünan injuries before, and I know the look. Geoff, he hasn't much time."

"What will that stuff do to him?" Geoff demanded, breathing heavily.

"Ease his thirst, at least..."

"And probably save his life," the Goddess interrupted, speaking Terran. "It is a risk: when taken in such pure state the formula places a great strain on the body. But it is a necessary strain which enables the injured one to recover. Tahn's chances are much better because he has already sampled the effect of a True Stone."

**"How?" Geoff still held Nedra's wrist tightly. Every second was precious to Tahn, but he couldn't just let them feed this unknown elixir to him, something the Goddess herself admitted was dangerous.**

**"It involves a massive stimulation of the body's metabolic processes, among other things," the Goddess said impatiently. "You are wasting valuable time, Geoff Latimer. Citizen Tahn will die without my help. You can do nothing for him —your mind has admitted that to me."**

**Geoff looked down at Tahn in near-panic. "He touched the stone, and the liquid was absorbed through his skin... and mine."**

**"In a manner of speaking," the mammoth contralto voice allowed, sounding even more impatient.**

**"And it will make him a slave, like all your worshipers."**

**"You are wrong!" Her voice rang off the ceiling, and the bewildered refugees drew close together, cringing before her wrath. "They love me, and are grateful. Will you debate your twisted ethics while your friend dies?"**

**"Please," Nedra begged. "I've seen it work."**

**Tahn lifted a trembling hand greedily toward the cup, and Geoff suspected the badly wounded Pa-Lünan had not really comprehended any of the conversation around him. He was in agony and racked by thirst.**

**"You cannot help him," the Goddess insisted. "Let me try!"**

**Geoff released Nedra's wrist, and instantly she lifted Tahn's head, pressing the cup against his lips. Again the Goddess spoke. She ordered her acolytes to conduct the newcomers to sleeping quarters and promised the Pa-Lünans she would protect them against their enemies. They shuffled out, leaving Geoff, Nedra and Tahn alone with a few acolytes and the Goddess.**

Tahn's eyes opened wide, and some of the dazed shock cleared. He was gulping for breath, the veins on his temples standing out noticeably, pounding with blood. The only similar reaction Geoff had seen previously was to an injection of adrenalin, but this had subtle differences, even to his medical untrained *eyes*. Nedra gestured to the acolytes, and they moved forward, bringing several blankets to cover Tahn.

Tahn's shivering was replaced with a different sort of trembling, a near-convulsion, and Geoff bit his lip, feeling useless. "It will take a while," Nedra explained. "But several hours should bring a big change; you'll see."

She seated herself on the temple floor beside Tahn and one of the acolytes placed a full stoneware pitcher beside her. She read Geoff's suspicion and smiled gently. "It's water. He'll be very thirsty for a while. His body is operating at a furious rate, replacing blood cells and fighting infection. We'll give him water, then broth to strengthen him."

Her assurance was almost convincing. Geoff slowly got to his feet, studying Tahn. His friend no longer shuddered on the edge of convulsion, but seemed to be dozing, breathing heavily, a pulse pounding visibly at his throat. There was nothing else Geoff could do here, and he forced his thoughts back to larger, less personal problems.

"The attack was ill-timed," the Goddess commented. "They should have heeded your advice. But I fear more than Mei-gan's little army. I fear the interference of the Deliyans."

Geoff eyed her with respect. "That unpleasant possibility had occurred to me, too. If I could only contact my pilot..."

"But you left your communication device where you first touched Pa-Lüna." Her probing of his mind had been damn thorough. She went on, "I believe I can adapt certain... devices... of my own to allow you to contact the Terran you think of as Miguel." The back wall of the temple opened, and her throne began moving on that invisible track or anti-grav. "Come with me, please. Nedra will care for Citizen Tahn."

**Reluctantly, Geoff obeyed. Like everything else on Pa-Lüna's Interior, the temple was honeycombed with tunnels, and this time the Goddess led him to a new section. She stopped before an outsized bank of what looked very much like electronic equipment, but equipment with a subtle Pa-Lünan flavor. Wherever she had acquired her technology, the Goddess had given it her personal native stamp.**

**Her hands moved slowly over the equipment, and Geoff again pondered if she had an alien metabolism.**

**"I shall compensate for your height." And two acolytes ran in, pulling the portable stairs Nedra had used to reach the telescoping altar. They pushed it into place and Geoff climbed, gazing around curiously. Closeup, the equipment was even more intriguing, and he regretted his lack of knowledge in that special discipline.**

**"I'm afraid I don't know a great deal about electronics."**

**"Your mind held the image of the calibration of both your communication device and the similar devices on the ship which brought you here. And you and Nedra taught me Ter-ran number systems," the Goddess said. "I believe I can make the conversion. It will be necessary to have a very tight signal, to avoid Deliyen monitors."**

**"Where did you learn all this? It's Level-6, at least. There's nothing in the Pa-Lünan culture that could make a jump from Level-2 to..."**

**"I believe it is ready." Was she ignoring him, or had she been too busy to hear? Her huge fingers held out a tiny object toward him. "Please try."**

**Geoff took the shiny cube. It looked disconcertingly like a Pa-Lünan model of his own communicator. Geoff sent a standard request for recognition at regular intervals for over a quarter of an hour before he received a response.**

**The Goddess pursed her lips and touched dials. "Not quite aligned. His signal is rather weak."**

**"Latimer? That you?" Some of the static remained, but the words came in much stronger than before. "You in trouble? Respond."**

**Geoff went on in detail, ordering Miguel to put through a scrambled call to the Federation. He spoke in a slang so inbred among the planet-hoppers serving Ethnic Protection Division that Geoff seriously doubted even the most astute Deliyian con man monitoring the signal could translate.**

**"Will do," Miguel confirmed. "Shouldn't be hard. There's a big stir-up in Deliyian circles over Kisyan's suicide, anyway. Won't take much more to keep 'em real busy. Out."**

***Geoff signed off and said anxiously, "The Deliyans might pinpoint the source of my transmission."***

**"They will not," the Goddess said with flat confidence. "And on Deliyas?"**

**"The Federation will keep Deliyas' government very busy for the next few weeks. There are lots of ways short of military action, and I doubt the Deliyans are going to have any time to investigate rumors of an uprising in the Pa-Lünan provinces."**

**"Good! If we are fortunate, we shall have gained victory before they are able to act."**

**"Victory?"**

**"Over Meigan's province, for a start. And Kehl—"**

**"Will be your puppet, if you succeed."**

**The immense bronze-black eyes gazed at him unblinkingly. They were even more frightening than when he was at her feet. "Kehl will be his own man, Geoff Latimer. If he chooses to give me his adoration, well and good. Perhaps it will make him a better ruler. There is much I can give him, and other provincial Pa-Lünan rulers."**

**"Like this?" He gestured to the electronic equipment.**

"They are not ready for this. Not yet. But with my help they can be brought to the light of knowledge with far less pain. Or do you prefer they continue as a Deliyian protectorate? Protected from advances in medicine, transportation, Weapons." Geoff was pushing, but it was the closest he'd come to discovering the many secrets of the Goddess.

"Ah yes, weapons. Eitagan..." She rarely summoned her acolytes vocally, but apparently it gave impact to her commands. A temple assistant ran in from an adjoining corridor almost immediately. "Have you one of the slaver-killers?... Then give it to him." The acolyte handed a crossbow up the steps to Geoff's waiting hand; it was subtly different from his own in a certain curvature of the wood and the metal that formed the scope. Pa-Lünan, but still a crossbow, and well-engineered. "One of many. Is it well-done?"

"Very. Many?"

"Kehl's army will be smaller, less well-trained than Meigan's. He will need advantages to win the coming battle."

"Kehl's army?" Geoff felt a bit *dizzy*.

"I have sent messengers to meet those who escape from Bai-Shan, and others of my faithful are spreading word of the revolt throughout the province, calling all to Kehl's banner. I have read his purpose, and he means well. He is honest, and not so greedy as Meigan. Above all, he hates everything off-world."

"A Pa-Lünan army," Geoff mused, turning the crossbow in his hands. "It just might work. And they can make these themselves, with a little help."

