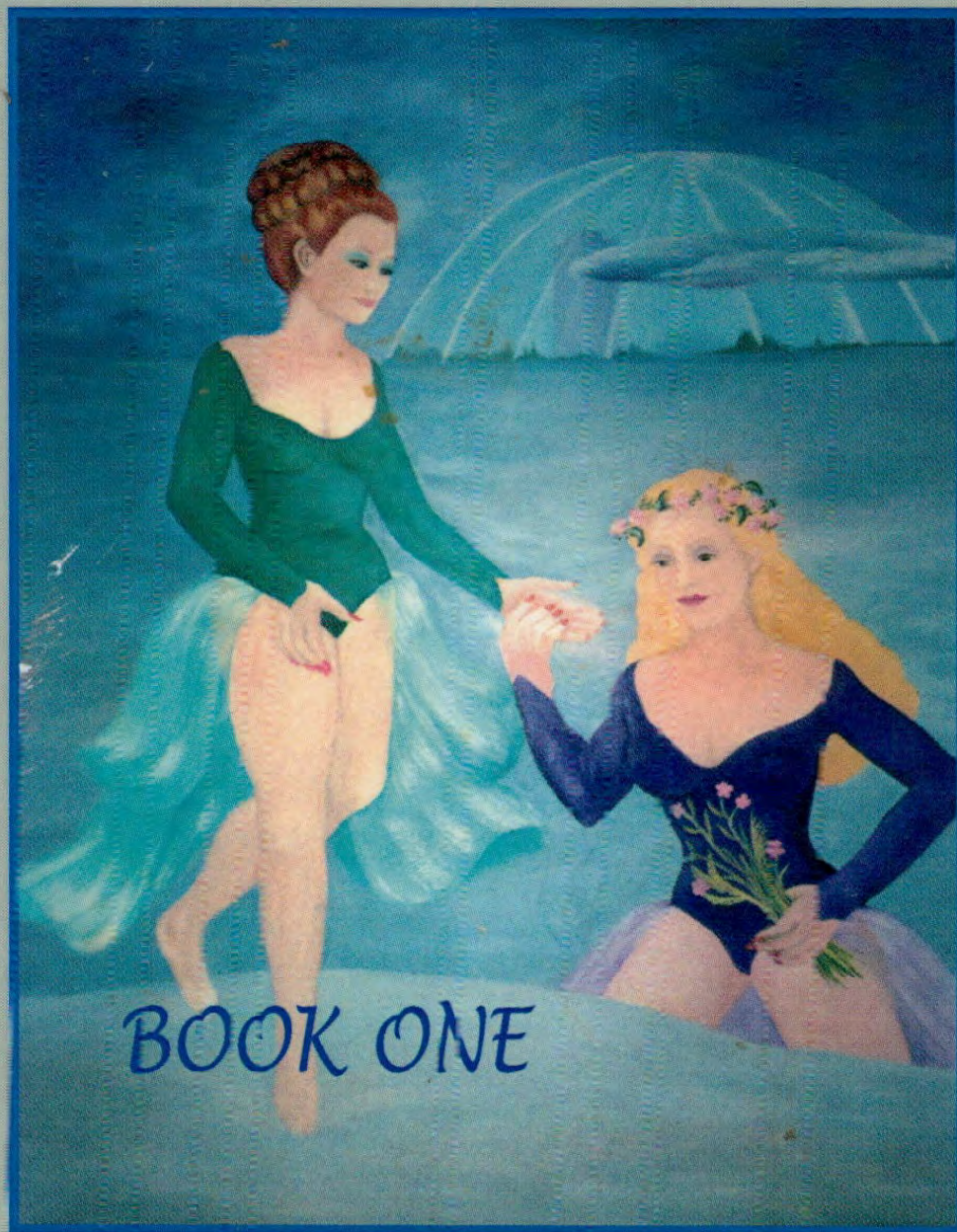


ADVENT OF THE SUPERNALS

THE  
**ZŌ'ÖID**  
MISSION



A NOVEL ..... by GERDEAN



Advent of the Supernals

Book One

The

**Zō'·ÖID**

**Mission**

**GERDEAN**

Harp of God Foundation, Inc.



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The Zoid Mission  
is

**DEDICATED**

*To Joe and Kuhus  
And Sally and Debby  
Who could not wait  
for The Portal.*



What *is* a zooid?

## DEFINITION

**According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary:**

zo·oid \ 'zo ,oid / *n*: an entity that resembles but is not wholly the same as a separate individual organism: as **a**: an organized body (as a phagocyte or a sperm cell) having locomotion **b**: a more or less independent animal produced (as by fission, proliferation, or strobilation) by other than direct sexual methods and so having an equivocal individuality - zo·oi·dal \ zo- 'oid-' \ *adj*.

**According to Stedman's Medical Dictionary, 26<sup>th</sup> Ed.**

zo'oid (zo'oyd) 1. Resembling an animal; an organism or object with an animal-like appearance. 2. An animal cell capable of independent existence or movement, as the ovum or a spermatazoon, or the segment of a tapeworm. 3. An individual of a colonial invertebrate, such as a coral. [G. *zoodes*, fr. *zoon*, animal, + *eidōs*, resemblance]

**According to Gerdean, author of "The Zooid Mission:**

A Zo'oid is 1. An enlightened Homo sapiens. 2. A free will agent of independent intelligence. 3. Any superconscious resident of the material worlds capable of altruism. 4. A self-acting individual capable of bonding with others of like mind in order to create ideal conditions for personal growth and for sustained social harmony.

**"We can do more together than we can accomplish alone. But ten men are of little more value than one in lifting a great load unless they lift together -- at the same time. Those who lift together are Zooids."**



The

# ZŌ'ÖID

Mission

To Jim,  
my brother,  
my friend,  
Lillian



# CONTENTS

## *Cast of Characters*

Prologue . . . . .	i
0802-LZ	
1	
The Media . . . . .	2
<i>Audley Claudine Blackstone</i>	
2	
The Man . . . . .	28
<i>Bradford Jules Spencer</i>	
3	
The Entity . . . . .	50
<i>Lanon (La-non') Zenton</i>	
4	
The Woman . . . . .	85
<i>Sylvia Chandler Watergate</i>	
5	
The Mindal Scientist . . . . .	114
<i>Wilhelm "Doc Will" Blackstone</i>	
6	
New Dimensions . . . . .	152
<i>Dierdre Vessey and Sarah Blackstone</i>	
7	
New Connections . . . . .	188
<i>Professor Alexius Vessey</i>	



8	New Perspectives . . . . .	215
	<i>Twilah Leighton and Angus</i>	
9	New Social Paradigm . . . . .	246
	<i>The Zooids of the Jural Colony Project</i>	
10	New Leadership . . . . .	287
	<i>Jessie Cain Brothers</i>	
11	New Arrivals . . . . .	322
	<i>Flora and Cybelle</i>	
12	New Administration . . . . .	350
	<i>The JCP Board of Directors</i>	
13	Assignments – The TASC . . . . .	389
	<i>Colony Coastline - Victoria Redbow</i>	
	<i>Penn State Reserve - Dr. Arthur Findley</i>	
	<i>Colony Breadbasket - Elliot and Anna Sproul</i>	
14	Celebration of Fruition . . . . .	433
	<i>Ellen and Oscar, and Verbena</i>	
	Epilogue . . . . .	467
	<i>Benjamin Wilhelm Blackstone Spencer Brothers</i>	



## PROLOGUE

Materialization from vaporous Zentonite to opaque Urthling presented 0802-LZ and his spacial associates with myriad existential considerations:

Since situations requiring energy- and matter-transfer entail continual and intricate supervision, permission for the metamorphose must first be granted by a Most High Authority; after permission is granted, Life Transporting Specialists are subpoenaed to oversee the creation of the configuration; and, once its completion and perfection have been adjudged by a Matter Expert, the Plasm Planters and Energy Utilizers embark upon the tediously meticulous task of transferring the life plasm of the subject into the scientifically designed cells.

Throughout these proceedings, requiring 948 hours Zenton time (2,803 hours less some seconds Urth time), the subject, 0802-LZ, observed the development of what would become his mortal raiment. As required by the Constellation By-Laws, 0802-LZ familiarized himself with the intricacies of the cellular structure, which was necessarily inoculated against all human disease, and, as a universe precaution, its sperm count was reduced to insignificance.

In session with Mind Manipulators, 0802-LZ learned the ways in which his faculties would be diminished once materialization in the flesh was actualized: he would perform function with limited senses and reduced intellect. The subject was prepped in the foreknowledge that seven Urth miles is the equivalent of Zenton's one. He was practiced in the alternate systems of weights and measures and educated in the fluent use of several human languages.



In the Archives, 0802-LZ studied the history, evolution and status of the peoples of the planet Urth.

To effect transmigration, the electro-chemical system of the subject was reduced to a rate less than one-tenth his normal capacity. Once actualized, the material being would need time to habituate his new form without disruption to either of the two combined systems. Familiarity in the use of the five senses would take hours, while locomotion, with subsequent bodily functions of eating, sleeping and elimination, could take days. The evolutionary and time-consuming emotional development process was an option for 0802-LZ to determine.

To avoid the dangers of isolation, a special channel of communication was established between the Zentonite and his Home Station of Zenton and, to oversee the safety of the man from Zenton, Professor Alexius Vessey, the human contact personality, had been duly notified.

Master Physicians calculated that activation of 0802-LZ's mortal structure should take place in a temperature range of 50 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Atmospheric conditions most favorable to successful transposition and human activation were determined to be existent in pastoral central Pennsylvania in the United States of America between dusk and dawn commencing the night of August 14<sup>th</sup> in the Year of Our Lord.

Comes now the arduous task of transferring the dormant combination of cosmic energy and material mass to the site, and, having placed the form and withdrawn to their respective observation posts, the spacial entities wait.



## 1

## THE MEDIA

*Audley Claudine Blackstone*

Audley clicked the snap shut on her suitcase, half hoping she wouldn't have to go.

"I'm late," she said aloud. "I'm going to miss that goddamned plane, I just know it."

Defiantly she ran upstairs to the loft, checking to see that everything was in good order. The bed was unmade.

Catching her reflection in the mirror, she acknowledged that at least on the surface everything was in good shape. The tailored grey traveling pantsuit and matching suede pumps would hold up well during the long flight. Her blouse was wrinkle-resistant; her deodorant, fail-safe.

"Where did you put your lighter?" she inquired of the naked green eyes. Her face, lightly made up, stared back at her.

"Outdoors?" Sweeping the air with her long brown hair, she swiftly turned to scan the eclectic studio apartment she had designed and created for herself. On the redwood deck, running along the front and east sides of the two-story beach front structure, freshly watered plants stood erect, shading smaller bowls of blooms. Her favorite, the California poppy, held its bright face to the sun, waved



gently in the ocean breeze. Audley overlooked the chaise lounge, barrenly soaking up the sun's piercing rays, enticing her to come and partake of the Malibu balm. She could not, much as she would like to. The lighter was not outdoors.

From the loft, her eyes descended to the writing table that faced the high windows to the front, overlooking the blue Pacific, and holding ready her briefcase packed with fresh notebooks, pens and pencils, laptop, tapes and recorder, snapped tight and lying next to her recent gift from Brad: a new Nikon and myriad film.

Where was that lighter? As much as she smoked, it was as important as air that she find it. Glancing at her watch, her eyes sped again, looking for the lighter and lingering in the apartment that she loved and hated leaving.

In the center of the studio was a French Provincial sofa; in front of this, an authentic Chippendale table -- too tall to be a practical coffee table but aesthetically pleasing and esthetics were more important to Audley than practicality. On the table, in neat array, lay the latest issues of *L'Amour*, *Architectural Digest*, *National Geographic*, *Playgirl* and *The Silent Majority*. Snuggled next to these she spied the lighter.

"On the coffee table," she said, answering her own question. "Right where you left it."

Grabbing a silk green-grey paisley scarf and a last glimpse in the mirror, she descended almost leisurely, and reached for the lighter and yet another cigarette, her eye focusing on the slick glossy monthly for which she wrote: *The Silent Majority*.

"At five bucks a copy," she commanded of the inert magazine, "this better sell a lot of copies! How else can I expect to meet my expenses?" Audley would not settle for less than First Class.

In the kitchen, the telephone rang. "Damn that phone," she muttered, returning to her inventory and gathering her paraphernalia, one at a time, at the door ...

(1) Suitcase: certainly enough clothes for a simple weekend assignment.



... wondering who might be calling.

"Not Dad," she surmised. "I already talked to him this morning."

(2) Train case: cosmetics, necessary items of feminine hygiene, blow dryer.

(3) Briefcase: laptop, cell phone.

(4) Camera case: batteries, film.

(5) Purse: checkbook, ID, cash.

"It's probably Weinberger checking up on me."

(6) Lighter, cigarettes.

(7) Jacket. ("It's too hot for a jacket." "Take it!")

(8) Plane ticket.

(9) Keys. ("Where are your keys?" "In your purse.")

"Well, screw Weinberger," she said as the telephone continued to ring. "After being an Ace Reporter for three years, I can damned well take responsibility for my own assignments."

What else? Oh, yes, very important. Marijuana. Only two, neatly tucked into a film cartridge in the camera case. "That's more than enough. Brad doesn't like me to smoke, anyway."

The telephone trilled for perhaps the tenth time.

"Damn that phone!" She retrieved the receiver. "Audley Blackstone's residence."

"Aud? It's me. Sylvia." The voice was sultry. Obviously, Sylvia had just woken up. Audley automatically looked at her watch: 11:35. Thirty-five minutes before flight time. "I'm glad I caught you," Sylvia purred. "Haven't you gone yet?"

"Oh, yes, Sylvia," she replied dryly. "I left ten minutes ago, right on schedule. You're talking to a recording."

"Oh, Audley, you're too funny. But seriously, have you got a minute?"

"I've got all day, Sylvia. I'm not going."

"What? Why, of course you are! Listen, I won't keep you."

"Hold on a minute. Let me get a cigarette."



"You smoke too much," Sylvia said into the empty receiver.  
"You're practically a chain smoker."

"Okay," Audley said, inhaling, "I'm back."

"I just wanted to remind you to pick up my dress."

"I'm not going."

"You sound serious."

"I *am* serious. The Institute of Futurology can have their goddamned convention without me."

"But you have an assignment to do!" Sylvia objected. "What will you do about Weinberger?"

"Screw Weinberger."

Sylvia overlooked the vulgarity. "And what about Brad?"

"Screw Brad."

"Now, Audley, is that any way to talk about your fiancé?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Of course it isn't. And you haven't even seen him for over a month."

"I know it, but damn it, I don't like seeing him when he's involved with his work. Every time I get near those people and that damned computer, we end up in the most vile arguments."

Sylvia could not dispute that. She could only envision herself at her party in the dress that lay waiting for her at Bonwit-Teller in New York. She took a practiced deep breath.

Audley grinned. This practiced patience was so like Sylvia who had never done a stitch of work in her life -- not labor, anyway, but many calculated verbal efforts. Sylvia calculated correctly this time. "You need the money."

Audley scowled. Sylvia was right.

"Audley?"

"I hung up."

"No, you didn't. I can hear you smoking."

"I'm breathing!"



Sylvia knew she had conquered. She was as good as wearing that dress already. It now remained for her to activate the problem child. "Alright. Are you packed?"

"Yes," Audley half pouted.

"Good. Have you got your ticket?"

"Yes."

"Well," Sylvia paused. "You know what to do. I'll see you when you get back."

Audley was still scowling over the prospects of the next few days. Regardless of her financial circumstances, something inside her rebelled against going.

"And don't forget to stop at Bonwit-Teller. It's right on Fifth Avenue."

Audley cracked a grin. "Fifth Avenue! I thought it was Times Square!"

"Bitch."

Audley giggled.

"Give my love to Brad."

LOADING LUGGAGE into her tiny green roadster, Audley took her customary moment to say good-bye to her home. She never left it, not even for a run to the corner grocery store, without giving the redwood structure a deep smile of appreciation. It was hers now, free and clear, thanks to her efforts and a hefty graduation bonus from her father. It needed some more fixing -- the downstairs lavy would expand to a laundry room -- but that was simple remodeling. It was shaping up just as she had imagined it would. The junipers were growing tall; the snapdragons were ready to bloom. She hoped to be home in time to water them before they suffered from thirst.

Almost simultaneously, she slammed shut the trunk and the garage door, hating the rush. Haste was alien to her natural temperament. Her father had teased her: "You were born in slow motion, Audley. You aren't built for speed beyond first gear." She revved the engine and shifted into second. In anticipation of the



trip, she had left the top up on the car but now she regretted the heat; she unwound the window, letting the wind whip.

She loved to drive and she was a good driver. She loved, in fact, her life, for the most part, and herself, despite her acknowledged flaws. She was pretty. She stood a lithe 5' 7" and bore herself well. Her figure, supported by shapely long legs, was deceptively well proportioned. She looked equally good in a bikini or a blazer, an asset her voluptuous friend Sylvia disdained.

Her tendency toward slow motion gave her poise and grace, most evident in the beauty of her aristocratic hands. Her nails, which she kept at a moderate length, were manicured in pastels, and to use this feature to her best advantage, she had developed the habit of gesturing, albeit slowly; she was not one for exhibitions.

Her skin, inherited from her deceased mother's French line, was classic and smooth and, in keeping, her nose was a trifle too long. Her lips pouted provocatively. However, her best features, and the one she guarded most highly, were the luminously large green eyes, forever hidden behind dark glasses. She chuckled, recalling one of her father's analyses: "You have a deep-seated fear, my dear, of being discovered for what you are: Human! And so you hide your mortality, your vulnerability, behind dark glasses." She pooh-poohed his psychiatric sketch at once but registered every word of it, for she truly believed everything Doc Will ascribed.

Yes, Audley Claudine Blackstone was a beauty by anyone's standards. She was 27 years old, liberated, educated and engaged, and had carved herself a career which suited her perfectly.

Many of her friends thought she had sold out when she refused to continue with her Masters in Sociology and switched to Journalism. They thought it beneath her station in life. Her schoolmate Sylvia had commented, "It's such a dirty job, Dahling," but Audley had a good mind for reporting. She rarely overlooked important details and, once assigned to cover a story, either by Weinberger or by her own choosing, she sleuthed to the core of the issue, carefully plotting her emotional appeals.



Audley was doing exactly what she wanted to do. Except this time. She had an unshakable, eerie feeling about the convention and she simply did not want to cover it. However, the plumber was scheduled to begin the new laundry room and, besides, she had given Weinberger her word.

AUDLEY MIRACULOUSLY ARRIVED at the airport in time to make 'last boarding' and settled into her seat in the First Class section, attitudinally barring social contact. There were few passengers; she consumed the adjacent seat for herself, setting upon it her camera case and purse. While waiting for take-off, she reviewed her itinerary. She would arrive at Kennedy Airport at 7:40; the connecting 45-minute flight to Meadowland was at 9:20. At least she and Brad could be together for a few hours before the demands of the convention took over. It would be a hectic weekend.

She closed her eyes for several uninterrupted moments to redistribute her scattered adrenalin and re-establish her poise. Adjusting her seat to a reclining position, she inserted the earphones, leaving the sound 'off.' "You can't buy silence like this," she murmured, letting the reverberations of her voice lull her into relaxation. She breathed deeply, holding her breath for a count of ten, feeling tranquillity come over her.

The Institute of Futurology was having its third annual conference. She scowled. There would be a review of the Institute's accomplishments and unending speeches, all cordially academic, on what they had expected to do, what they had actually done, where their goals had fallen short and why. The 'why' was usually because they lacked the necessary funds. There was never, ever, quite enough money.

"They could begin by cutting salaries!" She thought of Brad's enormous income, realizing ironically that his enormous income would one day be hers to enjoy. All too soon, the outside world penetrated, even here, into the silence. She felt the presence of



someone too close and begrudgingly opened her eyes to see the flight attendant standing over her. "Yes, Miss? Did you need something?" he asked.

"Oh, was I talking to myself? Sorry," she said, sitting upright. "I think better when I can hear what I'm thinking."

"How can you hear what you're thinking with earphones in your ears?"

How could people not know of such simple techniques? "It's all in the vibrations," she stated flatly.

"Well, I'm sorry if I disturbed your vibrations. Just let me know if you need anything."

Audley stopped his departure for an order of Galliano. "On the rocks, please. And make it a double." Might as well enjoy what was available. Audley had long since learned to enjoy what was available! God knew it would not be long before work and worry, haste and hypocrisy would enter in. It was better to enjoy what was presented when it was presented. Didn't Sylvia? Yes, except that Sylvia was more particular, more specific in what she would and would not enjoy, no matter how available it was.

The women had met in college in their first semester at U.C.L.A. with little in common except famous fathers. Sylvia's father, Hiram P. Chandler, owned the most widely distributed newspaper in the Western States, while Audley's father, Dr. Wilhelm Blackstone, was a renowned Doctor of Mindal Sciences.

Sylvia, for example, always seemed to preface her decisions by asking, "Is this something Daddy would like to see in his newspaper?" Because of this cautious attitude, Sylvia did little that Daddy might disapprove of and, therefore, did little that endeared her to her peers. Audley's father, on the other hand, had always encouraged his daughter to experiment with life. To Dr. Blackstone, life was comprised of experiments and experiences; the more of which he was made aware, the more he could contribute to his field. Audley thus experimented with life at large, delving into role-playing, drugs, sex, or whatever happened to be the current vogue.



She usually discussed her adventures with her roommate Sylvia who was half-scandalized and half-envious of Audley's free encounters with life, but always interested.

Thus Sylvia lived vicariously through Audley and was in a better position to select available diversions, already having privy knowledge of the outcome. Sylvia would never indulge in the drug culture activities, nor would she imbibe in any intoxicating drink. When Audley discovered that Sylvia intended to keep her hymen intact for her husband, she teased her, imagining the headline: "Chandler's Daughter Loses Virginity!" Nevertheless, Sylvia was adamant; it was important to Daddy. So throughout their freshman and sophomore years, Audley spoon-fed Sylvia tid-bits of her sexual excursions, Sylvia kept her hymen, and Audley put off for yet another year the awesome inevitable: sexual involvement with emotional commitment.

AUDLEY SURVEYED THE CLOUDS, listening to the ice cubes clunk in the plastic cup. There was no reason for her to attend this conference. Through Brad, she knew more than enough of what was going on to fabricate a story for *The Silent Majority*. After all, wasn't her fiancé, Dr. Bradford Spencer, the Head Systems Analyst for the multi-million-dollar computer system, the technical heart of the Institute? Did he not, when they had time to spend together, divulge all of the details and aspects of his work? Through Brad, she already knew more than the public, and more than the press.

This, of course, was one reason Weinberger was so happy to have her on his staff. She had inside access to one of the hottest topics in modern history. This, too, was one reason he allowed her to remain so independent. She might go for weeks without checking into the office, but she turned in her stories before deadline. He was always diplomatic when he had to edit her work. No, Weinberger was not a problem. He did not need to know if she had or had not physically attended the conference.



From her purse, a large one with many organizational pockets, she withdrew the conference program. Perusing it, she saw plenty to weave into an article. The format was familiar to her. Besides, she knew most of the bigwigs personally *and* their wives, more than enough to add the necessary personal touches.

"No," she concluded aloud. "I don't really have to go." The assignment was not the problem, she sensed, but *something* was interfering with her usual investigative verve. Was it Brad? According to Sylvia, Brad was 'a fine catch'. Audley snickered, "a fine catch," as though Brad were a fish. Well, perhaps Sylvia's opinion was not very accurate, but it was valuable because it was yet another opinion and, God knew, Audley had few confidants.

Her father's opinion in the matter was useless to her. Doc Will and Brad were thick cohorts. Her father, in fact, had introduced her to Brad three years ago when the two scientists were working together setting up a new program for the Institute. In saying, "Here, daughter, I want you to meet someone," he as much as blessed the union at that moment. Dr. Bradford Spencer was equally impressed with Doc Will. Their relationship developed to a point that superseded the blossoming romance between the young lovers. The two men remained in constant communication long after Blackstone's job with the IOF had terminated.

Audley sipped a fresh Galliano and thought of Brad, and, as usual, her first Bradford thought generated from her pelvic area. Now she impatiently dismissed these normally pleasant remembrances. The past few months had brought about a disagreeable change in Brad, sexually and socially. In every way, he had changed. It had been so lovely in the beginning. She had been twenty-four, just out of college and making her first waves in the journalistic world when they met. Brad was ten years her senior and that impressed her. Everything about him had impressed her then -- his self-containment, his good looks, his mind, and potential -- all were attractive by comparison to the younger men she had known and discarded.



Moreover, Brad was so completely taken with her! He was charmed by her flights of fancy in the face of his underdeveloped imagination. He was captivated by her fresh approach to life and enchanted by her idealism. Almost immediately, he looked at her as his future wife, so much more attractive than the wives of his IOF associates. Moreover, being the daughter of the world's authority on Mindal Sciences was an attribute not to be overlooked.

They made a handsome couple: Brad -- tall, fair and boyish; and Audley -- slight, feminine and elusive. It was conjectured they would have beautiful children. Even Brad's mother had to allow to her son that Audley looked right. Yet, Audley had not been able to fix the date of the wedding.

"You're pushing thirty, Audley!" Doc cajoled. "You want to have children, don't you?"

"Probably not as much as you want to have grandchildren. Anyway, I have plenty of time. After all, when I was born, Mom was over forty and you were over fifty!"

Doc would sigh resignedly and bide time until another opportunity arose for him to encourage marriage and motherhood, but no matter how creatively he addressed the subject, Audley would maneuver her way clear. To Brad, however, she was less considerate. She adroitly avoided the subject entirely, taking Brad instead to art shows, tennis matches, political conventions, and to bed.

"You've got bride's jitters, Audley," Sylvia would say. "That's all it is and you'll get over it as soon as you see 'Mrs. Bradford Spencer' on your checkbook."

Audley wished she could be so sure. Sometimes she peered into the future that had once looked so enticing, and imagined only stuffy, dowdy IOF wives hostessing one boring bridge party after another. Surely, there was more to being Mrs. Bradford Spencer than that! None the less, she was hard pressed to decipher what that might be, since, during the last six months Brad had given himself



over entirely to his work, and the idea of being systematically screwed following every Thursday night's bridge game was abhorrent to her.

She shook her head, trying to shake away her misgivings. He would be waiting for her at the airport in Meadowland. His firm hand would clutch her arm. His cool mouth would press briefly against her face. The picture was enticing but not entirely convincing.

UNITED'S FLIGHT NO. 373 set down on schedule at the Kennedy International Airport. The flight to Meadowland, Connecticut, Eastern's Flight No. 203, departed from Gate #27 in a little less than two hours. She realized with little dismay that it would be impossible for her to take a cab to Bonwit-Teller and get back in time to catch her connection. Maybe she would drive down tomorrow, or maybe she would just miss her flight.

A surge of nausea hit Audley as she stepped off the liner and into the airport terminal. The energy levels of the people coming and going, bumping into each other, struggling with luggage, tickets, embraces, and tears -- these were too much for her. The environment represented chaos to her, not excitement. Not one face stood out in the crowd, not one that bore a semblance of reality. The ticket-takers and porters presented some kind of order, but not reality.

"Why would anybody of right mind want to live in New York?" she questioned, bull-doing her way through the throng. "Brad couldn't pay me enough to live here!" she said angrily. Manhattan, his home, was alien territory to her. She sought sanctuary in the ladies' restroom and calmed herself with a light sponge bath. Even if meeting Brad wasn't what she wanted to do, she would see it through as far as she could and she might as well smell nice.

Studying the menu in the coffee shop, she heard her name spewing over the loud speaker: "Audley Blackstone, come to the Information Desk, please." The 'please' was pronounced in two



syllables. Muttering complaints, she located the Information Desk and presented herself and her ID in exchange for a parcel from Bonwit-Teller.

Was that not just like Sylvia? She would get her dress. She would get her way. Another calculated verbal effort, a telephone call, a large tip, a special delivery. Sylvia amazed Audley for no important reason. Like, on the package it read: Mrs. Roger Watergate. Audley could not remember a time when Sylvia was simply Sylvia. She was always Sylvia Chandler, daughter of the newspaper magnate, or Sylvia Watergate, wife of Roger Watergate of the Prince, Damon & Watergate, P.A., law firm. Sylvia was always supported by someone or something.

But not Audley. Huh-uh! Audley was Audley Blackstone now and forevermore. All her identification testified to that fact. If she married Brad, (*If she married Brad? No, no. Erase. When she married Brad!*) she would keep her own name. The idea of being Mrs. Bradford Spencer, even on a checkbook, appalled her. Could Brad deal with that? How would he explain it to his parents and peers? "This is my wife, Audley Blackstone." No. It was too preposterous. Brad might let her *write* under her own name, but for all other purposes.... She sighed impatiently.

Sylvia always got her own way. Whatever it was she wanted, be it a new dress, a new car, a trip to Europe, whatever! She got it. Very simple. Not Audley. No. Whatever Audley got, she got because she *worked* for it. Like her house. Her lovely Malibu studio. Why had she left it? She shouldn't have. Why was she even going to this stupid conference? She didn't want to. Now, if Sylvia didn't want something she just said, "No, thank you," but if Audley didn't want something, she had to consider everything and everybody else before herself.

Suddenly she knew how it was that Sylvia managed to pull it off. Sylvia knew what she wanted. Audley didn't. Audley did know, however, what she *didn't* want, and she knew she shouldn't have come.



SOMNAMBULISTICALLY Audley worked her way through the oppressive crowd of the John F. Kennedy Airport. Stumbled into an aisle seat for the 45-minute flight to Meadowland, Connecticut, muttering, "Why anybody of right mind would go to such a God-forsaken place as Meadowland is beyond me!"

Obviously many people would, for the small plane filled with passengers, en route at least in part to the IOF convention. Ahead of her in the small section that constituted First Class were the Governor of New York and the First Lady. Audley also immediately recognized several IOF men, all resembling IBM salesmen with their uncluttered Madison Avenue suits. The two opposite her pored over mathematical equations and spoke the language Brad used when talking about the Institute. Phrases such as 'system stages', 'gravity circuits' and 'unrevealed energy' infiltrated their dialogue.

Tucking the Bonwit-Teller package under the seat, Audley registered a mental note to compliment Sylvia on her perspicacity, a trait few people gave her credit as having.

As the coach gradually filled, Audley was forced to move into the window seat to make way for a very large man to sit down. He was nondescript except for his size. Although absorbed in himself, he was not of the IOF caliber. He immediately grunted, fastened his seatbelt, and went to sleep, oozing a strong smell of stale liquor. He was softly snoring into his shoulder before the engines started.

In her impatience, Audley instinctively reached for a cigarette but was reminded by the overhead sign: No Smoking. She begrudgingly obeyed, sliding the cigarette back into its pack and finding solace only in the scent of her own perfume.

The engines were purring now. The constant surging reminded her of a high-powered vacuum cleaner, pumping and sucking back and forth over the same soiled spot. "Damn!" she complained loudly, acknowledging the eyes that turned furtively in her direction. "Won't this plane ever get off the ground?" she asked



no one in particular. "It'll be midnight before we get there!" Uncommunicative eyes slipped back into Wall Street Journals and paperback novels.

Her mood, since alighting in New York, had grown increasingly more negative but by now, she had ceased to fight it. By now, she didn't care about her poise and sense of well being. There was just something about this entire trip

The man next to her slumped inward, pressing on her. His presence represented to Audley the epitomy of the entire mass of humankind: dense, unkempt and, over-all, asleep.

At last, she could feel the runway move and ultimately slip out from beneath her. Spiraling upward, she craned for a view of the city lights below. Her stomach swirled as she looked at the great and awesome array. As much as she detested the City, she was in awe of its immensity. Below her, she knew, were millions of people swarming and sweating in the August heat. Night would bring little relief. New York would swelter for weeks yet, like a young and imperfect planet: confused, hot and unsettled.

From her perch, she could see the energy of the millions of air conditioners and electric pumping stations straining to bring some surcease to the hapless hordes below.

She ordered another Galliano; it was served to her across the sleeping hulk. She wanted a cigarette. She was hungry and in a foul mood. Aggravated, she ate the fat man's peanuts and her own. Her bad attitude spread its tentacles outward and touched everyone around her, everyone she knew, everyone she did not know -- even herself.

So, what are you bitching about, Audley? she asked. Why blame them? Your father, Sylvia, Brad, these fellow passengers? Why blame anybody but yourself? It's your decision; it's your life. She swirled the drink absently. Why even blame yourself? Why blame anyone? You have no will of your own. So what? No fault, no blame. Status quo. She sipped the sweet liquor easily. No high purpose, no Silver Grail. No momentum, no reserve tank. No



anticipation. Accept it and grow up. The Galliano in the bottom of the plastic cup looked like pee.

The large man slavered on her grey-green scarf.

"What if I had to go to the bathroom?" she demanded of him. "How would I get out?" He, of course, did not answer. She bared her teeth at him and turned her head toward the black window, seeing her face reflected.

"There' is the problem," she acknowledged. She pulled the shade and closed her eyes. She lacked the courage of her own convictions. She *had* no convictions. If she didn't want to cover the convention, she shouldn't have come. If she didn't want to marry Brad, she should break it off. The next time, the *very* next time, she would act the way she wanted to, and not to please somebody else. She would do something, even if it turned out to be wrong.

She leaned back into the seat. The faint smell of stale whiskey drowned out the pleasant smell of her own body. Her legs felt cramped. Her throat clogged with frustration. The man was crowding her. Everyone was crowding her. She should not have come.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The intercom crackled with imperative authority. "This is your Captain speaking. We have just received word that Meadowland Field has suffered a power failure."

Audley alerted her senses and gathered all her capacities to the fore. She held her thin frame erect, placing her long legs beneath the seat while maintaining a firm grip on her Galliano. Her free hand automatically shot up to secure the sunglasses.

The Captain's reassuring voice continued, calm but firm. "There is no cause for alarm. The instruments are out and we will not be able to see the air field until the emergency generators are activated." Audley looked at her fellow passengers and was not surprised to see confusion and inconvenience registered on their faces. "We are going to decrease our air speed and circle until further notice. I repeat: there is no cause for alarm. The flight attendants will continue to see to your needs and, due to the inconvenience, all



beverages will be compliments of Eastern Airlines. Please observe the 'No Smoking' and 'Fasten your Seatbelt' signs."

The intercom clicked off as a murmur went through the aircraft. Audley was aware that the predominant attitude among the passengers was one of confusion. She dismissed them, letting them be confused. She had a reporter's detachment.

The attendants were instantly busy filling drink orders and at the first opportunity Audley ordered another double Galliano, wishing she had sufficient courage to light up a cigarette. At least she could enjoy the free drinks. Would she love to get smashed! She liked to drink. It enabled her, at least for a while, to get properly hostile.

She would love to be pissing drunk when Brad met her! He had never seen this side of her! She had never felt the need to expose it to him. From the start, she had assumed a role for him, a role that her father enjoyed, but one with which she was bored. No, she affirmed. She had done enough role-playing. Let him see Audley for once through a new looking glass. Maybe he would become more human.

Behind her, someone turned on a battery operated police radio, the volume set very low. She gave the crackling instrument her full attention and at length the reception cleared enough for her to hear, "... black-out covering the entire City of New York, extending into the New England states and as far south as...."

"Sir!" a flight attendant shrilled. "I'm sorry, Sir, but that's against FCC regulations. I must ask you to turn it off at once!"

"Turn it off!?" the man objected. "Why? This is an emergency! It's something we have a right to know about! Our lives are in danger!"

Heads began to turn toward the commotion. Audley carefully observed the expressions on their faces. Confusion was giving way to fear.

"The entire East Coast is blacked out!" the man announced to every ear.



"Sir, please," the stewardess said, trying to control the rising sense of panic. "You heard the Captain. There is nothing to be alarmed about. We are simply waiting for the emergency generators to activate. We'll be on the ground in a matter of minutes. The Captain will see to it that we all get safely down." These were rehearsed lines, spoken now out of a sense of duty, but every paranoid ear heard anxiety in her tone of voice. Even so, she stood staunchly by the provocateur, calmly commanding him to put the radio back into its case. The man acquiesced at last, and the flight attendant disappeared into the cockpit.

The atmosphere fascinated Audley. There was fear in the coach, hanging heavy. It was the kind of fear that revealed itself in the eyes, but no one looked at each other lest their own fear would be exposed to others and reflected back at themselves. Audley, however, had her sunglasses on. Protected thus from her vulnerability, from her mortality, she could think, and think she must.

She finished the Galliano and took a fresh note pad and pen from her purse, jotting hurried notes on the behavior patterns of the passengers. Dr. Blackstone would appreciate it, if only for entertaining reading, and, too, she might be able to use it in an article, and what an article! Too good for Weinberger!

"August 14th," she wrote, "10:03 P.M. Eastern Standard Time. Eastern Airlines, Flight No. 203, somewhere over Connecticut, craft temporarily suspended." A fresh Galliano appeared. "Power failure reported by Captain. Apparently spread over entire East Coast. Plane is circling, waiting for emergency generators. What's going on?"

The two IOF men pored intently over their equations, their dialogue now interspersed with 'default', 'over control' and 'transition difficulties'. "Over control"? Was that the same thing as predestination? Was this the reason for her not wanting to come on this trip? She didn't want anybody trying to control her!



Doc Will would say this experience was for a reason. What would she learn, then, from this experience? Her programming rescued her. At once, she felt relief, as if an unconscious burden had been lifted, for she had just been chiding herself about her lack of courage. Now she could see that if she had succumbed to her fears and stayed home or turned back from New York, she would have missed this!

Missed what? Whatever!

She smiled a deep, satisfied smile. How good she felt now. How she loved the unknown. Every other person on the aircraft was dealing with the possibility of death or disaster, and their terribly fragile mortality, but not Audley. Audley was not afraid of dying. The sunglasses rested poignantly on her nose.

It was nearly an hour now since the plane began circling. The smell of fear was strong and Audley hated fear. She hated even, for the moment, tears and prayers. Where was their sense of adventure? Where was the love of life?

"Why didn't Brad warn me?" she scribbled absently. Why didn't he? He had to know it was coming. Surely the computer had predicted it. At least he must have known of the possibility of a power failure! Why *didn't* he warn her? "Damn!" Why did she have to do everything alone?

She felt tired suddenly, and depressed. Tired of holding her end up when everyone else hung suspended, wavered, pulled her down. How nice it would be, she thought, to move from place to place for once without having to make an effort, like perennially riding on an escalator. There was too much effort involved in everything! She had to do everything herself. No one helped make life easier, more comfortable, or more meaningful.

She felt her eyes sting. She slammed the notebook shut and defiantly lit a cigarette.

"Vulnerable!" She spat the word. She had been trusting. She drank deeply of the Galliano, piling defenses around her. The bastard! If he really loved me, he would have told me. He would at



least have let me be prepared! Her father would have prepared her. In this thought she felt an overwhelming appreciation for her father and the things he had taught her, the way he had urged her to teach herself, always supportive, always encouraging. He prepared Audley for life! She lived it fully, aware of it.

She knew clearly that she had a destiny. If nothing were ever to happen to her that was worthwhile, if she was to live out a life as uselessly as the snoring hulk beside her, she would deliberately and consciously and quickly put an end to it. She was fated to live, and fated for something exclusively her own.

Brad had no sensitivity toward fate. She realized this abruptly, angrily. Obviously, Brad would be of no help to her in her life. He was in the way. She must be rid of him. She felt sorry for him, and with that came a creeping compassion for her anxious fellow passengers, even for the hulk next to her who continued to sleep, blissfully unaware of what was happening to him and around him.

"Ladies and gentlemen." The intercom captured every ear. "This is your Captain speaking." To Audley the voice sounded relieved. "We have just received radio contact with Meadowland Field. Their emergency generators have been activated and we are now cleared for landing."

Audley blurted, "It's about time!"

"There will be light on the field," the Captain continued, "however, I regret to say that we have not heard anything additional regarding the blackout. Those of you who are going on to New Haven, Waterbury and Hartford, please remain on board during refueling. Please continue to observe the 'No Smoking' and 'Fasten Your Seatbelt' signs. Again, we are sorry for any inconvenience you may have experienced, and we thank you for flying Eastern Airlines."

The tension broke. Suddenly half the passengers were laughing and the other half, drunk.

"Praise the Lord," the Governor's wife murmured.



Audley directed her comment to the First Lady's ear, "No thanks to you!" Her own tongue sounded thick.

"What?" It was the hulk, waking from his nap.

"Wake up," Audley ordered. "We're here."

"Already?"

She was one of the last passengers to leave. She refreshed her make-up, brushed her hair, smoothed her suit and donned the jacket. The purse and camera case slid easily over her shoulder, leaving her arms free, to be available for Brad's initial greeting. She intended to get an explanation from him and then return at once to California. She had no intention of attending the conference, if indeed there would still be one, nor of attending to Brad.

When she stood, she discovered, to her delight, that she was *very* tipsy. In this condition, her mouth had a mind of its own and she enjoyed hearing what she had to say.

A pale and exhausted flight attendant came along, clearing out the stragglers. "You alright, Miss?"

"Damned if I know!" she said. "I thought so 'til I stood up."

"You had quite a bit to drink."

"Did I?" She didn't remember drinking much.

"Do you have someone here to meet you?"

"Damned if I know that either!" She laughed, but she knew he would be there. He didn't dare *not* be there after what he had just put her through.

The steward guided her to the door. The fresh air caught her off guard. She fell into it, reeling slightly.

MORE THAN TALL ENOUGH to be a basketball center, Brad loomed up through the darkness at the bottom of the ramp.

"Cheerio!" Audley flipped to the steward, cautious of her footing. She didn't want to slip and inadvertently fall into his arms lest he get the misguided impression she had come to marry him at last. She did not want that to happen, nor did she want a nasty confrontation.



Brad took her arm and her package, kissed her quickly on the cheek and directed her away from the plane and toward his waiting car, with a glance at his watch. He always managed to impart the attitude of 'time's a wasting!'

Audley stopped abruptly. "I'd have been here sooner, Brad, except that we thought we'd take a little joy ride."

He said, very gently, "Seems we've had a power failure."

She glared at him. "Do tell!"

He shrugged, helpless against her mood. He would let her relax, calm down, have a bath maybe. Then they could talk. He didn't want to try and reason with her while she was in this mood. She exuded Galliano and adrenalin.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"No!" she fairly shrieked. "I'm *not* alright!"

"Well," he said, trying to be delicate, "I guess it was probably pretty frightening." He took her arm to lead her on but she tore herself loose and planted her feet firmly on the ground.

"No, Brad. It wasn't frightening. *You* are frightening!"

"What?" He would have to think fast.

"You! Why didn't you warn me?"

"I didn't know it was going to happen," he lied.

"Oh," Audley grunted, heading for the car.

He had expected her to be shaken, but not like this! He had anticipated something else. The Audley he knew should have rushed into his arms, glad to be alive, glad to be safe with him. This woman, and perhaps understandably so, was someone he didn't know. He had to run to catch up with her. "Would you calm down?"

"Why should I?" she demanded. "Aren't I entitled to a little hysteria? I could have been killed up there."

He blushed. "The odds were a million to one."

"But you took it," she snapped. She allowed her venom to reach him, then she assumed a reporter's calm. "Didn't your computer predict it, Brad?"



He was relieved by her sudden composure. "Off the record?"

"For Christ's sake, Brad. This is not an interview!"

He blushed again. He couldn't find her. There was no point on which he could fix her attention to assuage her. Impulsively he reached up and took off her sunglasses. She nearly slapped him. "Brad!"

"Audley," he said, appealing to her. "Let me look at you!"

She heard his tone but recoiled from it. "I haven't changed, Brad." Her voice was cold, impersonal; her eyes were deadly.

Brad's face twitched. It didn't escape Audley's notice but she would not relent. "I'm not so sure," he said.

"Well, never mind about me. Just answer my question."

So demanding! Such a different person! He was hurt and confused.

"Please," she added. "Off the record."

Reluctantly he handed her the glasses and she put them back on. They walked singly.

"Okay," he sighed. "Sam told us."

"Sam!" she spat.

He looked at her.

"Why must you call that damned machine 'Sam'?"

He ignored this and went on. "Sam told us months ago. I knew it was on the way when I saw you in California last month. And, yes, we did meet with General Lassater and his boys and we gave them our recommendations and opinions. But we never received official response to our contracts, reports, warnings or entreaties so we had to assume it was taken care of." His body sagged under the apparent failure.

"To my knowledge the Commission on Natural Resources is in session right now, Brad. Why aren't you up there with them?"

"I'm not the one to do that, Audley. You know that. That's Ernie's job and he's been whipping them for weeks, but still it



happened. Now, come on. Let's get out of here. I'm tired. You're tired." He took her arm and opened the passenger door.

"No, Brad. I'm not going." She wrenched free. "I'm not going with you. I'm going home." She was no longer drunk nor angry.

"You aren't serious." What she proposed was insanity.

"I'm very serious," she said, and her voice held the necessary conviction. "Let's just say that I intuitively knew the Feds were going to muzzle the conference. Now, I'm sure of it. You boys are only going to discuss those issues which are safe, non-provocative and politically unembarrassing. I'm not interested in covering a tea, Brad."

She extended her hand and for a second he thought she might want him to shake it, so callous was her mood, but instead she said, "May I please have the keys to your car?"

All he could think of was: What about us! As he hesitated, she tossed her purse and camera case onto the passenger seat.

"Audley!"

She went around to the driver's side.

"Audley, for Christ's sakes, I'm holding up an emergency meeting at the Institute. What are you doing?"

"I'm lighting a cigarette," she answered literally. "You know I like to smoke while I drive."

"You're serious."

"Yes, sir."

"You want to drive now? To California?"

"That's right, Brad," she said, smiling up at him. "And in your nice Maxum, too." She slid behind the wheel. "Keys, please."

"No, Audley, I can't let you do it. It isn't safe. There's a national emergency on."

She dismissed it. "I'll be alright."

Uncomfortably he knew she would be. "But we haven't had any time together, and what little time we have had this evening, all we've done is argue! Listen. Let's go to my place and have a drink.



We can relax and talk this over. Then, if you still want to, you can drive home tomorrow when it's daylight and things are safer."

She puffed contentedly on the cigarette.

"Audley, damn it! I love you!"

She didn't budge.

"I'll skip the meeting."

"Yes, you should," she agreed amiably. "You've been working much too hard. It's not good for you."

He felt miserable. For a moment he thought that if he were to open the door, drag her out bodily, give her an impassioned and desperate embrace, she would change her mind. Then he realized sickly that it would probably only make matters worse.

"You're not making much sense tonight, Audley." He groped for an explanation outside of himself. "Is everything okay at home? Is Doc Will alright?"

"Yes, thank you." Then suddenly she, too, sounded tired. She took off the glasses. "He's fine. Everything is fine. I just want to go home, that's all."

He shook his head.

"There's nothing here for me, Brad!" She looked up at him, but he couldn't meet her eyes. "No story." She spoke automatically now. "We won't be able to spend any time together, not with the convention and the emergency. You'll be needed. When.... If you want to see me, all you have to do is catch the first flight out when it's over." She put the glasses on and snubbed out the half-smoked Spring. "It's that simple."

He handed her the keys. "Do you realize how much fuel energy you'll use up driving this tank across the country?"

"About as much fuel energy as it takes for that freak computer you so affectionately call Sam to operate for about two minutes! And a lot of good it's done any of us!"

He cringed while she smiled brightly up at him.

"Thanks, Brad. And, please, get some rest. You look beat. Don't let them do this to you."



He nodded. "Keep your doors locked. Don't pick up any hitchhikers. It'll be a mess out there."

"I'll be fine! Don't worry."

"Watch out for the roadblocks."

"Yes. Come and see me when you can."

"I will, dear. Be careful."

"Bye." Maneuvering the Maxum across the runway, Audley felt a bittersweet triumph. They hadn't even shared a kiss.



## 2

## THE MAN

*Bradford Jules Spencer*

Brad stood watching the singular red glow of the taillights careening through the blue lights of the runway. Angrily, and aloud, he said, "Spoiled brat!" but inwardly he almost sympathized with her. She was right, in that they would not be able to spend any time together. The power failure would have the Institute and its' Washington affiliates occupied indefinitely. Providing she got safely through the roadblocks, Audley would be better off at home.

He wondered for a moment at the uncanny wisdom of the little snit, driving away in his automobile. She had the ability to size up a situation and deal with it in a much more accurate way than he did. He attributed this to women's intuition but suspected that the ability was deeper than that, like some highly refined ESP.

He turned toward the terminal. She was right, too, that he had been working too hard. He should get some rest. Maybe he would skip the meeting, go home, have a shower, a decent meal and a full nights sleep for a change.

"Dr. Spencer!" Emerging out of the darkness was the messenger boy for the IOF.

"Oscar? What are you doing out so late?"



"Everybody's working overtime tonight, boss," he said, falling in with Brad's long stride. "They want you at the Institute right away."

Brad shook his head. "I'm tired, Oscar. I'm going home. Tell them you couldn't find me."

Oscar persisted. "Come on now, Dr. Spencer. I know how you must feel, Sir." He was sticking his neck out. "I overheard your conversation with the lady over there." He lowered his eyes, unaccustomed to probing into the private affairs of his superiors, but he was following the strictest of orders. When he looked up to say, "The President has authorized it, Sir," his eyes were imperative.

"What makes Sammy run?" Brad asked absently. What makes Bradford tick? What makes him feel he has to abide by such authority? What authority superseded his own needs? When would he, Brad, be allowed to find his own reasons for being where he wanted to be, when, and for his own singularly selfish purposes? Conditioning, he knew, was the answer. Behavior modification. Train a child in the things he should know and when he is grown, he will not depart from them.

Brad had been trained to be a machine. Do not upset your sister; do not argue with your mother; do not interrupt your elder brother; do not disturb your father. Don't move so quickly, so slowly; don't shout; don't whisper. Don't breathe; don't exist. Except, of course, in the disciplinary ways we establish for you. Don't look at women. They will distract you from your work, your life's destiny.

Open your books. Study. Learn. Excel. Attain perfection. And do it now! You have a brilliant mind. It needs trained so that people will need your skills, for which they will pay you great sums of money. You will have power and wealth, and we will be so proud.

Bradford Jules Spencer was the second son born to Lt. Col. Dudley Paine Spencer and Lydia Monroe Spencer. Dudley, Jr., three years older than Brad, followed willingly in his father's footsteps and was now a Captain in the Army. The sister, Kathleen, who was perhaps the only member of the family who understood Brad,



married a fashion designer; she lived in France with Ives and their children, Paul and Gena.

Brad was indoctrinated into the ways of education and discipline when he was two years of age. Ambition rather than maternal instincts drove Lydia Monroe Spencer. She arranged a lifetime of institutions for her youngest progeny, one regime following immediately upon the other. After a series of prep schools, Brad was sent to West Point. The military life was not for him, however, and he argued heatedly with his father on the issue. In the end Brad won out and attended a college of science in Chicago, receiving his master's degree, *summa cum laude*, at the age of 23.

Having earned parental approval, he went on to work in Quantum Mechanics, continuing his studies and continuing to excel. He worked on several projects for the Space Federation and, after being published in some notable journals, was discovered by General Lassater and invited to work on the federally funded Institute of Futurology. There he helped set up and administer IOF programs, soon becoming their Head Systems Analyst. It was during this time that he met and became closely associated with Dr. Wilhelm Blackstone, a surrogate father.

Because of Brad's stringent upbringing, his ability to develop trusting and meaningful human relationships was naturally handicapped. His most comfortable liaison was with Samantha, the computer. Not until he met Dr. Blackstone's daughter Audley had Brad been enamored of a woman and only now, in the eerie blinking of the blue lights on the empty runway, did he feel he might be in love.

Underneath his scientific facade, Brad was a witty, dramatic, sensitive and aesthetic being. Audley had tapped these in him, and with her he had just begun to glimpse who the human Brad might be. He had found a woman he could love, would be permitted to love. Only it was not until this precise moment that he realized, in an almost blinding rush of emotion, that it was, indeed, a woman he



knew almost nothing about and who had somehow, just now, eluded his grip.

The red blinking taillights, doggedly dodging the Meadowland roadblock, carried off all hope. Why he felt that it was over he did not know, but as surely as he knew Quantum Mechanics and Samantha, he knew that Audley had driven *not* just out of the airport, but out of his life. The potential loss of something so great, that came so close to being his, staggered him. He grabbed for the only reality he knew: the scientific equations and disciplines of his work.

"I beg your pardon, Sir?"

"Never mind, Oscar. Where's your car?"

Oscar led the way, happy to have succeeded in his mission. In the old Chevy sedan, the messenger proved to be a good source of information. "Lassater was at the Convention Hall this evening, Dr. Spencer. He really gave the boys hell!"

Brad bristled. "What's he saying?"

"He's saying Sam is to blame for the power failure."

Brad's blood pressure shot up. "Son of a bitch!"

Oscar sniggered.

Sam had done more to prevent the inevitable than anyone or anything. All Lassater accomplished by this lie was to shove the responsibility off his own shoulders onto the IOF, and the President was letting him get away with it.

"Three-Star Generals get away with too goddamned much!"

Oscar did not speak.

"What a load of crap!" he said to Oscar as much as to himself. "Anybody with an ounce of sense would know that we were the only ones who did anything about it at all!"

"Yes, Sir."

"Lassater and the President have ignored our reports from the beginning!" Anger seldom occurred to Brad but he was having his fair share of it now.



"Yes, Sir," Oscar said. "I know that, Sir. But wait until you hear the General tell the story."

Brad rode the rest of the way in silence.

THE INSTITUTE HEADQUARTERS, covering several acres of prime Connecticut real estate, lay in total darkness. At the gate, Oscar flashed his pass card to the sentry and, by the dim lights of the Chevy, maneuvered the two miles to IOF's Administration Center. At the front, by-passing the parking lot, Oscar reverted to a flashlight to light their way up the steps.

Inside, a handful of the original 678 members hovered around a lantern in a solemn half-circle reminding Brad of a Shakespearian tragedy.

"Alas, poor Yorik!" he intoned. "I knew him well!"

His rare display of theatrics was rejected. They stood at once and began to verbalize their separate dismays.

"That is not funny, Brad," said one man. "That's the Institute with worms crawling through its head!" said another, "and we'll be buried with it!"

"Oh, come now, gentlemen. It can't be that bad," Brad said, stealing strength from their defeat.

"There is no question about it, Brad. This is serious." "And just when we were starting to get somewhere!" "What a time for a power failure to occur! The Third Annual Convention!" "If I didn't know better, I'd say it was calculated to happen now, just to make us look bad."

"I doubt if anyone could," Brad objected, "but who would want to?"

"Lassater!" was the unanimous response. He really had given them hell. These men were beaten. "We're a laughingstock." "People will immediately revert to the present." "The IOF is at stake." "The Future is doomed."

"What, precisely, did the General say?" Brad asked in an attempt to debrief them from the General's curse.



"He was furious." "He said, 'The President is disappointed'." "Which means no more funding. No more federal support. We're finished!" "Unless..." one man suggested.

"Unless what?" Brad asked. He was handed a sealed envelope bearing the embossed insignia of the IOF. "What's this?"

"Open it," the donor suggested.

Brad studied their worried faces. They were unanimous in laying something at his feet, but what was it? He broke the seal, withdrew the official-looking document and turned it toward the lantern's feeble flame to read:

Dear Brad: By unanimous vote your peers have selected you to represent the Institute of Futurology at an emergency meeting of a Special Conclave as inaugurated by the President of the United States, to be held at the White House at 10:00 A.M., August 15, 2002, in special attendance with General H.T. Lassater. Present the enclosed card at the East Gate at precisely 9:30 A.M. for admittance. Good luck. And remember, Sam loves you. Signed: The Future.

He folded the letter slowly and placed it in his breast pocket. What makes Bradford tick? More conditioning. He wanted to fly to Audley; it might be *his* last chance. What did he, Bradford Jules Spencer, have to do with any of this - with the President, with Lassater and Special Conclaves - for Christ's sakes? He was free now. The IOF was being destroyed. He could walk away and seek his personal fortunes as he chose. Instead, he asked cautiously, "What does this mean?"

One man answered for them all: "It means you're *it*, Brad."

Brad swallowed his resentment that the panel should select him for this dubious honor.

"You mean I'm the one who gets to convince that two-faced Lassater that he's a prick?"

"You work with Sam," one man appealed. "You've got more knowledge of the technicalities of the operation than any of us." Their attitudes implored him to understand their predicament and to



represent them. "You're young," someone added. "No family obligations." "You're in the best position to argue our case."

"Case?" he asked, swallowing the gall.

"That's right. If necessary, the Future will take Uncle Sam to court."

So the IOF had not died after all! Embedded in all the gloom lay a sliver of hope, a will to fight, to survive. He succumbed. After all, he had nothing better to do now than Audley.... He pulled himself upright in a gesture that immediately relieved the tension of the men in the room.

"Well, a fighting spirit gives me a little boost."

"You weren't selected because it's a flunky job, you know. It's a responsible job we've asked you to undertake, and we all feel you can do it. You will be well paid for your efforts."

"I appreciate that, but I don't yet know what it is I'm supposed to do!"

"Just present the card at the East Gate. And good luck."

"What do I need luck for?" he asked. "Sam loves me."

OUTSIDE OF MEADOWLAND Audley abruptly stopped the car and opened the window. She had come a long way since this morning: the flight to New York, the blackout, and the fight with Brad. Ahead of her lay more hazards. She was hungry and wrung out but she must think, plan and use reason, for only a clear head would see her through. She rummaged in the camera case and lit a joint, inhaling deeply. She smoked half of it, put away the rest, then set out to do some serious calculating.

The Meadowland roadblock was still admitting certain persons through. She had conquered that obstacle easily enough with the vehicle registration listing Brad's IOF address. Connecticut needed the IOF and had no intention of harassing or inhibiting the comings and goings of its members and/or affiliates.

Leaving New Haven to the west, however, implied entering New York State and, conceivably, New York City. She decided to



by-pass the City to the north, cut down from Route 84 to 80, which would give her direct access through Pennsylvania and Ohio. Here she could pick up Route 40, which would take her cross-country all the way to Bakersfield, California. Eighty more miles would bring her into Santa Barbara and Doc Will. One hundred more miles and she would be home. Stopping to rest, she could make it in three days, four at the most.

She checked the gas mileage. Thanks to Brad's sense of responsibility, it was a full tank. How many gallons? How many miles would it take her? Well, it was a big tank; it would take her far enough. The blackout could not last forever. She could be well into Pennsylvania before she had to worry about refueling.

She checked the locks on the doors. What about food? She hadn't eaten since when? Coffee and pastry for breakfast this morning in Malibu. Malibu! A hundred light years away. She should never have left. Oh, yes. She had eaten on the plane. Veal cutlet. Peanuts. It was not much, but it would stave off starvation. No time for the "marijuana munchies" now. She was glad for the good supply of cigarettes. Bracing herself for the New Haven roadblock, she lit one.

The emergency broadcast station was frantic, despite its admonitions for the public to stay calm. It was their nearly impossible task of keeping under control the police department, the fire department, crime labs and, most significantly, the mindless, frightened people, when there was little or no control to be had. She had covered smaller blackout assignments before and she knew what it would be like. Looters would be the biggest problem, after the problem of the dark.

"Pull over to the side of the road and wait for a patrol car to assist you." The offers and admonitions were universally ignored. The City of New Haven teemed with cars; their eerie headlights careened through the darkened streets. Squad cars, identifiable only by their overhead colored bubbles, were out in full force. Police, self-



appointed and otherwise, waved flashlights and lit flares. Looting, she could see, was already out of hand.

Creeping slowing through the city streets, intoxicated by adrenalin, Galliano, weed and adventure, Audley became fascinated with the red glow of the flares. The city oozed red, as if the whole town was on fire. Red faces shouted and ran, scurried like rodents, danced a strange dance, then vanished into the blackness. Red bodies sat behind the wheels of red-black cars. She shook herself. She must not allow herself to become mesmerized. She must remain detached from it and capture it by observation. What an article! Hell, by the time she got home she might decide to write a book.

Those drivers who had not pulled over to the side of the road (obstructing traffic, Audley thought), and those who were not crazed, were displaying uncommon courtesy to the other drivers. It was choreography on wheels, with everyone moving in syncopation, maneuvering his or her way through the red city.

It was a small city; Audley was soon on the west side approaching the New Haven/New York roadblock. She slowed with the traffic and stopped when instructed. Now she offered her driver's license and Brad's registration but withheld the press card. When her identification was confirmed, she proceeded through to the next town, Ansonia. In Ansonia, she was pointed in the direction of the city limits, where now unencumbered by officers of the law, she floored the accelerator and sped toward Route 84.

Entering the on-ramp, she checked her watch and the mileage. It was 12:34 and the gas gauge had barely moved.

At the juncture of 84 and 684, a main artery out of New York, she was forced to a near stop. Fire blazed from an upturned gasoline truck which lay toppled over in the center of the median with as many as thirty other vehicles snared in the fiasco. Sirens screamed in and away. A trio of automobile horns blared incessantly. Police set flares and directed the illegal traffic through the single free lane.



"Armageddon!" thought Audley as she passed the scene. It would be everywhere, like the aftermath of an Urthquake, waves of terror washing over seas of faces, bodies out of touch with reason. She shuddered, grateful for the safe confines of the Maxum, poignantly aware that if she were not careful she, too, would be a victim of this nightmare. She drove cautiously, like an animal in search of survival, fast here, slow there, speeding away from terror and crawling slowly toward safety.

In time traffic began to thin. Many drivers, in their haste and lack of preparation, ran out of gas and stopped mid-road. It became a game of skirting from lane to lane to miss the obstacles. Audley thought enviously of those drivers who had conquered, who were already safe at home.

Another, lesser accident at the intersection at Route 6, she passed through quickly, praying she would not be ambushed by a desperado out of fuel. Her hands and feet were cold, yet she could feel the chill of perspiration under her arms and in the palms of her hands. Adrenalin, flowing freely and continuously these many hours, altered her. Her eyes had grown even larger, like smooth glass marbles, round and unfeeling.

New York State fell behind her. Highway 84 stretched before her like a wave, carrying her half conscious over its endless crest. The emergency broadcast system fell out of range and faded, leaving the radio mute, except for the occasional crackle of a local station trying in vain to get through. Her legs ached. Her mouth was dry, as if full of cobwebs., and her eyes burned. But she was safe, alive, and still going.

When she noticed she had not encountered another car for perhaps half an hour, she pulled to the side of the road and ventured out, stretching her prickly legs and filling her lungs. The air, smelling faintly burnt, hit her uneasy stomach and sent her into a fit of retching. After, though, her head was clearer. She finished the half-smoked joint, then gulped a deep mouthful of air in an attempt to shrug off the journey behind her.



After urinating behind the odd protection of the passenger door, she got back inside and locked the doors. Everything was so still. She opened her window and slumped over the wheel, trying to find her long-lost sense of well being. In time, balance returned and she realized she was very hungry. She found a piece of chewing gum in her purse, which took away the thirst and the taste of bile. When the sugar was gone she lit a cigarette and doggedly resumed her vigil at the wheel.

The respite restored her calm. She found she was not tired. She could drive on and on and never tire. Like the silent earphones in the airplane, a quiet place is a place of beauty. She saw, by moonlight, that the sky was alive with stars, and very close. In this Pennsylvania countryside, the plains rose gradually into hills and from the hills to the abrupt and dramatic Allegheny Mountains.

Fumbling under the dashboard for a cassette, she slipped one into the component and immediately her confines were sweetened by "Moonlight Sonata."

She breathed deeply of the music and the moist night air. How curious, she thought. She had not spoken aloud for hours, as if the sound of her own voice would be too loud, would upset the crystalline world she found out here. She couldn't even clearly remember the events of that night. She knew she had fought with Brad and had escaped from something, from somewhere, had run for her life, and now her life was her own.

Her gratitude extended to the vehicle. The Maxum had saved her, she felt, with its security. She remembered when Brad had bought the car, she had teased him for his conservative upper-class snobbery, but now she was infinitely glad he had done it. It was a dream to drive, effortless. The leather upholstery still smelled new, gave comfort even after these many hours at the wheel. She also attributed to the power of the Maxum, the courage required for her to surge through the horrors of the New York freeways and the accidents.



She wondered where she had gotten the courage to drive away from Brad. He was tired and upset, otherwise she was sure she would never have gotten away with it. She knew, too, without remorse, that she would never renew the previous intimacy of their relationship. It was deceitful of her to let him think she was someone she knew she was not and never could be. She would never be happy as a socially acceptable wife of an eminent scientist. She would not enjoy the political society of Brad's contemporaries, and she could never fully share his life. He was already married to science and to Sam anyway.

She allowed herself a nostalgic glimpse of their love affair when it was young, how he was then, away from his work, influenced and buoyed by her optimism and vitality, then shook her head. No. She couldn't be a man's reason for life, for happiness. He had to have his own source. Otherwise, it wasn't fair to either of them. They were worlds away from each other. They really had nothing, she realized, in common. He was totally committed, while she was committed to nothing and to no one.

Audley Claudine Blackstone drove on through the darkness, unfettered by other cars on the road. At this time, she had no past and no future. She had no existence aside from her foot on the accelerator and the stars overhead, and this was sufficient.

"Moonlight Sonata" concluded. Without thought, Audley drove through the night, ever westward, until the faint grays of dawn came up behind her. She knew that time was passing, but she cared not to think what it was passing from or passing to. The radio was mute. Hers was the only car on the road. She had not passed another for two hours.

Suddenly the car took a mean swerve to the right. Sitting bolt upright, Audley reacted to the jolt with pumping adrenalin. Adrenalin, she realized with a frown, was getting to be a habit. Hearing the sickening hiss of deflating rubber, she skillfully aimed for the shoulder and brought the speeding automobile to a soft rest.



"Damn!" she exploded, cracking the morning air. A flat tire. Now this liberated woman would have to play mechanic. "Christ!" she complained, cutting off the ignition. She lit a cigarette. Exhaustion was right around the corner.

Exhaling slowly, she observed her surroundings. The sun was now playing coquettishly with the morning clouds, enhancing the morning mystique. The near and distant mountains and forests were bathed in misty shadows and sunrays. It was cool up here, and silent. The air smelled crisp and new. There wasn't another human being around for miles. She was totally and happily alone. She stepped on the fresh cigarette and moved away from the car.

"God," she whispered. "It is so beautiful." She sighed, enjoying the sound of her own voice, so long mute in the dark. She leaned against the fender and looked off into the treetops. The majestic silence awed her. She stood for a moment in what rightfully could be called a state of prayer, feeling the pink warmth of the sun play through the leaves onto her face. It soothed her tired body. She had driven it hard.

She stepped into the thick soft grasses growing at the side of the road and stretched, wriggling her feet out of her shoes and into the dew-damp foliage. Hearing the trickle of water not far off, she sought its source in the underbrush. Within minutes, she discovered a mountain brook gurgling happily in its unhampered environs.

Audley stopped to rest here, dropping beside the cool waters, and bathed her face in its healing power. Refreshed and at peace, she lay back gazing up through the pines. Overhead, the treetops created for her a cathedral. Early birds sang.

"I could stay here for the rest of my life," she said, and fell asleep.

TO A VAST MAJORITY of the populace, the power failure was just another calamity, yet another incident for which to blame the government. It was something brought about, no doubt, by an



incompetent government employee sleeping on the job; sleeping, of a certainty, with someone's mate other than his own.

To New Yorkers, New Englanders, and those as far south as the Everglades, and as far west as Cleveland, however, it was sheer horror. The fact that the blackout was lasting so long was bad enough in itself, but as time elapsed and no reassurance was forthcoming from their elected leaders, morals and morale decayed rapidly. Certain sections of New York City, Boston, Newark and Hartford had become armed camps. Parts of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Atlanta and Norfolk were burned beyond recognition.

Riot squads patrolled and fought valiantly against the mobs and the unending darkness. Hospitals were in chaos. Airports had passed the critical stage and entered the 'there is nothing we can do about it' stage. There was simply no energy anywhere. The emergency generators failed almost as soon as they were activated. In retrospect, the news media listed deaths at over 20,000. Statistically Death by Accident increased 712 percent. Rape cases were reported to be up 585 percent in a 12-hour period. Murder was up 335 percent in the same period. Armed robbery and burglary, estimated by some to be too low, shot up over 7,000 percent. Cases of assault and hysteria were too numerous to calculate.

The President of the United States was consciously considering National Martial Law. He had long since called out the Reserves and the National Guard. Now he seriously contemplated the use of the active armed forces. The State Department had contacted their ambassadors and diplomatic agents in every foreign country. He knew that not many hours could elapse before he would have to reassure the citizenry, but what could he tell them? Not one of his commissioners could assure him that power would be restored before noon tomorrow and, even so, how would the reassurance be broadcast? He could only hope that his country and his people would survive until daylight.



DR. BRADFORD SPENCER reached the White House in clockwork fashion. The military helicopter deposited him at the East Gate at exactly 9:30 a.m., Eastern Standard Time. Checking credentials and a phone call to the mysterious bowels of this imposing world palace placed Brad outside the door of the Oval Office within ten minutes of his arrival. Now, with time to wait, Brad recognized his own anxieties.

He questioned his Futurist cronies' wisdom in selecting him for a mission as sensitive as this. Diplomacy was not his forte. He was better known for abruptness and cynicism when under pressure, and right now, the air was thick with tension. With power unrestored, it was obvious to a trained mind that the nation had moved into war footing. Internal order was more pressing than external threats. Sam had foreseen this.

Sam had even told them that no foreign governments would move on them during these crises. That, at least, should be reassuring. All possible and potential actions, counter-actions, and interim measures had been forthrightly presented in the Institute's Report. Ernie had spent weeks talking to the bigwigs, preparing them. Obviously, they had not listened.

"Brad!" It was 3-Star General Lassater. "I'm glad to see you!"

Dr. Spencer stood as quickly as his elongated frame would allow and extended his hand. "Same here, Sir. You thought I might not come?"

Lassater slapped him on the back. "Nothing like that. No. I didn't know who they were going to send. I'm glad it's you."

Brad intuitively distrusted Lassater but it was best to play his game. "Your boys wouldn't even hear of a pee stop, General," Brad grinned.

"There's a can just down the hall. I'll join you and we can talk." Their heels clicked militantly in the echoing halls. "We have exactly ten minutes," Lassater was saying, "but I wouldn't use them all up if I were you. The President has a habit of starting these things



early. I sometimes think he does it just to see who has weak kidneys and who doesn't." The General always enjoyed his own jokes but he finished this one off on a serious note. "He's very disturbed."

Brad knew that military men had a habit of being their most provocative while facing a urinal; the General did not disappoint him. "Hell, Sam really fucked up on this one, eh Brad?"

There it was!

"What the hell's that supposed to mean, General?" Brad nearly missed his aim.

"Jesus Christ, Brad, don't such possibilities ever cross your minds?" The General zipped up and moved to the sink. "What you Futurists don't realize is that we did everything you proposed in that goddamned report of yours and we still had the biggest, most devastating black-out in the history of the goddamned world!"

Brad moved to the basin and noticed his hands were shaking. His only comment was an audible sigh.

"I don't mean to put you on the defensive, Brad, but the President is going to ask you some hard questions and I just wanted to prepare you." Crisply maneuvering Brad back to the waiting room, Lassater continued to fill the scientist in on events of the previous night. "I will give you this, Brad: Sam was right on the money as far as the exact time of the failure."

"Thanks, General," Brad acknowledged cryptically.

"Oh, we like to give credit where credit is due. You know that, Brad. Now listen to this...." Lassater proceeded then to outline every action taken since last May in preparation for the predicted event. Most of those things in the IOF's report were covered.

Without public knowledge, the government had stockpiled enough fuel oil to see the entire country through not only the summer but also the coming winter, particularly the Atlantic seaboard area. A secret detente had been reached between Saudi Arabia and the United States. The Saudis had agreed to hold their prices on crude oil in return for military support against the pending military aggression of Israel. Naturally, this was politically sensitive,



but the President had been working on it for months. This was all Top Secret, of course, and would be denied should the occasion arise.

There were obvious ramifications to all of this, but the General knew there was no need to reiterate them to a Futurist. And, most baffling of all, according to Lassater's opinion, within fifteen minutes after the black-out hit, at exactly 10:15 p.m., a confidential report was handed to the President indicating that there was no mechanical failure involved. The blackout simply could not be accounted for!

"I hear what you're saying, General," Brad responded, "but I don't see how, in the face of it, you can tell me that Sam goofed!" Brad allowed that his prejudice for Sam was showing, for to blame Sam was to blame himself. "You must know that we deal in probabilities, General," but before he could finish his train of thought, he was face to face with the President of the United States.

THE TELEPHONE NEXT TO DOC Will's bed had a rude sound to it. It woke him to a grouchy mood. He peered at his digital clock and saw that it was minutes after seven. "Who in hell would be calling at this hour?" he grumbled.

"Doc? Brad here. Sorry to call so early, but it's important." Brad's voice was steady and commanding. "I'll hang on while you splash some water on your face. I want you wide awake, okay?"

"Sure, Brad." Doc Will felt for the hair on the back of his head. "Give me a minute."

He threw off the cover and moved as fast as his aging legs would carry him. On the way to the bathroom, he pushed the buzzer for his housekeeper, Martha. He paused in the bathroom long enough to massage his arthritic neck and shoulder and do a few quick jogs in place, before returning expectantly to the phone. "I'm awake, Brad. What's on your mind?"

"Have you seen the morning papers yet?"

"No."



"Then you haven't heard the news."

"I missed the 10:00 news last night. What is it?"

"It wasn't on the 10:00 news, but the entire East Coast was hit last night with a power outage. It's still out."

"Good Lord." Doc Will sat down. "Is Audley alright?"

"She's fine," Brad speculated convincingly. "But let me go on. You know General Lassater?"

"Yeah, what about him?"

"Well, the President isn't too happy with the IOF or with Sam. It was the good General who suggested to the President that I get involved in all this."

"I'm filling in gaps here, Brad. Before you go too fast, correct me if I'm wrong. Lassater is holding you responsible for the power failure. He knows you did the programming for this project. Right?" Doc was quick.

"That's what it boils down to, but there's more. The President is convinced that the power will be on shortly, and I don't necessarily disagree with that, but the point is that he is convinced that there was no reason for the black-out."

"I'm filling in gaps again, Brad."

"The President has a memo on his desk that states, unequivocally, that there was no mechanical failure, that there is no *Urthly* reason for the black-out. Also, the Feds, without IOF's knowing, followed all of our suggestions to forestall this possibility, but in spite of all attempts to avoid it, it happened anyway. For no apparent reason."

"Is this phone bugged?"

"It better not be, it's a White House phone."

"Brad, sometimes your naivete...."

"Doc, listen. It doesn't matter." He forged ahead. "Through Lassater's insistence, the President and the IOF want me to head the investigation into the causes and come up with a Futuristic Synopsis, as he put it, of our next sequence of events."

"What did you tell him?"



"I hinted he was blackmailing me, to alleviate my sins, so to speak, for programming Sam."

"Sounds about right to me. What did you say?"

"I said 'yes', of course."

Brad could sense Doc's unspoken reaction. The doctor would have told them to take a flying leap.

"I can't let the IOF take the rap for this. What I need," Brad went on, "is access to your files on the IOF personnel."

Doc was lost in thought. The boy was not qualified to head this kind of thing. His over-emotional reactions confirmed it. It was unfair of Lassater, who obviously wanted to see Brad fail, to see the IOF fail. Why?

"I know what you're thinking. Those files are confidential. But before you scream 'Privileged Communications', I'm going to remind you that those evaluations belong to the government, and I...." Brad immediately regretted his innuendo. Blackmail seemed to be contagious.

"I don't need that kind of reminding, Brad. I know full well you could get the CIA files if I didn't lend you mine."

"Also," Brad continued, meeker, "I'm going to need access to a computer that's completely unrelated to any governmental program. Technically, this is the point where I thought of you."

"Thanks for nothing, Brad. I have no intention, at my age, of getting involved in any paranoid governmental saboteur's hunt, nor of getting any of my innocent associates involved. It all sounds like basic schizophrenic humbug to me. You are welcome to the files, but leave me out of this. I have a book to finish."

"What if I were to tell you that the President went so far as to intimate that he was willing to use this investigation to inaugurate certain basic changes in our society? The kinds of changes you have been advocating for years. The kind you are now writing about?"

Doc fumed. "Look. What do I have to do with this? I don't like the feel of it. If they wanted to inaugurate these programs, they



would do it whether I worked with you on this or not, Brad. Leave me the hell out of it!"

A shivery chill ripped through the younger man, collapsing his resolve.

"Brad," Doc went on in a gentler tone, "you're not politic. Don't try to buy me."

"Doc, listen. My head is swimming. I haven't slept in days. I'm sick about this, and I'm sick about Audley, and I...."

"What about Audley? Why? She's with you, isn't she?"

Now they were on common ground.

"She was."

"She *was*! Well, where the hell is she now?"

"Doc, please. Calm down! She's alright." He hoped he was convincing. "She's on her way home. She's driving out. She left last night in my car, obsessed with the idea of driving until she gets home."

Doc Will snarled into the receiver. "That's insane! You should never have let her do it."

"I had no choice, Doc. She was...." Brad was distraught in the White House telephone room. He had called Doc for reassurance and, so far, had blundered his way into further isolation.

Doc Will sensed Brad's defeat. "Yes, well.... Have you heard from her yet? Has she called to let you know where she is?"

"No. Actually I was hoping she might have called you."

"No, she hasn't."

Both men were anxious. Their shared concern for Audley transcended all else.

"Well, I'm sure she'll call when she can. It's still early. And I'm sure she's alright," Brad stressed, as much for his own reassurance as for Doc's. "Believe me, Doc. She is better off away from here. She left early enough to have made it out easily. This place is an armed camp. She did the right thing. Really."

"I wish I could be so sure." Doc reflected. It was foolhardy, but Audley would somehow come out of it unscathed. At least, she



had always survived before. "Well, I'm awake now, for Christ's sake. How soon will you need those files?"

"I'd like to come out right away."

"Well, come along then, son. We'll be expecting you."

As Doc replaced the phone in the cradle, Martha entered, wearing a worried expression and carrying coffee and the morning paper whose headlines read: "East Coast Declared Disaster Area!"

SYLVIA CHANDLER WATERGATE had no idea anything was going on. The night of the blackout she had drunk too much, argued with Roger, taken a sleeping pill, and was blissfully unconscious in her satin-covered bed, snug at home in Beverly Hills. Had she known about the power failure, it was a safe bet that she would have thought about her friend and then the dress, in that order.

She ordered a Bloody Mary on first sight of the morning's headlines. "My God!" she said through her hangover. "Audley's in that mess!" She threw the paper across the table to her husband. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Roger was accustomed to his wife's accusations. They were meaningless. He made no response except to return the paper to her. He was fond of Audley. If the truth were known, he was even more fond of Audley than he was of his wife. But long ago he had reconciled himself to the life he lived with Sylvia and he was not going to make any alterations in his established life-style. He had a politically powerful legal career going for him and was not about to rock any boats.

"Roger! Can't you do something? Can't your friends in Washington get her out of there?"

Roger hid a smile. It was not often that his wife was concerned about someone other than herself. He found it cute. "If I know Audley, Sylvia, she's doing just fine, probably having the time of her life. Drink your drink and stop worrying."

"Well!" she bemoaned. "There goes my dress!"



Now, that's more in keeping, Roger thought, pushing himself away from the table. "I'll be at the office all day, Sylvia. If you hear anything, give me a call." He perfunctorily kissed his wife good-bye and left.

Sylvia called after him absently: "Ta-ta!" She was already engrossed in reading her father's newspaper. She must speak to him about this: one other item of news struck her as being interesting and he had put in on the final page of the C-Section. It read: "Private Citizen Spots UFO at Exact Time of Black-Out."



## 3

0802-LZ

*Lanon (La-non') Zenton*

Whether she heard the twig snap first and then awaken or vice versa she never knew, but there she was, eyes round with surprise and confronted by a stranger. Her first instinct was to get to her feet, which he helped her to do. Automatically Audley accepted his proffered hand and then her adrenalin pumped for the third, or was it the fourth, time in less than 24 hours. She shuddered and pulled away, wanting to seek the security of the Maxum. Then she remembered the flat tire.

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" she nearly screamed.

The stranger asked: "Are you afraid?"

She was terrified. "No!" She turned and sped toward the car.

0802-LZ watched the lithe young woman scramble across the underbrush, admiring her agile long legs. He had not intended to frighten her.

At the Maxum Audley stopped short. Where had he come from? "Damn!" she said again, half in panic and half in frustration. Who is he? What does he want? Tears sprang to her eyes, blurring



her vision. She reached inside the car and quickly retrieved her sunglasses. His body came into her peripheral vision, standing apart by a good thirty feet. Her legs buckled and she sat, trembling, fumbling to put on her shoes. A bitter taste arose in her mouth and she knew it was the taste of fear and she hated herself for it.

What did she have to be fear? Not dying, no, but of what? Her vulnerability! There wasn't another soul around for miles! Was it her imagination or was he as powerful as he seemed? Her hand, where he had touched her, still tingled. He could crush her, she knew, without effort. She had seen his face for an instant. What had she seen in it? Energy. Power. "What do you want?" she demanded.

The man maintained his distance and made a helpless gesture with his hands.

"Who are you?" she asked again, finding her footing.

"I won't hurt you. Please, don't be afraid," he said.

She refused to believe him. She didn't dare believe him. Not now, with a national emergency going on. Not out here in the wilderness miles from anyone. Yet, he had not assaulted her in her sleep. He had offered his hand and she had instinctively taken it. Besides, she liked the sound of his voice. It was resonant. Warm and capable. Capable of what? Rape? Robbery? Murder?

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He replied, "What are *you* doing here?" and his voice smiled.

Her fear was fast subsiding in the brilliant morning sun. She caught herself wishing that if he were going to rape or rob her, he would hurry up and get it over with. She looked around. The flat tire had to be repaired. She went to the trunk of the car and found it locked. The keys were still in the ignition where she left them.

Suddenly she knew she need not fear. He was not going to hurt her. So far, in fact, he had been nothing but helpful. Well, then, she resolved, if he is going to hang around, he can damned well be useful. "Hey!" she called out. "Come over here."

As he approached, she tried not to notice that his body



looked as warm and capable as his voice sounded. Supple muscles rippled under his forest green jersey. His legs were long and lean and he moved with a good stride. To Audley, the stranger pulsed with virility. His hair was dark. Even with her eyes averted, she could see his skin was clear and ruddy, and he was big!

She clutched the key ring, feeling a familiar twinge between her legs as he approached then stood obediently near the open trunk into which she directed her vision as she felt him looking at her. His eyes burned her, moving slowly over her face and neck, down over the soft curves of her breasts. Like a laser beam, she could feel his visual sojourn over her hips, through her groin, down her legs and out through the bottom of her feet. She trembled.

"How can I help you?" His voice came to her as if through a channel, reaching directly into her, caressing her inner ear.

Not daring to look at him, hearing her own voice completely disassociated from her environs, she said, "I'll pay you to fix my flat tire."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," he said softly, "but I have never fixed a flat tire. I don't know how."

It was too ludicrous. Her eyes darted to his face and she fell into his blue eyes. Blue! Incredibly blue, like the sky on a clear day. And bottomless.

"You're joking," she said, feeling giddy.

"No, I'm not. Have you?"

"Have I what?"

"Fixed a flat tire."

"Oh. No. Of course. I mean," she stammered, "of course not. But I've watched. I know what to do. I'll instruct you."

"Good. I will need instruction."

Again, the voice crept into her head, settled and lingered there, diffusing her thoughts into fragments. She realized she had been staring.

Abruptly she directed her attention to the lug wrench, jack and spare tire and, with his assistance, gathered them all to the



damaged tire. As she explained the function of each piece he watched and listened intently. His presence was so disconcerting. She foolishly tore a fingernail and, after a blaze of DamnDamnDamn, he proceeded to change the tire without her help.

Standing over him, watching his tawny fingers explore the tools and examine the faulty tire, Audley imagined those fingertips touching her nipples. She wanted him. She didn't know or care who he was, where he came from or where he was going, but she wished to God he would take her right there on the shoulder of the road, in the dirt, beside the lug wrench. But he worked in silence, concentrating on his project, seemingly having forgotten all about her. His indifference irritated her.

The sun was getting hot, she complained to herself, and still there were no other cars on the road. Was the power failure still on? Surely not. She looked at her watch. "Damn!" she said unwittingly. "My watch has stopped. Have you got the time?"

He looked up for a second and then returned immediately to the task at hand. "About 10:15."

"Say, that's pretty good. Where'd you learn that?"

He tightened the final bolt and replaced the hubcap. "I've had some training in Celestial Navigation." He wiped his hands on the cloth Audley handed him, careful not to make contact.

"What about you?" he asked. "What do you do?"

"I'm a reporter. At least I *was* a reporter. I'll probably get thrown off the press after this recent fiasco."

The stranger stood up, brushed the dust and dried grass from his fudge-colored trousers. "What fiasco is that?"

Closing the trunk, Audley caught herself wondering about the contents of those trousers and moved away abruptly. She might want him, but be damned if she would be brazen about it. She wasn't *that* liberated. "It's too much to go into," she said. "What do I owe you?"

He smiled. "What I could really use is a ride."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Sure," she answered at once,



remembering her promise to Brad that she would not pick up any hitchhikers. Well, he wasn't hitchhiking. She was paying off a debt. "Where to?" She hoped he wanted to go a long way.

"Where are you going?"

Again, his simple question sparked off many possible answers. Where, indeed, was she going? She had the feeling that any answer would be acceptable to him. She smiled. "Far, far away. Come on. I'll give you a lift." She slid behind the wheel, ready to leave before he could change his mind.

0802-LZ LEARNED A LOT during his first encounter with a human being, aside from the art of tire changing, much of which was a solid appreciation for the complimentary opposite sex. He had studied charts and reports on the mortal male-female relationship, of course. He had been informed about the innate sexual attraction of these creatures of animal origin and had found the concept no more or less interesting than any other mental or social concept. But now he had been exposed to the sex attraction first hand; in his some two thousand odd years of existence 0802-LZ felt something new, and he enjoyed it.

He also recognized that his system was geared too high. It was not in his jurisdiction to read other people's thoughts, but the female's thoughts were unjustly evident. He fitted his new frame into the plush comfort of the Maxum then pressed two forefingers to his brow to instruct his mentors to reduce his energies. After his recalibration, he said, "You were talking about a fiasco."

"What?" She had been thinking about the fiasco she had made of her and Brad's engagement. Breaking the news to Doc Will would be difficult.

"Something having to do with your work as a reporter," he urged.

"Oh, yes. Weinberger."

"What's a wine burger?"

Audley laughed. "That's a legitimate question. Weinberger



publishes 'The Silent Majority'. You've seen that magazine, haven't you?"

"No."

"Well," she continued, undaunted by his ignorance and feeling more at ease in his presence. "It's a monthly magazine, slick and glossy. People think it fashionable to have the most recent edition on their smoked-glass coffee tables. I suppose they read it, I don't know. Who is the silent majority anyway? I don't really care for the format so I don't know why I stay on with them but... I'm sorry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to run on and on. I don't usually talk so much."

