

# Piers Anthony

## Key to Chroma

### Book Two of the *ChroMagic* series

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## Chapter 1—Stevia

Havoc was troubled. He had won a great political battle and had been roundly confirmed as King of Charm, but was unable to relax and enjoy it. For one thing, he did not want the office; it had been thrust upon him, yanking him from his pleasant ignorant life in Trifle Village, and he had been balked from quitting by the persuasive threat of being executed for treason. For another, some anonymous but powerful party was trying to kill him. For yet another, the mystery of the changelings remained; he had set out to fathom it, being a changeling himself, but had been balked. But mainly, he was distracted by the mental after-image of the Red Glamor.

He sat on the palace privy pot, not because he had anything really urgent to do there, but because it was one place where he had some privacy to think. As King he was almost always in company, and that grew wearing at times. He was a country boy, considered a barbarian, more at home in the wild forest or teaching martial arts than in the dense city. He would prefer to be alone most of the time, or in the company of one or two trusted friends. Instead he was usually in the center of a deferential group who diligently attended his every need except isolation. So he had to steal moments of solitude, and this was the place.

"Red Glamor," he murmured longingly. "Where are you?"

The lovely red woman appeared before him, swathed in a faint red aura. "I am here, Havoc."

Startled, he was suddenly aware of his exposure. His pantaloons were down, his posterior bare.

"Embarrassment," he said, trying to cover his exposed crotch.

"What did you have in mind?" she inquired as she sat on his lap. Her red robe became tenuous, so that he felt her warm bare bottom on his thighs, and the curling tresses of her fine red hair tickled his exposed belly.

"Not this!" he exclaimed ruefully. "I thought I was speaking rhetorically when I named you."

She twisted her upper body gracefully to face him. The robe outlined her perfectly formed breasts, so close to his face. "It is as I interpret it to be, Havoc. You desire me."

He could not deny it; she was rapture incarnate. But he knew better than to yield. "Glamor, I beg you—do not take me." For he could not resist her, he could only plead to be spared.

"I know," she said regretfully. "You have other business to attend to before I possess you."

"Yes. Otherwise—"

She touched his lips with a finger. It felt like a kiss, sending a ripple of delight through his face and head. "I understand. But I think I will help you, in my fashion. I do not wish you to die before I have my way with you."

"Glamor, you can have your way with me at any time. I am powerless before your magic beauty. But I am unworthy, because I did not believe in you. I thought the Glamors were merely folk tales. So I made up a tale of my own, meaning no affront, because—"

"And therein you named me, evoking my interest. Now comes the consequence of that interest."

"Will you toy with me and discard me?"

"Of course, at my convenience. But for the moment there are other concerns."

Havoc wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed, assuming she was serious. "I am at your mercy."

She touched his mouth again, and this time it felt like a slap, though without punishing force. "I will help you to a degree. Not to accomplish your mission, but to do what you believe you need to."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

Her lips made the pretense of a kiss, and his lips felt it strike. "No. Your understanding is limited. But you must follow your course as you see it, until you come of age. This project will give you time."

She was indeed toying with him, and on one level he resented that, but the rapture of her presence was such that he craved more of it. "Lady Red, what do you want of me?"

"What do you want of a fair but innocent girl you encounter?"

Was there hidden meaning here? "Many things, perhaps. But always there is the desire to have

her body in love, if she is not otherwise committed and is amenable. I would not seek to hurt her, physically or emotionally, yet I would want to enjoy her if I could. It is the male way."

"And so I with you. But you are otherwise committed."

"I love Gale," he agreed. His fascination with the Red Glamor was quite apart from that, and did not interfere with it. Love was one thing, passion another.

"That also. You have your missions."

"So you spare me as I would spare a fair girl I could take but should not."

"For now," she agreed. "Here is the limited help I offer: seek soon and secretly in seven places. First four, then two, then one. The last of them may be the completion of your interest."

"The last? Why not make it the first, then?"

She waggled a cautionary finger at him, and he felt like an errant child. "Clarification: You must seek in all, to obtain what they have. Seven ikons. These will assemble to make the thing we need."

"Apology for my ignorance," he said, humbled.

"It is charming. The sites are all at volcanoes, seven Chroma."

"At volcanoes! These are dangerous even for Chroma folk."

"Agreement. Do not go alone. Here are the coordinates." She spoke them clearly.

Havoc's eidetic memory caught the list and filed it. "I will need help to cover such scattered sites soon. May I use my friends?"

"Yes. But you may not take any friend with you personally, for the first. You require the service of one you do not know, who has no known prior association with you. This is true also for your friends."

"But in that case, how—"

She flexed her buttocks, instantly distracting him. "Go anonymously to a random section of the city of Triumph. Ask any you meet there to go with you on a wearing, dangerous, and perhaps futile mission. Take the one who accepts, and tell that person everything, in reasonable stages so as to avoid confusion. Go directly on your mission, bypassing the palace and all who may recognize you."

"But I have secrets I must not betray."

"This person can be trusted, and must be advised, so as to be able to assist you accurately. Similarly for your friends: they must conceal their missions from all but their selected companions, whom they may inform if they choose."

"A random person? Glamor—"

"Within the hour, Havoc."

"Within the hour! I can't possibly—"

This time she leaned forward and kissed him lightly with her real lips. There was a soft explosion of infinite pleasure that blanked out all the universe. All except her divine mouth on his, her exquisite breasts against his chest, and her phenomenal bottom governing his midsection. Ecstasy was a woefully insufficient term to describe his feeling. He floated in rapture, his body and mind utterly committed to her will, whatever it might be.

When he recovered, the Red Glamor was gone. He was sitting on the pot with a rigid erection. She had obviously had her way with him, but he had not had his way with her.

He would do as she had directed. The potent kiss left him no choice.

\* \* \*

Havoc reassembled his robe, emerged from the privy, and went to his bedroom. He removed his crown, set it on the bureau, and changed to a minstrel's outfit.

There was a flicker in the air before him. He put out one hand and intercepted it. *Swale, I need you*, he thought.

The presence expanded. *In what host?* she inquired in his mind.

*Not sexually*, he clarified mentally. *As a courier. Carry this message to Gale: 'We have new missions, courtesy the Red Glamor. Choose one from among these sites to check yourself, give one other site to Throe and one to Symbol. Set aside three sites for now, and inform me of the one that remains. Have Spanky cover for you and go anonymously within the hour. Return when your site is done, and tell the same to the others.' And to Berm: 'Cover for me now.' You, Swale, serve as liaison between the parties, informing none of the activities of the others, only that they are well or not well. Use your judgment.*

*What of Ennui?* The older woman, his oath friend, had become his most trusted personal secretary and general center of communications. Swale was right to verify her involvement.

*Inform her only in general. She must room with a golem for now, as must Chief.*

*Serving you is hell on relationships.*

*Hell on my own, too. Sail, succubus.*

*Sold*, she agreed, punning on sail as sale, and was gone.

Havoc completed his change, strapped on his knife sheath, donned his emergency traveling pack, took his staff, and sneaked out his private exit. This was nominally a laundry chute, and indeed it served as such, but also as a secret passage.

He landed in a pile of soft sheets, holding his staff aloft so that it would not bang into anything.

His ear buzzed warning. He tossed a sheet over himself and hunched down. He heard the footsteps of a maid. When they passed, he lifted his head. Receiving no buzz, he clambered out of the laundry bin and made his way silently to an exit. Soon he was in the city proper, walking among strangers who took him for a routine entertainer on the way to an assignment.

He paid no attention to the levels and passages of the city of Triumph, deliberately losing himself. When he was satisfied that he had no idea where he was, he commenced the next part of the Red Glamor's assignment.

He spied a young healthy green man carrying a barrel of fresh radishes. "Greeting, laborer."

"Acknowledgment, minstrel."

"I need a companion for a wearing, dangerous, and perhaps futile mission. Will you go with me?"

The man did not bother to critique such a wild request. "Parting."

As expected. The next person was a lovely young silver woman in a revealing cloak. "Greeting, courtesan."

"Parting, minstrel." She was evidently on business without time to waste. Too bad; she could have been fun to travel with.

The next was a grandmotherly straight human woman. "Greeting, matron."

"Acknowledgment, minstrel," she replied, interested.

"I need a companion for—"

She laughed. "A virile young man like you can find better companionship than me! I have no money and less desire. Parting."

The fourth person was a slightly heavysset young gray woman in matching peasant garb. "Greeting, maiden."

"Acknowledgment, minstrel."

"I need a companion for a wearing, dangerous, and perhaps futile mission. Will you go with me?"

"Yes."

Havoc was already starting to move on before it registered. She had accepted!

Or was this a flirtatious game? He tried to read her mind, but her thoughts seemed oddly fuzzy. "Immediately," he said. "Beyond the city. No time for partings from friends or conclusions of other errands."

"There is no need, minstrel. I live alone, and my room is private. I'm thrilled to be asked. I will be understanding if your effort falls short, and will do my best to complete it."

She thought he was soliciting secret sex with a stranger, having suffered some incapacity with his usual partner. "Misunderstanding. My words are literal. This may be a long and difficult trek, suffering privation."

"Better yet." She took his arm with one hand, as she touched the buttons of her gray blouse with the other. In a moment a full gray breast showed. "I am yours, minstrel, no fault."

And he was obliged to accept her, according to the Red Glamor's directive. Had his mission gone wrong already? He tried again to fathom her thoughts, but was unable to get a focus on them. Either she lacked mental coherence, or there was some kind of interference.

Swale's shimmer appeared. He put out a hand to touch her. *The unclaimed mission is a site on an island in a pool in Blue Chroma, among the amorous merfolk. Here are the coordinates.* She gave them, and Havoc immediately highlighted that set in his memory. *It seems the others do not care for the social aspect.* Then she was gone, with a silent chortle. She loved a good sexual joke.

"What was that?" the peasant girl asked, brushing back a gray tress.

"We must be alone before I tell you," he said.

"That's nice." She was certainly an amenable type. He tried a third time to read her mind, still with no success. Was he losing his power of telepathy? "This is beyond the city? I see your staff and pack."

"Yes, far beyond. Do you have traveling gear?"

"Of course, minstrel. This way."

So they went to her simple chamber, where she quickly assembled a gray supply pack, obviously the one she had brought from her home Chroma. She was efficient, at least.

They made their way out of the city, catching a shuttle ferry to the land. Havoc looked back at the huge floating wooden pyramid. Here he was just beginning to get used to city life, and he had to leave it for the field. With an ignorant gray peasant girl. Was Red having fun with him?

When they were on the road away from Triumph, the girl spoke again. "Introduction: I am Stevia, of Chroma Gray, orphaned peasant employed in drudgery I long to escape."

What was he supposed to tell her? The Red Glamor had said everything. Havoc sighed inwardly and took it literally. "I am Havoc, King of Charm, in disguise."

She laughed. "That must be a lovely role, minstrel! But please, if I am to go far with you, I would like to know your underlying identity."

Perhaps he should have anticipated this. He tried once more to pick up her mental activity, but the blur remained. There was definitely something about her. "Why do you doubt me?"

"You have no crown."

Oh. "I am in disguise," he repeated. "The crown would be a giveaway."

"If you say so," she said, smirking. "And what was that shimmer you touched in the hallway? You said you'd tell me."

"That was Swale, a succubus I know—a traveling spirit without a body. She keeps me in touch with others."

Stevia's head turned to look at him obliquely. Obviously she found this no more credible than his kingship. "A sexual spirit? I thought they only invested women. What does she want with you?"

"I did her a favor, and now she serves me."

"That kind accepts only one kind of favor, and thereafter takes the man's soul. You do not seem soulless."

"I arranged for her to have another body."

She considered that a moment, evidently dubious. "If she comes again, let me touch her."

"Agreed."

"Where are we going?"

Havoc looked around. "I am required to answer you in all things, but I am concerned about being overheard. An anonymous enemy is trying to kill me, and to balk my project."

"All this, and paranoia too!"

"Reality," he said doggedly. "If that enemy should overhear my plans—"

"You need have no concern about that."

Havoc was slightly nettled. "I assure you, it is a genuine threat."

She smiled at him. "Have you not picked up on my Chroma?"

"Gray," he said. "The one without magic."

"Not precisely. We have what we need or want. Gray is immune to magic."

"Immune," he agreed. "So you are unable to practice it, and must depend on other Chroma for magical produce or effects. Yours is the poorest of the major Chroma."

"Approximately true, which is one reason I sought refuge in the great rich city of Triumph. But our effect is not entirely passive. At close range we actually interfere with other magic."

"So I have heard. This makes you unpopular elsewhere."

"So it does. Other Chroma's magic operates only in its own color, or in the presence of concentrated matter such as a gem stone. Ours lacks flash, but operates throughout the Planet of Charm, within or apart from other Chroma. We are unable to escape the effect."

"It is like gravity," Havoc said. "Considered the weakest of the fundamental forces on the small scale, yet the dominant force in the universe on the large scale, because it extends outward without limit."

She smiled. "I like that analogy. Yet among full humans who have no magic, it has little consequence. This is another reason I came to the Pyramid. But in this case it may be useful to you."

"Useful?"

"Others will not be able to spy on you magically while you are close to me."

Suddenly he saw it. He was unable to read her mind because her Chroma interfered with the magic. If he could not fathom her thoughts, neither could anyone else. This suggested reason for the Red Glamor to have selected her to help him. "Excellent! I apologize for being dense. What is your range of effect?"

"When I first left my Chroma, it was as far as I could reach on either side. Now my color is fading, and with it my magic. I suspect it operates only quite close to my body."

Havoc considered. "I do not wish to embarrass you, maiden, by pressing too closely to you."

"Press closely, minstrel; I do not mind. You are a handsome man."

And she was not a lovely woman. Her features were plain, her torso thickset, and her uniform grayness made her seem older than she was. "I have no untoward designs on you."

"More's the pity. I would gladly oblige your ardor at any time. It is seldom that I have access to a comely man. But I do understand; your reaction is typical."

That gave him a twinge of guilt. He was reacting exactly as other men had, isolating her. She seemed to be a nice person, and not stupid. Just not sexually attractive. "I apologize if I have been unkind."

"Be not so, minstrel. Perhaps propinquity will in due course change your mind. I do not require any commitment; I am amenable to passing interest of whatever nature. In the darkness you might mistake me for a more lithesome morsel."

Havoc had had more than enough of this line of dialogue; it was merely enhancing his guilt. He did not like to perceive himself as shallow, but the fact was that he was attracted to pretty women and not to plain ones, and he ordinarily had several quite pretty women at his beck. "I will tell you my mission." He stepped close and put his arm around her, suspecting that physical contact would strengthen the effect of her magic interference. "We go to a site in a Blue Chroma region, on an isle in a lake."

She snuggled close, unashamed to show her delight in the contact. "That's nice. I understand



they do marvelous things with animals."

"They do. But there is a social aspect."

"What is that?"

This just might make Stevia change her mind about accompanying him, showing that she was after all the wrong person and giving him a chance to try for another, so he did not mind telling her. "The Blues of the wet hinterlands are wont to require relationships with those who traverse their territories."

"Oh, I remember! Men have to make out with their women, and vice versa. That should be fun."

So much for that. This relationship-starved woman was eager to get close to any man. "Perhaps," he agreed with an inward sigh. If this was really the person the Red Glamor intended as his companion, Red was cruelly teasing him.

They walked on, for without the use of magic, walking was the most practical way to get anywhere. They followed the winding road that led in the general direction of the indicated Blue Chroma.

"I don't want to be critical," Stevia said, "but I am not used to walking such a distance. Could we get a ride?"

Havoc did a quick mental calculation, and felt uncomfortably stupid. Walking at a reasonable pace would require about thirty days to get them to the site, and similar time on the return. That made it an excursion of at least two months. He lacked the patience for that, especially with dull company. They did need to get transportation. "We should do that," he agreed. "But if it is magic, won't your nature interfere?"

"Not if I draw in to myself, and use my hair."

"Use your hair?"

"It can shield me, so that I am not disruptive."

"Oh—an aspect of your magic? Limiting the immunity, as it were?"

"As it were. But it's really a different type of magic, that may be useful in other ways."

"I think I am missing something. I understood that you, as a Gray Chroma woman, are immune to magic. How can you have magic hair?"

"I shall be glad to explain, and demonstrate, if we can rest for a time. My legs are tired."

Havoc suppressed his impatience. He was used to traveling far distances by foot, but of course he was not a soft city woman. "We shall rest."

Stevia went to a spreading shade tree and sat beneath it, leaning against the trunk and lifting her

knees comfortably. Her thighs showed under the skirt. They were interestingly firm, not showing the dumper aspects of her body, but Havoc was determined not to let her distract him with portions of her body.

"Request."

"Considered."

"I could use a leg massage to restore my vigor," Stevia said.

She would not give it a rest! Yet her request was reasonable in the circumstance. Havoc squatted before her and put his hands on her feet and calves, kneading her tired feet. "Tell me where to stop," he said, knowing that she would not. She was out to play a game of Tickle & Peek without ever getting ticklish.

"I am not strong on theory," she said as he worked his way upward past her ankles and calves. "But I understand that the debate about the powers of magic of the several Chroma has never been settled. You are familiar with this?"

"Of course." He put down another surge of impatience. She was trying to extend the explanation, to give him time to get beyond her knees. Indeed he was passing them now, reaching the full firm flesh of her lower thighs. Her upper legs were actually quite appealing, and she made no effort to conceal their juncture. "Some claim that all the Chroma are similar in magic, differing merely by color, and that the specialization we see is merely human convenience. So any color of magic can perform in any manner, if appropriate effort and training are applied. What does this have to do with your hair?"

"My body is magic immune. My hair is magic active. There is no conflict, since as you say, all Chroma may be able to do all magics."

Havoc paused to knock the dottle from his head with the heel of his hand. "I think I have just been stupid."

"For a kiss, I will forgive you."

This was not a Guess & Penalty game, but perhaps there was an element of it. He owed her that much. He leaned forward, bracing himself with two hands on her firm thighs, and kissed her carefully on the mouth.

She closed her eyes dreamily. "With luck, there will be other pretexts for forgiveness, you virile man."

She was hardly shy about her interest. How sad that she was not prettier. He removed his hands and withdrew, concluding that he had catered to her enough for now. He sat beside her. "You have explained. You were also going to demonstrate?"

"Observe my hair."

He watched her hair. Gradually the gray changed texture, becoming almost liquid. It flowed

across her head and down around her shoulders, rippling. It reached the ground and trickled across it. One strand intersected his leg. The wetness soaked into his trouser leg.

Havoc put down a hand and touched it. It was water!

Then his leg turned cold. The water was freezing against it. He reached forth to touch her shoulder where the stream of hair coursed, and it was solid ice.

In a moment the ice puffed into vapor and floated away in a dissipating cloud. His leg was dry again, and Stevia's hair was its original dull gray.

She looked at him. "It can do more, but maybe this is enough for now."

Havoc nodded. "I have never before seen magic like that."

"Appreciation. I am rather proud of it. I labored long as a child to train my hair, and it is useful on occasion. Is there any way this can be helpful in obtaining transportation?"

"Oh, yes! We could do a magic show for favors, and buy rides to anywhere. Except that it would bring more notoriety than I care to have, preferring to remain anonymous."

"That is a problem," she agreed. "I am sorry I am not more useful to you."

She was fishing for another compliment on her hair magic. He was cautious about giving it. "But there may be a way. You could support me in a minstrel show."

"Gladly. Tell me how."

"We could narrate and demonstrate an entertaining skit that would pay our way with a caravan traveling our way."

"Alas, I am not good at invention."

"Fortunately I am; that's a minstrel's profession. You have merely to be my assistant."

"Gladly. Tell me what to do."

"I think I can adapt the story of the boy and the ghost girl. He sees her changing her clothing, and—

"A ghost wears clothing?"

"Rather than go naked. Clothes can make a considerable difference in effect."

She nodded. "I have not seen a ghost, but that makes sense. But I fear I am not very insubstantial, let alone ghostly." She glanced down at her chubbiness.

"I am impressed by what you can do with your hair. I think that can make you ghostly."

She clapped her hands. "Oh, yes! We must rehearse."

They reviewed it, and practiced with the hair, until Havoc was satisfied.

Then they resumed walking. Havoc knew of a staging point for floating caravans not far along the road.

"Your massage helped," Stevia said. "You have good hands."

"Appreciation." Then he thought of something. "Question."

"Acknowledged."

"How is it you are able to do active magic between Chroma? Normally magic is limited to its own color." Which was why nonChroma folk generally stayed clear of Chroma: they were not at a disadvantage there.

"I have a gray garnet," she said, lifting her right hand. Indeed, she wore a ring with a large stone; he had not noticed it before because it merged with the color of her hand.

"But such stones are depleted when invoked beyond their Chroma. My crown has ten Chroma gems, protecting me from magic mischief by any Chroma, but each time it counters magic, it loses some power, so the stones must be replaced periodically."

"Depletion is slight for light magic," she said. "My hair magic is mostly illusion, which draws only a tiny fraction of the power that an act of substance magic would."

"My foot got wet! That was no illusion."

"Yes it was. Touch illusion."

Havoc reconsidered, realizing that it could be true. "Awe." He was complimenting her ability.

"Gratitude." Then, after a pause: "Question."

"Acknowledged."

"What brought you to my part of the city to solicit a companion?"

Havoc reminded himself that he was supposed to tell her everything. He was not easy about this, but the Red Glamor surely had reason. "I was visited by the Red Glamor. She told me to go to a random section and take the first person who agreed to come with me. That turned out to be you."

"That is great fortune for me. I thought Glamors were creatures of folklore."

"So did I. But when I told a story that featured the Black and Red Glamors, both showed up and helped me vanquish my enemies. Then the Red Glamor came to me alone and told me."

"I shall try to live up to her expectation. But I think I have much the best of the deal. This is

already more adventure than I have had in a long time."

Surely so, if she had been limited to a dull job in the city. They walked on.

"Observation," she said.

"Acknowledged."

"I am coming to believe that you really are the King."

"Appreciation."

"Did you truly not want to be King, and they had to force you?"

"Affirmation. My choice was to serve for at least a year, or be executed for treason. Anger."

"Comprehension. Sympathy."

Havoc found himself touched, as she was evidently sincere. Her name suggested enormous sweetness, and it seemed apt. "Gratitude. I am trying to do the best job I can. That means not only governing responsibly, but fathoming the mysterious enemy of Kings who killed my predecessor and is trying to kill me too."

"Admiration."

The road curved between Chroma, avoiding the colors of magic, because normal human beings were uncomfortable in the presence of powers beyond them. But as it skirted a brown region, Havoc indicated a path that led directly into it. If they wanted magic help to travel, they would have to get into a magic region.

They reached the staging area, which was not far from the edge of the Brown Chroma territory. A caravan was there, evidently about to take off. "We can catch it!" Stevia said.

But there was a negative buzz in Havoc's ear. "Not this one."

"As you wish, of course," she said, disappointed. They walked instead to a rest area that had shelters and water for travelers. They settled down under a brown pole barn. "But what is wrong with it?"

"I don't know."

"But—"

He would have to explain, though he was loath. "I have a dragon seed. It warns me of danger or wrongness. It warned me against this."

"A dragon seed!"

"You know of them?"

"I have heard stories. They are very hard to come by. How did you?"

"I befriended an injured dragon in childhood. We made oaths of friendship so we could trust one another, exchanged names—we called him Mentor—and Gale and I brought medicine to heal him, and he gave us dragon seeds."

"Who is Gale?"

"She is my betrothed. I love her, and want to marry her." He hesitated, but knew she would ask anyway, so he went ahead with the rest. "But we are changelings, more closely related than siblings, so must not marry."

"Frustration."

"I find it so," he agreed wryly.

"What is a changeling?"

Havoc had tended to forget that the average person did not know all the things he had been recently learning about the hard way. He schooled his patience and answered. "When women are infertile, they may go to pray at a temple. They may subsequently conceive—but the baby may not actually be sired by the man of the family. It may be a special one implanted by the Temple, crafted to be superior in all things human. This is not generally bruited about, because families might take exception. Those babies differ in details such as facial features and gender, but are extremely similar to each other, so should not intermarry. I have learned that I am a changeling, and so is my beloved Gale, and so is my associate Symbol. The prior King Deal was also one. He may have been killed because of that; now I am the one being hunted. So I need to hide my identity, and to locate the source of the changelings, and to identify our nameless enemy. That is the object of this mission, though it is only one of seven similar missions."

"You are certainly a smart and strong and handsome man," she said. "But maybe you are cursed by similar token. I will help you all I can."

"Appreciation."

She was not through. "How did King Deal die and why, if he was a superior changeling?"

"He died *because* he was a changeling. I mean in two ways: he was investigating the origin of the changelings, and I believe he was killed for that. But he was killed by the invocation of a liability only changelings have."

She gazed at him. "I perceive no particular liability in you, apart from the evident savagery of your nameless enemies."

"This is a kind of switch in the mind of changelings, that can be flipped by a signal from elsewhere. After we learned of it, I went with Gale and Symbol to the mental professionals of the Translucent Chroma to have it nullified. They said it was inherent, but they were able to bridge across it so that it no longer operates. We can't be stunned that way, anymore."

"That is a relief," she said.

"Agreement."

She glanced sidelong at him. "I meant that I am glad you can still be stunned in some other manner."

"Confusion."

"Look at my chest."

He looked. In a moment her shirt opened to reveal the twin heaving mounds of her gray bosom and the deep valley between them. It was a far more impressive sight than he might have expected; her breasts were large and well formed.

"Like that," she said.

"Question?"

"You have been several minutes in stasis, and did not observe approaching company."

Havoc hauled his gaze from the valley and looked around. Others were indeed approaching. "Apology."

"Needless. It is a power I value."

To stun him with the sight of her breasts. "Point made." Of course he would not have allowed himself to be diverted had they been in any immediate danger; this was idle time. But why tell her that, when she so enjoyed his fascination? Still, the views she had so willingly given him of her legs and breasts were persuading him that her body was not after all chunky so much as voluptuous. Perhaps she had not wanted that to be evident until she knew him well enough to wish to seduce him.

She closed her shirt, satisfied. "In due course I will show you more of them. But now we have other business."

"Agreement." Havoc had seen breasts before, and of course liked them, but Stevia had a real asset there.

Enormous brown men tromped from the darker region of the Chroma. They were golems, far larger than any living men could ever be, magically animated. They picked up the coaches of the caravan and carried them rapidly across the landscape, just above the treetops.

"That's impressive," Stevia said. "I know it's their specialty magic, but they remain considerable figures."

"Yes. Brown Chroma golems can be made to emulate living people, too," Havoc said. "I have had one to emulate me, and another to emulate Gale."

"But they are not alive. How could they fool anyone?"

"They can do so, when properly crafted and animated. Their hard flesh can become soft and warm."

"Do you mean they can be sexual?"

"Definitely."

"This is something that intrigues me. If a competently animated golem man took me to bed, would I know the difference?"

"Not if the animator did not wish you to, unless he or she became careless."

"A woman could animate a male golem?"

"If she wished."

She shook her head. "It seems there are horizons I have not yet dreamed of." She smiled. "But you will certainly do for now. I trust your member is not wooden."

"Not unless you make it so."

She laughed. "Not yet."

No other caravan arrived. They would have to wait the night.

"I will make us comfortable," Stevia said. She jumped up and set about doing that, picking brown fruits and gathering brown wood. They, as non-Brown Chroma visitors, could not do Brown magic; that was why the rest area catered to non magical tastes. It was not just straight humans who could not do magic here; visitors of any type from any other Chroma were similarly limited.

Another visitor appeared. He was a green man. "Greeting!" he called.

"Acknowledgment," Havoc replied politely.

"Request."

"Considered."

"Minstrel—may I join you in peace?"

Havoc shrugged. "Welcome, Green."

The man came to sit by Havoc. "I am Gerund, a school instructor, en route to an assignment in another Green Chroma." This was true; Havoc verified it in his mind.

"I am Hayseed, a Minstrel, traveling with a companion to a Blue Chroma."

Stevia returned, and introductions were repeated.



Gerund doffed his green pack. "I have food to share, in return for your fire and company." He brought out green bread, green jam, and a flask of green wine.

Havoc made a small pyramid of brown sticks and twigs, and used his flintstone to light it. Soon they had a nice little brown fire.

Stevia brought chunks of hard cheese and pebble candies from her pack and passed them around. Havoc provided pemmican. All together, with the fresh brown fruits, it was a fine meal, with the strong wine providing them a pleasant buzz. They chatted inconsequentially, then located bushes to fertilize and settled down under a shelter for the night. They shared a large brown blanket, Stevia sleeping between the two men, their body warmth fending off the cool evening air.

At dawn Havoc rose first, walked to the nearby brown stream, stripped, and splashed himself clean. Then as he exercised his arms, warming and drying, Stevia got up, stripped, and bathed herself and her clothing. "Yours too?" she asked Havoc.

"If you wish."

She took his clothing and washed it also. By this time Gerund was also up, and she did his clothing too, while he splashed clean and ran about, warming. Then Stevia emerged, hung the clothing on brown bushes where the slanting sunlight caught them, and returned to the shelter. She added sticks to the fire, and it blazed up anew. Then she went to gather more fruit.

They rejoined her for a breakfast of fruit, squatting naked around the fire. No one commented or stared at bodies, though Havoc noted privately that Stevia's body was exactly as it had seemed when clothed: weighted around the center, and therefore not completely sexually appealing. She made no effort to mask it with her hair, and he realized that she did not want the third person in their party to be aware of her magic. He also realized that she had showed off portions of her body before with fair skill, causing his mind to imagine a more appealing continuation than actually existed. He appreciated the craft of it.

In due course they fetched their partly-dry clothing and dressed. Just in time, for a caravan was arriving. Six-legged horses were drawing wheeled coaches along the road, and the servants of the merchants were carrying bundles on their backs. They would have come from a nearby landing site at the edge of an adjacent Chroma.

The wagons parked in the camping area, forming a circle, and the people spread out to gather fruit, wash, and rest under the shelters. The horsemen departed with their horses.

Havoc, Stevia, and Gerund approached the foreman. "Greeting," Havoc said.

"Acknowledgment."

"We are three travelers going to two locations," Havoc said. "May we trade for a lift?"

"Yes, if each pays his way. You and your woman will entertain?"

"A mere skit," Havoc agreed. "But with nice effects."

"Basic instruction for children, or refresher for adults," Gerund said. "Manners, Geography, Calculation, whatever."

The foreman nodded. "Present yourselves in one hour within the circle. Show your wares, and the merchants will vote. Parting."

"Parting," the three of them said together as the man moved away to see to other matters. They had won a fair hearing. If they did not meet expectations, they would not be allowed to join the caravan.

In an hour they entered the circle of wagons. The merchants and many of their assistants and servants and families were there, with several children, seated in a smaller circle. Folk were always eager to be entertained or educated, and to expose their children to interesting new things. But by similar token, they could be choosy about the quality of the presentations. Good minstrels could live well; poor ones might have to eat the fruits thrown at them.

Gerund went first. He stood in the center of the circle. "Greeting, all," he said.

"Acknowledgment, Green," the audience replied.

"I am Gerund, a school instructor. I will not bore you with any detailed lesson, but will offer a sample, and will amplify for any individuals who wish it as we travel. At this time I address the children, though others are welcome to listen." He paused briefly, looking at the children, who were seated in the tightest ring. "Hello, children!"

"Hello, Green," they chorused cheerfully.

"I will teach you some Manners, though I see you already know some. You know that when you meet a person you say 'Greeting' and reply 'Acknowledge.' But do you know who should be the first to speak?"

The children glanced around at each other, perplexed. He had neatly identified an area of their ignorance. Havoc could see that the man knew his business.

Gerund smiled. "I give you three guidelines for convenience. The man before the woman, the elder before the younger, and the one who most wishes to initiate a dialogue. That is, to start talking." Young brows had furrowed at the larger words, but cleared with the clarification.

"For example," the green man continued. "I greeted all of you first, because I am a man, older, and I want to tell you something." He paused just a moment. "But what if you met me on a trail and wished to talk with me?" he asked a little girl.

She looked blankly back at him.

"Let us say that you are lost and need guidance home," Gerund said. "I am about to pass you by, having no interest in you. What do you do?"

She remained blank though interested, as all the children were; this was relevant, because they did not want to be lost.

"Remember, I said it can be the one who wants to talk. If I were about to greet you, I would signal by lifting one hand above the level of my waist, so." He raised his right hand to chest level. "But since I am passing you by, I do not do that. What do you do?"

The child smiled, catching on. She lifted her hand to her chest.

"Very good!" Gerund said, as if she had performed a marvelous feat. "And when I look at you, so you know I see you, then you may greet me. Because there is no point if I don't see you."

The children laughed.

"Now let's try it." Gerund turned away from the girl, walked a few paces across the circle, then turned back and approached the girl, but did not look directly at her.

She lifted her hand. After a moment he spotted her, and looked directly at her. "Greeting," she said.

"Acknowledged," Gerund said.

The children broke into applause, and the girl blushed, pleased. It had worked!

Thereafter Gerund described some of the other conventions of Manners, such as Parting, Apology, Appreciation, and Expletive. That last made all the children react again. "We shall pretend your parents and friends are not listening," the green man said seriously. At this the adults sitting behind the children formally averted their faces. "You must never use that term carelessly. But there are times when it is necessary." He took a step, tripped, and sprawled on the brown ground. "Expletive!" he exclaimed ferociously as he dusted himself off. The children laughed, but also understood. The averted faces returned, heads nodding; they had of course seen it coming.

The head merchant stepped into the circle, hand raised to waist level. Gerund glanced at him. "Admiration," the merchant said.

"Gratitude."

The merchant glanced around the circle, receiving nods. "Ride with us, teacher, and welcome."

"Appreciation."

"Parting."

Gerund nodded and departed the circle. He had given a good lesson, and they all knew it.

The merchant faced Havoc, lifting his hand. "Greeting."

"Acknowledgment," Havoc said, stepping into the circle. Stevia followed.

Havoc addressed the audience, rotating as he did so, so as not to miss any portion of the circle. "Greeting to all of you."

"Acknowledgment," they murmured. Normally the conventions of manners were abbreviated or omitted in established circumstances like this, but they were following them precisely after the green lesson, for the benefit of the children.

"I am Hayseed the Minstrel. That's my working name, of course; my real name would not be entertaining. This is Stevia, my assistant." Stevia made a little circular curtsy. "We shall demonstrate the tale of the Boy and Ghost."

There were some nods among the adults; they were familiar with this story, but that was no liability. Some folk liked to compare the performances of different minstrels on similar tales, judging fine points. Havoc knew they would discover this variant to be original in at least one detail.

Havoc took a light blanket and covered Stevia as she sat on the ground, so that she became an anonymous hump. He brought out his blue dragon scale and played an eerie chord. Music was a mainstay of minstrels, as was a repertoire of familiar tales. He was quite well prepared in both. He favored the audience with another circular glance, and began.

"There was once, on the Planet of Mystery, a Boy," he intoned, glancing up at the huge colorful sister world, the size of a man's fist at arm's length, where many stories were set as a convention of supposed anonymity. A number of the children glanced up; Mystery, or Counter-Charms as it was also called, was an object of perpetual fascination.

"This Boy lived with his parents, but they were very busy and never told him all of what he most wanted to know," Havoc continued. Several children nodded; they had experienced that. Conventions differed from Chroma to Chroma and from village to city, with some being quite open about natural functions including sexual expression, and others being restrictive, but no child ever had everything he wanted. "For one thing, he did not yet know all of what he might want to know, so could not ask the right questions. His house was somewhat set apart, so he had no close neighbor children to play Tickle & Peek with." That was a popular game wherein little boys and girls took turns tickling each other in prescribed fashion, and peeking at normally hidden parts of anatomy when the other reacted violently to the tickling. It was a standard way to learn essential gender distinctions without openly snooping. The most popular children were extremely ticklish, and very quick to catch on to the pretense of seeing and not-seeing secret things.

Havoc played an innocuous background melody, signifying that this was preparatory material. "Boy was extremely curious what a grown girl looked like under her clothing, but there seemed to be no way to find out, so he was unhappy." There were more knowing nods. "Then one evening as he was walking home from the village he was caught by a sudden storm. The cloud was huge and black, and he feared the magic it might have, so had to get under cover rapidly." Now he played a somber and slightly dissonant theme, signifying the justified fear of black magic. "But the only house close by was a deserted one. Its owners had died in an unfortunate accident half a year before, and new folk had not yet moved in. It was a rather frightening place, for there were said to be ghosts therein."

Several children looked nervous; they had heard about ghosts.

Havoc played an eerie melody, and put concern on his face. "But Boy had no choice, so he ran to the house and got inside just before the first black raindrops fell. The roof was not tight, and black drips oozed through the ceiling and fell to the floor, where they slowly dissolved it into dark pits. He had to move to the bedroom to avoid the sinister dripping, for he could not afford to be touched by

that Black Chroma magic. There he huddled beside the bare bed, waiting for the storm to abate. He was absolutely still, fearing both the rain and the interior of the house." Havoc looked apprehensively around, playing a quiet and nervous tune. The smaller children were evincing fright, while the larger ones were appreciatively amused.

"The rain beat relentlessly on the roof and against the windows, and he dared not go out." Havoc turned, once again scanning the audience surrounding him, as if seeking some escape. He was pleased to see that not only were the children rapt; many of the adults were getting into it. There was nothing like a good spook story to hold attention.

"Then he saw a faint light in the chamber. Something was there in the room with him!" He played alarm music and stared at the mound that was Stevia: it was beginning to glow faintly under the blanket. "He gazed, frozen where he hunched, staring at the glow. There seemed to be illumination from an invisible lamp, and the light showed a dresser with a mirror, and reflected in the mirror was a shape the size of a woman, though there was no such shape in the chamber itself." Havoc walked slowly to the still figure. "And lo, it was a ghost!" He whipped off the blanket to reveal the woman, whose hair had grown so long that it covered all her body. It was radiating gray luminescence, a truly eerie effect. There was a satisfying gasp of surprise; this was the original touch.

He gave the audience a moment to assimilate the living tent that was the gray woman, continuing his evocative music. "In fact it was a Lady Ghost, who did not realize that the Boy was there. She had formed just this moment, and was before the mirror to perform her toilette." Stevia got slowly to her feet, her hair cascading like a silken garment, keeping her modest. "She brushed her hair—Stevia's hand came up, and she used a gray brush on her hair, stroking down past her shoulders and on toward her knees. "She had very pretty hair." Indeed, the gray tresses were reflectively glossy.

"Boy stared, his fright for the moment abated. The ghost was beautiful!" Stevia turned a little, her hair thinning translucently, giving the impression of a svelte figure beneath. Havoc augmented the impression with lovely music.

"Her hair in order, the ghost prepared to change her clothing. She drew off her blouse"—Stevia made the motions, but her canopy of hair concealed her torso. In a moment she produced a gray blouse from beneath the hair, having shown nothing of substance. Havoc, however, playing the role of Boy, was staring, his face evincing awe. "She wore a full halter beneath." The rough outline of it showed through the filter of hair. "Then she undid its fastenings as she turned." She slowly rotated. "And saw the Boy." He played a crashing chord, and silenced the instrument. The audience was completely quiet.

"For a moment the two stared at each other, mutually astonished and dismayed."

Then the Ghost spoke, as Stevia assumed her role. "You're a male child. You shouldn't be watching me change."

"Oh, please, Lady Ghost," Havoc said for Boy. "I have no sisters and have never seen a woman bare, and I'm unbearably curious, and you are so beautiful. Please, please let me watch."

The Ghost considered, her hair rippling brightly. She was evidently flattered by Boy's description of her. "But I am long dead. I am not a real woman. You are supposed to be frightened of me."

"I am! At least I was. I thought ghosts were ugly and awful, but you are lovely and nice. Please, please—

She was wavering. "You really have no one else to sneak a peek at?"

"No one!" Boy swore.

"I suppose there would be no harm done, since I have no substance. But perhaps it would be better if you did not tell anyone else. That would protect my modesty."

"Peek and No Tell!" Boy agreed eagerly, taking a step toward her.

"Remain where you are," she said sharply. "If you occupy my space, I will vanish. That's my nature."

"Apology," Boy said, retreating abashed.

"I will pretend you are not there." Then she resumed her toilette, removing her halter and skirt and washing herself with a translucent gray sponge. She turned slowly around as she did so, so that in the course of the event every aspect of her was revealed.

Boy stared with open mouthed appreciation, finally seeing all that had been secret. But somehow the glowing hair managed to mask the details from the audience, so that mere hints of bared breasts and buttocks and thighs manifested. It seemed that a phenomenally beautiful woman was being displayed, if only anyone beside Boy were able to see the ghostly body clearly.

Finally the Ghost was fully garbed in her new outfit. By that time the storm had passed. "I must go, for I am late getting home," Boy said.

"Of course," the Ghost agreed sensibly.

"Observation."

"Accepted."

"I think I love you."

The Ghost laughed. "I think that's the nicest thing anyone has said to me since I died!"

"May I visit you again?"

She looked surprised. "Whatever for? You have already seen everything."

"You have been nice to me. I like your company. I promise not to try to touch you."

The Ghost shook her head ruefully. "You have already done that, I think. Yes, you may visit again, if you come alone. I will talk with you."

"Oh thank you, lovely Ghost!" Then he thought of something else. "May I know your name?"

"You really want to destroy my anonymity! But I will tell you. I am Peril. In life I was called Purl, for I was skilled as a knitter, but that no longer fits."

"You are a pearl to me," Boy said. "Perfect in color and nature."

"That, too, if you wish. Now go, before you get in trouble." She blew him a kiss. The music was blissful.

Havoc addressed the audience. "And so began a lifetime and deathtime friendship of some duration," he concluded. "Can any of you tell me what it means?"

The adults smiled, not volunteering the moral. The children looked confused. Finally one little boy lifted his hand. "Greeting," he said when Havoc looked at him.

"Acknowledgment." In a situation like this the ritual was not necessary, but there was no harm in honoring it.

"Maybe it's not to judge ahead? To—to give someone a chance, even a ghost?"

"Affirmation. Congratulation. Be cautious, but open-minded, for a ghost is not necessarily evil." The children nodded, understanding.

The merchant stepped into the circle, glancing around. "Welcome to join our caravan, Minstrel," he said. "You and your girl."

"Appreciation," Havoc and Stevia said together. They were in—not that Havoc had had any doubt of it.

"That's some hair," the merchant remarked. "I never saw magic like that before."

"Gratitude," Stevia said. "It is mostly illusion." She lifted her hand, showing the gray garnet. In that manner she reassured the merchant that she was not some weird creature masquerading as a person.

The giant brown golems returned, or maybe this was a new group; it was hard to tell them apart, as they were pro forma constructs animated by magic. The three travelers were given bunk room in a covered wagon, crowded but sufficient. This was not after all a holiday cruise, but ad hoc basic transport.

"That was a very nice rendition," Gerund remarked. "You can surely have regular caravan employment here if you desire it."

"We seek richer pastures," Havoc said. "We will run our errand in the Blue Chroma, then return to the larger audiences of the great city."

Gerund nodded. "Rich pasture indeed. Perhaps you will achieve a royal audience."

"We hope so."

They looked out at the brown terrain passing rapidly below them. The golems were striding hugely, setting their feet in marked spots. They carried the wagon with hardly a tremor.

But after a time the travel became dull. Their incidental dialogue lapsed. Stevia turned to Gerund. "Proposition."

"Confusion," the green man replied, surprised.

"I crave entertainment, and there is little here. Would you like to share bodies for a time?"

Gerund glanced at Havoc. "I assumed—"

"We travel together," Havoc said. "I am committed elsewhere."

Gerund nodded. "No fault?"

"No fault," Stevia agreed. That meant that there would be no implied commitment; it was to be a connection of the moment.

"In that case, affirmation. Desire. Your performance was evocative." Indeed, she had come across as a lithe lush form. The Green man had seen her as she was, but had evidently been turned on by what she had made herself seem to be. This sort of thing was great for spot passion.

"I will see what else is to be seen," Havoc said, and climbed out of the bunk space to get on top of the wagon. He was granting them privacy.

He found a spot beside the golem's great hand that held an anchor point of the wagon. "Greeting," he said, not expecting an answer.

"Acknowledgment," the golem responded, surprising him.

But that turned out to be the extent of its ability to communicate. It was not being animated by a living person; it was a programmed creature, doing a rote job.

Havoc sat by the hand and pondered Stevia's action. She had done a fine job in the skit, and had indeed evinced sex appeal. She was not an unattractive woman; he had simply been spoiled by the likes of Gale or the King's servants, selected for their esthetic appeal. The ordinary man would find Stevia's body attractive enough despite its imperfections. All three of them had shown each other their bodies when they washed in the morning; by the convention of traveling companions, they had taken no overt notice. But covert notice had been taken, of course; it was expected. So Gerund knew exactly what was being offered. Stevia had expressed interest in Havoc before, and he had demurred. Was she raising the ante by tackling another man in his presence? Trying to incite his own desire? Perhaps so. Did he care?

The fact was, he really didn't care. But she was the one assigned to help him by the Red Glamor, and that meant that he must need her in some more substantial manner. He would do well to avoid alienating her. Did that mean accepting her sexual interest?

Havoc didn't like being too directly steered by anyone, even a Glamor. He decided to maintain



his neutrality. He would bed Stevia only if she became sexually appealing to him, not merely to maintain her cooperation. That matter decided, he felt better.

Soon he saw the edge of the Brown Chroma in the distance. Beyond it was a faint sheet of yellow. They would soon have to park and march across another interstice of low magic to get fairly into the next Chroma. The huge golems had transported them what might have been a day's foot travel, in an hour. That was why it was worth riding with a caravan.

He climbed toward the entrance to the interior. "Landing ahead," he called, alerting the others in case they were unaware of his approach.

He paused a moment, then climbed down. They were both back in order. It was clear from Gerund's mind that they had had a most ardent and fulfilling sexual encounter. Stevia had been amazingly passionate, and in the dusk of the wagon's interior her body had seemed lithe rather than chubby. She had not been fooling about desiring such interaction with a man. The teacher had been impressed and gratified.

Neither spoke of the encounter; it was as though it had not occurred. That was the nature of no-fault; it was virtually anonymous, carrying no commitments overt or implied. But they would remember, and do it again if convenience and desire obliged.

The golems set the wagon down in the park site and departed. The foreman rented more horses to haul the wagons across the null-magic boundary between the Brown and Yellow Chromas. The three travelers got out and walked. The Green man and the Gray woman did not touch each other physically, but there was a benign mood; they had had the pleasure of each other.

There was another wait at the Yellow Chroma camp. Gerund gave another sample lesson, this time on Geography, which of course included spacial as well as planetary. "Mankind came to Charm a thousand years ago," he told the children. "The ships that brought us sailed the space between worlds and stars. They departed and never returned, but we have prospered. This is what is termed a double star system. Vivid is the bright star, and Void the dark star. It is what we call a Black Hole: an object so dense that light does not come from it. Instead it sucks in light, and anything else that comes near. There is no return from Void."

He paused as a child raised his hand. "Like a Black Chroma volcano!" the boy said.

"Similar, perhaps," Gerund agreed. "It is true that Black Chroma volcanoes erupt inward, drawing in their surroundings, in contrast to the other colors. We are not sure that Void operates on the same principle, but it may be." Then he returned to the lesson. "The bright star and dark star orbit each other, and Planets Charm and Counter-Charm orbit both in what is called an ellipse. That is like a squashed circle, or an egg. For part of the year we are closer to Vivid, and that makes a hot season. For another part of the year we are closer to Void, and that makes a cold season. But not always." He paused, inviting a response.

"When Void flares," a child said eagerly. "Then it's burning hot!"

"Exactly. Thus we have five seasons, which we liken to the elements: Fire, Water, Earth, Air, and Void. But none are perfectly predictable, because of the irregularity of those flares. Meanwhile Charm and Counter-Charm are orbiting each other on a smaller scale, and that also affects the

climate. These deviously interrelating motions and forces cause the planets to be extremely volatile—that is, they change quickly. New volcanoes are constantly appearing, and old ones fading, so that no permanent maps can be drawn. The Cartographers are constantly checking, but even they can not be certain that what they find will remain for long. Since each Chroma is magic, and the different colors of magic do not cooperate with each other, this makes for a rather confusing geography. But we do the best we can."

The lesson continued, but ended before the children became bored. Then Havoc and Stevia came on. This time Havoc played his instrument and sang standard folk songs while Stevia put on an illustrative hair show. It worked well enough, and both children and adults were satisfied.

The Yellow magicians arrived, and soon the wagons floated up above the yellow tree tops and sailed rapidly across the yellow land. This time they covered what might have taken two or three days by foot in hardly more than two hours. The travelers even caught a passing glimpse of the central Yellow Chroma volcano, the source of the region's magic. It was quiescent at the moment, with only a few yellow fumes showing; had it not been, the caravan would not have been allowed to pass this close to it. Volcanoes were dangerous, for all the benefits they provided the Chroma inhabitants. Yellow specialized in Fire, so an eruption might be a phenomenal blaze.

When they landed, it was evening. The travelers shared the caravan food; that was part of what they were paying for by their performances. Then they settled down under a yellow shelter. The caravan would resume travel in the morning. They shared a blanket again, without other interaction, in the traveling convention. One no-fault episode of sex did not imply another, unless there were a longer agreement, and in any event it would not be courteous to do it in the presence of the other man Stevia was traveling with, Havoc. So they were like brothers and a sister, for this occasion.

In the morning horses appeared, and the wagons were hauled across to the next Chroma, which was Green. "This is where I get off," Gerund said. "It has been nice traveling with you. Perhaps we shall meet again."

"Perhaps," Havoc agreed.

"It was nice," Stevia said. That was her only reference to the encounter the two of them had had in the Brown Chroma.

"Parting."

"Parting."

Then the green man stretched out his arms and flew into the air. He was in his natural color now, and could do magic again. Flying was his most convenient mode of travel within this region.

"Sometimes I miss my home Chroma," Stevia said. "It was convenient being able to fly."

"I miss my home village of Trifle," Havoc said. "That's between Chroma, but we could venture onto the fringes of three colors, and many of the plants had magic properties. We knew nothing of real magic."

"You found comfort in ignorance?"

"Yes. The Planet of Charm is far more complicated than I like."

"But there are so many advantages to magic. The way Gerund simply flew, needing no other aid—wouldn't you like to have that power for yourself?"

"No. Magic brings as much danger as convenience, and sometimes can be downright inconvenient."

"How so?"

He was supposed to tell her everything. He remained uneasy with this, but obeyed. "I am magically telepathic. That can bring me information I'd be satisfied not to know."

"Telepathic! Mind reading?"

"Mind reading," he agreed.

"I should think that would be interesting. What information did you not want to know?"

"Like the details of your liaison with the green man."

She made a partial smile, evidently not really believing. "For example?"

"When he closed his eyes, and you made him guess which breast you were using to tickle his nose."

She nodded. "You got that from my mind?"

"No. I can't read your mind. From his mind."

She laughed. "I thought I had you there. I know you can't read my mind. No one can. I forgot that Gerund was not similarly protected. How did you, a nonChroma man, come by such magic?"

"It was actually an illness. A disease. It was incapacitating people, because all their thoughts were going out to others, and the thoughts of all others were coming in to them, like continuous shouting from all sides. But I have trained my mind, and helped my associates train theirs similarly, so that we could project or mask our thoughts and not be overwhelmed. Now it is a very useful ability."

"How can it work out of Chroma?"

"That's something I don't properly understand. I think it is that telepathy, like illusion, is very inexpensive magic, involving only thoughts, so it can operate in the trace magic between Chroma zones, and can operate within zones similarly."

"Like my illusion," she agreed. "That does make sense. Havoc, you continue to be a font of surprises."

"Gratitude," he said humorously, pretending it was a compliment.

"You sound almost a trifle jealous of my liaison with Gerund."

"Almost a trifle," he agreed.

"That's progress. I will keep working on it."

In due course the caravan was ready to travel again. This time long green tentacles reached out from huge green trees and lifted the wagons into the air. They swung each wagon across to another tree, which caught it without slip or jolt, and movement was similar to what the brown golems had provided.

They sat at the front of the wagon, their feet dangling down. "I remain impressed by Chroma magic," Havoc said, gazing out. "I remain an ignorant lout from the backwoods at heart."

"I have been out of strong magic long enough to find it refreshing," Stevia said. "For a short while. But I think I shall soon be bored again. Why don't you sit beside me, put your arm around me, and take hold of my breast under my shirt while you gaze at the passing landscape, while I hesitate to protest lest others take note?"

"I will spare you that harassment."

There was a faint edge to her words. "It is a fair offer in the circumstance."

"You know I am committed to Gale."

"I know nothing of the kind!" she snapped. "You said you can't marry her because you both are changelings."

"Contrition," he said, taken aback. "You are correct."

"And you know that traveling companions are default no fault. You can do anything with me we both might wish, without being untrue to your home commitment."

"Embarrassment. You are correct again."

"So at this point, failure to act becomes rejection. Is there some other diversion you would prefer?"

He was indeed being tacitly offensive, in the face of her expressed interest. "Apology. I have been spoiled, and will indulge with you in penitence."

"That's not the way I want it. Just give me a fair chance to seduce you if I can, and if not, not."

"Agreement. We shall make it a game for the leisure hours."

"Satisfaction."

He nudged closer to her, put his right arm around her body, infiltrated his hand under her shirt, and slid it across her breast, cupping it. The breast was full and warm and smooth, perfectly shaped,

and it sent a continuing impulse of sexual discovery back to his body. "Actually, I think I would like to—

"No, this is enough for now. I prefer to tantalize you."

He had to laugh. "You do want it all!"

"And I mean to get it all, in good time."

She surely would succeed. Already he was thinking of her body as voluptuous rather than chubby, as he had before seeing the whole of it naked. But one thing bothered him. "You said no fault."

"Agreement."

"But your approach suggests a desire for commitment."

"How so, when I have set a limit?"

"Immediate sex would abate the interest and allow us to separate, as was the case with you and the Green man. Instead you are engaging me in limited but progressive manner, guaranteeing a longer and more thoughtful association."

Stevia considered a moment. "Chagrin. I am a hypocrite. I do have an urge to bring you to commitment. I will disengage."

"No need. I like your breast, now that I am acquainted with it. I am willing to be led in your direction. But I do see it as a no fault relationship."

"Acquiescence. I will proffer full sex and acquittal now, in apology for being devious."

"That's not the way I want it," he said, smiling.

She turned her face to him. "Thank you for playing it out, Havoc. I have never had a full relationship, and this provides the semblance."

"Welcome, Stevia." Then he kissed her. The combination of her lips and her breast was potent. He also liked the way she had cooperated in the play and song skits. He would never love her in the way he did Gale, but she had become an intriguing traveling companion.

Her hair rippled liquidly. "If you do that again, I will not be responsible for the consequence."

He nodded. "We have agreed to a game, an emotional challenge. It would be a shame to cut it short now."

"A shame," she agreed.

So he did not kiss her again, because it had too much effect on them both. He continued to hold her breast, and they talked of inconsequentials as the trees and vines swung them onward. Certainly

Stevia had accomplished much of her objective, winning him from indifference to strong interest.

After they crossed the Green Chroma, they came to a Blue Chroma. But it was not the one Havoc sought; that was several more jumps away. So the wagons were lofted magically, and floated swiftly over the blue landscape, and the ride became dull again.

This time Stevia spread her skirt and sat on Havoc's lap, tempting him with her ample bottom. "Tell me about your prior girlfriends."

"This is supposed to be no fault," he reminded her. "You're not my girlfriend."

"Correction: I am an ad hoc girlfriend, a term relationship, for the duration of this mission. I have a right to be possessive while it endures."

She was pushing it, but she had a case. "Briefly," he said. "No salacious detail."

"Oh, but I want the salacious detail!"

"Negative."

"Threat: I will make you remove your trousers."

And that plush bare bottom would make short work of his resistance. It was a lover's threat, really a premature consummation. He had to yield, if he wanted to maintain the slow development. "Capitulation."

He told her about Gale, one year his junior, a lovely fellow changeling he had loved since childhood. They had played Tickle & Peek, but it had soon become academic as full love developed. But when he had gone on a public mission, and Gale had gone on a secret one, he had had to take the sixteen year old mistress of the royal bath, Bijou, instead. She had been made up to resemble Gale, and conditioned to believe she was Gale, so that others did not know that Gale was not with him.

"Aversion," Stevia said. "That was a dirty trick to play on the girl."

"Agreement. Soon she figured it out, and was angry. Next secret mission I took her for herself, and promised her a fourth." That was the convention that each woman had to bear three children by her husband, and at least one by another man, to maintain human diversity.

"A fourth! She was sixteen and already had three children?"

"The fourth can come in any order," he reminded her. "In this case it would be her first, leaving her free to remain with her love thereafter and bear only his babies."

"Except that she is in love with you."

"We were traveling companions. No fault."

She merely looked at him, canny as women were about such things.

"She loves me," he agreed with regret. "Or at least with the idea of having a fourth by the King of Chroma."

"She will survive it, as will I. The fourth will be a fine consolation for us both."

"I have not promised you a fourth."

"You may not be able to avoid it."

"I refuse—

She took hold of his head and kissed him with surpassing expertise. She had evidently had good experience somewhere. And she was correct: he might not be able to avoid it. She had already demonstrated her ability to bring him to full sexual expression when she was ready for it, and any such act could be fertile if the woman wished it to be. She was a good deal more woman than he had first taken her for.

The wagon settled down to the landing at the edge, and they crossed to the next Chroma, which was silver. During the pause as they waited for the next magical lift, they entertained the merchant families again. By popular request they repeated the ghost girl skit, and this time took it farther: several years later, when the Boy was grown, he encountered a woman who for a moment looked familiar. Then her hair fell before her face, shimmering, and he understood.

"You are she!"

"In a manner," she replied. "The girl liked your look, but could not approach you. She agreed to give me occupancy if I could bring you to her."

"Oh, yes!" he agreed. And so for the first time he was able, in a fashion, to actually touch and be touched by the woman he had come to love. He embraced her and kissed her, delighting in the contact. "But I still want to watch you change," he murmured in her ear.

"What do you think I am?" she demanded with feigned shock.

"My beloved," he said.

"But the woman whose body I borrow may not understand."

"I will marry her, if you stay."

"I will let her speak for herself." The Ghost faded.

"Yes!" the woman exclaimed.

The children applauded, and the adults seemed satisfied. The lesson had been more than made: ghosts could be more important than mere spooks. Whether a woman should so blithely marry a man she hardly knew, when his love was for the ghost within her, was a question for another session.

In two more days they came to their destination Blue Chroma, and bid parting to the caravan.

"Satisfaction," the foreman said.

"Pleasure," Havoc and Stevia said together.

They were now at the fringe of the Chroma zone, and needed to make their way to the interior. They bargained with the local personnel, trading a brief entertaining show for animal transport. The animal turned out to be a blue elephant: six legs, a prehensile trunk, a prehensile tail, and considerable intellect. It could understand and respond to full sentences.

Havoc gave it the coordinates, and it set off, carrying the two of them in a small tower mounted on its back. They made good progress over rough terrain; this zone was mountainous. Much of it seemed trackless, but the elephant set its huge feet carefully on secure ground, used its trunk and tail to brace itself on steep slopes, and occasionally made grandiose little leaps across fissures. When something hostile was in the way, it trumpeted warning, and the creature gave way.

In due course it brought them to the location. It used its trunk to lift each of them down to the blue ground. "Appreciation," Havoc said. "Please check once a day at this spot for us, as we shall need you for our return." The elephant nodded, then disappeared into the blue jungle.

They surveyed their situation. They were at the edge of a mountain lake whose blue waters wound irregularly through the valley between rounded peaks. It was a pretty monochrome scene.

"You understand," Havoc said carefully. "We both will have to take ad hoc partners for this portion of the mission."

"I am eager for it. It will warm me up for you on the return trip."

She was certainly open about it. The truth was, he was getting interested as he fathomed her wider personality. He wasn't sure whether her shape was improving, or he was simply attuning to it. "I am not sure how we get in touch."

"Make a commotion," she suggested.

Havoc smiled. He put his hands to his mouth and called: "Greeting! We are travelers needing assistance."

In a moment there was a stir in the water. A blue head broke the surface. "Male or female?" a woman's voice called.

"One of each."

"Are you healthy?"

"Yes."

"Perfect." The head disappeared, but in a moment reappeared closer to the shore, with a second head beside it.

Soon two human figures stood in the shallow fringe, male and female. Both had webbed hands



and feet, with gill slits in their necks, but were otherwise well formed humans. The man had muscular arms and chest, and the woman was spectacularly breasted, probably because of similar muscle underlying her mammaries. Their sexual anatomy was normal.

"I am Theme Guirl," the woman said. "This is my husband Thesis Buoy."

So they had normal given names but watery gender identifications. "I am the minstrel Hayseed," Havoc said. "This is my companion Stevia." Stevia gave the mer folk a pleasant gray smile.

"Do you understand the protocol?"

"We must keep sexual company with the two of you for the duration of our association."

"Do you understand why?"

"We don't object, but do not understand why."

"It is for the second."

"The second?"

"The fourth!" Stevia exclaimed.

Theme glanced at her. "Yes, we are more closely interbred, so must breed out every second time. I am in heat, and a breeding in the coming few days will surely take."

"I am not in heat," Stevia said, somewhat sourly considering her normal sweetness.

Thesis laughed. "It doesn't have to take, for you. It is our merfolk population we are concerned about. But we buoys honor the convention in the same degree as the guirls do. Fair is fair, withal."

Havoc smiled understandingly. Males of human derivation typically liked to have sexual relations with as many young women as was feasible, while females preferred to avoid such variety. So the mer guirl had to breed out, while the mer buoy did it for pleasure. Thesis would perhaps be pleasantly surprised by Stevia's enthusiasm.

"Curiosity," Havoc said. "How can you maintain full water readiness as a subspecies if you are constantly half diluted by landbound stock?"

"Our salient qualities are dominant," Thesis explained. "Gills, webbed digits, and certain internal adaptations. So we maintain breedability with the larger pool, while retaining our specialization. However, on occasion an offspring will lack a key attribute, and will be confined to land. We do not waste these individuals; they settle at the shoreline and serve as couriers to other settlements. This facilitates species rapport. Should we have to contact the landbound authorities in Triumph City, for example, we would not have to depend on non-mers whom we might not fully trust; we have our own. There are also certain chores like refuse disposal that are best confined to land."

Havoc nodded. "You have worked it out well."

"What is the assistance you require?" Theme inquired. She was evidently the dominant member of this family, or perhaps it was that she was the one who had to find a suitable partner for her second.

"We must go to a particular site, and fetch what is there," Havoc said. Then he gave the coordinates.

Theme and Thesis exchanged a glance. "That's a bad site," Thesis said after a moment. "Close to the volcano, and the flow of water in that region would be from the volcano."

"Strong magic?" Havoc asked.

"Uncomfortably strong. We shall have to plan for a rather swift, precise penetration, getting clear promptly."

"You should have no problem with that, dear," Theme told him, though her smile was a bit strained.

"Always nice to be appreciated," the mer buoy said, spanking her bare bottom.

"Don't you touch me," she protested with more of a smile. "That belongs to Hayseed for the duration."

"Apology." He stepped forward and delivered a similar spank to Stevia's clothed posterior.

Theme beckoned to Havoc with four webbed fingers. He stepped across and spanked her blue buttocks. They were surprisingly firm and springy.

"Some ground rules," Thesis said. "You will want to discard your clothing, as most of the travel will be in water. In addition, you will have to accommodate animal assistance, as we have some distance to cover, and there can be strong currents. Finally, we had better rehearse breathing."

"We can't breathe water," Havoc said.

"Precisely. Therefore we shall assist you with mouth breathing. This takes some adjustment on the part of the recipient, so some practice before need is advisable."

Havoc and Stevia remained perplexed, but the clarification was immediate. Theme took Havoc into the water, and Thesis took Stevia, and they swam down well below the surface. The mer girl's legs were locked together, her large webbed feet angling outward, so that they resembled a tail, and she used them in the manner of a tail. Her long hair came down around her neck and across her breasts like a cape, streamlining her upper torso. Her gills were now concealed, but the water surely was reaching them. It was clear that she was a far more efficient swimmer than he was.

Then Theme swam close, catching his hands in hers and drawing him in to her. She clasped Havoc chest to chest and face to face, and put her mouth to his as she pumped with her tail, propelling them both along. She blew into his mouth, and her breath was like sea wind, fresh and rich. Then he exhaled into her mouth, having no choice, and felt her chest expand as she took his breath. She reversed it again, and he received her breath, recharged with oxygen. She was drawing it from

the water via her gills, and delivering to him via their shared parcel of air. Gills and lungs coordinating; they were separate systems, interrelating rather than merely duplicating functions. In this manner she was enabling him to breathe under the water. Thesis was doing the same for Stevia.

Havoc began to get the hang of it, fastening his mouth perfectly to hers so that no air leaked out. It was no kiss, but a business relationship, pumping the air back and forth. He would have preferred to breathe fresh air, but this was certainly better than drowning. He was impressed; these folk were not fully adapted to the water, but had achieved a marvelous compromise that made them able to function well in either medium.

Theme released him and drew away, stroking smoothly for the surface. Havoc did the same, now holding his breath. Their heads popped out of the lake almost together, and he breathed wild air again. It was a relief.

"When we travel, I will show you how to merge sexually simultaneously," she said.

"You have sex while swimming?" he asked, surprised.

"While traveling. You'll see."

"Then what do you do at night?"

"We sleep, of course."

The other two heads popped the surface. Stevia gasped more air, though obviously she had not drowned. Havoc knew how she felt.

"They will need watertight bags," Theme said to Thesis.

The mer buoy nodded and disappeared under the water. Then Theme ducked her own head and made a weird clicking call.

"This is interesting already," Stevia remarked.

"They have sex while traveling," Havoc said.

"That, too."

Thesis returned with two translucent blue bags large enough to hold their packs and clothing. Havoc and Stevia took them and put their things inside.

Two sea creatures arrived. They looked like blue dolphins, with fat sleek bodies and strong flukes. Thesis put his face in the water and spoke to them. Then he beckoned Stevia, and Theme signaled Havoc.

The dolphins were wearing harnesses that dragged large nets. Havoc and Theme got into one net, heads pointing forward, with the bag at their feet, and he saw the other couple doing similar. Theme took hold of him and put her mouth to his, though their heads were not yet under water. Her large breasts pressed against him, warming him and shutting the surrounding water out. Her web-feet

curved around his ankles, holding them secure. Suddenly the dolphins set forth, dragging the nets, and they were moving swiftly down into deep water.

Havoc would have liked to look around, but two things prevented: his face was locked to Theme's face for breathing, and they were soon deep enough so that there was little light. So he breathed, satisfied that he wasn't missing much.

Now she showed him what she had promised. Without disengaging from his mouth, she stroked his body with her web-fingers, caressing his posterior. She reached between his legs from the rear, catching his penis and kneading it expertly. In a moment it became firm, and as it did, she introduced it to her cleft, so that he grew into her. Her legs had never parted, but there was enough of a channel there to provide admittance. He had never before had sex quite like this. She clenched internally, and just like that he was ejaculating into her. Neither their mouths nor their chests had changed position. She had simply locked him in place and efficiently milked him. He had not even had any great deal of pleasure from it.

His member shrank, but was not released; her flesh held him within her. Thus they traveled, locked together, buddy-breathing, and as securely connected at feet and crotch. She let him recover for a time, then began to work him again, her vagina stroking his penis into slow life and holding it there, pending the next peristaltic milking. It was not unpleasant, but neither was it particularly satisfying. The mer guirl was all business, no joy.

In due course the dolphins slowed, and the nets went slack. Theme brought Havoc out of the net without disconnecting, propelling them with flicks of her flukes. Only when their heads broke the surface did she let his face go, but held on to his member a moment longer, silently demonstrating that she still controlled this aspect. Then her muscles relaxed, and he slid out. She had milked him several times, and he had lost all interest in further sex.

They were in a moderately sized cave illuminated by faint blue light. Havoc and Stevia got on the shore. The air was comfortable, and there was some food stacked there. "We will return in the morning," Theme said, and the two mer folk disappeared under the water.

"How was it for you?" Stevia inquired.

"I thought sex with a mer guirl would be fun. I was mistaken. You?"

"Contrast. He was most ardent and potent and sensitive to my interest. A great lover, overall."

"Surprise. She was so thoroughly businesslike it was an extraction, a chore."

"She is now a former girlfriend. Tell me all the details."

Havoc had to smile at that. "She is a current sex partner, not a girlfriend. She simply clasped me to her, put me in her, and milked me of whatever I had. I wanted to rest, but she would not let me go; she had her will of me at her leisure, repeatedly. I am utterly drained."

"Oh, let me see," she said, intrigued. In a moment she verified that his member was lifeless. "You poor man." But she was suppressing a smirk.

"Thesis had to remain as close to you as Theme was to me, his mouth and body locked to yours; how did he make it interesting?"

"Confession: I was teasing you. He did much the same to me. He put it in and locked it there; soon it was as if I were riding a dead post. I was afraid it was going to chafe. He may have had satisfaction of me, but I had none of him."

Havoc found this perversely reassuring. "Why were you teasing me?"

"To make you jealous, of course, so that you would be more ardent for me. It was a womanly wile."

He laughed. "It was wasted. It will be hours before I have any further interest or capacity for sex, and then the guirl will milk me again."

"To be sure. At least we can have companionship without the distraction of sexual interest. I am no more interested in it than you are, this night. I don't even want to kiss; my mouth is raw."

Havoc agreed; his lips were bruised.

They ate of their pack rations, caught up with natural functions, and lay together on the cavern floor. They did not bother to unpack their clothes; the cave was warm enough. Stevia's hair became thick and soft, providing a place for him to rest his head. They talked of inconsequential aspects of their lives. They embraced without kissing or sexual response, making each other comfortable. Stevia was warm and soft, nice enough to be against. Perhaps it was the position, but she definitely seemed thinner about the middle, without having lost any breast or thigh.

"Do you know, I am getting to like you," Havoc said. "With neither romantic nor sexual titillation."

She rolled over and hugged him, pressing her breasts against him without proffering either mouth or genital. "You do me great kindness. This is the first time a man has ever been this close to me, naked, without sexual inclination."

"I think its the first time I have been like this with a young woman without sexual purpose."

"But when we recover our sexuality, I mean to have yours."

"You will surely get it."

They laughed together, and slept.

In the morning the mer buoy and guirl arrived. "From here we go deeper into the ground," Theme said. "There will be some current, and the passages are too small for the dolphins. There will also be strong magic."

"How will that affect us?" Havoc asked.

"Uncertain, since you aren't of the Chroma. You may be untouched. But our own qualities will

intensify. We shall have to get in and out swiftly, lest there be mischief."

"We understand."

Theme took Havoc, and Thesis took Stevia, as before, and locked mouths and brought them down through the blue water passages. Havoc hoped the guirl would not bother with sex this time, but he was disappointed; she clasped him close, set his member in her, and milked him as she propelled them with flicks of her flukes. It was evident that she intended to capture all the seed he could generate. He appreciated the irony: she was a shapely woman who wanted only one thing from him, and he would rather have had far less of it.

Their progress was slower than before, but actually faster than he might have swum on his own; her flukes were effective. He felt the power of her legs channeling down into the webbed feet, indefatigably. He made a mental note: never annoy a mer person in the water; they were supreme. They were moving through narrowing passages against an increasing current, forcing her to work harder, but she was up to it. He was a well conditioned martial artist, but in this medium he was not close to her match.

They came abruptly into air as the passage hit a pocket. Theme released him so they could walk. Thesis and Stevia were there ahead of them. "You will have to leave your bags here," Theme said. "The tunnel's too tight."

"But if we need to eat—"

"We can regurgitate some honey for you."

Havoc exchanged a glance with Stevia. He hoped the guirl was joking.

They moved on where the water resumed, and once again Theme possessed him and milked him. He had lost all interest in sex, but her body was able to force an erection and siphon out its content. The experience was on the verge of becoming painful, but he literally had no choice.

The surrounding water warmed. In fact it grew hot. And Theme's body and breath turned cool, enabling him to handle it. He was coming to appreciate the extent of the mer folk's adaptation to their environment. It seemed they could generate body heat or coolness, as required.

A tentacle touched them. Havoc was alarmed, but Theme lifted one hand and made some sort of gesture, and the creature retreated. Whether it was chemical, magical, or some kind of signal of friendship wasn't clear, but it was effective. Score yet another one for the guirl.

They came to another dry section. "One more hop," Theme announced. "But this one is difficult."

"Can we handle it?" Havoc asked. If she found it a challenge, it was surely formidable.

"I hope so. We'll get the two of you to the site, but then you must accomplish your business within seconds, or be overwhelmed by the effects."

Havoc nodded grimly. He was sure she was not being facetious. "Comprehension."

"Keep us close together," Stevia said. "I may be able to help him."

"Against the massed magic of the Blue Chroma Volcano?" Thesis asked dubiously.

"Maybe just enough to enable him to perform his task more quickly."

The mer buoy shrugged. "That would help."

They returned to the water, and Theme took possession of Havoc's parts again. She was certainly making sure she got value for her breathing air! If she did not get her second, it would not be because Havoc had held anything back. But he suspected that she had already nailed that aspect, and was merely draining the cup, as it were, so as not to waste a single drop.

The mer folk were right about the difficulty. Not only was the passage tight and the water hot, there was an intensifying blue color in both water and rock. It made Havoc's skin tingle uncomfortably. He knew it was the ambiance of magic flowing from the volcano. He felt a tremor, and worried that the cone was about to erupt, but knew that was unlikely. Any active volcano had continuing effects in its immediate vicinity. Full eruptions were not frequent; months could pass without one. But tremors and spot flows of water, gas, or magma could occur at any time.

Then something unpleasantly odd happened. Havoc knew it was a result of the potent magic, but that did not make it easier to bear. He suffered a vision in shades of red.

He tried to close his eyes, but it made no difference. No only did the vision remain, it developed sound and touch. It felt as if he were alone, no longer attached to the mer guirl, just drifting through viscous plasma, embraced by its encompassing whorls.

It was a storm looming ferociously as it closed in on him. He stood by or in a vast sea, with no place to seek shelter. Tendrils of cloud descended to touch the surface of the water, sucking up fluid, becoming waterspouts. Two of them circled each other, and then three, doing a deadly dance. Then they were shoved aside by a massive funnel that drove across the water, lashing it into red froth. The surface of the sea disappeared; now all was a giant spinning wall of water, keening piercingly. Thin films of spray whipped out ahead, knifelike in their thrust.

It struck. He cowered, unable to help himself—and his feet slipped off an unseen shelf. He dropped down, sinking beneath the surface of the sea, but found no reprieve; the storm was here too, roaring, battering at him without mercy.

The noise of the storm was deafening; he slipped, and slipped again, disoriented as much by the noise as the storm around him. Finally his feet found a ledge with crevices, and his toes dug in, halting the slippage. He spied a dreadful red sea monster coming after him, hissing as it opened its giant jaws. He had to step off the ledge, into the depths. For a sickening moment he plunged.

Then it was as though he floated a hundred feet above the ground, and he could see everything. He saw trees and animals, but they were weird. One was a giant snail with three antenna, sliding along at a respectable speed. Another was a weird creature with five legs, each ending in a wheel. It lifted one or two wheels at a time over obstructions, always having good balance on three wheels on the ground. There was also a flying creature that seemed to have one wing whirling overhead, supporting its flight. He had never seen anything like that on Charm; could such things exist elsewhere on the

planet?

It changed again. Now he was a woman, with breasts. Another woman was kissing him, seeking further closeness. She was a strong Translucent Amazon, and had hold of him (her?), and he lacked his male muscle, and could not escape. Nor did he want to. He was female, yet he yearned for sexual fulfillment—with another woman.

Well, love could be eternal, but sex tended to abate when exercised. Woman to woman was not normally his style, for rather more than one reason, but he thought he could do it when he had to. If that enabled them to make it through this siege, why not?

He released his female passion, and kissed the woman back. They clasped each other, and soon were into serious lovemaking. They rolled on the ground, embracing, stroking, squeezing, licking, bypassing clothing, overcome by the passion of the siege. And when the culmination came, they lay for a moment, savoring it.

"Better than a man," the woman whispered.

He was hardly ready to concede that. Still—

"Havoc!"

It was Stevia, pressing close to him, embracing his head with her spreading gray hair. She was fending off the blue magic, enabling him to recover his equilibrium. The vision of the red storm was gone, and the weird alien creatures were fading, but the female passion intrigued him. "Recovering," he said. "For the moment."

"Fetch it fast," Theme said tightly. Her blue form was scintillating, and not with joy; the intensity of magic was paining her.

Havoc looked around. They were in a small cubic chamber, accessible only by the water behind them. There was a kind of altar carved in the blue tuff, with a flat surface from which eighteen buttons projected.

He stepped forward—and immediately the magic swirled about him dizzily. He felt stifled by it, unable to breathe. He began to fall.

Then Stevia was touching him again. "Hold my hand," she murmured. "I can stave it off somewhat, but must be in contact."

Evidently so. He gazed at the altar, but now it was fuzzing into blue vagueness. "My eyes—can you help?"

"I will try." Stevia lifted her hair and put it over his head, forming a kind of hood. That did help; now he could see clearly again. Her gray magic was potent.

They moved together another step to stand before the altar. He reached out and pulled on the leftmost button. It lifted, bringing up a cover. Beneath was a small chamber. It was empty. He set the lid down and tried the next: also empty. So he continued, trying each in turn—and each was empty.



There was nothing in any of the chambers.

"Hurry!" Theme gasped.

Where could it be? There had to be something, yet there was nothing.

Then Havoc got a notion. "Illusion!" He lifted the first lid again, and this time reached into the chamber with his hand, feeling its sides and bottom. It remained empty, but he did the same with the second, and the third. And the bottom of the seventh chamber was illusory; his fingers found a small stone model of a five-legged insect. He lifted it out. This had to be it.

He had nowhere to carry it, so he popped it into his mouth, storing it between his teeth and cheek. Then he stepped quickly back, colliding with Theme. She knew what to do; she wrapped her arms around him, turned him to face her, put her mouth to his, and jumped feet first into the water.

Then they were moving downcurrent, away from the altar chamber. The mer guirl sought and possessed his member as she propelled them back through the cave tunnel. They were on their way back. His mission was successful—but he knew that he and Stevia would not be having any sexual relations any time soon, whatever her original intention had been. The mer guirl had wiped out any desire he might have had, for at least the next week. It was surely a similar case with Stevia. He knew there was no malice in it; it was just the way of the mer folk. He hoped Theme did get her second by him. But he hoped never to come this way again. He had not properly understood the reluctance of others to deal with the mers; now he did. At least he had the item—whatever it was. He had earned it.

As they moved away from the blue cone, so intimately linked, Havoc's mind returned to his brief vision of the storm, and suddenly he realized that it wasn't himself who had been in it, but Gale, his beloved. *She* was braving storm and monster—and he was unable to come to her rescue. Someone else was observing the weird creatures—probably Throe. And the female love—that could be Symbol. Their adventures were as challenging as his own.

He had his ikon, and was on his way back to Triumph City. But what of the others? Would they succeed similarly? He was not at all sure.

## Chapter 2—Dour

Gale bound her hair back and concealed it under a dusky cap, masking its luxuriant mass. She donned peasant clothing, deliberately baggy so as to hide her firm figure. She put her hammer dulcimer in a ragged basket-purse, similarly obscuring its quality. She intended to come across as exactly what she was: a barbarian wench with a talent for music. Definitely not the consort of the king.

She entered the local office of the Cartography Guild. The man at the desk looked up without speaking.

"Greeting," she said formally.

"Acknowledgment."

"I must have a guide for a distant and maybe dangerous mission."

"And how do you propose to repay such a service?"

"No fault association." This bothered her, for she would have much preferred to do it with Havoc, but she was of course familiar with the convention. She could handle it, and this was a proper occasion.

The clerk looked tired. "I think there would have to be something more than that."

"But that is all I have. I'm just a country girl."

"Precisely."

She had evidently masked her beauty a bit too well. "If I can persuade a guide?"

He shrugged, evidently concluding that the best way to get rid of her was to let her try. She could have read his mind to verify that, but it was hardly worth the effort. "Then it becomes a private arrangement."

"Appreciation."

He brought her to a chamber where several men and one woman were at a large table, working on a map. "Distant and dangerous mission. No fault."

They glanced up, surveyed Gale, and returned to their work, uninterested.

Gale walked around the outside of the table, pausing at each person. Now she couldn't read their minds, because anything more than a single person was like several talking at once: a Babel with only fragmentary thoughts intelligible. The overall impression was of mild curiosity and annoyance that she should waste their time.

She considered asking the nearest man, but the dragon seed buzzed in her ear. That functioned regardless of the number of people close by, but was far less specific, in this case merely signaling negation. That was what counted, though; somehow the seed knew, and she relied on it. She came to the woman, and there was another buzz. She was relieved; she was a man-woman, not a woman-woman, though she could play the role if she had to. She got another buzz at the third person, and the fourth, but not at the fifth and last. This was the one.

"Favor," she murmured.

"Aversion," the man said without looking.

"Allow me one minute in private to make my case." She had two reasons to get him isolated: to read his mind to verify his suitability, and to use her assets to win him over.

The man paused, then stood silently and led her to an adjacent chamber. He wore a comprehensive cloak, with an oblong shield slung across his back, a large helmet, and carried a long stout staff. Apparently this was his uniform, though the others were not similarly garbed.

His thoughts clarified as he stood alone. He had tried to turn her down not because of hostility, but because he had little notion how to behave with women. He was intelligent and honest, and his cartographic region was exactly where she needed to go. The dragon seed had indeed steered her correctly.

She faced him. "No fault," she repeated, and opened her shirt to show her unbound breasts.

His jaw dropped. He stared, not speaking. She did not bother to read his mind; she knew what any man would be thinking at this moment. She had one of the finest bosoms extant.

"Deal?" she inquired.

He finally spoke. "Joke?"

"Sincere. I need guidance and protection for a dangerous mission. I am a lovely woman and can not safely travel alone, even if I were able to navigate."

"But I—" He broke off, then tried again. "I am ugly." He was correct; he was a powerful but homely man.

"Permission." In a confrontation like this, that meant permission to touch him.

He opened his mouth, but did not manage to speak. She was picking up more of his reaction now. He was not aloof or arrogant, he was in awe of her, afraid to presume that she wasn't cruelly teasing him. Obviously no lovely woman had ever been interested in him.

"I take silence as acceptance," she murmured, and approached him. She put her hands on his left arm, squeezing the muscle there. She touched his face with her fingers, verifying that it was as it appeared. Magical illusion was unlikely here in the city of Triumph, but not impossible. "May I embrace you?"

"I would faint," he said, fiercely embarrassed. He looked much like a warrior, but she had already seen that he was extremely shy. "Please, lady, do not tease me further."

"Then let me simply speak to you. I am not teasing." She put her two hands on his elbows, facing him squarely. "I see you are not accomplished with women, but I believe you are a good and competent man. I can handle this on a no fault basis. I will never intentionally be unkind to you, and will be to you as a traveling companion is. Is this sufficient?"

He worked again to speak. "I—I am no good with women. I would not—not know how."

As she well knew. This put the relationship into her control, making it easier. "I will guide you in this, even as you guide me across terrain. I will make up what you lack, and perhaps leave you better able to deal with other women thereafter. Deal?"

He tried to speak, and this time failed. This was simply too much for him to believe.

"I take silence as acceptance," she repeated. "I will take you from here."

"I—" But he could not finish. His mind was in turmoil, because though he hated his own social incompetence, what she offered was beyond his wildest dream. Not merely a willing woman, but a lovely one.

She released one of his elbows and turned to stand at his side. She closed her shirt, becoming plain again. She stepped forward, urging him, and he stepped with her. They went out into the main chamber.

The others looked up, astonished. Gale marched the cartographer past them and out the door. She had her guide.

When they were alone in the hall, she broached the next stage. "Introductions."

"Agreed." He was able to speak when the matter was neutral. About the rest of it he was numb.

"I am Nonesuch, a songstress. That is my traveling identity, for no fault companionship. My mission is private, not to be known by others."

He nodded, understanding that though travel companionship often was no fault, some preferred to hide their real identities to avoid any possible social taint. "I am Dour Cartographer, competent in my district."

"Of course. That is why I chose you." Actually the dragon seed had selected him, but she trusted it implicitly. His district included her site, and he would be able to do the job.

"Question."

"Acknowledged."

"You pose as a peasant girl, but you are lovely enough to be a king's toy. Why do you come anonymously to me?"

"My mission and my life might be in peril if I were known to be doing this."

He nodded again. He was shy with her, but by no means dull about his business. "Yet you could have taken a more advanced guide."

"Not with anonymity."

"Understood. I will do my best. But as you may suspect, I am not—not socially apt."

That was abundantly clear, even without her mind reading and his prior statement. "I will manage," she said, smiling.

"As a matter of professional integrity, I must advise you that I am likely to be an embarrassment to you. I urge you to reconsider—"

"Declined."

"But to travel any distance—my company would become wearing. Better to change guides now, before getting committed to a caravan or outdoor trek."

"No."

He hesitated. "I am not sure you properly understand the nature of no fault travel. It—"

Gale caught his arm again, making him stop walking. She caught his head with her free hand, holding it in place. She stood on tiptoe to kiss him lightly on the mouth.

He wavered, seeming about to fall. She took firm hold of both his shoulders, steadying him. In a moment he clarified. "Apology. I fear I suffered a—a vision."

"No vision. I kissed you. At night I will do more. Now conduct me to this address." She spoke the coordinates.

"That is awkward territory." He was a cartographer; he could visualize exactly what given coordinates indicated in real terms.

"Understood. It is challenging and dangerous. You will take me there."

"I will take you there," he agreed. "Yet caution requires me to advise you that—"

She squeezed his arm warningly.

"You could die there!" he flared. "And I would be blamed."

She was tired of his well meaning arguments. He was surely correct, but she had to go on her mission regardless. She read his mind, verifying his confused sincerity. But she knew his weakness. She would have to seduce him now, to gain his unquestioning commitment. "Take me to a private place."

"Lady, I am only trying to—for your own safety—"

"Now."

He hesitated. "You want me to stop arguing."

"Yes."

"Nothing can change your mind?"

"Correct."

"I think I should decline to do it."

She brought him to another halt, faced him, and opened her shirt.

He had to look. His tongue ran around his lips. He was normally oriented, but still could not

really believe that anything of such nature would be offered to him. "You are not being fair!"

She opened wider.

He capitulated. "I am lost." Literally true; she saw the vision of her breasts obliterating all else in his mind.

Gale discovered that she rather liked playing the vamp. She had always known she was lovely, since capturing Havoc's love, but had preferred to play a slightly demure role. This was a change, and fun, as long as she knew it wasn't her real nature. Telepathy enhanced it; she knew the exact effect of her display. "We will not have this discussion again."

He now knew better than to attempt to protest that aspect. She could obliterate his arguments with just a twitch of her shirt. "But you must let me choose the route. There are dangers—"

"Of course." She turned in place, closed her shirt, slipped her arm inside his and made them resume their walk. He carried his staff with his other hand, upright. It was easy to control a shy man whose thoughts were open to her. "That is why I need a man who can handle himself well in threatening situations."

He took her to a caravan master, a balding older man. "Greeting," Dour said.

"Acknowledgment."

"We travel to the third Red Chroma zone on your tour."

"You are welcome, of course, Cartographer. You have toured with us before. But the woman must pay her way."

"I will cover her."

"I will cover myself," Gale said. "I am a songstress."

The caravan master studied her with an experienced eye. He recognized beauty when he saw it, regardless of the clothing. "You will dress for the occasion?"

He was asking whether she would show some flesh. Theoretically songs were their own object, but an indifferent performer could win over an audience if she looked good. "Agreed."

"Then welcome, songstress. We depart noon tomorrow. Meet me here two hours before."

Gale nodded. "Parting."

They were back in the wooden hall. "I have only my small spare chamber," Dour said. "If you wish to return tomorrow—"

"Negation." She pretended not to be aware of his thrill of excitement and fear at the news she would night with him.

His chamber was indeed small and spare, with little more than his bed and clothing. "You may take the bed. I am used to the floor when I travel."

Gale smiled, reading his suppressed desire. "No fault has begun. I will share it with you."

"But—"

"I think we need to break the ice. We'll do it now."

"I—I have never been with a woman."

She had already picked up on that. "Then it is past time."

He stood there, staring at his stout shoes. His mind was in turmoil; he wanted so much to have sex with her, but was unable to take any initiative in this respect. So she undressed and stood naked before him, no longer hiding the perfection of her body. She shook out her hair, letting the brown tresses play about her shoulders. She smiled.

He did not look at her, though he wanted to. So she approached him and undressed him, taking his staff and leaning it against a wall, noting in passing that one end was metallically pointed, the other squared off like a hammer. Weapon and tool and walking stick in one. She lifted off his helmet, then the shield at his back, and then opened and drew off his cloak while he offered no resistance. His bared body was well constructed and muscular; he was a powerful man, physically. There were scars to prove he had fought and survived. He was probably a tiger against an armed man, yet helpless before a woman.

Then she brought him to the bed. He was rigidly erect, and embarrassed about it; it was obviously awe of her rather than incapacity that inhibited him. He truly did not know how to proceed. She would have to lead him through it.

She had him lie supine on the bed. Then she got on him, full length, and kissed him, preparatory to setting his member within her. His mind was a welter of disbelieving hope. No woman had ever indicated interest in him, let alone approached him like this. But then she felt pulsing at her belly, and realized that he had already jettisoned; the approach and contact had been too much. He himself had not realized it was happening until too late.

"Apology," she said immediately. "I mishandled that." She got off him, fetched a cloth, and cleaned him up. "We'll try again in an hour."

"My fault," he said, flushing furiously. His mind was horrified; he feared he had thrown away his only chance.

"No. You lack experience. I do not. I will make it right, in due course."

He lay there with his eyes closed, not knowing how to respond. She had to get his suffering mind off this loss. So she lay beside him, taking his hand. "If you led us into a trap, and I died, you would blame yourself, for your expertise would be at fault. This is in effect my area of expertise, and I let you die. The blame is mine. But I will mend it, and we will not speak of it thereafter, to spare me embarrassment. Agreed?"

"No, that is not—"

She rolled over, coming to rest partly on him so that her breasts flattened against his chest. "Agreed?" she repeated with more emphasis.

"Lady, you know that—"

"Call me Nonesuch."

"Nonesuch. I have shamed myself."

She moved again, sliding across him to reach his mouth with hers. She kissed him. "Agreed?"

He formed a ragged smile, on one level appreciating the irony of the situation. His internal shame was finally abating, in part because she evinced no embarrassment about his situation. "Agreed."

She rolled off him. "I am really a village girl, not at all a lady. My upbringing is barbarian."

"No, lady!"

"But blessed by appearance. I love a man it seems I must not marry, but at least I can help him by accomplishing this spot mission. I will do my best never to embarrass you in public the way I have in private. Since men we encounter in the caravan are apt to wish to sire a fourth by me, I prefer to be fully committed elsewhere. I will be your woman, and I ask that you be ungracious if the matter of a fourth is broached by any man."

He was supposed to be possessive of her, sparing her other attentions. It was bad form for a man to decline to sire a fourth when a woman requested it, but women tended to be more choosy about sires. They could and did turn down offers. She was really telling him that she intended to be true to him alone, for this trip. "I will try," he said, bemused.

They talked a while longer. Well within the hour she saw that he was ready, so she proceeded to the act before he could get charged up enough to lose it externally again. She lay on him, and kissed him, and squeezed him where it counted, and brought him to a proper culmination within her. It was slow because he had lost his charge so recently before; this was a trick of management she had learned with Havoc, when she wanted him to take his time. She was not close to achieving her own climax, but she was quite satisfied with that; in this manner she was obliging Dour without really participating herself. This was business, not love. This man lacked the sophistication to realize that she had not given him all, and she hoped he would not catch on.

"Now that wasn't so bad, was it?" she asked as he subsided. She knew the rapture she had evoked in him, having received it from his mind as it happened.

"I love you!"

"No fault!" she reminded him sharply.

"Apology. No fault."



Thus they had established it. Men did tend to get romantic about sex, but it had to be understood that the two of them had no relationship outside of this tour. She would remind him of that as often as was required. His emotion probably would carry over beyond, but he would have no illusion about any larger relationship. One reason no fault encounters could be mutually delightful was that same lack of commitment; the future did not exist, only the joy of the present, that had to be exploited immediately or lost.

They cleaned up, ate from his limited supply, then retired to the bed for the night. Gale addressed the man again, preferring to take the edge off his resurging hunger so that she could get a good night's sleep.

"You don't have to—" he began. But his guilty desire was strong.

"When we are in the field, I will not question your judgment."

He was silent, acquiescing to her ministrations. This time she lay on the bed and had him approach her from above, taking more apparent initiative. He was clumsy, but did find the place. He hesitated to kiss her, so she caught his head and brought it down to hers. Soon he climaxed. That would probably hold him for the night.

She was correct. She slept beside him, touching him, and he did not interrupt her sleep with his eagerness. But in the morning, to be sure, she took him again. That should hold him for the day. She wanted no awkwardness in other company, or frustration that might distract him from their mission or safety.

"I—I am not questioning your judgment," Dour said. "But this—this is much more than technical compliance. It can't be because you are attracted to me."

Candor was best. "Correct. It is because I mean to deliver full measure, completely satisfying you, expecting the same of you in return. You will know that I am completely yours as long as we associate. I will know that I can trust you with my life."

"I will do all I can!"

She was sure he would. He was indeed already in early love with her. Men could launch into love in an instant, following their penises, in contrast to the more discerning nature of women. She had known this could not be helped. All she could do was make sure that he had no expectation of permanence. His mind indicated that he did understand.

They were at the caravan master's station on schedule. Several merchants appeared. "So we have a songstress," one remarked, glancing appreciatively at Gale, who was no longer concealing her prettiness.

"That is all she is," Dour said firmly.

"Of course, Cartographer." But the merchant had been fishing for something else. Dour was doing his job, being openly possessive of his lovely companion, exactly as she had asked him to do.

They left the pyramid of Triumph and proceeded to the staging area of the caravan. Gale and

Dour were given a curtained chamber in the lead wagon. They rode in style as the six-legged horses hauled the wagons to the fringe of a nearby Translucent Chroma.

"The Water Chroma specializes in mind reading," Dour murmured. "Try not to think clearly of anything you wish to conceal."

"I will try," she agreed. She did not tell him that she was able to read minds herself, and to mask her important thoughts. Probably he could be trusted with the information, but there was no point in spreading it without reason. For one thing, the ability of the Translucent Chroma folk meant that the Cartographer's secrets could not be kept from them. Actually at this time his private thoughts were all on her and their night together; others might marvel that she had given him so much, but would not discover any of her secrets from him. Probably the very intensity of his focus would distract mind readers from her mind, especially if she stayed close to him. Who cared what was in a lovely woman's mind?

The caravan came to a halt just within the fringe of the Chroma. It was glistening wet, because not only was Translucent the water magic, this was a water volcano, and its outflow was fairly steady. This far out, the water had had time and space to thin and cool, so the appearance was rather like regular land after a rainstorm. But this moisture was magic.

There was a wait while the Translucent contingent took note of the caravan and organized transport for it. Gale and Dour got out and walked around. "Have you crossed Translucent before?" Dour asked.

Actually Gale had; she had even had a no fault affair with a Translucent man, Placebo, and retained a fondness for that nice youth. But she did not want to go into that. "Not on land. The one I visited was a lake."

"Most Translucent is lake," he agreed. "But not all. This one is water-covered land, with a rather pretty volcano." He was animated as he spoke of geography; it was of course his specialty. He knew just about every aspect of his region, and would note any changes so they could be properly mapped.

There was the wail of a baby, followed by several more. A woman jumped out of a guard wagon and ran toward it. Dour and Gale happened to be standing beside it. "Greeting!" the woman cried as she ran by.

"Acknowledged," Dour replied to her back.

"The mother?" Gale asked.

"Amazon guard."

Gale had never met an Amazon. "Where is the mother?"

He glanced sidelong at her. "There are no mothers. This is a baby trading caravan."

Gale stared at him, horrified. "You didn't tell me that!" And she hadn't thought to look in anyone's mind.

"Is it relevant?"

"Yes it's relevant! I don't want to touch that business."

"It is legitimate," he said. "There is considerable demand. They take good care of the wares."

"Wares!"

"They are traders. Their wares are the babies and young children."

"Obscenity! I don't want to be here!"

"But this is the one caravan that is going where you are going, and doing it now. There will not be another for several days."

And she needed to accomplish her mission as rapidly as possible. In addition, the dragon seed had not buzzed to prevent her from associating with this caravan. She would have to live with this atrocity. "Apology. I did not specify type of caravan. You chose appropriately, considering."

He was out of sorts. "I did not know you objected. I would have spoken, but was distracted."

She had given him little opportunity to formulate possible objections to her travel. She had seduced him instead. It really was her fault. "I will make the best of it," she said grimly. "I will go see the babies."

"That may not be feasible."

"Why the expletive not?"

"Babies are valuable cargo. They try to conceal them, to prevent raiding."

"Contempt!" Gale marched toward the wagon aperture where the Amazon had gone. The dragon seed did not object.

Dour followed helplessly. "You must not!"

"Obliteration."

The Amazon was there, with two others who must have come from different directions. Each was holding a baby, and nursing it.

Gale stared. "Amazement!" She had assumed that the Amazons were single women.

"I could not prevent her," Dour said apologetically to the Amazons. "I tried to explain."

"Then she must participate," an Amazon said. She drew her baby from her bared breast and held it out to Gale.

"Aversion," Gale said. "I want no part of any of this affront."

"Threat," the Amazon said. "Take—or I drop."

"Outrage! I'll accept no threat from you!"

The Amazon let go of the baby. It started to fall. Gale dived for it, catching it before it hit the ground. "Appalled!" But she realized that she had been bluffed out; the woman would have caught the baby had Gale not done so.

The Amazon removed a thin chain from her neck. From it dangled a red gem. She put it on over Gale's head, so that the gem fell down across her shirt. "This is a demonic freshening stone. It travels with the baby, and goes with it to the adoptive mother." She opened Gale's shirt so that the gem dangled between her breasts. Gale, holding the baby, was unable to prevent this familiarity. The gem seemed to reach out to fondle her breasts with warmth, making them swell urgently. It was a weird sensation. "Now nurse."

"I will do nothing of the kind!"

The baby began to cry. The Amazon pushed its head so that its mouth collided with Gale's left breast. It found the nipple and took it in. It sucked, satisfied.

Gale stood openmouthed. "Impossible!"

"The Red Chroma specializes in demons, ectoplasm, healing, blood, and the like," the Amazon said. "The freshening stone is designed to enable instant breast feeding. Yours will strengthen soon. Relax and enjoy it."

Gale opened her mouth to protest this virtual rape, but discovered that there was indeed pleasure in the nursing. The baby was a warm little bundle of joy, and was abating the press of substance forming in her breasts. It was as though she had birthed this infant herself, and was giving it its first wonderful feeding. There was an almost sexual satisfaction in the process. She did not want to stop.

"Now you understand," the Amazon said.

Gale was beyond arguing. "What gender? What name?"

"Female, no name. The adoptive parents will see to that. But we will take the best care until that time."

"I—I don't want to give her up." Gale was surprised to hear herself say that, but it was abruptly true.

"Understanding. That is more of the work of the stone. When you remove it, your passion will fade along with your breasts, as mine has."

Gale remained appalled that there should be such open trading in babies, but she no longer had the will to condemn it openly. "Capitulation. Greeting."

"Acknowledgment."

"I am Nonesuch the Songstress." The Amazon surely already knew, but the formalities were important.

"Angina the Amazon."

That made Gale pause. Names were generally descriptive in some way, as was Gale's own: she had been named after the strong wind she had claimed to have encountered as a child, when covering up a secret matter. Havoc had been named for the havoc he wrought when taking vengeance against bullying boys who had threatened Gale. But angina was a form of physical ailment, painful spasms of choking or suffocating, or even heart trouble.

The woman saw her confusion. She produced a short length of cord: a garrote. "I don't suffer it; my opponents do."

Oh. She was of course a warrior woman, and that was a weapon that did not require male muscle. Gale glanced down at the baby she was holding. "May I continue—this?"

"Granted. You may take the baby to your wagon, if you wish, while we travel."

"Appreciation. Parting." Gale turned and walked back to her wagon as she changed the baby to her right breast, which seemed about to burst. Dour followed silently. He had, after all, tried to warn her.

"Chagrin," he said as he helped her climb into the wagon, for it was awkward with the baby, who continued to nurse blissfully.

"Negation. I ignored your cautioning, and reaped the consequence. It is, I discover, no bad thing." Had the dragon seed known this would happen? Probably not; all it knew was when there was a lie or a threat to her, and there had been neither.

The Translucent Chroma travel contingent arrived. They were semi-transparent men and women paddling large flat boats or barges across the liquid terrain. They brought these to the wagons, and the Amazons pushed one wagon after another onto the craft. When all wagons were loaded and secured, the Transluents resumed paddling—and the boats moved forward. But the little paddles couldn't be providing that much thrust.

"Magic augmentation," Dour explained. "The paddling is mainly guidance."

"Comprehension." Then she returned to the subject of the babies. "They do seem to be taking good care, though I am amazed to see Amazon warriors doing it."

"They are ideal dual purpose guards," he explained. "They can fight ferociously to protect the caravan and its cargo, but between times can sustain the babies. No diminution of their defensive prowess is implied."

"So I gather," Gale agreed, remembering the garrote. That was one wicked little weapon, capable of killing a person quickly and silently, or of merely subduing him if that were the preferred option. "But this business of selling babies—who would ever voluntarily give up her baby?"

"These are legitimate," he said. "But if raiders should get them, they would become illegitimate, for criminals have no decent standards. Sometimes parents are killed, and neighbors lack the resources to take their orphaned children. Sometimes a mother bears a fifth, and can't support it. The value of such a baby is enormous; that family can trade it for a significantly more comfortable situation. Some girls prefer not to marry, and to give up their babies. They apply for special license, and may produce eight or ten healthy babies in the course of their fertile careers. They are doing the adoptive parents a favor."

"Maybe," Gale agreed reluctantly.

"Without this service, those children would go hungry or find themselves in adverse situations. As it is, they go to families that truly desire them and can sustain them. The baby merchants are scrupulously screened; they abuse no babies."

"I suppose." The nursing little bundle was changing Gale's mind about the business. She had taken care of children in her family and village, but never before experienced this particular role.

The water craft were now moving swiftly across the terrain. The land was visible under a thickening coating of water that followed its contours, impressive water magic. Gale had thought all water had to be flowing in rivers or flat in lakes; this was another interesting aspect. To the side she saw the Translucent Chroma Volcano, a shimmering cone of water from whose apex flowed an even spread of fluid. No doubt an eruption would hurl water into the sky, and be dangerous, but this quiescent flow was nice.

Dour lifted his shield from his back, turned it around, produced a stylus, and began writing on it.

"This is a scroll?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes, in its fashion. It is standard cartography equipment. I see that the water terrain has shifted somewhat, so I am making a note."

"Of course." It did make sense; the reason Cartographers were constantly traveling was to keep abreast of the lay of their territories. They were always on duty, in this sense. He knew where he was going because he had made notes before, keeping his geographic information current. She simply had not considered the mechanism of it before.

He completed his note, which seemed to consist of coordinates and spot diagrams. "When I return to Triumph City, I will post my corrections on the master chart, as we all do," he explained as he returned his shield to his back.

Then she felt wetness. "Complication."

Dour saw—and smelled. "I must fetch an Amazon!"

"Negation. I am competent to change a baby. See if there is a basin and a fresh diaper handy."

He checked behind them in the wagon, and in a moment found what she needed. This was after all a baby caravan; baby supplies were surely in every wagon. He dipped the basin in the surrounding water while Gale lay the baby on a water resistant surface. She washed the filthy bottom, needing to

rinse the cloth several times, as the excrement was liquid rather than solid. Dour kept changing the water for her.

At last she had things all the way clean, and re-diapered the little form, and resumed her seat with the baby in her arms. The baby was no longer nursing, but sleeping, so Gale could relax.

"You are competent," Dour remarked.

"I was a big sister. I learned how to handle babies. All except—" She shrugged, glancing down at her bosom.

"Of course."

Then she thought of something else. "I should be able to put the baby down now, for a while, as her needs of input and output have been satisfied and she should sleep for at least an hour. I can't be sure of that at night. So this may be the expedient time to be a woman to you."

"Declined."

She glanced at him, reading his mind. This time he was not being shy; he meant it. Surprised, she explored farther, and discovered that he really liked the feeling of being a family man, traveling with a beautiful woman and a baby. As if they were married. He believed, probably with justification, that he would never have such an experience again, even in emulation.

She was touched, but did not want to reveal her telepathic ability, so questioned him. "Explanation?"

He struggled for the words. "You—you have been very—very good to me, and I—I hope I can—can share your embrace again. But this—I know I have no right—the baby—the feeling—"

He wasn't going to get it out, so she helped him. "It feels like a family?"

He nodded, blushing.

"That's sweet," she said, and leaned across to kiss him.

"You aren't angry?"

"At the notion of no fault travel marriage? No. Not as long as you understand—"

"That it is strictly a term liaison," he finished. "I do."

"Would you like to hold the baby?"

He was surprised. "You would allow that?"

"I am no more the mother of this child than you are the father. We are all playing roles."

He was gratified. "Yes, I would like to."

She gave him the baby, and adjusted his grip to support her properly. The infant stirred, waking, but then burped and went back to sleep.

The Translucent paddler nearest their wagon glanced across at them, evidently picking up Dour's mixed but highly charged thoughts. Gale leaned across again and kissed the cartographer on the cheek, in the manner of an affectionate wife. There was an explosion of appreciative feeling. The Translucent smiled and returned his attention to his paddling. He knew the business of the caravan.

They passed close by the volcano. A puff of vapor rose from it, and there was an extra surge of water from its brim, but this was merely a routine fluctuation. The barges slid down the descending slope, allowing the paddlers some rest. It was an easy voyage.

Until the monster came. Suddenly a huge greenish head popped out of the water, and rose on a long neck to survey the caravan. "Plesiosaur!" a Translucent cried, alerting them all. There was a scramble to assemble defensive magic.

But it seemed that the monster was not predatory at the moment, merely curious. The head could readily have swooped down to bite at a person, but it simply gazed for a moment, then sank silently back into the sloping water.

"Lucky for us," Gale breathed, relieved. Actually the dragon seed had not buzzed.

"The reptile knew the shield would stop it," Dour said. "It would have gotten burned on the nose if it came too close. Humans are not its natural prey, and it wasn't hungry anyway."

"You know the native life?" Gale asked, impressed.

"I have to. I am not always on a protected boat."

She squeezed his forearm. "That's nice." It was amazing how much private emotion such a simple gesture could generate. He was enjoying this minor role playing almost as much as he had the sex of the prior evening, albeit in a different manner.

In due course they came to the far side of the Translucent Chroma zone, and landed at a staging point. Horses were ready to pull the wagons to the next zone, so there was hardly any delay. They moved out of Translucent and into the edge of a completely black region.

"Black Chroma," Gale murmured with a shudder. But again, the dragon seed did not buzz. It found no danger, though her prejudiced imagination did.

"No need to be concerned," Dour said. The baby still slept peacefully on his shoulder. "The Blacks know when there will be an eruption, and don't allow transport then."

She was relieved. She knew that the Black Chroma volcanoes, unlike the others, were inverted: instead of blowing out, they sucked in. Anything caught within the range of their force was drawn into the black hole in the center and obliterated. Any volcano was dangerous when active, but like most people, she especially dreaded this type. The natives of course had their magic to protect them, but nonChroma folk were vulnerable.



They circled the wagons at the staging area. "I am advised that the cone is restive," the caravan master announced. "So instead of crossing the zone now, we'll night here and do it in the morning, if it is clear. Fall out for functions, food, and entertainment. Do not leave the demarked camping region."

The travelers debouched. The baby woke when Dour got down, so Gale took her back and put her to her breast. The freshening stone had remained active, and she was now more than ready to feed the baby again. They walked to the separate sections marked for excretory functions, and Gale managed to perform hers without disturbing the baby's nursing. Then she rejoined Dour for the midday meal, still with the baby. She saw a number of Amazons doing the same thing; they were taking good care of their charges. Now she understood why, on more than the intellectual plane. Maybe it was mostly the magic of the red gem, but it was a rare pleasure to be doing this. She had condemned baby trading in her ignorance; she would not do so henceforth.

After the meal, the caravan master approached Gale. "Performance," he said.

She nodded. It was time for her to pay for her transport. They had taken her on faith so far, but now she would demonstrate that she was indeed a songstress.

But what was she to do with the baby? She did not want to return her to the Amazons, for fear she would not get the same one back later. That might be foolish, in view of the random nature of her acquisition of the baby, and of course the time of this bonding was sharply limited anyway. But that was the way of it. So she tried for an alternative.

"Favor," she said to Dour.

"Granted." He was completely smitten, and would literally do anything for her.

"Join me in my performance."

He was abruptly appalled. "On stage?" Suddenly it was clear that his shyness was not just of women; he was subject to severe stage fright.

"You can do this. All you have to do is hold the baby and look at me."

"I don't know—"

"Fortunately I do know. You will be perfect." She held the baby in the crook of her left arm, put her right arm through his left, and urged him forward, into the ring. He was reluctant, but unable to resist her will. She had not changed to more revealing clothing, for this was not that type of show. She expected to satisfy this audience with her competence rather than her flesh.

She brought him to the center and parked him there. "Greetings," she said to the audience that surrounded them.

"Acknowledgment," the people replied together.

"I am Nonesuch the Songstress. My man will assist. Call us a family."

They nodded, understanding that she was about to do a song-skit. Those were popular.

She turned to Dour, who was frozen in place. "Take the baby, dear, for I have somewhat to say to you," she said clearly, and put the bundle into his hands. He had no choice but to accept. He was also half stunned by the appellation "dear," even in an open skit. So he stood holding the baby, somewhat awkwardly with his left arm, holding the staff with his right, as the audience chuckled. How many wives did exactly that, to husbands exactly as awkward about it?

Gale briefly embraced him and the baby, and kissed him tenderly on the cheek, the very picture of domesticity. Then she stepped back a pace, faced him, and sang a very old, very popular love song normally sung by a man to a young woman he was courting:

Believe me, if all these endearing young charms,  
Which I gaze on so fondly today  
Were to change by tomorrow, and fleet in my arms,  
Like fairy gifts fading away—

There was a ripple of laughter, for Dour was anything but young and pretty. He was a somewhat hulking ugly man, completely out of place in any such role. The humor was what made it a successful skit.

But it was a song, and Gale knew herself to be not merely adequate, but an excellent singer. She had specialized in music, and was competent to teach it; it was unlikely that many in this caravan had ever heard a finer voice than hers. Now she brought out her little hammer dulcimer, and put on her finger hammers. She played a chord, demonstrating her complete competence with the instrument, then accompanied herself as she sang into the refrain

Thou wouldst still be adored, as this moment thou art,  
Let thy loveliness fade as it will,  
And around the dear ruin each wish of my heart  
Would entwine itself verdantly still.

The laughter had faded, for the song was beautiful and so was she; they were listening raptly. She continued, concluding with the ancient analogy:

As the sun-flower turns on her god, when he sets,  
The same look which she turned when he rose.

And she favored the cartographer with a look of sheer feigned adulation, evoking a low moan of appreciation from the audience. It was almost as if he were bathed in a glow of grandeur, like that of the sun.

After a moment, the applause started. Gale glanced at the caravan master. He nodded. She had earned her keep.

She went to Dour and took the baby from his unresisting arms. She gave him another kiss on the cheek, then faced the audience and rocked the baby in the cradle of her arms. "Sleep my child, and peace attend thee, All through the night," she sang. There was another oooh of appreciation from the audience, for this was excruciatingly relevant to the situation of the caravan. Several of the Amazons rocked their babies, matching Gale's cadence. One did not: Angina, who had given her baby to Gale. Gale realized that each Amazon had a baby to care for, and so this one now lacked hers. But Gale couldn't bring herself to give it back.

She continued with other songs, and the merchants, families, and Amazons were all much with

her. Sometimes she used Dour as a prop, and sometimes she didn't; it hardly mattered. Gale had won this audience, as she had known she would. This was, after all, her true profession. When the show concluded there was sustained applause, and Dour was no longer afflicted by stage fright. He had become part of a supportive family, right there on stage.

Thereafter, the other members of the caravan were far more cordial than they had been. Part of it was the baby Gale still carried and nursed and cared for, but more of it was the songs. They had perhaps assumed that she would be a hack, depending more on her appearance than her skill with music; now they knew she was real. Among them was Angina. "Apology."

Gale did not try to embarrass her by pretending ignorance. The woman had thought to put her in her place, but instead Gale had won her respect. "Needless." She hoped the Amazon would not ask for her baby back.

"Perhaps." The Amazon departed.

That evening Gale did set the baby down and had sex with Dour, having read the desire in his mind. "You did well with the song," she murmured.

"I was frozen."

"Typical male response to the situation." There was just enough truth in that to exonerate him.

"Oh, Nonesuch, you are so good to me!"

She kissed him and received his pulsing. "Your turn to repay me will surely come."

In the morning the Black Chroma authority deemed the volcano to be sufficiently quiescent for travel. Black men pushed the wagons to a large portal in the slope of a black hill. Therein were huge black bubbles that surrounded the wagons, encapsulating them. Suction brought the bubbles rapidly through a long tube-tunnel. There was nothing to be seen, as the tunnel walls were black and there was no light, but they felt the motion.

"Black Chroma folk live mostly in tunnels," Dour explained. "That protects them from getting sucked into the volcano when it implodes. They use residual suction to move their bubbles through travel tubes."

"It's actually quite comfortable," Gale said. "But I'll be glad to get to the next Chroma zone."

"I won't."

"You like blackness?"

"I like every moment with you."

"No fault," she reminded him again, this time without sharpness.

"That is why I want this mission to last."

She kissed him, and felt his rapture from the gesture. It was as intense in its fashion as his sexual climaxes, but of another nature.

Soon the bubbles emerged at the far side of the zone, and the wagons rolled out to the staging area. There were horses ready for them, and the caravan set off for the next Chroma. "Which one is that?" she inquired.

"White."

"That should be interesting." For the White Chroma's specialty was the magic called science, in some ways rather odd. Of course all magic was odd to Gale, who had been brought up with only marginal knowledge of it. She had learned a lot in the past year.

The dragon seed buzzed. That meant danger, or wrongness, or that someone was lying. Gale looked about, but saw no likely threat. The wagons were rolling along the dirt road without impediment.

"There is a problem?" Dour asked, noting her distraction.

"A foolish intuition, perhaps."

"I have observed little that is foolish in you."

"I worry that something bad may happen. Needlessly, it may be." But she knew there was something, because the dragon seed was never wrong.

"Your concern is my concern." He drew his shield up over his head and set it in front of him. He gripped his staff, looking right and left.

Suddenly there was shouting. Garishly garbed men appeared, brandishing hand weapons. "Yield! Yield!" their leader screamed.

"Expletive!" Dour swore. "Raiders!"

"What can we do?" Gale asked, alarmed.

"Not much, if the Amazons can't fend them off. They're after the babies."

"Negation!" Gale held the baby close to her bosom.

"They won't kill us if we give it up."

Gale was in a fury of indecision. She did not want to give up the baby, but would be unable to fight effectively while holding it. She had a knife and knew how to use it, but had to be free to move rapidly and unpredictably.

The wagon lurched to a stop as it was surrounded by rough men wielding clubs. The horse was confused, and the wagon ahead had stopped, so it had nowhere to go.

Raiders charged the wagon from either side. "Babe here!" one cried. Then, to Gale: "Hand it over, slut!"

Gale knew the sensible thing to do was to obey. The raiders clearly outnumbered the defenders, and were free to use their weapons effectively. But she couldn't. "No!" She expected the dragon seed to buzz, but it didn't.

"Then we'll do it the hard way." The man lifted his club.

But another beside him stayed his hand. "Look at that lassie! Got more than tits. Take her too, for double duty."

Double duty: sex and nursing. Now it was too late to turn over the baby, even if she could make herself do it. Did the dragon seed regard robbery and rape as wrong, if she were not physically hurt?

"Got it." The first man dropped his club and grabbed for Gale.

And halted, for her knife was pointing at his nose. Some women were helpless, but Gale was not. This was as much bluff as substance, considering her situation with the baby, but at least she could make him cautious.

"Okay, we'll knock her out first," the second man said. He raised his own club. Gale knew she would not be able to stop that, for it was a longer range weapon than her blade, and she had to try to shield the baby.

Then the blunt end of Dour's staff rammed into the raider's forehead, hard. He was knocked back and fell to the ground, unconscious. The staff was already reversing to knock the head of the man on the other side of the wagon. The cartographer really did know how to use it; he had hesitated only because he wanted to give Gale a chance.

This of course meant trouble. Raiders swarmed in from both sides, yelling. Dour set his shield across Gale, protecting her and the baby. Then he struck with the staff again, knocking back two more men. But two more were already looming, their clubs lifted, and another man grabbed the staff, nullifying it. Gale knew that they had lost, and that she would be clubbed unconscious and probably raped repeatedly before she woke—if she woke. Dour would simply be killed. She should never have resisted, forcing the issue.

Yet the seed had not buzzed. It had given warning of the ambush, then remained quiescent. Evidently it knew of some way out of this danger, if they could find it.

A knife appeared in the face of the man on Dour's side, and the one on Gale's side fell back, gagging. He had been garroted. The Amazon woman had come.

Gale stabbed at the hand of the man holding Dour's staff, forcing him to let it go. As he did so, the staff lifted and jabbed him in the throat, and he fell back, also gagging.

Angina stepped clear of the men and leaped onto the back of the horse. She slapped its flank, and it plunged forward, guiding around the wagon in front. The wagon bounced across the terrain, toward the white zone ahead.

The other horses saw this and almost mindlessly followed the leader. Soon all the wagons were lurching along, shedding raiders who were caught by surprise. Amazons aboard them immediately took advantage of the situation to attack any raiders remaining on the wagons and dump them off. But the others, after a moment of amazement, charged along the sides, pursuing the fleeing caravan, and they were able to run about as fast as the harnessed horses were. In fact they gained, and were catching hold of the wagons, trying to slow them or get on them to take over.

Angina glanced back, saw that, and urged their horse to a faster lumbering gallop. The wagon gained speed, and with it the others did too, their horses keeping the pace. But it was an extremely bumpy ride, because the road was not made for racing, and they were not squarely on it.

Ahead the land turned pale, and then white. They were approaching the fringe of the White Chroma. But would that save them? None of them could invoke the White magic. So they might be lost anyway, unless White Chroma residents showed up to help. So far there was no sign of them; the white land was bare. Probably they would take an hour or two to show up, as had been the case in the other Chroma. That was too late.

Indeed, that was the way the raiders saw it, too. They charged right into the white terrain, surrounding the caravan. Several managed to get ahead of the horses and make them stop by shouting and waving their hands. So Angina's gallant effort had been for nothing.

"No more Mister Nice Guy!" the raider leader cried. "All we wanted was the babies, but now we'll teach you a lesson. We'll take your wagons too, and rape the Amazon sluts before we kill them." His wild eye spied Gale. "And you started it, you lovely wanton; we'll keep you for a permanent sex slave and milk spigot, until you wear out."

Dour lifted his deadly staff. "You will not," he said grimly.

Gale was frightened, but tried to caution him. "They should let you go, if you don't antagonize them further." She had no real assurance that the dragon seed would buzz if he were about to die; she was the one it attuned to.

"I will not leave you."

The leader considered. "Cartographer, eh? We don't need trouble with your kind. So we'll let you go, and the rest is none of your business."

"Go!" Gale whispered urgently.

"You will not let me go," Dour said to the raiders. He recovered his shield from Gale, jumped to the ground, and stood protectively before her. "You will not have this woman."

The leader shrugged. "Have it your way, then; we'll just kill all of you, so there's no evidence what happened to you. Then your people won't have a case." He signaled, and a group of men approached, clubs ready.

Gale could not read the grouped minds; there had to be some reasonable isolation to get the signal of a single mind. But the group impact was overwhelming: they were serious about killing him. Why had he insisted on making a target of himself, when the Cartographers normally had immunity to

civil disturbances and brigandage? He was smitten with her, of course, but had to know that he could not save her or the caravan. Only if he got away could he report on this outrage.

Five men were coming at Dour, but they were getting in their own way. One stepped forward to swing his club, but the Cartographer's staff leaped out and clouted his head, knocking him back. Two others leaped in before the staff could recover position, but Dour's shield came up to intercept them, shoving them back in a tangle. The man really knew how to fight!

But the raiders kept piling in. Gale saw one dive for the shield, grabbing on to it, while another swing viciously at the Cartographer's head. Gale screamed—

And a cord snaked out and wrapped around the club, yanking it to the side. The Amazon had re-entered the fray, saving Dour again.

Still the raiders came on, determined to overwhelm the cartographer. It seemed impossible to hold them off much longer.

"Halt!"

Gale looked, and saw a man standing nearby, holding a small object. He was obviously of the White Chroma, because he was completely white, from clothing to skin.

The men around Dour paused. The raider leader looked around. "There's just one of him! Take him out!"

The raiders regrouped, orienting on the White man. They charged.

There was a loud bang, and a puff of smoke before the White man. A raider clutched his belly and plowed into the ground. But the others continued their advance.

There were two more bangs, with more smoke, and two more raiders fell. What was happening?

"There's only one!" the raider repeated. "Get him!"

There was another bang and smoke, and this time it was the leader who fell. At that point the remaining raiders broke and ran. In moments all of them were gone.

Dour strode forward to meet the White man. "Greeting, White. Dour Cartographer."

"Acknowledged. Sixgun."

They shook hands. "Pleasure, Sixgun. I was afraid you would not make it in time. We were hard pressed."

"We are thinly spread on the fringe. I heard the commotion and came as soon as I could."

Gale realized that Dour had been trying to distract the raiders until White help could come. He had been this way before, and knew that help was likely. He had gambled with his life and won.

Merchants and Amazons were appearing at every wagon, starting to put things in order. It seemed that most of the action had been at Gale's wagon, because of the resistance Dour had made, and that had eased the attacks on the others.

Now a White wagon came down the road, moving rapidly. But there was no horse drawing it. Gale stared.

The caravan master approached the lone White warrior. "Appreciation."

"Accepted."

"Confession: I feared we would not escape. That was a worse raiding party than any we have faced before."

Dour returned to Gale. She got out of the wagon and kissed him. "Gratitude."

He shook his head. "Necessary."

"You saved the baby—and me."

Angina spoke. "And I saved *you*, Cartographer. Twice."

He faced her, nodding. "How may I repay you?"

"Sire my fourth."

Dour froze. The Amazon had just asked the one favor this man could not readily oblige. "I—I can't—"

But he would have to. "This is not a request you can decline," Gale murmured to him. Then, to Angina: "He is—awkward. May we talk?"

"When we ride," the Amazon agreed. She went to see to other business.

In due course the Whites had piled the bodies of the raiders to the side, poured white fluid over them, and set fire to it. There was an instant white blaze, consuming flesh and bone alike, making sickeningly sweet smoke. They had no sympathy with criminals.

