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# **Seed of the Gods by Zach Hughes**

## ***Chapter One***

The flying saucer picked up the Volkswagen that had yellow flowers painted on its dented fenders as it crossed the causeway, rattled the loose boards of the swing bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway and sputtered in acceleration up the narrow asphalt road between the Flying Saucer Camp on the left and the newly cleared pulpwood land on the right.

"Hello, dum-dum," Sooly said to it, but there was a little lifting feeling in her stomach as adrenal activity belied her calm. The flying saucer, in the form of a symmetrical lightglow, posted itself on her port bow and paced her through the pre-dawn dark. She watched it with one wary eye. It was too early in the morning for her to be in the mood to play games with it, but she knew that if she slowed it would slow, and that if she accelerated it would accelerate, and that it would not, if it adhered to the usual pattern, eat her.

"My daughter, Sue Lee," her father would say when introducing her to people. "She sees flying saucers."

It was all a grand joke. Unless you were the one the damned things glommed onto every time you stuck your head out of the house at night.

There were two blinking red lights atop the storage tanks at the Flying Saucer Camp. It was still too dark to count the tanks to see if there were six or seven of them.

The lightglow off the port quarter followed her chugging Volkswagen

past the sod-strip airport, the location of which had dictated the installation of one red blinking light on the tallest cylindrical storage tank at the Flying Saucer Camp. It lowered slightly as the car moved through an area of sparse population. Frame houses alongside the road showed lights here and there as someone prepared for an early fishing trip or, more unluckily, for early work, Sooly turned on the radio, pointedly ignoring the flying saucer. She was sick of the whole mess.

Someone had left the radio on the country music station. She was blasted by the gut-bucket voice of Johnny Cash and silenced his tuneless growlings with a quick flip of the dial. The more pleasing sounds of hard rock came from the Big Ape, far to the south. The light of dawn was showing, dimming the glow of the flying saucer.

Ocean City, an early rising town, was waking. It would be a sad day for fish. Everyone in town owned a boat either for making money or for escaping the tensions of making money ashore and the mackerel were running. On Main Street, Ocean County's only stop light was silent and dead. Sooly shifted down, engine whining, rolled down the window to see if her escort were still around, saw it low and directly above her, and rolled up the window. She turned up the radio and broke the speed limit on Water Street making it down to the small clapboard restaurant on the Yacht Basin. The flying saucer stopped with her, shifted almost uncertainly as she ran from the car to the building, then settled low above the flat roof of the restaurant.

There was the smell of buttered pancakes, coffee, an arrogant early morning cigar, stale fumes of booze from a sad looking party of four fishermen who had spent the night drinking and playing poker instead of resting in preparation for the early departure from the docks. Most of the tables were filled. Sooly paused inside the door, liking the friendly buzz of voices, the clink of forks against plates, the tight, odorous security of the place. The slight shiver which jerked her arms could have been the result of the abrupt change from the early coolness of the outdoors to the moist closeness of the restaurant. She saw Bud. He was sitting with a couple of the charter boat skippers. He had a woolen sock cap pushed back from his forehead, his long hair puffing out around it. He was lifting a coffee cup when she spotted him, and the movement seemed to her to be as full of athletic grace as a Bart Starr pass.

For long moments she stood there melting inside as she looked at him.

Then she moved toward him, a solidly built, All-American-girl-type in a warm sweat shirt and cut-off jeans, legs smooth and healthy below the ragged blue, breasts making their presence known even through the bulky shirt, hair cut short for ease of upkeep, no makeup except for a slight flush from the early morning air. She moved with hip-swaying ease through the crowded tables, smiling at Bud with pretty, white teeth, her brown eyes speaking but unable to communicate her fabulously warm feeling.

Bud was an easy smiler with a handsome handlebar mustache, bushy eyebrows. He was better looking, she thought, than Elliot Gould and, although not quite as groovy, even more handsome than George Peppard. As she approached him she felt that vast, surging love sweep through her body with a force which caused her step to falter as her mind overflowed with a confusion of nice thoughts: young puppies and clean babies in blue bassinets and rooms with thick red carpets and cozy fireplaces and the smell of broiled steak and baby formula.

"Hi, Sooly," Bud said. "I tole 'em the usual." He didn't bother to stand. You don't stand up for the girl you've been dating since the tenth grade, the girl who wrote you seven hundred and thirty letters during the two years you were in the service and over in Nam at a cost of seventy-three dollars in airmail postage alone, not counting the perfumed stationery.

"Hi, Bud." She said his name in a way which made the older men, the two charter boat skippers, feel both uncomfortable and envious. He squeezed her hand and looked at her fondly. She felt a great tide well up and capsize all her dikes before it.

Outside, in the growing light of dawn, a marine diesel, fired and caught and began to cough out evil-smelling fumes over the smooth, dark water of the Basin. Gulls stopped sleeping or resting on the water and soared, scouting for tidbits. One of the drinking fishermen fell down the three steps of the restaurant and ground his face into the gravel. He lay there embarrassed, bewailing his luck in his befuddled mind, while his three companions shifted their feet. He'd only lost a hundred and six dollars at Acey-Deucey the night before and now this. Low atop the flat roof of the restaurant, hidden behind the upward extension of the walls, the flying saucer flickered and winked out of existence.

Sue Lee Kurt, better known to Bud Moore, her intended, and to other residents of the small coastal fishing village as Sooly, because it was easier to say than Sue Lee and because Southerners tend to slur two-name

names, fell to with a healthy gusto as a stack of pancakes with an over-easy egg atop were, delivered to the table. She ladled on five pats of butter, poured on half a pitcher of syrup, punctured the eye of the egg and smeared the yellow over the pancakes and, with one contented, "M-mmm," filled her mouth.

Bud Moore was taking a busman's holiday. His charter party had canceled out at the last minute, and since he wasn't being paid to take people out into the deep green to catch big, fierce king mackerel, he was taking Sooly and a couple of friends out into the deep green to catch big, fierce king mackerel for fun and, possibly, for enough fish flesh to sell and pay the cost of running his 55-foot Harker's Islander out to the edge of the continental shelf.

Sooly had put together a massive six-course lunch of boiled eggs, tins of Vienna sausage, potato chips, cookies and Schlitz beer, giggling when she bought the latter because Freep Jackson at the market asked to see her I.D. when he knew full well she was over nineteen. Everyone else brought food, too. The ice chest aboard the boat was full, with much of the space given over to cans of beer. There was a tiny hint of a southeast breeze at the mouth of the river. The bar was bouncy with the breeze blowing into a falling tide. Sooly and Bud, knowing that Carl Wooten was prone to seasickness, began to chant, "Up and down. Up and down." Carl obliged by barfing over the stern rail while Melba and Jack Wright laughed, lying side by side on the padded engine cover, arms entwined, causing a flood of pure and happy envy to engulf Sooly. Melba and Jack had been married for over a year and were fabulously happy. Jack wasn't hard-headed like some people Sooly knew. Bud looked at her with a raised eyebrow, asking silently what he'd done to deserve her dirty look.

"You and your damned security," she said, but softly so that no one, not even Bud, could hear over the muted roar of the big G.M. 671 under the engine hatch.

Carl wobbled up from the stern. "Up and down," Sooly said at him, but without real heart. Carl made a weak sound and pretended that he was going to strike her.

At mid-morning, the engine was purring at trolling speed and Carl was forgetting to be seasick for minutes at a time as kings came flashing and squirming aboard, straining arms and slipping drags on the working Penn 6/0 reels. Sooly was at the wheel and Bud acted as mate, taking fish off

the lures, untangling lines, handling a gaff hook with one hand and a Schlitz in the other. For a man who got up at four o'clock, mid-morning was the middle of the day and time for a pick-me-up. Sooly thought drinking beer in the morning was delightfully sinful, but there was something about a fishing day which seemed to call for at least one before noon. She liked the taste, but didn't like what alcohol did to her and was known to be a one-drink girl at parties.

The action slowed and Bud stood beside Sooly. She was perched on the stool in front of the wheel. As she brought the boat around to run back through the school of fish, she said, "I saw it again this morning."

"Saw what?" Bud asked, his eyes busy trying to spot the school.

"You know."

"Want another beer?" Bud asked.

"It doesn't bother you at all, does it?"

"Aw—"

"You don't care that every time I go out across the damned marsh at night, no matter what time it is, I'm apt to be carried off or something."

"We oughta get back into 'em soon," Bud called out to the fishermen in the chairs.

"It just doesn't bother you in the slightest, does it?" she asked. "Or is it that you just don't believe me?"

"Sure," Bud said. "I believe you, Sooly. Why shouldn't I?"

Carl was watching the big, green swells overtake the boat from the stern, lifting and then dropping her. He heaved emptily over the rail. Bud giggled and Sooly, feeling sorry for Carl and admiring him for his love of fishing under such terrible conditions, laughed with Bud and forgot all about flying saucers and glowing lights and just let herself revel in the goodness of being alive in the sun with the water clean and deep and the fish cooperating and Melba and Jack sitting in the stem chairs looking at each other so lovingly that it was enough to tear her heart out.

## *Chapter Two*

Meanwhile, back at the Flying Saucer Camp, Toby and Jay were unloading the new shipment. They worked swiftly and smoothly getting the securely packed cases off the vehicle and into the shed before the day became too far advanced. Toby did the heavy work. Jay had a boss complex. He was newly promoted and in charge of his first independent operation. Responsibility was heavy on his shoulders, so heavy that he neglected his share of work to have time to worry. He panted in his anxiety as he let his worry increase his heart rate, accelerate his pulse and further redden his rodent-like face. His skin was too tight over his cheeks, his large eyes bulged and he looked, all in all, to be hyper-thyroid and coronary prone.

Because Jay was senior and older, and because Toby's young body didn't protest at the extra load of work thrust upon it, Toby did the work with the aid of the machinery, carting the power plants from the vehicle to the shed quickly as the sun melted redly through a silken cloud-bank to the east. He paused, the work done, to admire the sunrise. He wished, momentarily, for time to explore the area. It was a nice place, if one liked salt marshes and pine stands and the silty, polluted water of the canal. He'd seen a lot worse places.

The red disc of the sun cleared the clouds and Jay was calling. Toby joined him. There would be no return cargo this trip, so it was only necessary to close the empty vehicle. However, it would be a full day. Wiring had to be run and ducts installed before the power plants could be connected.

In the shed there was an all pervasive smell of long dead and rendered menhaden. The entire facility reeked of it. It was all right out in the air and the wind, but the sheds and storage tanks held the stench and the earth was poisoned sterile-bare by leakage, although the plant had not been operative for years.

From the road the menhaden rendering plant looked, to passing residents of Ocean County, to be as deserted as ever. Long ago, when the local boosters and Jay-Cees announced the "landing" of a new industrial facility, the county had rejoiced because their area had been honored by being picked as the site for the plant, but that was before the plant started melting down thousands of tons of that small, oily fish called poggy, fatback

or menhaden. Those who lived downwind from the plant soon began to question the value of industrial progress. At peak operation, the plant employed a half dozen men and brought a hell of a lot more stink than money to poor, isolated Ocean County, and not even the boosters mourned when the plant was closed without explanation and left to smell quietly in the sun. The plant had operated for only one season and the local explanation was that it had been built as a tax dodge.

Only a few people knew that the plant had changed hands recently at a surprisingly low price. The financial problems of the parent company didn't make the weekly paper in Ocean City, but insiders at the courthouse could look at the documentary stamps attached to the legal papers in the files of the Register of Deeds and know within a hundred dollars how much money had been exchanged. The ridiculously low total would make more than one land speculator moan, curse and cry in his beer, for along with the abandoned rendering plant went fifty acres of land bordering the Intracoastal Waterway, a sturdy pier built to hold a hundred and fifty foot pogy boat in winds up to near hurricane force, three large buildings, two small houses, assorted boilers and pipes and other odds and ends of rusting machinery, a loft filled with rotting nets and bags of used net floats, three beached purse boats with gasoline motors still mounted and usable after overhaul and six huge storage tanks which had been erected to store the rendered menhaden oil pending shipment to fertilizer and pet food plants further inland.

The most disgusted of all the land speculators was the Squire. He mumbled into his beer and moaned and cursed because the whole works went for less than a fair acreage price. All that hardware, which could have been sold for scrap; all the buildings, which weren't worth much but would have yielded some good material for resale upon being torn down; the tanks, which would have brought a pretty penny on the scrap market; that beautiful, sturdy dock, which could have been used to tie up the Squire's boat, thus saving thirty dollars a month dockage at the Yacht Basin; all went for less than the Squire had paid for his last housing development site on the Waterway. He was chagrined. He bewailed his stupidity. He cursed the previous owner of the plant as a New Jersey Yankee and he judged the new owners harshly, especially the new one with the rat face who came into town in a used Ford pick-up to buy a few dollars worth of lumber from the building supply. Outsiders, all of them.

"Looks like you missed out on that one, Squire," said that smartass,

John Kurt when the word got around. "Fifty acres on the Waterway close to the beach, the airport and town. Let's see—six lots to the acre at about a thousand bucks a lot, say three thousand for the waterfront stuff—"

"Haven't you got some oysters to watch?" the Squire asked sourly, sipping his beer and patting his paunch. Squire was short, somber of mien and perpetually evil of disposition because he fancied himself to be a problem drinker. Having this problem added a new dimension to his character and got him some sympathy, but it forced him to drink at least a six-pack a day and he didn't really like beer. Beer added inches to his paunch, which already sagged softly over his belt, irritated the lining of his stomach and stimulated the production of acid to give the Squire a permanent case of heartburn. Add to those troubles the effrontery of a mere state employee—a warden with the Commercial Fisheries Division of the Department of Conservation and Development—and you had a situation which raised Squire quickly to a simmer.

"As a matter of fact," John Kurt said, pushing his boy scout-type hat back and grinning, for the conversation was taking place at the shrimp dock with a few basin characters as audience, "I've been thinking seriously of going out to the big bend in Big Piney Creek to check on pollution."

The Squire cringed and killed his beer, burping deeply but without much satisfaction. He knew what Kurt meant. On the inland side of the bend in Big Piney there was an open garbage dump. The dump grew more rapidly than its source, which was the Squire's own little town, Big Piney Beach. As the son of the founder and current and perpetual mayor of Big Piney Beach, Squire knew that the town could not afford the cost of a sanitary fill, even if the run-off from the dump did kill a few oysters in the creek. The creek was already ripe with the results of raw sewage dumpage from the big towns upstream, but the Squire resisted the temptation to put the lowly game warden in his place. In fact, he smiled. The effort forced his face to bend slightly. The effect was not so grotesque that it sent the younger members of the audience screaming away, but it did shock some of the older ones who had known the Squire long enough to know that he didn't smile except at the closing of a deal where lots of money changed hands in the Squire's favor or as a ploy while making such a deal. To see the Squire smile was rare. To see him actually use his most potent weapon on a lowly game warden was an event.

"I thought you'd be checking on the new owners of the rendering plant,"



the Squire said. "When that old plant was operating it dumped the waste right into the canal."

"I don't think they're planning to render fish," Kurt said. "At least they've made no application to dump stuff in the Waterway."

"You don't think?" the Squire asked nastily, seizing on the weak word in Kurt's statement. "You're so busy worrying about a harmless garbage dump and trying to raise the taxes of honest citizens that you haven't even checked out a real threat to the ecology of the area?" *Got you*, the Squire thought. He didn't wait for a rebuttal. He waddled toward his Lincoln, pushing his paunch ahead of him, leaving the loafers to chuckle as John Kurt swung easily into his outboard, backed it deftly away from the dock and went tooling down the Waterway in his never-ending quest for oyster rustlers and shrimp poachers.

## ***Chapter Three***

Garge Cele Mantel knew that she was being capricious and irrational in ordering the two Pronts to two consecutive tours of fatigue duty. Their offense was minor and should have been punished by a tongue lashing. Moreover, they were doing make-work. The outer hull had already been inspected. The tiny meteorite pits sustained while maneuvering at sub-blink speed through a rather impressive asteroid belt had been filled and the ship was conveying perfect mechanical health.

Nevertheless, two young unrated crewmen were outside in the cumbersome suits made necessary by the yellow sun's potent particle spray, crawling slowly over the angles and curves of the hull, checking in dutifully with the watch officer according to Fleet safety procedures and Cele could not find it in herself to be sorry. She was a woman in a woman's world and one of woman's prerogatives is to be capricious in small matters. A delightful unpredictability was one of the small traits which went into making women superior. Men tended toward a plodding seriousness, moving toward a goal relentlessly while overlooking what they considered to be frivolous things which, often, took on importance through sheer neglect.

If it were left up to men, for example, all ships would be cold and barren. She shuddered, remembering the almost deplorable state of the U.A.T. *Entil* when she assumed command. The bulkheads were expanses of drab, bare metal. The crew's quarters were unadorned and utterly ghastly. She was firmly convinced that the monotony of surroundings had been an important factor in the difficulties which arose on past tanker cruises and still, to this day, made fleet tanker crewmen prime candidates for rehabilitation upon return from long blinks. She had, in fact, spent many hours on the outward blink preparing a paper which she would present to the Fleet Board upon return. There was some work left to be done, for the paper would not be complete until she had integrated the statistics regarding crew morale improvement following her renovation of the aging *Entil*, but she was convinced that the final results would be overwhelmingly positive and would result in renovation for the entire tanker force.

It was joyful to watch the changes. The growing incidence of something so simple as a smile was reward for her work. The job was not an easy one. It was a stunning challenge, in fact. A lot of time and energy had been expended on the outward blink in a transferral of certain materials from the cargo wells to their designated places, but as paint was applied to dull walls and bulkheads in pleasing brightness, as soft hangings muted the harsh contours of the quarters, she could see the improvement. She would have to justify the expense of tossing perfectly good but unattractive hard metal furniture out the jettison hatch to be replaced by soft-hued, rich woods from the decorator colony on Ankan II, but she was not concerned. The planet below, hidden from her view by the bulk of its large satellite, was an example of what could happen when tanker crews were bored, lonely and far from home without the supervision of a woman. A happy crew is an orderly crew. By the time she got home, she'd have enough proof to convince even the penny-pinching senior Garges on the Fleet Board.

A Bakron rating knocked, entered on her signal, laid a report on her free-form desk. Seeing him, she was once again reminded of Manto Babra Larkton's magnificent job of uniform design. The crew of the *Entil* would have no reason to be ashamed upon return to the home planet. Thanks to Babra's imagination and talent they would be able to stand proudly beside any ship's crew, even that of one of the titanic exploration ships. Cele had not seen anything to match the *Entil's* new colors, not even aboard the *Hursage*, private vessel of Unogarge Clarke, a ship which was the pride of

the system and boasted the latest equipment and luxury and was crewed by handpicked talent from the five home worlds and all the colonies.

The *Entil's* colors, with the exception of the scarlet capes worn by the officers, were deliriously understated. Yet they were so smart that a full review inspection with the crew in dress made Cele's eyes sting with pride. She felt that her pride was justified, not only in the uniform, but in the entire ship. The *Entil* was, after all, nothing more than a powered cargo hold. The decorating problems were stupefying when one considered the limitations. The quarters, crew and officer country alike, were wedge-shaped cubbyholes stuck on almost as an afterthought around the huge central cavity of the holds. The lighting was atrocious. Odd shapes and protruding machines defied conventional methods of decorating. Moreover, Cele had been allowed only two months to specially order the custom furnishing and she'd been budgeted to such an insignificant total that she'd been forced to buy some items for her own quarters out of her own pocket.

Yet, seventy-four long blinks from home, the ship snug in its orbit behind the screening satellite, the job was complete. She should have been pleased. The mission was proving to be unexpectedly complicated and there were new, unprecedented demands on her energies and concentration, more than enough to keep her busy. Still, she was restless. A woman does not rise to the rank of Garge in the Ankani Fleet without developing the gift of knowing herself, so she could analyze the reasons. But being a woman, simply knowing the why of her slight feeling of dissatisfaction did not dispel it. She was simply let down. Now that the renovation was complete, there was nothing to do to satisfy her feminine cravings.

She reached out a shapely arm and picked up the report left by the rating. It was a confirmation of the latest arrival, without detection or incident, at the planetary base. She sighed. Her mature, firm breasts rose and fell under her officer's green blouse. Once the power plants were installed, a simple procedure rehearsed a dozen times on the blink out, the slow process of extraction could begin. Meanwhile, survey teams were working in other parts of the planet, sending back a steady stream of reports, some dull, some interesting, some marked "urgent," all of which were beginning to build up a picture which, if she let herself think about it, made her feel a mixture of anger and sadness.

Cele was a mature woman, an outstanding example of Ankani womanhood—born to lead, trained to excel, Garge at forty, a full five years ahead of her classmates, three years in grade and in line for promotion. Her hair was done in the traditional round circlet of burnished bronze around her well-shaped head. Her makeup was applied with a generous hand but was immaculately neat. Her body showed that sensuous maturity which comes only after a woman has borne her two compulsory children. Her genetic configuration was so nearly perfect that she'd been awarded the relatively rare privilege of bearing two girl babies. One was a rising young Larftontwo serving in the home fleet, and the other, less career-minded, was contributing to the aesthetic wellbeing of the race by doing light paintings in the art colony on Ankan II. Two of her second daughter's light paintings formed an eye-pleasing focal point on the long wall of the lounge in Cele's suite. Daughter number one had already been awarded one female birth, proving that Cele had chosen well when she had opted that nice, quiet Larfton from Computer Center to father the girl.

She was, she knew, a fortunate woman. There was no reason for her depression. It was silly to be sad simply because the interesting work was done and only the duty remained. She would think positively.

Although the *Entil* was just a tired old fleet tanker, being assigned to command was a positive thing. It was standard practice to toss a dull but necessary command to a rising Garge before handing out the split comets, symbol of Larftongarge rank, the magic key to command of one of the expo ships. The Fleet Board knew that it was sometimes a difficult assignment to keep the spirits of a whole ship's crew high in the face of endless months of blinking across empty space to the ore-producing planets of the outer fringes, and during the deadly months of waiting while the extraction team did its work, and then the sluggish, heavily laden blink home. And in view of the disasters involving tanker crewman in the early days of ore extraction, when Fleet command considered the missions so deadly boring that the ships were manned by male punishment tour crews, tanker command had ceased to be a dead-end for unpromising officers and had taken on the aspects of patriotic duty and high responsibility.

Yes, she was fortunate. She was even fortunate enough to encounter an entirely new situation which gave her an opportunity to exercise the full feminine judgement with which she'd been gifted. If she handled it well, and she had no doubts on that score, her promotion would be assured.

Meanwhile, she had to shake her mood. If the Garge, herself, had morale problems, what about those poor men in the crew? She moved her hand and was in instant contact with the control bridge. The face on the screen was that of a technician, Bakron grade. He was at attention, his eyes showing a sort of wistful respect. He was a fine looking lad on his second deep space blink and Cele had been aware for months that he had developed a passionate attraction for her. Reminded by his eyes, she studied him carefully, considering the situation. She ran a taut ship, but she was not the stand-offish type of Garge. In her previous commands she'd discovered that a bit of compassion on the part of senior officers did wonders for morale. It was not only democratic, it was good policy to opt a tech grade male now and then. Such broadmindedness proved that the Garge was human and didn't consider herself untouchable by lowly tech grades. Of course, she'd already endeared herself to the crew by opting a career Koptol on the blink out, but there was a long period of boredom coming up and showing her warmth to this handsome young Bakron would, at least, be an interesting diversion.

A good officer thinks of business first. "Progress at the base?" she asked, in her no-nonsense voice of command.

"Transportation completed," the Bakron said. "Local reference point moved during the operation, but stayed well within guidable limits."

"I want to be kept informed regarding installation," Cele said.

"Yes, Lady," the Bakron said, still at attention, waiting for her to break the circuit. Cele smiled. A red flush of pleasure crept up the young man's neck to his face. "You've done a good job, Bakron," Cele said.

"Thank you, Lady." His voice was choked with emotion.

"I'm pleased with your success in finding a strong emanation," she said. "It has speeded the mission."

"Lady," the Bakron said, clicking his heels in delight.

"You will find that diligent work does not go unrewarded on my ship," Cele said. "Would you be free during your next off-watch?" One never made an opting request an order. Even a male has some freedom of choice.

"Oh, Lady," the Bakron gasped. "You do me the greatest honor."

Cele shifted to a more comfortable position on the lounge, letting her strong, feminine legs show as she raised one knee. She let him look for a long moment, then closed off with a smile. She knew the word would spread rapidly. Before the end of the current watch every rating on the ship would know that their Garge was, indeed, a very warm and human woman and the reward earned by Bakron John Truto would be an incentive for every man on the ship.

Some Garges were cold and limited their favors to ranking Larftons, putting an unbridgeable void between themselves and the ratings. Cele knew that she was known throughout the fleet as a warm Garge and that her efforts on this blink would reinforce that reputation. Her popularity would soar and, although promotion depended on more important things, a high popularity would certainly not hurt her chances.

Around her the *Entil* lived. A deep space ship, whether a glamor-wagon exploration vessel or a working tanker, was a complex of interwoven wonders which seemed, at times, to have a life of its own. A deep space ship was never totally silent, and there was something reassuring about the low level of vitality expressed in the movement of hidden things, the almost inaudible hums, the muted clatter of computers on the bridge, the click of switches and relays acting out the automatic routine of sustaining the life of the crew, the mutter of voices in the quarters, the crisp military precision of the duty watch, the sullen, low roar of power in the engine room. Outside there was a frighteningly hostile nothing. Space. Airless and cold, hateful to all life. The sounds and the feel of the ship made good psychological counter to the mute threat of the great emptiness. To those who chose space as a career, a ship was more than a complex of machinery. Each ship had its own personality. Cele's last ship, an interplanetary passenger liner, was in total contrast to the old *Entil*. A liner was a Lady, sleek and luxurious. A liner's inertial cushions made blinking almost indiscernible, while the poor old *Entil*, prior to blinking, churned and muttered and groaned and shivered as her power banks built the charge and jerked one's eyeballs out as she blinked. A working tanker could well utilize the space given over to inertial cushions on the luxury ships. A liner was a dancer, sweeping smoothly through space. The *Entil* was a laborer in heavy shoes slogging its way from point to point.

Not that the *Entil* wasn't comfortable now that Cele's renovations were

finished. Outside she was utilitarian and clumsy, but inside, except in the engine rooms, which were made hopeless by huge mountains of machinery and which had always been and always would be man's country, she was as smart as a ship of the line and only slightly less plush than Cele's former command, the liner. She could not, of course, come close to the oldest and smallest of the exploration ships in style, comfort or equipment, but then the choice *everything* went into the expos.

If Cele had not entertained every expectation of having an expo ship of her own, and not too far in the future, she could have very easily resented the emphasis put on expos. Even when one looked forward to mounting the bridge of an expo, one could still wonder about the wisdom of putting so much emphasis on them. One could wonder if it were actually worthwhile to make expo top priority, as it had been for a thousand years, since the discovery of the Wasted Worlds near Galaxy Center. The best officers, the finest equipment, a surprising percentage of the wealth of the United Ankanian Worlds went into those titanic, fantastically beautiful ships which touched down on an Ankanian planet only long enough to refit, recrew and reprovision before blinking out again on a computed course into the dense starfields.

Cele, being a good Ankanian, did not consider pride to be a vice, and there was a certain pride to be had from the fact that the Ankanians were a persistent bunch of bastards. A lesser people would have given up. A thousand years of searching had failed to produce a single additional clue, and still the huge expos lifted, blinked and punched holes in the fabric of space, covering incredible distances, investigating a million stars and a myriad of planets only to send back the report—negative.

"A vast waste," the naysayers cried. "We are alone. Turn the exploratory toys into cargo ships. Concentrate on making our Ankanian worlds perfect jewels in this sea of nothing."

In Stellar History IV, at the Academy, Cele read the works of Mari Wellti, Expo Garge, Unogarge of Ankan, intellectual. "The most profound argument against a policy of isolation," Prof. Wellti wrote, "is a tour of the Wasted Worlds."

Cele's graduation trip was to the Planet of Cities. She looked down from a height to see graceful towers, magnificent architecture spreading from ocean to ocean. Then the ship lowered and she smelled the emptiness. She walked through streets and buildings built by something of humanoid

form and saw the fused metals and cried because of the total lack of life, the absence of records, the mystery of what happened to what seemed to be so strong and so beautiful a race.

A thousand worlds spun in space: city worlds, factory worlds, farm worlds, pleasure worlds, and all that remained was enduring stone and plastic—no life, no records, no language. Even the inscriptions on stone and plastic had been obliterated, leaving Cele with the conviction that the fate of all the Ankani worlds depended on one word: *why*? For if there was a force in the Galaxy terrible enough to waste a thousand worlds, could not that force, someday, come sweeping down on peaceful Ankan?

"We are alone," said the isolationists, who were still in the minority. And yet there was Orton. Out of a thousand thousand cataloged stars there was one small yellow sun with a nice little family of planets, and on one of them there was life.

"Sub-human life," said the isolationists.

"Life on Orton," wrote Mari Wellti, as she argued for continuation of the exploration program, "proves conclusively that the Ankani planets are not unique in the Galaxy. Our scientific teams have brought back evidence of a definite evolutionary process. The sub-human life on Orton is reaching up, by a process of change which, according to theory, is the result of certain qualities of Orton's sun. There is every reason to believe that Orton life could, at some distant point in the future, achieve all the qualities of humanity."

"The sub-human life on Orton perverted our men," screamed the isolationists. "This hateful sub-life should be exterminated to remove any future temptation from our weaker sex."