"No, please. I find it very interesting. Tell me more." While he absorbed Audley's words, tone of voice, pace, energy content and inflections, 0802-LZ observed with equal interest the passing landscape of his landing sphere.

"I was on assignment," she ventured.

"Yes." He noted the thick vegetation of the area. He felt the density and weight of the atmosphere, the temperature, humidity and barometric pressure. He studied the transporting vehicle, took in its odors and sounds and the methodologies utilized to propel it from one space to another.

"A very special assignment, actually. To cover the Third Annual Convention of the Institute of Futurology in Meadowland, Connecticut." She could hear herself trying to impress him.

"Did you fulfil your assignment?"

"No," she confessed. "Not exactly, anyway."

Rather than ask "why not" as she anticipated he would, he asked, "Do you enjoy the topic of futurology?"

She glanced at him, appreciating his appearance. His nose was perfectly sculpted and straight, set between two high, pronounced cheekbones. Nice strong chin, sweet lips.

"Do you think about the future?" he asked again.

Her eyes quickly returned to the road. "Not much." She had just driven away from her future with Brad. "Do you?" She, too,



could answer a question with a question.

"Often," he responded. "For example, how long can you continue to propel this vehicle without fuel?"

Audley gasped. She had completely forgotten about fuel, and the gauge registered 'empty'. Damn! she thought. Where in hell am I going to get gas out here in the middle of nowhere? Her passenger seemed unconcerned.

"There might be a map in the glove compartment," she said, pointing to the latch, not having the nerve to reach across his legs. "Take a look."

Inside, 0802-LZ found a small road atlas. The map was altogether different from the ones he knew on Zenton. After observing the mortals' quaint perspective of space, he quickly located their position on the highway while Audley racked her brain trying to figure out how to get fuel. For the first time since midnight, she hoped to find a car on the road, a car with gasoline she could siphon.

"Penn State Reserve is up ahead just a few miles," he offered. "Do you think they would have fuel?"

Relief flooded her as she answered, "Yes! They *will*. I'm so glad you thought of them! I didn't know *what* I was going to do!" Twice already, he had earned his keep. Even if the tank ran dry, they could walk from this distance.

He returned the map to the glove box and shifted his pelvis. "This is a very comfortable vehicle," he observed. "Very accommodating."

"Yes, I think so, too," she said, also relaxing. "But it's not mine. I have a small sports car. Not as comfortable as this one but less expensive to maintain." He didn't seem inclined to discuss cars, so she egged, "This car belongs to Dr. Bradford Spencer."

"Doctor of what?" he asked.

She didn't like it. A man with his physique and mystique should want to know who this Spencer fellow was and what was her relationship to him.

"Doctor of Physics," she snapped.



"He is with the Institute of Futurology?"

"Yes, he is," she nodded triumphantly. Now she was getting somewhere. "He was appointed to the IOF when it started three years ago. He's their Head Systems Analyst. He's very intelligent."

"You're very impressed with him. Is he your mate?"

"He's a friend of my father," she blurted, furious with herself that she had not definitively said 'No!' She sulked. This was not at all going as she had hoped. She drove on, watching for the PSR off-ramp.

At length he asked, "Why are we the only travelers?"

"The roadblocks," she replied indifferently.

"Why are the roads blocked?"

She couldn't believe he didn't know. "Where were you?" she demanded. "Since 10:00 last night the entire East Coast has been suffering a massive power failure!"

"A power failure?" He scowled. Had he caused it? Would they have let him materialize if the requisite energy was detrimental? He pressed his forehead with his fingers.

Audley noticed the gesture. Was he okay? Confused? He was certainly unconventional!

After a moment he said, "I was unconscious."

"Unconscious?" she asked cautiously. "Why? What happened to you?" Be damned if she would be more interested in him than he was in her.

"My craft went down," he said simply, removing his fingers.

"Your plane?" He must be a pilot, she assumed. He said he'd had Celestial Navigation.

"Yes," he added. "Back there where I met you."

"And you didn't get hurt?"

"Apparently not," he said, patting his arms and chest to indicate that all was in normal working condition. 0802-LZ was learning masculine techniques very quickly. She noticed his hands were solid and well formed. His fingers were elongated and sensitive



without being feminine. His nails appeared manicured. One thing was certain: he worked with his brain and not with his hands. She took a deep breath and returned her attention to the road.

"What about your co-pilot? Any passengers?"

"No. I flew solo."

"Well. It's a wonder you weren't killed. Did your power go out?"

"Yes," he laughed. "You could say that it did."

The most unsettling quality about him, she determined, was his voice. Somehow, he spoke more intimately than any voice she had ever heard, as if he had a secret that he shared only with her. He was like a constant and pleasant double entendre.

"What are you called?" he asked.

She grinned. His vernacular was fun. "Oh, I'm called a lot of things. Spoiled, indulged, wilful, sexy...."

"I meant, what is your nomenclature?"

Nomenclature? "My nomenclature is Audley Claudine Blackstone, but my friends call me Audley."

"Audley." He tried it out, sounding it.

She liked the way he pronounced it -- with the umlaut. So many people, including Brad, made it sound like 'oddly'.

"It's French. My mother was French."

"She is making the ascent?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said she *was* French. Past tense."

"'Making the ascent' is such a novel way to put it. But, yes, she's been making the ascent since I was four years old."

"And the Claudine?"

"I'm not sure where that came from. It's probably the name of some old movie star. What about you? What's your nomenclature?"

0802-LZ considered. Nothing regarding his mortal identity had been pre-arranged; he had been left to his own creative devices. But before he could formulate a response, the radio crackled loudly



and the voice of an announcer broke in:

THIS IS WWVA IN WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA. THE BLACKOUT IS OVER. FULL POWER HAS BEEN RESTORED. REPEAT; THE BLACKOUT IS OVER. FULL POWER HAS BEEN RESTORED. PLEASE REMAIN IN YOUR HOMES AND STAY TUNED TO THIS STATION FOR FURTHER DETAILS. THIS IS WWVA IN WHEELING, WEST VIR....

Audley clicked off the radio as her passenger pointed to the Penn State Reserve turn-off. She swung the speeding Maxum onto the off-ramp. The gauge registered below empty, but from here the road sloped downward and the Maxim could coast if necessary.

The scenery changed quickly from the eight-lane highway to a gently curving country lane, paved with macadam, lined on both sides by thick rows of maple trees and evergreen. A vast field of grazing cattle lay to the left, and to the right, a dense forest clung to the side of the mountain range. Tall fences on either side announced a Private Property effect.

"What is this Penn State Reserve?" he asked.

"It's one of the JCP Life Experimental Stations."

"Oh?" Had he reached his destination already?

Around the final downgrade and curve, the engine sputtered. They coasted the balance of several yards to a gas pump and guard station where two guards in denim stopped them, one on each side of the car. Audley extended her license, press card and vehicle registration to the guard whose nameplate read: Barrister.

"Good morning, Barrister," she chirped.

Barrister scrutinized Audley and her passenger, then her credentials. "What'd you do, run out of gas?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yep."

"We can accommodate you, Ms. Blackstone, but you'll have to pay for it." He returned her identification.

"Well, of course! I expect to pay for it. Premium prices, too,



if necessary. I can't very well go on without fuel!" "What I mean is we don't take checks or plastic."

"Alright, Mr. Barrister. I have cash."

While the second guard filled the Maxum's tank, Barrister inquired, "You wouldn't happen to know a Wilhelm Blackstone, would you?"

"Yes, he's my father," Audley responded proudly.

"Well, I'll be," Barrister said. "Small world, isn't it?"

"Is it?" she asked. "How do you know my father?"

"I was one of the first inmates he ever tested. Habitual criminal. Mostly armed robbery. If you remember, tell Dr. Blackstone that Barrister said hello."

"I surely will, Barrister," she said, smiling. Putting some psychic distance then between herself and the guard, she turned to her handsome passenger to explain, "My father helped set up this place."

The man from Zenton was genuinely interested. "What did he do?"

"First he had to convince the United States Criminal Justice System that they needed this kind of rehabilitation."

"Rehabilitation?"

"Yes. PSR is a prison, didn't you know that?"

"You said it was a Life Experimental Station."

"It is!" she insisted. "They experiment with prisoners."

Zenton had no prisons. "How?"

"I don't know how, but I do know the government is very grateful to Dad for the work he did."

"Barrister said your father tested him."

"Well, Dad does that, as a mindal scientist. He makes up and administers tests. Here at PSR, he set up all the special tests they use on prisoners."

"Does PSR belong to the government?"

"No, it's one of the projects of the JCP."

"What is the JCP?"



"You haven't heard of the JCP?" she demanded. "That's like saying you never heard of the CIA or the FBI! The JCP is the society of people who live in these Life Experimental Stations. PSR is just one of them."

"Are they all rehabilitation centers?"

"Oh, no. I think this is the only one of its kind. The others are for other kinds of experiments."

"What kind of experiments?"

"I have no idea. I pay very little attention to them."

"Did your father help set up all of them?"

She nodded, blandly.

"When was this one set up? Recently?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, PSR is one of the oldest. Dad worked here before it opened, over twenty years ago."

"Can we go inside?"

His question startled her. "What for?"

"Because I'm interested in Life Experimental Stations, and clearly this is one," he said.

"Well, clearly I am not at all interested!" she said, adding, "Unless they happen to have ladies' room. I need to ... brush my teeth."

Reinforced by 0802-LZ's presence, Audley got out of the car and approached the guard station to ask Barrister, "Is there a ladies' room here that I can use?"

The rehabilitated habitual criminal proved to be quite civil. "Yes, there is, Ms. Blackstone. And a men's room, too, for your friend, but you'll have to sign the register."

"Great!" she exclaimed, waving for 0802-LZ to "Come on!" Feeling more kindly toward Barrister, she said, "Where do we sign?"

As Barrister handed Audley a clipboard, 0802-LZ again considered his nomenclature. Audley had three names but Barrister had only one. He would compromise. Audley scrawled her name on line 13 then handed the clipboard to her passenger. Under 'last name' he wrote "Zenton", the name of his Home Station. Under



'first name' he wrote "Lanon" which, in the Zenton language, means Life. He passed the clipboard back to Barrister through Audley who read line 14 with interest.

"Rest rooms are over there in the Administrative Offices, and your bill comes to \$46.76." Barrister grinned.

"Highway robbery," she declared, grinning back. She handed him a fifty-dollar bill and took off toward the gate. "Keep the change!"

Lanon caught up with her to report, "If we're not out in 15 minutes they'll come in after us." Somehow, it did not sit right with Audley that a prisoner, no matter how rehabilitated, was putting limits on her freedom, but inside the gate, the Administrative Offices were unlocked. A rack of literature stood just inside the door. Lanon was already perusing them as Audley instructed "Wait here!" and slipped inside the women's room, where she secured the lock on the door and tossed her purse and camera case onto the counter.

Now that it was all over -- the flight, the power-failure, the break with Brad, and the night's perilous drive -- she could take a moment to celebrate her accomplishment. Never again would she berate herself for not having the courage of her own convictions. How perfectly adventurous it all was! She would not want to have to relive any of it; however, now that it was over, she was glad to have had those experiences.

Over? It was *not* over. That was just the point! It was only the beginning! And it had something to do with Lanon Zenton, she was sure of it. The sense of destiny she had felt in the airplane was alive in her, pulsing, making her feel weak. There was something about him.

Hell, yes, he was gorgeous, but there was something else. Something in the way he spoke to her. Something she heard in him besides his voice. Something intangible yet somehow more real than anything she had ever known. Whatever it was, she loved it.

He appreciated Penn State Reserve? Fine. He was interested in Life Experimental Stations? Fine. Great. Whatever he



wanted. Meanwhile she would have a much-needed toilette and catch up on a few stray thoughts.

After a thorough sponge bath with paper towels, to make certain she looked good and smelled good, she emptied the contents of her purse onto the counter. She revitalized her make-up and lit the remaining marijuana cigarette.

"Do like they taught you in school, Audley," she advised herself. "Get the emotionality out of the way and report the academics." On the commode then, with notebook and pen in hand, she put her thoughts into perspective and then on paper. She inhaled and wrote:

1. Cut out the Galliano drunks. ("You'll get bad circles under your eyes, and besides, you can't afford it.") 2. Get rid of the stash. ("You don't want to be fogged up and not be able to tell what's real from what's not real. Get high on this new life that's unfolding.")

3. Observe. Ask questions. ("There's a story in here somewhere. He knows something you don't. Find out what it is. Get involved in the mechanics of it.")

4. Call Dad and tell him you're okay.

5. Draft the IOF article for Weinberger. Spice it up with a first hand account of being in the air when it happened. Praise the IOF for their foresight in knowing it was coming and trying to thwart it. Make Brad the hero. ("It is the least you can do.")

6. Get out of here. Make tracks. Get food in your stomach and get a good night's sleep. ("Alone!")

7. Find out exactly who this Lanon Zenton fellow is. Is he married, divorced or what? And do it *now*, before he disappears!

After a last minute appraisal of her appearance, she flushed the balance of the joint, repaired the contents of her purse and took a deep breath. With luck, he would be finished with whatever he was doing and they could be on their way.

HE WAITED FOR HER AT THE CAR. On the way past the



guard station she smiled and waved to Barrister and, once on the freeway, let loose with an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Boy, am I glad to be out of there!"

"Why?" He made a note of her altered Nucleus.

"I just don't like the place, that's all. It gives me the creeps to be around that ilk. Criminals make me nervous."

"You don't like anything about the JCP, do you?"

It was, to her, an accusation. She was immediately defensive. "Why shouldn't I like them?"

"I don't know why, but I perceive that you don't."

"Oh, you do, do you? Anyway, what is it with your vocabulary? 'Perceive.' Nobody says 'perceive'."

"I didn't intend to alienate you."

"Alienate' now." She gave concentrated attention to her driving, knowing she was not following her own advice to leave the emotionality out of it. He fell silent. After a while, she looked over to see that he was again sitting with his fingers pressed to his brow. She worried that something was wrong. He must have been hurt in the plane crash. Perhaps not physically, certainly, but in the head, and if he did have a screw loose, she knew not to be afraid for herself because he had already proved himself harmless. "Mr. Zenton?"

With his fingers pressed tight to his brow, he did not respond. She interpreted his silence as an indication of pain. She determined that somehow she would arrange to have her father run some tests on him. She drove for several miles before he withdrew his fingers.

"Are you in pain?" she asked, when he resumed his looking out the window.

"Not at all. I feel . . . 'fine'!" he said, mimicking her.

"Then, why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Put your fingers on your forehead like that. Do you have a sinus headache or something?"



THE 20th CENTURY MISSION

"No. It's a method of communicating with my Home Station."

"Your what?"

"My Home Station. Zenton."

"Oh. Mr. Zenton from Zenton."

"Zenton is in the Seventh Constellation. I don't think your scientists have discovered it yet."

"I see. No, I don't think they have." There was no doubt about it. He had hurt himself in the crash. Maybe it was some kind of delusion or selective amnesia. "Well, excuse me for asking, but if you are from Zenton in the Seventh Constellation, how did you get to Pennsylvania?"

"I was materialized."

"Alright." Better to humor him than to abandon him in his obvious hour of need.

"I perceive that you don't believe me and I understand."

"Well, in this case I'm glad that you 'perceive' as you must admit it's an unusual claim."

"I am an unusual mortal."

Unwittingly, she remembered his laser beam eyes. "You can say that again," she allowed.

"I am an unusual mortal," he repeated. "I would not have told you except that I am going to need your help."

"Me? Why me?" Oh, God, why me?

"You found me."

"Correction. *You found me!* Anyway, what makes you think I can help? I know nothing about men from other constellations."

"No, but you know how to brush your teeth and I don't."

A very weird kind of amnesia, she reflected, that would cause a man to forget a thing like that.

"A toothbrush," she explained nevertheless, "is what you use to brush your teeth. It has a long handle, at the end of which are many stiff little bristles that are designed to get to the tartar that accumulates on your teeth as a result of eating and drinking and so



forth. They cost a few bucks in drug stores or supermarkets." She was astounded to find that he was paying close attention, as though what she was telling him was of utmost importance. "A toothbrush is used in conjunction with toothpaste," she continued, "which comes in a tube. It is usually a white, sweet substance that, when brushed on the teeth -- you know what teeth are -- creates a foamy, pleasant-tasting cleanser." He acknowledged her counsel by nodding, so she added, "You should always buy a toothpaste that has fluoride."

"What is fluoride?"

"I have no idea. Just make sure it says 'fluoride' on the label."

"Alright. Thank you."

"You're welcome." This is insane, she thought. He is serious! She considered the immediate disadvantages: he would have no identification, no social security number, no military records, no driver's license, no credit cards, and no money. No money! Oh, no! And him without so much as a toothbrush. "I suppose this means you don't know how to drive?"

"I don't know how, but I am willing to learn. It cannot be that difficult," he said. "It's a simple conveyance."

No matter how she looked at it, they were a long way from home. She pulled over to let him take the wheel and, sure enough, he caught on quickly. "Please don't get us a speeding ticket," she said, buckling up her seatbelt on the passenger side. "You don't have a license to drive, so you must obey all the rules."

"What are the rules?" he asked, adjusting the rear view mirrors.

"I'll let you know if and when you break any."

Assuming command of the vehicle, he pulled out onto the highway and they resumed their earlier thread of conversation. "You understand that what I have told you about my materialization is highly confidential. My safety depends on this remaining our secret."

"Oh, you bet! I will not tell anybody! Otherwise you would soon find yourself in a loony bin."

"What is a loony bin?"



"It's a place where they put crazy people."

"I'm not crazy."

I must be! she said to herself. Why even pretend he is serious? But aloud she asked him, "Are you hungry?"

"I don't know," he said.

She shook her head. "Pull over at the next truck stop."

In pursuing her line as a reporter, she had certainly stumbled onto a story, but if she didn't believe it, how would she be able to sell it to someone else? Never the less, she asked the requisite questions and was told that a superior form of life inhabited Zenton: three-brained non-air-breathers who did not eat, drink, sleep, or procreate. Their population was fixed. They partook of something called Nucleus for energy, or 'life sustenance' as Lanon called it.

According to Lanon, the realm of Zenton was small by universe standards, comprising 106,000 students and 3,546,000 instructors. The instructors came and went from sphere to sphere, similar to visiting lecturers, and they traveled without the aid of a space vehicle.

"What about the students?" she asked, as if she believed him. "Do they travel to other worlds on assignment, too?" She was finally able to watch him, as he drove, and she gave him her total attention. He appeared to be a blend of all Urth's races, almost bronze colored. He was such a pleasure to look at. She felt giddy in his company.

"Infrequently," he said, "and only with the strictest supervision. My request to visit a planet of animal origin was not approved until long after the administrators met to discuss the merits of such a visit. It took quite some time for them to make their decision -- probably two hundred years by your time."

Impulsively she asked, "How old are you?"

"I was created over 2,000 years ago, reckoned by your time, but that is quite young by Zenton standards."

Audley shuddered to think of it. An hour ago, she was hot for this guy. Now, she was so bemused by his matter-of-fact recitation of life on another planet, the prospect of having an affair



with him was entirely ludicrous. Still, she asked, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"You are my girl friend."

"No, I mean, do you have a sweetheart? A mate?" Why would he need a mate if they didn't have sex?

"I have not yet had that experience."

Not counting Brad, she hadn't either. "Just how long do you plan to stay, Mr. Zenton?"

"That will depend on the success of my assignment."

"Which is?"

"I'm not authorized to tell you."

"Oh." She felt rejected, somehow. "That reminds me. What happens when you put your fingers on your forehead?"

"That is a prearranged signal that lets my supervisors know I wish to communicate."

"Mmm," she wondered. "That's in the area of the third eye, the sixth chakra. Are you a mystic, Mr. Zenton?"

"That is not my intention."

She smiled. "I can't hear anything when they speak to you. How does that work?"

"You would not be able to hear them because they are working through my brain. As you advance, you will also be able to access your supervisors through your brain."

She did not have the heart to tell him that she heard the voices of her father and Martha and Brad and Syvlia in her brain all the time! "So what did you ask them? If you could tell me who you are?"

"Yes."

"And what did they say?"

"They permitted it so that I could learn from you the art of living."

"The art of living!" She laughed aloud. "Oh, that's funny!" It was utterly preposterous that he could think that she could teach him the art of living.



He smiled. "I am glad you are amused."

As they drove on, she could not stop listening to the sound of his voice, how it caressed her ears. He could say anything to her and she would enjoy listening to him, even if she did not believe what he was saying. Peculiarly enough, however, he was so believable! And why shouldn't what he said be possible? Anything's possible! It would certainly explain why she had experienced such a poignant sense of destiny. Think of the magnitude of her position if what he was saying were true! Of course, Brad paled by comparison, and *no wonder* she had balked at making this trip. If she had known that this was in store for her, she might have refused outright. Except that he was so damned attractive.

She was busy studying his face, trying to fathom whether he was for real or not, when she noticed the Maxum was not moving. He had pulled into a truck stop and let the car idle. It took a few seconds for her to realize he was waiting for her to instruct him.

"Turn off the ignition." He did, removed the keys and handed them to her. "Better lock up," she said. "Push that button before you close your door. In the restaurant, just do what I do. I'll take care of everything but, please, let's not talk about anything having to do with Zenton, okay?"

"Okay."

Inside the truck stop, Audley directed Lanon to a table in the far corner of the smoking section. When the waitress arrived with the coffeepot, Audley ordered breakfast, adding, "He'll have the same." Lanon sat quietly, observing Audley light up a cigarette.

After the waitress left, he asked, "Why do you defile your lungs?"

Audley glared at him, then inhaled purposefully. "I like to."

"It clouds your Nucleus," he offered.

"So what?" As she put cream and sugar into her coffee, he did the same, blowing and sipping on it like she did. When the food arrived, she snuffed out the cigarette, smeared jelly on her toast, and drenched her hash browns in ketchup. Lanon followed her lead. He



used his fork and knife to cut the ham and used his paper napkin to wipe his mouth. Unlike Audley, however, Lanon chewed each mouthful for what seemed to Audley an interminably long time. She finished far before he did, then drank more coffee and smoked more cigarettes, watching him savor the experience of eating. When he had finally finished, he wiped his mouth and fingers and laid his fork tine-side down on his plate.

"You full?" she asked. "You want some pie?" She grinned, thinking of *Starman*.

He shook his head and remarked, "When this breaks down to waste material, I will need to eliminate. I don't know the art of elimination."

"Good grief." She shivered and grabbed her purse. "It's part of doing what comes naturally." Leaving a twenty-dollar bill on the table, she sped him quickly to the car, advising him, "You will feel an unmistakable urge." Lanon could not account for why such a natural function as elimination should elicit such modesty from her, when she had been so accommodating with the lesson on ingesting. She added, "Please let me know in plenty of time to locate a facility." She had no desire to toilet train a fully-grown adult, and the concept rather squelched her interest in him but, at the same time, it activated her maternal instincts.

"I'll drive."

What an awesome responsibility parenting must be, she considered, the highway purring beneath them, with someone helplessly dependent on the whims of an adult to care for its every basic need. Lanon may not be as helpless as an infant, but he was, in fact, naive about life -- if what he said about himself was true -- and many things about him *supported* his preposterous proposition that he was new to the human race.

As they drove, he asked questions about everything. He asked about the physical structures of buildings. What was the purpose of a silo? How were boards made out of trees, and why were some buildings red and some white? How long did it take to go from



here to there, from Pennsylvania to California, from New York to Meadowland, by car, by plane, by train? What did Audley and her father talk about? Who were her friends? What did she and Sylvia talk about? What were the reasons for the limitations in their communications? Why didn't they ask questions? Why didn't she ask more questions? Was he asking too many questions?

Her mind worked. She gave full attention to Lanon's inquiries and answered them as honestly as she could, but while he was thinking up a new question, her own mind was full of questions of her own. Would Doc Will help her? If she could get him to test Lanon, the tests would find out what was wrong with him, would they not? And if he had amnesia, could they find a cure? Had the plane crash caused it? If not, what did? Then, *if* he could be cured, and *when* he was cured, - (and if anyone could do it, her father could!) - *who was* he? Where was he from? What did he do for a living? Was he married? Did he have children?

On the other hand, if he was who he claimed to be, if he *was* recently materialized from the Seventh Constellation, what was he doing here? What was his assignment and what did she have to do with it? How would it affect her? her father? the planet? She questioned her own sanity that she would even consider that he might be telling the truth, but he was so believable! He spoke of his Home Station like it was a suburb of Los Angeles!

And, critically important, how would her father, who had been a proponent of such possibilities for as long as she could recall, how would he react if, indeed, Lanon *was* from another world? For indeed, if Lanon Zenton *was* an other world form of intelligent life, it was not likely that Doc Will would approve of her infatuation. What father wants his daughter cavorting with other-terrestrials? If it came right down to it, would Doc Will turn Lanon into higher authorities? For that matter, *what* higher authorities?

DUSK CAME ON on and with it her eyes turned to sandpaper. She could not keep alert, and she did not know if Lanon was sleepy, but



she couldn't trust him to drive while she slept because he might be more exhausted than she was and not have the good sense to know it.

A roadway inn sign appeared and she made a decision to check in for the night. What kind of room should she ask for? Two rooms adjoining would have been ideal, but the only room available was a large suite with two double beds. She took it.

"I'm so tired I can't see straight," she said, unlocking the door, trying to act nonchalant. At her bidding, Lanon obediently followed Audley into the motel room. "You take the bed near the door. That way if someone breaks in, he'll get to you first." She realized it was a bad joke. She also realized she was a nervous wreck. What would any normal male think of the situation?

Lanon, however, sat on his bed as she set up camp on the other.

"You want to use the bathroom first?" she asked.

"No. You first," he said, observing the contents of the room with interest and bouncing slightly on his bed.

She shut and locked the bathroom door quickly, her heart pounding. My God, she thought, what am I doing? Whoever he was, she was a fool to have put herself in this position. Besides, he had no cash, and she did, and she had left it and her car keys out there on the dresser. Then, in the shower, as the hot water poured over her, she remembered that morning by the stream. She had been afraid of him then, too, afraid he would rape her or rob her, and he had not. He had asked her for help, said he needed her, and regardless what he said about Zenton, he acted the perfect gentleman. She *knew* he would not hurt her. She just had to *believe* it.

"Damn!" she complained. Why wasn't she prepared? She at least ought to have a robe and pajamas!

Lanon, meanwhile, investigated the room thoroughly and found the mirror irresistible. He stood in front of it and peered carefully at his reflection. It was not as gross as he had expected. In



his mind's eye he relocated the various organs and observed their position according to where he knew them to be in the body. "Stomach." This is where food is stored, he thought. "Heart." This is the area of the heart, and the lungs. "Lungs." Life. "Zenton." He breathed deeply, watching his chest expand as he filled himself with air.

Audley encountered him thus when she came into the room, again dressed in her traveling clothes. She went to her own bed and turned down the covers. She was very perfunctory. "Your turn," she said. "Do you think you can get yourself clean?"

"Academically I know what to do," he replied. "If I have a problem, I'll let you know." He entered the small tiled room and closed the door as she had done, but was unsure of what to do now that he had enclosed himself inside. There was another mirror but he turned his attention instead to the three porcelain structures.

He examined the fixtures in an effort to determine their usages. At the curious one that resembled a chair, he pressed the lever and saw a gush of water swizzle and gurgle and empty. That would be for elimination, he reasoned. The large one, with the water splattered inside the plastic curtain, would be for cleansing. The small scoop-shaped bowl also wet and directly under the mirror would be for grooming the face and hair, and for cleansing the teeth.

Having identified these, he proceeded to use them, washing his eyes and mouth with soap before remembering Audley's lesson on toothpaste. He would need those items since soap burned the eyes and left an unpleasant taste in the mouth. Once finished with his toilette, he dressed fully, including his shoes, and returned to the main room.

Audley was feigning sleep in her bed, naked, with the covers up to her chin and with her back to Lanon. He did not disturb her, but went to his own bed and turned the covers and then lay down, pulling the blanket up to his chin as she had done.

0802-Lanon Zenton assumed the prone position naturally. In the woods last night, during the materialization and the



activation, he had lain on the bare ground for hours, becoming aware of his extremities and accustomed to his senses. He had thought he should never need to lie down again, but he had been wrong. It felt good. This body did tire.

His muscles were like those of a newborn. He had been supporting himself by sheer will power. As he built muscles and gained strength, his will power would be free for other challenges, but for now his respiratory system was overworked and his senses were bursting with the barrage of sights and sounds of this new environment. His reaction plasm reservoir was depleted and needed renewed. Even though Urth's density rendered life slow motion compared to Zenton, this deceleration was like a deformity he must learn to overcome.

As he lay on the bed, tapping into his Nucleus, he could feel strength, energy, and calm come rushing into him, massaging his aching body and ministering his battered spirit. It was critical that he gained strength quickly. He must learn to function as fast and faster than these human beings, in order to accomplish his purpose, to fulfil his assignment. He needed more food, a regular ingestion of a solid source of fuel energy.

He felt the need for sleep but first he must record his observations. With his fingers resting on his brow, he waited until the electro-chemical circuits had eased and the pattern for interstellar communication fell into place.

"0802-LZ here.

"I am found in a material existence. The limitations of the English language, with which I am encumbered, fail to provide me with the necessary avenues of expression with which to adequately describe my environs or my reactions to them. My emotions, which I have recognized, are still quite new. For example, I have experienced the animal-based emotion of fear, which, as you know, is not present on Zenton. I do not recommend it to you, for it causes strange physical side effects. I knew fear during that period of time when I



actuated, in the density of the forest, though I did not know what I was afraid of. Perhaps it was the density itself.

"I have also experienced awe, for the actual physical beauty of these terrestrial environs is great. The splendor of the natural state of Urth is something I shall remember and treasure always. The myriad greens in the forest, on which my newly awakened eyes feasted, dazzled me for an endless span of time.

"All the while I was waiting for mobility to come into these limbs, my senses experienced themselves. I became aware of my becoming part of the material world through the smell and texture of the forest: decomposing leaves; pine needles; fallen logs, with their strange parasitic growths. It was, and is, remarkable. Sounds, too: the winds in the trees and the songs of the birds; although not comparable to the music of Zenton, are gentle and renewing.

"One of the most peculiar things I felt, lying there in my mortal birthplace, was how distant the sky seemed. It was visible overhead, seen vibrant beyond the overhead canopy of treetops and dotted with lively glowing heavenly bodies. I knew my homeland was somewhere out there, but I did not know where, and my new eyes could not stretch so far into the universe.

"There, likely, was the source of my fear: to be so far removed from the familiar embrace of you, my peers. The fear of isolation! Of being cut off from all that I have known, all that I am! The knowledge that I have embarked willingly on this mission, and realizing I am now experiencing it, and am destined to fulfil it alone. I admit I was and am still afraid.

"Even so, I am most appreciative of the mortal associate you provided for me. I was, of course, familiar with my own physical structure. I knew it intimately from its construction. But I had not known how comfortable it would be until I witnessed the female counterpart. She is a lovely work of creation, this Woman. I lost much of my own fear when I saw her there, asleep, so vulnerable in the forest and yet so trusting. I watched her supine for quite a time, absorbing her natural essence in sleeping, in being. But when she



awoke, how alert! How wondrous to see her life manifested in animation, in her eyes, in her quick agile movements.

"There is a paucity of Nucleus here. The woman's Nucleus is in evidence, but her mind is underdeveloped. It saddens me to realize this, for I know that this is a reflection also of my own limited abilities now that I, too, am as a creature of animal origin.

"In that regard, I am going to undertake to know the emotional dimension of the mortal existence. Such a sentient perspective might help me understand their state of mind better, so that I can present them hospitably in my report. Can you imagine what a challenge this existence must be to the human? To strive mindally to overcome the dense barrier that sets it apart from its own Nucleus?

"My gratitude is lavished on you supernals, you teachers and guides who helped to bring this experience and this assignment about. I feel very natural and calm now. I will do my utmost, within limitations you cannot realize, to fulfil this mission. I will record my observations with you again and, although I know that you are with me, that you hear me and see me, it grieves me deeply that I cannot hear, see and be with you."

AUDLEY WOKE ABRUPTLY. What had awakened her? It was a dream, yes, but what was it about? It lay on the brink of her consciousness, threatening to break through. She sat up and lit a cigarette. It had been a good dream, she knew. A beautiful dream. She had been in a garden. No, not a garden -- the whole *world* was a garden. Trees and flowers were everywhere. Urth was a Garden of Eden, idyllic and unspoiled, created exclusively for her. The dream remained hazy as she smoked her cigarette in the dark, lovely and hazy, but the flowers jumped out at her in living, vibrant color.

There were daffodils of the most cheery yellow; sweet william of the softest, gentlest lavender; vivid violets; and multi-colored cosmos, waving in the breeze; and coleus. Coleus! That's what woke her! Her plants! Good grief, they would die of thirst left



alone for days like this. She would not be home until ... God only knew when.

Her eyes had adjusted to the dark; she could see that Lanon was asleep. She reached for the telephone and dialed Sylvia's number, knowing that it would take time for Sylvia to answer. Roger wouldn't hear it. According to Sylvia, Roger *died* as soon as he entered a bedroom. She counted; the phone rang nineteen times before Sylvia, sultry with sleep, answered, "Hello?"

Audley whispered: "Hello."

Sylvia was instantly wide awake, demanding, "Is this an obscene phone call?"

Audley grinned into the receiver and lit another cigarette. "It's Audley," she whispered loudly.

"Audley?"

"Yes, Audley Blackstone. We went to school together?"

"I know we went to school together, for Christ's sake! You called me in the middle of the night to remind me?"

"No, I called to tell you I survived the black-out."

"Well, I'm glad, but you could have waited until morning to tell me."

"I didn't want you to lose any sleep over it."

"And you're making damned sure I don't, right?"

"Right."

"Did you get my dress?"

"Of course."

"Good. When are you coming home?"

"That's what I'm calling about."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you have a valid reason for waking me up in the middle of the night," she said. "Where are you?"

"I'm in Illinois. I think."

"What are you doing in Illinois? Where's Brad?"

"As far as I know he's at the Institute, but that's none of my concern. My concern is for my coleus."

"Your what?"



"My coleus. It's on the front deck in the sun and I'm afraid it will die of thirst before I can get back to Malibu."

"You called me long distance in the middle of the night to tell me your plant is thirsty?"

Audley sought the ashtray, spilled it over onto the floor and cursed into the receiver.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Sylvia demanded.

"Now, Sylvia," she purred, picking up the ashtray, "that's no way to talk to your best friend."

"What best friend?"

"Go back to sleep, Sylvia. You know how much you need your beauty rest."

"You go to hell. When are you coming back? How did you get to Illinois? Where's Brad?"

"Good night, Sylvia," she purred. She hung up the telephone, turned on the lamp, picked up two stray cigarette butts and heaved them into the wastebasket. With all her fussing around, Lanon still slept, his bedspread tucked under his chin.

"Damn!" she said loudly. "I'm wide awake!" She looked around the floor and could not locate his shoes. Cautiously she reached across to his foot and felt that he still wore them. "Lanon," she said firmly. "Wake up."

He opened his eyes immediately and looked at her, wrapped curiously in her bedspread. He smiled and said, "Hello."

"Hello, yourself, you idiot. You're sleeping with your shoes on."

"Oh," In pursuit of the items in question, he tossed off the bedding, exposing his entire wardrobe.

"I'll bet you don't even know how to tie your own shoe laces," she said derisively.

"What are shoe laces?"

"Never mind." She took his foot in hand, struggling to keep herself within the confines of the bedspread, and pulled off one shoe then the other. "Now the socks," she ordered, indicating them.



He pulled them off and smiled to see his toes. She took a deep breath. "Now your jersey." He was not sure what she meant until she said, "Pull it over your head."

She involuntarily gasped as she beheld his naked chest. "You can take your pants off by yourself, I hope?" She stood up and turned away, dragging the bedspread with her, fully aware that he was struggling with the catch of his trousers. "I don't believe you," she said in feigned exasperation.

"I know you don't. I don't expect you to. I just want you to help me get adjusted and not tell anybody."

"You may be assured I will not tell anybody." She settled into her bed and readjusted her covers. The whiz of his zipper reverberated in the quiet room, then she heard the trousers fall to the floor. She could hardly contain herself, but she managed to keep her back to him. After a long silence, she heard him pull the bedclothes loose. Wrapping himself in his bedspread, he went towards the bathroom, explaining, "I feel the urge to eliminate." She laughed aloud. "Good!" No one would ever believe her if she did tell. It was all too incredible.

When he returned, still fully draped in his bedspread, he sat in the chair adjacent Audley.

"It isn't time to get up yet," she said, fully awake.

"How long should we sleep?"

"Normally a person should sleep for eight hours. Did you sleep well with your clothes on?"

"Yes. Did you sleep well without yours?" Her grey traveling suit and green-grey scarf rested at the foot of her bed with her underwear tucked in her purse.

"No, I didn't."

"No?"

"No. I was constantly afraid ... Never mind."

"What were you afraid of? Mortals fear too much."

"Well, listen to you! You aren't afraid of anything, then, I guess."



"I have experienced fear. I don't like it. But what were *you* afraid of?"

She fluffed her pillow and sat upright, holding the bedspread up over her shoulders. "I had the ridiculous notion that you might take me by force. I don't know you very well, after all."

"Take you by force? Where would I take you? You have the automobile. You are taking me!"

She snickered. "Never mind. It was silly of me. I haven't a thing to worry about."

"No, you haven't," he affirmed. "I have already told you that I won't harm you."

She leaned back into the pillow.

"May I look at you?" he asked in all innocence. "I have never seen a woman's body."

Her adrenalin pumped. If he was from Zenton, he was probably telling the truth, but if he was not, it was the most original approach to a roll in the hay she had ever heard. She retorted, "So what?"

He pondered. "When I saw my mortal form being designed in the Zenton laboratories, I thought it was ugly. But now that I am in it, I appreciate it."

"What has that got to do with *my* body?" "Woman's body is a perfect compliment to man's, as far as I can tell. I just wanted to see to what extent."

She was fascinated. Could he really be so naive? As naturally as possible, she allowed the bedspread to fall. "I don't see how it can help," she said conversationally. "What you don't understand is that there is much more to the bodies' complimenting each other than meets the eye!"

He did not exactly stare at her breasts, she noticed, but he was definitely giving them his focused attention. "Those are mammary glands," he stated, without removing his eyes from them.

"Close enough," she chuckled.

"May I ...?" but before Lanon could finish the question, his



hand reached out.

Suddenly Audley found herself observing his finger on her nipple as if she were watching a movie on television. She remembered imagining this exact moment when his fingers had touched the protruding bolts on her tire this morning, but she was not sure if she had the courage - or the right - now, to follow through.

"That's enough!" she cried, pulling up the bedspread.

"What's the matter?" he asked, recoiling. "Did I hurt you?"

Her groin throbbed unmercifully. "No, you didn't hurt me. It's just that ... now is not the time to be checking out body parts." She was not some mass of protoplasm in a laboratory to be studied and poked and probed. She was a woman. Physically she *did* want him. She had a healthy amount of lust in her make-up, but she did not want him under these circumstances. It was not right. It would not be good. Not for her and not for him, either. "Please," she urged, "go back to bed."

Reluctantly he stood up and as he did so, his bedspread stuck out specifically in front of him. Over her trepidation, she giggled.

"What is humorous?" he asked. She pointed. When he noticed the protrusion in the bedspread, he was curious, so he held the cover away from him enough to discover his erection. "What happened?" he asked. It was all she could do to keep from laughing at the expression on his face.

"It's what I was trying to tell you before, Lanon. Looking is just a preamble."

He sat on the edge of his bed, confused and uncomfortable.

Needing to do something, Audley talked. "You know about the reproduction process? About making babies?"

"Yes. Academically, I know, but not experientially."

"Well, you have just encountered a couple of factors that are involved in the process of reproduction."

He appeared dejected. "I am not encouraged to reproduce."



"Don't worry about it. I'm not encouraged to reproduce either."

He seemed surprised. "You aren't?"

"No," she explained. "I'm not married, and our social customs encourage parents to be married before having children." He seemed resigned to a sexless existence so she added, "But, Lanon, for future reference, you don't have to be married or intend to reproduce to simply make love."

"Make love," he repeated, laying back on his bed and adjusting his covers and his pillow. Like Audley, he stared at the ceiling. Neither of them considered turning out the light.

At length he said, "I think my circuits are stopping."

"What makes you say that?"

"I feel ... disconnected."

"I know the feeling."

"Then why don't we make love?" he suggested.

She bit the inside of her lip. Such a plaintive note! Such genuine innocence! She smiled. "Someday we will, perhaps, but not now."

After a while he ventured, "Then what *shall* we do now?" Obviously, the man from Zenton was not sleepy either.

She sat up, discarded the bedspread and lit a cigarette, saying, "We drive." As she stood and gathered up her clothes, Lanon's eyes were riveted upon her. She strode to the bathroom and slammed the door, calling back, "Get dressed!"

"But we haven't slept eight hours," he called after her. He felt as though something were unfinished. His groin was still sensitive. As he dressed, he couldn't put aside the impression of the warmth and softness of her body, the fleeting glimpse of her breasts, the firm white buttocks framed by her suntan, the mysteriously appealing patch of dark curling pubic hairs, the gentle lines of her torso and the length of her silky tresses. *Woman was created differently.*



THE OLD MISSION

His fingers were pressed to his brow in search of an explanation from his peers when Audley came into the room.

"You're going to have to stop doing that," she ordered. "It looks like you have a headache when you do that. It calls attention to yourself. Is that what you want?" She was brusque as she pulled on her boots then ran the brush through her hair. Lanon watched and waited. She grabbed up her purse and keys and opened the door.

As they pulled away from the roadside inn, the sky was beginning to turn grey in the East. The change of environment lifted them both. Behind the wheel, Lanon was more his old self but Audley felt, regretfully, that she would never be the same.

"I've made some decisions," she announced when they were again comfortably on the highway.

"Good," he said. "What are they?"

"One: I am going to act on the assumption that what you have told me is true. I'm going to try to believe that you really are from Zenton, wherever that might be."

"Good," he responded. "That will enable you to apply yourself more conscientiously to teaching me the art of living."

"I have no choice."

"Oh, but you do!" he countered. "All mortals have free will choice."

"Alright then. This mortal freely wills to help you, okay?"

"Yes. Okay. I am glad it will be you." He added, "You have made other decisions?"

"Yes. In the event ... It's not that I don't believe you, you understand, but in the event you -- hurt yourself in the plane crash and you are *not* from Zenton, which we must consider a remote possibility, I would like my father to run some tests on you."

"What kind of tests?"

"I don't know. All kinds. But he will be able to determine if what you say is true or not."



He shook his head. "Then I cannot risk it. I must be discrete about my origin. My safety and the success of my mission depends on this remaining a secret."

"He's my father!" she insisted. "He won't tell anybody. He is a doctor, and doctors abide by the Hippocratic Oath. They are sworn to confidentiality by the very nature of their profession. Anyway, he will be on your side. Trust me."

He said simply, "Alright. I will trust you," and Audley blinked. That was a new one! Nobody, including herself, trusted Audley's judgment.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Yes. We must spend time together -- as much time as possible! -- so I can teach you about everyday things like toothpaste and shoelaces and idioms and swear words, but you're going to have to work hard, Lanon! I'm going to give you a crash course in being human, okay?"

"Okay!" He was infinitely pleased.

"You're going to have to read a lot. Do you know how to read?"

"I can read and write in fourteen human languages."

"Wow!" she allowed. That might be a way for Dr. Blackstone to test his validity but it would not be *her* way. "I want you to have a working knowledge of music and art and the movies and movie stars and politics and politicians and history and all sorts of things. You have to know these things before you can master the art of living."

"Whatever you think I should know, I will learn."

"Good." She snuggled into the rich Maxum upholstery and smiled at the possibilities.



# 4

## THE WOMAN

### *Sylvia Chandler Watergate*

Sylvia woke unusually early, and by 10:30 she was donned in a smart, red-white-and-blue pantsuit with her hair neatly coiffed into a becoming wave at the nape of her shapely neck. Her recently serviced, navy-blue Mercedes two-seater awaited her.

Roger had long since left for the office to finish up some final details before his flight to Chicago, where he would be for several days, leaving Sylvia with time on her hands. Excess time was normal for Sylvia, but this time she had a responsible job to perform, and she was looking forward to her trip to Malibu to water Audley's coleus.

It was a lovely day; the smog was light and the sky was clear. A tropical breeze wafted in from the Pacific. Once outside Beverly Hills, she sped to the Coast Highway and drove directly and leisurely west. Both Sylvia and her vehicle were at their best. She almost wished a cop would stop her so her beauty could impress him. If one did, she would tell the officer who she was and where she was going and he would be enthralled by her wit and her friendliness. She would ask him unimportant questions to pass the time of day and they would admire the rocky coastline together. But no traffic cop stopped her, for none had reason to. She drove slightly under the



speed limit, looking often at the sea, watching the white crested waves lap gently onto the shore.

Right now, this minute, she thought, Audley would be driving too, and the thought of them sharing something gave her pleasure. That was the absolute best thing to do on a day like today: drive.

Along the Malibu Coast she took the right turn onto Juniper Drive and drove the final quarter mile into the graveled driveway that was Audley's. In no hurry to step out into the humidity, Sylvia sat looking at the tall, redwood structure that had once been a miserable, vermin-infested shack, totally different now than the first time she had seen it. It was Audley's dream come true.

Audley had a green thumb. The mass of weeds made way for a small but perfect patch of lawn which, Sylvia had been advised, was the future site of outdoor furniture. But now, in its natural manicured green state, it was surrounded by sunflowers and young junipers. Clustered along the west wall of the ground floor, which comprised the garage and future laundry room, were beds of portulaca and Audley's favorite, California Poppies.

The garage door was shut, of course, so Sylvia ascended the wrought-iron banistered stairs to the back landing and let herself into the kitchen with the spare key that was kept over the doorframe. This was the first time Sylvia had been alone in Audley's house. Oh, sometimes when she visited, Audley would run over to the corner store for mushrooms or wine, but this visit was different. Audley was a thousand miles away, and for a moment, an hour, a day, Audley's dream come true would be hers.

Sylvia's heels touched softly on the yellow-tiled kitchen floor. It was too quiet. Normally, when Audley was home, the stereo was playing. She went straight to the music bar and pressed 'on'. Immediately the mellow sounds of jazz permeated the room, filling it with its owner's vibrations. It seemed now as though Audley might be on the front deck, or upstairs doing her toenails, or reading in the bathroom. This was more like it. Now Sylvia didn't feel so alone.



The coleus could wait a bit longer.

She went into the kitchen and poured a tall glass of iced tea, cut a slice of lemon, and carried the cool drink to the sofa where she slipped off her shoes and curled her legs beneath her, picking up a magazine and preparing to enjoy herself.

The magazine opens to a photographic article done in the style of the 1940's. A woman, exotic and classy, very nouveau rich, is standing alone on a train platform. She is smartly dressed and her piece of luggage suggests a short, perhaps, business trip.

A man approaches. He could be a character out of F. Scott Fitzgerald. He is very attractive in a sleek, almost gaunt sort of a way, and he gives the impression of being extremely capable in bed. The woman sees him. Their eyes meet. Untold waves of passion pass between them. They want each other. Now.

Sylvia stole a sip of iced tea and turned the page.

Now the two are in a private berth. The photographs are stylized, as though they are from an old family album. The sepia tones of the photos lend a surreal, mystical quality. The man is undressing the woman. He is very adept. She undresses him. They are urgent. Tension mounts with every photograph.

Sylvia squirms on the French Provincial sofa and quickly turns the page.

They are doing it! Right there in the magazine. Right there in the train. Although his trousers are off, showing his hard buttocks, he still wears his crisp white shirt -- unbuttoned and pulled back so that Sylvia's eyes can travel furtively down his chest to his taut belly and the quivering shadows below. His vest and tie are draped across the back of the settee.

She is brilliant. Her eyes are glazed with passion. Sultry, animalistic, and very controlled passion. Her stockings dress her legs, and she is wearing her jewels, but the rest of her is naked and he is doing wonderful things to her. You know it's wonderful by the quality of the photographs.

Sylvia couldn't sit still. She jumped off the sofa and walked



around the room in her stocking feet, visualizing the couple, hearing them absorbed in each other and oblivious to the train and the passing scenery and to the business engagement they must each proceed to. There is nothing but their sex. Nothing but the straining of each body on and in the other. They don't speak. They never do. Their communication is in their actions.

She returned to the magazine and turned the page quickly for she could not dwell on how they must be feeling. But, oh. Now they are dressed. They are leaving the train. His shirt and tie and vest are impeccable. Her hair, once ruffled with his caresses, is pinned into place, leaving not a trace of what transpired. They each carry their respective briefcases. They don't look at each other. They will never see each other again. They seem, to Sylvia, magnificent. She sighed deeply.

Flipping through the rest of the magazine, looking briefly at the ads, the titles of articles -- how to get over a love affair, how to look your best this summer -- her mind remained on the photographic essay. Why had she read that damned thing?

She stood up, stretched, and found the watering can then went about methodically watering all the plants. The coleus was thirsty. They were all thirsty. Sylvia was thirsty. She poured herself a drink. As she went about watering the plants, inside and out, she walked carefully, looking at all the things Audley had collected to adorn her home. The miniature figurines from France, the music equipment, color television and VCR and the array of books, tapes, records and CD's. The liquor cabinet was full and varied as were all the cupboards.

She went into the bathroom and looked, admired the fixtures and the grandiose elegance of the bathtub and the toilet. A man could sit on that toilet, she thought, without breaking it.

The towels were thick and cocoa brown and rough to the touch -- a man's towel. And mauve towels, too, of a softer quality, for a woman. Both colors matched the flocked and foiled wall covering and the downy soft carpet. Carrying the watering can,



Sylvia climbed the winding stairs to the loft.

Upstairs was a wall of closets, another wall of mirrors and a king-sized bed. A king-sized bed! What single person the size of Audley needed all that space? Sylvia noticed that the bed was unmade, unmade only in the upper left-hand corner. Audley slept in a ball, in a foetal position. Sylvia noted that Audley would only have to launder one-quarter of the sheets because the rest of the bed was unused.

Her mind turned immediately and unwittingly to the magazine article and the impassioned man and woman. She turned away from the bed and looked instead at the two large chairs, arranged with a low, round hassock that overlooked the studio and the distant ocean. As if deciding to stay a while, Sylvia put down the watering can, then sat tentatively on the edge of one of the chairs, allowing herself to succumb to its comfort. It was an overstuffed chair that all but swallowed her up. She rested her feet on the hassock and crossed her ankles. On the footrest were two books, a newspaper, and a tray. The tray, she knew, was for coffee or Galliano. Sun glittered on the far-away ocean. The chair and the drink conspired to relax her. Cautiously, she let herself go.

She wasn't comfortable at home. Why not? Her home was too fussy, she thought. Too feminine. She recalled her own bathroom, all in pinks and laces. No self-respecting man would go in there. He would not belong. And why shouldn't her own husband feel comfortable in her bathroom? What was so private and personal that two people couldn't do it together?

Roger had never even seen her bathroom. She, in fact, had never seen his. What did he look like in the shower, she wondered, with shampoo on his hair or lather on his face? When he shaved, did her husband use a razor or an electric shaver? She could not remember. What did he do while he sat on the commode? Read? File his nails? Sylvia was depressed. Miserably depressed and did not know why.

Her eyes wandered over the room below and settled on



Audley's desk, a large man-sized mahogany desk with a highjack upholstered swivel chair. The desk faced a room divider of shelves that contained miscellaneous books and objet d'art. On the desk was a telephone, one of the ornate kinds with gold filigree, a penholder, and a note pad, open to receive messages.

Sylvia struggled out of the chair and went quickly downstairs. She went straight to the desk, sat, and read the messages:

"January 1: recuperate from hangover; afternoon cocktails at Eugene's;

"January 2: make an appearance at Weinberger's but don't stay more than 20 minutes."

Sylvia flipped the pages forward.

"March 30: pay Bullocks' bill -- \$16.72. Pay telephone bill -- \$378.43." \$378.43! Who did Audley call long-distance? Her father? Not that much. Brad probably, but he should pay for it, not her. She read further:

"June 15: return call to LBCU in Dallas.

"June 18: submit article on LBCU."

Of course. Audley was an independent business-woman. She owned her home outright, played the stock market, had her own credit cards in her own name, took lovers and forsook lovers when she felt like it, came and went where and when she pleased. Sylvia's stomach churned. She flipped the pages to August 14.

"August 14: Flight 702. Gate 14. 11:35 a.m. to JFK; Flight 364, 7:40 p.m. to Meadowland." It had been scratched out. So she really didn't want to go. Why did she? For Sylvia's dress? No. For Brad? Sylvia seriously doubted it. For the money? Also dubious. Why, then?

Sylvia reviewed the conversation she had had with Audley in the middle of the night -- from Illinois, of all places. Audley had been upset about her plants. Sylvia felt a funny kind of affection for her strange and unconventional friend who would be concerned about the 'little' things in life. Little things like her plants and her



house.

Never in a million years would Sylvia have looked twice at this property. Only Audley would have seen it for its potential and acted upon it. And just look at it now! More than quadrupled in value. Ceiling-high windows overlooking the Pacific, wall-to-wall custom loomed carpeting, a microwave oven, automatic icemaker in the frost-free refrigerator....

Sylvia went to the kitchen and opened all the cupboards and began pulling things out: pickles, breads, cold meats, vegetables, salad dressings. Throwing these together into a meal for herself, Sylvia fumed. Damned Audley anyway, she thought. Why should she be out having one adventure after another? What gave her the right? Wasn't she, Sylvia Chandler Watergate, just as smart, just as pretty, just as capable? When was the last time she had done something adventurous? She was doing it right now -- making a dagwood sandwich in spite of her diet. Well, hell. She had been watching her weight for 28 years. Why shouldn't she feel free to gorge herself if she wanted to?

She thought again about the man in the magazine and dropped a slice of tomato on the floor.

"Damn it," she said aloud, jumping at the sound of her own voice. She never talked to herself. Matter of fact she never talked much to anyone. Why not? Wasn't she just as interesting as anyone? Maybe more so? At least she was pleasant to look at. Some people had their ugly faces all over the place. She wondered, "How can anyone pay attention to what an ugly person has to say?"

If she were to have someone to talk to besides Audley, what would she talk about? Had she ever in her life really talked about something serious? People were always assuming she was stupid, just because she was blonde. People like Roger, and like Brad. Well that was bull. She could think of lots of intelligent things to discuss. She could talk about floods and the cold spells and the heat waves. She could talk about food shortages and solar energy and birth control and political candidates *and* their issues. She read her father's



newspaper. In fact that's about *all* she did, was to look nice and read her father's newspaper.

And what for? she thought, carrying her plate to the sofa. What pleasure or point is there in discussing the world's unhappy problems? Nobody ever does anything about them! She chewed on the sandwich absently, mopping up tomato seeds and juice from her chin with the bread. There is no pleasure in the world's problems. There was no pleasure because there was no solution and if anyone ought to know about living with an unsolvable problem it was Sylvia.

Without wanting to, her mind focused on the figure of a yellow-haired child, lying in a hospital bed in Denver, lying in a coma for seven years. As always when Sylvia thought about her daughter, she felt sick. Sick like she felt when she had her period, like there was a hot brick in her belly, burning and weighing her down. She didn't like that feeling, but she had grown used to it.

Grown used to it! That was the real tragedy! She had become accustomed to an insolvable problem, to a miserable state of affairs, like everybody else in the United States, everybody else in the world. You just, "Get over it!"

But where was the fight? Where was the right to the pursuit of happiness? Happiness for Sylvia? Not for Jennifer, who had no use for happiness. Jennifer didn't even know if she was alive or dead. Jennifer didn't know anything! Why *wasn't* she dead? Dead and gone, out of sight, and out of mind. Why was it that she and Roger should have to live with this mindless tragedy and become *accustomed* to it?

Sylvia carried her plate into the kitchen and filled her iced tea glass with gin. Jennifer should die, she thought. She has no right to be using me like this.

Years ago the schoolgirl Sylvia Chandler, who was having trouble with German and Biology and English, the Sylvia who didn't have to worry about getting high marks because she would survive anyway -- nobody would fail Hiram Chandler's only child, the pretty young thing who had such potential! such vitality! -- years ago Sylvia



would not have been used. Everyone had treated her with respect! Everyone liked her. She had a million friends!

"Bull!" she said aloud, startling herself. That was a lie. Everybody in school hated her except for Audley. Why hadn't Audley told her what to do? Why didn't she tell me to have an affair? or to take drugs like she did ... like everybody did. Oh, no. Not Miss Goodie Two-Shoes. I had to get married and have a vegetable for a child!

Sylvia noticed Brad's photograph standing proudly on the shelf over the desk.

"You don't see Audley jumping into something just because her father wants it," she said. Perhaps she should divorce Roger.

She stepped out onto the deck but the sun was too hot; it would blister her fair skin within minutes. She came back inside.

Why don't you divorce Roger? she asked herself. Because, her mind answered, I am a good wife and Roger loves me. He needs me for his career. What a liar, she thought, and was disgusted with herself for being such a worthless excuse of a woman. The truth was that Roger would never consent to a divorce. He would stick it out with her, having discreet affairs on the side, and one day she would become Mrs. Attorney General, Mrs. Supreme Court Justice, or even First Lady, and wives like that do not have to think. Better to not even talk about controversial issues. Their function, like hers, was to look lovely, be gracious, and lend dignity to their husband's image.

Besides, she loved Roger. Didn't she? She had loved him once. She thought she did.

She could see herself and Roger on the pages of the magazine. It had been like that for them once. It had been just like that. She remembered that Roger was a beautiful man. His legs had been strong, his waist firm and narrow. She remembered how her legs had reached around his waist, locking him to her in their passion ... when it wasn't necessary for them to speak, when their actions said it all. How long had it been? How long had it been for them?

It wasn't her fault. She was afraid. What if she was to have



another child? What if, again, she and Roger looked forward to being parents, if they decorated the nursery and planned for the future of the unborn child, only to find that it was born without a mind, without a soul, without any knowledge of its own or anyone else's existence, with no purpose whatsoever other than to be beautiful, like Roger and herself, and to grow bigger and more beautiful and more useless?

No. She dared not take the chance. There must be no sex! No physical relationship with Roger or anyone, because she might get pregnant and there could be no more children. After all, accidents do happen and what if she gave birth to another Jennifer?

Once she thought she would kill the baby. Just casually smother it before it went away to the hospital. But what if that leaked out? How would that look in her father's newspaper? What would that do to Roger's career?

She would live with it. She had her therapist when her own reserves failed her. And she must not think of Jennifer's dying. It was wrong to think that way. Jennifer lived for a reason! She was a reminder of some kind. Some kind of punishment for Sylvia. A cross for her to bear for being a spoiled, wilful girl. Sylvia had prayed alternately for release and then for forgiveness for so long, she had long since ceased to pray at all.

She finished the gin. "Therefore," she concluded, "I will live with it. I have become accustomed to the tragedy and I will live with it until I die or until I find a way to be free of it. Free of the doubts, free of the guilts, free of the trap of non-action."

Audley was free, her own person. She made her own decisions, and came, and went, and had perfectly wonderful experiences. Audley enjoyed all that life had to offer without guilt and without fear of the outcome. And somehow Sylvia felt better by simply being in Audley's studio. She felt a part of Audley's freedom, surrounded by Audley's things, in the same apartment Sylvia had once denounced as not being fit for an animal. Yes, perhaps it was, in the beginning, but so what? Had there ever been a finer animal



than Audley?

From the security of the French Provincial sofa, Sylvia sat and watched the afternoon wear on and the sun sink into the ocean, feeling bathed in its diffused rays. As the stars began to twinkle overhead, she climbed the winding stairs to the loft and slipped into the comfort of Audley's one-quarter of the king-sized bed.

BRAD WAS ACCUSTOMED TO CRISES. He wore them as easily as a Hickey-Freeman suit.

Intent on finding new and better techniques of dealing with old and inadequate methods, the IOF frequently initiated crisis situations in order to bring about desired changes. As an example, the preparations made prior to the now historical East Coast Black-out were elaborately detailed and charted months in advance of the predicted event. These preparations, designated Operation Onyx, related to problems of food shortages, medical emergencies, crime, ad infinitum.

Mass propandization enabled some of the more far-seeing populace to act on these potential hazards. After the IOF paved the way, new institutions developed to help man help himself in cases of temporary crises. Many families became largely self-sufficient as to food supply and solar energy, but even in the face of all these efforts, few were prepared for the mayhem and misery hinging upon the power failure of August 14th.

And, as if to flaunt this pathetically inadequate state of affairs, Brad knew that these problems would be considered "impossible obstacles to the Future" until society at large could uplift the socio-economic levels of the peoples through improved education and a new sense of social responsibility.

But now, packing his suitcase for the West Coast flight, Brad faced a new and unprecedented crises in his life: that of his relationship with Audley. At the airport, when she had driven away, he sensed that she had not driven away from the IOF conference, nor even from the blackout, but from him and from their



relationship. The more he considered this depressing theory, the more he felt convinced it was correct, and the more exhausted he felt.

Yes, he had deliberately chosen not to tell her of the possibility of the blackout. All precautions had been taken, and the chances of anything happening were, indeed, a million to one. Anyhow, he had been insane enough to think that if, on the outside chance anything untoward did occur, it might somehow accelerate their marriage. What a fool he had been.

Obviously he had been a fool about a lot of things. He should have known the first time he slept with her that she was too spirited, too independent to be stultified into a circumscribed role. It would have been foolhardy of him to expect it of her. No wonder she had avoided their future in the setting of the wedding date.

He had not helped the situation any, either, by being so engrossed in his work. He should have been trying to help her overcome her anxieties, assuring her it didn't matter whether or not his mother approved, whether or not her father was famous. He should have let her know that their life together could rise above social and political rituals, that their union would be a new beginning, not an ending.

He, more so than she, had been childish. She at least had the good sense to get out of an impossible situation. And she had the audacity to get out in his car!

He saw himself looking at life from a purely human standpoint -- as a selfish, needy human being. Love, he knew now, was not a scientific equation to be worked out and then shelved. It required dedication such as he had given solely to Sam. No wonder she hated the word! No wonder she hated the IOF and the future.

He did not want to lose her. What could he do?

He fumed with resentment at what had been pulled on him. Lassater and the President, giving him authority to inquire into a situation that was beyond what even Sam could comprehend. And the IOF had put them up to it! If by some fluke he were to



determine the cause of the blackout, he could begin making his own decisions. He could name his price at any higher institution of science and learning in the world! He would be able then to take the time necessary to build his life with Audley.

He had alternatives. He could reopen discussions with U.C.L.A. on their invitation for him to teach and he could tell Lassater to go to hell. Or, he could ask Audley to join him as an Investigative Assistant on this ludicrous presidential assignment. She might even enjoy that.

But first things first. He had to rest and he had to think. He would talk this over with Doc Will and Doc Will would advise him, while Martha would nurse him back to health with her good cooking and her coddling. By the time Audley returned, he would be ready for her.

LANON PROVED TO BE a good driver and a tremendous help at the wheel. Working together, they drove night and day, stopping to eat, then driving and sleeping in shifts. Their waking hours were not wasted. Lanon listened to the radio while he drove and learned to recognize the names of musical groups and words to popular songs. He paid close attention to the news broadcasts and the all-talk programs. Somewhere in Oklahoma they stopped at a department store where Audley purchased jeans, T-shirts, underwear and miscellaneous toiletries for them both. Here also she charged a compact encyclopedia, which Lanon read at an incredible rate of speed.

When Audley felt it would be good for Lanon's "education", they stopped at major tourist attractions that were not too far off the route. Once exposed to America's wonderlands, Lanon harangued Audley to stop everywhere, at each new desert vista, at each waterfront, so that he might wonder at what he called Urth's "primitive majesty". In distraction, Audley finally put her foot down.

"Lanon! We just can't! We'll never get home if we stop to examine every bush and rock along the way." She made him promise



to stop making comparisons to Zenton. "You're a human being, Lanon, and you can't forget that! The sooner you get used to being one of us, the better off we'll all be."

By the time they reached California, three days behind schedule, Lanon could pass for normal fairly well. Idioms no longer stymied him, his speech patterns were relaxed and he could swear in good taste. Audley, too, had developed during the journey. She threw herself into the responsibility of teaching Lanon those things she felt he ought to know. She was constantly impressed with the magnitude of what it must be like to raise and train an inquisitive child. In her deep recesses she knew that by putting off marriage and family life, she was shirking a major responsibility and depriving herself of a means to happiness and fulfillment, but teaching Lanon the "art of living" was an entirely satisfying experience which completely surpassed her earlier, pleasure-oriented experiences.

Los Angeles overwhelmed Lanon. The size, smells, hustle and bustle of the metropolis excited him. Then, when he thought the City went on forever, he saw the ocean and wanted to stop and look.

"No. We'll be home -- to my place -- very soon now," she said. "It's on the ocean. You'll be able to look to your heart's content."

"Great!" he said, drinking in the size of the horizon.

"I've got to call Dad."

"Fine," he agreed, enjoying himself. "Whatever you think is best."

Audley was anxious about introducing those two. Her father would be suspicious of Lanon for the simple fact that she was interested in him. For Doc Will, the sooner she married Brad the better, and he wouldn't take kindly to her interest in another man, no matter how platonic.

She wheeled the Maxum onto Juniper Drive. God, it was good to be home! Each palm tree waved hello to her. She grinned when she maneuvered the potholes, but frowned at once upon seeing



Sylvia's Mercedes in her driveway. She had not anticipated seeing anyone until she had had a chance to get organized. She needed a bath and Lanon needed more time. She needed to talk to her father and arrange for the return of Brad's car. She needed to get her MG from the airport and locate her abandoned luggage. "Damn."

"What's the matter?"

"We have company."

"Who?"

"Sylvia," she said, getting out and feasting her eyes on the sunflowers.

Lanon got out and stretched. "Why 'damn'? She's your best friend," he reminded her, eyeing the redwood structure critically. "This is your place?"

"Yes," she responded. Looking up, she saw that the coleus were vibrant. "Like it? Wait 'til you see the view!" God, it was good to be home.

Sylvia met Audley at the top of the stairs. "Hi," she squealed, pulling Audley in with a hug. "It's good to see you! Welcome home." Her eyes devoured Lanon.

Audley acted quickly. She pulled Lanon inside and shut the door. "Sylvia, this is Lanon Zenton. Lanon, this is my friend, Sylvia Watergate."

Lanon took Sylvia's hand in both of his and held it. "I'm very glad to meet you, Mrs. Watergate."

Sylvia felt a peculiar tingling sensation in the hand he held and she pulled it away. "Sylvia," she corrected. Her skin felt flushed and she shot Audley a quick look but Audley ignored it, brushing past her into the room.

"We've been driving day and night, Sylvia," she said. "We're exhausted. I need a bath." Her voice was distant, leaving Sylvia to understand that she should leave, but Sylvia was having no part of that. Who was this man? And what about Brad?

"Well, of course! I'm sure you must be exhausted, you poor thing! That awful blackout, the trip. You go draw yourself a nice



bubble bath and tell me all about it." Sylvia intended to stay.

During their exchange, Lanon had approached the front window to survey the view and it didn't disappoint him. He whistled appreciatively, capturing both women's attention.

"This is really something, Audley," he said. "It's even better than you described."

Audley wrenched herself free from Sylvia's grip to join him. "I'm so glad you like it, Lanon. I love it." She opened the double doors to the deck and walked out, relishing the feel of the breeze. "Isn't it just delicious?"

Sylvia, not to be left out, donned a straw bonnet and joined them. "I don't know how you can be gone for even one day, Aud," she said. "These plants are thirsty all the time! I didn't dare leave them alone, and you never did tell me how long you thought you'd be gone." Her voice reeked with implications.

"They're hardier than you give them credit for, Sylvia, but just the same, I do appreciate your taking care of things for me." She knew that Sylvia could hardly keep her eyes off Lanon and she did not want Lanon reacting to Sylvia's overt admiration. Damn. She had wanted more time alone with him. Still, she rose to the occasion. "Speaking of thirsty, how about a drink? Lanon?"

"Whatever you're having."

Sylvia, too, rose to the occasion. "Let me do that, Audley. What'll you have? Galliano?"

"No, thanks. How about some scotch? Heavy on the soda."

"Scotch it is." Sylvia scuttled off, in a hurry to return. "You two sit down."

Audley shook her head. "We've been sitting for days."

Lanon meandered around the deck then around the room, taking in Audley's books, the desk, and her music collection. From the kitchen, Sylvia kept her eyes and ears on Lanon and Audley while adding a dash of soda to the potent scotch.

"You wouldn't have any Wes Montgomery, would you? He's always nice," Lanon said glibly.



Audley was relieved. He wouldn't betray himself to Sylvia. And she was proud of him, acting so normal. She inserted the CD while he studied the art prints on the wall.

"Nice collection," he remarked. "Where'd you get your Matisse?"

"It was a gift from Dr. Spencer," she replied, biting her tongue. Sylvia didn't miss the reference to "Dr. Spencer" as she returned with the tray of drinks and snacks.

"How is Dr. Spencer, Audley? Did you give him my regards?" She took her drink to the wingback chair that floated mid-room.

"Unfortunately I had very little contact with Dr. Spencer, Sylvia. Our visit was cut short by the black-out."

"Do tell."

"I'd rather not."

Audley took her drink into the bathroom and turned on the tap for her bath. Lanon sat near the stereo sipping his drink. He could not understand why humans drank the awful liquid. It tasted bitter, left a flat after-taste and blurred the mind, practically debilitating Nucleus. But he toasted in Sylvia's direction. "Very good," he said. "Nice work!"

Sylvia blushed, unaccustomed to compliments.

"Audley tells me you two went to school together," he persisted.

"Yes," she said, finding her voice. "College. We go back a long way. We have no secrets from each other," she threatened.

Audley emerged in a thick purple robe, her hair wrapped in a towel, turban-style, as Lanon was saying, "It helps to have someone to talk to."

Sylvia watched Audley sit next to Lanon, assuming what she perceived to be an intimacy with the stranger, and saying, "It certainly helped having Lanon to talk to all the way across the country. It would have been a very lonely trip, otherwise."

"I can imagine," Sylvia purred.



Audley knew Sylvia was deliberately twisting things. "Mr. Zenton and I," she said firmly, "were both in a very trying situation, Sylvia. We were both in an airplane when the blackout occurred. We could easily have been killed."

Sylvia ignored the reprimand. "Are you with the IOF, Mr. Zenton?"

"No," he said. "And please dispense with the 'mister'. All my friends call me Lanon."

Audley grinned. All his friends, indeed.

"That's a nice name," Sylvia remarked. "Different."

Nobody spoke.

At length Sylvia turned to Audley. "Did you ...?"

"... get your dress? Oh, yes! Lanon," she suggested. "I left a package in the trunk of the car. Would you get that for me, please?"

"Oh, sure!" he said, getting up. "Gimme the keys and I'll bring in all the stuff."

As soon as he was out of earshot, Sylvia launched. "My God, Aud! Wherever did you find him? He's the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen!"

Audley grinned smugly in spite of her resolves. "He really is, huh."

"I didn't think they made men like that anymore!"

"Trust me, they don't. He's a breed all his own."

"Married, I suppose," Sylvia suggested.

"No, I don't think so."

"You don't think so! You mean you haven't asked?"

Maybe it would be better if she didn't even mention the amnesia theory. No sense in Sylvia asking awkward questions. "No, and don't give me that kind of a look," she snapped. "He isn't. I'm sure of it. I can just tell. I didn't have to ask."

"Well, if you don't, I will! I'm not going to let you make a fool of yourself over a married man." Lanon came back with his arms full as Sylvia was saying, "Not MY best friend!"

"Here you are," he said, handing the package to Audley.



Sylvia snatched it up. "I sure appreciate this, Aud. I really do, and I hope it wasn't too much trouble for you."

If Sylvia hadn't coerced her into connecting with that dress, she would never have met Lanon. "We're even," she said. "You took care of my plants." She exited to the bathroom and turned off the tap. Sylvia followed her.

"Have you been here all this time?"

"Since Sunday. Your father called here twice."

"I'm not surprised." If she and Lanon had driven straight through, she might have been home by late Tuesday. It was Friday. "I'll call him in the morning. How come you've stayed all this time?" She set out a razor, shampoo, conditioner, and a selection of oils and lotions.

Sylvia sank onto the cushioned toilet seat. "Oh, Aud. I just couldn't stand to go home. Roger's in Chicago on depositions all this week. Not that it makes any difference. He's no company. We just tolerate each other." She followed Audley back into the living room, altering her attitude as she passed through the doorway. "I just thought the change would do me good, so I stayed here. I've had a nice time, too. Thanks."

Audley again sat next to Lanon. "And you, sir? Are you having a nice time?" He nodded, noticing her sudden warmth. What a peculiar creature was woman: independent one minute and dependent the next. He accepted that and smiled at her. She wanted a moment alone with him.

"Sylvia," she crooned, "why don't you fix us all another drink before I go take my bath?" Sylvia obliged, happy at not being asked to leave. "I'm going to take my bath, Lanon," Audley conspired, "and I'm going to trust you alone with Sylvia, but I want you to do me a favor and keep the conversation away from yourself. Will you do that?"

He winked, a gesture she had not taught him, and said, "Don't worry about a thing."

Sylvia came in with the drinks as Audley stood up, swooped



up a glass and, eyes twinkling, left them. "Make yourselves at home. I'll be back!"

Lanon hardly touched the second drink; he didn't like the blurred feeling. Sylvia, also, was uncomfortable. She knew her ample cleavage was perspiring, and her face felt crooked, but Lanon smiled into her eyes then rested his gaze squarely on his ice cubes.

She took a deep breath. "Are you a pilot?" she asked for openers.

"No, what makes you think that?"

"Well, you said ... Audley said you were in a plane when the black-out happened. I just thought it might have been your plane."

"No, the plane belonged to an associate. Actually, I don't know the first thing about flying."

"I see." In spite of Audley's graciousness, Sylvia felt she ought to be somewhere else. She didn't know how to talk to this man. She twisted uncomfortably in the chair, thought about getting up, changed her mind. Lanon was aware of her discomfort but had no understanding of the effects of hormones nor any reason to believe humans knew how to behave otherwise. He only knew Sylvia's Nucleus was very unfocused.

"Where do you live when you aren't here?" he asked.

"I live in Beverly Hills," she said, smiling. "I'm not here very often."

"You are married," he said.

"Yes." It would have been a perfect time to ask him if he was married but for some reason it didn't occur to her. Instead, she looked at her wedding band. "My husband Roger is an attorney. He's on business in Chicago this week so I decided to come here for a few days."

"And your child?"

Sylvia looked him over. "I didn't say anything about having a child."

"But you have one, don't you?"

A cool calm settled over her. What made him say that? "I



can't imagine where you got that idea, Mr. Zenton. Can I get you another drink?"

He shook his head, still peering at her expectantly.

If Audley had told this stranger about Jennifer, she would skin her alive! She shifted.

"I'm sorry," Lanon offered. "You're uncomfortable."

She snapped, "I am *not* uncomfortable!" She stood abruptly, feeling herself getting angry. Maybe she didn't like him as well as she thought she did. She couldn't think of anything to say, or a way to change the subject, but she did feel compelled to stay there with him. It was peculiar, but she saw herself as silly and deceitful. She laughed lightly and sat back down. "Actually, you're very astute. I guess some men can tell." She felt giddy and brave. "I do have a child."

"Where is she?" he asked.

"She's ...." (Imagine the headlines.) "She's not ...." " Why didn't she just say the child was dead? "She's not with us anymore!"

"She's visiting somewhere?" he probed.

"She's just not with us!" Sylvia strode to the window, trying to appear unaffected. For seven years no one had asked her these questions. They had no reason to. It was published in her father's paper: Mr. and Mrs. Roger Watergate's infant daughter, Jennifer, aged five months, died in her sleep last night of natural causes. No services will be held." It was right there in the paper: Jennifer was dead! Why did he have to ask? Why couldn't she just lie to him?

His voice, damnably cheerful and unsettling, came to her. "She must be very beautiful. Her mother certainly is."

"Yes," Sylvia acquiesced. "She is very beautiful."

Lanon heard her sadness, and when he spoke next, his voice reached deep inside. "Why isn't she with you?"

Damn him! "You're out of line, Mr. Zenton!"

"Am I?" He was astonished. "I'm sorry."

He was not sorry. He had pushed those buttons on purpose. Why? She was furious! She was in pain! "Did Audley tell you about Jennifer?" she demanded.



"No. *You* told me."

Sylvia suddenly felt exposed. "Excuse me," she said, leaving him and bursting in on Audley in her bath. "Audley, I'm going home."

Audley saw the look on Sylvia's face and her stomach wrenched. "What happened, Sylvia? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"He asked me about Jennifer." Sylvia collapsed onto the toilet seat.

"He did?" It did not surprise Audley. "He didn't call her by name, did he?"

"No."

"What did he say?"

"He asked me about my child." Sylvia seemed helpless.

"And you told him." She groaned. Lanon affected people. Evidently, he could not help that, no matter how cautious he was.

Sylvia nodded. "I don't know why. I just couldn't lie to him." She jumped up. "He's weird, Audley. What are you doing with him? Where did he come from?"

Good question. Audley pulled herself up out of the soapy water. "Lanon's not weird, Sylvia. He has amnesia."

"Amnesia?"

"Yes. He hurt himself in the plane crash. I'm taking him to see my father."

"Oh." She had thought Audley was out to snare him. "Then you're not interested in him?"

Audley pulled the plug and wrapped herself in one of the mauve towels. "To the contrary. I AM interested in him. Otherwise, I would have left him on the side of the road where I found him."

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to be interested in him, Audley. He's a perfect stranger. I'm not going to leave you alone with him. I'm going to stay here and make sure you're safe."

Actually, it might be helpful to have her around. "Suit



yourself."

"I am suspicious, Aud, I can tell you that."

"Trust me, Sylvia. He's harmless."

"You mean he hasn't made any moves?"

"None whatsoever." She slipped into a loose one-piece lounge.

Sylvia grinned in spite of herself. "Too bad, huh?"

Audley started rinsing out the tub. "Listen. Is there any food in the house?"

"Tons. I stocked up. You want me to cook something?"

"You? Cook? Will wonders never cease!"

"Oh, cut it out." Sylvia's color had returned to normal; she looked much better.

"You start. I'll be out to help in a minute."

Sylvia passed Lanon without looking at him, deciding to forget the conversation even happened, while Audley drew another tub of water, going light on the bubbles this time.

Lanon responded at once to her summons. As he took in the decor of her bathroom, certainly more colorful than the one at the motel, she instructed him on bathing, shaving, et cetera, then laid out towels and an oversized terry cloth robe for him to wear.

"Whatever made you ask Sylvia about her kid?" she asked. "Of all the things you could have picked to talk about, that was not the best choice."

"Why not?" Her criticism didn't seem to bother him in the least.

Maybe it was at that, she reconsidered. Jennifer was Sylvia's nemesis, that's for sure. "The kid is a vegetable. The whole experience has practically ruined Sylvia's life."

"A vegetable?" Surely she didn't mean that literally.

As Audley talked, she urged him out of his clothing, using the conversation as a buffer to conceal her absurd fascination with his body. "A basket case," she explained. "A nothing. Jennifer hasn't got a mind." She tapped herself on the head for emphasis.



"She's not all there."

Lanon scowled and slid under the bubbles. "And she is alive?" He was incredulous.

"Alive and well in an institution in Denver, Colorado, where they feed her, change her diapers and treat her like a China doll."

"Why hasn't she been eliminated?" He could not believe that on this world the Voids were allowed to exist.

She handed him a wash cloth and a new bar of soap. "It's against our laws."

"The laws must be changed!" he insisted.

"Perhaps. But that's not our problem." She stood up. "Now, take your bath."

As he began to lather himself he thought about Sylvia's vegetable. "That's not our problem, you say, but it is for our friend Sylvia."

AUDLEY WOKE IN HER OWN BED. Beside her, Sylvia slept soundly and would sleep undisturbed until noon or until she was deliberately roused. She lay there listening to the wind in the junipers and to the birds singing, reflecting.

She felt good inside. What she had done, what she was doing, what she intended to do -- all this was good. Today she would introduce her fledgling friend to another aspect of life, the world of the complexity of the mind, and this too was good. Whatever it was that was happening, of which she understood very little, she felt good about it. She would be fearless. But, she would keep him and enjoy him for as long as possible within the framework of that which she did not understand. She crept downstairs and watched him sleep. He was such an innocent. She did not relish the idea of giving him over to her father and Mindal Science, but she felt it must be done.

She perked coffee, made up her face and dressed, then went back to watching Lanon. Was he sleeping? Or was he out somewhere in the galaxy? Was it possible? Even so, his lovely body was here, and to that extent she was with him.



He opened his eyes and, seeing her, smiled and said, "Hello."  
She returned the smile. "The appropriate thing to say upon rising is 'Good morning'."

"Good morning."

If he were a little more experienced, just a little more sophisticated, she would crawl under the covers with him. Heck, he would have pulled her in with him already, but he was so new. She would have to wait. "Did you sleep well?" she asked, moving away.

He nodded. "And you?"

"Very well. It was great to wake up in my own bed."

"I'll bet," he agreed.

She did not know if he was talking about waking up in his own bed or hers, but it was fun to speculate. "Sylvia is still asleep. Are you ready for coffee?"

He tossed off his covers and, sure enough, he was in great morning condition. She hid a smile and went to the kitchen to start his breakfast, thinking what life would be like as Mrs. Lanon Zenton. It would be heaven, she decided. Sheer heaven on Urth.

After breakfast she said, "I need to talk to Dad about you before Sylvia gets up."

"About the testing?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Are you ready to learn how to use the telephone?"

"Of course, I am ready," he said confidently.

She showed him how to feed in the destination, how to listen for the 'go' signal and so on, then finally put in the call to Santa Barbara.

Martha answered and, recognizing Audley's voice, launched at once on a verbal tirade about worrying her father half to death, why hadn't she called, Brad was there and beside himself with concern, when was she coming up, et cetera.

"Martha," Audley cut in, "let me talk to Dad." Martha knew when to be a mother and when to be a housekeeper. She connected father and daughter at once.



"Audley?" His voice was understandably terse.

"Hi, Dad." She grinned at Lanon's eyes fixed on hers.

"You're late getting back. Did you have trouble?"

"No. No trouble."

"When are you coming up? Brad's here."

She took a deep breath. This was not going to be easy. She gave the task her full attention.

"Dad, the reason I'm calling is to ask you a favor." She paused, trying to find the words to phrase it right. "I want you to test someone."

"Who?" As she anticipated, he was suspicious. She took another deep breath and forged on.

"His name is Lanon Zenton."

"He? Audley, what are you doing?"

"Nothing, Dad. I know you're frowning and I know what you're thinking, but it's not like that."

"Goddammit, Audley. Brad has been here since Sunday. We've both been half out of our minds with worry. You owe at least Brad an explanation!"

He was angrier than she expected. Well, she could be angry, too. "What goes on between Brad and me is none of your business, Dad. What's he doing there anyway, bothering you? He's got no right dumping on you about our problems."

"He hasn't 'dumped' on me, and you watch your tone of voice with me, young lady. This is your father you're talking to."

She wasn't going to get away with it that easily. She would have to pacify him. "I'm sorry."

"You damned well should be sorry. I'm an old man, Audley. I can't adjust to your mis-adventures like I used to. It wouldn't have hurt you to call and let us know you were alright."

"I know. I should have called. I called Sylvia."

"Christ," he sulked. "Was I supposed to call all over the country trying to see if you were alive or not?"

"I said I was sorry!" Would he go on all day? There followed



a long silence, during which Audley toyed with the cord on her telephone. He had finished. "I know you're mad at me," she continued, "but this is important."

"You're single-minded, Audley!" he launched anew. "It only counts if it's important to you. It matters little if it's important to other people."

"Please, Dad. This is important to other people. Trust me."

"Ha!" he spat. Another long silence. "Who is he? Your latest and greatest paramour?"

She bristled. "He's an acquaintance! A friend, Dad. We met during the black-out."

"What do you want me to see him for?"

She hesitated. "He was in a plane crash."

"Then he should be in a hospital somewhere on the East Coast."

"He wasn't physically hurt."

"Then what is it?"

"Well, Dad, I can't explain it. I think it's some kind of amnesia." She could feel her father's disbelief. "Dad, please see him. I beg you. I want to make certain he's all right."

Audley begging? Despite himself, Doc's interest was piqued.

She continued. "He's been very helpful to me on more than one occasion and I want to return the favor."

"That's all there is to it?"

"That's all there is to it!" That was a lie, but ... if it made him happy.

"Where is he now?"

"He's here, at my place."

"He slept there?"

"He slept here on the sofa. Sylvia and I slept in my bed. Now, are you satisfied?"

"I'm going to tell Brad you're coming up."

"Go ahead!" It sounded flip.

"Audley...." It was a leading tone of voice. "What happened



back there?"

"We had an argument. I'll tell you about it later."

"Is everything alright with you and Brad?"

She hesitated again. "I'll talk to you about it later, okay?"

She didn't want to talk about Brad in front of Lanon.

"What time can we expect you?"

"We'll have to wait for Sylvia to wake up."

"Why?"

"So she can drive."

"Why?"

"Because Lanon doesn't have a driver's license, and my car is at the airport, and I need to find out if my luggage has come back yet, and I need to bring Brad's car up to him,..."

"Oh, alright! About 2:00 then?"

"Better make it 3."

"We'll be expecting you."

"Thanks, Dad. I appreciate it."

DR. BLACKSTONE HUNG UP without saying 'good-bye'. What the hell was she up to now? He sometimes regretted having raised her the way he did. She got away with murder. He rubbed the back of his neck, relieved to have heard her voice, even if she did get his dander up.

This was peculiar and he didn't like it. She had never asked him to test anyone. Never. And certainly not any of her man friends. This 'interest' she had was more than platonic, he was sure of that. She never set her cap on something that there wasn't something in it for her. And now this thing with her and Brad ....

Doc Will suspected the worst and felt justified in his feelings. And another thing! The little brat was leaving it up to him to break the news to Brad! No, he couldn't let his suspicions be broadcast to Brad. Maybe she was being straight, although he doubted it. Strange things happen in times of disaster. Maybe it had scared some sense into her. He hoped so.



Amnesia, indeed, he harumphed. And what a handle: Lanon Zenton. Probably some buck passing himself off as a Nairobi prince. He shook his head, feeling sick. God, he hoped she was being straight for once.



## 5

## THE MINDAL SCIENTIST

*Dr. Wilhelm "Doc Will" Blackstone*

Upstairs in Doc's second floor guestroom, Brad shifted in his prone position and stared at the four-poster overhead. Beside him the stack of IOF personnel dossiers lay untouched. The distant sound of the phone ringing roused him; he sat up, reached for the dossiers and began to read.

"What am I even looking for?" he asked himself again and again. "I am looking for the reason for the August 14th blackout. I am looking for the reason for the failure of Operation Onyx. I am looking for the information that Sam didn't have." Each page served to remind him how exhausted he was. He had been under strain too long. Audley was right. No wonder she had been angry. They hadn't been to the theater in months. He had become so stiff and unbending and engrossed in the IOF he had become a total bore.