Each caravan wagon was hooked to one of the horseless White vehicles, which then hauled it exactly as the horses had. "This is weird magic," Gale remarked.

"It is Science Magic," Dour explained. "It specializes in machines of all kinds, which need governing by people in much the manner animals do."

"How did the White warrior, Sixgun, kill the raiders?"

"He held a little machine in his hand, that expelled small metallic balls at great velocity. They punctured the bodies of the raiders, disabling or killing them."



"Amazing."

As they moved along, Dour brought his shield around again, and made another note. "Brigands," he explained. "We track them as we can, though they normally don't remain long in any one region. Still, the pattern of their appearances can be informative."

"I hope so," Gale said, shuddering.

Angina appeared. She must have been at the back of the wagon, so was able to join them while it moved at rapid velocity behind the metal horse. "Now we talk," she said tersely.

Gale knew the dialogue would be up to her. "Dour is a fine man, but he lacks experience with women. He does not feel up to performing the particular service you require."

"He is with you, isn't he? Hasn't he done it with you?"

"He has. But I—had to lead him through it. It would be different with you."

"It sure would! I won't seduce him. All I want is his seed, nothing else. No sweet talk, no handling."

"He can't do it that way." During this interchange, Dour sat silent, unable even to address the subject. But Gale knew that she was correct, hardly needing to read his mind.

"Let's see if I have this straight," Angina said. "He's as weak with women as he is strong in combat."

"Affirmation."

"Frustration! I can't do it either."

"Then why do you ask for—"

"I've seen Dour before, on other trips. He's a good guide and a good guard. He never messed with women, so I figured he liked men. His business. But when I saw him with you, I knew no woman could lead him like that if she didn't have control of his lust. So he's a prospect. But it has to be dead body, for me."

Now Dour managed to speak. "Why?"

The Amazon grimaced. "I guess you're entitled to know, if you're to sire my fourth. But it's not something I care to spread about."

"Neither is Dour's hesitation with women something he cares to advertise," Gale said.

"Deal. Private dialogue." Gale and Dour nodded, and Angina continued. "I'm really a conventional housewife. I love my man, and he's the only one ever to touch me. He understands me; he makes me soft as no other can. I had three by him, and that made me due for the fourth by some other man, but I just couldn't do it. I'd freeze up, hating it. I'd have to be raped, and I'd kill the man

who tried it. So I refused. And my village banished me. Until I get my fourth."

Now Gale understood. "You have to submit to something you can't stand, or lose your man and family."

"That's it. So I was never a weak woman, physically, and I became an Amazon for the past year, and had no complaints. I could do both parts of this job."

"I have seen you before too," Dour said. Now that the subject was not his incapacity, he could talk. "You're a tough fighter, but you never abused a baby."

"It's the closest I can come to the family feeling," Angina said.

"And I took your baby," Gail said, feeling guilty.

"I gave her to you, to shut you up. I thought you'd give her back, once you understood."

"Chagrin! I didn't know."

"It was better that way. I am not bereft; I have two others."

"Two others?" Gale was astonished.

"Each Amazon has charge of three babies. She can nurse one at one breast, then nurse another at the other breast while the first breast recharges for the third baby. Policy prevents more; even three suckers debilitates her body in the course of the tour. We all have to eat well, but that amount of nursing gets ahead of us. So you have eased my burden. It freed me to range more widely, guarding the caravan. I saw you looking around and figured you knew something, so I watched more closely. But you weren't in with the raiders; you fought for the baby."

"Shock! I would never—"

"I couldn't be sure. Sometimes there's infiltration, so we're careful. But you're no fake as a songstress, and then you fought, and made Dour fight, so I came to help."

"I was nervous," Gale said. "I thought there could be danger, but I didn't see any. The very idea of giving up the baby—"

"Understood. And when I saw you sing to Dour, with the baby—I knew I just had to get back to my family, whatever the cost." She paused. "Confession: it's my job to defend this caravan. I can't demand a fourth for doing my job."

Dour looked relieved, but Gale couldn't let it go. "I took your baby, more than you meant. Maybe I can give you something back. I'll help Dour do it."

Both Cartographer and Amazon looked at her quizzically.

Gale felt herself flushing. She plowed on. "I know how to seduce a man. I can tell you, each of you, what to do, if you wish. So you can—can get it done."

"I know how it's done," Angina said wryly. "I just can't do it on my own. My man—he knows what to say, how to touch, and I love him. It's a whole different Chroma."

"Dour knows the mechanics too," Gale said. "Similar problem. But I got around it, and I think—"

"You have a face and body like the King's mistress. I don't."

Gale was momentarily startled by the analogy. She *was* the King's mistress, or would be if only she and Havoc were free to breed. But it was only an analogy. "It's not just appearance. It's actions, and words. Words especially. They fire the imagination, they signal desire and acceptance. I know the words."

Angina shook her head. "Sounds weird to me. I shouldn't have asked."

"Observation: I am with Dour on a mission. After it is done, I will go my way and he will go his, having no more ability with other women than you do with other men. He needs to learn how to be with other women. Maybe even other Amazons, if they are interested."

"Some are," Angina said.

Dour jumped. "I never—"

"You're a good man, and Amazon duty gets dull. Others aren't limited like me. Nursing turns them on, and they get hot for a man, but the merchants have their wives along, by no coincidence, and the wagoners are low types. Most women prefer sex with men they can respect, and any Cartographer is that, and you especially. They'd meet you halfway, no fault, if you showed interest."

"I could never—"

"I could spread the word. They would come to you, as I did, only they would have more action. Some like taking the initiative. They're not looking for fourths, just for fun. You're not handsome, but you're all man, and that's ideal for diversion. All you'd have to do is agree, and let them have their way."

This was an unexpected break. "As you let me have my way," Gale said to him.

Dour sat with his mouth open. "I—I can't believe—"

Angina looked at Gale. "I think you're right. He needs practice. But how can you make him do it with me, when I can't meet him halfway?"

"You're an Amazon. You can follow orders."

"Affirmative. But—"

"Let me give the orders."

"You'd be right there?"

Gale blushed again. "I think I would have to be. To make it work."

The Amazon shrugged. "I'm game if he is. One time. More if it works. It usually takes more than one shot to be sure of a baby."

"I'm not—" Dour started.

"He's game," Gale said. "We'll need a private place."

"Next staging area has rooms."

"Done."

"But—" Dour said.

Gale smiled. "Quiet, or I'll kiss you."

"But—"

She leaned across and kissed him.

"I couldn't do that," Angina said.

"I think you could—in the dark."

"The dark," the woman repeated thoughtfully.

The Cartographer remained out of sorts. "Darkness doesn't matter. The—the feel unnerves me as much as the sight."

"It will be like a song skit. You'll know it isn't real, but you'll be able to perform."

"A song skit." That registered, for he had been successful there despite his awkwardness.

"The worst that can happen is failure," Gale said. "None of us will be talking about it, so no one will know."

"I'll be there." The Amazon disappeared around the wagon.

Dour turned to Gale. "This is impossible! I—you—you have captivated me. But anyone else—"

"I'll be gone after the mission," she repeated. "No fault. But you can have other women, if you learn how. They all have similar equipment, especially in the dark. You won't need me."

"But you—only with you can I—"

"No fault," she repeated. "You may love me if you wish, but you can't keep me. Another woman you might keep. If you learn how."

He licked his lips. "I will try."

"Good. And you *will* have me for the duration of this mission, after you are done with Angina. I am not foisting you off on anyone; this is a passing obligation. You must give her a life for your life that she saved."

He was silent, his mind in turmoil. She let him be, and nursed the baby.

Her own mind was not completely sanguine, however. Three babies per Amazon! No wonder she hadn't seen the warrior women out and around much; if they weren't scouting ahead for danger, they were in keeping up with their hungry babies. And she had felt the vaguely sexual pleasure of the nursing herself; those women were getting heavy doses of it. Indeed, there was a market for Dour's sexual passion. His future missions with this caravan could transform his success with women. She would do her best to make it happen; that way she would not have to feel guilt for arousing his passion and then relegating him to a resumption of painful celibacy.

The White engine hauled them to the far side of the Chroma, where there was a staging area with rooms, as the Amazon had said. They made camp, joined in with supper and entertainment—Gale sang more songs—and the three of them took a room.

"I really don't think—" Dour said.

"He's right," Angina said. "This was a bad idea."

"No, it's a good idea," Gale said. "One of you needs a baby. The other needs experience. Let's give it a try."

Both looked glumly at her. Gale herself had considerable doubt, but suppressed it. "We'll do it in darkness. Woman on that bed, there, naked, supine. Man across the room, also naked. I will sing a ballad."

Amazon and Cartographer exchanged a silent glance. Both thought she was crazy. But both were willing to cooperate to the extent they could. Both had formidable needs, with formidable impediments. Gale was picking up the tenor of their thoughts. Normally she could read only one person at a time, but their thoughts were similar now, so the medley was roughly intelligible.

"Turn out the light," Gale said. She pulled the string that dangled from the bright glassy bulb suspended near the ceiling, glowing by the odd Science Magic of this Chroma. The brightness clicked abruptly off, making the darkness suddenly complete. "Assume your stations, as described. Then follow my song." She found the other bed in the dark, and sat on it, laying the sleeping baby beside her.

Neither protested, though both retained strong doubts. They stripped efficiently, and Angina lay on the bed while Dour stood across the room.

Gale brought out her dulcimer and donned her little hammers. She played a tune, beginning the presentation. "This is the story of the Slumbering Belle," she announced. Then she sang, going into a song in her repertoire, a ballad that described the manner a warrior woman of Planet Mystery had been caught by a spell, rendered unconscious, stripped, and robbed of her clothing and possessions.

All except her primary weapon, the garrote, which was magic and dangerous for anyone else to touch. Gale was adapting, making it apply to the present situation. The garrote was laid across her neck; the brigand had dumped it there without handling it, and could not use it to throttle her. In this position it did not choke her; its magic had a slower effect, gradually fossilizing her body without actually killing it, turning to living stone. Thus she became a virtual statue, seemingly dead except for her innermost core. She had been left in a cave; now foliage grew up around her body, enclosing and to a degree protecting her, hiding her from discovery. So her companions never found her; they assumed she was deceased. But she wasn't, quite.

Gale tuned to the Amazon's mind as the story proceeded. Angina was getting into it, finding the role compatible. She lay absolutely still, feeling her limbs and head become cold while her belly retained some life. She could slumber for a thousand years this way and hardly notice the passage of time.

Meanwhile, Gale sang, an explorer, a hardy man dedicated to fathoming the unknown reaches of the planet, had traveled widely but never penetrated this particular region. He found it intriguing. He had never before seen terrain quite like this, or foliage. It was as if it concealed some subtle secret—and he was determined to discover what that might be. So he forged on, silently, carefully avoiding the stinging nettles and grasping vines, using his trusty staff to test the solidity of the ground.

Gale tuned to Dour's mind. The Cartographer was in motion now, making his way through the darkness toward the bed. He too identified, finding the story compatible. Gale amended details to make it more so, so as to turn him on increasingly to the wonder and challenge of it. Much could be done in story, especially when listeners identified well with the leading characters. That was a human magic that was independent of the Chroma magic of the planet.

Soon the explorer found the entrance to the cave, masked by the foliage. He made his way inside, and discovered the Slumbering Belle. He touched her toe, and it was stone. He recognized the situation: she had been petrified. Sometimes it happened. He saw that she was a fair figure of a woman who surely would be better off in the living state, so he was minded to save her. But there were cautions. First, he saw the garrote still lying across her throat, and recognized it as the mechanism for petrification. It was magic, of course, and in this partial position its killing potency was muted, so it stunned rather than killed. He lifted it clear with the tip of his staff, but that did not restore the Belle. She was too far gone. That meant that she had been here for some time, as the foliage around her suggested. Her whole body was stone, except for the core.

The explorer considered. There was only one way to save a far-gone living statue: an injection of the essence of life into her warm core. That would reverse the cruel course of petrification, and restore her torso and then her extremities to flesh. But it was not necessarily safe to do. She was evidently a warrior woman, trained and experienced in fighting and killing. If she woke, she would not be aware of the long interim of sleep. She might think that he was the one who had stripped her and left her there to fossilize. Indeed, she might suppose he was raping her, and would fight back, possibly using her garrote to render him into a similar statue that would lie there for a long time, waiting for some kind woman to rouse him by addressing *his* core. So he would have to do it quickly and depart. She would never know who had revived her.

Gale remained tuned to their minds. They were in harmony: the Amazon hoped the man would save her from her stone age, while the Cartographer pondered how best to accomplish this safely. Gale encouraged them by singing more descriptively.

The explorer gazed at the Slumbering Belle and saw that she was fair. Her breasts were like young melons, her thighs like full wineskins, and her face like a perfectly carved emulation of a Glamor. She was desirable, and it would be a pleasure to embrace her. (But the real Amazon was tall and spare, not matching the description well. Gale amended her theme, increasing the sensuousness of the music, so that it became easier to visualize the body as voluptuous.)

But she was cold stone, so he didn't want to touch her, as that would ruin the effect. So he held himself above her and addressed just the access to her core. His member touched only the one soft part of her, the cleft between her parted legs, and nudged into the cool avenue there. (But the real Cartographer was suffering nervousness, not daring to complete such direct and personal action without encouragement from the woman. Gale strengthened the urgency of the theme, attuning to what increased his desire, making him potent.) It found the channel and slid slowly inside, discovering the lingering warmth of her core. Only when it was all the way inside did it pump out its essence of life. (The music became strident, intensifying the urgency, the sheer need to culminate, until it had to happen.) With the first pulse the core responded, animating, and the tightness eased. The warmth of life spread out through the belly of the woman. Each subsequent pulse added to the effect, until by the sixth one her arms, legs, and head were reviving. It was time to get away before she opened her eyes and saw him.

He jerked out and retreated just in time, for the warrior woman was indeed waking. She grabbed her garrote, but the explorer was gone, fleeing the cave with nothing but a rather pleasant memory to show for his act of restoration. He had done the right thing: he had restored the stone maiden to life, and that was to an extent its own reward.

Gale's song ended. The deed had been done, and the seed of the Cartographer was within the Amazon. Her song had sufficed to make it possible.

"Appreciation," Angina said. "That is exactly the way I needed to have it."

"Acquiescence," Dour said. "I did not think I could do it, that way, but that story—that music—made it feasible."

"There should be two more times, to make connection more likely," the Amazon said. "Perhaps—perhaps the next time it will not be necessary to avoid touching the rest. If that makes it easier."

"It would," he agreed. "The—the breasts—if that can be tolerated."

"How can a statue prevent a man stroking or kissing her breasts or her face, if that is his inclination?"

"It would signal no interest on her part," Dour agreed. "No lack of faithfulness to her husband. She is not responding, merely enduring what she must."

"She is merely there," the Amazon said.

"Merely there."

Gale was relieved. They were working it out, following this evident success, and the other acts

of impregnation would be easier, not requiring the song.

"Gratitude, Nonesuch," Angina said. "You enabled it. I shall return to my family with my fourth."

"Gratitude, Nonesuch," Dour agreed. "You have shown me that it is possible to perform with another woman, even one who is completely passive."

"Physically," the Amazon said. "Emotionally I was much there. I wanted to be revived."

"Acknowledged," Gale said. "I am glad it worked out. I can absent myself the next night—"

"No!" the two said together.

Then they all laughed. "As you prefer," Gale agreed. "Now we should sleep."

At that point the baby woke. Gale put away her hammers and dulcimer and lay on her bed, nursing. She was well satisfied with this particular project. She was also glad she didn't have to keep up with three babies.

Soon Angina had to go to feed her remaining two charges. "I want it understood that I have duty elsewhere," she said. "I am not being driven from this room by the proximity of a man."

"Understood," Dour said. Gale felt his appreciation for the Amazon's statement. She had implied that she would have remained to share the bed with him, had she been free to do so. It might be a false implication, but the verbal gesture was nice.

"As it is, you will have to settle for me," Gale said, joining him with the baby. "Keep us warm." This was a gesture on her part, demonstrating that his act of sex with the other woman had not alienated her. Indeed, she was pleased with the success of her ploy.

In the morning the horses came and hauled the wagons across to the fringe of the next Chroma. This one was Red, but it was not the one Gale was going to. They would have to cross this and another Red before reaching the one she needed.

Something touched her. Gale recognized the touch. "Swale!" she said subvocally. "Come on in."

The succubus spirit siphoned into Gale's body via her genital avenue and joined her mind. *Routine tour*, she said voicelessly. *I am checking the four missions to be sure they are on track.*

*Mine is, so far. All is well elsewhere?*

*I checked Havoc. He is traveling with a Gray Chroma girl, not one we know.*

*A new girl? How'd he find her?*

Swale made a faceless smile. *Random.*

*I don't believe it.*



*Maybe not random, then. The Red Glamor visited him when he was on the pot—*

*On the pot!*

*I think she likes to tease. She made him hot for her, and vanished without completion. I got that from his mind when I visited him. She told him to go anonymously to a section of Triumph and accept the first person who agreed to accompany him. That was Stevia.*

*Stevia?*

*Very sweet girl. Her Gray Chroma magic shields him from magical observation. It was a struggle for me to get close to him.*

*Gale nodded. Makes sense. Is she pretty?*

*Mediocre. But they're traveling no fault, of course.*

*Of course. Gale felt better. She preferred that Havoc travel with a mediocre girl. As long as he's all right.*

*And you're traveling with an ugly Cartographer, Swale said. No fault. So you're even. And*

*Never mind.*

*But the succubus was already drawing it from her mind. Oh, isn't that something! Vicarious sex!*

*Not exactly. It's a special situation.*

*You sang them together! The impotent man and the frigid woman!*

*They are neither frigid nor impotent. She's loyal to her husband and he's shy.*

*What a tale! I've known a lot of sex in my day, but this is a new one. She siphoned out and departed before Gale could retort. Probably it didn't matter; Swale wouldn't relay the story to anyone likely to encounter either of the participants.*

"You are well?" Dour inquired.

"I was thinking too hard. Was I inattentive?"

"You were nodding your head as if talking with someone, but not speaking."

"I get that way sometimes."

The surroundings turned red. Gale had had sufficient experience recently, but still tended to be bemused by the monochromatic effect as she entered a new Chroma zone. Everything had been in shades of white; now it was in shades of red. This was the Chroma specializing in demons. That made

her nervous—but of course just about any Chroma made her nervous. She remained at heart an ignorant village girl, not quite trusting magic, other than her dragon seed. But she had to deal with it.

Red men and women came. They boarded the wagons—and the wagons lifted into the air and floated forward, just over the red ground and red trees. The red man for their own wagon stood on the front hitch, facing forward, until satisfied that the elevation and course were good. Then he turned and nodded to Gale and Dour. "Greeting," he said politely.

"Acknowledgment," they answered together.

"You I have seen before," the man said to Dour. "But you I have not," to Gale.

"This is my first visit to these parts," Gale said.

The red man spoke again to Dour. "You seem to have married."

"Negative," Dour said quickly.

"He is my guide," Gale said. "And this is not my baby." She glanced down at the baby she was holding, who was sleeping at the moment.

"You do not look like an Amazon."

Gale smiled. "I poked my nose in—and got this." She touched the red gem.

He nodded. "Now I understand."

There was a flickering between them. Something touched Gale. It was weird, and she jumped, waking the baby. Quickly she bared a breast and started nursing, to prevent crying.

"A demon," the red man said. "The stone attracts them. This one is harmless." He faced forward again.

The demon might be harmless, but it made Gale distinctly uncomfortable. She ignored it firmly, and after a few more eerie touches it drifted away, to her relief. She had no understanding of the nature of demons; they seemed to be mere whiffs of mist, but they could be dangerous.

They passed in sight of the central volcano, a massive red mountain-cone girt by intense red clouds. It was quiescent at the moment; they would not have come this close otherwise. But it started Gale thinking: how was it that each volcano had such purely different magic? She knew that there was constant convection in the depth of the planet, causing bubbles of molten substance to form, where it became charged with magic, but what made it separate into distinct colors? Why couldn't a Red Chroma person work Green Chroma magic? There was so much she didn't understand about her world of Charm.

She glanced up at Mystery, now coming overhead, half its face deep in shadow, the other half a medley of colors. Surely it was very similar to Charm—but were there people there? The legend had it that only Charm had been colonized by the human beings from far-distant Earth, but how could anyone be sure of that? There might be a colony on Mystery too, told that it was the only one. How

she wished they could communicate with each other and ascertain the truth.

"I marvel too," Dour said, observing her gaze. "I would give anything to visit Counter Charm."

"If you ever find a way, take me too," she said fervently.

"Suppose we could go but not return?"

"Incapacity," she said. Indeed, she couldn't answer. At times her curiosity about their sister planet consumed her, but there were things holding her to her own world. Such as Havoc, if only the way could be cleared for their marriage.

"We suspect the Glamors know," the Red man said. "That they can travel there and return. So all you need is to be on good terms with one of them."

And Havoc had a relationship of some sort with the Red Glamor, appropriately. A woman who could effortlessly take his body and mind, if she chose. That, too, made Gale nervous. She knew Havoc loved her, but no mortal could oppose the will of a Glamor. How clearly they had seen that, when the Black and Red Glamors had come to support Havoc as King.

"Glamors are dangerous, if they exist," Dour said.

"They exist," the Red man said. "Human and animal and plant. They are indeed dangerous."

"There are animal and plant Glamors?" Gale asked, startled.

"We believe so."

Gale was silent, thinking about that. It made sense; why should human beings be the only ones with special members? Assuming that the Glamors really were human. They might be native spirits who assumed human form. In that case, they could also assume animal or plant forms. But if that was true, those natural spirits had a lot more power than human beings had ever credited. It would probably be better if they sprang from human roots; at least then their affinity would be compatible.

They floated to the opposite staging site, and horses hauled them across to the fringe of the next Chroma: Brown. Dour made another shield note; it seemed the site had shifted since his last passage. Here they camped for the evening and night.

And here, for the first time, a baby was adopted. A nonChroma woman approached the caravan master. He summoned an Amazon. The Amazon came with a baby. When she saw the woman, she nodded. She gave the baby to the woman, then took off her red gem and put it on the woman. Gale realized that of course the woman would need that, for she had not birthed the baby and would not otherwise be able to nurse it. Baby and red gem had to go together. By the time the gem's magic faded, the baby could be weaned. It was a viable system for adoption.

"But how can the Amazon nurse her other two babies, without the red gem?" Gale asked.

"She has two more stones," Dour replied.

Oh. Of course. One per baby. She would don one when nursing, then leave it with the baby when she was ranging out in defense of the caravan. Or having sex with Dour. Obvious, in retrospect.

Gale sang her songs, earning her keep, but was distracted. When would she have to give up *her* baby? Would there be a good mother? Obviously the deal had been made before, and the baby paid for in kind or service, on a prior loop of the caravan. The deal had to be completed. But she hated the notion—not for her original reason of disapproving any trade in babies, but because she didn't want to give this baby up. She had real pain coming.

In the evening, Dour and Angina coupled again, and it was easier for them both. Gale was there, and sang, but did not need to stress the key elements; the two were able to perform their roles without that encouragement.

"Next time," the Amazon said, "maybe without the song. As ourselves. In the light."

"But you must not respond to another man," Dour protested, unnerved.

"I see that now as specious," Angina said. "I *couldn't* respond to another man, so I put a moralistic face on it. But the fourth *has* to be from another man; everyone knows that. I—I would like mine to be from you. So I can name it after you. If—if you care to do it."

The Cartographer hesitated, in the darkness. "Do it," Gale murmured. "It's a very good offer."

"But I—I can't—"

"I will move my body," Angina said with difficulty. "I will try to help. I will kiss—" She stalled out, her limit reached.

"Do it," Gale repeated. "She wants it real."

"Real," he agreed. "I will try."

Gale saw in his mind that this surprising development pleased him considerably as its sincerity sank in. The Amazon knew his limitation, and was willing to help. And to make it an actual affair, instead of a pretense in darkness and anonymity. To make it an open fourth, the sire recognized. It would also give him more of the practice he needed, being with a woman other than Gale.

The next morning the huge brown golems came and carried the wagons across the Brown Chroma. Again the Cartographer made a note; it seemed that the details of the landscape were constantly shifting, and his trained eye picked up on it. At the next staging area two more women came for their babies; the caravan was now in the thick of its delivery route.

The following Chroma was Blue. Gale expected huge animals, but was surprised even so; this time it was a python so large that the wheels of the wagons locked onto scales of its upper surface, and it undulated smoothly but rapidly across the blue terrain.

The third night Gale sat on her bed, neither singing nor playing her dulcimer, just nursing her baby, while Cartographer and Amazon made love. Gale had tried to excuse herself, but neither would allow it; they wanted her present in case it went wrong. But it did not go wrong; the man approached

and embraced the woman, and the woman stroked and kissed the man, and they worked into a fully satisfactory mutual climax. It was amazing how well it worked, now that they understood each other and had mutual experience of the basic elements.

"Gratitude," he said when it was done.

"Stay," she said.

"But—"

"Stay," Gale said.

But then a baby cried, and it was one of Angina's. She jumped up.

"I will fetch it," Gale said. "I will fetch both to you here." She now knew which ones were the Amazon's.

"Appreciation."

Gale fetched the crying one first. "Angina's getting her fourth," she explained as she picked up the baby boy. "I am taking him to her there."

"Her fourth!" another Amazon said. "She got up the nerve?"

"With Dour."

"Next trip he's mine," the Amazon said.

Dour and Angina were sitting together, holding hands, when Gale returned with the baby. "It's a real affair," the Amazon said. "I will tell my husband. He'll be pleased."

"Pleased?"

"He always feels guilty about siring fourths elsewhere. Now he will no longer."

It did make sense. Fourths could be adopted, or sired in sterile, non-romantic manner, or be the result of full fledged extramarital affairs. Sometimes a married man or woman had a hankering for one outside the marriage, and this was a way to satisfy that interest legitimately. Angina had let her husband do it openly, but had not been able to do it herself. Now she had done so, and would make the most of it—and be true ever after to her beloved husband, having proved her capacity. At first she had wanted only an insemination; now she wanted the credit of an affair, so that it could be documented and accepted. She had done it properly.

Dour held one baby while Angina nursed the other. Then they exchanged babies. Gale felt his pleasure in this aspect; again he was emulating a married man. In the process he was discovering that he was not enamored of Gale so much as enamored of the role. He wanted to be sexual, to be loved, and to be married, and to have three children by his wife and let her have a fourth by another man but return to him with it. Now he was beginning to hope that it was possible.

"I believe I have conceived," the Amazon said. "So this will do it for me. But I will tell the others, and some will surely approach you."

"I—I don't know," Dour said. "Gale is so competent and lovely, she took me right through it, and enabled me to do it with you. Then, after the first time, you helped. But—"

"Believe me, Cartographer, they will be competent."

"One has already expressed interest," Gale said.

"But I'm with you!"

Gale shook her head. "I am paying for your service as a guide and protector; you know that. An Amazon would seek you for a fourth, or for yourself alone. If she offers, take her. Do it before you part with me, so that if there is a problem, I can help. Then you'll know."

"I think you are going to be a family man," Angina said.

"This—this is so much more than I ever hoped for!"

"You hoped," Gale said. "You simply did not believe."

"Acknowledgment."

Dour remained with Angina, helping with the babies, while Gale slept alone. She remained privately thrilled by how well this was working out. She had seduced the Cartographer as a matter of business expedience; now she knew she had done him a lasting favor. She had also freed him from his obsession with her; he knew he could make it with other women.

The other Amazon did approach Dour in the morning, and took him to her own wagon that night. That turned out to be just as well, because Gale had a problem of her own: she had to give up her baby. It was at the fringe of a Silver Chroma, and a Silver woman came. "Nonesuch," the caravan master called, and Gale knew her time had come.

She nerved herself and walked to the center of the circle with her baby. "But you're no Amazon," the Silver woman said, surprised.

"The Amazon allowed me to care for this one," Gale said. She glanced at the infant, who was nursing at the moment. "She gets a little colicky sometimes after feeding, and needs to be soothed. She—"

"Of course. My three were like that."

The woman held out her arms, and Gale disengaged the baby and handed her over. She felt wetness on her face, and knew her tears were flowing; she couldn't help it. But she lifted off the cord with the red gem and put it over the Silver woman's head.

"Apology," the woman said. "I see you really care. I did not mean to be curt."

"I—it's my first time," Gale said. "I didn't know how it would be."

The woman started to nurse as her breasts freshened. "I can see you have taken excellent care of her."

"She never left me," Gale said. "I just couldn't let her go."

"Gratitude. She did not have to share milk with two others, or spend much time alone. I can feel how well fed and healthy she is."

"She's a fine baby," Gale said, her vision blurred.

"I will name her Nonesuch."

"Appreciation." Gale was halfway overwhelmed.

Back at the wagon, Dour tried to comfort her. "It is the red gemstone," he said. "It bonds you. The effect will soon pass, now that you have removed it."

"The stone! I never thought of that!" But actually she had been told; she simply hadn't realized how deep the emotional component was. Perhaps she hadn't wanted to know.

He was correct. Her emotion faded as time passed, and she no longer felt the same intensity of loss. But she knew she would never forget the experience.

The caravan continued, but Gale was hardly aware of it. She was in withdrawal from her baby. Even the lessening of the attachment was painful in its way, because it confirmed the loss: she was losing her caring commitment. Still, by the time the destination Red Chroma arrived, she was pretty much over it.

They bid parting to Angina. "You have given me more than I can repay," the Amazon said. "I have my fourth."

"You gave me the experience of the baby," Gale said. "This is repayment enough."

"Perhaps." But the woman seemed unconvinced. "May I kiss you?"

Gale had not encountered this convention before, but had heard of it. It did not suggest a sexual or emotional preference for woman, but a sincere moment of friendship. "Acquiescence."

Angina embraced her and kissed her firmly on the mouth. She broke. "Parting." She turned away, and in a moment was gone.

Gale was shaken. She understood the meaning of the kiss, but was startled by its impact. It had been no token touch, but a sincere exchange of feeling.

"You gave me even more," Dour said.

"You I owe for service." But Gale was significantly moved.

They departed the Caravan at the edge of the Red Chroma. "If you ever travel this way again," the caravan master told her, "we will welcome you. We have never had songs like yours."

"Thank you. This has been an exceptional experience." An understatement.

They set out across a red desert. The terrain was flat or modestly rounded; there were neither mountains nor chasms, just unambitious hillocks. There was a clump of red trees and bushes at the staging site, because it was an oasis, but not far beyond it there was only scraggly red grass interspersed by red cactuses. The sun bore down hotly.

They carried a heavy load of water bags in addition to their regular knapsacks, and their legs were wrapped in red canvas available at the staging site. Gale found this awkward, because the wrappings came right up under her skirt, almost to her crotch. Dour had insisted that Gale take a red staff, also, and wear a long-sleeved shirt, together with a broad brimmed red hat. Almost every part of their bodies was shielded from the sun and air. All this seemed like more than was necessary, but she knew he had reason, so did not question it.

"On guard," the Cartographer murmured.

Gale looked about, but all she saw was a faint rippling in the air, probably heat waves. Then she caught the warning from his mind: demons. They came floating up at about eye level, five or six of them, evidently curious about the travelers. She braced herself for the inevitable weird touching.

Suddenly the scene changed. The two of them stood before a vista that could only be described as magnificent. It was the slope of a great red mountain, wending down to a pleasant valley with a winding red river. Open fields were interspersed by clumps of thick forest, the trees tallest in the centers, so that the clumps resembled hills. Bird calls sounded from them, and indeed, she saw a flight of red herons glide from a spot jungle to the river.

"Oh, lovely!" she breathed.

"It is illusion," Dour said. "Do not trust it."

"But it's a delightful illusion. How did it come to be?"

"The Red Chroma demons make it. They are disturbed by our intrusion, so are trying to drive us out."

"They are using the wrong vision. I find this attractive."

"It is dangerous."

"Illusion? How so?"

"It can encourage us to do foolish things."

"But all we have to do is ignore it."

He grimaced. "That can be hard to do. Suppose a monster serpent charged you?"



"I'd get out of the way in a hurry." Then she paused, reconsidering. "Which might be foolish, if it didn't exist. Still, once I learn to control such reflexes, it should be all right. I can simply walk straight ahead."

"Unless you step in a crevice."

"A crevice?"

"In the wet season this region becomes a brief marsh. When it dries, the mud hardens and cracks. It is dry now."

Gale nodded. "Might turn an ankle," she agreed. "I will step carefully."

"Step this way," he said. He demonstrated, tapping the ground immediately before his feet with the blunt end of his staff, back and forth, slowly advancing the tip. When he had tapped a pattern one pace ahead, he stepped into it, stopped, and resumed the pattern.

"But that's very slow," she protested. "It will take all day to get anywhere."

"It will," he agreed.

"But I need to accomplish my mission as rapidly as feasible."

"You hired me to guide you safely. You said you would not question my expertise in my specialty."

She had indeed said that, when encouraging him to accept her guidance sexually. She peeked into his mind, and saw that he was quite serious; he had reason. She did not delve further; she knew he would tell her what she needed to know, and she would risk exposure of her mind reading talent if she learned his information too early. "Apology." She took her staff and tapped and stepped as he had.

They made slow progress across the lovely vista. Gale repressed her irritation. "How do you know where to go?"

"Mental dead reckoning. I can find the coordinates."

Of course—he was a Cartographer. It was a requirement for his office. He did not need to see where he was going; he *knew*. So he would get them there—tediously.

A large bird detached from a flight, looped about, and flew directly toward them. "Schraw!" it screamed as it dived at them.

Gale dropped to the ground, lifting her staff to protect her exposed body. Then, as the bird passed beyond, she stood again. Dour had not moved. "I forgot," she said ruefully.

"What we see and hear is not a threat," he said. "We must beware what we don't see."

After an interminable hour, he stopped. "Here is one."

She emulated him, poking her staff ahead. There was no ground there; the land simply dropped down beyond the reach of the staff. "This—this is a crevice?"

He nodded. "They can go deep." He sat on the ground, his legs dangling down out of sight, as if buried in it. He extended his staff forward, and in a moment tapped on something. "Not too wide; we can hurdle it."

"Hurdle it?" she asked, horrified. "You mean—jump?"

"Yes. I will go first, and scout the landing for you. Most crevices are not wide, but it is not safe to make assumptions."

"Not safe," Gale agreed weakly. She had spoken of turning an ankle; how far short of the case she had been! She could have dropped into that narrow abyss and done herself far more damage than that, assuming she survived the fall.

Dour scouted further, then squatted and jumped forward. It looked as if he were passing over a patch of red turf, but now Gale knew better. He landed, remaining in exactly the place his feet touched. Then he turned around, tapping in a widening spiral. Gale no longer begrudged the time he took; she wanted him to be sure of solid ground.

At last he nodded. "It is secure." He laid his staff on the ground, crosswise between them. "This marks the edge. Jump just beyond it, and hold your position."

Gale nerved herself and jumped, handily making it. She had learned to move precisely as a child, traveling their paths into the magic wilderness. Any deviation could mean a severe sting from a plant. But she had never had to travel a completely invisible route before.

They resumed forward motion. They crossed two more crevices similarly, then reached the great illusion river. It was in rapids at this point, the roar of them almost drowning out speech. Now she had to peek into Dour's mind to be sure of his meaning.

"Proceed the same way," he shouted. "We can not drown, but we can fall."

"Understood," she screamed back.

They waded into the rushing river, feeling nothing. The illusion was sight and sound, not feeling, fortunately. In the middle they encountered another crevice; Gale thought irrelevantly that the water should be flowing down into it. They scouted it and jumped across in the usual manner, and moved on.

By evening they reached an oasis. Here the illusion faded, and the clump of trees and bushes was as it appeared. "Why isn't the illusion covering this spot?" Gale asked.

"It is crafted by the desert demons," Dour replied as he made more notes on his shield. "They don't appreciate living things. Perhaps the plants have magic to resist the demons."

"And how is it that we could see each other, and our staffs, when we were out in the illusion?"

"We are not native to this region. The Red demons can affect only their own Chroma in that manner, making us immune."

"Intriguing." But how glad she was for that relief. They were evidently not completely immune, because they did see the illusion rather than reality, but it would have been much worse if they had not been able to see each other.

They ate from their supplies and refilled their water bags for the morrow. Then they settled down for the night. But at that point Gale remembered her temporary baby, and her pang of separation returned full force. She no longer had the red gem, but maybe the red environment affected her similarly, because she was almost unbearably lonely inside. Now she knew: she wanted her own baby, one she could keep. Worse, she wanted it to be Havoc's. How could she endure, being denied both?

She had to distract herself, or she would soon be in tears. But what offered, here on the red desert?

What else but sex? It distracted men constantly; it might do on a spot basis for a woman. If she had to, she could mind read his passion and cling to that in lieu of her own. "And how was the second Amazon?" Gale inquired archly.

"She was surprisingly easy. She—she took it to me. But she is not the woman you are."

"I am flattered to hear it." She stripped away her clothing. "How would you like me this night?"

"I would like you the way you wish to be."

"That is not sufficient. I wish only to accomplish this mission and return to my true love, though I may never marry him. Specify how you would have me sexually."

"I understood you. If you prefer to sleep unmolested, I want you to do that. I—I want to please you. By leaving you alone, if you prefer."

He was sincere. She was touched. "My truest desires may not be feasible. Meanwhile I prefer to pay my way. Take me quickly and let me sleep, for I am sore and tired from our creeping progress across the desert."

"That I can help." He put his hands on her, but did not move into sex. Instead he massaged her stiff muscles with his strong hands.

The relief was immediate. She was transported by the firm stroking and pressing. Her muscles relaxed, melting into utter relaxation. "Oh, you have found me out! That is divine."

"I am glad to please you."

"This would please any woman. When you find one you wish to marry, do this to her, and she will be yours."

"The Amazons are interested in spot liaisons, not marriage. And when they marry, it will not be

to an ugly man."

"Handsome is as it does. Your hands are wonderful. Do it with the Amazons, and one may marry you so as to reserve that treatment for her continuing life."

"Humor?"

"Serious. Women are less taken by appearance than men are. You have things to recommend you, and this is not least among them. When they ask you for sex, do this before or after, or maybe even during, and wait for results."

He shook his head. "I will do it. But I doubt that—"

"In fact one may propose marriage to you, so that you have but to decline or accept. Choose carefully."

"I think I could be satisfied, if not actually happy with any woman who wanted me. Until you came, I did not believe any woman would touch me."

She rose up and wrapped her arms around him. She bore him back, kissing him. "Now you know better." She opened his clothing and set herself on him, bringing him quickly to climax. "Thank you."

He had to laugh. "You could vanish forever this moment, and still have given me more than all other women combined."

"Don't let me vanish." She kissed him again, and prepared herself for sleep. The memory of the baby returned, but the sexual therapy had worked; the separation was no longer unbearable.

In the morning she looked out of the oasis, and saw a changed landscape. They were on an island in a broad rippling red sea. Sea birds flew between other islands, and red clouds floated above.

"They changed the illusion!" she said, amazed.

"They do," he agreed. "Each day it is a new one. Most are rather pretty."

"What are the ugly ones like?"

"Storms, monsters, barrens. There is a fair amount of artistic imagination in their efforts."

"But they're not intelligent?"

"Not as we know it. They don't reason from past to future. They merely react to intrusion, and do what works. Their failure to drive us out yesterday may have annoyed them, so we can expect more strenuous effects today."

"As long as they can't physically hurt us," she said.

"Not if we don't let them spook us."

"How far do we have to go?"

"Half day's travel, at our likely speed. We can be there and back to this oasis by nightfall, in the normal course."

"Let's hope for that."

They set off across the heaving sea. It was only ankle deep on them, but of course it masked the treacherous desert floor. They could not hurry; they had to tap out every step. The crevices were there. It was weird leaping across seemingly open stretches of water, or ducking down below the surface to climb through indentations too wide to be jumped. Gale found herself unconsciously holding her breath when her mouth was under water.

"We are approaching the cone," Dour said.

"That, too, is hidden by the illusion?"

"That, especially. The demons are protective of their source of power."

Gale saw that a disturbance was now forming on the horizon. Clouds swirled and the waves rose higher. It was a storm, and it was sweeping toward them. "But it's all illusion," she murmured, trying to reassure herself.

Dour nodded. "But the real terrain is treacherous. The volcano may shake or have a small eruption. We had better rope."

"Rope?"

He unwound a length of cord and fastened a loop about her waist. Actually it was a double loop, intricately knotted, with a strand that passed between her legs, so that there was no way she could slip out of it. "If you fall, just hold on; I will pull you to safety."

"I will try not to fall." Actually she had no expectation of falling, but knew he was trying to ensure her safety, so did not protest.

The storm loomed ferocious as it closed in on them. Tendrils of cloud descended to touch the surface of the water, sucking up fluid, becoming waterspouts. Two of them circled each other, and then three, doing a deadly dance. Then they were shoved aside by a massive funnel that drove across the water, lashing it into red froth. The surface of the sea disappeared; now all was a giant spinning wall of water, keening piercingly. Thin films of spray whipped out ahead, knifelike in their thrust.

It struck. Gale cowered, unable to help herself—and her feet slipped off the unseen shelf. She dropped down, but found no reprieve; the storm was here too, roaring, battering at her without mercy.

Then she got slightly smarter. She closed her eyes and covered her ears, muting the illusion. She felt the rope harness holding her. Dour had not slipped, and was hauling her back up.

The noise of the storm was deafening; they could not talk. But Dour was like the trunk of a tree

in his solidity, and kept her steady. She slipped, and slipped again, disoriented as much by the noise as the vision of the storm around them. Finally, Dour picked her up and carried her over his stout shoulder. The position was indecorous, but she appreciated his need to keep his hands free to wield his staff, scouting the path.

Then she spied a dreadful sea monster coming after them, hissing as it opened its giant jaws. She screamed and struggled, overbalancing the Cartographer. He had to step off the ledge, into the depths. For sickening moment they dropped. Then he landed, and they were steady again.

But they were well down in the crevice. Gale had gotten them in trouble by her foolish reaction. She felt silly and stupid.

Dour had to set her down. She found her footing and stood beside him. She wanted to apologize, but could not make herself heard. That was a further humiliation.

Then she read his mind. He was not angry with her, just concerned. He knew that the nearness of the Red Chroma volcano intensified the magic, and it was affecting her mind, making her abnormally flighty. She had not been this close to a live cone before, and was not schooled in resisting its effect.

She read his mind further, seeking the mental ability to handle the effect. It was there, as he was invoking it. It was not precisely an understanding or determination so much as an attitude, a mental resilience that enabled him to slide past the effects and maintain his orientation. She emulated that, and her confidence increased; now she could handle this challenge.

She took her staff, which Dour had carefully saved, and resumed tapping. She found a ledge ahead, and another, and stepped onto them as she scouted for more. The cartographer, after a surprised pause, followed. They were on their way again.

As if fed up with this lack of effect, the storm abated. The level sea returned. They were able to converse again.

"You have become competent," the cartographer said. "I am amazed at the suddenness."

She debated for a moment, trying to decide how to explain it without revealing the truth. And the dragon seed buzzed.

Startled, she reconsidered. Deceiving him was a mistake? But she had concealed her identity from him throughout without the seed objecting. Except that she had done so openly, while now she was considering actual lying. Dour was an honest man; what would be the consequence if she lied to him, and he learned of it? She would lose his trust, and evidently she could not afford that. So she decided that he deserved to know the truth, and the seed did not buzz. "I read your mind."

He looked at her. "You have magic?"

"It is actually an illness I have learned to use. My brain's natural barrier to the thoughts of others has been lowered, so I can receive them. At first it seemed overwhelming, like the storm, but I learned to erect a substitute barrier so that I could protect my mind. Now that I can handle it, it is a useful ability. I copied your technique for handling the high ambiance of magic. I am competent

because you taught me how to be. But I prefer not to have this ability of mind reading widely known."

He felt alarm. "You can read my mind at any time?"

"It is a good mind."

"Even my—" He balked.

"Even your sexual thoughts," she agreed. "But you have no need to be embarrassed. I have read similar thoughts in many men; they are no novelty to me."

"You must be disgusted."

"No. It helped me seduce you. I understand you in a way few women do. Do not be concerned."

But he was concerned. Now he knew that when he looked at her and felt a stir of sexual desire, she knew it, and that when he threw her over his shoulder and felt her breasts at his back and her thighs on his front, and delighted in those contacts, she was aware. That when he daydreamed of taking her sexually as she stood before him, she read those dreams. This was intolerably embarrassing.

"Apology," she said, pausing in her scouting and progress across the red sea. She was mishandling this. She should have anticipated his reaction, and phrased her revelation more cautiously. "It was never my intention to cause you distress." But she saw she had done so; he was burning with shame.

Rather than argue the case, she acted. She stood before him, opened his clothing and hers, removed her underpants, and put their genital regions together. "Lift me," she murmured, taking his staff.

Numbly, he set his hands on her elbows and lifted. His strength made this well within his capacity. She came up, circled his body with her legs, and worked herself around until his rigid member was in place. She relaxed, taking him in, then found his face and kissed him. She was enacting his guilty fancy, having sex with him in the middle of their trek.

Then suddenly the dragon seed buzzed. *Not now!* she told it, but it was insistent, buzzing continuously. She had to stop what she was doing, at the least convenient moment.

She lifted her knees, bringing her feet to rest against his hips, then abruptly shoved. She pushed herself away from him, breaking the intimate connection, then dropped to the ground, landing on her descending feet.

"What?" he gasped, astonished and dismayed.

"I changed my mind," she said somewhat lamely. "I—I'm sorry. I'm not a tease. Something happened."

His mind was in a whirl. "If I hurt you—"

"No, Dour, no! You are fine. I—simply had to change course, unexpectedly." How could she explain, when she didn't understand herself?

"Of course," he said. But his thoughts were a riot of uncertainty. He thought he must have hurt or offended her in some manner, and that upset him greatly.

She performed quick ministrations, restoring them both to decency. "Suffer no further shame," she said. "What you dream is not only natural, it is possible. You are a man; this is your nature. I just—it turned out I couldn't oblige you right at this moment. Apology. There will be another time, soon, I promise."

He did not answer, but he was coming to terms with it, realizing that she truly was not embarrassed or annoyed by his thoughts. That was what was needed.

"In future," she continued, "the women you encounter will either be mind readers, or not. If they are not, as is the case with the overwhelming majority of them, what you think won't matter. If they are, they will already be as familiar as I am with male thoughts and will not be bothered. Probably they will not choose to reveal their ability, as was the case with me. Female thoughts are just as awkward when read by men; we too like to have our secrets. You need have no concern."

He was accepting it. "Why did you reveal it?"

She was glad to get the subject away from what she could not answer. "I did not wish to lie to you. I panicked and made mischief; you saved me. I owed you."

He shook his head. "I am not sure you should have told me."

She had her own doubts. So she would not tell him any more. But as she decided that, the dragon seed buzzed again. What was bugging it? She sighed inwardly. "It is the least of the secrets I have kept from you."

He laughed, then sobered. "I think you are not being humorous."

Gale considered again, and decided to tell him the rest. The seed was quiet. "I need to travel anonymously, to better accomplish my mission. But perhaps you can better help me if you understand who I am and what that mission is."

He shook his head. "I think I would be further discomfited by the knowledge. You owe me nothing; in fact you have more than paid me for any service I can render you." He was trying to persuade himself, in part, because her abrupt sexual balk was painful both physically and emotionally.

"I have come to know you and to respect you," she said sincerely. "Therefore I believe I should be open with you, asking only that you keep my secrets."

"I will. But the safest way is not to tell them to me." He was trying to be sensible, but she had aroused his curiosity.

"I am the King's mistress, and my mission is for him. It is to find and bring back a particular magical ikon. That is the whole of the secret."



He stared at her. "You—Angina said you have the face and body—and you do, but that was an analogy."

"I can prove I can read your thoughts," she said. "The rest you will have to take on faith. Think a thought."

Bemused, he tried it. He thought of her wearing a crown, garbed in a translucent negligée, waiting in the King's quarters.

She told him. "But that's too obvious; think of something I could not guess."

He thought of a purple book with little legs, running across a desk.

She told him.

He was convinced, yet confused. "You have given me so much. Why did you bother?"

"Two reasons. I prefer to pay my way honestly, and this is not an easy mission. And I wanted you to support me absolutely, so that if any question came, I would know I could trust you."

"I would never betray a client!"

"I know that now. I did not when I first approached you."

He nodded. "Yet you must have had some hint, for you approached me forthrightly, as if you knew of me before."

"I did not." Then she realized that there was one more secret she would have to share. The seed did not buzz, so she plowed ahead. "I had a way to know who was best. It was you."

"The clerk told you of my cartographic region?"

"No. I told him nothing."

He smiled somewhat grimly. "Just as well. He's a gossip. The news of a woman taking me on a no fault mission must be all over the Cartographer's Guild by now. But if you had no prior knowledge—"

"I have a dragon seed."

He whistled, knowing what it was. He had encountered dragons and other creatures, and learned to get along; she felt his experience coursing through his awareness. "Few even know of them, let alone possess them. You had to have made friends with a dragon, or caused it to have incurred an obligation of honor—no easy task."

"Havoc and I were children. He—"

"King Havoc?"

"I told you: I am the king's mistress."

"The king has many mistresses. He can take the lovely bath girls if he wants."

"He did," she said, smiling ruefully. "But I'm not one of those. I am his fiancée, Gale."

He was appalled. "That's considerably more than a mistress. You are his beloved. And I had sex with you! The King will have my head."

"No. He can have mistresses; I can have masters, as it were. We give each other freedom, knowing we can never marry."

"But if you know each other of old—"

Yet again she considered evading, and again got buzzed. "We are both changelings, closer than brother and sister. We did not know this when we betrothed. It would not be healthy for us to beget babies together."

"Changelings! No wonder you are so lovely and talented. I should have realized."

"I did my best to mask it. But the point is that we are trying to wean ourselves away from each other sexually, so as to be able to remain close without wanting to marry. We have not yet had the gumption to sever our betrothal, but it must come in time."

Dour shook his head. "If I were betrothed to you, I would find it impossible to sever." Then he realized what he was saying, and flushed. "Do not misunderstand me; I mean—"

"I do not misunderstand you. Havoc is as appealing to women as I am to men, and we do love each other. We hate the pass to which we have come. But now you know you have done no wrong. I sought a no fault relationship, and you are enabling me to accomplish my mission."

"I thought you had done me a singular favor with your temporary companionship. Now you have done me another with your information. I do like to know the full situation, and tend to work most effectively when I know it."

"The seed told me to break off our activity, and I had to obey. It also told me to tell you, in its fashion".

"So there must be reason. I will do my absolute best for you."

"Thank you." Still, she wondered why the seed had required her to be so candid with him, when secrecy should have been better. And why it had balked their union, when it had never objected before. It was not like it to be inconsistent.

They continued across the sea, the red demons making no further efforts of distraction. "I do not trust this," Dour murmured. "They should be increasing in intensity as we approach the cone."

"It is not far, now?"

"Correct." Then something occurred to him, but instead of speaking, he thought it, phrasing it as clearly as he could: *You are reading this thought?*

She glanced at him and nodded.

*The demons are not intelligent in themselves, not the way we are, but neither are they inert. They will seek other ways to stop our progress, and are probably considering these right now. They will try one thing, and another, seeking what works. If we have communication without speaking, we may be able to mask our immediate plans from them, and perhaps deceive them. Could this be why your dragon seed prompted you to inform me of your telepathic ability?*

Suddenly it was making more sense. His knowledge did open a private channel of communication. She nodded again.

*And the dragon seed will guide you infallibly. I should be guided by you when my own ability is balked.*

More sense yet! Now that he knew of the seed, he could indeed be guided by it, and that could make the difference between success and failure.

"Tell me more of your life, while we travel," Dour said aloud. *And if the dragon seed gives warning, let me know.*

"Well, it's really pretty dull," she said. "But if you are interested, maybe it will help pass the time while we slog laboriously onward. Havoc and I were mere villagers, satisfied to remain so. He would be a teacher of martial arts, and I a teacher of music, and we would marry and start our family. We already had tacit understandings about on which lovely wench he would sire her fourth, and which smart man would sire mine. Then the King's man came."

"They came for you?" This was a diversionary dialogue, but his interest was real; she felt it in his thoughts.

"For Havoc. We did not know it, but he had been selected to be a contestant for the office of King. He did not want to go, but the King's man stripped his mother and tied her to a whipping post, and whipped her every hour until Havoc submitted. Havoc was absolutely furious, but he had to do it. He went with them."

"That is the way of the King's men," Dour agreed. "They do not brook defiance or evasion. I know a number of them; what was the name of this one?"

"Throe."

"King Deal's bodyguard!"

"And now King Havoc's bodyguard," she agreed. "But at the time he was doing dirty duty, as punishment for failing to keep King Deal alive, though he really was not at fault."

"I knew he remained bodyguard," Dour said. "But surely, if he beat King Havoc's mother, he

should be dead now."

"Havoc concluded that Throe was merely doing his job. So he sent him to apologize to his mother, and to bring me in. And I found Throe to be a good man."

"You—he?"

She laughed. "No fault? No! He merely brought me to Havoc, exceeding his mandate in no way. I respect Throe, and I trust him, because we can read each other's minds. In any event, his romantic interest is elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? Who?"

"Havoc's secretary and oath friend Ennui."

"I don't know of her. She must be remarkably appealing."

"Negative. She's of my mother's generation, and quite ordinary apart from that."

"Then why—"

"Apparently they find each other compatible."

He came to a stop. "We have reached the cone. The site of the coordinates are within its fringe."

"*Within* it?"

"Surely a cave. There will be access."

"Lead on."

He led, tapping with the staff. Suddenly the red demons were back in force. This time they didn't bother with water; they presented monsters. A giant snake slithered toward them, hissing, and a huge predatory bird dived from the sky, screaming. Large insects buzzed at them, making Gale flinch. Red six-legged rats swarmed out of crevices; those bothered her just as much. She was a village girl, used to vermin, but these were eerily bold, with glowing eyes.

"There is too much resistance," Dour said. "We shall have to retreat." But his mind thought otherwise: *Demons are not smart. If we face away, they will think we are departing.*

"Retreat?" she demanded. "After we have come so far?" But she turned around, facing the way they had come.

*Use your staff to feel your way behind.* "Yes. We can't handle so much opposition."

They proceeded backward, and the assorted red monsters faded. The demons really were being fooled. That made it easier, because the water faded also, allowing the natural terrain to show. As long as they seemed to be going the the right way, out the demons were making it easy.

*Here is the nearest cave entrance to the site. The demons will not pursue us inside. Step backwards into it.*

The dragon seed buzzed in Gale's ear. "No," she murmured.

*The dragon seed warns you?*

"Yes."

He did not question it. That was, she thought, one advantage in traveling with a Cartographer: he had experience with such things, or at least knew of them.

They felt their way around the curving, sloping side of the cone, still proceeding backwards, coming to another aperture. *I don't know this one*, Dour thought. *It is new.*

The dragon seed did not buzz, so they entered this cave. What remained of the demonic illusion faded, allowing the red stone walls to show. Dour turned around, producing a small hooded light. "We can go directly to the site, now, if this passage connects."

"Let's do it as swiftly as possible," she said nervously. She did not quite trust this.

The passage led to a room-sized chamber. Beyond it was another passage. The intangible feel of intense magic was almost suffocating. "That one should take us to or near the site," Dour said.

Gale stepped forward—and the seed buzzed her. "No."

"But there seems to be no other route."

"I received a negation. The specific application of these warnings is not always clear."

"Does it mean you are not supposed to reach the site?"

"I doubt it. But something about my approach must be wrong."

He gazed at her, frustrated. "What would you have us do?"

"I don't know."

"Could it be dangerous for you, but not for me?"

She shrugged. "The seed won't warn me of danger to you, unless it directly affects me. We can't assume you are safe."

"It is your decision."

"Maybe this chamber has a danger we don't see." She looked around it, seeing no threat. "Or maybe just a part of it does. Let me explore."

Dour stayed back, while Gale explored the invisible barrier. Wherever she tried to enter the

chamber, the dragon seed warned her off. Then she thought of another angle: maybe her thoughts were giving her away, triggering some dangerous defensive mechanism. But she could hide those, to a degree, if she had to.

"We'll probably have to give it up," she said. "Wait for me to consider." She couldn't tell him exactly what she had in mind, because if what she suspected was true, his thoughts would betray them both.

"As you wish," he agreed. He realized that she was testing the limits of the threat with the dragon seed.

She pictured herself turning around and facing the way they had come, making ready to depart though still undecided. Meanwhile she retreated her real attention to her hidden mental cache, the one Havoc had taught her to develop. A mind reader could not read that part of her mind, so if someone or something was tracking her thoughts, it would not find this.

While her open thoughts continued to toy with departure, her secret focus did the opposite. She stepped cautiously into the chamber—and there was no buzz. She had found the key!

She took another step, and another. Now she was in the center of the chamber.

There was a horrendous roar, and a giant red bear charged out of the far passage, directly toward her. But the seed did not buzz, so she stood her ground. It was illusion.

But Dour, caught by surprise, thought she was in real physical danger. He dropped the light and leaped into the chamber to challenge the bear, bringing his staff around.

The bear faded away. Dour and Gale faced each other, almost touching in the glow of the fallen light. Gale felt a sudden overwhelming urge to embrace him and make love to him. She threw away her staff, and he did the same.

The dragon seed buzzed. But the desire was on her, and she could not resist. She picked up a similar desire from Dour's mind; he wanted to possess her immediately, and it blotted out all other considerations.

They came together in the center of the chamber. The seed was buzzing continuously, but Gale could not help herself; though she die for it, she had to have this culmination first.

Another presence flitted through her mind. *Gale! Gale! Don't do it!*

"Negation," she muttered, brushing it aside. "Wonder. Desire." She kissed Dour, who was embracing her passionately.

*It's Swale. You are being possessed by a passion demon. Both your souls will be forfeit. Fight it!*

Now Gale recognized the succubus she had befriended. This was Swale's area of expertise; she had to be correct. Such demons sucked out a person's soul with the climax. It would be effective death to yield to their passion.

Even as that communication occurred, the demon reacted. *OUT* it roared, driving Swale violently away. Here in its stronghold it had far more power than the intruding spirit, and in an instant Swale was gone.

But she had given fair warning. Now Gale understood the true nature of the trap. That was why the dragon seed was warning her, and why it had stopped her before: the moment she climaxed, her soul was forfeit. And Dour's. Outside the cone of the red volcano the demon's power was less; it had encouraged them to copulate, but could not *make* them. Here in its home chamber it could indeed make them do it. How cunningly it had struck with illusion to get Dour in here with her, because it needed the two of them together to perform the act. The act that would cost them everything.

She muscled her mind back down into her protected recess, fighting off the desperate desire. But that did not stop Dour. He remained hostage to the demon, and was frantically clasping her, his mouth on hers, his strong hands holding her close, his crotch striving against hers. She understood his passion, for she shared it, but she had to make him stop.

"No," she said. But sound came, the roaring of the invisible red bear, drowning her out. The demon had the wit to cut off her verbal communication.

She put her hands against his chest, trying to push him away, but he was too strong for her. She tapped him on the shoulder, trying to get his attention. When he looked at her face, she mouthed "No." But the visual illusion returned, making him look like a bear, and she knew from his mind that she looked like another bear. Visual signals were being blocked too. Again, the power of the demon this close to the cone was greater than it had been farther out.

She had to get away from him, but she didn't want to hurt him. It wasn't his fault that he was being possessed by the demon. How could she escape his amorous grasp before they both lost their souls to the demon?

Maybe a ruse would fool him and the demon. She tugged at his shirt as though to remove it. After all, passion was best vented naked. He responded, addressing her clothing similarly. Soon they were both naked.

She leaped for the far passage as the last of her clothing fell. But he dived for her, catching about the waist. He—or the demon—must have remembered her prior escape, and been ready to prevent it. They rolled on the floor, their bodies shoving the two staffs on out of the chamber.

She lifted her bare legs and clamped her thighs about his neck. He tried to draw free, but she got him in a headlock. Havoc would have known how to break that immediately; he would have tickled her in the crack. But Dour wouldn't, so this should stymie him. They could not complete the sexual act if they were unable to get their genital regions together.

But the demon inspired him. He put his hands on her knees and hauled them apart. She locked her ankles behind his head and clamped down harder, but he was able to pry her knees just far enough apart to allow his head to slip free.

That, however, meant that for a moment he was not holding on to her body. She twisted around so that his hands could not hold, and scrambled for the far passage. He pursued, catching one foot, but she was able to get the rest of her body into the passage, dragging his arm along. He advanced

farther, getting a grip with both hands, in the process joining her in the passage.

And the passion was off them.

"Dour!" she cried. "It's a demon of lust! It will take our souls! That's why the dragon seed warned me off!"

He stared at her. "The bear—illusion," he said. "The passion—a succubus!"

"Worse. It's a sexual demon inciting both of us—and it will take both our souls. The moment we climax."

"I should have realized." He let go of her. "Go!"

She scrambled away from him, picking up her staff. Why the passion effect was limited to the chamber she didn't know, but this was the opportunity she needed.

The passage led directly to another chamber, but this one had no illusory defenses. There was simply a red stone altar carved from red tuff, with eighteen round buttons on its top surface.

As she contemplated it, she felt the intensity of magic increasing to an almost tangible level. Trouble was building; she had to fetch the item and get out of here before it struck.

She hesitated no longer. She grabbed the first button and pulled. A lid came up, uncovering an empty hole. She didn't trust that; there had been too much illusion. She nerved herself and reached in, feeling around the hole. Nothing.

At least she hadn't gotten bitten or stung by some nasty creature. She checked the other spots, and soon found a small red statuette of a nude woman in the fourteenth pocket. She took it, but also checked the remaining holes, just in case the ikon was a decoy. There was nothing else.

"I've got it," she said. "Let's get out of here."

Dour came to join her. He had a small light; evidently he kept more than one available. She discovered from his thoughts that he had kept it bound in his hair. He had also had the wit to use his staff to recover their clothing and equipment from the passion cave, only the larger light being beyond its reach. "I don't want to pass through that chamber again."

"If we do it separately, the passion demon can't make us do it. It seems it is chained there as a guard, not allowed to enter this storage chamber."

"I don't trust the illusion. It could make the first person think he was through, then bring the other in, thinking the same."

She nodded as she dressed and donned her knapsack. "Then what about the other exit?" For there was another passage out.

"That must be the one your dragon seed warned you against."



That made her pause, but the magic was suffocatingly concentrated. "We'd better try it anyway. Seed's not buzzing now."

They set off down the tunnel. But in a moment the seed buzzed. "Now it is," Gale said tightly.

Dour looked around. He shined his light around the passage. Then he poked his staff into the ceiling just ahead. "Vulnerable point. Stand back."

The ceiling collapsed. Red rock crashed onto the floor. Had they been a few steps farther along, it would have crushed them both. "Now we know why it warned us," Gale said. "A purely physical trap, surely triggered from the other side."

"Should be safe now." He started climbing over the mound of rubble.

"Let me go first," she said. "The seed will warn me."

He nodded and waited for her to pass him. She scrambled across the rocks, bending over to put one hand down to steady herself, heedless of the posterior view she was providing the Cartographer. It wasn't as though she retained anything she needed to hide from him. Once they were away from here, safe from the passion demon, she would give the Cartographer some experiences to remember.

But that reminded her of another thing: the dragon seed had stopped her from giving him sex well before they entered the treacherous chamber. So the danger couldn't be limited to it. So why had it been so suddenly worse there? She concluded that the chamber was the passion demon's center of power. Farther out it could take advantage of voluntary copulation to grab souls; within the chamber it could force sex, no longer having to wait. Only the ikon chamber seemed to be immune to the demon, protected by some other force. They would probably have to get all the way out of the Red Chroma zone to be sure of safe sex; their indulgence on the way in had been far more chancy than she had realized. Bless the day she had befriended the blue dragon, and gotten his seed!

Where was the dragon now? Mentor—that was his name, a teacher of his kind, and teacher of Gale and Havoc. Dragon seeds and dragon training had served them both excellently, saving their lives more often than was comfortable. Gale wished she could be with Mentor again; he was her only oath friend apart from Havoc. For that matter, she wished she could be with Yellow Spider again, her earliest animal friend.

The light of day showed ahead, banishing her idle thoughts. They emerged to see a barren desert; the illusion demons had evidently given up the effort. But they would tap out their routes regardless. The important thing was that Gale had accomplished her mission.

## Chapter 3—Sisters

Throe gazed at his coordinates. This was bad. He had a fair familiarity with the local terrain, having traveled widely with King Deal and King Havoc, and knew that the site was in the center of an Invisible Chroma zone. He would have preferred almost any other Chroma, except perhaps Black, but he had chosen by lot, and the lot had given him this.

He was not a man for regrets or hesitation. Havoc had treated him extremely well, and trusted him. He would repay that favor and trust with absolute loyalty and the best service he was capable of. He knew what to do.

He headed for a particular stable that handled special kinds of steeds. "Any going my way?" he inquired, describing the general area.

"Millipede," the stable master replied laconically, obviously expecting to dissuade this nuisance.

"I'll take it."

"Welcome," the man said, surprised. "I thought I would have to pay someone to ride it back."

"They may be ugly, but they are amiable if well treated. I need a fast private ride, and this will do well."

The man showed him the millipede. The creature looked like a huge bug, curled into a spiral, its reaction to confinement. He did not challenge Throe's credentials as a rider; no incompetent would dare approach such a creature, and would not be able to make it perform.

"Name's Inertia," the stable master said.

The millipede uncurled slightly, raising three antennae. She recognized her name.

"Good enough," Throe said. "We'll go now."

"She's got a homing spell. You can't turn her loose until she's home."

"Affirmation."

The man opened the pen. The millipede unwound the rest of the way and marched out onto the floor.

"Halt," Throe said, and she halted, only the tail section still curled.

The stable master brought the saddle and set it over the fourth to seventh sets of legs, which were the stoutest. He passed the straps under and fastened them. "She'll have to be fed nightly. You can't turn her loose to graze."

"Understood. I'll sleep riding at night." Throe mounted, settling into the saddle and fastening the safety harness. "Parting."

"Parting," the stable master echoed.

Throe addressed the millipede. "Inertia: Walk."

The creature set off, her feet alternating from side to side and segment to segment. Throe used his knees and feet to guide her left or right, and she was finely responsive. They moved on out of the stable and out of the city of Triumph, taking the ferry to the mainland. Other people gave them plenty

of space, not trusting the enormous bug; that was fine with Throe, who did not want to answer questions.

They got on the access street. "Inertia: trot." The steed broke into her second gait, every second foot striking the ground together, and the odd feet on one side synchronized with the even feet on the other side. It was a swift and pretty clip, though somewhat bone rattling. The sounds were like those of just two feet, or of a troop of men double-timing together. Throe liked it; he knew that the millipede could maintain this pace indefinitely, and that it would cover ground reasonably rapidly.

They moved on out of the citified region, following the trail that wound between Chroma. NonChroma folk generally avoided Chroma when traveling, unless they had the wherewithal to make deals with Chroma folk for transport. So did most Chroma folk, actually, because they had little or no magic outside of their home Chroma zones. So the caravans could have a fair variety of colors, and there could be interesting interactions. Chroma men tended to be fascinated with women of divergent Chroma, and the women were often amenable, especially if looking to get a fourth.

He understood the fascination, for he had had a recent affair with a Chroma woman. Symbol, former mistress of King Deal, cast adrift by the King's sudden death in much the way Throe was. Throe had been punished for not preventing it, and Symbol had lost her lover. Each understood the other's suffering, to a degree. Each had known King Deal well, having associated with him constantly. Symbol had been implicated in the King's death, as had Throe; that appalled her, as her guilt had been inadvertent.

But both of them had been overtaken by a new relationship: with the new King Havoc. Throe owed him his career and status, and served him utterly. Symbol was desperately in love with Havoc. That, in the end, broke the two of them up; they had no romantic future together, and knew it. They understood each other too well.

So it was that Throe had come to appreciate Havoc's oath friend Ennui—and therein found to mutual astonishment their truest love. Two homely people in their forties. One a professional martial artist and bodyguard who had been tainted by the suspicion of incompetence, the other a burned-out housewife without much physical or intellectual appeal. Their common link was Havoc, who had restored to each of them lives well worth living. Each was completely dedicated to Havoc's welfare, and understood that about the other, having no jealousy of it. They had seemed to have little if anything in common, and discovered everything in common.

There was a faint flicker ahead of his face. Throe recognized it, and put out one hand to intercept it. Sure enough, it was the succubus. "Hello, Swale," he said.

*Hello, Throe. I am liaison for the fetching missions. Is all well with you?*

"All well so far. But I am hardly started. What of the others?"

*Similar. Any messages to relay?*

"My loyalty to Havoc. My love to Ennui."

*They know.*

"Tell her anyway." For women liked to be reminded, and the mere thought of reminding her gave him pleasure.

*What of Symbol?*

"She understands."

*And Gale?*

The routine query brought a non-routine thought. Symbol and Gale were both Changelings, outstanding women, both cursed by loving Havoc, whom neither could marry. "I wish her happiness," he said sincerely.

*She gave me life back, and saved my brother.*

"We are all bound by ties of extreme gratitude and loyalty."

*Affirmation. Parting. She was gone.*

Throe realized that he had, in extemporaneous dialogue, come at an essential truth: they belonged to a small unlikely group of people who had become quickly bound to the two principals, Havoc and Gale. It wasn't just the telepathy, or the social and ethical commitments, or the fact that the principals were highly engaging changelings. There seemed to be something more to it. Perhaps it was fate.

The road diminished into a path as it fled human development. Now they could afford to move faster, having the route to themselves. "Inertia: canter," he said.

The millipede accelerated, her feet striking the ground in a new pattern: the odd numbered segments continued the trot, while the even numbered segments moved their feet together, striking the ground harder. It was a three-beat cadence, about half again as fast as the two-beat trot and three times as fast as the four-beat walk. He could tell that Inertia liked it; her mind was limited, but she was made for this, the pace that got her kind where it was going about as fast as was feasible. In their natural habitat, millipedes beat out endlessly intertwining paths, and traveled constantly. The scenery on either side fairly flew by.

Throe gazed at it now, admiring the colors. The land was Blue to the right and Silver to the left, the colors intensifying toward the horizon. Blue was the animal Chroma, and Silver the electrical Chroma, and marvelous was the magic each could enable. On rare occasions Throe was sorry he was not a Chroma man, for if he were Chroma, any Chroma, he would be able to do convenient magic of many types. He would be able to fly from one place to another within the Chroma, to conjure food to eat without having to work for it, or to make minor illusions. But as soon as he thought of that, he remembered that the dangers were enhanced in proportion to the magic, and that every animal and plant had magic too. So he would *have* to fly, because the grass he trod walking would sting or eat his feet, and *have* to conjure food, because the fruit tree he tried to rob would put a thorn-spike through his hand, and as for illusion, it could be downright dangerous. Chroma zone folk were used to it, taking it as a matter of course, but woe betide nonChroma intruders, or even Chroma folk from a different color. So it was easier living without much magic, knowing what was what. What nonChroma folk needed from Chroma, they could trade for. Trade was a great convenience and

unifier.

His chain of thought wandered afield, as it tended to do when not restrained, like an unbridled millipede. One might have thought that the magic folk would rule the planet of Charm, but in fact the nonChroma folk did. That was partly by established protocol, which assigned the duties of planetary governance to them; no Chroma person could hold a position of global responsibility other than at the specific behest of the King, who was always nonChroma. Also partly expedience, for only nonChroma folk could travel widely without being at a disadvantage. Their home colors were always the same—the "natural" non-magical hues, rather than the monoChroma shades around the volcanoes. Their ground was always solid and exactly as it appeared, rather than masked by illusory imaginations. Their plants did not fight back, and their animals did not cast spells. Their weapons were always effective, rather than failing the moment the background color changed. It was simply convenient to exist in the nonChroma environment, despite its limitations. Finally, the heart of the species was nonChroma, for legend had it that mankind had come to Charm a thousand years ago in a ship that sailed between planets, and all aboard it were nonChroma. Chroma folk were fragmenting, becoming increasingly magical, perhaps turning into animals or plants or demons; only nonChroma folk were reliably human. Isolated Chroma communities could become awkwardly inbred and suffer ill health unless constantly refreshed by divergent blood from outside; that was the reason for the rule of fourths, each woman required to bear one child of four by a man other than her husband. Women were encouraged to conceive their fourths by men as far removed from their husbands as was feasible, which meant seeking men of other Chroma or nonChroma. This had the effect, on the planetary scale, of unifying the species. It made sense. Those who did not care to mate with foreign men were free to adopt; there was a considerable trade in adoptive babies, and no baby failed to find a family.

Now the Silver side merged into Red, with a thin path winding between them. There was surely a nonChroma village at its end, where the natural curvature of the Chroma left a wider space between them. Each volcano tended to cast its color in a circular pattern, modified by the prevailing winds, which were in turn governed by the planetary patterning of mountains, lakes, plains, and forests. So one Chroma zone would be pear shaped, another wedge shaped; few were perfectly round. Most were roughly elliptical, and some had odd projections. The lay of Chroma constantly changed, as the seasons altered the winds and waterflows, so the Cartography Guild was constantly busy remapping the planet. But since there was always a boundary, however it might move, the paths between Chroma were seldom dead ends, and almost always got the traveler somewhere. So Throe wasn't concerned about getting lost, apart from the millipede's awareness of its home turf.

With one exception: brigands tended to congregate on the between-Chroma paths, knowing that travelers could not safely deviate from them. That was why rich caravans had guards, and solitary travelers were wary. The brigands typically struck and fled before any King's men could take them out. Throe did not like them at all.

The Blue Chroma curved away, leaving a patch of natural terrain on the right. Then the next Chroma appeared, Black. That was the eerie one, the Void, that sucked inward instead of blowing outward. It was really no more dangerous than any other Chroma, and its magic fringe was similar, but Throe shared the general awe of it. The idea that its cone might choose to erupt implosively just as he passed near made him nervous.

"Inertia: gallop." That was the fastest gait, and not one the millipede could maintain indefinitely; it required too much energy. She moved into it, her odd feet striking the ground almost in unison, her

even feet following, so it was a virtual two beat gait, but not in the trotting pattern. The velocity was four times the walking pace, and exhilarating to experience.

Soon the Black Chroma passed, and gave way to Translucent, the Water Chroma. No two Chroma of the same type seemed to be identical, though they were certainly similar. This one was a broad lake whose water lapped the edge of the path. Throe suppressed his real thoughts, hiding them in the guarded spot in his mind that he had learned from Havoc, concealing his ability to read minds. For the specialty of Translucent was mind reading, and even the fish could do it; secrets were hard to keep. He set up conventional thoughts of relief about being safely beyond the Black Chroma zone, hope for a resting place soon, and general interest in the forms of young women.

The millipede was laboring. "Inertia: walk," he said, and the steed dropped down three gaits, setting into a walk. Soon she would recover enough to resume trotting or cantering, but for now slow was best.

And horsemen appeared. Brigands—right at the least convenient time. By no coincidence, of course. He had foolishly fallen into their ambush.

But Throe was no patsy for robbery. He smiled grimly as he unhooked the components of his bow from his belt and snapped them together. He was a martial artist, and he knew how to handle warriors. These brigands were unlikely to be anywhere near his level of combat proficiency. They might have a stern lesson coming.

"Inertia: trot." It was a bit soon to resume speed, but necessary in this case; he could not afford to be a slow target. When the millipede obligingly accelerated, Throe steered her in a sinuous course, making him a trickier target. Because the brigands would be attacking him, not the millipede; the steed was valuable, and probably the reason for this attack.

The six-legged horses gained ground, approaching from the left where the Red Chroma reigned. There were four of them. Throe cautiously peeked in their minds to verify that there were no others; he wanted no ugly surprise.

An arrow flew before him: a warning shot, a signal that he should stop, lest the next one take him down.

Throe lifted his bow, nocked an arrow, and fired at the leading rider. It scored in the man's chest, and he fell off his horse. The shot had been so sudden and accurate that the brigand had been caught by surprise, taking no evasive action.

But the three remaining were not cowards; they spurred their steeds to a faster approach as they oriented their bows.

"Inertia: canter." As the millipede speeded up, Throe nocked another arrow and aimed at the second rider. The man ducked down behind his horse's head—and Throe's arrow struck the man behind him, who had not realized that he was the true target until too late. These were indeed relatively amateur, and were paying for it.

The last two were now too close for the bow to be effective, and were taking evasive action. Throe drew his flexible club and caught the third man across the face. He fell back, blinded.

The last man flung himself from his horse and grabbed Throe around the shoulders, trying to sweep him off his steed and onto the ground. But Throe was already drawing his knife. He ripped it into the man's belly, angling the point up into the lungs. In a moment the man dropped away, dying.

"Inertia: walk." For it was safe now. All four brigands were strewn along the path, dead or hurting. It would be long before any of them attacked another traveler. They had been fools to attack a martial artist, though of course they had not known he was one until too late. And that was part of the point of the exercise: to make brigands uncertain, so that they would hesitate before attacking travelers. Anyone who saw the signs of this recent struggle would know that bad men had received an ugly surprise.

Throe mopped some of the blood off his cloak. He had been in little danger, for his cloak was arrow-proof; only a lucky shot to the face would have hurt, and Throe was adept at dodging his head out of the way. The fools should never have tried to close with him after noting his proficiency with his bow. But once committed, they had known no course but onward, and so had paid the price. He had no sympathy for them.

He remembered his first encounter with Havoc. Throe had assumed he could handle any village man, but the instant he had seen the way Havoc carried himself and moved, he had been alert. The young man, half his age and healthy, was a martial artist in his own right, and gifted with rare power and coordination. Throe surely knew tricks Havoc didn't, and experience counted, but he had known it would be best to win the young man over if at all possible. He had done so, or maybe Havoc had won Throe over, and they had found mutual respect. Then Havoc had become King. In retrospect, it seemed to be the most significant decision of Throe's career, for Havoc had restored his position and indirectly brought him the woman he loved.

Actually Havoc's woman Gale was special too, for she was another changeling. Only one woman in Throe's experience rivaled her for beauty and talent: Symbol—and she too was a changeling. Gale was to Symbol somewhat as Havoc was to former King Deal, a younger version of outstanding presence. The changelings were superior examples of the human state, perhaps second only to the Glamors.

And what were the Glamors? Throe had now seen two of them: Glamor Black and Glamor Red. Both had shown magic independent of their Chroma zones, and more potent than any other known. Both had come to support King Havoc when his life and crown were threatened by traitors in Triumph. Throe had thought Glamors were the stuff of legend, with no real existence; now he knew better. But why were they involving themselves in human affairs? This present mission was really because of the Red Glamor, who hardly needed the help of any mortal person to have her way. Why had she bothered?

Throe had no answer to that, and none to the riddle of the changelings. But Havoc was trying to unriddle those mysteries, and maybe he would succeed. Assuming that Throe and the others did their parts. Havoc had in fact been paying far more attention to things spread across the Chroma than he had to running the kingdom. So far that hadn't seemed to make much difference, perhaps because the general populace did not know that the King was absent.

He came to a camping site. It was within the fringe of a Brown Chroma zone, which meant that Brown golems protected it from molestation. It had food and water, and a marked pasture with brown fruit trees and brown grass. It was ideal.

"Inertia: stop," he said as they pulled in. The millipede came to a halt. "Inertia: wait." Then he got down, stretching his legs. He used the outhouse, drank water, fetched brown bread and fruit, and returned to the waiting steed. He climbed back into the saddle. "Inertia: walk."

He guided the creature to the watering trough and told her to drink. Everything had to be told to a millipede, when saddled and ridden, as he could not set her loose. It was important that her needs be taken care of. Indeed, she drank copiously, filling her segments. Then he directed her to graze, and removed his feet from the stirrups, so that she knew she could choose her own pattern. Only if she seemed likely to wander beyond the marked grazing area would he use his feet to guide her back inside it. Meanwhile he ate his own meal.

As night came, he slept in the saddle while Inertia continued to graze. Every few minutes he woke to verify their location, and on occasion did guide her back. Eventually she had her fill and let her segments rest on the ground. She could snooze while grazing, but she had worked hard and evidently needed rest for her legs and feet. He couldn't leave her, even now, for she could wake at any time and wander off, and a loose millipede in human occupied territory was subject to theft or execution. So he remained in the saddle; it was a condition of his use of the millipede for transport. He would be liable if she were lost or damaged because of any neglect on his part.

In the morning he watered the millipede again, fetched some more food, and moved on. He had not seen a golem or a Brown Chroma native, but he knew they had been aware of him, and would have appeared had there been any mischief. Magic was not as strong at the Chroma fringes, but it did exist, and it was never safe to assume he was unobserved. In fact, had he not had to remain on the millipede overnight, he might have been visited by a Brown Chroma woman looking for a fourth, or perhaps just for variety in the guise of seeking a fourth. He was satisfied that this had not been the case, because he was not looking for interaction of this nature. Not since Ennui. So he waved as they resumed travel, his acknowledgment of the usefulness of the camping site. They were maintained by order of the King, but appreciation was never out of place.

The steed was refreshed and vigorous, so they moved along at a comfortable canter, making good progress. They passed Invisible and Yellow Chroma, the first looking like vague mist, the second like fire. But the path safely skirted both, as it was its nature to do.

Then, as the path approached a crevice between Green and White Chroma, a storm came up. The weather was constantly changeable in any season, of course, and he had expected to be caught at some point in his trip. But this was a bad locale, because the path region was narrow and there was no immediate shelter. His choices were to retreat and seek cover, which would confuse the millipede and perhaps cost him more time than he cared to lose; or to forge on through it, hoping to win safely to the other side.

Had there been shelter close behind, he would have gone to it, for it was foolish to take any unnecessary risk. But there was not, and the storm was blowing rapidly toward them; they might not be able to outrun it anyway. By similar token, they might get through it quickly by going ahead; it would be passing them as rapidly as they passed it, as it were.

"Inertia: brace pace." That meant she should not maintain any particular gait, but react to the buffeting of the storm so as to maintain her balance and place on the path. She would surely have encountered storms before, and have appropriate reflexes. She would hew to the path without straying into a Chroma, having a natural aversion to magic.



To his surprise, she broke into a gallop. She was evidently as eager as he to get through the storm rapidly. He hung on and let her do it.

The storm closed around them. Wind whipped across, carrying green rain. Green was the Plant Chroma, but that was the human specialty; its natural ambiance was simply magic, which could take any form. Without guidance, it might be neutral.

It wasn't. Huge green tendrils reached down to grab at them. Throe drew his knife and sliced off any that came within his range. They didn't seem to be able to get hold of the millipede, who perhaps had some natural repulsion. Fortunately they were moving so rapidly that by the time the cut tentacles could react, man and millipede were out of reach.

Then Throe felt light. He hung on to the saddle, but it was a more general effect; Inertia was getting light too, so that she was bounding far through the air with each leap of her gallop. Would she lose her balance? If she fell on her side or back, she could be injured. But she maintained equilibrium, evidently having had experience with this effect, and in a moment weight returned and her feet landed more firmly on the ground.

A huge green golem appeared. That was a Brown specialty, but Throe did not dare assume it was illusion, which was an Invisible specialty. He ducked down, avoiding the giant hand, and then they were beyond it.

Only to encounter a green monster. It opened its mouth, roaring, showing jagged green teeth. It lunged, but misjudged the millipede's velocity, and its jaws snapped closed some way behind. Inertia's decision to gallop was proving its value.

There were green flickers in the air. One intersected Throe's shoulder before he could flinch away, and he felt the weird curiosity. It was a formless demon of the type generally known in the Red Chroma; obviously Green demons existed too, in nature.

But now a wave of green fire formed. Throe felt the heat. This was no good; there was no telling its extent. They could both be severely burned before winning through.

"Inertia: off!" he shouted, bringing down his feet to take the stirrups and guide her left, toward the White Chroma zone. White was weird, and he was not comfortable with it, but it seemed to be the better bet at the moment.

The millipede veered left, leaving the path. She slowed, for there was imperfect footing here. Fortunately when the front feet found good lodging, the latter feet did too, for they landed in the same spots.

The storm quickly thinned, for its magic could not operate in a foreign Chroma. To a degree, it was making this region its own Chroma, for windblown dust from the Green volcano carried its magic. But it was vitiated where it overlay dust from the White volcano, so its force weakened.

It seemed to know that, for now a wall of huge animalistic faces formed, glaring at the travelers. That had to be illusion, for two reasons: it was not feasible for faces to exist without bodies to support them, and illusion was among the least energy-intensive of the magics, so could appear where more solid magic could not. Yet it was odd, for it seemed that the green magic had awareness and emotion

of its own; that instead of being random, it was actively attacking them, and was angry when they escaped. That was hard to believe, yet it did look that way.

Now they were crossing pure White territory. The White Chroma was the magic of science, which followed its own odd rules. Or it seemed like the absence of magic, but White Chroma natives could demonstrate impressive and sometimes deadly applications. There was no telling what they might come up with if annoyed. So it was best to get off this shades-of-white land as rapidly as possible.

The millipede agreed. She broke back into a gallop and followed such faint paths as she fathomed, skirting the green cloud. She did not venture any farther into White than she had to. Soon, fortunately, the storm did blow on by, and they were able to return to the established path between Chroma.

"Inertia: walk." Because the millipede had been working hard, and her segments were radiating heat; she needed to rest. A millipede did not necessarily know when to ease off, which was one reason they were given names like Resolute, Consistency, Stubborn, Earnest, and, yes, Inertia, in the sense of continuing what she was doing.

Then he reached back to pat a flank. "Inertia: good." He was complimenting her on her performance.

The antennae on the insectoid head quivered, and a small ripple of pleasure ran along her length. A millipede was not the smartest animal extant, nor the most feeling, but did have a few basic emotions. Throe could relate. Much of his life he had served the King, always ready to do the King's bidding, never expressing any personal opinion unless specifically asked, and never presuming. He had been the perfect servant, character neutral. But he had had feelings, and these were quite real despite their invisibility. Only with the advent of Havoc had Throe become a full person. And of course that connection had brought him Ennui. King Deal had been competent, winning, fair minded, and Throe had liked him. King Havoc was all of those, and something else. Perhaps the best perspective was via Gale, who was a virtual clone of Havoc in the female gender, replacing the male capacity for violence with the female capacity for feeling. Gale was the age of Throe's youngest daughter, but she could have seduced him with a gesture, had she chosen to, and bound him to love, had she wished to. Throe doubted that any living man could resist Gale, if she went after him. Just as no woman resisted Havoc. Both had been raised in their distant village of Trifle, and come to Triumph City with the quaint ignorance of their origin, but neither was any patsy, and both learned so quickly it was awesome.

Throe smiled ruefully. He tended to think too much. This time the pleasure of a millipede had led him into the power of changelings. Perhaps he was making parallels where none belonged.

The journey took several days, but in due course they reached the Invisible Chroma zone that surrounded the destination site. This was going to be a challenge, but Throe intended to accomplish his mission.

First he had to deliver the millipede. He stopped in the camping area near the fringe and hailed the man there. The man was young, muscular, and handsome. "Greeting."

"Acknowledged."

"I am Throe, nonChroma, of Triumph City. I must return this mount, and pursue a personal mission. I will require a native guide."

"I am Robust, Invisible." For an instant he faded into complete invisibility. His appearance was of course illusion. "What is your mission?"

"I must fetch an object from a site." He gave the coordinates.

The man whistled. "That's at the volcano! We have only one guide competent for that region, and he is presently distracted."

Bad news. "I nevertheless have need of him. What price will be required?"

"I do not know. But it will be high."

"I will be obliged to pay, to the extent of my ability."

Robust nodded. "Deliver your steed; the guide will meet you there if he chooses to negotiate."

"Appreciation. Parting."

"Parting," the man agreed, as Throe addressed the millipede.

"Inertia: home."

The creature took off with a will. She followed the trail as it circled around the Invisible Chroma zone, and soon cut in, seeking an attractive farmstead. That was a real development illustrated by illusion; nothing in this Chroma could be seen in its natural state, but the powers of illusion more than made up for it. The actual farmstead might be ugly, but its illusory representation was pretty. Similarly it was said that there were no ugly women in the Air Chroma, which was the popular name for Invisible, because each crafted her image as she chose. No ugly men, either.

The door opened and a lovely (of course) woman emerged. Her hair was like golden sunshine, her face was barely shy of perfection, and her figure was outstanding. "Inertia!" she cried, running forward. She had the appropriate illusion down pat; her tight sweater was bouncing sexily.

The millipede's antennae vibrated as she turned her leading segment toward the woman. Then the two collided in a close embrace. "It's so good to have you back, dear," the woman said, kissing a mandible. "You're looking great."

Throe quietly dismounted and waited by the saddle. In a moment the woman glanced his way. "Greeting," he said.

"And you brought her back! Um, Acknowledged, of course. Thank you so much. We missed her."

"She's a good steed. Well trained."

"Oh, yes!" Then she looked prettily flustered. "Introduction: I am Vision, Inertia's keeper."

"Throe, of Triumph City. I needed transport, and she was available."

"How fortunate for us! I can see that you have taken good care of her. She says you are a considerate rider."

It was Throe's turn to be flustered. "She talks?"

Vision laughed. "Hardly! I mean, I can tell by her reaction. She is relaxed and vigorous, and she likes you. She will obey any rider, but she is choosy about whom she likes. You have ridden millipedes before, and respect their needs."

"True. She is about the best I have ridden. We were attacked by brigands, and she maneuvered well so that I could take them out. Then we encountered a green storm, and she handled herself well again. It is easy to like her."

"Don't I know it! Come have some refreshment while you wait for Jamais."

"Jamais?"

"Jamais Vu, your guide. He will be here shortly."

Throe shook his head. "Communications are fast in the Invisible Chroma zone! All I knew was that a guide would come here to negotiate terms."

"This way," she said, putting a fine hand on his elbow and urging him toward the house. Inertia, released, began to graze on the lush-looking shrubbery at the fringe of the Chroma. Apparently there was no need to confine her, once she was home; she would not stray.

At the house Vision served excellent blue bread with yellow cheese, and sparkling silver wine. All seemed to be genuine rather than colored by illusion, and of excellent quality. This was clearly an upper class household. Throe appreciated it; he was hungry, as the days of riding had not allowed him very regular or substantial meals.

"I am not sure I understand the name, Jamais Vu," Throe said.

She smiled. Her teeth were starlike in their brightness, as were her eyes. "It means he is oddly strange, in contrast to Deja Vu, oddly familiar. There is simply something intriguing about him. Were I not already married and in no need of another fourth, I would be amenable to a liaison with him. He is a fine young man. I envy the woman who gets to fathom his mystery."

"All I seek is a competent guide."

"He is that. You will like him; everyone does." She smiled again, and though Throe well understood that her beauty was illusion, he remained impressed by it. "Now tell me about the gossip of Triumph City. Is it true that the new King is wild?"

He did not care to reveal his own closeness to King Havoc, for that could compromise his mission. "It is true. But also sincere. He is doing his best to learn governance and keep the peace. He is from a barbarian village, unaccustomed to the ways of civilization, but is unusually smart. The

women like him very well."

"Women do like kings."

"And kings like women," he agreed. "But he made a friend of King Deal's widow, and another of Deal's mistress."

"Those would not have been easy conquests."

"Surely not. But perhaps like Jamais, there is something about him. I understand that when there was an assassination attempt against him, two Glamors intervened."

"Glamors!" she exclaimed. "I never heard of them intervening before."

"Nor I. I admit to having entertained some doubt that they even existed. But Glamor Black appeared and turned the traitors to ashes, and Glamor Red appeared and embraced Havoc after perhaps restoring him to life. I was not the only one astounded."

"Glamors," she repeated. "We are surely come upon interesting times."

"I think they were annoyed about the murder of King Deal."

"As were many of us. He was by most accounts a good and virile man."

"So I understand."

"And young King Havoc is similar?"

"Possibly more so. He seems to have won the favor of King Deal's entire staff and household personnel, which he kept on."

"He did not replace them? No wonder they like him!"

"I think it is more than that. They are like a family to him, protecting him socially as well as physically. His young consort Gale is similarly winning."

Vision looked beyond him. "Greeting, Jamais."

"Acknowledgment, Vision." Jamais turned out to be a handsome young man with a shock of blue hair. The Invisibles were not limited in colors, since their appearance was entirely illusion.

Throe stood. "Greeting."

"Ditto."

"I will leave you to your negotiation," Vision said. "Take my seat, Jamais."

"Appreciation." The young man sat, as the woman went to rejoin Inertia. Throe wondered why Inertia was not invisible, then realized that the farmstead by the fringe of the Chroma zone was

probably no accident; the millipede was a nonChroma creature tamed by the Invisible Chroma woman.

They exchanged formal introductions. Then Throe repeated the coordinates.

"This is a considerable challenge," Jamais said. "We shall have to brave the cone itself. You are aware of the danger?"

"I approach no volcano by preference. But my mission is to recover an artifact from that site, and I must make my best effort."

"I can do it if I choose, but I have a price you may prefer not to pay."

"My resources are limited, but my need is great."

"Are you committed to a woman?"

Throe was surprised. "This relates?"

"Yes."

"I have been married and have raised my four. Now I have a new woman, and I love her, and she me. We will marry when our present businesses are done."

"Excellent. So you have no interest in any other woman."

"I admire youthful proportions, as always, but wish no relationship other than the one I have."

"I must marry within the month, but have not decided on the woman. You will help me decide."

"This is hardly my business."

"Oh, it is, because this is my price. You must acquaint yourself with my three loves, and advise me which one I should marry."

"I plead incompetence. I am not of your generation, and my expertise with women other than my former wife is slight."

"But you have traveled no fault?"

"Yes. But such relationships hardly count. In fact they are by definition non-committal."

"They are nevertheless experience."

"Perhaps. But not toward marriage. Surely only you yourself can make such a decision."

"They are sisters, similar in respects, yet set quite apart from each other. Ina, Ine, and Ini, in descending order of age. All well worthy of a man's commitment. Each has a quality I desire. Were it allowed, I would marry all three. As it is, I must choose one. I am not able to do so."

"There must be others to advise you. I am not the person for this."

"Oh, but you are. You have no interest in a foreign relationship. You are objective. You will have insights I lack."

"I will have clumsiness and confusion you lack, and no clear notion what might be best for you. I am not of your Chroma, and hardly know your conventions."

"All I need is your opinion. As an outsider your judgment will not be distorted by local issues."

They argued, but Jamais Vu was resolute: Throe must meet the sisters and form an opinion which one Jamais should marry. That was the price of Jamais' service as guide. Throe had no choice but to agree.

They set off by foot, for Jamais assured him that no one employed magic means to approach the cone; magic could react dangerously in that vicinity. Throe was not sure he believed that, but had to accept it. He did not try to read the man's mind, for any such effort might be detected, and in any event, what he needed was the man's service as a guide, not information on his private thoughts.

It was a pretty path, with multi-colored flowers growing on either side. Further back were trees with leaves of several hues, some with exotic fruits and nuts. There were hills and dales, and they crossed a bridge over a sparkling river. "Is all the zone this lovely?" Throe asked.

"Not all; some parts wish to be left alone, so they make themselves ugly."

"The scenery makes itself pretty or ugly?"

"The living aspects of it. Each tree puts on its appearance, and each shrub, and each tuft of grass. Animals project their chosen aspects."

"So illusion is not merely the choice of the human population?"

"It is not. We merely follow the natural pattern, as is the case with other Chroma."

Throe wondered. He had thought that the human populations guided the specialties, but this suggested that the creatures and plants originated them. What was the real answer?

"How is it that you do not fly, or use other magical means to travel more readily?"

"We could fly, and some do. But it can be awkward or even dangerous outside of carefully defined channels. Since all that is visible is illusion, we can be certain of nothing unless we know it personally. It is safer when going beyond our own homesteads to stay afoot, and on the marked paths."

"Couldn't a marked path be illusion covering a pitfall?"

"Indeed it could. That is why you need a guide. I know which paths are real." He gestured ahead, to where the path divided. "For example, the path I know is the left fork. The right fork may be new, or may be nothing. Shall we find out?"

To Throe's eye, the two paths were similar. One wound through a field of red flowers, the other through blue flowers. Both were level, without threatening aspects. "I am curious."

Jamais produced a brown staff. He had not been carrying it; evidently he had conjured it at need, or perhaps had it waiting invisibly where he needed it. That was one advantage of living in a Chroma; incidentals were convenient. He poked at the right path, and nodded. "Try it," he said, handing the staff to Throe.

Throe accepted it, and tapped at the worn surface of the center of the path. But the end of the staff passed through it, encountering no resistance. Only when it was a good foot beyond the visible surface did it strike solidity. That lower surface, it turned out, was sloping down, and rocky. The person who stepped onto it might find himself sliding down a steep slope to some unknown landing.

"Point made. But why would anyone—or any thing—take the trouble to set up a ruse like this? What is to be gained from it?"

"It may be a settler who does not like trespassers. Or plants that have been molested by passing youths. Or a predator."

"But it is just a slope down."

"Or the edge of an ant lion trap."

Throe had seen the conic holes of insects that trapped unwary ants or other small insects. This one would be large enough to catch a man. That spoke for itself. "I hope you do not make any mistakes."

Jamais laughed. "I hope so too. We shall have to go carefully near the cone, because I do not go there frequently, and the landscape changes constantly." He led the way along the left path, walking with confidence.

In due course they came to a lovely little cottage. "This is Ina's house. You will stay here the night, and I will come for you in the morning."

"I don't mean to take the only lodging. Surely we can share."

"Not tonight. Ina is the first sister."

Oh. "One you might marry? But I should not spend the night with her. I can talk with her, perhaps an hour, and go on."

"You must get to know her better than that. Parting."

"But—" He stopped, because Jamais had literally faded out. He had turned off his illusion, and now was invisible. "As you wish," Throe concluded gruffly.

He walked to the house. The door opened as he approached. A lovely young woman stood there, with an elegant blue coiffure and a rather scant red dress. "You must be Jamais' friend. Do come in."



"Greeting," Throe said awkwardly.

"Acknowledged. Introduction: I am Inamorata, Ina to my friends and lovers."

"I am Throe, traveling in the King's service."

She took his elbow in much the way Vision had, guiding him into the house. He realized that when everything visible was illusion, a physical touch could be a necessary guide to spot reality. "I have prepared a nice supper for us, and a soft bed."

So she had known he was coming. "I appreciate the supper, and shall be glad of comfortable sleep. But it was never my intention to put anyone to any inconvenience."

"I'm sure." She guided him to an inner door. "Here is the lavatory. You will want to clean up, as you are sweaty."

"Thank you." He reached for the door handle, and to his half surprise it was exactly where it seemed to be. He had traveled through Invisible Chroma zones before, but always in the company of the King, who rated special facilities. He had never stayed in the house of a private Air Chroma citizen.

There was a privy pot, a basin, sponge, and pitcher of water. Just what he needed. There was even a mirror on the wall behind the basin. He doffed his clothes, which were indeed sweaty, and sat on the pot. Then he used the wet sponge to clean his body, rinsing it often in the basin. It was good to get clean again.

He stooped to pick up his clothes from the floor, but did not find them. They were gone. He suffered a pang of alarm, then realized that they must have turned invisible when separated from him, yielding to the Chroma ambiance. He felt around more carefully, and found cloth. He lifted it—and discovered that it was an unfamiliar blue cloak.

Throe paused, considering. She must have left the cloak there for him to find. But what had happened to his clothes? What of his weapons? He did not like to be separated from them. So he expanded his search, feeling across the floor.

His bow and arrows were resting on an invisible table to the side, along with his knife, short club, and personal items from his pockets. All returned to visibility when lifted from the table. But his clothing was gone. So there was no confusion on his part; someone had taken his clothing, neatly storing his artifacts. Which meant he had not been alone in the lavatory.

He pondered further. Obviously the motive was not robbery, and he doubted that there was any other person in this house besides Ina. She must have done it. She was invisible in her natural state, and could have come in silently to exchange clothing. Probably she was washing his grimy things, and would return them clean in the morning. This was one of the things a good woman did for a man. So his best bet was accept it without quibble, and express appreciation in due course. His weapons could remain where they were; they were not suitable props for a quiet dinner with a young woman. Should any threat materialize, he was hardly helpless bare-handed.

He donned the cloak and faced the mirror, combing his hair with his fingers. As he did so, it fell

perfectly into place, as if done with a fine comb. His gruff bearded face was darkly handsome; he looked thirty rather than forty. Illusion, of course, making him seem more appealing than he was. Deep within the Chroma of illusion, this sort of thing was to be expected. The natives did not even consider it magic; it was simply part of their routine existence.

How did a mirror work, when it could not be seen? The illusory image of the glass overlaid the real mirror, which might simply be a wooden board. But reflective illusion? Apparently it was so.

Another aspect caught up with him, a bit belatedly. If Ina had come to take his clothing and leave the cloak, she must have done it while he was on the pot or sponging himself. She had to have seen him naked. A native could have used the facilities naked without embarrassment, because he would be invisible, but Throe was all too chronically visible. So she had viewed all of him. Did it matter? Probably not. She would have known that he was not trying to flaunt his body before her. She might have been curious. She would have seen a healthy muscular man who was nevertheless twice her age.

He turned, opened the door, and stepped into the main house. She was there, lighting a candle on the table. She had set it for two, and green wine had already been poured. It was evident that anything she wanted to be visible was visible; only neglected things disappeared.

"Appreciation," he said.

She smiled, and there was a gentle glow about her face as she did so. "Welcome, Throe."

They sat down to eat. The candle flickered, casting pleasant shadows across Ina's face and décolletage, reflecting from her sparkling necklace and the translucent gem hanging between the upper swells of her breasts. The wine was excellent, as were the purple potatoes and orange fruit. She served a green cake with surrounding leaves that swayed slightly in some imagined breeze.

"I am here on somewhat awkward business," Throe said as they concluded the meal.

"I understand. You must decide which of us Jamais will marry."

"Surely not! He must decide. But he has asked me to—to interview the three of you, and proffer an opinion. I must say that this is not something I sought, nor do I feel competent. I am a martial artist, not a judge of women. But he refused to yield to my demurrals."

"You are married?"

"I was married, for twenty years, until our children were grown. Then we separated amicably. It was a marriage of convenience, but we got along well."

"Tell me about your wife."

"I will be glad to. But is this of interest to you? I should be asking about you, rather than talking about my own relationships."

She smiled again, and again there was a glow, and a flicker from the gem at hollow of her breasts. It was impossible not to note how well formed that region was. "You will learn all that you

need to know of me soon enough. Meanwhile I am curious what relationships are like in the dreary nonChroma realm."

"It is not dreary, merely different from your experience, because of the lack of ambient magic. We are accustomed to it, as you are to your Chroma environment."

"But you and your wife, seeing each other all the time, in your worst and middle phases instead of merely at your best—how did you stand it? Or is that why you separated?"

"By no means. My wife was a comely enough woman. She simply—"

"What was her name?"

"Oblige. It fit her well. The constraints of culture and parentage required her to marry well, and I, as a warrior in the service of the King, was considered suitable. I think she loved another man, but she was not allowed free choice, so she obliged her family. It was similar for me. Because there are a number of fair young women in the King's larger household, it was required that I be firmly committed elsewhere, and—"

"Exactly."

Throe was nonplused. "Explanation?"

"I am a comely young woman. Jamais wants an opinion from a man who will not be tempted to dally beyond his necessary stay."

"I have no designs on you! If I ever gave that impression, my immediate apology." Throe felt himself flushing.

"Be at ease, warrior. I merely clarify that this was the basis of your selection for this service. You are a man, with a manly eye." Her eyes flicked down to the gem at her bosom, which flared. She had caught him looking. His flush increased. "We desire that eye; it shows that you understand the appeal. But also your commitment elsewhere. I could have virtually any man I choose, with the snap of my finger." She snapped her finger, and as the sound came, her red dress flicked off for an instant, showing a flash of her fine bare breasts. "But none in this zone would separate opinion from personal desire. You will."

"I will," Throe agreed. "But perhaps it would be better if you covered the—the gem."

"By no means. It is time to move to the next stage."

Next stage? "I am ready for sleep. It has been a long and varied day."

"In due course." She rose from the table, and it faded out. "Come sit by me. Hold my hand and tell me the rest about your wife."

"Confusion."

Again she smiled, and was stunningly lovely. "Is it possible you do not know the extent of this

interview?"

"It seems possible," he agreed. He had deliberately not read her mind, fearing that would skew his impression of her. "I thought to talk with you perhaps an hour, and then talk similarly with your sisters. You have already been a far more gracious hostess than I deserve, considering that I have been required to make judgment of you. Do I have a confusion?"

"Evidently you do. Jamais already knows our three personalities and capacities, as well as our family background. We are all suitable partners for him, socially and practically. It is our sexual compatibility that he can not know, for none of us will indulge him in that respect until he commits to one of us. You will advise him which of us is the best in bed."

Throe felt his jaw drop. "How could I possibly know that?"

Ina laughed, and the gem flickered, synchronized. "How could you possibly not know, after this night?" She caught his hand and drew him to a soft couch. "We are about to get to that, but first I still want to know the rest about your wife." Her red dress faded out—and so did his blue cloak. They were virtually naked.

"Wife," he repeated, trying without success to avert his gaze from the juncture of her slightly-parted thighs. She was perfect in every part, thanks to the illusion. Belatedly he realized that her name, Inamorata, was literal: she was a lover, a sweetheart, and was playing her role. He clung to the haven proffered: the subject of his wife. "We were a fair match, and we understood the nature of the marriage. She was a seamstress for the Queen, and at times had to remain at work for several days at a time, for the Queen could be very particular about her apparel when a social or political event was incipient. I was a guard, and required to travel with the King, and might be away from Triumph City for weeks at a time. So we spent more time separated than together, and we both accepted that. We understood that our union was secondary to royal convenience."

"Of course," Ina murmured, leaning forward so that her breasts became fuller.

He was reacting, and she knew it, for the invisible apparel concealed nothing. She was half his age, but was now the very essence of sex appeal. He continued, doggedly. "We did get together for the generation of our offspring. And I must say, Oblige was a wonderfully supportive partner, and a delight in bed. I would never have thought that her heart longed elsewhere, had I not known it before we married. I—I did love her, and wished she were fully mine. I wanted so much to please her, and it seemed that I did, but there was always that hidden shadow."

"The shadow Jamais must avoid."

"You love elsewhere?"

"No. But how can he be sure of that?"

He thought about it a moment before speaking. "If you turn out to be his best match, and he marries you, then he will be sure of it."

"Affirmative. But he must take the best match. Otherwise there could come later problems, and alienation of affection. None of us want that, or even the potential of it."

"This is beginning to make more sense to me. But I remain dubious. Do I understand correctly that you are prepared to have sex with me, but not with Jamais unless you marry him?"

"You understand correctly. The one he marries will be his virgin bride, as far as that relationship goes. Of course, we are not virgins in any other sense." She drew him in closer, touching his cheek with her lips as she spoke. "And did you please your wife?"

"I hope so. When it came time for the fourth child, I urged her to seek it from the man she loved. I wanted to give her at least that much satisfaction."

"You are a nice man." She was speaking into his ear, and her soft breath stirred him further. She was going to seduce him, and they both knew it.

"I am not a nice man. I am a warrior. I have killed repeatedly, and performed other ill acts in the service of the King. There is much blood on my hands."

"Your wife knew better. So do I. Blood is of no relevance. Did she go to her love?"

"Yes. And he turned her down in crude language. It seemed that her passion for him had been one sided. He had wanted to be rid of her, and had a hand in the arrangement of her marriage to me. He broke her heart."

"That was cruel. He could have pled other business."

"Yes. I wanted to kill him, and I could have done so."

"But she stayed your hand."

"She stayed my hand," he agreed. "She still cared for him, despite his attitude. She made me promise to leave him alone, knowing I would keep my promise though it galled me. I wanted to comfort her, but did not know how. I offered to—to leave her alone, so that at least she did not have to submit her body to the wrong man any more. But she—"

"She said she would not do to you what her love had done to her."

Throe was astonished. "How did you know that?"

"I am a woman." She certainly was! She put her arms about his shoulders and drew his head down to her breasts. "Tell the rest."

He spoke against her right breast, feeling the passionate wonder of it. He was completely unable to distinguish illusion from reality; the breast seemed fully as well formed as represented. "She went elsewhere, and got her forth from a man she had no passion for. Thereafter it was as before, and she remained my delight. I hoped that she had come to love me as I loved her, but when our children were of age so that our marriage was no longer required, she chose to separate, and of course I let her go."

"Of course," Ina echoed. "As you will let me go, tomorrow."

"But I do not love you."

"Perhaps not yet." She put her feet on the floor, stood, drew him up, shrugged out of her invisible dress, removed his cloak, and led him to the bed. "Savor my body. I want you to have no doubt that it is genuine."

He was beyond protest. He clasped her, and ran his hands over her back and buttocks, and kissed her mouth and then her breasts as they fell on the bed. All of her was exactly as represented by the illusion; she was indeed a beautiful woman. In moments he was in her, climaxing with a force he had not felt in years. She participated completely, catering to his every whim of the moment. It was quite clear that she knew exactly what she was doing. She had the body and the touch. Inamorata—how well she was named!

"Oh, Ina," he gasped. "You are the best lover I have encountered."

"I rather thought to be," she agreed. "Now I will let you sleep a while, before passion comes again."

"There is no need—"

She silenced him with a finger on his lips. "This is what we are here for, and it is my area of expertise. What I do for you I will do for Jamais, if he marries me."

"Acquiescence." He lay on the bed while she fetched the sponge and cleaned him off, for he had sweated again and become somewhat sticky in another manner. Then she disappeared—literally—to attend to her own toilette. At this point he wondered whether there was any point in interviewing the other two sisters; he had already found the one who would put Jamais into bliss.

Ina returned to join him on the bed, and she put one hand on his shoulder and slept. So did he, but as she had predicted, he woke in the night, dreaming of her, and in a moment she embraced him and made the dream come true. Just the touch of her breasts and thighs were enough to inflame his passion. It was dark, and he didn't know whether she was invisible, but she was definitely there.

As light came, she kissed him. "This will be last. Are you up to it?"

He had to laugh, for she was already stroking him into urgency. She bestrode him, her remarkable breasts pressing him down as she kissed him and took him in. She stroked him internally, too, summoning his final performance. He simply lay there and let her do it, and it was a fulfillment of another nature, less impetuous, but more meaningful. He flowed, and she accepted, and it was about as nice as a relaxed experience could be.

"It is fortunate that this is no fault," he said. "For you could readily take me from my fiancée if you chose."

She kissed him again. "I like you, Throe. At such time as I am in need of a fourth, I may come to you."

"If you seek me, you will surely have me," he agreed.

Then they got up, and she joined him in the lavatory, sponging him off once more and letting him sponge her off. Oblige had never done that. She had obliged him completely, as was her nature, but not made a project of impressing him the way this young woman did.

Then Ina gestured, and he saw his original clothing, neatly cleaned and folded on the table. He donned it while she shrugged into a yellow dress and went to prepare breakfast. He fastened on his weapons.

"You know I must interview your sisters," he said as they ate. He noted that her breasts no longer showed; she was demure, having completed the sexual aspect of their encounter.

"They will impress you similarly, but in other ways. Then you will decide."

"Then I will report my opinion to Jamais, and he will decide."

"Perhaps." She glanced down, in a fetching mannerism, then met his gaze. "Your wife—Oblige—did love you in her fashion. But she felt she had wronged you, and did not deserve you, so she freed you to find happiness elsewhere. Just as you tried to do for her."

"How can you know this?"

"I am a woman," she repeated.

There was a dismaying certainty in her verdict. He had indeed found happiness elsewhere. But he would never have left Oblige if he had realized it wasn't her preference. "Have I wronged her in turn?"

"I don't think so. A good relationship is not made from guilt. It is unfortunate that you were not able to love each other simultaneously, but your relationship is not over. You will surely be there for her when she needs you."

"I hope so."

"Jamais returns." Indeed, in a moment there was a knock on the door.

"Then I must go," Throe said. "But I must say, this has been more of a—an experience than I anticipated."

"Appreciation." Her dress vanished and she stood before him splendidly naked. Then she opened the door, and her dress was back in place.

Jamais stepped in and kissed her, and she kissed him back. Throe could tell by the supple yielding of her body that her feeling for the young man was dimensionally greater than any she had for Throe himself. Quite possibly she had imagined Jamais in Throe's place as she indulged him during the night. She was ready and able to make the man a good wife.

Soon they were on their way. Jamais did not inquire about Throe's night; he surely knew as much as he needed to. Instead he showed the way on toward the Invisible Volcano. This was impressive in a new way; the scenery was now wild and at times threatening, but Jamais knew how

much was real and how much was bluff. A monstrous serpent dangled from an overhanging branch, hissing as it opened its mouth; Jamais walked right through it, not seeming to notice. But when a small black rabbit sat on the path, Jamais went carefully around it, and Throe followed.

"I do not question your expertise," Throe said. "But I am curious what that rabbit was in reality."

"Then you shall know." Jamais turned, took a pebble from his pocket, and threw it underhand back at the rabbit.

The pebble bounced off the rabbit's head. The rabbit roared and leaped—and became an apelike creature with huge hands and teeth. But its hands closed on air; there was nothing for it to grab.

"An ogre," Throe said, recognizing the species. "But why didn't it grab one of us as we skirted it?"

"It was masquerading as a bunny. It is not smart enough to focus on two things at once, so was not alert for prey. It simply grabbed anything that touched it."

Throe nodded. "A simple device, normally effective. Yet how did you know?"

"I heard its breathing."

Men of the field did know animals by sound and smell as well as sight. "I admit to being impressed."

"I would surely be impressed by a demonstration of your expertise."

"I hope that is never necessary."

As the day wore on, the invisible Volcano cone came into view—or the illusion of it. "Do inanimate things cast illusions too?"

Jamais smiled. "No, but their associated demons do. The invisible demons are proud of their cone, and want it to be admired and feared, so they show it. They will be less forthcoming when we approach it closely."

"There is, then, danger?"

"There is danger everywhere, for those not wary of it. We should manage."

Throe did not argue the case. He knew it was true, and especially true of volcanoes.

They came to another house. This one was plain but well constructed, with satellite sheds around it. "Ini will be expecting you," Jamais said, and faded out.

Throe walked on toward the house. Sure enough, a young woman appeared. She was garbed in brown work clothes, and was rather plain. She had to be using illusion, because otherwise she would have been invisible, but she was clearly not much interested in appearances. She resembled Ina on



possibly her worst day. "Greeting," she said, spying him.

"Acknowledgment."

"You would be Throe."

"I am. Jamais asked me to—"

"Of course. I am Initiative, the intellectual sister, or at least the inquisitive one. Do come in."

"This role is not entirely of my choosing."

"It is nonetheless a worthy one." She had precise enunciation, and an efficient way of speaking. Her every gesture was businesslike. "Allow me to clean up and make myself presentable."

"I think all I really need to do is talk with you."

"Hardly." She took his arm much the way her sister had, bringing him inside.

So he was not to escape the rest of it. "May I help you in some manner? If there are chores—"

"It really is not necessary."

"Please. I feel guilty approaching you in the manner required, and would like to pay my way in some manner if that is possible."

She studied him with disconcerting savvy. "You dread having to have sex with me."

She had him dead rights. "That, too. But I am serious about the other."

She nodded. "There is something. Come this way." She led him out of the house and around to a shed. "I am studying Planet Counter Charm, hoping to fathom a bit of its mystery. I have fashioned a telescope, but it is difficult to orient and focus it while actually viewing the subject. If you care to do the viewing, and report what you see, it would significantly facilitate my work."

"I shall be glad to. I share every person's fascination with Mystery. Counter Charm."

The shed opened out into a large shiny concave disk. "This is illusion," Ini said, passing her hand through its edge without resistance. "Maintaining it isn't difficult; it is using it that is challenging."

"I am not acquainted with such things," Throe said. "I thought a telescope was a tube used by White Chroma folk to see long distances."

"It is. But all Chroma magic is similar in its underlying principles. When I make an illusion telescope, it operates in much the way the White Chroma devices do. I am doing by Invisible Chroma magic what they do with White Chroma magic. White Chroma magic would not work here, of course, but its parallel in Invisible Chroma magic does. I learned the principles by consulting with a White Chroma scientist. He thought my illusion would work, if I wrought it correctly, and he was correct. But he couldn't stay to see it through. The principle is this: light comes from Counter Charm,

reflects off the shiny apparent surface of the disk, focuses on the little reflector there, and reflects to the eyepiece here." She gestured to the various parts.

"I do not wish to appear dull, but what is the point of all that reflection?"

"What is the point of the reflection in a mirror?" she retorted, then answered immediately: "It is to see something you can't otherwise see. You want to see your face; I want to see magnified detail of the surface of a foreign planet."

Throe began to catch on. "It is like standing closer to a thing, so as to see it better?"

"Exactly. This will make it seem as if we stand only a tenth of the distance we do now. So we should be able to see ten times as much detail. How I long for that revelation!"

"Ten times the detail!"

"To start," she said, pleased by his reaction. "With the handheld refractive scope. That one I have used; it is the big reflector that I need the help with. That starts at a hundred power."

"A hundred times as close to Planet Mystery?" he asked, awed.

"Yes. Isn't it marvelous? The very thought excites me. Unfortunately, my neighbors are not much interested. They ask why I should bother looking at a world I can never visit personally. They say it's impractical."

"But Mystery is the most wonderful thing in the sky! I have gazed at it all my life, and am always intrigued. I want to know whether there are people there, and whether they are similarly gazing at our world and wondering about us."

Ini nodded. "I can see that you and I are going to get along. I am glad you stopped by."

"It is no glad mission, as far as you are concerned. I have to make a judgment I am incompetent to make."

"Perhaps," she said, in much the way Ina had. She handed him a wooden object, larger at one end than the other. "This is the telescope, which is simply a tube of wood with illusion lenses at either end. Look through it in this manner." She produced a second telescope, lifted it high, pointed the large end at Planet Mystery, and put one eye to the narrow end. "Tell me what you see."

Throe emulated her procedure, and discovered that there was a picture visible in the tube: the curving fringe of a monstrous object. "I think I am looking at the Charm horizon."

"Unlikely; the horizon is not being animated by illusion at present. You are seeing Counter Charm."

"But it's so big! I can't fit the whole of it in this little window."

"Ten times as big," she agreed. "Pass across it until you see a big black spot. That is what I am orienting on."

He moved the scope, and the scene jumped dizzily. But in a moment he got it under control and found the black spot. "Shaped like a sleeping spider," he said.

"That is it. I believe it is a Black Chroma volcano, larger than any we know on Charm. But I can't see enough detail to be sure. So we'll employ it as a reference, and orient on something nearby."

"Even so, it is impressive. I have seen that black dot before, but now it's a huge blotch."

"Do you see the yellow line below it?"

Throe looked, and after some waving around managed to find the line. "Slightly curving."

"Do you know of any volcano that forms a Chroma zone like that?"

"No. Ours are round or irregular, as the Chroma settles around their cones. That can't be a volcano."

"Not like any we know, at any rate. What about a volcanic vent?"

"I suppose that's possible. But tiny as it looks, it must be enormous on that world. We don't have vents that size."

"My sentiment exactly. I think it is time to go to the reflector scope, now that you are conversant with the principle. I have been consumed by curiosity about such details, and perhaps now at last I can begin to fathom their natures."

Throe was getting excited. "I was never a—an explorer of this nature. But my curiosity is becoming painful."

"Give me the telescope."

He removed his eye from the lens, reluctantly, and returned it to her. "I begin to appreciate your frustration, having an even more potent tool without being able to use it."

"Exactly. Here is the eyepiece of the reflector." She showed him a lens mounted on a tripod set at about head height. "Now you will have to tell me where to move, and report what you see as I adjust the orientation." She went to another tripod. "I will change the angle of inclination of the illusion lens by gradual stages."

"I will do my best." He saw how it was that she could not do both jobs at the same time. Obviously the illusion did not manipulate itself; she had to put her full attention on it. This was a two person job. Would Jamais cooperate with her on this, if he married her? That was critical.

This time the picture was so big he had no idea where he was. "It is just a mass of vague color," he said.

"It is out of focus. Tell me when it clarifies."

The fuzzing got worse, then abruptly better. "It looks like a map!"

"Let me see if I can find the yellow line. First I will seek the black region, as that can not be mistaken. I will cast back and forth; tell me when you see black."

The scene fuzzed, as if he were flying across it too rapidly to see the details. Then it turned black. "Black!" he cried.

"I will try to move below, slowly."

"How do you know where you're going, when you are flying blind?"

"I know the general layout. I know where things should be. But getting specific is impossible when I'm doing it indirectly."

There was a flash of yellow. "Yellow!" he exclaimed. "But you passed it."

"I will nudge back."

Then the yellow returned. It was a vague patch rather than a line. "You have it, but I can't make out detail."

"I will increase the magnification. The image will lose focus, but you can tell me as I get it back."

"Yes."

"This is 1,000 X—the picture a thousand times as large as what the naked eye sees."

It blurred again, and the yellow was lost, but he was able to guide her back. Then she went to 10,000 X, and then to 100,000 X.

In a moment the color formed into a scene like that of a valley viewed from the top of a mountain. "It's there!" he said. "A forest, I think, and a valley. And a lake!"

"What of the yellow?"

"I lost that."

"I will move it very slowly."

The flying resumed. "Yellow! Now I have clear detail. It is a vent, spewing dust on either side. It goes on forever."

"Confirmation!" she cried, thrilled.

They went to one million X, and much more detail appeared. Throe saw shapes moving at the fringe of the yellow region.

"I'll take it to ten million," Ini said. "That's my limit; I don't have the magic for a larger reflector."

But that magnification was enough. It was as though he floated a hundred or a hundred and fifty

feet above the ground, and he could see everything. The shapes turned out to be trees and animals, and they were weird.

"Tell me!" Ini cried.

"I haven't seen anything like these," he said as he moved slowly across the landscape. "One is a—a giant snail with three antenna, sliding along at a respectable speed."

"An uncatalogued species," she breathed.

"And here is a wheeled creature. It has four, no five legs, and each ends in a wheel. It lifts one or two wheels at a time over obstructions, always having good balance on three wheels on the ground. And there's a flying creature—it seems to have one wing whirling overhead, lifting it."

"A vertical wheel, perhaps," she said. "Counter Charm has wheeled creatures!"

Then the scene fuzzed out. "You lost focus."

"No, it's a cloud. Obscenity!"

Throe removed his eye from the lens. She was right; a cloud had cut off their view. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," she said, coming to him. "We have made so much progress, it will be all I can do to record it accurately before the view is clear again. I spoke intemperately, but a moment suffices to restore my perspective. Oh, I could kiss you!"

"Affirmative." They came together and kissed. Ini no longer seemed plain to him; she was the essence of explorative discovery. Who could have believed that he would so suddenly see so much of the world that had mystified him all his life!

"We have some time to spare. This is where my initiative fails.

I know I am not a seductive creature."

For a moment he was blank. "Seductive?"

"So I must be blunt. Let's do it now, before the cloud passes," she murmured.

No need to ask what. He was supposed to have sex with her. Actually, the excitement of viewing the companion planet made him passionate. Ini's essence was not in her appearance, which she did not deign to enhance by illusion, but in her joy of discovery, and he was sharing it. They hurried into the house, stripped, and piled onto the bed. "A new world—up close," he said as he penetrated her.