Fortunately for the life on Orton, less bloody-minded counsel prevailed and the problem was solved by manning the essential tanker traffic to Orton with picked officers to stand guard over the baser instincts of the Ankani male. Orton ceased to be an issue. The decades passed uneventfully as Orton continued to yield a vital mineral, an element which had always been in short supply on the Ankani worlds, a metal which became more and more important to Ankani technology as the centuries passed and the home supply was used up. Other worlds had the mineral, but Orton had it in more abundance, an incredible 65 parts in one million by weight of the entire planetary mass. For over 4,000 years Ankani ships



had blinked out to Orton on regular schedules to mine the mineral directly from the crust. Then more convenient planets were discovered and the small, blue planet with its amazing zoo of life was left to wheel in its lonely orbit undisturbed by Ankani ships for almost two millennia.

Then came the *Entil*. She came with every expectation of being able to lower to the surface and extract her cargo directly and quickly from Orton's crust, but Garge Cele Mantel had not advanced over all her classmates by being rash. Although Orton was well-known and had been scouted hundreds of times in the not-so-distant past, she observed all the rules for approaching an alien world, ordering out a scout party in the space dinghy.

Cele was on the bridge when the first report came back. It was such an astounding report that it took her mind off putting the last pleasurable touches on her redecoration project.

It began informally. "Larkton to Mantel."

"Yes, Babra," Cele answered to her second in command.

"Cele, we're getting something from the satellite." Babra's voice showed a surprising excitement.

"Be specific, Manto," Cele ordered, the use of Babra's title telling her second officer that she considered the situation serious enough to warrant strict military formality.

"Yes, Lady," Babra said, chastised. There was a moment of silence. "Our analyzer says it's high frequency radio waves. They seem to be aimed in a tight beam toward the planet."

"Impossible," Cele said. She moved a hand toward a technician. "Monitor the dinghy's analyzer and feed it into the big computer."

It was done. Within seconds it was established that the signals from the planet's satellite were encoded measurements of the particle spray from the yellow sun. Cele felt weak. For one delirious moment she was sure that she, Cele Mantel, had found them, the people from the Wasted Worlds. At worst, she'd found the people who had destroyed the civilizations there. In one split second she felt the feminine weakness, and then her brain took over and the pitifully inadequate weapons of the poor old *Entil* were

readied and the crew was scrambling to full alert and Cele was barking orders and then there was Babra's voice again.

"My God, Cele, the whole planet's alive. All sorts of activity. Long and short waves. Voice transmissions. Good God! Picture transmission!"

"Impossible," repeated Garge Cele Mantel. She still had hopes that *the people* had come to Orton. Anything else was unbelievable, for 2,000 short years ago the sub-humans of Orton had been naked animals sacrificing their fellows on blood altars and killing one another with crude, hand-made projectile weapons.

"They're into atomics," Cele heard Manto Babra Larkton say with ill-concealed awe. "The evil little beggars are trying to poison themselves."

"Impossible," Cele said. But it was true. She'd studied the report of the last expedition to Orton, which described the sub-humans as dark skinned, big nosed, thick haired and having only a rudimentary written language.

"They've been in space," Cele called. "I get launch pads on two continents with vehicles capable of carrying man— I mean—" She paused.

They all paused and wondered and sent out careful scout parties and cursed the bastards down on Orton who had, by making a fantastic leap into the future, added months to their mission. For with an atomic shallow-space culture down there, it would be impossible to lower to the surface and do their extraction.

Fortunately, the Ankani were a thorough race of people. The *Entil* had the equipment aboard to meet the emergency and the know-how in its Garge and crew to do the assigned job in spite of the unexpected difficulties.

## ***Chapter Four***

Inqui, the Fierce Saber-Toothed Tiger, and the world's finest New York alley cat according to John Kurt, bounded on stiff legs from behind an oak

tree and attacked Bem, the panting, fat, ancient Boston dog, as she followed Sooly from the deck at the back of the house toward the weathered dock on the tidal creek. Inqui/Tiger (who knew both names because Sooly insisted on using her first-quarter French and her imagination, and because her father refused to twist his tongue around the word 'Inqui,' calling the gray-striped kitten Tiger instead) ruffled his fur in pleasure when his attack caused the old waddling dog to grunt in displeasure.

Sooly felt as warm as the July sun. She had done everything, helping her mother put the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher, running the vacuum, scrubbing the grout in the hall bath which represented a never-ending chore, since the salt-water climate mildewed the damnable stuff as fast as she could clean it with Clorox and elbow grease. Now, with the day less than halfway gone, she was a free agent, content with her world and heading for the dock with serious intent. Her goal was to bake herself to a degree of brownness which would cause *oohs* and *ahs* of envy when she went back to school in September.

She had to halt halfway to the dock to watch the family's prize pair of cardinals giving their new hatch flying lessons and she spoke harshly to the Tiger, who took a greedy and unwarranted view of the proceedings. "Beast," she yelled at the Tiger, flipping at him with her towel to divert his attention from the excited bird sounds coming from the small tree.

The Tiger made it out of there, tail high, moving so swiftly that Sooly had to laugh at him. He waited on the dock, his head jerking from the flight of a white water bird to the cardinals. For a city cat, he was adapting to country life well.

The Tiger was the only worthwhile thing to come from Sooly's brief stay in New York. "I think that would be fabulously exciting," Sooly's mother had said when Aunt Jean asked Sooly to spend the summer in New York working in Jean's office. So Sooly went as much to please her mother as to satisfy her curiosity about big-city life, and she'd stayed three weeks, just long enough to miss Bud with a heart-pounding intensity, to rescue the Tiger from unwanted extinction and discover that New York was not for her.

"The most expensive New York alley cat in the world," her father would say when he wasn't holding the Tiger in his lap or chasing him out of the planter, which he seemed to prefer to his kitty litter. For Sooly had spent

almost all her briefly earned salary buying shots, a carrying basket and an airline ticket to bring the Tiger home.

"No animals," John Kurt was always yelling. "We're not going to have any more animals. You're good at bringing them home, and then you bug off to school leaving me and your mother to take care of them." But there was the old Boston dog who was only a few years younger than Sue Lee, and all of John Kurt's grumblings didn't disguise the fact that he liked Bem. "I spend more on that dog than I do on myself," he'd growl, but he always paid the bill for the medication for Bem's heart condition, the pills for Bem's grass fungus, the special salt-free diet dog food which she required. And he'd spend hours playing with the Tiger, who liked sacks and boxes.

"You're nothing but a big fake," Beth would tell her husband when he groused about Sue Lee's animals.

Indeed, animals took to John. When the Tiger finished his first inspection of the Kurt living room, showing by his thorough probing into very small corners that he was aptly named by Sooly, he decided to rest from his rather nerve-racking airplane ride in John Kurt's lap.

"You think he doesn't know who to butter up?" Beth asked, when the kitten leaped up onto John's khaki-clad legs.

When the Tiger, who had never seen dirt before, only the pavement of the city and the interior of Aunt Jean's apartment, made his first trip to the great outdoors, it was John who watched and roared with amusement as the city cat walked gingerly, lifting each foot and shaking it, through the rustling leaves. It was John who retrieved the frightened kitten from under the car, where he'd retreated upon discovering that the country outdoors is a threatening maze of movement—trees, squirrels, blowing grass, flying birds. And it was John who waited anxiously when the developing nerve of the city cat sent him picking his way slowly and with great care into the uncleared bay beside the house. When the Tiger emerged from the jungle thirty minutes later within six inches of the spot where he'd entered, John breathed a sigh of relief and allowed as how the Tiger might just make it.

Sooly liked her parents. She was not in one-hundred-percent agreement with them on everything, but there was none of that communications gap she observed between her friends and their parents. She shared her

father's love of the outdoors, would fish with him for speckled trout on the rawest of late fall days and she pleased her very feminine mother constantly with her interest in domestics. Sooly would have been more than content to stay with her mother and practice keeping house and sewing and cooking until Bud saved enough money to get married, but Sooly's abilities extended beyond making a mean pot roast and sewing in invisible zippers. With an ease which she took for granted, she'd graduated with the highest grades in her class, made a valedictorian's speech about the responsibilities of the younger generation and earned a scholarship to a great little girl's school in Virginia where the science faculty was very good. There, during a long, endless school year, she'd added to her total of letters written to Bud Moore, caught rides home for weekends to fish, made-out breathlessly in the back seat of Bud's old Mustang and issued broad hints that Bud could take her away from all that school mess any time he was ready.

As a reward for being a good girl, her father told her not to look for a summer job. She had earned a full scholarship and her school cost him only clothes and spending money so there wasn't a great drain on his just-adequate state salary. She sometimes felt guilty, especially after her failure in New York, because she was, after all, over nineteen and not pulling her weight. But at such times, he would merely hug her and say, "Kid, you'll have your nose to the grindstone the rest of your life. Live it up. Lie in the sun. Go fishing."

Her father was, she thought, one of the world's great men and it was a great world and the sun was just wonderful. She loosened the straps of her halter so that she wouldn't have white stripes on her shoulders, timed her baking to ten minutes per side, sipped Pepsi in which the ice was rapidly melting, and said a friendly word now and then to old Bem, who had found a shady spot under the overhang of the upper dock level, and watched the Tiger practice climbing trees. She was on her third ten-minute turn when a compact ball of energy landed in the small of her back, having sneaked up in dirty tenny-pumps, shushing and grinning at another, smaller ball of energy tagging along behind him. Sooly whooped as the air rushed out of her lungs, rolled over, gathered the small boy in her arms and playfully massaged his scalp with her knuckles through a shock of cotton-white hair.

"Let's go swimming, Sooly," her cousin, Bill, gasped through his laughter.

"Twim, Tooly," said young Anne, coming up to join in the roughhouse.

"In you go," Sooly said, tossing Bill into the creek. He went out of sight, came up blowing and kicking energetically. Sooly lowered Anne by the arms to let her stand on the lower lip of the dock, which was under water on the mid-tide. Hot and sticky with suntan cream, she bailed out, splashing mightily, her hair soon wet and clinging to her head.

On, the marsh side of the creek there was a flat of delicious mud. Bill swam over and started taking labored, sucking steps, sinking in to his knees.

"Mud, Tooly, mud," Anne kept repeating, until Sooly swam across with Anne in tow and let the small girl join her brother in the fun. Bill turned out a soft-shell crab which had been hiding in the mud and all three chased the poor creature until it was caught and put into the crab trap by the dock for John Kurt's dinner.

"Hey," Bill screamed in that full-voiced roar which seems to be the common voice of all small boys. "Let's go crabbing."

"You'll have to help clean them," Sooly told him.

"Sure."

The fat, black dog insisted on going, too, although Sooly knew it would be better for the dog to-stay at home and sleep in the shade. She hadn't the heart to say no, however, so she lifted Bem into the back of the battered old pick-up which was the family beach buggy and installed Bill and Anne in the back with the dog after severe injunctions to sit still and not move at all. She drove no faster than twenty miles an hour going across the causeway and the bridge, turned left into the little-used dirt road leading up to the Flying Saucer Camp, parked the car in the middle of the road in front of the piece of rusted cable which was stretched across the road to keep vehicles out. Faded signs said PRIVATE PROPERTY—KEEP OUT. She ignored them, as usual. She lifted dog and children out of the bed of the truck, loaded Bill with bucket, crab lines and net, and allowed Anne to carry the rank fish heads which would be used as bait.

The dock at the rendering plant had, for years, been a favorite crabbing spot for people in the immediate area and for summer people, the unlucky

ones who worked upstate in the grimy factory cities and looked forward all year to spending two weeks doing what local people did all year round. The absentee owner was never present to enforce the KEEP OUT signs.

There were six tanks. The buildings were closed, walls faded rustic from the original red of the cheap barn paint used on the rough-sawn boards. The two peeling, white houses—windows closed, cheap shades frayed half-way up the panes—looked abandoned. Bem showed an interest as they walked across the bare dirt of the area between buildings, sniffing and grunting in an effort to get both scent and air into her tired old nose. Bill and Anne ran ahead and were busily making the tangles in the crab lines almost foolproof when Sooly arrived at the end of the dock. She hadn't bothered to change, since the Flying Saucer Camp was almost always deserted. She wore a faded blue bathing suit, a size or two too small, selected that morning because it was so far gone that a bit more suntan cream wouldn't hurt it. She finally freed two lines from the tangle, tied fish heads above the lead weights at the end and set her two little cousins to pulling in angry blue crabs which she netted, throwing out the small and medium-sized ones and putting the large ones into the bucket.

John Kurt thought the crop of crabs was good around the rendering plant because of its one season of operation. As the pogy boats were unloaded, fish had been dropped into the Waterway, encouraging the colony of crabs which still peopled the dark water near the dock. Fishing was good.

It was Jay, the worrier, who first heard the loud, childish squeals of delight and looked out a window to see intruders on the dock. His eyes seemed to protrude a fraction of an inch further as he motioned Toby silently to the window. Toby had oil on his hands and smudges on his face and his khaki work costume was wet with perspiration and soiled by contact with the well-lubricated power plants which he was installing.

"Intruders," Jay said. "We'd better get rid of them."

"A female and two young ones," Toby mused, his eyes not missing the flow of girl as Sooly netted a crab and bucketed it. "Our advance studies showed that the people of this area often use the dock to catch various marine species."

"Get rid of them," Jay ordered.

"Me?" Toby felt a flush. "You're senior. You get rid of them." Toby wasn't about to go out there and face a female and tell her to beat it.

"And because I'm senior I'm telling you to do it," Jay said, his voice rising.

"What should I say?" Toby asked nervously, accepting the order as any good man would.

"Tell them it's dangerous. Tell them it's private property," Jay said.

Toby wiped his hands and pushed back his blond hair, leaving a hint of dark oil on it. He braced himself. A man often is called upon to perform distasteful duties. He walked briskly out of the overheated barn, felt the full blast of sun on his face and wondered how much damage its rays were doing. He rounded the corner into a slight sea breeze blowing across the marsh, swallowed as he reached the long dock and let his heels click on the boards to warn the female of his approach. Apparently she didn't hear him, being intent on netting crabs and laughing with the two young ones. He was within ten feet of her back when he stopped, close enough to see the dent in her skin where the upper garment dug in, to see that the lower garment fit snugly and wouldn't zip up all the way, being slightly too small. Her body was as full as a mature woman's, her legs sturdy, her hair nice, slightly mussed as if it had been wet and then hurriedly combed. He waited for her to turn, feeling uncomfortable. After watching her net two more of the vicious blue crabs, he cleared his throat. She didn't hear. He coughed. He caught himself getting a bit panicky. He coughed again and this time she heard and turned her head. She was busy with netting a crab, however, and looked back at her work immediately, using the net expertly, turning to face him only when the job was done.

"Hi," she said. "They're biting good."

"I must tell you," Toby began, his voice weak, "that it is dangerous and this is private property."

"Huh?" Sooly asked.

"What did he say?" Bill piped.

"Oh, it's all right," Sooly said, smiling. "They swim like ducks and I'm a senior lifesaver."



"I have been instructed to tell you," Toby said, his voice growing stronger, "that it is dangerous to be on this facility and that it is private property."

"Pooh," Sooly said, her smile fading. "It's always been private property. Are you the owner?"

"No," Toby answered truthfully.

"Then what's the score?" Sooly asked.

"I am employed here. My superior requests that you leave."

"You've got to be kidding," Sooly said, her face clouding up. "I've been crabbing here since I was a kid."

"Nevertheless—" Toby began.

"No one has ever objected before," Sooly said, interrupting in the way of a woman. "I don't understand why the sudden concern. We're not hurting anything. The old plant is not running, the owner never comes down—"

"There is a new owner," Toby said. "Please leave."

"O.K., kids," Sooly said, thoroughly angered. An outsider was butting in on something that wasn't any of his business, telling her she couldn't do something she'd been doing for years. "The nice man said we have to leave."

"Mean man," Anne said, glaring at the tall, blond man with fire in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Toby said. "But it's not my choice. I'm only—" he paused, "—an employee."

"I dig," Sooly said. "But who's the C.S. bastard who gave the order? I'd like to talk to him."

"Ah, I'm afraid that would be impossible," Toby said, knowing that there was only one authority and that an order from Jay was, in effect, an order from that authority.

"Well, you'll be hearing from me anyhow," Sooly said irrationally, angry in the way of women. "You can bet on that." She was gathering up the equipment. She swept past Toby with the young ones in tow, eyes flashing. When she was angry, her eyes appeared to be larger and made her so much more attractive that Toby could not help himself. He had to watch her. From the rear she looked very womanly. He tried to wipe such evil thoughts from his mind as he walked back to the shed to resume his work.

"Has somebody bought the old fish plant?" Sooly asked her father over a fine meal of steamed crabs.

"That's the word," John said. "Northern outfit."

"They say we can't crab off the dock anymore," Sooly said.

"Breaks of the game." John cracked a claw and sucked out the meat expertly.

"I think that's terrible," Sooly responded.

"What did he say?" asked John, with only minor interest.

"He said it was dangerous. And he kept talking about how he was ordered to tell us to leave."

"Nice-looking young fellow with blond hair?" John asked.

Sooly thought. "Come to think of it, he was. I was so mad I didn't notice. He was sorta groovy—long blond hair, a wild mustache, big, soft eyes."

"That's Toby. The other one's called Jay."

"There's no reason to make us stop using the dock," Sooly pouted.

"Every reason in the world," John said. "They own it."

"Best crabbing spot around," Sooly said.

"You can always take a boat," he replied.

"Hey, that's right," she said. "We could anchor right off the dock and they couldn't do a thing about it, right?"

"Right," her father agreed. "But can't you find another spot to go crabbing?"

"Sure," Sooly said, "but they've made me mad."

"It couldn't be," her mother asked, "that you're thinking about that groovy blond fellow with his soft eyes and blond mustache?"

"Oh, *mother*." Sooly said.

## ***Chapter Five***

A fresh, new pipe some thirty inches in diameter snaked out of the shed, across the bare earth, down the muddy, sloping bank through the marsh grass to bend down into the Intracoastal Waterway. An identical pipe came out another hole cut into a wall and made its way to the water fifty yards to the west. There were no seams, no visible joints. Toby made a last minute inspection of each pipe, walked through the morning haze to the building, entered, resisting the urge to hold his nose until he could find his mask. Mask in place, he ran down a check list, nodded in satisfaction, gave Jay the go-ahead and nodded again as the three in-line power plants hummed into life. He could hear the rush of water through the intake pipe. Jay, monitoring gauges, nodded. Toby moved around the power plants with a critical ear, listening to the smooth hum. He pushed a button and the extractor whined. He heard the rush of water as it hit the outlet pipe and moved to the extractor to watch the indicators. As he watched, the accumulator gauge moved ever so minutely. He grinned at Jay, opened the access port, dipped up a tiny quantity of material and fed it to the analyzer.

"Ninety-nine point six," he said. Jay frowned. "I know," Toby said, making adjustments. The next small quantity showed 99.88. Optimum. Satisfied, Toby walked to the dock. The intake pipe was sucking hard enough to make a visible current moving into it. The outlet sent swirls of clear water to the surface before it mixed in with the dark water of the canal. Back inside, he checked power consumption. For various reasons it had been decided to use local power. It would have been much easier to use their own power, but the plant was going to be in operation for four

months and if they'd put in their own power, sooner or later someone might have asked questions. Using local power posed some problems, of course. For one thing, they had to counterfeit the money to open a bank account so that they could pay their power bills. The way the stuff was being used, their bills would be large. But it was good money—so much a duplicate of the real thing that no detection device could tell the difference. At any rate, that was not Toby's worry. That and many other details of the same nature were handled by another team working in New York. Toby was not a part of that operation, but he knew that the northern team had set up a series of dummy corporations, making it impossible to trace the money back to its source within the time needed to do the job.

Toby's education was limited to language and customs. Although he was prohibited from undue contact, there would be other incidents like the encounter with the female and the two young ones on the dock. He would handle such contacts with as much courtesy as possible and end them as quickly as he could. Meantime, he was in for a long period of boredom. The machinery was automatic and required only a minimum amount of maintenance.

For two days he spent most of his time in the shed, checking and making sure that the initial installation had no flaws. The power plants hummed and the extractor whined and the accumulator gauge clicked steadily now, advancing by miniscule degrees as the material built up in the receptacles. On the third day, Toby requested permission to go into town. This worried Jay. "You know the orders," Jay said.

"I have a special dispensation," Toby said. "I am to be allowed to pursue one of my interest fields while here at the base. To do this, I need access to the library in the town."

"Do you have a card?" the female librarian asked,

"No, I'm sorry," Toby said.

"Do you own your own home?" she asked.

"No."

"Then your card will have to be signed by your employer or by a local property owner," she told him.

All of which necessitated another trip to town with the card signed by Jay who was, technically at least, Toby's employer. It all seemed rather foolish to Toby, for Jay's signature could not possibly mean more to the library than his own, but the rules were to be obeyed. Moreover, the rules worked, for he walked out of the library with an armful of books having a bearing on history. There were also a couple of natural history books, since Toby was fascinated by animal and bird life.

Jay made some remarks about Toby's book selection. Jay spent all of his off-watch time in the lab he'd set up in the second house. Toby didn't mention that Jay's work could have no more relevance than his own. He felt that a man's off time was his own and if a man wanted to while it away repeating experiments that had been performed hundreds, thousands of times in the past, well, that was his business. Toby wasn't very close to Jay. He knew little about the man except that he was well past middle age, was a fleet veteran with an interest field involving medical sciences, a rather barren field since all the mysteries had been solved millennia ago.

Toby developed a horrified interest in war and spent hours going through book after book. His trips to the library were frequent and finally brought a comment from the librarian which he didn't, for the first moment or so, understand.

"What do you do," she asked, "look at the pictures?"

He frowned, trying to find the reason for the comment and then he realized that he wasn't giving enough time to the books, going through two dozen per day. To avoid further suspicion, he limited his reading to a mere four books a day and soon found time hanging heavy on his hands.

For long hours, protected from the harmful effects of the sun by a special preparation which was unpleasantly gooey and which closed his pores so that he could not perspire, he steamed on the dock, making notes and drawings on the astoundingly varied life in the marsh and its environs. He had purchased a book on birds, a paperback edition from the rack in the local drugstore, and he identified two dozen types of waterfowl including a beautiful number called a skimmer gull which fed on minute marine organisms by flying just above the surface of the water with the lower half of its bill skimming up the food. He witnessed a tragedy and was saddened. One beautiful skimmer walked along the mud bank at low tide, weak, feathers muddy and bedraggled, his lower bill broken, starving

slowly. He saw death in other forms, too. Squirrels played in the trees next to the plant. One, standing on its hind legs with its forepaws held in front almost in the position of a supplicant, sent out a chirping, bird-like noise, announcing, Toby conjectured, love or territorial claim. Suddenly a hawk swooped down and struggled into the air with the squirrel. The animal's frantic fight for survival ceased before the bird was out of sight as cruel talons sank into soft flesh.

Shrimp boats plied the Waterway before light and near dark, going out toward the sea in the early mists and coming home with a million gulls in attendance as the workers on the boat headed shrimp and tossed the heads over to make a feast for the birds. Pleasure craft sent wake waves crashing against the dock. People waved. Shapely females in skimpy costumes lounged on the sun decks, soaking up the rays of the sun.

The Squire found the younger hairy fellow on the dock the day he tooled down from Ocean City to check out a report that the rendering plant was dumping something into the canal. He was in a sleek ski-boat, for which he had absolutely no use, athletic activity being far in his past. He owned the boat with its hundred-horse outboard engine because, rather shrewdly he thought, he'd insisted on its being a part of a swap.

Seeing that one of the new people was on the dock he went past, turned around a half mile down the Waterway and tooled back up.

Toby saw the boat go past and noted that the operator, unlike most, didn't wave. Then he saw the boat coming back, slower, and he broke off his observation of the sun-worshipping claw-waving of a colony of fiddler crabs to observe. When the boat came in close to the dock he waited for the operator to wave or yell a greeting. The boat moved in close to the outlet pipe and the man aboard it was looking at the clear swirl of water.

The Squire moved his boat to the intake pipe, saw the current moving into the pipe and frowned. Then he remembered that he was being watched and, to live up to his reputation, popped a beer. After this flourish he took off, his mission completed.

"Dear Sir," the Squire, later seated in his study, wrote to the head of the Department of Conservation and Development. "Your man here, a—" Here he crossed out the word 'smart-ass' and continued "—an impudent fellow named John Kurt, isn't doing his job, since it is my personal knowledge that the old menhaden rendering plant is now engaged in some sort of

operation and is dumping stuff into the Intracoastal Waterway. In view of the past persecution of honest taxpayers in such matters, I am sure you will do your duty."

It was that same afternoon when Sooly decided, having done her housework and baked herself to a brown crisp, that it was time to show those newcomers at the Flying Saucer Camp that you can't snow an old-time Ocean County girl. She pushed her father's aluminum boat into the creek, struggled down to the dock with his nine-and-a-half horse fishing motor, loaded in Bill, Anne and the fat, black dog who insisted on going in spite of the heat of the July sun, and ran the creeks to the Waterway and the dock where, as it happened, Toby was still observing the local wildlife. To show the outsider, she anchored only feet away from the pilings and, coldly ignoring him, set the kids to hauling in crabs.

Toby suffered the close proximity of the female and the young ones as long as he could and then beat a strategic retreat to tell Jay that they were back. "Send them away," he said.

"They're not on the dock."

"You said they were back."

"They're in a boat."

"Then they're not back."

"They're just a few feet off the dock and near the intake pipe."

"Maybe you'd better send them away," Jay said.

"You can't do that here," Toby, having returned, told the female as he stood on the dock looking down at her.

"Aha," Sooly said. "Gotcha." She giggled. "This, my friend, is public water and I can do what I damned well please on it as long as I don't come ashore on your property."

"Are you sure?" Toby asked, not knowing what to do.

"You can bet your bippy on it," Sooly said. "Watch out!" This last was to Bill, who, in his excitement over trying to land a barnacle-encrusted

granddaddy of a blue crab, knocked Bem into the water. The dog surfaced, snorting and gasping, and started to swim for the shore. Sooly leaned over and called, but the dog continued to make it for the nearest dry land, swimming directly toward the swirl of current above the intake pipe.

"Watch out!" Toby yelled.

Caught in the current, the dog was drawn to the center of the eddy above the pipe. The suction wasn't strong enough to draw her under, but it was strong enough to prevent her breaking free. She swam in the same place, her eyes frightened, her breath coming in labored gasps. Sooly stood up, dived into the water, leaving the canoe rocking and Bill and Anne squealing and hanging onto the gunwales. Toby, who had seen the sadness of the starving skimmer gull and the quick and violent death of the squirrel, also realized the danger. His splash was only a split second behind that of Sooly.

Sooly reached Bem first, caught her by the scruff of the neck. Toby was there then and he said, "Let me get her."

"She's my dog," Sooly said. She tried to push Toby away and got a mouthful of water. She coughed and spit and struggled toward the near bank, since climbing into the canoe from the water was ticklish and she didn't want to have Bill and Anne and the dog in the water with her. Toby, trying to be helpful, laid hands on Sooly, felt her warm softness, flushed with embarrassment, took an elbow in the chin and saw stars. He gave up trying to help and swam along behind Sooly. She waded out, sinking into the mud. Bem was gasping and struggling in her arms. She was close to the dock. She put the dog on the weathered boards and hoisted herself up. Toby followed, dripping.

"Is it all right?" he asked, as the old dog, exhausted, flopped down onto the boards with her legs stretched out, her fat belly panting.

"She is not an *it*." Sooly said, angered. "What are you trying to do, drown my dog?"

"I did nothing," Toby said defensively.

"You've got that thing out there," Sooly yelled, pointing to the intake pipe. "I think it's illegal and dangerous."



"The intake pipe?" Toby said, flustered by her anger.

"Whatever it is," Sooly said, bending to pat Bem reassuringly. "And she's got heart trouble and the excitement could very well kill her."

"I hope not," Toby said sincerely. "Do you have *troleen*?"

"Of course I have—" She paused. "Do I have what?"

Toby realized his error. "Do you have any medication for her?"

The dog's breath was uneven and panting. "At home," Sooly said.

"Wait." Toby ran to the small house, found the *troleen* in the medical kit, ran back. He was at a loss as to how to get the pill into the animal. He looked at the panting dog helplessly.

"Are you a vet?" Sooly asked.

"A what?"

"An animal doctor, stupid," Sooly said, worried out of her mind about the dog.

"In a way," Toby said.

"Here," Sooly said, taking the pill from his hand. Her fingers touched his. He felt the contact. She thrust the pill far down Bem's throat and forced her mouth closed. Bem gasped and swallowed. The relief was almost instantaneous.

"Hey, great," Sooly cried, as Bem rose, wagged her tailless rump and sniffed at Toby's feet. "Do you have any more of that stuff? That's the best medicine I've ever seen."

"I'm sorry," Toby said, thinking quickly. "That's all I have."

"Well, thanks, anyhow," Sooly said. "Know where I can get it?"

"It's an experimental drug," Toby said.

"Is that what you're doing here?" Sooly asked, looking at Toby with an approving eye. His wet, blond hair clung to his skull and he looked groovy,

like a surfer just in from a wild ride.

"Not exactly," Toby said, wondering how he could get rid of them now.

"Well, listen, thanks a lot for helping." She took her eyes off him. "You kids pull up the anchor," she told Bill and Anne. Bill started working. Sooly yelled instructions and Bill started the motor, put it in gear, banged the boat against the dock. Sooly made it fast and turned to Toby.