"They will need training if they are to learn skill with this weapon in time for it to be of any use." He knew he was being tempted. Geoff's eyes went to the electronic equipment again.

"And will you give them this knowledge, too?"

"No: it is part of my... special power." The acolyte pattered out, probably following telepathic instructions, and the

Goddess continued, "You and I, and Nedra, know I am not a deity. But there is enough miracle, and irony, in my existence that I may serve the Pa-Lünans as a goddess, for now. Someday I may be able to explain to you. They must be led out of darkness, and"—a sad pleading tone entered her voice—"I cannot do it alone."

Why? With the exception of a telepathic distance limit and some temporizing about why she wouldn't leave the temple, she had seemed omnipotent. Obviously she wasn't, or she wouldn't seek his help against the Deliyans and Meigan. Still, Geoff was disturbed by the seeming enslavement of her "faithful" to the True Stones. In the end, it boiled down to her or the Deliyans. If Pa-Lüna had to be ruled, better by its own.

"Good!" She had been picking his brain again, but gently. He hadn't even known she was there. Perhaps she'd sensed his resentment and knocked the lumps out of her method.

"Kehl will need a core of professional soldiers to backbone his army. If Aitar and his boys escaped..."

"You need rest, Geoff Latimer. The time is not yet critical, and your old wound pains you."

"And Tahn?"

"He is much improved. You will see my gifts are good." Another acolyte trotted in and waited politely at the foot of the steps. "Let my assistant take you to a place where you can rest. Your mind must be clear to plan what must be done... for I know nothing of war."

Whatever else she was, she was feminine, and Geoff recognized the pampering and helplessness for what it was. But, he *was* tired, groggy from drugs and exhausted by the sustained activity of the past hours, the tension of the past week. He descended the ladder and let himself be shown out.

*He* awoke feeling vague and fuzzy. The dull ache was *still in his* throat, so sleep hadn't helped it; probably it would be his constant companion from now on. He'd been promised as much,



months ago.

Cautiously, he opened his eyes, then widened them.

"How do you feel?" Nedra knelt beside his bunk. She was dressed once more in the bronze gown.

He sat up and looked around, coming completely awake. "Hungry, among other things."

She followed his glance toward the dozen pallets lining the walls of the low-ceilinged room. "An infirmary. I'll get you something to eat."

The room was occupied by an assortment of Pa-Lünan peasants, mercenaries and servants of noblemen. Geoff recognized the faces of some who'd been left behind at Bai-Shan, and reasoned that the rendezvous between refugees and acolytes had succeeded. One of the injured was a Terran, and Geoff raised himself slightly to see the face: Lynch. The slaver's head was swathed in bandage, and Geoff wondered if the Goddess had wasted any precious elixir on Lynch's cracked head.

Then he saw Tahn in the shadows to his right. Geoff threw back the thin blanket over his legs and stood up. Tahn's breathing seemed almost normal, only a little ragged, and his face *no* longer looked colorless.

"He's doing very well," Nedra assured him. Geoff turned and accepted the bowl of stew. Her eyes were soft as she looked beyond him to Tahn's pallet. "We told you it would work."

Geoff grunted impolitely, spooning in the stew. He hadn't realized just how hungry he was. "How long did I sleep?"

"Almost a day. I think you needed it."

"Loss of time we can't spare. Did Meigan follow the rebels?"

"Not so far. Swordsman Aitar is pretty skillful."

**"I could have told you that."**

**Nedra grinned and took the empty bowl. "They're waiting for you. You have an army to instruct, *General Latimer*."**

**Geoff found the Pa-Lünans' trust helpful but embarrassing. Kehl consulted him like an oracle, only slightly less revered than the Goddess, and his cabinet of fellow nobles seemed to have the same attitude. Swordsman Aitar placed his men and skills entirely at Geoff's disposal. That capable mercenary had observed the steadily increasing stockpile of cross-bows the Goddess' artisans were turning out, and the warrior's lips watered with anticipation.**

**"Even a peasant can do a good job with one of these," Aitar exulted. His deep voice resounded in the weapons room, a commodious cavern the Goddess had provided for their training procedures. Geoff had set up a target range at one end and the mercenaries had rapidly become proficient enough with the weapon to serve as instructors to a willing class of peasants and nobles.**

**Geoff squatted by the nearest of several dozen acolyte artisans seated on the floor, busily turning out more crossbows. Perhaps the Goddess was right; properly encouraged, the peasants weren't afraid to try anything. Tiny hands skillfully guided a crude plane along a wooden stock, and in a moment the workman would pass the finished piece to a companion for another stage of assembly. Pa-Lüna was already striding up the ladder of technology.**

**"Honored Sir, we will be invincible!" Kehl beamed happily.**

**"Hardly invincible," Geoff cautioned. "But an edge in our favor. Plus... one of these... fine! Let's see." Aitar removed his helmet to accommodate the strap, and Geoff slipped the cleverly whittled snow goggles over the mercenary's large eyes. He ran a finger along the narrow slit in the wood. "With these you'll be able to see even in broad daylight."**

**"We won't need to stop fighting when the sun rises," Kehl said, nodding.**

**"You'll need the advantage. Meigan has a few lasers, and you'll need to place your best sharpshooters to pick off the men carrying those, *fast*." Geoff ticked off on his fingers. "A crack troop of crossbowmen is almost ready, and just about enough snow goggles for your forces. Plus the Wind-Eaters..."**

**"Thirteen in all," Kehl gloated, "since the Goddess healed the one Lynch rode. Honored Sir Latimer, I wish you to lead the attack of the Wind-Eaters. It would do me honor."**

**"Another few days and—"**

**"You haven't got that!" It was Nedra. She ran toward them, long skirts streaming back, hair flying. Something in her expression raised hair on the back of Geoff's neck. "Geoff, come quickly. The Goddess must see you."**

**"What-"**

**"Lynch is gone, and so is Daitan. We're afraid they're halfway to Bai-Shan by now."**

## ***Chapter Ten***

**"I notified you as quickly as I could," Tahn was saying to the Goddess when Geoff entered the main temple. "I was detained, I'm afraid, by the over-solicitousness of your infirmary workers."**

**Tahn certainly didn't look like someone who had recently suffered a severe laser wound.**

**"Part of it I overheard while I was dozing. Money, and a healthy dose of jealousy on Daitan's part. He agreed to guide Lynch back to Bai-Shan, providing he wasn't punished for his part in the uprising."**

**"Fool!" Geoff commented. "They'll finish him off as soon as Lynch is safely home."**

**"His injuries may—" the Goddess began.**

**"You didn't treat him with your elixir?"**

**She hesitated, then said, "I have never used the formula on an injured Terran. I could not be certain of its effects, and..."**

**"It seemed a waste on something like that," Geoff agreed. "Unfortunately I'm sure Meigan's court has enough off-world medicine to put Lynch back in shape in no time, both arm and head. We haven't seen the last of him."**

**"When the Terran slaver informs Meigan of what he knows, the prince will certainly mount an attack as soon as possible." The Goddess paused, anxiety plain in her features. "And he will know exactly where to strike."**

**Kehl clasped a small fist and beat it dramatically against his chest. "My shame is beyond measure, Esteemed One! Dai-tan! My own cousin! To betray us all so foully..." He straightened suddenly, and said brusquely, "Your permission to leave, Goddess? I shall see at once to setting our army afield. It is poorly prepared as yet but—"**

**"It will have to do. Go."**

**"I'll join you in a short while," Geoff called after him as Kehl hurried out. "Goddess, you put your finger on it squarely: Lynch knows the location of the temple. Further, he knows the exact location of the True Stones. Tahn said you keep the opals here. Does Lynch know that?"**

**"Unfortunately, yes. Further, he ended the existence of two of my acolytes guarding the compartment where the... the formula is stored."**

**Geoff said tightly, "I'll make odds Lynch has a sample of the stuff. If he can analyze it..."**

**"Difficult, but not impossible, I'm sorry to say. I do not fear the Deliyans, but Terran technology..."**

**"Lynch will want the whole cake, Goddess," Geoff reminded her. "He'll counsel Meigan to attack and head straight for the"**

temple. He has lasers, such as wounded Tahn—but perhaps that won't affect..." Nedra's gasp and the Goddess' countenance told him such weapons would be quite effective against the giantess. "Then I suggest you get out of here at once. Use your anti-gravs or something... have the acolytes build you a cart and pull it with Guyans if nothing else. Relocate in a safer place."