"Three new species already!" she agreed as she clasped him closely to her.

The sex was satisfying, if rushed, but both were eager to get back outside and be ready for the passing of the cloud. Soon they were looking again, discovering a plant or animal like a huge moving sponge, and a creature like one of the legendary dinosaurs. Then more clouds came, and they had to

end it for the day.

"Oh, I meant to make a good meal for you," she said. "I got so carried away, I forgot."

"I don't care about that. I'll eat whatever you have, and meanwhile let's write down those discoveries before we forget any details."

She hastened to comply, and they gobbled it down while chronicling the telescope experience. Throe was able to remember more details as they reviewed it, and the scene clarified and solidified for him as he did. He had actually noticed a lot more than he had realized at the time.

"I feel as though I saw them myself," Ini said half wistfully.

"Can you teach me to guide the telescope, so that you can look?"

She shook her head. "This requires a complex exercise of the mind, to shape and orient the intensely specific illusion. You would have to be Air Chroma yourself."

Throe had a notion, but preferred to let it percolate a while before broaching it. "Will Jamais do it?"

"If he marries me."

"So he understands that part of the price of you is to support your research."

"Yes. We have agreed that I would not hold him to more than an hour a day. That should suffice; I will have many notes to make at other times."

"Why do you wish to marry him? I mean, you could surely get competent assistance without having to marry anyone."

"Oh, yes, I could, and I will, if he does not marry me. But there's something about him. None of us can go elsewhere until we know he is settled. So we are agreed: he will choose one of us, and the others will not begrudge her. All of us have other prospects, once we know that Jamais is committed."

"I find this unusual. First that three of you should compete so amicably for a single man—"

"Four, actually. But Ino refuses to compete."

"Oh. She's the fourth." That said volumes; she would be at best a half sister. "Second, that you should do so in such a manner. Requiring a stranger to judge you, even to the extent of—"

"Especially to the extent of," she said, smiling. "I fear I was abrupt with you, in my distraction of the observation."

"I was as eager as you to get back to the observation. I will remember it for all my life. I have never before seen such sights."

"Because there are no such sights on Charm. Today we have verified that the life on Counter

Charm is different. Oh, I am jealous of your experience!" She shrugged. "But it is as it must be. I should not have pressed you into such service. We must retire to bed, and can go again, at proper leisure. I can use illusion to make myself more interesting, so that it is not arduous for you."

"It was hardly arduous! We were both so excited by what we had seen that this seemed to be a natural alleviation."

"It is kind of you to say so. Nevertheless—"

Throe came to a decision. "I realize that you need to show me what you can do there, so that I can come to a conclusion for Jamais, and I don't want to deny you that. I admit to being intrigued by the prospect of experiencing what you can do when buffered by illusion. But I think it would be a waste."

Her face became blank. "You have already decided?"

"No. I can't do that until I have visited the third sister. But though I doubt that you can match what Ina did in bed, I know that you are probably a better potential wife than she is. You do not need to extend yourself for me."

She gazed at him. "I am not a stupid woman." She paused while he choked back his laughter; that was a considerable understatement. "But I think I do not understand the basis of your conclusion."

"Ina gave me a night of such sexual fulfillment as I have never had elsewhere, even in my more ardent youth; I doubt anyone else can match it. She can surely do the same for Jamais. But despite your agreement to compete in this aspect, I can't agree. A marriage is more than sex, and you should not let that one aspect determine the decision."

"But the other aspects are even. Jamais finds us equivalent in other respects. So it must be the deciding factor."

"No! It must be a *compatible* factor, not the deciding one. Ina will not be as impressive when she ages. The long term must be considered as well as the short term."

She nodded. "You make appealing sense. Still—"

"In this respect, I have the advantage of experience. But that is not my point of the moment. It is that it would be a waste to take your time in bed, when I may be able to give you time looking at Counter Charm."

"I think I have learned better than to dismiss your notion without ascertaining its specifics. But I confess extreme doubt."

"I am telepathic. I don't use it much, and I have not read your mind. But I may do so, with your permission, so as to draw from your mind the expertise to guide your telescope. I would not need to learn it myself, merely to channel your ability through my own mind. If that is possible, we would do better spending the night viewing Counter Charm, than wasting it in bed."

She came to him and kissed him, and such was the passion thereof that he knew he had been right to broach this notion. They went outside, and the clouds had not abated, but they practiced with the telescope. Throe sat at the second eyepiece, which turned out to be dual, so that the eyes could coordinate, and Ini reviewed the mental mechanism of controlling the intense illusion. It was dark, but that did not matter; Counter Charm's face was locked to Charm's, and vice versa, so was always visible. Throe did not understand her complexly channeled thoughts, but did not need to; they coursed through his mind, and enabled him to control the telescope. For the present it was as if he were a clone of her, able to draw on her mental resources.

The clouds passed, and they were doing it seriously. Throe continued with the telescope, following her thoughts, and Ini peered through the single lens—and saw the detail and creatures of Counter Charm. He felt her overwhelming thrill as she explored the planet directly. Her dream of a lifetime was being realized.

Then the clouds closed in again, this time so solidly that it was obvious that they were there to stay. But Ini was satisfied; she had seen what she had seen. The two of them reentered the house.

Ini said no word. She flung her arms about him, kissing him fervently. He carried her to the bed, and shed his weapons and clothing, and this time they made love in a manner that did indeed rival what he had experienced the night before. The rapture of her breakthrough outside suffused her mind, and she associated him with it, and had great joy in him, and that delight spilled over to his mind and made the experience unique.

Panting, they fell apart and lay beside each other on the bed, still too worked up for sleep. "Oh, I forgot the illusion!"

"You had no need of it. You are as much of a woman as any, and outward form becomes irrelevant."

"You have a way of putting it that delights me."

"I did learn something in the course of a long marriage. There are many qualities contributing to a relationship."

"Nevertheless, you flatter me."

"Negation."

"You were married," she said after a pause. "But now you are not. Tell me of your other women."

Throe was surprised. "Why should you care about them? They have no relevance to you."

"Yes they do. They made you sensitive."

She might be right. "After my marriage ended, I was busy on the King's business, and pretended that Oblige was still at home for me, though I knew she was gone. Then King Deal was murdered, and King Havoc came to be, and he had a special way with women. The elder ones mothered him, and the younger ones longed to be his mistresses, and some of them succeeded. King Deal's mistress



was a woman of your Chroma, slowly losing her invisibility, so that some of her internal organs showed. She couldn't do much illusion in the nonChroma zone, but covered up with competent clothing, body paint, and I am not sure what else. Her name was Symbol, and she thought to seduce King Havoc, and I opposed it, not trusting her. It was my job to protect him, you see, and I believed her to be a danger to him. I did not approve of her, and said so. Maybe she took that as a challenge, for she set out to seduce me, and soon enough succeeded, and for a time we were a couple."

"How could she seduce you, if you did not like her?"

"Approval has little to do with sex. I did not trust her with the King, but I was expendable. She was extremely good at her trade, and I must confess she eased my regret about the passing of my marriage. The King approved; his woman Gale joined him, and he liked to see those around him matched up. But as time passed I came to know Havoc's oath-friend Ennui, a woman of my own generation, her appearance no more than yours, no offense."

"And you loved her!"

"We were compatible in subtle ways, and slowly came to appreciate each other's qualities. And I found true love at last, when I least expected it."

"That's so romantic."

"It wasn't romantic at all. We had to coordinate to properly serve the King, and there came a time when we realized that we had another interest. We both were beyond our youth, seeming to have little personal future. But the King supported us, so we endured. Then with the advent of the telepathy we knew each other's hearts, and we were together. That was all there was to it."

"One of the appeals of you is that you love and are loved."

"I don't know how you could have known that."

"I am a woman."

The same thing Ina had said. There was evidently more to being a woman than he fathomed.

They slept, and Ini did not wake him for further bouts of sex, but she was comfortable to be with. He realized that it was, indeed, because of his recent associations. He had been with an Invisible Chroma woman, and with a plain one, and Ini was both.

In the morning Jamais came, and Ini made no special gestures of parting; their business together was done. But her eyes flicked to the table where their notes about Counter Charm remained, and he knew that she would always be his friend.

The path wound on toward the volcano. "How is it that the sisters are on the route we need to travel?" Throe inquired.

"There are many routes; I chose the one that passes them. Ina needs minimal illusion, being naturally lovely, so resides near the fringe. Ini needs more, to craft her lenses. Ine needs most for her effects."

"What is Ine's business?"

"She is in training as a sorceress."

"A sorceress!"

"It is a necessary trade, like any other."

"Is it? All Chroma folk do magic, and nonChroma folk get along well enough without it. Why should anyone do magic for magic's sake?"

"Why have a King?"

Throe was surprised by the seeming non sequitur, but he answered. "There is a problem of organization, for equitable distribution of supplies and regulation of trade, so that there will not be quarreling or war between Chroma. The King heads the governing apparatus. Also, it is essential that the human kind remain united, rather than fragmenting into a number of different species. The King is the symbol and authority of that unity."

"In short, there is a job to do, so the King does it."

"Yes, the job of governance, assigned to a nonChroma person because the Chroma couldn't agree to let such power fall to any single Chroma. The King must have the consent of the Chroma, having no magic of his own."

"There are magic jobs also, that are beyond the capacity of ordinary citizens. Those who have aptitude train for them, at any Chroma. Have you ever been floated across a Chroma zone?"

"Yes, often. The King has connections, as do established caravans."

"Ordinary folk may run them, but it requires more detailed magic to make them. Sorcerers do that, and other projects for the common good."

"Embarrassment. I never thought of who might fashion floating transport."

Jamais smiled. "Negation. Most folk don't think of it, and neither did I, until I met Ine. She educated me rapidly."

"I think I have seen how that works," Throe said. "Am I allowed to discuss my contacts with the sisters?"

"Not until you have your decision. That would be meaningless if I influenced it."

"Then let's just say that I have learned much, and suspect I will learn more."

"And let me just say that they are impressive, all three of them. I remain sorry I can't marry them all."

That was a sentiment Throe could appreciate. He had seldom been as quickly impressed by

women as had happened recently. "I understand there are four."

"I never met the fourth. I conjecture that she, being a half sister, lacks the qualities of the others, and prefers to remain invisible, as it were. She is the youngest, and the others are protective of her."

Throe's feelings were mixed. He had not sought any such assignment, but his encounters with two sisters had shown him that there was much to experience in the Air Chroma. How much more would he have learned had there been a fourth girl to evaluate? Yet his real business was to reach the coordinates and fetch the object there; all else was distraction.

The surrounding scenery became wilder. The trees assumed irregular shapes and colors; some actually seemed to consist of floating foliage without trunks to support them. There were flowers galore, some huge, some tiny, some merely odd. Throe realized that most people lived in the outer ring of the zone, and shaped appearances to please themselves. Deeper in, the wild plants and animals had more influence. Still, he found the shapes and colors appealing in their individuality, and wondered how close they came to matching the realities they covered. Why should plants care how they looked to others?

The question brought the answer: some plants needed to protect themselves from being grazed, harvested, or infested. They would make themselves look inedible. Others wished to attract insects for pollination or grooming, and illusion could make a far more spectacular flower with much less effort than real growth. Some might prefer to remain invisible, but that could complicate encounters with their own kind, so compromise was necessary.

"Now we come to a tunnel," Jamais said.

"We must pass through a mountain?"

"No, this is more apparent than real. It is a flux of magic that blots out illusion as well as external light. I know the path, so this will not impede our progress, but you will have to walk with me without flinching."

"That should not be difficult."

"The path is narrow, girt in spots by jagged escarpments. You could hurt yourself if you jerked into them, especially with your face. The demons may try to make you do that."

"Demons?"

"They exist in every Chroma, though most prominent in the Red. They seldom interfere directly with human activities, but their attention can be mischievous. Ignore them and they will generally go away."

Throe had had some limited experience with that. "I will try."

"Take my hand. Proceed exactly by my side. Do not stop or turn. We will not be able to talk. It will not endure long."

Throe took the man's right hand with his left, and matched his step. The way ahead seemed

open and unthreatening.

Abruptly they were in it. It was as if the day had been turned off, and a starless night set in. Throe did not like walking boldly ahead, but had to trust his guide. He knew he had been walking blind throughout, in effect, because what he had been seeing was all illusion. Now he *knew* he was seeing no reality.

There was an eerie rushing sound, as of wind rising in a closed cavern. It swelled in volume until it became deafeningly loud, but it was not physical; when Throe put his right hand up to cover his ear, it made no difference. Illusion sound.

Then sparks of light appeared, forming a cloud ahead. They rushed toward him, expanding to the size of flying stones. One came straight at his face. Throe barely stopped himself from flinching, and the stone passed through his head without resistance. *Sticks and stones will break my bones, but illusion will never hurt me*, he thought, remembering a childish ditty. Its message was false, as he had learned when he traveled across Chroma; illusion could indeed hurt a person in a number of physical or social ways. There were stories of marriage breaking up because one partner had seen the other having sex with a neighbor when neither traveling nor looking for a fourth—and the act had been a set of realistic images crafted by a third party.

The deadly-seeming flying stones continued to come at him. Throe closed his eyes, but it did not cut off the sight. That was further proof that the illusion did not depend on his physical senses; they were generated in his mind, by the demons passing through it.

The noise faded, and the last of the stones cleared. Now there was the ground-shuddering impact of some huge foot, and another, as some giant tramped behind him. If he did not get out of the way, those awful feet would crush him to death. But Jamais' hand remained firm, and the pace of walking did not change. Throe had to trust him.

There was a boom ahead, as of a powerful explosion, and the outline of a cave appeared, already collapsing. The roof caved in on their heads, crushingly. But without impact.

Suddenly they were out of it, walking along the visible path. "Fortunately the demons were only playing, this time," Jamais said, disengaging his hand.

Only playing. Throe knew he would not care to experience their anger.

"And we are at Ine's house. I will come for you in the morning." Jamais faded.

House? This was a veritable castle, with towers and battlements, and a moat whose flowing liquid rippled with more than water. Piranha, by the look of it—the vicious fish with teeth and pincers.

Throe marched on toward it. What else was to be expected of a sorceress? Why should she settle for minor illusion when she could do major illusion?

As he came close, a monstrous snout rose from the moat, the head of a serpent big enough to chomp a man with dispatch. Its left eye oriented on him. "Greeting."

Oh. "Acknowledgment."

The serpent became a stunningly lovely woman standing on the water. Her hair was wild and orange, her cloak striped with myriad lines of scintillating color, and her hourglass torso fairly burst from its mailed vest. "I am Ineffable, of Air."

"I am Throe, of Triumph City. I am here at the behest of—"

"Certainly. Do enter." She gestured, and a drawbridge appeared, lowering into place across the moat.

He hesitated. Should he set foot on an illusion bridge? Then he realized that the moat itself was probably illusion. He strode forward, and the footing was solid.

Ine floated across to join him at the castle entrance. "Shall we make love now, or court a bit first?"

He was getting used to the situation. "I prefer the illusion of acquaintance and familiarity."

"Illusion I can provide. Kiss me."

He tried to demur. "As I said—"

She stepped into him, putting her mouth to his.

"What are you doing?" It was a voice from the side.

Throe jerked back his head and looked. A farm girl stood there, staring. What did this mean?

"Nobody kisses a golem," the girl said indignantly.

"Golem?" He looked at the woman before him, and saw a brown wooden form with carved features. The eyes were painted, and so was the mouth.

She had played a trick on him. Suppose he had tried to have sex with the golem? Actually the golems of the Brown Chroma *could* have sex with people, when animated by a nearby person. King Havoc was making excellent use of them, sometimes using golem emulations of himself and Gale to confuse assassins. Still, he was going to have to take nothing for granted during this encounter.

"If you do not wish to talk with me, I can depart," Throe said to the farm girl. But she was already changing into a white dove. It spread its wings and flew across the moat and away.

She was calling his bluff. He turned around, ready to make good his offer/threat.

The moat was gone. Instead he faced the front gate of the castle, the dark interior showing under the raised portcullis.

He glanced back over his shoulder. There was the moat, and the path beyond it. Had he gotten disoriented? No—his sense of direction told him that he really was facing back the way he had come. So he stepped forth, determined to call *her* bluff. He would leave if she didn't stop him.

There was a squeak above. He leaped forward even as he glanced up. The portcullis was coming down!

He landed inside the apparent castle and faced the gate. The points of the portcullis crashed into the stone pavement, chipping off fragments and raising a cloud of dust. One of the chips struck his leg and bounced off; he felt it. The dust made him sneeze.

If this was illusion, it was impressive. He reached out to touch the metal grating of the portcullis—and caught hold of an iron bar. It was real! He could have been severely injured or even killed if he had not gotten out of the way in time.

Several thoughts went through his mind. This suggested that the castle was real, rather than illusory, or at least had some substantial real components. Also that his sense of direction was confused, because the real castle had indeed been where he thought the moat was. And that the games of the sorceress Ineffable were not necessarily innocent. Maybe she was annoyed by the examination to which she was being subjected, and was taking it out on him. That annoyance could be dangerous. This might not be her only trick.

He needed to get out of here without delay. It would be no good for the woman to have second thoughts after he was dead or incapacitated. Once he was clear, he could decide what to do. Maybe he could camp out in the wilderness and wait for Jamais' return in the morning.

He shook the bar. It rattled, but did not come loose. He checked on either side of the portcullis. It met stone; no exit there. He tried to haul it upward, so that he could pass under and escape the castle, but it would not budge.

There was no help for it: he would have to brave the rigors of the castle. This was unlikely to be fun.

He took an arrow from the scabbard on his back and used it to test the pavement ahead. Illusion could hide real objects, but it could also hide pitfalls. He did not want to step into a deep hole.

The floor seemed solid. He moved on into the dark depth of the castle. Soon the passage turned, and he was in shadow almost too deep to penetrate. Except for a dim glow ahead. He approached it, and found a guttering candle in an alcove. He lifted that out and used it to light his way.

The passage curved again, while offering no exit. He had no choice but to follow it deeper into the castle. It also slanted down. He wasn't comfortable with that, but until he found stairs or a window he could climb through, it had to be his route.

After several more turns, the passage opened into a dank chamber. He stepped into it—and there was a squeal. A rat scurried out from a hole in the wall. More rats followed. As if this were not bad enough already. Unless they were illusions.

Throe brought out his short club and held it ready. The rats turned and ran for his feet, their eyes gleaming redly. He brought down his club, sweeping it across the floor beside his feet, knocking them snouts over tails. They squeaked and skittered away, satisfied that this was no patsy. But he was not greatly reassured, because he had verified that the rats were real.

The next chamber was filled with scuttling scorpions. Some of them were huge, with multicolored segmented tails curving over their bodies. There were too many of them to sweep aside with his club; they would get under and over and around it and sting him.

He turned, looking for a safe retreat while he considered options. There were more scorpions behind him, coming from the walls. No escape there.

There was no help for it: he would have to plow through them, hoping none got on him. He wasted no time; he charged forward, not trying to avoid them, concentrating mainly on shielding the candle from the wind of his motion. He felt them crunching under his boots. At least those ones would not be stinging him.

He reached the far side of the chamber, and discovered an old mattress, evidently thrown away long ago. He whipped out his knife and cut it open, then sheathed his knife and grabbed for the straw inside. He held a tuft to the flame of the candle. It burst into fire, and he dropped it on the floor and grabbed more.

The pursuing scorpions halted by the burning straw. He had balked them.

But then he felt a tickle on his leg, and discovered several scorpions on it. They had somehow scrambled onto his feet while he ran. He took another tuft of straw and used it to sweep each one off him. As he did so, one dropped off his head. By sheer luck none had stung him. He was shaken; he had had an extremely close call.

He stuffed more hay in his belt, in case of more scorpions, and went on. The next chamber was an old prison; cobwebbed skeletons were along its walls, iron chains still on their wrists and ankles.

The next chamber was larger, round in outline, and in its center was a dark hole. He walked to that hole and peered into it. There was a slight updraft of cool air from it, making the candle flicker, but he could not see the bottom. He ignited a tuft of straw and dropped it into the hole. It fell far down, and finally went out with a faint hiss. Water must have put it out.

This was an oubliette: a chamber below a prison, used for wastes or for confinement of prisoners deserving of special isolation or torture. Normally it had no other exit, but that cool draft suggested otherwise; where was the air coming from? Could there be a secret way out, that no normal person would think of?

Throe decided to give it a try. He uncoiled his loop of rope and tied it around the largest of the rough stones in the floor. He would use this to draw himself up from the depths, if he had to return this way. Then he wedged the candle in a crevice near the edge and climbed into the hole. He would have to explore the oubliette in darkness, but he could handle that.

The circular stone wall was slippery, in the manner of a well, but that didn't matter as long as the rope held. He let himself slowly down, his feet swinging.

And he didn't descend. He was going down, yet remained only knee-deep in the hole. How could this be?

His eye fell on the candle, which flickered in its crevice. It had been hardly more than a stub

when he took it, but it had not burned down. In fact it had not diminished at all. How could that be?

There were several mysteries here. The entire castle had appeared behind him, which suggested that it was illusion—but that portcullis had been solid. The scorpions had gotten on him, but not stung him. The oubliette hole was not letting him enter, though his feet had no support. And the candle burned without using up its substance. Was there a common thread?

Suddenly he had it. Touch illusion! Ordinary folk could do sight illusion, and some could do sound illusion too. But a sorceress would be able to do touch and smell illusion. How could a person tell whether the iron bar of a portcullis was real or illusion, when it looked, sounded, and felt real? Logic said it was probably illusion. He could not descend into the hole because it too was illusion. His feet felt as if they were dangling, but obviously they weren't.

He let go the rope, so that he had no apparent support. His body did not drop. There was the proof. He could not trust any of his senses, but his logic fathomed the limits of the illusion.

There was no hole. There was no dungeon. There was no castle—at least, not here.

Throe stepped out of the hole, which was only knee-deep, recoiled his rope, picked up the candle, and resumed walking. When he came to a wall, he walked on into it. He felt its substance against his chest and thighs, but he kept walking—and forged on through it. In a moment he was out the other side of it, in another chamber.

A column of huge ants came at him. They swarmed over his boots and up his legs, biting at his flesh. He felt the bites, but ignored them. Sure enough, the bites had no substance either; the brief pain of them faded immediately. That was why the scorpions had not stung him; their stings could have been lethal, and he would have realized they weren't real when he didn't die or suffer.

He walked through another wall, and found himself outside the castle. He had won free of it, the easy way—once he had caught on to its nature.

The farm girl appeared before him. "Do not go, smart man," she said. "I will behave."

Throe nodded. "You had better. I do not appreciate jokes of this nature."

"Apology."

"Acknowledged." He did not say "accepted."

"I will make it up to you."

"No need. This interview was not of my choosing."

The girl came to take his arm. "I know it. I was annoyed. I do not like being tested, especially by a stranger."

"Understandable." He remained gruff.

She drew on his arm, making him face her. Her face and bosom were almost painfully lovely,



despite the fact that one eye was blue, the other red, and her lips black. At least her hair was a normal brown. "Please. I am contrite. It is not my natural state. How may I obtain your forgiveness for offense?"

He knew that she and all around her were illusion, but her aspect and manner were melting him. "Play it straight henceforth. Be candid with me. Answer my questions honestly."

"Granted! What are your questions?"

"Can we avoid this encounter?"

She smiled, and her eyes exchanged colors as her lips and hair turned yellow. "We are already in it."

"I spoke euphemistically. Do we have to have sex?"

"We do. And to anticipate your next, I did not want it, but now I do. It is no longer unwilling. You are no longer a stranger, but a man of competence. I will make it as nice as I can for you."

He shrugged. "Once that is done, maybe we can relax."

"How many times did you do it with my sisters?"

Surprised, he counted mentally. "Three times with Ina. Twice with Ini."

"Twice, then, for us, and the third optional. And you remained the night in their beds?"

"Agreement."

"Let's do the first your way, and the second my way."

Throe did not quite trust this, despite her contrite manner. "Reversal. Your way first."

"As you wish. And we will talk between." She took him by both hands and drew his face down to hers for a kiss. Her eyes were now brown, her lips red, and her hair green, sacrificing none of her beauty.

As their lips touched, sensation radiated from them, suffusing his body with warmth while her mouth remained cool. Startled, he opened his eyes, and saw no woman, though the feel of her lips against his remained. She had been replaced by a scintillating fountain of colors that arced to the ground and became flowing liquid that coursed into a variegated stream that flowed toward the horizon.

He drew back. "You agreed no more tricks."

She reappeared before him. "You agreed my way."

So he had. "Apology."

"Accepted. I am a sorceress. My way is with effects."

"I had somehow thought a bed, in a private chamber."

"In your turn. I prefer public display."

And he had asked for it her way. "Do your will."

The coursing stream solidified into a colorfully woven carpet. Ine stopped onto it, drawing him along. She sat, crossing her legs beneath her so that her thighs showed under her skirt. They were excellent thighs. He sat too, uncertain where this was leading.

The carpet lifted into the air, causing him to jump with alarm. "I will hold you steady," she said, putting her arms around him.

Then he caught on. "Kinesthetic illusion! We aren't moving at all."

She kissed his ear. "True. Enjoy the ride."

They floated across the landscape to the castle, which had reappeared. The carpet rose to sail into an upper window, and came to rest on a bed in the chamber beyond. The bright colors faded, revealing the reality beneath.

"If the flight was illusion, how did we get in here?"

"We were always here. Now if you care to remove your weapons and apparel, I will clothe us in raiment more suitable to the occasion."

Throe's cynicism about this process was weakening. He stood on the stone floor and removed his things. He turned to face her on the bed.

She was splendidly nude. Every part of her was perfect. Then he caught on again. "You are emulating Ina's body."

"It is better than mine."

"But in the course of—of doing what we have to do, I will feel your real body."

"Try it."

He joined her on the bed and ran his hands over her breasts and belly. The touch exactly matched the appearance.

Yet again, he caught on. "Illusion of touch."

"Anyone can do sight. A sorceress does all senses."

"Then how was I able to fathom your ruse of the castle dungeon?"

"I am as yet in training. When I graduate, I will be able to maintain a full castle with an oubliette that works. As it is, I can handle each effect competently separately, and in prepared clusters. So you will have no need to deal with my real appearance."

"Compromise: show me briefly the reality."

Her hair became somewhat duller in color, and her breasts smaller, her belly larger. But her legs, in this position, remained full fleshed and enticing.

"You are by no means an ugly woman."

"But not a beautiful one." Then her ordinary face become lovely again, her body following. "I assure you that all the essential parts are here for your accommodation, regardless of appearances."

"As they were with Ini," he agreed. "I have no objection to illusion; I merely like to have a notion of the reality behind it."

He was sitting beside her, his feet on the floor. She moved to sit on his lap, her bare thighs pressing warmly against his. She turned her head to kiss him, her full-seeming breasts close under his chin. As she did so, the full bed elevated, and the stone chamber faded out, along with the castle. They were floating at about treetop height, their legs dangling. It was somewhat daunting, but now that he was familiar with the illusion, he accepted it. If they fell off the bed, they would land on the floor just below his feet.

They cruised across the forest. Ine rested her chin against his shoulder, so that he could see past her fragrant mass of translucent hair to the panorama beyond. There were hills and vales, with a river winding through, and mountains in the distance. It was a lovely natural scene.

They passed over a farmstead. Throe looked down at it, but Ine's full breasts were in the way. They obligingly disappeared so as not to impede his vision, but the left one still pressed against the side of his chest. There was a farmer below, hoeing his garden. He looked up and did a double-take as he spied them. "What's this?" he cried.

The door of the farmhouse opened, and a woman and three children rushed out. They all stared up at the couple on the sailing bed. "For shame!" the woman said, and hustled the children back inside.

"That is impressive illusion," Throe said, not completely comfortable. "We're not actually floating over a farmstead."

"That would require a kind of magic I lack," she agreed. "I deal only in illusion. Nevertheless, it has its reality."

"How so?"

"I projected an illusion image of us to the farmstead, and brought back the illusion of them here. So the episode occurred, just not quite the way either party thought."

For a moment Throe was alarmed, before he penetrated yet another little ruse. "All sights are

illusory here. Neither a farmer nor his family would be surprised by the appearance of a naked couple in the sky, and if they didn't like it, they would simply overlay it with masking illusion of their own."

"You are entirely too smart. The fact is, I have a bit of a taste for voyeurism, or exhibitionism, as the case may be, so in my fancy there may be people watching and reacting. Does this bother you?"

"Some," he admitted.

"Good." The farmer and his family reappeared, the wife trying vainly to turn the staring children away. "They have never seen a nonChroma man do it. It's an oddity."

"An oddity," he agreed, bemused.

"Shameless hussy," the wife said. "And you, strange man—don't you have a woman of your own back home?"

This was entirely too realistic. "Please," Throe said.

"As you wish, brute man." The farm family vanished. Ine kissed him again, hard, and bore him back on the bed, which became a softly padded cloud. She straddled him expertly, and in a moment he was inside her and thrusting, and she was matching him, tightening rhythmically about him. As he climaxed, the sensation expanded explosively, putting them at the center of a universe of coruscating colors. They drifted through air and space, slowly settling back towards ground.

"That was wonderful," he said.

"Do you forgive me for the dungeon scene?"

"I forgive you everything."

"Even the way I pretend you are my father when we embrace?"

Throe was appalled. "You do that?"

"Every girl longs to possess her father. If he knew, he would whip my little bare bottom till it bled."

"You are teasing me again."

She stretched languorously. "Perhaps."

"Are you trying to make me feel guilty?"

"Of course. You are committed to your own woman, and your guilt over enjoying me lends a special edge to the experience. I love that." She stroked his backside, cupping a buttock and then patting it.

There was too much truth in what she said. "I think I have had enough of this for now."

"Then it is time to eat and talk."

Robes formed around them, and the chamber became a dining room, and the bed a table loaded with all manner of exotic foods. "I think I will not inquire what we are really eating," he said. Nor about how she managed to key such elaborate effects to his senses, without telepathy; she must be responding to his reactions, and applying her illusions to enhance them. She was superlative not only with illusions, but in their relevance and timing.

"Tell me of your children."

He was getting used to the abrupt shifts of subjects these sisters practiced. All of them seemed to be interested in aspects of his past life. It must be a woman thing. "They are of your generation. My wife raised them well. None of them became martial artists. My eldest is a boy named Blue; he farms blue corn at the fringe of the nearest Blue Chroma, and trades it to a middleman for other staples, and lives well. He is twenty now, and married, and has his first and second children."

"So you are a grandfather."

"So I am. Would you have clasped me if you had known?"

"Not as ardently, so as not to strain your senile system. You don't seem much the worse for wear, however."

"My second lover was an Air Chroma woman. She ensured that I did not become senile in that region."

She laughed. "Of course. We are invisible, not insensible. What of your second?"

"My daughter, named Thread. She is nineteen, and a seamstress, like her mother, doing very nice work."

"Pretty frills?"

"By no means. She sews ugly underclothing: vests and pants. They are much in demand."

"You are teasing me back?"

"Only marginally. She is mistress of the art of impenetrability. An arrow will not pass through her cloth, and a knife will not cut it. She incorporates tough strands of vegetable fiber, and animal hide, and resilient sponge, so that the sharpest object is caught and slowed and encumbered. It is almost weapon-proof. I wear it myself, under my shirt."

"So if I had set a spiked trap for you, it would not have worked."

"Not unless it struck my face or an extremity, or had unusual force. She got interested in it when she married a soldier, and wanted to be sure of his protection. She turned out to have a talent for it. Now her husband is the envy of others, though she is not lovely of feature. She looks too much like me, instead of her mother."

Ine laughed, causing sparkles to radiate outward. "And your third?"

"A boy, now eighteen, named Plank. He is a carpenter, doing routine work during his apprenticeship, but ambitious to become a specialist and make tree houses."

"What is a tree house?"

"A structure constructed in the branches of a tree. Bird keepers use them, and beekeepers. It is a different realm, especially when the tree is magic."

"So his ambition is specialized."

"Specialization is a route to success. Isn't that the case with you three sisters?"

"Indeed. And your fourth?"

"My wife did not want to indulge with another man—well, that is a separate story. But she had to, so she went anonymously to a chamber where women seek fourths. Those are always well patronized by men. She took the first man who asked her, but it didn't take, so she came again and took another, but that didn't take either. Finally she went again and asked a Chroma visitor, and that one took. I never knew his name or Chroma; the baby was of course nonChroma, and we called him Chaff. He is quite unlike the others. He has aspiration to be an entertainer. He learned early to get along by making others laugh, so probably he will succeed."

"Fourths can have trouble getting along," she agreed. "We all like our fourth, Ino, but she has always been diffident. Our mother, like your wife, did not wish to be with another man, so she went to a Temple and got a changeling."

"You know of the changelings?" This was surprising news.

"I am sinfully curious, so I investigated and learned that the Temples can implant babies in the manner of men, but without men. They may not even be related to the women who bear them. But Ino is no monster, and none of us wish her harm. She is only fifteen, but quite lovely. We invited her to join the competition for Jamais, as she does like him, though they have never actually met. But she declined."

"She will not have to marry until eighteen; she has time."

"But she *could* marry now, and Jamais is worth it. We do not understand why she demurs; she is pretty enough."

That reminded Throe that all four of these sisters were younger than his own daughter, though they hardly seemed it. They seemed uncommonly mature. But he realized that his daughter seemed quite mature to others; it was only in his fancy that she remained a cute child.

But that was not his present concern. "I am curious about the appeal of Jamais. The others simply say there is something about him. Can you tell me exactly that that is, that makes three of you willing to compete for him?"

"Certainly. My sisters are more discreet than I am, so do not reveal all they know. He has a rare and essential ability. He can see reality."

"You mean he has a sensible mind?"

"No, he can be as foolish as the next man. He can see the invisible landscape, and he can penetrate illusions. Their masks do not deceive him. This makes him an excellent guide."

"It certainly does! We passed a rabbit, which he avoided; it turned out to be an ogre."

"Yes. Normally he does not make his talent obvious, because it can be useful to have others ignorant of it, but he shows it when he has to. That is why he is the best guide for the dangerous regions, and why we desire him. He would be an asset to any woman, and could keep our children remarkably safe."

"I do not mean to be cruel, but what will you do if he marries one of your sisters?"

"Oh, I would wish them well. I want Jamais for practical reasons; his straight sight and my command of illusion could make us prominent as a team. I do not actually love him, though I would if we married. I think it is similar with my sisters, except for Ino. She likes him for himself. But of course she remains young and impressionable, and evidently shy, because she is not truly of our blood. It's too bad."

"Fourths can be that way," Throe agreed. "My fourth always felt different, and I know of other fourths with similar misgivings. They were, as it were, forced on their families. But it is the law and custom, so it must be. And of course they can marry other fourths, who do understand."

"There is the saving grace," she agreed, standing. "Now we are done eating. Have you recovered enough for another senile effort of sex?"

"You are as impertinent as my daughter! I should turn you over my knee for a spanking."

"Oh, yes, that should be fun." Her bottom turned bare.

"I was joking!"

"I wasn't."

Throe found himself blushing. He had walked into that one. He realized belatedly that her prior reference to spanking by her father was a fantasy evoked less as punishment than as arousal. "No spanking."

"It is a legitimate form of sexual initiation."

"I kill men; I don't abuse women."

"What you do for discipline you will not do for pleasure?"

"It's not pleasure!" But she had him in retreat, and she knew it. "I'm not ready for more sex."

"If you spanked me, you would be."

"The first time was your way. The second time is my way. No spanking."

"Oh come on. You might like it."

"I wouldn't."

"How do you know? Have you ever tried it?"

"Never."

"So it is time to find out." Before he could get off his chair, she draped herself over his lap, her bare bottom up. "Try it."

He stared at her plush posterior. She had put him in the position of a bigot, one who condemned a thing without any experience of it. He patted her bottom.

"Harder," she said, her head near the floor.

He patted harder.

"You call that a spank? Make me *feel* it!"

Half irritated, half intrigued, he struck her hard enough to sting. Her buttocks responded, quivering under the impact. The touch was evocative, and she was right: it was extraordinarily sexy. His hand tingled with more than the shock of contact. So did his groin.

"You're getting it now," she said. "Get into it. Make it bounce."

He did, and it did. Then she got up and clasped him as the table became the bed, and they fell onto it, kissing. Then she flipped over, presenting her reddened rear to him again, and he entered her from behind. "Harder!" she cried as he thrust, and he obeyed, coupling violently. The feel of those buttocks against his groin was special, spreading the area of contact across his belly and thighs. Now it was his whole body spanking hers. It was as if he were climaxing from his entire midsection, the pleasure magnified accordingly. His member was merely a tiny pin holding the place for the larger event.

He felt her climaxing also, her pleasure so powerful that his mind could not keep it out; his climax had triggered hers, and hers was like a violent storm. Indeed, the illusion of a storm formed around them, rain slanting down to blast at his flesh. The bed was a boat, pitching in steep waves of pleasure. He clung to her, riding it out, surge after surge, maintaining the divine connection.

At last it subsided, and they fell apart, panting beside each other on the bed. She had been right again: the spanking had made him more than ready for sex.

"If we were in a contest, you have won it," he said. "You know more about sex than I do."

"And I'm younger than your daughter," she said. And laughed when he winced.



Then they slept. In the night he woke, aware of her body against his, but he did not want to get into yet more sex. Fortunately she remained asleep, so there was no issue.

A thought occurred: did her illusion remain when she slept? The castle chamber did, but it might be that stationary structures of illusion could be set permanently, while animated ones like personal appearance did not. The other sisters, he realized, had taken care to sleep in darkness.

But if he made a light, it might wake her, and then she would be clothed in illusion regardless. He could stroke her body to verify its form, but again, that might wake her. So he would have to be satisfied with conjecture. Or he could simply ask her in the morning. He slept.

Dawn came with a phenomenal display of pink clouds, yellow shafts of sunlight striking them from below. A cloud caught him looking, formed lips, and blew him a kiss.

He reached out to touch Ine. His hand came up against her bottom. That wasn't coincidence either, he realized. "You do have fun," he said.

"I think life should not be dull."

"No man would find life with you dull."

She climbed onto him, her breasts pressing against his chest, her right leg coming down between his legs, her kiss ardent. Ina had done this too, and it had been effective. He had not planned on more sex, but she gave him no choice; he had to respond. The bed disappeared as they embraced, and they floated on a warm sea tide, rolling over and over but having no trouble breathing when under the surface. This time she climaxed before he did, her body heating against him, her breathing fast, her interior tightening. His own climax was submerged in hers, a small section of the larger process.

"How much of this is illusion?" he asked as it finished.

"All of it except the sex," she said.

"Then you are one passionate woman."

"We all are. We use illusion to make our partners respond, so that they think it is their idea, but it is ours."

"I thought you three were merely trying to impress Jamais through me."

"That, too, of course. It seemed best to let you think that, because sexual desire is supposed to originate with the man. I was disappointed when you did not take me during the night."

"I thought you were asleep."

"I was."

"But then—"

"I dream of being taken as I sleep. But of course then I lack animated illusion, so can't tempt a

man to ravish me despite his best intentions."

"But an act like that—surely you would soon awaken."

"I would feign continued slumber, of course, not even generating supportive illusion. The point is to seem to be unconscious of it. To feel his hands on my breasts, his member probing me, and I remaining illicitly quiescent. With luck I might even return to sleep and dream of it before it finished."

Throe whistled. "I think, had I known that, I would indeed have been tempted."

Her response was electric. "Can you stay another night?"

He laughed. "Down, tigress! I have a mission to accomplish."

"But you will have a return trip to make, once you finish with the cone."

Throe was amazed. "You want to see me again, after I render my verdict? Suppose it isn't you?"

"Outrage! This is not a bribe for your decision, but sincere interest. I want a man who will take me in my sleep, indulging my secret fantasy, and not condemn me for my desire for it."

"Apology." He was blushing.

"Accepted," she said, kissing him. "Explanation: I think you will not choose me, so I will be free to seek other than Jamais. You are old, but still virile, and committed elsewhere, so no fault is feasible. You have come to know me somewhat, so are no longer a stranger. I have a certain taste for ravishment and voyeurism, as you may have noted, and this is an aspect. Will you return, and spank me, and take me in my sleep, and perhaps indulge in other mild perversions?"

She was not bluffing. "I should decline."

She kissed him again. "You imply no, but mean yes."

He nodded. "I think you have uncovered an aspect of me I sought to suppress, even from myself."

"We shall call it a consolation prize. The other sister you do not select will be interested also. Can you handle group sex, if we are the group?"

"Would I have a choice?"

"And we will let you pretend it is against your will."

"Appreciation." He might be disgusted with himself when it was over, but she had indeed introduced him to something highly intriguing. Perhaps it was her personality and illusion more than the acts, but it all came in a package.

"The chosen one will of course be true to Jamais from the instant of decision."

"Of course," he agreed faintly.

"Ina has no trouble making men react, so she can have all the sex she wants while remaining demure. Ini sublimates it as research, but she is as lusty as any."

"You are amazing. All of you."

"And despite appearances, we can keep secrets."

That was surely just as well.

"The three of us voted on this contest, and the decision was two to one."

"Who voted against it?"

"I did. That is why I was annoyed. I don't like losing."

"But you have been the most passionate!"

"I wanted to make Jamais himself the arbiter of our competence."

Throe digested that for a moment. "So it was a recent decision to be virginal for him alone?"

"Yes. We wanted to be absolutely fair to each other. So we asked him to find us a man for the contest."

"Maybe it is just as well that you lost. Jamais would never have been fooled by your illusions."

"But he might respond to the illicit passions."

"I'm not sure. He seems to me to be a man of ordinary tastes."

She sighed. "Ina would have taken him. I know it. But at least Ini and I would have had him for a night."

"You make me sympathetic for your plight."

"Don't be. You will make me cry, and I don't like that."

Throe realized that her poses and passions were the cover for a hurting interior. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry."

Then she *was* crying, and he was holding her more in the manner of a daughter despite their nakedness. "You're a nice man," she murmured through her tears.

"I am a trained killer."

"With a secret heart much like mine."

"Fortunately I, too, can keep secrets."

She found his mouth and kissed him with a quite different kind of ardor. "Gratitude."

In due course they got up, cleaned, had breakfast, and were ready when Jamais appeared. The castle was now a giant animal, the path leading into its gaping mouth, but Jamais approached without hesitation and knocked on the real door that was deeply buried by illusion. There was no doubt: he could see reality.

Before she opened the door, Ine embraced Throe one last time, pressing all of her bare body against him as she guided his hand to her bottom. "All that you feel is the real me," she murmured, and kissed him with the passion that had emerged as her trademark.

He could tell that it was true. She was back to normal. "It is good enough." And that was true, too.

"Age and commitments elsewhere are no barrier for secret passions."

"None," he agreed.

Then she let him go and opened the door, the demure farm girl outfit forming around her. Throe realized that she was entirely clothed in illusion, so was actually naked. "Why hello, Jamais," she said, as if moderately surprised.

"Put something on," Jamais said, taken aback.

Her mouth formed a little O of dismay. She hurried to the wall and fetched a physical cloak, quickly covering herself. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Forgotten," Jamais said gruffly.

Throe realized with surprise that though Jamais could see right through illusion, he was not immune to social deceit. Ine had deliberately flashed him, and made him back off. Probably the other sisters managed him similarly.

The two men stepped out the door. Ine caught Throe's gaze one last time, and shot him a smoldering glance of silent invitation, a small scene of ardently clasped bodies appearing just over her head. The image-women's eyes were closed as if in sleep, and her bare bottom was reddened. He had no doubt Ine desired him, but in precisely what capacity he wasn't sure, except that romantic love was no part of it. And he was responding in kind, wanting it, however temporary the liaison. Then she closed the door, and they were on their way.

"Have you decided?" Jamais asked.

"I have come to a conclusion," Throe said, shifting mental frames. "The decision, of course, is yours."

"Which woman?"

"Permit me some discussion as we travel, for I would like you to comprehend my reasoning."

"I need no reasoning, merely an objective decision."

The man evidently lacked the perspective the sisters had. "My conclusion is: none of them."

Jamais halted, staring at him. "You did not clasp them?"

"I clasped them. I repeat: my reasoning may be relevant."

"As you wish." The man was disgruntled.

They resumed walking. "Each woman has obvious virtues, and any of them would make an excellent wife. Ina is beautiful, Ini is smart, and Ine has marvelous talent as a sorceress. All three are highly motivated. But if you marry Ina, men will always be after her, seeking to sire her fourth or even to take her from you, because her beauty is real rather than illusory. You would never be quite at ease. Only when she ages, and loses the appeal of perfectly formed youth, will you be able to relax—and then she may not be of much interest to you, either, since beauty is her only trade."

"Men are already after her," Jamais agreed.

"Ini, in contrast, is rather plain physically, but is a very intelligent seeker of information. Men will not be chasing her, both because of her lack of physical prettiness, and because they often don't like to be with women who are smarter than they are. She has her own agenda, which she expects you to support. This might bother you too, since she makes no effort to conceal her superiority."

"It does," Jamais admitted.

"Ine is surely destined to be a prominent figure, because she will be a sorceress. You can see through her illusions, but others can't, so she will make whatever impression she chooses to make, on others. She also has a bit of a taste for masochism that might make you uncomfortable."

"It does."

"So each has assets and liabilities, and all are assertive. The one you marry will make you her adjunct, bending you to her will, rather than bending to your will. Are you amenable to that?"

"No." Jamais walked silently for a while, and Throe let him mull it out. "Maybe that is why I couldn't decide between them. I thought it was their positives, but maybe it was their negatives. But I still have to marry soon, or the Air Council will assign me a wife not of my choosing. I do like them all."

"And they like you," Throe agreed. "And as I said, all are worthy, and perhaps I have overstated the negatives."

"You have not. I see it now. You have opened my eyes in a manner that does not please me. What am I to do?"

"I do have a suggestion. This too may need explanation."

"You have an answer that will please me?"

"I believe so, when you understand the rationale. I believe I know of a woman who will be as lovely as Ina, as smart as Ini, as talented as Ine, and who will have no other agenda than to please you and support you and bear and raise your children."

"But what of the men who will seek her beauty, or of her need to exercise her intellect despite me, or—does she have weird sexual tastes?"

"She will mask her beauty so effectively that no one will notice unless you wish it. She will mask her intellect similarly, attributing her best ideas to you so that you will have the advantage of them. Her sexual tastes will be defined by your desires, of whatever nature. She will be completely dedicated to you, and all her properties will remain as she ages. Frankly, if there is a better woman for you to marry, I would be surprised."

"You describe a woman who is all three sisters combined, yet amenable to my will. How could there be any such creature, without my awareness of her?"

"Because you have not met her, and her qualities of modesty have kept her from your attention. One of her many virtues is her lack of desire for notoriety. She prefers personal anonymity."

"NonChroma!" he exclaimed. "A woman you know from elsewhere. I don't want that."

"I have not met her, but she is of the Air Chroma."

Jamais looked at him. "Enough of this riddling. What is her name, and where may I find her?"

"She is Ino, the fourth sister."

"But she's a nondescript child!"

"She is fifteen: old enough. And she likes you. She is the one."

"How can you possibly know this, when you have not slept with her, or even seen her? All these rare and ideal qualities you describe—did you make them up? Are you having fun with me?"

"I know her description and nature because of what she is. She is a changeling."

"A what?"

"Background: there is a class of people who are not generally known, and do not seek to be known, but are excellent specimens of our species. I have known four, and had an affair with one. They are so similar to each other that to know one is to know them all, to a degree. That may be one reason they conceal their abilities. But some are nevertheless destined for prominence. Some have been King, some King's consorts. Fine men—and remarkable women. As far as I know they have no hostile agenda; they achieve success because they are crafted to be human ideals."

"And one of them would marry me?"

"Perhaps there is a downside: with her support, you are likely to achieve considerable success in your profession. You may become a power in your Chroma. Is this objectionable?"

"No."

"Ino would marry you because she knows you through her sisters, and is attracted to the special ability you possess. Because she is young, she lacks much experience of men, and you have, I think, become her model of the ideal man. Normally that sort of thing passes as a woman ages, but the changelings are loyal to their spouses. I think you have nothing to fear; she will not become disillusioned with you or seek to cast you off. I judge in part by the changeling I know who is closest to her age; that one is absolutely loyal to her man, despite being unable to marry him. Yet she is a woman who could capture any man she chose, of any age."

"This word, changeling. What exactly is it?"

"This relates to my mission; I am in quest of further information about the changelings. But I can tell you that they are given to women by the Temple, magically implanted in them as if a man had done it, but not by a man; there is no sex. They take longer to gestate, but are invariably fine babies and, when they grow, fine people. All are very much alike, bearing more resemblance to each other than to their siblings. The details of their features differ, and of course their modes of upbringing, and their ages and Chroma, so they are not obvious, but underneath they are the same. Indeed, they are not blood related to their siblings. We think they are really variants of one person, closer to each other than brother and sister. That is why the changeling couple I know can't marry; they are too closely related. Changelings must marry non-changelings. Whether there is some larger purpose in their distribution by the Temple we don't know; we seek to discover their true origin, and then perhaps we'll have the answer. But each changeling is his or her own person, loyal to his own, not seeking goods or success for himself. You could not find a better wife than any changeling female—and there is one waiting for you. Marry her, and you will never regret it."

"Amazement!"

"I have not met Ino, but I am sure she is as I describe. This is my answer for you, but of course you must decide."

"Come with me to see Ino. If she is as you say, I will ask to marry her, and if she agrees, I will know you are correct."

"But my mission—"

"Your answer is not complete until I see Ino. Prove her to me, and I will see you as rapidly through your mission as I can."

Throe chafed at the delay, but had to agree. They set out in a new direction, and by day's end came to the house of the parents of the four sisters. Only the youngest remained there, the others having set up their own homes as they came of age to do so.

An older woman came to the door. She was handsome without being special; her illusion was intended to suggest her role rather than to impress anyone. "Why Jamais—what brings you here?"

"I come to see Ino."

"Inoffensive? But I thought you were interested in her elder sisters."

"I realized that I needed to meet the fourth." Jamais indicated Throe. "I am guiding this nonChroma man, but something came up. May I see Ino?"

"Of course. Come in."

As they entered, a man approached. "What is this?"

"Introduction," Jamais said. "This is my travel companion, Throe. These are the sisters' parents, Intrepid and Innate."

"Acknowledgment," the parents and Throe said almost together.

"I came to see Ino," Jamais repeated. "It may be important."

Innate raised her voice. "Ino! Please appear."

A girl entered the room. She wore a dress of dull color, and had her hair tied back by a dull ribbon, but it was immediately apparent that she was a beauty. "Acquiescence," she murmured.

"You're right!" Jamais murmured to Throe. "She is exactly as she presents herself. But what of her other qualities?"

"Permission," Throe said to the parents. They nodded, uncertain what was in the offing. "Ino, I am from Triumph City. Can you tell us its dimensions?"

"That would be at present about two thousand feet on a side," Ino said.

"At present?"

"It is a tetrahedron, or what is commonly known as a four sided pyramid, each face triangular. A property of this shape is that it can be added to on any side without changing its overall shape. Triumph City has been expanded many times in the course of the past thousand years, with new wooden courses added, surfaced by metal, and now is anchored on the water. It accommodates about one hundred thousand people, with one hundred square feet allotted per lower person, more for upper persons, plus space for the commons, storage, the King's residence—"

"Thank you," Throe said. He turned to Jamais. "This is accurate. She seems knowledgeable."

The man remained dubious. "What of her talent?"

Throe addressed the girl again. "Ino, what is the nature of your ambition?"

"That will be defined by the man I marry. I will do his will, and support him in his endeavors."

"But you must be undertaking some training now."



"True. I am learning cooking, sewing, medicine, sexuality, child care, self defense, and other disciplines facilitating wifely duties."

"What do you make of me?"

"You are a skilled martial artist. I hope you are Jamais' friend and not his enemy."

"How can you judge my competence?"

"By the way you constantly survey the room and people, the precision of your movements, and the convenience of your weapons. You even wear well-made fiber body armor." She smiled briefly. "And the story of the brigands is current; you answer the description of the lone nonChroma man on a millipede who routed them without pausing."

Throe was taken aback. "I seem to have more notoriety than I thought."

"I suspect my sisters could amplify it, if they chose."

Ouch! Throe glanced at Jamais. "Satisfied?"

Jamais nodded. "Inoffensive, I wish to marry you. Will you accede?"

Now it was the girl who was taken aback. "But I did not enter that competition! That is for my sisters."

"Why didn't you enter?"

"It would not have been fair. I do not wish to interfere in their success or happiness."

"Why not fair? You possess the traits of all of them together."

She cast her eyes down. "Affirmation."

"You knew you would win if you entered!"

"They are my sisters. I would not hurt any of them if I could possibly avoid it."

"She is loyal to her own," Throe murmured.

"Ino, will you agree to be my wife?"

She blushed, not concealing it with illusion. "I beg you not to ask me that question."

"I had already decided not to marry any of your sisters," Jamais said.

"But they are good women! Any one of them would make you an excellent wife."

"But I realized that one sister remained," Jamais continued relentlessly. "If I do not marry you, I

must seek elsewhere, beyond this family. Please, Ino—"

"Oh, do not put it that way!"

"Marry me."

The girl looked desperately at her parents. "I did not seek this! I do not wish to hurt my sisters."

"We know," Innate said. "They will understand."

Intrepid nodded. "Follow your heart, daughter."

Ino stared at the floor again. "Acquiescence," she whispered. Then she burst into tears and fled the room.

"Ino is not truly of our blood," Intrepid said. "She is our fourth. But I say it as shouldn't, she is the finest young woman extant. We shall be sorry to lose her, but happy to see her well married."

"She is our joy," Innate agreed, shedding a tear. "We thought no girl could excel our prior three, but we were mistaken."

"I will return when this mission is done," Jamais said. "I hope Ino is reconciled by then."

"She felt guilty for desiring you," Innate said. "She tried so hard to avoid being selfish. We shall reassure her."

"Appreciation. I never met her before this hour, but already I love her."

"She has that effect," Intrepid said.

Jamais grimaced. "I dread telling her sisters."

Throe shrugged. "This is my mischief, if we call it that. I will tell them, if you like, on my return trip." Actually, the sisters would know the moment they heard about Jamais' visit to this house.

"Appreciation."

They resumed their journey, but it was now dusk. "We shall have to stay at a hostel," Jamais said. "I will make sure your mission is successful. You have changed my life."

"I think you now have personal reason to support my mission. We need to know where the changelings ultimately come from."

"I do. We do."

Jamais guided them to the nearest hostel. There were two other travelers there, comely young women. Of course with the illusion they might not be quite as they looked, but there seemed no reason to doubt them. "No fault?" one inquired.

"No offense," Jamais said quickly.

"He became betrothed to the perfect woman just an hour ago," Throe explained. "And I am forty."

"Understanding," one said quickly. They retreated. Throe smiled. Betrothal presented an emotional, not a legal barrier to a no fault liaison, and the three sisters had had no difficulty surmounting his liability of age. But both had been effective excuses in this case.

Jamais had an errant thought as they retired. "Suppose I should some day encounter another changeling woman?"

"Even a changeling could not take you from a changeling, and I think she would not try. It will be some time before you are even aware of other women, once you spend time with Ino. Your greatest challenges will be to sire a fourth elsewhere, and to allow her to do so."

"You are correct. There could be a thousand like her, and I would still love Ino, now that I have met her. I would never have considered the others, had I met her first. You knew this, having met the type."

"Affirmation. So did she." Throe remembered how readily Symbol had taken him, once she set her mind to it. And Gale—her loyalty was to Havoc, as was his own, but she could have taken him at any time, had she chosen to. Fortunately she was too nice to take advantage in that manner. What a terror the changelings, male and female, could have been, had they not been decent. Still, this was a necessary mission. Their mystery had to be fathomed.

The next day they moved rapidly toward the cone, using shortcuts Jamais knew. The image of the volcano loomed large.

"Mischief," Jamais muttered.

"There is a problem?"

"There is an eruption threatening."

Throe's enthusiasm sank. "I can't wait for it to pass. I am already behind schedule." Indeed, he was due back at Triumph tomorrow; he would be holding up the others by several days. His only hope was that he would not be the only latecomer.

"The Air Cone seldom blows violently. Usually it releases gas, and there can be lava flows. I can lead you through it, if there is a route. But you will have to trust me absolutely, and it will not be pleasant."

"Have I reason not to trust you?"

"You have located my ideal girl and prevented me from making a mistake that would have complicated my life. Now I am prepared to salvage your life similarly, if it is in my power. You may distrust my competence, but not my sincerity."

That did seem to be the case. "Appreciation."

"The lava flows will be invisible to you, or displaced, and their illusions will be multiple. You will feel the heat, and the pain, yet that will not be real. The real ones you will not feel until they kill you. This is why you must trust me: if I seem to be leading you into death, I am not doing so. If you break away from me, you may die before I can call you back. This may become a most unpleasant excursion."

"I believe it. Proceed." Throe trusted his military discipline to bring him through.

They walked on toward the volcano. As if in response, it became active, jetting a plume of smoke into the air. "That is as represented," Jamais said. "But it will soon intensify the magic and the deception."

"Because the Air demons are not with the first emergence," Throe said, working it out. "But they will soon close in to enjoy it."

"Agreement. They can be mischievous. They prefer to have no animal intrusion in their home territory."

And people were animals. Throe almost understood their attitude.

"Now it begins," Jamais said grimly.

A vent opened in the side of the cone, and bright red lava spilled out. It flowed down the slope, lovely in its deadly progress. "Illusion?"

"Displacement. The real flow is coming toward us."

Throe saw nothing but bare rock between them and the cone. But he did not protest as Jamais led the way toward the visible flow. "Where is the real flow with respect to the coordinates?"

"Not close, fortunately. But we must cross a channel that will soon fill. We must hurry."

They ran. The real ground dipped, though the apparent ground did not, so that they seemed to be waist deep in rock. Soon they approached the end of the lava. Horrendous heat radiated from it, and flickers of fire danced across its surfaces. Throe hesitated. This was extremely real. Should he really distrust his senses? Suppose Jamais was mistaken? Was there a threshold beyond which illusion would overpower even this man's ability?

Jamais took his hand. "We are past the channel, but there are other flows. Walk exactly with me. Do not let go my hand."

"Acknowledged." He had to trust the man's ability; nothing else was safe.

The flow loomed close. The ground crackled as the burning liquid touched it, and the smell was pungent. Throe had to squint as his eyes smarted. He was not a coward, but this terrified him.

Jamais led him right into it. They stepped into the flow, and clouds of discolored steam rose as

their feet disappeared. The pain was horrible. But Throe hung on to the hand and kept walking, discovering that his legs did not terminate at the ankles. He could after all handle this, just as he had when he walked through the walls of Ine's castle. But illusory pain felt just as bad as real pain.

Then the ground dropped out under him. He plunged into the lava, trying to choke off a grunt of utter dismay. But though now his whole body was bathed in pain, and his eyes were in lava, he still was there, moving his legs. It was indeed illusion.

They came out of it, and the effects abated. Throe's body had not been burned. Even the drop had not been real. But Jamais did not relax. "We are near the flow. We must walk a ledge parallel to it. Step in my steps." He released Throe's hand and stepped carefully ahead.

Throe saw only a level section, no lava. But he copied the man's motions exactly. Jamais had been right about the illusion of lava, and was surely right about the illusion of its absence.

"Now we climb."

The ground ahead was level, but Throe felt himself laboring and realized that he was indeed climbing. What treacherous stuff, this illusion!

"Now we enter the cave."

Already? The exterior plain remained, but they moved as if wedging into a tight aperture.

"We are there."

"But I see and feel only ground and space. How can I find what I seek?"

"I do not know what you seek, but I can guide your hand."

So Jamais took Throe's hand and used it to touch empty air. "This is a kind of altar, with eighteen buttons on the top."

"That's it, I think." Jamais was pressing down on his hand, but it wasn't going anywhere. Just as he had failed to drop down into Ine's oubliette. "Let me lift the lids and check inside."

Jamais moved his hand. "Close your fingers." Throe did. "You have lifted a lid. The chamber below seems empty." Throe checked it, feeling nothing, but the man assured him he wasn't finding anything. It seemed ironic that he could not trust the feeling of nothing, while it was accurate.

They did similar with the second lid and chamber, and continued to the sixth. "There is something there," Jamais said. "A millipede, like the one you rode, but smaller." He smiled.

"That must be it." Throe closed his fingers until they refused to come together, and lifted the invisible, unfeeling ikon out. He put it in his mouth, in his cheek, and still felt nothing, but his cheek bowed out slightly.

They checked the others, just in case, but found nothing. It was, it seemed, done. The victory was oddly unsatisfying, because of its intangibility.

They went back. "The flow has changed," Jamais said. "We must seek a different route." Throe saw nothing.

"If we can cross here, we shall have an easy remaining route," Jamais said. "But the channel is hot; it will burn our feet."

"Even if we run?"

"Yes; it will set our shoes afire." He cast about. "But I see some old, fragmented pieces; we can use them for stepping stones."

They got to work, moving intangible fragments that nevertheless made them struggle and pant. They built an invisible trail of stones. Then Throe followed Jamais precisely as he stepped from one to the other, seeming to be walking in the air above the ground, and finally jumped to safety beyond. It was like a children's imaginative game, pretending there were unseen threats. No pretense now!

Thereafter the route was relatively straightforward. They passed though another lava flow, and Throe gritted his teeth against the pain and the smell of his own burning flesh, but kept moving. They also passed through a horrendously dark ball of gas that made night of day but did not impede or suffocate them. Jamais was right: these illusions were most unpleasant.

At last, they made it back to the slope of the more normal terrain. "We are done with the danger," Jamais said.

"Relief. But my feet are hurting."

"Those stepping stones were getting hot by the time we crossed them. The illusion no longer shields your awareness."

Throe's prior experience with illusion had been limited to sight and occasional sound. Now he had a more formidable appreciation of its potentials.

They set off down the invisible path toward normal existence. In a moment a figure appeared. "Message," it said in a dulcet feminine tone.

"Ino!" Jamais exclaimed. "How come you here?"

"If I am to marry you, I want to see that you are safe."

"But this trail isn't marked. Only I can see it. Unless—"

"She can see it too," Throe said, catching on.

The girl merely looked down, blushing.

Jamais stared at her, astonished. "True?"

"Not nearly as well as you," Ino said modestly.

"We are betrothed. I think it is time to kiss you." He took her in his arms, and she did not protest. He kissed her, and she kissed back. "Oh, Ino—how is it I was never before aware of you?"

The girl merely blushed, so Throe explained. "She avoided you, in favor of her sisters."

Jamais nodded. "But now you should return to your home, so as to be socially chaste until we are married."

"Acquiescence. But I have a message. My sisters are at the house. They will conduct Throe to Triumph City."

"They have no need to do that," Throe said. "I will call on them at their own houses." But he realized that there was no longer a need to give them the news of Jamais' choice; they were evidently informed.

"There is need," she said. "Throe is badly behind his schedule, because of his dalliances with them. They have decided to facilitate his return, so that he will be in Triumph tomorrow, on time."

"We will barely reach the house by nightfall," Jamais said. "It will not be possible for him to be in Triumph so fast."

"I have a shortcut. And my sisters will pay his way there, by magic transport. They do not wish to see him penalized on their account."

"A shortcut!" Jamais said.

"This way, if you please," she said, and led the way. "I was fortunate to discover it."

Throe nudged Jamais. "This is one phenomenal woman you are getting."

The man nodded, and followed. In a surprisingly short time they were at the parent's house.

The three elder sisters came out to meet them. "Come with us, please," Ina said, taking Throe by the arm.

"We have a rendezvous with a floating bubble," Ini said, taking his other arm.

"We apologize for delaying you," Ine said. "But we will make it up."

They hustled him along another invisible path. Throe glanced back in time to see Jamais wave parting before being led into the house by his fiancée. "Ino set this up," he said.

"She has a social conscience that puts us to shame," Ini said. "We had not realized how difficult we were making it for you."

"But what of—of the stops I was to make on the return trip?"

"We shall all marry elsewhere," Ina said. "We are happy for our sister, but have a hankering for some further experience with you. We drew lots. Ine will be in charge this time, and Ini and I will seek

you for fourths later on. We have worked it out."

So it seemed. "But such a fast trip back—how is that possible?"

"We shall pay for it," Ine said. "We have an Air Stone that will enable our magic beyond our Chroma. Ini and I will set up her telescope while Ina does a provocative dance. Then Ini will show scenes of Counter Charm. We believe the proprietors of the floats of the several intervening Chroma zones will accept this as sufficient exchange for emergency transport."

"Air fare," Ini said, laughing.

Throe realized that they could do it. Ina's dance would be spectacular with or without illusion, and the scenes of Counter Charm would pop some eyeballs. And with float magic to cross the zones, they could do in hours what had taken days before. He would be back on schedule.

"Gratitude," he said.

"Don't thank us," Ina said. "Ino set it up."

"And we are free to seek other men," Ini said.

"But we will work you over first," Ine said. "We have a certain score to settle with you for depriving us of Jamais. First I will spank you and compel you to perform in an embarrassing manner while my sisters watch. Then we may get into some group action. You will have to satisfy each one of us before we let you go."

Throe laughed. "In less than a day, at my age?"

"We are going to wring you dry," Ine said confidently.

Ina gestured. "And here we are at the local coach."

Throe saw nothing, but they led him into what they described as an invisible ball. In a moment they were floating up and across the varied illusive terrain.

"Now we shall have an hour before we reach the transfer point and have to walk to the fringe of the next Chroma zone," Ini said. "I will pilot this crate, leaving you in the care of my sisters."

"Care?"

But Ina was already starting her provocative dance, while Ine was stripping him of his weapons and clothing. Throe realized that he was going to be busy. Each sister had been more than a handful alone; now all three were tackling him together. And how would he ever explain this to Ennui?

## Chapter 4—Wasp

Symbol went to the Traveler's Exchange section of the concourse. She entered the line of



people, waiting her turn.

A slightly portly man was on the small stage. "I travel for business to a town in the second White Chroma zone to the west," he said. "I offer this rare bauble to the man who can get me safely there within three days." He held it aloft, and it sparkled magically.

An Amazon stepped forward. "I know the way."

The man looked at her, surprised. Like most Amazons, she was well formed; they made it a point to stay healthy. "I had thought a man, but if you can protect me—"

"I can protect you," she said. "No fault?"

He considered the feminine aspects of her body. She was lean but serviceable. Amazons were known to be lusty when they chose to be, as though their masculine combat training gave them masculine drives. "Done." He gave her the bauble and they departed together.

A woman stepped onto the stage. She was of intermediate age and appearance. "I must travel to see a friend I lost years ago; I am good with cooking and mending, if there is a man going my way who needs such services. I am not looking for sex."

Two youths answered. "We are going your way," one said. "Cooking and mending is exactly what we need. We are not warriors, but we can fight as a pair if we have to."

The woman nodded. "Let's hope there is no need."

Another Amazon was next. Her body was translucent, signaling her home Chroma. "I came here as a guard for a merchant. Now I must go home to my unit. The trip is dull. Is there a man who can entertain me, no fault?"

Several men were interested, but none were going her way. Symbol was interested too. "I must go to a site in a Translucent Chroma," she said. "Is it near yours?"

The Amazon looked at her. "I seek a man, not a woman."

"So do I," Symbol said. "But I have other entertainment. I am of the Air Chroma, and have a gem enabling me to make illusion stories. They have men galore."

"That, perhaps, will do." They compared notes, and found that they were indeed going to the same Chroma zone. So the deal was made.

The Amazon was nicknamed Lucent, from her Chroma, and was satisfied with that name; she would resume her real identity when she rejoined her unit. Travelers often used alternate names; it facilitated no fault relationships.

"But there is one thing," Symbol said.

"You don't have supplies enough for the full trip," Lucent said, reading her mind. Though Symbol was not telepathic, she had learned to mask her thoughts; part of the masking was to have ordinary

superficial thoughts that those of the Translucent Chroma could read. They would be suspicious if her mind was wholly impervious, and that would nullify much of the point of masking.

"I thought I might travel no fault with a lusty man, and share his supplies." She formed an image of a torso showing bared breasts and spreading thighs. Hers were excellent ones.

"As did I," Lucent agreed. "We are ill matched in this respect. Maybe we should break this up and wait for suitable men."

"I can't wait; I have a deadline."

Lucent considered. "It's several weeks' travel by foot. A day or three here shouldn't matter much."

Symbol was appalled. "Egregious miscalculation! I have had air fare before, and didn't stop to consider the time by foot. I must return within ten days."

"Impossible!"

"In addition, I am not hardened to extended walking."

The Amazon looked at her with a certain understandable bemusement. "Then we have a problem."

"I have one way to handle such a problem. Both problems, actually. Chroma travel. No fault."

"I have no objection in principle to faster travel. There might be Chroma men going our way at one of the intersections."

"A pair of men," Symbol agreed.

"Or a single man interested in having two women together. Can you handle that?"

"Affirmation."

"I lack experience with men of other Chroma. In fact, I lack felicity in seductive arts, despite my ability to read their minds. I can perform, but am no siren."

"Then how did you anticipate getting no fault attention?"

"I am healthy and tractable, and men of my home Chroma seem to find that satisfactory. They need very little encouragement, and indeed the lust in their minds transfers to mine and makes me lusty too. But I fear other Chroma men may be more choosy, because of the color difference. My hope was to encounter one who would take it to me, as it were, not caring about color."

"It was a realistic hope," Symbol said. "I have had experience with men of many Chroma, and the only difference color makes is to intrigue them further. Most have bedded only home Chroma women, and the alien lure of other Chroma is almost irresistible. So that is an asset, not a liability. All they require is firm flesh, novelty, and amenability. I can negotiate for us both, if you wish."

"You negotiate with friendly men. I will negotiate with unfriendly men." Lucent drew a short sword part way from its sheath. She was a warrior woman, and Symbol had no doubt of her combat prowess; a woman did not get to be an Amazon without demonstrating it to the satisfaction of the Amazon Guild.

"A fair division of labor," Symbol agreed. "Each to her own expertise."

The Amazon nodded. "Then let's get started. This may turn out better than we first thought."

They set out, walking to the ferry, then out of the suburb, along a trail between Brown and Green Chroma zones. Symbol could see the phenomenal foliage deeper within the Green; plants were its specialty. The brown looked ordinary, in its shades of brown.

The road divided, either side leading to staging points just within the Chroma zones. "Which one?" Lucent asked.

"Do you prefer being swung along by huge green tentacles, or carried by giant golems?"

"Which color of man seeks translucent or invisible women?"

"I suspect Green, because Brown has golems in any form desired, including the most luscious of women."

"Less competition. Green it is, then."

They turned right and entered the green zone. A green man appeared. "Greeting, ladies."

"Acknowledgment, handsome man," Symbol replied.

"Introduction: I am Gourd."

"I am Symbol of Air, and this is Lucent of Water. We are two damsels loath to walk around your Chroma if there is a chance of riding across it. We can be rather friendly, singly or in tandem, for a swift ride." She opened her jacket to reveal her sweated bosom, which was a fine one. "Our flesh may not be fully visible, but it is as represented."

The green man looked, licking his lips. "I have two friends. Will you consider three?"

"And a bite to eat," Symbol said. "No fault."

"Done. This way." He led them to a large green tree from which hung a great pod. At his touch, the vines lowered the pod to the ground and laid it flat. The man lifted a flap, revealing a padded interior. "Make yourselves comfortable. My friends will be here in a moment."

They got into the pod. "Set your weapons aside," Symbol said. "Do not disrobe. They will handle that themselves."

Soon the men arrived. They were all green and looked much alike to Symbol, but that was the thing about Chroma: it took time to tune in to the distinguishing details. They carried a basket of green

fruits and breads.

"I will take a volunteer while my friend eats," Symbol said as the men settled in and the pod moved upward, carried by vines. "Then she will take one while I eat. In an hour we should be able to accommodate three men and three sessions of eating. Agreed?"

They were too eager to argue about details. Gourd approached Symbol while the other two watched, and Lucent delved into the basket. Of course voyeurism was part of it, and Symbol could handle it. For one thing, when she stripped they wouldn't actually see anything.

In fact, that might be a problem. "Would you prefer me mostly clothed?"

"Not if I can feel you," Gourd said.

Symbol quickly removed her clothing, and became essentially invisible in the gloom of the pod. By full daylight she showed shadows where her brains and lungs were, because she had been long out of her Chroma and was becoming polluted by the nonChroma environment. But she had an Air gem to preserve her, so the process had been slow.

Gourd quickly stripped, and indeed, his swollen member resembled a gourd. He felt somewhat clumsily for her, so she grasped his hands and put them on key parts of her body, helping him orient. He hardly had time to find the place before he jetted into her.

That freed her to start her own meal. She took a green sandwich and chewed while the second man had eagerly at Lucent. As Symbol had predicted, he found her translucent torso fascinating rather than repulsive, and felt it thoroughly as he entered it. He could see the faint green tinge of his member inside her, through Lucent's flesh, and that turned him on even more forcefully.

There was a faint flicker before Symbol. She recognized the spirit trace of the succubus liaison, and silently put out her hand. *A scene after my own heart*, Swale thought, noting the sex in progress.

"We are buying food and transport," Symbol said subvocally, careful not to change her expression. Her mission and contact with the succubus were none of the Green men's business.

*I grieve, having just missed your own session.*

"I will have another in a moment."

*Oh, may I stay for it? Let me into you.*

Symbol let her in. The spirit siphoned into her wet vagina and took temporary residence in her womb. *I don't get enough sex these days.*

"How much is enough for you?"

*Once an hour will do, as idling, between serious bouts.*

Symbol almost choked laughing. "How are the others doing?"

*Havoc has a plump Gray Chroma woman who means to seduce him. Gale is traveling no fault with a husky ugly Cartographer. Throe is riding a millipede between Chroma. You seem to be in good order so far.*

"I am. As long as there are lusty men traveling our way."

*You are modest. You could make a eunuch go with you no fault.*

"I have done so," Symbol said with a reminiscent smile.

The second green man finished with Lucent; it had not taken long. Symbol gulped down the last of her green sandwich and girded for renewed action as the third man approached.

*Here comes one. Please, let me have him.*

*Take him,* Symbol agreed silently.

The succubus did. Symbol was thoroughly experienced in sex, but now her body performed in a new way. It leaped up to intercept the green man, the legs circling his hips as the vulva neatly trapped his member and squeezed it into the channel. He jetted violently before ever having a chance to thrust, and was done before he knew it. His expression was a mixture of rapture and astonishment.

*Ahh, that felt good! Too bad I no longer take souls.*

"You could have sex once a minute, that way," Symbol said, amazed.

*I can savor it slow, but I was hungry. If you ever have need to take on ten men in near simultaneity, call me.*

"You do have the touch." An understatement, for the succubus had not been joking about the ten.

*I must go about my rounds. Parting.*

"Parting," Symbol echoed as Swale siphoned out. She had not experienced succubus sex before, and was impressed. There had to be magic, to make a man perform that emphatically, that suddenly, when he couldn't even see the woman and had not yet touched her. Probably it was to prevent a victim from changing his mind and thus saving his soul before the succubus harvested it.

The three men had all been serviced, but the basket of food had not yet been emptied. "Now for the second round, when you are ready," Symbol said, donning her sweater so that they would know where she was. She knew full well that it would take them a while to recover their virility, and meanwhile the two women would have a good meal. "We'll take the ones we didn't get before."

The men did work their way up to sex again, in due course, but meanwhile were fascinated by another aspect of Air: Symbol's digestive process showed when she removed the sweater. She could have masked it by illusion, but realized that she would get more food if they could watch what she did with it. It was exactly what anyone did with it, but on her it showed. It was chewed in the head, swallowed to the stomach, wrestled around there until it flowed on into the small intestine. By the time

it reached the large intestine, it had disappeared, having been integrated into her system. They encouraged her to keep eating, and she did, and so did Lucent, whose internal processes were less visible, but could be vaguely seen.

"You handled that third one so fast I didn't think he had even gotten into you," Lucent murmured as they ate.

"I was hungry," Symbol said. "I'll make my next one last as long as both of yours." And she did. She felt a bit guilty for the super speed the succubus had wrought; the men deserved some by-play along with their climaxes.

When the pod touched down at the far side of the Green zone, all five of them were satisfied in different fashions. The green men had had all the exotic other-Chroma sex they could handle in an hour, and a lesson in digestion, and the two women had bellies full of green food. "That was almost fun," Lucent murmured as they walked from the Green Chroma zone staging point. "You had them completely distracted. They never even realized that we ate all their food."

"We gave good value," Symbol said. "Each of them had sex with two foreign-Chroma women of good shape, and got to see things they can't see at home."

"Who would have thought they would be more interested in intestines than in genitalia!"

"Men are easy to manage, when you know how." But Symbol realized now that she was distinctly inferior to the succubus when it came to management. It was humbling.

The next Chroma was Purple, an overlapping of Red and Blue, with many small vents whose substances mixed. This was a region of demonic animals that they wanted no part of. Fortunately they were able to make another deal for transport, this time with a single Purple man who did not want sex so much as to be seen with a lovely woman on each arm. Lucent was less than beautiful, but her translucent face was obscure, so Symbol reworked her clothing to make her more glamorous, and enhanced her with spot illusion. Thus they were drawn rapidly across the zone in an open wagon, one on each side of the man, consciously pretty and smiling at any and all who happened to be looking. He took turns kissing them and publicly fondling them, but had no interest privately. They were both satisfied to have it that way, after their large green meal. They had a good deal of digesting to do before returning to strenuous physical activity.

"It hasn't been dull so far," Lucent said. "You have a way with men that makes all the difference."

"It is my business," Symbol said, once more remembering what Swale had demonstrated. Maybe Symbol could learn that from the succubus, after this mission was done. She had thought Gale naïve or crazy to tame such a creature instead of killing it, but Gale had proved to be correct. "I was mistress to a prominent man, and I had to know how to handle men." She kept the information about exactly what man hidden in her private mind, so that all the mind reader could glean was what was spoken. She had loved King Deal in her fashion, and now loved King Havoc utterly, for all that he would never be hers, and not just because he loved Gale. *Foolishness, thy name is woman.* Whoever made the changelings should have made them immune to each other's appeal. "But he died, and now I love another." She also concealed the matter of the changelings: closer than blood siblings, so they could not marry each other. What an irony, that the fittest and most attractive people could never fully commit to their own kind. Or was that deliberate, to prevent them from breeding their own

superior species and becoming independent of whoever or whatever made them now?

The next Chroma zone was Yellow, the whole region seeming to be on fire, though it did not burn them. This time no men were interested, but two Yellow women were: could Symbol explain to them how to be beautiful and manipulate men? They floated across the zone while Symbol explained how effective just a little bit of illusion could be, to mask flaws of appearance and enhance assets. She used Lucent as a model, starting her as quite plain, then prettifying her stage by stage. Those of the Fire Chroma could do illusion, of course; just not as well as the specialists of the Air Chroma. "Much of it is just attitude," Symbol said. "Listen raptly when a man speaks, always, and he will find you more interesting."

"But that's so obvious," one protested. "Won't he see right through it?"

"When a man's vanity is stoked, he is blind to the obvious." She demonstrated again, having the women speak to her alternately. One she brushed off with seeming inattention, while she focused on the other with wide-eyed awe. The first was annoyed, the second pleased. Then she reversed it, making the point. "If you were two men, how would you feel about me? Think how much more effective it would be if I also showed just a bit of cleavage. Attitude and appearance operating together." It was elementary, but the women were satisfied.

At last they ran out of Chroma: there was a broad nonChroma band separating Lucent's home zone that had to be crossed without magic. They called it the Dead Zone. "But the neighboring Chroma cooperated to facilitate travel," Lucent said. "We built a railway."

"A what?"

"A track formed by parallel rails, similar to what the White Chroma folk use. You'll see."

They walked along the trail. Then Swale came again. Symbol let her in, so as not to be obvious about reaching out to touch her spirit substance. "Another routine check?"

No. *There is danger ahead for you.*

"Of what nature?"

*I do not know. I can't fathom it. But it is as deadly as I was, in a different way. You must not expose yourself to it.*

The succubus had been in the business of tempting boys into sex, and sucking out their souls at the moment of climax. There were incubi who did similar to impressionable girls. This was as bad? That chilled her.

Nevertheless, she had a job to do. "I need to get to the site, and I can't wait around on something unspecified."

*I know. I wish I could tell you more, but it is something outside my experience. I caught only a psychic whiff of it as I passed. Be extremely wary.*

"Is it something that can be avoided or fought?"

*I don't know. But my guess is that it can be, otherwise it would not be hiding. Maybe you can stop it, if you know how. If you are on guard.*

"Thank you," Symbol said grimly as Swale departed.

She looked around, but saw only ordinary nonChroma landscape. "This does not look dead to me."

"Dead to magic," Lucent explained. "It is a large patch of ordinary terrain, with the Translucent Chroma zone in the center, like an island or oasis. Thus we are surrounded by no magic, with no other Chroma zones visible from our fringe. It is as though this territory was reserved for a volcano, but ours turned out to be too small to fill it. We are a small zone, but it is very nice within it. Because brigands sometimes infest the Dead Zone, we have a fair number of warriors and Amazons. Normally travelers are guarded; that is how I came to be out of my zone."

"I have a premonition of danger, but I don't think from brigands. Are there other threats here?"

"There may be. On rare occasion, lone travelers have disappeared without explanation. Once one was found, months later: a woman, reduced to bones. It was never determined what killed her; the ants and grubs had cleaned away all her flesh."

This remained sinister. "Was she in ill health?"

"No. She was an Amazon."

"So she would not have died of natural cause."

"Unlikely. Nor was she likely to have killed herself. Though there was an oddity: she was in a secluded cave, and her weapons were untouched. She must have gone there herself, perhaps to sleep, and died in her sleep. Yet there seemed to be no reason for her to deviate from the railway, or to sleep in daytime. It was as though she suddenly changed her mind about where she was going, and went to hide, and died."

"Brigands! Could they have attacked and wounded her, and she went to recover?"

"It is possible," Lucent said dubiously. "But there were no reports of any brigand band in the area at that time."

"A lone brigand, then, just passing through."

"Against an Amazon?"

Symbol did not pursue it further, lest she risk affronting her companion. Lucent did have a case: brigands tended to be ordinary riffraff, not highly trained, and their careers tended to be brief, because posses hunted down any that became too annoying. Amazons, in contrast, were highly trained warriors, almost impossible to catch by surprise. They could be as lusty as men, and did sometimes set aside their weapons when indulging in sex, but any man who supposed that made such a woman helpless was a fool. An Amazon, as a matter of general policy, did not have sex with a man she wasn't fairly sure she could kill or disable if she had to. If she had sex with a warrior man, she might keep a



weapon on her, and he would accept that, understanding her need to be sure she would never be helpless. Rape of an Amazon was virtually unknown. Lucent could have dispatched any or all of the three Green men; Symbol knew that, and in fact had depended on it, just in case they turned abusive. They had been innocent in that sense, merely interested in having a good time, perhaps never suspecting that the woman who yielded so willingly to their ardor could have been merciless if angered. So something other than a brigand must have dispatched the lost Amazon.

Was that what lurked for them now? Symbol did not like this at all. She knew Swale would not have warned her jokingly; the succubus was as dedicated to King Havoc's welfare as any other of their close number, and knew the importance of this mission.

They came to the railroad station. This was a set of metal rails, as described, less than an armspan apart, supported by wooden ties set at right angles. They went straight into the Dead Zone, soon disappearing over a rise. At their near end they divided into two sets, with three metal wheeled carts set on one set.

"We take a cart, push it to the main track, and ride it," Lucent said. "On the level one can push, the other ride, taking turns resting; I am prepared to do all the pushing. On the rises no one rides; on the descents we both ride. Overall it is three times as fast as walking, and less fatiguing. Even so, it will take us two days to reach the Chroma zone, unless we travel during the night. There are rest stops spaced across, so there is no need to struggle."

"A novel means of transport," Symbol said.

"Your premonition: could it refer to a problem with the track, so that we might wreck during a fast descent?"

"No. I fear something living, or maybe demonic. Maybe whatever took out that Amazon, though I did not know of that before you told me."

"I have learned not to take premonitions or intuitions lightly. But it would help if I knew what to guard against. We will not see demons here; the zone is as dead for them as for magic, by no coincidence. What about a sexual spirit—an incubus? They can go beyond the zones."

"Not an incubus. Maybe a crazed animal—I don't know. My apology for being so vague."

"Some of the worst dangers are vague ones. An animal I could dispatch with my sword. I will expect you to keep alert watch while I am pushing."

"Be sure of that," Symbol agreed. "I think we shall simply have to brave it, hoping I am wrong."

Symbol climbed into the smallest cart, which had one seat in the center, with foot room front and back. She faced forward, while Lucent got behind, put her hands on the back rail, and pushed forward. As the cart moved on its tracks, she pushed harder, until she was running.

It came to the rise, and slowed, but the Amazon kept pushing, and in a moment it topped the rise and started down the hill. Lucent jumped up, swinging her feet athletically over the rail without letting go of it, and landed neatly in the cart. She sat on the seat, facing back, her body bracing Symbol's as the cart accelerated down the slope.

"Exhilaration!" Symbol exclaimed as the wind took her hair.

"There's as much uphill as downhill."

The cart whizzed past bushes and trees, shaking as it crossed irregularities in the track. It swung around the side of a hillock, leveled out, and slowed.

"First free ride done," Lucent said, jumping out. She resumed pushing, moving the cart along a roughly level stretch.

Then came a formidable hill. "Here you must walk," the Amazon said.

Symbol appreciated the need. She scrambled out, fell behind, and followed cart and Amazon up the incline. She looked around—and saw something as it disappeared behind a tree. She kept looking, but it did not reappear.

Until she looked away. Then she caught another motion from the corner of her vision.

Was she imagining it? Or could it be a curious bird, tracking them until they left its territory?

"Something's alarming you," Lucent grunted as she pushed the cart.

"It's probably nothing. I'm just not much used to the country, being a city girl."

"You're one nervy, experienced city girl. You don't spook easy."

"You can read minds out of your Chroma?"

"A little, if I am in contact with the subject. But I don't need mind reading for this. You're looking around nervously."

Oh—her Amazon training. "Something keeps disappearing in the bushes. I can't quite see it. Maybe a bird."

"And maybe something stalking us."

"I didn't want to say that."

"I don't want to overwork you, but maybe you should push while I look. I don't like mysteries."

"Agreement." Symbol took the Amazon's place and started pushing. The cart was heavy, but she could handle it for a while. She put her head down and pushed it on up the hill.

"There's something, and it's no bird I know of," Lucent said after a moment. "Nor any other animal I recognize. I know the creatures of this zone. None move like that."

"You saw it?"

"No. Just the disturbance of its passage." The woman joined Symbol behind the cart, and her

added power made it move much faster. "You sneak peeks right, and I'll look left. Maybe we can get a full glimpse of it."

They continued to push, and soon reached the crest of the hill. "I didn't see it," Symbol gasped.

"Neither did I. But it's still pacing us."

"How can you tell?"

"The mind trace. It's just a fuzz at this range, like a little sour smell, but it's there. If it gets closer, I'll get a better notion."

Symbol tried to suppress a nervous chill. "Do you think it's dangerous?"

"Can't tell. We can't afford to assume it's not, given that it's non-native and is stalking us. It would attack if it thought it could take us, and go away if it couldn't. It must be waiting for us to sleep."

"And we do have to sleep, sometime."

"We can do it in relays."

Symbol nodded. "So we can get through."

"Agreement."

They were standing by the cart, looking around as they spoke, but not seeing the thing. "Maybe we can outrun it, rolling down a long slope."

"Let's find out."

They climbed into the cart and started rolling down into the next valley. The grade was steeper than the initial one, and the speed was formidable. "Will this thing stay on the track?" Symbol asked, concerned.

"Oh, yes, as long as we don't lean out too far to the side. All the slopes and curves have been tested."

"Then the faster the better! Let's leave our stalker behind."

The cart raced downward, and swung around several curves, before coasting to a stop three quarters of the way up the opposite slope of the valley. They clambered out, and Lucent pushed while Symbol gazed nervously around—and saw the faint motion of something hiding.

Lucent picked up her reaction. "I was afraid of that. The thing's fast; we can't outrun it. Must be an alien bird of some sort, flying across the crevices. But it's too small to be a man-hunting raptor. This is weird. I don't like it."

Symbol had a dreadful thought. "That dead Amazon—something like this?"

"It is possible," Lucent agreed grimly.

"Maybe she went to a cave to hide from it, so she could sleep—and it caught her anyway."

"Possible."

"She was alone, and had to sleep. But we can take turns. So it can't get us."

"Maybe."

That was not reassuring. "Why not?"

"We're just guessing about the Amazon. Maybe she went to meet a man, and he killed her."

"But—"

"By treachery, of course. If he had a stasis spell, or poisoned her water bag. Maybe she trusted him, but he had found one of those slick soft creatures—"

"Like me."

"No offense."

"None. A woman like me could have taken him from a woman like you. Men are idiots."

"Contempt!" Lucent agreed vehemently.

"Do you really think that's what happened?"

"Negation."

"So we may be in real danger."

"Acquiescence."

They reached the top of the rise. Now the valley ahead contained a winding river. The track went right down to it. "We'll get dunked," Symbol protested.

"Negation. There's a trestle bridge."

They got in and started down. Symbol peered to the side, trying to see what stalked them, but there was nothing.

The cart raced down to the river. Now the bridge was evident, a thin series of wooden towers projecting from the water, supporting the tracks. The framework hardly seemed solid enough to bear the weight of the cart. Then they were on it, the surface of the water close enough to touch, and the pylons were firm. They raced across the river and mounted the far slope, slowing as they ascended.

"There," Lucent murmured, looking back at the water.

Symbol saw a faint flicker of something just above the water, streaking across beside the track. Then it disappeared into the foliage. She felt a chill. "I couldn't make it out, but it's not a bird."

"Concurrence. An insect. Maybe thirty pounds."

Symbol's chill intensified. She hated big bugs. "A bloodsucker?"

"No. No type I know. But the wings are insectoid."

"Why would a non-biting bug be stalking us?"

"That I would like to know."

"Could it be one that feeds on refuse?"

"It could. But there is bound to be plenty of animal manure around; it should have no need to wait for ours. We may not even leave any here."

"So we still don't know its business," Symbol said, quite unassured.

"Affirmation. But I think we had better discover that business. It surely has reason to follow us, and I don't like mysteries of this nature."

"Agreement."

They labored up another hill, and scooted down the other side. By this time it was getting late in the day, and they were tired. "We had better stop the night at the shelter," Lucent said. "We could push and ride the cart at night, but would be unable to see if a tree branch has fallen across the track, and could crash."

Symbol had to agree, though she was quite nervous about the stalker. "You said we can take turns sleeping."

"Acquiescence. If it had the power to attack us openly, it would have done so by now. It must seek to come upon us unaware, and perhaps sting us into submission so it can feed. Some insects do that."

"But you said it wasn't a bloodsucker!"

"None I recognize. But it could be a variety of dragonfly, chewing out chunks of flesh. It may subsist on living or fresh-killed flesh, and we look fleshy."

"Because we are women," Symbol said with a shudder.

They arrived at the shelter. This was an open structure, providing a roof, fireplace, blanket, candles, and latrine section, but little else. They could not enter a cell and shut the insect out.

They made a fire and foraged for edible roots. Symbol wasn't good at this, but Lucent was. "You did your part bedazzling those men, getting us food and fast transport," she said. "This is my turn."

The roots looked unappetizing, but proved to be tolerable when cooked. They ate and used the latrine trench as dusk came.

"Now for our shifts," Lucent said. "How well can you remain awake when you have to?"

"As long as I stay on my feet and walk about. But I'm tired."

"Then take the first sleep shift. I'll wake you in two hours." She lit a candle and set it on the floor. Its flickering flame provided a surprising amount of light.

"Gratitude." Symbol lay on the pallet, covering herself with the rough blanket. But the moment she did so, she realized it was no use. "I can't sleep. I'm tired, but apprehension has taken me."

Lucent considered. "I do not relish this sort of siege. My inclination is to fight it. Maybe we can pretend to sleep, and dispatch the thing when it comes close."

"Maybe," Symbol agreed gratefully.

The Amazon lay down beside her. "Lie on your back or side, and watch your half; I'll watch mine. If you see it, touch my foot, slowly, under that blanket, so." She poked a toe into Symbol's ankle. "Do not move; when it is upon us, I will strike. Trust me to do that."

But Symbol had doubt. "Insects can move fast. Suppose you wait too long?"

Lucent reached out of the shelter and plucked a twig from a low shrub. She pressed it into Symbol's hand. "Toss this up."

Bemused, Symbol flipped it over the pallet. The twig jerked in the air, separating into two pieces that landed on either side of them. Symbol fetched back the one on her side. It was cleanly cut. The Amazon had used her blade so swiftly Symbol had never seen it or the motion, and scored perfectly on the twig.

"Apology," she said, reassured. "I forget your calling."

They waited, but nothing came. "It is too canny," the Amazon finally muttered. "It knows that while the light is on, we are feigning sleep. But we need the light to spot it; I doubt it will make a sound."

Symbol had a bright idea. "Inattention," she said. "Could we fool it into thinking we are oblivious?"

"How so?"

"My illusion shows. I have a small library of them. Folk normally sit quite still while watching, for considerable periods."

Lucent nodded. "Comprehension. You promised to show some, but we got distracted."

"By men and insects," Symbol agreed, rummaging in her purse for her Air stone. Then she thought of something. "Possible liability: the illusion covers reality. The bug could approach and we would not see it."

"Negation. I will feel its mind as it closes. I got a whiff at a distance, and that will strengthen inversely proportional to distance. It may think I am oblivious, but I will score on it if it comes in range."

"Relief." Symbol selected a show. "Do you mind sickly sweet sentimentality?"

"Affirmation. Do you have one of thwarted love or conflict?"

"I think so, though all are resolved by the end."

"That can't be helped, it seems. How about with an Amazon?"

Symbol considered. "I do have one such. 'Reversal' features use of passion spells on innocent victims, leading to mischief. Will that do?"

"Enthusiasm."

"However, this is a feel illusion. For example, when there is sexual activity, what can't be seen can still be felt. Some folk consider this effect to be indecent."

"Physical or emotional?"

"Physical. You have to provide your own emotion."

"That's fine, then. I want sex without the burden of emotion, as we had it with the Green trio."

Symbol wondered at the Amazon's taste in romance, but did not question it. She selected the show and projected it.

The illusion spread out from the stone, forming a three dimensional picture of a handsome young man in a fancy hat walking down a path. The scene covered over the two real people and the shelter; only the flame of the candle showed through when it flickered. "On Planet Mystery there once lived two families at feud," an unseen announcer announced. "The Hats and the Coys. Each was eager for a pretext to quarrel with the other, to attack and gain advantage and settlement of ancient grudges, but each was careful to give no such pretext, so as to appear to have the right of whatever case developed. At present, there is a difference about a particular piece of farming land. It has been decided that one representative of each family shall be sent to negotiate."

The man continued down the path. It was traditional to identify the locale of any story as Mystery or Counter Charm, so as to avoid offending any local Chroma or region, and sometimes to free a story of the Chroma framework entirely, so that folk of any Chroma or nonChroma could enjoy it alike. The man's hat identified him as a member of the Hat family. That made orientation easy.

He came to the edge of a field. There stood a rather pretty young woman in a close-fitting cape. "Greeting," he said gruffly.

"Acknowledged," she replied coldly.

"Observation: you are an Amazon."

"And you are a warrior," she retorted.

"This is supposed to be on Counter Charm?" Lucent asked. "Yet they look like regular nonChroma folk, and they speak our same language and share our conventions?"

The scene paused, the characters frozen in place.

Symbol was surprised that the Amazon was not up on the illusion conventions, but probably she had spent much time in the field and had not had the chance to view many such shows. "For convenience we assume that there are human beings there, and that their language is translated to ours. Likewise their conventions. These are mere details; it is the essential story that counts."

"Comprehension."

The scene reanimated. "Introduction," the man said. "I am Hero Hat, sent to negotiate on behalf of my family."

"And I am Coma Coy, sent likewise. We have agreed that if you and I can work out a compromise without killing each other, our family will accept it."

"Affirmation."

There was a pause before she spoke again. "Candor."

"Accepted."

"This is however academic, as we are not prepared to compromise. This land belongs to Coy, and no part of it may be occupied or used by Hat. No matter how many misnamed bumpkins may be sent to argue their feckless case."

"Candor," Hero said, his jaw clenching.

"Accepted."

"I agree only that there can be no compromise. This is Hat territory, and shall remain so. No matter how many unscrupulous sluts may be sent to plead otherwise."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Candor continued."

"Continued," he agreed.

"I should be pleased if you give me a fair pretext to slit your flabby belly, provided your gross



guts do not foul our pristine land."

Hero's belly was anything but flabby, of course. "I do not like your words, but am sure they would seem sweet in comparison to your body, were it not guiltily hidden." No Amazon had a flabby body, either. But for the purpose of a suitable exchange of insults, certain assumptions could be made.

"Obscenity!"

"Precisely."

Her sharp knife appeared in her hand. Simultaneously a short club appeared in his hand.

"Make your move," Coma hissed.

"Make yours."

They stared at each other a moment, their mutual hostility fairly radiating around them. Neither attacked the other, because they knew they were being watched, and the one who started the bloodshed would be at fault, giving the opposing family a pretext for justified vengeance mayhem.

Then something odd happened. There was a faint flash of magic, noticed by neither party. Nothing physical changed, but their expressions did. Hero's face lost its anger and became flushed with another variety of passion. Coma's attitude shifted from cold rage to something else.

"Truce," Hero whispered, licking his lips.

"Granted," Coma agreed.

"I have conceived sudden irrational passion for you, and must either have you or flee this moment, ending the negotiation. What may be the price of you, setting aside the question we came for?"

"And I for you," she said. "Similarly inexplicable. No fault?"

"No fault," he agreed.

"Take me this instant." She put away her knife and ripped open her cape to reveal a splendidly formed torso.

Hero put away his club, ripping open his own clothing. He clasped her to him, standing. She caught his shoulders and heaved her legs up to circle him as the two of them cooperated to make the intimate connection. It was done in a moment, explosively.

She lifted her face to his, without unwrapping her legs or breaking the connection. "I am not yet done."

"Neither am I."

They kissed passionately as their bodies labored to produce another climax. This time Coma

came first, leading Hero into a powerful second performance.

He thought to subside, but she continued pulsing around him, not letting him withdraw. "More!" she gasped.

"I am not sure I—"

"New stimulus!" She gripped his shoulders and held her upper torso away from him, so that her fine breasts were exposed, bouncing with her motions. "I will hold on."

He removed his hands from her back and put them on her breasts, and she did maintain the position. They were firm yet yielding to the touch, and highly evocative. "Effective," he said as his member reversed course and hardened again. Her pulsing never paused as he resumed thrusting, and in due course he had a third climax, slow but strong. This finally satisfied her, and she relaxed, drawing close to him, finding his face for another lingering kiss.

"That's some effect!" Lucent said. "I felt him coming right into me, and me squeezing him, inside."

The picture froze as Symbol replied. "Yes. For male viewers, it's the male feel, penetrating and being squeezed. Pretty sophisticated illusion; I would like to know how it is recorded. But some folk object to it; they don't like being touched there, even if they know it's not real."

"They are prudes. On with the show."

"Don't forget why we're doing this."

"I haven't. The stalker is closer, but not yet close enough."

The animation resumed. It was no longer possible to maintain the sexual connection, and Coma slid to the ground. "Question: have you ever performed like that before?"

"Never. Once sufficed, or twice after a pause. Never thrice in a single session."

"I never before had continuous climax, and did not know I was capable of it. I am pleasantly worn out."

"Similarity."

"Observation: There is no precedent for what we did. We have been ensorcelled."

"Agreement," he said, surprised. "We came here to negotiate, or to fight, not to have sex. No offense during no fault, but you are perhaps the last woman I would have chosen for such a liaison."

"No offense," she agreed. "And you the last man. Only magic can account for this crime against our natures."

"A passion spell," he agreed. "And it is wearing off now."

"I know something of the type. They last until used up. We had no choice but to dissipate it in its

own fashion. We should otherwise have been locked into it, able to focus on nothing else, until finally forced to abate it."

"I think we abated it in record time. While we remain in no fault truce, I will say that your female body and facility were marvelously conducive."

"And yours quite manly and enduring."

"Soon we will revert to normal, and can resume hostilities. But I am concerned: is this a cruel joke played on us by some unknown party?"

"Similarity. Perhaps intended to force us to settle the property issue despite our best intentions."

"Or to goad us into a killing frenzy, because of the shame of it."

"And set our families off into a feud that might kill enough to make it easy for a third family to take over."

"I do not like being joked or forced," he said grimly.

"Agreement. My inclination is for vengeance."

"Endorsement." He fidgeted. "Preference: that we end no fault but not truce while we consider further."

"Denial. We are being observed, and it may be that the spell caster is among the observers."

He nodded. "Excellent thought. Should we separate now and resume hostilities, that party will know that the ploy, whatever its nature, has failed."

"And we will lose our chance to identify that party."

"And to deal with it," he agreed, touching his club.

"Agreement." She touched her knife.

"Comparison: my revulsion for you and your works is returning."

"Similarity. The spell is fading. It pains me to remain this close to you, especially with my body exposed to your gaze." But with an iron effort of will, she remained exposed, her bare breasts just touching his bare chest.

"I am disgusted by what we did, despite knowing it was involuntary." He exhibited similar will, maintaining his downward gaze at that exposure.

"It was rape—of both of us."

"We are at least agreed. Death to the perpetrator."

"Death!" She looked cautiously around. "Who might it be?"

"There are several families dastardly enough to do it. We dare not guess, lest we extract vengeance against the wrong one."

"But to catch it we must first deceive it. How may we best accomplish that?"

Hero considered. "It pains me to say this, but there is a ruse that might be effective."

"That we pretend the passion spell has not yet been expiated," she agreed.

"Yet surely the observer can tell from our proximity that we did expiate it." They remained in contact, face to face, embraced though no longer connected.

"These spells have variable effects, depending on locale, personnel, and circumstance. Sometimes they seem to lock on, refusing to be expiated."

"Yet continuous sexual expression would hardly be feasible."

"It diffuses into unsatisfied desire," she said. "The victims endure repeated plumbings but are never satisfied, so remain close enough to keep doing it. It is similar to what we experienced, but doesn't end. It merely abates for a time to allow them to recoup physically, and is horribly wearing."

"We could emulate that state, for a time," he said. "We would not actually have to do the deed repeatedly, just to maintain the pretense of it."

"That would alleviate the burden somewhat," she agreed.

"We would have to make a viable pretense. Embracing, kissing, touching parts." Hero looked grim.

"I can stand it if you can." She was making a challenge.

"For an hour, for proper vengeance, I can endure."

"For an hour," she agreed. "Shall we take turns?"

"Turns," he agreed. "One must act, the other react."

"Acquiescence. Who starts?"

"Play fingers. Winner starts."

"Agreement."

Each made a fist. They shook the fists together, once, twice, thrice. On the third pass, he put out one finger and she put out two.

"Odd," she said, satisfied.

"Male," he agreed. Male was odd, because he had one projection. Female was even because she had two. It was a universal coding. Each of them had thrown his/her own symbol, and the total was odd. "Remember, no biting or stabbing."

"I know the rule," she said sharply, removing her hand from the knife.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. She acquiesced. He held it just long enough to count, then released her. "I feel sick," he muttered.

"It is amazing how much we agree. Now the negotiation: have we a choice?"

"If we are locked in, we must seek a way to maintain contact, so as not to be separated. A decision either way would complete the mission, leaving no need for further dialogue."

Coma nodded. "Temporary split down the middle, until we conclude our negotiation?"

"Acquiescence," he agreed distastefully.

"Then it is time to present our ongoing status to our families, and await some betrayal of disappointment from the guilty one."

"Time," he agreed. "Or from some third family, which I think is more likely."

"Agreement." She grimaced. "My turn. No clubbing."

"Of course." He removed his hand from his club.

She embraced him, kissed him, then slid her hands down to pinch his buttocks. He stiffened in anger, which made her flash a genuine smile. She had affronted him in a way he could do nothing about, in a way women normally suffered. Then they walked together to brace the families.

The Hat family was astounded. "You have a passion for each other?" the Hat patriarch demanded. "How is this possible?"

"Hero was just too handsome and virile to resist," Coma said with a fetching smile.

"She is a most fetching woman," Hero said. "So rather than quarrel, we are trying to find an equitable settlement of the issue."

"You just want more time to be together!"

"That, too," Hero agreed, lying manfully. It was his turn; he turned to Coma and embraced her, stroking her bottom. She neither resisted nor objected. That made the case. Only Hero felt her seething ire at the familiarity. He had gotten her back.

But the patriarch was too canny to be lightly taken in. "Let's see what her family says about this," he said.

They went to the Coy family. Of course no one accompanied them, because there was no direct

communication between the families; that was why the one-on-one meeting had been set up.

"We're coming in sight of them," Coma said grimly. "My turn." She drew him into her and kissed him lingeringly. Of course she wasn't fooling him; her body was tense with revulsion. But at this distance, who would know?

"We have scored upon each other," he murmured into her ear. "Shall we call a truce in that respect, lest we force each other to show our wrath and spoil our act?"

"Truce," she agreed. "For now." But of course they would have to continue with the essence, holding and kissing, which was bad enough.

The Coys were staring as the two came up to their station. "What ugly game are you playing?" the Coy matriarch demanded.

"I love him, Grandma," Coma said, no slouch at lying herself. "I just couldn't resist him."

"A Hat?! He's just trying to seduce you into giving away our property."

"Negotiations continue," Hero said. "Nothing has been decided."

"And you're hot for her?"

Hero nodded. "Against my better judgment. She is a fine figure of a woman, and accomplished in other respects." It galled him to realize that this was literally true.

"Then of course you will want to marry her."

The smiles froze on both their faces. They had walked into that one! The matriarch was testing them for deception. What could they say?

"There's really no future in that," Coma said uncomfortably.

"Not if you're faking."

They were stuck for it. Either they had to admit the deception and lose their chance to identify the spell caster, or carry it through long enough to accomplish their purpose. "We haven't set a date," Hero said.

"Naturally not. The families will make the arrangements. Meanwhile you will share lodging, the better to indulge your newfound passions."

"Of course," Coma said faintly.

It was Hero's turn. He put his arm around her and kissed her cheek. "Of course," he echoed, as faintly.

The lodging turned out to be in the middle of an apartment complex, surrounded by Coys. Every sound would carry. So that night they were obliged to make the sounds, lest the ruse be betrayed.

They couldn't fake it; others were too well acquainted with the mechanisms of sex. They indulged in passionate sex several times.

"Apology," Hero murmured in her ear, though it was as much a struggle for him as for her.

"I'm closing my eyes and pretending you are a diseased ogre. That helps."

"Try pretending you are a blue Chroma mermaid, so I don't have to work so hard."

"Negative," she whispered in his ear. "I want you to suffer." She wasn't joking.

So he plumbed her harder, trying to make her protest, but as an Amazon she was able to handle such trials, and met each thrust with as hard a response. Their bellies collided with solid thumps. It was almost as if they were back under the influence of the passion spell. And they still had no idea who was responsible for that.

At last they settled into troubled sleep, nestled together so that any magical spy could see how close they were, physically and emotionally. They were both great liars.

The banns were published, and their nuptial date set. But there was no sign of the spell casting family. Apparently it had retreated into its territory, knowing that they were searching for it. But neither of them could stand to give up the chase, or to be the first to admit defeat.

The day of the wedding came, and yet there was no reprieve. They had to go through with it. "I'll get you for this," Coma breathed in his ear as they stood before the magistrate.

"You already have," he returned fiercely. Then they had to kiss, and it was done. They were married.

They moved onto the property they were negotiating. They couldn't decide on a settlement until they located the guilty party and got their revenge, so the lot was theirs until they did. The two families were forcing them to complete their negotiation, or pay the price. It was awful.

"You are fair of feature and form," Hero said when sure they could not be overheard. "If I close my eyes, I could pretend that you are someone I like."

"Negation. You are too apt to speak the name of that doxie, and give away the pretense."

She had a point. "Then you can't either," he said.

"I am suffering every bit as much as you are," she said. "You bear a passing resemblance to a man I might have liked to marry, and can't, because of this."

"This much I am forced to admit: you are making me hurt as no other woman has."

"That would give me joy, were I not in similar pain," she confessed.

But there was no escape for either of them. They could not even confide their misery to family friends, lest news reach the mutual enemy they were stalking.

Within the year, Coma birthed her first child, a lovely girl. Coma named her Coda Coy, for they agreed that the females would be hers and the males his, per family convention. For one thing, the power in the Coy family was with the women, and with the men in the Hat family. Of course, Hero had to pretend to be thrilled. What made it worse was that he felt significant guilt, knowing that the child had no blame in the manner of her generation. He tried very hard to conceal his true feeling from her, and seemed to succeed, for the little girl was not at all shy about liking him.

Two years later she birthed their second, a boy that looked just like Hero. He named him Halo Hat. Coda was resentful of the intrusion, but was stuck with it, much as they all were. Still they had not located the spell caster.

"I wish we had never made this deal," Coma gritted as they embraced theoretically for love.

"It was a terrible mistake," Hero agreed. "We had our lives ahead of us, and ruined them both."

And of course Coma had to nurse and care for the boy, never letting him know the truth, for he too was innocent of his origin. It was apparent that however much the Hats and Coys hated each other, they had certain common values relating to children, and strode to protect them from emotional as well as physical hurt. Hero almost felt sympathy for Coma when he saw the baby boy clinging to her, inflicting his unquestioning innocent love on her.

Finally they could stand it no more. "Let's ask the oracle," Coma suggested.

"But that is hideously expensive!"

"We can assign it the land we live on."

"That would solve that problem," he agreed. "Neither family will have it."

"Both families know or suspect the predicament we are in. They deserve to lose it."

"And once we have our vengeance, we can be annulled, and get our lives back."

"Phenomenal!"

They went to the oracle. But the priest had odd news for them. "For reason sufficient to itself, I can not provide your answer for two years yet."

"Two years!" Hero exclaimed, outraged.

"Take or leave it. You will not like it, when you learn."

"We take it," Coma said, though she was as angry as Hero was. They had already had more than enough to dislike; now vengeance was all that remained to them both.

They waited two more interminable years. They managed to avoid having another child despite the need to have frequent and loud sex for the benefit of the listening families. It was even worse now, because the children were just as alert as the families were, and would have known the instant their parents were anything other than obviously loving. In fact, the children fussed if their parents did not



hug and kiss frequently in their presence. It was sheer torture.

Worse, after an initial period of doubt, Coda decided she liked her baby brother, and the two became far better friends than their parents were. They didn't know it was an act intended to deceive others about their real hatred of each other.

Finally the two years were done, and they went again to the oracle. "The guilty parties are your two families," the priest said. "Each cast a spell on the opposite negotiator, the one hoping for a rape to occur that would serve as a pretext for further family mayhem, the other hoping for a forced seduction that would lead to a rage-killing."

Hero and Coma stared at each other, appalled. "Your family cheated!" she exclaimed furiously.

"As did yours!" he said with equivalent temper.

"However," the priest pointed out, "you nullified both their malign efforts by reversing the ploy and falling in love. Neither gained anything."

They stared at him with similarly cold expressions. "Why did you make us wait two more years for this fell news?" Hero demanded.

"The oracle looks at far more than the immediate picture. Your children have great potential, but needed more time in a good environment before being deprived of it. Now they may be more safely cast out. The damage of your breakup and the resumption of the Hat and Coy family feuding will be tolerable."

"To be sure," Coma said tightly.

They departed. "Before the feud resumes," Hero said, "shall we agree that our children will be exempt from it? Their origin in deception and hatred is not of their doing."

"Agreed. It is too bad they must be separated."

Hero felt a pang. "Would it be possible for them to have visitation rights—to each other?"

"That would force us to meet again," she pointed out.

He sighed. "Point taken. It was a bad idea."

They arrived home. "Fetch the things you value," Coma told the children. "We will not be returning here."

Coda's eyes went round. She was five years old, and looked exactly like her mother, allowing for age. She was even taking Amazon lessons, and was good at them. "Why?"

"We are separating," Hero said. "This land is ceded to the oracle."

"Why?" Halo asked. He was three, and looked exactly like his father.

"Your father and I can't stand each other," Coma explained gently.

Both children stared at her, then at Hero. "Confusion," Coda said.

"We were required to pretend to be in love," Hero said. "Now at last the need for pretense is past, and we can do what we have longed to do for the past six years."

"Ob—ob—" Halo said, unable to get the complete word out.

"Obscenity," Coda finished for him.

"You have a foul-mouthed son," Coma said severely to Hero.

"Your daughter knew the term," he retorted.

They gathered up their separate things and went to the magistrate who had married them. "And to what do I owe the dubious pleasure of this visit?" he inquired.

"An annulment," Coma said.

"Astonishment! Humor?"

"They can't stand each other," Coda explained helpfully. "They were pretending from the start."

"Obscenity," Halo repeated, getting it straight this time.

"Child, there is no need for language like that," the magistrate said severely.

"Just perform the ceremony of annulment, and we'll be gone," Hero said. "Bad language and all."

"Not quite yet," the magistrate said. "This is no longer a matter of merely the two of you. What of your children?"

"My daughter comes with me," Coma said. "She is Coy. His son is Hat, and goes with him. Now cease dawdling."

The magistrate considered, then came to some internal decision. "Then take your children, for the ceremony."

Hero took hold of Halo, and Coma took hold of Coda. But the two children did not want to separate. They clung to each other.

"Aversion!" Coda cried.

"Pain!" Halo cried.

But the adults took firmer hold, and managed to drag the children apart. They stood at opposite sides of the room, holding daughter and son so that they could not run together again. Coda evidently drew on her Amazon training to stifle her tears, but Halo was plainly crying.

"Now for the ceremony," the magistrate said. "Do you, Hero, declare that you never loved this woman, and that your association with her was a mistake from the start?"

"I do."

"And do you, Coma, declare that you never loved this man, and that your association with him was a mistake from the beginning?"

"I do."

The magistrate glanced around, his gaze lingering on the two children. "Be there any here who object to this annulment? Speak now or forever hold your peace."

Halo stared at his mother and burst into renewed tears. Coda stared at her father. "Daddy!" she wailed, reaching toward him. "Desperation!"

Hero dissolved. "We've got the wrong children," he said, aghast.

Coma nodded. "But we can't exchange. That would put them each into hostile territory."

"A Hat among the Coys," he agreed. "And a Coy among the Hats. This isn't feasible."

"It seems we have a problem," the magistrate said. "Let go your children."

They let go. The boy and girl ran to each other and hugged, both crying.

The magistrate looked at Hero. "It seems your daughter loves her brother—and her father. Do you love her?"

"I do," Hero said, shaken. "Our quarrel is none of her doing. I can't bear to hurt her."

The magistrate turned to Coma. "And do you love your son?"

The woman's eyes were wet. "I do. I thought I could let him go, but I can't."

The magistrate nodded. "Observation: Both children resemble their parents of similar gender exactly. Both parents love their children of opposite gender. What does that suggest?"

Hero and Coma exchanged glances of bafflement, unable to answer.

"Then I will answer for you," the magistrate said. "The two of you have lived a lie from the outset, sponsored by the animosity of your two feuding families. Unable to admit that you love each other, you have displaced that love to your children who resemble you exactly."

They stared at him in mutual horror.

"Now abate this idiocy," the magistrate continued. "Go home together. You'll get no annulment here."

"But the feud—" Hero said.

"Our vengeance—" Coma said.

"Is already complete, as it has been from the moment you embraced each other instead of killing each other. You foiled the worst plotting of both your families, and now they have grandchildren they can't deny. You destroyed the feud itself: the ultimate retribution. You can maintain the discomfort of the guilty parties by continuing as you have been. Go home."

"You don't understand," Hero said. "We hate each other."

"We can't remain together," Coma agreed. "We have waited impatiently for six years for this release."

The magistrate sighed. "Very well. Kiss before me, knowing what you know now, and separate if you can."

"Readily accomplished," Hero said.

"The very last affront," Coma agreed.

They came together, embraced, and kissed. The two children hugged them from outside.

It was as though a barrier was being torn asunder. The passion of mutual hatred seemed to turn inside out, becoming its own opposite.

Hero drew back his head, not letting go of her. "Defeat."

"Abject," Coma agreed.

"I love you. I know it now."

"I have always loved you."

Then another thought came. "Dismay!" Hero said.

"Do not be concerned about your home," the magistrate said. "The oracle can't take it if it means breaking up a family."

"That, too," Coma said. "But what he meant was, we can have only one more child of our own, before the fourth."

"How can we separate, so soon after discovering each other?" Hero asked. "I want to clasp no other than you, not even once. We have lost much time."

"Six years," she agreed. "We must erase every wrong act of passion with a right one, in half the time."

"Adopt one, and be free," the magistrate said impatiently. "You do not have to be unfaithful to

each other."

"Solution," Hero agreed.

"Forever," Coma agreed.

They kissed again, this time pressing rather more closely to each other, and caressing each other's flesh.

"Not in front of the children!" Coda said, imitating an adult voice. Then she and Halo dissolved into laughter as they tried to imitate the kiss.

The illusion show ended. "That was ludicrous," Lucent said. "How could they be in love, and have sex endlessly, and two children, and never realize it?"

"It's a story," Symbol said. "Stories don't have to be sensible. They just are."

"At least they should be halfway realistic. No Amazon would act like that."

"And they couldn't have fooled the children," Symbol agreed.

"Well, they didn't," Lucent said. "Not really. The children knew they loved each other."

"And the children loved them both."

"Children do."

"Children do," Symbol echoed. "I wish I could have had my own, instead of being exempted as the king's mistress."

"Similarity, in a fashion," Lucent agreed, surprised.

"Still, I confess it's not at all realistic."

"Egregious."

"Ludicrous."

The Amazon sighed. "I loved it."

"It's one of my favorites."

"That first sex scene is phenomenal."

"One of the best."

"Frustration! Where is a man when we need him?"

"Or two men," Symbol agreed.

"Or three." They laughed together.

Then they got serious. "What of the stalker?"

"I have been attuning to it, never fear. It came about to the edge of the illusion, and paused, never coming closer. It's there now."

"Now!" Symbol cried, horrified.

"And now it's gone. Our awareness of it drove it off."

"What was it waiting for?"

"For our complete oblivion. But we never slept, so it couldn't close. Our ploy didn't work; it knows when we are alert."

"I don't know whether to be disappointed or relieved."

"Both, maybe. I still can't tell what it is, or what kind of threat it represents."

"If only it were a man."

"It is *not* a man. Never forget that. Nor even male, I think. Sex is not its object."

"Is our death its object?"

"I don't think so. But that other Amazon died. That bothers me."

Symbol experienced another shudder. "Let's get out of here! You said we could travel by night if we had to."

"I said it was risky. Safer to stay awake this night and travel by day. Better logy than injured or dead."

She made sense. "But I can't stand just waiting here while it lurks. If only we could know its exact nature! Then we could assess our chances."

"I wish we could ask an old timer. Someone must know."

Symbol had an idea. "My library of illusion shows—they have many settings. Maybe there's something similar in one of them."

"We need a description, not just a glimpse."

"I have some natural life and hazards shows too. I could look something up—if I had its name or description."

"Could we catch a glimpse in a regular show, then use that to orient on the natural life description?"

"Yes, I think so. But it could be a long random search."

"We're awake anyway. We can watch a lot. Can you speed it up to pass the irrelevant parts quickly?"

"Yes, and slow it to focus on relevant parts. Illusion is versatile."

"Satisfaction."

They reviewed illusion shows, this time skimming over the romantic or sexy sequences, to Symbol's regret, and focusing on the scenes of forests or bare landscapes. They saw many strange animals, but not what they wanted.

"Maybe we can narrow it down some," Lucent said. "Can you orient on large insects?"

"Some. The spooky ones can have those."

They watched spooky romances, with marvelously shapely young women being horrified by armies of ants, spiders, or big stinging flies. "Larger," Lucent said.

They watched the shapelies being chased by ants, spiders, and flies larger than they were. "Not credible," Lucent said. "The big spiders stick mainly to their webs, and the ants to their trails. The flies are nectar eaters." Then she emitted an unAmazonian shriek. "What's that?"

Symbol played the sequence over. It was a giant wasp.

"That could be our creature," Lucent said. "It's the right size, and it flies."

Symbol got another show stone and played it. In a moment it oriented on wasps of all types. Then it came to the big one. "All wasps are deadly, to some degree," the announcer said. "All sting. But some are especially ugly." It showed the giant, thirty pounds heavy, with an enormous wingspan and five legs. "This is the so-called love wasp. It consumes pollen and other plant fruits. It is of solitary habit, making no nest. Male and female meet only briefly to breed."

"That doesn't seem deadly," Symbol remarked.

"Could be a bad lead," Lucent said. "But the physical description could fit what I saw."

"The female then looks for a suitable host for her eggs."

"Host?" Symbol asked, suffering a nervous tweak.

"I think we're getting there."

The show showed the male and female wasps coming together in flight for a brief connection, then separating. The male then returned to foraging, while the female set up a search pattern, flying

back and forth. "Only she knows what host is suitable," the announcer continued. "We do not properly understand the criteria. Only that it must be of suitable size, and have a certain amount of fat on its body."

Symbol felt worse. "It must kill and set up the body for the grubs to eat."

"And there is the wasp's choice," the announcer said. "A fat pig, lost, isolated from its herd. The wasp watches and waits, for it can't address an alert animal. But in time the host sleeps. Then it is vulnerable." The wasp closed on the sleeping animal, then with a quick lunge struck with its stinger. "The venom is far from sufficient to kill a creature this size," the announcer said. "But it does pacify it so that it will not wake during the critical stage."

"Critical stage?" Symbol asked.

"I think I have a glimmer," Lucent said. "This really will be ugly."

"Must we watch, then?"

"We'd better, so as to know our enemy. We already know that it has to catch its victim sleeping, just as we suspected."

The wasp flew around above the pig for several minutes, watching. Then, satisfied that the creature had been properly pacified, it came in for a landing. It settled on the body, inspected it carefully, and finally oriented on its posterior. It unlimbered what looked like a giant phallus.

"I thought this was a female!" Symbol said, repulsed.

"It is," Lucent said grimly.

"The wasp uses its ovipositor to insert its egg," the announcer said. The phallic-seeming member worked its way into the anus of the pig, slowly but deeply.

"That sure looks like sex to me!"

"Maybe it is, in a way," the Amazon said. "Planting the seed into the host."

"And what kind of a birthing will result?"

"We shall see."

At length the wasp completed its insertion of its eggs and withdrew its tool. It flew away, having no further interest in the pig.

"The hatching of the eggs and development of the grubs take some time," the announcer said. "It is important that the host be healthy, so it will move about and eat for a time. Then, as the grubs develop, consuming the intestine, this becomes impractical and the host will seek a private place to retire." The pig staggered to a small cave and lay down. Then, in fast motion, the progress of the gestation was shown. The pig became shrunken though its belly was swollen. It remained alive, but unable to move. At last the grubs ate their way out of its flesh, emerging from a hole in its side.



"Ugh!"

"I agree," Lucent said. "To be eaten alive, by grubs, helpless—I would much prefer to die outright."

