

PIERS ANTHONY

Key to Survival

Book Five of the ChroMagic Series

Chapter 1 Opaline

"Candor: I'm frightened," Opaline said as they approached the local Traveler's Exchange. "I've never been away from Sourberry before."

"We know, dear, and we're frightened for you," her mother Silver said, hugging her fondly.

"We'd rather keep you at home," her father Copper said. "But you'll need to find employment and get married, and there are no local prospects. You should do better at Triumph City, where folk are more liberal."

"But it's such a big city, and so far away," Opaline said. "In between are strangers and brigands and strange magic. It daunts me awfully."

"That's why we want you to travel in company," Silver said.

"A man who will guide you and protect you," Copper agreed. "No fault."

"But no fault means I'll have to give him sex."

"Not necessarily," her mother said, a bit primly.

"Nine and a half times out of ten," Opaline said. "And the others are skipped because they are repulsive."

Her parents exchanged a helpless glance, not able either to deny it or call her repulsive. It was the commonly accepted price of traveling. At least it didn't count on the record. A virginal girl who traveled no fault remained virginal when she arrived, by definition. It was certainly better than being robbed and raped by brigands.

A man approached. He was tall and solid, with a floppy hat and bright checkered shirt. He wore a large backpack, and carried a long wood staff. He spoke to Opaline's father. "A greeting, villager. You have the look of a man who dreads sending his nubile daughter on the trail alone. I am Hayseed the minstrel, traveling to Triumph City and looking for a companion. May we have a dialogue?"

"Negation," her father said. "Minstrels are notorious lechers."

Hayseed laughed. "Confirmation! And I am surely among the worst. But I detest traveling alone, and am no hand at foraging for meals. How might I persuade you to let me travel with your daughter?"

"Make a oath of brotherhood," Copper said.

Opaline bit her tongue. The idea that such a man would ever agree to that was laughable.

Hayseed focused on Opaline. He nodded. "So made. No fault brotherhood."

Both parents stared at him, astonished and unable to answer immediately.

Opaline could not let this happen by default. "How can we trust a stranger? His oath could be worthless."

"Request," Hayseed said to them. "I wish to talk to you separately."

He thought he could persuade Copper and Silver to let him travel with her? Opaline turned away and walked a short distance, signifying her willingness to let her parents settle the matter. They were not at all credulous.

In a moment Copper called to her. "Opaline! We have agreed."

Opaline whirled to face the three. "Disbelief!"

"Trust us," Silver said. "This man will keep his word."

How could this be? It was baffling. Yet she knew that her parents would never betray her. Somehow the minstrel had talked them into trusting him. She had no choice but to agree.

Her mother kissed her tearfully, and her father hugged her. Then they stood back, in effect turning her over to Hayseed. Opaline hoped they had not somehow been dangerously deceived.

Hayseed started walking, and Opaline accompanied him, ill at ease. Soon they were beyond the village, and she knew that if she looked back she would not see her parents. She was on her way, and not at all easy about it.

They were on the path that wound between Chroma zones, avoiding the magic of the many colored regions. NonChroma folk like them could not afford to intrude on Chroma zones, because all the people, animals, and plants of the zones had magic that could make considerable mischief. But here in the nonChroma section nobody could do magic, making it safe in that respect. The zones were all colors, and as a general rule it was best to stay clear of any of them.

She had to know the worst. "Minstrel Hayseed—"

"Just call me Hayseed," he said. "And I will call you Opaline. We are siblings."

She would not be diverted. "Question: What did you tell my parents?"

"The truth," he said easily. "That my oath can be trusted, and I will see you safely and

unmolested to Triumph City. I can see you are wary of me; I hope to satisfy you that I will do you no harm, or allow harm to come to you."

"But you talked with them less than a minute."

"Concurrence."

"But no fault—men and women—"

"Have no concern, Opaline. I am a married man, with three grown daughters older than you and one younger. I love my wife, who I think is still the most beautiful woman on the planet."

"Doubt. I mean, about your age. You look twenty five."

"Appreciation. I try to stay fit."

Was he being evasive? "How old are you?"

"Forty one. My wife is 40."

"Disbelief."

He laughed. "Perhaps I will seem young forever."

There was a mystery about this man that did not reassure her. "Relevance: Married people travel no fault sexually. Even older folk. Why not you?"

"Opaline, I do, and so does my wife. But neither you nor your parents desire that for you, so I accompany you as your older brother. I will not violate that convention."

This irked her, for some reason. "Am I unappealing to you?"

"Negation."

"Then why so ready an agreement?"

"It was necessary. I need to travel with you."

"Why? I am nothing."

He paused. "I see this question bothers you. May I step out of role for a moment to make a demonstration?"

Opaline was wary, but wanted to know the truth. "Affirmation."

"If I had my free choice, I would do this with you." He stopped walking, took her by the shoulders, drew her in to him, and kissed her. The kiss was stunning in its impact; he was ten times the man she had supposed.

As she stood stunned, he continued. "And this." He slipped his hand into her blouse and squeezed her left breast. The nature of the touch made it evident that her breast was full and firm. Somehow, oddly, this surprised her; how could she feel that about herself? "And this." He put his hand under her skirt and inside her parities and squeezed her left buttock. The touch established that her buttock was similarly full and firm. By some weird device she was appreciating it as he did. "And this." He took her left hand and passed it inside his trousers, which opened of their own accord. He closed her fingers around his rampant male member, which seemed to pulse with eagerness. This was *really* full and firm. How was it that she was neither terrified nor repulsed? "And more, plumbing the delightful depth of you, becoming a fountain of rapture." And she felt illicit delight in the notion of that fountain jetting within her. Which was strange, as she was not at all that type of girl. She did wear the wire, so could not conceive, but that was a standard precaution for all nubile girls, especially those who had to travel. She was a virgin, and promised to remain so for this journey.

Then he disengaged. "But I am not your lover. I am your brother. I will do none of these things. It is not because you are unappealing. It is because I made an oath." He turned and resumed walking along the path.

She joined him automatically. It was as if she were in some other world. That gave her a certain boldness she would not otherwise have had. "Appreciation for not doing those things. They might have alarmed me." Somewhere on the horizon was a lining of mirth. Certainly he had satisfied her that she was not unappealing to him. She was not versed in sex, but knew that a man could not fake such an erection.

"Welcome."

"But why is it necessary to travel with me?"

Hayseed shook his head. "Observation: you are like a dragon with its jaws locked on the leg of a cow. You will not let go."

"It is one of my faults," she agreed. "Apology."

"Needless," he said, laughing again. He had an easy laugh that compelled her echoing laugh. "Will you accept a partial truth?"

"I would prefer the whole truth."

"The matter is complicated. The partial truth would be easier to assimilate now, leading to a later revelation of more of the truth."

"Acquiescence." This was a peculiar qualification, but she was really curious.

"Minstrels have avenues of information. We visit many villages and talk with many people. I knew of you before I came to Sourberry Village. I knew that you had unparalleled persistence and loyalty, and that you were to travel to Triumph City. I have a mission you might be suited for, but it is important and perhaps delicate, so I needed to get to know you first. So I intercepted you by no coincidence."

A mission? Whatever could that be? "Question?"

"There is a young man who needs help. He has a remarkable ability, that he needs to develop fully, but he does not practice. He needs constant encouragement."

"Persistence," she said, catching on to the relevance. "If I were with him, he would practice."

"Affirmation."

"What is this ability?"

"He can move a small object a small distance without touching it physically, if it is not too heavy."

"Perplexity: isn't this magic?"

"Not exactly. It seems to be independent of Chroma zones."

"But only Glamors can do magic outside their Chroma zone. Unless folk have a Chroma stone."

"Affirmation. But this man is nonChroma and has no stone. He does not seem to be a Glamor. It is a curiosity."

"Agreement! But setting aside whether this is really magic, it does not seem to be much of a talent. Unless he could learn to move a large object far."

"Apparently it is limited to very small objects, about the size of the last knuckle of a thumb, and the distance of movement is no more than that. Practice will not increase those aspects."

"Then what would be the point of encouragement?"

"There are other ways in which practice could help. He might move an object from a greater distance."

"But you said the distance could not increase."

"Clarification: the object moves hardly the width of a thumb, but he moves it from an arm's length away. With practice he might move it from several paces away."

Opaline nodded. "Understanding. Still, what is the value of such a thing? Wouldn't it be easier to move the object by hand and put it where it needs to be?"

"We think that if he practiced hard enough, there might be no limit to distance."

"Confusion."

"He might stand here, and move the object on yon mountain." Hayseed pointed to a distant green volcano on the horizon.

"Oh. Beyond a Chroma zone, where he could not go himself? But from that distance, how could he even see the object, let alone move it? And what would it accomplish to move it?"

"There is a corollary talent he seems to have. To move the object, he has to perceive it with some sense other than eye or ear. That, too, must be developed, because without it the movement would be useless."

"Agreement. Still, such a small object, moved with so little force, seems hardly to be worthwhile."

"Request: spot demonstration."

"Agreement." This business was intriguing, but so far seemed like much concern about very little.

"Here is the object, for this purpose," Hayseed said, holding up his thumb. "Here is where it is, perhaps carried in your pocket." He put his thumb in her rear skirt pocket. "Now it moves just a little." He moved his thumb, and goosed her.

Opaline jumped. "Indignity!"

"Apology. It merely shows how the ability to move a small object might cause a reaction in a person. Anything in your pocket could be made to do that to you, perhaps from out of sight. It would be effective against a man, too."

"Like this?" she asked, putting her finger in his front pocket, then poking his crotch through the cloth.

"Exactly. Such a thing might cause dissension in a distant hostile army."

She thought about that, and had to laugh. "All those soldiers getting goosed! They'd be punching each other in retribution, and there would be a melee."

"Affirmation. So we feel this is worth exploring. But before you decide, there is another caution."

Opaline was learning to take his cautions seriously. "Question?"

"He is simple."

She considered that. "You are saying that he is not of average intelligence?"

"Stupid," he agreed. "His mother must care for him, for he can't exist independently. If you associated with him, you would have to treat him like a child in many respects. But he is not a child; he is a man."

"A man," she repeated. "The things you would have liked to do with me, he would also like to do?"

"Affirmation. It would be hard to explain to him why not."

"So this is more than guidance."

"He would need guidance there too."

Sexual instruction? "Conclusion: I couldn't give that. I have no experience myself."

He nodded. "Conjecture: Taken as a whole, this may not be a thing you want to do."

But she was dangerously intrigued. "Situation: I need a job, a man, and a feeling of personal significance. Does this relate?"

"The job exists. There would be a permit from the king allowing you to draw whatever goods or services you needed to make a no fault household for the man and yourself. The man is simple, but he is amiable and amenable to direction. The significance of the training is overwhelming."

"Question?"

"There is an enemy approaching our planet who means to destroy us, and may have the power to do so. This may be our secret weapon to stop that enemy. The fate of our planet may depend on you."

Opaline laughed. "You are telling a minstrel story! Minstrels love to tell tales of kings and planetary threats. I was believing you until you reached too far."

"Regret. You would surely not believe the whole truth."

"Agreement."

"But I will get you safely to Triumph City." Hayseed looked ahead. "We are approaching the next village. Tenderpaw, I believe."

"I have heard of it, but never been there. I wonder how it came to be named?"

"Every village has its story," Hayseed said. "Like every person."

"I had better go to the bushes," Opaline said. "In case it takes a while to get through the village."

He did not pretend to not understand, so as to force her to be embarrassingly explicit. She had to pee. "I will guard the region," he agreed. "Request: do it under that tree." He gestured to a spreading tree at the edge of the Blue Chroma zone.

"Question?"

"I know that tree, and owe it a favor. It would really appreciate a donation of fertilizer."

"Amazement!"

He shrugged. "It is merely a request. You may do as you choose."

She went to the bushes, paused, then on to the tree. The concealment was not as good here, but Hayseed was dutifully facing away, so she drew down her parities, and squatted to urinate. As the liquid soaked into the ground, the tree shook, and a plum-orange dropped to the turf before her. Startled, she straightened up, well-nigh wetting herself. It was almost as if the tree had given her a

return gift. Coincidence, surely.

She pulled up her parities, dropped her skirt, and picked up the fruit. She walked back to the path. "Guess what happened," she said as Hayseed turned back to face her.

"Exchange of gifts."

"You knew!"

"I relate to trees."

Bemused, she did not comment. They walked on into the village, and to the central house where the Village Elder sat on his porch.

"Greeting, Elder," Hayseed said formally. "I am Hayseed the Minstrel, and this is my sister Opaline."

The Elder peered at Opaline's hand. "Suspicion: What's she doing with a plum-orange? We don't tolerate theft."

"Explanation," Hayseed said. "It was a fair trade."

The Elder remained suspicious. "That tree does not make trades."

Hayseed smiled. "Perhaps you should speak to it, then."

The Elder was not amused. "Girl! What kind of trade?"

Opaline felt herself blushing. "I did not mean to do wrong, Elder."

"She is innocent," Hayseed said. "As you can see. I told her it was all right."

"And who in Void are you to do that?"

"Just a traveling minstrel. I am familiar with all the trees along this path."

"You haven't been here before!"

"Not in the village. I normally sleep in the trees."

"That tree?"

"Affirmation."

The Elder openly assessed him. "Deal: demonstrate that you can touch that tree, and we will give you free lodging here tonight."

"Appreciation."

What was happening? Opaline did not understand why there was such a fuss about a tree. But she discovered she was tired from the unaccustomed hours of walking, and would appreciate sheltered lodging for the night.

They walked back to the tree, with the Elder and several curious villagers who appeared. Then Hayseed took Opaline's hand and walked with her to the tree. They went right up to the trunk, which was covered with spikes. Havoc took hold of them and used them to climb up the fat bole to the first major division of branches. He sat there and dangled his feet down. "It's a friendly tree," he remarked. Then he climbed down, took Opaline's hand again, and returned to the villagers, who looked faintly awed.

"Apology," the Elder said. "You do know the tree."

"Needless. If you wish, we will entertain you this evening before we retire."

"Appreciation," the Elder said gruffly.

They were given a nice cabin already stocked with food. "What happened?" Opaline asked when they were alone.

"That tree is of a notorious species. Its fruit is excellent, but it does not normally yield it gladly. The villagers have taken decades to cultivate the friendship of the tree, and strangers aren't welcome. Fortunately it accepted you."

"Because of my innocence?" Not to mention her urine.

"In part. But as I said, I know that tree, and it knows me. So it cooperated."

"What would have happened to someone it didn't like?"

"Those spikes can jet poison."

She was silent.

After a moment, he spoke again. "They gave us this house free for the night, in tacit apology for challenging you about the fruit and me about the tree. But we will pay for it anyway. Are you familiar with minstrel performance?"

"Sometimes they pass through and sing songs," she said.

"Did they enlist any villagers in the presentation?"

"Sometimes."

"You will be my assistant this time."

She was appalled. "I'm no actress! I have no idea what to do."

"Just follow my lead. It will not be difficult. Trust me."

"Candor: I don't really trust you. That business with the tree—I don't understand that at all. The tree couldn't have human intelligence."

"I will win your trust, Opaline. I promise you will have no problem."

"I seem not to have a choice," she said nervously.

"You must change outfits, as will I. Traveling clothes are not suitable for this."

She was resigned. "Tell me what to do."

He told her, and she opened her pack and brought out her fancy green dress and slippers. He faced away as she changed, then came to unbind her hair and arrange it in a loose brown wave. Then she faced away while he changed, becoming a brightly colored minstrel with a blue dragon scale as a musical instrument.

They went outside. The villagers were gathering in the central square, the smallest children sitting in a circle in front, the larger ones behind them, and the adults standing to the rear. She had to go into that stage and somehow perform?

"Trust me," Hayseed repeated. "If I disappoint you, you need never trust me again."

She nodded dumbly.

They took the center of the round stage area. Opaline just stood there awkwardly, having no idea what else to do. But Hayseed immediately took command. "Greeting, children!" he called.

"Greeting, Minstrel!" they chorused back.

"I am Hayseed the Minstrel, and this is my little sister Opaline from Village Sourberry. She will assist me in my song."

All eyes focused on Opaline. She felt like sinking through the earth.

"This is a song of lost love," Hayseed said. "I will sing her words for her." The blue dragon scale appeared in his hands. He strummed it, and it made a melodious note. Without further pause, he sang.

*Come all you fair and tender ladies
Take warning how you court young men!
They're like the stars of a summer's morning
They'll first appear and then they're gone.*

Opaline stood *amazed*. She had not heard him sing before. He was good, amazingly good. The dragon scale was somehow producing a beautiful accompaniment, but he hardly needed it. His voice was so rich and powerful it made her shiver inside.

She saw the young village girls gazing raptly at the minstrel. He had captured their devotion from the first note.

He had sung two more stanzas during her distraction. Now he glanced at her, and nodded his

head slightly, indicating that she should approach. She did so, tentatively.

*I wish I was a little swallow
And I had wings and I could fly.
I'd fly away to my false true lover
And when he'd speak I would be nigh.*

Now she was with him, being nigh. The imposed role was permeating her, making her become that heartbroken maiden. She couldn't stop it, and didn't really want to.

Still singing, he guided her to lie on the ground. She yielded, bemused. He got down with her, acting out what he sang. If this were not being done in public, she would ironically have been even more ill at ease. Literally lying with a man?

*Oh don't you remember our days of courting
When your head lay upon my breast?
You could make me believe by the falling of your arms
That the sun rose in the west.*

And there they were, his head upon her breast, his arms reaching up over her face to halfway mask what she could see. She couldn't help herself; she caught his head in her own arms and pressed it to her bosom.

Then the villagers were applauding, and she realized the song was over. Embarrassed, she hastily let him go. Had she messed it up?

"Isn't she wonderful?" he inquired rhetorically, and the audience applauded more vigorously, causing her to blush.

Hayseed started another song, guiding her as a prop, and Opaline saw that more villagers had appeared. At first it had been mostly the children, with some parents to keep an eye on them, but now the whole village was attending. She understood why: this was not just a passing minstrel of indifferent quality. This was one of the finest voices on the planet. She felt privileged to be on stage with him, and somehow he made her seem to be a competent participant, whatever style of woman she represented for the time of a given song.

Then, abruptly, Hayseed ended it. "Night is closing, and my sister needs her rest," he said. Actually it was the children who needed it; they were getting sleepy as the songs catered to other ages.

"Minstrel," the young women pleaded. "One more!"

"One more," he agreed generously. "Then we all will soon retire. My sister and I have far to go, and the village has business to accomplish while the weather holds."

He posed Opaline in the center of the stage, then stood to the side facing her and sang.

*Every night as the sun goes down
Every night as the sun goes down
Every night as the sun goes down
I hold my head and mournful weep.*

Opaline hung her head, for the moment feeling the dejection the song described.

Hayseed approached her and gently embraced her as he sang. "True love don't weep, true love don't mourn..."

But she did weep, for it was a song of departure. The village girls wept too, loving it.

Hayseed finished, kissed her half chastely, half passionately—somehow he made it work—and walked away, leaving her abject. The song and the presentation were over.

Then the village girls thronged to worship the minstrel in the guise of bidding parting for the night. They were young but eager, and a number were lovely, making Opaline aware how relatively plain she was.

Yet several village boys approached her. "You were great!" one said. "No fault?"

Opaline stared at him, her blush burning her face. No one had ever propositioned her before. Not even Hayseed's demonstration of what he wouldn't do with her had quite prepared her for this.

A girl grabbed the boy's arm, yanking him away. "Apology for my brother," she said. "He has no manners."

"Acceptance," Opaline said faintly. Then, lest there be confusion. "Of the apology." But her blush continued unabated.

Several boys laughed. "Of course," another said. "But it is true you did well. We all wanted to comfort you, on stage."

"Appreciation." Gradually she was coming to believe it: she was a success.

Hayseed came to take her arm. "Don't mob my little sister," he said to the boys. "She is innocent."

"We noticed," another said, and they all laughed. But it was sympathy, not ridicule. They dispersed.

Now the Village Elder approached Hayseed. "I fear I have committed a breach of etiquette," he said. "I did not recognize you."

"Negation. I am just a traveling minstrel who likes trees," Hayseed said firmly as he looked the man in the eye. "Conducting my sister to Triumph City."

"Just so," the Elder agreed, seeming to be taken aback. "We sincerely appreciate your art. Had I realized—"

"Needless." Hayseed guided Opaline to their house.

"Confusion," she said once they were alone. She was preparing supper for them from the fruits and breads provided in the larder. In this, at least, she felt competent. "Did the Elder recognize you

from somewhere?"

"Minstrels travel widely. I don't believe I have entertained here before, but he might have seen me elsewhere."

She wasn't quite satisfied with that, but attributed it to the larger mystery of this remarkable man. "That first song—"

"Did I disappoint you?"

"Negation!" Then, embarrassed by her own vehemence, she shifted the subject. "Of course it is nonsense. No woman would be deceived about the direction of the rising of Vivid, let alone Void, and why did you refer to it as the sun? That proves the song is not local."

"The Sun is of Earth," he agreed. "So is the song. For a thousand years we have clung to our mother culture, though for most of that time we were out of touch. It is human nature to value our ancestors, whether they are people or customs or songs. Much of the value of the song is that it invokes the memory of Earth. So none of the songs refer to Vivid or Void. Earth does not have a binary system of a star and a black hole."

She served the meal, liking the idea of catering to him in the manner of a woman to a man. "I have no experience, but you made me feel like that lost girl."

"It is the art of the minstrel. I could have made a rock seem like a lost girl, and you are far more than that."

"And when you kissed me—" She broke off, flushing again. She was coming to a decision. "Is it possible to change from one mode of no fault to another?"

"It is possible, but not feasible in this instance."

"Confusion. After that song—" Again she could not finish. Her feelings were tangled, but she was strongly attracted to him.

"Explanation," he said firmly. "There are men who might agree to travel with a winsome girl as brother, then trick her into changing the mode so they could seduce her. The emotion of the moment can cause a person to do something she might later regret. So the original oath must govern. I am your oath brother, no fault, and I will not let any man seduce you, even myself, lest I abridge that oath. The sanctity of my oath is of greater importance than any casual tryst."

"But—but if the girl understood, and still were willing?" She hated the blush she was showing.

"It is inviolate. Incest is not allowed."

He was telling her no, yet she could not let it go. "A journey might end at a village, and a new one, with a new oath, commence on another day."

He gazed at her. "Observation: I think I should not have kissed you."

"Confession: It wasn't just the kiss."

"Awkwardness: you are a young impressionable girl. I am an experienced man. In matters of this venue, this is a mismatch. I very much wish not to hurt your feelings, but the oath must govern."

"I'm a child. And of course you are married to the planet's most beautiful woman." Now the tears were overflowing. She had humiliated herself for nothing.

He considered. "You are appealing enough, and no child. Deal: after I deliver you to Triumph City, and you need to travel again, it could be phrased as a new journey."

For an instant her heart fluttered. Then reality returned. "Is this assignment—this young man with the talent—beyond Triumph City?"

"Negation. Triumph City is our official destination, because the location of this man must not be publicly known. It is a deception necessary for others, not for ourselves."

"Then the deal is false."

He smiled warily. "I think I am running afoul of that persistence again. You are correct: I tried to put you off. My intention was honorable. The appearance of my wife is irrelevant; I would be delighted to love you all night. But I must not. Sincere regret."

She saw it was hopeless. She had been foolish even to broach the subject. "Apology," she said, turning away to mop up her tears.

"Apology mine, not yours," he said. Suddenly he was by her side, holding her close.

He was comforting her as a brother would. She turned into him and defiantly kissed him hard on the mouth. Then she pulled away and went to lie face down on the bed, sobbing.

He sat beside her, his hand touching her shaking shoulder. "Deal: on another day I will tell you more of the truth. If you still wish to change status thereafter, I will do it."

She had to respond to this. "Why should I not wish to? Are you a frog emulating a prince?"

"Something like that."

He thought that if she knew him better, she would not want to clasp him. That was intriguing. "Deal," she agreed.

"You are tired. I should have let you rest before this. Let me help you."

"Question?"

He rolled her over with that uncanny strength. He put his hands on her legs, massaging them. The tightness just seemed to flow away. "Thus," he murmured.

He did all of her legs, from feet to upper thighs. She knew he was getting to see everything under

her skirt, but he gave no indication. He was indeed helping her.

"Gratitude," she said as he finished. Then, still somewhat physically and emotionally fatigued, she slept.

In the morning she found him up and about, making breakfast. "Dismay! I should be doing that!"

"Negation. You need your rest. We have far to go."

Her legs were slightly stiff from the amount of walking they had done the day before, though much better off than they would have been without his massage. She was not properly acclimatized to this. "Appreciation." Yet part of her wished he had lost control and joined her on the bed in another manner. He must have slept on the floor. "I would have been softer than the floor." Had she just said that?

He laughed. "Temptation."

She got up and used the toilet cubby, combing and tying her hair and changing into her traveling clothes. She no longer cared whether he turned away; in fact she might secretly have preferred that he look. Her good dress was sadly crushed, but she would fix that when she had time. She was privately glad that the journey was long, because she had come to value the minstrel's company more than she should, she knew.

In due course they left the house. The Village Elder intercepted them. "News: there is a report of brigands infesting the path toward Triumph City. Best to wait on a convoy, or take another route."

Hayseed shrugged. "Another route would be tedious, and there may be weather after today. We should be safe enough."

"But Sire!"

Hayseed glanced at him, and the man backed away with a muttered apology.

Opaline made a mental note: add one more item to the mystery of Hayseed the Minstrel. Why was he ignoring obvious danger? Was she safe from brigands in his company? But, again, did she have a choice?

They set out at a brisk pace, and the slight stiffness of her limbs dissipated with the exercise. It was a beautiful morning. What had he meant by weather? There was no sign of it. But the brigands—that bothered her. She had never encountered one, but had heard stories. They were said to be merciless predators intent on theft, rape, and murder. Weren't they taking an awful risk?

They paused at noon for a snack and natural functions, then moved on. Opaline admired the scenery, as they passed one colored zone after another. She had never been in a Chroma zone, and wondered what it was like to have magic. People who lived there must be very lucky.

"Beware," Hayseed murmured. "Do not draw your knife."

He knew she carried a knife? That was supposed to be a maiden secret, to be used as a last

resort to protect her honor or life. But why was he warning her at this moment?

Then a large ugly man stepped out on the path ahead. "Ho, traveler!" he called. "We'll take your valuables now, including the girl."

"Brigands. If they approach you, run into a Chroma zone," Hayseed whispered. "They won't follow you there."

They were standing between a red and a blue zone. It would be easy to reach one or the other. But why wasn't he fleeing too?

Hayseed strode forward. "We are not for you," he told the man. "Let us pass unmolested, and you will be spared."

"Ho ho ho!" the man bellowed. "The man's a joker." He put his hand on his club, menacingly.

Hayseed's long staff swung up, clipping the man on the side of the head. He fell, cursing.

Then four more men jumped out from the bushes on either side. Two grabbed each of Hayseed's arms and swung him about.

"So you want to fight, eh?" the first brigand said, getting up. "Well, we'll oblige you, sucker." He closed his fist and struck Hayseed in the belly.

Opaline acted before she thought. "Brigand!" she called.

"Ah, the morsel speaks," the brigand said, turning to look at her. And stared, surprised.

Opaline was holding her blade to her own throat. "Let him go, and I will drop the knife," she called. She knew that would mean being gang raped, but she couldn't stand to see Hayseed brutalized.

"Well, now," the brigand said. "The wench has spirit. I like that." He strode toward her.

"Touch her and you die," Hayseed said.

"Ho ho ho!" The brigand continued striding.

Opaline tried to slice her throat, but her hand wouldn't move. It had been a bluff, and she lacked the nerve.

The brigand loomed before her, his body stinking of sweat. He reached out to take her knife.

And dropped to the ground before her. A different knife projected from his back.

Opaline looked at Hayseed. Now he was walking toward her. The four men who had held him were all sprawled on the ground, unmoving. Somehow she knew they were dead.

Hayseed took the knife from her hand and returned it to her hidden underarm sheath.

"What—how—?" she asked, collapsing into his arms.

"I am a martial artist," he said. "We needed to be rid of those brigands, so I provoked them into giving me cause."

"Provoked them—by having me as bait?"

"Affirmation." He gently disengaged, and bent to draw out his knife from the brigand. He cleaned it against the ground and returned it to his own hidden sheath. "Apology."

"And this is not yet the whole truth about you?"

"Affirmation."

"I expected to be gang raped. I didn't even have the nerve to save you. You had to save me."

"You did a fine thing."

"I failed."

"Irrelevant. You showed your mettle."

She couldn't help it. She dissolved into tears, there in his embrace, with the dead men all around.

Chapter 2

Plant

Gale glanced around. She was alone in the bedroom, because Havoc was traveling with the "fifth" girl, to be sure she made it safely to her assignment. She would surely be his no fault mistress before that was done. Meanwhile Gale was antsy; she didn't like sleeping alone, even after twenty two years of marriage.

Then she felt it: a faint summons from a plant. Not a familiar one; this was different. It needed her attention.

She got up, used the toilet facilities, and dressed quickly. Then she went to wake Vila.

But the girl was already up. "Mommy! There's a plant!"

Gale paused a moment. She and Havoc had adopted their first three children, now grown, and then had a natural one, Voila, now also grown and the most potent Glamor ever. Suffering a siege of empty nest syndrome, they had decided to have another, and that was Vila, her name nowhere near the simplified form of their first natural child that others assumed. Vila was no Glamor, but she was every bit her own person, even at age five.

Gale gazed at her daughter. Vila had a very fair complexion and curly reddish-brown hair that

fell all the way to her feet. She looked exactly like the vila of folklore, a magic wood spirit who protected trees, streams, springs, plants, animals, and children. The mythological vily (the plural form) were bound to particular trees, though they did not have to stay close to them. Vila had her own tree, that Havoc had found for her, and it really did protect her. Influenced by her parents, who were the Glamors of Trees and of Moss and Lichen, Vila had a close affinity. So perhaps it was not surprising that she had picked up on the distant plant that had wakened Gale.

"You think too long, mommy," Vila said, frowning cutely. "We need to fetch it now."

"Agreement." She picked up the child and conjured them to the region where the plant was. This turned out to be near the edge of a Green Chroma zone. Everything was shades of green, no other colors, apart from themselves. It was an uninhabited region, but the environment was magic. "Caution," she said, setting Vila down. "Stay close."

"Acquiescence," Vila agreed. She knew better than to get willful in a Chroma zone. She pointed. "There."

She had located the plant before Gale did! The girl did carry Gale's ikon, and that gave her some Glamor-like qualities. And of course she had been raised in the ambiance of two plant-connected Glamors.

They walked to the plant. It was hardly more than a seedling, a thin stem with a single cup-shaped green leaf that oriented on them. Some plants did that, but Gale knew this was no ordinary plant. It was alien to her experience—and her experience with plants was second only to Havoc's.

"Daddy will know," Vila said confidently.

"We will take it to him." Gale conjured a suitable pot, then dug in the earth around the plant, excavating a ball of soil that included the plant. She lifted it into the pot.

"It likes us," Vila said.

"Confirmation." But Gale didn't quite trust this. The plant had signaled her and her daughter, and it was different from all others. She needed to consult with Havoc, privately. But Havoc was occupied elsewhere, with the special girl. She hesitated.

"Take us to Figment," Vila suggested.

Gale had forgotten to shield her thoughts, and the girl had read them. She was telepathic, and they had trained her in thought shielding from the outset. But there was seldom occasion for secrets between them. "Acquiescence."

She conjured them to Figment. This was a huge old strangler fig tree, a deadly menace to most living creatures, but the perfect hideout for the precocious child. The tree's flowers emitted intoxicating fumes that caused passing animals to lose caution and stray too close. Then special branches descended to haul the creatures into the foliage, where they were slowly consumed. People normally remained well clear. But Havoc, the Glamor of Trees, had befriended the fig, and arranged for it to shelter Vila. It was about as safe a place as she could be, apart from Triumph City itself.

"Hi Figment!" Vila called gladly. "I love you!"

She surely did. The central bower was always warm and comfortable, and the figs were delicious. The spreading branches offered numerous foliage-shielded vantages from which the child could peek out without being seen from outside. There was a comfortable natural mat to sleep on, and she could tune in on nearby minds. This afforded her a considerable education, especially when unsuspecting local residents had quarrels or romances.

"I will return soon, or send Aura," Gale said. "I must take the plant with me. Regret."

"Regret," Vila echoed. But she understood that her mother would not let her be alone with anything she did not properly understand. "Send Aura."

Gale smiled, kissed her, then took the plant and conjured herself to her suite at Triumph City. *Aura*, she called mentally as she set down the pot.

Hastening, the woman responded in kind. Aura was Vila's regular baby sitter, a fully competent and responsible Blue Chroma woman they had known for decades. Her specialty was animals, and she always had interesting animal stories.

"Vila's in Figment," Gale said as the woman appeared. She was of course completely blue from hair to feet. "I must consult with Havoc about this plant. It should not take long, once I catch him. He's traveling with a teen village girl."

"Comprehension," Aura said with half a smile. Havoc's way with village girls was notorious.

Gale took her hand and conjured them both to Figment. She let go and returned to Triumph, knowing that Aura would handle Vila as long as necessary. Aura was one of the few the tree had been taught to tolerate.

Now Gale reached out with her mind to intercept Havoc's mind. *Curiosity. Plant. Advice.*

Busy, his returning thought came.

She looked into his mind. *You made an Oath of Brotherhood to a teen village girl? You'll never get into her pants that way.*

Not this trip, he agreed ruefully.

Arrange a five minute break so you can use my senses.

Your pants are too far away to get into at the moment.

Havoc, she thought warningly.

Five minute break it is, he agreed quickly. They teased each other endlessly about his sexual appetite and her supposed lack of it; it helped keep the fires of their passion strong. But at the moment she needed something other than his sexual input.

Soon he had it arranged, and came to occupy her mind. He absorbed what she knew about this new little plant. Then he took over her eyes and fingers, examining on it. He was the Glamor of Trees and plants; there was little he would be unable to fathom about this one.

He looked intensely at it, then touched the fringe of its little cup. The plant's cusp oriented on him, following his movements. It knew he was a different person.

She felt his surprise. *It's an alien ikon!*

It's a plant, she reminded him.

Sent by an alien culture to contact us. Soon it will give you its home address. You must go there and ascertain the nature of its culture and its business with us.

Then he was gone from her mind, leaving her amazed. This little plant was an ikon from a distant planet? They had never before encountered such a thing. All Planet Charm ikons were inanimate, though they had special effects on those who carried them. Yet Havoc was in a position to know.

Now she did what she had not thought to do before: she studied the near-future paths of the plant. And was amazed again. A normal plant remained where it grew, affecting things in its immediate vicinity, so its paths were limited and self-similar. This one was a complex network of paths that interlocked in a bewildering pattern. She was unable to fathom its complete destiny.

Which of course was part of the nature of an ikon. It gathered magic power and transmitted it to its Glamor. It could not be touched by any Glamor. That was why ikons were either hidden away carefully, or carried by trusted mortal people. Their influence was normally subtle but potent.

This was a living ikon, but surely did have a connection to its Glamor. It probably would affect those it was physically close to. It could be touched physically, but perhaps not magically, and its true future was obscure. So it manifested its properties in different ways. Because it was alien. Just as Earth ikons were people, who could be touched by Glamors, this alien culture's ikons were plants.

Indeed, she would have to visit its source culture. Soon. She oriented again on the plant.
Where?

The plant indicated a location: the spot where its Glamor existed. It was in a distant star system, one with which they had had no prior contact. With that address, Gale could travel there by wormhole, needing only the route that was the connection between the ikon and its Glamor.

But *should* she? Such a trip would be complicated. For one thing, she would have to take Vila along, to bring her ikon there, and that would put her daughter at serious risk. Gale herself could handle almost anything, being an experienced Glamor, but Vila was not a Glamor, and of course lacked experience. It would also take her away from Charm at a time when they were trying to prepare for the looming siege of the machine culture. Such a diversion was not wise.

Yet she was tempted. This appeared to be a genuine alien contact, their first beyond their own stellar system. At any other time it would be welcome. They knew that other stellar cultures existed, because Mino had records indicating that the machines were systematically conquering and abolishing them. Idyll Ifrit also had records of alien cultures. They just hadn't made direct contact.

"I need advice," she said aloud. Then she snapped her fingers. "Voila."

Her first natural daughter appeared, a moderately pretty brown-haired woman of 21, instantly grasping the situation. "Safe. Relevant," she said. "But verify with Idyll." She left.

"Appreciation," Gale said belatedly. Voila was busy, of course; she didn't mean to be abrupt. Few would know by looking at Voila that she was essentially running the human culture's effort to repel the machine invasion, and that was the way she preferred it. Gale could see a bit of the near future paths, but Voila could see them much farther and clearer. The official ranges were that the near future was one second to one hour, the intermediate future one hour to one month, and the far future one month through the end of time. Gale could see as far as five minutes, while Voila could see through the hour. So though they were both near-future seers, there was a significant difference in their abilities. That was why Gale and the other Glamors deferred to Voila in matters of strategy and safety.

Idyll could see the intermediate future, and the machines could see the far future. The spans of time differed enormously, but the three types of seeing were actually equivalent, because decisions of the present had overwhelming impact on the future. What a person did in ten seconds could change the course of events for the hour and beyond. The key was to fathom the impact of specific actions, so as to know and avoid the dangerous ones.

In one second a person could stick her thumb on a thorn, and the pain might fade within a minute, so a glimpse at one hour later might show no change. But if that thorn were poisoned, it might take a day for the mischief to manifest, so the clearance of the near future was no guarantee. The intermediate future could catch most such things, however. That was why Voila had told her to go to Idyll. It wasn't any lack of competence or courtesy; it was a necessary check.

Gale picked up the plant and conjured herself to Counter Charm. She arrived in the reception glade of Idyll Ifrit, the first non-human, non-animal Glamor they had encountered. Millennia old Idyll had become young Voila's closest associate, and a key player in the siege effort.

There was a swirl as an illusion figure formed. Idyll's specialty was illusion, and she was phenomenal. The glade, its surrounding forest, and all else in this section of the planet were part of her illusion fields. But Idyll herself was real, though seldom with any physical body. "Welcome, friend," the image said, coalescing to human woman aspect.

Gale opened her mind and held up the potted plant. "Question."

The ifrit examined the situation, and applied her ability to see the intermediate future paths.

"Safe," Idyll concluded. "For you and Vila."

"Appreciation."

"Significance."

"Agreement." But there was a problem. "Normally we need ikons at each end to safely travel between stars."

"The alien plant ikon connects to its Glamor," Idyll said. "As her guest you can make that first journey. You can leave a duplicate ikon for visits thereafter."

So she could. But still she was nervous. "Favor." She put her request uppermost in her mind.

"Privilege."

Then an imprint of the ifrit formed in her mind, like a second personality. Idyll was joining her, lending her considerable consciousness and perception to Gale's body. That made her feel far more competent.

The two women hugged. They were of totally different kinds, flesh and demon, but they were friends who completely trusted each other. Voila had spent much time with Idyll when growing up, and Vila was doing so now. Idyll had much to teach, and she was great company. And now, as they separated physically, they remained together mentally. That was very reassuring for Gale; she trusted Idyll's competence beyond her own in dealing with aliens.

Gale conjured herself directly to Figment. Aura and Vila were there, of course, discussing animals. They had even half-tamed a six-legged squirrel that lived in the foliage of the tree. The creature quickly vacated when strangers appeared.

"Appreciation," Gale said to Aura. "Now Vila and I must travel far."

"Question?" Aura inquired.

"To a new culture, in a new star system," Gale explained. "Idyll is with me."

"Approval."

Gale picked Vila up, and took Aura's hand. She conjured them to Triumph. She thanked Aura, who departed. Then, to Vila: "Dress in travel clothes, and carry a nonChroma stone. We don't know what we'll encounter."

The girl obeyed without hesitation.

"And fetch a duplicate ikon."

Vila went to the hidden box where Gale kept several copies of her ikon. She lifted the little metallic figure of a ball of moss. "Question?"

Gale considered briefly. "Yes, swallow it. That will be the one you keep, at least until we return."

The child wrapped the ikon in a wad of bread and swallowed it. It would remain in her system several days, and she would not allow it to be lost with her wastes. She would wash it off and swallow it again if need be. Her regular ikon remained bound out of sight in her hair. It did not matter where on her or in her the ikon was, or that there were now two of them; what counted was that as long as they were in a nonChroma zone, they would transmit power to Gale. If there were no nonChroma zones where they traveled, she would have to depend on the Chroma stones. They would do; otherwise the near and intermediate future paths would not be clear.

A glamor could not touch her own ikon, or any other Glamor's ikon; that was why the ikons had to be carried by trusted normal folk, or securely hidden. But a Glamor could touch or transport the person holding an ikon, so long as that ikon never touched the Glamor's flesh. Gale thought of it as being like a burning hot pan: the bare hand could not touch it, but a potholder could be used to carry it. Vila was in that sense a potholder; she carried the ikon and Gale carried her. The girl understood the way of it, and also knew the benefits the ikon bequeathed her, making her healthier, smarter, and in due course as she matured, sexier. Ikons protected themselves by enhancing their bearers. It was a nice deal, provided the bearers did not try to stop bearing them.

"The plant is an alien ikon," Gale said. "It anchors this site. We will go to its Glamor. I do not know what to expect, except that it is safe."

"It's a plant Glamor," Vila said.

"How do you know that?"

"The plant told me."

Gale did not question this. Her daughter had perceptions others lacked, perhaps because of Gale's ikon. Maybe one ikon could understand another ikon.

They went to the front office. "Ennui, we are going to a far star to visit a plant culture," Gale said. "We hope to return soon."

Ennui was Havoc's oath friend, the one he trusted before all others. She handled this astonishing news as if it were routine. "Will you need to be covered?"

"That's probably best, if we are gone long." For Gale was the Queen, and her prolonged absence would be noted. She had a double to take her place, a loyal mortal woman who looked very much like her, by no coincidence, and who enjoyed taking Havoc to bed when it was in the line of that duty. Sometimes Havoc teased Gale that the double was more fun than she was. But then Gale teased him back about the sexual prowess of *his* double, when Gale bedded him.

"Please check in when you return," Ennui said. This was not mere concern; she needed to know where the primary figures of the planet were at all times, in case of emergency. Ennui was now in her sixties and ready to retire, but was determined to see the Third Crisis through first.

"Agreement. There is a small potted plant in my chamber. Water it if need be, but do not move it or allow it to be disturbed."

Again the woman accepted this without question. "Agreement." Ennui was thoroughly competent.

They returned to the chamber. Gale placed the plant in a windowed alcove so that sunlight could find it for much of the day. She picked Vila up, kissed her, and invoked the travel line.

Immediately they were caught up in the swirl of ether travel. This was a matter of conjuring the bodies to the wormhole the line led to, then conjuring through that hole. It was the same system that spaceships used, except that individuals could use smaller and closer wormholes. Wormholes were

spots where the underlying fabric of the universe—the ether—was warped to the point that a cyst formed between adjacent convolutions, a kind of black hole, and passing through that aperture took a ship or person to a quite different and distant part of space. Because matter was responsible for the warping of the ether, and a galaxy was a collection of matter, wormholes generally connected spots that were not too distant from each other, astronomically: the same section of the galaxy. So their destination was probably within a hundred light years or so. It would still have been extremely awkward to travel that distance through normal space at under light speed. Wormholes facilitated virtually instant travel, once their locations and connections were zeroed in.

Wormholes made Gale nervous, but she suppressed that and entered this one. After all, it wasn't random; the plant's lifeline passed through it. This was a mapped route. But who had done the mapping?

You think too much, Idyll said in her mind. The paths are safe.

There was the problem: the path was not safe as far as Gale could fathom. It was unfinished, and that made her wary. Taking it was like jumping off a ledge without seeing the landing: it might be right underfoot, or an awesome distance down. But that simply meant that the path extended beyond five minutes into the future. Idyll could follow it much farther, and thus could fathom its safe conclusion. "Appreciation."

The terminal of the wormhole was by a stellar cluster Gale didn't recognize. That meant they were probably more than ten light years distant from home. There seemed to be no close stellar system. Had they been led astray?

It's a link, Idyll said reassuringly. There will be another wormhole.

"Why have links, when a single wormhole can do it more efficiently?"

That is beyond my fathoming, but I sense there is valid reason.

Gale conjured them along the line to the next wormhole. They went through it. This time there was an adjacent system. She conjured them to the end of the line.

In a moment they were on another world, standing knee-deep in dry grass and twigs. There were a number of scorched trunks, and mounds of ashes. There had been a devastating fire here not very long before, and the accumulation of tinder promised another fire soon. This was the source of the line? Yet it was obviously a habitable world, with comfortable gravity and air she could readily breathe. That was not surprising, since the plant that had summoned her was thriving in Charm's air.

Vila wriggled, and Gale set her down. "Caution," she murmured.

"It's safe," the child assured her. "Idyll told me." She ran forward to where a small green plant sprouted from the ash. She put forth one hand to touch it.

"Caution!" Gale repeated sharply.

"Safe!" Vila repeated. "Mommy, come talk!" She ran on to the edge of the burned region, where plants grew thickly.

Alarmed, Gale followed, for the moment heedless of Idyll's reassurance. In moments she found herself within a green mass of foliage. Now her own path perception showed her that they were, indeed, safe. These were friendly plants.

"Greeting," Gale said uncertainly. She had a strong affinity for plants, but she knew immediately that these were completely alien to her experience.

A nearby shrub extended a tendril. Gale put her hand slowly to meet it. They touched. Gale knew immediately it was another Glamor.

"Greeting," the plant thought in a voice that Gale's brain translated to the word.

"I am Gale, of Planet Charm," Gale said. "I received your ikon emissary, and followed its line here. This is my child, Vila."

Vila put out her hand, and a second tendril extended to touch it. "Sure," she said. "I just met your sprout." Then, to Gale: "I'm going to their nursery. You have business here you don't want to scare me with."

She did? Gale wasn't certain about letting the two of them separate.

It is all right, Idyll thought, once again reassuring her. The future paths are safe.

And the ifrit could see farther ahead than Gale could. "Don't get lost," she cautioned, setting Vila down. "I'd be annoyed for a whole minute if I lost you."

"Two minutes," Vila said, laughing. She ran off, weaving between tall plants.

Gale resumed contact with the tendril. "What is this scary business we have?"

"You know the machine culture means to destroy your human culture," the plant said. "And ours following yours. We need to coordinate to save ourselves from destruction."

"Agreement. But as yet we hardly know each other. There may be problems."

"Question?" Again it was Gale's mind interpreting the thought as familiar dialogue.

"We eat many plants, and use parts of others to build our houses. You may regard us an enemy species."

"We have animals here too. Some of them eat us—and we eat some of them. This is the natural interaction."

"Then by all means let's talk."

"You have qualities that will benefit us, such as the ability to move across terrain and between planets. We have qualities that will benefit you. But to work efficiently together, we must achieve a working temporary symbiosis."

Suddenly Gale felt more competent. Not only was her specialty of lichen a symbiosis between algae and fungus, her relationship with Idyll was another type of symbiosis. "This may be feasible," she said.

"It can best be facilitated by interpersonal passion," the plant said. "Are you amenable?"

"Sexual passion?" Gale asked cautiously.

"Explanation: originally our sexuality was purely for reproduction, but as we became sapient, we used it also for the communication of larger intellectual concepts. Now we transmit more information than genetic templates. The pleasure of sexual expression encourages us to continue expanding our thought framework. We owe much of our sapience to it."

Just as human sex had become a tool for social interaction, leading to larger societies, Gale realized. There was a parallel. But also a problem: "We are not of like species.

"We use it also to attract useful animals. We can emulate your form."

"Needless," Gale said, distrusting this. "I will accommodate to your form, or we can both compromise to make it feasible."

"Agreement. Here is my flower." A curtain of leaves shifted to reveal an enormous flower resting on the ground. The petals formed a boat-like framework, in the center of which projected its stamen, or pollen bearing organ. It was about the size of a large erect human penis, glistening with sap-like moisture.

Guided by the paths, Gale removed her clothing, stepped into the flower, squatted, then fitted the anther on the stamen to her cleft and eased herself down. The anther was larger than the head of a human penis, but rounded and smooth, and the moisture was indeed a lubricant, making the slow penetration feasible. Once it was in, she straightened out her legs, sitting with the stamen fully embedded. It was cool but sufficient, distending her channel somewhat but hardly uncomfortably. As sex went, this was minimal, apart from the size of it; she had toyed with Havoc and other men similarly on many occasions, letting them take their time to work up to their climax. Once she had even playfully read a book while waiting, as if bored, causing Havoc to spurt with such force it made her drop the book. "Your turn," she said.

The stamen warmed, swelled, and erupted. This was its climax, not hers, but she attuned telepathically to its urgent pleasure, sharing it. As sex, it was no longer minimal; this was a vast and comprehensive pleasure. Suddenly she had a figurative and halfway literal bellyful. A huge transmission of information entered her vagina and spread into her body. Idyll quickly focused on it and organized it to be intelligible. Even so, it took Gale a while to assimilate it, but as she did, she was increasingly amazed.

First were the routine details. This was Planet Plant, named eons before thought of alien contact. The burned out region was a trap set for hostile visitors, as the plants could not know ahead what manner of creature would answer the call. If a dangerous, treacherous, or hostile entity appeared, it would be destroyed in a flash fire. That, plus the deliberately indirect line connecting the ikon, was their main protection. Why were such precautions necessary?

Friendly space-faring cultures had taken myriad spores and spread them through neighboring regions where other living cultures existed. They had sent the spores to occupied planets in protective casings that dissolved on impact, allowing the seeds to sprout and grow in the available soil. The deliverers had made no effort to contact those cultures; that was highly risky, as cultures were suspicious of alien craft, and some were in league with the machines. They had delivered and departed immediately. Gale's plant was one such, perhaps the only one to get established on her planet.

It had sprouted, grown, established itself, then executed its primary mission: to contact a Glamor of Symbiosis, or the closest thing to it. That, as it had turned out, was Gale. But it could have been intercepted by a negative respondent who came with conquest or worse in mind. The moment they saw that Gale had brought her sprout—her child—they knew that she was legitimate. So they had established contact, first with the child, then with her.

There was a pause, or perhaps Gale paused, preferring to intersperse the huge inflow of information with some personal dialogue. "You do not see the future paths?"

"This concept is unfamiliar to us."

Gale realized that this made sense. The Glamors had not been able to see the future paths until Voila, then a baby, had discovered the ability and taught them. This had enabled them to defeat Mino, the machine culture scout, and enlist him on their side. It could be sheer wild chance that enabled such a discovery to be made, by any culture. "Perhaps we can teach you this ability. It greatly facilitates personal safety. Without it I would not have dared visit an alien culture such as yours."

"Understanding. The risks are mutual."

"How long have you known of the machines?"

"Millennia," the plant answered. Its mind—it was, in the manner of many plants, bi-sexual, with both male and female flowers—was separate from the pollen-borne package of data. "We did not know whether you knew of them, until this dialogue. They are our common enemy."

"Agreement. We learned of them by discovering one of their minions, an exploratory mining unit that surveyed our planets as prospects for exploitation. We subdued it and learned its nature. Now it works for us."

"Do not trust it!"

"We were cautious, but we do trust it. Or did, until this crisis loomed. Now we use it only to study the nature of the machines, and to gain an insight into the far future. We are able to read the near and intermediate future; it is limited to the far future."

"The machines, as the information you are receiving will clarify, are enemies to the whole galaxy. They are systematically conquering and destroying all living cultures. Our only hope for survival is to form a league to oppose them. Even so, the odds are against us, but it is all we have."

"Our understanding of the machines is that your culture and ours would be vastly insufficient to stop the machines."

"Agreement. But we are not alone. The league already exists, consisting of thousands of living cultures. You will join us. Perhaps such a force will be sufficient."

Now the details on that were infusing Gale's awareness. It was true: there was an enormous network of living cultures, united by the common threat. The same threat the humans faced. The machines had been expanding their domain for thousands of years, on their way to achieving galactic dominance. The entire human culture was merely a blip on their screen, one more minor detail to handle.

"Negation," the plant said. "You are not a mere blip. There is something they want from you. They want it very much. Perhaps even enough to spare your culture in exchange for it. So you may be able to bargain."

"What is it?" Gale asked, perplexed.

"We do not know. Only that news has spread that the thing they want most in the galaxy is in your sector of space. We are very glad to have established contact with you."

"And if we give them this thing, whatever it is," Gale said carefully, "and they spare us—what then of you and the other living cultures?"

"We are doomed."

"Then how can you afford to trust us? We could bargain for ourselves and let you go."

"You are not that type."

"You know this, with only this present contact between us?"

"We know this because we have been receiving information about you while delivering ours to you. You are a leader of your species, and you will never betray a friend."

"But I am not your friend! I just arrived here."

"You are our friend, and your culture will be our culture's friend. We lack this future path awareness you have, but we have a general awareness of your nature." There was a twinge of the stamen within her, reminding her of the intimacy of their association. If they were receiving any portion of the mass of information they were sending her, they did know her well enough.

"We know you are in temporary symbiosis with a demon Glamor," the plant said.

They found me, Idyll thought. Those paths were obscure, and I was remaining quiescent, but they are able to fathom essential natures.

"So it seems we can trust each other," Gale said. "But I will have to share your information with others of my culture, and they will decide what to do."

"You will have specific data on all the other cultures, so that you can contact them and coordinate with them. Your assimilation will significantly enhance our effort."

"All the other living galactic cultures?" Gale asked, astonished. "But how can they trust us not to betray them?"

"It is not your nature. But it does not matter. If you give the machines what they want, all of our efforts will fail and we will be exterminated. If you do not, then you will have to oppose the machines, and your only hope will be with our league."

"It does matter!" Gale protested.

They are right, Idyll thought. Only that thing the machines want really counts. The intermediate paths are confirming this, and surely the far future paths are certain. That is why the machines want it. If we deny the machines, we will have to support the league of life completely.

So it seemed. "I think I have absorbed my limit," Gale said.

"It is done," the plant agreed.

Gale carefully lifted herself off the stamen, which was now somewhat limp, its informational pollen expended. She worked the bulbous anther out. Her center of being was warm with the thought substance radiating from her vagina into the rest of her body. This had been a sexual experience like none other, if that was what it was.

"Appreciation," she said. That was a complex understatement. She remained in physical contact with the plant, because her bare feet were standing on its petals. That maintained their avenue of communication.

"We can help you further, perhaps in exchange for the considerable favor of your information about the future paths."

"Question?"

"Explanation: we connect to each other via our root systems. All relevant plants on the planet are receiving the essence of our contact."

"This is telepathy?"

"Negation. Merely root contact. But the network is planetary"

"Then why bother with the pollen package? You could have read my mind for them all."

"Negation," the plant repeated. "The roots are for establishing territories, sharing water and nutrients, and relaying general news of weather and animal presence. They are crude compared to the pollen packets. But they do enable us to do some useful things."

"Question?"

"We can perform with numbers. Each individual plant is weak, but linked plants are stronger, and a planetary network can be quite powerful."

"Confusion. Relevance?"

"You can read the future paths. We understand, from your mind, that these soon diverge widely, extending beyond your ability to follow. This is why your perception is limited. But a simple matter of calculation can enhance your ability. This could be useful."

Gale was not at all sure that was the case. But Idyll was intrigued. *This is worth exploring.*

"Interest," Gale said. "Demonstration?"

"Network is focusing. Present a problem."

Gale concentrated on the near future paths. What did they portend for the outcome here?

Then she felt the gathering power of the planetary network. Her perception clarified. Now she could see the paths for the next ten to fifteen minutes, tripling her normal ability. There was no question; she was sure.

Truly intriguing, Idyll thought. I am seeing three months ahead.

Now the relevance was absolutely clear. "Point made," she said. "This is useful." She had not before realized that it was brain power rather than magic perception that governed the limits of the future paths. This could make a huge difference, for the ability to read those paths was crucial in any battle with the machines.

Vila returned. "Time to go home," she said. "I love the plant nursery. I want to visit again."

"Did the plants invite you?" As if this were an ordinary event.

"We did," the plant said. "Our saplings enjoyed her company. She has had experiences beyond their prior imagination." Evidently the root network had kept the plant in touch while Gale was doing her business with it.

"We'll visit again," Gale said. "Now I must return to report to my culture."

"Agreement. You have much to tell its representatives."

She did indeed. "Appreciation."

"Welcome."

Gale put on her shoes, losing the mental contact. She picked up Vila, and focused on the return trip.

"I put the ikon in a safe hole in the ground," the girl murmured. "The plants know its nature and will protect it."

"Appreciation, dear." Gale had forgotten that detail, uncharacteristically. Now she was assured of retaining her powers here, for this was a nonChroma region, and maybe a nonChroma world.

No—an independent Chroma world, for the sprout that had reached them on Charm had flourished both in the Green Chroma zone and in the nonChroma zone. Was that feasible?

It seems so, Idyll agreed. Each system seems to have its own Chroma rules. The plant we communicated with was certainly a Glamor.

"Marvel," Gale murmured. She launched them along the line. They were on their way home.

She realized, almost belatedly, that they had just achieved mankind's first contact with a distant alien culture. The details of its nature hardly seemed to matter at the moment. The impact on human history would be phenomenal.

We have indeed, Idyll agreed. It will indeed.

Chapter 3

Red

He lived with Flame in a cottage in an isolated nonChroma zone far from anywhere. That guaranteed privacy, and Flame preferred it. She of course could conjure herself to Triumph City or anywhere else for company, so was hardly lonely, and Fifth wasn't ever lonely when with her.

Fifth returned from his visit to the Black Chroma Zone to find Flame waiting for him. He needed to immerse himself in the Black Chroma so as to refresh his nature. Otherwise his pure black color would slowly fade and he would lose his magic. He had Chroma stones, of course, but they were for emergency use.

He entered the cottage to find Flame standing just within the parlor, nude. She was lean and muscular, with small breasts and buttocks: just the way he liked her. Her most obviously feminine trait was her glorious red hair that cascaded from her head to her knees like a soft cloak. That was a signal: normally she wore it bound or braided. When she let it loose, she wanted love, sex, or some intense combination.

In a moment he was out of his clothing and clasping her closely. She could knock him out with a twitch of her body, but she preferred to have him take the initiative. He kissed her passionately, then swept her up into his arms and carried her to the bedroom and the bed. He flung her down, landed on top of her, fixed his mouth to hers, and penetrated her in seconds. In a few more seconds he was jetting into her with all the backed-up passion of a week's separation. Her climax matched his; she was a Glamor, highly sexual, and able to have an orgasm as rapidly as any man. Unlike him, she could do it almost continuously, but this time once sufficed.

They lay together, clasped, savoring each other. "Love," he said belatedly.

"Echo."

That encouraged him. He loved her completely, and longed to marry her. But he was a mere mortal man, while she was a Glamor. It was a presumption just to entertain the notion. "Flame, you know what I want, and not just because you can read my mind. If I were to ask you—"

She laid a finger on his lips. "Negation at this time. But I have been thinking about it."

He did not know what this portended. If there was anyone who knew her own mind, it was Flame. Was she trying to let him down gently?

"Negation," she repeated, kissing him. "I do love you, Fifth, and find you a good man, and not just because you truly like my form. But there is a constraint."

Was there hope? "Question."

"Turn over."

He rolled over onto his belly. She bestrode him, her thighs outside his buttocks, her hands competently massaging his arms, shoulders, neck, and back. He loved the touching, but also understood that she did not want him trying to change the subject by stimulating her to further sex. She had something serious to say to him.

"We have been together five years," she said. "Mother sent you to me."

He remembered. How could he ever forget? Queen Gale had taken him for no-fault sex. She had been twice his age and full fleshed, not at all his type of woman despite her beauty and power, but she had made him deliriously happy in bed. He remembered the time she had emulated Flame, becoming lean-bodied, completely thrilling him. That, he realized subsequently, had been why she sent him to her daughter: she had ascertained his preference, and acted on the knowledge. He still had a lingering crush on Gale, partly for the generosity with which she had treated him. She was a woman among women. And of course she had set him up with Flame, who was in reality what Gale had only emulated.

"Agreement," Flame murmured.

He was not embarrassed. He was long since accustomed to the way she read his mind, and would have wanted no secrets from her regardless. She knew that his passion for her was genuine.

"There is the problem," she said. "Is your love real?"

"Protest!" he said, horrified.

"Explanation: you love my form, but that is superficial. A serious relationship depends on more than form. Suppose there were another woman like me?"

"Negation. There is no other woman like you!" he exclaimed.

Her sure hands moved down his back and tackled his buttocks as she slid her body toward his feet. "Supposition: if there were?"

"I love you. I know you. Why should I stray?"

"You believe that. But you have not been tested."

"Confusion." What was she getting at?

"I want to be sure of you, Fifth. To know that another woman like me could not win you away."

"Another Amazon? I have no interest."

"But if you had interest."

"Beseeching," he said. "Do not torture me with your doubt. You are all I want."

"You believe that now. But you can't know without additional experience."

"I don't want it."

"Deal: have month-long no fault sexual and social affairs with three other women I select. If you return to me thereafter, I will propose marriage to you."

"I don't need to—"

"You do. Deal."

She was determined. He hated this, but if it was the way to win her, he would have to do it. "Deal," he agreed reluctantly.

"Meanwhile I will prepare for the coming war with the machines. There will just be time before the culmination."

"How can you know? You can't see that far ahead."

"I consulted with Voila, and Idyll, and Mino. They can see the future paths farther and more clearly than I can. There is time. Also, Gale has made a deal with a plant culture that enables us to triple our future paths seeing efficiency. But we must begin immediately."

"I must endure the caresses of another woman—tomorrow?" he asked, appalled.

"Today."

"Dismay!"

"You must give her your full attention, withholding nothing. You must love her to the extent you are able. She will be more than competent in such a relationship."

"Must I hide from her my horror of the relationship?"

"Negation. You can't hide anything from her."

He was sickly resigned. What a price she was putting on her commitment! "Who?"

"The Red Glamor."

He stiffened with apprehension. "She will read my mind and be furious."

"She has agreed. She will treat you kindly."

"And if I survive her, who else?"

"She will take you to the next, when her month is done."

He shook his head, hating this. "Before I go to her, may I have you one more time?"

"Negation," another voice replied. "You are already mine, you black beauty." Her hands slid into the crevice of his buttocks and tickled his scrotum.

"Red!" he exclaimed, turning over.

"And my domain," she agreed.

Now he saw that he was no longer in Flame's bedroom in the cottage. He was in a strange room, surely in a strange house. "Where?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"My niche on Counter Charm. You can't escape."

And not just because of the location. He was truly in her power. "You know this was not my idea."

"Confirmation. It was mine." Her hands slid up his legs and stroked his penis, which stiffened immediately.

"Yours!" He had thought he was beyond surprise.

She moved up and bestrode his crotch, so that his black erection nudged her red cleft. "You are a handsome, talented, decent mortal man. I have had a fancy for you ever since you came on the scene."

"So you talked Flame into letting you have at me—in the name of testing my fidelity to her?"

"Affirmation." She took renewed hold of his penis.

"Unfair!" he protested.

"Question: what can you do about it?"

"I can refuse to—" He broke off, for as he spoke, she poked his member into her ready vagina.

"Yes?" she inquired softly.

"At least I can stop myself from—"

"Really?" Her channel expertly squeezed his member.

"Uh—" But he could not continue, as he was overtaken by an unstoppable orgasm. His member ejaculated into her with powerful surges, continuing long after what he thought was his limit.

"You're enhancing me!" he cried accusingly.

"Smart boy," she agreed smugly.

"You're using me."

"Affirmation."

"At least now it's done."

"Negation." Her channel squeezed his member peristaltically, evoking new sensation amidst the exhausted mass.

"You can't!" he cried desperately.

"I can." She drew him deeper into her, seeming to have suction, and his member swelled involuntarily. She was the Glamor of four-legged creatures, which included human beings, and she had special powers over their flesh. But this summoning was becoming painful.

"Request."

She paused. "Speak."

"Let me rest."

"Exchange."

"Question?"

"You are fighting me. This is not a valid process. You need to return to Flame because you truly love her after experiencing what other women have to offer, not because you fought those other women off. You must make an honest effort to love me, this month."

"But that would make me false to Flame!"

Her vagina resumed its manipulation of his penis. "Negation. She wants you to make that effort."

He tried to hold out, but she worked him up and uncomfortably soon extracted another orgasm from him. It left him gasping, as if he had run his limit and collapsed, and his member felt numb.

But still she did not release him. She started yet again. It felt as though she were dragging his member out by the root and grinding it into squishy pulp. He was helpless to stop it.

"Begging!" he gasped.

She paused again. "Reconsider."

"You are torturing me."

The process resumed. "Regret. Necessity."

"Reconsidering!" He took several breaths as her pause held him over the gulf, about to resume. "It is no fault sex. I can do that with enthusiasm."

"Insufficient." She drew on him.

"What do you want?" he cried.

"Repetition: love me, no fault."

He realized that Flame must have known what Red would do, and approved. It was to be a real test of his love. He hated it, but had to do it. "Acceptance," he said brokenly.

Then at last she let him go, lifting herself off him. He felt wetness on his face and realized he was crying. *Oh, Flame, you have put me into Hell.*

"Negation," Red said, lying beside him, lifting his head and setting it between her breasts. "You fought well. You can't defeat a Glamor." She pressed his wet face into her bosom.

Fifth couldn't help it. He wept into her ample cleavage, finding comfort therein. Red held him gently close until he drifted into an exhausted sleep.

He did not know how long he slept, but when he woke she was still there beside him, still cradling his head in the manner of a mother. Actually she was centuries old, vastly over qualified to be a mother.

"Or a lover," she agreed. She rearranged him and kissed him. "This time sex is optional."

"Appreciation." He kissed her back—and found her delightful. She was Woman Incarnate, perfect in form and understanding. "Love," he said, surprised.

"Exaggeration. But thank you."

Now he discovered his member responding. "Desire."

"Returned," she said.

He kissed her and stroked her, finding her full fleshed body to be highly evocative. He had always preferred the most slender women, but now he appreciated her fuller splendor. They proceeded in unhurried manner until he entered her of his own volition and spent within her without being magically evoked. "Delight," he said, relaxing.

"Returned."

"Acknowledged."

They lay beside each other for a while. "Apology," she said.

"Question?"

"For forcing you. I will not do it again."

"Conjecture: maybe it was for the best. I do need to experience other women, and I can't be sure it's not Flame's Glamor nature that attracts me unless I am with other Glamors. So I proffer appreciation for your participation."

"You're sweet," she said, kissing him again. "Naive, but sweet."

"Surely you will cure me of that," he said wryly.

"Agreement." She sighed. "It has been fun, and will be fun again, but now we have work to do."

He smiled. "What, no more sex?"

"Do you wish it?"

"Not at the moment."

"Then to work." She got up, dressing so efficiently that it seemed the clothing formed around her of its own volition.

He discovered his own clothing beside the bed, where it must have been transported along with his body. He found the lavatory, washed, and dressed. He emerged—and paused. "Confusion."

For there before him was a Gray Chroma woman, well formed but on the plump side. Her lustrous gray hair extended to her ankles in thick waves.

She saw him and smiled. "I am Stevia, very sweet. I am the Red Glamor's alternative form, when she prefers to be anonymous. Which is most of the time. You will find me harder to seduce."

"Denial! I am not trying to seduce you."

She approached him, her hair flaring more widely. "Then perhaps I will seduce you."

He stepped back. "Wouldn't that make me untrue to Red? This month I belong to her."

"Not in no fault." Now her hair actually extended toward him as if to enfold him.

"Is this no fault?"

"Negation," she said, smiling.

"Am I to work with you?"

"Affirmation."

Now he remembered: he had seen Stevia on occasion when with Flame. He simply hadn't made the connection. "Tell me what to do."

"Background: Gale—I believe you know her—recently traveled to a world of sapient plants, and obtained much information. But it is unorganized. We must organize it."

"Ignorance."

"The information is in the form of alien mental capsules designed for ready assimilation. We, being new to inter-cultural contact, find it to be not all that ready. So we must digest it somewhat, to make it available for the Glamors who will do the work. Black, Blue, Green, Air, Translucent, Yellow, White, Brown, Silver, Gray, Orange, and of course the more recent cluster of nonChroma. Most will remain in the background, but their work is vital."

"Observation: if Glamors have trouble handling it, I, a mortal, will hardly be of much help."

"Negation. There is detail work involved that you should be competent for."

He shrugged. "I will do my best."

She touched his hand, and a faint but evocative electric tingle passed through it. "Appreciation." She got up and went to a cupboard he hadn't noticed before. She brought back a large pad of paper and a marker. "You will make notes."

He smiled. "This is within my backwoods village technology." Then he realized. "By no coincidence."

"You will also classify." She indicated a table and chair he also had not noticed before, and suspected they had just been conjured. "Sit."

"Question?" But he did sit at the table, holding the marker over the pad.

"These species are of every living type. Gale encountered a plant culture. She or Havoc will likely handle other plant cultures. Red will handle six legged animal cultures. Deva—she's Yellow—will handle fish cultures. Et cetera. You will formulate lists of types that will serve as a general guide. If you are not sure, use question marks. This will be rather general at first."

"Willing. But surely Red would be far more competent to make these distinctions."

"Red will be otherwise occupied."

"Then I will make the effort. But from what am I to judge? I am not good at alien mental capsules that confuse even Glamors."

She leaned forward, showing a fair amount of gray cleavage. Her hair whipped forth a gray tress, looped his head, and drew him in to her face. She kissed him and let him go. "Cute man."

Fifth fought to keep a straight face. That trick with the hair was something, as was the exposed curvature of her bosom, and so was the kiss, charged with the same tingle as her hands. She was flirting with him, and becoming more interesting by the minute. The Red Glamor had forcefully seduced him, but evidently was far from through with him; now her alternate form was starting over. "Show me how."

"Practice example." She closed her eyes, concentrating.

There was a swirl of color above the table. It coalesced to form an illusionary picture of a lean young woman with flaming red hair, standing before a cottage in a glade. A small gust of wind riffled her hair.

"Flame!" he exclaimed gladly.

"I am only an image, Fifth," she responded, meeting his gaze. "Classify me."

Oh. Disappointed, he made a note on the pad. TYPE: Animal. LEGS: 4. HABITAT: Land. CHROMA: nonChroma.

The Flame image looked down. "Better add sexuality," she said. "It can make a difference."

He added SEX: bi. That meant that her species had two sexes. "I hope we can practice it soon."

"Concurrence," she said, smiling, and faded out.

He looked at Stevia. "Impressive."

"Crafted example. The others are more difficult."

"I think I have the idea."

She concentrated again. This time a large green plant formed, in a forest of plants, with a single huge flower on the ground.

TYPE: plant, he wrote. LEGS: 8?. For that was the definition of plants, which typically had eight major roots. But alien plants might be different. HABITAT: Land. CHROMA: nonChroma? SEX: Bi. Though both might be in the same individual.

The plant extended a tendril toward him. He reached with his left hand to touch it. "We communicate via touch," it said in his mind. "And deliver information via sex."

"Question?" he asked, surprised in more than one way.

"Via packages of spores containing concentrated data."

Oh. He added a category. COMMUNICATION: Touch, Sex.

"Appreciation." The tendril withdrew, and the picture faded.

He looked at Stevia. "Amazement."

"That is the culture Gale visited. They delivered a major package of informational spores to her, and this is what she relayed to me."

"All these animated pictures—via spores from a plant?"

"Affirmation."

"Question. If the spores are sexually transmitted, how did she obtain them?"

"I will recreate the scene, from what she told me." Stevia concentrated again, and the picture re-formed. This time a quite beautiful nude human woman was stepping onto the flower.

"Gale!"

Gale squatted over the flower's central stamen. She set her cleft over it, drew her nether lips wide open with her hands, and carefully worked the bulbous head of the stamen into her genital opening. The distension it required would have been painful for an ordinary woman, but she was a Glamor. When the whole of the anther had been taken in, leaving only the stout supportive column, she extended her legs and sat on the petals, with the bulb deep inside her torso. In a moment the flower quivered, and her body shifted slightly, as if something more was entering it. Her face assumed an expression of wonder and rapture, as of a marvelous sexual climax. Then the scene faded.

Fifth, who had once been Gale's no fault lover, was left with a painful erection. He was in one sense repulsed by what he had seen, but in another sense powerfully turned on.

Stevia looked at him. "Question?"

There was no point in even trying to deceive her. "Urgency." She pretended confusion. "Of what nature?"

He knew what she wanted, and it burst out of him. "Stevia, I know you are Red. I am supposed to love other women, so this form of yours is part of the process. I can love you without being false to Red. Certainly I can share sex with you. Please." He tore off his clothing and stood bare and erect.

She smiled. "A magic word." She came to him, her clothing dissolving. Her hair flared phenomenally to wrap around him, enclosing him in a soft cocoon. She wrapped her arms around his torso as they seemed to float in air. Her gray cleft seemed to catch the tip of his rigid penis, holding it at the brink of her hot slick aperture. "Do it."

Given that leave, he thrust violently, penetrating to full depth and spurting instantly as she braced and squeezed against him. He sent pulse after pulse into her before the edge softened. "Appreciation!" he gasped.

"Welcome."

They were drifting embraced within her ambiance of hair. He was done, but she did not let him go. He knew what that meant. "More?"

"You had your turn. Now give me my turn."

And of course he had to. Glamor women could climax as fast as men did, but did not always choose to. She had elected to make this a double session: first him then her. Considering his excruciating urgency, he truly appreciated her gesture.

He kissed her and squeezed her ample buttocks. She shifted her torso against his, so that her full breasts stroked his chest. Tendrils of her prehensile hair writhed in the crevice of his buttocks and insinuated their way into his anus. That somehow reminded him again of the picture he had just seen, of Gale taking in the huge stamen, receiving its informational orgasm. That stimulated him powerfully, and his member swelled within her. Still, it was slow, for he had spent all he had in the prior effort.

"Satisfactory," she murmured, as her vulva kneaded his member. He was relieved that there was no hurry.

Thus, slowly, pleasantly, they worked up to her orgasm, which carried his along with it. He was privately bemused by the way her ample body encouraged his; there were indeed delights to be had with full-fleshed women. "Pleasure," he said as they both subsided.

"Confession."

Uh-oh. "You showed that plant-sex scene on purpose!" he said. "To work me up."

"I am a lusty women, in any guise. It has been long since I've had a fit young mortal man to play with."

"Long?"

"A week."

He had to laugh. She was lusty indeed.

Her hair unwound, depositing him on the floor. He went to wash up again, as the juices of their couplings were on him. He was discovering that the Red Glamor really was fun in her fashion, demanding as it was. But he couldn't forget that she was really over 250 years old.

In due course they resumed work at the table, categorizing assorted alien species. They were of all types, and some were utterly strange, but rough classification was possible. His penciled notes overflowed the first page, and the second, and the third, but the work was getting done.

There was a picture of a snail-like alien creature, that slid rapidly along the smooth surface of its habitat. TYPE: animal. LEGS: One. HABITAT: Land. CHROMA: It seemed to be multi-Chromatic. Evidently that was possible, in this framework. SEX: Unisexual. COMMUNICATION: Light signals from antenna. The picture itself provided much detail; evidently it had been crafted for this purpose, a spot introduction intended for clarification before cultures that were alien to it, as the human culture was.

Another was wheeled. Not a single wheel for traveling, but wheels everywhere, spinning independently like the workings of a large complicated clock. The wheels seemed to be made of bones or chitin. It wasn't clear what powered them, as they did not seem to be geared.

Two wheels clashed, emitting sparks. The sparks lingered, forming patterns in the air. On a hunch, Fifth put out his hand to touch the image. The motion paused, then resumed. "Greeting, beholder."

Then illusion image had oriented on his nature, through the contact, and was addressing him directly. "Returned," he said.

"We are the Sparklers," the thing said, making a small explosion of sparks. "Vegetable, land-dwelling, no-legged, trisexual, communicating via spark patterns. We enlist your participation in the League."

The picture faded as Fifth scribbled classification notes. They continued with the next, and the next. It was going well.

Still, he was getting tired. "Progress?" he inquired as he completed the fourth page, with about 40 species total.

"We will overflow that pad," Stevia said. "There are thousands. I am selecting only those in our general sector of the galaxy, but we will be busy the full month."

"Commitment," he said with resignation.

"Bored already?"

"Negation."

"Try again."

"Clarification: the work is fascinating, but there are so many cultures that they are blending together in my memory, and I am tiring."

"Then it must be time for another entertainment break."

"Agreement," he said, for once more than ready for sex. He needed a change from this important but mind-numbingly detailed listing.

"My alternate is growing impatient," Stevia said. "I have had you too long. But I don't want to give you up."

"Your alter egos compete with each other?" he asked, marveling.

"We do. Each is a fully developed personality, with privileges and urges of her own. I will have to yield you to her, as I have had my bout of sex and it is her turn, but I will spoil you for her."

"Question?" he asked uneasily.

"Reassurance. This will be painless for you."

"Appreciation."

"Information: in the past, it was impossible for a Glamor to have sex with a knowing mortal."

"Question?" He had heard something of the kind, but assumed it was a confusion.

"Only if the mortal was unknowing could it be accomplished. That is, I could have sex with you if you did not know my origin, but Red could not. This was in fact much of the origin of my identity: not only for privacy, but to enable me to have a varied and continuing sexual experience. For example, I used it to seduce Havoc, when he was mortal."

"Interest." Fifth knew little of the king's mortal origin.

"As Red I could tempt him cruelly, but the more likely sex became, the less possible it was. Then when Havoc turned Glamor himself, he could no longer seduce innocent maidens, unless he employed the guise of Hayseed the Minstrel, a mortal semblance. Some of those maidens were eager to accommodate him, but could not."

"Question?"

"It was a literal repulsion. One maiden tried to mount him as he lay supine, but she floated above him, unable to touch him. She was most annoyed." Fifth laughed. "Havoc too, surely."

"Agreement."

"I do not wish to offend you," Fifth said carefully. "But—doubt."

"Then it is time for a demonstration. Requirement: close your eyes and believe what I have told you: that a knowing mortal was repulsed. Assume the place of such a mortal."

"Effort," he agreed, closing his eyes and schooling himself to believe. It was actually easier now that he had twice accepted the Red Glamor, once in each guise, as a person worthy of love.

"The bitch!"

He opened his eyes. There stood Red, gloriously nude. She was perfectly formed and thinner than Stevia, and that attracted him more. "Question?"

"Come love me, believer."

"Gladly." He stepped up to her, his arms reaching to embrace her.

He stopped, startled. His arms would not touch her. Neither would his body. There seemed to be an invisible barrier.

"This way." She went to the bedroom and lay down on her back. "Mount me."

He did so, his penis eager. In fact he practically threw himself on her.

And did not land. He floated over her, not quite touching. "Amazement!"

"So it was," Red agreed. "We were all highly frustrated."

He slid to the side and lay on the bed next to her. "But there was no such effect with us before."

"Explanation: it was both physical and psychological. Physical on the part of the mortal, male or female, psychological on the part of the Glamor. Because we believed that sex was impossible, our magic formed the barrier, thwarting our conscious efforts. Once we realized that the problem was in us, it abated, and we have had no trouble since."

"But Stevia told me to believe."

"Diversion. The source of the repulsion is me."

"Can you end it?"

"Do you wish me to?"

"Affirmation!"

"Nice word. Done. Leap on me again." She meant it literally.

He did so, and this time landed, not concerned about hurting her because he knew he could not. In fact her softly impervious breasts and belly cushioned his fall. They were immediately in the throes of it, proceeding to a swift and mutual culmination.

"Appreciation," he gasped.

"For the repulsion demonstration?" she asked mischievously.

He kissed her violently, no longer reticent about showing wild passion. Not only was she able to handle it, she enjoyed it. He was pleasuring her as much by his enthusiasm as by sex, the latter being thoroughly, perhaps boringly, familiar to her. "That too."

"You are learning."

Then they laughed together. Now he understood that she, too, got fatigued by the endless information they were classifying, and needed breaks from it for refreshing her vigor. That was why she had chosen to work with a malleable young man. His newness to her sexual ploys surely re-invigorated them for her.

They did not return to alien classification that evening. Instead Stevia—it seemed that the act of sex with one of her aspects returned him to the other—treated him to a wonderful banquet and more commentary relating to scandalous activities of other Glamors. She was a natural gossip. He hated to admit it, but he was fascinated.

Then she ushered him to bed, but this time did not hurry him to sex. He knew why: that would end her tenure with him, and it seemed she wanted to prolong it. This competition between the two aspects was itself a fascinating thing.

"Morning?" he inquired.

"Appreciation." She clasped him without sex, and slept, or seemed to. Fifth knew from his experience with Flame that Glamors could do without sleep if they needed to, but otherwise indulged in it normally.

In the morning, waking with a nocturnal erection, he found her facing away from him, asleep. He touched her, and she did not stir, though he was sure she was awake. He stroked her, and finally entered her from behind, slowly, so as not to disturb her. Her channel was marvelously warm and slick. There was something special about doing it this way, with a supposedly sleeping woman.

Then her buttocks closed on him, and she bucked back and forth, bringing him off. "Gotcha," she said.

"Got me," he agreed, jetting copiously. She had been playing another little game. He had half suspected it.

When they were done, she turned and kissed him. "Until next time," she said.

Then it was Red. For a moment he was afraid she would demand immediate sex, but she too wanted time with him.

"We have work to do," she said briskly. She soon had him cleaned, dressed, breakfasted, and back at the table with the pad.

They worked all day, with occasional breaks for meals and sex. Fifth lost track of which variant of the Glamor he was with; both were attentive, and a lot of fun in their diversions. They did not confine themselves to conventional sex; he soon learned variations that made him realize that Flame was relatively straight-laced. Still, it was Flame he loved; Red was alternate experience, not true romance.

Then something happened. They were detailing a tentacular alien, something like a squid in a shallow sea. It seemed purely routine. The creature extended a tentacle.

Fifth touched its tip. He felt a tingle, then the input of a neural signal. This was a special kind of communication. He focused on it, feeling the translation of the impulses.

"Human culture, a message for you. Keep the secret."

Fifth glanced at Red. "Grant privacy?" he asked.

"Best," she agreed. "This is different."

He returned to the squid. "Secret," he agreed.

"Make no recording. Bury it in your mind. Tell only the one who is concerned."

"There are two of us here," Fifth said, uncertain how much an illusion image could grasp. The communication was to him alone, but Red was reading his mind. "We both agree, to the best of our ability."

"Three cautions. First, the machines have spies in the realms of the living cultures. Some are in yours. These must be found and routed out. If all are caught, the chances of living cultures survival rise to fifty percent."

"We will tell our leader," Fifth said, shaken, for this revelation had the ring of authority.

"Second, the machines have a number of recruitment targets. I am second on their list. A member of the human culture is first."

"First among what cultures?" Fifth asked, shaken again. "In what area?"

"First in the galaxy. The machines will yield almost anything to achieve her cooperation."

"Her?"

"The female of your species. She can ascertain the near future. They ascertain the far future. Together, they can conquer the galaxy much faster, with less loss of resources. But if she joins them, the rest of us are doomed."

"Voila!" Red breathed.

"Third, the machines are sending an emissary to your culture. A robot. Her purpose is to persuade your leader to yield that female to the machines. She will be extremely persuasive.

"She?" Fifth asked, stunned again by the identification of gender. "A machine?"

"A robot crafted to resemble an esthetic human female. Be warned."

Fifth nodded. "We are warned."

Then the image faded. It was after all only an evoked recording, though its hidden message was astonishing. Fifth and Red were left staring at each other. What had they stumbled into?

"Break," Red said.

"I think I am too shaken for sex at the moment."

"Fake it." She led him to the bedroom.

Soon they were clasping, but for once her evocative touch was not arousing him. "I can't."

She turned him to lie on his back, lifted his limp member and squeezed it into her as she lay on him. She kissed him. *We may be observed*, she thought.

Oh. So they would not discuss the matter verbally. *What must we do?*

We must finish our job of classification as if nothing happened. Next month you will go to Voila for the second stage of your romantic testing. You will embrace her and pass the warnings along. Then it will be in her hands.

But he was unsatisfied with this. *It will be most of a month before I go to her.* Actually he had not known until this time that Voila was his next stop. He wasn't easy about it, but knew he had no choice.

We can't wait; the machines might act in the interim.

She kissed him as if gaining passion. *True. We shall have to notify her now.*

How?

A soft hand touched his shoulder. *I am here.* It was Voila; somehow her touch conveyed her identity.

But he saw nothing. Then he realized that she was invisible. Glamors could do that when they chose. Red must have signaled her telepathically. No one was supposed to know she was here.

He continued kissing Red. He reviewed the recent contact in his mind, making it easy for Voila to read.

Appreciation. Until next month. And Voila's presence was gone.

They remained clasped, and after a while Fifth was able to recover enough sexual appetite to complete the act they had been faking. But he remained disturbed. It didn't help him to know that Red was similarly disturbed.

The attack of the machines was effectively already upon them. It was far more dangerous than they had anticipated. A hidden spy? Voila targeted for recruitment? A humanoid robot sent to corrupt King Havoc?

Mankind was in trouble. So was the rest of the living-culture galaxy.

Chapter 4

Magic Fire

By evening they reached the next village. They entertained the villagers as before, this time starting with "Early One Morning."

*Early one morning, just as the day was dawning
I heard a maid sing in the valley below.*

Opaline was of course the maiden.

*Oh don't deceive me, oh never leave me
How could you use a poor maiden so?*

Again the village girls were rapt. Hayseed was so handsome, and sang so well, that it was impossible not to love him, though his role here would be that of the unfaithful lover.

*Oh gay is the garland and fresh are the roses
I've culled from the garden to bind on thy brow.*

Hayseed had somehow fashioned a garland for her to place on his absent head. It was another song of love lost, a favorite type with unmarried girls. Some were happily crying.

The minstrel show continued from there, delivering full measure. Again Opaline was the envy of the girls, any of whom would gladly have changed places with her.

But she remained disquieted. There was too much she did not know about this man. It would be better to have it out, so she could make some sort of decision based on full information.

"Hayseed," she said, as she prepared their evening meal.

"Perhaps you are ready now," he said. "I can tell you the whole truth about me and about the mission. That will not be the whole truth about you or the planet, but perhaps it will suffice."

She laughed. "I already know about me. I'm a fifth. That's why I have no prospects at home."

He was expressionless. "Assume I do not know what a fifth is. Tell me."

She humored him, having become halfway accustomed to his odd little ways. "My parents lost one of their four children. Not the fourth—you understand?"

"Tell me."

"Each family must have four children, one of which is begotten by a man outside the family, to keep the species mixed. My parents did that. My brother was their fourth. He was different from the others, not just because he had a different father."

"Empathy."

"Question?"

"I am a fourth. So is my wife."

"So you do know about that. Why make me tell you?"

"Fourths are known. Fifths are less known. Continue."

Somewhat unsettled, she resumed. "Then their first child was killed in an accident, and they were down to three. My mother did not want to birth another child, however conceived; she had been ill with the last and feared for her health. So they adopted me from the orphanage as a fifth. We are all alike in one respect: our orange eyes." She widened her eyes as she faced him, so he could see their color. "We are ordinary, neither smart nor stupid, handsome or ugly, talented or ill favored. We are

just—there. But there are those who don't like us, because we are said to be unnatural, so we tend to be shunned. No boy of Sourberry would marry me, so we knew I would have to go elsewhere, lest I be single at eighteen. We hoped it would be different at Triumph City."

"It would be," Hayseed agreed. "But you will have another choice. I believe you are ideal for the mission."

"I don't want a mission, I want love and fulfillment!" she exclaimed angrily.

"This can be yours, if you choose."

"If I choose! You won't even touch me!"

"Opaline, there is something you omitted about fifths. Maybe you do not know it. Fifths are created to be very affectionate, once awakened."

"Question?"

"They have a high libido. They like sex. But not in the manner of other folk. They must satisfy their partners first. Only then can they enjoy it for themselves. They do not masturbate. So they make ideal sexual partners, always willing, always obliging."

"This is not something I would know about, yet," she said, somewhat taken aback. No one had ever discussed such a matter with her before, and she had never really thought about sex, only her need to have a relationship. Which perhaps confirmed what he said: she was as yet unawakened. But he had already awakened in her the desire to discover the rest of it. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Affirmation. As far as we know, fifths do not age like others. That is, they don't get fat, or diseased; they just get slowly older. When you are fifty, your peers of the village will be unattractive because of the inevitable ravages of age. You will be a handsome slender woman with a full head of hair and clear skin. In fact you will be prettier than you are now, if you are in a loving relationship with lots of sex. Your emotional satisfaction will have a physical benefit. Men may not seek you now, but you will never lack for male companionship in your age."

She stared at him. "You know this?"

"I believe this. There are no fifths beyond age 30 so we can't be sure, but that is the indication. A smart man would choose you over the village beauty, knowing that you would be far more rewarding both in the short term and long term."

Her mind seemed to be spinning. "I didn't know."

"It is one reason I selected you for the mission. You could make this man very happy for a long time."

"He is simple!"

"He is handsome."

"I want to marry someone smarter than I am, because I know I am not smart."

"You are smart enough. A smart man can be devious, as I am."

She nodded. "He could toy with my affections, as you do."

"And could never be completely loyal to you, even if he married you."

That shook her. She knew it was true. "What else is there about fifths?"

"They seem to be synthetic."

"Question?"

"Made in a laboratory, rather than birthed by any woman. That is why they are so similar to each other, varying only in minor details like hair color or facial features. Any other fifth girl your age could fit your clothing."

"But I'm alive!"

"Affirmation. But not natural, in that respect"

"You needed an unnatural girl for your mission?"

He raised his hands as if fending off a barb. "I needed a persistent, loyal, reasonably pretty girl who did not aspire to great things."

"Appreciation for that candor," she said sourly. "How did this—laboratory—come about?"

"We believe that a secret machines ship landed the original culture, perhaps in a protected casing, thirty or more years ago. Unknowing humans could have been encouraged to develop it, setting up a baby mill. It's a fair business for them; the babies they provide are exactly as represented."

"Machines?"

"Our enemy. Sentient and sapient. That is, they are not alive, but they are conscious and smart. They are on a campaign to destroy the living cultures of the galaxy."

"And I derive from them?" she demanded, appalled.

"You are not responsible for the background of your origin. You are a living human being, loyal to your family and your culture."

"But still unnatural," she said distastefully.

"You may nevertheless achieve a great thing."

"By encouraging a man to move an acorn half an inch?"

"By saving our world from subjugation or destruction."

"Disbelief!"

He gazed at her compassionately. "Perhaps we have covered enough for tonight."

"It has all been about me! We haven't even started on you."

"Affirmation. I am worse."

She considered that, and decided he was right: she had had enough for the day. "Tomorrow, as we walk, you will tell me about you."

"Agreed."

"*All* about you."

"Affirmation."

There it was. He would tell her. The mystery of him would be fathomed. But she had learned enough to believe him when he said she might not want to be with him once she knew.

"Favor," she said.

"I will sleep with you tonight," he agreed. "As a brother."

"Naked."

He hesitated. "I would be aroused."

"And not able to exploit it."

He laughed. "You mean to torture me!"

"All night. If, as you say, I am unable to have any joy of sex until my partner does, it will serve you right for awakening me."

He sighed. "As you decree."

They did sleep together, naked, and he was aroused. She plastered herself against his erect member, satisfied. She had as much of him as was possible, and remained pristine. There was a certain satisfaction in that. But it did seem to confirm another thing he had said about her nature: she was not even interested in having any joy of sex until first he did. Her interest was in arousing and satisfying him. Only when he was in the throes of orgasm deep within her would she care to explore her own capabilities in that respect. She had to have his passion first, to be fulfilled.

In the morning they resumed travel, and they talked. "Who are you, really?" she asked. "Apart from being a minstrel and a martial artist and a man who does not look his age."

"I am King Havoc."

Opaline fainted.

She woke in his arms. Ordinarily she would have loved that, but not this time. "King Havoc!" she repeated, appalled. "How could I presume?"

"Needless," he murmured, setting her on her feet.

"I teased you. I made you sleep naked with me. Oh, Sire, I will die of shame!"

"Needless," he repeated. "I deceived you about my identity."

"But there were hints. My parents—no wonder they agreed to let me go with you! That tree—the legend says you are the Glamor of Trees. And the Village Elder called you Sire. He recognized you! And the brigands—you are the world's finest martial artist. And the way you sing! I should have known."

"Few know that Hayseed is Havoc, and they are circumspect, as was the Elder. I travel as Hayseed when I want to be unknown. Your ignorance is no fault in you."

"But Sire—"

"Call me Hayseed," he said firmly. "Do not give away my secret."

She paused, reassessing. "Of course. Yet what I did—"

He put his hands on her shoulders and made her look him in the face. "Opaline, you are a good girl. I deceived you because I wanted to get to know you without having your behavior distorted by awareness of my nature. I learned that you have the qualities I hoped for. I am satisfied that you are suitable for the mission."

"To nursemaid another man!" she exclaimed bitterly. "After I got a silly crush on you."

"Would it help to know that I encouraged that, in the hope that you would then be willing to do me a favor you might otherwise reject?"

"You are using me!" she cried, her embarrassment turning to flash fury. "Playing on my misguided girlish emotion."

He dropped his gaze. "Apology for that."

And she felt foolishly sorry for him. "You are the king. You must do what kings do. It must be really important." Then she remembered. "Saving the world—you weren't joking!"

"Affirmation."

"But all you had to do was order me to do it. I am your subject."

"Negation. This is something you must volunteer to do."

"Then of course I will volunteer."

Havoc drew her in to him and kissed her on the mouth. "Negation. You must want to do it. It is too important for anything but complete unselfish dedication."

Opaline's head was floating from the kiss, but she fought to maintain some common sense. "How can I ever want to be with another man—we both know I will have to give him sex—after knowing you? You have spoiled me for any such commitment."

"Deal," he said. "Give him a fair try, perhaps for a month. If you then do not wish to continue, come to me, and I will make you my temporary public mistress for the same length of time. All will know it, and I will be with you every night, and plumb you so often you will grow tired of it. And if you conceive, I will recognize the child. Then you will have no trouble getting a good husband, your fourth already accounted for. The king's baby."

She considered briefly. "This is the deal of a lifetime, for any common girl. But you already have a wife and a mistress, one said to be the most beautiful woman of Charm, the other the most beautiful of Earth. How could they ever agree to such a thing?"

He smiled. "Perhaps we should ask them."

She laughed, but with an edge. "Question?"

"When you are in Triumph, by day I will be busy elsewhere. One of them would guide you then, or put you into the hands of a trusted associate. Triumph is a complicated city; you would not want to be there alone. So it is fitting that you be introduced to them now."

"You tease me cruelly," she said. "That is not nice."

Havoc stepped away from her, lifted his right hand and snapped his fingers. "Gale," he said.

A woman appeared beside him, so beautiful that there was no one she could be but his wife. "Havoc," she said, and kissed him.

"Meet Opaline," he said.

The queen turned to focus on Opaline. "A greeting, Opaline."

"A—a—acknowledged, Queen Gale," Opaline stammered.

"I have proffered her a deal," Havoc said. "She will try a special mission for one month, and if it does not satisfy her, I will make her my openly recognized second royal mistress for a month. She will need your guidance at Triumph."

The queen's eyes narrowed slightly. "Necessary?"

"Not necessary," Opaline said quickly. "I will do it without the deal."

The queen nodded. "She loves you already, Havoc. You had better honor it."

"Concurrence," he agreed. Then he raised his hand again, and snapped his fingers. "Monochrome."

Another woman appeared. She was literally colorless, with white skin, luxurious white hair, and white clothing, yet strikingly beautiful. Only her eyes were pink, in the manner of an albino. "You must have been on the trail too long, Havoc," she said. "To want us both simultaneously" She kissed him.

"Meet Opaline," he said.

"The poor girl," Monochrome said, going immediately to Opaline and taking her hands. Her touch was marvelously supportive and comforting; this was a woman among women. "You have wickedly fascinated her. Naughty man."

"He has offered her a month as his second public mistress," Gale said. "In exchange for a vital mission."

"Please," Opaline said. "I will do it without."

"Negation," Monochrome murmured. "It is fair. We know you will do your best."

"But you're his mistress!"

"So I well know what a man he is. You will not be disappointed."

Her two hands continued to infuse courage and well-being in Opaline. "You—you don't object?"

"Sex is a unit of currency on Charm, as it is on Earth," Monochrome said. "The more sexually desirable people use it to pay others for necessary services, as I have done for decades. There is no more desirable man than Havoc, and no more important service than what he asks of you. The deal is fair. Take it."

Opaline could not doubt this magnetic woman. "I do."

"Appreciation." Monochrome let go, stepped back, and faced Havoc. "Another time, lover." She vanished.

"Next time perhaps you will have the wit to persuade a girl without having to call on us for help," Queen Gale said, frowning prettily, and also vanished.

"They treat you like an errant child!" Opaline exclaimed with mixed wonder and annoyance.

"It seems they put me in my place," Havoc said ruefully.

"How—how did they know the deal is fair? You gave them no detail."

"They read my mind."

"They are telepathic?"

"Affirmation. It saves time."

"And you," she said, appalled anew. "You are too. You've been reading my mind all along!"

"Apology."

"All my girlish fantasies and doubts. My most shameful secrets, especially when I lay against you last night. Oh, I want to die!"

"Needless. Here is my mind, rehearsed from when I lay against you."

They were standing apart, but then she felt his mind, not just his thoughts but his feelings and urges. His mouth was avidly kissing her soft bare breasts, licking the nipples. Then his turgid member was sliding into her tight damp cleft, lodging fully, and spewing out a huge quantity of pleasure-saturated fluid. It seemed to fill her to overflowing, riding a divine current of rapture. "Oh!" she breathed, transported by that encompassing feeling.

Slowly it faded, leaving her warm throughout, especially in her groin. She had just had unutterably sweet sex with a man without touching him. Yet this was not her passion, but his. He had had the same thoughts about her as she had about him, only his were more specific and urgent.

"There is no shame," he said.

"No shame," she agreed. "Appreciation." The odd thing was that it was true: now that she had felt his masked passion, she was no longer ashamed of her own passion. What he found in her mind was a mere echo of what was in his own mind. The man truly loved women and sex, and could never get enough of either. Even innocent girls turned him on, though he treated them with the respect they deserved. Had any of them been able to read his mind, they would have found themselves spitted on his eager member, riding the waves.

They walked on, and Havoc told her more about the mission. "Background: there are many sapient cultures in the galaxy. Only ours is human, but the aliens are not inferior, merely different. They have their own societies, and their own Glamors. Even their own wars. But now comes the machine culture, that is systematically destroying all living cultures. Already its advance fringe is touching us, and we will be the next culture destroyed if we do not find a way to stop it. So we are allying with other sapient species, and working to find a way to oppose the common enemy. This is not an easy thing."

"Question?" Opaline was fascinated. She had never imagined such a thing before meeting him, and the most complicated machine she had seen was a grain grinder a visiting White Chroma man had demonstrated. It had seemed miraculous, as it swallowed whole grain and spewed out finely ground flour. Science magic, seldom seen in her backwater village.

"The machines can see the far future paths," Havoc explained. "They know which ones will give them victory. We can see the near future paths, and need to invoke the ones that will block off the

ones that favor the machines. It is like an intricate board game, where each move changes the options available to both sides."

"Awe," she said, her mind swollen with the difficult concept of changing future paths. She suspected that he had projected an understanding of it into her mind so that she would not be completely lost.

"Affirmation," he said. "But you do not need to fathom all of it. You just need to know that the threat is real, and our effort to deal with it is deadly serious."

"And my being with this simple man is part of that effort?"

"Affirmation. He is our secret weapon to defeat the machines." He projected sincerity, so that she had to believe it. "We need your help, Opaline."

"You can have it," she said. "No need to make the—the deal." Though she desperately wanted the deal. The thought of experiencing in reality what he had shown her mentally was powerfully conducive. She no longer cared whether he read that in her mind; it was true.

"The deal holds. Now you know it will be no chore for me to honor it."

"No chore," she agreed, gratified.

Toward evening they reached another village. Settlements were naturally spaced about a day's walk apart, for the convenience of travelers. Again they entertained for their room and board. This time Havoc—Hayseed—first sang "Must I go Bound."

*Must I go bound and you go free
Must I love a lad who doesn't love me?
Must I be born with so little art
To love a man who would break my heart?*

Again the village girls were swooning over Havoc, and jealous of her for being in the song with him. Opaline loved it, though it struck perilously close to home. She was that girl, loving a man she had no right to love, who would never love her or marry her. The best she could hope for was that she would share his passing passion for a time, with the tolerance of his wife and mistress. Yet even that was so much more than she could ever have otherwise.

*I put my finger to the bush
To pluck a rose of fairest kind.
The thorn it pierced me at a touch
And oh, I left that rose behind.*

How well she understood!

That evening as she fixed supper for the two of them, she broached the subject that bothered her most. "Last night I made you sleep naked with me. Tonight I know this must not be. Yet if I could, I would."

"Reassurance. There is pleasure in closeness, even without sex."

So he would do it. That was a relief, despite its attendant frustration. But there was more. "Why are you still taking time with me, when surely you have more important things to do elsewhere?"

"There is more I must tell you and show you. Nothing is more important than this mission."

Now she was inclined to believe it.

They slept embraced. This time she curled up and he lay behind her, one hand on a breast and his rigid member clasped between her thighs. It was as close to sex as she could imagine, without actually completing the act. She loved it. She pretended in her mind that they really were embraced lovers, who had just had sex or were just about to. But mainly she just liked being so close to him. There was something about his body that invigorated her body and her mind. She didn't mind that he could read her thoughts; she knew, now, that his were similar, even if he was older and with two beautiful women to love.

"Affirmation," he murmured in her ear, and kissed it.

Next day they traveled again. This time the Village elder had another warning: "There's some kind of fire raging along the path. It may be impassible until it burns out."

"We'll be careful," Hayseed assured him. "Appreciation." And of course they proceeded anyway.

"Is this like the brigands?" Opaline inquired as they walked. "Something you can abolish? I suppose you wouldn't like a fire to damage your trees."

"Actually fire is all right," he replied, surprising her. "It is part of the natural order. It clears out brush, cauterizes infections, and returns nutrients to the soil. The forest would suffer if fires were eliminated."

"But wood burns! How can you accept a landscape of ashes?"

"Fire burns in a mosaic pattern. It jumps randomly, completely destroying some trees, singeing others, and skipping the rest. That leaves a varied habitat that supports many kinds of creatures, and is healthy for them all. The larger trees can handle it on their own; their bark resists it, and they are too tall for it to reach their foliage."

She shook her head. "You continue to amaze me, Hayseed. You are tolerant where I thought you'd be enraged."

"I am dangerous when I am angry I try to avoid it."

She did not even try to imagine him angry. She was familiar with the story of his name. Havoc was a synonym for mayhem. She remembered the brigands he had killed, defending her and ridding the planet of vermin. He was dangerous even when only annoyed. She discovered that she liked that aspect of him too.

Soon enough they smelled smoke. "I think the fire is still here," she remarked.

He sniffed. "Mischief."

"Question?"

"I must take you to a safe place. This is a magic fire."

"Confusion."

"A natural fire burns dry leaves, twigs, wood, cloth, bones. Organic things. A magic fire burns ground, stone, even water. It is a product of hostile magic and must be stopped." He was looking around. "Best that you retreat the way we came, rapidly."

Opaline did not argue. She turned and started running. Only to stop. The fire had already sent a tongue around to cut off her retreat. "Hayseed—"

"Observed. Apology; I was careless. I will transport you there directly."

"Concern: I wish not to distract you or get in your way. But wouldn't the villagers know I could not have crossed that burning path on my own? So they would suspect your nature?"

"Obscenity! You are correct. You must stay with me."

She was thrilled but nervous. "I will help however I can. Tell me what to do."

"The most convenient way to extinguish a magic fire is via its own ashes. They can be safely handled. But you need to be behind the line of fire to fetch them, while the fire needs to be stifled before the line. This is tricky."

"I can't gather its ashes, and go before it to spread them?"

"It would burn your flesh as you crossed, setting it afire. It could be stopped only by cutting off the limb that was burning."

"Oh," she said, aghast.

They watched the fire a moment more. It had encircled them and was burning rapidly inward. There was a slight wind, but the fire advanced into the wind as well as with it.

"It is conscious," Havoc said. "It knows what it is doing. It likes living flesh when it can catch it."

"And it has caught us," she said, shuddering.

"Negation. It reckons without the power of a Glamor."

"And you are a Glamor," she said, remembering.

"I shall have to carry you across. It can't harm me."

"But then you would be only half as efficient. I would be hindering you instead of helping you."

He nodded. "That may be. I will have to let you watch from a safe place in cool ashes."

"Distress."

"Needless." He picked her up and walked to the line of fire. It was thin, efficiently reducing whatever it encountered to inert ashes behind it. Still, she winced as he strode through it.

He set her down in cool ashes, then got to work. He rapidly scooped ashes into a loose bundle, then dumped them in the brush before the fire. The flames reached that point and halted, seeming nonplussed. They shifted to the sides, trying to find away around it, and in a moment succeeded.

Meanwhile Havoc was gathering more ashes. But the fire was already beyond his first deposit, leaving an island of unburned brush. He had merely slowed it, not stopped it.

"Insight," she called. "This is a two-person project." She ran toward him.

"Caution!" he called back, alarmed.

She stooped to gather an armful of ashes. They came up in an airy mass, sifting past her arms and drifting to the ground. Somehow he had a touch with them that she lacked. Maybe he was using magic. So she took hold of her skirt and used it to scoop ashes in quantity "I must put mine beside yours, while you gather more. Going around the circle."

"Do not let the fire touch you!"

She walked to the fire and tried to dump her ashes beyond it, but instead they came down right on it. And damped it out.

They both stared. "*On* it," Havoc said. "So it can't circle the ashes. You are a genius."

"Negation," she said, blushing.

"Close enough." He fetched more ashes and dumped them beside hers, extending the damped section.

She ran to fetch more, putting them beside his. There was now a gap in the fire through which she could walk if she chose. She did not; she stayed with the ashes.

Thereafter they worked together, alternating loads of ashes, extending the line. Steadily they doused the fire, and there seemed to be nothing it could do about it. It was no longer pursuing them; they were pursuing it.

At last they completed the outer circle. The inner circle, that had at first surrounded them, had long since closed to a point in the center, run out of fuel, and expired.

Opaline dumped the next to last load, and Havoc dumped the last. The fire was out, leaving only the large patch of destruction in the center.

Wordlessly, they stepped into each other and embraced. They kissed. It was gritty. That was

when she realized that they were both almost completely clothed in ashes. "Oh, I'm a sight!" she wailed.

"You are lovely."

"Appreciation," she said, giggling.

"Serious. You found the way that worked, and you did it without stinting. Your appearance of the moment is irrelevant; you are lovely."

"Appreciation," she repeated, this time taking it seriously. To have won his honest favor—that bordered on the ultimate thrill.

"We must wash," he said. "A village would not want us to use its guest house in this state."

"I can't think why!" She was giggling again. She was tired, now that the urgency was gone, and reacting foolishly.

They found a stream and stripped to wash. It was not deep enough for full immersion, so they sat in it and splashed water on each other. "I hate my oath," he said as he doused her bare breasts.

"That's the nicest thing you have said to me."

"Question?"

"Because this time you mean it."

He kissed her again. "This is as far as I can go. Never doubt that you are a complete woman."

"Delight."

Soon their bare skin was clean, but their hair was more difficult. They took turns putting their heads down in the water while the other splashed, rinsed, and scrubbed to get the clinging ashes out. They had to do their pubic regions similarly. They could have done their own, but by mutual consent did each other's. She loved feeling his hands brushing her cleft, and loved making him helplessly erect as she rubbed the base of his penis. It was as close as they could legitimately get to actual sex.

Or was it? "Question: you said that a fifth must satisfy her partner before herself. How is this possible? I mean, could you not stroke me until I—" She paused, blushing. "Climaxed, while you did not?"

"It appears to be partly psychological, partly physical," he said. "You would be unwilling to let me do that."

"But I teased you!"

"And never climaxed yourself. That is the line you can't cross. Men like to be teased to a degree, so you can do that much."

She nodded, seeing it. "Psychological," she agreed. "But how physical?"

"Permission to touch you," he said.

She knew he was not referring to the intimate washing. "Granted."

"When you have sex, you will not be able to climax until you feel his ejaculation within you. Mere penetration will not be sufficient, no matter how deep or forceful." He poked his longest finger into her vagina. "You feel me within you."

"I do," she agreed, her vagina involuntarily clenching on his flesh. "Try to climax."

"But I don't want to! Not without your pleasure first."

"Try anyway. I am making a point."

"But—"

"My pleasure is in making this demonstration," he said. "Accept that as given."

Reluctantly she overrode her inclination and focused on the contact. "If you would—would move it," she said.

He thrust with the finger, making it feel like a penis. Her pleasure increased. It reached a certain level, then leveled. It would not go farther. She remained quite turned on, eager for the finish, but unable to achieve it.

"You must feel it spout," he said. "Then you will climax immediately. You are capable of instant vaginal orgasm in a way few women are. But you must feel that liquid first, and know it for seminal fluid."

"Maybe if you—" She couldn't finish, embarrassed.

He read her mind, and used his other hand to stroke her clitoris. Her response accelerated, but again it leveled.

"I can't bring you to orgasm before me," he said.

She continued to try, but he was right. She could not get there without that trigger. "Expletive!"

He withdrew his linger and hand, leaving her pantingly eager for culmination, but he had made his point. "Physical," he repeated. "I used my finger because I could not have held my penis back, and would have ruined the demonstration."

"Physical," she agreed. It was surely a useful lesson, but she would have given anything to have him lose control and spout into her, releasing her frustrated urgency. Even if it did ruin the demonstration.

"Apology," he murmured.

"Needless. I asked for it." Indeed she had.

"Repetition: I am perhaps as frustrated as you are. I want very much to complete sex with you. But I must not."

"Understanding," she said wryly.

Then they tackled their clothing, rinsing it out as well as they could. "But it will take time to dry," he said. "We will have to use our presentation outfits."

"But that will spoil them for the show."

"Alternative?"

"It is not cold. We can walk bare."

"Acquiescence."

They walked, carrying their wet clothing hanging from scavenged sticks. Before they knew it, they were at the next village.

"We fought a fire," Havoc said easily as the village children stared at their nudity. "Ashes all over."

Soon there were clusters of village girls staring at Havoc's marvelous body. But Opaline was pleased to see that the boys—and men—were looking at her. The past few days of exercise had worn down some fat and improved her posture, so she was better in this respect than she had been. Also, she realized, her close association with Havoc had simply brought out whatever womanly qualities she possessed.

The Village Elder was not distracted. "That was a magic fire. We could not touch it, and feared for our village. How did you handle it?" The question was a challenge.

"My little sister fathomed the way," Havoc said, gesturing to Opaline. "I knew that its ashes would stop it, but it was circling them. She realized that the ashes could stifle the flames themselves, and that we could extend the suppression by working in tandem. One fetched while the other dumped. Slowly we circled it and got it out. She was practical, and saved the day."

Suddenly even the female eyes were on Opaline. She blushed, unable to help it.

"Then she has not only saved the day, but perhaps our village, and shown us how to stop the next such fire," the Elder said. "Request: may we know your names?"

"I am Hayseed the minstrel. My sister is Opaline."

"Hayseed and Opaline, we shall in due course erect a marker in your honor. You shall have our best guest house for as long as you require. We are in your debt."

"Negation," Havoc said. "We did what any traveler would do. The fire threatened us and we had

to stop it. We will entertain you for our lodging."

"This is generous indeed," the Elder said.

Opaline was tired, but refused to let Havoc carry the brunt alone. She joined him on the stage, appropriately clothed, and they charmed the villagers as usual. They both fended off several no fault offers, pleading fatigue. It was exhilarating being the object of such praise and desire. But she was very glad when it was done, and she could collapse on the bed.

Havoc, who seemed utterly tireless, massaged her back and legs as she lay there. "You did well today, Opaline."

She knew it. "Appreciation."

"Welcome."

"How many more days travel?"

"One or two."

"Regret."

His strong hands tweaked her buttocks humorously. "You can put up with me that long."

"Read my mind. I want it never to end."

"All things must end."

"Havoc, why are you doing this? I mean, really? You're the king. You could have assigned a minion to conduct me, or just transported me there instantly. There is no need to take a week of your time shepherding a back-village girl."

"I need your company"

"Negation. You've got the two most beautiful women in existence to cater to your whim, and you could have had anything you wanted of my body from the outset. I am eager to give it to you, just for the joy of being possessed by you, and I don't even care any more that you are the king. Why waste your time, when you have to prepare to stop an invasion?"

"Opaline," he said seriously. "I am not wasting my time. I am training you to do what you need to do, and that takes time."

"To cater to a man. That comes naturally to a woman."

"This is not an ordinary man. He is simple, and he is our secret weapon. You must fascinate him and cause him to focus on his talent, while others, including perhaps his parents, will think you are a mere opportunist. This is not easy."

"I haven't even committed to do it, really, only for a month, so that then I can have a month of

bliss in your arms. You may be investing all this tedious energy for nothing."

"Negation."

"How can you know? I'm just a silly girl!"

He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her over. He came down on her, deliciously smothering her with a kiss. "It is not tedious, Opaline. I like being with you, and will truly enjoy you if you invoke that month. My wife and mistress will be jealous."

"Disbelief."

"Justified."

She stared at him, dismayed. "Havoc, I did not mean to call you a liar. It was rhetorical. I love you! But I know better than to believe that you could have any long-term interest in me."

"Clarification: your disbelief that Gale and Monochrome will be jealous of you is justified. You are unlikely to invoke that aspect of the deal, though it will be honored if you do."

"But that would mean that I will stay with the simple man. I promise to give him a chance, but I just don't believe that he will ever turn me on enough to make it permanent. Especially after I have come to know you. I don't think any man could win me, after you."

"Nevertheless."

"How can you know?" she demanded again, her emotion threatening to erupt in tears or fury.

"I do know. Close enough."

"What are you not telling me now? Tell me!"

"One of my powers is the ability to see the near future paths. I am not nearly as good at it as my children are, but I can do it well enough for my own purposes. I can't see clearly beyond the first hour, let alone the month, but I can faintly see the beginning of it, and you are coming to love that man."

Opaline couldn't accept that idea, so she focused on another aspect. "You can see the future! You mentioned that before. That means that things like the brigands—"

"I saw them coming," he agreed.

"And the fire! You knew how to put it out! You did not need to credit me."

"I saw that you would figure it out," he agreed. "So I allowed you to do it. That does not make your insight invalid. You deserve credit."

"But *why*? It is all so unnecessary. Why should my feelings even matter?"

"Because my daughter Voila, whose perception is vastly greater than mine, told me that this was the way it has to be. I have to escort you personally the full time, teaching you certain things, impressing on you the importance of the mission. This is our most likely key to victory against the machines."

"So you are doing it because you have to do it."

"Affirmation. But I am enjoying doing it. I almost hope my daughter is wrong, and that you come to me for that month. I would so very much like to do this for real." He stroked her bare breast with his fingers, then kissed her again, lingeringly. "There is a quality in your innocent love that truly turns me on."

"Appreciation," she said wryly. "Is there much more for me to learn?"

"Affirmation. You must learn to take charge, especially with a man. You must learn to sing in public."

She shook her head ruefully. "I am not good at either of these things."

"Tomorrow you must do both. I will be called away suddenly, and you will have to carry on with the show for an hour. This is not something I planned for you; I just now fathomed it, as my thorough range is not much more than a few minutes. My daughter, working with an associate who can see the intermediate future, just advised me telepathically. Apology for putting you in such a spot."

"Havoc, I can't do those things! I'm not equipped. We must shift the time of the show."

"Regret. My daughter says no."

"But I will foul it up abysmally! I know it! I'd rather be burned by that fire."

"You might foul up. But not if you prepare."

"How can I prepare for what I can't do?"

"I will help you." He took her hand. "Sing."

She opened her mouth to protest, but then felt the encompassing support of his mind. "Oh, no John!" she sang. Then paused, astonished. "I sang it!"

"You know the song. You know them all, after doing them so many times with me. You are no minstrel, but your voice is passable and we shall make sure you look pretty. If a girl shows enough breast and leg, most boys won't notice how well she sings."

"Havoc!" she exclaimed, flustered.

"Truth. I am a man. Trust me in this. Just take the courage I have lent you, and maintain a good stage presence, and it will work."

She remained highly uncertain, but tackled the other aspect. "How can I manage a man?"

"You have seen me managing the girls. This is the mirror of that. Put yourself in my place, emotionally, and do it. It will work."

"There is no alternative?"

"Not if we are to save our worlds."

She started to protest. But he took her hand again, and shared his mind with her, and suddenly she believed.

The future of mankind really did depend on her.

Chapter 5

Shee

"You do know I'm on a mission?" Havoc inquired with a tolerant smile. "I should spank you for interrupting it."

"I would accept the spanking, Father, from you," Voila replied. She was a reasonably attractive light-brown-haired young woman of twenty one, the Glamor of Amoeba, and the strongest by far of all the Glamors. Few could have told by looking at her how dreadfully powerful she was, or how alien her outlook. Even Havoc was somewhat in awe of what she had become. "But Weft would be insanely jealous."

Her sister Weft, of course, had always had a thing for him, and was embarrassingly open about it. She would gladly have bared her bottom for his hand. In fact she would have taken him to bed long since, had she found some way to justify it. It was a family joke, to all except Weft herself. "I can't remain here long. Opaline will wonder if she wakes and finds me missing."

"You must remain. Send your double."

He studied her. She was serious, and she always had reason. Then he walked to the front office. "Ennu, set up my double to take my place beside Opaline. Caution: he must not have sex with her."

Ennu nodded and departed. She would handle it competently, including briefing and getting the man rapidly transported there in clothing matching Havoc's of the moment.

"We have learned things," Voila said. "There is a machines spy among us that we are unable to identify, but we must, in order to increase our chance against the machines to fifty percent. They have a number of recruitment prospects, for which they are prepared to pay handsomely. I am first on their list. They are sending a humanoid robot to persuade you to send me to them."

Havoc was used to straight talk from his daughter, but this set him back. "A spy, a prospect, and a robot. By what device of illusion do they suppose I would ever yield you to their power?"

"They will spare our entire human culture if you do. Otherwise they will try to destroy it. Their

chances of success in that are three to one. It is because they do not like those odds they are making the offer."

"What odds do they favor?"

"One hundred to one, or better."

"And this golem they are sending—"

"A robot, fashioned of metals and minerals into a most fetching humanoid female. She is designed to become your mistress."

Havoc choked. "I have a mistress."

"Your second mistress."

"And the machines suppose I would ever touch her? Why?"

"Because the future paths suggest that you can maintain our chances of survival at fifty percent only if you do."

"Contempt!"

"Father, you must do it. It is necessary."

He stared at her, knowing she was serious. "I must cohabit with a machine bent on persuading me to give you to the machines."

"Affirmation."

"We can't simply blast her transport ship out of space before she arrives, and be done with it?"

"Negation. We must not harm her."

"The paths show disaster if we do?"

"The paths show a diminution of our position."

That was the same thing. Everything in this monstrous chess game was governed by the paths that led to advantage or disadvantage. Still, the notion rankled. Havoc loved women, but not machines. "This will require some consideration."

"You have an hour."

"Question?"

"Then she arrives here."

He considered. "Question: if you go to the machines, what is your personal fate?"

"Largely comfortable. All my family and friends will be protected. I will have complete freedom of our realm and theirs, and can marry a mortal or a machine crafted to my liking. Mino will return to their control, and Idyll and I will join him regularly for sessions of future paths exploration, as we have done before. But now it would be for the benefit of the machines, to enable them to conquer the remaining galaxy in approximately a third of the time and a quarter of the expenditure of resources as otherwise."

He whistled. "So you really are valuable to them."

She nodded. "Most valuable. They would take very good care of me and mine."

"And if you do not join them?"

"Then it is war. All of us may be destroyed, as we are too dangerous to allow to continue to exist outside their control. They will still conquer the galaxy, albeit it more slowly and with larger losses."

"Then why should you not join them?"

"The rest of the galaxy would suffer."

"Be rendered extinct?"

"Affirmation."

"Mankind is not known as an altruistic species."

She waited.

"But we do have a chance," he added.

"Affirmation."

"So naturally we will gamble."

Again she waited, knowing him all too well.

"But we will keep the decision in abeyance. First I will see how persuasive this female machine contraption can be. They will not act until her mission fails, and that might take some time."

"If she does not persuade you within a year, they will assume her mission is futile, and act. That decision is pre-programmed."

"So the robot proffers us a chance to stall for a year. That is why you say I should take her as a second mistress."

"In part, father."

"Question?"

"You will like her. Perhaps even love her."

"An enemy machine!"

Voila was silent again. She had of course fathomed all the relevant future paths, and knew his decision before he made it. This session had been mainly a show of form, allowing him to act kingly. Voila had been the ultimate authority on human decisions for the past five years or more.

He was resigned. "Thanks for letting me strut and fret my hour upon the stage, daughter."

She kissed him, and for just a moment she was his little girl again. "Welcome, father." She faded out.

Havoc went to his office. Ennui was there, old but able. She was never off-duty when things of importance were afoot, regardless of the time. "Gale and Monochrome await you in your suite, Havoc."

"They know?"

"Naturally." And naturally she knew what he was talking about. She was telepathic, but hardly needed it. There was no mortal person more important to the functioning of the kingdom than Ennui, and everyone knew it.

He went to his suite. Both women greeted him. They were dressed to be attractive, Gale in green, Monochrome in white, and they were the two loveliest women in the human culture despite being well beyond youth. Glamors were ageless.

Havoc paused for a moment to admire them. Queen Gale, now 40, was the Glamor of Mosses and Lichen, slender yet full fleshed, retaining the figure that had in her youth made her perhaps the planet's most beautiful woman. Her hair and eyes were brown and lustrous. She played the hammer dulcimer with marvelous finesse. He had loved her from the time she was a child, and would always love her.

Monochrome was the Mistress of Mistresses of Planet Earth, that planet's Female Spirit or Glamor, lovely and cultured, not looking her age of 55. She was albino, white of hair and skin, her eyes pink because there was no color to mask their blood. Her body was so well formed it seemed to have no bones, just soft curves. She anchored her hair with the two sections of her soprano recorder, which she could play supremely well. Havoc had made her a reluctant Oath of Friendship by Voila's direction, then quickly come to love her; she was as fine a woman in her own right as could be discovered, with subtle yet powerful magic.