"If it were only possible." A painful silence settled in the stony alcove, and Geoff digested the statement. Tahn looked as concerned for the giantess' safety as Nedra. "I... I have a certain limitation in mobility," the Goddess said, stammering. "You must have guessed my metabolism is, shall we say, somewhat different. Excessive effort can prove disastrous to me."

So, she wasn't immune to advanced weapons, and on top of everything else her metabolic rate was quite undivine. He thought unhappily that the giant female had picked a critically poor time to admit her feet were clay.

"Your anti-gravs," he repeated.

Nedra clenched her hands in frustration. "She can't! Don't you understand? The entire power source is here, and if she tries to stretch the fuel," and she suddenly clapped both hands over her mouth, looking up at the Goddess in horror.

There was sad forgiveness in the large face above them all. "She is quite right, Mr. Latimer. I am rooted to this temple. It would take many many nights for me to convert my equipment, to enable me to-travel even a short distance. This is my temple, and my prison. I have not stirred from it for some time. And, as you comprehend, my telepathic abilities are limited by geography."

"Not divine," Geoff said absently.

"Does it matter?" Tahn retorted defensively. Geoff eyed him, wondering if Tahn was now a pawn of the Goddess. But Lynch and Adrian surely sampled the True Stone they'd stolen, and it certainly hadn't made them fawning acolytes. "We've seen she's benevolent, and compared to Meigan . . ."

**"And I am Pa-Lünan," the Goddess finished, trumping. She read his mind and motives very well. "You said you would decide, Geoff Latimer. Your decision must be made now, or others will make it for you."**

**Geoff debated the possibilities with himself, and he thought of Sorenson reading the Federation Charter for loopholes. Somehow that picture gave him bitter amusement and settled the question. "All right. If the Pa-Lünans trade their worship for your True Stones, at least you seem to give them a fair exchange."**

**"You will help us?"**

**"If I can. There's no time to ask for the Federation, and I doubt they'd move in, anyway. We have to do this ourselves. Can you at least probe to Bai-Shan?"**

**"Daitan has a very receptive mind."**

**"I'll bet. Well, if he stays alive he might be a source of information. Find out all you can; warn us when they start to move out. And," Geoff said carefully, "if Kehl loses the battle, I suggest you destroy the opals and the liquid. If you really care for the Pa-Lünans you'll keep those out of the hands of Meigan and Lynch. They could dominate Pa-Lüna with the wealth those stones could bring them off-world."**

**The Goddess gazed down at him calmly. "That liquid is, in a very real sense, my life; without it, I perish. I swear it shall never enrich those who would enslave Pa-Lüna."**

**"If things go well, such a sacrifice won't be necessary. Let us know as soon as you can about Meigan's movements. We have to have time to throw Kehl's army across their path before they get here."**

**Frantic minutes of feverish activity followed, with the troops gathering gear and the war council deciding on battle schemes.**

**"Honored Lord?" It was Aitar, saluting sharply. "We are ready to move out, and the Wind-Eaters are waiting."**

**Geoff eyed him calculatingly. "Enough trained crossbow-men for both Lord Kehl and the Wind-Eater force?"**

**"Honored Sir, when you lead the Wind-Eater's to the attack you will have eleven of my best marksmen, plus Citizen Tahn, who has proved an excellent shot."**

**Tahn met Geoff's sharp look with a small puffed-out chest and a determinedly set jaw. Geoff had to admit Tahn looked hale, and possibly in better condition than he himself was with his crippled throat. He returned his attention to Aitar. I wonder you did not accompany Lord Daitan. You are his man, are you not?"**

**Aitar's broken teeth flashed in the cave's dim light. "Have you any idea, Honored Sir, how many of Meigan's men I spitted on my sword, back there in Bai-Shan? A prince may forgive a nobleman, but one of the people... ? And besides," and the soldier's scarred and calloused hand went to his belt. Geoff saw a familiar square of plastic secured next to the mercenary's businesslike dagger, and he knew the wallet contained a True Stone. The Goddess built her bridges well.**

**Nedra hurried into the weapons room once more, her expression clearly indicating crisis. "They are moving! They have left Bai-Shan."**

**"Then *we* must move," Kehl said. "All right, Swordsman. Form up our men."**

**As the soldier hurried off to obey, Geoff said to Kehl, "You engage the ground forces and I'll do what I can to protect you from the sky. Maybe we'll get lucky and catch Meigan."**

**Kehl made a doubtful face. "He will stay snug in his palace. No, if we are successful against his army, there will still be the siege of Bai-Shan."**

**"Remember to position your crossbowmen well. Meet them while you're on a height, if possible, and take out their laser men first. Good luck!"**

**Kehl finished buckling on a decorative short sword. "And the blessings of the Goddess follow your Wind-Eaters, Terran friend."**

**Geoff and Tahn followed Kehl and the others to the main room of the temple, where the Goddess awaited them, her huge hands uplifted in a kind of benediction. The Pa-Lünans bowed, shouted their glorious intentions, then trooped up the ramp toward their waiting army.**

**Nedra stood by the right foot of the Goddess, looking radiant. Her Terran ancestry was almost lost in her present mood of fervor and confidence.**

**"You haven't left this place undefended?" Geoff asked uneasily.**

**"A necessary force, but it will not be needed."**

**Geoff walked across the temple, depressed by the inability of those two females to consider gloomy possibilities. At the foot of the ramp he paused. He offered one last warning to the Goddess: "Keep a mental probe out, and if we lose, don't wait too long to destroy your supply of that formula."**

**He didn't wait for further comments, but hurried up the ramp and out into the Pa-Lünan night. Ahead he heard the soft stirring of wings and off to the right the muttering voices, squeak of leather and occasional ring of metal that indicated the presence of many armed natives. One of the green glow-stones lay on the ground by the Wind-Eaters, casting a feeble light on the bellies of the animals. A cluster of Pa-Lünans stood nearby, their eyes iridescent in the pale light.**

**"Honored Sir," Kehl addressed him again, "let us pledge our victory."**

**Geoff was annoyed at the time-wasting formalities, but he extended his hands to clasp Kehl's four-fingered paws, then stepped aside and let Tahn repeat the gesture. Kehl wore the light body armor of a moderately wealthy Pa-Lünan noble, with a handsome sword sheathed in a baldric and a pair of the slit**



eyepiece snow goggles slung about his thin neck.

"Maneuver to delay them," Geoff advised. "If you can hold them off till daylight..."

Kehl touched the goggles understandingly. "They shall fall like mowed grain, their eyes afire!"

Only two of the Wind-Eaters were unmounted. Cross-bowmen sat atop the others, cradling loaded weapons, prepared for anything. Tahn moved toward the twelfth animal, and Geoff could detect no weakness in his friend's stride.

"My own eyes are a disadvantage now," Geoff said, gathering the reins of the remaining, the largest, Wind-Eater. "But if it's Terrans and Deliyans we meet up there, I won't be the only one half blind. I doubt infrared would be part of their equipment. They couldn't have planned on something like this."

Kehl turned and shouted an avowal of victory to his troops, tacking on a phrase referring to the Goddess leading their efforts. Other voices took up the shout, and it blended with a ululating cry common to righteous humanoid armies on hundreds of worlds.

Less noisily than Geoff had expected, the army began to move out. There were nobles and mercenaries, of course, but also many peasants, some dressed in tunics, others in the baggy shirts and leggings of Pa-Lünan farmer folk. Geoff was certain at least half the hastily assembled army possessed True Stones and were fighting as much for the Goddess as for Kehl.

Geoff swung aboard his mount, and the Wind-Eater shuffled its feet nervously. "How long till dawn?"

Tahn said, "About four hours."