The grubs remained near the pig, finishing the last of its flesh, until only the bones remained. Then they attached themselves to nearby plants and pupated, becoming indistinct blobs. In due course they would emerge as little wasps, and forage until full grown, when the cycle would continue.

Symbol shut off the illusion show as it moved on to other insects. "I think this is it," she said with a shudder.

"And it is seeking one of us to be host to its grubs."

"Me, I think. I have more edible flesh."

"Acquiescence. But mostly, it is that we are for the moment isolated. If we escape to a Chroma, it will seek some other creature."

"So let's escape to a Chroma," Symbol said.

"That would be effective for me. I will shortly be home. But what of your return trip?"

Symbol was stunned. "I must return on schedule! I can't wait for a better time."

"Precisely. You will likely have to travel alone. You will know the route, and once you reach the next Chroma you will have no trouble charming any number of men for free floating. But you will have to sleep here one night—as that other Amazon did."

"Horror!"

"Deal."

"Deal?"

"I have something to do, that your illusion could facilitate. You have a problem traveling. I will help you handle yours if you help me with mine."

Symbol hardly dared hope. "What is your notion?"

"I believe there are few such wasps that go after human beings. For one thing, humans tend to be vengeful, and kill those who predate on them. If we kill this wasp, there is unlikely to be another, and you will travel safely alone, apart from the usual threats for a solitary woman."

"Like rape and robbery," Symbol agreed. "I am much more inclined to risk those than the wasp."

"Even brigands you could probably charm, so they would protect you rather than abuse you."

"I have done it before. But how can we kill the wasp, when it won't approach us awake?"

"We can reverse the ploy and stalk it. I suspect it is not used to being the prey instead of the predator."

"In the dark?"

"By night or day. We may have to stay here another night to get it, but then it will be gone."

"I don't think we can just chase after it," Symbol said. "It can move faster than we can."

"Accuracy. But not faster than an arrow. You will decoy it near the candle while I move out. Thus it will be in light, I in darkness. When it comes to you, I will riddle it with arrows."

"Decoy? I dislike the sound of that."

"Practicality: it will come only to a sleeping person. We must both sleep some time. You will sleep, but instead of guarding you from close, I will guard you from a distance. This should be effective."

"I can't sleep!"

"Confession: I have some sleep dust. On occasion, I use it to pacify men I prefer not to indulge. It will enable you to sleep."

"While the wasp comes!"

"And I lurk with my arrows."

Symbol realized that this made sense. She did need sleep, and this was a viable strategy. "I will never forgive you if you miss the wasp and I host its grubs." She was trying to joke, but it seemed supremely unfunny.

"I will not miss."

Symbol decided to agree before she thought of several dozen reasons not to. "Do it."

"But I have not told the assistance I want from you. You may not wish to do it."

"More than I wish not to be impregnated with grubs?"

Lucent laughed. "Hardly! But it will take a day or so."

"I can spare it, if we handle the wasp."

"Acquiescence. Here is the dust. Make yourself comfortable and sniff it once."

Symbol took the dust in the palm of her hand, lay on her side, and sniffed. She wasn't sure how well it would work, because she remained tense.

She woke at dawn, alone. For a moment she was afraid the Amazon had deserted her, but then

she saw Lucent striding toward her. "No luck," she said regretfully. "The beast must have been aware that I was alert, and remained well clear."

Symbol was almost relieved. "Maybe we should just ride the cart out of here and be done with it."

"And leave the wasp for your return?"

The final argument. "We'd better stay. I can watch while you sleep."

"Appreciation." The Amazon threw herself onto the pallet and was instantly asleep, needing no sleep dust.

Symbol used the toilet trench, and checked the fire. It had been neatly stoked, and more wood was ready beside it; Lucent had obviously been busy during the night. There was also a skinned rat, mounted on a spit, ready for roasting, and the remnant of another beside it; she had been hunting also.

Symbol considered that rat. It wasn't her idea of breakfast, but she was hungry, and she didn't want to turn down something her companion had evidently gone to some trouble to prepare for her. So she picked up the stick and held the rat over the hot embers. Soon the smell of the cooking meat rose from it, and it was good.

She looked around, making sure nothing was attacking the Amazon. Nothing was. Indeed, there mere presence of an alert person seemed to be enough to keep the wasp back; she didn't have to be especially watchful. But she watched anyway.

When the rat seemed done, she nibbled on it, still on the stick, then ate more voraciously. This was much easier than hunting, killing, and gutting the thing; it seemed almost sanitary.

Lucent woke, looked at Symbol, turned over and returned to sleep. Well, she needed it too. Symbol walked around, picking up more sticks of wood for the fire. Meanwhile she wondered how they were going to get the wasp. They did not dare both sleep at once, and it would not come while one was awake, so what was the point remaining here? Somehow that aspect hadn't occurred to her before. Were they merely wasting time? No, surely the Amazon had some notion for the night, and had merely forgotten to mention it.

Around midday Symbol saw something in the distance. She craned her neck and shaded her eyes, and discovered that it was motion on the track ahead. A cart was approaching.

"Lucent," she murmured. "Somebody coming."

The woman woke so fast she seemed to materialize standing, short sword in hand. "Two men—brigands. Bad news."

"Brigands! How can you tell from this distance?"

"They have that look. Scruffy, dirty, mean-faced, nonChroma. Also, I get a faint ugly mind trace."

"What will we do? We can't escape them."

"I can take them, by the look of it, especially if they don't know I'm Amazon. But maybe we should let them be."

"Let them be? They won't let *us* be! I've encountered men like that."

"So have I. That's what I'm counting on. They may be our salvation."

"They'll rape us and rob us and maybe kill us!"

Lucent was already hiding her weapons. "We'd better be two helpless victims. Weak women. I'll follow your lead."

"But that will get is nowhere!"

"It's like this: what's a rough man do after he's had his woman?"

"He sleeps."

"And what's the wasp looking for?"

"A sleeper. But would it take a man?"

"One of them's fat." Lucent was changing her hair, hiding the Amazon helmet.

The light dawned. "I'll do that," Symbol said. She went to work on the Amazon's hair, converting it into a loose sultry display. "But these won't be nice lays."

"They'll be rapes. Then they'll bind us and throw us away for a while, until they get horny again. But eventually they'll sleep. I'm betting that the wasp will know we're helpless, and go after the fattest sleeper. All we have to do is wait for it to happen. Then we'll get out of here, knowing the wasp is done."

"How, when we're bound?"

"Binding can't hold an Amazon long, especially if they don't realize."

Symbol wasn't easy with this, but had nothing better to offer, and if it took care of the wasp, she was game. "Can you cry? If you do that, they'll never suspect."

"I'll try, humiliating as it is."

When the brigands arrived, they found two helpless and rather pretty women. "So nice to meet you," Symbol said. "We're just about to go on our way."

"The hell you are, slut," the fat brigand said, grabbing her arm. Symbol screamed, so he backhanded her. She moved with the blow so that it was glancing, and shut up. He had cowed her.

Meanwhile the other brigand caught hold of Lucent. She tried to shrink away, ineffectively affrighted, but was unable to break his grip. No one would take her for an Amazon, which was of course the point.

"I'm Foul Fettle, and this is my brother Fine Fettle," the fat one said. "We don't care who you are, so just keep your mouths shut and we won't hurt you more than we have to." He hauled Symbol to the pallet, threw her down, and ripped at her clothing. In a moment he had her crotch exposed and was on her, his weight crushing the breath from her as his member rammed home.

Fortunately he was done so quickly that soon she was able to recover her breath, gaspingly. He hauled her off the pallet so his brother could throw Lucent there. Lucent cried convincingly as Fine Fettle had at her, and it was evidently that the man liked that.

Then Foul brought out metal manacles and put them on her wrists and her ankles. She could neither gesture nor walk. This was rather more effective than she cared for, but there was no help for it now. When Fine finished with Lucent, he produced two more sets of manacles and bound her similarly. They then left the ravished girls and scouted the premises, looking for food.

"You can handle this?" Symbol whispered when the men were far enough away.

"I expected cord. This is more of a challenge. But they've got the keys on their bodies; we'll just have to get them. At least they didn't have the sense to shackle our arms behind us."

Symbol looked at her bound hands. "It makes no difference to me. I can't get out of this."

"You don't want to, yet. Not until the wasp comes."

"I hope you know what you're doing!"

"I hope so too."

That was not reassuring. But since there was nothing to be done about it, they lay back and relaxed.

The brigands finished off the remains of the rats, and rifled the women's packs for their stored food. Satisfied that they were in control of the situation, the men did not do a thorough search, so did not find Lucent's small cache of weapons.

In due course, the men returned to the women. This time it was Fine who raped Symbol, and Foul who raped Lucent. Men liked variety when they could get it. These rapes were less urgent, but no less unpleasant. Then they moved the women to the far side of the shelter and manacled them to a stout post. As dusk came, the two men pissed into the trench, not concealing themselves from the gaze of the women at all, and lay down on and beside the pallet. Soon both were snoring.

"Do you think it will come?" Symbol asked.

"Yes. Watch."

And there came the flying creature, the thirty pound wasp. The wingspan was huge, but it made

no sound as it flew in for a landing on the fat brigand. It stung him immediately on the back and took off again, exactly as the one in the illusion show had done with the pig. It flew by the women, and it did seem to know that they were helpless though alert.

Soon it landed again on the brigand. This time it oriented on his posterior and unlimbered its ovipositor. The instrument looked huge, several times the size of a man's erect penis. Clothing proved to be no barrier; the wasp slowly drove the member into the man's rump. It seemed that it hardly mattered whether there was a natural avenue; the instrument would make its own access, once it found its lodging. The insect was using that approach to gain convenient access to the gut without banging into bone. As deflowerings went, this would have been extremely uncomfortable, had the man not been sedated. Even so, he grunted and tried to shift about, but was unable to act effectively or to dislodge the stake that was penetrating his gut from the nether side. It occurred to Symbol that the sting might not have anesthetized the man so much as paralyzed him, so that he could feel the whole of the insertion without being able to resist.

"Lovely," Lucent breathed. "He's getting royally raped. It couldn't happen to a more deserving lout."

Symbol had to agree, though the whole business utterly horrified her.

When the ovipositor was deeply embedded, the tube-like length of it bulged with the eggs coursing through it, perhaps carried by pulses of supportive fluid, going into the man's body. It looked almost exactly like a gross act of sex, making Symbol shudder anew. She was long accustomed to all manner of sexual acts, and unfazed by most, but this one was not only horrible, but special: That, but for Lucent's help, might have been her own fate.

"Is the wasp having an orgasm?" Lucent asked rhetorically. She really seemed to be enjoying this.

Indeed, the insect was quivering as if in the throes of some tremendous release. What was it that made such a creature bear the risk and awkwardness of such an act, if not overwhelming pleasure in the performance? Just as was the case with human men, who resorted to any persuasion, subterfuge, or violence to get their little stickers into the body of any available woman? It certainly wasn't much reasoning concern for the future of the species.

The act of injection seemed to take forever, but in due course the wasp withdrew the spent bloodstained ovipositor and folded it back into its body. Then it flew away, leaving the man to writhe while recovering from the sting, if not the rape. That was all there was to it—for now.

"And the worst is only beginning," Symbol murmured. "Those grubs in there—"

"And you bet he won't be able to crap them out."

"Ugh!"

"Let's get going," Lucent whispered.

"How?"

"This post is set in a fixed hole, loosely. I'll lift; you pass your hands under."

Surprised, Symbol discovered it was so. The roof was slight, and the post less solid than it seemed. The Amazon braced herself against it and heaved, and it came up. She lifted the base clear of the ground, and Symbol got her chain under it. Then she held it in place while Lucent did the same. Then they set the post back in its hole. They remained manacled, but were at least free to move.

"Now we get to Foul Fettle, before he recovers consciousness, and get his key," Lucent said.

They made their way across. Symbol glanced nervously at Fine Fettle, but the man continued snoring obliviously. They reached Foul, and Lucent quickly searched his pockets, coming up in due course with the key. They used it to unlock their manacles. Then, in an act of inspiration, they put the manacles back around the post, locked, and returned the key to the man's pocket. Let them figure out that escape!

"Actually it would be as easy to kill them," Symbol said. "Now that the wasp has been nullified."

"No. Killing without need is wasteful, and might get us in trouble. Also, they raped us, twice. They deserve to suffer. This will make them suffer."

Symbol realized that the Amazon was correct. Foul Fettle would suffer worse than any human agency could have arranged, and Fine Fettle would suffer as he saw his brother dying of a mysterious ailment that finally erupted in sheer horror. What could be better than leaving the brigands to their awful fate, while the women's hands remained technically clean?

Quietly they fetched their things, went to their cart, and pushed it away from the station. It was dark, but they were not about to wait for the dawn. They needed to get well away from here. As it happened, the station was low in the valley, so they had to push the cart all the way up the slope, a long walk. Symbol did not mind; this was slow enough to be safe in the darkness.

When they reached the top of the ridge, they stopped. "We'll hear them coming, if they try to follow—which I doubt they will," Lucent said. "We can readily escape just by riding down the other side. Let's wait here until light."

"Agreement." Symbol was far more tired than she cared to admit, considering that Lucent had done all of the pushing.

The Amazon blocked the wheels of the cart so that it would not roll in either direction. "Sleep if you wish; I'll watch."

Symbol relaxed and did sleep for a time, but woke before dawn. "Your turn to sleep," she said blearily.

"Acquiescence." Lucent got into the cart and was instantly asleep.

She woke at dawn. "Let's move," she said. "We're out of food, but can get it in the Chroma zone." She got out and unblocked the wheels. She gave the cart a push and jumped in. They were on their way.

The rest of the trip was routine. They rode and pushed, rode and pushed, and nothing stalked them. Symbol's relief expanded as time passed. But she remembered that dealing with the wasp was only part of their deal; now she needed to help her companion achieve her desire.

"What is it you wish of me?" she asked during one of the walks.

"It's a fair story."

"This is the time for it."

Lucent told her story. Her real name was Choice, though she had long since given it up. She had been married for fifteen years and was raising four children. She returned one day from a trip to the market to discover that her key to her house did not work. Bemused by this inexplicable failure, she searched out the spare key hidden beneath a flowerpot and used that. But as she entered, the family's pet dog growled at her, baring his teeth. Astonished, she spoke to him. "What's the matter, Chomp?"

The dog backed away on his six stubby legs, snarling. She saw in his mind that he did not recognize her. How could that be?

She took her bag of groceries to the kitchen and began putting them away. Then her youngest child appeared. This was Chip, a lad of eight years, cheerful though not especially smart. That was not her fault; he was their fourth, adopted.

"Chip, do you know what's with Chomp?" she asked. "He's acting strange."

"Who are you?" Chip demanded.

Was he joking? "Suddenly you don't recognize your own mother?"

"You're not my mother!"

What was going on here? For she saw in the boy's mind that he honestly did not recognize her. This was very curious. "After spending your whole life in this household, suddenly you decide I'm not your mother?"

"Mom's dead!"

Lucent laughed. "Oh, I'm not dead yet, as you can see."

"Get out of here, spook!" he screamed.

This was odd indeed. How could the boy—and the dog—suddenly not know her? "I think I had better talk to your father," Lucent said.

"Dad's not home yet," Chip said. "That's why the door's locked. How'd you get in?"

And her key had not worked. Something was very strange. "You get back to your homework," she said. "I'll talk with Champ in due course."



Grudgingly the boy yielded. Lucent (Choice) finished her job in the kitchen, then sat down, pondering, disturbed by the wrongness of the situation. Surely there was some reasonable explanation, and she depended on her husband Champ to have it.

When Champ came home, she went to the door to greet him. "Dear, there is something very—" She broke off, for he was staring at her.

"Who are you?" he asked, much as Chip had.

"Objection!" she retorted. "This is beyond all reason. I am Choice, your wife of fifteen years, mother of three of your children. How can you have forgotten?"

"Choice died three years ago," he said. "I appreciate neither this intrusion nor this charade. What are you doing in my house?"

"Read my mind," she said, amazed and hurt by his attitude.

He did. "Wonder. You actually believe it!"

"Of course I believe it! Why don't you?"

Champ came to a decision. "Something is seriously amiss. We must work this out. Read *my* mind."

She did—and found the memory of the loss of his wife, and his lingering grief thereof. He was sincere: Lucent was no part of his life. "Confusion! We can't both be correct."

"Shall we ask the neighbors?"

"Negation. I have already been unrecognized by my son and my dog. It seems that I am the one who is out of place."

"Suspicion: could some other party have sent you, to provide me with a replacement wife? Thinking to do me a favor I do not seek?"

"You are a good man, Champ. I appreciate your loyalty to the one you remember. You deserve a good wife. But not in such manner. I must discover how the memory of your household came to be mine."

"Endorsement. I will take you to the mind center."

The mind center gave her excellent treatment. In the course of it she discovered that her fifteen year memories were indeed suspect; there were many details she should have known but did not, such as the experience of her honeymoon with Champ or the early illnesses of her children. She was satisfied that she had never been part of this family.

But what then was her real identity? It seemed that her real memories had been erased, and could not be recovered. She was lost, and had to forge a new identity. She had a good fit body, so undertook Amazon training, acting as a courier and escort to other Chroma, for she had some

legitimate memories of those and felt more comfortable away from her own Translucent Chroma. For three years she did well enough. But the mystery of her prior life nagged her.

Finally she decided on another approach: research. The Amazon station had a good library of identities. She searched through them, seeking women of her age and description. There were a number, in fact too many to give her much purchase; she needed some way to narrow it down to a few.

Then she had a bright if far-fetched idea. Her name: that went right back to her forgotten childhood. She *knew* it was her own. How many women named Choice were there?

There turned out to be a score. But some were too old, others too young. How many were in the 33-38 year old range that described her? Only five, and one had died six years before. That was Champ's wife, three years dead when Lucent entered his house. That left four. Three were solidly married family women. One had disappeared three years ago. That would be her.

She researched further, and verified her identity: Choice, 33 when she vanished. Her husband Chore had had her declared dead or deserted and promptly remarried a rather younger woman the children disliked. Her name was *Flagrante Delicto*, which fit her nature perfectly. But the children had no choice and made the best of it. What the woman lacked in character she made up in sex appeal; she had a remarkable figure, and nymphomaniac tendencies. Chore seemed to be quite satisfied.

In fact, they had had a relationship for several years before the event. What Choice had taken for the natural cooling of male ardor of middle age turned out to be the diversion of his sexual energy to the ever-grinding belly of *Flagrante*. How could she have missed it? It seemed that Choice had so trusted her husband that she had never even peeked into his mind. *Naïveté!*

However, now she lay in ambush along his route and did peek, specifically on his sexual life. What she read revolted her; the man had perverted tendencies which it seemed he had concealed from her, but that the other woman obliged in full measure. In fact she reveled in it. No wonder Choice had stayed clear of that; any normal woman would. But it seemed that the lure of that other type of experience finally caused him to plot to abolish his legitimate wife so he could take in the other. Since Choice had given him no pretext, he had cheated by having her secretly mind wiped and given the recent memories of her dead namesake. Thus she had gone to the wrong house, and made an ass of herself. While the real culprit escaped.

Now she knew what had happened, and why. She no longer remembered her true family life; that had been obliterated by the mind wash. Certainly she no longer loved her former husband. She no longer had legitimate identity; she was legally dead. Worse, after three years she would be unable to prove any of it. Chore had gotten away with it. That irked her something awful.

Actually she had a tolerably good life now, as an Amazon. She met interesting people, and was somewhat more liberal sexually than she had been before. In fact, this most recent trip had liberalized her rather more than she liked. So there was no reason to want to return to what she had once had. But the irk remained. She did not like letting Chore get away with ruining her life. She wanted vengeance.

"And that is what you can do for me," Lucent continued. "With your powers of illusion. You can enable me to do it back to the bad man, at least to some degree. To give him a taste of his own

potion."

"That I can do," Symbol agreed. She found Flagrate rather interesting, by the description; the creature had sexual notions Symbol had hardly thought of. But the way she had encouraged a married man to betray his long-term wife was a shame, and of course Symbol owed Lucent for finding their way past the wasp.

They set about planning it, as they completed the cart trip to the Translucent Chroma zone. They did not have a lot of time, but much could be done briefly with the right illusion. First they would arrange some hints of impropriety; then they would get blatant. Chore and Flagrate were finished, though they did not yet know it.

They reached the Chroma zone midday, for they had traveled part of the way by night. Everything was translucent, of course, with no colors: colorless monochrome. They went to Chore's house. Chore was away at work at this hour, but the woman and one child should be home.

Symbol doffed her clothing, becoming virtually invisible physically, and damped down her thoughts, becoming invisible mentally. Lucent hid outside while Symbol quietly entered the shimmering water walls of the house. There was the youngest boy, exactly as anticipated, studying from a water-paper text. He was totally bored; Symbol was no mind reader, but didn't need to be to see it in his attitude. He was about thirteen.

Symbol checked through the house, familiarizing herself with it. Then she emerged and located Lucent, who was in a shed, damping down her own thoughts. With all members of a Chroma zone able to read minds, naturally they knew how to suppress their thoughts, so as not to be constantly clamoring to others. Symbol was unusual in having learned this art without being either Translucent or a mind reader; Havoc had helped her there. Ah, Havoc—he had conquered her. But this was not the time to ponder that.

She whispered the situation to Lucent.

"That's Chum, my youngest—my fourth. A good kid, but impatient, though now I know him only by research."

"Problem: what we have in mind for Chore and Flagrate may be unsuitable for Chum to witness."

"He is bound to go to the park once Flagrate comes home, and not return until after Chore does. He doesn't like her. There should not be a problem."

"So we'll wait a bit, then catch Chore and Flagrate alone. Chum has no need to see the illusion."

"Acquiescence."

Soon the woman arrived. Symbol followed her into the house, invisibly.

The boy approached the woman immediately. "I've read it. Can I go now?"

"You know better than that," Flagrante said. "First you do your duty by me; *then* you go."

"Awwww." But he reluctantly approached her.

Then Symbol's mind control almost slipped. The woman was not checking the boy for dirt behind the ears, she was opening his clothing. Under her direction he was also opening hers. She took out his member and manipulated it into hardness. Chum was obviously ill at ease about this, but afraid to resist her imperative.

"I can't do it," he mumbled. Indeed, his member was not fully firm.

"Then open your mind to mine. Closed channel; no one else must read."

"Awwww."

"Or else."

He sighed, and evidently let her into his mind. Flagrante concentrated, and in a moment the boy flushed and his member became fully erect. Whatever she was thinking at him was ugly but brutally effective.

Then she made him lie on the couch, and she lay on top of him, taking him in. He did not need to thrust, nor did she allow it; she controlled the motions, and drew from him in precisely the manner she chose. When she was ready, she finished it, forcing his climax. But she did not let him go yet; she remained on him a while longer, savoring it, while he squirmed uncomfortably. Then at last she kissed him and got off, letting him up. "You're a good boy," she said. "Now you can go. But remember, this never happened."

"It always never happens," he said, putting himself back together. "If Dad knew—"

"He would throw you out."

By his reaction, it was clear she was right. Chum went out, leaving Flagrante to clean up.

Awed by the blatant nature of it, Symbol followed him out, then turned to go to Lucent. "It's worse than you thought," she said. "She's forcing the boy into incestuous sex."

"She's *what*?"

"Apparently her filthy passions are not satisfied by her husband. My guess is that she has a number of sex stations, taking it where she finds it, including home."

"The utter bitch!"

"You knew that already."

"My son!"

"He didn't want to do it, but she used threats and dirty thoughts to incite him, then more or less

raped him. I watched it all."

"I'll slaughter her!"

"Negation," Symbol cautioned her. "This is like the wasp. We don't need to frame Chore after all, just to reveal to him what she is into. That will torture him sufficiently."

Lucent considered. "Perhaps you are right. But the idea of having my boy hostage to that—!"

"Justified outrage," Symbol agreed. "Now let's handle it."

When Chore came home, Flagrante met him at the door with an open-bosomed hug. "Wait till you see what I have planned for tonight," she breathed.

He looked around. "Where's Chum?"

"He left for the park, as usual. We'll be done before he returns, as usual."

He entered the living room. There on the couch were two items of apparel: a boy's undershorts. "What's this?" Chore asked, surprised.

Flagrante was just as surprised. "He must have left them there. He usually cleans up." She quickly picked up the shorts. Under them was a pair of woman's panties.

"And this?" Chore demanded, grabbing the panties. They were somewhat damp, as were the shorts. Symbol had taken pains to wet both down before leaving them, after collecting them from their proper drawers.

"Maybe some laundry spilled, and I didn't notice."

Chore held out the panties, which were stained a darker translucent in the crotch. "Some laundry!"

"I'll be more careful in the future," Flagrante said, snatching the panties and taking them away.

"Of course." He let it go, but the seed of doubt had been planted. How could Chum's shorts and her panties have gotten there in such condition?

Now they prepared for serious sex. But as he looked at her, Chore saw what appeared to be something sticky in her hair. There seemed to be a tear in her skirt. And stains on her bra. "Suspicion!"

"Denial!" she flared back.

The ensuing argument ruined their planned tryst. By the time the dust settled, Chum was coming home. With apparent stains on the front of his trousers.

Symbol and Lucent called it a night. They retired to the Amazon's quarters for a good meal and sleep.

"What do you think will happen when he finds her bra in the boy's bed, and his undershirt under her pillow?" Symbol asked rhetorically. "Plus the other little hints scattered around the house?"

"He'll collar Chum and make him confess," Lucent said. "And Chum will be halfway glad to finger Flagrante."

"Then Chore will require her to open her mind to him," Symbol said. "And that will reveal more than merely the boy, I suspect."

"There must be a long line of men in her mind. What a hussy she is! And he thought it was all for him, when all she wanted was a safe base to operate from."

"And the best of it is that it's true," Symbol said. "The illusion and planted things only point the way. That relationship is finished."

"And they'll never know how it happened," Lucent said. "I'm sorry my boy has to be involved, but it will be better than it was for him."

Indeed, the job was done. "I will check with you on my way back. If more is needed, I will do it."

"Satisfaction." Then the Amazon reconsidered. "If you are approaching the cone, you will need help. I will go with you."

"But your obligation is done. You got me safely here."

"This is voluntary. You helped me arrive back early, and have been a worthwhile companion. I can do this much to facilitate your mission, as a gesture of friendship."

"Gratitude," Symbol said, feeling an unfamiliar rush of emotion. She was not much used to friendship, having been hard nosed most of her life.

They set out for the cone. This was a huge translucent mass that looked liquid, though it was not. It was an earthen rather than a water volcano, and its emissions were solids and gases. But because of its nature, it looked wet.

"Warning," Lucent said. "The cone defends itself with mind effects. It is seldom physically threatening, but can be quite uncomfortable to approach."

"This seems similar to illusion."

"Perhaps. But it is feeling rather than appearance. If you are not accustomed to it, you will find it difficult."

"I have no choice. There is something I must fetch."

"Understanding. Just be prepared. If you feel fear, it will not signal cowardice, but cone-demon-generated emotion. You must ignore it to the extent you can, or at least not be governed by it."

The cone was not far from the town. Soon the translucent forest thinned and they mounted the broad slope of the base. They were close to the coordinates.

Then the emotion came. Symbol felt enormous revulsion. She wanted to turn away from the disgusting scene and get far away, as quickly as possible. But the forewarning had indeed forearmed her, and she girded her loin, as it were, and marched on.

"First siege," the Amazon murmured.

"I can handle it because I must." But her stomach was roiling.

"Keep walking." The Amazon looked somewhat green herself, but did not pause. "Faster we go, faster we get through it."

"Acquiesc—" But Symbol couldn't get the whole word out, because it seemed to facilitate her gag reflex. "Right."

They forged on. It was like wading through muddy diseased excrement. There was no sight or smell, fortunately, but the feeling remained.

Then her stomach erupted. She tried to keep her mouth closed, but the vomit surged up through her nose, and she had to let it out. She spewed what remained of her last meal onto the ground, and continued heaving until the heavens were dry. "P-Pology," she gasped.

Lucent didn't answer, and in a moment Symbol understood why: she dared not open her mouth. As an Amazon she had good control of her emotions, but this emotion was there regardless, generated directly in her mind. Her disgust was as deep as Lucent's.

Then at last it passed. Symbol fetched out a handkerchief and wiped her soiled mouth. She had never before reacted to revulsion that strongly—but of course she had never felt it that strongly. As defenses went, this was a good one; had her presence here been incidental, she would have gotten away from it at the first twinge.

"Brace for second siege," Lucent said tightly.

"Braced," Symbol agreed as tightly. She knew now what she faced, and know it would not be faintly comfortable. But she had made it through the first siege, even if her breakfast hadn't.

It came. Suddenly she was afraid. In fact she was terrified. There wasn't anything in sight to be afraid of; it was ordinary Translucent zone terrain. But her fear was overwhelming.

She started to turn, to flee. A hand caught her arm. "Do not yield," Lucent said. Her eyes were wild, and she spoke through clenched teeth, and her hand was shaking; she was afraid too. But she had the courage to brave it.

Symbol gathered all the nerve she had and forced herself to turn back toward the cone. She stepped forward. She screamed, for no reason other than sheer terror. But she would not be shamed before the Amazon; she staggered onward.

It was like walking a tightrope across a bottomless gorge; every step panicked her anew. She thought she was going to faint, but the grip of the Amazon on her elbow kept her steady, and she advanced toward the cone. Somehow.

At last it abated, and Symbol was able to step screaming. She saw her hair flaring wildly about her head; she had been struggling violently with herself. But she had made it.

"You are doing well," Lucent said. "Even natives seldom come this far toward the cone."

"How—how many sieges are there?"

"Tradition says five, but not necessarily the same ones, so it's hard to prepare for them. A person needs very good reason to visit the cone."

"I have reason." She was doing it for Havoc. She would do anything for Havoc. Even this.

"Brace."

Symbol nodded. Then it struck: she became angry, then enraged. She had never been so furious before in her life. She wanted to strike out, to maim, to kill.

And there was the Amazon. Symbol dived for her.

"Negative," Lucent said.

But Symbol could not help herself. She attacked the Amazon with claws and teeth.

Then she found herself choking. Lucent had caught her in a hold that rendered her helpless and was dragging her on toward the cone. When she struggled, the hold tightened, cutting off her breath, forcing her to desist.

She fought, and choked, and struggled, and gasped, and resisted, and nearly lost consciousness. She could not get free. Meanwhile she was being hauled relentlessly onward. If only she could get her hands on Lucent's throat!

Then it eased. The Amazon let her sink to the ground, her breath rasping. "Apology," Lucent said.

"Accepted!" For she understood the reason; Lucent had felt the rage also, but had controlled herself and Symbol, nullifying her rather than hurting her, and getting her through the siege. It was probably the only way.

"We can turn back," Lucent said. It was an offer.

"Negative. I must reach the site."

"Then on. Brace."

They braced. This time the emotion was different. It was warm and encompassing, a pleasure. In



fact, it was love.

The Amazon turned to her. "Mischief," she said. Then she grasped Symbol and drew her in close.

Love—and sex. They were not identical, but were allied, and this siege of emotion was somewhere in that region. Sexual love. Symbol had had wide experience with it, and was rather cynical about it; in fact she had never let herself go completely, until she had fallen for Havoc. The one person she could never possess. But now, suddenly, she wanted to love her companion—and Lucent wanted the same.

Symbol considered rapidly. This was her area of expertise. Lucent had stopped her from hurting herself or her companion when the rage was on them; now it was Symbol's turn to control this other passion. But she couldn't, because it was not limited to herself. The Amazon wanted to love her, and she was physically stronger than Symbol. Already Lucent was kissing her, seeking further closeness. The woman had little experience of this kind of love, as her married history had shown; she was highly vulnerable to it. She had hold of Symbol, and Symbol could not escape. Nor did she want to. What was there to do?

Well, love could be eternal, but sex tended to abate when exercised. Woman to woman was not normally Symbol's style, but she could do it when she had to. If that enabled them to make it through this siege, why not?

She released her passion, and kissed Lucent back. They clasped each other, and soon were into serious lovemaking. They rolled on the ground, embracing, stroking, squeezing, licking, bypassing clothing, overcome by the passion of the siege. And when the culmination came, they lay for a moment, savoring it.

"Better than a man," Lucent whispered.

"Better than those brigands, certainly," Symbol replied. "Now we must get up and run out of here before it gets us again." For this was their window of opportunity, their spent bodies temporarily nullifying the overlaid passion.

They did so, and in a moment were in the next respite. "What did we do?" Lucent demanded, suddenly appalled.

"We abated the feeling," Symbol said. "The way it had to be done."

"I never did that before!"

"And never will again. Desperate situations require desperate remedies."

"Perhaps," the Amazon agreed dubiously.

"You hauled me through when I was overcome by the rage siege. You know how to handle anger. I know how to handle sexual passion. I did what was necessary." She was taking the blame on herself, if that was what it was.

"Revulsion."

Symbol didn't care to argue the case further. "Brace," she said, stepping forward.

Lucent hastened to join her. In a moment the next siege was upon them, and it differed from the others, but Symbol had trouble defining it. She wasn't disgusted or fearful or angry or passionate. Instead she felt an enormous wonder and joy. It was like love, but without sexuality or jealousy or possessiveness.

Lucent gazed at the apex of the cone looming almost above them. "My Lord!" she cried, stretching out her arms toward it.

Then Symbol recognized the emotion. It was agape, the selfless love of a person for her god. That was harmless, she thought. So she gave herself up to it, letting the revelation infuse her being.

They walked together toward the cone, lost in admiration for the source of Translucent magic. There seemed to be a halo of light around it, radiating delight. All seemed lovely beyond description.

And they were out of it. The emotion faded. "Observation," Symbol said. "The cone doesn't care whether we adore it. We are mere bugs to it."

Lucent nodded. "But what a feeling! Is that how it is with the priests of the Chroma temples?"

"I wouldn't know, but it seems reasonable. It was divine while it lasted. I never before felt so *clean*."

"Endorsement."

They were now on the cone itself. There was a scintillating cave in sight. They walked to it, and entered it. There were no further sieges; it seemed that the cone or its attendant demons did not care for such effects within its own substance. But the seeming scintillation of intense magic remained; there was awesome power here, regardless of agape.

There was a squat altar within a chamber of the cave. It had eighteen buttons on the top. Symbol took hold of a button, and found it was a handle for a lid. She lifted the lid and found a small chamber beneath. It looked and felt empty. She tried the second, and the third. Empty. In the tenth she found a small translucent statuette of a fish. She considered putting it in a pocket, but wanted to be sure not to lose it, so she put it in her mouth. That was the standard way to carry a small but vital object.

"I have it," she reported.

"What is it? I mean, what is it for?"

"I have no idea. Maybe it's an amulet of some sort. One of seven ikons Havoc needs to accomplish his purpose."

"Then it must be time to return."

"Time to return," Symbol agreed. She dreaded parts of the trip she would have to make alone,

but looked forward to delivering the ikon to Havoc. He would be pleased, and she wanted to please him. She could not marry him, but at least she could love him, and bring him this bit of satisfaction. That was almost the whole of her reason for existence, now.

"I will go with you," Lucent said.

"But your home is here," Symbol protested, surprised.

"Not any more, I think. Folk may not catch on to my part in my ex-husband's dismay, but even so, why should I remain? I can readily enough find work elsewhere."

"Surely so," Symbol said. "But you have more than done your part in our association. I would not have you inconvenience yourself for me."

"I do it for myself, and for friendship." She paused. "Truth: are we now friends?"

"We are friends," Symbol agreed. "We started as no fault companions, but too much has occurred to leave that indifference viable."

"Agreement. Besides, you surely have other illusion shows I would like to see."

"I do," Symbol agreed, relieved. She would not after all have to travel home alone. And she did like Lucent, who had proved to be a far more competent companion than expected.

## Chapter 5—Dancer

Havoc and Stevia arrived back at Triumph City on schedule, their mission successful. But they were not completely satisfied. The blue merfolk had so thoroughly exhausted them sexually that they had not touched each other in the return trip. Not even to Flirt, to Peek, or to Kiss. They had agreed to become sexual, but had not made the slightest gesture thereof. Only on the last day were they beginning to recover faint sexual interest—too late.

"I had in mind doing you," Stevia said candidly. "Especially considering your handsome nature and your royal position. I feel you owe me some sleepless nights."

"Agreement. You traveled well no fault, on little notice, and became intriguing. I will have another item to fetch; will you travel with me again?"

"I would like to, but am worn down. I want to retire for several days, seeing no one. I believe you will have a third mission soon; can we make it that one?"

"Agreement." Havoc wouldn't have minded resting a few days himself, but he was on the Red Glamor's mission, and had to stay on it until all the ikons had been fetched. He wished he knew the purpose of the ikons, but could not doubt the validity of the mission.

They separated once they were in the city proper, and Havoc went up to the palace. There was his oath friend and secretary Ennui, flinging herself into his embrace at the palace entrance. "I felt you

coming, Havoc!" she exclaimed. "I missed you."

"I never thought of you," he said honestly. "But now I realize I missed you too. You keep me in order." Their acquaintance had been chance, their oath convenience, but now he needed her in his life. "What of Throe?"

"He hasn't returned. You are the first one back. How was it?"

"First time in my life I had more sex than I wanted."

She laughed. "With Throe, it's the first time in my life I really wanted any of that."

"Love does that," he agreed. "I just want to rest and clear my mind until the others return. Is there anything else that demands my attention first?"

"Havoc, you weren't even missed. Berm and Spanky have things under control. The bureaucracy pretty much runs itself. Meanwhile the Lady Aspect has a private bath and bed set up for you."

"Lead me to her." Havoc did not want to take over from the couple emulating him and Gale; it would be easier to complete the missions before resuming his role as king.

The Lady Aspect appeared. "Havoc! May I?" Seeing his acquiescence, she approached and kissed him on the mouth. She was not in love with him, but she cared for him somewhat in the manner of a mother for a son. Then she led him to her own suite, and to a fine hot bath there.

"What, no bath girls?" he asked in mock surprise.

"They must tend to the emulation king. I will tend you myself." She began to remove his clothing.

"Lady, this is beneath you," he protested. "I did not make you a bath girl. You are the former queen, and widow of King Deal."

She shook her head. "Today all that I am is by your courtesy. Bijou will join you in bed when she gets free. Meanwhile, let me help you in the way I am able."

He yielded. "If this is your true desire."

"Confirmation, Havoc." She stripped him, let him get into the bath, then took a cloth and washed him as he soaked. His nakedness had no meaning for her. Her touch was careful and competent. "When my husband died, I thought I would disappear into my grief. The idea of a barbarian stripling assuming his place as king annoyed me. But you, Havoc, are something else, and not just because you treated me courteously and generously. You could have banished me, or made a mistress of me, or a bath girl or garbage woman; instead you granted me continuing status. It is hard for me to convey to you my gratitude for that. But it is more. In my fashion, I cherish you."

"I feel that feeling, and value it. Lady, I trust you."

"You may do so with safety. I will never betray your interest. But it is still more than that. You

are much like Deal."

"I am another changeling," he said. "It seems we have a strong family resemblance."

"You do, and so do the changeling women. Gale could readily emulate Symbol, if she chose. It is more than appearance; all of you have similar powers of intellect and conscience, though Symbol curbed hers. She is nevertheless a remarkable woman."

"I never have quite gotten used to the idea of you being friends with your husband's mistress."

"You are from the village culture. This is the royal culture. I was born understanding it, though I was not royal as a child."

"And you are my guide to it. Enlisting your service was one of my smarter moves."

"And you are very smart," she agreed.

"It is just common sense to seek the advice of knowledgeable people."

"Kings are seldom known for common sense." She inspected his body. "You're clean; get up."

He stood, and she toweled him off, then put him into a nightgown. "I will bring you some food."

"If you eat with me, Lady."

She smiled. "You probably don't appreciate how naïvely endearing that is."

"Lady, I like your company. I feel socially safe." Just as he felt personally safe with Ennui. Lady Aspect made sure he never seriously violated royal etiquette unless he intended to, and Ennui saw that he never ruffled the feelings of subordinates unless he meant to. As a recent village boy he needed both types of guidance.

She caught his hand and squeezed it. This gesture, for her, had more meaning than the full sexual act had for some. Then she brought him to a table and served him a small wholesome meal, the kind a mother encouraged a child to eat. She did eat with him, demonstrating the nuances of court dining etiquette. He emulated her, zeroing in on them, in this manner refining his minor graces. What he had said was true: she made him feel apt without embarrassing him. He really was a barbarian when it came to manners, but he was learning.

Bijou arrived. "Havoc!" she cried, flinging herself onto his lap and kissing him. She was barely seventeen, with brown curly hair and very fine features and form. She had emulated Gale, when Gale needed to go on a secret mission, and they had traveled no fault. He liked her very well.

"I think it is time for bed," the Lady Aspect remarked. "Brush your teeth first." She stood and cleared the table, warning Bijou off with the merest glance. Ordinarily a bath girl would never stand aside while a Lady did household chores, but they had other roles to play.

Havoc did brush his teeth. The directive had been less for his health than to ensure that he was fully appealing for a mistress, another civilized nuance. Soon he found himself naked in bed with Bijou.

"How do you want me?" she asked eagerly.

"I wish I had the Lady Aspect's gift of expression."

"Straight-out barbarian will do."

"I had to have the help of a blue mermaid, a guirl. She—"

"Oh, no! You're not yet recovered."

"Not quite yet," he agreed.

"I understand it's like rape. It takes time to be able to face sex again."

"It takes time," he agreed. "I think in two or three more days—"

"You'll be gone again tomorrow."

"Agreement."

"So I can't have you, this time."

"Bijou, I like you, and want you to be satisfied. I will make the effort if you wish."

"Confession: it is not mere sex that attracts me to you, Havoc. I can take it or leave it. It's the closeness. Is it all right if I—"

"Granted."

She rolled onto him, spreading her bare body the length of his. She kissed him passionately. She moved against him, and set his hands on key portions of her flesh. "I love you, Havoc," she whispered into his ear.

"If I were not committed elsewhere—"

"I know, I know. And I'd marry you in an instant, and not because you are King. But it is not to be. Now I will let you sleep."

"Talk to me instead."

"Gladly!" She shifted position, lying beside him and drawing his head into her resilient bosom. "Tell me all about your trip. Is it true you traveled with a Gray Chroma woman?"

"Stevia." He went on to tell her all about the trip. It relaxed him to tell someone. But before he finished, he fell asleep, lulled by her steady heartbeat.

He woke to find his face still cushioned by her bare breasts, her arms holding his head there. He was about to protest that this could not be comfortable for her, but lapsed back into sleep before getting the words out. It was her business to ensure his comfort in bed, and she would have been hurt

if he had not allowed her to do that.

In the morning he knew she was asleep, for his head had slid off her bosom and not been replaced. He considered a moment, then carefully put his head back against her breasts, and stirred as if waking. She woke, not realizing that she had ever let him loose. That was the kind of spot courtesy Ennui had taught him. It had certainly been a pleasant pillow.

The Lady Aspect appeared. "Gale has returned."

Havoc almost leaped out of the bed. The Lady Aspect held out a robe for him to step into, otherwise ignoring his nakedness. "Patience, Havoc! There is something you should know. Bijou will get you groomed while I explain."

While Bijou, still naked, washed his face, combed his hair and straightened out his details, the Lady Aspect explained: "Gale traveled no fault with a husky but shy cartographer named Dour. She educated him sexually. Then he learned who she is. That appalled him. She had posed as a village girl. So it may be awkward when you meet him."

"She brought him here?"

"It seems that her dragon seed guided her to do that. In addition, she traveled with a baby caravan, and made a no fault baby adoption. A magic amulet enabled her to nurse it. Such temporary bonding is meaningful to a woman, and no more forgotten than is a brief sexual conquest for a man, despite the no fault rule. So if she mentions this, you must take it in stride." She paused, delivering a firm glance. "In no event should you condemn or belittle this. Ignorant male sympathy is in order."

Havoc realized that Gale had had experiences equivalent to his own, that would have left their marks on her. "How should I handle this encounter with the cartographer?"

"Formally. Keep Bijou by your side, garbed for sexual appeal. Evince no jealousy of the cartographer; he feels awkward enough as it is. Make no unkind remarks about babies; he helped her care for it."

"I wish I could just take Gale home to Trifle Village and marry her."

"She wishes the same. But you know you can not. So take advantage of the situation to keep your distance from each other."

Havoc was caught unaware by emotion. "Expletive! Frustration! Desperation!"

Then the Lady was holding him comfortingly, while Bijou stood helplessly aside, then went to dress herself. "Understanding, dear." That was literal; she understood his situation and feelings, and did not condemn either. She would not gossip about his weakness, either. After a moment she wiped away his angry tears. "It was never destined to be easy, being king."

"Resignation," he agreed grimly.

Bijou rejoined them, dressed like a courtesan, showing much breast. It was no effort for her to appear as his mistress; she loved both the appearance and the reality.

Ennui appeared. "I see the Lady has prepared you for the meeting. Go to the second interview chamber."

"I envy the Lady," Bijou murmured as they went to the meeting chamber. "She can comfort you in a way I can't."

"I need both kinds," he said, pausing to kiss her.

She melted. "Oh, Havoc!"

They met Gale and Cartographer Dour as if they were so many formal acquaintances. But before they could feel really awkward, Symbol arrived with an Amazon woman in tow. That broke it up into separate introductions and explanations.

"Lucent decided not to remain in her zone," Symbol said. "I told her there might be something here for her. The truth is, I didn't want to pass through wasp territory alone."

"Wasp?" Gale asked.

"An insectoid predator," the cartographer explained. "Normally it preys on animals, but on occasion it fixes on a human being. This is extremely ugly."

"You know about it!" the Amazon said.

"Affirmation. I would not care to travel alone in such a situation."

As Havoc heard about the wasp, he had to agree. He realized that there were horrors in Charm he had not yet dreamed of.

Then Throe arrived, with three invisible Air Chroma women. Ennui greeted him passionately, then eyed the heavily clothed trio. At least two of them were quite shapely under their wrappings. "No fault?" she inquired with a bit of an edge.

Throe looked embarrassed. "It's complicated to explain."

"I suspect it is."

"You must be Ennui," one of the three said. "The woman Throe loves. You're so lucky!"

That alleviated the tension somewhat. "He's a great lover," another said, and the other two nodded. That brought it back.

The third looked at Gale. "She looks like Ino," she murmured. "A changeling."

"Who is Ino?" Gale asked sharply.

"Our little sister, courtesy of the Temple. She got our man."

There did indeed seem to be more of a story there. But this was not the time for it. Havoc got



down to business. "All missions were successful?"

In a moment he had a red statuette of a nude woman, an invisible millipede, and a translucent fish to add to his blue insect. Four down; three to go. It might make sense to send three parties out for them, but he had picked up enough of the complications already suffered to conclude that it would be safer to double up for the rest. "We'll go after two more now, as the Red Glamor directed," he said. "Then we'll see about the last. We can dispense with traveling companions from outside, if we do it from this group. Who wants to travel with me?"

"I do," Gale said.

"And we'd never come back here."

She nodded, as desperate for him as he was for her. "You'd better go with Symbol."

"Denial!" Symbol said. "Send me with a man this time."

"But you can't go with Throe, because—"

"So I'll go with you."

Gale, surprisingly, nodded. "I'll go with Throe. I won't run off with him." There was a ripple of somewhat strained laughter.

Havoc glanced at Gale. She knew as well as he did that the question of no fault would come up, and Symbol loved him. If she was barred from traveling with Throe, because they had been sexual before he committed to Ennui, then what of this? Then he realized that Gale was deliberately letting Symbol have at him, while she protected Throe from further Invisible depredations. She was doing it as a favor to Ennui.

"Ennui, see to the welfare of our visitors," Havoc said. "Symbol, draw coordinates. Throe, draw. We'll meet here again in another week. Swale will check the parties, as before, in case we need to coordinate."

They drew coordinates, then headed out again. "You really wanted to travel with me?" Havoc asked Symbol. She had to have had more reason than personal desire.

"I love you of course, and want to be with you. But it also makes sense. Neither Gale nor I are Amazons; we need to travel with someone physically strong. Since you won't travel with Gale, that leaves me."

"But you will put more effort into seducing me than into traveling."

"Not if you acquiesce readily."

He smiled, though she was serious. "What are the coordinates?"

She showed them to him. "We're in luck," he said. "There's a travel canal."

"But it's a toll canal. I assume you don't want to co-opt it as king. I could pay in sex, but not you."

"Pay in gossip," he said. "We both know things that will interest them."

"Such as the doings of a barbarian king?"

"If it makes a good story."

She smiled. "Remember, you asked for it."

"Don't enjoy it too much."

They made their way to the closest station. It gave access to a long frozen canal that skirted just inside the fringe of a silver Chroma zone. The magic of the Chroma kept it frozen.

Their offer of royal gossip turned out to be acceptable. Symbol turned out to have a juicy imagination and excellent descriptive powers. She described the scene wherein the old king's mistress tried to seduce the young new king in such imaginative detail that both male and female listeners were salivating. The truth was that Symbol had tried, challenging Havoc to a game of stripping, but had not succeeded. Her present narration left the issue in doubt, as if preserving a trace of privacy.

They boarded the travel craft. This was a small flat-bottomed boat with sharp nether fins and a large propeller. It had evidently been built by a crew from the White Chroma, because mechanical technology was its specialty even when it wasn't actual science magic.

There was a brisk wind from the north. The propeller oriented on it. Its vanes turned, geared down to a spiked vertical wheel below. The wheel turned, biting into the ice and pushing the craft forward against the wind. Soon it got up respectable velocity. All they had to do was ride.

"Now we were addressing the matter of seduction," Symbol said. "Do you prefer to make a challenge of it, or to succumb rapidly?"

"I prefer to watch out for accidents or enemies."

"Enemies?"

"We still don't know who is trying to kill me."

"But the Black Glamor wiped all the traitors out."

"All the traitors in Triumph City. But what of the ones beyond?"

"Havoc, be reasonable. We are traveling incognito. Has anyone tried to kill you since the Black Glamor acted?"

"No personal attempts that I know of. But I'm not the only one at risk. What of that wasp you spoke of?"

"It just happened to be in need of a host at the time I was passing that way." But she shuddered, remembering.

"Or was it sent to intercept your route?"

Symbol stared at him. "Havoc, you make me nervous."

"Precisely. Save your seduction for a safe setting."

"Acquiescence," she agreed faintly.

There were several brief portages between Chroma, but the boat was easy to push along the canal, frozen or liquid. They were soon moving at speed again. The wind shifted, and the propeller acted in the manner of a sail, enabling the boat to move along at greater velocity. Still, it was two days before they reached their destination: a Black Chroma zone.

They got off at it. Now they had to make a deal for guidance within it. Any Chroma was dangerous for visitors from outside, but Black had a special horror, because of the manner that its volcanic eruptions imploded rather than exploded. Havoc suppressed a substratum of panic; he could not avoid this challenge.

They approached the Black station master. "We have need to visit the interior," Havoc said. "We need a guide."

"You certainly do," the Black man said. He looked Havoc up and down. "You appear to be a very healthy specimen of a nonChroma male. We have natives in need of fourths."

Havoc had expected this. His interest in sex had finally recovered in the course of their travel. "I will serve."

The man eyed Symbol, whose figure showed up very well under her clothing, by no coincidence. "You?"

"Acquiescence for no fault." That meant she would indulge a man sexually, but was not looking to conceive.

The man spoke into a black tube. "Healthy couple, nonChroma and Air Chroma, appealing forms, amenable. Guide to interior."

Soon a Black couple appeared. The man was a reasonably handsome specimen of his kind, and the woman was petite and quite well formed. Both were completely black, with no other color of person or of apparel.

"Salutation," the man said.

"Acknowledged," Havoc replied.

"Introduction: I am Trigue, and this is my wife Intrigue. We work for the zone authority, and will not clarify further. We are competent guides to the interior."

Havoc's dragon seed did not buzz, so he knew the man was telling the truth. "I am known as Hayseed, a false name, and this is my traveling companion."

"I am in need of a fourth," Intrigue said. "I am extremely choosy, as I want to match the quality of the three. My husband's dalliance does not matter, except that she be interesting enough to keep him clear of me until I have my fourth conceived."

"Is this interesting enough?" Symbol inquired, removing her jacket and halter to show nothing.

"Air Chroma," Trigue said. "You could be ugly under that invisibility."

"Try me."

He stepped forward and put his hand to her invisible bosom. His black eyes widened. "Apology for doubting."

"Let me feel you," Intrigue said to Havoc.

"Feel free," he said with a smile, thinking she meant to embrace him.

Instead she took hold of his trousers, opened them, reached inside, and held his scrotum between her cool black fingers. "It will do." She let him go.

Havoc put himself back together. Women kept surprising him in odd little ways. She judged by scrotum?

"Where do you need guidance?" Trigue asked.

Havoc read off the coordinates. Both Blacks looked serious. "That is at the cone," Intrigue said.

"I need to fetch a small object there."

"You understand," Trigue said, "there may be danger. We can handle it, but you must obey our directives instantly, for your safety. Inruptions can be unpredictable."

"Understood." Of course it was an inruption, rather than an eruption, for a Black Chroma volcano.

"It will require three days, with apt weather," Intrigue said. "Longer if inclement. My husband will have the invisible woman no fault while we guide. You will be similarly at my beck, Hayseed."

"Acquiescence."

They started off afoot across the black landscape. Here at the fringe there was a path through a black field where a black cereal crop grew. A black cloud hung in the darkening sky. Only the light of Vivid Star was bright, and somehow it seemed that Void was dominant here. There was no looming cone; that was inverted, being a great pit.

Havoc walked beside Intrigue, and Symbol with Trigue. Havoc had recovered enough from his

experience with the blue guirl to be mildly interested in sex again. Intrigue was healthy and, indeed, intriguing, from her black hair to her black toes; it should be nice to indulge her need for conception.

They skirted a black lake. Havoc could not see into its depths, and was glad they did not have to cross it in a boat. He had a mental picture of the boat getting sucked into oblivion below.

"Note the crests," Intrigue murmured.

"Crests?"

She gestured, and he spied a series of wavelike ridges curving gently away to the sides. "Concentric rings around the cone, braced against implosion. Should there be a sudden inruption, fling yourself against the outer edge of a crest and hang on."

"Desperately," he agreed. Then, since she seemed willing to talk, he changed the subject. "Question: is it true that any Black Chroma person can kill with a mere look?"

She turned her dark gaze on him, making him suddenly nervous; even the so-called whites of her eyes were black. "Not without reason."

"So that, for example, if a brigand tried to molest a Black Chroma woman—"

She smiled, her teeth showing black too. "He would have to catch her out of Chroma, and even then he might lose what he put into her. But at that range a knife would do as well." A black blade appeared in her hand. "Any woman of any Chroma would be dangerous if so armed—and most are."

"A brigand would try to disarm her first."

"Perhaps so. It is a reason I prefer not to travel outChroma." The knife disappeared.

"No brigands here," Havoc reassured her.

"You are more than you seem. I think discovering you is fortunate."

Havoc shrugged. "As long as you are satisfied."

As evening closed, they came to an established camping site. Black shelters had black hearths with black wood bolts stacked neatly beside. Trigue made a black fire and roasted black tubers. A barrel contained black beer. The food and drink tasted much the same as the staples Havoc knew; only the color differed.

They retired in due course to separate cabins, Havoc with Intrigue. There was a single wide bunk sufficient for them both, and a basin, pitcher, and water. Intrigue stripped away her black clothing and washed, unconcerned by his presence, and he saw by the light of the black candle that she was quite finely formed with a tiny waist, well rounded bottom, and esthetically full breasts.

She dried and donned a nightdress. Then as Havoc stripped and took his turn with the basin, she approached and touched his scrotum again. "Not yet."

"Question?"

"You have millions of viable seeds in you. I require only one. That one is not yet ready. Sleep in peace."

Evidently she was not interested in sex this night. "Acquiescence," he agreed, bemused.

He put out the candle and joined her on the black bed, under the warm black blanket, beside but not touching. After seeing her, he would have preferred to have indulged in the sex, but it was of course her choice. He wondered whether Symbol was discovering a similar disinterest in the other cabin.

"Trigue will be enjoying himself," Intrigue said, as if fathoming his thought. "He has touched no woman but me in five years, and will surely appreciate the variety. I gather that your companion is indeed well formed."

"Superlatively, though invisible when unclothed."

"In darkness that hardly matters. I am sure it will not be boring, with an otherChroma woman."

"This one is never boring."

"That is good." She was silent then, and her breathing became regular. She was sleeping.

Havoc pondered her words. She wanted just one of his millions of seeds, and knew exactly which one? Or was that merely a figure of speech, indicating that she was not receptive at this time? Her attitude was a considerable contrast to that of the blue girl. Of the two, he preferred this one.

He slept. In the night she rolled over against him, her flesh interesting, but he remained unmoving, taking no advantage. It was her choice, he reminded himself again.

He woke in the morning to find her propped on her elbow, gazing at him. "You're a nice man," she said as she removed her hand from his scrotum.

They moved in toward the Black Chroma center, across terrain increasingly stripped of surface ornamentation. The suction obviously got worse close in, and their guides were careful; they zigzagged to keep ridges between them and the central pit. Then in the afternoon there was a huge sucking rumble, and a stiff wind blew toward the hole.

"Probably just a passing flexure," Trigue said. "But we had better scout for safe terrain. The two of you stay here." He showed them an entrance set into the slope, angling down to a sheltered chamber closed off by a stout stone door. "Do not emerge until we come for you."

They squeezed in. This was a small campsite, evidently constructed for just such occasions. Travelers could wait safely in it until the activity of the volcano abated. There was a bunk, water, candles, and potty.

"So nice to see you again," Symbol said.

Havoc laughed. They had been seeing each other all day, but had been with their Black Chroma companions, hardly speaking. "Shall we compare notes?"

"Endorsement! It was one of my more interesting nights."

"Less so, here. She touched my genital, then slept without me."

"No sex?" she asked as if shocked.

"None."

"Contrast. He was all over me. Rather, I was all over him. Did you realize that Black Chroma folk echo their volcano? They suck rather than blow."

"Confusion."

"We stripped. Then he sort of imploded, drawing me into him and around him. He did not penetrate me, I surrounded him. Kissing him was similar; my face was drawn up to smack against his. It was weird. Apart from that, he was normal."

"You mean to say that he wanted frequent sex with you."

"Precisely. It was easy to accommodate him, since all I had to do was let myself be drawn in. He remarked on how refreshing it was to be the one doing most of the suction." She gazed at Havoc. "That must be some woman, when she's ready."

Havoc shrugged. "I wouldn't know. But she has a nice shape and manner, and when she wants me, I'll be there."

"And you will tell me every detail, in due course."

"Won't you be jealous?"

"Deliciously so."

There was a sudden roar as air sucked out of the chamber. The door was made to swing shut from inside; it slammed to, preserving the rest of their air. "An inruption," Havoc said.

"A solid one, I think." She came to sit by him. "May I be a timid girl? This makes me unusually nervous."

Havoc felt it too. There was a special horror about being sucked into a hole that there was not for being blown away from it. He put his arm around her. "Acquiescence."

The roar got worse, though muffled by the stone. It seemed to be building to a full scale inruption. The warning to remain inside was well taken; they would have been sucked away had they been outside.

"I hope they're all right," she said, shivering.

"They surely know how to protect themselves. But probably they can't return here until it alleviates."

"So we're stuck alone together, perhaps for hours. O horror."

He laughed again. "We shall surely survive it."

They waited, but the suction storm did not abate. The sound became steady, and they could hear objects bumping as they were hauled into the giant maw. They were definitely not going outside yet.

"It seems we have some dull time to spend," Symbol said.

Havoc looked at her. She was a lovely and well constructed woman, and the fact that her torso and limbs were completely covered made that amply apparent. Her shirt was open to reveal a tight vest outlining her fine breasts, and her skirt ended at her raised knees to show the opaque stockings that defined her shapely legs and thighs. Such pseudo-exposure was no accident, he knew; she wanted to seduce him. But if she removed the clothing, she would disappear, and that would be even more suggestive.

"What do you have in mind?"

"You know what I would like."

And that was all too tempting. "You are another changeling. I could no more marry you than Gale—and if I *could* marry a changeling, it would be Gale."

"I know it, Havoc. But you can have infertile sex with either of us. I do not seek to win you away from Gale, only to amuse you in off moments. Any little thing you care to let me have, I want. I love you."

"Are you trying to induce me with guilt?"

"Of course. But be sensible: you will never encounter a more willing woman of my appearance and experience, with less obligation. Why not take what offers, no fault?"

"Because with you it can't be no fault. I know you too well, and must work with you in future. I need you for a reliable friend, not a throw away lover."

"I would gladly have filled that role. I did not seek to love you. I was caught off-guard, and it is a considerable embarrassment to me. But I am a realist. I want you on any terms you will grant me. I wish you would let me do for you what I am good at. I could give you considerable pleasure, and pleasure myself endlessly in that role."

"Acknowledged. But there is another aspect: I owe Intrigue an impregnation. I don't feel free to indulge elsewhere until that is accomplished."

"You're saving yourself for her. How quaint."



She had a point. When had he ever saved himself like that before? "Still, it is so."

"And she had her chance, and stroked your member and denied it. I think she's teasing you, Havoc."

"Perhaps. Yet—"

"I will beg, if you allow it."

"Negative." Yet it continued tempting despite his rational awareness of its dangers.

"I will cry, if you allow it."

She was playing fair. That moved him more than her conducive arts might have. "Symbol, I do desire you, and I need to wean myself away from Gale. You could help me do that. There is a case to be made. But I feel it is more important to retain you as an objective adviser, to the extent that is possible."

"Adviser, yes. Objective, no. Please, Havoc—"

She was starting to beg, and to cry. She couldn't help it. Even the briefest peek into her mind showed him the storm of love and desire she had for him; she was not trying to mask it. He had to come to some kind of settlement with her. "Compromise. Seduce me today, or not at all."

"Gladly!"

"Without touching me or flaunting your body. Without begging or crying. Do it by persuasion alone."

She considered. "A challenge. If I win, is it a continuing affair?"

"Yes, as convenient. Not when Gale is near. If you lose, you cease all persuasion, direct or oblique."

"Havoc, I don't know whether I am capable of that. Seduction is my nature."

"You will make a sincere effort."

She nodded. "A sincere effort. No pleas, no tears."

"And you will resume your relationship with Chief—or some other worthy man."

"Granted. And if I win—"

"You have me, as convenient. No jealousy of my other relationships, no open mistress status. But when I am alone, you may discreetly join me. An unofficial mistress."

"Done!"

She was agreeing too readily. She knew he had as much will as he required, and that she could not seduce him by trickery. "You have something in mind?"

"Only to wile away the time with an illusion show."

He wagged a finger at her. "No man-woman romance. No hot sex. No seductive implications."

"You are determined to make this difficult?"

"Yes."

She sighed. "A clean family style entertainment, no suggestive sexual element."

"Agreed."

"Then it must be 'Dancer.' The heartening story of an old man and a little girl. Absolutely nothing untoward."

Havoc nodded. He knew she was bound to try something, but if she cheated too overtly, he would deny her the reward. If she could seduce him without touching him, flashing him, or showing a suggestive illusion story, then she deserved her victory. And if she lost, she would be honor bound to desist her efforts, which otherwise were likely to be eventually successful. That was what he stood to gain by this contest.

There was a shimmer before him. At first he thought it was the illusion show, then realized that it was instead the succubus. "Swale," he said.

Symbol picked right up on it. "If I let her invest me, and she seduces you, would it count for me?"

"No. She's supernatural."

"I know it." Symbol sighed. "Hello, Swale. Come into me so we can talk, but don't seduce anyone."

Havoc watched as Symbol's face went blank. Then she spoke again. "Swale here, Havoc." It was no longer Symbol's voice or mannerism.

"How is Gale doing?"

"I haven't checked her yet. How are *you* doing?"

"We're about to watch an illusion show. We are unable to proceed toward the coordinates at the moment, so this is spare time."

"Why bother? This is an ideal occasion for sex."

"I am in the process of withstanding her blandishments."

"The more fool you. I'm in her mind at the moment; her desire for you is a thing to behold. She resembles me in this respect: she craves sexual expression of love."

"Move on, Swale."

"Parting."

"Parting," he echoed as Symbol's face went blank again.

In a moment her animation returned. "I like her."

"If the time comes when you wish to win some other resistant man, borrow her."

"I will. I have shared her action in the past. She's professional. Are we ready for the illusion?"

"Ready," he agreed.

The show came on. Their surroundings were covered by the illusion setting. It was a view of the great pyramid of Triumph, then a view of its interior. It focused on an old man walking slowly toward the travelers' exchange. He entered it and watched the participants assume the small stage and make their announcements of destinations and needs. At first it was all image and dialogue, but as it progressed there was a quiet thought-voice added to convey the main character's unspoken thoughts and concerns. That soon seemed to disappear, so that the thoughts came across as being heard directly; it was a standard technique to lend verisimilitude. When the old man's turn came, he mounted the steps and spoke:

"I am Beat, after my former trade as a drum musician. I wish to travel to Music Village to watch my son's troupe participate in the tournament. It is my hope that some younger musician is traveling there, who will be my companion."

Immediately there was an answer. "We have one such, for that destination," a man said. "My daughter Eke, who goes to rejoin her mother, a leading dancer." Beside him was a rather pretty little girl.

Beat was doubtful. "You are not going yourself, sir?"

"My business prevents. Eke must travel alone. She is nine years old, and I prefer that she have adult company."

"I am perhaps too adult. I am too feeble to protect her from harm, should it threaten. I had thought to travel with a younger man who might protect me, in the manner of a son, no fault."

"She can be a granddaughter, no fault."

"But at her age—should some unkind party seek to—I fear I would be inadequate." Beat was clearly trying to avoid saying in the child's presence that a man might try to molest her.

"I have in mind safe travel. She can dance well enough to pay her way. You are a drummer?"

"I was, before I became too old. I have not drummed in years."

"But you could do it for her? Nothing arduous is required."

"Weak drumming, yes, I believe I could. I would need to practice to bring it back."

The man looked at his daughter. She nodded. Then he spoke. "There will be time. I accept you as her no fault grandfather."

"But—"

"Parting." And the man was gone, leaving the child. She looked at Beat and smiled somewhat tremulously. What could he do? He smiled reassuringly back at her.

"It seems we must travel together," he said. "I shall try to do right by you. I never had a daughter or a granddaughter, so this is new to me."

"I never had a grandfather," she said. "He died before I came."

Beat looked at her with mock chagrin. "But I was depending on your experience to make this work, since I have none."

That made her laugh. "Just pretend I'm a boy."

"Negative. I always wanted a granddaughter. You look just like the one I never had."

"And you look like the grandfather I never imagined."

He sighed. "We just met, and we're already lying to each other."

She laughed again. "Maybe we'll get along."

"Maybe. Do you understand no fault?"

"It's when you have to pretend, so you can share a room or travel together."

"It is more than that. It is an assumed temporary relationship, and it is real while it exists. I must protect you as I would my own grandchild, and you must obey me when I tell you to do something for your own good. Others will accept us as we claim to be. But when we get where we are going—"

"It ends," she said. "And we never see each other again. With no regrets."

"None we might mention," he agreed.

"What won't we mention?"

"Well, suppose we got to really like each other. But I have real sons and grandsons, and you have real parents and siblings. We must not intrude on each other's real lives. So we would have to pretend to forget each other. That's the painful part of no fault. We must pretend it is real while we

travel, and that it isn't real when it's over."

"Understanding. Mom and Dad traveled to Triumph City no fault. They had nothing in common. He was a builder and she was a dancer. But they fell in love, so they married anyway, but they still have to live mostly apart, at least while she's on tour."

"That's a danger," he agreed. "They were no fault man and wife, then couldn't give it up. But at least they could marry. They could have traveled no fault had they been married elsewhere, but then they could not have married. No fault accounts for some wonderful forbidden love."

"I heard a story about two married people who traveled together no fault a lot."

"And their spouses may not have been pleased. Such mischief is best avoided."

"But if you don't have a granddaughter—"

"It is not just that we are unrelated. It is that our lives go in different directions. After this journey, you will be with your mother, and I will be with my son. They will travel to different villages, and we will go with them. We know that before we start. We know better than to let our emotions tangle."

"We know better," she agreed wistfully.

"Now we must arrange to travel. We must enlist with a convoy or caravan, and pay our way. It was been some time since I drummed, but perhaps I can recover enough skill to help you dance. How good are you?"

"Mom says I will be champion, some day. But I'm not nearly as good as she is."

"Let's go somewhere and see what we can do."

"Sure, Grandpa."

He took her to a trading site he knew of, where there was musical equipment, and they looked at a number of pairs of dancing slippers, and at drums. There was only one set of shoes that fit Eke, and only one old drum of the type he used. Neither were very good, but that was all that offered. "We will take them," Beat said to the proprietor.

"What do you have in trade?"

Beat brought out two clever little carved wooden figurines. One was a blue man, the other a red woman. They were so designed that they could be fitted together, face to face, as if in sexual embrace. There was generally a market for that sort of thing, especially with young folk who wished to make a certain muted suggestion couched as a gift of art.

The proprietor nodded. "It will do."

"Those were very nice carvings," Eke said. "They remind me of my parents, when they meet after long separation."

Exactly. "One of my sons, Beta, carves them. He is very good, and can make them quickly. He could make one that looked like you, if you wish."

"Yes! And one that looks like you."

He smiled. "We shall see. He may not be with my son Beau, the drummer, so it may not be possible."

They went next to a public room where assorted performers could practice. Eke put on her dancing shoes, and Beat set up the battered drum. Then he patted it with his gnarled old fingers, establishing a simple cadence, and she stood before him and did a simple tap dance.

It worked reasonably well. "I could do better with a good drum," he said. "But this one will do."

"I could dance better with my real shoes, but they are with Mom," she said. "But these will do."

They tried several small routines, and discovered that they worked well together. The joy of drumming was returning, infusing his hands, and the child did show real promise. What she lacked in experience she made up in balance, reflex, and enthusiasm. She would indeed be excellent, when she matured.

"I think this is feasible," Beat said.

"I wish I had my good shoes. Mom keeps them for me, because I have no one to dance with in the city. They have been in the family for generations; Mom used them when she was young. They can really dance." Then she caught herself. "But I don't mean I don't like these. Thank you for them."

Beat smiled. Eke was young, and tended to speak before she thought, but she had the right motives. "I understand. This drum is satisfactory, but not in the class with mine. That one is called Thunder."

"Thunder?"

"In my prime, I could beat so fast and strong that the overtones assumed the sound of thunder. When I could no longer make it thunder, I retired. No one has made it thunder since; my son may, in time, when he achieves his prime."

"I'm hungry," Eke announced.

Beat pondered. He had thought to use the figurines to trade for food, but could no longer do that. "Let's see if we can trade a dance for a good meal."

"Gee! Do you think we can? I never danced for anything but learning."

"Let's find out."

"This will be fun!"

He was not sure of that, but did not express his private reservations. This was a gamble.

They went to a section where an open air cook was working. "My granddaughter and I are hungry," Beat said. "Can we trade a dance for food?"

"You can make the attempt," the cook said cynically. He was evidently accustomed to people trying to cadge food. This happened to be a slack hour, so he was amenable to a lesser deal than otherwise.

So they did a demonstration dance for the cook, and it was better than their practice had been; they were already getting into it together. The girl was well formed for her age, and very quick on her feet, and Beat was drumming better than he had a right to expect. Soon several others had gathered to listen and watch. The cook nodded. "Do another number while I serve, and the food is yours."

They didn't have another number, so they consulted, and decided to try free-form. Beat tried a new rhythm, with a syncopation, and Eke danced to it, then added a new step. When Beat saw that, he amended his pattern. So it went through several variations, and the group of spectators grew. A number of them decided to trade for food themselves.

The cook brought two excellent platters of assorted vegetables and breads for them, with a mug of ale for Beat and berry juice for Eke. There was even sweet pudding for dessert. He set it all on a small table. Eke's eyes went round; this was far more of a meal than they had anticipated. "If you two care to stay a few days, you can have all you want. You are attracting customers."

"I regret we must travel," Beat said. "But we appreciate your generosity."

"Dance again before you leave, and I will give you food to take along." Then the cook went to deal with the others.

"I'll be too full to move my feet!" the girl said as she grabbed for the pudding.

"Use the trencher," he cautioned her. "And eat the vegetables first."

"Awww." But she obeyed. "Can I try your ale?"

"That's not necessarily good for a child."

"But grandparents are supposed to be soft touches."

So they were. "One sip." He looked around, making sure than no one was observing; as he did, others averted their faces, officially not seeing this transgression.

Eke took the mug and took a huge swallow. Then she almost choked on it. "It's sour!"

There was a murmur of laughter around the chamber. "Ale is not sweet like berry juice. I thought you knew."

She made a face. "I know *now*." Then she laughed, appreciating the joke on herself.

In due course, well stuffed, they got up and performed again, doing another free-form routine. It worked amazingly well; they seemed to be attuned to each other. The girl was cute when she stood,

and downright pretty when she danced; her legs moved precisely, and when she high kicked she almost had sex appeal; obviously her mother had been training her well. Watching her encouraged Beat, and his hands limbered and moved better than he expected, so that his drumming had more authority. He felt good; he realized he had missed drumming.

More people gathered to watch, and more sought the cook's food. As they finished, the cook brought a fair sized bag. "This will hold you a while."

"Appreciation," Beat said.

"Appreciation for you. I never saw a girl that young dance that well. You brought me my best day in a month."

Indeed, there were now a number of people eating. When Beat and Eke took the bag and departed, the others applauded.

"They liked us!" Eke said, startled.

"You didn't notice before?"

"I was dancing. My eyes were closed."

Beat realized that was true; he had seen it without noting it. She had tuned out all else but the floor and his drumbeat, and danced beautifully. "You did very well. You made many people come to watch."

She looked surprised again. "I never danced in public before! I thought it was just you and me. I mean, I knew there were people, but it wasn't an audience."

"It became one. You made it one."

"No, Mom makes an audience. She's beautiful. I just copy her."

Beat decided not to argue the case. "Let's see if we can catch a floating caravan."

"That'll be fun!"

"We are likely to be jammed into a tiny cubbyhole for most of it, and we'll have to perform for our passage. Float travel can be pretty dull."

"When I came to Triumph we went around by the fringes, giving a show at every village. That got dull. Floating must be fun."

So she hadn't floated across a Chroma zone before. "Maybe you will enjoy the sights." He considered, then brought up something else. "You're a girl. You'll have to use the women's section of the rest stops. I will wait for you outside."

"Why?"



That was the question he did not like answering. "Because some men want to get hold of girls and treat them unkindly. We must prevent that from happening."

"Okay," she said, humoring him.

He hoped there would be no problem. In his prime he could have handled such a situation, but as it was, he wanted to make sure it never arose. That meant being unusually careful. The girl might chafe, not understanding, and he did not want to explain in any more detail. It was partly her youth and partly her prettiness; she could be a magnet for the wrong kind of man.

They came to the sign-up area for caravans going north. Their foremen were present, dickering with merchants and travelers. Beat waited his turn, then talked with the foreman of one that seemed to be going their way. "We two wish to travel to Music Village."

"We do pass there. What's your trade?"

"Entertainment. Drum and dance. We aren't expert, but perhaps will suffice."

"Demonstrate."

Beat unlimbered his drum, and Eke donned her shoes. He beat the cadence and she stepped out, tapping the floor. Immediately others turned to watch. Beat knew why: she was good, with perfect cadence. But there was another effect. When Eke danced, her girl's body emulated a woman's body, especially when she flirted with her hips and kicked high under her skirt. It was legitimate, but it was also suggestive. This effect had never bothered him before—not until he had a granddaughter to look out for.

"It will do," the foreman said. "One show each rest stop. One nook on one wagon. Food provided."

"Goody!" Eke exclaimed.

But Beat was more cautious. "A female wagon."

The foreman looked again at the girl, who was animated from the recent effort of the dance, and nodded. "Agreed. Departure at dawn tomorrow."

"May we go to the wagon now?"

"Dance now, you can have it now." The foreman gave Beat a bit of green string with several knots in it. "Give this to the wagon master."

"Appreciation."

"Keep her close."

"Understanding."

"Parting." The foreman turned to the next applicant.

They walked to the staging area. "Why the female wagon?" the girl asked. "There's nothing but maids and washwomen there."

"And no rough-hewn men," he agreed.

"The kind that grab girls," she said, still really not believing it.

"Did your father or your mother ever let you be alone among men?"

She shot a resentful glance at him, and dropped the subject.

The wagons were arranged in a rough circle. Each one was massive and covered, with room for traveling supplies, trading goods, and several people tucked in around the edges.

They went to the clearing in the center. The wagon master glanced at the string. "Third wagon. Report to dance at the beginning of each stop, beginning tonight." He indicated the direction.

They walked to the indicated wagon. Rather, Beat walked and Eke skipped. She had a lot of energy. "He sure read a lot in that string," Eke remarked.

"The color and the knotting spells it out. They know what they're doing."

A fat old woman poked her head out of the third wagon as they approached. Beat held up the string for her to view. She nodded "Here you are." She showed them a crevice between bags of potatoes. "Put your stuff here; I'll guard it." She squinted knowingly at Eke. "Go do your dance."

They did so, and returned to the center. People were milling around, taking care of assorted details. There seemed to be no real organization, other than a table being set up for a caravan meal. So they set up to one side, and Beat sat carefully on the ground and began beating his drum, while Eke danced.

In a moment several people were watching, the men intent, the women curious. Soon all of them ceased their labors and looked, as Beat got into the cadence and Eke extended herself with increasingly fancy footwork. Each time they tried it, they were better; it was surprising. They did the set piece, then improvised, and it all worked well.

"Enough," the caravan cook called. "I can't serve while watching you, and I can't not watch you."

Others laughed. It was clear that the girl did have something; everyone who saw her dance stayed to watch.

The foreman stopped by. "She's a live one," he murmured. "But it's not all her; there is magic in your rhythm."

"Not a lot," Beat said ruefully. "I am way past my prime."

"Perhaps." The man moved on.

They had a decent meal, then went to the latrine area, where Beat waited for Eke, then required

her to wait for him. Neither would he let her run around on her own. She chafed openly at this restriction, but obeyed to a degree. She tended to run ahead of him, or to the side, not quite daring him to rebuke her in public. She was so full of energy it was a wary delight to see her; how was he ever going to get this pretty innocent safely to her mother?

Then as they were walking back to the wagon, Eke skipped too closely by a working area, and a man grabbed at the girl. She screamed piercingly.

The foreman appeared, peering across the inner circle. "Take him out," he snapped.

Two burly wagoneers converged on the grabbing man. He tried to dodge them, but they caught him by arms and legs and hauled him roughly away.

Beat turned to catch the eye of the foreman across the way, nodding. The foreman returned the nod.

Eke was shaking. "He grabbed me!" she exclaimed.

Beat suppressed his sympathy; this was a useful lesson. "Fortunately you were protected. Be alert henceforth."

"I will." Now she walked much closer to him.

Beat did not say so, but he was pretty sure the foreman had set up the grab, not to harass the girl but to make the point to her. He knew the danger as well as Beat did, for one as pretty as this. Unspoken was the man's assessment of Beat: unable to rescue the child, should the worst happen.

The fat woman frowned at Eke as they arrived at the wagon. "Don't you go near those men," she said. "Stay close to your grandpa."

"I will," Eke agreed fervently.

The woman allowed half a smile to form. "That's good, dear."

Their crevice was barely big enough for one, let alone two, and quite inappropriate for a man and girl. But now Eke was staying too close to him, nervous about any other contact, and he had no choice. She snuggled into to him, half curved within his embrace. She was his granddaughter, for the nonce; it was legitimate to hold her.

"I'm sorry I didn't stay close," she murmured. "I thought you were just being mean."

"Never that," he replied, and stroked her fine hair.

She was soon asleep. He lingered for a time, feeling oddly invigorated. It was not that he had any untoward thoughts about the girl in his embrace, but that somehow he felt younger and stronger than he had in years, better able to protect her. She was very much the child or grandchild he had wanted, even in her willfulness. A healthy girl, eager to explore life, too trusting of others, but delightful in that innocence. He wished he could keep her, but of course that was thrice impossible: this was no fault, their families were going different ways, and he was too old. He expected to die in the next year

or two. This unexpected charge to deliver the girl seemed to have invigorated him, but he would surely pay for that in due course, as he suffered the letdown when their journey was done. Yet how nice it was at this moment, to have this passing relationship.

He woke startled: she was kissing him. "Wake, Grandpa; we'll miss breakfast!"

"Don't do that," he protested, stirring.

"But I'm hungry!"

"I mean the kissing. It's not—"

"You're my Grandpa, and I love you. You take care of me. I had to kiss you."

And it was no fault. "Not on the mouth," he said, relenting.

"Awwww. Do you want me to tickle you instead?"

"Negation! I'm too old for that. If I laughed too heartily I might fall apart."

"No you won't. You're strong, to take care of me."

"Honey, I'm not strong at all. I'm feeble. But I am trying to take care of you as I should."

"I'm glad." She wriggled enthusiastically, working her way out of their necessarily squeezed embrace.

He followed. "I seem stronger than I was," he said, surprised.

"Its the healing."

"The what?"

"I'm a healer, like Mom. My touch helps, when I want it to, and I touched you all night."

So it wasn't his imagination. "A healer! Why didn't you say so?"

"You didn't ask."

"But that takes life energy from the healer. I shouldn't take yours."

"It's okay, Grandpa. I've got energy to spare. Anyway, it was slow, while I slept, so I recharged at the same rate. I'm okay and you're better."

Beat shook his head as he climbed out and joined her on the ground. "I'm supposed to be taking care of you, not making you take care of me. I want to deliver you to your mother in the best condition."

She pouted cutely. "Isn't no fault two way? Why can't I help you, if I can?"

She was right again. "Appreciation, Granddaughter."

"Accepted!" She flung her arms about him and kissed him on the cheek. And he felt the power of her healing, in her arms and especially in her kiss, like a warm glow that spread from the points of contact. She really was making him feel younger and stronger. He had not realized that healing could work like this; he had thought of it as applying to injuries or extreme fatigue.

"And next time you're hungry between meals," he told her, "take from the bag the cook gave us."

"I already ate the pie. I left the bag of salad for you. And the jug of ale."

"Thank you, Granddaughter," he said wryly.

They took their equipment and went to the morning mess. "Make it brief," the cook called, smiling.

They made it brief. Beat drummed with vigor, and Eke danced with similar vigor, and in a moment the folk of the caravan emerged from their wagons and came to watch. The sound had alerted them, and the dance held them. Now Beat realized that this had helped him the day before; it was not so much his getting back into the old routines, as the near presence of the girl with her healing power, enabling him. She had been contributing more than he had thought.

They stopped, and the cook gave them good plates. "Going far?" a drover inquired.

"To Music Village," Eke responded brightly.

"Then we'll have a nice trip, that far. You're good."

"It's Grandpa's drumming. He makes me move better."

Beat thought to protest, but did not want to second guess her in public. She was doing more for his ability than he was for hers.

After the meal it was time to get moving. The people quickly went to their wagons, and the horses stepped out.

"I appreciate your support," Beat said as they sat wedged at the front of the potato bags. "But there is no need to give me more credit than is due."

"But it's true, Grandpa! You've got the touch. My feet move better. I never was that good before, even with my good shoes."

"I've got the touch because you have the feet," he said. "You enable me to do it better than I have since I retired."

She leaned over and kissed him again, and he felt the flow of healing energy. "We're a team," she said. "We relate."

"We relate," he agreed. The relationship of a drummer and a dancer was said to be as close in its fashion as siblings or partners in marriage. There was truth there. But it was amazing to have it manifest in such divergent people.

The wagons moved to the staging area in the fringe of the first Chroma zone, Yellow. "Oooo!" Eke cried appreciatively as the fires leaped up around them, without burning. The flame men came, and lifted the wagons on great balls of flame. "Oooo!" the girl repeated, this time nervous as she saw the ground drop below, grabbing onto Beat for comfort.

"It is controlled magic," he reassured her. "The firemen know what they are doing. The caravan master has a deal with them for safe passage."

"And we have a deal to ride along," she agreed.

"Yes, that's why we must perform. No one travels free."

"If I weren't with you, I'd be really scared," she confided, shivering despite the apparent heat.

"No need, no need," he said comfortingly. "I have traveled across Chroma many times. It is fine, unless there's an eruption."

"I hope there isn't."

There wasn't, but in the next Chroma zone, a Green one, there was. The big green volcano let fly a huge green ball that floated ominously toward them. The other wagons of the caravan quickly descended. But the Green drover on their own wagon seemed oblivious to the danger. The other travelers on the wagon, long bored with such flights, were asleep.

"Get this wagon down!" Beat yelled. The drover didn't respond; he was snoozing too. So Beat fetched a potato and threw it. It bounced off the drover's shoulder, waking him. Then the drover quickly signaled the huge plant that was swinging them along with its tentacles, and the wagon descended to the ground just in time to let the green ball pass overhead.

"You saved us!" Eke cried.

"I just happened to be paying attention, thanks to you."

When they reached the next staging area, the foreman approached. "You owe us a potato."

"Apology."

The man clapped him on the shoulder, laughing. "Too bad you didn't hit that Green dunc on the head. He was sleeping on duty. We could have lost the wagon."

After that, the fat woman approached. "We heard what you did. Why don't you let the girl sit with me, next lift? My daughter would like to thank you." She indicated a voluptuous young woman.

"No need," Beat said, pleasantly embarrassed.

"You saved us all," the young woman said. "We agreed that I should be the one." She turned back the lapel of her jacket to show a healthy breast.

"No need," Beat repeated, blushing. "I'm an old man."

"Maybe tonight," the woman said, not pushing it at the moment.

When they were alone again, Eke had a question. "How come she didn't thank you, when she said she was going to?"

"She had something else in mind."

"What else?"

"I don't think it is appropriate to—"

"Oh, come on, Grandpa! How can I learn anything if you don't tell me?"

So he had to explain. "You know that all I did was throw a potato to wake the drover. But they feel grateful, so want to reward me with a—a service. The woman proposes to come to me for—" He stalled out.

"For sex!" she exclaimed. "That's how women reward men!"

"Affirmation," he agreed weakly.

"I guess you do deserve it. I'll go sit with Fatty."

"Negation!"

She eyed him cannily. "The name or the act?"

"Both."

"Neither. I won't call her that, and you can have the woman. I know it's fun; Mom and Dad do it all the time, especially when they've been apart too long. I'll be safe enough with the old woman."

This continued awkward. "Perhaps you will be. But would I be safe with that young woman?"

"She sure doesn't mean you any harm, Grandpa."

"Folk my age can't necessarily do what younger folk do. I don't want to embarrass myself."

She was perplexed. "Is there something else I don't know? Why would you be embarrassed if she's willing?"

Beat reminded himself that the girl had not had any close acquaintance with a man his age. "Older men can lose their capacity to do certain things. They don't like making that obvious."

She pondered only a moment. "I bet I can heal you so you can. Let me charge you up." She put her hands on his shoulders, and he felt the power starting.

"Negation!" he said. "This is not appropriate."

"Awwww." But she desisted. "So I don't have to go anywhere?"

"Affirmation."

"I'm glad."

"The old woman doesn't mean you any harm," he teased her.

"Oh, I know. But I like being with you. That plush woman would have kept you the whole night."

"Trying to do what a young man would do in one minute," he said ruefully.

She laughed. "Maybe an hour, for you. She looks pretty juicy."

"This is not appropriate—"

"Oh, come on, Grandpa! I know what it is. Mom travels no fault all the time with her drummer. He's married too, and older than she is, but she's so luscious she makes him young."

"And what does your dad think of that?"

"He travels no fault too, with his assistant. But he doesn't love her; it's just sex. He loves Mom. She's beautiful."

As if that was all there was to it. But it was clear that her parents had made a necessary adjustment for their enforced separation, and that the girl understood and accepted it. He had perhaps been unduly cautious about her innocence.

In the evening the voluptuous young woman reappeared. She was wearing a blouse that must have been fashioned in the Translucent Chroma zone. "Are you ready to be thanked?"

"I appreciate your appreciation," Beat began carefully. "But as I said before, there is no requirement."

"Confusion," the woman said. She was surely not accustomed to being turned down, with excellent reason.

"Grandpa means he can't get it up any more," Eke said helpfully.

Ouch! Beat was too busy flushing to think of anything to say.

The woman took it in stride. "Shall we see about that?" She stroked her tight skirt suggestively.



"Grandpa doesn't want you to see it not get up. That would embarrass him."

The woman seemed to bite her tongue. "We would not want to embarrass him," she agreed, turning away. She probably needed to get far enough distant so that she could safely let out her stifled laughter.

Eke faced him. "See? You didn't have to embarrass yourself."

Indeed. She had done it for him.

The journey continued. When they had a break, while the caravan handled its business, they ran through the various routines, which they now had down pat. "I wish I could do the finale," Eke said.

"I'm sure you could, if you practiced it."

"No, it's beyond me. It's just too complicated."

"Let's see about that. You know the step?"

"Sure, Mom always finished a show with it. But she says it took her years to get it."

"Maybe so. But you have real potential. I think you could do it, with the right cadence."

"You do?" she asked excitedly. "Show me!"

"Here's the beat." He started the intricate cadence.

"But that's too slow!"

"It starts slow. Do it slow."

She did the step. "It's fast that gets me."

"Follow as I pick it up." He drummed a bit faster.

She followed. But as he picked it up farther, she lost it. "Expletive!"

Beat ignored the crude expression. "You're thinking of your feet. You need to do it automatically. Focus on me while you dance."

"I can't."

"You can. Meet my gaze." He started slow again.

She fixed her eyes on his and resumed the step. She stumbled, cursed, and tried again. "This is weird. My feet are disconnected."

"They are supposed to be. Don't think of your body at all; just match the cadence. Once you get

it, you've got it."

She tried again, and failed, but he wouldn't let her quit. "I know you can do it, honey. Once you get the trick of it. It will fall into place."

"Naaa." But she tried again, and again.

Then, abruptly, it connected. Her gaze remained fixed on him, and her feet caught the cadence. He speeded it, but only somewhat. "You've got it. That's enough for today."

"But I want to go fast!"

"If you try, you'll lose it. Get it perfect slow, then we'll work up."

"Awwww." But she let it go. Then, as she stopped dancing, she grimaced. "My legs hurt!"

"Apology. I worked you too hard. You were so close, I wanted you to get it."

"And I got it," she agreed, pleased. "You made me get it."

"Now relax. Tomorrow we'll try it again. Stage by stage we'll get you there."

"Stage by stage," she agreed, and hugged him. "How come you know how?"

"My third son is a dancer. I went through it with him."

"I thought he was a drummer."

"That's my fourth son."

She shrugged. "Okay."

They continued to practice on successive days. Slowly they got up to speed, until Eke was able to do the finale before an appreciative audience. She still was not at competitive level, but she would get there as she matured.

"I'm better than I ever was," she said, amazed and proud.

"I am better than I have been since my retirement."

"It's not chance, is it?"

"I think it's not coincidence, dear. It's the rapport. It is said that a team that has true rapport can outperform a team of champions that lacks it."

She nodded. "I'm not there yet, and you're past it, but together we've got it."

"We have true rapport," he agreed. "It's not just my knowledge or your healing. When it comes

to performance, we relate very well."

She looked at him. "What about off-stage?"

"We relate well there too. Perhaps because I always wanted a granddaughter, and you—"

"I love you, Grandpa," she said.

"Remember, no fault—"

"I love you this day," she qualified. "No fault."

"And I love you, Eke. This day." But it wasn't the truth. He loved her permanently, but it would have been a violation of no fault to say it. He would suffer when they parted. She was the ideal granddaughter.

All too soon, it seemed, they arrived at Music Village. They bid parting to the foreman. "We'll miss you," the foreman said. "You have enhanced our leisure."

"Appreciation," Beat and Eke said together, then laughed. They had indeed developed considerable rapport beyond the stage.

Beat took her by the hand and walked her to the village. She knew the way, but they had taken to holding hands, liking the contact. "I don't want to leave you, Grandpa," she said tearfully.

"You know it has to be."

"I know." She tugged him to a stop just before the last turn of the path before the village. "Hug me, Grandpa, one last time."

They hugged. "Honey, it's been great."

"Truth," she said.

He had to honor it. "Truth."

"I love you, Grandpa. Not no fault."

"I love you too, Granddaughter," he said. "But we must part."

Then they hugged again, and cried together. After that they wiped each other's faces and composed themselves for the parting to come.

There were several troupes camping at the village. They were there for the musical tournament that would decide who was champion for this season, both individuals and troupes. Beat's son was with one troupe, and Eke's mother with another.

The first troupe they spied was Beat's son's. Soon they found the young man. He was a hale seventeen. "Glad you could make it, dad! Who's your friend?"

"This is Eke. We traveled together from the city, no fault grandfather/granddaughter."

"Hi, Eke," he said. "I'm Beau."

"Hi," she echoed, suddenly shy.

"Are we in time for the tournament?" Beat asked.

Beau nodded soberly. "You're in time. But we won't be competing."

"Confusion."

"We were doing great. We made the semi finals yesterday. But we lost our dancer. We won, but she tried too hard and sprained her foot. We're out of it. We'll have to default."

"Horror!"

"Agreement," Beau said morosely. "I don't know that we could have won the tournament, because there's a dancer out there better than ours ever was, but it's a shame to go down without trying."

"That's Mom," Eke said. "That dancer."

Beau looked at her more carefully. "Must be. You look like her, only less so." He looked at Beat. "You've been traveling with the competition, Dad."

"No fault makes no mind," Beat said, repeating a familiar saying. Enemies could travel no fault and get along perfectly.

"She'll win it. I never saw a more beautiful woman. At least I'll get to watch." But Beau's effort to be positive wasn't working. He was despondent.

"Regret. I have to take Eke to her mother now."

"I'll show you the way."

They walked to the troupe where Eke's mother performed. She was easy to spot: an outstandingly pretty woman in the very prime, the image of Eke matured. Eke ran to her, colliding with a violent hug.

"You made it!" the woman gasped.

"Grandpa brought me, no fault," the child exclaimed. "He saved me from a grabbing man, and he saved our wagon too, and he taught me the finale. He's great!"

The woman met Beat's gaze, and her loveliness smote him anew. She had a rare presence; perhaps it was the healing power. "Thank you, Grandfather. I am Eve."

"I am Beat. Eke exaggerates somewhat, but we did prove to be compatible. She's a fine girl.

This is my son Beau."

Eve turned her gaze on Beau. "I have seen you perform. The best drummer in the tournament."

Beau was struck dumb. He was evidently smitten with her. That was understandable.

"Too bad we won't get to compete," Eve continued regretfully. "It would have been interesting."

Beau managed to squeeze out two words. "You'll win."

"No, you will. We're out of it."

"Question," Eke said, surprised.

"We lost our drummer. His wife had an accident, and he had to go this morning. He'll miss the rest of the tournament, and so will we."

"But they lost their dancer," Eke said. "They're out too."

Eve's chagrin seemed genuine. "You too? This is dreadful. The tournament will be taken by a mediocrity."

Eke turned to Beat. "Grandpa—can't you fix it?"

Both Eve and Beau laughed ruefully. This was not normally the kind of thing that could be fixed. But Beat had a notion. "Some troupes have been eliminated. Surely they have spare drummers and dancers."

Eve and Beau shook their heads in unison. "Not good ones, Dad. And there'd be no rapport."

"Could you drum for Eve?"

Beau was surprised. "I guess I could. She's got the step. But she's the competition."

Eve was intrigued. "I think I could follow his cadence; he's not just any drummer. But would our troupes go for it?"

Beat addressed his son. "Let your two troupes make a deal: yours will lend hers a good drummer, if hers will in turn lend yours a good dancer. It's better than forfeiting."

"Perfect!" Eke cried, clapping her hands.

Eve nodded. "You do the talking, Grandpa."

Beat smiled. "That much I can do, even in my dotage."

"You're no doat, Grandpa."

They all laughed. They went to Eve's troupe leader, a grizzled man. "Introduction," Beat said. "I am Beat."

"I am Goad. Weren't you a champion drummer in your day?"

"In my day. It seems that two troupes have a problem. One needs a drummer, the other a dancer. My son Beau will drum for you no fault if—"

"Done!" Goad exclaimed, catching on.

They went to Beau's troupe, and won a similar agreement from its leader, a man of middle age called Step.

"Let's get private and practice," Eve said to Beau. She led him willingly away.

"What if they both win?" Eke asked.

"I *am* a dolt!" Beat said, striking his forehead. "They probably will both win, if the competition is as weak as they have indicated. Then they'll have to compete against each other, or both forfeit."

"Doat, not dolt. Anyway, you're not either."

"Thank you, Eke. But we may just have postponed the problem."

"Could *we* do it?"

"Enter the tournament? Honey, neither of us is up to that. I'm well beyond my prime, and you're not yet in yours. Even if we were, your troupe already has a dancer, and my son's troupe has a drummer."

"I mean, could you drum for mine? Or I dance for yours?"

"Eke, my rapport is with you, not your mother, lovely as she is. And your rapport is with me, not my son. So even if we were each good enough, neither of us would be sufficient in such contexts, even if they allowed it. And we'd be on opposite teams, each helping the wrong one."

"Expletive! I didn't think of that. I'm the dolt."

"Never that, honey," he said, hugging her.

"Are we still in no fault?"

"I don't think so. That ended with the journey."

"I don't care. I love you anyway." She kissed him emphatically on the cheek.

"We're still going to have to part, after the tournament."

"Then we've got another day."

"Another day," he concluded, glad of it. "Though I never heard of unofficial no fault."

"We just invented it, Grandpa."

"We must have," he agreed.

"Let's go see how they're doing."

They tracked them down by the sound of the drum in a nearby glade. Beau was drumming well, as he always did, and Eve was heaven in motion. They were not perfect together, but were ironing out the inevitable miscues. They would surely be good enough on the morrow. Beat and Eke sat and watched, entranced.

"We can do it," Beau said as they finished the session. "She's so good."

"Speak for yourself," Eve told him. She was breathing hard after the effort, and that made her prettier yet.

"What if you win for both troupes?" Eke asked.

The two looked at each other, chagrined. "We can't split now," Eve said. "We're just getting it together."

"We'll have to draw lots," Beau said. "For who defaults."

She nodded. "At least one of our troupes will win—and both of us."

"Both of us," he agreed. Still, it seemed like half a loaf.

"I wish we could have competed honestly," Eve said. "I mean, its great working with you, Beau, but I'd have liked to settle the championship flat out."

"Me too. Maybe next year."

"Next year," she agreed.

They had to separate for the evening meal, though it was evident that none of them wanted to. They had to make a show of joining their own troupes.

"Where will I ever find a wife half the woman Eve is?" Beau asked dreamily. He would have to marry within a year.

"Where will I ever find a granddaughter like Eke?"

"Realization: we're both in love."

"And both in no fault."

"If I could even drum for her, beyond this. Just to be near her."

"Just to be near her," Beat agreed.

"At last we have a night and a day."

"Night?"

"The tournament dance, Dad. Mixing's encouraged."

Beat had forgotten the social aspect. "That will be nice."

Indeed it was nice. All the troupe members gathered, and by convention the men danced only with the women of other troupes, not their own. There was a line for Eve, of course, but she insisted on doing every third dance with Beau. This was not to tease him, but to better familiarize herself with his nature. It made a difference in the performance, especially at competitive level. Drummers and dancers had to understand each other's nuances, in order to raise a good performance to a superlative one.

Beat danced with Eke. He was really too old for such activity, but she hugged him close and extended her healing power, and that gave him energy. "I wish I could keep you, Grandpa."

"I wish I could keep you, Eke."

"Now I know how it was with Mom and Dad. They couldn't let no fault go."

"Fortunately they didn't have to."

"But we do," she said sadly.

The dance ended, and they went to their separate troupe camps. There would be one more day—then it would be over.

In the morning they held the semifinals. Each troupe had a number of acts, ranging from singing to comedy, and these were entertaining. But the high point was the drum dancing, and that was what decided the issue. Beau drummed for Eve's troupe, and it won readily; the other drummer and dancer were plainly outclassed, despite having worked together for years. Then Eve danced for Beau's troupe, and again they won handily. At each stage they improved another notch. Beat had never seen a better dancer, and knew that his son had never played better. Not only had they ironed out the miscues, they had integrated surprisingly well considering their brief association. It seemed that they had been destined to be together in this respect, and finally had found each other.

But now came the crisis. Two troupes, one team. Which troupe would get it all? Which one would have to default?

The two troupe leaders came together, consulting before setting up the lots. Neither looked satisfied.

"Grandpa," Eke wailed.

She wanted him to fix it, again. Spurred by that need, he had an inspiration. "Idea," he said.



"You can draw a bunny from a cap?" Goad inquired sourly.

"Perhaps. Which would you prefer: to win by lot, or lose by being outperformed?"

"Rhetorical. I want to compete."

"Agreement," Step said.

"I may be able to provide a credible drummer and dancer, not of the caliber of Beau and Eve, but with aspects of interest. Perhaps sufficient to allow an honorable loss, with an outside chance for victory."

"No team can beat those two," Goad said, and Step nodded agreement.

"But they are newly formed and have performed twice today. Their edge could fade; they could make an error. That would give a fresh team a chance."

"Outside chance," Goad agreed sourly.

"Decide who gets Beau and Eve together. The other gets the new team. There will be a contest, and it may be a remarkable one in some respects, whoever wins."

The two shrugged. "Odd for the choice," Goad said.

They threw fingers. Goad threw one, and Step threw two. Goad got the choice. "Mine," he said, beckoning Beau and Eve.

Step turned to Beat. "Now produce your team," he said with resignation.

"A former champion, and a future champion," Beat said. "I will drum for Eke."

"Humor? You were the best, but you are long out of it, and she's a child."

"We can do it," Eke said gladly. "We have rapport."

"All I promised was a creditable showing," Beat said. "And historians will take note of my final competitive performance, and her first competitive performance. That may not be as sweet as a victory, but it's something."

"I wish I had won the lot," Step muttered as he turned away.

Eke fetched her good dancing shoes, and Beat got his superior drum, Thunder. It was like an old friend, long neglected but faithfully waiting for him. He felt guilty for neglecting it, just because he could no longer take it to its ultimate. Their equipment would not let them down.

The troupes lined up for the playoff. The opposing players met and hailed each other, per the tradition. When Beat met Beau, he said "If your team loses, let it never be said it was for lack of a drummer."

"It will never be said," his son agreed grimly. They both knew that however it had been in the past, Beat could not come close to Beau now. Not if Beau tried—and he was honor bound to do his best, though he was playing against his own troupe.

"Oh honey, I love you," Eve said to Eke. "I would do anything for you. But I can't give you this."

"You won't have to, Mom," the girl said. But she looked uncertain. She had performed before the folk of the caravan, but this was different. This was competitive, before an audience that knew the difference between potential and mastery.

The troupes retreated to their sides. While the other acts proceeded, Beat talked to Eke. "You are better than you think," he said. "You can make your mother sweat for her win. Do it. An honorable loss is no shame. Make them applaud you."

"Give me the cadence, and I'll do it," she said bravely.

"A fair showing," Beat said. "That's all. You can do it. I will be there for you."

"I can do it," she echoed faintly.

Their turn came. Beau and Eve took the stage on their side, and Beat and Eke on theirs. The two drummers were near the sides, their backs to their troupe lines, facing the center. The two dancers stood before them, facing each other. This was not to be free form; the dances were fixed, so that direct comparison could be made. They would resemble mirror images, at first. Until one faltered or misstepped.

The audience was seated around the stage, entirely surrounding it. They would indicate the victor by their applause, if there was no error or other failure on the part of one of the teams. But it was unlikely to come to that; the finale was not merely a contest of skill, but of endurance, as the cadence accelerated until one or the other lost it.

The referee lifted his hand, then brought it sharply down. Both drums started together, and both dancers did simple steps. The contest was on.

The initial cadence was slow and straightforward. The opposing drums sounded almost as one, and the two dancers stepped in unison, matching each other exactly. The woman and the girl—but most eyes were on the woman. Her legs were perfectly formed, and showed to advantage beneath her skirt when she flicked her feet back and forth and kicked high in the air. The eyes of all the men in the audience were locked on her. But the girl was doing the same motions.

After the initial dance, the referee signaled Eve. Beat's drum went silent, and Eke's motion ceased. It was time for turns, so that the full focus of the audience could be on one and then the other. Beau sounded the cadence, and Eve danced briefly. Then they stopped, perfectly together.

The referee glanced at Eke. Immediately Beat resumed drumming, matching the prior cadence exactly, and the girl danced the same number, precisely. Members of the audience nodded; the old man and the child did know the routine. They completed it and stopped together.

The referee signaled both. Each repeated the same beat and dance. Father and son drummed

together, and mother and daughter danced simultaneously, so that they could be compared, their techniques judged. They were identical.

Then it was Eke's turn to initiate a sequence. She and Beat did the second prescribed form alone, followed by Eve and Beau, and then they did it together. It was more advanced than the first, and prettier to watch. Not the least of it was the symmetry of the two dancers, so similar except for age and size. Their feet touched the floor together; they turned together, and kicked identically. Beat was focusing on his drumming, but he was aware how esthetically positive this was for all who watched. The beautiful woman and the pretty child, together.

They moved on through the required forms, the cadence accelerating. The woman performed them perfectly, of course. But so did the girl, and as they progressed, more eyes turned to Eke. She was doing it! She was matching the woman step for step, with perfect timing, and though no one would care to say so, she was not without a certain nascent sex appeal herself. It was not just appearance; her shoes were tapping the floorboards, the sound verifying the rapid contacts. The dance was as much sound as sight, an experience for two senses.

They entered the second series of dances. The drums shifted from straightforward to syncopated, enabling more intricate stepping. Still the legs moved like mirror images, and the taps sounded as one. The beat became more intricate, with choreographed irregularities, but the dancers never faltered.

When they entered the third course, more eyes were on the girl. This was advanced; how far could she take it before tripping or stumbling? When was the old man going to falter on his drum? A fault by either would wipe out both. This was the point at which the prior contestants had gone wrong. They could lose it here and not be ashamed. Yet the girl showed no sign of tiring or losing her concentration, and the old man had held out better than anyone, including himself, had expected.

Beat looked past Eke to Eve, and saw the woman smiling. It might have been for the joy of the dance, but he thought it was because she was pleased to see her daughter doing so well. They were rivals now, but what mother wished her child less than the best? The longer Eke continued, the better Eve liked it, regardless of the inevitable end.

They completed the forms, and there had been no misstep. All the audience was watching raptly; this was much more of a show than they had expected. They were surprised and pleased. Who would have thought the child would do so well? She had already made a creditable showing; there was no longer a question of dishonor. Even the troupe master, Step, was half smiling; this was well beyond his expectation.

Now came the finale. This was a tricky step when slow, and its quickening cadence would bring a decision, if only from sheer fatigue. The speed would increase until one dancer or the other lost the cadence. They did not take turns on this one; it was together throughout, until the decision.

It started—and Eke performed the step flawlessly, exactly as he had drilled her, never thinking she would have to use it in competition this soon. Never dreaming it would be against the finest dancer of the region—her mother. But she responded to his beat, knowing his touch. She could do it as fast as he could take it, at least for a little while.

But as the tempo quickened, Beat's hands began to lose their power. His fingers were going

slowly numb. He had drummed too long in one sitting, and his age was telling. He was the one who was losing it. Irony!

The girl's cadence, powered by the drum, began to fall behind the woman's. Eve's drum was strong; it was Eke's drum that was fading. It was not the girl but the old man who was the liability. Why hadn't he better anticipated this? It was his own troupe that was going to lose because it didn't have a drummer!

The referee glanced in their direction. He signaled a fault. Three faults would disqualify them. That would finish it. The audience focused entirely on the girl now, seeing the approaching end. It had been a good show, a very good show, but it was almost over.

Eke had faced Eve throughout. Now she turned, still dancing, and faced her drummer. She caught Beat's eye, and held his gaze. He felt the healing power come, entering his eyes and spreading through his body until it reached his hands. She was lending him strength to continue!

The referee frowned, but did not intervene. Normally the drummer supported the dancer, but there was no rule forbidding the reversal. The audience stared, an expression of wonder passing across its massed face; this was really new.

Beat's hands regained power. His beat increased, becoming stronger and faster. The cadence accelerated until it matched that of the opposition drum. They were together again.

Still the girl's feet moved, and her tapping continued, ever faster. Behind her the mother continued, matching it. Then a sigh passed through the audience; this was faster than most of the people had seen before—and not only was the child doing it, she was pouring her strength into her drummer.

It couldn't last. The healing strength faltered, and so did the cadence and the feet. Eke couldn't carry him while dancing at competitive level. No one could. The referee looked at the girl and signaled the second fault. Still, it had been a remarkable exhibition, as the surrounding reactions indicated.

Then it reversed again. The strength of the healing increased to beyond its prior level, and with it the drum cadence—and the feet. Now they were performing at championship level! But how was it possible?

Yet it continued. Beat's gaze was fixed on the girl, as he drew the wonderful power from her, but his peripheral vision indicated that his fingers were moving so rapidly they could barely be seen—and so were the girl's feet. The sound was a rapid staccato, tens of taps per second, impossibly fast.

And Eve began to lose the cadence. The referee glanced at her, calling a fault. She had been pushed to her limit, amazingly. But then it changed again, and Eve regained her power, matching the cadence. The mother, too, had resources to recover, when pressed. The beat increased, and she was with it. But this couldn't last much longer.

A new sound came. For a moment Beat was perplexed, not recognizing it. Then he understood: it was the thunder! He was drumming thunder! It started low but expanded to fill the glade. It shook the very clouds in the sky, filling the world with its power. How could it be? He had seldom done this

well even in his prime.

The audience was standing now, all eyes fixed on the dance. No one believed it, for it was unbelievable. Many of them had never heard the thunder before. But it held them rapt, in a delirium of participation. Yet still the cadence increased. There seemed to be a glow about his blurring hands and Eke's blurring feet. There was nothing in the universe except that sound and that glow, pulsing together, shaking the very fundament.

Then Beat fathomed it. He was throwing his life force into it, summoning his talent at his prime, supported by Eke's healing. His very heart was in the beat; it was fibrillating, for the cadence was too fast for any normal beat. He was giving the last of his life power to the drum. He was dying, but he was doing it in rare style.

Then it ended. Not Eke's feet. It was Eve who finally lost the cadence, falling behind her own drum. She slowed, could not recover, and stopped. Only Eke was left, dancing at astonishing speed, her hair flinging out, spittle flinging from her mouth.

The referee signaled, gesturing toward the girl. She had won. The audience burst into applause as Beat collapsed over his drum, stifling the thunder. He was finished.

Eke flung herself forward, catching hold of him from in front. "I did it! I did it!" she exclaimed as she hugged him.

"You did it," he agreed weakly. "You gave me your strength. I was failing." And he was still failing; even her healing could not sustain him now. He was an old man who had badly overextended himself. It was all he could do to answer her.

She burst into tears. "And now it's over!" She did not yet realize how literally that applied to him.

Eve crossed to join them. "Not yet, I think." She sat down behind Beat, her raised knees on either side of him, and took him into her embrace. He fell helplessly back against her bosom, and felt her encompassing healing strength as her long hair fell across his shoulders and chest. She was restoring him by the warm contact of her body, her power greater than that of her daughter. His heart stabilized, returning to its normal rhythm. She was denying him death. "Watch," she murmured in his ear.

They looked. Something else was happening. The referee summoned the two troupe masters. "You have a protest?" he asked Goad.

"I can't."

The referee looked at Step. "You have a rebuttal?"

"I can't either."

"Well I can, and I do," the referee said. "I want to know exactly what happened here."

"The girl healed her drummer," Step said.

"At a distance?"

"It is possible, when there is true love given and received. She had a right."

The referee turned to Goad. "What of the woman?"

"She healed her daughter."

"At a distance? From behind?"

"A mother truly loves her child."

"And thereby cost you the match. She gave it away."

Beat tried to sit up, startled. "What?" Suddenly he understood why Eke had recovered after drawing her fault.

"Peace," Eve murmured in his ear, holding him back.

"Negation," Goad said. "She kept her strength."

"She couldn't keep it and give it away!"

"She drew from her own drummer."

The referee—and Beat—looked. There was Beau, slumped over his drum.

"Uncle!" Eke cried. She lurched up and ran to Beau. In a moment she was hugging him—and he was starting to recover, as her healing took hold.

"I don't understand," Beat said dazedly.

"We can heal anybody by direct contact," Eve said. "As I am healing you. I will not let you break my daughter's heart by dying. But only true love enables healing at a distance. My daughter loves you—and you love her."

"But it's no fault. We must separate."

"And your son loves me—and I love him, in my fashion. In the context of the drummer/dancer relationship, that enabled me to draw power from him. I recovered, and sent it to my daughter, who sent it to you. It was a chain."

The referee spoke to the troupe masters, but it also answered Beat's question. "So the energy was even, between mother and daughter. Neither dancer had more."

The two troupe masters nodded.

"So then the dancing was fair."

They nodded.

"And the girl won."

Again they agreed.

"Very well. Decision stands. No protest."

The audience renewed its applause.

They moved on to the announcements. "Champion dancer: Eke. Champion drummer: Beat. Champion troupe: Step." Yet that hardly seemed to matter. The other aspects were more significant than who was declared winner of one contest.

"But if you had held back the healing, you could have won the dance," Beat said, bemused.

"I couldn't let my daughter fall. I had to support her. And it was even, because of your son. You taught her well; she beat me fairly."

"Not *that* well. She never danced that well for me."

"You never drummed like that before, for her. That spectacular thunder enabled her. We couldn't match *that*."

"But I gave out. She had to support me."

"And we had the chain," she agreed. "This will surely be remembered as one of the more remarkable tournaments."

"Not just for the dancing," he agreed.

"Eke loves you. I must support her in that too. This must not remain no fault. You must adopt her as your granddaughter."

"But our lives go different ways."

"Not any more, I think."

"Really different. I will be dead in a year or two. What kind of relationship is that? I don't want to do that to her."

"You can live to see her grown and married."

"Hardly! I can barely travel. You can feel my weakness."

"And you can feel my strength. We can preserve you, if you join us. You are going nowhere without us, by your own statement. Isn't adoption better than death?"

She was right. He had no future on his own. Her healing power was restoring him to vigor, if not

to youth. A daily touch like that could maintain him for a long time. "I do love her," he said.

"I want to keep Beau as my drummer. He's the best I have encountered."

"Eve, he's seventeen. He's impressionable. And you—"

"And I am twenty eight, and married, and a mother. I know. But we can go on to larger championships together. We'll work it out with the troupes. This is too good an opportunity to let go. I will treat him right."

"He'll have to marry in a year. You have already spoiled him for that."

"I think not. In time he will meet my little sister. She's not a dancer, but she has her ways."

Beat pictured a woman halfway between Eve and Eke, Beau's age, with the healing power. She would surely have her way with Beau, regardless of the rest.

Beau got up and walked across to join them, holding Eke's hand. Beat knew that she was sustaining him with her own healing. The circle was complete; Eke was returning the life energy to its source. Beau was young; he recovered faster from depletion than Beat did.

"Tell them," Eve murmured.

"I will adopt Eke as my granddaughter," he said.

"Grandpa!" Eke screamed gladly, diving on him.

"And I suppose that means Eve as my daughter," Beat said.

Behind him, Eve shook her head. "Negation."

He tried to look at her, but she remained too close to see, her warm energy still restoring him. "Question?"

"Why should I travel no fault with my brother?"

Beau looked perplexed, then faint, as the implication registered. Yes, Eve was a decade his senior, and married, but she normally traveled no fault with her drummer. She was the region's most beautiful woman. He could have her, no fault, while their professional relationship lasted. All else paled into insignificance. Until he met her little sister.

"I think you have captured us," Beat said.

"I love my daughter. I love my business. You make both complete."

"And you make us complete," he said.

"Oh, Grandpa, stop lolling about," Eke said. "We have things to do."



Apparently they did. She probably wanted to introduce him to the other aspects of her family. Would they be drumming and dancing together in the future? Surely so, though not at the level they had just achieved.

Eve let him go, and Beat climbed to his feet with a good deal more energy than he was accustomed to. He had thought he was undertaking his last journey. Instead he had found a new existence. It promised to be relatively dull, for the coming decade, before his life and her innocent childhood faded, but it would be a joyful dullness.

\* \* \*

The illusion show ended. Havoc shook his head. "There was some romance in that," he said, not caring to admit how strongly the story had affected him.

"Oh come on, Havoc! You can't have a story without a little bit of it, and there wasn't much. The central theme is Grandfather/Granddaughter. I played fair."

"If you played fair, you wouldn't try to seduce me with a suggestive story line."

"I didn't!"

"A young man only a year or so younger than I am, and a beautiful woman not much younger than you, setting up a no fault situation?"

She looked stricken. "I never thought of that! Apology. Read my mind."

He didn't need to. "You had forgotten that aspect when you chose that show."

"Acquiescence. But you're right: it is there. I shouldn't have run that show. Contrition."

"You yield victory to me?"

"I yield, Havoc," she said sadly. "I did not mean to cheat."

Now he read her mind. She was genuinely sorry, and intended to honor her loss. There would be no more attempts at seduction. Yet her love for him was unabated.

He sighed. "Mischievous. You impress me more in your yielding than in your scheming. You win."

"Confusion."

"You have your no fault affair."

"Humor?"

"Come here."

She came to him uncertainly. He embraced her, then kissed her. "Let me take you rapidly, this first time, for my passion is overwhelming my reason. Thereafter you have leave to work your wiles

on me at your leisure."

"Havoc, I yielded. I love you, but I yielded. If this is teasing—"

He bore her down, almost ripping at her clothing. She did not impede him, but neither did she take any initiative. In a moment he was on her and in her, climaxing explosively.

"You mean it," she said with wonder. "You took me."

"And hereafter you may take me. No fault."

"Of course," she agreed faintly. Neither of them pretended that she had gotten anything from the sex itself other than the proof of his acquiescence to the affair. That victory from seeming defeat was filling her with its own type of rapture. She would have her sexual delights soon enough. "But what caused this change in you? I had thought the game lost."

"That's why. I don't want to be dominated by a woman. I want to retain control of my nature. You yielded that control. Now I can indulge with you."

"I think I don't quite understand, but whatever you want of me is yours."

Havoc wasn't sure he quite understood either, but he had made the decision. Probably it was a combination of factors: his need to divert himself from Gale, Symbol's intelligence and beauty and experience, her absolute love for him, her proximity and convenience, and the warm emotion generated by the Dancer show. He had been on guard against direct seduction, but not against wholesome emotion. He wanted to do something nice for her, and this was it. "Take me."

"Oh Havoc, I will. My way."

"Your way."

She kissed him, and held him, and stroked him. "I am pretending you are mine."

"I am yours, no fault."

"I am pretending it is real. Havoc, I have never been in love before."

"Not with King Deal?" he asked, surprised.

"I liked him, but it was too much of a business, being his mistress. Filling a prescribed role. I didn't want to hurt the Lady Aspect. She's a fine woman."

"So I found."

"So I really wasn't free to truly love him. Then, thinking myself immune, I encountered you, unguarded, and by the time I recognized the danger, it was too late." She kissed him again, her passion genuine. That was the wonder of it.

"Apology," he murmured. "I would not have brought you this kind of distress, had I known."

"It just happened; we both know that. But there is a certain joy in it too. Just the experience of being in love is glorious. It makes of me a seemingly innocent girl, instead of what I am."

She stripped down, becoming invisible. She stripped him, and addressed him so tenderly that he had to respond despite the recent abatement of his lust. This sex had so much gentle caring it was a different thing, unhurried, unurgent, beautiful. Slowly they made love, and it was remarkable because it was not what he had ever expected of her. She did indeed seem like an innocent girl.

Finally they slept, embraced. They woke holding hands, and slept again. It was an emulation of love for him, and true love for her. He regretted that differential, but he could not give her more. He loved Gale, and was captive of the Red Glamor; he was not free to love elsewhere. Perhaps it was parallel to the way Symbol had not been free to love King Deal. Symbol knew this and accepted it, and that would have to do.

Eventually they got up and dressed, rested. "Of course I'll pretend it's just sex, when we return," she said. "That won't fool any of the mind readers, but it will do for strangers. Appreciation, Havoc, for allowing it."

"It is not what I expected."

"When has anything been what we expected?" She kissed him again, asking no more. That made it better; Symbol in love was lovable in a way she had not been before.

At last the roar of the inruption abated. The Black Chroma couple returned. "You are secure?" Trigue inquired.

"Secure," Havoc agreed. "However, we—"

"Of course," Intrigue said, feeling his spent genital. "Closer, but not yet."

"You're not annoyed that—"

"She can have anything she wants, except the one seed. I will take it when the time comes."

Havoc did not argue the case. The woman evidently knew what she was doing.

Their journey resumed. The landscape outside had changed, as the force of the inruption ripped trees and hills from their moorings and replaced them with others drawn in from farther out. But this made the center more accessible, and they reached it in a few hours.

The coordinates brought them to a depression with a door in the bottom. Everything permanent in the zone was below the surface. There was a ring-shaped tunnel that circled the central hole; this was as close to the inverted cone as it was possible to get without being lost in it.

At one point was an altar with buttons on it, similar to the one Havoc had found in the Blue Chroma zone. He checked, and found a small twisted object in the third pocket. "What is it?"

"A lemniscate," Intrigue said.

"A Mobius Strip," Symbol said. "A twisted tape that theoretically has only one side."

Havoc put it in his mouth. "Two to go," he said.

"May we inquire your mission?" Trigue asked.

"Not if you desire a true answer," Havoc said. "Be assured it means no mischief to you or your Chroma."

There was a rumble. Intrigue peeked out of the tunnel. "Not safe to depart. We must wait."

"We can wait on the other side," Trigue said, glancing at Symbol. She smiled and accompanied him around the bend. She had by no means forgotten her role with him.

Havoc looked at Intrigue. She came to check his scrotum again. "Not yet," she said.

"It needs to be before we depart this zone," he said.

"Affirmation. Rest." She settled down on the floor.

She remained somewhat of an enigma. He lay down beside her, and slept.

He woke when the rumbling stopped. It was time to move out. Intrigue was already on her feet and waiting by the door as Trigue and Symbol appeared.

They moved out. Again the outer landscape had changed, though not as much as before. Apparently intrusions were fairly frequent, and the natives simply waited them out. They still made Havoc nervous, but at least he and Symbol were now on their way out of this dread zone.

They were moving well, when another intrusion threatened. "This is probably minor," Trigue said. "But we had better be safe. Remain here until we verify the danger and the route." He indicated another buried campsite.

They entered, while the two Black Chroma folk remained outside. The chamber was quite similar to the prior one. "Fancy meeting you here, stranger," Symbol said. "Are you staying the night?"

"We don't know how long it will be."

"Agreement. Therefore let's not waste time." She kissed him.

"Haven't you just recently been satisfied?"

"Plumbed, not satisfied. Only you can do that. But you may simply hold me close, if you do not wish to do more."

He held her close, but the contact was inherently seductive. "Do you wish more?"

"I want everything you care to offer."

She didn't want to ask for it, but she did want it. He yielded, and immediately they stripped and were in the throes of lovemaking. There was something about the knowledge that she truly loved him that stimulated him to more urgent desire.