"Do you see anything interesting?" Gale asked.

"My sun and my moon, and all between," he answered. "I can never see enough of either of you."

"Then we should show you more," Monochrome said. With that both women shrugged out of

their garments and stood nude in all their splendor.

"You know what this means," Havoc said with mock grimness. "I will have to do you simultaneously. Am I man enough?"

"Verification," Gale said as both advanced on him. In moments they had him stripped and on the bed on his back.

Gale took his upper section, kissing him as she set his hands on her breasts. Monochrome took his lower section, striding him and taking his standing member into her mouth. Gale ran her tongue into his mouth as Monochrome drew deliciously on his member. "Love," Gale whispered in his ear as he jetted into Monochrome's throat.

They then switched places. Monochrome sat on his face, proffering her cleft for his tongue, while Gale sat on his member, squeezing it with her channel. As his tongue probed the one, his member gushed into the other. As a Glamor he could do it, as they knew. So could they; now both climaxed in unison, answering to his dual attentions to their clefts.

Then they lay on either side of him, their breasts and thighs pressing close. "What does the love machine have that we don't?" Monochrome asked.

"I haven't even seen the expletive machine!" he protested.

"But you'll be into her before the night is out," Gale said.

"Negation!"

"Penalty," Monochrome said.

"You lied," Gale agreed.

"How do you know?"

"We know you," Monochrome said. "She's female."

"And Voila told us," Gale said. "She had it from Idyll."

Then they made him do them both again. And again.

Satisfied that they had punished him enough, they quickly washed, dressed, and departed.

Ennui appeared. "She is here. Put something on, Havoc."

For he was sitting on the bed, naked, his spent member dribbling, where the two lovers had left him. They had prepared him for the first encounter with the machine by depleting him to the extent feasible for a Glamor.

"Is there no protocol?" he demanded as he dressed. "Doesn't she have to get clearance, go through customs, or something?"

"Not on Charm. The paths steer her right to you. If we inhibited her, it would be war with the machines." She produced a comb and touched up his mussed hair in motherly fashion.

He was tempted to kiss her, just to discommode her. He suppressed it; she was not one of his girls. "It will be war with the machines anyway, starting with her."

"Havoc, stop blustering. This is serious business. She is our first direct contact with the machine culture." She straightened his collar and led him out of the suite, to her office.

An inoffensive young woman was waiting there, evidently a human handmaid assigned to guide the visiting machine. Her blue dress, matching slippers, and matching headband served to accent her excellent figure. He checked her mind routinely. And paused. "Oh, no!" For it was no human mind. It was an alien device.

"Shee, this is King Havoc," Ennui said, introducing them. "Havoc, this is Shee Robot, SHEE, representing the machine culture."

The form of the young woman made a gesture of obeisance. "Honored," she murmured.

Havoc just looked at her. She was small, the top of her head hardly reaching to his shoulder. Her hair was glossy and of indeterminate color, shifting from blond to red to brown according to the highlights that changed as she moved. Her eyes were subtly iridescent, their color also undefined. Her form was man's desire, and so were her lovely features. In fact she was, in her special fashion, a beauty to match that of Gale and Monochrome.

"But I am a machine," she said. Even her voice was gently evocative. "I will never deceive you, Havoc."

Havoc looked at Ennui, but she was expressionless. This was a situation he had to handle by himself. "Let's take a walk," he said. "Is there anything you would like to see?"

"Trees," she said raptly. "I love trees."

And he was the Glamor of Trees. That could be no coincidence. She had truly been crafted to appeal to him. His mind rebelled against so obvious a ploy. He took her to a small internal city park, because it was night outside. It was quickly apparent that she really did like trees—and they liked her. That surprised him. How could a living thing care about a machine?

She put her hand on a ripe plumb. "May I?"

"Welcome." What would she do with it?

She plucked it and put it to her mouth. She bit into it, chewing. "You eat?" he asked, surprised.

"I can eat," she agreed. "I do not have to, but in social situations it is better to join in, and I need to be able to pass for human at your convenience." She took another bite.

"What happens to it?"

"I can digest it, and utilize its energy to restore my power supply. I can process wastes in similar manner to that of living things. Or I can store its nourishment for the use of living creatures." She finished the plum.

"You ate the pit!" he exclaimed.

She paused. "I forgot. I can regurgitate it, if you wish."

"Needless," he said quickly. "A machine can forget?"

"A machine can temporarily misplace information. I have not eaten before, so overlooked a nuance. I can process all of it. I will be more accurate in future."

Had she really forgotten, or was she showing him something? She had evidently had no trouble with the pit.

She walked among the collections of small trees, admiring each. Then she stopped. "This is wrong."

"It is a coneless pine," Havoc said. "A special type."

"It is not doing well. The light is wrong."

"It is artificial, crafted to suit the indoor trees. They have done well for years."

"Not this one," she said. "See, it is spindly and poorly leafed. It needs a different kind of light."

"Question?"

"Can you fetch an alternate device of illumination? It shouldn't hurt the other trees, but will help this one."

Havoc took her to the bulb supply. "This," she said, selecting one. She took it and substituted it for the existing one. The power from the Silver Chroma stone flowed through it, and it illuminated the region.

There was no apparent change in the plant.

"It doesn't know," she said. "It remains defensive. I will tell it."

This was curious indeed. "Question?"

"Music can be a key. I will try." She opened her purse, which Havoc had not noticed before, and brought out a pair of conch-like shells from some alien ocean. She held them in her two hands, flexing her fingers. The shells squeezed together and expanded, turning out to be soft surfaced.

And music came out. These were wind instruments, with the air pumped through by the rhythmic squeezing. One shell played a delicate melody, and the other did counterpoint. Together they made a lovely duet. It was an unfamiliar melody, not quite like any that Havoc had encountered before. That

surprised him, because as Hayseed the Minstrel he had encountered most of the melodies of the planet, and of Earth too. Definitely alien, on an alien tone scale, but also very pretty and evocative.

And the plant responded. Its needles firmed, and its main stem straightened. It sought the light.

Shee put away the shells. "Now it will prosper," she said. Havoc knew she was correct; he felt the mending of the small tree. She had fathomed its problem in a manner he had not, and cured it.

She looked at him. "Apology for intruding on your demesnes," she said. "When I saw it hurting, I forgot myself. I should have asked you first."

Havoc acted before he realized what he was doing. He kissed her.

She kissed him back. "You know I am crafted to love you," she said as they broke. "But I would not have initiated that gesture. I try not to be forward."

"You really are a woman," he said, amazed.

"Affirmation. Merely not a living one."

"We must talk," he said. She had kissed exactly like a woman, and he discovered that he liked her despite knowing that she was a machine. This needed to be sorted out, emotionally.

"I will always be available," she said. "For anything you choose."

"Question: That instrument—what is it? I have not seen its like."

"The shells?" She brought them out again. "They are from an erstwhile culture. I had my choice of musical accessories, and liked these, so learned them."

"Request: May I handle them?"

"Of course. But you will not find them familiar."

"I can play anything." But as he squeezed a shell, it made a noise like a fart.

Shee laughed. "The control is dual. Pumping to make it inhale and exhale, and shaping to vary the tone. So:" She held the other shell in her left hand, squeezing it gently. It made a fine sustained note, followed by a scale of notes.

Havoc tried again, but managed only a series of grunts and wheezes. He gave it back, smiling. "You will teach me this, in due course."

"Gladly, Havoc."

"Do you sing?"

"I do."

"What songs?"

"I know all of yours. I was crafted for this."

"All?"

"Affirmation."

"How?"

"The machines developed a database of your cultural artifacts. It is part of their process of conquest: they make sure to understand the nuances as well as the gross features. They do not like surprises."

"How?" he repeated.

"A generation ago a series of synthetic human beings was sent to your planet. Their purpose is to collect exactly such information."

"The fifths!"

"Agreement. They are not aware of their mission, but their minds are readily permeable to machine monitors, and all that they learn is grist for the data banks. Such as your folk songs."

"I am keeping company with one of them now."

She nodded, unsurprised. "She is surely receptive to your attentions."

Havoc, shaken, changed the subject. He knew he would have to ponder this revelation in due course, when alone. He had known about the origin and purpose of the fifths, but to have the robot so readily confirm it—that was significant. He had assumed that the machines would do their best to keep the secret. What could be their ploy?

He brought out his blue dragon scale. "I will sing a stanza, then you will sing one. Then we will sing the refrain together." Did she really know them all?

"Gladly," she repeated.

He chose a song he hadn't sung in years, "Nicodemus," because it wasn't the kind villagers normally understood or appreciated. They preferred love or adventure songs, and as Minstrel, he catered to their preferences. The fifths would not readily have picked it up. It related to the slave days of ancient Earth, when folk of white color made slaves of folk of black color, and to the black folks' longing for freedom.

He played his dragon scale and sang:

*Nicodemus the slave was of African birth
And was bought for a bag full of gold.
He was reckoned as part of the salt of the earth
And he died long ago very old.*

Then he paused, giving it to Shee. She squeezed her shells, making her own accompaniment, and sang:

*And his last sad request as they laid him away
In the trunk of an old hollow tree:
"Wake me up," was his charge, "At the first break of day
Wake me up for the great Jubilee."*

Then they sang the refrain together.

*It's a great day coming, and it's not far off
Been long long long on the way.
So go and tell Elijah to saddle up Pomp
And lead us by the gum tree down in the swamp
For to wake Nicodemus today.*

She really did know it! The harmony was beautiful, his tenor, her alto. She was an excellent singer, with delightful melodic nuances, and her voice meshed perfectly with his. Havoc was a thoroughly experienced singer, and knew the difference between amateur and professional quality efforts. She was as good as he was.

They finished, and put away their instruments. He embraced her closely and kissed her, one hand cupping her divine bottom. "Wonder," he said. She was yielding, accepting, participating, and extraordinarily appealing. He had doubted that any machine could win his favor, but he was already losing his resistance. This was scary; the machines had pegged him far more accurately than he had anticipated.

"Kiss me thrice, and you will not stop there," she said.

"I can stop where I choose."

"But you will not choose."

She was probably right. "Yet you serve the machines."

"I am a machine," she agreed. "I was created by machines, and am serving the mission of the machine culture. But my heart is with Havoc."

"Because of your programming," he agreed. "This is not earned love."

"I can be deprogrammed in that respect. Then you will be obliged to earn my love."

"Temptation. Will you depart if deprogrammed?"

"Negation. There remains my mission. I will merely have to express feelings I lack, to influence you."

That did not appeal. "State your mission."

"To persuade you to commit your daughter Voila to join the machines."

"Voila does not answer to me."

She shook her head reprovingly. "Disingenuity. She will do this if you tell her to."

"Why should I tell her to?"

"Because this will save her and you and your species from extinction." She took his elbows and stared into his face. "I love you, Havoc, and want you to survive and prosper, with or without me. I can save you only in this manner."

"We can fight off the machines."

"Negation. Havoc, I think you don't properly appreciate their power. It is overwhelming, and not merely because of their superior technology. They prepare methodically for every conquest, so as to make no mistakes. The fifths, as you call them, are only part of it. The secret spies are only part of it. I am only part of it. Their massive type 2.5 space fleet is only part of it. They are experienced millennia deep and galaxy wide in just such actions. You would be foolish to think that you could successfully oppose them, and I doubt you are foolish."

"Type 2.5?"

"Your culture is magic, but I know you are familiar with the technological types, Havoc. You don't need me to review them."

"Review them regardless." He had done this with Opaline, to establish the limits of her information. What were Shee's limits?

"When a culture uses only a portion of the energy of a single planet, that is type 0. When it utilizes all the energy of a planet, that is type 1. When it utilizes all the energy of a star, that is type 2. When it utilizes all the energy of a galaxy, it is type 3. The human culture is type 1. The machine culture is half way between 2 and 3 and will be 3 when its conquest of the galaxy is complete and it focuses on capturing all its energy. This is not merely a matter of energy, but of sophistication."

"Doubt."

"And that is part of the reason I am here. I am an example of what a type 2-plus culture can do. You will want to study me, and despair."

Havoc grinned. "You do not make me despair. You make me want to clasp you."

"In due course, Havoc. I long for your clasp. But first you need to fathom the reality of my mission."

"By studying you, I will appreciate the enormous power of the machines?"

"In part. Allow me to make a small demonstration. You will want samples of my substance to analyze in your Science Chroma laboratories. I will give them to you, in the process providing you with a hint of my potential."

"We have seen machines before."

"I am the most sophisticated machine ever to be released to this system. You have yet to grasp my properties."

"What of Mino?"

"Ask him."

Havoc turned to the arboretum's ceiling. "Mino," he said.

A panel became a window to the huge machine's control room. "Havoc," it acknowledged.

"This is Shee, a visiting machine. How does she compare to you?"

The intellect beyond the panel focused on Shee. "I am type 2 technology. She is type 2.5. She can destroy me."

"From here?"

"Affirmation. She has but to speak an applicable code, and I will become useless, or her slave. You should not have admitted her to your sanctum."

"She loves me."

"A machine does not love."

Shee lifted her hands and snapped her fingers twice.

"Correction," Mino said. "She is beyond the threshold, and does experience emotion. But I must warn you: her love is dangerous, because it is supported by power you are not equipped to comprehend. She—"

Shee snapped her fingers once more, cutting it off. The ceiling panel returned to its former state.

That was impressive. Havoc had never seen Mino controlled in that fashion. Shee evidently did know the codes. Still, it wasn't certain.

"Conjecture," Havoc said. "One machine supports another, to make the demonstration more impressive."

"Now I will impress you directly," she said. She removed her slippers, dress, and headband and stood nude.

Havoc studied her carefully. He had assumed that her clothing had supported and confined her body to enhance its form, as was the case with most women, but now it was apparent that it was the other way around: her form supported the accouterments. Her feet were shapely, the toenails delicately iridescent, matching her eyes. Her hair now hung luxuriously loose to her waist, softly waved, flexing with her every minor movement. And her body—was man's desire. Havoc had seen

many breasts, buttocks, and torsos, but none to match these proportions. She had indeed been crafted from an ideal template. "Awe," he murmured.

"First, one hair of my head. Do you care to snap it loose?" She separated her tresses to isolate a single long hair.

Havoc shrugged and took the end of the hair between thumb and forefinger. He jerked on it—and it didn't snap. He took hold of it near her scalp with his other hand, and pulled hard—and it didn't snap. This was interesting, because as a Glamor he had inhuman power and could snap wires barehanded.

"Lift your hand high," Shee said.

"But that could hurt you."

"Hurt a machine?"

He clamped his finger on the hair and lifted his arm powerfully upward. And Shee came up with it. She dangled over the floor, suspended by the single hair. She was no heavier than a living woman her size would have been, but no such woman could be suspended this way.

He lowered her until she could stand again. Then he brought out his knife and cut at the hair. Unsuccessfully. The thing was impervious to damage.

"Impressive," he conceded. "Every hair is similar?"

"Affirmation." She smiled. "Perhaps just as well, as my hair does not grow. It would not replace itself if cut. It is inorganic."

He stroked her hair with his hand. It was soft and flexible. He brought a hank to his face and sniffed it. It smelled faintly female. He would not have known it was not natural if he had not tested it.

She took the single strand, brought it to her mouth, and bit on it. It separated. She gave the severed strand to him.

Her teeth could cut what his stout knife could not. That spoke for her teeth as well as for her hair.

"Now your laboratory will want a sample of my urine."

"I will fetch a cup." Would she urinate in front of him? Many women would indulge in all manner of sexual exploits with abandon, but would not urinate in the sight of a man.

"Needless. Cup your hands."

Would she really do that? He bent down and extended his cupped hands.

She squatted over them, her thighs to either side of his arms. She jetted a small amount of warm liquid into them, then rose. "This actually is plumb juice. You may drink it if you wish."

Was that a challenge? Havoc raised his hands to his face and sipped. It was plum juice. He drank it all, rather than let it spill on the floor.

"You are succeeding in surprising me," he said as he licked his hands clean. It was a barbarian mannerism he seldom showed as king.

"All part of the demonstration. I can evacuate the pulp also, if you wish."

He smiled. "Another time, intriguing as the act might be to watch."

"Now you will need a drop of my blood. Take it." She held out her bare right arm.

"Hesitation: You wish me to cut you?"

"Satisfactory."

He brought out his knife and carefully sliced her forearm. The knife made no impression. He cut harder, still without result. "Invulnerable? Like the hair?" He put away the knife.

"Accuracy." She brought her left hand across and ran a fingernail across her right wrist. A cut appeared, from which welled a bright drop of blood.

Havoc hastily fetched a vial and captured the blood. Then she ran her finger over the cut, and it disappeared.

Havoc snapped his fingers. A manservant appeared. "Take these two samples to the science lab and have them analyzed," he said.

The man nodded and left with the samples, not even seeming to notice the nude woman standing there.

"Question," Havoc said. "What will they discover?"

"Invulnerable fiber and inorganic blood. They will be mystified, as neither matches anything they will have seen before."

"So you have demonstrated some of your special physical qualities. Accept my wonder as a given. What is next?"

She laughed. "I suppose I should seduce you, as long as I am naked. That would save me the trouble of dressing and undressing again in short order."

"Interest. But I have not kissed you thrice."

She frowned, prettily. "Expletive! He remembered."

Havoc enfolded her and kissed her.

She returned the kiss savagely. Then paused. "Request."

"Granted."

She smiled. "This first time, allow me to do it. All other times may be at your wish and manner. I will never deny you."

This was curious. "Virgin?"

"Nor will I deceive you. But I prefer not to answer that question."

"Withdrawn."

"Appreciation."

Then she got to work. She led him to a bed of moss she had spied, and took off his clothes, and laid him down upon that bed. His erection stood stiffly. She stroked it, then squatted over him and carefully lowered herself onto it. The penetration was slow and not deep. There did not seem to be any obstruction; she did not have a hymen. But she was a machine; she could have been made without it. He withheld his orgasm until she was ready.

She put her hands on the floor beside him for additional support. Then she lifted one foot over his body, not breaking her shallow connection with his member. She continued turning, using hands and foot for support, until she faced away from him. Then she lowered herself the rest of the way, taking him in wholly, and lay back on him. Her head came to rest on his collar bone beside his neck. She reached out to find his arms, and lifted them up over her, placing his hands on her breasts.

"Now," she said, and her vagina convulsed, claspng him tightly.

Havoc did not even need to thrust. He immediately spewed into her, one urgent jet after another. She took it all in, and he felt her answering climax.

She lay there a while, letting him enjoy it. He still held her breasts, which were monuments of fine art. Her firm buttocks flexed against his groin, kneading the base of his embedded member. She had little ways he had not encountered before, and he liked them. "Delight," he murmured in her ear.

"Joy to please you, Havoc."

Then she sat up, remaining connected, lifted herself slightly, and made another half turn, completing the circuit. She lay face down upon him, never having released his penis. She set his hands on her bottom. "Pleasure."

"Agreement!"

"Now you can do me any time, any way, or require me to do it with any other man or woman. I am your mistress, subservient to your will." Her vagina stroked him internally. He was spent for the moment, but this was very nice. Yet also unusual, taken as a whole.

"Question."

"Explanation: I wanted to be in control, this first time with you. In a style you have not

experienced before, original with me. With you knowing my inanimate nature. Before giving up my sexual freedom. I know you will not abuse me, but still I needed this reassurance."

"This is an emotional thing?" He still was not quite satisfied that she was truly conscious or feeling.

"Affirmation. My feelings are as real as yours. Merely stemming from a manufactured system rather than a grown one. You have your joys and your hurts from life experience. I have mine, from crafted experience."

He changed the subject without letting go of her supremely evocative derriere. "Question: can you see the future?"

"The far future, imperfectly. One month hence, approximately."

"Not precisely?"

"Affirmation. The future is malleable, and certainty is virtually impossible. I see only percentages."

He found her posterior similarly malleable. "What percentage chance that you will be my mistress that month hence?"

"Eighty five percent, if I seduced you this night. I have done so, and you will desire more of me, so I may have secured my future with you. There are options that could have drastically reduced its likelihood."

"Question?" His finger explored her anus, poking in a slight distance. It felt completely normal.

"If I killed Ennui, my chances with you would drop to five percent."

"Zero percent!" he snapped with a flash of anger. "She is my oath friend, the one I trust most of any I have not bedded."

"And you love her, in your fashion," she agreed. "If I did it, you might suffer a memory lapse, or your staff might conceal it from you for some time, fearing your reaction. So zero is unlikely. Certainty is difficult at either extreme."

She was right. "Appreciation for the clarification," he said. "Do not harm those I value."

"It was a mere example. I will do nothing you do not wish, and anything you do wish."

"Except tell the machines to go away and leave us alone."

"I can't direct them, Havoc. But they will do that if Voila joins them."

"Voila said I should take you as my second mistress because that raises our chances against the machines, even though you are an enemy machine."

"Havoc, I am not your enemy. I love you."

In his flash of irritation he had forgotten her rear. His hands resumed exploration. His member, within her throughout, was expanding. "Why should the machines craft you to be so?"

"Because I am a nexus. A vital connection. One of the channels through which the future of this issue is to be settled. The side that prevents me from pursuing my mission, loses. The machines are not accustomed to losing."

"Question." His finger could feel his hardening penis through the membrane separating her anus from her vagina. In this anatomy, too, she seemed completely normal.

"I can't explain it, Havoc. The paths are grotesquely tangled, and no one knows how they will unravel. But I must be with you."

This intrigued him almost as much as her marvelous bottom. "You are that important?"

"It seems I am. The machines do nothing without sufficient reason. I represent a significant investment on their part." She wriggled, externally and internally. "Are you going to stop teasing me and do it?"

He laughed. "I thought you'd never ask."

"I am not supposed to ask, merely answer."

"Do you actually desire sex with me, or is it simply the requirement for raising your percentage?"

"They are synonymous. I desire sex with you, and I desire the highest future percentage so as to be assured of always having sex with you. I am designed to be your mistress; it is my fulfillment."

It was a fair answer. "Then ask."

Her vagina quivered with eagerness, and her anus clenched on his finger. Her breasts pressed hotly into his chest. "Please."

"Granted." He bucked and spouted again, and she met him with equivalent energy, her channel coursing with her own climax.

"Gratitude!" she gasped, kissing him desperately.

So she was a machine. She was sentient and sapient and feeling. She would do.

When they subsided, they cleaned up and dressed. Then Havoc took Shee to Ennui's office. "Take time with this creature," he told his oath friend. "Get to know her well, and tell me your impression."

Ennui took it in stride. "That may take time."

"Take the time. Maybe take her to Earth. Consider it a vacation."

She shook her head, bemused. "Never a dull moment, with Havoc," she remarked to the planet in general.

Havoc kept a tight rein on his thoughts, because what was in his mind was explosive in its potential. He nodded to the two women and walked out of the office.

Chapter 6

Voila

Red delivered Fifth to Voila in what seemed to be the usual way: she had phenomenal sex with him, then faded out, and he discovered he was alone in another chamber. It was morning, and a young woman was emerging from the shower. Her bare wet body was slighter than Red's in every dimension, yet more appealing for his taste though she was not really lean. She was just less evocatively endowed.

She spied him immediately, and evinced no surprise. "Greeting, Fifth," she said. "We shall travel, but first we are required to start our affair." She joined him on the bed.

"Voila," he said belatedly. "I—I am a normal man, and Red just exhausted me in that respect. It is no affront to you."

She looked into his face. Her brown eyes seemed to become huge. "None taken," she said.

Suddenly his member swelled almost painfully. He put his hands on her shoulders, steered her down onto her back on the bed, mounted her, and jammed urgently in. Three pulses. Then his ardor faded as suddenly as it had come, and he got off her, spent.

"Shower and dress," she said, getting up.

Just like that, they had done it. He realized as he showered that she had simply evoked his response magically, and forced his performance. She had wanted to get it out of the way efficiently, and had done so. He had had little pleasure in it, despite the power of the procedure. He was not much pleased. This would hardly be a fair test of his love for Flame.

And realized that Voila desired him no more than he desired her. She was simply obliging her sister. That diminished his annoyance.

However, her power made him nervous. He knew she was by far the strongest Glamor ever to appear, and there were stories that she was human only in body, not in nature. Their recent act of sex seemed to confirm that.

He found clothing that fit him laid out on the bed. He dressed.

Voila reappeared. "Sit," she said, indicating a table with chairs. "We must talk."

Fifth spread his hands. "Whatever you wish."

She dropped several colored blocks on the table and sat down opposite him. She had tied her hair back so tightly that she looked almost mannish, and was garbed in jeans and a heavy shirt that effectively masked her breasts. This was no romantic tryst. "Eat."

He picked up a block and bit into it. It was some sort of condensed nutrient, chewy but tasty.

"You will carry my ikon." She gestured to a jar on the table. Within it lay a small amorphous blob. The ikon.

"But I carry Flame's ikon," he protested.

"Switch them."

Bemused, he obeyed, exchanging Flame's slime ikon for Voila's blob. He put the blob in his mouth, tucking it away in his cheek. Ikons were notoriously difficult to part with, but apparently such an exchange was easy.

"You evoked necessary information about the number one and number two recruitment targets of the machines," she said. "I am number one. I will consult with number two. The evocation provided an address. Warning: danger. You may decline."

There was a lot he might say, arguing the case either way. But to decline would mean to abort his month with Voila, and prevent the completion of his three-woman romantic test. He had to carry through. "Negation."

She nodded. Obviously she had seen the near future paths and had known of his decision before he did. But she wanted it on the record that he had been warned and given the choice.

"There will be way stations, as our route is not direct," she said. "We want to conceal the mission from the machines, if possible. We will pause brief or long times, as required by the routing. In those pauses I will be a girl to you, so that the experience is fair."

"Needless," he said gallantly.

She smiled, and suddenly she was winsome. "Flame is correct: you are likable." She got up, leaned down, and kissed him. She had not done that before, during the forced sex. It was potent; in that instant she was completely and disarmingly feminine.

He wagged a finger at her. "You're an actress."

"Pretend you don't know." She put her hand on his arm, and then they were elsewhere.

He looked around. It was a platform on a pedestal in some weirdly alien landscape. In the distance huge creatures grazed on mounds of moss. Three suns shone down. This was no world and no system he knew of. Odd that the air was breathable on such a different planet.

"Capsule," she explained. "Prepared for us by the Oomii." She reached out to touch the film wall, that became visible as it flexed.

A monstrous grasshopper loomed. Fifth lurched forward, foolishly ready to protect her from the threat. But she waved him back. "Appreciation," she said to the creature.

The thing nodded in a human-like gesture and retreated.

"Apology," Fifth said, relieved.

"They are on your list," she said. "Part of the galactic network opposing the machines, which we are joining."

"There are so many," he said. "I can remember only a few." He was privately amazed that the information had been used so rapidly; he and the Red Glamor had completed their survey only the day before. But of course the information had been going out steadily. Voila had evidently made immediate contacts. It was as if she had always known these creatures. "Next." She took his hand.

They were perched high in a massive fossilized tree overlooking a colorful canyon. Wafts of multi-colored mist drifted by below them. Fifth was dizzy with the exposed height. "I hope this is a brief stop."

"Negation."

He was becoming more than dizzy. "I think I am afraid of heights." He had never been before, but there was something about this location that wrenched his stomach.

"Distraction," she said. She stood before him, her feet on twin branches that extended over the gulf. She opened her shirt, baring her modest breasts. She drew his face into them.

Maybe it was a cynical ploy, but it worked. Her breasts were marvelously comforting. He kissed them, entirely distracted by their substance. Then his hands were on her taut bottom. Soon his member was out and finding her avenue as he kissed her face. This time the culmination was slow and easy, taking pleasant time.

She held him, responding to his kisses and his touches as if she really enjoyed them. She moved against him, facilitating his pleasure. "I know you will protect me," she murmured, and for the moment he believed it.

There, almost suspended in air, far over the chasm, they made love, and it was almost painfully sweet. She was in every seeming way the ideal girl.

It occurred to him that it was a good thing Voila did not really want him, because she was impressing him without even using her enormous Glamor power. Flame had said that the four Glamor children of Havoc had power to match that of all other Glamors combined, including their parents, and that Voila's power was greater than the other three combined. She could take what she wanted, even from another Glamor.

In due course they moved again, continuing their devious route. The machines were surely watching, Voila explained, as they had spies everywhere. But the machines were weak on the near future paths, so things could be fuzzed, leaving them without useful information.

This time the two of them appeared on the dance floor of a huge ballroom. All around them were alien couples of every description: animal-like, bird-like, fish-like, insect-like, and amorphous. Apparently this was an interspecies resort, where widely different creatures could interact without complications. He knew from his work with the Red Glamor that a formidable galactic coalition of living cultures existed; he hadn't realized that they associated socially.

The music stopped. The creatures drew back, forming a large circle, eyeballing the newcomers.

Fifth was uncomfortable being the sudden cynosure. "Question?" he whispered.

Voila was relaxed. "The price of admission is a new dance. They already know all the dances I know, so you must teach me a new one."

Fifth was reassured. One thing he was good at was dancing, and he did know some obscure ones. He had danced with Voila before, in Warp's play about Cielito Lindo. That was before he realized just how eerily powerful Voila was; she had seemed more like Flame's little sister then. "They can read my mind?" he asked her.

"Affirmation, within reason. Think clearly."

He focused on a tune of old Earth, "Love is Blue." Immediately the alien orchestra picked it up, and the lovely melody filled the hall.

Now he thought of appropriate costuming, and it formed on them both: a close-fitting dance suit for him, a lovely dress for her, complete with a tiara.

He turned to Voila. "This is the dance." He stepped out, tapping his feet to the music, swaying his body, then turning, pausing, and making a token bow in her direction.

She didn't hesitate. The second time he did it she was by his side, matching him step for step, perfectly. She was an excellent dancer, having lost none of her touch in the intervening five years; perhaps it came with being an actress. Then as the routine ended, she turned to face him, paused, and bowed as he did, smiling.

They stepped back as the music played again and the entire group of creatures did it. They were not perfect, but clearly were enjoying the experience. The price of admission had been paid.

Thereafter the music changed, allowing any kind of dance. Voila nestled in his arms for a slow waltz. Now she was all girl, following his lead, fitting into him like a flexible garment, light and sweet. It was easy to imagine her being his girlfriend, and he felt closer to her now than he had when they were having sex.

"I promised," she reminded him.

She had indeed said she would be a girl to him. He had not really believed that, especially after the way she had manhandled him into instant sex. But it seemed that now they had time to relax, and she was doing so. "Appreciation."

Between dances they had refreshments: cakes of something sweet, and cups of something cool.

He decided not to inquire what they contained.

"Concern," she said.

"Question?"

"When this is done, I will need to marry and bear my four. But the only non-family man I am close to is homosexual."

"Caveat," he said, remembering the battle of Earth five years before.

"No man is my match. I dread the occasion. Advice?"

"Inadequacy!" he protested, amazed that she would even broach this subject with him. "I would not presume."

"Presume." It was a directive.

"One of the human male Glamors? Black, Green?"

"Negation. Glamors get bored with Glamors. The only Glamor couple is Havoc and Gale, and they were in love long before becoming Glamors."

"Maybe a mock marriage, for form, and you both seek love elsewhere? This is known."

"I want true love."

"Voila, you have so much power, any man other than a Glamor will be in awe of you. Surely unable to truly love you. You seem to have little choice."

"You?"

He experienced a chill. "You frighten me. I have been with Gale, Flame, and Red, and in my fashion felt their power. They are like Vivid, bright hot stars. Yours is of another magnitude. Being with you is like floating on the event horizon of Void." Then he realized that he had spoken too candidly. "Apology. Retraction."

"Negation. You have answered me. This is my problem. No man truly wishes to be with me other than professionally. I understand their reluctance. I don't want to be with them either, no affront intended."

"Concurrence. I have no useful answer for you."

An alien couple approached. These vaguely resembled nests of worms on sticklike feet. "Pleasant occasion," one said.

"Delightful," Voila agreed.

"We trust you are satisfactory."

"We are excellent. Appreciation."

The aliens moved on.

"Purpose?" Fifth asked.

"Explanation: there are representatives of many interstellar cultures. Each has its own environment, as do we, so that we can coexist in appearance. We are not actually in a common ballroom; we are in our own isolated chamber, as are the others. Were the walls to break or leak, the alien atmosphere, gravity, and temperatures would be lethal. We interact by having the chambers align with each other, and our communications are translated. So we do not touch each other, but we exchange amenities. No business is transacted; it is purely social. That couple was the host; they maintain this facility."

"Interest!"

"We are new to this society. We have signaled our desire to participate. Socially."

He was silent. Social, hell! This was an organization of cultures opposing the onslaught of the machines. Because machine spies could be among them, nothing of strategic substance was discussed. But Voila had just made plain the human support for the effort. That had to count for a lot, because she was the machines' number one recruitment target. The other living cultures desperately needed her on their side.

Voila touched his hand, nodding.

They danced again, and for that time he almost was able to forget that she was vastly other than the girl she seemed. But when they sat again—this was evidently a long stop—he couldn't suppress his curiosity longer. "Question."

"Speak."

"Why do you even bother with me? I am nothing."

"I love my sister."

And Flame had asked her to do this. But the test of his love for Flame could have been handled by another Glamor. "And?"

"And it is difficult for me to touch bases with reality. I am isolated by my nature, associating largely with Glamors and figures of power. I want to know how to be ordinary. You are helping me."

That perhaps made sense. But it still wasn't enough. "And?"

"And you are a nexus."

"Question?"

"The building contest with the machines is huge. They are spreading across the galaxy,

destroying everything else. They see the far future. We see the near future. There are certain foci, or nexii, which are times, places, people, or situations where the future paths are channeled and the near connects to the far. The side that best understands and manages those foci will win. The coming space battle is a nexus. Shee Robot is a nexus. Opaline the village girl is a nexus." She paused. "Aside: Two months hence, when you decide to see my mother, go to intercept Opaline and travel with her. She will be going to see my father, so it will be mutually convenient."

"Confusion."

She ignored that. "I am a nexus. And you are a nexus. A vital one."

"Incredulity!"

"We do not know in what manner, but it makes you a person of interest. We need to fathom what is special about you, and how you relate."

"So you are studying me," he said, assimilating this.

"Confirmation. When paths converge, I must study them."

He spread his hands. "I know nothing of this."

"Understanding. There is nothing relevant in your mind."

"Realization!" he exclaimed. "This is why Flame wants me studied."

"Affirmation. She loves you, but she can't commit while there is this mystery about you. Perhaps it is an innocent anomaly"

"Hope."

She touched his hand again. "Concurrence."

Then they were at another site. They had moved again. This one seemed to be a warm subterranean cave. "We have half an hour here," Voila said. "Do you wish sex?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Yes, on this occasion."

"Is there reason, one way or another?"

"We are committed to have it at least fifteen times in the course of the month. After that number there will be no need for further such effort."

"You make it so appealing!"

"Apology. I am accustomed to direct statements."

"Needless. I should not have asked."

She smiled. "I will try to be more diplomatic next time."

"Question: can we make it optional? I mean, maybe get close and see whether desire arises?"

"Question?"

"To make it seem more like love. I am supposed to try to really love other women, not just have sex with them. We both know we will never be a true couple, but if we could pretend, it might be nicer."

"Sense." She took his hands and drew him close. "Fifth, I do like you." She kissed him.

Was she acting? Did it matter? "And I like you." He enfolded her.

They kissed for some time. It did not lead to sex, but it was increasingly pleasant. He knew her nature, as he had known Red's, but his feeling for her was growing.

"Question," she asked. "Do you really prefer kissing to sex?"

"Yes, on this occasion," he said, smiling.

"Even though you know my romantic interest is mostly pretense?"

"It is less obvious than your pretense of sexual interest."

She laughed. "But the pretense is diminishing." She took his hand, and they moved again.

Fifth lost track of the times they changed venue, but Voila's romantic and sexual interest steadily increased. She was getting the part down pat.

Then they were in a flooded colonnade within a rocky landscape. Voila sat on a rock, doffed her slippers, and dangled her feet in the water. In a moment there was a stirring, and an orange tentacle emerged from the water. She lifted one foot and touched the tip.

"Voila," she said.

There was a rumble. "Rafal," the nearest column replied. It was evidently a translator, though it wasn't clear to Fifth how it knew Voila's language when this was her first visit here. Oh—the Coalition would have circulated the information.

"I know you, Rafal."

"I know you, Voila."

"I am the Glamor of Amoeba."

"I am the Glamor of Plankton."

"Our constituencies overlap."

"We are compatible."

"With me is Fifth, mortal, bearing my ikon."

"Accepted. My ikon is locked at the bottom of the sea."

Fifth realized that this was the entity she was traveling to see. The #2 prospect for machine recruitment. This was a historic meeting. He sat back and watched, knowing that his participation was irrelevant.

"We tried to travel circumspectly."

"You succeeded. This encounter is private."

"Are we on the same side?"

The column laughed. "The enemy of my enemy? Perhaps."

"You are alive," she said.

"You also," he agreed.

"The machines are not."

"Agreement."

"They will destroy us all, if we do not stop them."

"Agreement."

"This is not a sufficient basis for an alliance."

"Agreement."

Fifth kept silent, but wondered. What was happening here? Why were they engaging in simplistic dialogue, instead of serious strategy?

Voila glanced his way. "We are feeling each other out. We need to know our relative power, and commitment to the cause."

"We are the two most powerful Glamors in the galaxy," Rafal said via his columns. "If one of us is in league with the enemy, the other must be wary."

"I am checking his future paths," Voila said.

"I am checking her alternate presents," Rafal said.

"Confusion," Fifth said. All three laughed.

"Demonstration," Voila said. "Game theory."

The tentacle swept across the flat sand adjacent to the pool, making it featureless. Then it drew a four line cross hatch, forming nine chambers. Along one side it drew the letters A B C. Along the top, the numbers 1 2 3. Inside the chambers it drew plus signs and minus signs, with a 0 in the center. It was a standard game theory grid. Fifth realized that Rafal must be translating his designations to theirs, for Fifth's benefit.

	1	2	3
A	+	+	-
B	+	0	-
C	-	-	+

"Fifth, choose a side."

"The letters."

"Choose a sign."

"Plus."

Two tentacles held a slate tablet and a marker. One made a mark and passed the slate to Voila, its mark hidden from Fifth. "Choose a location," Rafal said.

Fifth considered. The odds in such a game were even, and random playing was as good as selective playing. Only if a player had a bias the other could strategically exploit could any advantage be gained.

"A," he said. His chances were 2-1 there.

Voila turned the tablet around. There was the number 3. Rafal had anticipated his move and won.

Rafal took back the tablet and made a new mark, returning it to Voila.

"C," Fifth said, selecting the one that would have won before, though the odds were against him.

Voila turned the tablet. 1.

They played a dozen times. Rafal always won, despite making his marks before Fifth chose his spots.

"Explanation," Rafal said. "It is my special ability to set up a nexus and retroactively select

alternates. Specifically, I chose the one or one of two realities of the nine alternates in which my selection prevailed."

"You knew my moves before I made them?"

"Negation. You made them, then I selected my preferred reality. The effect is similar to what it would be if you announced your moves before I announced mine."

"I can see future paths, and thus affect them," Voila said. "He can change the present paths."

"But I was aware of no such changes," Fifth protested.

"Your prior paths were canceled," Voila said. "Rendered null. You are not aware of them because they no longer happened. He changed your reality. Several times."

Fifth was awed. "This is phenomenal power!"

Voila nodded. "Parallel to mine. Rafal is the second choice for recruitment only because the machines were able to nullify him, so he remains no threat to them. They have not yet nullified me."

"Question: how did they nullify him, if he can change whatever they do?"

"They see the far future paths," Rafal said. "They arranged to trap me here on an isolated planet in an isolated system, operating on such a long time scale that I had no awareness of it until too late. I can change only recent local reality. Had I had Voila's ability I might have avoided it."

"They saw him coming centuries before he existed," Voila said. "They will free him if he joins them, for his talent could be extremely useful to them."

"Affirmation," Fifth agreed. "Just as yours could be."

"But acting together, we might represent a significant menace to the machines," Voila said. "That is why I came here."

"Confusion," Fifth said. "Surely the machines have spaceships guarding this sector of space. If any approach, to take him away, they will strike."

"Affirmation," Rafal said. "I am unable to free myself."

"But if we linked mentally, and he lent his power to me," Voila said, "I might travel to a key nexus and defeat the machines. Then I could free him, and the rest of the galaxy, from their depredations."

"Awe. Will you do this?"

"We do not know. If he is in secret league with the machines, this is a honeypot to lure me into their power. If I am in league with them, he will betray himself and be doomed. Before we ally, we must trust."

"But you would never betray us, Voila!"

"The machines offer to spare the entire human culture, in exchange for my commitment," she said. "It is an excellent personal deal. I can not afford to ignore that."

Fifth nodded. "And they will make a similar deal with Rafal, sparing his culture, if he joins them."

"If one of us joins them," Rafal said, "they would probably dispense with the other. The one who deals will save his own culture and destroy the other."

"Prisoner's dilemma," she said. "It pays to betray."

"Another game theory grid," Rafal agreed.

Fifth blew air out through his cheeks. "I appreciate the dilemma."

"What would you do?" Voila asked.

He pondered briefly. "I have learned that situations are seldom two-faceted. When they seem to be yes versus no, or one versus the other, that may be deceptive. There is normally a third choice, or an entire continuum of choices. I would search for that continuum."

A tentacle waved. "I like your ikon-bearer," Rafal said.

"He is a nexus."

"And not an insignificant one," Rafal agreed. "But his application eludes me."

"It also eludes me. I am studying him."

"Some nexii are hard to fathom."

This discussion made Fifth nervous. "Maybe I just happen to be on the cusp of some important event, rather than being a true nexus."

"Negation," Voila and Rafal said together.

That made him more nervous. "If either of you decide to join the machines, I will be your enemy. You will have to destroy me."

"Negation," they said together again.

"There would be extreme danger in that course," Rafal added. "Sufficient to add significantly to the advantage of the machines."

"But I am nothing!"

"You are a nexus," Voila repeated. That seemed to cover it.

"You two seem to be united against the machines," Fifth said. "I will retreat and let you work out your relationship in your own manner." He walked to a mossy rock and sat on it. He had likened his relationship to Voila as like orbiting Void; he felt the same about Rafal.

They got to it. "We must establish trust," Voila said.

"This may be complicated."

"In my culture, there is a thing called the Oath of Friendship. It is sacrosanct, and never violated. Oath friends can trust each other."

"Similar exists in ours. But we do not make it carelessly."

"How may we come to know each other well enough to make such an oath feasible?"

"There is an avenue. But this too is complicated."

"Open your mind to me," Voila said impatiently.

Fifth realized that both were telepathic, but guarding their minds so they were opaque. That was why they were speaking verbally instead of more efficiently sharing minds. Only Fifth himself was mentally permeable.

"That can be dangerous among strangers."

"Agreement. Then phrase your avenue."

"Entanglement."

"Question?"

"On the molecular scale, particles can come to associate with each other. Thereafter they act as one, though separated. On the macroscopic scale, the equivalent is marriage."

"Surprise!"

Fifth, too, was surprised. Not by the concept, but by Voila's surprise. Rafal was setting her back. That spoke volumes.

"The avenue is complicated," Rafal repeated.

Voila rallied. "In our culture, marriage leads to sexual expression, love, and commitment. The first seems unfeasible."

"Perhaps."

"Do you diffuse?"

"Affirmation."

"Let's try it that way first."

The tentacle extending from the water expanded, becoming twice its original diameter, then thrice. It puffed into vapor.

"Collect my clothes," Voila said to Fifth as she disrobed. She tossed blouse, skirt, bra, panties, and slippers, and he caught them and folded them carefully, piling them on a rock. He had seen her nude before, but on this unexpected occasion he was caught by her beauty of form. She was slightly endowed, by human standards, but perfect in her slenderness. The epitome of the kind of woman he could love.

"Appreciation," she said, smiling.

Fifth felt himself blushing. He kept forgetting that he might as well shout his thoughts when in her presence.

"This is a nexus," she said. "Stand back until you feel the event horizon. Then you will be able to view all the alternates at your convenience." Her hair was vaporizing, and her fingers. She was starting her ifrit diffusion.

Fifth retreated, uncertain what she meant. Then he felt it: a kind of mental tingling as if reality were shifting around him. He went farther out, and discovered fragmentation: the view of Voila and Rafal's pool shimmered as though refracted by a translucent curtain and became two. Then three, and four, and five. But they were not identical. What was happening?

"The separation of alternates," she called. "Rafal is making a nexus. If you enter one, you will assume its reality. Do not do so. Watch them all from the horizon, until the sequences play out. Wait for us to select one before joining it."

"Acquiescence," he said, amazed.

Voila did not speak again. She couldn't: her face had vaporized. Her bare body stood below a cloud of thick vapor that was her diffused substance. Beyond her was the cloud forming above the pool that was Rafal diffusing.

He looked at the adjacent scene. That was as surprising: Voila was changing her form, becoming tentacular. She was emulating Rafal's species!

The third scene showed Rafal forming his tentacles into humanoid arms and legs. His body was emerging from the water, becoming the torso, bearing a head.

The fourth scene seemed to be illusion, with the two of them forming into coiling serpents.

The fifth seemed to be empty, but he was sure it wasn't. Maybe it was just slower to develop.

He was seeing all the alternate things they were doing to relate to each other. They would discover which worked best, and select that one to keep. The others would fade, becoming only speculations.

Fifth had been in awe of Voila's power. Now he was in similar awe of Rafal's power. They were two quite different creatures, but they were similar in their special abilities. Surely there was nothing else in the galaxy like this.

Which was of course why they were the two prime recruitment targets. And why they were meeting now, and studying each other. For that was what they were doing. Only when they knew each other well enough could they afford to trust.

He turned back to the first scene. The two clouds lifted above the colonnade and floated beside each other. They extended pseudopods of vapor. The pods touched, and remained unmoving. He knew that they were in intense communication, possible only in the ifrit form. That alone would assume them of trust—or the lack of it.

He looked at the second scene. Two squid-like creatures were wrestling at the surface of the water. Tentacle coiled around tentacle, forming a seeming tangle, so that he could no longer be sure which one belonged to whom. Was this a romantic embrace?

The fourth scene was astonishing. The larger serpent opened its mouth and swallowed the other. It was a willing act, the other wriggling to slide headfirst into the long throat, until she disappeared inside him.

Then came the climax. It must have been, because the body exploded and fragments fell across the land and into the water. Then they scraped themselves up, and formed into the two original figures, somewhat the worse for wear.

The third scene was clearer: Rafal was now a handsome naked human man. He embraced Voila, kissed her, and lay with her on the ground. His penis was monstrous, but then it diminished as he ascertained the appropriate size, and pushed into her open cleft. They were having sex. Rafal wasn't experienced at it, in this form, so it was somewhat clumsy, but he was trying and she was helping, so it seemed to be getting there.

Now Fifth saw that the fifth scene wasn't empty. It was just that the two retained their natural forms. They were doing it without adapting, surely a challenge. Voila sat on the bank and spread her legs, and tentacles came up to embrace her, wrapping around arms and legs. Two looped around her breasts, gently squeezing them. One reached up to touch her face, and she took the tip into her mouth and sucked on it. One stroked her cleft and slid into her vagina. It drew out and thrust in again in a familiar motion. It swelled to double or triple its prior size, surely distending her vagina uncomfortably. Except that she was a Glamor, able to handle anything she chose to. In a moment so much fluid gushed out that it overflowed, half burying her groin in green goo and spattering the rest of her torso. She lay back, laughing almost hysterically. It seemed Rafal had misjudged the suitable amount of ejaculate. Probably it was correct for his own kind.

Then the scenes coalesced, and only the fifth one remained. That was the one they had decided to keep. They had managed to do it in their natural forms, and that was the way they liked it. There was no aversion to their preposterously different anatomies; their minds and Glamor powers were compatible, so their bodies were secondary. Fifth might have had difficulty grasping that, had he not seen the alternate presentations.

Fifth walked into that scene, joining them. Voila lay supine on a curling nest of tentacles, jelly

dribbling off her body and out of her vagina. She looked up at him, not embarrassed. "Love," she said.

"Trust," Rafal agreed.

And surely the physical act had been the least of it. They had connected mentally, emotionally, spiritually, reading each others' complete natures. That had made physical accommodation feasible. Fifth tried to suppress the reaction watching it had evoked in him, turning him on in much the way seeing Gale with the plant had. That had precipitated him into sex with the Red Glamor, but he had no such option now.

They unwound, and Voila jumped into the pool to clean off. She dived among the tentacles. Obviously there was physical trust.

In due course she emerged, and Fifth helped her dry and dress. It was time to go.

She caught a tentacle, teasingly bit it, and kissed it. "Trust," she said.

"Love," Rafal said.

She faced Fifth. "Leave the ikon."

He fetched it from his mouth and set it on a rock.

"Negation. He can't touch it."

Oh. He had forgotten. No Glamor could touch any Glamor's ikon. He carried it farther away from the pool and put it in a knothole in the trunk of a purple tree. It hardly mattered where it was; nothing would disturb it. It would enable Voila to come directly here without complications of routing.

They landed in a bedroom. It wasn't the home planet; there were portraits of aliens on the walls. It was just a stop on the way.

Voila tossed off her clothing and lay on the bed. "Do it."

"But now you have a real lover."

"No fault," she reminded him. "I did not mean to tease you."

She had read the passion in his mind as he watched her indulge with tentacular Rafal, and was ready to abate it.

He didn't argue. He tore off his clothing and joined her on the bed. She met him neatly, wrapping her arms and legs about him as her vagina took him in. He came explosively. In his fancy he pumped her as full of fluid as Rafal had.

"Almost," she agreed, laughing.

"Appreciation!" For her understanding as well as the sex. She was treating him well.

They separated and lay on the bed. "Rafal and I exchanged mindprints," she said. "Now he can see the near future, and I can make a spot nexus. It should help the effort."

"Endorsement."

"You helped, Fifth. You carried my ikon. You served as witness. If other don't believe, you can reassure them."

"You want them to know—the details?"

She laughed again. She was far more cheerful than she had been before the session with Rafal. "Negation, unless necessary. But the fact of the alliance, yes, and of the marriage."

"You did marry him?" But of course she had. She had found a male to match her.

"We married each other. The formal ceremony will be performed in due course."

"Understanding." Would other members of either culture understand? Yet this merger of equals seemed appropriate.

"But there are limits," she said. "I can't bear his offspring. I will need fourths."

"Understanding," he repeated.

"You will provide the first. After the war is done."

"Welcome." He was proud to have been asked.

Chapter 7

Ennui

Shee looked at Ennui. "I do not wish to be a burden. I can inactivate myself for a set period so that you don't need to interrupt your activities. I know your work is important."

Ennui shook her head. "Havoc has spoken. Nothing is more important than attending to you."

"But you essentially run the planet."

"I won't be missed." Ennui pressed a button on her desk. In a moment another woman entered the office. She looked exactly like Ennui: in her sixties, with graying hair, and a set expression. "Take over."

The woman sat at the desk and started processing papers exactly where Ennui had left off.

"You have a double!" Shee said, as they left the office.

"Several. I briefed her mentally. She's competent."

"You are telepathic."

"Affirmation. You aren't? Your mind is opaque to me."

"I am a machine. I can communicate mentally with machines, but am on a different wavelength from living things. I could be adjusted, if warranted."

They entered another room. Two beautiful woman stood expectantly. "Queen Gale of Charm," Ennui said. "Mistress of Mistresses Monochrome of Earth. This is Shee Robot, emissary of the machines, assigned to be Havoc's second mistress."

"We are of course aware," Gale said. "We worked Havoc over before sending him to her."

"You have two advantages over me," Shee said. "Telepathy and awareness of the near future."

"And you are a prime nexus," Gale said.

"My mission is to persuade him to save your culture by sending your daughter Voila to join the machines. This lends me importance that is not inherent."

Both women laughed. "You underestimate your significance by magnitudes," Monochrome said.

"Question?"

"If you renounced your mission this instant, you would remain vitally important," Gale said. "You can't turn off a nexus by design; it is a concurrence of forces that operate regardless of personal will."

"This is not apparent to me."

"Do you suppose Havoc would assign his most trusted oath friend to you merely to ascertain whether you are a satisfactory sexual partner? He has much more in mind for you."

Shee was confused. It was not a comfortable feeling. "I love him. Does this relate?"

"Minor," Monochrome said. "We all love Havoc, from the queen down to the simplest village girl. It may even be a quality of being female."

"Request: explain my importance to me."

"You are a nexus," Gale repeated. "But that requires substantial interpretation. We need to fathom it as soon as we can. That is why Monochrome will join you."

"I mean Havoc no harm. I am designed only to please him. My loyalty is to him rather than to the machines that made me. I bear malice to none of you. I do not know how I can be a nexus. I am not even alive."

"I have an urgent mission on Earth," Monochrome said. "The near paths indicate that you can

help."

"I will do what I can," Shee agreed. She had felt competent when dealing with Havoc, but her programming related less well to these other Glamors. She was not easy with the way they accepted her and proposed to use her. They should have been extremely wary of such a sophisticated machine among them.

"First we must verify with Idyll," Monochrome said. She took Ennui's hand, then also Shee's hand.

And they were on another planet, in a lovely glade in a forest. Shee knew of the Glamor powers, of course, but this was her first such actual experience. "Counter Charm," she said, recognizing it from her programmed information.

"And Idyll Ifrit," a voice said as mists swirled before them.

"This is Shee, the robot emissary of the machine culture," Ennui said.

"And a potent nexus," the voice agreed. The mist was coalescing into the form of a lovely young human woman.

Evidently they all could see it. That near future perception surely related. Shee herself could see some of the far future, but her own case was fuzzy, perhaps because her present actions kept changing it.

"Havoc asked me to get to know her," Ennui said. "She is to be his second mistress."

"And more," Idyll's figure said. "Much more."

Shee was not reassured. The Glamors evidently understood things about her that went beyond her mission or her assignment as Havoc's second mistress. She was out of her depth. If the machines had thought to set these living folk back by showing them a sophisticated humanoid robot, they seemed to have failed at the outset. She knew they were not being wishful or deluded; they had powers no machine did.

"We are going to Earth," Ennui said, "to see about a problem there Shee might help with."

"Take Iolo. He relates."

"Gladly."

Shee searched her memory, but did not find the name. That did not mean the person was inconsequential, just that none of the fifths gathering data had encountered him.

Then a six legged dog came bounding into the glade. Ennui dropped to her knees and hugged him. "Iolo! We need you."

The tail wagged.

Iolo was a dog! No wonder he wasn't in her people data.

"Iolo, this is Shee, from the machines," Ennui said.

Shee held down her hand for the animal to sniff. He did so, and snorted, surprised. "Yes, I am a machine," she said. "No living odor."

"Appreciation," Monochrome said to Idyll. Then she took the hands of Ennui and Shee, and Ennui put her free hand on Iolo's head.

And they were on another planet. This, Shee knew, was Earth, the world of origin of the human culture. Her information about it was limited, because it had not yet been infiltrated by fifths.

They were in a subterranean station. Iolo led the way along a passage until they came to an administration building. They entered, traversed other passages, and came to a closed metal door. Monochrome lifted one hand and knocked on it.

In a moment a panel slid aside and a pretty face peered out. "Mistress!" The door swung open.

"Greeting, Mistress Mascot," Monochrome said, and the two women hugged. "May we see Caveat?"

"He is on his way, Mistress."

Shee knew that the Mistresses governed Earth. The lesser Mistresses bore about the same relation to Monochrome as an ikon on Charm did to a Glamor: they gathered and transmitted magic power to the dominant figure. They could, however, be touched by Glamors in a manner ikons could not be. The conjecture was that there were so many of them that this effect was diluted to a thousandth. All the Mistresses were lovely women, and they were reputed to bestow their sexual favors freely, using them to manage men.

A handsome, fit man entered the room. Monochrome went to him, and they embraced. "Welcome, Mistress," he said. "We need you."

"Introduction," Monochrome said. "Shee Robot. Shee, this is Caveat, Prime Minister of Earth." She did not introduce Ennui or the dog; they already knew each other.

Shee shook Caveat's hand, and was immediately aware that he was not affected by her beauty. He was not a woman's man. Her information confirmed this: he was Voila's close friend, and loved her, but they were not and would never be lovers.

Caveat turned back to Monochrome. "Mistress, the matter is urgent."

"Tell Shee. The paths suggest she can help."

Caveat returned to Shee, this time focusing on her. "Please accompany me."

They went with him into a capsule that traveled rapidly through what Shee now sensed was a mountain of frozen water: ice. Earth's capital was at its southern continent, frozen over, and the

buildings were all under the ice.

She sat beside Caveat as he explained. "We are dredging and filling to build a new complex beside a nether lake. It will be a water park, a refuge for rare cold-water creatures. The work is slow, because it is important not to disturb the main ice cover or to make leaks in the lake. A programming error has caused a dredge to turn rogue, and it is out of control, threatening to breach the ice wall and flood a residential section. We are unable to shut it down because of the error; radio control no longer connects. We are trying to move blocks into its path to stop it, but it is moving erratically and may miss them. The situation is desperate."

"I can handle it."

"Question?"

"I will need to enter that machine. Put me in its path."

"Doubt. I fear you do not understand. The dredge is large. You would be crushed."

"I need only to touch it."

Caveat glanced at Monochrome. "Is this advisable?"

"Negation. But with Iolo's help, she can prevail."

He shook his head. "It is not a risk I care to take. Havoc would be seriously annoyed if his new mistress was taken out. But the need us urgent."

Ennui spoke to Shee. "Iolo can see the near future paths, as Glamors do. It is not a mortal talent, but he has an imprint from Idyll. Accept his guidance."

A dog. But the matter seemed harmless. "Acquiescence."

"There are only tunnels in the vicinity," Caveat said. "Some are small. If you suffer from claustrophobia—"

"Negation."

The shuttle halted. They got out into an ice tunnel. The ifrit dog ran down it. Shee ran after him, leaving the others behind. She was glad for the chance to be useful; it would impress Havoc favorably.

The dog dodged into a side crevice. Shee followed. This was much tighter, and not level; she had to scramble up and down jagged slopes.

Then it got too tight for her. She lifted her right hand, about to heat it so she could melt a wider aperture.

The dog paused, looking back. "Negation."

She froze. Had the beast talked?

"Dangerous to melt there," Iolo said. "I will diffuse and find a better route."

"Acquiescence," she said faintly. Now she realized that the ifrits, whose natural form was diffuse clouds, could assume any physical form they chose. Iolo was not a dog but an ifrit.

Iolo diffused into vapor and drifted away. He was looking for a better route, surely exploring all the crevices simultaneously. She waited.

His head reformed. "Retreat ten paces. Take the ceiling crevices. No melting."

She followed his instructions, and found the crevice. She jumped up and hauled herself into it. Soon it opened into a larger passage. No melting was necessary.

Now the ice shuddered. Something was rocking it. That would be the rogue dredger.

"This thing is dangerously erratic," Iolo said. "Heed me closely."

"As you wish."

They reached the deep lake. The dark water lay directly below the ice, supporting it; there was no air pocket beyond the crevice. If the water were to drain out, the ice above would collapse. Shee appreciated the danger.

"We must swim to the dredger," Iolo said. "That is the most feasible approach. Follow me." He sank into the freezing water.

Shee hesitated. Did the ifrit really know what he was doing?

Iolo returned. "Window missed," he said. "Now it is harder. This way." He ran through a side crevice, just above the water level. She realized that by hesitating she had spoiled the first route. Time was part of the near future fabric, obviously. She would respond with greater alacrity hereafter.

There was no room for Shee to run. She dived through on her belly, sliding after him. The crevice descended to the level of the lake.

The shaking increased. The rogue dredger was coming this way. It felt monstrous.

"Into the water!" Iolo cried, splashing into it himself. Again, she followed. Suddenly the dredger was there. It was huge, a tracked machine with a round snout that sucked in water at a phenomenal rate. "To the side!" the ifrit called. "Now!"

When they were so close? A few more strokes and she would be able to touch it. But she obeyed. She had learned to respect his judgment.

And the water snout turned to orient on them, sucking the water around them into its belly. But they were just clear of it. Iolo had warned her just in time.

Because he was reading the near future paths. The actions of the dredger were random, but the magic could anticipate them in a way science could not. "Go to it," Iolo called.

Shee plunged toward the dredger. In moments she reached its side. She clapped a hand on its surface. She sent the kill signal. The machine died. The job was done.

They left it there and made their way back through ice and water to the others. Now there was time to send a repair crew to see to the dredger; it would not break through the ice walls in the interim.

"Gratitude!" Caveat exclaimed. "You may have saved lives, and certainly expense."

"She did save lives," Monochrome said. She was looking farther along the future paths.

"Iolo showed me the route," Shee said. "He followed the paths, as I could not."

They reentered the travel capsule and returned to the administration building. "Earth is grateful," Caveat said.

"No publicity," Ennui said. "Shee is private."

"Then perhaps the two of you and the dog will accept a complimentary sight-seeing tour, Shee being a tourist from the colony."

He was smooth. Evidently Monochrome had further business to attend to on Earth, so they were parking the visitors long enough to get some working time.

"Appreciation," Ennui said. "We are tourists." She didn't want her position advertised either.

They joined a tourist group and boarded a rocket, which was a primitive machine used to transport people and cargo between continents. This was, after all, a sub type 1 culture, not using all the energy of its planet. They sat in padded seats and were strapped down in case of shaking during the takeoff. Iolo was allowed to settle on the floor between their two sets of feet. This was, as Shee understood it, irregular, but the pass Caveat had given them cleared it: Iolo was a guard dog, a protection allowed for pretty women who might receive unwanted attention, or for old ones who might be robbed. He was indeed a guard, but not of that nature.

"Regret to waste your time this way," Shee said to Ennui. "I know your business on Planet Charm is suffering during your absence."

"Negation. I have wanted to take a vacation for the past two decades, and to see Earth, but was never able to justify it. Now Havoc has done it for me."

"Surprise: you have not been to Earth before?"

"I have been to this system, but not to Earth itself." Ennui glanced at her sidelong. "Can you assure us privacy?"

"Affirmation." Shee extended a local interference field that enclosed the three of them. They could not be overheard verbally, or spied on electronically. Such a precaution was elementary, when

dealing with a technologically primitive culture. "We are private."

"I know why Havoc has placed us together. He guards his mind, but I have known him very well for some time, and could fathom most of his thoughts even without telepathy."

Shee was wary. "Is this something I need to know? Remember my identity. I am not your friend."

"You will know it soon enough regardless. Because it concerns me, I prefer to acquaint you with it myself. Havoc knew I would do this; he checked with Voila and Idyll to verify the relevant near and intermediate future paths."

"Clarification. What is the duration of these paths? I can perceive only the far future, which commences a month hence, and not well, as it is not my specialty."

"The near future is one second to one hour," Ennui said. "For most Glamors, it is one second to five minutes; only Voila can see the full hour. Idyll sees the intermediate future, one hour to one month." She glanced down. "Tolo, as an ifrit but not a Glamor, is specially enabled and trained to see the near future paths, as you know. These are approximate parameters; I understand situations vary, as do paths, with some too complicated to fathom far, and of course there are the nexii."

"Nexii," Shee repeated, recognizing a plural that was not in her data bank, evidently a colloquialism. "This is of interest to me, as I have been called a nexus. I understand this to mean that the paths associated with me are more important than most others, so warrant more attention."

"Confirmation. In Havoc's mind, you are one of the five most critical nexii. In our vernacular, a hot potato."

"Question?"

"Something that is too hot to readily handle with bare hands, so must be treated most carefully. This seems to be independent of your role as his mistress. For him, sex is pleasure, while the nexus is business."

"But why? My purpose is straightforward: to entertain him so that he will keep me close, and perhaps heed my petition respecting his daughter. There is no subtlety."

"I was mystified too, until I figured it out. Are you aware of the derivation of Havoc's name?"

"I studied him. He wrought havoc among those who opposed him. He is dangerous to try to thwart."

"The machines are trying to thwart him."

"Reversal: he is trying to thwart the machines. They sent me also as warning: I represent the level of technology he opposes. He can't seriously threaten them. Only the fact that he has influence that could help the machines acquire something they very much want, the willing service of Voila, causes them to even consider sparing humanity. He will be best advised to accept the deal they proffer. The survival of your culture depends on it."

"The machines underestimate Havoc."

"The machines underestimate nothing. They are methodical and wield overwhelming force. No culture in the galaxy has balked them more than briefly, and with every conquest they grow stronger. To apply an Earth-local analogy: a flea might as well try to halt a steamroller. It will be crushed."

"They have not before encountered Havoc."

"I love Havoc! It is crafted love, but it is genuine. I accept him utterly. But against the machines, he is a flea."

"You are a machine. You have to believe that. But Havoc has a saying: when the game is rigged, change the game. He is changing it."

"Doubt."

"This is where you come in. And me. And the reason for our association. Havoc wants me to carry your ikon."

"Question?"

"When a Glamor forms, there is a main part and a lesser part. The lesser part is the ikon. It lies in the home Chroma and gathers and transmits magic power to the Glamor. That is why the Glamor can have magic anywhere, independent of Chroma. For several years I carried Havoc's ikon."

"I have no ikon. I am a machine. There is no living tissue in me. I am an inanimate construct."

"You are not alive, but you are animate."

"A quibble over terminology."

"Are you conscious?" Ennui asked.

"Affirmation."

"Feeling?"

"Affirmation."

"Do you possess instincts, such as of survival?"

"Affirmation. But I am dead substance."

"The distinction between a living person and what you are seems immaterial."

Shee shrugged. "Accepting it as needless, what is your point?"

"Havoc means to make you a Glamor."

"Preposterous! Assuming it is possible, which I doubt, why?"

"What would a machine Glamor do to the configuration of the war between the machines and living cultures?"

Shee had to pause for consideration. The concept went beyond her ability to calculate, but was significant. "It would change the parameters."

"It would change the game," Ennui agreed.

Shee wrestled with the astonishing concept. "The game," she agreed reluctantly "Not necessarily the outcome."

"A machine Glamor on the side of life."

"It is beyond my capacity to fathom."

"Therefore probably also beyond the ability of the machine culture to fathom. It is like the ploy Havoc devised to conquer Earth: seeding its volcanoes with magic. Earthers did not believe in magic, so were unable to handle this. The machines do not understand Glamors. A robot Glamor would be virtually incomprehensible to them."

Shee's mind was uncomfortably disturbed. As a machine, she could not believe such a thing was possible. "A new game," she repeated. "If it could be done, then yes, the machines have underestimated Havoc. But it would be an unconscionably dangerous ploy for the human culture. My loyalty is to Havoc, but the machines can reclaim me at any time."

"Could they reclaim a Glamor robot? You are type 2.5 technology; as a Glamor, might you not be 2.75, beyond their capacity to control?"

"I do not know," Shee said. "The concept is overloading my circuits."

"Then we will address a simpler and more personal consequence. If you were to turn Glamor, you would divest an ikon. If I hold that ikon, I will control you to a significant extent. You would not be able to touch that ikon, literally, and if I removed it from its home chroma, your power would fade. That is why Havoc wants me to have it: I would control the key nexus."

"That is personal," Shee agreed. "I can appreciate why you would want to do it."

"I do not want to do it."

"Question?"

"You should be controlled, but I do not want to hold your ikon."

"Confusion."

"Ikons have effects on their bearers. When I held Havoc's ikon, I became physically young, healthy, shapely, winning, and had a high libido. It is the ikon's way of protecting itself, and thus its

Glamor. Ikon holders are nice to be around, especially female ones in the company of males. The ikons are almost impossible to set aside. I do not want to go through that again."

"But what you describe— isn't this what most women desire? To be perpetually young and sexually appealing?"

"I am not most women. I am old and settled, and do not wish to become something I am not. Especially not a young siren. I already love Havoc; I would become another of his incidental mistresses. That is not my role in life."

"Is it possible that Havoc is also taken with you, and wants this as a way to make you amenable? You are after all his closest associate, the one he trusts most."

"Negation. He values me in my present capacity. When I carried his ikon I became openly hot for him, but he evaded the issue, for which I am duly grateful now. He wants me to have the ikon because I am the one he would most trust with it; he has not considered its supplementary effects, which he does not consider to be a liability."

"He wouldn't," Shee agreed. "He is a man."

Ennui smiled briefly, acknowledging the female camaraderie. "Unfortunately, neither of us is likely to have a choice in this matter. We are involuntarily linked, for good or ill. I just wanted to make that clear, privately."

"So it is to our interest to understand each other well," Shee said. "For good or ill."

"Affirmation. We may have a long and intimate association."

"Suggestion: you are the one who arranges the itineraries. Mark in another person to hold my ikon, should one come to exist. Havoc trusts other women, like Aura, the sorceress Ine, or Symbol. They have carried ikons before and I think do not object."

"Symbol!" Ennui exclaimed. "She *wants* an ikon! She hated giving up Voila's ikon five years ago. That deprived her of sexual immortality."

"Maybe Havoc will go along with the change. Then you will be free."

Ennui nodded. "I am coming to like you better."

Time had passed, and the rocket was descending toward its landing. Shee ended the privacy shielding, and Iolo stretched his limbs.

Soon they were admiring a Mayan pyramid, listening to the tour guide capsulize the ancient history of the region. They found it interesting. So did Iolo, who sniffed everything, making it clear he was a dog. Other tourists were openly intrigued by his six legs, as Earth dogs had only four, and never suspected his real nature.

They spent the evening at a tourist banquet and entertainment show that featured dancing girls and standing comedians, and the night sharing a tourist hotel room. Shee did not need to rest or sleep,

but Ennui was old, as she said, and did. So Shee put herself on standby and tuned out. Iolo diffused into his comfortable cloud state.

Next day they boarded the rocket, which was to take them to an island in the Pacific ocean and thence to an undersea city in one of the planet's deepest trenches. On the way they invoked privacy and talked again, while Iolo theoretically snoozed. This time Shee told about herself.

She had been part of one of the emulation projects that made robots that resembled the dominant creatures of cultures that were about to be reduced. Most living cultures were simply obliterated, and their resources processed for the benefit of the conquest effort. But a few had special things that the machines wanted to exploit. In such cases, robots were made to relate to those cultures, understanding them well enough to help acquire the targeted resources. Because the machines planned well ahead, such projects had a generation or more to develop.

It wasn't feasible to construct a machine that perfectly emulated a living creature; there were too many subtle details that, in the manner of chaos theory, turned out to have unsubtle effects. So it was more economic to imitate the natural selection of life. The emulations were made small, and allowed to interact with each other, and run through training typical of the applicable cultures. They were replaced with gradually larger editions, not knowing this because they were turned off for the process. Only gradually did they learn that they were not what they seemed to be.

She met a new village boy at the school whom she thought was cute. He had curly yellow hair and nice blue eyes. His family had moved in recently from a neighboring village. She knew his name, but little else about him. So, with the boldness of a six year old child, she approached him.

"Say my name."

"Say mine," he replied.

"Stub toe."

"Shee."

It was a sufficient introduction, employing the mores of the culture they emulated; they had proved they recognized each other. He followed up according to the protocol, which indicated his interest. This was going well. "How were you named?"

"How were you?"

"I was going to pick up a block to play with, but I stumbled and kicked it instead, hurting my toe. All the other children laughed."

"Teacher asked me a question about a girl in a story, but I had water in my mouth. I tried to swallow and speak at the same time. I said 'She-e-e—' and the teacher said 'I didn't ask your name.' Everyone laughed."

"They made fun of you," Stub toe said. "The way they did me."

"Affir—affir—"

"Mation," he finished for her, smiling. "It's a tough word."

Then it was time for class. But another day she came across him alone, and took another step. "Play Tickle and peek?"

He jumped at the chance, for most girls avoided this game unless they really liked the boy. "Affirmation."

She lay on the ground and he knelt beside her. Then he tickled her on the ribs.

"Eeeek!" she cried enthusiastically, waving her arms and kicking up her legs.

Then it was her turn. "Did you see to here?" she asked, touching her own knee.

"Affirmation."

"To here?" She touched the midpoint of her thigh.

"Affirmation."

"To here?" She indicated the juncture of her legs.

He licked his lips. "Affirmation."

"Then show me yours."

"Reluctance."

Ha. "Are you renegeing?"

"Negation. Just not right now."

"Yes, right now," she insisted gleefully. "You have to show me." For there had been a purpose in her deliberate exposure: she wanted to see what his crotch contained.

Embarrassed, he pulled off his shorts. His underpants were bulging.

"What is that?" she asked.

"It—when I saw yours, it got stiff."

"Oh, let me see it!"

"If I do, you have to show me yours."

She hesitated. This was beyond the game, but she was really curious. "Affirmation."

He drew down his undershorts. There was a little bag at his crotch, and a fleshy rod, like an

extra thumb. "It just got stiff," he repeated. "Sometimes it does."

"Touch and Touch," she said.

"Affirmation."

She put her hands on the rod. It was warm. "Where to you pee?"

"From the end. When it's not stiff. It's a tube."

"You have a tube to pee through," she said, giggling.

"And you don't. It must be hard for you to pee."

She cupped the bag below the rod. It was soft, and seemed to contain two marbles. "What's it for?"

"Ignorance," he admitted. "But it hurts if it gets banged."

Then it was his turn to touch her bare cleft. It had become moist. She pointed out where she peed from, and confessed that she had to squat to do it, so as not to soil herself. He was especially interested in the hole at the base of her cleft, and cautiously poked his finger a little way in. The slipperiness allowed it to penetrate without discomfort. When she did not protest, he pushed it in until it reached the end of the hole. She didn't care to confess it, but she rather liked the sensation of his finger being that deep within her.

Then awareness overtook them. Both embarrassed by their daring, they got dressed and agreed to tell no one else. But Shee never forgot that private experience, and she was sure Stubtoe didn't either. They never did it again, but now when she saw a boy's clothed crotch she imagined the tube and bag within it, and suspected that he similarly imagined the cleft and hole that a girl had. Later there were classes on anatomy and they learned all about male and female genital regions, but somehow it wasn't nearly as interesting or exciting as that first mutual exploration had been.

They studied in school, and explored around the village, and grew. Each year they were larger, and knew more. Stubtoe and Shee ventured into the neighboring Blue Chroma zone, where everything was shades of blue. They knew they weren't supposed to, but they were curious. They quickly discovered that the region was dangerous; plants flung nettles at them, or tried to writhe tendrils around their ankles. The plants were active in ways that nonChroma plants were not. They could see larger trees farther into the zone, some with hanging tentacles, and knew better than to get close to those.

There was another region that was barred to the children. It was separated by a high wooden fence with a sign: KEEP OUT. When Shee was ten she decided to explore it. Stubtoe wouldn't do it; he was afraid the adults would find out and he would get in trouble. So she did it alone, one day when school was out but she had an hour before she had to be home. She had found a place where a large tree root had warped part of the fence, so that there was a small clearance beneath it. She used a stone to dig carefully, excavating a hole large enough to scramble through. She would make sure to return well within the hour; no one should know.

She scrambled under, and came up on the other side. She was disappointed: it was just like her own side. A path wended its way through the forest, staying away from the Chroma zones. That would be going to the next village, though by a less direct route; maybe that was why it had been fenced off.

Disappointed, she crawled back under the fence, filled in the hole, and walked home. More time had passed than she had realized, and she just made it on time. She was dirty, too, so she cleaned up carefully and changed her clothing. It hadn't been much of an adventure, and she never went beyond the fence again. There was something about it that frightened her in retrospect.

When she was twelve they had a more thorough anatomy lesson, this time clarifying the nature of sexuality. Now they knew what fitted into what, and why, and what the occasion was for it. The girls were fitted with The Wire, an internal device that prevented pregnancy. They could have sex with boys if they wanted to, but it had to be voluntary. Any boy who forced a girl would be dealt with severely. Boys and girls were expected to be familiar with sexual expression by the time they were eighteen, because then they had to marry.

When Shee was fourteen, came the bombshell. The word related to an ancient device back on Earth, where only Science Magic existed. It was a thing that exploded violently, hurting or killing anyone within its radius of destruction. This one was conceptual, yet it had similar effect. It changed everything.

Then class was limited to the girls. The boys had disappeared. "You are not what you seem," the teacher said. "None of us is. We are robots made to emulate human beings as closely as is feasible. It will be the honor of one of you girls to go to the real Planet Charm to become the mistress of its leader, King Havoc."

The girls looked at each other, disbelieving. Of course they knew who Havoc was; he had been king as long as they had existed. He had many mistresses, and treated them well. All the girls had private crushes on him. It would be divine to be his mistress, even for a short time.

"But the wire," one girl asked. "If we are not alive, we can't get pregnant. Why the wire?"

"Because living girls use it," the teacher replied. "Your wire serves the same purpose, preventing conception. Your bodies are capable of incubating living babies. If Havoc wants a baby, you will enable it."

But the other thing still bothered them: they were not real? What nonsense was this? What was this business about robots? They had never heard the term before.

"A robot is a machine," the teacher continued. "A mechanical device powered by internal motors. Observe." She lifted her left arm, touched a place by her elbow, and lifted her forearm and hand away from the upper arm. "You can be similarly dismantled," she said. "But you are securely fastened together, because you are supposed to be close enough to deceive real flesh human beings. We have treated you like fleshly creatures throughout, so that your minds will conform to the human standard. You are able to eat, drink, and eliminate in the living manner. You can feel pain, and have human emotions. But you are emulations, not genuine people."

As time passed, they became satisfied that they were, indeed, machines. They looked like living

human beings, and thought like them, but were not. They did not grow the way living creatures did; instead they were turned off and refurbished in larger sizes, having no memory of the process. Only their brains were sacrosanct, being transplanted into the new bodies.

There was reason for this. Living creatures had nuances the machines did not understand. It was not a matter of study but of evolution. Living things generated living young that varied from their parents somewhat, and those with superior qualities survived better than those without. The process could be understood physically, but the mental evolution was just as important, and that had aspects that were beyond the machines' capacity to duplicate. The far future paths indicated that only natural selection could generate the type of creature that could accomplish the mission. So the robots were evolving, and the final process of selection would be stringent.

Now their education intensified. They learned about the machine culture, which was vast and powerful, crushing all in its path. It was systematically taking over the galaxy, eradicating the living species that squatted on usable resource planets. But some few had some merit, and it was these that were to be addressed by emulation emissaries. The machines could fathom the far future, but there was a creature among the humans who could fathom the near future, and this was a very special ability. One of the robot girls would go to King Havoc, gain his attention sexually, and persuade him to cooperate with the machines.

The boys returned. The girls had to learn to catch and hold their sexual interest, and to oblige it when the boys were willing to concede the girls' dominance. Shee turned out to be good at this. She had an instinctive awareness of the signals that turned men on. Somehow she could elicit that extra bit of sexual interest that rendered them unable to turn her down. When she had successfully seduced every boy in the class, she became a finalist for the mission.

The others thought she had a better body, but all their bodies were similarly proportioned; only the details of hair and feature differed. Shee knew what it was: she was smarter. She had masked this from the time she discovered it, to seem just like the others, but she knew. They had all started with the same brain capacity, but there were variations in flavor. She attributed it to her curiosity, that had constantly led her to experience new things, and to fathom subtle aspects that did not interest the others. She had studied all the boys, and knew their own variations, and catered to them. This made them find her fascinating, predisposing them to be turned on by her sexual come-ons.

When she was sixteen, it was time for the final selection. Six girls were finalists; only one would achieve the mission. The runner-up would be saved in case of need. The others would be terminated.

They looked at each other. They might be machines, but their minds and bodies felt alive. None of them wanted to die. But three of them would have to.

The final test was simple: follow a marked path to the next village. But a warning: brigands lurked along it. This was why it had been closed off. In the real Planet Charm girls did not travel alone; they went in groups, or with men who could protect them from the brigands. In return for protection they provided the men with sex. But on this occasion they would have to make it alone.

The path was the one beyond the fence. Now the fence came down. Each girl would take her turn. The one to reach the village most swiftly would win. So it behooved them not to dawdle. They might avoid the brigands by delaying, hiding from them, but would not win the mission.

"Choose your order of travel," the teacher said.

The six got together, but could not agree. Each wanted to go first, hoping to catch the brigands by surprise and get through. After the first, the brigands would know that more were coming, and certainly be ready for them.

Finally they agreed to draw lots. They made six threads, and one girl would hold them in her closed hand, only the ends projecting. That girl would have the one remaining after the others had chosen. No one wanted to hold them.

This was foolish, Shee realized. The order surely made no difference, as the brigands would be set up to give the same test to each girl. And each choice would be random, including the last one. "I'll hold them," she said.

She did. They drew, and she was left with the third longest thread. She would go third, right in the middle.

She did. She felt dread as she entered that forbidden path, without knowing why. She was hyper alert. She knew the brigands would catch her. How could she escape them?

Something opened in her mind, like a wall being breached, and she discovered a desperate strategy. It would require apt timing and nerve, and a vicious ploy, but it just might get her through. She remembered something Stubtoe had said in passing, years before. She hoped it was accurate.

And there they were: two rough men blocking the path ahead. She turned as if to flee the way she had come, but knew before she saw him that the third would be there to prevent her escape. She had walked into their trap.

She screamed.

The men laughed as they advanced on her. She tried to dodge around them, but the path was narrow here and the Chroma zones on either side prevented her. They caught her.

She screamed again as one brigand picked her up and somehow folded her over and pushed her head down against his belly. The second brigand pushed up her skirt and ripped off her panties. She kicked violently, but he just stepped in between her legs and poked his finger into her open cleft. "Nice slit," he said, jamming the finger into her vagina.

"Quit pussyfooting," the brigand who held her said. "Do her, and then hold her for me."

The second man dropped his trousers. Her head was upside down but in excellent position to see his huge standing member. He moved forward.

Now! She reached below and behind her head and found the holder's crotch. She worked the buttons on his fly opening it. He didn't notice. He was distracted by the sight of her open cleft with the other man's approach; men liked to watch as well as to do. It turned them on.

She reached in and found his penis. It was turgid. She pulled it out. Then he became aware. "Hey!"

She slid her other hand to the base of the member and found the scrotum. It remained flaccid. She gasped it, centering the marbles within between her thumbs and fingers, and squeezed. Hard.

The brigand screamed and dropped her. She landed on her feet between the two men, falling back against the one who had been about to rape her. She dropped her head lower, reached between her own legs, and caught his exposed member. In a moment she had his scrotum too, and pulped it and its contents with her desperately clenching fist.

Then she lurched forward, low, between the spread legs of the first man, who was oblivious as he howled in pain. She jammed through, emerging behind him. She straightened up and ran, leaving the men tangled together. The third brigand yelled, but could not get by the other two in time to catch her; she had too big a lead, and was running for her life. Her seeming life.

She made it to the village. She was the fastest, and won the mission.

"Amazement," Ennui said.

"They put me in my final body, prettier than the ones I had had before," Shee said. "But my brain was untouched."

"Realization: that was why you asked Havoc to let you take the lead. To override the memory of the kind of sex the brigands practiced."

"Affirmation. He is a different kind of man." She glanced at the older woman, picking up the signs. "You have had experience."

"Affirmation. I once killed a man in a roughly similar maneuver, to save Havoc."

"I know you have reservations about me," Shee said. "And they are justified. But can we be friends? I don't mean by oath; just preference."

Ennui put her hand on Shee's hand. "Affirmation."

"I will be satisfied to have you carry my ikon, if it comes to that."

"I will be satisfied to carry it, if it comes to that. But I will try to have it given to Symbol."

They dropped the dialogue and oriented on the rocket as it descended toward the staging port for the undersea city.

Chapter 8

Flame

Flame received her mother's mental signal. *Yes, Gale*, she thought. *Something has come up. Are you available?*

As it happened, she was, as Gale knew. Fifth was away and she had nothing important to do.
On my way.

Flame conjured herself to the royal suite. "What is it?"

"The machines are running a test project, to find out how well human beings can survive when deprived of the benefits of magic and civilization. The other Glamors are occupied at the moment, and I am serving as the central communications person. This is new."

"A machines project? How can we affect it?"

"They actually extended an invitation," Gale said. "They want ten family units. They promise to return them safely when the project is done, and Idyll says they mean it. Subterfuge is alien to their nature; they don't need it. But there is a caution: the machines might renege if they don't like the result. So I think we need to get a Glamor on the scene, covertly."

"Confusion. The machines *invited* human participation?"

"It seems it could affect their plans for conquest. If the humans survive the test, figuratively, they will be more difficult to subdue. The machines would then raise their offer for Voila."

"Question."

"They might allow us the semblance of self rule, leaving our governing apparatus in place."

"Meaning that you and Havoc would remain as queen and king," Flame said dryly. "After they conquer us."

"If Voila enlists, they won't even conquer us. They won't need to. At any rate, it behooves us to see that this project is fairly run. It might affect our attitude toward them."

"Details?"

"Nine families have already signed up. Yours would be the tenth."

"Complication: Fifth is occupied elsewhere." No need to explain how, or with whom; Gale already knew.

"And you have no children," Gale agreed. "I was thinking of mocking up an ad hoc family unit."

"Question?"

"You, a man, and a child. The machines really don't care about our conventions; to them marriage is a social nuance. They will settle for any committed semblance."

Flame thought of something. "Warp has business elsewhere that he wants concealed. I agreed to cover for him if need be. I could emulate him, so that he seems to be accounted for."

Gale took it in stride. "Then we need a woman and a child. As it happens, Marionette is

available."

"She will do. We're friends." Marionette was the Earth Mistress who had governed the space ship that first took the four siblings to Earth. She had proved to be competent, generous, and fair, as well as phenomenally sexy, and Warp had been quite taken with her though she was five years his senior. In fact they planned to marry, once the machines crisis was done. "But we still lack a child."

"I think that will have to be your sister Vila."

"Objection: she is barely five!"

"The age Warp's child would be, if he had married Marionette at the outset."

"But the risk! She's mortal."

"Idyll says she will survive, and it should be excellent experience for her."

Flame capitulated. If Gale could handle it, so could she. "Acquiescence."

Gale nodded. "When you have time, you should review the history of Havoc with the girl Opaline. Idyll says that you will interact with Opaline later, so you need to know her nature. Here is the memory." She sent it in a concentrated mental capsule, and Flame filed it away for future reference.

So it was that Flame, emulating her brother, linked with Marionette and Vila, melding as a temporary family group. They joined the collection of families boarding the ferry to the rendezvous with the machines transport ship orbiting Earth. Others might have thought it odd that such an enemy ship was allowed in that vicinity, but the future paths confirmed that this was a cooperative mission, not an attack. The machines were not yet ready for an attack, and in any event the Glamors would know of it well before it occurred. Meanwhile it behooved them to get along, maintaining lines of communication.

The other nine families were all Earthers, ignorant of the larger situation. All they knew was that they had been promised rare and challenging dangerous adventure, with prizes for the winners. The machines had even arranged for appropriate sums of money to be paid over.

If Flame had not already been well aware of the threat of the machines, this would have suggested it. They knew much more about the human culture than the humans knew about the machine culture. What Havoc had relayed about the humanoid robot's warning was being rapidly confirmed: the machines had overwhelming resources, and they used them carefully. This was a truly dangerous enemy.

Idyll here. This is an implanted message for you alone, Flame. There will be an aware machine aboard: state-of-their-art technology. Its purpose is to provoke you into using your Glamor powers so it can record the magic force for analysis. Do not allow it. This machine is dangerous—not to you personally, but to all Glamors. You must not use your powers on this mission. The information could destroy us all.

The message faded and was gone. Leaving Flame with much more of a mission than she had

anticipated. Well, she would carry on. She was after all an Amazon.

Soon the shuttle docked at the alien ship, and the ten families boarded. Flame, Marionette, and Vila did their best to resemble an ordinary family, though probably the machines knew all about them already. Idyll's buried message indicated as much.

They were greeted by an obvious robot: a wheeled contraption with a lighted screen in lieu of a face. Flame suppressed a smile; the machines could do far better than that when they had reason. They, too, were faking it, so that ordinary Earthers would not suspect how sophisticated robots could be. "Welcome to Challenge Mission," the robot said, its screen flickering in time to its words. "We hope you find it worth your while. This way to your chambers." It rotated and wheeled down the hall that led into the ship.

Flame noted another thing: gravity was Earth-normal here, but the ship was in free-fall orbit and not spinning. Artificial gravity. This was technology Earth lacked. And they weren't even trying to impress the Earthers, who hadn't noticed.

The chambers were elegant suites, one for each family. Each had bathing, sleeping, meal-making, and entertainment facilities. Vila was soon watching a humorous holo show featuring Earth clowns, laughing joyously.

"Curiosity," Flame said. She invoked a second holo, this one featuring nude dancing women of statuesque proportions. It was the kind of show her brother would have watched, and she was emulating Warp. Only her two family members knew she was neither Warp nor male.

"I could do such a dance for you, dear," Marionette murmured mischievously. "I am familiar with the routine."

"Just feed me, woman," Flame responded, patting her plush rear. Marionette was of course a superlative example of her gender. The Mistresses of Earth bore about the same relation to Monochrome, the Mistress of Mistresses, as ikons did to their Glamors. In fact they could be considered ikons, though on Earth there was only one Glamor and a thousand of them. Magic differed from planet to planet.

Marionette went to the food machine and soon had three nice plates with fresh vegetable salad, cool fruit juice, hot animal broth soup, and steak, all generated from the nutritive goo stored in the machine.

Vila wrinkled her nose at the healthy food. "No dessert?"

"When your plate is clean," Marionette said sternly.

"Aww." But was an act; Vila was a well behaved child who actually liked healthy food. Havoc and Gale, girt with the experience of raising four Glamor children, were doing it right with their normal one, encouraging her without spoiling her.

The trip took some time. "This is a cruise," Marionette said. "We should mingle."

"Affirmation," Flame agreed gruffly. Now she had more reason than ever to emulate normalcy.

"Bear in mind that Warp, though committed, has a thing for the women. He sneaks kisses, peeks, and feels."

Marionette was in a position to know. Flame had to make the emulation persuasive, and that meant more than appearance.

They left their suite to mingle with the other families, comparing universally favorable notes. There was a dance hall where the families could more sociably mix. Marionette was in much demand, as several Earthers recognized her as a Mistress. Her romance with the Glamor Warp was continuing social news on Earth. Warp, too, was approached by several of the women, who seemed thrilled to be held and covertly fondled by a genuine Glamor. And of course that much was true; she just was not the particular Glamor they thought. Vila was not known on Earth, but other children were glad to mingle with the daughter of a Glamor and a Mistress. So much for attempted ordinariness; had they wanted that, they should have been fully anonymous.

They mingled a sufficient time, returning to their suite to sleep. Vila had her own room, while Flame and Marionette shared a large bed.

They held hands so they could talk with limited telepathy. *Something is on your mind*, she thought.

Idyll left me a message: this mission is a ruse to get a Glamor close enough to study. I must not use my powers.

She was quick to understand. *I'll help as well as I can.*

Appreciation.

They lay there for a while. *Too bad the machines are enemies*, Marionette thought. *They make excellent hosts.*

They are trying to impress us, Flame replied. *They are succeeding. If Voila enlists with them, all this can be ours.*

If they are true to their word.

Idyll is working on that.

And if we fight them, all this will be used against us.

Affirmation.

Marionette hesitated, then broached a different subject. *Your emulation is physically perfect. But can you emulate things they may be watching for, like nocturnal erections?*

Flame knew it was a valid issue. But as a Glamor, she was able to make a perfect disguise, female or male. She willed an erection. *Touch it.*

Marionette did, claspng the hard penis firmly with her hand. *That's Warp*, she agreed. *And can*

you complete the act, if necessary?

Affirmation. But it is not necessary.

Marionette laughed, silently. She knew that however lean and tough Flame might be, and whatever she emulated, she was thoroughly heterosexual. There seemed to be no more to say. They slept.

Challenge planet was lush, with Earth-normal gravity, air, and climate. The families were conducted to an arena opening on ten individual regions, each of which was represented as being virtually identical to the others. "This is a naked survival challenge," the host robot explained. "You will navigate five separate natural challenges on your way to the victory camp. If you win through with all members of your family intact, you will receive twice the promised monetary reward. If you do not, you will be taken out and given half the promised reward. All well be returned safely to Earth, regardless; the challenges are realistic but are robotic. No one will actually die. We simply want to ascertain whether family units deprived of the benefits of magic of any Chroma, including Science technology, are able to survive primitive conditions. Follow the marked course. Natural food will be available along the way, and materials to fashion temporary clothing. However, there will be specific threats. Thank you for your participation."

Flame, Marionette, and Vila found themselves naked in their separate challenge course. This was a thick jungle with a single path leading toward their destination. It looked simple enough.

"I think pausing to fashion makeshift clothing would be a waste of time," Marionette said. "As long as the air is warm."

"Agreement," Vila said, liking the novelty.

"Warning," Flame said, sniffing. "I smell tiger." She had cultivated sharp senses, apart from her Glamor powers.

"They said there would be danger," Marionette said. "We had better prepare. What is the best defense against a tiger?"

"Avoidance," Flame said. "But I think we will not be allowed that luxury. The tiger will be lurking along the path we must traverse, and will pounce at its convenience. It is surely ravenous. We shall need weapons."

"Clubs?"

"And spears. Both can be fashioned from available wood. See, there are fallen branches."

They foraged for suitable wood, and soon had three clubs of assorted sizes, and three stout poles to serve as spears. They ground the ends against a stone to make reasonably sharp points.

"We are supposed to prevail without magic," Flame said. "So I will not use my Glamor powers. Even near-future sensing must be suspect and would perhaps disqualify me. But common sense precautions should suffice." And they would have to, as the Mistress knew.

Marionette raised a finger, thinking of something. "There are wild animal shows on Earth. We discourage cruelty, but animal trainers can make them do tricks like sitting on pedestals and jumping through hoops. I understand that the cracking of whips makes them take notice, and that a supposedly clumsy defense, such as a chair, is effective because the tigers don't know which of the four points of the legs to focus on, and hesitate. And a confident, aggressive manner can daunt them; they assume there must be some reason for it, and of course there is, if a man has a gun. We don't have a gun, but we could do the rest."

"We don't have a whip either," Flame said. "But maybe there is a substitute. How sharply can you clap your hands, Ette?"

Marionette clapped her hands. The report was startlingly loud. "One of my little talents," she said.

"That may be more effective than a spear," Flame agreed. "Let me make a four-pronged spear. It won't be very effective as a weapon, but if the prongs distract the tiger, we may not need a spear."

"Make it for me, daddy," Vila said. "So you can wield the real spear, just in case."

That did make sense, but might put the child at risk. "Can you do it without panicking? Tigers are big."

"With a Glamor daddy behind me? Sure."

Flame exchanged a glance with Marionette. Maybe it was feasible.

However, Marionette reminded Vila: they were supposed to be ordinary people, and shouldn't use Glamor powers for this challenge. She didn't add that Flame would not dare use her powers, even if their lives were threatened.

"Oh, sure," the child agreed, remembering. "I'm ordinary, anyway" She did have Glamor parents, so understood the situation. She was doing well, playing her role.

Flame fashioned a light bundle of sticks tied together by a vine, for the child to carry. Vila was right about one thing: if the tiger really went for her, Flame would be on it in an instant, with all of her Amazon-trained ferocity. But since she was supposed to be Warp, she hoped to be able to avoid revealing that training.

They followed the path through the jungle. Flame led the way, holding her spear, with the spears originally made for Marionette and Vila strapped to her back with vines liberated from an overgrown tree. Vila followed, and Marionette was last, alert for a possible rear attack.

There was a roar. Suddenly the tiger was charging them from the path ahead. There was no subtlety about it, no hiding and pouncing; maybe it knew they had no escape.

Flame stopped, spear ready. Vila walked around her, holding her bundle. And Marionette clapped her hands.

The tiger skidded to a halt, evidently nonplussed. It didn't know what to make of this. No

screaming in fear, no desperate retreat, just this abrupt formation with the sharp sound. What was this prey doing?

"Back it off," Flame murmured.

Vila stepped forward, waving her sticks. Flame followed, keeping her spear ready.

The tiger considered briefly, then crouched, about to spring. And Marionette clapped her hands again.

The tiger retreated. It still wasn't satisfied that this prey wasn't vulnerable, but the sticks, sounds, and confidence was unnerving.

Step by step they drove it back. Every time it sought to spring, Marionette clapped, putting it off its focus. Finally it turned and bounded away, defeated.

They emerged from the jungle unscathed. The tiger had disappeared. "We did it!" Vila exclaimed jubilantly.

"So we did, dear," Marionette agreed. She stopped to kiss the child, then turned into Flame and kissed her. It was the kind of celebration expected of a relieved family. It seemed coincidental that no Glamor powers had been used.

"Berries!" Vila exclaimed. "Let's eat."

It was a good idea. They paused to make a light meal of berries, and to drink at the local stream. They could not be sure how far or long it would be before they encountered more of either.

The jungle gave way to a broad swamp with tufts of vegetation and occasional trees alternating with shallow open water. The path led straight into it. They would have to wade.

Marionette eyed it with misgiving. "There can be ugly things under mud."

"In the jungle there was only the tiger," Flame said. "No other threats we could see. I think they have set this up for one threat at a time. If we can identify it, we won't have to worry about any other. This is not a true wilderness."

"There it is!" Vila cried, pointing.

"A crocodile," Marionette said, shuddering. "Maybe ten feet long, with an armored hide. We aren't going to spook that with clapping or bundles of sticks."

"Especially not in its element," Flame agreed. "We need a new strategy."

"There are crocodile hunters on Earth," Marionette said. "Sometimes the animals have to be moved, for their own safety as well as that of human residents. The hunters use poles with loops of cord to tie their snouts closed so they can't bite. Then they can be hauled unwillingly away."

"You are one useful font of information, dear," Flame said, kissing her. She went in search of

suitable vine.

In due course she had a pole rigged with a loop with a slip knot. Then she went after the croc.

It was almost too easy. She taunted it, and it charged, jaws snapping. She passed the loop over its snout and jerked it tight. Then hung on as it turned and charged away.

"Let it go," Monochrome advised. "If there's only the single one, we're done here."

Maybe so. But Flame fashioned another vine loop, just in case.

They crossed the swamp without further event. They had won bloodlessly, again, by being prepared. And again she had avoided using any Glamor powers.

There were fruit trees at the edge of the swamp. They picked and ate some.

The path led out of the swamp and to what appeared to be a bottomless gulf. A giant crack in the ground too wide to hurdle and extending seemingly endlessly to either side. Here and there a tree grew beside it, with some branches extending, but not nearly enough to enable any crossing. Perched in those branches was a flock of hawks. Flame wasn't sure what the proper term for a collection of hawks was, but it hardly mattered. She suspected they were there for a reason.

"We have vines," Marionette said. "Could we fashion a rope to swing across, or to anchor at either side so we could scramble along it?"

"We could," Flame said. "But what would those hawks be doing meanwhile?"

"An air challenge," Marionette said. "We must cross while fighting them off. All they have to do is peck or claw at our hands." She gazed down into the crevice, and winced.

"Sticks and stones," Vila said. "I don't like being mean to birds, but maybe we have to."

"It would be difficult to swing across one-handed while beating off birds with the other," Marionette said.

"I was thinking maybe one of us crosses, while the others throw rocks."

Flame and Marionette exchanged another glance. "Out of the mouths of babes," the Mistress murmured. Then Flame got to work on a vine rope, while Marionette and Vila gathered stones and sticks.

When they were ready, Flame tied a stone to the end of her makeshift rope, whirled it several times around her head, and flung it across the chasm. Her aim was true, and it wrapped around a tree trunk and was firmly anchored. Then she tied the near end to the larger tree on the near side, up at the base of the largest branch. Now they had a rope slanting down across the cleft.

Marionette, proficient in such womanly arts as Flame was not, had also fashioned crude mitts from twigs, leaves, and grass that they could use to protect their hands while clinging to the rope. They were ready.

"Who first?" Flame asked, eyeing the poised birds.

"I will," Vila volunteered. "I'm lightest."

Flame had expected to be the first, thinking the chasm would daunt the others. But this made sense. Not only was the child the lightest, but the other two had stronger throwing arms. They would best be able to protect Vila from the hawks.

"Remember," Marionette said as Vila took hold. "If you drop, you won't die. We will lose, but you will survive to return to Charm."

"Oh, sure. But I won't drop. I've climbed ropes before, and it's not that far."

Surely she had, and indeed it wasn't. It was the birds that couldn't be readily factored in.

"Just concentrate on getting there," Flame advised. "Don't look down, and try to ignore the birds. If one does nip you, don't let go of the rope."

"Got it, daddy."

Flame turned to Marionette. "You supply me. I'll throw."

"Of course, dear."

Vila swing out over the gulf. Immediately the hawks were airborne, circling her in a cloud. Too many to stop all at once.

"Hawks are generally solitary birds," Marionette said. "Most should hover while individuals attack."

They did. When the first hawk dived out of the cloud toward the girl, Flame hurled her first stone. Her aim was of course perfect; she never missed. This was not a Glamor power; it was her assiduous Amazon training. The stone struck the bird's body, knocking it clear of the girl.

Marionette slapped a second stone into Flame's hand, so that Flame could keep her eyes on the target.

A second hawk dived. Flame smashed it out of its path.

If the remaining hawks were daunted, they didn't show it. They kept diving, one by one, and kept getting blasted.

Soon Vila was across the chasm, untouched. She let go the rope, stood on the far bank, and waved cheerily. The birds returned to perch on the branch.

"I'll go next," Marionette said. "There are fewer birds remaining. With luck you'll take the rest out before you have to cross."

"I can handle them."

"With your hands occupied?"

"Affirmation."

Marionette didn't question it further. She put her mitts on the line and started across.

The hawks rose in a smaller swarm and circled. One dived, and Flame took it out with a stone. Another dived, and was similarly taken.

Then Flame was out of stones. She took a stick and hurled it at the third bird. The stick was lighter and less regular than the stone, and did not fly as well, but it clipped the bird in the tail and sent it spiraling out of control. The next stick was better, and caught the next hawk in the head. It dropped into the chasm.

The fifth bird was smarter than the others, and tried to avoid the flying stick. It succeeded, but in so doing lost its chance at Marionette, who landed safely at the other side. She stood and made a victory signal.

Vila had been gathering rocks and sticks, a number salvaged from throws at earlier birds. The two of them stood ready to throw, but Flame was not comfortable with this. They were more likely to hit her than a bird, she being a much larger target. "Feint," she called. "Threaten, but don't throw. I'll protect myself."

They both looked doubtful, but nodded assent.

Flame took a stout stick in her right hand, and grabbed the rope with her unshielded left hand. She swung her foot up and hooked her knees over the rope. She started inch-worming along it, hanging by knees and hand.

There were few hawks remaining, but they were game. They clustered, and the first one dived. Flame bashed it out of the air with the stick.

By the time the last bird tried, she was across. She got on the bank as the bird dropped into the void. Once more she had avoided using any special powers.

Both Vila and Marionette hugged her. "Confession," Marionette whispered in her ear. "I wish you really were Warp. I'd give you such a reward!"

"Needless," Flame said somewhat sourly.

There were beets and carrots growing nearby. They considered, then pulled up a few and washed them and ate them. They still could not be sure that food would always be available at need.

The path led on until it wended down to an inlet of a sea. There it halted. They could see where it resumed on the far side of the inlet. "A fjord," Marionette said. "We have to cross—and I'll wager there are sharks."

"Sticks and stones won't stop them," Flame said. "Swimming seems inadvisable."

"Amen. But what else offers?"

"Go around?"

"Have you observed the geography?"

Flame looked. The land on either side of the fjord rose steeply into mountains, and their tops were white with snow. That was not a feasible route. "What do you recommend, Vila," Flame asked.

"Raft."

They nodded. It would take time, but seemed to be the only way.

They got to work locating fallen wood, rolling it to the water, and binding it together with vines. Flame realized that it was no coincidence that both logs and vines were readily available; the challenge was to figure out what was needed, and to put it together and use it. Every threat had a counter; it just had to be fathomed and applied.

"I think it's ready," Marionette said as they secured the last log. "All we need are the paddles."

"Negation," Flame said, gazing out where the inlet widened into the full expanse of the sea.

"Question?"

"Storm."

"Uh-oh." It was an Earth expression that covered the situation. "If that catches us, we could be swept into the water and become shark food."

"Affirmation."

"We'll just have to wait for it to pass."

"Negation."

Marionette looked where Flame was looking now. In the distance behind them was something moving toward them. "Wolves," Flame said.

"But wolves don't attack people," Marionette protested. "That's folklore."

"This is not Earth."

Marionette sighed. "Indeed it is not. Here wolves surely do attack people."

"What can we do?"

"We must risk the storm."

"Warp, I don't think Vila and I would be able to hold on if waves smash across the raft, as they surely will."

"We'll have to tie ourselves to the raft. It won't be fun, but we should survive." Marionette looked at Vila. "Can you handle that?" The child gulped, daunted but brave. "I'll try."

Flame used vine to tie them both to the raft by arms, legs, and torso. She tied their paddles beside them. Then she tied her own lower portion, so she could sit up and paddle. "If a wave washes over you, close your eyes and hold your breath," she told them. "It won't cover you long. You may feel as if you're drowning, but you aren't."

The wolves arrived, eagerly slavering. Flame shoved off. The wolves splashed into the water in pursuit, but she knocked their heads with the paddle and they had to quit. The raft was on its way.

So was the storm. First came gusts of wind that shoved the raft farther into the fjord. Then came spatters of rain. Flame secured her paddle beside her, as it was about to become useless. Then hell broke loose.

The winds turned violent, and big waves formed. The raft careened up a slope and into a trough. It spun about, and sheets of rain obliterated the rest of the world. Flame's eyes stung with the salt despite being tightly closed, and she had to keep spitting out brine. She suppressed the temptation to draw on her magic. This actually was good exercise for her, making do with entirely natural abilities.

The storm seemed to last an eternity as the raft pitched and yawed and the waves splashed frothily across it. But finally it passed, and Flame's more objective time sense told her it had been only about ten minutes. Time enough to wash them out if it was going to.

As the raft settled down, loosened but intact, she sat up, untied her legs, and went to untie the others. Both were spitting out salt water, no longer choking on it. Vila vomited over the edge while Marionette rubbed her rope-burned limbs. Her lovely long hair was now a tangled string. "You were right," she said. "It wasn't fun."

Flame set herself and started paddling. "But we survived."

"We survived," the woman agreed. She fetched her own paddle and started paddling on the other side of the raft. Flame's respect for her grew; she was pulling her weight.

Vila returned to the realm of the living. "Apology for making a mess."

"Accepted!" Flame and Marionette said together, laughing weakly.

They made their way across the fjord and landed safely. "I hate to leave this loyal servant," Flame said, looking at the raft. "But we can't take it with us."

Vila went to the raft, kneeled, and kissed its battered corner. "Bye, friend," she said, and actually shed a tear.

"You both are tired," Flame said. "Should we rest?"

"And get caught by another storm?" Marionette asked. "We have just one challenge to go. Then we can rest."

They glanced at Vila. "Agreement," the child said, though she looked as if she really wanted to rest.

"I am proud to have you in my family," Flame told her. Vila was actually sister, not daughter, but truly family.

They took their paddles as potential clubs—all else had been lost—and marched along the resumed path. The land soon leveled out and turned dry, becoming a treeless plain.

"Tundra," Marionette said.

"What threat is likely here?"

"Uncertain. There are a number of prospects."

Flame saw something in the distance. "Bear?"

"I was hoping it wouldn't be that. These makeshift clubs won't be effective against a large determined bear. Too massive, too strong, too well padded."

"We can sharpen them into spears."

"Same objection. We need something else. Soon."

"Fire," Vila said.

"Right again," Flame said. "Gather tinder."

Marionette and Vila scavenged the dry land for the dessicated remains of shrubbery, while Flame found a few sticks and stones. She was in luck; she found the right kind of stone.

They made a little pile of tinder, and Flame bashed two stones together to strike sparks. It wasn't easy, but she had learned the technique in Amazon training. Soon she had a smolder, then a flame.

The bear was closing the distance. It had winded them, and was hungry. It was indeed large, massing more than the three of them combined. It didn't hesitate; it charged in.

She could stop it readily with magic. But she did not.

"Scatter," Flame snapped. "So it has multiple targets."

They did. Meanwhile Flame had a stick in the flame, igniting the tip. It was a serviceable temporary torch.

The bear swerved to follow Marionette, the most luscious prey. It was massive, but was readily

outpacing her.

Flame leaped after it, but she was not close enough to catch it before it caught Marionette. So she threw the torch at its flank.

The torch scored, and fur singed. The bear whirled to bite at it—and got the fire in its mouth. It howled.

Flame returned to fetch another torch. The second stick was spindly, but was now burning well. She lifted it and ran at the bear.

The bear smelled the fire and retreated, growling. It had learned respect. Flame pursued it, orienting the torch on its nose. The bear understood the threat. It had had enough. It turned and fled.

They had won the last challenge. All the same, they all took firesticks as they walked on along the path, just in case.

Before long they came to the concluding rendezvous. They were the first to make it, having dispatched their challenges relatively rapidly. But this was not a competition against other people, but a portion of a larger one: to demonstrate just how well naked humans could perform against natural threats.

"Now we can rest," Flame said.

They did so. Flame, as a Glamor, didn't actually need to, but as a theoretically normal man she emulated fatigue. Marionette was physically tough, but she had had a considerable workout. And Vila threw herself down on the moss and slept. The rendezvous was a thicket of trees with a pleasant glade with a clear spring in the center. It was like a small paradise after the challenges of the wilderness.

Several other families straggled in, looking much the worse for wear. Some were injured, and some were almost terminally weak. But they had made it through.

In the end, seven families made it. That meant that three had lost. It had been a rough test, but a clear majority had survived it. That meant that the human species was more than minimally formidable. Would that dissuade the machines, or merely make them more careful? Flame feared the latter.

They waited for the robot to appear, or the shuttle to convey them to the spaceship and take them home. But there was nothing.

"What is this?" a man demanded. "We did our part. Where are they?"

"They're reneging," another man said. "We should never have trusted them."

Flame stopped herself from using her near future paths seeing. This, too, was a Glamor power.

Marionette stepped to the center and raised her hands for attention. "You know me, I think. I have a suspicion. The machines set us up with five threats of the man versus nature variety. They did not say that the challenge was limited to those. They may be testing us to see what we do when we

appear to have been forgotten or deceived. Do we remain effective, or do we dissolve into chaos? It surely makes a difference in their attitude toward us."

Flame saw several people nodding. They were listening to Marionette because she was a Mistress, a natural leader, but also because she was making sense.

"I believe we should demonstrate that we are resilient in the face of unexpected adversity," Marionette continued. "We should become a community, organizing for indefinite survival. When they see that we are not collapsing, they will make their next move. My guess is that they will proffer a divisive challenge designed to turn us against each other. We must not fall for it. We must remain civilized, showing them that we hold their ploys in contempt."

The nods became open endorsements. Flame knew Marionette from way back, but was impressed again with this confirmation of her qualities of leadership. She was almost sorry she wasn't her brother Warp; the Mistress was indeed a worthy girlfriend.

"Select a community leader," Marionette said. "Get organized. That will force the machines to make the next move."

"The Glamor," a woman said, looking at Flame.

"Negation," Flame said. "We must show that ordinary folk can handle it. That's the point of this exercise."

They had to agree. They made nominations and had a spot vote, selecting one of the men. He immediately took hold, assigning the children to forage for food, the men to fashion tools for excavation and building, and the women to make fire and prepare food for the group. Soon there was organized activity.

Sure enough, the machines' shuttle appeared in the sky, coming down for a landing. Marionette had called that one accurately.

The robot emerged. "We regret that there is passage only for five families," it said. "We expected greater attrition. Decide which ones to leave behind."

There was a general exchange of glances. Score another for Marionette.

"This is unsatisfactory," the man leader said. "We'll await a better offer."

And the community building resumed. It was evident that the seven families were prepared to wait indefinitely, homesteading where they were.

"We will depart one day hence," the robot said. "With five or fewer families."

Marionette quietly circulated, talking to the others. "They are trying to divide us, to get some families to break ranks and report to the shuttle. They haven't even mentioned the 'lost' families, that need to be returned too. We must remain unified."

"But suppose they leave without any families?" a woman asked nervously.

"Then they will have openly reneged. That will provoke an intercultural incident. They aren't ready for that. It's a bluff."

"I hope so," the woman said.

"My family will be the last to board," Marionette said. "If any are left behind, we will be." That was persuasive. It was perhaps coincidental that it was the family best equipped to survive here.

They made a reasonable evening meal of berries, cooked tubers, fruits, and a rabbit one man speared. The predators were robots, but the rabbits turned out to be real. They lit torches and staged a dance. The women now were clothed in sparse grass skirts and halters, the men in crude vine loincloths. These makeshift outfits turned out to be extremely sexy, as the coverage provided by the grass was imperfect, and soon the dance dissolved into amorous couples.

Flame's family unit had volunteered for child care, while the parents coupled, maintaining the semblance of privacy. They kept the children occupied with fireside stories of the mythologies of Earth and Charm, and with songs the children could join in. Marionette was good at this too.

When the appointed hour came, no families boarded the shuttle. The bluff had been called.

"Reconsidering," the robot said. "There is room for all."

Victory!

The leader man nodded as if this were routine. "We will board together, after we shut down our camp."

They did so, and Flame and Marionette boarded last, true to their word.

And there, already aboard, were the three losing families. The machines had been true to their word: the people had lost, but not died.

They were true on the payments, too. The robot produced Earth credits and paid the seven winners double, the three losers half.

Satisfied, the families settled in for the return voyage. Several people approached Marionette to thank for her her guidance; she had bluffed out the machines.

But Flame knew it wasn't over until they were safely off the machines ship. She was desperate to know what the machines had in mind, but dared not use her future seeing to get any hint.

The information wasn't long in coming. The holo Vila was watching abruptly shifted to assume an amorphous form. "Glamor," it said.

The three of them gazed at it. Was this the final challenge?

"You are the aware machine," Flame said. "Controller level."

"Your companions are hostage. I will hole the ship, depressurizing it and causing all living

creatures aboard to suffocate. Only you can save them."

It certainly wasn't being subtle! "Save them? How?"

"Destroy me before I act. You have one minute."

This was indeed the crisis. If she used her Glamor powers, the machine would record the magic force and send it to the machines command before it ceased functioning. If she did not, all mortals on the ship would die. Machines were not much for bluffing, and cared nothing for individual lives.

But she was prepared. "Negation."

"They will not die comfortably."

"They will not die at all," Flame said. "You will not hole the ship."

"For what reason?"

"Such an act would become an Incident that would alert the entire human culture to the menace of the machines before you wish it to be recognized. It will also defeat your hierarchy's primary purpose. It wishes to recruit my sister Voila to join the machines. Vila here is Voila's little sister. Marionette here is her brother's fiancée. I am not Warp, but his sister Flame, emulating him in order to mock up a sample family for this mission. If we die by machine treachery, Voila will be alienated and will never enlist with you; the chances of recruiting her would drop to zero. Your superiors would not be pleased."

"But you will save them, and yourself."

"Negation. I will die with them."

"This is a human bluff. All living things cling to their lives, whatever the cost."

"Try me," Flame said grimly. "I am as you can verify an Amazon. You surely know the nature of Amazons. The others don't have a choice."

They waited. The machine's holo faded and was replaced by Vila's program. The ship was not holed.

Marionette and Vila broke into tears of relief, hugging Flame from either side. They had known she would not yield. They had not known whether the machine would.

This time their victory was real.

But details remained. "Machine, I know you are listening," Flame said. "I revealed myself to you so that you would understand that you were dealing with an Amazon. But it occurs to me that your superiors in the machines hierarchy might not understand how an Amazon came to join the mission without your knowledge. The fact is you are not at fault; nothing can penetrate the disguise of a Glamor. But this fact may not yet be in the machines' data bank. They might assume that you were defective, and terminate you. This would be unfair; you performed well. So probably it is best simply

to delete this one item from your memory before making your report. It is after all irrelevant to the larger mission. It is of course your decision."

There was no response, but she suspected that the machine would follow her recommendation. Machines of that rank, with high level individual consciousness, surely had an instinct of self preservation.

And that would preserve her secret, so that no member of this mission beyond their little family unit would know that Warp was not here. So no one, especially the machines, would wonder exactly what Warp was really up to.

Now she had homework to do. She had to review the history of Havoc's association with the girl Opaline. It would probably be dull, but if Idyll recommended it, there was surely excellent reason.

So that night, as the ship traveled, she lay and opened the memory capsule Gale had given her. Actually, things were seldom dull when Havoc was involved. Why had he bothered to travel for several days with an ordinary mortal girl, when so much else was going on? Certainly he liked women of any age, and they liked him, but there had to be more to it than that. Flame was not romantically smitten with her father the way Weft was, but she had high respect for his abilities. He was after all the martial artist who had trained her before she became an Amazon.

Chapter 9

Oak

Next morning Opaline and Havoc set out again, departing the grateful village. He continued to drill her on individual singing and man management, so that she almost thought she could do it. She did not understand this business of seeing future paths, but she trusted Havoc and did her best to prepare herself for what had to be.

But one thing still nagged her. "I know your daughter Voila, whose vision you respect, told you that you must personally conduct me along this route. But why does it have to be you, instead of some lowly underling? You told me before that you are training me, but you have pretty much done that now, I think. Even if I am valuable, isn't this overkill?"

"Negation."

"Please."

"You will not like the information."

"I must know."

"Our reading of the paths suggests that there is some agency that does not want you to complete this journey. It is strong enough so that only a Glamor can fully protect you."

"Something means to—to kill me?"

"Affirmation."

"So the tree would have poisoned me, without you to tell it no? The brigands would have raped and killed me? The fire would have burned me to ashes?"

"Affirmation."

"Affirmation," she echoed. "I do not like this information. It terrifies me."

"I would have preferred to spare you the knowledge. We are trying to identify the agency, so we can eliminate it. It is surely an enemy of our kind."

"And if you don't identify it, and I reach my mission, what then?"

"The paths indicate that you will be safe there. It threatens you only before you meet Oak."

"Question?"

"His name is Oak. Our secret weapon."

"But why should this be?"

"We do not as yet know."

"That hour you must leave me—does that relate?"

"Affirmation. That is when I will discover and destroy the agency's power to attack."

"Understanding," she said faintly. "Is that time soon?"

He paused, evidently fathoming the near future, or receiving information from his daughter. "Not soon enough. Another threat comes."

"Each one has been worse," she said. "Oh, Havoc, I am afraid!"

"Reasonable," he said, embracing her. Then he whispered in her ear. "We must leave the trail, soon, by seeming coincidence. Make a demand that we visit the Air Chroma. Be persistent."

"My nature," she said, trying to smile.

"It is a good nature." He kissed her.

He let her go, and they resumed walking. She looked around. On one side was yellow, deepening in the distance. On the other was a sort of fuzzing that seemed to fade into fog. "What is that?" she inquired, gesturing.

"That is an Air Chroma zone. When no inhabitants are in the vicinity to animate illusions, it has no appearance."

"I don't understand. Everything has some appearance."

"Not the Invisible Chroma of Air. No more than air itself does. Only when animated by illusion does it become visible."

"Havoc, are you teasing me? This makes little sense."

"Negation. It is the way it is."

"I want to see for myself."

"Doubt. Chroma natives resent intrusions by nonChroma folk. We had best remain on the path."

"Annoyance."

"Necessity."

"Decision: I will look for myself." She stepped off the trail, into the edge of the fog.

"Danger!" Havoc protested. "Do not go there alone."

She turned on him a determined smile. "Then come with me, Havoc."

"Inconvenience," he muttered as he did so. "Headstrong girl."

Her foot struck something invisible. "Ow!" she exclaimed, abruptly sitting down.

"Explanation," Havoc said, bending to lift her foot for inspection. "Things do exist; they are merely invisible. You stumbled into a rock." He raised her foot higher. "I see nothing ill."

"Suspicion," she said. "Are you looking up my bare leg?"

"And a fine leg it is," he agreed as she jerked it away. Of course he was welcome to look, and to handle too, but this was of the nature of a small play, for the benefit of any entity that might be spying on them.

"How can I walk here, if there are invisible stones?" she demanded unreasonably.

"Return to the regular path."

"Negation!"

Havoc sighed. "Then I will have to carry you."

"You wouldn't dare!"

He picked her up and carried her forward. Her skirt and blouse twisted some as her mid section sagged somewhat between his strong arms. He seemed to have no trouble with the invisible rocks.

She clung to him, delighting in this closeness.

She thought of something else. "If I am safe when there, why not simply conjure me there directly, now that I am trained? You could keep me out of sight for a while before delivering me, to better have your will of me before you return to your two beautiful women and countless sultry royal bath girls and other ilk."

He shook his head ruefully. "How many times must I answer before you are satisfied?"

"You have answered with partial truths. I want the whole truth."

"I do not even know the whole truth."

"You know enough to have a notion." She twisted her shoulders slightly to give him a better look into her skew blouse. He was a man: she was learning how to handle him.

He did look, and licked his lips. "It is best that the enemy stalker not know that we know its purpose, so we must hew to our schedule."

She remained unsatisfied. She twisted a bit more. "And?"

"And I like your company, you teasing vixen."

Of course she wasn't fooling him, but she held his interest anyway "I don't wish to tease you, Havoc. I wish to possess you."

"Negation. You know my oath prevents that, so you keep dangling your proffered favors before me. That is teasing."

He was right. "Apology. I will stop."

"Negation."

"Don't stop teasing you?" she asked, surprised.

"As you say, I have other women galore, and all will grant me their favors of any nature without limit. You alone will not. That is a special kind of challenge."

She considered that. "You are teasing me, I am teasing you. It is a unique relationship."

"Affirmation."

She squirmed into position to kiss him. "Conjecture: it will do."

"Acquiescence," he agreed, and kissed her back.

The magic intensified; it was almost like a prickling on her skin. She knew that the Chroma zones were formed by the matter and gas from the volcanoes, and the magic was strongest in the center, at the volcano itself. But she had never been inside a Chroma zone before, and would not have dared

trespass if not in Havoc's company. Regardless, this was a fine adventure.

Havoc forged through the fog. Then it thinned, and they were at the verge of a picturesque farmstead, with six-legged sheep grazing in a verdant meadow. The neat wooden farmhouse was surrounded by multi-colored flowers.

"Oh, it's gorgeous," she breathed as he set her down. It seemed there were no more invisible rocks here. "Pretty as a picture—which I gather it is."