"Well, I guess we'd better go."

"Yes," Toby said.

That made her flare up a bit. To punish him, she decided to stay longer. Seeing a pile of books on the dock she bent and checked titles. She thumbed the bird book. "This one isn't complete," she said. "What you need is Goody's *Book of Shore Birds*."

"I have found it difficult to identify species," Toby admitted.

"They all look alike, huh?"

"But there is an amazing variety," Toby said.

"Look, I'll tell you what." He wasn't a bad guy after all. Any man interested in birds couldn't be all bad. "I've got Goody's. Want to borrow it?"

"I don't want to put you to any bother," Toby said.

"No bother. I'll run it by on the way into town this evening." She frowned. "If it's permissible to come onto your private property."

Toby considered. "That would be nice of you," he said, seeing no harm in borrowing a book. After all, he had permission to pursue his interest while off duty. "If you'll tell me what time you're coming, I'll meet you at the gate."

"I hate being tied to schedules, don't you?" She used her best smile on him. "I'll park at the wire and walk up." She was in the boat before Toby could think of a counter offer.

Bud was running a charter party to the continental shelf that day. He was due in between 5:30 and 6:00. Sooly started for town at 5:00 with a copy of the bird book on the seat beside her. She parked the car at the cable across the road leading to the buildings at the Flying Saucer Camp and walked the rest of the way. The place looked deserted, as usual. As she passed the largest building she heard the sound of electric motors from inside, but the doors were closed and padlocked. She directed her steps toward the house into which Toby had gone to get the pill for the dog, but once past the building she saw Toby on the dock, lying on his face looking over the edge. She walked to the dock. Hearing her, he turned and put a finger to his lips. She joined him on the edge and looked over. A female marsh hen and her brood were chasing sand fiddlers on the mud. The hen was a long-legged, long-necked, long-billed water bird dressed in dirty black. The chicks were balls of furry feathers, their long little legs adding a touch of comedy to their appearance. They watched in silence until the mother hen led the chicks back into the grass.

"Fascinating," Toby said.

"They're clapper rails," Sooly said. "Are they in your book?"

"I couldn't find them."

"Here," she said, opening the Goody book to the rail section. Toby read in silence for a moment, looked up. "You eat them?" His face showed his distaste.

"Tasty, as a matter of fact," Sooly said.

"How terrible."

"You some kind of vegetarian nut?" Sooly asked.

Toby was silent. He nodded. "No rare steaks cooked on a charcoal grill? Baked flounder? Trout fillets in butter?" She shook her head in pity.

Toby was turning pages rapidly, absorbing the information in the book. Sooly glanced toward the storage tanks. Six of them. The largest one had the light on it. "Very nice," Toby said. "I'd like a while to finish it, if I may."

"Sure."

"If you need it, it'll take just a few minutes."

"You're kidding." It was a big book. Toby saw his mistake. "You can keep it. I'll pick it up in a few days or you can bring it, if you like." Now why did she say that?

"You're very kind," Toby said. "Perhaps I can return the favor. If your dog gets sick again—" He was on dangerous ground. There was something about the woman which made him want to please.

"I thought you didn't have any more of that stuff," Sooly said.

"Perhaps I can get some more."

"Sure," she said. "Well, I've got to run."

He walked with her. She looked up at the tanks, counting. Six. He saw her lips move and her fingers move as she counted. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she laughed. She turned her face to him. She was, he thought, very attractive, although her eyes were too small. She laughed again. "If you must know, I was counting the tanks."

"Oh?" Toby dared not say more.

"Sometimes there are seven," Sooly said.

"Oh, no," Toby said quickly.

"They're smart. They park between the two big tanks so you can't tell there's anything there unless you look good."

"They?" Toby asked, his heart pounding.

"The aliens," Sooly said, smiling to show that she was half-joking. "Didn't you know that this is a Flying Saucer Camp?"

"It's just an abandoned fish rendering plant," Toby said, his face flushing. "We're—"

"You think I'm crazy," Sooly said. "Don't mind me. I see flying saucers."

Toby felt as if he wanted to run away and report. He paused, standing

near the corner of the big building. Inside the power plants hummed and the extractor whined. "I have to go in now," he said.

"Why?" Sooly asked, annoyed. "Is your mama calling?"

"Thank you for the book," he said. "But I don't think I need it after all." He extended the book.

"Don't be silly," Sooly said. "Keep it." She walked away without looking back. She wanted to look back, because she found Toby to be a very attractive man. She felt guilty about that, and about her secret thoughts, as she drove to Ocean City to admire Bud's catch of fish.

## *Chapter Six*

The vehicle came in just after midnight and Toby supervised the unloading of the raw material. He was nervous. He'd known there was something wrong when the vehicle landed and Manto Babra Larkton stepped out, dressed in full *Entil* colors. He snapped to attention with Jay and saluted. He was left alone to do the loading while the Manto and Jay held a conference out of his hearing distance. The job done, the vehicle's hold filled with the first products of the extraction process, Toby stood at ease beside the vehicle, waiting.

"Bakron Wellti," the Manto said, striding to him, finished with whatever she'd been saying to Toby's immediate superior, who followed, his eyes bulging, his breathing showing his agitation. "Three times in the past week our instruments have shown the coordinates of the local reference point and the base to coincide. Koptol Gagi can shed no light on this novel situation." Jay shifted on his feet at the mention of his name.

"Lady," Toby said. "Nor can I."

"Yet the Koptol says there have been three incidents of intrusion by native life forms," Babra said.

"Yes, Lady," Toby said. "There have been four incidents, counting the close approach of a native male in a boat."

"And the others?"

"A female, Lady. Twice with two young ones. Once alone. May I ask what this has to do with movement of the local reference point?"

"The local reference point is female," the Manto said. "I know that navigation and shipment is not your field, so I will explain. You're aware that the surprisingly high state of communications science achieved by the Ortonians has made the use of standard navigational and shipping signals impossible?"

"I understand that, Lady," Toby said. "Such signals would be subject to detection by the natives."

"As a result, we selected an alternate method, the monitoring of an individual life emanation," Babra said. "And you know that emanations are subject to change with emotions."

"I've done no work in that field, Lady," Toby said, "but in school I had an indoctrination course. Strong emotions give strong emanations. Pain, anger, fear, love. Yet, as you say, these emotions are subject to rapid and decisive change."

"It was necessary," Babra said, "to find a steady emanation associated with an individual whose day to day activities would not take her beyond useful range. We found that emanation in a local female." She smiled. "You're aware, of course, that female emanations are more powerful?"

"Yes, Lady," Toby said.

"We monitor this emanation constantly. The fact that it moved onto the base, itself, has caused some concern. I am led to believe that you have met the source of this emanation three times. Tell me about her."

"She's quite young," Toby said. "Yet she has a mature body. Except for the smallness of her eyes she is quite attractive. She can be contentious at times, Lady. I had to become quite forceful, in fact, to get her to leave the grounds the first time she appeared."

"And the reasons for her intrusion?"

He told her. He left out nothing. A good man does not try to cover up

his mistakes, and he realized now that his having accepted the book from the Orton woman was, indeed, a misjudgment. He stood prepared to take his punishment.

Instead, when he was finished, the Manto smiled. "You have done nothing wrong, Bakron," she said. "I would suggest as little contact as possible in the future. Do not encourage this Orton woman to visit the base, but if she does, be courteous and make her stay as short as possible. Since you're going to be here for some months yet, it will be impossible for you to avoid all contact. Indeed, minimum contact with the local populace should help to divert suspicion. You must convince them that you're human." She smiled again. "You may return the woman's book."

"Thank you, Lady."

"And now there is time," Babra said, the aura of authority suddenly replaced by a softness which caused visceral stirrings in Toby, "for me to spend some time with you in your quarters, if you like." An opting was never an order. Even ratings had freedom of choice.

"Lady," Toby said, pleased and feeling a growing excitement.

"I know it must be lonely for you down here all alone," Babra said, taking Toby's arm and pressing her warm breast against his shoulder, "and I would welcome an opportunity to talk with you about your work with the Orton animal life. As a descendant of the great Mari Wellti, I'm sure you've reached some interesting conclusions regarding this zoo." She used the Orton word, since there was no comparable word in the Ankani language.

There was talk. It lasted until just before dawn, when Manto Babra Larkton boarded the laden vehicle for the short blink back to the *Entil*. But first, in the darkness of the little room, with Babra's eyes glowing softly—those huge, lovely eyes which took up a full third of her face— there was sweetness and fulfillment and then later talk, and once more before the dawn with Babra soft and clinging and wonderful, a true Ankani woman, beautiful as only an Ankani woman could be, as beautiful as and younger than the Garge herself.

Bakron Toby Wellti was a happy, sleepy man as he watched the seventh storage tank rise slightly and blink out of the space between the two large, odorous fishoil storage tanks. The *Entil* was a good ship with officers who

were genuinely concerned with the well-being of its crew. And Babra Larkton was as much woman as he would ever want. He stood in the coolness of the dawn and counted his blessings. Even without the briefing he'd received, even without the stern injunctions against opting with the Orton females, he would never have been tempted to such an animal act. Even if, as in the dim past, the tanker had been crewed by men alone, even after haunting months of loneliness without women, he would never fall victim to such debasement. It was inconceivable to him to think that Ankani men had done such things. For Ortonian life was sub-human. This basic fact was part of every text he'd read in preparation for his first great blink out to the mineral-producing worlds. And in spite of the surprises, in spite of the advanced state of Ortonian technology, in spite of the very human impression given by the Ortonians, especially the males, whose eyes were not really much smaller than those of the average Ankani male, the Ortonians were still sub-human. They ate animal meat. They killed. Their history was only a continuation of the horrors cataloged by the scientists of Ankan from the early days of discovery, when Ortonians fought and killed with rocks, sticks, crude spears, bow and arrow. Even the female of them we're using for the emanation had killed. She'd dispatched dozens of blue crabs. He deduced this, since the crabs had been carried away in a bucket, still alive, but it was known that the Ortonians ate the repulsive creatures, and to take them as food required killing, since not even savages could manage to eat scratching, pinching, hissing crabs alive.

Logically, however, it was difficult to dismiss the advances made by the Ortonians. They were in near space in crude, chemical rockets. Their electronic technology was reaching toward some very complicated things. There were, as revealed in the books, scholars among them who had come up with some surprising answers. The emanation female's knowledge of local wildlife proved that even the most ordinary Ortonian had learning capacity. His ancestor, Mari Wellti, a true genius, had postulated a strange concept, a process of natural selection which gradually improved the strains of Ortonian life. He couldn't quite swallow that, for the basic form of Ankani life hadn't changed over a history which reached back 500,000 years. However, he could not completely close his mind to it, for there were strange things in the universe and no one had made a thorough study of Mari Wellti's theory. Take one thing, that furnace of a sun up there, unbelievably close, tossing deadly particles around and through all living things on the planet. Who knew what effects would show in the life forms over the millennia as a result of that particle spray?



"One down," Jay said, coming up behind him. "How many to go?" He answered his own question. "Too many. How I'd like to be off this hell-hole of a planet."

They walked together toward the extraction shed. Toby's mind was on the Orton woman. "Jay," he asked, "what is the nature of the emanation we're using for a blink reference?"

"You wouldn't believe it," Jay said, chuckling. "It's too wild."

"Tell me."

"Suppressed passion," Jay said, with a disbelieving shrug. "The Orton woman has never opted."

## *Chapter Seven*

John Kurt eased his boat atop the roil of water over the discharge pipe and dipped up a jar of the fluid. Holding it up, he squinted and shook his head. He'd never seen anything like it. Obviously, water was being pumped into the old fish plant through one pipe and being discharged in much the same quantity through the other. Unless there were some very large storage tanks inside, the process, whatever it was, was almost instantaneous. And the water coming out into the blackness of the polluted Waterway was as clear and green as any water you'd find forty miles off shore.

He took several samples. He labeled each and put them in a box of straw to protect them from breakage. The fish plant was as deserted-looking as ever. Neither of the two men he knew worked there was visible. He didn't know a lot about machinery, but somewhere up there one damned big pump was working and no one, apparently, was watching it. He didn't dwell on the problem overly long. He was an outdoor man and his knowledge of things modern didn't go far beyond being an avid fan of the moon trips when they were televised. He could do emergency repair on an outboard motor, but he wasn't qualified to speculate on what sort of equipment it would require to pump that much water out of the dirty canal, clean it and pump it back.

John motored back to the Yacht Basin, the wind in his face, at peace with his world. He sent his carefully-packed samples to the laboratory in the state capital by bus that afternoon, and they were tested the next day. Tests showed, in the dark samples of Waterway water, the usual rich mixture of human excreta, lead, industrial solvents, agricultural insecticides and fertilizer, a trace of radiation from the atomic power plant upstream and the usual amount of coliform organisms which, when present in sufficient quantities, indicate the probably sure presence of such goodies as *Salmonella typhosa*, which killed three people and caused 1,497 known cases of gastroenteritis in Riverside, California in 1965. On the other hand, the sample dipped from the clear water coming out of the discharge pipe showed no coliform organisms at all, no organic pollutants in any form, causing a technician to wonder why he couldn't find a hole of water that clean when he went to the beach to pick oysters and dig clams.

Because a local resident of some influence had raised the question, a report on the product of the old rendering plant went to the head of the department and a letter was sent to the mayor of Big Piney Beach to the effect that there would be room in the world for more of the type of pollution put out by the rendering plant. The department head made a mental note to find out what it was they were doing to make water so clean down there in Ocean County, but he was late for a golf date, had a par on the first hole, a bogey on the tough par-five on the back side, a birdie on the seventeenth (on which he won four dollars and fifty cents) and two martinis at the nineteenth.

It was left up to the Squire to ask several days later, "They got a permit to dump that stuff in the canal?"

"Squire," John Kurt said patiently, "they're not dumping anything. They're putting in clean water."

"You put anything into public waters, you gotta have a permit," the Squire insisted, still smarting over the loss of those fifty acres on the waterfront. "How come I have to tell you your job?"

Later that day John found himself confronting the two workers at the plant. "You see," he explained to Jay and Toby, "it's necessary to have a permit from the department before you can dump anything, even clean water, into the Waterway." Being a good citizen, the Squire had insisted on coming with him.

"Tell 'em they'd better shut down," the Squire said.

"I don't think that will be necessary," John explained patiently. "The permit is rather routine and since they're not polluting—"

"I know my rights," the Squire overrode him. "No permit, no dumping. Tell 'em to shut down."

"Come on, Squire," John said.

"It would be impossible to shut down," Jay protested. "We would fall behind schedule."

"You shut 'em down," the Squire repeated, "or I get an injunction against all of you. Man works hard all his life and gets persecuted for paying his taxes like a good citizen, he doesn't take kindly to seeing the law broken."

"Squire," John said, "they'll be able to operate as soon as a permit is issued anyhow. Let's not make trouble for them."

"You don't know what trouble is, boy," the Squire said, turning away.

"All right, dammit," John said to him. Then he turned to the two men. "Look, you see how it is. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to shut down until we can get this ironed out."

Jay's breathing increased in tempo. "How long will it take?" Toby, who was also anxious, asked.

"I have forms at home," John said. "If you can fill them out today and get them in the mail, it'll take about three days, I'd say." Jay looked as though he might explode.

"How may I get the forms?" Toby asked.

"Well, why don't you run over with me now and pick them up?" John asked. Toby looked at Jay. Jay managed to nod without popping his eyes.

"I hope you're that damned reluctant to help next time some nut complains about my garbage dump," the Squire grumbled.

"I will turn off the power," Toby said. He entered the building. John

tried to get a peek, but Toby closed the door quickly. Jay drifted away, looking unhappy.

"I understand my daughter has turned you on to bird-watching," John said, when Toby came out.

"Ah, she's your daughter?"

"Sooly. Yeah. That's her."

"I wonder if you would give me a minute? I've finished with the book she loaned me and this would be a good opportunity to return it?"

Sooly was all set to cook dinner when John escorted Toby into the house. "Well, hi," she said gaily. "You're just in time for chow."

"That's kind of you," Toby said, "but it is not yet my meal time."

Sooly grinned. "Quick meal," she said. "We're having crisp fatty animal tissue, unfertilized fowl embryo, liquid mammary gland secretions of an animal, and the congealed fat from that same liquid atop cooked, ground plant seeds."

"Bacon, eggs, milk and buttered toast," John said. "Again?"

"He's a vegetarian," Sooly said, smiling at Toby. "I can whop up a nice salad."

"I have returned your book," Toby said.

"Ignore the teeny-bopper and come on into the den," John said. "I'll get the forms." Sooly followed them in and enjoyed Toby's interested look when he spotted the bookcase. It was six feet wide and the height of the wall and was stuffed with her mother's art books, a set of the Britannica, all of the books of John D. MacDonald, some old goodies handed down from Sooly's grandfather and assorted Book-of-the-Month novels.

"Since you're here," John said, "why don't you help Toby fill in this form?"

"Sure," Sooly said, seating herself at the desk behind the battered old typewriter. She took the forms from her father's hand and inserted the top one in the machine. The form was a simple one. She learned only two

things, the name of the company for which Toby worked, uninteresting, and the purpose of the company, rather interesting. "What does your company produce?" she asked.

"We are operating an experimental desalinization process," Toby said.

"D-e-s-a-l-i-n-e-i-z-a-t-i-o-n," Sooly spelled carefully, still spelling it wrong. "What are you producing then, fresh water?"

"Ah, no," Toby said. "We're extracting a certain mineral."

"It says, what does your company produce," Sooly said. "I guess we'll have to put down what you're extracting."

"You call it lithium," Toby said.

"What do you call it?" Sooly asked, looking at him.

"Lithium," Toby said, recovering quickly.

"Sign here as an official company representative," Sooly said. "Like to see the nest of the new baby cardinals in the back yard?"

"I should get back," Toby said.

"Sooly doesn't get a good-looking man cornered often," John said. "You won't get away so easily."

"Right," Sooly said, coming from behind the desk to take Toby's arm in a natural feminine gesture. "Besides, you can't go until I tell Daddy to take you, can you?"

"There is a certain logic there," Toby said, trying to hide the pleasure he felt from her womanly touch.

Beth Kurt stood at the sliding door in the living room and watched Sooly and Toby studying the cardinals as they fed their young. "My, he's a nice-looking boy."

"Now mother," John said. "Just because you don't want your only daughter to marry a poor fisherman, don't start matchmaking. The kid's from up north somewhere. How'd you like for Sooly to marry a damyankee and have to go four hundred miles to visit her?"

"I'd love it," Beth said. "If he's from New York."

## *Chapter Eight*

The last mail truck of the day left Ocean City at 4:00. John had to stand on the back deck and yell at Sooly to remind her that Toby's letter was important. John enclosed a note explaining the need for an immediate ruling. He recommended a permit without further investigation. He had no way of knowing that the Squire was also writing a letter, protesting what he called a biased attitude on the part of the local representative of the department. Both letters arrived at the desk of the department director in the morning mail and resulted in a call to John with instructions to make a more thorough investigation.

"All they're putting into the canal is clean water, chief," John protested.

"What are they doing with the crud they remove from it?" the director wanted to know. "The canal water you sent has a bacteria count just slightly lower than Lake Erie's with a couple of lumps of raw sewage not even broken down yet. If they're moving as much water as you say they are, they're building up a pile of stuff."

"Chief," John said, "would it be pollution if they're doing nothing more than putting back into the Waterway what they took out?"

"We're not concerned with what they take out," the director said, "although we're getting into a question of water usage from a federal waterway without official permission, but once they take it out it becomes their responsibility. Find out what they're doing with the crud."

But before that happened, before the letters arrived and before John got his instructions via telephone, Sooly and Toby went into Ocean City to mail a letter. Bem begged and was allowed to go, taking her favorite place in the luggage space behind the seat. Sooly, sensitive to the gossipy tendency of the locals, stopped up the road and loaded Bill and Anne into the back seat to act as chaperones. She was, after all, an engaged girl and she didn't think it wise to be seen riding around alone with a good-looking cat like Toby.

The ride into town was noisy. Conversation consisted mostly of Sooly's answers to a million questions. Toby came in for a few questions, himself. He was asked, for example, if he used curlers on his hair. He found the young ones to be interesting and rather delightful. It was an entirely new experience to be exposed to the frantically jumping minds of children. He had one bad moment as the yellow-flowered Volks passed the base and Bill began to count, "One, two, three," ending at six. "Only six, Sooly," Bill said.

"They only come at night," Sooly said.

Toby was reminded of the ticklish fact that the Orton woman knew about the transport vehicle. He risked a question of his own. "Have you seen the flying saucers, too?"

"Oh, sure," Bill said.

"True," Anne seconded.

"We seen 'em two times with Sooly comin' home from the show," Bill said.

Toby made a mental note to do something about making his long overdue report about the Orton woman's knowledge. But he wasn't sure. Sooly treated the whole thing as if it were a huge joke. He was sure that others, hearing Sooly and the two young ones talk about flying saucers, would think it a game.

With the letter deposited in the outgoing slot at the P.O., Sooly took the scenic drive along the river to the Basin. "The charter boats will be in soon," she said. "If you're not in a hurry we'll stay and see what they caught."

"I have nothing to do," Toby said. It was true. With the power shut down there was nothing to do but report to Jay and, in truth, he was a bit pleased to delay his return to the lonely base. It wouldn't hurt Jay to stew and worry a bit.

Sooly had two motives—well, maybe three—in staying until Bud's boat rounded the point of Blue Water Beach, slipped inside the markers on a high tide to make the trip between the point and the Basin a bit quicker and backed and bounced off pilings into its slip. She was, as always,

genuinely interested in Bud's catch. The more fish his charter parties caught, the quicker the word of his fish-finding ability would spread, the more charters he'd get, the more money he'd make and the sooner they could get married. Of course, she wanted to see Bud himself and, with an inward grin, she admitted to herself that she was not totally unaware of the nice picture she made standing beside blond, tall, powerfully-built Toby. She made it a point to look up into Toby's large, sensitive eyes just as Bud finished the docking process and looked at the reception committee. Toby, unaware of the female's intricate little ploy smiled back at her. The effect was not lost on Bud.

"Who's the dude?" he asked, when he had a chance to speak to Sooly alone.

"A handsome stranger who is going to take me away," Sooly said. "Are you jealous?"

"I don't think my party would mind if you took your folks a fish," Bud said, lifting a 15-pound king mackerel and holding it in front of Sooly's eyes.

"That war movie is on at the show," Sooly said.

"Look, Sooly," Bud said, with a trace of irritation. "I was up at four o'clock. I've been bouncing around on the ocean for twelve hours." He realized that he was being harsh. He put a fishy hand on her arm. "Why don't you come by the house for awhile? We can pop some popcorn and watch't.v."

"Big deal," Sooly said. But she knew he was a tired fellow and he'd done a fine day's work. The fishbox was overflowing with fish and the fishermen were in good spirits. They would spread the word in their upstate home town about that young skipper who could find the mackerel down in Ocean City.

"That dude with you?" Bud asked, his eyes turning sideways to examine Toby.

"I was just helping him mail a letter," Sooly said, grabbing Anne with one hand on the fly as she almost fell into the Basin.

The director's call to John Kurt came next day and John announced



that he was going over to the fish oil plant. "I'll ride with you," Sooly said. Beth Kurt looked at her husband with a tiny smile.

Jay had been locked up all day in his lab. Toby had finished his daily ration of books and was lying on his stomach on the ground observing a colony of small ants. He'd performed one chore. As junior rating he was handed all of the chicken stuff. His head was packed full of enough knowledge to give a small computer a run for its money on most problems, but he didn't have a computer at the base and balancing the checkbook had drained him. There'd been a surprising number of checks, most of them involving Jay's interest, the lab. Toby had seen the items coming in in small and large packages, but he hadn't realized that Jay had made such a variety of purchases. They ranged from pure chemicals to white rats. The latter interested him slightly, but Jay was very possessive and would not allow him into his lab to see the animals. He knew, by the increased supply of food being purchased, that the small animals were multiplying rapidly and he thought it rather selfish of Jay to keep them all to himself. He also thought it rather reckless of Jay to spend so much money on expensive items of equipment such as centrifuges and X-ray machines and an electron microscope. Some of the equipment could have been requested down from the ship, but it was no big matter. The relatively small amount of duplicated money put into circulation by the Ankani base would not affect the topsy-turvy economy of Orton, American division. In fact, from a shallow study of economics he'd undertaken, Toby judged that Jay was merely helping the government by spending the duplicated. When the economy slowed, the government manufactured money and put it into circulation by such artificial means as paying renegade street gangs to teach their skills to younger hoodlums, and by inflating the cost of a single primitive jet aircraft to 13.5 million units of American currency. So Jay was merely helping out by spending a few thousand artificial dollars. What he was doing in the lab was another question. Toby often wondered about that, but his hinted inquiries were ignored.

Ants were more interesting. In many ways they were like the Ortonians, coming in astronomical numbers, running around in every direction with a vast waste of energy and, in spite of their apparent aimlessness, accomplishing something. He was so engrossed in watching one small individual struggle with the amputated leg of a grasshopper that he didn't see Sooly and her father walk up the road.

Sooly thought it was nice to see a man so interested in important things like nature. She stood in the background while John explained the difficulty and saw Toby's worried look. "I'll have to consult the boss," he said.

He was back in a few minutes. Jay had not opened the door to the lab when he knocked, carrying on the conversation through the door. "They want to see the equipment," he told the Koptol.

"Show them then," Jay yelled.

"I think you'd better talk to them," Toby said.

"Tell them only what you've been told to tell them," Jay yelled. "You know that the equipment is made to seem to be of Ortonian origin. I'm busy."

"What we do," Toby said, inside the big shed, his nose full of the stench of long dead and rendered fish memory, but unable to don his mask because it was not of Ortonian design, "is pump water in here and pump it out there. This machine extracts lithium from the water. As you may know, lithium is one of the more plentiful elements dissolved in sea water, making up roughly seventeen parts in one million."

"What do you do with the crud?" John asked, following his instructions.

"The impurities?"

"You're taking out more than lithium," John said. "The lab said your discharge water is as pure as—" he started to say angel's piss, but remembered that Sooly was poking around nearby, "—as the cleanest water in the Antarctic Ocean."

"Well," Toby said, "the impurities get in the way. We merely filter them out here." The filter was a tiny machine mounted in line ahead of the extractor.

"Must be a very new process," John said.

"Quite new. Experimental, in fact." Toby had his cover story down pat. "Once we've proved the effectiveness of this technique, we'll market it."

He could not tell the rather pleasant Ortonian that, once the *Entil* was packed full of lithium, the parent corporation would report that the extraction method tried out on the Intracoastal Waterway in Ocean County was prohibitively expensive and the company would be dissolved.

"Once you filter out the crud, what do you do with it?" John asked.

"We burn it in this small hydrogen furnace," Toby said, indicating another small box.

"Hydrogen?" John frowned.

"Another innovation," Toby said. Actually, there was a small fury of hydrogen fusion going on inside the box.

"You're not making any radiation or anything?" John asked.

"Oh, no. Merely great heat. The crud, as you call it, is reduced to individual atoms and dispersed harmlessly into the atmosphere."

"Sounds like we could use one of those gadgets over at the Squire's garbage dump," John said.

"When will we be able to resume operation?" Toby asked. "It's quite important that we not fall behind schedule."

"I'll call the director tonight," John said.

"Daddy, couldn't you let them start again on your own authority?" Sooly asked. "You can see they're doing nothing wrong."

"Don't see why not," John said. "But if anything comes of it, I'll swear I told you to hold off until the permit comes from the state capital."

Toby threw switches and pushed buttons and looked at gauges and nodded in satisfaction as the accumulator gauge moved minutely. Outside, John shook his hand. Leaving, he turned. "My wife said invite you over for dinner since you're stuck out here without a woman's cooking."

"That's kind of you," Toby said non-committingly.

"I'll do an all-vegetable meal," Sooly said. "How about tomorrow night?"

"I—" He paused. "Yes, thank you." He was thinking of John Kurt's well-stuffed bookcase. He was, however, looking at Sooly in shorts, subconsciously comparing her with Manto Babra Larkton. He would not think such thoughts openly, but it was not unscientific to wonder about the intimate habits of these Ortonians who, on the surface, seemed so much like human beings.

## ***Chapter Nine***

"What do you do?" Sooly asked, "just look at the pictures?"

Toby looked up from the book guiltily and lied with what he hoped was a straight face. "I'll confess," he said. "I have a photographic memory."

"Hey, neat," Sooly said. "Can you teach me? Talk about groovy, I could do my homework in minutes and spend the rest of the time doing what I wanted to do."

"I think it's an inherited characteristic," Toby said.

"It would be."

John and Beth Kurt were in the living room watching t.v. Beth had herded Toby and Sooly into the den with a matchmaking obviousness which made Sooly snicker. Beth wanted Sooly to marry a rich man who could afford an apartment in New York where Beth could visit, or at least use the home of her daughter as headquarters while shopping in all the strange little stores in that fascinating flea market of a city. Toby had zoomed in on the bookcase immediately, but he was able to carry on a small-talk conversation with Sooly while reading. By chance, he started on a shelf of novels and was through *Gone With The Wind* and had started *War and Peace*.

"I feel sorry for you," Sooly said. "You'll never know the joy of being a sixteen-year-old girl reading *War and Peace* for the first time. Oh, God, the anger you feel when it seems that Natasha is going to run off with that horrible Anatole."