"If I were Lynch, I'd send my Wind-Eaters straight for the temple," Geoff said thoughtfully, reaching forward to stroke the crest of the large beast he himself had wounded not long ago. It was larger than the others, presumably so selected to bear Lynch's greater weight. "We'll have to spell the Wind-Eaters or

they'll be exhausted when we do meet them. First" —he raked his memory for the maps he'd studied—"we make for the Hill of the Hawks."

Tahn led off, his winged biped loping into the darkness with heavy steps. Geoff's own beast repeated the takeoff run, and he heard the whistling flap of wings before and behind, and then his Wind-Eater was airborne. It beat its way upward for a while, then leveled off.

Once more Geoff was surrounded by an inky landscape, sailing through the night, dependent on the faint glow in the sky for his only illumination. There was no massive light from electrically lighted cities to cancel the starlight or the dim shine of the moons. Geoff felt strangely at peace, relishing the sweet scent of unpolluted air and the starry beauty of the Pa-Lünan night.

All too soon the animal beneath him began angling down. After a rough landing and a few seconds in which to recuperate from the jolt, Tahn informed him all members of the party had arrived. "Air force complete, eh? Can you see well?" Geoff asked.

"Very well."

"Then send three of the mercenaries aloft as scouts. Send up a relief team about every quarter of an hour, and tell them all to keep the watch toward Bai-Shan and rotating all points of the compass."

Tahn relayed the orders, and a trio of takeoffs agitated the air. When the sound faded, Tahn asked, "Kehl's army?"

"Daylight will work in his favor, and I'm betting Meigan's commander will have the same thought. He'll make a forced march and try to make his kill before dawn. If Kehl can just hold him off long enough..."

"He's learned caution, Geoff. I really think we may succeed." Most of the old sparkle was back in Tahn's voice.

**"I noticed you bowed to the Goddess when Kehl and the others did. Are you a new convert to her religion?"**

**"I owe her my life. And, if the Pa-Lünans *must* worship a deity..."** Tahn left the rest unsaid, and they sat in the darkness, waiting. Overhead the scouts circled, other scouts rose to replace them, and the original group came back to the Hill of the Hawks to rest. The routine repeated, and Geoff lost track of the time. He reminded the Pa-Lünan mercenaries several times of the special handling properties of crossbows, and regretted again they'd had no opportunity to practice in flight.

The pain tightened his throat and chest gradually until he was forced to take gel from his rapidly dwindling supply. Geoff let the drug wash syrupy fingers over his tortured flesh, hating the numbing of mind and body. Time was running out all along the line. It couldn't be more than an hour or two since he'd taken the last gel.

For the first time he wished the attack would hurry, would come now while the drug still held. He couldn't see until dawn, but what good was sight when he was doubled over with pain?

**"Geoff? Too far away to count yet, but a swarm of them coming."**

**"Anybody spot the army?"**

**"Off to our right, about two, three kilometers."**

**"Lynch will try to flank them. We'll have to head him off. How long till dawn now?"**

**"Maybe an hour or less, though we'll get the light earlier up aloft."**

**"Let's get going, then," Geoff said.**

The Wind-Eaters ran along the crest of the hill, dark blobs of huge legs and great wings, their tiny riders almost invisible to Geoff's hampered vision.

Then the wind blew back the sheltering hood from around his face. Geoff had belted his cloak tightly, but the speed of the Wind-Eater had loosened the fabric around his face and exposed his ears to the damp cold of the upper air.

Off to his left Tahn shouted, "Fourteen. No, fifteen of them. And one of the riders looks like a Terran."

Geoff bellowed: "Keep the range long and aim well."

Time and their greater altitude made it easier for him to distinguish objects. The Wind-Eaters were climbing still higher toward the gray-black dome of the sky, and faintly, to the south, he could pick out a dark mass against the cloudless background. The cloud separated into individual, mounted Wind-Eaters, angling northwestward across their path.

"Five of them are Deliyans!" Tahn cried joyfully. "They'll be as blind as Terrans in the darkness."

The approaching Wind-Eaters veered steadily westward. Geoff tugged at the reins circling his own mount's head and crest and the beast beneath him banked, accompanied by its herd fellows, dark shapes on either side.

Geoff's crossbow was braced across the high pommel of the saddle, but could he see well enough to be sure of his aim? They were fast closing with the other flight of Wind-Eaters, and he lifted his bow, waiting for a clear shot.

"It is Lynch, and the Deliyans slavers!" Tahn yelled in final confirmation.

In another second the two groups would be dangerously close. Geoff took a deep breath, drawing bead on the largest target he could see—one of the enemy Wind-Eaters—and triggered the quarrel away with a hushed snap of the string.

The sound repeated all around him, and then the angry and frightened cries of beasts and men overrode the noise of the weapons. Geoff tugged on the reins and his Wind-Eater flapped its wings frantically, reaching for a still greater altitude. The

others were climbing too in a classic effort to get on top of their opponents. It had to end soon; there was a practical limit to the strength of the flying mammals.

The scream of a wounded Wind-Eater cut across the air from the enemy group, and a great dark shape dropped away from the others, its wings beating the air futilely.

While its shriek still pierced his ears, Geoff saw a wide band of blinding light stabbing through the darkness, upward through his squad of flying mercenaries. It was the familiar microsecond beam of a laser, and just to Geoff's right another Wind-Eater bleated in pain. Then something huge and heavy-breathing brushed past his Wind-Eater, forcing it to stroke the air strenuously to keep its balance.

A crossbow fired nearby and a moment later there was a shrill yelp from the enemy group, followed by a long, fading scream that painted a death dive with brutal clarity.

"Pull back a little," Geoff ordered in Pa-Lünan, and the canny mercenaries withdrew like a flock of birds suddenly reversing direction. "If they can't see us, they'll have to shoot blind. Remember your greater range..."

"They're trying to regroup," Tahn shouted. "They have one riderless Wind-Eater."

"And ours?"

"One's having trouble keeping up, but we're still all here."

Lynch too was shouting orders, a garbling of Terran, Deliyán and Pa-Lünan, and Geoff seized the opportunity to launch a few more darts in the direction of the slaver's voice. Lynch was having trouble flogging his little band of nightriders into action, and his curses tore the air.

Again the enemy tried to circle westward, and Geoff canted his mount over in another intercepting bank. He blessed the Pa-Lünan eyes on his team, and their willingness to *fight*. Distantly, he could hear the faint noise of battle far away and

**below them. At all costs, Lynch and his crew must not reach the scene before dawn.**

**When the slaver found his aerial path once more blocked by Geoff's Wind-Eaters, the laser flashed out angrily, ill-aimed, harming no one.**

**Dawn seemed a long time coming. Geoff could do little but mark time now; dawn would bring him an opportunity to strike back. Still, the Pa-Lünan mercenaries were doing very well. Another animal scream signaled the loss of a third animal from Lynch's party. Discounting their own wounded Wind-Eater, the odds were now even.**

**Minutes wore on in a grim mixture of black shapes nearly colliding, the hushed twang of crossbow strings and the whistle of arrows from Lynch's group. A pattern was established: close in, fire, withdraw, and Lynch would try to sidle westward, and the mercenaries would meet them once more.**

**Geoff swallowed the fiery needles in his throat and tried to spot a landmark below. The sky was beginning to lighten, gray to overrule black. There! The Hill of the Hawks—but it was *south* and *east* of their present position! Lynch was winning. They were being pushed back toward Kehl's army, not rapidly, but losing ground all the same.**

**Again and again Geoff fired, trying to be cautious with his ammunition, but determined to stop the attack. Four more of the enemy dropped groundward. And in Geoff's own ranks the wounded Wind-Eater was forced to withdraw and two more were struck down, one spiraling down gradually and the second struck squarely by a laser flash and plummeting like a stone.**

**The light increased, and Geoff was bitterly aware the Hill of the Hawks was noticeably southward now, and they couldn't retreat much more without seriously endangering Kehl's army.**

**Another shriek momentarily drowned the sounds of wings and weapons, and this time Geoff clearly saw the ground-ward plunge of one of Lynch's men.**

**"The Deliyans are gone!" Tahn shouted.**

**Only Lynch and the Pa-Lünans left, and the brilliant pink and orange glow in the eastern sky rolled back the night by seconds. The situation was reversing; the mercenaries and Tahn had snow goggles, and when the sun rose, their Pa-Lünan enemy counterparts would be helpless.**