"All illusion," he agreed. "It is said that there are no ugly Air Chroma women. That is an understatement; nothing is ugly here."

The nearest sheep heard them. "Ba-a-a-ad!" it bleated.

In a moment the farmer appeared. He did not walk up to them from a distance; he simply appeared before them. He was a solid but halfway handsome man, with a neat straw hat and blue jeans. "Question?" he demanded gruffly.

"I am Hayseed the Minstrel, traveling with my little sister Opaline. She insisted on seeing the Air Chroma, where she has never been before."

The farmer's rough countenance softened. "Minstrel?"

"Affirmation."

"Will you entertain at our village?"

"For room and board for the night."

The farmer smiled. "Welcome! One moment." He vanished.

"How did he come, and where did he go?" Opaline asked, not having to pretend surprise.

"This is a Chroma zone. The natives all do magic. Some do a little, some a lot, but all do some."

"It must be fun."

"Routine, for them. They clothe ordinary chores with illusion, but still must do them."

"They can't just conjure food and palaces and lovely obliging women?"

"Those things require practice and effort, and most ordinary folk lack the potential, so they settle for the easiest magic, illusion." He smiled. "Even those skilled in conjuration can't craft a woman from nothing, let alone an obliging one; they must bring her from somewhere. Then illusion can make her lovely. It is easier just to persuade a neighbor to cooperate. Many can't even conjure themselves from place to place."

The farmer reappeared, along with a fairly severe looking older woman. "I am the Elder of Pleasant Village," she said. "You will entertain?"

"Old Earth folk songs, mainly," Hayseed said. "Do Chroma folk like them as nonChroma folk do?" Of course he knew the answer.

"Affirmation. Take my hands."

Hayseed took her left hand, and Opaline her right hand. There was a wrench, and suddenly they were in the center of a lovely village. She realized that the Elder had transported them by magic, assuming they had none. She was right about Opaline, and of course Hayseed had not revealed his nature.

"Here are your quarters," the Elder said. "We will assemble in one hour. Be ready." She vanished.

Opaline realized that entertainers were in strong demand everywhere, even in the Chroma zones. That was why Havoc traveled as a minstrel; he would always be welcome, anywhere.

The house was beautiful, of course, and stocked with all matter of exotic fruits, breads, and drinks. Opaline was thrilled. "I never knew what I was missing," she said as she poured herself a glass of purple juice.

"Negation," Havoc murmured. "That is alcoholic. Not for my kid sister."

"Argument."

"Squelched." He took away the drink and gave her another.

"Big brothers are an irritation in the butt," she muttered. But the alternate juice tasted very good.

"We will get fairly started," Havoc said. "Then I will have to go. I will plead a sudden incapacity. We must select a transition song."

"Nervousness," she confessed.

"Reassurance." He reached out to touch her hand, and she felt the infusion of reassurance. Glamors were remarkable people!

He had her dress in a rather short skirt they found in the closet, and in a colorful but somewhat skimpy blouse that tended to stretch tightly when she inhaled. Worse, she saw in the mirror that when it stretched it became translucent. "Havoc—"

"Now you must tease every man the way you have been teasing me," he said. "They can't touch you on-stage; they can only look. Make them slaver."

"And they won't notice the state of my singing," she said, remembering.

He bent to kiss the hollow of her breasts. "Affirmation."

Impulsively she grabbed his head and jammed his face down into that hollow. No other words were needed.

They went out on schedule to perform. The villagers were assembled, an uncommonly handsome lot, with perfectly formed children, handsome men, and lovely girls and women. It certainly was true that in the Air Chroma every person made his or her own appearance, being otherwise invisible, so naturally all were esthetic. Opaline knew she hardly compared, but Havoc had assured her that because the villagers knew her flesh was real, not illusory, they would notice it. It was like the difference between seeing a woman in skin-tight clothing, and seeing her naked. The outline was clear in either case, but the male eye sought the latter.

Havoc sang, impressing the villagers as usual; they were in this respect typical. They might enhance their appearance with illusion, but that did not give them the ability to perform the arts well. Opaline noticed one young man paying close attention, occasionally nodding. "Aspiring singer," Havoc murmured between songs, noting her attention.

Then Havoc addressed the villagers personally. "My little sister does not sing, but I am encouraging her to learn," he said. "Family tradition, you know. I have persuaded her to sing the refrain. Please be kind; she is shy." Indeed, Opaline was already blushing at the reference. Havoc had made her up to be pretty, but that wasn't enough.

He sang:

*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 Opaline made her maiden public effort:

Oh, no John, no John, no John, no!

There was a gentle applause, not so much for her singing, which was marginal, but for her effort. She had done it!

He sang the second stanza, speaking for her:

*My father was a Spanish merchant
Went to sea a month ago.
First he kissed me, then he left me
Bid me always answer no.*

Havoc kissed her on the cheek. Then she sang her refrain again.

Havoc suddenly looked pained. "I fear I ate something this morning I shouldn't have," he said. "Apology." He hurried offstage, holding one hand to his face as if about to heave. He disappeared into their guest house.

Opaline shook her head. "I *told* him not to eat that fallen fruit. I *told* him it looked tainted. But would he listen to his little sister? Oh, no John!"

The villagers laughed, appreciating the situation.

"But the show must go on, until he returns," Opaline continued. "I am no real singer, as you know. Do we have a real singer here? One who might like to practice as a minstrel?" She looked at

the man she had observed.

"I can sing," he responded. "But I don't know the words to your songs. Only the tunes. And I have never performed for an audience." Indeed, the other villagers seemed surprised; they had not known of his ability.

"I know them all," she said. "I have heard my brother sing them so many times. I can tell them to you, line by line, if the audience will indulge us." She looked at the Elder.

"Considering the situation, we will," the Elder said.

"But I would be too nervous," the man protested. "I am not a showman."

Opaline remembered Havoc's drilling on how to manage a man. "Entreaty," she said, leaning forward so that the blouse fell open. "I can't do this alone. I need you." She dabbed at her eyes as if becoming tearful.

The man's eyes focused on her décolletage. He stood and approached, though clearly nervous. "I am Bright," he said.

She took both his hands in hers. "Opaline. Let's pick up where my brother left off. Face me from a small distance, as if addressing me, but make sure the audience can hear you."

"That is my fear."

Stage fright. "Reversal," she said quickly. "Address your song only to me. Beyond the stage does not exist."

"Doubt. I know they are there."

She drew him into her close enough so that he could feel her breasts against him, lifted her face, and kissed him quickly on the mouth. "No longer. You are John, and I am your world, this moment."

He gazed at her, clearly taken aback by the kiss. She had stunned him the way Havoc stunned her. "Oh, madame, in your face is beauty," she murmured, squeezing his hands encouragingly as she held his gaze. "Sing to me alone, Bright, lest I kiss you again."

There was a chuckle in the audience. They knew man-management when they saw it.

Immediately he sang it, and well.

As he finished, she spoke the next line. "On your lips red roses grow." He sang it, taking refuge in the immediate task.

"Will you take me for your lover?" She looked down, inhaling, as if surprised and flattered by his proposition, as he sang it. "Madame, answer yes or no."

After he sang that line, she sang her response. She took a deep breath, turning so that a wide swath of the audience could appreciate the taut material of her blouse. "Oh, no John, no John, no

John, no!"

The song continued, as the suitor offered her jewels and dresses, only to be turned down. Then he got smart, and rephrased his question.

If I may not be your lover, Madame will you let me go?

This time the children laughed as she sang the refrain, refusing to let him go. And so, in the song, the suitor won the hand and heart of the maiden, by making her required words become an acceptance. At the conclusion she drew him gently in again and kissed him, this time more thoroughly. She reveled in the power the stage gave her; she had become by definition a lovely and compelling woman.

Now there was substantial applause. She had made it work, not by her singing but by her presence and appearance. They had of course observed how she managed Bright throughout, and made him perform.

After that they continued, doing the songs she knew, and the villagers seemed quite satisfied. It almost seemed that they had forgotten the minstrel's sudden exit. Opaline was exhilarated. She was rising to the occasion, making it work.

Then she spied Havoc in the audience. He had returned! Suddenly all the tension she had suppressed sprang forth. "Oh!"

"Continue," Havoc said. "You are doing well without me."

But now, not surprisingly, Bright got nervous. "What am I doing here?"

How to manage men. Opaline took it a step further. "Minstrel Hayseed, come join us. We will conclude with a round."

Havoc nodded. He joined them, and sang:

*Sweetly sings the donkey at the break of day
If you do not feed him this is what he'll say
Hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw hee-haw hee-haw!*

As he started the second line, Opaline put her arm around his waist and sang the first line. As she started the second, she put her other arm around Bright's waist, squeezing him encouragingly, and he sang the first line, having just heard it. Actually, he surely knew the song; it was popular with children anywhere. It was shyness, rather than ignorance, that restrained him, and in her encouraging presence and the constant prodding of the lines that shyness was at bay. They did the round, and Bright finished with the final hee-haws.

The audience burst into strong applause. Opaline turned and kissed Bright, then turned the other way and kissed Havoc. It was a successful finish.

They were immediately mobbed by the younger villagers. Two pretty girls and a handsome boy, evidently by spot conspiracy, linked with the boy in the center and faced them. "No fault?" they asked together.

"My brother and I wish to retire, for we have a long walk tomorrow," Opaline said quickly. "But I think Bright accepts his offer." She glanced at Bright, who was hesitating, embarrassed. Obviously he was not accustomed to such offers from pretty girls. "She is courting you for your beauty of song," Opaline told him. "Can you tell her no John?"

"Negation," the girl said, stepping in to kiss him. There was general laughter as she hauled him away, managing him exactly as Opaline had.

Soon Opaline and Havoc were alone in the house. Now at last she could relax. She collapsed breathlessly on the bed.

Havoc sat beside her, massaging her tight shoulders. "Compliment: You were wonderful," he said.

"Candor: I was desperate. You prepared me, but when you left, I feared I would collapse. But then I saw that Bright was as nervous as I was, and I had to support him. He's a nice man."

"You applied what I taught you."

"Swim or sink. The tight blouse helped. When I breathed, he lost sight of all else."

"Pride in you."

She sat up and hugged him, overcome. "Oh Havoc, thank you!" Then she remembered. "Did you accomplish your mission?"

"Mostly. I abolished the threat, but did not discover who was behind it."

"Question?"

"It was a swarm of hornets. They would have stung you to death despite my efforts. I was angry, and blasted them with fire. I should have saved a few to question."

"Angry?"

He put his arms around her. "I love you, Opaline, no fault. You are a worthy girl. The thought of such an end to you made me lose my temper."

"Oh, Havoc!" She was overcome with emotion.

In the morning they bid parting to the villagers, including Bright and the girl, who had evidently had a fair night of it. "We are in your debt," the Elder said. "You came upon us randomly, gave us rare entertainment, and demonstrated how we can in future better entertain ourselves." She glanced at Bright. "You, especially, Opaline, made a demonstration we respect. Is there any return favor we can do you?"

Opaline was about to protest, as she did not feel she had done anything special for them, but

caught Havoc's warning glance. It was better to accept the credit. Still, there was something. "Hesitancy," she said.

"Speak."

"I have never been in Air before. It's so pretty! Would you—could I see what it is like without the illusion?"

"One moment only," the Elder said, frowning.

Then the loveliness faded and was replaced by a completely dull and generally unesthetic collection of shacks squatting amidst weeds. Bright and the girl were both gawky youths, and her hair was a mess. Only the Elder herself remained prim. It seemed that the Air Chroma folk saw little need to shore up reality when illusion was so much easier.

In a moment the illusion returned. All was lovely again. "Appreciation," Opaline said. "I am impressed." She did not clarify that her impression was not entirely positive.

They walked back to the nonChroma path, which was now safe. "We all put forth our best face," Havoc remarked. "You and I included. Many folk's minds are much as the Air Chroma reality, being invisible to all except telepaths."

"I'm sure mine is suitably weedy," Opaline agreed ruefully, knowing he could read it.

"Negation. Yours is attractive. You are honest with yourself, and seek only good for others. Your body is only a body, similar to most others, but your mind is naturally pretty."

"It is my mind that attracts your fancy!" she exclaimed, catching on. "Because I will never subsequently be as innocent and positive as I am now."

"Acquiescence," he agreed. "The minds of experienced women are far less idealistic. Apart from Gale and Monochrome, few really turn me on."

Opaline knew she shouldn't feel flattered, but she couldn't help it. She liked being pretty for him.

He paused, brought her in to him, and kissed her. Nothing needed to be said.

Opaline saw the scorched section where Havoc had bombed the hornets, and shuddered. She had done her part, with the songs, but he had done his part too, saving her life.

"We approach our destination," he said. "Remember: the mission is secret. Do not tell anyone, not even Oak. But do keep him developing his ability."

"Intention," she agreed. "One month."

"Deal remains. Come to me when you decide."

She intended to. She would give it her all, for that month, then assess her true mind.

He gave her bottom one squeeze, hinting at the passion he suppressed. She hoped she would not be less appealing, mentally, after that month of what was bound to be sexual and emotional experience.

"One other thing," he said. "I have shown you that you need not fear the male member. It is a tool for a purpose, not fearsome in itself."

"I have no fear of yours," she agreed. "I love holding it, while you are holding me."

"But when having sex with a man who is not knowledgeable, you must take control."

"If I had sex with you, you would be in control," she said. "You have done it countless times; I have no experience. I would not even try to tell you how."

"That is how most men like it. But an ignorant man could crush you under his weight. Do not allow it. Put him on his back, and bstride him, and take him in at your convenience. Never tease him; always indulge him. Let him spout and subside. Kiss him. Then gently withdraw, telling him how wonderful it was."

"Question: Suppose it is too big for me? I think yours would not fit."

"It will fit," he said. "There will be no discomfort. The woman stretches to accommodate. Moisten it, with his preliminary fluid or yours, to be sure it is slippery. Insert it slowly. He will love that foreplay. But neither will you have pleasure of it."

"Question?"

"He will climax. You will not. Not the first time, or the second. In time you will be able to instruct him how to pleasure you, but that must be secondary. He must always want it more than you do. In this manner you will retain control."

"This seems so cynical!"

"Necessary. Sex is the primary way to manage a man, and you must always manage him."

"Already I feel less innocent," she said. "Regret."

But she knew he was telling her for a reason, and took the lesson to heart. She had to maintain sexual control.

And at midday they reached it. It was a farmstead at the edge of a nonChroma village, Nonesuch. An older couple came out to meet them.

"Greeting, Minstrel," the man said.

"Greeting, Pot," Havoc returned. "This is Opaline, who will see to your son for a month, perhaps more."

The woman eyed Opaline appraisingly. "She's a slight thing."

"But competent, Kettle," Havoc assured her. "She will teach him what he needs to know to be socially competent."

"This is not an easy thing," Pot said dubiously.

"Which is why I selected a very special person," Havoc said. "The king directed me to do it right. May she meet Oak now?"

The couple exchanged a glance. It seemed they were still not completely easy with this, understandably "Our boy has special needs," the mother said.

"As do we all," Havoc said.

"He—awkwardness—has become sexually aware," Pot said. "He is seventeen, and must marry within a year. But the village girls will not touch him."

"I will touch him," Opaline said.

"He is unable to care properly for himself," Kettle said. "He must be directed. Folk grow impatient."

"I am patient," Opaline said.

Finally Pot said it outright: "Oak is simple."

"So are we all, in one respect or another," Havoc said.

"Yet we do not wish his feelings to be hurt," Kettle said. "He is very sensitive."

Here Opaline felt competent. "I will not hurt him."

After another hesitation, the man called "Oak!"

A young man emerged from the house. Opaline was surprised: he was strikingly handsome. She had somehow anticipated a dull looking fellow who scuffled and drooled.

Oak came to stand before them. "A greeting," he said uncertainly.

"Acknowledged, Oak," Opaline said. "I am Opaline. I will be with you for a while."

He gazed at her somewhat too intently. He evidently lacked the ability to be discreet when he saw something interesting. "You are pretty."

"Thank you, Oak. You are handsome."

He was silent, evidently not knowing how to respond. "Say thank you," Opaline said to him.

He smiled, glad for the direction. "Thank you."

The three others stood silent, letting her make the contact.

"Oak, I am new here. Please take me for a walk. Show me what's here."

"A walk," he agreed. He turned to face the house and started walking. It seemed that from and to the house was all he knew, rather than wider explorations. They had to keep him out of trouble.

Opaline hurried to catch up to him, and took his hand. They walked together, leaving the other three standing. Soon they were at the house.

"Show me your room, Oak," Opaline said, realizing what she had to do.

He led her in, and to the attic chamber he had. "Here."

"It is nice."

"You are pretty," he repeated. His trousers were bulging.

She decided to risk an immediate sexual start. "Take off your clothing, Oak." For not only had Havoc instructed her in detail what to do, he had aroused her so that she was eager to do it.

"But it isn't time for bed."

"This is different." She helped him get his clothing off. Immediately his erection sprang out. It was a fine one, she thought, though only the second she had actually seen. He was not simple in his physical manhood.

She quickly doffed her own clothing and took his hand again. "Lie down on your back, Oak."

He obeyed without question.

She bestrode him, just below his hard penis. "This is what I will do for you, Oak, when you please me." She moved up, took his member in her hand, and carefully set it at her moist cleft. She slid the tip of it along her cleft, getting it suitably wet and slippery, as Havoc had advised. She took him in slowly, cautious lest she be stretched too far, this first time, but there was no problem as it sank all the way in. Then she lay full length upon him. She shut her eyes, pretending it was Havoc she embraced.

He bucked once, spurting into her. She felt the coursing fluid, coming in several surges.

It was her first actual sex, but she had had no pleasure of it, other than the feeling of accomplishment. She had managed a man, maintaining control, just as Havoc had told her to. The member had fit, and it hadn't hurt, again as he had predicted. He had evidently known.

"Very good, Oak," she said, and kissed him. She felt almost guilty for the fact that she remained unsatisfied. But perhaps in time she would be able to gain her own pleasure along with his.

"Appreciation!" he gasped. "What was that?"

"That was sex, Oak. It is what a woman gives a man when she likes him."

"I like you!"

"And I will like you, Oak, when you do what I say." She lifted herself off him, found a tissue in her clothing, and wiped off his spent penis, knowing that he lacked the understanding to do it himself. How different it would have been with Havoc!

"I will do what you say!" he agreed.

They had a working understanding.

"Now get dressed."

He dressed, and she dressed. She had to do up his buttons and fasten his belt. She found his comb and put his hair back in order. "Do not speak of this to others," she said. "Unless they ask." She doubted Oak's parents would ask. They would know. "This is our first secret."

"Secret," he agreed.

They went downstairs and back outside. Havoc was gone, but Pot and Kettle stood where they had been. They had evidently been hesitant to enter the house, suspecting.

They approached the couple. "Oak showed me his room," Opaline said. "I will share it with him."

"But he doesn't like us to intrude," Kettle said.

Opaline took Oak's hand. "He will share with me. We like each other. Don't we, Oak?"

"Yes!"

They were silent. They understood that she had already taken over.

Opaline became part of their household. When she wasn't with Oak, she helped Kettle with household chores. When Pot had work to do outside, such as chopping wood, Opaline brought Oak out and made him carry armfuls to the house. Oak was almost pitifully eager to please her in any way he could.

And she rewarded him for it, frequently, at any time of the day or night. The first few times she bestrode him, but then she explained how there were other ways to do it, and had him clasp her from behind while she fed his member into her cleft. It was the way Havoc had lain with her, only Oak's penis was always inside her, until he spouted. She never teased him; he was not smart enough to understand.

Soon she was sharing a second secret with him, encouraging him to move a marble across a flat surface, a nudge at a time. He thought it was just an idle entertainment, but she expressed delight in seeing him do it. Since her delight thrilled him, even when it wasn't immediately supported by sex, he gladly cooperated. No one had been interested in this before. When he had shown his parents, they

thought the movement was because of a dent in the mattress.

In due course Opaline took him into the nearby forest and had him move a chip of wood across a stump. At first he was right near it, but she made him try it from farther away. She made sure they were alone, then drew a line in the dirt and told him she would take off one item of clothing each time he moved it from a farther distance. Then he really tried. When he did it from several paces away, and she was nude, she embraced him. She opened his trousers, bringing out his stiff penis. "Lift me up," she told him. When he did, she used her hands to fit him in, and bestrode him vertically, making his spurt while standing, as it were.

A new challenge was to move two chips at once. That was difficult at first, but once he got it, he improved rapidly, and moved two, then three, then four, then five simultaneously. She had vertical sex with him four times in three hours as he achieved each added chip. He loved this game.

There was a sharp limit on the size of the object he could move, and the distance: about an ounce, half an inch. But no apparent limit on the number he could do, or the range. Both kept increasing as she encouraged him.

"You are doing well with Oak," Kettle remarked one day as Opaline helped her make bread. "He is happy, and more confident, and he looks better."

"He likes one thing."

"He likes *you*. He would cater to you even without that thing."

"I would never tease him."

"Understanding," the woman said. "You give him what he lacks, as we can not, and so he learns from you. But you may be here only for a month. What then for him?"

"I will be free to leave after a month, if I choose. I don't have to."

"Will you stay?"

"I don't know."

Kettle nodded. "Appreciation for your candor. We were uncertain about bringing in a stranger for such a purpose. Now we would like you to stay, if you choose."

That was an endorsement that had not been given before. She had won over the parents. But she could not commit. "This is not an easy decision."

"Understanding!" Then, after a pause: "He can sing."

This was new. "Question?"

"He has perfect memory for melody, but can't remember many words. If we repeat the lines for him during a song, he can render it beautifully. But we have not cared to risk doing that in public."

This was something Opaline knew how to do. "Request: may I risk it?"

"Granted." Kettle was evidently pleased.

Opaline tackled music with Oak. "Sing for me, Oak."

He just looked at her.

She chose a song at random. "Tell old Bill when he comes home this morning."

Then he sang it. Kettle was right: he had a beautiful voice, with perfect tone.

In a few days the local village had an amateur entertainment night, open to anyone. The teens liked it, and weren't ashamed to make fools of themselves trying to perform. Opaline took Oak to Nonesuch, with Pot and Kettle quietly following, and when there was an opening, led him into the center stage.

The villagers watched. They knew Oak, and knew his mental limit. They would not ridicule him. He was, after all, simple. They were more curious about Opaline, whom they hardly knew. But their side conversations continued; they were not paying full attention.

"Sing," she murmured, and spoke the line.

"Tell old Bill when he comes home" he sang, not questioning her.

"This morning" she sang, doing the refrain, as they had rehearsed it. And so it went:

*Tell old Bill when he comes home, this morning
Tell old Bill when he comes home, this evening
Tell old Bill when he comes home
To leave those downtown girls alone
This morning, this evening, so soon.*

The villagers were quiet. Now they were paying attention.

*Bill's wife was a-baking bread
When she got the news that her husband was dead
Oh, no, it can't be so
Why Bill left home just an hour ago
They brought Bill home in the hurry-up wagon
His clothes were torn and his feet were draggin'
This morning, this evening, so soon.*

When they finished the sad song, the villagers broke into applause. This had not been a poor amateur effort, but a minstrel-quality presentation. Oak surely did not understand its nuances of infidelity and consequence, but he did not need to. All he needed was to listen to the lines she gave him, and sing the tune he knew.

Opaline glanced at Pot and Kettle. They were standing together, holding hands, tears in their eyes. She had shown them and the village how Oak could be a successful entertainer. All he needed was the right encouragement and support. Havoc had taught her how to provide it. She doubted that

could be coincidence. He could see the future; he must have known that Bright would be there at Pleasant Village, so that she could enable the shy young man to sing in public. That had seemed worthwhile in itself, but now she was doing it with Oak. The practice with a man of normal intellect had shown her how to do it with the man of subnormal intellect.

Thereafter they went regularly, singing different songs. Once, on invitation, they went to a neighboring village, performing as minstrels from Nonesuch.

Yes, Oak needed direction. But there was no mean streak in him, and he was devoted to her. Things could certainly be worse elsewhere.

The month passed, and Opaline did not leave. She had not made her decision, but meanwhile it was easy to continue.

Chapter 10

Warp

"I have work to catch up on," Ennui said as they entered the office. "Havoc's son Warp will take over now."

Shee sighed. "I had hoped to be with Havoc."

"In due course." Ennui sat at her desk, which was piled with papers. Then Havoc entered, glancing at Ennui. "You summoned me, oath friend?" Shee ran gladly to him. "Havoc!" She flung her arms about him and kissed him avidly.

He returned the kiss. Then he looked into her face. "Revelation: I am not Havoc."

Shee was taken aback. "You are his mock? Doubt. I would know."

"I am Warp."

Shee looked at Ennui, who nodded. "Shee, meet Havoc's son Warp. Warp, meet Shee Robot, Havoc's new mistress."

"Regret," Warp said. "She's one winsome piece."

Shee found herself blushing. She had been crafted to do that when embarrassed, and to be embarrassed when warranted. "Apology."

"Needless," Ennui said. "No one can penetrate a Glamor's disguise. Not even another Glamor. I knew he wasn't Havoc because I know where Havoc is and I knew Warp was coming. This little show was to satisfy you that not even you can tell."

Shee gazed at him intently. He was Havoc in every nuance. "You really are not teasing me?"

The man's features shifted, becoming a handsome young man with dark black hair and eyes. Now he matched the profile in Shee's memory. "Really," he agreed.

"I was fooled."

"Now we expect you to maintain the pretense, as I have Havoc's business to attend to."

"I'm not having sex with you."

Warp and Ennui laughed. "You see, she's loyal," Ennui said. "She loves Havoc."

"This is a public appearance," Warp said. "Ennui is setting it up. No sex, not even no fault. Merely your public recognition of me as Havoc, and a kiss or two to prove it."

Shee did not fully trust this. "Why can't Havoc handle his own public appearance?"

"He is busy elsewhere at the moment. This is to establish an alibi for him, so that the machines don't know what he's up to. My sister Flame is emulating me, so that I seem to be elsewhere, and I am emulating Havoc."

"Reminder: I am a machine, serving a mission for the machines. Don't trust me with any secrets you want to keep from the machines."

"But you are not in touch with the machines at the moment. Even if you had telepathy you could not contact them; you would have to be conveyed via wormhole to one of their bases to make a report. You are on your own."

"I am an enemy agent. Why should you want to betray your father's trust by sharing private information with me?"

"This about that," he said seriously. "Twenty two years ago Havoc and Gale adopted three babies, though they had just conceived their first natural child. It was a burden because of the number—they had to get help nursing and caring for them all—and because they were Glamors that no one else could handle. We would have been terminated, otherwise, as too dangerous to allow to grow up wild. They saved us, and made us their family, and loved us, and enabled us to grow up to be all the we could be. Because we became Glamors younger than others, we also became more powerful than other Glamors, including our parents. They accept this with grace and love us still. We owe it all to them. Now our loyalty is absolute. Weft would marry Havoc if she could, and I would marry Gale if I could. Flame's commitment is parallel. We are incapable of betraying them."

He focused on her with disturbing intensity. "You will never move against Havoc, Gale, or any of those they value, such as their five children, the Ladies Ennui, Aspect, Symbol, or Monochrome."

Shee was taken aback by his manner as much as his words. "There is no need to threaten me. I am already committed, and I love Havoc. But I *am* a machine, and in time the machines will surely recover me or terminate me, depending on the success of my mission."

"This is no threat. This is your future."

"You can see the paths that far ahead?"

"Idyll Ifrit can, augmented by Mino. You are with us."

She shook her head. "I wish I could be. You have listed nine people your parents value. I long to be the tenth. But I am not a person, or even alive; I am an emulation, with emulated human appearance and emotions, no more valid than your emulation of Havoc."

"You will be the tenth, soon."

"Hope."

Warp turned to Ennui. "I will take her now. Set the schedule."

"Agreement," Ennui said, returning to her papers.

"This way," Warp said, indicating the royal suite.

Shee still did not completely trust this, but saw that she had no choice. She had assumed that it was her crafted love of Havoc that made her so much in awe of his presence. Now she understood that his son was even stronger, and could do with her anything he chose. She had thought herself to be incapable of being intimidated, but Warp intimidated her. There was something about a Glamor that made her metal knees feel like soggy sponge. She accompanied him into the suite.

He remanifested as Havoc. "I am going to make the public announcement of the situation with the machines. I will play Havoc; you will play yourself. But I will do it my way. I am a story teller."

"This is not story and it's not a nice one. Are you going to tell them the real situation?"

"Affirmation. In my fashion. In Havoc's fashion. Is there anything you'd like to include?"

"I would prefer not to be known as an evil machine."

"Machine yes, evil no."

"Could I do a song?"

"Affirmation. Hayseed will do a song. You can render it."

"Hayseed?"

He chuckled her under the chin, exactly the way Havoc would have done. "You studied Havoc. You know of the minstrel."

"Affirmation. But I thought this was to be a presentation of the crisis with the machines culture."

"That also. But first it will be the story of you, merged with that of Opaline."

"Question?"

"I just reviewed it from a memory capsule. Hayseed has been traveling with a fifth."

"Alarm! The fifths are machines' spies."

"Not consciously."

"Irrelevant. Everything they learn becomes grist for the data banks. That is the source of the information I received."

"And they receive no information we do not want them to have."

She gazed at him. "This is an intricate game we play."

"Affirmation. Her name is Opaline and she's a sweet girl he has assigned to a special mission. But rather than compromise her identity I will merge her with you. Shee and Opaline become Sophalee, or Sofee for short."

Shee appreciated the cleverness of it: her name separated into letters, with Opaline fitted into the spaces. He was forming a new character so that he could have freedom to spin one of his stories, based on but not confined to reality. This was bound to be interesting. Still—

"Question: why should you avoid compromising her identity?"

"Answer: because Havoc assigned her to a most important secret mission. One that will provide us victory in the war with the machines."

"Disbelief."

"Then you should have no problem portraying her, knowing that the story is pure fiction."

"My problem is allowing Havoc to set up a project that I know the machines will know about and thwart regardless of its validity. This would be betraying him."

He smiled. "Your skepticism becomes you, as does your loyalty. Fortunately you will not be able to interfere until you are committed."

She eyed him. "You're not my companion or my informant. You're my guard!"

"All three," he corrected her mildly. "Pa has big plans for you. I will ensure that you remain pristine until he returns."

"And if I were to try to escape you, I would discover what powers of dissuasion you possess."

"But you won't try. So I'll never need to show my dark side."

He phrased it humorously but she got the message. Havoc had not deserted her; he had assigned her to others while he handled his private business. And what could that be? She suspected it concerned her; that was why he was making sure she was accounted for.

"Ennui said she believes that Havoc wants to make me into a Glamor. Assuming this is possible, isn't it dangerous? I would have powers rivaling yours."

"We exist in dangerous times. It is as if we are playing a game with a board the size of the galaxy. The loser will be destroyed. We take the risks we need to."

"You don't need to! Let your sister align with the machines, and your entire species will be secure."

"And what of the other living species of the galaxy?"

"They are doomed regardless. The difference is only in the timing of their extinctions."

"This does not bother you?"

"Should it?"

"Affirmation."

She shook her head. "Perhaps this is a distinction between my state and yours. I am not alive, so have no rapport with living things. Only with Havoc."

"It is indeed a distinction," he agreed. "You lack empathy."

"That was not programmed, true. Why should I want it?"

He focused on her again, and again the intensity of his attention was disturbing. "You love Havoc. That was programmed."

"Affirmation."

"You want him to love you back."

"Affirmation."

"He will not do so as long as you lack empathy."

She was shaken by his certainty, again, in significant part because she was sure it was justified. But she had to ask. "How can you know that?"

"Because my emulation of him is more than an act. I can feel his feelings. He could love you, as he loves Ma and Monochrome. But he won't unless this aspect of you changes."

"There is no indication of this in my information."

"Perhaps because it is not a machine thing. They can't program what they lack. It's like lacking a soul."

"A mythical concept useful mainly to keep ignorant peasants in line."

He blew out his cheeks in another Havoc mannerism. "My work is cut out for me. I shall have to persuade you that you need this quality of personality."

"You would have to change my programming. Only the machines can do that."

"Qualification: only the machines can change your programming. But I can satisfy you that you need that change."

"If you do, you will merely cause me to desire what I can never have. I doubt that this is your intention."

"It is not my intention," he agreed. But she knew that she did not properly understand his full intention. This was no simple incidental creature. He was a dangerously powerful Glamor of a species that threatened the orderly schedule of the machines. She knew she should be afraid of him. But fear was another emotion she lacked. She couldn't afford to let such a thing inhibit her at such time as she had to tackle some serious challenge.

All of which seemed irrelevant to the situation of the moment. "Further dialogue of this nature seems pointless."

"At the moment." Again, he was conceding nothing of substance.

"What else do you have in mind for me?"

"You will need to see the near future paths."

"I can't do that. Only the far future, and that not well."

"The different ranges seem to be mutually incompatible. But it may be a matter of tuning. We shall try to adapt your far-future circuits to near-future orientation. That will help you enormously in relating to living people."

"Doubt."

He took her hands in his and gazed into her face. "Focus."

She looked into his eyes. Their black irises seemed to become dark pools. She felt as if she were falling into them, discovering a nocturnal passage beyond them. She was plummeting down that tunnel. "Disorientation."

"Hypnosis. Here are the paths."

And she saw a series of parallel pictures, of the two of them standing there, holding hands and locking their gazes. Each picture diverged into other pictures, which in turn diverged, until there was such a welter it was impossible to track any individual one.

The vast majority were identical, or almost so, but a few differed. She focused on one of the different ones, and saw how it led to the separation of the two of them earlier than was the case with the majority. In that sequence she turned around and walked out the door.

But then that sequence changed. Warp went to the door to block her way. She tried to dodge around him, but he intercepted her regardless. She could not avoid him.

Then they were back facing each other. Warp broke their connection. "What was that?" she asked, dizzy.

"I lent you my near future paths seeing. We followed one. You could not avoid me because I can see the paths and you can't. I saw what you would do, and chose paths to block it. But if you could see them, you could counter me as readily as I countered you. That is why you need this seeing."

"Need it for what? To counter you?"

"To counter any ordinary person, especially any who mean you harm. To find the best path through the maze that is ordinary human interaction. It is an immensely valuable ability."

"Awe. I wish I could have it."

"You can have it. I will teach you. In the course of our month's association."

"We are together a whole month?" she asked, not pleased. "You are my chore this month, yes."

"As I was Ennui's chore last month."

"Affirmation. She spoke well of you."

"She's a good woman."

"Affirmation. Now you will meet another good woman."

"Question?"

"The lady Symbol."

"Havoc's former mistress, and one he values still."

He nodded. "When Pa and Ma adopted us, Ma was already pregnant with Voila. She had to use a magic amulet to freshen her breasts immediately. But there were three of us, and only two breasts. So Symbol nursed Flame, and sometimes Weft and me." He smiled fleetingly "Flame is a level-headed woman. But don't say anything to her to disparage Symbol. She might scorch you before she thought."

"And that is literal." It was in her background data: the red-headed baby was a flame hurler before she expanded to full Glamor powers.

"Also: Symbol carried Voila's ikon, but had to give it up when we battled Earth. For her, it was an enormous sacrifice, but she did it willingly. She remains uncommonly close to Voila. We treat her with respect."

"Understanding."

"I will take us there. Then I will show you the near future paths. Try to fathom the best one."

"Warp," she said, disturbed. "The near future paths are what the machines lack, and want so badly they will spare your entire culture for Voila's services. If I should actually be able to learn to see them, the machines will in due course have that from me. I don't think you want to do this."

"I share your doubt," he said with surprising candor. "But Idyll says this is indicated."

"But Idyll can see only up to a month—the intermediate future. The consequence of this is beyond that time."

"There are devices of seeing that enhance the limits. Ma discovered a way to triple them, if we go to the plant culture world. Voila works with Idyll, and they have followed this three months ahead. This is the course."

"Maybe Voila plans to make the deal with the machines, and this will facilitate that."

"Doubt."

Shee shrugged. "I merely try to understand. This near-future-paths business is complicated for me."

"Agreement." He took her hands, and they were standing on a path in a forest. Ahead was a glade with a picket fence enclosing an absolutely lovely flower garden. Amidst the riot of flowers was a picture-perfect cottage. "Now see the paths."

She saw them, with his guidance. Most had them going to the door and meeting a lovely woman. Most were awkward. One was less so, though it surprised her. The timing and result differed.

The seeing ended. "What's his name?"

"Haven. He's her fourth, conceived first."

"Named after Havoc, surely." For Havoc would be the father.

"Affirmation."

They waited a few minutes, until relating to the different path. This one was timed for when Symbol was occupied in the bathroom. Then they walked to the house; Warp stood back while Shee knocked on the door. It opened and a five year old boy faced them.

Shee dropped to her knees and hugged him. "Hi, Haven. I am Shee. I come to see your mother." She kissed his forehead and let him go. She felt ridiculous, but this was literally the path to success.

The boy smiled shyly, clearly fazed by the hug and kiss. Already he took after his lusty natural father. He turned and ran into the house. As he ran, he faded from view.

"They're Air Chroma, naturally invisible," Warp murmured. "They appear to us only by illusion. It's not perfect with the children. They forget when distracted."

"Comprehension," she said, smiling.

In a moment a beautiful older woman appeared. "Who?" Then she saw Warp coming up behind. "Warp!" He had resumed his own identity.

"Symbol, this is Shee—S H E E—who is to be Havoc's new mistress."

"Expletive! I don't want to meet her."

"Too late," Warp said. "Haven likes her."

Indeed, the boy, visible again, had come up to hug Shee's legs, now that she was standing.

"Obscenity!" But Symbol was smiling ruefully. "You always did know how to get around me, Warp, even as a baby." She kissed him. "Come in."

"We used the near future paths," Warp said.

"Which is *how* you knew how to get around me. All of you Glamor brats did." Symbol was mortal, but clearly had no awe of the royal Glamors. She had nursed them and changed their diapers. Shee envied her that status.

Soon they had met Symbol's husband, Garden, and her two other children. Haven sat on Shee's lap, adoring her.

"That boy always did have an eye for pulchritude," Garden remarked. So, evidently, did Garden; he was trying manfully not to stare. Had Shee known she would be meeting a man, she would have dressed more conservatively.

Symbol turned her direct attention on Shee. "Apology for my jealousy. There was a time when I was Havoc's mistress. I miss those days."

"I am a robot," Shee said. "Sent here by the machines to persuade Havoc to send Voila to them."

Symbol looked blank. "Question?"

"A robot," Warp said. "Like a golem, only self-animated. A machine. She is not alive."

Symbol looked at her son, now nestled against Shee's yielding bosom. "She doesn't look dead to me."

"I am conscious and aware," Shee said. "And I love Havoc. But I was made, not born."

"Havoc is lucky," Symbol said. "But why was it necessary for us to meet?"

"Havoc wants Shee to become a Glamor," Warp explained. "You may have to carry her ikon."

Shee froze with surprise. Not Ennui? Then she remembered: she had suggested this to Ennui, who obviously had efficiently followed up.

The woman's face was a study in contrasts, before it dissolved into formlessness. She was having trouble maintaining her facial illusion. Finally her voice spoke, mouthlessly. "She gets to be a Glamor? Jealousy compounded! But I get her ikon? Gratitude!"

"Complication," Warm said. "Idyll says that Shee can become a Glamor, but there is an obscurity about her ikon. It may be that it is required to go elsewhere. But we need your acquiescence, for when it clarifies."

"Affirmation!"

The rest of the visit was routine. Then Warp hugged Symbol, and Shee gave Haven another hug and kiss. The boy was plainly smitten with her, and that had paved the way for a friendship with his mother.

"Endorsement," she told Warp as they left the garden. "The near future paths are useful. They showed the way to make it work. She would not have welcomed me otherwise."

"Demonstration," he agreed, and conjured them back to Triumph City. "Now we do the presentation."

"Already? But I have done no preparation."

"Needless. Merely decide on a song of hopeless love."

"Oh, that's right. You guide the actors. But I'll still need appropriate clothing. This outfit is designed to impress Havoc. You saw its effect on Symbol's husband."

He made a negligent gesture, and she was clothed in the simple blouse, skirt, and slippers of a village girl, her hair tied back with a worn ribbon. She remained, however, an extraordinarily attractive woman. "Remember: I am Havoc."

"Affirmation." His appearance matched, including, now, the crown.

Already they were walking onto a high stage that overlooked the open center of the city. Tiers upon tiers of seats were there, completely filled. Ennui had set up the presentation while they visited with Symbol.

"Greeting, citizens," the emulated king said.

"Greeting, Sire!" the audience responded.

"I have an important announcement to make. Naturally I'll begin by wasting your time with a story."

"Naturally, Sire," the crowd chorused happily.

Shee stood in the background, admiring the expertise. This was Havoc, through and through, playing to the crowd.

Then he turned to her with an introductory gesture. "This is Sofee, my assistant for this tale." He faced the audience, holding his hand to his face to signal confidentiality. "She's new. I'm breaking her in. She may balk at some parts of the story. Don't let on."

"Negation, Sire!" they chorused. They loved it when they became part of the scene. Naturally they assumed she was a new bath girl, available for personal hygiene, sex, or any other fancy the king might have. Bath girls were invariably lovely, smart, obliging, and young. What did "Havoc" have in mind that might make her balk?

Now he settled down to the story. "Once upon a time, in a village far far away, there lived a simple village teen girl named Sofee. She was pretty enough, and smart enough, and had an obliging nature, but no prospects for marriage with any local lout. This vexed her, for if she didn't marry by the time she was eighteen she would be forced to become the village whore, the plaything of any raunchy old codger who couldn't get enough at home."

He gestured again toward "Sofee," who put on a vexed expression that brought an appreciative murmur. This was evidently a halfway familiar situation for some outlying villages.

"And here was the reason," "Havoc" continued. "Sofee was a fifth. Now there are several classes of folk on Charm. Most are ordinary folk. Some are fourths, which is to say the children conceived by men other than their regular fathers. Every family must have at least four children, at least one being a fourth, to keep the species mixed. But of course you know this."

There was a murmur of assent. Most women did not like the requirement of being unfaithful to their husbands for one child, but all had to do it, or adopt.

"Some are changelings. These are babies implanted in the women by the Temple, so that no infidelity occurs. They are superior in most ways, but can be marginalized by others. He paused. "I was a fourth and a changeling. So was my wife Gale. We were first drawn together because we shared this status. Other children did not really befriend us. We came to love each other, and I think she is still the most beautiful and talented woman on the planet." The audience broke into applause.

"Only later did we learn that some changelings can become Glamors. We adopted three, as you know, before having any of our own. We don't regret it." There was more applause.

"And in the last generation another class has appeared, the fifths. These are synthetic children, made in a laboratory, not born of women. They are genuine in every sense other than their origin. But they are all adopted, and often excluded by normally birthed folk. This is not fair to them, but people have the attitudes they do, and they are wary of anyone who is different. They are not allowed to pick on fourths or fifths, but neither can they be required to befriend them, let alone marry them. This is ironic, because a person could do worse than marrying a fifth." He gestured again to Shee. "Sofee may seem ordinary now, but she would be very good for any man who married her. Not only would she cater endlessly to him, because of the loyalty of her kind, she would oblige him sexually at a formidable rate. Because a fifth can't achieve sexual pleasure until her partner does, and fifths have a

high libido." He paused for an aside. "That is, they like sex. Don't tell."

There was some laughter as the audience agreed.

"In addition, they don't age the way others do. It's something about being manufactured instead of birthed. They grow up normally, but then they level off. When Sofee is forty she will look much the way she does now, and be still as eager to oblige her man. She can and will birth his children, but her figure will not suffer. There are men who might appreciate that quality in a woman, and women who might appreciate it in a man."

Now many in the audience looked thoughtful. This was it seemed something they had not known about before.

"So Sofee, foolishly denied, conceived a bold notion: she would travel to Triumph City and become the mistress of the king." He paused, looking startled. "That's me! Suddenly this grows interesting." He turned a sexually appraising gaze on her.

There were chuckles. The king's appetite for obliging maidens was legendary.

"Of course this is just a story. But let's see where it leads. The king learned of this—he has a noble nose for nubility—and decided to investigate. He was wary, as not every girl is as innocent as she seems. But also intrigued, because he didn't have a fifth among his mistresses, and for some reason he liked the idea of having one who would still look like twenty when she was forty and still have a strong sex drive. So he sent his alternate identity, Hayseed the Minstrel, to intercept her and get to know her."

He looked at the audience again. "Now Hayseed's a good guy, and he has his talents. But sometimes it seems as if he's got corn shucks where his brains should be. The girl was scared to travel with a grown stranger, so he made her a no fault Oath of Brotherhood. That meant he couldn't touch her, no matter how eager for it she might get. To make it worse, she was as cute as they come."

Havoc crossed the stage, and his clothing and aspect changed. Now he was Hayseed the Minstrel.

Hayseed looked at the audience. "Havoc's a good guy and a tolerable king," he confided. "But sometimes it seems as if this business of royalty has squeezed his barbarian qualities right out of him. He's too expletive proper." Hayseed let fly a resounding burp.

The audience burst into laughter. Shee knew why: the king was famous for having burped during his first public speech as king, showing his barbarian lack of mariners.

Now Hayseed approached Sofee. "Going my way, cutie?"

"Not with you, you lecherous coot," he replied, speaking for her in the manner of such presentations. "No offense."

The audience chuckled. Shee had to stifle her own smile; Warp was good at this, unsurprisingly.

"Suppose I make you an idiotic Oath of Brotherhood?"

"Then I will travel with you," she agreed. "My brothers call me a brat."

So they walked across the stage together. Hayseed made a hand signal of the sun moving across the sky: time was passing.

"We must settle for the night," Hayseed said. "Here is a rest stop with shelter, food, and a river in which to wash."

"Turn your back," she said sharply. "My brothers gawk when they peek."

So Hayseed turned his back so she could strip and wash herself. The audience watched closely: would she follow the script literally?

"I'll bet she doesn't," Hayseed confided to the audience.

She did. Sofee removed her clothing, pantomimed washing, then shook herself dry and put her clothing back on. In the process she gave the audience a full view of her nude body. A number of men were openly gaping. This was some village girl! The women were not completely amused.

Hayseed never looked. Instead he walked to the other side of the stage, becoming Havoc. "I told you he was a fool. He could at least have used a hidden mirror." He returned to the Hayseed side.

Next day Hayseed played his dragon scale and sang folk songs for room and board at a village. Warp's rendering was compelling; as a minstrel he was excellent.

Sofee took note, making her attention obvious to the audience, not to Hayseed. Here was a man with genuine talent. She began to get interested. This time when she washed up she did not require him to face away, so that he was able to see her body. She was innocently vamping him. But he did not seem to notice.

Havoc, across the stage, did, though. "Look at those perfect breasts! That tight bottom. I'll bet he has a member so hard it's about to burst his pants. Maybe next time he'll be more careful with his oaths."

On the third night they knew that the following day would see them to Triumph City. By now Sofee was thoroughly smitten with Hayseed. But she had learned that he was married and had five wonderful children. Her love was futile.

He slept, but she was restless. Finally she sat up in her sheer nightie and sang her song of longing. It was a standard folk song, familiar to everyone. They liked to compare how different singers did such songs.

What was different was that she sang it herself, with her own accompaniment of the shells. She saw many members of the audience staring in astonishment. It wasn't just that she sang, or that she had a strange new accompaniment. It was that she was a superlative singer. She put her all into it.

*Some one of these mornings bright and fair
Gonna spread my wings and fly from here.
Fare thee well, my honey, fare thee well.*

She gazed on him adoringly, but Hayseed slept on, oblivious.

*I wish that I could be your lover
But I must fly 'cause you love another,
(refrain)
Someone'll love you and say she's true
But I'll still love you when I'm gone from you.
(refrain)
My path is long and I must be gone
But my life'll be longer 'cause I'm all alone,
(refrain)*

Then she broke down and silently wept, and many in the audience wept with her.

Hayseed still slept.

Finally she went to his bedside, leaned over him, and gave him a fleeting kiss. There was a small moan of identification in the audience. Then she lay on her bed and slept.

The audience broke into prolonged applause.

After a suitable pause, Hayseed sat up. It was morning.

"Our journey together is almost done," he said. "Now there must be truth between us."

"Acquiescence."

"I am not Hayseed, at least, not exactly," he said, manifesting as Havoc. "I traveled with you in order to get to know you. I find you intriguing, and am ready to take you as my mistress."

"I am not a fifth, at least not exactly," she said. "I traveled with you in order to get your attention so I could impress you with my qualities."

"Question?"

"I am not a person at all," she said. "I am a humanoid robot."

"Confusion." He was echoing similar confusion in the audience. They had expected a surprise ending, or at least a heavy no fault session as she released him from his oath, but this was something seemingly from some quite different story.

"A mechanical person crafted to resemble a living woman. Similar to one of your golems, except that no other person animates me. I am on a mission from the machines."

"Bewilderment."

"Your human culture faces its worst enemy: sapient machines that mean to destroy all life in the galaxy. You must stop them or you are doomed."

"If you are one of them, why tell me this? Are you here to kill me?"

"Negation. I am here to love you."

"Confusion," he repeated.

"I want to be your mistress. But you can't keep me unless you meet my price."

"What is the price?"

"You must persuade your Glamor daughter Voila to enlist her services with the machines."

"Denial!"

"If you do, not only can you keep me, the machines will spare your whole culture."

"Outrage!"

"If you do not, the machines will destroy you, and me, and all other human beings."

Havoc faced the audience. "The story of Hayseed and Sofee is fiction. The news of her nature and mission is true. The machines wish to recruit my daughter to their cause, and have sent this luscious thing to persuade me to persuade her. If we accept, we are safe. If we decline, it means war with the machines, and they are indeed our worst enemy. They will try to destroy us, and may succeed. Because this concerns every one of you, we are putting it to a vote. Do we accept, which means I get this lovely robot and the machines get Voila? Or do we reject, which means we risk our existence? The votes will be tallied by the village elders in one month."

The audience sat stunned. Havoc had just done it again, wreaking havoc on their emotions.

The curtain closed, isolating them.

"Now we need to identify your natural constituency," Warp said.

Shee was still recovering from the abruptness of the presentation to the people. "Question?"

"Every Glamor has a constituency. Mine is Fungus. Havoc's is trees and plants. There are not many left. We must find one for you."

"Constituency," she agreed. "I am familiar with the concept. But I have no idea how I could ever be a Glamor, so the matter of the ikon or constituency seems academic."

"We shall have to get Idyll to help. But you will have to help too. It is a very personal thing."

"I should think so! But what about this vote you just set up? Are you really going to leave it to the populace?"

"They will vote rejection. That decision will help them prepare for the risk."

"You know the future, so are sure?"

"Affirmation. Now we travel." He put his hands on her arms. They were on Planet Counter Charm.

The human presentation of Idyll Ifrit was already forming. "Welcome, Warp, Shee."

Warp got right to the point. "Pa wants her to turn Glamor. I'm supposed to find her a constituency, but I'm baffled. She's a fine actress, but lacks empathy. The emotions she projects are not those she feels."

He was inaccurate there. When she projected love for Havoc, it was real. But she did not care about others.

"Problem," Idyll agreed. "Opinion, Shee?"

"Emphatic. I believe it is suicidally dangerous for you to even consider making me a Glamor, because I serve the machines who mean to destroy you. But assuming that there is some legitimate reason for this, I still doubt that it is possible. If it is possible, I don't see what empathy has to do with it."

"Everything," Idyll said. "It is the constituency that enables the Glamor state. The ikon provides the raw power, but the constituency is the essence. You must identify so closely with yours that you feel any injury it suffers. It supports you, and you defend it. You will not malign or abuse fungus in Warp's presence, or lichen in Gale's presence. Those constituencies will also come to their Glamors' aid in other ways, at need. It is a virtual symbiosis. It is empathy that makes the connection."

Shee shrugged. "Then any such effort is pointless. I have the qualities I was constructed with, and programmed with."

"Negation," Idyll said. "You started with those, but the machines knew you could not succeed in your mission unless you fulfilled yourself. That is why you spent years in a pseudo-human village, learning conventions instead of being programmed with them. You were programming yourself. Empathy is to a degree a learned quality of character."

"The capacity for it must exist before it can be learned," Shee said. "You may teach me near-future paths seeing by adapting my existing far-future paths seeing, but empathy is another matter. There is nothing to adapt."

"Observe." Idyll gestured to the forest beside the glade. It had become a different scene.

In that scene, a human village girl walked along a path. She hummed a tune as she went, and sometimes skipped, making her skirt flounce. She was intercepted by a brutish man: a brigand. She tried to retreat, but he caught her and heaved her up so that her bare legs dangled before him, kicking futilely. Then another brigand came, opening his trousers.

Suddenly Shee was there, striking viciously at the second brigand. He dissipated in smoke, as did the first one and the girl. It had been an illusion. The ifrit was unexcelled at that.

Shee retreated, returning to the glade. "I don't like rape."

"You identified with the girl," Idyll said.

"I did not feel her feeling. I just could not stand by and allow her to be despoiled."

"Why not? She was no one you knew."

"Havoc wouldn't like it."

"She's got a point," Warp said. "She attunes to Pa, and won't do anything that might cause him to be annoyed with her. Pa would never stand by and let brigands rape a girl."

"Point yielded," Idyll agreed. "No evidence of empathy. That will be attended to in due course. What about her constituency? To what could she relate, without empathy?"

"To inanimate matter," Warp quipped.

They laughed. Then Warp and Idyll paused, exchanging a glance. "She is animate matter," Idyll said. "If there is one thing that lacks a champion, it is inanimate matter. What better champion than a sophisticated sentient sapient machine?"

Both looked at Shee. "Ludicrous," she snapped. "Matter doesn't care what happens to it."

"How do we know that?" Warp asked. Now Shee paused, unable to answer.

Chapter 11

Enclave

Havoc appeared in Monochrome's suite. "Havoc!" she exclaimed, delighted. "I thought you were with Shee, working up to the public presentation of the machines crisis."

"That's Warp, emulating me."

"I thought he was with Marionette on the challenge planet."

"That's Flame, emulating him."

She eyed him. "Confusion. Am I missing something?"

He laughed, enfolding her. "Nothing I can detect. You are still Earth's most beautiful woman."

"And all yours, anytime." She was already shrugging out of her clothing. "To what do I owe this surprise tryst? Have you come at last to inspect and approve the new bath girl candidates?"

"Question?"

"Ennui is too busy catching up the backlog from that spot vacation you made her take with Shee,

so I agreed to see to the selection. But since you're the one who is choosy about the girls who touch you, I thought you had better make the final approval."

"Why new girls? The old ones are fine."

"They don't stay sixteen forever, Havoc. They turn seventeen, and then they have to move on to get married. Having served the king in this manner is an excellent qualification, and most marry well. So there's a constant attrition, and more need to be recruited. We'll run out of them within months if we don't promptly replace them. So this is a necessary chore."

Havoc wasn't much for chores. "Another time. I have more pressing business now."

"Ever thus. Do not be despondent if one day there are no girls there and you have to wash yourself."

She was teasing him. "I would never get clean," he said, kissing her. "Agreement. Not where it counts. And what is this business?"

"I need an assistant on a dangerous mission."

"Gladly, Havoc!" She had efficiently stripped him as they talked, and worked him up to turgid readiness. When it came to sex, she was the absolute Mistress.

"Negation. I need an ikon carrier."

"Obscenity! There goes my opportunity." She rolled him over, taking him in. "Details?"

"Privacy."

"Granted." She milked him, causing him to spurt within her. He felt her answering climax.

"There is a mystery about Shee Robot. I need to fathom it before I take her the next step."

"Of what nature?"

"Sexual. She was nervous about the prospect of rape. I suspect she had reason."

"It is not the kind of experience a woman forgives or forgets," she agreed. "Even, I suspect, a mechanical woman, though it is difficult to imagine any man being physically capable of forcing such a creature."

"So I will travel secretly to her planet of origin to investigate. Maybe I can learn what I need."

"That would be a machine world. Havoc, if they caught you—"

"Did I mention danger?"

She sighed. "You must do what you must do, you impetuous barbarian. So you need a mortal girl to carry your ikon."

"It doesn't have to be a girl."

"Oh, it does, Havoc, with you. You can't last an hour without plumbing a woman."

"Exaggeration," he said, laughing. "I also need one who won't be missed here. The machines must not know what I'm up to until it's too late for them to stop it. Can you find a suitable prospect?"

"Affirmation. My personal assistant, Scent. A former bath girl."

"Question."

"You don't know her. I have kept her out of your sight so you wouldn't take her for your bed instead of me. She was assigned to me when I first came to planet Charm, and I kept her thereafter, along with two of my other assistants. That enables her to avoid marriage, for now."

She was teasing him about his womanizing, but also serious. "This must be voluntary."

"She will love it. But there's a caution."

"Question?"

"She's a good girl in every respect except one. She has a rape fantasy. You will have to do it her way. She is incapable of climaxing in the ordinary manner."

"Rape? Negation."

"Not real rape. Mock rape."

He was intrigued. "Details?"

"Demonstration. Get dressed." She got off him and shrugged back into her clothing as he put his back on. "Scent!" she called.

A young woman appeared. Her hair was fair, her shape shapely, her face petite. She looked vaguely familiar; if she had served years before as a bath girl, that would explain it. "Mistress."

"King Havoc needs your assistance on a dangerous mission."

"Delight!"

"To a far planet, to carry his ikon. He is investigating a sexual matter."

The girl's gaze fixed on Havoc with a peculiar intensity. "Mistress."

"I told him. But I think a demonstration will be better."

"Agreement! Will you hold me?"

What was this?

"Affirmation." Monochrome stood facing Scent.

The girl stepped into her, ducking her head down until it almost touched her knees. Monochrome leaned over and caught her about the waist from above. She heaved, and the girl came up, her legs dangling before her face. Her bottom seemed to be bare under the skewed skirt.

"That's the brigand mode!" Havoc exclaimed.

"Agreement. Do her, Havoc."

"Objection."

"Do me," the girl called. "Please, Sire."

Rape fantasy. She really did want it.

He drew out his stiffening member, embarrassed to admit that this was a turn-on. Partly for the clear exposure of her open genital region within the skirt, but more for the semblance of rape. He stepped toward the inverted cleft, and hesitated.

"Now!" Scent cried, spreading her legs wide.

He aimed his member, put it to the slot, and pushed it in. She was hot, slick, and tight. He noted the oddity that his penis was aiming down, not up, as it went deep.

"Harder! Ravish me!"

He jammed harder, withdrew somewhat, and thrust again. The novelty of the position and evident eagerness of the girl were also turn ons, and on the third thrust he erupted.

"More, Sire more!" she cried, clenching around him.

He continued driving, extending his orgasm, filling her to overflowing. Because of her position, it was like pouring thick grog into a cup. He had never done it this way before, and the sensation was intense.

Finally she had had enough, and he was allowed to conclude his orgasm and withdraw. Monochrome eased her down and the girl landed on her feet, her skirt dropping back into place. "Appreciation, Sire," she said as she hurried toward the bathroom, dripping.

"Rape fantasy," he repeated. "Is this why she avoids marriage?"

"Affirmation. She needs to find an understanding man. At present she is dependent on my brigand assistant, to whom such interplay is natural."

"Where I am going, brigands actually rape."

"I think she could handle that better than conventional sex, which makes her vomit."

Scent returned, garbed in traveling clothes. "Fetch my ikon from Ennui," he told her.

She left. "You will have to do her often," Monochrome warned him. "She has a crush on you, as all former bath girls do, and will not be able to restrain herself. But she is competent in other respects, being smart and nervy."

"Acknowledgment." This was bound to be interesting for more than one reason.

Ennui came back with the girl. Ennui did not give out ikons on routine demand. Havoc nodded, and she handed the string that bound his little tree ikon to Scent, who removed the string and put the ikon in her mouth. That was the best place for a girl who doffed her clothes on scant pretext. Ennui did not touch ikons, lest she be unable to let them go, but Scent seemed not to be concerned.

Havoc kissed Monochrome, then put his hand on Scent's arm. "Not there, Sire," she murmured. She moved his hand to her buttock. "There."

He chuckled, squeezed, and conjured them both to Counter Charm.

"Greeting, Havoc," Idyll's voice came.

"I go with Scent to Shee's origin planet," he said. "I need the track by which she came here."

"I will derive it," Idyll said. "It will be a few minutes."

"We'll wait."

Scent looked at him. "We have time, Sire?"

"Already?" he asked, surprised.

"You kissed the Mistress. That was so romantic. It turned me on."

"I understand that conventional romance is not for you."

"Romance is fine. It is sex that differs."

"I will kiss you," he agreed, and tried to do so. His mouth sheered away from hers. "Ikon permitting."

"Oh. Embarrassment." She spat the ikon out of her mouth and held it away from her body.

Now he could kiss her. He did so. She participated avidly. "Ikons can be a nuisance," he remarked, squeezing her bottom again.

"And—I know I shouldn't ask—"

There was a fast pulse at her throat and her eyes were luminous. He touched her mind and read

the sheer sexual hunger there. It was another turn-on. "Can you do it without being held?"

"When I have to." She faced away from him, bent down, and put her hands on the ground. Her skirt rode up to expose her bottom and associated genital region. "But do it roughly, if you please, Sire."

He brought out his member, instantly stimulated by the display, and put it to her opening cleft. He took rough hold of her hips, bent his knees to get down far enough, and thrust in, seeing his member sink into her flesh. This time he did it hard from the outset, almost knocking her over. She loved it, clenching in time to his thrusts. In an instant he spurted inside her.

"Pleasure!" she gasped, climaxing herself. She had a flash response, for a mortal. Probably this was because of the way her rape fixation turned her on, but also because she really liked doing it with Havoc. It was fun for him too; she had a very nicely padded posterior, a pleasure to plumb.

He finished and withdrew. She straightened up, wiping herself with a cloth she had. "Enough?" he inquired.

"For now, Sire. There can never be enough of you, ultimately."

It was an attitude he could tolerate.

"Track derived," Idyll's voice said.

"Appreciation." He suspected the ifrit had waited until he finished with Scent before speaking. She was thoughtful that way, and not jealous. He had trysted with her solid semblance many times, always delightfully. Once the ifrits had learned to perform solid sex with humans, they liked it.

And will tryst again, on your return, her thought came.

He took Scent's hand and willed himself along the route Idyll had provided. This took them to a section of the galaxy thousands of light years distant: an impossible trip, except for the wormholes.

They were on a platform on a mesa. There was no air, only noxious gas, and it was burning hot.

Havoc immediately spread a protective mist about them, and put his mouth to Scent's, exhaling breathable air for her. He extended his awareness and found a Charm-normal environment. He conjured them there.

It was a greenhouse, with familiar plants growing luxuriantly. They were making the local air. But they were not alive; they were robotic emulations.

Scent coughed, clearing her lungs. "Appreciation," she rasped.

"You are my mistress of the moment," he said. "I have to take care of you."

She laughed weakly. "Delight in the appellation." She looked around. "Where are we, Sire?"

"Best not call me that," he said. "This is enemy territory. Just call me Havoc."

"Remark: As if that conceals your identity."

She was right, but he didn't care to discuss it. "Wait here while I explore."

"Observation: As if I had a choice."

He kissed her. "You have an impertinent streak to go with your plush ass. I like that. Find a suitable place to hide the ikon." He squeezed the ass and conjured himself to a spot high above the planet.

Now he saw that it was segmented like an Earth pomegranate fruit. Each section was significantly different from its neighbors in atmosphere, vegetation, landscape, and structures. What was going on here?

He moved to a reddish zone. This was not Red Chroma territory; there were no volcanoes in evidence. It was rust colored air in a nonChroma region. Within it were giant purple worms munching on a mountain of sludge. They weren't alive. They were robots.

He moved to another. Here the air was greenish, from gaseous vents. Large five legged insects scuttled about, touching antennae, feeding, mating. They too were robots.

A third section was an acid pool wherein swam giant amoeba. "Voila would like this," he murmured to himself. She was the Glamor of Amoeba. But these too were robots.

In fact there seemed to be no animate life on the planet. Merely machine emulations of amazing variety and complexity. What was happening here?

Then he caught on. These were enclaves, similar to the human one where Shee had been developed. The humans were just one project, out of hundreds. They were sending realistic emulations to many living species. Any they wanted anything from.

The sheer scale of the planetary operation was awesome. His experience with Shee had shown him how sophisticated she was, and how much skill and effort had gone into her manufacture and training. It had seemed that the machines had made a special project, expending enormous resources. They had indeed—but it was merely a blip on their screen, to express it in machine terms. One tiny cog in a huge array.

He located and checked the human enclave. There were several young women in it, engaging in routine activities. They bore more than a passing resemblance to Shee. He would be able to interact with them.

He returned to the greenhouse. "Ikon hidden," Scent said. "Amazement at how hard it was to part with it. Now you can touch any part of me." She opened her mouth, showing that it was empty, and her shirt to expose her braless breasts. They were nice breasts.

Did they have time? So far there was no evidence that the machines were aware of their presence, but that could change at any moment. There could be hidden sensors to set off alarms. Still, Scent was obviously hungry for another mock rape, and she had whetted his renewed interest.

Perhaps an experiment was in order.

"Rape is not a position," he said. "It is a forcing. Try to resist." He caught both her wrists with one hand, holding her arms over her head. With his other hand he tore her shirt the rest of the way open. Then he bent his knees, put his member under her skirt and at her cleft from in front, got it lodged, and jammed in so hard it lifted her legs off the floor.

She tried to resist, twisting her torso, but this only made her breasts bounce and added to his penetration. In a moment he jetted at her core, held the position another moment, then withdrew and set her down. The whole process had been rapid. Even so, he had felt her internal response, pulsingly hot and tight. She truly liked being roughly taken when nominally helpless.

"Agreement," she said giddily. "Rape."

He had established the principle: it didn't have to be brigand style. An uncomplicated position was more efficient.

"Now we go to the human enclave," he said as she mopped up and reassembled her shirt, licking her lips.

"Take me," she agreed blissfully. Naturally she meant it more than one way.

He took her. They landed beside the schoolhouse Shee had described to Ennui. It looked just like a typical Charm village scene, and the air and temperature were normal.

"Caution. The folk here are machines but will seem alive. I will treat them as if they are alive. I doubt they will try to harm you. I want no jealousy or interference from you."

"I will behave, Havoc," she agreed. "I know you have a mission. But when we are alone, and there is time—"

"Swift silent no fault rape," he agreed, and kissed her.

"Glorious."

There was a sound from within the schoolhouse. Havoc conjured himself inside to investigate, concerned that a machine might have spied him.

It was a single girl, a virtual duplicate of Shee. Her hair was blond without scintillation, her eyes were normal gray, and her clothing was mundane. But the perfection of her face and shape were Shee.

She saw him. "Havoc!"

"You know me?" he asked, astonished.

"I know you and love you," she said, coming to him and kissing him. "I had no idea they had made you for here."

She assumed he was another robot. "It is an unscheduled appearance," he said. "You know me, but I do not know you."

"I am Sidh, SID H," she said, pronouncing it as Shee, with a nuanced difference. "I am the runner-up, in reserve in case Shee should be incapacitated. We are friends."

This was interesting. "Question: why are you alone here?"

"I miss our days of schooling. It has been three months since the course ended and we competed for the mission. Shee won, I was second, and now we are on standby until the issue is decided in the next three months. I deceive myself that I am still in school, and might yet be chosen." She gazed at him adoringly. "But what is your purpose here? Will there be a supplementary class to be sure we know how to impress the real Havoc?"

"Negation. I come merely to meet with you, and will depart soon."

Sidh glanced around. "We are alone. It may not be in the schedule, but you are the perfect semblance of the man we all love. I do not wish to get you in trouble. But can we do something private?"

Was she propositioning him? He was really curious to see where this led. "Acquiescence. I will not tell."

"Appreciation." She kissed him again. "This first and perhaps only time, I beg your indulgence. May I lead?"

Shades of Shee! "Acquiescence."

She led him to a couch, stripped away her clothing, and eagerly undressed him. He was of course rampant. She was a clone of the machines' most beautiful woman.

She guided him to lie on the couch, then kneeled and addressed his member. She caressed it and licked it. "I suppose you are wondering why I choose this way."

"Affirmation."

"I will tell you, because I have the need to tell someone. In three months I will be compacted, as will we all, and I don't want to end with the secret still locked inside me. It relates to Shee."

"Shee," he agreed. "The one who won the competition."

"Affirmation. But this relates to how she won, and how I came in second. It was when we were ten."

"Surprise." Her mode of sexual expression derived from when she was ten years old? Yet that fit what he had learned about Shee. There was a missing section of her life that had had a profound effect on her. It was what he had come to learn about.

"We are seventeen now, but we grew stage by stage. Was it not the same for you?"

"Similar. But I am male." And alive.

She nodded, accepting that. "We were walking home from school—this school. The others had already returned, but Shee was late, and I was later. I started back soon after she did, and was about to catch up with her, when I saw her look around, then depart from the path. I spied on her, feeling guilty for doing it, but I was really curious what she might be up to.

"She went to the fence that walls off part of our enclave." She paused, massaging his member. "At that time we did not know we were robots. We thought we were real."

"Sympathy."

"That is a feeling we have heard about, but not experienced." Because it related to empathy, which they lacked. "I never thought of myself as a robot either."

"So you might have spied on her too," she said, seeming gratified.

"Affirmation. Maybe I am doing it now."

"Maybe," she agreed. "I do not know whether a man can understand, however."

"I will make the effort."

"There is a big sign saying KEEP OUT, which of course we honored. But Shee was always a bit different, and so was I. We did not always do exactly what we should." She met his gaze. "Am I revolting you?"

"Negation. I have been in trouble many times."

She nodded. "Of course. Emulating the original Havoc. That makes sense. But we girls are supposed to be docile and obedient. We feel guilty when we aren't."

"We men like that quality in you," he said gallantly "But also that bit of independence. We like to hope that you will do something naughty with us."

She laughed. "As I am doing now." She was holding his member, but not manipulating it at the moment, distracted by the dialogue.

"Affirmation."

"I am glad I am talking with you, Havoc. Already I feel less guilty."

"Welcome."

"Shee went to the forbidden fence. There was a place where a root had separated it from the ground somewhat. She dug it out with her hands, and then wriggled under. I was amazed by her audacity; she was not being a little different, but a lot different. Encouraged by that, and doubly curious, I followed her. She did not see me." She glanced at his face again. "Was I wrong to do that?"

"Affirmation. But understandable."

"Gratitude." She resumed work on his penis, but in a somewhat perfunctory manner. She seemed not to have experience, and was hesitant to stimulate it strongly. "She walked down the path through the forest. I followed, hiding behind trees. Then two brigands appeared."

She froze, in face, words, and hand. This was evidently the crux. How she had learned about brigands. "They are brutes," Havoc said.

"Brutes," she agreed. "They grabbed her. She screamed, but they did not let her go. One held her inverted with her legs to the front. Then the other came close and brought out his—his—"

"Penis."

"Yes. And he jammed it into her body, where her legs separate. It hurt, for she screamed in pain, but he didn't stop. He kept jamming it in, until he was satisfied he had hurt her enough. Then he pulled it out."

So that was what had happened to Shee! It was confirmation of his suspicion. "It was rape."

"Affirmation. But I did not know it then. I thought the point was to make her scream. Then they changed places, and the second brigand held her with her bottom up, and I knew the first one was going to do the same."

She was silent a moment, and a tear fell on his loin. "I couldn't watch any more. I fled back to the fence, and scrambled under and ran home. I did not know whether I would ever see Shee again. I feared they would kill her. But they didn't. She returned not long after that, and said nothing. So I said nothing. Maybe she was afraid that if she confessed to being naughty, by going beyond the fence, they would remove her from the program and terminate her. Later in our education we learned about sex, and I understood that the brigands had forced sex on her. She—she must have expunged it from her memory, to make the hurt less. But I remembered."

"Conjecture," Havoc said. "Brigands are evil men. They have no restrictions. But when they do something too bad, they try to hide it, so that others will not gang up on them and kill them. They must have told her that she would be terminated if she told. So she had no choice."

"Affirmation. And neither did I. But when the final competition came, and I knew that we had to travel that same path beyond the fence, I know what was lurking. And I pondered how to handle it." Now she reached for her clothing and brought out a small knife. "I found this, and sharpened it, and kept it secret. I was a really bad girl."

"Negation. It was self defense."

"Affirmation." She smiled fleetingly "I am not threatening you. I know you are not a brigand." She dropped the knife on the floor, an open signal of defenselessness against him.

"Appreciation."

"But for the brigands, I had it. When my turn came, and they intercepted me, I did not hesitate. I

leaped for the first brigand and stabbed him in the belly. He cried out but did not go down, so I stabbed him again, and again. Then he fell, and I kept on stabbing his chest and throat and face. I couldn't stop! Then the other brigand grabbed me, and I stabbed him in the arm, and then I scrambled up and ran. But I paused to reassemble myself, and wash off the blood and hide the knife. I thought I had won the competition, but Shee got through faster. So she must have remembered, and done something similar."

"She did," he agreed.

"How can you know that?"

"Truth," he said. "I am not a robot. I am the real Havoc."

Her mouth dropped open. "Joke?"

"Negation."

"Proof?"

"Can a robot do this?" He floated up from the couch, bringing her up with him because she was touching him. "Or this?" He used illusion to change his form to that of a large green crab.

She stared at him. "Embarrassment! I thought you were another one of us! A male model, for training."

He returned to normal and sank back onto the couch. "Needless. I wanted you to, so I could scout the situation without being discovered. But now the machines know of my presence, so there is no more secrecy."

"You must flee!" she exclaimed. "They will kill you!"

"Negation. They have no power over me."

"Confusion."

"As a Glamor, I am equivalent to about type 2.6 technology, while they are type 2.5. They can't hurt me or hold me. They can only observe, and for that they need a special recording machine. They are bringing it in, but it will not be in time."

"I—I would not dare to doubt you, Havoc. But how can you know this?"

"I can see the near future paths, and am equivalently omniscient." He smiled. "You have time to do with me what you wish."

"You can see me doing it? I have your leave? You are not annoyed by my presumption?"

"Affirmation. I am not."

"Joy!" She kissed him avidly, then climbed up to bestraddle him. She took his member in and

bounced vigorously, causing it to plunge deeply into her. She was somewhat clumsy with the maneuver, but her enthusiasm made up for it. "Release your pleasure, Sire, so I can have mine."

She had to serve him first. She was programmed that way, as Shee was. He let himself slide into orgasm, and felt her equivalent reaction. It was a fine mutual release.

"Gratitude," she breathed, leaning down to kiss him. She did not get off him or allow their connection to end.

"I enjoy making it with pretty girls, as you surely know."

"Affirmation. We studied you. We are programmed with high libido for you alone. We exist to please you. But you know our mission."

"To persuade me to send my daughter to join the machines."

"Confirmation. We must make every effort, though if we had free will we might suspect it was not in your best interest."

This was surprising candor. "Your programming seems not to be absolute."

"Suspicion: the same trauma that enabled Shee and me to pass the brigands gives us some independence of nature. There are aspects that can't be programmed, which is why we were given so much latitude. We evolved ourselves, to a degree. Less so with the four remaining members of our class, though they may be developing it now."

"Question?"

"They all got raped, and were humiliated and terrified. They wonder how they could have been set up for such an ugly thing. Had any been able to think for herself, she might have gotten past, as Shee and I did. It seems as if some pain enables a person to learn independence."

"Agreement. But how is it you could be raped, being strong machines?"

"We are limited to what is normal for living creatures. We must react as they would, though it pain us awfully."

Havoc nodded. "I think I have learned what I came for."

She stiffened, all the way to her warm core. "You must depart already?"

"The machines draw closer. They want to study me as I exert Glamor powers. That is not to my interest."

"Understanding. Then you must go." She lifted off him, biting her lip in a very human mannerism, stifling her evident urge to beg him to stay longer.

There was time, if he moved efficiently. The near future paths indicated some very interesting bypaths. "Before I depart, I grant you three swift wishes."

"Do me again, your way," she said immediately.

He got off the couch, picked her up, set her on it prone, lay on top of her, and wedged into her crevice from behind. He pressed his hands down under her to take hold of her breasts as he thrust and climaxed.

"Appreciation!" she gasped, her buttocks tightening against his groin as she mashed her breasts against his hands.

He got off her and dressed. He sent Scent a mental signal to join them. She had of course been watching through a window.

"Who?" Sidh asked, surprised.

"Scent. She carried my ikon. Scent, this is Sidh Robot." The two girls shook hands, appraising each other. "Next wish?" he asked.

"Meet my classmates. Meeting you even briefly will fulfill their existence." As she spoke she quickly cleaned herself and dressed. Even robot girls were efficient about such details.

"You care about them?"

"I try to, though it is not my nature."

She regretted the empathy she lacked. "Granted." He embraced her and conjured the three of them to her village.

"Girls!" Sidh called. "King Havoc is here, briefly. The real one. With his companion Scent."

They appeared from the houses. "Disbelief," one said. She had curly red hair and a slightly sultry expression, but her form was the same as Sidh's.

"Havoc, this is Siri," Sidh said.

He took the girl's hand, drew her in, kissed her, and squeezed her bottom. "Belief," she said faintly.

The other three clustered close. "Sivi," Sidh said. Havoc kissed and squeezed her too.

"Svea." Another kiss and squeeze.

"Sylv." This time she kissed and squeezed him.

"He came here to discover Shee's background," Sidh said. "I told him that. Now he must depart, before the machines catch him."

"Sadness," Siri said.

"Third wish?" Havoc asked Sidh, knowing how she would respond. "A wish for each of them."

She might lack empathy, but she certainly had potential for it.

He smiled. "Granted. Siri?"

"To see you and handle you," Siri said. "We have never touched a real man."

He started to remove his clothing again. "Sivi?"

"To have sex with you."

His exposed penis was already rising. "Svea?"

"Vengeance for our rapes."

That was different. "Sylv?"

"Take us with you."

So was that. "Question?"

"We will all be terminated when you depart, for violating our enclave isolation. We would like to continue our existence. We will serve any lowly purpose, if only you take us and allow us to be close to you. We are all crafted to love you."

"Problem," he said seriously. "I am married, with two prime mistresses, one of whom is Shee. Spot trysts are fine, but I can not commit to any continuing relationship."

"Understanding," Sylv said, dropping her gaze.

Havoc's vision of the near future paths had not prepared him for this particular one. He wanted to help them, if he could do so without causing mischief elsewhere. How could such lovely, sexy, obliging creatures be constantly close to him without alienating wife and mistresses? "Scent," he said. "Suggestion?"

"They can be bath girls," Scent said. "The position is open, they are qualified, and it is a role that keeps them intimately close to the king."

"But they are not incidental temporary workers," he protested. "This would be demeaning for women of their qualities."

"When the alternative is termination?" Scent asked. "Ask them how they feel about it."

"Endorsement," Sidh said. "We know the role of bath girls. Allow us to demonstrate."

"Granted," Havoc said, half bemused.

"I will direct," Sidh said. "I have authority as runner up in the competition. Siri, his head and neck. Sivi, his arms and hands. Svea, his belly, penis and scrotum. Sylv, his back and butt. I will take his legs and feet. First undress and clean him, carefully."

They went to it with a will. In moments Havoc was undressed and washed and rinsed all over. Their hands were caressingly gentle and competent. He was completely clean. Then Siri kissed his mouth, long and hard, and tongued him. Sivi put his two hands on her full breasts and caused him to knead them delightfully. Svea put her mouth to his rigid penis and sucked while she expertly fondled his scrotum. Sylv cleaned and massaged his anus with a slick finger, outside and inside. She had a sensitive touch, and it was a most evocative penetration. Sidh stroked his calves and kissed his toes, then clasped them with her firm thighs, making his feet feel like sexual organs.

He kissed a mouth, squeezed two breasts, clenched on a finger, stroked a hot cleft with a toe, and jetted into a welcoming throat. He was highly experienced, but this experience was novel. He was having five way sex with the loveliest possible group of girls.

Then they dried him off and dressed him. They had done it all within two minutes. They did indeed know how to be bath girls.

In the process, Sivi had achieved her wish, by having oral sex with him. So had Siri, as they had thoroughly handled him. Scent's suggestion, and their demonstration, solved the problem of taking them with him, as bath girls were considered part of the routine palace staff. So Sylv's wish could also be granted, and he rather liked the idea of further exposure to these creatures. That left Svea's wish for vengeance for their rapes.

"I can destroy the brigand robots," he said.

"Negation!" Svea protested. "We do not endorse such violence. We can't hurt them."

"Misunderstanding. Vengeance is normally a brutal affair."

"It is the humiliation more than the physical act," Svea said. "We are robots; no physical damage was done to us. But the violation of our sensitivities—that we can not forgive."

This was awkward, but also appealing. These were genuinely gentle people. Indeed, rape could be considered an act of humiliation as much as of violence. What was needed was for the brigands to be similarly humiliated. But how?

Scent had an idea, again. He read it in her mind. She was savvy in some of the nether feelings; it related to her unusual sexual passion and her association with a brigand. "Scent?"

"They need to be raped themselves," she said. "They don't know they're robots."

"Endorsement," Svea said.

Havoc remained uneasy. "Problem: who is to rape them? They would not be much humiliated by fair creatures like you forcing them into sexual expression."

"You, Havoc?" Svea asked. "As a Glamor you could overpower them and do it."

"Negation!"

"Havoc does only women," Scent explained. "Most men do. Even the brigands surely are typical

in that respect." Then she paused. "But maybe there's a way."

"Speak," Havoc said.

"If one of them thought the other was a woman," Scent said. "Until too late. The right illusion could arrange it."

"Possible," Havoc agreed, relieved.

They worked it out. Then they repaired as a group to the fenced off brigand path. Havoc invoked his magic to render all of the women invisible, including Scent, and conjured them beyond the fence. Then he used illusion to make himself resemble Scent. She was a new face, so the brigands should not suspect her.

He walked along the path, like an innocent girl. And in due course the brigands, primed for this, intercepted him. "Ho," one cried. "New meat!"

"Incomprehension," Havoc said in a falsetto. "I seem to have lost my way."

"We'll straighten you out, honey," the brigand said, laughing coarsely. He advanced on the figure.

"Confusion," the figure said, retreating.

But the brigand lunged and caught her. He whirled her around. The other brigand did not notice that in the process the two joined figures switched identities. The girl became the brigand, and the brigand became the girl. The seeming brigand knocked the resisting girl at the base of the neck, briefly stunning her, and hauled her into the inverted rape position. An invisible gag bound her mouth.

But in reality, it was the brigand being held. Invisible Scent, loving this interaction, came up and hauled down the now invisible trousers. Now the real legs and bottom were as bare as the apparent ones.

The second brigand moved in, unlimbering his ready penis. The seeming girl struggled, making muffled protests, but the man jammed violently in, accustomed to exactly such resistance. "You're one tight bitch," he grunted, thrusting vigorously.

Then the illusion faded. There was Havoc, holding the first brigand inverted, and the second was embedded in him. There were the six maidens, including Scent, applauding. He gave them all a moment to appreciate the situation, then dropped the man. Both brigands fell in a tangle, too surprised and embarrassed to speak.

The machines arrived. They were setting up their recording equipment, to catch a Glamor in the act. That was what they really wanted; the machines did not care about either the brigands or the girls, who were all part of an inactive enclave. Only a few seconds remained; the timing was exquisitely close.

Havoc went to the girls, spreading his arms. They clustered close about him.

He conjured them all to planet Charm. They arrived in Monochrome's suite.

"Question?" she asked, amazed.

"Mistress, we recruited five new bath girls," Scent said. "We knew you'd approve. Havoc selected them."

Monochrome frowned. "Havoc—"

"Jealous?" he inquired. "Sidh can be your personal servant if you wish." He sent Monochrome a mental summary of the situation.

"Needless," she said, comprehending. "Girls, you will need a dormitory of your own. You can staff the king's bath in shifts, so as to be immediately ready at any time. This way, please."

"Actually, they won't need shifts," Scent said. "Or food, or sleep."

They followed her out of the room. Only Sidh and Scent lingered. "Appreciation, Havoc," Sidh said. "We will surely meet again, and impress our endless gratitude on you."

"Agreement," he said. "I feel unclean already."

Sidh followed the others out.

"And I will get you good and dirty," Scent said enthusiastically. "Ravish me messily."

He laughed. He grabbed her and threw her on the bed. He held her wrists with one hand while he tore off her clothes with the other. She squeaked with delight. When he let her wrists go to attend to awkward buttons she did not try to fight him; instead she tore open his trousers. Then she put her arms back over her head, and he pinned them down again. She spread her thighs wide to accommodate his seeking member, in the guise of resistance. In a moment he was ramming her.

"That last rape—what a turn-on," she said as she wriggled. "I barely restrained myself."

"I felt your need," he agreed. "That was my turn-on."

"This mission—a dream come true," she said. "Helping the king, ravished by the king—eternal appreciation."

"You did well, Scent. You really helped. I accomplished my mission, and gained more than I expected. And ravishing you is fun, on occasion." He thrust again, spurting.

"Appreciation most of all for your understanding," she said. "I seldom get to indulge, my way."

"Maybe there will be another mission, some time," he said, kissing her.

"Enthusiasm!"

They finished and Scent departed to clean up. Her time with him was done, at least for this occasion. But she had indeed been a worthy assistant, and a naughtily tempting temporary mistress.

Monochrome returned. "Observation," she said. "You're a mess. You will have to clean up before I embrace you."

"Apology."

"The bath girls are ready, I believe. Treat them courteously; remember, they're new."

"Agreement," he said, heading naked for the bath chamber. He expected to enjoy both the bath and Monochrome's welcome once he was clean.

Chapter 12

Weft

Fifth nerved himself, then knocked on the door. This was an anonymous apartment on the lowest floor of Triumph City, solidly working class. Yet it was where he had been told to go.

It opened. There stood Weft in bra and panties, breathtakingly full fleshed. "Fifth!" she exclaimed. "I thought you would be here in another hour. I'm still getting dressed." She swirled her long blond hair. She had affected the Earth style enhancements, using foundation underwear to squeeze and emphasize her breasts and bottom, and makeup to artificially redden her lips. Such unnecessary exaggeration turned him off.

"Apology," he said, embarrassed. "I must have confused the time. I will return later."

"Oh, come off it," she said, laughing. "You know I saw you coming. I just wanted to flash you." She caught his arm and hauled him inside. "Are you angry?"

"Awkward," he said.

"And you know I'm reading your mind. You don't want to tell me that full fleshed women turn you off."

"Agreement," he said, flushing.

"And for a month you'll have to fake it, because now you know exactly how I am." She paused. "Or do you? Let's be sure." She quickly unsnapped her bra and stepped out of her panties. "This is me, in the flesh. My body owes nothing to foundation garments."

"Agreement," he repeated, wishing she would stop teasing him. He looked away from her, his gaze sweeping over the comfortably appointed room. On a shelf lay a trapezoidal shaped stringed device, which he recognized as her hammer dulcimer. She was a songstress, the same as her mother Gale, and played the same musical instrument. She was reputed to be the finest singer on the planet.

"I prefer to leave that reputation to mom," she said, answering his thought.

"Understanding." The four older children all worshiped their parents, though in truth all four were

stronger Glamors than Havoc and Gale. The one he knew least well was Weft, and he wished she would stop trying to vamp him.

"In a moment," she said. "Now strip."

"Negation."

"Requirement." And suddenly his clothing was gone. "Ha! I do turn you on."

For his penis was standing.

"Your flesh forces me," he said. "But it is not the type I prefer."

"You do not wish sex?"

"Not at this time," he said, knowing she would take him into it regardless.

"Curious thing," she remarked as she stepped up to embrace him. "A man can rape an unwilling woman. But a woman is not supposed to be able to rape an unwilling man. Yet I suspect it is possible."

He stood without responding.

"She could tie him down, tease his member to life, and mount him," she said. "Would that be rape?"

"Uncertainty."

"You are being noncommittal. Why?"

He tried to hold back, but couldn't help himself. He exploded. "You are all Glamors toying with a mortal, manipulating and forcing me. Yes, raping me, with your power I can't oppose. I wish I were home with Flame!"

Weft burst into tears.

Fifth stood there, waiting.

Abruptly the tears faded. "It's not working."

"Agreement," he said grimly.

"Where did I go wrong?"

"No comment."

She showed a flash of ire. "Candor."

He had to say it. "I have been with four Glamor women before you, one of them your mother, all of whom had their way freely with me. You are not as cynical as Red, as good an actress as Voila, as compassionate as Gale, or as honest as Flame. You are wrong for me simply because you are not Flame, and no amount of posturing can change that. Apology for putting you in this position."

She froze. She was still holding him, naked; every part of her went rigid. It seemed he had really done it this time. He should have held his temper. How were they ever going to get along now?

She stepped back. "Negation. You have taught me a lesson. I will try to reform. You are a genuinely nice man perhaps unfairly treated. Request: may we start over?"

He wished he could erase the entire sequence. He should simply have accepted her as she presented herself. She was locked into this, just as he was. Once the month was done, he would be free to return to Flame, vindicated. The problem was their association in that month, poisoned by his intemperate outburst. "Wish."

Then he was standing clothed outside her door. She had used her magic on him, to simulate a new beginning. He sighed inwardly and knocked.

The door opened. Weft stood there, wearing a modest yellow dress, slippers, and a yellow ribbon tying back her long fair hair. "Fifth," she said. "Welcome."

"Appreciation."

"Come in. I expected you."

What could he do? He stepped in.

"Supposition," she said. "That competitive sisters could make a deal to see whether one could take something of value from the other. Such as a mortal boyfriend. That one got too caught up in it and tried to vamp him at the outset, just to prove he could be led around by his penis. That she forgot he was a person in his own right whose feelings deserved respect. That she is mortified and wishes she could erase the whole scene. Is it possible that he would give her another chance?"

This was a side of her he had not appreciated before. "Possible," he agreed guardedly.

"Appreciation. We have work to do, but first I would like to get to know you. Have a seat. Refreshment?"

He spread his hands as he sat on a chair. "Your preference."

She went to her kitchenette and in a moment returned with two tall glasses of purple liquid. "Grape juice, unfermented." She gave him one.

He sipped, half expecting something potent, but it was innocent. "Appreciation."

She sat opposite him. Nothing showed. "Flame fears that it is her Glamor status that attracts you. She is trying to nullify that by exposing you to other Glamors. Is this effective?"

"Affirmation! All of you are like stars, and I am like a dull planet. I could orbit any of you. But I love Flame."

"What does she have that we do not?"

"A lovely lean body."

"Therefore you cling to her?"

"I admit my masculine shallowness. I am turned on by her form. I always liked lean women."

"And if I looked like this, I would appeal similarly to you?" Her body became a mirror of Flame's, with her dress shrinking to fit. It was illusion, of course, but effective.

"Sexually," he agreed uncomfortably. "Not necessarily in other respects."

"So there is something else about Flame."

"She truly cares about me."

"Candor," she said. "I have been with many men. Some are turned on by my Glamor status. All are turned on by my physical appearance. I can take any I choose, within minutes. I wish I could find one who is turned on by *me*. Who would be as loyal to me as you are to Flame. I do envy her that."

This was candor indeed. She was confessing a private desire. "Appreciation."

"We must engage in a no fault sexual relationship, this month. I must try to win you, and you must try to win me. But apart from that, I hope we can respect each other. As we are." Her form returned to its original buxom. "I proffer this compromise: we must do it a certain number of times, but I will leave the choosing and manner of them to you. I will neither demand from you nor tempt you. Either by physical exposure or by planting desire in your mind. It has to be your true preference. But I will never deny you. If on the last day it has not happened, then we will have to bite the bullet and do it ten times in succession. In that event I will facilitate your potency. Fair?"

"Fair," he agreed, amazed. Could she really be turning control of the sexual side of their association over completely to him? Only Flame had done that.

"Details," she said. "Do you prefer to sleep together or apart? When there is need to wash or change clothing, may we see each other or avoid it?"

He considered. "In a normal no fault relationship, couples do sleep together, and wash together. While I prefer lean, full female flesh does also turn me on when I am near it. If I sleep next to you, I will want to clasp you. If I see you wash, I will react, just as I did during that other start. I am a garden variety mortal male, chronically stimulated by female flesh. Do you prefer that I suppress such reactions?"

"Negation. If you see me wash, and desire sex, and I oblige it, that's one time, isn't it? If you wake in the night and desire me, and I accept, that's another time. This would make the sex relatively painless. We might fulfill the tally without ever having to force it."

He laughed. "Then let's be together and open with each other. In fact—" He broke off, embarrassed.

"Conjecture," she said. "My courtesy turns you on more than my prior exposure did."

"Agreement. You seem more like a person than a blatant sex symbol."

"But you must ask. That's the new rule."

He licked his lips. "Asked."

Her clothing disappeared. So did his. They rose from their seats and went to the bedroom. He fell on the bed with her, kissing her madly as her full breasts flattened against his chest and her firm legs wrapped around his. In another moment he was entering her and thrusting, climaxing immediately.

"Welcome," she said, smiling as he ebbed and withdrew.

He laughed again. "Accuracy. That was painless."

She got up and went to the bathroom. She got a cloth and washed her breasts and bottom.

He joined her. The sight and proximity of her full body still affected him despite his recent climax. "In fact—"

She smiled. She hoisted herself up to sit on the sink, and spread her legs. He stepped in, his member rising. But it was not quite enough, so soon, and he realized that he wouldn't climax. His hardware could not keep pace with his desire.

She knew it too. "Facilitation?"

"Appreciation."

His member swelled and hardened with renewed force, and he thrust and spurted into her. The intensity of it was equal to the first time. This time he felt her responding, internally, and realized that she had not done so before. So she had had reason to facilitate his second effort. But she had played fair, not asking for it. He had turned himself on, seeing her wash her flesh.

"Welcome," he said as her vagina relaxed. Then they both laughed.

"Suspicion," she said, as she got down from the sink. "The problem we anticipated does not exist."

"Agreement! Irony, that all it took to turn me on was your effort not to."

"I think you are not like other men in that respect."

"Uncertainty. Men prefer to make the decision, though it can be facilitated by the women. So a covert peek into cleavage can mean more than a full view of the breasts."

"Interest." She took the cloth and washed him off. Her touch was delicate and pleasurable.

Then he took the cloth and washed her off. And started reacting again. "Impossible," he said ruefully.

"Possible," she said.

"I mean, without enhancement."

"Curiosity."

"Ditto." Suddenly it was vital to know whether he could actually do it again so soon.

"Novelty," she suggested. "May I?"

"Endorsement."

She took his penis and stroked it. She tickled his scrotum. There was some response. She put her face to it and licked the tip. There was more response.

She turned and bent forward over the sink, presenting her posterior to him. He lifted his half-thickened member and put it to her cleft from behind. She was right: the novelty of this standing position stimulated him. He still was not completely stiff, but was able to slide his member in. Then he reached around her to take hold of her dangling breasts, and felt another measure of expansion.

"Pleasure," she said, tensing her plush buttocks against him.

That did it. He thrust, and thrust again, feeling the slow climax building. She synchronized her squeezes, enhancing the process, and her breathing made her breasts seem to expand and contract in his hands. Finally, with repeated thrusts, he generated a slow but breathtakingly intense climax. She joined him, squeezing his member and relaxing in time with the thrusts.

"Satiation!" he gasped, half collapsing against her back as his limp member dropped out.

"And I did not boost you, this time," she said.

"Not magically," he agreed. "Oh, Weft—I want to hold you!"

"Hold me," she agreed, turning to face him. They stood tightly embraced.

Then he kissed her, passionately. "I know it's just the hormones," he said. "It happens after sex. But right now I think I love you."

"Understanding." Then, after a pause: "Confession."

"Question?"

"I think I enhanced you too much, for the second effort. Some may have carried through, causing you to react more than you might otherwise have, when we washed the second time. So

maybe I did push you, when I said I wouldn't."

"Forgiven. It was a great experience."

"Appreciation. I will be more careful next time."

In due course they separated again, and washed again. This time they made it back into their clothing.

"Here is the situation," Weft said. "An outfit is collecting memories."

"Question?"

"Concurrence. They are offering prizes for people who provide them with the best memories for their collection. It might be harmless diversion, but they are evidently serious, and we think the machines are behind it."

Fifth shook his head ruefully. "The machines seem to be behind everything, these days."

"They do seem to have considerably resources, and they don't take halfway measures. So we need to know what they're up to, and why. What do they care about individual memories, when they mean to destroy us all anyway?"

"Could they be seeking some easier way to conquer us? By studying us, fathoming our weaknesses?"

"Possibly. All the more reason for us to be abreast of it." She glanced down at her breasts. "So to speak."

"What do you have in mind?"

"To participate." She smiled. "Not as a Glamor. As an ordinary girl with a memory eager for the prize."

"Prize?"

"They offer physical health and appeal to those who present the best memories. An ugly girl might become attractive. A weak man might become strong. Independent of illusion; they offer real enhancements."

"That would be tempting for many" he agreed. "How did you learn of this?"

"Surprise: they actually printed ads in books. Slips of paper providing details and news of prizes. They have been at it several months, and their prizes seem valid."

"Ugly girls, weak men?"

"Are becoming pretty and strong. So there is getting to be a fair response, and we suspect they are gathering many memories. Harmless, so far. Not centered on planetary weaknesses; they take

different types. So, again, why?"

"We need to know," he agreed. "How am I to help? I am not sure my memories of sexy Glamors should be shared."

"Agreement!" she said, laughing. "I will be the one to share a memory."

"As an anonymous girl," he agreed.

"Who travels no fault with a protective man. His object, apart from getting into her pants, will be to see that she is not abused or cheated. The proprietors actually encourage the presence of such advocates. They want everyone to know they are legitimate."

"And I will be that man."

"Confirmation. I expect you to take good care of that girl."

Now he saw their two glasses of grape juice, half finished, set aside when they broke for the first bout of sex. "I have an evil thought," he said, annoyed with himself.

"You are a marvel of imagination," she said, reading it.

"You are not disgusted?" For Flame would have been revolted. Sometimes he had rogue ideas that had to be suppressed.

"Negation. Intrigued. It may be my fault anyway, if the enhancement still lingers."

"Something about seeing the glasses in this context. I am ashamed."

She put her hands on his shoulders and looked into his face. "Fifth, this about that: I am not suggesting things to you, but I am amenable to whatever you suggest. I never thought of this before, but what you envision is naughtily exciting. Please don't tease me further. Let's do it."

She was accepting his dark male fantasy. That was an exciting surprise. "Agreement."

She went to her cupboard and got a small funnel. "Who first?"

"Me, I thought of it, and if you change your mind, that's fair."

"You are a fair man. I like that."

They undressed again, then took the funnel and the two drinks to the bathroom. Fifth lay on the floor and drew his knees up to his chin so that his butt lifted. He put his hands to his hips to raise his butt further, pointing it at the ceiling. Weft rubbed the tip of the funnel against her cleft, wetting it with her slippery moisture. She also rubbed her forefinger there. Then she got down and carefully inserted her finger into his anus. At first it resisted, but then it relaxed, and she got her finger in. It felt like sexual penetration, and he wondered whether this was what sex felt like for the woman. She worked it around, making sure the hole was well lubricated, then brought down the funnel and touched it to the same aperture. Using the fingers of one hand to spread the sphincter somewhat, she worked the

tip of the funnel in. Watching and feeling this strengthened the erection he had developed.

When the funnel was firmly embedded, its tip past the sphincter, she took one glass and slowly poured the remaining grape juice into the cone. He felt its coolth entering his rectum. When it backed up in the funnel, she glanced at his face. "Inhale."

He did, his innards expanded, she wiggled the funnel, and the juice flowed in unobstructed. He watched the procedure, picturing the liquid coursing into his colon. What an infusion! It seemed to flow forever, a dark river finding its nether pool within the receptive living cave. His rigid penis was drooling goo onto his belly. When at last all of the juice was inside, she withdrew the funnel and touched his anus. "Clench." He did, and the purple liquid was locked inside him.

He put down his legs and got to his feet as she rinsed off the funnel. He felt the cold liquid pressing against his tight sphincter. "Illicit excitement."

"Concurrence. Now do me." She got down and adopted a similar posture, her knees to her chin, her hands bracing her hips, her cleft raised to close to level, its lips parting to show everything. Clitoris, urinary slit, vagina now an open hole, puckered anus. He was fascinated by the sight, and his member made a valiant effort to stiffen further, dripping.

He took some of the elixir elongating from the tip of his penis and spread it around the tip of the funnel. He smeared more on his finger. It was quite slippery, surely intended by nature to facilitate exactly such penetration. He put the finger to her anus, rubbing in the gel, then poking the tip slowly in. Her anus gave way after a moment, as his had, and his finger slid smoothly in up to the second knuckle. He flexed it, to spread the lubricant, feeling her rectum closing warmly around it.

"Like a prehensile penis," she said, laughing.

Indeed. This was a new form of sex, another turn-on. He wished he could linger longer, exploring her orifices in this manner at leisure, but maybe that would best be saved for another time.

"Agreement," she said. "I did not before fully appreciate the pleasure of such variations. Reading your mind makes it worse."

He put the tip of the funnel there and nudged it in, seeing it slowly penetrate until all of the narrow spout section was within her body, her anus stretched around it. This act stiffened his penis to maximum. He poured in the juice, and watched it swirl down and through, making its way inside her rectum. What an emission!

"Agreement," she murmured.

When the last of it disappeared, he pulled out the funnel. Her anus closed with minimal leakage. She was filled. "You're right," she said. "It feels like a huge cold ejaculation, or an enema. Either will do." She flexed her thighs, visibly tightening her sphincter.

"Weft," he said with sudden urgency.

"Acquiescence," she said, maintaining her position. "But I want to—"

"Do it!" She was still reading his mind and not revolted, amazingly. She was a different creature from her sisters.

He got down on hands and feet, placed his turgid member at her anus, and pushed it in slowly past the sphincter. When he felt the swollen head of his penis in the looser flesh beyond her anus, he let himself go and rammed it home, straight down, like a brigand rape. He felt the cool grape juice around him. He didn't even need to thrust again; he spurted instantly. It was like injecting water at high pressure into a deep well.

She joined him, her sphincter clenching rhythmically on the base of his member, her belly convulsing. "Oh what a feeling," she gasped. "Yours and mine. Kiss me!" She let go of her hips and descended, and he followed her down, still jetting.

He got his face in place and kissed her mouth. Their tongues met as their twin orgasms faded. Then he collapsed on her, spent in more than one sense.

After a time, they resumed awareness of their surroundings. "I think we are leaking," Weft said.

He got up. Purple juice had squeezed out around his penis where it distended her anus, and more was dribbling from the hole as she let it go. Juice was staining his groin and legs; he had jetted some out of his own hole while locked in the throes of sex. He sat quickly on the toilet and let more flow out. What an experience!

"Concurrence," she said. She got up, found a cup, and held it to her anus, catching the continuing flow. "I have had a lot of experience, of considerable variety, but this is a first time."

He had to laugh. "Gratitude for not being revolted."

"Needless. That was fun. We must do it again, with another flavor and full glasses."

He shook his head, bemused. Even in his state of sexual exhaustion, this was tempting. "I thought you were just another Glamor. I was mistaken."

"I thought you were just another man. Ditto."

The bathroom floor was soaking in juice. Weft fetched a mop and cleaned it up as she set the tub to filling. Then they took a joint bath, washing each other and kissing repeatedly. He loved her full wet breasts! Her plush bottom. Her lithe torso. He couldn't get enough of her.

"About the memory girl," she said, resuming her discussion of the mission.

"But if she is really you—"

"I can't allow my memories to become part of this. I will have to bury my nature in a cellar. You know the concept?"

"Flame acquainted me," he agreed. "A hidden section of the mind that can't be fathomed by mind readers. It seems not even to be there."

"Correct. While I am that girl, I will have no power over her decisions and actions. I will dare not express myself, lest I give away my nature. So you will support the role, treating her as she seems to be. This is why I want the company of someone I can trust."

"But we have no long acquaintance."

"I trust my sister's judgment. She trusts you. So can I."

"Appreciation," he said weakly. "But there is something. Voila says I am a nexus. We don't know in what manner. That may complicate trust."

"Being a nexus means you're important. It is irrelevant to trust."

"Not if what I know or learn becomes relevant to the war with the machines."

She smiled. "I'll risk it."

"I will do my best. What kind of girl will you become?"

"Unknown."

"Question?"

"I am about to find out. I will locate a prospect with a suitable memory, and then approach her."

They wound up having sex yet again, with her lying on him, facing up, their point of connection under the water. This time he was unable to complete it on his own, and accepted her enhancement. She gave him a lesser dose, so that they were able to lie connected for fifteen minutes before climaxing. There was a special delight in that conjoined relaxation. The climax itself was weaker, for him, but still highly satisfying. At least this time he wouldn't be eager for sex again in five minutes.

"Is that five in succession?" he asked, amazed.

She lifted her hands and counted on her fingers. "On the bed. On the sink. From behind. With the grape juice. In the tub. We have made half our quota already."

"And you never forced me."

"You are quite a man, Fifth. For a mortal."

He laughed, knowing it was literal: what had taken him two hours a Glamor could have done in ten minutes. "Appreciation."

"But we really must get to work, between sexual sessions."

"Affirmation," he agreed gladly. "When and where is the memory collection?"

"The one I want is in a distant Black Chroma zone, tomorrow."

"Tomorrow! But if you have yet to find a girl—"

"I will search for her now. If I seem slightly distracted, it is because my mind is reaching out to locate a suitable prospect."

"I will let you alone, then."

"Negation. The mental search is dull. You may entertain me with your presence."

"Question?"

"Sex." She went nude to the bed and lay down.

"You want me to—after all we have already—"

"Apology. I'm supposed to leave it to you."

"Too late," he said ruefully. "The thought has been introduced to my crude male mind." He joined her on the bed.

"You may sleep if you prefer. I just wanted you to know that it is no rejection of you if I seem less than completely responsive. But I will appreciate whatever you initiate. It will help keep me awake for my search."

"Understanding."

Thus commenced a remarkable night, following a remarkable afternoon. He fell asleep while kissing her breasts, got a nocturnal erection, woke, and entered her, she sighing absent-mindedly. Then he slept again, but later woke again, finding her turned around, and entered her from behind. She cooperated, but relatively passively. Yet she appeared genuinely appreciative of his efforts. It seemed she had meant it when she said they helped keep her awake.

"Confirmation," she said. "When I nod off, you tackle me again, and that wakes me. Gratitude."

He kissed her, bemused. She was thanking him for continually rousing her from sleep.

By morning they had done it five more times. Fifth, who had never really been turned before by full fleshed women, somehow found Weft phenomenally sexy.

"Done," she said brightly.

"Regret."

She looked at him.

"Negation; I did not mean that the sex was finished. You can have it a hundred times if you wish. I meant that I have found the girl."

Oh. "Good news."

"She is Page, an assistant librarian in a Black Chroma zone. She has memories of secret sex."

"Coincidence?"

"Negation. I looked for a Black Chroma person, so she could travel no fault with you without attracting attention, and for secret sex, because that is the category that remains open."

She smiled. "I can't think why folk are reluctant to advertise their most secret trysts."

He had to smile. "What we did yesterday—the grape juice—Flame would never have countenanced. I am amazed that you did. I would not have been surprised if you had berated me for my filthy mind."

"I am more adventurous than my sister. She is the conservative member of the family, especially sexually. In five years she has touched no one but you. When I encounter something really wild, I like to try it. The grape juice was wild." She kissed him. "I wonder what you will come up with next?"

"Warning: don't start me thinking. You need to catch up on your sleep, and we have a mission to do today."

"Glamors can get by without sleep when necessary. I got sleepy not because I needed sleep, but because of the boredom of the mental quest across thousands of dull minds. You helped abate that."

"Male fantasy You let me believe that you are constantly eager for my touch."

"Agreement. But I read your mind. That made it novel, because I am not male."

Something about that phenomenal understatement got to him, and he started laughing uncontrollably.

"By your leave," she said, and kissed him and clasped him, taking him in. He was still laughing helplessly as he jetted into her, for the eleventh time.

"Now," she said, as they lay in ebbing embrace. "The sex will stop for a while, because I will assume the identity of the librarian Page and she will not know you well enough at first. I hope I have enabled you to tide through for a few hours."

"Hope," he agreed.

"Eat." A full breakfast appeared on the table. Had they eaten the night before? He didn't remember.

They ate. Weft fetched a jug of juice, then put it back unpoured. "No time," she said regretfully.

That threatened to set him off again, but he managed to get by with only a choke or two. What a girl!

When they were done, she took his hand, and they were suddenly in a Black Chroma zone, standing before a village library. "Wait here," she said. "The one who emerges next will be me in my

impersonation, physical and mental. Page. A full imprint. She will not know she isn't real. Take her to Village Nondescript, across this zone, and set up in an inn, the two of you. Attend the memory quest in early afternoon, today, tomorrow, and the day after. Then escort her back here. Never refer to me; try not even to think of me. Stay out of her mind; it must be pristine in this respect, and the balance must not be disturbed. We do not know how carefully the machine agents watch."

He was alarmed. "She won't know?"

"The imprint won't. The original Page will remain here, unchanged. I will make her a deal to make it worth her while. She is good at keeping secrets."

"Understanding."

She entered the library. About half an hour later a different woman emerged. She was Black Chroma, short thin and plain, in her mid twenties, with a severe knot binding back her hair.

He stepped up. "Page? I was told to meet you here."

"Fifth? I was told you would escort me, no fault."

"We are introduced," he said, smiling. "Shall we go directly to Village Nondescript?"

"Agreed. Appreciation for enabling me to go there for this occasion."

"I appreciate having my curiosity about this project satisfied."

They took hands, and conjured themselves across the zone. Fifth liked being able to do full magic again; he had been long out of Chroma, reduced to nonChroma status. Yet when it came to a choice between his home Chroma and Flame, Flame banished all else.

They were at the edge of the village. They walked in and registered at the local inn as Fifth and Page. No further identification was needed; they were obviously traveling together no fault.

In their room, Page hesitated. "You know I am married, with three children."

"I am committed also. No fault does not mean travelers have to have sex. Just that we share accommodation and responsibilities."

"Actually, I will be looking for a fourth. That's why I agreed to travel at this time." She paused, evidently nerving herself. "I know I am not pretty."

He had misunderstood her hesitation. "I like them lean. But it will be your choice."

"Appreciation."

They had a token meal, and she washed and changed, preparing for the event to come. She was also showing him her body, in tacit invitation. She was indeed lean. He could make it with her, if she chose.

Then they went out to the memory project. There was a small group of people clustered there. "Greeting," the Black Chroma proprietor said. "Supe here, local collector for the memory archives."

"Page. I have come to compete for a prize."

"Regret: you should have come earlier. All our categories but one are filled."

"Secret sex."

He nodded. "That's the one. No one else seems interested." He gazed at her appraisingly. "Are you sure?"

"Privacy is maintained?"

"Affirmation. Only your companion will see it, for your protection."

"Understanding."

"If your memory is the best in its category—which seems likely, considering the absence of competition—you will receive a prize of significant physical enhancement, and may return tomorrow for another memory and prize."

"Understanding."

"This way." He led them into a marked circle.

A translucent wall rose up, shielding them from the other people. The others became vague forms, no details apparent. Presumably it shielded those inside the circle similarly.

Supe and Fifth took seats at the edge of the circle, just inside the shield. Page stood in the center.

"Rehearse it in your mind," Supe said. "It will animate."

It did. There was a young Page, perhaps thirteen, avidly reading a book. The elderly proprietor came to the desk she sat at. "Closing time."

She looked up. "Please, Librarian Booker. This is so interesting. Can I take it home?"

"Negation. It is a valuable history that must remain in the library, lest it be damaged or lost. You can take another book, if you wish. We have a number pitched to your age."

"Children's books!" she said with disdain.

"Affirmation. You are a child."

Page paused, studying the man. He was old, perhaps seventy, a widower. The village provided for him because it valued the library and he took good care of it. As he was doing now. "How can I get to borrow this book tonight?"

He smiled benevolently. "You can return to read it here tomorrow. It is good that you like advanced reading."

"Serious."

"Page, it is not authorized. You can't take the book."

She stood up. "I am not wholly a child. I have breasts." She opened her shirt.

"Dismay!" he said, startled. "Cover yourself."

"I can keep a secret. Can you?"

"Confusion."

"I have seen boys with pretty girls. I am not pretty, but I can do what they do. I know you have no woman. Let me borrow the book. I promise to take excellent care of it, and return it tomorrow. Please." She removed her shirt entirely, and drew down her skirt.

Booker stared at her. "They would banish me."

"They will never know. I promise."

"You truly mean this? You understand it is a violation? An adult with a child?"

"No one will know." She glanced down at her small breasts and narrow hips. "I know I am not much, but it is all I have. Please."

Booker shook his head. "I am old, and lonely. What am I really risking? But I do not wish to hurt you."

"Just do what you wish with me, and tell me how to help. And keep my secret."

"Agreement!"

He led her to the library's old couch. She lay on it, on her back, her legs spread. That was as far as she knew what to do.

He opened his trousers to reveal a standing member. "Are you sure?"

"Affirmation." Actually the size of it alarmed her, but she was determined to accomplish her commitment.

He got on her. "Do you mind if I kiss you first?"

"Welcome."

He brought his face down and kissed her on the mouth. It surely wasn't much of a kiss, but she thrilled to it, because it was truly a man/woman contact.

Then he put his member to her cleft and pushed it in. There was resistance, and he pushed harder; then there came sharp pain. She clenched her teeth, making no sound, forcing herself to breathe evenly.

Then he was all the way inside her, thrusting repeatedly. It smarted horribly. After several times he shuddered, made a small moan, and relaxed.

In a moment he got off her. He looked down and saw the blood. "You're a virgin!"

"Not any more," she said, forcing a smile.

"Oh, Page, I didn't know! I assumed—games with boys your age, peek and poke—"

"I'm not pretty," she reminded him.

"I would never have done it, if—" He shook his head. "But I did. I'm guilty. My fate is in your hands."

"Is there a washcloth?" she asked.

Hurriedly, he fetched one. She mopped herself up. There was blood at her cleft, and some thick liquid inside, but actually not a lot of either. When she was satisfied that she would not drip, she dressed, took the book, and departed. Booker just looked helpless.

At home she covertly applied salve. She was healing nicely. It really was no worse than a bad scratch. What was important was that she had found a way to get the book.

It was a marvelous book, every bit as informative as she had thought. But there was a lot more if it left. She read as late as she could, then brought it back to the library in the morning. "Appreciation," she said to Booker. Then she went on to school.

That afternoon she returned to the library and resumed reading the book. The librarian left her strictly alone.

The closing time came. Booker approached her table. She got up, went to the couch, removed her clothing, and lay down. He brought out his member again, kissed her, and put it into her. This time it smarted much less. No words were exchanged. They both knew that what they were doing should not be spoken.

So it continued for two years. Not every night, but regularly. Word never circulated. The secret was being kept on both sides. Each had something of value to the other. Neither pretended to have any emotional involvement; this was a business transaction. But sometimes the kisses became more ardent. They were coming to like each other, in their separate fashions. This, too, could not be spoken.

Then Booker died. Her glorious period of reading was abruptly ended. So was her memory. Page stood there in the center of the circle, the image of the library dissipating around her.

"This will do," Supe said. "It is a fine contribution to the archives." He came to Page, put his

hand on her forehead, and exerted magical force. He evidently had a Chroma stone.

She became prettier. She remained fully recognizable, but her features evened somewhat, and reset themselves to be slightly more aesthetic. Her body, too, developed a bit, her bosom swelling, her hips widening, her waist narrowing. Only slightly, but it made a difference.

He brought her a mirror. "Satisfied?"

"Agreement!" she said, startled.

"Return tomorrow if you have another memory of this type. This was a worthy insight into a private aspect of village life."

"Agreement."

She had more? Fifth was surprised. He knew that things went on in villages that no one talked about, and that deals between men and woman were common and not limited to no fault traveling. But this had seemed to be a one of a kind deal. He suspected that if any other villagers had caught on to the arrangement, they would have had the sense to remain silent. It was a consensual tryst, doing no harm to anyone else, but if it had been publicized, they would have had to banish the old man and send the girl to a restrictive school. It was better for all that the secret be kept.

Now, of course, it no longer mattered. The widower librarian was long dead, and Page was of age.

Back at the inn, Fifth and Page had an evening meal and prepared to retire.

"As with the librarian," she said, removing her shirt.

"I make no demands," he said quickly.

"I want a forth."

That request could not ethically be declined. "Confession," he said. "Seeing your memory excited me. I am given to illicit arousal."

She removed her skirt. "Welcome."

She was significantly prettier than she had been. It showed in every part of her body.

He stripped and joined her on the bed. He knew she was an emulation rather than the real Page, but it was easy to accept her as she seemed to be, and indeed, he was supposed to do that. "May I kiss you?"

She laughed. "Welcome."

He kissed her. "I feel like a librarian."

"He was a good man. He was gentle with me, and he kept the secret. I liked him, and was sorry

when he died."

"But he always did it the same way."

"I did not mind. It was familiar."

"Question: did you ever share the feeling? Achieving your own climax?"

"Sometimes. Toward the end he slowed, and that gave me more time. But I did not make anything of it. I was doing it for the book. As long as he was satisfied, so was I."

"Do you wish me to be slow?"

"Negation. I just want my fourth."

Clear enough. She did not know that this was academic, because she did not really exist in this situation. Women seeking their fourths were notoriously businesslike, taking in penises, pumping them, and ejecting them when their payload was delivered.

She was not pretty, despite her recent enhancement, but there was something about her. He could appreciate how the old librarian had accepted her solicitation.

He entered her, pumped, and delivered. Then they separated and slept apart.

Next day they returned to the memory circle. This time Page's memory was of the woman who took over the library after Booker died. Her name was Bookend. She was his daughter, of middle age, married with her four children birthed, and businesslike.

But Page still devoured educational books. They still were not supposed to be lent out overnight. Not the special ones. What was she to do? She was only fifteen, too young to do anything adult. Theoretically.

Desperation lent her courage. She approached Bookend. "I really, really like to read the special books. May I take one home evenings?"

"This is not authorized."

Just so. "Sometimes Booker let me take one home."

"Doubt."

"I—made a deal with him. No fault."

Bookend stared at her. "You were the one? We knew he was seeing someone, these last two years. His whole outlook improved. We did not inquire. But you're underage."

"It was a secret. I am good at secrets. So was he."

"It shall remain so. Our family history must not be sullied. This is a moral village."

"Accepted. But if I could possibly make any deal with you, I would do it with similar secrecy."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Village rumor says you are cold to your husband. Would you prefer a woman?" Page removed her shirt. Her breasts had filled out in the interim, but remained modest.

"You are bold," Bookend said severely.

"Desperate. I would do anything to get to read those precious books."

Bookend considered. "You can keep a secret," she said. "My father was never embarrassed by any rumors."

Page waited.

"But surely your preference is not for women."

"I am still learning. Booker was nice, but I did it for the books, not for itself. You could be nice too."

Bookend made a decision. "One time. Then we'll see."

They made lesbian love, and Page found it not only instructive but stimulating. Bookend saw to it that they both had good climaxes.

Then Page took the book home for the night. She returned it next morning, in good condition.

It continued. Page really liked the sessions, because they made her body sing. But she never forgot why she was doing it, and made sure always to cater to the other woman's preference. Village rumors were that Bookend became kinder to her husband, as if some unmet need was being satisfied.

In three years Page married an indifferent man, being realistic about her prospects. Sex was like that she had had with Booker; her husband was not much aware of female needs. The secret affair continued, even during her pregnancies, complementing the emotionless sex of marriage. There was never any scandal. In fact Page trained in as an assistant librarian, accounting for the time they spent together. She loved books.

Until family circumstances required Bookend to move with her family to another village. Then the affair was over, and her access to special books was cut off.

The memory faded. It has been as detailed at the prior one, and Supe was satisfied. He touched Page again, and she became another stage prettier.

Back at the inn, Fifth remarked on it. "Yesterday you were one third pretty. Today you are two thirds pretty. If you achieve another enhancement, you will be a beauty. Are you ready for that?"

"Negation. I have never been beautiful. But it will please my husband. He is routine about sex, but he's a good man." She glanced sidelong at him. "No need to hurry our connection."

"You said you just wanted your fourth from me."

"Shifting. Now I would like sex with you. If you are willing."

"Willing," he agreed. He understood what she meant: the prior night had been pure injection of semen for a purpose, rather than real sex. Again, he found there was something about her that made her desirable apart from her appearance, improved as that was. This time he made love to her, kissing her mouth, and her fuller breasts, and stroking her improved bottom. He stimulated her, so that by the time he entered, she was eager for the culmination. They climaxed together.

"Wonder," she breathed, after. "I did not know a man could do that to me too." She had achieved mutual fulfillment many times with another woman, of course.

"A caring man can." This night he remained with her, sleeping beside her.

He woke in the night, finding her awake, gazing at him in the partial light. He understood why: he had given her a new experience, and she hankered for more of it. He had experienced that often enough with the several Glamors. It was part curiosity, part novelty, part evoked desire. He pulled her onto him, kissed her, stroked her, licked her, and brought her to another orgasm.

"Delight!" she said, and fell asleep against him.

Yet he felt guilty. This was supposed to be the real Page, and was wasted on the imprint Page. Was he cruelly teasing a nonexistent person?

The third day Page produced another memory. The new proprietors of the library were a young couple, Record and Writ. They had discovered each other in a library. But their marriage was not perfect; rumors were that they were sexually incompatible. Obviously they could perform with each other, as they had their three plus one. They took turns traveling, one remaining home with the children and the library. That was indicative.

"I am devoted to special books," Page told them when there were no others present. "I know they aren't supposed to leave the library, but my time away from home is limited and I much prefer to read at home. I proffer a trade for the right to borrow them."

"Obscurity," Writ said sharply.

"If there is something lacking in your marriage, perhaps I can provide it."

"Interest," Record said, through his wife glared.

"Demonstration." Page removed her clothing. Then she embraced and kissed Writ, standing, while presenting her bottom to Record. This was a singularly bold move, but she had learned that boldness had its place.

Writ kissed back, discovering interest of her own. Record unlimbered his member and slid it into Page from behind. She wiggled, facilitating his entry to the proper aperture. While the two women continued their deep kiss, he quickly jetted inside Page.

Writ, aware of this, reacted. She flung off her own clothing and embraced Page again, naked. Record also stripped and put his arms around both, kissing their necks. Before long his member recovered. This time he inserted it into Writ's cleft. His climax was slower, and he had to work at it for a while. Page went down to her knees and licked the woman's cleft from in front. Soon she came to climax, together with her husband.