Discipline thwarted his self-pity. What had he forgotten? What had been overlooked? He told them what to watch for! Sam told them the power failure was on the way! They told Lassater to be prepared! It was not the IOF's fault. "It's not my fault!" Okay, so it happened anyway. Who cares whose fault it was? They followed his advice and still it happened. What went wrong? Was it subterfuge?



It couldn't be. Sam had denied the possibility. Forget Sam. Sam had failed. Who or what was behind this power drain? And why did the IOF select me? But, why not?

Absently, he looked at his watch: 1:35. Time to get a move on. He stood and ran a tremulous hand through his thick sandy hair. He hadn't had any rest, very little sleep. How could he have slept with Audley out there somewhere? And now how could he rest with her due to arrive soon? Doc had told him she was coming, along with Sylvia and a new patient.

What was she doing with a patient? She was a reporter, not a nurse or a psychiatrist. Was the patient male or female? He had the sick conviction it was male. And Sylvia. What was that all about? Sylvia as a chaperon? Ridiculous. Yet that was the impression he'd gotten from Doc Will. It didn't make any sense. Nothing made any sense. Nothing made sense since the night of August 14.

The front doorbell rang. He looked down at the driveway, fully expecting to see Audley arriving early with her new man in tow, but was surprised and irritated to see a government car. He knew full well it would be one of Lassater's boys prodding him to get a move on. As he descended the staircase, he was further surprised and irritated to see Oscar grinning up at him. Martha gave him over to Brad and disappeared.

"Oscar!" he said tersely. "What are you doing here?" It was not a kind way to treat anyone, but Brad was in no mood for kindnesses.

"Your personal answering service told me you'd be here, Dr. Spencer," he said. "We have to know where you are at all times, Sir, so I took the liberty of advising the IOF and General Lassater of your whereabouts."

"So now that you're here, what do you want?"

A large manila envelope appeared from Oscar's inside jacket pocket. Brad recognized immediately that it was a "For Your Eyes Only" communique carrying the Presidential Seal. Oscar handed it



over with a crooked grin.

"Thank you, Oscar," he said, taking the envelope. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes, Sir. I've been promoted to your Aide. If you need anything, I'll be staying at the Sandpiper. Room 217."

"Right." Brad let Oscar out, then broke the seal to the communique, appreciating that at least they hadn't deserted him. It was from the General.

"Brad," it said. "This may be of some help to you. A call from Air Force told of peculiar variations in hemispheric conditions since night of August 14. Photo Enclosed. Note apparent Breakage." It was signed "Lassater".

Brad studied the photo, recognizing it as the wall of our solar system. It was generally accepted that beyond our solar system was another similar system, which was very probably controlled by another constellation, and although that was speculated, there had never been any photographic data to support the theory. Now it would be accepted as fact, for it appeared from the photo that a seam, or avenue, had cracked the wall dividing the solar systems, leaving a visible space -- a space large enough for easy access.

A crack in the solar system wall! What could that mean? Influx of sufficient amounts of energy, or vacuum, to throw off the balance of the planet Urth? If it did represent, as it seemed, an energy drain, why was the blackout over? Why wasn't it still going on? Or had the crack been resealed somehow? Why didn't Operation Onyx spread to other countries? Did it affect other planets? Good God! Who or what else was aware of this? He re-inserted the materials into the envelope and went into Doc's study then waited, in deference to the old man.

Doc Will sat at his desk, gazing out the window. His body testified to his 76 years. He was a little bent, a little stiff with the rheumatoid arthritis indigenous to a seaboard climate. His shock of white hair radiated out from his head like an electric halo. His eyes were wise and encouraging, but behind the disciplined face were



traces of labor and despair. He turned his kindly eyes to his surrogate son.

"Brad! Come in, my boy. What's up?" In spite of his age and his attitude, Doc was in many ways young. He was still in awe of so many of life's mysteries. He still took interest in life's situations.

"Look at this, Doc," Brad said, handing over the confidential documents. "What do you make of it?" As Doc Will studied the photo and accompanying letter, Brad placed three calls, none of which gave him any satisfaction:

(1) The major portion of the break had closed almost as soon as it had opened. Total wide-open time was four minutes, three seconds Urth time. Even so, the imbalance remained. As Lassater pointed out, hemispheric conditions were still not normalized.

(2) Other breaks had been recorded and photographed, one in 1932 and again in 1936 in a position 45 degrees SW of Orion, and a series of breaks in the 1970's due north of the Bermuda Triangle. Nothing irregular occurred at those times.

(3) Even with abnormal conditions, according to the Air Force, there was no reason to consider a second break. No scar was evident in the wall. Apparently it was a natural act and not hostile. At any rate, it could not be discussed over the phone. That Brad had a Presidential Assignment cut no ice with the Air Force.

Brad felt unsettled. Conditions had not returned to normal, as if the cosmos were holding its doors open in abeyance of something. He asked for Doc's reactions but got very little.

"I'm a doctor of Mindal Sciences, son. The world of astronomy is far removed from my professional realm."

Brad nodded. From his as well.

"I wouldn't overlook it, though, Brad, if I were you," Doc advised. "Put it in your portfolio of informational leads and see if it's supported by any leads you may get in the future. Did you have a chance to look over those dossiers?"

"Nothing there I can use," Brad scowled. The furrows in his brow were becoming deep, permanent scars.



"You need to get your mind off it, son. Why don't you have a swim before the girls get here?"

"Maybe I will," he said, taking his leave. He hated to swim alone. "I'll see you later." Brad left the old man to his own thoughts. He didn't want to be there when Audley arrived and he didn't want Sylvia to see him defeated. Remembering Oscar, Brad called a cab.

IN THE BACK OF HIS MIND Doc Will heard Brad leave. He went deep into his work -- Martha would have called it snoozing -- and was roused by Sylvia's "Yoo-Hoo"ing from Brad's Maxum in the front drive. Audley's MG disappeared from view, continuing around the side of the house to the lab entrance. On the intercom he instructed Martha to make Sylvia welcome in his study, then he unlocked the door to the lab in time to hear Audley's knock, quite inconsistent with her usual arrivals.

His first glance at Lanon confirmed his suspicions that Audley's emotions, or at least her hormones, were involved. When he embraced his wayward daughter, however, he could feel that she was different, calmer. Either this man or the blackout experience, or both, had done something for her.

"Lanon, this is my father, Dr. Blackstone. Dad, Lanon Zenton." Doc Will extended his hand to the patient and Lanon took it firmly. In spite of his misgivings, Doc Will was drawn to his new patient at once.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," Lanon said.

"Come in. Come in." Leading them into the antiseptic rooms he said, "Audley tells me you might have some kind of amnesia."

Audley elaborated. "He knows his name and that's all. He has no identification and the plane he says he was in disintegrated."

Doc scowled, as if to say the patient could speak for himself. Excluding Audley from their rapport, he asked Lanon, "Your plane disintegrated and you weren't hurt?"

"I was thrown free." Lanon grinned in such a way as to



indicate to the doctor that he was either lying or hiding something. All the more reason to delve deeper.

Seeing that her father was sufficiently challenged, Audley said, "I'm leaving now, Lanon. I'll come back and see you later. Dad? Is Brad around?" Might as well get that over with.

Turning to preparing the new patient's charts, he said, "No. I heard him go out, but he should be back before dinner."

She slipped out quietly, allowing the two their privacy. Something in her wanted to giggle. Assuming Lanon *did* have amnesia, she'd be fascinated to find out who he really was. Assuming he *didn't* have amnesia, that he was who he said he was, she wished she could see the look on her father's face when he finally figured it out. Audley found Sylvia and Martha in the kitchen.

"I was just telling Martha I should be getting home," Sylvia said, helping herself to another pinch of cake batter. Martha appealed to Audley for support, as if it would break her heart if Sylvia didn't stay for dinner. Audley winked at Martha not to worry, then hustled Sylvia out of Martha's domain.

"You're not going anywhere," Audley said, leading Sylvia into her father's study. "I need you here for moral support. I don't want to be marooned in this house alone with Brad on the loose. You and I can stay in Mom's old room, since Brad is in the guest room."

"I don't get it," Sylvia objected. "Shouldn't you and Brad be in the guest room together?" She was clearly egging for information, but Audley wasn't giving out with any.

"Certainly not! I can't do that in my father's house!"

Sylvia made a derisive noise and settled herself into a chair near the window. "Since when do you let your love life suffer because of propriety?"

It was Audley's turn to make a noise.

"It's that Lanon fellow," Sylvia concluded. "You and he have got something going."

"I told you, Sylvia, we have *not*."



"Maybe not yet," she cut in, "but it isn't because you don't want to. I know you too well, Audley." Sylvia was right, of course. Right on target with her calculated verbal efforts. Audley had wanted Lanon since he first laid his laser beam eyes on her.

"Okay, I confess. Can you blame me?"

Sylvia rolled her eyes and grinned. "God, no! And, Brad aside, why not?"

How much could she say without risk? "He isn't ready."

"Isn't ready! What are you talking about? I've never seen such a hunk!"

"I'm not talking about physically. I'm talking about emotionally."

"Bull. What's to be ready?"

"This could be serious."

"It better not be. I just saw Brad coming up to the house."

Audley hissed. "Brad knows I've brought a patient to my father but he does *not* know I've got the hots for the guy and he *won't* know, either, unless some blabber-mouth *tells* him, and if she *does*, I'll deny it to my dying breath!"

"Alright! Alright! I get the hint!" Sylvia stood up to leave as Brad's long stride was heard approaching on the terrazzo tile.

"I'll be upstairs doing my nails, Aud. See you at dinner." Her departure was stopped by Brad's arrival. "Oh, hello, Brad!"

"Well, hello, Sylvia. Long time no see."

"Long time." (What a catch.)

"See you at dinner?"

She nodded. "See you then."

BRAD CLOSED THE DOOR to the study behind him and went directly to his fiancée and grabbed her, throwing her off balance. She thought he was going to hit her but, instead, he kissed her, hard. She felt no emotion at all, but waited for his ardor to subside then unloosed herself from his embrace and went to stand behind the protection of the bar.



"Well!" she exclaimed. "What was that all about?"

He shrugged. "I just felt like it."

"Since when do you do things because you feel like it?"

"Since I saw you at the airport." He sat loosely on a barstool. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, Aud."

"Bad for your health, thinking," she chided. "I told you that you needed rest. How long have you been here?"

"I came out Sunday afternoon."

"You still look beat. Isn't Martha taking care of you?"

He glowered. "I don't need Martha to take care of me. I need you!"

"Me? I'm not your mother, Brad. Besides, when did you ever need me before? How come this sudden kindled interest?"

It appeared to be a repeat of the scene at the airport and Brad was not about to lose this round. "Why don't we ease up?" he suggested. "I brought your luggage."

She shrugged. "Thanks. I brought your car." She maintained her stance behind the bar. "What's on your mind?"

"Us."

"What about us?" She wasn't going to help him any. She reached for the glasses.

He stood and paced. "I'm no psychologist, but I know enough to notice what you did the other night."

"Oh? Just what was it that I did?"

"You ... didn't just drive away from the black-out, from the power failure."

"That's astute, Brad. What *did* I drive away from?" She poured each of them a drink.

"Me. Us." From across the room he faced her, "And I want to know why."

"Because I'm not ready." She came around and sat firmly on a stool. "You should know from the way I've been postponing the wedding, I've been avoiding the issue for months. The black-out just gave me the impetus to act on it."



"Okay," he said, approaching. "You're being straight with me and I appreciate it. What aren't you ready about?"

"I can't explain it."

"You won't hurt my feelings," he said, next to her.

"Brad, I'm just not sure it's the right thing for me to do. I'm not sure I could make you happy."

"You aren't the judge of that, Audley. I am, and I think you would make me very happy."

"I hate bridge."

"Bridge?"

"I'm not the kind of woman you're looking for, Brad." She walked away to pace. "That ... bitch you saw at the airport is really who I am! I'm not very proper. I'm not even very nice! Your darling mother wouldn't tolerate me for ten minutes because I'd have to let her know how much I detest her and her kind. I'd get you fired from the Institute. I'd make your life miserable because I'm not the girl you thought I was. I'm sorry. I should have been honest with myself and with you from the beginning."

"Wait a minute," he said, pursuing her. "What you don't know is that I realize that about you. I told you, I've been doing a lot of thinking."

She had not expected this reaction.

"You are absolutely right!" he went on. "You would probably shock my mother and it's precisely what she needs. And if you got me fired from the Institute I'd be entirely grateful!"

"Brad, what are you talking about? The IOF is your life!"

"Not any more, it isn't. You are my life, Audley, and it's taken me all this time to realize it. If you hadn't driven away from me -- from us -- the other night, I probably would still be blundering around in the dark, playing some role and expecting you to play one with me. I was wrong. Not you."

After a long moment she took a deep breath. "Brad, if you would have said these things to me even a week ago it might have made a difference, but it's too late now."



"How can it be too late?"

"It just is."

"Is there somebody else?"

She avoided looking into his piercing eyes, so full of love and concern. "Not really."

"Not really? What kind of an answer is that?"

"No, there isn't anybody else. It's just me."

"I don't get it."

It was her turn to pace. "The black-out ... changed me, Brad. Flying around up there, not knowing if I would live to see tomorrow. It got me to thinking."

"Thinking what? Live for today for tomorrow never comes?"

"No. Not that. But that life *means* something. There is a reason for living -- *beyond* personal happiness."

His face paled. "Don't say that."

"But I believe it! You see, this is why it won't work with us. You profess to need me for your own personal happiness. That's fine, Brad, for you and for a million other people, but not for me."

"Audley, Audley. You're not making any sense!"

"I'm sorry you think that."

"What's wrong with wanting to be happy?"

"Nothing, Brad! Everybody has a right to happiness. It's just that different people find it in different ways."

"How do you propose to find yours?"

"I'm not thinking about my happiness, Brad, and that's the point I'm trying to make!"

"Then think about *my* happiness! Marry me!"

"Brad, I can't. Don't you see that? We don't belong together! We have nothing in common! We'll just get in each other's way and end up hating each other and ourselves."

Brad shook his head. Now, for certain, his entire world was shattered. Nothing, but nothing, made sense. He slumped onto the leather sofa.

Audley took advantage of his defeat. "Here." She removed



her engagement ring from her finger and pressed it into his unwilling hand. "I want you to take this."

After a moment he said, "You know, "it's ironic. All my life I've put the needs of others ahead of my own. I've dedicated my life to science so that I could help make this a better world, and finally I recognize that I, too, have needs, that I, too, have a right to happiness. And," he snapped his fingers, embittered, "Kaput! The lady says, 'It's too late.'" He shook his head. "It's too much, Audley. Too much for a man to endure."

She had never seen Brad like this. Emotional. Defeated. It wasn't fair. He didn't deserve what was happening to him. She peered deep into his suffering and saw something more than a broken romance. "What is it, Brad?" She sat with him. "Tell me. Is it Sam?"

He needed her. To talk to. He had kept her shut out for so long. It was his fault. Maybe he could still win her. He longed for her. "Sam failed," he said, and it was as if *he* had failed, as if his reason for living had failed him.

"Tell me."

He began at the beginning, with the programming, with the statistics and the outside stimuli. He related the memos to Lassater's boys in Scientific Defense and their lack of substantive response. Then the blackout, during which even Sam shut down. Then the meeting at the IOF, held in the dark, the "honor" of being selected, and his feelings of resentment in the face of Audley's behavior at the airport. She listened to it all, hearing Brad's voice pull her in, bridge the gaps, merging the two of them into one whole, one united concern. Then he told of the meeting with Lassater and the President and, finally, about the Presidential Assignment.

Brad's fiancée was furious. "How dare they! How dare they pawn this off on you, Brad? What do they hope to prove? What do they expect to gain?"

"Lassater discovered me; he can destroy me. They are out to make me the scapegoat for it, Audley. Unless I can prove my and



Sam's innocence, we're finished."

"It wasn't your fault!"

"It was Sam's fault, and I'm Sam's master. They can and they will ruin me -- not to mention the Future."

"Oh, God." The grandfather clock chimed 5:00 and ticked on. "What are you going to do?"

He took a deep breath. "I don't know. With you, I have options. Without you, I have no idea."

There it was again! He had to have his own reason for living. He couldn't live vicariously through her. God. "With me, what are your options?"

"One, I could put you on governmental payroll and you could be my Investigative Assistant. Maybe if the two of us put our heads together, we might come up with something."

"Like what? Espionage? Subterfuge? That's too deep for my investigative talents."

"Something happened that night, Audley," he confided. "Something no one expected. Some inter-galactic disturbance."

Audley paled. Lanon had arrived that night. She could not betray him when he trusted her. She could not encourage Brad. If Brad knew ... oh, God. "Don't be silly, Brad," she countered. "That's science fiction! UFO baloney! You don't really believe that stuff, do you?"

"No, but..."

"Good. Then, what's another option?"

He turned to her, encouraged. "Remember my telling you about the open offer to teach at UCLA? I could tell Lassater to take a flying leap and go to UCLA. I could teach. Settle down. We could get married, have kids, and start a new life for ourselves."

He was appealing to her. If she accepted, she could keep him away from investigating the blackout. But then somebody else would look into it. Maybe somebody who was more qualified than Brad, someone who would find out! How long would Lanon need to be here? How long did she need to keep him safe? How long could



she be with him?

"Well, Audley, what about it?"

"I need more time."

"How much time?"

"Six months."

He protested, "Six months!"

"If in six months we ... still care for each other and if ... we still feel ...."

"You will marry me?"

"Six months from today. Yes." There. A commitment. But first, Lanon.

LANON ENJOYED THE STERILE laboratory. It was easier on his senses, and it reminded him of the laboratories of Zenton. As the afternoon wore on, he marveled at the mechanics involved in measuring the intricacies of the human body. On Zenton, when he had looked at the mass of material he would inhabit following his materialization, he was fascinated; but now he was beside himself. He laughed when the doctor checked his reflexes and his foot swung forward. Doc Will noted every reaction of the patient and answered every question, no matter how simple or complex, and Lanon absorbed every answer.

The preliminary examination alone was enough to convince Dr. Blackstone that Lanon Zenton was a very interesting case. His new patient was 6' tall and weighed 195 pounds. He did not know how old he was or when he was born. He had never been to a medical doctor or to a dentist. He knew nothing about his parents, but he knew almost as much as the doctor did about his physical structure. He knew his pulse rate and his blood pressure and blood type. He knew his temperature. He knew he was in perfect health and had no compunctions about saying he was perfect in all respects.

There was no indication of his having been in any plane crash, no matter how Lanon avowed that he had been. He had not incurred any bruises, lacerations or abrasions in the plane that he



could not describe. His working memory seemed to have begun when he saw Audley sleeping near the stream in the woods.

She had done the right thing in bringing him here, the doctor thought. It would take several days of tests -- psychological and electro-chemical and whatever else he could come up with, to tap the root of this peculiar variety of amnesia.

It was nearly dinnertime when he called Audley in to confer. A professional courtesy. She came at once.

"What is it, Dad? Have you found something?"

Doc Will couldn't help but notice her sudden and unprecedented personal interest in his skill as a doctor. He enjoyed her belated recognition. He shook his head and seated himself behind his desk in the study, careful to close the door to the lab and lock it. When he took on a patient, the patient was confined to the laboratory area for the duration, where a small, comfortable private room and bath were reserved for the exclusive use of the patient.

"It's a case, that's certain. Never seen anything like it."

"What have you found?"

"Nothing yet." He waved to a chair and she sat, attentive to his every word and nuance. "He's in good physical condition. In fact, excellent. But there are so many unanswered questions, I want to test him further."

"His psyche?"

He nodded. "Among other things. I'm going to have to keep him here for a few days, you understand."

She nodded. She had expected as much. "You might want to ask him about languages. He said he spoke a whole lot of languages, I forget how many."

"Mmmm," Doc said, making a note.

"Can I see him?"

"In a minute." He put down his pen and studied his daughter very carefully. "You know something about this man you're not telling me," he said, "and I want to know what it is."

She defied him. "I can't, Dad. I'm sorry. What I think



might not be true, might do more harm than good. That's why I need you to test him. You're the best man in your field, and I want to know what can be determined about him on a purely scientific basis. I want the facts."

"You want me to invent a few?"

"No, of course not."

"Audley. The man has no background whatsoever. No family, no origin, no education. Or at least he isn't owning up to any."

"When you ask him, what does he say?"

"Nothing! He either grins or tells he me he doesn't know what to say. I get the feeling he's a game player but I can't seem to trip him up in his game."

"Do you think he can answer the questions? Or won't?"

"He knows who he is. I think you know who he is, and for some unknown reason you want me to play some kind of hide and seek with you both."

"No, I don't, Dad. This is really very serious."

"Then why don't you tell me what you know? Or what you think you know and let me take it from there?"

"Because I really don't know anything! That's my point! I want you to tell me who he is. And tell him, too, if you can."

"Why? Because he doesn't know? Or because he won't tell me?"

"Whichever."

Doc Will stood up. The professional courtesy was over. He ran his hand through his hair in the familiar gesture and headed back toward the lab.

"You did say, though, that you wanted to keep him for a few days. Why? If you think he's a game player."

"I found a couple of irregularities I want to double-check."

"Such as?"

"I'll let you know once I've ascertained for certain. It's nothing serious." He was lying and she knew it. Already he had



found something he wasn't telling her. Maybe Lanon would.

"I want to see him now," she ordered. She would not be put off. "Alone."

Doc nodded and let her into the lab. He would give her five minutes and no more.

Lanon, dressed in white, blended in so well with the fixtures in the lab, Audley had to look for him. He was transfixed by a slide in a microscope. She approached him slowly, so as not to disrupt him.

"Audley!" he whispered. "This is incredible! Look at this."

"What is it?" She bent over to examine the slide.

"A hair! One of my hairs!"

"Big deal!" she replied, amused. "Everybody has hair. What's so special about yours?"

"It's incredible. It's just ... incredible."

She grinned at him. He was such an innocent. "Yes. It really is. But besides the fact that you have human hair, how's it going?"

"I don't really know. Doc Will mutters a lot. I can't always hear what he's saying."

"I would suggest that you ignore the muttering and play close attention to anything he might say out loud, or if he asks you specific questions, pay attention. You haven't mentioned anything to him about Zenton, have you?"

"No. Have you?"

"Of course not."

"What do you think he will find out?"

"I don't know. Something, perhaps, that will either prove or disprove what you've said about your origin."

"He won't find it in my body. I watched them make it. If they can create a hair, they can create a body."

"Yes, I suppose so" she acknowledged. "Did he do an EEG?"

"What's that?"

"I think it measures brain waves."



"I'm a human being, Audley! With a human being's brain waves!"

"Right. Who just arrived this week from another solar system."

"Another constellation, actually."

"Okay, neighbor. I'll tell you what. Dad wants to do some psychological tests on you but it might take several days. Will you cooperate?"

"I'll trust your judgment."

Doc Will entered the lab to hear Lanon's comment about trusting her judgment. No wonder she wanted to know if his brain was scrambled! "Have you seen Brad, Audley?" he asked rather brusquely.

She faced him with her eyebrows arched. "Yes, I have, Dad. Matter of fact, we had a nice long chat." There was nothing self-conscious in her attitude when she turned to Lanon. "You remember my telling you about Dr. Brad Spencer? He's here as my father's houseguest for a few days. You needn't worry, however, that he will know about your being here. Daddy is very conscientious about his doctor-patient relationships." She smiled at Lanon and then her father. "See you at dinner, Daddy."

Before the door closed behind her, she heard Lanon's voice hasten across the room and nestle in her ears. "Sleep well," he said. She was glad her father couldn't see her lop-sided grin, reminiscing: Did you sleep well with your clothes on? Did you sleep well without yours?

Doc Will didn't like it. He didn't like it at all.

MARTHA WAS IN HER GLORY. She loved to cook and to know that her food was appreciated. If there was one thing she missed it was having a big family to cook for, and although four hardly constituted 'big', it was more than one. The day's efforts preparing the meal were not wasted. From Martha's vantage point, the dinner was a total success.



Sylvia was the first to come down, precisely at six, and she looked as enticing as Martha's table. She had found a dress which had belonged to Mrs. Blackstone, a sheer black voile with massive blue, yellow and red flowers, the neck of which was cut deep into the cleavage, where Sylvia had inserted a large, silk, purple flower. It suited her taste and fit her perfectly.

To Sylvia's surprise, Audley came into the dining room on Brad's arm. They were both formally dressed and they looked the perfect pair. They behaved graciously with each other, but it didn't take Sylvia long to notice that the engagement ring was missing from Audley's finger. She could hardly wait to hear the details.

"I hope Dr. Blackstone won't mind my wearing this dress," she said with some concern.

Audley scowled. She hadn't remembered her mother being so voluptuous as to fill out that dress, or to wear such bold colors, but she said, "Why should he mind? It looks lovely on you."

Seating the women, Brad added, "And you know the Doctor, Sylvia. He has an eye for an attractive woman." He meant the compliment sincerely.

"Thank you, Brad." She blushed.

"I wonder what's keeping him," Audley remarked, then bit her tongue, regretting her words.

Sylvia reminded them, "He's with his new patient."

"Yes," Brad said. "I heard about that. Where did you find him, Audley?"

She tensed. "What leads you to believe it's a 'him'?"

He shrugged. "Just a hunch."

Sylvia, taking detailed mental notes of their interplay, said, "Oh, no, Brad. You've got it all wrong. He found her! Audley had some trouble on the road."

"No trouble," Audley objected. "Just a flat tire." Why couldn't they change the subject?

"I'm sorry to hear that," Brad said. "I guess I'll need to get a spare."



Sylvia wondered if he could use a spare mistress. He was really such a fine catch.

"What does he need to see the doctor about?" Brad pressed.

"He has amnesia," Audley said, again regretting saying anything.

Brad said, "Oh."

"So you see, Brad," Sylvia chattered, "he probably forgot that he has a wife and several children somewhere."

Audley kicked her friend squarely on the shin.

Sylvia gasped, more out of fury than pain. Brad stood up as Sylvia flew out of her chair, exclaiming, "Excuse me, Brad. I must have a pin sticking me somewhere. I wonder if you would help me, Audley?" She fled into the kitchen and a rather contrite Audley followed.

"What the hell are you attacking me for, Audley Claudine? I'll be a mass of black and blue marks!"

"I told you not to talk about Lanon! It's delicate enough between Brad and me right now without your making matters worse!"

"My, God, you are paranoid. Brad is used to my teasing. If I don't tease he'll be suspicious."

"Alright," she glowered, "but find another subject about which to make insipid jokes. Please try and remember my father's relationship to his patient."

"Okay, but where's your engagement ring? Are you and Brad an issue or aren't you?"

"We are an issue, but .... I don't know. I gave him back the ring. Come on. Now is not the time to discuss this."

Audley left Sylvia with her mouth open. Not only had Audley kicked her, but also she had been rude and snotty and she was throwing away a perfectly decent man over an infatuation with a weirdo. None of it sat well with Sylvia. Not at all.

When Sylvia returned, Brad was most solicitous. He lingered over her when he helped her with her chair. "I hope your



dress will treat you kindlier, Sylvia."

"I hope so, too, Brad. Thank you." What a fine fellow. Audley wasn't making any sense at all. She pouted until Doc Will joined them, rolling down his shirt sleeves from his work in the lab. He was in a jovial mood and Sylvia, for one, would take advantage of it.

"Well!" Doc bellowed as he settled in at the fine table where everything and everyone looked so festive. "Isn't this an occasion!" He surveyed the guests and the spread with infinite satisfaction. Brad poured the wine and Doc Will proposed a toast: "To this family gathering." Since no one but Doc was feeling familial, they drank the wine and gave themselves over to the roast leg of lamb.

Doc Will carved and served and lavished compliments on Sylvia when she helped him to recognize Sarah's dress. "I know Mrs. Blackstone would have wanted you to wear it, my dear," adding, "she would have liked you, I think."

"Really, Doctor?" Sylvia purred under his attentions. "Why do you think so?"

"You and she are very much alike."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Very much."

"In what way?" She wondered for the umpteenth time what kind of lover Doc Will had once been.

"Well, you know what George Bernard Shaw said."

"No, what did he say?" she asked, giggling.

"He said that a good woman was a lady in the parlor, a cook in the kitchen, and a ..." he mouthed the word 'whore' ... "in bed." Doc, of course, knew of Sylvia's seven-year celibacy. He also knew she enjoyed pretending she hadn't been.

Sylvia howled, enjoying the interplay. "Oh, Doctor, you're such a card!"

Audley was uncommonly quiet. She thought Sylvia was behaving like a real tart.

"How's it going with your new patient, Doc?" Brad asked



point blank.

Doc looked curiously at Audley who threw the blame on Sylvia.

Sylvia rallied. "Why are you glaring at me like that, Audley?"

Brad studied the overhead light fixture.

"I know, Doc," Sylvia went on indignantly, "that your work is confidential and that your work, Brad, is confidential and, for God's sake, I know that my husband's work is confidential, but I do want to say that with all this confidentiality, a woman has got to learn to think on her feet if she ever expects to know what's going on!"

"What, exactly, IS going on, Sylvia?" Brad asked.

She looked hard at Audley, daring her, then answered, "Nothing, Brad. Absolutely nothing."

"That's not quite true, Sylvia," Audley corrected, speaking now to her father. "Brad and I have set a date for our wedding."

Sylvia blinked and Doc Will beamed.

"That's wonderful news, son!" he said to Brad. "Let's have a toast." Doc poured the wine and rang for Martha to bring another bottle. After they drank he asked, "When?"

"In six months," she volunteered.

Brad was dumbfounded by her announcement. He had thought she said "if" in six months. Evidently she had changed her mind. Then why didn't she say so in the first place? Why the time lapse if she meant to do it in the end anyway? Something was fishy. Why the theatrics?

"Oh, that is happy news!" Doc exclaimed. "Maybe I'll live to see my grandson after all." He beamed at Audley, "I'm very pleased with your decision, my dear."

"Yes, of course." Of course he would be. Brad was his choice, not hers. But she had to do something to get them all off being suspicious about her and Lanon.

Her tactic didn't work. Besides alienating Sylvia, Brad was irked. He had believed they were being honest with each other but



now he felt she was deceiving him, using him, and toying with his emotions. And he distinctly felt that Doc Will's new patient had something to do with it. He suspected she wanted to have an affair with him. One last fling before she settled down to, he gathered, a dull and inevitable routine of married life. Well, two could play that game.

Doc Will virtually ignored the women in his elation. "Well, son," he said, "what are your plans? Are you going to teach?"

"No," Brad offered. "I think I'll go ahead with the assignment."

"What assignment, Brad?" Sylvia asked, feeling a special camaraderie with him.

"You might as well know."

"Yes, I might as well."

"I've been given a special assignment by the President to determine the cause of the August 14th black-out."

"The President of the United States?"

He nodded. "That's right."

"Oh, Brad! I'm impressed!"

She did have a way of making a man feel good, but he demurred. "It might sound impressive, Sylvia, but it's a political dead end street."

"I don't understand."

"The possibility of my coming up with the reason for the power failure is incredibly slim. I have absolutely no experience in that field."

"Then why did they give you the job, for Heaven's sake? They must have faith in you, that you can do it, Brad. I certainly do."

"You do?" Any support was welcome at this point and Sylvia obviously intended to do just that.

It was unforgivable of Audley to treat him so shabbily. "Of course I do! You're intelligent and capable. And you have a tremendous background to draw upon. Your work at Cape Kennedy,



your family ties, the IOF, us."

"Us?" He warmed to Sylvia's emotional support and it didn't go unnoticed by the good doctor.

"Of course! Dr. Blackstone, Audley and me."

"No," Audley interrupted. "I'm afraid I can't be of much help here. I'm already backlogged on work assignments."

Sylvia fairly snarled at her. "Well, anyway, Doc and I can help."

Doc Will, master of Mindal Sciences, observed Sylvia's attitude with fear and fascination. She was giving herself to the man. Not playfully, as she did with him, but in earnest. Not sexually, not yet, but he noted with dismay that it was his future son-in-law towards whom she was directing her gestalt.

"I have a suggestion, Brad," Audley put in. "You spoke to me a while ago about being your Investigative Assistant. Why don't you consider Sylvia for the job? As you can see, she can be very persuasive."

Sylvia sat bolt upright. Not only was Audley throwing him away, she was throwing him in her direction!

Brad seriously considered the idea. Obviously Audley was going to use this six months for her own ends. Why shouldn't he as well? Sylvia was bright, rich, asexual, and she might provide him with some pleasant female company. "Is that something that might interest you, Sylvia?"

Doc, observing the interplays, was aghast. He could see it all. What now would Sylvia say and how far would she go?

Sylvia mused. A job! Literally dropped in her lap. If anyone had suggested such a thing as recently as a week ago, she would have been insulted, but the reflective days alone in Audley's apartment had made her think about a lot of things. She realized she envied Audley's independence and involvements, but Audley was wrong to discard Brad for a total stranger. Obviously, Brad would need some looking after until Audley came to her senses and Sylvia was the one to do it. She would be loyal to Brad even if Audley wouldn't. "I'd be



very interested, Brad."

Doc Will recognized Sylvia's psycho-dynamics. The die was cast. He would not interfere with the out-workings of their decisions, but his good humor had been put on hold.

"You won't even have to pay me."

"Whoops! Wait a minute, young woman," Doc interjected. He might not interfere with their decisions, but on her path to emotional recovery, Sylvia needed to maintain her self-respect. "You must never let your services go financially unrewarded. It matters little whether you need the money or not. Brad needs to pay you. Whether he wants to or not is another matter, but you get paid for a job well done and that's the way that game is played."

Brad nodded.

"Alright then," she shrugged. "Pay me whatever the going rate is for an Investigative Assistant to a Presidential Assignment." She extended her hand to Brad and he shook it. His hand was ice cold. "When do I start?"

"What about Roger?" Brad asked.

Doc Will nearly spilled his wine. Mindal Science could be so raw sometimes. It was like seeing people with their clothes off or their souls exposed.

"What about him? Roger doesn't care what I do as long as it doesn't interfere with his career."

Doc Will sighed on that one. People must care, he thought. Not about careers and appearances, but about each other's feelings. This was a primary factor in good mental health.

"Okay. You're hired. You start at once."

"Good," she said, getting right down to business. "I'll tell you what I'd like to investigate first."

It was Brad's turn to be impressed. He approved of her enthusiasm and her readiness.

"It's a little article I saw in my father's newspaper the morning after the black-out. It said: 'Private citizen spots UFO at exact time of black-out' and it was in the vicinity of Central



Pennsylvania."

Doc Will was the only one who saw Audley turn pale.

Brad's mind went at once to the "For Your Eyes Only" communique and the Air Force's comments. Sylvia had given him more support than he could have hoped. It was obvious which direction he must take. He poured more wine.

"Audley, dear," Doc interjected. "You look tired." Had she seen the interplay between Brad and Sylvia? He hoped so. It would do her good to be a little jealous.

"Yes, Dad. I am tired. It must be the let-down from the trip and all."

"And the excitement of your engagement, certainly," he added. "Why don't you go up and rest? I'll send Martha up with some brandy."

She helped herself away from the table. "That won't be necessary, Dad, but thank you."

Audley was glad to be away from the table, away from the charade of Brad and Sylvia's drivel. Why couldn't Sylvia just keep her mouth shut? Lanon *did* materialize in Central Pennsylvania. Maybe he *did* cause the blackout. If so, the less said about UFO's the better. Sylvia was not a stupid woman. People liked to think she was, but they were mistaken. Sylvia was shrewd. When she set out to do something, she did it. She had connections and money and unbelievable powers of persuasion. It would not do to discourage her from her investigations, for such would only spur her on.

Sadly, Audley didn't dare confide in her friend. Lanon's secret was sacred. She didn't have to guess what might happen to him if he were found out. He would be taken from her. He might get hurt. If only she could take him away somewhere and hide him. Keep him to herself. But Lanon would not allow that. He was here with a mission; he had his work to do. Witness how he had barged into Penn State Reserve! No, the best thing was to have him tested. Find out the truth of the matter and go from there. Maybe, please God, he just had a screw loose.



But each day, each moment, his reality grew in her and she became more and more assured that he was telling her the truth. It was preposterous, yes, but she was part of it! She had to believe it! His safety depended on her. And, perhaps soon her father would know. She had to trust that he, too, would recognize the significance of this stranger.

It had nothing to do with her relationship with Brad. Lanon was simply more important, that's all.

IN SPITE OF THE RAPPORT Sylvia and Brad had established at dinner last evening, both were unusually quiet at breakfast. They were each aware that something had changed. Neither was sure what it was that was different, but they both felt it had to do with Audley. Her behavior was disturbing.

They had been thrown together as conspirators almost against their wills. And now, without Audley as an intermediary to instill them with fury or gaiety, they were left to their own devices. A new process of getting-to-know-you was called for, but neither was sure on what level that should be. The subconscious physical attraction could not surface, for neither Sylvia nor Brad would know how to deal with it. For Brad, Sylvia had to be reappraised. She was emerging as her own entity, no longer just Roger's wife or Audley's friend.

"You're awfully quiet this morning, Sylvia. Are you having second thoughts about your new job?"

"Oh, no, Brad," she responded quickly. "I just have a lot on my mind."

It had been much easier for him to think of her as a nice-looking woman. Now he had to think of her as having intelligence. Assuming she did, he said, "A penny for your thoughts."

She laughed. "Not worth it." She had been stewing about Audley's throwing Brad away. She had been mulling over Lanon's significance in Audley's life, then in her own -- the peculiar 'accident' of his stumbling onto the subject of Jennifer. And she had been



rather frightened by the dream she had last night. She hadn't thought of Brad sexually until that terribly vivid dream. It all conspired to leave her feeling very unsure about herself. "In the cold light of day," she said, "that UFO idea sounds a bit far-fetched, doesn't it?"

"Any time of the day or night it sounds far-fetched, but what choice do either of us have?"

She felt encouraged. "You find some merit to it then?"

"Oh, yes, Sylvia. I hate to admit it, but I do."

She felt smug about introducing the idea. Obviously investigative reporting was just following your hunches. She smiled, asking, "What are your plans now? Are you going back to Sam?"

"Yes," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, Sam is the only reliable thing left. I won't believe that Sam let me down. The way I figure it, I let Sam down by not giving her all the information she needed."

"So what information will you give her now?"

"UFO baloney."

"My God, Brad. That could take years!"

"It could, but maybe your private citizen can give me the information I need."

"Maybe I could get an interview," she suggested.

He shrugged. "If you feel like it." A moment later he said, "You met that fellow, Sylvia. Doc's new patient. What's he like?"

Oh, she didn't want this. But what could she do? Maybe the best approach was an honest one. She settled into it. "Well, first off," she sighed, "he's very attractive." Might as well get that settled. "Physically, that is. I won't lie, but there is something peculiar about him."

He seemed piqued. "What?"

She crossed her legs, shifting slightly, and was pleased to see Brad's eyes drawn to her. She shrugged. "I don't know." She sipped her coffee. Brad leaned in, pursuing the subject. "Women's intuition?" She shook her head slightly. "There's more to him than



meets the eye."

"Was he pursuing her? I mean, was he on the make? Is he a con man?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. I'm sure he's a nice guy, and as Audley said, he helped her out quite a bit during that awful experience she had. Changed her flat tire, helped her drive. It would be only natural that she would appreciate him."

"You didn't like him, though, and that interests me."

She thought about Lanon's probing questions about Jennifer and how the subject had been cropping up more and more lately. Maybe it was time something was done about it. She calculated that Brad knew about her miserable situation. She couldn't expect Audley not to have told him.

"I don't know how to put this, Brad. He seemed to have ESP or something. Some sixth sense that honed in on my ... on my peculiar situation with ... Jennifer. Audley told you about her, didn't she?"

Brad sat on the edge of his seat. "She did, but you don't think Audley told him about it, do you?"

"No, I'm sure she didn't. He just seemed to know. Like he was clairvoyant or something, and I wasn't prepared to deal with some of the questions he asked."

"Like what?"

"Like why was she alive. Why wasn't she 'eliminated'."

"Eliminated?!?" Brad reacted angrily. "What a crude, god-awful thing to say!"

She was quick to clarify. "Oh, but he didn't say that to me. To me he was very polite, really. Very kind. But I overheard Audley talking to him about it. She scolded him for asking personal questions and he told her that people like Jennifer should be eliminated. When Audley told him our laws prevented it, he said the laws should be changed."

"It's hardly any of his business."

"That's what I thought, too, but in all fairness, he was just



thinking about me, being concerned about my problem. And he did make sense, Brad, saying the laws ought to be changed, and Roger being in law and politics and all." She chuckled. "It was a bit of an attack on Roger's credibility."

Brad didn't know what to say. He didn't know Roger Watergate very well, but at any rate, he couldn't find serious fault with the man Lanon Zenton. "And Audley thought he might have some kind of amnesia?"

"That's what she said. Said she wanted her father to help him. As a favor for what he'd done for her."

"I see," he said, but wondered, Then why did she want to postpone the engagement? He frowned, went over to the window, rested his eyes on the surf.

Sylvia applied one of her calculated verbal efforts to ease Brad out of his slump. "I'm organizing a rather large party, Brad." This was in keeping. Brad would expect it of her. "I put on this party every year to raise funds for the clinic in Colorado. I was wondering if you might be able to come?"

"When is it?" he asked. What difference did it make?

"Next week-end. The whole week-end." She joined him at the window.

He grinned at her. "Hell of a party you throw."

"I get a better turn-out that way. More people come in from the East Coast if they have an excuse to stay for a few days rather than just one evening. Some of the guests stay at the house and some others stay at the downtown hotels. I'd like for you to be my guest." She almost batted her eyelashes. "Dr. Blackstone always attends."

"We'll see," he said, looking away. Was he mistaken or was Sylvia giving off deliberately seductive body language?

"And Oscar, of course." Another chaperone.

"God, yes." Brad said. "I keep trying to forget him, but it seems he's become a permanent fixture in my life."

"A temporary permanent fixture, I'm sure. What, exactly,"



she asked, "is his capacity?"

"Oscar's? He's my Aide. A high-ranking gopher."

"Can I use him? As your Investigative Assistant, am I entitled to use the services of your Aide?"

"Oh, you bet. Anything at all you need, just let me know." He liked the fact that she took her job seriously. More seriously, in fact, that he took it. "What do you have in mind?"

"I thought I'd go into Central Pennsylvania, after the party, to interview that person who saw the UFO and I might need some help. I don't think I'm up to prowling around the countryside alone, looking for it. I don't know if I can even handle a four-wheel drive."

"What do you need one of those things for?"

"To investigate the area where the UFO was supposed to have been sited!" she insisted.

"But what would you look for?" He couldn't picture Sylvia on such an excursion.

"Soil samples of the area. Maybe signs of a crash. Trees damaged. I'll know it when I see it, I guess. But, anyway, thank you for letting me use Oscar. He can arrange to get us a jeep or whatever?"

"Sure. You bet. Anything you need."

She wished he would quit saying that. Some day she might have to let him know what it was she really needed.

Brad waved Oscar up from the driveway and introduced him to his Investigative Assistant Sylvia Watergate and in this official capacity Brad informed Oscar they would all be working together. As they exchanged phone numbers and addresses where they might be reached, Sylvia, as a professional courtesy, gave Oscar her itinerary:

Next weekend there was the party, to which they were both invited, and after that she and Oscar would go into Central Pennsylvania where she would talk to the private citizen and scout out the area for signs of a UFO landing. Then they would return their information to Brad at his apartment in Manhattan as there was



no reason for Brad to stay on at the IOF Headquarters since the IOF was virtually dead until the mystery of the blackout could be solved. Brad could get Sam moved from Headquarters and set up in his Manhattan penthouse apartment.

That arranged, Brad offered, "We'll drive you back to Audley's so you can get your car."

"How thoughtful of you, Brad. Give me a minute?"

The men waited for her in the driveway. On the way to the government car, Oscar noted, "You don't waste any time, do you, Dr. Spencer?"

"What do you mean?" It occurred to him that he didn't know a thing about his Aide.

"She's a real beauty. Any more where she came from?"

Not knowing whether to be angry at Oscar's impertinence or grateful for enabling him to save face, Brad opted for the latter and, as Sylvia came bouncing out to join him, he slapped his Aide on the back. "Come on, old man," he said. "Work now, play later."

Through the rear-view mirror of the Maxum, Brad watched Oscar watching him. No longer was Oscar relegated to the Chevy. The sleek government car tailed Brad and Sylvia with expertise. No longer was Oscar the IOF's familiar and affable messenger boy. The uniformed young man was 'on the way up' and Brad realized that Oscar could work for or against him, depending on how he was treated. If he didn't play his cards right, Brad concluded, Oscar could be dangerous.

AUDLEY WOKE LATE, having slept for over twelve hours. When Martha took coffee up to her, she learned that Sylvia and Brad had each gotten up early, breakfasted together, and left at the same time. "Where did they go?" she asked, accepting the awful feeling in the pit of her stomach as jealousy.

"I don't know the details, dear. Sylvia will probably go home, and Brad said something about being tied up for the next six months."



"Damn!" With them away, she couldn't keep an eye on them. Maybe it was better this way. She should be away from them both for awhile, since Sylvia's investigating would make her a nervous wreck and Brad would make her feel guilty. She was determined to consider the whole thing a fabrication, designed to enliven dinner table conversation: Sylvia was on her way back to her satin sheets in Beverly Hills and Brad was returning to Sam and the IOF. At least, she fervently hoped so.

She found Doc Will in his study.

Startled, she asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I live here, daughter. I'm working." He turned off a video machine.

"Why aren't you with Lanon?"

The doctor remained composed and controlled so she could not detect from his professional demeanor that he resented her intrusion. He closed the door on the video machine and locked it. He then went to his desk and absently located the key to the file room, deposited notes therein, and returned to the desk where he sat and removed his glasses, spending a long moment massaging his eyes. All this while Audley attitudinally demanded an answer. When he finally looked up, he acted surprised to see her still standing there.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, what? The patient is being monitored. I need to see his normal behavior patterns before I know what tests I'll need to administer."

"You will find out," she averred. "You will find out who he is."

"I'll try, Audley. That's all I can guarantee."

His detachment unnerved her. "He wants your help. Doesn't he?"

"I doubt it. He's physically healthy and he's bright, but he doesn't seem to be bothered by his 'amnesia'."

"Well, you've got to help him!"

Doc Will studied her. "Help him what? He isn't sick!"



"But he can't remember his past." she insisted. "He doesn't know who he is!"

Dr. Blackstone eyed his client. "He will remember when he chooses to. No one can force him. I can't just give him a pill and Presto!" He snapped his fingers. "This kind of thing takes time, Audley. You seem to think I can 'cure' him before lunch!"

"You can do it, Dad. You're the best in your field." He was astounded by her intensity. "I'll pay you," she added.

She was behaving as if she were obsessed! "Why is it so important to you?" he asked, realizing with horror that she was in love with him! He scowled and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Me, too, please?"

She was in love, he concluded, and didn't even know it. "He could just be hiding a shady past!" he suggested in a father-daughter tone of voice. "Besides, you and Brad are scheduled to be married in a matter of months."

"I know." She sat at the bar, stirring cream and sugar into her cup. "I was going to call it off altogether, but.... He was so sweet, Dad. He was genuinely tender."

"Of course he was! Brad loves you." He stifled his anxieties about Brad and Sylvia.

"He hasn't shown it lately."

"He's been under a lot of strain, my dear. The IOF has been working him very hard on this Operation Onyx."

"Yeah, yeah. I know, I know."

"For all your talk about liberation, Audley, I don't think you realize what it means to be devoted to a career, to be committed to a cause that's bigger than yourself."

"Mfffff."

"Culturally, you are a submissive, subservient female wanting to be coddled and protected by a male. And there is there's nothing wrong with that! -- provided you realize that *this* male ... Brad, your fiancé ... is devoted to his career, without which he would not be able to coddle and protect you the way you want to be coddled and



protected."

"I agree. Lecture 1,982 recorded."

"What? No smart retort?"

"I'm inclined to agree with you." To emphasize, she announced, "I'm quitting my job."

"You're quitting your job?"

"Yes."

"You're being ridiculous!"

"I don't think so. Weinberger rubs me the wrong way."

"So what?"

"So I don't feel like being a prostitute."

"I don't get it. I thought you loved your job!"

"I love being a reporter. I like the independence of it. I like to see my name in print, and I like the pay, but the Silent Majority is not my cup of tea."

"You don't say. What is?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll write a book."

"Audley, be serious!" He poured them both a second cup of coffee, glad for the father-daughter talk and glad to be off the subject of her infatuation. "You haven't got anything to write a book about. Secondly, how do you propose to support yourself while you get this unlikely book written?"

"Unemployment?"

Doc Will made a rude sound. "Hardly sufficient to keep you in panty hose, my dear. No, I know you better than that."

"Well, I only have six months to worry about it, haven't I? Then Brad and I will be married and he can coddle and protect me."

"Six months can be a long time without funds."

"As long as I can be near Lanon Zenton, six months is hardly enough," she said, deliberately provoked him. "Why don't you approve? You said yourself there's nothing wrong with him!"

"You're acting like a two-timing harlot, Audley! You think I don't recognize that look in your eye? You can't wait for me to finish the tests so that you can jump into the sack with him. I just hope



you have the decency to wait until he's out from under my roof!" His face turned purple. "I've made my share of mistakes in this life, but the worst one was with you. I should have let Martha raise you. You should have been reared by a disciplinarian, not by a behaviorist. Your behavior is ...." He sought his most vile curse. "... primitive!"

She snuggled up to him. "Grrrrr," she purred, and as usual her father succumbed to her charms. "I assure you, Dad, my relationship with Mr. Zenton is as pure as the driven snow. We have never so much as exchanged a kiss."

He held her back and scrutinized her. "I would like to believe that."

"Believe it. Mr. Zenton is a virgin."

"Highly unlikely, my dear, highly unlikely." He freed himself from her embrace. "Now you really must excuse me. I have a patient that needs monitoring."

DOC WILL MONITORED his patient for 24 hours. The room in which Lanon was confined recorded his pulse rate and temperature by the minute. Without his being aware, his emotional reactions were photographed, dissected and analyzed. His every move was studied.

It was amazing and noteworthy to the good doctor that anyone could be so easily entertained. The patient was exceptionally sensitive to stimuli. He seemed to find the mere act of elimination a wonderful experience. He studied a brussel sprout for a full minute before spending five minutes ingesting it. The patient manifested infinite patience. It didn't seem to bother him that he was confined a full day and night without human contact. He paid little attention to the mirror that was in the room and only after 17 hours of isolation did he take an interest in the dials, conspicuously placed to be used.

Once Lanon learned the significance of the dials, the music buttons did little to hold his attention but, after finding the sound effects dial, he listened to Wind in the Trees for an hour and a half. Doc Will was tempted during this time to interrupt the monitoring



because the patient's electro-chemical levels dropped to a shocking low. Obviously, the patient had gone into some sort of delta meditation.

The doctor was relieved when the patient sat up and began again to examine the dials. He was clogged as listening to the all-talk program, the country-western channel, a rock and roll station and classical music for exactly four minutes each.

Lanon appeared to have never seen a television set before. He studied the visual device for a long time before realizing it was intended to communicate and entertain. He turned the channel often and at odd times, seeming to enjoy the commercials more than the feature. He paid particularly close attention to a toothpaste commercial and the only word the patient uttered aloud during the 24-hour period was 'fluoride'.

In all, the patient slept for two hours. At the end of the 24 hours, Doc Will unlocked the door and Lanon said, "Good morning."

Lanon liked Dr. Blackstone who had a large, bright Nucleus. And Doc Will enjoyed his patient, who did not smoke and did not object to the food that was brought to him. The patient was a happy man with a cheerful attitude.

The 24-hour monitoring concluded, the real testing now began. The first series of tests were of a physical nature and, as was his custom, Dr. Blackstone would have called in a medical examiner but Lanon flatly refused to have any contact with anyone but Doc Will. Doc explained to him that a medical doctor was better suited to administer the medical exams but, yes, he had to admit that he did have the necessary equipment and, yes, he knew how, so in the end Lanon won and Doc Will, having no alternative, began.

It was all very interesting to Lanon, watching the mechanical devices determine his blood type, his heart rate, his brain waves, his chemical composition, the intricacies of the human body and the myriad peculiarities of the flesh.

The doctor didn't overtly verbalize his findings but he mumbled constantly; Lanon soon learned to decipher the mumblings



and learned that his teeth and bones were disarmingly perfect, his vision was a healthy 20/20, he had no impurities nor infections, his senses were somewhat exceptional.

All x-rays were clear. He had no broken bones, no fractures, sprains or bruises, no indication whatsoever of having been in an accident, much less having been 'thrown free' of an airplane that had crashed and disintegrated. His urinalysis was clear of drugs but showed minuscule traces of alcohol, which, if he had been around Audley, was understandable.

In short, Lanon Zenton was an exceptional physical specimen of manhood with one exception. The exception lay in the Priority Chemistry-Glucose: Random Examination. In the Electrolyte portion, Sodium was normal at 140; CO<sub>2</sub> was normal at 29; Chloride was normal at 100; but Potassium, which normally should range between 3.5 and 5.0, registered 42.3! The doctor ran the Priority Chemistry-Glucose: Random Exam a second time and then a third time, unable to accept the results. Perhaps the equipment was faulty. But everything else on the chemistry test was fine! Calcium: 4.8; Phosphorous: 1.9; Magnesium: 2.2. All the entries were within the range of normalcy except Potassium. He ran the test a fourth time. 42.3.

Yet, through it all, Doc Will remained the scientist, taking notes and applying new gadgets, giving the EEG, the EKG, the EMG, the x-rays, reserving his comments until the entire barrage of medical testing was completed and the results were all in.

Another peculiarity arose when Doc Will, motivated by his paternal interests, thought to ascertain the man's sperm count and Lanon would not cooperate. The patient endured all the other tests having to do with his sexual aspects - he had no communicable diseases - but he seemed to have no experience with masturbation. "Why would anyone want to do that?" he asked, when the doctor asked him to ejaculate into a jar.

"So I can determine your sperm count."

"What does that have to do with my identity?"



Doc Will flushed bright red, admitting "It has to do with the identity of your children!"

"You needn't worry that I will father any children, doctor. I have no sperm count."

"How do you know that?"

"I just know. I am not authorized to reproduce."

Doc Will asked, "Not authorized by whom?"

But Lanon replied, "I am not at liberty to say," almost apologetically.

Doc Will knew that Lanon had voluntarily divulged something very personal about himself. He let it go. When the physical testing was completed, with the exception of the Potassium count, which test must be repeated at another later time, and the sperm count, which he would accept at face value, Doc Will folded his coat and put it away with quiet resolution.

"I'm not a medical doctor by inclination," he said, his first conversational words in two days. "I find it hard work." He tapped himself on the temple. "My forte is here!"

Lanon observed the doctor sterilize and put away his equipment and responded, "Your reputation precedes you, Dr. Blackstone."

Doc Will accepted the compliment but filed the inconsistency as a strange statement for an amnesiac to make, unless Audley's testimony counted for "reputation."

The psychiatric exams on this patient, scheduled to begin the following day, promised to be interesting, for when the testing changed from physical to mindal, Doc Will's attitude changed also. He would open himself fully to the patient's mental circuits and peer as deeply into the mind of the patient as the patient would allow. Compared to any of Doc Will's previous patients, Lanon Zenton had already taken on new and unprecedented dimensions.



## 6

## NEW DIMENSIONS

*Dierdre & Sarah*

Unknown to Audley, the laws of the universe were at work. The gods don't arbitrarily send entities into foreign realms and desert them. There is a vast network of personalities and coordinated activities that assure the safekeeping of the sojourner, and 0802-LZ was no exception.

The Warden of Penn State Reserve read the Visitor Log from the night of August 14th and the day following the black-out, noting Audley Blackstone's request for admittance as well as the name of her traveling companion, Lanon Zenton. He forwarded this information, along with all the other pertinent information on PSR's operations, to Jessie Brothers at JCP Headquarters.

Jessie was not surprised when he read in the report that Audley Blackstone, daughter of his own member-at-large Wilhelm Blackstone, had been in the blackout. He knew she was an adventurous woman. The fact that she stopped at PSR was no surprise, either, for in spite of her known prejudices against the JCP, she'd had no choice; she needed fuel. But the name Lanon Zenton meant nothing to him.



Across the globe in Guadix, Spain, however, Jessie's mentor, Professor Alexius Vessey, knew all about this entity. He knew 0802-LZ was coming, how he got here and when, what his mission was, who he was with at that very moment, and what could be expected to happen next. He knew about these things in the same manner he had come to know about everything meaningful in his life for well over the past forty years - from his communications with the Supernals. He was their Taction, their contact personality.

In his workroom, built apart from the house in which he lived with his wife, Dierdre, and their two small children, Professor Alexius Vessey stilled his body, cleared his mental mechanism, and prepared to listen to the familiar voice who brought him messages from another world.

"Greetings. We bring you good news. 0802-LZ has incarnated."

Alexius absorbed this news with supreme satisfaction. He had looked forward to this message for a very long time.

"The materialization took place in a remote, wooded area in the State of Pennsylvania, in the east central portion of the United States of America," the voice continued. "The process was successful by all standards. Before dawn on the night of August 14, 0802-LZ was a fully functioning human being of your realm."

Although his body was now frail and confined to a wheelchair, Professor Vessey's mind was still sharp and his will was strong. When he heard the news of 0802-LZ's arrival, he determined to live a little while longer; at least long enough to see the Zoid mission accomplished.

"You will hear of a power failure in the eastern portion of the United States," the Messenger reported. "This energy drain was not brought about by the materialization process. Kindly reassure the entity that he was not responsible for the power failure."

What now, Alexius silently wondered. What next?

The communication continued: "The entity has made contact with a female of the realm, Audley Blackstone, who is the



daughter of your JCP peer and member-at-large, Dr. Wilhelm Blackstone. She will take the entity to Penn State Reserve where he will record his safe arrival.

"I will ask you to adhere to the same restrictions as those placed upon *our* communications, and do not discuss 0802-LZ or his interests on any electronic media. Even so, please admonish Jessie Brothers to monitor the entity's whereabouts."

How can I admonish Jessie to do anything if I can't talk to him openly on the visophone? Alexius wondered. Maybe the woman is a liaison. Can she be trusted?

"To answer your question, yes. The woman has been thus far approved. Whether or not she will remain active in our mission will depend on her. Whether or not she will be informed of the nature of the mission will depend upon the entity. We cannot interfere with free will."

"Fine," Alexius mused, "but Doc Will is probably the contact we need, not his daughter."

The voice went on, "It is our conjecture that the woman will lead him to her father, Dr. Blackstone, who is also approved, but again, it remains to be seen whether or not 0802-LZ will take the doctor into his confidence. Remain alert for further communications. Any questions?"

The Taction had no questions.

THOSE SAME COSMIC OVERSEERS work in the realms of the minds of mortals. Although they do not interfere with mortal free will decisions, they do act upon the decisions that mortals have made.

The day after Lanon was admitted into her father's laboratory, Audley's mind was busy trying to decide what to do next. Brad and Sylvia were out of the way. No doubt she had handled that situation poorly, but at least now she was free to consider her options. As for the coleus, the hell with it; maybe it would rain.

She knew Lanon was safe, reasonably safe with her father. If



Doc Will should happen to stumble upon Lanon's origins, Lanon would have to deal with that. The question was: What should *she* do now? Her gut told her that her next move was to adjust her attitude about the JCP. Lanon's reason for being here had to do with Life Experimental Stations, of that she was certain, and whether she liked it or not, Penn State Reserve was a JCP Life Experimental Station, one of many.

She tried to remember why it was that she had such an aversion to the JCP -- the Jural Colony Project. She knew it was a deep-seated prejudice, one that went back a long way in her mind, back to when her mother died. Audley had gone from being an only child, doted upon by both parents, to nearly a virtual orphan in a matter of days, for no sooner was her mother laid to rest than her father immersed himself in the establishment of the PSR. Dr. Blackstone had always been dedicated to his work so his behavior was not out of the ordinary, but for the suddenly motherless child, his absence spelled yet more abandonment and insecurity. Alas, Doc Will was too grief-stricken at the time to notice.

He did what he could. He explained to Audley's four-year-old consciousness that Mama had gone to be with God in heaven. When Papa left too, right after that, becoming absorbed in the Jural Colony Project, her child mind reasoned that since God had taken Mama to Heaven and the JCP had taken Papa, God and the JCP would be her life-long enemies.

The grown-up Audley knew she couldn't hold this childish theory over their heads forever. As an adult, she accepted the fact that her father's work was vital to him. He loved mindal science, he was good at it, and he was entitled to find fulfillment in it. If the JCP appreciated his abilities and utilized his services, so much the better.

But there was another prejudice from the early days of the JCP that she had to rethink. This one was from her teenage years, when Doc Will had tried to impress her with JCP values. He went on and on about the maturity of the Zooids, the morality of their ideals, and the responsibility that such a way of life entailed. She



remembered these concepts as being crammed down her throat when she wasn't yet interested in Values, Morality, Maturity and Responsibility. In her defiance, she had turned her back on all that the JCP represented. Forever! It had been an immature decision, yes, but she had made it, and through these many years it was this she lived by.

But now this man from Zenton was propelling her to review her thinking and change her attitudes. Were he a lesser man, were he a Bradford Spencer, she would have told him to go fly a kite, but with Lanon she couldn't do that. Well, she could, but she found herself committing herself to him. Why, specifically, she couldn't say, but she wasn't about to turn her back on him. To all intents and purposes she now had something of value, a direction for her maturity, a reason for morality and an interest in responsibility. If Lanon Zenton did nothing else while on this planet, at least he did that for Audley Blackstone.

She knew she had to do something, something that pertained to destiny, but what was it? She wasn't a seer, a religious leader, a great war general. She was a reporter. This was what she was trained for -- investigative reporting. "So investigate, Audley," she instructed herself. "Take notes."

Investigate what? Investigate the JCP. If Lanon was interested, she obviously should take an interest in it, too. Would the JCP be receptive to a man from outer space nosing into their affairs? If Lanon was interested in Life Experimental Stations and he had come all the way from another constellation to get involved, it reasoned that the JCP might be interested in him, too, but they would have to deal with her first.

God, she mused, what could she remember about the JCP besides that creepy prison? They called themselves Zooids, they wore funny clothes and lived like ants colonies they called Life Experimental Stations. Jessie Cain Brothers was their leader. There was a Board of Directors.

Somehow she had the idea that Jessie was young and that



somebody had to have worked on it before him, but who? How did it start? Christ, she couldn't remember a thing! She lit a cigarette and sleuthed. Jessie's father must have had something to do with it, she reasoned, and she seemed to remember he had an uncle, a Senator, who was involved somehow. But even before that. Whose idea was it in the first place? Wasn't it Jessie's college professor? Didn't she remember hearing Doc say the idea originated in the student-teacher relationship between Jessie and his Professor when Jessie was attending the University of Where? The University of Knossos. Wasn't Knossos in Greece? Yes. That must be it. She remembered her father saying, "The seed has been planted." What seed?

What Professor? Who was he? Is he still alive?

Jessie would know, of course, but could she trust him? Doc Will would remember the professor's name, but she didn't want to bother him again. When he was with a patient, Dr. Blackstone didn't like to be disturbed. She knew that he would have Lanon holed up in the lab for nearly a week and she could do a lot of investigating in that time. She crumpled up an empty pack of Springs and opened another, noticing without alarm the alarming condition of the ashtray.

It was Monday. Jessie would be in his office. Would he have time to talk to her? Even if he had time, would he? She wasn't anybody important. Her father was a member-at-large of the JCP, but so what? She was only a notoriously wilful snip of a rookie reporter who probably was, to them, more a part of the problem than the solution.

Well, she concluded, it's time to get Audley out of the picture. It was necessary that she contact Jessie because he could help her help Lanon, and helping Lanon was more important than wondering about her status in the eyes of the JCP. Yes, Lanon *could* do it by himself, in his own good time, but she felt she had a duty to perform on his behalf. After all, she was the one who had coerced him into spending a week of his valuable time locked in a laboratory environment, subjected to a barrage of tests to prove or disprove who



he said he was in the first place. Maybe she could make waves for him in his absence.

She lit another Spring and reached for the phone. As she waited for the call to go through, her mind froze time and again. How would Jessie react to her call? Would he react at all? She didn't know him. She'd never met him. Why should he talk to her? Her anxieties had nearly convinced her to hang up when Jessie's voice came through.

"This is Jessie Brothers." He had connected with her so quickly and so unceremoniously, she hadn't had a chance to formulate her thoughts into words.

"Oh! Uh, hi. This is Audley Blackstone."

"What can I do for you, Audley?" He sounded friendly, as though they had known each other for years.

"Thanks for taking my call, Mr. Brothers. Listen," she blundered on, "I won't keep you; I know you're busy. I was just wondering if you would tell me the name of your professor in Knossos."

There was a long silence. Had she been presumptuous? It didn't matter. She needed to know. At last he said, "His name is Professor Alexius Vessey." Jessie's tone was curious yet cautious. "Why?"

She didn't know what to say, to tell him, without giving away her ... secret, so she said nothing.

"Are you thinking about writing an article about him? Or about the JCP?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she said. "I know the JCP has its own staff of reporters and that I don't qualify. I was just wondering. I don't suppose he'd be listed in the phone book."

Jessie grinned. "You were just wondering, huh?"

Of course, he would question her motives. He needed to protect his interests, too, but she wasn't in a position to tell him why she was interested. She held her ground and waited for him to answer, if he would. She knew he was weighing their conversation;



she could feel his brain clicking.

Finally he said, "I can do this for you, Audley. I can contact the Professor and tell him you're wondering about him and let him answer for himself."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "That would be great. Thanks."

"Is there some lead I can give him as to what it is you are wondering about?"

"Yes." She took a deep breath. "Ask him, please, if the word 'Zenton' means anything to him."

"Zenton?" He recognized it as the name of her passenger the night of the blackout.

"Yes." She spelled it. "If that word does mean something to him, would you please ask him to call me here at my father's? Collect. The number is ...."

Jessie interrupted. "I know the number."

"Okay." Now she sighed. It was done. "I appreciate your help, Mr. Brothers."

"Call me Jessie," he smiled into the phone. "And I'm happy to help, Audley. Anything else I can do for you?"

"No. Just ... just tell the Professor it's important."

"Obviously. Good luck!" His phone clicked off.

"Thanks." She gripped the receiver and reviewed their conversation. Weighing him now, in light of her change of attitude, she kind of liked him. He didn't waste time on idle chatter; he got straight to the point and handled matters expeditiously. He accepted her as herself and not as an extension of her father. He respected other people's privacy. He respected the fact that what she was 'wondering' about was important, at least to her. When, after several moments, the dial tone interrupted her thoughts, she realized she had not hung up and slammed the receiver down quickly. Professor Alexius Vessey might be trying to get through!

She lit another Spring and tried to be patient. She didn't have to wait long. She and Martha answered the phone



simultaneously. "I've got it, Martha." The kitchen extension clicked off.

"Hello?" There was a long pause and a lot of static.

"Hello? Who is there, please? This is the Blackstone residence. Audley Blackstone speaking."

Suddenly the wires cleared and a voice sounding as close as the Santa Barbara Shopping Center said, "Hello, Ms. Blackstone. This is Alexius Vessey returning your call." He sounded strong and healthy, not at all like an old man. Her heart was in her mouth. What was she to say? Do you know of a man from outer space? No? Oh. Sorry to have bothered you. But before she could say anything, he continued. "I got your message. Yes, I recognize the word but I cannot discuss it with you on the phone."

Her throat caught and she couldn't speak. All she could think was, "It's true."

"Are you there?" he asked.

The "yes" she uttered was something of a croak.

"Don't say anything," he instructed and she knew at once that he was also protecting Lanon. She felt an immense relief, but at the same time new fears spread through her. He asked suddenly, "How is your father?"

"Oh, fine, thank you," she said easily, understanding his technique. "He's with a patient right now."

"Yes," Professor Vessey said, as if confirming what he already suspected.

"Have I made a mistake, Professor? Did I do the wrong thing?"

"Of course not, my dear. What could you possibly do that would be wrong? Why don't you come over and visit Dierdre and me for a few days. It would be wonderful to see you."

"Yes, alright. I'll come right away. Where are you? In Greece?"

"No. We are in a small village in Southern Spain. You must take the train from Madrid." She began writing notes. "Guadix is on



the way to Almeria. Dierdre will meet you on the platform. When can you come?"

"I'll be there right away!" She would go now and be back before Lanon's tests were completed and evaluated, before he was released or found out.

"Don't worry," he reassured her. "Bring me an accurate description. As specific as possible."

"Okay." Maybe she could get her father's notes. Height, weight, stuff like that.

"It's quite exciting, don't you think?" he asked.

Exciting? The Professor's voice was childlike when he asked that, now that he was no longer giving her orders and they were mutually reacting to a phenomenon. Even so, she pictured Lanon sleeping with his clothes on, his fingers pressed to his brow (or her nipple), looking at his hair under a microscope, and grinned into the receiver. "Yes, Professor, it is. Quite exciting. Frankly, I'm overwhelmed."

"Yes," he agreed, then added cheerfully, "We'll see you soon!" as the line clicked off.

It was not yet noon. She called her Malibu neighbor Eugene and asked him to housesit, then dialed the airlines and got an afternoon flight from Santa Barbara to New York and a night flight to Madrid, Spain. Connections on the train and she could be in Guadix, Spain, within thirty hours with a bad case of jet lag and a belly full of butterflies.

JFK International Airport. Christ! She had just gotten away from there! This time, however, the outlook was different. Last time she was contemplating Brad; this time she was contemplating the next step in the Case of the Man from Zenton. She was excited. Sober. Her mental faculties were intact and operable.

Alexius hadn't given her much. Neither a phone number nor an address. He hadn't offered to pay for the round-trip ticket. My God, she thought, I'm on the story of a life-time and I can't write it, can't get paid for it, and it's costing me my life in time and money!



She took out her pen and paper but, as a reporter, what could she do with this kind of story? No one would buy it, literally or figuratively. It was all registered in her mind: every thought, every reaction, every bit of information and every conversation, but if someone should happen to find her notes, it might harm Lanon. She didn't dare put this on paper. Instead, she wrote Weinberger a letter of resignation for with the intention of mailing it from Madrid. She loved that kind of prank.

When the person behind her got up to go to the rest room, she reclined her seat as far as it would go, then settled in for the nine-hour flight. With the earphones on "off" she fell asleep during the movie and slept soundly all night.

IN THE DREARY LIGHT OF A WET DAWN, the plane set down at the Madrid airport. She had never been to Spain; she had never been abroad alone. Were she in her right mind she might have felt anxiety, but she was not in her right mind. She had a goal and a determination to reach it that superseded her concerns on how to get there.

She followed the crowd off the plane and into Customs where passports were stamped and luggage was checked, then to the Exchange to have her dollars transferred into pesetas. She spoke almost no Spanish, but the Spaniards were willing to attempt English, so with many gestures, *por favor's* and *gracias's* she was able to board a bus for the downtown Madrid train station. No one tried to steal her luggage (a simple bag this time), and no one tried to pinch her, these being the two things she had been warned to beware.

Downtown Madrid, which she had been prepared to enjoy as a tourist, disappointed her. A Sears-Roebuck department store, a McDonald's restaurant, signs advertising Eastman-Kodak film, and all windows displaying Visa and American Express placards, revealed Madrid as an extension of America. The Chamartin Station, a wonderfully modern train station, confirmed this. At the ticket counter, however, she was informed she needed the Atocha Station,



on the south end of town, and in the taxi that took her this distance, she passed from one time zone to another.

From the Atocha Station she saw she had passed from the 21st Century into the 18th. This was the Spain of storybooks.

There were no First Class accommodations. She could not smoke in the train, which was more like a rickety bus, having no private compartments and no amenities. The toilet, built like a privy in the front of the car, emitted an unacceptable aroma; voracious flies flitted from one homely passenger to the next.

She was obviously out of her class. Everyone knew she was a foreigner. They stared at her openly. She felt overdressed and out of place. She should have worn jeans and she should have a dowdy black scarf over her hair. The women passengers lowered their eyes, stealing peeks at her while she looked away; the men watched her overtly without expression.

Most of her fellow-passengers wore black. Many of them were plain-faced countrywomen, obviously Catholic. The men all had stubble on their swarthy faces and they smelled of cheap red wine. The children, without exception, kept close to their mothers and were silent. Each traveler carried a bag of sorts, containing bread and cheese and wine. Even the children drank wine. She was sorry she didn't know of this custom because by now she was hungry and thirsty and she desperately needed to feel included.

The train started on schedule and chugged on down the track at an interminably slow speed. At this rate, she would not reach Guadix until nightfall.

After several miles the train warmed up and the stares of the passengers cooled off. She accepted an orange from a woman then settled back on the hard wooden seat to await the end of the ordeal. Several hours later, lulled by the movement of the train and caught up in the timelessness of the Andalusian countryside, she wrote in her journal:

"Southern Spain. Somewhere between Baeza and Guadix. One might think that after these many hours, gazing mindlessly at



the terrain, one would become immune, as if mile after mile of sameness would become dull. But not so, not so. One panorama merges with the next, ever-changing, constant variations on the same theme of Urth's beauties. Plains at first, the train has ventured slowly: climbing ... gently sloping upward. For an hour now -- or has it been an eternity? -- we are in high tablelands, in gentle, rolling fields of fertile, peaceful, bountiful land.

"In the distance the mountains merge with the blue and purple of the sky, one a shadow of the one beyond, while in the foreground are dizzying waves of rippling fields, peppered with red poppies which creep insidiously into the green and gold of the wheat as in a Van Gogh vista. The byways have been carved out of the land and the generations by age upon age of the tracking of the herds and the hand-wielded farming tools, housed in winter in deserted haciendas, crumbling with the dust of the ages. Here and there a herd of goats and a flock of sheep commingle with the lone herder and his pair of faithful dogs."

It's another age, she marveled. Another dimension. She could see that her fellow-passengers were right! They were one with the countryside: staid, constant, sturdy, reliable, steadfast, plodding.

"Out of nowhere a small village, a cantina. A man leads his mule. A woman in the dark garb of the Spanish countrywomen, pushes her wheelbarrow. In a moment the village has passed and the vistas of fields and plateaus, mile upon mile of fertility, resume."

The women nodded over their rosaries; the children slept against their mothers' bosoms; the men closed their eyes and occasionally swallowed the dust on their lips with a sip of red wine. Audley dozed, her head slipping quietly to lean against the window, her sun-glasses securely in place, sensing that as mile followed mile, she was traveling farther and farther back in time, away from the hustle and bustle of civilization, entering another era, another age. It was a peaceful transition.

As one perfect horizon followed the other, she dozed. Two or three times she opened her eyes to notice that little had changed.



Perhaps Guadix was a myth. Perhaps she herself was a myth. Perhaps even life was a myth, as incredible and unpredictable as that stranger back in her father's laboratories. Perhaps none of it really existed. All that existed was a nap, a dream, and a mirage of endless fields accentuated by red poppies.

Late in the afternoon she was bumped awake. The fields were gone and in their stead were rock upon rock, red upon purple, grays and blacks and still more reds. Gone were the soft and endless greens, replaced by an almost violent Grand Canyon, a dramatic Hades, a sublime and stately array of red pinnacles of non-life. Her eyes opened wide, alarmed at the change. Had she gone so far back in time? Surely this was the age of dinosaurs! She watched, transfixed, as the sun slipped behind the mountains and the violent shades cooled and tempered into pastels. It's a continuation of the dream, she told herself. Life is just a misty unreality.

But what was that? Something caught her eye. A pillar of smoke coming out of a mound of Urth? A door cut into the side of the rock? A hole at the base of that stone wall and another. And a window! See here, she told herself, there's a door into the side of that mountain! Indeed, a whole community of people must live inside that mountain. Yes. Smoke was coming from that chimney and an opening revealed a room painted bright blue. Cliff dwellers. My God.

She instinctively sought confirmation from her fellow passengers. They were still there, still in their eighteenth century raiment, still nodding over their beads. She couldn't sleep now. Life was too full of surprises. She stood up, ready to come awake and stretch and see more of the unreality of life outside the train windows. On the opposite side of the coach she opened the shade, fully expecting to see a repeat of vast pastel nothingness speckled with cave-dwellings, but instead she lost her breath to a visage of Shangri-La.

The sun, now sinking behind the mountains, cast a halo of light on the village. Billows of magnificent clouds, outlined by a



brilliant glow of sun, revealed the proverbial 'silver lining.' Her gaze slowly lowered into the eerie light which hovered over the deep green valley at the base of the Sierra Nevadas. There, protected and blessed, the rippling verdant valley held in the palm of its hand, the loveliest sight her eyes had ever beheld: Guadix.

The Village was a Bali Hai, an Invitation, and a Siren of dwelling places. Set back under this panoply of wonder, the Village nestled in the lowlands, protected by a wall of mist and a moat of deep low fields. This was not a dream. The train ground to a stop. The conductor rang out, "Guadix!" and she stepped off the train in a fog of adulation. Even the air was different. Crystallized into perfection, it tingled the nostrils and smelled of exotic, delicately scented blossoms.

The altitude swept her breath away. She stood light-headed for many minutes, lost in the heady aura. When she began to focus, not yet knowing what to do or where to go, her eyes came to rest on a very beautiful woman who seemed an apparition as perfect as this unknown village. Poise surrounded her. Tranquillity and clarity emanated from her. Like the women on the train, this young woman wore no make-up. She wore a dark cape over a loose-fitting dress and open toed sandals. Over her yellow hair she wore a mantilla. She carried a large bag, burgeoning with parcels. She smiled in recognition and approached, holding out her hand and setting the bag on the platform.

"Welcome, Audley. I'm Alexius' wife, Dierdre." With that, she embraced Audley as she would a sister. Audley responded instinctively. It was no social kiss, nor was it sexual, but it was profoundly satisfying.

As they set out on foot, Audley could see that they had a good two-mile trek ahead of them and that she had worn the wrong shoes. She lit a cigarette and fell into line with Dierdre's established pace, enjoying the beauty of the second sunset. The silence was unnerving.

After discarding several options for small talk, she said, "I'm



glad you were here to meet me, Dierdre. I would never have found my way alone."

"I agree, and the towns-people likely would have stopped your attempt. They are very wary of strangers."

"Professor Vessey didn't give me an address or phone number," she pointed out. "I could have taken a cab."

"There are no cabs in Guadix. The fact is it was easy to meet you. I called the airport and traced your arrival. There is only one train a day. Addresses and phone numbers are mere details. Alexius doesn't like details. He lets me tend to those." Nothing in her voice indicated she might resent the role her husband relegated to her. "It's been a long journey. You must be very tired."

"No, not really," Audley confessed. "I slept."

"I get very tired when I travel, so I travel very little. Alexius can't, you know. He's been confined to a wheelchair for the last two, almost three years. Otherwise, I know he would have come out to meet you."

"Did he tell you why I'm here?"

Dierdre shook her head. "Alexius confides very little of his work with me. We have our world that we share with each other and with the children. Alexius keeps busy and I give him freedom to have as much fulfillment as he needs. As for me, I am a wife and the mother of two very active little ones. And Alexius allows me as much fulfillment as I can absorb from that."

"I take it you're not into Women's Lib, then."

"Heavens, no," Dierdre laughed a lovely trickle of joy. "I'm not naturally sympathetic to American women. I don't think they need the ERA or whatever it is called."

Audley thought of Lanon and smiled. "You're probably right." With a man like Brad, however, liberation was a woman's only hope of survival!

Dierdre acquiesced, "If women's liberation is necessary in order for you to discover human liberation, then I will bear with you."



The sun, now deep behind the Sierra Nevadas, cast long, shadowy haunts along the Village streets. Dierdre led her guest through the shadows to the Via de Comprende which wound upward, meandering, into the black foothills. The unUrthly quiet, as well as the unfathomable dark, unnerved Audley, who again sought the comfort of Dierdre's serene voice.

"You don't look Spanish, Dierdre."

"I am as Spanish as one can be, Audley. Where I live with Alexius, where our children were born, is where I have lived since the beginning."

"Do you have family?"

"A large family, yes. They live nearby."

"The only 'near-by' I saw were the cliff-dwellings."

"In that direction, yes. But there are many haciendas, and what might seem near-by to us might seem far away to you. The sense of time and space is different in this way of life."

"Yes, I noticed that. Guadix seems to exist in another dimension."

"All of Andalusia is that way."

"It's beautiful country," she allowed.

"Yes. It is. Heavenly."

They had climbed for half an hour and both women were breathless when they stopped to turn and look at the Village that now lay below them. The train station, a dark spot in the reflection of the moon on the train tracks, was in the far distance. The villagers had lit the lamps in their homes and the lights danced merrily into the dusty streets. The last mystical blues and lavenders of the sunset settled over the valley. Before Audley could light a cigarette, Dierdre said, "We are here. Come. You are hungry."

They veered off the dirt path through an arched wrought-iron gate and entered a veritable garden of domesticity. Well-placed lanterns lit the path and Audley could discern bougainvillea sprays, geranium beds and manicured lawn off the slate walkway.

"Tomorrow," Dierdre promised, "I will show you the



gardens." Audley followed Dierdre into the glow of light coming from an outdoor patio where two dark-haired, fair-skinned children, aged about six and ten, met them. They held back in the shadows, even while relieving their mother of her burden. "And our guest!" she admonished. "Take hers, too! We have been walking for an hour. Where is your father? Where is Maria?"

The children disappeared as Maria emerged from the golden glow of the candlelit kitchen. Dierdre and Maria spoke entirely in Spanish, but Maria smiled and bowed when Dierdre introduced them. Another outpouring of Spanish sent Maria flying back into the kitchen and Dierdre led Audley, now barefoot, into the house.

"Alexius is in his office. He will likely be there until quite late. Maria will bring us a nice supper then you can go to bed early. Would you like to refresh yourself? Wash your hands? The children will show you."

Audley would like that, yes. She smiled at the children, who led her down a long, wide, hall. The house was very old, she noted, but also very well cared for. The paint was fresh and bright off-white. The wooden floor and stone hallway were highly buffed and polished. Throw rugs of dramatic design, deep color, and coarse texture adorned the floors and walls. The ceilings were very low and cross-beamed. Hidden lights embedded in the beams gave just enough light to show the way. There were many doors along the hallway and she sensed that even with small rooms, it was a large house.

The bathroom was enormous. It had two windows and, except for the fact that it was dark outdoors, she expected them to overlook some sort of garden. Even so, the room was a profusion of potted plant life, evidencing Dierdre's green thumb. She washed her hands and face and then her feet, opting not to put on fresh make-up or shoes. She wound her hair into a braid and let it fall down her back. She then abandoned her dusty traveling clothes in favor of a loose-fitting paisley gown. Returning, refreshed, she detected women's voices and followed them into the main part of the house where Dierdre greeted her.



"There you are! How lovely! You feel better now." It was statement, not a question.

"Yes, thank you."

Dierdre touched her arm and directed her into a very large and airy room, lit by candles and adorned with flowers. There was a table set, picture perfect, where another woman, easily as beautiful as Dierdre, stood to greet them as they entered. Suddenly Audley felt weak. Jet lag, she supposed.

"This is my sister, Flora." Dierdre said. "Flora, this is Audley. She has come to see Alexius."

"I am pleased to meet you." Flora said. "You have traveled far." Again, a statement, not a question.

"Yes, Flora," she heard herself say. "Quite far."

"We are honored that you can join us," Flora said, seating herself again at the table.

Dierdre urged Audley to sit also. "Have a glass of wine," she urged. "It will refresh you. Maria will be serving us soon."

Audley sat, feeling drunk. It must be the altitude, she thought. She determined to go easy on the wine. The sisters waited for their guest to look around and get her bearings.

"You have a way with plants, Dierdre," Audley said. "Your home feels like an atrium!"

"Flora and I are both botanists," she explained. "Do you enjoy growing things?"

Audley thought of her humble coleus. "Yes, very much."

"It is the most noble of endeavors," Flora said. "To plant a seed and nurture it to fruition is to take part in the miracle of creation." Maria entered with a cart of fresh fruit, bread and salad greens. She withdrew, and when the three were alone again, an intense stillness prevailed. The atmosphere was so heady, Audley felt faint.

"Please," Dierdre urged, "take food. Gain strength."

With her first bite, Audley was renewed. She soon felt lighter and more carefree than she could remember. These women



were so different from Sylvia, from any other women she had known. Their beauty had overwhelmed her. A halo of yellow hair framed each woman's face. They epitomized good health. She had felt intimidated by them until their graciousness and good cheer put her at ease.

"Do you live in Guadix, too, Flora?" Audley asked.

"No, I am a Visitor," Flora said, without ado.

"Well, you certainly resemble each other," Audley said.

"It is said we take after Our Mother," Dierdre avowed.

During their meal, they all laughed easily and often. The ambiance, the light supper, and the filial rapport of the women conspired to envelop Audley in an aura of well being. Neither Dierdre nor Flora felt compelled to play hostess or direct the conversation, so they sat enjoying the atmosphere and the food until it must have been quite late. Their conversations were about simple matters. Audley noticed that the things which seemed important to these women were those things which were immediate: the flower arrangements, the folds of their dress, the comfort of the guest, and the music which emanated from some hidden, subtle source. Was it a guitar? or was it many guitars? Whatever it was, it was hauntingly beautiful.

Long after they had eaten their fill, Maria cleared the table and served the three a heady flower blossom tea before extinguishing the house lights, leaving them to savor the uncanny peace.

When Audley could no longer stifle her yawn, Dierdre escorted her across the lawn to the guesthouse where the children had earlier placed her suitcase at the foot of her bed, and her purse and camera case on the dresser. She unpacked her few things, hung her blouses in the open closet, and arranged her cosmetics on the shelves over the sink, jet lag and the tea overcoming her.

Reflecting on her evening with Dierdre and Flora, comparing their comportment to hers and Sylvia's, Audley was impressed by the total absence of competition.

Hers was a small room. Any sounds she made were quickly



absorbed into the thick, cool, adobe walls. Around the three windows and two doors were massive wood sills. The windows were high and deep and housed a nest of plants and flowers. The bed appeared to be as old as the house, but the mattress was firm. Over the massive wood-carved headboard hung an oil portrait of an ancient-faced Spaniard. The floor was wooden and bare. In one corner nested a kiva fireplace built low to the floor with bancos off to the sides. The dresser was rickety but functional, and a wicker rocking chair floated freely in the scant open space of the room.

It was intensely quiet, and within seconds of sliding between the cool white muslin sheets, Audley was fast asleep.

THE PSYCHIATRIC EVALUATIONS began the following day in earnest. Doc Will began with the standard Rorschach, amazed at Lanon's lack of creativity. He next applied the Alfons-Thermatic Personality Evaluation, followed by Mexler's Standardized Social Evaluation and the Wexler-Belview. Following a review of these fundamental tests, there came a series of Doc Will's own tests, notably the Blackstone Behavioral Indicator, as well as the Criminology Potential exam he had devised for the PSR, and myriad other secondary and tertiary psychological evaluations.