**But Lynch wouldn't. He was trying to put the fear of Meigan into the remains of his force, flogging them to a now or never effort. No attempt to flank this time; they separated, whipped their foaming Wind-Eaters and launched an aerial charge. It was plain the Terran slaver had already picked his target, and Geoff urged his own tired Wind-Eater to a bit more altitude, gratified the flying mammals were not quite so nocturnal as their humanoid masters.**

**The venom tortured him from his chest to his soft palate now, and there were only two quarrels left in his sweating palm. Geoff loaded one and aimed.**

**Agony exploded into his chest, just below his raised left arm, and an instant later his stunned brain comprehended the preceding flash of the laser beam that had struck him. Forcing himself to breath evenly, steadying his hands, he sighted in the scope. Lynch had dropped his reins, and was hastily thumbing back the reset on the laser.**

**The Wind-Eater was coming straight on at his own, with no more than thirty meters separating them: a clear target, and the quarrel lanced away quietly.**

**Gasping with pain, he began reloading even as he saw Lynch fling up his hands in surprise. Something small sailed out and downward in an arc, its metallic surface reflecting the light of the rising sun.**

**Clutching the reloaded crossbow, Geoff shook his head, driving his crumbling energy. Lynch had lost the laser, but he didn't intend to stop; he was drawing a sword. Geoff was certain the slaver was no stranger to primitive weaponry, and if he didn't put that last shot home Lynch would finish him.**

**Everything seemed to move with preternatural slowness. The pain was making Geoff tremble alarmingly.**

**Ten meters now, and Lynch's feet and bleeding right arm punished his foam-mouthed Wind-Eater. The sword was upraised in his left hand—clumsily, but with his present momentum he didn't need much skill to unseat Geoff.**

**No scope now; Geoff let the quarrel's speed meet Lynch's own, burying the dart just above his sternum. Dreamily, Geoff saw Lynch's mouth open in disbelief, but if there were words he could not hear them.**

**Then Geoff's world became a mass of winged, gray fur and something hot and heavy almost crushed him as the two Wind-Eaters collided in a din of cries and beating wings.**

**His middle ear triumphed over the agony in throat and chest, warning him, and Geoff grabbed desperately at the saddle, then clasped his arms about the neck of his mount. They were falling, pinwheeling earthward, a tangle of men and animals. Geoff tried to clear his vision, loath to concede de-feat, and he tugged at his mount's head; despite the pain, he shifted his weight, trying to help his Wind-Eater disengage from Lynch's steed.**

**Lynch too was clinging to his beast's neck, and blood streamed down the side of saddle and animal in a bright red, gushing flow.**

**Finally, the two Wind-Eaters managed to separate themselves, their wings catching the air in heavy, panic-driven flapping. Geoff fastened his arms still tighter around his mount's neck, hanging on for the precious seconds it took the Wind-Eater to return to a horizontal position.**

**A dark mass parted from the other Wind-Eater, falling. Geoff stared down, trying to concentrate. They were still several hundred meters up, and the Wind-Eaters were gradually descending, too worn to fly any longer.**

**But Lynch reached the ground first.**



## *Chapter Eleven*

**"Did you find any water?"**

**Geoff sorted out the blur of Pa-Lünan words. He felt resentful, wanting to flee back to the painless world of unconsciousness. Then he heard Tahn berating someone for the lack of water.**

**"It's a candle's walk to the nearest spring," the someone retorted.**

**"Tahn," Geoff managed, forcing the words past his raw throat. He opened his eyes, then winced in the sunlight. The Pa-Lünans circling him all wore the slit eyepiece goggles. Tahn was kneeling beside him, and Geoff realized he was lying on the grass. He fumbled toward the pocket of his tunic, and Tahn read his intention.**

**In a fog of pain Geoff saw Tahn's small clawed fingers holding the vial of gels, prying off the cap. "Four..."**

**The little alien hesitated a moment, then cradled Geoff's head, easing the gels one by one between his lips. The drug did not hit as hard as Geoff had hoped, but in a few minutes he was able to shove most of the pain into the background and concentrate. The landscape was dotted with Pa-Lünans and Wind-Eaters, and a jubilant group of peasants were speaking earnestly to the bowmen.**

**"I didn't fall..." Geoff half-questioned, still feeling vague.**

**"You managed to hang on till your Wind-Eater landed," Tahn filled him in. "Just rest. I'm having them rig a litter."**

**Geoff waved the words aside and struggled to sit up, despite Tahn's anxious protests. The quadruple dosage of the painkiller gave him a temporary strength he didn't dare waste. "The army? Kehl?"**

**One of the peasants turned and shook upraised fists in a victorious gesture, praising Kehl's name. The mercenaries and**

**other peasants joined him enthusiastically.**

**"Then I gather the battle's going well?"**

**"Surprisingly well," Tahn said. "They were badly outnumbered, but thanks to your high-ground strategy and the crossbows and goggles, they've gained five kilometers and are pushing Meigan's army back toward Bai-Shan."**

**Geoff digested one of the triumphant shouts of the Pa-Lünans and repeated it tiredly, "With the help of the Goddess. How long was I out?"**

**"Maybe an hour." The sun was well above the horizon, but dew still sparkled on the grass. The air fairly steamed, and Geoff already felt uncomfortably hot. Tahn went on, "Kehl hopes to finish them off before they run for shelter. And they will, as will we all. This kind of day breeds Whirling-Winds."**

**With difficulty, Geoff got to his feet. "What about Lynch's men?"**

**Tahn pointed, and Geoff saw a group of bound Pa-Lünans. "We captured the remaining Wind-Eaters and collected the riderless ones. They were scattered over ten kilometers. It was quite a battle," Tahn exulted.**

**"Are they rested enough to fly again?"**

**"Yes, but..."**

**"Then let's get mounted. Everybody you can find, any kind of weapons..."**

**"Geoff, you can't—"**

**Tahn's solicitousness was a temptation he did not dare surrender to. "We'll never have a better chance to finish Bai-Shan. Meigan's army seems to be going down to defeat and with luck he left only a skeleton force to guard his palace. If we move in now, while he's off-guard, attack from the air..."**

**"Yes, it might work," Tahn said slowly. "Especially if we can rally the Bai-Shan population. Take Bai-Shan, and we cut off the army's retreat."**

**"Save yourselves a siege," Geoff capped. "Let's get moving."**

**Tahn caught his arm as Geoff started toward a waiting Wind-Eater, and Geoff was aware of the picture he must make. He looked down at the blackened fabric circling a hand-sized wound on the left side of his chest. He'd seen enough such injuries not to be encouraged, and he felt the ominous trembling in his legs. "Geoff, please, let us take care of your injuries."**

**"Then let me go to Bai-Shan." He decided to be brutally frank. "This is a bad one, and Bai-Shan is the closest source of the kind of medical aid I need right now."**

**"There is the Goddess," Tahn said gently.**

**"No!" Geoff gasped as the effort closed a painful fist around his chest. "I'll take contraband medicines, *Terran* medicines. Are you going with me?"**

**"I'll go with you." Tahn's voice dripped disapproval.**

**Geoff struggled aboard the Wind-Eater and supervised the hasty rearming of his little air force. They divided the remaining ammunition equally. Geoff loaded one quarrel and pocketed the other two, then urged them all skyward.**

**The Wind-Eaters winged southward, and Geoff cradled his crossbow in shaking hands. He was beginning to shiver badly now, despite the heat, and he recognized the unwelcome symptoms of shock. He was punishing his body beyond all reason, but it was necessary. Lynch had left the temple with a probable concussion and an injured arm—yet he had been unbandaged and in top form in that aerial battle. Obviously Lynch had reaped the benefits of contraband medicines at Meigan's palace, and Geoff had to hope he could last until he could duplicate the procedure.**

**"The Al-Laedur," Tahn shouted, pointing downward. They angled, following the track of the small river, and Geoff concentrated on the watery ribbon below. He concentrated so well he did not see the testimony in the sky until they were almost upon Bai-Shan. Then he stared numbly at the smoke; black, oily clouds streamed up from the city, and the breeze had begun to brush them northeastward in a promise of a furious wind to follow soon.**