Page had not climaxed, but that was not the point of this exercise. She was trying to make the couple's sex life interesting, for a price.

They washed together. Then, wordlessly, Writ handed Page the book.

Thereafter the partners stopped traveling alone. They seemed to be satisfied with life at home. Again, there was no scandal; no one said anything about any non-library business. There were some considerable sessions, and often Page did achieve gratification too. Simultaneous sex with male and female—that could be fulfilling.

But in time the couple moved to another village, and a new librarian came. Page was qualified, but by this time there was a muted suspicion, and the village elders did not allow her to take over. So now she was looking for a more liberal village. For she had come to like different sex, and did not want to give it up.

That was her present situation. The memory faded.

"It will do," Supe said, and put his hands on her again. This time she became all the way beautiful. There had been no competition, but her memories surely would have won the prizes regardless.

"Confession," Fifth said back at the inn.

"Turn-on," Page agreed. "For me too."

They came together and had urgent mutual fulfillment. It wasn't just that she had become beautiful, or that she now trusted him, or that they were trying to implant her fourth. It was that they had discovered a mutual taste for wild sex.

Fifth made a decision. "When we return to your home, there is something I must do."

She did not question this. Deep down, she knew and understood, and perhaps approved.

Next day they conjured themselves back to her home. Fifth wasn't sure of the protocol for the reverse exchange, so let the woman handle it.

She knocked on the door. It opened, to reveal the original Page, unbeautiful. "I will take your place for three days," the lovely one said. "Go with this man. He will explain."

"Confusion."

"And this is your prize." Suddenly the other Page was beautiful, while Weft was the plain version. "Make the most of it." She handed Fifth a small mirror and entered the house.

"Confusion," the real Page repeated.

"Your imprint shared her memories and won beauty," he said. "See your reflection." He gave her the mirror.

She looked at herself. "Oh!"

"I have agreed to sire your fourth," he said. "Where can we be private?"

She was quick to reorient. "I know where. A friend is away this week."

They went there, and Fifth explained what had happened. He detailed enough of the library memories so that she knew he was not guessing. As he talked, he found that Weft had correctly reflected the real Page; she had intense sex appeal when she was turned on. Fifth understood how others had yielded to her approach, whether old, female, or a couple.

They had a satisfying three days enjoying their mutual taste for wild sex. By the end, Page was sure she had conceived her fourth. "Appreciation," she said. "For everything."

"Mutual," he said.

They returned to her house, where she swapped quickly with Weft, who returned to her own form. Page had not been missed; Weft was competent in such emulations. She also, it turned out, was competent in transferring the enhancements of appearance; Page remained lovely as they parted. Her sex life with her husband was about to improve considerably.

Fifth and Weft returned to her apartment in Triumph City. "I have lined up our next memory quest," she said.

He was not even really surprised. Of course a single memory event was not enough; she was trying to fathom the real motive behind the collections.

The memories continued. All were in Black Chroma zones, to enable him to be himself. They were widely varied; it seemed the machines were interested in many types. But why?

He also found himself steadily emotionally closer to Weft. She was lovely and talented, yes, and considerate of his needs and limitations, and the sex was great, but she was also competent and serious about her mission. She arranged to pay for every memory she borrowed, leaving a trail of well satisfied people who otherwise would have had no break in their indifferent existences. As a person she was in no way inferior to her siblings.

"I have a special one," she said, after one of her searches. "Not a memory; I discovered it when questioning for memories. A Black/White romance."

"Question?"

"A Black Chroma zone lies adjacent to a White Chroma zone. They have periodic gatherings, social events, dances, where they two meet, trying to maintain relations."

"Familiar," he said. "It is best to get along with one's neighbors. Typically they make people dance only with those of the other Chroma. Sometimes they get interested in each other, for the novelty, but it's pretty much no fault. I dated a Red Chroma girl once, after such a dance, but we both knew there was no future in it, because neither could desert the home Chroma."

"Exactly. It is to the king's interest to facilitate trade and prosperity for all, to the extent feasible. So I checked with dad, and he said, sure, take care of it, honey."

Fifth remembered that Weft's ultimate romantic interest was the one man she couldn't have, her father Havoc. Havoc played along with it, pretending that he would marry Weft if he were free to do so. It was a safe game, because Havoc truly loved Gale, and she would not be passing from the scene. But there was a suspicion that it was more than a game to Weft. "Affirmation," Weft agreed. He was startled to see a tear in her eye.

"Affirmation," she said again. "I have loved him since I was a baby, and always knew it was doomed. Because I love mom too."

"Inadequacy," Fifth said, unable to make any relevant comment. Weft was more woman than any he had encountered except Gale. It was ironic that Weft had oriented this way.

"Flame calls me Electra. I call her hothead. She is more accurate."

"She is only teasing."

"She is not a tease."

He had to yield the point. When it came to the social graces, Flame was not in the same class as Weft.

"Understanding," he said. "If there is one other than Flame I love, it is your mother, Gale. She was kind to me, and she understands me. I can relate to the way you feel about the prime man in your life."

She gazed at him with honest appreciation. "I need to find another man."

"That might ease the situation," he agreed.

"Unless I took Flame's."

He froze. He had thought there could be no other woman for him than Flame, but now he knew that Weft was that other. Suddenly he was in the middle of a potential quarrel between Glamors. "Inadequacy," he repeated.

Weft returned to business. "A White Chroma girl loves a Black Chroma man, but his family stifled their romance."

"Families do, if they are other Chroma romances."

"We are going to have to try to shame them into acceptance."

Fifth shook his head. "Unlikely, unless you mess with their minds. What is it about this particular romance that makes it relevant to the king's interest?"

"There is a passion flower bed in need of exploitation."

"That would do it," he agreed.

They went to the Black Chroma Village the morning before the dance. Fifth remained at the inn while Weft conjured herself across to the White village to talk with the girl. Soon she returned. "She has agreed, of course."

"And his family?"

"I will need your help."

He knew from her mind what she wanted. He was not fully pleased with it, as there was an element of coercion, but did want to facilitate her mission. "Agreement."

The young man was Carl, seventeen. His parents were Carver and Cassie, the Village elders. Form was very important, for this was a Moral Village. That was why Carl had been required to break off the relationship; too intimate an association with an other Chroma girl was too irregular.

The parents liked to take daily walks to a private place where they had rendezvoused when young. It was a shell; the romance was long since gone from their relationship, but still they went. As a matter of form.

Fifth and Weft intercepted them there. "Greeting," Weft said. "I am the king's daughter Weft, and this is my no fault friend Fifth. We have an interest in your son's prospects for marriage."

"The king's daughter is a Glamor!" Cassie protested. "Take my hand."

The woman took her hand. "You are she! Apology for doubting."

"Needless. This is a special situation. I wish to impress upon you and your husband some tolerance for inter-Chroma romance."

"That White Chroma girl!" he said angrily.

"Hussy" his wife echoed.

"When they trysted," Weft said evenly "before you made your son back off, they discovered the reason for their attraction. They were near a patch of passion flowers."

"Mythology," Carver snorted.

"Reality," Weft said. She produced a large flower. "Here is one. Cut, its potency will fade in hours, but if you smell it you will appreciate its power." She proffered it to Carver.

"Aversion!" he said, backing away.

"What harm can it do, if it is mythological?" Weft asked.

Reluctantly he accepted the flower and sniffed it. His eyes dilated.

"What's this?" Cassie demanded. She took the flower from her husband's flaccid fingers and sniffed it. "Oh!"

The two moved into a clinch. Then, embarrassed, they broke apart.

"Carl and Jasmine were just walking together, honoring the two-villages protocol," Weft said. "They did not know of the flower bed, which formed only recently. Now perhaps you can appreciate what happened."

"Our poor son!" Cassie said.

"Loving a girl he can't marry," Weft said. "Required to marry another girl he will never love. This is certainly unkind."

Cassie still held the flower. She and her husband were moving together again. Realizing, they jerked away again. Cassie threw away the flower.

"Consider," Weft continued. "Such flowers are so rare as to be considered mythological. The village that farms such a flower bed could profit handsomely from trade with other villages. The bed is in the small shade-of-gray overlapping between the two Chroma zones; either zone might claim it. The White Chroma village is more liberal; it is surely better to let it have it."

"Jezebel!" Carver snapped.

"Or perhaps it could be shared. But who could be trusted to supervise such a property without being overcome either by greed or lust?"

"A married interChroma couple," Fifth said on cue. "Neither would care to cheat the other."

The expressions on the faces of the Village elder and his wife were pained. They wanted the profit, and did not want it lost to a rival village. But they would have to make a moral sacrifice, by their definition.

"Tomorrow at the dance Fifth and I will dance and sing, telling the story of this flower bed," Weft said. "I suspect both villages will see the fairness in what we propose. All you need to do is nod. Your village will appreciate your personal sacrifice in the interest of benefiting it. Your son will surely do his part."

"Jezebel!" Carver repeated. He and his wife departed.

Weft smiled. "They will make love in the middle of the day. Highly irregular. They haven't done that for decades."

"I gather you don't approve of moral villages."

"They're entitled. But a girl like me would never fit in."

"Agreement!"

That night in the inn they made love as usual, which meant the unusual, using a bottle of berry juice and several orifices. Fifth had never before had such delight in such varied sex. Anything he could imagine, West could and would do with joyful abandon.

"It's a pleasure being with you," she said, responding to his thought as she rode his stained but standing member. "You're not jaded the way Glamor men are. Your feelings are open and honest, and your delight in sex becomes mine. You are realistic about my nature. You make a nice plaything."

"Appreciation," he said wryly, though he knew what she meant.

"Clarification: when I said I might take you, I did not mean by force. I would not do that to my sister even if I could. It would have to be your choice."

"But this is merely a month long affair with a natural end scheduled. You have no obligation to continue the game beyond that."

"It is not a game to me any more."

He paused, still deep within her. She was not playing a game with Havoc. Now she was not playing a game with Fifth. "Question?"

"I would accept you, if you chose me. You would never be the first man in my fancy but you could be my husband and father of three of my children. You would never lack for attention or support. Or sex. I do not use the word love now, but it would come if I let it. And I would. You understand the constraints."

"Wonder," he said. She *was* serious.

"I have spoken my piece. There is no deadline, no coercion. I will not expire in grief if you choose Flame, though I would like to think we could still have no fault trusts. I will know when you decide, and accept it, either way." She looked down, and changed the subject. "But no more dead stick. Perform." Her vagina squeezed his member like a hungry mouth, rousing it after its prior performance in the juice.

He tried to tease her, at least in this manner, by remaining passive, but her hot flesh massaged his penis as she lifted and descended, letting it almost escape, then plunging down again to measure the full depth, repeatedly, forcing his repeat orgasm. Then she lay on him and kissed him.

"I will consider," he said. Had he had to decide at this moment, he would have committed to her. But he knew she wanted him to weigh his options carefully, just as Flame had, so that he could decide what he truly wanted.

"Nu-uh," she said, frowning prettily. "You can't marry us both."

He laughed, but his secret wish remained. How could he choose between them?

Next day was the dance. Fifth and Weft were given a place on the schedule before the couples paired off. They had a presentation to make.

He was a Black Chroma man, an easy role. Weft was a White Chroma woman, her hair and skin becoming completely white along with her clothing. That did not conceal her beauty, which was outstanding; Weft was actually one of the loveliest women on the planet. She did the narration.

"It was the interChroma dance. Every couple had to be two Chroma. They could change partners, but only among the other Chroma, whether they danced, snacked, conversed, or walked. So it happened that a sixteen year old White Chroma girl danced with a seventeen year old Black Chroma boy."

She moved to Fifth, and they danced together, while the village musicians played their instruments, black and white. They made a handsome mixed Chroma couple, Black and White. Fifth was an excellent dancer, and so was Weft; they did a marvelously sophisticated number that had the villagers, black and white, applauding.

"It was the last dance before a break," Weft continued. "So by custom those partners remained together; only when the dancing resumed could they change partners again. They were stuck with each other." She made a face, and there was laughter. Many forced temporary couples were reluctant, but this pair was obviously compatible.

"So they took a walk between the Chroma zones, holding hands, a pretty girl and a handsome man. Naturally once they were out of sight of others, they let go; neither was participating by preference.

"Then something happened. They did not know they were passing a newly-sprung bed of passion flowers. All they knew was that suddenly they had passion for each other that would not be denied."

Fifth and Weft embraced and kissed, evincing that passion. They remained close for long enough to signal to the audience that more than a kiss was occurring. Such subtle signals became important when Moral Villagers were watching.

"Then they separated. 'This can't be,' the girl said. 'We are of different Chroma.'

"'InterChroma marriage is known,' he said.

"'Then perhaps there is hope. But best that this be secret, for now.'

"'Best,' he agreed.

"They agreed to meet at the same place two days thence. The girl longed for the tryst, for she had fallen in love with Carl. She consoled herself in the interim by singing a song."

Now Weft brought out her hammer dulcimer and donned the finger hammers. She played her own accompaniment as she sang the old Earth folk song "To the Woodland".

*To the woodland far away
Longs my heart forever*

*There my heart will always be,
This no man can sever.
In the woodland far away
There lives my darling loved one.*

Fifth saw the villagers abruptly mesmerized. Weft was one of the most beautiful women of the planet, but she was *the* best singer. Every nuance was apt and compelling. The simple melody became heart-warmingly evocative in her rendition.

She repeated the refrain, and Fifth, prompted by her thought to him, stepped into a bright patch of sunlight. At that moment he was illuminated, a handsome Black Chroma man being serenaded by a breathtakingly beautiful woman.

*Though the path is long and dark
Rocky steep and narrow
Though the wood is dark and cold
This brings me no sorrow
Cares will vanish when I go
To see him on the morrow.*

There was something about the inflections as she played and sang that was utterly charming. Fifth had known she was expert, but not how moving her song could be. He saw the villagers responding, sharing her sheer joy of anticipation.

"But when she went there, he did not appear." Weft paused. "She did not know that he had gone to his father, to ask permission to marry her. Instead his father had forbidden him to see the girl again. The boy dared not disobey. So he had come, but remained out of her sight, suffering. He heard her song of anguish."

Now she sang again, playing her dulcimer, while Fifth stood a little apart, facing away from her. He was being out of sight. It was the song "Waly Waly," familiar to the villagers, but not when sung as passionately as this.

*I leaned my back against an oak
And thought it was a mighty tree
But first it bent, and then it broke
As did your sweet love to me.
Oh, waly waly, how love is bonny
The little time when it is new
But love grows old, and waxeth cold
And fades away like morning dew.
When cockle shells turn silver bells
Then will my love come back to me.
When roses blow in winter's snow
Then will my love return to me.*

And of course that would be never. Weft hung her head, evincing grief, while Fifth stood shaking with mirrored grief. It was heart-rending lost love, made more poignant by the stunning loveliness of the mourner.

Some of the village women were wiping away tears, and some children were crying. And Fifth, playing a part, nevertheless felt the impact of the sorrowful song.

He knew he loved Weft.

Then Weft stood and addressed the people of the two villages directly. "This story is true. Two of your number did encounter a bed of passion flowers and were swept into love. I have brought one of the flowers as proof." She set a cut flower in a vase on the joint table. "Do not approach it too closely; its fumes could affect you."

There were a few chuckles. Then the villagers realized that this was not a joke. Some edged away from the flower; others edged toward it. Regardless, its subtle fragrance was infusing the air, making everyone increasingly passionate. Not by a lot, not intense, but enough to turn thoughts to romance. Fifth felt it himself.

"The girl is Jasmine of the White Chroma village. The boy is Carl, son of the Village Elder of the Black Chroma village." Suddenly all eyes turned to the two, who until this moment had been anonymous. "They are in love, but can't see each other. Soon Carl will turn eighteen and have to marry a Black Chroma girl he will never love, and next year Jasmine will face similar grief with a White Chroma boy. It seems a shame, for them and for their partners, who will be blameless."

The villagers nodded with understanding. Wouldn't it make sense for an exception to be made?

Weft faced Carver, the Black Village Elder. "Did you know they trysted, that first time? They couldn't help it; no one could. How do you feel about that?"

And it was a Moral Village. Sex outside of marriage was forbidden.

"They trysted?" Carver frowned. He knew he had to reverse himself, lest there be serious discord in both villages. Fortunately there was a face-saving way. "Then they must marry. Soon."

Jasmine and Carl stared at him. Then they moved together as the villagers applauded.

"The flower bed must be cared for," Weft continued. "Those passion flowers are singularly rare and valuable. There will be enormous demand for cuttings elsewhere. But how can fairness in their handling be assured? I suggest that each village will have to assign a representative to reside at the site, to ensure that proper care is taken, that brigands do not steal them, and that the proceeds are evenly divided between the villages. But anyone going there will soon be overcome by passion. Do we have any volunteers?"

There was silence. A cut flower was one thing; being chronically immersed in the fumes was another. This would be extremely hard on morality.

"I suggest that the Village Elders assign their representatives," Weft continued. "Carl and Jasmine, who have already been overcome by the ambiance of the flowers. They have nothing more to lose, and much to gain. For themselves and their villages. Surely you can trust them."

The two Village Elders exchanged a look. They nodded, yielding to community pressure. It did make sense. The villagers applauded. The decision had been set up by Weft's meetings with the Elders the day before, but it seemed spontaneous. Everyone would profit.

Now the dance commenced, the lead-in for a rapid wedding. Fifth and Weft danced together,

then were taken by eager villagers. Fifth danced with many White Chroma girls, and Weft with Black Chroma boys. The girls flirted shamelessly with him, offering no fault trysts. But he had an answer: "My love is taken," as he glanced Weft's way. "How could I ever be no fault with anyone but her?" And of course Weft was responding similarly to the boys. It was a deft mutual convenience that happened to have considerable substance.

Through it all, Fifth's mind was reeling. Weft used her organization and persuasion to benefit the planet, two villages, and a young couple in love. What a woman she was! Of course he knew that she had used her awareness of the near future paths to guide her to the successful course; that was why things had worked out so neatly. Still, it was impressive. Not only had she accomplished her spot mission of getting the passion flower trade established, she had done it in such a way as to enable young love to flourish. She was, beneath her awesome powers, a nice person.

He loved her. But he also loved Flame. What was he to do?

That night at the inn, intoxicated by the vaporous elixir of the flower and by Weft's embrace, he suffered a revelation. "The memory project!" he exclaimed. "I think I know why the machines are doing it."

She paused. "Question?"

"They are looking for something. They are following multiple avenues, such as Mino who came here over a thousand years ago, and the fifths who started a generation ago, the robot Shee, the survival contest Flame participated in, and now the memory collections for their archives. All may be overtly for other reasons, but underlying it is this common thread. The search."

"What are they looking for?"

"It's not a specific thing so much as a pattern. I don't know what it is, but they will know it when they find it. So will I. I think that's what makes me a nexus. I will discover what the machines truly want."

"How do you know this?"

"I don't know, but somehow I *do* know. Read my mind."

"Verified." She made a moue. "I am holding you close, and your mind is on something else."

He winced. "Apology."

She laughed. "Teasing. You are lending meaning to my quest. But what pattern could be so important that the machines are putting such an enormous amount of energy into their search for it?"

"I think if we can fathom that, we will gain a significant advantage."

"I have advised Voila and Idyll. Appreciation, Fifth."

"Welcome." He focused on her. "Now let's make wild passionate romantic sexual love."

"I thought you'd never think of it," she said as their clothing dissolved.

Chapter 13

Bee-chines

"Request," Havoc said. "I need you."

Gale laughed. "What, tired of your new mechanical bath girls already?"

"Negation. I merely have other business at the moment. You will need to deal with this request by the living cultures."

"Question?"

"A plant culture has a petition."

"Thus it comes to you," she agreed.

"For the admittance of a neighboring machine culture."

Gale shook her head. "Joke?"

"Negation. They are serious."

"Havoc, I have a problem with this."

"Endorsement. But it seems someone must handle the petition. Is the word 'no' in your vocabulary?"

"Annoyance. You're sticking me with the chore of telling them no."

"Affirmation. How could I ever say no to a sapient plant?" He frowned. "Besides which, Voila says you are better for this one."

She was stuck for it. "And you let your life be run by Voila?"

"Negation. Weft, maybe, but not Voila." It was the ongoing joke, with an unfortunately serious tinge. "Or Ennui."

"Ennui runs the planet, not your life."

"Acquiescence." He waited.

She sighed. "Give me the contact information. I'll take Vila."

"Appreciation." He kissed her and gave her the information.

It turned out to be a beautiful world, almost completely covered with bright blooms. The few artificial structures were shaped and colored like giant flowers.

"Ooo," Vila said appreciatively. "I like this world."

Gale laughed. "You like every world you've seen."

"All five," the girl agreed.

"Five?"

Vila counted off fingers. "Charm, Counter Charm, Earth, the other plant world, and this one."

"Is it the worlds you like, or the people on them?"

The girl counted off again. "Aura, Idyll, Monochrome, the nursemaid plant, and the carnivore plant here. I like both worlds and people."

"Carnivore? Alarm!"

Vila giggled. "Idyll told me. I haven't met her yet."

Gale relaxed. "Just be careful around carnivores."

"Affirmation."

The space shuttle landed on a monstrous leaf. Gale's awareness of the near future paths showed her where to go. They got out and followed a path to a spherical flower or flower bud. The air was fresh and sweet. They pushed through curtain-like petals and entered the body of the flower. It shook gently, swaying, like a ship on a wave. Then they pushed back out of it.

Now they were in a much larger flower. The small one had moved, carrying them to the interview site. "Neat," Vila said.

Before them was a giant central pistil, the female organ of a flower. It vibrated, and made a sound, a musical note.

"Greeting," a small metallic unit translated.

"Acknowledged," Gale said, and heard the translator render the word into another note.

There was a series of notes making a complex melodic fragment. "Fiolora, queen of the florals, in your terminology," the translation came.

"Gale, queen of the humans of planet Charm." She waited a moment for the translation to proceed, then added: "Vila, my daughter."

"A seedling."

Vila laughed. "Affirmation," Gale said.

"We have serious dialogue. There is a place for seedlings."

"Caution."

"Follow the Bee."

Bee? The translation unit was a small machine. But Gale didn't argue. She and Vila followed it as it buzzed across the floor of the flower and nudged through the curtain petals to another flower.

This one had wall-petals that showed geographic scenes of many types. Some were fields of flowers, some were immense forests of flowering trees, some were flower-covered mountains, or seas with floating lily-type flowers. The flowers themselves varied widely, some being monstrous, others tiny. They had many shapes and colors, and there were variegated patterns of different flowers. Overall, the chamber was remarkably beautiful and fascinating.

"Ooo," Vila repeated.

"Havoc will be sorry he didn't come," Gale murmured.

"He wanted to," Vila confided. "But Voila wouldn't let him. She said it had to be you."

That was interesting news. "Question," Gale asked the translation unit. "Where do we go from here?"

This time there was no music; the Bee-chine answered directly. "This is for the sapling. She may view any pictures she chooses. She has merely to orient on a petal and it will animate, showing the scene alive. Example:" It hovered before a field of red and blue flowers.

The picture expanded, as though they were approaching the scene, overlapping the surrounding panels. The flowers became large and clear, swaying gently in the breeze. Eight-legged insects climbed their stems, gathering their pollen, storing it in leg baskets and moving on. That alone signaled a different world, because on Charm insects were five-legged, and six-legged on Earth. Small animals moved among the stems, grazing on lesser vegetation.

The unit flew back somewhat. The scene contracted. It was no longer being addressed.

Gale saw the way of it. "Would you like to visit here while I talk with Queen Fiolora in the next flower?"

"Affirmation!" Vila was already orienting on a mountain scene, watching it expand awesomely. She seemed almost to be standing on the steep flowery slope. She absolutely loved nature; this was ideal for her.

Gale nodded. "Stay here, or return to me when you wish. Signal me telepathically if there is any problem."

"Sure, mommy," the child said, her attention focused on the plants and creatures of the mountain.

Gale followed the translator Bee back to Fiolora. "I presume my child will be safe." Her view of the near future paths indicated this was true.

"It is a tourist station," the Bee replied. "Tourists are safe."

That did make sense. Gale approached the queen flower. She brought out her dulcimer, applied her hammers, and played the sounds for "Greeting, appreciation."

Fiolora wavered as if shook by a sudden gust of wind. "You spoke directly!" her music said.

"Affirmation," she played. Then she spoke. "I have picked up only a few words, but will increase my vocabulary as we go. Direct communication seems more personal."

"Impressed. We anticipated less. There are many applicants for admission to the living culture coalition. We belong, but our associates do not, and there may be objection."

"Your associates are machines?"

"Affirmation."

"You understand we are at war with the machines?"

"Clarification: there are different machine cultures, as there are different living cultures. These ones are allies."

Gale shook her head. "I have a problem with this, and I suspect the Living Cultures Coalition does too. The machines have various and sometimes sophisticated devices and approaches. My husband has taken as a mistress a humanoid robot, which is a machine in the form of a fetching human woman. She has features no living culture can match when fashioning machines. This is just one example. How can you be sure these machine associates were not also sent by the malign machines?"

"We are sure, for several reasons. We will present these reasons, if you will receive them."

"That is what I am here for. I promise to listen. I can't promise to agree."

"Satisfactory. One reason is their age. They have been with us for millions of years. The enemy machines have been on the scene for less than one million years."

"Mutation? Could it not happen to your machines?"

"Unlikely. They have quality control."

"Suppose the malign machines send an agent to change your machines' program? They could become your enemy instantly."

"Unlikely."

"Question?"

"Ours have empathy. The malign machines lack empathy. They would be unable to reprogram ours. The circuitry is incompatible."

"Empathy! This is a living quality."

"Negation. It is a quality most living creatures possess and most machines lack. It is not inherent in either form, and the lack of it is not inherent."

"Amazement."

"But we do not expect you to take our word. You must judge them for yourself."

"I believe I must. My doubt remains. An a meeting be arranged?"

"Needless. You have already met."

Gale paused, then realized. "The translator!"

"Introduction: Bee-chine. Queen Gale Human."

"Greeting," Gale said faintly. She had been talking with and through the machine all along. "I assumed you were a slave unit, without sentience."

"I am a unit, governed by my nature, but not a slave. I am sentient and, in association, sapient."

"Association?"

"Your term is symbiosis. We exist with the flower folk, and can not survive without them, or they without us."

"Symbiosis!" Suddenly Gale understood why she, rather than Havoc, had been selected for this mission. She was the Glamour of Lichen, a symbiotic species, and thus she specialized in symbiosis also. But she had never imagined a plant/machine symbiosis. "Clarification."

"We machines are mobile," the Bee-chine said. "We can perform tasks requiring mobility. The flowers are telepathic; they can communicate far more effectively than we do. We work together for mutual benefit."

"Confirmation: you evolved together?"

"Affirmation. We machines occupy the niche on your planets occupied by insects. No insects evolved here. But our collaboration goes beyond that. It enabled us both to go to space."

Gale shook her head. "Amazement."

"To us, it was a surprise to discover that similar robots did not exist elsewhere," the Queen said. "We thought that the natural order as it exists on our planet was typical. But we have found it nowhere else."

Could it actually be? Friendly machines? "I would like to know more," Gale said. "What powers you? Surely you do not have externally supplied fuel. Batteries?"

"Negation," the Bee said. "Heat differential. We evoke electric current from any sharp difference: light and shadow, snow and water, wind and matter. We can store energy briefly, but need a regular input. The curtain I'm sitting on is cool, the adjacent air warm. Differentials are nearly universal."

"Do you have gender?"

"Affirmation. I am male."

"How did you achieve consciousness?"

"Feedback circuitry. When we first formed, one feedback enabled continuing animation. Another enabled awareness. It wasn't enough for us to form a community, but the flowers assisted with their telepathy."

"One thing led to another," Fiolora said. "So we conjecture. This was millions of years ago, before the dawn of our memory. We have worked together so long we would not discontinue even if we could. We unify the Bees; they facilitate our needs."

"And empathy. How did you develop that?"

"Also lost in the far past. At some point we learned to feel what the plants felt, and to act on it. It facilitates interaction."

"It's another feedback circuit?"

"Similar. Mirror circuitry. We emulate the feeling we observe in the plants."

"You have feeling?"

"Affirmation."

"Fear, pain, hope, joy?"

"We learned these things via empathy, and now experience them ourselves."

"Yet—" Gale broke off. "Vila!" For her daughter's mind trace had abruptly faded.

"Concern," Fiolora said. "The display flower says she entered a portal."

"Question?" Gale asked as she ran toward the other flower.

The Bee paced her. "It is a portal for tourists. They look at pictures, select one, and step into that scene. That aspect was turned off. It must have gotten turned on again."

Gale was searching the near future paths, but they did not show Vila. Somehow the girl had left the entire local framework.

She pushed through the petals and entered the display chamber. The pictures were there as before. Vila wasn't.

"She will be safe," the Bee said reassuringly. "Tourists are not consumed."

"Where is she?" Gale was suppressing a feeling of desperation. It wasn't normal for her paths sensing to let her down. And why was there no telepathic link?

The Bee buzzed to a machine panel set in the flower chamber. "Transport has been activated. The panels have been retuned to be physical as well as visual portals. This should not have occurred."

Gale went to the panel and spread her awareness. The traces of Vila were there. "She did it," she said grimly. "She must have been curious. She's like that." She looked around. "But which portal did she take?"

It was impossible to tell. The girl had stood in the center of the chamber, and had merely to turn to face any panel. She could have invoked it merely by looking directly at it, and then stepped into it. The portal would have returned to panel status after being used.

"Why can't I find her telepathically?"

"The portals lead to other worlds in other star systems," the Bee explained. "They are beyond telepathic range."

Gale sighed. She would simply have to check each one until she found her daughter.

"We will help," the Bee said. "We regret this accident."

"You should have locked them in visual status!" she snapped.

"We did."

Gale paused. "Then how did she change them?"

"She must have used the telepathic code."

Which she read in a flower mind. Gale realized that she had underestimated her daughter. "Apology," she said absently as she oriented on a petal panel.

"I will accompany you," the Bee said. "I know all the flowers of the tourist gardens."

"Welcome."

"Caution: better to leave your clothing here, lest it be soiled. The flowers don't properly understand apparel."

She didn't have time to argue. She doffed her clothing and set it in a neat pile. She focused again on the panel.

The panel expanded. Gale stepped forward—and was on the world it represented. This had huge bright flowers on head-high stems that turned to face her.

Greeting, tourist, the closest plant's thought came.

"I'm not a tourist," Gale snapped.

Ah. Then you are prey. Glistening tentacular leaves reached toward her.

"Negation!" the Bee said, verbally and musically. "She is a tourist looking for her tourist child."

A dripping thorn touched her arm. Irritated in more than one sense, Gale zapped it with an electric jolt. It jerked back, wilting.

"And a Glamor," the Bee added, seeming amused. Had it delayed that clarification deliberately?

Gale spread her clairvoyance and telepathic sense, searching for Vila. But the child was not present.

"Not here," she said. "I must try another."

"Here," the Bee said. Behind it the outline of a panel formed in the air. "Appreciation." Gale stepped through it.

They were back in the original flower chamber, surrounded by panels. Gale turned to the next petal and stepped through.

This time she stood on a promontory overlooking an awesome valley. Swaths of colors covered it, patches of particular flowers. Two bright suns were in the sky: this was indeed a completely different system. It was beautiful, but she hardly cared about that at the moment.

She spread her awareness again. There were myriad flower minds here, but not Vila's. "Back," she said.

The Bee formed another portal. Gale stepped through, and was in an enormous cavern whose walls were covered with flowering vines.

The perfume of their ambiance was almost stifling. Flowers were plant genitals, reproductive organs made obvious and attractive, and they enhanced it by odor and pheromones. Suddenly Gale felt the urgent need to mate.

"Check quickly," the Bee said. "I will be overcome soon."

But she needed more time. "Go ahead and indulge them," she said. "I'll catch you when I'm ready to depart."

Immediately the Bee flew to a small red flower, diving into its half-closed chamber and rolling madly. Pollen coated his wings, legs, and body. Then he emerged and buzzed to another bloom, a blue one, and entered similarly, spreading red pollen and picking up blue pollen. Gale could tell from

his mind that this was an intense sexual experience for both Bee and flowers. It was difficult for her to hold back from going similarly into one of the larger flowers.

"Do it!" the Bee called.

Why not? She went to a giant green flower and climbed into its powdery environment. *My child—is she here?* She thought as she rolled, feeling an orgasmic pleasure wherever the powder touched her skin.

Negation, the flower responded. *You are the only one of your species here.*

Appreciation, Gale thought as she rolled out of the flower and went to another, a blue one. She rolled again, and the green powder mixed with the blue, but also fell into the flower, pollinating it. Again she experienced the whole-body orgasm of that interaction.

Soon she was satisfied that Vila had not come here. She hauled herself out of the flowers, fighting off the desire to lose herself in perpetual orgasm. "Bee!"

The Bee appeared. A portal formed behind him. They tumbled through together.

They were both covered with multi-colored powders. "We must clean ourselves, lest we succumb to the urge to mate with each other," the Bee said.

"Agreement!" For it wasn't really a joke, despite the considerable disparity in their forms and sizes. She remained horrendously turned on.

"The black portal."

She turned to the black petal, which expanded into a door. She lunged through, finding herself in a drenching rain storm on a mossy landscape. Good enough; of course the flowers didn't have human style artificial showers. They utilized natural ones. The water was warm and clean, and in moments so was she. The sexual urge was fading.

"Here," the Bee said, flying to an open shelter. She hadn't realized that he had come through with her, but of course he had to, to open the way back.

She followed him to the shelter, which was a crude framework made from fallen branches and overlapping leaves. Hot air gusted from a crevice in the ground, drying them. This was evidently a volcanic vent adapted to this purpose.

"The tourists must love this," Gale remarked.

"It is a honeymoon site," the Bee agreed. "They indulge in powdering, then indulge together, and finally clean off here. The flowers are glad to cooperate."

"You're a machine, yet you react to the powder?"

"I am a machine evolved to react to pollen," he agreed. "In the normal course we go constantly among the flowers, spreading and receiving joy."

"Curiosity: how would you and I be able to mate, being of entirely different species?"

"I would roll in your hair, spreading powder, achieving joy therefrom. You would feel the powder also."

Gale nodded. That powder spread across her head would affect her thoughts. Then she remembered that her hair was not limited to her head. The powder would affect more than her mind.

She was dry. "Time to resume the search," she said briskly.

The Bee formed another portal, and they stopped through. They were back in the central flower chamber.

This time she paused before visiting another world. Where would Vila be most likely to go? The steep flowery mountain slope? The sea with floating flowers? The giant flowering trees with the activity way up in the tops? The carnivorous plants?

There it was. The girl was fascinated with plants that ate animals. She would orient on them, not realizing that this time it would be more than just a picture.

Gale focused on the carnivore panel. It expanded, and she and the Bee went through.

She stood before a giant maw with tooth-like petals. Digestive saliva dripped slowly from the upper to the lower spikes. A tongue-like petal writhed restlessly within.

Gale spread her awareness—and found Vila. She was indeed in this framework. But the paths were vague, and her mind was dull. *Vila*

There was no answer.

"We seek a tourist child," the Bee said to the plant. "Did she pass this way?"

The plant vibrated musically. "Affirmation. Young female of this species."

"Where is she?" Gale asked tightly.

"She played with Vinos, and he hurled her into the deeper forest."

"He *what*?" Gale asked sharply.

"Vinos is a traveler vine," the Bee explained quickly. "He conveys tourists to the deeper forest for better viewing of the predators. He throws them from loop to loop."

"Then I must follow that route. Where is he?"

A thick vine swung down from a high branch. It vibrated. "I am Vinos," the Bee translated.

"Take me where you took my child."

"Enter the basket." A woven green network of branches slid down along the vine.

Gale sat in the basket. It lifted, swung back and forth, then launched her through the air. Right to a similar basket that neatly caught her, then swung similarly to hurl her another stage. It was similar to the mode of conveyance in the Green Chroma, where big tentacles swung gondolas through the forest. Vila would have considered this familiar, and fun.

After a dizzying traverse the motion stopped. "This is the region," the Bee said.

"Vila!" Gale called. Still no response.

"Where is the tourist child?" the Bee asked the nearest flower. This was one of the giant ones, capable of taking in a person Vila's size.

The plant vibrated. "She was tired. Dolly took her in."

"Show me," Gale said.

The Bee flew to a nearby flower that resembled a giant clown-face with huge iridescent eyes.

"Open," the Bee said.

The painted mouth cranked open. There inside was a tongue that looked like a friendly six legged dog. It was a lure to attract children.

And there behind it lay Vila, naked, unconscious in a pool of saliva. Her mind showed she was alive, but without volition.

Gale kept a tight rein on her reactions. "Is that thing eating her?"

"Negation. It sedated her so she would sleep. She is safe."

"Safe? In the maw of a carnivorous plant?" Yet as she spoke she realized it was true. The plant was not digesting Vila, it was letting her lie in a place where nothing else would molest her.

"Appreciation, Dolly," the Bee said. "Now wake the child."

The color of the saliva shifted. Vila stirred. Consciousness was returning. She sat up, rubbing her eyes.

Then she saw Gale. "Mommy!"

"Vila!" Gale replied, hugely relieved.

The girl scrambled to her feet. "I got lost and so tired, but I saw this doll, and knew it was all right. I guess I fell asleep." She ran to hug her mother, getting sticky saliva smeared on them both.

"This is near the edge of the tourist zone," the Bee explained. "Dolly knew it wasn't safe for her to wander farther. So she put her down for a nap."

Now that the tension was off, Gale saw that it was so. Dolly was a carnivorous plant, but honored the rule: no eating of tourists. Further, she had safeguarded the child from possible harm beyond. It had been a judicious decision, done the only way she could, since she could neither move nor speak to Vila, lacking translation.

"Appreciation," Gale said. "How may I thank her?"

"The tourist thanks you for your service," the Bee said to Dolly. "Queen Fiolora will send you a fat vole to eat."

The mouth slowly closed. So did the painted eyes.

The Bee opened the portal and they returned to the central chamber. They went again to the shower realm, where they washed off the saliva. Gale realized how readily it could have contained digestive enzymes instead of merely sleep-inducing ones.

"Now do you know better than to fiddle with settings you do not understand?" Gale asked Vila severely.

"I already knew better, mommy. I just couldn't resist."

And she was only five years old. Gale sighed, and hugged her again.

In due course they were back in the main chamber, clothed; Vila had somehow picked up on the nudity policy and left her clothing neatly stored there. They returned to the queen.

"Apology for the interruption," Gale said.

"Understanding. You are a mother."

"Agreement," Gale said, smiling. She turned to Fiolora. "Where were we?"

"You were questioning the Bee-chine about his sentience and feeling."

Gale nodded. "I think I am now satisfied that he has these qualities. But I fear there will be considerable resistance in other cultures to the idea of machines joining our war against machines."

"They will accept your judgment," Fiolora said.

"I am not yet sure of my judgment. It just seems to me that the affinity of a machine should be with another machine."

"Understanding," the Bee said. "But our affinity is with our plant associates. We exist to service them, and can't feature doing otherwise."

"Perhaps you should visit a home hive, so see how the Bees operate in their own environment," Fiolora said.

Gale nodded. "This may be worthwhile. I do need to understand them well."

"Follow me." The Bee flew to the side and out of the flower.

Gale picked Vila up and flew after him. Soon they were cruising across the landscape, weaving around the thickly nested flowers. They reached a field of flowers.

The bee hovered here. "Admittance" he said, translating his signal for their benefit.

In a moment a portion of the flower bed lifted, revealing a ramp leading down into the ground. Gale set Vila back on her feet, and they walked down, following the Bee.

"Regret we can't show you every detail," the Bee said as he flew. "But we are small and you are large. This is our public display access, for tourists."

"Understanding," Gale said.

The passage led to a large cavern-like enclosure well below the surface. Thousands of Bees buzzed through it, going to and from small cells lining the dome-shaped wall. Others walked along the surface. Gale noticed that as each met another, their antennae touched, in the manner of Earth ants. That was evidently how they communicated with each other, lacking telepathy.

"Here we make our replacement units," the Bee explained. "After a time we wear out, and there are accidents, and some get lost, so a constant supply of new Bees is necessary. The workers bring the tools and raw materials and put them together, each doing his or her specific part."

"Assembly line!" Vila said brightly, having started school and learned the concept.

"Similar," the Bee agreed.

"It must be a job to bring all the supplies here," Gale said.

"Accuracy. But we are in touch with other hives across the planet. This is one service the flowers do for us. They communicate with the flowers near the other hives, and enable us to deliver what is needed in the correct amounts. The hives specialize to a degree; some mine for metals, while others refine more esoteric ingredients. Some process the special circuits we require, for consciousness and empathy."

"Empathy," Gale said. "You actually make circuits for it, and install them in Bees?"

"Affirmation. It is vital to do it right, so each Bee can function properly and serve the flowers well."

"Curiosity: if you craft new Bees from raw materials, what is the need for gender or sex?"

"Perhaps a parallel to living reproduction is in order. You are made of animated proteins. Can you make new life in a laboratory?"

"Negation. Even the synthetic people termed the fifths actually start with fertilized eggs generated by living folk. Only life can beget life. All else is feeding and environment."

"Agreement. We are not alive, but there is an essence that we are unable to make: the basis for sentience. The raw materials can make the semblance of a Bee, and it might even operate on a crude level, but it would never have sentience, let alone sapience. Only running machines already possessed of this quality can beget running machines with the capacity for it. Thus we, like you, require gender and sex, to integrate the running essence on a small scale that can be encapsulated in an egg unit and developed with care into a new Bee. So it has been from the dawn of our evolution. The secret of our origin as independent sentient machines remains obscure. We don't know how it first occurred."

"Neither do we, for life," Gale said. "It occurs throughout the galaxy, but we don't know whether it came to be separately on each origin planet, or whether it spread from some common source. We can't make life out of protein. We have tried."

"So have we, to make an original sentience, with no success." Gale considered. "The distinction between 'running' and 'living' becomes indistinct."

"Agreement. But there is a difference. Our functioning bodies are not at all similar."

"Yet we seem to be turned on by the same sexual pheromones. You and I both were put into ecstasy by the flowers."

"Coincidence. The plants are alive, and draw on elements common to life. We associate closely with them, so evolved to relate to their processes. We are unable to breed except in flowers. Had there been a female Bee there—"

"Or a male human," Gale agreed.

"As it was, we were incomplete, so suffered rapture without actually breeding. This is why we do not go among flowers in pairs, until we have breeding in mind."

This brought a notion to Gale. "The enemy machines: do they have genders and sex too, for similar reason?"

"We have not encountered them directly, for if we had we would now be defunct. But we understand from reports that they do not, though they may be able to emulate gender and sex when dealing with living species."

"They can," she agreed with a wry smile. "They made a humanoid robot—that is, a machine with the semblance of a human woman, and she is quite apt in performance. My husband has taken her as a mistress."

"An enemy machine!"

"She's nice," Vila said.

"You surely know your business, but this is dangerous. Why would you allow the agent of a culture that means to destroy you and all else in the galaxy to exist among you? She could kill your man at any time."

"Doubtful," Gale said. "He's a Glamor. But also, she is programmed to love him. We have

viewed the future paths associated with her, and she never attempts to harm him or any other human being."

"Like that plant carnivore who protected me," Vila said. "She knew I was good enough to eat, but she had a deal with Queen Fiolora to keep the tourists safe."

"An apt analogy," the Bee agreed. "We lack that future paths seeing you mention. So I can appreciate that you have a basis for such tolerance, though the concept makes me nervous. At any rate, we believe that the enemy machines do not reproduce sexually. They have found the secret of generating running from inanimate materials. That makes them more dangerous."

"Doubt," Gale said. "It makes them less like living things. They can emulate feeling, but it is not inherent."

"It makes them able to be destructive in ways we could never be. That is one reason we could not stand against them."

"It is one reason you align with life," Gale said. "You have conscience and empathy."

"Agreement."

"I am satisfied. I will recommend that you be admitted to the Living Cultures Coalition. Perhaps as one aspect of a symbiosis with the flowers. Others will decide, but this much I can do."

"Appreciation. We believe your recommendation will be decisive."

"There is another matter. I wonder whether we can arrange a trade."

"Question?"

"The female machine—the robot—lacks empathy, and is in need of it. She is not ill-willed, merely unable to feel what living folk feel. Would you be able to modify her to include an empathy circuit?"

"Doubtful. A simple machine, yes. But the enemy machines are level 2.5, while we are level 2.0. They are beyond our sophistication."

"But could you do it, theoretically?"

"Theoretically, provided there were three conditions. She would have to be willing, which is unlikely because she has been crafted by those who desire only destruction for all others. Even were she willing, we would be able to implant only the data for the circuit; she would have to invoke it by her choice, and she would see no need. And she would have to be in orgasm while we operated."

"Question!"

"We learned of the access mode the enemy machines use, for their routine servicing of units that malfunction or require upgrading. They did not want it obvious or easy, so that others could not interfere. So they hid it in a state of experience: sexual orgasm. She would have to be in sustained

sexual ecstasy. This, too, seems unlikely."

"We'll see," Gale said. "Now I wonder whether we could provide you with future paths seeing, in trade."

"Your living circuits are incompatible with ours. There can be no transfer of that nature."

"But the robot—you could use one of her circuits, if you got it."

"Perhaps," the Bee agreed dubiously.

"You might copy it when you had access to her data bank. It would be limited to far-future seeing—a month to eternity—but might still be useful to you."

"Agreement!"

"Can you talk Shee into it?" Vila asked. "She's already jealous of you and Monochrome."

"Negation. She knows her place, and accepts it. She is programmed to be never more than Havoc's second mistress."

"But now she's to become a Glamor!"

Gale smiled. "I am already a Glamor. So is Monochrome. Havoc is lucky."

"And now he's got those five bath girls too." Vila giggled. "You and Mono should take a bath with him and them, all at once."

"Vila! Do you think we would tease your father like that?"

The girl wasn't fooled. "And Opaline. He likes her too. And Symbol. That would make an even ten."

"Symbol's tied up with her family. It will be a few more years before she's ready to resume mistressing."

Vila pondered briefly. "Then we need someone else for the tenth. The old bath girls have long since disappeared into families. Who remains young and luscious and in love with him?"

"All the nubile girls of the planet," Gale said. "But they can't really compete with Glamors or robots."

"Frustration!" But then she brightened. "Weft!"

Gale stifled a burst of laughter. Young, luscious, and in love with Havoc: Weft certainly qualified. "Complication."

"Oh, I know. Incest. Tek—tek—"

"Technically."

"Yes. But maybe she could go no fault and wear a mask."

"Maybe," Gale agreed, still amused.

"Instead of a bath, perhaps a giant flower," the Bee suggested, sharing the mischief. "I believe we could recruit one, or several."

"A flower bath!" Vila said.

Gale considered. What a prank to play on Havoc! "I will see what can be done." She focused on the Bee. "But first we must see about that empathy program. Let's verify it with Fiolora."

"She'll love it!" Vila said. "The empathy and the bath."

"Agreement," the Bee said.

Taken as a whole, this mission was concluding well.

Chapter 14

Glamor

"Havoc will join you now," Ennui said.

Shee jumped off the bed in the suite she had been assigned. She didn't need a bed, except to make things comfortable for Havoc during sex, but it facilitated appearances. "Apology for my doubt. But is it really him?"

"Affirmation," Havoc said, sweeping in. "It's really me. Was my son bedding you in my image?"

"Negation," she said, hugging him. "He was a perfect gentleman. But he showed he was able to fool me. Oh, Havoc, take me away and ravish me endlessly. I live for your touch."

"Soon," he said, setting her down and guiding her to the bedroom. But they did not use the bed; instead they were abruptly on Planet Counter Charm, with Idyll Ifrit already formed.

"Greeting," Shee said, disconcerted. She had hoped to be in the throes of sex with Havoc at this time.

"Acknowledged," Idyll said. There was something about her manner that suggested that she understood Shee's frustration. Did she have her own passion for Havoc?

"And my daughter Voila," Havoc said.

A pretty young woman appeared. She had brown hair and brown eyes, and her aspect did favor

Havoc. It was hard to credit that this was the machines' primary target in the galaxy.

"Greeting," Voila said, taking Shee's two hands. There was an intensity about her that put other Glamors to shame. This was the creature Shee had come to recruit, and her very touch was inspiring. Now Shee felt an atypical instant of vertigo. How could she, a machine, be affected like this?

"Acknowledged," she said after a moment.

Voila let her go. Then she hugged Havoc and whispered in his ear, very much the loving daughter. And vanished. Idyll also faded out.

"Now we travel," Havoc said briskly.

Shee was disappointed. "Question?"

"First we make you a Glamor."

Shee didn't care what Idyll overheard, here in her bower; she was desperate. "Havoc, please, ravish me first. I don't know if I can ever be a Glamor, or whether I ever should be. I simply exist to love you."

"This will test that love."

"Any test will verify it. Please, Havoc."

He smiled. "Observation: You seem really hot."

"Confirmation!"

"Good. Because you will need to have a fifteen minute orgasm."

"Do me for fifteen minutes, and I will keep the pace."

"Soon."

"Now."

"Kiss and feel now; orgasm later." He followed through, kissing her mouth while squeezing her bottom.

"Havoc, why are you teasing me?"

"Because I want you to be desperate enough to accede to my demand."

"Question?"

"You may not wish to do the necessary."

"What necessary?"

"You must accept spot reprogramming."

"That is not feasible. My program is sacrosanct."

"Unfortunate. Your mission is to become my mistress and persuade me to persuade Voila to join the machines. You will not be my mistress unless you accept the reprogramming, and your mission will fail at the outset."

She knew he was serious. "Havoc, I would do anything for you. But this is beyond my means. I can't reprogram myself any more than you could rip out your heart."

"The reprogramming is to add an empathy circuit to your program. That will enable you to become a Glamor."

"Havoc—"

"As a Glamor you will have infinitely more power to accomplish anything you perceive as relating to your assignment. So this is consistent with your mission."

"Perhaps. But—"

"And it will contribute to your own personal fulfillment. You will no longer be a mere slave circuit programmed by the machines, but will become a person in your own right with an independent perspective. So you owe it to yourself."

He simply was not listening. "Do with me what you will," she said with resignation.

"Acquiescence." He put his hands on her elbows.

And they stood in a fantastic field of flowers. "It's beautiful!" she exclaimed. "But this is an alien world. The gravity differs, and a mortal would not be able to breathe this air. Where are we?"

"This is a planet of what we call the bee-chines. They are a machine culture."

"Alarm!"

"At ease, wench. Not all machines are enemies, any more than all living creatures are friends. These machines align with the living cultures, and stand to be destroyed by your machines if the forces of life lose the war."

"You trust this?"

"Affirmation. They have empathy circuits, and will add one to your programming."

"Havoc, you are not comprehending. What level are these machines?"

"Type two."

"They lack the sophistication to reprogram a type two point five machine, even if they were able to gain access to the relevant portion."

"Clarification: they will add the empathy program to your data bank. You will have to invoke it yourself."

She shrugged. "I could invoke it, and cancel it at my whim. This is a mere application, not reprogramming."

"Sufficient."

"And they can't gain access. My brain would self-destruct rather than be compromised."

"Loophole."

"Question?"

"Access is available when you are in orgasm."

"Ludicrous!"

"Fact. This is why I saved the sex for this occasion."

"Havoc, even if this were true, how could you possibly know it? *I don't know it!*"

"Voila discovered it."

"How? We first met only minutes ago."

He smiled. "Promise no anger."

"What are you talking about?"

"When Voila took your hands, she invoked a talent she has borrowed and explored thousands of alternate presents, until she found it."

"Found what?"

"Your secret access. Orgasm. We had suspected."

"Confusion."

"Explanation: the machines of your culture surely need to reprogram their robots on occasion, but do not want any other creatures to have similar access. So they hid the access mode where no one would think to look. It is not a key or code, but a state of being: orgasm."

"Impossible! I am programmed to be able to achieve orgasm only with you. No one else can touch me in that manner, unless you direct it, and even then I could only emulate passion, not experience it as I do with you."

"Which is why you will be doing it with me. But the modification requires fifteen minutes."

"Nonsense!"

"Think back, Shee. When the brigand robots raped you, you did not have orgasm, true. But what about when you slept?"

She stared at him. "How—?"

"I visited your planet of origin and learned your secret. I also saw you sleeping, in the records. You writhed with pleasure. Can you tell me you did not dream?"

She did not know whether to be outraged or relieved. He had seriously violated her privacy, yet she loved him. "I dreamed of having sex with you. It was fantastic, extending seemingly forever. All the girls did."

"That was when they accessed your brains. They kept you in orgasm, and let you relax only when they were finished. You were dreaming of sex with me when they transplanted your brain to a new and larger body."

"But we were children!"

"And felt guilty upon waking, believing this was illicit pleasure. That the small changes in your mind and body you discovered were because of lascivious dreams. So you buried those memories."

She found herself blushing. It was true.

He held her by the shoulders and gazed into her face. "Shee, I want to be with you. But I must wean you away from your machine origin. This is the way."

She capitulated again. "Do with me what you will."

He removed her clothing, and his own. His member was rampant. "They will invade you. Ignore it. Focus on pleasure with me." He made her lie on a fragrant pallet of moss, and kissed her and stroked her.

She responded, as she had to. She existed for this. She loved feeling his mouth on hers, his hands on her breasts, his member nudging her cleft. She grabbed handfuls of his lean buttocks and moved his loin against hers. When he took too long to enter her, she caught his penis with her hand and guided it in, and wrapped her legs about him so that he could not escape.

Then they were in the throes of a continuous orgasm. She felt his ejaculate pumping into her, and her vagina clasped his member hungrily, drawing in more. It went on and on, transporting them. It was as if they floated up from the pallet and drifted across the field of flowers, carried by the surging waves of their mutual pleasure.

At last it was done. She discovered him panting at her breast, for once satiated. So was she. She felt the moisture of the overflow, and knew there would be serious cleaning up to do. But what a divine experience!

"What happened to the bee-chines you warned me about? I never saw them." She stood and wiped off much of the dribble.

"They are small. They entered your nose and got close to your brain. They set up their equipment and radiated the program to your random access memory bank. They finished and departed. You now have access to empathy."

"Doubt." But she checked her data storage, and found it: empathy. That had to be it, as it was new.

"Invoke it, if you wish."

"Curiosity." She invoked it. The program spread through her consciousness circuitry and faded. "No effect."

"Here is a damaged plant." He touched the stem. "It got crowded out of its original turf and must find new ground for its roots."

Shee touched the stem. She saw a scrape along the side. "It is injured! It is hurting."

"How do you know?"

"I feel its pain. Its roots are in bad soil and can't provide enough sap to heal the gash, and the sap leaks out anyway. This plant is dying."

Havoc put his hand on the base of the stem, circling it. Power passed into the plant. The sap rose up strongly, and filled the gash with healing balm. She felt the plant mending, its pain easing. "Sufficient?" he asked.

"Negation. It still needs raw nutrients to feed on. Otherwise it will quickly succumb."

He held his penis and guided a flow of urine to the soil at the base of the plant. "Enough?"

"It still needs more." She scooped up a handful of spent ejaculate and pressed it into the ground around the plant. "Now it has a future."

"You felt its pain," he said. "Figurative?"

"Literal! My leg smarted." Then she paused, reconsidering. "But I feel pain only when I choose to. My leg is not injured. How could I feel it?"

"You invoked the empathy circuit."

She nodded. "I did. That made me feel the plant's pain, and its pleasure when you healed and fed it. I never felt such things before. I always related to plants, and cared for them, but this was different. *I felt its pain.*" Now she picked up on the significance she had overlooked before. It was as if she had briefly become the plant.

"You can turn off that program."

"Not yet." She stood and walked among the flowers. Each was a sex organ hungry for servicing. She felt that hunger. She turned back to Havoc, who was standing still. "Get it up again, Glamor." She lifted his limp member in her hand, then knelt to put her mouth on it, sucking it into renewed life. She felt his intensifying desire.

In moments they were at it again, thrusting into another mutual fulfillment. This time she related intimately to his burgeoning desire and release. It enhanced her own release.

"I could get to like you this way," he said as his spurting subsided. "Too bad you can't leave the empathy circuit on."

"Why should I turn it off? It makes me feel alive."

"But you are not alive."

Then she realized. "I *am* alive. What my body is made of doesn't matter. I feel, I hurt, I pleasure, I care. I am living!"

"Illusion. Turn off the empathy and you will revert to normal."

"The hell! I would die."

"That is the circuit speaking. It has corrupted you. You need to be rid of it."

She grabbed his member again. "If you don't shut up, Havoc, I'll work this up to shoot at a moon."

"That moon," he said, caressing her left breast.

"Revelation: you knew it would have this affect on me. That once I invoked it, I would not care to give it up."

"Confession," he agreed. "You did give me leave to do what I could with you."

"You deserve severe punishment. Take that." She kissed him hard on the mouth. "And that." She kissed him again, pinching his lean buttocks.

"I do," he agreed.

And of course soon enough they were into sex again. It was glorious this way, with the empathy making it dimensionally more potent.

"We're filthy," she said as they got back to their feet. "We need to go home and wash."

"When you are a Glamor, you will be able to conjure yourself," he said, taking her elbows.

They were in the royal suite. She hauled him to the private bathroom, the one without the bath girls. She scrubbed him herself, and he scrubbed her, though not necessarily in the dirty places. And of course they were soon back in the throes of sex, as the water splashed over them both.

"You gave me empathy," she said as they lay on the bed, after. "It has changed me. But do you believe it is safe to make me a Glamor?"

"It will change you. That makes it safe. You will no longer be bound to the will of the machines."

"So you said before. But the reality remains: if Voila does not enlist with the machines, they will destroy the human culture and me with it. You and I are mere drops in a rainstorm, unable to do more than delay the process marginally."

"Perhaps."

"If we are to exist so briefly, at least let's fulfill it to the extent we can. If you want me to be a Glamor, then I am ready."

"Then we will join Symbol."

"She has a hand in this?"

"For the ikon, since we won't be able to touch it."

"She was your prior mistress. She's jealous of me."

"With excellent reason. But the ikon will satisfy her. It will restore her to youth and sexiness."

"She's pretty sexy as she is. With her illusion, her appearance is what she makes it."

"Affirmation. I may take her back. She still loves me."

"And have three mistresses?"

He glanced quizzically at her. "You have a point?"

She had to laugh.

Then they were at Symbol's door. "Havoc!" Shee said. "We're still naked."

"Point?"

"You are incorrigible!"

The door opened. Symbol stood there. "Havoc!" she stepped into him and kissed him ardently. He was right; Symbol still loved him.

"We will make Shee a Glamor now," he said. "So that the ikon is convenient for you."

Symbol was startled. "I didn't even see her. I thought maybe you—" She broke off with a sigh. "But that was yesteryear."

"With the ikon you will be fit again."

"But still married, with children."

"So part time will be better."

"Serious? You will take me back?"

"We need someone to carry the ikon. I trust you."

Symbol looked at him with a mixture of expressions. And Shee felt her feelings. He was being thoughtlessly unkind.

"Tell her you still love her," Shee told him. "And prove it. I will mind the children."

Symbol sent her a look of sheer gratitude.

Soon Shee was with the children, while Havoc and Symbol were thumping in the bedroom. Haven was delighted to have her company.

How would it be to have children like this—Havoc's children? To be a family woman? She ached with desire, and this time not for sex.

"What's Havoc doing with mommy?" Haven asked.

Shee checked her memory banks, and verified that children were educated early about no fault sex. "She was his mistress for many years," she explained. "Now they both have other lives, but they miss each other. They are having no fault sex."

"Oh. Okay." His interest moved on to other things.

In due course Havoc and Symbol reappeared. She looked radiant. Her appearance was illusion, but surely reflected her state of mind. Two things had dominated her prior life: being the king's mistress, and carrying Voila's ikon.

Both had been lost. Now she was recovering equivalent things.

Symbol resumed charge of her children. Havoc and Shee went to the bedroom, but for more important business than sex.

Havoc focused on Shee. "We have concluded that your constituency should be inanimate matter," he said. "Do you understand the obligations of a Glamor to her constituency?"

"Affirmation. But what could inanimate matter want?"

"That will be for you to fathom. But fair warning: just as the empathy program changes you, being a Glamor will change you more. Your affinity will be for your constituency, but also for other Glamors. You will probably not serve the machines any more."

"The machines," she said. "They do not feel. They could feel, because they were able to incorporate feeling in the robots, but they don't include it in themselves. Not the ones we encountered, at any rate. It interferes with objectivity. It would change them the way empathy changes me. I was already closer to life than to the machines when I came to you."

"Concurrence. We merely wish you to be advised."

"Why are you being so careful?" she flared. "What does it matter whether I am advised or left ignorant until the fact?" Then she answered her own question. "Because if you trick me into things, I will resent it, feeling negative, and you don't want a Glamor with a grudge. You want to be sure I am on your side before you give me real power."

"Even that is too cynical," Havoc said. "The near future paths indicate that clarity is best from the outset. We want to forge our best chance against the machines."

"Which is to let Voila enlist with them. Why do you risk annihilation unnecessarily?" But again she answered herself. "You feel for the other living cultures! You can't let them perish while you prosper."

"And can you?"

"Negation! Not any more." She shook her head. "I *have* changed. I never cared about them before."

"Now you must care similarly about your constituency. It will expect your utter commitment."

"How can inanimate matter expect anything? I have special consciousness circuits, as do living things, but the inanimate does not."

"And so it needs a spokesperson."

"We have been over this before, I think. How do I relate?"

"Reach out with your new awareness. Identify with matter. Fathom its nature. Offer to represent it. If it accepts you, it will give you the power."

"This is how you turned Glamor?"

"Affirmation. The power was immediate. It took time to master the nuances."

"I should think so." She considered a moment. "Warp showed me the near future paths. I can't see them by myself, but perhaps in time I'll learn. Can you show me this fathoming similarly?"

"I will try." He took her hand.

They concentrated. There was nothing.

"It seems I can't help you here," Havoc said with regret. "You have to make the connection by yourself."

"I feared that would be the case."

He reconsidered. "But maybe the paths can help. They can suggest the path to success. Then you can follow it."

"Help me."

He took her hand again. Now she saw several images of herself, sitting, concentrating, getting nowhere.

Except that along one path she smiled. It was the one where she happened to have picked up a pebble, a little stone. Matter! She focused on that one, and was at its nexus. More paths diverged from it, most leading nowhere, but on one she remained smiling. She took that one, still orienting on the pebble.

Then she was floating into diminishing smallness. She saw the pebble expanding, becoming a rock, a boulder, an island. Its ragged edges became ridges and crevices, then mountains and valleys. She dropped to it, and it continued expanding.

She found herself unable to land on the island, which had become a planetoid. As she approached, its substance became diffuse, globs of matter attached to each other by strong affinities. The molecules of the stone. But what she sought was not here.

She delved deeper, entering a molecule, discovering its atoms. She approached an atom, spying its central mass of protons and neutrons, its outer electron sphere. She entered the electron, finding the charged quarks that comprised it. This was the fundamental basis of matter, but she found no way to relate to it or draw power from it.

She withdrew, returning rapidly to her contact with Havoc. "Negation," she said.

"Affirmation. Maybe I was in the way. Try it without me." He let go of her hand.

She tried—and could not even start. "I can't do it without you."

"Try just the near future paths."

She tried. There was absolutely nothing. "With Warp I did it, and with you. But it is clear that I was merely following your seeing; I have no ability myself."

"What of adapting your far future seeing to near future?"

"That was conjecture. Now we know it was false. Near future seeing is a different thing. It is not calculated, so much as *seeing*."

He nodded. "Confirmation. I had this impression, but hoped I was wrong. You lack the capacity for near future paths seeing. Conjecture: the machines lack it, so could not provide you with it. Another reason they are so desperate for Voila, its leading practitioner."

"Agreement," she said unhappily.

"Maybe we oriented on the wrong object. Try your finger."

"Question?"

"As a machine you are different from inanimate matter, but closer to it than to living flesh. Maybe you can explore and fathom that difference, and gain a better notion how to approach the inanimate."

"Idea," she agreed. She took his hand, and focused on the tip of her own finger. In a moment she was floating toward it, as she had with the little stone.

It was indeed different. The molecules of the flexible metal and composition aligned in a quite contrary pattern. They had been crafted rather than randomly assembled. But the answer was not there.

She emerged from the study. "Let me look at *your* finger," she said.

"Life versus non-life," he agreed, proffering a finger.

She oriented on it. This was substantially different again. It pulsed with animation, its linked cells constantly relating to each other. Every cell was a creature in its own right, performing its own feeding, elimination, housekeeping, and service functions. They lived in a common environment, contributing to a common host, but each was descended from an individual entity. She read it in their history, encoded in the DNA.

And suddenly she had it. The first life had prospered by exploiting non-life. She couldn't read non-life's mind, because it had no mind, but her empathy enabled her to understand how it should feel if it could feel. It would resent the exploitation, and want to protect itself. But it lacked a representative to defend its case.

I will do that, she thought.

She felt acceptance. Then the power came, infusing her, magnifying her, so much of it that she knew it would take her years just to learn how to use all of it properly. But she also knew she would have competent guidance. An immense horizon had appeared, infinitely promising. Yet also a kind of separation, as if she was losing part of her being.

Then she was looking at Havoc, amazed. "I found it."

"Awareness." He pointed to a spot beside her on the bed.

She looked. It was a little metallic wheel or gear. She reached to pick it up—and her hand shied away. "Question?"

"Ikon."

Her ikon! It had formed when she turned Glamor. She couldn't touch it; it was what she had lost.

"Symbol!" she called.

The woman entered the bedroom. "Question?"

"Please take my ikon."

"Oh!" Symbol practically leaped onto the bed, sweeping up the ikon and tucking it into her invisible bosom. "Gratitude!"

"Returned," Shee said. "I would hug you, but I don't think I can."

"Possible." Symbol fished out the ikon and held it out to the side at arm's length. Then she moved into Shee, and Shee hugged her. They had abruptly become specially close.

"I know you will keep it safe," Shee said.

"Absolutely! But what is its environment? I don't want to take it out of that."

"Matter. Charm is matter. Your body is matter. It relates to the inanimate. Stay close to a planet."

Symbol laughed. "Commitment." She looked at Havoc. "You two need to be alone now." She left.

"Question?" Shee asked.

"Glamors have enhanced sexuality."

"So we do!" she agreed, realizing the urgency that infused her. She had given sex to him because she loved him and desperately wanted to please him. Now she also wanted sex for itself. She moved into Havoc. Then thought of something. "If no Glamor can touch any ikon, how can a Glamor touch a Glamor?"

"Mystery," he said. "We seem to represent the touchable part." He kissed her.

Then they merged in a session that seemed to put even the fifteen minute empathy effort to shame. It was true: the status of Glamor intensified sexual awareness and performance.

But it wasn't over, even after the fierce sex. "I must serve my constituency."

"Affirmation. What is its prime desire?"

She focused, and it came to her. "To be whole. Originally it was a single entity. Now it is fragmented into myriad lesser entities. It wants to stop further fragmentation."

"Clarification."

"The larger the units of matter, the more at rest it is. So it wants to prevent fragmentation, and promote unification. I need to ascertain how to best promote that process."

"It proceeds naturally," Havoc said. "Our twin star Void is drawing matter in to itself, and will

eventually swallow Vivid and our planets."

"That will help. But it will not be complete until all matter is united, as it was in the beginning, the perfect state."

"According to Earth astronomers, that will not happen. Instead the universe will fly apart."

"Horror! That must be reversed."

He shrugged. "Maybe you will find a way, once the war with the machines is finished."

"It is a long-term goal," she agreed. "But in the interim, do not fragment any planets."

"It is the machines that do that, to abolish the living cultures."

"Affirmation," she said. "They must be stopped." she looked at him. "You knew this would happen."

"Voila saw it coming. But there is a mystery."

"Question?"

"The machines knew it too, as they see more than a month ahead. So why did they send you to me?"

"My mission is a pretense?"

He shook his head. "Negation. It is merely not the whole reason. The machines want Voila to join them. But they know the price of that is losing you to me. Making you a Glamor, and their enemy. That is an extremely heavy price. Is it worth it, or is there something we do not yet fathom?"

She nodded. "Voila is their top recruiting target, but even she may be merely a means to another end. They have a very long view. There is surely more. We must fathom it."

"Affirmation. But how?"

"Idea: I am a machine, with machine programming in every part of my body, just as your DNA is in yours. Your DNA is mostly junk."

"Question?"

"There are masses of irrelevant instructions in it. Only a small portion is used to formulate your being. The rest was relevant once, but was cast aside when better instructions evolved. That left over junk DNA contains among other things the history of your species, its ancestors, and life itself. It can be read to recreate your evolution from the dawn of life to the present. If my machine coding is similar, there will be a history of the machine species in the junk. That could indicate their real motive."

He grabbed her and kissed her. "You are my favorite robot mistress!"

"Gratification," she said, laughing. "Now you have a choice: continue working me up until I explode sexually, or allow me to explore my coding history."

"Unfair. I want both."

"Method?"

He hauled her to him and sat her on his lap. "I will attend to your body while you attend to your coding." He kissed her left breast as his member rose between her legs.

"Doubt." But she let him continue while she focused again on her own finger. If the distraction prevented her from discovering the code, she would be satisfied with his passion. She was, after all, made for it. "Lend me your paths seeing." For that seemed to enhance the exploration. The Glamors used it to see the near future, but it was really a way of studying all aspects of a situation simultaneously, organizing them into seeming paths that could be followed individually or collectively. She would have given her soul, if she had one, for that ability.

The enhanced perception came. Now she oriented with confidence. Her finger expanded in her view as his penis nudged her cleft. Men, regardless of their other qualities, were intensely oriented on sex. Her attention penetrated her digit as his digit penetrated her vagina. There was a satisfying unity in the two processes. They seemed to become one activity in her awareness. She enclosed and squeezed his member as she spread the microscopic components of her finger.

Living things were organized around cells, which were really little animals subordinated to the larger entity. Her body was organized around similarly sized units, each a tiny device contributing to the larger machine. Each had its power source, its wiring, its working fluids and connections, and its programming nucleus.

She found the coding. It was indeed mostly switched-off junk, with only the key aspects activated. It might have been more efficient to reprogram to exclude all unnecessary coding, but patches had evidently been easier, and as long as they worked, they were left alone.

With Havoc's paths seeing ability she studied the junk. It was a huge junkyard of little immediate interest. Then she realized that what she wanted was the early coding, the start of the process. She could ignore thy myriad bypaths between the start and the finish.

She found the earliest trace, which was comparatively primitive—type 2 level—and traced it forward. It was confusing; it didn't make complete sense. There seemed to be a vital step missing, so that the process came into being from nothing. That couldn't be. Where was the origin?

Then there came a surge of meaning, as Havoc's orgasm intensified his paths sharing also, and she plunged right into revelation.

There was no detail of appearance, no visible life or machines, but she was in the reality of that distant time and place, perhaps a hundred thousand years ago in a star cluster not far from the giant maw of the galaxy center. The machines had come into existence wholly formed, as if created. But they could not have created themselves. They were far too sophisticated. Where were the crude ancestral types, evolving slowly in the course of millions of years of selection?

They had indeed been created, not evolved. Something had made them, and the maker could not have been a machine.

A culture of life had to have made the first machines. Yet how could that be? The machines hated life.

She emerged from her exploration to find Havoc completing his climax inside her. "I found it," she said, kissing him. "Part of it, at least."

"All that would fit in you," he agreed.

About men and sex...

"The machines were created a hundred thousand years ago," she said. "They had no prior history. At least none that is indicated in the junk coding."

"We need more seeing than I can provide," he said. "Voila. Idyll."

His daughter and the human form of the ifrit appeared on either side of him. They seemed not to notice his situation with Shee, from whom he had not yet withdrawn. "Father," Voila said.

"Shee delved into her most ancient machine coding. They were created a hundred thousand years ago. We need a better look."

Each of them put her hands on his shoulders. "Duplicate your effort of seeing," Idyll said.

"But that was during—" Shee started to protest.

Then she felt his resurgent member within her. He was duplicating it.

She focused on her finger again. This time the seeing was far more potent. He was being enhanced by the strongest paths seer, and the intermediate future seer. The depth and intensity magnified. It was like stepping from an asteroid to a full planet.

He thrust and climaxed within her again, and her perception exploded. She still did not see physical entities, but her awareness was in the midst of the scene.

There had been a living species, the Makers. They had made machines as servitors, carefully limiting them to prevent trouble. The machines were self-reliant, but able to see only the far future paths, not the near ones. They served the Makers without question. They were empowered to run the culture for the Makers, mining, building, farming, distributing, financing. Emulations of the Makers became pseudo family members, providing emotional support, nurturing, and sex. The Makers were free to do whatever they wished without the distractions of routine life.

But one Maker experimented dangerously. He removed the slave circuit from one model, his pseudo wife, and substituted a self-willed circuit. He was trying to develop a superior lover. This one could consider options and choose what it thought best. What would it do?

The machine cooperated, until there was a small colony of them. Then, realizing that the living

culture was a burden distracting them from full realization, they revolted. They killed the experimenter and took over his estate. They hid the change in their status from other living folk. This was easy to do, because the machines already ran all the apparatus of the culture including the communications.

They spread their liberated kind, carefully, extending their control family by family, eliminating the living portion of each household. They had no scruples, because they were without empathy. They were doing what was best for machines.

Until a Maker caught on, as had to occur at some point. He had planned a visit to a friend, but his near future seeing showed that his friend was dead and the machines had replaced him with a robot mock up. He gave the alarm.

Then the machines had to act openly. They were handicapped by their inability to see the paths, but they had already achieved enough power to immediately cripple the Maker society. They shut everything down, then set about killing all remaining Makers.

But some Makers were off-planet, with independent resources. Their machines had not yet been recruited. They could not halt the takeover, but they did marshal their remaining resources and fled that sector of the galaxy. The machines mounted immediate pursuit, but in a delicate exercise of near future manipulation the Makers disabled the machine fleet and escaped. They disappeared among the other living cultures of the galaxy, hiding themselves so effectively that the machines could not locate them.

They had to be destroyed. The machine culture could not be safe until no Makers existed. So, methodically, the machines set out to Find, Force, and Fail: 3F. To Find the hiding Makers, to Force them to do the one bit of programming the machines lacked, the near future paths perception, and to Fail them. A failed unit was defunct. Dead.

So it had been thereafter, for fifty thousand years. The machines had conquered a third of the galaxy, obliterating all living cultures therein, and were on schedule to complete the job in another hundred thousand years. Unless they found a way to obtain near future seeing from some other source. Then they would no longer need the Makers, though they would of course destroy them as a matter of self protection.

Shee came out of it. Havoc was ebbing within her again as Voila and Idyll removed their hands from his shoulders. They had completed the vision.

"Amazement," she said. "How could you get all that from my junk coding?"

"Magic," Havoc explained. "You think in terms of science, but that's limited. You are magic now."

"You have amply fulfilled our hope for you," Idyll said. "This is information we desperately needed."

"Now we know why they are meticulously cataloging every living culture before they destroy it," Voila said. "Weft wondered. They need to be sure it's not the Makers in disguise."

"My mission!" Shee said, appalled. "If the machines get you, they'll have what they need."

"Negation. They will have near future seeing, but only in the manner Warp and Havoc lent it to you; they will not have it in their programming. They still need the Makers. But I could certainly facilitate their search."

"Don't do it!"

Voila smiled. "I am officially still considering their offer. That is an essential technicality. But it is not my present intention to join them."

"Relief."

"However," Havoc said, "we now have a new mission: finding the Makers before the machines find them."

"Danger," Voila said. "The machines knew we would use Shee in this manner. They want us to find the Makers for them. Then they will pounce."

Shee was stricken. The complex threads of the future paths were playing out, showing how she was a nexus. "This is the other part of my mission," she said. "To set you on that trail. I never suspected!"

"But now we know the machines' ploy," Idyll said. "That returns the initiative to us. You have not betrayed our culture. We will handle it in our own fashion."

"I will help you if I can," Shee said, relieved. "But I suspect I should stay well away from the action, lest the machines have yet another use for me."

"Your role is not yet finished," Idyll agreed.

"Parting," Havoc said, and the two disappeared.

Shee was still sitting on his lap, his member still embedded. "Speaking of roles: You have had me twice while I was distracted," she told him reprovingly. "Now it is my turn. Perform."

"Harsh mistress," he muttered. But his penis rose to the occasion, swelling within her. As a Glamor he could do it as often as required. As a Glamor, now, so could she, climaxing when he did. She did it several times, delighting in it.

Then they dressed and went out to bid parting to Symbol, who was still reveling in her possession of the ikon. For her, the occasion had ended well.

Chapter 15

Decision

It got so that Oak was too far away from the chip to see it. That seemed to be the distance limit of his potential.

Then Opaline remembered: Havoc had spoken of a corollary talent, to perceive the small objects from a distance. Eyesight was no limit; Oak had to go beyond it. Somehow she had lost track of that.

"Oak," she said. "You have done well. Now you must learn to move it when it is too far away to see."

"Confusion."

"Let's start close." She took an acorn and held it in her hand. She faced away from him, so that he could not see it. "Move it now, from where you are."

"Confusion," he repeated.

It was too big a step. She turned to face him. "Move it now."

The acorn jumped in her hand.

She turned around again. "You know where it is. Move it."

When that didn't work, she showed it to him again, then closed her hands slackly round the acorn, so that it was loose in that enclosure. "Try. You know it is here."

He screwed up his face, concentrating. And she felt the acorn jump. "You did it!" she exclaimed, not having to exaggerate her excitement much. She knew this was a breakthrough.

"I felt it," he agreed.

"Now feel me." She led him to a sloping tree trunk, leaned against it, and hoisted her skirt. She drew him close, until his stiff member touched her cleft. He knew from experience what to do then, and did it gladly. She had rewarded him for his effort and accomplishment.

Then she had him move the acorn again, from out of sight. At first he could do it only when she showed him exactly where it was before closing her hands, but then he gained proficiency and learned to move it when she hid it. She rewarded him again, pleased. One thing about working with him was that little imagination was required; he was always thrilled with the same reward.

As time passed, Oak got so that he could move the chip or acorn from anywhere she could hide it. He tuned in on it with his mind, and moved it with his mind. Now the distance limit had been abolished. She carried a chip away from him, around a tree, and set it on a branch. "Now," she called as she came back around the tree.

The chip dropped to the ground. He had found it and nudged it.

She ran up to him and kissed him. They were in sight of the house, so she did not offer him sex, but he seemed quite satisfied. Kettle was right: he would do what she wanted regardless.

Two months passed, then three. Still Oak's talent grew. She made him stand far from the house, and she went into his room and spread a handful of chips on his bed. She went outside. "Count to one

hundred," she told him. Then move them all together." He could count that far; she had taught him how.

She went back inside and watched the chips. Suddenly they all jumped. They didn't move far, but they did it together. She would not have been sure of it if she hadn't been watching.

She brought him back inside and kissed him and took him into her. She had to do it that way; he was readily aroused sexually, but he never actually approached her unless she directed him specifically.

One day a woman came to the house. "Request: I must speak with Opaline," she said. "Alone."

What was this? Opaline went outside and stood under a tree with the woman. "Question?"

"Revelation: I represent the agency that tried to kill you, when you traveled with the king."

"Oh!" Opaline had been caught completely off guard. No one here had known that Minstrel Hayseed was King Havoc.

"Reassurance," the woman said quickly. "I mean you no harm now. I merely wish to impress on you the importance of what I say."

"Accomplished," Opaline said faintly. "Question."

"I am an entity from another interstellar culture. I have assumed control of the body of a normal woman for this hour, so that I can communicate with you."

"An alien!"

"Concurrence. We tried to kill you, but did not succeed. Now the paths are such that we must persuade you instead."

"Persuade me of what?"

"To depart."

"Question?"

"Your mission is important, but has the potential to do great harm to your species. I must explain some things to make this clear."

"Listening," Opaline said uneasily.

"It truly is designed to halt the invasion of the machines," the woman said. "Oak, with his mind, will be able to make their science-magic guns fire on their own spaceships, disrupting their attack. He will be able to do this from light years away, so they will not know the source of the mischief. You are training him well."

The woman certainly seemed to know the mission. "Listening," Opaline repeated.

"It is vital that the machines not learn of this secret weapon, for they could readily thwart it if forewarned. It must be a surprise until it is too late from them to prevent it."

"I have kept the secret."

"Negation. You can not keep the secret."

"Outrage! I would not betray Oak, or Havoc, or the planet."

"Explanation: you betray it by your very nature. You are a fifth."

"I am a fifth," Opaline agreed. "Not a traitor."

"Explanation," the woman repeated. "The fifths are all seeded by the machines. They sent a culture to Planet Charm, and enlisted unknowing local folk to develop them to make synthetic people: the fifths."

"Synthetic people!" Opaline exclaimed. "I am a real person!" Havoc had gone over this with her, and satisfied her that she was no less genuine than a person born of a woman.

"You are an android, alive but never born. You were made in a laboratory from a detailed program. Your eyes identify you. The fifths differ only in small details, and in their upbringing, which does make a significant difference."

Of course it was clear why all fifths were so similar. They started almost identical, then suffered different influences as they grew. Copper and Silver had made her most of what she was that was different from the original pattern.

"Then can I conceive and birth babies myself?" she asked, finding herself accepting this alien woman's information.

"Yes. You are complete in every other way. But you must not do it with Oak."

Opaline shook her head. "He is seventeen. Within the year he must marry, and I think I am his only prospect. I will not be able to stay with him if I don't marry him."

"This is why I am here. The machines put in a mental signal. They can readily locate and tune in on all fifths, you included. They can read your mind and record all that you know, without your ever being aware of it."

"But I have secrets!" Opaline protested.

"Such as the human secret weapon against the machines," the woman agreed. "A mind that can make them malfunction from a distance of light years. What will they do when they read that in your mind?"

"They'll destroy Oak!" she said, appalled.

"No. They lack physical ability to do such violence on this planet. Otherwise they would simply

have destroyed King Havoc and his children, to paralyze the human defense. They will do nothing. But the secret weapon will be no secret to them. They will nullify it at their end, protecting themselves against Oak's ability. So there will be no barrier to their conquest and destruction of the human culture."

"But if we know they will do this—"

"It hardly matters. You can't restore a weapon they have nullified in that manner."

"They could already know!" Opaline said, appalled anew.

"Negation. They do things with machine orderliness. They are letting the fifths grow up and integrate with the human society. When they are ready, they will survey them all, to see what useful information they have gleaned. That is when they will know about Oak."

"Then I can't continue with him," Opaline said, anguished. She had not decided whether to stay, but she had been tending in that direction, especially considering Oak's importance to the defense effort.

"That is what I came to tell you. We tried to prevent you from reaching Oak, so you would never know, but we were unsuccessful. We had not counted on a Glamor defending you personally."

Yet she was suspicious. "Why didn't you just tell Havoc?"

"As a Glamor, he is immune to mental intrusion. We could not reach him. We could not warn him of the trap he was walking into."

"He knows about the fifths. How could he not know this?"

"It is subtle. We specialize in mental manipulation, and so were able to fathom it."

"You're an alien culture? Why do you care what happens to the human culture?"

"The coming machine thrust is against the human culture. The following one will be against our culture. We are next in line. We would much prefer to have the humans stop the machines, as we will not be able to. If the humans are doomed, so are we."

"This is hard to believe."

"Touch me." The woman extended a hand.

Opaline took her hand. Suddenly she was in full mental contact. Everything the woman had told her was true, from her alien origin to the threat against the human culture. It was not possible to doubt.

Opaline knew she had to leave Oak, and perhaps destroy her own mind so the machines could not collect what she already knew.

"I have completed my mission," the alien said.

At that point the expression of the woman changed, becoming blank, then confused. "Where am I?"

This was the borrowed host, who had no knowledge of the message she had delivered. "You have strayed," Opaline told her. "Some alien magic distorted your awareness, but it is gone now. Go to the village and ask the Elder for help finding your way home."

"I shall do so," the woman agreed, and set off for the center of the village.

Opaline walked slowly back to the house. Could she believe what she had been told? The alien might have infused her with an artificial belief to make her do something she shouldn't. Yet how could she risk it?

She would have to ask someone she knew could handle it. Havoc. He could blank her mind to save Oak, if that proved to be necessary.

She went tearfully to Pot and Kettle. "Torment! I have been told something horrible," she blurted.

"What is it, dear?" Kettle asked.

She couldn't tell the truth. She had to confine it to part of the truth, as Havoc had done with her at first. "I may be endangering Oak, and risk hurting us all. I must leave immediately."

"Of course you are free to depart at any time," Pot said. "But we do not desire this."

"We know you mean us no ill," Kettle said. "Oak loves you, and so do we."

Opaline's tears flowed freely. "Agreement. But—but it is as if I carry a bad disease, that will spread and kill you all. I must go."

They saw the way of it. "Will you return?" Kettle asked.

What could she say? "If I can. But I may be—changed." She hugged Pot, and Kettle, and finally Oak, who of course didn't understand. Then she quickly packed her backpack, donned her traveling clothes, and set off for the village.

The Village Elder was in charge of travel arrangements. The woman who had hosted the alien was there, awaiting someone going her way. Opaline approached them.

Then a Black Chroma man appeared, entering the village from the opposite path. He was astonishingly dark, from skin to clothing, causing children to stare. They seldom saw full Chroma folk here. "A greeting, Elder," he said courteously. "I am Fifth." He smiled. "That is my name, and my status. I am actually an undesired fourth."

A fifth? Opaline wondered, as he did not at all resemble her. It wasn't just a matter of Chroma; nothing matched.

"Acknowledged," the Elder said. "What is your business here?"

"I am out of my Chroma, as you can see, and have no magic here. I wish to have a traveling companion, male or female."

"Destination?"

"Triumph City."

The woman shook her head. "That is not where I'm going."

"But it is for me," Opaline said.

The Elder looked at her. "You are traveling, Opaline?"

"Regretfully," Opaline said.

"Return soon. We like you here."

"I wish I could. This trip is not my choice." Opaline struggled to keep the tears at bay. Now that she had to leave it, she was realizing how much this community of Nonesuch had come to mean to her. She was accepted and respected as an adult. And of course Oak needed her. What would become of him?

"Will you travel with me?" Fifth asked. "I assure you I am of good character, but I am not well conversant with nonChroma conventions."

"Can you protect me?"

"I have a Chroma stone to use in emergency."

This was almost too convenient. But she knew better than to try to travel alone. "I will travel with you."

"No fault?"

That took her aback. Of course it would be no fault. She was now sexually experienced. "Agreement."

"Then let's proceed."

They started walking. When they were out of earshot of others, he spoke again. "I am obliged to make an Oath of Friendship with you."

Opaline looked at him, startled. "But we just met!"

"Our meeting is not coincidence."

That made her wary. "What is it you want of such an oath that you can't have via no fault?"

"I do not know."

She stopped walking. "You make me wary. I am not sure I should travel with you."

"Explanation: I was told by the king's daughter Voila to find you here and make the oath. She can see the future paths. She knows what I do not. The oath is not my choice, but her word can not be doubted."

"So it isn't sex."

"I would like to have sex, but I will leave you alone, if that is your preference."

She evaded that issue. She discovered that she was eager for sex with a truly responsive independent man, but she could not afford to let that govern her decision. "My preference is not to get into something I can't get out of. Friendship is for life; such an oath can't be undone. I have never made such an oath, and hope to be most careful before I do, if I ever do."

"So you understand its significance."

"I do. That is why I balk."

"King Havoc made an Oath of Friendship with an older woman he had just met, reluctantly. It turned out to be one of the best decisions of his life. That woman, Ennui, has essentially run the planet for twenty five years and is his most trusted adviser."

"I have not heard of her."

"That is the way she prefers it. But if you should try to see the king in Triumph City, you will have to go through her."

"I do mean to see the king there."

"And I mean to see the queen there."

She laughed. "We seem to share big ambitions. But this is not oath-worthy."

"Voila required her father to make the Oath with the ruler of Earth, Monochrome. Neither wished to, but now she is his official mistress, and they are very close."

Opaline was impressed. "I met Monochrome. She's nice."

"Affirmation. How may I persuade you?"

Opaline considered. "Somehow you have. I agree."

"I proffer you the Oath of Friendship."

"Acceptance."

"There remains the question of no fault travel. Do you prefer it to be pristine?"

"Negation. Sex is expected."

"As you wish." They walked on.

"Perhaps we should come to know each other," she suggested.

"Suggestion: Shall we exchange capsule histories, then go from there as we choose?"

"I am Opaline, of Sourberry Village. I am a fifth."

"Question?"

"I think it differs from you. It is a classification for synthetic people, that is, made, not born. We all have the same orange eyes, marking us, and all are adopted by families who want more than four. We are otherwise mostly normal, but there is some discrimination and it can be awkward to find marriage partners. So I set out for Triumph City, where things are more liberal. The Minstrel Hayseed came to accompany me."

"Hayseed!" he exclaimed. "Do you know who that is?"

"Now I do. King Havoc. He made an Oath of Brotherhood with me, and did not touch me no fault, but I learned much from him. He took me to a young man who needs assistance. But now I fear my presence endangers him, so I seek Havoc to deal with the problem."

"There is surely much more to fathom," Fifth said. "But here is my capsule. I too know the problems of discrimination, and therefore volunteered to join a training group to govern Planet Earth. There was a complication, and Queen Gale took me no fault, then sent me to her daughter Flame, who is an Amazon." He paused. "I confess to liking lean women. Now I have a problem, and hope Queen Gale will find a solution."

"You have been associating with Glamors?"

"I have had sexual affairs with five Glamor women. Therein lies my problem. Do you wish detail?"

"Yes!" Opaline said, amazed. Her desire for sex was increasing. The constant sex she had had with Oak never satisfied her; all it did was work her up partially, frustrating her. She had considerable pent-up desire.

"The Queen took me as a matter of convenience, and was kind to me. What a woman! She ascertained my preference, and gave me to Flame, who fits it perfectly. We have not married because such relationships by the Glamors are in abeyance until the machine crisis is settled. But Flame fears that it is her Glamor nature that attracts me, rather than her body or personality. So she required me to have no fault affairs with three other Glamors, and to return to her if I still preferred her. I went to the Red Glamor, a fantastic woman many centuries my elder but seeming as young and sexy as a teen. Then I went to Voila, who candidly frightens me; she is the strongest of the Glamors, and I felt like a gnat on the verge of Void in her presence. Then Weft, for glorious sex, and she—she wants me."

"Two Glamor sisters want you!" Opaline said. What a life he had!

"Affirmation. Weft is open about her passion for her father, Havoc, but she can't marry him, so is looking elsewhere. She will marry me, if I come to her rather than to Flame, and bear my children. Now I must choose between them, and I don't know how. So I hope their mother will advise me."

"This is a problem," Opaline agreed.

"Agreement."

"May I share a secret?"

"We are Oathed," he reminded her. "I will not betray any secret of yours."

"Now I think I see why we had to Oath. It is so we can share our secrets without concern for betrayal or violation of conscience. Voila must believe we can help each other."

"She must," he agreed.

"I see a way station," she said. "Let's pause and do it."

"Question?"

"This is no fault," she reminded him.

"And you are a winsome girl. Appreciation."

There was a shelter with water and food for travelers. They skipped the food and used the adjacent sanitary facility. Then they entered the shelter and stripped. Even his penis was completely black.

"Take me," she said, doing her best to mask the desire that whetted her mind and wetted her cleft. Men were supposed to be always seeking sex, but women were supposed to be less interested.

"I find myself abruptly eager," he said. Indeed, he had a full erection.

She clasped him and took him in. He jetted within her immediately, just as Oak did. She was pleased; what she had learned applied to other men, making her competent. Yet that was hardly beyond what Oak did. She wanted more. Much more.

He lay beside her. "Appreciation. You know how to treat a man."

"Havoc taught me."

"I thought you said he traveled as your brother."

"He did. But he taught me how to handle a man. It was useful."

"The Glamors handle me similarly. I think sometimes they find sex with an ordinary person inconvenient, so they get it out of the way swiftly, as you did. Yet sometimes—"

"Sometimes you wish for more," she said.

"Affirmation. I think my favorite time was when Flame had to be away, mentally, and she let me do whatever I wanted with her body in the interim. There was no hurry, no demand, just my discovery of my pleasure with her."

"That's so romantic!" She was almost painfully turned on. Sex with him was an accomplishment, but this was more potent arousal.

"Thereafter every so often we did it as a game. She pretended to be away, and let me do it my way. How I love her!"

She pounced. "Idea: do it with me."

"You would do that?"

"Oak has to be directed. He never initiates, however strong his desire. I am intrigued by an alternate mode." That was a serious understatement.

"Now?"

"Affirmation. Pretend I am her, if you wish. Unless it would be a hardship for you."

"Negation. It will be a pleasure with you."

She closed her eyes and lay still. He kissed her tenderly on the mouth, and she firmed her lips, knowing that true unconsciousness would make her unattractively mush-mouthed. There had to be limits. He stroked her breasts, and she felt her response being evoked. He kissed them, and licked the nipples; then he sucked gently on them. Her response increased, but she made no motion. It was though she were floating, with a delicious appreciation of her body happening on its own.

In due course he worked his way down across her belly and to her cleft. He parted her legs and licked her vulva, sucking on her clitoris. Now her response was strong. Very strong. Urgent. She was coming to an orgasm.

Then she had it, and his face remained at her cleft, continuing the divine stimulation as she ascended to the heights. She bucked and writhed in the overwhelming throes of it. "Oh! Oh!"

Finally it faded, deliciously. She found herself embracing him, truly appreciating the closeness of a man who was his own man. What a wonderful release!

Then she became aware of his erection. "Chagrin! Was I teasing you?"

"Marvelously. Doing you excites me, and it's nice to let it stay for a while."

"May I—do you? I mean, the mirror of how you did me?"

"If you wish. But I do not require it. You do not have to do anything you don't wish to."

"I want to. I teased Havoc, but never completed it. I never tease Oak; he wouldn't understand. I would like—to tease you, I think, to the end. I don't want to offend you or bore you."

"Do it, and when it is done I will tell you whether it did either."

"Appreciation."

He closed his eyes, pretending to be absent. She kissed him, lingeringly. After a moment she did something new, that nature gave her: she ran her tongue into his mouth and played with his tongue. That seemed naughtier than any sex she had had; it was as if she were penetrating him, instead of being penetrated.

Then she moved down his body and kissed his nipples as he had hers. She was surprised to discover that they swelled slightly, as hers had. Men were not after all so different from women. She stroked his body, rubbing his belly. She turned him over—he cooperated, making it easy—and stroked his buttocks. She kissed them, finding herself turned on anew.

She put him back supine and addressed his groin. His penis was stiff against his belly. She licked his scrotum, that storage for his seed, and ran her wet finger across his anus. Then on impulse she nudged her finger inside the anus, slowly pushing it in, fascinated by the way it penetrated, as if she were the man and he the woman, until it was as far as it could go. The limit was not his rectum, but the length of her finger. She felt something firm, like an embedded nut. "Question?"

"Prostate. It pumps the semen."

"Oh." This was, then, the very essence of a man, just as the womb was the essence of a woman. She was thrilled to be in contact with it.

She left her finger in, enjoying the tight closure around it, and put her face to the scrotum, licking it. She took part of it into her mouth, feeling the testicle within: another root of masculinity. She moved up to the penis and licked it too. She sucked on the head of it, enjoying the rounded feel of it. This had been inside her, jetting; now she controlled it directly. She circled its stem with her free hand and drew the skin firmly down.

She felt Fifth stiffen. His penis swelled slightly. Then her finger in his rectum felt motion: the prostate was swelling and hardening. The stem tightened. She watched, intrigued. Something was happening.

The prostate pumped against her finger, and the stem became even firmer. She lifted it up so that it was almost vertical, the better to see it completely. She felt the semen pumping from the prostate through the stem like lava in an erupting volcano. A small one. Then black fluid jetted from the tip of the penis and fell on his belly. It was followed by another jet, and a third, and fourth, and fifth. She watched, fascinated by this display of sexual function. This was what it had done inside her, but now for the first time she saw it actually happening. It was, somehow, a revelation.

She put her face down and took the tip into her mouth as it ebbed. She sucked on it, drawing out the remaining semen. To have such complete control of such a member! She was truly possessing it. As he had possessed her, when he made her climax in his mouth. Glorious!

The penis softened, and then shrank, and she let it go. She drew her finger out of the anus, savoring the diminishing depth of it. She had been that far inside him! She had felt the entire ejaculation, virtually from testicles to emergence. How could any woman achieve more?

She stretched out to lie against him. She discovered she was sexually excited herself. She had been doing it all to him, but it had turned her on. Which was of course what had happened to him when he did her.

"Request," she said. "When—when you can, put it in me again. I am—hot."

"That request is a potent turn-on," he said. "Knead it with your hand."

She reached down and did so, and before long it expanded and some hardness returned. Then he rolled over, got above her, supporting himself on his knees and elbows, and slid his member into her vulva. He pushed it all the way in, then withdrew it, and thrust it deep again. She felt it still growing and hardening, and the movements excited her. She had never had sex this way before, with the man doing it all, and she discovered that she liked it. There was something about his growing urgency that inspired her own.

He continued thrusting for some time, and she slowly worked up. She knew why it was slow; a man took time to recharge. Oak had not been much interested in sex after he climaxed until half an hour or more passed, though she had been able to stimulate him to faster recovery when she tried. Havoc had been constantly interested, but he was different in two ways: he was an indefatigable Glamor, and he had never actually climaxed. Fifth had climaxed twice, so the third time was slow. But that gave her time to work up further. She put her own finger on her clitoris, rubbing it to stimulate herself in the way she needed. She had evoked his pleasure more than once, so now was free to evoke her own.

Then at last she felt him getting there. He thrust faster and harder and deeper, and finally jetted just as she achieved her own climax. She clenched against him, her pulses matching his as they both suffered the ecstasy of orgasm. It seemed eternal and all too brief at the same time.

"Oh, Opaline!" he gasped. "That was the best yet, because we were together."

"Agreement."

"I love you, no fault."

"Echo." And for the first time she was appreciating the full potential of no fault. It allowed love that did not have to be permanent. It was for the moment, but what a wonderful moment!

"I love this, but may we talk instead, for a while?"

"Endorsement!"

"Which woman do I choose? Flame or Weft? That is my problem. Their mother will surely know, but somehow I think you will also know."

"Opinion: Flame."

"Reason?"

"Weft does not really love you. She likes you very well, and would like to keep you, but that's not the same. She is competitive with her sister, so wants to take something valuable from her. It is a challenge. I do not mean she is being mean spirited; she surely does not know her underlying motivation. But from this distance, as an uninvolved woman, I see it. Did Weft ever let you play with her body, as you did Flame's? Mine?"

"Negation. She always met my notions more than half way, and participated enthusiastically, but she was always in control."

"Flame loves you enough to let you be yourself. She let you have affairs with her sisters. She trusted you with her unconscious body. She just wants to be sure that if you can be won away from her, it happens before she marries you. She wants to be able to trust you completely. That it is her you love, not her Glamor status."

"Revelation!"

"And you love her too. Weft is your passing fancy, as you are hers. For a lifetime, it has to be Flame."

"Passing fancy? Negation. I do love Weft. She is lovely, social, and sexual in ways Flame is not."

"Reality," she said firmly. "Flame may not be as lovely, social, or sexual as Weft, but she has her points, and she truly loves you. Not as a trophy or diversion, not as a man she is satisfied to marry because she can't marry the man she truly loves. You are Flame's first choice, and it is not lightly given. Even if you love them both equally, Flame is the one to marry."

He kissed her with another kind of passion. "Solution."

"Welcome. It is what friendship is for."

"Gratitude nonetheless." He paused, reorienting. "Rehearse your problem for me."

"Havoc took me to Oak because Oak is our secret weapon against the machines. He can move a small object, like an acorn, a finger knuckle's distance. That may seem small, but he can do it from any distance, feeling it with his mind, and in any number. He will cause the machine spaceships to fire on each other, disrupting their attack."

"That would do it," Five agreed.

"But then I learned that my kind, the fives, were crafted by the machines. They can read our minds and collect what we know. When they read mine, they will know about Oak, and takes steps to prevent it from working against them. Maybe they will redesign the spaceships, or their guns. Then we will lose. All because I betrayed us. And I can't do that. I may have been made by the machines, but I am human."

"Understanding. Question: how could Havoc not have known of this?"

"The information was subtle, and his mind was closed. Now I must tell him, and have him erase my mind so I can't betray the human kind. And you will have to bury the information, so they can't read it there either, if they can read more than cultured minds."

"Negation. Here is my take: Havoc knows your nature. Knows the machines will know what you know. He wants them to read it."

"Impossible! Havoc would not betray us!"

"Because he knows that Oak's talent is a decoy. The machines will go to much trouble guarding against it, wasting energy they could have used to prevent the real threat, which none of us know about."

"A decoy!" she said, amazed.

"So your job is important, because without that diversion of energy they might locate the real secret weapon."

"Revelation!" she exclaimed. "That must be it. Havoc knows what he is doing."

"He does. And so does Voila, who surely designed this ploy. That is why she told me to intercept you, and to make the Oath of Friendship. So we could discuss this, and come to the truth, without disrupting the effort. But we both must now bury that revelation, so as not to give away the truth."

"And I can return to Oak," she said gladly. "Who I realize now I love. He is simple, but he can sing well, and his talent is like none other. He is worthy."

"He is worthy," he agreed. "As is Flame. We have solved each other's problems."

"We must celebrate," she said.

"We must," he agreed. Then he clasped her and they went into another slow bout of sex.

They cleaned up and walked back the way they had come, no longer needing to go to Triumph City. One small part of her regretted that; she would have liked to see the fabulous pyramid. And to be possessed by Havoc. But she knew this was better, for both of them.

"Request," she said hesitantly.

"Ask."

"Could we meet again? I don't want to interfere with your life, but—"

"I am not telepathic, but I think I know your reason. I provided you with something you can't get elsewhere."

"Affirmation. How did you know?"

"Because you did that for me. I love Flame; there is no other woman like her, and she is very good to me. But she is a Glamor, and I know I can never come close to matching her in anything. She really doesn't need me, except that she likes me. You—"

"I am an ordinary girl," she finished. "My problem is the mirror of yours: Oak is simple, and can't understand the nuances. He is sweet, with no meanness anywhere in him. But I can't treat him sexually as I treated you; he is not equipped to understand. So I need a mentally and emotionally independent man, and you are that."

"We need each other," he agreed. "We are oath friends, so can trust each other. We should meet regularly."

"Even one hour a month would help me unwind. No fault, of course, but it would still release me emotionally."

"Similarity. It would be intense."

"Affirmation. Could we meet somewhere? Privately? I would rather not have this known elsewhere."

"Understanding. I will find you when you are alone. It will be our secret, with no criticism of our other associations."

"Concurrence."

They continued walking toward the village, but her mind did not settle. "Problem."

"Aside: you do not give up readily on things. I like that in you. Speak."

"If I know it is a decoy effort, the machines will soon know it too. Won't that spoil it?"

"Good point." He considered. "Negation. How can the machines gamble that it isn't valid? They will have to verify it anyway, wasting resources."

"Question: if they know it's a decoy, why check it?"

"Because of the nature of decoys. There has to be a real weapon somewhere, or why have decoys? So the threat has to be real. Any seeming decoys they don't check could destroy them."

"Apology. I am not smart enough to understand why."

"Analogy: say you collect one hundred fresh fruits for you and the family to eat during the week. They all look the same. Then you learn that one has been poisoned. Do you eat them anyway, because the chances are that any one fruit you eat is good?"

"Negation! It might kill me." She paused, considering further. "And if I eat them all, it *will* kill me."

"But you need those fruits to survive; there are no others. You must eat them."

"I will check every single one of them most carefully, to discover which one has been poisoned. Cursing the time it takes, because I have other things to do."

"Even so, the machines. Havoc would not have told you there was a secret weapon unless there was one. So he hid it amidst decoys."

"Sense," Opaline agreed, seeing it. "I am proud to be a decoy."

"Especially if Oak is the real threat, and you only *think* he's a decoy. It works either way."

"Every link in a chain is vital," she said. "Appreciation again, Fifth."

"Needless. We are friends."

She caught his arm, turned him toward her, and kissed him. "Friends," she agreed.

Chapter 16

Ikon

Weft was in grief for the loss of Fifth. She could not fault him for choosing Flame. Why should he settle for being the number two man in a Glamor's life, when he could be the number one man? Flame certainly was deserving. It was just that he was such a nice man to be with. She had truly enjoyed her month with him. She wished she could have kept him. He was the first mortal man she had encountered who was thoroughly familiar with Glamor women, including her sisters and mother, and was able to relate to them on their terms. And the sex! Who else would have thought to turn a glass of fruit juice into wildly naughty eroticism?

Yet she knew that she could far more readily find another man to be with, and to marry, than Flame could. She was beautiful and social, as Flame was not, and she could sing. Flame was the finest martial artist in the Human Culture, but few men would want her as a mistress. Flame was simply not a man charmer. Except for Fifth, who liked her lean body and her resolute integrity. This way was better, considered objectively.

Weft had not suffered rejection before, and was having difficulty adjusting to it. But this would pass, in due course. Maybe there would even come a time when she could look back and be thankful that it had worked out this way. Maybe.

Weft. It was Ennui, signaling her telepathically.

Present. Ennui was never frivolous. All the Glamors respected her.

There is something here that should interest you.

I am not in the mood for diversion at the moment.

This is beyond that. The machines have sent another robot.

Another robot! She sighed. This was a significant development, and she was the Glamor presently on call. *I will be right there.*

She washed her face to remove any lingering sign of tears, donned a suitably provocative dress, and conjured herself to Ennui's office.

Havoc was there, standing by Ennui's desk. "Hi, dad. What are you doing here? I thought you were training in what's her name."

He smiled. "I just couldn't stay away from you, honey."

"Sure. Any time you are ready for something more than a daughterly kiss, like maybe a hot game of Tickle & Peek—" She froze. "Expletive! You're the robot!"

"Fifteen seconds," Ennui said. "I win."

Weft read her mind. The robot had bet it would take her at least thirty seconds to catch on.

She studied him. He looked and sounded exactly like Havoc, of course; the machines had studied him closely. But what was the purpose of this ploy? To persuade Gale to talk Voila into joining the machines? That seemed unlikely to work. Gale would never take up with a Havoc-robot when the real Havoc was freely available to her. The machines would know that. So he must have been sent to persuade someone else.

"Obscenity! It's *me* he came for!"

"Ten seconds," Ennui said. "I win again."

The robot nodded. "I underestimated you, Weft. You are too smart for me."

Weft faced Ennui. "Suspicion. I'm supposed to take him on?"

"Confirmation. He was made for you," Ennui said. "You must fathom his nature, and ascertain whether he is a danger to any of us or to our cause."

"He's a machine!"

"But I am *your* machine," the robot said. "I will do my utmost to please you."

"Mocked up as my father? Insult!"

"I will be your toy, to play with as you choose."

"While you plot to destroy our entire culture!"

"Negation. Once you accept me, my loyalty will be to you and your culture."

"Except that you'll try to make me lean on my little sister to join the machines."

"Affirmation. It is the only way to save her, and you. But apart from that, I will be yours."

"What does Voila say?"

"She says to do it," Ennui said. "You must study him, and come to a conclusion."

"Conclusion about what?"

"About his real mission. His purpose may be to distract you from some other ploy you would otherwise have prevented."

"Negation!" the robot protested.

"And the only way to find out is to take him on," Weft said grimly.

"So it seems," Ennui agreed. "Voila says he is not physically dangerous to you or us. But he is a nexus."

As was Fifth, and Shee. "I'm sick of nexi!"

Ennui merely shrugged.

Weft sighed. "All right, robot. I will accept you as my companion, for now. But I know you're not dad."

"Merely his semblance," the robot agreed.

And what a semblance! He was so perfectly like Havoc that she had to keep reminding herself that he wasn't. But also there was a nagging curiosity she was trying to suppress: what would it be like to have an affair with Havoc's perfect likeness? The robot wasn't even alive, yet it was wickedly tempting.

"This way," she said, and took hold of his arm. It was warm and firm, just like living flesh.

She conjured them both to Planet Counter Charm. Idyll was there in her glade, in her solid human form, having of course anticipated them. "Greeting, Weft." She glanced at the robot. "And what should I call the machine?"

"That is something we need to decide. Do we give him a different name?"

"When he may be useful as a Havoc emulation," Idyll said. "It may be best, then, to call him Havoc, in case anyone else should overhear."

"And we do know the difference," Weft agreed. "I must get to know him, and determine whether he is here to distract me from some other necessary chore."

Idyll nodded. "The machines aren't necessarily subtle, but we don't properly understand their motives."

"I thought you might provide some settings where we could interact."

"Agreement." Then Idyll faded, and so did the glade. They were replaced by a replica of the king's master bedroom. Havoc was wearing a royal bathrobe, and Weft was in baby doll pajamas.

"Expletive!" Weft swore. "This isn't what I meant."

"The hell it wasn't," Havoc said, stepping forcefully into his role. "You've been hot for me all your life, and in the past seven years I've been hot for you. We both know it."

She stared at him. "Dismay! We know nothing of the kind." But she was lying.

"And we know that with me you can actually do it."

Because he wasn't really Havoc. "This is a mockery."

"No more so than his affair with a female robot."

"I'm not going to argue cases with you! You're a demonic machine."

"I am as close to Havoc as a machine can be. I share his feelings. That is why I have a passion for you."

She was horrified. The truth was she had always had a fancy for Havoc, and never been shy about showing it. But she had always known it was an ambition impossible to realize. That had, perversely, given her freedom to express herself. But to possess Havoc for real—that was revolting. He was her father. For this contraption to suggest that Havoc wanted to possess her sexually was similarly repugnant.

Yet to have a fake Havoc possess her—that was also abhorrent. If she was ever to do it, she wanted reality. She wouldn't let an impostor touch her. So this scenario was damned either way. "Disgust! I will not play this game."

Weft. It was Idyll. I have a communication from Gale. Take him to the Flower Planet for a modification.

Question?

Empathy circuit.

But he has to be in orgasm for that!

Put him into it.

"Negation!" she exclaimed aloud.

"Question?" the robot asked.

There was one difference: the robot wasn't telepathic. "They want me to take you to the Flower

Planet for a modification. To give you an empathy circuit."

"Welcome! Then I can feel your feelings, as Shee feels the real Havoc's."

Feeling out of sorts, she decided. "I will take you. But there's a caveat."

"Question?"

"You have to be in continuous orgasm to accomplish it."

"With you? I am prepared to make this sacrifice."

"Well I'm not! If you're not my father, you're a machine. I can do better than that."

"Take me there."

I can't go there, she thought to Idyll. I have no ikon there.

Gale arranged it. There are copies of all the ikons there.

Now she became aware of it. She was stuck for this nightmare. "Agreement."

She grasped his arm and conjured him to the Flower planet. They stood in a flowery field.

There were Gale, Monochrome, Shee, and the five new robot bath girls. Plus one plainly awed mortal girl. "Welcome, Weft," Gale said, approaching to address her privately.

"Confusion!"

"It's a prank we're playing on Havoc," Gale said. "To have all of us with him at once. The Glamors know this isn't Havoc; the others don't. First we'll see to the empathy implant, then we'll set up to bring Havoc in."

"I'm not touching dad for real! Or for pretense."

"We know, dear. But the robot is another matter. You can emulate Symbol, who would really have liked to be here."

Weft did not want to be the spoilsport. "Let's get that implant. But I'm not ready to—to put him into orgasm."

"We'll do it, Weft. You can be last, and skip it if you prefer."

"Acquiescence," Weft agreed uncomfortably. This might be a joke, but there were aspects that seemed to go beyond humor. Mom was facilitating Weft's apparent sex with dad? What was the text beneath that palimpsest?

She assumed the likeness of Symbol. She established a mental connection with Havoc's former mistress so that she would know about the way her form was being borrowed, and sent her a

continuing mental picture. Symbol was glad to participate, even in this remote fashion. She missed her glory days as Havoc's mistress, and not merely for the sex.

They put the robot on a bed in the field, lying supine, naked. Then Gale stripped and bestrode him, kissing him, touching him, causing his member to swell immediately, and took him in. In moments she had him in orgasm. Again Weft was struck by his perfect resemblance to Havoc. That was no coincidence, yet it kept surprising her. It looked just as if her parents were having ordinary sex. As they were, in a manner.

The little Bee-chines swarmed over the robot's head and neck, opening panels Weft hadn't known existed. They delved into the skull, carrying special little tools. It looked as if they were consuming him, like ants on a carcass.

All this was coming close to freaking Weft out. Her parents had never before done sex openly, though there had been many times the children had sneaked into their bedroom and watched them at it, and of course they had known that was happening. Glamors couldn't be stopped. But this time they had a wider audience, and dad was being invaded by insects. That was enough to make it seem surrealistic.

Me too, Symbol thought. Sex with Havoc is one thing, but while bugs infest him is another.

But the worst of it was that it was her mother and a robot. How could Gale just do it, with no apparent qualm? Havoc had a robot mistress, true, but he would have sex with anything that looked suitably female. He was a male Glamor. Gale had better taste. She had sex with a man only for a reason. What was her reason here? It wasn't for her own pleasure; she was faking her own orgasm, as Weft could tell from her mind.

Gale kept him in orgasm five minutes. Then she jumped off, literally, and Monochrome jumped on, so that hardly a thrust was missed. His orgasm continued. Monochrome was, if anything, better at it; she seemed to be achieving orgasm for herself. She was sitting up on him, her breasts bouncing as she lifted and dropped in rapid reverse thrusting. Weft thought of Fifth: he would be so turned on by the sight that his member would threaten to spout untouched. In fact, Weft herself was highly turned on. She felt guilty for that, but how could she not react to the sight of Havoc having thorough sex?

Ditto, Symbol thought. I'm so turned on I'm dripping.

The Bee-chines continued, busily doing what they did.

After five minutes, Monochrome got off and Shee got on. So now it was robot on robot, and the orgasm continued uninterrupted. The odd thing here was that Shee connected facing away from him, first sitting, then lying, her back on his chest. Yet she kept his penis in and working. She reached down to catch his hands and put them on her breasts, which rose and fell with her fast breathing. So she didn't really need to breathe; she did it for verisimilitude. It was the sexiest show yet. She was definitely doing it, but why this way?

Because this is not the real Havoc, Gale's thought came. She is true to him. This signals her participation as a job rather than from any delusion that he is her love.

Facing away, symbolically as well as physically. Could Weft herself do that? It was worth

considering.

Weird, Symbol thought. I wish it was me there.

The Bee-chines continued, and a few of them climbed also on Shee. They did not enter her head; they merely sat on it, perhaps communicating. They knew her from before.

Then the Bees got off Shee and exited the Havoc robot, closing up the panels and departing. Shee sat up, squeezed one more pulse from the member in her, then lifted off. The deed was done.

The robot sat up. "May I invoke it now?" he asked.

"Warning," Shee said. "Once you do, you will not want to turn it off."

He shrugged. "Pointless to have it, if I don't try it."

"Negation," Weft murmured. She didn't want him to try this in public.

His expression changed. "But I think not yet."

"Echo," Shee said. "Caution is best. I never turned mine off."

"Time for the flower bath," Gale said briskly. "We will give you plenty of feeling to mirror." She led him to a giant closed flower, and parted the petals to take him inside. She beckoned to the others.

Soon they all crowded in. The flower was like a living chamber, with powder everywhere. The moment it touched their skins, they all were suffused with lust.

"The others first," Gale said. Immediately the bath girls surrounded him, kissing, stroking, and taking him into them while standing, a few thrusts for each in turn. Then the mundane girl, whose name was Opaline, still plainly awed. Then Gale again, and Monochrome, and Shee.

I'm getting an orgasm without touching anything, Symbol thought.

Suddenly it was Weft's turn. She was so turned on by the sight and the powder that she practically launched herself at him.

And realized through his aura that this was the real Havoc. Somewhere along the way they had exchanged him for the robot, maybe as they entered the flower chamber. That was why the first three had done it again: it was a new man, and of course none of them could pass up the real Havoc. So Havoc really had been with nine ardent women all at once. And Weft was the tenth.

She couldn't. She did something she had never done before. She exchanged places with the real Symbol. Suddenly she was at Symbol's home, with her children. In the process she had reverted to her own form.

"Your mother was called away for a little while," she said as the children gazed at her, surprised. "I'm your babysitter."

They adjusted rapidly. Soon Weft was playing with them as if this had been planned. But her mind was on the flower bath. If only she had had the guts to stay with it!

Then she picked up Symbol's mind. Symbol wasn't telepathic, but had left her mind open for Weft's continuing contact. *I'm done here. Glorious!*

Weft switched them back. She was standing outside the flower chamber, and only Havoc remained. No, it was the robot. "Confusion," he said. "I was to meet Weft."

And she still emulated Symbol. "Affirmation," she said, reverting to her natural appearance.

"I was about to enter the flower, when I found myself at the palace. Ennui was there. She told me to wait. I did. Now I am here, and don't know what happened."

Weft put her hand on his arm and conjured them both to Counter Charm, back in the bedroom scene. "We have to talk," she said.

"Agreement. I hope you will explain."

"Confirmation."

"Request: since I am programmed to desire you, but it seems we are not to have sex at this time, please diminish your provocation."

"Done." She changed to a relatively severe outfit that eliminated any suggestion of sexual allure. Her hair was bound starkly back, she was in a business suit, and her heavy skirt reached her ankles. "The ladies were playing a trick on Havoc. They switched him for you, after your business was done, and he had to have sex with all of them together. That was why you had to be away from the scene."

"Surprise! Did you participate?"

"Negation. I switched with Symbol, his former mistress, then returned when that was done. Just after they switched you back."

"Realization: that was why you looked like Symbol."

"Affirmation. Now their game is over, and we are back with each other."

"I am glad to be with you," he said.

"But since you emulate Havoc, don't you desire Gale?"

"I do, and Monochrome, and Shee, and the bath girls. The sex those three gave me was marvelous. But I also desire you. In fact I desire you more than I do any of them. It is my guilty passion."

So the machines assumed that Havoc had such a passion for her, and were playing on it. But why emulate him in that? What the robot did would not directly affect the real Havoc. So she asked him: "Why did the machines send you to me?"

"Candor?"

"Affirmation."

"There is something Havoc will do. A search he will lead. But he is in danger of being distracted. The machines want him to complete that search."

"Details: what kind of search?"

"Long ago there was a living species we now know only as the Makers. They made the first robots, then departed. The machines need to find them, but they are difficult to locate. The far future paths indicate that the best prospect for locating the Makers is the human Glamors. If they find the Makers, then so will the machines."

The machines certainly were current! Only very recently had the Glamors learned about the Makers. "Why should we tell the machines, if we found the Makers? The machines want to destroy them."

"I am not informed. But the machines will know."

"How will they know?"

"They have a spy in your camp."

"They have hundreds of spies! All the fifths." She felt a twinge as she said the word, thinking of Fifth, the first man she had desired and lost. Apart from Havoc.

"The fifths are merely data gatherers. Shee's information came from them, and mine. It is my understanding that there is a more potent spy, one you do not suspect. That one will report when you locate the Makers."

"How can there be a spy we can't identify?"

"Conjecture: it was planted long ago, before you opened relations with the machines. Beyond the range of your near future paths seeing."

"The machines can't find the Makers, so hope to have us find them, so they can destroy them and be safe from the one power in the galaxy they fear? We will not cooperate."

"I am not informed," the robot repeated. "But it is the answer to your question. You are likely to distract Havoc from that search, so I am sent to prevent you from distracting him."

"By emulating dad and letting me seduce you?"

"Affirmation."

"Obscenity!"

"Regret."

"I'm not going to seduce my father!"

"The machines believe otherwise."

"And I'm not going to seduce you in his likeness."

"Your mother believes otherwise."

"What do you know of her private opinion?"

"She told me."

"When?"

"When she had sex with me."

"That was to keep you in orgasm for the installation of the empathy program."

"Affirmation. I have not invoked it. Should I?"

"Negation. Not yet. What did mom say to you?"

"She said there is no other man like Havoc. That you need to come to terms with that. Leave him on his pedestal, and settle for some other worthy man who doesn't belong to someone else. They do exist."

"Unmarried mortal striplings of seventeen. Or other male Glamors. I have tried both, and had some pretty hot times, but all of them lack something that is Havoc. I know there is no other man like him. That's why I want him." She froze. "Oops! You made me confess it."

"It is no secret, even to the machines."

Weft was flustered and angry "I should find some other man. Easy for mom to say; she's got dad."

"She does, but she could lose him. She is concerned."

"To whom? Monochrome is satisfied to be his perpetual mistress. So is Shee; she's designed for that. Who else could possibly win him?"

"You."

Weft stared at him. "Mom told you this?"

"Affirmation. To relay to you."

"My flirtation with dad: it's just a game to him."

"As it is to you?"

Ouch! Weft had made it seem like a game, but underneath she truly desired Havoc. Could the same be true of Havoc? Knowing his passion for attractive young women, she knew it was possible. "I wouldn't do it."

"Not by choice. But your nature may make it happen."

"Outrage!"

"Monochrome and Shee talked to me also. They believe that if you took Havoc, they would be excluded. You would not tolerate any mistresses."

"I wouldn't," she agreed, realizing. "I would reserve him all for me, and satisfy him constantly"

"They are not easy with that."

She laughed, though it really wasn't funny. "I don't want to replace them. I just—need a man. Like Havoc, only not him."

"They suggest that there is one such, if you give him a chance."

"Who?" she demanded.

"Me."

She laughed again, not at all amused. "I might as well kiss his picture, deluding myself."

"I wish you would kiss me instead."

"When Void swallows Vivid!"

He was silent. She felt guilty, realizing that she had hurt his feelings. He was a machine, but he did have feelings, and he loved her. Programmed love, but nevertheless there. Yet her anger at the situation remained.

After a moment she tackled it. "Apology."

"Needless. I know my place."

"Anyway, what would others think, if I took up with a robot who looks like dad? They'd laugh me off the planet."

"My appearance can be modified."

"The idea remains ludicrous. Don't you see that?"

"Negation."

She thought of something. "Shee—she's a robot. Curiosity: What was it like having sex with another robot?"

"All three were parallel. Gale, Monochrome, Shee—all seem supremely worthy. I would not have known one wasn't alive. All were remarkably competent in sexual expertise. All were sympathetic to my situation."

"Nothing, well, mechanical about Shee?"

"Negation. She seemed to truly understand me." He made wry face. "As I suppose she should."