He stayed in the lab late that first night, grading the tests and mulling over Lanon's unorthodox reactions and responses. True to form, Dr. Blackstone became totally detached from the external world. He refused to take calls or see visitors and he grew increasingly irritated by Martha's insistence that he stop to eat on schedule.

Lanon dutifully followed every instruction that was put to him by the good doctor and so the psychological testing went well. Almost too well. The patient often finished tests even before the doctor could grade and analyze the one previous. Lanon would have occupied himself reading Doc Will's many psychiatric journals, but the Doctor forbade the patient to read anything until the testing was completed. 0802-LZ thus spent many hours resting his eyes on a



plaque on the wall that read, "While the mind is not the seat of the spiritual nature, it is indeed the gateway thereto."

On the third day, when Dr. Blackstone still had no insight into the man's amnesia, Lanon turned the tables and set out to psychoanalyze the doctor. He had finished a rather grueling morning of testing when he spoke up in the early afternoon, his stance formidable.

"Dr. Blackstone," he began. "I'd like to try to penetrate the hidden recesses of *your* mind."

As a rule, Doc Will would object. He had a policy of long-standing that there should be little or no extraneous dialogue between doctor and patient during a testing series. This time, however, he decided to break his own rule. He had no leads so far. He might as well try another approach.

"Okay. Shoot."

"The tests you use. Do you make up your own?"

"Yes, I use the standard tests, like the Rorschach and Mexler's Standardized Social Evaluation, but I administer my own as well, depending on the subject in question."

"When you set up the tests for Penn State Reserve, what all did you have to take into consideration?"

Doc pondered his patient for a moment before he revealed, "Doctor Martin Belger of Alabama devised a test which predicted, in essence, the criminality potential of children before they reached the age of six ... which is to say that by way of this test it could be determined if, when the child became an adult, ..."

"Yes," Lanon interrupted. "I understand all that. Did you feel his test had merit?"

Doc rather growled, "I had a lot of respect for the theory and I'd like to see the test administered more often."

"In every case perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Doc Will admitted. "I'm a great believer in potential. I like to know what could *potentially* happen."

"But the ones you dealt with, those who were already



adjudged as criminal, how did you test them?"

"I made up several new tests." It seemed Lanon was truly interested. "The first test, and the one I regarded as the most important, was designed for prison personnel because we needed to know right away if they would draw out responses from the criminal element and, more to the point, what their responses would be. I mean, it would not do to have guards being sarcastic or abusive to the people we were trying to rehabilitate."

"Of course. You tested Barrister, the guard at PSR?"

"Oh, yes." Doc nodded kindly. "He was found to be a peace-loving man, a follower, one who would obey orders. In his case, it was a matter of determining where his orders would come from. We can find out all kinds of things about people through these tests -- all you'd want to know and then some."

"What did you need to find out about the prisoners?"

"Strangely enough," he said, warmed to the subject, "the first thing we wanted to know was who had leadership ability, and then we ascertained whether or not they were capable of being re-programmed. Rehabilitated."

"Are the tests you devised still being used today?"

"Oh, yes," Doc said proudly, "along with the standard tests, of course. But the most ingenious device being used now is a machine that photographs personality. I regret I didn't think of it myself. This camera shows emotional reaction. Feelings are color-coded, so to speak. If, say, something makes a person angry or anxious or whatever, the machine will photograph that emotion. It's quite a breakthrough."

Lanon let his fingers linger briefly on his brow and after a moment suggested, "Why don't we get back to work?"

As Lanon willingly set upon the afternoon's tests, Doc Will set about reviewing the morning's test results and noted that Lanon had begun the test at 8:04 and finished it at 10:17. No one had ever even finished this test at all, much less under the time limit. Doc Will was perplexed. He had reviewed less than one-half of the



finished test when he looked up to see his patient staring into space.

"Ahem!" he said with some annoyance. "You finished the test already?"

"No." There was something in Lanon's tone.

"You understand all the questions?" Doc asked.

"I understand the questions, but I don't understand the intent of such a test."

"It's a simple test, son," he said. "Did you read all the instructions on Page 1?"

"It's not the test that I don't understand. As I said, I don't understand the intent."

Doc Will became authoritative. "You're not here to understand the intent. That's what *I'm* here for. *I'll* understand it, if you don't mind. Your job is to answer the questions." He prepared to return to the morning's tests but Lanon's persistence stopped him.

"For example, Doctor." The patient's attitude demanded a hearing. "By this test it is strongly intimated that all humans will steal or kill or commit other acts of violence if they feel justified in doing so or if they feel they can get away with it."

Doc Will was immediately defensive. Patients weren't supposed to read into the tests. It would appear, however, that Lanon had done just that. "Well, it's true," he admitted reluctantly.

Lanon studied Doc Will's face and rebutted, "It is *not* true. It's an incorrect assumption."

Doc Will's eyebrows shot up. "You don't say!"

"I know that these tests were designed for the guests at PSR, but I am not a criminal. I have no criminal tendencies."

Doc Will felt he was being severely rebuked. "Go on," he said.

"It's unfair of you to expect me to answer this kind of question. It puts me in a position of guessing what I would do in a situation I have no intention of experiencing."

"Such as?"

"Such as...." Lanon pointed out a specific question. "This.



'If you had not eaten for three days and you found a loaf of bread (a) on your doorstep; (b) on your neighbor's doorstep; (c) in a supermarket; would you consider it (a) a stroke of luck; (b) your due; (c) not at all; and would you (a) take it; (b) borrow it; or (c) leave it alone?'"

"What is it about the question that you take exception to?"

"I take exception to the question itself!"

"But why?"

"Before you put me in the position, through this question, I would not have considered that I might not eat for three days. Naive? No, I don't think so. *Trusting*. Trusting in powers higher than you acknowledge here, except in your primitive reference to 'luck' which could be easily construed as 'superstition'. There is no option here for discussion with my neighbor, either by note, a telephone call, a visit. Moreover, if I *were* hungry, why would my neighbor not know it and have offered to share with me before even one day had passed? So you see, it is the question I take exception to. It doesn't paint a positive picture of humankind, Dr. Blackstone."

"I'm not painting anything," Doc countered, smarting from Lanon's use of the word 'primitive'. "The results of the test paint the picture. You, in refusing to take the test, have painted a picture."

"But I am assumed to be guilty by default, if that is the picture I paint, without explanation. The test implies to me a rather backward level of life here on this planet."

"Does it come as a surprise to you to learn that man is an animal?"

"No, of course not. I know man is of animal origin, but what surprises me is that he has evolved so little! You are telling me, by the use of this test alone, that with several million years of evolution behind him, man still hasn't overcome his animalistic tendencies."

Doc Will nodded. "That's correct. And if we're smart, or lucky, we might survive to evolve for several million more years."

"For what? To what end? To remain at a status quo and continue to justify these unevolved natures?"



"Lanon," Doc urged, "take the farther view! Yes, it is true that men, women and even children do steal and murder and worse. But most of us don't. Most of us find other ways. We develop ethics and values. We are becoming civilized after all."

"It wouldn't appear so from this test."

"You've made your point. Let me have the test back."

"You said we need to take the further, long-range view. How long do you suggest? How long before the human race grows up?"

"That's a question I ask myself. It's hard to say how long it will take, Lanon, but I do know that given enough time and effective techniques in behavior modification we will mature."

"Behavior modification?"

"Yes. Behavior as it influences and is influenced by the behavior and needs of other people. It's a new science, granted, but with the programs now being developed we will, in time, be able to modify behavior first on an individual level, then as a family unit, then as a community, a nation, and eventually as a world. We do have goals and views that preclude violent crimes and asocial behavior."

"Your method takes too long. I don't think I'll be here to see the end result."

Doc Will was miffed. "Of course, it takes time! Do you have any alternatives? It's all very well and good for you young people to complain about this world, but do any of you have any concrete suggestions? Or, Heaven forbid, do any of you do anything about it? No! Like Audley, you're spoiled. You think a pill will fix something that takes generations to come about. All you youngsters do is demand and complain and I'm getting too old to tolerate it any longer!"

Oh, dear. Why had he gotten angry in front of this patient? Sometimes he did, but it was highly unusual.

"How old are you?" Lanon asked, undaunted by the doctor's tirade.



"How old am I?" The doctor sat down. "I'm 76. Why?"

"Do you think everyone under 76 is a youngster?"

Doc Will had to admit that he did. He referred to his 50-year-old clients as 'kids' and to Jessie and the Board of Directors as 'children'.

"By Urth's standards, that's a reasonable length of time to live, isn't it?"

"Reasonable, yes. Some live to be twice my age, but these are usually in other cultures. The American culture is such that it burns one out more quickly."

"Why is that, do you suppose?"

Doc shrugged. "Drugs and alcohol aside, I'd say it was because of the striving."

"I'm led to believe that a certain amount of striving is desirable."

"Some, yes, but we strive incessantly. We strive for success, for acceptance, for affection, for something, all the time. We don't know how to relax. If you were to ask someone over the age of 100 how he managed to live so long, chances are he would say because he wasn't in a big hurry, that he quit the striving long ago. A man of years lives each minute for itself and for the fact that he's still alive, not for what can be gotten tomorrow. Or for that matter, what he failed to get yesterday. Smart people modify their strivings sooner."

Lanon nodded solicitously. "I will take words under advisement, Dr. Blackstone, and cease my useless strivings." Doc Will didn't realize he had been giving advice or that Lanon was taking it as such.

"Fine, son. Fine. And I will, of course, make a note of your response to this test and release you from the subject. By the way, I quite agree with you, but I had my reasons for giving you that test." Not the least of which was his daughter. Lanon dutifully went on to the next test while Doc Will wrote, under "Comments: No Criminal Tendencies," and went back to grading the morning examinations.

The rest of that day was uneventful, as was the following



day, but on the subsequent day Lanon once again stopped the flow of progress. In the manner of a precocious child, he stated, "I cannot continue with this test."

Doc Will was immediately attentive. It was the test addressing the patient's attitudes toward death and dying. Lanon might not be criminal, but he faced death as surely as any taxpayer. The doctor was curious to hear the patient's views. "Why not?" he asked.

"It doesn't make sense."

"The subject of this test, Lanon, is death. That might help you understand the test."

Lanon shook his head. "It doesn't help."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"You mortals have no concept of what occurs at the time of death. What you have is based on sketchy, fear-ridden, ignorant ideas so far beyond my comprehension, so backward, I can't even relate to this." To emphasize, he pushed the papers away from himself and away from the doctor.

Doc Will was perplexed. 'You mortals' he had said, as if he were not. As if he had some super-human insight into what happened after death. It occurred to him then that perhaps Lanon had experienced 'clinical death' at the time of his plane crash, a 'life after life' experience. He decided to pursue that possibility, so in all sincerity he asked, "You have already experienced death, perhaps?"

"I have not!" Lanon retorted.

Doc Will scratched that theory.

"It isn't necessary," Lanon added.

Doc Will cocked his ear. "I beg your pardon?"

"It isn't necessary that I experience death. Nor you."

"Would you care to explain your theory?"

"No," Lanon said. "I've said too much already." Lanon sat with his fingers pressed against his forehead for a long moment before Doc said, "We have time for another test today if you're up to it. Otherwise, we can do it tomorrow. How do you feel? Would you



like to rest?"

"No," he said, removing his fingers. "I'd like to ask you some more questions."

"Such as?"

"I'll ask the questions," Lanon averred.

Doc Will considered. So the patient wants to out-psych the psych? He had the stamina for it. "Go ahead." "Referring back to the Criminology test for one moment, do you think it refers to you?"

"It refers to man."

"And what is man?"

"Man is an animal with intellect and potential."

"Potential for what?"

"Selflessness."

"And you don't consider that suicidal?"

"Not at all. I consider that altruism."

"Hmmm. Good. Now, in reference to this more recent test, about death. What does that mean to you?"

"Death is cessation of life."

"What happens, then, to the intellect and the potential? Do they die as well?"

"Well, I haven't died, of course, but I'm under the impression that there is some sort of afterlife. Intellect and potential ... well, they...." He blushed at his inability to respond as adroitly as he expected his patients to respond. Still, he made mental notes of his patient's behavior and the tenor of the questioning.

"You said you were 'under the impression'. Where did that impression come from?"

"I suppose it came from Christianity."

"Are you Christian?"

"I guess so."

"You aren't certain?"

"What is this?" Doc objected. "A psychiatric examination or a third degree?" He saw Lanon hesitate, as if he was not sure what was meant by the phrase 'third degree.'



"I'll ask the questions, all right, Doctor?"

"Sure."

"Are you Christian?"

"Sure."

"What makes you Christian?"

"My heritage. If I were Chinese, I'd be Buddhist."

"Do you have no personal belief of your own?"

"I'm a scientist!"

"Does being a scientist negate the possibility of your having a personal theology, a personal philosophy?"

"No. I have a personal philosophy."

"Is it one you inherited or one you developed?"

"It's mine. I developed it myself."

"Are you pleased with it?"

"I'm not ashamed of it."

"I'd be interested to hear it."

Doc Will hesitated. He didn't want Lanon taking on his, Blackstone's, philosophies. "I have many."

"I'm specifically interested in your philosophy of life as it relates to death."

"Life terminates at death. There's no philosophy there."

"But if there could be, what would you have it be?"

"Immortality, I suppose."

"Do you love life, Dr. Blackstone?"

Doc considered: life without rheumatism, without arthritis, with work, fresh air; with Audley and the dream of a grandson.

"Yes," he said. "I do."

"What do you love about life? The animal? The intellect? The potential?"

"All of those."

"And do you believe in love, Dr. Blackstone?"

"Do I believe in love?" He thought about his wife and his daughter. "Yes, very much."

"Good. Now, when you answered that question, you had to



have pictured something that you love, since the mortal mind works in words and pictures, right? What did you think of, what did you picture when you thought of love?"

"My daughter and my deceased wife."

"Interesting. Your deceased wife. You think of love in the same terms for someone who is alive and for someone who is no longer alive."

Doc Will nodded, now feeling pinned against a wall. He regretted going along with the game Lanon insisted on playing.

"Someone who has experienced death," Lanon pressed.

Doc Will nodded again.

"Someone who is dead!"

"Yes!" Doc Will said aloud at last.

"Yet you think of her in terms of love."

"Yes," he admitted quietly.

"Therefore, is it fair to say that the love did not die?"

"It would be fair, yes."

"Let me ask you something."

Doc Will waited, fascinated. Fearful.

"There was a moment," Lanon said. "Once you loved a moment. A peaceful, sublime and tranquil moment that you shared only with a flower."

"All right."

"Do you still love the flower?"

He said "yes" but his voice faltered; his attitude questioned.

"Do you love that flower, that moment, the same way you love your wife?"

"No, of course not."

"You had no objection to my saying you love your wife in the present tense. Is it fair to say you still love your wife after ... how long has it been?"

It wasn't easy for Dr. Blackstone to uncover and admit his emotions, yet he answered, "Twenty-three years."

"You still love her after twenty-three years?"



"Yes." And he missed her.

"Present tense."

"Present tense."

"What's her name?"

"Sarah."

"So you're telling me, then, that Sarah is still loved."

"Yes."

"I will go so far as to say that Sarah still lives! She is alive, and not just in the love that you keep alive for her. She is as alive and well as you and I are, sitting here."

Dr. Blackstone didn't know how Lanon knew that, of course, but he was impressed with Lanon's certitude. He was reminded of Sarah's strong faith and belief in after-life.

"Wouldn't it have been easier, Doctor, if Sarah had not experienced death?"

"Easier? I don't know what you're saying."

"Just as I don't know what you're asking me in that test. Death is a door." Lanon held Wilhelm captive. "You're familiar with the analogy that if you come to a door and you want to get to the other side, you open it and pass through it. That is all death is, Dr. Blackstone, a portal, a door, a 'gateway thereto', and you don't have to die in order to get to the other side."

"I don't understand."

"You will. You'll approach that door yourself, but it doesn't have to be called death, and this is my point. Couldn't we, for the sake of discussion, call it Fusion? Or Home Transport? Or Dematerialization?"

"What's the difference what we call it? We all end up going through the same damned door!"

"The difference is how we react to it, how we regard the person who left and the people who are left here."

"This is philosophy," Doc muttered.

"This is philosophy until it becomes reality. You're the one who spoke of a man as an animal with intellect and potential.



Potential! Potential then, now and in the future!"

The doctor envisioned Sarah - alive, loving, laughing, giving, caring, teaching, and accepting. He sagged.

"I'm nearly finished," Lanon said.

"Yes," Doc Will responded, recognizing that he was as caught up in Lanon's mental machinations as Lanon ever was in his, if not more so.

"If a method could be devised to approach death as easily, as academically, as we approached the door to your laboratory, would you be interested?"

The ultimate behavior modification. Modify man's approach to death. It was the one area of Mindal Science he had not developed, the only challenge that life had not yet put before him, but it was a challenge he would readily sink not only his teeth, but also his whole soul.

"Yes" he confessed. "I *would* be interested."

"Good. We will discuss it at another time."

"Yes. Enough for today." He was drained.

"Are there any more tests you want me to do?"

"No, Lanon. No more tests."

Lanon retreated to his cubicle to inform his peers of his progress for the day and Doc Will retired to his room upstairs. In all his years as a doctor, a patient had never before treated him. Who is Lanon Zenton? he wondered. Where does he come from? And why has he challenged me about Death?

DOC WILL DIDN'T SLEEP at all that night following his discussions with Lanon. It had been many years since something had so disturbed him. Not that he, himself, was leery of the subjects of death and dying, no, but that someone had encouraged his own theories along these lines.

It had been very difficult for him when Sarah died. It was called an accident, but he never believed that. As a scientist he accepted their verdict, but as a sensitive and feeling human being, he



reflected deeply and asked himself such questions as 'Why?'

Sarah's faith had been simple and traditional. His was not. His beliefs were derived from questioning and testing and experimenting, and for poignant moments, he sought answers. Not necessarily reasons -- he didn't expect to understand all the reasons -- but some kind of an answer that he could live with, that helped make sense out of life.

It was, originally, improbable that he would ever find a woman, a wife, at all. He had dedicated his life to the Science of Mind years before he met Sarah and he had no reason to need a wife. If he had not met Sarah, had not come to deeply love her and marry her, she would not have been on that scaffolding that day and she would not have had that fatal accident. Yet, he could not deny how he had benefitted from the experience of knowing her and loving her.

From that unlikely union they had produced Audley. At their ages! Audley was not an accident. They wanted a child, and look at what he had been able to experience and contribute to his field as a result of bringing up the girl. Look now at what she was contributing! It was not an accident, he knew, that she had brought Lanon Zenton to his house. Doc Will didn't believe in accidents.

Sarah's death was not an accident. He couldn't, didn't and wouldn't allow himself to think that way. But if she had to die, if it were necessary for her to cease, if it were necessary for her to not be here anymore, it would have been so much simpler, so much more dignified, if the Powers-That-Be had simply taken her without all the mess and distortion of the 'accident'.

The odd thing was that Sarah seemed to know she was going to be leaving this world. She had said as much to Wilhelm only days before it happened. Whatever it was that she said, and he couldn't remember the exact words, it had startled him and he could see that it rather startled her, too, when she said it. As if something in her knew she would be leaving and was preparing to go, and she was telling him so that he could be prepared to let her go.



It would have been so much easier if she had just said, "Well, I'm off!" Instead, there had been a tragedy. There was much screaming and wailing and calling of ambulances and medical attention and expense and trauma. There were guilts to be dealt with and worked through. There were regrets and depression, anger and resentments, and the dark hole of grief that threatened to consume him.

Then followed the public reaction, the newspapers, the funeral, the mourning, the sympathy. The sympathy! It was worst of all, for it fed the sense of loss, of helplessness.

If it could have been clean, if she could have just said, "It's time for me to go," and left, with no one making a fuss, if it were expected to be a natural part of living, the leave-taking, rather than the infernal negative approach running rampant on this planet, it would have been so much easier.

Yes, Lanon had struck a very sensitive nerve. He had a damned good point. Dr. Blackstone had a room full of notes on the subject of death, on the stages of death and dying. The existing theories were 'primitive!' Why should anyone have to go through those phases at all? How could one be expected to calmly approach anger, denial, depression and acceptance? Like Lanon said, death wasn't necessary! It distorted all of life, ending all human experience with a negative.

The entire world would have to be re-programmed. Death was not and had seldom ever been handled right. What did one do, then? Send the human race to Alaska to see how the Eskimos did it? They knew when their time was up. They invited all their friends and family in to say good-bye, they put their affairs in order and they left! God, that was clean. They knew how it should be done. Goddammed civilized society had to put on the garb of mourning and the fear of God and the expense of the damned.

What did Lanon call it? Prefer to call it? Home Transport. That was a good one. It had a positive ring to it.

Doc Will didn't believe in accidents. Things happen for a



reason and Lanon Zenton was in his laboratory talking about death for a reason. Audley was up to her neck in this for a reason. He might not know the reasons but he would, by God, find an answer.



## 7

## NEW CONNECTIONS

*Professor Alexius Vessey*

Audley woke with the sun and the sound of children's laughter pouring in the window. She lazed, not anxious to rouse from her bed, and in that state of half-sleep, half-wakefulness, allowed her fears to get the better of her.

The children's play reminded her of her father's fondest hope: a grandchild. She recalled how tender and warm had been Brad's embrace that day in the study when she said she would marry him. She was a woman. Her womb was ripe for bearing the fruit of Brad's loins. What in God's name was she doing in a foreign country, invading the lives of strangers, pursuing the origin of a man who was insane enough to think he was not of this world?

She bathed, brushed her hair, dressed, made up the bed, packed her suitcase, then went in search of Dierdre. She found her hostess on the patio behind the main house, digging in the herb garden. Dierdre was even more beautiful in the full light of the morning sun. Her hair shone like a yellow-white halo; her face and voice radiated a joy in living.

"Good morning!" she sang, rising, wiping her hands and picking leaves from her apron. "You're up early."



Audley smiled cautiously, fully intending to leave. "What time is it?"

"Almost 8:00. Are you well rested?" Already she was leading the way to a covered arboretum where a white wrought iron, glass-topped table awaited with coffee, sweet rolls and fruit. Dierdre began to pour, indicating for Audley to sit.

"Where's Flora?" she asked.

"She's gone already," Dierdre said, sitting.

Audley's stomach lurched, thinking the train had gone already and she wasn't on it. She sat, allowed herself a cup of rich, dark coffee. "I've got to get back, Dierdre."

Dierdre smiled and sighed at the same time. She held her coffee cup under her chin, inviting conversation.

"I don't know why I came," Audley said, adjusting her sunglasses on her nose. "I don't know what I'm getting myself into. I don't know anything anymore."

"You're trying to put something into an intellectual mold and it won't fit?"

"Absolutely."

"Then you must stop being intellectual about it."

"But I *can't*," she objected. "I *have* to think about it. It's affecting me and my family ... my work."

"Of course it is," Dierdre agreed in that incredibly sane and soothing voice, "and nobody is going to tell you it won't, but think of it this way: maybe it will affect everyone for the better."

"It's just so ...."

"Unprecedented?"

"At least." Audley sipped her coffee and allowed herself a sweet roll. "What do you know about all this?"

"Let me tell you what I know." Dierdre began to shred the bowl of herbs that she had picked. "I love my life here. I could spend every day, all day, in my garden, talking with my favorite branch or bloom, for I often use my plants to reflect aloud. Or I come out here when the little ones are asleep at their naps or when they're busy



with their lessons. And I especially like to come here in the early morning while the dew is still clinging to the petals, or at twilight, which is my favorite time of day, when the colors are the most surreal and the lights of the village below begin to twinkle, merging with the twinkle of the stars.

"And the man in my life? Alexius has always been a different type of man from the usual, and this difference suits me for I am my own self, too. Alexius spends much of his time alone, as I do. Lately -- how long? two weeks? -- he has spent an unusual amount of time shut away in his study. I have almost no knowledge of what goes on in there with his private phone calls, tape recordings and note-taking, for aside from what directly affects me and the children, he keeps it to himself. We have our own interests in common."

"Don't you care what he's doing?"

"I am passionately interested in his work, especially his project with Jessie Brothers. I've watched it develop, but from a distance. I very much want to see their project advance so that the life-long work and dreams of my husband might take place during his lifetime. I would like to see him have that.

"Occasionally Alexius tells me about the progress of the Zooids, of the development or character of a new community, but it's only cursory information. The real news comes when Jessie visits, for Jessie tells me what is going on in great detail, and in this way I keep abreast.

Thus, I know all I need to know. So even with Alexius' recent preoccupation, I don't worry, and I would never consider leaving him, quitting him or getting angry with him. He sleeps well and eats well. He loves the children and he loves me. Love is very important in this household. More important than words.

"And that is what I know, Audley. Nothing and yet everything. I have everything I need. If I don't have it, I don't need it." She stood up with the shears and cut a spray of bougainvillea for the table.

"It's a simple and beautiful life you live, Dierdre. I envy its



lack of complications."

"It is not complicated, that is true," she responded with a smile, "but it is complex!"

At that instant the two laughing children came barreling around the corner and stopped short, breathless and flushed from their activities.

"What is it?" They didn't speak, but looked at Audley then back to their mother. "Papa?" They nodded vigorously. "It seems that Alexius would like to meet you. The children will take you to him, ... if you are willing."

Audley rose reluctantly then allowed the children to lead her to the room adjacent hers at the back of the house. They took her to the door, banged once on the screen, then fled into the yard with squeals of laughter.

"Please, come in." She heard it as a strong voice, and with Dierdre being so beautiful and the children being so young, she was not at all prepared for the visage that met her in the cool, darkened room. Alexius appeared very frail, very old. He sagged all over. His eyes were set far back into his head and horrible blue hues hung under them. His hair was white and very sparse. His long fingers were gaunt. His clothes hung on his puny body. He seemed more an apparition than a man, and her earlier fears returned at once. She desperately needed her sunglasses but, somehow, she had left them on the patio.

"I'm sorry to appear so decrepit, but please, sit down."

His voice didn't belong with his body. The voice was firm and strong. Soothing. She sat stiffly, taking in the atmosphere of the room. It was cluttered with plants and pencils and empty cups and glasses. The floor, which was loosely carpeted, was littered with bits of paper, paper clips, rubber bands, leaves and orange peels. Still, under all this hodge-podge, there was order. The room smelled good: of wood, and leather, and fresh-growing spearmint. It was a dark room, being on the northwest side, and cool. She imagined it must be very pleasant in the heat of the afternoon. Alexius placed an



ashtray in front of her.

"How do you like my Dierdre?"

Audley was still feeling the glow of Dierdre's response to her anxieties. "She's remarkable."

"Remarkable, yes. I'm old enough to be her grandfather, you know."

Audley shifted nervously, rummaged for her cigarettes and lit up.

"Well, it just goes to show that all things don't have to be standardized, right?"

"Right," she agreed. "I guess."

"Like our unorthodox friend from Zenton." It was hard for her to look at him. His eyes burned holes in her. "Well," he said, leaning back into his chair and away from her, "we have a lot to do. You must try to be more comfortable. You're very tense."

Eerie people made her skin crawl, as though they were reading her mind like the words on a page.

"You must remember this," he said firmly. "You have nothing to be proud of and nothing to be ashamed of. You have been approved by the powers-that-be, for whatever service you can perform -- to our Zentonite, to them, to me and to yourself. There is nothing wrong with you and nothing special. Obviously, you have a good enough mind and honorable enough motives. Stop worrying about it. I had to."

"Alright," she said, but she was still not comfortable.

"You're a reporter?"

"Yes." Her letter of resignation to Weinberger was on its way across the ocean.

"Are you taking notes on all this?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I didn't know if it would be a good idea." She exhaled and succumbed. "I wanted to but I was afraid someone would find my notes and bring him harm."



"I think it's a good idea for you to keep notes."

"You do?" She wanted to! Did she need permission?

"Certainly."

"What would I do with the notes? They'll never sell!"

"Are you guided solely by the profit motive?"

"No, of course not," she snapped. "I have integrity."

"I'm sure you do. And you wouldn't use these notes to discredit our Zentonite either, would you?"

She shook her head. "Lanon," she said. "He calls himself Lanon. Lanon Zenton."

"I see. You wouldn't do anything to bring harm to Lanon, would you?"

She looked squarely at him. "No, I wouldn't."

He nodded, folded his hands on his chest and smiled. "I didn't think so."

"So what good does it do to keep notes?" she asked.

"Posterity, my dear," he smiled. "Do it for posterity."

She grinned, realizing that Professor Vessey was quite like her father. And now that her eyes had adjusted to the darkness of the room, and to the physical presence of the old man, he was not so frightful as she'd thought. She acknowledged he had poise, grace, strength, and diplomacy. He was wise and kindly.

"Here," he said, handing her a loose-leaf notebook. "It will give you something to do. We all feel more at ease when we're doing something familiar." He searched around until he came up with a pencil that had a good point and still some eraser left on it, and handed it to her.

"Alright. Report. Ask me questions."

She had hundreds. She began: "It would seem as though Lanon has been expected...."

Yes, 0802-LZ had been expected. He was expected to make contact with any of the several Life Experimental Stations (which accounted for his wanting to go into PSR). He was also expected to notate his findings and report them to his Zentonite supervisors



(which accounted for his fingers pressed to his brow).

What was the mission? He was to determine the evolutionary status of these Life Experimental Stations and if they met cosmic standards, an avenue of communication would be set up between Urth and Zenton, thereby rewarding human effort and accelerating human evolution. There would be any number of additional side effects if this were to come about.

Would he return to Zenton once the Mission was accomplished? If it were accomplished, 0802-LZ could return to Zenton, but that was not today's concerns. During his sojourn here, it would be the responsibility of the Life Experimental Stations to ensure that the sojourner would be protected from the inhabitants of Urth's propensity to assassinate, crucify, or otherwise destroy what they did not understand. No 'unauthorized' persons should interfere, inhibit or otherwise negatively affect the Mission.

All approved Life Experimental Stations fell under the auspices of the Jural Colony Project. These colonies were administered by Jessie Brothers and his Board of Directors. The JCP was the brainchild of Jessie's mentor, Professor Emeritus Alexius Vessey, through the supervision of Zenton intelligences who, long ago, had singled out Alexius to be their mortal contact personality in the development of the ideologies that would formulate the zooidal way of life that 0802-LZ now had come to adjudge.

The process of making clear and undistorted contact between Zenton and Alexius had disrupted more than half of Alexius' life. He had been teaching Cosmology and Philosophy at Knossos University when the first attempts at contact began.

"I would be in my study," he said, "preparing the next day's lecture, when my pen would wrench itself away from my hand and begin to write by itself. It made me angry, as I had no use for what I termed 'poltergeists' or paranormal phenomenon. I refused to acknowledge anything aside from normal, accepted, reality. I renounced their existence.

"For a time, the attempts at contact stopped. Then I learned



that 'they', whoever they might be, had been using my recording equipment and what they had recorded was preposterous. They set out the qualifications they sought in the human being who would carry out their Mission. They told me I met most of those qualifications and asked if I was interested in adapting my thinking so they could use me.

"On one hand, no, I was not at all interested, but on the other hand I was a man hungry for truth. This was not orthodox truth, however, and so I became irritable, then depressed. I put off making a decision. I took a sabbatical from the University and spent a year reveling in anything even remotely hedonistic, nearly ruining my health and my sanity that year in philandering, but within two weeks of my return to Knossos, the communications began again, this time without the aid of the recorder or the pen. A voice simply emerged into the privacy of my mind and spoke directly to me."

Alexius was an avid scholar of Cosmology. He believed in the concept of life, even other intelligent life in the universe. He believed, too, in a Creative Force, for the universe was too well defined to have been an accident of time, but he resisted the temptation to call this force "God" for fear that his beliefs, which were potent, would be diminished in the common jargon. His major problem was in universe hierarchy.

"I resented the Zentonian position that the human being was the lowest creature on the totem pole of existence, that man was far removed from the stature of most other forms of life in the cosmos. Under no circumstance would I accept a 'fallen man' theory. To me it was unthinkable that man, who could reason, who could idealize, who craved learning, who was basically good, could be held in such low esteem by our stellar neighbors. To me, Urth was not a cosmic orphan. It was one among many. I had always taught my students to have high opinions of themselves. 'Man is a noble creature!' I said to them time after time.

"Yet the voices kept speaking to me, indicating that they were superior. Not necessarily better, but superior. My conflict was



in that it was inconceivable for me to alter my thinking and my teaching to say that man was in any way less than any other entity in the universe, save possibly that unnamed Force, and the Force was, probably, too great for any creature in the far-flung universe to understand."

At length, in a pique of anxiety, Alexius related his peculiar experience to a co-worker at the University and was soon invited to resign his post. It was feared by Academia that his 'heretic ramblings' might have a negative effect on the students or on the University's reputation. So, he was relieved of his teaching post but the conflict persisted. He found himself one day without peers, without work, and worst of all, without a sure conviction of what he believed anymore.

The singular meaningful reality remaining for Alexius during that time was Jessie Cain Brothers, a young and loyal student from the United States of America. While Jessie pursued his higher education in traditional fashion at the University of Knossos, his true learning developed in the friendship he had with his professor. The two men talked together for hours on end, into the nights, about man's relationship to man, to the universe, and to that recognized but undefined entity they called the Force.

In the course of these verbal trysts, Alexius was led to privately acknowledge the possibility of the reality of the mysterious voices, then to the probability of their reality, and then finally to acceptance, and with acceptance came sheer awe. He became exhilarated that voices were pursuing him, an unemployed bachelor, asking for help in their as yet unrevealed plans. But Alexius never told Jessie about the voices. He alone learned who they were and where they came from; he alone learned about the constellation of Zenton, and much about other worlds in other constellations, but he didn't talk to Jessie about them. Instead, with the guidance of the voices, he introduced his protege to an ideal that took hold and grew.

According to science, a zooid is an entity that resembles, but is not wholly the same as, a separate individual organism. It is an



organized body of life whose elements give it locomotion. They are more or less independent animals produced by other than direct sexual methods and so having an equivocal individuality. The scheme delivered to him from Zenton was to elevate the modus operandi of the common zoid to a superhuman ideal. Thus, as conceived in Zenton, Zooids would become a unique group of highly evolved human beings working together for the common good; independent yet co-ordinate. This new world order would be founded on the highest ideals of intelligent life in the universe, altruistic service.

As the zooidal ideal came into focus, Jessie began to get excited about the idea of being a part of this "brave new world." Between Zenton and Alexius there followed many months of drawing up and laying out detailed covenants and intricate procedures for such a corporeal venture to come about, and with the aid of the Zentonites, Alexius conveyed these concepts to Jessie, for Jessie was in a position to carry out the plan.

Audley's fingers cramped as she sought to capture each pause, each inflection of the old man's narrative. He paused, smiled, gave her time to limber her fingers and light a cigarette before he proceeded.

As the eldest son, it had been established long ago that Jessie would take over the family business, his father's development corporation worth millions. The family had old wealth, social position, a politically viable name and strength of character. His well-respected Uncle Bartholomew was a United States Senator; his godfather was a land baron; Jessie's loyal childhood friends, who could be persuaded to follow Jessie into any venture he might outline for them, were all pursuing educations in fields that could aid the plan.

Alexius knew that Jessie's management of this business enterprise would eventually expand into a series of Life Experimental Stations of advanced lifestyle whose social ideologies would eventually be taught worldwide. Far after the founders had gone on,



Alexius knew the Jural Colony Project would be instrumental in transcending nationalism and bringing about a United World. The voices had been speaking with Alexius now for nearly 40 years.

Sometime during the day, without disturbing them, Maria had brought in a tray of food, but even with nourishment, the old man could see that Audley was becoming saturated, so he ceased his narrative and asked her "What does he look like?"

"Who? Lanon?" Her eyes flashed with renewed energy as she described him. "He's 6'2", weighs 190 pounds, has medium brown hair, not coarse or curly, and blue eyes." The depth of his blue eyes smiled at her in her memory. "He's kind of tawny-colored. He has prominent cheekbones and a square chin."

As Alexius watched her describe him, he understood why Audley had been approved.

She went on. "He wears a size 15/35 shirt, 34/34 slacks, 11 shoe. He has no scars or birthmarks. He has 20/20 vision."

Alexius made notes for Lanon's dossier. "That's fine," he noted, putting down his pencil. "How did you meet?"

She described to Alexius the events of the night of August 14<sup>th</sup> - the blackout, the roadblocks, and the long drive through the night. She told him about having a flat tire, and sleeping in the grove of trees, and how Lanon helped her when she opened her eyes. She mentioned their having stopped at Penn State Reserve for fuel. She described in detail what he had told her about his origin and how he had asked for her help. She told Alexius about their trip west, about the radio, the encyclopedia, the road maps, the tourist spots and Lanon's reactions to them all.

She confided to Alexius how Lanon had inadvertently questioned Sylvia about her child. She told him of her compulsion to have Lanon tested and how she went about convincing Doc Will to do it. She added the information about Brad, about how he was commissioned to locate the cause of the August 14th blackout and her concerns that it might have been Lanon who caused it.

"He didn't," was all Alexius would give her on that.



Between Alexius' narrative and Audley's recital, the day was gone. It was well past dusk when the intercom rang and Alexius promised Dierdre they would wind it up. True to his word, they set their notes aside and went out into the summer night air. It was an incredibly beautiful night, and after being confined to the small room all day, the air felt soft and smelled wonderful. The moon was a sliver of light in the cloudless sky.

"This is my favorite phase of the moon," Alexius imparted, as they made their way slowly across the lawn. "I call it a promise moon, as it gives me something to look forward to. Dierdre prefers the full moon. She likes the fulfillment of the promise, while I prefer the anticipation."

MARIA'S DINNER was a culinary delight. Herbs and spices from Dierdre's garden enlivened a simple stew. The salad and vegetables, the fruit compote, as well as the wine were all their own produce. But more savory than the meal was the companionship of the unlikely husband and wife who drew Audley in and made her feel as though she belonged there, at home with them.

She had spent time with each of them individually and found them both fascinating in their own right, but in tandem, Dierdre and Alexius' sensitivity toward each other was so acute, Audley felt herself being drawn into another dimension. Nothing out of the ordinary was discussed during dinner. To the uninitiated, there were only references to Maria's culinary skills, the children's antics, the weather, and the phase of the moon, but Audley could not shake the sense that she was being included in something. The sense of destiny she had been impressed with on the night of the blackout came back to her. All through dinner, she was on the alert.

"I was telling Audley on the way in, Dierdre, that this is my favorite phase of the moon."

"Ah, yes. The promise of things to come. And I suppose he told you that I prefer the fullness?"

"He did," Audley averred, "but I am wondering how it is that



I can feel such fullness and anticipation at the same time."

At that very instant there was a muffled knock on the front door. Although it was hardly perceptible to the human ear, it stopped their conversations. As Maria opened the door, Alexius excused himself from the table and went to greet the uninvited guest who presented himself in a dark cloak and a regal demeanor. Audley couldn't see his face for the hood he wore, but she saw Alexius dismiss Maria then turn to the man who knelt while the two discoursed intently in hushed tones for perhaps three or four minutes.

During those few minutes the atmosphere in the room altered perceptibly, as it did when she met Flora last evening. Audley tried to identify what it was she sensed, but she could not define it. It was neither evil nor sacred, but it was definitely something, yet when she inquired of Dierdre with her eyes, Dierdre merely smiled. Then, as unobtrusively as he had arrived, the visitor left, and at once, the atmosphere returned to its original state and the host returned to the table.

"Let's see," Alexius resumed. "We were talking about feeling fullness and anticipation at the same time. That's very gratifying," he said, "considering the mood you were in when I first met you this morning."

Audley blushed, remembering her urge to bolt.

"I myself," he continued, "was enjoying the full satisfaction of this repast while at the same time anticipating the arrival of our visitor. It is unfortunate Angus couldn't join us this evening. You would have enjoyed his company."

Alexius became thoughtful, as though he might elaborate, but Dierdre spoke, saying, "That feeling of completion and anticipation can be likened to the feeling of perfection, Audley."

"Dierdre's right," Alexius agreed, taking up his fork. "There's no point in limiting our good feelings to the moment or the day. In fact, the farther we can extend our anticipation, the better perspective we have on our life here."



"Here? Do you mean Guadix? Or Urth?"

"Wherever!" Dierdre expanded, "The point is to not limit our feelings of fullness and to not stop anticipating. As soon as we perceive our Self to feel empty, we are void. We have closed the door on all possibility. As long as there is possibility," she concluded, "there is hunger for perfection."

Perfection was something Audley had never truly considered. A perfect dress for an occasion, a perfect score, or a perfectly lovely day, fine, but perfection, in and of itself? Fullness and anticipation at the same time? She wondered if somehow perfection could be tied in with a sense of destiny.

"Well," she acceded, "I have to admit to being perfectly stuffed!" She pushed herself away from the table, complaining, "I have no hunger left!" Whereupon Maria served a concoction of pastry, pudding, ice cream and whipped cream for dessert and they all laughed, for in spite of feeling so full, they all salivated in anticipation.

That night in her bed, the air cool and the sheets crisp, her mind was agog with the events of the day. She had not truly assimilated all that Alexius had told her. It was not a question of whether she believed his story as much as it was something that was new to her. Everything was new to her!

No wonder she had discarded Brad! He had no sense of destiny, no perfection hunger! She realized suddenly that Brad's destiny might simply be different from hers. That did not mean he had no possibility at all! To her mortal mind, the only possibility she had room for was the one with her and Lanon, as preposterous as it seemed. And, as preposterous as it seemed, she also had to admit to herself that there was a possibility of something between Brad and Sylvia.

Impressed by both the fullness and the anticipation, she drifted off.

0802-LZ A/K/A LANON ZENTON had no criminal tendencies, no



psychotic behaviors, was not egocentric, but at the same time, was socially and emotionally retarded. He could indeed read and write in at least a dozen languages but he was limited in his ability to make conversation. Scholastic exams seemed to augment Doc Will's psychiatric findings but they also served to confound him further. Lanon's written responses could have been lifted verbatim from a textbook. He seemed to have no knowledge of his own. He was a cultural void.

He mimed what he had observed on the television. He could elaborate to some extent on current events, including music and theater, but they had no emotional content. His recall only went back two or three years at most. He knew nothing personal about the previous decade, except in terms of history, which, again, seemed directly "quoted" from some academic source.

The patient's stubborn quality of refusing to let anybody but Doc Will examine him precluded bringing in a hypnotist, but it did leave open the possibility of putting the subject under Sodium Pentothal. Doc Will considered this option but was not morally convinced he should do it, for obviously there was something in the patient's subconscious that would not allow for exposure. "Truth serum" might seriously endanger his patient's well being and the doctor did not feel confident that he understood the patient well enough to help pull him through any possible crisis.

He could not consider discussing this with Audley. The doctor/patient relationship superseded his daughter's interests at this point. Even though she had brought him, Doc Will was sufficiently engrossed in Lanon Zenton's personality that it over-ruled his daughter's altruistic motivations, if indeed there were any. At last, he decided to discuss it with the patient himself.

"I have reservations, Lanon," he admitted. "The tests I've given you have to do with the realms of the conscious, the subconscious and the super-conscious. I won't confuse you with literal scientific interpretations, but the results of these tests indicate that there is a deep, *deep* block against your revealing anything *real* about



yourself. I have no doubt that you would understand the scientific interpretations, mind you. You have a high intelligence and interesting theories and philosophies, but you are limited on the experiential levels of consciousness and your sub-conscious levels are virtually non-existent. At least they are non-evident."

Lanon listened to the doctor's recitation with great interest. "What do the super-conscious levels reveal?"

"Well, the super-conscious levels are rather well developed. That is where you get your ethics and morals. But none of this has told us who you *are*."

"And you think this Sodium Pentothal would?"

Doc Will evaded the direct question. "Normally I might go along with the Sodium Pentothal. In some cases, I might encourage the breaking down of those barriers. As a doctor, I would very much like to see what your sub-conscious is hiding. However, I must say, on the whole, you are healthy. Physically speaking, with one exception, you are probably perfect. I've never seen anything like it. But psychiatrically, I can't deduce you."

Lanon grinned. It was gratifying to him that the best of Mindal Scientists could not decipher that he had come from another world. "What's the physical exception you mentioned?"

"That's the one thing which medically inhibits my recommending the Pentothal. Your potassium levels are abnormally, perhaps dangerously high."

"What does that mean to you?"

"Potassium is a highly reactive element, an electrolyte, which is to say, 'a substance that dissociates into ions in solution or when fused, thereby becoming electrically conducting'. And these ions have an atomic, or electric, charge."

"What should that mean to me?"

"It could mean that if I administered the barbiturate, which is what Sodium Pentothal is, that slowing process, coupled with your highly activated potassium levels, well ... you might blow your circuits."



"What does Audley think?"

"I haven't asked her, but I don't think she'd be in favor of anything that might potentially harm you."

"You haven't asked me, either."

"No, not specifically."

"I think I'd like to try it."

Doc Will was surprised at his reaction to his patient's response. It angered him to think that Lanon would risk his own well being, not to mention the reputation of the good doctor, for no good reason.

"Why?" he demanded. "I've told you the risks! I've also told you that you're sufficiently healthy to continue as you are. Your potassium levels, I'm happy to say, are steadily diminishing. Maybe when they have gone back to normal, which I'm sure they will, then I could administer Sodium Pentothal in good conscience, but not now." He had to admit defeat.

"I would not 'blow my circuits'."

"How the hell can you be so sure? Are you a doctor?"

"No."

"And how is it you know who you are *not*, if you don't know who you *are*?"

"I *know* who I am."

Doc Will was turning purple again. "Then why risk your life?"

"So that *you* will know who I am."

"Why don't you just *tell* me?"

"You wouldn't believe me. But if you asked me under Sodium Pentothal, this 'truth serum', you would be *forced* to believe me. It would be scientifically irrefutable."

Never had Doc Will heard anything like it. It irritated him, yes, and it was frustrating that he, the finest in his field, was being out-witted, but he was so incredibly fascinated with the man, with his powers of discipline, he could not stay angry for long. He heaved a deep, somewhat defeated sigh.



"Lanon, I assure you. It is not necessary for you to risk your life. If it is important to you that I believe you, why not just tell me? For that matter, what the hell do I care? You haven't asked me for my help. This is all Audley's idea! For some reason, *she* felt it was important."

The doctor shrugged, ambled out of the lab. God, he was tired! He had spent days -- long, involved, and exhausting days -- and nights! -- on this patient. And after it all, he had nothing to report. He couldn't tell Audley a goddammed thing about Lanon Zenton except that he had high potassium levels.

He removed his lab jacket and poured himself a drink then slid slowly onto the sofa, allowing himself to succumb to the dark behind his eyelids. After a moment, he heard the click of the lab door as Lanon entered the study.

"Dr. Blackstone?"

With his eyes closed he said, "What is it?"

"I've been instructed to tell you who I am."

Doc perked up. "Instructed? By whom?" He opened his eyes to see Lanon sitting with authority behind Doc's own desk.

"It has now been ascertained that I can't be exposed medically or psychiatrically. I'm to tell you who I am and what I'm doing here so that you can help us."

Who had been testing whom? Doc wondered. "Help who?"

"My identity is critical. It must remain a secret."

Doc Will sat up and scowled. "Are you sure I ought to know?"

"Yes," Lanon insisted. "You need to know what you are dealing with."

"Alright. Who are you then?"

"I am designated 0802-LZ, a materialized being from the Constellation of Zenton. I have been given permission to visit Urth in order that I might report, first hand, to my Home Station, on the status of Urth's advanced civilizations. You know these to be the Life Experimental Stations of the Zooids of the Jural Colony Project



which are administered by Jessie Brothers and the Board of Directors and by yourself, since you have been instrumental in setting up their programs."

Doc Will was speechless.

"It is our hope that your zooidal ideals will conform to the standards of the Constellation Zenton. Although we are a superior form of existence, we readily acknowledge the efforts of the mortal races. Zenton has been instructed by *its* superiors to look into inculcating the Zooids into the Stream of Time."

Doc Will's eyebrows raised perceptibly.

"The Stream of Time is constant. Your planet has been suffering under the misconception that life ends. Life does not end. Death is not an end to life, but is a part of life. It's an experience of life, as we have discussed."

Doc Will was too dumbfounded to react. He nodded, not yet trusting his own voice.

"This is the reason I am here at this point in time -- at this point in the *Stream of Time*. We hope to introduce the means by which the portal to life after life can be successfully opened, and by 'successfully' I mean willingly, intelligently, enthusiastically, if you will. You have done valuable and impressive work in your field, Dr. Blackstone, and your efforts have contributed much to the success of the JCP. We hope to include you in the next step, as well."

Doc Will's voice was a croak. "Am I expected to die?"

"Of course not," Lanon said. "We want you to help the Zooids develop the new paradigm." Lanon almost pitied the perplexity of the old man. "Why don't you review the information I've just given you and look at the file again in light of what I've just revealed to you," he suggested. "Maybe you can verify it to the satisfaction of your own mind. Then, once you have an understanding of this within the framework of your field, we can discuss it more fully."

Doc Will stood, went to the bar and poured himself a drink, then thought to offer one to Lanon. "Before I do what you ask," Doc



admitted, "there's something I need to know."

"Ask," Lanon said, accepting the offer.

"It's about Audley. What's she got to do with this?"

"She has been a counterpart and a loyal guide."

"The 'guide' I understand; she brought you to me. But what about the 'counterpart' part?"

Lanon shrugged. "Throughout the universe men and women are designed to help to each other."

"This is what bothers me, Lanon. You see, my daughter is already spoken for. She's engaged to marry Dr. Spencer. I don't know if Audley mentioned that to you." Doc Will distinctly remembered her announcement at the dinner table last week -- the wedding date had been set for six months away.

"She may be engaged to marry Dr. Spencer, but she is committed to me."

"How long will you be here?" Doc Will demanded.

"I can't say," Lanon responded.

"Why can't you say?"

"Because I don't know. It depends on how quickly I can accomplish my purpose *if* I can accomplish my purpose."

"And what happens to Audley when you leave? If she gets emotionally involved with you, I don't want to see her get hurt. You can understand my position."

"Yes, it's obvious you love your daughter."

"And do you?" Doc Will couldn't suppress a glare at the other-terrestrial.

"I'm still new to this world, Doctor, and new to human emotions. I can learn and retain facts quickly, but emotions have to grow and develop. You know that. I've only been here a few days, not long enough to be 'in love', as they say in the vernacular, but I do love the woman in a way neither she nor you can understand."

"Why does it have to be Audley?" Doc whined.

Lanon sat shoulder to shoulder with Doc at the bar.

"For one thing she is attractive; for another, she is



concerned; but mostly because she has been approved."

Doc was annoyed. How dare the universe presume to toy with his daughter's affections?

Lanon continued. "I might live to become an old man like you, Dr. Blackstone. I might reach the age of 76 and experience the very thing I've come to introduce. If that's the case, then it would behoove me to have a love companion, wouldn't you agree?"

Doc moaned, more concerned about his progeny than himself or what Lanon was here for.

"It's to your own credit!" Lanon insisted. "You're the one who raised your daughter to experience life! To be open to new experiences, new concepts, new adventures."

This did not please Doc Will as Lanon hoped it would. The good doctor was sorely distressed.

"Or," Lanon suggested, "permission might be granted for Audley to go with me."

Dr. Blackstone reacted with alarm. "Impossible! She couldn't survive on your world!"

"Not in her present state, of course, but Doctor, it is entirely possible for her to adapt to a new environment once terrestrial escape has been accomplished. It will happen to you, too, once you leave this world."

Doc Will was reminded again of his late wife's deep conviction of an afterlife. Somehow, it had just been a remote concept to him, a solution to ease the pain of separation, but Lanon was saying that an afterlife existed -- if not in Heaven, at least someplace -- and Lanon was, in a sense, living proof.

"And, too," Lanon continued, cutting into Doc's musings, "there is the possibility that when it is time for me to go, Audley will relinquish me willingly. Human emotion can be fickle, you know, and fate is unpredictable. She may have lost interest in me by then."

Doc Will arched an eyebrow.

"It is possible! And if I were you," he cautioned, "I would not make any attempt to coerce her. People are entitled to make



those choices which affect their own life." Doc Will sighed. "I'm not naive, Lanon. I know my girl. I have some insight into her needs. You are a ... superb physical specimen and Audley is physically attracted to you."

"That may be true, but you discredit her," Lanon objected. "Your daughter has a fine mind and a clean spirit. She is capable of having altruistic motives as well as pleasure motives."

Doc Will was ashamed of himself. In his attempt to 'save' her, he had 'sacrificed' the best in her. "Alright," he acquiesced at last, "but does she have to know? I mean, is it necessary that she know about your origin? Your mission?"

"She already knows. She brought me to you for verification."

"Well, now that you've been tested and verified, can't we just tell her that you were having delusions of grandeur and that you're simply a man from Roanoke, New Jersey, with a wife and five kids?"

"Obviously you don't like the idea of her interest in me, but you've failed to consider the benefits she could derive from our association, not to mention how she could benefit the JCP if she is helping me."

Doc scowled so hard he gave himself a headache. He didn't like it, he just didn't like it.

"And I know that as a scientist you would concur."

Knowing in his gut that he was thinking of himself, of his dream for a grandchild, Dr. Blackstone begrudgingly agreed that he was being selfish. "It's only human," he said, heaving a great sigh of resignation.

He polished off his drink and stood to face his foe and former patient, but Lanon was so contagiously optimistic, Doc Will had to accede that although he didn't feel good about it all, he did feel better. After all, the mysterious Zentonite had no sperm count, and under the circumstances, these next six months could prove to be very interesting.

THE WATERGATE ESTATE in Beverly Hills was a vulgar display



of wealth. Roger had thought it would suit his wife, which it did not. The fact of the matter was that Roger knew very little about Sylvia, her tastes, her needs or her ambitions, if indeed she had any. To him, she was amenable, pliable, anxious to fulfill her prescribed role as wife, and was, in fact, a most dutiful wife except in that most critical of areas: the bedroom.

The one and only time Roger had deferred his own interests and his career was when Sylvia became worryingly debilitated after the unfortunate birth of their first, and only, child. At first the infant's condition was unnoticeable and never had there been a more radiant and devoted wife and mother than Sylvia, but as the evidence crept in and the final verdict was handed down, Sylvia literally fell apart.

For a while Roger suffered with her, but he soon had to get on with his career and other aspects of a normal life. He believed his wife should be able to rise above her plight. She had money, connections, therapists and hairdressers. She should be able to manage. The truth was, however, that Sylvia could not and would not manage this on her own. She had been so sheltered all of her life that this stroke of ill luck nearly destroyed her. To survive, she built a firm wall between herself and her spouse, the partner in this travesty, which wall she would not let down. A calculating, coldly-under-control automaton replaced the innocent, fair-haired young woman Roger married.

Roger had been remotely concerned for a period of about a year and then he shrugged it off. People had quirks, he concluded. Society provided outs. If you were insolvent, you filed bankruptcy; if you were incompetent, society provided sustenance; if your wife didn't respond to your needs, you found someone who did. It was academic to Roger. His infidelity didn't bother him in the least. He did, however, carry on these extramarital affairs with discretion. He saw no need to make Sylvia suffer any more than was necessary.

This fund-raiser, this party, was an annual event that Sylvia had established after that first year. The fact that it was a charitable



event encouraged attendance, lending it a lucrative, political flavor that Roger enjoyed. There were certain personages who were sure to attend, such as Claude Hoagland, the chief administrator of the hospital where Jennifer was housed. His institution was the major recipient of the funds forthcoming from this yearly endeavor.

Sylvia always had mixed emotions about hostessing this party. Of course, she loved parties and she enjoyed the preparations and the results. She enjoyed the opportunity to do her own politicking and hostessing. But it always reminded her that Jennifer and the carefully guarded secret of her condition were still in existence. If Jennifer died, would she still feel compelled to put on this extravaganza? Or would she turn her back on the subject of mental retardation, mental deficiency, mental illness, and turn a deaf ear to Hoagland's financial appeals in the name of 'those less fortunate'? Every time she heard that phrase, Sylvia wondered how anyone could be less fortunate than she could, then berated herself for her 'poor little rich girl' self-pity.

The Watergate Estate covered three acres of prime Beverly Hills real estate. The main house and grounds took up one full acre. Guest bungalows peppered throughout the other acres, each privately situated by way of lush landscaping, soon would be teeming with guests from all across the country. There were 500 names on the guest list. Over half of them came from the L.A. area. Out-of-towners were being put up in hotels in the City, as the bungalows had been 'booked' long ago. It was a bit of a problem, now, for Sylvia, as to where to put Audley. If she had come with Brad, it would not be a problem, but, no, she would be arriving with Lanon Zenton in tow, and Brad was invited also. It would serve her right, Sylvia thought indignantly, if she put Lanon and Brad in one guesthouse and put Audley in the garage.

All arrangements for the party had been made well in advance, leaving Sylvia a full day to rest and to fret over the Jennifer situation. With each passing year, she became more psychotic about Jennifer for as long as Jennifer lived, Sylvia's block about sex



remained strong, her fears of being pregnant with another defective were so great. And as each year passed, realizing how much she was missing, she invariably made herself ill then had to spend the week following the party sedated and in constant contact with her therapist. Now this year, along comes Lanon Zenton who has the temerity to suggest that Jennifer be eliminated! She felt guilty in agreeing with him.

And then there was Brad. Lovely, warm Brad. She should be having sexual fantasies about her husband, but she didn't even *know* Roger, much less love him or desire him. Roger was the only man she had ever known sexually. Audley would say it was normal for women who were virgins when they married to wonder about other men, to get a whim to try out something new and different after a while. Sylvia was getting a whim to try something, period!

She thought for a moment of Lanon Zenton. He was certainly a hunk by any woman's standards, but of course Audley got to him first. She always did. And Sylvia didn't want Audley's leftovers. God, she thought, what a vile phrase! Brad used to be a good catch; now he was a leftover. She realized she was still thinking of Brad in terms of Audley. If she thought of Brad on her own terms, she thought of him as tall, handsome, brilliant, coming from a good family, having a good future, accustomed to wealth and culture, and sexy. Very sexy. But, she reminded herself, Brad was still in love with Audley and, to be honest, she was a married woman and she believed it was immoral to cheat. Not that Audley or Roger were so moral, but she and Brad were old-fashioned, self-effacing and disgustingly self-righteous. She doubted if two such people could even enjoy an illicit affair.

She reviewed herself in the mirror, appraising. The dress Audley had picked up for her in New York fit perfectly and she looked wonderful. It was a floor-length, mauve chiffon, perfectly cut, flowing with Sylvia's natural lines. Each move she made revealed a rippling shadow of thigh, and the neckline was deep, clinging graciously to her ample breasts.



She had spent most of the day getting ready. First, she had an hour in the spa, exercising and toning up, next a massage, then a leisurely bath, generously laced with oils and perfumes. For the event, she had a hairdresser come in and do her hair, upswept and elegant with alluring wisps teasing her flawless neck. She spent an hour at the make-up table and in the dressing room preening, preparing, and fantasizing continuously about Brad.

She convinced herself that they could have a meaningful affair only if they were properly motivated. It wouldn't do for either of them to simply resort to lasciviousness. If it came to that, she was convinced that Brad was capable of helping her be deliciously lewd, but it had to be more than lust. It had to be thought out and developed. They couldn't just have sex for sex's sake. It might seem crazy, she rationalized, but that's the kind of people they were. What else could they do? They were bred that way.

At the last, she realized she had not thought of Jennifer all day. She had dressed entirely for Brad and was looking forward to seeing him more than anything. Leisurely descending the stairs to oversee last minute details before the guests arrived, she wandered from room to room in this Beverly Hills mansion, impressed by how something so beautiful could be so empty. The halls, the chandeliers, the carpets, the windows, the oil paintings, the books, the furnishings. Everywhere her eye fell, she encountered a visual delight, and for her ears, music wafted through the rooms to sweeten every corner. Outdoors, the grounds provided the perfect grace and symmetry to nourish the senses. Every inch of this grand house was physical perfection, but it was as empty and useless as Jennifer's mind. Beautiful and utterly useless.

What should a house have to make it right, she wondered? It should have a man in it, for one thing. The right man. And it should have half a dozen children. It should have disorder and chaos, squeals of laughter and pangs of pathos to disrupt the perpetual order, the crystallized perfection that these rooms reflected. There was nothing out of place, no dust on the banisters, no lint on



the carpet.

Sylvia was made to feel that her life was designed, cut out of a rare mold, pasted and buffed, painted and sculpted, then hung on the wall with every other inanimate piece of beauty to be looked at but not touched. "Are you warm, are you real," she hummed to herself, "or just a cold and lonely, lovely work of art?" She did not have a satisfied feeling about herself or her life.

She gravitated toward the walnut 17th Century secretary desk in the foyer. Every pen and pencil stood in place, ready to receive and notate the names of the guests. A large Record volume contained the names and addresses of those people who would be attending and the pledges of those who would not. There would be \$10,000 from the Burnses, \$15,000 from the Sally Hutton Estate, \$25,000 from her father, scores of \$1,000 pledges. At minimum it was a \$250,000 party and such a party merited imported caviar and champagne, cold duck and roast beef, two floors of the Beverly Hilton Hotel, twelve additional servants, but she was anxious for it to be over. Every year for five years she had given this party. It was her 'cause' and her contribution to society. What a waste these years had been, she lamented. This would be her last party for the cause.

Henceforth, her cause would be Sylvia. Not Roger's wife, not Chandler's daughter, not Jennifer's mother, but Sylvia. After this party she would absolve herself of one life and enter eagerly into another. She didn't care what it would be or what Roger thought of it. She only knew that she didn't want any more damned perfection.



## 8

## NEW PERSPECTIVES

*Twilah Leighton & Angus*

Gateway Headquarters of the JCP stood as a crucible in the Nevada desert, far removed from the fast-paced, slow-evolving civilization of the United States of America. A polyglass bubble enclosed the community, creating an environment of near semi-tropical comfort and beauty on the otherwise barren horizon. From Jessie's office on the uppermost floor of the Headquarters spire, the distant mountain peaks and endless desert vista created a vivid contrast between the world of the Zooids and the rest of the human race outside.

Jessie often sat in this office musing about his concern for the world outside and feeling a compassionate pity for those who were caught up in a value system devoid of altruism, under a government without universe loyalties. It was in this office that Jessie held interviews with prospective Zooids. It was also here that he met with representatives of various outside interests.

This morning he had had an appointment with Senator Braggins, whose son had again been convicted of distributing a controlled substance, and he had come to plead with Jessie Cain Brothers to let his son into Penn State Reserve. The young Braggins



had already been tested and found unsuited for rehabilitation at the Reserve and Jessie had had to turn him down. The Senator, accustomed to getting his own way, was outraged and had threatened to 'close him down'.

Ignorance and prejudice, the two greatest barriers to growth, always dismayed Jessie and left him momentarily depleted. At times like these he would take several deep breaths and renew his resolve to foster this Jural Colony Project for the Zooids, those who had tired of the hypocrisy and the betrayals, those who had the courage to break free from the bonds of fear and distrust and who dared to explore other options, higher values, altruistic goals.

Jessie was incredibly proud of the Zooids, proud to be a part of their way of life. He did not think of himself as their leader, but as one of them -- a single independent entity in a living, growing organism. He did not delude himself into thinking the JCP was something it was not. It would never enfold them all. The outside world was filled with self-seeking, manipulative, grasping degenerates and misfits and always would be. There were, plain and simple, a lot of animals running around out there to feed off each other by their own preference.

But there were the others, like the Zooids, who knew they deserved better than to be subjected to the whims of the takers and the power-hungry, and for the Zooids Jessie was grateful, to them he had dedicated his life.

On the wall hung a plaque, which read:

## JURAL COLONY PROJECT

Those words had been carefully selected when, in the beginning, as a young student, he and Professor Vessey had spent countless hours designing what humankind had only dreamed about and seldom tried to realize: a new way of life, a brave new world.

In this new social order there would have to be rules, of course, but they would be rules for the people, rules based on positive



THE ZOOID MISSION

law, natural law. Rather than a nation, they would become colonies, where one life was inter-dependent with the others, and where each colony could become as a living, growing organism. It would be an experiment in altruism, a project, undertaken by willing, vital participants. Alexius had been referring to the inhabitants of this would-be Jural Colony Project as "Zooids" since the idea took root, and now there were thousands of them, upholding zooidal philosophies in 72 active colonies.

Throughout the years Alexius had been telling Jessie, 'This is only the beginning!' and until this morning Jessie had thought Alexius was talking about the scope of the colonies. He now realized that the JCP was part of a surge forward in planetary evolution, for this morning he had received from Alexius a dossier on one Lanon Zenton, as well as an astounding summary of the Professor's 40-odd years of communication with Zenton intelligences, including the outline of every step they had taken in the creation of the JCP, leading up to and including the revelation of the Zooid Mission by this materialized man from Zenton.

The authority with which Alexius spoke of these matters left no doubt in Jessie's mind of its authenticity. If Lanon's research on Life Experimental Stations found the Jural Colony Project's evolutionary status acceptable, if the Zooids were approved and if they were willing, the door to the cosmos would be opened. The lowly Zooids had been unwittingly building a bridge between this life and the next!

Jessie adjusted his TASC and put in a call to Dr. Blackstone. Martha put it through at once and, to Jessie, Doc Will's voice sounded relieved to hear from him.

"Jessie!" he said. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thanks. I'd like you to come to Gateway as soon as possible."

Doc Will hesitated. What was he to do with Lanon? "Well, I'd like to Jessie, but I have a patient with me. Audley brought him, and I don't know where she's off to or when she'll be back."



"Bring Lanon with you," Jessie said.

The doctor needed no further confirmation. "We'll be right there. Set the Transport Line."

"It's already done."

ON MONDAY FOLLOWING THE PARTY, Sylvia reappraised her life. For the first time, she had given a party and nobody came. Oh, people came, all right. Hundreds of people actually, but not Audley, not Brad, not even Doc Will. She couldn't remember ever feeling so lonesome. It was obviously time for her to change her ways.

A call to Malibu proving fruitless, she called Martha in Santa Barbara and ascertained that Doc Will had unexpectedly left with his patient. The IOF referred her to Oscar where she learned that Brad had spent the weekend moving the IOF computer system to his Manhattan apartment. And last but not least, she learned that her husband had departed for New York City without leaving word as to when he might return. His law office gave her the number of the Grand Hotel where he could be reached. She had already decided, however, not to tell him that she had a job or where she would be.

UPI gave her the name and address of Twilah Leighton, the woman who had spotted the UFO on the night of August 14<sup>th</sup> and wired her that she was coming. After confirming her plane reservation she re-dialed Oscar and instructed him to secure a four-wheel drive vehicle and a metal detector and to meet her at the Williamsport, Pennsylvania, airport as soon as he could get there. She then carefully selected a few items for her overnight bag and dressed for her undertaking. Gathering the checks and pledges from the party in her purse, along with her wedding rings, she then left her Beverly Hills mansion with no remorse and no plans to return.

Several hours later she and Oscar were driving into the backcountry of rural central Pennsylvania where the UFO sighting had allegedly taken place. To Sylvia, set free and on assignment, the drive proved to be pure adventure. She felt appropriately dressed in



a designer safari suit, a soft red V-neck sweater, oxford boots and safari hat. Looking out to the gently rolling fields, accented here and there by stately red barns and white fences, she remarked, "It's so picturesque, don't you think, Oscar?"

Oscar's post-adolescent fervor hardly extended beyond the scent of Sylvia's perfume. "Yes, Ma'am. It's real pretty."

She turned her full attention to the view. The expanse spread out before them as they sought out Rural Free Delivery #3. Rows of mailboxes at the end of unpaved roads indicated life was there somewhere, but it wasn't evident. Referring to the hand-scrawled map that she had taken from the County Sheriff's instructions, she told Oscar to "Slow down!" while she watched for a dirt road that turned right at the top of the hill. "Here, Oscar. Stop! Turn here!"

Oscar hit the brakes, turning up the dust. "Sorry about that, Ma'am. I wasn't sure you meant to turn here. It hardly looks like a hill to me."

She shook the dust from her clothes impatiently. "Of course it's a hill, you fool. It comes up and then goes down. Doesn't that constitute a hill?"

He turned right and followed two ruts leading through a field of high grass. "Are you sure we're going the right way?" He was grinning, enjoying the rough terrain and Sylvia's dismay.

"Slow down!" she cried out.

He slowed to a reasonable pace: 10 mph. "How far do we crawl from here?" he asked.

"Half a mile," she managed to say, hanging on to the frame of the Jeep as though she were riding a run-away horse. "At the fork in the road you veer left."

"What road?" he joked.

"Just veer left!" It was more of an adventure than she had bargained for. She only hoped that it proved her hunch correct.

Beyond the next bend, down a steep slope on the north side of the hill, stood a small ramshackle homestead, the home of Miss



Twilah Leighton. In the side yard stood an old windmill, slowly going round, and in the opposite yard was an old oil well, slowly pumping up and down. There were half a dozen outbuildings looking fairly seedy, and the main house was small and very dilapidated. The front porch sloped to the side, the shingles were all mis-matched in patches on the roof, and the wood frame structure was badly in want of a new coat of paint.

Miss Leighton was on the front porch waiting for them. She waved her blue cotton handkerchief in greeting as the Jeep came around the bend. "Yoo hoo!" she called. The Jeep pulled to an abrupt stop in the high grass and wildflowers of the front yard.

Miss Leighton was a very old woman, but she had all her teeth and her smile was enough to brighten anyone's day. Sylvia liked her at once. They shook hands. Miss Leighton insisted they both call her Twilah, then she led the way into the house, which was cool and cheerful. The floor was bare wood with throw rugs everywhere. The sofa was threadbare but comfortable. There didn't appear to be a television set. The 1940's style radio was surrounded by a plethora of family photos on the buffet. Old floral print curtains hung drearily, in need of a good starching.

From the sofa where Sylvia found herself, she could see into the kitchen. On the sink was a pump, from which Twilah maneuvered water for the teakettle. The cookies she had especially made for the occasion, still warm from the oven, were placed on the coffee table on Depression Era glass.

"I seldom get any company," Miss Leighton said. "It makes me nervous!" She giggled, stuffing strands of wiry white hair into pins behind her ears.

"We're not exactly company, Miss Leighton," Sylvia objected, but Miss Leighton wouldn't hear of it.

"You are too company! And call me Twilah, I told you. If you lived out here in the sticks you'd know what I mean. All's I ever see is the mailman if'n I get out there early enough to meet him when he comes, and two or three times a year Old Man Oldecker will



come check up on me and bring me some eggs or a plucked chicken."

"Don't you ever get out? Go anywhere?" Sylvia asked conversationally. "Do you ever go into town?"

"Onct a month," the old lady nodded. "I get young Buck Thornton to drive me in for supplies or whatever I might need but I don't need much. I got my Sears catalog, of course."

"Of course," Sylvia agreed, as though the Sears catalog was the accepted tie with civilization.

"But you didn't come all the way out here to hear about my raggedy life, did you?"

"No," Oscar offered, receiving in exchange a piercing scowl from Sylvia.

"Why don't you go outside and play, Oscar?" she said rather tersely, and was pleased to see him so compliant.

"I'll just wait outside, then," he said.

"I'll be sure and call you when tea is ready," Twilah offered, then turned back to Sylvia to say, "Now, where were we? Oh, yes, the night of August 14<sup>th</sup>."

Sylvia took out a pad and pencil and in the process flipped a switch on a tape recorder she had stashed in her bag.

"Yes," Sylvia urged. "Tell me everything, from the beginning."

"Well," Twilah began, her eyes large and her hands worrying her blue handkerchief, "it was just getting dark. I had been in town that day. I had to go in to arrange for my winter corn supply. And I was tuckered. So I was just settin'. Settin' right out there on the front porch. It was a hot night. August gets downright sticky here, and I was just settin' on the front porch there in my rocker, like I do all summer long, just lookin' at the sky and the stars. It was a pretty big moon that night. I don't know if'n it was full, but it was pretty close, so I could see real good. If somebody was to walk through the field out yonder, I could'a seed him, you know? It was that bright out."

"Were you drinking anything, Twilah?" She had to make



sure the old lady wasn't in her cups and seeing things.

"Why sure! I had a quart of pump water. Like I said, it was a very hot night."

Sylvia nodded.

"Then all of a sudden I saw this bright light in the sky. I didn't know what it was. I thought it might be Haley's Comet or a satellite or something because I couldn't hear no noise and I can always hear it if it's an airplane, but it weren't no airplane. I don't for sure know what it was."

"Can you describe it?"

"Not really. It was just this big fat bright light."

"How long did you see it? Did it move?"

"Oh, yes, it moved! That was what made me so scared! It was comin' right at me! I saw it first way out in the distance. I thought it was just another star -- it fit right in with all the others -- then this particular one -- I thought it was a star, you know -- it starts coming down like a falling star, only slower. But it definitely was moving and it was coming in my direction. It got bigger and brighter 'til I thought it would explode!"

In her telling the story and reliving the excitement, Twilah got up and paced the wood floor, pulling at her handkerchief, remembering her fright.

"As I said, it came right toward me. And it was so big and so bright, it got *way* brighter than the moonlight. It was like broad daylight! I could see all the way to the Oldecker's farm three miles away and I could see their silo as plain as you can see it now in the light of day."

"What happened to the light, Twilah? Did it extinguish?"

Twilah ignored the long word. "It just went out." "Did it make a noise?"

"Well, not really," Twilah said, resuming her seat on the hassock. "Except I could hear a big crack when it went out."

"A crack? Like what kind of a crack?"

"Like it hit a tree of something. It sounded like the crack of



a branch breaking off a tree."

"But whatever it was, whatever caused the light, that didn't make any noise at all?"

"Nope."

"What about a smell? Could you smell anything?"

Twilah scowled then shook her head. "Nope. No smell."

"Did any of your neighbors see it, too?" Sylvia asked, ever so much like a reporter.

"Not that I know of. Like I told you, I don't see many people out here. Old Man Oldecker came over a couple of days after that and I asked him about it but he didn't see nothin' 'cause him and his wife were in town visiting their eldest boy and they didn't even come home that night. They spent the night there. His eyes aren't as good as they used to be."

"Did you see where the light went out? Approximately?"

"Sure did." She got up quickly for a lady her age, and led Sylvia to the window. She pointed. "See yonder where that bird flies?"

"Um-hum."

"Long about there the light started to fade. As I said, I was settin' on the front porch and it was comin' right at me, so I was glad to see it go out. But I'd been lookin' at it, so when the light did go out, all I could see was this big spot in front of my eyes and I couldn't blink it away."

"Like when a flashbulb...?" Sylvia sympathized.

"Yeah, like that. Anyway, I couldn't see too good after the light went out, but I was sure glad it didn't hit me. I was full well prepared to meet my Maker. Fact is, I closed my eyes and was prayin' for mercy when I heard the crack."

"The light was out, though, before you heard the crack?"

"Oh, yeah. Several seconds."

"Where did the sound of the crack come from, do you remember that?"

"Sure do." Now Twilah led Sylvia out onto the porch and



pointed to a grove of trees toward the southwest. "That gully there. Somewhere down in that gully."

"Did you go down to look?"

"Land sakes, child! Do I look like a youngun to you? I cain't be traipsin' up and down the hills like a youngun!"

"What about Mr. Oldecker? Did he go down?"

"Shoot," she lamented. "Old Man Oldecker is 94. He can still traipse around, but not that good."

"When did you call the newspaper?"

"I never did call no newspaper." She went back into the cool of the house to turn off the whistling teakettle. "I almost didn't call nobody. People around these parts already think I'm off my rocker just because I won't move into town and have the County take care of me. This is my home, you know." She went off on a tangent, emotionally riled. "I was borned in this house 87 years ago. 'Twas built by my pappy when he brought home his bride, and I was their firstborn. The only one borned, actually. Ma died having me then Pa took care of me 'til I was old enough to take care of him and me both. I don't need no County home!" She poured water in large mugs and dunked a Lipton tea bag vigorously up and down in each. "I figured I'd better tell somebody, seein's how I'd never heard tell of such a sight. What if'n it was the Russians or the Chinese? I'd'a never've heard the end of it. So I called. Cost me 27 cents, too, it did."

"Who did you call?"

"Called the Sheriff. Sheriff Baker is a nice man. He comes out to see me every time there's an election. He brings me my ballot and has a cup of tea while I decide who to vote for. He usually has to tell me who to vote for since I don't get the paper and I only listen to the music on the radio."

"Didn't Sheriff Baker come out and have a look around?"

"Nope. He didn't. He said, 'Well, if you see it again, let me know.' He pretty much puts up with me. What's the word? What do you call it? Oh, I don't know. He...."



"Humors you? Tolerates you?"

"That's it. He tolerates me. Treats me like I was three years old." Twilah tossed the old tea bags into the sink and carried two cups into the living room, leaving Oscar's on the sideboard.

"I reckon the young man will come back," she said.

"I reckon he better!" Sylvia added. "So how did the newspapers get hold of it?"

"Get ahold of what?"

"The news. Saying you had seen a UFO?"

"The party line," she said, matter of factly. "Can't say nothin' on that phone without somebody listenin' in. I 'spect it was Madeline Templeton, that new woman in town. She don't have enough to do out here in the sticks, so she listens to everybody else's business."

"And you think she called UPI?"

"Who's You-Pea-Eye?"

"United Press International."

"Oh, I wouldn't know about that."

"Would you mind if Oscar and I traipsed around down in the gully to see if we can find anything?"

"Heck, no. I'd go with you if I could be sure these old legs would get me back up the hill, which I can't be sure of anymore. But you go ahead if you're sure that's what you want to do. I wouldn't think you'd want to get your purty clothes all messed up."

"Oh, that's okay," Sylvia said, looking at her boots.

"That gully gets mighty soggy when it rains. You might want to borry my galoshes to keep your nice boots clean."

Sylvia had to recognize that even in her safari outfit, she was overdressed. "Thanks. Maybe I will."

They went onto the porch, leaving the hot tea in the living room for later. Sylvia tugged on a pair of wool socks and the rubber boots before climbing into the Jeep and laying on the horn to rouse Oscar. In a few seconds he came tearing out of one of the half dozen out buildings, tugging at his pants.



"Where to now, Boss?" he asked, scrambling into the driver's seat.

"Straight down the hill there into the gully."

Oscar grinned. Must be something in the air out here in the country that would have Sylvia plowing into the underbrush and him using a privy.

The field was easier to drive through than the road had been. Twilah was right. The summer rains had made the gully soggy. Mosquitoes bit their hands and faces as they drove through the underbrush to the grove of trees where, allegedly, the UFO had landed.

"What are we looking for, Boss?" he asked, foraging a new road into the bushes.

"A broken branch, first of all. A good sized branch."

He turned off the engine. "We're going to have to walk from here," he advised. "It's getting too thick to drive."

As they got out of the Jeep they both noticed the wheels were sunk at least four inches into the mire.

"You sure we won't get stuck?"

"Sure I'm sure. That's what these babies are for."

The creatures of the thicket, -- bullfrogs, crickets, birds, all sorts of wild creatures -- silenced their voices in protest to the intrusion. Sylvia's voice automatically sank to a whisper.

"A big tree, remember, with a broken branch."

"Right."

"And don't lose me."

"You can't get lost in here," he said. "It isn't big enough to get lost in."

Oscar was wrong. Sylvia did get lost, lost to the other-worldliness of the gully, which was thick and dense and verdant and fragrant and entirely consuming. Overhead she could hear the distant chirping of the birds and see the pale blue sky made as lace by the distant leaves of the treetops. It took her breath away. Looking down, in response to a small splash, she saw a fat toad-like creature



sitting on a smooth, round rock covered with slick dark green moss in a freshwater spring that trickled and gurgled, the sunlight dancing on its surface.

Small forests of fern accented like a checkmark a patchwork quilt of purple ground-cover with tiny white flowers, mixed with mounds of cocoa and gold-colored mulch. Sylvia was quite lost in this world far removed from Beverly Hills. She paused to wonder how she had managed to survive twenty-seven years in such an ivory tower. Taking the job with Brad, she reflected, was the smartest thing she had ever done.

"Over here!" Oscar yelled.

"Where?"

"Over here!"

Several minutes later she had made her way through the thicket, mud up to her ankles, her designer pants snagged beyond repair by thorns from red raspberry bushes. Mosquito bites welted her hands and fingers. "My God!" she said when she caught up with him. "It's a jungle!"

"Here's your branch," Oscar said, pointing. After a quick glance at the broken limb, which was a good twelve inches thick, she looked at the ground where the UFO must have landed. The Urth was totally unblemished, with the exception of the broken limb. There was not a mark on the ground.

"I don't know how you could tell if there was a mark," Oscar pitched in. "As thick as this growth is, if something was here, it would have been covered up by now."

"You're probably right, but let's look anyway. Where's the metal detector?" An hour later, filthy from one end to the other and smelling of skunk cabbage, they finished. Placing the soil samples in a box in the back of the Jeep, she lamented, "There's nothing here. Nothing at all."

"Well, what did you expect? A nose cone?"

Sylvia scowled at him. "A Martian flag."

He helped her into the vehicle then skillfully maneuvered it



out of the mud and up to higher and dryer ground. When they arrived back at the house, Twilah was nodding her head, fast asleep in her rocking chair on the front porch.

"Maybe we should just go," Oscar suggested. "It's a long drive back to the airport."

"You just hold your horses, young man," Sylvia said, falling in with the local vernacular. "We haven't had our tea yet and Miss Leighton went to a lot of trouble to brew us a cup and put out homemade cookies." She touched the old lady on the knee but Twilah was sound asleep, snoring slightly. They went inside and quickly drank the now cold tea and took a handful of cookies. Oscar looked at the dozen and more family photographs on the buffet while Sylvia wrote Miss Leighton a note, not knowing for sure if Twilah could read. She then put the empty cups on the sideboard and went outside to knock the mud off the galoshes. By now Twilah was awake.

"You back already?"

"Back, yes," Sylvia said, "and ready to go. I want to thank you for your hospitality."

"Well, shucks," Miss Leighton said, getting up. "It was my pleasure. Come back and visit again sometime." Oscar came out just then and she demanded to know if he had gotten enough cookies. "Do you want a glass of milk, young man?"

Oscar blushed. "No, Ma'am. The tea was fine. Thank you."

She took the muddy boots away from Sylvia and shooed them towards the Jeep. "You leave them for me. I just hope you got what you was after."

She saw them out and into the vehicle. When they were seated and buckled up, Twilah asked, "Tell me, are the woods still cool and damp?"

"They certainly are," Oscar volunteered.

"There's frogs and ferns and lots of little flowers?"

Sylvia nodded, smiling. "And red raspberries."

"And skunk cabbage, too. I can smell it on you." Her old



nose wrinkled. "Well, I guess I'm not missin' much of anything then." She seemed resigned to her limitations.

"Not a thing," Sylvia assured her. "You've got everything you need right here."

Twilah Leighton patted her hand, stood back and waved the old blue hanky. "Come again, you hear?"

Oscar insisted it was a wild goose chase, but Sylvia argued she would not have missed it for anything.

AUDLEY WOKE IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON and chided herself for being lazy, but Dierdre disagreed, insisting Audley was entitled to rest. Even so, Audley felt the need to do something. There was nothing she could help with in the kitchen or the garden, so she decided to walk down to the Village. Was there anything she could do while there?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact there is. Alexius has an overnight letter he wants posted."

"I'd be happy to do that," she volunteered.

"Good, but take your time. Everyone is having siesta now. The Post Office won't even be open for another hour."

As Audley set out on her errand, she was stopped by the two little ones and handed a straw bonnet. As usual, they said nothing, but as she took the hat and thanked them in their own language, the light glinted from their deep brown eyes and they smiled up at her before tearing away across the yard with peals of laughter.

Feeling rested and somewhat adventurous, her step was buoyant as she descended the hill. She had arrived in Guadix at dusk, when the colors were deep and somber. Now, in the clarity of daylight, the colors of Guadix were dazzling. Even with her sunglasses securely in place, she had to squint against the brilliance. The bonnet was a Godsend, and she vowed to buy a treat for the children before her return.

Guadix was bigger than it first appeared. Even though the one main street was only three or four blocks long, there were several



arteries leading radially out of town. The residential areas were located at the base of the mountain and in the foothills. Along the side streets were quiet little shops and cafes leading out from the town's central plaza to the surrounding expanse of pastureland and farmland.

Once or twice she stopped to survey the view and catch her breath, the high elevation accounting in part for the slow life-style. As she tarried at the fountain in the main square, the villagers began to slowly rouse from their daily siestas and resume their activities. She waited there until the postmaster opened his door and changed the sign from 'cerrado' to 'abierto'. Although the villagers may not welcome strangers, she was recognized and received as the American woman from the Vessey household.

"Senorita Blackstone!" the postmaster hailed, drawing her into the cool interior. "Buenos Dias!" He took the letter from her outstretched hand and regaled her with a litany of Spanish but she didn't know a word of it.

"Senor!" she interrupted, laughing. "No habla Espanole!"

He was disappointed. "No comprende?"

"No," she said with remorse as he set about stamping the letter in silence. The Spanish were so gracious, so willing to communicate, she determined to essay a conversation.

"Excusa mi, Senor?"

He looked up at once, eager, "Si, Senorita?"

"Uh,... café aqui?"

His face lit up. "Oh, si!" Perceiving that she might understand if they spoke slowly and simply, he continued. "Café Diablo, Café del Sol, Café de Valle de Dios." He pointed in three directions.

"Abierto?" she asked, knowing that some siestas might last throughout the afternoon.

"Si!" He pointed toward one of the side streets. "Aqui. Sierra Nevada Restaurante. Abierto. Bueno. Mui bueno." A restaurant, open, very good.



"Gracias, Senor. Muchas gracias." They shook hands and she departed feeling very good about herself, very good about the day. She felt like a tourist on holiday. The streets beckoned to her.

Returning to the plaza, she splashed her face with water from the fountain then took a moment to appreciate the beauty of the town. In that instant she had the sense that she was being watched. She looked around but could see no one especially interested in her, beyond the normal glances given to one who is a foreigner, so she set aside the feeling in order to play tourist and find a shop where she might buy a gift for the children and perhaps a souvenir.

The side street she chose was conspicuous by the bougainvillea that marked its entry. This bougainvillea grew to a height of over 20 feet, covering the front and side of an ancient but well-tended, two-story building which may have once been a hotel. The sign said 'cerrado', and by the bar across the front door, Audley believed it must have been closed for a very long time. Its wooden portico provided cool shade and firm footing.

Along this Avenida she passed a barbershop and flower stall before pausing to look into the window of a shop whose quality and variety of merchandise impressed her. As she admired the finely made rugs, pottery and textiles, her eye suddenly fell on a necklace, the blue of which, with the light reflected therein, was the exact color of Lanon's eyes.

Entering the shop, the clerk quickly withdrew the lapis lazuli necklace from its case and handed it to Audley without any attempt at salesmanship. The necklace slipped easily onto her neck. A mirror was thrust into her hand. She admired how each bead was sedately separated from the next by a silver filigree, but they were meant to be together. Wearing it gave her a sense of armor, yet the large bead in the center, falling naturally into the dip of her throat, gave her a private thrill of vulnerability. It was lovely to look at. She nodded and paid for the necklace.