**As the Wind-Eaters swooped over the city, Geoff surveyed the scene anxiously. Meigan's Wind-Eater pens and arsenal were afire and beyond them earthen barracks belched smoke and flame from a half dozen doorways and vents.**

**Rapidly, the Wind-Eaters descended, pointing for the palace. The dark specks on the ground in front of the portcullis became uniformed bodies. As his Wind-Eater landed with an agonizing jolt, Geoff saw the barrel gate had been splintered open by a battering ram. Smoke curled out of the mouth of the earthen turtle that was Meigan's palace, and a group of peasants armed with clubs and spears charged out of the gate toward the arriving Wind-Eaters.**

**Geoff got down with some difficulty, clutching the Wind-Eater for support. Tahn hurried toward him, one hand out to help and the other pointing a sword warningly at the oncoming peasants.**

**They skidded to a halt, looking at Geoff's force with watering eyes, and then the leader of the group turned and shouted to his comrades, "This is Lord Kehl's Terran!" Their warning oaths turned to cheers of greeting. They wore an almost comic assortment of rich vestments over their ragged clothing, and their leader carried both a spear and a jeweled sword, its belt slung across his chest like a baldric. Geoff stared at the leader, trying to place him.**

**It was the youth with the hungry expression, the one they had freed from the slave pens, and he welcomed them eagerly. The peasants laughed and; shouted, displaying their plunder.**

**Geoff escaped their congratulatory overtures and ran toward**

**the palace, Tahn trotting after him. The incline approaching the portcullis was strewn with the bodies of Meigan's palace guards. As they ducked beneath the shattered bars, Geoff heard the crackle of flames somewhere ahead. He began to run, teeth clenched against the pain.**

**The narrow archway at the bottom of the stairs had cost many lives, both guards and peasants, and the bodies clogged the hallway leading to the massive metal door. The door itself was badly dented, and the heavy piling that had served the peasants as a battering ram lay abandoned across the doorsill.**

**Meigan's court was wrecked, stripped of everything valuable, fires beginning to feed on the ruined remains of furniture. A few peasants were busy looting the bodies of Meigan's courtiers, and when Geoff and Tahn entered they looked up apprehensively, gripping weapons. Then they recognized the intruders and relaxed.**

**Geoff gazed at a particularly gruesome joke: Meigan sat in his throne, staring with dead eyes at his ruined court, his handsome clothes pierced with dozens of tears and stiff with dried blood. The peasants must have dragged him here and enthroned him in a morbid gesture of contempt.**

**"Have we won?" the peasants pleaded.**

**"We are winning," Tahn assured them. He pulled his goggles down around his neck and eyed Geoff worriedly.**

**Near collapse, Geoff leaned heavily against a broken table. "Meigan's physician..."**

**"That dealer in evil! Fear not, Honored Friend. He shall unwitting no more of our females with his powders and foul smelling liquids."**

**"The physician," Geoff croaked; "where are his quarters?"**

**A thin clawed hand pointed down one of the corridors, a corridor brightly lit with flames and beginning to trickle smoke. "There, Friend Terran. We made him a pyre on all his wicked**

**magic. Lord Kehl is free of his evil power..."**

**Geoff took a step toward the fiery corridor, then the floor came rushing up toward him. How strange, he thought, as his vision blurred at the impact, that for once in long months, he felt no pain.**

**Geoff rose out of a warm, enveloping sea of mental fog, trying to separate the noises he heard into words.**

**Words. What language? There were so *many* languages. How many had he learned over the years, absorbed, force-fed his brain?**

**He sought through his memories with childish impatience, and gradually he became aware of searing pain, whipping him from chest to skull, and the fog drifted apart.**

**Pa-Lünan. Yes, that was it—Pa-Lünan: Nedra, Tahn, the Goddess. And the voices: one was Tahn's. "We must get him back to the temple."**

**"No chance for a while."**

**A moaning roar drowned out the voices for a moment, and Geoff's viscera revolted to a nameless instinctual terror at the sound. Pressure joined pain in his head.**

**"The wind—this is the worst one of the season."**

**Geoff opened his eyes to almost total darkness and until he remembered he feared he had blinded himself somehow. Then he made out guttering torches and realized he was underground, in a Bai-Shan dwelling or a Citadel. Tahn was still arguing, somewhere at the edge of the yellow mist that was swirling in closer and closer.**

**"He's hurt. If we can get him to the Goddess, she can help him."**

**No! Geoff tried to scream, but no one seemed to hear him.**

**"We have to wait for the wind to die, first..."**

**Geoff sank back into the fog, letting its soothing forget-fulness engulf the agony racking him. The fingers of his awareness lost their grip, and when he again became conscious, he was bitterly certain it was a long while later.**

***You should be grateful to be alive*, a tenacious spark roared inside his head. And the greater, exhausted part of his mind retorted: *Why?***

**More Pa-Lünan, more noises. Many feet and voices, occasional cheers for Lord Kehl. "Meigan is dead! His off-worlders are dead!"**

**Classify, stubborn brain cells insisted; Geoff pawed through a pain-dulled mind, and tried to comprehend.**

**"Come to my banners. The Deliyans and Terrans will enslave us no more! The Goddess gave us victory, and in her name I shall rule kindly, generously. If you come to my banners now, you shall be pardoned. We shall serve the Goddess together—the Goddess. A Pa-Lünan miracle!"**

***Not exactly what Sorenson expected*, Geoff thought, trying to laugh; the effort stabbed fresh agony upward through his chest and throat like a hot sword. He lay gasping, hearing Tahn interrupt Kehl's speech. "Please, Lord Kehl... Give me an escort through the battlefield, please. Time is all important now; I have to get him back to the Goddess."**

**Geoff slipped back into the fog again, trying to shout refusals.**

**How long had he been unconscious *this* time? He was sweating, shivering, gnawed by a bitter desire to escape the pain. Somebody was speaking his name, and slowly Geoff opened his eyes—to see the dimly lit interior of the temple. Things drifted in and out of focus, first blurry, then abnormally sharp, and he heard himself panting for breath.**

**Nedra and Tahn knelt by him, one on either side, and above them loomed the Goddess. A scrap of remaining**

professionalism tried to make Geoff identify the section of the temple, but he suddenly understood that was unimportant.

The throbbing in his throat was still there, and he could feel a light, rapid fluttering along his carotid vein where an arm supported his neck and head. The pulse was too light and too fast, Geoff catalogued with detachment.

Nedra was holding a cup to his lips and Geoff blinked, trying to think clearly, part of his mind beginning to panic. "Geoff, please drink."

He was consumed with thirst, frantic for anything to drink, and he stared dizzily at the bronze liquid reflecting the green light of the temple's glowstones. This stuff had helped Tahn, saved his life when he was badly hurt.

*And bought his soul, something screamed within his head. I don't know that. I can't be sure.*

"Lift his head a little more," Tahn suggested.

"Geoff—Geoff, *phase*." Nedra was lifting his head, and he saw tears glistening in her eyes.

His own man or not, he wanted to live. If he couldn't maintain his independence despite the Goddess' formula, then he didn't deserve it. Geoff let the bronze colored liquid seep into his mouth.

The taste was like nothing he had ever encountered—salt, sweet, sour or bitter. It raced down his throat like a living thing searching for food.

The flutter he had felt in his veins earlier rose to a pounding, and his vision began to clear with terrifying speed. It was as though he had been jolted by a massive, incredible stimulant. He had drained the cup, and Nedra and Tahn were removing the blankets swathing him; Geoff almost wept with gratitude, sweltering suddenly in the oven of his own flesh. His muscles tightened convulsively, and the pain rose to a crescendo he had not thought possible.