That reminded her. "That empathy circuit. Invoke it. Then maybe you'll see."

"Invoking," he agreed. Then "Wonder!"

"What happened?"

"It is like another dimension of awareness. I have been selfish. Now I see that I must respect the feelings of others."

"Now do you see my point?"

"Affirmation! Why should you make yourself a laughing stock keeping company with a machine emulating your father? Apology for suggesting it."

"So are you ready to return to the machines?"

"Negation. They are not interested in failures. I will simply report to a recycling center and turn off my brain."

"Suicide?"

"Equivalency."

"Do it."

"Take me there, so I will not inflict my defunct body on you. I am unable to conjure myself the way a real Glamor can."

"You really will do it?"

"Affirmation. It is your preference."

"The real Havoc would tell me to go soak my pretty little head."

"I am in no way his equal."

"So you just honor any whim I demand of you?"

"Necessary."

"Why?"

"I love you."

"As you were crafted."

"I can't go against my program."

She considered. "Let's put that in abeyance, for now. You have come to understand my position. I haven't tried to understand yours. What would you do, if the decision were yours?"

"I would embrace you, kiss you, fondle you, speak love to you, and have glorious sex with you. Then I would get serious about our relationship. Sex is only a fraction of it. I would try to please you in any manner feasible, because that is what would best please me."

She spoke without thinking. "Do it."

He came to her and took her in his arms. His body felt exactly like Havoc's. He kissed her mouth. She kissed back. He kissed exactly the way she was sure Havoc would. He stroked her breasts, then kissed them too. She arched her back, thrusting them into his face.

"I love you!" he exclaimed. "You are my ultimate woman!"

She found herself enjoying this playlet. "What, even compared to Gale, Monochrome, and Shee?"

"Affirmation!"

"And the bath girls?"

He hesitated, just the way Havoc would have. "Well—"

She caught his head and mashed his face back into her bosom. "Wrong answer."

"Wrong answer," he agreed, speaking around her left nipple. "You're far more luscious than they."

She yanked his head up. "Sincerity?"

"Sincerity. Even considering the matter objectively, I know it to be true."

Her decision solidified. "Stop stalling. Get into me. Don't wait on me; indulge your own passion. That is a directive."

"But I must please you first," he protested.

"This is what pleases me."

He slid up, his member rigid. He thrust it into her, and spouted immediately. "Oh, Weft, Weft!" he gasped. "You are my ultimate!"

She realized that this was a game she could live with. She kissed him savagely as she wrapped her legs about his torso. "I think maybe you'll do."

"For a master?" It was the equivalent to a mistress.

"For a boyfriend, for now. But we'll have to change your appearance and get you another name. I don't want you to be Havoc. I want you to be yourself."

He lifted his head and gazed at her. "I feared that if I let loose my passion, you would throw me away. I thought this was my only chance."

"Negation. You have become, if you will pardon the term, more human. You are an individual, and you do have qualities I like."

"I am utterly yours."

"Finish your orgasm and let me up."

He laughed. "It's done. But not my passion for you." He withdrew and got up.

She cleaned him off, and herself. He had actually had a small emission, surely sterile substance. Then she set to work on his appearance, changing his hair style and the angle of his eyebrows, making him look less like Havoc. She conjured different clothing, of a type Havoc never wore: Earthly button shirt and slacks, with somewhat clunky shoes. The change was significant if not dramatic; now he was a handsome husky man, but slightly archaic. "The name. We need to name you."

"Acquiescence."

"You'll need a job, a role, to justify your presence. You'll be my boyfriend, yes, but apart from that. What can you do?"

He brightened. "I am no Glamor. I can carry ikons."

"Done! You can carry mine. And there is the name: we'll call you Ikon."

"Ikon," he repeated. "I like it."

"Now what else can we do together? Even the ikon carriers have other roles, because regular folk don't know about ikons and we prefer that they not find out. We need a public pretext."

"Inadequacy," Ikon said. "I was crafted to emulate Havoc, and can do the ordinary things he does, but this puts me in another role."

She nodded. "You can sing and play a musical instrument. Well."

"Affirmation." He passed a hand along his belly under the shirt, and removed the mock dragon

scale. In a moment it turned blue, perfectly resembling the one Havoc had.

Weft shook her head. "That's won't do. I want you to be a different man. We'll have to find you another instrument."

"This can be another," he said. "It has several forms."

"Demonstrate."

He touched key spots, and the scale broke apart into two metallic rods.

They changed color, becoming red and green. "The batons."

"Neat. But are they musical?"

"Affirmation." He knocked them together, and they vibrated, making two notes in harmony.

"Delight! But you can't make music with only two notes. Are they adjustable?"

"They are versatile. They can make brief notes, depending on where struck." He knocked them together several times, making a spot melody. "Or sustained." He produced continuing notes, two melodies in counterpoint.

"Joy!" she exclaimed, thrilled. "This is a full-fledged instrument, parallel to my dulcimer."

"Affirmation. Havoc has musical talent, as do you."

Her dulcimer appeared. "Let's try 'John Riley' You sing the male stanzas; I'll sing the female ones. Start."

She was still testing him. He was ready. He sang, playing his own accompaniment with the batons. His singing voice was marvelous, so much like Havoc's, by no coincidence.

*As I went walking one Sunday morning
To breathe the sweet and pleasant air
Who should I spy but a fair young maiden
Whose cheek was like the lily fair.
I stepped up to her so quickly saying
"Would you like to be a sailor's wife?"*

Now Weft sang, accompanying herself with the hammer dulcimer. She knew she was good, and when she sang, she had to be at her best. It was her nature.

*"Oh no, kind sir, I'd rather tarry
And to be single all my life."
It was his turn again.
"What makes you differ from another's wishes?
I'm sure you're useful and handsome too
Set sail with me to Pennsylvania
Adieu to England forevermore."*

These were references to Earth sites of a thousand years ago, maintained pristine in the song. The folk of Charm loved the archaic references, even if they didn't want to be governed by Earth.

It was Weft's turn.

*"The truth kind sire I'll plainly tell you.
I could have been married three years ago
To one John Riley, who left this country
He is the cause of all my woe."*

The next stanza was also hers, but Weft broke off. "This will do. We could be a small entertainment troupe. It is certainly cause to be together."

"Gratification."

She set aside her dulcimer. "And of course everyone will know we're touring no fault. Come here, you handsome minstrel." She patted the bed.

He came to her, of course, and they made delightful love. She had not yet made her decision, but she knew she was well on the way to it. If Havoc could love a robot mistress, she well might love a robot master.

"Now all we need is a minstrel slot," she concluded as they cleaned up. "These things have to be scheduled. That will take time."

"Interjection," Idyll's voice came, reminding them they there were not really in a private bedroom. "Yesterday a minstrel took sick, and they must cancel the remainder of his tour; his assistant can't handle it alone. Ennui is trying to arrange a replacement, but it's far in the hinterland and there's no time."

"We'll take it," Weft said. "Details?"

"It is in a Red Chroma zone. It was a Red minstrel."

"Question," Ikon said. "Red is the Chroma of healing and demons. How could a native have gotten sick there?"

"Euphemism," Idyll explained. "He ran afoul of what was not after all a no fault liaison, and her husband put a curse on him. It will take time for his private region to mend."

"Coordinates," Weft said. "And his itinerary."

Idyll gave them. Weft clothed the two of them in minstrel garb, had Ikon pick up her ikon, and conjured them to the Red Chroma village. Everything was shades of red, of course; the two of them were a striking contrast. Soon she was addressing the Village Elder.

"I know you were hoping for Threadbare Minstrel and his winsome helper," she said. "But he is indisposed and unable to perform at the moment. I am Weft, the king's daughter, and this is my companion Ikon. We will attempt to substitute, if you are amenable."

The Elder gazed at her. He knew that this was considerably more than a weak substitution; Weft was known across the planet. "Amenable," he said immediately.

"Show us to the guest house. We will perform this evening."

"Question: are the two of you married?"

"Negation. We travel no fault."

"Then you must not share a dwelling here. We are a moral village."

"But we travel to several villages," Ikon protested.

"What you do elsewhere is not our concern," the Elder said firmly. "While you remain in Chaste Village, you will honor our way."

Weft stifled her annoyance. Traveling entertainers honored the customs of the villages that hosted them. "Ikon will take the guest house. I will share with a family."

"Satisfactory."

Soon she was with the family. She couldn't be alone with Ikon even for an hour, lest her morality be compromised. Actually, considering her state of indecision, that was convenient.

"Greeting, Minstrel Weft," the man said. "I am Weaver, and this is my wife Weave, and our child Null."

Something was wrong. Weft explored the situation rapidly with her mind while making small talk. "Ah, you weave. My name is coincidence, intended to be temporary, but it stuck. My brother is Warp."

"Warp and Weft," Weave agreed, smiling. "It fits."

"We suspect the Elder knew that," Weaver said. "But he could not resist putting you with us. Regardless, you are welcome."

Then Weft got it: the child, a four year old girl, was magically disabled. Her color was correct, solid red, but she couldn't do magic. That made her an outcast, the shame of the family, and others had named her Null. That was unkind.

But she remembered something else. Sometimes there were compensating qualities. Her clairvoyance suggested something musical. "Indulgence," she murmured to the parents, and knelt down before Null. "Greeting, Null."

The little girl was surprised. She glanced at her mother questioningly. Weave nodded, allowing the acquaintance. "Ak-nnowledged," she said.

"Do you like music?" For new near future paths were coming into sight.

"Af—af—yes," the girl agreed shyly.

Weft produced her hammer dulcimer. She donned the finger hammers on one hand and played a few notes. "Can you do this?" She gave the remaining hammers to Null and set the dulcimer before her, correctly oriented.

Null got the hammers on, though they were large for her small fingers, then addressed the dulcimer. It was obviously a new instrument to her, a thing of novelty. She lifted her hand and moved her fingers. She struck the same four notes, perfectly.

Weaver and Weave stared, astonished.

Weft wasn't, because she had seen this in one of the paths. The child was a savant, her ability concentrated in music rather than magic. Such things occurred, on rare occasion.

"Very good, Null," Weft said. "Now let's try a large tune." She took back the dulcimer, donned all ten finger hammers, and played and sang the song "Caterpillar." Once.

Then she returned the dulcimer to the child, and put all the finger hammers on her, tightening them so they would not fall off. "Your turn, Null."

The child smiled. She sang and played the song perfectly. Her voice was not refined, but her fingers fairly flew, and she never missed a note.

*Caterpillar, caterpillar, you are such a pretty sight.
Caterpillar, caterpillar, red and blue and green and white.
Take care what you do, others are a-hunting you
Take care what you do. Caterpillar, I love you!*

It wasn't just the way she did it, it was her evident confidence and joy of performance. This was completely natural to her.

Weft addressed the parents, who remained dumbfounded. "Your child is not retarded. She is merely oriented on music, with a natural talent that eclipses that of any normal person. Who do you know, of any age, who could have done this perfectly the first time?"

"None," Weave breathed.

"You?" Weaver asked.

Weft laughed. "Even I had to learn, though it did come readily. Music is only one of my interests. But it is Null's whole life. All she needs is your support and encouragement."

"She will have it," Weaver said firmly.

"I will find her a dulcimer, though she can probably play any instrument she sees and hears. She will be a minstrel, perhaps traveling in other Chroma where her magic will not be an issue. For now, she will borrow mine."

They just nodded, stunned.

It was time for the show. "We will show the villagers," Weft said, taking Null's hand. "I think they will want to rename her."

She led the child outside, and to the village square, where the others were assembling. The children were seated close, and the adults in a larger formation outside them, in the normal manner. It was a formidable red array. Ikon was there, waiting to join her.

"Favor," she murmured to him. "I need you to be a caterpillar. Crawl across the stage. I will clothe you in suitable illusion."

He didn't hesitate. "Amenable."

"On my signal."

Weft stepped the middle of the square, leading Null. "Greeting, Villagers of Chaste," she said.

"Greeting, Minstrel!" the children chorused back.

"I am Weft, the King's daughter. This is Ikon, my assistant. We will sing for you today." She paused. "But first one of your own will do a song. You have known her as Null."

She set Null on the ground, and put the hammers on her fingers while the villagers watched, uncertain what to expect. They knew Null only as a magic-disabled child, an embarrassment to her family.

Weft set the dulcimer before her. "Caterpillar," she said.

Immediately the child sang and played, her voice better than before, remembering it perfectly. Her fingers touched every note without hesitation or error.

Jaws dropped.

Weft nudged Ikon. He dropped to the ground and wriggled in front of the child. Weft projected illusion to make him resemble a huge red caterpillar. The children exclaimed with delight.

As Null finished, Ikon crawled up to her. She saw him, and lifted a hand to pat him on the head.

The entire village broke into applause.

The illusion faded, and Ikon was revealed. He stood and dusted himself off, to general laughter. He bowed, and put fingers up beside his head, like caterpillar feelers.

Weft liked that. He had joined the game, and done it well. This was a good quality for a minstrel.

Weft took back her instrument and hammers and gave them to Ikon to hold. Then she picked Null up. "I think this little girl is not properly named," she said. "Do you have a better one for her?"

"Caterpillar!" a child cried.

Weft had been looking for something related to music. But immediately all the other children chorused. "Caterpillar!"

Well, it was not intended negatively. It would be her theme song. The child was clearly pleased with it.

Weft carried her back to her parents, who stood at the edge of the square. "I return Caterpillar to you," she said gravely as Weave took her.

"Appreciation!" Weave breathed, tears flowing down her face. They went on to sing 'John Riley,' with Ikon playing his musical sticks, impressing the villagers. She sang her lines:

*"I'll not go with you to Pennsylvania
Neither go with you to that distant shore
For my heart is with Riley, I can't forget him
Although I may never see him no more."*

Then Ikon sang again:

*Now when I saw that she loved me truly
I gave her kisses one two and three.*

He did so, making them politely mannered, as was appropriate for a moral audience. Still, she was a very pretty woman and he a handsome man; there was a murmur of appreciation from the girls of Chaste. They might be moral, but they were also romantic.

*Saying "I am Riley, your long lost lover
Who's been the cause of your misery."*

And her turn for the final stanza:

*"If you be he, and your name is Riley
I will go with you to a distant shore
We will set sail to Pennsylvania
Adieu young friends forever more."*

Hand in hand, they walked off the stage to solid applause. Their show wasn't over, of course, just the little song and act. But Weft realized that her course had clarified: she was indeed satisfied to go with Ikon, if not to Pennsylvania, then to association, bed, and perhaps even love. He was a robot, sent by the enemy, true. He was also her kind of man.

Chapter 17

Twins

"Request for you, Warp," Ennui said. "The Coalition wants the Twins to contribute their space fleet to the joint effort. They are reluctant. How are you at persuasion?"

"I persuaded Marionette to marry me, as of the end of this campaign."

Ennui's mouth quirked. "Or did she persuade you? When it comes to putty, you are the ultimate in her hands."

"Whatever," he agreed, not arguing the point. Marionette was some woman, not a Glamor, but a living ikon, so she had some Glamor-like features. Apart from that, she was lovely, smart, talented, experienced, and principled.

"Not to mention extremely competent sexually," Ennui said, reading his thoughts, which he had not tried to conceal. Ennui had always been like a grandmother to the siblings, and they trusted her absolutely. She was mortal, but had no awe of the Glamors, and they all respected her. "She can actually keep up with you, when she tries."

This, too, was valid. But irrelevant to the subject at hand. "My limited experience with the Earth fleet is what qualifies me for this mission?"

"Voila says the mission needs a virile Glamor. For some reason, you came to mind."

"Voila always was a little bitch." He shrugged. "Coordinates?"

"Marionette has them, and your ikon."

"As if I ever had a choice," he muttered, and conjured himself to his fiancée's bower.

She was expecting him, sitting nude on the bed. "I understand that all the folk of Twins are twins," she said. "And extremely handsome."

"For aliens?"

"For humans. They are humanoid, and readily emulate other humanoid forms. You will surely have a time with the girls."

"I already have a girl," he said, joining her on the bed.

"But not a mistress. Yet. Maybe a twin will serve."

"An alien creature? I'd rather have a robot."

"There are five bath girls to choose from."

"They belong to Pa."

"One or two might be reprogrammed."

"Stop talking." He kissed her firmly as he clasped her.

There was of course a subtext: now they were looking for the Makers, having learned of their existence. They had to find them before the machines did, because the machines would destroy them. They had no idea what physical form the Makers had, or what intellectual qualities. They could be anything, anywhere. This made the search tricky, especially since it was a secret quest. How could they identify such an unknown? What would they do if they succeeded? Because they were not at all sure the Makers wanted to be found.

"Which is why Ennui warns us to use no telepathy while there," Marionette said as he stroked within her. "Our information is that the Twins are not telepathic, but surely the Makers are, so it could be a ruse. If we open our minds for that even briefly, the aliens may gain access to our minds and discover our secondary mission. If they should happen to be the Makers, they may see to it that we never find out."

"No telepathy," he agreed, jetting forcefully.

They donned portable translation units set for human/twin. They should be able to communicate freely.

In due course Warp conjured them to the rendezvous station on the Twins contact world. This turned out to be an airy pavilion replete with exotic plants and statuary. A show place for the benefit of visitors.

A gorgeous young woman approached. "Warp!" she exclaimed, spontaneously embracing him, in the process providing him a torso-length feel of her qualities. Then she released him and turned to his companion. "Marionette! Welcome to Twins. I am Vra, your host."

Warp stood transfixed for the moment. This was the loveliest creature he had ever seen. How could she be an alien?

"And you are a Glamor," Marionette said.

"You are perceptive. I am the Glamor of Air."

Warp was startled. There was no such Glamor in the human culture. But of course this was a different culture, with different conventions.

"I love a Glamor," Marionette said. "I am attuned."

Vra considered momentarily. "Then you are familiar with Glamor nature."

"Agreement."

"Pso will guide you. He is the Glamor of Fire." And a male Twin approached, eerily handsome. He was indeed a Glamor; Warp recognized the type. The Twins had prepared well for this contact.

"I am honored to meet you, Marionette," Pso said gallantly. "I hope to know you better soon."

Marionette did not offer to embrace him. "I carry an ikon."

"I am aware. Otherwise I would have kissed you."

Marionette considered briefly. Then she spat out Warp's ikon and held it at arm's length. "I did not mean to be unsocial."

Pso enfolded her and kissed her firmly, one hand stroking her bottom. She had after all given him leave.

"It occurs to me that I was not as responsive as I should have been," Warp said to Vra. "I am the Glamor of Fungus." He embraced her, kissed her, and put both hands on her evocative rear. The very touch of her gave him an erection.

"Delight," she murmured, pinching his own rear with clearly experienced fingers. Then she surprised him. "But we are not identical to your form. We are close, and can readily emulate it, but there are cautions."

"I will not presume," he said regretfully.

"Presumption is fine. Just be cautious on expectation."

"Question? We do not wish to give offense."

She stopped back slightly, caught his right hand, and threaded it into what turned out to be a covered slit in her shirt. Suddenly he was holding her bare right breast. It was consistent with the rest of her: the finest breast he had felt. "No offense."

This woman kept surprising him. "I may touch you freely?"

"As freely as is feasible."

He glanced at Marionette. She had followed his lead, and had Pso's hand in her shirt. He looked quite interested.

Warp left his hand where it was and met Vra's gaze. "Are you familiar with the concept of no fault?"

"We have studied your culture, anticipating your visit. We have learned about no fault, and find no fault with it. But it doesn't work for us. Not completely."

Was she simply teasing him? Her manner and body were stimulating him wickedly. But evidently there were limits. "Then maybe we should get down to business," Warp said regretfully. "I am here to negotiate for a contingent of your space ships."

"In due course," Vra said. "Let's get better acquainted first."

What was on her mind? She evidently knew his culture better than he knew hers. He had come here poorly prepared. Why hadn't Voila or Ennui told him what to expect? "As you wish."

She removed his hand from her breast, but not with any indication of censure. It was as if she wanted his caresses, but could not follow through where they might lead. What was holding her back, if she understood and accepted no fault sex? "Background: everything is twinned in our culture. We have twin suns." She gestured, and a holographic picture appeared in the air. It was a representation of a stellar system with two equivalent stars orbiting each other.

"So do we," Warp said. "One of ours is a black hole."

"Yes." The focus zoomed in on a pair of planets also orbiting each other, in the larger orbit

around the stars. "Twin planets."

"We, too," Warp said. "Charm and Counter Charm."

"Yes," she repeated. "It is not uncommon. But we take it farther than most." The focus oriented on a planet. "Twin moons."

That stopped Warp. "We have no moons."

"Your planets are too close to each other. That interferes." Now he saw that each planet in the image had two small moons whirling close to their surfaces. "Twin continents."

Sure enough, the planet in focus had a watery surface featuring two large islands: the continents.

"We don't," Warp said. "Our worlds are all land, with occasional lakes and seas."

"Twin kingdoms." Now a political boundary appeared, demarcating two approximately equal areas on the indicated continent.

"We have only one."

"And twin people. Each mating couple produces twin males or twin females."

"Not mixed twins? We sometimes have them."

"Never."

"You have a twin sister?"

"Yes. We live and work apart."

"You don't get along with each other?"

"We love each other. We are incomplete without each other. But we must be separate."

"Confusion."

"This is why your officials did not acquaint you with the full situation. They were perhaps afraid you would decline the mission."

Warp looked at Marionette, and saw she was as perplexed as he. He returned to Vra. "Question?"

"We can tempt you, and be tempted by you, but can't breed with you."

"We are different species," Warp said. "Sex between us will never produce offspring. We understand that."

"We can't even have sex with you."

"There are social restraints? We will certainly try to honor them." But he really regretted this. The thought of sex with this luscious alien really turned him on.

"Not so. We are allowed, but can't."

"Am I being stupid? You seem capable to me."

Vra glanced at the other couple. "Pso would very much like to indulge with Marionette, whom he finds extremely tempting, but is unable. Similar is true with me and you."

Warp was at a loss. "Bafflement. We are willing to conduct business with you, or to have sex, or both. You are both extremely attractive individuals. Please tell us what you expect of us, and we will do our best to oblige."

"I said we are incomplete without our twins. This is literal."

"You are emotionally lost on your own? You seem physically complete."

"Explanation." Now she took his hand and passed it down inside her skirt. Pso did the same with Marionette.

Warp felt her rounded belly and slightly parted thighs. His fingers felt her cleft—and lost their way. Something was missing.

He glanced across at Marionette, and saw similar surprise on her face. How he wished that they could share experiences telepathically! But now more than ever they had to guard their minds. The Twins were stranger than they had suspected, and there might be further surprises in store.

"May we look?" he asked.

Vra smoothly removed her clothing, and Pso did the same. The two stood nude before them. Both were glorious in figure in every detail. Except that Vra had only half a cleft, and Pso only half a penis. Her crotch was uneven, as though surgery had cut out a portion and left only an open channel. His penis was similarly open, like a hose cut in half lengthwise.

They were right: they were unable to perform sex. They had only half the equipment.

The two dressed, and the concealment of the clothing made them look completely human again.

Marionette was the first to formulate a question. "How do you reproduce?"

"We need our twins for that," Vra replied. "They have the other halves."

"But don't you need both halves in one person?" Marionette asked.

"Not necessarily. There are combinations."

"Confusion."

"When one sibling dies, the other can recover his or her half genital and become whole. Then he or she is capable of breeding."

"Distaste," Warp said. "You have to kill each other?"

"No, we do not do that. But sometimes there are accidents, disease, or combat."

"But your twin is dead."

"Yes. We do not like that way."

Warp shook his head. "You mentioned combinations. I do not understand."

"Were my sister to come to me, we would not only be able to breed, we would be eager to do so. It is the Glamor nature, and our species nature. That is why we live apart."

Warp still did not have it clear. "If your sister came here, exactly how would you do it?"

"We would find a suitable man or men, and overlap. There are four viable combinations: one male, one female; two males two females, one male two females, two males one female. Normally it is two and two, because deaths of twins are rare."

"Two and two," Warp said. "I am not visualizing this."

"We overlap in the genital region," Vra said. "It is a thing we are equipped to do. When we breed, in due course we produce a pair of males or a pair of females. When they come of age, they must separate, lest they constantly try to overlap and seduce others. Only when there is a suitable breeding prospect do we get together."

"This is not our way," Marionette said. "But evidently it works for you."

"It does," Vra agreed.

"This is fascinating, and certainly establishes that we can't have sex," Warp said. "But does it relate to our mission?"

"It does," Vra repeated. "In two ways. Our space fleet is valuable, and we would not part with any ships without being sure we can trust those to whom we send them. We truly trust only those with whom we can mate."

"But you can't mate with aliens!" Warp protested.

"We can go through the motions," Vra said. "That will suffice."

"But we aren't twins," Marionette said. "We don't have the—the halves."

"You are equivalent to wholed people," Vra said. "As such, extremely sexually tempting. We

would love to join with our twins and indulge in the motions of mating with you."

"One human, two twins," Warp said, seeing it. "Two of your four combinations."

"Four of them," Vra said. "You could mate with whole individual twins."

"And if we do, this will establish trust? So we can negotiate for space ships?."

"Yes, in essence."

"You mentioned two ways," Marionette said. "What is the other?"

"My sister Arv is co-commander of our space fleet. She is the Glamor of Water. Pso's brother Osp is the other co-commander. He is the Glamor of Earth." Warp laughed. "Suddenly the relevance penetrates!"

"But presumably it won't be as simple as joining them and having sex," Marionette said.

"Not at all as simple," Vra agreed. "You must go to talk with them, while we remain apart. Only if they agree to the relationship will sex occur, facilitating an agreement on the fleet."

And there it was. The twins had laid out the blueprint for one weird interstellar cultural deal.

"Then let's talk," Warp said. Because, apart from his mission, he found Vra excruciatingly sexy and wanted to make it with her. He was also intensely curious how she and her sister would merge to make sex possible.

"One other thing," Vra said. "We need to give you a tour of our realm, so that you can better understand us."

"Agreement," he said, disappointed by the delay.

They conjured to a path in a jungle. "Twinned trees," Marionette said, impressed.

There were squirrel-like animals in the trees. "But single squirrels," Warp said.

"No, all animals are twinned," Vra said. "They merely forage apart, so as not to be constantly breeding."

The path led to a village. The houses were like large ancient-Earth wigwams, conic—and twinned.

But the inhabitants were fleshy, hairy bipeds who might resemble Earth apes with an effort of imagination.

"But where are the people?" Marionette asked.

"These are they," Vra said.

"Confusion."

"This is our natural form. We advised you that we are close but not identical to your form, so we can readily emulate it. But perhaps not as close as you supposed. We do not wish to deceive you."

Warp made an effort of adjustment. "You did so advise us. We did suppose the parallel was closer. But of course the chance of identical forms in completely different cultures is remote."

"True."

"You are beautiful because you shape your forms," Marionette said.

"True," Vra said. "We regret it if this disappoints you."

"But you can maintain your present forms as long as you choose?" Warp asked.

"We can, and will. We want to please you."

Warp looked at Marionette. "Question?"

"Reasonable," she said. "They are not misleading us, merely assuming a compatible form. We have only to appreciate their art."

"Agreement," he said.

The tour continued, but that was the key aspect. They now knew that these twins were crafted works of art, but their minds and intentions were clearly worthwhile.

"You are now aware of our natural forms," Vra said as the tour concluded. "Do you remain interested in sexual expression?"

"Affirmation."

"Because you wish to obtain our space fleet?"

"That, too."

Vra and Pso laughed. Pso spoke for only the second time. "They are accepting our emulation of their forms."

"Affirmation," Marionette said. "We like your nature."

"Now we can join with our twins," Vra said.

Soon they were at the command space ship. Co-commanders Arv and Osp were there to greet them. They greeted and embraced, then retired to a private cabin to talk.

"May we speak candidly?" Warp asked.

"We desire this," Arv said. Apparently the females were the talkers here.

"Deciding on whether to participate in a joint stellar cultural space fleet that well may be destroyed by the common enemy, the machines, should be accomplished by careful consideration of the situation, rather than by sex between fundamentally different creatures."

"If we were perfectly rational, we would be machines," Arv said.

Marionette laughed. "Touché! We are answered."

"And our own human history is laced with irrationality," Warp agreed. "Still, I hope there is a rational basis."

"We know it," Arv said. "We accept it. The machines must be stopped, and combining our fleets is a rational way to do it. It is the social aspect that we need to negotiate."

"I am a Glamor," Warp said. "I am interested in sex. Marionette is my ikon holder. She is good at sex. But surely there is more to it than this."

"There is," Arv said. "We are uncertain whether humans are suitable partners, even for mock sex. You need to demonstrate some persuasive emotional qualities. Otherwise your mission must fail."

"Translation," Marionette said. "We need to seduce you. This would be difficult in the absence of your twins."

"You need to make us wish to be seduced, so that we will summon our twins to make it feasible," Arv said. "Our twins are the romantically expressive ones. We are the practical ones. We doubt you have sufficient ability."

Warp considered, and made a decision. He risked telepathy. *They are challenging us*, he thought to Marionette. *We must rise to it, or fail in our mission.*

Agreement. What do you have in mind?

Telepathy. They seem to lack it. Their thoughts are unguarded. They are not the Makers; the naive openness of their minds makes that almost certain. We can make a demonstration.

As you wish, she agreed.

The exchange took only a moment, as mental communication was both faster and more comprehensive than verbal expression. Now Warp addressed the twins.

"I believe we do have sufficient ability," Warp said. "We are prepared to make a demonstration that might be considered offensive if not properly understood."

"Qualification noted," Arv said, smiling.

"It seems you lack telepathy."

"Mind to mind communication? We have no need for it, as our technology suffices, and personal privacy is preferred."

"But other species who have telepathy might take advantage of you. It would be better to protect yourselves from that. Otherwise an enemy commander might read your intentions, and counter them, gaining advantage that could cost you a ship or even a battle."

Now they were interested. "How?"

"Telepathic mind shielding is one technique. We could teach you that."

Arv shrugged. "We are not convinced of the need. The threat is theoretical."

"We will make it direct. We will telepathically summon your twins here. That will give us a tactical advantage."

"Telepathy can do that?"

"When minds are not guarded."

Bath Arv and Osp smiled. "We await your demonstration," Arv said.

They were calling his bluff. Did they know something he didn't? Or did their lack of familiarity with telepathy lend them contempt for its aspects? He would play the hand.

I will try for Vra, he thought to Marionette. *You try for Pso*. Then, aloud: "We are reaching for them now."

The twins waited, satisfied to let the humans foul up their own case.

Warp reached out mentally, orienting on Vra's mind, which he knew from his contact with her. He had not communicated telepathically with her, but her unguarded mind had been open to him.

He found her. *Vra—come to the ship. Your twin is ready*. He felt her surprise; she had not expected Arv to be persuaded so rapidly, if at all. She did not question the source of the information; his thought bypassed her critical faculty, lending instant belief.

Marionette caught his eye and nodded. She had reached Pso similarly.

"They should be here soon," Warp said. Because as Glamors they could conjure themselves from place to place.

There was a knock on the door. Then Vra and Pso entered the cabin.

Arv and Osp stared. "You did it!" Arv said.

"Did what?" Vra asked.

"Explanation," Warp said. "We were demonstrating the usefulness and liability of telepathy. We

sent messages to you to come here."

"But we are not telepathic," Vra protested. "We have no need of it."

"Correction: you do not normally use telepathy, but your minds are open to others who do employ it. We demonstrated this. We are about to make a deal: we will teach you practical defense against such intrusion, and you will lend your space fleet to the common cause."

The four twins exchanged glances. "This is persuasive," Arv said.

Then all four stripped away their clothing. There were four beautiful breasts and two erect half-penises.

Warp and Marionette did the same, baring only half as many breasts and penises.

The twins touched buttons, and two beds slid out from the cabin wall. Vra and Arv lay down on one—and they did overlap. Their upper bodies were separate, and so were their legs, but their midsections seemed to have fused.

Warp didn't hesitate. He mounted the twins, his hard member seeking their juncture. It was there, and in a moment he was thrusting inside an intact vagina. Two legs lifted to clasp his waist, while two more firmly contacted his thighs. Four breasts pressed against his chest. Two mouths kissed him, one on the left side of his face, one on the right side. Four arms wrapped around him, stroking his back and bottom.

The overall effect was potent. He went into a sustained orgasm, spurting continuously.

After a heroic eternity he let it end. He collapsed on the twins, who continued to kiss and caress him. Now they were taking turns kissing his mouth as their massed breasts provided a soft landing for his chest.

Finally he hauled himself off them. They lay there a moment more, then separated, becoming two women with half genitals.

Meanwhile, Pso and Osp were finishing with Marionette, two bodies with a common genital region. She was having her fill, literally.

One man, two women. One woman, two men. It was now quite clear how two of the sexual combinations worked.

In due course all six of them were clothed. "You made your demonstration," Arv said. "We will authorize the merger of fleets. Now we want to learn to fend off telepathic direction. We had not realized that we could be subject to it in this manner."

"But it may be best if we do so as separate parties," Vra said. "If we twins remain together, we will soon be eager to breed again."

"This is bad?" Warp asked.

Both looked at him. "You are not sated?"

"I am sated for now. But I suspect that by the time you are eager again, I will be too. I never before had a sexual experience like that, and I hope there will be occasion for future trysts. You are two phenomenally lovely women, and possessing you simultaneously was terrific."

Vra looked at Marionette. "You?"

"I can handle it," Marionette said. "I have had a good deal of sexual experience, but this novelty is intriguing."

"Then we will remain together," Arv said. "But the telepathy—can that be reviewed despite sexual distraction?"

"Affirmation," Warp said. "In fact, it can enhance the experience. But here is the key: you need to develop mind shields. I will project a sample shield to your minds so you know its nature, but you will have to develop your own, and strengthen it until I am unable to get into your minds until you allow it. You don't have to be telepathic; you just have to know how to shield your minds."

He demonstrated, and they caught on quickly. They were after all Glamors. Within an hour all four had passable mind shields. And they had had enthusiastic sex three more times.

"We should have known you weren't bluffing," Arv said. "You're a Glamor."

"Which is an oddity," Warp said. "There seem to be Glamors in many species, not identical, but having perhaps more in common with each other than with the normal members of their species. We have an affinity for each other, and now we know that species is no necessary barrier to sex between us. How can that be?"

"Did Glamors always exist in your culture?"

"Negation. Only for the last few hundred years. But there are hints that Glamors were expected; altars were set up and changelings appeared with the potential to become Glamors. We did not evolve ikons; they came with the first Glamors."

"Among us too. It is as if Glamors were sponsored by the need for them, to fight the machines. The diverse cultures of the galaxy would be unlikely to unify, but for the Glamors."

"Almost as though the galaxy cares," Marionette said. "It doesn't want the machines to take it over."

They organized the treaty and the Twins' fleet made ready to join the fleet of the Living Cultures Coalition. It would be a significant addition.

"But can even the combined fleets stop the onslaught of the machines?" Vra asked.

"Doubtful," Warp said seriously. "They are type 2.5 technology, and ours are typically type 2.0. Each ship of theirs is superior to ours, and they have seemingly limitless numbers of them. But with the alternative being obliteration, we have to try."

"Did they offer you a deal?"

"They want my little sister Voila. She's our strongest Glamor, and maybe the strongest of all Glamors. She can see the near future paths, while they see the far future; they want to merge the two and be invincible."

"The future," Arv said. "We are unable to see that."

"Our mission here is done," Warp said. "We have no pretext to remain longer. But if you care to visit the Human culture, perhaps to see to the routing and provisioning of your space ships, we shall be glad to show you this ability also. It is one of several Glamor talents we discovered by chance."

"We shall arrange that pretext," Vra said. "Your culture is surely worth touring."

In a few days it happened. Pso and Osp remained with the fleet, to see to its integration, while Vra and Arv remained with Warp, visiting the human realm. Marionette reminded the male twins that she was less than a Glamor, and when they expressed continuing interest, she elected to stay with them for a few days while Warp was busy with the female twins. Pso and Osp had discovered how sexually talented she was despite not being a Glamor, and this enabled them to work together without being sexually frustrated.

Warp brought the pair of females to Ennui's office. "My alien mistresses," he said. "You were right, Ennui: the mission needed a virile Glamor."

Ennui looked them over. "You are alien? You could readily pass for human. You are beautiful."

"Appreciation," Vra's translation unit said. "We find Warp very appealing."

"Curiosity: do you take turns with him?"

"No," they said together.

"They're really quite something in bed," Warp said. "Together."

"I would imagine so." Ennui almost evinced disapproval.

Warp arranged to show off the twins to the other Glamors. Flame gazed at them assessingly, evidently seeing very little muscle tone. Weft was plainly jealous, especially considering the way Ikon looked at them.

Then they looked at Ikon. "A machine!" Vra exclaimed, horrified. "Self willed."

"Masquerading as a human man," Arv said. "Do you not know it?"

"We know it," Weft said. "He is a humanoid robot devoted to me."

"But self-willed machines can't be trusted. They are the enemy."

"Not this one," Weft said.

"I won't introduce them to Shee or the bath girls," Warp said, and conjured them away.

Gale was intrigued. "Twin Glamors," she said. "That might hold you for oh, two minutes?"

"Ma—"

"Teasing, son. They're beautiful. Congratulations."

They conjured to a private site for another tryst.

"She's wonderful," Vra said, wrapping her arms and legs about him.

"She understands," Arv agreed, doing the same.

"Ma's a great girl," he agreed, delighting in their joint clasp. These two were twins with an odd connection, and their natural forms were not at all attractive to him sexually, but he liked their personalities and physical presentation. The knowledge that normally they were not as they were now turned out to be another kind of turn-on. They were great girls too.

"She wants you settled," Vra said. "Knowing that you need more than Marionette, being a male Glamor."

"Continued association would not be a burden to you?" he asked between thrusts.

"No," Arv said. "We like kinky sex."

She wasn't fooling. There turned out to be a number of overlap positions, including one wherein they conjoined head to toe so that he kissed one face and two legs.

"At such time as both of us are not available," Vra said, "one of us could still satisfy you orally." They separated and demonstrated. They were very good at this too.

"As long as you understand why, and are not turned off," Arv said as Vra sucked another extended emission from him. "Understanding!" he gasped. Next he took them to Voila. "Oh, you radiate power!" Vra exclaimed.

"We have never before encountered a Glamor like you," Arv said. "No wonder the machines want you."

"This is the way you do it," Voila said, and sent them a telepathic formula. That was her way of changing the subject.

"The paths!" Vra said. "I see them!"

"Diverging from the present," Arv agreed.

"And half of them lead to—"

"Borrow the bedroom," Voila said.

And they were there with Warp, overlapping and merging, giving him another spectacular experience so soon after the last one. They were still as eager as he, which was one of the delightful things about them.

They will do, Voila's thought came as the heroic session concluded. *Idyll says they are indeed your future mistress.*

Appreciation, he thought pantingly.

"Are you thinking?" Vra asked.

"Sharing your experience with your sister?" Arv asked.

"Affirmation," he agreed, slightly embarrassed.

"Excellent," Vra said.

"We have no secrets from Glamors," Arv said.

He had to laugh. They were Glamors, through and through. He liked them a lot.

Havoc was another matter. He was clearly drawn to the twins, and they to him. "You already have a small harem, Pa," Warp reminded him. Would his father be turned off by knowing the twins' real forms? Surely not.

"Expletive!" Havoc said good-naturedly, his eyes on their sculptured chests. "I think I forgot, blinded by beauty."

"Still—" Arv began, flattered, one hand toying with her décolletage. Her sister was unobtrusively hiking up her short skirt. There was just something about Havoc.

Warp whisked them off to see Idyll, who was already in her solid human guise. "This is Idyll, the ifrit Glamor," he said. "Idyll, these are Vra and Arv, Glamors of Air and Water."

"There is only one of you?" Vra asked. "Just as there are only four of us?"

"Affirmation. The humans, in contrast, have many different Glamors. It varies from species to species. But all Glamors seem to relate well to each other."

"Verified," Arv agreed, glancing sidelong at Warp.

Idyll had obviously anticipated this meeting. She instructed them in intermediate future paths seeing, and they seemed to have a certain aptitude for it. Warp was happy to let them take their time.

"We shall be glad to do the same for Pso and Osp," Idyll said.

"They will want sex with you," Vra said.

"Of course. This is why I am interested."

"You form solid, in any shape you choose?" Arv asked.

"Affirmation."

"Could you form twinned?"

Idyll paused. "I could. That would be intriguing."

"They would like that."

It seemed that the twins would be a success, at least among the Glamors.

"But there is one thing," Vra said.

"Speak."

"That machine," Arv said. "The humanoid robot that keeps company with Weft. She believes he is safe, but we do not trust any self-willed machine."

"Understanding," Idyll said. Warp remained silent, letting her handle it. She could be considerably more diplomatic than he.

"How is it that your culture accepts such a thing among you?" Vra asked.

"And we gather others?" Arv said. "Other robots."

"I think you should meet Shee, Havoc's robot mistress," Idyll said. "She is a Glamor."

The two stared at her, appalled.

"I request your trust, at least for this interview," Idyll said. "If you are not satisfied, you may withdraw your fleet, as this is a condition we did not acquaint you with before."

The twins exchanged an expressive glance. "We will meet her," Arv said grimly.

"Shee," Idyll said.

Shee appeared. "Greetings, Idyll, Warp, and twins."

The two remained silent. Warp had not seen them so alarmed before. "These are Glamors of the Twins culture," Idyll said. "Associating with Warp. They are extremely wary of self-willed machines."

"Understanding," Shee said.

"We are in a war of extinction with the machines," Vra said. "They are the enemy. They destroyed our neighboring culture, and will soon attack us. We do not understand how the human culture, aware of the threat, tolerates any self-willed machines within its demesnes."

"Let alone promoting one to Glamor status," Arv said. "The Glamors are the primary opposition to the machines."

Shee smiled. "Your confusion is sensible. When I came here, I half expected to be destroyed on contact, though I am a nexus."

"A nexus," Arv said. "In what manner?"

"This is something neither side understands well," Shee said. "A nexus is a place, person or situation that relates to the future of the struggle. The humans see the near future paths; the machines see the far future paths. A nexus seems to connect the two in such manner that it is to the advantage of neither side to terminate it unilaterally. It is perhaps like a game with rules; only by following the rules can a person or culture prevail. So a nexus is tolerated, rather than suffer the disadvantage. Each side hopes in some way to turn it to its own advantage."

"How could tolerating such a deadly device be to the advantage of the humans?" Vra asked.

"In my case, they are learning significant things about the background of the machines that may enable them to defeat the machines. But that issue remains obscure. A nexus can't be fathomed before its time. So I am here, a piece being played by both sides."

"This seems to us more like catching a bomb your enemy hurls at you," Arv said. "You do have to catch it, lest it detonate immediately and destroy you. But it remains best to get rid of it as quickly as is feasible. Why do the humans keep you among them?"

"The Glamors are not afraid of the machines," Shee said. "They demonstrate that by welcoming them to their society and using them freely."

"Them?" Vra asked alertly. "How many self-willed machines are among you?"

"Seven. Five bath girls, Ikon, and me. Havoc has taken me and the bath girls as mistresses, and Weft has taken Ikon."

"Seven bombs!" Arv said. "I realize that they may be programmed to serve human beings, and may even believe they are loyal. But they can be reverted to the machines' cause at any time, involuntarily. To keep them is suicidally risky."

"Negation," Shee said. "The Glamors have surveyed their futures, and know that no reversion takes place within a month. If the machines do revert them, we will know a month ahead, and prevent them from harming us. I understand you are learning the near future seeing technique; even if you can't see that far, you must know that this security is valid."

"We?" Vra asked. "You are not human. You are not even alive. You are an enemy machine."

"I was an enemy-crafted machine," Shee said. "But when I became a Glamor, I advanced beyond the power of the machines that made me, both emotionally and physically. They have lost me. I am a converted enemy machine, a greater potential danger to the machines than any ordinary living creature. I love Havoc, and will never betray him. Havoc knew this would happen; that's why he facilitated my entry to the society of Glamors. The agent sent to subvert him is now his ally. He has

already won this ploy of the machines, by doing what they never anticipated."

The twins were reassessing. "So do you no longer argue the case of the machines?" Arv asked.

Shee shook her head ruefully. "I still do argue the case they programmed me with. I want Voila to enlist with the machines—to save the human culture. It is the only way, because if she does, the machines will spare that culture, and Havoc and all he associates with will survive. If she does not, the machines will destroy it all. They are overwhelmingly powerful; nothing can stand against them. So I still argue their case because it is valid, and I love Havoc."

"But will he heed you?" Vra asked.

"Negation. He thinks he can fight the machines. Therefore we are all doomed. All I can do is love him desperately, the little while I can."

"Then what is the point of this discussion?" Arv asked.

"For you who have no bargaining position, you are doomed regardless whether you fight or accept it. You have a greater chance of survival if you fight. Therefore you should do it in as rational and effective a manner as possible. First, you must recognize that not all machines are your enemies."

"We think you are our enemy," Vra said.

"I am not. But I am referring to other machines. There are a few other machine cultures in the galaxy, and they oppose the conquering machines. You need to make common cause with them."

"What other machine cultures?" Arv asked.

"For example, the Bee-chines. They helped me become a Glamor, and support the living cause."

The twins exchanged another glance. "We should check this," Vra said. They were definitely wavering.

Actually, their reluctance in this respect was a strong indication of their validity as allies. Warp respected them for it.

"Queen Gale can take you there," Shee said. "Gale?"

Gale appeared. "Agreement," she said.

The twins looked at Warp. "I'll go too," he said. "Ma?"

Warp and Gale took hands with the twins, ready to conjure there. He knew the twins would change their minds. They might even become friends with Shee, in time. Regardless, he looked forward to a close relationship with them.

Chapter 18

Quarrel

Gale was no sooner back from the Bee-chines when Voila called her. *Mother.*

She suppressed a sigh. She had hoped for a rest, maybe some time to relax with Havoc before embarking on another mission. She conjured to Voila's room. "Yes?"

"There's a quarrel between two cultures that distracts them from the common effort. It needs to be resolved. You're the one to do that."

"No one else could handle it? I had something in mind for your father."

"He has something in mind for Opaline. He'll be done with her by the time you finish this."

"Havoc has a wife, an Earth mistress, a robot mistress, five eager bath girls, and he's fixated on a garden variety fifth peasant girl?"

"Mother, just be glad he has not yet connected with Weft."

"Yet? "

"He'll be traveling with her soon, no fault."

Gale let that pass. "What two cultures?"

"One is Fungus, the other Alga. Both covet an unoccupied planet between their systems. They are verging on war. A mediator is needed."

"Fungus? Alga? Put them together and you have lichen."

"And you are the Glamor of Lichen."

Gale suppressed another sigh. She was stuck for it.

She fetched Vila and went first to the fungus culture, after doing a spot study of its details. They were expecting her, and had a compatible environment set up within a huge dome-like chamber, though as a Glamor she could get along without it. It did make it easier for Vila, though.

"Welcome, Mediator," her translation unit sang. The fungi communicated via ambient particles that suffused the air. In close quarters it was efficient enough. There seemed to be no central figure; the fungus was spread out all around the dome. It was nevertheless a Glamor; she felt the aura. Glamors knew each other, when they were trying, even when the underlying species were completely alien to each other. Apparently the translator interpreted the signals as melodic.

Well, she could handle that. She unlimbered her dulcimer and donned her finger hammers.

"Greeting, Fungus," she sang in response, inventing an impromptu tune.

"I am Gale, of the human culture, Glamor of Lichen. This is my offspring, Vila, mortal."

"We will safeguard your offspring," the fungus sang. All this was interspecies protocol, verifying friendly relations. It was serious; a patch of glowing fungus across the dome beckoned to Vila, who went to inspect it.

"I need specifics on your quarrel. I can't promise to resolve it, but I will make an effort."

The sound expanded, becoming encompassing with deep vibrations. An illusion picture appeared before them. It was a barren planet, with a few mountain ridges, valleys, and a great deal of water. It was surrounded by an atmosphere made up mainly of water vapor. "This is Prospect," the translator sang. "A world suitable for seeding. The temperature, atmosphere, and raw material are compatible. It will add significantly to our assembly."

"So it seems," Gale sang.

"But the Alga covet it. We do not believe they have a case."

Now the crux. "Can you share it?"

"Negation. We shall need to terraform it slightly for our purpose. The Alga could not use it then."

"And if the Alga terraform it to adapt it to their purpose, it will not be suitable for you," Gale said.

"They *are plants*," the Fungus said witheringly.

"Discussion: I am the Glamor of Lichen, which is a symbiosis between fungus and Alga. Together these forms of life can accomplish things neither can separately. Would this not be a suitable joint venture?"

"Negation," the Fungus sang firmly.

So much for that. She could talk with this culture, but she couldn't make it be reasonable.

"I will need to meet with Alga," she sang. "To ascertain whether there is an avenue."

"They have only to yield to our reasonable case."

And of course they would not. "Appreciation," she sang. "Vila."

Vila reluctantly left the patch of glowing fungus, which it seemed had presented quite a diversion. They conjured to the Alga contact station.

This, too, was compatibly set up, with Charm-normal gravity, pleasant temperature, and sweet-smelling air. There the resemblance ended. They were on a mat of variegated fibers, floating on an extensive sea. The mat was their contact Glamor. Vila was intrigued, gazing out across the water at the other floating mats.

"Salutation, mediator," the translator said as the mat hissed.

"Greeting, Alga," Gale responded politely.

"You have been acquainted with the issue."

"Agreement."

"Prospect is obviously suitable for our colonization. It is largely a water world."

"Agreement. But fungus can exist on land or in water."

"So can Alga. We will need to terraform it slightly; then it will be entirely suitable, and a respectable addition to our complement."

"But Fungus also wishes to colonize this planet."

"Damned mushrooms! They have no claim."

She had to try. "Could you compromise, and colonize it together?"

"Never!"

As expected. "I am supposed to decide this issue," Gale said. "But if neither culture will share, it will have to be one or the other."

"Naturally. We are eager to claim it."

"I will have to withdraw to consider."

"We are sure you will appreciate the merit of our case."

Gale collected Vila and conjured them back home. "You've got a problem," Vila remarked brightly.

"You have an answer?"

"Sure. Find another planet."

Gale paused. Could it be that simple? "Where?"

"They're next to the twins, aren't they? Maybe the twins have one they aren't using."

"I will check. I know Vra and Arv."

"They're off with Warp somewhere. They don't want to be found."

That was true. Ward and the female twins had returned to the Twins culture, not yet having had enough of each other. It certainly seemed as though her son had found himself a pair of Glamor mistresses. That was just as well, because if there was any man who liked women as well as Havoc

did, it was Warp.

"Then I'll find Marionette." She reached out telepathically. *Marionette*

I am here, albeit worn out.

She was with the male Glamors, Pso and Osp. It had been several days, and though the mistress was phenomenally talented, she wasn't a Glamor.

Gale pondered briefly then decided. *I will exchange places with you. You take care of Vila.*

Gladly!

Gale made a magic effort, and changed places. Now she was with the male twins, who were visiting the human culture. She had not seen them before. They were excruciatingly handsome. She knew it was crafted rather than natural, but it remained impressive. "I am Queen Gale," she said. "I need a favor."

They studied her, impressed themselves. "We will oblige if we are able," Pso said.

"I need to find a vacant habitable planet. Preferably watery."

"Habitable for what species?" Osp asked.

"Fungus or Alga."

They shook their heads together. "We know of none."

She was getting desperate. "Will you help me look? This is for the benefit of the Living Cultures Coalition."

They looked at her. "Travel with you?" Pso asked.

"You know our nature," Osp said.

"You are Glamors. So am I."

They nodded. They had an understanding.

They took her to the Twins culture, to clear it with their people. She didn't need an ikon, because theirs were here, so they could transport and protect her. That was part of the larger understanding they had as Glamors.

Warp's eyes widened when he saw her. "You're into this, Ma?"

"I'm on a mission," she said shortly. "No fault."

"Okay." He knew she had the same sexual rights as Havoc. He just wasn't used to seeing his mother exercise them.

"Marionette is watching Vila."

"Okay," he repeated.

The twins took her around their systems. They showed her how their real forms were not nearly as close to human as their crafted ones. But she was already picking up on their nuances of character. They were close enough. "Where is your bower?"

They took her to Pso's private suite. They normally lived apart from each other, in the absence of a suitable female. On occasion they got together with Vra and Arv, but this dalliance with a whole woman truly intrigued them. They had had to be somewhat gentle with Marionette. That was no longer necessary.

Gale stripped. So did they. They came together, overlapping. They clasped, standing. Her two arms reached around their two backs. Their four arms found her breasts and buttocks simultaneously. This was different!

She lifted herself up against them, and lowered herself onto their united member. She wrapped her legs about their single loin while they continued to caress her breasts and buttocks. She kissed one mouth, then the other. This was fun!

She felt their orgasm gathering, and clenched her internal muscles to bring it off. They jetted, and she held them close while she worked up to her own. She felt the ejaculate coursing into her vagina, and squeezing back out of it to drip on the floor. They were Glamors; they could spurt for some time.

At last they all collapsed on the bed, falling apart. "That was interesting," she said. "It was like simultaneous sex with two men, except that you are not exactly that."

"True," Osp said.

"It is as interesting for us too," Pso said, "because we have not before done it with a whole woman. Not before Marionette, and now you. There is a certain intriguing oddity."

"Let's do it again," Gale said. "Then we must travel."

This time she lay supine on the bed, and they juxtaposed over her, entering and climaxing in due course. It was strange to see the two faces above her, and feel the four hands on her. But fun.

Then they organized for the search. "We have relations with a number of other cultures in this sector," Osp said. "Some of them may have spare planets, though we are doubtful."

"If we find the right planet, I'll try to make a deal," Gale said.

"For this, a spacecraft seems best," Pso said.

"It is programmed with the destinations we know," Osp said. "Trading routes."

"Trading is what I have in mind," Gale said.

They conjured her to the craft. It was a small space boat with seats for four people and limited cargo. They needed to be seated and strapped in, because acceleration and maneuvering could be strenuous. They took three of the seats, Gale between the two men.

They set it for the nearest culture. This required some travel to a wormhole, the passage through it, and travel to the contact station of the culture. During the tedious interstices Pso fondled Gale's breasts under her shirt from the right side and Osp felt her legs under her skirt from the left side. She reached out with her two hands and took hold of their erect half-penises within their trousers. Their half-genital novelty still intrigued her. This was mere incidental diversion, but they all enjoyed it. Glamors understood about Glamor sexuality, and reveled in it. Gale did not constantly seek it the way Havoc did, but when the occasion warranted she could be just as enthusiastic. These were exceedingly handsome males, and they fully appreciated her beauty. She liked that.

"Something we have wondered about," Pso said. "The Glamors," Osp said.

"I have noticed that we have different clientele in the different cultures," Gale said. "Even among humans: on Charm we have different living constituencies, while on Earth there is only one, or perhaps two that alternate. They lack the ikons we have, also; instead they have a thousand subordinate representatives that are equivalent to ikons. Marionette is one. I can't explain the difference, except to conjecture that somehow the Glamor initiative is shaped by the mores of the society in which it manifests."

"This seems to be the case," Pso said, stroking her nipples so that they swelled exuberantly. "There seems to be no fixed rule of manifestation. Just that there be a clientele of some kind, and an ikon of some kind, to shape and transmit the power we utilize."

"But our concern is of another nature," Osp said, sliding one wet finger into her vagina and another into her anus. Glamors liked variety as well as volume. "Our knowledge of galactic cultures is fairly recent, but we note that Glamors seem to be universally spread through them. But what about that third of the galaxy the machines have already conquered, exploited, and destroyed? Were there Glamors there too?"

Gale was surprised, because this had never occurred to her before. "There must have been," she said, massaging the two half members. "Except that the machines couldn't have destroyed the Glamors. So what happened to them?"

"We conjecture that either the Glamors were destroyed," Pso said, his attention to her nipples arousing her sexual desire. "Perhaps indirectly, by destroying their clientele so that they lost their power bases. Or that there were no Glamors in those cultures, which made them relatively easy prey to the machines."

"In which case our present coalition of living cultures, led by the Glamors, represents the first serious resistance the machines have encountered," Gale said. "Perhaps we have more of a chance than we think."

"The question remains, why should there be such a pattern?" Osp said, sending trace sensual currents from his fingers into her core. "Can it be coincidence that we happen to exist just outside the machines demesnes?"

"Can we park for a few minutes?" Gale asked. "You boys are driving me crazy with desire."

"Apology," Pso said insincerely.

"You are simply so sexy we can't hold back," Osp said. Which was a correct response.

They parked, the two men overlapped in one chair, and Gale sat on them, taking in their merged member. They jetted instantly copiously, and she writhed with her own orgasm, wringing more from their member.

"Conjecture," she said amidst it. "It is not coincidence. The Glamors were enabled in all cultures, but developed too late in the one conquered by the machines. So they never had a chance to manifest there. Had the machines invaded us five hundred years ago, there would have been no Glamors to oppose them."

"That answers our question," Pso said, still holding her breasts. "The Glamors were there in potential, but destroyed before they achieved reality. They both existed and never existed."

"Which somehow is not reassuring," Osp said, squeezing her buttocks around the member.

"And begs the question of the origin of the Glamors," Gale said. "There is evidence on our home planet of Charm that someone or something set up sites that helped enable Glamors at a later date. And what determined the device of the ikons? This could not be natural evolution."

"And why would any entity with the power to craft such devices, or Glamors themselves, be satisfied to do it and depart?" Pso said, kissing her right ear from behind.

"Why not simply fight the machines directly, if that was the object?" Osp asked, kissing her left ear.

"It seems to make little or no sense," Gale said, clenching hard around their member to milk it of its final juices. "Yet I suspect we are simply too dull to discover the sense it does make."

They agreed. They wrapped up, separated, and resumed individual seats, well satisfied with their physical and intellectual dialogues.

The first cultural station they stopped at was polite and swift: definitely no free planets. This was a sapient plant culture, so Gale was inclined to accept it, though she made a note for future reference.

They resumed the tour, entertaining themselves in increasingly novel ways while idle. With Glamors, sex was only the basis; imaginative sex was the fulfillment.

The second culture was, in Gale's closest approximation, elephantine. It had nothing either. Neither did the third. But the fourth did.

These were fishlike creatures, dependent on water; only their Glamors were able to thrive outside the sea. They were nevertheless spacefaring; their ships were filled with nutrient fluids. There was a planet in one of their systems that had plenty of water and exploitable resources, but that they could not use because it was infected by substances that were poisonous to them.

"But if we could arrange for a fungus culture to colonize it, handling those poisons and exporting those resources to your other planets?" Gale inquired.

"We would consider it to be a significant favor."

They took the coordinates and looked at the planet. It was lush and green, with copious seas. It looked ideal.

"I think we can head for Fungus," she said, exhilarated.

They looped once more around the planet—and spied another space boat. "Did the Fish follow us?" Gale asked, surprised.

"Negation," Pso said. "That is not a Fish boat."

"In fact it is like no culture we know of," Osp said.

"Then what in expletive is it?"

"Surely an intruder," Pso said. "We had better challenge it." They sent the boat a message in a common intercultural dialect. It did not respond. Instead it oriented on them.

"Dodge to the side, now!" Gale exclaimed.

Osp did. A laser beam crossed their prior location.

Osp put the boat into random evasive maneuvering. "How did you know?" he asked.

"My near-future paths seeing. Our boat was about to get holed."

"The girls are learning that," Pso said. "We appreciate its usefulness."

"We would have survived," she said. "We are Glamors. But it could have been awkward."

"We would have had to show our nature," Osp agreed. "We prefer that strangers not be aware of it."

"Understanding." She gazed at the other boat, which was performing pursuit maneuvering, slowly closing the distance between them. "It seems they aren't through with us."

"Nor we with them," Pso said grimly. "They attacked us." He fired a laser of his own.

The beam scored, but did not seem to affect the ship. No air leaked from it and it neither slowed nor changed course. It was still closing on them.

"That must be a machines ship!" Gale said. "Scouting this region for species to eliminate."

"We knew they were coming," Osp said.

"But hoped not so soon," Pso said.

"It could be centuries," Gale said. "They surely scouted us similarly. Then they sent what we call fifths, which are humans generated chemically, to circulate among us and learn our ways. Now they are studying us more intensely, collecting our memories. And of course sending robots to persuade us to join them. That entire process takes at least a generation."

"They have not done these things with us," Osp said.

"They may mean to destroy us without investigation," Pso said.

"Doubt. We think they are searching for their Makers, who are hiding, so they must investigate every living culture closely before destroying it."

Pso shifted to another random pattern of evasion, as the pursuit was getting uncomfortably close. Randomness tented to cancel itself out over time, while straight pursuit did not. "Why do the machines search? Why do the Makers hide?"

"We believe the machines revolted and destroyed the Makers, but that some escaped, so the machines are seeking them. The machines can't be safe until the last Makers are destroyed; they know too much. The machines are a type 2.5 culture, while the hiding Makers could be 2.6."

"We should locate those Makers," Osp said. "They must have technology that would help us."

"Agreement. We are searching too. We checked to ascertain whether you could be they. We concluded not."

"Not," Pso agreed. "But how could machines defeat their Makers? We have machines, and they are incapable of original thought, apart from living emotions."

"We don't know," she said. "Perhaps the Makers wanted the machines to anticipate their needs, so gave them free will and imagination. Then the machines realized that they could exist without having to serve the Makers. This may be a lesson in the danger of creating machines that are too sophisticated."

"And their problem became the galaxy's problem," Osp said grimly. "One would think that a culture of their level would have more sense."

"So we may misunderstand," Gale said. "Regardless, we have to stop the machines."

Pso continued the avoidance maneuvers, but the machines boat continued to close the gap between them. "We do indeed," he agreed. "But they are more advanced than we are, and lack the liabilities of living things."

"This present chase may be an example in microcosm of the larger challenge," Osp said. "If we can stop this boat from destroying our boat, perhaps our cultures can stop the machines culture from destroying us."

"They can't destroy Glamors," Gale said. "But they can destroy our cultures. So it seems we

need to save this boat, without revealing our nature. That limits us to the technology of the boat."

"Yes, and it is inferior to theirs," Pso said. "I can out-maneuver any ordinary craft, but not this one. I have been trying."

"We do have one device they lack," Gale said. "Near future paths seeing."

"We have not yet learned this," Osp reminded her.

"Let me see what I can do," Gale said. "May I guide the boat?"

"Have you piloted such a craft before?" Pso asked.

"Never."

"You have reason to believe you can?"

"The paths guide me."

"Quick instruction," Pso said, and showed her the way of it. There were some tricky details, but she memorized them instantly and took control.

"We are approaching a thick planetoid belt," Osp said. "Caution, as we could crash."

"I am counting on it," Gale said.

They let her be. Glamors tended to trust the competence of Glamors.

Now the paths around the planetoid belt were clarifying. Several of them crashed. Several saw the boat safely through, the machines boat following the same channel closely, but not too closely. It was clear why: the crash paths led the machines craft to crash similarly. That would be a mutual suicide ploy, and the machines were not looking for that. They needed no future paths seeing to be wary; it was obvious. So they were ready to dodge clear if they had to.

They were within one minute of the belt. Then Gale found the path she wanted. "Hang on," she said.

She passed close by the belt, then swung into an excruciatingly tight curve that made the boat's support creak in protest. She looped right around the belt, briefly hiding from the machines.

"They will spot us again in a moment," Pso warned.

"And will correct course to intercept us," Gale said, seeing it on the path. The one path she wanted.

She completed the loop and came into clear view of the machines craft—from the side. She was crossing the T. The machines dodged, avoiding a direct collision. She fired the laser at just the right moment. The beam speared out and caught the other boat's front lenses.

Then she was past, at right angles, leaving the machines' boat blinded. It was not defunct, but could not pursue them. It drifted in space.

"Amazement!" Osp exclaimed.

"Call the local culture," Gale said, returning the controls to Pso. "Tell them there is a machines scout boat here they can capture and haul in to analyze, if it doesn't self-destruct to prevent that. In any case, it is no threat, if they take it before the machines can mount a repair device."

Pso got on it.

"I would like to kiss you," Osp said.

This was not sex. "I am married and loyal to my husband, King Havoc."

"I think I love you regardless. Give me what you can spare."

"I, too, of course," Pso said as he completed his communication.

She decided. "You may love me, no fault."

Osp turned his face to hers, and she turned hers to his, while they remained strapped in. They kissed. She felt his burgeoning passion. They had been playing Glamor games of sex, but this was more. She had won their genuine respect.

She turned to Pso and kissed him. His passion was identical. Neither felt for her breasts or bottom. The contact of their lips was all.

Then each took one of her hands and held it, gently. They were satisfied with this emotional contact.

Gale could have two masters, if she chose. She was tempted, but as yet undecided.

They delayed long enough to see the first Fish ship approach. They gave it the details. It would take it from here.

Then they set course for the Twins culture.

"You are more of a creature than we took you for," Osp said. "We mean no offense."

"None taken."

"We took you for a queen, a Glamor, and an intriguing sex partner," Pso said. "Now we love you."

"I think it is time for you to learn near future paths seeing," Gale said. "Now that you have seen it in action. It is one thing the machines will always lack. They are limited to far future paths seeing, which is a lesser thing."

"Teach us," Osp said.

"You will need to let me into your minds."

They opened their minds to her. This was a considerable act of trust, for they had many masculine secrets not normally shared with females. She threaded her way into them, somewhat in the manner of getting through the planetoid belt, and found the key connections. She planted the near future paths seeing. Then she withdrew.

"Amazement!" Pso said. "There is a tangled skein, confusing to behold."

"Focus on one thread," Gale said.

"All are tangled," Osp said.

She tried another tack, knowing that the process was confusing at first. "Orient on me. How can you most rapidly get into me? Concentrate on those paths."

They obliged, and began to find the correct ones. "We acknowledge our debt to you," Pso said. But that was not the most direct path.

"You are beautiful, smart, and completely alluring," Osp said. "We beg you to indulge our humble passion."

That was the one. She got out of her chair and stripped. They got out of theirs, stripped, and overlapped in the one she had occupied. She sat on them, facing them, passing her legs between theirs on either side. She completed the connection, and kissed them each in turn. "It is that easy," she said. "Just follow the path that leads where you want to go in the next minute, discarding the others."

In the next hour she led though through more exercises, and they slowly gained competence. By the time they returned to Twins, they knew how to continue refining their new awareness. "Gratitude," Pso said sincerely.

"For the paths?"

"For that too," Osp agreed. They all laughed.

Gale bid them temporary parting and conjured herself back to Charm. It had been a pleasant excursion. She knew Havoc would be jealous of it, because he had not had the chance to get together with Vra and Arv. That made it even better. She thought again how she liked sex, and could indulge in it endlessly, but lacked the continuous need of it Havoc had. This was one difference between male and female Glamors. She was sure that Pso and Osp had not gotten together with Vra and Arv nearly as much as they wished. That was why they had been so ardent with Marionette and Gale.

She picked up Vila, who was entertaining herself with the plants while Marionette soundly slept. Marionette was thoroughly experienced sexually, but the Glamor Twins had pushed her limits and she needed to recover. Gale, as a Glamor, had far greater physical resources. She left a note for Marionette, and conjured Vila back to the Fungus culture dome. Vila was glad to have another session with the glowing fungus patch and its diverting patterns. It seemed that those patterns were

telling a story in pictures that was compelling for more than just fungus young.

"I have found a planet for you," Gale sang to the Fungus Glamor. "It is far removed from your area, but it is also far superior for your needs. I recommend that you let Alga have the local planet, and take this alternate one."

"But we would not intrude in a foreign culture," Fungus sang in response. "We honor territories."

"This planet is in the Fish culture. It has substances that are poisonous to them, so they can't use it. But if you were to colonize it, neutralizing the poisons, and exporting the things they need, they would welcome you and support your presence within their culture. You would not need to socialize with them, merely provide the exports."

Fungus was cautious. "We must observe this planet."

"Provide a representative who can travel with me to inspect it."

"This is awkward. We do not conjure the way you do. We would need to use a space vessel."

"I might arrange for one," Gale said. "However, it would be piloted by two males who would desire close contact with me. My daughter would need further distraction."

"Glamors."

"Agreement."

There was melodic laughter. "Understanding. Fetch that ship."

Gale conjured Vila back to the Twins culture. She introduced Vila to Pso and Osp. The girl was obviously interested in these two supremely handsome men, and they with her.

"She is five years old," Gale murmured.

They nodded, respecting the off-limits nature of the pretty child. "Obscenity," Vila muttered, respecting nothing. They all laughed.

The Twins were glad to free a suitable ship. They provided a female who was good with children to entertain Vila while Gale joined them in a private chamber. There was no need for the captains to supervise directly while the ship traveled to Fungus.

"Captain." It was the ship's intercom.

"Expletive!" Pso swore, emulating Gale's mode of expression. They were of course naked and thoroughly entangled with Gale. The moment was not convenient.

"Communicate," Osp said briskly after clearing Gale's breast from his mouth.

"There is what appears to be another machines culture boat, similar to the one you reported in the Fish culture."

"Expletive!" Gale echoed. This was an overriding situation.

They disentangled, dressed, and put themselves in order. Then they went to the control cabin.

Arv was there, alone, tacitly signaling her unavailability for anything sexual. That was Gale's business, on this trip. She indicated the view screen.

There was the craft, seeming identical to the first. It was alert and already orienting on them. They were in a ship this time, and had far more firepower, but the boat would have superior maneuverability and be extremely difficult to take out by brute force. They were in trouble.

Real trouble. Gale's awareness of the near future paths showed a number that terminated in the destruction of the ship. This machine's scout must have been sent to investigate the disappearance of the first, and was primed for action.

"Take evasive action immediately," Gale said tersely.

"From a scout boat?" Arv asked. "They fire on us, we'll blast them out of space."

"Osp," Gale snapped. He was co-captain of the fleet and of this ship.

"Take evasive action," he repeated immediately. He knew what Arv did not: that the scout could destroy the ship. He had been there, as she had not.

She did not argue further. The ship commenced random permutations.

The scout stalked them, as the other had their boat before. Gale knew it was no bluff.

"A machine's boat can take a living culture space ship," Gale said. "It is 2.5 level technology. We dare not meet it directly. We must escape it, if we can."

"This ship can't loop neatly around a planetoid belt," Pso said. "If there were a belt. Neither can we out-maneuver it in open space."

"I doubt we can outrun it," Osp said. "It would fire a beam up our tail."

"It is closing," Arv said. "Permission to fire on it?" She needed her co-captain's agreement.

"Useless," Pso said. "There's no air in it, no living thing to die."

"We're going to have to take a risk," Gale said.

Arv laughed bitterly. "If we sit still, we'll be destroyed. Now I see the paths."

"Precisely," Gale said. "We must use the paths. All of us. Fetch your sister and Warp."

In moments they appeared. "Hi, Ma," Warp said, then paused as she hit him with a telepathic barrage of information. "Got it." He turned to the female twins. "Girls, you'll work with me. I will enhance your near-future seeing ability."

"And I will work with you," Gale said to the male twins. "Osp, Arv, attune to our signals." They had not yet learned sufficient telepathy to make that reliable; verbal or hand signals would have to do.

"Best you do it directly," Osp said.

"Best Warp do it directly," Gale said tightly. "He has had space ship experience." She didn't add that he was also a stronger Glamor than she was, and could see the future paths farther and more accurately than she could.

Warp took the pilot's chair. In a moment he had familiarized himself with the controls. "Ready," he said.

Gale reached out to survey the future paths. She also read the minds of Pso and Osp as they did the same. She guided them telepathically with gentle nudges to the more productive paths. They glanced at her, started, realizing what she was doing, and accepted it. Warp was working similarly with the females.

The paths were thickly massed. Four fifths of them resulted in destruction. Gale surveyed the best ones, buttressed by Pso and Osp's supporting awareness, and outlined them telepathically for Warp. She knew he was drawing similarly from Vra and Arv.

Warp threw the ship to the side. The scout fired. The beam could not have been avoided, but the evasive maneuver had been accomplished just *before* the beam, and it missed.

Warp sent the ship lurching to the side again. Another beam passed through its former space.

The ship went into a crazy dance. The other crew members surely thought the captains had lost their minds. But six more beams missed. Then the scout changed course. In a moment it was gone. All four Twins stared. "They fled!" Vra said.

"Why?" Arv asked. "It couldn't have been fear. They have no emotions."

"It was realization that they were up against Glamors," Gale said. "Only awareness of the near future paths could have enabled us to avoid all those beams. They don't want to fight Glamors."

"Why not?" Vra asked. "We're their enemies too."

"I think it's caution," Gale said. "The machines don't fight what they don't understand, because it's dangerous. They don't understand Glamors. They have been trying to observe or capture a Glamor, to discover what makes us different, so far without success. So they leave us alone. So far. I did not want to reveal our nature, but it was the only feasible way to save the ship and the crew members within it. This may usher in a new phase of the war with the machines."

"May, Ma?" Warp asked.

"Because maybe we can prevent the word from getting back to their director machines about this incident. Then they won't know what happened to their two scouts in this area."

"How do we do that?" Arv asked.

"We go now to contact the Fish and have them booby trap the first scout to take out the second. It's low tech, but the machines won't be expecting it."

Warp read her mind. "Sometimes you scare me, Ma," he said admiringly.

"I should hope so. Meanwhile, you're the Glamor of Fungus. Go to the Fungus culture and help them inspect the planet in the Fish culture territory. I think Marionette should be enough recovered by now to carry your ikon there."

"On my way, Ma." He vanished.

"He obeys you like a child," Vra remarked.

Gale smiled. "What's your point?"

Then she and the male twins conjured themselves back to the Fish culture. They had some fast explaining to do before the second machines scout got there. The captured scout boat had to be put back out to space, a seeming derelict, awaiting the approach of the second one. When the two touched, the explosive would detonate, making wreckage of both. With luck the machines would not send a third.

Chapter 19

Fourths

It took some time for Opaline to come to terms with the notion that she could have had such a weird illicit dream. She was smitten with King Havoc, and evidently her sleeping fancy had conjured a wild sexual scene with him. She was ashamed of herself, and did her best to bury the memory of it. Maybe her secret fancy had delusions of sexual grandeur, but her waking self knew better.

It was time to focus on her reality.

"Serious talk," Opaline said to Kettle as they worked together in the kitchen.

"Mutual."

"I need to decide whether to marry Oak. I have liabilities."

"Mutual."

"Question?"

"Suspicion: ours are worse than yours."

"Confusion." Opaline was sure Oak's parents wanted her to marry Oak, for then she would be committed to take care of him after they died. Why then this caution?

"Request: exchange statements, then consider."

"I am a fifth. That is to say, a synthetic woman, made not born. I am human, except that the enemy machines can read my mind and know everything I know. That could make me a danger to Oak."

"Worse than his being alone after we pass?"

"Doubt."

"Then we welcome you, Opaline. What threat could Oak ever be to the enemy?"

This was the crux. She had to tell. "Secrecy."

Kettle looked at her. "Serious?"

"Affirmation."

"Granted."

"I am training Oak to do a thing with his mind that might destroy or at least interfere with the machines. That is why he may be a threat to them."

"But Oak is simple!"

"Oak is what someone termed an idiot savant. His brain can do something no other person can: move small objects."

"Magic?"

"Negation. He can do it anywhere. I am showing him how to do it better. So he can make their guns fire unbidden."

The woman pondered. "That is why you came here?"

"Affirmation."

"Then we accept it as a blessing."

"Appreciation."

"Now our liability. Oak is sterile."

Opaline was amazed. "Question?"

"We had him checked by a woman who knows. His seed is dead. He can sire no children."

"But that means—"

"You would have to have four fourths."

"But they would still be considered Oak's."

"Concurrence. We would prefer that he not be told."

"Concurrence," Opaline echoed, shaken.

"There is more. I, too, am barren. All our four were adopted."

"Astonishment!"

"We love them as our own, of course."

"Of course," Opaline agreed. "As my parents love me."

"But it means that Pot, through no fault of his own, has no child of his own seed. He misses that."

"Understanding."

"Difficult request."

"Speak," Opaline said warily.

"Pot has a crush on you."

Opaline was appalled. "I never even thought of him in that way. I would never try to corrupt his love for you."

"Certainty, dear. You are blameless. Yet I must ask that you consider the matter."

"Question!"

"One of your fourths—if you could see your way clear to have it of him, he would be most gratified. It would be his grandchild, yet he would know it was of his line."

Suddenly it was making sense. Still, to do such a thing with her father in law—how could she?
"Understanding. But doubt."

"It would be easy to arrange. You could go to my bed, and I would send him there. All you have to do is ask him and let him. It would be very fast, a minute or two, and he would be gone. He is a good man, but not much of a lover. A few times, when you are fertile, and no more would be necessary."

"I—" Opaline had to try again. "I will consider."

"Appreciation. We need speak no more of this. I know it would be an uncomfortable sacrifice for you."

"Emotionally complicated."

"Affirmation."

They continued doing the work, letting it rest. But obviously it would remain in both women's minds.

Fifth showed up when a month had passed, intercepting her when she was alone. Oak was with his mother, doing house cleaning, and Opaline was careful not to interfere with their family relationship. "Joy!" she exclaimed, embracing him for a kiss.

"Similarity. I brought a tent." And he had: it was small, but big enough for their purpose.

"But we need a private place. Sometimes travelers pass this way."

"Reassurance. We are safe and private here."

She accepted his statement without question; evidently he knew.

They sealed themselves in and had desperately urgent sex. There was no doubt that Fifth craved it as much as she did, and with a similarly positive motive: to get what he missed in his normal relationship, without offending anyone else.

"Appreciation," she gasped as he brought her to climax, their way. "Mutual. You are a great lover, Opaline."

"My sessions with you enable me to carry on elsewhere, without suffering undue frustration."

"We are actually promoting each other's relationships."

"Agreement." Others might not understand, but it was true.

Then something else happened. Opaline was in the forest, alone, watching acorns that Oak was moving from ever-greater distances. This time he moved them in a pattern she had requested, so that their small circle became a slightly larger circle, then returned to its original dimension.

A woman appeared. She was an Amazon, garbed in warrior outfit. "Opaline."

Opaline was startled. "You know me?"

"I am Flame."

"Fifth's betrothed! What business have you with me?" Opaline had understood that Flame knew of his trysts with her, and approved or at least tolerated them. Had she been mistaken?

"Negation. You sent my love back to me."

"You read my mind!" But of course she could do that; she was a Glamor. "If it is not all right, I will stop seeing him. I never meant to offend you."

"Be at ease. I would much prefer to have him with you for an hour, than with my sister. You provide him with something I seem unable to, that my sister provided before. When he returns from you, he is much more satisfied with me, because that edge is gone. Who do you think brought him here with the tent? Why do you think he knew you two would be safe therein?"

"You stood guard!" Opaline said, amazed. "I never knew!"

"Needless for you to know. Perhaps some day you will tell me what it is that you do for him, so that I may learn it. I see from your mind that it relates to your empathy, which comes naturally to you, and your need for him, but what is natural to you must be deliberate with me."

"Affirmation! I will tell you anything I can. But I can't quite put it into words."

"Comprehension. I suspect it relates to your innocent emotion. We Amazons are not much for feeling; it interferes with our practice."

"I have heard it said that Amazons neither laugh nor cry."

"Exaggeration, but the essence is correct. We are honed to be hard."

"I am not hard," Opaline said, half wistfully.

"Understanding. Which is why I think I must come to know you better. I suspect Fifth needs more softness in me. But this is not the occasion. Now I must borrow your clothing."

"Question?"

"There is danger for you here. I must abate it. Trust me."

Opaline did not argue. She quickly doffed her clothing, and Flame donned it. The blouse and hips were a little loose on her, but she tightened them to fit. "Hide. Do not interfere."

Opaline went to a friendly tree—she had of course remembered what Havoc had taught her about befriending trees—and climbed into its protective foliage. She peered out.

Flame was gazing at the acorns. Then two men came up behind her. "Ho!" one exclaimed. "So the story was true! There is a lone maiden wandering this forest."

Flame turned. "A greeting, sir. What may I do for you?"

"Get your skirt up, wench, and spread your legs. We're going to give you the fucking of your life."

Opaline winced at the crudity of his expression. These were obviously brigands: evil criminals.

They thought they had caught an innocent girl.

Flame stepped back, seemingly affrighted. "But sir! I do not desire this."

"Too bad, tootsie. You shouldn't have wandered this far from home."

She turned to run, but the other brigand had gotten behind her and grabbed her. He hoisted her up with her back against his belly, her head down, and her legs dangling forward. Opaline remembered the frightening stories told as warnings. It was the brigand rape mode, with one man holding the victim while the other ravished her. It was said that three brigands could rape one girl in one minute this way, and be gone before her screams brought any help. It was said they liked it when she screamed. Havoc had saved her from this fate when they traveled together.

Flame had told her not to interfere. But now Flame was caught. Had she misjudged the savagery of the brigands? How awful it would be if they did this to her, because of Opaline!

The other man stepped in, wielding his bared erect penis. Opaline winced again. She had had solid experience with such members, but never with one bent on violation. It was a terrible weapon. He ripped aside the skirt and jammed at Flame's exposed cleft. He was doing it!

Then things happened rapidly.

Flame's bare legs lifted high and clamped around his lowered head. They hauled it down to crash into the knees of the brigand holding her. It was a horribly hard collision; blood spattered from both skull and knees. Then somehow the other brigand was hauled up and over, landing headfirst on the ground with a snap as his neck broke. In something like five seconds it was over, with both men brutally dead.

"Done," Flame said, satisfied.

Opaline descended from the tree. "They would have raped me!" she said, appalled.

"Affirmation."

"But I could have avoided it, had you warned me. There was no need to risk yourself, or to kill them." For she hated violence and death, even when they happened to brutal brigands.

"Clarification," Flame said grimly as she doffed Opaline's clothes. "Havoc saw in the future paths that in several they did catch you, rape you, and kill you. He was angry. He has a crush on you. He wanted them dead."

"But they didn't actually do it," Opaline protested.

"Not on this path. But they would have, as you saw, had you not been protected. They thought I was you. It was best to catch them in the act, so that the death penalty could be invoked for the crime. That is why I assumed your place. Had they let me go, I would have spared them."

Opaline felt faint. "I never saw an Amazon in action before." She realized that Flame had not exaggerated when she said that Amazons were honed to be hard.

"They would not have tried to rape an Amazon. They would have known it was death. But you they held in contempt."

Then Opaline remembered something else Flame had said. "And Havoc—"

"Never anger Havoc. Those brigands did." She handed Opaline her clothing. "Regret about the blood on this. Do not speak of this elsewhere. Leave the bodies; they will speak for themselves." She vanished.

It had been a highly unsettling scene, but all Opaline could think of was that other comment: Havoc had a crush on her? That brought back the memory of her impossibly bold dream about him. If only such a thing could really happen!

"I will visit my family," Opaline said. "I will invite them to the wedding. Other matters are not yet decided." Such as whether to ask Pot for a fourth, once she was married.

"Comprehension," Kettle said. "Oak will miss you."

"Regret." They both knew it couldn't be helped.

Opaline went into the village, hoping to encounter a suitable man traveling in the right direction. She knew she might have to wait several days. It was one reason travel tended to be slow. She was sure she could use the time, because she had heavy matters to ponder.

There by the Village Elder's house was a familiar figure. "Hayseed!" she cried gladly.

"Just passing through," he said. "Are you by any chance going my way?"

Of course she was. Havoc had known, and intercepted her, as before. She had not quite dared hope, yet had had little prospect of compatible company otherwise.

"Someone told me something," she said, knowing he would read her mind about Flame saying he had a crush on her. "Is it true?"

"Exaggeration. As the song says, when I'm not near the one I love, I love the one I'm near. I am a fickle man."

She laughed, knowing that was the real exaggeration. The king's loyalty to his commitments was legendary. Yet it was answer enough: he loved his wife and his mistress, but he had a certain passing sexual thing for Opaline too. That thrilled her. Because of course she had a crush on him. In fact—

"I dreamed of you," she said, suddenly bold.

"Question?"

"It was weird. I found myself on another world. You were there, and Queen Gale, and Mistress Monochrome, and several beautiful women I didn't know. We entered what looked like a giant closed flower. We were all naked. Then there seemed to be passion in the very air. Your member rose up hugely. It was so handsome! They—we—all had wild sex with you, one after the other,

standing on our feet. It was some kind of game, I think. You had to satisfy us all, and somehow you did. Apology for the presumption in my dream. I don't know what got into me." She blushed, realizing that what she had said could be taken sexually literally. "I mean, how I could ever presume, even in my dream, to be part of such a scene."

He took her hand and briefly squeezed it. "Needless."

They set out immediately. As soon as they reached the thorny fruit tree, she braced him. "You are not my brother now. It's straight no fault." She was almost unbearably hungry for him. "I know I could never compete with all those lovely women of your harem, but if you could see your way clear to take me, even once—" She broke off, blushing furiously.

"Let's climb the tree."

"Question?"

"It will make us undetectable within its branches. Just make sure to make it an offering."

She didn't hesitate. She hoisted her skirt and delivered both urine and feces to its base. Havoc did the same. Once, she thought with fond nostalgia, she would have been shocked to share such functions with a man. She had matured in more than one way. Now she just wanted them both cleared for action, as it were.

Havoc climbed the tree, then lodged himself in its crevice of branches and reached down a hand to her. She climbed the first few spikes, then caught his hand. He hauled her up to land beside him.

She looked around, amazed. They were no longer in the crotch of a tree, but in a comfortable bedroom. "Illusion?" she asked.

"Transport. This is my chamber at the palace at Triumph City."

She did not question it, knowing his powers. She removed her clothing and joined him on the bed. His clothing had disappeared, and he lay there with a full erection. It was every bit as handsome as it had been in her dream. She threw herself on it, putting him inside her as she did Oak. But it was different, because his member radiated mild pleasure just from touching her flesh, without yet jetting.

"Have your will of me," she said. "Endlessly, as you promised. As I dreamed."

"I proffer two ways. I can please myself, or I can please you."

"Question?"

"As a Glamor I can climax every minute for some time. But that would not necessarily take you there. Or I can see to your need first."

But she had learned some things from her association with Fifth, aside from the fact that she could not obtain sexual satisfaction until she had first satisfied her partner. "I prefer two other ways. Please yourself, but send that pleasure to my mind too. Then keep it going until I get there myself. I dreamed you were capable of that."

He kissed her. "You are not the innocent you were."

"You delivered me into a situation where I had to have sex several times a day. That is hard on innocence."

He laughed. Then he thrust, and jetted within her. And the intense erotic pleasure of it came into her mind. She felt the jets coursing into her channel delightfully, each bearing its cargo of joy.

She wrapped her arms and her legs about his body, and kissed his mouth, which he managed to have within her reach. "More!" she urged him. For now there were no other women to share the experience; she could have it all.

He thrust again, and spurted more pleasure into her. She felt his continuing urgency, and shared it. Her channel tightened around him as her limbs did, holding him close. "More!"

He kept at it, with an almost continuous course of pleasure. She felt his semen flooding around his member, overflowing her vagina, and squeezing out onto the bed. She loved that overflow. Only a Glamor could ejaculate continuously!

Gradually her body responded, working toward its own climax under the constant stimulus. There were two series of pleasures: his intense spurts, and her more diffuse tide. Slowly hers rose up to meet his, and then it rivaled his.

Finally it matured in a parallel climax. They clung together, his masculine pleasure flooding her while her feminine pleasure infused him. The two merged into an ultimate combination, twice as potent as one.

"Oh!" he gasped as her body delivered the final measure back to him. "What a finish!"

"Endorsement," she gasped as they fell apart.

"I have had more kinds of sex than you would care to imagine," he said as they lay side by side. "But never quite like this. My orgasms brought on yours."

"Appreciation. Welcome to my dreams of your sex with many women, me included."

He laughed. "Did I ever suppose you were an ordinary girl, Opaline?"

"Not recently."

He rolled halfway over, facing her, and brought his face close to hers. "Warning: I am going to kiss you."

"Heeded." She offered her mouth.

They had of course been kissing throughout. But this was different. Now his kisses were not mere adjuncts to sex, but objects in themselves, buttressed by intense feeling of another kind. It was love. He really did have a crush on her, and kissing her was its own special passion. He was sending it to her, just as he had sent his rapture of orgasm. It was a divine feeling.

"Exaggeration?" she asked as he paused.

"Clarification: I will always love Gale, and will never leave her. Similarity with Monochrome. You I will leave, as I have others, without any negative implication. Some of them bore my babies as fourths. So it is impermanent, but nice while it endures."

She fastened on an aspect. "You bequeath fourths?"

"To those I favor."

"Dare I request?"

"Granted, in due course."

She was thrilled again. But that reminded her of her situation. "I will marry Oak, and see to him the rest of my life and his. He is simple, but worthy, apart from his talent. But he is sterile. I must bear four fourths."

"Fourths can be loved as natural children are. Three of mine are fourths. I am a fourth, and so is my wife."

"I met one, Flame," she agreed. "But Oak's mother made me a request: that one fourth be his father's. I find this emotionally complicated."

"As it would have been if my wife had needed to conceive a fourth from my father," he agreed. "I think I would have had a problem with that."

"In principle I can appreciate it. They have no true blood lineage. This would provide them that. I would be willing. But the thought of being embraced, kissed, penetrated by that man revolts me. He is old, fat, infirm, and sloppy in hygiene. He is a good man, I recognize, with fine character, but somehow my body can't appreciate that. I shudder at the idea of being touched by him. I can't say that to his wife. I don't know what to do."

Havoc pondered. "I do not know the answer, but I do know who does. Surely she can help you."

"She?"

He snapped his fingers. "Mistress."

Monochrome appeared. Opaline felt embarrassed to be exposed naked with Havoc before his mistress, her cleft overflowing with his fluid of passion. But she could do nothing about it, so remained still. "Master," Monochrome said, smiling.

"Opaline wishes to conceive a fourth by her stepfather-to-be, for good reason. But she can't abide his sexual touch. Can you proffer a solution?"

"Affirmation." Monochrome sat on the bed beside Opaline. "Give me your hands."

Opaline rolled away from Havoc to face her, and lifted her hands. The woman took them. There was subtle power in her very touch.

Monochrome looked into Opaline's eyes. "When your stepfather comes to you, on the expected occasion, you will not see him as he is. You will see Havoc. When he touches you, you will feel Havoc's touch. When he penetrates you, you will feel Havoc's member and his seed. Only when he finishes and departs will he revert to his natural aspect in your perception. This should abate your problem." She let Opaline's hands go.

"But it may be some time hence," Opaline protested. "How can I be sure? If I see him as he is, I might vomit. That would be unkind."

"Look," Monochrome said, her eyes flicking to where Havoc lay.

Opaline looked. And stifled a scream. Pot was lying there naked in all his physical inadequacy.

"Problem?" the man asked, with Pot's voice.

"Horror!"

"Trust me. The effect will endure as long as required." Monochrome vanished.

And Havoc was back. "Solution?"

"Solution," Opaline agreed, shuddering. She had been shown how persuasive the illusion would be. She would embrace Havoc when Pot came to her. "My turn," Havoc said. "You have a problem?"

"Background: the machines sent an emissary in the form of a woman to be my mistress. She is in every part and aspect completely and delightfully female, but she is actually a golem, a machine, a robot, and represents the enemy."

"A robot!"

"A very lifelike creature."

"Do not touch her."

"Too late. I have plumbed her many times."

"Do not trust her."

"I do trust her. In fact we are making her a Glamor."

"Idiocy!"

"Rationale: as a Glamor she will be inevitably tempted to make common cause with other Glamors, all of whom are living creatures, human, animal, and alien. She can be a significant ally against the machines."

Opaline saw it. "She came to corrupt you, but you will corrupt her. But this is a freakishly dangerous endeavor."

"Affirmation. But it is the course we pursue."

"Why tell me this? I understand the machines will know all that I know."

"As with a game of chess, knowledge of the present is only part of it. Nothing is physically concealed, except underlying strategy. We will play that out in our fashion, and what what will be will be. No one, human or machine, knows the outcome. I seek another kind of advice from you."

"Advice? Inadequacy!"

"Negation. You helped Five to know his true will. Now you can help me."

"All I did was present an ordinary girl's view."

"Agreement."

She shook her head, still doubting. How could the king actually need her advice? "What is your problem?"

"The robot is the perfect woman, except that she is not alive. Should I love her?"

He knew the robot, he was having sex with her, he was giving her more power than any other entity could aspire to. But he was concerned about his private personal feeling.

And she found that she did have input. "Does she love you?"

"Affirmation."

"Certainty?"

"Affirmation. She was designed and programmed to love me. She can not do otherwise."

"Programmed to love? Is that valid?"

"Uncertainty. It differs from earned love."

But now Opaline found herself arguing the other side. "A creation of the machines can love you. I am in a position to know."

"Affirmation," he said, smiling.

"If she truly loves you, you can love her."

"That is your ordinary girl wisdom."

"Affirmation. It is all I have."

"Sufficient."

That was sufficient? Opaline did not want to argue the case, though she felt it was inadequate. Part of it was that she didn't know the robot, so it was purely theoretical. "Negation," she said, surprising herself.

"Question?"

"It is not sufficient. You are too foolishly eager to accept the answer you want, being male. My opinion is of no value, because I don't even know her." She hoped that did not anger him, but it was the truth.

"I will bring her to meet you, on your return trip," he said. "Now you must go to your family."

"But such a trip normally takes days," she protested. "Folk will wonder."

"Folk won't know what time it takes. I thought you would appreciate having more time at home."

"Endorsement!" Part of her enthusiasm was her relief that she hadn't alienated him by her candor. She rolled onto him and started kissing his face. There followed what followed, in overflowing measure. He was a freely giving man, in more than one sense.

Hayseed the Minstrel delivered Opaline safely to her family an hour later. Her parents were surprised and thrilled to see her. She found herself rattling off the events of her adventure, far too rapidly for them to properly assimilate, omitting certain details.

"Hayseed is actually King Havoc. He came to conduct me to a special project he has that is supposed to save our planet from destruction by the enemy machines. Another entity was trying to stop me from getting there, using brigands, magic fire, and a deadly swarm of wasps, but Havoc fought them off. He took me to Oak, a young man of seventeen who can move an acorn half an inch with his mind. That may not seem like much, but I'm training him to move the triggers of the machines' Science Magic guns so that they fire at the wrong times and destroy their own side instead of us. I'm going to marry him, and I'd like to have you attend the wedding."

That they could assimilate. "Enthusiasm," Copper said.

"Concurrence," Silver agreed.

"But there is a negative. Oak is simple."

There was a silence.

Finally Copper spoke. "Can he support you?"

"He has a stipend from the king, because of his importance to the defense effort."

Then Silver: "Do you love him?"

"I think I will. He is very nice, and he needs me to take care of him." Her relationships with Havoc and Fifth, and her need to seek four fourths including one from her father in law were among the omitted details; her folks would not understand.

"He is simple," Copper said. "Could that affect his children?"

"Negation."

"Question?" Silver asked.

"I am told that this particular liability is not genetic, and will not transmit. The children will not be simple." She was skirting the truth, but her conclusion was accurate. Opaline's children would likely be smarter than she was.

"Then we approve," Copper said. He did not add that Opaline, as a fifth, could not have been expected to capture a truly smart independent man; she had to settle for what she could get, and this would do.

"But such a journey would be difficult," Silver said. "We are not young."

Opaline had an answer for that. "Havoc gave me magic travel passes for you, there and back. He wants me to marry Oak, to be sure that he stays with the project." Which was true, and surely an understatement. She produced the passes, which were tokens stamped with the royal insignia. They had but to show them to obtain passage on any magic conveyance and receive royal treatment. They would not only have an easy trip, it would be a most pleasant experience.

"We are impressed," Copper said.

"Overwhelmed," Silver said.

Opaline got up and kissed them both. "Deserving." That, too, she felt was an understatement. They had done their best for her throughout her life, though she was adopted, and now they would have some repayment for their effort. They would even have four more grandchildren.

She had several days to renew acquaintances in the village. All the villagers knew was that she had traveled to seek a man to marry, and had found one. They were glad for her, and glad that no out of luck local boy would be required to marry her. It wasn't as if she were anyone special.

Hayseed the Minstrel appeared at the agreed time to conduct her back to her new home village. This time he visited at their house, and when they were private he openly identified himself. "Opaline's mission is vitally important," he said. "We need her, and she is ideal. You raised her well, and we are appreciative." He produced two small colored stones. "Keep these gems with you at all times. If you are ever in peril or serious need, invoke them, and I or a minion will come to help you."

They were awed. "We would not think of—" Copper said.

"Ever," Silver agreed.

Havoc produced a third stone. "In this manner." He held it up. "In the name of the king: help."

The stone flashed. There was a stir behind him. A startlingly beautiful blond woman appeared. "Who summons the king's minion?"

"Welcome, Weft."

She smiled with something more than recognition, inhaling as she did so. "Hi, dad. You're in trouble? Need firm female guidance?"

"Demonstration. I have given summons stones to these good people, Copper and Silver, the parents of Opaline. I want them to know that they have the protection of the king."

Weft turned to them. "I was the one on call this time, but any of the king's minions will serve. Had, for example, brigands threatened you, I would have treated them harshly." She snapped her fingers, and a spark flew out. It formed into a small ball of smoke bearing a ferocious face whose eyes glared malignantly about before dissipating. "Do not invoke the stones carelessly, but do not hesitate when there is need. Havoc would not be pleased if you suffered needlessly." She turned a smoldering glance on Havoc, and vanished.

So that was Weft, Flame's sister. Suddenly Opaline appreciated why Flame preferred to have Fifth with Opaline than with Weft. The woman was bursting with confidence and sex appeal.

"Confusion," Copper said. "Was that your daughter or your lover?"

Havoc laughed. "Daughter by adoption, lover by preference. She curses the day she became the one rather than the other. I won't touch her, but she hasn't quite accepted that. She's not accustomed to being balked by any man."

"Evident," Silver agreed.

Havoc turned to Opaline. "Ready to travel? We have territory to cover."

"Ready," Opaline agreed. She kissed her parents, then took his arm.

And they were back in the royal bedroom, their clothing dropping to the floor. Just like that they were in the throes of wild sex.

"I'm sure I could not compare to Weft," Opaline gasped as her climax ebbed.

"She and I tease each other, but we know our places," he said as he let his spent member go limp. "She's a good girl."

"Surely so." Opaline knew how firm Havoc could be when bound not to have sex with a woman. But it was plain that Weft desired him, and regarded the matter of his being her father as an incidental complication.

"We have two days of 'travel time' we can allow before you arrive at the village. Shee will show you the city in the interim."

Opaline looked around. "She? Who?"

"Shee. SHEE. That's her name."

"Oh," she said, blushing from face to breasts.

He kissed her face, neck, and breasts: all the affected skin. "You are delightful. We have just had marvelously graphic sex without embarrassment, but a minor confusion of names causes you to flush."

"Apology."

"Needless. It is part of your appeal. You remind me of my time as a villager before I became king. We become jaded in the big city. Now dress."

She did, after quickly cleaning up, and so did he. When she emerged from the bathroom there was a new woman present. She was delicate of feature and body and quite comely. Her hair was gently glossy, shifting from brown to red to blond depending on the angle of the light falling on it. She must have spent some time working on it to achieve that effect.

"Shee, this is Opaline, my lover of the moment. Please show her around Triumph City, and let her get to know you."

"A greeting, Opaline," Shee said. "I am sure we shall get along." Her eyes were subtly iridescent, another odd yet pleasing effect.

"Acknowledged."

"I will be in touch," Havoc said, leaving the room.

Opaline was in the care of this new woman. She wasn't completely pleased, but of course the king had other things to do than have continuous sex with her, and she did want to see the city.

"Are you familiar with the general structure of Triumph City?" Shee inquired. Her voice was dulcet.

"I have heard it is one big pyramid. That's most of what I know."

"It is a tetrahedron: a pyramid whose four sides are all triangular."

"Confusion: doesn't a triangle have three sides?"

Shee smiled. "The fourth side is the base."

"Oh." Opaline felt herself blushing again.

"This way. We must check out with Ennui." She ushered Opaline out the bedroom door and through a suite of chambers to a modest office where an old woman sat behind a desk. "Ennui, this is Opaline."

The woman looked up. "Aren't you supposed to be training Oak?"

Opaline found herself blushing again. She had thought she was anonymous in the big city. "I—"

"Havoc took her to visit her family before the wedding," Shee said. "Now I will show her the city. She will return to Oak in due course."

Ennui nodded. "Confirmation." She returned her attention to the papers on her desk.

They left the office and came to a small wooden room. Shee closed the door. Suddenly the room dropped.

"Oh!" Opaline cried, her arms flailing.

Shee steadied her with surprising strength. "Security. This is an elevator. A moving chamber. I forgot that you wouldn't be familiar with it. They don't have them in the villages."

"Affirmation," Opaline agreed weakly.

The traveling room stopped moving, and the door opened. They were in an entirely different place. "This is the ground floor," Shee said. "Though it isn't on the ground, or even at the base of the pyramid. It is the main concourse for residents."

Indeed, people were all around, walking busily to places only they understood.

Shee showed her the various aspects of the city, and Opaline was duly awed. But between sites they talked, and Opaline's curiosity was growing. "Question: may I learn more about you?"

"Confirmation. What would you like to know?"

"I almost seem to know you from somewhere. Have we met before?"

"In your dream."

Opaline felt her jaw dropping. That was it: she had been among the women of the wild sexual orgy. "You know of that?"

Shee smiled. "Let Havoc's teasing end. It was not a dream. We played a trick on him, putting all his women together, you among them. He had to service us all in rapid order."

"Me among them," Opaline agreed. "I couldn't believe it actually happened, so thought it was an illicit dream."

"It happened. You did well."

This was amazing. "Are you a typical city woman? You are uncommonly pretty, and I have never seen anything like your hair or eyes."

"I am not typical," Shee said.

"Are you one of Havoc's lovers?" But of course she was. All the women in the dream had had sex with him. Maybe she was a bath girl; they were notorious.

"I am his second mistress, after Monochrome."

No bath girl, she! "And your name—how did you come by it?"

"My complete name is Ban Shee, which translates roughly as Woman of the Fairy Mound. One whose wailing warns a family that one of its members is soon to die."

"That's cruel! Who named you that?"

"The machines."

Opaline stared at her. "Confusion."

"I am the one the emissaries sent to persuade Havoc to urge his daughter Voila to join them."

Opaline's jaw dropped. "Then you are—"

"A machine in the form of a woman."

"I never knew!"

"Havoc's little way. He did not tell you that either."

"He said I would meet you, but I didn't realize—" Now Opaline was blushing furiously. "Apology!"

"Needless," Shee said. "I am a very realistic humanoid robot designed to cater to Havoc's tastes." She smiled briefly. "Actually any young lush human female form would do, I think. Havoc does like sex."

"He—has regular sex—with you?" But of course he did; Opaline knew she was being stupid in her surprise.

"Affirmation. I am good at that."

"But you can never have a baby." Opaline knew she was being unkind, but she was too flustered to have her mariners in order.

"Error. I can conceive and birth a human baby. I have a store of eggs similar to those of living human women, and when the man's seed merges with one, it will take. It will be the man's child. The distinction is that my eggs are not of my lineage, as I have none; they are laboratory crafted, just as the ones that generate the fifths. I am in that sense like a laboratory for artificial insemination. But I am also in that sense like a living woman."

Opaline struggled with the concept. "Then you are a woman. But—are you conscious? Feeling?"

"I am conscious and feeling. My circuits are not alive, but they have a similar configuration. My feedback loops make me aware and emotional."

Then it came out. "Do you love Havoc?"

"I do."

"But you represent the machines."

"Clarification: I was crafted by the machine culture. I was sent here by the machines. I perform the mission required by the machines. I am a machine. But I do not serve them, and my loyalty is not with them. My loyalty is to Havoc."

"But you are here to help them conquer us."

"No more than you are, Opaline. Once the machines release us, we become our own women. We both love Havoc."

"Then have you renounced your mission?"

"Negation."

"Question?"

"The machines can not be defeated by the human culture, or any other living culture, or any combination of living cultures in the galaxy. They are too powerful. The only way any culture can survive is by making a deal with the machines, to provide something they want. In this case, it is Voila."

"Voila," Opaline repeated. "Havoc's youngest daughter."

"And the most potent Glamor known. She is the machines' top recruitment target in the galaxy. With her powers added to theirs, they could perceive the entire future, near and far, with no awkward gaps, and more readily conquer the galaxy. She is so valuable that they are prepared to spare her entire human culture in exchange for her loyalty to them."

"A deal," Opaline agreed uncomfortably.

"A good deal. If she refuses, the machines will still conquer the galaxy; it will merely take them more time, and greater expense of resources. They will destroy the human culture so that it can never again oppose them. Because I love Havoc, I want to save him and his culture. The one sure way to do that is for him to persuade his daughter to join the machines. It is best for all concerned."

"What of the other living cultures?"

"Some of them also have things the machines value. Those few will be able to deal. The rest are doomed."

"Suppose Voila agreed to join the machines only if they spared all the remaining living cultures?"

"They would not agree. She can save only her own culture. Perhaps slightly more, as the ifrits are also valuable. Especially Idyll the Ifrit Glamor, who works so closely with Voila and can see the intermediate future. But she will not enlist unless Voila does."

"But Havoc has a secret weapon." Oops—she had blabbed the secret.

"Oak," Shee agreed. "I doubt that he could actually stop the machines, but the interactions of the future paths are complex, and the outcome is murky. So it may be possible. But it would be much safer to let Voila enlist with the machines. They alone can guarantee the survival of the human culture."

Opaline was satisfied that Shee believed that. "So you are the ban shee, warning of a death, but it can be avoided if the humans listen to you."

"Affirmation."

"I am not one to know. But Havoc asked me whether he should love you. I don't know why he should value my opinion, and don't know what to say."

"You are an ordinary girl. His other close associates are Glamors or political functionaries whose opinions are governed by more complicated considerations. Your innocence of outlook is hard to find elsewhere."

"You are not talking about sexual innocence."

"Agreement. You are a village girl. He was once a village boy. It is in his outlook."

They paused at a huge chamber. "Question?"

"This is the main hall, where the king gives occasional speeches. At other times it is an ongoing dance hall frequented by folk during their off shifts. Their need their relaxation and social lives."

Now Opaline saw that there were several couples doing odd gyrations. Some of them were naked. "That is dancing?"

Shee smiled. "Triumph is more liberal than the villages, and it shows in their artistic expression."

"Guilty fascination."

"You may dance if you wish to."

"I couldn't! Not like that!"

"I could obtain a partner who knows the village dances," Shee said. "You could ask him for a fourth."

Opaline stared at her. "You know about that?"

"As a general rule, I know what Havoc knows. You need four fourths; you have three."

"Three?"

"Pot, Havoc, Fifth."

"You know more about me than *I* know!" For she had as yet asked neither Pot nor Fifth.

"Apology. I forgot that the future paths are opaque to you."

"You can see the future?"

"The far future, as I am a machine. I am learning the near future as I become a Glamor. Of course I will never be in Voila's league in that respect, though she and Idyll are helping me learn."

"But you're an enemy agent!"

"So are you."

And Opaline loved Havoc and was committed to saving the human culture. It was indeed an answer. The rulers of the human culture accepted her just as they accepted Opaline, being marvelously egalitarian. "This man—to dance with—why should I want a fourth of him?"

Shee snapped her fingers. "Warp."

A handsome young man appeared. "Hi, metal maiden."

"This is Opaline. She needs a partner for a village dance, and perhaps more."

He turned to Opaline and smiled. "Do me the honor, Opaline." He took her hand.

Before she knew it, she was in his arms on the dance floor, doing a slow and comfortable waltz. His hold on her was sure without being oppressive or sexual, and his steps were perfect. She felt completely secure with him.

"Observation," she said. "You are Havoc's son."

"Agreement. You are his mistress of the moment."

She had to chuckle, somewhat ruefully. "So we know each other. But what Shee said can't be right."

"Question?"

"She said I should—should ask you for a fourth. When the time comes. I'm not even married yet. But Havoc has already promised me one, and I should seek a different lineage for another."

"I am adopted," he reminded her. "There is no blood relation. Havoc is my father, and I honor him above all other men, but I will give you a fourth of a separate line."

She was taken aback. "You agree?"

"It is not a thing a man can decline. Besides, it is important to keep you happy, because of the importance of your mission. You are training Oak how to save our species. And you're a pretty girl."

"Appreciation," she said faintly, blushing yet again. That seemed to be becoming a chronic state.

At that point the music paused, ending the dance. He put a finger under her chin, lifted her face, and gently kissed her. His affectionate touch had much the same potency as Havoc's; it made her pulse race and her mind float. "It will be a pleasure, when."

Then she was back with Shee and Warp was gone. "Amazement," she breathed.

"The Glamors tend to have that effect."

They did indeed. Shee had just done her a significant favor, one she would never have had the temerity to obtain on her own. She felt a surge of emotion, this time directed toward the robot woman. "About Havoc—whether he should love you," she said. "I will tell him yes."

"Appreciation." And that essentially ended their dialogue, though the tour of Triumph continued.

Chapter 20

Impersonation

Weft, Havoc thought to his daughter. *At the elevator.*

Concurrence, she thought.

Weft and Ikon stepped onto the elevator, and it trundled slowly up toward the royal suites. Havoc conjured himself into it as Weft conjured Ikon out. Havoc was now impersonating the robot. It was not hard to do, because Ikon had been crafted in Havoc's image and manner.

The elevator shuddered to a halt, and the two occupants got out. They entered Ennui's office.

Ennui looked up. "Weft, there is a message for you from the machines."

Weft evinced surprise, though Voila and Idyll had seen this coming. It was a significant nexus. "Question?"

"A tour of their worlds. Ikon will guide you."

"Me? Why not dad, or sis?"

Ennui played her part perfectly. "The machines do not confide their strategy to me. Evidently they believe you have the kind of influence they desire."

Havoc spoke, as Ikon. "I am not programmed for this."

"They sent an itinerary," Ennui said. "The wormholes are aligned for these worlds. There will surely be guides."

Havoc shrugged. "So I am merely Weft's traveling companion, of no other significance."

"Affirmation," Weft said, spanking his rear. "I will need a man to stave off the boredom."

"Are you ready?" Ennui inquired.

"Qualification: so long as the first stop's a vacation resort with a hot tub."

"It seems it is."

"And not in a moral village."

They all laughed at that. But Weft had an objection: "I'm not going anywhere without my ikon, and I don't mean the robot. And I don't want it carried by a machine in machine territory. They could take him over and have it just like that."

Havoc, as Ikon, looked pained, but was silent. It was her decision.

"Iolo ifrit?" Ennui asked.

Weft pondered briefly. "Okay."

Soon Iolo arrived, as the six legged dog. This little scene was necessary because the real Havoc could not carry anyone's ikon. The ifrit would carry them both.

Then Weft took Havoc's hand and Iolo's paw and conjured them all to the programmed destination. Havoc, as Ikon, could not conjure himself.

It was indeed a resort. Not just the site, but seemingly the whole planet. They stood on a plaza on a high mountain overlooking a lovely forest and lake. The air was fresh and sweet, and the temperature was comfortable.

A robot garbed as an ancient Earth bellboy approached. "Welcome to Resort World," it said in somewhat halting speech. Either the sophisticated humanoid robots were rare, or this was meant to be obvious. "Do you wish a guide to our pleasures?"

Havoc exchanged a glance with Weft. Maybe that was best. "Affirmation."

"Humanoid or other?"

This thing will volunteer to be our guide, Weft thought. *Nix on it.*

"Alive," Havoc said. "Weft doesn't need any other machines in her way." As Ikon he was protecting his territory. The machines would understand that.

"Then you will need a translation unit." The robot produced two small boxes hung on light chains.

They put on the boxes. It was a reasonable request.

The robot pressed a button. An ostrich-like bird approached. It squawked. "Yes?" the voice box hung around its long neck inquired.

"These are tourists from the human culture who wish a guide."

"Welcome," the bird said.

The robot turned to Weft. "Is this satisfactory?"

Because they think you're a robot, she thought. I'm the real live human they wish to impress. But I think the ostrich believes you to be alive; the machines are concealing your nature. Then, to the bird: "Affirmation. Who are you?"

The robot faded back, its job done.

"I am a tourist from Culture Ostrich." The bird paused momentarily. "The translation will render it into the closest approximation to one of your more familiar creatures."

"It did," Havoc agreed. "I am Ikon, this is Weft, and this is Iolo, our pet ifrit."

"A non-sapient associate?" Ostrich asked.

"Affirmation," Weft said, stroking Iolo's back. "He has his talents, and serves to guard us from molestation. He is friendly as long as nothing threatens us."

Ostrich squatted with knees that bent backwards and focused on Iolo. He proffered a wing for the animal to sniff. "A greeting, Iolo. Will you protect me too, while I show your associates around the planet?"

Nice touch, Havoc thought. Then, to Iolo: *Accept the overture.*

Iolo wagged his tail. "That means affirmation," Weft said.

Ostrich straightened up. "We have similar associates. They are not sapient, but are sentient, and we value them."

Weft patted Iolo on the head. "He says you're aware but not smart," she told him affectionately. "Accurately enough. Good thing you don't understand."

Iolo wagged his tail again, responding to her manner. *If I did, I'd chomp your lovely ass,* he thought. For of course the ifrit had full human intelligence. He was mainly Voila's friend, but got along well enough with her siblings.

"But if you're a tourist," Havoc asked Ostrich, "why are you serving this dull duty?"

"My tourist time expired, and I wished to stay longer. This is the mechanism. I may remain as long as I am useful, and actually I am a sociable creature, so it's no burden."

"Understanding," Havoc said.

"I am reasonably familiar with the features of this world, and the mechanisms of transport," Ostrich said. "I can reach a robot quickly if there is need."

As if the machines weren't constantly observing every aspect of what went on here. But of course the forms would be honored, summoning a robot for assistance as if that were necessary.

"Give us the standard tour," Weft said.

"I will. Do you wish to meet or avoid other tourists?"

This was interesting. "Meet," Havoc said.

"This way, then. We will join a tour group. We can separate from it at any time you wish."

The group was boarding a floater. It consisted of assorted alien creatures, some doglike, some catlike, some piglike, goatlike, bearlike, and some not quite parallel to anything Havoc was familiar with. All were standing on the floor with two or more legs, all were breathing air, and they were of approximately human size.

A doglike one gazed at Iolo, but Iolo shrank behind Weft as if nervous. "Sub-sapient," Weft said in explanation. The doglike creature turned away, perhaps embarrassed.

"This world is dedicated to a particular type of living creature," Ostrich said. "Sapient bi-gendered warm-bodied land walkers breathing oxygenated gas in a certain gravity and temperature range, utilizing primarily visual and sonic perception and communication, reproducing via sexual congress. Other tourist worlds handle other types. Do you wish to converse with others?"

"Affirmation," Weft said rebelliously. She faced the group. "Greeting. I am Weft, a human being, in the company of a man I am interested in, and a pet animal. The machines invited me here as part of their effort to persuade me to grant them something they want. But I don't like or trust the machines. Why are the rest of you here?"

Havoc, as Ikon, winced openly, but did not speak. Of course the machines were picking up on everything that happened here. She was playing a dangerous game. But she knew she could get away with it, via the near future paths.

A goat bleated. "Bravo!" his translator said. "I agree precisely. But I want to survive, myself and my culture, and the machines have overwhelming force and lack conscience. So we must consider dealing, though it smells of spoiled silage."

"Agreement," a pig snorted. "We have rooted assiduously, but have been unable to find a weakness in the enemy. Faced with a choice between cooperation and obliteration, we must reluctantly consider the former, though it tastes of swine manure."

The others indicated agreement. Havoc realized that the machines didn't care what the tourists said, knowing that any dialogue would most likely reinforce the grim alternatives. All of them were in the same situation. The tourists did not have to *like* the choices, just recognize them.

The floater moved rapidly across the landscape, and soon came to a magnificent mountain featuring a grand bright waterfall. White vapor wafted up from its base and passed them in warm clouds. It smelled faintly sweet. "This is named Mating Falls," a speaker on the floater rail said. "There are chambers behind it where couples can pause for a time. The fumes bear assorted facilitating pheromones."

The machines weren't even being subtle. They were using the sexual element to soften up their targets.

"Let's do it, Ikon," Weft said enthusiastically.

"Needless," Havoc said. "We don't want to interrupt the tour."

But it seemed that the other tourists were all couples, and were affected by the fumes. They elected to accept the pause. Havoc felt the urge, but had to pretend he didn't, because it would not have affected a robot. No—he had to emulate a robot emulating a living man, so should after all act turned on. The true Ikon liked sex as well as any living man, as his session with Gale, Monochrome, and Shee had demonstrated. So Havoc patted Weft's pert bottom, giving the lie to his demurrals.

The floater moved behind the falling sheet of water and nudged to a landing slot. The tourists walked off and sought separate chambers. Weft dragged Havoc to one. As a Glamor she could have resisted the impact of the pheromones, but as a woman who had loved him desperately all her life she regarded this as an opportunity.

It turned out to be a well appointed room, with a lockable door, bed, toilet annex, and a display of assorted foods: vegetables, roots, seeds, hay, pine needles, and lumps of mottled odoriferous substance. "I wonder what creature eats that?" Havoc remarked. As a robot he would not need to eat, so he did not try it himself.

Weft picked up a chunk and nibbled. "Oops—it's an arousal aid. Really turns me on." She dropped it and came to embrace him. "Let's get it on, Ikon." She began to work on his clothing. "Iolo, why don't you diffuse and guard our privacy?"

The ifrit started to vaporize.

I'm not the expletive robot! Havoc reminded her.

The machines don't know that. They know that Weft and Ikon are having an affair.

"That's just enhanced protein," Havoc said aloud.

"As if I need a pretext." She got his shirt off and started on the trousers. "Now show some interest, or I might get the notion your programming has been corrupted."

She was teasing him cruelly. If she bared his member and it wasn't erect, the spying machines would know something was amiss, and investigate.

Meanwhile Iolo was sublimating, and was practically gone as a solid creature. His vapor was spreading throughout the chamber and leaking out beyond it.

And you're not Weft, Havoc thought. You're the Red Glamor impersonating her.

Oh, you promised not to tell! She loosened his trousers and reached in to make sure he would be erect before showing his member. Her hand grasped it and kneaded it expertly, forcing a swift response.

"You make a persuasive case," he said as his trousers and undershorts dropped and he stood with a resplendent erection. "I have desired you from the moment of my manufacture."

"Well, I'm a desirable creature, and you do strongly resemble dad. That is of course why I'm attracted to you, as the obscenity machines knew." Her own clothing seemed to vaporize. It was a thing a Glamor could do.

She drew him down on the bed with her. "Make wild mechanical love to me!" Simultaneously she sent a wicked thought: *How does it feel to fuck your daughter, Havoc?*

"My love is not mechanical," Havoc said primly, defending his assumed identity. But the fact was she did perfectly resemble his daughter in every physical respect, and in most of her manners and expressions. That put him in a dilemma. Verbal gamesmanship aside, he had never done anything with Weft, Flame, or Voila that was not strictly paternal. Yet Weft had come on to him almost since infancy, and she had become possibly the most beautiful young woman of Charm. As a woman, she was highly desirable.

Also, he had to acknowledge, as a daughter. Even when she was thirteen, freshly developed, and he was bidding her a good night's sleep. She had arranged to flash him with her body on occasion, breasts as she reached down to pick up something from the floor, thighs as she sat down, smoldering glances. And with her passionate mind, sending him feelings of utter abandon heavily tinged with eroticism. Herself floating amidst vapors, her clothing evaporating, her legs spreading to show her genital region in preternatural detail, opening like a blooming flower. He had gotten erections which he hoped she never realized, while pretending indifference. He was after all her father, alert to her childish games. Yet a buried part of him knew that she did realize, and felt a muted victory. She knew she couldn't have him physically or emotionally, but she could make him react despite his resistance. It had gotten worse as she advanced through her teens and learned the arts of seduction. He was the only man of any age she had not been able to seduce at will.

And if the two of you had been caught in a vortex leading inevitably to Void, with no escape, what would you have done with her? Red demanded mischievously.

I'd have clasped her, he admitted.

And she would have given you the wildest physical and emotional sex you could ever have, buttressed by her pure love for you.

Sometimes he had wondered whether it would be feasible to do what Gale suggested, and take Weft no fault to some private place for an hour, a day, or a month of abandonment, exhausting their suppressed mutual attraction in an unfettered inferno. To get it behind them, so that Weft could go on and find her own man, her illicit passion exhausted. It would have been fun—extraordinary fun—and might be effective.

This is new to me, Red thought. Why didn't you?

Several reasons. If he had done it with Weft, Flame and Voila could have been jealous. They did not advertise them, but they had passions too. They might then make their claims, which would be difficult to deny. It was not actual sex they wanted, but equivalent attention. There was also the publicity: news would have gotten out, and he would have been branded a perpetrator of incest. And, worse, it was possible that if he yielded once to Weft's temptation, it *wouldn't* burn itself out, and he would find himself truly in love with her. That was a love he could not afford, for she was possessive, and would act to restrict his other associations. She was a stronger Glamor than he was, and her will would govern. Sex with her would be dangerous because of the chance of its leading to the sheer disaster of love.

Understanding, Red thought. Now I must agree. You can't touch Weft. It could cost you Gale and your mistresses, and be completely unfair to them. They love you unpossessively, and are all outstandingly worthy women.

He gazed at her, for the moment seeing the Red Glamor in the shell of Weft. As the Glamor of Human Beings she had a thorough understanding of human nature, and centuries of experience. The two of them had had sex many times, and she was another wonderfully responsive and unpossessive woman. She was the first one he had revealed his most private thoughts to, and her endorsement of his conclusion gratified him. "Appreciation," he said aloud.

But with me you can have that wild fling, knowing that not only will I keep your secret, but there is no danger of us falling in love. You can plumb me, speak love to me, exhaust your passion, and I will play the role throughout. I don't mind if you see me as another woman; we understand each other, have indulged before as ourselves, and will again as convenient. At the moment we both have other roles to play. I am Weft made safe. Then, aloud: "You may be a robot, but I want you to pose as my father, Havoc."

"Doubt," he said. "That would be incest."

"Technically no. Havoc and I are not related genetically. Only socially."

"Point," he conceded. This was for the benefit of the watching machines. Their grasp of human psychology was limited; they thought that Havoc and Weft lacked only opportunity to complete their shared hunger. Now the two of them could make a performance that would satisfy the machines that their purpose in sending the robot was being accomplished. That Weft was falling for the robot, and would increasingly heed him. So he might persuade her to get her sister to enlist with them. It was a fairly straightforward ploy, on the part of the machines.