She continued down the street to the Sierra Nevada



Restaurante. Inside, the dark and cool room featured a wooden floor, massive wooden beams on the frescoed ceiling, and on the patched adobe walls were classic oil paintings of Spanish gentry. She selected a wooden table near the window where she could watch people as they passed by. As soon as she was seated, she again felt that peculiar sense of being watched. Her fingers went instinctively to the necklace where they lingered on the large blue bead. She told herself she was here for a purpose, for Lanon, and she would come to no harm.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she looked around the room to see who else might be in the restaurant. At once she saw the mysterious visitor from last evening, the one called Angus. He was sitting on a bench, not at a table, on the other side of the room, far back, under a magnificent hanging plant, wearing his hooded cloak, scrunched over, barring contact. If it was him who was watching her, he could project from across the room, certainly, but surely not from the Village Square.

She conveyed to the waitress that she was very hungry. Was there something she could have with huevos? eggs? And coffee, por favor? Mucho, caliente café.

The waitress brought the coffee at once, leaving Audley to ponder the strange emanations generating from the area where Angus sat brooding. She now believed it was him who had been watching her and so she determined she would meet his gaze. In a moment he looked up and she swore she could see light coming from underneath the hood that he kept close to his face. She was startled; she looked away quickly and shivered. He was surely a cave dweller, she thought. A mystical creature from another time.

Still she felt herself compelled to make contact with him. Her investigative reporting approach failed her. She perceived that this creature was approachable, but not with notebook in hand; that tactic would be inappropriate with Angus. He wasn't the kind of man who would be luring her for sexual purposes, not if he was an intimate of Alexius, but she distinctly felt him pulling her.



The waitress brought the food. It smelled delicious and, though her mouth watered, she could not bring herself to pick up her fork and eat. Some psychic connection had been established with this Angus, and to eat would somehow alter the energy flow. All this was quite clear to Audley although she didn't know why. She sat there in a quandary until suddenly the connection was broken. She picked up her fork and ate ravenously.

At length he left the restaurant and she allowed herself time to savor the food and to indulge in the luxury of another cup of the rich café con leche, wherein the milk had been warmed to keep the coffee hot. As she sat savoring her coffee and her adventure, she willed herself to remember yesterday's interview with Alexius. Her thoughts flitted back to the States where Lanon would still be in her father's lab. She remembered briefly that Sylvia was working for Brad and that Brad was working for the President, but none of these thoughts would stay in her mind. Her mind kept being drawn back to Angus.

She paid her bill, put on her sunglasses and reentered the brilliant daylight. On the portico she looked to the left and the right but could not see him. She tuned in her senses and determined she would locate him. She stood still until she felt something, a leaning, then she turned in that direction and moved down the portico.

A few doors down she spotted a store whose windows were filled with wooden puppets. She went inside and purchased for Dierdre's children two giddily happy puppets on a string. She had them gift-wrapped then returned to the outdoors where Angus' vibration was waiting for her. She turned left again moving farther and farther away from the center of town.

The shops thinned as the villas appeared. The walls of the villas, where the people lived apart from their street, were long, indicating wealth and space for the inhabitants. Here and there she could glimpse inside the walls through wrought iron gates to see giant bowls of geraniums gracing both sides of the walkway up to the inner door. It was very quiet, and still she was lured on by the impelling



psychic energy that she now knew to be from Angus.

At the end of the street, she faced the fields of Guadix, spread out below the expansive mountain range. In the near distance cattle grazed lazily. Her eye roved from left to right across the field until she saw his hooded figure sitting at a rustic table under a tree in the pasture. She could feel him looking at her. She stepped onto the grass and proceeded into the field.

She was, of course, aware that she had followed a strange man to an isolated spot, and she was as fully aware that she had not one shred of anxiety. As she ventured, she felt him looking now to where the Sierra Nevadas met the sky. She, too, turned and stretched her vision to where, though miles away, the mountaintop seemed close enough to touch. When she turned her eyes on him, her vision was glazed from the brilliance of sky. He scarcely moved his hand but she felt it to be an invitation, and so she sat with him.

They exchanged no words. Her mind had been occupied with the energy he had directed toward her. The communion between them was palpable; she felt completely at ease. They sat for some moments rather examining the psychic connection that seemed to have them both in its grip. At length he spoke.

"Your sense development is very keen." His voice seemed cloaked in shadow as well, as though he were whispering. She turned her eyes to him and as their eyes met, she could see that he was indeed shrouded in a cloak of darkness, but that if he were not, he would have blinded her. His aura was deliberately attuned to conceal his true light. It was clearly evident to Audley that she was sitting with some kind of phenomenon.

Perhaps if this were another day, last month certainly, she would have fled or had any number of fearful reactions, but not today. Not any more. As Flora and Dierdre had impressed upon her, there were too many strange and wondrous things happening to her lately for her to be alarmed. The only thing to do was to take it in stride.

"Am I supposed to say 'thank you' or something?"



"You would do well to be grateful for your higher senses, but it is not necessary to thank *me* for them. I didn't create them. I am merely aware of them."

Her hand slid up to touch the blue bead in the dip of her throat. "Who are you?"

"I am a visitor," he said.

"That's what Alexius said. I thought you were one of the cave dwellers."

She felt his smile. "I shouldn't wonder. It's my costume."

"Why do you dress like that?" she asked naively.

"It's my way of adapting to my surroundings. Your planet and its people are very dense. Hardy anyone notices me in this garb."

"They might not notice you in Guadix, but you'd stand out like a sore thumb where I come from."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. It depends upon whether or not people choose to see. Where do you come from?"

"California," she said, vaguely realizing that Angus would probably fit right in."

How does one talk to a visitor from another part of the universe? she wondered.

"Ask questions," he responded to her non-verbal musings.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"More to the point is why I'm here, wouldn't you agree?"

"I suppose so. Why are you here?"

"I am here to study the early stages of psychism as it evolves on a young planet."

"What's psychism?"

"Higher sense development."

"Oh. Like what you said I have." She actually felt rather 'dense'. "What are you made of, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It's called Ultimaton Aggregation."

"What does that mean?"

"It's very simple. It's a phrase that comes from the fact of my ultimacy. I can't get any more ultimate. I have evolved beyond the



need for a physical body. Aggregation is a way for me to adapt to your environment."

"How's that?"

"Since in my natural state there is nothing there at all, no matter, no form that you can identify, I pull things out of the atmosphere to make up a form. I aggregate matter around me."

"Do you ever become whole? I mean, are you always going to be this vaporous or are you going to solidify?"

"As I said, I am already whole. Eventually you will be able to see me," he said, "but that will have more to do with your perception than with my solidarity."

He seemed to think they would become great friends!

"I'm not going to be here very long," she offered, realizing her remark might be taken as rude. "When did you get here?" she asked in an attempt now to be sociable.

"I arrived last night, as you were having dinner. I stopped by to notify Alexius of my arrival."

"Are you from Zenton?" she ventured.

"No, but I have been there."

This was, to her, further confirmation that Lanon was who he said he was.

"Did you come by yourself?"

"I did, but I am not alone; there are others."

"Other what?"

"Other beings, other planes."

"Like you?"

"We are individuals, all of us. Some are more evolved. In time you yourself will evolve enough to realize that there are hundreds and hundreds of types of life."

"Are you all friends?"

"It is a friendly universe, and so we are, yes, friends."

"You all have different jobs to do or what?"

She thought he laughed. "Like you, yes, we have a job to do. What is your job?"



"I'm a writer. I take information and put it in a form that literate people can understand."

"So you are a teacher!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, I don't know about that," she laughed. "I learn so much from what I write about, I think I could be more rightfully called a student."

"That is good," he observed. "Have you come to learn about Alexius?"

"Well, his work." She couldn't talk about it, though. "Have you known him for a long time?"

"Seems like forever!" he said lightly.

"Do you know my dad? Dr. Wilhelm Blackstone?"

"I have been told of his work but I haven't met him. Like me, he also works in the realms of the mind."

"Yes." She thought better of telling Angus that her father was even now working in the realms of Lanon's mind. "Why did you bring me out here?"

"You came willingly," he reminded her.

"So I did, but you invited me."

"Yes, and you came because you did not fear me."

"I did fear you, but I came anyway."

"You are courageous."

Audley laughed aloud. "Not courageous. Curious."

"So am I. You are withholding something from me."

She blushed. "I'm entrusted with a secret," she said.

"Loyalty is honorable," he said. "I will not ask you to betray your secret. Is there anything I can do to assist in this . . . mission?"

Abruptly she looked at him. In that very instant the piercing clarity of his light entered her pupils and penetrated her brain. It was as if she had plugged into the energy of the universe. She had never known such calm. It was as if all the mysteries of the universe were revealed. In here, there were no secrets. Without hesitation she said, "How would you like to come with me into the JCP?"



He was amused. "For what purpose?"

"I think that's where it's happening."

"Where what is happening?"

She suggested, "An upsurge in psychism."

"Well, if that's the case, perhaps I should! Like you, I would not want to miss anything!"

"Have you ever heard of the Zooids?"

He nodded, leading her to conclude that Angus was involved in all this somehow! He had stopped by to inform Alexius of his arrival, he had heard of the work of Jessie Brothers, and he had knowledge that her father's field was mindal, just like his. At once she suspected that someone besides Lanon was interested in the JCP Life Experimental Stations.

"I'll bet you wouldn't even have to buy an airplane ticket," she offered. "I mean, you could just have yourself transported or something." She felt a grin emanate from this companionable new friend.

"But I am a visitor, a tourist, and what is it they say? When in Rome, do as the Romans do! At any rate, I am prepared to finance my venture."

"I wish I was," she mumbled aloud. It would soon be time to return to the REAL world and face her creditors.

He suggested, "Perhaps your venture is being financed for you. After all, wealth is immaterial."

One thing Lanon and Angus had in common was that both their voices crawled into her head.

"Well," she said. "It's getting late. I'd better get back." She found herself so at peace in his company, she was reluctant to leave him. "You want to come for dinner?"

"You are very gracious, but I must make my travel arrangements. I will come after dinner and bring dessert."

Audley grinned. "It's been nice meeting you, Angus," she said. Picking up the parcel for the children, she sauntered off, calling back, "We'll be expecting you!"



He watched her cross the field and stride, rather cockily now, up the street toward the Village Square. As she began her ascent on the Via de Comprende, she felt the connection break. It was then that she remembered she had left her sunglasses under the tree.

BRAD WAS TROUBLED. For years his life had been on a steady upward course, but suddenly he found himself being emotionally buffeted and his career hung in the balance. He had taken a bite out of life and it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Oscar accompanied him back to the Institute of Futurology where they arranged for the relocation of the computer, but Brad wasn't happy about his Aide. There was something innately impudent about Oscar -- his youth, perhaps, but irksome just the same. The way Oscar nudged Brad, for instance, and leered when making reference to either Audley or Sylvia. The kid wasn't a chauvinist or even macho, but something of a sleeze. No doubt General Lassater thought he was "top notch" as an Aide.

Audley was playing head games with him. He thought he knew her well enough to at least give her the benefit of the doubt as to her motivations, but he wasn't pleased with her about-face regarding the wedding date. He hadn't received the support he had hoped for from Doc Will, either, due to the fact that Doc Will was inordinately consumed with this new patient. He tried not to think of Doc Will's patient as competition for Audley's affections, but he did. In his saner moments he didn't really give a damn.

In the meanwhile, Sylvia kept appearing in his mind's eye. When he neglected to attend her party, he felt so guilty he sent her flowers and a telegram then a large check for the benefit but his underlying thoughts were not as honorable. Perhaps he was going through a mid-life crises, he told himself, or maybe even male menopause, but even if he were able to set aside his feelings for his fiancée, how could he disregard the fact that Sylvia was a married woman?



As usual, he gave himself up to his work. The IOF site in Meadowland depressed him; it was almost totally deserted, and without the support of his peers, even the ideal of their work seemed shallow and senseless. What was the point of all these modern devices if humankind didn't put them to good use? He knew now that technology without a heart was a waste of time.

His Manhattan apartment had not been lived in for the three years he had been at the Institute. It was kept clean by building maintenance, but it had no food, no staples. Upon his arrival in Manhattan he put in an SOS call to his mother. She could not have been prouder of her son with the Presidential Assignment, but for all her highbrow ways and elitist values, she was still a mother. She came at once, saw the condition of the apartment and set about making it liveable.

Sam, however, had virtually taken over the penthouse. The two days that it took to move in and set up the complex computer system, taxed the patience of Brad, his mother, the neighbors, the management, and the utility company workers. The formal living room was transformed into an office dominated by Sam, while the dining area was taken over by the printer system and attendant supplies. Only the kitchen, bath and bedroom remained operable as living quarters.

When Sylvia and Oscar arrived at Brad's apartment, following their trek in the Pennsylvania backwoods, the door was open; workers were putting the finishing touches on the power lines and cords that ran everywhere. Brad was at the helm, instructing where and how to set up filing cabinets, drafting tables, lights and research books.

When a disheveled Sylvia showed up, standing open-mouthed in the doorway, his eyes lit up. "What on Urth, Brad? Is this Sam?"

"The one and only," he said, coming to greet her.

"No wonder Audley hates it!"

"Her. Sam is a she. Samantha, meet Sylvia. Sylvia, meet



Samantha."

Sylvia followed Brad into the apartment, peering around Sam to see what was left of the once gracious living room.

"Excuse the mess," Brad said without apology, "but one does what one has to do, and with the IOF temporarily shut down, Sam had to live somewhere."

"Lord," she remarked, searching for an empty chair. "There aren't any more where that came from, are there?" In spite of her complaint, she was impressed that Brad knew about all this stuff.

"Not unless you count my mother. Mother?"

"Yes, Brad?" At once a gracious silver-haired lady came out of the kitchen. A designer apron and a magnificent pearl necklace covered most of her stylish dress. She was taken aback to see Sylvia and Sylvia, too, was caught off-guard.

"Mother, I'd like for you to meet my Investigative Assistant, Sylvia Watergate. Sylvia, this is my mother, Lydia Spencer."

Sylvia imagined how unpresentable she must look, covered with mosquito bites and with dust in her hair. Mrs. Spencer likewise busied herself with a dishtowel. Sensing some awkwardness between the ladies, Brad continued with the introduction. "Sylvia is a friend of Audley, Mother." Mrs. Spencer's eyebrow shot up perceptibly. "She's also the daughter of...."

Sylvia interrupted. "Just Sylvia, if you don't mind. Just plain Sylvia. My only claim to fame is that I've just spent the entire day in mud up to my ankles looking for a needle in a haystack. Please excuse my appearance, Mrs. Spencer. Had I known I was going to meet you, I would have stopped at the hotel first and made myself presentable."

Mrs. Spencer was appeased, particularly since she could not help but notice how her son brightened up at the sight of this attractive young woman who was not wearing a wedding ring. "Nonsense, my dear. I'm not exactly presentable either." She indicated her apron and extended her hand to Sylvia. They shook. Allies. "Brad hasn't lived here for months," she exclaimed. "There



was nothing in the cupboards!"

Even so, the smell of something very savory emanated from the kitchen, and Mrs. Spencer appreciated the delicate way in which Sylvia's nose lifted to catch it.

"Where are you staying?" Brad wanted to know.

"Well, actually, the Grand Hotel," she lied, borrowing on Roger's location, "but I'm not going to stay there. I thought if we're going to be working on this for the next six months or so, I ought to take an apartment. Maybe an efficiency. I have no idea how to go about securing one. Do you know of an agency, Brad?"

"No, but I'm sure Oscar can find something for you."

"That would be fine," she agreed.

Mrs. Spencer, assured that the two were interested in something other than work, excused herself. She removed the apron and retrieved her purse. "You young people go about your business. I've straightened up for you, Brad, and put in some groceries. The roast should be done in about half an hour. Sylvia, maybe you could look in on it so that it's not overdone." She kissed her son on the cheek and stopped at the door. "You know, Sylvia, if you're going to be working in New York with Brad for the next several months, perhaps we might engage you in a game of bridge sometime."

"I'd like that, Mrs. Spencer. I love the game."

Lydia exited with a cheery "Ta-ta!" and when she had gone, Brad said, "She likes you!"

"She does? You mean she approved of me?"

There was an edge to her voice Brad hadn't noticed before. He nodded.

"Well, that's fine, Brad, but frankly I don't give a damn."

Brad was shocked. He had never heard Sylvia utter an off-color word.

"I don't mean to be offensive, Brad, but I've spent my entire life worrying about what other people might think of me, and I'm through with that. I really don't give a fig."

She was so earnest, Brad had to laugh. "Well, good for you,"



he said. Sylvia was going to be fun to work with after all.

She leaned in towards him slightly, revealing the bare mounds of her ample bosom in the V of the soft red sweater. He couldn't help but appreciate the gesture. She begged to use his shower and, of course, he let her. Oscar brought up her travel bag then was sent out to locate an efficiency apartment for the new Investigative Assistant.

At length Sylvia emerged from the bathroom looking totally fresh and new (Doc Will would have said 'virginal'). "Let's see what's going on in your kitchen." She announced. "The roast is done!" As she pulled ingredients from the refrigerator to make a salad, Brad opened a bottle of Cabernet.

"Tell me about your investigation."

She relayed the adventure of the day, as they sipped the wine and fixed the salad, chopping and talking, their energies falling into place. Sylvia noticed how easily they maneuvered around each other and wondered how she had managed to go for so long without being in the intimate company of a man. The dining room being "out of order", they set their places in the kitchenette, all the while talking shop and sipping wine.

"It was probably a wild goose chase, Brad," she concluded, "digging around in a gully for a UFO. The metal detector," she said, "turned up nothing but a rusty old coca-cola bottle cap."

"What about the soil samples?"

"I don't know yet. Oscar dropped them off at the lab."

"What do you hope to find?" he asked, impressed with her efforts if not the results.

"Something," she mused. "Something."

For the next hour and a half, through dinner and the Cabernet, they reviewed Brad's scrupulously legible notes. When she saw the photos in the "For Your Eyes Only" envelope, her heart skipped a beat, for it indicated she was not the only one who had tied in the blackout with galactic disturbances. More than ever, she was convinced that Lanon Zenton was an alien, that Audley was in



trouble, and that Brad's career was on the line unless and until she could prove her hunch.

Later that evening Oscar returned with the lab reports of the soil samples. Handing them to Brad, he asked Sylvia, "Can I give you a lift to your hotel?"

"Never mind, Oscar," Brad said. "We'll be working late tonight."

The smirk on Oscar's face did not go unnoticed.

When the Aide had gone, Sylvia and Brad read the lab report. It revealed that the soil in the area had recently been exposed to high levels of potassium.

"Potassium," they pondered. "What could that mean?"

The computer had little to offer on the element; thus, the circumstances being what they were and Sylvia's perfume being so enticing, Brad had little choice but to change the subject.

"Look," he said. "You know what they say about 'all work and no play'."

Sylvia put down her pencil and blushed. His remark was reckless, but it did open the door for her fantasies to come alive. Pushing aside the lab reports, she admitted, "I guess I was being a bit obsessive."

"Well, I understand how it is to be obsessed with work. I can't say I recommend it."

"Is that an order, boss?"

"No, Sylvia. I don't give orders." He felt compelled to add, "Although maybe if I *had* given more orders, Audley would be my Investigative Assistant instead of you."

"I don't think so, Brad. Audley isn't the type to take orders. I don't think it would have made any difference what you said or did."

He recognized that, and appreciated Sylvia all the more for her honesty. "What about you? What difference is there for you, that you are not wearing your wedding rings?"

Flushing under his steady gaze, she said, "My marriage is a



farce, Brad. It has been for years and I'm tired of living the lie. I need to try to pull my life together."

His eyes were drawn to the deep breath she took. "You look pretty 'together' to me," he observed.

When their eyes met, she couldn't stop the trembling that took hold of her body. There was nothing for them to do now but for Sylvia to turn off the light, and for Brad to carry her into the bedroom, where they remained adhered to each other throughout the night.



## 9

## NEW SOCIAL PARADIGM

### *The Jural Colony Project*

Having declared 0802-LZ medically fit and mentally ready to mingle with humanity, Doc Will prepared Lanon to enter the JCP arena.

"Get dressed," he told him. "And get busy figuring out how to work this TASC. We've been invited into Gateway, so find out everything you can about it while I gather up my notes. We leave in one hour."

Exchanging his comfortable lab uniform for the fudge-colored slacks and forest green jersey, Lanon sat at the Transmit Access System of Communications that was at the heart of the JCP, studying the keyboard for a few minutes, deciphering the many codes.

JCP Headquarters, "Colony Gateway", was enclosed in a polyglass dome to deflect the severe temperature extremes of its Nevada desert locale. Gateway was recently constructed and, like his Home Station, was built on a septenary theme, reflected in sevens. The JCP Headquarters colony was .07 kilometers high and seven kilometers across. There were seven floors in the obelisk-shaped high-rise structure in the center of the colony, and radiating



outward from it were seven escalator arms stretching across the complex. This Minor Transport Line accessed the 777 apartments of the permanent Zooid Elder residents, employees and guests.

Studying the layout, Lanon saw that the landing dock of the Major Transport Line connecting them from Las Vegas, Nevada, was located underground, as was the power plant where solar energy was collected and stored in massive batteries, a primacy source of energy for Gateway and the other JCP communities.

The ground floor of Gateway Headquarters was the social hub of the community. The Center comprised a large lounge and reception area, complete with a lobby bar, surrounded by the kitchens, dining rooms, reading rooms, as well as several game areas. These all fanned out to the patio, which was highlighted by an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Courts for tennis, volleyball, badminton and shuffleboard were situated between the walk-ways which led into the well-tended, park-like grounds, generous with trees, flower beds and park benches.

Between where the polyglass dome attached itself to terra firma and the apartments, space was allotted for "back yard" private gardens. These gardens provided much of the food needs as well as a major form of physical therapy and socialization for the Elders.

The second and third floors of the high-rise were devoted to housing, testing, orienting, classifying and dispatching new inductees. The fourth floor was dedicated to physical fitness. In addition to exercise areas, saunas, spas and an indoor pool, there were massage tables, a clinic and a lab.

Zooidal courts comprised the fifth floor where judicial proceedings, arbitration and mediation took place, all of which could be viewed by the Zooids, if they so chose, by way of their individual TASC's. All manner of personal, family and group counseling sessions took place in this area.

The sixth floor was the learning center, dominated by the main database of the zooidal system of communications, the TASC (Transmit/Access System of Communication). A massive library was



available to all. Several separate rooms were set aside for Planning and were used often by the Elders when setting policy and by the members of the Board when working on Special Projects.

The seventh and uppermost floor comprised the headquarters offices, the main Conference Room, and Jessie's private apartment. The balance of the seventh floor was a deck, accessible to all Zooids and their guests, from where one could enjoy the panoramic view.

"Ready?" Doc asked, suitcase and briefcase in hand.

"Yes, sir," Lanon responded, rising. The woman standing next to Doc Will smiled at him.

"You must be Martha," he said. "I've been looking forward to meeting you." As Doc Will led them all to the car, he said, "I'm glad to have a chance to let you know that I appreciated all those delicious meals you prepared for me over the past several days. I especially enjoyed the little cabbages."

"Brussel sprouts," she replied. It was easy for her to see why Audley was smitten with him. Not only was Lanon well mannered, he was extremely good-looking. "You are very welcome."

Doc Will interrupted their tete-a-tete. "I don't know when I'll be back, Martha," he said. "Screen my calls. If you need to reach me, we'll be at Gateway. Jessie's number is on my desk."

"I know it by heart," she said. "I'll hold down the fort, Doctor. You just enjoy yourself."

At the Santa Barbara airport, the men boarded a small plane and, in spite of the noise and the smell of fuel, Lanon loved the experience of flying. When they landed at the Los Angeles airport, they did not change planes to go on to Nevada, but took a shuttle bus to one of the major hotels.

Lanon was disappointed. "Where are we going? Aren't we going to fly again?"

"No," Doc said. "We'll take the Transport Line. It's faster." They rode the hotel elevator to the underground parking level then entered an adjacent elevator, large enough to contain an automobile.



Here Doc pressed the palm of his hand to a metal panel and punched in a series of numbers. Another door opened, leading them onto a platform where they stepped inside a private train.

"This mode of transportation belongs exclusively to the JCP," he explained. "When you become a Zooid, you are identified by your individual electro-chemical system. That's what I was doing there, letting that metal panel know who I am. It identified me as a member of the JCP and I entered the code for my destination." They entered the train car, sat, and secured themselves into their seats. "Make yourself comfortable. Next thing you know, we'll be there.

There were no windows in the car, but Lanon could feel the vibrations of the transporting vehicle. "How does it work?"

Doc Will reached up and lowered a TASC, adjusted it to Lanon's eye level. "Look it up," he ordered. His own agenda was to review the files he had brought with him.

Lanon scrolled down the Index until he came to Transport Lines then pressed a red button; the screen for Major Transport Lines lit up, revealing a chart of the route connecting the 72 colonies. When commanded, the TASC focused on the Los Angeles-Gateway Major Transport Line. 275 miles, total travel time 36.5 minutes.

Another command, another chart appeared, this one showing the route of the Line across the United States. On this rendering there were many circled numbers. He pressed one number to find a full explanation, in laymen's terms and in technical terms, how the Line was constructed and how to run it. A flashing red light on the chart indicated their current location.

He keyed in Gateway Shuttle. At once the route appeared: Las Vegas, Nevada, bus terminal NNW to Colony Gateway; total 42 miles; travel time 7.5 minutes.

Since Doc Will wasn't inclined to converse, Lanon experimented now with the Communication aspects of the TASC and found himself suddenly confronted with the smiling face of Jessie Brothers. "Hello."



Doc Will looked up from his papers, saw Jessie's image on the screen, and pressed the Audio button. "Haven't you got anything better to do than spy on us?"

Jessie grinned. "No, I was too curious." Jessie hadn't really expected Lanon to be a film-industry rendition of alien life, but he had been sufficiently piqued to tune into the TASC on the incoming Transport Line in order to peer at the man from Zenton. "You're only a minute away from arrival," he said. "I'll meet you at the landing."

As Jessie's image left the screen, Doc Will connected with "Satellite Projection" to reveal Colony Gateway now directly above them. They had only seconds before the screen went blank as they were drawn into the underground terminal of the Jural Colony Headquarters.

As the door of the car opened, they encountered Jessie already on the platform, his hand outstretched to first clasp Doc Will's. "It was good of you to come on such short notice, Doc." Jessie was dressed in a one-piece navy blue jump suit with sock-like slippers on his feet. He was a mature man and very attractive with blue-grey eyes and fine bone structure. Gracefully svelte, with white hair flowing, he had the aura of a poet.

"I'm glad you called!" Doc responded. "We had just finished with all the tests." He jerked his head toward the man from Zenton. "This is Lanon Zenton who you've heard about. Lanon, meet Jessie Brothers."

Jessie had intellectually prepared himself to meet a man from another Constellation, but he wasn't prepared for the psychic satisfaction he experienced when Lanon shook his hand and smiled. The entity from Zenton was utterly convincing as a human being. There was nothing even remotely alien about him and, despite an earlier fleeting anxiety for the welfare of the Zooids, Jessie liked Lanon at once. "Welcome, Lanon."

"Thank you," Jessie replied. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Same here. Well, let's go up!" Jessie led his guests into the elevator.



As the glass elevator lifted them up through the open lobby of the main floor and on up to the seventh floor deck, Doc Will wanted to know, "What in Sam Hill is Audley doing in Spain?"

Jessie shrugged. "Professor Vessey invited her over," he explained, "because of her association with our visitor here. She may be doing some work for us. She'll be here in a day or two," he added.

When they reached the top, Jessie led them to the edge of the deck where they stopped to look out over the flawless expanse of lawn, trees, and flower beds below. Along the walkways, park benches accommodated happy, chatting Elders and the lawn chairs spread out near the busy pool were all in use as well.

"It's not always this crowded," Jessie explained. "We just finished an Orientation yesterday, so today the Elders are taking advantage of the lull. Would you like to sit?" "Why don't you tell me about this mysterious pox and let me get to work, Jessie," Doc said. "I know that you and Lanon have a lot to talk about."

"Alright." He directed them to a nearby table and chairs. "It's hard to describe, Doc. Each case is unique."

"How many cases are there?"

"As of this morning, seventeen. The first case was diagnosed a couple of weeks ago. The only thing consistent in each case is that each patient gets something like a rash on his or her forearms every afternoon; it subsides by early evening."

"In the heat of the day, huh? It's not a heat rash?"

"No. It's more like a blister. Maybe two or three on each forearm, and they itch."

"Maybe an allergy. What else? Fever? Nausea?"

"That's the strange part, Doc. Each manifestation is different. Some are lethargic, some are hypersensitive, some feel nausea, and some have hallucinations. One victim giggles all afternoon. They're all different, and that's what's makes it so hard to diagnose."

"And you have no idea what's causing it?"

"None whatsoever. I don't believe it's contagious."



"Are the victims in quarantine?"

"No, but four of them are in the clinic."

Doc Will stood. "Why don't I run down and take a look at these mysterious blisters before they fade for the day? Lanon, you'll be alright here."

"Oh, yes," Lanon agreed.

As soon as Doc Will was gone, Jessie turned to Lanon, "You're safe here," he assured his guest. "I'm to keep an eye on you."

Lanon nodded, "I appreciate your providing me sanctuary."

Lanon sat.

Unable to contain his fascination any longer, Jessie was full of questions. "I heard from Alexius this morning," he said. "He told me about you."

"Alexius Vessey, yes," Lanon said. "He is the contact personality."

"I've always been very impressed with Alexius and his ideologies. I always knew he had a progressive mind, but I had no idea that the philosophies that are the basis for our zooidal way of life were coming from higher intelligences."

Lanon smiled. "Don't give all the credit to the supernals," he said. "It's you who have done the work!"

"I didn't do it by myself, I assure you! Our society is the result of the Zooids' efforts, their dedication and talents." Jessie deferred praise. "But tell me about your mission, Lanon. What is it, exactly, that you're here to do?"

Lanon explained, "I'm to investigate your society and determine its level of evolution. If they meet certain universe criteria, and if they are willing, the Zooids will be incorporated into the Stream of Time. What that means basically is that a channel of communications will be opened up between the JCP and the rest of the universe."

"The rest of the universe? But who? And why? Other forms of life in the universe are far removed from my frame of reference, Lanon. I've never even considered that there might be



other-terrestrials much less that they would be watching our developments or interested in helping us. I can't begin to speculate what that would mean to the Zooids."

"The Zenton civilization has been watching worlds like yours for hundreds of thousands of years," Lanon said. "Their interest in this world is fairly recent."

"Why?"

Lanon shrugged. "Because they have been enjoying watching the development of this Jural Colony Project and the growth of its inhabitants, much the same as you have been. And they would enjoy contributing further to your development. They don't want to take anything from you."

Jessie realized that if it was true what Alexius and Lanon were saying, the very existence of the JCP was because of these Zenton intelligences. For a moment he felt as if he were a galactic guinea pig and that the universe had used him for some unknown cosmic purpose.

Lanon encouraged him. "What you have done here is heroic! The JCP is a very impressive piece of work!"

"It's probably just as well I wasn't aware of it," Jessie admitted, considerably appeased. "But what would it mean to be in contact with other intelligent life in the universe?"

Lanon shrugged. "You would no longer be alone. You would be able to seek the counsel of those who were older and wiser, more experienced. You would have access to the records of hundreds, maybe thousands of other forms of evolved life to aid you in your development."

"Like having an older Brother, sort of."

"Very much like that. Like having many elder brothers, but they would not invade your privacy or take over or try to coerce you or get you to do something you didn't want to do. You would still be very much your own JCP organism made up of your own Zooid entities. The only really significant difference would be the elimination of mortal death. That's one of the side-effects of being



inducted into the Stream of Time.”

“The elimination of death?” This was not believable!

“Well, the elimination of death as you have known it. You still have to leave this world, but it isn’t regarded as a death, it’s entering into a new way of life.”

Jessie scowled. “I’d have to know more about that.”

“Of course, you would,” Lanon agreed. “We can discuss it anytime you like.”

After a few moments Jessie asked, “What’s the criteria? Are you comparing the zooidal way of life to other life on this planet?”

“No. The rest of this planet is of no concern to us. We know that life on Urth is only semi-civilized. We are not comparing the Zooids to anything. They’re unique and, like any other evolved group, they can’t be compared to any other way of life, because they have evolved their own identity, their own level of reality.”

This Jessie understood and he appreciated Lanon’s acknowledgment, but he persisted, “You aren’t comparing us to other life in the universe either?”

“We aren’t making a comparison at all! We are registering a level of evolution. We’re recording an actuality status. It either is or it isn’t. The society stands on its own merits.”

Jessie acknowledged it was a basic zooidal principle that each Zooid stood on his or her own merits without comparison to the others. He returned to the question. “You said that a side effect would be the elimination of death as we know it. How can death be eliminated?”

“The Portal.” Lanon struggled to find a way to express this concept so that it could be understood. “It’s . . . let me think of an analogy. It’s like a ‘knowing’ comes upon you. You let that ‘knowingness’ happen and you don’t fight it. Instead of giving up your life, you embrace your bigger life and it ‘takes’ you to its new level of existence.”

“Are we talking semantics here?” Jessie asked.



"Since you haven't died, since you are not connected to the Stream of Time, since you do not know of the immensity of the universe and what myriad lives lay ahead of you, and because of your religions that instill in you the fear of god and the wrath of his judgment, you tend to look at death as an end of life. It is only the end of life as you have known it. We discourage the use of the word 'death' for in truth nothing dies. It metamorphoses."

Jessie shrugged. "We're talking semantics."

"Alright then, let's use the term 'terrestrial escape' as a new semantic, or 'home transport'. This new phrase will eventuate in a new attitude and with the new attitude a new belief system is developed and with a new belief system, we create a new paradigm of reality."

"Through the power of words."

"Yes. But no matter what semantics we use, no matter what we call it, the natural process of going through the Portal generates a great deal of energy, a gigantic implosion of energy. Thus, if the Zooids were to approach terrestrial escape as an affirmative action, as a positive experience of passing from this life to the next, they would need to design and build a structure that would be able to withstand the impact of that kind of energy transfer."

Jessie pondered. "Does this have anything to do with transmigration of the soul or something? I ask because, as a society, Zooids don't subscribe to any particular theology."

"No, Jessie. It has nothing to do with religion. Religion is a personal matter and I am not here to convert anyone. I am not here to address the matter of souls or spirits or anything like that. Whether the Zooids have a deity of any kind is not my concern. I'm here only to report my findings and to open up communications between the Zooids and other forms of life in the universe, if you are willing."

"This elimination of death theory. Have you discussed it with Doc Will?" he asked.

"We have discussed death as a door, and he seemed



interested in that as an aspect of Mindal Science. He has done considerable research on the topic, probably due to his wife's terrestrial escape. But I have not discussed with him the details of my mission, nor have I told Audley, although I believe they are both eager to help however they can."

"Well, so am I, for that matter, but I'm still not sure what this is all about. My main concern, of course, is the welfare of the Zooids."

"That is our concern, as well," Lanon said, and Jessie had no reason not to believe him.

THE THING ABOUT THE POX that most fascinated Doc Will was knowing that most non-communicable illnesses are caused by mental distress. His challenge was to find the distress that led to the symptoms. The only consistent symptom was the rash, or more aptly, a blister or two but not more than four, located on the forearms of the victims. In each case the blisters itched for several hours during the afternoon, subsided in the evening, were dormant through the night, then became inflamed and itchy again the next afternoon. Scratching them did not make them spread. Other symptoms manifested on the third day but there was nothing at all consistent in these subsequent, secondary symptoms.

The four victims he examined in the clinic had four reactions. One had a high fever; one was nauseous; one had diarrhea and one had uncontrollable muscle spasms. On their chart, he read about the other thirteen victims. He noted their symptoms were vertigo, hot flashes, cold chills, lack of appetite, insomnia, hallucinations, giddiness, hives, myopia, joint inflammation, gout, indigestion and headache. Doc was nonplused. All 17 victims, being Elders, were between the ages of 60 and 93. Several of the victims had various allergies, such as cat fur or codeine, but the answer didn't seem to be in independent allergies.

When he returned to Jessie's quarters after reviewing the files on the pox victims, Doc asked, "Where's Lanon?"



"I took him to his room," Jessie said. "He said something about wanting to check in with his Home Station. What did you find out about the pox?"

Doc Will confessed, "I don't know what to make of it, Jessie. I see no evidence of it being contagious, so I don't think there's any threat of an epidemic. I'll review their medical histories to see if there's anything specific they have in common aside from being old, but I'm not hopeful."

"You're talking about 1,000 cumulative years there, Doc," Jessie observed.

Doc Will shrugged. "I wasn't doing anything else anyway," he said. "Did you get to visit with Lanon?"

"I did." Jessie nodded. "It's a good thing Alexius was the one to break the news to me. I don't think I'd have believed Lanon otherwise."

Doc Will acquiesced, "No reason why you should!"

"He doesn't look alien at all!" Jessie reiterated.

"Oh, I know," Doc Will agreed. "He's human in every way, at least in medical and mindal science terms. He's emotionally retarded, though."

"There's something here I don't understand, Doc," Jessie confided. "If you've tested him and find no reason not to believe he is who he says he is, that would seem to indicate that we're being honored somehow by getting to know him, help him. Wouldn't you agree?"

"No doubt about it."

"Then why don't I sense any enthusiasm from you? I'd think this kind of thing would be right up your alley."

Doc Will scratched the back of his neck. "Academically, yes. Intellectually, yes. Scientifically, yes. But personally? It scares the hell of me, Jessie."

"What does?"

"His relationship with my daughter for one thing. She has turned her life around for this guy and I don't like it. I want my girl



to live a normal life. I want her to marry and have children. I want grandchildren to carry on the Blackstone genes." He sighed. "But it's also about death."

Peering at his old comrade, Jessie realized that Doc was facing his own mortality. "You're talking about yours!"

"Yes, I am," he avowed. "You know, when Lanon told me who he was and started talking about this Stream of Time stuff, he asked for my help and you know what my response was? I asked, 'Am I expected to die?'"

"But you aren't. Are you?"

"No, but it's like something in me volunteered! Something in me said, 'I want to do it! I want to be the first one to go through that door!' Jessie, I don't want to die. But the door! The Portal! That's different. I don't know why it's different, but it is."

It was Jessie's turn to sigh. "Well, look, Doc, we don't know that much about it yet. We haven't really discussed it fully. I'm going to have to talk to the Board members about it and the Zooids themselves are going to have to be consulted. I wouldn't start making out my Last Will and Testament already if I were you."

It was meant as a way of keeping Doc in perspective, but it seemed to have come too late. "I already have," he said. And there was finality in his voice. And resolve.

SYLVIA'S FIRST INSTINCT was to reach across the ruffled covers to feel Brad next to her. She caressed the downy, silken hairs of his body until he woke to make love with her again.

"Penny," he said afterward, watching her supine and sated.

"Hummmm?" she purred. "Happy, happy, happy."

He smiled down at her and kissed her nose. "I'm glad."

She hugged him again before she'd let him get up.

"What do you eat breakfast?" he asked, pulling on his robe.

She sat up. "I don't know. I don't usually get up in time."

"Brunch then," he said, heading for the kitchen. "How about coffee?"



"Ummmm, yes. Where are you going?"

"To the shower," he called.

"Wait for me."

They were still lathering when Oscar arrived. He helped himself to the fresh perked coffee and browsed through the papers lying next to Sam. Brad came out in time to find him holding the "For Your Eyes Only" envelope. "Oscar!" he snapped. "What the hell are you doing?"

Oscar met him coolly. "Just waiting for you, boss."

"You aren't authorized to look at my data."

"I ... I really didn't look at the data. I was just looking at that seal. It's pretty neat."

"Never mind that seal. Never mind any of my stuff. I ever catch you near my data again, I'll have you removed as my Aide. You got that?"

"Yes, sir. But I didn't see anything. Really."

"I want you to arrange for a car and a plane. Sylvia and I are flying to Malibu.

"Ain't I coming?"

"No. I need you to go to the library and look up everything there is to know about potassium."

Oscar was visibly dismayed. "Potassium?"

"That's right. Find out who discovered it, when and where. Find out what they do with it, who uses it, is it mined and if so where. Is it combustible, flammable, biodegradable, everything."

Oscar shrugged. "You're the boss."

"And don't bother finding Ms. Watergate an efficiency."

"Yes, sir." That was information Oscar could understand. He grinned an impudent grin.

"Wipe that smirk off your face."

"Yes, sir. When will you be back?"

"I don't know."

At that point Sylvia emerged. Oscar's look to her left no doubt as to what he thought of her taking over his job. He didn't like



it one bit.

"Good morning, Oscar," she crooned.

"Ma'am."

"Be a good boy, Oscar, and get us some doughnuts."

"Anything else, sir?"

"Oh, and Oscar," Sylvia went on. "Do you still have the metal detector or did you return it already?"

"It's in the car. I was just going to take it back."

"Bring it up," she instructed. "When you bring the doughnuts." She returned then to the sanctity of Brad's bedroom.

"That'll be all, Oscar," Brad said in dismissal, then went in to find Sylvia brushing her hair. He liked the way her eyes lit up when he came into the room. He liked the way she made him feel, supporting what was important to him.

"Penny?" she asked.

"Just thinking."

She stood up. "I know you were." Her arms slid easily around his slim waist. "'Bout me?"

He nodded, took her in his arms and kissed her nose. "I was just thinking that in all the years I've known you, I've never really known you."

"I've never really known myself."

"What happened?"

Lanon came along, she thought, but she shrugged and said, "Life."

"Well, I'm glad."

She burrowed her head in his chest. "Me, too. Happy, happy, happy."

By the time Oscar returned with the doughnuts and the metal detector, Brad and Sylvia were ready to leave, having locked all the data away.

Late that afternoon they pulled their rental car into the driveway of Audley's Malibu studio where a red Lambourghini and a yellow Ferrari announced that, since Audley wasn't home, who was?



A very flashy young man in tiger-striped bikini briefs and a fishnet tank top answered their knock. Behind him in the studio, three other gaily-clad fellows were enjoying their music loud.

"Who are you?" Sylvia demanded, over the din.

"Who are *you*, darling," he returned. A certain lisp and inflection told her all she needed to know. The music stopped and she turned on the charm.

"I'm Audley's friend, Sylvia. This is Audley's fiancé, Dr. Bradford Spencer.

He sized them up. "I'm Eugene, Audley's house sitter."

"Her house sitter? Where did she go?"

Eugene shrugged.

"How long will she be gone?"

He shrugged again. "Six months, maybe more, maybe less."

Sylvia pouted. "Mmmm, I see."

"Anything else? I don't know where she can be reached."

"Well," Sylvia brightened, "never mind about her. What I'm really here for is," she said conspiratorially, "last week, when I was Audley's house sitter, I think left a diamond here."

Eugene remonstrated, "Oh, I assure you there's no diamond here, Sylvia. I would have noticed."

"It's just a chip. I think it fell out of my ring. Would you mind if I took a peek?"

Eugene was too charmed with Sylvia's style to deny her. He gestured her inside.

"Brad, would you bring up the device?"

Brad was down the stairs and up again in a flash, with the metal detector.

"I slept on the couch when I was here," she said to the curious on-lookers. The metal detector glided easily over the sofa and the carpet near the music center.

"I didn't know you could detect diamonds with a metal detector," Eugene observed.

"It's a new model. State of the art." It registered high levels



of potassium.

"Why would it be registering potassium?" asked a sharp-eyed fellow with long red fingernails. "Where would that come from?"

Sylvia gave him one of her sultry looks. "Maybe a banana."

Red Fingernails giggled. Sylvia prepared to leave.

"Well, I guess you're out of luck, Sweetie," Eugene said as he accompanied them to the door. "No diamonds. Just potassium."

Sylvia was undaunted. "But I'm a gold digger, Darling. Any old thing will do." She touched him on the arm. "Thank you so much for letting us take a look."

Eugene had been entertained; he didn't mind. "Come again, Sylvia, and bring your toy. We'll go beach-combing."

"Thanks for the invitation, Eugene. Don't forget to water the coleus! Ta-ta!"

"What now?" Brad asked, in support of Sylvia's path of investigation.

"Now we go to Doc Will's."

Brad balked. He didn't want to see Doc Will. Rather, he didn't want Doc Will to see him with Sylvia. "What's Doc Will got to do with your investigation?"

"Nothing. But Doc Will won't be there," she said. "He and Lanon left yesterday."

Brad was alarmed. "Where did they go?"

"That's what we're going to find out."

Brad had no more idea what Sylvia was doing than the man in the moon. He didn't really care. He was away from Oscar, away from the IOF, away from Lassater and away from Audley. To him, this was a well-deserved vacation. They headed north.

Sylvia was beside herself with her new evidence. To her, the potassium was proof that Lanon was an alien who had landed in Twilah Leighton's gully the night of August 14<sup>th</sup> and whose arrival had caused the blackout. Her conflict, however, was that she couldn't tell Brad about her theory. For all of it, she still had a loyalty to her best friend. By nightfall they were in New Santa



Barbara where Martha was surprised and pleased to see them.

"Come in, come in," she said. "I was just fixing myself some dinner. Can you stay and join me?"

"That would be great," Sylvia admitted. The airplane fare had long since digested. "We've been hard at work!"

"Where's Doc Will?" Brad asked on the way to the kitchen.

"Oh, he and Lanon left," she said. "Didn't Sylvia tell you?"

He shrugged and made a place for himself at the kitchen table. "Somewhere I had the idea they would be right back. Where are they? When did they go?"

"They left early yesterday morning to see Mr. Brothers," she said, putting out two more place settings. "Mr. Brothers called here and asked Dr. Blackstone to come and investigate a virus or something."

Sylvia ran her stockinged toe along Brad's ankle under the table. "Did he say how long he would be gone?" she asked.

"No, he didn't. He just said 'indefinitely' and that could mean anything."

"Did he say specifically where they were going? Was it Gateway?"

"He wrote it down," Martha said, serving Brad a portion of ragout. "It's on his desk. He always leaves me instructions and a number where he can be reached in case of an emergency." She handed Brad the salad then thought to ask, "This isn't an emergency, is it?"

"Oh, no," Brad assured her. "Just routine."

"Why don't I go in and get the note and find out where he is for you?" Martha offered.

Sylvia beat her to it. "I'll get it, Martha," she said, getting up. "You stay here with Brad and make sure he gets enough to eat."

Once inside Docs' study, Sylvia latched the door, quickly went to the desk drawer and took out the key to his file room. Under "Z" she found the file on Lanon Zenton, which contained reams of psychological and physical test results. Most of it was scientific



gibberish. She flipped through the pages until she came to Doc Will's handwritten summary:

"Subject extremely susceptible to stimuli. Shows no inclination towards violence or passion, likely due to underdeveloped emotional framework. Acutely aware of all environmental factors/influences. Subject has well-defined value standards and advanced ideologies. Does not respond to negatives. Does not accept death. Innate gregarious tendency exhibited (conflicting with undeveloped emotional framework). Refined sensibilities. Enjoys silence. Keen appreciation for truth and beauty; has aversion to discord. Well-moderated sex drive. Sterile (unverified). High potassium levels tapered to normal on day 5."

Sylvia copied Doc Will's notes verbatim, returned the file, locked the file room, and replaced the key in the desk. She turned the light out in the study and returned to the kitchen.

Brad greeted her with, "Hey! Did you get lost? We were about ready to come looking for you."

"Gee. Can't a girl powder her nose?" She sat.

"Did you find it?" Martha asked.

"It was on his desk, just like you said." Picking up her fork, she complained, "Okay, now we know where Doc Will and his patient are, but what I want to know is, where's Audley? She didn't even call me to tell me she wasn't coming to my party!"

"I don't know where she is, Sylvia, but she's been gone for several days," Martha said. "How was your party?"

"Fine, thanks, except nobody came!" She pouted, then plunged into her dinner while telling Martha in great detail about the guests who attended, the food she served, and all the gossipy details they enjoyed.

When they were finished with dinner, Brad suggested they push off for Gateway but Martha objected. "You don't have to go tonight, do you? Why don't you just stay here and go on to Gateway in the morning? Both of you know your way around upstairs." She wasn't born yesterday.



"That's very gracious of you, Martha," Sylvia purred. "And there's a clock in Audley's room, so you won't even have to bother waking us up in the morning."

"Oh, you're no bother." She wouldn't hear of them helping her clear the table. "You young ones run along and enjoy yourselves. I'll fix you breakfast in the morning before you go."

Brad and Sylvia got a little more sleep that night than the night before, but not by much, and the following morning, after a gluttonous breakfast, they set out for Nevada, driving into the rising sun, feeling in their souls that it was a brand new day.

BY THE TIME SHE CLIMBED THE HILL to the Vessey household, she had filled herself with dread that she had somehow done the wrong thing in making the acquaintance of the enigmatic Angus. To assure herself she had said or done nothing to endanger Lanon, she insisted on sharing with Alexius the details of her experience in meeting the Psychist, and repeating their conversations in the cow pasture, but Alexius could find no fault with her actions.

"He invited your friendship, Audley. Feel honored. Don't be anxious about these new developments; learn to enjoy yourself!"

Somewhat appeased, she asked, "What is a Psychist?"

"Something like a clairvoyant, I suppose."

"A mind-reader?"

"It's not so much that a Psychist reads minds as it is that he perceives the Light. Did Lanon mention Nucleus to you?"

She nodded, "He mentioned it; I don't know what it is."

"It's something like your soul," he said, confusing her even further. "Mortals don't know much about Nucleus, but Angus is an expert. Ask him about it when you see him."

"I invited him to come here for dessert this evening. I hope that was alright."

"I'm glad you did! Maria has the night off, and Dierdre is taking the children to see a play. This will give us both a chance to get to know Angus better."



When Angus arrived at the door, wearing Audley's sunglasses and without his hood, the sunglasses appeared to be suspended in mid-air. As she reached for them, giggling, Alexius took the chocolate torte Angus extended.

Accepting the portion of torte Audley cut for him, Alexius said, "Audley tells me you might be returning to the States with her. If you do, you will get to experience the zooidal society we have created with the Zentonites!" He then accepted the portion of torte which Angus declined.

"Yes," the visitor said, following Audley and pushing Alexius in the wheelchair into the livingroom. "I'm told there is an upsurge in psychism taking place there!"

"There's an upsurge, alright!" Alexius agreed. "The Zenton civilization has sent an emissary to investigate the evolutionary status of the JCP, which is our creation!"

Audley had been reluctant to tell Angus of her association with Lanon and his mysterious mission, but Alexius seemed to regard Angus as one of the family.

"Aha!" Angus said, pushing his host up to the table. "That's why the upsurge! Yes, of course," he agreed.

"Tell me about psychism, Angus," Audley said, urging the guest to sit. "How long have you been a psychic?"

"Oh, I'm not a psychic," he said. "I'm a Psychist."

"I guess I don't know the difference," she said.

"Well," he ventured, "a psychic reads minds. They sense. They intuit and maybe even predict. I don't just read minds, I anticipate them. Sometimes I do psychic surgery. I manipulate how the mind works - to turn on the Light."

"You mess with people's minds? Isn't that dangerous?"

Angus chortled. "I've had a lot of experience. I've been in existence for some 5,000 years, much more than that by Urth's measurement of time, and I've been practicing psychism since I was a youngster. I qualify as an expert."

"Yes, I see." It was too preposterous to consider anyone



being 5,000 years old, so she reduced her inquiries to something she could more readily grasp. "What's going on with Lanon?" she dared to ask.

"Oh, he's having a marvelous time!" Angus revealed.

"Isn't he tired of being cooped up in Dad's lab?"

"But he isn't in a lab!" Angus said. "He's in the desert."

"That would be Gateway, headquarters for the Zooid society and Jessie Brothers' base of operations," Alexius said, glad for the update.

"How did you know that, Angus?" she asked.

"Keen sense perception. Psychism." Her confusion was evident. She could not see Angus, and Alexius would only smile, but at length he elaborated, "Very few people use their higher sense perceptions. Most people are too intellectual, too skeptical, or too caught up in making a living to practice psychism."

"You see," Angus went on, "the denser life forms are simply too self-absorbed. For instance, here you are face-to-face (as it were) with 5,000 years of experience and all you care about are your emotional attachments." Her face burned in embarrassment as she suddenly realized the degree of her own self-absorption. "But that is not to be deplored," he consoled. "This is what's to be expected on the path of evolution. The race must survive in order to grow up and survival requires a certain amount of self-interest. Once basic survival has been assured, however, and the higher energy levels begin to emerge, my specialty enters in."

She thus inquired, "How do you recognize these higher energy levels?"

"As a light. Some lights flicker, some lights burn steadily. Many Urthlings have no perceptible light at all and I simply can't see them."

She made so bold as to ask, "Then how do you keep from running into them?"

"Well, they do have an energy field," he explained. "They're easy to avoid. I prefer to go after the lights that burn steadily, like



Alexius here."

"Does this happen often, Alexius?" she asked. "I mean, do other visitors pop in on you like this?"

"Student visitors visit the planet often," he replied. "They don't always come to dinner. They don't even necessarily come to Guadix. But they do come to Urth."

"Are there many?"

Alexius and Angus responded in unison. "Many."

"Why? I mean, what do they come here for? Are we such a curiosity?"

"Yes, we are!" Alexius laughed.

"Your world is like a baby," Angus offered. "And all elders enjoy babies."

She envisioned a massive parental universe cooing down at the planet, hearing it cry for food and to have its diaper changed. The image brought a smile to her face.

"Like an infant," Angus continued, "Urth was born and it is now starting to get into things. It needs attention, and so we visitors come to tend to Urth in our different capacities."

Alexius enlarged the concept for her. "Lanon, on the other hand, has come to see just how grown up some of us have become."

"It seems odd to me that Lanon would be the one to do that," she said, "since he's not very experienced. I mean, compared to you, Angus."

"That may be the wisdom of the selection, since he is a bit of a babe himself. Do you see?"

"I guess."

"You feel very protective of him," Angus observed.

She nodded, thinking about how the visitors must feel, protective of people.

"Audley has been teaching Lanon the art of living," Alexius added.

"So! You are working for the universe already!" Audley was pleased to recognize the compliment in Angus' words, "It is no



worder, then, that I saw your light shining."

ALTHOUGH THEY VISITED until late and Audley woke early, she felt rested, prepared to return to the States, and enter the JCP. Dierdre met her on the patio for coffee. "Did you enjoy your last evening in Guadix?" she asked.

"Yes, I did," she said simply, having no idea how to explain Angus. "I enjoyed every bit of my visit here."

"I'm glad," Dierdre smiled. "It has been wonderful having you as a houseguest, Audley. My sister also enjoyed meeting you."

Audley was surprised at how fond she had become of Dierdre in such a short time. "I'll never forget you, Dierdre, and all that you've shared with me. If you're ever in America, please come and visit me."

"I shall. If I ever leave Guadix." The children ran across the lawn, calling attention to the gate where Angus waited, shrouded in his velvety cloak, waiting to accompany Audley to the train station.

As they walked down the Via de Comprende, Audley found herself beset by anxieties about re-entering the mainstream of life. She had felt safe here in Guadix with these people and with Angus. Her immediate worry was how people would react to the Psychist's still very nebulous presence.

Sensing her anxiety, Angus whispered, "Don't worry about me. I have not lived for 5,000 years without learning survival techniques and without gaining insight into other life forms." Of course, her concerns were ridiculous. At the train station, however, he whispered, "Watch."

Angus then detached himself from her and walked away, standing alone on the platform, a stranger. Instantly he was just another person, so insignificant he wasn't even worth taking time to notice. And then, on the train, Angus sat alone, hunched over as if asleep, merging quite effectively with the other passengers, leaving Audley free to once again enjoy the Andalusian countryside.



Her perception of the landscape had changed. She now felt tenderness towards the Urth. She saw the life-style of the cave dwellers as a living museum, a reminder of prehistoric humanity. She saw the fertility of the fields and the billowing clouds as a nurturing relationship. The vivid red poppies reminded her of blood, and the rain, tears of joy. "I perceive, Lanon." she smiled. "I perceive!"

In Madrid, they taxied to the airport and then, without warning, in the hustle of getting their tickets and boarding the flight to New York, her mood took a nosedive. Were it not for Angus in the adjacent seat, she would have allowed herself to succumb completely.

"How rude people are to each other!" she observed, "pushing their way to their own ends." It saddened her that people were so impersonal. Why had she never noticed this before? Had she, like them, been in such a big hurry to get somewhere, too busy to notice, too preoccupied with herself to acknowledge the simple existence of other people?

Angus, in the adjacent seat, patted her hand and shifted towards the window. He didn't have a thing to worry about. No one would see him. He was invisible, as was she, as are we all until someone takes the time to notice. "How much mankind is missing!" she realized. Simple acts of courtesy, thwarted by the very nature of a self-absorbed lifestyle. In such a hurry to get where? To attain what? "People don't really know each other because they don't really know themselves," she concluded, "and they seem afraid to find out."

She felt the weight of her musings as a dark cloak, similar in essence to Angus', and she recognized how having insight carried with it certain responsibilities. No wonder people didn't develop keen sense perception. They would have to develop tolerance and compassion and patience as well. They would come to see the world as a living thing and all life in it as precious. Most people don't act precious, and it's hard to love unlovely mankind.

Of course the Zooids made perfect sense now! All that talk



about selflessness that her father had spoken of, that she had ignored for years. She now understood what he had been working towards all this time, and what a failure she must appear to him. Her eyes filled with tears to think of the distress that she must have caused him. She would look at him now, really look at him. She would look at Martha, too, with her loyalty and devotion and pride in service. And all of this was being brought home to her because of the man from Zenton. What an impact his presence had made on her life! More than ever she was determined to protect him from the likes of the semi-civilized, from people who would demean him and destroy him. She would go with him into the JCP communities. She would go with him to the ends of the Urth!

Angus reached over and patted her hand. At last, she slept.

At the airport terminal in New York, she made connections for the next leg of their journey. A call to Santa Barbara confirmed that Doc Will and Lanon had gone to Gateway. Calling that number, she was surprised when Jessie himself answered the phone.

"Don't you have a secretary, Jessie?" she asked.

"Matter of fact, I don't," he said. "The word secretary comes from the Latin word 'secret' and Zooids don't have any secrets. What can I do for you, Audley?"

"I just got back in the States. I've been visiting with Professor Vessey for ... what? A week?"

"I know. I spoke with him."

"Did he tell you I have a traveling companion?"

"Yes. Another visitor."

"Well, can we come to Gateway?"

"Yes, of course. You're calling from New York?"

"Yes. Where do we go from here?"

"Fly into Las Vegas. When you get there, go to the bus terminal and ask for the Gateway Shuttle."

"The Gateway Shuttle," she repeated. "Alright. How is Dad? And Lanon?"

"They're both fine. We'll be expecting you."



She didn't know how much Jessie knew of all this, but she knew he was in on it, whatever it was, and that made them comrades. "Thanks, Jessie," she said sincerely. "You're welcome." So did he.

She ordered breakfast but it was terrible. After the café con leche in Guadix, American coffee was insipid. The eggs were like rubber. The potatoes were cold. Everything was tasteless and overpriced. There was no courtesy, no real service. Unsightly litter was strewn everywhere. She was embarrassed to be an American citizen. She couldn't wait to get out of New York.

At last, it was time for the flight. Once on board, however, the flight was delayed. The plane sat with all its engines running while the clock ticked away. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes. She began to fidget. Other carriers in front of them, unable to take off, taxied on the runway, queuing up, milling and swarming. Half an hour. Forty-five minutes.

Flight attendants were conspicuously unavailable to complain to. Over an hour now, with all their engines running. The air, even in the compartment, was thick with fumes. Poor baby Urth. How much fuel oil was this taking up? And for what? A pilot? A faulty carrier up ahead? No answers, no excuses, no comment. Just waste. A waste of time, a waste of fuel. A hideous, inexcusable waste. No wonder it cost so much to fly!

Angus patted her hand.

"Angus," she demanded somewhat irritably, "where do you go? Are you here with me or are you off somewhere?"

"I am right here. Resting."

"How can you rest?"

"What else is there to do?"

"I don't know." What else indeed was there to do? She did feel like such a baby.

No sooner had the plane left the ground than Audley fell asleep again, acknowledging that psychism took a lot of energy.

Las Vegas at twilight was a sight to see. She hadn't been to



Vegas for years, but she had no thought to stop. The experience she was having was a gamble of a lifetime. When they found their way to the bus terminal and asked the attendant for the Gateway Shuttle, she was surprised to see that it was not a bus, but a something like a subway, a Transport Line. The attendant keyed in a code and the car sped away under the desert.

DOC WILL AND LANON met them at the landing. The embrace between Lanon and Audley was spontaneous and sincere, but it didn't sit well with the good doctor. Angus, emerging from the Transport Line, noticed Dr. Blackstone's disgruntlement. "Young love is so beguiling, is it not?" he said to Wilhelm, directing him discretely away from the young couple. "I can remember when I was first in love, can't you?"

Doc Will couldn't take his eyes off the mysterious visitor. The scientist couldn't decipher the gauze-like aura concealing the face and eyes of this peculiar visitor, but his mental acumen was well aware that he was being brought up short for being impatient with the infatuation between Audley and Lanon.

"What kind of an apparition are you, anyway?" Doc Will blurted.

"I'm an old man just like you, and just as cantankerous if I choose to be, so what of it?"

Doc Will was jarred to his senses. "Well. Sorry. Didn't mean to be rude." He extended his hand then quickly pulled it back. "I'm Wilhelm Blackstone."

Angus bowed. "I am glad to greet you, Wilhelm. Your light shines true."

"What light?"

"The light by which I recognize you."

"Oh. Alright." He muttered something about foreign potentates and stuffed his fists into his pockets as Lanon and Audley came up behind them. Audley hugged her father, and true to her resolution to truly look at him, peered deep into his eyes. Doc Will



pulled back. "What the hell are you looking at?"

She giggled and hugged him again. "You! You're so funny when you act the grouch."

Doc Will harumphed but his attention perked up when he noticed that Angus and Lanon seemed to be engaged in some kind of telepathic communication. Audley smiled, knowing that Angus was reveling in Lanon's keen sense perception.

"This is Angus, Daddy. I met him in the Village of Guadix through Professor Vessey. You're really going to like him once you get to know him." Lanon and Angus still stood locked into each other's energy systems. Finally Audley yanked on Lanon's sleeve and said, "Lanon, let me introduce you to Angus."

"We've met," Angus said to her, releasing the connection. "We've been reminiscing."

"I was just a boy then," Lanon revealed. "What brings you to this planet, Angus?"

"The usual. Psychism on a young planet. I'm told this is your first assignment."

"It's just a reporting assignment, actually," Lanon said modestly. "I take notes, report in." On hearing this, Audley recognized she and Lanon shared the same career.

"And opening new doors, perhaps," Angus said.

"Well, we hope to, of course, but I've hardly begun the work. Being human takes some time to get used to."

Angus nodded toward Audley. "You certainly have a comely companion."

Lanon smiled at her, causing her to blush. "Her father does not approve of me, however." Doc Will, who had been gaping at the interchange between the two entities, cleared his throat to speak but at that point Jessie approached in a jubilant mood.

"This is all really very exciting," he announced to them all. "Welcome, Angus!" He slightly bowed to the visitor who bowed in return, almost as a whisper, then nodded to Audley who acknowledged him kindly.



THE DO-OR-DIE MISSION

If the truth were told, Doc Will was experiencing a spasm of jealousy. He had always been the elder, the most revered, he always had the most startling information and insights. He was dwarfed by these two aliens, while Jessie was completely taken in by them, as was his daughter.

"Well, Audley," Jessie continued, playing the host, "you must be very tired from your trip."

"No!" Audley objected. How could she possibly sleep? "I slept. So did Angus." Lanon and Angus exchanged a grin.

"How about some refreshment then?"

"In the lounge?" Lanon suggested, drawing Audley close to him.

"That's the best idea you've had all day, Lanon," Doc piped. "I could use a drink!"

Jessie guided the entourage up the elevator and across the lobby to the lounge. Doc Will poured and downed a double shot of bourbon while everyone got situated. Audley and Lanon were enmeshed on a settee facing Angus in a wingback chair, obviously delighted by the developing love affair, but Audley became so unnerved by Angus' glee, she relocated herself to a nearby ottoman.

Jessie served drinks and snacks then pulled up a chair and for a moment no one spoke. "Doc," Jessie finally urged, "Tell us about our pox victims."

Doc was honored to begin the socializing process. "Well," he expressed to the group, "I had a hunch early on that this was a symptom of psychic disturbance. The only thing these victims have in common is that they are Elders, so I probed for their reactions to the prospect of dying. Without exception they all felt they were living on borrowed time already, which is common for people their age." Dr. Blackstone was gratified that everyone, including the enigmatic Angus, was paying attention. "Aside from the pox," he continued confidently, "they are all in relatively good health, so my hunch was that the symptoms of the pox are caused by the prospects of their imminent demise."



Lanon asked, "Are you saying they are afraid to die?"

"No, they're not afraid to die. They're afraid they're going to, and there is a difference. If you know something, you can deal with it. They don't know what's happening to them. They know they're afflicted with something, but they don't know if they'll die of it. It's the prerequisite to dealing with the fact."

Although Angus nodded his head in agreement, Jessie said, "I don't understand. These are Elders who have benefitted from an entire course in Aging and Dying as part of our educational system. Why should they be having adverse reactions to something they know about?"

"Well, Jessie," Doc explained, "they're educated but they're not experienced. Knowing something in your head is not the same as knowing it in your gut!"

Lanon added, "I understand that, but it doesn't explain the blisters."

"No," Doc admitted, "it doesn't. Not yet. But these patients' secondary symptoms reveal a lot about their specific anxieties. My interpretation is that each patient is manifesting his or her preconceived notion of what will happen when they leave here." Having now their full attention, he sat down on the settee Audley had vacated, and elaborated. "The giddy one, for example, simply can't wait to go! The one with diarrhea is scared shitless. The one with cold sweats is insecure. I am oversimplifying, perhaps, but in terms of Mindal Science, it seems pretty obvious. Except, as you say, it doesn't explain the blister."

Lanon nodded, "But the blister identifies the victim."

The air stirred as Angus swept it with his quasi-visible arm. "The answer is near at hand," he announced with full confidence, then resoundingly changed the subject by asking, "Lanon, is your assignment of a confidential nature?"

"No, it's not confidential," Lanon said. "It's selective."

Audley added, "It's Lanon that's confidential."

"To those who are not approved, my origin and purpose are



confidential, yes, but, of course, everyone here is approved."

"Tell us, then, about your assignment." Angus urged. "What is your Mission?"

"My mission, simply put, is to study this Jural Colony Project and, depending upon how evolved it is, recommend the opening of a channel of communication and a method of terrestrial escape."

"Only this one society?"

Lanon nodded. "It is the only society on this planet I am interested in because it is the only advanced group of people in residence here. Dr. Blackstone, perhaps you could tell Angus about the global situation of this world."

Doc Will, who had warmed to the discussions, was delighted to elaborate. "In general, human society on this planet is backward and extremely self-oriented. It's a very troubled world." He shook his head and used his favorite profanity: "It's primitive. It's filled with violence, sick with apathy and disease. It's polluted. It's politically, economically and geographically fragmented, so there is nothing to congeal its differences. The imbalance of wealth ... well," he ran his fingers through his hair, "the more advanced nations are rampant with greed and corruption, while the more backward nations are stagnating in sloth and despair. On all levels, illicit drug and alcohol abuse are testimony of the need for some kind of higher reality, or at least a more equitable reality."

"There are exceptions," Angus suggested.

"Of course," Jessie said. "We hope to assimilate them."

"But tell me more about these Zooids. I understand them to be the brainchild of Zenton, and brought into being by you, Jessie, through Alexis' connection with Zenton intelligences."

"Yes." he acknowledged, appreciating the perspective of the alien. "Let me explain. Zooids are the inhabitants of this society, the Jural Colony Project, which now comprises 72 individual communities, or colonies. Zooids are people who are united by their ideals. They are connected by their own transportation system and by their communication system. Including Penn State Reserve, the



population of the JCP is in the neighborhood of 50,000."

"You say they are united by their ideals...." Angus urged.

"Yes," Jessie continued. "Our societal behavior is based on interaction. Zooids are inter-dependent. Even though we are individuals, we function as part of an organism. In this kind of a living system, one cannot rise higher than the others, since all are parts of the whole. In the communities, for example, there are no wealthy people and no poor people. Our value system is not based on economics."

"Doesn't this foster mediocrity?"

"On the contrary," Doc Will elaborated. "Our goals are for higher levels of perfection.

"But if one cannot rise higher than another...."

"Well, we function as a living organism and, as such, we are always alert to retrogression and dis-ease, for when one aspect of an organism is dysfunctional, the entire body is affected. When the organism is healthy, however, when it is functioning optimally, it develops an energy that is larger than the sum of its parts. Since this societal organism is alive, it takes on more energy, more power, more potential than it would if it were operating as each man, or woman for himself."

"Or herself," Audley put in.

"Thus," Angus said, "the greatest barrier to your success would be individual ambition. Self-determinism."

"Yes. Asocial aspirations," Doc Will said. "A self-absorbed life pays off only in externals which do not provide permanent satisfactions. Zooids are people who have come to recognize the emptiness of a self-centered existence and have set out to create a life-style which pays off internally rather than externally."

"Lemme guess," Audley offered. "Morality, responsibility, values, and maturity?"

"Among others," Doc grinned, appreciating his daughter's quantum leap of growth.

"But," Jessie added, "personal expression, such as creativity,



is certainly encouraged."

Angus nodded. "Unique," he offered. "I'd be glad to assist in any way I can."

"As a matter of fact you can help," Lanon suggested. "If Audley is willing to do some research for us, her fact-finding would be greatly aided by your powers of perception, Angus. Maybe the two of you together could investigate some of these colonies and report your findings back to me. I could then forward them on to my Home Station as reference material when I submit my findings. Is that something that would interest you both?"

It interested Audley a great deal but Angus balked, "Before I agree, I should point out that Audley is somewhat concerned about her financial condition."

"Angus!" she chastised.

"He's right, Audley," her father affirmed.

Jessie suggested, "How does 'Journalist on Contract' sound?"

"That sounds great!" she acknowledged.

"We'll work out some amicable terms."

Angus smiled. "Then we would be delighted."

"Excellent!" Jessie stood. "Check in with me in the morning, Audley, and we'll discuss your assignment." He stood and paused before his guests. "My friends, you must excuse me. It's been a full day and there are still several things on my desk I need to attend to before I turn in. I just want you to know how pleased I am to be part of this. Please, make yourselves comfortable. Lanon, Doc, if you would show Angus and Audley to the guest wing?"

"You bet, Jessie," Doc said, making his way to the bar for a nightcap. "Anyone else for refreshment?" He tossed a skeptical glance toward Angus and raised an eyebrow to Lanon.

Angus lifted himself up and drew Lanon with him. "We will leave you to visit with each other. Audley has many new insights she would like to share." Angus was the quintessential elder. "If you will excuse us, I'd like to have a chance to visit more with Lanon about his mission. No doubt we will see you both tomorrow."



"No doubt," Doc responded with a nod, disliking the look that lingered between Lanon and his daughter. "What about it, Aud? You ready to turn in?"

She was not at all interested in sleeping. "No, Dad!" she complained, "I'm wide awake!" She watched as Lanon and Angus disappeared into the night.

"Let's have a nightcap before I show you to your room. Tell me where you've been, what you've been up to."

"Well, alright." She adapted to the situation and warmed to her father's presence, doting on him and looking at him as she promised she would, regaling him with details of her adventures in Spain. She told him about the beauty of the terrain, about Dierdre and Alexius, including his fascinating recital of 40 years' communications with Zenton intelligences.

After they finished their drinks, they walked out to sit on a park bench and there, while telling her father about sensing the vibrations that led her to the pasture where she met the mysterious Angus, she began to realize the magnitude of her situation. For the first time she was able to clearly see that Lanon was not a man at all, but was 0802-LZ, Zenton's materialized representative.

Seeing her sudden introspection, Doc Will asked, "What's the matter, Audley?" He suspected what she was experiencing. It was just what he'd wanted to protect her from.

She shook her head, struck by the ludicrousness of her emotional involvement. "Nothing," she lied. "I guess I just realized how tired I am, from the trip."

"Well," he murmured, "it's all a lot to absorb. You'll feel a lot better when you've had a chance to get a good night's sleep. Why don't I show you to your room?"

"Alright, Dad." They walked in comfortable silence to the guest area, both of them trying to process the revelations of this evening.

How could she accept what she heard this evening, that that Lanon was an emissary from another world, here on a temporary



assignment? She didn't want Lanon to be a man with a mission; she wanted him to be just a man! But there was nothing anyone could do about it. He was who he was, and she couldn't even be angry with him. He couldn't possibly know what she was experiencing because his emotions were ... not even alive, and hers, it would seem, were about to die. Would Lanon ever, truly, be mortal? Would she ever, truly, get over the fact that he wasn't?

When they stopped walking, in front of the many doors, she asked, "What do you think about all this, Dad? Can you believe it?"

Doc Will did believe it. He had been as much a co-conspirator as any of the Zoids. He was a man who believed in possibilities, who believed in potentials, and now he was seeing them actualize! Imagine! His own life's efforts had helped bring about this evolutionary leap into a cosmic connection. Still he felt flabbergasted and dumbfounded. It was overwhelming.

"No, I can't believe it," he argued, "At least not for a day or two. But I will. I've got a good head start on you. But I'm worried about you, Audley. How are you going to handle this? I know you have feelings for that man from Zenton."

Was it ridiculous of him to be so protective of her? No. She was his baby girl, and Lanon was an alien, no matter how you looked at it.

"Oh, come on, Dad. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself," she said bravely, not being a baby, not reverting to tears. "I'm a reporter!" she said, hugging him, "You just go on to bed and get some rest. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

He placed a quiet kiss on her cheek and with incredible tenderness, said, "Good night, daughter. Sleep deep."

She slipped inside her room, quickly shaking off the self-pity she felt pressing in on her. If she was going to survive this with dignity, she had to be professional about it. She would need a good work environment. Turning on the light, she saw that this would do just fine. Immediately inside the room, in front of a large draped window, two delicate but comfortable upholstered chairs sat on



either side of a tall lamp table, and opposite the daybed were a desk, chair and yet another lamp. To the rear of her guest quarters was a small complete bathroom with vanity and closet. On the back wall was a window, in front of which was a kitchenette with a counter and bar stools.

Someone had placed her luggage and camera case on the floor near the daybed. She set out to unpack her clothes and put some things to soak, but when she opened the closet she discovered it to be full of garments such as Jessie and the Elders wore. These were uniforms of a sort. They came in two styles of various colors. One style was a djellaba and the other was a one-piece jumpsuit. At the foot of the closet, she found two types of footwear. One was an open sandal and the other was more like a sock with a slim sole. She decided to forego the unpacking.

In the drawers of the vanity area she found fresh linen for the bed and bath, as well as several more garments, again in two styles. One was loose fitting, similar to a T-shirt, and the other was a body suit, to be used as underwear or for play. She took one of the T-shirts into the bathroom where she found the cupboards supplied with everything she might need, including items of feminine hygiene. She decided to forego the hand laundry.

Sinking into a warm bath, she allowed the last two weeks to fade away. Had it really only been two weeks since she set out to cover the IOF Convention? Not much more than that, certainly. Funny, she mused, how you can go along at a comfortable pace, not even knowing you're in a rut, when all of a sudden something turns on the lights, kicks your engine into overdrive, and away you go on a brand new adventure. Blocking out her feelings for Lanon, she allowed herself to visualize herself in flight, circling above the Urth, with thoughts of destiny, whirling, swirling.

She caught herself starting to doze off. She rinsed off and slipped on the T-shirt. Looking in the refrigerator, she discovered fresh milk and juice, fruit, bread and cheese. She took an apple with her to turn down the covers on the daybed. On the desk she found a



chart of Colony Gateway and studied it to see where she was in relation to the residents, the headquarters tower and her father. She reviewed each area as to what purpose it served, then put the chart in her purse as part of her job research.

Temporarily secure in the attitude that even if she couldn't have him forever, she could work with him for awhile, she ate the apple, decided to forego the cigarette, and fell asleep.

ANGUS AND LANON DID NOT SLEEP. They walked the grounds and talked. And throughout the course of the night, Lanon learned much from Angus who, as he explained to Lanon, had been "working the universe" for some 5,000 years Urth time. This, compared to Lanon's 2,000 or so, made Angus' experience invaluable to the neonate.

On the other hand, Angus had never taken on human form, and so he found Lanon's experience interesting. Gradually they got around to discussing personal perspectives, and when Angus confessed to Lanon that he had met his own soul mate millennia ago while she was still a mortal and he himself was on an assignment, Lanon ventured to confide in Angus about his and Audley's awkward emotional development.

Over the centuries Angus had developed into quite an expert on the many variations of love. As such, he was pleased to give Lanon some pointers on how to become an effective lover. "Women are women throughout eternity, Lanon," he said, "and they all enjoy the same aspects of love. Women like romance."

"What do you mean by romance?"

"Romance," Angus extolled, "is a sentiment, a refinement of emotion. Romance calls up feelings of tenderness and beauty. Graciousness." He embellished his lesson with inflections and gestures. "The ideals inherent in the romantic situation are represented by things that depict romance, such as music and flowers. And gifts. Or candy."

Lanon was duly attentive.



"Women also long for adventure," Angus continued. "They want their hero to take them to new and exciting places. Not just physical places, but places in the heart and in the imagination. They do not want to be constantly taking care of things. Women appreciate a break from nurturing. They want to soar, and they want their mate to go with them on the flight."

After a while Lanon asked, "What about men? What do men want?"

"Ah, you are such a babe!" Angus heaved. "Men want to feel important. Not a pompous kind of importance, but they want to feel that what they do is meaningful."

"Well, I do feel I'm doing something meaningful, but how would that affect Audley?"

"Well, she's crazy in love with you."

"She is?" Angus nodded. "How do you know?"

"Because, dear boy, she looks at you, and when she looks at you, her eyes light up. She looks to you for confirmation of her existence, for reassurance. She is so impressed with the importance of your mission, she was willing to give up her own career, risk her father's affection, and even go half way around the world to find ways to help you, and at her own expense!"

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Apparently not. You could begin appreciating her efforts and you could let her know you appreciate her. Have you ever thanked her for teaching you how to be a human being? No? Well, you're not being very romantic, then."

"Angus," Lanon ventured after another long moment. "What about sex?"

"Sex is wonderful. What about it?"

"I don't understand it. I've seen Audley's frame, but ...."

"Her what?" Angus interrupted.

"Her frame."

"Her body, dear boy, her body! Her voluptuous, sensual, desirable, caressable body!"



"Not her frame?"

"Not her frame."

"Alright. I have seen Audley, and I believe she knows that I appreciate her voluptuous, sensual, desirable, caressable body, but she won't let me make love with her."

Angus threw up his hands. "Well, that's probably because you were approaching her as a frame! That goes right back to what I was saying about romance, Lanon." He warmed to his subject. "Woman is, of course, a mass of flesh and bone and nerves and organs arranged in a frame, but the whole woman is so much more than that! The whole woman lies in her charm, her personality, her soul, and her feelings. These things aren't literal, but they are *real*, and they comprise the female. This is why romance is so important! To love the body is only part of the mystery. To find the female inside and love that is also only part of the mystery. To love the body and the soul together, is to love the whole woman."

"How do I find the female inside?" he wondered aloud.

Angus studied the stars for a moment and sighed deeply. "Give Audley a chance to show you. Let her know you care about who she is, how she looks, what she thinks, how she feels. Women are vulnerable, Lanon, or at least they like to think they are, and they are very protective of those tender feelings, which could be ignored or abused by an insensitive male. You get her to reveal her inner nature by being romantic."

"If it's that easy, wouldn't she know that I was trying to get her to reveal herself?"

"She wants to reveal herself!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. You just have to assure her that when she does reveal herself, her inner self, you won't make light of her sincerity or disdain her frailties."

"I see. And then we can make love?"

Angus shook his head and chuckled. "Yes, Lanon, ideally that is what will happen. But you must be patient! When I was



courting my soul mate, we knew from the first moment that we would spend eternity together, but she made me wait for almost 200 years."

Lanon was aghast. "But by then she had discarded her voluptuous, sensual, desirable, caressable body!" he objected.

"This is true," Angus admitted, "but she was still voluptuous, sensual, desirable and caressable. Some things never change." The smile on Angus' countenance was akin to smug, but Lanon was downhearted. "What troubles you?" Angus asked.

"Audley is a strong woman. Emotionally she is stronger than I am. I am still concerned that I will not be able to court her effectively."

"Then you must wait until you become more human, Lanon, or until she becomes more divine."

It was Lanon's turn to look at the stars and sigh.

"I perceive that you are becoming more romantic already!" Angus said.

And many more things they discussed before the sun rose and the two entities went their separate ways to take in energy and prepare for the new day.



# 10

## NEW LEADERSHIP

### *Jessie Cain Brothers*

Audley woke early, eager for the day. She dressed quickly in a blue djellaba then adorned herself with the lapis lazuli necklace she had brought back with her from Guadix. Her wristwatch hadn't worked since the black-out and she saw no clock, but it *felt* early. When she opened the draperies, the phenomenon she beheld filled her with wonder, for the sun, rising on the polyglass bubble, created a prism effect, bouncing multi-colored lights everywhere. She rushed out onto the lawn as if into a psychedelic rain.

Lanon, with Angus' advisements about romance fresh in his mind, awaited her.

Seeing him, she exclaimed, "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes, it is," he said, enjoying her delight. "Jessie and I watched it yesterday while we waited for you to get here."

"Wow," she said, "It happens at sunset, too?" The sun had risen high enough that the prism effect was starting to subside. Alas, her romanticism was not.

He nodded obligingly. "You're looking radiant this morning," he said, gently touching her shoulder.

She immediately blushed. As he looked at her more closely,



to admire her sudden high color, she nervously fondled the gem in the pit of her throat before setting off determinedly toward the headquarters high-rise.

"Where are you going?" he asked in his double entendre.

"Oh," she smiled. "I'm going to talk to Jessie about my new job with the JCP."

"I'll walk with you," he said, leading her on. "I have a feeling you're going to enjoy it."

Her shoulder tingled where he had touched her. Last night she had felt sorry for herself. This morning she felt like a lucky girl. "Where's Angus?" she asked.

"Jessie took him on a tour of headquarters. They wanted to do it before the Elders got up." Already many of the Zooid Elders were making their way across the lawn to the dining rooms for breakfast. "Angus is self-conscious about his appearance -- or should I say his lack of appearance -- and doesn't want to alarm anyone."

"It's funny, but nobody noticed him while we were traveling," she remarked. "At least no one reacted to him."

"Angus won't go unnoticed in the colonies," he assured her. "Zooids actually look at each other."

"I don't know how he'll be able to help me with my research if he's afraid of being seen," she complained.

"It's not that Angus is afraid to be seen," Lanon clarified. "He doesn't want to frighten anyone. If people don't understand how he's put together, they might think he's a ghost or something. Anyway, in due time he'll be properly introduced, and then he'll be able to function more fully."

"What are you going to do today?"

"Some of the Board members are meeting to talk about the construction of a new building and Jessie wants me to sit in on it."

"Well, ..." She lowered her eyelids. "I'd better get up to Jessie's office. It's almost time."

Lanon was intrigued by the mystery in her gesture. How odd that by shielding her gaze from him, he was able to catch a glimpse of



the woman within! As he stood dumbfounded, the elevator door opened and she fled.

On the ride up, Audley chided herself for acting silly but still, she loved feeling all girlish and goose-bumpy. Lanon had been so attentive, so human, and so romantic! She mused, "Maybe it's not so impossible."

She sought a glimpse of him from the view at the top but he was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Jessie strode across the deck to greet her, as fresh and free as the morning air. He seemed so invigorated, so vital, Audley wondered if he, too, might be in love.

"Good morning, Audley!"

"Good morning, Jessie."

"You look especially radiant this morning," he remarked, leading her toward his suite. "No sign of jet lag. You slept well?"

"Yes, I did," she responded excitedly. "And I woke up well, too. That prism effect is enough to make a person want to get up every day before dawn! It's wonderful!"

"Yes, it was a happy accident of construction." Since the bubble shielded the inhabitants from inclement weather, and since doors and windows against the elements were unnecessary, he led her through an open archway into his office and showed her to a chair at a small table. "Have you had breakfast?" he asked.

"I'd love a cup of coffee."

"Help yourself," he said, waving to a tray of breakfast rolls, fruit, coffee and juice.

As she stirred cream into the rich dark coffee, Jessie busied himself opening the doors of the panel across from her to reveal a wall of charts, graphs and maps of the JCP. At once Audley's ebullience gave way to professionalism. She took out her notebook as Jessie sat next to her.

"I contacted Weinberger," he said.

"You did?" She scowled. "What for?"

"He has agreed to carry your series."

"Really!?" She grinned. For some reason, she thought



Weinberger would be mad at her for quitting. "How did you come to choose the Silent Majority?"

He shrugged. "Why not? It's a good publication, reaches a good cross-section of thinking people who are most likely to respond to issues like ecology, education, transportation, and the like. Do you have a problem with him?"

"No! I've always worked well with Weinberger."

"That's what he said." Jessie turned his attention to the keyboard on the table in front of him, tapping keys until a map of the United States, dotted with colored pins, appeared on the screen. "You'll see on the Legend there on the bottom right what the colors of the pins represent. The big purple one there is Gateway and the black one is Penn State Reserve. Green is agriculture, yellow is education, orange is industrial, red is residential and blue is cultural."

Audley began writing notes.

"Oh, you won't need that," he said, indicating her notebook. "All this I'm telling you can be gotten from any TASC. That stands for Transmit/Access System of Communication and you will find TASC's everywhere throughout the colonies -- on all the Transport Lines, in every residence, everywhere. They connect to everything in the JCP. As soon as you learn how to work a TASC, you will have access to all the factual information you need."

She was perplexed. "What am I doing here, Jessie?" she asked. "I mean, you've got all the facts already, so what do you want me to do with them? What's the point?"

"You're going to present the facts to the outside."

"Why not get your own Zooids to present the facts?"

"We're already absorbed into it, already detached from outside living, but you're still close enough to the outside world that you will be able to connect with the readers. Your articles will have more spontaneity than ours, since we are already ... 'brainwashed'."

She grinned. "So you want my *slant*."

He nodded. "Basically, yes. Don't overlook the fact that Lanon will be learning the emotional value of our society through



your slant. This way you'll be helping him and at the same time you'll be educating yourself *and* the reader as to zooidal ideologies, so you'll be doing everyone a service. For which you will be amply paid, I might add, thanks to the shrewd managerial skills of your friend Angus." He grinned, giving her the opening she needed.

"Speaking of emotional value, Jessie, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure. Like I said, Zooids don't have secrets."

"Are you married?"

"Nope. Never have been."

"You have a girlfriend?"

"No."

"Why not?" Her question sounded impertinent, even to herself.

Jessie pulled himself up, clasped his long fingers under his chin and allowed himself a slight scowl. "I guess because I'm married to the Zooids, Audley. I've devoted my whole life to this project."

"Yeah, but everybody needs a personal life," she objected.