Toby, who was encountering the romantic idealism of Orton for the first time, had no answer. He was both fascinated and frightened by the premise that the abstract idea, love, could be confined to a one-on-one relationship. He was intrigued, in a visceral way, by the fantastic idea of having one woman for one man, of actually owning a woman. But there wasn't a woman he knew that he would like to spend a lifetime with. For one thing, he was always a bit intimidated by women. It wasn't a matter of questioning the innate superiority of women, no one did that. It was just that women were so different. Manto Babra Larkton, in charge of the education program on the blink out, had understood the complexities of alien contact thoroughly and, when it was discovered that Orton had leaped into the future, she'd been able to organize a new education program quickly, not even hesitating over the absolutely irrational aspects of Ortonian society. Deficit finance, complex moral codes, the ambiguity of the Ortonians in all matters—nothing surprised the Manto, and she could quickly explain why, for example, a crowded world which threatened to over-breed its food supply would spend much time and effort reversing nature's population-control methods by curing disease while killing in wars. The Manto had even explained why a nation such as the United States, engaged in a massive birth-control program, would give government grants to scientists who were trying to make babies in test tubes. She could also show great anger when the research team on the surface sent up reports that the Orton scientists were even making primitive efforts to penetrate to the very heart of life by experimenting with molecular surgery at the DNA level. Toby, who had learned earlier of the atomic experiments which were slowly poisoning the atmosphere and environment of the planet, was merely further saddened by this terrible revelation, and the additional knowledge of the perversions practiced by the Ortonians reinforced his feeling that the Ortonians were, indeed, sub-human.

And yet, there was a certain puzzling beauty in the stories. Was it because his orientation had pounded the language and the thinking of the Ortonians so deeply into his head? Was he being influenced by simply being among them?

He found himself being saddened when Scarlet blew her chance for happiness with Rhett and pleased when Natasha didn't run off with Anatole. And when he dipped into Beth Kurt's art books, he was moved almost to tears by the efforts of Orton's primitive artists. Some of the impressionists gave indication of discovering some of the techniques of

the light artists on Ankan II and Paul Klee's amusing work pleased him, even if it was shown to him in a one-dimensional format.

He discovered a treasure trove of archaeological books on the bottom shelf and thumbed through them rapidly, truly looking at the pictures, while Sooly talked about the joys of living in Ocean County as if she were a one-woman chamber of commerce. Toby knew, from previous study of the works of Ankani scientists, that the age-old Ankan technique of rock cutting had been used in various Orton civilizations, and he was very interested to note that the last Ankani expedition to Orton, although under the control of officers, had left its mark on the Mayans. Evidently there had been no forbidden activity, but someone had taught the Mayan rock masons how to fit stone with amazing precision. So there had been, at the very least, a bit of culture bleed-through from the Ankani presence. Not, however, enough to make the Mayan culture a long-lived one. It began to flower, Orton date, about 300 A.D., less than two centuries after the last Ankani visit, and died only a few hundred years later.

Sooly, getting restless and a bit put out by having to share Toby's attention with the books, stood, walked to look over his shoulder as he was enraptured by a two-page color photograph of the Mayan city of Uxmal, rising real and ruined from the green of the surrounding jungle with the soft gold of a late sun on its stone. After thumbing through three or four fine volumes which pictured the art, artifacts and ruins of past Ortonian civilizations, he was bemused by the inevitable comparison with the Wasted Worlds near the Center of the Galaxy.

"But what happened to them?" he asked softly.

"Someone zapped them," Sooly said. "They got fat and careless and someone hungrier came along."

"And where are they?" Toby asked, thinking of the people who wasted the thousand worlds of the old empire.

Sooly shrugged. "Who knows? Poor *Indios*, maybe. No one really knows."

Toby came out of his reverie. She, he realized, was speaking of the Mayans.

"They saw flying saucers too," Sooly said. "Sometimes I think I may be

a Mayan reincarnated."

Toby was disturbed. He tried to pass it off. "Your nose isn't big enough," he said, pointing to a terra cotta head of a Mayan woman.

"I don't ask you to believe that I see them," she said, "but why don't you keep your eyes open?"

"When do you see them?" Toby asked, slightly uncomfortable because of the sensitive subject.

"At night. Almost any time I go out."

"What do they look like?"

"Oh, it's usually just a light. It follows me. The other morning it followed me all the way to town."

"But I understand that you people—I mean that people have been seeing unexplained flying objects for years," Toby said.

"Sure. They saw them." She went to the bookcase and came back with a copy of Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* "Every primitive culture has its myths about white gods who came from the sky on wings of fire. The Mayans even drew a picture of a man in a space ship." She showed him. The drawing was from a wall at the temple at Copan. It showed a Mayan in a small space capsule surrounded by fanciful whorls and kinks which could easily have been a primitive representation of machinery not understood by the artist. "And look," Sooly said, showing him pictures of unexplained concrete roads in Bolivia and strange, huge markings in the earth at Nazca, in Peru.

Toby's pulse increased. "May I read it?" he asked.

"Sure, take it with you."

He had himself transported aboard the next vehicle, which arrived to load the extracted lithium two days later. During the period of waiting he had read and reread Daniken's book and did some hurried research at the local library. He also had seen a white rat with teeth like an extinct saber-toothed tiger in the poisoned dirt of the base. The rat was attacking a rabbit with a ferocity which amazed Toby. He made a mental note to

check his books, thinking, perhaps, that the rat was not a rat but a large species of shrew. Aboard the ship, he was escorted into Garge Cele Mantel's suite.

"Lady," he said, "I thought you should know that there is a small but surprisingly accurate body of knowledge on Orton about past Ankani expeditions." He proceeded to recite the pertinent facts. The most evident scars had been left by the last ship which extracted minerals on the continent called South America. Large markings remained, markings used to land mineral-carrying vehicles visually. There was evidence to indicate that Ankani aerial maps had fallen into the hands of Ortonians. Eighteenth century (Orton Time) maps showed features of the continents which would have been unknown with the state of the technology at that time. The Mayans and others had possessed knowledge of the stars which could have come only from a space traveler. The Baghdad Museum displayed the actual fragments of an Ankani electrical battery from some piece of field equipment, fragments left on Orton by one of the early expeditions. Even ancient cave drawings showed men in protective suits.

"The original research team reported such items," Cele said. "However, the team determined that reports of flying saucers and other phenomena came from a lunatic fringe and were largely discounted by those in authority."

"True, Lady," Toby said. "The Daniken book seems to have been accepted in the same spirit as earlier works, such as those of Charles Fort. However, I thought it worth note that the Ortonian had stumbled onto such convincing evidence."

"It was all taken into account," Cele said, telling the rating with her tone of voice that he was presuming to think that matters of such import could have been overlooked by officers. "In fact, because of the advances made on Orton since we were here last, we thought, at first, to find and make use of a deserted island in the western ocean. This was not done because of the irrational, warlike posture of the two major powers. Our scout teams learned that both powers keep all oceans patrolled. After much study, we decided that the safest course would be to locate our extraction plant inside the territory of the less paranoid of the two major countries." Paranoid was an Orton word, of course, there being no counterpart in Ankani. "Do you have reason to doubt the security of the base?"



"Lady," Toby said, suddenly ill at ease, "as you know, I have been extended permission to continue my studies in Orton history as influenced by Ankani expeditions."

"We tend to be lenient with crewmen in hardship posts," the Garge said.

"In my limited contact with the Ortonians, I have, as you know, met the source of the emanation used to guide the cargo vehicle."

"Yes, yes, make your point," Cele said impatiently.

"Our beam makes a visible glow while it is in use," Toby said. "The Orton female has seen it repeatedly. She calls it a flying saucer."

"She has talked with you about this?"

"She mentions it as if she, herself, does not quite believe it, but I have reason to believe that she has noticed our vehicle in place on the surface."

"Humm," Cele said. Toby stood patiently as she thought. "Does she tell others?"

"Her father treats it as a joke," Toby said.

"You may go," Cele said abruptly.

As Toby saluted and turned, she stopped him with a soft voice. "Since you're here, Bakron, an opting can be arranged if you like." She had, after all, done her duty with the bridge technician. It was not yet time to demonstrate her democracy again. Another officer would serve in this situation. "It must be lonely down there."

"Yes, Lady," Toby said. "Thank you for your consideration."

"Are you refusing, then?"

"I have not been opted, Lady," Toby said stiffly.

"It is because none of the officers know of your visit to the *Entil*?"

"Still," Toby said stubbornly, "I have not been opted, Lady."

She let him leave. They had their pride, those men. So stiff and stubborn in their little minds. Any officer on the ship would have gladly done her duty, but he had to stand on tradition. Merely informing a few willing officers of his presence would, to him, have violated the opting code, making it seem that he was requesting. She sighed. That would mean a special trip to the base for some officer, when the necessary therapeutic kindness could have been performed in comfort aboard the *Entil*. There was just no explaining male logic.

## *Chapter Ten*

"Filth," Cele Mantel said with tight lips.

"Isn't it terrible?" Babra Larkton agreed.

The Manto's full report was on Cele's desk and reading it had given Cele a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Those who had thought that war, violence and the killing of life forms, including their own, was the ultimate in Orton's sub-human degradation had a new experience coming.

"I hate to put you through this, Babra," Cele said, bending back as far from the offensive material as she could, "but I must, in all conscience, call a Board to consider this evidence."

"I understand, Lady," Babra said. "My reaction was the same. However, in going over it," she pointed a delicate hand toward the spread of report sheets and supporting material in the form of popular and scientific journals from Orton, "I have developed a certain immunity to it. It's almost as if my mind has developed protective barriers against the filth."

"Then you won't mind handling the briefing?"

"Speaking of such things is always distasteful," Babra admitted, "but I agree that it is necessary."

The officers of the *Entil* were assembled in the conference room, made comfortable with the Ankani equivalent of tea and tasty cakes. "Ladies," Cele said, after everyone was seated and served by her personal service

rating. "Please enjoy your tea, for once we've begun, I'm sure you won't be able to stomach anything." She waited until the rating had bowed and retreated through the soundproof door. The officers, enjoying the rare gathering, nibbled and sipped and laughed and passed friendly small talk.

Cele decided to use shock treatment. She projected the filmstrip which Babra's research team had obtained. On the screen there appeared a surprisingly human-like ovum under assault by sperm. A gasp went up from the gathered officers as the ovum was attacked by hundreds of thousands of sperm. The ovum glowed with the forces of life, a small sun which was soon tailed with sperm as the outer shell was penetrated. The sperm writhed furiously as a shocked silence fell in the room.

"The elapsed time is measured in Ortonian hours," Babra explained as numbers appeared on the lower left-hand corner of the screen. "We have left off the sound, because we see no reason to expose ladies to the crude comments of the so-called scientist doing the narration."

A sperm found access to the heart of the ovum. The heartless film rolled on to the end as the unsuccessful sperm died.

Lights went on. The officers shuffled their feet, did not look at each other.

"The title of this film," Babra said in her tight voice, "is *The Dance of Love*." She let this obscenity sink in. "And, of course, the fertilization took place on a microscope slide."

"Poor thing," someone breathed sadly.

"This is only the beginning," Babra went on. "Our studies have told us that the monsters engaged in this filth have already violated the basic law of life to the extent of growing embryos to an advanced stage outside a mother's womb. Other obscene experiments have been attempted. For example, one doctor has implanted a fertilized egg inside the womb of a subject."

"Don't they know?" asked a pale, young Larftontwo in a subdued voice.

"We will have a question and answer period after the Manto has concluded," Cele admonished.

"We have observed a total lack of sensible genetic practice on Orton," Babra said, "in spite of the surprisingly advanced state of their knowledge. For centuries they have possessed the ability to sterilize obviously faulty genetic sources and yet they have not developed the humanity needed to prevent the birth of damaged individuals. This simple solution, when it has been suggested, is met with rabid opposition. The simplest methods of birth control still face stiff opposition from organized culture groups and deluded individuals who pay lip service to the sanctity of what they call human life. And yet these same groups and individuals do nothing more than make mouthing noises when madmen tamper with the sacred foundation of life. In addition to producing test tube babies, these Ortonians aspire to changing the very form of life by doing what they call molecular surgery on the molecules which direct the manufacture of proteins, the building blocks of life."

There were uneasy coughs, shufflings. "One so-called scientist has suggested that through such genetic control, they breed men without legs to man their spaceships." Babra paused to let it sink in. "There is talk of creating a race of supermen by genetic engineering."

"We must kill them," said a motherly Larftonfour.

"Please," Cele said.

"We must not judge the Ortonians without taking all the circumstances into account," Babra said. "Remember that our earlier expeditions, all male expeditions, naturally, had quite serious impact on the native lifemode. You have all made a study of the reports by the ship's behavioral scientist on the occasion of the last ore-gathering trip to this planet. At that time it was concluded that, although there were definite cultural crossovers caused by the ill-considered actions of Ankani crewmen, the effects were not overly serious. Then we come, a mere two thousand years later, and discover some rather amazing things. I think there will be some revision in social theory after we get home. The theory that a complex technological culture cannot be passed along to sub-humans, for example, is in great doubt in my mind. How else do we explain such a quick leap to atomics, a rapidly developing sub-space technology and the even more surprising advances into forbidden fields in medicine?"

Babra paused and sipped at her tea. "The Ortonians moved into immunization theory over a hundred years ago and are, at present, making great strides into viral immunology. This work has led them to the

threshold of a complete knowledge of the forbidden science of molecular biology, as they call it. Without knowing the dangers, they are moving ahead, creating primitive protein strands in test tubes. They have the hardware available at this moment to begin the experiments in creating artificial life, growing monsters outside of the womb, making alterations in the basic form of life itself. One scientist has, while performing brain surgery, discovered a crude method of stimulating chemically stored memory. This discovery has led to great excitement and some men are talking about being able to implant stored knowledge into a new brain. Because a certain species of worm can pass chemically stored memory to other worms through the simple process of being eaten, these Ortonians joke about saving the stored knowledge of a brilliant man by allowing his students to eat him." She laughed bitterly. "They don't know how close they are to the truth. And, I assure you, our studies have shown that these sub-humans would, if and when they are allowed to discover the techniques, enter into even this unthinkable perversion."

She had her audience spellbound. The faces of the officers were uniformly grim and disbelieving. A few of the younger officers were pale. One had her hand in front of her mouth as if to hold in her sick revulsion.

"It is a recognized maxim that advances in one field of knowledge lead to advances in another. Thus, their approach to forbidden fields is matched by advances in hard technology. They are so close to blink theory that our team would not, at first, credit its findings."

"I think I can illustrate that point," Cele Mantel said. "Ortonian man has existed much in his present form, with certain recognizable outside influences," she smiled wryly, "for some five hundred thousand years. If we compress this into a more easily grasped period of fifty years, the Ortonians were nomadic hunters for forty-nine years. It took him forty-nine years to learn how to plant crops and settle into small villages. This date, incidentally, coincides roughly with discovery of Orton and the first extraction expeditions, leading us to believe that it was Ankani influence which triggered the basic change in the Ortonian nature. After forty-nine and a half years, he discovered writing. He practiced this art in a small area of his world, the area in which our extraction teams worked. Carrying on this analogy, the first great civilization was built up only months ago. For example, the civilization which seems to impress the Ortonians most, the people called the Greeks, flowered three months ago. Their Christian God, Jesus Christ, was on the cross two months ago. Two

weeks ago the first Ortonian book was printed. A week ago, they began to use steam power. And at 11:59 p.m. on December 31st of the fiftieth year their present age of technology began. Consider this. Their knowledge is increasing at an ever-increasing rate. They've gone from animal transportation to primitive space rockets in one week of our relative time, or in less than two hundred of their years. We can only assume that their fumbling approach to blink theory will put them into sub-space within fifty to a hundred years, at about the same time they develop the knowledge which will enable them to re-engineer their life form through genetic meddling." She paused for emphasis. "We could be facing a race of supermonsters within a hundred years, a race with a history of incredible violence."

"And if they fail to learn the dangers of their so-called molecular biology, our peaceful Ankani worlds would be subjected to the tender ministrations of a superrace of madmen," Babra said.

"We are now open to discussion," Cele said.

"It is written," said the motherly Larftonfour who had given vent to a previous impetuous suggestion to kill the Ortonians. "The penalty is death."

"For whom?" Cele asked. "Those who are working in the forbidden field? The governments who permit it? The people who condone it?"

"We cannot ignore the foundations upon which the Ankani race has built," the Larftonfour said. "Whatever it takes, we must do it."

"Could we contact them?" asked a young officer. "Couldn't we warn them of their danger and persuade them to stop their work in the forbidden fields?"

"We are prohibited from contact," Cele said. "The penalty for contact and the passing of knowledge is not quite as severe as that for genetic meddling, but I, for one, have no desire to spend the rest of my life in the dark mines, of Asmari."

"The Larftonfour is right," said a senior officer in the nutrition section, "even if it means wiping the planet clean of life."

"True," Cele said, "the easiest solution would be to kill the planet. This,

however, seems rather drastic to me. Orton is unique. Many of you have served on the expos. You know the emptiness of the Galaxy. You know the disappointment of approaching a likely planet to find that life consists of vegetable matters and primitive organisms. In all the explored Galaxy, Orton is the only planet which shares that strange and beautiful wonder which we call life. Can we destroy this so lightly?"

"No," Babra said. There were other negative answers.

"We have limited choices," Cele said. "We can do nothing, complete our mission and file a complete report with Fleet Board upon our return. Or, we can take matters into our own hands and sterilize the planet. We do not have the power to weed out the offenders selectively. This would be a work of years and would entail not only punishing the active offenders, but cleaning away all traces of knowledge pertaining to the forbidden field. Even if we could accomplish this task, it would be useless, for the state of Orton technology would lead them inevitably back to the same point so that we would be faced with having to perform a distasteful purge every few decades. The third choice is to send a blink message home, giving as many details as possible, leaving the decision to the Fleet Board and the Council under Unogarge Clarke. This choice, too, has its drawbacks. Many of the people in the political arena have not seen Orton and are unfamiliar with its unique and beautiful position in the scheme of things. What would you do if you were sitting in the council chamber and were told that sub-humans on a distant planet were committing the ultimate sin and in doing it posing a definite threat to the home worlds?"

"I'd probably say kill them," Babra answered.

"Exactly," Cele said. "And that is distasteful to me."

"So we wait, then?" Babra asked.

"I don't know," Cele said. "If we wait and present our views before the Board and the Council, that will take time. What if the Ortonians made an unexpected breakthrough and upon our return to carry out the decision of the Council we found them in sub-space? A mastery of blink theory produces an ability to make the very weapons with which we arm our expo ships. We arm our ships for the sole purpose of self-defense. Our knowledge of the Ortonians tells us that they would arm their ships. In fact, my guess would be that the first blink ship launched would be a ship of the line, armed to the teeth and capable of inflicting casualties on any

ship we might send."

"A disturbing possibility," Babra agreed.

Cele stood. Her large, soft eyes glowed with life. "As you know, the purpose of a Ship's Board is merely advisory. The Garge bears the responsibility for the final decision. Your views will be taken into account. We will vote now. For the first solution, sterilization of the planet."

There was one hand.

"For waiting and presenting the facts to the Fleet Board in person, taking the risks such a course would entail."

Two hands.

"I will inform you of my decision," Cele said, leaving the room quickly. She was composing the message to Fleet in her mind. There had never been any question, really. She had merely gone through the formalities. Most junior officers never had an opportunity to sit on a Ship's Board and she had not wanted to deprive her officers of the opportunity.

## ***Chapter Eleven***

The saber-toothed rat attacked Toby as he stepped out of his quarters at the base and before he could dispatch it with a handy short length of pipe he was bitten severely on the left calf and ankle. He left the dead rat on the bare earth and hurried to the medical kit to sterilize the wounds and apply the healing rays from the compact little gun-like mechanism which drew its power from the batteries of the kit. The process took over an hour. When he went outside, the dead rat was gone, carried off, he presumed, by some carrion-eating animal or bird.

He spent a long afternoon hour looking through his books in an effort to identify the vicious little animal. That he was unsuccessful did not puzzle him. His library was incomplete. Often the descriptions and drawings of Orton life forms seemed so unlike the actual living animals and birds that identification was, at best, tentative.



The extractor was working steadily and the quantity of stored lithium was sufficient to warrant a blink down by the transport vehicle. Toby made ready for the nighttime visit. Jay was taking less and less interest in the mission, leaving the work to Toby. This suited Toby. Jay had never been a pleasant companion and his absorption with his lab projects seemed to make him even more surly and withdrawn.

Toby had been on the surface for two months. He had an even longer period ahead of him. On any other ore-producing planet he would have been bored stiff. Orton was another matter. He had his engrossing interest in observing the planet's wildlife. He had his books and the ever more fascinating study of Ankani influence on Orton.

When the transport vehicle grew into the space between the two large tanks and disgorged two females, he had something else—a gnawing guilt. For reasons hidden in his secret mind, he was not enthusiastic; and he could never admit to the pretty, blond young Larfton that he was not suffering from missing his regular rotation in shipboard opting. However, he was a healthy young male and he soon regained his interest. Jay disappeared into his quarters with a motherly Larftonfour near his own age and Toby buried his guilt and committed himself with abandon to the enthusiastic blond Larfton who was making her first trip to the surface. Opting, as a universal Ankani art form, was raised to new heights as the pumps loaded the transport vehicle. It was a giggling, sated Larfton who boarded the vehicle in the early morning hours, leaning on the supporting arm of the motherly senior officer.

Toby yawned. Life was, indeed, good. His performance left no reason for suspicion in the mind of the officer. She had indicated that she would ask for the duty of the next visit to the base, a sincere compliment. Toby was reassured. For a few silly moments he had felt that she could not help but realize. The vehicle blinked. So far the new procedure had not been detected by the Ortonians. The ship sent a brief burst of communication on a tight beam and in that one instant the instruments in the vehicle locked on and blinked. The technicians onboard the *Entil* were looking for a new emanation, but pending its finding Toby had sent a brief burst for guidance. A quick study had revealed that the particular section of the coast in which the base was located was not under constant monitoring from the defense forces of the United States. In fact, quite often a jet aircraft would practice a sneak approach, flying low up the Intracoastal Waterway to see how near it could get to military installation up the coast

before detection, so evidently the base was located in a blind spot. And if another local emanation was not found, the system of brief bursts of guidance beams could be used with impunity.

Jay went tiredly off to bed leaving Toby gazing up at the sky. He had studied the Ortonian star books and could identify the constellations by local name. He mused, as he let his eyes rove over the blinking stars, about those first Ankani crewmen who visited Orton. If anything, Ankani influence on Orton had been underestimated, for Ortonian mythology, as related to their fanciful namings of the stars, showed many links with the Ankani language and Ankan's own history. He felt a warm kinship with those old tankermen who plied the starways alone, without the comfort of women.

He fell into his bed numb with a pleasant fatigue and awoke with difficulty when he heard the screams of agony coming from the building which housed Jay's lab.

What he heard was the death screams of the Squire.

What he discovered when he pushed into the lab behind Jay, ignoring Jay's protests, outraged his moral sensibilities, posed a problem larger and more difficult than anything he'd ever faced, and left him helpless.

The Squire came to the base by a series of coincidences based on the fact that a stationary front was sitting along the coast bringing a night of hushed stillness. The position of the moon also contributed to the Squire's demise by making a low and rising tide match the windless night to create ideal conditions for flounder gigging. Being a sensible man with a dollar, the Squire did little sports fishing. If a man ran a boat out to the shoals and burned eighteen gallons of gas, he paid dearly for the few pounds of fish fillets he gathered—if his luck ran good. The Squire figured that every pound of fish he'd ever caught sports fishing cost him roughly five dollars. On the other hand,, flounder gigging from a small skiff cost nothing except the pennies it took to burn a Coleman lantern. It was also good exercise to pole a skiff along the banks of the Waterway and into the creeks of the marsh; and the Squire, while wanting to maintain his reputation as a problem drinker, was secretly concerned with his growing paunch. So a windless night and the right tide sent the Squire, a loner who didn't want to have to split his flounder with anyone, poling on through the night chortling with glee as he stuck a rusty tri-barbed gig into the eye-balls of flat, foolish founder lying in the mud waiting for minnows. Gigging was so

successful he was sure he was going to have enough fish not only to stock his freezer but to sell a few pounds and make a dollar in addition to getting all that free fish.

He poled until the water had run in so deep the good banks were overrun by the rising tide and then he started home, tired, happy and smug with his success. As it happened, he was on the side of the Waterway next to the old rendering plant and the place was dark, although the pumps were working and his skiff danced as he poled it over the uprushing water coming out of the outlet pipe. He rested holding the skiff alongside the dock and thought about that smart-ass, John Kurt, and the fact that a citizen who paid his taxes didn't have a chance against the big boys like the Yankee owner of the rendering plant and its prime fifty acres of waterfront land. He'd been informed by letter that the Department of Conservation and Development saw no reason not to give the new owners a permit to run their experimental desalinization plant, but he smelled a rat in the woodwork somewhere. It didn't seem reasonable to think that some rich Yankee would go to a lot of trouble just to put clean water back into the Waterway.

It didn't take the Squire long to decide that it was the duty of a good citizen to look into the matter and with everyone asleep he had an opportunity. He carried a pocket flashlight, having tied the skiff securely, up to the big shed and tried the door. It was locked. He could hear the machinery running inside and this seemed nefarious to him. Why were the Yankee bastards running night and day if they weren't up to no good? He prowled and heard a snore coming from the first house, steered away from it lest he wake the two bastards.

Standing with his ear to the window of the second house, he decided that it was his duty to investigate the noises coming from inside. They were not human noises.

"Now look," he told himself, forming the words silently. "If those bastards are just taking salt out of the water why are they dumping the water back in the Waterway?"

"Maybe they're taking valuable minerals out," he told himself. "Like gold."

And if some outfit had found a way to take gold out of ocean he wanted a piece of it. He played around with the market a bit.

But it was not for personal gain that the Squire tried window after window and finally found one with a broken latch at the back of the old house. The noises from inside were suspicious as hell, like a zoo. Bunch of vivisectionists, maybe?

He was inside and he felt something run across his foot and shined his light down and saw the disappearing tail of a white rat and then he was sure that the damned Yankees were breeding rats to spread the plague. A rotten Commie plot?

Cage after cage was lined up along the walls of a room. The Squire was about to shine his light inside one when he saw an astounding thing. He heard movement and turned his light away from the cage. There, lined up in formation facing him, were what seemed a million white rats with pink eyes and teeth as long as daggers. He stifled a scream. He heard a movement near his side and turned with his light and saw a rat scale the wire front of a cage. Hanging by his rear feet, the rat used his forepaws and his teeth to pull the wooden plug out of a simple lock-latch. The Squire was frozen with astonishment. The rat finished pulling the plug and then he flipped the latch and from inside a dozen rats pushed and the cage door flung open and rats poured out, squeaking and clicking their teeth and then the Squire felt fear. He turned to go. His way was blocked by another million rats lined up three-deep standing on their hind legs looking at him, eyes flashing pinkly in the beam of light. The Squire ran, kicking. He felt the rats on his feet and then their teeth were digging into his legs and he screamed and fell and they were on him like schools of four-legged, air-breathing piranha. The Squire beat at them with his light and rolled on top of them, crushing dozens of them. He kicked and struck out and the teeth were ripping, and when one dug into his cheek near his eye and stayed there as he beat at it with his empty hand his screams reached a crescendo of pain and horror.

"Get back!" Jay yelled. Bumping into Toby as he fell out the door, kicking at the rats which latched onto his feet and legs. The screams were fading away. Toby danced, dislodging clinging rats. Jay had a weapon in his hand, forbidden for him to have here. Toby, at that stage of the game, with rats trying to climb his legs and succeeding in getting painful mouthfuls of tender flesh, was more than happy to see the blaster, even if it was forbidden. He danced and kicked and yelped as teeth got him and then the sizzling beam of the blaster began to fry the rats into little, steaming globs. The tenacity of the rats kept them close, so that none

escaped as Jay sprayed the beam around in a continuous fury, picking off singles as Toby kicked them off his legs, then moving into the house to continue the slaughter.

It took a few minutes to clean out the front room, making sure that no animals escaped. In the back room, the fiery beam interrupted a grisly meal. When the last rat was beaten off the Squire's mutilated body and melted in the blaster beam, Jay pocketed his weapon, leaned over the body and cursed in a low voice. Toby was leaving bloody tracks as he walked. Jay faced him, his breathing sporadic, his eyes bulging. "There will be no report," he said.

"I cite the Ratings Code Of Ethics," Toby said.

"I cite this," Jay said, waving a tri-dee ecto-model camera in Toby's face.

"Koptol Gagi," Toby said, standing at attention with his own blood wetting his shoes. "I have reason to suspect that you have been engaging in forbidden experiments. It is my duty—"

"And this?" Jay screamed. "Is this, too, duty?"

The ecto-model was embarrassingly intimate. Toby pictured Jay snaking through the bushes to snap it. "I must think."

Behind him, there was a movement. Jay moved quickly, pointing the blaster almost directly at Toby. Toby, thinking the Koptol had gone mad, leaped to one side in time to see, before it was dissolved in the blaster beam, a rat trying to free a group of its fellows from a cage by lifting the plug from a catch-latch on the last full cage.

"Their intelligent behavior is astounding," Jay gasped, having difficulty, still, with his breathing.

"Genetic engineering?" Toby asked.

"What harm, here on this sub-human planet?" the Koptol asked. "The restrictions against it are unthinking and foolish."

"I suggest," Toby said, "that we neglect blasphemy and attend to our wounds. I think you could use a dose of *troleen*."

"In a moment," Jay said, turning the blaster on the Squire's body.