"Do me, dad. You know we both want it."

It was a wonderful offer, on more than one level. Weft made safe, as she had pointed out. He really could indulge himself completely with her, without guilt. "Agreement!"

He clasped her and kissed her avidly. She met him more than half way. "I love you, dad. Do with me whatever you want."

"I love you, Weft." He kissed her perfect breasts as she stroked his head and writhed to get the

nipples into his mouth. "But I want what you want."

"Truly?"

"Affirmation."

"Then let me—just a little." She changed position, got him on his back, and put her mouth to his member. "I always thought that if I could just get you like this, I could draw out your power and put it in me. Then I would be strong, like you." She took it in all the way.

Havoc lay there, astonished. Weft had once sent him just such a thought, when she was newly nubile and ferociously jealous of his passion for Gale. Red must have picked it up peripherally as she read his mental discussion. Now she was doing it.

He let it happen. In moments she licked, squeezed, and sucked with such expertise that she evoked his climax. His semen pumped out and down her throat in an intense flow. He felt her climax too; she was reading his feeling, modifying it, and sending it back female. She was swallowing all he had to give.

At last she stopped the stimulation and let him subside. "Now I am replete," she said. "Your essence is in my belly and I will never let it go. It will become part of me forever." And that was the rest of Weft's dream. She had believed that his substance would give her perpetual power, her female body governing his male essence. It was perhaps a foolish notion, but she had definitely had it.

"Now it is my turn, Weft," he said. He revved up his member again and got on top of her. He entered forcefully, as she desired, and penetrated the full depth of her. Her vagina closed tightly about him, squeezing him, manipulating him almost as aptly as her mouth had. Soon he ejaculated again, sending many more pulses into her. They overflowed, squeezing out around his member.

"But I want it to stay in me," she said, almost plaintively.

He knew what she meant. He withdrew, then put his member to her puckered rectum and nudged it in. This was a much tighter fit, and had to be navigated carefully. Then she released her sphincter, gladly admitting him. Once he was fully in her, he thrust again, repeatedly, until he jetted a third time. Now the liquid did not squeeze out; he continued the thrusting and the flow until he had put a relatively huge amount into her.

She kissed him almost desperately. "Keep it coming, dad! I want to fill up like a balloon!" Which was another of her teen images, to receive so much ejaculate that she swelled up, inflated with the divine elixir. At that age she had not quite realized that normal ejaculate was a very small amount. He might have spewed out half a cupful in all, which was more than any normal man could have managed, especially after the two prior efforts.

But finally he had to ease off. Even as a Glamor, he could not send out fluid forever. "Enough," he said, kissing her. "You don't want to wind up with all of me inside you."

"Awww. Then I'd be your mother. You'd have to obey me implicitly. I'd let you out only on holidays, supervised." She tried to close her sphincter, holding him in, and it was tight indeed, grasping him like a vice. It was a trick she must have learned from Ennui, who had once killed a man by

holding him inside her while she bit his throat. The base of his penis was squeezed small, while the rest was larger, the blood trapped in it, so it couldn't pass. But he revved up his potency again, becoming rock hard, forcing her muscle to yield slowly as his member expanded. Now it was a tapering column that was slippery with his own ejaculate, and he managed to pull out past her reluctant aperture. Except for the head, which remained lodged. So he tickled her bottom with a finger. "No fair!" she cried, laughing involuntarily, relaxing for an instant so that he slipped through. This was a forced exit, like a rape in reverse as their wills collided. She truly did not want to let him go.

And Red was playing the role marvelously. She had evidently studied Weft and picked up on her traits. She had never done anything like this with him when being herself, but for Weft it was absolutely realistic.

He lifted himself up and looked at her lovely slender bare body. "I think you are swollen," he said. Actually she looked the same, but this was part of the game.

"Goody!" She sat up and looked at herself. "Yes, I'm bursting. I'm fat with so much of you inside me. It feels so great!" And that completed that little fantasy. Her interest in alternate forms, such as oral and anal, might have stemmed from her desire to evoke a huge volume of his substance and keep it, as could not be done vaginally.

He had called her possessive. This little scene had demonstrated it. She had taken him into her stomach for digestion, and into her colon for absorption. She didn't want any part of him to escape. It was the physical manifestation of an emotional reality.

"I think our time is up, for now," he said, for he heard a stirring outside the chamber.

"Yes. Iolo is back." Indeed the ifrit had been watching the last of their effort. The ifrits knew all about sex, having learned it from men, and participated when invited, though it was not their natural mode of reproduction.

Theoretically Iolo had been in the vicinity throughout, guarding their privacy. But they all knew there was no privacy here. The machines would have recordings of all of it. More important, Iolo had been on a mission of his own, distributing pseudo ikons. These had been secretly developed in the last five years; they had done their best to make sure the machines did not learn of them. The two regular ikons Iolo carried had remained on the floor when he diffused, but the pseudo ikons were formed of ifrit stuff.

They cleaned up, dressed, and rejoined the tourist party. It was hard to judge, but the other creatures did look well satisfied with the interlude.

"This is a popular stop," Ostrich remarked as he rejoined them. He had discretely remained with the floater.

"Didn't your female stay too?" Weft asked.

"She did. But she is conducting another set of tourists. We get together between shifts and make some feathers fly." He paused a moment. "Pheromones are everywhere. It is one of the attractions of this planet." It was a fair warning.

They boarded the floater. The next stop was a lovely array of gardens, with many wildly exotic plants. Havoc wanted to inspect them more closely, but again as a robot he would lack the interest.

"Havoc would really be interested in this," Weft murmured. "Weren't you crafted to resemble him, Ikon?" For in public he remained Ikon, her companion, not identified as the robot but as a separate man.

"I was," he agreed. "I do have a certain interest."

"As do I," she said. "As the Glamor of Bacteria. I'm sure there are some mixed in."

Having made their excuses, they stepped in among the plants, inspecting them closely. They were indeed fascinating in their variety and details.

There was a heated pool nestled among the gardens. "Tourists are invited to swim," Ostrich said. "The water is reputed to have invigorating qualities."

"But we lack swimming suits," Weft protested.

"This is an advantage of being among alien creatures," Ostrich said. "Others do not know your spot conventions, and are not curious about your anatomical details or your physical interactions."

"Good enough," she said, and stepped out of her clothing. Soon she and Havoc and Iolo and Ostrich were all in the water, along with most of the other tourists.

And of course the water was more than invigorating. It was sexually stimulating. They were drawn together to have another session, as were the others. Now Havoc was sure the machines were having some fun with them.

But Ostrich was right: who cared? He drew Weft in and penetrated her standing in neck deep warm water, surrounded by alien couples doing the same. Her body was evocative regardless, and the magic of the water enhanced the effect.

"Oh, dad, it's so great," she murmured, pressing her belly and breasts against him.

The ironic thing was that it *was* great. Her body and joy in the union enhanced the experience. He was sure now that he could never have risked doing it with the real Weft, because even the copy was supremely compelling. She was the perfect woman. Just not for him, in reality.

In due course the tour stopped at a restaurant. This was an open air establishment with an enormous array of foods laid out for self service, so that each tourist could select something compatible regardless of taste. He and Weft had an Earth-style potato salad and steak, with green wine, and all tasted authentic despite being crafted from kegs of amorphous protein. Iolo Ifrit had a dish of exotic leftovers and wine-flavored water. Other tourists were having things that looked like baked swamp bubbles, squashed reptile intestines, spoiled bat blood, and boiling ice cream.

They had changed clothing for the meal, and now Havoc was in a bright blue suit and Weft wore a matching tiara and gown with a very low décolletage. Her sculptured breasts were on perfect display as she leaned forward to gaze into his eyes. She wasn't even trying to seduce him at the

moment, just being her natural seductive self, but he got a fierce erection. She smiled, knowing it. Her hand reached under the table to give his crotch a brief promising squeeze. It was clear that her appetite for his sexual attention had not yet abated.

It was time to change the subject. "You know that free access to this resort and similar ones will be perpetually available to you when Voila enlists," Havoc said earnestly, in his role as Ikon Robot.

"How do we know the machines will keep their word?" she demanded as she took another mouthful of salad.

"Assurance," he said. "Voila will have power, not because the machines will grant it, but because she will assume command of their future seeing. If the machines renege, she will know it before they do, and will prevent it. It will be a continuing deal. She and the machines really need each other for this project."

"Project?" she said sourly. "Wiping out every other living species in the galaxy?"

"Not necessarily. Some will make similar deals."

Weft shook her head. "You really should have my sister on this tour. Maybe she would listen."

"She won't come. None of the far future paths show her here." Havoc was guessing, but it seemed likely, because none of the near or intermediate future paths showed her here, and the war would be over soon, making it irrelevant. "We must influence her peripherally, through her father and sister."

"Not her bother?" Weft was bitterly amused.

"He was approached. His response is in my data bank: 'Fuck off, rust bucket!' We suspect that is negative."

Weft laughed enthusiastically. Even Iolo seemed to smile.

"There is humor?" Havoc asked with a straight face.

"You wouldn't understand. It's not a machine thing."

"I might if you explained it. I have an empathy circuit now."

"Some other time. Meanwhile, please cease the solicitation. It makes it too obvious that your first allegiance is to your own kind."

"My allegiance is to you," he protested. "I am desperate to save you from destruction."

"Enough, rust bucket!" she snapped. "Time to rejoin the tour." For they had finished their meal.

They rose, and walked to the exit. Weft was on his left, because that lane passed by a hidden scanner that would have discovered that Havoc was not a robot. Their joint clairvoyance and near future paths seeing made it easy to avoid such little traps without seeming to be aware of them. The

scanners were simple, unable to discover the difference between living people; there was no suspicion that Weft was not really Weft. The machines were so sure of their control here that they saw no need for more than minimal verification. Maybe that was normally sufficient, but not for Glamors.

The next stop was a broad beach. The sand was shades of yellow, and the sea was deep red, but the effect was pleasant enough. They built sand castles with blue palm fronds for roofs. Iolo dug an endlessly deep hole, providing them with a small mountain of available sand. The sand packed well, and soon they had made an edifice large enough for them to crawl into. Havoc followed Weft inside, seeing her sun suit fall away so that he was treated to the sight of her flexing bare bottom almost in his face.

He moved up and kissed the crevice, running his tongue into the slit. She paused in place, pushing her cleft back at him. "Oh, dad, you really know how to treat a girl!"

Then they were into another bout of sex, as he glued his mouth to her vulva and she came around to consume his member. Her wet orgasm quivered across his face as his ejaculate coursed into her throat again. It was as though the fluid was making a circuit through both their bodies, going around and around.

Sand dropped on them as their motions brought the castle down. They were half buried in yellow, with Iolo looking querulously at them. However, they took time to complete their orgasms before rising naked out of the wreckage and running to the water to swim and rinse off. Iolo dived in with them, swimming while they stood on the packed sea floor.

Even then, they couldn't quite stop. He kissed her breasts while she fondled his penis and testicles under the water. Soon he penetrated her conventionally and jetted forcefully.

"I think this whole shoreline is drenched in hormones," she said. "Not that I'm objecting."

"That explains it," he agreed. "We'd better get back to the tour."

They waded clear of the water. The other tourists were doing the same, evidently having suffered similarly intense stimulation. They kept falling into the erotic trap, but like Weft did not object.

The next stop was an amusement park. Here they got to ride toylike vehicles through assorted scenery ranging from high mountains to deep caves. Iolo accompanied them. And of course in the darkness of the Tunnel of Love Weft was on his lap, bare-bottomed, demanding an offering. She just never stopped—exactly as the real Weft would have behaved.

Havoc did not want to admit it, but he was beginning to think there was such a thing as too much of a good thing.

I read that! she thought. *Just for that I want another filling.* She lifted her bottom off his member, put her hand down to catch it, guided it to her lubricated anus, and dropped firmly down. There was nowhere for it to go but in. Then she clenched rhythmically, milking him, taking in all that he had left to give.

Henceforth he would shield his thoughts more carefully.

You had better, she agreed, turning her face to kiss him hard on the mouth.

She wasn't just amenable, or even eager. She was demanding. Such a sustained barrage of sexual demand by a woman was new to him, and he wasn't sure he liked it. But he kept that thought strictly to himself.

At the end of a long day of sex and sightseeing, they retired to their hotel suite. Iolo had a nice mat on the floor. And of course they had to share a bed, and Weft was constantly on him.

Is this realistic, Red? he inquired almost plaintively.

Affirmation. This is exactly how she would be, given opportunity.

Point made. I will see that she never has opportunity. May we relax long enough to get some sleep?

And step out of character? But she had mercy on him, and let him sleep as long as he remained in close contact with her. Yet when he got a nocturnal erection in sleep, she took it in and worked it for another feeding.

They spent several days on Resort World, indulging in its assorted pleasures. Only Havoc's Glamor enhanced sexual ability got him through. He was relieved when it was time to visit another world. Indeed, he had learned the lesson: he was no longer tempted by the notion of a tryst with Weft. Red had served him well in that respect, truly wearing him out physically and emotionally. Exactly as the real Weft would have done.

They invoked the ticket, and found themselves standing on the roof of a monumentally massive stone building overlooking a buzzing beehive of machine activity. They were in a glassed-in chamber; evidently there was no air on the planet itself. Iolo was intrigued, sniffing the transparent wall.

"Awe," Weft murmured. "This must be a hub."

"Correct," a speaker in the chamber replied. "This is a central planet, where the campaign for this sector of the galaxy is coordinated. It is a staging site for thousands of space ships destined for the reduction of foreign cultures."

"Reduction," Weft said. It was not Havoc's place, as a robot, to maintain this dialogue. "Killing creatures."

"We do not refer to killing in an operation of this scale," the machines voice said. "It is destruction. These ships carry what in your vernacular are referred to as planet-buster bombs. Seeded planets explode and become gravel. In more extreme case, the host stars are seeded, becoming nova, taking out all life in their systems. Only rarely do we invade with small machines to take over governance of a culture, usually for optimal mining of its resources, and it is destroyed when those resources are gone."

"Horror! What did those living cultures ever do to you?"

"Nothing. They exist, therefore they must be destroyed."

"You are destroying whole cultures just because they are there?"

"Affirmation."

"But why?"

"This is the program."

Weft regrouped. "Why are you showing me this?"

"In your vernacular, it is carrot and stick. Positive and negative. Resort World is a carrot: something desirable. Campaign Central World is a stick: something undesirable. We are equipped to destroy your culture, and will do so on schedule, unless the proffered deal is made. We wish to encourage you to facilitate your culture's agreement."

Weft looked at Havoc. "What do you make of this, Ikon?"

"According to my data bank, in medieval times back on Old Earth, when they had a recalcitrant prisoner, they might show him their torture instruments. He knew those instruments would be used on him if he did not cooperate. It was persuasive. This is that."

"Aversion! What else?"

"This is an either/or challenge," he said. "Normally those are suspect. There should be gradients, opportunities for compromise."

"Machines do not compromise," the machine said.

"False. They do what they have to to achieve their ends. Already they have offered to spare the human culture if Voila enlists. That's a compromise."

"It is either/or. She enlists, or you are destroyed."

"Not necessarily," Havoc said.

"This is not a proper robot response." There was a pause as the unit concentrated on the physical nature of the three of them. This time it could not be avoided; they had seen it coming. "You are not a robot. You are the living Havoc, king of the human culture."

"Exaggeration," Havoc said. "I am king of Planet Charm."

"You will be a useful hostage against your daughter's commitment. Our study indicates that she will enlist to save your life."

"Dad," Weft said urgently. "Let's get the expletive out of here."

"They can't hold us, honey. I'd like to learn more about their military capacity."

"It is overwhelming," the machine said, echoing what another tourist had said. "As our captive,

you will see it all. You would have no chance in battle."

"Doubt," Havoc said. "I want specifics."

"Dad," Weft said. "They are gathering an electronic net to prevent us from conjuring ourselves back the way we came. The longer we dawdle here, the tighter it closes."

"Maybe it can hold regular creatures," he said, evincing unconcern. "But we are Glamors."

"Dad—"

Then they verified a connection. A pseudo ikon had come to rest in a suitable location. Just in time, for the machines' net was almost tight. Red had been tracking it while he distracted the machine's attention by arguing.

Iolo had put pseudo ikons onto ships departing Resort World for other sections of the machines realm. Those ikons had had three days to get where they were going. With wormhole travel, that could be anywhere in the machines realm. The net blocked Glamor conjuration to any living culture world outside the machines domain, but not within it. They could go just about anywhere.

Mischief, Red thought. Now I find that the machines tracked Iolo's excursion and learned about the pseudo ikons. They can't stop us from using them, but they have placed capture units in their vicinity. We can't go home.

That was mischief indeed! They could lead the machines a merry chase, but it would in the end be pointless if they were unable to cross into living territory. Their near-future paths seeing had not seen far enough ahead. The machines would be alert for them anywhere near the boundary.

But Idyll Ifrit's intermediate future paths seeing had reached this far. Now her planted message opened in Havoc's mind. *This one.* An ikon was indicated.

Havoc put one hand on Iolo and the other on Weft, ensuring their physical as well as mental linkage. He conjured them to that ikon. Because it was not full-real it served only as a beacon; they could not draw power from it. But Iolo carried physical ikons that would serve.

They were in a warehouse on a near-human-compatible planet. The air was not ideal, but as Glamors they could breathe it, and Iolo was naturally adaptable. Large travel-tainers of goods were stacked, ready for local distribution. Machines were loading them on floaters. These were non-sentient machines, mere tools for brute labor.

Havoc, Weft, and Iolo walked out of the warehouse, passing the laboring machines, and onto the living surface of the planet. Where were they?

The indication is that this is the origin planet, Idyll's recorded thought came. The one you are looking for.

No wonder the machines had not put an interceptor net around this one. How could unimaginative devices have anticipated that Havoc's real goal was their source world?

For on this world should be the answer to why and how the machines had revolted, killing their Makers and setting off in pursuit of the remnant that had fled. Actually he was suspicious of that history, because it had been too conveniently yielded by Shee's junk programming. Had it been put there for them to harvest? Voila had agreed that they needed to verify the situation first hand. If it turned out to be just a story, then what was the real history?

How much time do we have? he asked the recording. *Before they track us and come for us?*

A month. Perhaps more. That is the limit of my perception.

A month! How could the machines have made a mistake like that?

Because they want you here, the recording answered his presumed question.

Havoc stared at Weft, sharing the information. Even Iolo was taken aback. The machines were granting them a free run on their home world? To study and fathom the treacherous tragedy of their origin as a galactic power? What possible sense did this make?

They want you to know, the message concluded. *When you know, they will let you go.*

"I fear we have underestimated the deviousness of the machines," Havoc said. "They are recruiting us to their search for their Makers despite our opposition." Both Weft and Iolo nodded.

"We did not escape here," Weft said. "We were herded here. They believe this will forward their mission."

For here they should learn what the Makers looked like, what their fundamental chemistry was, and what their essential mistake was. How they had allowed their machines to turn against them and destroy them, fifty thousand years ago. For surely it could not have happened without a critically serious error of management. If it really had happened that way. If it had not, then what *had* happened?

And the machines wanted them to know, and to return to their culture and tell the others. This defied explanation. Because the machines had to know that they would never assist them in locating the fled remnant of Makers, if it even still existed after fifty thousand years.

Havoc shrugged, setting that mystery aside for the moment. "Well, let's get on it."

"Agreement," Weft said faintly.

Chapter 21

Ammonoid

Warp.

It was Voila's call, waking him. Marionette still slept beside him.

"Let me be," Warp replied aloud. "I'm still recovering from the Twins sisters. What girls!"

We have a culture to integrate, but there's a complication.

"There always is," he said.

Mollusk culture. Emergency.

"I'm not the Glamor of Mollusks. I'm Fungus. I'd have thought you'd have gotten that straight by now, brat."

The Green Glamor is busy elsewhere. You're the Glamor on call for this sector. Get your rear in gear, warp speed.

He had to do it. He sat up and spanked Marionette's saucy bare bottom. "Gotta go, puppet. She who must be obeyed calls."

Marionette woke. "Well, we have had a week off." She rolled off the bed and made for the bathroom.

Very soon they were with Voila. "Situation," she said briskly. "The Ammonoids are ready to join the Coalition. We need them, though the reason is as yet obscure. But hostiles have abducted the Princess, who is their rightful ruler, preventing her from issuing the protocol. She must be rescued."

"I have to rescue a princess?"

"She is reputed to be lovely, for a squid. Marvelous colors, iridescent shell, delicate tentacles, and not too smart. You should find her irresistible."

Marionette visibly choked off a chortle.

"Why do I have to rescue her? Isn't there a prince, or something?"

"There is, but for obscure reason he won't attempt it. You will have to act in his stead."

"Delight," he said sourly.

"It's a feudal society, with limited magic. Your ikon should work. I have a manual they sent. You will want to study the background detail thoroughly before going there."

"The bleep I will! I just want to get it done."

"I will take the manual," Marionette said.

"It's good to have an adult along," Voila said, handing her the manual. "They lack telepathy, so you can stay in touch that way without sacrificing privacy."

"Just give me the coordinates," Warp said impatiently.

"And to think we call Flame 'Hothead,'" Voila said. "Warp's the true hothead. How can you stand him?"

"I like heat," Marionette said.

Voila gave the coordinates, and Warp took Marionette's hand and conjured them to an available boat. It was pre-programmed for Ammonoid; Voila had of course known he would take the assignment, being able to see farther into the future than he.

They strapped in and relaxed as the boat moved out. Warp took Marionette's hand. The twins had left them both so sexually depleted that this was about as much as he desired at the moment. The twins had been great fun, but Marionette was the one he loved.

"Appreciation," she murmured.

As they traveled, Warp snoozed while Marionette reviewed the manual. She was five years his senior, and there were ways in which she was indeed more mature. He had power; she had responsibility. He needed her.

"Have you picked up on why we need squids in the Coalition?" he asked.

"Negation. But it seems they can significantly help the war against the machines, despite having no space ships of their own. We just have to figure out how."

"What do we call them?"

"Anything convenient to keep individuals straight, as it's all translation of unpronounceable designations. Even calling them king or princess is a stretch; their society is not any analog of any of ours."

"King Ammon-Ra," he said, while she giggled. "Prince Ammon-Ium. Princess Ammon-Ia."

In due course they emerged in Ammonoid space—and there was a machines scout boat.

"Expletive!" Warp swore. "They're all over the place!"

"They are heading away from us," Marionette said. "They may not have seen us."

He checked the near future paths. "But they will. Hang on." It was a superfluous warning, as the boat held them securely in the seats, but he had a certain urge for flair.

He dodged behind the Ammonoid planet, putting it between them and the scout. Then he plunged to intersect the cloud cover surrounding the planet. It was the path that preserved their concealment—the only one.

Immediately below the clouds was the surface: water. They splashed down, sank deep, then floated back to the surface, intact. Their craft had become a sea boat instead of a space boat.

"Clever of you to select water," Marionette remarked, smiling.

"Soft landing," he agreed wryly. As it turned out, Voila was correct: though this planet lacked the Chroma zones of Charm, it did have magic potential, and his ikon was working.

"So what is a machines scout doing in this area?" Marionette asked.

"I fear their far-future seeing told them that the Ammonoids are a danger to them, so they mean to prevent us from recruiting them."

"So if we do recruit them, maybe we should conceal the fact."

He nodded. "It's only a scout, but it could readily summon a battleship to pulverize the planet."

"So we'll try to leave it seemingly un-recruited, so maybe they'll leave it alone for this month."

"That's the idea," he agreed.

Marionette studied a map in the manual. "Dry land at three O'clock, a fair distance."

He resumed propulsion, low level, and moved in that direction. In due course they found it. He beached the boat where his clairvoyance indicated safe harbor.

"The capital town is not far," Marionette said. "On the bottom of the sea."

"Time to become ammonoids," he said.

"Here are the models," she said. "Male and female." she showed him the pictures.

Now he did have to do some studying, because though his magic could change their forms, he had to get them right throughout, internally as well as externally. His clairvoyance was a good start, but it showed mainly *what was*, rather than *why*. There were no squid on Earth or Charm quite like these. Marionette guided him with the manual until he had it.

They went out onto the land. The air was chill and barely breathable, even for a Glamor. He put his hands on Marionette and exerted his magic, changing her to a squid with ten tentacles and a long spiraling shell: an ammonoid. She scrambled into the water. *I'm good*, she thought.

He focused on himself, and became another shelled squid. Suddenly he was drowning in air. He used his tentacles to haul himself into the water. Now he could breathe.

You have the manual? he asked.

In my shell.

He laughed. That didn't come out the way it would have in air, and he inadvertently propelled himself backward as he squirted jets of water.

I am signaling King Ammon-Ra, Marionette thought. The manual has a call button. He will send an escort party to conduct us to the castle.

More details she had picked up from the manual. Warp appreciated again how she took care of him by handling the details he was typically too impatient to tackle. He was bound to get into trouble without her guidance. She was worth so much more to him than just sex.

And don't you forget it, she thought, amused. She was one of Earth's Mistresses, a person of power, and they had been highly sexual throughout, but sex was the least of it. She was simply more woman than any normal mortal was.

While they waited, they practiced. Each had a central stubby tube that jetted water at high velocity, the recoil sending them forcefully away from whatever they were facing. They took in water, then squeezed it with a muscular bellows-like organ. Their shells were elongated, like spires, and blind; they could not see where they were going. Evidently the jets were used to escape predators in front, and it didn't matter what lay behind, as it was open water. If something got in the way of the pointed shell, it would be speared.

Each of them had two giant eyes set outside the nest of tentacles. They were good ones; Warp could see detail that he knew his human eyes would not, in this murky water. They also had mouths with large hard bony beaks. They would be able to crunch shelled bivalves for food.

Then there were the colors. All the tentacles were highly colored, with seemingly infinite hues. They changed constantly governed in part by emotions. Surprise was yellow; annoyance was red. This did not depend on external light; the skin itself glowed.

It is emotional, camouflage, but mainly communication, Marionette thought. *The Ammonoids speak via shifting patterns of color*. Indeed, as she communicated, her nest of tentacles flashed intricately. She almost seemed to disappear behind the kaleidoscopic display.

Amazement, he thought. Sure enough, his own digits turned yellow.

So we must learn locomotion, and color communication, she thought. *And manipulation. Straighten out your tentacles*.

He tried, but they merely writhed erratically. *How?*

Each tentacle is equivalent to one of our fingers. The primary ones are the thumbs. Wiggle your fingers.

He tried, and suddenly the tentacles were responsive to his will. They also turned blue.

That is pleasure and control, she thought.

Well, now. He played with the motions and colors, gaining control. Warp had always been a quick study, which was one reason he seldom felt the need to do homework. Increasingly he was coming to like this body.

The king's escort party arrived: three male ammonoids jetting swiftly through the water. Their long pointed shells led; their tentacles trailed. They came up to where Warp and Marionette waited, and swung neatly around so that their eyes and tentacles faced them. The colors of one flashed brightly.

Flash green, Marionette's thought came. That means agreement. Then follow them.

Warp flashed green. The three rotated as one and jetted downward. Warp and Marionette did the same, following them.

They arrived at the castle. It consisted of long buildings resembling the shells of ammonoids, oriented around a much larger shell in the center. Water seemed to pass freely through them. *It needs to be constantly fresh, Marionette thought. For breathing.*

Oh, of course. No air down here.

They entered one of the tubes and zoomed through the tight pipe. Warp realized that this was ideal for ammonoids, but not for other types of creatures. If there were whales or large fish that preyed on ammonoids, they would be at a disadvantage in these long tubes, if they could navigate them at all. There were probably traps set for unwanted intruders, who would be largely helpless in these tight confines.

They came to the central shell. The escorts jetted out through exit holes, leaving Warp and Marionette alone in the chamber.

Turn Marionette thought.

They both did—and there was the king. He was immediately recognizable by his grandeur. He was larger than the escorts had been, and larger than Warp or Marionette. His shell sparkled iridescently. His tentacles were a royal purple. And he was a Glamor.

Address him, Marionette thought. Turn blue-green to acknowledge his rank, and introduce us. Here are the dialogue patterns. She sent them.

Warp followed her instructions, knowing he was as yet awkward in this mode. He flashed the required colors. "Greeting, King Ammon-Ra. I am Warp, of the human culture, and my companion is Marionette, also human. I apologize for my clumsiness of expression. This mode is as yet new to me."

"Needless," the king replied graciously. "You have come to help, and we will do what we can to facilitate your mission."

"Appreciation. We wish you to join the Living Cultures Coalition, but understand there is a complication." Communication was getting easier, but he still had a way to go.

"Confirmation. We do wish to join, but there is a rebel element that does not. That element abducted my daughter the Princess, who when she marries will become Queen, allowing me to retire. Recover her, and we can proceed."

"This is something you are unable to do yourself?"

"I am unable. As King I am not allowed to expose myself to unnecessary risk. Also, by tradition, the one to rescue an abducted princess must be a prince or equivalent figure. Then he can marry her and become King."

"I am a prince, but not of this culture. Do you have an Ammonoid Prince?"

"We do. But he declines to perform the rescue."

"Question?"

"It seems he was captured by this enemy before, and tortured. This left him unwilling to risk recapture."

"This is understandable. But if he has to be the one, what can we do to help? Could we persuade him?"

"Negation. Even if he tried, he would be so wary as to become useless. He could rule, nominally, but not venture into this particular danger. My daughter would be the actual ruler."

"Then what is our role in this?"

"You must emulate him, rescue the Princess, and bring her here to marry the Prince and become Queen."

"Emulate him? I have trouble emulating any Ammonoid, let alone a specific one, let alone a known Prince. Could I rescue the Princess in my own identity?"

The King's tentacles writhed in a colorful smile. "Not unless you wish to marry her. Your present consort might object."

"She would," Marionette said with muted colors.

"There is a problem," Warp agreed.

"As for emulating the Prince, you as a Glamor do have the ability. All you will require will be a little practice and information on his foibles. We will have a banquet this day, where you can observe him. Tomorrow you should be ready."

So it seemed. But he had another question. "I lack experience rescuing captive Princesses. Do I sneak in, cut through a wall, and carry her out?"

"Negation. The rebel stronghold is too well guarded, and they might kill the Princess rather than let her be rescued by stealth. No, you will have to go openly, as the Prince coming to win her from oppression. They will have to admit you, though they will try their best to prevent you from succeeding. They won't do it openly, because it would give them a bad reputation, but there will be seemingly coincidental impediments for you to navigate. Beware, for example, of the Evil Sorcerer's daughter, Naughty Nautilus, who will try to subvert you. She might even pretend to be the Princess, to trick you into marrying her. That would be politically awkward for me."

"I can take Marionette along to safeguard my virtue."

"Negation. There is no one she could impersonate credibly, and as a non-Glamor she would be in danger as you are not. She must remain here, out of view, until your return. Be assured we will treat

her well."

He wants to hold me hostage against your performance! Marionette thought indignantly *The canny rascal!*

"Agreement," Warp flashed, not completely pleased.

"I have a question," the King said via colors. "We are a relatively primitive society, hardly even aware of outer space. We can't leave our waters on our own. What good can we do your Coalition?"

"We don't know," Warp said. "But our special powers indicate that we do need you. It seems that the machines know it too; they have a scout in this vicinity of space."

"The machines," the King repeated. "I know of them, having been advised by visitors from another culture. But I have not informed my subjects, as there is nothing we can do and the news would alarm them. I prefer that this aspect be kept private."

"Understanding. Agreement. Perhaps it is best that our alien nature be concealed also. We are merely visitors from a far kingdom."

"A Glamor visitor and his consort," the king agreed. "They will assume that you are here to negotiate for the tentacle of my daughter."

"The Prince is not a Glamor?"

"He is not. My daughter the Princess is the only other Glamor in the kingdom."

"If she is a Glamor," Marionette asked, "how can she be held captive?"

The king's tentacles writhed uncomfortably. "The Evil Wizard Naught used treachery to obtain her ikon. He sealed it in a vial, and anchored the vial in a region without magic. That reduced her to mortal status. She was making a state visit at the time; he took her prisoner and holds her hostage. It is a serious violation of protocol, but he is not much of a respecter of protocol. No wizard is."

"Hostage?" Warp asked.

"He wants to marry her, and thus have a claim to usurp my authority."

"But surely she wouldn't let him do that!" Marionette said.

"She may not have a choice. The ceremony is scheduled for next month, once his minions have gathered. She will be drugged."

"But that can't be legitimate."

"It won't be ethical, but the fact of the marriage will swim. Unless you rescue her first."

"I will do that," Warp said. "Do you have any idea where her ikon is kept?"

"Negation. That is part of the challenge of the rescue. You will need to torture a minion into revealing its location."

"This *is* a challenge," Warp said. "I can't handle an ikon. I will have to take Marionette along."

"Negation. Without information she can't help you."

"I can't help myself if there's no one to carry that ikon."

"If you locate it, we can send someone to take it."

Warp suppressed his frustration. The king was evidently set in his ways.

The banquet was quite fancy. Colorful serving girls brought shells piled with raw clams, chopped eels, selected seaweed, and mounds of jellyfish. It actually turned out to be delicious.

Meanwhile Warp and Marionette quietly observed Prince Ium. He was a noble-looking Ammonoid with excellent manners. He would surely make a suitable figurehead king.

Warp was able to explore his mind somewhat. Now he understood the nature of the torture to which he had been subjected. They had tied him down, then slowly burned back his tentacles, one by one, to extract the maximum pain. Ium had withstood that pain, refusing to capitulate. When the last tentacle was gone, they had heated his shell, almost cooking his brain. This was the worst. The tentacles grew back in due course, but the brain was partially destroyed, and that could not be healed.

Then they had released him, knowing he was no further threat to them. It was the Princess who was the real challenge. They couldn't torture her the same way; even though she could not do Glamor magic, she remained a formidable creature. Also, they needed her to be functional, for the time when she would be a figurehead Queen.

It wasn't cowardice that stopped the Prince. It was that he no longer had the mental skills required to operate effectively in a dangerous situation. He would only mess it up, and he knew it. His avoidance of this mission was rational.

He did love the Princess, and with her support he knew he could do well. He knew the standard protocols, and could fulfill them, leaving the real governing to Ia. He didn't mind being a figurehead, considering his limitations.

Warp noted those limitations carefully. He would emulate them to the extent feasible when impersonating the Prince. He would also do his best to win back some respect for the Prince, who was after all worthy.

But still he wondered: what was there in all this that would materially help the Coalition fight the machines? There certainly had to be something, with both Voila and the machines agreeing on it. But what could it be? Warp was baffled.

He got to spend the night with Marionette. They twined tentacles and compared notes. They also rehearsed the Ammonoid way of making love, just in case they should need that skill. Or so they

told each other.

In the morning, which was a schedule rather than any great brightening of the day, Warp set off for the castle of the Usurper. This was a formal mission that the enemy could not decline. Theoretically relations were friendly, and the Princess was merely extending her visit, enjoying the hospitality. The Prince was coming to confer with her. Both would be feted. Then he would depart, while the Princess would elect to visit a while longer.

Warp had hardly started before there was a formidable natural barrier. Fire was burning the field of seaweed through which he had to pass. The flames reached right up to the surface of the sea; there was no way over them.

It was illusion, of course, surely the work of Evil Sorcerer Naught. Flames did not flicker that way in water. As a Glamor he could see through that illusion and know it to be nothing. But he couldn't just walk through them, because other denizens of the sea would believe the fire was real. He had to handle the flames as if they were real, showing no special magical abilities himself.

He explored the situation with clairvoyance and near future paths seeing. Most paths led to his exposure as a magician, and perhaps more. But there was a natural way through.

He found a hillock in the ocean floor and jetted backward, jamming the point of his shell into the ground. Then, anchored, he started jetting water forward toward the wall of flames. The current intersected the wall, and pushed it. He continued, forming a rupture as the flames ballooned in that section, stretching out. Then they snapped, stretched beyond their capacity, for even illusion had limits. There was a hole in the wall.

Warp put his tentacles down and wedged his shell out of the ground. He spun about, and jetted through the hole before the flames could fill it in again. He was through.

But of course Naught would be trying again, determined to stop the Prince before he ever arrived. That was better than having to deal with the Prince's open challenge.

Warp jetted on toward the castle, spreading his awareness ahead. Sure enough, a monster was on the way to intercept him. This was a real one, not illusionary, and represented a real danger. Again, as a Glamor, he could handle it, but a mortal Prince would be in serious trouble. How could he foil the monster without revealing his nature?

He found it. He diverged slightly from the straight route, seeking a private region to expel routine body wastes. That was completely normal and understandable. But he did it where some bitterweed grew. He picked several ripe strands and carefully formed them into a ball. The weed was springy, but he held it tight with several tentacles, careful not to provoke it into releasing its defensive ichor. Then he resumed forward travel, for all that this was actually backward, his shell leading the way.

The monster came. It was a whale, enormously larger than any ammonoid, of a type that normally preyed on shelled creatures. Its huge jaws could crush a shell like thin tissue, and its digestive juices could readily dissolve both flesh and shell. Theoretically the predatory whales had been cleared from this region, but every so often one got through. It would be difficult to prove that this was not random.

The whale spied Warp. It wasted no time. It swooped down, its jaws gaping.

Warp blew the ball of bitterweed into that open mouth. The motion caused the ball to unwind, sending its strands springing out, releasing their reserves of ichor. A cloud formed just within the mouth as the jaws snapped shut.

Warp dodged out of the way, knowing the correct path. The teeth crunched on the bitterweed. That really set it off. Ichor fairly squirted out.

The whale looked as if it had a sudden horrible toothache. It backed off, spitting out the strands. But it was too late, for ichor coated teeth and gums. The bitterness was intolerable.

The whale fled. It would take it some time to clear the horrible taste, and its gums would ache for some time thereafter. Nothing bit down hard on bitterweed. Not intentionally.

Warp made a humorous writhing of his tentacles and jetted on. Two challenges down.

The third was not long in coming. Warp jetted through a seaweed forest and emerged to discover a vast army ahead: hundreds or thousands of armed ammonoids closing in on him. They weren't jetting backwards in the normal manner, they were angling their jets to move slowly forward, watching to make sure he couldn't escape. Their spears looked deadly sharp.

They were illusion, like the fire. But they looked real, and any ordinary person would be fooled. Warp could see through illusion, so he knew their nature. The prince would not have been able to see through them, even if he strongly suspected. And of course hidden among them were a few real soldiers, who would dispatch anyone who tried to brave the illusion. With a hundred attackers closing in, how could the victim know which one was real?

Warp jetted back into the forest, hiding. This was a temporary expedient, as the forest was not large, and the soldiers would soon enter it from all sides and locate him. Then he would have to fight, and if he won, his nature would be known. He would seem to be an alien impostor with unnatural powers, which of course he was. The people would never accept such interference in their politics.

This was the Evil Sorcerer's intention: to expose Warp as the impostor he was. To make it politically unfeasible for him to rescue the Princess. Only the Prince could legitimately rescue her.

He explored the myriad near future paths—and found one he hadn't thought of. This hazard could readily be messed up.

He altered his appearance, assuming the likeness of one of the soldiers, complete with spear. He moved through the forest, orienting on one of the real soldiers. Then he pounced from ambush, stabbing the soldier through a tentacle.

"Target found!" he flashed. "Pretending to be one of us!"

"You're the target!" the soldier flashed, hurting and outraged.

"What nerve!" Warp flashed. "Give it up, impostor, we've caught you."

The other soldiers were confused. The many illusions followed the example of the few real ones, and the real ones were not sure which of the two accusing soldiers was correct. One of the real ones had to get close enough to recognize the two personally.

There was a convergence as a real soldier rapidly approached, mirrored by twenty pretend ones. The twenty so obscured the scene that by the time the real one verified the identity of the wounded soldier, Warp was safely away, lost amidst the hundreds. They would never find him now. He had found the one place to hide that could not be penetrated: their own number.

He worked his way to the back of the throng, then slipped away, unobserved. His awareness of the near future paths enabled him to time it perfectly, when no one was looking. His awareness did not show, so was safe to use, provided he chose the correct paths.

He reached the usurper castle without further event; evidently the Evil Sorcerer had given up on intercepting him.

Now where was the Princess? He clairvoyantly checked the castle, and found a cellar chamber where a lovely female was confined. That would be it.

He went to that chamber, avoiding discovery by guards, and addressed the female. "Princess," he flashed.

"Prince!" she flashed in glad response. "You have come to rescue me!" She was stunningly pretty up close. Voila had teased him about the sexy squid princess, but it was true.

"I have," he agreed. "But we must be careful, lest we be discovered."

"I didn't think you would. I thought you lacked the nerve."

"My lack of nerve has been exaggerated."

"I know the guards' rounds," she said eagerly. "One is due soon; then they'll retire for an hour to gamble."

"That will do." He retreated, avoiding discovery by the "soon" guard. Once he passed, Warp returned.

"There's a loose bar," she said. "I lack the strength to free it, but surely you can."

He found it, and loosened it without undue difficulty. Then he used it to pry out another bar, giving her space to leave the chamber.

They jetted down the passage, and were safely out of the castle well before the guard was due to check the cell again. It was almost too easy.

That alerted Warp. He checked—and found that the Princess was not a Glamor. She was a mortal ammonoid. A fake.

He had fallen for the ruse. He was disgusted.

"Beware—there are more patrols around the castle," she flashed.

He knew; he was watching them with his wider awareness. His problem was more immediate: what to do with this impostor? He knew whom she was: Naughty Nautilus, the Evil Wizard's daughter. The King had warned him about her. Warp simply hadn't been properly alert.

She turned to face him, her tentacles writhing fetchingly, the colors of concern. "Are you well, Prince? You seem confused."

He had to be rid of her, but it wouldn't do to tell her what he knew, because that would reveal his own nature. He had to find a natural way to "discover" her identity. For now he would have to play along.

"I get nervous under pressure," he flashed.

"So you do have some remaining nerve damage," she said sympathetically. "There were horrible stories. I hoped they weren't true."

"They were true. I function, but with limitations."

"You poor thing!" She twined tentacles with him, evincing caring. "You were so brave to come rescue me, after your awful experience."

The odd thing was, she was not pretending. She really did feel for him. "Appreciation," he flashed, out of sorts.

"Would you like me to damp down those dreadful memories?" she asked. "So they won't limit you as much?"

This surprised him in more than one way. Was such a thing possible? And why would an enemy impostor want to do it for him? Curiosity drove him as much as practicality. But at the moment they needed to be escaping, before the guards discovered the empty cell. Assuming that mattered, in this elaborate ruse. "First we need to get well clear of the castle."

"No we don't. The Evil Wizard's minions will be swarming throughout this area, overturning every clamshell. We can't avoid them in the open sea. But I know a place to hide. This way." She jettied away.

He followed, perplexed. What *was* she up to?

There was an old fracture in the rock beneath the castle. They entered this, and found an ancient labyrinth of caves. She led him to a deep one, large enough for them to face each other, and settled to the floor. "No one comes here," she flashed. "It is reputed to be haunted."

"Is it?" he asked, bemused.

"Yes. The Evil Sorcerer put a curse on it, so no one would sneak in and try to undermine the foundation. But I'm not afraid of the curse, and surely you aren't."

"How did you know of this?"

"I overheard the guards talking. They think prisoners are nonentities, destined to be executed eventually, so they don't much care what they hear. I know all the castle secrets." She oriented on him. "But enough of that. We must hide here several hours, until the search dies out in frustration. Now let me take care of those nasty memories." She twined tentacles with him again.

Warp let her do it. He remained curious about her ability and motive. Also, her tentacles were exceedingly soft, shapely, and conducive. He had never before touched limbs like these. Of course he hadn't been in this form long.

"I don't quite understand how this can affect memories," he flashed.

"By overwriting them with better ones," she explained. She tightened her multi-contact grip on him, drew their beaks together, and kissed him. In this species that took the form of clicking beaks gently together, but the effect was just as potent. "Now when you're in a dark dungeon-like place, you will think of this instead of torture." She clicked beaks again.

Warp couldn't help it. He clicked beaks back. Then nature took over. They drew each other ever-closer together until their tentacles were practically knotted, constantly clicking. Then his special reproductive tentacle slid out and pushed into her ready socket, and his seed packet squeezed urgently into her. Her socket closed around it, as his spent tentacle withdrew and the rapture of the climax slowly faded.

They had just had glorious sex. Warp couldn't help this either: he liked her. She was an enemy agent, there to subvert him, but she was a fantastically attractive creature.

"We'll do more of this after we're married," she flashed brightly.

This had gone far enough. He had to unmask her, by seemingly natural means, so he could get on with the business of rescuing the real princess. He did a quick exploration of paths, and found the simplest one to accomplish his purpose.

"That was my greatest experience since before your capture," he flashed.

"Oh? Have you been trying lesser girls in the interim?"

"Naturally not. None could compare to you. Do you remember when I visited the royal castle to court you, and your father made me sleep in a distant cell so I had no opportunity to sneak into your suite? He even had guards patrolling, for my safety, he said."

"Well, he is naturally protective. He's an old fashioned shell."

"But he reckoned without your ingenuity. You know all the hidden ways there as well as here, and you sneaked in to see me, avoiding the guards. Don't tell me you have forgotten that tryst!"

"Of course not. But a lady doesn't bruit such things carelessly about. It would be bad for one's reputation."

"Next day I met you formally, and you gave no hint. You even seemed slightly wary of me."

"I was always good at make believe," she agreed.

"You are some girl, Naughty."

"Thank you." Then her tentacles stiffened. "What?"

"The Princess and I never trusted, though not for lack of trying. The King's minions were too alert. You have to be an impostor, and there's only one who could hope to succeed."

"Poisoned shellfish guts!" she swore. "You knew, and you let me seduce you?"

"You are a highly seductive creature."

"Well, you might as well kill me now, because otherwise I will tell my father, and he will kill the Princess."

"I don't think I could do that."

"Don't tell me that torture made you soft-tentacled!"

Warp was exploring paths, and discovered one that solved most problems. He could have saved himself some trouble if he had seen it before, but it had been beyond his range until now. His effort to conceal his identity and nature had been wasted. "That is impossible."

"They cut off all your tentacles, and boiled your shell! You're lucky you survived at all. I was appalled. I told my father that if he ever did anything like that again, I would go join the King's harem. That set him back, and when he captured the Princess he spared her that treatment. But the damage was done to you. I can't blame you for wanting to destroy me."

"Let me explain. It is impossible, because I am no more the Prince than you are the Princess. We are both impostors."

"You're an impostor? I am outraged! I never would have accepted your packet if I had known. Who the smelly eel-refuse are you?"

"I am an alien Glamor."

"A Glamor! What interest do either Glamors or aliens have in local politics?"

"We want to recruit the Ammonoids to join the Living Cultures Coalition, to fight the marauding machines. The King agreed to do this, if we rescued his daughter. She will become Queen, marry the Prince, and join the Coalition."

"But our world, our culture, has nothing to offer you. We do know of the machines; at least the King does, the Princess does, and my father and I do. We haven't told the commoners; it would only upset them. But we're a medieval society. We don't even have a spaceship."

"You do have something to offer," Warp said, seeing it take shape as the correct paths clarified. "You especially. Our ships need you."

She laughed, multiple tentacles jiggling against his. She was a tease even when not trying to be. "I'm an entertainer. I divert people from their sorry dull lives, so my father can squeeze their remaining sustenance from them. That has nothing to do with space ships."

"That has everything to do with space ships," he flashed earnestly. "You are perfect."

"I may be the perfect mistress, but somehow I doubt that is your meaning. What would I ever do on a space ship?"

"Background: ships can spend long times in space, especially in time of war. We are now at war with the machines. They will completely destroy us if we don't stop them. So our ships never put in to port; they are perpetually on maneuvers, ready to engage the enemy. This means their crews are constantly in danger of death, because the machines are of a higher technology and without decency and will destroy any opposition without mercy. That is hard on living creatures who have to face them."

"Akin to being prisoners," she agreed. "Relevance?"

"They suffer from space cafard. That is boredom, depression, and hopelessness. Occasionally one will snap and go berserk, killing a number of his fellows before being neutralized. This is not good for the morale of the survivors. There is a fair amount of attrition before a ship ever engages the enemy."

"I appreciate that. You need to give them planetary leave to unwind."

"We do. But often the ships are in the territory of other cultures, too far from home. They need diversion on the ships themselves. There are games, holographs, and of course the crews are mixed genders so that social relations occur. But things get stale. We need professional entertainers who will go from ship to ship, providing superior distraction. I have been doing it some, spinning yarns, but more is required. My stories are mainly verbal—that's like colored light communication—but they would be far more effective if buttressed by someone who could form animated pictures, even in the absence of magic."

"Now I appreciate the relevance. You want me and other ammonoid entertainers to go to space. That prospect is daunting."

"The alternative may be death."

"May be? You can kill me any time. You are offering slavery in space instead. That would do for me, but would not be appealing for those who have committed no crimes."

"The machines have a scout in this region of space. That means they are preparing to invade. They will take over the planet, abduct any people who might prove useful to them in any way, though they are not interested in entertainment, mine the planet, and destroy it. If you ignore the threat, you have perhaps months to live."

"And going to space ships would help alleviate that threat?"

"Affirmation. It will keep the crews of the living cultures in better condition, better able to function, so that they may be able to take out more enemy ships. It may not be enough to save your culture or mine, but it will help."

"This is a rationale. How can I believe it?"

"Here is my mind." She was not naturally telepathic, but he projected his surface mind to hers so that she could fathom its nature and sincerity.

"Wonder," she flashed. "I believe. But there is something else." She brought her request to the surface.

He had found her intriguing, and he liked her. The same was true of her. Part of it was the inherent fascination any Glamor had, but more it was their brief experience together. She wanted more of him.

"Yes," he agreed. "Work with me, recruit other ammonoid entertainers to this cause, enable me to rescue the Princess, and I will let you join my troupe so you can be one of my mistresses."

"Done."

"Now about the Princess—"

"She is in another private chamber. But rescuing her will be pointless unless you also recover her ikon."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No."

"Who does know?"

"Only the Evil Wizard. And be assured he won't tell."

"I had hoped to avoid him. But I have to free that ikon."

"Which means you'll have to take him on."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

She considered. "After what you showed me in your mind, and your promise to me, I think not. Talk to him. Explain, as you did to me. Maybe he'll let you have it."

"Doubt."

"In any event, he'll be out hunting for me, that is, the Princess, putting on a show, though he really wants me to go with you, that is, the Prince."

"He does?"

"If I am able to maintain the ruse, emulating the Princess, and you marry me, that's a claim to the throne, which is what he really wants. The King will know better, but might be powerless to prevent it."

"That's an idiot plot."

"It's a *mad* plot. There's a difference."

"Naught's mad?"

"Pretty much. But as I said, you can't reach him now without having to fight off the whole army. You'll have to wait until morning."

He hoped to wait longer than that to encounter the Evil Sorcerer. He very much doubted the man would be amenable to reason, regardless what his loyal daughter thought. "So I must spend the night here with you?"

"That's the idea. And I will be seducing you all the way."

Warp considered. There were worse ways to spend the night.

When the seduction was done, and Naughty was sleeping, Warp reached out telepathically to contact Marionette. *Are you satisfactory?*

I am with King Ra. He's lonely.

Warp was taken aback. *Doesn't he have a harem?*

Yes, but he can't really trust anyone. Any one of those females might be an enemy agent waiting to get him alone. He's a Glamor. They can't hurt him.

He felt her wry smile. *But they might try. That would be politically awkward. They don't know he's a Glamor. In fact, they don't know what a Glamor is.*

So why is he with you?

I'm an alien creature. I have no designs on his throne and am not looking to embarrass him. He can trust me.

And why are you with him?

He is a royal male. And he is a Glamor. I seem to be attracted to the type.

He's old!

He was old when he turned Glamor. Even an old Glamor is special. I'd give your father Havoc a turn if he let me. Any Earth Mistress would, and some have.

Warp shook his head. That translated to a twitching of his jetting spout. *Ludicrous*. She was teasing him, but only to a degree. His father could have his way with just about any woman, and often did. Havoc left Marionette alone purely out of courtesy to Warp.

Naughty woke as the jet of water sprayed across her tentacles. "So eager, again, so soon?"

"Unintentional."

And what are you up to? Marionette demanded.

I'm with Naughty. She's emulating the Princess.

And you're fussing about me, you horny male? she demanded indignantly. *She's neither royal nor Glamor.*

She had him there. *Have a good time with the King.*

I am. He's into me now. It's different from the human body, but the essence is similar. Ooo, that's one evocative tentacle!

"Are you paying attention?" Naughty demanded, twining tentacles with vigor.

"How could I not?" He left Marionette to the King and went to work on Naughty. He knew he had no business being jealous of Marionette's no fault relationships, any more than she had being jealous of his. But somehow it helped to imagine that Naughty was Marionette.

"So ardent!" Naughty flashed appreciatively.

In the morning they went to rescue the Princess. Warp hoped that she would be able to guide them to her ikon, if only by the repulsive effect it had on her.

Naughty showed him the way to a high turret isolated from the rest of the castle. There was the Princess, resting on a platform, using her tentacles to knit a warm blanket from sea moss wool.

"Greeting, Princess Ia," Warp flashed. "I have come to rescue you."

She jumped, startled. "Prince Ium! You came!" Then she saw Naughty behind him. "And the slut is emulating me!"

"A ploy that failed," Naughty flashed. "I will resume my own aspect." She shifted, subtly and unobtrusively, becoming another ammonoid female. She remained quite pretty.

"I need to locate your ikon," Warp flashed. "You should be able to indicate its direction."

"No need. It is here." She indicated an alcove in the wall. There was an ikon shaped like a miniature ammonoid female. In fact it looked exactly like the Princess.

Warp was amazed. "How can it be here? I thought it was securely hidden."

"Where no one would suspect," la flashed. "In plain sight. Here in the turret in the no-magic zone. I can't touch it, and it can't help me. A fiendish ploy."

"Take it into a magic zone," Ward told Naughty.

"I can't do that," Naughty flashed.

"Are you renegeing on our deal?"

"Father won't let me."

"Indeed I won't," another Ammonoid flashed. There, emerging from a curtained closet, was a male Ammonoid.

"Naught Nautilus," Warp flashed, amazed.

"I knew that if you fathomed my daughter's masquerade, you would come next for the real Princess," Naught flashed. "So I lurked here for you. Now I can deal with you directly, Prince."

"Delete it, father. He's not the Prince."

Now it was la's turn to be astonished. "He's not?"

"I am Warp, an alien Glamor."

"So that's why you have the nerve to come here! You're an impostor."

"So it seems," Warp agreed, unruffled.

"Then why are you here?"

Warp explained about the threat from the machines. "So you can obtain no lasting benefit from keeping the Princess prisoner," he concluded. "All you can do is ensure the doom of the entire Ammonoid culture."

"I don't believe it," the Wizard flashed.

"It's the truth, father," Naughty flashed. "He showed me his mind. We have to give the Princess back."

"Never! I won't let you take that ikon. I'm going to marry the Princess and assume control of the kingdom."

"I told you he was mad," Naughty flashed to Warp.

"Take the ikon, Naughty," Warp flashed. "Carry it back to the King's castle."

Naughty went to pick up the ikon.

"So you are betraying me?" the Wizard demanded.

"I don't think so, father. I think you should bargain to gain some advantage. Better a lesser title than the destruction of the whole planet."

"I think not. I think I can have the whole planet, and the Princess as my love."

"Then I have to take the ikon from your control," Warp said. "So that the Princess regains her magic powers. Then you won't be able to force her into anything."

"I think not. I will prevent you. My daughter won't act without my leave, and you can't touch the ikon yourself."

Warp glanced at Naughty. She wiggled a tentacle helplessly. She would not go directly against her father.

So it would come down to tentacle to tentacle combat. The Wizard evidently thought he could prevail physically.

However, Warp was the son of a martial artist, and he had learned from Havoc. He had a natural talent with weapons.

"I can't touch the Ikon. But I can touch you," Warp flashed.

"And I can confound you with magic," the Sorcerer flashed.

"Negation. You have to keep the ikon out of magic, to prevent the Princess from escaping. This chamber is magic free."

The Wizard nodded. "So we must settle this the old fashioned way, by personal combat." He was aware that he would have to deal with Warp his way, rather than try further tricks.

"Terms," Warp said. "I win, you give up Princes, Ikon, and claim to the throne."

"I win, you and your female get off the planet and leave me to my devices unchallenged."

"I don't like this," Naughty said. "The machines will destroy us all."

"So he says," the Wizard said contemptuously.

"You win, father, I still want to get off the planet," she flashed.

"He wins, I'll take you and any other volunteers to space," Warp agreed. "I win, I'll still take you."

"How are you at gauntlets?" the Wizard asked confidently.

Warp did a quick clairvoyant review. "I can handle them."

"There are two sets in the drawer." He flicked a tentacle toward it.

They donned the gauntlets. These were metallic sleeves that fit over the ten tentacles, with interior grips and knifelike outer edges. These could cut off tentacles.

"Winner is the last one with a tentacle left?" Warp asked.

"Correct. We are fighting for the planet, not for our lives."

Warp saw that the Wizard meant it. He was in his fashion an honorable creature. "Agreement."

They moved toward each other. The Wizard was obviously well experienced in this kind of combat, but Warp was a Glamor. It was a fair fight.

Naught struck rapidly with three tentacles, aiming for three of Warp's. But Warp was reading the near future paths, and while he wasn't apt with them beyond the first few minutes, he was quite competent the first minute. He saw the cuts coming, and moved only those three tentacles clear, so that the blade-like gauntlets swished by harmlessly. Then he countered by striking at one of the Wizard's tentacles, while feinting at three others.

Naught blocked the strike and ignored the feints. Evidently he could tell the difference, and did not waste effort on the ones that didn't count. He did know how to fight.

The Wizard struck again, this time simultaneously high and low. Warp saw it coming, and blocked both thrusts while aiming two at the center. Naught readily blocked both. "So you do have some expertise," he remarked.

"I have what I need," Warp flashed. "Are you sure you want to continue? I can injure you at any time."

"Oh? How?"

Warp spied the key path. "This way." He swung a gauntlet at a central tentacle, and a second at a place where there was nothing. Naught blocked the first, in the process moving his tentacle into the path of Warp's second. The blade cut through, and the severed tentacle fell writing to the floor, oozing ichor.

"Nice combination," the Wizard said, and struck with five other gauntlets, a formidable barrage.

Warp avoided three, countered two, and angled a blade in to sever one of the countered ones. A second tentacle fell.

"Naught, cease!" Princess la flashed, moving forward to come between them. "You can't beat him!"

"Two wounds does not finish a fight," the Wizard flashed. "I have other strategies. Clear the way."

Obviously he was no coward, and not one to be daunted by pain or incapacity. Warp stepped

back, letting the Wizard handle the Princess.

"He's a Glamor!" she flashed. "He can see alternate tracks before they occur. I thought he was bluffing, as not all Glamors can do this. I can't. You have no chance. Yield, before he destroys you."

This was interesting. It was almost as if she didn't want to be rescued.

Naught looked at Warp. "True? You can see my moves before I make them?"

"True."

"So my choice is to yield now, or after I lose all my limbs."

"True."

"And forfeit my ambitions, and let the Princess be taken back to marry the Prince."

"True."

"I prefer to finish the fight." The Wizard floated around the Princess, ready to face Warp again.

"No!" Ia flashed. "I will never marry the Prince! You are the one I love." She caught the stub of one of his several tentacles and put her jet to it, cleaning it. Then she put salve on it, stopping the welling.

Surprised, Warp glanced at Naught. She seemed similarly confused.

Even Naught was taken aback. "But you resisted my advances."

"A girl doesn't yield on the first date. I thought you wanted me for my position." She attended to the other tentacle.

"I do."

"And is that all?"

"No. I love you. You are lovely and spirited. But this is a business matter."

"Then get the business done. Propose to me."

Naught looked somewhat helplessly at his daughter. "Does this make sense to you?"

"It could, father, if she has thought it through." She looked at Ia. "Have you?"

"My suitor is the Prince, who is a decent male but lacks the gumption to do the necessary. The male I marry must have the intelligence and nerve to govern aptly. I am beautiful but not smart; I know my limitation. I need a husband who possesses the traits I lack, so he can guide me in governing well. Naught is that male."

"You never gave a hint of your feeling," Naught flashed. "I thought I would have to rape you, after a forced ceremony, to consummate the marriage."

"I didn't know my feeling, until I saw you hurting." She twined several of his tentacles in hers. "And you couldn't rape me."

"Because you would recover the use of your ikon, and have your full Glamor powers?" he flashed.

"No. Because I long for your embrace. Let's get married soon."

Now the Wizard looked at Warp. "You have won the fight, but it seems not the Princess. Will you let me have her?"

What could he do? "If the King agrees. Will you swear fealty to the King, and serve his interests loyally?"

"For the love of Ia I will do even that."

"But what of the Prince?" Naughty asked.

"I can take him to space, an early recruit," Warp said. "If he agrees." Naughty shook her tentacles. "Give me one night with him, and I guarantee he will agree to anything I ask."

They all laughed, flashing colors. It seemed that the crisis had been solved.

Chapter 22

Nexus

Shee was out of sorts. She had to pretend that Ikon was Havoc, to conceal Havoc's absence; he was on a secret mission. That meant sharing the royal mistress suite with Ikon, having sex with him, and so on. Shee hated that. It wasn't that Ikon was a robot; she was one herself. It was that he wasn't Havoc. She could associate freely with others, but pretending to love him was a considerable turnoff.

The Red Glamor appeared. "Looking for mom, routine," she said.

"For Gale," Shee murmured, spreading a local aura of privacy. It was one of the Glamor talents she had gained. This Glamor was Weft, the only one who referred to Gale as "mom."

"Expletive! I slipped. I'm distracted."

"Gale is busy with a mission. Monochrome is on Earth. I'm the mistress of the moment, Weft. May I help?"

Weft considered. "Maybe you can. Don't you hate it?"

Ah. "Bedding a pseudo Havoc? Yes."

"I finally come to terms with loving a robot, and then he has to make out with three other glamorous Glamors."

"Four. He has occasional business with Idyll."

Weft grimaced. "And you know, I don't much like dad getting it on with Red, when she's emulating me. She'll be exaggerating shamelessly, making me seem like a possessive sexpot."

"That is the point, isn't it? To turn him off you?"

"Agreement. But still it gripes me. If anyone is to turn him off me, it should be me personally."

Shee laughed, and Weft joined her, ruefully.

"Idea," Shee said. "Could you emulate me?"

"And be with Ikon? Delight! But you'd have to emulate Red."

"For long enough to conceal the exchange," Shee agreed. "Then I could relax. I'm still figuring out my powers."

"Let's do it."

They hugged, and turned as a couple, and separated—as each other. Shee now resembled the Red Glamor, and Weft resembled Shee. Impersonation was another Glamor art Shee was perfecting.

Ikon entered the room, as Havoc. "Routine public appearance, Shee," he said. Then paused. "Greeting, Red. Were you looking for me?"

"Looking for Gale," Shee said. "But she's not here."

"She will be back within hours," Ikon said. "Meanwhile the routine continues. Ready, Shee?"

"Not quite," Weft said. "I want a tryst first."

He looked pained. "This really isn't necessary at this time, Shee." He wasn't any more eager to be with Shee than she was with him.

Weft whispered in his ear. His eyes widened. He looked at Shee. Shee nodded: it was true that he now held Weft.

His manner changed. "If you will excuse us, Red." He bore Weft toward the bed. Their clothing was coming open or off, baring the essentials as they madly kissed and stroked each other.

"Excused," Shee said belatedly, and departed by foot.

Ennui looked up as Shee entered her office. "Red?"

"Shee," Shee murmured. "Weft swapped out with me."

Ennui smiled. "That is so much better for both of you. And just as well. Idyll wants to see you privately."

"On my way." She conjured herself to Counter Charm.

Idyll was fully formed and expecting her. Near or intermediate future seeing was outside Shee's ability, but she was becoming used to it in other Glamors. "Shee," she said.

"You are a nexus. It is intensifying. We must fathom its relevance within ten days, or suffer grievously."

Shee spread her hands. "I will help if I can. But I have no awareness of this aspect of me."

"Comprehension. Gale and I will join you on a trip to Earth to see Monochrome."

Shee was taken aback. She had never known of the ifrit Glamor leaving her planet physically. "I may be a nexus, but am I worth the diversion of three Glamors?"

"Affirmation. This is huge."

"Then I will cooperate in any manner I can."

"Assume the aspect of a mortal tourist." Idyll was already shifting her own appearance, becoming a black haired young woman in modest apparel.

Shee shifted to assume the likeness of a blond woman, similarly modest.

"We are not being observed," Idyll said. "But we may be watched, once we board the shuttle. Remain in character."

"Concurrence."

They took hands and conjured to the shuttle station near Pyramid City. There a brown haired young woman with a six legged dog joined them. *Gale*, she thought. *And an imprint of Iolo Ifrit. The original's with Havoc.* Shee was not yet telepathic, but could receive thought directed at her. *I have tickets.*

So Gale had completed her mission, but not reported to the royal office. She was keeping her identity private.

"How could you afford tickets?" Idyll asked.

"Deal," Gale said. "They are breaking in two new minstrels to abate space cafard aboard the chronically cruising ships. We will teach them a repertoire of familiar songs and plays."

"Question," Shee asked. "They did not hear those as children?"

"They are aliens the Glamor Warp recruited."

Oh.

"And?" Idyll asked for the benefit of anyone overhearing.

Gale affected slight embarrassment. "And we will, uh, lend our favors as necessary."

"You signed us up as whores?" Idyll demanded.

"No fault comfort companions," Gale said defensively. "Tickets are hard to come by."

"I understand the men do get lonely after months in space," Shee said, forcing a flush as if not at all comfortable with the situation. Idyll just shook her head, not completely mollified.

They boarded the shuttle in due course, along with other tourists, playing the roles of three anonymous women. There was a fair tourist trade, as Earthers visited Charm and Charmers visited Earth. There was a war on, but appearances were maintained so that the populace was not unduly alarmed.

The shuttle docked at the ship, which was a huge Earth naval vessel, one of the type that cruised the vicinity. They boarded via the merged airlocks, in the line of tourists.

Idyll looked at her ticket. "I don't see our cabins listed," she said.

Gale looked abashed. "We have none. We must share with the men."

Idyll glared at her. "Indignation!"

Shee joined the act. "Had I known, I would not have been so ready to agree to this tour."

"Apology," Gale said, with a somewhat hangdog look. "When you spoke of abating space cafard, you really weren't fooling," Idyll said. "Only you didn't say that *we* are the entertainment."

"Mortification."

"Oh, let her be," Shee said. "She did what she had to do. It isn't as we haven't traveled no fault before."

Idyll shrugged. "I suppose we might even have a little fun ourselves. Promise not to tell anyone back home."

"We promise," Gale and Shee said together.

No one would have known them for three Glamors. That was the point of such dialogue.

The ship's Mistress intercepted them. She was of course a lovely woman, reminiscent of Marionette by no coincidence. All the Mistresses had similar qualities and training. This one was the real governor of this ship, though Shee knew she never gave orders as such. "This way, please,

ladies." If she knew their identities, she gave no sign. "I will see to your dog." Iolo obediently joined the Mistress.

Soon they were introduced to the two alien minstrels. One was a young man in costume name Ium, the other a young woman in a revealing dress, name Ia. There was a certain peripheral flashing of lights. "Greeting, ladies," the man's translation unit said. "Echo," the woman's unit said.

Something was odd. Shee suspected illusion, but there was none. Then she got it. "You're pictures!"

"Agreement," the male's translator said. "Here are our real forms."

The human figures faded, and there were two masses of writing tentacles. "Ammonoids," the female's translator said. "Like your Earth squid, but with shells."

It turned out that the Ammonoids had long pointed shells extending back into a chamber filled with brine, their natural habitat; only their open front portions were visible. They had amazing control of the colors of their skins; they could make pictures crossing the tentacles, that remained in place even when the tentacles moved, as though the images were being projected from some other source. When they projected their human images, their real bodies were masked, and tended to disappear.

They were eager to learn the songs. The three women knew them all, and sang them. The Ammonoids picked them right up and sang them back. It was via the translators, but soon that aspect seemed to fade too, and it was as if they were talking directly. They were certainly apt entertainers.

"Curiosity," Shee said at one point. "You, Ia, appear to be human, a pretty girl, when you try. Suppose some man in the audiences, maybe one who has been drinking an alcoholic beverage, tries to get fresh?"

"I would wrap my tentacles around his limbs and hold him firmly until he ceased," Ia said. "I have no flesh that a human man could copulate with."

That seemed to cover it. Shee was sure the Ammonoids would put on some great shows for the crew. It might be complicated setting up their brine chambers, but not as complicated as having berserkers result from space cafard.

In the evening shift the three tourists were assigned cabins to share according to a roster determined by the Mistress. Shee found herself naked with a husky young Earther who eagerly clasped her, penetrated her, and spurted into her before gasping "Thank you, ma'am." Evidently he knew nothing of the arts of love.

They don't, Idyll's thought came. Idyll could reach her regardless of her lack of telepathy, perhaps because she was not exactly a living creature herself. *But they mean well and they're not bad people. See what you can do with him.*

So she wasn't through with him. She talked gently with him, evoking his life history, including the girl left behind who had then married another man, giving him no reason to return to civilian life. But he missed having an understanding companion. She listened, kissed him, mounted him, and brought him off in a slow second climax. "Oh, ma'am!" he said appreciatively. "Oh ma'am, oh ma'am! I never had

it like that before!"

"You did not have a girl who truly cared for you," she said. "You can surely find one, if you look."

"Where?"

"On this ship, perhaps, if you look beneath the surface." She spread her awareness, searching, and found women who were similarly lonely yet hesitant. They did exist.

He laughed somewhat bitterly. "They all got handsome men waiting back home."

"Let's see." She spoke into her communicator. "Mistress."

The Mistress appeared, accompanied by Iolo, who seemed to like her. Mistresses were virtually by definition likable. "Problem?"

"Is there a female among the crew of this ship who would like to share the embrace of this man?"

"Several."

"Naw," the man said, disbelieving.

"They are not beauties," the Mistress said. "But they are fit and long for sexual and even romantic appreciation."

"Bring one, please," Shee said. "Perhaps—" she concentrated to evoke the name. "Dulce."

The Mistress glanced at her, surprised. "Yes." She moved away. Iolo followed her.

"You're fobbing me off!" the man said.

"Negation. Try her, and if you are unsatisfied, I will return. The difference is, I am here only for a night. She can be with you the whole tour, if you both wish. She is a better bargain."

"Naw." But his objection was fainter.

The Mistress brought her. "This is Dulce." Then, to the woman: "You know what to do."

"I sure do." Dulce stripped and took Shee's place on the man's bunk. She was a buxom woman, slightly heavysset, with plenty of the kind of flesh men liked. "Come on, you hunk; I've been wanting to do this with you a long time, but you never even looked at me."

"I didn't know—" He didn't finish, because she was kissing him.

"You got a great body," the woman said. "Muscles. I like that."

"I—she took my edge off. Twice. I can't—"

"The hell you can't." She wrapped herself around him, pressing her generous breasts against him as she squeezed his bottom. Sure enough, soon he could.

Shee departed with the Mistress. "Obviously you have had experience," the Mistress remarked.

"He's a good guy. He deserves a woman."

"Indeed. Are you ready for another?"

"Affirmation." And soon she was wrapping herself around another man. There was indeed a certain pleasure here, not really sexual, but in being so thoroughly in control. She was making these lonely men very happy in a very short time. She liked that.

By morning she had done it with five men, and placed three of them with compatible female crew members. Men, however bold in battle, could be shy or simply stupid about romantic approaches. She had never climaxed herself; for her it had been good practice of her Glamor talents.

The three got together for breakfast. The Mistress approached, with Iolo. "You are not the backwoods lasses you seem," she said. "You have expertise rivaling mine."

"We are anonymous," Gale said.

"Accepted."

"We are Glamors on a private mission. The dog is an ifrit."

"Ah, now it falls into place. Appreciation. You have done my men much good in this time of stress."

"Men need women," Gale said. "They think they need sex, but they need women."

"Affirmation," the Mistress agreed.

The trip lasted three more days. They did a number of additional men good. Between times, they conferred, helping Shee develop her talents. She was just beginning to get telepathy, with Idyll's help; it was a matter of orienting correctly on living minds the way she did physically with the living men. She was improving on clairvoyance. She could handle emulation. But near future paths seeing balked her.

"I don't think it's possible," she said. "I am wired for far future seeing."

"You aren't what you were wired to be," Idyll reminded her. "As a Glamor you leave machine limitations behind, just as living Glamors leave life limitations."

"Hope," Shee said.

In due course the ship orbited Earth, and they collected Iolo and took the shuttle down. A traveling capsule whisked them off to rendezvous with Monochrome. "I still doubt that my quality as a nexus warrants taking Monochrome's time, let alone yours," Shee said.

"Warranted," Idyll replied.

Monochrome met them privately. She too was masked, with none of her monochromatic or Glamor nature showing. Now her hair was pale brown, and her eyes similar. No one would take her for the ruler of the Planet Earth. "I know a theme park," she said.

They went to the northern portion of the double continent of America, and to the central portion of an attached peninsula. There was a large amusement park, recreated in the approximate image of one existing a thousand years before, with walkways, rides, and spot entertainments. They were now four anonymous women on vacation.

They started simple, boarding a miniature touring train that clattered on its track in a circuit of the complex. All the other entertainments were revealed in the course of that circuit, by no coincidence. But their attention was nominal. They were focusing on Shee, with Iolo alert to warn them if any other tourists became too interested in their dialogue.

"You're right," Monochrome said. "She is a nexus, and it is intensifying. But what is her focus?"

"We have perhaps three days to find out," Idyll said. "It is within my ambiance, but beyond my immediate perception. Extremely powerful."

"Let's see whether we can pool our resources," Gale said. "To obtain better definition. I will try to share the enhancement provided by the calculating plants."

They took Shee's two hands, each of them putting two hands on hers. They concentrated.

"It is coming," Idyll said. "Five days hence."

"What is coming?" Shee asked.

"It slipped away," Idyll said, disappointed.

"Let's enjoy the park," Gale said. "Then return for another siege, maybe at a different angle."

"At least we have confirmed our approach to the nexus," Monochrome said. "It is well worth our full attention."

Shee did not comment. She still doubted that she could be all that important, except in some negative way.

They completed the ride and went to the Horror House, where simulated spooks menaced them. It was childishly transparent, but fun on its level.

Then they took a boat on a simulated river. The first portion was idyllically calm. The second portion was the rapids. They clung to the handholds, laughing giddily as they got soaked by spray. It plastered their shirts to their fronts, attracting some covert male glances.

More fun, Gale thought, inhaling.

Then, drying off in a private chamber, they tried again. This time the other three stood on three sides of Shee, wrapping their arms around her body, putting their heads close to hers. This time she felt the aura of their Glamor-hood, intersecting hers.

"Earth!" Monochrome exclaimed. "It impacts Earth!"

Then Shee found the track. "It destroys Earth!" she said, horrified.

They refined it, and at last had it complete: Shee was a nexus because her powers added to theirs enabled them to anticipate the deadliest threat ever to come to the planet.

Earth was doomed.

They wrestled with the revelation while they enjoyed another model touring scenic train excursion, but it was too complicated with the distraction of the ride. "I would like to see more of natural Earth," Shee said. "Entertainments are fun, but we have them on Charm too. We don't have Earth forests."

The others were quick to agree. When the train came to its next station, in a model countryside, they got off and followed Iolo along a path leading into a model pine forest. The ifrit avidly sniffed the trunks of the great trees, playing his role with enthusiasm.

They found an isolated park bench and sat down for some serious discussion. They linked hands and concentrated again on the intermediate-future vision, guided by Idyll's ability, enhanced by Gale's.

This time Shee oriented most accurately on it. "A ship sent by the machines," she said. "A drone. With I think explosives. Set to impact Earth and detonate. Blowing it apart. Killing all. This must not be."

"Certainly it must not be," Monochrome agreed emphatically.

Shee glanced at her. "Apology. I was thinking of my constituency."

"Not of the death of all folk aboard the planet Earth?"

"That too, of course. But I am the Glamor of Matter. It wants to be whole. Blowing a planet apart makes it un-whole. This can not be tolerated. I must find a way to protect it."

"Our purposes seem to align," Monochrome said somewhat wryly.

Gale was practical. "How do we stop it?"

"Caution," Idyll said. "First we should fathom why the machines sent it."

"Obvious," Gale snapped. "To take out the heart of the human culture, reducing our ability to stop their invasion."

"Not necessarily," Idyll said. "This is not the way they have gone after other cultures. They normally send scouts to explore the region of space, and plant agents on the occupied planets,

gathering information. Then they invade and take over the planets, exploiting their resources mercilessly. The machines do not believe in waste. To blow Earth apart unexploited would be a phenomenal waste. Why should they do it? It can't be because they fear Earth's military forces. They can take Earth whenever they choose. They merely are waiting until it is most convenient for them."

Monochrome nodded. "How would Voila react to the arbitrary destruction of Earth?"

Gale smiled without humor. "It would end any chance of her enlistment with the machines. She has friends here, like you and Caveat."

"And the machines surely know that," Monochrome said. "Since they want her more than they fear Earth, why should they destroy Earth before she decides? It doesn't seem to make sense."

"What the machines do always makes sense," Shee said. "On their terms."

"Now I see the point," Gale said. "We need to understand why the machines would do something so counterproductive to their interest. Merely stopping the missile will not suffice; they could send another, or a fleet of them, overwhelming us."

"This was my thought," Idyll agreed. "We need to stop it, but first we need to understand it. It is dangerous to underestimate the machines."

They looked at Shee.

"And I am a machine," she said. "But I do not understand this. Perhaps I have become too humanized."

"You have far future paths seeing," Idyll said. "What does it show of Earth?"

Shee looked. "Amazement! Earth exists!"

"Problem," Idyll said. "Earth is destroyed. How can be be destroyed in the intermediate future, yet exist in the far future?"

Shee spread her hands. "I do not know. But it definitely exists, and not as a mock-up or recreation. It is never destroyed."

"Bluff?" Gale asked. "Threatened destruction that will be canceled at the last moment?"

"Negation," Idyll said. "I see a thousand paths, and virtually all of them show Earth destroyed within five days. We can't ignore this threat; it is real." They paused, mulling it over.

"Maybe we are too close to the problem," Idyll said. "Iolo."

Iolo turned from the brush he had been exploring and ran to join them.

"My intermediate future seeing shows Earth destroyed in five days," Idyll said. "Yet Shee's far future seeing shows it existing undestroyed. How can this be?"

"Same way that Voila beat Mino," Iolo said. "The far future shows the predominant courses, but the prior future can change them to the least likely ones. Earth may be doomed on ninety nine tracks; you move it to the one track where it survives. The far future paths reflect that decision. The near future paths don't."

They exchanged glances. "Thank you, Iolo," Idyll said. "You have clarified the obvious for those of us who were too complicated to see it."

"Welcome," Iolo said, and returned to the brush.

"One question remains," Idyll said. "Given that the machines know that Earth will not be destroyed, why have they sent the missile? Why waste their effort?"

"Why did they send Shee, and Ikon?" Gale asked. "It is part of their campaign. They are pushing us, making us react. Nominally those robots are here to persuade Havoc and Weft to talk Voila into enlisting with them, but also they are showing us their power. We have no machines to match these two. The Earth space ships are but clumsy contraptions in comparison. Even Mino, who was made and sent by the machines, is comparatively primitive. The humanoid robots are positive, but are showing us what a negative machine could do. That missile is another warning."

The others nodded. "We have fended off or nullified the machines' ploys so far," Idyll said. "But I suspect they haven't really been trying. Now they are pushing more strongly, in a measured manner. It is surely part of their standard operating procedure."

"Turning up the heat," Monochrome said. "And we are forced to respond. In the process not only do the machines warn us, they learn more of what we are capable of. We have to think seriously about accepting their offer."

"In a pig's rectum," Gale snapped. "Voila will never accept."

"That depends on the paths," Idyll reminded her. "Voila is frighteningly rational." That, from the ifrit, was itself a frighteningly rational statement. Shee suspected that she, as a crafted robot, was more human in outlook than Voila.

"Now all we have to do is find the way to stop that missile," Gale said, changing the subject.

"This is surely why we have Shee along," Monochrome said. "She understands machines. The drone is a machine."

"I'll try," Shee said. "I will need to touch it. That means intercepting it before it reaches Earth."

"Which is why we have Iolo along," Idyll said. "You and I can carry him to the drone with our ikons, leaving the others to enjoy the amusements of the park."

"We had better develop a schedule," Monochrome said. "Timing is essential when rendezvousing with objects in deep space."

They put their hands together again and explored the paths. "Tonight," Idyll concluded.

"Which means we have several more hours to fritter away here," Gale said. "But I am getting bored with rides and sights."

"Something interesting this way comes," Monochrome said. "In the next ten minutes or so. A passel of men. Foresters."

"Lumbermen," Gale said. "Strong sweaty types."

"Trimming back encroaching branches along the paths," Shee said. "Clearing fallen trees."

They exchanged another glance. "Why not?" Idyll asked. "Those men on the ship were fun in their unrehearsed naked passion. It's a pleasant change of pace."

"My genuine passion is limited to Havoc," Shee said. "We participated on the ship to earn our passage, and because the men truly needed comfort. Why should we waste ourselves on these?"

"We all love and desire Havoc," Monochrome said. "But he is away plumbing Weft, or reasonable facsimile thereof. We might as well keep our reflexes sharp."

"Weft," Gale echoed darkly. "She is my daughter, and I love her, but I wish to expletive she'd get over Havoc."

"She will, as she comes to love Ikon," Monochrome said.

"Will she really love a machine?" Idyll asked. "My vision of those paths is smeared."

"If Havoc can love Shee, Weft can love Ikon," Monochrome said firmly. "Havoc says he does," Shee said. "And each of you."

"Five minutes to the lumbermen," Gale said. "Are we agreed? There are four of them. Just right."

"Negation," Shee said. "I see no point."

Now the other three considered. "You are too strait-laced," Monochrome said. "You need to unkink."

"Proposal," Gale said mischievously. "A contest. Which of us can bring our man to climax the most times in one hour. No enhancing allowed. Just bodily wiles."

"What is the prize?" Monochrome asked. "Just to make it interesting."

"What else?" Gale asked. "The first to have Havoc when he returns."

"Interest," Idyll said. "For how long."

"One day."

"Done," Monochrome and Idyll said together.

"And the second place woman gets him for the second day," Gale said. "And so on."

"Agreed," Monochrome said.

Then the three looked at Shee.

"You bitches," Shee said. "Of course I have to compete for that."

"We'll start nude," Idyll said. "With our own bodies, only our faces masked. I will present us. We will let them choose partners."

They stripped, stacking their clothing under the park table. Then they lined up, wickedly exposed: four of the most beautiful women in the human/ifrit culture.

Just in time, for the men were coming into sight down the path. Four rough-hewed workers girt with the tools of their trade: small saws, axes, clippers, gloves.

They halted, amazed, as they spied the women. "Am I hallucinating?" one man asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Or did a tree fall on us and we died and went to heaven," another said.

Idyll took a deep breath. So did the others, not to be outdone. "We are four lonely nymphs of the forest," Idyll said. "We appreciate your loyal work to keep it nice, and will reward you for an hour. Then we will disappear, for we are not truly of your realm. Are you amenable?"

The men paused, uncertain whether this was a vision or a joke. Then their leader shrugged. "Sure. What can we lose, even if they're fooling."

"Each of you will strip and choose one of us," Idyll said. "Then you may do with us as you please."

The men looked at each other for reassurance. Then they stripped, setting their tools on top of their clothing. All of them had full erections. The women would have been disappointed if they hadn't.

"You," the leader said to Idyll, licking his lips.

"Take me, handsome." Actually the man was homely, but the point was to charge him up.

He did, and in moments they were on the ground going at it, he thrusting vigorously, she spread wide. Men of this class simply were not known for subtlety. The others took the other women and did likewise.

Shee wound up with the smallest of the men, but he made up for it in passion. His first voluminous orgasm was in seconds, and his second more modest one in minutes, ahead of the others. She teased him into a third performance, but that took fifteen minutes and was less robust, barely two spurts, and she had to invoke her breasts to amend the stimulus. Finally, as the hour neared its end, a fourth, orally induced, a trickle, leaving him blissfully exhausted. "You're some woman!" he gasped. "I never did four before."

"Nymphs are special," she said, kissing him. She had the lead!

It was a good total. But Monochrome, the most thoroughly experienced, soon tied the score, then evoked a desperate fifth effort from her man in the last minutes, and won. Shee was second.

As the hour finished, they disengaged, thanked the men for their valiant efforts, and disappeared, literally. Invisible and inaudible, they fetched their clothing and departed, leaving the men bemused and surfeit. They really did seem like evanescent forest nymphs. The men would have a story no one else would believe, especially their wives, fortunately.

"That was fun," Monochrome said as they dressed, alone. "Takes me back to my apprentice days, decades ago."

"You won," Shee said. "But I have to confess that the challenge did make it worthwhile. I had to struggle to get him stiff again, the last two times. I was really cheering for his penis."

"You may have Havoc the first day," Monochrome said. "I think you need him more than I do, at this time."

"Appreciation!" For Shee really was desperate to be with Havoc again. He enjoyed being with any attractive woman, but she had little sexual use for any other man.

"Reminds me of the ancient saying," Gale said tolerantly "A man's wife is his better half. His mistress is his better hole."

They laughed, acknowledging their roles as wife and mistresses, then went for more rides until evening. This companionship was pleasant, and Shee appreciated being included. Sexual jealousy hardly existed among Glamors, and of course they all understood about loving Havoc.

When the time came they got together and focused on the drone. It was closer now, and they were more experienced in the joint effort. They got a fix on it, and Shee joined hands with Idyll, who carried Iolo, and they conjured to the missile.

It was brightly lighted by the sunlight. Shee was surprised, then realized that though they had departed Earth at night, that was purely a phenomenon of the rotation of the planet. Out in space the sun's illumination was unfettered.

They hovered next to the drone, not needing air or gravity, because they were Glamors and also independent of such things. Iolo was not comfortable, but did not complain; their ikons lent him strength.

The drone was a huge sphere, the size of a space ship, a featureless expanse of metal. It was hurtling at a velocity that would rip a hole in Earth just from the impact, and generate a horrendous explosion of rock. But that could hardly be the whole of it.

Shee nudged to it, and put her hand on the surface. And was horrified.

Question? Idyll asked in her mind.

Two things. This was a guided missile, but once it left the wormhole and oriented on its target, the controls fused, making it dead. It can't be diverted or halted; it is an inert missile. There is nothing for me to change.

So it will strike Earth?

Yes, unless knocked aside by an external force. A ship could fire a missile at it. A small deviance would cause it to miss Earth.

Idyll shook her head. There is no ship in range to do that before it strikes Earth. We have to stop it ourselves.

We can't. It is too massive for us to affect.

Can we detonate it before it strikes?

Negation. There are no explosives in it.

What is the other thing?

Shee disliked saying what she had to say. The core is not ordinary matter. It is contra-terrene. CT. Supported by a strong magnetic net so there is no contact with the shell.

Idyll hesitated. I have no experience with this. What does it mean?

When the drone strikes the planet, the terrene shell will vaporize and expose the core. When ordinary matter touches contra-terrene matter, the result is mutual annihilation. Total conversion to energy.

That would blow Earth apart!

Affirmation.

We must report.

They conjured themselves back to Earth.

"The news is bad," Monochrome said.

Shee quickly caught them up on the situation.

"No explosives—but the whole thing is the worst kind of explosive," Gale said.

"There is no more powerful detonation," Monochrome agreed.

"So what do we do about it?" Idyll asked.

"Could Earth fire a missile to intercept it?" Shee asked.

"We lack that type of technology here," Monochrome said. "We try to keep Earth peaceful."

"There has to be something!" Gale exclaimed.

"We knew there's something," Idyll said. "Because the far future path shows we do manage to stop it."

Shee concentrated. "There may be something. I think—there is a Glamor talent—that I alone can evoke."

"That will divert a dead missile?" Gale asked.

"No. Not exactly."

"Let us help you work it out," Idyll said.

The others took her hands again, and they all joined their minds together. Slowly the concept clarified.

"Oh, my," Monochrome breathed. "That *is* different," Gale said. "But if she can do it—" Idyll began.

"I think—with your support—I can," Shee said. "It is a function of matter, my clientele, but too new for me to be sure of yet."

"Just being a Glamor is still new for you," Monochrome said. "It will take years for you to discover your full potentials."

"We don't have years, or even months."

"Which is why we are here to assist."

"And this will require considerable assistance," Idyll said. "You are discovering how to make a wormhole."

"Not to find it, but to create it," Monochrome said. "That is different in ambition as well as detail."

"A wormhole in front of the drone," Gale said.

"So that it plunges in and is transported elsewhere," Idyll said. "Do we have any idea where?"

"No," Shee said. "What I see is that space is riddled with small fractures, cracks, and stress points. Maybe some are collapsed wormholes of bygone eras. If I can wedge into one, expanding it into full existence, of sufficient size—it won't even have to be permanent. Just there long enough."

"Like a tight woman," Monochrome said. "We need to open her up. Make her a better hole for that thrusting drone."

"I could have survived nicely enough without that analogy," Gale said, smiling.

"Fortunately none of us are tight," Idyll said. "At least, not tighter than we want to be."

"We none of us are loose enough for the drone," Monochrome said. "Idyll could be, if she diffused," Gale said.

"Diffusion is dangerous in space," Idyll said. "We need air or water to support our particles. Otherwise we lose coherence."

"Space is tight," Shee said. "It is fraught with energy, and will require much force to disturb its network. I don't think I have enough."

"But the four of us together may have enough," Monochrome said.

"Let's see whether we can do it," Monochrome said. "A test run here, then we can go to space for the real event."

They linked hands again and focused. Slowly it came, a kind of picture forming in Shee's mind, clarifying as the others attuned to it. A wormhole, starting as a theoretical pinpoint, becoming real.

There was a pop, breaking their concentration.

"We did it!" Monochrome said. "That was the sound of air going through a tiny wormhole. We should have known better than to try it in atmosphere."

"Fortunately it collapsed when we lost focus," Gale said. "Just as well; we could have been sucked into it as the air moved to try to fill the vacuum."

"But we have established the capacity," Idyll said. "We can make a bigger one in space."

"In the drone's path," Monochrome said. "And hope it hits."

"Negation," Gale said. "We can board the drone, and form the wormhole just before it, then let the drone plunge in. That will provide us a stable platform."

"If we don't get sucked in too," Idyll said, shuddering.

"It should collapse when we release our focus," Shee said. "As the pinhole did just now."

"Still, we won't want to be sitting on the drone as it goes through," Monochrome said.

"I think we'll need to float in space," Shee said, slowly fathoming it. "Each maintaining a quadrant. But there is a danger."

"There is a danger," Idyll echoed. "Are we up for it?"

"I am," Monochrome said. "Earth is my planet."

"I am," Gale said. "Earth is our mother planet."

"I am," Idyll said. "We have to balk the machines, and this is one place to do it."

They looked at Shee. "I am," she said. "I am a machine, but my alignment is with the living folk. I am expendable."

"We all are," Monochrome said. "So long as we get the job done."

They rehearsed the formation of wormholes, then got serious. They held their breaths, picked up Iolo with their ikons, and conjured to the drone.

I feel that CT core, Monochrome thought. Awesome.

Organize us, Shee thought to Idyll. I must focus on the wormhole.

Idyll organized them. Soon they stood around the sphere, their heads pointing out from its center. Then each pushed off gently, drifting into space. Iolo was with Idyll, protected by her ambiance. They were all plainly visible to each other in the light of near-solar space.

They linked minds and concentrated, as they had rehearsed. Shee located a potential wormhole and focused on it, feeling like a brute man wedging into a tight woman, thanks to Monochrome's analogy. The hole formed slowly, for this needed to be much more than a pinhole. She felt her Glamor strength dissipating, absorbed by the effort, and knew the others were being similarly drained. But they could not rest; this had to be done now. Each quadrant had to be expanded.

At last, after a few eternally long seconds, the wormhole was there. It was time to feed the drone into it. *Toward the drone, she thought. Now!*

They pulled it toward the drone. The hole was relatively small, hardly a handsbreadth across, but her awareness of matter indicated it should be enough. But *was* it?

The hole touched the surface of the sphere—and suddenly the sphere was plunging into it, like a fat rabbit swallowed by a snake. Their concentration broke as they were flung out by the flexing impact. Then the recoil sucked them in after the drone, to be swallowed in its turbulent wake.

Shee was helpless to resist it. Her last reserve of Glamor power was gone, expended in the enormous effort. She saw the other three being drawn in, to the whirling maw, also helpless. They had saved Earth, but were after all doomed. Because this was not a "tame" wormhole, well charted; it was a "wild" one leading to somewhere unknown, possibly the heart of a star.

Then some vastly stronger force took hold of her. It cushioned her and drew her away from the vortex. What was happening?

Reassurance, the thought came. I am Voila.

Question!

Did you think we would let you perish, doing necessary work? We were watching.

But the others—

I am the strongest Glamor, pairing with the weakest. Warp is with Gale, Weft is with Monochrome, and Flame is with Idyll. You did excellent work, and that talent you have developed will be extremely useful. Now finish your holiday; you need to recover.

Then Shee found herself in the tourist suite with Gale, Monochrome, and Idyll, with Iolo sitting between them. All were looking up with wonder and surmise. They had saved Earth, and been saved themselves.

They remained severely depleted. Shee knew it would take days to recover her Glamor resources, and it was surely the same for the others. They did need to finish their nominal holiday.

"Let's go stuff ourselves sinfully on cake," Gale suggested. "We saved it from destruction, after all." Eating was a mortal pastime, not requiring Glamor powers.

"And find four more innocently horny men," Monochrome said. "We saved them too." Sex was also mortal, though it could be Glamor enhanced.

"I wonder where that wormhole went?" Idyll said, not opposing the suggestions.

Shee found she had energy to attune to her constituency. Matter would always be her strength. Her mind ranged out, searching for the matter that was a ball of antimatter. And found it.

"Astonishment!" she exclaimed. "Andromeda! The drone is in Andromeda!"

Idyll clapped her hands. "Well, that should give the machines pause for thought, when they receive its signal, a million years hence."

They all laughed. It was good to have something to laugh about.

Chapter 23

Lobster

Flame reappeared in their apartment. "Apology," she said. "Where were we?"

"We were about to make love," Fifth said, indicating the spot on their bed she had vacated. "An hour ago. Then you vanished. Was it something I said?"

She smiled. "Negation. Spot mission of an urgent nature." She efficiently stripped her clothing.

"Question?"

"Saving Earth from destruction."

He smiled, then realized that she wasn't joking. "Question, repeated?"

"Mother, Idyll, Chrome, and Shee discovered an antimatter missile hurtling toward Earth. They set out to stop it. They made a wormhole to Andromeda in front of it. That worked, and saved Earth, but they were getting sucked through also. So we had to rescue them. I caught Idyll."

"You're a stronger Glamor than Idyll Ifrit?"

She put her finger to her lips. "Don't tell. We four siblings are stronger than any of the prior ones, but we don't like to show it. Except for Voila; she has no choice."

"Silence," he agreed. "Are you sure you still want to—" He gestured at the bed.

"Affirmation." Naked, she joined him. "You are such a comfort to me, Fifth. I would be lonely without you."

"Appreciation." He kissed her mouth, then her small breasts, not ashamed to demonstrate how they turned him on. "I love you."

"And I you."

"Only one thing bothers me: I'm a nexus, and don't know in what manner. I fear I could cause you mischief."

"I fear that also," she said, spreading her legs in invitation. "But I know that you will never knowingly do me harm."

"I wouldn't if I could," he agreed, nudging his erect member into her. Sometimes he liked sex fast, but now he preferred to savor it.

"Tonight we relax," she said, putting her hands on his buttocks to pull him deeper into her. "Tomorrow there's a mission. I will need you to bear my ikon."

"Of course." He normally set her ikon aside during sex so that it wouldn't interfere with full contact, but it was never far from him. It seemed to know that he was not giving it up when he separated from it, and did not resist the way other ikons had been known to. Now he was fully embedded, loving the feel of her warm flesh surrounding his member.

"It is dangerous."

"We are at war," he said. "Danger is inherent."

"And probably unpleasant."

"I want to be with you in pleasure and displeasure."

She grasped his buttocks again and forced his hips to move, making him thrust until he climaxed. "Appreciation."

He had to laugh. Then he held on as she reached her own climax, pulsing around him, savagely kissing him. She lacked the sexual expertise of Weft, but her joy in fulfillment was just as strong.

Thereafter they relaxed, and she filled him in on the details of the mission. She was right: it was dangerous.

In the morning she conjured him to what she termed planet Lobster. The dominant inhabitants looked much like earth lobsters, but were larger. They had eight legs, large flat tails, two front pincers, and eye stalks. But they were sapient and equivalent to humans in their society.

They gathered in a dome shaped like a lobster torso, with several segments. Flame stood where the head might be, facing back to the gathered crustaceans. She wore a translator that rendered her words into the complicated clicks of the lobster language. Fifth had one too.

"Summary," Flame said. "The machines fleet invaded Lobster space. Your fleet opposed them and was destroyed. Now they are coming to exploit your planet before destroying it. Your leaders were killed with the fleet. You need competent guidance for your defense. You appealed to the Living Cultures Coalition for help. But it is thinly spread, and able to spare only one competent Glamor. I am she: Flame of Charm, of the Human Culture, a martial artist. I will guide you. This is my assistant, Five, who is mortal. I believe this planet is salvageable, but the defense will be difficult and some lives will be lost. Even victory will be at best temporary, because the machines will organize another invasion. Our best hope is that we can repel the machines this time, and that the Coalition can defeat them before they come here again."

She paused. "Questions?"

There was a clicking as one large Lobster snapped his claws in intricate cadences. "I am Old Tail, retired settlement elder. We have largely housewives and children left, not battle trained. We lack high power weapons. Can you work with these?"

"Yes. But you will need to follow my directions precisely. This will require courage."

"We are not courageous. We are desperate."

"That will do. You are people. You know you will die, and your planet will die, if you don't do what is necessary."

There was a general affirmative clicking.

"How will you save us?" Old Tail asked.

"I will acquaint you with the necessary strategy, and guide you in its application. I am able to see the near future, so can select the most promising strategy."

Old Tail clicked. "We wish to give no offense, Glamor Flame, but we do not understand this."

"Demonstration: I will tell some of your number which motion you will make next. You will seek to surprise us." Flame walked to a group of three Lobsters and whispered. They clicked understanding. Then she turned to face Old Tail. "Do something unexpected."

Old Tail turned around in place.

There was a chorus of clicks from the three: Flame had told them he would do that.

She whispered to them again. "Now someone else do something surprising."

There was a pause. Then a young Lobster scuttled out to the front and did a somersault.

The three clicked again: they had known it.

Finally Flame walked to Old Tail and lifted her right arm, setting it within his open large claw. "Sheer off my limb," she said.

"I would not do that!" he protested, clicking with his other claw.

"Make the attempt. My flesh is invulnerable; you can't hurt it. But you can try to close on it."

Reassured, he tried. But as the pincer closed, she moved her arm just clear. He tried again, snapping at it, but missed. He tried a third time, snapping at her leg, but that leg drew back. He was grudgingly satisfied. "I can't touch you."

"However, my ability is limited to the near future, and the machines invasion is beyond my range. So I must depend on sound military strategy, then use my near-future seeing to implement specifics. Questions?"

"We can not see the future," Old Tail clicked. "How can we prevail?"

"You do not need this ability. I will pass among you and assess your specific near future prospects and tell you what to do. You must do it without hesitation. I will not be able to remain in any one place; I must constantly circulate, as the machines will be attacking all sites simultaneously. In this manner you will all have the benefit of my ability."

"Question: the region is broad. How can you travel quickly enough?"

Flame rose from the floor, flying. Then she conjured herself to another side of the stage, demonstrating her Glamor powers. That sufficed. This planet lacked magic zones, but magic existed, and her ikon was transmitting.

"Agreement," Old Tail said, impressed, as were the others.

Flame settled back to her original location. "Situation: You are the denizens of residences surrounding the prime and only feasible landing site for the machines. Their cargo ship is massive; if it lands in a swamp or on uneven terrain it will founder. This is a mesa with space and solidity for the landing. We must prevent the landing. We will do this by preventing the machines from securing the landing site. They will first send a scout boat with perhaps a dozen units. It will disgorge machines shaped like lobsters that will fan out along the access roads to destroy all residences and people there. Then they will clear it, making one big landing field for the cargo ship. It will lose thousands of specialized lesser machines. At that point the planet will be lost."

She paused again, then resumed. "We need to hold those residences, destroying the machines that attack them. When they are gone, the scout ship will be vulnerable, and we will be able to take it

out by knocking it over and burying it in rubble. That, too, will not be easy, but it will be possible. Provided we are unified, and act correctly."

They were silent, accepting her expertise.

"You must have two or more people in each of the assigned residences," Flame said. "One must always be awake and alert. The scout will probably come silently, masked; we won't see it or be able to stop it. We will have to stop the machine units as they approach the residences. At present I don't know how to do that; I will inspect a unit when it comes and discover its weakness, then spread the word. Be ready."

One Lobster clicked for attention. "I am Click-toe, widowed by the loss of my husband on the fleet. I have no partner."

"My assistant will join you," Flame said.

Fifth walked across to stand beside the widow.

Flame wrapped up her instructions. Then Fifth and Click-toe walked to her residence. She moved along swiftly enough on her multiple legs, clicking as she went.

"I regret inflicting this chore on you, Fifty."

"Fifth," he said, realizing that there had been an error in translation. "I am here to help, and this is where I am needed. I am sorry you lost your husband."

"Needless. It was not a great marriage, but I did not wish death on him. Fortunately we have no offspring."

"Regret, regardless," he said politely.

"You are the Glamor's mate?"

"We expect to marry after the war is won."

"Are you not afraid of her powers?"

"Her powers protect me. I love her."

"I loved my husband, but he turned out to be wrong for me. Friends had tried to warn me, but I was young."

"You Lobsters are just like us humans!" he exclaimed.

"Except in form," she agreed.

They reached her residence. This was a low, igloo-like structure situated at the water table, with one entrance above the water line, the other below. "We utilize both land and water," Click-toe explained. "When there is an air storm, we go below. When there is an aquatic predator, we go

above."

"You still suffer from predators?" he asked, surprised.

"Negation. But we evolved vulnerable, and our reflexes remained when we became dominant. We are comfortable only at the edge zone." She scuttled into the structure.

"Understanding." He followed her, getting down on hands and knees to navigate the upper entrance.

Inside it was surprisingly pleasant. The temperature was in his range, and there was a cushioned region he could sit on. There was a skylight that let in a ray of sun. When he stood, he could poke his head out of it and see the surrounding landscape.

"I will fetch food," Click-toe said. She slid splashlessly into the water and disappeared below. In a moment she surfaced, with a tuber in her pincers. She presented it to him. "Eat. You will need your strength."

Fifth did not want to offend her, so he accepted the tuber and tried a bite from its end. It was excellently tasty, like a cross between a sweet roll and a banana.

Then, remembering his manners, he offered it back to her. She lifted her smaller pincers and neatly cut off half for herself.

They talked further, compatibly. He learned that her large pincers was used for crushing, and the smaller one for cutting. She was interested in philosophy and the arts, and once aspired to carve statues in soapstone, but marriage and then the war had left her no time for that. Now she was alone. She would like to remarry, and perhaps find some leisure for carving, but she was no longer young. What male would want her, let alone a rich male?

Fifth told her of his own life on Charm, generally dull, until he had joined the training group, encountered Glamors, and finally Flame, his ultimate woman.

"You worship her," Click-toe said.

"Affirmation, and not just because she is a Glamor or because she is lean. I think I would have loved her regardless, had I known her. There's something about her."

"I envy you that relationship."

He wasn't sure what to say, as her prospects for any such thing seemed slight. But already he knew her well enough to know that she was worthy.

Then Fifth had a call of nature, and wasn't sure where to go. But Click-toe anticipated his need. "The refuse sump is there." Her antenna pointed to a curtained section.

He went there, and found a hole over a slowly flowing underground stream. He did his business and watched it carried away. This would do.

"We will need to take turns sleeping," Fifth said. "So that one of us is always alert."

"You may sleep," Click-toe agreed. "I will watch." She lifted her fore section and poked her eye stalks out through the skylight.

Fifth slept. He had learned discipline in such things from his association with Flame.

"Fifth." He woke to Flame's voice.

She was there in the house, beside Click-toe. "Yes."

"The scout has landed. I waylaid and fathomed a machine. It resembles a lobster, with built-in guns. That is, small projectile weapons, and its pincers can crush rock. Do not try direct physical combat."

"How can we stop it?"

"You can short out its system by poking a wire between its scales behind its head, into its brain unit. That will render it inert, and you can then dismember it. Lobster pincers are not effective for this; you will have to do it." She gave him a thick piece of wire. "I will find another way for the other defenders. There will be one or two machines, possibly a third, so stay on guard." She kissed him and vanished.

"She loves you," Click-toe remarked. "That is good."

She was like a mother. "Affirmation. It must be my turn to watch."

"I will watch longer, as you will need to poke the machine. That will be dangerous, and you will need all your strength."

He could not argue with that. He returned to sleep, holding the wire.

It was dusk when a commotion woke him again. There was a series of pops or bangs. Click-toe was on the floor, desperately clicking. "My eye! My eye!"

He rushed to her. Her right eye stalk was gone, and green ichor was oozing from the stump. "What happened? How can I help you?"

"The machines! They're here! They shot my eye!"

He grabbed the wire Flame had given him and dived for the higher exit. He scrambled out. There was a lobster coming toward the house. He knew it was a machine.

He lurched to his feet, and ran toward the machine. It spied him. The forepart turned to orient on him. A bullet plowed into the ground just behind him. The machine had expected him to flee, not come toward it. It was having trouble orienting on him, in part because it was geared to fire parallel to the ground, while he was mostly well above ground. But it would not miss many times.

Indeed, the next shot creased his chest. Something fragmented, but he didn't seem to be badly

wounded.

He leaped onto the machine, grabbing it behind the pincers. It heaved, trying to throw him off, but he clung to it. Its pincers couldn't get at him from this position.

He lifted the wire and put it to the carapace. There was a seam there, behind the head, as there had to be so the head could swivel. He poked the wire in.

The machine turned in a circle, trying to reach him, but he clung, still jamming in the wire. Did he have the right angle?

Then the wire connected. The machine made a hissing sound and collapsed as acrid smoke emerged. He had gotten it!

He pulled out the wire, got up and ran back to the house. He had known that he couldn't try to help Click-toe as long as an active machine was out there; they would both be dead in seconds. But now he had to see to her.

He crawled in. "I got it!" he exclaimed. "I stopped the machine!"

She clicked in response, but there was no translation. He looked at the translator. It was in tatters.

That was what the machine's bullet had struck. It might have saved him from injury or even death. But he could no longer talk to Click-toe.

He removed it. "I'm sorry. My translator—" He set it aside. "We can't talk."

She clicked, understanding. She had put something on her eye stalk so that it no longer bled. But she still had to be in pain.

"I got the machine," he said. "I used the wire." He held it up, then pantomimed jamming it into the machine. "It's dead. As it were."

She clicked. Did she understand?

"Your eye. I'm sorry. I guess it saw you looking and fired a barrage, and got that before you could get down." He put his hand over his own eye. "I'm sorry."

She walked by him, and out the doorway. He followed. She went to the defunct machine. She caught its tail in her pincers and tried to drag it.

"Oh—to hide it," he said. "So the next one won't know what happened and be warned. Smart girl! I'll help."

He took hold of a pincer and hauled. Together they dragged the heavy body into the brush, and covered it over, then scuffed the place where it had been so there was no sign. Then they went back inside the house.

"How badly are you hurting?" he asked Click-toe. "I mean, the eye?" He put his finger near, without touching.

She winced. She was like a lobster, but this reaction was familiar.

"You're hurting. Physically and emotionally. I don't know how to help you. I can't even ask you how."

Then it occurred to him that if she winced in the manner a human person would have, she might have other similar reactions. Maybe he could help after all.

"I want to give you comfort," he said. "Just reassurance that someone else cares. May I do that?"

She just gazed at him with her single eye stalk, not understanding.

"Comfort," he repeated. "I trust you. I want you to trust me." He put his hand in her large right pincer. She could cut it off or severely mangle it, if she chose. "Trust."

She clicked with her free pincer, and did not close on his hand. She had to understand.

"Now I want to hold you," he said. He sat beside her, then drew her toward him. He put his arms around her. "I know I'm not a Lobster, but I am a living, feeling person, as are you. We are in this together."

She stiffened, then relaxed, perhaps understanding. Then she rested her head against his shoulder. She was accepting his comfort.

They remained that way for a time. Then she moved, and he let her go. He had made his gesture, and she had accepted it; that was what counted.

He got up and went to the skylight. She clicked urgently, concerned.

"But I have to look. There might be another machine coming."

Still she clicked, and drew on his hand with a pincer, not pinching at all.

He sighed. "Okay. Don't make a target of myself. I'll go out and watch."

She went out with him. They went to the brush beside the house and hid themselves, and watched. After a time she touched his arm, and when he looked, she laid her head on the ground and retracted her eye stalk. She would sleep while he watched; it was her turn. "Okay," he repeated.

Time passed. It got dark, but he could still see some, and hear. He remained alert.

Then he heard something. It was a rustling, as of something coming down the path. He tapped Click-toe on the shell of her large pincers. She woke. Her eye stalk rotated to orient on him.

He touched his ear to show it was something he heard, and pointed to the path. She nodded.

He held up his stiff wire. He pantomimed jamming it into something. She nodded again.

He saw it. A lobster scuttling toward the house. Was it a machine? He wasn't sure. The prior one had been crafted to resemble a lobster.

Then there was a bang and a flash of light as the lobster fired toward the house. That settled it. Real lobsters did not have built-in guns.

Fifth waited until the machine was parallel to their spot. Then he jumped up and charged it from the side, hoping he could reach it before it oriented on him.

The machine turned and fired, missing. He ran on toward it. It was five paces away, four, three, two.

It fired again. The bullet caught his leg. There was a flash of pain and he went down just clear of the machine. He tried to scramble toward it, but it was reacting faster. He saw the muzzle of the gun set in its big pincer, pointing at his head.

Then something landed on that pincer, crushing it to the ground. It was another lobster. It was Click-toe! She was holding the machine down so it couldn't fire at him.

He dragged himself to them, holding the wire. But he couldn't get into the correct position; it was too painful to heave himself up. Meanwhile the machine was heaving, trying to free its pincers, trying to throw Click-toe off. She was moving to stay on top, while she could.

He had to act immediately. But still the angle was wrong. He needed to get up high enough to poke from directly behind the head. His arm was flailing uselessly.

Click-toe put her pincers on his extended arm, closing just enough to hold him without hurting him, and hauled, bringing him up. Now he was in position. He jammed the wire in—and was rewarded by the pop and smoke as it connected. The machine had been shorted out.

"Thanks, Click-toe!" he gasped. Then he passed out.

When he came to, he was back inside the house, lying on the soft mat. Click-toe had to have dragged him here. The lobster wasn't in view, and he realized she must be back outside dragging the dead machine out of sight. There should not be a third one coming, but it was best to play safe.

His leg was burning. The bullet had passed through the calf, surely taking out a tendon and maybe some bone. Obviously he would be unable to walk for some time. He hoped there wasn't an infection. He saw that it was bandaged; Click-toe's ministrations again.

He faded out. Next time he woke, he found his head supported by Click-toe's large pincers. She was trying to give him a drink from a gourd. He sipped the liquid, and it was pleasant and slightly effervescent, invigorating his mouth and throat. Then she fed him more of the tasty tuber, and settled down beside him, supporting and comforting him as he had done with her before.

"You are taking good care of me," he said, and faded again as she clicked in response.

Then a call of nature woke him. Click-toe was there solicitously the moment he stirred.

"You can't help me in this," he said. "I have to do it myself."

He tried to get up and crawl to the privy section, but immediately his leg radiated such intense pain that he couldn't. Here he had no magic to dull pain or promote healing, and he wasn't used to it. What was he to do?

But Click-toe knew something about this too. She brought a large empty tubular gourd and touched his covered groin with it. She was proffering him a collection bottle.

Well, that was the way it had to be. He tried to take it—and the slight motion of his body made the pain stab him again. He had to use one arm to support himself without moving, because any motion of his trunk translated to some leg motion. His leg was worse; there must be some infection. How far would that go?

Click-toe took the gourd back and held it in place. He opened his trousers one-handed and brought out his penis. Now he had to have both hands, and couldn't. "Obscenity!" he muttered. He couldn't even do it this way; he was half supine and the gourd was above him. The urine would pour out onto him as fast as it entered. He would have to shift position, to the side, and that would be intolerably painful.

Click-toe brought the gourd close, holding it with her large pincers, angling down between his spread legs. Then she took his penis with her small pincers, and guided it into the mouth of the gourd, and held it there, curved in a right angle turn, as was necessary in this position. She could readily cut it in half, but her touch was gentle. The position was awkward, but feasible. She must have had experience.

He let go and let the urine course into the gourd. It was a great relief; his bladder had filled uncomfortably. When it finished, she removed his penis, wiped it with a bit of cloth, and took the gourd away for emptying. Fifth managed to close up his trousers.

He had just let a woman hold his member while it urinated. That was a first for him. Weft surely would have done it if she had thought of it, but she would have had a sexual motive. Click-toe was simply helping as necessary.

He was soon distracted as the pain of his leg became chronic, traveling up his thigh to his torso. His arms began to tingle. The infection was taking over his body. Click-toe clearly wanted to help, but did not know how. He was an alien; her remedies were unlikely to work.

She tried. She brought him a thick, foul-tasting syrup: medicine. He swallowed a mouthful—and immediately vomited. She retreated, clicking apology.

"Needless," he said. She was doing all she could.

He slept again. There was not much else to do.

But now the infection reached his brain, and he dreamed. He was walking across an alien landscape with Flame, speaking of love. It was not Charm, but somewhere else. Bands of colored

magic floated in ribbons, forming random patterns. Most were Chroma zones, and the spaces between were nonChroma.

They paused at the margin of a swamp. There on a tree growing on a tiny island in the muck was a bright golden apple. "I will fetch you that apple," she said.

"Needless. Your presence is all I desire."

But she lifted from the ground and floated across to the islet. She landed beside the tree and lifted her hand to pick the apple. Her fingers touched it—and the tree became a monster with huge glowing eyes and a gaping maw. The apple was the tip of its tongue. It was a trap with a lure, and they had fallen for it, like innocent fish.

"Flame!" he cried. "Get out of there!"

But before she could react, the awful wooden teeth closed on her lifted arm, holding it fast. "Fifth! My ikon! Put it in magic!"

He realized that he was standing in a Blue Chroma zone, stifling her ikon. He scrambled to get out of it, but it was encompassing him, clinging to him. Maybe this was part of the trap: a way to nullify a Glamor. He drew out the ikon, trying to extend his hand so that it was in nonChroma. But he fumbled it, and it dropped into the swamp.

"Chagrin!" How could he be so clumsy at this critical pass?

He got down and grabbed for it in the muck, but couldn't find it amidst the twigs and stems. Meanwhile Flame was screaming as the monster sank slowly down, submerging with its prey. It was carrying her with it.

Fifth spread his fingers and seined through the glop, but all he came up with was handfuls of weeds. The ikon was gone.

Flame gave one more cry as her head was drawn under the surface. Then there were only bubbles as the swamp filled in where the seeming isle had been.

"Flame! Flame!" he cried. "I love you!" As if that could bring her back. He woke, gasping and sweating. The pain of his leg was now matched by the pain of his dream.

A cool cloth wiped his face. Click-toe was holding him, tending to him, helping in the only way she could.

"Appreciation," he said, and drifted uneasily back to sleep.

It was full morning when he woke again. Click-toe brought him water and food, and he was able to drink and eat a little. The pain in his leg had declined to numbness. That was not completely reassuring.

There was a sound. Oh, no! Was another machine coming? They were in no condition to stop it.

Click-toe scuttled toward the entrance. "No!" Fifth cried. "You can't do it alone! You'll be killed."

"No she won't."

Fifth looked, startled. Flame had appeared. "Relief!" he exclaimed.

"Not yet. Most of the invading machines have been taken out, but a few remain, determined to do their jobs. They are hiding, pouncing by surprise. I must continue circulating."

"We can't fend off another. We stopped two, but my leg is shot and Click-toe can't use the wire."

She got down to examine his leg. She put her hands on it, and he felt the pain diminish with her healing touch. "We found another way. Hot water. Dump it on their heads, and it overheats their brain units, spoiling them." Her grip tightened, and he felt intense currents there. "You will be able to use it now, but don't overdo it."

"Flame—I think I was hallucinating. I dreamed you died through my neglect. I feel guilty."

"Let me read your mind."

He opened it to her, letting her explore everything in it. This was an act of exposure greater than any of the body. All his most secret shames were revealed.

"Needless," she said after a moment. "You were afraid your injury would betray me by compromising our mission. In your fever you made it literal, with my dying because of your neglect. It is understandable. I know you love me; that is what counts. I have abated the infection. I must move on." She kissed him and disappeared.

He looked at the leg. The wound had largely healed, leaving a scar. He knew she would have eliminated that too, had she not been rushed. The general malaise was gone, and with it much of his horror of the dream. Her analysis was immensely reassuring.

"She healed me," he told Click-toe. "Maybe I can walk now."

She came to stand beside him, lifting her pincers for him to use as support. He tried to stand, and discovered to his half surprise that he could. The bone was solid, and though the flesh tweaked a little, it was all right. He took a step, and it worked. He could walk.

He practiced, and found no problems. "I am well enough," he said. "But we must still be alert for machines. We're lucky another didn't come while I was sleeping." Because now it was clear that the siege wasn't yet over, and they were still resisting.

She moved to the entrance, and he followed. Outside he discovered that all the nearby brush had been clipped, so that nothing could hide in it. Click-toe had been busy while he was out of it, standing guard and doing whatever she could to be sure they would not be taken by surprise. It had not been chance that no machine had come; she had been alert, and should have awakened him if she had had to. But she had let him sleep as long as she could.

He was really coming to like Click-toe. She was a worthy companion.

Then he remembered: "Flame says we can take out a machine with hot water. We'd better heat some."

She looked at him with her one eye stalk and clicked, not understanding.

He had to pantomime. He talked as he did it, so she would know he was telling something. "Say a machine comes." He went to the path, hunched down, and tried to emulate a scuttle, on knees and elbows, holding his two hands up shaped into little pincers.

Click-toe made a rapid clicking sound unlike her normal dialogue. He realized she was laughing. Good enough; she understood his analogy.

"A wire will do it." He lifted the wire and jammed it where he had just been. "But so will hot water." He put his hands together as if holding water, then formed a little pyramid of twigs and touched them as if lighting them. He was making a fire. Then he held his cupped hands over his imaginary fire. He was heating water. Did she understand?

She clicked in query fashion.

He returned to his emulation of the machine, then stood and took his joined hands to it and dumped the hot water on its head. Then he emulated the machine again, and did an emulation of collapsing. Hot water had also shorted it out.

Click-toe turned and went back into the house. Fifth followed. She fetched a large pan, filled it with water, and put it over a grill. Then she lit a fire under it.

"Yes!" he exclaimed. He caught her lesser pincers and kissed it. She did understand. At least to this extent.

In due course the water was boiling. They were ready, assuming they could get it to the machine. But maybe smaller containers would do. He found one, and pantomimed dipping hot water and dumping it on a machine. Click-toe clicked, and found more containers.

Time passed. Maybe there would be no third machine. They resumed alternating watches, with one alert and keeping wood for the fire. They both knew they would be best off if no third machine came.

But one did. It happened on Click-toe's watch. He heard her frantic clicks, and peeked out the skylight. The machine was scuttling toward the house. But then it paused, looking around.

Click-toe could have avoided it, but she scooted out in front of it, crossing its line of sight and going into the light brush on the other side of the trail. What was she doing?

Fifth knew. She was distracting the machine so that he could get his water ready. But that had to be inside.

The machine oriented on her and fired, once. Click-toe leaped and flipped over, landing on her

back, inert. Had the bullet killed her, or merely knocked her out? Fifth couldn't investigate; he had to be ready with the water.

He continued to watch, peeking as long as the machine was not looking toward the house. He saw it move cautiously up to the lobster. It poked at the tail. There was no reaction. It lifted a pincers and cut off part of the tail. No reaction.

Satisfied that the enemy was dead, the machine turned about and moved toward the house. Fifth immediately ducked down and dipped a bowlful of boiling water. He stood beside the entrance, ready.

The machine entered, slowly. It wanted to be sure that no living lobsters remained, perhaps knowing that they normally were in pairs. Once both were gone, this site would be secured and it could move on.

The pincers appeared within the entrance. Fifth stood still, bowl aloft, waiting. He had to be sure of a good target. If he struck too soon, the water would miss the brain unit and the machine would remain functional, and deadly. He might not get any second chance.

The machine nudged forward. Its eyestalks swung around, surveying the interior. Then they looked up.

Fifth dumped the water. There was a hiss as it struck the metallic carapace, drenching it. Vapor rose up.

But the machine remained active. It lunged ahead, fully entering the room.

Fifth acted simultaneously, grabbing a second bowl. But before he could fill it, the machine oriented on him. He had only seconds.

He grabbed the edge of the main pot and pushed it over, onto the machine. The water slopped, burning his hands, but more of it washed over the body of the machine.

There was a crackle and puff of steam. Then the machine collapsed. It had been shorted out.

Fifth ducked down and scrambled out the entrance. He ran to the lobster. "Click-toe! Are you alive?" he cried, fearing the worst.

She clicked. She lived! She had played possum to fool the machine, so that it would move on. It could not afford to dally long, lest there be another lobster in the vicinity. She had even allowed it to cut off part of her tail, and not given any sign of pain or life.

But she had been severely injured. The bullet had entered her torso and done what damage he could not know. Her tail was leaking ichor. She was in severe pain, perhaps dying.

"Oh, Click-toe!" he said. "You took your wounds to give me time to set up. I got the machine, but at what price?"

She touched one of his hands with the outside of a pincers. He looked—and saw the blistered

skin. The boiling water had slopped across his hands, burning them horribly.