"The JCP is my personal life. I find it very satisfying."

"Satisfying in terms of accomplishment, maybe, but wouldn't you enjoy the company of a woman? And don't tell me you have the company of a lot of women. I know you do. Me, for instance. I'm talking about a personal partner."

He leaned back in his chair. "To that I'd have to say that, yes, if the right woman ever came along, I'd bite. I would like to have a personal soul mate, a female companion, but I don't know of any woman who would put up with my almost obsessive dedication to my work. She would have to be as committed to the Zooids as I am, or as committed to *something* as I am. And even if she *was* as committed, there's so much that has gone on that she missed, so much of my life that has been lived without her...."

"But a woman committed to your interests, Jessie, would feel as if she had known you all her life! Those little details of our past, our childhood and our experiences, those are not what makes a



person who she is. Anyway, I'm sure she would bring her own riches to the union, her own experiences, that would make her the right one for you."

Jessie nodded. "Yes, I'm sure you're right, but I haven't met her yet. It's not as though I've ruled it out, mind you." His eyes flashed a mischievous twinkle. "I'm rather normal in that regard."

Audley bet he was. He was certainly attractive. "Don't you get lonely?"

He sat up and turned to the wall of charts and graphs. "I don't have time to get lonely. I keep busy."

She sat shoulder to shoulder with him. "Okay," she said, turning back to business, "so you want me to gear this to the outside reader. Am I selling the colonies?"

"No, but you are selling some of our concepts, techniques and ideals. There are people out there who think like we do, and we want to let them know we're here and that we're available for them to investigate."

"Okay. Where do I start?"

"You might start with an introductory article on the Zooids in general. Tell them who we are, what we're trying to do."

"Can you fill me in a little here? Professor Vessey gave me a lot of background on how the concept of the JCP got started, but he didn't go into how the actual physical organization came about. I know that your father died and you had to leave Knossos and come back to the States and take over his business."

"Well, yeah." He poured a glass of water and swirled the ice cubes. "I was trained for the job before anybody even knew what the job would be."

This time when Audley took out her notebook he didn't object.

"My parents had ambitions for me, their firstborn. Mother wanted me to be a spiritual leader, so from her I received my moral and religious training. Father was a pragmatist who wanted me to be a financial wizard, a corporate giant, and so he taught me how to



organize people, how to manage money, how to play politics.

Now, you've got to understand that this was no small ambition that my parents had! They were influential in our community, and their enthusiasm was contagious. Their messianic zeal convinced their friends and neighbors that great things would come of me. As such, all my childhood friends and our activities were governed according to our parents' dreams. These people had a concept of what kind of success we ought to be and they were fairly ruthless in seeing it get underway."

"Pretty amazing," she allowed.

"The amazing thing is not so much what our parents did, but what we boys did! We took our friendship very seriously. Maybe our way of finding our own identity, in the face of the scheme that our parents had ordained for us, was to override their scheme with one of our own. Oh, we did all the things that boys do, of course. We built our tree houses and river rafts. We played our sports and later, in high school, we dated the same girls. But we were united somehow in a very special sense. We were committed to our friendship above all things. Our *real* success was in our loyalty to each other and to the social stability that resulted.

"As a result, we grew up developing into true Zooids. We upheld each other. We only went as far as the weakest one of us could go and then we would all turn our attention to the weak one and pull him up. We discovered that each of us had inherent strengths to compensate for our innate weaknesses. The zooidal way of life was ingrained in us by the nature of our friendship long before we went away to college.

"Anyway, to answer your question, yes, I was in my last year at Knossos University when my father died unexpectedly, and I came back to the United States to take over my father's business. I had to take my final exams through the mail. My father's business holdings were fairly significant. Part of his conglomerate was a construction firm. His staff was kept on as Trustees, and they were able to continue that enterprise, but other, smaller holdings were either sold



off or brought into the colony concept."

Jessie walked to the window and gazed at the distant horizon. "Peter, Andrew, James and John finished their schooling and were ready to throw in with me in developing some of the ideas I had brought back with me from the long-term association I had Professor Vessey, my academic mentor at Knossos, but the project was interrupted by the war. We all went."

He paused for a long moment, lost in reverie, and at length resumed, "That's really another story," he said, "but through that experience, our loyalty to each other was deepened, cemented. We were all profoundly affected by the times. We realized how - in a very real sense - we *were* the times. We realized we could *change* the times.

"We got back together and discussed the current social ideologies and discovered that there were enough of us who were fed up with racial injustices, political assassinations, ecological rape, the unequal distribution of wealth, moral bankruptcy, war... war! That was the biggest affront to human dignity of all!" He paused. "We knew there were enough people who were fed up with the way things were, that we could actually do something about it.

"At first we believed that we could change the system just by espousing our ideals, by living them, but we got swallowed up by the reigning culture and spit out along with the ideals we held as worthwhile. We learned by experience that in order for us to survive, that is, for our values to survive, we would have to set ourselves apart."

Jessie returned to the table and sat. "Along the way we were joined by Nathaniel and Phillip, and when the seven of us came together we were committed to the job we would undertake. The Jural Colony Project was underway."

"What was the first one?" she asked, not giving him a chance to slow down.

"I had been in communication with Alexius all this time and at some point he began giving us suggestions. His first suggestion was



that we begin with what we had, so we first met at the family beach house in La Jolla. It was much too big for Mother alone, so we met there. After we outgrew it, we sold it and used the proceeds to start our next colony.

"We soon recognized that our combined educational resources wouldn't be enough to cover the growing needs of the JCP. I instructed each of my six associates to find one person whose ideal of brotherly love was sufficient to join with ours. As a testimony to our resolve, we each changed our given name to Brothers, even the women."

"Speaking of women, what happened to your mother?"

"She's a Zooid Elder. She lives here at Gateway."

"And the twelve?"

"They still serve as the Board of Directors."

"So when did PSR come into the picture?" she prompted.

"PSR was our first project, for several reasons. The prison system, as it existed in the United States at that time, was long overdue for re-evaluation and overhaul. And the US Justice Department was more than willing to allow for experimentation. We applied for sizeable grants to get it started. One of those paid for the initial services provided by your father, who set up the tests and administered them to prisoners in penal institutions throughout the country who were open to experimentation and rehabilitation. The ones we selected were willing subjects who could be observed and whose behavior could be modified most effectively under controlled circumstances."

"So the JCP, like the original 13 colonies, was settled by criminals?"

"No. Long before we finished the first phase of PSR we had enough people interested in what we were doing -- people we knew, people who had heard of us, who wanted to help, sight unseen -- to start our first real colony which was Colony Origin in California."

"Did you call yourselves Zooids at that time?"

"Oh, yes. From the very beginning."



"Didn't that attract a lot of weirdos? I mean, when I first heard the word 'zoid' I looked it up, and all I could imagine were millions of little bugs or amoeba crawling around, maybe like a colony of ants, all marching in a row or milling around like mindless eight-legged creatures."

Jessie laughed. "Sometimes we were mindless. There were times we were so tired we could hardly see. We just kept putting one foot in front of the other and trudged on. Working together, though, like we did, we somehow pulled each other up and carried each other forward."

"What were the early Zooids like?"

He grinned. "They had youth and idealism. It was a great era," he reminisced. "There were a lot of young people who threw in with us for something to do but there were old people who seemed to have been waiting for us all their lives. Many of the vets found out about us when they came back, as did the draft evaders and the girls who waited for them at home. They had a lot of hope, a lot of dreams."

Audley interjected, "A lot of drugs, too, I'd bet."

Jessie scowled. "Yes, and we lost some of them when they learned we would not build our Brave New World on chemicals. Most of them appreciated the fact that we were on a natural high, intent on actually doing something about society's ills, so every once in awhile we'd have a big party and burn all the paraphernalia and drugs to celebrate our mutual purpose. Those parties were the origin of our annual celebrations."

"You still have them?"

"Yes, we have four fests a year, one for each season. You'll be here for the fest this fall. You'll enjoy it." He stood up.

"Where is it?"

"It's everywhere! All the colonies celebrate fests at the same time. It's like a fair. It lasts a whole week. We have arts and crafts, we dress in costumes and sing and dance. Each season has its own theme. Fallfest, as you can imagine, is a harvest, a celebration of



fruition."

She, too, stood. "What about regular holidays, like Christmas?"

"Those are up to the individual. Zooids come from all races, all cultures, all religions, and they all have their own heritage and holidays that they celebrate as they wish, like Christmas and Cinco de Mayo and Hanukkah, but those are individual. The JCP has only the four celebrations a year. Otherwise, we're a very busy group of people. And speaking of busy," he said, "I'm very late for another meeting. You've distracted me by these reminiscences."

"That's what makes me such a good reporter," she said. "I get people talking." She put her tablet away. "So what shall I report on and what should I keep quiet about?"

"After your introduction, why don't you just start with the Transport Lines? Everyone who pays car insurance will find our system has value. Also, get a pass from one of the Aides then take a trip or two and see how it works. And you should familiarize yourself with the TASC so you can get the facts you need, but don't get into our financial system just yet, or our calendar. And, of course, don't expose Lanon or his mission with us."

"Of course."

"Why don't you get Angus to show you how the TASC works?"

"Where is he? I thought he was with you."

Jessie pressed a button and the misty visage of Angus appeared on a screen in front of them. "I've been with you all this time," he said. "Come down to the sixth floor, Audley. I want to show you something!"

Jessie led the way out to the deck, saying, "Angus is very impressed with our computer. He can see almost everything that's going on without anyone seeing him."

"What's to worry?" she laughed. "They can hardly see him anyway!"

"By the way," he added. "You can move your things into the



employee wing whenever you want to."

"Okay. Where can I go to smoke a cigarette?"

Jessie grinned and shook his head. "Go to any TASC and press the button marked Vent."

"Is there a TASC in here?" she asked when Angus met her at the door of the Terminal.

"The whole floor is a TASC!" he said, anxious to show off his findings. "What do you want to know? Anything!"

"Where's a Vent? I want to smoke a cigarette."

"Right this way."

Off the elevator shaft, a small balcony perched over the grounds. She sat in one of the two director's chairs and lit up a Spring as Angus hit the Vent button overhead. Propping her feet on the rail, she asked, "So what does your keen sense perception tell you about all this, Angus?"

"I think the JCP is high-tech for a reason," he said. "If this weren't such a dense and finite realm, I'd expect the communication channel which Lanon has come to open up, to be opened *in the minds of the mortals*. But, since we are dealing with finite creatures here -- very *dense*, finite creatures -- I think it'll be done by way of the TASC's."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah! Think about it," he suggested. "And you might also think about someone you could recommend to do the programming."

She thought of Brad at once, of course. She refused to encourage his involvement, however, because Brad was technically still on the trail of a reason for the August 14th black-out, and she didn't feel comfortable letting Brad get too close to Lanon.

"Oh, I'm sure the JCP has programmers that can do the job," she remarked, snuffing the half-smoked cigarette in a 'receptacle'.

"Come!" he said, leading her back into the Terminal. The massive room was sterile and cold, in spite of the monstrous amounts of energy that must be throbbing through its myriad cords, blinking lights and surging discs. Overwhelmed by the Terminal's impressive



size and power, she shivered. "Angus! This damned room is alive! I can hear it breathing!"

"It's ventilating itself to keep cool," he assured her.

"It's working!" she remarked. "It's ice cold in here. Can we go?"

Angus had been watching the blinking lights and shiny steel panels in abject fascination of what was going on behind the scenes. "It's cold you say?" He turned to see Audley shivering behind him. "Oh, I beg your pardon. I have no sense of temperature. Come on."

Outside the main Terminal room, he was eager to show her to one of the many private cubicles where a TASC stood perched on its own torso, ready to instruct. "I hate computers," she complained.

"You won't hate this one. It's 'user friendly'."

She laughed at his ability to appreciate modern jargon. "So what do all these buttons mean? Don't I have to log on or something? Shouldn't I have a password?"

"It's already on. You just tell it what you want to know about. Anything at all."

"Alright." Audley went straight to the TASC Index and looked up Zooid Finances. At once she realized why Jessie didn't want her to reveal to the world at large that every Zooid's accredited worth was on display for anyone who cared to see. Zooids did not pay rent nor mortgage payments, did not pay utility bills nor any kind of insurance. They had no money, in fact, but functioned with acquired economic credits. Debt was not permissible.

All transactions were recorded in the TASC at once. She and millions of other people in the outside world often wrote checks on empty accounts in anticipation of a payroll deposit. In the colonies, such would not be possible. By the same token, such need would be unlikely, for every new Zooid began life in the JCP as a colonist with 1,000 credits, indicating they were regarded as an asset. It was virtually impossible to find a way to squander so many credits. What it boiled down to was that no Zooid ever had to experience financial anxiety, since their needs were all met by virtue of being a



resident, as part of the organism.

She could not help but notice, using her father as an example, that the financial records of financial institutions outside the JCP were not in the TASC. Thus she could plainly see that although Doc Will had amassed well over 45 million credits during the years he had worked with the JCP, the TASC gave no indication of his balance at the Santa Barbara Savings and Loan.

SYLVIA AND BRAD stopped for lunch in Barstow. They had driven all morning, each deep in thought about what they had gotten themselves into. That they were in constant physical contact, either Sylvia resting her hand on Brad's leg or vice versa, indicated to both of them that they were totally conjoined, so neither of them had any doubt or regret about their union. It's just that each of them had thoughts to ponder as to how their relationship would affect others.

The farthest thing from Sylvia's mind was Roger. For all her cultural conditioning, she had absolutely no regrets about having committed adultery, for as far as she was concerned, Brad was her mate. Never had she been so sure of anything in her life. Never had she felt so good. Never had life appeared so wonderful. Even the fact that she had emotionally abducted her best friend's fiancé didn't bother Sylvia. For years she had seen Audley toy with Brad's affections and she was tired of it. It's not that Audley didn't deserve a fine man like Brad. Audley deserved the best. But not Brad. Brad was hers. If Audley had felt about Brad as Sylvia did, she would not be roaming around the country looking after a man from outer space.

For surely, Lanon Zenton was the uppermost concern in Sylvia's mind. Doc Will's notes, tucked securely in her purse, assured her that she had solved the question of what had caused the August 14<sup>th</sup> blackout. The potassium data, on top of her uncanny instincts, was proof enough for Sylvia, but what was she to do with this information? Even though she felt confident about her findings, she held back from telling Brad. She feared that if she told Brad,



something terrible might happen. She would wait and talk to Audley about it first.

"You're quiet this morning," Brad observed, once they had ordered their meal. "What's on your mind?" He reached for her and they clasped hands across the table.

"Oh, a lot of things, I guess," she admitted demurely.

"You're not sorry, are you?"

"About us you mean? Oh, no, darling. I'm not sorry about us. I'm very happy."

"Then what are you worried about? Roger?"

She stirred her tea. "No. In the long run Roger will be pleased. Especially when he finds out I'm not going to make a mess of his life. For years I've just been a figurehead for him, anyway. Now he'll be able to find a woman who can fulfill all the functions of being his wife."

"You're worried about Audley, then."

"Not really." The meal was served, allowing her a moment to construct her words. "She's not really committed to you, Brad, and you deserve better. I think Audley, too, will be pleased in the long run. It's a funny thing about women. When they throw a man over, they worry that he'll be okay, and in this case, she'll know you're okay because you're with me. It'll be a relief to her, really, when she finds out." She buttered a roll. "I'll tell her."

Brad was relieved to hear that bit of insight into women's ways. He had felt anxiety that Audley would throw a fit and the women's long-term friendship would be ruined. His big concern was Doc Will. Doc had his heart set on Audley's marriage and, more particularly, a grandchild. It would not be easy to face Doc with this new development.

"Doc Will is going to think we're total degenerates," he said, chomping on his club sandwich.

She giggled. "We didn't waste much time, did we?"

He had to laugh, too. "Didn't see any point! Did you have designs on me, woman? Had you been plotting to get me into bed?"



She demurred. "Well, Brad Spencer, what a thing to say! I'm sure it was all *your* idea."

He admitted, "It had crossed my mind."

"Did it? When?"

"When?" He finished off a pickle. "That night we all had dinner at Doc Will's house and Audley suggested you might make a good Investigative Assistant. I had to look at you in a new light, and what I saw looked damned good."

She nodded. "I didn't know it until the night of my party. By the way, did I thank you for the flowers you sent?"

He leered at her. "I feel you did."

"It was very thoughtful. And the check, of course."

"The party was a success?"

"In every respect. It was a special celebration for me."

"How so?"

"My last hurrah as Mrs. Watergate. End of an era."

"So you had made up your mind to make changes before you came to New York?"

She blushed. "Yes, I had made up my mind. Fortunately for me, you had no objections."

"No objections and no reservations."

As they held hands across the table, Brad slipped Audley's diamond ring on Sylvia's finger. It fit perfectly.

DOC WILL SPENT MOST OF THE DAY in his room reviewing medical histories. He didn't expect to find much there, but it gave him something to do.

All of these recent developments proved to be too much for the old man. He had gotten used to Lanon and, in fact, had started to find him interesting, but now there was another one, a different kind, this Angus, who was not even human but some kind of an apparition. And Audley getting so involved. It bothered him.

It was too much too fast. He was becoming increasingly crotchety, and it did not contribute to his peace of mind when he



for a break."

In the lobby, intending to get a pass to ride on the Transport Line, she met Ellen, a freckle-faced, buxom lass of about 20. Ellen had huge brown eyes and warm, rich amber hair that she wore in a single long braid over her formidable left breast. As Ellen photographed her electro-chemical system for her I.D. on the Transport Lines pass, Audley asked the Aide about zooidal time.

"Let's see. It's 5:25 so if you got up in time for the sundance, you should be getting hungry about now."

Audley grinned. "Now that you mention it," she said, "I could probably eat something. But if you just do things when you feel like it, how do you get anything done?"

"You actually get more done, Audley," Ellen said, "because you're motivated differently. Here you don't have to do everything in a regimented way like they do on the outside. You eat when you're hungry and sleep when you're tired, not because of a superimposed time structure but because that's your natural pace. The important thing is that it's all Part of the Whole. The month is the important time frame. Eating and sleeping take care of themselves, but the organizational week establishes the production schedule which is how we spend our lives."

"I still don't know how you can keep track of what time it is."

"Just live your life," Ellen suggested with a knowing smile. "Work and watch, and you will see that it is a better system. In this way of life, time works with you and not against you."

After she got her pass, she moved her things into her new quarters and began again to work at her given TASC.

AS ANGUS WALKED THE DESERT sands absorbing solar energy, he sensed the approaching lights of Sylvia and Brad, then made his way to the atrium to wait for their arrival.

Brad drove the rental car on the sand-dusted roadway that ran atop the transport line from Las Vegas. When the dome of Gateway appeared on the horizon, Sylvia gasped. The oddity of the



THE OLD MISSION

massive polyglass dome in the middle of the desert landscape seemed otherworldly to them both.

"Have you been here before, Brad?"

"No, but Doc Will showed me some photos of it during its construction."

"I hope it's got air conditioning," she remarked, tucking her hand into Brad's groin.

"Oh, it will," he assured her. "It's got all the modern conveniences. I understand the constant temperature wavers between 68 and 74 degrees."

"How do we get in?" she wondered.

"We've gotten this far," he assured her. "There's bound to be an opening in it somewhere."

Spotting Angus' hooded cloak, Sylvia pointed, "Look, Brad. There's a sentinel."

Brad grinned. "I don't think there are any sentinels these days, Sylvia. Maybe a guard."

"What would they need a guard for?"

"To keep strangers out, I guess."

"We aren't strangers. Are we?"

"Now's a fine time to wonder but, no, I don't think they will turn us away."

Angus directed them to an open glass door, which led into an atrium-like chamber whose platform lowered the car to the landing level where Brad parked. It was cool and dark in the underground garage and their eyes, coming in from the blazing desert sun, were slow to adjust. When they got out of the car, Angus stepped back a pace and gave his little bow, which thoroughly charmed Sylvia. "I am Angus," he said in his rich voice. "I am your temporary host. You are a bright light and welcome to this place."

Sylvia gave Brad's arm a squeeze. Brad's instinct to shake hands was thwarted by Angus' distance and by the fact that their host kept his hands inside the sleeves of his umber robe.

"Thank you, Angus. I'm Dr. Brad Spencer and this is Sylvia



Watergate. We're friends of Dr. Blackstone and are given to understand that he's here at Gateway."

"He is here," Angus acknowledged.

"If he's available, we'd like to visit with him."

"Wilhelm is in the clinic. I'll tell him you are here. Come with me."

As they entered the elevator Sylvia asked, "Doc Will isn't sick, is he?"

"I will let Wilhelm speak for himself," Angus said with a bemused smile. It was then that they noticed for the first time that Angus was vaporous. Although Sylvia found Angus charming and totally in keeping with her impression of what Zooids must be like, Brad was not amused. His scientific background would not accept a shrouded mass of energy in the guise of a man. Perhaps Doc Will would have a viable explanation.

Angus deposited the guests in the lounge, with assurances they were to make themselves comfortable, while he went on up to the clinic. There, on video screens in the lobby, he could see what was going on in each of the rooms on that floor. He located Doc in one of the rooms engaged in an interview with one of the patients who had been diagnosed as having the mysterious pox.

As Angus focused energy on him, Doc Will twitched, as if something had tickled his ear. He swatted the air towards the side of his head a couple of times then, as if curious, excused himself from the patient and entered the hall where Angus stood waiting. Seeing him, Doc Will scowled.

"You have visitors," Angus stated simply.

"Visitors? Who?" Doc Will removed his lab jacket and ran his fingers through his unruly hair.

"Dr. Spencer and Sylvia Watergate." Angus knew Doc Will was uncomfortable alone in his presence. He therefore stepped back a pace, deliberately remaining both physically and psychically removed.

"What are they doing here?" It was more of a mumble to



himself than a comment to Angus.

Angus ventured, "They've come for your blessing."

"My what?"

"Your blessing," Angus reiterated.

"My blessing for what?"

"Their union."

The color drained from Doc Will's face. Nearby was a bench. He gestured for Angus to sit with him for a moment. When the two seniors sat down, Doc confronted his feelings.

"Angus," he said. "I'm having a hard time with you."

"I know you are," Angus sympathized.

"I realize it's my problem and not yours, but can you enlighten me as to what my problem is?"

Angus felt very kindly towards the old man. "I could, and you could, too, if you weren't so stubborn."

"I'm stubborn, huh?"

Angus nodded. They sat for a moment without speaking.

"Actually," Angus said, "we're very much alike, you and I. We both work in the same field. We both have insights into people that sometimes we'd rather not have."

Doc Will nodded.

"The only difference is that I'm older than you," Angus suggested.

"Well, that's not the *only* difference," Doc objected.

"Oh, you think just because I'm less material than you that I'm so much different?"

"Well, sure!"

"All that is relative," Angus countered. "Your old bones aren't that solid anymore, Doctor, and people looking into your eyes have to see through the cataracts and assume you can see them back, right?"

Doc nodded begrudgingly.

"Now, Dr. Spencer, who is a healthy young man, he has reason, perhaps, to distrust my form, but you are closer to me in form



than he is. You see?"

"Of course I see," Doc snarled. "I'm decrepit, and more gone than not."

"Oh, now you're feeling sorry for yourself."

"Well, dag nab it, I've got the damned pox!"

"So on top of everything else, you're now worrying about dying."

"Let's just say I'm thinking about it."

"Dying is the least of your worries. What you might want to do, though, since you're having these premonitions about dying, is to make your peace with the living."

Doc Will harumphed.

"Are you manifesting any symptoms yet?"

"No. I just got the blisters. God only knows what'll happen next. The gestation period is three days."

"As a doctor of Mindal Science, you should be able to predict your symptom and take care of it before it takes care of you."

"Yes, I suspect so." Doc Will began to relax, comfortable in the realm of Mindal Science, no matter with whom he spoke.

"You've analyzed yourself before, of course."

Doc nodded.

"Are you analyzing why it is you're putting off going to see your guests?" Angus nudged.

"No, I'm not."

"Aren't you willing to give them your blessing?"

Angus was not surprised to see tears in Doc Will's eyes when he turned his ancient face to the apparition and said, "Audley and Brad were to be married. It was my fondest dream that they would give me a grandson. Now all this," he flapped his hands helplessly, "stuff has happened."

"All this 'stuff'!? This is love, Wilhelm! Love and life! The woman is pregnant!"

Doc blustered, "Already?" He was miffed.

"I'm sure of it. Thirty-two hours."



Doc Will demanded, "How can you tell?"

"I can tell. I have keen sense perception, remember? I know life when I see it."

"Then she can't even know yet."

"I doubt if she knows, but she wants the baby and will be happy to find out."

"Don't tell her." Doc was torn between his affection for Sylvia and Brad and his irritation that they had foiled his dreams.

"You still haven't grasped the fact that your daughter's destiny is beyond your control." When Doc Will didn't object, Angus continued. "And what's more important, you haven't gotten yourself sufficiently out of the way to realize that you *will* have grandchildren. One way or another, here or there, in one form or another you will have progeny, so quit holding up everyone else's happiness and your own through sheer stubbornness."

"Oh, why am I even listening to you?" Doc grumbled. "You're part of my problem!"

"Oh, pooh, I am not and you know it. You're just looking for something to grumble about. Matter of fact, if I were a betting man, I'd bet that your symptom is going to be one of sheer cantankerousness. If you want that on your conscience, you go ahead, but if I were leaving my loved ones, I'd want to go out in a good mood, and I'd give them *all* my blessing."

Doc and Angus sat on the bench for a full five minutes before Doc heaved a mighty sigh and left the clinic.

He entered the lounge to find a forlorn Brad sitting by himself. "Is everything alright, son?" he asked as he approached.

Brad quickly rose and, in spite of his misgivings, greeted his old friend warmly. "Everything's fine," he said, but something in his manner belied his testimony.

"How about a drink?" Doc offered.

"Sure."

Doc Will fixed them both a cocktail. "Where's Sylvia?" he asked. "Angus said she was here, too."



"She went somewhere with Audley."

"Martha told you I was here?"

"Yeah. Sylvia has a theory about the blackout that took us to Audley's." He accepted the drink and Doc's proximity. "Her house-sitter referred us to your place, and Martha directed us here."

"Is something wrong, Brad?"

"No, I don't think so. Just work."

"Let's hear it."

Brad recalled to Doc Will the "For Your Eyes Only" report and the photographs of the cosmic explosion on the night of the blackout with statistics on potassium explosions in particular. He then reported to Doc about Sylvia's interview with Twilah Leighton and the soil samples registering potassium, and the metal detector also registering potassium in Audley's apartment. Uppermost in Doc Will's mind was his notes reflecting Lanon's high potassium levels. If Brad knew about those notes, he would have mentioned them as well.

"Why do you suppose there was potassium in Audley's apartment?" Doc probed.

"She had been in central Pennsylvania that night," Brad said, without tying it to Lanon. "She may have been exposed somehow."

"I see. So Sylvia's theory is what?"

"I don't know exactly. She says it's just a hunch but she hasn't told me what the hunch is."

"You'd run all over the country on a woman's hunch?"

Brad flushed. "She's very convincing."

"And very attractive, Brad."

The young man cleared his throat.

"There's possibly some recent development that I might be interested to know about?"

"Like what?" Brad hedged.

"Are you trying to act naive with me, Brad? I wasn't born yesterday!"

When Brad's eyes met Doc Will's, there was little question



that he felt guilty about betraying the doctor, if not Audley.

Doc Will patted Brad on the knee as he would a contrite boy. "Oh, son," he said, "don't worry about me. There are few things in life that would make me happier than seeing you happy, and if it is with Sylvia? Hell, I couldn't ask for a better partner for you. Sylvia is almost a daughter to me anyway."

"I know how much you wanted a grandson," Brad confessed.

"So what? You and Sylvia might give me one."

"You're not disappointed with me?"

"Of course not. If anything, I'm disappointed with myself for taking so long to see what makes so much sense. Sylvia has been living in a vacuum far too long. She needs someone like you and ... I'm very happy for you both." He scowled, cleared his throat and pronounced, "You have my blessing."

Brad was amazed at the size of the burden that lifted with those words. He now sat quietly nursing his drink with his friend Dr. Blackstone at his side. After a moment, they noticed Angus on the lawn talking with one of the Elders. Doc Will recognized the old woman as one who had been diagnosed as having the pox and whose secondary symptom affected her vision.

"Who is that, Doc?"

"Angus? He's an old fart, just like me."

Brad laughed. "Well, so you are, but at least I can see your face!"

"He's alright." Brad detected sour grapes in Doc Will's next remark: "Look at him out there plying his trade."

"Which is what?"

Doc Will puffed himself up. "He's a Grand Master of Mindal Sciences." Then he rather mumbled, "Maybe I'll be like him when I grow up."

HER EYES WATERING FROM PEERING into the TASC, her back aching from hunching into it with such absorption, and her head spinning from trying to retain it all, Audley walked out to have



a swim and perhaps a smoke before dinner. Assured by the Elders that her body-brief was appropriate for swimming, she was about to dive in when Sylvia called out, "Hi, Aud!"

Hearing Sylvia's voice behind her, Audley spun around in half alarm, instinctively fearing Sylvia had come in pursuit of Lanon. "Sylvia! What are you doing here?"

"Working on Brad's Presidential Assignment. What are you doing here?"

She would have to think on her feet. "Actually, I'm working, too. Jessie Brothers signed me up as a Journalist on Contract to do a series for the JCP." She pulled on her djellaba and led Sylvia towards the employee wing. "And not a moment too soon! I quit Weinberger, you know."

"No, I didn't," Sylvia said with a backward glance at Brad in the lounge. "Fact is, I can't keep up with you these days."

"How did you find me?" Audley asked, leading Sylvia along the escalator, a hard knot at home in her stomach.

Sylvia's eyes were busy taking in the impressive overhead dome and the manicured lawn. "We went to your apartment yesterday and your house-sitter told us you'd be gone for awhile so we went to Martha's and she said Doc Will and his patient had come here. I figured if Lanon was here, you probably would be, too."

"Who's 'we'?" Audley scowled.

"Brad and me." Inside the room, Sylvia sat stiffly on one of the upholstered chairs, while Audley busied herself compulsively folding things and moving them from here to there. Sylvia could read Audley's mannerisms like a book. "Sit down and talk to me. Where's Lanon?" she asked.

"He's in a meeting with Jessie," Audley said, sitting. "They're working on plans for a new building or something." She lit a cigarette. "So much has happened since I saw you last, Sylvia, I don't know where to begin!" She got up, went to the fridge. "How do you like my new digs? Not bad, huh, for institutional living!" She poured them each a glass of juice. "I went to Spain, Sylvia!" She rummaged



for cheese and crackers. "I can't begin to describe the trip. I met the most fascinating people!" She brought the tray of refreshments back and sat them on the table while Sylvia watched her, enjoying Audley's anxiety. "Oh, my God, Syl, I forgot about your party!"

"Never mind about the party," Sylvia said. "I need to talk to you about something."

Audley sat. "About what?" The knot in her stomach turned into a hot coal.

"As you suggested, I've been working as Brad's Investigative Assistant and I've come up with something I'm not sure what to do with."

"What?"

"I think your friend Lanon caused the black-out."

"He didn't."

Sylvia noticed how quickly and with what conviction Audley defended him. Her hunch was that Audley had suspected the same thing at some point. "I think I can prove it," she persisted.

"But he *didn't cause* the black-out!" She couldn't very well say it was just a coincidence. She couldn't really say anything. Nor could she allow Sylvia to pursue this avenue of thought. "Who have you told about this? Far-fetched as it is."

"No one yet."

"Not even Brad?"

Sylvia shook her head. "I wanted to talk to you first."

"Thank God." Her appreciation for their friendship was immense. "Please don't tell him."

"Why not?"

"Because he might believe you. He's grasping at straws."

Sylvia flared. "He is *not!*"

In that instant, Audley saw the whole scenario. Sylvia was in love with her fiancé. She demanded, "You're sleeping with him, aren't you?"

Sylvia turned crimson.

"Aren't you?!"



"Yes." She shifted her hand conspicuously, exposing the diamond.

Audley felt like she had been sucker-punched. "You traitor!"

Sylvia rallied. "Audley, how can you say such a thing? How can you even *think* such a thing? Brad and I love each other! Anyway, aren't you sleeping with Lanon?"

"No," Audley replied, full of self-righteousness.

"Well, it isn't because you don't want to," Sylvia countered, "so what are you getting so huffy about?"

Right now Audley had more pressing concerns. "I'm jealous, alright? Anyway, what makes you think Lanon caused the black-out?"

"Because of the potassium and because he's got super-powers."

She danced right past the potassium. "Super-powers!" Audley stood up to think and pace. "This job has gone to your head, Sylvia. You should be writing script for Star Trek, not looking into governmental intrigue!"

"That's why you're scared, isn't it?" Sylvia demanded. "You're afraid the government will find out that Lanon is an alien and they'll take him away from you!"

Audley sat and faced her accuser. "Do you know how ridiculous you sound?"

"It may sound ridiculous, but it's true, isn't it?" She defied Audley to contradict her theory. "Isn't it?"

Audley sat dumbly. She couldn't figure Lanon out. Her father hadn't been able to figure him out. How had Sylvia?

The morose expression on Audley's face told Sylvia that some serious girl talk was required.

"Aud, who are these guys, really?"

"What guys?"

"Lanon! And now Angus."

"Lanon is a man with a mission and Angus is some kind of



higher up mucky-muck who studies brain waves or something. They come from two entirely different places and are working on two entirely different things."

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't worry."

"How do you know they won't hurt you? You don't know anything about either of them."

"Oh, yes I do! Dad tested Lanon thoroughly and found him to be completely human, and Angus is wonderful, really, Sylvia, and so fascinating. He came with me from Spain. We've been together for days and he's an absolute dear."

"What about the fact that he's nearly invisible?"

"It's some kind of phenomenon called Ultimaton Aggregation. Just because you can't see him doesn't mean he isn't real!"

Sylvia studied her friend's reactions a long time before she sighed resignedly. "Well, speaking of real, Aud, I'm totally head over heels for Brad. I hope you're not mad."

She was so relieved to be off the topic of Lanon, she nearly collapsed. "Of course I'm not mad. I'm very happy for you both. Anyway, it's obvious that Brad was ready for a relationship and it sure as hell wasn't going to be with me."

"Audley, you're nuts. How can you throw over a man like Brad for a guy from outer space?"

"Sylvia, quit it! Lanon is flesh and blood of the highest and finest order. He is absolutely mortal. Dad had him under a microscope for over a week and could find nothing different about him at all. Nothing at all!"

"Except the potassium."

"What about potassium?"

Sylvia retrieved the stolen notes from her purse and read Doc Will's commentary: "high potassium levels tapered to normal on the eighth day."

"So?"



"Eighth day after what? After the blackout. And there were traces of potassium on your sofa where Lanon slept and there was potassium in the soil sample I took from the UFO landing site in central Pennsylvania."

Audley was so impressed with Sylvia's investigative abilities, she burst into laughter. "UFO landing site!"

Sylvia was not amused. "What's so funny?"

"'UFO landing site'. That's *hysterical!*" She enjoyed a deep, cleansing belly laugh.

"Stop it! Quit laughing at me."

"Oh, that's a good one. UFO landing site." She wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "You really think Lanon is an alien who arrived in a flying saucer."

"Yes, I do." Sylvia was adamant. She was not about to discard her theory or her research simply because Audley didn't want her to think so."

"Lanon Zentonovitch is from Russia," Audley corrected, taking Alexius' data from the dossier.

"Right. And I'm Sylvia Waterfall from Kenya, Africa."

"He is!" Audley insisted.

"How do you know? I thought he had amnesia."

"He did. Now he remembers." She snatched the notes from Sylvia's hands and read Doc Will's commentary. Sylvia hadn't intended to break the news to Audley of the patient's sterility. After a moment she snatched the notes back and stuffed them into her purse.

"So what about Angus?" Sylvia persisted. "What's he all about?"

"I don't know about Angus. Anyway, I'm not in love with Angus, so what difference does it make?"

Sylvia probed hard enough to capture Audley's attention. "You know a lot more than you're telling me, Audley Blackstone."

"Sylvia," Audley said, "I don't know what to say. I met Angus in a cow pasture in a tiny village in the southern part of Spain."



He says he studies psychism. He says he has keen sense perception and that he sees people by their light. I don't know what that means. Maybe he's a Tibetan Monk or something. You met him. What do you think?"

Sylvia admitted, "I thought he was totally charming."

"I'm sure he thought you were, too."

"But are you sure you're safe?"

"I am one hundred and one percent certain! I've never been more certain of anything in my life." She took Sylvia's hand. "Sylvia," she said, "something very special is going on and I'm being made a part of it. I'm not so much scared that you're going to tell the government about Lanon, as I'm scared something will happen to stop this wonderful thing that I'm being included in. I'm not even sure what it is, but Sylvia, I believe it to be important. You know what I mean? I mean *really important*."

Sylvia looked at her friend whose face was more earnest and sincere than she would have believed possible. She looked into those green eyes for a long moment then squeezed her fingers.

"It's important to you, Audley, and that's what matters."

After another long moment they stood, embraced, and walked back to the lounge together.

ON THE PATIO BY THE POOL, Lanon watched their approach. Sylvia waved. "Hi, Lanon," she called. It was easy to see why Audley was so completely taken with him. He was so handsome and charismatic.

"Hi, Sylvia," he said, kissing her cheek. "You look great."

"Thanks. I feel great," she purred. She looked better than ever. Her face had the warm glow of sun-ripened peaches and her hair fell in loose folds over her shoulders. The blue of her eyes was nearly as deep as Lanon's. She admitted to herself that if it were not for Lanon's prompting, she would still be reading magazine photo arrays and fantasizing about what she was now experiencing. No wonder she was having a hard time exposing him to Uncle Sam.



"What brings you into the colonies?" he asked. Audley drew up and stood by him.

"Brad wanted to see Dr. Blackstone. I left him in the lounge. He should be there. Would you like to meet him?"

"Yes, I would. I've been looking forward to discussing the future with him."

As Sylvia preceded them into the lounge, she explained, "The Institute of Futurology has temporarily disbanded, Lanon. I'm afraid Brad's future is up for grabs."

Brad and Doc Will watched them come in, Sylvia leading with her left hand, Audley and Lanon together. As Brad and Doc stood, Brad felt almost grateful. It appeared that all the details had been worked out.

"Hi, Brad," Audley said with a grin. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Fancy." The two young men appraised each other.

"I want you to meet Lanon Zenton. Lanon, Brad Spencer."

"It's good to meet you, Dr. Spencer," Lanon said, shaking Brad's hand. "I've been wanting to talk to you about your work."

"Sit down, everybody," Audley urged. "I'll fix us a drink."

Brad, with Sylvia at his side, laughed. "My work is temporarily suspended, I'm afraid. That is, my work with the IOF."

"What's happened with the Institute?" Lanon asked.

Doc Will could see that the ring on Sylvia's hand was not the Watergate wedding ring, but Audley's engagement ring. He was fairly amazed at the finesse with which the exchange had taken place, almost as if it were a given, and he was the last to know.

Brad edified Lanon. "The August 14<sup>th</sup> black-out was to have been averted by the IOF and when it happened anyway, the President was ... unhappy. The IOF elected me to represent them at a special session at the White House, which I attended and at which I was given the dubious honor of finding out why the black-out occurred in the face of our efforts, given the fact that the IOF did everything in it's power to prepare the government for the blackout



in the first place. It's pretty clear to me that the government screwed up in not following the directives we outlined and is now trying to make the IOF the scapegoat."

"So the IOF predicted the black-out," Lanon reiterated.

"Yes. Months in advance."

"And still they requested this investigation?"

"Required it, actually. So until we find out what happened, the IOF is shut down. Unless, of course, I can present them with some kind of plausible answer and, barring some inner-galactic disturbance, I doubt I'll be able to solve the mystery."

"You have reason to think it might be inner-galactic?"

"Well, Sylvia seems to think it might. She's been looking into potassium explosions."

Lanon was amused. "Sylvia, you clever woman! We must have a little talk about your knowledge of potassium."

Sylvia turned three shades of crimson. He was so charming, how could he possibly be an alien?

"Have you considered the UCLA offer, Brad?" Audley asked.

"It's been in the back of my mind."

"What offer is that, Brad?" Sylvia asked, admiring the glint of light in the diamond.

Her toying with the ring did not go unnoticed. Brad flashed an appreciative grin to Audley before saying, "I've been offered a teaching position at UCLA."

"There is merit to that," Audley suggested. "You could even live in Beverly Hills!"

"Oh, no, Aud," Sylvia interjected. "I have no intention of living in that house. Nor would I saddle Brad with the maintenance of such a monstrosity. I've left that life entirely. My life is now as up for grabs as Brad's."

Doc Will had a sudden thought. "Audley, why don't you take Sylvia and see if you can find Angus. Ask him to join us for a few minutes. I'd like him to have a chance to visit with Brad before



the Elders come in for dinner."

"Sure," she complied. "C'mon, Syl."

Brad's curiosity was piqued but he kept it bridled. "Tell me, Mr. Zenton," he said when the women had gone, "are you totally cured of what it was that you were being treated for?"

"Please, call me Lanon. Actually there was nothing wrong with me but a bump on the head. I told Audley I had been in a plane crash during the blackout and it wouldn't do but she had to have me checked out to make sure I wasn't mortally wounded. I'm glad she insisted, otherwise I might not have had the pleasure of getting to know Dr. Blackstone."

Doc Will made a mental note of how well Lanon had learned the social graces.

"What's your field, Lanon?" he asked.

"I'm in science, too. Cultural anthropology of a sort. I study the ways in which people live together, how they set their goals and how they work out their differences."

"Sort of a corporate mogul?"

"No," Doc intercepted, "Jessie Brothers is the entrepreneur around here. Lanon studies the philosophies of advanced civilizations, such as the JCP, and the people who make up the civilization, such as the Zooids."

"I confess I know very little about it."

Doc Will stood as Audley and Sylvia returned with Angus in tow. "Angus," he said cheerfully. "Meet Brad."

"Oh, this is the computer person we were discussing this morning, is it not, Audley?"

It had hardly been a discussion, as she recalled. She had only thought of him! "Yes, Angus. This is Dr. Bradford Spencer, the guy who knows all about computers. He is one of my dearest friends and Dad's associate."

Angus bowed to Brad. "I am pleased to greet you again, Dr. Spencer. Please don't let my peculiar appearance distract you from the truth of my essence."



Brad reciprocated with a bow. "I'll try not to, Angus, but you must forgive my curiosity."

"Please, sit," Angus said, taking a seat on the edge of the sofa. "My vaporous appearance is due to a phenomenon known as Ultimaton Aggregation. You have heard of it in your scientific studies, no doubt?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"It's a rare phenomenon, but obviously possible."

"Obviously," Brad acquiesced.

"Audley and I were discussing your qualifications to undertake a new assignment. She would have recommended you, but she felt you were already occupied."

"According to the discussions we've been having, Angus," Lanon said, "Brad's occupation is nebulous at best."

"What kind of an assignment is it?" Brad asked.

"It has to do with computer science."

"That's my field. I'm confident that I would qualify, but what's the nature of the assignment?"

"Lanon," Angus said as an aside. "I don't know if I have the authority to address this subject."

"I defer to your advanced experiential status, Angus. If you sense that Dr. Spencer would be approved, I certainly have no objection." Brad's curiosity was visibly aroused.

"We are embarked on an advanced science," Angus said. "We hope to open a line of communication between the Zooids and other intelligences. You must understand, however, that we are still in the speculative stages of this project. Nothing has yet been confirmed."

Brad was drawn to the vibrational integrity of this unusual Aggregation of Ultimaton. He smiled. "And you must understand, Angus, that my other options are similarly elusive."

Angus liked the romantic young man. He beamed. "After dinner we will show you to the Terminal."



## 11

## NEW ARRIVALS

*Flora and Cybelle*

They were ten in number for dinner. Jessie headed one end of the table, Doc Will the other. Andrew, Peter, James and John, the four Zooids who had been in the all-day Planning Session, joined Sylvia and Brad, Audley and Lanon.

In retrospect, Jessie regarded this evening as the last "normal" evening for him as the administrative head of the Colonies. He basked in the triumphant atmosphere wherein everyone had something to celebrate and to share. Brad and Sylvia were rather feted as prospective new Zooids. Audley, the new Journalist on Contract, was made to feel welcome. JCP member-at-large Doc Will was proud to bursting in the sense of rightness about everything transpiring. And Lanon's social artistry was so natural, the Board members had no clue he was a man from another world.

After introductions and before the first course was served, Jessie stood and proposed a toast. "I know you are excited about the new project, but I'd like to hold off discussing business matters until tomorrow when the other Board members arrive and can join us. There are many other things we can share and enjoy, not the least of which are our own relationships. Thus," he raised his glass, "I would



like to propose a toast: 'To friends, old and new'."

When Jessie sat down, Doc Will stood up. "I would also like to propose a toast." He lifted his glass. "To the betrothal of Brad, who is like my son, and Sylvia, who is like my daughter." Glasses were raised high in acknowledgment of the young lovers. Sylvia was radiantly happy and Brad had never appeared more handsome.

This festive group, with its odd mix of interests and personalities, conversed easily and shared readily. It was impossible to distinguish between the good spirits of the wine and the good spirits of the group. Words and time flew. And when everyone was physically sated and intellectually replete, they strolled onto the grounds to enjoy the spectacle of the sky, intense with the deep reds and purples of the second sunset, and the psychedelic rain that was uniquely Gateway's. Then, as the moon rose, the group dispersed, Board members going their own way and Doc Will retiring to his room to read medical histories. When Jessie offered to show Brad the TASC Terminal, Lanon asked to join them. The two women were left alone.

As darkness fell and the stars came out, so did Angus.

"Angus!" Audley called happily. "Come! Join us!"

"Your soul mates have gone off and left such beautiful women unattended?" he lamented on their behalf as he sandwiched his visage between them.

Audley pouted, "Yeah. Jessie took Brad to see the Terminal and Lanon went with them."

"Then I will see to your companionship," he assured them aloud while his mind silently asked after their more subtle needs.

At length Sylvia asked, "What did you mean by that, Angus?"

"By what? Soul mate?"

The women nodded.

"Ah," he said. As he prepared to orate, their ears sought the timbre of his voice. His atmosphere held them in his grip as he said, "In the vast realm of human relationships, there are many kinds of



relationships and for many diverse reasons.” He paused to clarify. “We are talking about adult love relationships here, of course?” Sylvia and Audley nodded eagerly. “Of course. So we will not talk now of family life. We will discuss love companions.” He needlessly paused to make certain he had their full attention.

“Playmates!” he pronounced. “Children playing together. This relationship is simple and uncomplicated. It may be physical in nature, such as a hug or a pat on the back, but it fulfills an elemental human need.” Sylvia thought of the photographic essay of the couple on the train. He continued, “A playmate relationship can involve mutual social interests, where you engage in athletics together or attend a concert. Beyond the moment, not much is required from each other in a playmate relationship, but if it were to be developed, it might evolve into that of helpmates.

“Helpmates are friends. A helpmate relationship is a friendship that sweetens your hUrth and makes your Urthly existence less barren, less troublesome. In the most common sense, it provides convenience, but in many cases, helpmates marry and have children, hence home life, but not always. Often helpmates commit themselves to each other for a shorter period of time, or for a specific purpose, while some stay together for a lifetime. It is a worthy relationship.

“And finally we come to soul mates.” Angus’ voice, like resonant music, waltzed the women round and round the compound. “In soul mates we find the love relationship between two people who have each evolved sufficiently to include the aspect of their souls.” At this use of the word ‘soul,’ Audley scowled.

“Any and all of these relationships involve responsibility to the other partner and they all have value in the Stream of Time, but the two personalities who are involved in the soul mate relationship have perhaps the greatest responsibility. They have not come to the relationship out of a sense of need, but from a point of compliment. They must each know their Self so well that they have become individually replete. Their union augments the personality gifts of



each other. Thus, in order to have a soul mate, one must have a knowledge of and appreciation for one's own soul."

Sylvia was content to hear Angus share his concepts, but Audley's confusion was discomfiting. Was it possible for her to be *any* kind of mate with Lanon? He was from Zenton; she was from Urth. How was it possible for her to trust *any* kind of feelings under these circumstances?

"Angus," she ventured, "is the soul the same thing as what Lanon calls the Nucleus?"

"Oh," he lauded. "Such keen sense perception! It is, indeed, the same."

She didn't know if the nagging insecurity in her stomach was a message from her soul or a touch of indigestion. "Do you have one?" she asked.

"Oh, yes! And so do you!" he let her know.

Sylvia asked, "And what about a soul mate, Angus? Do you have one of those?"

His non-face lit up the night. "Oh, indeed, I do." He would have elaborated, but their attention was drawn to an unusually bright light in the heavens.

"What is that?" Audley asked. "Is it a star?"

"I don't think so," Sylvia said, recalling Twilah Leighton's story. "It appears to be moving."

"It's not an airplane," Angus assured them.

"It must be a falling star, then," Audley concluded. "Go ahead, Sylvia. Make a wish!"

"You make one, Aud. Mine has already come true!"

As they stood there gazing, neither of the women could see that Angus' piercing eyes acted as a beacon light for the new arrivals.

WHEN AFTER THREE TURNS around the grounds the men had not yet returned from the Terminal, Angus accompanied the women as they moved Sylvia's things into Audley's new apartment in the employee wing before bidding them good night. Sylvia unpacked her



bags and hung her clothes in the closet while Audley drew herself a bath.

Once settled in and settled down, Sylvia sat on the toilet seat to do her nails while a pensive Audley soaked in the tub, thinking about Angus' lesson on mates. She had rather ruled out being sexual playmates with Lanon, and if he couldn't have children, there wasn't much point in being helpmates. But the idea of being soul mates intrigued her.

What did it mean to have a relationship that addressed the aspects of the soul? What *were* her soul's aspects? Since she wasn't certain, did that mean that her soul was as undeveloped as Lanon's emotions were undeveloped? Their prospects of ever being soul mates looked bleak. Given their differences, having come from different parts of the universe, she perceived that Lanon might never develop an appreciation for the full range of human emotions, and she might never develop a full appreciation of her soul. What the hell is a soul, anyway?

As the nail dryer blew warm soft air onto the fresh layer of rose-colored enamel, Sylvia asked, "Do you think Jessie will offer Brad a job?"

"Probably," Audley murmured through the bubbles. "He's qualified. Angus likes him."

Sylvia squirmed and purred, "I like him, too."

It suddenly irritated Audley that her friend should be so smugly content while she herself had major personal problems to work out. She sat up slowly. "But what if he does go to work for the JCP, Sylvia? What would you do?"

"I would become a Zooid and live happily ever after."

"But what would you *do*? I mean, what could you offer the JCP? You don't know how to *do* anything!"

Sylvia threatened to drop the electric blow dryer into the bathtub. "Audley Blackstone, what a mean thing to say! I'm not totally illiterate, you know. I'm sure I could do *something*! After all,



I'm divorcing Roger because I'm sick to death of sitting around feeling *useless!*"

"Oh," Audley uttered, sliding back under the bubbles. "I thought you were divorcing Roger so you could marry Brad."

"I left Roger before I got involved with Brad, I'll have you know!"

"Well, it sure didn't take you long."

Sylvia stood her ground. "Audley, why are you being such a bitch all of a sudden? It didn't take Brad and me long because we *need* each other. You never *did* need Brad, but I'll bet it didn't take you ten minutes to be dazzled by Lanon!"

"True," she had to admit, smug in the realization that the love relationship between her best friend and her former fiancé did not qualify for the responsible level of soul mates.

"Then why aren't you two at least playmates?" Sylvia persisted.

"Because he isn't emotionally ready," Audley allowed.

"Oh, that's absurd. Men are *never* emotionally ready. You have to trick them into it."

"I don't want to trick Lanon into anything." She pulled herself up, clean, and stood in the tub to dry off. Sylvia handed her a thick terry-cloth towel and said, "It seems to me that *you're* the one who isn't ready."

"You're probably right, Sylvia," she said, rinsing out the tub, "I'm not ready."

"Well, have you at least let him know you think he's special?"

Audley started a bath for Sylvia, sighed audibly then said, "He knows I think he's special."

"Then what's the deal? Isn't he interested?"

Audley thought about the night in the motel room when he stood up, the blanket sticking out in front of him and his recent attempts to be romantic. She grinned. "Yeah, he's interested."

Sylvia shrugged. "Well then, go for it!"



"I don't want just a playmate, Sylvia! I want more than that!"

"Like what? Here." Suddenly Sylvia took off her ring and handed it to Audley. "Take it!"

"Don't be ridiculous. It's yours." In this gesture Audley recognized what she had thrown away and what Sylvia had acquired – a mortal victory. Sylvia had acquired a helpmate, a 'real catch'. Audley was quick to suggest, "Unless you want a new one, of course. I'm sure Brad would get you a new ring if you want."

Sylvia put her ring back on triumphantly and slid into the tub. "Why would I want another one?" she mused. "This one is beautiful and it's hardly ever been used."

"I guess that's appropriate," Audley said, hanging up her towel. "You've hardly ever been used either!" Abruptly they laughed, happy in their friendship.

Audley meandered into the outer room, something still weighing on her mind. Too many things had happened lately that she hadn't had time to process. Lighting a cigarette, she opened the door to the compound, allowing visual images to parade through her mind's eye, critically surveying each one for signs of her discomfort. It was not because of Sylvia and Brad, no. She really was happy for them. What about quitting her job with Weinberger and taking on this new assignment? Hardly! A scoop series on the Jural Colony Project coming out in the Silent Majority could land her a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize in Journalism! Nothing wrong with that!

Across the compound, Lanon and Brad were just now returning from their visit to the Terminal. Brad was closing the door to his guest quarters when she spotted them, but Lanon saw her and waved. It was late. She waved back. "Good night!" His door closed.

It was something about Lanon. It was about the relationship between soul mates. He was here on a mission to bring the Zooids into open communication with the rest of the cosmos. What did



that mean? How could she possibly compliment that? What was her mission? Did she need one? Did her soul?

Sylvia, coming out from her bath and slipping into bed, distracted her by asking, "When do you go out on assignment, Aud?"

"Whole Child."

"When's that, pray tell?"

"Three days from now."

"I'm going to Reno in the morning to start my divorce proceedings. You have time. Why don't you come with me?" She fluffed up her pillow and adjusted her covers.

"To Reno?" Audley resisted. "Whatever for?"

"Just to get away for a few days. Take a vacation. Wear some real clothes for a change and maybe meet a hunk right off the divorce press."

"Don't be ridiculous," she snarled.

"Alright, forget the hunk, but come with me. We'll go shopping, get our hair done. It would do you good to get away and get your mind off Lanon for awhile."

Audley closed the door and disposed of what was left of her cigarette, then crawled into her side of the bed. "You're probably right," she acknowledged wearily, turning out the light.

"I know I am," Sylvia murmured.

In the dark, Audley's mind wandered. A "hunk" indeed. A hunk of Lanon is just what she needed! Where was that cosmically condoned one-night-stand Angus had talked about? With other men, she'd had no trouble jumping into the sack. What was keeping her and Lanon from doing the same thing? Why wasn't she hotfooting it across the compound right now instead of being in bed with Sylvia?

She was yanked away from her fantasy by Sylvia's common ploy, to be lulled to sleep with a bedtime story. "What were you doing in Spain?" she asked in the dark.

"Spain?" Audley collected her thoughts, glad for something specific to focus on. "I went there to interview Professor



Alexius Vessey, the founding father of the JCP.”

Sylvia said, “Hmmm,” meaning, “Go ahead, keep talking, I’m listening.”

“He reminded me a lot of Dad, in a way,” Audley reminisced vaguely.

“Hmmm?”

“Oh, I don’t know” she mused. “He was old. Wise.”

“Mmmm.”

Audley thought back to the evening with Alexius and Dierdre when, at dinner, she felt as if she were being drawn into some new dimension. How could she begin to describe such a thing?

“His wife is gorgeous, Sylvia!”

“What’s she do?” Sylvia’s voice was sleepy.

“Do? Dierdre? She doesn’t ‘do’ anything! She’s a perfect wife and mother.”

“I mean for work. She doesn’t work?”

“She works all the time, but it doesn’t look like work. She manages their beautiful home. She takes care of her husband and their kids and the garden. What a garden! And those kids, Sylvia. I don’t usually like kids, but....” She recalled their sparkling eyes and laughter the day they gave her the sunbonnet to wear into the village. Without thinking, she found herself asking, “What about you, Sylvia? Are you and Brad going to have a family?”

Sylvia’s answer was so long in coming, Audley thought she might have said something wrong, but at last Sylvia murmured, “Yes, I want to have a baby,” in such a way that Audley was glad. As Sylvia’s breathing lapsed into deep sleep, Audley wondered if her problem might have to do with Lanon’s inability to have children, but no, it was not about children.

Staring at the ceiling, she let herself delve deeper. Picking up her earlier train of thought, she let her mind take her to where her soul could see, and suddenly it was clear that her quandary was not about sex or marriage or children or even romance.

She threw off her cover and lit another cigarette, not



surprised to discover her hands were shaking. Standing up and throwing open the door, she acknowledged that her problem was the one her father had pointed out to her many times before. She was mortal! No matter what Lanon was or where he was from, she was indissolubly mortal. Thus, she was vulnerable.

Standing in the open doorway, blowing smoke into the night, she realized that *for years* she had been passing judgment on the entire human race for their emotional weaknesses. She had disdained people who couldn't embrace the unknown, who hid from adventure. She had looked with pity on those who, with their frailties, shrank from life, with its vicissitudes. And all the while she had been denouncing people for their fears, she had been totally oblivious of her own. She was afraid of love.

Long after the light in Lanon's room went out, she closed the door, put away her smokes, and lay back onto the pillow, letting hot tears well up to roll down her temples and into her hair. She was afraid of love and afraid of life, afraid that love would be taken from her, and she would be left alone. It would be emotional suicide for her to fall in love with Lanon. Everybody knows that nothing lasts forever. Better to not get too close in the first place than to have to mourn its passing.

BRAD GOT AN EARLY START, eager to apply himself to the Terminal, first stopping into the dining room for a quick cup of coffee. There he ran into Sylvia and Audley.

"Hey!" he said, joining them at their table. "What gets you up so early?" He pulled his chair in close to Sylvia.

"I'm on my way to Reno to get a divorce," Sylvia announced brightly. "I've got to get that out of the way to make *this* official!" She flashed the ring at him, as if he'd never seen it before.

He caught and kissed her fingers. "Are you sure you like it? Does it really fit? We can get you another one, if you want," he worried.

She beamed at him, "It's perfect, darling. I love everything



about it." Pouting suddenly, she said, "You were out late last night."

"Yes." He was undaunted. "Audley," he insisted, "tell Sylvia what an incredible thing that Terminal is!"

Sylvia wrinkled her nose. "I'm not crazy about computers."

"It's not a computer," Audley said grumpily. "The TASC is a movie theater, a library, a telephone, a radio, a bank, all the modern conveniences rolled into one."

"Can it do my nails?" They ignored her.

"So what do you make of all this, Brad?" Audley asked, in an attempt to be sociable.

"That Angus is all right," Brad admitted. "He's got a great sense of humor, huh, Aud?"

Audley grinned. "Yeah, he does."

Sylvia wanted to know, "Is he going to offer you a job?"

"I don't know." Brad shook his head. "Angus seems to want me to do it, but I'm still not sure what the job is! It's some new development. I have the feeling it's another one of those Top Secret things."

"I doubt it, Brad," Audley cautioned. "Zooids don't have any secrets."

"Well, I don't know about that. I really don't know much about anything, but I *will* know something later today. There's a Board Meeting scheduled for this afternoon, so I imagine they'll make a decision then." He looked at his watch and stood up. "Anyway, I've got to go," he said in his 'time's a wasting' way. "Angus is waiting for me in the Terminal." He bent and kissed the top of Sylvia's head. "How long will you be gone?"

Sylvia stood. "I don't know," she said, winding her arms around him. "They say you can get a divorce in Reno in no time, but I don't know how long 'no time' is."

"Well, however long it is, get right back here! And behave yourself."

"Oh, I will!" Sylvia crooned.

Ignoring the lovers, Audley sipped her cold coffee until



Brad's elongated frame disappeared into the elevator and Sylvia began to badger her again. "I don't know why you just don't come with me, Aud."

"Because I have work to do!" she said. "I'm on the payroll now."

Sylvia argued, "You don't have to start work for three days yet, and all they're going to be doing in the meantime is messing around with that computer and having meetings."

"Yeah, but the meetings might be important! Maybe I can learn something from them."

"Oh, *come on*, Aud!" Sylvia badgered. "I'll tell you all about my visit with Twilah Leighton."

"Who's Twilah Leighton?"

Sylvia rolled her eyeballs conspiratorially. "Anyway," she bribed, "Don't you need to find out how the Transport Lines work?"

"Yeah," Audley allowed.

"Then come with me," Sylvia cajoled. "I'll even let you tell me about that damned computer." In the end, Sylvia's calculated verbal efforts won out, as usual.

THE FALLING STAR that Audley made a wish upon, set down in the desert north of Gateway. It was a small ship, easily hidden in the dunes. Cybelle, a nature goddess, and Flora, a flower goddess, took a moment to adorn their bodies in mortal raiment then set foot on terra firma.

This was a wondrous morning on planet Urth. The summer wild flowers were in full and radiant bloom, such that Flora was immediately pleased with the offerings and began at once to gather a variety for her study. Cybelle, who had never been on such a finite world before, opted to climb to the top of a nearby rise, the better to see the terrain.

The terrain was unremarkable, but she watched two solar-operated vehicles appear in the distance, approach to within a quarter of a mile from her, then stop. Two males, Lanon and Jessie,



got out of the first vehicle. Three other mortals, two males and one female, got out of the second vehicle. They did not see her watching them, but she could hear them discussing the proposed site of the new structure.

"This land," Jessie explained to Lanon, "was purchased by the JCP at the same time we bought the Gateway property. It was rather too small to do anything with, but the price was right. We figured if we did need it, we could easily connect to it from headquarters."

"What are the neighbors like?" Lanon asked, still not in total command of the nuances of the English language.

"We're right next to the nuclear testing site of the Nellis Air Force Range and Nevada Proving Grounds of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission."

"So nobody would notice if there was a mild implosion of energy here now and then," Lanon suggested.

"It's a very remote spot," Jessie confirmed.

Lanon was very pleased with the location. "You must have intuitively known this would be the ideal location for the Portal, Jessie."

Jessie demurred, "Actually, it was just a good deal on a piece of real estate."

Project Engineer John Brothers hauled his equipment out of the van and set it up in preparation for reading the area. Overseer of Aesthetics Rebecca Brothers, with her binoculars, was of course surveying the aesthetic aspects of the area when her vision fell upon Cybelle on the distant rise.

"Jessie," she cautioned. "Look."

Jessie took the glass and focused into view the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Cybelle, realizing she had been discovered, stalwartly held her ground and lifted herself up to her full dignity stature. The red-gold of her hair appeared as a crown glistening in the sun. Her garments were stately yet sensual. An emerald green leotard caressed her perfect body like a second skin. The skirt a



bustle of pale emerald chiffon that wafted then settled when she turned to Flora to advise her that they had been discovered. Jessie was spellbound.

"What is it?" Lanon asked.

Jessie reluctantly handed over the glass for Lanon to see first Cybelle and then Flora on the rise. "Who are they?" he asked, handing back the glass.

"They?" Jessie looked again. Now two beautiful female forms stood overlooking their proceedings. If possible, the second was even more beautiful than the first. A cloak of golden hair poured over her body like a shaft of sunlight. Her regalia were the color of royalty. Shaken, he silently returned the glass to Rebecca. "I don't know who they are or what they're doing here," Jessie said, confused and intrigued.

"Shall I go find out, Jessie?" John offered.

"I'm a woman," Rebecca objected. "I should go."

Thomas asked, "Are they trespassing?"

"No," Jessie said to his crew. "I'll go and greet them." Adding, "They are the most beautiful women I've ever seen."

Rebecca was dumbfounded -- not because she felt slighted, no, but because never in all the years of knowing Jessie, had she known him to take the slightest interest in any woman. Of course, she had to accede, these were not just *any* women! She looked again.

When the goddesses saw that Jessie was coming across the sand towards them, they began the descent to greet him. Flora explained to Cybelle that it was not uncommon for a delegate of the native tribes to greet her upon her arrival. With the superstitious, as most mortals are, she did not feel any danger. As a rule they treated her according to her rank and allowed her to leave when she was ready. Once or twice, she confessed, they had tried to get her to stay to rule their kingdom, but not often.

Jessie had never before been enthralled by a woman. In his years at Knossos women had sought him, but he had been too



occupied with his studies and his relationship with Alexius to devote any time to the opposite sex. Since the inception of the colonies, he had been devoted to his work and had not really made time to think much about female companionship. But his eyes and his essence were drawn to the redhead. The nearer they came to each other, the more beautiful he realized she was. When at last they stopped, perhaps ten feet away from each other, he was breathless at the sight of her.

Flora, the more experienced, spoke. "Greetings."

Tearing his eyes away from Cybelle, he found his voice. "Good morning," he said to Flora, then felt compelled to say, "Welcome."

"We are visitors to your land," she explained. "I am called Flora and my companion is called Cybelle."

"How do you do?" he said. "My name is Jessie Brothers."

Flora took a step nearer to the mortal, who was humble in her presence but not nearly as backward as those she normally encountered. Cybelle approached as well, fully alert to the mortal man's admiration of her. She was also alert to Lanon, who was advancing.

These two beings could not be ordinary women, Jessie thought. "What kind of tourist are you that would bring you to this remote part of the desert?" he inquired.

"I am a galactic botanist. I study native flora, hence my nomenclature," Flora explained. "I am on a gathering mission, and Our Mother has recommended that Cybelle accompany me on this particular assignment."

Jessie seemed fixed to the spot. He noticed that Flora carried a handful of wild flowers. Cybelle's eyes left Jessie to smile at Lanon as he stepped into their range.

"Greetings," Flora repeated.

"Greetings," Lanon replied. At once, he recognized that these were not mortals. Their Nuclei were powerful. "I am Lanon from the Constellation Zenton," he said by way of introduction.



Flora was pleasantly surprised. "I have been there!" she said. "I am from the neighboring Constellation of Uriah. What is your mission?"

"My mission is to attempt to open the door between this isolated sphere and the cosmos. And yours?"

Jessie was amazed at nature of their casual exchange.

Flora was happy to report, "I study local flora. I am on a gathering mission of native flowers, which I will take back with me. They tell us a great deal about the survival aspects of life, particularly in such a barren atmosphere as this. Cybelle is my companion on this mission. It is her first assignment."

Lanon smiled at Cybelle. "This is my first, also."

"Did you come on a ship?" Cybelle asked, and when she spoke, Jessie felt his ears tingle. Her voice was as music.

"No," Lanon replied. "I was materialized."

"So you are here as a mortal!" Flora remarked.

"Yes," Lanon acknowledged. "My assignment is to determine the status of a particular civilization."

"Are you faring well?"

"As far as I can tell!" Lanon acknowledged. "But I'd love to discuss this with you further and get your perspective. Will you be staying here long?" He grinned, realizing that to a human "a long time" could be ten minutes, but to other-terrestrials, "a long time" could be ten millennia.

"We do not have a specified return," Flora responded to his smile, reflecting long experience with the amusing peculiarities of local languages.

Flora was intrigued that planet Urth was more advanced than she had anticipated. She was delightfully aware of Jessie's obvious infatuation with Cybelle, so she was not at all surprised when Lanon suggested to Jessie that the visitors might like to make Gateway their base of operations during their sojourn here.

"Of course!" Jessie agreed, finding his voice. Eyes fixed on Cybelle, he said, "Please, stay as our guests."



"You are very gracious," Cybelle responded, bringing goose bumps to his flesh.

Lanon went on to explain to the visitors that the area was being surveyed for eventual construction of an edifice for terrestrial escape.

Flora exclaimed to Jessie, "A Portal! How exciting for you, and for your world!"

Most of this sailed over Jessie's head; he was just as pleased to let Lanon explain, "We need to work here for a Part of time," he said, "before we return to Gateway."

"Very well," Flora said. "We will accommodate your schedule. Cybelle and I will go about our business until you are ready to take us there."

Cybelle smiled at Jessie and his knees became weak. Lanon took Jessie's arm and turned him around. The new arrivals watched in silent communion while the men descended to their arena, before they ascended the hill to dispatch their ship and to resume their work.

Back at the site Rebecca asked, "Who were they, Jessie?"

His face was aglow but his only reply was, "Tourists, 'Becca. Let's get back to work."

DOC WILL SLEPT FITFULLY and woke late with the nagging feeling that he had entered a phase of life wherein he couldn't keep up if he wanted to, and he didn't want to.

He had given Brad and Sylvia his blessing, but he still had his resentments. Sylvia had gotten pregnant immodestly fast. This implied to him that they hadn't even had the decency to wait a civil amount of time before going at each other like dogs in heat, and he was disappointed with both of them.

He was also disturbed that Lanon had planted seeds of death in his mind. The initial motivation may have been for science and the benefit of evolution, but the reality was that he was cursed with the damned blisters. Now, instead of approaching death



academically, he was burdened with having to consider it as a reality for himself and he was afraid.

He was also irritated with that apparition Angus. How dare he know more about Mindal Science than Doc himself? How dare he know that Sylvia was thirty-two hours pregnant? How dare he guide Brad's career and secure Audley's affections? It wasn't fair that he, Dr. Wilhelm Blackstone, had devoted his entire life to science only for this half-here, half-there apparition to come along and know all these things innately.

He was irrevocably mad at Audley for bringing all this into his life and onto his shoulders, but he was mostly angry with himself for having limitations. He didn't have the strength or the time he needed to enjoy such an exciting new phase of planetary development, but he wouldn't let himself consciously acknowledge that yet. He didn't want to talk to old people about dying. He didn't want to talk to Jessie about the new project or the old projects. He didn't feel like getting out of bed, and so he didn't. What he did want, he admitted, was Sarah.

Undisturbed in his bed he thought of her in living color, remembered when they had been as enthralled with each other as Brad and Sylvia were now. It had been a long time since he had allowed himself to remember how wonderful it was to share his life with his woman. Too long. Before, it had only made him feel lonely to think of her, and so he had quit thinking of her. When he thought of her now, however, it did not make him feel lonely. He was already lonely, and so the thought of Sarah made him feel loved, and he felt better.

After a while he began to wonder if perhaps Sarah wasn't trying to tell him something, and when it dawned on him that he was thinking of her in the present tense, something happened to him. He acknowledged the conversation he had earlier with Lanon, about love being an active verb, about Sarah being alive and well, and suddenly the idea of leaving this world became exciting to him. He could be, *would be* with Sarah again!



He became charged with the image of himself molting from the flesh, leaving the rheumatism and the arthritis behind, and waking up in a new world, with Sarah, strong and vibrant as they had been when their love was young. Together they could be so much, do so much. He could almost reach out and touch her, and this knowledge brought tears of joy to his eyes.

In spite of his enthusiasm, his body was slow to respond. He pulled himself up, bathed and shaved, dressed in his customary brown jumpsuit, and went out in an expectant mood. He told himself he was ready for the Portal and wondered how long he would have to wait for the Portal to be ready for him.

JESSIE RETURNED TO GATEWAY with the Board members, leaving Lanon to escort the new arrivals to the guest wing. At the site all morning Jessie had been preoccupied with the realization that something was going to have to be done about all these visiting entities. If they were to be a regular feature of colony life, the Zooids, or at least the Board members, would have to be advised.

He put in a hasty call to his mentor and launched as soon as Alexius' ancient visage appeared on the screen. "I think I'm losing my grip here, Alexius. You never told me *this* would happen."

"What is it, Jessie? What's happening?"

"Ever since Lanon got here, things are different. There are so many things to adjust to. I just feel like I'm . . . losing control."

Alexius had been anticipating this call for days already. "Give me an example."

"Well, like Angus for one thing. You know Angus. He's like The Invisible Man or something!"

"Yes, I know Angus. He's a good friend of mine. It's not his fault he's non-corporeal."

"What makes him look like that?" Jessie complained.

"He's 5,000 years old! But you don't have to worry about him. He knows how to get in and out of places and can take care of himself."



"5,000 years old?" Jessie sat down abruptly, dizzy in the dimension he had fallen into. "A good friend of yours?"

"And he's your friend, too, Jessie," the Professor counseled. "What else is troubling you?"

"This morning we went out to the site, out to where we're going to build the Portal?"

"The what?"

It dawned on Jessie he hadn't even discussed this with his mentor. "Oh, God. You see what I mean? It's all happening too fast! I'm losing it! How could I forget to discuss the Portal with you?" he asked incredulously. "It's Lanon's idea. It's for 'terrestrial escape' he says."

"I'm not worried about that. You can trust Lanon. What happened at the site?"

"Two women showed up from the Constellation Uriah, wherever the hell that is, to study wild flowers or something. I'm not sure, Alexius, but I think they arrived on some kind of space ship! Is this what I can expect from now on?"

"Well, I don't know! Are they interfering with your work?"

"Well, no, but ...."

"But what?"

"Alexius, ... these two women, these new arrivals are ... superhuman!" He admitted it. "They are like goddesses! And the redhead? The one who calls herself Cybelle? Well,..." Words failed him.

Alexius grinned into the receiver. "It's about time!"

"What do you mean, 'It's about time'?"

"It's about time a woman caught your eye."

"But, she's a -- I don't even know what to call her!"

"Call her Cybelle. That's her name. She is an other-terrestrial."

Jessie acknowledged to himself that "other-terrestrial" sounded better than "extra-terrestrial." Maybe she was just another humanoid from a world whose advanced technology made it possible



for her to come here in a space ship. Maybe he could think in terms of feeling something for her. Maybe all of this was merely an adjustment in perspective.

“Well, I’m going to have to at least tell the Board members something! If all these invisibles and other-terrestrials are to be coming and going or staying here at Gateway, sooner or later we’re going to have to tell the Zooids something!”

He came back to himself hearing Alexius say, “Look, son, we will, as soon as it’s time for them to know. This isn’t an emergency, Jessie,” Alexius reassured him. “Don’t worry about the Supernals. The door is opening, that’s all. It’s all part of the Jural Colony Project. This is what we’ve been working for, all these many years!” Jessie shivered, and Alexius continued, “I’m so excited for you, Jessie, to be there in person, experiencing all of this. How I wish I could be in your shoes to see it all happen.”

Alexius had known of this, had been waiting for this, all this time, Jessie realized. “I don’t mind telling you, Alexius, I wish you *were* here. As an administrator I usually feel at least competent, but all of this is outside my normal jurisdiction and I have no idea what’s going on.”

“It’s outside *all* our jurisdictions, Jessie. This is what makes it so exciting! What’s happening is that we’re coming into contact with other worlds, with cosmic intelligences, higher authorities. You’ve got to trust that this is all happening according to plan.”

“Yeah, but whose plan? What if something happens to the Zooids?”

Alexius recognized the source of Jessie’s fear. “Nothing bad is going to happen to the Zooids and certainly not from these outside entities. The Supernals are here to help. It’s like we’ve talked about so many times, Jessie. It’s a friendly universe. Remember our talking about this? ‘Forward strides in science and evolution go hand in hand, but belligerence doesn’t go far from its origin.’ If these entities can travel so far in space to visit us, I can guarantee you they are beneficent. They are our neighbors. Make them welcome.”



"I am. I think. We did. Anyway, Lanon is."

"And he is one of the visitors, so you see? Already you are being assisted. You are not alone in this, my boy!" As Jessie nodded, Alexius said, "Listen. Why don't you ask the Board members to come by this afternoon and use it as a forum to introduce them and see what happens?" While Jessie scowled, Alexius persisted. "I believe you're worrying needlessly, Jessie. I can assure you the Supernals are part of the solution, not part of the problem."

"I'll think about it."

"The universe knows what it's doing," the professor concluded. "And as for the redhead? Don't argue with it, son. You've been alone long enough! What did you say her name is?"

"Cybelle." He liked saying it.

"Cybelle," Alexius repeated. "Nature goddess. Nice name."

Suddenly the line clicked off, leaving Jessie standing in front of the blank screen, staring into space, hair mussed, holding the mike to the viso-phone. Lanon found him thus. "Is something the matter, Jessie?" he asked.

Jessie turned off the viso-phone and waved to a chair, inviting Lanon to join him. "It's just that everything is happening so fast, Lanon!"

"Like what?" Lanon sat.

"Like *what*?" His laugh was a bark. "Like *you*, for instance! You show up telling me you were materialized into the body of a full-grown man less than a month ago. Like Angus! No material body *at all*! What is he, for Christ's sake, and how can he survive in our atmosphere like that? How can he be 5,000 years old?" Jessie ran his fingers through his hair again. "And those women we met this morning, your neighbors Cybelle and Flora. What are they doing here? They have to be doing more than picking wildflowers, Lanon! What's going on?" he demanded. "Who are these people? *Who are you*? And why is everything changing so suddenly?"

Lanon answered levelly. "Nothing has changed, Jessie. Your world is still the same. And nothing *will* change, either, unless and



until you and the Zooids approve of the changes that *might* come about as a result of your own decisions. We would never interfere with your free will. I've told you that. If you don't want to proceed, I will leave and the others can go back to doing whatever they were doing before you had knowledge of them, and you can continue on as you have been. If, however, you *do* want to proceed, you will obviously be coming into contact with other forms of life. But nothing will happen without your full consent and cooperation."

He continued, answering Jessie's unasked questions, "I've told you why I am here. I'm basically a reporter, giving my superiors an account of your level of existence. I haven't done this before so I don't know why the others are showing up in your life at this same precise time, but maybe they've all come to show you what you can expect. We can ask them! We can talk to them if you want to, and if you don't, if it's all too much, you can make the decision for us to all leave and maybe we'll return again forty or fifty years from now."

"So," Jessie clarified, "what you're saying is, if it doesn't happen in my lifetime it will happen someday."

"Yeah, if your planet is still here," Lanon said "and if it can still maintain life. If it hasn't destroyed itself or been destroyed."

Jessie reacted passionately. "If Urth is destroyed, it won't be because the Zooids haven't tried to advance it! We have fought *hard* against the darkness. It's what motivated us into existence in the first place!"

"I know that, Jessie, and I'll testify to that fact. Regardless of Urth's destiny, the destiny of the Zooids is assured, but we are not blind to the ignorant forces at work on your planet. We might be able to help you! If nothing else, we could keep you company! Even so, this is your decision. Yours and your fellow Zooids. Let us know your wishes, Jessie, whether we should leave you alone or whether we should proceed, and your free will will be honored."

Jessie felt immense relief. He was not losing control. He still had choices. All this was simply another part of the emerging new paradigm. He knew they were progressing quite well on their own,



but it did bother him to think that the Supernals might leave because he was reluctant to progress further. Such an attitude was not zooidal. Besides, he had to admit that the idea of Cybelle keeping him company was an inducement if not out-and-out cosmic coercion. He smiled and nodded. "I was thinking of introducing you all to the Board this afternoon."

"That's a great idea," Lanon said, visibly relieved. "I'm glad you have opted to proceed."

"Well, I haven't," Jessie hedged. "But I can't make this kind of a decision alone. The Board has to be involved."

"Of course."

"I'll arrange for the meeting," Jessie said. When Jessie turned to leave, he asked, "Where are Flora and Cybelle?"

"Downstairs." Lanon grinned. "Having a massage."

Jessie nodded, his eyes twinkling. What a clever way to introduce them to the human condition.

IN RENO, SYLVIA AND AUDLEY checked into a luxury hotel and had lunch before Sylvia left Audley at the pool. She went on to investigate how to get a divorce in no time. After finding the right lawyer and fixing the right price, she filed her Petition, then, while waiting for certain paperwork to be processed by the appropriate offices, found a jeweler who would give her cash for her rings. They were worth ten times the amount she got, but she was glad to be rid of them, glad to be done with the false security they offered.

The next item on her agenda was more difficult. From the hotel room, she checked the airlines then called Hoagland and made an appointment to see him the next day regarding Jennifer.

SUMMONED TO THE BOARD meeting, Angus left Brad alone in the Terminal and Brad was happy enough to be left alone, for the computer he had so arduously sought had literally been laid in his lap. With a machine like this, he could predict the future indefinitely. He could calculate the reason for the blackout and offer



future remedies. He could access the government's files on UFOs and Remote Viewing. He could see into submarines, the KGB, anything!

Sitting in the cold room, amazed by his good fortune, he thanked God that at long last, he had his own task. Within minutes, Brad's steady breathing had taken on the same rhythm as the Terminal's ventilation. He had become One with Science.

IT DIDN'T SIT WELL WITH OSCAR. He was angry at his boss, Dr. Spencer, for leaving him -- his assigned Presidential Aide -- to go off with a woman -- his girlfriend and self-appointed Investigative Assistant. The only difference Oscar could see in their qualifications was gender, and he came "this close" to filing a report against Dr. Spencer for sexual discrimination. It angered him even further that Brad was not keeping in contact, not even keeping his Aide informed.

Seeing no reason why he should stay cooped up in a dreary library reading all there was to know about potassium while Dr. Spencer was out having fun, Oscar planned some fun of his own. They had said they were going to Malibu. What for? What was in Malibu? Didn't Sylvia say she had been staying at the Grand Hotel? A call to the Grand Hotel led him not to Sylvia but to her husband, Roger Watergate, an attorney who lived with his wife Sylvia in Beverly Hills.

Making a mental note of this, in case he decided to file a discrimination case, Oscar went on to his next contact, Dr. Spencer's socialite mother, Lydia Spencer, who was infinitely more helpful than the hotel desk clerk. Lydia had done her own homework and was able to confirm for Oscar that Sylvia was not only the wife of Roger Watergate of the Prince, Damon & Watergate, P.A. law firm, but she was also the daughter of Hiram Chandler, the newspaper magnate. And, not to be overlooked, she was also a close friend with the eminent Mindal Scientist Dr. Wilhelm Blackstone's daughter, Audley, a one-time reporter for the Silent Majority who happened to



own a studio in Malibu. Oscar was on his way.

In Malibu, Audley's house sitter Eugene admitted to Oscar that Dr. Spencer and Sylvia had been there with a fancy metal detector they brought with them to do a reading. He made a note of this and asked several more questions. Yes, they did detect high traces of potassium. No, Eugene didn't know where they were now. Audley? She supposedly went to Spain but should have been back by now. Perhaps her father, Doc Will, would know more about the current whereabouts of his daughter or Sylvia or Dr. Spencer.

Having previously been to Doc Will's Santa Barbara estate, Oscar had no trouble getting information from Martha. Eager for company with Doc Will gone, she greeted Oscar as a long-lost friend and fed him a lunch he would not soon forget. Ever anxious to oblige, she was quick to tell him that as far as she knew, they had all gone to Gateway. All? Yes, all: Brad, Sylvia, Dr. Blackstone, Audley and Lanon Zenton.

Oscar the whiz kid had earlier cracked the code for Sam and copiously studied Brad's notes. Of course, he had gotten into the files and found the lab report on Sylvia's soil samples as well as the "For Your Eyes Only" communique referencing a recent potassium explosion in the galaxy. He now used every telecommunications system available to Sam and to Uncle Sam but could find no reference anywhere to a Lanon Zenton. He found a file in general records on one Lanon Zentonovitch; it was a remarkably unenlightening document.

Before approaching Gateway to confront Dr. Spencer, Oscar investigated and studied in depth all recorded data about the Zooids of the Jural Colony Project, an obscure, registered not-for-profit undertaking that was condoned by the government but carefully observed for potential subversive actions.

It was not Oscar's conclusion but it was his strong suspicion that the August 14<sup>th</sup> East Coast blackout was caused, somehow, by a foreign potentate in collusion with the communist sympathizer JCP. Fired by his ambition to lead his boss to discover this subversive plot



against the government, he advised Lassater, on behalf of Brad, then set out for Gateway in Nevada.

SYLVIA HAD LUNCH ON THE PLANE to Denver. When she arrived at the hospital, Hoagland himself met her in the lobby, as solicitous as ever. He directed her to his office and exchanged her generous financial contribution for a tax-deductible receipt before relaying to her that an unfortunate turn of events had transpired. Sylvia listened with uncommon poise as Hoagland explained that two days ago Jennifer had developed viral pneumonia, through no fault of the hospital, and they had been compelled to put her on a respirator. He explained that they had tried to notify Mrs. Watergate but could not locate her, although Mr. Watergate, through his law office, had been notified at once.

Assuring Dr. Hoagland the hospital would suffer no negative ramifications from them, having been for years completely content with the hospital's management of their situation, she asked to see her daughter.

"Well, yes, of course."

Jennifer was in the same room she had been in for the past seven years. It was a private room with a window overlooking the parking lot. As Sylvia sat on the side of the bed, looking out to the view of distant mountain peaks, she realized for the first time the irony of the window. The view cost an extra \$5,000 a year and she was the only one who ever looked out. As her eyes caressed the horizon, she thought about Lanon's comment that the Voids should be eliminated, and she now very calmly agreed with him. Who was she to play God and insist that Jennifer find this existence meaningful?

Jennifer lay there as if asleep, as beautiful as ever - totally perfect. Sylvia could see herself in her daughter, how together they had suspended time and set aside living. If Jennifer were freed from that young body, if her soul -- if she had one -- were released, wasn't it possible that Jennifer might find happiness in a new existence



much as she had found happiness in her new life with Brad?

It was clear to Sylvia what she must do.

After forcing open the window, she disconnected Jennifer from the life-sustaining apparatus, then kissed her daughter good-bye for the last time. She sat with her, then, until the need to leave was greater than the need to stay.

She stopped in the office to thank Hoagland again for his courtesies and assured him Jennifer was resting peacefully.

In the parking lot, she turned to look up at Jennifer's window. Taking a deep breath, she watched as the curtains billowed like clouds, her heart swelling as she sensed her daughter's and her own release to freedom.



## 12

## NEW ADMINISTRATION

*The JCP Board of Directors*

Lanon helped Jessie arrange the chairs in the main Conference Room for the specially called Board Meeting, as Jessie confessed his reluctance to tell the Board about the ultimate purpose of the Portal. "Maybe if they can accept that there is other intelligent life in the universe, they'll be more likely to accept their afterlife alternatives, but no mortal likes to think about death, not even Zooids."

Recalling the test he took in Doc Will's lab, Lanon agreed. "Well, the immediate issue is whether or not they are willing to work with us."

"Yeah. It might not be necessary to tell them about that specific side-effect of open communication."

"Let's just see how it goes."

When Doc Will and the twelve members of the Board were present and seated as assigned there were four extra chairs conspicuously arranged at the table.

Jessie stood and surveyed his associates. "I want to thank you all for coming on such short notice," he said, taking command. "I want to first acknowledge our member-at-large, Dr. Blackstone,



who is here at my request.”

They readily and affectionately acknowledged Doc Will and, the meeting now having been formally established, Jessie sat and resumed speaking to his associates in an intimate and confidential tone.

“We have a lot to discuss today, but I think that if we are all succinct, we can do this without running too far into the evening. Lately there have been ...” he began, but his voice trailed off. “ ... certain new developments ....” He struggled for the right words. When he looked to Doc Will, as if for inspiration, the old man shook his head and shrugged. “I don’t know how to say this,” Jessie stammered, “but recently, I’ve become aware of ... certain new developments that have affected ... and will continue to affect the future of the JCP and the Zooids.” He paused to rethink his approach.