"Don't!" Toby yelled, but the body was shriveling and melting and soon there was only a blob, only slightly larger than the scattered remains of the rats. "You will clear the remains away," Jay ordered.

"Not on your life," Toby said firmly.

"That is an order."

"Insist on it, Koptol Gagi, and I will place an emergency call to the Garge even before I use the medical kit."

"Very well," Jay grumbled, leading the way to the other house.

While ministering to his wounds, Toby considered the situation. A man's sins do have a way of catching up with him. But, oh, sweet winds of Ankan, what a sin! And the event flashed back to him.

"There is a family of otters in the marsh below the Flying Saucer Camp," she'd said. "We can probably sneak up on them in the canoe."

They had—on a beautiful August day with the sun burning her bare shoulders into a more attractive shade of brown, with a soft southeast wind cooling them and a salt spray kicked up from the plowing prow of the canoe. She, knowing the intricate bends of the multiple creeks cutting the marsh, was at the stern, guiding the boat. Well into the marsh she killed the motor, elevated it out of the water and began to move the canoe silently and expertly with a paddle. He sat facing her. Her breasts moved with the motion of her arms, threatening to come out of the skimpy halter of her bathing suit. He'd known her for a few short weeks and she was not his equal. And yet, with the sun on her hair and the spray wet on her face, she was beautiful.

They found the otters and observed them from a safe distance with John Kurt's binoculars. They were lovely animals, antic, sleekly graceful. Then, after the otters had winded them and darted away into the protective marsh, there was a lazy boatripe through the maze of creeks to a sandy beach on the rendering plant property. Toby didn't realize how close he was to the base, since the view was blocked by tall trees. There was a picnic lunch. Toby ate fowl eggs and cheese. He'd fallen victim to natural curiosity over the past days and the food of Orton, while barbaric,

was good to his palate. She sat on a large beach towel, sharing it with him. They drank Pepsi and talked and she said, after all eternity had passed with a pleasant slowness, after having moved close to him and after having looked up into his large, gentle eyes, "Toby, what does it take to get you to kiss a girl?"

Toby had no idea how much agonized thought went into that simple question. He was beginning to understand a little bit of the Ortonian way of Life. When John Kurt patted his wife on the fanny in a friendly, possessive way, he mused about it. No Ankani male would indulge in such a spontaneous gesture without invitation, but it was merely a small part of the rather interesting relationship between Ortonian males and females. Toby could not know the worry he'd caused Sooly, the nights of wakefulness, the feeling of painful sadness which came when she realized that she was no longer spending all her waking moments thinking of Bud. He would not, at that point, have been able to understand her tears and then her fear, for all the time she was falling out of love with Bud and falling in love with Toby he did nothing to indicate that his blue eyes even saw her as a girl. It was in an agony of unrequited love that she took him to the secluded, sandy beach, posed fetchingly for him all through the picnic lunch, made a special effort to put herself within reach of his arms. And it was in sheer desperation—she was on the verge of throwing away long years of her life and a lot of dreams by falling out of love with her childhood sweetheart—that she asked: "Toby, what does it take to get you to kiss a girl?"

She, on her part, had no way of knowing that it took a simple, unmistakable invitation. She had no way of knowing that such an invitation meant more than a kiss to Toby and that by issuing the invitation she unleashed the surprised, pleased and totally uninhibited talent of an expert who had 500,000 years of erotic knowledge at his disposal.

It was the most complete mismatch since David and Goliath. It was a complete rout. Nineteen years of proud morality sizzled into white heat. He had had an Ortonian sub-human.

"If I tell them why the emanation flicked out," Jay said, reading his thoughts and waking him from his reverie, "there'll be one more worker in the mines of Asmari." Jay lay under the healing rays.

"The penalty for genetic meddling is death," Toby countered.

"We both have much to lose," Jay said, fully recovered from his breathlessness after a dose of *troleen*.

"So it seems," Toby agreed.

"A pact of silence?" Jay offered.

"Let me see that ecto," Toby said, reaching out a hand. He studied it. She was there in miniature—round, almost warm to the touch, in a pose which, he found, came naturally when demonstrated by an expert. He remembered her cries of pain, her sobs of regret, her happy smile when he kissed away the tears. *He had owned a woman*. He could understand them fully now, those old tankermen. He could even understand why some of them jumped ship and stayed on Orton.

"Koptol Gagi," he said at last, "I can't accept blasphemy, not even to escape the mines of Asmari. If I am to remain silent, you must give up your experiments."

"You're in no position to dictate terms," Jay said.

"I mean it," Toby said. "No more monsters. No more meddling with the sacred secrets of life."

"The Ortonians themselves are doing it," Jay said. "I learned of it through their publications. I have merely advanced the work they are doing."

"It's a dark sin."

"So is opting with Ortonian females."

"No. That is human." Toby, his wounds closed and healing rapidly, sat up. "And the mines of Asmari are not death."

"I'm in the last quarter of my life," Jay said, his voice soft. "These Ortonians have delved into the secrets of life to an extent which gives me hope. Through my experiments, I can, using the knowledge gained in forbidden work here on Orton, retard further maturation. By breaking down cross linkages and preventing further cross linkages, the connecting rods which join and immobilize the molecules essential to life, I can prevent the rapid aging process which comes to the Ankani male in the



last quarter of his life."

"I don't understand what you're saying," Toby said. "I know only that what you've been doing carries the only death penalty left in the Ankani Code. I will turn myself over to the Garge and go to the mines unless you stop." He put his hand on Jay's shoulder. "Is death so horrible? It comes to all. These poor Ortonians, living in their furnace of a sun, die at an age when an Ankani is finishing his primary schooling. They would give their souls to be able to live as long as we."

"The life span of a sub-human means nothing to me," Jay said. "What matters to me is that I can almost feel my brain cells dying. In ten years, I'll be forced to retire. In twenty, I'll be feeble. Then I face thirty years, if I'm lucky, of being almost helpless." He looked at Toby with inspiration in his eyes. "I'll treat you, Toby. You can live to be a thousand."

"No," Toby said. "I'm sorry." He began to put on fresh clothing.

"I will stop," Jay said.

"No more forbidden work?"

"None."

"A pact of silence, then." He reconsidered. "And I will see the Ortonian female as I please."

"For you, permission. For me, nothing?"

"The degree of severity is not the same," Toby said.

"The Ortonians have a saying. It depends on whose ox is being gored."

"No genetic meddling," Toby said.

"There is another way to approach my problem," Jay said. "Not understanding the problem, since we have been under the taboo, our superiors would also think it forbidden. However, you have my word that my experiments are, if one drew a line between black and white, on the white side."

"Not even a bit gray?" Toby asked.

"Only to those who don't understand," Jay said. "You have your Ortonian animal. I have my work."

"May I ask why the saber-toothed rats?" Toby asked, rubbing his scars ruefully.

"Merely to expand my knowledge," Jay said. "To gain competence in molecular manipulation. I know all I must know, and there is no further need for animal experiments. Are we agreed?"

"May you live forever if that's your bag," Toby shrugged.

## *Chapter Twelve*

"Darling," Sooly said, "do you know that your eyes glow in the dark?"

Toby closed his eyes quickly, but it was difficult to keep them closed. With his head turned he said, "The glow of love."

"Ummm," she said. "That I believe."

The room was dark. The full moon which had led to the Squire's demise by pulling a low tide in the early part of a windless night had waned and was down, leaving the base in a dark gloom which was even darker inside Toby's quarters.

Sooly, a woman of the world, over a week having passed since that fateful afternoon in the August sun on a small, secluded, sandy beach, suffered merely agonies of guilt instead of the untold agonies which had befuddled her very reason immediately after her fall from grace. She was rather cynical about the fact that the agonies of guilt came afterward, not before.

Here she was, deliciously nude and languid with the satiety of love, alone with her lover in his bedroom, the cool ocean breeze carrying the lovely odd smell of the salt marsh into the open window, unashamed, loving the feel of his hand on her thigh.

"I know," she said sleepily, "that you're really not human and that your

fantastic abilities to melt me into a little puddle of purple passion are alien."

Toby looked at her guiltily, seeing her clearly even in the dimness of the room. Her eyes were closed and her lips had been cleaned, in a pleasant, passionate way, of lipstick. He never knew when she was joking.

"And you're going to carry me away to a far star and I'll find that you already have six wives and eighteen kids," Sooly said. "Where did you learn all that?"

"Oh, it just comes naturally," Toby said with a gulp.

"God, I'm jealous," she said, sitting up and wrapping herself around him, pressing her soft breasts against his chest. "Don't ever tell me who taught you." She giggled. "But I'm dying to know."

"You know boys," Toby said. "We talked a lot when I was a kid."

"And read feelthy books?" she teased.

"Oh, yes," Toby said. "That's where I got all my ideas. Actually, I've never tried them on anyone before."

"Liar." She sighed. "You have the most fantastic eyes." She traced a soft finger around one of his eyes. "They get bigger now, in the dark."

They did. There was nothing he could do about that. But there was something he could do about her overall soft warm goodness and he did and she responded once more and clung to him and then, in the sweet after touches, whispered, "I belong to you, darling. I've never belonged to a man before. You know that, don't you? Not Bud, not anybody. Just you."

Yes, he knew that. And it was more astounding to him than the mystery of a dark star. At first he had been a little concerned. It was difficult for him to understand the concept of virginity. Ankani women, he suspected, were born not virgin. But the largest, most beautiful mystery was her complete attachment to him. He'd never known such a lovely joy. It made him feel frightfully evil, for such —you couldn't call it anything else but ownership—of a woman was a totally new experience for him. The concept of exclusive love was alien, but he was astounded by the ease with which he accepted it. The closest thing to it was the comradeship between

Ankani roommates in the lower levels of school. But his closeness to his childhood friend paled to insignificance beside the feeling he got with this Ortonian woman. He could touch her as he pleased! It was pure luxury to be able to take her hand during one of the long walks through the pine woods, a delight to be able, when the urge struck him, to pause in his walk and take her into his arms. He could talk with her, look at her with hungry eyes, even make the first advance. It had taken him some time to get over his feeling of degradation when he let his instincts impel him into making the first move toward opting. No, with this woman it was not opting. He preferred the Ortonian word, love. It was different and it was so natural that he spent many sleepless hours examining his concept of morality, which had been severely mauled during the first few days of his—she called it an affair—with the Ortonian.

Once, in the first bloom of the thing, he'd remembered how John Kurt playfully patted his wife on the fanny and he'd tried it. Sooly jumped, smiled, said, "Beast." But the smile was warm and he could tell that his touch had been welcome. With an Ankani female such a gesture would have been unthinkable.

"Why are there more women than men in your country?" he had asked her one day in a moment of unguarded puzzlement.

"There are more women than men everywhere," she said, "except perhaps in some countries where female children are unwelcome. I don't think they still kill unwanted girl babies, but it hasn't been long since they did. And in the Orient, girl babies are still sold, given away, put into prostitution."

That had to be explained and it was something he hadn't encountered in his reading. He was bemused. There was some sort of significance in the related facts of girl babies being undesirable in certain countries of Orton and in girl babies being kept to a ratio of five to one on the Ankani worlds, but he couldn't explain it, since Ankani women were superior to the male and were kept to smaller numbers because it took five Ankani men to do the work and provide for one Ankani woman. By the end of the first week he was so degraded that he had had the blasphemous urge to ask why Ankani women were superior. And why it was necessary to limit the number of women and why an Ankani man had to wait to be asked before indulging in one of man's most pleasant experiences.

Was it because a man, with unlimited opting, or love, available, lost

interest in everything but? His work didn't suffer, because the machinery was almost totally automatic, but he found himself thinking night and day about the wonder of Sooly in his arms.

Meanwhile, Sooly had a big worry. She was, she told herself, a stupid goose and if she got caught it would be her own fault, because she'd taken no precautions at all. Of course, she hadn't *planned* to expose herself to the most fearful fate a single girl faces in a situation of sin, but after that first time she could have done something, and she didn't. She couldn't go into the local drug store and say, "Hey, baby, gimme a bottle of pills, huh?" She'd *die* if *anyone* knew. But there in the warm night with her body melting with love she decided that it wasn't fair to Toby. She was *not* going to get a husband *that* way. She'd kill herself first.

Her voice was low and pained. "Darling, I don't know how to say this—"

"Well," Toby joked, "you form the words in your mind, push air through your larynx and move your lips."

"I'm serious," she whispered.

He held her close. "In this most perfect of all perfect worlds nothing is serious."

"It would be if I got caught," she said. There, it was out. "Shouldn't we do something?"

He chuckled. "You are a greedy broad." He liked the Orton word.

"No, damn it, you know what I mean."

"Do I?"

"I'm not protected," she said, having to force the words out.

"Against what?" he asked innocently.

"Oh, Christ, Toby," she said. "I can get pregnant."

"Huh?" It was a grunt of surprise. She couldn't know. And he couldn't tell her. "Well, don't worry about it."

"You want me to be pregnant?"

He hadn't even thought about it. He reviewed all he knew about Ortonian mores and came up with the answer. "I'm protected," he said.

"Oh, God," she said. Her mind raced, wondering if she could love him enough to marry him, to face a childless life. She felt tears ooze out of her eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You haven't, Toby. Tell me you haven't."

"Haven't what?"

"You haven't had an operation, not at your age. How could you?" She was so sure she'd guessed right that she turned her back to him, sobbing.

"An operation? No." He tried to pull her back over to him. "Look, there's nothing to cry about. I could give you a baby."

She raised herself up on one arm, trying to see his face. His eyes were wide, glowing. She had an eerie feeling and there was a bit of fright in her which made the sobs harder and the tears wetter.

"Please," Toby begged, distressed beyond his understanding. He'd never seen a woman cry. It was painful. "All I'd have to do is skip my next pill at the end of the month."

His glowing eyes. The lights in the sky above her, which she hadn't seen in days. The fun thing she'd had with the Flying Saucer Camp, seeing a shadowy shape between the two tanks, counting six, seven. "Toby," she whispered, "who are you?"

"A man who loves you," Toby said, his heart pounding.

"There's no pill for men, Toby." She sniffed. Her nose was runny from crying.

"Well," Toby said lamely, "it's new, experimental."

"Like your equipment?" she asked. "Like the furnace which burns up the pollution you take out of the water and leaves no ashes? Like the machine which takes lithium out of the water in pure, huge amounts?" She pushed him away. "I've seen something out there, Toby. I've seen

seven tanks. I know I have."

"Shadows," Toby said. "The night plays tricks."

Sooly lay back, her mind in a turmoil. With her shoulder to him, she loosened the small pearl earring from her pierced ear. She tossed it onto the floor. "Oh, darn, I dropped my earring."

"I'll get it," Toby said. He leaned over her, reached down and without fumbling or feeling around retrieved the tiny earring. Sooly, looking down at the floor, saw only blackness.

"How are you able to see in the dark?" she asked.

He had reached out to place the earring in her hand. She took it, then seized his hand in hers. He could not speak. "You're not answering my question, Toby," she said, sadness in her voice. He pulled his hand out of hers and swung his feet off the bed to sit up. "I don't care what you are," Sooly said. "I love you, Toby, but I must know." He remained silent. "Because I don't know what I am to you, don't you see? Can't you see that?"

"You are the best thing in my life," he said softly. "Isn't that enough?"

"For how long, Toby?" she asked.

He resented it. He had been avoiding that thought. It was painful of him to think of leaving her. Yet, not leaving her was also unthinkable. Others had done it in the past, deserted their posts, jumped ship. He, however, was a son of the line of Mari Wellti. Love of Ankan was inbred in him. He was lonely for Ankan even on the outlying Ankani worlds. This alien place with its furnace of a sun shooting killing particles through human flesh? Not to see the black wonder of space again? The slow march of the stars in their glory?

"So I'm just here," Sooly said. "A momentary pleasure. Like a sailor's woman. When will you be in port again, Toby?" She forced a bitter laugh. "Or am I just an animal to you, something of a lower order? You can read a book at a glance. What else can you do?" She seized his shoulder and jerked him to face her. "Look at me. What am I, Toby? Am I just a handy piece of ass?" The harsh words sounded stilted on her lips.

He wanted to tell her. There was no reason for not telling her, since she'd guessed most of it. But he'd disobeyed one order. He was an Ankani male, there lay his loyalties. What other choice was there? Then, too, telling her would merely make her more unhappy and he didn't want to see her suffer any more. Silence, he decided, was best.

"Please don't go," he said, as she dressed.

She didn't speak again. He held the door open, watching her as she ran to her little automobile, heard the motor start, saw the lights come on, sweep as she turned, blink redly as she braked before gunning onto the highway.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

Sooly moped around with a cloud over her head like the little man in the comic strip, lashing herself with recriminations, hating herself. She told herself that she was acting the part of the betrayed Victorian lass in an age of permissiveness, but cold logic was worthless. In many ways she was an old-fashioned girl. She was a loner and proud of it, different by choice. Although Ocean City was somewhat of a quiet backwater, the protest generation had been represented while she was in high school by long-haired boys and girls who used pill prescriptions. She had not been a part of it in high school and, as a result, was often left out of some of the things which her contemporaries considered exciting. Often, during her senior year, Bud would deliver her to her door at eleven o'clock on weeknights and twelve o'clock on weekends and, after a few thoroughly enjoyable kisses, motor off in his Mustang to join an after-hours party on the beach where there was beer and booze and a few joints. Bud swore that his dissipation consisted, merely of a few beers and professed to disapprove of the drug scene, but his hair gradually grew into a long, unkempt mass and Sooly found herself disapproving of his companions.

On one thing Bud agreed. Since it was an accepted fact that they would be married as soon as he established himself as a charter fisherman, Sooly would "save herself." Many nights, alone with Bud in the coolness of an ocean breeze, they talked and kissed and burned and discussed the universal question of "why wait?" But since marriage and motherhood was



Sooly's chosen career, she and Bud agreed that they should start with everything possible in their favor. Waiting was sometimes very frustrating, but Sooly valued her love, did not want to dilute the passion she would take to her marriage bed by premarital experimentation. She was, perhaps, not the only nineteen-year-old virgin in Ocean County, but she was, at best, among a select few and she was known in circles of high school society as a prude who not only scorned the new morality but refused to drink, smoke or take a friendly toke from a joint when it was being passed around at a party one night on the strand. In fact, she reacted indignantly when she discovered that some of the members of the group were smoking marijuana and gave an angry lecture on how they were putting her in peril; for if the fuzz had arrived while the joint was being passed, she would have been hauled into the local lock-up and charged along with the guilty.

She was labeled square by progressive elements, the long hairs and their stringy-haired female followers, had few friends, not because she was an unfriendly girl but because she was selective. Her one year in the girl's school in Virginia was much the same. Girls spoke openly about their chosen method of birth control, sneaked pot into the dorm rooms and looked on Sooly as something out of the antediluvian past. As long as she had a life with Bud to look forward to, this situation didn't bother her.

But now she'd severed her ties with Bud, although he was not fully aware of the startling change, in a way which would, forever, make it impossible to repair the damage. This was a sadness to her, but not the overwhelming sadness which she would have once thought it to be. It was not even her fall from grace which sent her moping around the house in a suicidal mood. It was Toby. She was a warm, passionate, idealistic girl with enough love in her shapely body to make heaven on earth for a man and she'd given all that love to some kind of weirdo who could read a book at a glance, see in the dark and who knew so much about the art of love that it was definitely supernatural.

She tried to tell herself that she was imagining all of it and that what had happened was that she had been skillfully seduced by a man of the world, of *this* world. That was pure crap. For she was not crazy. She hadn't imagined the flying saucers and she hadn't been seeing shadows when she could, on more than one occasion, count more than six tanks at the Flying Saucer Camp. And he could see in the dark and he said funny things.

Actually, it was frightfully romantic. Earth girl meets and falls in love with man from outer space. Whee.

She relived that last evening a million times, trying to convince herself that she was wrong. She was always looking out the window the minute she heard a car and hoping that it would be Toby to tell her that he loved her and that the reason for his queer behavior was that he had a rare tropical disease which was not contagious but which had eerie effects, like making his eyes so large and glowing in the dark and making him sterile. She very definitely, flowingly, was not pregnant. Then she could make the grand sacrifice, forego her dream of children and love him selflessly her whole life long.

The cars passed by the house or turned out to be Beth's bridge-playing buddies stopping by for coffee and that made her so very angry, after suffering for two whole days, that she determined to find out once and for all what the hell was going on over there at that damned Flying Saucer Camp.

With luck or with unerring feminine intuition, she chose a night when the transport vehicle was making its regular run. She parked her car beside the bridge, noting that the bridge-keeper was asleep, as usual, and crept up the road dressed in a spysuit, a pair of blue jeans and a dark sweater, so that she couldn't be seen easily. She was peeking around the corner of the large building when the vehicle blinked into the empty space between the two largest storage tanks. It was dark and tall and roughly cylindrical. It scared her so badly that she felt weak and had to sit down flat on the damp ground to catch her breath, but then Toby came out and connected a long, flexible pipe to the vehicle and went into the extractor building to do something which caused the pipe to pulse and make gurgling sounds.

She watched, her own eyes large and frightened, as Toby leaned on the vehicle humming a little tune which was unlike anything she'd ever heard. He didn't look her way and she was thankful for that, knowing his ability to see in the dark. She kept all but the top of her head and her startled eyes hidden. Toby lazily opened a port on the vehicle, climbed in, and came out moving less lazily, walking purposefully toward the second peeling white house where lights showed through the windows. He pounded on the door and the other one came out. They talked in low voices in a language unlike any Sooly had ever heard, and language was

her meat. When she was a child, the family lived in Florida and a very progressive school there started third grade students on Spanish. Sooly took to it easily, unable to understand why the other kids had trouble. She took French, Latin and more Spanish in high school and tutored herself in Italian, Portuguese, German, Greek and Arabic. At the girl's school she was deep into Russian and was picking up Hebrew from an Israeli exchange student. She was, she felt, no wing-ding scholar, but somehow language came effortlessly to her once she'd dug her teeth into the basic sound, lettering and grammar of the beast. So when she could not recognize the language being used by Jay and Toby she had one more nail to drive into the lid on the coffin of her love, one more piece of evidence that Toby was something else.

She'd seen and heard enough to convince her and still she could not make herself sneak quietly away. There was a dim moon and Toby looked grand in moonlight and her dreams could not die because she was a girl who had to have something, even a hopeless dream. So she stayed there, tears oozing from her eyes, until she saw Toby unhook the flexible pipe and go into his house to come out with a small package of some sort in his hand. The port was still open on the vehicle and she could see comfortable-looking seats inside. Toby put a foot up and started to board the vehicle. Her reason told her that he was not going to leave for good. The plant was still operating and the other one, Jay, was in his house. But her heart cried out in panic. He was going to leave her without even so much as saying goodbye. That she couldn't stand. She was on her feet and running toward him before she had a chance to reason it out and he was leaping down, turning, crouched in surprise before he realized who it was running across the bare earth crying his name.

She threw herself into his arms. "You shouldn't be here," he said, not in reprimand but in cold fear. He looked quickly up to see if Jay were watching. "Get out of here fast, Sooly."

"Not before—you're leaving—not even goodbye—" Her voice was thick with sobs.

"Get out of here now," he ordered, trying to push her away, but she was clinging to him sobbing heartbrokenly.

"What's going on out there?" Jay called out, standing on the porch of his lab building. He saw that Toby was not alone and ran across, panting with his excitement. "The Ortonian woman!" he gasped.

"She knows nothing," Toby said, in Ankani.

"Not even an Ortonian is that stupid," Jay said.

"A pact of silence," Toby said.

"Impossible," Jay said. And Toby knew that it was true. The situation was definitely out of hand and he could almost feel the cold, clammy air of the mines of Asmari. He patted Sooly on the back and said, "Easy, easy." She sobbed harder. "It will be all right," he told her. "I'm not leaving. I was merely going up to the ship to present a report."

"Oh, Toby," she wailed. "What are you really like? Are you a giant spider or something? Did you kill the human whose form you took?"

He had to laugh. "No, you see me as I am."

Her sobs stopped suddenly. "Well, that's something, anyhow." Her eyes were sparkling in excitement. "Which star are you from? Can you point it out to me? Do you live to be a thousand years old? Are all the flying saucers your space ships?"

"Whoa," Toby said, seeing that Jay was on the verge of an attack. "All in good time, honey. Right now we've got to decide what to do with you."

She sobered. "I won't tell anyone about you," she said.

"That won't do," Jay broke in, panting. "We can't just let her run around knowing—"

"What do you want to do, kill her and burn her body, as you did to the man?"

"Oh, Toby," Sooly said. "Have you killed someone?"

"He broke into Jay's lab and was killed by experimental animals," Toby said. "It was an accident."

"A funny little man with a pot belly?" Sooly asked.

"Yes," Toby said, still thinking furiously.

"The Squire," Sooly breathed. "And they've been dragging the bay for

his body for days."

"We can send her up to the *Entil*." Jay said in Ankani, his voice even now, since he'd popped a dose of *troleen* to make his heart behave.

"And what?" Toby asked.

"Have the doctor excise the part of her memory dealing with us," Jay said.

"And, in the process, read other memories?" Toby frowned in negation. "We have to trust her."

"I can do it then," Jay said.

"Not on your life," Toby told him. "You are not a surgeon."

"I have the equipment," Jay said. "And it is in my interest field. You can help. It's really a simple process. There is no room for error, it is painless and you, yourself, can monitor the memories we're excising."

"No," Toby said.

"The other choice is liquidation," Jay said. "Look, we're flirting with the mines or worse. You know that."

"I wish you two would speak English," Sooly said, "you're making me very nervous."

Toby looked at her thoughtfully and was melted inside by the softness, the very femaleness of her. "I would never allow anything to hurt you," he told her, "but we do have problems."

"I'm good at problems," she said. "Why don't we sit down somewhere and discuss them?"

Both Jay and Toby were accustomed to taking the smallest suggestion of a female as an order. It was natural that they nod in agreement and, before either could think it over, they were seated in Toby's quarters over coffee with Toby giving Sooly the picture.

"They'll send you to Siberia because of me?" she asked.

"And send me spiraling down into a hot star," Jay said.

"But it's so simple," Sooly said. "I won't tell."

"Jay is frightened," Toby said. "His offense is more serious."

"All right, if you won't trust me," Sooly said to Jay, "what's your suggestion?"

"We can simply erase your memories concerning our origin, the vehicle, the man who broke into the lab."

"That simple, huh?" Sooly said. "Just how do you go about this erasing process?"

"It's a simple machine used in our educational process," Jay said. "We locate the particular brain cells involved in the memory—"

"Whoa," Sooly said. "No one's going to go mucking around in my brain."

The more Toby thought about it the more he liked the idea of simply erasing the incriminating memories. "There's no surgery involved," he said. "And I'll be monitoring the process. We simply find the particular cells involved in memory—"

"And destroy them?" Sooly asked, with a wry face.

"Oh, no. We simply wipe them clean, so to speak."

"Fine," Sooly said. "I've very carefully limited my intake of alcohol all my life because if there's one thing I hate it's the thought of little parts of me, my brain, dying off by the hundreds of thousands. It'll be bad enough when I'm thirty and they start ending it all from natural causes." She looked at Toby and the trust in her eyes made him wince. "Do you want me to do this thing, Toby?"

"Sooner or later, Sooly, I must leave," he said. "And it would be against my orders and my conscience to leave you with the knowledge that we Ankanis were here."

"You could take me with you," she said, unashamed.

"No," Toby said sadly.

She accepted it. "I see. But while you're here? Are you going to make me forget you, too?"

"It would be best," Toby said gently.

"Then I won't do it. Look, if it means so much to you, take my memories of the flying saucers. Wipe out the knowledge of your space ship, but leave me you."

"Are you sure?"

"Very, very sure."

"Then you're willing?" Jay asked.

"Only to protect Toby," she said.

To prove to himself that Jay knew his work, in the lab Toby allowed the headgear to be fitted and told Jay to seek out a particularly irritating little memory involving a childhood prank. The process was quick. The tiny current went out through Toby's brain, stimulated certain chemical changes and the memory was gone. It was as if it had never happened, and Jay's questioning showed that Toby didn't even know he was missing anything.

Sooly, knuckles white on the arms of the chair, felt the cap-like gear slip over her head. Toby's presence helped her. Jay began to operate intricate dials and Toby, monitoring, got swift glimpses and flashes of the most serene, happy mind imaginable and then Jay was locked in on the flying saucers and ready to erase.

"Make a general survey first," Toby said. "See if we're going to be able to get all of it before we start erasing piecemeal."

The result brought a frown to Toby's face. It would be possible to erase the saucers and the early, game-like suspicions that there was something between the two tanks which counted up to seven instead of six tanks, but after that it became hopelessly complicated. "I don't understand," Jay said in Ankani. "There's an incredible muddle in there."

"She is, after all, alien," Toby said. "Her molecules hold more than a single concept."

"But still we can do the job," Jay said.

But not, Toby realized, without wiping all memory of him from the brain of the girl who sat there quietly, waiting, trusting him implicitly. Astounding as it was, the Ortonian brain, at least as represented by the brain of Sooly, seemed to possess the ability to back-file, to add relevant information to memories already stored. Every memory of Toby was tinged by the knowledge which began to build the night in his quarters when she realized that he could see in the dark. Somehow, Sooly's brain had gone back and planted the nature of Toby, his alien origin, even on the earliest memories, the memories of that first day when he'd told her to leave the dock.

"We must do it," Jay said, preparing to press the proper button.