**It was a cruel trick, he wanted to protest. Yellowish spirals closed in on his vision, blotting out Tahn, Nedra, and at the very last, the Goddess.**

**He could not pinpoint what had wakened him, but when he opened his eyes he saw everything with new, surprising clarity. Nedra and Tahn were still beside him, but the room was different, a section of the temple he had never seen before. "Do you feel better?" Tahn asked.**

**"Much better." It was true. When Nedra held out a bowl of steaming broth, Geoff was able to raise himself and eat without assistance. He curiously studied the wound on his chest, gingerly prodding the area with his free hand; healthy flesh had already begun to replace the burn.**

**"You heal much more quickly than a Pa-Lünan," Nedra commented. "You're a particularly healthy specimen."**

**"How long was I out this time?"**

**"About thirty-six hours."**

**He looked at his wound again, incredulously. "What's in that potion?"**

**"Why don't you ask me, if you feel strong enough."**

**Geoff got to his feet, staring up at the giantess. He could not believe he had been so near death such a short time before. As he gazed around, it seemed he saw everything with preternatural clarity, from the room sheathed with strange, glass-smooth material, to the workmen he could see in the adjoining hallway. The Pa-Lünans seemed to be building an immense, multi-wheeled cart.**

**A cart to transport a goddess and her throne?**

**"You suggested I leave this temple," her familiar contralto confirmed. "Prince Kehl is providing a splendid temple for me in Bai-Shan. An excellent opportunity to make this a model Pa-Lünan city and province, wouldn't you say?"**

**"Yes, but..."**

**"And his government will seek independence from Deliyan rule, through proper legal channels, of course. We shall be polite, and careful to prove the Pa-Lünans are no longer Level-2, as you think of it." Geoff eyed her warily and the Goddess smiled. "The Pa-Lünas will no longer be pushed, but they will be led."**

**"By you."**

**"By us, if we can persuade you. We need an emissary to carry our legal brief to the Terran Federation. Will you be our emissary, Geoff Latimer?"**

**She didn't waste any time. Once more he twisted the puzzle of her technology this way and that. Her statement about metabolism had implied she was no robot, only a gigantic humanoid with the same physical problems on a different scale from her puny subjects. But where had she come from?**

**"I owe my existence to Deliyas," she said calmly.**

**"You're Pa-Lünan in every way, not Deliyan," Geoff protested.**

**"True, in part. Citizen Tahn told you the source of the opals, the mines north of here. Most of my acolytes come from that area, and so do I."**

**"The area is supposed to be cursed," Tahn said softly, not arguing, just recalling what he had heard.**

**"Yes, by a Deliyan ship. You must have seen the remains of many another Deliyan ship about here. Such crashes were not at all unusual, but the ship which crashed in the mines of Pa-Eis-Arka almost twenty-five Pa-Lünan years ago was indeed exceptional." Geoff was vaguely aware his eyes were almost bugged out at her casual disclosure. "Though it took me some years to comprehend fully; it was equipped with an experimental ion drive, one since wisely abandoned by the Deliyans as unstable. The ship was intact in many respects, and I learned much from it as a child; because while most of the**

unfortunate Pa-Lünans near the site of the disaster perished as a result of the crash, my parents did not."

Geoff's mind raced down genetic pathways. A mutant? A telepath, unusual intelligence and comprehension far beyond her cultural level—but, such mutations were generally rejected by an unforgiving Nature.

"Perhaps Nature forgot me," the Goddess speculated, and this time Geoff did not resent her mental probing. "Perhaps I was allowed to fill a cultural need of Pa-Lüna. Nature was exceedingly generous, permitting my intelligence to out-race my voracious metabolism."

"There couldn't have been enough to feed you up there in a mine field. Such places are notoriously poor in nourishment, and with your size..."

"The size was a late development, and my growth began *after* I had discovered the properties of the formula."

Geoff said carefully, "You created the formula?"

"With help from the Deliyian ship. There is a seepage in the mines, and the radioactive leakage produced some... shall we say, unusual chemical alterations. I learned, by accident, that it would serve me as a food supplement. And by experimentation and observation I discovered the liquid, when absorbed by the opals, produced rather startling effects in my Pa-Lünan contemporaries. Lacking my mutation, their growth was not stimulated—and I presume I am to be the only one of my kind. But the opals..."

Geoff still remembered the euphoria, the painfully sweet memory of the essence of music.

Her large head nodded. "When the liquid is absorbed in small doses from the opals, it produces, initially, certain neural responses that are the duplication of pleasant memory; the reasons I have not ascertained. Long-range effects on Pa-Lünans, and presumably Terrans, are a gradual stimulation of the body's defenses and more efficient utilization of

nourishment..."

"Producing the mental and physical health Tahn and I observed in the acolytes."

"A gift for my faithful."

"I'm not one of your faithful," Geoff said quickly. He was surprised and cheered to learn it was true; he was still his own man, and he felt no urge to bow or worship. And yet, he did feel grateful. "I thank you for my life."

"Did you truly think you would be enslaved? My faithful serve me because they too are grateful, and because their simple minds interpret me as a deity with miraculous powers. But you... surely you knew that the slavers had tasted the opals they stole? *They* did not worship me, as you will not."

Geoff was a bit sheepish, comprehending the truth of this. He had a wish to repay her gift of life in some way.

"Repay me by helping Pa-Lüna. With your help, I can lift Pa-Lüna from the primitive darkness."

The idea was tempting. "But... you know the Federation Charter forbids interference with the cultural development of a Level-2 world. And I'm still a Federation employee."

"Even though they could not give you the peace you wished?"

Geoff stiffened, and reflexively his fingers sought his throat. The pain there was gone—completely gone. The elixir produced by a Deliyen wreck's drive unit altering mine drainage had rinsed the blue-fang's venom from his body. "And they told me it was permanent," he muttered.

"Nothing is permanent. My existence will end when the supply of liquid is exhausted. But that will be some time, and I would see Pa-Lüna put on its own feet before that distant day."

"It is time the Interior came into its own," Tahn said suddenly, and he looked eager with hope. "We have been held

in darkness by the Whirling-Wind and the Deliyian guardianship. Sometimes it was kind, true," and Geoff recalled Tahn's mention of a patron. "But we should no longer be the ugly brothers."

The Goddess smiled. "I myself am indebted to Deliyas for my very being. I am not free of Deliyas yet, nor is Pa-Lüna; but we would no longer speak to her as our mistress, but as our equal. Geoff Latimer...?"

He still stroked his throat, filing the stupefying facts rushing into his brain. It seemed his thoughts were clearer, his reactions more precise than they'd ever been. Free of the pain, he felt in a quite vivid sense a new man.

"Perhaps," the Goddess went on, and Nedra smiled widely, "Terran technology too has something yet to learn."

## *Chapter Twelve*

"Dammit, Geoff, this isn't a report—it's an ultimatum!" Sor-enson slammed the tape viewer down on the bar viciously. He cupped his hand around the mist dispenser, tensely directing the euphoric cloud toward his face.

"Hardly that," Geoff said. "A proposal. A Pa-Lünan declaration of independence, if you will, with the pictorial proof to back it up."

Sorenson had been staring at him angrily, and now he shifted his glance to the abused tape viewer, his beefy countenance twitching. "Fake. Has to be."

"Ask Miguel." Geoff was a little annoyed. He'd expected Sorenson to be surprised, but this fly-off-the-handle reaction seemed excessive. "He was a disinterested witness while I took the shots. You'll find his deposition in there. Let me find it for you." He started toward the viewer.

"Forget it. I saw it, and I'm not sure I believe *that*, either. Miguel is an old buddy of yours. You planet-hoppers stick

together." The Director got up and paced to the polarized windows. Geoff settled himself back in a chair, wondering how long it would take Sorenson to run out of steam and get down to business. The sensuous ease and luxury of the planet had apparently ruined the man's detachment.

"It's all there," Geoff said calmly. "I know my business by now, I should hope. Everything from photographs to eyeball witnesses."

"But Lord, Geoff! Level-3!"

"Two and a half, maybe. But I admit they're climbing fast. They've just started mining fossil fuels. It won't be long before they make Level-3 and go on. Within a year they should..."

Sorenson's open hand struck the wall beside the window with a blistering smack. "What's come over you? You took part in all this. You're helping them, interfering with a Level-2 culture!"