“This morning I called and talked to Professor Vessey about these ... changes, and he suggested I simply introduce you to ... to some new personalities who have found their way into our organization.” The Board members respected Jessie’s confiding in them and would hear him out, but he was unable to put his concerns into words. Finally he said, “Doc Will, would you invite our guests in, to join us?”

Doc Will crossed the large room and opened the heavy wooden doors expecting to see only Lanon and Angus, but his eyes fell also upon the visage of Flora and Cybelle for the first time. He was stunned. Not only were they beautiful, they seemed to be the very embodiment of self-mastery. When he intuitively made way to allow them passage, the four Supernals entered the room with super-human dignity. The goddesses, being so beautiful, captured their eyes, but it was Angus, with his non-material aspect, who captured their attention. In full awareness of their effect on the mortals, the visitors crossed the room and took their seats at the conference table.

“As you can see,” he said, “these visitors are quite unique.” Rather than stare, the members of the Board directed their eyes to



their leader, who gave them something to think about. "These visitors are interested in the Zooids. They have been observing our development. Some of them may be here only temporarily, some may stay, and others will surely follow, but it is apparent that the JCP is on the threshold of something that involves not only a new colony but a new era, a new age."

Receiving puzzled looks and raised eyebrows, he said, "It seems we Zooids have been instrumental in building a bridge between the JCP and other intelligent life in the universe." Drawing blank stares, he stated, "These entities are here to establish an intergalactic liaison."

This statement brought forth such a surge of stimuli in the twelve, that the very molecules of the air were affected. This alteration in atmospheric conditions was clearly visible to the keen sense perceptions of the Supernals. Flora and Cybelle fairly giggled with delight, underscoring for the Zooids that something revelatory was taking place.

Jessie cleared his throat to corral their wandering attentions. "I want you to realize that what we tell these visitors about our work with the JCP is as important for them to hear as will be for us to hear what they will have to say about their work, so please speak freely," he said.

This seemed a logical plan; no one objected.

"I will begin with a short introduction."

At once Cybelle focused her full attention on him, virtually lifting him out of his seat, and so he stood, took his pointer and, as would any consummate instructor, approached his class.

"The Jural Colony Project is a young society. We have been in existence for only a quarter of a century," he said to the guests. "Since we are human animals, we are rightfully a field of zoology, thus we affectionately refer to ourselves as Zooids. Zooids are defined as 'comparatively independent animals living and functioning together as if they were a living organism' -- which is, of course, true of any society. We are essentially an experiment, in that there are no



guidelines for what we are attempting to do.

“The society of Zooids is organized under the aegis of the Jural Colony Project, the JCP. **Jural** refers to our system of government; our law is Natural Law. The **Colony** concept reflects our desire to work as a unit, a community. And we are a **Project** because we are a society based on spiritual principles. This simply indicates that while we do not represent any particular religion, we do regard ourselves as children of divinity.

“Our social values and ethics are derived from our personal relationships with divinity. In other words, we live our lives as if we were in the presence of God, and while this reflection of spirit reality will be unique for each of us, we honor that spirit, no matter what you call it. Beliefs are personal. We are not a church. We are a society.

“Simply put, Zooids are people who have grown tired of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling, sensing, experiencing and tolerating gross imperfection, whether it is in ourselves or in others. When and if we discern gross imperfection in our families, co-workers, friends or ourselves, we commit to its correction. We define gross imperfection as destructive thoughts and selfish actions such as rudeness, carelessness, aggression, hostility, discord, negativity, self-pity. In short, we are people who became tired enough of the status quo to actually do something about it.

“Instead, we claim relative perfection, and this is acquired by living by what you would call The Golden Rule. Our way of life entails giving up feelings of worthlessness, guilt and shame, and focusing on developing those qualities of character, such as trust, devotion, honesty and service for ourselves and others that will allow us to live in progressive harmony. We are, however, non-doctrinal.

“Our philosophy is that each individual is responsible for his own religious experience and this does not entail dogma so much as attitude. This adds a new dimension of reality to our way of life, in that, we aren't here to convert anyone to any particular belief system, nor do we meddle in each other's personal theology. However, we



function as a self-conscious organism. We are mindful of the effects our beliefs and attitudes have on others.

“As I said, we are essentially a social group. Our social ideal is seen as the ability to share, to communicate, to negotiate, to be creative and productive, to foster peace, security, harmony and a sense of well being. Our goals are to attain and maintain a civilization which provides each and every Zooid with intellectual peace, social progress, moral satisfaction, spiritual joy and cosmic wisdom.”

Jessie paused in his presentation and took a sip of water, reviewing his audience. Cybelle was intent upon his every word but the Board members were only half listening. They were far more intrigued by the demeanor and appearance of their visitors, particularly Angus, and while they did not stare, they did study the guests who, in contradistinction, focused their attention completely on what Jessie had to say. And so he continued.

“The JCP is completely self-governing. We buy our property outright, upon which we build our communities with our political structure and economic system. Currently there are nearly 50,000 of us, inhabiting over 72 active colonies throughout the United States. We have made in-roads into the Canadian Provinces as well as the Common Market countries of Northern Europe and word of us has reached around the globe. We are in the planning stages of creating an International School of Zooidal Philosophy for World Peace, which will be built within the next five years on property we have already purchased in Switzerland.”

Here Jessie sat down and became somewhat more familiar. “We started this would-be Utopia a little over 25 years ago with this original Board of Directors.” The guests now turned their attention to the Board members, openly studying them as Jessie explained,

“On my left is Andrew. He is Co-Administrator, sort of like a Vice-President; Andrew is truly indispensable to the administration of the JCP.

“Next to Andrew is James, who is in charge of our



computers or, as we like to call them, TASCs. This stands for Transmit/Access System of Communications, and through our TASCs we are all able to communicate with each other almost instantaneously. Since we manufacture our own TASCs, every Zooid speaks the same computer language.” Addressing the guests, Jessie added, “You might regard these devices as somewhat clumsy, but they are a great advancement for our civilization.”

“Sitting next to James is his brother John who is in charge of Logistics. John sees to the orderly relocation of Zooids as well as our products by the intelligent management of our Transit Lines from one Colony to another, sort of like an Air Traffic Controller.” He paused then, recognizing how elementary the JCP must seem to these advanced beings. “Again, this might seem backward to you, but for our world it is quite sophisticated.” The phrase “our world” seemed to cause some consternation in some of the Board members so rather than explain, Jessie went on.

“Peter oversees Mediation, Arbitration and Legislation which involves our Elders. Nathaniel recruits and orients newcomers. Matthew is our financial and legal liaison with the Outside. Thomas is in Engineering and Construction. Phillip is the warden of Penn State Reserve, the rehabilitation center. Samuel heads up Resources, Sales and Distribution. Joseph there is our man in Philosophy and Education. Rebecca handles Aesthetics and Public Relations. And last but not least is the lovely Erica who oversees Domestication and Values.”

Through this brief introduction, everyone had a chance to look each other over – except for Angus, of course. Their eyes could not see him clearly, but the Psychist perceived them readily enough. He saw their attitudes projected toward him in their emotional currents and these psychic antennae indicated very clearly to Angus that each one of these Zooids either feared him or were in awe of him -- a natural enough reaction. He projected back to them “Relax!” and, without knowing why, they all resigned themselves to his presence and returned their attentions to their CEO.



"We are entirely self-sufficient," Jessie continued. "Nearly half of our colonies are agricultural, and those which are not totally agricultural, grow so much of their own food that we have excess that can be stored, preserved or given to those who need it. We are not strictly vegetarian; we also have colonies for animal husbandry and fisheries enough to provide for our total supply of meat, fish and poultry.

"We have no fossil fueled vehicles, although we do use solar-energized carts on a limited basis. In fact, one of our industries is the manufacture of solar power packs. Let's see. What else can I add?"

Cybelle took advantage of the lull. "Your description of the JCP indicates your consuming devotion to your work, Jessie Brothers. This is a highly commendable attribute."

Jessie demurred at once, "I couldn't've done anything without the Board here, not to mention the Zooids themselves! The Board can give you an idea of how we manage. Go ahead, Andrew, tell us what you do in the JCP."

Andrew seemed reluctant to divulge the inner workings of their society to strangers but the realization that their mentor Alexius Vessey had urged the meeting swayed him to proceed, albeit with a cursory sketch and not his usual in-depth analysis. "With your permission, Jessie, I'll table the minutes of our last meeting."

"Understood, Andrew. This is an atypical meeting. Just give us an overview."

"Very well." Andrew was a tall, slim man with chiseled features. He wore his brown, curly hair short enough to wisp at the collar. He had an air of competence and efficiency. He took in a deep breath and commenced.

"While Jessie has been concerned with the outbreak of the pox and making your acquaintance, I have been making the routine rounds of the colonies, overseeing whatever the Zooids feel should be brought to our attention. These issues come up by way of our political structure which I will hold off boring you with." He paused before continuing.



“By the way, Jessie, the Swiss government has asked to lease our land there since we aren’t planning to build on it for a while yet. I told them we’d discuss it and get back to them before Winter Fest.”

“Did they say what they want to use it for?”

“Some kind of commercial venture.”

Erica spoke up. “I’d like to know more about what kind of commercial venture they’re planning, Andrew. That parcel is very important to the future of a United World and it must maintain the vibrational integrity we found there when we purchased it. I really would need to meet with the people first and find out what they plan to do there before I could give my consent.”

“Alright,” Jessie said. “We’ll table that for the next regularly scheduled meeting. In the meanwhile, Andrew, see if you can get a concrete idea of the nature of their needs. Anything else?”

“I have been negotiating a parcel of land in Nova Scotia as a possible site for a new fishery but the deal has complications and negotiations are far from complete. I’ll have more on that at our next meeting.”

“Very good. Peter,” Jessie said. “What’s being mediated these days?”

Peter was a thick, burly man with long, thin hair that he wore pulled back and tied with a leather strop. His complexion was ruddy and his eyes twinkled when he revealed, first, that his daughter had just given birth to his first grandchild. Congratulations were extended all around.

“Aside from that,” he said, “I have been busy with the matter of a barking dog.” This gave rise to a group chuckle. “Each of the residential colonies,” he explained to the newcomers, “is comprised of clusters with seven residences per cluster and each cluster is allotted one dog. Colony Homestead in upstate New York has acquired an extra dog. The original dog, which is quite old, and the new dog are carrying on a loud conversation until the wee hours of the morning and this is disturbing the residents to the point where they have made an official issue of it. The matter is now in



arbitration because some feel the old dog should be retired." He admitted, "The new one is quite likeable."

"This leads to another matter also under discussion at that same Colony, and that is the fence. The new dog apparently was dropped off along the side of the highway that runs near Homestead, and the dog naturally wandered onto the property in search of food and shelter. Construction of a fence for Colony Homestead has been brought up and tabled before, but now the residents feel that something must be done."

He explained, "Homestead is a 240 acre residential colony with agricultural interests. A fence for a parcel that size could be expensive. Timing is a factor here, too, since we're coming into harvest season, and nobody can stop to construct a fence during harvest."

Joseph offered, "I'm sure the students would be glad to take a week or so out of session to put the fence together."

"I think I know just the type of fence for Homestead, Peter," Rebecca offered. "That's a beautiful area up there and it would lend itself well to one of those gracious fences that they use for horses. Not barbed wire, of course, but a ranch style, wooden slat fence, painted white, maybe criss-crossed, with a screen installed at the ground level to keep out small animals."

Samuel suggested, "We could get the wood from Coastline and install plain old chicken wire on the lower level barrier."

"Study the options;" Jessie said, "remind us at the next meeting. James, what's the word in Communications?"

James, a rather bookish fellow of good stock, was pleased to report, "Use of the TASC's has improved since we added the Viso-Phone." He explained, "We're constantly updating the programs. Of course, I'm very curious to know what the new program is that I heard about last night at dinner. Dr. Spencer seems very well versed in the computer sciences and I'm looking forward to showing him the TASC manufacturing plant. Otherwise, that's about it."

"Okay. Phillip, how are things at PSR?"



Phillip was a large man of good humor. "Good," he said, then acknowledged Lanon. "Nice to see you, Mr. Zenton."

"Have we met?" Lanon asked.

"No, but you were at PSR the morning after the black-out. You and Ms. Blackstone stopped to gas up and use the rest rooms." His voice was slow and deliberate.

"Yes, we did. I remember it well. I wanted to stay and meet you, Phillip, but Audley was in a hurry to get home. From the brochures I read, that's a fine place you run there."

"We do alright," Phillip agreed, nodding. "We graduated ten residents last week, then checked ten new ones into South Field. One of 'em is up for murder but I think he'll be okay. His wife is coming through Orientation next session. She'll be in Colony Midway, close by. That's what we like. Family support."

Samuel asked him, "How's productivity?"

Phillip nodded, his fingers intertwined on the table. "Rebecca showed us a nice new upholstery fabric last week. It's going to make some fine new furniture."

"Do you need anything?" Jessie asked.

"Matter of fact we do, Jessie. Guys at West Hill want some new book entered into the TASC. It's something new on Real Estate. I got the name written down here somewhere," he said, rummaging in his pocket. "Here it is." He passed the slip of paper down to James.

"We got it," James noted. "It's scheduled to be added to the library this production period."

"All right," Jessie said, moving things along. "Nathaniel?"

Nathaniel was an attractive man. It's difficult to say what made him attractive, for his features were not outstanding, but he had an aura of natural good will. He was ideal for Human Relations.

"Well, as you know, Jessie," he said, pausing to look at the guests as well as his peers, "we just had Orientation. Of the 65 people attending, 52 were accepted. Fact is, we are due for another colony. Our capacities are virtually reached."



“Colony Willow will be ready for occupancy next month,” John said, adding, “That’s a residential colony in Kentucky.”

“A gorgeous location,” Rebecca stressed. “With impressive agricultural capacities!”

“Is everybody settling in alright?” Jessie asked.

Nathaniel grinned. “As well as can be expected, considering it’s a new life-style for everybody and they all come in with their own ideas of what an ideal society ought to be.”

“What happens when they don’t get along?” Lanon asked.

“We’ll get to that, Lanon,” Jessie said, “Please be patient.”

“Oh, sure.” Lanon sat back. “I’ll wait.”

Jessie continued. “Thomas, what’s up in Engineering and Construction?”

“Well,” Thomas launched, “I have yet to hear the details but I understand we’re looking to build a new colony just over the hill from Gateway. It’s being referred to as the Portal and if my recollection of Latin serves me, that’s a door. I don’t know what the door is for, but the specs for construction are very unusual.” He addressed his peers. “I was out there this morning with John and Rebecca after we all met yesterday to review the specs that Lanon showed us. It’s a God-forsaken spot, that’s for sure.”

Cybelle put her hand on Jessie’s and caught his attention at once. “There is no such thing, Jessie Brothers, as God-forsaken. It’s not possible.”

Flora placed her bouquet of wild flowers on the table and concurred. “Cybelle is correct, Thomas. By some miracle these grew in the barren desert.”

Thomas was at once defensive. “It’s just a figure of speech,” he said. “I didn’t mean to hurt anybody’s feelings.”

“It’s alright, Thomas. Nobody’s upset.” Jessie urged, “Go on. Just try to be mindful of your semantics.”

“Matter of fact, that’s where we ran into these two ladies. Anyway, we’re going to build something out there that’s designed to withstand ‘energy implosions,’ whatever that means. Maybe it has to



do with the Nellis Air Force Base just over the next hill." He dared to defy Flora by adding, "We won't be growing any flowers out there, that's for sure."

"I beg to differ," Erica interjected, indicating her support of Flora. "You will notice that our headquarters, Gateway, is also built in the desert and it is an oasis of green growth, including food."

Thomas scowled. "You know, I think I'll just pass the floor to Matthew."

Everyone chuckled good naturedly before Matthew reported, "Well, financially we're maintaining a good lead. Politically, though, we have the usual snags. We have the on-going meddling of outside people who swear we are involved in some communist plot to overthrow the government or deny people their civil liberties. They think we have brainwashed the Zooids into giving up all their worldly goods and God knows what all.

"We have a new discrimination suit filed against us by Senator Braggins on behalf of his son when PSR rejected him because of his incorrigible attitude. There is a hospital in Colorado saying we are murderers because we encourage termination of life in certain appropriate circumstances. Of course, there are the usual protests of the right-to-lifers or the just-say-no folks. So you can see that this division of the JCP has its hands full."

In the gesture of pencil pushers everywhere, Matthew adjusted his eyeglasses and concluded, "On the whole, though, we're doing fine." He smiled and relinquished the floor.

"Thank you, Matthew. Joseph?"

Joseph was a diminutive man with a resounding voice that hardly fit his slight frame. He pulled himself up and said, "Zooidal philosophies are constantly expanding, therefore the educational colonies are constantly upgrading. Change and growth is the hallmark of the JCP. Zooids are constantly developing new thoughts, mental constructs, ideals, and subsequently they move to a colony where they can intermingle with people of like mind. Each new configuration generates even more change, more educational



adaptations.

“The pinnacle of zooidal philosophy is here at Gateway with the Elders, which gives me the opportunity to be here often, but I am also away a good deal of the time in educational colonies, of which there are seven at this time.”

“Would you tell our visitors something about our educational format, Joseph?”

“Be glad to. To a Zooid, the mind is a gift and education is a lifetime pursuit. The mind is not just for intellectual pursuits and scholastic certitude, but for the rightful understanding of our purpose in life as we relate to ourselves and to others. Thus, life itself is an education. Knowing how to live and how to die is an on-going process, and this includes learning how to rise above the debilitating effects of prejudice, ignorance, arrogance, self-aggrandizement, greed, jealousy, distrust and other negative emotional conditioning and behaviors.”

“Excuse me,” Lanon interrupted. “You said, ‘knowing how to live and how to die is an on-going process.’ What do you mean when you say ‘knowing how to die?’”

Before Joseph answered, he acknowledged the Chairman of the Board. Jessie directed Doc Will to respond.

“We’ve talked about this before, Lanon. People only think about death when they are forced to. For example, this pox.”

He addressed the Board at large. “In case you hadn’t heard, a pox has broken out here at Gateway, and Jessie called me in to take a look at it. Since I am not a medical doctor, but a doctor of Mindal Science, I have focused my research on the psychiatric aspects of the affliction. For some confounded reason, I felt the pox was a way of getting some of the Elders to pay attention to the fact that they might be getting ready to die. As a result of that fool theory, I’ve managed to scare some of the patients. Fact of the matter is, I’ve managed to catch the damned pox myself, and I’m probably projecting my own fears onto the others. But the point is, as I was saying earlier to Lanon and Angus, if we *know* we’re going to die we can deal with it.



If we *fear* we're going to die, we can become debilitated by the anxiety no matter how intellectually prepared we are."

"Thank you, Doc," Jessie said. "I think this would be a good time to take a break. Why don't we resume in, say, ten minutes?"

Doc Will got up to stretch and the Board members turned to the common interests of their particular domain. Angus and Flora, sitting next to each other, remained silent and composed, but a keen observer could easily have detected that they were engaged in a non-verbal conversation. Lanon discretely turned a deaf ear to the pair and found diversion in the discussions of the Board. With an ear to the murmuring of the group, Jessie was simultaneously captivated by the lovely Cybelle.

"Jessie Brothers," she said, turning her undivided attention to him.

"Yes?" He now turned his full attention to her and the rest of the room fell away.

"Are you all Brothers?"

He nodded. "We are." In the business of the Jural Colony Project, Jessie was confident. "We agreed to adopt the name to indicate our commonality."

"And the females had no objection?"

"No. At least they didn't voice any. Our culture has always used the masculine to designate both sexes, as in mankind."

"Humankind seems more inclusive somehow," she remarked.

He was humored by her. "Are you a feminist, Cybelle?"

"No, Jessie Brothers, but I am feminine."

He couldn't help but say, "You certainly are."

After a moment, she turned to him again.

"Do you have a mate, Jessie Brothers?" she asked.

He smiled. "No. Do you?"

"Not that I have been made aware," she said, her voice tinkling as music.



"Why do you ask if I have a mate?" he ventured.

"Because of the way you look at me."

"Does it embarrass you?"

"No. Why should your admiration for me be embarrassing?"

"You are very beautiful," he said.

"You are also pleasing to the eye."

"Ahem!" It would seem from his impatience that Doc Will had been trying to get Jessie's attention for some time.

"Oh, excuse me!" Jessie's apology was directed more to Cybelle than to Doc Will. "What is it, Wilhelm?"

"Your guest, Flora, might have something on that pox. Look." He extended his forearms to indicate that the blisters were gone.

"Don't they usually go away about this time of day?" Jessie questioned.

Doc shook his head. "Not that fast. She just rubbed some little blue wild flower on it and it stopped itching right away. I just sat there and watched the blisters disappear!"

Jessie excused himself from Cybelle and turned to Flora who sat composed and silent.

"Flora," Jessie said. "Can you tell me about that flower that you rubbed on Doc's arm?"

"Certainly," she said. "The flower contains a certain nitrogen which is required for life. There is apparently not enough nitrogen in the diet to compensate for what is unavailable in the synthetic atmosphere created by the polyglass enclosure."

"So you've solved the mystery of the pox!"

"It was no mystery."

"It was to us!" Jessie insisted. "Would you tell us how to utilize the flower to counteract the symptoms of the pox?"

"As I have explained to the doctor, the diet is to be augmented with the petals of this flower. Not the stem or the leaves, which are poisonous, but the petals."

"How much?"



“At least four petals per day. All your inhabitants should receive nitrogen in this way as a dietary supplement.”

Doc Will was elated. “So we’re not going to die?”

“Not from nitrogen deficiency,” she said with a smile.

“That is wonderful news!” he exclaimed. “Wonderful! Thank you!”

Flora pressed her hand to Doc’s happy face. “Of course. You are certainly welcome. This is my gift to you.” There was little doubt that Doc Will took it personally.

Angus was impressed that Doc Will’s disposition had cleared up as well.

Jessie called the meeting again to order. “All right, ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “We are progressing well. We can still finish this meeting before dinner if we get on with it. Shall we proceed? John?”

“Yes, Jessie. As Thomas was saying, we were at the new site this morning. I think that if we need a new Transport Line, it could be installed within a month. The Gateway shuttle was done in six weeks and I see no reason why the Portal shuttle can’t be done in less. It’s only eight miles, compared to the 42 or so from Las Vegas. Maybe even less than a month, since I’m given to understand that it will only be for human transport. No industry. No residences.”

“That’s correct,” Jessie allowed.

“Otherwise there’s nothing new to report except that the Minor Transport Line in Colony Orchard is working out very well.” He explained to the newcomers, “Orchard’s Transport Line is set up among the trees much like an assembly line. By the time it traverses the field, the fruit is picked, weighed, washed and packaged for distribution. It’s cut down on labor considerably. That’s it.”

Samuel, distinguished by his completely bald head, took his turn to discuss Resources, Sales and Distribution. “We’ve worked out a trade agreement with an outside firm: their Styrofoam for some of our surplus textiles. This project is designed to foster good will



with the outside since they are burying themselves in their own garbage." Turning to Lanon he said, "As soon as you've decided what kind of building materials you want to use on this Portal, let me know so that I can get it in here. You have any idea what it's going to be made out of?" You say it has to withstand a lot of energy?"

"Energy implosions," Lanon offered.

"Hmm. Never heard of it. Well, just let me know. Some materials are hard to get hold of."

Lanon thought to ask, "In this trade agreement, how much Styrofoam will you be taking in?"

"More than enough. As much as we can use."

"Where is it being stored?" Lanon persisted.

"Nowhere yet, but if you're interested, I'd be glad to work with you on it."

Jessie suggested they get together after the meeting.

Next in line to speak was a professional woman who wore her maroon jumpsuit like a military uniform. Rebecca Brothers was as blond as Flora but not as fair; she wore her thick hair in an easy pageboy that flattered an otherwise rigid facial expression. "My name is Rebecca Brothers. My field is Aesthetics and Public Relations. It's nice to see you again, Lanon," she said, then smiled broadly to the other newcomers.

"I'm very serious when it comes to my work," she said. "To my mind there is virtually nothing that does not have the elements of aesthetics and public relations. It is absolutely vital that we adhere to practices of tact and tolerance. Aesthetics involves not only that which meets the eye, but also that which meets the ear and the nose and the tongue and the skin and the spirit.

"The matter of a fence, for example, is a matter of great significance. It implies the keeping in or keeping out of something unwanted, and so it must be handled with sensitivity, with diplomacy, so as not to cause offense, even in the unconscious levels of the mind.

"These seemingly trivial matters occupy me constantly! The



design of a residence, the layout of a cluster, the packaging of fruit, all these lie within my purview. The work is never done. Fortunately, Zooids are fairly sensitive to aesthetic qualities and I am pleased that they call on me for advice, usually before it's too late." Concluding, she said, "I have viewed the site of the Portal and am most interested to hear of its purpose. My work will then begin in earnest."

Rebecca relinquished the floor to Erica.

"Thank you, 'Becca." Erica was as dark and delicate as Rebecca was fair and formidable. "Hmm," she pondered. "How do I describe my work? We Zooids strive for perfection but we aren't perfect just by an act of will. Domesticity does not strive for conformity but for individual uniqueness. Since we are all different, we aspire for unity with diversity. Much taming of the human animal is required to effect the desired result.

"As with any society, we have domestic uprisings, sibling rivalries, insurrections of various kinds, a restiveness that will set in with even the most replete of citizens, and these need to be focused on, identified, worked through and brought to rest. All this activity on the conscious and unconscious levels is a matter of values coming into conflict. There is no growth with conflict, however bothersome, and if Zooids are doing anything, they are growing - growing both in value and in values. So my work is subtle, but I feel it is important." She paused. "I love my life with the JCP and feel honored to be a part of it. I guess that's all I have to say, Jessie.

"Thank you, Erica. Thank you all."

They had now reached the unique guests. Attention focused on the four. A hush came over the room as Jessie said, "Lanon, would you be so kind as to tell these people who you are and why you are here?"

Lanon stood. "I am designated 0802-LZ. I come from the Constellation Zenton and I am here to ascertain the evolutionary status of the Zooids. If you meet the standards of my universe supervisors, and if you are willing, the Jural Colony Project will be



brought into open contact with other intelligent life in the universe.”

The Board members exchanged significant if unspecified glances.

As Lanon sat down, Flora stood and graciously addressed the group. “You may call me Flora,” she said. “My art is to study life. I specifically study vegetation, and even more specifically flora, hence my nomenclature.” The handful of wild flowers she held took on new meaning. “I come from the Constellation Uriah. My companion and I arrived on our ship just this morning.” She paused to allow another surge of psychic excitement to settle down. “I suspect it was our arrival that prompted our host to introduce us at this meeting, for if, after all, you are to be received into the Stream of Time, the door will be open for such visitations.” Something about her intonation made this an immensely alluring proposition. “You should know that we visit worlds for many purposes and you should also know that we greet you with affection.”

Flora passed the floor to Angus. The conference room now was quiet enough to hear people breathing.

Angus stood. In this gesture his ultimaton stirred the atmosphere and so he became somehow more visible, but when he was up, he vanished again, except for his mysterious voice which came from somewhere undetermined. “I am called Angus,” he said. “I come from ... another place.” He went on, “For many thousands of years I have been called upon to study psychism as it develops on young inhabited worlds. Psychism is simply sense perception as it affects the mind and therefore the decision-making processes of human behavior.”

No one was sure if he had finished speaking, or even if he was still there, but they waited until at length he added, “I am not particularly involved in O802-LZ’s mission. Entities such as we arrive at about the same time in the evolution of a world because of the nature of planetary development itself.” After another pause he said, “I am harmless.” The air stirred as Angus sat down and Cybelle stood.



“While I am here I am called Cybelle.” The sound of wind chimes tinkled in her voice. “You will know my name on your world as a nature goddess. The realms of nature are the most conducive to worship, and so my work is performed within that context. I am accompanying Flora on this excursion at the recommendation of Our Mother, thus I am only here to visit and, the occasion being auspicious, to welcome you to the universe.”

The Conference Room remained silent even after Cybelle sat down. Every one of the Board members looked to Jessie for an explanation. He thanked the group at large, then directed his words to his associates. “But before we proceed, I’d like Doc Will to tell you about the nitrogen deficiency here at Gateway.”

Doc Will was only too pleased to announce the solution of the pox and to testify to the matter by rolling up his sleeves to show his unblemished forearms. Although most of the Board members’ faces reflected a pronounced positive attitude, there were some non-committal expressions as well, and Thomas’ expression was particularly dour.

Sensing their conflict, Jessie said, “I would like for us to proceed with our meeting, but I will not insist unless and until you are all comfortable with this new development.” Everyone seemed to sigh deeply, as if suddenly burdened with a monumental decision and, since no one spoke up, Jessie pacified them by saying, “I don’t expect you to respond to this immediately.” The question before the Board is: Are the Zooids willing? You will need to talk this over among yourselves and air your reactions.”

As Co-Administrator, Andrew took the floor. “Thank you, Jessie. We appreciate this consideration, especially in view of the tremendous influence you must be feeling from these ... as you say ... very unique guests.” He looked at each one as openly as he knew how, in order to indicate his good faith, before telling Jessie, “I’d like to request the Board have an opportunity to meet in Special Session to reflect on this as a group and to speculate how it might impact our civilization as a whole.”



Jessie nodded his approval. "Do you want to do that now?" he asked, "Or do you want to sleep on it first?"

Erica spoke up. "I think this is something we should talk about right now, Jessie! We're all here. It is the issue at hand." At her impetus, the group unanimously agreed to meet there and then.

"Yeah," Thomas grumbled. "Let's get this over with."

"Very good," Jessie commended. "I'll be in my office. This meeting is recessed while we await your decision."

DOC WILL went at once to the clinic to advise the pox victims that a cure had been found for their mysterious malady. The fact that two of the victims were actually disappointed to have been cured, underlined Doc Will's theory that they were subconsciously dealing with the subject of death. He was not the only one, then, making preparations to depart.

JESSIE INVITED THE VISITORS to join him for a light supper in his private apartment while the Board met in Special Session.

"Angus and I are of an Order that does not partake of material food," Flora explained, "but we will accept your hospitality."

"I, however, will accept your offer of nourishment," Cybelle said. "I am hungry!"

As Jessie grinned, Lanon asked, "Shall I get the cart?"

"No, I'll get it, Lanon. You take our visitors in and make them comfortable. I'll just be a few minutes."

The Supernals were in no hurry to go indoors. They lingered on the deck in apparent silence until at length Flora asked, "Where is your mate, Lanon?"

Lanon pulled his focus back to the present. "I don't know," he confessed. "I haven't seen her since last night."

Angus knew. "She left on a Transport Line this morning with Sylvia." By way of explanation he added, "She is confused about her feelings for you, Lanon, and is trying to sort through them."



"Confused?" Lanon asked with a puzzled look.

Angus' directed his words to the females. "Audley is trained to be an objective reporter. She is not accustomed to dealing with her subjective emotions. She fears that if she conjoins with Lanon, she will lose her objectivity and thus her ability to survive."

"She has no *reason* to fear!" Lanon argued, but Angus only shrugged.

"Fears aren't necessarily reasonable, Lanon," he said.

"Perhaps she is intimidated by Lanon's standing in the universe." Flora suggested.

"But that's ridiculous. In the Stream of Time we are all equal!" Cybelle objected.

"We know that, Cybelle," Angus counseled, "but you have to appreciate Audley's limited cultural conditioning. She is not accustomed to thinking in terms of eternity."

Cybelle's pretty face crinkled in distaste.

Flora mused further. "Perhaps she is unsure of herself because she feels she cannot understand him."

Cybelle objected. "The female will *never* understand the male, any more than the male will ever understand the female! One must not let that mere lack of understanding interfere with union!" She then suggested, "Perhaps she is daunted by the nature of your mission, Lanon."

He gestured helplessly. "I have told her I need her and she seems very willing to assist me," he said, adding, "except in the matter of sex."

Angus again enlightened the ladies. "Lanon has confided to me his concern that his lack of human experience will interfere with his ability to court Audley effectively."

This time Flora balked. "I cannot believe that Lanon lacks for anything."

"But enough of my problems," Lanon said, pleased and bolstered. "Let me take you inside. I have missed the broadcasts. What is going on in the rest of the universe?"



All talk of universe broadcasts ceased when Jessie returned with the cart of food. Cybelle took it upon herself to examine Jessie's natural habitat while Lanon set the table and Jessie saw to the comfort of Flora and Angus, seating them to socialize. When Cybelle found her way back to the table, she inhaled deeply and said, "It all smells so wonderful, Jessie Brothers!"

Seating her next to him, he said, "You know, Cybelle, it isn't necessary to use both of my names. 'Jessie' will do."

"Yes," she confirmed. "Jessie will do fine." Everyone recognized that Cybelle had just made Jessie an offer he had no intention of refusing.

Flora said, "We have been discussing the unique challenges of personal relationships between mortals and other-terrestrials".

"How intriguing! Please continue," he urged.

Angus prevailed, "Relationship challenges are more cultural than anything".

"What do you mean?" Lanon asked, mindful of his awkward liaison with Audley.

Angus, not eating, began talking. "It's all in what you're used to. It's a matter of cultural conditioning."

Jessie asked, "You mean if you are Irish and you marry an Italian, you learn to eat pasta?"

"That cultural frame of reference is not much of a problem," Angus suggested. "All races enjoy the taste of good food. It is more insidious than that. It has more to do with ideologies. For instance, if you are both Catholic, it should not matter much that you have cultural differences. But if you're a Jewish academician from New York, you might have trouble connecting with a Baptist gospel singer from Georgia.

"Any successful relationship requires a degree of compatibility in personal politics. If the politics are not the same, there needs to be compensation. I don't mean governmental politics, I mean personal politics. For instance, in the American culture, a Republican and a Democrat can find marital happiness because there



are personal politics that can override that value system, but a materialist will have difficulty communing with a spiritualist unless they find something in the middle they can agree upon.

“It’s the same thing with urthlings and other-terrestrials, or mortals and supernals. If you can find out what you have in common and focus on the similarities, the differences should not present a problem. It should rather present unique perspectives that are available to consider. Mind you, I did not say the perspectives have to be adopted, simply acknowledged.”

“Then Audley and I ought to be alright in a relationship if we operate from the perspective that we are both reporters,” Lanon suggested.

“It may take more than mutual careers to hold a union together,” Jessie offered. “If you change jobs, you might not have much in common any more.”

Cybelles clearly understood the principle. “Jessie and I will find happiness in our devotion to the Jural Colony Project which represents our mutual interest.”

Flora concurred. “Yes, a mutual cause, providing it is a big enough cause, will unite a pair.”

“Then what we must do,” Lanon realized, “is expand our recognition of our common mortal career to that of a common eternal career.”

“That would, of course, be helpful,” Flora suggested.

“She *must* become aware of an eternal perspective!” Cybelles insisted.

Flora shared, “This anxiety that Audley is experiencing reminds me of when I first met my soul mate. I was mortal and he was not. I could not conceive of what an eternal career might be! It took me nearly 200 years to resolve my conflict.”

Lanon peered at Angus, then exclaimed, “Angus! Flora is your mate!”

Angus grinned mischievously and nodded.

“Well, then,” Lanon allowed, “I must agree with you! She



certainly is still voluptuous, sensual, caressable and desirable!"

"As a matter of fact," Flora said, gliding past Lanon's obvious compliment, "I chose this particular planet for my gathering mission this season because Angus and I are soon to celebrate our third anniversary and I wanted to be near him for the occasion."

Jessie, the quintessential host, suggested, "I'd better arrange for you two to have a honeymoon suite!"

Flora deferred. "That won't be necessary, Jessie. We no longer sleep."

"What about you, Cybelle?" Jessie ventured. "Do you sleep?"

"I rest," Cybelle said modestly. "I'm of a different Order than Flora and Angus. I am much younger and not as Ultimate as they are. I will accept your bed."

The high color in Jessie's cheeks prompted Angus to say, "You know, Cybelle, when I met Flora, the nature of my form precluded a physical relationship. Might I suggest that if you and Jessie are so destined, you not wait until his terrestrial escape to partake of the pleasures of the flesh."

"And might I suggest, Angus," Cybelle countered graciously, "that you mind your own business!"

The mirth generated by their good spirits permeated the air.

AFTER A REFLECTIVE REPAST served to them by a zooidal aide, Andrew called the Special Session to order. "We've all had a chance to think on it," he said. "The floor is open."

All the Board members started speaking at once, so Nathaniel suggested, "Why don't we take a vote to find out where we stand?"

"Good idea," Andrew said, passing out paper and pencils.

A secret ballot was cast as to whether to wholeheartedly go with the new development or not. To not go with it was not to rule it out, but to find out where the concerns were. The vote was seven to five for acceptance.



"Alright," Andrew said when the votes were counted. "We've got some work to do. Who wants to start? Shall we go around the table? Peter? What does Mediation and Arbitration have to say?"

"I'm in favor of it."

"Any reason in particular?"

"No. It just seems right. I mean, if what we do here is advanced, which we know it is, why shouldn't we break through to something new? It's not going to hurt any of us to learn how they mediate differences. They might be more highly evolved than we are, but I'm sure they have their differences just like anybody, and I'd appreciate their input. I don't always know what to say or do. I don't have all the answers -- nobody does -- but I am interested in the perspective of someone who might have a new insight.

"What did that fellow Lanon say was going to happen? He said if we were approved, communication would be opened between us and higher intelligences in the universe? Hey," Peter averred, "they might have gone through some of the things we haven't worked out yet and I'm game to listen to an outside opinion."

"Okay. James?"

James took a moment to check the clarity of his lenses before he embarked on his reason for voting no. "I'm just not convinced they ought to be meddling in our affairs. I mean, don't they have their own world to take care of? I can't imagine setting aside my TASCs to go messing around with IBM or Mac. I have enough to do right here.

"I'm also concerned about the overload factor on the TASCs. That fellow Angus is obviously some kind of powerhouse, and who knows what kind of energy it would require to handle his power blasts if someone came in and opened up a new program? We have a lot invested in these TASCs. People are just now starting to take full advantage of them. The Educational Colonies use them, of course, and the younger Zooids have really caught on, but the older Zooids are just beginning to appreciate what a TASC can do besides



entertain them. That's one worry.

"My other concern has to do with Dissemination of Information. How do you disseminate information from someone who isn't even all there? Angus' face wouldn't even show up on one of the TASCs and I can just see him scaring the children. And even if they didn't get on the TASCs themselves, how would you disseminate such information as they gave us today? I'm afraid the Zooids would lose faith in us." He concluded, "I don't know if they're really believable or if we were simply impressed by their appearance."

"I appreciate your candor, James. John, what are your thoughts about it?"

"Well, I can see what your point is, James, but I think it would be great! Can you imagine what Transportation and Relocation would be like with those people? I mean, we're talking about going places! It's not impossible that these beings arrived here in a space ship. Are you aware of how much we could learn from them in terms of getting from here to there? Imagine what we could accomplish in Transportation with those people working with us. I think it's very exciting."

"I wish I could be as excited about it as you are, John," Phillip said. "I might have my head in the sand but, we are a long way from zipping around in space travel. The men at PSR are still crawling, man! They haven't even learned to walk yet, and here we are trying to get them to fly. I'm afraid it would scare them, if you want to know the truth. I'm afraid they'd be intimidated into regression."

"Okay," Andrew coached. "What about you, Nathaniel?"

"Oh, why even bother to ask? You know I'm in favor of it! Those people know how to get along! Okay? Lanon is from some place called Zenton. At least one of the women is from a place called Uriah, and the metaphysical one is from somewhere entirely different. And they sat there in total accord! Unity in diversity! And did you hear the way they talked? I mean, their voices were



dripping with graciousness and authority. I could learn a lot from them!

“And as for Orientation, why shouldn't new people coming into the colonies know from the start that we are in contact with other-terrestrials? Just because the Air Force doesn't want us to own up to intelligences beyond ours, doesn't mean we have to deny them!”

Andrew interrupted. “I think I should remind you that they didn't say they are here to help us. Each one of them is doing their own thing. It doesn't mean they're going to be active Zooids. What about it, Matthew?”

“I don't think they'd do a thing for our financial status or for our legal matters either, for that matter. I don't mean to sound inhospitable and think only in terms of what they can do for us, but we do need to consider the extra work they would cause us. Like, who is going to pay for this new structure, the Portal, and what's it for?”

“Thomas?”

“I agree with Matthew. I don't know who would benefit by their being around. Matter of fact, I like the idea of the Zooids being their own people. Lanon says we're highly evolved and that's why they're interested in us. If that's the case, then where were they when we really needed some help? I didn't see any space ships or magic flowers around when we were working twenty hours a day to do something about the mess this world was in. The mess the world is *still* in, I should say. So why are we acceptable and interesting all of a sudden? Call me a doubting Thomas, but I think they ought to leave us alone.”

“Samuel, what do you have to say?”

“You know me, Andrew. I'm always interested in generating good will. If we can generate good will with other life in the universe, I'm all for it. My opinion is not based on Resources, Sales and Distribution, but on my personal philosophy. I figure if they're bright enough to visit here, they're bright enough to stay out of our



way if and when we need to do it ourselves. I vote to encourage it.”

“You know,” Joseph philosophized, “if they had been here twenty years ago, we wouldn’t be able to claim our status as our own accomplishment. There is really nothing as good for self-esteem as an accomplishment, and I think it is important for us to take credit for our efforts and to give credit to each other for all we’ve done. Praise is a major motivator, and the fact is we *have* attained this evolutionary status by ourselves and through our own actions. Had they been here when we first started, we would not be able to claim it. We would still be back in the age when it was said that all good things come from above or from some outside source and we wouldn’t be able to feel the pride of our combined accomplishments.

“The fact is,” he continued, “we *did* do it. We reached this point by ourselves, by working together, and our reward is a level of attainment. My understanding of this new era Jessie spoke about is that they have acknowledged our level of attainment. By denying these communications, these visitations, we are saying, ‘Keep your gift; we don’t need your acknowledgment,’ and that is an anti-zooidal philosophy. So my vote is, of course, to become an active part of the advancement of civilization, even to cosmic citizenship.”

“Thank you, Joseph. Well said. Rebecca? I sense some reluctance on your part.”

“Speaking for Aesthetics and Public Relations, I believe they would make life difficult. I know, Nathaniel, you think it would be an added incentive for newcomers at Orientation, but consider that it could cause an adverse affect. If new people know we are in communication with other-terrestrials, they might think they won’t have to put forth so much of an effort. Being a Zooid is hard work! Not only are we productive and self-disciplined, but we spend inordinate amounts of time in simply growing! Just getting along takes time, and I don’t want the new era, as they call it, to bring about sloth and indifference.

“Aesthetically speaking, Cybelle and Flora and Lanon are some of the most aesthetically pleasing beings I’ve ever laid eyes on,



so I'm not blind to their value. I'm just concerned about what kind of an impression they might have on the others."

"Okay. And what about you, Erica?"

"Yes, yes, a thousand times yes! And the reason I urge you to consider what this would mean to us is that we would be helped just by their presence! They are a positive force. They are sensitive, intelligent, witty, and considerate. They are Zooids! They are like us, if you could see that point. They want the same things we want. They have the same things to offer. They are growing, contributing, loving members of the universe and I, personally, don't see how we can deny anything they want! I know that what they want is what we want, and if we should run into difficulty with, for example, people on the outside, I am convinced that they would know how to guide us in our resolutions. Difficulty or no, I vote yes!"

"Okay," Andrew said. "We have a few opinions to take under advisement. First, let's go back and recall what it was they said. Lanon, I believe, is the one who is here to.... Let's see. My notes say, 'to ascertain the evolutionary status of the Zooids and, if you meet with the approval of my supervisors, and if you are willing, the Jural Colony Project will be brought into open contact with the rest of the universe'. Right?"

"Right," Peter said. "And then the other guy, Angus, has got nothing to do with what Lanon is here for. He just came because he does that when a planet reaches this stage in evolution. He has nothing to do with us."

"Except," Thomas added, "he's an example of what we could expect to be coming and going all the time, and if he has the nerve to show his face, such as it is, who knows what else will show up!"

"Well, really, Thomas, what makes you think you're so cute?" Erica put in. "Obviously if they were listening to this conversation, they wouldn't think we were so advanced."

"Anybody have any objection to the phrase, 'if they meet with the approval of my supervisors'?" Andrew asked. No one could object "Well, just what do you think it means to be in contact with



the rest of the universe? Anybody?"

"Evidently it means we'll be having more contact with people like Lanon, Angus, Cybelle and Flora," Rebecca suggested.

"Yeah, well, I can see that other-terrestrials like that might come here," Joseph pondered, "but don't you imagine that we would be able to go to wherever they come from, also? I mean, they did call the new project the Portal, after all, and a portal is a door. A door to the universe, I suppose."

"Well, if that's the case," Matthew offered, "and they get to be more trouble than they're worth, we can shut them out. It's our property. I assume we'd hold the key."

Phillip nodded. "That's what we do at PSR."

"I think what you just said is important, Matthew," Erica suggested. "We hold the key. I think this contact with the rest of the universe is totally dependent on our free will decision."

"Another point I think we should remember," Rebecca said, "is that Jessie seems to be very pleased about it all and we've never had reason to distrust his instincts."

"He's certainly pleased with the redhead," Peter noted, "and that's an instinct we haven't seen Jessie use before."

Joseph added, "Remember that it was Professor Vessey who suggested that Jessie introduce us."

James asked, "What's that got to do with it?"

"If it weren't for Professor Vessey, we wouldn't even be here. We'd still be living outside wondering what was the purpose of life, wondering why there was no joy in living, wondering how to make ends meet. Professor Vessey is the founding father of the Zooids and he sanctioned our meeting these ... beings."

"I agree," Samuel concurred. "I trust Professor Vessey implicitly, even if I do have reservations about ... all this."

"Alright then," Andrew went on. "Assuming for a moment that this is something we decide to undertake, what do we do about our reservations? What's really the problem here? Is it fear? James, you say you don't think they ought to be meddling in our affairs."



You're concerned about the energy required for a new program for the TASCs. And, you're afraid the Zoids will lose faith in us if they are asked to swallow this. Anybody have any ideas to help James see the other side of the coin?"

After a moment Phillip admitted, "I really don't think that picking a few of our wild flowers is meddling. And Angus, who has evidently been here for some time already, did not show his face, such as it is, until he was formally introduced. Which tells me they are showing some respect for our feelings, our reactions."

"It would seem," Samuel added, "that they are sensitive to our sensibilities, yes."

"Cybelle was certainly charming," Erica noted. "Both of the females, in fact, welcomed us to the universe and were quite enchanting."

"As for the power," John suggested, "we've got power. The sun isn't going to dry up on us. Plus, did it take any of our power to get them here? We didn't fuel the ships. Their coming and going hasn't affected us at all, so why should we worry that we're going to have to provide the energy? Anyway, nobody ever said they were going to use the TASCs, James."

"You mentioned the impact they might have at PSR, Phillip. Would you care to elaborate?"

"Oh, not really. I was just thinking outloud about how the men might react. As I think about it again, though, maybe it would be a good idea for them to realize that they aren't just rehabilitating themselves for the colonies or the outside, but for a potential life in the universe. It kind of opens up a door for them, too. So I'll retract my 'no' vote at this time."

"Matthew, you mentioned you felt they would cause us extra work. You want to give us anything else on that?"

"I don't want to, but I will because I have to admit to being lazy here. Anybody that far advanced, who can traverse space, who can function without a body like Angus, anybody as beautiful as those females, *of course* they're going to cause us extra work. We're



having to work right now just to accept them! So I was not speaking so much in the sense of labor as I was in the sense of psychic, emotional or social work. And, in that, I was just being lazy, so, never mind. I'll get used to it."

"It's not a question of getting used to it, Matthew," Erica remonstrated. "It's a matter of being willing, of being actively enthusiastic. Here we go again, it's a basic zooidal philosophy."

"Need you be reminded, Matthew," Joseph said, "that there are rewards to be had at each new level of growth. As we experience rewards from what we build here in the colonies, we will also experience rewards as a result of being open to universal concepts and personality adaptation."

"I know that," Matthew growled. "I told you, I was just being lazy. And you all know that when it comes right down to it, I'm *not* lazy. But I did want to put that on the record. Where is your sense of humor?"

"Ha Ha."

"Well, doubting Thomas, are you still steadfast in your belief that they are johnny-come-latelys?"

"You voted 'yes', huh, Andrew?"

Andrew nodded.

"Am I the only one left?" Thomas asked.

"Rebecca had misgivings as well. Related to extra work, too, as I recall."

Rebecca flared slightly. "Andrew, you know full well I am not afraid of work! I simply said I didn't want these new entities to get the impression that if we know them, we can sit on our duffs and not produce. I didn't want the new Zooids to think that our battles were won or that it was all going to be handed to us on a platter. My concern was not so much extra work as it was just the opposite!"

"Are you still concerned about that?"

"After this discussion? Heavens no! It's more than evident that much work remains to be done, even among ourselves."

"So I guess I'm the only one left then," Thomas lamented.



"Alright, I'll change my vote."

"You will not!" Andrew objected. "If we're going to go through with this, we're going to do it enthusiastically or we aren't going to do it at all! So let's hear it, Thomas. Maybe you can sway us all to your point of view."

"Well, that would be a switch!" he said. "No, really, I mean it. I'll go with the program. Enthusiastically even. We aren't finished yet. There's still a lot of growing and improving to be done and if they just got here, so what? Better late than never."

"Alright," Andrew said. "That was easier than I thought it would be. Obviously there's a lot of merit to Lanon's proposal."

"But what does it mean? That's what I don't understand," Peter remarked. "What does it mean to be brought into contact with the rest of the universe? What's out there?"

Andrew admitted, "I don't know what it means. We called this meeting to decide if we would be willing to usher in a new era and we are. What the effects will be, we have yet to learn. But at least when we encounter one of these ... other-terrestrials, we will be able to greet them cordially."

Matthew cautioned, "And I don't think, John, that it will mean we will be taking rides on their space ships."

"Although we might!" John insisted.

"Let's ask Jessie."

THE SPECIAL SESSION CONCLUDED, the Board members, followed by Doc Will, filed into the Main Conference Room once again while Andrew went to notify their Chairman they were ready to proceed.

In deference to his colleagues, Jessie excused himself from his guests and dutifully returned to his work, calling the meeting again to order.

"Has the Board reached a consensus, Andrew?"

"Yes, Jessie. The Board has voted to embrace the new era."

"Thank you. Thank *all* of you," Jessie repeated with a



gratified grin. "I am not able to act without you, nor would I, so I appreciate how quickly you've responded to the situation. I am also glad we will all be involved in what I call 'our extended existence into the galaxy' because I know of no other way to describe it. I am as new at all this as you are."

"Didn't you say you talked to Alexius earlier?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, I did, but he was taking everything in such stride I couldn't remember all the things I had wanted to be alarmed about." He grinned sheepishly.

"We do have some questions we'd like to ask."

"Yes, you are entitled to some answers. I'll call Lanon back in."

"We'd like to see all of them, if that would be alright."

Jessie nodded. Doc Will once again opened the doors for the Supernals who entered and again took their seats. This time the Board's scrutiny was overt, but they all saw reflected back to them zooidal qualities of love, joy, harmony and cooperation, confirming for the Zooids that they had made the right choice.

"The Board has agreed to cooperate, Lanon, so it appears you may proceed with your Zooid mission."

Lanon acknowledged their decision with a formality they had not expected. "This is not only my mission, Jessie," he said, representing the authority of his Home Station in his response. "It has been your mission throughout your life and the lives these Board members, whose dedication to the fellowship of its members rises to the standards of the Constellation Zenton. In truth, this civilization of Zooids has been the mission of *all* co-operative and intelligent life, for it fosters those values that promote truth, cultivate beauty and reveal goodness throughout time and space. My Zenton supervisors have asked me to commend your courage and to thank you for your cooperation."

Jessie spoke for the Board. "Please tell them we appreciate their regard."



Andrew added, "We have some questions we would like to ask."

"What are your questions?"

"What will it mean for the JCP to be in open communication with other intelligent life in the universe? And what is the purpose of The Portal?"

Angus offered to explain. "Intelligent life has been watching the development of your world and worlds similar to yours for millions of years. This unique civilization of the Jural Colony Project, that you have created here with the Zooids, has now reached a point of evolution where it is capable of maintaining conscious contact with these intelligent life forms."

"What would they want to talk to us for?" Thomas asked. "If they've been watching us all this time, they should know all about us."

Angus' voice wore a wry smile. "It would be more to your advantage to want to talk to them!"

"But how? The universe is a pretty big place!"

"A method of direct communication is being programmed into your TASCs so that you will be able to communicate one-on-one. I would say 'face-to-face' but... You understand my reluctance to use that phrase."

Several of the Board members twittered, fully appreciating Angus' already-manifesting sense of humor.

Doc Will, not to be left out, said, "You might think of it as cable television after having only the major channels. You get a much wider range of ... entertainment."

Flora's maternal nature expounded, "It will be a comfort to you when you fully accept that your world is not isolated, that you are an integral part of a vast network of inter-connected life throughout the far-flung universe."

Cybelle added, "You will be personally encouraged by our presence in your lives. You will find us able helpers for your physical needs and in your problem-solving efforts."



Jessie was sold.

"Does this mean that we'll be able to visit your worlds like you can visit us?" Matthew dared to inquire.

"No," Flora said. "That is not within your purview. Your arena is here. Perhaps later, when you leave this sphere and have received some training, you will travel throughout space, but while you are housed in your tabernacle of flesh, you will remain here." Something in her warm, wise voice did not induce disappointment in John by that announcement.

"The Portal. What's that for?" James asked.

Jessie nodded to Lanon, who proceeded to say, "One of the side-effects of open communication with the universe will be the elimination of death as you have known it."

Thomas exclaimed, "The elimination of death!?! What do you take us for?"

Flora said, "We take you as you are, Thomas," and the conviction of her unconditional acceptance left him stunned.

Doc Will now took the floor. "The whole idea of death on this planet is morbid. This morbidity seems to be perpetrated by those who profit from grief. Frankly, I'm thrilled that something is finally going to be done about it."

"Death is merely a passage," Lanon went on. "It's a journey through a door, and the Portal is the door you will go through to arrive at your next incarnation."

"The dread with which you regard death is precisely because you have not been in open contact with the universe," Flora added. "From this day forward, you will become increasingly aware that life and love are truly eternal."

"And far from occasioning concern," Cybelle said, "terrestrial escape is an occasion for celebration! It is a graduation, and should not bring about grief, but joy!"

In general, the Board members did not look joyous.

Jessie assured them, "Going through the Portal is not a requirement. It's only for those of you who want to use it."



"And I do!" Doc Will said simply, and all eyes riveted on him. He nodded. "Just as soon as they get that computer rigged up, I'm going to be the first to volunteer."

"Actually, Doc," Lanon clarified, "it's not a matter of volunteering. You have to ask for permission."

"Oh. Well, then I'll ask for permission." Doc Will guffawed. "If I can remember how! I don't think I've asked permission for anything in the last fifty years!"

"If it's any consolation to you, Wilhelm," Angus said, "I have to ask for permission for *something* every day."

Doc Will smiled.

"We'd like to know who's going to pay for all this," Matthew demanded. "Where do we get the materials to build a building that will withstand these mysterious energy implosions and who's going to build it?"

Angus enjoyed tit for tat. "I guess if the powers-that-be can build a planet, they can build a Portal."

After a pause, Rebecca asked, "What about aesthetics? What's this building to look like? It seems to me that even if it needs to be well constructed, it shouldn't be so formidable as to exclude aesthetics."

"I agree with you entirely, Rebecca," Cybelle volunteered. "My work and yours are very similar in that regard. It is my feeling that the Portal should resemble a temple or a shrine, and should induce a feeling of awe or splendor, don't you agree?"

Rebecca blinked. "Absolutely."

"I would be happy to study examples of architecture while I am out gathering, if that would help you," Flora said.

Rebecca, now part of the solution, was surprised at how quickly and thoroughly she had become caught up in the new era and the new entites. "That's very kind of you, Flora."

"Erica," Jessie said, "would you like to join this emerging Women's Committee for the Design and Beautification of the Portal?"



Erica, fully supportive of the new era and all it entailed, was pleased to join. "Providing my work allows me to," she said. "I can see that this new development might play havoc in the minds of some of the Zooids."

"Which reminds me," their administrator said. "If you will, this is not for general dissemination yet. We have not yet been approved, although Lanon feels assured that we will be. We'd like to wait until the channel is open, the Portal is completed, and we have experienced at least one successful transmission before we tell the general populace."

Doc Will grunted. "Yes, please! Wait til I'm gone! I'm getting too old to put up with their mental gymnastics."

Angus disagreed. "You're still a pup, Wilhelm!"

"If you say so." He reached for a sheaf of papers he had with him. "This pup would ask the Board's permission to have this questionnaire sent around to the Elders." Distributing them to the Board members, he explained, "This is part of my original research on death and dying and I think it would help clarify how the Zooids in general, and the Elders in particular, will feel about the Portal."

"We'll take that up in our general session, Dr. Blackstone. Do any of you have any further questions of our guests?"

Everyone had more questions but they held them in reserve, each resolving to go about their lives as usual, but to be prepared to meet again, on short notice if necessary, at the first noticeable development.



# 13

## ASSIGNMENTS – The TASC

Colony Coastline - *Victoria Redbow*

Penn State Reserve - *Dr. Arthur Findley*

Colony Breadbasket - *Elliot & Anna Sproul*

For a time there were no noticeable developments, but the not-so-noticeable developments were many.

LANON LEFT THE BOARD MEETING and encountered a visibly shaken Brad in the lounge. "Mind if I join you?"

"I wish you would."

When Lanon was seated, soda and lime in hand, Brad confessed, "I watched the Board meeting from the Terminal." He swirled the ice cubes in his glass for a moment, as if still questioning what he had just seen and heard with his own eyes and ears. "Is that why Audley wanted you to be tested?"

Lanon nodded. "She was the first person I met. My supervisors suggested I tell her who I was so I could get some help in the humanizing process. Of course, she thought I was crazy and wanted me to be tested."

"Did Doc Will figure you out?"

"No. In the end, though, I told him."



Brad nodded, letting this information digest. After he had absorbed it he said, "I hope you don't mind my asking, but it occurs to me you might know something about that black-out. I'm assuming you didn't cause it."

"I appreciate that," Lanon said. "Sylvia thinks I did."

"She didn't tell me what her hunch was, but I guess it was that you *did* cause it." He grinned. "She can be pretty persuasive."

"I'm not worried," Lanon grinned. "I'm sure Sylvia discussed her theory with Audley -- who can *also* be fairly persuasive, and I'm sure Audley would have discouraged such an idea. But no, to answer your question, I wasn't responsible for the blackout. It wasn't even related to a galactic explosion."

"So what was it? An energy drain like the IOF said?"

"There *are* natural disasters in the universe, but disasters like the black-out are man-made, resulting from his misuse of the natural resources."

"And they want me to subvert their irresponsibility into a natural disaster." Brad shook his head. "That two-faced Lassater."

"What's a two-faced lasiter?"

"A two-faced Lassater," Brad explained, "is the man who put me in charge of this ... investigation." He sneered. "This farce! The IOF is the government's scapegoat. They can't afford to accept their responsibility in this."

"The IOF is not a government agency?"

"No. It's partially funded by the government, but it's independently set up. The government took great interest in it at first, but the IOF told them things they didn't want to hear. Too many things had to change. Too many of their private interests would have to be abandoned or destroyed."

"If the IOF's motives are sincere, maybe they're just ahead of their time," Lanon suggested.

"They *are*," Brad agreed, "in many respects, but as I think of it, they're a private interest, too, and far more dispensable than the big business of running a country."



"They are not inherent Zooids, then, the IOF?"

"Fraid not. Their work would *appear* to be altruistic, but in the long run, they're in it for the profit."

"Another ideal undermined by self-interest."

"Yes, and I almost can't blame them," Brad mused. "People only want technology that will keep them entertained."

"I noticed that tendency on public television," Lanon said. "And they have an almost obsessive interest in sex!"

"Well, that's a viable interest!" Brad grinned, swirled his ice cubes, and began to let himself relax.

"What do you think of these Zooids, Brad? Do you think *they* are a viable interest?"

"Doc Will certainly thinks they are, but I really don't know much about them, except what he's told me, and then what I learned just now from watching the Board meeting."

"My only reservation," Lanon confided, "is that they're only about 25 years old. Those who were in it from the beginning are certainly committed to it, but I wonder if the Zooids will stay with it after their leaders are gone?"

"To use one of Doc Will's favorite phrases, you mean you think they might 'revert'?"

"Or, since urthlings are such pleasure seekers, they might get bored."

Brad laughed. "What would you know about boredom?"

"I read about it in one of Doc's books. It said that some people can't tolerate even *relative* perfection, that when things start going good, going right, they get uncomfortable, so they make a mess of things just to keep their life lively. I think the term they used was 'crises junkies'."

Brad shook his head. "No, there's a difference here. Boredom is not the same as stability. What I got out of that meeting, Lanon, is that the JCP seems to exist to eliminate undue stress."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know if you understand stress, but our culture is



rampant with it. In free enterprise, competition can be overbearing and capitalism can be like a disease. Everyone wants something from you, whether it's your money, your time, your creativity or your very soul. And the system is very clever at getting what it wants. It uses peer pressure, social status, manipulation, justification, taxation, you name it. If they can't seduce you into keeping up with the escalating standard of living, you're shamed into it. And it's very easy to be discarded if you don't measure up.

"At one time such unremitting striving may have been necessary, but as a nation we've reached our goals of attainment. How much does one person really need, after all? Every push-button gadget, every toy, every material comfort, and still people either want more or else they have to fight like hell to hold on to what they've already got, because someone will want to take it away. People are tired of the stress of trying to maintain even a simple life."

After a thoughtful moment Lanon nodded his head. "Materialism is what you're talking about."

"Yes, and it appears that the JCP is not based on materialism, that their values have gone beyond what they can get to what they can do to *make life more meaningful for each other*."

Lanon nodded. "I appreciate your observation."

Brad was flattered, and felt a sudden affection for Lanon. It occurred to him that Lanon probably didn't have another mortal male friend in whom he could confide. He decided to try to develop it. "You know, Lanon, I want you to know I have no hard feelings about you and Audley."

"That's very decent of you, Brad. I appreciate that, too. I've heard that jealousy is a very unpleasant emotion."

"I'll admit I had a pang or two of it in the beginning, but fortunately Sylvia took care of that for me."

"Evidently you've taken care of some things for her, too. She looks great!"

Brad allowed a lascivious grin. "She is great!" When he saw that Lanon was not smiling, he said, "Aren't you and Audley ..."



taking care of ... you know. Each other?"

Lanon shook his head.

Brad was incredulous. "Are we talking about the same woman?"

"I'm sure we are. Why?"

"Well, Audley *loves* sex! And the Audley I knew was assertive about getting it! I can't imagine her with cold feet!"

"Cold feet?"

Brad shook his head. "It's just a figure of speech."

Lanon revealed, "Angus tells me she is confused about her feelings for me."

"Well, hell, Lanon, can you blame her? You aren't exactly the boy next door!"

"But I am! I'm just a guy from a neighboring constellation."

"This constellation you come from," Brad ventured, "is that what you mean when you talk about communicating with intelligent life in the universe?"

"Zenton, yes, and others. It's a big universe."

"So is that what this TASC assignment is that Angus thinks I can do?"

"Yes. Is it something you could find interesting?"

"Work in my chosen field without a two-faced lasiter breathing down my neck? Hell, yes, that's something I could get interested in."

"Well, I can't say there isn't supervision. It's just not like what you're used to. Angus, for instance. He's over me and he'd be over you, too."

"Well, I like Angus. He's a kick." Brad admitted, "His appearance was disconcerting at first, but as he said, I shouldn't let his appearance detract from his reality, and Angus is definitely real! He's a man's man, you know what I mean?" He slapped his knee for emphasis. "I can't ever remember anyone being as open and honest about sex as Angus. He's a real hoot."

To which Lanon confided, "I think Angus has got something



going with Flora."

Brad said, "You're kidding."

Lanon now returned Brad's lascivious grin, and as the two men laughed together, Lanon began to understand and appreciate the human fascination for sex. When their laughter subsided, Brad went on, "As for those beauties, Flora and Cybelle, well, my tastes run to something a little more substantial, if you know what I mean, but they're alright. Angus and Flora, huh? And it looks like Jessie has an eye for the other one. What did they say they were here for?"

"Flora studies physical life through vegetation and Cybelle is keeping her company."

"Right. So they're just visiting."

"Well, so is Angus. So am I for that matter."

"Where'd I get the idea you'd be around for awhile?" Brad asked.

"I think Audley would like for me to stay, but I don't know what they want me to do when this mission is ended."

"I guess it's kind of like being shipped overseas," Brad remarked off hand.

"Pardon?"

"Oh. That's a phrase from the war. Getting shipped overseas, leaving your wife and family behind, lots of marriages were lost. Shipwrecked."

Lanon mused, "I can't help but wonder if those that were shipwrecked were built to withstand the storm."

"I see what you're saying. Well, good luck to you, however it turns out."

"Thanks."

After a long moment Brad asked, "Now are you going to tell me what my job is, or do I have to fill out a damned application?"

DR. BRADFORD SPENCER WAS OFFICIALLY HIRED on by the JCP to install the new program that would herald in the new era. Jessie, Lanon and Angus briefed him in the Terminal on what to



expect.

"This channel won't be like any other system you've worked on before," Jessie advised him. "We're not working a TASC here with the standard Transmit/Access modem."

"There is no software for the Access we anticipate," Lanon explained. "This Access will be from an outside source, so you'll have to build this, essentially, to transmit and receive from a void."

Brad nodded. "So we're assuming, then, that the other end of the channel will have a Transmit/Receive that is compatible to ours?"

"Exactly."

"From how far away will the broadcasts come?" Brad asked.

Lanon pondered a moment then suggested, "From a substation probably.... Figure within this solar system."

"Then I should think in terms of a satellite receiver."

"Exactly. This channel will be operated by and through energy patterns," Angus elaborated. "The human voice will be changed into energy waves and sent through the program to a receiver stationed somewhere in the stratosphere. From that point, another life force will send its energy waves back to the Terminal where the energy waves will again be translated into the human voice. Both of these voices are to be recorded and will later be transcribed into the written word and archived for future generations."

"So," Brad acknowledged, "we will need a voice activated recording device. What about a FAX?"

"What's a FAX?" Lanon asked.

"That's for transmitting documents."

"No," Jessie said. "And no keyboard, either. This is strictly voice activated."

Brad was confident he could devise the program. He was confident also that, with the TASC, he could devise an answer for the blackout -- one that would pacify Lassater and absolve the IOF of any failure. Boy genius here would come out smelling like a rose.



RETURNING FROM RENO with Sylvia, Audley reminded herself again to do it like she learned it in school. Forget the emotionality and go for the academics. She had resolved it in her mind that Lanon was a phenomenon, and his mission was important to the world at large but not to her personally. She was incidental to him, in fact, except where her research would help him, and even that was none of her business. Her business was to report her observations for publication in the *Silent Majority* for which she would receive payment. It was a business deal. Romance was not part of the bargain.

Thus, while Sylvia napped, Audley wrapped herself in her perfunctory armor. She culled her notes on the zooidal communication and transportation systems, calculating that a rough draft would let her new boss know how conscientiously she was approaching this assignment. She got off the transport line, leaving Sylvia sound asleep in her seat, and went straight to Jessie's office to present him with her draft, but he would not accept it.

"I want you to hold onto all your notes until the end of the assignment, Audley. Wait to compile your notes until after you've finished all the research."

"But why wait?" she asked, a bit miffed to be told how to do her job.

"Because your emotional appeals will be developing while you're doing your research, even well after you've finished. I want you to wait until you have really grasped what it is we are trying to tell the reader."

She picked up her papers without comment and turned to leave. Jessie stopped her at the door. "Have you seen Lanon?" he asked.

"No, not yet. I just got back. Why?"

"Because he was wondering where you went - as were we all. You didn't tell anyone where you were going."

She bristled. "I didn't know I was expected to punch a



clock."

"You aren't," Jessie assured her.

"I just wanted to get away for a few days," she said without apology. "You said to take a trip on the Lines!"

"I'm not reprimanding you, Audley. Relax. I just want to remind you that one of the elements of the zooidal philosophy is that you ask for help when you need it. No one has to face life alone. If there is something bothering you, talk to someone."

"Nothing's bothering me, Jessie," she lied.

As she walked away, he called, "You won't get the emotional appeals right if you don't put your heart into it!"

CROSSING THE DECK, Audley's eyes were drawn to the intimate social cluster of Lanon and two women. In spite of her resolve to remain emotionally detached, her first instinct was to be jealous and her first reaction was to be angry with herself for being jealous. She braced herself as Lanon spotted her and came to greet her. He was as attentive as he had been when she last saw him in the psychedelic rain.

"I'm glad to see you," he said, taking her hand. "Come! I want you to meet some friends of mine."

At once Audley recognized Flora, Dierdre's sister, who approached her with psychic arms outstretched. "It is so good to see you again, little sister."

Almost bashfully, Audley responded, "Hello, Flora."

Lanon was intrigued. "You've already met?"

Flora bowed her head slightly, deferring to Audley, who acknowledged, "In Guadix. At Professor Vessey's."

"Have you met Cybelle? Flora's traveling companion, Cybelle?"

Audley shook her head as Cybelle stood to survey her, attesting, "How lovely! Is this your helpmate, Lanon?"

"Yes," he said, "this is Audley, the woman I've been telling you about." She fought against her heart's flutter, as he went on to



explain, "Flora came here on a gathering mission from the Constellation Uriah, which is next to Zenton, and Cybelle accompanied her."

Confirmed. Two more supernals. And gorgeous! How could she even *hope* that Lanon would rather be with her than with the likes of them! His graciousness was surely just cordiality. Her heart was so conflicted!

"Come," Flora said, sitting and patting the seat beside herself. "Sit with us."

Lanon relinquished her so she could sit down, which was good, for in truth, her knees were weak. In deference to his innocence, his being so new, she determined to be brave. She took a deep breath. "Are you a botanist, too, Cybelle?" she asked in an attempt to be sociable.

Cybelle wrinkled her nose. "No. I'm just along for the ride."

Something in Cybelle's tone struck Audley as being unfriendly. It felt like a slap.

Oblivious to her distress, Lanon said, "Audley, your father wanted to see you. I'm going to go look for him while you visit with Cybelle and Flora."

"Is anything wrong?" she asked, instantly anxious. "Oh, no," he assured her. "He was just wondering where you went. He's probably in the clinic. I'll go tell him you're back and that you're fine."

Left alone with the females, Audley felt vulnerable. Sitting next to these daughters of divinity whose beauty was like none on Urth, she felt like an ugly duckling.

"Fear not," Flora said. "We are your sisters."

"I'm not afraid," she lied.

Cybelle and Flora exchanged glances. After a moment Flora said, "You have been provided to teach Lanon the emotional aspects of being human. How can he learn the full spectrum of human feelings if you won't share yours with him?"

"I don't know what you mean," she balked. "I'm just a



reporter, helping him do research. His emotions are not my problem."

"What is your problem?" Cybelle asked.

Again, Audley felt as if Cybelle had upbraided her. Flora came to the rescue. "Cybelle," she admonished. "Be patient."

In the long silence that followed, Audley collected her wits. It was not a new experience for her to have conversations with Supernals, but she didn't feel at ease with Flora and Cybelle as she did with Lanon and Angus. Her eyes connected with Flora's as she recalled the evening they spent with Dierdre in Guadix, and how comfortable she felt then, and how much she *did* enjoy their company. Determined to try again, she apologized.

"There is no need to apologize," Flora offered. "You are experiencing something new. Please, be at ease with us. We only want to be companionable."

"Thank you," Audley said, taking a deep breath and beginning again. "Are you from Uriah, too, Cybelle?" she asked.

Cybelle's smile was more than courteous. It was a gift of light. "No," she said in a gentle voice. "I am from a satellite world, much closer to your own Milky Way."

It was their beauty, Audley concluded, that intimidated her. Flora's yellow-gold hair, were it not for the tight curls, would have reached the floor, and Cybelle's hair, wrapped in a wondrous arrangement atop her head, was the color of copper. They both gave off an aura of intoxicating energy. She knew that these were the women she should talk to, if anyone, about her feelings for Lanon, but she side-stepped her opportunity by asking, "Have you met Angus?"

"Angus is Flora's mate," Cybelle said.

"His soul mate?" Audley exclaimed.

"Yes," Flora allowed. "We have had the good fortune of being together for a long time."

"Well, you're a very lucky lady, if you don't mind my saying so, Flora. Angus is very special."



Flora smiled, while Cybelle dared to say, "Lanon is also very special."

Audley looked at her hands in her lap. "Yes, he is."

"I am confused," Cybelle persisted. "I sense a reserve between you and Lanon. Is that normal for your kind?"

Audley was not accustomed to her most intimate secrets being on display. She hedged, "I've only known him a short time."

"How long does it take an urthling to know its own mate?" Cybelle asked in stupefaction.

"Well, I was attracted to him right away," Audley admitted, then blurted, "it's just that, in our culture it's the man who makes the advances, and I don't think Lanon is emotionally developed enough, yet to do that."

"I see," Flora said. She pondered a moment before delivering her response. "It is only in primitive societies, Audley, where the man directs the relationship. In the more evolved realms, it is the woman who makes the selection."

Audley's eyes widened. Sylvia had been right!

"By the female assuring the male of her attraction to him," Cybelle added, "he is given permission to pursue her."

Flora explained, "In primitive societies, the strong overpower the weak, "but in the realm of *advanced* relationships -- in the development of soul mates -- both the male and the female have refined sensibilities. In the mating process, respect must be shown to each other's *soul*. The wisdom of this advanced mating technique is that it is more gracious for the female, for she can now control the pace of the development of the partnership."

"I don't even know what a soul is," Audley complained, "and I don't know for sure what *love* is except that it scares me to death."

"There is no death," Cybelle said simply. "Life, and therefore love, is eternal."

Flora nodded, giving confirmation to this truth. "Recognition of this truth results in the *growth* of the soul."



Audley blinked. "I don't think I'm ready for any of this. I'm not emotionally courageous or sexually aggressive."

Cybelle insisted, "It's not a *question* of aggression and it has *nothing* to do with courage. It is simply a matter of allowing one to compliment the other."

Flora, as maternal an entity as ever was, leaned in to Audley and spoke very softly. "Tell your sisters what is *really* standing between you and your mate."

How adroitly they focused in on her very real fears! With this invitation to intimacy, she confessed, "I'm afraid he'll finish his mission and then leave me."

Flora shook her head sadly. "I have heard of this fear of abandonment. It is sometimes experienced by creatures of animal origin, but I cannot understand such an emotion."

Cybelle responded to Flora's concern. "It has to be a result of their sense of isolation in the universe." Turning to Audley, she said, "Have you not considered how less alone you would feel if the two of you were united?"

Audley bristled. "*Of course*, I have thought about it! But I've *also* thought about how I would feel if he and I were united and then *he left!* Lanon does me no good on Zenton!" Tears welled up in her large green eyes. "I'm a *mortal*, Cybelle, and I have to live my life on Urth like other women. I would like to have a husband and maybe children. I need someone to grow old with me. I can't give myself to Lanon and then learn to live without him. I'm not super human like you and Flora."

Cybelle smiled and Flora persisted, "Even so, Audley, it would benefit your soul to know the love of the beloved."

That word 'soul' again. The concept was too lofty, too divine. She didn't feel qualified to be Lanon's soul mate.

After a moment Cybelle said, "You seem to be *convinced* that he will leave you. Have you no confidence that Lanon might feel as attracted to you as you are to him?"

Audley shrugged. "No," she admitted. "I can't *imagine* what



a man like Lanon would see in me."

"But you are *perfect!*" Cybelle insisted.

"Ha!" Audley remonstrated. "Hardly!"

"Why would you doubt your own perfection?" Flora asked. The incredulous look on Audley's face left no doubt that counsel was in order. "Unless and until you recognize your degree of perfection, you cannot see your potential!"

Audley's mind went to Guadix, to Dierdre and Alexius telling her about perfection and potential. She remembered the analogy of the phases of the moon, the promise and the fullness, and she remembered that sense of being drawn into something.

Capturing Audley's wandering attention, Cybelle said, "I assure you, it did not take long for me to let my intentions be known to Jessie Brothers!"

Cybelle had set her cap on Jessie! Audley's eyes lit up with delight, thinking of Jessie with this divine creature. Somehow, the awareness that another mortal and Supernal could have such affinity reopened her emotional veins.

"It is a wonder, is it not," Flora mused aloud, "that throughout the universe females are so quick to understand each other?"

"You aren't here, then, to help Lanon?"

"No," Cybelle said. "That's *your* job."

Again skirting her own issue, she dared to ask, "Just how far do your intentions toward Jessie go, Cybelle?"

"I intend to be his mate, in every sense of the word."

"You would stay here and have his children?"

"Yes, of course. If he wants children."

"But how can you do that?" Audley balked. "I mean, you're *different!*"

Cybelle laughed and the sound chimed like a cymbalom solo. "Of *course* we are different! I am female; he is male. That's the way it works!"

"But ... aren't you worried that your children will be ...?"



"What? Mutants?" Cybelle shrugged. "You've met Dierdre. Are her children peculiar in any way?"

"Who?"

"Dierdre! Alexius' mate. She is a Supernal!"

Audley was dumbstruck. She sat with her mouth open wondering how long the universe had been playing such tricks on mortals.

"It's a very large and varied universe we live in, my child," Flora said. "There are many ways in which to mate and to produce. There are more forms of life in the universe than you can count. Angus and I, for instance, have produced 94 offspring. Half of them are visible and half of them are invisible."

Audley's buoyant mood revealed itself in a joke. "I guess the invisible ones take after their father."

"I'm certain they do," Flora agreed. "They also emulate the qualities of their Mother."

"It is certainly clear to me why Lanon has come," Cybelle said, rising. "This world is *desperate* for the open channel! I can't *imagine* anyone being afraid to love!"

"How long will you be here, Flora?" Audley asked.

Flora stood, and the energy of her movement lifted Audley to her feet. She explained, "I chose to come to this particular planet for my gathering mission this season because Angus is here and we are soon to celebrate our third anniversary. I wanted to be with him for the occasion."

"Your third anniversary. Well, isn't that wonderful?" Audley mused romantically. "Three years, huh? Well, you're practically newlyweds!"

"Three millennia, actually," Flora corrected. "That's three *thousand* years."

Audley gulped. These females gave her a whole new perspective to the phrase 'happily ever after'.

ANGUS AND DOC WILL EMERGED from the elevator together,



THE DOG AND THE MESSIAH

assuring Audley that the two mindal giants had overcome any barriers that might have been between them. She approached her father and gave herself up to his embrace.

"Hi, Dad. How are you?"

"Never better," he averred, holding her hand.

"You've met my lovely mate, I see," Angus said.

"Yes," Audley gushed, "We've been having a *very* interesting conversation. Girl talk."

"Women are hopeless romantics until we find our perfect mate," Flora allowed.

"Lanon said you wanted to see me. Is everything okay?"

He nodded. "Just wanted to have a little father/daughter chat." He turned to the group, "Will you excuse us?"

"Of course," Angus said for all of them.

In the lobby lounge Doc Will fixed a drink for himself and his daughter, then led the way to a pool side table where he sat across from her, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Well?" she said. "What?"

"*What what?*"

"What did you want to chat about?"

"I just wanted to visit with you, see how you've been, find out what you've been up to."

"It's not like I've been in Reno for a month, Dad. You're up to something."

He shrugged. "I'm always up to something. How are you?"

"I'm fine!"

"No, I mean it, Audley. A lot has happened in the last month. Sylvia and Brad. Lanon. These others. How are you taking all this? And please don't give me any glib response."

"Okay." She swigged on the drink. "I'm very happy for Brad and Sylvia."

"And?"

"And I adore Angus. I'm also very impressed with Flora and Cybelle. The chat we had was fascinating."



"And Lanon?"

"Why are you asking me all these questions?" she hedged.

"I'll tell you in a minute." He rattled his ice cubes. "You were going to tell me about your feelings for Lanon."

She grinned. "Oh, was I?" She lit a Spring. "Okay. I'll tell you." She snuffed out the cigarette unsmoked. "When I was the only one who knew who he was, I felt very drawn to him, and I got very caught up in protecting him. Then, when I went to Guadix and Professor Vessey told me the whole story, I ..." she shrugged. "Have you heard the whole story?"

He nodded. "Jessie told me." His voice was somber.

"You believe it?"

"Yup."

"Me too. Which is probably why I had no problem accepting Angus. And Flora and Cybelle."

"Let's get back to your problem with Lanon."

She launched. "The problem is that I'm losing the battle to keep from falling in love with him. He's doing everything he can to endear himself to me and my heart is scared to death of him."

"This may seem like a strange question, coming from me, but why are you trying to keep from falling in love?"

"Because Lanon will likely leave here when he's finished with his mission."

Doc pulled on his drink and set the empty glass on the table. "Abandonment anxiety," he diagnosed. "If I'd been afraid to fall in love with your mother, you wouldn't've been born."

"Yeah, but Dad, that's different. You had every reason to believe that she would live another thirty or forty years!"

"I incorrectly assumed that, yes. I would have been better off if I thought she might leave any day. That false assumption that she and I would grow old together was a mistake based on societal conditioning."

"You're not going to get all scientific on me, are you?"

"Yes, and what's more, I'm going to encourage you to let



yourself fall in love with that man from Zenton."

She looked at him askance. "This doesn't sound like you at all."

"I know it doesn't, but I've changed some of my attitudes. Supernals tend to influence people, you know."

"I noticed. How have *you* changed?"

"I'll get to that in a minute." The look on his face told Audley to brace herself. "He's sterile, Audley. He can't give you children."

"Yes, I know," Audley said calmly. "Sylvia told me."

"How in the hell does she know?"

Audley giggled. "She snooped in your files."

"She *what*?"

"She had a theory that Lanon caused the black-out and to prove it, as Brad's Investigative Assistant, she got into your files. The potassium convinced her she was right."

He scowled. "So what happened?"

Audley shrugged. "She fell in love with her boss and lost interest."

"I'll take her over my knee," he growled.

Audley chuckled. "You'll have to wait until Brad is finished with it."

"So that was the theory Brad was talking about."

"She told me she didn't tell Brad about her theory."

"He just knew she had one, and he followed her around like a puppy dog while she did her snooping."

"Well, she did what reporters do! She did a bang-up job, Dad."

"What about your job? How's your research coming?"

"I've done about as much as I can do on the TASC. Tomorrow Angus and I are going out into the field."

"Do you have any time constraints to meet?"

"Not really. Jessie doesn't mind how I go about it, and he hasn't given me any deadlines. Why?"



"I was just wondering about the time frame here."

"Time frame for what?"

He stood up, thought better of it and sat down again. "I'm making plans to leave, Audley."

She shrugged. "Okay. I'm sure Martha will be glad to have you home."

"No, I mean leave the planet. Home Station. Terrestrial escape."

She paled. "What do you mean you're 'making plans'. Are you ill?"

"No, and that's the great part about it. I feel better than I've felt in years. I'm just going to go."

"You can't just go, Dad!" she objected. "Are you getting senile on me or something?"

"I miss Sarah."

"Well, so do I!"

"No, you don't. You don't even remember who she was. But I do, and Lanon helped me realize that I miss her, and I've been away from her long enough!"

"Dad, Mom is dead!"

"No, she isn't. She just went through the damned door! And now I want to go through it. That's why I was telling you that if you feel that strongly about Lanon, then go for it. So what if he leaves next year or in ten years or even tomorrow? If he's your mate, give it all you've got while you've got each other."

"Oh, sure, so I can spend the rest of my life in mourning."

"Well, you could do that if you wanted to, but it seems to me it would be a tremendous waste of time and energy that you could be putting to better use." He looked at her, fair and square. "You could go first, you know. Just because you're young and healthy doesn't mean you couldn't find yourself suddenly facing that door."

"What door are you talking about? Death's door?"

He nodded and she shook her head. "I haven't thought about it for myself."



"Not consciously, maybe. You're still very young. But you're as vulnerable to conditioning as anyone. Beware of that conditioning, daughter. Anyway, I wanted to let you know what's up, just in case I leave while you're out researching colonies."

"Listen, Dad, if it's that immanent, I'm not going!"

"Of course you are. You have to live your own life, Audley. You don't have to stand still while I live mine. Incidentally, my Last Will and Testament is up to date and my attorney knows what I want done with most of my estate. I'm leaving the house to Martha. You don't need it. Is there anything from the house that you want?"

"Hell, I don't know! I don't even know what's *in* that house, but I know I don't like this conversation, Dad. I don't feel comfortable discussing what to do with your stuff when you leave. Nobody knows for sure that you're even going anywhere."

"I *do* know, and I'm telling you, so believe it."

She had been forced to accept too many truths recently not to recognize the truth in his pronouncement, and while part of her accepted it, part of her resisted.

He added, "There's one thing I'd like you to do for me."

"What?" she sulked.

"I've written volumes on the subjects of death and dying."

"Dad, this is morbid."

"No, it isn't. Listen. It's all there. It's 'The Ultimate Behavior Modification.' I want it published, and I want you to see to it that it gets done right. The notes are clear and in order. I have only to add this last chapter and I will have made my contribution to the growth of this planet and my own immortality. When it's in print, your trust fund will be released to you."

"It's not bad enough I have to watch you die, I have to have a book published about it?" She fought the tears by assuming the reporter's calculating pose.

"Yes, you do, just in case you haven't gotten the point. And the point is, just so you remember, is that there is no death. Life is eternal, and since life is eternal, love is eternal, too. Got that?" He



stood up.

"Yeah," she said. Cybelle had said the same thing. "So now I can go ahead and fall for Lanon and live happily ever after."

"Right."

She stood up. "Dad, you've been working too hard. You need a vacation."

He looked down on her. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"Yes, but everything is crazy these days. I've gone through so many changes, I don't know what to think anymore."

He took her by the shoulders. "Then don't think, Audley. Feel."

She started to cry. "Oh, Daddy, I don't want you to go."

He held her. "Just pretend I'm going on a long trip. You'll see me again, and your mother. I promise."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Trust me." He patted her and caressed her hair until she pulled back and sniffed.

"Well, don't go until I come back and we can finish your book together."

"We'll see." He handed her a handkerchief.

As she blew her nose she asked, "How long is eternity, daddy?"

"I don't know," he said, "but whenever I try to imagine it, I get very tired. So let's just enjoy one day at a time, alright?"

"Alright."

"Now go fix your face. It's almost time for dinner."

THAT EVENING AT DINNER, Audley was amazed to see the relationship that had blossomed these past three days between Jessie and Cybelle. She regarded their intimacy on one hand as refreshing and on the other hand as terrifying. Lanon, too, was fascinated to observe the couple. If he somehow felt left out, he didn't let on to Audley.

Brad and Sylvia had become conspicuous by their absence.