There was no other person in the entire universe, Toby realized, his temperature rising, his heart pounding, who thought of him as Sooly did. Nowhere in the entire, vast emptiness of the cosmos was there another person who loved him. His reaction was instinctive and faster than the approach of Jay's finger to the button. "No," he shouted, for in erasing those memories of him, Jay would be killing a part of himself, a part which had become, so suddenly and so completely, vital to his very existence. Hands met over the complicated keyboard of an instrument, which should not have been on the surface of Orton, an instrument which was, in Jay's hand, as illegal as his experiments on the DNA molecules of the white rats. A jury-rigged instrument, it was built by Jay from available Orton electronic parts with some vital elements pirated from Ankani gadgets. Usually used only in the event of emergencies, Jay's instrument was programmed to do more than the allowable forced education and was capable of more than wiping away traumatic experiences that contributed to mental ill health.

Toby's hand caught Jay's and there was a brief struggle. Jay's knuckle hit a button which sent a tiny beam of energy lancing down into the mysterious portion of Sooly's brain over her right ear, and as the momentary contact was broken she slumped.

"You miserable *nanna*." Toby gasped, pushing Jay away. "What did you do?"



"I didn't mean to," Jay said, gasping for breath and reaching for his second *troleen* tablet of the night. "You made me do it."

"What happened?" Toby demanded, bending over the unconscious Sooly.

"A surgical beam," Jay said. "I think I hit the beam."

"Get out," Toby said, tears forming. "Get out."

Jay left, clutching his heart. Toby, finding it difficult to see, tuned the reader.

*Nipari squatted on a brown rock, high, pushing her long lank hair out of her face to see the men in the valley below. They had surrounded a grazing herd and were closing in, using cover expertly. Her pink tongue flicked out, gathering the saliva which flowed at the thought of succulent meat roasting over a fire. She had not eaten, save roots and berries, for three days. Far away, across the valley below, she could see the great waters where brown leviathans reared out of the depths and beyond to the bottomless bogs. But her attention returned quickly to the men as Jar, the leader, rose with a hoarse yell and buried his spear into the heaving side of a frightened animal. Others found targets, also, and Nipari danced in joy, her feet bare and brown on the hot, brown rock.*

*Mouth-watering aromas rose from the camp. Her lips were smeared with blood as she tore at half-raw meat, growling contentedly. Hunger satisfied, she danced. Gri, the young male, danced with her. Her blood, hot, pulsed through her veins like fire. At the height of the dance Gri, growling, seized her, into the low cave, struggling, fighting, feeling the fire in her, reluctant to enter into the mystery but urged on by forces so powerful—with the yelps and laughter of the elders, watching from the entrance. A stab of pain and a growling, panting acceptance and outside the raucous laughs changing to screams and mutterings of awe and Gri, his long hair stiffening on his neck, running to meet the threat and up above a fiery beast lowering as the people screamed and ran and Jar, the leader, standing steadfast.*

*A white god came from the bird of fire and spoke to the people. He was tall, pale, had a mane of golden hair and a voice of softness. Finding her fair, he claimed her, after walking the earth like a man for two moons, and she bore him a daughter, writhing in the wholesome pain, a*

*daughter with eyes like moons and skin of lightness and—*

"Holy shit," Sooly said, using a word she didn't like, because such words should be saved for extreme emergencies, but she was there, in a chair with the strange thing on her head and there, too, with—

"Are you all right?"

"I remember everything," she said. "What went wrong?" She turned her head and went dizzy as her brain swirled.

*Tigri, woman of the square, dependent of the merchant, Tepe, smiled with pride on the two daughters and four sons she'd given Tepe. Her house of sun-dried mud bricks was not luxurious, but according to the law Tepe provided her with grain, oil and clothing and, since Tepe's wife was barren, Tigri's own offspring would fall heir. She was pleased with her lot. Other women of the square had not been so favored by the gods.*

*Her house stood near the wall of the city. She made her way to the square, her lithe hips swaying, issuing an invitation. The visit of her issue ended, there was business to attend. Atop the ziggurat, the fiery bird of the white gods sat in metallic splendor. One was in the square, waiting. He smiled when he saw her. She arranged the neckline of her garment to show the uplift of her generous breasts, met his smile with invitation. Her eyes, large as the desert moon, seemed to please the god who took her hand and carried her on magic wings to the bitter sea where she lay with him. Her son had pale skin and large eyes and was treated with the respect due to a half-god.*

"Toby, what's happening to me?" she asked.

"There was an accident."

"Am I going mad?"

"No." He could not believe the reading of the machine. The patterns were strange.

"Wait, listen," she closed her eyes. "And God said, let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament:

and it was so. And God said, let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let dry land appear: and it was so."

"It sounds much like your Bible," Toby said.

"I wrote that," she said, her eyes wide with awe. She shook her head wonderingly. A roaring wave of sickness caused her to swallow deeply, close her eyes.

*Larsa, wife of Shurup, sat by his side in honor, smiling shyly at the white god who stood tall and blond before them. He spoke their tongue and it was a language she'd never heard, neither Semitic nor Indo-European nor Romance nor Slavic.*

*"The two great rivers." the god said, "can be your life. The land between is very rich and will grow your grain."*

*"The gods have made that land poison and deadly," said Shurup. "The people cannot live there."*

*"We will help,. We will separate the waters, we will make dry land where there is now bottomless mire." The white god spread his hands. "The riches of that land will make you strong. No longer will your villages be prey to the barbarians of the hills."*

"Toby, Toby, I'm scared."

"There seems to be little damage," Toby said, feverishly examining, making recordings of Sooly's brain waves. "A few cells, that's all. But I don't understand."

*Laga of the moon-like eyes and skin of purest alabaster took the tall, blond god to her and bore him two daughters and flew high over the city in the bird of fire to look down on the two rivers and the bitter sea where the gods dwelt and sent their huge birds to the heavens bearing the salt of the sea. Priestess of Anu, god of the heavens, she kept vigil atop the temple, where the gods came to earth. Her tears dried as the years wrinkled her alabaster skin and the troops of Sargon the Conqueror found her there, faithful, awaiting the second coming of her god. She went to her death with her head high and her body joined others in the trench beside the tombs of the nobles killed in the battle, human sacrifices so that the warriors would not lack servants and the comforts*

*of women. And though she was dead she lived and saw the tall walls of Ur rise and knew the joy of seeing the favor of the gods expand her city to rule all of Sumer, for it was the duty and the privilege of the people to serve the gods, to minister to their comfort and it was the duty of the fairest of the nubile women to lie with them and bear their godlike children, the women of the moon-like eyes and the men of tawny skin and great strength. Priestess of the Moon Temple, she blessed the soldiers who guarded the gates to the land of the gods beside the bitter waters, for man could kill but gods shunned violence. Atop the temple sat the sky bird of the god, Entil, who taught them and spoke with their tongue. The gods smiled upon the city and it prospered and merchants went out to the hinterlands and across the waters and brought back sweet-smelling cedar and soft, wondrous gold. She knew the odd, sweet love of the god and was fruitful and then, on a day of sadness, the gods blessed them and went away into the distant heavens and the city, left without inspiration, fought endlessly against the encroaching, hungry, envious people of the brown hills until the bricks of the temple were stained with blood and she was carried away screaming into slavery, her children slain before her eyes, her city destroyed, her love burning away into a hidden ember as the years passed and she grew old and bent and still he did not come back as he had promised.*

"Toby, how old are you?" She found that by holding very still and concentrating, she could stop the vivid images.

"Sixty of your years," Toby said.

Then it couldn't have been him. She was there, she knew it, but it couldn't have been him. "Have you heard of a place called Ur?"

"I am familiar with it in my studies," he said. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm fine. Something weird is going on, though. Did your people—" and suddenly she was speaking the tongue of the people, a strange, harsh language unlike anything she'd ever heard and he was cocking his head and nodding in wonder. "—gather minerals from the bitter waters into which flow the two great rivers, mothers of life?"

It was a strangely accented Ankani. Toby could pick it out, although the phrasing was awkward. "It began seven thousand years ago," he said, "when you Ortonians were savage hunters."

"And you created the land between the rivers, draining the swamps, teaching the people to build cities." Her eyes flashed. "Of all the low things. You did it only to have a barrier, a protection between your extraction camps and the barbarian tribes of the hills."

"No, they wanted to help."

"You left them. You pulled them up out of barbarism and deserted them." She could remember the sadness, the despair, the pain. "You let them carry me off into slavery!"

"Not you, Sooly. Not me." He took her hand. "I don't understand what's happened, but apparently you Ortonians are different, more different than we ever thought. You seem to be able to remember things which happened centuries before you were born."

"You've tampered with us, played with us, seduced our women, stolen our resources," her voice was not her own; it was fuller, more authoritative, a combination of things.

"Our men were lonely and without women," Toby said. "They wanted only to help. Haven't they helped?" He reached behind him, picked up an Ankani technical manual. "Can you read this?"

It was, at first, alien, but she found something, some dark area of her brain and the marks and lines and angles sprang into language. The words were technical and she could not get the meaning, but she recognized it as the cuneiform writing of the city, her city, Ur of the Chaldees.

"We would have done it without you," she spat.

"Perhaps," Toby said, "but not as quickly."

"She was happy," Sooly said, remembering Nipari, the woman of the hunters. "And she was of Earth."

"And you, evidently, are part Ankani," Toby said.

"Does my being a mongrel make me more acceptable to you?" She reconsidered. "I didn't mean that, Toby. I don't know what to think. This is a little too much for me."

"I love you," Toby said, remembering his utter horror when he thought that she'd been damaged. "I understand the word now."

"I've loved you for thousands of years," Sooly said, a happy smile lighting her face.

He was removing the gear from her head to take her into his arms when Manto Babra Larkton, having been sent to investigate the sudden emanation of an education machine from the base, stepped forward, having heard the last half of the exchange from the shadows outside the open door.

"Bakron Wellti," she ordered, her voice showing her anger and outrage. "You will take this Ortonian to the vehicle."

"You don't understand, Manto," Toby said, his voice going servile and pleading. "She's—"

"I understand perfectly," the Manto said. "You have disobeyed a prime directive. You are familiar with the punishment."

"What will you do with her?" Toby asked.

"She will make a most interesting study," the Manto said, "before we erase her memory."

"But extremely large areas of the brain are involved," Toby protested. "I don't think it's possible—"

"It is not for you to think, Bakron," the Manto said haughtily. "Obey the order."

"You don't have to, Toby," Sooly said. "You don't have to do what she says."

"Move, Bakron," Babra said, a blaster appearing in her hand. Toby helped Sooly from the chair. Her knees were weak.

"Toby, I don't want to go. I don't want to be made to forget," she said.

"We have no choice," Toby said, knowing that the blaster was on his back.

Jay waited beside the scout ship which was resting in the bare area between buildings. He trembled as the group approached. "Inside," Babra said, waving her weapon. "You first, Koptol Gagi."

Jay's legs wouldn't work properly. The Manto had seen his illegal equipment. He knew that, under questioning, he'd be forced to tell of his other forbidden experiments. He didn't want to die in the fire of a huge sun. He gathered his strength, took a deep breath, whirled, knocked the weapon from Babra's hand and followed through with a strong right to the Manto's chin. Toby was shocked into a rigid stiffness. Never in his life had he heard of a rating striking a woman and an officer.

"Quick," Jay gasped. "Let's get out of here." It was crowded in the small scout ship. Toby punched in a random short blink and hoped he didn't blink into an Ortonian mountain or an aircraft. Just before he lost sight of the base as the scout ship faded, he saw the blur of an incoming vehicle. They had made it just in time.

## ***Chapter Fourteen***

Few men had seen such a sight. The Americans and the Russians in their rocket-borne capsules had looked down and watched the march of dawn across the mottled surface of the planet, and, of course, millions had seen it via television, but Sooly was the first woman—no, not the first, for there was in her that other, large-eyed Laga, who flew with her god-lover high above the earth to see two rivers and the sea—but she was the first in thousands of years, the first woman. She flew high above the broad Atlantic and it was narrowed by height to melt into the far shape of her own country and, nearer, the outline of the great mass of Europe and Africa.

From that far point, she could not see the mountains of garbage, the discolored rivers, the dead lakes, the cancerous automobile junkyards, the belching smoke of the factories. Instead, she saw the whorl of a tropical depression in the South Atlantic, the billows of clouds, the dark hue of the continents and it was not the good, green Earth, but the beautiful, blue Earth. The strain of *The Theme From Exodus* kept repeating in her head and the phrase, "This land is mine," took on a significance which caused

tears of beauty-inspired joy to glisten on her lashes.

Down there, far off, was Ocean City, so tiny that she could place it only generally on the outline of the continent. Down there was home, the brackish creeks, the white beaches, the glistening white boats plying the waters just off shore, her family, Bem, the fat, tired old dog. A sudden wave of homesickness swept through her. But there was more now. Across the continent of Africa was another home, the parched, arid lands with the ruins of towers which once reached to the sky to bring the people closer to the gods. The gods. She looked at Toby. He was anything but godlike. He was chewing his lower lip in thought. His mane of blond hair was tousled. His eyes were sad. She felt a vast sympathy. Somewhere out there, in the blackness of the space above them, was his home. "Oh, Toby," she said, taking his hand. "Oh, Toby." Jay was resting in one of the two rearward seats in the cabin of the scout. His eyes were closed, his breathing labored.

The instruments were lettered in cuneiform. She could not get over her astonishment at being able to make out most of it. For a moment she was tempted to probe once again into that newly opened area of her brain and a flash of hot sun and warm wind swept over her and names came to her tongue, Urnammu, first king of the dynasty, Lord of Sumer and Akkad. She shook her head. There would be time for that.

"Toby," she said, "you're in trouble, aren't you?"

"Trouble?" he asked, with a bitter laugh. "There's a word in your English. Mutiny. There isn't even a word for it in Ankani."

"Who was she?" Sooly asked. "That beautiful woman. She had eyes like Laga." The women of Ur. In one of her mother's books was a grouping of votive statues, small figures, male and female, in an attitude of supplication, right hand clasped over left in front of their breasts. One, a tall, mature woman with her hair rounded tightly about her head, had those lovely, large eyes. She had been, most certainly, the daughter of one of the "gods," one of the tall, fair Ankani men.

"She is the Manto, second in command," Toby said.

"Toby, couldn't we explain? Wouldn't they listen?"

"They don't know you, Sooly." He wondered how to tell her. He didn't



want to hurt her. "We Ankanis have been in sub-space for three hundred millennia."

"I think I understand," she said. "We're sort of barbarians?"

"The last time an Ankani ship came to Orton it landed on the continent you call South America. The people there were hunting wild beasts with spears and arrows."

"But we've changed," Sooly said. "We've come a long way."

"Ankan doesn't change," Toby said. "And Ankani opinions change rarely."

"But your men mixed with our people," she said. "The astounding thing was that there was not a distance of thousands of years, not in her mind. It was almost as if the ships of the Ankani had landed atop the towers built to honor them only yesterday."

"In those days tankers were crewed by men. Men without women—" He paused.

"I see. It was something like an English colonist going native in old Africa, huh?"

"Aboard the *Entil*, studies are being made of the surprising advances you Ortonians have made," Toby said. "The first opinion seems to be that these advances are the result of an infusion of, pardon the expression, superior Ankani blood."

"Do you feel that way, Toby?" she asked. "Do you think I'm not good enough for you?"

He looked at her quickly. "No. I know you."

"I could talk to them."

"You don't know Ankani women," he said.

"You're ruled by women?"

He nodded.

"Humm," she teased, trying to lift his spirits. "Maybe I was born on the wrong planet." He managed a weak smile. "But, honestly, Toby, I wouldn't want to rule anyone. We have minor examples of that here. We say a dominant woman wears the pants in the family. I don't want that, Toby. I want a man I can respect, a man who can tolerate my feminine weaknesses and love me and protect me and—"

"You can't know how alien that is to me," he said. He smiled. "And you can't imagine how beautiful it is to know the meaning of your word love."

Jay moved behind them. He straightened up in his seat. "You both make me sick," he said. "And you, Bakron, have you forgotten? Doesn't it mean anything to you that we're stranded here on this blasted zoo planet?"

"I haven't forgotten," Toby said.

"You're sure you couldn't go back, explain it all?" Sooly asked.

"I would be explaining all the way down into the heart of a star," Jay said.

"We can find a place," Sooly said. "Some small town somewhere. It wouldn't be so bad. You both know enough to do wonderful things. You could work toward them slowly—"

"And be fried by a furnace of a sun, if your politicians don't fry us with atomics first," Jay said. "I wish I'd never seen this *girnin*-begotten place." He fell back in his seat.

"I'm so sorry, Toby," Sooly said.

Toby shrugged. "It's worse for him. He's old. He has no one."

On the far edge of the world darkness came, a line of shadow moving across. When they were in the shadow the stars gleamed with a brittle sharpness.

"We have to find a place to land," Toby said. "As long as the ship is under power their instruments can track us." He was studying aerial maps of the surface. "Any suggestions?"

A new wave of homesickness swept Sooly. "There are tremendous swamps near Ocean City," she said.

"And advanced means of detecting flying objects just up the coast," Toby said. "No, I think one of the less developed countries."

"Could we go there?" Sooly asked, feeling strangely unable to voice the idea.

He understood. He flew low in the light of a moon. His Ankani eyes saw, apart from cities such as Baghdad, clusters of Bedouin tents, a dam, a pipeline. The rest was wasteland through which ran deep waddies. He lowered the ship into a depression so that it would be hidden from all eyes.

For long, awesome moments, Sooly gave herself to the sweep of 7,000 years, knowing scattered glimpses of human life and achievement and heartbreak, then she controlled it. Her first concern was Toby. For her, he was giving up his country, his birthright, everything.

Into the chill hours of morning, while Jay slept fitfully, they talked. He told her of his childhood on a distant, dim planet warmed by a distant sun and its own internal fires, a planet called home where his night-seeing eyes cut naturally through the darkness. He told her of the achievements of his race.

Sooly had one question which made his brow furrow in thought. "If you've been in sub-space, as you call it, for thirty centuries, and if all those achievements you speak of were accomplished so very, very long ago, what are the advances of the past few hundred years?" She smiled. "I'd have guessed that you would have developed goodies like matter transmission or telepathy or eternal life."

"Blinking is somewhat like matter transmission," he said. "But I see your point. Considering the fantastic progress you people have made in the past two thousand years, we seem rather static, don't we?"

"Maybe you've gone as far as man needs to go," she said.

"There are many things we don't know," Toby said, an entirely new avenue of thinking opened to him. "Our theories of the age and creation of the universe are amazingly like those developed by your scientists and not much more advanced. You know almost as much about the structure of

the atom as we, but you've made a tragic detour into the destructive aspects of the science. In some fields you're even more advanced."

"Score one for our side," Sooly teased. "Tell me so I can feel superior."

"I'm not sure it's an achievement," Toby said, "but your scientists have done work in the field of what they call molecular biology which has never been duplicated on Ankan or any of the Ankani worlds." He grinned. "Of course, I must admit that the reason is an ancient and severe taboo against such work, a taboo which is one of the foundation stones of Ankani morality. I was shocked, at first, when I learned of the experiments being conducted, but I admit that you have reason. Do you know that your lifespan is shortened drastically because of the harmful rays of your sun?"

"No," Sooly said, thinking of all the sun baths she'd taken.

"If I were faced with such an early death," Toby said, forgetting for the moment that he was, being an exile on Orton, "I suppose I would try everything to remedy the situation, down to and including messing around with the very foundations of life, sacred as they are." He mused for a moment. "Then there's the theory, first proposed by my ancestor, Mari Wellti, that your sun's rays also contribute to what, apparently, is unique to Orton, evolution of species."

"If evolution is unique to us, how did your race get started?"

He laughed. "In the old records there is a fable much like your Adam and Eve. That's another of the things we don't know. We Akanis can be stubborn people. We've been looking for the mystery of the Wasted Worlds for centuries, for example, but when we run into a problem which has no answer, even our stubbornness wears thin. I think people gave up speculating on the origin of the race thirty millennia ago. It's like you trying to answer the question who created God?" An amusing thought came to him. "And speaking of God, do you know who lit the burning bush in your Bible?"

"Don't tell me," Sooly said, slightly shocked.

"And the pillar of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night?"

"Bastard," Sooly said, only half-joking.

"Abraham came out of Ur," Toby said. "When his people ended up enslaved by the Egyptians a few of the old tankermen didn't like it. After all, they were our people, in a way. They did something about it."

"The Egyptians were a native people?" Sooly asked.

"I suppose there was some bleed-through from Sumer," Toby said. "We haven't documented it. I'd say that the Egyptian civilization was largely Ortonian."

"Now who's so damned superior?" Sooly said. "You see, we'd have made it on our own."

"You might have, at that," Toby admitted. "And that pleases me."

Sooly had drifted away from him, trying to find memories in that unexplored mystery. She wanted to see the pyramids under construction, to see the legends of Mentuhotep II rebuilding the lost grandeur of the old kingdom, to see if Nefertiti were as beautiful in life as in her statues. Once, as Jay and Toby slept, she brushed past the young man later called Abraham, but she could not follow him. She seemed bound to the area between the rivers and there was ample cause for staying there for the land was good and life, or lives, were filled with joy and sadness and she, half dozing, let her memories live in her. She was *there*. She lived in the walled cities and watched men fight and die and love and was a part of it, sometimes exalted, sometimes a woman of the villages. In a thousand years she could not hope to relive all of it and there seemed to be a barrier beyond which she could not go, the fall of Ur, the last, sad days, the slavery which followed. After that was blankness and before it was a dark tunnel which led back into time past the girl, Nipari, who ate half-raw meat with her hands and saw the first Ankanian ore-gathering ship settle to the earth. The dark tunnel narrowed into frightening impressions of savagery and violence and cold and hunger and dimly-seen vistas of animal-studded plains and icy hills. It was more pleasant, for the moment, to see proud Ur rising, extending its influence over the land between the rivers. She lived as a servant girl and died, after thirteen summers, in childbirth. She wept in sadness and, exhausted, slept.

## ***Chapter Fifteen***

Cele Mantel's face went white when she saw the bruise on Babra's chin. Her fury, upon hearing the details, resounded throughout the entire ship and sent timid ratings scurrying to the safety of hiding places to avoid her wrath. Never before in the history of the Ankani Fleet had an officer been struck by a male. There wasn't even a punishment for the offense, it was so unthinkable. That left the punishment up to the Garge and she entertained gory scenes of lungs rupturing in the emptiness of space or a slow broil on a spiraling orbit down into a sun.

To ease her anger, she sent half a dozen ratings on punishment tours in steamy suits outside the ship on the angles and projections of the hull, demoted a Koptol who was one minute late for a change of watch and threw a cup and saucer smashing against a painted bulkhead. This last helped more than any of the others and she calmed long enough to discuss the situation with the Manto, who was still shaken by her unbelievable experience. Ankani women had faced the dangers of space and the pain of childbirth and other such inconveniences, but no Ankani woman had ever been called upon to endure being struck by a man. The Ortonian blink of the U.A.T. *Entil* would make history, but not the sort of history Cele had had in mind. She'd been determined to revolutionize tanker design and her statistics regarding incidence of smiles, completion quotient in optings and general morale had almost assured her success, and now those misbegotten men had spoiled it all. Since the Garge is ultimately responsible for all the actions of her crew, she was the bearer of the guilt, as much so as the Koptol with the bulging eyes and the handsome young Bakron. The offenses involved were as terrible as possible. Opting with an Ortonian female in spite of stern directives to the contrary, and, she thought with complete revulsion, forbidden experiments involving the life forces. Add to that desertion and the unheard of crime of striking an officer and her promotion became a remote possibility.

But Cele Mantel, above all, was an officer of the Fleet. As such, personal considerations took second place to duty and her sense of responsibility. Her first impulse, to begin to sterilize the planet immediately, doing in the two rebels along with a few billion Ortonians, soon on lost its appeal. Her blink message to Fleet was still out going, making the tortuous, zig-zag journey along the 7,000-year-old route, pausing at the anchor stations waiting for the small power capsules to build for the next stage of the journey. The message would make the trip in less than half the time it would take the *Entil*, since the *Entil's* bulk made longer waits necessary

while the engines built power.

She was not concerned with the possibility of escape for the two culprits. The small scout ship was not equipped with exploratory gear. Its blinking ability was, therefore, limited to anchor station routes, and the only anchor station route from Orton led directly to Ankan, a place where the two ratings would not dare go. On the other hand, it would be next to impossible to capture the criminals, since, by using the planetary bulk as an anchor, a known point, they could blink endlessly around the area of space within half a light-year of Orton. They would be there when the directive came from Ankan. Cele almost hoped that the order would read, "Proceed with sterilization." Above all, the two ratings were not to be allowed to go relatively unpunished for their crime. In a society as old as the Ankani, new ideas were rare and the pure novelty of a male striking a female was so revolutionary that it would, possibly, appeal to that personality fault in men which had proved so troublesome in the distant past, the longing for what the males thought of as adventure. Women were the stabilizing influence in Akani life. If it were left up to the males, change for the sake of change would be the order of the day.

Of course, being left to die an early death under Orton's killer sun would be a certain kind of punishment, but there was, still, a sort, of romantic feeling among certain types about the old tanker crewmen who had learned to like Orton and its women so well that they chose to stay. Some would not consider a footloose life with a nubile Orton woman a punishment. And there was, too, the demonstrated fact that Koptol Gagi had allowed his advancing age to distort his reason. His notes on his experiments with animals and genetic manipulation were downright frightening. Even on Orton he would have a few more years in which to do damage.

Meanwhile, a back-up crew had been sent to the base, for Cele was determined to return to Ankan with a full cargo hold. The transport rating had come up with a mild emanation which was being used as a guide point for blinking down. The mother of the Ortonian woman with whom the young Bakron had become involved was wakeful and concerned.

Calmed slightly, Cele considered all possibilities and decided on one futile gesture. She swept into the communications room with her head regally high, her huge, soft eyes striking sparks. When she spoke on the emergency channel, a signal activated a receiver in the scout ship hidden

in a waddi in the wastes of Iraq and Jay snorted in terror, while Toby and Sooly jerked awake, wide-eyed.

"Bakron Toby Wellti. Koptol Jay Gagi. You will be given one opportunity to surrender. For five minutes, the *Entil* will broadcast a periodic blink beacon. If you approach with power off, you will be allowed to board. The Ortonian woman will be treated with kindness and her memories eradicated. As for you, Koptol, and you, Bakron, your crimes are serious, as you well know. I can promise only that your rights will be respected and that you will be accorded a hearing before a Fleet Board."

Toby looked at Jay. The older man was frightened. He opened, his pill case and popped a *troleen*. His face was a study in desperation as he looked at the nearly empty case. He fumbled hurriedly into the emergency kit of the scout vehicle and found a supply of a half dozen *troleen* tablets.

"We'll have to go back," he said, his voice almost inaudible.

"You know what they'll do to you," Toby said.

"What's the difference?" Jay asked, holding out his meager supply of life-preserving *troleen*

"I won't go," Sooly said. "Let him go alone, Toby. Let him put us down somewhere in the United States."

"In five minutes?" Toby asked.

"Then we'll stay here," Sooly said.

"Yes," Toby said, with sudden decision. "It would be only fitting." He put his hand on Jay's arm. "Are you sure? It's certain death."

"On an Ankani sun," Jay said. "Not here on this miserable world."

They watched the scout blink away. It was early morning. The chill made Sooly huddle close, a mixture of fear and a warm glow of being at home causing her emotions to well up into her eyes. At a distance across the flat plain she could see the mound of a ruined city.

"We'll have some explaining to do," Toby said.

"We can say we're survivors of an aircraft crash," Sooly said.



"Without passports or identification?"

"Lost in the crash," Sooly said.

"It might work," Toby said doubtfully.

But it was not necessary to try. As the red sun lifted a swollen rim over the horizon, the scout vehicle lowered on visual control and settled into the waddi. Jay's face was red, his eyes wild. "They tried to kill me," he gasped, "without warning. I blinked out within sight of the *Entil* and they fired two blasters."

"And missed?" Toby asked, although that was evident. He was stunned.

"Thanks to the winds of Ankan, our Garge isn't one to believe in weapons practice," Jay said.

"So she'd decided on summary execution," Toby mused. "That course was last followed forty millennia ago."

"What now?" Jay asked, on the verge of collapse. "What can we do now?"

Toby frowned in worry. "Stay here during the day. We shouldn't be moving about when people can see."

"I don't care about these Ortonians," Jay said. He slumped. "But it doesn't matter. Nothing matters now."

The scout was not constructed for comfort. And, with power off, the sun soon made them feel as if they were, indeed, being spiraled down into a star doing a slow broil. Toby and Sooly went outside, in spite of Toby's distaste for Orton's sun, and lay on the ground in the shadow formed by the vehicle. For the first time, Sooly had time to consider all the implications of the events of the past few hours. She thought of her parents, who would, most certainly, be frantic by now. She hadn't even told them where she was going, walking out of the house while her mother was helping her father write his weekly report. She wondered if they'd have the fuzz looking for her by now. They'd find her Volkswagen at the bridge. Would they drag the Waterway for her body? Here she was on the other side of the world, an incredible distance when one considered the usual forms of communications. Where, in this wasted land, would she

find a mailbox? A telephone?

She loved her parents and it pained her to think that they were worrying about her and would have to continue to worry until she found a means to contact them. And poor old Bem, lovingly named because of her most prominent feature, her eyes, Bug-Eyed Monster. It was that way on the registration papers, Sue Lee's Bug-Eyed Monster. Bem had refused to eat for days when she went away to school and had had to be taken to the vet for treatment when Sooly left once more, after being home only days, to spend her abortive short weeks in New York. Poor Bem.