Then, of course, he remembered. "Intrigue still hasn't taken her seed. I really should have waited."

"Too late, Havoc," she said, smiling. "I just got the last of it."

Then their guides returned. "It is safe," Trigue reported. "The way is clear, and no intrusion at this time."

Havoc, embarrassed, sought to clothe himself, but Intrigue stepped in first, once again touching his genital. "It is time," she said.

"Now?" Havoc asked. "I just—I can't oblige you right now."

Intrigue glanced at her husband. "Take her elsewhere for the moment."

Trigue beckoned Symbol, who was scrambling into her own clothing. They left the shelter.

"If I had known, I would have waited," Havoc said awkwardly. "I do mean to honor my commitment to deliver your fourth. But—"

She ignored his protests. In a moment she was naked, and standing before him, beautifully black. Then she seemed to implode. Somehow he was brought to his feet and to her, his flaccid member drawn into her, involuntarily expanding. A single thrust, a single pulse, and he was jetting into her. Then, as quickly, it was done, and he was out of her and stepping away, dazed.

"Appreciation," she said, stepping back into her clothing. "Now we must travel before the next intrusion."

It seemed that was all there was to it. He had thought himself sexually exhausted, but she had taken the seed she wanted, and was done with him. Now he had a better understanding of what Symbol had described. These people did reflect their environment.

They left the shelter. Trigue and Symbol were there; she was somewhat mussed, and Havoc knew she had had implosive sex with the man. She was honoring their deal to keep him entertained, and was versatile enough to do it at any time. The fact that she loved Havoc did not handicap her sexual ability elsewhere.

"I have it," Intrigue announced.

"Excellent," Trigue said, not sounding entirely pleased. In that respect he was a typical man: glad to have relations with other women, but ambiguous about what other relations his wife might have.

"So you are finished with Hayseed?" Symbol asked, interested for her own reason.

"Yes. But you are not finished with Trigue. Keep him away from me."

"Away?"

"I need two days undisturbed for the seed to set. Thereafter I can handle him."

"I will serve the post," Symbol said, bemused, as was Havoc. It seemed that reproduction was methodical in this Chroma, at least as far as the women were concerned, and distinguished from sexual expression.

In another hour they reached another ring of shelters. It was getting late. They had an evening meal, and settled down in separate chambers, Havoc with Intrigue, and Symbol with Trigue. Havoc knew Symbol would rather have been with him, but she was doing her part to fulfill their bargain with their guides.

"Question."

Intrigue glanced at him. "Affirmation. I tracked the seed as it advanced, and when it was ready, I summoned it. I will have a very fine son, in due course."

"In due course," Havoc echoed.

"I did not want any baby not of Trigue, but the law of the fourth required it. Yet I confess I like this one. He will be my pride, a very fine specimen. What is your secret?"

This bypassed his comprehension. "Confusion."

"You are the smartest, handsomest, healthiest man I have encountered. Your woman is similar for her gender. I have little faith in coincidence. How came you two to be?"

Oh. "We are changelings. We are crafted to be superior representatives of our species. I do not know our origin, other than that it derives from the Temple."

"And this is your present quest," she said, guessing accurately.

"Agreement. I am curious about my true origin."

"I wish you success, and not merely because I like you. I would like to know the grandsire of my son." Then she kissed him without suction, and lay back to sleep.

The next day they resumed travel, and this time made it safely to the canal station. Symbol took Trigue aside one more time. She was completing her job: guaranteeing that the man would not have much of a hunger for sex for the rest of that day. This aspect, too, was new to Havoc's experience; he had not before heard of a wife requiring such a service of another woman. But it did make sense in this context.

They got into the craft and began the trip back. It had been an adventure in more than the travel sense.

"And it is not yet over," Symbol murmured as they got up speed. "Trigue may be sexually exhausted, but I am not. That will be *your* challenge."

"Suppose I merely hold you and kiss you and whisper sweet ciphers in your ear?"

"That will do, if you can convince me you mean it."

"There is always a catch," he grumbled. Then they both laughed.

"It was almost like old times," Symbol remarked somewhat later. It was warm, and she had removed her jacket and halter, so that her swathed head seemed to float above her empty skirt.

"Surprise: with King Deal?"

"Yes. When the Lady Aspect asked me to distract him so that she could bear her children in peace."

Havoc had not thought of that. He had considered a mistress to be a function of a man's desire for more varied sex, and surely she was that. But now he appreciated that she served the wife as well as the husband. Not all of a man's escapades were necessarily his own idea. "He did not suspect?"

"Oh, he knew. But he loved his wife, so he let me divert him. I did my best. And of course he had chosen me because my body pleased him, and so did my mind."

"And if I could marry Gale, you could do the same for her."

"Perhaps. To a degree."

"Question?"

"Havoc, I have been denied marriage and family these twelve years. Originally I disparaged those, but now I crave both. Only my inconvenient love for you prevents me from retiring as anyone's mistress and finding some nice dull ordinary man to marry and provide with three or four children. By your leave I will soon do that anyway. I could still serve as your mistress, and would gladly do that. But I would on occasion be with child. You would need another mistress then."

This was another insight. "You have my leave, of course. You could have your fourth by me."

"I want it! But there are two buzzes in that face cream: you can't marry Gale, and you must not sire a child by another changeling."

"Expletive! But I could still have you as my mistress when you are not with child."

She faced him seriously. "Havoc, I would gladly serve. But you would have Gale as your mistress. Therein lies my loss."

"Confusion." She had shown him how he could after all have Gale, and how imperfect it would be. He could neither marry her nor sire children by her. He could only love her—just as Symbol could only love him. Now he felt Symbol's pain for himself. Tears were stinging his eyes.

"Life is cruel," she murmured, bringing his head in to her comforting invisible bare bosom. This, too, was a function of a mistress he had not before appreciated. "But Bijou is worthy of marriage."

Indeed she was, and she loved him too. She had held him similarly. She was not a changeling, so could safely bear his children. "It fits together so nicely, but leaves me married to a worthy woman I do not love, making a mistress of the one I do love, and cutting you off from that aspect of your love I could otherwise oblige. Is this what it means to be king?"

"Affirmation, Havoc," she said, stroking his hair.

"Frustration," he said into her full right breast.

"Empathy." She hugged him closer. "Adoration."

"Appreciation."

"Appreciation for letting me love you."

And love was the problem throughout. Would this mission provide a satisfactory answer? One that would allow him to marry Gale and give Symbol her fourth? He had no certainty of that, but it was his best hope.

There was a shimmer. "Come in, Swale," Symbol murmured, not releasing Havoc.

Havoc felt the change as the succubus took over. "So she succeeded," Symbol's mouth said.

"She yielded, and I yielded," Havoc said. "Now it is true; she is my mistress."

"And I missed it! Why didn't you summon me for the event?"

"I didn't realize it was happening. How is Gale?"

"I'm on my way there. May I tell her this news?"

"Tell her I got my object, and Symbol got me. But if there turns out to be any way I can have Gale—"

"Understood. Symbol, can I have a shot at him? There's no one I'd rather—" She paused, evidently receiving Symbol's negation. "Oh, well. Some other time. Congratulations."

"Parting," Havoc said.

"Gone." And she was.

"Should I have let her?" Symbol asked.

"No. While you are my mistress, I am faithful to you, as is feasible."

She hugged him closer. "Oh, Havoc!" Her tears flowed.

Thus held, he drifted to sleep.



"Havoc."

He woke, his face still supported by the unseen pillow of her bosom. He remembered again how Bijou had held him that way; it seemed to be a woman thing, just as it was a man thing to like it. "Question?"

"We approach a station, and there seem to be people there."

Oh. There was no need to advertise her invisibility or their relationship. He sat up, and she re-garbed her upper portion. By the time they reached the station, they were both in good order.

An old man and a young girl stood there. "Shades of prophecy!" Havoc whispered. "The drummer and the dancer."

But it turned out to be more mundane. "We need a lift to the next station," the old man said. "We lack fair exchange."

That explained why they hadn't gone before. "Ride with us, no fault," Havoc said generously.

"Appreciation." The two followed as Havoc pushed the craft along the canal between Chroma zones.

As they rode along the renewed ice, the likeness of prophecy quickly dissipated. The two were indeed grandfather and granddaughter, but the man was a garrulous bore and the girl an impertinent snipe. They were villagers with little interest in the arts. Both stank of dirt and sweat. He scratched and belched frequently and she squirmed and farted without concern. It reminded Havoc of himself and Gale before they came to Triumph City and learned the affectations of civilization. Havoc had been bemused by all the unnatural restrictions "polite" society imposed, but now he realized that the new habits had become part of him.

He could not return to Trifle Village, with or without Gale. He was no longer of the backwoods culture. He had been spoiled by civilization. It would be similar with Gale. It was not the trappings of power that had corrupted him, for he had hardly indulged in them; it was those of the artificial city culture.

They came to the next station, and man and child departed with thanks. Havoc was relieved.

"No drummer, no dancer," Symbol said. "Yet they remind me oddly of someone."

"Of me, when I came to Triumph City," he said.

"Chagrin!" She blushed. It was not visible on her swathed face, but he felt it in her mind. "Apology."

Havoc laughed. "Needless. You tamed me, you civilized me. Now I am of your culture. I was as dismayed by their manners as you were. Now I prefer the illusion of courtly drummer and dancer and no fault love to the reality of hick barbarism."

"Yet it was your barbarian drive that captivated me."

"Argument. It was my changeling nature that captivated you, just as was the case with King Deal. We changelings are drawn to each other, whatever our cultures or Chroma."

"Defeat," she agreed. "Oh, Havoc—"

He took her in his arms. "I am Beau Drummer. You are Eve Dancer. We are traveling no fault."

"Delight!"

And so it was. He had accused her of trying to seduce him obliquely with that sub-theme in the illusion show; she had been innocent of that, but now it was a comfortable analogy. The story match in ages was good, the match in feelings reversed, but still applicable. One liked, the other loved, and they both knew it and accepted it; this was in part what no fault was for. They made most passionate love, as the craft sailed on along the frozen canal.

## Chapter 6—Trial

Gale walked with Throe to the ferry. "No fault?"

"No offense."

"None!" she agreed, relieved. She knew his problem: he loved Ennui, and did not want to have sexual relations with a friend of hers. Neither did Gale. "But it may be necessary with strangers."

"I don't care about strangers."

Again, she understood. No fault allowed strangers to return to that condition after the association was done. People who knew each other and worked together did not have that option, so sexual interaction was more complicated. It could be done, but needed to be more carefully considered.

Still, she teased him. "Those Air Chroma maidens—you evidently had a time."

"And you want to know all about it."

"I'm a woman."

"That's what they said." Then he glanced obliquely at her. "There is something that may be relevant."

"Interest."

"The fourth Air Chroma sister is a changeling. She can see reality through illusion. It occurs to me that this could be a changeling ability."

"Now that *is* interesting. I never had experience with much illusion until I left Trifle Village, and never thought to try to see through it. Is this confined to Air Chroma illusion, or does it apply to any

illusion?"

"Ignorance. Conjecture: if it is general to changelings, it is general to illusion."

"I must try it as soon as convenient."

They walked to the fringe of the neighboring Blue Chroma zone, as this was in line with the coordinates. "How do we purchase passage?" Throe asked.

Gale touched her hammer dulcimer. "I am a songstress. I will sing a ballad of thwarted love. You can be the dumb lover."

"Are you remarking on my 'no offense'?"

She laughed, for it was humor. They were reading each other's minds, and he knew that she meant for him to be silent—dumb—while she sang the tale. Any third party might indeed take him for stupid, for passing up the chance to possess her no fault. They might yet relate that way together, if it became necessary to establish their identity as a couple, to spare them from uncomfortable sexual interactions elsewhere. Ennui was not a jealous woman, and would understand, but sex between them was really not advisable. They both truly preferred simply to be companions and friends.

"Affirmation," he said, answering her thought. "I must say that awkward as it was to learn, mind reading has become an advantage for me. It was this that enabled me to relate to Ennui, and she to me, both knowing our true minds. And it is similarly comfortable with you."

"You appreciate my personal and sexual appeal, without needing to take advantage of either," she agreed. "And I do value your thought that I could take you at any time I wished, if I wished. Fortunately you know that I do not wish, as Havoc is my only love. But your interactions with those Air Chroma girls are still swirling in your mind, and that narration will wile away some dull time."

"One made note of the fact she was my daughter's age, as she seduced me, telling me I reminded her of her father."

"Delightful girl!"

"Yes, actually. Teasing can heighten reaction."

"Are you familiar with 'Barbary Ellen'?"

"Thread's favorite." Thread was his seamstress daughter, two years older than Gale.

"Then you should have no trouble with the role."

"All I have to do is die."

"So you can speak your dying lines."

"Affirmation."

They were at the staging area for caravans, but there was no caravan at the moment. So they approached the keeper. "We would like swift passage across your zone," Throe said. "How may this be arranged?"

The blue man eyed Gale. "What is your offer?"

Gale showed her dulcimer. "A sad song."

"Insufficient."

"Wager."

He was interested. "Terms?"

"Let two men and their families hear my song as we travel, then vote. If they find it insufficient, I will make myself available no fault to two of the men, to cover my passage and that of my companion."

He smiled. "Four men."

"Three."

"Done."

She nodded. She had proffered her willing body as collateral, but this was academic, as she would not have to pay it. The blue man did not know that she was a professional songstress whose performance would dazzle all but the dullest listeners.

The blue man snapped his fingers. Four blue birds flew to perch on his lifted hands and head. He chirped, and they flew off. "Use the facilities while you wait," he suggested.

They did so. Soon the ground shook as a giant blue creature stomped toward the station. It was a sphinx, with nine massive legs and a globular body on which perched a little tower. The creature entered the clearing, then slowly settled to the ground, gazing in the blue man's direction. Its head was vaguely human, though this was a coincidence; its kind had existed on this planet long before any humans colonized it. "At your serrvice," it said slowly.

"Company of fourteen to cross the zone," the blue man told it.

"May I waaatch?"

"As you please."

The sphinx nodded. Then one of its eyes fixed on Gale. *I know you, Gale.*

Startled, Gale returned its gaze. She had for the moment forgotten how advanced Blue Chroma animals could be. She had encountered truth-sniffing, talking dogs, and a telepathic blue dragon, but had not been thinking along such lines at the moment. *How do you know me?*

*You carry Mentor Blue Dragon's seed.*

So she did. *You know Mentor?*

*And Yellow Spider. You are a good human female.*

*Yellow! How is he?* For that was the tiny seven-legged spider she had rescued and protected until it grew large and protected her. When it killed a man who tried to rape her, it had had to flee to the wilderness.

*Aged. But you need fear no evil of his kind, in any Chroma. They value their own.*

*How do you know so much?*

*I am a sphinx.* And that of course was answer enough. Sphinxes never forgot anything; they were natural repositories of information. Any creature with knowledge of interest shared it with any sphinx it encountered. This was not generally known by human beings, who regarded them as convenient beasts of burden, but Gale had learned it from Mentor.

*I thank you, Sphinx.*

*Pleasure.*

*Do you wish information of me?*

*Affirmation.*

*Can you take it from my mind as we travel, respecting my privacies?*

*If you allow it.*

It understood that she could shield her mind. *I do.* She opened her mind to it. Further direct communication was not necessary; it would slowly absorb her memories without disturbing them or requiring her attention, and it would not embarrass or endanger her by sharing them frivolously. She had not encountered a sphinx before, but trusted Mentor's judgment in this respect. Mentor was her oath friend, and Havoc's, and they both owed their physical and mental competence to the blue dragon's training. The two dragon seeds had been infallible personal guides, and the failure of hers to buzz warning was another factor in her trust of the sphinx. The Sphinx of course knew this.

"That was some exchange," Throe murmured.

"Havoc and I value our animal contacts," she said. "They are in some respects superior to human contacts."

"Agreement. Havoc showed me this."

Meanwhile other blue people were appearing. They lifted a ramp to the base of the tower. "This way," a man said to Gale and Throe. Evidently all of them understood the deal. It was impressive what Blue Chroma folk could do with animals; the birds must have given them all the information they

needed.

They mounted the ramp. The tower was surprisingly spacious inside, with a small central stage and a ring of seats facing it. It was a miniature theater.

Soon there were three men, three women, and six children of mixed ages and genders watching the stage. There was a slight sensation of motion as the sphinx stood and walked. One huge eye appeared at a tower portal: the sphinx was watching. Gale knew it could proceed safely at speed at the same time; it had several other eyes. It didn't really need to watch physically as it could pick up the whole scene from her mind, but she was not the only one it was watching.

She and Throe took the stage. "I am Nonesuch Songstress, but you may think of me as Barbary Ellen, and this is my travel companion Sweet William." She smiled at Throe, who put on a morose expression, bringing a small laugh, as he hardly looked sweet. Several of the adults nodded, recognizing the names; Gale's repertoire was of course familiar, by design, for folk loved to see the old classics done by new singers.

Throe lay on the floor and closed his eyes. Gale stood facing away from him, adjusted her hair and mien, played a preamble on her dulcimer, and sang:

In the village where I was born  
There was a fair maid dwellin'  
Made every youth cry "Well-a-day!"  
Her name was Barbary Ellen.

This dated a thousand years back to the original home world from which the human kind had come, and perhaps a thousand years beyond that. The old songs had perpetual lives, because people valued their forgotten origins. It was traditionally sung by an older person, a minstrel, with a young and pretty actress playing the part. But Gale was as pretty as any woman, when she put her mind to it, and could sing as well as any, so could handle it alone. She could tell by the sudden coalescing of attention that this small audience had caught on to her competence. The men were smiling ruefully; they knew already that they would not be sharing her physical favors. She had abruptly become the woman of the song, and all them were now in the scene.

All in the merry month of May  
The green buds they were swellin'  
Sweet William on his death bed lay  
For love of Barbary Ellen.

And there he was, looking twice her age, suffering. It was early in the ballad, but already some of the children in the audience were crying.

Gale turned around and looked down at the still man. She played her music in a minor key, changing the mood, and sang in a different mode:

And death is printed on his face  
And o'er his heart is stealin'  
Then haste away to comfort him  
O lovely Barbary Ellen.

Then she turned back to address the audience. In the song she described how Sweet William sent his servant to her house. "O miss, O miss, O come you quick, if your name be Barbary Ellen."

Gale spoke in the tones of the servant, a different voice.

"What do you want of me?" Barbary Ellen demanded imperiously. No music here; this was a contrast scene, supposed reality.

"My master Sweet William is fading. You must come to him."

"What business is that of mine? Let someone else go to that ingrate."

"O miss, O miss, he loves only you. You must come."

"Expletive! He cares nothing for me."

But the servant would not desist until she agreed to go. So, with extreme reluctance, Barbary Ellen complied.

O slowly, slowly, got she up  
And slowly come she nigh him  
She drew the curtain to one side  
And said, "Young man, you're dyin'."

Now Sweet William opened his eyes and gazed at her. He agreed that he was very sick and grieved, and would not recover unless he could have her love.

Now she turned on him a look of sheer fury. She shook her head so that her hair flared out in visible anger.

"Do you remember the other night  
When you were at the tavern?  
You drank a health to the ladies all  
But slighted Barbary Ellen!"

Sweet William answered her, the only words Throe actually spoke so far, but his voice was faint and cracked, and she was now facing away, refusing to listen.

"Yes, I remember the other night  
When I was at the tavern.  
I gave a health to the ladies all  
And my heart to Barbary Ellen."

There was a murmur from the children in the audience, catching on to the nature of the misunderstanding. The proud woman had taken the ultimate compliment for a slight. But Barbary Ellen would not have it. It appeared that her imperious nature could not admit of a mistake. She was out of the house almost before he finished speaking.

Sweet William turned his pale face to the wall and shuddered as he came nigh death. "Goodbye, goodbye, my dear friends all. Be kind to Barbary Ellen." Now all the children and the three women were quietly crying, appreciating the tragedy of it, and the generosity of the man despite the unfairness of the woman he loved.

As she was walking toward her home  
She heard the death-bell knellin'  
At every stroke it seemed to say

"Cold hearted Barbary Ellen!"

But it was too late to change her mind. She went to the funeral, and looked at the corpse. Now at last her tears flowed. But what could she do? She could have saved him, but instead had held on to her grudge. She went home, but found no solace there.

"O mother, mother, make my bed  
O make it long and narrow  
Sweet William died for me today  
I'll die for him tomorrow."

But neither could she find escape in sleep. The vision of Sweet William haunted her dreams. How could she have been so cruel to the man she loved?

"O father, father, dig my grave  
O dig it long and narrow  
Sweet William died for love of me  
And I will die for sorrow."

Barbary Ellen died, and they buried her beside Sweet William. Gale sank to the floor to sit beside the man, but continued singing as narrator: From his heart grew a red red rose, and from her heart a briar.

They grew and grew to the steeple top  
Till they could grow no higher  
And there they tied in a true love knot  
The rose clung round the briar.

As she sang the last verse, Gale set aside her dulcimer and got the rest of the way down on the floor, wrapping her arms around Sweet William's body. In a moment the children in the audience were there too, hugging them both as they cried. The first time was always the most effective, for a listener. But the adults were comfortably sad as they applauded. They were Blue Chroma, and had magic, but an artistic performance was beyond magic.

No more was said about Gale's body. Sometimes travelers pretended to be entertainers to get free passage, so the Chroma representatives were cautious, but Gale had proved herself. The Sphinx delivered them to the rendezvous on the far side of the zone, and let them off.

One of the women approached Gale. "If you pass this way again—"

"I will sing again," Gale agreed.

"Here is food and drink for your journey, with our appreciation."

"Gratitude."

*You are special*, the Sphinx thought. *May we meet again.*

*May we*, Gale agreed.

The boundary between the Blue Chroma and adjacent Red Chroma zones was purple. Rather than being a region without magic, it was an overlapping that had both kinds of magic. Blue was the so called Animal Chroma, and Red the Demon Chroma. Gale had had more than enough of Red on



her prior mission, but this time she was just passing through.

The scenery was odd. There seemed to be purple plants of types not seen elsewhere, and probably there were animals too. The path was wide, which was just as well, because some of the plants looked dangerous. One shot purple tentacles across to block their way, and was readying more. Throe's ready staff knocked them clear. Gale had paid their way across the Blue zone; he was doing his part here.

They reached the rendezvous point where the Red Chroma zone became dominant. They approached the Red Chroma man on duty there. "We would like rapid passage across this zone," Gale said. "I am a songstress, and can—"

"We have an alternate program, if you qualify."

Gale exchanged a look with Throe. They did not quite trust this. "Question?"

"We need objective jurors for a trial. The two of you may serve."

Gale shook her head. "We prefer not to involve ourselves in the business of others. We are in a hurry. We merely wish to travel across your Chroma and go our way. I'm sure I can entertain you sufficiently to satisfy you."

"If you do not qualify as jurors, we will transport you free of any service. But if you do, this is the service we require."

Gale was getting angry, but Throe, more experienced with balky situations, intervened diplomatically. "It is not wise to make any decision on ignorance. Please tell us more of this trial, and we can judge whether we are competent for such a service. We would not want to attempt it if we knew ourselves to be incompetent."

"We will judge whether you are competent," the Red man said arrogantly. "We do not care to advertise the nature of the trial to outsiders."

Again Gale's rage rose, but Throe assumed the role of a father and smoothed it over. The mere fact of his intervention helped; it took away some of the need for her reaction. "I do not wish to affront anyone, but if we turn out to be unsuitable, then we will indeed be outsiders with knowledge of your private business. So some hint might be in order."

"It is a trial for interChroma treason."

"Then we are likely incompetent, being nonChroma. The nuances of Chroma affairs are surely beyond us."

"Contrary: you are objective in a way we are not. You will decide on the basis of your values rather than ours."

"This risks an unfair decision. We prefer to avoid—"

"You become repetitive. This is our requirement for your passage: that you undergo the

qualification, which need take only brief time, and if approved, serve as jurors, this process taking perhaps a day."

Gale was becoming rather curious, despite her common sense. She tried to read the Red Chroma man's mind, but he was just outside her range and was focused on making them do his will rather than the essence of the trial. Mental communication with Throe was easy, because they knew each other, and they could facilitate it by touch. Strangers were harder, and Chroma folk harder yet. If she could put a hand on the man she could probably get what she needed, but she lacked a pretext to touch him. *Resignation* she thought.

"In that case, we shall be glad to attempt qualification," Throe said gracefully.

"Step through this portal." Gale saw a red doorway she had not noticed before; in fact she suspected it had not been there until this moment.

She stepped through, and found herself in a red chamber with several exits. Before each stood a naked person or an animal. Not comfortable with this, she turned back, but found only a solid red wall behind her. Throe had not followed.

*Throe! Where are you?*

His answer was faint. *In a chamber with several bare folk of varied Chroma. I followed you, but must have been transported to another chamber.*

They compared notes, and found that their two chambers were identical, each with Red man and Blue woman and others. *It must be the qualification test*, she thought.

*Agreement.*

*Probably best to read no minds here, so that we come across as normal nonChromas.*

*Endorsement.*

She approached the nude woman. She was a fine specimen with a lovely face, figure reminiscent of Gale's own, and beautiful long blue hair. "Introduction: I am Nonesuch Songstress. Perhaps I have strayed into the wrong chamber. I was to attempt qualification as juror for a trial."

"My name is irrelevant," the woman replied. "This is the qualification chamber, and I am part of the process. To depart this chamber you must select an exit and satisfy its guardian."

"Confusion. What does any person here require of me?"

"Your body in no fault passion."

Gale was taken aback. "This is not what I anticipated."

"It is straightforward. Choose the one you wish to indulge, and do so. Then you will use that exit."

"I shall not!"

The woman shrugged. "Then wait indefinitely."

Gale stepped back. She surveyed the exit guardians again. There was a handsome red man, the pretty blue woman, a young green boy, a young brown girl, and two six-legged silver goats. She was supposed to have sex with one of these?

She returned to the woman. "What of you? How do you feel about an interaction of this nature?"

"My sentiment is not relevant to your decision. It is yours alone to make."

So it was a test of sexuality, with no input from the others. Hetero, homo, pedo, or bestial. Gale could take no fault sex or leave it, but she had definite preferences as to partner and type. A handsome man was interesting at any time; a woman was not, and the other options were not in the picture.

She made a mental decision to do it, and listened for the buzz of the dragon seed. It did not come. She contacted Throe again. *How fare you?*

His answer confirmed it: *If I do not take the blue woman, I must take the red man—or worse.*

Gale sighed. *No fault sex—unless we make an issue.*

*I can handle it if you can. She's a luscious woman.*

Gale smiled grimly. *Last one out is a rotten lover.*

Then she walked to the man, removing her clothing. "Take me, Red." She set aside her dulcimer.

He did so, and she indulged him fully. Appearance did make a difference, and he was about as conducive a specimen as she had encountered since Havoc. She was doing this as a requirement, but there was real pleasure in it. In fact, she liked this man, and the fact that he was Red Chroma heightened the effect. If she ever had occasion to travel no fault with him, she'd be interested.

"You remind me of my love," he said as he finished. "You qualify."

"So would you, if I were in charge," she said. Then she gathered up her things and stepped out the exit before the man could recharge. She found a pleasant red courtyard with red bushes and trees, and a red stream crossing one corner. She donned her clothing.

Throe appeared at the same doorway she had used, his clothing and weapons in a bundle. He spied her. *You win*, he thought ruefully.

*Perhaps it was more pleasure than business for you*, she thought back, teasing him. He was twice the age of the robust young man she had entertained, so naturally was slower to perform. He had also had an intense interaction with the three Invisible Chroma sisters, and probably had not yet recovered fully.

He scrambled into his clothing. "That was some test," he said aloud. "You had to tackle a man?"

"Agreement." This was redundant, but they were concealing their telepathy from the observers who were surely eavesdropping.

"So did we qualify, or disqualify?"

A Red Chroma man emerged from the doorway, followed by a Blue Chroma woman. Which chamber were they from? Both looked like the ones in Gale's chamber, but that might be deceptive. Both were clothed in conservative uniforms. "You qualified," the woman said.

She sounded just like the one Gale had talked with. "Which chamber were you in?" Gale asked her.

"There is only one qualification chamber," the blue woman replied. "Fortunately the two of you selected different partners."

Some sort of magic had given them the illusion of being in separate chambers. There had been only one set of guardians. "What would have happened had we both selected you?" Gale asked.

"You would have been disqualified. Since we require two jurors of conventional sexuality, not one, you would have moved on across the zone without further interaction."

"You could simply have asked our sexual orientations, if that's what's so important to you."

"People do not necessarily tell the truth in such matters. It was important that the truth be known. We are satisfied that both of you are sexually normal, and not averse to such relations with those of other Chroma than your own."

At this point they could hardly have doubted it! Gale thought again how she had approached the Red man as a necessary chore, but sincerely enjoyed the interaction because of his urgent masculinity. If any woman could restore Throe's vigor rapidly, the luscious Blue one was it. There was something liberating about no fault sex, and this was a variant. "There is, then a sexual component to the trial?" Throe asked.

"There is. The guilty parties claimed the right to be judged by their peers in this respect, so we had to be sure. The two of you have demonstrated your capacity and even enthusiasm for no fault sex, so will not be biased on that account. Now we will present the case."

"Objection," Gale said, her simmering anger flaring. "It is not fair to call them guilty before that issue has been decided."

"There is no question of their guilt," the woman said evenly. "The question relates to the comparative *degree* of their guilt. This you will decide."

"I would prefer to see the evidence first," Gale said grimly.

"The guilty parties will present it for you."

"But that's self incrimination! That isn't right."

"The Red Chroma determines what is right for the Red Chroma," the woman said.

"But you are Blue Chroma!"

"So I am. This is nevertheless a Red Chroma matter."

"So we have qualified," Throe said quickly, intercepting Gale's next expression. "What is the case we have to judge?"

"We will present it now," the man said. "If you will sit to the side, we will act it out."

"Act it out!" Gale said as she and Throe took seats at the edge of the yard. "Aren't we allowed to question the accused?"

"The guilty," the woman said. "You may question at any point, and be answered."

"The *accused*," Gale repeated. "I don't understand this rush to a decision."

They ignored her. The Red Chroma man took center stage. "I am Auger, a researcher on plants in the Purple Chroma zone. The plants here have aspects of both Blue and Red Chroma magic, as do the animals. I want to know more about their mixed potential."

The Blue Chroma woman came to join him. "I am Aura, a researcher in animals. I want to know more about their special nature. Is it similar to what occurs in the plants?"

The man spoke again. "There is a research station in the Purple zone, open to anyone. I go there to share information with the animal researchers, as we may be able to do each other good."

Aura spoke. "I go there for similar reason. Blue has knowledge of the Blue aspects of Purple magic, but that can be only half the story. A Red researcher might provide invaluable keys to what I lack."

The two turned to face each other, and it became a play rather than a presentation. "Because there is rivalry between our two Chroma, we tend not to associate," Auger said. "On a given night, I made a no fault tryst with an attractive Red Chroma woman of my acquaintance. I was between relationships, and her husband was traveling to another Chroma, so that she was amenable to some passing entertainment. Because no fault is generally for travel rather than at home, she preferred to seem anonymous. Thus it was that she chose to come to me in darkness, without speaking, so that I would not officially know her identity."

Gale and Throe nodded together. They knew how it was. No fault relationships extended farther than was generally openly acknowledged.

Aura spoke. "Because this was beyond my home Chroma, I preferred to be circumspect. I caught the eye of a healthy Blue Chroma worker, silently querying as to his interest. He nodded, so I noted his nocturnal location. Then I went there at night. This, at least, was my cover story. I had seen a rather handsome Red Chroma man, and the temptation came upon me. So I switched the chamber

markings, this misdirecting the Red Chroma woman, and I entered the Red Chroma man's chamber instead."

The two embraced and kissed, sharing love, without at this point demonstrating the sex itself. This was understandable, since each had just had sex with another person. They seemed to be very well matched.

"I did not know," Auger said, smiling. "But I was impressed with the form and enthusiasm of the silent woman who came to me. I liked her very well. In fact I was sorry she was married, as I thought her to be."

"And I liked him very well," Aura said. "In fact, I realized that I wanted a continuing relationship. This would be awkward in secret. So as it came time for me to leave, I spoke:"

"Confession."

"You are not my date!" Auger said, surprised. "I do not know your voice."

"I am not the woman you sought. I took her place, desiring you. Now I desire you more."

"Who are you?" he demanded suspiciously.

"I am a Blue Chroma researcher."

"Blue!"

"I apologize for deceiving you. I was curious, and now am interested. I would like to have a genuine relationship."

"How can such a thing be based on deception?"

"It can't. It must become open, or end. Will you consider me, though I am of foreign Chroma?"

Auger hesitated. "I do not like deception, but I find you to be delightful to hold. Are you married?"

"Negation."

"Come to me openly tomorrow, and I will try an open relationship."

"Appreciation," she said, and departed.

In the morning she approached him openly. "Greeting, Blue," he said, intrigued for a reason he did not speak. There was unlikely to be more than one Blue woman coming to him on this day, but it was possible.

"Acknowledged, Red."

"I seek Blue information on Purple magic."

"I seek Red input similarly."

"Would it be convenient to work together?"

"It seems so to me."

"Observation: you are a well formed woman, for a Blue."

"Appreciation. You are handsome for a Red man."

"No fault?"

"None."

They kissed. Then they faced their small audience. "It proceeded to an open affair," Auger said. "Actually less random than might have appeared, as we had already taken each other's measures in darkness. We cooperated in research, and learned much that was useful, but the personal aspect was rewarding too. I had not before had such relations with an other Chroma woman, and found that I liked them very well."

"In fact," Aura said, "not only did we learn much about the nature of Purple animal and plant magic, we fell in love."

"This of course was difficult," Auger said. "Because we could not practice our magics outside of our Chroma. Only in the Purple Chroma zone, which was the overlapping of Red and Blue Chroma, could we be together with our powers complete."

"So we considered settling in the Purple Chroma zone, perhaps marrying and having Purple Chroma children. That would extend our researches, and our relationship, and our love."

"Are there questions at this point?" Auger asked.

"You are the Accused!" Gale exclaimed.

"The Guilty," Aura agreed.

"Now we must have this out. How can you be guilty before the trial? Why are you presenting your own case? And selecting the jurors? It is not us you wish to clasp, but each other. Endless confusion!"

"Perhaps these issues will clarify in the remainder of our presentation," Auger said. "If not, then we can answer directly, before the punishment."

"There must be more here than we know," Throe murmured.

Gale took caution. "Acquiescence," she said shortly.

The play resumed. "Unbeknownst to others, I had a secret mission as a spy," Auger said. "The Red authority suspected that Blue was planning a nefarious deal to make the animals and plants of the

Purple zone controllable by Blue Chroma magic. That would in effect put the Purple zone into the Blue circle of influence, to the disadvantage of Red. It was my job to ascertain whether this was true, and if so, to discover how to stop it. This was in my mind as I encountered the Blue Chroma maiden; perhaps she knew something I could fathom if I developed a sufficient relationship with her. So my approach to her had an ulterior motive."

"Unbeknownst to others, I too had a private mission," Aura said. "I was a counterspy. The Blue Authority was suspicious of the Red researcher, and wished to ascertain whether he was a spy, and if so, to effectively nullify him so that he could not do much damage to our cause. Because, of course, Blue did have a project to make Purple fauna and flora responsive to Blue magic. We wished to do this before Red discovered how and took the Purple zone from us. This was in my mind as I approached the Red Chroma man. If he proved to be a spy, I had to have a way to stop him."

"Thus our relationship was after all based on deception," Auger said.

"Mutual deception," Aura agreed. "I had approached him in the night not merely because I found him appealing, but because it was my assignment to get close to him. I did that by seducing him, thus guaranteeing that he would acquiesce to an open relationship thereafter. Men are subject to such influencing."

"Affirmation," Auger agreed ruefully. "Yet had I known, I would not have had it otherwise. She is the best sexual partner I have encountered, regardless of her mind."

"As is he, though I love his mind."

They kissed again. They had trouble keeping their hands off each other. Gale, seeing it, wished she could be with Havoc this instant. The two Chroma folk reminded her of the two of them. Love would not be denied.

"But the research was real," Auger said.

"As was our love," Aura agreed.

"As time passed, I saw that the Blues were indeed engaged in preparations to control purple. I learned all I could, without alerting the Blue woman to that private mission."

"As time passed, I became satisfied that the Red man was indeed a spy. I helped him all I could, because otherwise he might have suspected my private mission. I wanted him to trust me."

"I loved you," Auger told her. "I did not trust you."

"I suspected that, and tried to persuade you that I was your friend." She kissed him. "And I *was*, but I still had my job to do. I was not comfortable with that, but seemed to have no easy way out."

"We were caught in a difficult situation. All we could do was continue our researches and our cooperation."

"And our love," Aura said. "For we feared it could not last."



"Our love became desperate," he agreed. "But what else was there?"

"What else?" she echoed.

"Then I found confirmation. The Blue scheme was almost complete, and would soon be implemented. I had to go report to the Red authority, so that it could act in time." Auger began to walk offstage.

"I tried to stop him," Aura said, clinging to the Red man. "I tried everything." She virtually wrapped herself around him, and indeed they were soon in the midst of lovemaking, heedless of their audience. Each had had sex recently, but their love evidently made that irrelevant.

Throe glanced at Gale. *Oh to be with Ennui this moment!*

*With Havoc, she agreed. If I get any hotter, I'll have to do it with you, obscenity with our platonic understanding.*

*If it happens, I will answer to Havoc's name if you will answer to Ennui's name.*

*Endorsement!*

"I truly hated to leave her," Auger said as he completed the process. "But time was limited, and my job required it."

"As my job required me to prevent his going," Aura said. "But it was also love, for I feared I would never see him again once he departed."

"It was awful. I wanted more than anything to stay with her, for I feared I would never see her again. But I did what I had to do."

"He took himself away," Aura said, weeping. "I knew he did not want to, any more than I wanted him to, but I also knew he had to do what he had to do. Just as I had to, too."

"And so I left her, leaving my heart behind."

"He left me, taking my heart with him."

"I reported my findings to the Red authority," Auger continued. "It put me in charge of the counter-strike, because I understood the situation best. We had an ectoplasm bomb to loft by catapult at the research site, for that was where the key Blue personnel and equipment was for the takeover of Purple. The bomb would both immobilize it and preserve it, so that our forces could move in and take it over. Then the power would be ours, and Purple would become ours. We were ready to strike the day before their implementation."

"We knew we lacked time either to implement or escape with our secret process," Aura said. "I had not been able to hold the Red spy quite long enough, so that Red would be able to strike and eliminate our project. It was my fault—"

"It was not your fault!" Auger cried. "You did your best."

"My best was not good enough. Therefore the fault was mine, and I had to make up for my failure."

"I should have taken you with me, and spared you that."

"I should have kept you with me, and spared you your crisis."

They kissed again. This was getting to Gale, and she knew to Throe too. Love and desire suffused the chamber.

"We did what we had to do," Auger said sadly. "I readied the bomb. But I hesitated, because I did not want Aura to be caught by it. I wanted her out of there, so that at least she would survive. For the bomb would kill the personnel; immobilization does not hurt inanimate objects, but living things need to move and breathe. So I sent her a demonic message: I LOVE YOU. GO NOW."

"I received the message, and understood what it portended. I sent back my own message: I LOVE YOU. I WILL NOT GO."

The Red Chroma man walked around the stage, distraught. "I thought she did not understand that she would die horribly if she did not flee the premises. I could not bear that. So I sent the demon back. GO NOW. COME TO ME. I WILL MARRY YOU."

Now the Blue Chroma woman walked the stage, similarly distraught. "I understood what threatened, and what offered, but I could not betray my people. I had to make him postpone the bomb until we could clean out the station with our equipment and personnel. So I made myself hostage. I WILL NOT GO. COME TO ME AND I WILL MARRY YOU."

"And there it was," Auger said. "If I ordered the strike, my love would die. I knew it was no bluff."

"I was ready to die," Aura said tearfully. "I loved him, I could not have him, so death was the alternative."

"And I could not do it. I held off the strike."

"And gave us time to escape."

"I was arrested for treason."

"I went to him, and was arrested too."

"But at least we were together," Auger said.

"Together," Aura echoed.

They stood together and faced the audience. "Now you should understand," the Red Chroma man said. "I am guilty because I betrayed the interest of my Chroma zone."

"And I am guilty because I made him do it."

"We do not deny our guilt. But the allocation of it remains in doubt."

"That is where you come in. You must decide who is the more guilty."

Gale looked at Throe, horrified. "You were guilty of loving each other!"

"What is the punishment?" Throe asked.

"Death," they said together.

"We would not kill you for such an error," Gale said. "It is true you did wrong, both of you, but you had reason."

"We are prepared to pay the penalty for our transgression," Auger said. "I committed treason by sparing the Blue plotters. I knew it as I did it."

"And I forced him into it," Aura said. "Using his love for me against him. For that betrayal I deserve to die."

"As do I."

"But in your own Chroma zone, you would be a hero," Gale said. "All you had to do was stay there."

"No. I promised to join my love if I lived. He let me live."

"But you walked into death."

"I am with him, now, in life or death."

Throe frowned. "I am not clear on our place in this. I agree that you both may be considered guilty, in the eyes of the Red Chroma authority. But how does our judgment affect the penalty?"

Auger nodded. "That is a fine point. It may be that one of us has greater guilt than the other. In that case that one will die and the other will be spared. Or it may be that we are equal in guilt. Then we both will die."

"But we, as jurors, might decide that there is no guilt sufficient for death."

"Negation. That is not your option. You must decide on death for one, or the other, or both."

"Outrage!" Gale exclaimed. "We are the jurors; we should decide *whether* as well as *whom*."

"The rule is Red Chroma zone's," Aura said. "We accept it."

"I decline to make a decision, thus handicapped," Gale said.

Both shook their heads. "You will not be allowed hence until you make that decision," Auger said.

"You mean we could keep both of you alive by remaining here indefinitely?"

Both nodded. "But we are sure you will not care to do that," Aura said. "You have other business elsewhere."

"We do. We are not a couple; we merely travel together on a common mission. We must be gone from here this day, if possible."

"We understand," Auger said.

"What is the manner of the voting?" Throe asked.

"You will exit by the door you came from, and will find yourselves in separate booths," Auger said. "Each of you will state your decision. For example you may say 'I vote death for the Red Chroma man.' Then you will be released to your transportation elsewhere, your service completed."

"And if I balk," Throe said, "I will not be able to rejoin her. I must declare death for one or the other, or both—"

"Negation," Aura said. "You have but one vote for death for one person. We both die only if the two of you, voting separately, decide death for different ones. If you both vote death for the same person, that one only dies, and the other is spared."

"We could consult before voting," Gale said. "And decide to vote for the same person."

"That is permitted," Auger agreed.

"What would you prefer?" Throe asked.

"Both," they said together.

"But surely if one can be saved—"

"That one would suffer," Aura explained. "That is an aspect of the punishment. Our love for each other brought us to this pass, so it is fitting that our love make us suffer."

"That is not fitting, it is torture," Gale snapped.

"Then in your mercy, let us both die."

"I am not satisfied with this," Throe said. "How long are we permitted to ponder our decisions?"

This time both shrugged. They were remarkably similar, in all but gender and color. "Indefinitely," Auger said. "Which of course is not feasible for you. We will help in any way we can; you have but to ask."

Gale looked at him. "I have had good sex with you. How can I vote you dead?"

"That is easy," Aura said. "Vote *me* dead."

"And become the no fault mistress who eliminates his true love and puts him into eternal grief!"

"I have a similar problem," Throe said. "I was recently seduced by three fetching young women the age of my daughter, and I wish them no harm at all. You are another, Aura. This was required sex rather than seduction, but you—" He paused thoughtfully. "You, oddly, remind me less of the three than of my former mistress, a thirty year old woman of the Air Chroma."

Aura smiled. "Why did you give her up? I sense thwarted love in your being; that was a factor in your favor as I qualified you as juror."

"That was not my thwarted love," Throe said. "But you are correct: I loved my wife of twenty years, but she moved on, leaving me in discomfort, until I discovered another woman of my own generation. She bears no similarity to you; she is ordinary, as am I. But my temporary mistress—she could be your elder sister."

"She is not. All my siblings are brothers. In any event, I do not resemble them closely, being the fourth."

"The fourth!" Gale said. "I am a fourth."

"And by further coincidence," Auger said, "You resemble Aura rather closely. Were the two of you hooded and color matched, I would find it difficult to tell you apart. In fact when I clasped you, I was struck by how much you felt like my love. This was a factor in my qualification of you."

"And I was struck by how much you felt like *my* love," Gale said. "Whom I must not marry."

"Thwarted love, again," Auger said. "You do understand. You are a good juror."

"And you also are a fourth," Gale said.

"Affirmation."

Gale looked at Throe. "They are changelings!"

"They are," he agreed.

"Confusion," Aura said. "We do not know this term."

"Neither did we, not long ago," Gale said, excited. "Your mothers went to the Temple, rather than adopt or have affairs with other men?" Both nodded. "And each of you are not only different from your siblings, but superior in appearance, intelligence, and force of personality?" They nodded again. "And when you met, you were strongly drawn to each other despite being of different Chroma. Each of you could have had others of your choice, but that became unimportant once you found each other."

"Confirmation," Auger said. "But I see now that had I not encountered Aura, I could have loved you. I mean no disrespect. It is just that—"

"Comprehension. Here is the frustration," Gale said grimly. "We have studied this matter, and

concluded that all changelings are cast, as it were, from a similar mold, and are more closely related to each other than siblings. Therefore it is wrong for them to marry; we fear the consequence to their children. That is why my love is thwarted."

Aura stared at her, astonished. "Auger and I should not have married, even if we had escaped death?"

"That is our understanding."

"And if I were spared," Auger said, "I could not marry you, or any other changeling?"

"No more than Aura could marry *my* love," Gale agreed. "We are all banned from each other, though most attracted to each other. We must all, it seems, marry others we love less. So if you were spared, you would have to break up."

The two came together. "We couldn't do that," Auger said. "Even theoretically."

"I know the difficulty of the decision," Gale said. "I must contemplate marrying elsewhere, and perhaps being a sterile mistress to my true love, as the only way I can be with him."

"But why would the Temple do this?" Aura asked. "Why send out people doomed to heartbreak?"

"We wish we knew. We are trying to find out." Actually it was not the Temple, but the mysterious source of changelings that was at fault, but Gale did not feel free to reveal this, lest the mission be compromised.

"Then we should not hold you longer," Auger said. "Vote as you must, and we thank you for your concern."

"I remain unsatisfied," Throe said. "This is a political killing."

"Question?" Aura asked.

"Had the two of you gone to the Blue Chroma, you would both have been feted as heroes. Only here in the Red Chroma are you consigned to death. That is not justice, it is vengeance, and pointless."

"Vengeance is not pointless," Auger demurred.

"Some vengeance is justified," Throe agreed. "But this is not, because there is nothing to be gained by it. The Red authority has gained much of what it wanted: it broke up the Blue Chroma plot, and by now I am sure it has taken steps to ensure that the Purple zone can not be taken over by Blue."

"Or by Red," Aura agreed. "Surprise was of the essence; with both sides knowing the things we learned, as they do, the Purple zone remains in balance."

"So neither side can profit by an illicit plot," Throe continued. "Red is angry because it was

balked from taking over Blue's plot, and is taking it out on you. There is no reason to kill either of you; if you both were freed, the situation would not change. Your actions prevented bad things from happening, and ensured the status quo."

Auger nodded. "I suppose they did. But I did balk the wish of my Chroma, so am guilty of treason."

"Negation. Had the Red Chroma succeeded in taking over the plot, and in acquiring the Purple zone for its exclusive use, the Blue Chroma would have sent a complaint to the king, who would have had to act to restore the Purple to neutral status. Had Blue's plot succeeded, the Red Chroma would have succeeded. Neither of you are criminal; you acted with honor as you understood it."

"Endorsement," Gale agreed. "Neither should die."

Auger spread his hands. "Perhaps there is merit in your position. But the decision is not yours to make."

"We need time to think," Gale said, troubled. Then she sent a thought to Throe: *Is there any way out of this?*

*There may be. Sometimes King Deal had unpalatable choices, and he evolved special ways to handle them. In general, they involved will and pretext: he made the concerned parties truly want to discover some acceptable settlement. Then he provided them with a pretext to do it.*

"We have time," Aura said. "Perhaps you would like a tour of the Purple Chroma zone."

"You can do that?" Gale asked surprised. "You can go freely out in it?"

"Affirmation. We are honor bound not to flee, and to facilitate the process of decision of our case. We have the freedom of the zone, and continue our researches in the interim."

"You could flee together—but won't?"

"Affirmation," he repeated.

*We must save them* she thought to Throe.

*Affirmation.*

*But I doubt they are truly free to go. It is not the nature of any governmental authority to trust its people implicitly.*

*Agreed, Throe thought. I have privately noted evidences of observation. There are stations with men on guard. Should they actually try to escape, they would be quickly recaptured.*

*And given far less freedom thereafter,* Gale thought. She trusted Throe's observation, because it was his business; as the king's bodyguard he was trained to detect traps and potential threats of any nature.

*So anything we say aloud is bound to be heard, Throe continued. We can speak to the Red authority at any time.*

They went out into the Purple Chroma zone. This was impressive, because this time it wasn't a wide path, but a narrow one, with the foliage overlapping and overhanging. It quivered as they passed; Aura reached up a blue hand and stroked a purple branch, and its leaves rippled affectionately. Auger leaned down to touch a purple root, and it writhed to increase the contact. It was clear at the outset that the things of the Purple Chroma knew and liked these people, though neither was purple.

*You mentioned will and pretext, Gale thought to Throe. How can these apply to these nice folk?*

*I suspect that we can give the Red Chroma authority the desire to spare them, by clarifying that what the authority is doing is wrong, and will come to the attention of the king.*

*It certainly will!*

He made a mental smile. *You might expound on the manner Havoc deserves his name. They may be daunted.*

*I will! But if they believe they are right—*

*I may expound on precedents I have encountered in my prior service. That should make them consider whether such notoriety is really worthwhile.*

"Here come my pets," Aura said, gesturing.

A large purple snake slithered forward. It looked poisonous, but it was not threatening. It lifted its head for the Blue woman to pat. It gazed at Gale, and its bearing changed. It began to coil.

"Negation," Aura murmured. "These are our visitors."

The snake relaxed. After a moment it slithered away under the brush.

*And what of pretext?* she asked Throe as they continued through the garden.

*If we can come up with something that makes the execution awkward, and they prefer to vacate it without losing face, they may accept our ploy. The trick is to find something suitable.*

*I don't see any way to avoid death, when that is the only option allowed.*

*Once King Deal invoked a paradox, to make a thing unfeasible.*

*Paradox!*

"And here is Grandfather Tree," Auger said as they approached a huge tentacular thing.

"That's a land squid!" Throe protested. "They catch and eat anything in reach."



"Unless they are tame," Aura said. She and Auger stepped into the range of the tree, and its purple tentacles quickly wrapped around them both, hauling them off the ground. But in a moment both were set down again, unharmed. "It likes to hug," Aura explained.

*I think I have a paradox,* Gale thought.

They continued to discuss it mentally, as they toured the Purple Chroma zone physically. By the time they completed the loop, they had their plan. They began their rehearsed dialogue, for the benefit of the Red authority listeners.

"We are about to cast our votes," Throe said. "But first I wanted to make an observation. We will of course be obliged to make a report on this matter to our superiors when we return to Triumph City, and it will surely come to the attention of King Havoc."

"King Havoc," Auger said. "Didn't he belch?"

"The same," Throe agreed, smiling. The story of Havoc's deliberate barbarian belch at his first public address seemed to have spread widely. "I understand he was taken from his home village and required to be king, and he was not pleased. But as time passed, it became evident that he was well selected, for he handled several awkward problems. However, it turned out that his name was also justified, for he made havoc of more than one public meeting, and his enemies died. I would not want him as an enemy."

"He sounds like fun," Aura murmured.

"You would like him," Gale agreed. "But not as an opponent. He is dangerous when angered."

"It is irrelevant," Auger said. "We expect not to live out the day." He did not know that they were speaking for a hidden audience.

"Which may be too bad," Throe said. "Because when news of this execution comes to King Havoc, he is likely to be annoyed. I understand that he takes his role as peace keeper among the Chroma seriously, and resents intrusions on his authority. He may feel that this is his prerogative to settle, not the Red or Blue Chroma's. He may compel the Red authority figures to make appearance before him, possibly for similar justice."

"Yes, from what I have heard of him, he would likely do that," Gale agreed.

Auger shook his head. "That would not be reasonable. This is a matter between Red and Blue, and there will be nothing to be gained, since the deed would be long since done."

"King Havoc is not necessarily a reasonable man," Throe said. "There are stories."

"Wild stories," Gale agreed with a shudder. "And a suspicion that he *likes* to wreak havoc, justifying his name."

"If only they realized that no actual damage was done, as it happened," Throe said, wrapping it up. "And that the two of you can better serve continuing where you are, studying and cultivating the Purple Chroma zone entities. They could confine you to this zone, with their sentence applicable only

if you tried to leave it."

"There is nothing to be gained from your deaths," Gale agreed. "But we, too, are locked into a situation we do not like, and must do what we must do, now and on our return to Triumph City. We hope you will forgive us that."

"We do," Auger and Aura said together.

Then Gale hugged them both, tearfully. "I think we shall not meet again. But we will not forget you. Parting."

"Parting," they echoed together.

Throe passed through the doorway, and Gale followed. She found herself alone in a booth. "It is my desire to have the man and woman share the same fate," she said. "Since I am not sure what the other juror may do, I make my vote dependent on his. I vote to kill the one he spares." Then she pushed on through, and emerged at the station they had first come to.

In a moment Throe came out, behind her. That was an interesting effect; how had they passed each other without bumping? But of course the magic could have transported them to some entirely different spot or spots between doors. "You have voted?" she inquired.

"I have voted. Now let's move on."

"A capsule awaits you," the red man said.

Sure enough, there was now a red ball resting on the ground. As they approached it, a spot appeared on the side, and it swirled open to form a portal through which they could pass. They stepped inside and found a comfortable coach interior. They took their seats, and felt the craft lift from the ground.

"I could not make myself choose blindly," Gale said. "So I made my vote dependent on yours: I chose the one you did not choose."

"But that's what *I* did!" he replied, emulating surprise. "I deferred to you."

"But then which one dies? Neither of us gave a name."

"It's a paradox," he said. "I hope we haven't interfered with their due process."

"I thought I was enabling them to be together."

"So did I." He shook his head. "Maybe they'll have to call us back to get it straight."

"I hope not," Gale said, alarmed. "We have a mission to accomplish."

"We do indeed. Otherwise we could have dallied longer. That blue woman was an excellent lover."

She made a small fist and banged him on the knee. "You would think of that! Is that all you men care about?"

He looked surprised. "There is something else to care about?"

"The merits of the case."

"The red man was not good for you?"

Gale pouted. "She was just being kind to an animal."

"And he was just planting a seed."

Meanwhile they had a more realistic mental dialogue. *Do you think it will work?* she thought.

*I think it has to work. Paradox is intractable. We did give them lure and threat, too. They'll probably suspend the decision pending resolution of the paradox, then not try very hard to resolve it.*

*Meanwhile two fine people will continue to live and work indefinitely. Do you think they will understand what we did?*

*Their innocence was part of our strategy. There was obviously no collusion with them. But perhaps they will realize, when they find themselves alive and fairly free.*

*And whoever heard of telepathy among nonChroma folk?*

They both smiled mentally, while keeping straight faces. They were surely still being observed.

"You men are great at planting seeds."

"And you women are great at soliciting them."

Thus their play dialogue, as they waited to see whether they had succeeded in planting the seeds of doubt and paradox. If the Red Chroma authorities caught on too soon, the travelers could still be in trouble.

At any rate, they were not called back. Before long the capsule came to rest on the far side of the Red Chroma zone, and they got out and walked on to the fringe of the next one.

Only when they were far from the Red Chroma zone did they relax. "We seem to make a good team," Gale said.

"Let's hope that enables us to get the Yellow item."

When they reached the fringe of the Yellow Chroma zone that contained their coordinates, their success abruptly seemed more doubtful. They were barred from entry. "Incipient eruption," the Yellow Chroma man said tersely. "No admittance at this time."

"But we have important business," Gale protested.

The man glanced at her with near contempt. "Woman, you won't accomplish your business if you die in the eruption. Come back in a week when it subsides."

"We can't wait that long."

The man's head became a mass of flame. Then fingers of cold fire picked them both up and blew them to an adjacent camping site where refugees were arriving. The Yellow man, annoyed, had ceased arguing with idiots.

"Eruptions are serious business," Throe said. "We can't blame them for taking precautions."

"But we can't wait a week," she said.

"His point has merit. Our deaths will profit our mission nothing."

"Are you getting fatherly on me? Expletive if I wait."

"If my daughter used such language, I'd smack her bottom." Then he looked abruptly appalled.

That interested her. "What is it?"

"Merely an association that is of little external interest."

"Which would you prefer: to help me head in toward the fire cone, or wait here and let me pry out your supposedly uninteresting secret?"

"Blackmail," he grumbled.

"Determination."

"We'll have to sneak in, and we won't have any help from the natives."

"And it's risky, with the eruption incipient," she agreed. "Maybe you should remain here."

"And let you go in alone? When I'm not with Havoc, I'm your bodyguard. I have to go with you."

"And here I thought you were my friend."

"That too."

She stopped teasing him. "What's feasible?"

"There's a private route that bypasses the guard's station. Move casually to your left." As ever, he had noted strategic aspects of the terrain.

She moved casually to the left. "My threat wasn't real. You may keep your secret association to yourself."

He followed her, as casually. No one was paying attention anyway; the Yellows were too busy setting up temporary refugee camps. "But female curiosity, once roused, suffers no retreat."

"Yielded," she agreed. What could have caused him to react so strongly to a simple matter of discipline?

"You will fathom it eventually anyway," he said. "So you might as well know. Ineffable—Ine—is the second eldest Air Chroma sister of the three who are visiting Triumph. She's the sorceress, seventeen. All three seduced me, but she was the one who teased me about reminding her of her father. Somehow it got into spanking."

"Spanking?" Gale asked blankly as they sidled into an inconspicuous exit.

"It became an inducement, by her demand. She claimed that such attention to a female bare bottom was erotic. Then she proved it."

"And I'm her age—and our dialogue got coincidentally similar," Gale said, catching on.

"The association caught me by surprise."

"Erotic for whom? The spanker or the spankee?"

"Both. It was not something I had encountered before."

"Interesting. So if I had to seduce a reluctant man, I should lure him into spanking me, bare?"

"I suspect it depends on the man."

"Men aren't all identical when it comes to sex?"

"I wouldn't know. But she certainly turned me on, to my surprise and perhaps dismay."

She smiled. "I'll keep it in mind."

The exit came to a dead end. "My error," Throe said. "I thought I saw a Yellow man quietly using it."

"I wonder." They faced a blank yellow fence.

"Yet the grass has been recently trodden," Throe said. "Why would someone go to a dead end?"

Gale concentrated. Then part of the fence seemed to dissolve, showing a gap. "There!"

"Where?"

"There's a gap in the fence. Don't you see it?"

"I see no gap."

"This way," she said, stepping quickly to it.

Throe did not follow. "There's no gap."

"Oh? Then what's this?" She stepped through it.

He jumped to the spot she had been. "Gale—where are you?"

"Right here," she said, reaching back through the gap to touch his arm.

Throe's jaw dropped. "Your arm—from the fence!"

"Illusion!" she exclaimed. "I saw through it."

He put his hand out to touch the gap. "Illusion," he agreed. "So it's true: you can penetrate it, when you try."

"I saw it, then when I concentrated, it dissipated," she agreed. "And it conceals me now?"

"I see only your arm from the elbow to the hand. Beyond is the fence."

"Well, come through the fence." She caught his arm and drew him forward.

In a moment his eyes focused on her. "Illusion, all right. Now I see you." He turned around. "And now I see the back side of the fence. I can't penetrate the illusion."

"You're not a changeling."

"Affirmation."

She drew him in and kissed him. "Thank you for revealing my ability to me. You may spank my bottom if you wish. Shall I bare it for you?"

He jerked back, then laughed. "You are a tease."

"Throe, for the revelation you have given me, I'd have given you sex, and that's no tease. Similar for your support of my determination to advance to the fire cone. So it was a tease, but if it arouses you—"

"Embarrassment. Desist."

"Maybe I'll find some other return favor to do you."

"Let's just get on with the mission."

They followed the way past another illusion barrier, and emerged in a yellow forest. "Maybe

we'd better leave the beaten path now," Gale said, "lest we encounter a regular Yellow user who will know us for intruders."

"Affirmation." They cut into the yellow underbrush, disturbing it as little as possible. Chroma vegetation could strike back if annoyed, as Gale knew from experience as a child in Trifle Village, between three Chroma zones.

When they thought it likely that no one would associate them with recent travelers, they found a road and followed it. There were often nonChroma and otherChroma visitors in any Chroma zone, because though the majority of natives did not venture from their zones, some did. Traders, explorers, cartographers, curiosity seekers, women looking for fourths—there was a fair amount of traffic. That was why the stations and camping sites existed around the zone fringes. So they should not seem remarkable. Nevertheless, they tried to avoid contacts, so as to eliminate potential problems.

They rounded a curve, and there was a Yellow Chroma family. "Hail, nonChromas," the man called. "You are going the wrong way to evacuate."

"Appreciation," Throe replied. "We'll turn around soon."

"Don't delay long. An eruption is brewing—a bad one. We are all migrating to safety."

"Not long," Throe agreed.

"I confess it makes me nervous," Gale said. "It is not easy to approach even a quiescent cone. The demons near the Red cone dazzled us with illusory effects that covered real pitfalls, and there was worse in the cone itself."

"The Air cone was in partial eruption when I was there," Throe said. "Invisible lava flows, while the visible ones were illusion. I would have been lost without my guide."

"I know I'm being a fool. My dragon seed hasn't buzzed yet. But how can it be sure about an actual eruption?"

"It surely knows. I had forgotten about that."

"Havoc and I don't mention it casually. But if mine prompts me—"

"I won't debate the matter," he agreed.

The road curved again, and now the distant cone of the volcano came into clear view. It was huge, and yellow clouds swirled above it. It did not seem to be erupting, but Gale had little doubt that the Yellow authorities knew what they were doing.

Gale's dragon seed buzzed in her ear. "Mischief," she said.

"Make no move until we know its nature."

More people appeared on the road. Gale and Throe thought to retreat into the bushes, but this time it was the straightway that betrayed them: the others had already seen them, and moving off

would seem suspicious. So they continued walking, anticipating another warning about the evacuation.

That was not what they got. The party of five Yellow Chroma men eyed them frankly. "NonChroma," one said. "Going the wrong way. That means no local protection."

"And look at the girl," another said. "That's one rare piece."

This was indeed mischief. These were brigands, or at least opportunistic riffraff.

Throe placed himself between Gale and the men, holding his staff. "We are not looking for trouble."

"Your misfortune, old man. Get yourself clear; it's the girl we want."

"Warning," Throe said. "She is not available."

Now the men circled the two of them. "Get clear, or watch," one said. Their circle tightened.

"Negation."

They laughed.

*I have warned them three times, Throe thought to Gale. When I act, get yourself clear. Beware of magic.*

*Compliance*, she agreed. She could handle herself when she had to, but she was no Amazon, and there were too many of them. She knew that she would be a liability to Throe if anywhere in range, so she would get herself quickly out of it. She knew what he intended. And what the ruffians intended. No fault was one thing; rape was another.

The yellow men pounced. Two grabbed for Gale while two drew yellow knives and went for Throe.

Gale leaped outward, drawing her own blade. She slashed at the nearest arm, laying it open, and forged on down the road before the man could react. She got several paces clear, then whirled, her knife ready.

Two yellow men were already on the ground, and Throe was going after a third. This one had a sword, but Throe's shield was already slung in place, and it knocked the man's arm aside before he managed to swing. The sword flew wide and clanged on the pavement.

Then all three of the men who remained afoot were fleeing. Like so many brigands, they were cowards when faced with real resistance. Throe did not pursue them; instead he walked across to pick up the sword. He checked it, and nodded. "Good work," he said. "Probably stolen."

Gale's heart was thudding. She did not much like violence. "Can we get out of here?"

"Of course. Do you know how to use one of these?"



"No."

"Wear it anyway; it should dissuade other thugs." He brought it to her, and succeeded in fastening it to her waist with a length of cord. "Or it may serve as an item of trade."

The dragon seed buzzed again. "Warning," she said.

Throe whirled, orienting on a mental trace. One of the brigands had belatedly remembered that nonChroma folk lacked defensive magic, so was readying a fireball. They would be helpless against that. But as it formed, it exploded, engulfing the brigand and singeing him; Gale felt his pain. He staggered away as the fire dissipated.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Conjecture: the incipient eruption is intensifying the local magic, leading to wild effects. He got blasted by his own fire."

That made sense. "We were lucky."

"This time," he agreed grimly.

They walked on, leaving the two fallen thugs unconscious on the road, next to the yellow splotches of blood. The blood she had shed represented the only such mayhem done; Throe had not even drawn one of his edged weapons. He had merely used the staff.

"For a moment you reminded me of Havoc," she said.

"We never actually tangled," Throe said. "It would have been interesting."

"You call mayhem interesting?"

"Professional interest. He has youth and speed; I have experience. I think I would have taken him, the first time, and possibly the second."

"He learns swiftly," she agreed.

"So I found. And of course he did well for me."

"Havoc remembers his friends and his enemies," she said.

"Apart from that, I think I am glad he is king. I think he has the capacity to accomplish some worthwhile reforms."

"If he lives," she said darkly.

"If he lives. Let's hope that this mission enables him to solve the mystery of the changelings and secure the safety of all of you."

"And we don't even know that it will."

They managed to avoid other people, and camped in the yellow forest. Here Gale's childhood expertise paid off; she recognized most of the plants, though she had encountered them in other colors. She was able to harvest small fruits without affronting the plants that produced them, and located a warm safe trunk for them to sleep against. "All we have to do is make an offering of food for the tree," she explained.

"Tree food?"

"Urine. Substance if you've got it."

"Oh. Now I remember; Havoc did that."

"We each have to contribute. Then the tree will recognize us, and protect us. We'll be able to sleep without fear."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes."

He shrugged. "I would like to sleep well; I think we have a difficult day ahead of us."

"The tree will warn us if any danger approaches."

"How can it do that?"

"The trunk will vibrate. The foliage will rustle. I know the signals, and will wake."

"I am a city man. I am obliged to trust your expertise in this respect."

"I trusted yours against those brigands."

They went to opposite sides of the tree, and urinated and defecated, burying the substance carefully so that the tree's roots could orient on it. Then they ate their fruits, relaxing.

There was a faint stir in the air. Gale poked forth a finger. "Swale!" she said aloud.

*Just checking. How are you doing?*

"We're heading toward the site, but the volcano is about to erupt." Gale continued speaking aloud so that Throe would know of the contact.

*Isn't that dangerous?*

"Yes, it's is dangerous. But we can't afford to wait, so we're risking it. How is Havoc doing?"

*Symbol is set on seducing him, but he's resisting.*

"The fool! They are traveling no fault."

Throe smiled, picking up that situation from her mind.

*He wants her as an objective adviser, not a mistress.*

"And she'll be good at that regardless. Tell him its okay."

Swale shook her head, mentally. *I think they have to work it out for themselves. She's showing him one of her illusion shows, and the wonder is, it's not erotic.*

"Then she's a fool too." But actually Gale's feelings were mixed. Symbol was another changeling, and marvelously facile at sex, and she loved Havoc utterly. She was barred from marrying him for the same reason Gale was, but she was of a different generation of changelings, so just might qualify after all. Yet if that turned out to be the case, why not let Havoc have her? Gale wanted him to be happy, with or without Gale herself. Symbol could and would do that for him.

*You have such a generous nature, the succubus thought. But of course I knew that, because you befriended me after I tried to destroy you.*

"I want him for myself, but I'm a realist," Gale said.

*I must move on. Interesting things are happening elsewhere.*

"Parting," Gale said.

*Parting, friend.* The succubus faded.

"She's right," Throe said. "You do have a generous nature. So does Havoc."

"We're well matched," Gale said sadly. "If only we *can* match."

They were done eating. They lay down, touching the warm trunk, and slept.

Gale woke to the humming of the trunk. Something was approaching, and the tree judged it to be a threat. "Throe," she murmured.

"Alert," he answered immediately.

"The tree is warning us. I don't know what threatens, but there is surely something."

"Is the threat to us or the tree?"

"Probably both. We are one with it, this night. We must gird for action."

He went out far enough to gaze in the direction of the Yellow Chroma cone. It was not yet dawn, and the forest was dark. "The cone's on fire."

She joined him. "That may be the preliminary to the eruption. Hot gases streaming up, visible because of the darkness. But I don't see why that should be an immediate threat. We don't use magic, so it can't react against us. The dragon seed hasn't buzzed."

"Depends on the eruption. But I agree: the tree should be reacting to something more specific. It is native to this Chroma; it may perceive a threat before the dragon seed does."

Then there was a rumble, and the ground vibrated. "Quake!" she said. "*That* could be immediate."

"It could swallow the tree," he agreed. "But I doubt we could do anything about it."

"Agreement." But then the dragon seed buzzed in her ear. "Correction: we can and must do something about it." She tapped her ear, her action invisible in the darkness, but she sent him her thought. The seed had caught up.

"I have had some experience combating men, but less combating nature. How could we stop a quake?"

She cast about, mentally. "Maybe not the quake itself, but a consequence of it."

"Collapsing houses, tsunamis in lakes, clouds of dust?"

"None of the above," she said, and the seed did not buzz. "There must be something else."

"Changing landscapes, animal stampedes, freak weather from the disturbance?"

"None of the—" The seed buzzed, so she started over. "Negative on changing landscape, animal stampedes—" It buzzed again. "Stampede!" she exclaimed. "The quake may not do much original damage, but if there's anything a ground animal fears, it's loss of ground stability."

"I am a ground animal," Throe said. "The mere notion makes me nervous."

"If a stampede came this way, it could crush us," she said. "And maybe damage the tree. This is the Fire Chroma; those animals may be burning in their panic. Too much of that could do it. We've got to divert that stampede."

"Now we get tactical. That's back in my department. We need a barrier or something that will turn them aside, even in their madness. Elsewhere a fire would do it; here I doubt it. We might make a barricade of stones, but I observed few loose rocks as we traveled yesterday."

"Animals," she repeated. "I remember when Havoc handled some by making a stink. That might do it."

"A bad smell?" he asked dubiously.

"Not just any bad smell. One designed to repel animals who might graze on a sensitive plant. A stench weed might do it."

"Crazed animals in stampede may not be sniffing the air."

"Evidently you have not had experience with stench weeds." She paused, casting out her mind. "I can read plants a little—yes, there's a patch not far off. We'll have to transplant it."

"This must be another time I am obliged to trust your judgment."

"Affirmation. Maybe we can use your shield to transport them. Follow me." She set off in the darkness, orienting on the faint mental odor.

She found the patch. The smell was slight, as the weeds did not pollute the neighborhood without cause. But a stampede would be another matter. "Now we must dig several up and move them closer to the tree," she said.

"If these plants react the way I think they will, we won't want to disturb them."

"Endorsement! First we must befriend them. You have urine from the night? Piss here, carefully so as not to wet the leaves or stem."

The man had evidently come to appreciate the need, but was hesitant. "I can't see the plants. I'll likely wet them."

"We don't have time for this," she snapped. "Give it here."

"Confusion?"

"Your spigot." She found his trousers in the darkness, and opened the front. "Kneel; you need to be closer to the ground."

"Embarrassment."

"No time for that, either." But he kneeled as she caught hold of his member and aimed it correctly. "Now piss."

After a moment the flow started, and she directed it carefully to the bases of the plants she had located. When it ran out, she let him go and squatted herself, getting the remaining plants.

"I think I will not brag of this particular sequence, back in Triumph," he remarked.

"Why not? Tell them I made you spout for me."

He laughed, but not comfortably.

After that they used their hands to dig out the moist base of each plant and set it carefully on the inner curve of his shield. Then Throe lifted and carried the shield flat to the spot she selected, and they went through the process again, hand excavating holes in the ground and setting the plants into them.

By the time they finished, dawn was cracking the sky. They had a little garden of eight small weeds arranged in a triangular pattern, the apex pointing toward the volcano.

"Now may we wash up?" Throe asked plaintively. "Our hands are covered with urine soaked mud."

"What, you don't want me to give you a facial mud pack for your complexion?"

He shook his head. "You would surely like Ine. You have points of similarity."

"Spankable bottoms," she agreed. "We can go to the local stream if my seed lets us."

The seed did. There was a larger shaking of the ground, an evident tremor, but not close enough to threaten them directly. Still, it was fair warning. They found the stream, and drank and washed in the yellow water. She reminded herself that this was not more urine, merely natural water for the Chroma. The mud had gotten all over them, so they stripped and rinsed their clothing.

Gale stood for a moment, facing away from him. "Are you sure you don't want to do something, while it's bare?" She glanced back at her bottom. "A spanking new opportunity?"

"If I couldn't read your mind, I might suspect you of being seductive."

"But you *can* read my mind, so you are sure of it."

They laughed together. It was a camaraderie that came of thorough acquaintance buttressed by the mind contact. She could afford to play at seduction because they had a firm understanding that it *was* a game. They were neither lovers nor father and daughter, but had become knowledgeable friends who could play either role as required.

The seed buzzed.

"I think we're on stage," Gale said.

They ran back to the tree, carrying their wadded clothing. Already the ground was shuddering again, this time from the beat of many hooves. The stampede was coming.

They reached the tree just as the vanguard of the stampede came into sight. Yellow buffalo, their six legs pounding the ground, their three horns pointing forward. No creature that valued its life would get in the way of those charging beasts.

"The tree was right," Throe yelled over the growing thunder of the stampede. "This is formidable. But can a few little plants stop it?"

"I hope so." She had been confident; now in the face of the charging herd, she was uncertain.

The lead buffalo approached the wedge of stench weeds. Suddenly it tossed its head, snorting fire. Then it veered to the side, face averted. The following animal sneezed and veered the other way, in similar discomfort. In a moment the herd divided, and charged past the tree on either side.

"Amazement!" Throe said.

Then the odor of the aroused weeds wafted back. It was breathtakingly awful. Gale choked and tried to hold her nose, but she had to breathe, so it got inside her. She stifled the urge to vomit, and clamped her eyes closed, because the ambiance was making them water copiously. The stench weeds were coming through.

She felt something at her face. Throe was pushing her own wet clothing to her mouth. *Breathe*

*through it.*

*Gratitude.* She covered the whole of her face with the material and use it to filter the fetor. It wasn't enough—nothing could ever be enough!—but it helped.

Meanwhile the stampede continued, fleshed out by lesser animals who had also been spooked by the quake. They were a yellow blur passing around the tree and its encompassing cloud of stench. Fire danced across their backs, singeing the leaves of saplings and bushes. The plants of the Fire Chroma were resistant to damage by fire, but there were limits.

At last it passed, and the foul odor eased, drifting away on the breeze. The stench weeds had done their job, protecting themselves from trampling, and in the process protecting tree and people also. Now ordinary life could resume.

Gale patted the trunk of the tree. "All even?" she inquired.

There was a rippling of leaves not of the breeze. The tree agreed. It had alerted them; they had helped it. This was the ideal way of interaction.

"I think I have learned something," Throe said as they climbed into their damp clothing. "I will have mere respect for trees hereafter." He glanced at the weeds. "And for smell as a defense."

"Havoc taught me," Gale said. "I love nature."

"And you love Havoc."

"Forever."

"You are his ideal bride."

"If only we weren't so close!"

"Your tragedy," he agreed. "Symbol loves him too." As if she didn't know that. Yet in the aftermath of the stampede, with their nerves trying to settle, she knew he had to say something, even if it turned out to be stupid.

"And I can't even give him to her. *Damn* this business of being changelings." Ditto for her.

"She can be his mistress. So can you."

"As if that's enough. I want all of him, and for him to have all of me." But it was pointless to bewail that frustration. "I hope Symbol is his mistress now."

"You don't resent her competition?"

"I might have, but she let me read her mind. I never saw a love that complete, except—"

"Except yours," he finished.

"No one loves a changeling like a changeling. No offense."

"None. I love Ennui, but there is a—a ferocity to your passion that eclipses mine."

"Is it safe to move on?"

"I think so. The stampede has passed, and I think won't return this way. But there may be wreckage ahead."

"There may be an *eruption* ahead. We'd better hurry."

They walked along the broad beaten path left by the stampede. It led them to a fallen section of ground, a new rift that was the remnant of a fragment of the quake. Throe poked at it with his staff, locating a firm crossing.

It was worse beyond. There had evidently been several quake cracks radiating out in a pattern, opening the ground and closing it, dropping small trees and spooking the animals. They had fled it, heading for the tree. Sheer coincidence—yet the dragon seed had known. Its magic was small, limited to that faint buzzing, but its perception was uncannily accurate. It had never led her astray. *Thank you, Blue Dragon*, Gale thought.

That reminded her of the one case in which the dragon seed had seemed to be inaccurate: when she embraced Havoc. But later they had learned of their incompatibility of too-close relationship, so the seed had after all been correct. Its limitation was that it could not define wrongness; it merely knew it when it encountered it. Sometimes the problem was obvious, sometimes subtle. It was never to be ignored.

"Look at that!"

She looked. A glowing yellow river was flowing toward them from the slope of the mountain. It had already covered the road ahead, making the bridge impassable. "Water?" Gale asked, surprised. "Is this a water volcano?"

"Negation. That's lava."

"Lava!" She had never seen it before. Since everything here was shades of yellow, she had not distinguished it from water. "We don't want to mess with that."

"Comes with the territory."

They veered away from the lava, toward a water river. But the quake had struck here too, and the only apparent bridge across it lay in ruins. How were they to cross?

"Swim?" she inquired.

He extended his staff, dipping the tip into the water. He brought it back and touched the wet spot. "Too hot."

Now she saw steam rising from the surface. The water had been heated upstream, and was



close to boiling. "Boat?"

"I think they have all been used by the refugee natives."

"They would have been crossing the other way. There should be boats at this side, left when no longer needed."

"Should," he agreed. But they saw none. "Must have been hidden away, pending their return."

She nodded. "Can we make one?"

"In time. Too much time."

"Expletive!"

He looked back at the lava flow. "Oddity: no burning there. It should be igniting the foliage it touches. Also, it seems to be flowing along the level, instead of downward. This is not normal behavior."

Gale oriented on it. "Realization: it's illusion. I should have seen it before."

"You can penetrate illusion, but only if you concentrate," he said. "It has power over your perception, but not complete."

"Accuracy. I see it unless I question it. I must learn to be more questioning."

They walked to the lava flow. It looked horrendous, but Throe had seen similar before, in the Air Chroma zone. This was vision only, without seeming heat, fortunately. They were able to walk right into it, and through it.

"Who made this illusion?" she asked as they crossed the bridge. "With all the people gone?"

"Must be the Fire demons. I understand Chroma demons are thick around the cones."

"They are. I had a time fetching the Red sphere. The demons fashioned horrendous illusions, as I mentioned." She paused, realizing. "If only I had realized I could see through them!"

"It is the nature of life to discover the obvious well after its usefulness has passed."

"You're a real font of reassurance."

They emerged from the seeming river of fire and resumed walking along a road. But now the cone got more serious about eruption: it blew out a shower of fiery stones. They arced across the landscape and smacked into the ground, starting fires.

"Those aren't illusions," Throe said. "We'd better get under cover." He lifted his shield overhead.

"We'll need more cover than that," she said as she joined him.

"There's a house ahead with a stout stone roof."

They ran for it, matching their steps so as to remain under the shield. Gale might once have wondered why anyone would use heavy stone for a roof; now she knew. They reached the house, pulled open the door, and wedged inside.

There were three people and a baby there.

The two parties stared at each other. "We thought this house was empty," Gale said, halfway apologetically.

"How did you get here?" the yellow man asked.

"We crossed the stone bridge," Gale said.

"But it's covered by lava!"

They were natives, but they couldn't penetrate illusion. Gale had good news for them. "Introduction: I am Nonesuch Songstress, and this is my bodyguard."

"Awry," the man said. He indicated the woman. "Cajole, my wife." Then the small girl. "Smidgen, our daughter."

"How did you miss the evacuation?" Throe asked.

"Cajole was birthing our son," Awry explained. "By the time she finished, the quake had shaken down most bridges, and the lava covered the other. We are trapped."

"No more," Gale said. "The lava is illusion. But you will have to wait for the stone shower to abate."

"Illusion!" Cajole exclaimed. "We never thought to question it!"

"It was chance that we did," Gale said. "My companion saw that it was not setting fire to the things it touched." She did not care to advertise her newfound ability, any more than her mind reading ability. In any event, the latter was not feasible here, because there were too many people too close; their overlapping thoughts were a confused jungle. That was why she and Throe normally suppressed their ability; constant access to the minds of others could be overwhelming. Only when they were alone together was mind sharing easy.

"Apology for what may be a stupid question," Throe said. "But I had understood that all Chroma folk could do magic, like flying. Why do you need bridges?"

"Flying is a skill that must be honed, or it becomes dangerous," Awry explained. "Especially when the magic ambience is unstable, as is the case now. And the flying cinders are worse aloft. So we must remain grounded, covering our heads."

Gale realized that also explained why the Yellow brigands had remained grounded. They could have flown headfirst into trees had they tried to go aloft. An eruption changed everything, taking away

abilities folk might normally depend on.

"You have saved us," Awry said. "We must make a fair trade for this information."

"No need," Gale said.

"Negation."

*Let them trade, Throe thought. It will ease their concern.*

"As you prefer," Gale said. "We have a mission near the cone, but the way there is becoming awkward. Do you know of any safe shortcut?"

"I do!" Smidgen said. "I go there all the time."

Cajole looked at her. "You do, knowing it's forbidden?"

The girl looked crestfallen. "Chagrin! I didn't mean to tell."

"We'll be glad to trade information," Gale said quickly. "Let's do this: we will show Smidgen the illusion, so she knows you have a safe way out, and she will show us her shortcut to the cone. Fair exchange?"

Cajole looked as if she had some reservations, but decided to make the best of it. "Fair exchange," she agreed.

Gale looked out. "The rock shower is abating, but care should still be taken. My companion can use his shield, as we did to come here, and show the girl the way."

"Negation," Awry said. "No offense intended, but we do not let our child associate with strange men."

"Point taken," Throe said. "I have a daughter I never let do that either. You can do it, Nonesuch." He handed her his shield, which turned out to be reasonably light.

It did seem best. Gale lifted the shield over her head. "Stay close to me, Smidgen," she said. "A hot rock could still come down."

"I will."

They moved out. They matched step and made good progress. "What is it about the volcano that so fascinates you?" Gale inquired.

"Oh, you know, it's so big and bright, and there's so much magic. I like it."

Gale had not meant to, but found herself looking into the girl's mind—and was shocked. This innocent-seeming child was lying, deliberately and without concern. She hardly cared about the cone; she had another interest. It was a boyfriend who lived near the cone. Her shortcut was so that no one would see her going there so often.

The girl was seven years old. The boyfriend was twenty three and married. It was consensual, and it was complete. He was a pedophile, and she liked the attention. She didn't even mistake sex for love; they had been honest with each other throughout, if not to others. They understood each other perfectly. She was happy to hold his interest, and had discovered how to do it. She went to him every chance she could. He accommodated her every chance he could. It was their secret, and it brightened both their lives. It enabled him to maintain appearances despite having little sexual interest in his wife, and her to have the full ardent fascination of a handsome man. It was their private realm, which each would deny if challenged.

Gale wished she hadn't peeped. Now she was stuck with an ugly decision: should she tell the parents, whom she knew from the girl's thoughts had no idea? That would generate a firestorm not of the volcano's making, and probably finish with the girl placed in forced adoption elsewhere. Misery for all three of them. Or should she keep her mouth shut?

She hated it, but she knew what it had to be. She had to keep silent, because it really wasn't her business, and more damage would be done by the revelation than by the secret. Maybe in time the girl would tire of the game and break it off with no outside party the wiser. Or more likely she would mature, physically, and the man would lose interest. With luck that, too, would end quietly, as the girl sought attention elsewhere.

This was the second time Gale had had to make a hard decision about another person's welfare. She hoped she had saved the lives of Auger and Aura. Now she hoped that her silence would enable something to end without hurting innocent parties. For the parents were innocent; it was the child who was not. What irony!

They approached the apparent lava flow. "That looks awful hot," Smidgen said. "Are you sure it's not there?"

"I am sure. We crossed this bridge coming in."

They marched on into the apparent river of fire. "Amazement!" the girl cried. "I see it, but I can't feel it. It's a secret fire."

"An apparent fire," Gale said. "Its secret is that it doesn't exist."

"Weird! An inside-out secret."

And the girl did know about the regular kind of secret: a situation that existed without being known. She was already planning to tell her lover about the lava that wasn't there. She liked the idea of knowing something he didn't; usually it was the other way around.

Satisfied, they walked on out of the lava flow and back to the house. The rain of rocks had abated; this aspect of the eruption was done, for now.

"It's true!" Smidgen cried. "It's illusion!"

"We believe it," Awry said. They had been talking with Throe, who must have been persuasive.

Smidgen gladly showed them the shortcut. It was a winding path through wilderness brush that

intersected no houses or yards—except one. That house was now empty; the family had evacuated. The girl stared at it a moment, soberly, then turned to go back. She had to rejoin her family so they could all get to safety before real lava came.

"Gratitude, Smidgen," Gale called.

The girl paused, turning back. "And to you, too, for not blabbing." Then she spun about and ran off.

"She knew!" Gale breathed, chagrined.

"Question?"

Was she obliged to keep the secret from him? She thought not. "That little gamine is having an affair with a pedophile. I read it in her mind. Since there would be more mischief in revealing it than in letting it be, I decided to keep her secret. She must have a little mind reading ability of her own, so I knew I knew and would not tell."

"She lives close-in to the cone, where magic is strong. Any magic ability is possible, if a person takes the trouble to learn it and perfect it. She could have some mind reading ability. It would help her to keep secrets."

"Surely so! But is it right for me to keep that secret?"

"I think so. What the girl is doing is advanced Tickle & Peek. That is her business."

"With an adult man!"

"He does not force her?"

"No force."

"Then it is their business."

"Suppose your daughter—"

"I would prefer not to know."

Which was another argument for secrecy. Gale remembered her early relationship with Havoc, when she had offered to give him all the Peeks he wanted, with no obligation. She had not told her parents. She would have given him full sex then, if he had wanted it, if she had known how. And not told any adult. "Maybe so," she said reluctantly. Somehow it looked different from an adult perspective.

They moved on past the house to the slope of the fire mountain. The magic was intense, almost palpable. They were on the wrong side; the coordinates were about a quarter of the way around it. That would take them to the end of the day—assuming there were no further eruptions.

As if responding to that thought, the cone rumbled. A cloud emerged. Instead of sailing into the

sky, it bobbed just above the cone, then spilled over and *rolled* down the slope. "What is that?" Gale demanded, astounded.

"Pyroclastic flow," Throe said grimly. "With magic. I have read of it." Then he got practical. "It's coming this way. We've got to get out of here!"

"What is pyro—pyro—"

"Come on! This is deadly!"

They ran to the side, trying to get out of the rolling cloud's path. As they ran, Throe described it mentally. *Ball of gas, ash, air, water, vaporized lava, superheated, can kill you any which way.*

They came to a crack in the mountain. In terms of the volcano, it was trifling, but for them it was a crevasse.

"Can you make it?" Throe asked as they ran toward it.

"Yes."

They reached the brink and leaped together. Gale remembered that this was the way King Deal had died, caught by a changeling vulnerability as he jumped, so that he fell to his death in a seeming accident. It was murder, as Havoc had verified. Changelings were different from regular people in some subtle ways, not all of them positive. But Havoc, Gale, and Symbol had gotten that particular liability fixed. Havoc was not one to let a known weakness remain.

They landed on the far side and slowed. They stopped and gazed back.

The yellow pyroclastic cloud was not far behind. It was bouncing down the mountain, spreading out. It was intensely magic; Gale felt that as much as the heat. It reached the crevasse and tried to spread across. It sagged down into the gap, unable to float. Then its rolling motion carried it on, with only a fragment dropping into the crack.

"That is a fearsome thing," Throe remarked. "I think it was trying to get at us."

"But it's inanimate."

"That's what makes it scary."

"When I was at the Red Chroma cone, the demons seemed to be trying to balk us. They don't have our intelligence, but they do seem to have some will of their own."

"And these would be fresh demons from the depths. I wonder whether we will ever understand them."

"We'd better get on with the mission," she said. "I don't want to be caught by the darkness, and of course we don't know when the next solid eruption will come."

"At any time," he agreed. "The faster we can fetch the ikon and get out of here, the better."

"Emphatic agreement."

They walked toward the crack, then ran, and leaped. They landed neatly on the other side.

"Oh!" Gale cried. "It's hot!"

"Burning," he agreed. "Will take hours to cool. Here." He stepped toward her and put one hand across her back, the other against her thighs. In a moment he lifted her up, clear of the hot stone.

"But your feet will burn!" she protested. "And you can't carry me far this way; the terrain's too uneven. We must go back." But as she spoke, her dragon seed buzzed.

"I felt that buzz in your mind," he said. "We have to go forward. Anyway, my boots are better protection than your slippers. I can make it."

He was right. "At least carry me on your back, so your arms are free."

"Agreement." He set her down. Immediately her shoes started heating.

She jumped onto his back, her arms around his shoulders, her legs around his waist. He lumbered onward.

But she felt his pain, radiating from his mind. His feet were being destroyed! But what could she do?

Then from the depths of her something came. It was a healing power she had never known she had. She projected it from her whole body into his, sending it down into his legs.

It worked. His pace became strong, and he moved faster. He made rapid progress toward the coordinate site.

There was a cave. "Go in!" Throe gasped, setting her down. "Get it!" He dropped to the stone, which was no longer hot; he had crossed the section the pyroclastic ball had heated.

"Throe! You're hurt!"

"Just my feet. You somehow stopped the pain, but they're gone. Go get that ikon."

"I can't leave you here!" She dropped to her knees, looking at his boots. But as she did so, she saw the scorch marks on the soles, and smelled the burned flesh. "Oh, Throe!"

"Get it!" he cried. "It's our mission!"

He was right again. She got up and forged into the cave. Because the rock was bright yellow, she could see some distance inside. In fact there were small flames along the walls, lighting it.

She came to the key chamber. There was an altar—and it was on fire. In fact it seemed to be made of fire. How was she going to handle this?

Then she realized that it was illusion. She refocused her eyes, and perceived the true altar beneath it, similar to the one she had seen in the Red Chroma zone, and not burning. She approached it.

There was a rumble, and the chamber shook. Was it a tremor—or an eruption?

Did it matter? She dived for the altar and started checking the pockets. The last was empty, as was the one next to it.

The whole mountain vibrated. Gale felt a wash of sheer magic. She knew it immediately: the eruption!

They were too late. They could not survive a full eruption while on or in the cone itself.

Still she scrambled for the ikon—and found it in the first pocket. A yellow star, seemingly burning, but that was merely its color and shape. She scooped it up and popped it into her mouth. Then she ran for the exit, boosted by the growing force of the eruption, which was shoving the entire chamber outward. She envisioned the magma, gas, smoke, ash, and pyroclastic cloud jamming up the throat of the cone, like a monstrous male emission, forcing it to expand. In a moment it would blow off the top of the mountain and vent into the sky, blasting everything in the vicinity. She felt both its awesome physical and magic power. She was but a fly on the surface of the bomb as it detonated.

Still she ran, determined to get as far as she could before it blew her to oblivion. She came to the cave entrance. There was Throe. She had almost forgotten him. He couldn't walk. Even if she could get free of the cone, by some miracle, how could she save him too?

"Throe!" she cried, kneeling beside him.

"Did you get it?"

"Yes. A yellow star. In my mouth." She touched her cheek.

"Then get out of here! The thing's erupting."

"I can't leave you!"

"Don't get womanish on me! You have maybe half a chance. I'm done for anyway. Get going!"

"You brought me here. I can't desert you like this."

"The mission, idiot! Remember the mission. Go!"

He was right. Whatever chance she had lay in moving out and hoping that somehow the hell of the eruption missed her. It was a small chance, a tiny chance, a mere theoretical chance, but all there was. "Parting!" she said, and kissed him.

"Tell Ennui—"

"I will!" She stood and took a step away from him.



The cone fragmented. Gale felt the overwhelming force of it shoving everything ferociously away.

She whirled and threw herself down on Throe, clasping him, trying to protect him from the dreadful power of the blast. She knew it was a pitiful gesture, but it was all she could do at this stage. Neither of them had any chance of survival.

The eruption picked them up and hurled them outward. They flew through the air, locked together, surrounded by the roiling golden smoke of it. The entire Fire Chroma was passing beneath them, spread out like a yellow map.

Was she dreaming? How could she be seeing this, when she was dead in the eruption? Had she merely imagined their journey to the cone? She doubted it. Therefore she must be dead, and it was her soul watching, and Throe's soul with her. Where were they going?

They dropped toward the ground, their bodies following an arc from the volcano. Why here? Surely the repository for spirits was on Planet Mystery if it was anywhere. And why drop? They should no longer have any solid substance.

They landed on a yellow field, bounced, and plowed to a stop. Gale did not move, uncertain what the protocol was for the afterlife. Would there be some guidance?

"What did you do?" Throe asked.

That jolted her out of her stasis. "I died, I think. As did you. What are we doing here?"

"If I'm dead, why are my feet still hurting?"

"We can't be alive! We were caught in the eruption!"

"Affirmation. You threw yourself on me, and then we both got thrown to the edge of the Chroma zone. We seem to be alive. I have no idea why."

"We're really alive?"

"Want me to spank your bottom to prove it?"

She had to laugh. "I guess we are. But I can't explain it. It doesn't seem possible."

"Maybe we'll figure it out sometime. Right now there's the mission to complete. I still can't walk, so you'd better get moving alone. Not much has changed."

"You're coming too. I'm not going to tell Ennui I left you here alone." She considered. "Maybe I can heal your feet, at least enough to enable you to walk."

"Don't try. They're gone."

She feared he was right. "Then I'll get you home some other way. I won't leave you."

He sighed. "I suppose you can sing us home. Let's see if I can fashion a cart for my feet so that I

can propel myself with my arms." Then he looked at her. "The ikon! It's magical!"

"Of course it is," she agreed. "They all are."

"I mean potent magic. It must have protected you—and me too, because you were covering me. It made us invulnerable."

Gale stared at him. "That must be it! They come from the heart of their Chroma zones, where the magic is strongest. Whatever they are designed to do, they can do with enormous power."

"I think the mystery of the changelings must involve potent forces indeed."

She nodded, agreeing. "Yet I think if I took time to consider the matter properly, I would freak out. I really thought we died."

"Agreement." After a pause, he said: "This experience has caused my respect for you to grow. We have been associates. Can we be friends?"

"We're already friends."

"We work together. We've been nominal friends. I mean real friends."

She was suddenly overwhelmed. "Oh, Throe, you sacrificed your feet for me! And almost your life. That's not nominal. Of course we should be friends."

"My feet were line of duty. But the way you threw yourself on me as the eruption occurred—you did save my life by that act."

"Line of duty," she said, smiling. Then, suddenly, she was overwhelmed. "Oh, Throe—we almost *died!* I can't face it."

"What choice do we have?"

"Just comfort me a moment. As a friend."

Then she was sprawled across him again, being held by his strong arms. She sobbed, letting the burgeoning emotion out. It might be stupid, but it helped.

After a time, she straightened up and reassembled herself, physically and emotionally. "I don't think I'm through, but the rest can wait. Now we have to get us home."

"Home," he agreed. "With the ikon."

"With the ikon," she agreed grimly. "It cost us so much; we aren't going to let it go."

A shimmer appeared. Gale put out a hand. "Swale."

*What happened?*

"Throe carried me across burning rock, and destroyed his feet. Now he can't walk. But we got the ikon, and will return to Triumph. How's Havoc?"

*She seduced him. He has taken her as his mistress.*

"Good for her." But Gale felt a pang. Others thought her generous, but she did not feel so. "As long as they're both all right."

*She's his mistress, but you're his love. I know.*

And that was reassuring, but not enough. Still, there was no point in struggling with it. She had other huge concepts to digest, such as near death. "Tell them we're on our way."

*I will.* The succubus faded.

"We'll be all right," Throe said.

With his lost feet and her broken heart? "I hope so."

"We'll solve the mystery of the changelings, and then it will be all right."

"I hope so," she repeated dully.

## Chapter 7—Avian

Havoc looked at Throe. "You can't walk?"

"Apparently not," Throe replied. "The medics say that my feet are literally cooked. They will have to amputate."

"I did not wish this on you."

"It was necessary. We got the ikon."

Gale produced the yellow star. "It has phenomenal power. It protected us from a full-fledged eruption. It's my guess that all the ikons have similar power."

"We'll find out," Havoc said. "But first I have to get the seventh ikon."

"We all do," Gale said. "Except for Throe."

Havoc frowned. "It's my understanding that we were to send four to fetch the first four, and two parties of two for the next two, and one party of four for the last. It may not count, without Throe. He's worth any four others."

"Then let's take four others."

"But the privacy of our mission would be compromised."

"Not if they know it already. I can speak for Dour, who knows how to travel and is a doughty fighter."

"The Cartographer," he agreed. "Who else?"

"The one you brought back, the sweet woman—Stevia."

He nodded. "She has special properties, and I owe her no fault. Who else?"

Throe spoke. "The one I brought back: Ine. She's a sorceress of illusion."

"We may be able to use that. One more."

"Symbol brought back an Amazon," Gale said. "Lucent."

"Done!" Havoc glanced at Throe. "You guard the home base with Ennui."

"I will." Then, after a pause, he murmured, "But beware: Ine is insatiable, with a certain twisted slant."

"Question?"

"Sexually. Sado-masochistically."

"I'm not going to be having sex with her!"

Throe smiled ruefully. "You may not be able to avoid it."

"Parting," Havoc said with good nature.

Within hours they were on their way. They used the buddy system, each with another as a traveling companion. It was apparent that the Cartographer and the Amazon liked each other and made a convenient pair. Gale and Symbol associated, neither caring to be with Havoc in the presence of the other. It wasn't rivalry so much as camaraderie; they both loved him and understood that aspect of each other. That left the Gray Chroma woman and the Air Chroma sorceress. "You two can get along?" Havoc asked them.

"Not so fast, Hayseed," Stevia said. "You can't travel alone."

"I'm the odd man out."

"And the one who can't be risked," Ine said. "You need a companion, and that must be one of us."

It was his rule, and he had to honor it. "But if I take one of you, the other will be alone." Actually he had planned to be with Stevia, but the addition of Ine had complicated it.

The two women exchanged a glance. Then Stevia spoke. "It's my turn to travel no fault with you. But I can share you. Take us both."

"Both!"

"That's very sweet of you," Ine said. "But you do have a claim I lack. I can strip down and travel invisible. I should be safe enough."

"And if you get in trouble, who will be able to find you? You need a buddy, and I can be that."

"If you're sure—"

"He's young and virile. He can handle us both, especially if we cooperate."

The Air Chroma woman oriented her veil on Havoc. There was a disturbing suggestiveness in her manner. "Agreement. Appreciation."

"But I did not agree to this," Havoc protested.

The two exchanged another glance. Then they approached him on either side. Stevia took his right hand and passed it inside her shirt, placing it on one fine full breast, thumb on the nipple. Ine took his left hand and passed it under her skirt and behind to her firm full buttock, fingertips pressing into a hot crevice. Then both leaned forward and kissed him on either ear.

"Submission," he murmured, half dazed by the input. They knew the power their hidden flesh had on his imagination and desire. If they didn't let him go soon he would embarrass himself by trying to have sex with them simultaneously.

The others laughed. Symbol turned to Gale. "You and I must keep that ploy in mind."

"Lets throw for his hands," Gale said.

"Unnecessary. You're his right hand girl; I'm left."

Lucent turned to Dour. "Give me one of yours." In a moment she had it under her shirt, while the Cartographer blushed. But he did not try to remove it.

"We have a mission," Havoc said somewhat desperately.

"So we do," Stevia said, twitching her bosom before removing his hand. "We'll have to remember our places."

"Too bad he doesn't have four hands," Ine said, flexing her bottom before removing the other. "Alternate completions?"

"Throw for first one," Stevia said.

"I'm odd."

They threw fingers, and it was even. Stevia smiled. "But the other can address whatever else at the time."

"Delight."

"Don't I have any say in this?" Havoc asked, embarrassed by both their banter and his obvious erection.

"Negation," they said together, laughing.

"How do we travel?" Symbol asked.

"We can make up a troupe," Gale said. "Havoc and I can sing, Dour and Lucent can guard, and the others can fill in. There should be no trouble."

Havoc agreed. They quickly selected sample songs and acts as they walked out of the city. They went to the neighboring Translucent Chroma zone. "We are an entertainment troupe," Havoc said. "We need passage across to the adjacent Yellow Chroma zone."

"Seven? It will have to be good." Then the Translucent man spotted Gale. "Aren't you the songstress who passed this way two weeks ago?"

"Affirmation. I'm with my troupe now."

"It is of your level?"

"Affirmation."

"Transport within the hour. Will you perform in the interim?"

"Affirmation."

The Translucent man got to work summoning a transport craft and audience. "You must have made an impression," Havoc murmured.

"Dour helped."

Soon the group of Transluents was assembled in a circle. The group of them took the center for their first performance. They stood in a line, silent.

First Havoc addressed the audience. "Greeting."

"Acknowledged!" the children in the front circle exclaimed jubilantly.

"I am Hayseed, master of this troupe. I am a singer, and so is my partner Nonesuch, whom some of you may have seen before." Several Translucent heads nodded; that was why they were here.

"For our first number we need three volunteers," Havoc continued. "Coachmen, preferably, or

wagoneers."

In a moment they had three Translucent volunteers. It was always fun to be on stage with a troupe; this was a standard device.

Havoc looked around. "But where will these fine men sit?"

That was Lucent's cue. She hastened to fetch three chairs, setting them in a triangle facing out, so that no part of the audience was excluded. The volunteers took their seats expectantly. Havoc and Gale took their places inside the triangle, back to back.

"These are the three jolly coachmen," Havoc said. "They are deep thinkers, with wisdom for all."

Havoc glanced over his shoulder at Gale. "Music, please, songstress."

Gale played a chord on her hammer dulcimer. Then she and Havoc broke into song.

Three jolly coachmen sat  
In a village tavern

They repeated that stanza while the audience gazed at the three seated men, who looked smugly satisfied. They knew the song, of course, and liked the role.

And they decided that  
And they decided that  
And they decided that  
They'd have another flagon.

There was a wash of laughter. This was the deep thinking these men did? Meanwhile Lucent hastened to bring them empty mugs to gesture with.

For tonight we'll merry merry be  
For tonight we'll merry merry be  
For tonight we'll merry merry be  
Tomorrow we'll be sober!

The three waved their mugs around, getting into it. Now Gale sang alone:

Here's to the man who drinks light ale  
And goes to bed quite sober...

As Gale repeated the stanza, Ine, garbed as a slender man, walked around with a small mug, from which she took small sips. It was easy for her to emulate such a person, because none of her real flesh showed. Her clothing was all.

He falls as the leaves do fall...  
So early in October.

The date was an obscure one that came with the song; it was understood to be near the onset of a cold spell. Ine went to the side and carefully settled down to sleep, her head against the legs of a delighted child. Lucent went to lay a small blanket carefully over her.

Here's to the man who drinks stout ale  
And goes to bed quite mellow.

Dour went out with a large mug, from which he seemed to take huge gulps. With each gulp he staggered worse.

He lives as he ought to live...  
He'll be a jolly fellow!

Dour almost lurched into the three coachmen, the singers, and the audience, before falling flat on his back, dead drunk. Gale had mentioned that he had been shy before an audience, but he was evidently getting over that, hamming it up awfully. The audience loved it. So, it seemed, did Dour.

Now Havoc sang alone:

Here's to the girl who steals a kiss  
And runs to tell her mother...

Symbol went out, garbed as an innocent village girl. She spied the drunken man as he sat blearily up, stooped to peck him on the cheek, and ran quickly away to pantomime before an older woman in the audience: her no fault mother.

She does a very foolish thing...  
She'll never get another!

The older woman in the audience gestured violently in negation, and Symbol slunk away, ashamed. Lucent gave her a shroud to hide under. The audience chuckled knowingly, and the old woman was pleased to have become part of the show.

Here's to the girl who steals a kiss  
And lingers for another...

It was Stevia's turn. She swirled her lengthening gray hair around, walked up to Dour, who was now back on his feet, grabbed him, and kissed him with a loud smacking sound. The children laughed. She kissed him again, her shirt somehow falling open to reveal her very full gray breasts, not quite covered by the descending tresses. She was evidently almost as drunk as he was. The men were watching closely.

She is a boon to all mankind...  
She'll be a jolly mother!

Stevia looked at her belly, thrusting it well out, appalled, while the audience laughed and applauded.

"You were great, Dour," Lucent said.

"So were you," the Cartographer replied, flattered.

They went on to other songs, a great success. There was nothing any audience enjoyed so much as a reasonably familiar song acted out in a new manner. Most of them dated back a thousand years or more, to the original home world, and were cherished as memories of its ancient culture.

The boats arrived, and they moved swiftly across the zone. "You know," Gale remarked, "We do make a good troupe. We could probably travel indefinitely this way."

"I'd prefer it," Havoc said seriously. He might have been spoiled by civilization, but he still disliked being king. A troupe like this, in contrast, was fun.



Several zones later, they stopped at a campsite. They had been fed generously along the way by appreciative audiences, but needed to get some rest and sleep. Dour and Lucent took a cabin, Symbol and Gale another, and Havoc had one with Stevia and Ine.

"I don't suppose you women want to sleep first?" he asked.

They didn't answer. They stripped him and washed him in the tub, then did the same themselves. They laid him out on the bed, Stevia on his right, Ine unseen on his left. Ine worked on his head, kissing all over it, while Stevia worked on his nether section similarly. When he was about ready to burst, Stevia spread herself on him and took him, while Ine kissed him ardently on the mouth, tonguing him in the process. Her body was invisible, but eminently tactile; her breasts were quivering against his chest and shoulder. It was weird, knowing that these were two different women addressing him, but also extremely potent. Both of them seemed to be highly experienced.

After the first completion, they exchanged places, and Stevia worked on his upper section, stroking his face with her breasts, while Ine seemed to be doing something similar below. Stevia's hair flowed out from her head, touching his face like warm water, tickling his ears. Ine's mouth was caressing his member, with just a hint of teeth, tickling it to renewed life. He knew he couldn't see what she was doing even if he looked, but the feel was extraordinary. In a surprisingly short time he found himself entering Ine while clasping Stevia, for another powerful climax. They were truly working him over, cooperatively, and he was only half surprised to find himself loving it.

"We seem to make a good team," Ine remarked.

"Affirmation," Stevia said. "It's a good job."

"Don't I have something to do with it?" Havoc asked somewhat plaintively.

"Of course," Ine said. "You are the clay we mold."

"Highly pliable at the moment," Stevia said, kneading it. "More rigidity would help." Her hair flowed again, bathing it luxuriously.

"Let it rest!"

They both laughed. "Tomorrow we can get into the naughtier variants," Ine said. It was apparent that she had unusual appetites. Throe had mentioned that, but Havoc had not taken proper warning. Now he wasn't sure whether he regretted it.

They settled on either side of him, each holding him down with an arm and a leg, and composed themselves for sleep. He had never thought to sleep in such manner with two naked women, but was more than comfortable.

He woke in darkness. His hands were on two bottoms, and someone was checking his member again for pliability. Fortunately nothing came of it.

But in the morning they were at him again, forcing another turn for each before they let him get up. Only when both were satisfied did they allow him to visit the toilet unit.

"Greeting," someone said at his ear, startling him.

"Symbol," he said. She was invisible in the gloom of the interior.

"Do your business," she said. "That was some session you had, overnight."

"It's hard to keep up with those two," he admitted as he sat.

"You did well enough. Twice last night, twice this morning."

"What do you know about it?"

"Gale peeped."

"My mind was guarded, and she wouldn't have gotten anything from Stevia either."

"But Ine doesn't have a mind guard, and she truly loves the action. We got it all from her, play by play. Fascinating technique."

"I just responded to their efforts."

"It was their technique to which I referred, not yours. That fellow Air Chroma girl has a wicked imagination, and the Gray Chroma is no slouch."

All too true. "Nights with you were easier."

Her teasing stopped. "Oh, Havoc." She sent a wash of adoration and desire. Then she was gone.

They shared a community breakfast. Dour and Lucent were already out scouting the terrain ahead. They returned with a sober report: "There is a White Chroma zone ahead, but it's unoccupied," Lucent said. "It's a boiling lake."

"Can we go around it?" Havoc asked.

"Unfeasible. It's a fair sized lake, and the surrounding terrain is rough. It would require several hops and hikes, and delay us several days. Crossing it directly could be done in an hour or so."

"How?"

"There's a White Chroma man with a machine. But he has a captive market and knows it; passage will not be cheap."

"We'll find a way," Havoc said philosophically. He had to concede that being king had some advantages; as king he could have commanded the machine crossing, instead of having to work for it. But he preferred working.

They marched to the White Chroma lake. It was as described, with bubbles of steam bursting at the surface. They could not touch it, let alone cross it. Magic would be no good, because none of

them were White Chroma; they could not do the science magic of this zone.

They approached the White man, who stood waiting for them to assess the situation. "We are a traveling entertainment troupe," Havoc said. "We need to cross the lake. Can we deal with you?"

"You can try," the man said with arrogant confidence.

"Introduction: I am Hayseed the minstrel."

"I am Track, for my tractor." He gestured to the large machine at the hot water's edge. It was the size of a small residential hut, made of white metal, with wheels all around and a belt of treads on the outside of the wheels. It was hard to make any sense of it.

Havoc was reading his mind, trying to ascertain his true desire. That was why Havoc had approached him alone: so that the thoughts of the other members of the troupe would not interfere with his reading. The problem with mind reading was the normal jangle of overlapping thoughts that made an impenetrable mush; only when a subject was isolated could he be read cleanly. Even then, his thought had to be somewhat organized, because each human mind was its own jungle of impressions, conjectures, and feelings. Usually verbal speech was easier, because it was single-channel. But sometimes a person did not say what was really on his mind. So leading questions could be useful to channel particular thoughts.

"We are prepared to make some reasonable exchange."

"I am not a reasonable man."

"It's good to encounter candor," Havoc said, smiling. "What is your price?"

But Track was too canny for that. He wanted to get as much as he could, without aggravating potential clients to the point of refusal. "Make me an offer."

"We have a shapely woman who will entertain you no fault."

"For a party of seven?"

"We have two shapely women, or three. They are talented, and of different Chroma." How well he remembered the past night—and those were not even the most appealing women in the party.

"Negation." Behind the rejection was the reason: the man's White Chroma girlfriend had laid down the law about no fault liaisons: any more of those and she was gone. Anyway, Track had found from experience that with one woman or three women, he could climax only once, and so it was really no more than what his girlfriend provided.

"We have a couple of strong men who can do some laborsome chore."

"I do my own." He did; he was self sufficient.

"We can entertain you with an animated song."

"I've heard them galore."

Havoc was getting no useful leads; he saw that Track normally charged what the market would bear, which was an extortionistic portion of trade goods. Since this was not a trading caravan, they had no goods to yield. So they were not of much interest, and the man did not care whether he took them across. As a matter of principle, he did not sell cheap; he was satisfied to have the word circulate that he was as likely to refuse as to accept. That made the serious travelers more amenable.

But they needed to cross without delay. They could not force the man; he alone knew how to operate his machine and make it respond to his science magic, and he alone knew the precise safe route across the bottom of the lake. The danger was real; any stranger attempting it was likely to get boiled.

"Let me consult to see what else we can offer," Havoc said. He retreated to join the others. "Any ideas? This is a man without many interests other than acquisition of goods."

"Let us try," Symbol said. "He's bound to want something, even if he doesn't know it yet."

"Welcome."

Symbol and Gale stepped up to join Track. Havoc knew that Symbol would make suggestive remarks while Gale read his mind. If he had a secret, they would evoke it.

They talked with Track. After a moment they returned: "We have achieved a deal," Symbol said. "We evoked a desire he didn't realize he had: to be an actor in a play."

"We can't take the time to train him in," Havoc protested.

"Dummy role. You and Gale can handle it; the rest of us will be the audience. Plus his girlfriend, Clean."

"She is concerned with being sanitary?"

"She cleans houses."

"And right now she's mad at him," Gale said. "For the last time he accepted a no fault crossing with a particularly pretty maiden. He wants to make up, but she'll hardly speak to him, let alone share his bed."

"Can't think why," Symbol said innocently, provoking laughter.

"We told him the play would change her mind," Gale said.

So now the reason for the man's sudden interest in drama was clarifying. They had better come through for him.

While Track went to fetch his irate girlfriend, Havoc and Gale organized the presentation. They would adapt a familiar song to the circumstance, making actors of duffers, making them like it. This had to be more than merely having villagers sit in chairs and be acted around; they had to give the

subjects a real impression of acting themselves. They knew they could do it; the key was to do it well enough to completely satisfy the duffers. Especially the angry woman.

Clean turned out to be a plain White Chroma woman on the far edge of youth. She was, however, quite clean, as befitted her name; her white clothing and skin fairly shone. She seemed doubtful about this business, but wanted to know exactly what her boyfriend was getting into. She also remained angry; it was uppermost in her mind. If this were some trick, she would bid Track permanent parting. He had reason to be concerned.

Havoc joined them. "You are about to be the lead characters in a song play," he said. "The two of us will sing your lines; you have only to stand and gaze at each other."

"Ludicrous," Clean said. "I'm wasting an hour of working time for this?"

"You must be satisfied," Gale said. "Or Track won't convey us across the lake."

"Let's give it a try, honey," Track said. His desire, once evoked, was strong. He wanted to act in a play, and to have Clean respect that. He also wanted her to forgive him.

"Satisfy yourself." Clean stood looking at him with an expression of impatience.

Havoc went to stand just behind Track, and Gale stood behind Clean, while the five other members of the ensemble seated themselves in a circle around the four.

Havoc addressed the audience. "Track has just come across a lovely woman he has not seen before. He falls immediately in love with her. He knows he must win her, or be forever desolate. There she stands." He gestured to Clean, who snorted with derision, very much with this aspect. "Now Track speaks." Havoc broke into song:

On yonder hill there stands a creature  
Who she is I do not know.  
I'll go court her for her beauty:  
She must answer yes or no.

Then Gale sang, from behind Clean:

Oh, no Track, no Track, no Track no!

Havoc spoke quietly to Track. "So she rejects you out of hand? There must be some reason. After all, handsome suitors do not appear every day."

Now Track snorted derisively: he had no illusions about his appearance.

Gale sang again, for the woman:

My father was a village merchant  
Went on tour a month ago  
First he kissed me, then he left me  
Bid me always answer "No."  
Oh, no Track, no Track, no Track no!

"So that's it," Havoc murmured, loud enough for others to hear. "Her father gave her a directive.

But maybe we can break down her resistance. I think she likes you." That brought the first partial smile from Clean, who was discovering she liked being feted on stage, even foolishly. The thawing was beginning.

Havoc sang again, for Track:

O Madame in your face is beauty  
On your lips red roses grow  
Will you take me for your lover?  
Madame, answer yes or no.

The woman maintained her frown, but it was weakening. It was difficult for any woman to remain aloof when described in such terms by an evocative singer. But Gale sang again for Clean:

Oh, no Track, no Track, no Track no!

"I think the lovely creature is weakening," Havoc said. "Just a little more persuasion should do it."

Oh, Madame I will give you jewels  
I will make you rich and free  
I will give you silken dresses.  
Madame, will you marry me?

But the same refrain came back:

Oh, no Track, no Track, no Track no!

Havoc shook his head. "She has more resistance than I thought. But I know she likes you. How can we get around this imperative her father left?"

Track glanced at him blankly; the song was evidently new to him. It seemed that not all of the old standards from ancestral Earth made it to all listeners in all Chroma. But Havoc took it as a speech, for the purpose of the presentation. He straightened up as if just learning something exciting. "A simple reversal? I think you're right; what a brilliant notion! We'll try it. After all, we can't let this beauty get away."

Clean nodded, beginning to enjoy this. Gale had figured she would; plain women liked the feeling of seeming beautiful, even in outrageous pretense.

Havoc sang again:

Oh Madame since you are so cruel  
And that you do scorn me so—  
Since I may not be your lover  
Madame will you let me go?

Now Gale spoke to Clean: "Did you hear that? He reversed the question! But did your father give you leave to change your answer?" Clean shook her head, participating to that extent.

And Gale sang with surprised enthusiasm:

Oh, no Track, no Track, no Track no!

"It's working!" Havoc stage-whispered. "She truly wants you to stay. But let's make sure."

Then I will stay with you forever  
If you will not be unkind  
Madame I have vowed to love you  
Would you have me change my mind?  
Oh, no Track, no Track, no Track no!

"Now to nail it down," Havoc said. "Here comes the proposal. By the time her father returns, it will be too late. You'll be married."

Oh hark! I hear the church bells ringing  
Will you come and be my wife?  
Or dear Madame, have you settled  
To live single all your life?  
Oh, no Track, no Track, no Track no!

"She's yours," Havoc said. Go claim her." He urged Track toward the woman. Gale simultaneously directed Clean toward the man. The woman was unable to resist this clever and flattering ruse.

They met in the middle and kissed. The audience broke into applause. The play was done.

Clean whispered in Track's ear, then tugged him toward the tractor. "Be right back," he called over his shoulder. "Got to prepare the equipment."

"The consummation," Symbol said. "That certainly thawed her ice."

"We must do that song some time," Lucent said to Dour. He nodded happily. That was another romance that had worked out, and indeed the two were well matched.

"With two maidens," Ine said to Havoc.

"Love and mistress," Symbol agreed.

"Some other time," Havoc said.

"Why wait?" Ine asked. "Now is the romantic time. Let's make it more." She beckoned wickedly to Gale and Symbol.

"Should such generosity be denied?" Symbol inquired rhetorically. The two stepped forward, willing to participate in this manner.

The four women closed around him. "Let's see if you can do a round of four before they emerge," Ine said.

"Fabulous notion, Air sister!" Symbol said. "You have a rare imagination."

"It comes with the territory," Ine said, opening her shirt to reveal her seemingly empty bodice. The sight nevertheless caused Havoc to react; he had an excellent notion of the shape of that invisible flesh. The Air sorceress had turned out to be quite a girl, and not fooling about her taste for naughtiness.

"I knew I shouldn't have traveled with so many women," Havoc said. "Any one of them is more than enough." He was only partly joking.

They pressed in on him from four sides, acquainting him with assorted anatomy. One claimed a kiss while another goosed him. One reached into his shirt while another reached into his trousers. Thoughts of hot passion came from all of them, even Stevia; it seemed that she could open her mind when she chose to.

"Who has waited longest?" Ine asked.

"I have," Gale said. "All three of you have had him several times since I have."

"Then you're due."

"But this is not the way," Havoc protested without real force. They had made him want it, any way it came.

"Who asked you?" Stevia inquired as the two Air Chroma women helped Gale strip.

But then the two White Chroma folk emerged from the tractor. "Frustration!" Gale exclaimed, hurriedly dressing.

"Rain check," Ine said, and the others nodded.

Would they really let Gale have a turn on this excursion? He hoped so, because while all of them were fun, Gale was the one he loved.

*I caught that,* Gale thought at him.

"Equipment's ready," Track said. "Clean's coming along."

Havoc nodded. The song had really melted her—and all of them, as it turned out.

They filed into the tractor. It seemed to have room for about ten, so there was not a lot of room left over. It was open in the center, with handholds. It could not have been very comfortable for lovemaking, but Track and Clean had surely found a way. Havoc found himself beside Stevia and before Ine, who had evidently reclaimed him for traveling. Ine had no companion beside her; that was the empty tenth place. Before him were Gale and Symbol, and before them were Dour and Lucent.

"Stay in your places, and don't let go your holds," Track said. "Sometimes the sand shifts, and we don't want to tip it over. Don't touch the outer walls; they get hot."

There were round port holes on the sides. Havoc could see the white lake shore outside his port.

Track took his place at the front, with Clean beside him. He closed the front portal and twisted it tight. He did things with several small wheels and bars. It seemed that Science magic required complicated mechanical controls.



Suddenly a roaring developed, startling them all. "Dragon?" Lucent asked, touching her short sword.

"Motor," Dour said. "A machine. White magic power device." He had evidently had experience with White Chroma effects.

Havoc had encountered similar, but it remained weird magic. Animals or plants were natural, and floating was common, but machines were unlike any of those. He would be glad to get through this zone and back into regular magic.

The tractor lurched forward, splashing into the water of the lake. How was it moving?

"The wheels turn, carrying the treads along," Track called back. He had surely had questions about this many times before. "The power comes from turning axles, and the axles are turned by the motor. That is a boiler—a heated chamber—that heats water to steam, and the escaping steam makes the axles turn."

A steam engine. Havoc had encountered one of those before, so was less confused than he might have been. But it hardly needed to be understood, any more than any other magic. Just so long as it worked.

The water of the lake splashed up against Havoc's port, and he saw the lower part under water, and the upper part showing the rippling surface. For a moment he felt as if he were drowning.

"Breathe," Stevia said.

Oh. He had been unconsciously holding his breath. He had been under water before but hadn't yet managed to quite trust this particular method of going under.

The line of water rose until it covered the port. Now the whole view was below, and it was interesting. Stringy white water plants reached up from the lake floor, making a weedy waving forest. The tractor forged on through, going ever deeper. That was scary, but at least they didn't have to borrow magic so as to breathe the water.

The tractor turned, and Havoc saw that it was following a kind of ledge. Beyond, the lake dropped much deeper. There seemed to be lights on the outside of the tractor, and these illuminated the surrounding scene. All of the travelers were watching avidly. Few if any had seen a white underwater scene before.

The ledge trail wound down below the level of the plants. Now there were white fish swimming, perhaps attracted by the lights of the tractor. One put an eye to Havoc's port, peering in. It seemed to find him as interesting as he found it.

"Horror," Gale murmured. Havoc looked at her port, and saw a mass of white sucker-lined tentacles.

"Squid," Tractor called back. "He always comes to look, but he has learned that he can't get inside to eat us, so he's friendly. He's adapted to the extreme heat, as are the local fish; they would die in cool water."

They came to the bottom, and there was a mound somewhat like a small volcano cone. From it white water jetted, bursting into smoke as it rose.

Smoke? Under water?

"Yes, smoke, of a sort," Track said. "Super-hot water, carrying many minerals from below. It turns into steam when it can, and the white dust falls out. This is one of the sources of both the heat and the science magic. The White Chroma demons are thick at all the vents. My tractor always works very well here."

Indeed, the vehicle was now moving rapidly along. It left the White smoker behind, crossing the bottom of the lake.

Havoc's seed buzzed. Then Gale looked back, and he caught her thought: hers too. Something was wrong. But what could they do to avoid trouble? They were confined to the tractor.