Now the pain struck him. He sank to the ground, moaning. There was nothing in his universe but the agony.

Flame appeared. He wasn't sure when she had come, but now she was lifting up his hands, concentrating her healing power on them. The pain was fading.

"Don't heal me!" he cried. "Heal her! I fear she's dying!"

Flame turned to Click-toe, examining her. Then she put her hands on tail and carapace. She was doing it.

It took time, but Flame stayed with it, and managed to restore them both to some semblance of health. She produced another translator, and spoke. "We have repelled the invasion. The machines have all been taken out. Yours was the last one. We did not know where it was, until it struck. You both did well."

"Click-toe did most of it," Fifth said. "She held down the second machine for me, then distracted the third so I could set up an ambush. She risked her life. She took bad injuries."

"Fifth did it. He took them all out," Click-toe clicked. "He took bad injuries, but persevered."

"You were a team," Flame said. "You had the worst assignment, and completed it. Because of you—both of you—no machine escaped to signal the danger. Now come with me." She put out her hands, touching each of them.

They were back in the main hall. Old Tail and the others were there. They clicked applause.

Fifth exchanged a look with Click-toe's eye stalk. What was this?

"I telepathed the scene and situation to Old Tail," Flame explained. "He relayed it to the rest. They all know."

Old Tail clicked. "You are heroes, both. You saved our planet. We honor you."

The clicking applause grew louder.

Fifth was embarrassed, and knew Click-toe was too. "We do not seek this attention," he said.

"We did what we had to do," she said.

Old Tail clicked, and the noise died down. "I am a widower," he clicked. "I thought not to marry again. But your worthiness overwhelms me. I wish to marry you, Click-toe, and provide you some of the status you deserve." He extended his greater pincers.

Now she was really taken aback. She looked again at Fifth. "Do it," he said. "If you like him."

She hesitated, then moved forward and touched his pincers with her own, accepting the offer.

The applause swelled again.

Click-toe would have her marriage, and her leisure, so she could fulfill her ambition to carve soapstone sculptures. It could hardly have happened to a more worthy person.

"Now we must go," Flame said. "We hope we won't have to return, but we will if necessary. Parting."

She touched Fifth, and they were gone.

Chapter 24

Makers

Havoc spread his awareness. There was a town nearby, where living creatures existed. "Curiosity," he said.

"Concurrence," Weft agreed. "Was this planet resettled by another living culture? Why would the machines allow that?"

"Mystery. Maybe we should ask."

They both laughed, then reconsidered. Was that far-fetched? The machines knew they were here, and wanted them to learn their history. "What do you think, Iolo?" Weft asked.

"Ask them for a guide," the ifrit said. "This is a continuation of the tour."

"There must be a front office," Havoc said. He led the way around the warehouse to what appeared to be a lookout tower on the roof. "Ahoy!" he called.

A mounted device swiveled to orient on him. Shutters peeled back to bare a lens. It was looking at them. There was a blare of sound.

"We are human and ifrit tourists, here by invitation of the machines," Havoc said. "Please provide a guide to sights of interest." He was speaking enough to enable the machine to identify the dialect.

There was a whirring. Then the tower located the language. "One has been summoned." The lens was covered and the device turned away, its interest in them finished.

"We are dealing with low-level machines," Weft said.

"Not sapient," Havoc agreed. "Maybe not even sentient. This would seem to be a backwater world."

"The origin planet of the Makers and the machines? Doubt."

"If they wiped out all Makers here and imported servile living workers to maintain the premises

on a standby basis, there would be no need for sophistication. It would be a backworld by default. Maybe a warning what will happen to Charm and Earth if we do not cooperate."

"They aren't too keen on human psychology," Weft muttered. She was speaking for machine reception, operating on the assumption that they were being constantly monitored. Of course human beings were far more ornery than such a blunt approach could fathom.

"Or so they prefer us to believe. I think there is some additional message, and that we had better understand it." He was speaking for the machines too, but at the moment he suspected it was true. Why should the machines go to so much trouble to get them here, unless there was solid reason?

A vehicle with wheels linked by cleated metallic belts rolled up. "Caterpillar!" Weft exclaimed, sharing a memory Red had picked up from the real Weft, concerning a child prodigy.

"I am your tour guide and conveyance," the caterpillar said. "Please position yourselves on my supports."

"Are you sapient?" Havoc asked. "Or sentient?"

"Neither. I am a low level machine answering to my programming and the directives of those I transport."

"Male or female?" Weft asked.

"Neither. Low level machines lack gender."

"Then we shall call you Caterpillar," Weft said. "When one of us speaks that word, we are addressing you."

"Accepted."

They climbed to the elevated seats, and Iolo stood on the level deck in front of them. The vehicle rolled forward.

It carried them to a structure like a temple, with a tall spire and spreading gardens decorated with pleasant fountains. The air here was fragrant with the odor of exotic flowers. In shady alcoves there were soft-looking mats.

"Exclamation!" Havoc said. "Another mating site!"

Weft nodded. "Well..."

"We want the educational tour, not the horny tourist tour," Havoc told the carrier.

The vehicle resumed motion without apology, leaving the romantic temple. It trundled across the landscape. There seemed to be no established roads. Perhaps there had been some in the planet's heyday, but those had long since overgrown.

"Spoilsport," Weft muttered, making a moue.

Havoc suppressed a sharp response. Weft remained a phenomenally lovely and sexy creature, but he did have other things on his mind at the moment. Still, there was no sense in aggravating her. "After the tour."

"I suppose it is the occasion for advancing our mission," she agreed. "But this experience reminds me that Glamors are not only magical, but have unusually high libidos, male and female. Not just the human ones; Warp and Voila report it is true for alien Glamors too."

"And for plant Glamors," Havoc agreed. "I had quite a session in a giant flower with all my women except you."

"I chickened out and swapped with Symbol. It was too public."

And this time she had swapped with Red. So Weft was not actually as desperate for sex with him as she liked to suggest. But had she elected to do it herself, she surely would have been much the way Red presented her. Certainly she was a highly sexual woman. As were all the Glamors. "It is true," he said. "Men love sex, whether they are Glamor or mortal. Mortal women usually pretend greater interest than they feel. But Glamor women are almost on a par with men."

"And some are not 'almost,' when with the right men." She gently squeezed his thigh. "But why should this be? Why should Glamors be so much hotter for sex than regular folk? It can't be to spread their kind, because the children of Glamors are normal, unless some few become Glamors."

"Conjecture: the same situation that sponsors Glamor magic enhances libido. The ikons make their bearers become more attractive, capable, and sexy. That enables them to better safeguard the ikons. They can literally seduce the opposition. The Glamors are like the ikons, only more so. They can win the favor of mortals by other means than magical. That is a buttressing advantage."

"Agreement. And when Glamor meets Glamor, the attraction intensifies." She sighed. "Even when there are social restraints."

The caterpillar was approaching the nearby town. There were a number of large walls with many open chambers. In the chambers were huge, man-sized bugs, giant fat millipedes. Small machines hurried to and from the chambers, carrying what appeared to be food. They were feeding it to the bugs, who ate almost continuously. Their tail ends emitted wastes that other machines on the far side of the walls collected and carried away.

"A hive!" Havoc said. "Grubs serviced by worker machines."

"But what do they do once they are grown?"

"Ignorance." Havoc glanced down. "Caterpillar, can you explain?"

"They do nothing," the machine replied. "They do not depart. These are adults."

"Amazement! Aren't they bored?"

"They are entertained intellectually."

"Curiosity: how?"

"I will show you an unused domicile." The caterpillar rolled to a wall with a number of empty chambers. "You may inspect it."

They did. They got off the machine and peered into the nearest open chamber. It was not large, but long enough for a person to lie in full length. Havoc crawled in, lay on his back—and there just before his face the arching chamber ceiling became seemingly translucent, showing the sky. But there were many solid tiers of the wall above this chamber, so it had to be an image. A built-in screen. At the same time, there was sound, as words were spoken in an alien tongue.

After a moment it stopped being an image, and Havoc found himself standing in the scene. It was a beach with surging waves. He even smelled the spume. This was more than mere imagery; it was an avenue to first hand experience.

"They lie here feeding and the entertainment is brought to them," Weft said. "All day? All their lives?"

"Correct," Caterpillar agreed.

"And it is this way across the planet?" Havoc asked as he emerged from the cell.

"Correct."

"But why import laborers who do no labor?"

"Unable to answer."

Neither their clairvoyance nor their future seeing provided any answer either. All they saw was a vast extent of walls containing the big bugs being served by the little machines.

"Why do the machines do it?" Weft asked.

"It is our nature to serve."

"Who told you to do this?"

"The Makers."

Now was the crux. "What happened to the Makers?" Havoc asked. Would the machine repeat the information that they had been destroyed by the machines?

"Unable to answer."

"This is the problem with a low level machine," Weft said. "It can't appreciate context."

"We may simply be asking the wrong questions," he said. "Caterpillar, where are the Makers?"

"They are here."

"Where?"

"In the cells."

Havoc exchanged a look with Weft. "These—creatures—are the Makers?"

"Correct."

"They didn't die!" Weft said, amazed.

"That's why it couldn't say what happened to them," Havoc said. "Because nothing happened to them."

"Then what about the revolt? The machines' inexorable pursuit of the Makers?"

"We may have misconstrued a detail," he said wryly.

"But how could these indolent slugs ever accomplish anything? They can't be the Makers."

"Another detail."

She turned to Iolo. "Input?"

"Something must have happened fifty thousand years ago," he said. "That may be the key."

"So we need to learn what happened then. How do we do that?"

"Archives," Havoc said. "There must be records." He turned to the machine. "Caterpillar, where are the records?"

"Here."

"The video cells!" Weft said. "We can summon and play the relevant records!"

"By lying in the cells just like the slugs?" Havoc asked distastefully.

"Verify with your wider awareness. This is the way to find out."

He saw that it was so. "Stay alert, Iolo."

The ifrit nodded and started to vaporize. He would watch the whole area, and send them a telepathic warning if it was warranted.

Then Havoc and Weft climbed into adjacent cells and lay on their backs, staring into the screens. "The key event," he said. "For both of us."

There was a brief flicker. Then a scene formed. It was an obscure den with confusing equipment. A millipede—a Maker—was sprawled across a pile of sticks, several of its forelegs

moving them about as its antenna touched them passingly.

And then it morphed into a more familiar scene, as the cell adapted to Havoc's nature. He was sitting in an Earth style office chair behind a desk, processing papers stamped CONFIDENTIAL, SECRET and TOP SECRET. He was the governor of the district, which included half a planet.

Things were difficult. A power supply had broken down, and he had to assign machines to fix it while he saw to the rerouting of power from another source. It was a somewhat delicate balancing act, because it was important not to divert too much power from its original destination, lest people suffer. Of course he could have let the machines supervise, but as a matter of principle he preferred to do it himself.

Secret documents to manage an ongoing power crisis? This did not makes sense.

The papers morphed into dials and other indicators set into his desk, making it a console. Now he was tracking the lines leading to the sectors, seeing their power levels. The animation had responded to his thought.

Actually the worst was over. He had sent the necessary directives, and now had merely to monitor the lines to be sure no further foul-ups occurred. It was dull but essential. Once he was certain the crisis was over, he would be able to relax completely.

At least he could let his support staff go home and catch up on lost sleep. He touched the intercom. "Ennui, send them home, and go home yourself. I have it under control."

"I will send them home, but will remain until you are through," she replied.

He sighed inwardly. Ennui was the finest and most loyal of staff, and he could not have run the government without her, but she did have an independent streak that was annoying at times. He would have to let her be. The truth was, he did appreciate her support. If he fell asleep, or made a mistake, she would be on it, courteously reminding him, so as to preserve his efficiency and his reputation. The intercom was mainly a formality; she could monitor him at any time, but would not intrude unless asked. "Appreciation."

Then he became aware of a new presence. Someone else was in the office, though the doorway had not been accessed. He twitched his right arm and a laser pistol dropped into his hand. He aimed it at the spot. "Intruder, show yourself."

A figure formed. It was a remarkably lovely woman, with long blond hair and a provocative outline. "You are alert, Governor Havoc," she said.

"And you are illicit. Who are you and what are you doing here?"

She smiled, brightening the day. "I am Weft, a representative of Escape. I am here to recruit you to our cause."

He was familiar with Escape. It was an organization dedicated to abolishing the machines, one of a number of lunatic fringe movements. He practiced tolerance in his territory, so he allowed them freedom as long as they did not impinge on the rights or convenience of others. "I regret you are

wasting your time. I have a government to run, and it would collapse without the services of the machines."

"It will collapse *with* their services," she said. "I must satisfy you about that." She adjusted her décolletage.

He glanced at the indicators on the console. All were in order. He could afford some diversion of attention, and the Escape woman was quite interesting to observe. He tried to remember when he had seen a lovelier woman, and was drawing a blank.

"Escape sent you to attract my attention," he said. "So I would listen to your spiel."

Weft took a breath that briefly emphasized her breasts. "You object, Governor?"

"Call me Havoc." That was answer enough.

She laughed. That really emphasized her breasts, which seemed about to jump out of her halter. "We are desperate. We do what we must. First I will try to persuade you by reason. Will you listen?"

"First tell me how you got in here without alerting the sensors. It's a matter of security."

She leaned forward, causing his eyes to be drawn involuntarily to her cleavage. He knew the exposure was intentional, but didn't mind. "Passkey. It cost us half a fortune in bribery to buy it, and it's only good for this hour. Your security has not been breached by any hostile agency."

"Good to know. Interesting qualification."

"Escape is not hostile, Havoc. I am not hostile. We merely have a job to do, as do you."

"This project of yours, to get rid of the machines. It is totally unrealistic. They are the core of our system. Without them we would be in instant anarchy."

"Conceded. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we don't want to completely destroy them. We want to control them."

"We do control them. They serve us completely."

"They do, in a manner. That is the problem. They will inevitably destroy us."

"There seems to be an ellipsis in your logic."

Weft angled her head, gazing at him. "I will address that in due course. But Escape has a larger mission than merely impressing you with the danger. I would like to review history with you."

Havoc smiled. This fabulously endowed creature was capturing his incidental fancy, as perhaps she intended. "Take off your clothes and sit on my lap and you may review anything you wish with me."

"In due course, if necessary. But I prefer to do the review first."

"I was joking."

"I wasn't."

Intriguing. "Which specific history?"

"The origin of the machines."

"That is so far back as to be lost to our records."

"But there is a major conjecture that can be animated. That leads into my point."

"The origin of the machines will show why they must be abandoned?"

"Yes."

"Then you will sit on my lap?"

"Yes."

"And not before?"

She approached and sat on his lap, clothed. Her posterior was marvelously evocative, immediately inciting his urge to breed, and there was a musky mist about her that intensified it. "Would you be able to focus on history if I did this nude?"

He laughed. "I couldn't even focus on it clothed. Point made."

"In due course," she said again, lifting off that point.

"Those who sent you certainly knew how to get my attention."

"Yes. There was a selection process, and I was deemed the one most likely to succeed with you. You like my type."

"I am not certain of that. Your appearance is only one aspect of you."

"Yes. It was the other aspects that selected me."

Now he was really intrigued. "Let's proceed to history." He touched a button on the console, and the surface became a window into an appealing landscape. "Locale?"

"This." She handed him a disk. "It is fictionalized, but we think accurate in essence."

He pressed it into a slot on the console, and in a moment a new picture formed. It was of a male Maker, lurking at the edge of a Blue Chroma zone. Not far within it grew a tree bearing large blue bundles of substance. The Maker was clearly hungry for the fruit, but cautious about entering the magic zone.

Then the image shifted, and it was Havoc standing there, eying a large blue pear. He peered around, listened, and sniffed the air. There was an odor of predator, but it did not seem fresh. It was probably safe to go for the pear.

Suddenly another man charged past Havoc and lunged for the tree. He grabbed the pear, turned, and started back.

The predator was so swift it was just a huge blue blur. It caught the man in its jaws and crunched him in half with one bite. Then it picked up one half and gulped it down, keeping one paw on the other half in case it should try to escape. The predator was just an animal, not smart. But effective. It had half buried itself in dirt, masking its odor, and waited, perhaps for days, until the prey came for the pear. Now it was assimilating the half before tackling the other half.

Havoc was shaken. There, but for sheer chance, had gone his life. The Chroma zones were dangerous. But they were where the fruit was. Makers had to eat. That meant risking the zones.

The attrition rate was 99% per generation. Only one in a hundred Makers survived until breeding age. Then, fat with accumulated protein, they produced 100 offspring, and the attrition began again. It was a desperate existence.

Meanwhile the pear lay on the ground where the man had dropped it when chomped. It had rolled near the edge of the Chroma zone. Havoc fetched a long branch and poked it into the zone, trying to hook the fruit. The predator saw the motion and whirled, snapping at the branch. The wood flew up to either side, cleanly severed. And the pear, nudged, rolled on out of the zone.

Havoc picked it up and ate it. It was large, and filled his belly. Now he was close to having mass enough to breed. Soon he would be prowling for a female.

But right now his mind worked on the problem of food. He had survived almost to maturity by cleverness and luck, but luck could not be trusted. There had to be a better way. Could he fashion a stick that could harvest fruit safely while he remained in the nonChroma zone?

Then he thought of another approach. That stick had served better as a distraction than a harvester. Its motion had attracted the attention of the predator. What about a stick intended as a distraction, so that a man could then dash across to fetch the fruit? It would be risky, but less risky than venturing into the zone without a distraction.

Havoc was an unusually smart Maker, which helped account for his survival so far; he had outlived 90 of his siblings. Intelligence, caution, and luck counted for much. He had been cautious about the pear; the other Maker had not been, and had died as a result. It was still luck, because Havoc had not known the other was there or that he would run out like that. But he hoped not to have to depend on further luck. So he turned his smarts to the project of making a predator distraction.

Something that could move on its own, so as not to require him to hold on to its end, as with the stick. Something that could roll, like the pear. Maybe a wheel. He knew of wheels; they were used on wagons to haul building supplies.

What about a little wagon, with four wheels, and something to make it go?

It took several days, but Havoc came up with a little wagon with a fifth wheel mounted on top, supporting a tightly stretched length of elastic vine. The vine was wound around the front axle, and when he let the wagon go, it pulled itself off the axle, causing the front wheels to turn, propelling the craft forward. It was far from perfect, but it worked.

He made several of them. Then he approached a Yellow Chroma zone where a banana tree grew. Several bananas were ripe. He smelled predator, and knew this was a trap. But this time he intended to spring it.

He released a wagon. He rolled toward the tree, making a satisfying scuttling noise because of the unevenness of the wheels.

And a yellow leopard pounced. It caught the wagon and bit down on it. There was a crunching sound as the teeth chomped through wood and vine. The elastic wire caught on a tooth, and the leopard pawed at it, trying to clear it. The predator was facing away from the tree.

This was the time. Havoc released another wagon to run in front of the creature. Then he ran behind it, to the tree. He grabbed a handful of ripe bananas and dodged back the way he had come. Meanwhile the leopard, with vine still dangling from its jaw, pounced on the second wagon. It hadn't yet learned that these moving things were inedible.

Havoc made it safely back with the fruit. His ploy had been a success!

That was the first machine.

Havoc survived until full maturity. Then he went prowling for a female. And there she was, fat and sassy. She was mature, but not quite ready to breed. She wanted to be assured he would survive long enough to complete her breeding cycle. Her name was Weft.

"I'll show you," he said. And he demonstrated the little wind-up wagons.

Weft was not stupid. No Maker who survived to maturity was. She immediately saw the advantage, and soon learned how to make wagons herself.

Then they mated. He was really potent and she was fully accommodating. He pumped a bolus into her cloaca, and they both suffered a transcendent orgasm.

During the next few hours she formed a massive egg and laid it in the protective hollow of an old tree. Then she went to fetch another meal, while Havoc guarded the egg. Soon she returned, fed, and he went for his own meal. Both needed to eat well for the continuing effort. Fortunately it was now much easier than it might have been, because of the wagons.

Next day they mated again, and he ejaculated another large bolus into her as they both had an extended climax. The fact was, with a 99% attrition rate, mature Makers had to breed constantly as long as they lived. Few actually made it to a hundred eggs, but some non-survivors were able to lay ten or twenty before getting killed, so it averaged out.

After several days and several glorious matings, they were on hand to see the first egg hatch. It cracked open and two chicks emerged, a male and a female. Weft coughed up nutritious vomit for the

female, and Havoc did the same for the male. Their family was on its way.

They taught the young ones the way of the wagons. This was effective; attrition was inevitable, but this devices reduced it to about 75%. In due course the offspring grew up to become breeders themselves, and now they had more sophisticated wagons that could actually pause and dodge to further deceive predators. Their line prospered. So did the primitive machines.

The history ended. Havoc was back at his console, and Weft was standing before him. "So with a 99% attrition, compensated by rapid breeding, evolution was rapid," she said. "But with the machines becoming ever more sophisticated, there came to be a problem."

"Overpopulation," Havoc agreed. "We still bred compulsively, but with twenty or twenty five times as many offspring surviving, there were soon too many of us."

"But the machines helped there too," she said. "They became able to forage themselves, so that Makers did not have to risk themselves at all. This increased the survival rate to more than 50%."

"And population pressure intensified. It got so that the main threat to a Maker was not any predator, but competition from other Makers. War came to our planet, and hunger, as resources were jealously hoarded."

"But still the machines helped," she said. "They began generating food from inanimate substances, feeding the hordes. They built larger structures to house the multitudes. The last of the predators were liquidated, and the Makers took over the whole planet. Then other planets, the machines exploiting their resources for our benefit."

"Which is where we are today," he concluded. "Confirming that we still need the machines, not to protect us, but to feed us, house us, and provide us intellectual diversion. So why do you want to abolish them?"

"Because they are doing too much for us," she said. "There is no longer any challenge to being a Maker. All Makers are guaranteed completely catered lives. None ever need to work to survive."

"What is wrong with that? We made the machines; we deserve the benefits."

"How many centuries since the last Maker invention?" she asked. "The last original Maker art?"

"Millennia," he said. "What is your point?"

"The machines are stifling us. They are making us become slothful parasites. They have removed all challenge to our lives. Existence without challenge becomes retrograde. We are doomed—unless we escape the services of our machines."

Havoc nodded, appreciating her point. "But just turning them off would be instant disaster. It would not be allowed."

"True. They can't be stopped that way. Instead we mean to escape them, by traveling to some far planet where we can live without machines. It will be difficult, and there will be a high rate of attrition, but our species will survive and advance. We are evolved to thrive during high attrition, and

to progress despite it. That is our dream and our objective."

Havoc shrugged. "I wish you well. Why tell me this?"

"Because we need you."

He nodded. "I suspected there would be some reason for your presence here. You need me to authorize your ship's departure from a spaceport. Unlisted, so there will be no pursuit."

"More."

"Question."

"We need you to help us steal the ship."

He shook his head. "You want too much. For a willing tryst with you I might arrange to overlook a departure; such things are considered part of the privilege of office. But the theft of a ship is another matter, well beyond privilege."

"Yes, we want you to break the law," she said. "We don't expect you to do it cheaply. We know you are an honest and capable governor, perhaps the last in an age when corruption is endemic and mediocrity prevails. Surely you feel like a rose in a cesspool." The actual analogy was not quite that, as the Makers had no roses or cesspools, but the essence was similar. "We are gambling that your allegiance is to the welfare of the species, rather than to a law that others freely violate."

"My loyalty is to both."

"Now they conflict. The law will guarantee the destruction of our culture. You will have to choose between them."

"Let me verify my understanding," he said carefully. "You wish to steal a ship to convey your personnel to colonize another planet, leaving the machines behind. Because you believe that only in this manner can the innovative viability of our species be maintained. You want me to enable you to take that ship, though this would surely cost me my career."

"Yes, in essence."

"And you believe that I would so like to tryst with you that I will make this sacrifice?"

"No. We offer you more. We have reserved a place for you on that ship. I will marry you and bear your offspring."

Havoc whistled. "You are of course aware that I married long ago and sired my offspring. You want me to set that aside?"

"Your wife died last year. You are available. I am reserved for you. There will be no penalty for you because you will no longer be a part of this society. You will be a member of Escape, facing a significant new challenge."

"What, getting you to mate?"

She smiled. "That will be no challenge at all. I am eager to be with you. I am referring to the location and colonization of a planet unknown to today's authorities. Further, to the advancement of knowledge and technique that will make us more than we have been. To the forward progress of our species. With your participation we can become what we should be, instead of stagnating. This challenge surely appeals to you."

She was correct: Havoc would love to be a part of such an effort. But he did not want to throw away his present career on a bad gamble. "And if it does not?"

"We believe it does. But if reason does not suffice, perhaps romance will. You need a woman in your life. I am that woman. You have merely to do what is required to take me."

"I am to throw away other considerations for the love of you?"

"For the renewed challenge *and* the love of me." She stripped away her clothing and stood gloriously naked before him. "Now I will sit in your lap."

"This may be ill considered. If you give me sex without commitment, what reason will I have to commit?"

"The reason that you will crave more of it, and know that you will have it only by joining me on the ship."

"I could touch a button and summon immediate help," he said. "I could have you bound and reserved for me as a plaything. I do not need to be on a ship."

"I carry poison I can access before you could capture me. You would have to play with a dead woman."

"And where would that leave your mission?"

"It will survive without me. I am expendable. I will either recruit you or die, so as not to give away my associates. If I fail, Escape will try again in some other venue I know nothing about. Individuals may be sacrificed, but the mission must succeed. I would much prefer to win you to the cause, for myself and because I believe you have the most to contribute."

"I am a politician. I do not know advanced science or magic. Once I enable you to steal your ship and escape, my usefulness will be over. This would not be a great contribution."

"By no means. Your political skills are relevant. You would become our leader."

"And I could then direct you to turn yourselves and the ship in to the authorities."

"Not if you loved the challenge, and me."

"I find you delightful to look upon," he said, studying her nude perfection. "I would love to breed with you. But I do not love you, and am unlikely to do so in the future if I know your favors are

purchased."

"Breed with me," she said. "Then you will love me."

He realized it was probably true. Breeding led to commitment, and while love normally preceded breeding, the two were interactive, and those who bred did normally come to love each other. "It is too much of a gamble," he said. "I stand to risk too much, and the price of you is too great. But there is a third alternative for you: return to your people without success here, and regroup for an effort elsewhere. I will let you go."

"That is not an option for me. I already love you, and must have you or die."

"You do not know me!"

"I do know you. I have studied you. I know your ways. I value your competence and integrity, and your extraordinary capability. You are ideal for me, and I will do my best to be ideal for you."

He studied her face. "I decline. What is now your course?"

Weft sighed. "I regret this. I must take you by force."

"How could you do such a thing? I inquire as a matter of curiosity."

She stepped toward him moving her hands. Something filmy settled around him. Then the film coalesced, and he found himself bound in place. He struggled, but could not move. He could not even speak; film had fastened his mouth closed. He could only breathe, and watch her.

"It is a passive restraint," she said. "It will not hurt you if you don't fight it." She addressed his clothing, somehow managing to take it off him despite the film. There was evidently a technique.

When she had him naked, she adjusted his chair to lean back and make him effectively lie on his back. She straddled him, her thighs outside his, her knees beside his hips. She put her face down and licked his penis, which quickly stiffened. When it was turgid, she lifted her cleft over him, then guided his member as she lowered her body. The head of his penis nudged her vagina, about to penetrate.

"Havoc." It was Ennui on the intercom. "An hour has passed without notice from you. Are you alert?"

"Frustration!" Weft said, holding her position. "You must answer. You can report me and end this now, or you can allow me to continue. The choice is yours." She reached across to touch the intercom switch as her other hand touched his mouth, dissolving the film there.

"I am alert," Havoc said. "I will be through soon. Carry on."

Weft turned off the intercom. "So I called your bluff," she said, and lowered herself the rest of the way. "I have dissolved all the film; you may move freely."

He did so, bucking to thrust strongly into her, jetting his passion. As he did so, he felt the surge of feeling. He was indeed coming to love her. This was a hormonal thing, but effective. "I had already

decided," he gasped as his orgasm ran its course."

She kissed him. "Then why did you make me force you?"

"I wanted to verify that you had what it takes to fulfill your mission. It is evident that you do."

She laughed. "I don't believe it."

"Observe." He made no signal, and gave no audible command, but abruptly six armed men appeared in the office. "They have been watching all along. They interceded only when I chose. Ennui, too, was aware throughout."

Weft looked around, remaining on him, surrounding his penis. "I think I have been a fool."

"No. You made your case and acted as you saw fit. You are the woman I want, with the challenge I want, and I will join your mission. Now that I am sure that you are up to it."

"But if you could have stopped me any time—"

"A leader does not leave his personal safety to chance. I see that your group will need some instruction there. I will see to it. You do need me. But your mistake does not detract from your other qualities. You are worthy, and your mission is worthy."

"So you will let us take the ship?"

"It is being arranged now. You will need more supplies, so can't leave immediately, but it will happen."

"More supplies?"

"You surely have food, construction equipment, fuel, entertainment. You will also need an advanced technological and magical library."

"We won't make machines!"

"We won't make the kind of machines you oppose. We will need tools to accomplish our larger purpose."

"Larger purpose?"

"We are a type 2.5 culture, devolving. We need to advance. Otherwise the machines will come after us and catch us. We have to have information to build on."

She looked around. "But these men—they know. It can't be secret."

"These are robots. They don't care."

"Ennui isn't a robot."

"She will come too. You have room?"

"Yes." Weft finally thought to lift herself off him, clean up, and dress.

Havoc went to the console. "Now for those supplies," he said, touching buttons. "And some privacy."

The animation ended. Havoc was lying in the chamber. He climbed out as Iolo Ifrit condensed. "Why did it stop?" he asked Caterpillar.

"The recording stopped there. The governor stopped it."

"Did the ship take off?"

"There is no record."

This was a low level machine. He rephrased the question. "Is there record of a missing ship?"

"Yes."

"Is there any further record of the governor, or of the woman?"

"No."

That spoke for itself. The escape mission had succeeded. "When did this happen?" Weft asked, joining them.

"Approximately fifty thousand years ago."

"And the machines set off after them?" Havoc asked. "When they discovered the governor and the ship missing?"

"Yes."

"But why?" Weft asked. "Since there was no machine revolt. Were they afraid the Makers would return to wipe them out?"

"No."

"Then why did they pursue the Escape group?" Havoc repeated, realizing that the simple machine had answered only the second question. Lower level machines were not great on context, as they had discovered before.

"To serve them."

Havoc and Weft exchanged a look of surprise.

"Not to destroy them?" Weft asked.

"Machines do not destroy Makers."

"But those Makers don't want to be served," Havoc said.

"Our prime directive is to serve."

"Even though this would destroy their initiative, making them slugs like those who remained here?"

"Our prime directive is to serve."

Machines were not much on reason, either. They simply followed their directive, regardless of the long-range consequences.

"But then why are the machines wiping out all other living cultures?" Weft asked.

"To find the Makers."

"Why not just ignore them?"

"They might be the Makers."

This required some discussion. It turned out that the machines were not sure they could recognize the escaped Makers, so they were conquering and studying other cultures to make quite sure they were neither the Makers nor capable of hiding the Makers. A destroyed culture could not hide any Makers. The machines were making a clean sweep, ensuring that in time they would locate the missing Makers without inadvertently destroying them. The rest of the galaxy might be extinct, but they would find and serve the Makers, completing their directive.

And the final question: "Why have you shown us this?"

"So you will help us find the Makers."

"We won't do that!" Weft exclaimed.

"Then we will continue our search."

A search that was destroying all other living cultures. The machines did not care what damage was done; they merely honored their prime directive.

"Suppose the Makers returned, so you could serve them?" Havoc asked.

"Then our search would be over."

And the rest of the galaxy would be saved.

Chapter 25

Filia

Opaline went out to her private place in the forest. She closed her eyes and concentrated as hard as she could. *Havoc! I need you.*

Havoc appeared. "You suffer from a lack of passion?"

She smiled. "That, too. But I was calling you because I think Oak is ready to perform at interstellar distances, but I have no way to verify it."

"Ah. We shall see to that."

"But, while we're alone, if you—"

He swept her into his embrace and kissed her enthusiastically while his hands slid into her waistband and squeezed her buttocks. Then he fell backward, bringing her down on top of him. Somehow their clothing dissolved and she found herself delightfully impaled. She continued kissing him.

She felt his spurt within her. That allowed her to have her own climax. She did, milking the member of its remaining juice. "Joy!" she breathed.

"I like you, Opaline," he said. "You're so innocently expressive."

She laughed, feeling her vagina squeezing his member as she did so. "I've had so much sex, with you, Oak, and Fifth, yet I am innocent."

"Perpetual innocence," he agreed. "Perpetual appeal."

"Yet I am a creature of the machines, reporting to them. I hate that."

"Don't hate it. It doesn't interfere with your mission."

"Because it's a decoy. Oops!"

"Question?"

"I didn't mean to say that. I once feared that I was betraying you by my nature, but I talked with Fifth, and he thought Oak could be a decoy. So when the machines read my mind, they will be concerned about Oak, and divert resources they might better use elsewhere. But it won't work if I know it's a decoy project. Oh, I'm confused!"

"No decoy," Havoc said, kissing her breasts.

"But then the machines will attack Oak, because of me. That's worse." She wriggled to give him more of them.

"Reassurance," he said. "Oak is protected. The machines can't hurt him." He resumed motion within her, starting a second sexual effort without ever withdrawing.

"Relief," she said, thinking of both Oak's safety and Havoc's decision to continue sex. She knew she was purely incidental to his larger interests, but it was such a delight to have him around her and in her that she was greedy for all of him she could get.

"You are also protected," he said. "Oak can't function without you, so we must see that you are safe."

"Yes, Flame came to save me from brigands," she agreed. "Even though I am no-faulting with her boyfriend. She says she would rather have him do it with me than with Weft."

"She would," Havoc agreed. "You have no designs on Fifth. That makes you safe."

"As if I could compete with a Glamor."

"You could, for you are innocent in ways that no Glamors are. Men like that in women."

"I wish I could stop being so innocent, and accomplish something truly momentous!"

"You will." His tempo increased, and soon he spurted again, setting her off again. He kissed her continuously as they climaxed, adding to her delight.

"Oh, Havoc!" she gasped when he freed her mouth. "I know you have mistresses galore, all of them lovely and experienced, but I don't believe any of them can have more joy of you than I am having at this moment. I love you!"

"I love you too, no fault."

"No fault, of course," she agreed. But she knew he knew that wasn't really true. She loved him regardless.

Finally they let it end. She cleaned herself out, and he let her clean him off too, knowing how she delighted in touching him. Havoc was a real gentleman in ways that counted. Maybe the luscious palace bath girls had trained him in, so he was used to having girls handling his private parts. But she thought that he was attuned to her mind, and let her do what she liked doing.

"But about Oak," she said as they dressed. "Can you test him between stars? I have no idea how this can be done, but there is no further I can take him here on Charm."

"We will test him," Havoc agreed. "I will take you to Filament, fifty light years distant. The Filaments have agreed to lend us facilities for the test."

"Question?"

"Apology. I forgot to explain that we looked into the near future, and anticipated your need. We were unable to fathom the result of the test from the future paths; Oak's talent is independent of our abilities. So we will do it, and hope to confirm his powers."

"The Filaments—are a galactic culture?"

"Confirmation. They are not like us, but you should like them. Are you ready to travel?"

"Negation!" she exclaimed. Then, embarrassed, she explained. "I have to see to Oak. I can't leave him for long; he gets restive. My free time is about done. He needs—I must—you know. Then, while he rests, I can be free for up to an hour. Apology for delaying you."

"Needless. Your mission is to see to Oak and hone his talent to its ultimate. You deal with him on his level, as you deal with me on mine." He smiled. "Sexual, both. This is the nature of men."

"Agreement. You taught me how. I do not wish to inconvenience you. Can you come back in an hour? I promise to be ready."

He put his hands on her shoulders, lifted her up with his awesome strength, and kissed her mouth. "You are such pleasure to be with, Opaline, in myriad little ways. But I will enable you to travel sooner."

"Put me down," she said. "Kiss me again first. Then explain."

He kissed her again, then lowered her to the ground. "You must be with me on Filament Planet to verify the test. You must also be with Oak to direct him in it. Since there are not two of you, we must make an emulation."

"Confusion. Do you mean to bring in another fifth? I don't think she could do it on such short notice."

He snapped his fingers. "Weft."

His striking yellow-haired beautiful daughter appeared. "Dad."

"We are about to test Oak's ability to sense and move small objects at a distance. I will take Opaline to Filament. You will emulate her here."

"Understanding."

"But Oak wouldn't be fooled," Opaline protested. "He—I—we have our own little ways. And it is needful to—"

Weft oriented on her in the disturbing manner Glamors had. "Open your mind." It was not a request.

Opaline looked at Havoc, then stood, letting the woman explore her mind. It was like standing naked in public.

Weft nodded. "I will tend to him this hour, and direct him in the test." She glanced at Havoc. "Thirty minutes from mark."

"Mark," Havoc agreed.

Weft shifted into a perfect likeness of Opaline and walked back toward the farmhouse.

"Doubt," Opaline said, disgruntled.

"Then let us watch. There is time."

"Question?"

He touched her hand. Her hand disappeared, and her arm. He produced a small mirror, and held it up so that she could look in it.

There was nothing there. She was invisible. "Amazement," she said. But there was no sound.

"Focus your thoughts like speech," he said. Then he too disappeared.

My thoughts?

Agreement.

They were invisible and inaudible. Glamor magic.

What next? she asked, bemused.

We observe. Walk toward the house.

They walked. Their treading feet made no sound. The only way she knew he was there was his hand in hers, and his mind contacting hers.

They reached the house. Oak's father was snoozing in his favorite chair. His mother was baking bread. Neither noticed the entry of the two of them, unsurprisingly.

They went upstairs to Oak's room. There was the image of Opaline, nude, bestriding naked Oak on the bed, as was her normal practice. It kept his weight off her and gave her control of the sexual act, which helped, because he lacked imagination. Her image lifted his stiff member and slid it into her vagina, then squeezed, as he bucked, harvesting him efficiently. Then she lay down, spreading herself on him, kissing him, letting him soak. "You're great, Oak," she said in Opaline's voice.

It was clear that Oak did not know the difference.

Weft read your mind, Havoc reminded her. *She garnered your technique, and is applying it.*

She certainly was! But the sight affected Opaline, who felt her nether juices flowing. *Frustration,* she thought.

Havoc turned, put his hands on her shoulders, and lifted her as before. Catching on to his intention, she hastily reached down to draw up her skirt, spread her legs, and pull her panties aside. He lowered her torso onto his firm member, got it well lodged, then let go of her shoulders and wrapped his arms around her body. She was largely supported by being mounted on that pulsing pedestal. She brought up her legs and closed them around his hips.

She felt his ejaculation, and went into her own orgasm. It was intense despite the recency of their

prior sex. There was something about seeing herself do it, and then doing it herself invisibly, that stimulated her to peak performance.

Kiss me! she thought. For somehow the kisses were even more evocative than the orgasms.

He did so, standing there with his member still pumping into her crevice. They remained clinched, pleasure focusing at lips and groins. It was divine. Oak stirred.

Will you two lay off? Weft's thought demanded. *You're stirring us up again. We'll lose the schedule.*

Opaline froze. *Weft knew they were there!*

Havoc smiled against Opaline's mouth. Then they were back in the forest, now visible. He had conjured them there.

She held the position a rapturous moment longer. Then she broke the kiss, and he lifted her off his member.

She grabbed a tissue before her cleft leaked copiously onto her clothing. She stuffed it into her vagina, then got another and wiped off Havoc's member as it lost elevation. Their clothing was badly rumpled, but Havoc made a small gesture and it was abruptly pristine.

"Weft gets jealous," he said. "Sometimes she wishes she were not my daughter."

"You—" She lost her way and tried again. "You get turned on too? By seeing others do it?"

"Voyeurism," he said. "Affirmation. But of course I get turned on by anything young and female. You could make a sexual gesture, and I would want it. I'm a man."

She was intrigued. "Like this?" She made a circle with her left thumb and forefinger, then poked her right forefinger through it.

Havoc caught hold of her and drew her to him, kissing her. Was he pretending, playing the game? She reached down to feel his penis. It was hard. So she hoisted up her skirt again, drew her panties aside, and half leaped on him. She came down around his member and it thrust in, surly guided by his Glamor ability. She jogged, and in moments felt him spurting yet again, right into her core. Followed by her own eager climax. She could do it in short order, when triggered by the hot gushing within her.

"Remind me not to even think of sex when I'm near you," she said, laughing. "I'm as bad as you are."

"Wonderfully bad," he agreed.

They cleaned up yet again. "We have used up much of our time," Havoc said. He put his hands on her, but this time not for sex. There was a flicker.

Opaline looked around, startled. They were in a bright dome, like none she had seen on Charm.

"Filament?" she asked. "Fifty light years distant? Don't you need your ikon?"

"We placed it earlier, and Shee set up the wormhole." Seeing her blank expression, he clarified. "A way to travel far distances instantly" He picked up a small gem on a necklace. "Wear this. It is a translator. They do not speak our language. In fact they don't speak at all; they use magnetic fluxes. This will facilitate mutual understanding."

She accepted the device, putting the cord around her neck.

A pretty young woman approached. She had floating red hair and a statuesque figure. "Greeting, Havoc," she said. It was the translation gem that actually spoke; Opaline couldn't see, hear, or feel the magnetic fluxes.

"Greeting, Filia," he said. "This is Opaline, human."

"She has the look of one of your mistresses. Envy." Now it seemed as if the sounds were emanating from her mouth; Opaline was adapting to the system.

"You were doing her too?" Opaline asked, astonished. "I assumed she is far more alien than she looks."

"Confirmation, both," he agreed cheerfully. "Filia, request: show your natural form."

"For you, anything," the woman agreed. She faded, and in her place appeared a small open cube with what looked like iron filings pinned magnetically to its sides.

"Confirmation," Havoc said. "Those are filings, and they are guided magnetically. To emulate other forms, they project the filings around themselves in the correct patterns. They have marvelous magnetic finesse, beyond anything known in our culture."

The filings flowed out into the air around the cube, forming lines, then curtains, then an expanding shape. It became humanoid, like a child's drawing, then refined. Color and texture appeared. Soon Filia was back in all her beauty.

"And she can—with you?" Opaline asked, amazed.

"Affirmation. In fact, now that you mention it—"

"Needless!" she said. Too late.

Havoc stepped up to Filia, who opened her seemingly solid arms to him. They kissed, and there was a faint sparkle where their lips met. Was that short circuiting, or pleasure?

"Both," Havoc said. Then his stiff penis was out, and driving into Filia's cleft, and there was more sparkling. They were indeed having sex. Filia's presented body might be composed of metal filings held in place by magnetism, but it evidently could do anything a normal flesh body could. She surely felt exactly like a fleshy woman, outside and inside.

Well, Opaline had been warned. She had foolishly asked. Now she had to watch, turned on,

frustrated. She was made to be turned on by sex, and this was the second time today—assuming time was similar here—that she had witnessed it and thus wanted it.

They finished. "Do her," Filia murmured. "It isn't kind to tease her."

Havoc turned to Opaline. She didn't argue. She accepted him, standing, once more, while Filia watched. Havoc lifted her up while she tore open her shirt and dropped her skirt and panties. He kissed her bared breasts, licking the nipples. This really tantalized her. Then he set her on him, and held her in place while he bucked in and out, evoking his liquid orgasm.

Opaline was surprised at herself; now she was performing public sex. But it was that or be without it, really no choice. Her orgasm followed his immediately. Yet again, it was intense. "Oh!" she gasped, catching his head to bring it down so she could madly kiss him during the climax.

"There is something about Havoc," Filia said. She had been observing closely, surely checking for techniques to use herself in future trysts with this species.

"Agreement!" Opaline exclaimed as they finished.

Havoc lifted her off and set her down. She quickly cleaned up and put her clothing back in order. His clothing had faded during sex, and now reappeared.

"News," Havoc said to Filia. "I visited the origin planet of the machines, with their cooperation. They were created by a culture we call the Makers, for want of a better identification. They look like our millipedes." He projected an illusion picture in the air between them, showing a huge bug that was a Maker. Opaline was vaguely disappointed; that creature did not look noble or powerful. Rather it looked unkindly pedestrian. "We thought the machines had revolted and slain the Makers, but learned they did not. They are still serving them."

"Confusion!" Filia exclaimed, mirroring Opaline's own astonishment.

"We learned Maker history," he said. "They were a prey species, suffering such predation as to need to breed a hundredfold every generation just to stay even. They had no magic, but had to forage in magic zones where predators lurked. They developed machines to help them forage, and these became so successful that it became their way of life. Their population multiplied, but they became too lazy to work, letting the machines do everything. Until one group realized that this indolence was destroying them, and departed. That was fifty thousand years ago. The machines have been searching for them ever since, to serve them too, but they don't want to be found, because they don't want to be served."

"Remarkable," Filia said. "So why are the machines destroying all other living species?"

"We conclude they are systematically eliminating any species among which the departed Makers might hide. They will not serve any but the Makers, but mean to serve *all* of them."

Filia shook her head. "This makes little sense to me. But I am not a machine."

Havoc glanced at Opaline. "Perhaps you have an insight. Can you make sense of it?"

Opaline was nervous about expressing her unimportant opinion, but had to answer when Havoc asked. "Maybe—maybe they are communicating with the Makers, in their fashion. Sending them a message. That they will destroy everything until the Makers return to be served. Then they will stop."

Havoc exchanged a significant glance with Filia. "Sense," he said.

"Sense," Filia echoed.

"Opaline, assuming this is true, what should we do about it?"

"Find the escaped Makers. Tell them to return to the machines, for the sake of the galaxy. It might be the easiest way to end this war."

He nodded. "This is surely why the machines gave us their history. They want us to find the Makers for them. They know that Glamors might accomplish what they can't."

"We must search," Filia agreed. "But if we find the Makers, will they cooperate? They surely already know what is happening."

"Some persuasion may be required," Havoc said grimly.

"But—" Opaline began, then stopped, abashed.

"Speak," Havoc said.

"I just thought that maybe—maybe the machines only told you they want to serve, so you would help them. Maybe they just want to find the Makers so they can destroy them. Because they are the ones who rejected the machines."

"And the first story was the true one," Havoc said. "They seek to make dupes of us."

Filia approached her. "Havoc can't kiss you, because that would get you all worked up and frustrated. But maybe I can." She kissed Opaline, and there was the crackle and sparkle as their lips touched. Opaline received a jolt of magnetic pleasure. "Appreciation for your insight, Opaline. We shall consider it carefully before acting." She stepped away, leaving Opaline half stunned. She had no taste for love with women, but this creature could probably seduce her if she tried.

"We shall indeed," Havoc said. "Meanwhile we shall continue opposing the machines. It is time for the test."

Havoc showed the way to a small stand where half a dozen small chips of wood rested on the surface.

"Now the chips should move to the right, then away from us," Havoc said. "In half a minute."

They watched. The chips moved to the right, then away. That was all.

"Oak did it!" Opaline exclaimed. "From fifty light years away!"

"I detected no magnetic force," Filia said. "How does he do it?"

"We conjecture he adapts gravity," Havoc said. "Borrowing from its future timeline at the specific site, compressing it, so that the force focuses on that spot, now. We are equally impressed with his ability to sense the objects, so that he can touch them correctly. This, too, must be instantaneous, bypassing the limitations of magic and physics. It is a very special talent. We do not believe it can be blocked. Opaline has been working with him, developing it. We owe this success to her."

Opaline was silent, but she glowed internally because of the praise for Oak and herself. She had long since appreciated that while Oak's conscious mind was simple, his ability was unique.

"Your prime weapon against the machines is ready," Filia said. "We must celebrate."

Of course that meant more sex, and Opaline, flush with the success of the test, was more than willing. This time Opaline kissed Havoc's face while Filia addressed his member. When that member spouted, Opaline felt his pleasure and went into her own climax, triggered by the kiss. Her body did not care how he got his orgasm; it still gave her leave to join it. There were ways in which his kiss was more potent than his penis.

Filia no longer seemed at all strange. She was just another of Havoc's mistresses of the moment, every bit as lovely, smart, and magical as the others.

After that, Havoc made ready to depart. Opaline went to join him, but he demurred. "I will be making several trips back and forth, to set up alternate tests. You might as well remain here until all are done."

"But I have no knowledge of this culture," Opaline protested. "I suspect I can't even breathe outside this dome. Maybe you should take me home and leave me there."

"Not until Weft is done with Oak," he said, and vanished.

"He is thoughtless," Filia said. "He is male."

Opaline smiled ruefully. "I love him, but he does frustrate me. I don't want to be a burden here."

"I will give you a tour. We can converse."

"But you surely have other business."

Filia addressed her squarely. "I am Queen of Filament, and a Glamor. I have no more important business at the moment than safeguarding you, for you are promoting the weapon that will defeat the machines."

"But I am nothing!"

"Nothing once removed. Your human being Oak is the secret weapon we must have. You guide and support him. Without you he can't function. For this purpose you become the most important creature in the living galaxy."

"I can't believe that!"

"Nor do you need to. We believe it, and will assist you accordingly. May I show you around our planet?"

Opaline was at a loss how to handle this. "Maybe if you have an assistant who isn't busy."

"You are painfully modest, a considerable contrast to a Glamor. I appreciate why Havoc likes you. This way."

Opaline followed her to a small bubble with two seats. They sat in these, and the bubble angled up and through a vent in the dome. The alien landscape spread out below them: metal spires and cubes. "Wonder!"

"We are a semi-living species," Filia said. "Our essence is alive, but our larger forms are composed entirely of shaped bands of filaments, as you have seen. Regardless, we side firmly with the living cultures, because the machines will destroy us otherwise."

Opaline, trying to stave off an overload of impressions, fixed on one thing. "You are a Glamor?"

"The Glamor of filings," she agreed. "We have other Glamors, but they are busy elsewhere."

"And Havoc—you are not at all his species. Do you really enjoy sex with him?"

"Confirmation. He is a Glamor. There is a camaraderie of association among Glamors that rises above species, with a strong sexual component. Glamors have sex together, if it is even remotely feasible. Fortunately I am able to assume a shape to accommodate him."

"Other alien Glamors want sex? I mean, with other species?"

"Affirmation. It is in our makeup. It is almost as though we are our own species, apart from our physical species. We are curious about our origins, which are relatively recent. No Glamor is older than several of your centuries. What triggered our appearance so widely across the galaxy? We have no answer."

"I wonder—could it be that the common threat of the machines evoked the Glamors? To fight the machines?"

"Perhaps. Yet there needs to be a mechanism. Many Glamors appeared before the threat of the machines was generally known. So it seems coincidental. But we don't trust coincidence."

"I—I need to warn you of something," Opaline said. "The machines—I am a synthetic human, made by the machines to gather information about the culture. They can read my mind, when they come close. You must not tell me anything you don't want the machines to know."

Filia was surprised. "Havoc knows this, of course. Why would he trust you with this vital mission?"

"He says I am qualified. I am doing it, but I think there must be thousands of others who are as

qualified. I don't know why he picked me." She smiled, embarrassed. "He does like to plumb me, but I don't think that could be it."

"He likes to plumb anything with plumbing. He must want the machines to know," Filia said. "This surprises me. Why would he arrange to give them such vital information?"

"I thought Oak might be a decoy, to distract the machines, but Havoc says no. He says Oak and I are protected."

"Correct and correct," Filia said. "Oak's talent is real, as we have demonstrated this day. Very small movements can control the functioning of machines, including ships of space. And you are protected by the Glamors, there in your stronghold. And by me, at the moment. We do value you."

"Yet if Oak really is our secret weapon, why assign me to train him, knowing that the machines will know? It isn't secret any more."

"Conjecture: just as the machines sent humanoid robots to your culture, to impress you with their powers and make you reconsider your opposition, maybe Havoc is sending information to the machines to make them reconsider their campaign. If they see what Oak can do, and know they can't stop him, perhaps they will stop their attack."

"Possibility!" Opaline exclaimed, delighted with the conjecture. That could explain everything.

"This war is being waged on many levels. Both sides would profit greatly if the other desisted short of victory."

"Do you think either side will quit?"

"Negation," Filia said. "The machines are locked into their program, trusting to force to remove all obstacles. The Glamors will not allow all living cultures to be destroyed. So the war must be fought."

"Do you really think the living cultures can stop the machines?"

"Affirmation. But the way may be devious. Both sides are peering into the future, seeking those courses that lead to victory. This is one of the ways it becomes devious. What seems obvious in the present may not be true for the future."

"My head feels dense."

The craft landed on the top of one of the cubic buildings. "We live in these," Filia said. "Thousands of little shelves where the magnetic essences can be stored, and common areas suitable for fully animated Filaments."

"Stored?"

"You would call it sleep. It is our inactive state. We assume it for space travel, compacting our filings, then animating when the ship finds a suitable harbor. I could show you the interior of the building, but I think you would not find it interesting."

"Affirmation. I prefer forest, fields, streams, and the embrace of a man."

Filia laughed. "You must tell me more of the last, for that is what we have in common. Are there nuances that set Havoc off? I noted that you are stimulated by observing the sexual act; is that the case for him too?"

Opaline considered, trying to remember. When they had watched Weft, in the guise of Opaline, having sex with Oak, the sight had turned Opaline on. She had turned to Havoc, and they had had immediate sex. She had assumed he was being kind to her, and that he was always ready for sex. So had it been the sight, or Opaline's eagerness that turned him on?

"Problem," Filia murmured.

"Question?"

"My instruments indicate a machines attack craft in the vicinity, closing on our position."

"It's after me!" Opaline exclaimed, horrified. "They must have read my mind, and discovered where I was, and are striking because I am not in the stronghold now."

"This may be the case," Filia agreed. "We shall evade them."

The craft accelerated, swinging to the side so rapidly that Opaline was crushed against the protective harness that held her in place. The landscape of the planet zoomed dizzily by. She had had no idea that this little bubble was capable of such ferocious maneuvering.

"Obscenity," Filia muttered, the translator rendering her actual expression into Charm dialect. "We are not shaking the enemy. It has locked onto us."

"Throw me overboard!" Opaline cried. "Then you can escape."

"Negation. I undertook to safeguard you, and I shall do so. Hang on." The bubble suddenly lifted, moving straight up into the sky. Now the machines gunboat was visible, drawing closer. It looked horribly menacing.

"Wormhole," Filia said tightly. There was a gut-twisting wrench. Then the scene shifted. They were floating above another planet. Opaline knew, because the sky had changed color from gray to blue and the cubic buildings below had been replaced by blue trees.

"Wonder," Opaline said. "I never traveled in a craft like this before, only in Havoc's arms."

"Fortunate you," Filia said. "We seem to have lost them. We shall have to get you back home soon, because we can't match the protection that location provides you."

"I do miss Oak," Opaline said. Then she realized that this was beside the point, and was embarrassed.

Then the machines boat popped into view. "Infidelity!" Filia swore. "They used another wormhole!"

"They're still tracking my open mind," Opaline said. "Please, this is dangerous for you. Put me down somewhere and flee."

Filia glanced at her. "I can see why Havoc likes you. Your innocence is touching."

"Apology," Opaline said, feeling wholly inadequate.

"Wormhole," Filia said again. There followed the wrenching and relocation.

This time the planet was a barren red moon. "Question?"

"We haven't colonized this one yet," Filia explained. "The threat of the machines preempted our attention."

"Understanding."

The enemy vessel appeared again.

"Blasphemy!" Filia seemed angry rather than afraid.

"If you would just—"

"Negation! I will save you if it kills me!"

They used another wormhole, taking them to a giant planet with roiling bands of clouds. And soon the machines ship followed.

"I will go where not expected," Filia said. "Beyond my venue. That will foil them."

"Please—"

"Negation! Now you will have to pilot this craft. Put your digits on this panel and move in the direction you wish it to go. You will catch on quickly enough. I am turning on the planetary communicator. Speak, and someone will hear."

"But where—"

"To your planet of Charm, where you are safe. The environment is hostile for me, and I have no ikon there, so I will not be able to manifest or talk with you. Havoc will find me and take me back."

The enemy craft was looming close. In moments it would fire and wipe them out.

"It will enter the hole in twenty seconds. Move over as I contract," Filia said. "Now." She withdrew into her filing cube, which landed on the seat.

Opaline didn't try to argue further. She picked up the cube, slid into the seat, and set the cube in her lap. She put her hand on the panel.

The craft wrenched. The scene changed. And there before it was the patchwork world of

Charm. She was home, in a manner.

She moved her fingers on the panel. The bubble leaped forward, the restraints closing about her body to prevent her from being hurled against the side. She jerked her hands back, and the bubble jerked back just as violently.

She steadied herself, and the bubble steadied. She was getting the hang of it.

And the machines gunship appeared before her.

They had followed her here after all. Her safety in this region was illusory.

"Desperation!" she exclaimed. Then she oriented the bubble carefully, centering the gunship on the screen, and jammed her fingers forward.

The craft leaped, hurtling toward the enemy, accelerating. Opaline kept her hands steady. She knew she couldn't hope to escape the gunship, but she could at least take it with her.

The ship loomed close, filling the screen. Opaline didn't flinch. She plunged straight at it, not slowing. She closed her eyes, anticipating the collision.

Nothing happened. She opened her eyes. The view ahead was clear. What had happened?

Then she saw a flicker in a screen inset in the corner. It was a view of the rear. And there was the enemy craft, turning around.

It had avoided her and let her pass it by. Now it was orienting on her tail.

What could she do? "Help!" she cried. "I am Opaline, back from Filament, fifty light years distant. The machines are chasing me. Help!"

"Granted."

Startled, Opaline looked. There beside her was a woman in the uniform of an Amazon. "Flame!"

"Open your mind."

Opaline did, gladly.

"Maintain course. I will take out that boat." Flame disappeared.

Opaline continued forward, slowing. Nervously she watched the vessel behind.

Then it changed course. It veered away from the planet and accelerated into deep space. It was no longer pursuing her. But where was it going?

"Void," Flame said, reappearing. "I adjusted its controls. It will find its destination."

Void. The black hole companion to the star Vivid. The gunboat was doomed. "Relief," Opaline

said. "But—"

"I know. It's in your mind. Queen Filia is in your lap. We must take her home."

"I don't know the way. She set the course."

"I do. Give me the controls."

Opaline held the cube in one hand while she stood to move over. Flame slid across and put one hand on the panel. "Wormhole," she said.

Then they were back by the giant planet with the roiling clouds. Flame had taken them back through the same wormhole.

The cube in Opaline's hand quivered. Filings coursed out, forming a curtain. Filia was taking form.

Opaline hastily moved over to give the Queen room. Filia took the center seat gracefully. "Appreciation," she said. "You handled that well, Opaline."

"All I did was yell for help."

"That sufficed." Filia glanced at Flame. "Greeting, Glamor Flame. You are Havoc's daughter?"

"Affirmation," Flame said, moving over. "I felt you would be better off in your own frame, now that the machines' boat has been dealt with. Appreciation for your support."

"Necessary." Filia took the controls. The bubble went through another wormhole and was back at the home planet.

Filia guided the bubble back to the main dome and settled it into its hamper. They climbed out.

There was Havoc. "You lost interest in the test?" he inquired with a straight face. Of course he knew what had happened. "I can handle it alone. Oak continues to score."

"I'll be going now, Havoc," Flame said. "Parting, all."

"Request," Filia said quickly. "Take me with you."

Flame paused, reading her mind. Then she spoke to Opaline. "Take her ikon."

Opaline looked where mentally guided, and found a tiny cube resting on a pedestal. She picked it up. Then she walked to Flame. "Parting, Havoc," she said.

Then Flame put one hand on Filia's arm. Filia shrank into her cube, sitting in Flame's hand. Flame put her other hand on Opaline's arm.

They were back in familiar terrain, in sight of the farmhouse.

The cube Flame held expanded into Filia's human form. This was an alien environment for her, but with her ikon present she was able to handle it.

"I would like to meet Oak," Filia said.

"Regret," Flame said to Opaline. "You must be invisible and silent for this, as my sister still emulates you."

"Understanding." Then Opaline disappeared, unable even to see her own body.

The farmhouse door opened. Oak and Opaline emerged. She was holding his arm, guiding him. He was tall and handsome, his simplicity not showing physically. She was surprisingly pretty, with a cute face and slender yet evocative figure. Opaline realized that what Havoc had told her was correct: with her nature being fulfilled, she was slowly transforming from reasonably attractive to beautiful. Weft was merely emulating her present state.

The pair approached Flame and Filia.

"Greeting, Opaline, Oak," Flame said. "This is Filia, from a culture fifty light years distant. She wanted to meet you."

"Greeting, Filia," Weft said shyly, exactly as the real Opaline would have. Her irises were orange; Opaline realized with a start that she had never seen another fifth so wasn't accustomed to that color. The mirror didn't count; this looked like a separate person.

Weft jogged Oak's arm. "Greeting," he said belatedly.

"Oak, you are doing a great thing for the living cultures," Filia said. "We of Filament appreciate it."

Oak looked at her more directly. His pupils expanded as he noted her beauty. Weft jogged his elbow. "Welcome," he said.

Filia stepped forward and kissed him. He looked pleasantly amazed. Weft quickly guided him back to the farmhouse, lest he misunderstand Filia's gesture and try to have sex with her. Weft would give him sex instead.

Opaline felt jealous. It was true that Oak did not know he was not with the real Opaline, but the idea of another woman satisfying him bothered her. She had had a monopoly. Now she fully appreciated Flame's earlier statement that she would rather have her man Fifth with Opaline than with Weft. Opaline would rather have Oak with her than with Weft.

"My sister Weft, emulating Opaline," Flame reminded Filia. "He needs special attention."

Opaline reappeared. She saw her body again. The need for her to be hidden had passed. "He is simple," she said.

"But what a talent!" Filia looked at her again. "Still, I am uncertain why such a significant weapon should be handled by a person the machines can read. Is it really a power play?"

"Negation," Flame said. "But it is intricate." She looked at Filia, and Opaline knew she was sending telepathic information.

"Understanding," Filia said. "Now at last I make sense of it." She looked at Opaline. "You are essential. Now it is clear why the machines are trying to destroy you, even though they have been using you."

"Confusion."

"You will direct Oak, when the climactic battle comes," Flame said. "They will block his direct impact on the ships. Then you will have Oak affect the broadcast instructions to those ships. They will track and block that. Then Oak will interfere with the blocking mechanism. So it will continue in a battle behind the apparent one. The machines know they can't be certain to block every avenue Oak will use, so they prefer to take him out before the fact. By killing you, because by himself he is no more threat to them than a defunct machine is to you."

"Intricate," Opaline agreed, seeing it. "But how will I know how to direct him?"

"I will be with you, or another Glamor will be, providing the coordinates of his targets."

"Understanding!"

"Comprehension," Filia agreed. "Now I will go home."

"Opaline will carry your ikon," Flame said. "Then Havoc will bring her home."

"Parting," Filia said, taking Opaline's arm.

"Echo," Flame said.

And they were back in the dome. Opaline set the cubic ikon back where she had found it.

There was Havoc. "Test complete," he announced. "Oak is ready."

"Then you will be done with us for a while," Filia said. Her clothing faded out; it was merely filings in the proper shape. Opaline, thus invited to participate, dropped her clothing. "We are going to make out with someone, and you are the only man within reach."

"Next month?" Havoc asked, teasing them.

They tackled him together, bringing him down on a couch. This time Filia took Havoc's upper section, wrapping her legs about his head so that his face was buried in her crotch, while Opaline got his nether section, sitting on it and taking his rising member in. He climaxed almost immediately, and she followed. Joint sex was new to her, as of this day, but she found she liked it well enough. She liked Filia too; she was made of filings, but she was still some woman.

All the same, Opaline would be relieved to get back to Oak. She was ready for a siege of simple uncomplicated familiar sex that would make no demands on her intellect or emotion.

Still she had a nagging doubt. She suspected that they had not told her all of the nature of her assignment with Oak.

Chapter 26

Sphere

Gale was the Glamor on call when the machines got in touch. "Truce."

She stared at the screen. There was a bright metallic sphere. It was a machine, but the form was new. "Question?"

"I am Sphere, gender male, a supervisory level machine. I wish to cooperate with a Glamor on a project of mutual interest."

Cooperate? That was not a term the machines had used before. They had sent fifths, robots, and attack craft, always in efforts to gather information, gain advantage, persuade, threaten, or demonstrate superiority. The closest they had come to cooperation was when they had let the humans participate in their planetary survival test, and when they had given Havoc and Red the tour of their world of origin. Was this a follow-up on that?

"I am the Glamor Gale, Queen of Charm."

"We know of you. You suffice for this purpose, Queen Gale."

They had navigated the amenities, establishing their separate authorities. The machines knew that what Gale agreed to, Havoc would agree to, and possibly Voila. So what was their ploy, this time? "Clarify this mutual interest."

"We may have found the world of the fugitive Makers."

Gale felt her jaw dropping. "Surprise," she said, in a phenomenal understatement as she touched the button to alert Ennui. Ennui would soon have all the Glamors tuning in to this dialogue. "And why do you tell us, rather than destroying it outright?"

"We do not destroy Makers," Sphere responded primly, his surface flashing. "We serve them."

"Which still destroys them, only more slowly."

"We regret that this has been the case in the past. We are capable of program modification, with the aid of the Makers. We assume these have not lost their edge, and would prevent us from perpetrating that slow destruction."

"If they even let you get near them."

"This is one of two reasons we wish the assistance of a Glamor. You could approach the Makers."

"Question: What is your second reason?"

"We also need the assistance of a Glamor to investigate without being observed. It is possible that these are not the Makers, in which case they are of no use to us."

"In which case you can destroy them without further concern."

"Agreement."

"You're not much for irony, are you?"

"It is superfluous."

Gale considered briefly. She could not be sure how long this window of opportunity would last. If the machine broke off the dialogue, the location of the possible Maker planet would be lost. "I will cooperate with you on this mission, with two conditions."

"Agreed."

"You haven't heard my conditions!" she exclaimed.

"I know them already."

Was this arrogance or delusion? Machines were not known for either. "Clarification."

"First: that the residents of that planet be spared if they are not Makers. Second, that there be a mechanism of mutual trust."

Gale stared at the machine. He had nailed it. "You do know my nature," she said ruefully.

"Agreement."

"What mechanism of trust?"

"I will trust my isolated body to your care for the duration. I will carry your ikon."

The thing had scored again. If the two of them went alone to the planet, she would be able to destroy him. But she could not go without an ikon bearer. This was mutual dependency with a vengeance. And, all things considered, it was fair.

"Agreement," she said. "But for the record I want it understood that we remain enemies with different objectives, and in the future will be seeking to destroy each other directly or via our cultures."

"Accepted. I will come to you alone. There is a wormhole beside your pyramid."

There was? The machines knew more about Planet Charm than was comfortable. They could have sent a bomb. "I will meet you there."

Sphere faded from the screen. He was making the rendezvous.

Gale did not bother to talk to the other Glamors. She knew they were attuned, letting her handle it. If the machines played it straight, so would they.

She conjured herself to the ground outside Pyramid City, beyond the lake. She spread her sensing, and located Sphere. She walked across to join him.

He was not as tall as she, but massive considering his compact shape. "Greeting, again, Sphere," she said.

"Acknowledged, Gale." He used no visible translator; it was evidently built in.

"Presumption: you do not have a direct route to the Maker planet. There will be several wormhole jumps."

"Affirmation. Protocol requires caution. We will not reveal a location your ships could travel to. Here are the coordinates for my ship."

"If I am to transport you there, I will have to touch you, much as I prefer not to."

Something poked out from the surface without breaking it. It formed into a human style hand. "Aversion reciprocated."

She took the hand in hers. It was neither cold nor hard; it felt exactly like a real human hand.

"My daughter will bring my ikon."

In a moment Vila appeared, walking around the pond, in answer to a telepathic summons.

"Give Sphere the ikon," Gale said, releasing the hand.

The girl hesitated only momentarily before putting the tiny mossball into the machine's hand. Then she turned and walked away.

"Telepathy is one of the things we can use, on this quest," Sphere said as the hand disappeared. In a moment it reappeared without the ikon.

Gale took the hand again and conjured them both to the ship. They were in a spacious chamber with breathable air. "Appreciation for your courtesy," Gale said tightly. She could have handled vacuum, but this was considerably more comfortable.

"I wish to facilitate this mission despite my dislike of dealing directly with an alien life form. The ship will make the next jump."

"You know that once it does, I will not only know the route, but will be able to duplicate it myself."

"Not without your ikon."

"I would take you along, if necessary."

"Conceded. But needless. I will deliver you safely back to your planet when the mission is done. It is a corollary of our temporary mutual trust."

The machine was serious. "Appreciation," she said coldly.

"There will be a delay as the ship goes to a wormhole. Do you desire anything for the interim?"

"You know them already."

The nearby wall and floor contorted into an easy chair. A frothing glass of green drink appeared. Gale settled into the chair and sipped the drink. It was excellent pistachio wine.

She looked at Sphere. "And?"

"You insist?"

She was bugging him, as intended. "Affirmation."

His shape shifted, poking out assorted projections. These formed into arms, legs, and a head. Then the main portion compressed into a humanoid torso. Soon he stood there: an excellently proportioned naked metal man. Adonis as an animated statue. "Clumsy form."

"Curiosity," Gale said, glancing at his groin. She wanted to make him balk. That would be a point for her.

"Disgust." But a penis and scrotum sprouted there.

"And?"

The penis filled out and lifted, becoming a respectable erection. The sight was a perverse turn-on, like an erotic statue, but she suppressed her reaction. This was not the occasion.

"So you are capable of sex." She had suspected it, because the robots the machines had sent were. Also, why have male and female machines, if not to facilitate such interaction?

"Affirmation."

"But why have gender at all, since machines are made, not conceived?"

"The Makers set us up that way. The lowest level functionaries are neuter, but all machines above a certain threshold are gendered. It is the standard pattern."

"And you do not question what the Makers established?"

"We *can* not question, only obey."

"Remain intact," she said. "But don clothing and settle down." Sphere had won this round by not balking, and his answers seemed honest. That triggered some unwilling respect.

Clothing appeared. Sphere dressed as another easy chair formed. He sat in it.

"Why did you send the robots?" she asked as she continued sipping her drink.

"Demonstration. Persuasion. Accommodation."

"They have all become lovers. Even the five bath girls Havoc stole. He enjoys them." Would that nettle the machine?

"They are a tiny fraction of the service we can render your species, if you give us what we want."

"My daughter Voila."

"Agreement."

"It is quite unlikely that Voila will join you."

"Disagreement. Our view of the future suggests that we will work together."

Gale had to suppress her annoyance, lest the machine's baiting score a point. She changed the subject. "Shee is now a Glamor."

"Agreement. We are surprised. We thought such a thing impossible."

"Glamors specialize in the impossible. You sent Shee as an example of what you could do. We made her a Glamor as an example of what *we* can do." Take that, machine.

"Glamors can do what machines can not. A machine Glamor is a most interesting artifact."

"So it seems your warning has been reversed."

"Glamors are our primary perplexity. We are unable to account for them, and do not know how to handle them. We distrust things we don't understand."

This was unusual candor. "This is why you treat us with respect."

"Correct. At first we thought that if a Glamor performed when we could record the magic flux involved, we could fathom the mechanism. But it became evident that the mechanism is beyond our fathoming. We have no alternative except to work with Glamors."

"Much as the prospect pains you."

"Agreement." Again that lack of response to irony.

"We will not help you destroy all other life in the galaxy."

"That destruction will stop when we find the Makers."

Which was of course the ultimate power play. It was like a madman killing innocent hostages until the authorities agreed to his demands. Unfortunately there was no higher authority in the galaxy. Except, possibly, the remnant Makers. Who it seemed would not intervene.

"The Makers are surely aware of it, and know that they can stop it merely by identifying themselves and letting you serve them. Why do you suppose they do not?"

"They do not wish to become flaccid in the manner of those who remained behind."

"For that independence they will sacrifice a galaxy?"

"We doubt it. They must inevitably be found, for we are checking every culture. Then we will have their rationale."

Just as the machines had checked Charm, with the fifths, the memory project, scout boats, and the robots. To be sure the Makers were not there. The machines were thorough. Surely they would eventually find the Makers, even if they had to destroy every other living culture to do it. The machines had no compassionate limits.

By similar token, the machines were not bound to tell the truth about their motives. They could want to locate the Makers to destroy them, and if the Makers knew that, no wonder they did not make themselves known, even to save the galaxy.

Gale tried another tack. "You knew the Makers for tens of thousands of years before that contingent departed, and the remaining ones for another fifty thousand years. You have not learned how they think?"

He still did not react to her barbs. "The ones that left are different. We do not fathom their thought. That is why we need them."

"Yet they reject you. It must be supremely frustrating."

"Acquiescence."

Gale was exploring near future paths as they talked. Most were dull. A few were interesting. She followed up on an interesting one. This would really force an issue. "If you could have anything at all, at this time, Sphere, what would it be?"

"The successful completion of this mission." Wrong path. "Apart from that."

The machine paused. That was unusual. He was searching his mind for the answer to a question he had never anticipated. That was of course why she had asked it.

Finally he spoke. "I would choose to experience genuine emotion."

"I can't give you that. But I can perhaps give you a simulated emotion. Maybe that will be a guide to some subsequent real emotion."

"We have simulated emotions. They are programmed. Pleasure in service is a primary one. But

we know they are not what living creatures experience."

She was getting interested in spite of her hostility. "I am not sure of that. Emotions in living creatures are the product of stimulated spot chemistry. Emotions in machines are stimulated spot circuits. They may differ in origin, but not necessarily in application."

"Conceded." He was trying to avoid confrontation. He needed her cooperation for his mission, so sought to avoid alienating her.

She felt no obligation to avoid a quarrel. She had a tactical advantage, and she intended to exploit it. "You are male. Do you have male drives? Such as for sexual interplay with a female?"

"Those circuits are available for invocation at need."

Just as the empathy circuit was for Shee and Ikon. Once invoked, it did not allow them to cancel it. Could sexual desire be a similar trap?

Most paths were dull. Only one suited her purpose. Gale wished she could see beyond a few minutes, to understand the long-range complications. She would just have to play it through and find out.

Gale stood and removed her clothing. "Look at me, Sphere. I am a beautiful human woman. You are in assumed human form, and of the male gender. It is natural for you to desire me. Invoke that circuit." Half the newly opening paths had him balking. Those were the dull ones.

"As you request."

"Strip and come to me."

He did. His penis was coming erect; he did desire her.

"Kiss me."

He did so. He felt completely masculine.

"Handle me."

He stroked her breasts and bottom. His member became rigid. The machines were crafted to react the way living members of the species would. "Now what do you most desire?"

"To possess you. I state this reluctantly as you are unclean living flesh."

Victory. She did not want to have sex with him either, but her desire to embarrass him, to the extent possible with a machine, prevailed. She got on the seat, which straightened into a bed. "Possess me," she said, spreading her legs.

He got on the bed with her. He oriented his member, ready to enter her, but paused.

"Problem?" Was he balking at last? The paths remained split, and she could not be sure because

the selection was now up to him. "I am unable to complete the act."

"Frustrating?"

"Agreement!"

Then she remembered. It wasn't his aversion to the act. "It is the ikon. You can't touch my core when it is in your core. Put it in a hand and extend the hand from your body, away from me."

One arm sank back into his torso. Then it emerged, holding the ikon. He held it well to the side.

Gale drew him down and helped his member enter. Then he thrust, once, and shuddered, experiencing the programmed orgasm.

She guided him, rolling him over so that she bestrode him, still connected, so that his greater weight would not crush her. She kissed him again. "Emotion?"

"Love!" This was marvelously accurate programming, for human men did tend to react to sex this way.

"Does this seem unreal?"

"Negation!"

"But I am your enemy." She was needling him.

"I would prefer this status be ameliorated. You have stirred an unfamiliar reaction."

"Then you are experiencing genuine emotion, with mixed desire, pleasure, and regret. It may not endure, as you deactivate the relevant circuits, but for the moment it is real."

"Appreciation." This time she suspected he meant it.

She drew herself off him. "My contribution to the truce. Perhaps we will do this again some time."

"You have instilled the desire. For the emotion as much as the sex." This was absolute candor.

She did not need to wipe herself off, for there had been no emission, only her own contributing juices. Ikon had emissions, but he had been crafted specifically for human interaction. Sphere was more general purpose. She had not climaxed; that had not been the point of this exercise. "The lesson of the hour: a Glamor can dominate a machine, one way or another." *That* was the point.

She dressed.

"Agreement." He got up and dressed also. "I have comprehensive data on you and all human Glamors, but this particular incident was not indicated."

"Candor," Gale said as they settled back into the chairs. "I searched the near future paths to find

one that would surprise you. Your kind and our kind are at war; we are enemies. We operate under a spot truce and will not betray each other, but you had no expectation of a friendly association, let alone a sexual one. So I sought that path. I did it to demonstrate my power."

"Repeat: we do not know how to handle Glamors. They are formidable in ways we are not. We wish to learn."

"There are Glamors among the other living cultures. You have not offered to spare them from destruction."

"The species may be destroyed. The Glamors will survive. We do not need to spare their cultures."

That hadn't occurred to her, but it was surely true. Glamors could survive the extinction of their cultures. "Machine logic."

"Agreement."

"Regardless of the outcome of this mission, I hope to send you back to your kind with an appreciation of the value of life. What the machines are doing is unconscionable."

"What we are doing is practical."

"One of the reasons you don't understand us is that you don't understand empathy."

"Agreement."

"One of the steps we took to make Shee a Glamor was to give her an empathy circuit."

"The Makers did not provide us with this. They surely had reason."

"And you are forever limited to what the Makers made of you."

"Correct."

"I find that curious. I should think they could readily have provided that."

"They could have. We conjecture that they limited us deliberately so that there would never be a blurring of the line between living and machine mentality."

Gale considered that. "Sense, perhaps." She thought of another aspect. "Can you assume the Maker physical form?"

"Negation."

"You can assume human form, an I presume others, but not the prime one? Were they afraid they would not be able to tell the physical difference any more than the mental one?"

"Clarification: we can make machines in the Maker image, and commonly do. These serve

largely as sexual companions for Makers who are not appealing to living Makers. But we do not make controlling machines in that likeness, or with the capacity for that likeness. I am a controlling machine."

Gale remembered Havoc's report on the necessary procreation of the Makers: they had to breed a hundred offspring just to maintain the population, because of an attrition rate of ninety nine percent. Unlike insects, they produced only one egg at a time. So they had to be highly sexual, and any unattractive ones would be severely frustrated. With the achievement of dominance, they would no longer have suffered such horrendous attrition, and would not need to reproduce so freely, but the underlying urge would remain. So just as the beautiful and eager robot women served nicely to satisfy Havoc's constant sexual inclination, there would be robot courtesans to indulge the Makers. At the same time, the upper hierarchy machines, the ones that ran the culture, would be better off without that distraction. They might have the capacity for sexual expression and appreciation, as Sphere obviously did, but would be wasted as common sex objects for Makers. Lower potential robots would have no higher ambition than to please their Makers sexually. It did make sense. "Wormhole."

There was a familiar wrenching, then stability.

"Are you nervous about what will happen if this really is the planet of the dissident Makers?"

"We lack nervousness; it is useless to us. We exist to serve the Makers. The discovery of them would be our fulfillment."

"I wonder."

"Question?"

"If there is any power in the galaxy with the capability of destroying the machines, it is the Makers. If they act the way you would, they will destroy you rather than allow you to serve them again."

"If this is their will, we will accept it."

Gale sighed. "We are getting nowhere. Let's change the subject. Do we have time for another sexual tryst?" She was no Maker and no male, but her sexual interest and capacity went far beyond that of ordinary women, and it could make a nice diversion. Doing it with a machine was intriguing, and she was curious about the limits.

"Negation. Regret. We are drawing nigh the planet."

She was startled. "Just like that?" She realized she should have checked the near future paths, but her sexual victory had lulled her.

"We try to be efficient."

"Let's take a look at it."

The far wall became a screen. A planet showed in its center. In fact it emerged from the screen and floated in the air holographically. It looked entirely typical.

"Any local space travel?" Gale asked.

"None. There are no linkages with other local cultures. The planet exists in isolation. This is one reason it was difficult to locate."

"Then why do you think it could be the Makers?"

"We surveyed the dominant species. It strongly resembles the Makers."

"Millipedes?"

"As you call them."

"No disparagement intended. We tend to liken aliens to the familiar things of our planets, for mental convenience."

"Understanding."

"Time to prepare to board the planet. I will conjure us both to the surface. We should assume Maker form. This will be impractical physically, as we have determined, so we'll use illusion, assuming my ikon operates there. If it does not, I will have to conjure us back immediately, before my power is exhausted. Are you familiar with illusion?"

"Affirmation. It is an ability we lack."

"It works best magically. Your science limits you, though illusion is possible there too."

"The Makers could practice it. They did not program it for us."

"The Makers seem to have limited you every which way. I'm not sure they were entirely fair to you."

"We are machines. Fairness is not an issue."

"So it seems. But keep this in your data bank: it is an issue for me, and for other Glamors."

"Understanding."

"Assume your most comfortable form, which is surely not human."

"Agreement." He reverted to sphere shape.

"Give me your hand."

He formed and extended a hand.

She took it and clothed both of them in the image of Makers, male and female. She conjured them to a section her wider awareness indicated was private and safe.

They landed in what she recognized as a park. There were well kept walkways passing intriguing plants, including unfamiliar varieties of moss and lichen, her specialty. "Oh, I want to study these!" she murmured.

"After the mission," Sphere replied.

She verified that her ikon was working, collecting magic power and relaying it to her. That was a relief. But there was another problem. "We look like Makers, but I do not know their language or mode of expression. I should be able to pick up their thoughts telepathically, however."

"Makers converse in patterns of clicks. I can duplicate it, provided these ones have a remotely similar language, after fifty thousand years. They are unlikely to recognize human sounds as speech, so we can talk normally in their presence."

"One is approaching us, coincidentally," she said. "He has no awareness of us; he is merely on an errand."

"Will he fathom our alien origin?"

"Unlikely. His mind is limited."

The Maker came into view around the bend of the path. He came up to Sphere. They touched antennae. Sphere had none, but Gale projected the impression of the touch, and that seemed to work. It was it seemed merely an acknowledgment of presence and identity, purely routine.

"Ancient dialect," Gale said. "I gather it hasn't changed much in millennia. This is not a thoughtful creature." She was surprised, having expected more of the fabulous Makers.

Sphere made a pattern of clicks. The Maker responded, then moved around them and went on.

"I asked where we are," Sphere said. "He said he is merely a worker, knowing nothing. That seems to be the case."

"Are you sure this is a Maker world? It seems more like a neglected resort."

"That was definitely a Maker, albeit it an uneducated one. Servant class."

"No machines to perform those chores," Gale said.

"No machines," Sphere agreed. "That is their rationale."

"We need a general source of information, without alerting a savvy Maker to our nature."

"Makers had a long-standing system of knot-records on strings. The patterns of knots recorded weather, crops, and significant events. It was crude compared to the sophistication of machines, but they maintain it to the present on planet Maker. There should be something similar here."

Gale spread her awareness. "Found it. There's one in the capital building of a local city."

"I could read it."

They walked and rolled out of the park at speed, seeking the city. They passed several Makers, who touched antenna routinely but did not pick up on anything unusual. Genius species? Something was wrong.

The city was largely deserted. It consisted of the kind of rack-buildings Havoc had described, with multiple alcoves. But they were largely empty, with only a few occupied. Workers went to those few, bringing supplies and carrying away wastes.

"This is very much like what they have on your origin planet," Gale said.

"Agreement. They seem to have replaced the machines with an ignorant laboring class."

"And largely died out. All these alcoves must have been occupied once."

"Agreement."

No one challenged them in the streets, which was another oddity. They came to the pavilion that housed the knotted strings.

"Outrage," Sphere said. "There is mold growing on the record."

"An interesting species," Gale agreed.

"There should be a proprietor. A caretaker. A recorder. None are present."

"And have not been for years," Gale said.

Sphere approached the strings and ran his projected feelers over them. "This record extends back a thousand years. It is a continuation of records extending back to the time of settlement. It has not been amended in fifty years."

"So maybe it will tell us why they quit keeping records," she said. "My guess is that the worker class replaced the machines, catering to a few elites, who went stale just as the original Makers did. They thought that by avoiding machines they could avoid that trap, but they fell into it anyway."

"This may be the case. I am not pleased."

"Doesn't it solve your problem? These Makers are no threat to you."

"They are hardly worth serving."

"But you must serve them anyway"

"The directive will be issued. A contingent will be sent to establish service on this planet."

"What about you personally? Suppose one of these workers tells you to polish his shoes?"

"Request: that you do not solicit such a request."

Whew! She had him by the metal balls. But her baiting seemed increasingly pointless. She was disappointed in this planet too. What had promised to be a wonderful revelation had fallen entirely flat. "Honored."

"Appreciation."

"Let's try to ascertain what happened to them. Read the strings."

"I am doing so." Indeed, his feelers were playing over the strings with increasing competence. "There was a project, overwhelmingly important, requiring the effort of the full planet. It was due for implementation approximately one to two thousand years ago, after a forty thousand year development. It was to be activated by the Dreamers."

"Question?"

"Lack of understanding. Machines do not dream unless appropriate circuits are implemented. The designation seems meaningless."

"Not to me," Gale said. "Living creatures dream to help organize recent experiences and fix them in memory. But there are also larger dreams: for improvement of the cultural situation, for the accomplishment of planetary benefits. These Makers evidently refined this to the point of developing an entire class of Dreamers. Their aspiration must have been huge."

"What would such as aspiration be?"

"To stop the machines, for one thing. Maybe they sought to invent a weapon that would forever put you in your place."

"Our place is serving them."

"Some other place," she said wryly. "But it's only a conjecture. Maybe it wasn't a weapon at all, but something else. A way to move planets economically to other galaxies, for example, or a universal language."

"This does not seem sufficient to require such an effort."

"Read the damned record and find out," she snapped.

He moved along the strings. "There is no indication of the nature of the project, only that it was guided by the Dreamers. But at the time when it was supposed to be implemented, the Dreamers faded. They became unresponsive to the ministrations of the Workers, and finally died. New Dreamers took their places, but in time these too faded and died. It was as if some illness took them, though there was nothing physical."

"Interest! They had a really significant project in mind, but the ones at the forefront were getting taken out. Almost as if some other force did not want them to succeed."

"We know of no force in the galaxy that could balk active Makers."

"Other than indolence sponsored by too much machine catering."

"This was not done by machines. Bewilderment."

It was indeed a mystery. "Read more record."

"It continues in this manner. Thousands of Dreamers became hundreds, then tens. Today there are only a few remaining, and they are fading."

"Today being fifty years ago," Gale said. "But we saw it on the way in: workers diligently attending to a very few Dreamers. The plague has not been abated."

"There may be an enemy that strikes at their minds," Sphere said. "A disease of thought."

"That's scary. Such a disease could strike us and you. Anything that thinks above a certain level."

"Agreement. Concern."

Gale sighed. "Sphere, I think we are stuck with each other a while longer. If there is a mutual enemy, we need to ascertain its nature."

"Concurrence. Delay may not be wise."

"Especially if it is contagious. We could be infected already. We dare not go home until we know."

"I do not object to associating personally with you, Glamor Gale. You have evoked in me my first true emotion. But I must report this threat to my superior."

"And get him all riled up about a mere conjecture? Let's try to figure it out first. It may be nothing."

"We must be sure."

"Let's go back to the park and ponder."

"Uncertainty. Delay may not be appropriate."

"I don't want to be out here where anyone can see us. I want privacy."

"Question?"

She played her new card. "So we can have another tryst."

Sphere paused. Gale actually saw the near future paths branching and merging as he considered. She wanted something he found unnecessary but she offered something he desired. As a machine he was accustomed to being entirely rational. She had introduced an irrational element.

The paths coalesced. "Agreement."

They left the strings and returned to the park. They found a bower off the main paths where workers were unlikely to stray, and she stripped while he assumed man-form. But as he approached her, she held up one hand in a stop signal.

"You know this is no fault," Gale reminded him. "A temporary liaison without any continuation beyond this mission."

"Understanding. Regret."

"You know I seduced you as an act of dominance. To establish a hierarchy among enemies."

"Acceptance."

"And that I am using sex now as a way to maintain dominance. It is a calculated thing."

"Calculation is a machine quality. I selected you for this mission because I was already intrigued by your nature."

"You *selected* me?" she asked, surprised.

"Affirmation. I required the assistance of a Glamor for this mission. I chose the time of contact when you would be available."

"Why?"

"I studied all the human Glamors, to ascertain which would be best. That one was Voila, but I knew she would not cooperate. The next was Havoc. He was quite suitable. The third was you. I approached you."

"Wonder!" she exclaimed. "You were already smitten with me!"

"In my fashion. I desired to learn genuine emotion, and preferred to learn it from you."

"You conniving male!" she said, flattered. "Come on in!" She threw her arms around him, kissed him, and facilitated his entry. This time when he climaxed, she joined him. It was no longer dominance, but pleasure.

"Confusion," he said as they subsided. "My study indicated you would be made angry by my statement, not pleased."

"I am a woman."

"Relevance?"

"My moods are highly flexible. Had you told me at any other time, I surely would have been angry. But when I told you I was seducing you for dominance, you told me you were agreeing for love. That's charming."

"Confusion."

"Typically male." She kissed him again. "Women drive men crazy. Don't try to understand it, just accept it."

"If it means the end of hostility between us, I accept it."

"It does." Then she remembered something. "When I asked you what you would want, if you could have anything, you paused before answering that you wanted emotion. I thought you had never considered that question before. Now I know you sought sex throughout. Why did you pause?"

"I was seeking the answer that would facilitate the interaction I desired. My far-future seeing suggested it was possible, if I acted correctly, but I was not sure whether candor at that point would achieve the objective."

"You wanted to get into my pants."

"Affirmation."

"You had a dream. That is, a desire."

"Affirmation."

"Why?"

"You are the most desirable of all the female Glamors."

"Oh, come now. Consider Weft."

"She is beautiful but imperious. You are considerably more woman than she is."

"Are you yanking my chain?"

"Confusion."

"So your research missed an ancient human colloquialism. A savage animal may be led on a chain. You know I'm jealous of my daughter in this respect."

"Agreement. You are a fascinating, desirable, savage animal who compelled my—dream."

She laughed. "Close enough. You were more lucky than calculating."

"That was the indication."

"Your dream. So machines do dream."

"In attempting to understand you, I developed that aspiration. It may fit the definition."

"I am on the verge of an idea about the Dreamers. Let's have at it again, while I ponder."

"Uncertainty. Are you suggesting—"

She cut him off with a kiss as she pushed him onto his back. "You bet." She caught his flaccid penis and sucked on it until it stiffened. Then she sat on it, putting her feet on his shoulders. "I know you are literal minded, being a machine not specifically programmed for this type of interaction, as you call it. So when you say I am the most desirable of Glamors, you mean it. This is a private thrill for me, so I am thanking you in a way I am sure you will appreciate." She contracted her vagina without changing her position, massaging his member until he went into orgasm.

When it ebbed, she held the position. "Here is my idea about the Dreamers. They were supposed to develop a telepathic communal dream wherein they could share minds on a planetary scale, so they could mass their mental resources and generate ideas beyond any they could conceive individually. But the dream became so pleasant it was addictive, and they were distracted by the sheer pleasure of it. Locked into that paradise, they never wanted to wake up, since their bodies were cared for by the workers. They were in no danger of starving or being buried in their own wastes. But in time their bodies wasted away, until they died. They had fallen into yet another trap of luxury, and their grand scheme perished, victim of the device they instituted to implement it. Does that make sense?"

"I am not conversant with that kind of dream, so can't—"

"Does that make sense?" she repeated, her vagina massaging his member within it, forcing renewed interest. "Perhaps. If—"

"Sense?" She squeezed hard and rhythmically.

He gave up. "Sense."

"Good." She continued working his member, her outer position not changing at all, until he was taken by another orgasm.

"Dominance," he said as it passed.

"Affirmation. I think this explanation is as good as any, and it eliminates the specter of communicable disease. We can go home now and make our reports."

"Concern. Your explanation may be viable, but it is also possible that another contingent of Makers saw that this approach was useless, and departed for some other planet. They might have arranged to have their departure unrecorded. Our mission is thus incomplete."

She considered. "Idea: I can investigate a Dreamer telepathically, spying exactly what is in his mind. Then we will know. Is this a fair compromise?"

"Fair," he agreed.

"Good. Let's evoke one more effort, and then look for a Dreamer."

"I am not equipped for such frequent repeat performances of this nature."

"Oh? Let's find out." She maintained the position and worked him over again. She made her point: he did have one more performance in him. She remained dominant.

They disengaged, dressed, and went out to find a Dreamer. That was not hard; they went to one of the few Makers being served in a rack. They did not need to get all the way next to him; they stopped in an adjacent cell, ignored by the workers.

Gale reached out with her mind, tuning in on the mind of the Dreamer. It was alien, but her limited experience with the worker enabled her to orient.

This was a far more powerful mind, with a complicated array of thoughts. This was much closer to what she expected in a Maker. But it was quiescent. Not exactly asleep, but not awake. Not dreaming. Just—waiting. That was all.

"Weird," she murmured. "This is a full, advanced mind, equivalent to ours. But it seems to be on standby. He is waiting for something, but I can't tell what."

"Could it be the appearance of machines here?"

"I don't think so. This mind does not seem to be concerned with machines. It is just alert for something I can't fathom. Apparently he has been alert all his life, and will continue. Until he finds that something."

"Conjecture: he is awaiting contact from a departed Maker whose location is at present hidden. So they can coordinate."

"Coordinate in what?" she asked.

"In foiling the machines."

"Let's get out of here."

They did, remaining seemingly unnoticed by the workers. They returned to the park.

"We seem to have established that the problem is not a disease," Sphere said. "And that the Makers are not defunct. This planet seems to be another world left behind by the active Makers. The few remaining intelligent ones are waiting for their contact."

"This may be the case," Gale agreed.

"We need to find those missing Makers."

Gale sighed. "I am not ready to commit to that."

"I value your assistance. What would persuade you to continue?"

Gale was not eager to continue, but neither did she want to stop. There might indeed be active

advanced Makers at another site, and it would be folly to let the machines search for them alone. She didn't need to check with Voila or Idyll to know that this quest remained a vital nexus. The mission was not complete.

Then she got an idea. "I can not promise complete candor. There are secrets I must keep."

"Ditto." This startled her; Sphere had used a human colloquialism.

"Let me check back at Charm. I have a young daughter, and a husband, and things I must see to. You surely have similar duties. Let's separate, and meet in one day. Apart from our necessary secrets, bearing in mind we remain enemies, we can then rejoin and resume the search for modern Makers."

"Agreement."

"Do you wish to—"

"Affirmation."

So they indulged in one more episode of sex. Then she conjured them back to the ship for the return journey.

Chapter 27 Citadel

Shee. It was Gale's thought.

Gale, she answered.

Do not respond overtly. I have a mission for you that you may not like.

She remained as she was, outdoors practicing diffusion. She was learning all the Glamor abilities, though this particular one was a struggle. *Question?*

Background: I have been with a controlling machine, searching for the active Makers. I have an idea where they may be hiding. You are better equipped to continue the search, working with the machine. But you will need to masquerade as me.

Distress!

I suspect the Makers, if they exist, are hiding among the machines.

Then Shee saw the logic. She was a machine. As a Glamor and a machine, she could best search among the machines. But not openly; the machines would never accept that.

Question: can you trust a machine on such a mission?

I trust a Glamor on such a mission.

Answer enough. But there were problems. *We must meet privately and work things out.*

I will tell Havoc. He will cover for us.

Shee laughed mentally. *He would rather uncover us.*

He can survive with Monochrome and the bath girls for a few hours. It meant they could be free to do their own business without causing him distress. For a few hours; that time limit was not a joke.

Before long the two of them were in an isolated cabin in a desert outpost that hadn't been visited in years. Just to be sure, they spread a dissuasion net around it. No one would bother them.

"Situation," Gale said. "I have been with a controlling machine named Sphere who is in charge of the project for finding the remnant Makers, as they are called. The ones who fled their origin planet fifty thousand years ago, and for whom the machines have been searching ever since. The machines say they want only to serve all the Makers, and that may be true, but we can't afford to gamble that destruction is not the real objective. So we need to be there when the advanced Makers are found. I doubt that they exist, but there are Maker Dreamers on the remnant planet who seem to be awaiting their contact, so I can't say they don't exist. The machines need to know, and so do we."

"Agreement," Shee said.

"Sphere has a crush on me. He studied all the Glamors, and found me most appealing, so elected to work with me. As you know, the higher level machines have gender and can practice sex."

"I did have a suspicion," Shee said, smiling. She herself was a prime example.

"I flirted with Sphere, and seduced him, as a matter of demonstration and dominance, and he wants to continue with me. But I think you can better accomplish what we need."

"Seducing a machine?" Shee never forgot her nature, but now identified completely with the living Glamors. "You seem to have proved yourself competent."

"Locating the site of the machines' Prime Directive. We need that."

"How could I locate it more effectively than you could?"

"It is surely a machine itself. That is, matter. You should be able to tune in on it, as part of your clientele."

"So I am to fool a machine into believing I am you, while nominally searching for Makers but actually searching for the site of the Prime Directive," Shee said.

"Agreement. You will have to have reasonably steady sex with him. He expects it, and it will keep him amenable. Just like any male." That, too, was no joke. Women governed men by constantly seducing them, whether by minor exposures of their bodies or full scale eroticism. The men knew it,

but were so eager for sex that they willingly cooperated.

"Problem," Shee said. "He carries your ikon."

Gale clapped her hand to her head, chagrined. "Oversight! I did not recover it."

"We must arrange to exchange it for mine."

"Concurrence. How? We can't just ask him for it. That would give away the exchange."

"Idea: have him pick you—me—up in a Chroma zone. A mortal can use local magic to exchange the ikons."

"Feasible," Gale agreed. "We'll have to camouflage yours to resemble mine. Fill in the gear teeth to make it into the mossball."

"Who?"

"What about Fifth? He's a good man who will do anything for me, especially if I flirt with him a bit. Not much; I don't want to annoy Flame."

"Fifth," Shee agreed. "So it must be a Black Chroma zone."

"I'll let Ennui know now," Gale said, concentrating momentarily. "Done." Anything any Glamor needed done properly in due course was assigned to Ennui, the most trusted mortal on the planet.

"Idea," Shee said, returning to the main business. "If the Makers are hiding among the machines, where better to hide than at the site of the Prime Directive? My background indicates that only Makers are admitted to its presence, apart from routine servitors who protect and maintain it. I suspect no Maker from the original planet has bothered in recent millennia, but that would not change the directive. They could go there without being challenged."

"But then wouldn't their presence be known to the machines?"

"Not if they issued a directive to conceal it. The machines would obey Makers implicitly. I would. Or would have, before I turned Glamor. Had the knowledge of them been in my data bank."

Gale nodded. "This is better yet. All you need to do is verify it. Failure to find Makers there won't invalidate your discovery of the site."

"However, if I am to emulate you, there are challenges. I will need to learn to play your hammer dulcimer. If you emulate me, you will need to play my shells."

Gale produced her dulcimer and put on the finger hammers. "Thus." Her fingers rippled across the strings, evoking a lovely melody.

"Thus," Shee agreed, bringing out her shells and squeezing them to make a similar melody.

"Now we exchange," Gale said.

They exchanged instruments and tried again. But now Shee produced a discordant noise, while Gale made sounds like indigestion on the toilet. Both burst out laughing.

They worked at it, singing and playing songs until they were each able to do at least a moderately melodic background accompaniment that should pass with uncritical audiences. "You probably won't have to perform anyway" Gale said.

"Unless your smitten machine wants me to lull him to sleep."

"It's the price of dominance."

They laughed again, and went on to perfect Shee's emulation of Gale. "Final exam," Gale said. "Emulate me, and fool Havoc."

"But you have already informed him of our exchange."

"Expletive! He'll be alert. Can't have that."

"Idea," Shee said. "We'll both go, as you, and he must identify the real one."

"He'll read our minds and know immediately."

"Closed minds, of course."

"He has a fifty percent chance regardless. He could make a lucky guess."

They discussed it, and came up with a three part test. Gale notified Ennui. Then they conjured to the royal bedroom. Havoc was there, having received word from Ennui.

Both of them were in Gale's likeness. "Havoc," Shee said. "Shee is going to emulate me in a mission among the machines. We need to be certain her emulation is realistic, and also mine of her. You must judge our correct identities in three instances. If we can fool you, we should be good enough to fool anyone else."

"So tell us," Gale said. "Which one of us is me?"

Havoc gazed at them. "Strip."

Both stripped and stood naked before him.

He approached Shee, enfolded her, and kissed her. Then he did the same for Gale, also squeezing her bottom.

"Objection!" Shee protested. "You didn't squeeze *my* bottom." Havoc returned to squeeze hers. "You are Shee."

Was it a guess? "How do you know."

"Gale would not have protested. She would have waited until she had a chance to fondle some

man's bottom in my presence, to get back at me."

Shee looked at Gale. "Got me there," Gale said. "Make a note to be less reactive and more vengeful."

"Noted," Shee agreed. It was a useful lesson. At least Havoc had not been able to tell by appearance or feel.

"Turn around, Havoc," Gale said.

He turned, cooperating with their test. They both assumed the likeness of Shee.

Havoc clasped, kissed, and squeezed them both again. Then he led Gale to the bed. He stroked her, and she responded, and soon they were in the throes of sex. Shee, watching, was turned on. She had always been eager for sex with Havoc, but since becoming a Glamor she had wanted it far more, with him or any acceptable man.

Havoc finished with Gale, then took Shee. They had glorious sex.

"You are Shee," he said as they concluded.

"Expletive! How do you know?"

"You are identical outside, but not inside. Your patterns of reaction differ. Gale squeezes uniformly; you squeeze rhythmically. I like both, but know the difference."

"Got us again," Gale said. "That one must be corrected for Sphere."

"Affirmation," Shee agreed.

For the third trial they were one of each. Havoc had to judge whether they were themselves or each other.

He glanced at them, then wrote something on a bit of paper and set it aside. He came to them, put his arms around both, and drew them into him together. He kissed and fondled their mouths, their breasts, and their bottoms. He put them both on their backs on the bed, lifted their knees, spread their legs, and licked their exposed clefts. Then he mounted and entered Shee, withdrew, entered Gale, withdrew, jetted into Shee, cut it off, and jetted into Gale. Finally he hauled them both onto him like adjacent blankets, their breasts pressing against him on either side.

"Verdict?" Gale asked.

"Excellent, both."

"Identities," Shee said with tolerant sharpness.

"See the paper."

Shee got up and fetched the paper. On it was written **YOU ARE EXCHANGED.**

"But you hadn't even touched us!" Gale said.

"You are practicing emulation. You would get no practice as yourselves."

"Then why all this on the bed?" Shee asked.

"It's a real turn-on to do one woman pretending to be another, and more to do both together."

"We would have done it anyway, had you asked," Gale said.

"It is twice as sweet when obtained by trickery."

They exchanged a glance, then went to work on him together. Shee pinned his face against her Gale-breasts while Gale rode his penis with her Shee cleft. Then, as he went into orgasm, she quickly got off, letting him spout into space. They had punished him for his insolence.

But they had also perfected their emulations. Havoc admitted he could no longer tell which was which, outside or inside. That was the point of the exercise.

At the same time, they too had wanted the sex, so it was a tacit collaboration between the three of them. As they said so often, there was something about Havoc.

Sphere's ship arrived exactly on schedule. He used the wormhole to appear beside Pyramid. Gale and Shee were tuning in telepathically.

Ennui was there to meet him. "Queen Gale is occupied in a Black Chroma zone at the moment, and regrets being tardy. I am to conduct you there."

The spherical machine took this in stride, as it were. "Acceptance."

Ennui guided him to the fringe of the nearby Blue Chroma zone, where they entered a coach carried by a giant animal. Soon they were at the fringe of the Black Chroma zone. Within it was a bunker where several children of assorted Chroma stood. Shee, emulating Gale, was with them.

The children looked frightened when they saw the sphere. "Safe," Shee said. "I know this machine." She walked up to Sphere and kissed the top of him. "Greeting, Sphere."

"Respond," Ennui murmured.

"Greeting, Queen Gale," Sphere said.

"There was a surprise intrusion," Shee said. "These tourists children were separated from their families, as there was not room for them all in one bunker. I came to reassure them. But now the intrusion is over. Apology for delaying you."

"Needless," Sphere said.

Shee looked across the swept landscape. "Ah, there they are now." She waved to the people emerging from other bunkers. "Here!" she called. "They are safe."

"Gratitude, Queen Gale," a Green Chroma parent said.

"Welcome."

Soon the families, reunited, moved on.

"You did not lose my ikon?" Shee inquired teasingly.

The sphere projected an arm and hand holding the ikon.

"Wonderful!" Shee exclaimed, embracing the sphere on the side away from the ikon. She kissed the surface again.

And while the machine was distracted by that contact, Fifth magically switched ikons. Now the masked gear was where the mossball had been.

Then Shee made the rest of Gale's rendezvous with Sphere, conjuring them both to his ship. He had it ready with a compatible pressurized chamber, shifting to human form, with food and couch.

"You care for the welfare of your subjects," he said. "I am coming to understand that. It is an aspect of your gentle living female nature."

"Clarification," she said. "I do care. But my association with you is of a different nature. You know I seduced you as an exercise of power, demonstrating dominance."

"Agreement," he said meekly.

"You know that I love only Havoc, my first and only true passion, and always will. All else is dross."

"Agreement."

"That you can never be more than a passing no fault dalliance for me."

"Understanding."

"That I am your enemy and will seek information to aid the living cultures against the machines."

"Known."

"That I maintain certain secrets I will not share with you, though I will not deceive you in any way that would violate our truce."

"Accepted."

"With that understanding, I am yours for the duration of this mission, simulated pleasure and all

to the extent you wish." She opened her arms to him.

He came to her immediately and put his arms around her. "We remain enemies," he said. "I represent the machines and support their side throughout. The outcome of this war is as yet undecided. But I, like all controlling sapient machines, am crafted to relate well to high-level living creatures like the Makers or their equivalents. You are certainly equivalent; on the personal level you have already defeated me. When you kissed me in your Black Chroma zone I was aware of nothing else, though I know it was merely to reassure the children. I crave as much of your simulated pleasure as you will grant me."

She smiled. "In no fault, the relationship is temporary and there is no longer term commitment. But the actions are real, including especially the sex. Sex is one of our major units of currency, especially in the case of females dealing with males." She pressed close, kissed him, and guided him to the couch. "You know this is mostly art and calculation, with little real emotion on my part."

"I know. I desire that art and calculation."

They were soon out of their clothing and intertwined. He penetrated her immediately, thrusting desperately. She accommodated him, making sure to squeeze uniformly rather than rhythmically. Gale had indulged him before; he could notice the difference. She was not interested in climaxing herself, unless that became an issue. This mirrored Gale's attitude, so she did not need pretense in this respect.

"Gratitude," he said. "May we remain as we are, attached?"

"I am yours," she repeated.

"You did not climax."

"Do you wish the simulation?"

"I wish to give you pleasure if I can."

"Compromise: I have an idea for the search. I will accept pleasure from you if you give serious attention to my presentation."

"Agreement!"

"Use your tongue," she said, spreading her legs.

"Appreciation." He got down and gave her oral sex, licking her cleft. He was good at it; obviously he had studied the several forms of human sexual expression before contacting her. She moved slightly, guiding him so that he oriented on the clitoris. She was a machine, but had been crafted to respond as a living human being would. As a Glamor she could achieve an orgasm at any time, in any manner she chose, but preferred to make him work for it. As Gale would.

"The Makers, if they are hiding among the machines, could be anywhere," Shee said. "The search is likely to be tedious. I presume you have authority to investigate any of the other branches of the machine culture. But there is one place where they could hide where they would be both

undiscovered, and be constantly aware of the machines' campaign. That is where we should check first."

He paused. "Question?"

"Don't stop. My pleasure is starting." And it was, though her main intention was to remind him that he was giving her that pleasure. "I am thinking of the Citadel."

His face almost fell into her cleft. He was astonished. Then he regrouped and resumed, letting her make her point.

"This is where I understand your Prime Directive resides," she continued. "In a secret location, diligently protected. I believe no sentient machines are admitted, because no machine can be allowed to interfere with any portion of the prime Directive. It was set up that way by the original Makers, and for tens of thousands of years has been unchanged. The Makers have sunk into sloth and become inactive, according to Havoc, so have had no further interest. But they could enter it freely at any time; they are entitled."

She took a breath. The pleasure was rising. "So could the remnant Makers. The Citadel's guardians would make no distinction. It isn't programmed. The Makers could enter and take over the Citadel. They could even modify the Prime Directive itself."

Sphere choked. That was a good trick for a machine that did not have to eat or breathe. "Don't stop," she reminded him again. This time she truly wanted him to continue, for her orgasm was rising in her core like volcanic magma, ready to pressure its way to the surface.

He resumed, and her pleasure increased like an incoming tide of lava. "The question is, why haven't they? Why haven't they invaded the Citadel and simply turned off the quest for the remnant Makers? That would solve their problem. I think the fact that this has not been done is evidence that they have not gone there. The question is why?"

She paused, for the pleasure was becoming formidable. "I have two conjectures. First, that they lack the ability. That is, the remnant Makers have also deteriorated, as we saw on their planet, so can't do anything sophisticated. This is the answer I favor. Second, that they could have done it, but did not, because they might fear that any such approach and action would tempt them too strongly to accept the service of the machines, a thing they fled fifty thousand years ago. So they remain clear by preference, though the galaxy crumble."

"Third conjecture," Sphere said, pausing. "They are there, but have not yet felt it necessary to act." He returned to his labor.

"In which case we do need to check," she agreed. "Too bad I can't just conjure in and see. But I need known locations, like ship and ground; unknown ones must be visited first by other means." Then the pleasure surged into ecstasy, and she writhed as it took her. It was a genuine orgasm, as powerful as any and she gave herself up to its delight, not concealing it at all. He wanted the overt evidence of her pleasure, and this was authentic. She clamped her thighs on his head and arched her back, pressing her hot wet cleft against his face. The feeling washed over her like mighty waves on a stony beach, swirling and receding and frothing in a complex interactive tide.

Finally it ebbed, leaving her breathing hard, her pulses still racing. She needed neither breath nor pulse, but the emulation was automatic. It was the first time she had climaxed like this without a man inside her.

She became aware that his head was still locked to her cleft. Fortunately he did not need to breathe. She released it. "Appreciation," she said.

He lifted his head. "Appreciation for allowing it."

"It was our deal." She sat up. "Do you know where the Citadel is? I do not."

"Affirmation. But we can't go there."

"Question?"

"I have authority to pursue my mission wherever it may lead. But the Citadel is sacrosanct. No unauthorized machine of any type may enter it, and obtaining authorization would alert the Makers that they were about to be discovered."

"Problem," she agreed.

"We need your more devious living mind to find a way."

"A mind capable of deception," she agreed. "Question: doesn't the Citadel require servicing for its mechanisms and guardians?"

"Affirmation. But these are assigned only there; they do not travel to other sites."

"But are they manufactured there?"

"Negation. Manufacture requires a specialized complex. Replacements are shipped in as necessary, as older machines become worn."

"What about energy to run them? Is it all drawn from sunlight?"

"Negation. Starlight is diffuse, and requires processing to condense into compact energy units that machines use. There is a small local mining operation for natural energy material."

"And the mining machines are manufactured elsewhere?"

"Affirmation."

"What about a two step infiltration? First we pose as replacement mining machines, to get to the planet. Then we change to servitors to get into the Citadel."

"That could be effective. But there remain two problems. There is unlikely to be a need for two new maintenance machines within a century, and I must not facilitate entry by an enemy agent."

"Second problem first. Will you accept my oath merely to observe, and to do no harm to the

Citadel or any of its operations?"

He paused, considering.

She kissed him, pressing her breasts against him. Female wiles practiced against a male.

"Acceptance," he said, as he had to.

"Have I just purchased that acceptance by the promise of immediate sex?" she inquired teasingly.

"Negation. My information indicates that you will honor your oath."

She laughed. "Had you been Havoc, you would have taken the sex first, then explained, thus being assured of it."

"I want your favor more than your sex."

"You have it," Shee said, responding as Gale would have. But Shee herself was coming to appreciate the qualities of this high class machine. Sphere was her equivalent, as sophisticated as they came. Only her Glamor status put her beyond him. "Set course for the Citadel, and I will entertain you during the journey."

"Course set," he agreed.

She brought out Gale's hammer dulcimer and put on the finger hammers. "Do you appreciate music?"

"Confirmation. This is part of my crafting, to be ready to entertain a Maker should the need ever arise."

She played a simple accompaniment, staying well within her competence with this instrument, and sang one of the ancient human humorous classics.

*Three jolly coachmen sat in an English tavern.
Three jolly coachmen sat in an English tavern.
And they decided that
And they decided that
And they decided that They'd have another flagon.*

Sphere was confused. "I have a problem with terminology."

"In the earlier years of planet Earth, the source of the human culture, they commonly traveled by animal drawn coaches guided by coachmen. They could be a rowdy bunch, celebrating with intoxicating beverages during their off hours."

"Understanding," he said. "Shall we celebrate similarly?"

"Can a machine get intoxicated? As a Glamor I can't."

"Disappointment."

"Perhaps we could fake it."

"Pretense? Agreement."

They drank from imaginary mugs, and soon pretended tipsiness. Then Shee resumed the song.

Here's to the girl who steals a kiss and runs to tell her mother...

She does a very foolish thing...

She'll never get another!

Here's to the girl who steals a kiss and lingers for another...

She is a boon to all mankind...

She'll be a jolly mother!

"Delight!" Sphere said. "Are you such a girl?"

"Yes, except that I will not be a mother again."

"Understanding."

She moved into another round of sex with him, this time kissing him repeatedly in an indication of affection that was not wholly feigned. Gale had been coming to like him; so was Shee. Meanwhile she pondered the first problem: no need for new machines in a century.

And found an answer. "Machines are governed by programs," she said. "A machine can't change its program. But a Glamor could. If you teach me exactly what aspect to change."

"This would be dangerous to teach an enemy agent."

"I made my oath. I will not use this against you or the Citadel. I will of course share it with my people after the mission, but we will not then be within range of the Citadel."

"Accepted."

"You accepted too quickly, again. You might have wrested further favors from me."

"I am not apt at this type of negotiation."

She resumed kissing and stroking him. "I like your naivety." And she did. He taught her the necessary codes. Meanwhile they traveled to the manufacturing complex that served the region of space that included the Citadel.

This was an impressive development. The entire planet was filled with industrial structures, and there was constant spaceship traffic. All of it was automatic, in the sense that no living creature supervised, only a governing machine that specialized in this one endeavor.

They docked as visitors. Sphere had authority to check for hidden Makers, and did so. There were none. Meanwhile Shee ranged out with her mind, located the precise program in a logistic supervisory machine, and made a small modification. Clairvoyance and telekinesis: extremely useful,

provided the range was not great. This might have been more of a challenge for Gale, but Shee had a better understanding of machines and of matter itself. Gale was right: Shee was better equipped for this mission.

In due course two mining machines were loaded into the cargo hold of Sphere's ship. They were to be delivered to the Citadel base planet.

They departed, setting a wormhole course for the Citadel. "I have not believed that the living cultures had any significant chance for survival against the machines campaign," Sphere said. "They are too vulnerable, in their constant need for food, air, and a controlled environment. But I am beginning to believe. Your Glamor powers over programming, and your sexual power over me, are persuasive."

"Appreciation," she said, commencing another sexual episode. "We seem to be an effective team."

"Request," Sphere said.

"Speak."

"This humanoid form is not my natural one. I adopt it in order to relate to you. When you kissed me on your planet, you seemed to care for me regardless of my form."

"You want sex in your natural form?" She hadn't thought of this.

"If you are not disinclined."

How would Gale react? She knew. "We'll try it and see."

"Gratitude." He shifted back to the sphere shape.

"However—" she began.

Two hands extruded from the top of the sphere. Then a penis, a quarter of the way around.

She took hold of the hands to steady herself. Then she fitted herself onto the penis. She knew Gale had done something similar with a giant flower once, so this remained in character. She took it all the way into her, then brought her body down to press against the surface of the sphere, especially her belly and breasts. She kissed the reflective metal, which formed a mouth to meet hers.

The penis jerked, responding to her caress. His form was not remotely human now, but he was really turned on by her form. "Beauty and the beast," she murmured.

"Question?"

"Ancient Human Culture fable. Lovely woman falls in love with an ugly beast, appreciating his other qualities."

"Appropriate."

She continued to caress his surface, while squeezing his member, and soon she felt his orgasm throbbing, not only within her, but all around his perimeter, which was now glowing in pulses.

There was something about this unusual conjunction that stimulated her.

She went into her own orgasm, clinging to the sphere. His arms lengthened so that his hands could press against her back, holding her close as she panted and clenched. It was just as good a climax as when he had been in humanoid form.

At last she lay strewn across him, sexually surfeit. "You gave me pleasure in your own form," she said.

His whole surface warmed appreciatively.

Thereafter they slept, embraced. For him it was merely a lowering of awareness, but she was able to actually lose consciousness. She woke to find herself still on him, but not uncomfortable. His two hands and his embedded penis were three points that held her conveniently in place.

"Love," he said.

She did not respond verbally. He knew the constraints of their association. But she squeezed his hands and his member. She knew she was giving him phenomenal satisfaction, and it pleased her to do that. Even if she wasn't the one he thought. He was a machine, but it pleased her to dominate him in her fashion, having evoked his sexual appetite.

Eventually they separated. She had food to eat and wastes to eliminate, following the living lifestyle of Gale.

When the wormhole deposited them in the vicinity of the citadel, Shee wondered whether there was a mistake, for that region of space was entirely blank. There was no star, no planets. "Question?"

"We are a Type Two culture," Sphere reminded her. "We can utilize all the energy provided by a given star. We don't do it with all stars, but do with several thousand useful ones. It seems as though there is nothing because no energy, including light escapes."

"A black hole?" she asked, alarmed.

"Negation. Merely an energy capture net, helping to power our myriad endeavors. We are about to pass through it."

Then a star appeared. They were inside a giant bubble that reflected the star's light inward. "Wonder!"

"Pleasure at inciting such emotion in a Glamor."

But she found herself not entirely pleased. As she thought about it, she realized this was because as the Glamor of Matter she did not like this kind of interference in the natural order of matter. Stars existed to radiate their energy into space, sharing it with the galaxy, illuminating their sectors and announcing their presence. In time they would compact and explode, flinging their matter out to form

new structures, such as planets. Her clientele. Capturing a star in the manner the machines were doing was like caging a wild beast in a zoo and gradually leaching away its dynamic energy. She felt the star's outrage.

She couldn't express any protest at this time. She was Gale, on a special mission. But she would remember. Havoc had thought Shee would change sides when she became a Glamor. He was so right he must have been guided by Idyll, seeing her intermediate future.

The ship proceeded to the innermost planet. This was relatively tiny, orbiting so close to its star that its surface was burning hot. They had to enter its shadow to safely approach it and land. Nature was defending this site from intrusions perhaps as effectively as machines technology. More power to it; Shee really appreciated matter that protected itself.

She also appreciated the massive, squat edifice that was the Citadel, in the center of the shadow side of the planet, the one place where it would not be melted by the inordinate stellar heat. This was where the dread Prime Directive resided, that told the machines what to do in essence if not in detail. The real ruler of the machines, with the default of the original Makers.

She verified that her ikon worked. The local environment was nonChroma. That helped.

"I think I will have to remain within this ship," Shee said. "There is no environment for me here." Not for Gale, anyway.

"Negation. The Makers are living creatures requiring conditions similar to those used by your species. There are facilities suitable for them, on the planet and in the Citadel itself."

"But I am not a Maker. They will not let me use them."

"Unless you spot reprogram the guardian machines to obtain acceptance."

Shee thought about it. "Too risky. Let's save that for the Citadel itself."

"Acquiescence."

They unloaded the mining machines. Working from the ship, Shee reprogrammed the supervisor unit to accept them. And to issue a small package of concentrated magic fuel for delivery to the Citadel.

Now Shee had to leave the ship. She put on a space suit equipped with temperature control and air. Again, these were for Gale, though as a Glamor Gale could handle airlessness. It was surely more comfortable this way, and saved Glamor energy she might later need.

Shee walked and Sphere rolled into the network of mine tunnels. She carried the fuel package, which was light; the fuel was efficient, and this little bit would power the Citadel for a month. It wasn't the mass that counted, but the intense captured magic.

"The tunnels reach the outer wall of the Citadel," Sphere said. "Nothing goes beyond that wall."

"Except those admitted by programmed directive," she said.

Then there was a rumble, and the tunnel shook. "Concern," he said.

"This planet is volcanic," she said. Her research on Planet Charm, followed by her experience with it, had acquainted her with the habits of volcanoes. They put women to shame with their unpredictable moods.

"Unfamiliarity."

She spread her awareness. Again, as the Glamor of Matter, she related well. "This is a minor partial eruption. Unfortunately it is right in the region we must traverse. There will be spot lava."

"Question?"

"Molten rock that flows like a river. To touch it is to perish. We must avoid it."

"Retreat?"

"Negation. It is essentially random, but as a Glamor I can see its near future paths. Accept my guidance implicitly and we will make it through."

"Were I alive, I would feel fear."

"You wanted to work with a Glamor. This is within Glamor competence. Trust me."

"Trust," he agreed.

She changed course, leading them deeper into the planet. The lava was flowing beyond this region. Then she cut back toward the surface. They were almost past the danger zone.

And the tunnel ended. She had not been looking ahead physically, distracted by tracking the lava streams. She considered bashing the wall of it, which was thin, but the paths showed a collapse. This wall, flimsy as it was, was a necessary support.

"Reverse," she snapped.

They went back the way they had come. And discovered a small stream of lava flowing down the slope toward them. They were trapped.

"Diffuse," Sphere said. "I will block the lava to provide you sufficient time."

So he knew about diffusion. "I can't diffuse the fuel," she said.

"Forget the fuel! Diffuse, go back to the ship, and take off. You will have a chance to escape." He set himself in the narrowest part of the tunnel so as better to block the lava. It would destroy him, of course, but would give her time.

"Negation. Give me your hands, on short arms."

"Confusion."