But wasn't it silly to be worried about the fat old dog when Toby faced permanent exile and poor Jay faced an early death without his life-giving medicine?

"Toby," she said, "if this is growing up, to hell with it."

"Hummm?" Toby asked sleepily.

"Cool it," Sooly said, not wanting to burden him with her petty problems.

However, there was one good thing about the whole mess. Her love for Toby. At least they'd be together. It sounded inane to say that she'd make it up to him, but, God, wouldn't she try? But what if he came to resent her? What fantastic ego she had to think that her love, her body, would make up for everything, his losing his whole life to live for a terribly short time, among what to him must seem to be primitive people.

It was all very confusing and she hadn't been able, as yet, to absorb all of it. Her entire concept of herself and of the world had been changed in a few short hours. All the old questions remained, but the answers were different as could be and just as inaccessible. However, looking at the big picture took her mind off her parents and poor Bem and even, although it stayed in the back of her mind, the larger problems. The nature of God and the universe was still too much for her, but she knew a bit about the history of mankind, thanks to the freaky thing which had happened in her brain under Jay's infernal machine. It was a bit belittling to think that her people had been savages living from hand to mouth when the first Ankani ship came to the land between the rivers. And yet, thinking of the girl, Nipari, she could feel a fierce pride, for alone in a land of terrible elements and great beasts, the people had survived and conquered the beasts. And

even if they had been given a hand up by Ankani knowledge and an infusion of Ankani blood, she could not quite accept the premise that all of man's achievements were to be attributed to Ankani influence. No. There was that feeling of, something, humanness, earthliness, something.

Curious, wanting to know more, she let her mind go as blank as possible and searched for the memories. She was bemused, at first, by the young Nipari and was tempted to reexperience the first coming of the "gods," to know the fear and awe and the joy of knowing that the gods had noticed and were coming to earth to aid the people. But she wanted to know more and pushed herself back, back, dying at the hands of a raiding band of hunters, being clawed by a huge cat, living, loving in different bodies but always a woman, never able to penetrate the minds of the males around her.

She went back through pain and lust and hunger and the joys of gluttony when the hunt was good, through winds and sand and ice and splashing in clean, clear water, with the memories becoming dim and misty and only areas of high emotional content coming through. Back into the slow, plodding, changing minds of heavy-limbed females, with her spirit sinking and her entire body being drained by the fierce emotions of the beds of natural lust, the killings, the birthings. Only the peaks now, never the quiet moments or the everyday life, and the land changing as the eons rolled back, back. Tortuous treks following changing climate, centuries compressed into moments, and the sun redder, more fierce, winds wet and torrential falls of rain and fierce beasts and it was all becoming so dim, so dim. Rudimentary language. Grunts of pain and anger and lust. Hulking, hairy males with huge, ugly heads and jutting jaws and the crunch of bone as a flint ax crushed her skull and she was so distant, so far that she despaired of ever coming back. Brutal, savage, bloody, dim-witted. Man. Roaring his challenge, taking his women with the strength of his hairy, massive arms. Knowing only the elemental flow of storm and sun and food and lust. Animals. Oh, God. Had she come from this? And yet so far, so far, such a vast sea of change and time and wonder from those upright apes and the joyful youth of the young Nipari.

Nothing. A misty sea of nothing. Aware of being, but in a dull cloud with only hints of pain and hunger and, always, that force, that lust, that urge to perpetuate the race. And just before exhaustion made it necessary to stop the sad, humiliating probe, just before, tears flowing in sympathy for those first men, those animals who stood on their feet, a blinding,

brilliant revelation of such force that it was engraved on the memory of the race, a point of light in the darkness.

Shaken, experiencing the wonder through the eyes of a squat, powerful, hairy female, she could, at the same time, relate. It continued for days, weeks. Around her the people gaped, grunted, rolled their eyes in fear. And she could stand it no longer as it continued.

Another answer but an incomplete one. Back once again to the basic question, who created God? Lying there, weak, full of questions, the hot sun baking the dry land around them, Toby dozing. It was utterly freaky. But she knew that they had been alone. Then came—

She looked quickly at Toby to see if he had spoken. He was asleep. Jay was huddled miserably in the scout, ports open, his eyes closed.

Again.

*Children*

"Toby! Toby!" She was shaking him, frantic. He sat up rubbing his eyes. "You weren't the first, Toby."

"Huh?"

"They put it there. We, I, saw them. It was small and gleaming and they used machines and put it there—"

"Are you all right?" Toby asked. "The sun—"

"You weren't the first. They came long before you. So very long. And I saw them and—"

*Children*

"Toby, we've got to go there."

"Where?" Toby asked, thinking she must, surely, be suffering from the sun.

"There," she said, pointing. "Now."

"We can't move in daylight."

"Yes we can. We must. Now." She was up, pulling on him. "Because I know, Toby. I know a lot now and I can hear them and I've *got* to go, because they left it there until we could hear it and—"

It was difficult, almost impossible, for Toby to resist the will of a woman. Obeying was ingrained. And it would, at least, get them out of the infernal heat. What did it matter if the movement of the ship led to a few more flying saucer reports?

A family of wandering Bedouins saw the ship rise and disappear and murmured in fear before the wise patriarch dismissed the sights as another mirage of the flat land. Flying high, avoiding the air space of the warring Middle Eastern powers, Toby followed Sooly's pointing hand across the Persian Gulf, over the brown hills of Africa, questioning her.

"They came in huge ships from the sky," Sooly explained, as the small voice repeated itself in her head, guiding her, leading her. "Thousands of them, herded out onto the floor of the valley and forced to disperse by a mere handful of tall beings in space suits. We watched from the shelter of the ridges and we saw them use the machinery to put it there and I think that's what I'm hearing. It's saying, *children*, that's all. Just *children*. But I can feel it drawing me."

Jay was skeptical, but morose enough not to care. Toby was, himself, a bit doubtful, but he'd seen the first racial memories back there while monitoring Jay's machine and he knew that there was something very different about this Ortonian girl.

An anthropological expedition was camped in tents in the midst of a vast wasteland through which ran deep ruts of erosion, exposing the age-old remains of primitive man. "It doesn't matter," Sooly said forcefully, hearing the voice very loudly now. "They'll know soon."

Dusty, sweating workers and tired, aging scientists, concerned at that moment with digging at the bones of the earth, itself, stopped their work, staring at the scout as it lowered, settled to raise puffs of dust.

"We're here," Sooly said to the voice. She waited. There was nothing. Around them the bare rocks were exposed and a white man in khaki was moving hesitantly toward them, several hundred yards off.

"We're here, damn it," Sooly said desperately. "We're here."

It was not in words. It flowed into her brain in a quick burst and she knew. "Did you hear it?" she asked. Toby shook his head. She listened. The message was repeated. There was no more. It was cryptic and she was furious with disappointment. Was that all? The message was repeated.

"We can go now, Toby," she said sadly. The scout blinked up, fading before the startled eyes of the scientists and the black workers.

"They put them here because they were going away," Sooly said. "And they left the thing there under the earth and I don't think they ever, really, expected anyone to hear it."

"I think it's time you explained," Toby said.

"Toby, on the Wasted Worlds is there a huge city?"

"The Planet of Cities," Toby said, wondering where it was all going to lead.

"They want us to go there," Sooly said. "To a high tower on a mountain top, a tower built in the shape of a five pointed star."

"There's nothing there," Jay said. "It's deserted, all clues to the identity of those who built it erased."

"Tell me the whole message," Toby said.

"It wasn't in words," she admitted. "It was a feeling. They called us children and there was a hint of sadness and then this picture of the tower in the shape of a star and I knew that they wouldn't be there, because I saw it empty and deserted, but they want us to go there. I had a feeling that it was part of some kind of test."

"The Ortonian girl has lost her reason," Jay said.

"Toby, can this ship get us there?"

"Oh, yes." He nodded. "We have synthetic rations for six months. We draw power from the stars. We can go anywhere in the Galaxy where expo ships have put out beacons."

"Let's go, then," Sooly begged. "What have we got to lose?"

"Our lives if we get on a beacon with an Ankani ship," Jay said.

"This feeling you had," Toby asked. "Did you have the impression that those who left the message also built the Planet of Cities?"

"Yes."

Toby looked at Jay. "If we could crack that nut, we'd be home free."

Home. Sooly felt as if something had torn loose inside her. Her parents would be frantic by now. It was purely incredible to think that she was about to embark on a trip into the stars, at distances which were unthinkable to her. It was even more incredible to think that she, Sooly, was to be the instrument in a vast change in the miserable history of mankind. For there was an implied promise in that feeling, that unspoken message sent into her brain from a shining, small object buried far under the earth by someone, someone who had helped people the earth, bringing a sea of humanoid beings to the old plains and valleys at a time when the people were not much more than animals. There was a promise and it was not meant for her alone but for all, for all of them. But in spite of it, of all the vast importance which she knew to be attached to that command, that invitation, she could not bring herself to go bugging off into the stars without telling her parents.

Mom and Dad. I'm going off to a distant solar system with Toby. Don't worry. Jeeeeeeesus. Flip? They'd die. They'd be sure she'd fallen into the hands of pimps and dope addicts and was strung out on some wild drug scene.

It was a time for crazy, almost comical happenings. Like an alien space ship slowly easing down into the cleared space in the lot next to the darkened Kurt house.

Hey, Mom and Dad, there's a space ship on the lot next door. How about that?

Toby, who didn't share Sooly's complete confidence that a blink to the Planet of Cities would solve all problems, was not hard to convince that Sooly should leave some kind of message for her parents. He was more than willing to postpone the nerve-racking trip to the heart of the Galaxy, because all the odds were against them. So he put her down on the vacant lot in a small clearing among big oak trees and she stepped out.

Bem was sleeping outside. She always did when Sooly was out, waiting up for her on the coolness of the cement stoop to greet her with wagging rump and snorting breaths. Bem was a silent type. A bark from her was an event and was not inspired by ordinary events such as the passage of a cat, a coon or a fox through the yard. The last time she had barked was when the bobcat got on the roof after a field mouse and so it was out of complete surprise that she gave one strained yap as she saw the ship come down. She was undecided, at first, but she caught Sooly's scent and came lumbering out to meet her, her whole backside wagging with happiness.

"Hi, old fatty," Sooly said, bending to pat the dog. "Old black dog."

The house was quiet. It was late. She imagined her mother inside, wakeful, perhaps. At best sleeping fitfully. How wonderful it would be to use her key, go in, wake them. But she couldn't. There would be hours of explaining and her father would yell. He was the type of father who had to be told everything and she'd never objected to that. It gave her a feeling of being valued and having to give information about where she was going and when she'd be in was a small price to pay for the place she had in that household.

She left the note pinned to the inside of the rear screen with a bobby pin.

Luvs

Please don't worry. I'm fine and in no danger and I love you both very much. I'll be back soon and when you hear about it you'll forgive me for causing you this concern.

Sooly

Bem followed her back to the scout, snorting her disapproval of Sooly's behavior. "You can't go, baby," Sooly said. "You have to stay." The dog trembled and snorted. Sooly was crying. It was bad enough to worry her parents, but this poor, dumb old dog would never understand why she'd been deserted once more. "She won't eat when I'm away," she sniffed to Toby.

"Bring her if you like," Toby said. "If you think she can eat concentrated



rations."

"She'll eat anything when I'm around," Sooly said, with a burst of silly happiness. Bem curled up in the seat beside her and went to sleep, snoring loudly. It was going to be a long, fantastic trip, but Sooly had something, at least. With Bem along, she would not feel that she was leaving everything behind on the world which grew small and disappeared as the scout blinked.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

Seldom in the fine history of the Ankani Fleet had a blink been made in more discomfort. The scout, built for short-missions, had no sleeping facilities, only four seats and a space just wide enough to accommodate a body between the banks of engines. As always on a blink, it was the long periods of waiting at the blink beacons which were the most deadly. To the pure tedium was added the tensions of uncertainty. As the stars grew more dense and the blinks became shorter, the Ortonian route merged with other starways. If an Ankani ship had blinked out while the power banks were gathering energy, the explanations would have been, to say the least, sticky. Curious officers would have wanted to know why a scout was at such a distance from the mother ship, and both Jay and Toby knew the impossibility of hiding the truth long from an officer.

The long blink was difficult for Toby in another way. He could see and touch the most fascinating woman he'd ever known, a woman for whom he'd given up so much, and yet common decency prevented him from opting with her. This tension added to all the other considerations made him, at times, moody.

The redeeming feature was that the long periods of waiting could be used for talk, for speculation about the nature of things, for personal confidences. By the time three-quarters of the distance between Orton and Ankan had been covered, Toby knew everything there was to know about his woman. His woman! The very words made him grin with a fierce joy. He was the first Ankani man in thousands of years to have his own woman and that wondrous fact made it all worthwhile.

As for Sooly, she asked thousands of questions and expressed loud and indignant surprise at each new revelation of the Ankani way of life, a life which had been controlled by women for fifty millennia. During a discussion of opting customs, she realized with a feeling of sadness that Toby had known many beautiful Ankani women, but she did not ask him specific details. He, sensing her hurt, kissed her, ignoring the scornful snort from Jay. "All that is past," he said. "I have made my final opting." And that satisfied her.

The message from Fleet Board was intercepted one short blink from the nearest Ankani world, with the communications gear monitoring all frequencies and both Jay and Toby on the alert for Ankani ships. It came in a one-minute burst and was extended by the repeater.

"Sterilize?" Sooly asked, upon hearing the message. "What do they mean, sterilize?" But she was deathly afraid that she knew. She'd been told of the Ankani taboo against genetic meddling and her stand was that such a taboo was fine for Ankanis if that was the way they felt, but that they had no right to impose their taboo on the people of the Earth.

"It means wipe off all traces of animate life," Toby said sadly.

"We have to go back," she shouted. "We have to stop them."

"How?" Toby asked.

"I don't know. We can go to Ankan. We can talk to this Fleet Board of yours."

"They wouldn't listen," Toby said. "Our only chance is to go on to the Planet of Cities. If we can provide the Board with the secret of the Wasted Worlds, perhaps they'll listen." He sighed. "We're two blinks away. It will take the message approximately four of your weeks to reach the *Entil*, about another week for the ship to prepare the sterilizer. We have time to get to the Planet of Cities and back to a point where our message might just get there before they carry out the orders."

"But if we don't learn anything?" Sooly asked.

"We can only try," Toby said. He was thinking of the small birds and animals around the base, back there on Orton. They would feel nothing. But for a long time the stink of carrion would pollute the atmosphere of

the planet while a few surviving micro-organisms toiled away to decay unthinkable mountains of flesh. For the first time in his life he was not proud of being Ankani.

In spite of Sooly's desperation, there was no way to hurry the two remaining blinks. But then, with the sense of urgency that had an almost tangible force in the cabin of the scout, the Planet of Cities was below, magnificent in ruins, lit by a mild sun whose benevolent rays glowed golden on the enduring age-old buildings. Jay, who had made two trips to the planet as a youthful crewman on scientific ships, found the star tower by trial and error, with only a few wasted hours.

There was a gentle breeze. It made its way through the deep canyons between buildings to caress them, to belie the grim message of death which was flashing and resting, flashing and resting, through the stars behind them. The entranceway penetrated to the center of the square and led them into a tremendous, domed hall. The walls were niched, but all the recesses were empty, save for a fine, ancient dust. Sooly paused in the center of the hall, looked around, listening. Not even the sigh of the wind could be heard inside the huge building. Her feet left tracks in the fine layer of dust on the floor. She had never felt so lonely. She'd seen the extent of the empty cities and the vastness of the planet. On that entire world four entities breathed. A woman, two men and a fat, black dog. Dust got in Bem's nose and made her sneeze.

"Anything?" Toby asked.

"No," she said, her brow furrowed in concern.

She walked slowly around the great hall. Doorways led off at angles into the points of the star. The wall niches were irregularly shaped. She completed the circuit of the hall and stood with Toby, feeling despair. "This is the place," she said. "I know it is."

"It's estimated that this planet was deserted as long as five hundred thousand years ago," Toby said.

"But they told me to come here," she said. "This has to be it."

"There are other deserted cities on other planets," Jay said.

"The planet I saw was this one," Sooly said. "I saw it in my mind. It was

one vast city from horizon to horizon. No oceans. No mountains. Are there others like that?"

"We know of none," Toby said. "But—"

"Oh, goddamn," Sooly said. She raised her head. "Speak to me, you bastards. We've come all this way. Now you speak to me."

The only sound was Bem's troubled breathing.

"We can search the other rooms. The other floors." Toby's voice contained little optimism.

"We have to hurry," Sooly said, remembering that deadly message winging its way to the Ankani ship in orbit around her home. "Let's separate." Toby frowned. "If this damned place is as deserted as you say, there's no danger."

"Some of the buildings are in an advanced state of decay," Toby said. "And we'll have to get power belts to reach the upper stories. The elevators don't work, of course, and there are no stairways."

"We have to do something," Sooly said desperately. "I'll start on the ground floor while you two get your belts or whatever and begin on the upper floors."

It took two days to search the building. After Toby and Jay went to the scout for power belts, Toby suggested that a separate search would be useless, since Sooly had been the only one able to hear the message back on Orton. None of them knew exactly what they were looking for, but judging from the way the message was received by Sooly on her own planet, there would not be, perhaps, any external sign of the hidden communications device. So having to guide Sooly through every room of the huge building took time and energy. Bem was left outside, snorting and worrying when Sooly was lifted by the power belt to the upper stories, but she soon grew calm when she realized that Sooly wasn't going far away and would come back at intervals.

Level after level yielded nothing, only empty rooms, odd-shaped rooms, surprisingly conventional rooms, long tunnels, unexplained shafts. Toby, able to find good in most everything, applied his brain to a detailed and complete study of the architecture of one Wasted Worlds building, but it

was an exercise in futility with no reward in view, for he was resigned now to being an exile. He was angry about, but also broodingly resigned to, the destruction of Orton. He was powerless to stop it.

Late in the evening of the second day, dusty, tired, despairing, they reached the topmost level. The tips of the star were much the same as on other floors, but at the center of the star, circled by a wide hall, was a solid core of the enduring plastic used for much of the building on the Planet of Cities. The enclosed space was large, but there were no entrances.

"It could have contained a sealed power unit of some sort," Toby guessed.

"Such a large space would not have been wasted," Jay agreed.

"If we had a weapon, we could blast out a section," Toby said.

Jay produced a small hand blaster. Toby had forgotten that his former superior rating had carried an illegal weapon back on Orton. Jay stepped back as far as possible, put the weapon on narrow beam, and aimed it. The force was absorbed by the material of the circular wall of the inner core. Jay frowned, increased power. The energy would have cut through five feet of stainless steel. The wall, however, did not change in the slightest. Jay walked a few paces, tried another spot. The result was the same.

"We must be onto something," Toby said. "There is no material known which can withstand a sustained blaster force."

As if to confirm that statement, Jay pointed the blaster at the outer wall and a section of material smoked and disintegrated. "It would seem to me," Toby said, "that the entire thing is a sort of test. That object which you say was buried on Orton had been there for a long time and no one heard it before you. To get to this planet, we had to have certain advanced knowledge. Perhaps we don't, as yet, possess the knowledge required to break through this wall."

"We have to," Sooly said.

They started walking around the circular core of the building again, examining the wall carefully. It was solid and continuous. Not one crack or blemish marred its white expanse. At intervals Jay tried the blaster with

negative results. Sooly was becoming increasingly desperate and irrationally angry. They'd been led this far and she was not going to be put off by trickery.

After circling the unbroken wall twice, Toby was stumped. "Look," he said. "Let's go back to the ship, have some food, think it over."

"No," Sooly said emotionally. "This is it. I know it is. We can't give up." She faced the wall and hated it with a fury which sent color into her face, increased her heart-beat, set her glands working furiously. "You, in there," she said, her voice low, intense. "You've got to help us. You can't just lead us on and then stop us cold."

Directly in front of them the wall changed color. The unbroken white turned dim blue and deepened in the shape of an arched doorway. They waited. The color change was complete and still the wall was intact. Toby pushed against the blue outline of the doorway and it was firm, solid. He stepped back. Jay used the blaster. The blue doorway melted, leaving an opening into a large, circular room. It, like the other rooms of the building, was empty, but in the center was a round column which extended from floor to ceiling and, upon approaching it, they saw two niches in the shape of the human form, one obviously female, the other male. With a wild excitement, Sooly approached the column. She touched it, waiting. Nothing.

"I think we're supposed to stand inside, in the niches," Toby said.

Sooly moved quickly into the niche which was cut into the shape of a female. She fit snugly. Toby stood in the other. She heard, felt, sensed it immediately. But it was merely a meaningless series of numbers. She opened her mind and waited. The series of numbers was repeated. Disappointment was a vile taste in her mouth. After hearing the series of numbers three times, she stepped out. Toby was standing in his niche, frowning.

"Did you hear anything?" he asked.

"Didn't you?"

"No," he said.

"It was just numbers," she said. She repeated the first few as best she

could remember. Toby looked at Jay.

"Blink coordinates?" Toby asked. Jay nodded, interest on his face for the first time in weeks.

"Go in again," Toby said. "Write them down carefully. Be sure you don't miss a single digit."

She listened four times through to be sure. Satisfied, she handed Toby the paper upon which she'd written the series of numbers which were meaningless to her.

"Let's get down to the ship and check the charts," Toby said. "The first one is the coordinate for this planet. But I think the second and third must be wrong."

Back in the scout, hunger forgotten in the excitement, Toby checked and rechecked. "Meaningless," he said sadly. He showed his calculations to Jay. Jay's face fell. Toby tried to think how he could tell Sooly that the blink coordinates she'd heard in the room there atop the ancient building were meaningless.

"Right out into inter-Galactic space," Jay said. "Right into limbo."

"What does he mean, Toby?" Sooly asked worriedly.

"Blinking is tied to the known mass of a particular star," Toby explained. "When a ship blinks, it ceases to exist, for all practical purposes. It goes out of the fabric of time and space and is in—" he thought of something she'd understand, "—whatever it is, but you might call it another dimension, but it's a dimension with no dimension. It just doesn't exist. It happens so fast that you don't know it. It seems almost instantaneous. But when a ship blinks, it and everything in it literally ceases to exist and the only way it comes back into existence is to use the mass of a large star to pull it back from this nowhere. To blink, you have to know in advance the exact location and the exact mass of the anchor star. We've been traveling a route which was mapped out laboriously, going from star to star to set up known beacons and coordinates. But this first blink in your series of numbers would put us completely outside the Galaxy, out in space where there would be no anchor. We'd have nothing to pull us back. We'd just cease to exist."

"No," Sooly said, remembering the sadness, the kindness she felt when she first heard the call of the small object beneath the African plain. "They wouldn't do that. They must have known."

"Perhaps the mechanical object which delivered the message has lost some of its effectiveness," Jay said. "It could have given her the wrong coordinates."

"Yes," Toby said.

"Check again," Sooly told him. "It's right. I know it's right."

Toby checked again. This time he checked the entire blink through. From the plane of the Galaxy, the first blink went out toward the vast emptiness on a line perpendicular to the flattened spiral. The second extended outward, coming back toward the plane of the spiral at an angle, to end near a giant, outlying star. That one made sense. It ended near an anchor. The third blink disappeared into the thin stars of the periphery opposite the planet of Orton, all the way across the huge, central bulge of stars from Ankan.

"Could they have calculated the mass of the entire Galaxy?" Toby asked, with sudden inspiration. "I know it sounds impossible, but could they have done it?"

Jay was interested. "The first blink is far enough out," he said. "It's a fantastic idea. It would open us to inter-Galactic exploration."

"They built this planet," Toby said. "They put people on Orton, according to Sooly's memories." He made his decision. "I'm willing to try."

"What the hell?" Jay shrugged, using an Ortonian phrase.

## ***Chapter Seventeen***

The Galaxy was spread before them like an illustration in an astronomy book. The flattened central disc was a brightness which seemed to draw the eye from the whorls of the spiral arms. Huge globular clusters



appeared as single stars. Other, more distant galaxies were pinpoints in the blackness. There was time to admire and for a long time none spoke and when they did it was in awed whispers. Meanwhile, the power banks were drawing on that vast panorama of stars, using the entire Galaxy instead of a single star and the process was accelerated, the second blink programmed and executed before they had time to enjoy, to drink in the incredible beauty of a spiral galaxy seen from a distance just great enough to allow an appreciation of the symmetry of the system. Jerked out of nothingness by a huge fellow on the Sagittarius periphery, they were still awed by the last vista which had sent light patterns into their eyes before blinking. The nearness of scattered stars was a letdown. But now only one short blink was ahead.

They came out near a kind of dim star without a family of planets. Alone, it wandered an emptiness on the fringe of the Galaxy, their destination—and an evident disappointment until Toby activated the sensors and found, at a respectable distance from the sun, a tiny mass too small to be called planet, too large to be called asteroid. They moved close enough to measure its mass, blinked in close. And they knew that they had reached the end of the search, for the planetoid was artificial, a circular mass of white material with the same readings as the unbreachable wall back in the Tower of the Star. Expecting another test, Toby lowered the scout to the surface and was preparing to set down when a force seized them, moved them across the surface, lowered them, power banks dead, through an opening which appeared at the last second.

Blank white walls surrounded them with an unbroken expanse. A quick test proved the atmosphere to be breathable. With a growing eagerness and some fear, Sooly followed Toby outside the scout. A section of wall opened. An unseen force urged them forward into a chamber which was so luxuriously furnished, that it took Sooly's breath. The carpet underfoot had the feel of thick, closely-mowed grass. Furnishings were strangely shaped, but blended into the overall contrast of color and texture in an alien but delightful way. And the walls, while giving the impression of being at a distance, were not walls but shouting, heart-stopping works of art which seemed to change and alter while speaking directly to the mind, giving an impression of beauty which made Sooly's heart forget, for the moment, the urgency of the situation.

*Children, you have come so far*

The voice was unheard, inside them. It was feminine.

"Please," Sooly said. "Please talk with us."

*So far we are pleased*

"Are you the people of the Wasted Worlds?" Toby asked.

*You call them that you will be seated while we——— you*

There was no understanding of the concept. However, they sat on soft, yielding cushions which, while yielding, supported them in comfort.

*Pleased, excited laughter. But you have combined forces marvelous. Puzzlement? The native life form? Unforeseen —a male voice—pleasure, surprise. The large-eyed ones and the hairy animals of———III. Delightful.*

*Children you may go*

"Go?" Sooly asked. "We can't. Not yet. You must help us. They're going to kill everyone—"

*Regret. Indifference. A trace of resentment and boredom and impatience and then a leak-through of pleasure so keen that the infinitesimal amount which filtered through*

*Stop you'll burn them out*

*Random punchings.*

*Wait can't you see*

*No matter*

*Yes put them back*

*Long, long journeys into ecstasy with three frail children lying, stunned, on the grass-like floor*

*Put them back*

*Feminine weakness if you want them back you put them back*

*I went out it is the rule a small part of you*

*Simpler to eject them*

*No put them back we all agreed to see them*

*A glow over the fallen bodies touching, entering, erasing, an unseen force lifting, moving. A small, black animal giving one startled bark before she, too, was limp. A glow hovering and time which wasn't time passing as the scout blinked and lowered to a dead Planet of Cities and then movement in the recesses of the ship's instruments as time turned backward to leave no record of the*

Late in the evening of the second day, dusty, tired, despairing, they reached the topmost level. The tips of the star were much the same as on other floors, but at the center of the star, circled by a wide hall, was a solid core of the enduring plastic used for much of the building on the Planet of Cities. The enclosed space was large, but there were no entrances.

"It could have contained a sealed power unit of some sort," Toby guessed.

"Such a large space would not have been wasted," Jay agreed.

"If we had a weapon, we could blast out a section," Toby said.

Jay produced a small hand blaster. Toby had forgotten that Jay had carried an illegal weapon on Orton. Jay stepped back, put the weapon on narrow beam and cut a hole in the wall. Toby led the way into the large, circular room. He'd seen photographs of others like it. Although all of the equipment which had once filled it had been removed in those dim, dark days of the distant past when the worlds were divested of any clue as to the form or achievements of their inhabitants, such rooms did give Ankani scientists reason to suspect that they were once repositories for advanced machinery probably used to develop some type of energy. It was empty. The floor was devoid of the layer of fine dust which was present in other, unsealed, rooms, but it was totally empty. Nothing marred the smoothness of floor, walls and ceiling. And, although she tried and vented all her anger on the unfeeling things which had led them so far on a fruitless mission, Sooly heard nothing. Nor did a repeated search of the star-shaped tower yield anything.

"We have time to get to Ankan," Toby said.

"For what? Our executions?" Jay asked in a surly voice. He was hoarding his last *troleen*, and his heart was reminding him of his age with irregular sharp pains.

"It may be too late already," Toby said, "but maybe they'll believe that Sooly heard something on Orton. Maybe they'll send a message canceling the sterilization order. If the *Entil* hasn't started—"

"We have to try," Sooly said. God, she felt old. She was nineteen years old and she'd found the man she loved and she lived so long, so very long, all those thousands of years back to Nipari and beyond and now it was all going to end and they'd kill Toby and Jay and it was so damned unfair. But then what had ever been fair about being human? She knew the pain of death and the horror of seeing a city overrun by the barbarians of the hills and the crunch of teeth on bone and the momentary burst of brilliant sun when the skull is crushed and through it all man had lived and died as hopelessly as even the most depraved maniac could ever have imagined and what did it all mean? Nothing, goddamn, nothing.