Sighing, Geoff spread his hands. "Look; you told me to do something, to get you something about the slave trade and about the stones. Well, I've done both. There's enough on that tape to drag up several dozen Deliyian bigshots and their Terran partners before the Moral Crimes Committee of the Federation, plenty of proof that they outright lied to the Pa-Lünans when they talked them into indenturing off-world."

"I know, but..."

"And the stones *were* being stolen. Adrian killed a Pa-Lünan to get that stone he brought to Deliyas. We've got plenty of testimony that Domatian and the others did a little throat cutting to acquire the stones they had, too. The Pa-Lünans regard the True Stones, the Stones of Song, as their personal, sacred property. And that petition asks the Moral Crimes Committee to issue an injunction absolutely forbidding any further exportation of the gems by anybody—Terran *or* Deliyian."

"I see that. It's what happened to you that bothers me," Sorenson insisted. He walked over and placed a fatherly hand

on Geoff's shoulder, and Geoff smiled slightly. "You've interfered with a Level-2 culture and stepped so far outside your assignment that... well, I suppose I can bail you out with Division Head. But believe me, it'll be tough. I think they'll be willing to overlook this when Pa-Lüna requests a Federation membership..."

"They won't."

Sorenson's jaw dropped, and his hand slipped from Geoff's shoulder. "Tahn came here complaining about the Deliyian protectorate—so you pulled off a miracle and now they can claim they're too high a culture to be protected by anyone anymore. What reason could they have? Of *course* they want a membership."

"No."

"No?" The Director's voice was positively frail.

"Not at this time, no. Prince Kehl is doing just dandy with things the way they are. With a minimum of bloodshed, he's extending the enlightening of his province to include all the surrounding territory. I estimate he'll control the north hemispheric capital in about six months."

A glint came into Sorenson's eyes. "What about this new religion?"

"The Goddess? Purely a Pa-Lünan deity. The ritual is built around the Stones of Song and the Goddess, and you know what inspired cultural jumps some primitive peoples make under the stimulus of a new and exciting religious concept," Geoff said smoothly, still smiling.

"Goddess. Just materialized out of thin air, no previous mythology?"

"The legend says she was born of the Deliyian sun and the Pa-Lünan night, but that her sacred father, the sun, abandoned her," Geoff explained, amused at the mythos Nedra had so adroitly concocted. "Therefore, Pa-Lüna feels it may cast out

**Deliyas, but with the kindness a child owes a parent. Or haven't you wondered why so few Deliyans have suffered in this revolution? The Pa-Lünans round them up and 'persuade' them to leave the planet."**

**"Geoff, I can bust you from here to breakfast for . . ."**

**"I sent copies of that report to the Moral Crimes Committee, Federation Court, and Enforcement Division. The precedents I could quote were pretty impressive, too; I threw in references to Beringia, Jalos IV, and, of course, Kanrak. I'm pretty sure Enforcement will back the Pa-Lünans to the hilt. They've been itching to give Pa-Lüna back to its own Abos. And I thought you were, too," Geoff finished.**

**Running a hand through his thinning hair, Sorenson said, "All right; we send in observation teams and..."**

**"I don't think so," Geoff said gently. "Pa-Lüna's had enough Terrans to last her for quite a while. Terrans mean corruption and contraband and slaving to most Pa-Lünans, and I can't say I blame them. They don't want to be a protectorate of anybody, I repeat. They want their independence. Maybe in three or four years, they *might* consider a slight amount of interplanetary trade. But not before then." He got up and went to the bar. It took him a moment to find the water carafe, but the stuff was icy cold and worth the search.**

**"Geoff, you act like... I never knew you to break regulations this way. You even *look* different."**

**"Maybe I am." Geoff fished the vial of gels out of his pocket and dropped it on the counter top. "There's a few left. Medical Central can use them on another poor sucker or drop them down the sink."**

**Eyes narrowing, Sorenson said, "You on some native weed?"**

**"No. I'll go through Medical Central to prove it before I leave; they'll confirm my system is completely undrugged, unstimulated. I never felt better in my life, thank you."**



**"Okay, okay. A little work will straighten out whatever is eating you. I've got a problem on Thae-yan VII, practically next door. It's..."**

**"You didn't read that tape far enough. My resignation's at the bottom."**

**"Dammit! What are you trying to do?"**

**"Resign. I consider my job done, and I think my sign-on papers agreed I could have a free ride out if and when I ever quit," Geoff replied quietly. "I've already arranged for Miguel to give me a lift back to Pa-Lüna."**

**"Your job isn't done!" Sorenson yelled almost frantically. "You can't just quit. What about those blasted stones?"**

**"From now on they're strictly a Pa-Lünan phenomenon, a religious one to boot. No more will be sold, bartered, or stolen for off-worlders."**

**"But where did they come..."**

**"Pa-Lüna, and the owners consider your questions prying into their personal beliefs. And, if you please, I have here a request from Citizen Tahn of Pa-Lüna: he wants the stone you kept here in Division, his stone."**

**Sorenson looked embarrassed. "The... the lab tried to do some more analysis on the thing and it... well, it shattered. Those damned things are fragile."**

**Frowning, Geoff shook his head. "Unfortunate. You'll reimburse him, I trust? Family heirloom and all that."**

**The Director slumped helplessly. "We'll reimburse him, of course. He's some kind of high muckymuck with the Pa-Lünans now, isn't he? I saw his name on that ultimatum."**

**"Petition. Yes, he's head of the political advancement council, as I am the ambassador."**

**"What?"**

**"The Pa-Lünans specifically requested it, no options. If you ever intend to welcome Pa-Lüna into the Federation, I suggest you comply."**

**His face florid, Stfrenson snarled an affirmation. "All right. *All right!* I know the Committee, and they'll just love to go along with you, and that... that petition. From past experience, I'd say they'll give Pa-Lüna carte blanche, including assigning you as ambassador." He paused and shook a chubby finger in Geoff's direction. "But let me tell you; once Miguel parks you on that little windblown rathole, you stay there till we're good and ready to talk to you."**

**"You mean, till Pa-Lüna is ready to talk to *you*."**

**"You sure this is the place you want?" Miguel said dubiously. "This isn't the capital, you know. My radar says there's people-out there, but I sure don't see 'em yet."**

**"I do." It was amazing what human eyes could learn in a month, and Geoff found that short unpleasant business on Deliyas hadn't cost him too much in the way of adjustment. The bridge across the Al-Laedur lay a hundred meters to the south, and beyond it he saw the dimly glowing lights of Bai-Shan, including some of the brand-new golden gaslights. "There—can't you see them now?"**

**Miguel squinted, but Geoff knew the pilot wasn't seeing the figures coming up the meadow toward them. Nedra's green glow-stone cast its warm and cheering light on the grass, and he could clearly see her turn to grin at the smaller shape beside her—Tahn.**

**"You sure got good eyes," Miguel conceded, shaking his head. "You part cat?"**

**"Maybe. Or part Pa-Lünan." When Miguel looked astonished, he went on, "By adoption, at least."**

**"Geoff, you sure this is all the supplies you want? Soren-son**

won't let me come back and... well, I need the job too bad to break regulations."

Amused by the concern, Geoff clapped Miguel on the back encouragingly. "I'll be fine, better than I've ever been in my life."

"Citizen Latimer..." Nedra's voice came out of the night, laughing, and Miguel shivered as she approached, the green stone lighting her face from below. "We welcome you, Mr. Ambassador. Prince Kehl eagerly awaits your report."

"Well," Miguel said with some embarrassment, "if you're sure you're set, I'll pull out."

Geoff smiled. He felt at peace as he never had, stronger and wiser than he ever had. And his choice had been made freely. "Goodbye, and a good trip."

He stepped back beside Tahn and Nedra, watching Miguel clear the meadow and climb until his planet-hopper was a dying coal in the sky. Kehl would be waiting in the new temple, the one they had built on the site of the slave pens in ironic satisfaction.

The Goddess would be waiting too, but he would not have to tell her much of the news, for she would already know it. It was a vast convenience to have a telepathic partner; it saved so much time.

"Welcome home, Geoff," Tahn greeted him, starting back toward the bridge to Bai-Shan.

In the east, the largest of the moons was rising, palely lighting the way to a better night on Pa-Lüna, a night of knowledge and a step toward freedom.