There was a clanking sound, and the tractor halted. "Expletive!" Track swore.

"Problem?" Lucent inquired nervously. As an Amazon she had courage, but seemed as uneasy about this confinement as Havoc was.

"Affirmation. A tread has come loose and snagged. I can't fix it here. I'll have to signal for help."

Havoc did not like the sound of that. "How long will it take for help to arrive?"

"Depends how close the next tractor is, and whether it's busy. Probably several hours."

"Air," Dour said. "How long will it last?"

"Several hours."

"And if help doesn't arrive on schedule?"

"No need to consider that."

That sounded worse. "What happens?" Havoc asked.

"It would become uncomfortable here," Track said reluctantly. "But that is academic; help will come."

"Can we fix it ourselves?" Dour asked.

"I have a hot water suit, but I've outgrown it." Track patted his belly. "Stupid of me not to get a larger one, but I never thought I'd need it. I can't go out to tackle the cleat."

"But one of us could," Lucent said. "Following your instructions."

"I suppose so. But it's dangerous out there. Even with the suit, it's uncomfortable, because it can't protect fully against the heat. Very soon the person would have to come back in, or be cooked."

You are passengers; it's not your business to take any such risk."

"I could do it," Dour said.

"Negation; you're way too tall and long. So's the minstrel."

"I could fit in that suit," Clean said.

"Oh, honey, no! You're not strong enough."

"What about me?" Lucent asked. "I'm strong."

Track looked at her. "Amazon, eh? Yes, you could probably handle it. Still—"

"I will do it," Stevia said suddenly.

All turned back to look at her, surprised? "Gray lady, I don't think so," Track said. "You're no Amazon."

"My Gray magic nullifies other magic, when it needs to," Stevia said. "That will help. I can handle the White magic heat, and I can use a White magic tool. I will do it." She left her place and started forward.

"I don't like this," Havoc said. "This is more danger than you should risk. I did not bring you here for such peril."

She looked at him, and there was something murkily potent in her gaze. "I brought myself," she said. "I craved adventure and wild romance, and I'm getting both. You're sweet to be concerned. Do not fear for me."

Havoc would have protested further, but something about her set him back. Did her ability to null magic extend to nulling a person's will? He remained silent while she advanced to the front and climbed into the suit. She had to strip naked to fit into it, and her gray body was chunky yet excellently formed, and he admired that, but remained quiet.

Only when she used the double portal to exit the tractor did his volition return. "I did not mean to let her go," he said.

"She's a remarkable woman," Ine said. "She can surely handle it."

"I hope so."

They watched through the ports as the Gray Chroma woman in the White suit made her way around to the stuck cleat. She found it, and must have used the tools to adjust it, because suddenly a light blinked on Track's panel. "She fixed it!" he said, amazed.

"A woman can't fix things?" Clean inquired.

"I thought it beyond fixing in the field. It normally requires special tools, and a team of trained

men. It must have been less serious than I feared."

Stevia returned to the lock. Track let her in. "Gratitude!" he exclaimed. "I feared you could not—that *no* one could—"

"It was fortunately only out of position, not broken," Stevia said, stepping out of the suit.

"You're burning!" Clean exclaimed.

"It did get hot out there," Stevia agreed. Then she sank to the floor, unconscious.

Lucent went to her immediately. "Heat prostration," she said. "She needs cold compresses."

"I have them." Track opened a panel and brought out damp wads of cloth. Lucent and Clean put them on Stevia's head and body, cooling her as rapidly as they could.

"A remarkable woman," Ine repeated.

"Agreement," Track said, as he started the vehicle moving again.

The underwater scenery continued interesting, but Havoc was distracted. Stevia was indeed remarkable, and this bothered him, because she had been randomly chosen. He had taken the first person willing to travel with him, and she had not made any pretense to anything special, yet somehow she had evinced qualities of character and talent beyond the ordinary, and was a genuine asset to the mission. Was this phenomenal luck on his part, or something else? Havoc did not trust unduly to luck.

But as he pondered, he remembered that the Red Glamor had told him how to choose his companion. Could she have known that he would encounter Stevia? Or, more likely, had she sent Stevia to him, knowing her qualities? That should have been within Red's power.

"Havoc," Ine murmured, bringing him out of his reverie. "I think she's ready to come back now."

He saw that the gray woman was. She was sitting up and smiling as she resumed her clothing. "Appreciation," she said. "Perhaps I got hotter than I realized."

"You could have died!" Havoc said, making his way forward. He put his hands under her shoulders and knees, picked her up, and carried her carefully back to her place.

"Apology for causing you distress."

"Chastise her," Ine suggested with a wink that barely showed through her veil.

Havoc nodded. "Here is your punishment: two lashes." He kissed her on the right eye, and then the left.

Stevia dissolved into laughter. "Eye lashes! Punish me some more."

He kissed her on the mouth. Then the tractor lurched, heaving them to one side, and they had to grab for their respective handholds.

"He'll spank you tonight," Ine said. "Bare."

"Anything but that!"

These women were getting along entirely too well.

Havoc stared out the port, making a show of ignoring them. But the fact was that Stevia had indeed done a brave, painful, and necessary thing, and deserved reward. He had little to give her except his attention. He would do that.

"Petrified forest," Track called back. "Suggesting that this was once land rather than lake."

Outside was a forest of white pillars rising to various heights in the hot water: the ancient trunks of once-living trees. He knew that geography was constantly changing on Planet Charm, which was why there were no permanent maps. But this was impressive regardless. These had been growing on a plain or perhaps even a mountain, and now had sunk below the water. Would they rise again some day?

"Hold on," Track called. "We're going into the hole."

The tractor lurched, nosing down. This was some deep pit within the lake, yet no ordinary hole. The slope most resembled a cut section of a layer cake, except that the layers were different complexions of white stone. So not only must this have been above water in the past, it must have been cloven to reveal its layers. Was this another weird White magic effect?

"White cliffs of Dover," Track said.

The approached a sheer white wall that seemed to rise right out of the lake. They turned and moved along the base. Then there came an upward slope. Havoc was glad to be heading out of the lake at last.

White tentacles appeared, wrapping around the tractor, brushing across the ports. The occupants shrank back. Then a giant eye appeared. Gale screamed. She too was nervous in this alien environment.

"My other squid," Track announced. "The big one. Friendly, fortunately. She just likes to look."

Havoc tried to gauge the size of the creature. He could not see the whole of it, and the thickness of each tentacle varied with its distance from the central body. But it seemed big enough to pick up the tractor if it wanted to.

"I bring her tidbits from above, when I can," Track said. "She knows me. But it might be hard for a stranger to pass this way."

Havoc was sure it would be. There were probably other large creatures down here—and in other large lakes, beyond the marked safe zones.

The tentacles slid off, and the tractor left the huge mollusk behind. Havoc saw that it glowed.

At last the tractor climbed out of the lake. It rolled to a stop. Track opened the front port and went out first. "Got to check that cleat."

They followed him out, much relieved to be back on real land. Havoc was the last, so was behind the group and couldn't get a distinct mental reading on the man, but he looked confused.

"It's fixed, all right," Track said. "But I don't see how. This looks as if it was never broken, but I know it was."

"It was just out of place," Stevia said. "I nudged it back where I thought it belonged."

"It was broken," Track insisted. "I know by how it stalled the whole track. You couldn't have replaced it whole."

"I was rather hot, and distracted," Stevia said. "But I think it was just dislodged."

The White Chroma man stared at her a moment, then shook his head. Obviously the cleat was not broken, and had been put back into place. Stevia was correct.

But Havoc wondered. Track surely knew his machine. If he had thought the cleat was broken, he was unlikely to have been mistaken. But that meant that Stevia had done more than merely replace it. Her magic was to null other magic; how could she have nulled a physical break? It didn't seem to make sense.

"Better check it out anyway," Track decided. Then, to the others: "I'll take you on into the village. It's on your way."

Havoc agreed; it was getting late anyway. He continued to brood on the episode of the cleat. Something was missing, and he didn't like that.

They got back into the tractor and rode to the White Village at the edge of the lake.

The White villagers came out to meet Track. "Give these folk lodging for the night," he said grandly. "They saved me from getting fried under the lake."

"You know we don't give free lodging," the man who was evidently the village elder said.

"We're a troupe," Havoc said. "We'll entertain you."

"Say—" Track began.

"Same number as before," Havoc agreed, smiling.

So they sang "Oh, No Track" again, with Track and Clean participating, and the villagers were thrilled. Hardly more so than Track and Clean, however. They had become actors before a hometown audience.

They walked on toward the village lodgings. Gale meandered close to him for a moment. "That cleat was broken," she murmured, and moved away.

So she had felt it too. He glanced at Stevia—and found her watching him. "Who are you?" he asked her.

"Just a girl who likes adventure."

"By doing magic in a science zone? That's not Gray."

"But I do want to help you."

"You can help me best by telling me who you are."

"It is not time."

She was being evasive. There was no further chance to talk, as the villagers got them settled in, and brought them good white food. But later Havoc joined Stevia in their cabin, while Ine was washing elsewhere.

"You have been thinking too much," she said, her hair flowing across her face.

He hit her with it: "You're the Red Glamor in disguise!"

"I could make you forget," she murmured. Now her face showed red through the veil of hair.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why come to me like this, anonymously, when you could have taken me at any time?"

"You asked me not to take you," she reminded him. "And it was not time. So I had to protect you in another manner."

"And take me without my knowing."

"It was the only way I could, without taking too much of you. And to ensure that your mission succeeded."

"It hasn't succeeded yet."

"So I must protect you longer." She gazed at him through the shimmer, her red face ethereally lovely behind the veil, framed by her gray head. "So you must forget."

"I will figure it out again."

"I can make you forget again."

Surely she could. "I would not be fully myself."

She nodded. "True. So you must pretend to forget, until it is time."

Havoc realized that he was facing a power that could readily destroy him if he forced the issue. She was offering him a compromise, and it would be best to take it. "How can I do that?"

"Make me an oath of forgetting."

He paused. He had made oaths of friendship on rare occasions, and never dishonored them. He had never heard of an oath of forgetting, but it should be possible.

"Bury it in your mind, along with your other secret thoughts," she said. "Treat me exactly as before."

"But we had sex!" he protested. "Next time I'll know."

"And the knowledge would destroy your independence," she agreed. "You would love me, forsaking all others—and I can't stay with you. It is no fault for me, but could not be for you. That aspect must cease."

Havoc wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or relieved. "How do we explain that?"

"I will defer to Ine, indisposed."

That did seem best. "How long before it is time?" He wasn't sure what the significance of that time was, but was sure it was important.

"Not long," she said.

Then Ine arrived from her bath, in the form of a floating towel forming a loop at waist level. "Your turn," she said to Stevia. She seemed to look at Havoc. "Or my turn."

"Your turn," Stevia agreed, departing.

Ine embraced him. He could see right down through the looped towel to the floor. "Did she seduce you?"

"Not exactly. She had something else on her mind, I think." As did he.

"Then I will." The towel unwrapped and flung itself aside. "I am nice and clean and warm at the moment."

Havoc was glad to let her continue. But his private thoughts were on the Red Glamor. Suddenly several obscure things made sense—including the way she had fixed the cleat. As a Glamor she had the power to do so, even here in the White Chroma zone. That had really given him the hint.

But how could his mission to discover the origin of the Changelings be so important that a Glamor felt the need to participate full time? There had to be more to it than he knew.

"Do I have your full attention?" Ine inquired. They were naked on the bed, but he had hardly been conscious of her ministrations.

"Apology. I seem to be distracted."

"What did Stevia *say* to you?"



"I forget."

"I doubt it. She put you into a daze—without even seducing you? This must be something I should know."

This was becoming impractical. "She told me something, and required me to make her an oath of forgetting. That is all I can say, and I ask you to accept it."

"And so I must, thus phrased. You must punish me for asking." He felt her flop over on the bed. "Spank me."

"Negation. The apology is mine, for failing to respond to you."

"Spank me anyway." She caught his right hand and directed it to her bottom. "There."

He curled his fingers around a full buttock. It was marvelously evocative, as she knew. "This is not my way with women."

She was silent a moment, surely gazing at him. "You're a changeling," she said suddenly.

"I am." Was she merely changing the subject?

"My little sister Ino is a changeling. She took my love Jamais Vu from me, but I forgive her because I love her. There is something about changelings."

"So it seems," he agreed, bemused.

"She can see reality through illusion. So can Gale. Perhaps you can too. Look at me."

"I don't understand."

"Then read my mind."

He did so, and caught a blast of passion. She wanted his complete attention, and believed that sex was the way to get it. His desire surged, echoing hers; he would have had to shut down his mind to avoid it.

He sought to embrace her, but she resisted, refusing to change her position. "Look at me," she repeated. "See if you can see me."

"You really think I can?"

"Affirmation." She sent another wave of desire at him. "See me first."

Desire made him try. Then, faintly, he saw the outline of her body, prone on the bed. Head angled to face him, one breast partly showing, buttocks rising, legs stretched out. "I see you!" he said, amazed.

"Do you? Prove it. Turn away from me, then back."

He did so. When he turned back, she had reversed herself on the bed, her head where her feet had been. "Naughty ploy," he said, gazing directly into her faint eyes as he patted her bottom.

"Are you tracking me by my mind?"

"Yes, but I can see you too." He stroked a buttock with a fingernail, tickling her.

"Don't tickle it, spank it!" she exclaimed, laughing.

"You have a thing about spanking?"

"Affirmation! And that's only the beginning. Do it."

He spanked her, not hard. Her bottom quivered, and her mind sent another ripple of passion at him. She was right: it was phenomenally conducive. Maybe not the flesh so much as her reaction to the contact, which was returning to him via her mind. He spanked harder, and received a stronger jolt. Curious, he spanked hard enough to sting—and felt an almost painful wash of desire.

"I can't stand it," she said. She scrambled up and around, pushed him flat on the bed face up, climbed on him, and straddled him. "Keep spanking," she said as she flattened her breasts against him.

He spanked with both hands while she used hers to lodge him in her. She was hot and wet and tight, claspng his member internally. Her flesh quivered against his with each contact, alternating tensing and relaxing, enhancing the effect. In a moment he was jetting within her, guided as much by her bouncing as his own effort. He wasn't sure whether it was the mental portion of her passion, or her unusual way of indulging in sex, but it was a remarkably strong climax. Her own was right with him, in synch. She had her own sexual agenda, and it was effective. As Throe had warned.

"So I finally got your attention," she murmured as they subsided.

"Affirmation. And you taught me something."

"That you can penetrate illusion."

"That too," he agreed, knowing it was a pun. Her invisibility was a form of illusion, and he had penetrated both that and her body. There was a small splash of translucence showing within her outline: his recent contribution, already fading as her ambiance governed it.

"And you need make me no oath of forgetting. I want you to remember this."

"I will remember," he agreed. His hands were still on her bottom, which pulsed rhythmically, echoing internally. That, too, was an interesting effect. He was done, but the aftermath was about as pleasant as he could remember.

She was satisfied, but remained on him for a while longer, savoring the contact. She was one woman, it seemed, who really did savor sexual experience for its own sake, extending it so as to get all it had to offer.

Stevia returned. "What have you two been up to?" she inquired.

"Token sadomasochism," Ine answered, clenching around Havoc again. "He's a beast."

"So I see. Your rear is glowing."

"Wonderfully!"

Gray Chroma folk could null other magic—but did that include seeing through illusion? That bottom was supposed to be invisible. Or was that the Red Glamor's ability? If so, was Stevia giving herself away? Then why wasn't Ine reacting to that? Havoc kept his thoughts masked, concluding that Ine knew more than she pretended, and that he had not yet fathomed the whole of what was going on here. These two women got along remarkably well together, and that was surprising, considering that one of them was a masked Glamor. But he had no doubt of Ine's passion, and it was pleasant enough.

It was his turn to clean up. When he returned, both women were sleeping, with space for him between them. He took it, and slept himself. There remained mysteries to fathom, but his dragon seed had never buzzed; these women meant him no harm.

Naturally they did not let him get up in the morning without more interaction. Ine lay on her side and had him clasp her from behind, while Stevia clasped *him* from behind. He felt Ine's bottom in front, and Stevia's breasts behind. In fact he had a hand on a breast, while a breast touched his back. He was folded around Ine's bent body, with her buttocks twitching to make him constantly aware of them, while Stevia was folded around his own bent body, her breasts pressing harder with her breathing. He felt Ine climax, and that set off his own, and then Stevia's, though she was merely adjacent. It made for an odd impression. They were still sharing him, in their fashion. They must have talked, because Ine never questioned her right to sole sexual access to him. What had Stevia told her? And what was Stevia's real sexuality? He doubted it could be entirely vicarious. In fact he doubted that either woman could be as strongly sexual as she seemed to be.

As he pondered it, he concluded that they were trying to distract him from something else. It couldn't be the realization that Stevia was the Red Glamor, because he had already gotten there. What else was waiting for his discovery?

Ine finally disengaged after a concluding internal caress. "Until tonight," she said. "Then we'll try something more imaginative."

He laughed, but he suspected she wasn't joking. She had horizons he scarcely imagined. Were all Air Chroma women like this? He had thought Symbol to be exceptional, but Ine was more so.

And of course Symbol was there as they emerged from the cabin. "I can do sado-maso too," she murmured when they were for a moment apart from the others.

"Gale was peeking and telling!" he exclaimed ruefully.

"What else? Not enough men on this mission, and the other one's taken."

She had a point. "There'll be another time," he promised.

In due course they resumed their trek. As chance would have it, the next Chroma zone was Air. Symbol and Ine stripped and disappeared into it, blissfully restoring their substance. Havoc focused,

and was able to see them both. Both turned and made highly suggestive gestures at him, having a fine time.

"I wonder whether Air Chroma folk do that to all visitors?" Gale remarked, coming to walk beside him.

"Why not? It must be fun. But let's pretend we remain ignorant."

"Maybe they don't," she said. "Because Air Chroma folk can't even see each other unless they put on illusion. Maybe they're whispering to each other what to do, so they can coordinate. Throe told me that Ine's friend Jamais is unusual because he can see through illusion."

"Is he a changeling?"

"I don't believe so."

"So some who aren't changelings can do it too," Havoc said. "If my understanding is correct. I'm not sure it is."

"I have my own doubts," Gale said. "The way Stevia fixed that cleat—that's another oddity."

And he couldn't tell her. "Another oddity," he agreed.

"This whole mission to collect seven ikons mystifies me. What use are they? Apart from their enormous magic."

"The Red Glamor told me to fetch them. I believe she had reason. I wish I knew what it is."

"I wonder whether we are too trusting."

"We may be," he agreed.

Then their path brought them back into contact with Dour and Lucent, and they let it be. But Havoc trusted Gale's judgment, as he trusted his own. There was too much they did not know.

They reached the fringe staging area for the zone. It was neatly set up with illusion houses that probably matched the real ones that were invisible. Yes—Havoc's new eye saw that they did, except that the real ones were not nearly as pretty. Why bother, when they could not be seen directly, and the illusion made them whatever was desirable?

Ine and Symbol returned to the group, donning complete coverings. Evidently their nudity was not intended for more general consumption.

An attractive woman came out to meet them. Havoc remembered the adage: there were no unattractive Air Chroma women, since they all clothed themselves with illusion. Indeed, as he focused he saw that this one was about twenty years older than she appeared, and would not have been pretty even in her youth. "Greeting, travelers."

"Acknowledged," Havoc replied. "Introduction: I am Hayseed."

"I am Delight." Like many Air Chroma women, she had a suggestive name. And who was to say she was not what she claimed to be? Since the Air folk could not see through their own illusions, only careful touching would reveal her homely facial features, and she surely would avoid anything in that region other than the pressure of lips on lips. So a woman was likely as pretty as she seemed to be, and there was no reason to fault her for the effort.

"We are a troupe of seven, prepared to entertain for transport across your zone. Can we deal?"

Delight considered. "We have had entertainment enough; another troupe passed this way not long ago." She glanced at Dour and Lucent. "But we may have interest in a cartographer, and an Amazon."

"Any members of our troupe will cooperate, for the sake of passage for all," Havoc said. "What is your interest?"

"We have had skirmishes with a neighboring zone. In fact they have raided us for women. They seem to find our invisibility intriguing. We are embarking on a program of self defense, but lack sufficient instructors to do this as rapidly as we would like."

"We can provide three," Havoc said.

"That will do. We will assemble a class."

"Self defense has many aspects. It will help if we know what the typical occurrence is."

"There are gathering places between Chroma where young folk from two or more zones can congregate. Normally there is no problem, but on occasion a man will lay hands on a girl and take by force what she might have given willingly, in a more social situation. He may then carry her into his Chroma zone, where her magic is gone, and keep her as a slave. We have made complaints, but the other Chroma authorities pretend that any such liaisons are voluntary."

"So if the girl avoids the first grab, and gets away, she will probably be safe," Havoc said.

"She will certainly be safe; an otherChroma man who pursued her into Air would lose his magic, and soon be at her mercy. The problem is between Chroma."

"We shall address that problem," Havoc said.

"Older folk are wary, as they are of sexual demons," Desire said. "But the young ones think the danger is exaggerated, and don't take it seriously."

Havoc looked her in the veil. "We can make them take it seriously—if this is what you wish."

She nodded grimly. "It is our wish."

Havoc consulted with the others while they waited for the class. "We have three instructors for personal defense," he said. "The others can be demonstration models. We can form brief playlets. One of them will be a shocker."

They worked it out, rehearsing just enough to avoid miscues. By the time the audience assembled, they were ready to perform.

All of the members of the audience were lovely young women. Havoc realized that illusion made them so, but it was impressive nonetheless. They were serious about protecting themselves.

He strode to the center of the circle. "Greeting," he said.

"Acknowledged," they chorused in response.

"I am the Minstrel Hayseed. I am also a martial artist." As he spoke, Dour came up behind him, lifting his staff menacingly. Just as the staff seemed about to strike, Havoc whirled, grabbed it, and levered the cartographer over his hip so that he landed flat on the ground. It was of course a standard device, with the "victim" likely as skilled as the martial artist, but always impressive. The maidens were suitably impressed.

"And so is he," Havoc continued as Dour slowly got back to his feet. "Cartographers travel widely, and may encounter brigands, so they know self defense." Then, suddenly, he whirled, whipping out a short club, and brought it forcefully down on Dour's head. But of course Dour was already moving. He dodged out of the way, caught Havoc's arm, and twisted him to the ground. The man was shy onstage, but could handle this sort of non-speaking part. The maidens were impressed anew.

Havoc got back to his feet. "And of course you know the reputation of the Amazons." Both he and Dour advanced on Lucent, who was innocently chewing on a bun she had brought from the White Chroma zone. Havoc came at her from the front, Dour from the rear, obviously intent on capturing her for some nefarious purpose.

But as their arms grabbed at her from either side, Lucent whirled and ducked. Her hand shot out to strike Dour's face while her foot shot out opposite to score on Havoc's crotch. Both men grunted convincingly and sat down. Havoc was grabbing his crotch in simulated pain, and Dour was staring around the bun, which had been jammed into his mouth. The maidens applauded as they laughed.

Havoc got up again. "Now you know we didn't really hurt each other, because we are friends. She didn't score on me, and she actually likes him." Lucent leaned down and kissed Dour on the forehead. There was more laughter. "And of course for any of you, it will be serious, and you will not want to miss a crotch or jam anything as gentle as a bun into a man's face." He paused as if undecided, then turned to Lucent. "What *should* you jab?"

The Amazon smiled. She lifted a hand to her head and drew a wicked looking pin from her hair. It was twice the length of a finger, and had a stout bulb at the near end. The maidens looked dismayed.

Havoc picked up on it. "Now consider carefully," he said. "Here you are, an innocent maiden, visiting a betweenChroma spot, and a man grabs you." Now Gale walked out innocently, looking utterly beautiful, and Dour grabbed her. They stopped right there, frozen tableau, as Havoc continued. "You have choices: you can scream, which may bring other men to help subdue you, because this is a hostile situation. You may struggle ineffectively as he drags you away and rapes you. Or you may fight back, escape, and get safely home." He turned in a full circle, gazing at them all. "You may do what

you wish, but we are here to show you how to do the last." He faced the tableau. "Fight," he said.

Gail's hand snapped up to her head. She drew a pin and jabbed it at Dour's face. He jerked his head back, avoiding it—and she stomped on his exposed foot. Then she twisted out of his slackening grip and ran off the stage.

"Here are the elements," Havoc said. "First be armed. She had that pin ready, in case she needed it. All of you should get something similar." Gale returned to the stage, making a grand gesture of setting the pin into her hair, out of sight. "Second, be alert. She knew she was in a nonAir region, so her magic was gone, and that a man was approaching her. Because he might be friendly, she did not act suspicious, but she was aware." Gale stood as Dour approached her again, but this time made it plain to the audience that she was watching him. "Third, act swiftly and surprisingly." As Dour grabbed, Gale's hand was already moving to her head. "We will do this slowly, so you can follow," Havoc said. Gale drew out the pin and slowly pushed it at Dour's face. He slowly drew his head back. She slowly stomped his foot.

"Then flee," Havoc said. "Strip your clothing as you go. Toss it anywhere. The point is to get invisible in a hurry. Then they won't catch you."

Symbol walked onstage. "Again, fast motion," Havoc said. "I am a marauder, and there is an innocent Air maiden. I'm going to grab her and beat her until she agrees to become my slave." He strode toward the woman, reaching out to grab her arm. She whirled, struck at his face, and wrenched away. He grabbed again, but she was already throwing off her cloak. He grabbed it, but she was invisible and gone. He threw it to the ground in a fine fit of rage.

The maidens were surprised. They had not realized that any members of the troupe were Air Chroma. They were suitably impressed, as this was realistic in their terms. But they still seemed to be regarding this more as entertainment than as defense. They were not taking it seriously enough. It was time for the shocker.

"Once more," Havoc said. "This time to demonstrate the consequence if you don't take it seriously."

Ine walked by, swathed in cloak and veil. Havoc grabbed her. She drew her pin but hesitated to use it. He saw it and struck it from her hand. Then he threw her to the ground and ripped open her cloak. She screamed piercingly. He punched her in the face, making her cry. Then he raped her as she flailed ineffectively with wrapped arms and legs. It was most realistic. Actually he had pulled his punch, but Ine had insisted that the sex itself be real; rape was one of her fantasies, and open humiliation another. It was not a thing Havoc would have cared to do, even in simulation, and had not planned to do literally, but her mind was blasting passion at him, and he was drawn into it. Indeed, her seemingly aimless struggles were not; she was drawing him into her, getting clothing clear, pursuing the connection. The worst of it was that she was making him respond, her way. For the moment, he had an irresistible need to drive deep into her, the motions of her struggling body enhancing the effect. She massaged him, inside, forcing the issue. In an instant he jetted, and felt her response. She was fulfilled by the violence as much as the sex itself. And by the presence of the audience; she wanted *public* ravishing.

When he finished his half-involuntary act, he got up, leaving Ine half invisible, a sprawled figure sobbing faintly. There was no laughter or applause. The maidens were staring, appalled. It had

become too real.

Then Havoc reverted to normal. "This was of course a drama," he said. "I would never do such a thing, and she is pretending too." He glanced at Ine, who got quickly to her feet and closed her cloak, all tears gone. Indeed, he had not violated her will; he had done nothing she had not wanted. That might however be tricky to explain to others. That girl was something else. "But if it happened to any of you, it would be real. So don't hold back; strike, strip, and flee. Keep this image in mind; this is what you face if you don't act effectively." He struck at Ine again, and she rocked with the blow and fell to the ground.

Gradually they relaxed, satisfied that it had after all been a simulation despite its savage realism. But there was a shaken quality to their reversion. They would not forget.

"Now we will do it with you, individually," Havoc said. "With illusion pins, so you don't really hurt us. You must score on the face. We will relax or let go, and you will get free and flee. If you are ineffective, we will hold you and kiss you. A kiss is a loss, and you will have to run through it again. Every one of you must get safely away before this session is done." He glanced at Dour and Lucent. "Normally an Amazon is not going to rape you, but you still don't want her to kiss you. Treat her as you would an attacking man; she is just as dangerous."

Then they went into the individual exercises. Havoc gestured to a maiden, had her walk by him, be grabbed, stab his face with her illusion pin, tear free, strip and disappear. She had passed. Dour did the same elsewhere on the stage, and Lucent too.

The third maiden was slow, and Havoc wrapped her up and kissed her. She was a delectable morsel. He had her run through it again, and this time she was effective, but when she threw off her clothing her bare body was fully visible. She had emulated herself in illusion. "Oops," she said, and faded.

Havoc had to smile. He knew from her mind that she had made both mistakes deliberately, because she wanted to be kissed, and to show off her body. But she had learned the technique, and that was what counted.

When all were done, the lesson ended. The Air authorities were quite satisfied. "That is the most effective demonstration I have seen," Delight said. "I could have sworn that rape was real."

"We try to be realistic, when necessary," Havoc said. "Your girls face a real danger, and we hope this enables them to handle it. Of course they should normally remain in the Air zone, or leave it with company, so as not to be vulnerable."

"Your transport is available. If you should pass this way again—"

"We'll give another lesson," he agreed. "There are of course other defensive techniques, but they require more training. You should encourage your girls to undertake such training with Air instructors."

"There's a long waiting list. As there would be for you, were you to remain here."

"That is not feasible. It would also be dangerous."



"Question?"

"One of your maidens deliberately missed with the pin, to get a kiss. Then she flashed me with her body. She had a very good body. I would not care to be subjected to such temptation on a regular basis; it would complicate my relations with my fiancée."

Delight nodded. "That would be Desire; she has unusual aptitude and drive, and will soon make some deserving man quite fortunate. She may be our prettiest maiden, and knows it. Therein can be mischief. You are handsome, with a fine stage presence; others would indeed try to tempt you. But there would not be that danger for the Cartographer or the Amazon."

Havoc shrugged. "When this tour is done, if they wish to return here, I would not oppose it. But I suspect they have other plans." Indeed, it looked as though Dour and Lucent would soon marry. Later-life relationships could be good, as Throe and Ennui showed.

They entered the illusion-highlighted capsule, where other maidens served them a fine meal as they floated across the zone. The zones could be quite hospitable when pleased.

Havoc spied an invisible girl. He checked her mind, and verified that she had sneaked aboard. He beckoned to her.

She straightened up, surprised, uncertain whether he was truly aware of her.

"Yes, I see you, Desire," he murmured. "Come sit by me and we'll talk. You are a fourth."

She came to him. "How do you know that?"

"Because all changelings are fourths, and you are a changeling. So am I. Changelings are attracted to each other, which is why you hover near me. We have more powers than we know. Such as the ability to penetrate illusion. You can do it too, if you try."

"I have tried, and done it," she said. "But never told anyone. I fear it would mark me."

"It might. But also open a new horizon to you. Talk with my fiancée." He caught Gale's eye, and she came to join him. "Tell Desire about changelings," he said. *She's one.*

Gale looked, and spotted the girl. She nodded. "Greeting, Desire. I am Gale. We can do some things. Such as healing. You will want to learn."

Desire stared at her, astonished. "You're another!"

"And so is Symbol, and she's of your Chroma. We have much common ground. We'll be moving on, but you will want to continue exploring. Perhaps you will discover something we don't yet know."

Havoc let himself fade out of it as Gale talked to the girl, and introduced her to Symbol. They were encountering more changelings, but perhaps that was not surprising. There seemed to be many changelings, there to be recognized by those alert for them. They tended to be the most comely, intelligent, and motivated people, so were likely to appear where important things were happening.

They did tend to draw toward each other, which accounted for his own relations with Gale and Symbol, and Desire's evident hankering for him, as he had told her. Perhaps that was all there was to it.

It was perhaps coincidental that during this quest for the origin of the changelings, they were learning more about them. The Red Glamor had sent him and his associates on what might have seemed like a fool's errand, but that seemed much less likely now that he knew she was along. She—and presumably other Glamors—was taking this seriously. He wanted to know about the changelings because he was one, and he hoped for some avenue of discovery that would enable him to marry Gale. But why were the Glamors interested? That suggested that the matter had more significance than he had realized.

At any rate, they would soon know, because he was now in quest of the last of the seven ikons. Whatever their purpose, it should bring the quest to a conclusion.

They landed at the far side of the zone, and disembarked with full bellies and rested legs. Desire departed; she had never become visible, so others did not know of their dialogue with her, which was perhaps just as well. Meeting her had been a small bonus on this hop.

The next Chroma zone was their destination. The final coordinates were at the cone of a Green volcano. They might simply have proceeded across the green terrain toward the site, but Chroma protocol forbade. They were other Chroma visitors, and had to check in and state their business.

"Introduction," Havoc said formally. "I am Hayseed, and this is my troupe."

"Acknowledged," the green man said curtly. "Bramble. State your business here."

"We wish to visit your central cone."

"Our standard sightseeing tour will accommodate that."

"We wish to actually set foot on it."

"Negation. The cone itself is banned."

This was unexpected. "We must obtain permission for this visit. It is important to us."

"Why?"

That was awkward. "We understand there may be an object there that would be useful to us."

"What use?"

"We don't know. We hope to find out once we get it."

"Denied." Bramble turned away.

Havoc suppressed his ire. As king he could command approval of his visit, but he did not want his office known. Neither did he want his specific mission known. How were they to get around this

obstructionist?

Havoc needed to settle this matter quickly, so he read Bramble's mind. He verified that the man was correct: the cone itself was off limits to visitors and natives alike. But why? That was not clear.

"We have traveled several days to come here," Havoc said. "We require more than an arbitrary denial of our mission."

"You have no rights in this zone," Bramble said, not bothering to look at him again.

"Still, there should be specific reason given. What is so secret about that cone?"

Bramble did not deign to answer, but Havoc's pointed question focused his mind on it, and Havoc read the answer: The high-magic area immediately around the cone was a reservation for a rare species of bird. The birds were not to be disturbed. This dated from a deal forged centuries ago, following trouble between humans and the birds. There had been conflict as humans moved into bird territory, and the birds resisted displacement. They were unusually intelligent and motivated, were a significant local force. The deal gave them the territory closest to the cone, and the larger area beyond it to the humans. That had brought peace, and the trouble had stopped.

Havoc probed further, and learned that the present leader of the birds was a large male named Avian. Only Avian could approve human intrusion into that region. And there was the key.

"I want to meet with Avian," Havoc said.

Bramble's head snapped about. "What do you know of that?"

"That is my concern. Avian is the one who can grant me and my troupe access. I have a right to deal directly with him. Now will you approve my passage to meet him, or must I ask for your supervisor?"

The green man stared at him a moment. Then, reluctantly, he yielded. "I will convey your party there—and back here when you are turned down. You will then depart without further nuisance."

"Agreement."

They boarded a capsule, and large trees picked it up with long stout tentacles and passed it from one to another until it reached a cleared field in sight of the massive green cone. Now they would have a new challenge: convincing a bird to let them in.

They walked out onto the field. "Avian," Havoc said. "I have need to meet with you."

In a moment a large green bird appeared, flying in a peculiar semi-rotary manner. It seemed to have three wings, only one of which moved at a time. Havoc was fascinated; he had seen flying creatures before, but never any quite like this. It looked as if one wing propelled it forward while a second projected behind as a stabilizer or rudder, and the third whipped forward for the next stroke. The wings never reversed; all motion was in one direction around the globular body. Before he could analyze it further, the bird landed on one wing, which extended three stout claws to grip the ground, and stood before him. It stared at him with three eyes.

*Avian* it thought. It was not so much a word as a concept; this creature had no spoken language.

"Introduction," Havoc said aloud, focusing his thoughts. He also wanted the others to be party to the dialogue. "I am Hayseed, and this is my troupe."

*Also Havoc, king of your species, with your fiancée, mistress, and assistants.* Again, not phrased in words; it was a single concept, Havoc's identity merged with authority.

Havoc paused. The bird had discovered his private identity! Not even a mind reader should have been able to do that. So news must have leaked out as they traveled. Unless there was more here than seemed likely.

"Leave me my secrets, and I will leave you yours."

*Agreement.* A blip of acquiescence.

"I have need to go to the Green Volcano cone to fetch an ikon. That is all I want; we will do no damage to your territory."

*You want too much.*

So this was not going to be easy. "We prefer to acquire it peacefully, but must have it regardless. If we are unable to make a bargain with you, we shall have to proceed despite you."

*So the other humans thought when they first came here.* Again, it was mostly an image of some past conflict, with a human body lying on the ground. There had indeed been conflict. The birds were not patsies for aggression; they could fight effectively when they had to.

Havoc did not underestimate the threat. With three martial artists in their group, and a veiled Glamor, and human ingenuity, they might win through to the cone—but they would take losses. Suppose Symbol died? Or Gale? "When differences can not be resolved by discussion, and force brings unpleasant consequences, sometimes compromise can be achieved by mock force."

*Confusion.*

"Do you understand gaming?"

*Flight games.*

"Fight games."

*Confusion.*

Havoc realized he was up against a cultural difference. The birds did not fight the way humans did and did not have competitive play. He struggled to find an analogy. Then he had it: "When two males approach the same female, what do they do?"

*Avian* formed a picture of ritualized strutting. The one who strutted best impressed the female,

and gained her favor.

"But if a common enemy came during that contest, both would oppose it together," Havoc said. "They do not hate each other, they merely contest for advantage."

*Strutting*, Avian agreed.

"Now you and I are contesting for something. I must go to the green cone; you wish to balk me. I have no animus against you, and I think you have none against me; we merely represent different viewpoints. We do not wish to hurt each other, but each wishes to prevail. We must have a strutting contest."

*To mate with a female?*

"No. To gain status, authority, so that the one who prevails can do what he wishes to do. Like a mating, only different."

It took some further discussion, but Havoc was finally able to get across the concept of competing for something other than the favor of a hen. Of avoiding real combat in favor of strutting. Avian agreed to this. Then they worked out the details. Tomorrow they would strut.

"You have come to an accommodation with the birds!" Bramble said, observing it. "I thought that impossible."

"Hayseed is something else," Gale said, smiling. "Now we shall have to camp the night here. Can one of us make a trade for food?"

"A trade?" Then he caught on. "Which one?"

"I'll do it," Symbol said. "I will keep you amicable company this night, if you will authorize a good meal for my companions."

"You're invisible!"

"But tactile." She took his hand in a manner that had become familiar, setting it against her breast inside her shirt. "In the dark, do you care?"

They got their green food, and a comfortable shelter with several chambers. Symbol got a night in a relatively luxurious plant house, doing what she did so expertly. Havoc knew she could keep Bramble well satisfied. He also knew she was doing it for him, Havoc. Some day, he thought, he should ponder the nuances of openly spending a night with one man for the sake of loving another.

Meanwhile the others had a battle strategy to work out. "Avian is telepathic," Havoc said. "The other birds may be too. We're not going to be able to sneak by them, and I think we can't outfight them. We'll have to outsmart them. That means I can't tell you all of what's on my mind, because they may read it in your minds. We'll have to fragment our strategy, so that no bird can read it all. Some of you are apt to die. Fortunately it won't be permanent."

They established the basics. Then the others turned in, and Havoc consulted with Gale by

private mind reading.

At last he rejoined Stevia and Ine for the night. They pounced on him, stripped him, stretched him out, and gave him a full body massage. "You need your strength for the morrow," Ine explained.

*I will not use Glamor powers on your behalf,* Stevia thought. *But I will use Gray Chroma powers.*

*Understanding,* he thought back.

*I do want you to succeed.*

*This is not a goose chase?*

*It is not.* And of course the Red Glamor knew that; this was her mission.

They completed the massage, and his body was marvelously relaxed. Ine lay to his left, Stevia to his right, both bodies softly pleasant against him. They had done something nice, sparing him heroic sex this time. He appreciated that. He composed himself for sleep—and found that his mind remained taut. There were too many unknowns, too many mysteries, too many things that did not quite add up. Avian—that bird was entirely too smart. Havoc would do his best, but was not at all sure he could prevail. Stevia—why did the Red Glamor bother with mortal business at all, now that he knew her identity? The seven ikons—what was their underlying nature, and how were they supposed to be used? What was he missing, that he should understand and deal with?

Stevia put a hand across his eyes. *You are not relaxed,* she reproved him.

*Affirmation.*

*I can distract you.*

That had the opposite effect. He did not want to be distracted into oblivion. Yet it was disconcertingly tempting. He had a certain illicit hankering for that devastatingly lovely and powerful creature.

*I hanker for you too.*

But to oblige that hankering would finish him. He knew it. It would be like stepping into a void.

*If I am to address you, I need a filter. Sleep will enable it.*

*Sleep is what I need,* he agreed.

*I will give you a lucid dream. That you will survive.*

*A dream?*

*A lucid dream. Of me.*

He tensed again. That was treacherous.

Her hand pressed down against his forehead. *Sleep.*

He felt himself going down, down, borne by her hand, sinking into slumber. His consciousness of his physical surroundings faded. It was as though he were descending to some nice retreat, leaving the cares of waking life behind. Stevia was indeed making him relax.

But not entirely. The troubling mysteries of the mission remained, and he had not yet fathomed their nature. He could not leave them unfinished.

Then his body seemed to turn, and to sail forward. There was light ahead, shrouded by curtains. The curtains parted, and he entered a plush bedroom chamber.

There lay the Red Glamor, resplendent in a red negligee. "Welcome, Havoc," she said, sitting up with a smile.

He looked around. "Where am I?"

"In your dream. Your lucid dream."

"A dream?" he repeated blankly.

"Lucid dream," she repeated. "When you know it is a dream, and have free will within it. You govern it. But your body remains asleep."

"I am asleep?" He felt stupid. It was not a comfortable feeling.

"You are asleep," she agreed. "Focus a moment: feel my hand on your forehead."

Havoc focused, and lifted part of the way out of sleep. There was the pressure of her hand on his forehead, as she said. His body was asleep. But it was difficult to maintain that awareness, and in a moment he sank back to the dream chamber. He was consciously dreaming.

He gazed at the Red Glamor. If there was a more perfect figure of a woman, he was unable to imagine it. Her negligee faded out and she was nude, red from hair to toes, every part sculpted to ideal proportion. Face, hair, limbs, breasts, belly, bottom—there simply could not be better than this. "So I am seeing you in my conscious dream. I can safely embrace you here, without—" He hesitated, coming on an ugly parallel.

"Without having your soul sucked out," she agreed, completing his thought. "I am not a succubus, and have no such design on you."

"Apology."

"Needless. It is a fair parallel. In direct waking sex I would leave you your soul, but claim your love, and that would make a shell of your relationship with Gale. She is a good match for you, and my own romantic inclination is elsewhere, so I do not wish to blunt you in this way."

"But I can't marry Gale!" he protested in sudden anguish.

"We don't know that. Why would changelings be generated who could not breed with each other? Why make them so they are attracted to each other, in that case? And if they should not breed, why not make them sterile, or at least mutually infertile, so there is no problem? So it seems to me that you need have no such concern. If you can breed with her, it is because it is safe to do so."

Havoc liked that notion. "You offer me comfort."

"This is my intent. I want a no fault liaison with you that I can enjoy without damaging you. I had some of it as Stevia, muted by the participation of Ine, so that you were not harmed. Yet it is not complete unless you know it is me, and therein lies the danger. It must be no fault for you also."

Yet she was so scintillatingly lovely that he was smitten just by seeing her. "I am in doubt it can be."

"I share your doubt. So we must take another derivative."

"Derivative?"

"A mathematical concept wherein a level of reality is reduced to a symbolic aspect deriving from it, useful because it simplifies certain interactions."

"Like a dream!"

"In this situation, yes. Since the first derivative remains unwieldy, we must take another. Perhaps that will enable us to perform safely."

The prospect was intriguing but unsettling. "Confusion. How is such a derivative taken?"

"Explanation: like this." She approached him, put her hands on his shoulders, drew him in to her, and touched his lips with hers. It was not a kiss, just a trace contact, but their surroundings faded away.

There was light. They were floating or flying toward a bright patchwork of color. His hand was in hers, and they were both bare, but neither cold nor hot. She remained ethereally lovely, a sculpture in red.

He looked at the patchwork, and suddenly recognized it. "This is Mystery!" he exclaimed.

"Counter-Charms," she agreed. "I have a bower there."

"And this is another dream."

"Or a vision. The dream is of our lips touching; this is our imagination."

It was some vision. Planet Mystery was closer than he had ever before seen it, its colors brighter and more variegated. He could see the wavering edges of Chroma zones, and the outlines of lakes, and shadowed mountain ranges, and the furry vegetation clothing much of it. So much like Charm



itself, yet so different too. A companion world, shrouded in mystery.

"How much of this is real?" he asked as they drifted closer, the huge orb expanding proportionately.

"How much of a derivative is real? All and none, depending on perspective."

"I mean, are we really coming to Mystery, in ghostly form, or is it merely a painted picture?"

"It is as we see it. Reality has a different meaning in a dream vision."

"But there must be something essential, regardless of interpretation. I want that point to fix on."

She became impatient. "If you got too much of a glimpse of reality, you would suffer this effect." Her body became intensely clear, and his gaze was locked onto that clarity, dazzled by it. Fire surrounded her, burning his eyes; he felt the flames in the eyeball sockets, small furnaces destroying the contents. Then it faded, and he was blind.

"But this is a second derivative, so you are not harmed," she said. And the scales fell from his eyes, and he saw again. She was as before, and they were now closer to the planet, so that he could make out the outlines of large trees in and out of the Chroma zones.

"Apology," he said.

"Needless," she repeated. "Just accept that there is a purpose in this derivative, and do not seek to negate it. This realm is as real as it needs to be."

He did have to accept it, so he shelved his question for another time. He studied the expanding landscape, comparing it to his eidetic memory map of Mystery. It was definitely Mystery, but with far more detail than he had ever seen before. He would retain the added detail, so that he could better understand the terrain at leisure.

She brought him around the planet to the side unseen from Charm. It was similar to what he knew, but new. There was a spot where several Chroma seemed to overlap, as if a number of small volcanoes merged their offerings. It resembled a nonChroma region because of the variety of colors. But with a difference. Trees were red, blue, green, brown, silver—all colors, but each individual was a single color. Monochrome tree by tree. He had never seen that before. Did it really exist?

They came to rest in a bower beneath a Red Chroma tree. They lay beside each other, half supine, facing. "Are we safe now?" she asked.

Could he have sex with her without freaking out? He wasn't sure. "Uncertain."

"Then we shall talk. What distraction remains on your mind?"

"Why did you come to me?" he asked.

"You summoned me."

He had told a story about a Blue man, a Silver woman, and a Red child. The adults had accepted a mysterious mission for the sake of beautiful bodies that they lacked in their natural states, and come across the child, recently orphaned, and helped her at the cost of their own business. They thus forfeited the bodies, and became as they were, lame and unappealing. But then the child had taken ill, and they appealed to the Black Glamor for help. He came as the child metamorphosed into the dawning Red Glamor. She then adopted Blue and Silver as replacement parents, guaranteeing their welfare, including the good bodies. When he finished the tale, both the Black and Red Glamors had appeared and supported him as king, guaranteeing his continuation in office. So he had summoned her, unwittingly. But she had hardly had to answer his beck. "Question?"

"We are alert to invocations. You got our attention. Then we saw that you were a remarkably fit man, a prospect not only for an effective king, but for our purposes as well. You are unusually intelligent and motivated, even for a changeling, a superior creature, with a special facility for accomplishing your purposes. So we supported you, and then enlisted your service."

Thus she had come to him in the privy, and dazzled him into going on her assignment. And joined him therein, perhaps ensuring his success. "This quest for seven Chroma ikons is my service to you?"

"True. We are unable to handle them ourselves, and ordinary folk are unlikely to fetch them. But we thought you might succeed."

"It has been a considerable challenge."

"Which is why I came to you as Stevia. I will protect you."

"What of my companions? They face dangers too."

"We protect them too."

That could account for a lot. "These ikons—are they of any use in my quest to discover the origin of the changelings?"

"They may be. We seek the answer to that mystery too. Our cause is common."

"You don't *know*?"

She smiled. "We are not gods, Havoc. There is much we don't know."

"Yet your powers are so great!"

"Powers of magic, yes. But we are not smarter than ordinary folk, and we are unable to fathom the past or future. We wish to better understand our nature, as you do yours."

"I am a changeling."

"So are we, Havoc."

He stared at her, astonished. "Humor?"

"Negation. "Every one of us started as a changeling. Later we manifested as Glamors. So your tale was not false in essence, merely in detail."

"Changelings," he breathed. "So you do seek the origin of changelings."

"We do," she agreed.

He gazed at her again. She remained enchanting. "Will you tell me how you became a Glamor? I ask because if we have common roots as changelings, it may be relevant."

She smiled. "Affirmation. I was a fourth, and a changeling, though I did not know the latter. My family lived near a Red Chroma cone. My siblings were older, and not much taken with me. I was Stevia, in red. So I had time alone, and ventured toward the cone from simple boredom and curiosity. I found that magic worked better there, and I liked the feel of it. Each day I braved closer, studying the cone, for often it rumbled and made minor eruptions. When my parents caught me, they cautioned me not to approach the cone, because of the danger. But they were busy and could not watch me much, and I was drawn to it. It summoned me, with its grandeur and power. Finally I braved the demons of the surrounding desert, with their conjured phantasms, and made it to the cone itself. Power came to me, and I entered the cave and found the altar. Then there was an eruption, and the mountain shook, terrifying me. I clung to the altar as a phenomenal surge of magic came—and lo, I separated into two entities. One was a little red model; the other was something else: an enormous question of identity. I seemed to be choosing what I was. It was overwhelmingly important. "I am human!" I cried. Then the figurine dropped into the fourteenth pocket, and I was free. I made my way out of the cave and flew home, shaken by the mysterious experience."

She paused, studying Havoc. "Am I being relevant to your interest?"

"Absolutely. Fascination." It was such a lowly question, considering her identity.

"But when I got there, they ignored me. That was usual for my siblings, but not for my mother. 'Mom, I had the weirdest experience,' I told her, but she looked right through me. 'Mom!' I cried, and grabbed her hand. But my hand passed right through hers. That was when I realized I was dead. The eruption had destroyed me, and I was now a ghost. I was horrified, but unable to change it. In the next few days I watched the burial ceremony. A sibling had seen me go to the cone, and they knew of the eruption, and I did not return for dinner, so they knew it had killed me. They lacked a body, but no one was going to brave the demons of the cone to try to locate or fetch it. They were sad, even my siblings, and I could not comfort them. There was nothing I could do except depart, hoping to find my way to Planet Counter-Charms and be with the spirits of my ancestors. Except, I realized, I did not know who they were: I was a fourth, my parentage unknown. Do you understand?" She looked at Havoc.

"Yes!" he said, taking her in his arms. "I have always understood that aspect. That was one reason Gale and I were drawn together: we were both fourths. We were well treated by our families, but we knew. And Symbol: she's older, and callused, yet there is that affinity. This much of you I comprehend perfectly."

"I am, at heart, a lonely girl," she said. "With extraordinary powers, but still in need of acceptance and love. This is not something I care to bruit about carelessly."

"I like you better now," Havoc said, holding her. "I mean, you fascinate me, but—"

"Understanding," she agreed. "We do have common roots. This explains in part my attraction to you, however peripheral. At any rate, I wandered for a time, a spirit others could not see or hear or feel. I did not go to Counter-Charms, though I tried; I was able to fly only so high before leveling off. I also found myself getting hungry. I was mystified; why should a ghost want food? So I returned to ground and sought to pluck a fruit, but my hand passed through it. Annoyed, I willed solidity to my hand—and it formed, and dropped to the ground."

"Confusion."

"Me too, at the time. I discovered that I had formed a solid hand, but not a solid arm, so the hand had no support. So I willed a solid body, and then I was able to pluck and eat the fruit. That experience caused me to come to the conclusion that I was not after all dead, but in some other state. I experimented, and discovered that I could fashion my body into whatever form I wanted: tall or short, thick or thin, plain or lovely. I could make it fly or change color. So I was alive, and in control. I did need to eat, and to eliminate, but I could readily find food. I also needed to sleep, but I could do that in my ghostly form, undisturbed. Yet what was the point? I was alone." She sighed in his embrace. "Figuratively. People were all around, but now I avoided them, certain that they would not understand my state. I did not understand it myself. So I continued to exist, and to explore my powers. I seemed to have all the magic any Chroma person did, and more."

She kissed Havoc, and he kissed back. "Appreciation for your comfort," she said. "This is not an easy statement."

"Welcome to it." Her humanity had grown greatly during this narration. She was no longer the seeming goddess, but a fellow being.

"Then one day I strayed beyond the Red Chroma zone, and encountered a hostile plant. Instantly I dematerialized and floated away. Then I realized that this should not have been possible; Chroma folk lose their magic beyond their zones. Yet I had done it. Thereafter I experimented further, and discovered that I had lost none of my powers of magic. I was the same in other Chroma or nonChroma zones as in the Red Chroma. I had never heard of this."

"Didn't you recognize this as Glamor status?"

She made a wry smile. "This was some time ago. Glamors were unknown then."

"Unknown? But the stories have been around for centuries."

"Affirmation."

Slowly he realized the import. "If I may inquire—"

"This happened approximately two hundred and fifty years ago."

He froze. She was that old?

"If you wish to turn me loose now, you may do so. I will understand."

Yet her body was that of a woman in her teens or twenties. "Immortality—it is another Glamor trait?"

"Perhaps."

"You don't know?"

"Not yet."

He considered, and realized that it was a fair answer. How could a person know how long she would live, before her life was done?

And how did he feel about her now? She was really an old, old woman. Yet still a beautiful one, and in need of comfort, as she said. "I think your Glamor identity is too much of a good thing. Your age is too much of a bad thing. Together, there is a kind of balance. You are someone to whom I can relate, no fault, if that is your wish."

"It is my wish," she said, kissing him.

Havoc suffered a sudden belated revelation: "The red ikon! It looks exactly like you!"

"Correction: I look like it."

"You modeled yourself after it?"

"It represents the ideal human woman."

He nodded; it did make sense. "How did you come to know you were a Glamor?"

"Unanswerable. I was the first. I defined the term."

"The first? How could you know that?"

"All Glamors were first changelings. There were no changelings before my day, and there were few thereafter. So it seems that something in changelings enables them to make the transition, and there were none from ordinary folk. I looked for others like me, and for thirty years found none. That was the worst of my loneliness."

"How did you tolerate that?"

"I had the distraction of learning and mastering my powers. I also recreated my original persona, Stevia, the sweet girl. She had brief boyfriends."

"No long term commitment?"

"I could have made her seem to age, if I wished. But it was easier simply to move on after a few years in no fault. I could not afford to have babies; they would tie me down, and might catch on to my nature, which I felt was best kept private. So I have known a number of good men, usually as mistress, so that they did not expect a family of me. But mere sex becomes repetitive after a few

decades. Fortunately I finally spied the Black Glamor, who had come on the scene. I was able to be of help to him, and of course we were lovers. We understood each other in a way no others could. That passed the time. We discovered that we represented not the Red or Black Chromas, but different types of life. I spoke for human beings; he spoke for saprophytes."

"Question?"

"Fungi. The things that break down the products of life, so they can be recycled."

"They need someone to speak for them?"

"So it seems. They provide Black his powers, and he represents their interests."

Havoc remembered how the Black Glamor had caused the conspirators who were trying to destroy the new king to dissolve into dust. They had been broken down for recycling. "So you called yourself Glamors, and the term leaked out into folklore."

"Approximately."

"Who are the others?"

"I think you know."

Havoc considered. "The ikons! We have found a blue insect, a red statuette, an invisible millipede, a translucent fish, a black mobius strip, and a yellow star. Now we are looking for a green one."

"A green squid."

"So the Glamors represent insects, humans, millipedes, fish, fungi, and—"

"The demons."

"And finally the squids. Seven categories."

"That is the number."

"Who represents trees?"

She shrugged. "We do not understand the system of representation, we merely reflect it."

"I think trees should be represented."

"Then you must appeal to some higher authority. We are not sure whether we choose our types, or whether they chose us."

"So now you are fetching the ikons—for what purpose?"

"They are actually threads encased in symbolic shells. With the threads we hope to weave a

tapestry, whose form will indicate the nature of the remaining Glamors."

"How do you know there are others?"

"There must be. To match the Chroma."

"Ten—or twelve?"

"Twelve. So we need to identify five more."

"Then what?"

"Then we will summon them, and hope to join with them to fathom the mystery of the changelings. Of our origin—and yours."

"You can't just call out colors, the way I did in my tale?"

"We have tried. They don't answer."

"Maybe they don't exist."

"We believe they do, but do not care to respond. Perhaps we are mistaken."

"Perhaps," he agreed. "Let's get that green squid, then see what the pattern is. Maybe answers will come."

"This is our desire."

"Speaking of desire: we were here for sex."

She nodded. "Now you understand me better. If you want me, I am yours, no fault."

"I think I want you, no fault. Can I handle it?"

"Perhaps."

"Let me try."

He embraced her, and felt her divine body against him, electrifying every part of him. He kissed her, and his face seemed to float free of his head. But as their genital regions came together, the feeling became too much. "I think I need another derivative," he gasped.

"Granted."

His groin expanded to encompass his whole body. He spun wildly in space. Then he steadied, and discovered he was the star Vivid, burning brightly in space. There before him was Void, a dark hole. A faint outline defined the Red Glamor, the dark star her groin. He moved toward her, and into her.

There was a phenomenal flash. Energy flew outward, illuminating the region. They had become a quasar, flashing its presence to the universe. The fulfillment was so intense as to be unbearable.

The fabric of awareness tore. Havoc found himself on Planet Mystery, in the bower, clasping the Red Glamor. But as the radiating light came, that flew apart. He found himself in the dream chamber, kissing her. The light overtook them and that too flew apart. At last he woke in the Green Chroma room.

Stevia and Ine were tending to him. "Come back, come back!" Ine was crying, stroking his face.

"Is Void flaring?" he asked dazedly.

Ine paused, uncertain whether he were joking.

"In your dreams," Stevia said.

He looked at her, and somewhat hysterical laughter burst out of him. A dream inside a dream inside a dream, Vivid penetrating Void, and a flare that seemed to blow away the universe. Even triple shielded, he had barely been able to survive the experience of sex with a Glamor. Yet his whole body was vibrant with the thrill of it, and he felt great. "Appreciation," he said to her.

"Mutual."

"What are you two talking about?" Ine demanded.

"Stevia told me I might have wild dreams," Havoc said. "She was right."

"Well, your dream almost put you into a coma," Ine said severely. "Try for a tamer one next time."

"I will try," he agreed meekly.

They settled down, covering him from either side with breast and thigh, and he relaxed. Ine had feral notions of sex that could make for unusual experience, and Ine and Stevia together were remarkable, but the Red Glamor was something else. She had tried her best to protect him from her devastating effect, and barely succeeded. He would never forget the effect. But the other aspect was more significant: he had learned her true nature, a lonely girl more than two and a half centuries old, who craved acceptance for her reality rather than her mortal emulation. Now that he knew her, he could do that.

His arm was around sweet Stevia's shoulders. He stroked her skin with three fingers, signifying that acceptance, and felt her breast twitch against him, acknowledging. She could read his mind, of course, probably right down to his secret thoughts. She was a Glamor. But also a woman.

He would have to assimilate the rest of what he had learned about the Glamors, in due course. For now he merely remembered it. He slept.

He woke at dawn, refreshed. The women did not demand more sex; they were evidently trying to spare him for the effort of acquisition of the ikon at the Green volcano. Indeed, they washed him



and dressed him and kissed him on either ear. "Now go perform," Ine murmured with a final pat on his bottom.

Symbol returned with a good breakfast for them all. She had evidently evoked generosity in the prickly Green Chroma man. She did know her business.

Then they girded for the coming battle. Each person donned light armor, literally: small mirrors that would reflect light. They had helmets with faceplates, gauntlets, elbow guards, crotch guards, greaves, and small mirror shields. It was not possible to cover everything, but with alert use of the shields they would be well protected. They also had light swords: hand grips that had no physical continuation, but shot out scintillating beams.

"Remember," Havoc warned. "The birds have no armor, but can read our minds, and are very quick to dodge. There are also three times as many of them, so we'll be outgunned. Best to be defensive, and watch yourself and your buddy. If you score, they'll go down, and if they score on us, we'll go down. There'll be a magic flash when there's a score. If you get killed, take off your armor and walk back to the base, here. You can do whatever you want, but may neither fight nor advise any fighter; you're out of it. Remember, too, that this is like chess: I'm the king, and if I go down, we're lost. I'm the one designated to fetch the ikon. So if you have a chance to give your life for mine, do it." He smiled. "Same story with Avian: get him if you can, even if you must sacrifice your life to do it. Their resistance will end when their king dies." He paused. "Any questions?"

Stevia approached and whispered in his ear.

Havoc faced her, publicly astonished. "*Now?* Why didn't you think of that this morning, before we got dressed?"

Stevia shrugged, looking at the ground.

"Oh, oblige her," Ine said. "I had my turns."

He sighed. "This will be fast," he said grimly, turning away from the smirks of Gale and Symbol and the amazement of Dour and Lucent. What possessed the woman to make such a demand at such a time? Ine they might have understood, for news of her odd tastes was circulating. Hot sex in armor might indeed appeal to her. But sweet Stevia?

They left Ine and retreated to their cabin. Once inside, Havoc and Stevia stripped rapidly, but expressed no sexual interest. She donned his clothing and armor, and he put on hers. Then she fished in her pack for a set of body paints. She painted his face and exposed body parts gray, and he did the same for hers, in nonChroma flesh color. Her hair flowed into the configuration of his, and also masked the differences in their facial features: she looked a lot like him. He slouched down to look shorter and thicker, and practiced walking her way, a few steps.

"It will do," she said. "Now try to act like a woman who has just had sex."

"I lack experience."

"Then blank out most of your thoughts, so you seem opaque in my fashion. I will broadcast mixed frustration and satisfaction: the sex was good, but would have been better at another time, and

slower."

"Why do I have a mental image of a quasar?"

"Banish that!" she said sharply.

"Banished," he agreed meekly.

They took up their weapons and went out. Stevia walked ahead with some swagger, while he followed more humbly. Would they fool the others? He wasn't sure. The trained eyes of Dour and Lucent might penetrate the change, but they would know better than to react. Similar for Gale and Symbol. He wanted their thoughts to support the ruse. With luck the birds would not question it.

The time for the engagement came. There was Avian, flanked by twenty other birds. The engagement was set to commence when the human force crossed the line that marked the limit of the birds' territory.

Stevia forged across, followed closely by Havoc and Ine, with Symbol and Gale at one flank, Dour and Lucent at the other. All drew their light swords and fired. It was a concentrated volley, and it caught the birds by surprise; three went down as the rest scattered.

That was the limit of the easy kills. The surviving birds took refuge in green bushes and trees, effectively disappearing. The humans stalked them, knowing that the surest strategy was to wipe out the enemy force, particularly the king, so as to end its threat. Stevia, emulating Havoc, took out after Avian, tracking him from tree to tree. There were several light jabs from the bushes, but the humans were moving in the manner of a phalanx, difficult to strike. They continued to fire at any birds that showed, and did catch two more. The birds were evidently not used to such organized, concentrated force.

Havoc, as Stevia, fell back. He dropped into the foliage of a bushlike tree as if searching for a bird. His effort was seemingly wasted; there were none there, as he knew. He sent out a quick thought to the tree: *Friend, cover me!* Then he urinated at the root of the tree. *My offering.*

The tree did not react, but that was positive. It was a prickler, with many sharply barbed leaves. Had it been annoyed, they would have struck Havoc's flesh. Instead he brushed against them without discomfort. The tree had accepted his offering, and regarded him as a friend. He had always gotten along well with trees, understanding their needs, regardless of their Chroma.

Concealed by the foliage, he stripped away his armor and clothing and left it on the ground with his laser sword. Naked and weaponless, he crawled out from the cover of the tree. His mind was blank; there were no open thoughts, and even his secret thoughts were mainly of vegetation. As he encountered grass, he paused, thinking an apology for intrusion and begging its indulgence. He was careful not to put any weight on any tender stems; he followed an animal trail that was largely clear of delicate plants.

Meanwhile the battle raged to one side. "Havoc" was still stalking Avian, trying to take out the enemy king. But the birds were catching on to the strategy, and their resistance was stiffening. More of them were going down, but increasingly accurate light probes injured one human and then another. Then "Havoc" himself took an injury in the right arm, and had to change his weapon to his left hand.

Ine rallied to him, and the others, so that their tight defense prevented the birds from getting any killing shot at the king.

However, this slowed progress. The humans had a good defensive emplacement, but could not advance from it without crossing a low open field where they would be highly vulnerable. The birds hung back, perched in surrounding trees, waiting for the sally that had to come. Because it was not feasible to sit at the site all day; if night came with no resolution, the battle would be over, and the humans would have lost by default, their prize uncollected. So the birds had the advantage, and knew it. They were content to wait.

Meanwhile the real Havoc crossed the field on hands and knees, focusing on each patch of grass. *Apology... appreciation... parting.* He was just a clumsy animal trying to get clear of the combat. He was in plain physical sight of all participants, but there was no royalty or human arrogance in him. He picked his way though, negotiating with each plant he encountered, deferring to whichever one held the immediate territory. Some were resistive, and he avoided them; others were tolerant, and he thanked them. One green cactus granted him passage, and he admired her thorns and flower, flattering her. Another small tree was hungry, and he squatted and strained and managed to produce a moderate turd for its nourishment. It gave him access to the forest beyond the field.

His mind received the thoughts of the battle without reacting to them. "Havoc" had taken another injury, this time in the leg, and was in simulated pain, unable to walk upright. Ine bewailed his incapacity and sought to help him walk, but that open field was daunting. The others were uncertain; Symbol had gotten killed, and Gale was injured. Only the Cartographer and the Amazon were whole, but they could not advance without Havoc. It was going badly for the invaders.

They decided to remain defensive, making surprise sallies when they thought they had a chance to get Avian. If they took out the king bird, they would be able to carry Havoc to the cone, facing no further resistance. It was a desperation strategy, but seemed to have the best chance of success.

The mentally nondescript animal that was Havoc moved on. Travel through the forest was easier, because the trees crowded out the smaller vegetation, and were not much concerned about passing animals as long as they behaved. He was able to follow a regular path now, and made better progress, because he did not have to negotiate with individual plants along the way.

He rounded a bend—and there was Avian, standing on one wing-leg, evidently snoozing. Had the bird anticipated this ploy, and blocked off the route? Havoc was naked, without weapons; he could neither attack nor defend. He could not circle around; the forest was magically thick here, near the cone, and he had seen no viable alternate paths. This was his only way through in time.

He pondered, and realized that he would have to gamble that the device that had fooled the other birds would also fool the leader. All he could do was avoid notice, if that was possible. He feared it wasn't. Avian would wake the moment Havoc approached, and beam him, and he would be dead. The bird had after all outsmarted him. Unless Avian had also outsmarted himself by being so sure of victory that he thought he could relax.

Havoc got back down on all fours and moved along the path, thinking animal thoughts. He was looking for nuts, berries, or roots to eat, varieties that wouldn't hurt his sensitive muzzle. Sometimes he found them around the base of the cone. He would sniff them out, or go hungry.

He was close to the bird. The animal took note: did the bird care? No, it wasn't a predator on his kind, and it didn't eat the same varieties of berries. So it could be ignored; it was of no survival significance.

Now he was up to the bird. He didn't want to disturb it, because he had no quarrel with it, but there wasn't quite room to pass. So he touched the foliage on one side, and found it was a stinging nettle tree. That required negotiation; nettles could sting, torment, or even kill, depending on the state of their annoyance. They did not suffer foolish animals gladly. Fortunately he had generated some more urine, so he made a cup of one hand, filled it with urine, and deposited it at the base of the nettle, where a root could imbibe it. *Friends?*

The nettle was interested, for animal urine was a nutritious delicacy it seldom got to taste, but it was not satisfied. So Havoc got another hand-cup full, and a third, and a fourth, depositing each carefully by one of the main roots. How many would it take? He was running low on fertilizer. But he had to continue. Like all trees, the nettle had eight major roots radiating out from the base, and it seemed that all of them had to be pacified by similar offerings. The tree knew he had no choice, and wasn't settling for tokenism.

He got the eighth cup, exhausting his bladder, and served the eighth root. Only then did the tree accept his friendship. Its nettles relaxed, and allowed Havoc to brush by them without being sorely stung. He moved carefully through the deadly foliage, skirting the standing bird without touching it. And emerged on the other side, resuming the cleared path. He had made it!

He set off down the path, ready to sniff out edible berries. He glanced back once, and saw the bird facing him, still snoozing. Then he rounded another bend, and was alone.

Something nagged. Facing him? Avian had been facing him when he approached from the other side, his lens oriented to fire down the path. Now the bird was oriented the other way. How could that be, if he had never awoken?

There were two explanations. The bird could have shifted position in sleep, to relieve a fatigued foot, and turned around in the process. Or he could have awakened and spied Havoc—and let him go.

The more Havoc considered it, the less likely it seemed that Avian would have come to the tight spot of the path to block Havoc's progress, then fallen asleep on the job. The mere approach of Havoc's mind should have alerted the bird, regardless. So probably Avian had been awake throughout. Havoc's mental pose as a dumb animal might have fooled a snoozing mind, but his human body would have given him away instantly to an alert mind. Avian had to have recognized him. That meant he had let Havoc go.

But why? Why yield the easy victory? Avian could have won the moment Havoc came into view, or at any time during his negotiation with the nettle tree. He could have shot Havoc down when he glanced back.

Not only had he spared Havoc, he had let Havoc know it. By turning. What motivated Avian?

It had to be that the bird wanted Havoc to succeed. That was another mystery. Havoc suspected that he had better fathom that mystery, lest he overlook something vital to his mission. But

at the moment he had to fetch that ikon.

He reached the base of the cone and mounted it. It was unguarded; even the local green demons seemed unconcerned about a wandering animal. He felt the terrible intensity of magic, but the cone was not rumbling; it was safe to approach at the moment. He would not remain here longer than he had to; he wasn't sure what effect unfocused magic could have on him, but it was uncomfortable.

He found the cave and entered. Inside was the chamber with the altar. There were the eighteen pockets. In the ninth one he found a small model of a ten legged squid. He picked it up and put it in his mouth. He had gotten what he had come for.

The intensity of the magic seemed to abate. Havoc realized it was because of the ikon: it had a tremendous focus of magic, and that protected him from the rest.

He walked back to the battlefield. The fighting had stopped. The birds were standing in a circle, no longer hiding. Stevia was lying on the ground, Ine leaning over her. "He isn't dead," Ine was saying. "He isn't dead."

"It was a fair shot," Dour said. "By the rules of this engagement, he is dead."

"Havoc isn't dead," Ine insisted.

Havoc realized she was stalling, to give him time. The game was over, but not in the way they thought. It was time to clarify that.

He strode toward the group. "She is right," he said. "I am not dead."

Birds and humans alike turned to stare at him. There he was, naked.

*What is this?* Avian demanded.

Of course the bird already knew. But evidently Avian's role in Havoc's victory was not intended to be publicized. He had done something for Havoc, and Havoc suspected it was a favor he would be obliged to repay in kind—when he understood how.

Stevia sat up. "It's an exchange. I am dead; I was fairly killed. But I am not Havoc. I am Stevia in his armor. Havoc went to fetch the ikon."

Havoc brought out the green squid and held it aloft. "I made it through," he said.

Avian put it together. *We did not track the gray woman.*

"And I crawled right past you, thoughts muted," Havoc said. "The battle was a diversion, concealing my progress. Any bird could have killed me, had it tracked my body instead of my mind."

Avian made an almost human nod of his body. *Things may be concealed in open view.* Then he leaped into the air and flew away. The others followed him. They had yielded the issue.

Things might be concealed in open view. Havoc had done that—but was that all that the bird

meant? What was Havoc missing? This bothered him increasingly. There was more here than he understood, and he suspected that it was important he achieve proper understanding. Avian was telling him something, if he but had the wit to grasp it.

Havoc came to Stevia. "Now if you care to return my clothes to me—"

But she scrambled away, and Dour and Lucent leaped to the sides. "Put away that thing!"

He realized that he had been reaching toward her with the green squid. He returned it to his mouth.

"You're squeamish about a model of a sea creature?" Symbol asked. She had returned to life when the contest ended.

Havoc knew it wasn't that. It was the fact that a Glamor could not touch a Glamor icon. But that had not been explained to the others, and until Stevia chose to reveal herself to those others, she was entitled to her privacy. So he tried to cover for her. "That wasn't the only thing closing on her. I'll put it away as soon as I get my clothing." He glanced down at his own crotch.

Symbol laughed. She knew that Stevia was anything but gun-shy in that respect, so took it as a joke.

Havoc went to the tree to recover Stevia's things. But as he did so, he pondered another odd detail noted in passing. Stevia had recoiled from the little squid, and he understood that. But why had Dour and Lucent flung themselves out of the way too? Had they taken the statuette for something else? A weapon? Why would they fear a weapon in his hands? That didn't add up.

He brought the things back. Stevia was standing naked, a buxom figure of a gray woman wiping off the remnants of whitish body paint. He set her things down a short distance apart, then walked to the pile she had left for him. He would give her reasonable distance on the return trip. Ine would surely be glad to monopolize his attention.

Now they had all seven ikons. What was their secret? The Red Glamor had called them threads, and said they would weave a tapestry that would provide the identities of the five missing Glamors. Somehow he doubted that it would be that simple. Those ikons had enormous power, and surely more significance than a mere woven pattern. They might provide an answer, but perhaps not to the question that either he or the Glamors had.

Well, soon enough they would find out. Once they got back to Triumph City and got the seven ikons together.

Meanwhile, he would belong to Ine, because he was not going to let the green squid out of his possession, and Stevia would not be able to touch him, let alone kiss him, while he had it in his mouth. Perhaps that was just as well. It prevented him from being tempted to flirt again with annihilation.

Still, those incidental mysteries bothered him. Avian, Dour, Lucent—could there be some common thread? To go with the threads? That seemed ridiculous. But *was* it?

## Chapter 8—Loom

Throe watched them go with certain misgivings. He wished he could be with them, and not just because it was his job to bodyguard the king. Nor just because the sorceress Ine was apt to be more of a handful than Havoc appreciated at the moment. It was that this had become Throe's mission too. He had fetched the Invisible millipede ikon, and helped Gale fetch the Yellow sun. He wanted to be in on the conclusion.

But his feet were gone. He balked at the notion that he would never walk again.

Ennui came to him, as he sat in a wheeled chair. She was a plain woman his own age, of no particular flare except for two things: she was Havoc's oath friend and secretary, and she was Throe's perfect soul mate. "I love you," she said, vocally and telepathically. "I will be your feet."

"I love you," he told her similarly, and it was true. "But I don't want to be a burden to you, and I see no way it can be otherwise. I believe I should free you and retire to medical indigence."

"You can't free me. I lived through a whole marriage and four children, and left them behind because that life wearied me. First I found Havoc, who brought excitement into my life. Then I found you, and love. I can't give either of you up without returning to the dreadful fate of my name."

Ennui. Her life of discontent, of emotional weariness. He knew it from her mind: she had not truly come alive until she connected with Havoc. Then she had been ready for love, and after failing to find it with Chief, she had come to Throe. And he to her. His marriage and family had been good, but it seemed he hadn't measured up. They were both forty, middle-aged, and not handsome. And somehow perfect for each other. Out of what berserk chance of fate had they come together?

"Havoc," she said, answering his thought. "He is the common element. There's something about him, and I don't mean his manly barbarian vigor. He is a creature of fate."

"That he must be," Throe agreed. "And Gale with him. She is some woman."

"She must be. You never gave up your feet for *me*."

"You didn't ask me to."

She sat on his lap. "Now I can do anything I want with you, and you can't escape." Her mind was bathing him in love and desire. She had been the first of their group to catch the illness of mind reading, and after initial problems had made it part of her being.

"I wouldn't try." Her supportive closeness was perhaps the single thing he most needed now. He had offered her freedom, but hadn't expected her to take it, and was tremendously relieved by her confirmation. He wished he could take her to bed right now.

"That's it!" she said.

"You're sitting on it," he agreed. She had, indeed, gotten him sexually excited. Ine and her sisters had had remarkable physical abilities, but Ennui's overflowing love added a dimension the others lacked.

"Not that," she said, striking him gently on the shoulder with a small fist. "Not yet, anyway. I mean the telepathy: that's what brought us together. Our minds were compatible."

It was true. They had had open access to each other's minds at a time when each was in a relationship with a non-mind reader, and they meshed so readily that they had to make it physical too. The pale clerk and the robust martial artist, their life styles so different. They might never have found each other, but for that mental rapport. "You were the one with the courage to deliberately catch the mind reading disease, to see whether it could be tamed," he said.

"I am not a creature of courage. I fear so many things."

"Courage is not lack of fear. You risked your sanity on Havoc's behalf. I think that was when I became aware of you as someone special. It's a kind of dedication I understand."

"Let's get private," she murmured in his ear.

He wheeled them to his chamber. By the time they got there, she had opened his clothing and hers, and her bare bottom was massaging his crotch. She twisted around to face him, and in a moment had him in her as she leaned forward to kiss him. It was a maneuver that Ine would have been proud of.

"Get that sorceress out of your mind!" she said severely.

"The comparison was favorable to you," he protested.

"So it was. Apology." She squeezed him, and brought him to a climax. Feeling it in his body, and reading it in his mind, she followed with her own. Mind reading was a phenomenal boon to sex; instead of partners being out of synch, they were together, because there was nothing more conducive than the partner's orgasm received directly in the mind.

"Were you ever like this with your husband?" he asked as they relaxed together, connected.

"Never. Never wanted to be sexual at all, until I loved you. Now I'm a nympho, with you. If I could have looked ahead and seen myself as I am acting now, I would have been excruciatingly appalled."

"I always liked sex, in contrast," he said. "That excursion with the three air sisters was terrific. There was a Blue Chroma changeling woman, too."

"Not to mention Symbol."

"Not to mention her," he agreed. "But it's better with you."

"Because I have no ulterior motives," she said, following his mind. "I just want to please you, and be pleased by you."

"You do please me, and I do want to please you. That makes all the difference."

"Let's get us decent," she said. She got off him and cleaned them both up. "I'll have to change



your pants."

"I can do it myself." But then he remembered his feet. He couldn't leave the chair, except to lie on a bed. That frustrated him no end.

"Made you forget for a while," she said smugly.

"That whole business was merely to distract me?"

"That too." She pulled off his trousers, and went to get a new pair. Her own body was bare from the waist down. She had never been that casual, before their relationship. He found that flattering.

"You should," she said.

A black figure appeared between them. "The Black Glamor!" Throe exclaimed, astonished.

"I have need of your service," the Glamor said.

"He serves the king," Ennui said nervously. Throe knew why: she was remembering how the Black Glamor had appeared in public and turned all of Havoc's human enemies to ashes. She did not want to annoy this grim entity.

"This relates." The Black Glamor contemplated Throe's feet. "Those are not serviceable."

"Agreement," Throe said. "I will do what I can to support the king, but I must do it sitting down."

"That is not sufficient."

"Apology, but—"

"I must replace your feet, but I can not make them from nothing. I must give you another person's feet."

"Another person's feet? You can do that?"

"Affirmation. Whose feet can I take?"

"Take mine!" Ennui said before Throe could speak.

The Glamor gazed at her. "Bring them here."

"Wait!" Throe cried. "You mean that literally? I can't take hers! She needs them."

Ennui stood before the Glamor. "Take them. I have a desk job anyway."

It was that damned courage again. She was no Amazon, no fighting creature, but when it came to something to do for someone she valued, she did not count the cost. "No!"

"Stand before him," the Glamor said. "Feet matching."

She stood before Throe, facing away, her bare bottom almost under his chin, her legs straddling his.

"You can't do this!" Throe protested.

"Regret," the Glamor said, squatting before them. "This is not my specialty. There will be pain." He put one hand on Throe's dead right foot, the other on Ennui's live one.

"Do it," Ennui said bravely.

Then she screamed. Her mind radiated terrible pain at her foot. It was being torn apart, skin, flesh, blood vessels, and bone. She began to fall. But now her screaming was silent. The Glamor had muted her.

Throe put out his hands to grab her hips, holding her up. But he could not stop her pain. It proceeded endlessly, filling her mind with itself. It was the destruction of her foot.

Then Throe felt his own foot. It had been numb following the burning; the flesh was dead. A doctor had put a spell of stasis on it, so that it did not spoil immediately, but Throe knew that both feet would have to be amputated once the king's party was safely on its way. Now sensation was returning, all the way to the sole. Sheer pain, but feeling. The flesh was no longer dead!

It stopped. The pain faded as the Black Glamor removed his hands from their feet. Ennui stopped screaming and stood panting from the exertion of her agony. The noise had been stifled, but not her effort.

"I can feel it!" Throe exclaimed. "It's alive!"

Ennui caught her breath. "Now do the other," she said.

"No!" Throe cried, remembering the cost.

But the Black Glamor put his hands on their two left feet, and the pain came again. Ennui tried to stifle her screaming this time, but it burst out of her—and was silent. Throe realized that the Glamor had muted it again so that others in the palace would not come running. A practical device, but not a gentle one. Yet Ennui had asked for it, knowing what she faced.

The feeling came, this time in the left foot. Even as the woman's foot was being destroyed, Throe's foot was being remade. He really was taking her feet.

At last it stopped. The Glamor let go and stood. "Recover. Prepare for a mission tomorrow. Obtain two circumspect female volunteers for a difficult challenge. One must be lovely and able to dance well. I will return in the morning." He faded out.

Throe remained sitting, his new feet tingling, his hands on Ennui's hips, still supporting her. Then she fainted. He eased her down onto his lap. She had wet herself in her agony. Her bare bottom was at his groin again, but this time the situation was horribly different. She had given up her feet so that he

might walk again. How could he ever come to terms with that?

Yet as he looked around her body, her feet looked undamaged. They were neither burned nor bruised. They looked exactly as before: small and ordinary, with delicately tinted nails. There was no physical evidence of either the pain she had suffered, or the deadening.

He wheeled to the bed, and carefully lifted her to it. He spread her out, checking her feet with his hands. They were warm and firm. Were they really dead?

Then he looked at his own. And gaped. They were just like hers! Small, with tinted nails. He did have her feet.

Cautiously, he levered himself to his borrowed feet. There was no discomfort or unsteadiness. He stood, and felt the pressure of the floor. He took a step, and then another, and had no difficulty. The feet really were working.

He heard a sigh behind him. Ennui was waking. He hurried to her side. "My love," he said, taking her hand.

Her eyelids flickered. "Apology," she said. "That pain—"

"I felt it from your mind. It was unbearable. Apparently it was from the transfer. He said it wasn't his specialty. Maybe another Glamor could have done it painlessly."

"It's gone now." She winced. "But death is in that Glamor, or at least the pain of it."

"And life," he said.

She shook it off. "Oh, Throe—was it successful?"

"Look at me. I'm standing on your feet. Walking on your feet."

She looked—and laughed. "My feet! You really do have my feet!"

He realized how funny it looked. He was a stout, muscular man. These feet were several sizes too small for him. Yet they worked.

But what of hers? "Your feet look all right," he said. "But I don't know their state. Can you—can you walk?"

"Let me try." She sat up and swung her bare legs off the side of the bed. She started to stand, and he grabbed her shoulders to steady her. "No need," she said.

And it was so. She was standing normally. He let her go, and she walked across the room and back. "They're fine."

"Then what—what did I take?"

She considered. "You do have duplicates of my feet. He must have copied them. Taken their

pattern. That's what he meant. If we had realized, we could have gotten strong man's feet for you. Apology for not catching on in time."

He embraced her and kissed her. "You tried to give me your feet, and make yourself a cripple, yet you apologize for confusion! What am I to do with you?"

She smiled. "Well, you might hold me for a while. I am somewhat shaken."

"I will hold you forever!"

"Negation," she said, laughing again. "It would be awkward when I needed to use the potty."

"Humor," he said, trying to suppress that aspect.

But she caught it from his mind anyway. "Did I wet on you? Shame!"

"You gave me back my mobility," he said. "How can I ever thank you?"

"Don't thank me, just love me."

"Forever!"

"But first put on your pants. And we'll have to find some shoes for you. Unless you prefer to wear mine."

He smiled, visualizing himself in lady's slippers. Meanwhile the realization was growing: what he had lost had been restored. He was no longer washed up as the king's bodyguard. For that he had the Black Glamor to thank—and Ennui. His future was reappearing.

They washed their legs and got dressed, and then addressed what else the Black Glamor had said: they needed two female volunteers for a difficult challenge.

"I'm one," Ennui said.

"No!"

"Be sensible, Throe. Obviously you and the Black Glamor are going on a mission. Twice you have gone without me. This time let me come. I don't want to be apart from you again so soon."

"But there is likely to be danger."

"I'm tired of watching you go out to risk your life while I bite my nails. If you're going to get killed, I want to be there."

"I think the Glamor meant an Amazon—one who could fight like a man."

"And maybe he meant a soft lovely young woman to cushion a no fault journey. I'm tired of that too. That Ine was more than enough."

"She's out with Havoc now. It will have to be some palace women we trust."

"Throe?"

He capitulated. "If the Black Glamor accepts you, so must I."

"Now who else?"

"Are there any mind readers remaining here? That counts for a lot."

"The Lady Aspect."

"She's a fine woman. I've known her for decades. But she's no young sexy dancer, and she's needed here to run the palace. She's the only one who truly knows what it's all about, and can cover for Havoc's absence."

"Bijou."

"Bijou," he repeated. "The former bath girl."

"She's savvy and adaptable, dances very well—and quite pretty."

"If it is as we suspect it may be, she could keep a Glamor company well enough. But she loves Havoc."

"Every woman loves Havoc. She'll be glad to help him any way she can."

"Maybe she'll do. But we'd better check with the Lady Aspect first."

"I wonder," Ennui said, musing. "Do you think our absence should be concealed, the way it is for Havoc and Gale? If so, it may be easier to keep you lame."

"Because who would ever suspect me of gallivanting on some other mission!" he agreed. "Right: I'll remain lame, and whoever impersonates me will get to lie about all day."

"I will talk with the Lady Aspect now." She kissed him again, and departed.

Throe practiced walking on his new small feet. They were serviceable, but would likely become fatigued if he hiked far in body armor, pack, and weapons. He would have to favor them, at least until they built up some additional strength. Still, he couldn't help liking them, because they were Ennui's. Now he would always have something of her with him.

There was a knock on the door. Throe got hastily into the wheeled chair. "Acknowledged!" he called.

"I brought you visitors," Ennui said. "To console you in your loss."

Chief entered, followed by the Lady Aspect and Bijou. The girl closed the door and stood guard by it.

"True?" Chief asked.

Throe stood and walked around the room.

The Lady Aspect ran to him and embraced him. "That's wonderful, Throe! You can continue employment."

"I am grateful for that," Throe said. "But at the moment it seems I have a private mission for the Black Glamor. We need—"

"Of course. Bijou has agreed to go, and Chief and I will conceal your absence, and that of the Lady Ennui."

"Lady, I wasn't asking you to do that!"

"We all serve the king. I will retire to my apartment, to be seldom seen, and Chief will disappear on a private mission for a few days. We will become the two of you. With the help of a little illusion and makeup, I think we can handle the masquerade for a time."

"This is most generous of you," Throe said.

"We have felt somewhat left out of recent activities," Chief said. "This enables us to participate, in our fashion."

"I am sure Havoc will be grateful," Ennui said.

They set it up, so that the change could be accomplished expeditiously the next day. Then the three departed. "I will be back early," Bijou warned them, sending a mental picture of the two of them being caught nakedly embraced. Throe returned a picture of a disembodied hand goosing her so hard from the rear that she was lifted out of the room.

"Belay those fresh images," Ennui snapped.

"Apology." He realized that mind reading could make thoughts as real as actions.

"However, she did have a point," Ennui continued. "We had better get that naked embrace out of the way early, so as not to get caught."

"As if she couldn't read our minds before ever opening that door."

"I like her. She had a rough adjustment when she emulated Gale, then discovered that she *wasn't* really the king's mistress."

"I remember. But she did get to be his mistress on another trip."

"And he has promised her a fourth. But that's Havoc. *You* can keep your mental hands off her fresh young bottom." But she smiled. Ennui was enjoying the role of possessive mistress.

Early in the morning, Bijou appeared, with a band around her brown curly hair, disguised as a

peasant girl. Even in that guise she remained rather pretty. "You are safely out of bed?" she inquired.

"We are never safe together," Ennui said, smiling. She and Throe had also disguised themselves as peasants. They did not know where the Black Glamor would be taking them, but peasants were everywhere. They ate a solid breakfast, not knowing what kind of meals they would have coming, and awaited the arrival of the Black Glamor.

"You understand—" Ennui began.

"I may be a plaything," Bijou said. "I will serve in whatever manner is necessary."

"Dancing well was specified," Throe reminded them. "The most effective dancers are personally attractive."

"I'd love to serve by dancing."

"Greeting."

They all jumped. No one had entered the room, but there was a man standing behind them. He was entirely clothed, with long gloves covering his hands and arms, and a veil on his face. But Throe recognized the costume and stance.

"Jamais Vu!" Throe exclaimed. "My guide in the Air Chroma zone. What are you doing here?"

The young man gazed at each of them in turn, before answering. He nodded. "These will do. Now necessary revelation: I am the Black Glamor." And his form changed to the black cloaked figure who had restored Throe's feet. "This you will know but not reveal."

"Amazement!" Bijou breathed.

Throe's own jaw had dropped. "I traveled with you, and chose a bride for you—and all the time you were the Black Glamor?"

"Affirmation." The figure of Jamais Vu returned, facing Bijou. "You and I will dance. I will guide you telepathically."

"Question?" she asked, understandably confused.

"By mind contact," Throe clarified.

"I know most dances," Bijou said. "If you tell me which, I can do it without such guidance. No offense."

"Vivid and Void," Jamais said.

"I can do Void."

"You will do Vivid."

"Vivid! But that's the man's role."

"I am Void." He stepped away from them and resumed his black aspect. He gestured.

"I—I can try," Bijou said. Throe understood her hesitancy. Vivid and Void was a classic dance, often used for contests, but normally the woman was Void, as she said. She would have had no practice in the other role.

The dance began. The Black Glamor turned in place, emulating the rotation of Void, while Bijou turned in her place, emulating Vivid. Her feet moved in the tricky step required, exactly matching his footwork. As they rotated, they slowly moved to the sides, orbiting each other.

It abruptly stopped. "So," Jamais said, reappearing. "Practice the step."

"I shall," Bijou said, looking slightly awed. Throe had felt the mind power as the Glamor directed her motions, showing her the unfamiliar role. It was clear that Black was an expert dancer, and knew exactly what he wanted. She went to a corner of the room and practiced steps.

"Background," Jamais said. "The succubus Swale has been laboring under my direction to locate the changeling stronghold. It has been a difficult search, as there are magical bars to its discovery; she had to identify it by its absence of appearance."

"Confusion," Ennui said. "No offense."

"Dispense with concern of offense," Jamais said. "I am aware of your quality of character." He glanced at Throe. "And yours."

"All the business of choosing a bride from among three sisters," Throe said. "This had no meaning?"

Jamais smiled. He could do this, though it would have been hard to imagine the Black Glamor smiling. "It had meaning. I was required to guard you during your mission, and this was the convenient way to keep your company."

"But it is the king who needs protecting," Throe protested. "I am his bodyguard, in that instance doing his bidding, to facilitate his mission."

"Red guards Havoc. Others guard the others."

"Other Glamors?" Ennui asked, her continuing amazement paralleling Throe's.

"All are protected," Jamais agreed. "We concluded it was necessary, after perceiving the prior threats, and considering the difficulties of the assignments."

"But the three sisters," Throe said. "I—I interacted with each, trying to determine which you should marry. But you're a Glamor!"

"Glamors can marry," Jamais said. "But usually we free our partners after the four children have been raised, so that our longevity does not become apparent."



"How long do you live?" Ennui asked.

"We seem to be immortal. I am approximately two centuries old, and my body remains the age it was at my accession as Glamor. It gets dull alone, so we do seek companionship, albeit masked."

"That is, as mortal folk," Throe said.

"Affirmation. We normally conceal our nature. But in this circumstance we are revealing it. Sometimes we have revealed it to our partners, if we have reason, though this has complications."

"So you did mean to marry one of the sisters?"

"My intended was Ine. But you did too good a job, and found me a better one. I will marry Ino."

"I did not know! I would not have done that to Ine, if I had realized."

"Ine will survive. She already had what she wanted of me."

"She knew?"

"Affirmation. She was my covert mistress."

"She sold her soul!" Ennui exclaimed.

"Negation. She sold her loyalty. She served me in exchange for instruction in sorcery. She insisted that a sexual relationship be part of it."

"Understanding," Throe said ruefully. "She has provocative tastes, and must have considered sex with a Glamor to have been the ultimate thrill."

"Agreement. She was learning to handle it directly rather than masked."

"But what will she do now that she won't marry you?"

"Our association remains. She continues to serve me, and will continue as my mistress if she chooses."

"But she's traveling with Havoc!"

"I had other business, so could not accompany you on that aspect of the mission. So she was to go instead, keeping me informed. When you lost your feet, it became convenient for me to protect you directly."

"So I messed you up a second time," Throe said ruefully.

"Negation. We do not know the future, and must adapt at need. Your presence here enables earlier achievement of this mission."

"Are we allowed to know its nature?" Ennui asked.

"To fetch the loom."

"Confusion."

"Havoc and his minions are collecting threads. Once assembled, they must be woven into a pattern. This pattern will suggest the nature of the continuation. But they are not easy to weave."

"Threads? Havoc turned them over to me for safekeeping, and they are small enchanted objects."

"Ikons are threads in other forms. They require the loom for emergence."

"I have done weaving," Ennui said. "Perhaps I will be able to make myself useful."

"Affirmation. Now the answer to your prior question: the changeling stronghold is masked from ordinary or magical view. Therefore it must be located by its absence of appearance. Consider the location of a dark cloud at night. How is it done?"

"I don't get to look at clouds at night," Ennui said.

"I do," Throe said. "I have spent many nights on guard outside the king's traveling tent, verifying the sky, among other things. You spot a cloud by the way it obscures the stars. They are bright elsewhere, but if there is a patch where they don't show, it is because their light is being blocked by a cloud. You can define that cloud by the pattern of the absence of stars."

"But the changeling stronghold surely isn't a cloud," she protested. "It must be somewhere on the planet, perhaps buried underground or underwater."

"So if you search for ordinary ground or water, and discover a region where it doesn't seem to be, there must be something blocking it. That could be the stronghold."

"Oh, I see, as it were!" she exclaimed. "Absence of appearance! Swale was looking for what didn't show." She looked at Jamais. "Where is it?"

"We are not yet sure. The succubus has located several potential sites."

"We can't just look at each, narrowing it down?"

"Negation. The changeling authority would be alerted by the first such effort of discovery, and would oppose further efforts."

"Oppose a Glamor?"

"All Glamors derive from changelings. Therefore the stronghold may be proof against Glamors, and in fact may have the means to destroy us. This encourages caution."

Ennui made a silent whistle. "We are dealing with powerful forces! But this loom—and the threads—can show the way?"

"We believe so."

"Why didn't you fetch the threads long ago, then?"

"Glamors are unable to touch the threads. They are related to our substance, and are apart from us."

"And that's why mortal folk have to fetch them!" she exclaimed.

"Affirmation. We have been hesitant to involve mortals in our business."

"But since Havoc's doing it anyway, you're helping."

"Affirmation."

"I wondered what kept Swale so busy! She was supposed to be liaison to the several parties, but she checked each only once or twice. She wasn't with Spanky much either, or Gale. What's she doing now?"

"Locating the loom."

"You don't know where it is?"

"We know now. But she needs to fathom the barriers to its acquisition."

Ennui pondered that a moment. "Meaning that we aren't going to be able just to go and pick it up? There are dangers along the way?"

"Affirmation. Now it is time to attend the dance."

"I'm not sure how I'll be at dancing," Throe said, glancing at his small feet.

"You will not be required to do exhibition dancing. Your work will come later." Jamais looked at Bijou. "You have the essence. Change to more provocative clothing. I will guide you." Then, to Throe and Ennui. "Garb yourselves for conventional dancing. We will return in a moment." He walked over to join Bijou, took her arm, and both vanished.

Ennui shook her head. "I know Glamors have strong magic, but it still amazes me to see it here in nonChroma Triumph."

"That's what makes them Glamors," Throe said. "Their magic is similar to what Chroma folk do, but they do it anywhere. They aren't limited to their own colors."

"So I appreciate. You really traveled with that seeming young man?"

"And spent delicious nights with his girlfriends," Throe agreed. "No fault."

"So I don't dare find fault," she said, frowning. But she couldn't hold it. "I do marvel on occasion that you prefer to be with me, considering those alternatives."

"You have what they have, only older. My velocity."

"We need to get dressed. Again. We thought peasant; now it's dance." She rummaged in his closet and brought out a suitable suit. Then she brought out a dress for herself.

"You have your clothing here?" he asked, surprised.

"A girl has to be prepared for emergencies. I didn't want to have to waste time apart from you, not knowing how much time I would have *with* you. You're always on the king's business."

"We're not married yet, you know."

"Yet." She was buttoning up his jacket.

He kissed her. "Curiosity: did I propose?"

"Not yet."

"Do I need to?"

"Affirmation."

"Consider it done."

"Negation! You will have to do it properly, on one knee, with a fancy ring, after a great night out, and I may or may not accept."

"After the dance?"

She made a moue. "That may have to do."

"It sounds pretty grim. Why don't you just be my mistress instead?"

"I'm too old and dried up for that nonsense."

He grabbed her. "Nonsense, is it? I want you right now."

"After the dance," she said firmly.

"At least give me one feel now."

"Negation. It never stops at one."

"You are a harsh mistress."

"A harsh fiancée-to-be. There's a difference."

"Agreement," he said with mock resignation.

"That's better," she said, pinching his bottom.

"Hey! What was that?"

"Half a feel. That's all I can spare at the moment."

He shook his head. "Here we are, playing touch games like children. What will people think?"

"They'll think we are in love."

"And at our age!"

They clung to each other, laughing, enjoying it. They were middle aged, but their love was yet young.

Jamais and Bijou reappeared. They were now in fancy dancing outfits. Hers seemed to be made of linked handkerchiefs that threatened to expose glisteningly firm private flesh whenever she moved; his was mainly a shining white cloak. "Ready?" she called.

"Ready," Ennui agreed. Her own outfit was far more conservative, as was Throe's.

"When I signed up to be the king's bodyguard, I never thought it would involve such sacrifice," Throe said.

Ennui spanked him, making him jump. She glanced at him, picking up a naughty mental association. "Oh you did, did you?" she murmured.

"It was Ine's idea."

"So I see." Unfortunately, she did.

Two cloaked figures met them at the door: Chief and the Lady Aspect, here to emulate them. Once inside the room, they would make themselves up to make it credible. "Appreciation," Throe murmured as they passed.

"All in the line of business," Chief said.

They walked down the hall to the ramp, and down it several stories to the main hall of the city. Other couples were walking similarly. "Why did they schedule such a big dance on such short notice?" Ennui inquired.

"There's a big storm coming," Bijou said. "King Havoc got notice, and decided to divert the populace." She meant Swale's brother Berm, who was emulating Havoc during his absence. Outside the palace section, they scrupulously honored the charade.

"Storm?" Throe asked. "I had not heard of this."

"Word came in the night," Bijou explained. "It's said to be ferocious, crossing whole Chroma zones as if they don't exist, stirring up the magic something awful. It may rock the city. People might

panic. So the repair crews are on alert, and the rest are encouraged to dance. There's a half-holiday declared."

Throe nodded. King Deal had done similar on occasion, anticipating civilian unrest and defusing it early. It did make sense. A big fancy dance would distract most folk, especially if there were prizes.

The Black Glamor had set up their attendance last night. How had he known? Then Throe realized that the question was foolish; Glamors could travel instantly from place to place. He had probably seen it coming, literally.

They reached the hall. People were pouring in from all three sides. The hall was shaped like the city, a pyramid within the pyramid, with a triangular floor and rising to a point above. It was a favorite place for regular folk, in part because of its spaciousness. Most residential chambers were cramped.

Musicians set up at one side, playing popular music. Decorations were being completed. Couples were taking places in the center, without dancing. They were garbed in their best. Folk liked to dress up, when they had a pretext; it made life seem less dull. Throe felt nostalgia; it had been more than twenty years since he had participated in a dance, other than in seeing his children to and from them. He had been too much on the king's business. Now, on the king's business, he was about to participate. Indeed, Ennui was leading him to a place, Bijou and Jamais following. Throe wasn't quite sure what the Black Glamor had in mind for them, but was sure Bijou did.

"Attention!" The announcer's amplified voice boomed across the hall. The couples applauded; the dance was about to begin. "I now present King Havoc and his consort Gale." The announcer turned and bowed. "Sire. Lady."

The applause redoubled. It seemed that the king and consort were popular. Throe had been so busy that he had had little occasion to observe public reactions. Of course whoever established the dance would be favored. Still, it seemed genuine.

The king stepped forward. "A storm is coming. The crews are on alert. But we want you to have the best time you can in the interim." He paused, making a subdued burp. There was more applause. Havoc had belched during his first public appearance, signifying his crude barbarian status, and it seemed it had become a trademark. The people evidently loved it.

The king reached out, and the consort took his hand. They walked to the center of the hall floor, the perfect couple. He was handsome and she was beautiful. Both were crowned—and the crowns were real. The personal emulations were nearly perfect; Throe himself could have mistaken them for the real ones, if he encountered them only passingly and without mind contact.

The announcer signaled the musicians. The music started. They danced, a slow and easy ballroom dance, graceful and grave. Then he goosed her, and she slapped him without force, and the throng went wild, loving it. The real king and consort were no longer like that, having achieved civilization in remarkably short time, but the popular image lived on.

They paused, separating. The king walked to a pretty female dance aide and took her in his arms; the consort took a handsome male aide. They danced, and again the crowd loved it; the king was mixing with commoners, symbolically. They goosed and slapped, and continued, laughing.

They paused, separated, and each of the four took new partners. They danced and did the rest. The third time they paused, the king and his consort somehow wound up with each other, while the others continued multiplying. The royals moved off the floor, waving. The dance was now in session.

"It is a nice touch," Ennui murmured. "They personalize it so well."

"Does Havoc know?"

"Havoc thought of it."

The dance swung into full play. The triangular floor was completely filled with couples, and many of them were goosing and slapping and laughing, even the older ones. "Now you can't stop me," Throe said, goosing her.

"You beast!" She token-slapped him. Then they hugged and kissed without breaking step. What delight!

After a suitable interval, the more unified programs commenced. The center was cleared for point dancing: individual men and women, doing styled or free-form, showing off their expertise. Then pair dancing, with couples demonstrating both simple and fancy moves. Then line dancing, with a fair number linking and stepping in unison, the women kicking high enough to show their petticoats. Next was the circle dance, with half of those present forming a giant circle comprised of two rings, one facing in, the other facing out, with their complicated steps.

Thereafter it broke up into many small triangle dances, each unit with three couples facing each other in the formation, its own separate world. Throe and Ennui were with Jamais and Bijou and another couple that happened to be closest by. They followed the announced directives, swinging their partners, do-si-doing with their corners, and promenading around the triangle. It was plain old fashioned fun.

Then came the pyramid dance. This consisted of a large triangle outside, with trisecting lines leading to the center: the apex of the pyramid, emulating the form of the city. The dancers swirled from point to point, embracing in threes at the points.

Meanwhile, the storm arrived. The loud music drowned out the muffled thunder, but Throe felt the shaking of the floor. There was real power there; it was indeed a bad one. Because the city floated on a lake, a storm sufficient to roil the lake could make the city rise, fall, shake, and tilt, and it was doing so.

*Stay close*, the Black Glamor's thought came.

Now came the finale: the dance contest. Jamais and Bijou were entering; Throe and Ennui were watching. "How are your feet?" she inquired as they joined the throng at the edge.

"Standing up well enough, so to speak," he said. "Your feet are stronger than they look."

"I should hope so." She was pleased on different levels: that he was doing well, and that she had enabled it.

It was the Vivid and Void dance, symbolizing the stellar interactions of the two stars their planets orbited. The men were resplendent in shining capes; the women were alluring and sinister in their black dresses. They stood apart from each other, posturing, circling each other in mutual orbit. The men tried to remain clear, but the women drew them inevitably in toward their fate. Everyone knew that Vivid was doomed; the question was how long the process would take. It was not of immediate concern, since human lives were not millions of years long; as a practical day to day matter there was little distinction between one million and ten million years.

It was a dance of elimination, and appearance was as important as the motions. The dance aides went from couple to couple, winnowing them out, selecting the most impressive for the final elimination.

And among them was one startlingly different couple, with the woman in bright dress, the man in a black cape. Bijou and Jamais Vu. Vivid and Void, reversed. But they qualified, because she was beautiful and he was darkly impressive. There was after all no rule against such interpretation.

Throe watched, impressed. The Black Glamor was a surprisingly good dancer; he must have had decades or centuries to perfect it, perhaps as diversion. His every motion was precise, not only in time with the music and the beat, but appropriate to the occasion. He fairly radiated attractive menace.

Sure enough, they were one of the three finalists. Each chosen couple centered on a point of the central triangle as the music began again. This time there were spotlights, three on each couple, the reflected light of the candles filtered through colored glass to enhance the effect. One spot followed the woman, another the man, and the third illuminated the larger circle that defined their dancing space. The spectators could cluster around each without intruding on that space. The couple that garnered the largest base of spectators would be the winner.

*Broach the candleman.* It was the Black Glamor's thought, coming directly to Throe, freighted with the desired details of modification.

He turned to Ennui. "I have to—"

"I got word too," she said.

They made their way off the dancing floor and to the stout lattice surrounding it. They climbed to the upper level where the spotlight operators were. They found the ones orienting on Jamais and Bijou. Throe went to the first, Ennui to the second.

"I am a supporter of the reversed couple," Throe told the candleman. "He wishes to have some modifications for his light."

The man was carefully aiming the reflector so as to keep it on the dancer. He had a small collection of translucent filters, and several replacement candles. It was clear that he knew what he was doing. "Sure. What's he want?"

Throe explained. The man nodded appreciatively and got on it. He was an artist of the spotlight, and liked the challenge.



Throe rejoined Ennui as they climbed back down to the floor. Then they resumed watching.

All three couples were impressive. All had clearly come prepared for this dance, and had tailored costumes for it. One of the other women had long black hair, and her tight black outfit showed an excellent figure that was bound to attract more than just her partner. But the other couple was a challenge for another reason: the two of them were changelings. Throe had become attuned to the nuances, and recognized them. That meant that both were physically handsome, and well coordinated, and went together in that indefinable way that changelings had.

Jamais and Bijou were something else. Her figure was good, of course; that had been a requirement of her selection. She could dance well, and knew this dance, though the role of Vivid was new to her. But her costume made the real difference. Each time she swung close to Void she detached and flung a handkerchief, and the supportive netting was left blank in that spot, so that more of her body showed. The spotlight followed the flying handkerchief, so that as it twisted in air it seemed to flicker until it was caught by Void. At that point Void flared, the spotlight obeying the instruction Throe had relayed: the light lifted and brightened for a moment, the filter changing to provide special effect. It really did seem as if pieces of Vivid were being drawn into Void, echoing the long-term horror of the System.

Void, too, was special. Jamais had removed his veil to reveal his invisible face, which meant that the black hood of the cape seemed empty. That was another eerie reminder of the dark star: it was empty. What fell into it had no return. As the dancer turned and gazed out at the audience, people averted their eyes, as if afraid of being sucked into that blank. Every nuance of his pose augmented that deadly impression. People did not know that this was the Black Glamor himself, rather than an Air Chroma visitor in costume, but they felt the aura of his talent.

Meanwhile the storm battered the city, shaking it and at times making the floor tilt. Throe could not remember a worse storm, and it should have terrified most people, but so entranced were they by the dance that they hardly noticed. The storm seemed to be contributing to the effect of the dance, rocking the city with the awful flares of Void. But Throe was concerned for the structural integrity of Triumph; how much battering could it take?

Slowly all three Vivids spiraled in toward their Voids: two doomed men and one doomed woman. The bright men tried vainly to escape, but the dark women made drawing-in gestures that recaptured them. Yet good as the other couples were, they were hard put to it to compete with Bijou's increasingly exposed body and the spotlight-enhanced flaring of the Black Glamor. Throe suspected that the Glamor was using his own magic to amplify the flares, with the spotlight merely a pretext, but he wasn't sure. The natural flickering of the candle accounted for much. The throngs around the three couples were shifting, with the Glamor summoning folk from the others in much the manner Void drew from Vivid. This would be the winner.

At last they came together, Vivid orbiting Void just beyond arm's reach, increasingly quickly, Bijou's costume down to only three handkerchiefs. Her flesh quivered marvelously as she moved, breasts and buttocks exposed. Her face was set in an expression of hopeless rapture, as if desiring her doom, and that expression was reflected on the faces of many of the spectators. Two handkerchiefs, then one, covering only her crotch. Then that one too went to Void, with a momentary flash, and she was net-naked and coming within his reach.

They two faced each other, locked like Charm and Counter-Charm, turning together as their

bodies closed, perfectly synchronized. Throe realized that they were in mental contact too; the Black Glamor had patterned her steps throughout, so that their unity never faltered. Then at last she fell into him. His black cloak flared out to encompass her, and she disappeared into his embrace with a final bright flare. He rotated alone. And the spotlights were doused. Void had swallowed Vivid.

There was no question of the winner; two thirds of the audience circled Bijou and Jamais. The announcer brought the victory wreath as Jamais reversed his cloak and became bright again. Bijou, clasping her partner, retained her rapt look, and it was unfeigned; Throe realized that this dance had been a remarkable experience for her. Perhaps she had always dreamed of winning it one day, and this was the day. But that was only part of it; she had come into the embrace of a Glamor and was half stunned. Despite the manner her vanishing costume attracted eyes, it had really been the Black Glamor responsible; he was probably the finest dancer the city had seen. Perhaps some watchers would have been suspicious, had it not been for the diversion of his partner's striptease.

The king reappeared. "Emergency," he said tersely as all people turned to face him. "The city has been damaged and repairs must be started immediately. Report to your work stations for assignment. Do not panic, but do not delay. Parting." And he was regally gone.

"Expletive!" the man next to Throe swore. "My crew's on leave out of the city. I can't do my job!"

Bijou turned to him. "My partner and I volunteer to serve with your crew," she said.

The man stared at her, evidently dazzled by her effective nudity. "But this is trained men's work!" he protested.

"Please," she said, stepping toward him. "I want so much to do my duty by the city. My friends will help too."

That was Throe's cue, buttressed by a signal from the Glamor. "My partner and I volunteer also," he said, putting an arm around Ennui. "We are untrained, but can learn readily for this emergency."

"But the work is dangerous! One mistake and there could be deaths."

"Please," Bijou repeated, taking his hands and drawing him into her. "I would be most appreciative." Her gaze flicked down to her well formed breasts, the implication unmistakable. "No fault, of course."

For the moment the man was dazzled by her exposed body and attendant suggestion. "I—"

"Oh, thank you!" she exclaimed, pressing into him for a pneumatic kiss.

Then, as the man stood half stunned, Throe addressed him. "Introduction: I am Throe, and this is Ennui. We will try not to let you down."

"And I am Bijou, and this is Jamais Vu, visiting from the Air Chroma."

"Patches," the man said numbly. "Foreman of a hull repair crew."

"Now we had better get to your work station, so you can train us for this vital task," Bijou said, taking him by the hand.

Jamais removed his cloak and handed it to her, and she put it on, the bright side out. Now she was no longer effectively naked.

In this seemingly random manner they became the crew for a difficult and dangerous repair mission. Throe knew that the Black Glamor had steered them to it, using the dance to bring Patches close enough to be captured, as it were. Who could have resisted bare Bijou in that moment?

But what did this have to do with the quest for the loom? Why arrange such an elaborate charade just to get on a work crew? Surely there were more direct ways to do it.

*Privacy, Ennui thought to him. It needed to seem coincidental.*

Oh. It had certainly seemed that. So the identity of the Black Glamor was protected while they nabbed the man they needed. But it still seemed like a rather complicated way to accomplish a purpose.

The Black Glamor turned his head and glanced at Throe. He felt a jolt of certainty. That sufficed; obviously this was the best way.

They made their way down to the lowest level of the pyramid. There a worried worker rushed up to Patches. "Storage number thirteen's been holed!" he cried. "We closed the bulkhead, but it's leaking. Got to fix it right away!"

"Thank you," Patches said calmly. "We're on it soon."

"What a relief!" The man dashed away.

Only when he was out of sight did Patches allow the grimness to spread across his face. "Obscenity," he murmured. "And me with a novice crew."

"We are quick learners," Throe said.

"Quick learning can't master a year's training in an hour. I know you folk mean well, but I'm going to have to borrow from other crews to get experienced men for this. That hold will burst asunder in hours; the bulkhead's not made for such pressure."

"Negative," Jamais said. "We will do it."

"And you aren't even native!" Patches rapped. "What the mischief are you trained in?"

"Irrelevant. Review the procedure. We will understand."

"Pain! This is rare naïveté."

Jamais' veil looked him in the eye. "Review."

Throe felt the jolt of mental command. The Black Glamor had just spoken. Patches blinked, not understanding what had happened, but there was no gainsaying the imperative. "Got it."

Then the foreman spoke, summarizing the procedure in some detail. The three of them read his mind, absorbing the larger ramifications. He was right: this was skilled, dangerous work, not fit for novices. But with the mind connection they could learn a lot in a hurry. Throe also felt the Black Glamor making a copy of the instructions so that he would not need to ask again; the others could get it from him when they needed it. It would not be fun or easy, but they could do the job.

Patches finished. "So now you understand why you can't do this job. It is simply too much."

"We are ready," Jamais said.

"Ready? Idiocy!"

"We two women lack physical strength," Bijou said. "Therefore we will be the guides and aligners."

"We two men have strength," Throe said, picking up his cue. "We will be the movers and pumpers."

"How can you guide what you don't understand? Move what you don't know where? This isn't child's play!"

"Give the orders," Jamais said evenly.

Patches shook his head. "Mark three."

Bijou and Ennui got moving. They went to a storage stall and fetched marking chalk. They brought it to the leaky bulkhead of storage compartment #13. They got down on hands and knees to locate the three corners of the triangular chamber below. They marked them with chalk. Then Ennui fetched a small wooden mallet. "Ready for alignment," Bijou announced as she walked toward another storage compartment.

Patches pulled his mouth closed. "Amazement! But that's only the first step."

"She is donning the suit for the second step," Ennui said. "Hadn't you men better get your equipment ready too?"

"Affirmation," Throe agreed. "Is crawler #4 available?"

"You don't think you're actually going out there!" Patches exclaimed. "The breathing alone is treacherous!"

"You have instructed us well," Throe said. "We can handle it. But we need an operative crawler, and since #3 is not operative we must consider #4."

"I never told you that! What the obscenity is going on here?"

Throe glanced at Jamais and got a slight nod. He would reveal a secret. "We are not ordinary citizens. Through an accident of circumstance we were exposed to a mental disease, and became mind readers. Once we learned to control it, it became useful and not contagious. We read your mind for the larger context as you reviewed the procedure. Our understanding is far more comprehensive than it would otherwise have been, but of course that does not substitute for experience. We need your constant direction."

"Mind reading!" Patches looked somewhat wildly around. "Here in nonChroma?"

"It seems to be independent of Chroma. It may not be magic at all, but rather a lowering of the mental barriers to thoughts that naturally radiate from every mind."

"The women too?"

"The women too," Ennui said. "Do not be concerned; we are not snooping on your private concerns. We wish merely to be effective workers, and not commit any stupid errors that could prove costly to our welfare and that of the city. You may think your orders to us if you wish."

Patches shook his head. "It still seems like magic to me. Assuming it is, how is this possible here in nonChroma?" he asked Throe.

The man needed more than one approach, to believe what his lifetime experience denied. Throe did his best to provide it. "I have wondered myself. I conjecture that there is some magic even in the nonChroma regions. It seems to work better in Chroma regions, and of course the crowding of minds here in Triumph City makes it impractical, like trying to listen to ten people talking at once. Normally we must be in close contact with others to read their minds, but sometimes we can do it at a small distance. So our coordination will be buttressed by this."

Patches nodded. Magic out of place was easier to believe than natural telepathy. After all, Glamors did magic in nonChroma zones. "Maybe you can do it after all. Lucky break for me that you were close by when the call came." He paused. "Or was it?"

"We were aware that the city could be in danger, and wanted to help. So we were close to you, believing that we could make a good crew." Throe gave him a direct look. "But we prefer to be anonymous about this; people are apt to misunderstand mind reading."

"You do the job, I'll keep my mouth shut!" He shook his head. "But the notion of that girl reading my thoughts when I looked at her bare—embarrassment!"

"Needless," Throe said. "When there is a pause in the work, as there will be, she will oblige you, as she indicated. She has no aversion to your interest."

"But isn't she with you?" Patches asked, glancing at Jamais.

"For dancing," Jamais said. "My romance is elsewhere. You would understand if you saw my fiancée."

The man glanced again at Bijou. "Better than her? Wonder." Then he reoriented his focus. "Crawler #4 is free. You can operate it?"

"Review its operation in your mind," Throe said.

The man did, and Throe had it. He went to the machine and sat in its seat. It had a cockpit cover that could be closed and sealed, so that it would operate safely under water. It had stout pedals connected to the outer track to make it go. It had probably been made in the White Chroma; their simpler machines could operate elsewhere. It was their mechanisms of power that required White magic, not their form.

"Remember, it'll be inverted, so use the harness," Patches said. "And the air is limited. You have to be back inside in fifteen minutes, fill up with new air, then go back out again. If you overrun your time, you'll start hallucinating or losing consciousness. That's what makes it dangerous."

"My associate will warn me," Throe said.

Bijou joined him in the cockpit. They pedaled to the nearest exit ramp, and into the lock. "Don't lose your way," Patches called as they closed the odd-shaped canopy. "That's doom!" The picture in his mind augmented that emphatically. He had been correct about the danger for novices; any mistake could be lethal.

Patches swung the lock door closed behind them. After a moment, the portal ahead cranked slowly open. Water rushed in, surrounding the crawler. The chamber air seemed to exit through a tube in the ceiling; when the water reached that level, a valve closed. Meanwhile the front portal opened all the way, and the crawler crawled out.

There was a kind of track here, a pair of rails curving out and down. Throe steered into it so that the crawler's tracks engaged the rails. Now they were anchored. They followed the rails around and down below the base of the city, the crawler's nose pointed straight down. Then they were on the base, upside down, and crossing it toward their repair site. They really did need the harness.

"That Black Glamor," Bijou murmured when she was satisfied that they were out of mind reading range. "I wish I could take *him* to bed!"

"Instead of Patches?"

"I'll give Patches good service; there'll be no complaint. But Black is something else!"

"I understand that a normal person can't have sex with a Glamor and survive," Throe said. "Not with intact mind. Something about overload of pleasure circuits."

"Surely true! Just embracing him made me float. But tempting anyway."

"You've had Havoc. I'd have thought that would be enough."

"Sure, if I could keep him. I'll always love him. But Gale—"

"Understanding. She is some woman."

"I wish I were a changeling."

"You're a lovely and talented girl."

"But not a changeling." Then she glanced at him sidelong. "You had a changeling."

"And gave her up for a normal woman my own age."

"Did you have a choice?"

"I don't know. Symbol is beyond ordinary ken. But I don't want a changeling. I love Ennui."

"I can feel it," she agreed. "It's nice. Maybe my turn will come."

There was a faint shimmer before them. Bijou put forth a hand. "Greeting, Swale. Have you scouted it?"

There was a pause. Then Bijou turned to Throe. "Something blocked her off the loom, but her impression is it isn't dangerous."

"This whole mission is dangerous!" Throe said.

"She's gone on to notify the others. It seems we'll just have to find out what's there ourselves."

"The rest of us will. You'll be distracting Patches."

She sighed. "Expletive. He's an okay man; it's that I wanted the adventure."

Throe understood. Hazardous as this might be, it was also fascinating. They were involved in things he had never before known existed, working directly with a Glamor. But the dull aspects had to be handled also. "They also serve who only spread their legs."

"Astounded appreciation for that insight," she said sourly. But she was smiling.

They arrived at the site. There was no missing it; the hull was staved in, with a sizable hole to the interior. "Your turn," he said, smiling.

She flashed him a return smile as she undid her harness. She landed on the cockpit ceiling, then wriggled out of her suit and netting. Nude except for a small metal hammer in one hand, she reached down to slide open the cover on the pot-like inward projection of the canopy. This was actually another type of airlock; below it was level water. The pressure of the air stopped the water from entering, and the water prevented the air from escaping, because the air would have to bubble downward to do that. It was a neat system.

Bijou took a breath, and plunged headfirst through the lock into the water. She swam around the crawler to the city hull, her hair trailing. She was prettier than ever, this way, a veritable nymph of the water.

*Thanks!* her thought came.

*Caught me looking,* he thought back.

She put one hand on the crawler for stability, and pressed her ear to the hull as she used her hammer to tap on it. In a moment she slid along the hull and planted her ear again, tapping. Satisfied, she reversed the hammer and used its other end to mark the spot with a visible X.

She swam back to the bottom of the crawler, trailing exhaled bubbles. She poked her head up through the lock and gasped, recovering her breath. "You heard the mallet?" Throe asked.

"Yes. And got a little bit of mind with it, so I'm sure. One down."

"Put on a tail and you'd be a mermaid."

"And sucker men into hour-long sex? Forget it." She took another breath and ducked down and out.

Watching her, he realized that part of the effect was the air in her lungs, that inflated her chest profile. But more of it was the seeming freedom as she swam, moving through three dimensions rather than being confined to two.

She went to another angle of the triangle, tapped, listened, and duly marked the spot. Ennui was inside, of course, with her own ear to the floor, listening and tapping so that they could orient on each other. They had to locate the sturdy beams, and the sound did that. Ennui could see where they were, but Bijou could not—and her markings were the ones that counted.

She returned for another breath. "Two down!" she gasped.

"One to go," Throe agreed.

"This is a piece of confection."

"Don't get cocky. We're not back inside yet."

"Women don't get cocky," she retorted, looking at his crotch. "It's a matter of anatomy." Then she took a breath and dived.

And the storm struck. It might have been a gust of wind, so strong it pushed the whole city around. The hull tilted, rattling the crawler. *Get back in here!* Throe thought.

She obeyed; it was clearly dangerous there, with the water swirling. She handed herself across the crawler and into it. "What was that?"

"Stray buffet of air, I think."

She nodded. "Must be. I thought the city was turning over."

"It's some storm."

"How much time remains?"

Throe had a good time sense. "We'd better start back. it took us five minutes to get here, and



we have five left."

"Let me try again." She straddled the lock.

"But it's not safe." He felt protective; she was only sixteen.

"I'll be quick, I promise." She dived through the hole.

Throe shook his head. She was a foolishly brave girl.

*Thank you.*

He smiled ruefully. *And quite a sight from the rear*, he thought, projecting a mental view of her flexing bare legs and buttocks as she swam.

*I've been a king's mistress*, she reminded him. And of course she had. And perhaps would be again, once Havoc got settled.