The little scout lifted, blinked. Four short blinks away was Ankan.

## ***Chapter Eighteen***

*Once every four-thousand pairings she was allowed by mutual consent to play a certain combination of six keys of a certain sequence against just over seven thousand of his keys in a complicated action which brought a surprisingly simple pleasure, happy nostalgia. She never became bored with it, although he preferred more sophisticated pairings made by random, experimental punches. However, with eternity ahead and eons behind and the punching combinations infinite, he indulged her and wallowed in her teary nostalgia, rather enjoying it, as a matter of fact. Actually, no combination was unenjoyable, some were just more lasting and exciting.*

*Around them the gleaming white asteroid pulsed silently with mechanical activity as undying, self-renewing servos drew needed atoms*

*from the distant sun and remolded them into the necessary elements. Immediately after the departure of the children, the force fields had crackled into place, distorting light to make the asteroid disappear and enclosing it in a cocoon which would have defied almost any force, up to the energies released by a supernova. After a brief, only mildly amusing interlude, pleasure flowed without interruption once again. The interruption was only the second in five hundred thousand years, the first being necessitated by a normal change in a particular star which required a move to the kind, pale sun at a respectable distance from the planetoid.*

*They were so cute*

*She had not, he decided, recovered from the novelty of communication other than through pleasure. Since it did not interfere, being carried on with only a small, insignificant portion of the entity, he did not object.*

*And the small black animal*

*Nine-eight-five-two-oh-six-two paired four-four-one. She had a thing about low numbers and in his random punches he humored her. The massive jolt of pure pleasure existed for an eternity and dimmed not and communication was not worth the effort for it was a happy combination reinforced by the nature of the combined entities massed into two and submerged in the sea of something above sex, above life, above the pleasures of food and drink.*

*But she remembered and, on her combination, she allowed a small part of her to visit the knowledge banks and seek out an unremembered figure.*

*On——, she told him evolution produced two hundred million species of plants and animals and it is estimated that the planet of the dark ones, being younger, has still produced one hundred million species*

*It disturbs you*

*The word has no meaning*

*A new combination. He was fantastically lucky with his random punches. It shattered her with new sensation.*

*Remember the Techcals*

*Of course*

*We could call up their shades*

*To what purpose*

*She chose a known combination, less adventurous than he, reveled in its familiarity.*

*We had never expected them to follow the trail, she told him, and were it not for the vitality of the native species they would not have been able to hear would it not be interesting to watch to see if they can achieve more for we are responsible*

*Meaningless*

*For creating them, the big eyes and the dark ones and the others, in our stumbling way moving toward*

*This, a combination which blasted with pleasure.*

*Once we were like them*

*Laughter. A long time ago*

*When I ——— them I saw the beautiful, large-eyed women. They have managed to continue their numerical superiority. Laughter, feminine, delightful, teasing. An achievement. And the young female was moving into a primitive stage of awareness*

*———III which they called Earth or Orton contains the age-lasting concept of animal force and violence*

*But we, too, went through that stage I know long ago and just two thousand of their years from barbarism to a shallow-space culture*

*Because of the influence of the large-eyed ones, which were more successful*

*The girl's development was mostly evolutionary. Don't you see—the experiments were not so unsuccessful*

*Even the large-eyed ones are hopelessly primitive. Are they not going to exterminate an entire planet*

*Remember the Techcals, how we———ed their colonization fleet of two thousand ships and then ———ed a few hundred stars on the rim of their Galaxy as a further warning. We had remnants of barbarism*

*Self-protection. We could not co-exist with the Techcals. We were mutually destructive*

*The large-eyed children see themselves threatened by the primitive attempts of the scientists of———III. And did we not implant the repugnance in the large eyes*

*It was decided long ago that we should allow them to develop naturally*

*And there were those among us even then who said that we were responsible*

*Females*

*They were our children not of our flesh but of our eggs. We had our arrogance. Creating them engineering them for special purposes. The large eyes for the dim planets and the dark ones for the fiery suns*

*You were sad when we left them, I know. But we felt we were right not only in altering them to spread life through a sterile Galaxy*

*Not sterile there was———III, a planet much like the home world with the same sun the same slow process of change. And you were not content to leave it to develop but peopled it with our children the special purpose ones*

*A wrong guess. We should have allowed more time for testing*

*You admit you were wrong*

*Do you realize this is the first time you've exercised the old feminine technique of I-told-you-so in forty millennia*

*In all the Galaxy two, just two, and because our sun was older and was developing life while the sun of——— III was still being formed we*

*are going to allow the large-eyed ones to destroy all life. They are ending the experiment and that ends our last influence on that mixture of native life, our children from the fiery suns and the blood of the large-eyed men. We made them and we were fumbling in fields which we did not fully understand. Not even our great knowledge of life could make them perfect outside the mother's womb with the building blocks of life manipulated to make them suitable for the marginal planets. And now we are given a second chance through the happy accidents which have produced that young girl. What will be left if we do not act once more. The large-eyed children will live and continue to make their minute advances but they will never reach*

*He saw and laughed. Fickle woman, are you so bored with me that you want another to play your console*

*And you radiant one with random punches and your lust for the novel, would you not view with pleasure the opportunity to share pleasure with an entirely new entity*

*I would have to go out once more*

*This time I will go. The eggs which produced them were taken from me. It will take but a moment*

*A multi-digit punch and a lucky one left her momentarily weak with joy and then she was gone. To amuse himself he broke into his billions of component minds and reviewed the history of the race for he would not punch his own console*

*That small, detached part of her found them preparing to leave. She ——— through the solid walls of the scout's cabin, a vibrant glow which caused the small, dark animal to bristle and bark warningly. For a moment she looked directly into the child's eyes and she found them to be beautiful, almost as beautiful as the orbs of the large-eyed ones. She sent a momentary message of reassurance and then entered, causing their bodies to go limp and sink back into the seats. It took but a moment. Then the ship's clock went wild, speeding backward, other instruments adjusting.*

*As she waited, she tried forms. This caused some minor discussion among the individual parts of her entity, but it was decided, in plenty of time, that she would take the form of a primitive. It was novel. Of course,*



*the flesh and blood form could not appreciate the pleasures of breathing the old air of the home world, but in the absence of true pleasure it passed the time. She traced their passage through lower levels. They were, of course, empty.*

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Level after level yielded nothing, only empty rooms. On the evening of the second day, dusty, tired, despairing, they reached the topmost level. There were only empty rooms in the arms of the star, but at the center, encircled by a wide hall, was a solid core of the enduring plastic used for much of the buildings on the Planet of Cities. The enclosed space was large, but there were no entrances.

"It could have contained a sealed power unit of some sort," Toby guessed.

"Such a large space would not have been wasted," Jay agreed.

"If we had a weapon, we could blast out a section," Toby said;

Jay produced a small hand blaster, the same illegal weapon he'd used against the rats on Orton. He stepped back. The wall absorbed the energy of the blaster. Puzzled, since no known material could resist the energy of a blaster, Jay advanced the power and tried again. The wall didn't even heat. They walked the circular hall, Jay trying the blaster at intervals without success. There was no crack, no blemish, in the whiteness of the wall.

Sooly's world was ending. With a mixture of anger and despair, she faced the wall. "You in there," she said, her voice low, emotional, her glands working, her face flushed, her tears forming. "You must help us. You can't lead us all this way and leave us with nothing."

A section of the wall in the shape of an arched doorway changed to a pleasing blue shade. Toby pushed against it. It was unyielding. But when Jay trained his blaster it melted away, giving them access. The room was huge, windowless, empty. But it was lit by a source which Toby could not

discover. Sooly ran forward, paused.

"Empty," she said desolately. She listened. There was nothing. Toby took her hand, trying to console her.

The woman materialized in the exact center of the circular room. The first impression was one of a blazing beauty which made one want to close one's eyes. Her hair was the blackness of space and her eyes were the blue of a summer sea and her hair was arranged in a style which none of them had ever seen. She wore a shimmering gown cut below firm, outthrust breasts but the effect was one of naturalness because of her regal bearing. She stood motionless, smiling out at them.

"Yes, Lady," Jay said, moving as he spoke, running out of the room with an agility which belied his years and the precarious state of his health. He returned with a wide angle tricorder and in the interim, Toby and Sooly tried not to stare, but their staring seemed not to bother the woman. She was as still as a statue, her expression not changing, the pleased smile frozen on her face.

"Children," she said. "Having come this far, you have shown certain traits of development for which we have been waiting." Her words were natural, soft, without pomposity. None of them noticed, so closely was their attention riveted to her beauty, that her words were being engraved deeply into the impervious material of the walls, but the tricorder was filming the formation of the words as it recorded the sound of her voice, the engraved words being additional, eternal proof of the miracle.

"Our own development dictated our actions. To achieve our destiny, we left you, for you could not accompany us. Yet, we prayed that you would follow us in achievement and would, someday, join us in—" They felt a feeling of eternal peace and joy. "Now you have made the first, tentative steps and although you do not need to know all, you may know our nature, as we were." And they saw the Planet of Cities living. It was an administrative and scientific center and the people were tall and fair and happy.

"This state of Galaxy-wide peace and plenty is within your reach. What follows is largely dependent on your own ambitions and abilities."

She paused. Sooly was deathly afraid of what was going to happen then, expecting her to disappear and leave the problems unresolved. She moved

forward, and in moving saw the wall clearly through the form of the beautiful woman. In the period of silence, she gathered her courage and walked to the woman. Her hand went through the image without disturbing the smile on the beautiful face.

"We erred," the woman said, the smile fading for the first time, "in making you." Jay and Toby gasped as fifty millennia of Ankan pride was blasted. "To prevent a repetition of such error, we implanted in you the abhorrence of genetic meddling which limited you."

"You didn't make me!" Sooly said, before she could stop herself.

"No, child." The woman looked directly at Sooly with a particular fondness. "And you are the hope. Nature—" she smiled sadly. "You see, in spite of our great advances, we do not have all the answers, either. So let us call that force nature and say that she, as the millennia crawled past, worked to rectify our mistakes. She took what we gave her, you, the large-eyed ones, the others which were placed on your Earth, child, and combined them to put life back on the track, to lead upward once again. Together, you can achieve." Once again they felt that unearthly joy and wonder, bliss, pleasure, fulfillment.

"The men of Ankan, outnumbering women five to one, find the daughters of the Earth to be fair and the women of Earth outnumber men. You must take up the surpluses by intermingling, for the seeds of both are necessary. The vitality of Earth. The knowledge of Ankan. Continue your abhorrence of altering the building blocks of life which nature has provided you, but moderate your position, men of Ankan, to work with the scientists of Earth to understand the mind. You have far to go, because it is the nature of man to be rigid. Your women of Ankan will protest and the men of Earth will resent the strangers who take their women, but," her face grew serious, "you are not alone and there is the danger." Images of alien life, strange, menacing, utterly different, came to them. The tricorder took the emotions and implanted them. They saw the ancient war, the aliens coming from inter-Galactic space in their strange ships. Confrontation. Mutual destruction. "They are crowded." In their distant Galaxy they saw the aliens, teeming, expanding. "People first the outlying worlds, for the Techcals have seen the ability of the people of this Galaxy and your mere presence on the outlying worlds, which they would have to colonize first, will be your first defense."

She faded. "Wait," Sooly cried. "Please wait." But she was gone. And the

order to sterilize her Earth was speeding across the wastes, leaping from star anchor to star anchor faster than any ship could travel, at the same speed, with an impossible head start, that a following message would travel.

Jay, having discovered the engraved copy of the beautiful woman's words, was recording it head-on, so that it would be distinct and readable.

Sooly sat on the floor and wept. They had come so near and the only hope was that they could get to Ankan, show the proof to the powers there and dispatch an order canceling the sterilization message and hope that the ship had delayed long enough in executing the order. It was, as Toby had explained, a remote possibility. Garge Cele Mantel was an efficient woman. It would take her only a matter of days to prepare the ship for the sterilization.

Sooly tried to get hold of herself, rose. "Toby," she said, "let's go."

The scout blinked out from the Planet of Cities and held at the first anchor point, building power. The wait seemed endless. Time ticked past and the death of a planet came ever closer.

Jay, who had taken his last troleen in the aftermath of the appearance of the beautiful woman, felt fine and bemused himself by playing back the tricording of the event. Toby was gnawing his lips in concern and Sooly felt as if she were going to have Jay's heart attack, so great was her fear and horror.

"If there were only a way to blink directly to Orton," Toby said, knowing that he was repeating himself, for he'd made that futile wish many times. But they were in the dense star fields, near the central bulge of the Galaxy. Between them and Orton, on any straight line, were hundreds of stars, and blinking was a straight line process. The immense fields of the stars distorted, had to be bypassed.

He studied his charts, hoping desperately to discover a route overlooked by the expo ships, but he knew that he could not possibly hope to discern, with one human mind, what banks of computers and hundreds of years of expo work had failed to find. He felt anger toward the beautiful woman. She had known, even if she were merely some sort of image. She'd known of the developments which brought them to the Planet of the Cities, so she should have known about the crisis on Orton. She could have

helped. If she had the abilities she had to possess in order to achieve the things she'd intimated, she could have helped them.

"Stars of Ankan," Jay exploded, the portable triviewer still in place before his eyes. "Copy this." He read a series of numbers. Toby recognized them immediately as blink coordinates. He checked his charts. "At the very end of the written message," Jay said. "She didn't speak them, but they were there."

"From the Planet of Cities into space outside the Galaxy," Toby said excitedly. "They computed the mass of the Galaxy and used it as an anchor point!"

Power was nearly total. The blink back to the Planet of Cities was a short one. Once there, there was time to check and recheck. The blink coordinates led, indeed, to Orton, and in three short blinks. The first went vertically out of the plane of the Galaxy and the second anchored to a star near Orton and the third would put them in sight of Orton's sun. Power built, they blinked and stared out in awe at the ponderous wheel of the Galaxy, used the power of the entire Galaxy to build the banks and blinked in an amazingly short time. The rest was elementary.

## *Chapter Twenty*

Cele Mantel nodded grimly when the message was received. She approved. It was a terrible thing to contemplate erasing all animal life on the planet, but there was no other choice. Five hundred thousand years of civilization was in the balance and there were no other choices. The evil scientists of Orton had chosen their own destiny. Her only regret was that the deserters would not be on the planet when she unloosed the killing rays. Ship's instruments had recorded the departure of the scout, blinking out toward Ankan weeks past. But they would not escape. Their travel would be limited to known starways and sooner or later they'd blink into a beacon station with an Ankani ship. At best, if they had incredible luck, they would find sanctuary on some empty planet and go into a permanent exile until some Ankani ship revisited, because the scout was incapable of traveling to uncharted planets. It might be a slow process, but they'd be caught. The alert had been given and soon all Ankani ships would be on

the lookout for the scout.

The conversion to sterilization power occupied the crew for days, while Cele fretted with impatience and Babra Larkton examined her face in the mirror to see if the bruise on her face had really faded, at last. There was an atmosphere of gloom aboard the Entil, for, although she'd told the entire ship the vital reasoning behind sterilization, it was a serious, unprecedented action. She sympathized with the younger officers who repeatedly asked if there weren't some way to do it differently, just punish the offenders and leave, at least, the amazing variety of lower animal and bird life. Cele tried to console them by saying that the rays would not penetrate into the depths of the oceans and that, therefore, the seeds of life might survive to crawl out of the ocean again, if, indeed, the theories of evolution on Orton were correct. It was small comfort.

When, at last, the engineering section reported that the weapons had been altered and were ready, Cele set the hour. It would begin on the western continents, radiating in hundreds-of-miles-wide bands sweeping from pole to pole and overlapping to prevent any survivors.

At the appointed hour, she positioned herself at control. She would not merely give a cold command. She would push the button herself, for it would be, at best, a traumatizing experience and she was not a Garge who would ask her subordinates to do something she would not do herself.

"We are prepared, Lady," said a glum-faced rating standing before the power switch.

"Five minutes and counting," Cele said, going through the countdown procedure to emphasize the seriousness of the operation. "Four and counting."

Time crawled. Chronometers crawled, oozing out the last minutes of a world. "One minute and counting," Cele said, "Fifty-nine, fifty-eight—"

Her heart was pounding surprisingly. For a panic-filled moment she took her eyes off the clock and looked at the viewer to see the blue planet swimming in space below them. She felt tearful regret, but her determination was as hard as steel. She was going to insure the continued survival and supremacy of her race. "Thirty seconds and counting," she said, her voice choked with emotion.

"Lady—" A rating on the censors.

"Twenty seconds," Cele said.

"A vehicle," said the rating. "Approaching under power."

"Ten, nine, eight," Cele counted, her finger on the button.

"He's coming on a collision course," the rating yelled. "He's going to ram us."

"Hold!" Cele cried, leaping from her command chair to see the small scout brake, ran its nose into the orifice of the main battery with a jar which was felt even through the vast bulk of the partially loaded Entil. "Use the grapples and get them inside." This part she was going to enjoy. For she knew her own scout when she saw it and providence had delivered the rebels to her. They'd come in a vain attempt to stop the sterilization. She should have known they'd try. They'd gone native, adopted the ways of Orton. Naturally they'd make some dramatic, manlike gesture to stop the destruction of life on their chosen world.

Toby felt the grapples engage. "They'll wait now," he said. "She'll want us down there before she begins."

The scout was drawn into the Entil. A reception committee of officers and ratings were waiting outside. "Follow me out," Toby said, Jay's blaster in his hand. He popped the port and leaped out to confront the startled officers. Unaccustomed to the ways of mutineers, they were not expecting an armed and determined man, but a cringing, begging, rating seeking mercy. Manto Babra Larkton reached uncertainly for her weapon and looked, for the first time in her life, into the orifice of a blaster.

"I'll fire," Toby told her and she believed him. She'd never seen such a look of determination on the face of a rating. "I want to see the Garge, quickly."

Unthinkable! A mere rating giving orders to females. "Now," Toby said, as Jay and Sooly arranged themselves behind him and Bem, in strange surroundings, gave one short, hoarse bark from the open port.

"You can't hope to stand against an entire ship," Babra said with a cold fury.

"Move," Toby said, surprised at himself. He added, "Move, please, Lady," to calm the sense of guilt.

The passage to the bridge was uneventful, although surprised, white-faced ratings watched as the little group moved swiftly through the corridors, winding around the central cargo hold to the Orton-oriented command room where Cele Mantel waited with impatience.

"What?" she gasped, when Babra entered first, Toby holding his blaster at her back.

"He's mad, Cele," Babra cried tearfully. "Blast him. Don't concern yourself with me."

"Lady," Toby said. "There is no need for blasting. If you will only listen."

"Take him," Cele said, her voice shrill with shock. "Seize them."

"Lady," Toby said. "I've never killed a man, but then no one has ever tried to kill a planet, either. I believe that I could kill anyone, even you, to prevent such a disaster. Please don't make me decide before you listen."

"Hold," Cele said, to the ratings who were edging nervously toward Toby as he stood with his blaster in Babra's back. "And if we listen, then what?"

"I can't answer that," Toby said. "I ask only that you see and hear a tricording made on the Planet of Cities."

"Impossible," Cele said, quickly calculating the time which had elapsed since the scout blinked out of the Orton system. "Are you telling me you've been to the Planet of Cities?"

"We have," Toby said. "And we have here a tricording which will change the course of history," He lowered his blaster. "Will you see it, Lady?"

"Your trickery will avail you nothing," Cele said. "However, I am a reasonable woman. I will see your tricording if you first yield your weapon."

"Don't do it," Jay said. "Remember that she promised a fair hearing



and yet she trained the ship's blasters on me when I approached."

Toby felt a cold sweat of indecisiveness break out on his forehead. Babra turned, held out her hand grimly.

"Give it to her, Toby," Sooly said. "I don't think your Lady will forget your honor twice."

The decision made for him, Toby handed the weapon to the Manto.

"We will view your nonsense," Cele said. Jay, his troleen losing its effectiveness, weakly handed the tricording to a rating, who inserted it in the projector.

"As I thought," Cele said, when the image of the beautiful woman appeared on the ship's screens, "look at the small eyes. An Orton woman."

"Wait," Toby begged.

"Children," said the image, and, as she viewed it through, Cele Mantel's pride began to shatter.

It was a different woman who called the Ship's Board of Officers into session, with Jay, Toby and Sooly present, to show the tricording again. Babra Larkton was furious with hate. She could not contain it, breaking out before the second showing was finished.

"Trickery," she shouted, "a cheap trick, filmed on the planet below, to save their own necks and postpone the inevitable justice which the demons on Orton deserve."

"Can you be sure?" Cele asked sadly. "Can we continue with the plan of sterilization as long as there is the slightest doubt?"

"No, Lady," Toby said, feeling sympathy for the Garge. He, too, had known the painful, humiliating agony she was enduring.

"I don't think you realize what this means, Cele," Babra said. "It means that we not only call these Ortonian barbarians equals and allow our men to opt with them, but we actually acknowledge them as our superiors in some ways."

"Not superiors," Sooly said. "Equals, yes. But not in knowledge. You

have knowledge we can't imagine. But she, the woman on the Planet of Cities, wants us to work together. We go into the future together, side by side. We both have something to contribute."

"If it is true," Cele said, "then we are both imperfect creations and, although I would like to believe that Ankani life sprang into being fully formed and the masters of the Galaxy, we have not been able to solve the riddle of the Wasted Worlds. We have not advanced as rapidly as the Ortonians. On a relative scale, the achievements of the Ortonians in the past two thousand years make us look like backward people."

"No, Cele," Babra cried.

"Babra, didn't you feel it? Didn't you experience the emotions of the woman as she showed what she and her race considered the ultimate in human achievement? Have you ever experienced pleasure in that degree? That alone is enough to convince me that the matter must have further investigation." She sighed. "And we dare not ignore the threat of the aliens. If it is true, they've had half a million years to arm themselves, to prepare. It is a risk we cannot take."

The Entil, not yet fully loaded, blinked sluggishly through the stars. Even with her beliefs crumbling around her, Cele could not bring herself to believe the story told by the ratings of blinking out into inter-Galactic space. She would not risk her ship and her crew on untried experiments. And there was another advantage to the slow, eye-popping blink home, the multiple layovers while the huge tanker's power banks charged. It gave her time to talk with the Ortonian woman, to analyze her, to see for herself, with the aid of the educator, the memories buried deep in the girl's brain. It was astounding to think that any brain could hold more than the million-billion impressions which were accumulated in an average Ortonian brain during a lifetime, but this brain could and did and when she saw, after a long, awesome session, the ships unloading the hordes of people on the green valley floor of the Ortonian continent called Africa, she was, at last, fully convinced.

Alone in her quarters, she looked at herself in the mirror. Those eyes, age-old symbols of the beauty of Ankani women, were artificial things engineered to see on dim planets—an imperfect creation—product of the very techniques which were the most odious concept in Ankani thinking. They were weak, incomplete, unable to follow the parent race into eternal bliss. She wept with her shame. She looked ahead and saw the inevitable

changes, for she was certain that investigation of the circular room in the star tower on the Planet of Cities would find the engraved words there on the indestructible walls. Yes, her entire world was changing, even as the Entil shivered and jerked into another blink. It would never be the same and she mourned the passing of ideas which had been perfected, a meaningless word, over fifty millennia. Ankani men, always tainted with that puzzling hunger for newness, would flock to do the bidding of that woman in white with her breasts shamelessly exposed. And the planets of the distant stars would be peopled with their sons and daughters, not with pure Ankani blood. The fair skin of the Ankans would be darkened by alien suns, browned by the mixture of bloods.

"Oh, winds of Ankan," she whispered aloud.

For the first time in her life she allowed her brain to become befuddled with stimulant, tossing down good Ankan brew, equivalent to wine, until she slept. She awoke to the realization that her bloodshot Ankani eyes had to be indicative of the Galaxy's most infernal hangover, but even though thinking was painful, she was more ready to accept. After all, past experience had proven that Ankani genes were dominant in some matters. Ankani-Ortonian girls would have large eyes and if, in exchange, they received the almost frightening vitality of the Ortonians, well, it would be a fair trade. And the outward movement toward the rim of the Galaxy would require huge new ships. Expo ships.

By the time the Entil startled port officers by blinking in months ahead of schedule, Cele was fully recovered. She entered the emergency meeting of Fleet Board dressed in the gorgeously understated colors of the Entil and enjoyed the envious glances of the shore-duty officers in their shabby uniforms. Her head high, eyes blazing with excitement, she mounted the hearing platform.

"Ladies," she said, her voice proud, unflappable, "I, Garge Cele Mantel, commanding the U. A. T. Entil, report respectfully that with the aid of my crew I have solved the mystery of the Wasted Worlds."

The gasps which came from the gathered ladies of the Fleet Board made the whole thing worthwhile.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

"Toby Wellti," Sooly said in a teasing voice, as Toby primed before the mirror, "you look great as it is. If you make yourself any prettier I'll have to fight off all the young Larftons."

"A father should look his best when meeting old shipmates," Toby grinned. "And about those young Larftons—"

"Not a chance, boy," Sooly said grimly.

"What? And offend our guests?" He was grinning happily as he adjusted his sash.

"You takes your choice and you sticks by it," Sooly said, "and you done taken yours, old buddy." But in spite of her teasing tones, she felt a little pang of something. She approached him, pressed her swollen stomach against him and hugged him. "Oh, Toby, am I so ugly? Would you like to opt with one of the pretty young Larftons?"

He turned, held her at arms length. "Little mother, no one could be half as beautiful."

The tender moment was shattered by a wail from the nursery. "The call of the wild," Sooly sighed, pulling away. Bem, five pounds lighter and frisky on a regular dosage of troleen and a couple of other wonderful drugs from the settlement hospital, panted into the bathroom, gave one sharp yip and waddled back toward the nursery, looking over her shoulder to see if Sooly were following.

While Sooly administered to the messy young Mari Kurt Wellti, Beth Kurt entered the front door without knocking, reporting for her babysitting job. Bem wagged her backside in greeting and returned to supervise the changing.

"She's inbound," Beth said. "If you want to see her land you'll have to hurry."

"Gee, Mother, can you finish Mari? I haven't even combed my hair." Sooly darted for the bath without waiting for an answer and Grandmother Beth finished the pin-up job and then proceeded to thoroughly spoil Mari

by lifting her from her crib to bounce her on a shapely but grandmotherly knee.

Outside, the sunlight was late evening, or at least it seemed that way. She could never get used to it, she thought, but it had its compensations. None of those killer particles put out by good old Sol, just a gentle warmth and enough light, really. And the trees were close enough to being real trees and so beautiful. The mocking bird carried from Earth in the settlement ship was happily feeding a nest of young in a fruit tree and the almost grass of the lawn was doing nicely, now that the boys down at Agri-center had found the combination.

They walked the short distance to the Village Green and she was up there, a growing dot which expanded to be the size of a small mountain and made Sooly use all her will power to keep from running out from under it, for it seemed that the silently descending ship would have to fall and crush all the life out of the entire population of the village.

It didn't. The United Planets exploration ship *Earthlight* nestled as light as a feather on the large, cleared area and the Boy Scout band struck up the Ankani anthem, following it with the Star Spangled Banner as crewmen snapped smartly to attention in their gorgeously understated but colorful uniforms. Mantogarge Cele Mantel stepped out to stand in salute of the tiny population of the world of Sumer—outpost, bastion, planet on the edge of nowhere, home.

Cele stepped down when the band finished and approached the official welcoming stand.

"Our hearts and our homes are open to you, Lady," said Governor Toby Wellti of the planet Sumer. "And to your officers and crew."

"I bring greetings from the United Council," Cele intoned formally. "And the congratulations of both peoples for the success of your settlement."

There was more formality, a tight, impressive little ceremony which warmed the hearts of the villagers. After that there was the official banquet, at which many young crewmen, Ortonians and Ankani alike, found the fruit of Sumer to be to their liking. Toby was pleased, because, for the first time, the planet had provided all the delicacies a laden table can offer. It was late evening and the three moons of Sumer were making

night into day when Cele was escorted into Sooly's cozy house.

"Christ," Cele said, taking off her hat, sitting down and kicking off her shoes. "I'm glad that's over." She smiled at Sooly. "How are the offspring?"

"This one's restive," Sooly said, patting her big stomach. "Mari is full of beans."

John Kurt entered from the kitchen, a drink in his hands, dressed in work clothing. "Hi, Cele," he said. "Have a snort?"

"I'll take one, too," Tony said, as Sooly started for the kitchen.

Cele was still not used to seeing women do the bidding of men, but the Galaxy was changing. "Jay sends his regards," she said. "We stopped on Ankan II for minor repair. He's fit and the labs are doing marvelous work. You're not the only one," she said to Sooly, as she entered with a tray, "with that trick memory. Other Ortonians have developed it, and they're working now to narrow it down to specific areas. One day soon we'll have a mind which contains all the knowledge of your world."

"Golly," Sooly said. "I don't know if I'm ready for that. I have trouble organizing what I know now." She served drinks. "To be frank, things are moving just a bit too fast for me."

"I think I'll take a look at the offspring," Cele said, to keep from laughing. She stood over the cradle and looked at the closed, large, baby eyes, which were Ankani and beautiful. Her mind idled. Single pairings aboard the Earthlight, men and women forming alliances. Scattered settlements all along the rim. Ankani and Earth scientists pooling resources to make fantastic discoveries. Things were moving too fast for the girl who had set them in motion?

"God," she sighed, not noticing that she had picked up still another Ortonian word. "You should look at it from these eyes." Her lids closed slowly, covering the huge, pretty orbs. Soon she rejoined the little party.