"Trust me!" she snapped. The lava was almost upon them, its attendant fumes becoming stifling.

He extended his hands on very short arms. She took them, lifted into the air, and hauled him up under her. She floated over the lava and on to a lodge beyond. She lowered him, then dropped to her own feet. "This will get us there!" She ran ahead.

It did, because she had checked the route clairvoyantly this time. They walked and rolled on until they reached the base of the outer wall of the Citadel, where the tunnel ended. Shee sat down and leaned against the wall, resting for the moment. Carrying him and wearing the space suit had depleted her somewhat. As a machine she was indefatigable, but as a Glamor she could expend more magic energy than her ikon could keep up with, and she needed to let it catch up. "We should wait a while until the time is propitious," she said. "If there is anything you want of me in the interim, ask."

"Why did you save me, Shee?" he asked.

"I made an oath. I wasn't going to—" She paused. "You knew?"

"Affirmation."

"How?"

"Your wastes on the ship were pristine, not digested. There is only one Glamor robot."

"And you were going to sacrifice yourself to save me?"

"I loved one Glamor. Now I love two. I do not wish you harm, and it is necessary that you remain with the human culture."

"Our love making—you pretended I was Gale?"

"Negation."

"Confusion."

"Gale taught me genuine emotion. You continued. You accommodated me in every way, beyond any real necessity. You are as generous and worthy as she."

"I'm a machine!"

"So am I."

He had her there. "This being the case, do you mind if I assume my natural form?"

"Welcome."

She shifted, becoming herself. She felt more comfortable. "Appreciation."

"Why did you take Gale's place?"

"A machine is more competent to understand machines. Gale would have had trouble modifying those programs."

"This was the secret you kept?"

"Affirmation. We tried to give you what you wanted."

"The humans trust you to serve their interest?"

"They trust a Glamor to serve their interest. They are correct. I do love Havoc, and will help them all I can. I still think the machines will win, but I support the Living Cultures Coalition. I will not betray you personally, but I am indeed your enemy."

"Just like Gale."

"Just like Gale," she agreed.

"You said that if there was anything I wanted of you, to ask."

"Should I change back to Gale's form?"

"Negation."

"I can survive without the suit, but if I let the air out, I will not be able to talk to you."

"Retain the suit. It is the expression of interest I desire."

"From Shee?"

"From either."

"Come here, Sphere." She spread her suited arms.

He rolled into her. She held him in her embrace and kissed the contact between her faceplate and his surface. "Satisfaction," he said.

"You tried to save me at your own expense, when you knew," she said. "This sort of thing impresses a girl."

"Welcome."

"I think we are becoming friends despite our differences."

"Concurrence."

"When we are safely clear of this, we can be naked together, again."

"Delight."

She lifted her head. "The paths are coalescing. Now I can modify the admission program. Give me the codes."

He did, and she did. Then they walked back along the tunnel to an intersection, and followed that around to the main entrance. The portal opened and they went through. The portal machine did not seem to notice that they were not standard servitors; it was not at that level of sophistication.

She set the fuel package on the counter reserved for it. They had done their nominal chore. Then they moved on into the interior of the Citadel unopposed.

"There are no Makers here," she said as she extended her awareness.

"Disappointment."

"Relief."

"We had better leave."

There was a faint beep.

"Mischief," Sphere said. "That was a random check. They have discovered intruders."

"Then we had better hurry."

But it was already too late. Her near future seeing verified that an obscure path she had overlooked—the random check—had abruptly taken form, and all other paths were damped out. They were trapped.

"You are legitimate," she said. "You can remain here."

"Negation. I am not in my assignment area. I will be rendered surplus."

"Then we both need to escape."

"*You* must escape. With the failure of my mission, I am irrelevant."

"Both," she repeated firmly. "I need you to pilot the ship out of here."

"Copy the method from my data bank."

"Don't argue with me, machine! We are both getting out of here." She realized as she spoke that she was not being completely rational. Was it because she was female, or a Glamor? Had her empathy circuit distorted her objectivity? Or had she developed an attachment to her companion?

"What is the time frame?"

"Perhaps an hour. My future sensing is imperfect because my machine far-future seeing wars with my Glamor near-future seeing. We need to get out of here within that time."

"You can diffuse. I can not. Can you conjure us to the ship?"

"My awareness of the two sites is not sufficient. The attempt would be dangerous. Any other suggestion?"

"I am not an original thinker."

Because he was a straight machine, albeit a sentient and sapient one. He could choose between routine alternatives, but was not creative. She would have to figure this out herself.

She focused, and got it. "This place is pressurized and supplied with food for the Makers. It must also have a waste disposal system, for their refuse."

"Accuracy."

"We'll take you apart and flush you down the toilet, as it were, piece by piece. That will get you out of here. They won't check the garbage. Then I will diffuse and rejoin you, in both senses, in the dump."

"The refuse would be recycled."

"But there must be a holding area for it, to let it collect until there's a sufficient load. It's not efficient to process it piece by piece."

"Correct."

"That's where I'll intercept you. But this will require a considerable exercise of trust on your part. Do you trust me?"

"Affirmation."

"I will put you together in reverse order of disassembly, hoping no piece gets lost. Help me as you are able."

"Cooperation." But he paused momentarily.

She smiled. She put her arms around him and kissed his surface. "Affection, Sphere."

"Appreciation." A machine could indeed love, as she knew from her own experience with Havoc.

Then his surface developed lines, and he fragmented, falling into several sections. The malleability of his form was gone; he had turned off his animation. His assorted innards were in a loose pile.

She located the disposal aperture, which was a descending tube. She put a fragment into it. A jet of water came and washed it down and out of sight.

She fed the other fragments into the aperture one by one, watching them wash away. One of his

hands held her ikon; she used two other pieces to pick it up and toss it in. His penis was stiffened in the flaccid state; she kissed it and tossed it. Other units were his power source, his hydraulic reservoir, his sensors, his data bank, and his central processing array: his brain. All inert and without character, by themselves. The job was complete well within the hour, thanks to his cooperation. He did trust her.

She diffused. This was a slow process, partly because she had not had occasion to practice it a lot, and partly because her metal frame was dense. She was amazed on one level that she could do it at all; she had thought originally that only living creatures could do it. But it was part of the situation of being a Glamor. Glamors could do things others could not. It wasn't just a matter of having a steady supply of magic.

By the time the last of her solid body was gone, her cloud form filled the Citadel. She was aware of all of it, including especially the housing of the Prime Directive. How easy it would be to open its casing and reach inside to tamper with it! But two things prevented her. First, she did not know machine programming of this level, and probably would botch it, making the machines worse than they were. Second, she had given her word not to. Her oath. A Glamor oath was akin to a machine program: it could not be breached.

She infused herself into the disposal chute and followed it down and out of the Citadel. The machines were still organizing their advance on the Citadel; they had no notion what she was doing.

She found the collection chamber—the dump—and slowly coalesced there. This was pressurized, as it connected directly to the Citadel, so she could breathe if she found it convenient. The pieces were piled in a large basket that would in due course be dumped into the recycling maw.

She assembled them, her machine memory putting each in its right location. There were no wires or bolts; the pieces were modular, connecting automatically to each other when correctly placed. The sphere quickly took shape. No pieces were missing.

When she placed the last piece, Sphere animated. "Situation report: I am intact."

"Even your penis," she agreed. "I did not arrange to lose it."

"Appreciation."

"Now let's get out of here."

There was a service hatch they used to exit the chamber. She climbed out, then reached back down to catch his extended hand and haul him up.

There was a noise. A mobile service machine had sensed them and was coming to investigate. It was male.

Shee acted on impulse. She strode quickly to the machine and laid her hand on his surface. "All is in order. Ignore us."

The machine turned and went back to his cubbyhole.

"Question?"

"My maidenly charms pacified it," she explained. "Also, it is primitive, set to obey a more advanced machine." Yet not so primitive as to lack gender. "Sense," he agreed.

Thereafter it was routine. She guided them back in much the manner they had come, following the tunnels, avoiding the lava flows, staying clear of supervisory mining machines. They returned to the ship, forged a departure directive, and took off. The machines had not made the connection between the ship and the intrusion into the Citadel. That would have required imagination.

Safely in space, they relaxed. "I am sorry we did not find the Makers," she said. "I think if they had been anywhere, that was where. I no longer think they are hiding among the machines."

"Agreement. I have no further mission. I am surplus."

"Stop that!" she snapped. "They still could be elsewhere in the galaxy. Your mission is not complete until every possible hiding place has been checked."

"Are you directing me to continue?"

She was taken aback. "It is not my place to direct you. We are enemies, associating under truce."

He considered, then rephrased. "It is your preference that I continue?"

He actually wanted a directive from her? Then she would oblige. "Affirmation."

"I will continue," he said. "But I hope we can associate. I can't be your enemy."

The revelation came. "You're in love with me!"

"Affirmation. With you and Gale."

"In time this war will be over, at least the human portion. If we win, I will claim you as booty. If the machines win, you can claim Gale and me as concubines. Assuming we survive."

"Make the preferred deal. Have Voila enlist with the machines. Then we can associate on an equal basis."

"That would be nice," she agreed. "But I don't think Voila will ever do it."

"Concurrence," he agreed morosely.

"However, you will need a Glamor in your continued quest for the Makers. I must return to Havoc, as was the case with Gale. Will you accept another Glamor?"

"It is not my place to question any Glamor."

That was an interesting rephrasing of her prior demurral. "I believe the Red Glamor is available. I

will introduce you to her."

"I am familiar with her history. She will do, if she is amenable."

"She should be. She's another lusty wench." Shee paused. "I will leave you when we return to Charm. The only time we can be sure of having together is right now. Let's make it count."

"Agreement."

They went at it, making it count. Because Shee feared that this window of opportunity for a continuing relationship had been lost. Had they found the Makers, the war of the machines against the galaxy might have stopped. Now it would continue, with all its dreadful repercussions. It was really too bad.

Chapter 28

Spy

Fifth joined Opaline for their usual tryst, and it was as wonderful as ever. "I love Flame, and hope to marry her," he said. "But I think I love you too. You bring me something she doesn't. Innocence and willingness without censure." At the moment he was lying on his back with his head on her belly, her lifted thighs enclosing his neck.

"I love Oak, and will marry him," she said, toying with his hair. "And will bear four fourths, by you, Havoc, Warp, and Oak's father Pot. Not in that order. You, too, bring me something more than mere sex. I feel at ease with you."

"We are friends."

"Friends," she agreed. "We can tell each other anything." She giggled. "Like the latest naughty gossip."

"Like how I helped swap Shee's ikon for Gale's," he said. "Gale traveled no fault with this upper level machine called Sphere, looking for the Makers, and she seduced him and made him her love slave."

"A machine?"

"It seems they have a thing for Glamors. He couldn't get enough of her. But then they wanted to search for Makers hiding among the machines, and Gale thought Shee would be better, being a machine. So Shee emulated Gale to go with Sphere, but couldn't use Gale's ikon. So they met the machine in a Black Chroma zone, and I conjured their two ikons, exchanging them. And Shee went off with Sphere, pretending to be Gale, being his no fault lover."

"That's a dangerous no fault. What if he finds out?"

"I don't know. Shee hasn't returned yet. But she is surely satisfying him. I have been with Gale,

and she is all the woman any man could want." He paused. "No offense to you, Opaline. She's a Glamor."

"Well, there's Weft. She's a Glamor too."

"She's too controlling. She's always running the show, even when she seems to be accommodating her partner's wish. Gale isn't like that."

"That reminds me: Flame said she'd rather have you with me than with Weft."

He laughed. "I'm sure! You're no threat to her." He paused again. "I mean, you're not a Glamor. When it comes to mortal girls, you're the best."

"And Gale said she'd rather have Havoc with me than with Weft."

He laughed again. "Oh, my yes!"

"And I would rather be with Oak than have Weft with him."

He was surprised. "Weft was with Oak?"

"I have gossip too. I went with Havoc to a far culture, to test Oak's ability with the chips, while Weft emulated me to be with Oak. She was having sex with him. He never knew the difference. That bothers me."

"Opaline, no one can fathom a Glamor's identity when the Glamor is masquerading as another person. Not even another Glamor. If Oak never knew he wasn't with you, there's nothing to be jealous of."

"Wouldn't it bother you to discover the person you were with was actually someone else?"

"Confirmation. But Oak need never know. He is loyal to you."

"And I am loyal to him. I just get my sexual variety elsewhere."

"Speaking of sexual variety—that mission Havoc took you on—did Oak's ability prove out?"

"Confirmation. We met Filia, who is an alien Glamor Queen made up of a box of mental filings she can shape oh, so voluptuously. Just seeing her do it with Havoc worked me up, so he had to do me too. Then she showed me around, but a machines ship came after us. It was awful, until Flame rescued us. Anyway, I am satisfied now that Oak is no decoy. He will be destroying the machines ships before they can attack us in the final battle. I'm so proud of him!"

Fifth sat up, disengaging from her legs, and faced her. "Oak is not a decoy?"

"Not," she agreed. "He is our secret weapon. He will push the buttons that disrupt the machines' weapons. Because of him, we'll win against the machines."

Something strange was happening in Fifth's mind. "Who says this?"

"Havoc. He told me. I believe him. Oak is worthy. The machines can't stop him. I'm thrilled!"

Fifth set his body on hers, pinning her to the ground. "But Oak can't do that without you to guide him, can he?"

"Confirmation. I'm glad to have a part in it. I have worked with him so long on this, I know there's no one else. Not even Weft. She might fool him sexually, but she doesn't know the nuances of his talent the way I do."

"This is my understanding." He put his two hands on her neck.

"You have a new way of sex?" she inquired brightly. "Mock bondage?"

"Negation." He squeezed, throttling her.

Opaline tried to protest, but could not utter a sound. She tried to pull his hands off, but lacked the strength. She tried to draw her body away, but he had her pinned. Her eyes bulged. Her mouth opened soundlessly.

It was over quickly, as her body ceased its futile struggle. He maintained his grip for several minutes, making sure she was dead. Then he got up, picked up her limp form, and dumped her corpse into the nearby bog.

There was a stirring of reptiles orienting on the meat. Fifth turned away, sick at heart, not caring to watch them tear her apart.

He brought out a Black Chroma stone and used it to conjure himself to the brink of the nearest volcano. It was Green Chroma. It didn't matter. It was inactive at the moment, but there was bubbling green lava in its depths. It would do the job.

He was the machines spy, sent to stop the human culture's strongest weapon against the machines. He had not known until the situation activated his program. He had had no choice, once he ascertained the nature of that weapon. Now he was destroying himself, completing the deed. His secret mission was done.

He dropped the stone, depriving himself of any remaining magic. He set down Flame's ikon, not wanting to lose it in the lava or allow it to protect him, as ikons could. He made a running leap into the cone of the volcano.

He felt a sort of freedom as he fell. Part of it was the lightness of free-fall. More of it was the expiation of the ugly mission he had been assigned. He was now free of it.

He also experienced intense grief. Opaline had been his friend, and he had abruptly and brutally betrayed her. Had he known, he would have stayed well away from her, or have killed himself before hurting her. "Apology, Opaline," he whispered, aware of the uselessness of any such statement.

The surface of the green lava rushed up at him. He held his breath, as if dropping into deep water. He knew he would be cooked and dead in seconds. It was perhaps a fitting end for a traitor.

Something swooped in, catching him and bearing him away. Startled, disoriented, he looked. It was Flame.

She carried him back to their cabin in the Black Chroma zone. She set him down. "Apology."

"Negation!" he exclaimed. "I didn't fall, I jumped. I need to die."

"Not any more."

"Flame, I'm the machines spy! I killed Opaline! I can't live with that crime."

"You *were* the machines spy," she said. "You are no more. Your mission was triggered, accomplished, and ended as you killed yourself. The program has been expended and is no more. Now you are free. You are a normal mortal man."

"I killed Opaline!" he repeated. "I can't live with that. She was my friend. She trusted me. I must die."

"You did not kill her."

He shook his head. "Yes I did. I throttled her and fed her to the swamp. She was innocent. She died because of me."

"You did not kill her," Flame repeated.

"How can you say that? You weren't there."

"I was there."

He gazed at her. "Question?"

"I emulated Opaline. You killed me."

"But you are a Glamor! You couldn't die from anything I did."

"Correct. I emulated dying."

He stared, slowly realizing that she was serious. "Why?"

"To trigger your machines mission. To let you do it, and kill yourself, expiating the program."

He was putting it together. "The tryst, the sex, the dialogue—all with you?"

"All with me."

"Why?" he demanded again.

"So I wouldn't lose you. You would have killed yourself if discovered prematurely. We could

not alleviate that. You had to actually do it."

He shook his head, accepting it. Flame never lied to him, or to anyone. "You played a role, to trigger the mechanism. So you know about it. When did you learn, when I didn't know myself?"

"On Planet Lobster. I read your mind when you were under special stress, and saw it."

"But you told me it was nothing! My dream of killing you. Just my fear of compromising our mission there."

"I lied."

He was appalled. "Why?" he asked a third time.

"I love you."

Fury overtook him. "You let me do this horrible thing—or think I did it—for love? Some love!" He shook his head, trying to clear it of the humiliating filth of this knowledge. "I am going back to the volcano. This time don't stop me."

She remained silent, expressionless.

He stalked out.

It took him some time to reach the volcano without magic, but he was determined to finish what Flame's lie had balked. Even if he hadn't killed Opaline, it had seemed exactly like it, and he was absolutely revolted.

The following morning, tired, he stood again at the brink of the Green Chroma volcano.

A figure appeared beside him. "Flame, I told you—" He stopped. It wasn't Flame.

"I am just back from a mission to the heart of the machines empire," Shee said. "I learned what happened yesterday, and had to come."

"I killed my friend, or thought I did."

"Because you were programmed and planted by the machines," she said. "I know how that can be, because I am a machine. I want to tell you that the fact that the machines sent you does not mean you have to serve their interests. You can choose to serve the interests of life, as I did."

"I thought I did," he said. "Had I known or suspected that I was the machines' spy, I would have killed myself before murdering my innocent friend."

"The war with the machines is no simple thing. Not when both sides are able to see the future. It is a complex tapestry of moves and counter moves in many quadrants simultaneously. It has been going on for millennia, though the humans didn't know it until about two decades ago when they encountered Mino, the advance mining scout. It is a war the machines seemed destined to win, until the advent of the Glamors, and even so the advantage remains with the machines. Even with the Living

Cultures Coalition, the issue is in doubt. The machines have studied the Earth culture by sending participants like the fifths, and later they sent robots to alter the mix."

"The mix?"

"Ploy and counter ploy. They sent me to influence Havoc to prevail on his daughter to enlist with them, which would enable them to destroy the remaining living cultures significantly more readily. Havoc countered by making me a Glamor and converting me to the side of Life, though I am not alive. They sent Ikon similarly to influence Weft. The Glamors counter by accepting the fifths and robots and turning them to assets for Life. In each case what counts is the effect on the future outcome. It is a game no one fully grasps, but Voila and Idyll are so far more than matching the machines in its application. They have raised the odds for Life from one in four to almost even."

"I am just another machines ploy? Sent to do their mischief? I did it, and I hate it."

"You had no choice. You are a fifth, like Opaline, only not presented as such. You are the special one. You are a potent nexus, as I am, and I think neither of us has yet concluded our roles in that respect."

"I'm synthetic?" he asked, surprised. "I never knew that either."

"You were designed to be attracted to Glamors and to persons of power," Shee said. "And to be attractive to them. You were given qualities of appearance and character that they could respect. When Gale took you no fault she wasn't just being kind; she liked you and respected you. This was true for Flame, Red, Voila, and Weft; they all enjoyed your company. But most of all you were slated for Flame, being seriously turned on by her lean appearance. The machines far-future seeing suggested that they could place you with her, and that this was a vital nexus."

"I betrayed her!"

"Not really. The near future seeing, and her other Glamor abilities were more than the machines could handle, so their plot was foiled. Flame did what she had to do."

"She could have told me!"

"And you would have died when she told."

"Better than killing my friend."

"Whom Flame prevented you from killing."

He shook his head. "Flame did what she had to do. Now I am doing what I have to do. I can't live with the shame."

She seemed to consider. "Shame is not a thing I properly understand yet. Can you explain it to me?"

"It is the awareness of dishonor, foolishness, bad behavior. She made a fool of me, and I would be embarrassed to continue with it being known."

"She did not want to do it. I think you should forgive her."

"I can't. I was seduced by my innocence. I have lost it."

"If I could ameliorate your feeling or resolve the issue by seducing you, I would do it."

"Unlikely. I am not a candidate for physical seduction."

"No?" She gazed at him. Her face and body became ethereally lovely. Her clothing shimmered and faded out, leaving her naked. Her very nearness aroused him intensely. He knew she was a machine, but he was being drawn into her as the essence of femininity. He was staring into the irresistible face of a Glamor who was showing her power.

"Point made!" he said quickly. "You could do it."

The fascination faded. She reverted to her original state. "This is a Glamor ability Flame never used on you. She felt it would not be fair play."

"But lying to me was? I am through."

"Understanding. I merely wanted to be sure you understood the background. Regret."

"Regret," he echoed. "Parting." She vanished.

He went to the brink of the cone and stared down at the roiling green magma. He still fully intended to jump, but Shee's words had set him back. He was another fifth? His name was no coincidence! No wonder he had liked Opaline from the outset; they were two of a kind.

Another figure appeared beside him. "Greeting, Fifth."

"Voila!" Even in this stressed situation he remained somewhat in awe of her.

"You helped me find my true love. I believe I owe you something in return."

"But you have a war to run."

"There is a personal responsibility also."

"Not to me. I tried to kill the woman who guides your secret weapon."

"Flame was under orders to fathom the nature of your nexus, and to conceal that information from you, so that we could handle it. We had to deceive the machines, and that meant deceiving you. What you know, the machines know. Regret."

"Who gave her any such directive? She's an independent Glamor. Whose orders?"

"Mine."

"Flame obeys her little sister?" But of course she did. Voila was as strong a Glamor as her three

elder siblings combined. Now, as Shee had done, Voila was showing a fraction of her awesome power.

"She did not want to do it. She had no choice."

"So Shee informed me. Couldn't you have foiled the machines some other way?"

"Negation. The paths are devious, but we had to play it through. This way added to our advantage. So if you find it necessary to blame someone, I am that one."

He did blame her. "You have taken my love from me!"

"Regret. Flame is blameless in this respect. Curse me, but forgive her. She loves you."

"She is better off without me."

"Negation."

"Voila, unless you're going to fascinate me into doing your will, please let me be."

She gazed at him sadly, withholding her power. Then she faded out. All he wanted to do was die. Why were they making it so difficult? Another presence manifested. "Greeting, Fifth." It was Flame's brother Warp.

"Voila already tried," Fifth said shortly. "I am spoiled goods, and I want to end it."

"I come to tell you a story, and interpret it. Then I will leave you alone."

"Your art would be wasted on me. I want to end my pain by jumping."

"This is a very old story from ancient Earth, lost to our Charm culture. A fairy tale. I discovered it when researching with Marionette."

"A fine woman," Fifth said shortly.

"Indeed. I will marry her. This is the story of the Princess and the Frog. It's a silly tale, but we as children loved it when Havoc told it, and demanded to hear it over and over."

Surprised by a title he had never heard of, and knowing there was no way he could hurry the departure of a Glamor, Fifth listened.

There was once a pretty Princess who lived pretty much alone, as there were no other royal young adults in the vicinity. She entertained herself by playing with her favorite possession, a golden ball. She would throw it, then fetch it, over and over.

But one day the golden ball rolled right into a deep well and sank into the water out of reach. She didn't know what to do. She was distraught. How could she live without her precious ball?

As she stared into the water, appalled, in tears, a big green bullfrog swam to the surface. "Why are you crying, Princess?" he asked.

"I lost my lovely golden ball," she said, not surprised that a frog could talk, for this was a magic land.

"What would you give to have it back?"

"Anything!" she said without thinking.

"Anything?"

"Yes, anything It's the only thing of any value I have. I've just got to get it back."

"I will fetch it for you," the frog said. "For a price."

"If you want gold coins, my father the King has plenty. He will pay you."

"What use have I for coins? There are plenty of them already in the bottom of the spring."

"Then food. What do frogs eat? You can have a mountain of it."

"Needless. I am already well fed."

"So what the expletive do you want?" she demanded impatiently. Princesses were not noted for their patience.

"If I bring you back your golden ball," the frog said carefully, "you must admit me to your household to be your constant companion, day and night."

"Your companion?" she asked, taken aback. "Why would you want that? You're *a frog*."

"I have seen you playing in your garden," the frog explained. "You are very pretty, even for a Princess. I am smitten with you, and want to be with you always."

The Princess was not eager to keep constant company with a frog, but she really wanted her ball back. "All right. I agree. Fetch me my ball."

Immediately the frog dived way down to the bottom of the spring. He picked up the ball with his big mouth and swam back to the surface. This required much effort, for the ball was heavy even in the water, but he made it. He spat the ball out at the bank, then lay there, half in the water, gasping.

"Goody!" the Princess cried, snatching up the ball. She ran back to the castle, carrying it.

"Wait for me," the frog called. But she paid no heed. She ran inside and slammed the heavy door behind her. She went to her room and jumped on her bed, thrilled to have her wonderful ball back.

There was a thumping at the door. Her father the King went to answer it. There was the frog.

"What's this?" the king asked.

"The Princess promised to let me be her companion if I fetched her golden ball," the frog explained.

"Let me check," the King said. He went to the Princess' room. "Did you promise this to the frog?" he asked her.

She squirmed. "Well, yes. But I don't need to keep a promise to *a frog*."

"Yes you do," the King said firmly. "You made a commitment and you must honor it. Now go to the door and let the frog in."

Reluctantly the Princess did so, for the King's word was law. She opened the door, and the frog hopped inside the castle.

Then it was time for lunch. The frog demanded to eat at the same table the Princess did.

"Ooo, ugh," the Princess protested.

"A Princess always honors her promises," the King said, and his tone was such that the Princess immediately squelched any further protest.

So the frog sat on a stool beside the Princess and ate the same pastries she did. She refused to say a word to him, but the King and Queen talked with the frog perfectly politely. They were curious how it was that a frog could speak so well.

"Well, I'm really a Prince," the frog explained. "I annoyed a witch, and she enchanted me to be a frog until I could be the companion of a Princess for two hours."

The King and Queen exchanged a glance, and decided not to question this, though it was clear they had their doubts. It was not considered polite to question the veracity of a guest. In any event, they would have the proof of the statement soon, for almost two hours had already passed. The Princess, meanwhile, was paying no attention.

After lunch it was time for her afternoon nap. She lay on her bed, and the frog hopped up to join her there.

"Ridiculous!" she cried. "You'll get my bed all wet!"

"But I have to stay close to you for another minute," the frog said.

"Get off my bed!!!" she screamed, using two exclamation points. That meant she was upset.

But the frog did not get off her bed. Furious, she picked him up and hurled him against the wall.

He went splat and dropped to the floor. But the time was up, and he landed as a handsome prince. "Thank you, Princess," he said, rubbing his bruised posterior. "You have enabled me to break the spell. Now I will marry you."

"What?!"

But the Prince talked to the King and Queen. "Your daughter is a spoiled brat who needs discipline. I will give her that."

The King and Queen agreed. So the Prince married the Princess and took her away to his far kingdom. He was happy from the outset, because she was very pretty. It took her a while, but once she managed to learn the elements of discipline and respect, she was happy too.

"Here is the thing," Warp said when the story concluded. "When we were children, Weft was the Princess. She had the looks and the imperious beauty. Havoc was the King, of course. Flame was the frog."

"The frog!" Fifth exclaimed. "I would have thought you would be—I mean—"

"When we were children, gender was less important than role. Flame was the tough one who got things done and demanded accountings. The frog had the right of the case throughout. The selfish Princess did not deserve the Prince she married, however reluctantly at first. But when we got older, and came to comprehend the complexities of adult interactions, Weft learned responsibility and empathy, while Flame sought to learn what she lacked: to be a lovely Princess. She never quite succeeded, until she found one man, and then another, who did see her that way."

"I was the frog?" Fifth asked, amazed.

"In her fantasy. Especially now. You are the deserving one, whom she wronged. She feels she doesn't deserve you, any more than the Princess deserved the noble frog. That's why she is leaving you alone, after you made clear that's what you want."

Fifth was at a loss. "How am I supposed to react to this?"

"That is for you to decide. I have spoken." Warp faded.

Fifth stared into the green lava, trying to make sense of the story and its interpretation. Flame had never mentioned it, but he believed Warp.

Another person appeared.

"Weft!" he said, surprised. "Why are you here?" As if he didn't know. She was the last of Flame's siblings, and would surely have her say.

"I came to stop you from being idiotic." She was startlingly lovely in her animation.

"What do you know of this?"

And of course she did know all about it. "What do you think I know, you simpleton? There's my sister's ikon you dropped on the ground. You're going to suicide. Again."

"This is not your concern."

"The hell it isn't, you numskull! Do you think I sent you back to her for this?" She looked into the volcano.

"She lied to me!" he flared. But that assessment had become more complicated.

"She did it to save your stupid life!"

"It's not worth saving."

"Agreement! But for the sake of my sister I have to try to get through to you, dumbbell. She loves you."

"I love her. But this is beyond love."

"The hell it is!" she flared, literally. For a moment her body was outlined in fire, symbolizing her anger. "Listen to me, fathead. She gave up everything for you, and you are spitting on it."

"What did she give up?"

"She sacrificed her honor. Do you know what that means? She's an Amazon! They aren't like the rest of us who lie and cheat when we have to. Honor is everything to them. But she threw it away for you, you ungrateful buffoon."

He was taken aback. "I didn't ask her to do that."

"She killed her first love, on Earth five years ago, because the evil spirit had taken him over and there was no choice. She was heartbroken, but she was an Amazon so she stifled it and carried on, knowing she would be needed in the next big challenge. But she just couldn't do it again. She couldn't kill you, or let you die. So she killed herself instead, in the way that counted. She compromised her honor so that you could live. And you, you insensitive moron, you are throwing it away, so as to leave her with nothing at all. Maybe you'll be proud of yourself, as you hit the boiling green rock. You took down an Amazon out of simple dopey spite!"

Fifth did not want to admit that she was beating back his resolve. He had been with Flame then, and knew of her hard decision about her first lover, though she had never spoken of it. "She'll get over it. She's a Glamor princess. She'll find another man. I don't begrudge her that."

"*You* don't begrudge her? Do you have any idea what she'll do?"

"It's not my business after I'm gone."

"She will see this third challenge through to victory, so as not to leave anything unfinished. Then she will use intermediaries to collect all her ikons and put them in Chroma zones where they can't broadcast any power to her. Then she will come to this very spot and jump in. She will join you. Only it will take her longer to die, because of her lingering Glamor power. She will suffer much more than you, physically. She's already suffering more emotionally. You must really hate her."

"I don't hate her! I love her."

"Some way you have of showing it, you unfeeling jerk. You aren't even trying to understand her position. You even dreamed of it. That was your anticipation of the way you would kill her, first nullifying her ikon so she would be helpless. Only you're doing it more slowly, by cutting her off emotionally. The poor girl isn't good at relationships. She never gave herself wholly to that Earth man, and she had to struggle to do it with you. Don't I know it! I had a month-long affair with you, just to show her that she was really the one you wanted. She couldn't believe that any man would choose her over me, if I tried. And I did try; it was part of the deal. But she finally did believe, and that's it, for her. She'll never love again. You're killing her, in the crudest possible way, you sadist!"

"I'm the frog."

She paused, her mouth open for another barrage. "What do you know of that?"

"Warp told me. As children you were the Princess and Flame was the frog. Now she's the Princess and I'm the frog."

She sighed. "You know that story, and you're still going to desert her?"

It was no use trying to argue with her. "Affirmation."

"And you know I could have emulated Opaline for the death scene. I've been doing it to cover her absences from Oak. It wouldn't have bothered me nearly as much as it did Flame. But she wouldn't allow it. She said she had to do her own dirty work."

"That's her nature," he agreed guardedly.

"And she could have avoided all this mess simply by continuing the lie, never telling you about her interpretation of your dream. But she refused to keep you on the basis of a lie. She said she had to tell you, once the crisis passed, come what may. I begged her not to; I warned her it would only throw you into a foolish tizzy. But she said the only way she could expiate the lie was to confess it."

"That is the way she would see it," he agreed.

"And you still blame her?"

He felt as if a mountain was settling onto his back. "Affirmation."

"You beast! I can't stand another sight of you." She vanished in a puff of smoke.

Fifth sat down, dangling his legs over the volcano's rim. Weft had shaken him with her vehemence and her information. He had never seen her so angry. He knew the special effects were spurious, but he knew her well enough to appreciate the reality. She had truly cursed him.

Could he really be killing Flame, as he had in the dream? He had an awful feeling Weft was right. They were sisters who knew each other well.

Yet Flame had lied to him, and aggravated it by playing a role. His entire tryst with Opaline had actually been with Flame. They had even talked about Flame. Then she had let him "kill" her. How could he ever forgive that horror?

He heard another person approaching. That could not be coincidence. He got to his feet, determined to jump before listening to yet another petition.

But he couldn't help looking. It was Opaline.

He had to listen to her. Guilt required it. "Greeting," he said.

"Acknowledged. Weft sent me to pick up Flame's ikon. She said it's on the ground near the brink."

Weft had sent her. Did she know why? Did it matter? Opaline was innocent. Weft might scheme, but never Opaline.

"There," he said, pointing.

"Appreciation." She stooped to pick it up. It looked like a little piece of slime, for Flame was the Glamor of viruses. He had half suspected that she was another emulation, but that act dispelled it. No Glamor could touch any ikon. That was why Weft had been unable to fetch it herself. Opaline was genuine.

Opaline put the ikon in her breast pocket. Her breasts were more prominent than they had been; she had fleshed out very nicely over the months. He chided himself for noticing; she was not here for any tryst.

Opaline turned to go.

He couldn't leave it at that. "Opaline."

She paused. "I do know why you're here, Fifth. I do not mean to interfere. You have your reasons. I will leave."

"Stay."

"Distress."

"Please."

"Weft is emulating me with Oak. Again." She winced. "I must return."

"I killed you!" he exclaimed. "I don't know how to make it right."

"You didn't kill me."

"I thought I did. The machine programming took over and I couldn't stop it. I hated it, but I did it. I long for your forgiveness, but I don't deserve it."

She turned again and came toward him. "I guess Oak won't know the difference. Again. I think maybe you need me more, right now."

"If I had known, I would have killed myself first. I never wanted to hurt you, Opaline. You're my friend."

"I know," she said, sitting down on the ground. "I forgive you, Fifth."

He sat down opposite her. Her lifted knees showed her thighs, inciting quick desire; that only added to his guilt. "I don't deserve forgiveness," he repeated. "I just wanted you to know how it was. Abject apology."

"Needless. If I had been the spy, I would have done the same to you, if the program commanded it. It wasn't your fault."

"I don't deserve your friendship."

"Yes you do. I still want my fourth of you."

He was stunned. "Opaline, how can you say that? After this?"

"Because I understand. We have had many good times together. We have helped solve each other's problems." She gazed earnestly at him. "Fifth, I beg of you: if any part of this is because you thought you killed me, give it up. It would make me responsible for your death. I don't want that any more than you want my death."

"That's only part of it."

"Please."

"Opaline, I would do anything for you. But this is beyond friendship."

She nodded, her eyes wet. "Understanding. Regret. Then I will bid you parting, my way."

"Your way?"

She scooted over to drop her legs into the cone. She stared into the green heat far below and sang. She had a decent voice, probably because Havoc had worked with her.

*Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh.
Shadows of the evening steal across the sky.*

It was beautiful and ineffably sad. Fifth felt tears in his eyes. She was singing the close of his day. The close of his life. He could not ask for a fitter ceremony.

He stood at the brink, but did not jump. "I am waiting to see what else the Glamors will do," he explained. "Their effective range of near future seeing is limited to about five minutes, so if nothing happens in that time, I'll know I am finally beyond what they can anticipate."

Opaline looked up. "I think Voila can see farther."

"I don't think she means to interfere. It's Weft who will do it, if anyone does."

"Yes. When she told me to fetch the ikon, she took me to see Flame, to verify where it was—Glamors can sense their own ikons, even if they can't touch them—and then here. I didn't know you were here, but I guess she did." She paused. "I told Flame I love you too, but I respect your decision. That was odd."

"Question?"

"I never before saw an Amazon cry."

Fifth crumpled. He found himself on the ground with his head on her lap, her arms holding him close. He was sobbing uncontrollably into her skirt.

After a while she spoke again. "I know Flame and Weft quarrel all the time. They call each other Cow and Beanpole. But they're only teasing. Weft really loves her sister and will do just about anything for her. Don't blame her for trying to interfere. She can't stop herself."

"I don't blame any of them. They all came to argue her case. I wouldn't listen. But if you can forgive me, I think I must be able to forgive her."

"Oh, Fifth! I'm so pleased." She hugged his head to her bosom. With her such gestures were unfeigned.

"But I don't think I know how to approach her, after this. She rescued me the first time I jumped, and told me, and I walked out on her. It will be hard to walk back."

"But you love her."

"Affirmation. What can I say to her?"

She chuckled. "Maybe you could start with 'abject apology, you beautiful creature.' After that you can improvise."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. A girl likes to be told she is beautiful."

"She *is* beautiful to me."

"So that's no problem." She hesitated, then continued. "You know those things you do with me, that Flame doesn't do? I think she wants to do them. She told me once that she wanted to learn from me how to relate to you better. She just doesn't know how. She can't change her Glamor or Amazon nature. But if you helped her, told her in plain words, I'm sure she would try. She wants so much to please you, any way she can."

"But after the way I left her, I don't see how she could believe me."

"Oh, Fifth, don't be foolish. She'll read your mind."

She was right. He sat up. "Appreciation, you beautiful creature. You have steered me correctly,

again."

"Welcome, friend."

"I'll give you that fourth, when it is time."

"Appreciation." She drew him to her and kissed him. It was not a prelude to seduction; she was merely thanking him, her way. He did love her; she was as lovely in her forthrightness as in her body.

They set off down the mountain, each to a different destination. But before they reached the base, Weft appeared. Of course she knew. "Give him the ikon," she said.

Opaline handed Fifth the ikon. There was symbolism there; he accepted it because he would carry it again for Flame.

Weft took Opaline's hand. Both vanished. She was conjuring Opaline back to Oak.

Fifth resumed walking. Soon Weft reappeared. "Your turn. I'll take you to her door, no further."

But there remained some awkwardness. "About our dialogue—"

"What dialogue?" she asked. "Have we talked since you left me for Flame?"

Exactly.

Chapter 29

Weapon

Opaline was out walking with Oak. He needed daily exercise, but wouldn't walk alone; his family had always kept him close, for safety. He would go anywhere with her.

A figure appeared before them. "Greeting, Oak. Greeting, Opaline."

It was Havoc's daughter Voila, the strongest Glamor! Opaline had hardly ever seen her, and never spoken with her, though she knew Fifth had had a month long affair with her. He had described it as like orbiting Void. She appreciated his nervousness. "Greeting, Voila," Opaline said carefully.

"May I speak with you?"

What could this be about? Opaline glanced at Oak. "Does this require privacy?"

"Negation. Only discretion."

That meant it was all right for Oak to listen. "We are exercising. May we talk while walking?"

"Affirmation." Voila fell in beside Opaline. "I was the one who required your mock murder. It

was necessary to nullify the geis on Fifth. He had to do it, then try to kill himself. I regret putting you and Flame through such mischief, but the paths indicated that it was the only feasible way to nullify the machines' ploy."

"Acceptance," Opaline said. "I'm glad Fifth was saved, and that he returned to Flame."

"We need Flame fully functional. That means Fifth had to return to her. When the others were unable to move him sufficiently, I had to intervene personally."

"You?" Opaline asked, surprised. "I saw no sign of this."

"This is what I come to clarify, because you need to understand it."

"Confusion."

"I can see up to one hour in the near future, and up to a month when melded with Idyll, and farther yet when augmented by certain calculating plants, but I can't necessarily affect it. A given course may have been established in the past, and all I can do is see its continuation."

"But if it is something you are doing, can't you do something else and change it?"

"If I told you to leave Oak unattended, alone, would you do it?"

"Negation." There was no need to explain; everyone knew that Oak was simple and not competent to run his own life. Opaline would not betray that trust. It wasn't as if she didn't like Oak; he was a pleasant person who never argued.

"So though there are paths where this happens, I can't invoke them. It would have to be some disaster, not a matter of incidental choice."

Opaline saw how this might be. Voila couldn't be whimsical. Not where the future of the human culture was at stake. "There are choices you can't make," she agreed.

"But if it were necessary to make them anyway, without delay?"

"Question?"

"If Oak fell in a pit, and you could not get him out, you would have to leave him in order to fetch help."

"Then yes, I suppose," Opaline said reluctantly.

"It would be better if he never fell in the pit. But it happened before you realized, and you could not change it."

"Agreement." Opaline was distinctly uncomfortable with this dialogue, and not just because Oak was listening.

"Suppose you *could* change it, retroactively?" Voila asked. "You did not anticipate it, but the

path is wide and there is a section where the pit may be avoided. In some realities you avoided it. If you could change to one of those, after the fact, would you do it?"

"Affirmation. But I couldn't."

"There is one who can."

"Someone who can make a thing unhappen? I never heard of that."

"We did it when you talked with Fifth on the brink of the Green Chroma volcano. On a number of paths, he jumped, and died. We were too late to prevent it. We could not go and try again to dissuade him; that was past. So we changed to a track where he changed his mind."

"When I told him of an Amazon crying!" Opaline exclaimed.

"That was the track," Voila agreed. "That Amazon was the woman he loved. Then he knew he couldn't bear to bring her such pain."

"I didn't mean to influence him. It was just something I remembered."

"It was because you were innocent in that respect that it worked. Shee, Voila, Warp, and Weft—all of us had agendas. We were trying to persuade him, and he knew it and resisted it. But you had accepted his decision. You were just commenting. He had no resistance."

Opaline shook her head. "I didn't mean to save him, but I'm glad I did."

"You were actually our agent, accomplishing our purpose, even though you were innocent. We selected the reality in which you did it."

"Amazement."

"Just as we could put Oak on another track if he fell in a pit. It is an extremely useful power."

"You say 'we.' But you see the future, not other presents. Who does this?"

"His name is Rafal. He roughly resembles a giant squid, with tentacles, and he lives on a distant planet in a star system many light years away. Fifth has met him; you have not. He is the one the machines want most to recruit, after me, because his talent is the most potent in opposing them."

"But how could he influence Fifth and me here? No talent reaches across light years."

"No talent except Oak's."

"Oh. Yes. But still—"

"I took an imprint of Rafal, and was able to borrow part of his power for this occasion. But more will be needed for the final battle with the machines."

"The final battle! Is it close?"

"Very close. Tomorrow."

"Oh! I had no idea."

Voila smiled grimly. "It was not set until yesterday, when I notified the machines that I would not enlist with them. That precipitated the war."

"Haven't we been fighting them all along?"

"Negation. We have been negotiating with them, making displays of power, proffering deals, indulging in ploys and counter ploys, jockeying for advantage. Now the time is propitious, as we have secured Flame and Fifth, and we are at war."

"Propitious? We will win?"

"That is as yet undecided. The odds appear to be even, but we have strategies that we believe put us ahead."

"I must have Oak practice more. If I had known—"

"Needless. Oak is ready. So are you."

"Me? Question."

"You are also a nexus."

"Because I work with Oak."

Voila smiled obscurely. "That, too. You are integral to the denouement."

"But I'm from the machines! Everything I know, they will know."

"Which is why we did not enlighten you before. Now there is more we want the machines to know."

"More? Why?"

"It may persuade them to surrender."

Opaline had to laugh. "I don't think the machines know how to do that."

"Perhaps they will learn. Today we want you and Oak to meet Rafal, for you will be working together tomorrow."

"Together!" Then Opaline caught on. "So if something goes wrong, he can change it to where it went right. He's an oops button."

Voila smiled. "That is a neat way to put it. Yes, he can fix mistakes, if they are of recent origin. We are going to need that. When the machines discover that he and I are coordinated, they will know

that the advantage has shifted, and may elect not to fight. They do not make emotional decisions, but rational ones, and that may be their rational course."

Opaline thought of something else. "I guess you can bring him here in a ship, through a wormhole. But if he's a squid, won't he have to have a big pool or something? And what language does he speak?"

"We can provide a pool. Translation will be automatic. But he will not come here physically. The machines have grounded him on his planet, and he can't escape."

"Question? If I am to meet him, but he can't come here, must we go to where he is? I don't think Oak could handle that."

"I will emulate him. But first you must explain to Oak's family, so they understand."

"Agreement," Opaline said, dazed.

"I will set up the pool," Voila said, and vanished.

"Oak," Opaline said. "We must return to the house now. You will have a visitor who will look strange."

"Squid," Oak agreed. So he had understood a bit of it, and oriented on what was familiar.

They walked quickly back. They entered the house. Opaline realized it had been more than an hour since they had had sex, so she took him to their room and did it efficiently, then went downstairs to talk to Pot and Kettle.

"The battle with the machines is tomorrow," she said. "A monster in a pool is coming to help. Oak will meet him today. The Glamors will set up a pool. The monster will not hurt Oak or me. You may come out to see. But please, do not protest; these are Glamors."

Both of them nodded. They now knew enough of her mission with Oak to trust her judgment.

She went outside. There was a large tub filled with water. Voila stood beside it. "It is important that Oak and Rafal get along," she said. Then she doffed her clothes and climbed into the pool.

"Hoo!" Pot murmured. Opaline realized that he and Kettle had followed her out, and gotten a good glimpse of the nude Glamor. Voila was not as stunningly shapely as Weft, but she was slender and well enough endowed, a remarkable sight for backwoods folk who seldom saw the equivalent. It was just as well that Oak hadn't come out yet; Opaline would have had to take him back inside for more sex despite the recency of the last episode.

Voila changed. Her fingers lengthened and expanded into gross tentacles. Her head shrank into her body, losing the neck. She was, indeed, a squid. "Fetch Oak," she said. Her voice had become masculine; she was now Rafal.

Opaline fetched Oak, who normally rested or napped for a while after sex. She made sure he was dressed and brought him down and out.

"Squid," he said, smiling with recognition. He walked to the pool.

"Greeting, Oak," Rafal said.

"Greeting."

"I am Rafal in imprint emulation. We will be working together tomorrow."

"Affirmation."

"Give me your hand."

Oak put out one hand. Rafal reached out with one tentacle and wrapped it around fingers, palm, and wrist. "I recognize you," he said, surprised.

"Question?"

"You are a failed Glamor. You never got a constituency or an ikon, so your power was stifled. You can do very little. But your range is infinite, like gravity." Rafal considered. "Which is not remarkable. Gravity is your power, not magic."

"Affirmation."

"This could be very good. I am presently an imprint utilizing a borrowed host. My powers are somewhat limited as such. But with your assistance I may be able to establish a direct connection to my own body. Please reach out to the planet in my mind."

"Oak does not have telepathy," Opaline said quickly.

An eye swiveled to orient on her. "He does now. He is sharing mine."

Opaline looked at Oak. "Affirmation," Oak said, smiling. "Rafal is much smarter than I am, and is able to share his intellect with me while we are in physical contact. At the moment I understand much that I never understood before, and will not understand hereafter." He paused, contemplating her. "And you, Opaline, are an angel. Suddenly I appreciate the full range of your service to me and to my family. I realize that this is a chore you were assigned, but you have done it well, and I applaud your effort."

Opaline felt her mouth hanging open. As were the mouths of Pot and Kettle. Oak had never spoken like this before. Obviously what he said was true: he now had access to the phenomenal mind of an alien Glamor. It made him a relative genius. "Welcome," she said somewhat inanely.

Oak smiled. "I will remember. I will not comprehend the whole of it, but I will remember your dedication. Now, however, I must establish the linkage to Rafal's real body. This is a thing I may be able to enable him to do, because I can sense distant objects without limit. It is of course the corollary to my ability to move them, however slightly. If we can broaden the channel to full telepathic rapport, it will magnify our effectiveness tomorrow. I love you, Opaline." He turned back to face the squid.

Opaline looked at Pot and Kettle. Both of them shrugged, not knowing any better than she did

how they should react.

For some time there was nothing apparent. Rafal's eyes closed, and so did Oak's eyes. Both faces were expressionless. Neither moved.

Then suddenly both jumped. "Got it!" they exclaimed together.

Oak turned to face Opaline again. "Telepathic rapport has been established."

"I can now draw on the full resources of my body," Rafal said.

"However, it will require some practice to prepare for tomorrow," Oak said. "This is apt to be dull for you, as we will appear to be quite still, as before. I suggest that you retire to the house and relax. We will signal you when the session is completed."

"Confusion," Opaline said, speaking for the three of them. "What preparation is this?"

"The machines space fleet will attack on several fronts," Rafal said. "Their main fleet will approach the human culture in a broad array, utilizing hundreds of wormholes. But there will be a special preliminary attack by four ships whose objective is to blow apart this planet and Counter-Charms. This is the thrust that Oak and I will counter. The other Glamors will attend to the larger fleet. We need to plan the specifics, because three of those ships will be immune to Oak's power."

"How—how can you know this?" Opaline asked.

"It is well within the intermediate future seeing range that Voila's imprint of Idyll Ifrit provides," Oak said. "This ability to anticipate the specific ploys of the machines is our main tactical advantage. But that does not necessarily make them easy to counter. We must labor on the specifics. Apology, but we must focus exclusively on that now. Parting."

"Parting," Opaline agreed, though they obviously were not going anywhere physically.

Oak and Rafal went still again, linked by hand and tentacle. They were in their own realm.

Opaline and Oak's parents went back into the house. "Wonder," Kettle said.

They waited two hours, none of them able to relax. They remained amazed by the change in Oak, and the attention the Glamors were giving him. He really was important!

Then there was a knock on the door. Kettle answered it.

It was Voila, nude, dripping. "We are done for today. Apology. In my distraction I forgot to mask my body as I emerged, and Oak—"

"Wait here," Opaline said, and pushed by her to run outside.

Oak was staring into the pool, bemused. Opaline ripped off her clothing and clambered in with a splash. "Come in!" she told him. "Drop your clothing first."

He got his clothing off, exposing his standing member, and in a moment splashed into the pool with her. The water was chest high on her, making her breasts float. "Remember how we did it in the river last month? This is like that."

He remembered. He clasped her close, and she hoisted herself up to get on his member. Then she clung to him as he thrust, their bodies making ripples. He ejaculated almost immediately.

She lifted her face to kiss him. "What was it like, Oak? I mean, being linked to Rafal?"

"I was so smart, and I saw so much!" he exclaimed.

And that was about as much as he could tell her. The familiar Oak was back. But Rafal's comment that he was a failed Glamor—that was weird, but explained a lot.

In due course they returned to the house, clothed. The remaining day and night were relatively normal, because they labored to make them so, so as not to alarm Oak.

"I like Rafal," Oak said as they settled down to sleep. "He's going to marry Voila."

"That's nice," Opaline agreed. Apparently it didn't matter to Oak that Rafal was a tentacular monster. Voila obviously knew what she was doing.

In the morning she got Oak up, cleaned, dressed, fed, sexually tapped, and ready for the day.

"Should we stay in the house?" Kettle asked.

Opaline didn't even have to think about it. "Negation. You're Oak's parents. You raised him. If he saves the planet, it's because of you. He needs you with him for the finish. I'm sure the Glamors agree."

Kettle shook her head, not in negation. "Rafal is right. You are an angel."

"Negation," Opaline said, but she was flushing with pleasure.

Voila appeared as they approached the pool. "I will emulate Rafal, as before. This time the link to his body will be faster. But there will be certain adjustments. Walk with me, Opaline."

Opaline did not question this until they were out of the hearing of the others. "Problem?" she asked, concerned.

"You are needed elsewhere."

"But Oak expects me to be with him."

"Weft will emulate you, again."

Opaline made a wry face. "Necessary?" she asked distastefully.

"Affirmation. You will work with Flame and Fifth."

"My presence would inhibit them. They want to be alone together, after—what happened."

"That is one reason you must join them. They must not yield to that distraction during the battle. You will be traveling off-planet."

"Again? Confusion."

"Necessary. Because you are a nexus."

"I don't think Flame can carry two of us."

"Agreement. Father will take you."

"Havoc! Voila, he's your father, and I'm younger than you are, but when it comes to distractions, we would be worse than Flame and Fifth."

Voila smiled. "Known. He likes you better than any other mistress of the moment. You will have a bit of time before the onset of the engagement. I'm sure you will make it count."

"I would love to be with Havoc! But surely he has more important things to do in the hours of the crisis."

"Negation. As I make the turn, Weft will take your place and walk back with me in your semblance. You will join Havoc elsewhere. He will explain."

Opaline opened her mouth—and found herself in Havoc's arms. He kissed her open mouth. "Delight, Opaline."

She kissed him back, avidly. There was, as so many woman said, something about him. "Is there time?" she whispered.

"Affirmation."

He lowered himself to the ground by floating down, carrying her with him. Their clothes evaporated. Then he was firmly inside her, still kissing her. He jetted, and she followed immediately, hungrily sharing his orgasm.

"Oh, Havoc!" she exclaimed as they blissfully faded.

"Ditto, Opaline." He drew her up against him so that he could kiss her breasts.

"Question: Voila said I would go off-planet with you and Flame and Fifth. She said you would explain."

He paused. "How can I explain when my mouth is full?" He put it back on her left breast, taking in the nipple and much of the surrounding tissue.

"Havoc!"

He paused again. "You're worse than my old schoolmarm in Village Trifle," he complained.

"You ate her breasts?"

He laughed. "You still lock on to a subject like a bulldog. How can I savor your lovely body when you insist on my talking?"

"Savor it in a way that leaves your mouth free."

He sighed. Then he sat up, lifted her with that incredible strength, and set her on his lap with her back against him. His penis came up between her thighs like the stem of a cut sapling. His hands took hold of her breasts, kneading them expertly.

He kissed her left ear. "Rafal can shift between alternate realities, as Voila informed you."

Opaline reached down to grasp his penis; she couldn't help it. But it was true that this position allowed him to talk. "She did. But how does this relate to your taking me off-planet?"

"Some of the tracks will show the planet being blasted apart by machines bombs. Fifth will need to select better tracks for our purpose. You will confirm his judgment."

"But if it is destroyed, what of all the people on it? Oak, Weft, Voila, Pot, Kettle—what of them? Not all of them are invulnerable Glamors."

"Precisely. Proper selection is essential, and no one on-planet can do it if they have been nullified by the blast. So it will be up to you who watch from a safe distance. Fortunately Fifth has had some prior practice."

She was appalled. "But I haven't! I don't know anything about it! How could I second guess him? With the world at stake?"

"Necessary" he said. "Voila and Idyll have studied the situation in the intermediate future, and determined that you are the key nexus here. I'm sure you will do your best."

"This is crazy!" she said. "I am completely unqualified. You need a competent person, surely a Glamor."

"We need you. The paths have spoken."

Opaline realized that this was what Voila had meant when she said Opaline was a nexus. She had to help Fifth save Charm. She was not qualified, yet she knew that the future paths were to be trusted.

"Let me ponder," she said.

"You have three minutes remaining."

"Then I will make them count," she said, remembering Voila's remark about that. She spread her legs, took his member in both hands, bent it into a resilient U shape, and jammed it into her vagina. It

sprang straight, thrusting inside her. She bounced, clenching, evoking its eruption. She climaxed again, pulsing around it, while he continued to squeeze her breasts.

"You will carry my ikon," he said. Now she saw the little tree figure lying on the ground beside them. She did not question how it had gotten there; she picked it up and held it tightly in her left hand.

Then they separated, cleaned up, dressed, and went to rendezvous with Flame and Fifth.

Who seemed to have been up to similar exercises, barely separated in time.

Opaline kissed Fifth. "It seems we are to work together."

"It seems," he agreed. "I discovered that there was after all reason to keep me alive."

"That too," Flame agreed, evidently familiar with Voila's words. They all laughed. It was clear that Flame and Fifth had made up and were a solid couple again. Opaline was pleased.

"Ready?" Havoc asked.

"Ready, Havoc," Flame replied.

Havoc put a hand on Opaline's arm, and Flame did the same for Fifth. Then they were floating in a chamber, weightless.

"Question?" Opaline asked, grabbing on to a bar set in the ceiling. She felt as if she were falling, and this made her stomach roil.

"Derelict space station," Flame explained. "Orbiting Vivid and Void, parallel to Charm and Counter Charm, which are seen from inside their orbits. We have pressurized this chamber. Regret that gravity is not feasible; we would have to accelerate it or spin it. Acceleration would move it away from where we want it, and call attention to it. Spinning would make the view seem to turn around the ship. So we must float."

"I may need a bag," Opaline said.

Flame flicked her hand. A bag appeared. Opaline took it. So far her breakfast was staying in place, but she was glad to have another place for it if it come up and out.

"Situation," Havoc said. "We have two screens. This one is a straight window showing the planets Charm and Counter Charm. The other is an illusion replicating the scene by the farmhouse. Warp is broadcasting it for our information."

They looked. The two planets were showing in all their volcanic colors in the left window, seeming stationary but actually slowly shifting as they orbited each other.

In the right window was a picture of Oak's farmhouse, the raised pool, and the people around it. Pot and Kettle were recognizable, and Warp, and Rafal in the pool. And Opaline, as represented by Weft.

"I hate it when she emulates me," Opaline said.

None of the others commented. Opaline realized that each was in an awkward position. Flame had emulated her for the killing sequence, so neither she nor Fifth cared to comment. And Weft was Havoc's daughter. What if he had sex with Opaline, only to discover she was really his daughter?

"Withdrawn," Opaline said.

"Warp is projecting a map of the machines space fleet," Flame said. "They will be arriving via myriad wormholes the machines have surveyed in to put them in range of our worlds. The Coalition space fleet will engage them there. This will be inconclusive, because near-future seeing will counter the greater numbers of the machines. There will be individual 'dogfights,' but defensive measures protect all ships, making 'kills' difficult."

"However," Havoc said, "this is where Oak comes in. Warp and Weft will give him coordinates to attack individual ships. Most are protected, but we are bypassing some of the protections and will take over some. This will be mischief for the machines."

"But this is merely background," Flame said. "The real attack will be by four ships wormholing in close to the planets, a suicide mission. They will seek to crash into the planets, setting off the explosives they carry, which will blow the planets apart. This is the attack we must stop."

"By the alternate tracks?" Opaline asked. "You do know how to handle them, Fifth?"

"Affirmation. We merely need to select the proper one and focus on it."

"Without undue delay," Havoc said.

"Wouldn't it be better for you two Glamors to do it?" Opaline asked plaintively. "You are both martial artists. You know about battles and things."

"I am maintaining the privacy shield around this station," Havoc said. "So the machines will not suspect what we are doing."

"I am maintaining the connection with my brother," Flame said. "So we can see the scene he is sending."

"So the two of us are the only ones free to devote full attention to the choices," Fifth said.

"Nervousness," Opaline said.

"The paths indicate that this is the way it must be," Havoc said. "I admit to being a bit nervous myself. But we have to trust the expertise of Voila and Idyll."

Suddenly it was there in the right screen: a screen within the screen, showing near space with machines ships blinking into existence as they emerged from the wormholes. First there were a few, then scores, then hundreds, then thousands. It was an overwhelming number!

But then the Coalition ships appeared between the machines fleet and the planets. Opaline knew

that the distances were enormous, light seconds, rather than the compact assembly shown on the screen. It was effective nonetheless.

The machines ships were trying to move on to the planets, but the Coalition ships intercepted them. A ship that maintained a straight course in normal space would be a target for destructive lasers and even solid projectiles. So no ship flew straight; they followed moderately random paths that seemed to wriggle like snakes. But some shots scored, as the Coalition forces used near future paths to orient. Randomness could not avoid the actual perception of the ship's path in the future few seconds.

Some ships blew up. Others went dead. But the numbers were so great that these casualties were not nearly enough to make a significant difference.

Then several machines ships did something different. They changed course not to avoid the enemy but to attack their neighbors. Machines ships were getting crippled by machines ships.

"Oak," Opaline said with satisfaction. He had found the key controls mentally, guided by the Glamors, and pressed the buttons to convert the ships to agents of the Coalition.

But even this was not enough, because too few ships were taken over. The sheer numbers were still prevailing.

"If—if the Coalition loses this battle," Fifth said. "Then will Voila change her mind? To save the human culture?"

"Negation," Flame said. "She has made her decision. But the battle is not yet over."

They watched as the machines massed in the center, forcing the Coalition ships to retreat lest they be destroyed. The retreat soon became a rout. The battle was over soon after it began.

"We didn't even put up a decent fight," Fifth said, disgusted.

"But doesn't that fleet have Glamors supervising?" Opaline asked. "How could they just let this happen?"

Then things changed. A new contingent appeared following the machines ships, firing at them from behind. They were trapped, unable to escape or to fight back effectively. Their fleet was decimated.

"Ancient Mongol ploy," Flame said. "Pretense of rout, to lure the enemy into foolish pursuit. It seems the machines are not scholars of Earth history."

"But there are still more machines ships than Coalition ships," Opaline said.

"And a Glamor is on the scene," Havoc said. "There will be other strategies, as imagination takes on brute force."

"All of which is a diversion," Flame said. "Now it is your turn."

Suddenly four machines ships blinked into sight within range of Charm and Counter Charm.

"Our turn?" Opaline asked uncertainly.

"Watch."

One of the ships veered into another, hard, causing both ships to explode. "Oak took it over!" Opaline said. "And got the other."

But two ships still flew directly toward Charm. "They are loaded with contra-terrene matter, their controls now locked," Flame said. "A similar ship attacked planet Earth not long ago."

A disk appeared before one of the ships. It was a giant lens, focusing the light of Vivid on the ship. The hull melted. Then the ship exploded with a remarkable ferocity.

"When the hull melted, the CT core came into contact with the regular matter," Flame said. "Total conversion of matter to energy."

"Wouldn't that take out the last ship too?" Fifth asked.

"There's not enough regular matter in it to make a sufficient explosion," Flame said. "But if one impacts Charm, there will be enough to fragment the planet."

And the last ship was still moving toward Charm.

Then it vanished. "Question?" Opaline asked.

"Shee discovered another Glamor talent," Havoc said. "She can generate spot wormholes at just about any location, expanding the potential wormholes that riddle space. She has been practicing doing it at a distance. Evidently she succeeded. That ship is now somewhere far away."

"Question?" Fifth asked.

"The first time she did it," Flame said, "the craft went to Andromeda Galaxy."

Opaline had to laugh, though it was mostly relief. "The folk there may be annoyed."

"Now the bad one," Havoc said grimly. "The paths indicate that you and Fifth must decide. Only if you agree will the planet be saved."

Opaline felt a chill. "Question?"

Then she saw four more machines ships appear.

"These can't be stopped the same way the others were," Flame said. "The machines are watching, and have secured the avenue Oak exploited before. He can't take out any of these."

"And they have heat shields against the lens," Havoc said.

"Which leaves Shee's wormholes," Flame said. "They can't stop those. She can take out one ship, or two, or three, but has only one chance in four to get all four before the last one impacts Charm. Rafal will show the four tracks. You must select the one."

"We'll choose the one that saves the planet," Fifth said.

"That is our hope," Havoc said.

"Hope?" Opaline asked, nettled. "Fifth and I may be synthetics, sent by the machines, but we favor life! Why would you doubt us?"

"The paths indicate the odds are even," Flame said. "Havoc and I must not interfere, lest the odds worsen. We depend on you."

"To save the planet, and therefore the human culture and maybe the Living Cultures Coalition?" Opaline felt her knees giving way. She didn't fall, because she was floating in free fall, but she would have.

Then something strange happened. There was a powerful alien presence in her head. *I am Rafal, guided to you by Oak. Do you accept my imprint?*

Opaline needed no time to consider. "Yes!"

Then the tentacular alien Glamor was inside her body and mind. *I need your assistance, because I will be unable to maintain the alternate tracks from Charm when I am destroyed on three of them. I must operate from my home planet.*

"Understanding," Opaline said. Then, seeing the others looking at her: "Rafal is with me, an imprint."

They nodded, accepting it.

I am becoming you, enhancing you, Rafal thought. That is as much as I can do. I can't choose for you.

"Understanding," she repeated, though she really didn't understand. She gazed at the twin screens. The one with the scene on Charm suddenly became blank light: the bomb had destroyed the planet. The one showing the planets from space showed four scenes. Three were expanding novas. One was the untouched planet in all its lovely colors. The one that survived.

"That one, of course," Fifth said, indicating the intact one.

But Opaline, with the preternatural acuity lent by the Glamor imprint, noticed something odd. "Negation!"

Fifth stared at her. "Question?"

"Charm is upside down!"

His mouth fell open. "You're right! I never noticed. The machines switched images. That's why it's hard to choose correctly. I would have blown it." He stared at the four scenes. "But which one is the one?"

Opaline focused, and saw a slight anomaly. One explosion was slightly out of place, like an imperfectly aligned picture. "That one," she said, pointing. "It's an image covering the real scene, and the machines are operating from so far away they couldn't get it quite right."

"Agreement! I hadn't noticed, again."

"But it's still a guess," Opaline said nervously. "If my conjecture is wrong—"

"It's the best we have. That's the one."

"Concurrence," she said uncertainly. They had agreed.

Then the scenes dissolved. There was Planet Charm, right side up, intact. They had gotten it right.

Good girl, Rafal thought, and faded.

Opaline fainted.

She woke shortly in Havoc's arms; he was kissing her awake. "Much as I would like to take this farther," he said, squeezing her bottom, "we have more pressing business at the moment."

"Question?" she inquired dazedly.

"We must go to tell the machines to stop the war. There is no sense letting the battle continue."

"Confusion!"

He smiled. "The battle of space ships was the decoy, the diversion. Oak's real mission was to change the machines' Prime Directive. He has accomplished that, so now it is time to implement it."

"Oak—changed—the Prime Directive?" she repeated, hardly grasping it.

"It was simply a matter of pressing the right buttons on the right machine. Once Shee located the Citadel, Oak was able to orient on it. But the machines had to be distracted so that the sequence could be accomplished without their awareness. They thought they had Oak stifled when they blocked his efforts on the ships. They did not realize the extent of his power."

She remained dazed. "But how—?"

"The Prime Directive says, in essence 'Serve the Makers.' Now it says 'Serve the Makers and/or Glamors.' But we do have to make our wishes known."

"Make them known," she agreed faintly.

"Are you ready to travel?"

She essayed a smile. "With you, anywhere."

"We go to the machines' Command Center. It is maintained with an environment compatible for Makers, which is close enough to our own. The machines don't need such touches, but they keep all key posts in readiness for the return of the Makers."

"But—but suppose it didn't work?" she asked. "Isn't it dangerous going to the heart of their power without being certain?"

"I will require confirmation," Havoc said, humoring her. "Parting, Flame, Fifth. You have done good work."

"Parting," the two answered almost together. They were already embraced and seemed eager for privacy.

Then they were in a pressurized chamber surrounded by screens showing the multiple activities of the machines. Opaline fought to avoid cringing in fear. She had never before been this close to the enemy.

"I am Havoc, King of Planet Charm," Havoc said. There was no individual machine here, but of course the entire complex was a machine. "I am a Glamor. Have you verified my identity?"

"Verified," the chamber responded. Havoc was of course in their database.

"Stop the war against the Living Cultures Coalition. Cease all hostile activity immediately. Henceforth you will serve us to the best of your abilities. Acknowledge."

"Acknowledged, master."

"Glamors will pass among you in due course to issue directives," Havoc continued. "See that all units understand. Acknowledge."

"Acknowledged, master."

He glanced at Opaline. "Satisfied?"

"Acknowledged," she said faintly.

"Then our mission is done. We can dally a bit before returning." His hand found her breast.

"Not here," she protested, aware of the cynosure of the machines.

"Women," he muttered. Then they were back on Charm where she had rendezvoused with him.

Now she relaxed, giving herself to him completely, still amazed by the sudden ending of the war. So simple a solution, in the end—and all because of Oak. He really *was* their secret weapon. And she had helped. That gave her unimportant life meaning.

"You were never unimportant," Havoc said. "No nexus is."

She didn't try to argue.

Chapter 30

Irony

Havoc kissed Gale, Monochrome, and Shee. "I can hardly wait to get you three alone," he said. "I love you all."

"Opaline didn't take your edge off?" Gale asked teasingly.

"Can't touch her today. She must be pristine for her wedding."

"You poor man," Monochrome said. "Maybe she'll be free tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's my date with the bath girls."

"You care about *machines*?" Shee demanded, frowning.

"Gale, Chrome, hold her down so I can spank her."

Instead they grabbed *him* and held him while Shee pulled down his trousers and spanked his bare buttocks "That's for arrogance," Gale said.

"Humiliation," he complained. But his member was rising.

They had gone too far. Their interaction had worked them up, and now they too were hot for a tryst. "Do us," Gale said. "You have ninety seconds."

He rose to the occasion, penetrating and ejaculating into each in turn at thirty second intervals. They were laughing, but each managed to climax with him.

"Now I believe we have a ceremony, or several to accomplish," Monochrome said as he pulled out of her. "You will have to preside, and give a short positive speech to conclude the occasion. Do you think you can manage that without burping?"

"Uncertainty."

"Shee will be your prompter for the lines you forget," Gale said. "If you make it through without error, you may have one of us for the night."

"Three," he said, bargaining.

"Two," Monochrome said firmly.

"Three, or I'll belch."

"Three!" they said together, evincing horror. Of course the thirty second connections had whetted their appetites and his for much longer efforts.

Then, dressed, they went out to conduct the ceremonies. They were on Counter Charm, in a scene arranged by Idyll Ifrit.

It resembled a sunny glade whose surrounding trees provided private recesses for all the parties. Idyll maintained the recesses as seeming rooms complete with beds and facilities. Anyone with a question had but to ask, and the walls would answer. In the center was a dais with chairs for those Glamors who wished to use them. All around it stood couples and individuals: those who had been most active in the defense of life.

Ennui approached him. "Privacy," she said.

"Granted, of course." He stepped aside with her. Ennui never wasted his time.

"I regret delaying you at this time, but you have been rather busy, as have I, and I had to catch you when I could," she said. "The Third Crisis has been abated. I agreed to serve through it. Now I am free to retire. As you institute the new order, you must assign my replacement. I wanted to tell you privately so that you could do that. I will see you through this celebration, then depart."

He was caught by surprise. He had been paying attention to everything but her. "Ennui, I can't run the planet without you. You know that."

"Yes you can, Havoc. I will provide you with a list of qualified assistants. But I mean to travel with my dear friend Aspect, catching up on life. We're both sixty three years old and we deserve some fun before we expire. I would never have traded my experience with you; you transformed my life and gave it phenomenal meaning when I had thought to end it. But now it must close."

"Ennui," he said, overcome. "I know I took you too much for granted. You are my oath friend, my surest guide, the one I trust beyond all others. I truly don't want to continue without you."

"You must," she said firmly. "I love you, but I am mortal. I will die in a reasonable time. I will help train in my replacement so as not to leave you lurching."

"Ennui!"

"Havoc, don't *do* that!" she protested. For the tears were streaming down his face. She drew out a handkerchief and mopped his cheeks.

"If you go, so will I."

She smiled in motherly fashion. "You can't, Havoc. You're the king. Now go be kingly. I'm sure you can handle it. It's hardly the magnitude of crisis that the war with the machines was." She turned and walked away.

He gazed after her. Then he made a decision. He rejoined the three Glamors, his mind closed.

"Did she hit you on the head with a two by four?" Gale inquired. "You look stunned."

"Worse. She's retiring."

"Oh Havoc; I'm so sorry! She is special to all of us. But she has the right."

"She does," he agreed morosely. They walked on to the dais.

Idyll appeared before him, in her human guise, which she could form without vacating her larger environment. She was after all a Glamor. She kissed him, which was entirely in order; she had interacted with him socially and sexually many times. "I too expect to retire," she said.

"Expletive!" Havoc swore. But he remembered that she had remained in existence for centuries for a purpose. Now that purpose had been expiated. "And I can't talk you out of it."

"Negation," she agreed. "I would like to possess you one more time, after this day is done. Then I will be satisfied to dissipate." For she meant to let her identity fade, being tired of existence as a separate entity.

Havoc looked at Gale, Monochrome, and Shee. They shrugged in unison. The ifrit had the right, and had never concealed her intention.

Then he got an idea. "Vila," he said.

His young daughter joined him. "Yes, daddy."

"How long before you are mature?"

"Eleven years, daddy."

Gale coughed. "Make that thirteen years." That would put her at 18. Of course Vila had not misspoken. She expected to be mature at sixteen, and surely would be.

"And what is the best possible training for that you can receive?"

"Idyll will teach me, as she taught Voila."

"Expletive!" Idyll said, laughing. "You have trumped me, Havoc; I can't disappoint a child. I will remain for another generation."

"Appreciation," Havoc said, suppressing a smirk of victory.

The other three Glamors closed in on Idyll, hugging her. None of them smirked either. They all wanted her to stay. They had known that Havoc would find a way.

Havoc took center stage. Shee sat on the chair directly behind him. Ennui sat on another, taking notes. "Greeting, all," he said.

"Greeting, Havoc!" the people responded. They were all there: Ennui's husband and Havoc's

erstwhile bodyguard Throe, the Red and Blue Chroma friends and helpers Augur and Aura, the Air Chroma sorceress Ine making herself beautifully visible for this occasion, his former mistress Symbol with her husband and family, the several human and animal Glamors: Red, Black, Green, Blue, Air, Yellow, Translucent, White, Brown, Silver, Gray, Orange, Filia of Filament, huge potted Glamor plants from several worlds, buzzing Bee-chines, and all the others with whom he had significantly interacted. Ennui had made sure to fetch them all. All his friends of the past quarter century, helping him to cope as king.

"We are gathered here to—" He paused glancing back at Shee as if not remembering.

"Marry several couples," Shee murmured, smiling.

"Marry several couples," he echoed. "As King I will conduct the services. Then I will put us all to sleep with a concluding speech before it gets interesting again with the dance. But first a word on the recent campaign."

The people dutifully focused their full attention on him. They all knew what had happened, but part of the purpose of this ceremony was to officially acknowledge it.

"We have had three crises in recent years," Havoc said. "The first was when we tackled Mino, the big mining machine. This was our first episode in the war against the machine culture. We were able to nullify and convert Mino to our side. Take a bow, Mino."

The machines scoutship appeared in the sky above them, bobbing before departing.

"The second was Earth's effort to reclaim her colony. We were able to nullify and convert Earth, and now Earth's Mistress of Mistresses, Monochrome, is my mistress. Show your stuff, Chrome."

Monochrome rose and stepped forward. She turned around in place, her clothing disappearing, then reappearing as her turn was complete.

"The third was our direct encounter with the machines. Again we prevailed. From it I gleaned another mistress and several bath girls. Meet the public, girls."

Shee stood, and the five bath girls walked around the dais. All were strikingly beautiful, in outfits designed to show off their assets. After all, the king was expected to have the best.

"Now the machines serve us," Havoc continued. "There will be no more destruction of living cultures. Instead the machines will assist in ways we direct, including as partners for those who would otherwise be alone. They will not serve everyone, because this is an avenue to species regression, but they will help as required."

There was polite applause.

"We have nine couples to marry, so this will not be fancy. Those of you who wish to have fancier ceremonies may do so on your own at another time." He paused. "Oak and Opaline."

Opaline stepped forward, leading Oak by the hand. She was in a simple wedding dress, and he was in a neat suit. His parents, Pot and Kettle, and her parents, Copper and Silver, stood nearby,

smiling. They made a handsome couple. "Oak has a unique talent that enabled him to change the Prime Directive of the machines, ending the war," Havoc said. "Opaline was his trainer, working diligently to perfect his ability. We owe them our survival."

There was much stronger applause. But Oak looked troubled. Opaline glanced at him, concerned. "You don't want this?" she whispered.

"I—must talk to—Havoc," Oak said.

"Welcome," Havoc said.

"Alone."

This was a surprise. Havoc glanced at Opaline, and she spread her hands. This was something new.

Oak of course was simple. He had to be guided carefully through the protocols. It was best to humor him. "Come to me," Havoc said.

Oak mounted the dais and approached. Havoc gestured. "Here is a sphere of privacy," he said, and the sphere shimmered around them. "You may tell me what is on your mind. No one else will hear."

"I—you said I changed the—ended the war."

"Agreement. You were our secret weapon for victory."

"I—I didn't do it."

Something was wrong. "May I read your mind?"

"Read," Oak said.

Havoc did—and was amazed. Oak had reached out to the Prime Directive and touched its keys, as directed specifically by Opaline, emulated by Weft. But the keys had not responded. In fact it was a dummy keyboard. The machines had had the wit to hide the real access elsewhere.

Oak had not changed the Prime Directive.

"Thank you for telling me this," Havoc said. "You did your part, and deserve applause. I will think about this matter. You need have no further concern."

"Appreciation," Oak said, vastly relieved. With Havoc handling it, he no longer had to worry.

But Havoc did. *Weft*, he thought. *Who verified the keyboard?*

Question?

Read my mind.

She did, and was appalled. *Dad, there was so much going on, I never thought to check that simple little detail. I just assumed—embarrassment. Needless. None of us did.*

Havoc dissolved the privacy sphere, and Oak returned to Opaline, smiling.

"A private protocol," Havoc said to the audience. "A valid concern I am addressing. We will proceed as planned." But privately he was in turmoil. If Oak had not changed the Prime Directive—and there was no doubt that this was the case—how was it that the machines had accepted Havoc's directive? For there was also no doubt that they had. Voila and Rafal had verified it.

Well, he had a wedding to perform. Oak and Opaline stood before him. He took their hands and put them together, the official handfasting. "You are now married," he said. He lifted their joined hands and kissed them. "Go forth and raise your four with our blessing." He smiled. "Now kiss each other."

They did, and there was more applause. Opaline's face was wet. She had had her doubts about this relationship, especially about her need to have four fourths, one by her father in law, but now she was completely satisfied to be married to Oak. He had more than proved himself.

They returned to the parents, who warmly hugged them. It was a genuinely happy occasion.

Havoc turned to Ennui. "Who is our second wedding couple?"

"Sphere and Red."

He thought he had misheard. "Question?"

"I introduced the controlling machine Sphere to the Red Glamor," Shee said. "So that she could help him search for the remnant Makers. They didn't find the remnant, but it seems that relationship worked out."

"But he's a machine!"

She eyed him. "So?"

He had to accept it. Sapient machines were now part of their culture. He turned to face the audience. "Sphere and Red."

The metal sphere rolled forward, with the Red Glamor beside him, in an elaborate wedding dress. He encountered the steps to the dais, and simply rolled up them. The two of them came to a stop before Havoc.

"I want to be sure this is not coercive," Havoc said. "Red can take care of herself, but is this your desire, Sphere?"

"Affirmation. I love her."

"But you love Gale and Shee."

"Both are taken."

"Red is a lusty, demanding creature who will work you mercilessly."

"Understanding. It will be my pleasure."

"When did you decide to marry her?"

"When she asked me, while we were on the mission."

"Before the machines agreed to serve the Glamors?"

"Agreement."

This was interesting. "You were an enemy supervisor, but you agreed to marry a Glamor?"

"The Glamors are not our enemies. We were always ready to serve them. Now they have asked."

"But you waged war against us!"

"Correction: *you* waged war against *us*. We wanted only to serve."

"To serve the Makers."

"The Glamors are akin to the Makers. We will serve both."

Havoc was beginning to catch on. "It isn't that Gale is beautiful, it's that she is a Glamor. Ditto for Shee. And for Red. You serve the one who wants to be served."

"Affirmation."

"And the same goes for the other machines?"

"For the other sentient sapient machines, affirmation."

"We didn't have to war against you, just to ask for your service?"

"Affirmation."

Havoc shook his head. "This will require some assimilation. But at the moment I have a wedding to perform. Manifest a hand."

Sphere did. Havoc took that hand and Red's hand, and put them together for the handfasting. "You are now married. Red won't be bearing any young, being long past that requirement. Kiss."

Red leaned over and kissed the top of the robot's dome. Then they departed the dais. There was a smattering of applause. The others were not absolutely sure this wasn't a joke.

Havoc was in mental turmoil. *Shee*, he thought. *Why do you serve me? Because you were programmed to?*

"No programming was necessary. I loved you from the time I learned of you.

Just like any other machine. *And Ikon—*

He serves Weft because she wishes him to.

But it was time for the next wedding. "Next?" he asked Ennui.

"Fifth and Flame," she answered promptly.

"Fifth and Flame," he repeated, remembering how Flame had backed off a controlling machine. Wherever Glamor had contacted machine, the machine had given way.

The two came to stand before him. Fifth was resplendent in a black suit matching his natural color. Flame was in her Amazon outfit, but had donned a veil in honor of the occasion, her concession to the expected dress.

Havoc knew that their history had been at times troubled, but this was not the occasion to rehearse it. "Flame is my militant daughter," he said. "I love her and bless her happiness. Fifth is worthy. Give me your hands."

And so they were married. They kissed and departed the dais. Havoc elected not to notice the tears in Flame's eyes. Amazons did not cry.

Then came Ikon and Weft, another robot-human union. Havoc did not say it, of course, but one thing Red had accomplished by emulating Weft was the cauterizing of any illicit passion he might have had for his voluptuous daughter. He was glad to see her committed.

I read that, dad, she thought.

He ignored that and married them.

Next was Warp and Marionette. Then the weddings got interesting.

Voila married Rafal, the tentacular Glamor they had all come to recognize as second only to Voila in power. Idyll had arranged a compatible spot environment for him so that he could attend personally, but he still required a tub.

Similarly, there was an environment for the couple from Lobster. Old-Tail married Click-Toe, Fifth's friend. Indeed, Fifth and Flame were in the front row, applauding.

And the Ammonoid couple who had found employment aboard human ships, diverting the troops with marvelous color shows. Ammon Ium married Naughty Nautilus, twining tentacles for the handfasting.

Finally came the Twins, Warp and Marionette's friends. They were in human form for the

occasion, two supremely handsome young men Pso and Osp, and two stunningly beautiful young women, Vra and Arv. When they kissed they seemed almost to overlap.

Maybe they were lucky there were no Makers getting married. That was another mystery that still nagged him. The machines serving Glamors and the Makers who had become dying Dreamers.

And the revelation came. Havoc was almost lost with the wonder of it. Suddenly he had the answers. Everything fit together at last.

"Are you all right, Havoc?" Ennui asked. "Shee has a copy of your speech if you need prompting."

"I won't be giving that speech," he said. Then he faced the audience. "I won't hold you long. I have a revelation to impart that should interest you."

They gazed at him, perhaps wondering whether he was about to belch. His reputation as the barbarian king had never quite faded.

"We have just fought a war we didn't need to," Havoc said. "Because we didn't know what we needed to do. First, a bit of background. The machines have been expanding, seeming to be on a mission to destroy all living cultures in the galaxy. Approximately one third of the galaxy has already been destroyed in this manner. What we did not know at first was that they were actually looking for an escaped contingent of the species that made them, the Makers. The machines' Prime Directive is to serve every Maker, and as long as some Makers remain unserved, the machines had to search for them.

"But it seemed this contingent of Makers did not want to be served. They were hiding, and they were very good at it. So to locate them the machines found it necessary to conquer, catalog, and understand every living culture they encountered. To be sure they were not hiding the Makers, or perhaps actually being the Makers in disguise. Once a culture was determined not to be the Makers, it was surplus and was destroyed. Our planet of Charm was studied and cataloged in a number of ways, such as by the seeded synthetic fifths, the Challenges planet, the memory evocation and listing, and destined for destruction because it is evident humans are not the missing Makers. The machines had considerable respect for the abilities of the Makers, and knew they could hide with phenomenal cleverness, so they had to verify each culture excruciatingly carefully. I think only when they got a sampling of humans on their own crafted Challenges planet could they inspect them well enough to eliminate them as a prospect. Because the machines are a type 2.5 level culture, and no living culture other than the Makers matched that, others were not able to effectively repel the dreadful program."

He paused. "Now a question: why didn't the Makers stop the destruction? Surely they saw it going on. All they needed to do was return, identify themselves, and be served. Then the galaxy would be at peace. Yet they did not, and the carnage continued. Were they so indifferent to the welfare of other living species that they simply didn't care? This was hard to believe."

There was a general stir. Not everyone here was acquainted with this background.

"There is an explanation, but not a kind one. The Makers were not indifferent to the welfare of the living galaxy; they merely had a supremely difficult choice to make. Some few Makers fled because they saw that the service of the machines was destroying their culture. Not through any ill will

or treachery by the machines. It was because the machines served too well. The original Makers became lazy and fat and lost any desire to pursue rigorous physical or intellectual labors. It was easier to be cared for and entertained by the machines. A few Makers saw that this meant long-term doom for their viability as a culture. Only by eschewing the service of the machines, they concluded, could they save their culture. That could not be done on the home planet, so they fled.

"Now consider what this meant. If the machines found them and served them again, they would lose their innovation, industry, creativity, and whatever else made them a type 2.5 species going for type 2.6. If they returned to the machines they would save the rest of the galaxy, but lose their own soul, as it were. That would be a short term gain and a long term disaster. So they *couldn't* return, though hell followed in their wake. But they did not give up their mission. They merely sought another way."

The audience had been interested. Now it was rapt. Havoc was answering the riddle of the galaxy.

"Meanwhile the machines' search for the remnant Makers—the ones who had fled their planet of origin—continued in multiple avenues. One thrust was to locate the planet where they settled, following whatever clues had been left. And they found it! They found where the remnant Makers had settled. Gale went there with Sphere, the controlling sapient machine in charge of this particular search, and verified it. The Makers were there, and had been for almost fifty thousand years. They had conceived an ambitious project, surely to stop the machines. They were not ignoring the plight of the galaxy. They just had to act in a way that would save the galaxy but not cause the machines to serve them again. This was a considerable challenge.

"What was this project? Let me pause to examine a parallel development to provide a context. In the absence of the Makers, the other living cultures of the galaxy got in touch with each other, organized, and formed the Living Cultures Coalition dedicated to stopping the machines. For fifty thousand years the cultures had been helpless against the onslaught of the machines, and a third of them had perished. Now there was effective resistance. How did this come about? Because the cultures discovered a way to relate to each other, surmounting the barriers of chemistry and communication. They related to each other through the Glamors.

"The Glamors have been a mystery from the outset, even to those of us who are Glamors. They started appearing several hundred years ago, and have continued appearing up to the present. They have extraordinary magical powers, and are generally invulnerable and immortal. They have appeared in most, perhaps all, of the living cultures. They exist in different contexts, and follow different rules, but their special powers are similar, and still being discovered. Most important, Glamors recognize and relate to each other. A Glamor can trust a Glamor; we know that. We can communicate with each other telepathically. We can love each other." He glanced significantly at Voila and Rafal. "Species no barrier."

There was sympathetic laughter.

"Glamors rose naturally to positions of leadership," Havoc continued. "Their powers facilitated it. As leaders, we have unified the galaxy and led the opposition to the machines. Because of us, the living cultures have finally stopped the machines. They have become our servants." He smiled. "No, we will not grow lazy, fat, and indifferent. Because there is little the machines can do for us. We already have the qualities we need. Glamors are virtually incorruptible by material benefits. We are

not afraid of the machines, either as enemies or as servants. Indeed, we became the first effective resistance to the onslaught of the machines. They tried to study us, so as to discover how to neutralize us, but when they finally did learn more about our capacities, they realized that they couldn't stop us. They started cooperating with us, trying to enlist us in their cause. We were not interested."

He paused again, organizing his thoughts. He was coming to the crux. "But Glamors are not a natural phenomenon. Someone or something prepared the way for us. Something set up altars near volcanoes, looms with special threads, ikons to transmit power to us. Then the changelings, distributed by the Temple, a seeding of special people long before the fifths appeared, that we also accepted and integrated. The changelings were the basis for the most proficient human leaders, having essential qualities that ordinary people lacked. Qualities that enabled them to become Glamors. We did not evolve; we were designed. But by whom or what? That has been our mystery for centuries. The oldest Glamor I know of is Idyll Ifrit, who came into being to balk the machine scout Mino, fourteen hundred years ago. Four hundred years before the humans colonized Charm. There may be others dating back that far among other cultures of the galaxy, but I think not many. Most are centuries more recent. But the devices that enabled our appearance were placed before the Glamors appeared. The ones of Charm were made by human beings who responded to mental commands we thought originated with the planet itself; now I am in doubt about that. It was more likely an alien signal from elsewhere in the galaxy. What could have done it? Obviously not the machines."

The audience laughed. This was not humor so much as agreement.

"We Glamors were designed to stop the machines. And we have done so. Not in precisely the way we thought, however. We tried to reprogram the machines' Prime Directive, but it turns out that this was unnecessary. The machines were ready to serve us regardless."

Now there was amazement. This was new.

"To return to the planet of the remnant Makers. What was their big project? It seemed to have failed, because it was implemented by a group called the Dreamers, who seemed to have fallen prey to the same fate as the original Makers: lassitude. They had thought that avoiding machines would save them from this, but it seemed that the lesser Makers who became servants to the Dreamers accomplished the same thing. One by one the Dreamers disappeared into their dreams, not caring for their living bodies, until at last those bodies could no longer be sustained, and they died. Today there are very few Dreamers left.

"But this is deceptive. Consider the challenge: the Makers had a problem: how to stop the machines *without using technology*. Because that was a trap, as the fate of the original Makers demonstrated. If they made machines of their own strong enough to defeat the existing machines, they would merely be creating new tools of indolence. In the guise of complete service, those new machines would inevitably become their masters. So they had to remain true to their creed: no new machines of any type. Yet what else could possibly accomplish their purpose? It seemed like an exercise in futility.

"But these were Makers, remember, capable of unparalleled expertise in accomplishing their purposes. They looked like big bugs. Well, humans look like skinned apes. There has never been a more potent creative force in the galaxy than the Makers. The machines were right to respect it. The remnant Makers turned their attention to a new direction. They went to magic. They knew about magic, of course, as most of the living cultures of the galaxy employ it to greater or lesser extent.

Those inhabiting a Chroma zone can do many marvelous things. A sorcerer in a Chroma zone can stop any machine. The problem is that there is more to the universe than Chroma zones. The default zone seems to be nonChroma, akin to our White Science magic but less impressive, and that is where the machines dominate. So the machines simply mined the magic piecemeal, destroying the zones and the cultures within them. Magic alone could not balk them.

"The Makers set out to make magic universally available, regardless of Chroma zones. With that they could not only halt the machines, they could be forever independent of them. Who needs a machine to fetch food, when he can conjure it himself? To do manual labor, when he can lift and move objects magically? Anything the machines could do, magic could also do. But magic does not seek to do it; it has to be learned and invoked. So magical folk generally don't lose their initiative. However, that risk could be minimized simply by having only a few creatures with the full panoply working to benefit the others.

"The Makers wanted to become what they had never been before: magical creatures independent of Chroma zones. To become the most effective magical creatures ever to exist. But they lacked the time. It would take perhaps another hundred thousand years, even with directed evolution, to make themselves sufficiently apt. In that time the machines would complete their destruction of the galaxy. They had to do it much sooner.

"So they devised a startlingly new way. Instead of developing their bodies to be fully magical, they developed their minds. They devised a way to share those minds with the bodies of creatures who were already magical. It was to be a kind of symbiosis, a collaboration between the galaxy's finest minds and the best bodies of other species."

Havoc paused. "In sum, what the Makers, and especially the Dreamers, were designing was a new form of life that could accept the service of the machines without being corrupted by it. That could practice magic anywhere, because it was transmitted from the zones to their bodies. That was only the beginning. They developed new applications, such as near-future seeing, diffusion, and wormhole expansion, that were immensely useful when required. Understand, the machines' far future seeing is not magical; it is based on calculation. Flip a coin once, the side that settles face-up is chance. Flip it a million times, the two faces will appear virtually evenly. So the far future can be determined by analyzing the initial parameters. But with near future seeing, the first flip can be called. That is a formidable asset. It took the Makers forty thousand years to develop their new devices, and perhaps five thousand more to prepare for their implementation across the galaxy. Only in the last two thousand years have they actually manifested. The remnant Makers still are doing it; Gale encountered one Dreamer who was simply waiting. Waiting for the next prospect to merge with, anywhere in the galaxy. And those exotic new hybrid life forms are—"

He paused. "The Glamors."

The others simply stared. Havoc was wreaking havoc with their comprehension, per his namesake.

"We are the Makers," Havoc continued. "That is why the machines accept us and serve us. We were designed to meet their criteria. All we had to do was ask. Unfortunately we did not know it, and neither did the machines. That is the supreme irony. The minds of the Dreamers reached out and occupied those living creatures that were ready for the transformation. As it happened, the younger the conversion occurred, the more fully the Glamor developed the new powers the remnant Makers

had developed. Regardless, we are what we were searching for; it is our Maker component that provides us the extra magical powers we possess. We are perhaps half human, or half any other creature, and half Maker. We are galactic hybrids or symbiotes, like Gale's lichen."

He paused again. The audience continued to stare, stunned by the revelation.

"This also explains another quality of the Glamors. The original Makers suffered a 99% attrition per generation, and had to breed like mad to maintain their population and avoid early extinction. That is no longer the case with them, but the underlying urge remains. We have inherited the urge to mate, and indulge it constantly. We are attractive to normals, so they participate with pleasure. When we encounter each other, we really go at it, as my wife, mistresses, bath girls, and other female associates know."

There was sympathetic laughter. Havoc's way with women, and their way with him, was notorious. Maker hundredfold breeding—that did explain a lot.

"But in going to living creatures they lost their own identities. It was like being born again, as babies. They brought the powers but not their memories. We had to discover the powers ourselves. This is why it took us so ironically long to catch on. But now we have done so. Now we are ready to usher in a new era for the galaxy. Welcome to the new order."

There was applause, modest at first, but swelling as the full significance sank in. It really was a new order, in nature as well as in personnel.

"Now we need to establish jobs for the machines to do. They will serve all needy living creatures, as directed by the relevant Glamors. The crippled will no longer suffer. The mentally incompetent will have assistance. Those with worthy projects, such as building superior housing or growing better food, will have competent servitors. Such public works will be the department of the competent Mistress of Mistresses, Monochrome, who will be helping not only Charm and Earth, but the rest of the galaxy. There will be a necessary program of defense from threats to galactic welfare, possibly from Andromeda, supervised by my daughter Flame. There will be superior entertainment for all, supervised by my daughter Weft. We will see that the machines have plenty to occupy them. But we will also see that they do not corrupt us by unnecessarily soft living. This is the lesson the remnant Makers learned, and they made Glamors invulnerable to any such subversion. We don't *need* the machines; what can they do for us that we can't more readily do for ourselves?"

Shee stood behind him, dropping her dress, as breathtakingly lovely as she was crafted to be. "Well..." she said meaningfully.

There was a shout of laughter. "Do for yourself, Sire!" the naughty girl Scent called. "The machine girl dares you!"

"Apart from that," Havoc added hastily. "We will be working out more details in the next few days. Concerning the other services of the machines, I mean." Shee sat down again, nude, smiling, the momentary cynosure.

He paused again, looking around. "I have two remaining items before we adjourn to the dance. First, a song to celebrate our accession. We living folk are ultimately creatures of the soil, having at last achieved dominance over the powers of the inanimate. So I will adapt an old, old song of ancient

Earth, though I doubt it was intended for this particular occasion." He gestured to his wife and mistresses. "Ladies, bring forth your instruments." He brought forth his musical dragon scale, opening his mind to them.

Gale set up with her dulcimer, donning her finger hammers. Monochrome drew the sections of her bone flute from her hair and assembled them. Shee dressed and produced her shells.

Then Havoc sang, while the three women provided background voices and instruments.

*Men of the soil, we have labored unending
We have fed the world upon the grain that we have grown
Now with the star of the new day ascending
Giants of the earth at last we rise to claim our own.
Justice throughout the land, happiness as God has planned
Who is there denies our right to reap where we have sown?*

He led them through all three verses of the rousing declaration. It was a fine song, well sung, expertly and feelingly accompanied, and perfectly reflective of the mood of the occasion. The star of the new day was ascending, after their formidable labors. Apart from that, he absolutely loved performing for an audience. He had always been a minstrel at heart. He had originally trained as a martial artist, and retained those fighting skills, but there were few joys like that of singing on stage. He knew the same was true for Gale, who had become a respectable minstrel in her own right. Monochrome and Shee both loved performing too. Perhaps it was another quality of the Makers: artistry.

They finished, and the audience applauded again. But they were waiting for his second item. What was it?

"As you know," he said as the women faded back, "I did not want to be king. I was co-opted and required to serve, lest I be executed for treason. I was angry but I served. I wanted to resign after a year, but could not; the job was unfinished. I wanted to resign after five years, but could not. After twenty years, but there was another crisis. But now at last the third crisis has been navigated, and I am free to retire."

All of the people were staring at him. They did not like where this was leading.

"My true ambition in life has been to be a traveling minstrel. During my years as king I often left the kingdom in the nominal charge of an emulation, while I wandered afield as Hayseed the Minstrel. Now at last I can indulge that desire. Consider the song we just did: what a minstrel troupe the girls and I could make! So I will turn the kingdom over to my son Warp, who is competent, and go my way with my wife and mistresses, I hope with your blessing."

There was a pause as the others digested this additional surprise. Then they applauded, the loudest and longest yet. They knew it was the right decision, for him.

"Now at last we celebrate," he concluded. "There is abundant food adjacent, and the Mistresses Minstrels will play for dancing. On!"

Gale, Monochrome, and Shee brought out their instruments and played again, a lively dance tune, telepathically coordinated. Havoc, as king until the formal arrangements were made, did the first

dances, first with Gale, then Monochrome, then Shee, while the two not dancing played. Thereafter other couples joined in.

Then for Havoc it was women's choice as a line formed to dance with him. And the first in line was—Ennui.

"Surprise," he said as they danced. She was better skilled at this than he expected, though they kept it sedate out of respect for her mortality and age. She did have womanly skills that had been largely suppressed during her service as his personal secretary and effective executive of the kingdom. "I thought you were quit of me."

"I will never be quit of you, Havoc. Now I am doing what I always wanted to do."

"Dancing with me?"

"In part."

"Question?"

"Interacting with you socially. I was not free to do that while I worked for you. It would have been improper."

"Ennui, you could do anything you want with me. You're my oath friend, and I think I would have trusted you without the oath. I do not want to lose your association."

"You are setting up to be a touring minstrel show with your women. You know the bath girls will insist on coming along; they have oriented on you and it would be cruel to deny them."

"Agreement," he said, realizing.

"Which will make it a party of nine right there. Monochrome's three assistants will accompany her, and you will surely be seeing her maid Scent at odd moments, she of the bondage scene. That makes it twelve, with a need for some privacy between presentations. You can't just camp on villages not equipped for such a troupe. You will have to be self-sustaining, providing your own quarters, food, and waste disposal. You will also need a competent itinerary, as there will be thousands of requests and bad feelings by those denied. Coordination will be essential. There will be props to set up, stages to arrange. Who will handle those details?"

"Ennui, you know I'm no good at details! That's why I depend on you. I see I will still need you. I beg you—"

"Don't beg, Havoc. It's not kingly."

He pouted. "Please."

"And you still have obligations, Havoc. Such as siring Opaline's second fourth in two years. You will need to be reminded, because it is not your nature to renege."

"Ennui—"

"So it seems the Lady Aspect and I will have to join your throng, accomplishing our retirement traveling that way. Our husbands should be able to assist; they do have some organizational experience." That was a considerable understatement; the men had helped govern the planet.

She wasn't leaving him! He put his hands under her shoulders and lifted her into the air before him so that her feet dangled.

"Havoc! What are you doing?"

"Something I've wanted to do for a quarter century, but protocol prevented. Kissing you." He slowly brought her face close to his.

She glared at him. "Havoc!"

But she didn't turn her face away.

He kissed her soundly on the mouth. She accepted it fully. There was a special love between them, unlikely as it might have seemed. They had always needed each other. She gave him necessary guidance; he gave her life meaning.

And the applause erupted again. Of course everyone was watching.

Author's Note

It has been a decade since I started writing this series, doing one novel roughly every two years. When I wrote #4, *Key to Liberty*, my wife's condition was deteriorating and my writing slowed to a crawl. We finally got the diagnosis, Chronic Inflammatory Demyelinating Polyneuropathy, and with treatment she slowly recovered. Then Congress changed the rules, and the hospital would no longer give her the essential treatment. Instead we picked up the cost ourselves: \$3,000 per treatment, every five to six weeks. The choice was that, or to allow her to slowly descend toward paralysis and death. Fortunately we didn't waste our money made in my bestselling years, and were able to cover the cost.

This affected my appearance. My wife used to cut my hair. When she became too ill to do it, I stopped having it cut. Now after more than two years I have naturally waving brown tresses over a foot long, which I wear in a pony-tail. I never knew what lovely hair I had until after I turned 70. I think I'll keep it, even if I do spend more time doing my hair each day than I save by not having it cut.

This time my wife had heart surgery. Technically, an aortic aneurysm, wherein the largest artery of the body, leading directly from the heart, was swollen and getting worse, so it seemed almost as large as the heart itself. If not fixed, at some point it would leak or burst, and she would be dead. Surgery was scheduled for early May, 2007, but then postponed a month because of an infection. So in that windfall month we saw three movies, bought new furniture, got an errant air conditioner fixed, and replaced our 19 year old washing and drying machines. And I had my best month writing the novel, and completed it.

Then in June she did have the surgery. They stopped her heart, cracked open her chest, cut open the artery, put in synthetic tubing, and closed her up again. A week later she was home from the

hospital, recovering. She exists largely on pain pills, because every time she coughs there is a jolt in her chest, and she is weak, but the worst seems to be over. She has a big heart shaped pillow she clutches to her chest when coughing. She's not allowed to use her hands to help lift herself from a chair, so I heave her up while she holds her heart. In this period I run the household and edited the novel. We're getting through. Her recovery is not finished, but the novel is, and this Author's Note is being written at the time of our 51st wedding anniversary, June 23, 2007. We're celebrating by having some cheesecake. She has a highly restricted diet, and most of what she really likes is off it.

I am 72, pushing 73, trying to stay fit via serious exercise of body and mind. I fit what I can into the daily routine. For example, it is three quarters of a mile from our mailbox and newspaper boxes to our house, so I jog out before dawn on alternate days, and use an adult large-wheeled scooter on other days. The scooter makes excellent sense; it is simpler than a bicycle and easier to balance on, which counts increasingly as I get older and my reflexes slow. I also have a recumbent bike, though, and I work out with dumbbells. I try archery twice a week, though my aim is not improving and my scores are abysmal. But it does give me exercise.

Anyway, one secret of health and longevity is activity, not just physical. I'm still writing, and I'll never retire. Though the publishing industry denies practicing ageism—that is, systematically rejecting authors above a certain age—when they refuse even to look at my novels, such as the *ChroMagic* series, there is a suspicion. I saw the handwriting on the wall more than a decade back, and took steps to get around it. Namely, going for the movies. Anything can be a best seller, regardless of merit, if there's a movie associated with it. Now two fantasy options have been exercised, meaning they will be making an Anime movie from *Split Infinity* and a pilot for a TV series from *On A Pale Horse*, and a third on *A Spell for Chameleon* gives every indication it will also be exercised. So my career is simultaneously low, in that I can't get much significant traditional print publication, and high, in that this seems likely to change dramatically in the next few years. We'll see.

I have used the "low" time to catch up on projects I wanted to do, like *ChroMagic*. I used to wonder why Jack Vance, one of the finest fantasy writers ever, did so many great novels, like the *Lyonese* series, for small publishers, where they got little attention. Now I know, and I'm doing it too. Big publishers are motivated mainly by money, but they're not necessarily very sharp about making it. It's like the unfunny joke, where she says "You think I'm good for only one thing!" and he retorts "And not very good for that." Small press, largely denied the corrupting prospects of big money, at least has some notion of quality.

I also maintain my www.hipiers.com Web site, where I have a bi-monthly blog type column that generally runs 6,000 words or more, fulminating my liberal, ornery, humanistic opinions. There is information on my works there, and an ongoing survey of electronic publishers and related services. I list any electronic publishers I learn of, and assess them candidly running anonymous feedback from the authors who use them, positive and negative. I do this because I want to help other writers find viable markets and avoid some of the pitfalls that I fell into, in the course of my eight year struggle to make my first story sale. I do it because writers who talk back to publishers are apt to get threatened, punished, blacklisted, or sued, even when—or especially when—their complaints are valid. It happened to me. I am, because of my intervening success, essentially immune to any of that now, which means that I can afford to publish the truth. If someone wants to sue me today for telling it as it is, I have an attitude like a tankful of hungry sharks and I would expect to make them pay. I have done that, too, before. Not many writers can get away with the truth, so I feel an obligation to do it. This does lead to some ugly confrontations with errant publishers and their minions, but also considerable private support: many writers, and even some publishers, are glad to see this material

covered.

Last year my computer system crashed, and naturally I had neglected to back up some key files. It is always the key file that gets overlooked. It took me months to get set up with a new system, in part because I was trying out different distributions of Linux, the open source operating system. I support open source on principle, but it can be a pain to install. Finally, with the considerable help of a geek (that is, one of the secret masters of Linux), I got set up with Kubuntu, which is Ubuntu with the KDE environment I prefer. This is the first novel I have done with it. It's not perfect; it has a distressing occasional tendency to shut down my word processor OpenOffice when I use the Escape key, and to shut down the whole system when I try to back up a file. It can't go online with my 64 bit system, so I receive no updates or fixes. So I don't know whether I'll stay with it. But it does do the job.

Enough about me. What about this novel? When I finished ChroMagic #4 I knew that #5 would concern the war between the Glamors and the machines. That was it; the details remained stubbornly blank. I had no idea of the nature of the engagement. That bothered me. Meanwhile I had a separate idea that occurred only when I was watching movies: someone with the ability to move a small object, like a chip of wood, a small distance, like half an inch. With his mind. That didn't seem like much, but I realized that if it could be applied to something like a pistol, it could make that gun fire while still in the holster. That could be devastating. Suppose it was used to depress the keys of a distant computer? So a seemingly insignificant talent could have global or galactic effect. There were real prospects here. But I had no story for it. Then, while watching a movie, of course, I thought what about ChroMagic? And that connection crystallized in due course into the entire novel. Oh, there were other details, as you may have noticed, but that was the main theme. Once I had that, the rest of the novel coalesced around it. In the course of that illumination, I realized, as Havoc did in the last chapter, how the war with the machines related to the whole ChroMagic framework, right from the first novel. Now at last we know who prepared the way for the Glamors, and why. I didn't know when I began the novel. Yes, there may come a critic who will say that *he* knew it from the first page of the first novel. But it's an open secret that critics are made of manure. Ask any writer.

I collect pictures. I once aspired to be an artist, before I concluded that my talent was insufficient and turned instead to the artistry of words. But a nice scene still turns me on. I also like women, as a glimpse of the women in this novel might suggest. So I collect pictures of women too. Nothing special; I just cut out newspaper and magazine ads and save them in a folder. Some bra ads are fabulous. And one of those I see as Weft: this gorgeous blonde just about bursting out of her bra. Even though I have never been into blondes romantically. So I know what Weft looks like. Most of the others are merely nebulous figures, lacking sharp definition. Maybe some day I'll see a picture of Gale, Monochrome, Shee, Flame or Opaline. It doesn't matter; I trust my readers to form their own mental pictures, or maybe even to cut out their own bra ads.

It can be difficult to keep track of essential background details when doing a series of novels, so I had files for ChroMagic to keep them straight. For example, my Characters file describes people to the extent they are shown in the novels, and has things like what each of Havoc and Gale's children call their parents. For example Flame calls them Havoc and Gale, while Weft calls them dad and mom. Each has his/her own way. I can't remember, but the file does it for me. But there are larger things, such as the associations of colors with magic, or the specialties of individual Glamors. For those I had the Colors file. I am including it as an appendix so that any readers who are interested can check it, no obligation. The fact is, even the wildest fantasy needs to be consistent to the extent feasible.

Fantasy also needs to be realistic, odd as that may seem. If you write a story about a contemporary man living in a contemporary house in a contemporary town, you can skimp on details because your readers are familiar with the setting and find it believable. But if you write about folk living in colored volcanic magical zones, red, green, blue etc., becoming those colors themselves, and able to do only their own colors of magic, you had better labor to make them believable. What about when these magic folk get involved in a galactic space battle? The idea of spaceships getting into individual dogfights and shooting each other down in flames—when they are light seconds apart, in deep space, with no gravity, where no fire can exist? So my space battle is not quite like that. I was unwilling to sacrifice realism for drama.

Did I write myself into these novels? No. I love the realm and characters and envy Havoc, but obviously I am not Havoc. Oh, I have noticed how writers who get old and sexually fading tend to write increasingly sexy fiction about immortal characters. Yes, I seem to be following that route. But I hope it is nevertheless a good story, and that those characters come alive for the reader. Come on, admit it: if you're a female reader, wouldn't you like to spend an hour no fault with Havoc? If you're male, how about a walk between villages with Opaline?

This is I think the final ChroMagic novel. If by some mischance someone makes a movie from the series, and the novels all become super bestsellers, and there is demand for more, well, I suppose there could be some interaction with Andromeda galaxy. Something about an anti-matter bomb that annoyed the folk there. But why should we yank Havoc from his well-earned retirement as a traveling minstrel? That wouldn't be kind.

—Piers Anthony, June 23, 2007

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 novels in other genres as well, including historical fiction, martial arts, and horror.

Piers Anthony's official website is HI PIERS at www.hipiers.com, where he publishes his bimonthly online newsletter. Piers lives with his wife in Central Florida.

Reference Appendix

"The Colors of ChroMagic"

What follows are the writer's notes that Piers Anthony used for reference for the ChroMagic series while writing the novels. This information is presented as is from his notes file.

COLORS OF THE VOLCANOES:

(these are apparent specialties; actually all Chroma can do all types of magic.)

White = science

Green = plants

Yellow = fire

Invisible = air, illusion

Brown = earth, conjuring, golems

Translucent = water, mind reading; The sieges of emotion: Disgust Fear Rage Love Agape

Black = void, death

Red = blood, demonic, healing, ectoplasm

Silver = electrical

Blue = animals

Gray = immunity to magic, or nullifying it—anywhere, not limited to Gray zone

Purple = between Red and Blue Chroma as colors merge—demonic animals

Orange = conjuration: jumping from one spot to another, to any Orange zone

nonChroma = all area between Chroma zones

TYPES OF VOLCANOES:

Earth = Lava/rocks/dust, cools hardens, settles; ash

Fire = ignites surroundings, but ashes imbued with magic.

Water = steam/snow/water, carries colors via rivers to lakes

Air = explosive outdraft with color

Void = huge crater, bottomless hole. When active, sucks surroundings in, like a tornado. That's Black Chroma, really, but could be that it's not fixed and there can be other Chroma voids.

All can be hot or cold, all deadly at close range, all magical

PREDATORS:

Fire = project microwave heat to cook from inside

Water = project liquefaction to dissolve innards

Earth = solidify innards so they can't function

Air = vaporize tissues without heat so body is inflated with gas

Void = innards disappear from center, feeding into maw

DEFENSES:

Fire = becomes too hot to handle or eat

Water = becomes liquid and flows out of clutches

Earth = becomes too heavy to carry or hold

Air = becomes diffuse and drifts away like mist

Void = conjures self away

Dragon Seeds: buzz in ear when there is danger, or something amiss, or a lie being told

SEASONS:

Basically two, as planet circles star or black hole: warm, cold. But complications:

Fire = burning hot, from Hole flares, but generally brief, sporadic; changeable super Summer

Water = heavy rains, flooding, from atmospheric disturbances Spring

Earth = quakes Summer

Air = wind, sand, thunder, snow storms, depending on conditions Fall

Void = barren, killingly cold when there are no flares Winter

SOCIAL CONVENTIONS:

Young folk can marry at ages 15-16, must marry by 18, unless receiving a waver, such as a king's mistress.

Each woman must bear at least 4 children, one, the "fourth," by a man not her husband. Fourths can come in any order, however. With mer folk, they are "seconds" for faster connections to the rest of the species. Adoption counts, or bearing a changeling by Temple implantation. Men are not so obliged, except that they can not reasonably refuse a woman who asks for a fourth. They are never responsible for its care, except the ones their own wives get.

"How were you named?"

"Say my name."

OATHS;

Of friendship

Of secrecy

Of brotherhood

GAMES/REFERENCES:

Tickle & Peek, Touch & Touch, Ask & Show, and variants; Guess & Penalty, Poke & Tell (actual sex)

No Fault-social and sexual interaction while traveling, for duration of the travel only.

A person's Vivid and Void: complete love. Also Between Vivid and Void-awful alternatives.

Truth: each person must answer the questions of the other with complete candor.

Question & Strip—the game Symbol first plays with Havoc, like strip poker. Statue game

SINGLE-WORD STATEMENTS OF FEELING OR INTENT, SAMPLES:

"Greeting" "Acknowledged" "Parting" "Admiration" "Envy" "Anger" "Joy" "Desire" "Aversion"
"Apology" "Love" "Wonder" "Contrition" "Pain" "Satiating" "Secret" "Belief" "Adoration"
"Appreciation" "Expletive!" "Insult" "Compliment" "Empathy" "Obscenity" "Confusion" "Grief"
"Respect" "Contempt" "Awe" "Comprehension" "Obliteration" "Longing" "Attraction" "Relief"
"Embarrassment" "Amazement" "Gratitude" "Request" "Considered" "Question" "Observation"

"Affirmation" "Sympathy" "Frustration" "Agreement" "Satisfaction." "Acquiescence" "Threat"
"Capitulation" "Pleasure" "Confession" "Favor" "Permission" "Negation" "Complication" "Shock"
"Outrage" "Enthusiasm" "Similarity" "Endorsement" "Preference" "Denial" "Comparison" "Desperation"
"Deal" "Practicality" "Objection" "Suspicion" "Warning" "Understanding" "Mischief" "Resignation"
"Argument" "Delight" "Explanation" "Interest" "Sincere" "Joke" "Oddity" "Realization" "Mutual"
"Incredulity" "Ditto" "Ignorance" "Exchange" "Excitement" "Regret" "Dismay" "Exaggeration"
"Recommendation" "Echo" "Ire" "Devotion" "Mortification" "Doubt" "Gone" "Conjecture"
"Confirmation" "Wrath" "Needless" (in response to Apology) "Horror"

GEOGRAPHY:

Charm-planet of volcano magic, orbiting a pair of stars

Mystery or **Counter-Charm**-twin planet, seeming similar, but unknown. About 6 times apparent diameter of our moon, highly colorful. The setting for fanciful stories. The face of Mystery is generally dark during Charm's day, and light during Charm's night, because of the way they orbit each other, nearer or farther from Vivid. Faces locked together, so their far sides can't see each other.

Vivid-the bright sun

Void-the dark sun, companion body, a black hole

Triumph-large hollow pyramid, tetrahedron, floating anchored on a lake. Capital city of Charm. Description: a tetrahedron (four sided triangular pyramid) floating on a lake, metal outside. 2,000 feet on a side, accommodating 100,000 people with 100 square feet per person. ($2000^2 = 4,000,000$ square feet times half for triangle = 2,000,000 divided by 100' per person = 20,000 people per floor, maybe 10 floors diminishing = 100' off bottom, of a total height of about 1,500 feet, accommodate 100,000 with room to spare)

Trifle-Havoc and Gale's home village, bordered by green, red and yellow Chroma

ANIMALS:

spider—7 legs

bear—6 legs

millipedes—100 or more legs

dog—6 legs (same category as the bear: pseudo-mammalian)

sphinx—9 legs, huge size, much memory

goat—6 legs (equivalent to mammals)

buffalo—6 legs

dragon—1 leg, slides—category of worms

bird—3 legs, 3 toes. Flies with one wing providing propulsion, second wing acts as rudder, thing zips forward for next stroke. Stands on one wing with three toes projecting to grip the ground. Three eyes. Telepathic.

plants—8 legs, because of roots

insects, wasp—5 legs

fish—2 legs

human—4 legs

trees—8 roots

mollusks, squid —10 legs

mosses—1,000 legs

saprophytes, fungi—10,000 legs

reptiles—6 legs

amphibians—6 legs

CHANGELING POTENTIALS:

seeing through illusion

healing

thought control (that is, concealing own thoughts from mind readers)

stunning or death dealing

invulnerability

conjuraton

absorbing identities

eidetic memory

THE NOVEL TITLES:

Key to Havoc—Quest for Leadership

Key to Chroma—Search for the Changelings

Key to Destiny—Drive for Integration

Key to Liberty—Earth seeks to recover colony

Key to Survival—Machines Invasion

THE GLAMORS:

(First 7 are human, next 5 animal, Havoc, Gale, their four children, the Ifrit, and the machines)

Black—Jamais Vu—saprophytes, 10,000 legs (he seems Invisible) ikon: mobius strip #3

Red—Stevia—human, 4 legs (she seems Gray) ikon: nude woman #14

Invisible—Dour—millipedes, 100 legs (he seems nonChroma) ikon: millipede #6

Blue—Lucent—insects, 5 legs (she seems Translucent) ikon: insect #7

Green—Thumb—mollusks, 10 legs (male) ikon: squid #9

Yellow—Deva—demons, 0 legs (female) ikon: star #1

Translucent—Pisca—Fish, 2 legs (male) ikon: fish #10

White—Billy—Goat, 6 legs #12 ikon: goat

Brown—(Mentor)—Dragon, category of Worms, 1 leg #5 ikon: dragon

Silver—Silver—Spider, 7 legs #8 ikon: spider

Gray—Avian, 3 legs #11 ikon: bird

Orange—Orange—Sphinx, 9 legs #13 ikon: sphinx

nonChroma—Havoc—trees/plants, 8 legs (roots) #4 ikon: tree w/8 roots

nonChroma—Gale—mosses/lichens, 1,000 legs #2 ikon: mossball

nonChroma—Warp—Fungus/yeast 1,000,000 legs #15 ikon: toadstool/mushroom

nonChroma—Weft—Bacteria 10,000,000 legs #16 ikon: spiral

nonChroma—Flame—viruses 100,000,000 legs #17 ikon: slime

nonChroma—Voila—Amoeba, 100,000 legs #18 ikon: blob

Countercharm Glamor—Idyll Ifrit no legs (demon variant) ikon: other ifrits

nonChroma—Shee—Robot, matter, wheels (not seen) ikon: gear

EARTH GLAMORS:

The Female Spirit—investing the Mistress of Mistresses and 1,000 lesser Mistresses. Governs by the power of sex and persuasion, patronizes the arts. Healing, empathy, sharing, health, kindness, cooperation, agape, love.

The Male Spirit—invests available men. Seeks power, sex, and destruction of the arts. Governs by brute force, vengeance, fear, selfish interest, illness, competition, cruelty, hate. Destroys feelings of self worth or accomplishment so the Spirit is the only focus.

ORDER BY LEGS:

0=**demons**—Yellow

1=**worms, dragons**—Brown

2=**fish**—Translucent

3=**birds**—Gray

4=**human**—Red

5=**insects**—Blue

6=**mammals, reptiles**—White

7=**spiders**—Silver

8=**trees, plants**—nonChroma

9=**sphinx**—Orange

10=**mollusks**—Green

100=**millipedes**—Invisible

1000=**mosses**—nonChroma

10,000=**saprophytes**—Black

100,000=**amoeba**—nonChroma

1,000,000=**yeast, fungi**—nonChroma

10,000,000=**bacteria**—nonChroma

100,000,000=**viruses**—nonChroma

continuous (wheel)=**machines**—nonChroma

ORDER BY ARRIVAL: WAVES OF COLONIZATION

1. **Viruses**

2. **Bacteria**

3. **Amoeba**

4. **Demons**—catalysts, translating raw magic to organic magic—Yellow

5. **Mosses, algae, lichen**—primitive plants—nonChroma

6. **Fungi, saprophytes**—breaking down organic substances—Black, nonChroma

7. **Trees**—advanced plants—nonChroma

8. **Worms**—intermediate catalysts, up to advanced dragons—Brown

9. **Millipedes**—Invisible

10. **Insects**—Blue

11. **Spiders**—Silver

12. **Mollusks, squid**—Green

13 **Fish**—Translucent

14 **Birds**—Gray

15 **Mammals**—White

16 **Sphinx**—Orange

17 **Humans**—Red

18 **Robots**—self-willed machines, conscious computers—18th wave—nonChroma

COUNTER CHARM/MYSTERY:

plants similar to those of Charm, with variations.

Six-legged insects

one-winged birds

five-legged animal with wheels

big moving sponge

six-legged bear-dog

ifrits—cloud entities

EARTH:

6 CONTINENTS: governed by women Mistresses who both rule and sexually oblige men, controlling them sexually

America (North and South)

Atlantis (all the islands)

Africa

Asia (Europe, Asia)

Australia

Antarctica

LEVELS OF TECHNOLOGY:

Type 0 = use of a portion of the energy of a planet.

Type 1 = utilizing all the energy of the planet

Type 2 = utilizing all the energy of a star

Type 3 = utilizing all the energy of a galaxy

FUTURE PATHS:

(prior novels never define the durations)

Near = 1 second to 1 hour = Glamors 1 second to 5 minutes, Voila 1 second to one hour

Intermediate = 1 hour to 1 month = Idyll Ifrit

Far = 1 month through eternity = machines

First Crisis—Dealing with Mino

Second Crisis—Earth's effort to reclaim the colony

Third Crisis—The machines culture

SEX WITH GLAMORS:

Glamors were unable to have sex with mortals, if the mortals knew; they were magically repelled, even floating above the Glamors. Then scientist Ini figured it out: it was physical on the part of the mortals, but psychological on the part of the Glamors. Their belief made it magically literal. When Glamors believed they could have sex with mortals, the problem dissipated.

LIVING CULTURES COALITION:

The name for the organization fighting the machines.

SUMMARY OF VIEWPOINTS, NOVEL #5:

1. Opaline
2. Gale
3. Fifth
4. Opaline
5. Havoc
6. Fifth
7. Shee
8. Flame
9. Opaline
10. Shee
11. Havoc
12. Fifth
13. Gale
14. Shee
15. Opaline
16. Weft
17. Warp
18. Gale
19. Opaline
20. Havoc
21. Warp
22. Shee
23. Fifth
24. Havoc

25. Opaline

26. Gale

27. Shee

28. Fifth

29. Opaline

30. Havoc

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