*I hope so.*

The city was still shaking, and strong currents were coursing around the crawler, pushing her to the side. But she made it to the third angle of the triangle and put her ear to the hull as she tapped with the hammer.

And got swept clear by another strong current.

Throe was diving through the lock before he knew it. He caught the outer canopy with one hand and swung himself around. There was the girl, swimming gamely back. He caught her arm and hauled her in, guided as much by his awareness of her mind as by sight of her body.

She pointed to the hull. *Must do it!*

The crawler was close to the site. He pushed her toward it without letting go of the crawler. That prevented the current from carrying her away. He had to let go and grab her thigh to enable her to reach the site with her head, and even so, it was hard to hold her in place. The flow was strong, and there was turbulence in it, tugging one way and another. He got a better grip, and she clamped her thighs on his hand, making the most of him as an anchor. She put her head to the hull, hammered, heard a response, and quickly marked the site. She had done it!

Then bubbles poured from her mouth. Throe felt her mind shut down. She had run out of breath and lost consciousness. She was drowning.

He hauled her in by her crotch, got his arm around her waist, and lugged himself around the tractor one-handed. He reached the lock and brought them both up into it. Their heads broke the surface, but Bijou did not resume breathing.

He scrambled up, then hauled her in after him. He spread her limp body across the inverted canopy and squeezed her chest. Some water flowed out, clearing the passage. Then he brought her head in to his, put his mouth to hers, and breathed into her. One, two, three—and she choked and

returned to life. In a moment she was gasping.

He climbed into his harness, upside down, got his seat and began pedaling backwards, making the crawler reverse course. They had only a couple of minutes left.

"Thanks!" she panted in a moment. "I thought I drowned."

"You did, for a while." He kept pedaling. He was breathing faster, and knew it was because the air was fading.

Bijou gradually relaxed. She was on the canopy, her body below his head, but her head was close to his. "Did you have a good time?"

"Question?"

"You goosed me, you laid me out, you squeezed my breasts, you kissed me when I couldn't resist. How was it?"

He glanced at her, perplexed. "You were conscious?"

"I read it in your mind just now."

"Then you know I was trying to revive you."

She laughed weakly. "I was teasing."

"Remind me to go through the motions again when you're not dying, and I'm sure it will be thrilling." Now that he thought of it, he had been pretty familiar with her body, and it was a fine body.

"Thanks." She climbed into her harness, getting suitably inverted, and positioned herself on her seat. "I'd better help." She started peddling backwards.

But it soon became apparent that they were not going to make it. They had played it too close, and the air was exhausted. Throe kept pedaling, but knew he would not be able to continue much longer.

"Oh, Throe, I'm sorry," Bijou gasped. "I should have waited on that third one. I was just so—I thought I could—I'm sorry." She slumped, fading out again.

He was sorry too, but understood her desire to get the job done efficiently. If it hadn't been for that storm surge, she would have succeeded. How could he blame her for trying?

After an indefinite time, he realized that he was recovering. He took in more air, and it was fresh and good. But they were still in the crawler. Where had the new air come from?

Then he saw the tube sticking out of the open lock. Air was wafting from half its double section, and being drawn into the other half. Someone had brought in an air tube, saving them. But who? There was no one.

*Jamais Vu*, the thought came. *Catch your breath, then resume motion. You have two minutes.* The tube disappeared.

The invisible Air Chroma man! Yet how had he done it without a suit of his own?

Bijou revived. "We're there?" she asked faintly.

"Jamais brought an air tube. We have two more minutes." He resumed peddling.

"Oh." She made her bare legs move too.

But Throe doubted that an ordinary man could have done it. Jamais must have taken the tube and swum with it to the crawler, poking it into the lock. And never taken a breath himself. That had to be the power of the Black Glamor.

And of course the Glamor didn't want his identity known. They would have to cover for him. *Bijou—*

*I know. We were unconscious. We know nothing.*

*Except that we got the air,* he agreed.

They reached the hull lock, and backed around the loop and into it, turning upright. The portal closed and the water was pressed out by incoming air.

While they waited for the descending air to prevail, Bijou turned to him. "I was disastrously foolish, and nearly got us both killed. Forgive me?"

"Of course. You were just trying to do the job."

She undid her harness and leaned into him. "If you ever do need young flesh, you won't even have to ask. I'll be there." She kissed him, and her mind made it clear that she was speaking literally.

He did not insult her by declining. "Appreciation."

When the lock was clear, the inner portal opened, and they backpedaled the crawler into the main city. They opened the canopy. "Spots marked," Bijou called out.

"Routine," Throe agreed.

"Routine, my obscenity wedged posterior!" Patches swore. "Didn't you jokers remember anything I told you about the air limit?"

"Apology," Throe said meekly. "Amateur mistake."

"My fault," Bijou said. "I went out for the third mark, and got washed away." She smiled apologetically at the foreman. It was a most winsome smile, buttressed by her bare breasts.

Patches' righteous ire diffused, as it had to. He nodded. "Storm surge. Ill luck. Don't do it again."

"Never again," she agreed.

"Good thing your Air Chroma friend was good with air. I thought he couldn't make it in time."

"We were unconscious," Throe said. "But saw the tube when we recovered. Lucky he didn't have to take it far." And even luckier that the power of a Glamor had been behind that effort, for it seemed it *had* been too far for a mortal person.

Then Jamais and Ennui were there. Ennui threw herself on Throe, and Jamais helped Bijou out of the crawler.

*Oh, Throe!* Ennui thought. *I felt you dying!*

*Just a little uncomfortable,* he thought back. But they both knew it had been a close call.

"You folk fit for the next stage?" Patches asked.

"We'd better be," Throe said.

"I've got the patch ready." For of course the man had not been idle while they worked.

The patch was a simple looking metallic hemisphere with three moveable anchor tags at the rim. It was light but strong. Patches put cords through the tags and tied them to the rear of one crawler and the front of another. "This time everybody goes out," he said. "Can you handle it?" As he spoke, he was loading big tubes of sealant into the crawlers, and hammers and bolts. "We'll have eleven minutes."

"Oh, yes," Ennui said, clinging to Throe.

"Eleven?" Throe asked, dismayed.

"Each crawler holds enough air for two people for fifteen minutes. But I'll be along too, taking my seven and a half. I'll ride out in one, and back in the other, taking three and three quarters from each. This will be tight, because we can't quit in the middle. You'll have to read my mind to get it exactly right, or we're all in trouble."

"Understood," Throe said. "We'll be linked." Even so, this was nervous business. They did need the foreman's expertise.

The two of them got into the lead crawler, while Bijou and Jamais got in the other. Patches joined the second crew.

"I am not an apt swimmer," Ennui said as they pedaled out.

"I'll tie a cord to you. When you have to come back in, hand yourself along the cord. If you get lost, I'll haul you in."

"Please do," she said tremulously. "Oh!" For it seemed she hadn't realized they would be upside down, until the crawler made its loop.

Throe put a reassuring hand on her knee. "I hauled Bijou in; its the least I can do for you."

"She said you handled her all over."

"I did. In another circumstance I might have—"

"Never mind." But she was smiling. Mind reading made the male interest in sexual experience so obvious that the women understood it quite well.

Soon they were at the site. The track went by it. They pedaled until the patch was beside the hole, and halted. The two of them got out of the harnesses and squatted on the canopy. He made a loop in the end of an anchored cord and fitted it to her left ankle: her safety line.

"First we three men will shove it into place," Throe said as he opened the lock. "Don't come out with the bolts until it's there."

"Acquiescence." She kissed him.

He took a breath and dived out the lock. He saw that Patches and Jamais (now wearing white bands on wrists, ankles, and neck to show his location) were already out and untying the patch. He joined them and helped them push it to the hull. His tag came down near a marked spot; several small additional shoves got it aligned.

He signaled to Ennui. In a moment she came out with a hammer and two bolts. She had not been fooling about being clumsy in water, and he felt the fear in her, but she was struggling bravely along, doing her part. He sent her mental impulses of swimming, and she responded, improving. She brought him the hammer, then got near the hull to hold a pointed bolt in place. Because they tended to float in the water, and the hull was directly above them, she was able to hold her position.

He hammered, and the bolt bit into the wood, turning as it screwed itself in. He felt the shock as the other two bolts were similarly pounded. Patches had his hammer and bolts with him; his experience enabled him to do it alone. But Throe struggled to get his done.

Indeed, as Ennui drew her hand away, he tried to strike harder, and made a glancing blow. The bolt dislodged and dropped down past him into the depths of the water, lost. That was why each party had two.

They tried again with the second, and with the advantage of the hole started by the first, managed to get it pounded in satisfactorily. Then they lurched for the crawler, their lungs hungry.

"Oh!" Ennui gasped as their heads broke water in the lock. "What adventure! It's wonderful!"

Throe refrained from comment. This seemed more like a dangerous chore to him, but of course he was more accustomed to physical things outside the city. "Now the caulk," he said.

They got the big tubes and plunged back out. Again, they were the last to arrive, but they went to work, putting the tube nozzles to the rim of the patch and squeezing out the whitish sealant. They went carefully, making sure the bead of the jelly-like stuff was continuous so that there would be no break in the seal. Throe encountered Patches, coming from the other direction, and their two beads

overlapped. They were done. Just as well, because his lungs were hurting.

He swam back and found Ennui finishing with Jamais. He caught her around the waist and launched for the crawler. They popped inside and gasped for air.

"Good job," Patches said from inside. He had gotten there before them. Now he would ride back with them.

Throe and Patches took the seats and pedaled, letting Ennui rest. They made good progress backwards, following the other crawler. They were in good time; they had arrived in three and a half minutes, getting the bolting and sealing done in four, and would get back just within eleven minutes total time.

There was a brief jam as they entered the lock; the other crawler wasn't quite far enough in, so that they bumped before the outer panel could close. But some jostling got them inside, and then the air started coming in, and they knew they were safe.

But the work was hardly done. Now they had to pump out the storage chamber. It was not designed for the displacement of water; it would have to be cleared by hand.

They got to work. Each had a hand pump that drew water from the chamber and fed it into a cistern that in turn conveyed it to the air lock for disposal. The work was complicated by the floating items in storage: supplies of vegetables and fruits. They were in waterproof bags, but tended to bob into the way.

A single stroke of the pump was not arduous, but the job required hours, and that before long became wearing. Ennui soon had to rest, apologetically; her arms were dead. Bijou followed; she was young, but not geared for this. Throe continued, and so did the other two men, and the water level steadily dropped. But eventually they had to rest also.

Ennui came to rub Throe down, massaging some of the tiredness out. Bijou did the same for Patches, and she was expert at this; the man truly appreciated her touch. Jamais did without, but after a while Throe sent Ennui over to him for token massage, so that the indefatigable power of the Glamor would not become obvious.

So it continued, on and off, for the rest of the day and into the night. "Plenty of rest after this," Patches said. "Have to let it dry three days before the hull can be repaired. Otherwise it'll leak."

"Delight!" Ennui exclaimed.

At last it was done, the supplies tumbled on the shattered floor of the chamber. They could see the inside of the patch below; that was what held the water out. It would not last forever, but did not need to; the hull would be repaired and the patch would become redundant. Then the crew would remove it.

"Take your break," Patches said. "You've earned it. But stay within range, in case of a problem."

Now it was Bijou's turn for the heavy work. She approached Patches. "My friends need to be elsewhere, anonymously."

"What are you talking about?"

"You and I can hold the station," she said. "I will be most appreciative."

"Confusion."

"I will be with you throughout." She kissed him, and set his hands on her body. "As I promised."

He was getting the message. "How long?"

"They will return in time for the hull repair."

"But suppose—"

"Please." She pressed herself to him, all softness and desire.

What could he do? Bijou had been mistress to a king; she knew how to make a man respond. "Make sure they are," Patches said at last. "This job is not yet done."

Throe, Ennui, and Jamais departed, knowing that Bijou—and Patches—would cover for them. There would be no record of their absence. But they would indeed have to be back within three days. They were tired, and had not had enough sleep, but this was the real portion of their mission.

They dressed anonymously and departed the city. Then they made their way back to the lake. There was a cabin beside it that the Black Glamor had evidently traded for, because it was well stocked and unoccupied. They entered it and slept until nightfall.

After darkness, somewhat better rested, they donned what Jamais called wet-suits made of waterproof canvas, and packs of supplies. Then they swam out into the dark lake, pushing a float that supported a stone in the shape of a ring. They took hold of the stone and hauled it off the float.

They barely had time to take breaths before the stone dropped toward the bottom, hauling them down with it. The darkness had been partial at the surface, because of the lights of sundry activities around the lake, but below it became absolute.

They landed in sloping muck. *Stay with me*, the Black Glamor's thought came.

They held on to the stone ring, because otherwise they would have floated back toward the surface, and slogged in the direction he indicated with his mind. They came to an indentation in the slope, and that became a cave, and inside the cave, suddenly, there was air. Just in time; their limits were near. The plunge and walk had taken only a minute or so, but seemed far longer. Throe could not remember when he had done more underwater swimming; it was not his idea of fun.

Now Jamais produced light. It was the illusion of a lamp, but it made real light; his Air Chroma magic was manifesting. Actually his Glamor magic, because this was still in the nonChroma zone around the city. But there was no one else to see or to guess the secret.

They waded out of the water and found themselves in a passage that led away, curving down. It seemed that this was an air trap, and the way was clear despite going down below the lake itself.

Throe was amazed; he had never suspected a place like this, so close to the capital city. Which was perhaps the point: it was secret because no one had thought even to look for it.

"There is no physical danger here," Jamais said. "But there will be a challenge that each of us must meet individually. The two of you will succeed by being yourselves. I will be halted. But you know your objective."

"The loom," Ennui said.

"Now it comes."

They rounded the continuing curve and came upon a lighted chamber of considerable size. There within it rested a huge orange female sphinx.

Throe was astonished. What was such a creature doing here? There did not seem to be access for anything of that size. Could it be an illusion?

*Greeting.*

They halted. The mental voice hardly seemed to be illusory. The appearance was realistic too; the face was regally human female, and so were the enormous breasts Jamais did not speak, so Throe did. "Acknowledged."

*Introduction: call me Orange.*

"I am Throe. This is my companion Ennui. And Jamais Vu, of the Air Chroma."

*I am the present guardian of this repository. You may pass only if you successfully answer my riddle.*

"Riddle?" Throe asked somewhat stupidly. He still wasn't sure that this encounter was real. In fact this entire mission was somewhere between odd and weird.

*What is better than the alternative?*

What could they do but try to answer? It would be impossible to pass such a creature without its acquiescence. Sphinxes had physical and mental powers that dwarfed those of ordinary human beings.

So what was better than the alternative? Jamais had said they could prevail by being themselves. So rather than search for a clever response, he gave an honest one: "Old age." For of course the alternative to that was early death.

*Accepted. Pass, Throe Human.*

Accepted? Just like that? Throe didn't argue. He stepped on past the sphinx and stood at the other side of the chamber.

The Sphinx oriented an eye on Ennui and repeated the question.



"Love," she said immediately.

*Accepted.*

Ennui came to join Throe. "But you gave a different answer," he protested.

"I gave the right answer for me."

And that had been acceptable. It made sense in retrospect.

Orange oriented on Jamais, with the same question.

"Knowledge."

*Not Accepted.*

Throe was startled. "But that's the best answer of all!" he protested. "I wish I had thought of it. What could be worse than ignorance?"

"I don't understand either," Ennui said.

*You may each ask a question of me, related to this matter, the sphinx thought. If I do not answer any, your third member may pass.* The eye oriented on Throe.

So they had a second chance! "What is the most common answer?" Throe asked.

*Life.*

"That's really the same as mine. The alternative to life is death."

The eye fixed on Ennui. "Why do you do this?" she asked.

*It is the most expedient way to verify the quality of the applicant.*

"But I don't see how our answers make the two of us worthy, and the third one unworthy."

Orange ignored her. The eye went to Jamais. "What was your answer?" he asked.

*What is the alternative?*

Throe clapped the heel of his hand to his forehead. "Of course! How can you give a relevant answer when you don't know the specifics of the question? I missed that."

"So did I," Ennui said. "I interpreted it in my own scheme instead of being objective."

Throe addressed the sphinx directly. "The two of us gave emotional answers, wanting life or love, while Jamais gave a rational answer. The same goes for our questions. We wanted to know how others answered, or why you try to balk us. Only Jamais saw through to the essence: the answer *you*

gave would be the one you most favor. Surely he is more deserving of passage than we are."

*Mortals are most concerned with survival and reproduction. Immortals are concerned with neither. The two of you are revealed as mortals. The third is immortal.*

They all looked at Jamais, but he merely stood there as if unconcerned.

*Which Glamor are you?*

And there it was. The sphinx had caught on.

"Black," Jamais said, manifesting without bothering to reverse his cloak.

*We shall have an interesting dialogue.*

"Surely so." The Black Glamor glanced at the two mortal humans. "Perhaps the challenge should be rephrased. It is not who is allowed to pass, but who is chosen for companionship."

"But you are the one who knows the real nature of our mission," Throe said. "We are here merely to assist you."

"I can not complete the mission," the Black Glamor said. "You can. Orange recognizes that."

"But what if we foul it up?" Ennui asked.

The Black Glamor seemed to smile. "Try not to do that." He turned to the sphinx. "You suspected?"

*You were testing me.*

"True. No one can find a Glamor who does not wish to be found. Not even another Glamor. Certainly not an alien creature. So I gave hints."

*You are unable to go there anyway.*

"Affirmation. So a visit with a sufficiently intellectual entity has alternative appeal."

*It has been some time since I have met with an intellectual challenge.*

The Black Glamor shook his head. "Intellect is not what sets Glamors apart. We can have long experience and memory, and we have magic powers, but are no smarter than we were as mortals. Sphinxes have larger capacities."

*Capacity without experience and memory is useless.*

Throe took Ennui's elbow and drew her on along the dimly illuminated passage. Obviously sphinx and Glamor were enjoying each other's company.

"This frightens me," Ennui confided. "I feel so inadequate to the occasion."

"As you did when you first met Havoc," he reminded her.

She nodded. "That was a crazy situation. We were all in this huge chamber, and every few minutes acid would wash across the floor, dissolving anyone who didn't make it to a pedestal—but there weren't enough pedestals. Havoc wanted to make an alliance with someone who was familiar with the city, but that barbarian man terrified me. I made him exchange an oath of friendship, so I'd be safe from him."

"That was a smart move."

"I think that was the smartest move I ever made! But it *wasn't* smart, it was sheer dumb luck. I didn't know he was going to be king. He saved me from the acid, and then, well, I guess he was stuck with the friendship. So he made me his clerk, and then I met you."

"Havoc doesn't see it that way. He trusts you beyond all others."

She laughed, embarrassed. "Negation! He trusts Gale, and the Lady Aspect, and Symbol, and you. He really doesn't need me any more, but he won't renege on his oath. I worry about being in his way."

"Gale is his beloved. But you really introduced him to the Lady Aspect."

"Negation!"

"He says that when he slept on the floor of the Lady Aspect's apartment, you persuaded her to accept him. In that manner you brought him perhaps his most useful ally. She feels similarly about you, because he saved her in much the way he saved you. And me. Without you it wouldn't have happened."

"I was just—there. I'm nothing. You know that, Throe."

"Correction: you *were* nothing, at least in terms of power. Now you are the linchpin of the kingdom."

"Stop it, Throe! You are embarrassing me."

"Your humility becomes you. But the rest of us trust you, because you are worthy of it."

"That's part of what's weird about it. I wasn't anything special in competence or trustworthiness, but once I was locked into that oath of friendship with Havoc, I had to try to live up to it the way he saw it. It's a higher standard than I ever had, and it makes me a better and a happier person. So whatever it is you see in me, it's mostly a reflection of Havoc."

He nodded. "We all have become reflections of Havoc, and all profited thereby. Symbol perhaps most of all."

"She loves him."

"And we don't?"

"You know what I mean. She's utterly gone. If he clasped her, they could fall into boiling water and she wouldn't notice."

"When you gave me your feet, that hurt as bad as boiling water. And you thought you were losing them."

"Well, I love you."

"Have I made my point?"

She turned to him. "You were making a point?"

He hauled her in and kissed her. "That point."

After a moment they separated. "I suppose we agree that Havoc changed our lives," she said, "and not just because he became king."

"There is something about him. I don't think we have fathomed the whole of it yet."

"Agreement."

The passage opened into another chamber. This contained a huge apparatus Throe didn't recognize at first. It had wooden planks connected in various ways, and treadles at the bottom, and what appeared to be little pulleys at the top. Around it were piled colorful skeins of thread.

"A loom!" Ennui exclaimed.

"*The* loom," Throe agreed, belatedly fathoming the nature of the thing. "But it's huge!"

"Looms are." She approached it, studying it from angles. "This must be the most fabulous loom on the planet! I have never seen such an elaborate construction."

"How are we going to take this to Triumph City? It must weigh more than the sphinx."

"I have remarkably little notion. Maybe it has to be used here."

"The Black Glamor said we were to fetch it. That suggests transporting."

"Agreement." She continued to contemplate it raptly.

"Could we take it apart?"

"We might," she said. "But I'm not sure we could ever put it back together. Looms may be simple in concept, but this one is not simple in detail. I think it is best not touched."

"It must be touched if it is to be used."

"Affirmation. I meant not to molest it."

"I believe we have a problem."

"There must be a way."

They contemplated the loom. "The objects we have to fetch have all been small enough to carry in the mouth. I somehow thought this one would be similar."

She smiled briefly. "A loom? You would have to have a very big mouth."

"They also seem to be magic." He remembered the yellow star Gale had gotten, that had protected them from being blown apart in the eruption. Phenomenally magic!

"This looks ordinary in that respect, and of course it's here in a nonChroma section. But it's not an artifact, it's something to process them."

"Can a non-magic apparatus handle magic things?"

"It must be possible, because you folk fetched the magic ones, and you aren't magic."

"We simply carried them. We did not work with them. This is supposed to change the objects into threads that can be woven. I don't see how it can do that."

"Bafflement," she agreed. "But it must be able to. If we can get it to the city."

Throe thought to test the loom's heft. He reached for its nearest support—and could not touch it. His hand was invisibly balked. "I think it is after all magic."

"Maybe we're addressing it the wrong way."

"What would be the right way to address a loom?"

"Weaving." She went to one of the skeins and drew out a length of yellow yarn.

"You can actually use this machine?"

"I think so. I have done a good deal of weaving in my day. This is a much more sophisticated loom than any I have had experience with, but I can use one facet of it to do something simple."

Throe wasn't sure what this would accomplish, but since he had no better idea, he let it be. He watched her take a number of strands and cleverly affix them to catches high and low, forming parallel lines. She had no difficulty touching the loom, which hinted that she was on the right track. She worked a treadle with her feet, and another set of catches came forth. She strung more strands between these. "This is the warp," she said, satisfied. "Now for the weft."

She took more strands and put them across, between the two vertical lattices. She had a bobbin she flung back and forth, making the vertical networks pass between each other to catch the horizontal threads and hold them in place, woven.

She glanced at him. "You haven't seen a loom in action before?"

"I blush to say I have not. It was—" He lacked a decent excuse.

"It was woman's work," she finished for him. "I never saw men training with clubs, either."

"Man's work," he agreed, grateful for her understanding. "Why are you weaving with the same color strands, when you could so readily alternate them?"

"This is the background. I'm doing a very simple pattern. This loom goes well beyond my fondest capabilities, but this is only a demonstration piece."

"As it is, it's more complicated than I could ever manage."

"Yellow on yellow? Even a man could learn that." She smiled. "Would you find me some red yarn, please?"

He looked among the skeins, and found a red one. He brought it to her. She took it and this time did some actual hand weaving, passing it before portions of the growing mat, and behind others. It formed a short red line, two dots, and another line in the middle of the yellow background.

Throe considered it. "I don't recognize that picture."

"Men are slow about such things." She continued the work, passing the red thread carefully back and forth. The left ends of the two lines became vertical lines, while the two center dots separated into diverging rising sets of lines.

"You are sure you know where you're going?"

"I am never certain," she replied complacently.

Only when the central pattern was half as tall as it was wide did he suddenly catch on. "Love! It spells LOVE!"

"It isn't as if I haven't used the word before."

"Affirmation," he agreed.

She completed the word and put more yellow strands across the top. She had a woven plaque with her message. "Now the question is what to do with it."

"Take it with you," he suggested.

"I shall." She reached for the loom, to start the process of removing her small tapestry—and suddenly it changed. The loom shrank alarmingly, becoming so small that she held it in her hand. She stood there, mouth open.

"What did you do?" Throe asked, astonished.

"I just touched it. I didn't mean to break it."

"You didn't break it. You miniaturized it. Look—it's all there—including your pattern."

She looked, seeing the tiny tapestry, still with its LOVE message, now barely discernible.  
"Amazement!"

"Now you can transport it!" he said. "You showed you understood it, and it responded to you."

"I was referring to my tapestry, not the loom itself."

"I think you weren't quite clear about that. The device is magic, not interpretive."

"But this is nonChroma," she protested.

"It's a magic artifact. Evidently it doesn't need a Chroma. Like the Glamors."

"Awe."

"Agreement. Put it in your mouth so you can't lose it, and we'll return to the others."

"But suppose it changes back, while it's—in there?"

"I doubt it will. But if it make you feel easier, I'll carry it."

"Do." She held it out to him.

But when he tried to take it, he could not. His hand balked, as it had before. "Apparently not. It is yours. You tamed it."

"I suppose it is, for now." She nerved herself visibly and put it into her mouth.

"I am curious. Can I kiss you?"

"You may, of course. You don't have to ask."

He embraced her and put his face to hers. And balked. He could not put mouth on mouth.  
"That's what I thought. I may, but I can't. It won't let me that close."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I'll take it out."

"No, leave it. I'll save the kiss for another time."

"See that you do." She tried to kiss him, but was similarly balked. She laughed. "Just think, a girl could protect herself from rape, depending where she carried it."

Throe forced a frown. "All you have to do is say no. I do not think of it as rape."

She punched him on the shoulder. "You're not a brigand. Of course I don't need to be concerned, as long as girls like Bijou are around."

"Brigands are foolish. If they had any sense, they'd go for you first. You're much better than a young thing."

"Thank you so much. That gives me so much extra confidence to go out into the wilds."

Laughing, they made their way back along the passage. Soon they came to the sphinx's chamber. *You were successful.* It wasn't a question.

"She has the loom," Throe agreed. "She tamed it, and it is hers, for now."

*Return it when done.*

"I'll have to make another trip?" Ennui asked, alarmed.

"The use of the loom may not finish soon," the Black Glamor said. Then he remanifested as Jamais Vu. "It has been satisfactory," he told Orange.

Then sphinx sent a thought of acknowledgment.

They walked to the cave entrance beneath the lake. Ennui hesitated. "I am not sure I can swim that well. The descent was swift and assisted; the ascent will require more endurance than I possess."

"There will not be a problem," Jamais said.

She remained dubious, but there seemed to be no alternative. Jamais plunged into the water and swam out.

"I will follow you," Throe said. "If you get in trouble, I will bring you out."

She smiled weakly. "You had better. Drowned women don't make good playmates." Then she took a breath and splashed into the water.

Throe followed in a moment—and found her swimming strongly, smiling. *Feeling better?* he queried her in thought.

*The loom—the magic loom—it is giving me strength. I don't need to breathe, and my arms are strong. I feel wonderful.*

*Don't push it,* he warned. *It may be more apparent than real.*

*It is real. It is also magic.* She stroked upward so powerfully that he was hard put to it to keep up.

They reached the surface, where Throe gasped for breath. Ennui did not. She treaded water, waiting for him, then paced him effortlessly as he swam to the cabin by the shore.

Jamais was there ahead of them. "The threads and similar artifacts lend powers like those of Glamors," he said as they entered the house.



"The Air Chroma millipede didn't," Throe said.

"You did not invoke it."

"You mean I could have had a much easier return trip from the Air cone? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was not supposed to know, and it would not have been wise to advertise its presence."

Surely true, unfortunately.

"We will return in the morning, not far distant. Rest." Jamais faded from view.

"Are we alone?" Ennui asked.

"There's no telling. Does it matter?"

"Yes. Get naked with me."

Throe decided that they were probably alone. He got out of his wet suit as Ennui got lithely out of hers. The magical effect of the loom was continuing; she looked a decade younger than she had been, and the smoldering glance she shot at him was ageless.

They got together on the bed. "You know I can't kiss you," he reminded her.

"No need." She clasped him ardently, pressing against him. He had had younger lovers recently, but in this dim light Ennui was giving away nothing to them.

"Nothing at all," she agreed squeezing her breasts against him as she drew him in. "Except a kiss." Her whole body was vibrant with energy. In a moment he was climaxing inside her.

He relaxed, but she did not. "You can do better than that," she said.

"That was quite enough," he said. "It was great."

"I will show you great." She squirmed around, putting her face near his crotch. He felt the almost magnetic interaction as her mouth got close, as the loom exerted itself. But this time it did not push him away so much as it activated him. His spent erection reversed course and became strong again.

The magic of the loom was restoring his virility! She was lending him that part of its power. When it was complete she straightened out and bestrode him, bringing him into her again. And again he climaxed, as powerfully as before. This time she climaxed with him. He had not realized that she had not done so before. That was why she had refused to let him go; she was demanding her share. And what a share it was! Her pulses continued after his faded, rhythmically kneading him, extending his own pleasure beyond its normal conclusion. It was a marvelous finale.

He pondered this new attitude of hers. It was unlike her, but he liked it; if she had a fault, it was lack of assertiveness, though she had been learning it as the king's secretary. It was of course the effect of the loom, invigorating her spirit as well as her body, making her all the woman she could be.

When she gave up the loom, she would surely revert, but perhaps she would retain some vigor.

"How long can you keep that loom?" he asked as they both relaxed.

"I don't know. That's why I mean to make the most of it while I have it."

"But we should rest, at least for a while."

"Awwww," she said, mimicking a child. He had to laugh.

But soon it was dawn, and they had to dress in their regular clothing and make ready for the return trip.

Jamais reappeared. They did not inquire where he had been, but Throe hoped it had been far away on Glamor business.

They walked away from the lake, and around to the ferry station. No one paid them any attention, which was exactly the way they wanted it. They were just three travelers of indifferent aspect. The storm had passed, but evidence of its visit remained; there were piles of debris, and a number of the houses had suffered. Business seemed to be reverting to normal; wagons piled with vegetables were on the road, heading for the city.

In due course the ferry delivered them to Triumph City. Throe was more impressed with it, now that he had seen its nether hull. It was not just floating there; it had to be maintained, and dedicated crews had to do the maintenance, which could be arduous or dangerous. The king might rule, but there was a substantial infrastructure that was just as necessary in its fashion.

They walked down to the lowest floor and reported to Patches. He was in the drying hold with Bijou, and looked quite satisfied. "Back already? Stay away another year!" he exclaimed.

Bijou smiled, but mentally she was glad to see them back. Patches was a good man, but she had been spoiled by a king.

They ate a good meal, used the privy, got bunks and slept, catching up on the rest of the night they had missed. Bijou continued to entertain Patches, doing her job. The man would never complain; he knew she was paying him for covering for their absence, no fault, and it was a great deal for him.

When the hold was seasoned, as Patches put it, they got to work on the hull repair. This involved splicing stout replacement beams into the cut ends of the damaged ones, and bracing them in triangular patterns so that the repair would be as durable as the original hull. The work was precise rather than heavy, but Patches knew exactly what he was doing, and they had no trouble following his directives. In two days it was complete, and the hold was ready for use.

"It's done," Patches said at the close of the second day. "You were a good crew; my apology for doubting you. I'll get my regular one back tomorrow. You are free to go, with my thanks, and the knowledge that you have helped secure the integrity of the city." But they read a certain regret in his mind.

"Let's stay the night, just to be sure," Throe said, picking up on the Black Glamor's signal. "I'd

like to meet the regular crew as we go."

"Welcome!" Because this meant that Bijou would remain in his bed one more night, extending the no fault delight. Her own thoughts indicated that Patches was a decent man and a fair lover; she had a certain joy of bringing so much pleasure to another person, even though she was slightly smitten by the Black Glamor.

The Black Glamor had allowed the extension because Havoc's party was not yet back from its excursion, so there was no immediate need for the loom. They could spare the time, and it allowed them to get fully rested before resuming their official lives. But Throe was as delighted as Patches, because this also meant that Ennui would have the loom longer. She was an absolute joy, buoyed by its power.

"But soon I'll be without it, my normal dull self," she reminded him.

"But at least I'll be able to kiss you again."

"Poor thing, having to settle for the other end of me for so long." She brought that end into play, delightfully.

"It has been a chore," he agreed.

"And you always were a glutton for chores."

"Always."

"Like that Air Chroma girl you brought back. What's-her-name the sorceress."

"In darkness, I can hardly tell you apart." The odd thing was, it was true; Ennui felt young and vibrant against him.

"Those objects—the threads—they must be aspects of the Glamors," she said. "So association with them lends some Glamor properties."

"Evidently so," he agreed.

"I sought adventure and love. Now I am having both. It is glorious."

"I sought neither, but found both."

They completed their embrace and settled into sleep. Throe realized that Ennui was right: despite its problems, they had found an ideal life.

In the morning they met the returning regular crew: two moderately young men with their wives. The regulars inspected the job and nodded; it had indeed been well enough done. They glanced at Bijou, quickly assessing her relationship with Patches, and nodded again.

The four of them returned to the upper floors. As they approached the palace section, Bijou turned to Jamais with a muted mental question. He shook his head. "A mortal is generally unable to do

it knowingly with a Glamor."

"I would risk it," she said. "I covered for you."

"Caution," Throe murmured.

But she knew that her association with the Black Glamor was ending. "I made Patches happy, hoping that you would make me happy."

"Compromise?" Ennui asked, sensitive to the girl's need. "A kiss?"

"Granted." Jamais took Bijou in his arms and kissed her, briefly.

Throe jumped forward to catch her before she fell. She had fainted.

"Regret," Jamais said as he faded out.

Throe carried the girl on into his chamber as Ennui opened the door. He laid her carefully on his bed. She remained blissfully unconscious.

"What happened?"

Throe and Ennui both jumped as they spied what they had overlooked in their concern for Bijou: a solid man in a wheeled chair, followed by a nondescript woman.

"Our emulations!" Ennui exclaimed, remembering.

Of course. Chief and the Lady Aspect, garbed as Throe and Ennui. "Apology," Throe said, embarrassed. "We were distracted."

"Evident," the Lady Aspect said. "Injured?"

"Negation," Ennui said. "She—she kissed a Glamor."

Chief nodded. "We had news that someone did a phenomenal Vivid and Void dance, with the man Void."

"That was Bijou," Throe agreed. "And the Black Glamor. He turned out to be a remarkable person. She—she was smitten, and asked to be with him. Instead he kissed her."

"She should survive that," the Lady Aspect said.

"I thought the sexual effect of the Glamors was folklore," Chief said.

"It's not folklore," Ennui said. "I felt her awareness overload."

"It makes sense, in its fashion," Throe agreed. "The loom makes it impossible to kiss you, but if it were possible, it might be lethal. There is just too much power there."

"You fetched the loom?" the Lady Aspect inquired.

"Agreement," Throe said. "Ennui carries it in her mouth."

Chief got out of the chair and began changing clothing. "This I would appreciate witnessing."

"Endorsement," the Lady Aspect agreed, similarly changing. Neither seemed concerned about bodily exposure as they stripped and went to the closet. Throe wondered just how far their emulation of the two travelers had gone.

Ennui fetched a cloth and wiped off the girl's face. "He said all the ones going after the threads are protected by Glamors. That means Gale and Symbol also. Do you suppose—?"

"That cartographer—and that Amazon?" Throe asked. "That is hard to believe."

She nodded. "Yet it may be so. If so, this could get very interesting when the other party returns."

"This adventure is not yet over."

"Indeed, it seems to be forging rapidly onward," Chief said, now looking more like himself.

Bijou stirred. "What happened?" she asked.

"The Black Glamor kissed you," Ennui said.

"I remember! I thought I went to paradise. But—"

"That was all," Ennui said. "You passed out."

The girl sighed. "So he was right. I couldn't have had sex with him."

"Not knowingly. Apparently it is possible if a person does not know the other is a Glamor."

"That's weird." Bijou sat up. "Oh!" She had spied Chief and the Lady Aspect, the latter just stripping away the cloth binding that had caused her bosom to lie more flatly, emulating Ennui's more modest proportions.

"We will be departing shortly, dear," the Lady said. She turned to Ennui. "May we see the loom?"

Ennui was startled. She looked at Throe. "May they? They did run interference for us so we could get it."

"We need to know whether it is operative, here in the palace," Throe said. "Let's find out."

Ennui put her fingers in her mouth and brought out the miniature loom.

Bijou stared. "That's it? It looks like a toy."

"Agreement," the Lady Aspect said.

Ennui set it on the floor and stepped back. The loom remained there, a tiny model.

"Doubt," Chief said. "No offense."

"Try invoking it," Throe suggested.

"Loom, restore," Ennui said uncertainly.

Suddenly the full-size loom was there, complete with the tapestry saying LOVE. Around it were the skeins of colored yarn, exactly as they had been in the cave. It seemed that they were part of the package.

"Doubt abated," Chief said, staring at it. "This is indeed formidable magic."

"And a formidable instrument," the Lady Aspect said. "I have never seen a more elaborate loom, magic aside."

"Amazement," Bijou breathed. "How does it work? I mean, with only seven little threads."

Throe exchanged a glance with Ennui. Neither of them had any idea. The available yarn could make the warp and weft, but that was merely supportive; the magic ikons had to make the actual design.

"The Glamors will know," Throe said. But there did seem to be something missing.

## **Chapter 9—Star**

Symbol shook her head as they rode the ferry. "Only one thing I'm sorry about."

Gale smiled. "That it wasn't the two of us having at Havoc, instead of Stevia and Ine?"

"That, too, of course. But at the moment I'm thinking of Throe."

"Throe! You're right. He lost his feet, saving me."

"He's a good man. I don't mind losing him to Ennui, since I love Havoc anyway, but I hate turning him over in that condition."

"You turned him over before that. I'm the one responsible."

"Pointless debate. Let's go see him first."

"Agreement."

They made their way to the upper levels of the city. The other members of the party were traveling separately, so as not to call attention to the nature of the mission. As far as they knew, they were the first to reenter Triumph.

Throe and Ennui met them at the palace entrance. "Did you fetch it?" Ennui asked.

"Yes," Symbol said. Then, after a moment, she did a double-take. "Throe! You're standing!"

"I'm standing," he agreed.

"But your feet!"

"I have new feet."

"New? Incredulity!"

"I gave him mine," Ennui explained.

Symbol laughed, but then the two of them removed their shoes and stood beside each other with identical feet. "The Black Glamor came," Throe said. "He required me for a mission, so he fixed my feet, modeling them on Ennui's."

"Another mission?" Gale asked blankly.

"You fetched the last thread. We fetched the means to weave those threads."

"Threads?" Symbol asked blankly.

"The objects you located are actually threads. They require a loom."

"A loom!" Symbol exclaimed. "Magic?"

"So it seems." Ennui seemed somewhat smug. She also looked younger and healthier. Something had changed her.

"Where is it?" Gale asked. Then, evidently reading Ennui's mind: "Astonishment!"

"She carries it in her mouth," Throe said. "It miniaturizes for her. Others can't touch it."

Symbol shook her head. "We thought we'd be bringing news to you; instead you have it for us."

"That surprised us too," Ennui said. "I never expected to have adventure on my own."

"You look the better for it! What makes you so vibrant?"

Throe answered. "You know the way the threads—the ikons have magic of their own? So does the loom. It affects the one carrying it."

"They have enormous power," Gale agreed. She turned to Symbol. "I'm worn. I'm ready for a ludicrous bubble bath."

"Endorsement!" They bid temporary parting and headed for the royal bath.

When they were alone, Gale mentioned something else. "Ennui's thoughts were complicated. She wasn't trying to conceal them from me, but it was hard to assimilate them while we talked. Apparently they encountered a sphinx, and the Black Glamor said that each person who went for an object was guarded by a Glamor."

"Ludicrous!" But then she reconsidered. "We have been on Glamor business. They might want to make sure we got it done."

"I suspect we have surprises coming."

"Affirmation."

In the course of the day the other members of the party arrived. They focused on baths, food, sleep, and incidental palace news. Symbol and Gale were pleased to surprise them with information about the loom.

The following day Havoc called a meeting in the throne room. He and Gale were there, of course, and Throe and Symbol. So were their four original companions, sweet Stevia, Cartographer Dour, the sorceress Ine, and the Amazon Lucent. But also Ennui, and Bijou, Chief, and the Lady Aspect. And Berm and Spanky, still emulating King Havoc and Consort Gale. Fourteen people—fifteen if the succubus Swale was counted. Why so large a group? It was going to be hard to keep anything secret.

"We have important business," Havoc announced. "And some surprises. I turn to the Red Glamor for guidance."

Stevia stepped up to join him. "I am the mortal impression of the Red Glamor. I prefer to keep this form while among mortals, but I will demonstrate." She shimmered—and became the glowing image of the lovely Red Glamor. *This is not illusion; I am she.* Symbol felt the thought in her mind, though she lacked the mind-reading talent. She looked around, surprised, and saw by the expression of the others that they had received it too. She was amazed—as were the others.

Stevia reappeared. "Now you know me. Remember my true identity, rather than this convenient shell. I sent Havoc on this mission because it seemed he could accomplish it. We made a tacit deal: we Glamors would support him if he pursued our purpose. He requires the ability to rule effectively, being free of threat from anonymous assassins, and to that end he pursues the masters of the changeling complex. We derive from changelings, and are vulnerable as they are, so we wish him success in this. But we are only seven; we have not been able to find the five remaining Glamors. We expect to locate them with the help of the loom."

Stevia turned to Ennui. "Present the loom."

Ennui put fingers in her mouth and brought out a miniature model of a loom, fashioned of small splinters of wood, complete with a tiny tapestry. She set it on the floor and stepped back. "Loom,



restore," she said.

Suddenly the toy was replaced by a full-scale wooden loom, complete with several surrounding skeins of colored yarn. Symbol gasped, as did a number of others. This was strong magic, Glamor-quality magic, here in the heart of the nonChroma region. This was the equivalent of one of the magic ikons.

"Each of the objects you have collected is magic," Stevia continued. "Each associates with a Glamor. The loom will convert them to threads, which will weave a tapestry that we hope will reveal the identities of the five missing Glamors. Then, united with them, we hope to go after the source of the changelings and the Glamors, and make it ours."

Stevia paused, letting them assimilate that. Then she resumed. "We Glamors are unable to touch our own ikons, or any others. Neither can we touch the loom. Only mortals can handle them. That is why we need your cooperation. We will now transform the ikons to threads, and weave the tapestry."

"Who is adept at weaving?" Havoc asked.

There was a pause. The men shrugged; it was not man's work. But so did the younger women: Gale, Ine, Bijou, and Spanky, as well as the intermediate ones Lucent and Symbol herself. After a moment just two women raised their hands: Ennui and the Lady Aspect.

Havoc looked at the Lady Aspect. "You have helped me so much already, Lady. Can you do this?"

"I have some experience with small looms, but would not call myself adept," she said. "This particular loom is a giant antique, evidently fashioned in the early days of the human colonization, before the magical Chroma weaving displaced conventional nonChroma tapestries. It has features I do not immediately recognize. In fact it is a superior artifact, perhaps a legacy of the elaborate knowledge of our ancestors of fabled Planet Earth. It would take me time to learn it, and I would be slow. Who wove the LOVE plaque?"

"I did," Ennui said, embarrassed. "I was just ascertaining how it worked, never thinking that it would be on show. I will remove it." She proceeded to do that, unhooking the several taut connecting strands.

"You are clearly the one to use this loom," the Lady Aspect said.

"Oh, but I am not adept either! I would not presume."

"It is no presumption, oath friend," Havoc said. Symbol saw Ennui flush slightly, because he was complimenting her in public. She was indeed his oath friend, but she loved him too, in the manner the Lady Aspect did, halfway between mother and lover. Symbol understood all too well how it was, being halfway between those roles in age. Young enough to be mostly lover, but she cherished Havoc also in a big sisterly fashion. What was it about the man? She was coming to doubt that it was merely because he was a changeling. He was more than a changeling.

"Others can't touch it anyway," Throe said. He made as if to touch an upright, shying his hand away. "Try it."

Havoc stepped forward and tried. His hand bounced without making contact. "Verification."

Berm tried. "Ditto."

Others tried, and found they could not. Symbol tried, and was similarly repulsed. There was no discomfort, just an inability to close the last bit of distance to the loom.

The Lady Aspect tried. Her hand did make contact.

"Because you understand and appreciate it, as I do," Ennui said. "You could use it."

"Perhaps I could, Lady Ennui. But I believe you are the preferred weaver. You brought it here."

"I remain daunted. Could we work together?"

"Accepted." The Lady aspect joined her in unhooking the small tapestry.

"Now we must weave the Glamor tapestry," Stevia said. "I hereby volunteer my Red Ikon as the first Thread for this purpose. Who fetched it?"

"I did," Gale said.

"Take it to the loom."

Gale looked around. "Where is it?"

"Consort, the king has it," Havoc said.

Gale paused an instant, then turned to face the mock king and consort. Symbol wasn't sure whether the pause was because of his name for her, or the reference to another person as king.

Berm, in his role as King Havoc, produced the small ornate wooden box he carried. He opened it and presented it to Gale. She reached in and brought out the statuette of the nude red woman. Symbol was struck by how much this resembled the Red Glamor herself, the form perfect. That was surely no coincidence.

Gale took the ikon to Ennui. Ennui accepted it, but was doubtful. "What do I do with it? This is not a thread."

"We do not know how the loom works, any more than we know its origin," Stevia said. "We learned of it only through coincidence a few decades ago, and are unable to touch it, even those of us who understand weaving. This is another reason we need mortal assistance.

The Lady Aspect took the ikon. "The loom transforms magically without regard to mass. This must have similar capability. Perhaps if you invoke it similarly?"

"Ikon, restore," Ennui said. Nothing happened.

"Ikon become thread," the Lady Aspect said. It did not respond.

"Anybody," Havoc said, looking around. "Suggestions."

Faces were blank. No one knew how to make a balky magic object perform.

Then Symbol got a notion. "The loom—it works only for one who understands it. Who can use it. Maybe the threads are there only for one who uses them."

Havoc looked at her. "Confusion, mistress." That set her back in much the way his reference to oath friend had done for Ennui. He was openly acknowledging her as his mistress, a signal honor. "How may one use a thread that isn't there?"

"I know it seems backwards," Symbol said. "But magic has some odd ways. Maybe it has to be in use before it changes."

Others shook their heads. But the Lady Aspect handed the ikon back to Ennui. "Try to use it," she said.

"First I must set it up," Ennui said. "I assume the magic threads are the weft. I need the warp."

"I will help," the Lady Aspect said.

The two of them got threads from the yarn and strung it to the catches, forming long parallel lines. Then Ennui drew up a chair and sat before the loom. She put her feet on the treadle and worked it, and another set of catches came forward. Symbol had next to no loom experience, but remembered that the two warps passed through each other, securing the weft. Hence the treadle. The theory was simple, but the mechanism looked intricate.

When the second array of threads had been strung, Ennui took the red statuette and put it in the boat-shaped shuttle, which she then flung across from one side to the other, between the two warps. And paused to stare.

The others closed in, looking also. There was now a red thread there. The Ikon had become a bobbin, a spool with red thread, nestled in the shuttle. Using it had indeed converted it. It remained a nude woman, but evidently that was a shape formed by the tight winding. It was capable of becoming part of a tapestry.

"One mystery solved," Havoc murmured, touching Ennui's shoulder. "Congratulations, friend."

Ennui smiled, worked the treadle to secure the thread, and sent the shuttle back across. "Oops."

"No thread," the Lady Aspect said, surprised.

Ennui sent the shuttle back and tried again. It didn't work. The Ikon remained, but no longer threaded.

Symbol got another idea. "It's a tapestry! It uses different threads. Different colors. Try one of the others."

Havoc nodded. "Whose thread is next?"

"Perhaps Black," Stevia said. She closed her eyes and spoke generally: "Black Glamor, do you care to reveal yourself now?"

"I do." And there was the Black Glamor standing among them, astonishing most of them. Except for Throe, Ennui, and Bijou, who had just worked with him and knew his mortal identity. Then Black reverted to that identity: the swathed visitor from the Invisible Air Chroma, Jamais Vu. "Take my ikon."

"Who fetched that ikon?" Havoc asked rhetorically. Then after a pause: "I did." He walked to the king's box and lifted out the black mobius strip. He brought it to Ennui, who removed the red ikon and put in the black one. She moved the shuttle, but it seemed to snag, not passing between the warps. Perplexed, she tried it again, with no better success. It would not go.

"But the reaction is different this time," the Lady Aspect said. "The thread seems to be there, but will not enter the tapestry."

"It must be the wrong place," Symbol said. "Could you try another warp?"

Ennui and the Lady Aspect exchanged a glance. "Perhaps we should clarify the process for our audience," the Lady said. "Shall I explain while you demonstrate?"

"Appreciation."

The Lady Aspect glanced at Havoc, while Ennui worked with the loom to remove the red thread. She substituted purple yarn from one of the surrounding skeins. Havoc nodded; he was interested.

"The loom is a device to facilitate weaving," the Lady said. "It greatly increases the amount and quality of weaving a single woman can accomplish. But it does require some expertise. Essentially it stretches out the warp, which is the pattern of lengthwise threads, making it easier to make the weft, or the crosswise filling threads. There are actually two or more groups of warp yarns, which the loom separates and passes through each other." She paused. "I see male eyes glazing over already, so let's demonstrate. This is the warp." She touched the array of long threads that went from the back of the loom to the front. "It consists of a number of evenly spaced threads held under tension; setting them up is called 'letting off,' and it does take time at the outset. That is what we did before."

Symbol had known that much, but saw that most of the others hadn't. The men, especially.

"Observe that the two groups of warp yarns can pass through each other." Ennui worked the treadles with her feet, and the upper set of threads moved down, while the lower layer moved up, reversing their positions. "This is called 'shedding.' That is, it forms a shed of threads." The Lady put her hand between the two planes formed by the threads.

"How do they do that?" Havoc asked. "Why don't they crash together?"

"That is the secret of the heddles," the Lady said. "A heddle is a wire with an eyelet, through which the warp thread is passed. So if you pull the heddle up, its warp thread follows, lifted by the eyelet. Give me your finger."

Havoc, evidently bemused, extended one forefinger. The Lady made a loop of her thumb and forefinger. "You have a line; I have an eyelet." She put her loop around his finger. "When I lift, you rise." She raised her hand, drawing his finger up with it. "I am the heddle, you are the warp thread. I move you up and down at will." She did so. "Every warp thread has its heddle; when the mistress of the loom uses her treadle, all rise together. It has ever been thus, with men and women."

Havoc looked embarrassed. Symbol smiled, and so did several others. The Lady was not concealing the analogy to the sexual act. This was perhaps as close as she would ever get to that, with Havoc. But it did clarify the operation of the heddles. Every thread was under individual control, so did not clash with any other.

The Lady returned Havoc's finger to him. "To actually weave, she passes the filler thread through the shed formed by the two groups of warp threads." Ennui flung the shuttle across, catching it neatly in the other hand. "This is called 'picking.' Then she uses a special comb to press the weft against the body of the previous weaving to make the tapestry tight; this is the beating up." Ennui obliged, using the comb with closely spaced teeth. She went on to throw the shuttle back and forth several more times, between sheds, beating each up, so that the fabric slowly formed. "And as it is completed, it is taken up into a roll," the Lady concluded.

Actually the process seemed straightforward to Symbol, explained and demonstrated in this manner, and the huge loom no longer seemed so formidable. But it was apparent that there was a lot more of it than the portion they were using.

"Now to answer the Lady Symbol's question," the Lady Aspect continued. "Why not simply try another warp—another group of heddles? We can try that, of course, but it will take time to string the threads through each of the heddle eyelets, and fix the weights to maintain tension on each. However simple the actual process of using the shuttle to weave may seem, setting up a loom is a tedious process. We do not care to do it unless it is quite necessary. We are not sure it would solve this problem, because we do have the loom in operation; if a thread balks here, it should balk elsewhere. The question is, why does it balk?"

Symbol felt guilty for pursuing the issue, but wasn't satisfied. "These threads are magic, and seem to follow their own rules. They must insist on being placed correctly, to form the right pattern. Maybe each has to be on a different set of heddles. How can we know?"

The Lady Aspect sighed. "How indeed. We shall have to try it. Come string up another warp."

"But I can not touch the loom!"

"I suspect you can, now, because you have come to understand and appreciate its nature."

Symbol tried it, and it was true: she could touch it. She got to work stringing threads for a third set of warp yarns, setting the weights on each for proper tension. Ennui set to work unmaking her brief segment; it had been only for demonstration, and she would need the heddles for the magic threads.

Meanwhile, Havoc set another process in motion. "We'll have seven threads to do, regardless; we will need the permission of five more Glamors."

"Agreement," Stevia said. "Let those who fetched the ikons take them and seek that permission."

Throe volunteered. "I fetched the Air Chroma millipede." He went to Berm and found the ikon by touch, as it was invisible. He held it up. "I ask permission of the Invisible Glamor to let this thread be used in the tapestry."

Cartographer Dour stepped forward. "Granted." Then, as others stared, he faded from view. *I am the Invisible Glamor* his strong thought came.

Gale was astonished. "But I traveled no fault with you!"

Dour reappeared. "And perhaps will again, but without any sexual embraces." Then, seeing her continued confusion: "This persona was crafted to be as you saw him, and your association was marvelously conducive. It encouraged him to find a more permanent relationship." He glanced at the Amazon Lucent, who smiled back.

"But a mortal person can't knowingly have an affair with a Glamor," Havoc said. "This revelation of your status must destroy your relationship with Lucent, as it does with Gale."

"Negative," Lucent said. Then she changed color, from translucent to blue, and becoming as bright and beautiful as the Red Glamor. *I am the Blue Glamor*.

"I traveled with you!" Symbol exclaimed. "How can you be a Glamor?"

"I protected you," Lucent said, resuming her mortal form and color. "As with the rest of us, I needed to accompany the mortal assigned to fetch an ikon, lest there be mischief on the way. We all did so anonymously."

"And there was mischief!" Symbol said. "That wasp! But you did not use your powers to stop it. You—you even submitted to rape!"

"Use of my powers would have revealed my nature," Lucent said. "Rape is meaningless to our kind. I was able to protect you without invoking my powers, and that was best."

Havoc was as amazed as the rest of them. "Four people seeking four ikons—accompanied by four Glamors. And none of us knew."

"You were not supposed to know," Stevia reminded him. "Glamors can hide well."

"But then we went out without Glamors," Symbol said. "I went with Havoc, and Gale went with Throe. Who was protecting us then?"

"We were watching," Lucent said. "We were not resting in Triumph City." She smiled briefly. "But we played it rather close, allowing Throe to be injured and Gale nearly killed. Therefore we rectified that."

"Appreciation," Throe said, somewhat grimly.

"Echo," Gale agreed, as grimly.

"But now that you have accomplished your initial mission, it is time for you to know," Stevia said. "Though we require you not to reveal it elsewhere." She looked around the room. All of the mortals nodded, accepting the restriction. "Now we shall evoke the three remaining Glamors. Take their ikons and summon them."

Havoc glanced around. "Ladies Ennui, Aspect, Bijou—take the green, yellow, and translucent ikons."

The three went to the king's box and took the green squid, yellow star, and translucent fish. They held them up—and three new figures appeared. A handsome green man, shingly lovely yellow woman, and translucent man, all strangers. "Granted," they said together.

"May we know you by name?" Havoc asked.

"Green Thumb, of the mollusks."

"Deva, of the demons."

"Pisca, of the fish."

Havoc nodded as if this were routine. "On behalf of the mortal human beings of Planet Charm, I welcome you to our effort."

Deva eyed him speculatively, causing Stevia to frown. It seemed there could be rivalries even among Glamors. "We shall try to enhance your effort."

Symbol had finished stringing the third group of heddles. "Shall we try different colors first?" the Lady Aspect suggested.

Havoc brought the black mobius strip. "This balked before; try it now."

Ennui gave him her yellow star to hold as she took the black ikon. She put it in the shuttle and flung it across the shed formed by the first two sets of warp threads. It went without difficulty. She beat it up, then used the treadles to remake the shed. But when she tried to bring it back across, it balked: no thread. Exactly as the red thread had done.

Havoc handed her the yellow star. She removed the black mobius strip and gave it to him, then put the star in the shuttle. She tried to send it across—and it went part way. That was all it would do.

"Maybe in the other order," Symbol suggested.

Ennui reversed course, removing the yellow thread, which was taken neatly up by the star bobbin. She recovered the black ikon from Havoc and used it to subtract the black thread. Then she flung the yellow thread across—and it went.

"It seems that any thread can be the first one," the Lady Aspect said. "But not any thread can be the second."

Ennui tried the black thread. It went part way, just as the yellow one had.

"Could it be on the slant?" Symbol asked.

"Perhaps," the Lady Aspect said. "If there were a background color to support it."

Ennui tried that, using some of the nonmagic purple thread, which went across without difficulty. Then she beat up the partial thread, changing the shed and passing the black thread back. It went. She continued, using the two colors, and soon a black line developed, angling up from one end of the yellow line. It grew to the length of the base line, then stopped. It was done.

"What is the pattern?" Havoc asked.

"A triangle!" Symbol exclaimed. "Only with one line missing."

"I can undo it and try another color for the third line," Ennui said.

"Let's hold on that," the Lady Aspect said. "It may be a triangle, or it may be merely an open angle. We can try the other threads first."

They tried, but none of the other threads would go, not even the red one that had worked before.

Then Symbol had a phenomenal notion. "Could it be a pyramid—like Triumph City?"

They pondered that. "A picture of Triumph?" Throe asked.

"With a side missing?" Symbol asked in turn. "I was thinking three dimensions."

"On a *loom*?"

It did sound ridiculous. "A magic loom," she said weakly. "With extra warps."

Ennui brought the third warp into play, the one Symbol had strung. She tried with several threads, but they balked—until she came to the invisible one. "It is working!" she exclaimed. "I can't see it, but I can feel it."

The invisible thread built its way up from the same angle where the yellow and black threads touched. None of them could see it, but they could see her fingers fashioning it. "It is integrating!"

What they could see was that the warp threads were passing through the existing tapestry as if it didn't exist, forming a shed so that Ennui could continue the invisible line. This was not only magic, it was weird. An invisible thread joining the material as if it didn't quite exist. But the effect extended to the neutral purple warp threads; they too were passing through the tapestry.

The invisible thread came to an end; they could see the shuttle balk. Its unseen line was the same length as the first two. Now they had three. No more would go.

"Another warp?" Symbol asked.

They made another set of warp threads, the three of them who could touch the loom working



together, making the work faster. Then Ennui tried new threads. This time the blue insect fitted, spinning its thread into another angling line.

"But try the others," Havoc suggested. "Before completing that one."

Symbol saw Gale glance at him. Was he catching on to something? He was the smartest man Symbol had encountered, even for a changeling; only his early barbarian ignorance had masked that at first. She suspected that Gale, being another late-generation changeling, was similarly smart, but also smart enough not to show it unless she had to.

Without much hope, Ennui tried other threads on this warp—and the green squid fitted. They had integrated five threads. No others accepted this warp, so she went ahead and wove the two. Their lines angled inward, starting from either end of the yellow line, and met at an angle—and stopped.

"A triangle!" Symbol exclaimed.

"And two lines poking out at odd angles," Ennui said. "We have only part of a shape."

The Lady Aspect sighed. "But we know what to do next."

Symbol nodded. "Another warp."

They got to work stringing the fifth warp.

"Now I wonder," Havoc said. "Could each warp be a dimension?"

"Who ever heard of a three dimensional tapestry?" Symbol asked. "I mean, not a two dimensional one wrapped around something, but true three? It would be an object made of yarn."

"Yet so may it be," the Lady Aspect said thoughtfully. "As I look at what we have, that triangle resembles a plane at an angle to the other lines."

"So perhaps the Ikons make threads that in turn make another object," Ennui said. "Magic indeed!"

They completed the stringing of the set of warp threads, and Ennui tried with the remaining two ikons. The translucent fish fit, but not the red nude.

"But the red thread was the first that worked," Gale said. She was the one who had fetched it. "Why shouldn't it work now?"

"There must be a set order," Throe said. "We started a different pattern, and it doesn't fit in it."

"Yet," Stevia said. She seemed a bit annoyed that her thread was balking.

Ennui completed the weaving of the line. It projected in its own direction, from the juncture of four prior threads, and formed no pattern. "Five lines radiating out like a pincushion," The Lady Aspect said. "Two of them joining with another to form a triangle. This does not make great sense to

me."

Resigned, they strung the sixth warp set. Ennui tried the red ikon, and it was accepted. Its line took off from the other end of the yellow initial line, and went nowhere.

"Like a bar with frayed ends," Symbol said. "Except for that one triangle."

"The way those other lines angle, they could be forming parts of other triangles," Ennui said. "I see that the red line and black line do not intersect; they attach to different ends of the yellow line. That explains why we could use black or red before, but not both together. We had to establish a connection first."

"Excellent observation," the Lady Aspect said. "They may be parts of other triangles. Yet how many triangles can there be attaching to the right end of the yellow line?"

"Maybe even five," Symbol said. "Each in a different dimension."

"Five dimensions?"

"Or maybe not," Symbol said, seeing how foolish it was.

"I think we need more threads," Havoc said. "We have a partial pattern with seven; the remaining five should help complete it."

Symbol turned to him. "Twelve in all?"

"Each ikon is of a different Chroma," he explained. "That should make twelve."

"Oh. Of course." She felt stupid.

"We have searched," Stevia said. "We have found no more Glamors. We doubt they exist."

"The pattern of threads suggests to me that they do. We simply have to locate them."

"If they do exist," Stevia said, "they are hiding. They will not be found."

"Disagreement. They may be found if we force them to reveal themselves."

All the Glamors smiled. "Doubt," Jamais said.

Havoc looked at him. "If I took your Ikon and summoned you, could you resist?"

"We have not had occasion to find out," Jamais said, surprised.

"Permission."

"Granted."

Havoc took the black mobius strip and held it aloft. "Black Glamor, here to me."

And the Black Glamor was standing directly before him. He changed immediately back to Jamais Vu. "Affirmation," he said, disgruntled.

Stevia was not satisfied. "You would have had difficulty obtaining those ikons, without our help, despite our inability to touch them ourselves. How do you propose to obtain the missing ikons?"

"We know their Chroma," Havoc said. "If you Glamors will assist us again, we will go forth to locate them now, and bring them here to complete the tapestry."

"But they could be anywhere on the planet!"

"All of them close to their relevant Chroma cones. We have but to check each cone of the five Chroma. This can be done expeditiously if Glamors will convey mortals to those sites. It may still take time, but can be done."

Stevia looked at Jamais, and nodded. "We shall do it," she agreed.

"We have four existing parties," Havoc said. "We need one more." He glanced around the room.

"Volunteer," Bijou said. "Give me a Glamor."

"I am the one," the Green Glamor said, appearing beside Bijou.

Havoc glanced at Ennui. "Assignments."

Ennui nodded. This was the kind of task the king's secretary had. "Symbol, fetch the silver ikon."

"Agreement." Symbol discovered Lucent standing beside her.

"Take my arm," the Amazon murmured.

Bemused, Symbol touched her arm.

Ennui probably continued making assignments, but Symbol did not hear; she and Lucent were suddenly standing at the base of a Silver Chroma volcano.

"Impressed," she murmured. "That's fast."

"We may have many to check," the Amazon said.

"Agreement. Is the cave close by?"

"Ignorance. We don't know which cones have caves, and which caves have Ikons."

Symbol nodded. "I forgot. Let's walk around the cone and see whether it has a cave."

"Idea: walk opposite sides?"

"Negation. You may fear no evil, but I am mortal. I fear everything from monsters to an eruption, and prefer to have you close to take me swiftly away at need."

"Agreement. Idea: fly instead of walk, for speed?"

Symbol looked around. She saw no living thing. "If no one sees."

"No one will see," Lucent said. "Take my arm."

Symbol put her hand on the Amazon's elbow. The translucent Amazon turned blue, manifesting as the Blue Glamor; then both of them became invisible. The two of them lifted into the air and flew sideways, facing the great silver cone. Symbol discovered she liked this mode of travel; she had an excellent view of the silver slope, and it was as fast and easy as she could imagine. Even so, she was relieved that the volcano was quiescent. These were huge, magical, dangerous mountains, and the aura of power fairly crackled around them. Given her own devices, she would have stayed well away from every one of them, even her native Air Chroma cone. Yet visiting them this way, in the company of an omnipotent Glamor, was a special thrill. She had seen the power of the Glamors when the Red and Black Glamors came to support King Havoc; now that power was at her own beck. Even in her heyday as mistress of King Deal she had never experienced power like this.

*It is intriguing to experience your wonder. I had largely forgotten the effect our powers have on mortals.* The thought came clearly to her, startling her. She had not caught the mind reading bug herself, and wasn't used to experiencing it.

*Actually our powers themselves are not remarkable, with the exception of our general invulnerability to physical damage and our longevity. Within a Chroma, any native can perform most kinds of magic. We are different mainly in that we can perform that magic anywhere, not being confined to our native Chromas.*

Still, it seemed remarkable. Symbol was an Air Chroma native, but had not been able to do all kinds of magic at home. That required expertise and training, while her personal abilities lay more in relation to the satisfaction of men. Even as a child she had been winsome rather than magical.

*We must compare personal histories, as convenient.*

"As convenient," Symbol agreed. Had she spoken aloud?

Suddenly Symbol spied it: a cave in the silver slope. "Victory!" she exclaimed. But her voice made no sound; she was mute as well as invisible. Still, it was easier to focus her thoughts by speaking, so she continued. "We are fortunate; we have found the cave already."

"Perhaps," Lucent said. Symbol realized that the Glamor's voice was mute too; it was still her thought that was coming, but now it came across like spoken speech.

They landed and entered. The opening of the cave was bright, because of the reflectivity of the silver, but it soon became dark inside. The magic was intense; Symbol's skin prickled with it. Then the cave brightened: Lucent was making a light. It radiated from her hands, and focused where she

pointed.

They came to the interior chamber, much like the ones she had seen before. Well, like the Red Chroma one; the Black Chroma one had necessarily been different, because of the inverse nature of that volcano. There was the altar, with its eighteen buttons.

Lucent stood back, knowing she could not touch an ikon. But Symbol had another notion: "Either it is here or it is not here. If it is here, you can find it by repulsion; your hand will balk. If it is not here, it makes no difference. So we can both search, speeding up the process."

"Agreement," the Amazon agreed, surprised.

They started from either end, lifting buttons and plunging their hands into the chambers below. Soon they knew: there was no ikon here.

"Expletive!" Symbol swore. "I thought we had it."

"It occurs to me that there may be caves and altars everywhere," Lucent said. "But that only one in each Chroma has an ikon."

"Affirmation. But why? Who made these? Why bother with empty caves and altars? It seems pointless." It was her disappointment speaking.

"The Blue Chroma chamber and altar I came to were without an ikon until I ascended. Perhaps I would not have been able to do it, had they not been there."

"So there could be altars at every volcano on Charm, ready in case Glamors want to use them?"

"Perhaps. We do not know."

"How can we be sure that *any* Glamor has used a Silver Chroma cone altar? That it isn't scheduled to happen some time in the future?"

"Ignorance. But we feel there must be a Glamor for each Chroma. It does not seem reasonable to have some without others. We have also seen evidence of Glamor activity."

"Question?"

"On rare occasion one of us has visited a place, exploring, and been balked from immediate inspection. We believe that only a Glamor can balk a Glamor. Once there seemed to have been a visit to our private bower, accessible only to a Glamor, but no Glamor among us had done it. So we believe there are other Glamors, but they hide from us. We do not understand why."

"Understanding. There must be Glamors. But I still wonder who made these altars, if not Glamors. For that matter, who made that fabulous magic loom Ennui fetched?"

"This is part of the mystery we wish to fathom. There are forces that we have not understood, and the rationale escapes us. We enlisted the help of mortals to resolve the mystery, and now we are in that process. We suspect that whatever has been trying to kill King Havoc has a connection, and

does not want the mystery resolved."

"The origin of the changelings," Symbol agreed. "I have a certain personal interest in that too. Maybe these several things have no connection to each other—or maybe they interrelate in some phenomenal fashion we know not."

"Endorsement."

"But it seems we may have many silver cones to check," Symbol said. "We'd better get on it."

"Take my arm."

Symbol obliged. Then they were standing outside the silver cone. No—this was a different one. It was larger, and there was a silver building at its base. So they had again traveled instantly to a new site. Now they were flying around the volcano, as before, searching for the cave.

"How do you do that?" Symbol asked. "I mean, I know you can float, and fly, obviously, but this seems to be instant travel. I didn't know of that."

"Affirmation. The Orange Chroma specializes in conjuration—the immediate summoning or removal of objects or people from one spot to another. We emulate the technique."

"Orange?"

"Neither Gray nor Orange are in the king's official listing of Chroma, and their gems are not in his crown, but they are nevertheless valid. That is why most folk in Triumph City are not aware of the protective magic of Gray or the conjuring of Orange. He will be smart to add such gems at such time as he stops gallivanting and settles down to govern the planet."

"If we get through this quest for Glamors, and the assassination attempts stop, I'm sure he will. I'd love to see him marry Gale and keep me as his mistress. But I fear neither will happen."

"Question?"

"We think the changelings are too close to each other, like almost identical siblings. Siblings don't marry, or even share sex."

"Academic for Glamors. We don't marry each other, but do share sex, because another Glamor is the only one who can handle it with a Glamor. We also have a concern about inbreeding, so breed only with mortals, in our mortal forms. But there are many more changelings than Glamors, so we see no objection to their breeding together."

"Similar for Gale and me with Havoc: sex but not marriage or breeding. But we both love him, and would do both with him if we could."

"He is an interesting man. Red chose to accompany him in mortal guise so that she could possess him anonymously."

"Yes, she and Ine had at him, last trip out," Symbol agreed, remembering Gale's report. "While

you were with Dour. He's your real boyfriend?"

"In a manner. We had relations a century or so ago, but lost interest. More recently you acquainted me with new wives, and Gale acquainted him with the delights of a lovely woman. We wished to explore these passing aspects of sex, in our mortal forms, so did so. But we will neither marry nor breed with each other, as clarified. We will seek mortals for that."

"You really can breed? I thought if you're immortal—"

"We can breed with mortals, and surely could with immortals too if we cared to. But we know each other too well for this to be satisfying."

They found the cave entrance, landed, and entered. Again light flared from the Glamor's hands, reflecting off the silver walls. And again there was no ikon in the altar.

They checked a third, and a fourth silver volcano, without positive result. The fifth one was in incipient eruption, so they left that one and checked another instead. But as the day waned—they seemed to be bearing east, causing it to wane faster—they still had found nothing.

"I realize you can go on forever, but I am tiring," Symbol said. "May we stop for the night?"

"Acquiescence. I am slightly fatigued myself."

"You? But I thought your power was limitless."

"Negation. We can tire too, if overworked. I have never conjured so often, so far before. Rest becomes attractive."

They conjured to a cave in a nonChroma mountain, where Lucent set a magical ward to keep intruders out, then fashioned a comfortable den with piles of pillows, and loaves of bread, wheels of cheese, and wineskins. They took knives to the bread and cheese and made sandwiches.

"No offense," Symbol said. "Why not just conjure sandwiches?"

"Complicated. We have deals with a bakery, cheesery, winery, and others, to do them certain favors if they provide us with their fresh staples, but sandwiches do not keep the way sealed things do, so are less convenient."

"I supposed you merely generated them from nothing."

Lucent laughed. "What magic ever did that? They must be conjured from somewhere. We lack the expertise to make bread, cheese, or wine from their natural origins, and would not bother if we could; it is far more convenient to deal for them whole."

"Comprehension. I did know that, but somehow attributed unreasonable powers to Glamors. What deals did you make?"

"Depends on the situation. For the cheesery we located superior goats, fine and tasty milkers. For the winery, Red assumed the form of a beautifully buxom nonChroma girl and provided

remarkable entertainment for the men. She has a talent for that."

"So I gather," Symbol said, remembering Gale's description of what she had read in Ine's mind one of the nights Stevia had had at Havoc. She took a bite of her sandwich, and a drink from her wineskin, and found both excellent; the makings were indeed fresh. "Curiosity: the story you told me of your deception by your Translucent Chroma husband, on whom we wreaked vengeance—untrue?"

"True in essence. He did do it to his wife, and she did join the Amazons, but never returned for vengeance. I assumed her identity for that. It is important to us that our mortal identities not be penetrated, lest our nature be revealed. We go to some trouble to make them secure."

"Affirmation! I never suspect you were a Glamor. And if I had suspected, I would have taken you for the Translucent Glamor, matching your apparent Chroma."

"We try not to match," Lucent agreed. "But we could if it happened to be convenient."

"And those emotional sieges as we approached the Translucent cone—did they really affect you?"

"Affirmation. I could have blocked them, but that would not have been in character for mortality."

"So you submitted to rape at one point, and sex with another woman at another, to maintain your identity?"

"Affirmation. These things are of little moment to us."

Symbol hesitated, then decided to go for it. "Desire: to know how you became a Glamor. I presume you were mortal first."

"Exchange: your personal history for mine."

"Enthusiasm! I can show mine in illusion, if you wish."

"Agreement."

Symbol brought out her Air Chroma gem and selected the story. In a moment the illusion spread out, filling the cave, making its walls disappear. The two of them also disappeared, together with what they were eating.

The scene was of an Air Chroma residence, pretty in the manner most such houses were, because all of what was visible was crafted by illusion. Around it played four children, all pretty. "Everyone is pretty in the Air Chroma," Symbol explained. "Because everyone is invisible, and can be seen only by his or her crafted illusion. I regret I don't have sound; this recording was made in an incidental manner by our parents."

"Which child are you?"

"The smallest. I was a fourth, you see. A changeling, though I did not then know the significance



of that. Fourths are supposed to be treated equally, but that is not necessarily the case among children."

"Remembrance."

Of course: Glamors were changelings, so she had been through it. Symbol had never expected to be on close terms with a Glamor, or to have any common experience. She was in danger of coming to like this woman.

The three older children were playing with an illusion ball. Little Symbol wanted to play too, but it became an increasingly cruel game of keep-away, until a parent intervened. But the point had been made.

The next scene showed her older, alone, watching an educational illusion show. "I got less interested in children's games, and more interested in studies," Symbol said. "I turned out to be unusually smart, which did not help my social status."

Another scene showed a group of older children coming to discover the girl playing with diagrams, trying to fathom mathematical relationships. "They asked me what I was doing, and I said I was contemplating symbols. That's how I came to be named. It was derisive at first, for they did not care at all about the ubiquity and usefulness of symbols, but it remained, and I was satisfied with it."

Then she was a novice woman, as pretty as they all were, attending a dance. A boy whispered in her ear, and she left the dance with him. "He was popular and I was eager," she said. "And it turned out that I was good at sex, in part because my physical body closely matched my illusion body. When sight gave way to naked touch, that became known. I may have made social or tactical errors, or been clumsy, that first time, but he didn't notice, because I had firming breasts and well formed slender hips and thighs. I was lightly but perfectly proportioned, and in a year I developed in all the right physical places. I became popular with the boys, unpopular with the girls. So I worked at it, learning how to truly please a boy—or a man. But I was also cynical, because those same boys had been indifferent to me as a child, and I never had a forgiving nature."

"Remembrance."

"As a young adult I became a guide for other Chroma travelers, because I craved adventure and this was as close as I could get to it before my maturity. I conveyed them no fault, learning the special ways of foreign men, and never had a complaint. But I knew that when I turned eighteen I would have to marry and start generating children. That prospect appalled me, for it meant the end of excitement. But what could I do? I was just a village girl, popular in the wrong way. The men I dazzled, including some of the fathers of my erstwhile playmates, had little respect for me, and hardly cared about my intellect. Nor did I respect them. Had I made known my real opinions, I would have been less popular yet."

There were scattered scenes of her traveling with different men—always men—through varied illusion scenes. "I was getting perilously close to my birthday. Then something happened."

The scene shifted, and now there was sound. It showed the guide station, with a sloppily garbed middle-aged non-Chroma man approaching. "I need to rendezvous with the king's party, and seem to have lost my way," he explained.

Other guides sized him up and shrugged. That left Symbol. "There was something about him," she said over the illusion. "I had learned to read men, and knew that he was not what he seemed. But I wasn't sure what that meant. So I gambled, and took him on."

Symbol, now recognizable as a younger version of her present self, approached the man. "The king's party is two days hence. I will guide you, no fault."

"Appreciation, pretty maiden. What is your price?"

"Do you have news of far places?"

"I hail from Triumph City. I can tell you of that."

"Do you know anything of the palace level?"

"I have worked there on occasion, and am privy to much of the royal gossip."

"Done."

They set off on foot, following the trails she knew. As they walked, he told her of the great pyramidal city of Triumph, that floated on a lake, and of the king's palace that occupied its apex. He shared stories of the rivalries among bath girls, and occasional miscues, such as when a lusty maiden sneaked into the king's bed in darkness, only to discover the king's wife there alone. The Lady could have had the girl abolished, but decided to facilitate the joke by lending the girl her own robe and departing just before the king arrived. "By the time he caught on to the exchange, it was too late—or so he said. Few believed that he really could not have distinguished the lush eagerness of the girl from the practiced accommodation of the queen. Next day the queen gave him the word: it was time he had a formal mistress, so that he would not have to grasp at anything that offered. It was humor; he had been largely faithful to her, having been foolish enough to fall in love with her despite its having been a political marriage." Lucent listened, clearly fascinated with every detail.

At length the man paused. "This information is really rather routine. Are you sure I am not boring you?"

"Enthrallment."

"I realize this is anonymous no fault. But if you care to answer, what is it you want in life?"

"Travel, adventure, and the appreciation of a good man," she answered promptly.

"Not a husband and family?"

"Eventually. I would like to live a full life first."

"Again, you have no need to answer. But I am curious what else interests you."

She hesitated. "It is not my position to tell you of my thoughts, but to satisfy yours, for the duration of this journey. You have done your part, telling me of Triumph City and the gossip of the palace. I do not wish to bore you."

"I am a man of curious tastes. Speak to me."

So she spoke, telling him of things she had learned, and of things that interested her, and of her futile dreams. He listened with surprising patience.

They came to the campsite. Symbol got immediately to work to prepare things for his comfort. But he insisted on helping her. "How can I fulfill my share, if you do my work?" she inquired, smiling.

"Apology for intruding." But he continued to help, though it was evident that he lacked experience in this sort of thing, as many men did.

They shared a supper, cleaned up, then retired to the cabin and the single bed. This was of course the real appeal of no fault travel: unfettered sex, to be enjoyed without consequence. Men liked it, of course, but so did many women; it gave them experience without commitment. She did her best, as she always did, making sure that he had no regrets about traveling with her. He turned out to be a fit man, and there was more than one bout of sex despite his age. Then he slept, and she slept with him, happy that she had more than satisfied him, but wishing that there could be something more for her in life than this.

In the morning they resumed travel. "I like you very well, anonymous maiden," he said. "Would you care to come to Triumph City with me?"

"Enthusiasm," she said before thinking.

"But you hardly know me. Let me clarify. I work at the royal palace, though I travel often. Sometimes my life is in danger. And I am married."

"Travelers normally are. That is why no fault relationships exist. Perhaps I can find a man to marry in Triumph City."

"But I understood you to say you did not wish to marry."

"Affirmation, at least for my youth. Later, when my bloom is off, I would like to have children and the responsibilities of family. But what choice do I have? Better to marry young in a fabulous setting than to remain in my dull home Chroma zone."

"I believe you could escape marriage for a time by becoming the mistress of a palace official."

That was somewhat less than her dream, but perhaps the most realistic way to enter a new venue without starving. "That would be preferable to what awaits me here."

"Then I will take you as my mistress. I promise you a life of travel, adventure, and appreciation."

"Accepted," she said, again before she thought.

The illusion show ended. "I did not know we were being recorded," Symbol said. "For reasons of his own, the man did not have more of this sequence recorded."

"And he turned out to be the king," Lucent said.

"King Deal," she agreed. "Traveling anonymously while another man emulated him as king—a standard device I did not then know. He had been looking for a mistress, but was choosy; he wanted intellect as well as beauty. Love as well as loyalty. He took me to Triumph City and introduced me to his wife the Lady Aspect, who was remarkably gracious. I liked her from that moment, and learned much from her. She became my dearest friend, a wonderful woman. She bore his children; I diverted him at other times. We coordinated on the common project: the welfare of the king. And he delivered: when he traveled, his wife remained in the city, and I went with him, and had all the adventure he did. He paid me much attention when we were alone together, and was a fine sexual and intellectual partner. I soon came to love him, in my fashion, and I believe he loved me too, though I was always secondary to his wife. I was well satisfied with that, and never sought to displace the Lady Aspect, as she knew. There was something about him, apart from the fact he was king. Now I know it was that he was another changeling. He had been attracted to me for similar reason, and when he discovered that I had a mind as well as a body, he took me. Of course he could have had me simply by revealing his identity, or by commanding my service, but he wanted a genuine relationship. So it continued, until his assassination twelve years later."

"That concerned us," Lucent said. "We approved King Deal, and did not like such interference. Thereafter we shifted our policy and began to get involved in mortal politics."

"As this present mission demonstrates," Symbol agreed. "Perhaps it is better this way. But I can never forgive myself for betraying King Deal and leading to his death."

"You did not kill him."

"I did what I thought I was supposed to, keeping an accurate record of his activities. I did not know that this record was being read by his enemy, who killed him. It was my fault." She felt tears, though she was not normally a crying woman. "I ended his life, and widowed the Lady Aspect, and brought desolation on myself. I should have been executed."

"Disagreement. You were duped, as were we all. You will not betray the king again."

"I have already betrayed King Havoc, by falling in love with him. He took me as mistress out of pity—I who never had pity for anyone else. My very existence is an affront to Gale, his true love."

"Yet you have helped Gale in much the way the Lady Aspect helped you."

"Only by diverting the sexual attention of her man."

There was a dangerous flash of blue. "Obscenity!"

Symbol was startled. "If I have offended you, Glamor, apology. I forgot my place."

"You offend me in this manner: by refusing to recognize your positive impact on King Deal, the Lady Aspect, King Havoc, and the Lady Gale. You supported and counseled the first throughout, making him a stronger and better king. You helped the second similarly; she never had to be concerned about her husband's welfare when he was with you. You civilized the third, enabling him to relate efficiently to the formidable role he was thrust into. And you are perhaps the best friend the fourth has in Triumph City. You are a sexual creature, but also a dedicated person, and a significant force for the harmonious establishment of the new order. We all depend on you for the continuation of

those roles."

Symbol stared at her. "I thought the Glamors neither knew nor cared about the social relationships of mortals."

"We care *now*. And we need you as you are."

"I will try to serve the post," Symbol said humbly.

"Appreciation. Now it is my turn to display my private personal history."

An illusion scene appeared, similar to the one Symbol had shown. But the Glamor needed no Air gem to facilitate it; the power was inherent in her. It showed a scene in monochromatic blue: blue trees, blue grass, a blue stream, and a blue girl child sitting alone on the bank, contemplating the ground. The view closed in, enlarging the girl, showing her face—which was badly scarred. "I suffered an accident in infancy that bashed my face and damaged my body, making me ugly and awkward. I was a changeling, as is now known, but then thought of myself only as a fourth. I had a good mind, but no one cared about that."

The illusion scene shifted orientation, focusing on the ground the blue girl was staring at. There was a small nest of blue ants there, the five-legged creatures busily attending their business. "I was always intrigued by insects," Lucent said. "They called me Bug. I was largely outcast, being unpretty and clumsy. Blue is known as the Animal Chroma, but most folk think in terms of conventional animals, not insects. I consoled myself by studying my subject, hoping when I was grown to be an entomologist. There are perhaps more varieties of insects on the planet than any other creature, and a greater number of them, and their adaptations and specializations are unrivaled. They accomplish vital things we do not even notice because most are small." Lucent's face appeared, superimposed on the illusion scene. "Am I boring you?"

"I would not presume to—"

"Answer."

"Negation. I have never paid much attention to insects, except in the case of that wasp, but their presence in your history makes them of interest to me. I am not bored, and regret it if I seemed so."

"You did not seem so. I merely am aware that I can speak too much on this subject, therefore am wary of it. Normally I do not mention it at all." The face faded, leaving the scene pristine. It shifted to an older girl, Bug at a later age, and Lucent saw that she was indeed rather homely because of her injury. Boys teased her cruelly and girls snubbed her, driving her ever into isolation. But when a boy tried to attack her, apparently just to hurt her to make her feel bad, she flicked something at him, and he cried out and fled. "A stinging bug," Lucent said. "I had learned to tame them, and always carried some on me. Others learned to leave me alone."

The next scene showed Bug as a young woman, her blue hair covering part of her face. "It was the moment of my blooming," she said. "My face was plain, but I was able to mask it somewhat with my hair. My breasts developed nicely. I had learned to move carefully so as to minimize my awkwardness. I could pass for a girl. I hoped to achieve a social life. But I knew better than to attempt it in my own village. Instead I set out for a neighboring village the other side of the cone,

where they would not know me." The scene showed the massive blue volcano, wisps of blue smoke rising from its cone. Beside it was a lake. The girl took a boat and paddle and crossed the lake. "I walked and boated to avoid attention. Folk traveling across a Chroma zone normally fly, but a person in the air is far more visible than one below. I could have masked myself with illusion, but I wasn't good at it, and that, too, would have attracted attention. So I avoided the use of magic and used the simplest means of travel."

A head popped from the water surface and gazed at the girl. "Greeting, landlubber!" he said.

"No offense," Bug replied. "I wish merely to reach the far shore and go my way in peace."

"Why go there, when here is a buoy who can provide what you need?" But as he swam smoothly close he got a better look at her face. "Parting." He disappeared below. She was not surprised; physical appearance counted for a lot. She would have settled for a buoy, if he had been interested.

Bug reached the shore and resumed foot travel, now skirting the base of the cone. The intense magic made the blue air shimmer. Then three blue men appeared, going the other way. They were upon her before she knew. "Well look at this!" one exclaimed. "A virgin girl."

"I tried to use magic then, to escape," Lucent said. "I could see that they were brigands. But they countered it and laid hold of me before I could fly. I tried to resist physically, but they bashed my head until I ceased struggling. They did not care at all about my face, only my vulva. I will spare you the details of the rape, unless you really wish to see it."

"Needless," Symbol said, though she had a certain suppressed curiosity about it. Rape was a kind of sex, therefore fell within her sphere of interest. She also wondered how Lucent had come to accept rape so readily, as a Glamor.

The Glamor caught her thought. The rape sequence appeared. It wasn't elegant. One man caught hold of her hair from in front, pushed her head down against his belly, reached across her back, circled his arms down around her waist from above, and heaved her up so that her legs dangled down in front of him. Another ripped off her skirt and underclothing, bared his member, and rammed it into her body from the rear. She had the wit to scream, but it didn't matter; it merely tensed her body around the invading rod. In two or three thrusts he was done, and backing away. The third man took his turn similarly, and this time she didn't scream, realizing that it merely gave them additional satisfaction. Then the second man took over the hold from the first one, so that the first one could have at her also. She hardly felt him; she had become numb in that region. There was no pretense of interest in her face or breasts, just her bared bottom. It occurred to Symbol that this was probably the way they raped struggling children, heartless brigands that they were, so they had no need of any of the rest of it. Children didn't have developed breasts. She was merely a momentary sheath, of no other significance.

"When all three were done with me, they broke my legs, threw me away and moved on. I wasn't worth enslaving, because of my face, so they crippled me and left me to die. This was a calculated thing; if they had killed me outright, the carrion birds would have sniffed the death, oriented on my body, and flown in to feed, and people might have seen them and investigated. So they arranged for me to die in a day or so, enabling them to be far enough away so that no substantial suspicion would attach to them. They cared nothing for decency or law, but were aware that others did, so they had

learned caution. I found myself lying prone under a bush, with dirt in my mouth, the pain of my shattered legs overwhelming all else. I had thought that rape was the worst of it; I had learned otherwise. I was helpless; I knew I couldn't walk, even if I could stand the pain. I couldn't fly; the ravishing had destroyed my concentration, and my broken legs were leaking blood, and in any event I had no great desire to survive. What could I do if I lived? Everyone would know that I had been raped and was therefore worthless. All I could do was cry, and wait for death."

The scene showed the day darkening into night as she lay there unmoving. The ants of the night came foraging, smelling the caked blood, and other bugs converged. Some insects glowed, illuminating the scene. They formed a ring around the girl, but did not attack her body. Symbol wondered whether they could be diffident about consuming live flesh. But that seemed unlikely, unless they were carrion eaters. Also, there was something strange about the way they pressed in around her without getting on her. They seemed to be waiting and watching. Waiting for what?

Then a giant fly came, its body the size of the girl's head. It landed by her head and crept close, its antennae extending forward to touch her forehead. *Communication.*

Symbol was startled, as was the girl in the image. What was this?

But it was a contact, and she responded automatically. *Pain. Horror. Death.*

The fly considered a moment. Then it sent again, a healing pulse. The pain diminished, as did the horror, and the desire for death faded. Bug's mind, freed from these distractions, cleared. She was unable to speak, and not just because her mouth was full of dirt; she remained too weak to move. But she could think. *Question?*

The massed insects seemed to draw closer in, antennae extended. They were receiving. But it was the giant fly who directed the thought. *Help.*

Help? For whom? Bug could not make sense of this. *Confusion.*

The fly tried again. *You. Us. Deal.* The thoughts were not quite these, but rather were allocations of identity, and the need for some resolution.

Freed for the moment of the pain and horror, Bug realized that she did after all want to survive. She did not know how it was possible, but it seemed preferable to extinction in the wilderness. The insects seemed to be offering some kind of assistance, if she would join them. This prospect did not appall her; she had always admired their capabilities and organization. If insects had human intelligence, what a power they could be!

*Affirmation!* Again, not the word but the acceptance.

Her thought paused. The fly had read it, and emphatically agreed. That insects should have human intelligence? That was impossible; they lacked the size and nervous structure, and were too well adapted to their existing mode of operation. There were also too many types; if they all had human intelligence, they would soon be warring with each other for dominance, doing a hundred times as much damage in the process as before. Human intelligence without human experience and caution would be a disaster.

*Affirmation!*

She began to understand. *You want me to join your cause. You will help me if I do.*

*Affirmation.*

This was becoming interesting. Yet how was it possible? They were insects and she was dying. They could not save her, and she could not do anything for them.

*Negation.*

They thought a deal was feasible? There was one way to find out. *Agreement.* Then she faded out.

When consciousness came again, she seemed to be on some kind of mat, and it was sliding across the ground. The dirt had been cleaned out of her mouth, and her legs still did not hurt. She tried to move her head, and discovered that she could. She looked to the side, and saw thousands of five-legged ants drawing on myriad strings leading into the mat. They were pulling it along, up a slope. Where were they taking her?

The fly came again. *Cave.*

A cave? Why? But understanding was too much for her, and she lapsed into unconsciousness.

She recovered in the cave. It must be in the Blue cone itself, because she felt the intense magic. No one came this close to the living volcano; it was dangerous. Yet here she seemed to be.

The fly approached, and its antenna touched her forehead. *Ascend.*

She twisted her neck to look up. There was some kind of altar, and beyond it the back wall of the cave. That was all. No stairs, no ramp, no aperture. In any event, she couldn't walk or even stand. So how could she ascend? Yet the insects had brought her here, with great labor on their part; they had something in mind. *Confusion.*

The fly tried again. *Become.*

Become what? She was baffled.

*Try!*

So she tried. She concentrated, making a sincere effort to become whatever it was she could become.

Then it happened. Some enormous power suffused her, and she became something incalculably greater than herself. Every part of her fairly glowed with magic vitality.

She felt her two legs. They were broken. She concentrated, and they straightened and healed. She turned over and sat up, gazing at them. Not only were her legs mended, they were perfectly formed. All because she had willed it.



She stood, feeling lithe and strong. She needed a mirror, so she made the wall reflective. She gazed at herself. She was naked and so lovely that it almost pained her to look. Every part was exquisite. She was the most beautiful blue woman she had ever seen.

She was hungry, so she conjured food from home. A pot pie landed on the altar. She lifted it and ate, delighting in the sustenance. Never before had her magic been like this! What had been an effort was now easy, and what had been partial now was whole. She was glorious.

She saw something lying on the floor. It was a small statuette of an insect. She bent to pick it up, but her hand would not touch it; some force prevented her. It hardly mattered; she was wonderfully whole, after being broken. What lay ahead?

Then she saw the fly, sitting on the edge of the altar. Oh, yes. *This is what you give me?* She no longer had to touch its antennae to communicate; she could do so from a distance.

*Affirmation.*

It was more than good enough. *What must I give you?*

The fly seemed not to know.

*But we made a deal. You did for me; now I must do for you.*

*You decide.*

But it should not be up to her! They had given her a phenomenal gift; she had to return some equivalent favor.

The fly departed. The ants were already gone. She realized that the intense magic was uncomfortable for them, as it had been for her, before her ascension. But still, how could they leave her with her part of the deal undone?

The scene faded. "It took me some time to figure it out," Lucent said. "They could not tell me what help they needed, because they lacked the intellects for it. I had to provide that. I owed them, and I had to find out how to repay them. And eventually I did. When insects are in trouble, I help them. When they need protection, I guard them. I am the Glamor of Insects; I represent them, and will never betray them. Like your commitment to King Havoc: I may make mistakes, but my dedication is constant."

"Wonder."

"You want to believe, but doubt. I will demonstrate." Lucent raised her hand.

In a moment there was a faint buzz. Then a huge insect loomed. It circled them, and came to perch on the Blue Glamor's joined lifted hands. It was so heavy that she needed to support her elbows on her knees.

"That's a wasp!" Symbol screamed, scrambling back in fear.

"Indeed. And tame, for me. It came at my beck; it has been tracking us, as we camp, in case of need."

"But what they do—what happened before—"

"We were never in danger," Lucent said. "True, it was hunting you, but I warned it off. Then I was obliged to find it another egg-host. Fortunately the brigands showed up." She frowned. "I have no love for brigands."

No doubt of that! The rape had been brutal in itself, and the calculated injuries and dumping had been worse. Those men had not deserved to live. "Those first three—what of them?"

"I did have vengeance in mind. I asked the insects where the brigands were, and they informed me. They were sleeping on the ground, just before dawn. I sent a swarm of bees against them by air, and scorpions by land, and when they dived into the lake, the crabs finished them off."

"Crabs?"

"If it has five legs, it's an insect, and it is mine. They feasted that day. Yet vengeance was not enough; the stain of their rape remained within me, and I have treated any brigands I encounter unkindly." She leaned forward and kissed the back of the huge wasp. "Go dear, and thank you." The wasp flew away, to Symbol's relief.

Symbol's mind was still spinning. "The rape—you let the brigands rape you. Us. On the way to the Red Chroma zone. How could you do that, after what you experienced?"

"I am not an ordinary woman. I do have ordinary emotions, but extraordinary power. I realized that I could not afford to be governed by that lingering horror. So I practiced to abolish it. When I spied other brigands I assumed mortal guise and put myself in their way, an attractive woman. When they raped me, I let them. Then I summoned the bees. Sometimes they did not rape me; those I let go. You can never be quite sure, from a man's appearance. But most did. At first it was sheer horror; I had to force myself to accept it without transforming them to goo. But gradually it became commonplace, and finally I no longer cared. I could handle rape, and the legacy of the original brigands was gone. That was the point: to clear the vestiges of them out of me. I had time to do it; I spent a decade clearing the rapes. In the process I cleaned all brigands out of the Blue Chroma zones."

"Realization! I have heard that there are no brigands in Blue zones. No one knows why, but travelers swear it is so. Brigands have learned to stay clear, because those who enter Blue seldom are seen again. That is your doing!"

"Acknowledgment. There are too many brigands on the planet—any man can become one, and some women—but Blue is my Chroma, and I will not tolerate them there."

"Endorsement. But after you cleared the rapes, what then?"

"Mostly scouting around for things insectivorous, keeping aware of the condition of my creatures. I take seriously my commitment to them." She touched the ground, and in a moment ants swarmed over it. "I am their creature too."

"Even insects in nonChroma zones?" Symbol asked, though she saw that it was so.

"All insects. Blue is merely my power; insects are my commitment. Of course it took me time to grasp the whole of it. I did not realize at first that I was immortal. In fact it took me time to realize that I was a Glamor."

"How did you realize?"

"Insects were in trouble in another Chroma zone, so I conjured myself there—and realized after I did it that I had gone beyond the Blue Chroma zone without faltering. My powers remained! I had never heard of this; I had thought the insects had given me full Blue Chroma magic, limited to Blue. I had been accustomed to flying to the fringe, then walking to the next Blue Chroma zone, a tedious process. Now I knew my magic was far greater than that; it worked in any Chroma, and in nonChroma. So I helped the insects, and explored the range of my powers. And in due course encountered the Black Glamor." She smiled. "That was our first affair. I was so glad to find another like myself, though he was of another Chroma. We compared notes, and I learned that he represented the saprophytes, the fungi, the organisms that break down organic material after it dies. He protects them, and they support him. The things he can do—"

"I saw," Symbol said appreciatively. "When he came to help Havoc, he dissolved all Havoc's enemies into ashes."

"Into organic dust left by fast-feeding fungi," Lucent clarified. "When it comes to destruction of organics, he is king. Just as when it comes to destruction by insect stings, I am queen. We do have our specialties."

"Amazement!"

"Black introduced me to Red. In time we were seven, and had pleasure in each other's company. We discovered that we could not amuse ourselves by having sex with mortals; they were unable to handle it. It wasn't our beauty, which we could make real in much the manner you Air Chroma women make illusion. It was the intensity of magic. When there is interpenetration, that magic suffuses the flesh of the mortal and stuns him. But we learned to mute it, assuming mortal identities, so that the mortals never knew."

"But surely the magic was still there, even if they didn't know."

"Apparently the muting diminishes its impact considerably. So that if it seems not to be there, it is not there. I do not understand the whole of the effect."

"Why did you interact sexually with mortals, when you had each other?"

"We are but seven: four men, three women. In a century all possible combinations become passé; we have done it all. Man with woman; woman with woman; pairs of men with woman. All seven together. Simulated seduction. Simulated rape. Sadism, masochism. Boredom sets in. Only with innocent mortals can we experience novelty. So we do, to pass the time. As Red did with Havoc. As Invisible did with Gale. As Black did with your bath girl, though that was only a kiss."

"Bijou. She is now an alternate consort of the king, and a fine young woman."

"And as I did with you, mainly by pairing to handle men."

"I remember. I never suspected. You were the perfect socially-clumsy Amazon."

"I had decades of practice in that role."

"And now I have come to know you as yourself. I think I understand you, and could like you."

"You have already become friends with mortal Lucent."

"I meant with the Blue Glamor. But I have no wish to presume."

The woman hesitated. "That has its appeal. But friendship with mortals is difficult."

"No fault?"

The Glamor paused. "For the duration only. No further obligation. That is tempting."

"Let's do it."

"Agreement."

That was all there was to it. It was not an oath, merely an understanding, but it was significant. Symbol gave her body in sexual embrace to men far more freely than she gave her friendship to anyone, and she suspected that it was a similar case with Glamors.

"Accurate," Lucent said. "Now we had better sleep. We have talked much of the night."

"Agreement." They lay down and closed their eyes, but it took Symbol some time to sleep. She was amazed by the Blue Glamor's revelations. For most of her life she had not even believed the Glamors existed. Then she had had proof of them. Now she was getting to know them personally. Not only was there a Glamor for each Chroma, it seemed there was one for each general species. The Glamors might be human, but they represented other types of life.

What did the Red Glamor represent? And the others?

"Invisible represents Millipedes," Lucent said, answering her thought. "It was not entirely coincidental that Throe, who traveled in the Air Chroma zone, was given a tractable millipede to ride, courtesy of the invisible Glamor, though it was actually the Black Glamor he traveled with. We coordinated. Green represents the mollusks, whose most notable species is the squid. Translucent represents the fish. Yellow represents the demons."

"The demons!"

"They have interests too, and lack human powers of comprehension. Abuse a demon, and Yellow will be on the scene."

"Astonishment! I thought demons were just anonymous malign spirits."

"Negation. They are as valid as any, when understood, and actually the earliest colonists of Charm."

"That leaves the Red Glamor. What obscure species does she represent?"

"The four legged ones."

Symbol pondered. "There's a four legged species on the planet?"

"Human beings."

"Humans! But we are two legged!"

"Negation. We walk on our hind two legs, and have adapted the front two for grasping and carrying. Four legs, regardless how they are used."

"Wonder! I never thought of it that way. But are humans being abused on this planet?"

"Actually humans do most of the abusing of other species. We are working to change that. The other species trust the Glamors to represent their interests, and we are doing our best. But humans are willful, and it is a considerable challenge. I never realized that until I tried to protect insects from human depredations."

"I used to step on bugs. No offense."

"Do not do it hereafter." For a moment the glowing image of the Blue Glamor showed in her mind; the woman was not joking.

"Never hereafter," Symbol agreed. This aspect too had been a mind stretching revelation.

It was too much to assimilate all at once. Symbol gave up the effort and fell into sleep.

In the morning they washed and ate and resumed the quest for the Silver ikon. They checked the volcano they had skipped before, as it was now quiescent; it was not the one. They proceeded on toward the dawn side of Charm. Cone after cone yielded no ikon. "Whoever thought there would be so many silver cones!" Symbol said.

"Agreement. I never thought to count them. I thought they were rare."

"They may be. It's a big world."

Worse, it was taking more time to jump from cone to cone. Lucent had started to tire the day before; she was tiring further now. She needed to rest briefly between efforts. That worried Symbol; it seemed there were limits to the Glamor's power. It was disquieting to discover that.

There was a flicker as they paused for lunch. "Swale!" Symbol exclaimed, extending her hand. "We are stymied so far. How goes it elsewhere?"

*Not well, the succubus said in her mind. No ikons yet found, and the Glamors are tiring.*

"So are we. We don't know why."

*Bad news: Havoc may have figured it out. The ikons of the Glamors have been removed from their sites near their volcanoes. He conjectures that they transmit magic power from the cones to the Glamors. Now the Glamors are deprived of that, and their resources are fading. We may not be able to complete this mission.*

"Disaster," Lucent said, reading the thought.

*But if we return the ikons to their sites, the Glamors' powers should be restored,* Swale said.

Symbol was alarmed. "But we need those ikons to make the threads to complete the tapestry!"

*Problem,* Swale agreed. *If you tire too far, return. We may have to do this in stages.*

"Better than failure," Symbol agreed as the succubus departed. She faced Lucent. "At least now we know why you are slowing."

"Agreement. Havoc has discovered something we never suspected."

Symbol had what might be a foolishly bright notion. "You draw power from your ikons, which draw it from their volcanoes. Could you draw it directly?"

"Clarification?"

"If you went to a Blue Chroma zone, could you absorb some of the magic on your own, the way mortals do? That might extend your powers."

"Brilliance! I must try that."

"Can you conjure us there now? Maybe if you sleep there, it will help more. Because of the extra time."

"Gather your things."

Symbol did, and took Lucent's arm. Then they were in blue, the plants glowing in the night. "Oh, I feel it!" Lucent exclaimed. "Wonderful!"

In moments they had a new bower, and resumed their effort to sleep. "Gratitude," Lucent murmured.

"Welcome," Symbol said, pleased. The Glamors had had no way to know of this effect before, because their ikons had been undisturbed. Probably they could have figured out this way around that liability themselves, but it was nice to have been able to help.

"It is also the usefulness of a friend," Lucent said.

In the morning they resumed checking silver cones, faster than the evening before; the Blue

Glamor had definitely been invigorated.

Swale came. *No fortune?*

"No silver ikon yet," Symbol told her. "But we have a breakthrough of another nature: time spent in a Glamor's own Chroma restores her. Maybe not as well as having the ikon in the right place, but enough to extend our search."

*Excitement! I will tell the others.* She was gone.

"I told you you were useful to others," Lucent reminded her.

"Appreciation." Symbol was pleased again. Normally her greatest use to others was sexual; she had never anticipated that her mind would count.

They continued, but as the morning progressed, the Glamor faded. "I must restore," she said. "Regret."

"Needless. This is a considerable job."

They went to the nearest Blue Chroma zone and rested. In an hour the Glamor felt sufficiently restored to tackle the silver cones again. But after two more she faded again. They were going to have to have a longer restoration. The magic output of the Glamor was faster than the input, without the channeling of the ikon.

The day was declining. "We can camp for the night," Symbol said.

"One more cone," Lucent said tightly.

Symbol realized that the woman felt guilty for losing her ability to perform. "Agreement."

They made it to the cone, but Symbol could feel the shakiness in the Glamor. She was weaker than she admitted; further trips this day could become dangerous. Symbol didn't want to argue, but was seriously concerned.

They entered the cave, found the altar, checked it—and found the ikon in the eighth pocket. It was a silver seven-legged spider.

"Wouldn't you know it!" Lucent exclaimed. "The fly finds the spider!"

"Yet you probably understand and appreciate the ways and needs of the spider population better than the other Glamors do. Spiders may prey on flies, but birds prey on both."

"Affirmation. The Silver Glamor is surely not my enemy."

"Now let's go back to Triumph City, our mission accomplished."

"Negation. I am out of power."

"Then to the nearest Blue Chroma zone."

"I think we shall have to walk," Lucent said apologetically.

Symbol considered. She was sure the Glamor was serious, and that any attempt to use her power would be futile if not dangerous. But she had no idea where the nearest Blue Chroma zone was. It might take days to reach it. But what choice did they have? "Then let's start walking," she said, putting the ikon in her mouth. "You retain physical strength?"

"Affirmation. I can defend us, utilizing my Amazon training, but will have very little magic. We had best stay out of trouble."

"We have done that before." Symbol thought of something else. "Do you still relate to the insects?"

"Affirmation. They will come at my beck."

"Then we have sufficient support."

They left the cave and descended the mountain. Symbol discovered a spring to her step and vigor in her body. The ikon was lending her strength. That was ironic: the Blue Glamor needed her ikon, while Symbol was getting a benefit from the silver ikon. Still, if what Gale had said was right, that could be important. Gale had survived a volcanic eruption, thanks to the ikon she carried. Ennui, too, had been charged by the loom ikon, becoming a vigorous and sexual creature. What could this one do in that respect for Symbol, who was a naturally sexy creature?

But as they came to the surrounding jungle, a party of silver men appeared. They had the look of zone authorities. "Who are you, and why do you intrude on sacred territory?" one demanded.

It was up to Symbol. "We are travelers who seem to have lost our way. We are tired and would appreciate news of the easiest path hence."

They were suspicious. Symbol knew they were trying to read the minds of the two women. They would not have much luck, as the Glamor surely could mask her thoughts, and so could Symbol. "You are a long way from an Air Chroma zone, or a Translucent zone. You could not have strayed here."

It was time for another story. "You are perceptive," Symbol said with a winning smile. "I—have a certain expertise with men, but need protection when traveling, so keep company with an Amazon. We thought to pass the cone, but I have not found much business here, and wish only to move on to a more populated region where I can trade for food and a night's lodging." She opened her shirt, showing nothing, because it was invisible. "What I offer is familiar, but some men are intrigued by its invisibility. Would you know of any nearby village where I might relate, no fault?"

The three exchanged glances. "Perhaps." They were, after all, men. The desire of men for new sexual experience was essentially insatiable. That was the single greatest source of power for women.

"My friend is prepared to trade similarly, though this is not her specialty." Symbol reached out to open Lucent's Amazon shirt, showing a translucent breast. Amazons were reputed to be diffident



about sex unless they had reason, but lusty when actually engaged in it. So Lucent was playing the role of the bodyguard who acceded to her client's preference, for the sake of convenience.

"One night only," the lead man said. "Three contacts for each of you, and on your way in the morning."

"Agreement, with our appreciation."

It was a good night. The three Silver Chroma men were indeed intrigued by other Chroma shapely bodies, and fed them well, and were reasonably good lovers. The beds were soft, the facilities excellent. These were upper class officials, not at all brutish, so there was no question of rape, merely of acquiescence. Symbol's reference to no fault meant that the traveling women were not only amenable, but would not be speaking of the liaison to others in this vicinity, so Silver wives had no need to be informed.

And it was true: she discovered that the ikon she carried enhanced her sexual vigor amazingly, so that not only did she perform in a manner that truly gratified the men, she did not have to make a pretense of her own climaxing. She was as ardent as they were, and derived pleasure as compelling as theirs. In short, she enjoyed the sessions, and it showed. The men had perhaps expected tolerance rather than enthusiasm, and reveled in her ardor.

Early in the morning they were, as promised, on their way, using a back path to a navigable river. There they made a deal with a Silver boatman: both women freely available and amenable as long as they remained in the boat. Symbol started him off, and Lucent took him on two hours later, some distance downstream. Thereafter it was all Symbol's play, as the ikon kept her going and she was the more shapely woman. By afternoon they were well out of the silver zone and into nonChroma. They had learned from his chatter that there was a Blue Chroma zone several hours' walk from the river. They each kissed him and gave him a final feel, but he was not able to take the matter further, having exhausted his sexual prowess in the course of the day. He paddled happily back upstream as they stood on the bank.

"Men's ambitions tend to be bigger than their penises," Symbol remarked as they walked along the new path. "They think they can indulge constantly without limit, but they soon fade. That's why continuous amenability is seldom arduous, particularly when the women outnumber the men, as can be the case with kings or wealthy men. The harem concept is not purely the will of the male."

"Exception: a male Glamor can be continuous, if he wishes. He could tire a harem. Green tried it once with five country women, posing as a truly lusty herdsman, and outlasted them all. Thereafter they called him Green Thumb, not realizing how apt the color was. Now we call him simply Thumb."

Symbol found this more than intriguing, in her present state. "Could he do it repeatedly with a single woman?"

"Red tackled him once. They called it off after thirty repetitions in two hours, as neither was fading. Both were getting bored."

"Desire. That might be an interesting experience."

"Negation: you could not endure knowing-sex even once with a Glamor, and unknowing sex

would be subject to mortal limitation, lest he betray his nature. We required Green to stop playing in that manner with mortal women, lest they catch on. That could complicate mortal relations for all of us."

"Unfortunate." Symbol realized that she probably suffered from an unrealistic notion herself: she would like to make continuous love to Havoc, but knew that her sheath would soon become abraded if he actually were able to do it. Any other man, even a Glamor, would be worse. Still, it intrigued her, foolishly. If an ikon could protect a person from a volcanic eruption, why not from repeated plumbings? "Could there be a way of dulling the knowing, so that it would become possible, one time?"

"Theoretical. We have often had relations with unknowing mortals, but I think never tried with dulled ones."

"Wine: could that do it?"

Lucent glanced at her. "You really wish to try?"

"Affirmation. It's a challenge."

"You have made me curious. I will mention it to a male Glamor, who surely will be glad to experiment."

"Appreciation." Of course by the time anything came of this, if it did, she would have delivered the ikon, and thus be back on her own resources. Still, she hoped it happened. What an accomplishment it would be, to have knowing sex with a Glamor!

They moved on, but the pace was slowing. Soon Lucent stumbled. Symbol caught her, realizing that she was after all fading physically as well as magically. Symbol, in contrast, felt as strong as ever. The ikon buoyed her. So she put her arm around Lucent's waist and supported her increasingly, lending her ikon-strength to make up for the Glamor's null-ikon weakness.

Then they encountered more men. Symbol quailed. "Bad news," she murmured, recognizing the type immediately. There were four of them, and they had all the attributes of brigands.

"Normally I wait for the rape before taking vengeance," Lucent said. "But at the moment I lack the strength." She was already changing herself to mask her Amazon nature, because brigands would know better than to try to rape an Amazon. That was a matter of natural selection: those brigands who didn't know better were dead.

"Then take it now," Symbol said.

"Maybe punishment rather than death, since they will not complete the rapes."

"Agreement." But Symbol wondered what form the punishment would take.

The men were already closing on them. They did not speak; they simply grabbed the two women and ripped off their clothing. They paused to admire the invisible and translucent bodies, squeezing breasts and buttocks. Then two men put pain holds on the victims while the other two

dropped their pants. It seemed the pain was not merely to prevent resistance, but to make the women scream, which they obligingly did. The men liked this affirmation that the victims were not enjoying any part of the experience. They were truly the feces of the species, deserving of the very worst.

A swarm of bees arrived. Big ones, each the size of a human fist. In a moment it was the brigands who were screaming, but they could not escape the multiple stings. The bees clustered in two areas: faces and groins. They stung eyes, tongues, penises, and testicles. Blinded and impotent, the four men writhed on the ground, their screams muted by their grossly swelling tongues. As for their genitals: they were coming to resemble bagged clusters of gourds. Punishment enough!

Lucent lifted a hand, and a bee landed. "Appreciation, dear," she said. "You have served well." The bee lifted, doing a little dance of joy, then flew away with its companions.

"You may be tired," Symbol said as they repaired their clothing and resumed their walk. "But by no means helpless."

"Accurate. Never quarrel with a Glamor."

"Never!" Symbol agreed.

The Glamor continued to weaken, until Symbol was practically dragging her along. But there was no other way. At least Symbol's ikon-enhanced strength was up to it. Finally she simply lifted Lucent in her arms and carried her like a child, her head fallen, her arms and legs dangling. Their roles had completely reversed.

As dusk came, the land developed a tinge of blue. They had reached the Blue Chroma zone. Symbol was vastly relieved; she felt fine, despite her labor, but hated seeing the Glamor like this. She forged on into the blue, trusting that greater concentration of magic was better.

Lucent stirred. "Alleviation," she breathed.

"We're in blue," Symbol said.

"It is like breathing after suffocation." But the woman remained weak, and Symbol carried her farther in before setting her down. Then she let her rest while she set about preparing a place for the night, and foraged for fruit.

Lucent sat up. "If we had not made an agreement of friendship before, it would have happened now. Debt."

"No debt between friends. You did the transportation when you were able; it was my turn."

"Regardless." But she did not argue the case further.

They ate, and rested, and slept. No bugs bothered them, of course; insects were there, but served as protection rather than nuisance. Symbol found herself getting to like insects; this was a relation she had not had with them before.

"Agreement," Lucent said, answering her thought.

In the morning the Glamor conjured them to Triumph City in good order. Ennui greeted Symbol with a hug. "You're the first to return," she said. "But the other teams are all right, Swale says, thanks to your insight about the Chroma zones. It's just taking them longer, understandably."

"We must return the ikons to their altars," Symbol said.

"As soon as we complete the thread figure."

"Let's see where the Silver thread goes."

They went to the loom, and Ennui tried the thread. It fit, starting an angling line that would complete another triangle adjacent to the first. "We are getting there," Ennui said, pleased.

"Dismay!" Symbol said. "I just remembered: we're supposed to get the Glamor's permission first."

"Agreement." Ennui reversed course, and removed the incompleting line. At least they knew that it would fit.

"I will go to the adjacent Blue Chroma zone to restore further," Lucent said. "Send your succubus to locate me when the others have arrived."

"Agreement," Symbol said. She knew how much the Glamor needed that recovery.

"Parting." Lucent vanished.

"I don't know what would have happened if you had not figured that out," Ennui said. "Havoc, dear man, is slow to admit a problem, going for the Gray ikon, and I think Stevia wants him alone long enough to see whether something between them is after all possible. Swale says they have made progress."

"Swale has an interest," Symbol agreed. "She's more interested in sex than I am, and that's considerable."

"If I had a body like yours I'd be more interested too."

"Negation. It's not the body but the mind that brings the interest. Mine is professional; Swale really likes it."

"Well, she *is* a succubus. Sometimes I wonder whether, if I invited her to join me when I'm with Throe—" She trailed off, embarrassed.

"She can make a man jet before he even gains entry," Symbol said. "I never saw anything like that before."

Ennui's expression was halfway between horror and envy. She reverted to the subject. "Meanwhile Gale and Dour are still looking for the Brown Ikon; she was nervous about entering an Invisible Chroma zone, but it really helped him continue. Throe and Jamais Vu seem to be doing well enough, but the Orange Ikon remains elusive."

"That leaves Bijou."

"She is with the Green Glamor, looking for the White ikon."

"Mollusks," Symbol agreed.

"Question?"

"The Glamors are not merely colors; they represent species, and interact with them and protect them. The Green Glamor is with the mollusks—the squid and such."

"How could you know that?"

"Lucent—the Blue Glamor told me. We got to know each other pretty well. She's with the insects. Do you see how the Silver ikon is in the form of a spider? That means he represents spiders or arachnids. I think all the ikons reflect their associations."

"Amazement!" Ennui took the box of ikons, which was now in her desk, and checked through them. "A black mobius strip."

"The infinity symbol. That stands for the saprophytes, that break down organic matter so it can be used again. Recycling it, in an infinite progression."

"Wonder!" She took another. "The red nude woman."

"She's the Glamor for the four legged species."

"Question?"

Symbol smiled. "I was caught that way too. Human beings. Our arms count as legs. We're four legged."

The woman considered, then nodded. "Perhaps so. She is certainly very human." She fished out another, though her hand looked empty. "The invisible millipede."

"He represents the hundred-leggers."

She brought out the translucent fish. "This at least makes sense; that's the water Chroma."

"The Glamors don't align the same way, so that's coincidence. But yes, he would represent the fishes."

"And the Yellow star. What would that be?"

"The demons. They were the first colonists of this planet, and have their own interests."

"And have a human Glamor?"

"Species that have trouble speaking for themselves take human Glamors to speak for them."

They're fully committed, and will not play their constituencies false. Their creatures know it, too. It is a—a symbiosis, perhaps."

Ennui shook her head as she returned the ikon and closed the box. "You certainly learned much."

"I really did. It was a great experience. It occurs to me that you should have all this straight, so you can keep Havoc informed. It could be important."

"It *is* important. If you would, please tell me what else you learned."

"Enthusiasm. It's a great revelation." Symbol went on to narrate all she could remember, while Ennui made spot notes. She no longer carried the silver spider in her mouth, but her high remained, slowly fading. She liked having Ennui's interest, because the woman was Havoc's oath friend, and anyone that close to Havoc was important to Symbol.

"I wonder if there is a Glamor for trees," Ennui said. "Havoc is close to trees, and would surely get along well."

"Havoc is Havoc," Symbol said. "He is our Vivid and Void."

"Understanding." She glanced sidelong at Symbol. "A year ago, would you have believed that women like us would love a young barbarian?"

"The whole of it would have been beyond my belief. I am now a no fault friend to the Blue Glamor."

In the course of the day, two other teams returned. First Havoc, with Stevia, and the Gray Ikon. The woman, for once, looked tired, as well she might be; Symbol knew how hard she had been working to transport Havoc from one gray cone to another.

*And by the time I seduced him as me, my powers had faded to the point where it hardly counted,* the Red Glamor's frustrated thought came.

Symbol saw Ennui stifling mirth. Ennui accepted Symbol as Havoc's mistress, for much the reason the Lady Aspect had accepted her for King Deal, but was wary of the Red Glamor.

"But at least the mission was successful," Symbol said. "You fetched the ikon."

"That, too," Stevia said somewhat sourly.

"I need rest," Havoc said. "Until the next returns."

"Symbol will put you down," Ennui said quickly.

"Symbol? As you say."

"Joy!" Symbol said. She was delighted by the prospect of being with him, even if only to help him relax. She understood Ennui's motive on two levels: she knew he would not get much rest with the

Red Glamor, and she trusted Symbol.

They were soon in his bed, and she was holding his head to her breasts and stroking his hair. She loved doing that with him; he was her lover, but also to a degree her child. Soon he slept, and she was as satisfied with this as she would have been with sex. To be trusted and needed by this man—that was her fulfillment.

"Love," she murmured, holding him close. Then she slept too, blissfully.

Ennui appeared. Symbol cracked open an eye. "Throe is back."

Symbol kissed Havoc's ear. "Another ikon," she whispered.

He jerked awake. She threw a robe around him as he scrambled up naked, then put one on herself, though her invisibility meant she would not show much flesh anyway. Ennui looked relieved; she had seen Havoc naked before, of course, but it was part of her job to be sure he was presentable in public.

When they entered the throne room, Throe kissed Ennui. It seemed she had informed Havoc even before greeting her beloved. Then Throe poked a finger in his mouth and brought out an orange sphinx. "We both need to rest," he said.

"Jamais should conjure himself to the nearest Black Chroma zone," Symbol said. She turned to Throe. "Ennui will put you down." Turnabout.

The Black Glamor disappeared. Ennui smiled and led Throe away.

Havoc contemplated the Orange ikon. "So this is the Glamor for the Sphinxes."

"Agreement." Symbol had not tried to mask her thought. "They all align. I told Ennui."

"Now tell me."

"Gladly." She explained about the way the ikons keyed into species, which the Glamors represented.

"Interest." He looked around. "Swale."

The shimmer appeared. In a moment she invested Symbol, and spoke through her mouth, answering his thought. "Gale is still searching for the Brown ikon. Bijou may be in trouble."

"Clarify."

"She and the Green Glamor are searching White Chroma cones. They have slowed. I think they don't want to quit, but he's running out of magic."

"Get them out of there," Symbol said, taking over her mouth.

"I'd better," Havoc agreed.

"No you don't," Symbol said. "Stevia hasn't had enough time in a Red Chroma zone to recover. Lucent has had longer; we can do it."

He nodded. "Appreciation."

Symbol went to the box in Ennui's desk, and took out the Blue Insect ikon. "Blue Glamor," she said to it.

Lucent was suddenly beside her. "Agreement; we are best equipped to do it."

Symbol took her arm, and they were standing beside a giant White volcano. Both of them were invisible. Ahead, two people were walking away from the cone—but several White men were there, intercepting them. Obviously the two would have conjured themselves away, if they had retained enough power to do so. Now they were about to be taken captive.

"If we use obvious magic, they will know that Glamors are involved," Lucent said. "This is the Science Chroma."

"We had better just watch, then rescue them from confinement," Symbol said. "Assuming the authorities are civilized. If they aren't, we'll have to act anyway." Then she realized that she still held the Blue ikon. "You took me away before I could return it to the box!"

"So put it in your mouth; what harm will it do you?"

Symbol did so. "Irony: now I am carrying your ikon, and gaining strength from it, instead of you."

"You will surely use that strength well."

"Further irony: Havoc and Stevia did not have sex when returning from fetching this ikon, yet had they realized its potential, he surely could have managed it."

Lucent laughed without great sympathy. "Poor Red!"

They watched as the Whites took the two figures prisoner and bound them with metal shackles on their wrists. They were brought to a cell and locked in. In due course they would be brought before a magistrate and punished in some manner for their intrusion on the cone territory.

But then one of the Whites returned. He left the Green Glamor, who was disguised to resemble a nonChroma man, and took Bijou to another chamber. Symbol and Lucent followed, invisibly. "Now we can do this two ways," he told her. "You can fight and scream, and I will have to shoot you to death to stop your prison break. Or you can keep your mouth shut and cooperate."

He was going to rape her. "Remember, we don't want to show our presence or any magic," Symbol said.

"I will distract him. You get his keys and unlock the shackles. Then go free Green and get him to water. I will rescue the girl."

"Done."



"Get him to a Green Chroma zone for recovery. Tell him of your interest."

"Question?"

Lucent glanced at her as if she were being stupid. Oh.

Suddenly there was a swarm of biting flies. They landed on the White man and wriggled into his clothing. In a moment he felt their attention. "Obscenity!" he cried, swatting himself. But the bites continued.

Symbol went up and grabbed the ring of keys at his waist. She went to Bijou, who was not being bothered by the flies. She used a key on the shackles. "Symbol here," she said. "Go with Lucent."

"Surprise," the girl said, for Symbol remained invisible.

Meanwhile the White man continued to struggle with the biting flies. He did not cry out, because that would call attention to what he was doing with the pretty prisoner and get him in trouble, but he was fully distracted.

Symbol went to the other cell and unlocked it. She had become visible away from the Blue Glamor, but it didn't matter; no other Whites were there. "Green," she said. "Symbol here. Come with me."

The Glamor did not argue. He followed her out of the cell and out of the prison. He looked around, sniffing. "This way to water," he said.

Soon they came to a white river. They waded in, and a large white squid approached. Symbol controlled her alarm; this was one of the Green Glamor's creatures.

The squid caught each of their left arms and jetted downstream. They fairly sailed along behind it, their heads kept high so they could breathe. Before long they were clear of the White Chroma zone and crossing a lake. On the far side was the fringe of a Green Chroma zone. The squid let them go and they waded out into the green.

The Glamor began to recover almost immediately. "Appreciation, maiden," he said.

"We are in this together. Havoc sent us."

"He is a good man."

"Affirmation!" she agreed fervently.

"Regret. I overextended myself and put the mission in peril."

"Blue got in trouble too."

"And you rescued her too."

"Exaggeration. I merely helped."

He shrugged. "I must recuperate some hours."

"I will stand guard while you rest or sleep."

"Intriguing inversion." He lay beside the water and closed his eyes.

Symbol sat and gazed out over the lake. A green tentacle rose from it. A different squid! She glanced at the Glamor, but he was sleeping. Obviously the squid had come to see him, but he was out of reach at the moment and she didn't want to disturb him. The water here was too shallow for the squid to get close enough to touch the Glamor.

She nerved herself and waded into the water. The tentacle reached toward her. She put a hand on its tip. *He is here, resting*, she thought.

The tentacle twitched, then withdrew. The message had been received. Symbol was pleased; she had conquered her fear of the monster and done a little bit of good. She returned to the shore.

The Glamor slept until nightfall, then roused himself. "Now we can travel."

"Recommendation: stay the night, gaining more strength. Tomorrow we can search more cones."

He considered, then nodded. "The job remains to be done."

"A green squid came to see you while you slept. I told it you were resting."

"You become more appealing."

She laughed. "I would do more for you if I could, but I know you are a Glamor."

He laughed too. "You talked with Blue."

"She called you Thumb before you introduced yourself."

"I appreciate your interest."

Then a green table appeared before them, laden with green utensils filled with green wine, bread, cheese, vegetables, and other foods. They had a wonderful supper.

The wine was intoxicating. Symbol drank more of it, deliberately overindulging. "I think I am drunk," she said as she staggered to a patch of bushes for a natural function.

"Do you know my nature?" he asked as she returned.

"Af-affir—yes. But I no longer care."

"No fault?"

"Why not?" She fell into his embrace.

Hours later she woke, lying beside him. Her head was clear, and she had no hangover. "Did I do it?" she asked.

"Affirmation. You were delightful."

"I don't remember."

"Perhaps you were unconscious."

"Expletive! I wanted to remember." She rolled into him and attempted to kiss him, but the glory that was his nature stunned her, and she fell away from him. "Frustration!"

"Agreement. I was unable to kiss you before, also."

"Unable? Because I was unconscious?"

"Because I was unable to approach that portion of your person."

Then she caught on. "The ikon! I have the blue ikon in my mouth. It repels you."

He nodded. "That would account for the effect. Perhaps if you removed it?"

She poked a finger in her mouth and took out the blue insect. She held it at arm's length. Then she approached him, proffering her lips.

He embraced her cautiously, then kissed her, this time successfully. The contact made her face seem to explode with green rapture, but she both survived it and retained consciousness. "Success!" she breathed as it ended.

"Agreement. The ikon lends you strength to withstand the impact. But I think not sufficient to handle conscious sex."

"Not," she agreed regretfully.

"Perhaps if I describe it in detail, your memory of that will suffice."

"Intrigued."

So he described their liaison, and it rang true; she had performed as she normally did. He had penetrated her several times, and shared his rapture with her so that she had had an unparalleled series of climaxes. She made sure of the details and filed the memory of the description. That was not ideal, but better than nothing. She had had sex with a Glamor, and had a possible memory of the event; that was more than any normal woman could boast.

They slept the rest of the night. She dreamed of it, and was not sure whether her dream reflected a real memory or the makeshift one. Maybe in time the two would merge and she would have the real memory.

In the morning they ate sumptuously again, and then he conjured them to a White Chroma cone. How he knew this one was not being checked by others she didn't inquire.

The cave and altar were similar to what she had been seeing. So was the intensity of magic. There were those who thought that White Chroma magic was somehow different from the other types, but as she saw it, each was distinct in its own fashion. The Black Chroma, with its inverted eruptions, had a better case for distinction. Still, it was odd the way Whites did not fly or conjure or heal without the assistance of bulky devices. And their smoky machines were remarkably different from anything seen elsewhere.

There was no ikon. They departed the cave. This time the Glamor conjured them to the next before any possible sighting by natives.

They checked a second, and a third, and fourth, with no better result. Then they landed in a Green Chroma zone. "I have learned caution," Thumb told her. "I have power, but felt some ebbing, so am restoring immediately."

"Endorsement."

"I should remain here an hour or more. I dislike boring you. Have you any other task to accomplish in the interim?"

"Negation. However—"

He caught her thought. "I do not wish to have you intoxicated while we are traveling to the cones."

"Some other device, then. I can hold the ikon in my hand, away from my body, so you can approach me, and it may lend me sufficient strength to tolerate your penetration. If we can mask your nature somewhat. Maybe if you assumed the herdsman role, and I that of a country girl."

He became a nonChroma boy, looking completely rustic. He even burped openly, as such folk did.

"Can you clothe me similarly?"

She found herself wearing a stout canvas farm skirt, a home-sewn shirt, and wooden shoes. She was sure she looked the part exactly. She took the blue ikon in her hand and held it away from her torso. It seemed that it was only actual contact that was balked, or the touch of flesh directly touching it. Arm's length was far enough, so long as her hand did not touch his body.

"Greeting, Herdsman," she said, and forced a burp of her own. She buried the knowledge of his nature in her secret mind, the one that could not be read by others, and allowed only superficial immediacies to play about her open mind.

"You're a pretty farm girl."

Now she forced a blush. "So I am told, handsome stranger."

"I have to travel, and would like a traveling companion and guide."

"No fault?"

"Of course."

"What do you have for me, that I should guide you anywhere?"

He reached into a pocket. "This sparkling necklace."

She gazed at the bauble. It did indeed sparkle. "Done." She reached for it.

He drew it out of her reach. "One bead at a time." He set it about his own neck, where it glowed brightly.

"But there must be fifty beads on it!"

"At least," he agreed.

"Then we had better be on our way, because I have to be home with the cows by nightfall."

"Agreement." They walked five paces, and a campsite appeared before them. "Afternoon."

"It seems like only a moment since we started."

"A moment that can become as long as we may need."

They entered a chamber. There was a curtained bed therein. "Give me a bead." Farm girls were eager for bright baubles.

"Take it," he said, sitting on the bed.

She reached for a bead with her non-ikon hand, but he leaned back, keeping it just out of range. She pursued it, falling against his body. One hand held the ikon while the other went for the bead; she had no hand to support her. Their clothing dissolved as his back landed on the bed, and she was plastered against him. But the necklace was not in reach. She pounced on a bead, and it came away in her hand, leaving the rest of the necklace intact. As this happened, she felt something press in elsewhere. Rather than inquire, she lifted her face to kiss his mouth.

A shock ran through her, convulsing her body. But rather than leap off him, she did the opposite, clinging to him and drawing herself in closer yet. She was straddling something huge, but she could contain it. The current continued, forming a circuit that seemed to connect her lips, breasts, belly, and groin, pulsing rhythmically, circling on through the man and back to electrify her again.

She broke the kiss for a moment. "I want another bead," she gasped.

"Take it."

She grabbed a second, and it too came away in her hand. She put her mouth back on his, and

the circuit resumed. It was as though she were mounted on a stake set into her middle, and pleasure radiated from it, coursing upward through her body until it leaped like a spark from her lips to his and traveled on down through his body.

She lifted her head a fraction, breaking the circuit for a moment. "Another!"

"Take."

She grabbed another as she dropped her face back onto his, and another strong pulse of pleasure jetted from the stake to the sheath and spread out as it rose. It diffused through the thickness of her body, then intensified as it focused on her lips and departed.

Then it was nothing but a scramble as she reached one-handed for bead after bead, barely pausing between them, and the pulses kept coming. She had never known such sustained pleasure. It became almost continuous, transforming her to a creature of sheer ongoing bliss. Bead and pulse, bead and pulse, bead pulse, bead-pulse, beadpulse, bepulse, on and on, wonderfully.

Then it ended. She found herself sprawled across him, naked, spent. "Why did it stop?" she gasped.

"The beads are all gone."

She lifted her head enough to look. There was no longer a necklace at his neck. But there was something at her throat. She brought a hand around to touch it, and found the necklace there, its beads present. The transfer was complete.

"I want another necklace," she said.

He smiled. "I think you have enough for now."

"Oh, pooh!" But she lifted herself off him, one-handed, and discovered that she was overflowing viscous fluid, as if a flagon of green jelly had been squeezed into her aperture. In fact, that region was almost numb.

She returned the ikon to her mouth, fetched the pot from under the bed and squatted on it, squeezing herself out. Green goop slid out and plopped down. The numbness faded, leaving a nucleus of fading pleasure. Fifty men could hardly have accounted for this volume of substance!

She paused. She now had fifty beads.

"How long has it been?"

"An hour."

"That milkmaid did some milking!"

"Amazement. You remember?"

She stood, and her regular clothing formed about her. "Horny herdsman and lusty lass, no fault

for beads, one per episode."

"Do you know my nature?"

"The farm girl did not, but I do."

He sat up, then stood, and his own clothing returned as the bed disappeared. "Say my name."

She smiled, remembering the childhood game. "Say mine."

"Symbol of Triumph City."

"Thumb, the Green Glamor."

"And we did what?"

"We had glorious continuous sex!"

He nodded. "Then you have done what no mortal has done before. You had knowing sex with a Glamor. How did you do it?"

She considered. "I think I understand. A Glamor can have knowing sex with a mortal woman, as long as she does not know it. The ignorance has to be in the mortal, not the Glamor. So it's not the act, it's the unknowing, and it's all in the mortal. So if she can pretend ignorance well enough, she can do it. I pretended to be an ignorant farm girl with a passing herder, and when my underlying awareness threatened to disrupt it, I buried it and jammed on. That girl really wanted those beads!"

"She earned them."

"All fifty of them. But it was that girl doing it, not the knowing courtesan. As long as she was in control, it continued. But now she's gone, and I have her experience, and it's all mine. I can remember it as mine."

"Yet you knew. Was the farm girl really necessary?"

"Let's find out." She removed the ikon and stepped into him, reaching for his lips.

But as their mouths touched, there was a divine shock, and she fell back, momentarily stunned.

"It seems not," he said with regret.

Symbol recovered equilibrium. She focused her mind. "Farm girl making tryst with stranger herdsman." She stepped into him and kissed him. There was a shock, but she wrapped one arm about him and held the kiss for several seconds. Then she drew back and gazed into his green eyes. "But I do know, behind my mind."

"You are perhaps the most remarkable mortal woman I have encountered."

"Appreciation," she said wryly. "Though surely the ikon lends me immortal strength. I welcome

it. Now I suppose we should return to work."

He nodded and took her elbow. They stood at the base of a White Chroma volcanic cone. But the cave and altar were empty.

After two more cones, Swale appeared, investing Symbol "Hoo girl! What you did!" she exclaimed with Symbol's mouth.

"Fifty times in an hour," Thumb said with seeming pride. "A record." Symbol realized that the Glamors had great magic, but valued their accomplishments of whatever nature, just as mortals did.

"Ludicrous! Even I would be hard put to it to do that. The man would give out long before that total."

"Not if he's a Glamor," Symbol said smugly.

"And she'd be raw."

"Not if she had an ikon."

The succubus paused. "Amazement! I must try it."

"Not with this body, not right now," Symbol said, smiling. "We're busy."

"Oh, yes. That's what I came for. Bijou and Blue fetched the White ikon. That's the last one. You can quit now." She departed.

Symbol had mixed feelings. She was glad to see the mission completed, but sorry to have no further excuse for no fault liaisons with the Glamor. Still, she had had the greatest single or multiple experience of her sexual life, and accomplished something no mortal woman had done before. That was more than enough for now.

"Another time, perhaps," the Green Glamor murmured. Then they were back in the throne room at Triumph City.

Bijou and Lucent were there. The Blue Glamor nodded, knowing what Symbol had done with Green. She had set it up, giving Symbol her chance.

"What a fine green necklace," Ennui said as Symbol returned the blue ikon to the box.

Symbol had forgotten that. It remained about her neck. "The Green Glamor gave it to me."

Now the other mortal women clustered close. "Curiosity," Gale said, speaking for herself, Bijou, Spanky, and the Lady Aspect.

"Read my mind." Symbol opened it to them.

Four jaws dropped. "Incredulity," the Lady Aspect said.



"Fifty times!" Gale breathed.

"With a Glamor," Bijou said in open wonder.

"Illicit, unbecoming envy," Ennui said, blushing.

"I will wear this always, with indecent pride."

But now they had business. "If you ladies will cease being naughty, the roster of ikons is whole," King Havoc said, amused, for of course the men had snooped on the open thought too. "We will complete the pattern."

"Not yet, Sire," Ennui said, reverting to form. "We must obtain the permission of the other Glamors to weave their threads."

Havoc nodded. "I almost forgot. I am fortunate to have you keeping order."

Ennui glanced at Symbol. The two of them had forgotten too, and almost woven in the Silver thread.

Havoc looked around. "Any reason we shouldn't summon the missing Glamors now?"

Symbol raised her hand. "Those Glamors don't want to be found. They have hidden from us until now."

"Agreement. Now they will be revealed."

"I would not want to be the one to summon an angry Glamor."

There was a silence. It seemed that no one else had thought of that. The Glamors present nodded; they agreed that this was mischief.

"And what would you recommend?" Havoc asked her.

"I think we do have to do it, and we can't wait long, because the ikons need to be returned as soon as possible." Symbol took a breath. "Maybe that's why Glamors can't touch the ikons. They protect the folk who summon them."

There were nods around the circle.

"Will you summon a Glamor?"

How could she decline? She would do anything for him. "Agreement."

"Take your ikon."

She walked to the box and lifted out the Silver Spider. She held it up, nerved herself, and spoke. "Silver Glamor."

A giant scintillating seven legged silver spider appeared. *Present.*

Symbol stared. So did most of the others, including the human Glamors. No one spoke. There was no question of authenticity; the power of the mind voice brooked no doubt. This was indeed a Glamor.

It seemed to be up to Symbol. "We—we didn't know there were animal Glamors."

*We did not care to have you know. But now that you have found us, we will join you. It is time.*

"Time?" she asked somewhat dumbly.

*Time for the Glamors to unify in a common cause. We resolved to remain apart until you showed your competence and commitment by locating us and recognizing our nature.*

"We recognize it," Havoc said, recovering from his surprise. "And welcome you to our midst."

*It was in part your ascension to the leadership of your species that persuaded us. You relate well to nonhuman creatures.*

"We do," Havoc said. "Gale and I were tutored by a blue dragon."

"And Yellow—the spider—was my friend," Gale said.

*Yellow is now part of me. I know your nature. You may call me Silver.* The Silver Glamor oriented on Havoc. *Summon the others.*

Havoc nodded. "We appreciate your acceptance." He turned to Gale. "Take your ikon."

Gale stepped up to the box and took out the Brown ikon, which was in the form of a dragon. "Brown Glamor."

A resplendent brown female dragon appeared. *Present.*

This time the general surprise was more subdued. "Welcome to our number, Glamor," Havoc said.

*Mentor is part of me. You carry his seed.*

"I do, and so does Gale. We have always respected your kind, and owe much to it. My crown itself, in part."

*Mentor chose well, with you. You have ripened nicely. You may call me by his name; his aspect will be with you.*

"Appreciation." Havoc turned to Throe. "Take your ikon."

Throe took the Orange Sphinx from the box. "Orange Glamor."

A female Orange Sphinx appeared. *Present. Call me Orange.*

"I know you!" Jamais Vu exclaimed.

*Agreement, Black Glamor. You did not know me when we met before.*

"Apology!"

*No one can find a hidden Glamor, as we agreed.*

"I never suspected."

At some other time Symbol might have enjoyed seeing a Glamor discomfited, but she saw that Throe, Ennui, and Bijou were similarly amazed. They had all been fooled.

If Havoc was nervous, it didn't show. "Bijou."

Bijou stepped up and took the White Goat ikon. "White Glamor."

A White Goat appeared. *Present. Call me Billy.*

Finally Havoc took out the Gray Ikon, in the form of a bird. "I wonder," he murmured. Then: "Gray Glamor."

A Gray Bird appeared. *Yes, we met. Call me Avian. I let you fetch the green ikon.*

"So you did allow it! I suspected that, but was not sure why."

*Weave your pattern.*

Havoc nodded. "We mean to return all the Ikons to their places as soon as we have seen the pattern. We did not realize at first the harm done by their removal." He glanced at Ennui. "Do it, friend."

Ennui went to work at the loom. Symbol watched, glad that she didn't have to be center stage at the moment; she had too much to assimilate in her own life.

The five new threads fit. One by one Ennui wove them into the complicated tapestry, while all parties, human and animal, mortal and Glamor, watched.

And when it was done, the pattern was still incomplete. There were more triangles, but also several missing lines.

"More missing Glamors?" Havoc asked, dismayed.

"Confusion," Stevia said. "We thought the roster would be complete with twelve."

Symbol studied the pattern. "This strikes me as a three dimensional geometric shape. We have five triangles, and a number of angles that suggest more triangles. Look, if we filled in lines here and

here, we'd have, let me see, seven more triangles. And you know what the first four triangles form? A pyramid! Just like Triumph City."

"A pyramid!" Havoc said. "I see it now. You have an analytic mind."

"I have a *symbolic* mind. Would you have had any interest in me otherwise?"

"Interest in your invisible body, surely."

"When you already have Gale? What of these Glamors?" She glanced at Stevia, Lucent, and Deva, who each obligingly flashed as stunningly nude Red, Blue, and Yellow Glamors. "Better that you appreciate my invisible mind."

They all laughed. "We like your body *and* your mind, mortal woman," Thumb said.

"Fifty times over," Ennui agreed, glancing at Symbol's necklace.

Symbol was the center of attention, and she loved it. "Here's the thing: there must be at least two threads missing, to fill in those partial triangles. Actually they are facets on the figure, which is obviously more complicated than a single pyramid. See, there are pyramids built on three of the faces of the original pyramid, with just one additional line missing. And I'll bet you there's a pyramid built on the fourth face, only we don't have any of its final three lines yet."

"Confusion," Stevia said. "I am unable to visualize the figure you describe."

"Maybe we can craft it by illusion," Symbol said. She glanced at Thumb. "Do these beads lend me any magic power? I'd like to extend my illusive technique to this tapestry."

"Granted," the Green Glamor said. She felt a tingling at her neck.

She reached out with illusion, fashioning the figure she described. "First the four sided pyramid. Then a second one built on its nether facet. Then a third, fourth, and fifth, on its other facets, so that the original pyramid is entirely submerged, as it were. Now we have a four pointed star."

"A star!" Deva exclaimed. She was the Yellow Glamor of demons.

"Now I see it," Stevia said.

"A fearful symmetry," Gale breathed.

"Of course I may be mistaken," Symbol said. "But this strikes me as a viable geometric positioning for the threads. If it is correct, it means we have five pyramids, eight points, counting the internal ones, sixteen facets, and eighteen edges—which suggests eighteen threads. But even if there is no fifth pyramid, it's still fifteen threads."

"And all we have are twelve," Ennui said.

"With twelve Chroma," Gale said. "How can there be any more?"

*We assumed there was but one Glamor to a Chroma, the Orange Glamor Sphinx thought. We may have been mistaken.*

"Denial," Jamais Vu, the Black Glamor, responded. "We all know our Chroma. We would have been aware of any other Glamor power there."

"Perhaps there are colors lacking volcanoes," Dour, the Invisible Glamor, said.

"There must be," Stevia agreed. "But how can we identify them? It was all we could do to locate your additional five, and these three or six must be more securely hidden."

"Is it possible that they don't yet exist?" Lucent asked.

Symbol gazed at the illusion figure. "Maybe the outermost ones don't, but the inner ones, on which the rest of the complex is built, must exist. Otherwise the structure has no integrity."

Havoc shook his head. "We need more information. Do we have any other way of classifying Glamors? Other than color?"

"No two Glamors have the same number of legs," Pisca, the Translucent Glamor, said. "That is, in the species we represent; these human forms are mere conveniences, not the essence of our natures."

Havoc turned to Ennui. "Make a survey, oath friend. Classify them by feet."

Ennui nodded, producing her secretarial pad. "If you please, Glamors—who has one foot?"

*I do, Mentor, the Brown Glamor thought. I am a Worm, with no permanent projections. I slither.*

"Some worm!" Havoc said. "You taught me most of what I know."

"Ditto," Gale said. "And you gave us your seeds, oath friend."

Ennui made a note. "And who has two feet?"

"I do," Pisca, the Translucent Glamor, said. "Two fins, left and right, for swimming."

Deva, the Yellow Glamor, flashed for attention. "If you mean to proceed linearly, you have missed me. I have no feet, and do not walk or crawl, being Demon."

"Apology," Ennui said. "I add you to the list, at the top. Zero feet. And who has three?"

*I do, Avian, the Gray Glamor, thought.*

Ennui marked him down. "Four?"

"I do," Stevia, the Red Glamor, said. "I locomote on the hind two, and employ the front two for general purposes."

"I am familiar with the adaptation," Ennui said, smiling as she marked it. "As are some of the others here. Five?"

"I have five legs," Lucent, the Blue Glamor, said. "All insects do, in their mature stages."

"Six?"

*I have six, Billy, the White Glamor Goat thought. All my variants do, whether herbivore or carnivore.*

"Such as the bears, dogs, cats, buffalo, and rats," Ennui agreed, making it. "Seven?"

*I do, Silver, the Silver Spider Glamor, thought. As with all arachnids.*

"Eight?"

There was no answer. Ennui looked around. "Have we found a missing Glamor? What has eight legs?"

No one knew. Symbol saw that Havoc looked thoughtful. He had a notion, she was sure, but was not sharing it with the others.

"Nine?"

*I do, the sphinx, the Orange Glamor, thought.*

"Ten?"

"I do," Thumb, the Green Glamor, said. "All mollusks have ten legs, though not all variants show them."

"Eleven?"

There was a pause. "I believe the system changes," Dour, the Invisible Glamor, said. "I have a hundred legs, representing the millipedes. I know of no creatures with legs between ten and a hundred."

"One hundred," Ennui agreed, marking it. "Then the next might be one thousand."

There was silence. "I think we have another blank," Gale said. "Assuming that we find categories beyond."

"Ten thousand?" Ennui inquired.

"I have ten thousand legs," Jamais Vu, the Black Glamor, said. "I represent the saprophytes, the fungi, that break down dead organic matter. My legs are virtually infinite, and I know of no category beyond this."

Ennui looked around. "Have I overlooked any Glamor?" There was no response. "I have twelve

Glamors listed in order, and two missing. The total would seem to be fourteen, with no viable prospect for a continuation."

"Eight legs, and a thousand legs," Havoc said. "Those are the ones to focus on. But what other way do we have to identify them?"

"Maybe by species?" Symbol asked. "We've covered all the Chroma, and all the legs, but have we covered all the living things on Planet Charm?"

"Planet Charm," Gale said. "What of Counter-Charm? Are there Glamors there?"

"Negation," Stevia said. "We have an enclave there, and the plants and creatures differ somewhat, but there are no eight legs or thousand legs there. And no human beings. We decided to leave it pristine."

"But have we identified *all* the local species?" Symbol insisted. "What about plants?"

"They aren't conscious," Stevia said. "They don't move about."

"Expletive!" Gale swore. "They have feelings too. I can lie in the moss and commune, and it protects me from dust and bugs." Gale glanced at Lucent. "No offense. I get along with bugs too. My best friend was a spider."

*Not quite the same, Silver thought. But point taken. You have not offended such entities.*

"And I have always gotten along well with trees," Havoc said. "They don't speak or think in the way we do, but they understand when addressed, and respond. They have helped me many times, and I would not play them false."

"This seems viable," Jamais said. "I represent the saprophytes because they lack the intellect or motion to represent themselves. Their position in the framework of life is vital, and they support me and give me special powers. Plants seem similarly valid."

"Persuasive," Stevia said. "Apology."

"Let's try those," Ennui said. "Is there a Glamor for the mosses?"

There was silence.

"Is there a Glamor for the trees?"

There was no answer.

"And yet it seems there should be," Ennui concluded. "But do their legs fit?"

"If fungi have ten thousand legs, the mosses have one thousand," Gale said.

Ennui nodded. "One thousand legs for mosses. Now the trees." She looked at Havoc.

"I would think one," he said. "But that's taken."

"That's the stem," Symbol said. "The trunk. The feet would be below. The roots."

"The roots!" Havoc agreed. "Large trees have eight significant roots. A tap root, three bracing roots, and four spreading roots. It matches!"

"Eight legs for trees," Ennui said, noting it on her list. "Our pattern is now complete through fourteen species."

"Maybe there'll be a new interplanetary colony arriving from somewhere else," Symbol said facetiously. "For the fifteenth Glamor."

"Colonization!" Stevia said. "Human beings colonized most recently. What of the others?"

*The sphinxes colonized from a far planet, fifty thousand years ago, the Orange Glamor thought. We were the last before the humans. We had similar disruptions before coming to terms with the prior species. It is part of our social history.*

"From another planet—in the manner of our species," Havoc said. "We assumed you were native to Charm."

*Negation. We do not remember how we traveled, but believe it was on a colony ship, like yours, which then departed.*

"Fascination," Stevia said. "Can this also be true of other species?"

"We have the fourteenth and thirteenth, perhaps," Ennui said, making notes. "Which would have been the twelfth?"

*The six-legged varieties, Billy the Goat thought. We came perhaps a million years ago, from elsewhere.*

"And the eleventh?" Ennui said, as both mortals and Glamors gazed about, amazed at these revelations.

*The birds," Avian thought. Five million years ago.*

"The Tenth?"

"That was ours," Pisca said. "About ten million years ago. The memory is vague, but definite."

"Ninth?"

"The Mollusks," Thumb said. "Circa fifty million years back. Our kind held sway in the lakes until the fish intruded."

The Translucent Glamor flared. "You had no right to keep all those lakes to yourselves."



"Eighth," Ennui said quickly.

Ours, Silver thought. *There was excellent feeding here, a hundred million years ago.*

"On our kind!" Lucent said, flaring blue. "We were here two hundred million years ago, and were well settled before your predators disrupted things."

"Sixth!"

Dour smiled grimly. "The millipedes, five hundred million years ago. We held fine sway before the flying bugs arrived."

*Which brings us to the Worms, a billion years ago, Mentor the Brown Dragon thought. We had no need of the intrusions by any of the recent species.*

"Fourth," Ennui said.

"That was the Trees," Jamais Vu said. "Following our spores by about a billion years. We welcomed them, having had nothing but the mosses to recycle."

"Fungi—third," Ennui said. "Mosses second." She looked up. "Who was first?"

"The Demons," Deva the Yellow Glamor said. "When we came four billion years ago, floating through space, the planet was barren. Nothing but sterile belching volcanoes. We spread out and adapted to harness their magic, establishing the base for all the other species to use it."

Havoc looked around. "Amazement! *All* the species are foreign!"

"Fourteen waves of colonization from elsewhere," Deva agreed. "I suspect it was that way on other planets of the galaxy, with the demons leading the way."

"So now we have established all the major species of Planet Charm," Ennui said, summing it up. "Of which the second and fourth seem to lack Glamors. The mosses and the trees."

"Unfair," Gale said. "They are as deserving as any."

"And as needful," Havoc agreed. "Trees have suffered grievously from human destruction."

"Let us not condemn humans," Stevia said, flashing nude red. "Our species provided Glamors for seven species that lacked such representation before, and has represented them competently." She glanced at Lucent. "Anyone ever try to step on a bug near Blue?"

"I would not!" Symbol said quickly. Others smiled.

"It seems we ran out of Chroma before those posts were filled," Deva said. "Therefore they were neglected."

"Perhaps," Havoc said, but he did not elucidate.

Symbol realized that he was up to something. She wished she knew what, for this entire exercise did not seem to have brought them closer to a resolution of the problem with the changeling complex, which seemed to be their enemy. Still, it had been a phenomenal experience, with remarkable discoveries.

She touched her green beads. Remarkable indeed! Who could say what the future held?

## Chapter 10—Glamor

"I think we have done what we can," Havoc said. "We have assembled twelve Glamors, all that are known, and identified the likely territories of two more. Now we have another mission to tackle: the changeling complex. As long as that exists outside our control, we are vulnerable."

"And we Glamors have had to protect you from its attacks," Stevia said. "It is time to bring it to account."

"Agreement. But first we must return the ikons to their stations, now that we understand why they must remain there."

Stevia shook her head. "Negation. If the changeling complex was not aware of our effort before, it surely is now. Speed is of the essence. We Glamors will see to the return of the ikons; you must tackle the complex while it thinks you are occupied elsewhere."

"You are not bracing the complex with us?"

"When the succubus notified us of the location of the complex, we checked it—and discovered that we are unable to approach it. It is similar in this respect to the ikons and loom. This is another task that must be performed by mortals."

"Agreement. Perhaps unsurprised." Havoc looked around. "Gale and I will nevertheless need some help getting there."

*Silver and I have it, Mentor thought. We will move you as close as is feasible, and remain clear.*

"I need my dragon scale, and she her dulcimer."

The two musical instruments appeared in their hands.

"And minstrel/songstress costumes."

The appropriate clothing appeared on them. Gale's was finely wrought, and he realized that it was made of spider silk. He arranged his own to mask his weapons, particularly his short sword.

"Swale."

The shimmer appeared before him. He poked it with a finger. "Stay with us. Serve as liaison

between us and the Glamors. Keep the others posted on our progress. Have Throe assemble a warrior column sufficient to besiege a city, and move unobtrusively toward the changeling complex, to arrive two days hence."

*This will be fun.* The succubus faded.

"It is a mountain," Stevia said. "Immune to siege."

"Not if someone opens its gates from inside."

"We know of no unguarded entrance. You will not be able to deceive them about your identity." Stevia looked troubled. "In fact, as I consider, I find this foolhardy. Send some nonentity to try to get in. You must remain alive, as king."

"A nonentity could not do what I can."

She shook her head in frustration, glowing red. "You can be the most annoyingly stubborn man." She paused as Gale, Symbol, and Ennui laughed sympathetically. "If you somehow get inside, they will kill you."

"Not at first," Havoc said. "They will want to know more about me, to fathom my plan, lest there be some secret aspect they have overlooked."

"And is there such an aspect?"

"Affirmation."

She looked at him. "You're a fine lover but a foolish strategist. We must assume they will know everything that is said here, and prepare for it."

"That is why I have not presented the details of my plan."

"I want to kiss you, as there may not be another chance before you die. And I can't. Ire." She considered a moment. "But there may be a way." Stevia glanced at Gale. "Kiss him, and broadcast."

Gale smiled and obliged. She gave Havoc a kiss that threatened to make him float away, her mind sending her feeling out to everyone else. He returned it emphatically, delighting in the sheer joy of her nearness and devotion. She had always been his ultimate woman, even as a child, and now she was his perfect desire. There could be no better love.

When it was done, she withdrew somewhat unsteadily and looked around. Havoc followed her gaze.

The Red Glamor had manifested, and she was floating, eyes blissfully closed. The same was true of the Blue and Yellow Glamors. Ine, Bijou, and Spanky stood with similar expressions. And Ennui. And the Lady Aspect.

"She did tell me to broadcast," Gale said, in wonder.

Symbol was the first to speak. "Even I received some of that, and I lack the mind reading ability. There's just something about Havoc. He's the handsomest, feelingest, sexiest man on the planet. We have to love him."

The Green Glamor manifested. "We males deserve similar delight. Kiss again, this time with Havoc broadcasting his impression of Gale."

"Negation!" Symbol said. "That would make me seem old and plain."

"So kiss Symbol," Gale suggested to Havoc.

But Havoc, knowing Symbol's emotion, did not want to tease her that way. "We must get on our mission." He sought the brown dragon. "It is time."

Mentor approached. Havoc addressed her mentally: *give us a moment in limbo.*

A cloud formed around Havoc and Gale. They floated in vagueness. "I need to clarify a fine point," Havoc told her.

"Since we have no chance of fooling the changeling complex, what is the point?"

"They will know our real identities," he said. "But not that we know they know. Therefore they may underestimate us, especially if we blunder into obvious traps and barely escape."

"As if we needed to make any special effort to do that!"

He smiled. "Remember that they may be spying on our every action, word, and thought. We must play our roles completely. Havoc and Gale playing Hayseed and Nonesuch."

She nodded, understanding perfectly. "Kiss me. Just for ourselves."

"Kiss you? I want to marry you!"

"We keep coming back to that," she said sadly.

He kissed her, knowing that she was as eager for marriage as he. If only they weren't changelings! That frustration blunted his edge, and the kiss was not all that it might have been.

Then he and Gale stood in a forest. "What do you have in mind?" she inquired.

He gave her a quick look, then smiled. "We'll pretend to be a minstrel and songstress, sneak into the Changeling Complex, and open its gates to let Throe's soldiers in."

She nodded. "That should work, if they don't catch on to our real identities."

"Why should they? We really are those roles, as good as any; we've done it often enough."

"Agreement. But we'll need supplies, if this is longer than a day."

Havoc looked upward. There was the slope of a mighty mountain. That was their objective; the Changeling complex was within it. "There should be a village close by. Let's walk."

They walked. Their simple dialogue had been entirely bogus, as signaled by Havoc's quick look; it was their sign that someone was probably snooping and nothing he said was to be taken straight. From this moment on they had no privacy. Actually they would be minstrel and songstress, and would try to sneak in, but it would all be an act. It would not fool the spies for a moment, but it might divert them from the real plan, if they believed that Havoc and Gale did not know their ruse was useless.

The real plan was a dangerous gamble, breathtakingly ambitious. He could not tell Gale, even by mind reading; it had to remain buried in his most secret mental recess, known to no one else. Until it could be implemented. But perhaps he could give Gale a hint, later, so that she could work it out for herself.

"We will need a theme," she said.

"The Ballad of Hayseed and Nonesuch."

She smiled. "I love that one."

So did he, but that was not why he had chosen it. It was that it was the best vehicle for the key hint. The ballad itself was an invention of theirs, when they were children. They liked to claim that the tale of the Hats and Coys had been stolen from their Ballad. Of course the tale preceded their effort by centuries, but that suggested their inspiration for it.

The Ballad was really their story of a contest between a talented man and woman, to see who was the best entertainer. They did not perform for others, only for each other. Hayseed wanted to impress Nonesuch so much that she would fall in love with him. Then he would laugh in her face, humiliating her, and be adjudged the best performer. Nonesuch had a similar objective, seeking to impress him with her talent and her body so that he would fall in love with her. Then she would deny him, and be judged superior. But their efforts would prove to be too effective; each would be impressed while impressing, and each would fall in love. So instead of humiliating each other, they would recognize their mutual losses, and make wonderful love. This notion had been thrilling to them as children, and remained so as adolescents, and they had played it out many times, each time with a different surprise. For there was another element, that grew with their experience: each one of them was not what he or she seemed, but actually a superior person, perhaps a professional entertainer masquerading as a beginner, so that their effort to impress each other was effective. Or a king, matched by a queen, or a long-absent lover returning. Not every variant worked perfectly, but all concluded the same way.

They had had full sex the first time in the Ballad, perhaps not a great performance on any absolute scale, as their bodies had not at that point quite caught up with their feeling, but highly significant for them. It was not the sex per se that had moved them so strongly, but the full realization of their love. That love had grown and refined as they aged, defining itself, perfecting itself, becoming its own end. Havoc had progressed to be a skilled martial artist, a clever minstrel, and a dedicated lover: for Gale. Gale had become a lovely actress, a remarkable songstress, and a dedicated lover: for Havoc. She had broadcast that emotion during their kiss, and stunned the minds of those who received it. It was that perfect union that had been interrupted by Havoc's forced assumption of the role of King of Charm, a development that had at first outraged him.

All of it, really, had been put in motion by their discovery of Mentor the Blue Dragon, whom they had befriended, and who had given them the dragon seeds that guided them so reliably. He had set them on the paths to entertainment and defense, and taught them of magic, preparing them for the larger world that had been hidden from them. None of them had known how much that guidance would be needed in their early adult lives. At least now they were together again, even if they could not marry.

Havoc paused in his walking. He had been so busy recently that he had had little occasion to reflect on his relationship with Gale. Now the memory overwhelmed him.

She paused too. "Question?"

"Love."

"Vivid and Void."

They embraced and kissed, this time only for themselves, without restraint, sending their feeling out not to others, but to each other. It passed back and forth between them, intensifying almost painfully. Havoc had known many women in the past year, and denigrated none of them, and Gale had known a number of men, as they followed the exigencies of governing and no fault. Symbol was correct: each of them had potent appeal for the other gender, and relationships were easy to come by. Ennui, Lady Aspect, Symbol, Bijou, Stevia, Ine, all were excellent in their particular fashions, and some were remarkable lovers. One was a concealed Glamor, with powers beyond his ken. But Gale was his one true love, and would always be. Little else truly mattered.

"Devotion," she murmured.

In time they had run out of surprises for the Ballad, so could play it through only when one of them came up with a new one. It was that element that would give Gale the hint this time. But could it work? He did not know, and if it did not, they would both be dead. He did not want her to die.

He gazed at her, about to speak again, to urge her to give this up, that he would chance it alone. But she shook her head, knowing and refusing. She would not leave him.

"If I could marry you this instant—" he said.

"This would be my wedding dress," she said. She did not mean that she objected, but that she was ready at any time.

"I loved you before you were beautiful."

"I loved you before you were competent."

"But now you are the loveliest woman on the planet."

"And you are king."

And none of it mattered, apart from their love.

They resumed walking, and soon reached the village. The Village Elder stepped out to meet them. "Greeting."

"Acknowledgment," Havoc said. "We are traveling entertainers, interested in exploring new terrain, and in finding responsive audiences along the way. Are any to be found in this vicinity?"

"Affirmation. We seldom encounter entertainers here, and welcome the opportunity."

"Introduction: I am Hayseed the Minstrel, and this is Nonesuch the Songstress."

"I am the Elder of Mountain Lee Village. We lack a separate house, being much in the backwoods, but a family will be glad to provide for you this night."

"Appreciation. Have you a preference as to type?"

"We are a moral village." That meant that no risqué or immoral songs were wanted.

"We honor that."

They were soon ensconced in the house of a willing family that made them quite comfortable. Then they went to the central circle, where the villagers had gathered, the children seated in the tightest circle. The Elder had taken them on faith; now they would amply reward that faith.

Havoc stepped into the center of that stage. "Greeting."

"Acknowledged!" the children chorused.

Havoc introduced himself and Gale, then got down to business. "We need a tree," he said.

The Elder signaled a man, who stepped forward. "Stand here," Havoc said, indicating the edge of the stage. "You are the lonely willow tree."

There was a murmur among the elder members of the audience. They recognized the song, while the children did not. That was a good sign; the parents would approve, and the children would be surprised.

"Beyond this willow tree is the sea," Havoc said. "That is to say, a very great lake, below a steep bank, with fierce currents and hungry monsters. No folk dare swim in it, for they would die."

Several of the children shuddered; this was scary.

"But it is a fine view," Havoc continued. "There is space between the tree and the bank where folk can stand and feel the cool breeze from the sea. It is nice."

Then Havoc walked to the other side of the stage, where Gale waited, properly demure, with her hammer dulcimer. He faced away from her and addressed the audience. He played a chord on the dragon scale, and sang:

There was a youth, a cruel youth,  
He lived beside the sea.

Six little maidens he drowned there,  
By a lonely willow tree.

The children looked alarmed. The adults nodded. There was a lesson in this song. Havoc turned and took Gale's elbow without interfering with her music. They walked slowly across the stage to the tree.

As he walked forth with a nice girl  
As he walked by the sea  
An evil thought there came to him  
By that lonely willow tree.

Havoc paused, letting the moment build. Then he faced Gale, who looked divinely innocent as she continued to play the musical theme. He sang to her:

"Now turn your back to the waterside  
Your face to the willow tree  
Six little maids have I drowned here  
And you the seventh shall be."

Gale had looked interested, until he came to the part about drowning maids. Then she reacted with obvious alarm. So did the children.

"But first take off your golden gown  
Take off your gown," said he.  
"For though I intend to murder you  
I'll not spoil your finery."

Gale looked desperately around, as if seeking some escape. But she was caught between the tree and the sea. Then she lifted her chin as if thinking of something. She faced the cruel man and sang:

"Then turn around, you false young man  
Turn around," said she.  
"For it is not meet that such as you  
A naked woman should see."

There was a gasp among the children; this was indeed a moral village, and the very thought of a naked woman was alarming. The parents nodded approvingly; this was a proper response.

Havoc looked at the audience, then shrugged. It was obvious that the maid could not get away, because the cruel man blocked the way. He raised his nose with supercilious disdain, turned to face the sea, and sang the narrative.

He turned around then, that false young man  
Round about turned he.

At that point Gale took over the narrative. She put away her dulcimer for the moment and grabbed Havoc from behind. She shoved him violently forward. Obviously surprised, he lurched off the stage and fell to the ground with a musical splash.

And seizing him boldly in both her arms  
She tossed him into the sea!  
"Lie there, lie there, you false young man  
Lie there, lie there," cried she.  
"Six little maidens you drowned here  
Go keep them company!"



The children cheered, and the adults remained approving: the maid had not gone naked. Havoc, meanwhile, was lying on the ground by the children, drowned. He sang:

He sank beneath the icy waves  
He sank down into the sea.  
No living thing grieved a tear for him  
Save that lonely willow tree.

The village man representing the tree raised one hand to wipe an eye. Volunteers always liked getting in on the act; that was part of the appeal of such presentations.

Gale concluded, setting aside her dulcimer, bowing to the audience, and was greeted by more cheering. Havoc remained dead a moment more, then quietly got up and stood at the edge of the stage. Their opening number was a fine success.

Thereafter, they could do no wrong. They dramatized several other proper moral songs before pausing to teach some of them to those villagers interested in learning. It was a pleasure to get back into this sort of thing. Havoc knew that he was a good stage manager and singer, and Gale was expert; they had provided as fine a dramatic singing as was likely to be had anywhere. For this evening, they could forget the duties and perils of governance and just be themselves, in a manner.

"We seldom see troupes here in Mountain Lee, but you are something special," the man of the house remarked as they returned for the night. "Extremely handsome and talented, both of you. May I inquire what brings you here?"

"We thought we'd climb the mountain," Havoc said. "We seldom get out alone together, no fault."

"No fault," the man repeated. "Best not to mention that in this village."

"We won't," Havoc agreed, allowing the implication of illicit liaison to stand.

"As for climbing the mountain: best not."

"Not?" Gale asked, looking prettily disappointed.

"It is haunted. Unsafe. We avoid it, especially at night."

Havoc found this interesting for his own reasons. "Surely there can be no haunts in nonChroma territory."

"We don't speak much of Chroma in this village, either. But there are haunts. There're deadly merfolk where a Blue fringe intersects the path, and goblins further up. In fact we call it Goblin Mountain. That's as much as we know; none return from beyond. So if you want peaceful hiking, stay clear of the mountain."

Havoc put on a daunted look. "Goblins!"

Gale looked at Havoc. "But dear, you promised—"

Havoc sighed. "Yet if it is dangerous—"

"More likely scare stories to hide nice camping grounds. Who ever heard of deadly merfolk? They make love not war."

"Negation," the old man said. "He tempts young women to their doom, and she tempts young men. They abuse their victims horribly, then destroy them."

Havoc was surprised by this. "I had understood they usually sought sex with travelers, but not that they harmed them."

The man stared darkly at him. "Depends on your definition of harm. Even those few who escape are so corrupted by the temptation that they are unable to reside longer in Mountain Lee Village, and must go elsewhere."

Havoc realized that the act of sex with a mer buoy or guirl might well be appalling to the moral villagers. Why would a person care to remain moral after experiencing such interaction? Extended mer sex could be wearing, but brief sex might be delightful, if the mers cared to make it so. They might, just to mess up the moral villagers and cause more young folk to visit. So that was perhaps understandable. But the idea of abusive merfolk disturbed him.

"They should be no danger away from the water," Gale said. Of course she knew better, but that caution did not fit her present role.

Havoc shrugged and returned to the man. "I think we must go there, at least until we encounter goblins."

"Then it will be too late," the man said. "We understand they do unmentionable things to women—and to men."

Such as forcing them into sexual activity. But Havoc had heard of rogue part-humans who could make sex ugly indeed. The villagers could have a legitimate case. For one thing, if the goblins were part of the Changeling complex defense, the affronts would be calculated to discourage further intrusions.

"But if there's a path, it must lead somewhere."

"To a goblin stronghold, most likely," the man said. "I urge you not to go there; no one will come search if you disappear."

"Appreciation for the warning." Havoc shot a dark look at Gale. "We will have words on this anon."

She looked properly rebellious. "As long as no one goes back on his word."

They were given a nook with reasonable privacy, but considering the nature of the village, made it a point to sleep clearly apart from each other.

In the morning they traded a song for some bread to carry along, and set off on the path to

Goblin Mountain. No one stopped them, but neither did anyone encourage them. They had been warned.

Once they were fairly clear of the village, they talked about it, playing their roles. "There must be something interesting up there," Gale said.

"It may be dangerous. Goblins are not creatures to be fooled with."

"I don't believe it. I want to see."

"I hope you don't get us both gobbled."

"He didn't say they ate folk. It sounded more like sex. What's the harm in that?"

"I wouldn't care to describe it to you."

"O, pooh! You're just trying to scare me off. Maybe those goblin maidens are pretty."

"And the men sadistic." They were speaking for unseen ears, as Hayseed and Nonesuch. So that the Changeling Complex would be reassured that they thought their disguise sufficient, and that they could actually sneak in and open the gates. "But first there may be the merfolk. They normally want sex too, but it's different."

"In what manner?"

"They don't always leave off soon—and their partners can't quit."

"That sounds fabulous."

"Not necessarily."

"So you say. I'm intrigued."

"Foolishness." Of course she knew exactly what he meant, but Nonesuch was supposed to be foolishly innocent.

They came to the base of the mountain. "This is weird," Gale said, peering at a rocky projection. "It's not volcanic."

"*All* mountains are volcanic."

"That's what you think. For one thing, where is the color? There are no nonChroma cones, are there?"

He laughed. "How could there be? They would erupt nonChroma magic." Which was a seeming contradiction of terms.

"Anyway, look at this: layered rock. That's not lava flow."

Havoc shrugged. "So maybe it is a mountain of debris or something. Now we've seen it; let's go elsewhere."

"You promised!"

Havoc sighed. "Let's get on with the Ballad."

She nodded. Theoretically they thought themselves beyond the range of spies, so had been speaking openly; now they were coming close enough to go into their act.

Privately Havoc wondered: to what degree could they fool the Changeling masters? If they did not, they would probably be killed without ever getting into the complex. The agents of the complex had tried to kill him before; this would be handing them an easy victory. Even if the two of them did get inside, there was no guarantee that his remarkable ploy would work. There were so many ways to fail, and only one to succeed. This whole thing seemed crazy.

Which was the reason no one else should anticipate it, including the personnel of the Changeling complex.

And Gale was taking it on faith. She trusted him. She had always liked to say that when things got worst, Havoc would wreak havoc. He would love to do that, as he had on prior occasions. If his plan worked.

The path ascended. "You are a remarkably pretty woman, Nonesuch," he said to Gale, playing the role of seducer.

"You are equivalently handsome, Hayseed," she rejoined, playing a similar role. They had to compliment each other constantly, and do things for each other, doing their best to make each other fall in love. It was a game whose conclusion was foregone, but they both enjoyed playing it.

"Let me help you with that pack."

"Why thank you sir," she said, giving him her pack. "That deserves a kiss." She kissed him on the cheek.

As they climbed, his compliments become more suggestive, and she arranged, under the pretext of becoming warm, to show an increasing amount of interesting flesh.

*Oh get on with it!* It was Swale, checking on them, having little patience with the slowness of the script. To her, what wasn't immediately sexual was a waste of time. She had intercepted him by placing herself ahead of him as he walked, so that his motion overlapped her. She could not touch him herself, but this device, employed with his acquiescence, had similar effect.

They ignored her, because their thoughts could too readily be tracked, as she understood. But she had news for them: *hot-bodied merfolk ahead. She's armed; he isn't. Doesn't need to be, in water.* Swale departed.

The path descended into a blue forested vale set into the mountain, the fringe of Chroma they had been warned of. There was a widened river or thin blue lake in the crevice. The path advanced to

this, and resumed on the other side. The lake was too wide to jump over, and there were no handy logs to make a bridge or raft; they would have to swim. That was surely the point of this setup: to put travelers into the environment of the predators.

"The merfolk will be alert," Havoc murmured. "You know what to do."

"I think I have found the chance to show you my whole body," Gale said, smiling, going into her act. "When you won't be able to touch it."

"That water may be dangerous," Havoc said.

"Pooh. It's beautiful. I never saw such lovely blue."

"Nonesuch, trust me: color is dangerous."

"So you say." She flung off the last of her clothing, stood gloriously naked for a moment, then plunged into the water. "Catch me if you can!"

Havoc had a traveling spear. He quickly unfolded it and stood at the bank, spear poised. Sure enough, there was a ripple approaching Gale from the right end of the lake. It was a blue merman. She saw him and screamed in simulated terror.

"Hey, buoy!" Havoc called. "Want to bet on my aim?"

The buoy paused to look at him. The fact was, travelers did not usually carry such weapons unless they knew how to use them, and the merman was well within normal throwing range. He lifted his two hands in a signal of capitulation and drifted back. "Introduction," he said. "I am Pistol."

"Hayseed. I do not fathom the meaning of your name."

"It's from the White Chroma: what they call a firearm. A short tube that fires out hard balls." He glanced at Gale. "Harmlessly, in my case, but they can have consequence, such as offspring."

So it was a sexual analogy. Now Havoc remembered his own experience with a similar device, when he had visited a White Chroma zone as king. This was evidently a macho merman, fancying himself with women. He had probably wowed bold village girls who sought education lacking in Mountain Lee Village.

Meanwhile Gale swam diligently to the far bank, and flung herself out of the water. Both Havoc and the buoy watched with interest as she scrambled to her feet, presenting a full bottom, and turned around, breathing hard as she presented full breasts. She was the most splendid figure of a woman, and making sure it showed. That was part of the act. The threat was real, but they could handle it, so they were making the most of what offered.

"That—that man!" Gale cried, affrighted. "He's *blue!*"

"I am indeed blue, but I'd be happy, if I could get into you, you luscious creature," Pistol said. "Why don't you jump in again? I promise to fill you delightfully to the brim."

"He *talks!*" Gale cried.

The buoy made a droll expression. He evidently liked naïve women, but this was remarkable ignorance.

Havoc ignored him, overtly. "I'll toss my things across to you," he said to Gale. "Then you must guard me as I cross."

"But I don't know a thing about weapons," she protested.

Ha. She knew exactly as much as she needed to about the one weapon she favored. "Just hold the spear, and stab it at the merman if he approaches." This would be virtually useless, but they were playing their game.

"If you say so," she said uncertainly.

Havoc bundled her clothing and his, and hurled it across. Gale caught it as it bounced on the bank, bending over to pick it up, providing Pistol another spectacular view of her shaped posterior. Then Havoc threw the spear across, so that it stuck into the ground. Gale bent well forward to pull it out, her breasts elongating where the buoy could appreciate them. Then she straightened up, everything quivering. She knew exactly how to hold any male's attention. Havoc recognized and appreciated Symbol's influence in that respect.

While Pistol's eyes were monopolized by Gale's show, Havoc searched the rest of the lake, looking for the merman's inevitable companion. He spied what he sought: the guirl was waiting well below the surface on the left end of the lake. She made no bubbles, needing no air to breathe; her gills sufficed. She was almost invisible to any but a trained eye, and she had a knife. So it was not sex but food she was after. She was the most immediately dangerous one. The buoy would take sex first, then perhaps drown the victim and save the meat. It was now clear why few travelers who progressed beyond this point ever returned.

"Now warn him back while I cross," Havoc said.

Gale held the spear somewhat inexpertly. "Are you sure? Maybe I should cross back."

"Negative. You wanted to camp on Goblin Mountain, so we'll camp."

"All right." She poked the spear uncertainly at Pistol, who was sliding close. He did not try to conceal the fact that he was sexually excited by her appearance. Havoc knew that Gale noticed and was pleased; she always liked appreciation for her performances.

Suddenly the buoy leaped half out of the water, catching the end of the spear. He yanked. Gale, overbalanced, screamed as she fell into the water. She did it perfectly; no one would have suspected how well coordinated she really was.

Havoc dived, going for them. He was the bold man rushing to the rescue of the helpless girl, heedless of danger. And the guirl shot up to intercept him, knife hand extended. The mer-trap had been sprung. The mers had needed to get both of them in the water at the same time, so that neither would escape to tell the tale.

Now the action was joined. Havoc plunged down to meet the guirl, surprising her. She had not realized that he was a martial artist, or she would never have approached him so straightforwardly. He caught her knife hand, squeezed her wrist painfully, took the knife from her, and drew her body into his. It was a nice body, lithe yet quite well fleshed, an incidental pleasure to embrace for whatever purpose.

Then hell broke loose. She had been surprised, but this was her element. She was a fit and determined predator, no fainting flower. She wrapped her arms around him and dived, her linked legs propelling them both to the depths. He had the knife, but she had the water, and would soon drown him. He could not come close to matching her swimming ability.

But as her arms clasped him close to her supple bare body, his arms were not idle. His left hand caught her trailing blue hair, wrapped it tight, and drew her head firmly back. His right hand brought the knife up to touch her exposed throat. The message was plain: yield or die.

She made a stressed nod, then launched them both toward the surface. He maintained his grip and his threat. He had learned long since never to underestimate an enemy. Their heads broke the surface. Now he could breathe, but he did not relax. She was still dangerous.

He glanced past her head, and saw that Gale had Pistol similarly: one hand locked in his flaring hair, the other nudging the blade to his throat, and her thighs clamped on his projecting member so that he could not twist free. She was no Amazon, but she could swim well and knew how to use her knife, which was always on her body. She could kill him in an instant, and had made that plain. He had been so dazzled by her body and seeming naïveté that he had taken no precautions against possible counterattack. Havoc had counted on that, so that he had been able to focus entirely on the guirl, who was more immediately dangerous because she wasn't looking for sex first.

But now came her second ploy: the seduction. "You have beaten me, landlubber," the guirl said. "You are some man. Take me." She parted her knees without separating her fluked feet. "Introduction: I am Pistil, the very flower of my kind."

"Hayseed, minstrel," he said, knife still poised. "Just move us to land."

"I hear and obey." She began moving them toward the bank as her hands slid down his back, caressingly. Her flexing thighs slid against his hips, then jammed in close as her hands tweaked his crotch.

"Hey!" But it was too late; she had succeeded in getting his member into her ready sheath, which clasped it firmly. He had misjudged her; she did want sex. At least as a way to nullify his advantage.

He moved the blade, scratching her neck warningly. But Pistil smiled. "You would not kill a guirl who wants only her second by you. You bested me; you are worthy. Do not deny me. Relax and enjoy it."

"Insult!" he said angrily. "Female obscenity!"

Pistil's vagina performed peristalsis, rhythmically squeezing his captive member, making it expand and harden. It was impossible not to respond, and the urge was on him. He remembered belatedly that the merfolk were required to have seconds rather than fourths, because of their narrow genetic

base. Of course she wanted sex; how could he have thought otherwise? She must have planned to cow him with her knife, hold him under long enough to make him yield, then give him spot mouth-to-mouth breathing while she forcefully seduced him deep underwater. There might even be a flooded nether cave she could lock him into. "Reville me if you must, but give this appealing flower your live seed, you powerful man." Her body pressed against him, breasts and belly flattening.

She had him. He could indeed kill her, but that was pointless, as she was no longer attacking him. A man was not supposed to decline a requested fourth, and that surely applied to seconds too. He had to let her do it, and spare her life, though she was raping him.

"I am defeated," she murmured. Hardly true; she had merely been balked in one manner, then cleverly counterattacked to gain her objective. "I will not bite. Lover's word." She brought her face slowly to his, so that the knife would not cut open her throat, and kissed him. Her eager tongue sought his as her vagina expanded inside so that it drew similarly on him, generating a relative vacuum beyond a tight closure. He felt burstingly huge. He remembered how the Black Chroma woman Intrigue had imploded, drawing him into her and his seed out of him in a single surge. Pistil was not as potent as that, but there were aspects of similarity.

It was too much. He climaxed, jetting forcefully into her warm conducive center. He felt her belly and breasts quiver with each pulse, as if being pounded from the inside.

"Appreciation," she said with a beatific smile as she smoothly milked the last of it from him. This had the effect of extending his pleasure as intensity faded to satisfaction.

They were still moving toward the bank. His feet touched the sloping ground under water. "Now you have done it," he said gruffly. "Let me go." He nudged her again with the knife.

Pistil relaxed her organ, allowing him to withdraw. He pushed away from her. Only when he was standing firmly in the muck did he remove the knife from her throat. He backed onto the bank, knife still held ready.

"Smart, too," she said. "I like that." She had promised not to bite, and she had not, but she hadn't promised not to kill once she had his seed. She lifted her right hand. He flipped the knife through the air, and she caught it neatly. "You have taken my weapon, and returned it; I will not use it against you hereafter. When you return, I will come on land for you, no fault, if you ask. To amplify my chance for a second by you. My respect is not readily won."

And it was tempting. No fault in this case meant that she would not seek to kill him, just to give him pleasure. She did want his baby, but it normally took several sessions to be sure of it. There were differences even among merfolk, and she had rare presence and nerve. In addition, Pistil's versatile vagina had treated him far more interestingly than the guirl Theme's had, when he fetched the first ikon. She was superbly equipped. She had raped him, and made him like it. "Perhaps," he said grudgingly.

She smiled and vanished under the water. Havoc oriented on Gale and the buoy. They remained clasped face to face. He fetched the spear, which floated nearby. "Are you done?" he inquired grimly.

"Done," Pistol agreed, disengaging and swimming smoothly backwards. "Maiden, you are the best." He disappeared under the water.



Havoc helped draw Gale out as she put away her knife. "You wanted him?"

"I was intrigued, once I had him harmless, so I let him. He is a robust man. His member pulsates wonderfully."

"It is a special ability of the merfolk."

"The females too?"

"More so, I think. She held me in her, and sucked."

"Envy. I can't do that."

"Needless, for you. But if Swale joined you, you could do it."

Gale nodded. "One day I will ask her."

He kissed her. "Needless," he repeated. "I love you."

She shrugged. "We didn't want to kill them anyway."

"Agreed. But had they been ready for us, we would have been dead meat." He was speaking literally.

"That's what made it so titillating. Seducing a killer."

"She invited me for another session, on land, no fault."

"Negation! You're mine on land, and not no fault."

"Awww," he said, imitating a child.

She mock-punched him in the belly. "Those two Blue mers must be something, together."

"It can last for hours. They do it while swimming long dull distances. It's really better brief, for us."

"If you say so."

They dried, dressed, and resumed their trek. Havoc hoped their act had impressed the likely watchers. They could have crossed without getting tangled with the merfolk, and could have avoided sex with them, but they needed to seem more careless than they were.

The path climbed steeply out of the blue cleft and the colors became normal variegated nonChroma. "I feel back at home," Havoc said.

"I think nonChroma is prettiest."

"I think you're the prettiest."

"Oh come on—you just had hot sex with that guirl."

"Can't I compliment you without being refuted?"

She melted visibly. "Well, I suppose you might make the effort."

"I'll whisper a sweet nothing in your lovely ear."

"It will float out the other ear." But she cocked her ear for him.

He put his lips there and whispered "Love," letting the feeling swell, for it was genuine. Under cover of that emotion he showed a brief thought: *Silver*.

She turned her head to put her lips to his ear. "Returned," she whispered, and her love swelled similarly. *Glamor*. Those two thoughts had been as well masked as they could arrange, and there were no details, because they did not know how good spying mind readers might be.

Then they kissed. It was true that each had just had emphatic sex with another, but their love for each other was unaffected. They had never been sexually jealous of each other, and since leaving their home Village Trifle they had become well familiar with no fault relationships and variants. So her remark about his hot sex was a joke, implying that his expressed love was merely a pretext to seduce her.

Nevertheless he did want to seduce her. They had not had sex with each other in some time, and he had no certainty that they would survive the next day. "Oh, Gale!" It was sheer longing.

"Let's find a place," she said.

The Ballad had not yet run its course, but they could hurry that up. "Done."

They walked more swiftly along the path, which now curved around the mountain rather than going straight up it. The scenery changed, becoming less esthetic. The trees seemed to be of the same species, but smaller and more gnarly; the bushes were twisted and discolored, with few flowers or fruits. "I don't like this region," Gale said. "There's something wrong with it."

"Agreement. Even the flowers are shoddy."

In an hour they found an ideal campsite, a reasonably level ledge beside a flowing streamlet. It was only afternoon, but they prepared to camp for the night. Havoc gathered dry wood and made a fire, while Gale gathered dry moss for a bed. He set poles to make a shelter; she spread light canvas across it. They broke out their pack supplies and ate, constantly complimenting each other. Havoc broke sticks to feed the fire, showing off his muscles, and Gale sat on a low stone with her knees high, letting the falling skirt show off her thighs.

"You are so strong," she said.

"You are so beautiful." It was the finale of the script, appealing in large part because it reflected

their true views.

They finished eating, then retired to the shelter. "I want you, Nonesuch," he said.

"Take me, Hayseed."

"No fault?"

She hesitated. "No commitment?"

"None."

"Then no sex."

"But you said you love me!"

Slowly she undressed, visibly saddened. "As you wish."

"Aha! You love me!"

"I love you," she agreed, laying herself unhappily open to him.

"Then I have won," he exclaimed. "But I will not have sex with you. For I am the nonChroma Glamor of Trees. Sex with me would wipe you out."

For an instant her astonishment showed. Then she rallied. "You have not won, for I am the nonChroma Glamor of Mosses. Sex with me would wipe *you* out."

"You can't be nonChroma! That's mine!"

"No, it's mine."

He considered. "It must be both."

"Both," she agreed.

Then they embraced and kissed. He had sprung his new ending for the ballad, and she had responded as she had to. Now they would have sex, admitting that each had won and lost the game, and they were in mutual love. But the meaning went beyond the game.

*About time*, Swale thought.

They lay together, well ready for the finale despite their recent events with the merfolk.

And both their dragon seeds buzzed.

*Obscenity!* the succubus swore.

"Now it comes," Havoc murmured, unmoving.

"Expletive!" Gale did not move either.

Then the goblins swarmed in. They were human in appearance, but stunted, with big heads and big feet and hands, but small globular bodies and ugly faces. They carried spears and clubs. There were scores of them, too many to fight. Havoc and Gale were naked, caught away from their clothing and his weapons. They did not move.

"Exuberance!" the goblin leader cried. "Tie them!"

Cord appeared, and soon both of them were bound to small stakes pounded into the sloping ground, arms and legs apart. Because they were mounted at an angle, they could see their campsite and the goblins and each other. The goblin men clustered around Gale, touching her breasts and crotch. The goblin women surrounded Havoc, admiring his muscles and member. Goblin children looked at both, wide-eyed; it seemed they had never seen such creatures before. But overwhelming the curiosity was an emotional ambiance of hatred.

*Ugly customers*, Swale thought. *Stall them a while*. She moved on to Gale.

"First we rape you," the leader announced. "Then we impale you. Then we torture you to death." He waited, but they did not react. "What have you to say before we start?"

Havoc spoke. "You look human, but distorted. Why is that?"

"Why do you hate us?" Gale asked, ignoring the poking fingers.

"It's just the way we are," the leader said. "We hate you because you're handsome."

"This has the look of poisoning," Havoc said. "Your extremities are normal sized, but your bodies are dwarfed."

"So are the trees and shrubs," Gale said. "They are suffering too."

"What do you care?" the chief demanded.

"There must be something in the air or water or soil here," Havoc said. "Something that hurts whatever it touches. You need to identify it and eliminate it."

"Or move away from it," Gale said. "Then maybe your children will grow up normal."

"This is our home," the chief said. "We won't move."

"We might be able to identify it," Havoc said. "So as to get rid of it. Then you could live here in health."

"Enough!" the chief cried. "You have said your say. Now we destroy you."

"Please don't do this," Gale pleaded. "Hurting us won't improve your lot."

But already the goblins were swarming over them, intent on their mischief. Havoc saw a male setting himself at Gale's midsection, about to rape her, and a woman was straddling him similarly. They were serious about rape, and surely serious about the rest of it. They would not listen to reason.

Had the two of them been able to stall long enough?

Then Havoc felt something touching his body, ticklishly light. He saw spiders—hundred, thousands, swarming over him. Gale was similarly covered.

Just in time. He relaxed and let nature take its course.

The spiders did not bite or sting him; they merely ran over his body. In a moment they reached the body of the goblin woman who was grabbing his member. They disappeared into her ragged clothing.

She screamed. She leaped off him, clawing at her clothing. Immediately after, the goblin man on Gale shouted and scrambled similarly. The others stared, not knowing what was going on. But in another moment, they too began screaming and dancing, tearing off their clothing. They fled the ledge, trying to escape the spiders. Soon all of them were gone.

Something was working at Havoc's wrists. He looked, and saw spiders covering the cords that bound him. They were chewing through them. Soon the bonds gave way at wrists and ankles, and he was free. He sat up, set his feet carefully on the ground, and waited for the little spiders to clear. Gale performed similarly.

"Appreciation," he murmured as the spiders disappeared. Then the two of them resumed their camping as if nothing had happened. They were fairly sure the goblins would not return.

"I might have been frightened," Gale murmured as he embraced her under the lean-to. "But I knew Silver would not let us down."

"Your friend yellow is part of him now." The body of Yellow might be dead, for spiders did not live as long as human beings did, but if the awareness of individuals could be merged with that of the Spider Glamor, that was a kind of immortality.

"Agreement. I'm so glad; I never dared inquire after Yellow, for fear he was gone."

"And Mentor. He was not young when we knew him, and he had suffered injury. But now he is eternal."

"And we still have his seeds."

"They never buzzed when we tangled with the merfolk," he said, realizing.

"Because we were not in real danger. We knew what was coming, and were prepared for it." She smiled. "You taught me that hair and knife trick. It worked so well!"

He caught hold of her hair and pulled gently. "Yield, helpless maiden, or I'll do this!" He kissed her breast and tongued the nipple.

She struggled in such manner as to shove the breast harder against his face. "Terrified acquiescence."

"Satisfaction." He kissed her mouth, letting love and passion overflow. "Oh, Nonesuch!"

"Mutual, Hayseed."

They proceeded to their scheduled act of love, savoring every aspect of it. The edge was off, thanks to their recent exploits with the merfolk, but the slower passion was more fulfilling. All the other women Havoc had known were but fractional aspects of Gale, his one true love.

"Joy," she breathed.

"If only we could marry."

And there was the expletive of it, again. "Irony!"

She laughed. "You got that backwards. You should have thought irony and said 'Expletive!'"

"Just hold me, beloved."

She did. No more was necessary.

They slept embraced until morning, getting as thorough rest as they could, because they knew they might have a difficult time ahead. Then they set off along the further trail.

It wound along the mountain, making a spiral around the narrowing peak. The vegetation got worse, and finally gave up, leaving the slope bare. The air here had a fetor; Havoc did not like breathing it, but had no choice. "Maybe it's better above," he said.

"Hope."

They came to cracks in the bare rock, from which flowed trickles of malodorous fluid. It spread out as it descended, coating the ground, then thinning and fading into a foul vapor that continued the descent. "This must be it," Havoc said. "Like volcanic vents."

"But this is not a volcano."

"Agreement. Analogy only. Something ugly is beneath, and this leakage poisons the life downslope."

"Natural?"

"Doubtful. The life on this mountain would have adapted to it if it were natural, as life does to the magic of the Chroma."

"I heard a weird story once, of something called pollution, back on ancient Earth. This seems like it."

"Affirmation. When it rains, the water must carry it on down, stunting the brush and trees, and the creatures that feed on them."

"Thus goblins. We were right: there is a source for the poison."

They moved on above the vents, and at last the air cleared. They climbed faster, recovering strength. There were even a few shrubs here, and some grass, showing that the pollution did not rise to this level.

At the very top was a series of metallic pipes rising from the rock, each expanding above head height into a cone or cup open to the sky. "This is not natural," Gale said.

Havoc nodded. "I want to see into one of these."

"Heft me up; I'll look."

He took her by knee and thigh under her skirt and lifted her until her head was well above his. There was a slight breeze, so he focused to maintain their balance. "They are screened," she reported. "Very fine mesh forming a shallow depression, obviously porous. They would let water pass."

"So they are water collectors." He lowered her, setting her gently on the ground.

She straightened herself out. "Did you forget, Hayseed?"

"Question?"

"You didn't even Peek," she reproved him. "There I was, helplessly exposed, skirt no protection."

"Mortification. I did forget. Let me lift you up again."

"Too late. One chance is all, this hour."

"Cruel mistress."

"Cruel *fiancée*."

"Maybe half a Peek down your shirt?"

She made as if to close her shirt tight. "Some lessons must be learned the hard way." Then she got serious. "What does it mean?"

"That there are people down there who don't mind polluting the mountain but want fresh air and water for themselves."

"Someone should speak to them about selfishness."

"That must be up to us."

"Curiosity: how?"

"First we must get their attention." They surely already had the complex personnel attention, but they needed to force it to become obvious.

"Ditto the above."

"Private notion." He walked away from the pipes, starting back down the slope. Just above the pollution vents he removed his water skin, and reached for hers. Both were half empty. He poured one into the other and gave the full one to her. Then he took the other to the vent that was flowing most thickly, and held its aperture to the flow.

"Observation: yuck!"

"Then stand clear; one of us might as well smell nice." He continued to hold the water skin in place, though the stench was surrounding him and making breathing uncomfortable.

"You will have to wash off your stinking eyes before you get a Peek."

"I suffer already." Indeed, he realized that he would not be able to continue this long, because he was choking. The fumes were not mere smell; there was something sickening here. But he needed to collect a fair amount of the flow.

A hand was shaking his shoulder. "Hayseed! Get upslope and breathe."

He got unsteadily to his feet and stumbled upward, finding fresher air. Gale squatted by the vent, holding the water skin in place. "But you'll stink too," he protested weakly.

"All the better to keep you company."

He gulped in air, his head clearing. Then he returned to take another turn, letting Gale breathe upslope. She did not look at all well, but it was the only way to fill the water skin.

When it was half full, he decided they had enough. He dragged it up the slope to the pipes as they both recovered their breath. When they reached the top he said "Now I will get my promised Peek. Lift this up and pour."

Her eyes lighted as her mouth formed an O of appreciation. She held the skin in her arms, averting her face, and he hefted her again by knee and thigh. He looked up and did catch a wondrous Peek of her bottom under the skirt. Her thighs had filled out marvelously since their childhood days when they last seriously played Tickle & Peek; somehow he hadn't thought to notice in this particular manner. But his purpose was to make sure she was close enough to pour the noxious elixir into the pipe. She was, and the stuff seemed to be flowing. A slow cloud of fumes overflowed the rim and settled down on him.

"Save some for the next," he said.

She managed to twitch her skirt. "The next Peek?"



"Next air vent."

"Awww. Affirmation."

He let her down, and they backed away from the pipe. If that air led directly into the complex, there would soon be a reaction below.

They went to another pipe and repeated the process, pouring more noxious goo in. Then they went to a third.

"Down," Havoc said tersely, lowering her as she quickly closed the waterskin. He had been keeping an eye out, and saw the men emerging from trapdoors in the slope. "Go unconscious when you feel the stun."

She nodded, facing the oncoming men. Then there was a pulse in Havoc's head, all that remained of the changeling stun switch they had had nullified. He collapsed, and Gale sank gracefully beside him, nominally unconscious. Both of them buried their aware thoughts, leaving their open thoughts confused or blank.

"Changelings, all right," a man said gruffly. "Take them down. Separate their weapons."

Men efficiently frisked Havoc, taking his folding staff, short sword, three knives, and wooden knuckles. "Loaded for bear, with quality tools."

"She's got a pretty little blade in her hair. These are professionals."

"Pretending to be tourists. And dumping toxic sludge down our air pipes. What an obscenity of a ploy."

"But one damned clever way to get our attention."

"Not quite clever enough."

They put Havoc on a mat and hauled it across to a trapdoor, while others hauled Gale similarly, and still others carried off the half-spent waterskin.

"What a mess to clean up," a man complained.

"Fiendish ingenuity," another said. "These ones need to be destroyed."

"Too bad. They're really nice specimens."

They shoved Havoc's rug into the aperture. It slid along a chute, spiraling down until it fetched up in a chamber where a number of men and women were working. He heard Gale's mat landing a moment later.

"Bind them naked to racks," another voice said. "We don't want them waking and making trouble when Mneme's questioning them." He pronounced it NEE-mee, but Havoc picked up the spelling from the thought.

It was time to act. Havoc rolled off the mat and to his feet, opening his eyes to take in the scene.

For a moment the tableau seemed frozen. The complex denizens were staring in surprise at Havoc's sudden animation. This seemed to be a storage chamber, with bundles of things scattered across the floor. There were doors in four directions. He had no way of knowing which one was best for escape.

Gale was sitting up. She stood, and came to join Havoc. "I think we'll have to go random," she said.

"Agreement." He moved toward the closest door, and she moved with him. He watched to one side, she the other.

"Capture!" a man cried. "Subdue without killing."

That helped to know. Three men charged them, cutting off their progress to the door. They were relatively soft workers, not trained fighters; he could tell by their stances.

Havoc went into combat mode. He swept up a length of scrap leather and wrapped it around his hand, a substitute for his wood knuckles. He clubbed one man on the head, just so, sending him down, and shoved the second into the third. Meanwhile Gale quietly picked up an awl, which could become a nasty little weapon in her hands. Then he and Gale ran for the doorway, and through it.

This turned out to be a transport ramp, similar to those in Triumph City. They ran down it. The room below was a kitchen. The workers looked up, startled to see them.

"Try another," Havoc said, swiping a carving knife from the nearest butcher counter.

They ran further down the ramp, to what seemed to be a residential floor. There were lines of bunks, some empty, some with men or women sleeping on them.

"Main gate must be at the bottom," Gale said, taking a pillow. This too could become a weapon when properly applied.

"Go for it," Havoc said, taking a bar from a broken bed. They were both now well armed.

They ran for another door, looking for a ramp down, but the door they came to was no more than an entrance to a closet. Another had stairs leading up. Meanwhile, men were gathering—and now a pack of dogs appeared.

"Mischief," Gale said.

"I'll handle the dogs. You find an exit—and take it. I'll follow."

Gale ran away from him, seeking another door. Meanwhile the six-legged dogs came at Havoc. He wielded his bar with deadly effect, striking accurately at noses, beating them back. He could handle dogs.

He saw Gale find an exit. She waved to him, then disappeared. He knocked back the last dog,

then clubbed the first man and ran after her. But the door had closed behind her, and it would not open for him. He knocked at it with the butt of his club, but it was too solid.

More men were converging. He had to move, lest he be trapped here. He ran to another doorway and through it. It slammed behind him.

Then he discovered that he was in a small storage chamber with only one exit—the door. And that door would not open. It was too solid to cut through or break down. He had foolishly trapped himself. And left Gale without defense. "Expletive!"

"Havoc."

He whirled, looking for the source of the voice. It was the opening of a small talking tube. A woman was speaking from the main chamber. She was not Gale. And she knew his identity.

He reached with his mind, and verified a suspicion. "Mneme," he said, naming the one the workers had said would question him. She would be one in authority who had information the ordinary workers lacked.

"Give me your oath of truce, and you will be treated fairly."

"Negation."

"Two things: We have Gale, and we can poison the air in your chamber."

"Bluff."

There was a pause. Then Gale's voice came. "They do have me Havoc. Do what you must do. Love."

"I do not threaten her at this time," Mneme's voice came. "I merely demonstrate the other threat."

Then there was a different sound. Gas was hissing through the sound tube. Havoc tried to plug it, but had nothing the right shape or size. He coughed as the gas spread into the chamber. It was similar to that of the pollution on the mountain. He could gain nothing by delaying; they would wait until he was unconscious, then open the door and make his body captive.

"Truce!" he called.

The hissing stopped. After a moment, Mneme's voice came again. "Your oath."

He was at a disadvantage, but not addlebrained. This was like dealing with the guirl. "Yours first."

"Oath of Truce."

"Oath of Truce," he agreed.

The door opened. A handsome woman of about forty years stood there. "Greeting."

"Acknowledged." He let a man take his strap, knife, and bar; he would not need them during truce.

"Introduction: I am Mneme, mistress of the changeling complex."

"King Havoc." She knew it anyway.

"I need your silence about this complex."

"I made a truce, not an agreement."

"I will, if you wish, show you the nature of the complex. Then you may make the agreement."

"If not?"

"The truce will end. We will destroy you and your fiancée and precipitate the choosing of a new king."

"That would expose your nature."

"Negation. We will convey your message to the mock king to continue indefinitely. In due course he will be dispatched, setting up the selection process. Ordinary folk will not know."

"The Glamors will not allow that to happen."

"The Glamors are changelings. We have ways of dealing with them."

Perhaps that was true. The complex had been able to bar the Glamors from its premises. But why had it felt the need to? He tried to read her mind, but discovered she had the same kind of privacy guard he did. She had let him read her mind only to the extent convenient for her. "You're a changeling too."

"As are all here." She smiled. "We understand you rather well, though you did surprise us by nullifying the stun signal. Now utilize the truce and see if we can persuade you. We would rather convert you than destroy you."

"You have been trying to kill me all along. As you killed King Deal."

"And others," she agreed. "We do what is necessary, as do you. If the truce ends, you will seek to kill me and throw open the complex. I will seek to destroy you after torturing your beloved to make you reveal your remaining secrets. We both know it can get extremely ugly. Better to seek compromise, if this is feasible. You owe it to us to comprehend our rationale."

"But if I comprehend it and reject it, you will not accede."

"Not voluntarily." She shrugged. "Perhaps you really do have a surprise that is beyond our ken. You have surprised us before. You have been uncommonly apt, even for your brood."

"I had special training."

She nodded. "We underestimated the effect of the dragon. Indeed, we had not known of animal Glamors."

"Brood: Question?"

"Come. I will explain."

Havoc stepped out of the chamber. He took Gale's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. She had trusted him so far, laying her life on the line.

"That is one reason we did not kill you outright," Mneme said. "We want to know what it is you think you have that could defeat us, just in case there is even partial merit there."

She conveyed them to a special chamber. "This is one of our laboratories. The details are somewhat technical, but I will simplify. We harvest the finest gametes, which are the viable sperm and egg cells, and cultivate them here."

"Harvest?" Gale asked. "How?"

"It is easy for the sperm. We send a specially equipped changeling woman to meet a promising man. She travels no fault with him, or requests a fourth, or simply visits him at night and seduces him. When he ejaculates in her, her adapted uterus takes in the sperm and holds it in temporary stasis until she returns to us."

Both Havoc and Gale nodded. A lovely woman could readily collect a man's sperm. "Like a succubus," Gale murmured.

"But we leave his soul," Mneme said with a smile. "We do not harm him at all. There have been no complaints."

What virile man would complain about no fault sex with a lovely woman? "What of a woman?" Havoc asked.

"It is more complicated for the eggs, for several reasons. On occasion a suitable woman visits the temple, seeking an alternate fourth. The temple may provide her with her dearest wish, in return for one of her ovaries."

"Question?" Gale asked.

"She may desire marriage to a particular man. She may wish to bear no more babies. She may be inclined sexually to her own gender. We have ways to facilitate such things without embarrassing a person. The deal is voluntary, and honored perfectly. Thus we have the ovary, which we place in a changeling woman, and encourage it to ripen an egg regularly. Such an ovary can produce for twenty years."

"So you can make a baby every month?" Gale asked. She was more interested in this than Havoc, or perhaps interested in a different way.

"An embryo every two weeks; we enhance conditions for the ovary so that it ripens eggs on a faster schedule, four times its normal rate."

"Question?"

"A woman normally has two ovaries, which alternate months."

"Understanding. These are mated with the same sperm?"

"Affirmation. This is what we call a brood. All the ripened eggs of a particular ovary matched with the sperm of a single donation. A full brood is potentially five hundred embryos. If the early ones prove to have flaws, that brood will be abridged."

"So they really are as close as siblings," Gale said.

"Closer, because siblings are normally the product of different batches of sperm. A brood is from different sperm in the same batch. Not as close as identical twins, but similar to fraternal twins."

Gale was silent. Havoc knew why; this was confirmation of the extreme similarity of changelings. Too close to breed safely with each other.

The tour continued, but Havoc was more interested in the layout of the complex than in the details of winnowing gametes and establishing viable embryos. Where was the main gate? How many defensive personnel did it have?

It was up to Gale to carry the dialogue. "Why do you do this? Why hide it?"

"Why does anyone do anything? It's my job. We conceal it because it is not yet time for the world to know."

"Who gave you this job?"

"It was not a gift. I am the surviving member of a small administration brood. I was crafted to perform this task, just as Havoc was crafted to be a leader, and you to be the consort of a leader."

"The bees!" Gale said. "The first queen cuts off the heads of the others, so she has no competition."

Mneme smiled. "That is wasteful. We destroy unfit units, not fit ones. The others received different assignments elsewhere on the planet. I happened to be the one ready when the need for a new Mistress of the Complex arose. As each new administrator matures, I assign her where appropriate. At such time as I am no longer able to perform capably, I will be destroyed and a new one will assume the office."

"And if we succeed in taking over this complex, you will be considered unable to perform."

"If you take over, I will be dead. But that would be a tragedy because you are not an administrator."

"Havoc will appoint one. He's good at that."

Mneme glanced at Havoc, who was listening without participating. "Affirmation. He is literally a born leader. But there is none in the kingdom better at this than I; that's part of the point of our effort. We generate the best."

Now Havoc spoke. "You assume that the Changeling complex will continue operation regardless. My inclination is to destroy it."

"We are speaking academically, because you are unlikely to have the opportunity. My effort here is to persuade you to leave the complex alone, so that I will not have to destroy you."

"Persuade me," Havoc said.

"I speak to rationale. Human beings are destructive. The planet of Charm has suffered grievously at human hands in the past thousand years. Some discipline must be established, so that we do not ruin this world the way we ruined Earth."

"We ruined Earth?" Gale asked.

"This is why Planet Earth was so desperate to colonize other worlds. There was little left at home. It may be why no second colony ship arrived: the wasted resources had finally been reduced below the point of viability for such an effort. So just as a king is needed to maintain order among Chroma that might otherwise wage internecine war, an authority is needed to limit the damage done by our species to the planet. Otherwise human tenure itself will be limited."

Havoc was suddenly quite interested. He was aware of the manner villagers systematically cleared back forests and eliminated animals to make more room for themselves. Mentor the Dragon had made that clear; his kind had suffered. Havoc liked trees; he hated to see good ones cut down or burned out. But this was the first time anyone with a perspective independent from his had voiced such a sentiment.

"But surely the answer is to have fewer people," Gale said. "To stop requiring four children per family. But you are doing the opposite; you are making more people."

"Qualification: we are substituting people. Every changeling is entered into a family in place of a fourth. We are not increasing the population so much as changing its nature."

"You are spreading your—your broods across the planet, so that more and more changelings are replacing ordinary children," Gale said. "Why? What do you expect all those changelings to do?"

"We expect them to take over control of the human species, and establish a new order, governed sensibly by superior individuals. We are not far from the achievement of that objective."

"You want to rule Charm yourself!"

"We want changelings to rule Charm. I am satisfied with the job for which I was crafted: producing changelings."

"So you think changelings can do a better job."

"I know they can. Look at Havoc; who could be a better king than he?"

"I am not even doing it," Havoc said. "Most of my tenure has been traveling on other errands—mainly searching for you, with an emulation left in my place."

"Guided by your agenda," Mneme said. "And you have succeeded in making the Chroma behave, and your sympathy for the natural life of the planet means you will act to conserve it. You have even enlisted the ungovernable Glamors in your effort. You are an example of the good changelings can do for Charm."

"Yet you want to eliminate him," Gale said.

"Correction: I want to enlist his support. Only if that fails will I eliminate him."

Gale viewed her with slitted eyes. "You want to make Havoc your puppet? So that you—or the complex—are the true ruler of the planet?"

"Negation. I want to persuade him to keep our secret and leave us alone, so that the conquest by the changelings can become complete."

"Comprehension," Gale said. "If news gets out, the people will rebel, and start killing changelings, ruining your scheme."

"Accuracy. The conquest must be complete before they realize."

Havoc shook his head. "I did not want to be king, but was forced to serve. I do not want to oversee a takeover by changelings who owe their allegiance to this complex. I can prevent that by destroying it now. You have not persuaded me."

Mneme sighed. "I regret this. Shall we terminate the truce?"

They were standing in a hall between chambers. No other changeling personnel were in sight. "Not while you are within my range."

"I am not in your range."

She couldn't be a golem, because they were magic and this was a nonChroma region. She couldn't be an illusion for the same reason. What made her so sure? She had to know his capabilities. Except for his secret weapon.

Havoc spied a fragment of stone on the floor. He picked it up. "When this touches the floor, the truce is over."

"Agreement."

He flipped the stone up. Mneme did not move. Neither did Havoc or Gale. But as the stone touched the floor, Havoc launched himself toward the woman.



And collided with metal bars that shot up from the floor. Then met bars descending from the ceiling. Suddenly he was in a cage, separated from Mneme.

He whirled to face the other way. But there were bars there too, separating him from Gale. In fact there were bars crossing the hall in several places, forming a series of cells that now confined all three of them.

"I did warn you," Mneme said. "You are captive. Will you now accede to my will?"

Havoc grabbed the bars between himself and Gale. They were absolutely firm. This was obviously a special section, made for this purpose. Mneme had led them here, then offered to end the truce. She had outsmarted them.

"Then we must become unpleasant," the woman said. She glanced up. "Do it."

A door opened in the side of the hall where Gale was trapped. Three muscular men emerged. Gale tried to dodge by them to escape, but the door closed. They advanced on her. She stepped into one, her awl plunging at his eye. She must have hidden that too well for them to find when they captured her before. But he caught her hand as the others grabbed her body. She tried to knee one, but he avoided it. These were changelings, and experienced in combat. They quickly had her helpless, one standing behind her with an arm around her neck, another squatting to hold her legs, the third holding her by one extended wrist.

The third man brought out what looked like a large set of clippers with a screw-like attachment. He set the device on Gale's left wrist and turned the screw. The clipper blades closed above and below her wrist.

"Interrogation," Mneme said to Havoc. "How did you null our stun signal?"

Havoc did not answer. He was searching for some way past the bars so that he could reach Gale.

"Turn," Mneme said.

The man put his hand on the bar projecting from the screw and turned it one full circle. The clipper blades drove into Gale's wrist. She screamed in pain as blood flowed.

"Will you accede?"

It was time to make his move. Havoc closed his eyes and projected his mind. *Trees! Accept me!*

Mneme evidently thought he was stalling. "Turn."

The man turned the screw another notch. The blades pressed on through Gale's flesh and cut into tendons. She continued to struggle and scream, helplessly.

"What is your secret ploy?"

Havoc felt the acceptance of the trees. Power flowed to him as something dropped from him.

"Turn."

The man put his hand on the screw bar. Havoc put his two hands on the bars and exerted force. He pulled them apart. He stepped through the aperture.

The screw-man never saw what hit him. His head hammered into the wall before he dropped to the floor. The other two men stared, startled. Havoc caught the forearm of one and the upper arm of the other and squeezed. His fingers were like dense wooden rods. The men screamed as their flesh pulped and their bones separated. They had been subjected to the same torture they had been using on Gale.

Havoc turned to Gale. "Do it!" he shouted, buttressing it with his mind.

Her eyes round, she paused in her screaming and focused. Light surrounded her. Her hair lifted from her head, as if suffused by invisible power. Her eyes glowed. Something fell from her.

She looked at the clippers, still fastened to her wrist. She flexed her arm and they broke apart and clattered to the floor. The terrible crushed cuts stopped bleeding. She was healing herself at a seemingly impossible rate.

Havoc turned to face Mneme, who had not moved. "I will answer your questions. We had the Translucent Chroma specialists block off our capacity to receive your stun signal. I will not accede to your authority. This is my secret ploy: I have become the Glamor of Trees, and Gale is the Glamor of Mosses and Lichen. The roster of Glamors is now complete through fourteen. We have breached your defense against Glamors by manifesting inside your complex."

"Impossible! This is a nonChroma zone."

"We are the first two nonChroma Glamors."

She stared, unable to accept this. "There are no trees in here, and on Earth lichen is a symbiotic union of fungus with alga: different kingdoms."

"This isn't Earth," Gale said evenly. "None of the animal or plant species align perfectly; all are as we choose to categorize them here."

"That may be. But how can you just become Glamors? This is ludicrous."

Gale shook her head. "We analyzed the patterns of Chroma, numbers of legs, and the order of colonization of this planet. Two early categories that should have had Glamors were missing. We realized that this was because they could not represent themselves, and no person or animal had thought to represent them. So we assumed those roles, with their acquiescence, and will do right by them. They will in turn do right by us."

Mneme shook her head, not accepting this.

"Now you have a choice," Havoc said. "Yield to me, throw open your main gate, and let our

troops in to take over the complex. Or discover what trees and mosses can do to it, and what we can do to you."

Mneme tried to run, but the bars restrained her. "Down!" she cried, and the bars started to lift and descend. But the ones Havoc had bent snagged, and the entire array ground to a stop. It had to be a counterbalanced mechanical mechanism similar to those in Triumph City, without a lot of leeway for error.

Havoc stepped through the bent aperture, advanced to the next set of bars, and pulled two of them apart. "Yield," he said. "I am not pleased with you." He caught her left wrist and squeezed.

Mneme did not answer. Havoc squeezed harder. Her flesh crushed inward and her bone cracked, but she met his gaze without flinching. He let her go. Her hand hung like a broken thing, but she would not yield to pain.

"Do it," Havoc said to Gale.

She concentrated. Greenish color appeared on the bars and floor. It was lichen, growing at an astonishing rate. In moments it furred all the nearby surfaces, and wafted a pale vapor upward. It coated the three fallen men, who began to change color. It also coated Mneme, causing her skin to develop an immediate rash. She coughed, choking on the colored air.

"Soon everyone in the complex will be suffering similarly," Havoc said. "How much discomfort can you tolerate?"

The three men were coughing and retching miserably. But Neither Gale nor Havoc had any problem.

Mneme considered a moment longer. "Unlike you, I am a realist." She coughed. "What do you require?"

"Make me an oath of fealty, and inform your personnel of the capitulation of the complex to King Havoc."

"Why bother with an oath, if you mean to destroy me anyway?"

"The oath will hold until you present your case for the survival of yourself or the complex. I will listen, then decide."

Mneme stepped through the splayed bars to Havoc's former cell. She stooped to pick something up with her right hand, then went on to enter Gale's chamber. She stooped again, then inspected the three fallen men.

She nodded. "Compromise. I will not make the oath, but will reinstitute the truce while we consider."

Havoc glanced at Gale. The lichen paused, then began a retreat. The haze faded.

"Bend the bars back, so they can retreat," Mneme said.

Havoc put his hands on the bars and slowly bent them back. He knew that he had barely begun to comprehend the powers his status as a Glamor brought him; strength was natural to him, so he had that, and flesh hardened like wood was natural to trees.

When the four bent bars were straight, the rods descended into the floor, somewhat squeakily. Meanwhile Gale put her hands on Mneme's wrist, and the flesh started mending.

"I would not have done that for you," Mneme said.

"I am more forgiving than Havoc is."

"He is hard like a tree; you are soft like moss."

"Agreement. We are well matched."

"Considering your demand for an oath," Mneme said. "It will not work. Were I to be so foolish as to make it, I would be deposed on the grounds that I have become physically or mentally incapacitated. No single person here can go counter to the objective of the complex."

"But they have no other administrator as competent as you," Gale reminded her.

"Confirmation. But there are lesser substitutes. You can't accomplish your purpose in this manner."

"Let's try it anyway," Havoc said grimly.

"Bear in mind that I warned you."

Gale smiled, as grimly as Havoc had. "Bear in mind that it is not wise to cross Havoc."

"Perhaps."

They walked to the main chamber. This was a broad concourse with a number of potted plants set around support posts. "King Havoc has prevailed," Mneme said, and her voice spread throughout the chamber, amplified by some hidden device. "He now controls the complex. Open the gates to his forces."

The men and women stared at her, uncomprehending.

"Havoc is now the Glamor of Trees," she continued. "He will destroy us all if we do not yield. Open the gates."

A man stepped forward. "You know we can't do that. If you insist on this fantasy, we must depose you as flawed and promote a new mistress or master of the complex."

Mneme turned to Havoc, spreading her hands.

"We seem to be at an impasse," Havoc said. "I do not wish to destroy this complex until I understand it better. It may be useful for some other purpose. Before we end the second truce, let's

consider further."

"As you wish." Mneme faced the man who had challenged her. "I spoke of King Havoc's demand, not my personal will. I remain competent. Continue business as usual while I negotiate."

Havoc walked to a potted tree. Most of the plants were shrubs, but this one he recognized as a stunted twist birch, a thing of quite a different nature. Evidently it had been transplanted from the polluted region of the mountain, not recognized for what it was: one of the largest and most aggressive trees of the planet. He had noted it during the tour, and returned to it by no coincidence. He sat down on the ledge beside it, and laid a hand on its warped trunk. Mneme sat next to him, and Gale on the other side of the tree. Gale wore an obscure smile.

"You have shown us that capturing you is not sufficient to take over the complex," Havoc said. "Now I will show you that holding our ikons is not sufficient to balk us."

"So you noticed when I picked them up." Mneme brought out the small metallic figure of a tree and the metallic ball of moss. "You can not touch them, but I can."

"But you merely have possession, not control. You are unable to use them, except to the extent they enhance your physical well-being and sexual capacity."

"Possession *is* control. I can take them from their source of power and thus slowly deprive you of yours."

"Correction: these are nonChroma ikons. You would have to take them to a Chroma zone, and there you would be subject to the will of our allies, the Chroma Glamors. This will not be feasible."

Mneme considered. "Perhaps. But I will retain them anyway. It remains your problem to force the capitulation of the complex, when you can not do it through me or any other individual here."

"Make another announcement: that if all the personnel do not swear fealty to me, I will destroy the complex."

"One has to admire your bluff." Mneme stood and walked out a few paces. "King Havoc requires that all personnel swear immediate fealty to him, lest he destroy the complex."

The personnel ignored her, continuing their business.

"You'll be sooo-ry," Gale said in sing-song.

"I will not attack you, Mneme," Havoc said. "Per our truce. But I will make a demonstration intended to persuade you to lead off the oath. This may become uncomfortable."

"I am interested. Make your demonstration."

Havoc exerted his new power as a Glamor. He knew that it would take time for the two of them to learn to handle the full range of Glamor powers, but that they were there to be used when understood. He understood trees.

The twist birch started to grow. Normal examples of this species were tenacious and ornery, poisoning their neighbors to make room for themselves, and growing to considerable size. This one had run afoul of the pollution, but Havoc had been healing that injury as he touched its trunk. Now it was ready to be all that it could be.

The trunk thickened. The roots burst out of the pot and sought the ground below. The branches reached up and outward.

"What is this?" Mneme asked, surprised.

"This is no shrub," Havoc said. "It is a twist birch."

"That means nothing to me."

Havoc smiled. "You are not the Glamor of Trees."

The roots reached the floor and dug between the tiles, looking for sustenance. The branches reached the ceiling, and pushed, sending twigs into crevices. There was a gentle breeze blowing in toward the tree, making its small leaves vibrate.

"It can't possibly get that big," Mneme said. "There's no soil!"

"The twist birch can feed on almost anything," Havoc said. "Including the dust of the air. But this one is sustained mostly by magic."

"There's no magic here."

"Correction," Gale said smugly. "There is nonChroma magic."

"NonChroma is by definition without magic."

"Negation," Havoc said. "Magic is everywhere on the planet. We simply did not recognize it before, because all that had been invoked was via the intercession of the Chroma demons. That is another reason why the Glamors of Trees and Mosses were unfulfilled."

Mneme stared at the tree. The trunk was becoming massive, its papery bark cracking and peeling to reveal new bark beneath. The roots were pushing up tiles as they burrowed deeper. The branches were thickening, putting pressure on the ceiling. The incoming breeze was stiffening.

Other personnel were pausing to watch, amazed.

"The twist birch is surly," Havoc said conversationally. "It does not like being balked. It reacts by pushing harder. It has been known to crack open solid stone. Even volcanoes have some respect, because they can't readily dislodge it, once it is established. I should think the very last thing you would want inside your premises, apart from a hostile Glamor or two, is one of these ornery trees."

"We didn't know it wasn't a shrub."

"Which is another matter," Havoc said. "What is the point of that pollution that stunts trees and

animals alike?"

"It is to discourage intrusion. Unpleasant to endure for short periods, and unhealthy for long periods. Outsiders can readily avoid it by remaining clear."

"The plants have no choice. That poison will have to go."

"Not while we govern here."

"How secure is your roof?" Havoc inquired, glancing up. The tree was now pushing the entire ceiling up, making it bow. Chunks of plaster were falling.

"The whole mountain is above! A tree can't move that."

"Perhaps we shall find out."

She looked nonplused. The tree continued to grow. Now some branches were pushing on the walls, which were giving way. Cracks were developing and spreading as the pressure increased.

"It never was smart to challenge Havoc," Gale remarked to no one in particular. "And maybe less so now."

The twisted birch tree was coming to justify its name. Its center trunk was a massive pillar with clearly twisted grain, from which eight thick round branches spread out and up. Eight stout roots descended into the floor, making it a mass of upended tiles and planks.

A large section of the ceiling gave way, smashing to the floor. But the floor was not in good condition either; questing roots were showing like feelers, their expansion quickly shoving blocks apart. The walls on either side were ragged remnants.

"We should see daylight soon," Havoc remarked. "This birch is coming into its strength, now that's it has found edible rock. There must be some deep water, too."

Some of the personnel tried to approach the tree with axes and saws, but the floor rocked beneath them, sending them scrambling for safer footing.

"This is suicide for you as well as us!"

"We are Glamors," Gale said. "Invulnerable to crashing debris. But you and your personnel may have difficulties, especially when the mountain cracks open and the pollution seeps in."

The woman looked around. She sighed. "Fealty sworn," Mneme said. She called across the waste the hall had become. "The Glamor of Trees will destroy the complex if we do not swear fealty to him. I believe it is time."

The tree slowed its growth, but not entirely.

Somewhat numbly, the personnel within range began to move. They stood and lifted their right hands toward Havoc in the salute of fealty.

Havoc removed his hand from the trunk of the tree. "Rest, friend," he murmured. The twist birch stabilized, neither advancing nor retreating.

Singly or by twos or threes, the remaining complex personnel appeared and lifted their hands in fealty.

"I think it best to leave the tree as it is," Havoc said. "If it shrinks, there may be significant collapsing of structures its branches are now supporting."

"That may be the case," Mneme agreed. "As it is, the complex has been rendered essentially useless. There will have to be enormous repairs before it can function properly again."

"Assuming that is allowed," Gale said.

"It must be allowed! What we are doing here is vital."

"Now make your case," Havoc said.

The woman did not argue or plead. "First I will make the case for preserving the complex essentially as it is, though under different management. Then I will make the case for retaining me as its mistress."

Havoc was surprised. "Make your second case first."

"I am familiar with the routine operation of the complex, and there is no better manager presently available. Apart from that, I can give you what you most desire, as a personal favor."

"Doubt."

"Do you wish that favor now?"

"Define its nature."

"You can marry your beloved and safely sire children by her."

Suddenly she had Gale's attention too. "What of the closeness of the brood?"

"There are a number of broods. We intend our changelings to breed, extending the number of superior human beings like yourselves. All the members of any single brood are of the same gender. Males may be as close as brothers, and females as close as sisters, but no male and female broods are sibling-close. They can interbreed."

Gale, eager for this news, nevertheless debated it. "But what if two males breed with two females in the same village? Their children will be as close as siblings, having almost identical parents."

"We do not send more than one representative of a brood to any single village. In fact we spread them around the planet, every two weeks as each new one becomes viable, so that there are seldom more than one of any particular brood to a Chroma zone. In the course of time, considering the vagaries of available hosts, it is possible that a second representative of a given brood will be sent



to a particular village, but probably that one will be at least a decade younger than the other, more likely fifteen or twenty years, and unlikely to breed and have children that would choose to marry children of the other. It would be extremely unlikely that both male and female broods would be duplicated in one region, unless brood members happened to travel to a common site. This too is apt to be rare."

"A decade or more," Gale said. "The difference between me and Symbol. We could be sisters."

"You are referring to King Deal's mistress? She is not of your brood."

Gale was surprised. "You know?"

"I track royalty, especially when it becomes mischievous. The closest you could come would be by each having babies sired by Havoc, and having them grow up and marry as half-siblings. Even then it would be no disaster, because none of our changelings have defective genetic traits. There is no problem."

"No problem," Gale breathed. "Havoc, she has answered me. We can marry."

Havoc nodded. "If the complex continues, you will be its mistress, subject to my directives."

"I have given fealty. Your directives will govern."

"Now the other. Why make babies and send them out? Why keep that secret, if it is a good thing?"

"Normal human beings are imperfect. They quarrel foolishly, they evolve into brigands, they cheat each other, they discriminate against others of their kind simply because they are different. Both of you, as fourths, must be aware of that."

"Affirmation," Havoc said. "But changelings are human too, surely with similar faults."

"Negation. We winnow for personality as well as body. Changelings are not only handsome and healthy, they are intelligent and pleasant. That is one reason they are attracted to each other: each appreciates the finest specimen of the other gender available. The two of you love each other because you are the two finest individuals you encountered in your early life. Actually you may be the finest on an absolute basis; your broods are superior. But other changelings are not inferior, merely distinct. They do not practice human vices. Were you in a position to encounter more of them, you would see that. Changelings are as nearly perfect human beings as we are able to craft."

Gale nodded. "I have met some. They are fine people."

"Perfect or imperfect, why interfere with the natural order?" Havoc remained troubled by this.

"Because we need to preserve the planet from the depredations of inferior folk. We want to replace them with superior individuals, who will upgrade the quality of the species and bring more sensible governance."

"Only if they are in a position to govern," Havoc said.

"They already govern. They are leaders in many Chroma zones, and you are king. Soon they will have sufficient power to establish new directives and establish a viable future for the species."

"So you are saving our species from itself," Havoc said.

"Affirmation. When changelings govern, and their children dominate, then the work of the complex will be done. But it is not done yet, and must continue for at least another decade or so, lest the effort be dissipated."

"Why the secrecy?" Gale asked. "Why kill kings rather than let them know? This does not bespeak superior ethics to me."

"Because the normal humans will turn on the superior ones and destroy them, if they know prematurely. The slight discrimination you felt as fourths would be magnified if others knew you represented superior types that could displace them. The process must remain private until the changelings are sufficient in number and power to withstand the reaction of the inferiors. We do not like killing, but we do what is necessary, for the interest of the greater good."

"I have a problem with that," Havoc said, "when I am the person you seek to kill."

"You were so savvy in protecting yourself that we concluded it would be safer to recruit you. We have not tried to kill you since you enlisted the aid of the Glamors."

Havoc shook his head. "We all do what we must do. But you have not satisfied me that you are justified in continuing your operations. You do use unkind methods to maintain your power, just as supposedly inferior human beings do. I suspect that power itself is your objective, and that when changelings take over human affairs, you expect to govern through them."

"Negation."

"Question?"

"We do not govern now, and will not in the future. I am mistress of the complex, but I obey another power. Eliminate me, eliminate the complex—you will not touch the power beyond. That is what you must deal with. You are better off to leave the complex as it is while you orient on the real source of your problem, whatever that may be. I don't know its location or nature; all I know is that I must obey its directives. In my capacity as your vassal, I recommend that you follow this course."

"Another power!" Havoc repeated, dismayed.

"How do you get your directives?" Gale asked.

"I go into a private booth and lay my mind blank. The power may not communicate, but if it does, I follow its directive. It was what told me to change our policy with respect to you."

"This sounds more like invention."

"Read my mind. I throw it entirely open to you."

Havoc did so, and found that it was true. Mneme did not originate the directives she implemented. He had completed only a stage, not the whole job.

"Keep it going," he said shortly. "This is a temporary decision that may be reversed as I learn more."

"Appreciation. We shall be busy repairing the damage done by your tree."

"Sire!" It was Throe's voice.

"Here by the tree!" Havoc called. Mneme had been true to her word, and had opened the gates to the troops. The takeover was complete. There would be many details to attend to, such as how to repair the premises without damaging the twisted birch tree, and to arrange a daylight access for it, but that would be largely routine.

Throe appeared, climbing up through the wreckage below. "What happened here?"

Gale laughed. "Havoc wreaked havoc, again."

"King Havoc is now the Glamor of Trees," Mneme said. "And Gale is Glamor of Mosses. Those powers disturbed this complex."

Throe hardly showed his amazement. "So I see."

"Let's go back to the city and get married," Havoc said.

"Agreement!"

"I retain your ikons," Mneme said. "Having made fealty to you, and been confirmed in my position by you, I say that it may not be in your interest to leave them here. To whom should I give them?"

"To Throe, for now."

She gave the ikons to Throe, who pocketed them without comment. The man was a marvel of discretion.

"Anything else, Sire?" Mneme inquired. She was making a point of her change of status.

Havoc looked around. "See to the necessary repairs to the complex, without damaging the tree. Arrange for light to reach it from above." He glanced at Throe. "Designate a person to supervise our people, to work with theirs to accomplish the repairs safely and expeditiously. Establish protocols of secrecy; we do not wish to advertise the nature of this complex at this time, or to make generally known the assumption of Glamor status Gale and I have achieved. Then conduct us back to Triumph City."

Throe nodded. "Sire." Then he set about it.

"Observation," Mneme said. "You have established a reputation for radical competence, fair

mindedness, and generosity to those you deal with, thus inspiring extreme loyalty. These are aspects of your select brood, but it is impressive to see them in action."

"I am what I am, and do what I must do," Havoc said. "Extreme power was never my ambition."

"That is why we entered your name in the competition for king. We did not know you would seek to fathom the mystery of the changelings."

"One reaps what one sows. Carry on."

"Sire." She made her way elsewhere.

"So she was responsible for the way we were ripped out of our village and thrown into the horrors of civilization," Gale said.

"And brought us a wider perspective and new friends," he agreed. "Do you want to return to Trifle Village?"

"Only to see my family and friends. We could no longer stand that life, after what we have experienced."

"Agreement." He kissed her. "Next we marry."

"Next we marry!" She drew back slightly and looked him in the eye. "Havoc, I want a baby."

He laughed. "I'll give you three, in due course."

"I'm serious. I'm removing the wire now."

He realized that her experience with the baby in the baby caravan had made her urgent. She had worn the wire that prevented conception so that she could indulge in no fault sex, but now she intended to conceive as rapidly as possible. He had not considered this aspect before, partly because he had thought he couldn't marry Gale. Now he realized that he wanted it too. "Our baby, soon," he agreed, and kissed her again.

Throe returned. "Processes have been set in motion, Sire. I am ready to conduct you back to Triumph." He paused. "But a question, if I may: since you are now Glamors, why don't you merely conjure yourselves there?"

"Three reasons. We wish to preserve our accession as a secret, and the demonstration of Glamor powers would ruin that. We also wish to travel long enough with you to organize new protocols for dealing with other people, including other Glamors, considering your advice. And we have not yet learned how to do much Glamor magic, such as conjuring."

Throe tried valiantly not to laugh, but it was threatening to make him burst. "Permission," Gale said quickly. Then they all laughed. It was a relief.

\* \* \*

On their arrival at Triumph, they had an early private meeting with Ennui and the Lady Aspect. The two women did not try to conceal their relief at the safe return. Quick hugs were exchanged.

"Is it now over, Havoc?" Ennui asked. "Is everything safe at last?"

"Negation. There is another power we must locate and nullify."

"So the risks will continue?" the Lady Aspect asked. "You will be traveling and getting into your barbarian brand of trouble?"

Havoc smiled. "Agreement."

The two exchanged a glance. "Relief," Ennui said. "Life will continue interesting."

"We love you as you are," the Lady Aspect said.

"We'll try not to overdo it, however," Gale said, shooting Havoc a cautionary glance. She did not like him taking undue risks.

"But we will be most annoyed with you if you get yourself injured or killed," Ennui clarified.

Havoc laughed, then turned serious. "Gale and I mean to marry as soon as feasible. But first we have something for you."

"Abeyance," the Lady Aspect said. "I have something for you, Lady Gale." She walked to a small wooden chest, opened it, and brought out a tiara. It was set with ten bright gems. "This is the protective crown I wore when I was queen. It must now be yours, as you will be the next queen."

Gale was surprised. "But I would not deprive you of what is yours."

"It was never mine. It is the queen's." She put it into Gale's hands. "Just as the crown is the king's. I am sure you will wear it with grace and honor."

"I—I will try to. When I am queen." Gale was clearly daunted, never having thought of herself as a queen. But of course her marriage to the king would mean that.

"Now for what we have," Havoc said. "These are not gifts but trusts that we feel the two of you are best equipped to handle. Ennui because she is my oath friend and most acquainted with my business, and the one I trust most to see to my welfare."

"You owe me nothing," Ennui said. "You saved my life and gave me marvelous adventure. Of course I support you."

Havoc smiled and continued. "The Lady Aspect because she is the former queen who understands responsibility and discretion, and has been kind to both of us."

"Echo: You owe me nothing," the Lady Aspect said. "You gave me an honorable position when my world was shattered, and were I younger and more foolish, I would be in love with you. You need no rationale to ask anything of me."

Havoc ignored that too. "When we became Glamors—"

"Did you really, or was that a clever ruse?" Ennui asked. "You can tell us."

Havoc glanced at Gale. Then both of them glowed and floated off the floor. "We really did," Gale said. "Our abilities are limited because we haven't yet learned how to fully invoke them, but that will come. We are working on it."

Ennui stared. "Apology for doubting."

They sank back to the floor and let the glow fade. "This is about as much as we can do at present," Havoc said. "Gale can heal, because she practiced that before, and I was able to make a tree grow explosively because I understand and relate to trees. But we want to keep it secret, so ask you to help us do that. It is enough just to be king."

"Agreement," the Lady Aspect said fervently.

"When we became Glamors, we formed our ikons," Havoc continued. "We are unable to touch them ourselves, but they make us vulnerable. If they are removed from nonChroma territory, we may lose our powers. So we want them kept safe, by those who will be discreet. Therefore I want you, Ennui, to keep mine."

"Your ikon!" Ennui exclaimed. "I never thought of that. Of course there would be one. But surely I'm not the one to hold that. I—" She broke off, catching Havoc's look. "I will serve the post, as desired."

Throe had been standing behind them, so quiet it was easy to forget his presence. That was the way he preferred to be, to do his job. Now he stepped forward, holding the tree ikon. He gave it to Ennui.

She held it. "Oh, it tingles! Like the loom. I wonder—" Then she flushed, for she had been remembering the sexual power the loom ikon had given her, her thoughts unguarded.

"Welcome to find out," Havoc said. "It may be safest on your body. Do not let any other person know you have it, or what it is. Don't leave it lying around next to the sink."

"Oh! I would never—" Then she realized that he was teasing her. She put it in a breast pocket. "I will protect it with my life." She was not joking.

"And I want you, Lady Aspect, to keep mine," Gale said.

Throe turned to face the Lady Aspect, bringing out the second ikon. She accepted it. "I will serve the post."

"Appreciation," Havoc said. "Curiosity: Can I embrace you?"

She smiled. "You may, but I think you can't."

He stepped toward her and tried to take her in his arms. But the moment he touched her, his

hand stopped. There was no apparent repulsive force; he was simply unable to proceed further.

The Lady Aspect smiled. "I think you and I could never be lovers." That of course was true for several significant reasons, which she had the grace not to state.

"Will you try me?" Ennui asked.

Havoc tried to embrace her—and could not even touch her. He fought to close the distance between them, but simply could not. It was his own ikon she carried, and that repelled him more than Gale's ikon did. Neither was touchable.

"Of course you could set the ikons aside," Gale said wickedly. "Then your only concern would be the problem of being knowingly close to a Glamor."

"But we hugged before," the Lady Aspect said.

So they had. "But you did not believe," Havoc said. "You thought it was a clever ruse. So it was unknowing."

She nodded. "Perhaps it is just as well. We can not touch you, and you can not touch us. But our relationship remains."

"The respect remains," Havoc said.

"Now we need both of you to plan our wedding," Gale said.

"That we are equipped to do," the Lady Aspect said. "I think you will want two, or perhaps three ceremonies."

"Two or three?" Gale asked blankly.

"There will be the royal wedding, of course, attended by all the leading functionaries of the planet, and hideously complicated." The Lady glanced at Havoc. "And no, you may not skip it. This is an official kingly function, done for the benefit of the masses. But there should also be a private, and perhaps more feeling wedding, at your home village of Trifle, for your parents, siblings, and friends."

"Our families!" Gale said. "Oh yes! It's been so long."

"And because you are now both Glamors, and the first to marry other Glamors, the other Glamors may want a separate ceremony."

"Do they care about that sort of thing?" Havoc asked, surprised.

"It seems they do. Stevia—the Red Glamor—paid me a call. She indicated that once you are married, you will need a formal mistress—"

"Symbol!" Gale said very firmly. Havoc smiled.

"So I informed her," the Lady Aspect said equably. "But I would be wary of traveling again with

that particular Glamor, now that you are, as it were, able to relate."

"I don't see the problem," Havoc said, teasing Gale.

"When you travel with Red," Gale said warningly, "I will travel with Green."

Who had indulged fifty times in succession with Symbol, once she figured out how to do it. "Suddenly I see the problem." Then they all laughed.

As it happened, the first ceremony was at Trifle Village, because the Royal Wedding took longer to arrange with all its glory. They were welcomed by their parents, siblings and friends, as foreseen. Throe was there with guards, protecting the king, but he did take a moment to make a formal apology to Havoc's mother for the way he had treated her the prior time they had met. She had forgiven him long since.

After the tears and reminiscences, they gathered in the central circle, where the Village Elder supervised the ceremony. Its heart was simple. They stood before the witnesses—the entire village—and spoke their vows.

"I, Havoc, make this oath of willing bondage to this woman Gale, my beloved, to sire or support four children by her and treat her always with respect."

Gale faced him, her eyes overflowing.

"I, Gale, make this oath of willing bondage to this man Havoc, my beloved, to bear or support four children with him and treat him always with respect."

Then they gave each other metal rings which were nominally enchanted to keep them always true. Whether it was possible to make such rings was doubtful, and in any event the backwoods Village Trifle did not acknowledge the validity of magic, so it was merely symbolic.

Then they kissed, and the children cheered. It was done, and they adjourned to the wedding banquet, followed by the wedding cabin for the night.

"Oh, Havoc, it was lovely," Gale breathed. "It was just what I always wanted."

"Ditto. Now let's have sex."

She laughed. "Try again."

"I always wanted it too. I love you."

"That will do. But we are not going to do it fifty times in an hour."

"Awww."

She kissed him avidly. "Maybe after we learn how."

Taken as a whole, it was a great night.



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this novel in 2000. No traditional publisher read it; in fact I didn't even send my printed copy to my agent. That was because no publisher wanted the first novel, *Key to Havoc*, and there was no point marketing the second on its own. Publishers would consider only Xanth from me, most of them declining even to look at anything else. This attitude is, of course, one reason traditional publishers tend to miss future trends; they are locked on the past. None so blind as they who will not see. So I finally went to small press, which is where you found this. Because I want my best work to be read, and this makes it available. With luck readers will like the ChroMagic series, word will spread, and it will in due course achieve its destiny.

My life at the time I proofread the *Chroma* galleys was suitably dull, which is good for writing. I don't travel if I can avoid it, I don't go out much other than for doctor, dentist, necessary shopping, and family emergencies. No big parties, no news conferences, just solitude on our tree farm. I stay home and write. I am 69 years old, which makes staying home easier. My wife and I, married for 47 years, have a settled old foggy existence. Once in a while we do go out to see a movie, at the senior citizen rate. Does such routine make for more imaginative fiction? I suspect it does. My excitement is mostly in my mind, in my fiction, and I share it with my readers. Most of them would likely be bored out of their gourds, following my schedule.

At this writing, the ChroMagic series is a trilogy. That is, I have completed three novels, the continuation depending on the success of the first ones. In popular fantasy the lead-off novel of a trilogy has whatever is original in it, and the third has the smashing conclusion; the middle one just sort of slogs between the two, spacing them out. That notion bothers me, and I try not to write that way. I want every novel I write to be able to stand by itself and be valued by itself. I want originality and interest, apart from its place in the larger scheme, so that readers will enjoy it page-by-page, as well as book-by-book.

So how does this second novel do? As I proofread the galleys I pondered, and am satisfied that *Key to Chroma* does meet my standard. This fantasy is qualitatively different from the norm, and not just because sex is integral rather than decorative. The plain-speaking verbal conventions have full force here, distinguishing this culture from all others; they are my private delight. Magic is pervasive, but not the point. There are no evil mages shooting lightning from their fingers, no horrendous monsters being slain by human heroes, no mystic magic swords, no armies of grisly ghouls, no climactic battle between the forces of the Good and Evil Empires. No one here is really evil, and there are no empires. This is a different genre of fantasy.

This volume starts with the sexy Red Glamor sitting on Havoc's bare lap on the privy pot, which isn't exactly routine in normal fantasy, and goes on from there. The mer folk with their special ways, Throe and the three Air Chroma girls, Gale suddenly nursing a foster baby, Symbol and the Wasp, the unusual trial of the Red and Blue lovers, the quest of the Black Chroma woman for one specific seed—I am too busy writing my own fantasy to keep up with what other fantasy is doing, but I doubt that there is much of this type out there. Publisher reticence pretty much guarantees it.

I also like the inset stories. I learned that technique from the Arabian Nights tales, and have always liked it. Note that they follow the same conventions as the main story; these are the tales of this special culture. The Boy and the Ghost, not a spook but an acquaintanceship becoming love

between the living and the dead. The Hats and the Coys, derivative of a famous Earthly feud, becoming forbidden love that the participants themselves couldn't admit. And the Dancer, wherein an old man and a child develop a relationship that neither can bear to end. That one warrants some background, as it is for me a high point of this novel.

In 2000 my wife and I went with our daughter Cheryl to see Riverdance. We were already familiar with it, but there is something special about a live stage production. We made a day of it, as it was more than a two hour drive each way. We stopped to eat at an associated restaurant set at a lower level, and I saw the people walking by, half a floor above us, so it was mostly their feet: men, women, children, some families. Something clicked in my imagination: suppose strangers were to meet to attend the event? They might act like families for convenience, this one time. Then my story-spinning mind was in full gear: why not have no-fault on Planet Charm that made a family, not man and woman for sex, but some other association. No fault could apply to any relationship that was convenient for traveling. Such as an old man and a girl.

And so it came about, naturally with a dancing theme like that of Riverdance. Strong beat, a whole lot of leg, not much else. Grandfather/granddaughter no fault that worked too well, and became a very special team. I wrote it rapidly and fitted it in as an illusion show, a novelette within the novel, complete in itself. In fact I can see this excerpted as a movie; it has all the elements. If only it could get the attention of someone in a position to do it. Meanwhile I still see/hear Beat drumming, summoning the thunder on the drum as Eke dances, bringing the audience to its feet in amazement as his old heart collapses. The quick perception and action of a mother who truly loves her daughter. A family story, courtesy of no fault.

Actually I also like the Dance of Vivid and Void, as the bright star slowly spirals into the flickering black hole. As I like all the cultural characterization here, including the "fourths" or "seconds" convention and the meaningful oaths of friendship, forgetting, or whatever. Theoretically female authors develop settings well, while male authors are more action oriented. This is both. Consider the Loom: like an ikon, making an ikon of itself, allowing only certain people to use it, and only in a special way. I had to research looms to get it right. The pattern it required turned out to be what is called a dodecahedron, a twelve sided figure, in this case with every facet a triangle. I couldn't properly visualize it, so cut out cardboard triangles and built the physical shape of it: first a four sided pyramid, counting the bottom. Then a similar pyramid built on each of those sides. Twelve external facets, four internal ones. Eighteen lines, or threads, signaling the full roster of Glamors. Ah, but we know of only fourteen Glamors, counting Havoc and Gale. Well, four more are coming in the next novel, to complete the roster. Also more on the Loom, and the twin world of Counter-Charms, as the final riddle is pursued and solved. And of course the personal development, as Havoc and Gale start an amazing family, and the Ladies Aspect and Ennui discover the powers and liabilities of the ikons they carry. This is magic with depth.

So this second novel really *is* an interstice, setting the stage for the wilder concepts to come. I loved revisiting it, and hope the readers like it too. Whether there is a future beyond the third, *Key to Destiny*, remains to be seen.

—Piers Anthony, October 2003

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Piers Anthony is one of the world's most prolific and popular authors. His fantasy Xanth novels have been read and loved by millions of readers around the world, and have appeared on the *New York Times* Best Seller list 21 times. Although Piers is mostly known for fantasy and science fiction, he has written several novels in other genres as well, including historical fiction, martial arts, and horror. Piers lives with his wife in a secluded woods hidden deep in Central Florida.

### ***Want to learn more about Piers Anthony?***

Piers Anthony's official website is HI PIERS at [www.hipiers.com](http://www.hipiers.com), where he publishes his bi-monthly online newsletter. HI PIERS also has a section reviewing many of the online publishers and self-publishing companies for your reference if you are looking for a non-traditional solution to publish your book.

Piers Anthony's largest fan-based website is The Compleat Piers Anthony at [www.piers-anthony.com](http://www.piers-anthony.com). The Compleat Piers Anthony contains extensive information about all the books and stories that Piers has written, as well as up-to-date information about forthcoming books.

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