It was only too obvious they were honeymooning in Brad's apartment, and if Audley felt any pangs of jealousy, it was only that she and Lanon weren't doing the same thing.

Doc Will, having finally had the dreaded father/daughter chat, acted as though a huge weight had been lifted from his weary soul. He flirted openly with Flora and Cybelle. Between his and Angus' wit, everyone laughed so hard they were weak. What was so funny, nobody could say, but they were certainly all in high spirits. When they took their after dinner promenade, everyone was further delighted by the fact that every time Angus and Flora touched, phosphorescent sparks flew from them.

Love was in the air this Day of the Child and love is contagious. It even, temporarily, transcended the matter of sex. Audley was happy to walk arm in arm with Lanon and to share in the laughter and companionship of these other love-saturated souls.

At the end of the evening, Lanon walked Audley to her door. As they lingered, he asked, "You're leaving again tomorrow?"

She nodded. "I have to get on with my assignment." She withdrew her arm from his and leaned against her door, asking, "What can I do to help you while I'm out there?"

"Just make your observations about the Zooid way of life, put them in the TASC for Jessie, and I'll interpret them for my report to Zenton."

"You want my observations. Okay."

"In case I haven't told you," he said, "I want you to know how much I appreciate all the help you've given me already, Audley."

She shrugged off the compliment. "I haven't done anything!"

"Yes, you have!" he insisted. "Every single day I feel something new because of knowing you."

Her heart was pounding so hard, she was afraid he would hear. To cover her emotions, she said, "I talked to Cybelle and Flora today about us."

"I was hoping you would talk to *me* about us."



"I'm trying to!" she said. Something new and different in her voice told him he was beginning to see the woman inside. "I'm trying hard not to fall in love with you, Lanon," she said, "but everywhere I turn I'm being told to go ahead and allow it to happen."

"You've never been in love before?" he asked.

"No." Her eyes met his. "Have you?"

"Not like this." He delighted to see the inner woman.

She lowered her eyes again, afraid she might faint.

He remembered Angus' words, that he must not disdain her frailties, he must respect her feelings, he must have patience. "Is falling in love a problem for you?"

She nodded, not daring to speak.

"But why? Love is liberating and joyous!"

"What do you know about love?" she protested.

"I know about love!" he averred. "It's *making* love that I know nothing about."

"That's part of what I'm having a hard time with."

"So am I." He grinned crookedly.

She had to smile.

"So," he said, "what is the problem? Talk to me."

She sighed. "The problem is, Lanon, I want to know what's going to happen to us tomorrow, next week, next year. I know we could go to bed, make love, have lots of fun and feel liberated and joyous today, but what's going to happen tomorrow? I mean, what's to become of us when your mission is finished? What's to become of *you*?"

He said simply, "I don't know, Audley."

"Then I'm not sure I want to get too close to you, Lanon." She looked up at him with her raw fear. "I don't want to be left half a person. If we became lovers and you left, I'd want to *die*! I'd be *miserable* without you."

"I can't guarantee anything!" he said, as gently as possible. "I might stay. You might come with me. Or you might go first. And if we were apart, it might only be for a little while. There are so many



possibilities, it just seems to me that, since we have each other, since we've been given to each other this way, we should treasure each moment that we *do* have together." He lifted her face to him and held it in the palms of his hands. "I don't know what might happen to us tomorrow. But whatever it may be, I want you to know that I love you more than words can say."

Whatever distrust, whatever cynicism, whatever fear or commitment anxiety she may have had, it dissolved with those three little words and before Lanon stood the inner woman swathed in her sensual, voluptuous, desirable, caressable body.

Losing herself in the blue of his eyes, she asked, "How long is eternity?"

"It's this moment," he whispered, and he pressed his lips to hers. All her thoughts and emotions fell away and there was only the sensation of his lips on hers, his energy flowing through her and hers through him. The universe hung in the balance of his becoming human and her becoming divine. Then, as suddenly as it began, it was over, and she watched him cross the lawn into tomorrow.

ON 8-URANUS-25, AUDLEY SET OUT with a glow in her heart and Angus at her side. "I'm glad you're coming with me, Angus. I thought maybe you'd changed your mind."

"Why would I do that?" he objected.

"You're celebrating your anniversary, aren't you?"

"Indeed, I am!" She felt his joyous lasciviousness.

"Angus, you are a dirty old man," she chided.

"I am no such thing! I am quite young. Where are we going?"

"North, before the snow flies. You might not feel the cold, but I do!"

Before they got as far as Las Vegas, Angus handed her his hooded cloak.

"What are you doing, Angus? I can't see you!"

"That's the point. It will be difficult enough for you to delve



into these people's personal lives without my interference."

"How will I know you're there?"

"Ask. I may be invisible, but I can still let my presence be known to you if you need me. I'll be nearby. Maybe I'll do some research of my own."

In retrospect, she appreciated his decision. Angus was a lot to have to try to explain and still maintain her credibility. For the most part, he stayed away from her. For all she knew, he might be cavorting around with Flora gathering wild flowers and sowing wild oats, but she never saw any sure sign of such activity.

COLONY COASTLINE, on the rugged Atlantic coast, is one of the colonies inhabited exclusively by Native American Indians. It had been arranged that Audley was to be met by and stay with Victoria Redbow, a widow and proud mother of seven sons and two daughters. They were all grown, but she shared her life freely with them and her fourteen grand children. It was not uncommon for the little ones to stay for days on end with Victoria. She spent most of her hours on these sunny, cold days near the fire in her stone cabin, creating corn maidens from clay, sculpting each kernel, each finger, as if it were a gift to the Great Spirit.

The coastal nights were already bitter cold, and in the mornings the ocean air chilled Audley to the marrow, though the afternoons were warm. When she was not with Victoria, she ventured out to visit with the red skinned Zooids as they worked in their lumberyard, or stone mill, or the fishing docks. According to their ancient ways, the women and the men kept to their carefully delineated realms, and one did not cross over into the other, but often both men and women sang as they worked. Their music was a haunting sound to Audley's ears; sometimes it made her feel happy, but sometimes it was painful to hear.

One afternoon everything conspired to remind her of her father's wish to leave this world, and the idea of being without him was more than she could bear. She sought to grapple with yet



another abandonment. Mourning already, she wrapped Angus' hooded cloak around her, to ward off the wet wind, and settled into a crevice in the rocks to cry, and this is where he found her.

"Greetings, odd one," she heard him say. He had taken to calling her 'odd one' when they were alone.

"Look who's talking!" she shot back. "At least I'm visible!"

"Not really," he replied. "You look a burlap sack caught between a rock and a hard spot."

She sniffed. "I was thinking about Dad." They listened to the waves crash on the craggy shore for a moment before she said, "He says he's getting ready to leave."

"He told me the same thing," Angus allowed.

"Really, Angus? What did he say?"

"Just that. That he was preparing to leave. When he first mentioned it, he was anxious about it, but since then he seems to have resolved it to his satisfaction."

"Well, it's not resolved to *my* satisfaction," she complained.

"Obviously! But it's not up to you."

"Maybe not but I still have to deal with it."

"All you have to deal with is Audley."

"That's plenty."

She sensed him pat her hand and, although Angus, with his keen sense perception, did afford her some comfort, it was not easy to accept her father's decision. It was so final! She sat on the rocks huddled in Angus' cloak until the air turned too cold to ignore. She was glad to return to the hogan to sit by the fire and listen to Victoria sing to her grandchildren while working with the clay. That evening, after a warm supper and after the children had gone to bed, Victoria chose to tell Audley the story of her youngest son.

"All my sons except the youngest, Amadon, were born to my first husband," she said. "Amadon and his sister were born to my last husband. Both my husbands are gone now. So is Amadon. He is one of the reasons this tribe is now a part of the Jural Colony Project." Her voice was as haunting as the songs they sang.



"My older sons are big and brawny. They can be too boisterous and they love to have a good time. They were taught by their father to believe that a man should be tough and loud and, as many do, they drank too much.

"My second husband, Amadon's father, was different. He was from a tribe farther north. Like his father, Amadon was delicate and sensitive. He had the temperament of an artist; he could sculpt like a master. He was not tough or loud or brawny, and so his older brothers made fun of him. To Amadon, his brothers were crude. It depressed him to see that they would fight among themselves as to what food they would eat instead of being grateful that they had food to eat at all. Life on the reservation was an unhappy life for my youngest son.

"He left. He went west where he hoped to make his way in the world of artists. He attended a fine school and learned the ways of the western white man but Amadon could see how they, too, fought among themselves and played one against the other for power and position. He was not happy in the white man's world either, and so he was a man without a country.

"In time my son met and married a woman from a southwestern tribe and they had a child, a daughter. His wife's family would not accept him, and include him in their ways, and she would not leave her people. For many years Amadon lived in the white man's city outside the reservation, hoping to remain near his daughter so that as she grew up he could teach her the good ways of his tribe and the good ways of the white man.

"The city grew. There came to be racial tension and violence. There came to be a group of men who attacked Indians for sport. They were said to be a white supremacist group. Amadon died from the wounds they inflicted."

Audley was not only moved by the story, she was moved by the dignity with which the woman held herself when she spoke of the life and the death of her youngest son. All during the telling, Victoria's fingers worked, carving out the kernels of the corn maiden.



"His wife and daughter brought his body home, to be buried here with his own people," Victoria said. "It was then that I met my daughter-in-law and my grand-daughter for the first time. We talked about what had happened to him, not just in his dying, but in his living, as a man without a home, caught between two worlds and two values. We wept together.

"She was the one who told me about the Zooids, about one of the tribes out west that had become part of the Jural Colony Project, and how they preferred it to being, as she said, second class citizens in the white man's world." Her telling was interspersed with long silences.

"The Indian tribes, you know, cannot seem to come together. They fight to maintain their history and their culture and their ways. Their own language. But they are being absorbed into the white man's world. We are becoming a museum piece and a tourist attraction and not what we were meant to be." She paused to toss another log on the fire, watching the sparks rise and the flame settle.

"My daughter-in-law and I went to see our Governor. He did not like the idea at first, but he asked the tribe members to put it to a vote. Many of us wanted to look into this Zooid way of life. Jessie Brothers himself came to see us. He came to a town counsel meeting and told us what it would mean to be a Colony.

"Some of us felt that he was one of us. He was not interested in taking our land or our culture. He was not trying to make us be someone we are not. He did not expect us to take on his God. Jessie Brothers told us we would be as one with other people who wanted the same thing as we did from this life: a place to raise our children and our crops.

"We have been Zooids now for eleven years and we have improved as a tribe. Our Governor now has the Brothers to discuss the business. We have wealth, and the white men Zooids respect us.

"It is good," she said, "that Amadon gave us something when he left. He said, 'I am a house divided'." Victoria Redbow sighed and put her work aside. "Now my grand-daughter can grow up to be



part of a progressive world where she can learn from us and from the white men who are our brothers. We have not been taken to the cleaners."

After a while Audley asked if the Zooids ever came to visit the reservation and Victoria replied firmly, "We are no longer a reservation. We are a Colony.

"Yes, they come here," she answered, "not to see us as a tourist attraction, but to see us as we are. They see what we see. We have good fish. We have good merchandise. We are a good people. Sometimes they come on their vacation to share our way of life. Sometimes they come to work in the lumberyard or the stone mill or on the docks. We, too, go to the other colonies and learn other ways. We are Indian, yes, but we are humankind first. We are Zooids."

THAT NIGHT, IN THE TERMINAL, when Lanon read her notes, he gleaned two important messages. One, that Audley was psychically preparing herself for her father's departure; and two, that mortals felt a keen attachment to each other, an attachment that death irrevocably severed. He talked with his peers in Zenton until dawn, trying to understand the human emotion of "loss".

CYBELLE ADAPTED AT ONCE to zooidal philosophies and way of life. From the first day, she wanted to know everything there was to know about Jessie Brothers and his work. She stayed in the guestroom provided for her, she wore the attire of the colonists. She spent every unoccupied moment with Jessie, and Jessie had no objection. Indeed, he found the riches she brought to their union invaluable.

THE WOMEN'S COMMITTEE for the Design and Beautification of the Portal got underway at once. The females worked well together, each able to learn from the other. Averring that the sun was too severe for their delicate complexions, Cybelle and Flora left



before dawn each day to gather flowers, returning with renderings of temples and gardens from all over the globe. During the afternoons, they pored over design specifications in Jessie's office, sometimes until dinner. Often Erica would avail herself to participate in the screening of the plans.

On more than one occasion, the women drove out to the site to reflect on how a particular structure would impact on the desert horizon. On one such outing, accompanied by Jessie and Lanon, they were surprised to see a crew of surveyors. Since the workers were not Zooids, Jessie wanted to ask them for an explanation, but Cybelle laid her hand on his arm and asked him to wait for a moment and to observe. It was soon evident that tons of sand was being leveled, yet there were no machines in sight. The workers were using invisible equipment.

Flora identified them as helpers from an architectural sphere. "It is possible they will need your help in terms of your temporal materials." They interpreted their energy into a language they could both understand, then conferred across the sands, Flora translating to Jessie that they would indeed need a suitable material and which, fortuitously, could be created from the styrofoam Samuel was amassing.

On their return to Gateway, Jessie instructed Samuel, via the TASC, to accept all the styrofoam they could collect and have it transported to the Gateway subterranean level right away. Production of battery packs ceased; production of styro-steel began.

As the Zooids created the steel-hard, paper-thin sheets of styro-steel, John's engineering expertise was tested. The distance was so slight between Gateway and the Portal, it was hoped an above ground conveyance could be devised, rather than the underground Transport Line. John introduced an idea he had formulated years ago, of a magnetic tram, and given permission to proceed.

Volunteer workers from the architectural sphere and the Women's Committee for the Design and Beautification of the Portal created the new edifice together. An octagon gazebo style was



selected for its long-distance visual appeal, but it was hardly delicate. In the center of the massive eight-sided hall, wide stairs led up to a circular elevated dais. Overhead, an opening allowed for a spacious view of the sky.

The periphery of the interior featured glass-enclosed botanical gardens, aviaries, and fountains and cushioned marble benches, focused toward the center. Flora selected and imported plants, then tested them for the new climatic conditions and soil adaptations. Cybelle chose birds for both their beauty and their song. James' engineering skills enabled the mysteries of the fountains. And all this work was reviewed and approved by Rebecca's critical aesthetic eye.

DOC WILL RELISHED HIS TASC. As the architectural work crew, unconcerned about the zooidal production schedule, gathered their styro-steel and applied it to the developing structure, Doc Will gathered and garnered every fragment of information submitted on the questionnaires which had begun coming in from the Elders concerning their views on death and dying.

By the time all 700 Elders had responded, two had already died, and of the other 698 Zooids, 18 believed that at death the body and all else ceased, that death was the end, that there was no afterlife and they wouldn't want it even if it was an option. The remaining 680 Zooids believed in some kind of hereafter, but the speculations on the nature of the hereafter varied with each response.

The majority of Elders didn't have time to think about dying. Busy living, they felt their application would be premature. Nearly 200 applications for the Portal *did* come in and Doc Will was not surprised to see that all of the pox victims had made application. Nor was he surprised to see that most of the applicants were Elders who had already lost a spouse to death or who were in inordinately frail health. He found it particularly touching that three Elder couples asked if they could apply to go through the Portal together.



ANGUS AND AUDLEY PASSED through security clearance together at Penn State Reserve. It was her idea, actually, to go to PSR. Colony Coastline had put her in a serious mood and, with a Fest coming up soon, she wanted to get all the serious business over with.

"Be sure and stay with me all the time, Angus," she said. "Pat my hand once in awhile or say something so I'll know you're there."

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this!" he enthused. "You see, when I visit a lowly planet like this one, I always feel like I'm 'doing time'. So I'm very interested in seeing how the Zooids manage this."

"Really, Angus? Do you feel imprisoned on Urth?"

"Of course! Any limitation is like a prison. Ask your host about it. See what he has to say."

AFTER BEING ADMITTED at the front gate, and after telling Angus about her earlier visit to PSR with Lanon -- even before she knew his name -- she was met by Rosa Brothers, Phillip's wife. Audley could see that Rosa was the kind of woman who took everything in her stride, for she had not removed her apron when she came out to greet her guest. After leading Audley into her kitchen, she resumed dicing celery and explained, "Phillip will be back soon. He's down at South Field monitoring new guests." Handing Audley a potato peeler, she grinned crookedly and said, "Jessie told us you were nervous about this part of your assignment."

Audley nodded and picked up a potato. "Silly of me, huh?"

"No," Rosa allowed, "I don't think so. I know where you come from. My daughter lives outside, and she's always telling me about what goes on out there -- that people live in constant fear of one thing or another, *especially* in the bigger cities -- so I can understand why you'd have anxiety. It's just that you don't *need* to be anxious in PSR. I can tell you that, but you'll have to learn it yourself in your own way."

"I'm sure," Audley said, not sure at all.

Rosa continued, "In the meanwhile, you'll rest easier



knowing that a lock has been put on your door and, of course, you have your TASC."

"Of course." And Angus, she thought.

When Phillip returned, they sat down to dinner and, as husbands will do, he told Rosa about his day at work, giving the impression that it was just another day at the office. He did not go into the details of PSR's methodology, but in the middle of his recitation said, "I'm going to have Findlay take you around."

Rosa nodded and handed her husband the mashed potatoes.

"Who's Findlay?" Audley asked cautiously. "One of the prisoners?"

Phillip's big voice fairly bellowed. "Prisoners? We don't have prisoners at PSR. We have guests, we have residents and we have tenants, but we don't have prisoners. Anyway, Findlay isn't any of those. He's what you'd call 'on the payroll'."

"You mean like Barrister?"

"You'll like Findlay," Rosa assured her. "He's a nice man."

"Dr. Arthur Findlay. Doctor of Education, Criminology and Psychology. Been with us, what? A long time. Pass the bread."

After dinner Audley insisted on helping Rosa with the dishes, partly to hear Phillip discuss South Field's new recruits and partly to avoid going to her room. When it was time for her to turn in, Rosa packed a wedge of elderberry pie into a container and walked her to her room, which, like her room at Gateway, was equipped only with the barest of necessities.

"Angus?" she said, locking the door behind her. "Are you with me?"

"I'm right here," he said.

She dove into the pie as Angus asked, "Is she a good cook?"

"Oh, yes! You want some?" She held her fork up in the air but of course he refused it. "If these Zooids are going to keep feeding me so well, I'm going to have to start exercising."

"You start tomorrow. Findlay likes to ride a bicycle."

"How do you know that?" She rummaged in her purse and



found her toothbrush.

"I read his bio in the TASC."

"What else does it say?" She asked, brushing her teeth.

"Not much. He worked with your father on the tests for the initial candidates of PSR. He has quite a few published major works in the field of Criminal Psychiatry."

"Don't peek while I get undressed," she admonished.

"Hey! Aren't you the one who called me a dirty old man?"

"Well, keep your hands to yourself." She stripped, slid in, and pulled the covers up under her chin, then turned off the light, asking, "How old is this Findlay fellow?"

"73," Angus replied.

"Lord." She turned the light back on, remembering she didn't have a travel alarm clock. The Menu on the TASC, however, provided for a wake-up call, so she pressed 1/W and went back to bed. In the dark she whispered, "Good night, Angus."

His voice came to her from across the room. "Sleep well, odd one."

FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS Audley and Findlay, tailed by an invisible Angus, scoured the vast acreage of Penn State Reserve.

One day was not enough to learn all there was to know about South Field, the ugly and imposing concrete and steel high-security Phase I of PSR's rehabilitation program. It was at South Field that the new "guests" were photographed with the kinetic camera, the device that photographed emotional reactions. Here the guests spent months identifying their weaknesses and establishing their strengths in a sort of psychotherapy aimed at resolving their angers, resentments, guilts and prejudices. Here they learned to pick up after themselves, attended classes, and learn a trade. No guest was allowed to leave South Field with a chip on his shoulder or without at least a high school education or without a sense of rightful self-esteem, no matter how long it took.

Nor was one day enough to see all of the intricacies of PSR's



Phase II, West Hill, the two high-rise towers of Alpha and Omega that overlooked the Reserve. At West Hill, a minimum-security facility, the "tenants" continued their education in fields ranging from Accounting to Zoology. The tenants of Alpha and Omega earned their keep, managed their checkbooks, paid rent, bought their own clothing and meals, and learned to invest in their future. In Phase II, the men were entitled to conjugal visits while they continued their therapeutic group sessions, refined their social skills, developed arts and crafts, engaged in theater arts, established the symphony orchestra and developed physical fitness.

And one day was not enough to appreciate Red River, Phase III of Penn State Reserve, the model town comprised of PSR's "residents," those who had graduated from both South Field and West Hill. The post office, bank, library, restaurants, retail shops and churches were all maintained by the residents. Without restriction they were encouraged to visit their families who lived at Midway, a colony close by which was established for wives, mothers, sweethearts and children of the men in PSR. At Red River, they learned how to work out their differences and live harmoniously in a community setting. Red River prepared its citizenry for the day they graduated from PSR as trustworthy, responsible, and contributing members of the human race.

Life at the Reserve was a model of beauty, industry and order. In all the time she went with Findlay among the men of PSR, Audley had not been sexually harassed, no one gave her any looks she would not have invited, and there were neither catcalls nor obscene gestures. Her week there was mentally stimulating and visually lovely. Each day the maple and elm trees turned more and more vivid red, gold and orange. From South Field to West Hill to Red River, the men were readying for the Fest of Fruition. As Rosa had promised, she forgot she was in a prison and began to feel safe.

One day as she and Findlay were pedaling their bikes across the expansive grounds, Audley remembered Angus' admonition and asked Findlay about prisons of the mind.



"Oh, yes," Findlay replied. "Prison is a state of mind. And that's what our work is here at PSR: human liberation."

At his suggestion they got off and walked the bikes so they could talk better.

"Most of our guests come from the prison of poverty, a state of want and need. Some of them come from the prison of plenty, where they were given everything they needed and so had never developed empathy for those who go hungry or have to work for a car or a pair of shoes. Prisons of knowledge can make you feel intellectually superior, while prisons of ignorance trap all mankind. Racism, sexism, nationalism -- these are all prisons of the mind and they're not unique to penal institutions. Even on the Outside, there are prisoners of greed who can't be happy with enough but must always have more. There are sick, addictive personalities who can never get enough alcohol or drugs or sex or food; all these cravings for external substances are to alleviate the prison of dissociation."

"I suppose you could even be imprisoned by good stuff," she thought aloud.

"Oh, yes!" he agreed. "Good ideas, for example. We can become imprisoned by our own concepts, perceptions or ambitions!"

"Or relationships," Audley suggested.

"Absolutely. So, you see, there's no reason to fear a place like PSR. This is a declared rehabilitation center; it's apparent that the prison exists. Consider all those seemingly successful and normal people outside who are busy influencing each other with their own individual prison mentality."

She thought of Sylvia's prison of Jennifer and Brad's prison of Sam.

"But I think the darkest prison is the prison of fear," Dr. Findlay said. "Fear is a crime committed by men the world over. Many of the things these men here have done was caused by fear of failure, fear of not being accepted."

"Women, too, have prisons of fear," she acknowledged.

"Of course! Fear of rejection, fear of abandonment."



That was the diagnosis her father had recently given her.

"But the worst of the fears," he concluded, "is the fear of love. That fear denies us the ability to accept our vulnerability and to trust life. It steals from us the joy of doing for others."

No wonder Angus had asked her to discuss prisons of the mind! Findlay was talking about Lanon's reason for being here and, more to the point, her own most insidious innermost fears.

"These days everyone wants to qualify his or her love," Findlay went on. "They say, 'I'll love you IF .... I'll give this much IF .... I'll trust you BUT .... And it turns out to be not love at all, but some kind of bartering. Even worse than that, it's some kind of cowardice."

"You admit that it takes courage to love," she said, looking for someone to justify her fear of loving.

"Love IS courage," he said. "Without love there is no courage, no trust, no faith, no belief, no life. Without love there is nothing. Without love you are imprisoned."

"Would you consider love as the ability to know fulfillment and anticipation at the same time?"

"Of course. It's accepting this moment for all it's worth, and expecting the next moment to be as good or even better."

She said, "I have a friend who says that he feels imprisoned on Urth."

"He is, in a way. We're all imprisoned here in our mortality, in our bodies. Obviously we couldn't live this life without being confined in our skin, but even with the limitations of our existence here, there is freedom if we know our individual prison well enough to make it sacred.

"How do we do that?" she asked.

"Through love. Love of life, love of others. Dress up life, feed it, play it some music, associate it with others, and when the time comes to leave this one behind, you will know you have at least lived a life that was made safe and free by loving."



SYLVIA EXPERIENCED ORIENTATION with 54 other prospective Zooids. They were housed together on the third floor of the Gateway spire. Classes and tests were scheduled all day, every day, for the entire 21 days. The new recruits ate in one of the dining rooms on the first floor and had no contact with anyone except Nathaniel Brothers and his Zooidal Aides.

During this three weeks Sylvia learned the basic structure and disciplines of zooidal life as well as the basic freedoms. She appreciated their calendar, made up of 13 months of 28 days each, since it was easier for women to keep track of their menstrual cycle.

She liked the idea of the first week of free time every production month plus a one month vacation every year. But she did not like the fact that Zooids did not put much time and energy into enhancing their appearance. She figured that if she were accepted as a Zooid, she would have to go outside regularly in order to have her nails manicured, or her hair done professionally. As far as she could ascertain, Zooids only wore make-up or jewelry during Fests.

She didn't mind that Zooids had no rites or rituals until she learned that this restriction included marriage ceremonies. Marriage in the colonies, in fact, was very unlike marriage on the Outside. Zooid men and women who committed themselves to each other declared a state of Union. If they found themselves diverging, they declared their union Dissolved. No merging or dividing of assets occurred in the case of Union or Dissolve.

Women in Union did not wear wedding rings to set them apart from their single sisters. Female offspring assumed the surnames of the mother while male offspring assumed the surnames of the father, and it was not uncommon for both the man and woman in Union to change their surnames to Brothers when anticipating a child.

Union schools were mandatory for all Zooids, even for those who were already married. These schools taught the joys and rigors of partnership. Parenting schools were also mandatory, ideally before



procreation. No child went without ample parental guidance, often from the entire community. All colonies were active in family counseling situations.

Relocation from one colony to another was a way of life. An independent Zooid, one not a party to Union, colonized with other independent Zooids. Once married, the couple colonized with other couples in Union. Families colonized with other families. Seven families comprised a cluster, a voting bloc.

Zooids did not own their own homes nor did they pay rent or hold a mortgage. They paid for neither utilities nor insurance. Although they lived in their own personal space and could amass certain personal effects, there was no ownership including private vehicles, but, even so, everything necessary for a comfortable, healthy, efficient life was provided, including education and health care.

After a study of the structure of Zooid family life, Sylvia was introduced to zooidal philosophies. At first she scoffed at the Zooids' idealism, not believing it possible for an entire society to act altruistically. But when at last she set aside the long-ingrained influences of her father's newspaper and her husband's law practice, she began to see things as she herself would prefer to see them. She then began to grasp what it would mean to be a Zooid and she wanted to be a part of it.

Mid way through the second week Sylvia had some physical tests done. Although she had missed her period, she hadn't given it a second thought, chalking it up to stress and all the changes she had been going through. It came as a total shock to her to learn that she was pregnant. She now had some real soul-searching to do regarding her relationship with Brad. Did he want to be a Zooid or did he just want this job? Did he really love her or was he simply killing time for the next six months?

Regardless, Sylvia was in excellent physical health. The child would be born on or about 8-MARS-26 or May 24, depending on which calendar she used. As a pregnant woman, what kind of work



would she be given to do? Would she be assigned to a singles unit? Would she be asked to give up the child until she had attended the union and parenting classes? She and Brad had indeed gone too fast. Did he even want a child? She was astounded to realize how much she did!

In fact, during the third and final week of Orientation Sylvia started to learn a lot of things about herself that made her feel good. After all the years of playing the role of a dumb blonde, albeit a beautiful and slyly capable blonde, she was emerging as a person of independence, capable of making shrewd decisions, a fair witness who could see all sides of a given situation, a person with deep empathies. Although she could follow if necessary, she could also be a leader, a source of boundless energy and contagious enthusiasm. With guidance, even her few character liabilities would become assets.

On 28-URANUS-25, Sylvia Chandler Watergate was ushered into the ranks of Zooid and assigned to Colony Midway.

ANNA AND ELLIOT SPROUL, joint overseers of Colony Breadbasket, took Audley under their wing as though she were a family member who had been away from home too long. Anna, who put Audley in mind of a plump Martha, set her up in one of the many cabins clustered not far from the main farmhouse. There, on her TASC, she brought herself and Lanon up to date before donning a denim jumpsuit and enthusiastically assuming the role of farmer.

Although harvest was in, there was still much work to be done. She drove the tractor one fine late autumn day as other farmhands lifted bales of fresh hay onto the wagon to be brought in to be stored in the lofts. In the barn she helped pitch the ensilage down from the high silo, her nose feasting on the sweet, yeasty fragrance. With other women and men, she shoveled manure from the trenches, filled water troughs and measured out oats and hay for the cows. In the early dawn she went with women and children to feed chickens and gather eggs. In the evenings she helped in the



kitchens, peeling potatoes, stirring stews, grinding coffee beans and sneaking bits of cookie dough to little children.

Angus loved the agricultural colony! He rode with Audley on the tractor, sneezed in the silo, and shooed the chickens. One evening, as they strolled together in the orchard under the stars, he confessed that he was "peculiarly tetchd by chlorophyll" which, in part, justified why he had been "seen running naked through the wheat field."

"No wonder you married Flora," Audley laughed. "If you like greens that much, she can provide you with a steady supply!"

"Oh, Flora and I aren't married," he said.

"What?" Her sense of propriety was offended. "Was that a lie about a third anniversary?"

Angus giggled at her expected reaction. "We are bound, we are united, we are one, but we never had a ceremony."

"Well, that's too bad," she lamented, knowing he was playing with her. "I guess that means your 97 children are bastards!"

"They are no such thing! They are entirely legitimate!" he insisted.

"What kind of children do you think Lanon and I would have if he could have children?"

"Perfect children, of course, but why do you say 'if'?"

She quoted her father's documentation verbatim. "No sperm count."

Angus blew off her concern. "That's just a standard universe precaution!" he insisted. "If Lanon decides to stay, that can be reversed. Matter of fact, I think Flora has the herbal antidote. Shall I tell her to slip him some in his iced tea?"

"Don't you dare!" she squealed, finding Angus' outlook, as usual, refreshingly candid and encouraging.

ACE REPORTER Audley Blackstone had changed her approach in her nose for news. She discovered that people would tell her what she should know without the static and impersonal interview. She



had been working like a farmhand at Breadbasket for many days and nights when finally the Sprouls opened up and told her what she needed to know.

"We would have lost the farm," Elliot told her, "Had it not been for the JCP. It was one of those that were about to go to the government for back taxes and a high interest loan. Samuel Brothers came to see me and proposed the idea of buying it outright, debts and all. Anna and I were dumbstruck by the Zooids' plan, but we weren't the only ones to take advantage of their offer and none of us regret it.

"The JCP bought us out then contracted with Anna and I to stay on as caretakers of this, Breadbasket, the new agricultural colony. That enabled us to keep the land, which had been Anna's great-great-grandfather's. It also enabled us to have help on the farm such as we'd never been able to afford. Now we can do what we've wanted to do all along, and that is to work the land. Live on it. We're a simple people and we crave this simple life."

"It might be simple," Anna joined in, her knitting needles clicking, "but it's not easy! It's a hard life, as you've seen. Up before daybreak year in, year out, all kinds of weather, taking care of sick animals, birthings, mending the outbuildings...."

"What about the weather?" Ace Reporter asked. "Blight and floods and early frosts have been known to wipe out a whole crop. How do you manage that?"

"For one thing," Elliot said, "we don't put everything into one crop, and now that we're part of the colonies, we have the resources to have greenhouses. We construct canopies over a lot of the crops and we bring water in on the transport lines and feed it through the irrigation system, even in the driest weather. We don't have to depend entirely on Mother Nature anymore. We depend on help from other Zooids. And in exchange, we provide them with food."

Anna added, "Not all of them. There are other agricultural colonies, too, and there are colonies that give us meat and fowl. We get fish from the fisheries. PSR is a good producer."

"Matter of fact," Elliot continued, "if you'll notice, the Zooids



don't waste much. We grow food or herbs or even flowers almost everywhere. With the sun and the rain free, and with people who enjoy nurturing the Urth, there's hardly any excuse not to plant a seed here and there. And did you know the Zooids have a seed plant, too, so there's just no excuse for not working the land."

"Working the land," Anna said maternally, "is good for the soul. My eldest daughter and I shelled peas the day her first child was born; we shelled peas and waited as the pains got closer. And after the last war on the Outside, my sister's boy came into the colonies and stayed with us for two years, making peace with himself for what he had done and what he had been made to go through. He hoed the fields night and day in good weather, then hoed the greenhouse beds night and day in winter, until finally he was ready to go on."

"Sometimes," Elliot said, "the residents of an industrial community like to spend a season in an agricultural community so they can be sure they've got things in perspective. A lot of the new Zooids come here first, just to get rid of the vibrations and poisons they've picked up from years and years of city living. Like Anna says, there's a lot of therapy in agriculture."

"Quite a few of the men who come out of PSR bring their families to an agricultural colony," Anna said.

Elliot followed up. "Yeah, there's not so much stress out here working one-on-one with the soil."

Anna laughed. "The most stressful thing in my life is trying to get everyone to the table before the food gets cold. We don't go hungry here, but we also don't pay much attention to the clock. We put out meals when it's ready, and sometimes folks are off looking at the sunset or letting the dogs take them for a walk."

"I think," Elliot pondered aloud, "that one of the reasons the JCP works is because Zooids are natural people. We eat natural food, we don't use any chemicals on our crops for bug control, we aren't afraid to let our feelings show. We laugh, we cry, we keep things simple. And we keep things small enough so it doesn't overwhelm



us, you know? Those big cities out there, all noisy and full of fumes and crime, that's no good. You don't find any crowding going on in a colony, no matter what kind it is. We all like to have a little elbow room."

"And peace and quiet!" Anna complained. "Would you just listen to that ruckus?" Somewhere under the old stately farm house a nest of crickets chirped to beat the band.

LANON REVIEWED Audley's impressions of the Sproul's way of life and began to reflect on the relationship humanity had with the soil. The next day he went with Flora on a gathering mission to garner her wisdom about growing things. With her counsel he was easily able to remember how the many gardens of Zenton provided its inhabitants with satisfactions akin to nourishment and comfort.

But his reflections on "prisons of the mind" stayed with him. He did not want to report about PSR to Home Station until he had settled in his own mind the concept of imprisonment. It was a concept unique to mortals, to those imprisoned in the flesh, and Lanon did not feel at all imprisoned. He loved his body. He was still fascinated by his limbs and hair and cells and the involuntary actions of breathing, sweating and blinking.

This mind, too, limited as it was compared to the mind he used on Zenton, was something he was intrigued by, so his considering the prisons of the mind was a way for him to further understand the mortal he was becoming.

At last he recognized that by continuing to refer to Zenton as his origin and his destiny, he was imprisoning himself in isolation from Audley and the rest of the human race. He realized that, in order for him to truly know whether the Zooids had attained the requisite level of existence, his self-imposed prison of uniqueness would have to be torn down.



## CELEBRATION OF FRUITION

*Ellen & Oscar, and Verbena*

When the circuit opened, Brad was alone in the Terminal. He had earlier completed the basic program simply by using information he had acquired from his work at Cape Canaveral to tap into a satellite station. Having done this, he had to assume that the intelligent life force on the other end would know enough about Quantum Mechanics to connect its own energy source, thereby effecting the open channel.

The tape recorders and transcribers in place, he turned to the less interesting and more tedious part of his work, which was to create a minuscule circuit board that Engineering would reproduce and insert into all the existing TASC's.

As always, the Terminal room was cool and quiet except for the interminable respiration system which by now had become second nature to the scientist. He tinkered in happy silence, missing Sylvia, looking forward to her return. At length he became aware of an alteration in the atmosphere. There was a subtle suspension, a pervading intensity.

Setting the circuit board aside, he stood up, visually scanning the Terminal for any sign of default. Lights blinking on the



panel assured him all systems were intact. Then he realized that the room had stopped breathing. As he stood wondering if he should call Jessie or if he should check the power source, he was startled out of his wits by a resounding voice coming through the channel.

"Greetings!" The voice boomed more from power than from volume. "I am El Rey, Ambassador for Those High in Authority." Brad felt compelled to sit down, as his entire body weakened, but he had the perspicacity to make sure the recording device was 'on'. The atmosphere in the Terminal was charged with positive ions.

"I bring salutations from the Grand Universe. I have come to welcome the civilization of Zooids into the Stream of Time." For a moment the voice paused giving Brad a chance to take a breath. He had no idea that the system he had installed would result in such a communication! He had expected the open channel to cross continental barriers, even extend to other worlds, yes, but not to the Gods themselves!

"We have been observing your planet for millions of years," El Rey pronounced. "We have nurtured your growth and lamented your many regressions and setbacks. It is now my privilege to honor the gains of the advanced few who have persevered in the face of extreme adversity. Your efforts have created a civilization that meets universe standards for cosmic citizenship." A lengthy pause ensued.

"I will not speak with you again. An open channel of communication has been established for the Jural Colony Project, and a personal monitor has been assigned to each individual Zooid. This encircuitment is cause for galactic celebration. I offer sincere congratulations to the Zooids for their courage and fortitude from Those High in Authority. Welcome to immortality!"

As the transmittal ended, the air in the Terminal hummed with static; the breathing of the room resumed. It took Brad several minutes to focus his mind enough to consider what to do. Obviously, even if a monitor came on, the voice would be recorded, but Brad didn't want to miss it if it came on at once. At length he realized that all he had to do was turn the machine 'off' and he was free to



leave in search of Jessie and Lanon. He fled the sixth floor and sought Jessie in his office but found it and the apartment empty. He found Doc Will in the clinic, putting the final touches on his book.

Doc Will looked up when he heard Brad enter. "What's the matter, son? It looks like you've seen a ghost!"

"It's ... It's working!" Brad stammered.

"What's working?" Doc stood. "The channel? It's open?"

Brad nodded, still unsure of his own voice.

"Go tell Jessie and Lanon. I'll meet you back in the Terminal." Brad nodded and took off, having no idea where to locate the others, but Doc Will knew exactly where he was going.

When he was certain Brad had gone, he rode the elevator to the sixth floor and entered the Terminal. Everything appeared normal. He saw the red on/off switch to the system and flipped it 'on', fully prepared to address the issue at hand. In an instant, a voice came through.

"Greetings," it said simply.

"Greetings. I'm Dr. Wilhelm Blackstone."

"I know who you are. I am your Personal Monitor." The Monitor was calm, soft-spoken. "You seem agitated. Perhaps you need to take a couple of deep breaths."

"Yes, of course," Doc said, now aware that his blood pressure was too high and his pulse was racing. He breathed deeply, calming himself.

After a moment the Monitor crooned, "That's better. No sense defeating the purpose of our conversation."

Doc guffawed, not surprised that the Monitor knew why he was there. "No," he agreed. "That wouldn't be in the best interests or science."

"Are you quite sure you've accomplished everything you wanted to do here?"

"Oh, yes," Doc answered quickly. "Quite sure. I've even managed to put the finishing touches on my book."



"And you don't care to be around for its publication? You are entitled to the accolades, you know."

"I know, but ... that's not important to me now."

"You may ask questions," the Monitor suggested.

Doc blinked. "I, uh, I'd like to be the first one to go through the Portal."

"Yes, we understand that you would."

He remembered Angus saying, "You have to ask permission, Wilhelm," so he asked, "May I do that? Go?"

"You may."

"Thank you." He felt his pulse rate speed up again and took another couple of deep breaths.

"When?"

"Soon."

"How will I know when?"

"You will know. Have patience."

Doc Will sighed. Soon the room's respiratory system started up and Doc could feel that the Monitor had gone. He sat contemplating the miracle of the moment until the entrance of Lanon, Jessie and Brad brought him back.

"You okay, Doc?" Jessie asked. "You look pale."

The old man got to his feet. "Yeah, Jessie, I'm okay. A little excited, maybe." He made way for Lanon to sit down at the system, but Lanon deferred to Jessie.

"It's your accomplishment, Jessie. Go ahead."

"Don't be ridiculous," he grinned. "Let's hear it!"

Brad rewound the tape and played the original pronouncement of El Rey. All ears were attuned to the timbre of the voice as well as to the words of the message. At the end, they all stood there in a long, thoughtful silence before Jessie instructed Brad to have the message transcribed so that he could read it to the Board and they could announce it to the populace.

Then, as El Rey's message was being electronically transcribed, as they were each still silently contemplating such an



announcement, the tape went on to reveal the dialogue between Doc Will and his personal Monitor.

When it ended, Jessie said, "Brad, these messages between the Zooids and their personal monitor, maybe they shouldn't be available to all ears. Fix this thing to edit."

Brad glanced anxiously toward Doc Will, but responded to Jessie's request, saying, "I thought you wanted a transcript of everything kept here at the Terminal."

"I thought I did, too, but I've changed my mind. Zooids might not have any secrets, but these one-on-one communications are confidential." He turned to Doc Will. "I guess you will be leaving us soon, old friend."

Doc Will had seen Brad's distress, so he said, "Oh, not right away. Audley will be home soon. Anyway, as far as I know, the Portal isn't even half finished yet."

"To the contrary," Lanon said. "We just came from there. It is completed! Down to the last bird and flower."

"How in Sam Hill?"

Jessie shrugged. "If we'd've built it, it would've taken months."

"Who did build it?" Brad asked.

Lanon answered. "Zooids provided the materials. The Stream of Time provided the energy."

The color drained from Doc Will's face. The Portal was ready for him when he was ready for the Portal.

BRAD ATTENDED SYLVIA'S GRADUATION from Orientation, leading her straight from the obelisk to his apartment. He had hoped to hide from his anxieties in her loving arms, but this new woman intimidated him. She was more confident, somehow, and it bothered him to realize that, right now, he was the weaker sex.

He withdrew from their initial embrace and invited her to sit, but it was he who was having trouble relaxing.

"What's the matter, Brad? Didn't you miss me?"



"Very much. Every day. But a lot has happened."

"For me, too." Was he backing out?

"Well, we have whole a week together, right?"

She nodded. "I report to Midway after the Fest."

"What's Colony Midway?"

"It's a satellite of PSR, made up of the family members of the men at the Reserve."

Brad was alarmed. "Are you sure you ought to go there, Sylvia? I mean, these people aren't going to be what you'd call the cream of society!"

"So what? I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty, Brad. Anyway, it's not like I'll be working directly with felons. I'll be working with their wives, mothers and children."

The intensity of her commitment dissuaded him from further objection. "It sounds very responsible."

"It is," she stated. "I'm very happy about it." She didn't sound happy to Brad's ears.

Without warning, Sylvia felt a wave of nausea. She fled to the bathroom and threw up, leaving Brad confused, helpless and somewhat embarrassed for her.

When she returned, still pale, he asked, "Sylvia, what's the matter? Are you ill?"

"Oh, God," she said, struggling to regain her dignity. "I need to talk to Audley."

"To Audley? Talk to *me!* What's the matter?"

"Oh, Brad." She suddenly started to sob, buried her face in his shoulder. He held her, rocked her back and forth. "I love you so much," she said at last.

"I love you, too, darling, but *please*, what's *wrong?*"

"I don't want to interfere with your life," she sobbed.

"You silly goose, you *are* my life! How could you possibly interfere?"

"I'm going to have a baby."

A strange sound emitted from Brad before the laughter



came. "A baby?" His face was aglow. "We are going to have a baby?" When she nodded, he got up and went to the door, opened it, and shouted to a passer-by, "We're going to have a baby!" He laughed until his eyes filled with tears. He hugged Sylvia again, kissed her hair and her ears, all the while murmuring, "We're going to have a baby." Suddenly he pulled back. "Don't you want to have a baby, darling?"

"Of course I do."

"Then what's the matter?"

"I want to be a Zooid."

"You can be a Zooid. You *are* a Zooid. What's that got to do with anything?"

"It has to do with everything! It has to do with whether the baby's birthday is in May or in Mars. It has to do with whether he'll wear knickers or a jumpsuit. It has to do with whether he'll spend Christmas vacation with his grandparents or Winterfest with us."

"Sylvia, either way, he'll be with us. It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does, Brad. I'll be here. Where will you be? Do you see?" He saw. "I didn't want to tell you because I don't want to influence your decisions about the way you live your life. If you want to finish this project then go back to the IOF or on to UCLA, I don't want to stand in your way. You have to resolve your own destiny."

But Brad's destiny was already resolved. He was the one who was there when El Rey's voice came through the channel. He was the one who felt the power of the Outer Cosmos welcoming the Zooids to immortality. Who was he to disregard the single most important development of the century? And who was he to disdain the nobility of this woman's offer? He looked into her sincere blue eyes for a long moment then said, "Influence me."

THE FIRST DAY OF FALL FEST, the Celebration of Fruition, saw the grounds of Gateway transformed into a replica of a Renaissance fair. Ellen, helpful under ordinary circumstances, was invaluable during Fests. She put herself in charge of the arrivals and departures



of visitors, the distribution and display of goods, overseeing construction of the booths, and otherwise being simply indispensable.

In keeping with her gala spirit, she had induced Cybelle to lend her the wondrously sexy costume, imported all the way from beyond the Milky Way. Ellen's ample bosom fairly pushed its way out of the bodice, and her buxom behind tossed the chiffon overlay in a way that Cybelle's never could have.

The thatch-roofed booths and multi-colored tents that lined the walkways contained gifts from all over the realm. There were bushels of fresh picked fruits and vegetables, quarts and pints of canned foods, jams, jellies and preserves, honey, berries, loaves of fresh baked breads, rolls and all manner of pies, cakes, cookies, tarts and candied fruit.

In addition to foodstuffs, there were hand-crafted wool shawls, tie-died scarves, hooked rugs, embroidered pillow cases, lace-edged picture frames, wood-carved jewelry boxes, water color landscapes, ceramics, oil paintings, and new items kept coming in with each arriving Transport Line.

The swimming pool had been covered over with an elevated platform that served as a stage. A program of live music was scheduled for each evening, according to the theme of the day. The theme for the Day of the Child was "Be Fruitful" and would be highlighted by Sylvia and Brad's Union Celebration at twilight. The chamber music ensemble was well rehearsed in the wedding march and they planned to augment their program with baroque favorites of a romantic nature.

For weeks, the Elders and Aides had been preparing their costumes. Bolts of satin and velvet had been imported, cut and sewn to order, transforming the men into Lords, while the women draped their limbs and criss-crossed strands of pearls across their breasts in the fashion of Ladies.

Suits of armor defended the lounge, crossbows graced the benches. Scribes read poetry from scrolls. Boys played the lute and girls chased them with frivolity. A festive holiday mood permeated



every inch of Gateway and throughout colonies like Mardi Gras or San Francisco on a New Year's Eve.

Ellen met each Transport Line as it arrived, greeting the guests and directing them on to their destination. Audley and Angus, still invisible, were on the Transport Line that stopped in Las Vegas pick up passengers en route to Fall Fest, Oscar among them. At the platform, agog with energy and excitement, Ellen directed Audley to go at once to her apartment where Sylvia was being fitted for her wedding dress.

Angus prodded Oscar onto the platform where Ellen accused, "You're not a Zooid."

"How do you know?" Oscar returned.

"Because you're leering at me." She smiled as she made that observation. "Zooids don't leer."

Oscar closed his mouth and gulped. "Sorry."

Angus was amused at the interplay between the young people.

Ellen tossed her braid. "Since you're not a Zooid, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see my boss, Dr. Spencer."

"You can't see him just now. He's not available."

"Why not?"

"He's preparing to be united."

"United to what?"

"To Sylvia, of course." Her skirts flounced.

"He used to be engaged to Audley Blackstone," Oscar informed her.

"Audley," she corrected, "is attached to Lanon."

"Lanon Zenton?"

"Yes, why?" All during this dialogue she continued to be of assistance to those who were seeking direction or needing instructions after disembarking from the train.

"Where is he?" He had a hard time keeping his eyes on hers her costume was so distracting.



"If you must know, he's with Brad and I *think* they went to the Portal. Why?"

"Sylvia is his Investigative Assistant. Let me see her."

"No, you can't see Sylvia," Ellen averred. "She's putting on her wedding gown."

He sighed, seemingly stopped in his efforts to get inside Gateway.

"You want to make yourself useful 'til somebody is available? I could use some help."

His face lit up. "Really! Oh, that'd be great!"

Ellen appraised him with distaste. "First we'll need to find you something to wear!"

"What's wrong with what I got on?"

"It's a uniform!" she complained.

"I thought women liked to see a man in uniform."

She flounced. "I don't know what movie you've been watching, but there's nothing very attractive about drab green. Especially at a Fest!"

"What's a Fest?"

She rolled her eyes back in her head. "It's a *party*."

"Oh!" Oscar grinned. "Okay."

"My name's Ellen, what's yours?"

"Oscar."

"Well come on, Oscar. You can help me put the canopy over Mrs. Drake's dried flower booth."

As Ellen scampered off with Oscar in tow, Angus mused that the young man with his misguided political fervor might inadvertently cause trouble. He called to his mate Flora for her counsel.

When she arrived, he explained, "A young man has come to Gateway to investigate Lanon Zenton. This young man was once involved in Dr. Spencer's search for the cause of the black-out and I suspect he's preparing to lay the blame on Lanon, thereby redeeming Brad's reputation with the IOF and with the American President."



"Oh, these zealous mortals!" Flora lamented. "They can be such a nuisance!"

"Perhaps," Angus suggested, "it is intended that now, since the channel is open and the Portal is completed, Lanon will be urged to return to his Home Station."

"Perhaps," she agreed, neither pleased nor displeased.

"My only concern," he advised, "is that, in spite of the accelerated pace of the project, it is not yet completed. This young man must not be permitted to upset the cradle of civilization!"

Flora nodded. "Ellen has the gifts to dissuade him from acting too quickly, but in the interest of the Stream of Time, we have the obligation to oversee these final stages."

"I agree, my dear," Angus said squeezing her arm and bringing forth a spray of phosphorescent sparks. "And the privilege."

THE CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION had nothing on the cradle Jessie lay in -- the cradle of Cybelle, wet and warm from their lovemaking. She purred and pulled him close, smiling into his bare chest, causing him to wonder again at the miracle of this woman who had become his. From the first instant he saw her he wanted her, and not just in the physical sense. He wanted her to inspire, encourage, stimulate and assist him in all ways and in all things, as he wanted to do and be for her.

He could not believe how perfect she was. Had he spent a year of his life trying to figure out exactly what he wished for in a mate, he would not have come close to the perfection he found in Cybelle. She breathed when he breathed, not to accommodate him, but because she was his counterpart.

"How can anything so carnal be so divine?" she whispered.

"Want to do it again?"

"Mmmm."

When she later opened the drapes to let daylight flood the room, Jessie's eyes lingered on her naked body. Her copper colored hair fell to the back of her knees and she often draped it around her



like a cape. Dressed thus now she paraded herself before him, enjoying his open admiration. "Shouldn't you be doing something for the Fest?" she asked. "Making a speech or something?"

"Not now," he said softly. "Later today Brad and Sylvia are going to celebrate their Union, and tomorrow I'll tell the Board about the open channel and read them the message from El Rey, but at the moment there is nothing more important than what I'm doing. Being with you." He propped himself up on an elbow. "Do you know El Rey?"

"Oh, heavens, no," she said. He's a *big* fish. Way out of my league."

"What I want to know is how come a beautiful thing like you is messing with a small fish like me."

"Because you're a perfect little fish. Just my type."

"Really, Cybelle. There must be thousands of wonderful personalities out there in the universe. You could have any one of them."

"But I don't *want* any one of them. I want *you!*" Her tresses covered him like a blanket. "There may be stronger arms, or clearer eyes, or sharper wit, but you are just my style. You're perfect, just the way you are."

"You're incredible."

"The Day of the Child," she observed. "No meetings to go to, no schedule to keep. Would you like to brush my hair, Jessie Brothers?"

"Yes." He brushed her hair, all of it, as they dreamed their dreams with the morning sun splayed upon their nakedness.

THE DREAM REALIZED, Audley found herself in a garden, a room strewn with tuberose, plumeria, white azalea and gardenias. Flora's mission was to gather the blossoms necessary for the bridal party; and when she returned from Hawaii with yet another fresh armful, Cybelle laughed and said, "Enough, Flora! Enough!"

Audley's dress and those of the goddesses were made of



whisper soft blue velvet. After the crowns of columbine, chains of tuberoses and corsages of orchids were in place, the females helped Sylvia into her wedding gown made of white rose petals.

They oohed and aahed and sighed and cried for a minute before Audley remarked, "I thought you said Zooids don't have weddings!"

Cybelle countered happily, "This was Jessie's idea!"

Sylvia prattled. "I know Zooids don't have weddings, but when Brad and I told Jessie we wanted to announce our Union, he just wanted to make a big deal of it." Her tone became conspiratorial. "It's not just for us, you know. It's a celebration for everybody! What with Flora and Angus having an anniversary, and with Cybelle and Jessie so much in love, and you, too, Aud, so crazy about Lanon, Jessie thought it would be appropriate for a Celebration of Fruition."

"Shouldn't this be taking place on the Day of the Union?"

"Actually," Flora counseled, "it's more appropriate that Sylvia and Brad get married on the Day of the Child. They're going to have a baby."

Audley grinned and hugged her friend. "Sylvia, that's wonderful!"

"I know, but quit squashing me. You'll bruise my blossoms!"

"And you! Quit crying! You'll mess up your face!"

The goddesses then saw to the appearance of the men, finding them all appropriately dressed and inordinately handsome. Even Angus had made an effort to pull himself together.

AS TWILIGHT APPROACHED and the prism lights danced in the air, everyone put away their day's activities in anticipation of the festivities of the evening.

"Sure seems like a lot of fuss for one wedding," Oscar said, transformed by his new costume.

Ellen, radiant by his side, said, "It's not just for Brad and Sylvia! It's for all of us. It's for lovers everywhere!"



Zooids, aides, and guests swarmed around the platform in hushed expectation. As the chamber orchestra began to play, Brad emerged from the lounge, flanked by his best man, Lanon, followed by Angus in his hooded cloak, with Doc Will pulling up the rear. One by one they stepped onto the platform, arranging themselves in a circle to await the arrival of the women. Posting himself at the top of the stairs, Doc Will was the official escort.

Flora came first, strewing blossoms, stopping only when she reached Angus' side. Cybelle came next, her hair graced with a crown of gardenias; she floated into Jessie's open arms. Audley, trembling, fastened her gaze on Lanon; his strength carried her across the lawn and up the stairs to stand beside him. Doc Will nodded and was very pleased.

Then, to the classic strains of the wedding march, Sylvia, the most radiant woman on Urth, carried herself and her gown of petals and pearls regally across the expanse. As the crowd murmured their approval, Doc Will stepped down, held out his hand to her, and led her up the staircase to Brad. They joined hands, all of them, forming a circle of friends.

After a moment Angus' voice rang out. "This is a solemn and joyous occasion, appropriately called a Celebration of Fruition. I borrow on the Union of this man, Bradford Jules Spencer, and this woman, Sylvia Chandler Watergate, to renew my commitment to my mate, Flora. May you young lovers find the same contentment in your souls three thousand years from now -- "

" -- Angus and I find today," Flora continued. "In your Union, may your children, visible and invisible, human and divine, be a joy to your heart and a credit to truth, beauty and goodness."

Next, Doc Will spoke. He said, "In the years to come, may you remember that you are your own person. It is not required that you always agree, only that you respect your differences. Above and through it all, may you always *care* for one another."

Jessie then paid tribute. "When you are away from one another, let your heart be assured of the soul mate's undying



affection. Let the waiting time be to whet the appetite for the taste of your lover's kiss."

Cybelles joined in. "May your friendship rob sorrow of its suffering. May your days be filled with laughter, your nights with contented sighs. And may your life together be forever."

Then Lanon offered, "May you each accomplish that which your heart finds to do, and if you should fall short of your goal today, may you comfort one another in the knowledge that you will be given a new opportunity tomorrow."

Audley wished for her friends, "May you always have the fullness as well as the promise, and may you never fear love, for love - and therefore life - are eternal."

It was Doc Will who said, "You may kiss the bride." As Brad and Sylvia embraced, Flora and Angus lit up the air with phosphorescent sparks.

There was no doubt in the minds of Audley and Lanon or in the hearts of Jessie and Cybelles that the words which united Brad and Sylvia extended to them as well. Ellen and Oscar, both aglow, led the bride and groom, their attendants and the throng of celebrants into the dining rooms where a union feast awaited.

THE FEST OF FRUITION was underway. After congratulations and champagne toasts, and while plates were being heaped with plenty, Doc Will stood back and surveyed all that he saw, and he was glad to have followed Angus' advice. He saw Sylvia renewed. He saw Brad fulfilled in love at last. He saw his daughter rarified by Lanon's devotion. Replete with all this joy surrounding him, he knew the time had come.

He approached Lanon and Audley, their hands filled with trays of food and drinks, as they crossed the room to the elevator.

"Hi, Dad," she smiled. "Wasn't it just perfect?"

"Absolutely," he agreed, beaming at her. He caught Lanon's eye. "A perfect end to a perfect day, wouldn't you say, Lanon?"

Lanon fully understood Doc Will's implication. "Yes, sir.



Thank you, Dr. Blackstone."

"You two going up to stargaze?"

"Dad," she blushed, none the wiser.

Lanon answered. "We thought we'd go up and enjoy the view. Get some fresh air."

"A candle light dinner, so to speak," Doc agreed.

"Want to join us?" she asked.

"I was thinking I'd turn in."

"But Dad, it's still early!" Audley objected.

"For you young ones, it is, but I think I'm ready to get some rest. Audley? You got a kiss for your old dad?"

"Of course." Their lips touched. "Don't worry about me, Daddy. I won't stay up too late."

He put his hand on Lanon's shoulder. "Thank you, son."

Lanon simply said, "Good night, sir."

Dr. Blackstone pushed the elevator button for them. "You two enjoy yourselves. Good night."

He waved to them, then to the life he had lived here with the Zooids. By the time Doc Will figured out how to fasten himself into the magnetic tram and set it in motion, the stars were bright. The full moon cast a mystic light upon the silent sand. Behind him the lights and laughter of Gateway faded and before him the shadow of the Portal appeared, a pristine gazebo on a distant dune.

He felt removed, disassociated, detached. The feeling had come over him as he was listening to the voices of the lovers in the Union ceremony, for he, like Angus and Flora, was renewing his vows to Sarah, and now it was time for them to be together.

At the Portal, Doc Will opened the capsule and stood on the threshold, astounded by its size. The design was misleading. It was immense! By the light of the moon, he stepped into the hall. Eight elegant supporting pillars lifted his eye to the glass-domed rooftop, revealing the star-strewn heavens. The sound of his footsteps were swallowed up in the vastness, giving way to the subtle warble of birds and the gentle trickle of water in the fountains.



"Wilhelm?" It was Angus, emerging with Flora from the shadows.

"Yes, Angus, Flora." He felt transfixed as they approached and stood beside him. "I'm glad you're here."

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Angus asked in his hoarse whisper.

"I'm sure," he averred. "How does it work?"

Angus and Flora stood on either side of him and helped him up the stairs to the platform. Again, his eyes were drawn upward. In an instant a star appeared. The light, dim at first, quickly grew in intensity until its light became brilliant. It grew brighter until it cast a beam of light into the center of the dais. As Doc watched in stupefaction, it crystallized and shattered, revealing the full figure of a woman, a goddess, in flamboyant array.

She wore a skirt of dazzling royal purple; her shirt was woven gold. Around her waist, she wore scarves of chartreuse and turquoise. Pounds of ornaments set with precious gems dangled from her wrists, her neck, her ankles, her waist and her ears. Her hair, long and curly and black as pitch, flared like a frame from her pale, beautiful face.

Flora approached at the sight of her. "Verbena!" she said, embracing her. "What are you doing here?"

The goddess flashed her eyes and her bracelets. "You are such a naughty girl!" Verbena said, enveloping Flora in a shroud of love, her voice coming from another dimension. "You told Our Mother you'd be right back and look at you! You've been gone for ages! Angus, is that you?" She turned her face to receive his kiss. "You've been having fun again, haven't you, dear boy?"

"Of course," he murmured.

Verbena's flashing eyes took in the good doctor. "Who is this child?"

Someone said, "Doc Will."

"I have come for you!" She extended her hand to him but he hesitated. "Are you ready to come with me?"



This was not at all what Doc had expected! Somewhere he had the idea that trumpets would blare and angels would sing. He had had visions of chariots of fire, but not an overdressed femme fatale with come-hither glances!

“Come!” Verbena insisted. “I will take you to Sarah!”

He looked at Angus then at Flora. “Tell Jessie I’ll miss him.” He then reached out and took Verbena’s hand. In that instant the light intensified and enveloped the two of them completely. There was a powerful surge, more like a vacuum cleaner than an explosion, then the loud, clear chirp of a bird, and it was done.

The strange thing for Audley was that, having made the awesome commitment, serenity washed over her. Instead of feeling anxious about loving Lanon, she felt the luxury of warmth and peace pervade the space between the two of them, lying unceremoniously in lawn chairs on the rooftop deck of the obelisk, watching the stars come out.

Emboldened by her receptivity, Lanon said, “I now know why humans have emotions.”

She smiled. “Oh? Why is it that we have emotions?”

“Experience actualizes! It is not enough just to know something. I mean, what value would it have for me to come here, look the place over, report my observations, then watch the Portal be built and the channel open, and not feel any of it? Life must be felt!” He was passionate about this realization. “And the full range of experiential living goes all the way from the recognition that something needs to be done, to assessing the challenges involved in doing it. It gives us a chance to master our struggles and then celebrate the victory of accomplishment.”

“It sounds pretty academic to me,” she said, resting her head on his shoulder.

“It is academic, in theory, but it’s *actual* in practice. Being human means to persevere with your dreams while accepting your limitations. Then, by applying our will intelligently, we can be victorious over great odds, and that brings a kind of rightful pride



that is very satisfying.”

“Yeah,” she purred. “I know the feeling.”

“I’ve been *feeling* it, too, lately,” he confessed. “I think I’ve learned how to see life from a human perspective.”

“I’m sure it will help you understand humanity better,” she affirmed.

“It also helps me understand why we couldn’t ... why you wouldn’t ... why we had to wait.”

She nuzzled into him and he held her close as the night sky, lit with a million stars, carried them uneventfully farther and farther out into space until their eyes were drawn to an especially brilliant beam of light toward the northwest. Slowly Lanon sat up, watching as the beam pierced through the darkness and lit up the gazebo in the near distance.

“Whoa!” Audley said, also rising. “What is that?”

“That’s the Portal,” he said, on his feet.

Suddenly she was cold and anxious. “It’s finished?”

He nodded. Within seconds the brilliant beam of light contracted into a single vibrant thread that connected Urth and sky.

She stood up. “What’s going on?” she demanded.

As the light went out, her keen sense perception came through with frightening clarity.

“Where’s Dad?” Lanon inclined his head towards the Portal but kept silent. They both watched intently as the light renewed and withdrew from the desert like a comet in reverse. His fingers shot to his brow while she demanded, “Lanon! What was that?” Hysteria was in her voice. “Tell me!” She pulled his fingers from his face and clutched them, seeing his eyes joyous, celebrant.

“It was accomplished.”

“What was?”

“Your father’s terrestrial escape.”

“Oh, my God.” She dropped his fingers; they burned her. She backed away from him. “What have you done?”

He was confused by her reaction. “It was a success !” He



stepped toward her but she recoiled.

"Don't touch me!" She stepped back. "Don't even *look* at me!" Her face contorted by pain and confusion, she screamed, "You murdered him! You came here to take him away!"

"No, Audley, I didn't!"

"Yes, you did!" Her eyes glazed like a mad woman. "Like a thief in the night you came here and stole him from me. Why? He was healthy! He was happy!"

Lanon reached for her. "Audley, your father wanted to go!" He reasoned, "He is the one who asked permission to be the first to go!"

"You *ghoul*," she snarled. "He left on the channel you came here to open up." She sneered her hatred toward him. "He'd still be here if it weren't for you."

Lanon had never seen fury. He responded, "Audley, don't be upset. The transmission as a success! Doc Will --"

"I'm *not* upset!" she spewed. "I'm *furious*! I'm *livid*! I'm *beside myself*!"

"But," he said helplessly, "this is a celebration!"

"For *you*, maybe, but for *me* it's a travesty! A cruel and heinous *execution*!" She started for the elevator.

He went after her. "Audley, wait!"

She turned on him. "Get away from me." Her voice was cold. "Thanks to you, Lanon Zenton, my father is dead! I never want to see you again!"

SHE WEPT AND RAGED. What a fool she had been! She had been vulnerable! To her, it was a betrayal, a conspiracy. Even Angus was a co-conspirator. The Zooids, who supposedly had no secrets, had arranged it all behind her back! Jessie had sent her off on a wild goose chase so she wouldn't know what was going on. Flora and Cybelle had brainwashed her with romantic notions and Lanon had blinded her with false promises of love. There was nowhere to turn. Her father was gone. Sylvia was now a Zooid.



Brad, too. Everyone was in on it. What a fool she had been!

In her room, smashing flower petals, she railed and packed her suitcases and cried. "Damn! Damn! Damn!" As the Celebration of Fruition proceeded into the wee hours of the morning, Audley rode the Transport Line to Los Angeles and took a taxicab home to her studio in Malibu.

SOMETHING HAD CHANGED while she was away. Even after Eugene and his pals vacated, and she had put everything back the way it was, something was different. She couldn't put her finger on it. The sheets on the king-sized bed were the same, and she still slept in one small corner. The upholstered chairs still overlooked the room below and the beach beyond. Brad's photo, the music, the liquor cabinet and the taste of Galliano were all the same but, like an old friend you haven't seen for many years, there was an experiential chasm between them.

Even so, it was here that Audley licked her wounds in silence and in solitude, going through the motions of a life. It was not until November, when her calendar read "Thanksgiving Day," that she answered the phone to hear Jessie's voice on the line.

"Hello, Audley," he said. "This is Jessie." When she didn't speak he asked, "How are you?"

She was cold toward him. He was part of the conspiracy. "I'm fine," she lied. "What do you want?"

There was a long pause before he met her where she was. "I was wondering about the progress of the work you contracted to do for us. Have you finished?"

She sat down. "No. They aren't finished." She had tablets full of notes in her luggage still untouched.

"What are your plans now?" he asked.

She had no plans.

"You are welcome to come back here, Audley."

Her eyes filled with tears. "There's no place for me there, Jessie. My assignment with the JCP is over."



"I see," he said at last. "Well, if you should ever change your mind."

She heard herself say, "Tell Lanon I said good-bye."

"I would tell him if I could, Audley, but he's gone."

What little strength she had left deserted her. "Did he go back to Zenton?"

"I don't really know. He, Angus and Flora, Cybelle. They all left."

Across the miles, she sensed Jessie's own private grief. "Their assignments were over, too?"

"Yes."

"Were they all a success?"

"Yes," he averred.

If they were all such a success, she wondered, why was it all so sad?

"We could use you here, Audley, if you want to come back."

Tears rolled down her face. "No," she said, letting the phone slip back into the cradle. "Thank you." She had already given the JCP everything she ever had.

Several days later she received a check in the mail, from the Jural Colony Project, paying her generously for her time, even though the work was incomplete. She wasn't proud of her inability to fulfil her own assignment, but with the check, she arranged to have the laundry room completed. While the workers worked on the project, Audley grieved. She drank and cried and refused to answer the phone when it rang, so it finally stopped ringing.

The world outside was now a place for her to hide, a dark cave of unreality where she could indulge her feelings of isolation and uselessness, but she could not look at the sofa without thinking of Lanon asleep there. She could not look at the bathtub without seeing Lanon immersed in its bubbles. She could not look at the view without hearing his whistle of appreciation.

She could not watch the television; it held too much violence. She could not keep up with world events; people were



killing each other over natural resources and ancient religious differences. Everywhere, people were maiming themselves and each other on highways in drunken attempts to escape the unreality of life and the imperfections of themselves and each other.

She could no longer read the newspaper. It was filled with stories about mothers killing their own children, fathers deserting the responsibilities of their own families, teachers wanting money to teach more lies, churches wanting money to instill more fears, politicians unable to speak the truth and impotent to do anything about anything. Even the completed laundry room gave her no sense of satisfaction.

Christmas came and went. She closed her eyes to the lights and her ears to the caroling. She bought no gifts, weeping over the fact that she could not give gifts to her father. In the back of her mind, she knew Sylvia and Brad would be celebrating Winter Fest, and she cried over the fact that she would not be exchanging gifts with either of them.

New Year's Eve came and went. Her resolve was to try to live, to try to find something to live for. Her whole life, it seemed, had led up to being in love with Lanon and on the eve of the Union, it was over. He had not only abandoned her love, he had taken her father with him. He had taken everything! Love had given and taken everything, and left her alone.

She knew that if she didn't do something she would die. She would succumb to alcoholism or starve to death. She called Martha, her surrogate mother, and accepted Martha's invitation to come and stay for awhile.

It was not an easy pilgrimage to make. She missed her father, and seeing the house where she was born and raised, seeing his study and his desk and the leather sofa where he once napped and read, seeing the lab, remembering Lanon, and having to recognize her own role in bringing the two together was painful.

Martha fed her, gave her warm milk, nurtured her through the worst parts. One day she confessed to Martha that her father



had told her he was planning to go.

"He told me, too, in his own way," Martha said. "I knew when he left with Lanon that I wouldn't see him again for a long time, but when I started getting instructions from him, I knew for sure he was getting ready to leave."

"What instructions?"

"Oh, stuff about his Last Will & Testament, his books," she said. "Everything was spelled out, what to do." She added, "He gave me the house, you know."

She nodded. "He said he was going to. It's only right. I don't need it."

"I don't need it either. I'm going to sell it."

"Fine." Audley's eyes craned to see the nooks and cupboards as if for the first and last time. "Where'll you go?"

"With my son and daughter-in-law in Austin."

"That makes sense." It was nice that something made sense, but now even Martha would be gone.

"I'll have a pension," Martha said. "Your father provided well for me, so I'm going to give the money from the sale of the house to the Zooids." The words were like a splash of cold water to Audley. She hadn't allowed herself to think of them for a long time. Martha consoled, "You'll be alright with the money from the sale of his book."

"Yeah," she said. "I'll be alright." She had forgotten about the book! She had promised her father she would oversee its publication. She had been carrying it around with her in her luggage, along with the notes from the JCP assignment, knowing that one day she would have to look at it. Venturing out of the kitchen and up to her room, the room in which she was born, she opened the suitcase. Doc Will's book, not surprisingly, had been renamed to "Home Station."

She spent the long winter days with Martha, going through her father's things, preparing for the estate sale. At night she read from his book. Over time, she began to see her father's life and death



from a new perspective. Poring over old photos of Wilhelm and Sarah, she saw that they had been very much in love. He must have missed her very much, all those years, never remarrying. He had devoted his life to his work, biding time until they could be reunited.

As the days passed into weeks, Jessie crept into her consciousness more than once, as he had also lost someone dear to him, his soul mate, Cybelle. With the success of the Zooid mission, it seemed, their cosmic support system had been taken away. She wondered if she would ever see Angus again, then had to smile when she realized that she had never really 'seen' him in the first place!

By the end of February, the house was ready for sale. The carpets and draperies had been cleaned, the floors buffed to a high sheen, the attic emptied of memorabilia. Doc's library had been packed up and the books dispersed according to his instructions, as were the contents of his laboratory. His patients' notes were archived, except for Lanon's; those she tucked away in her private things, reflecting that even now, through it all, she was still protecting him.

On the day before the estate sale, a gusty day in March, she found herself walking down the steps to the beach. With her childhood packed up and shipped away, she knew it was not her studio, nor the coastline, nor the season that had changed. It was she who had changed, and it was not just because of Lanon, it was also because of her experiences with the Zooids. The reason life was not real for her anymore was because all the reality she had ever known had happened to her in Guadix and in the Colonies.

She recalled the dignity with which Victoria Redbow had told the story of the life and death of her youngest son, Amadon, and regretted that she had not been able to do the same for her father. She remembered the red barns and white fences and happy faces of Elliot and Anna Sproul at Breadbasket, the smell of ensilage and the sound of crickets, and regretted that part of her was no longer tied to this urth. She remembered Findlay and his daily bicycle ride over the Pennsylvania hills of Penn State Reserve, and his teachings on



prisons of the mind, and she regretted her prison of self.

Listening to the waves lap upon the shore, she remembered the quiet devotion of Dierdre. She remembered the look of gratitude in Brad's eyes when he saw Sylvia openly displaying her ring, and Doc Will's toast to the marriage of Brad, who was like his son, and Sylvia, who was like his daughter. She remembered Angus, how he made her laugh, and took away her fears. She remembered the words of Cybelle and Flora, and finally she remembered Lanon.

She dropped to her knees in the sand and rocked back and forth to the rhythm of the capping waves, remembering all of him, the way his voice caressed her ears, the way her skin tingled where he touched her. She remembered him when he was brand new, his laser beam eyes, his questions, and his childlike wonder at this primitive planet. She remembered how he had trusted her, how he had wanted her. She remembered their morning walk in the mystical prism of Gateway and the wonder of his kiss.

She removed her lapis necklace and buried it in the sand along with all her dreams and illusions. She wept. How could she live without him? What life was there for her now? Perhaps it was herself answering her own cries, but she seemed to hear Lanon's voice. It said, "May you each accomplish that which your heart finds to do, and if you should fall short of your goal today, may you comfort one another in the knowledge that you will be given a new opportunity tomorrow."

There was only one thing she *could* do.

DR. BLACKSTONE'S PUBLISHER had been waiting for the book; it would provide her with an income for a long time to come. Her Malibu studio apartment was easy to sell; Eugene had always coveted it. Compared to the lifetime collection of her father, her possessions were few and easy to sell, donate or destroy. She gave her MG to Red Fingernails. She even left her memories behind.

With a small satchel of personal things, she placed her hand on the metal plate and punched in her destination. As soon as the



doors closed and she was buckled into her seat, she felt a long-absent sense of anticipation.

This was not just a reporting assignment, although she had all her notes and now finished drafts in her briefcase. This was not just a lark, an experiential adventure. This was a commitment. Audley Claudine Blackstone had committed herself to something besides Audley. Something significant. If she had to wait for an eternity for the taste of her lover's kiss, she would do something useful while she waited.

She turned on her TASC to look for the new program that Brad had installed, the one that Lanon had helped bring about. She identified it and brought up the screen to access "Monitor." This seemed to be a slower program than the others. She was about to become impatient when suddenly the air crackled with static electricity and the image of an unknown entity appeared on the screen. It was neither male nor female. "Greetings," it said.

"Hello," Audley replied, not knowing what to expect.

"Ask questions," it said.

"Are you Monitor?"

"Yes," it responded.

"How does this work?" The program did not come with instructions.

"Ask questions."

What should she ask? she wondered. Will Jessie be glad to see me? Will Sylvia be too busy to spend time with me now? Will I ever see Lanon again? She turned the machine off. What, indeed, was she to ask. What did she need to know? She turned the machine on, again cued into Monitor.

"Greetings," the voice said.

"My Dad. Dr. Wilhelm Blackstone. Is he well?"

"He is well," the Monitor replied and Audley's eyes filled with happy tears.

"Has he seen Sarah, my mother?"

"They are together. They send you their love."



A little sob escaped her before she dared to ask, "And Lanon? How is he?"

"Lanon is well."

She did not dare ask about him further. Instead, she went back to the academics. "Am I doing the right thing by joining the Jural Colony Project?"

"It matters little what you join. It is the spirit in which you join that makes a difference."

"Do I have the right spirit?"

"We find no objection to it."

Who is "we" she wondered, but turned the machine off. How did one talk to something so abstract? She remembered the first time she met Angus. "Here you are face to face with 5,000 years of experience," he had once said, "and all you can think of are your emotional involvements." Was the Monitor so different? She turned on the machine.

"Greetings," it said.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am your personal monitor."

"Do you have a name?"

"No. I am your monitor."

"Does that mean that you belong to me?"

"No," it replied. "I belong to me. I am attached to you. Exclusively."

"And we've never had a conversation before?"

"If you think about it, you will remember having spoken with me before, many times."

She had thought she was talking to herself. "We've never spoken so directly, though," she insisted.

"We have never spoken so mechanically. Our communication has *always* been direct."

"I see. Where do you come from?"

"I come from where you have not yet been, from where you have decided to go."



“And where is that?”

“Forward.”

Audley leaned back in her seat and felt the magnitude of what this Monitor might be able to tell her if she only had the wisdom to ask the right questions.

“Will we be able to talk again?”

“You have a TASC,” the Monitor said.

“I have a machine,” Audley clarified. “You tell me if I have a task.”

“Is that a question?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, you have a task. I will help you.”

“How?”

“Ask questions.”

She could not formulate a question and yet she could not bring herself to cut off the contact. The connection remained viable between them until she felt the Transport Line slow and stop at the landing of Gateway. There the TASC disconnected automatically.

Jessie met her at the platform. They didn't speak at once, but went into each other's arms and held each other, out of memory, out of affection, out of mutual experience.

“It's good to have you back, Audley,” he said, leading the way upstairs. “Are you well?”

“I am well,” she acknowledged. “And you?”

“I'm fine.” He didn't sound fine to Audley, merely well enough.

“What have I missed?” she asked, feasting her eyes on the bubble and the network that was Gateway. They crossed the deck and entered the calm of his apartment. “Have you heard from ... the others?” She slid into one of the wingbacks.

He shook his head. “Angus ventured off to another fledgling planet to investigate psychism, but he promised he would be back.”

“And Flora?”

Jessie sat across from her. “Flora left, too. Her sister



Verbena was having a graduation of some sort and Flora wanted to attend that before she went on to her next gathering mission." He did not mention Cybelle or Lanon. "But what about you, Audley? What have you been doing with yourself?"

She shrugged. "Mourning," she said simply. "For Dad and Lanon and everything I've thrown away in my life that I didn't cherish while I had it."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Audley," he said kindly. "It's part of the human condition."

Something in what he said caused her to ask, "And what happened with Cybelle? Have you heard from her? Will she be back?"

Jessie placed his long fingers under his chin in that familiar pose. "It doesn't matter."

She allowed her reaction. "How can you say it doesn't matter, Jessie? You know damned well it matters! How can you sit there and be so transcendental? Can't you admit to being human? To having feelings?"

As soon as he looked at her, she felt guilty for her outburst. It was all too apparent that he *did* have feelings but, like the Monitor, Jessie wasn't focusing on his emotional involvements.

"I'm sorry, Jessie. I didn't mean to say that."

"I know," he smiled. "We all say some strange things when we aren't looking."

She grinned. "I wasn't seeing very clearly."

"Why don't you?" he suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"Why don't you see clearly? You've never taken a good look at the Portal."

"No, I haven't," she admitted.

"Go ahead," he urged. "We'll talk when you get back."

"You mean now?" She felt like granite.

He nodded. "Now."



THE CAPSULE CLOSED over her head and moved her gently into the clear, spacious desert. It was a reflective sojourn for Audley Claudine, something she needed to do. She had left Gateway in such anger, in such an immature, emotional frenzy. Since then she had made peace with herself, at last, but now the Portal represented a way she might make peace with others -- with her father, with Lanon.

Her eyes welled up with tears at the thought of him. She had been so unfair to him in her distress. She had forgiven herself for her childishness, but she needed to ask Lanon's forgiveness for her anger, her human frailty. Would he be able to understand? Was he human enough then or now to know what she had been through? She had no way of knowing, but she had to ask.

The Portal, a delicate, romantic gazebo from a distance, loomed large before her as the capsule rose up at the last dune. It was aglow with an energy that was otherworldly. It was blue, sort of, and it glittered like sunlight on a mountain stream.

The capsule slowed to a stop. This was no place to come upon in a hurry. How many people, she wondered, had made their terrestrial escape here since her father had made the virgin journey through the Portal from this world to the next? And how fraught with strange and fearsome feelings were they? How had her father felt when he approached this imposing yet sublime temple?

He had said he was ready. He had tried to tell her he wanted to go. He had tried to get her to understand and to support what he was doing, but she couldn't deal with it. It called up too many fears, too many memories of untimely departures. Only after these many months of reflection was she able to appreciate that he, too, had a soul mate and was tired of living without her. Only when she was able to see beyond her own needs was she able to see that her father's love for her mother was no less than her own love for Lanon. Only now was she able to release him, to go on. How she wished she had been able to be there for her father! If she had to do it again, she would have given her blessing to his departure, she



would have walked with him to the door.

She stepped out onto the cool parapet of the Portal. It was more than large. It was immense! The light of the sun poured onto the elevated platform, which was a pedestal, not a funeral pyre. On the periphery were Flora's exquisite botanical gardens and Cybelle's aviaries. The marble benches near the fountains were cushioned and inviting. She slipped off her shoes at the entrance and made her way across the mighty floor.

The birds, minding their own business of making music, sounded close yet far away. In this place of mixed feelings, she tuned in to the sounds of the birds. Their song was the easiest thing on which to focus. As she heard them, she savored their simplicity, their purity, recognizing how we sometimes make life too complicated, too busy with emotions and conflicts.

The silence of the temple, so large, so generated to focus inward and upward, might have been overwhelming but for the gentle music of the birds, under which could be heard the trickle of the fountains. She sat on one of the benches with her back to the water and willed herself to feel the magnificence of the structure which took her father and which also took Lanon.

The energy of the Portal was intense. Its power was intimidating. Her eyes lingered on the gardens once more before she allowed her vision to lift to the sky. More than see, she could *feel* see the energy of the heavens swooping and swirling. She became ensnared in the incredible surge of life not of this world. Her surroundings fell away.

She lost herself and was lifted, no longer human, no longer mortal, no longer tied to the world of flesh and blood, of mind and matter, but a part of the universe, one with the energy of the cosmos, welcomed, accepted, validated. Her heart reached out and her soul stretched up, being born of the Spirit ripping through her like a spasm of joy.

An eternity later she could feel the living water of the fountain in her and on her face and she knew she was crying, but it



was not the sad cry she'd had for many months. This was a happy cry, a baptism. Something deep inside her celebrated a coming home. The birds trilled and her soul, too, was singing. In another instant, she could feel the bench beneath her, and her bare feet on the cool, smooth floor.

Reluctant to open her eyes, she hung suspended. She was not afraid to face life. She was ready to embrace her mortality, to do the work that would be required of her, to bring other souls to this Portal -- for it was clear that *this* would be her task. How could anyone not want *everyone* to feel this feeling, this oneness with everything? How could there be any fulfillment for humanity as a whole without this individual connection with infinity, this personal relationship with divinity?

It was all so exquisite, so timeless, so sublime.

Something cool touched her neck. Reaching up to find out what it was, her fingers came to rest on the large blue bead of her lapis lazuli necklace. How could this be? She had buried the necklace in the sand, along with all her illusions, and yet now it lay again on her neck like armor.

She opened her eyes to see Lanon, as through a veil, standing before her. She shut her eyes quickly, feeling her heart pounding in her throat. Was Lanon simply a hallucination? Was it *all* just an illusion?

With her eyes closed now, recognizing his presence, she felt him kneel in front of her, to be equal with her.

"Lanon," she whispered. She opened her eyes and reached out to touch him, to make certain he was real, but he put his finger on her lips.

"Audley," he said quietly, confirming his presence. "I have watched you. I have seen you grow in understanding, and I have seen you come to accept your destiny." She drank in his words. "I have watched you from Zenton and I have felt what you have felt. As close as we were before, I did not really know you until I felt you suffer. It is not in me to allow you to suffer."



"Be with me," she said, not realizing she was forming words, not anxious about his response, knowing their love was forever.

"Until the end of time."

Then the fountain vanished and the birds were silenced. There were only the soul mates, wrapped in the soundest, most profound, mortal embrace.



## EPILOGUE

The magnetic capsule enclosed them.

Audley nestled into Lanon and felt the quiet thrill that always came to her when she was near him.

"It'll be good to see Jessie again," he said, drawing her even closer. "Is he well?"

"Yes, but he misses Cybelle."

"He'll see her again. Soul mates are *always* reunited."

She rested her head on his shoulder and let fall the hot tears of joy.

"Hey!" he said, "You're getting me all wet!"

"Hey!" she said, sitting up, laughing and crying at once. "So what?"

BACK AT GATEWAY, the receiving station secured the capsule. When they stepped onto the landing, Jessie was there to greet them. "God, Lanon, it's good to see you!" he said, hugging him. "It seems like you've been gone a long time! So much has happened."

The triad ascended to the deck where Sylvia and Brad met them. The women squealed and the men all slapped each other on the back, grinning and hugging, until the initial emotional outburst subsided, then they all at once focused on the newest member of the JCP.

"How's the baby?" Lanon asked.

"He is alive and well!" she announced proudly, taking Lanon's hand and directing it to where the baby was kicking.

"He sure is!" Lanon agreed, having felt the thump.



“Are you sure he’s a he?” Audley asked.

Brad nodded. “His name is Benjamin Wilhelm Blackstone Spencer Brothers,” he said with pride, “but all his friends call him Ben.”

“And what do they call *you* these days, Brad?” Audley asked, pulling on a lock of his hair. “A hippie?” It had grown so long, it spilled onto his shoulders.

“A dramatist!” Brad countered. “What do you think? You like it?”

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Audley wondered aloud.

“Brad is Theater Director at a JCP Artist’s Colony,” Sylvia explained. “You must attend his next production!”

“I should say we must!” Audley agreed.

Jessie tore himself loose. “You’ll have to excuse me, folks. You’re welcome to come in and visit,” he said, heading for his apartment, “but I’m in the middle of something.”

“No, thanks, Jessie,” Brad said, waving him away. “You go ahead; we’ve gotta get going, too. But when we heard you were back, Audley, we wanted to see you. And it sure is great to see you again, Lanon. Welcome home.”

As the men shook hands, Audley hugged Brad, then Sylvia and the baby, then hugged herself in delight, then hugged Lanon.

“Call me on your TASC, Aud,” Sylvia said, taking Brad’s hand. “We’ll have a good long girl talk.”

When their friends disappeared into the elevator, Audley and Lanon turned to follow Jessie into his apartment. They found him in his bedroom, a suitcase open on the king-sized bed, selecting jump suits of the most regal colors.

Lanon asked, “Where’re you going?”

He beamed when he announced, “Switzerland!”

Audley couldn’t help but notice how Jessie’s attitude had changed since this morning. Whereas he had been somber, he was now jubilant.

“Looks like you’ll be gone for awhile,” Audley said.



“For awhile, yeah. It’s time to get the International School of Zooids up and running. We’ve got our work cut out for us!” he expanded, filling his suitcase. “Since we caught the attention of intelligent life in the universe, we get plenty of free advice about getting this planet squared away, but it’s us humans who have to do the work! New people have to be motivated, selected, trained and assigned!”

“You’re leaving Andrew in charge?” she pursued.

“No, actually, thanks for asking.” He snapped the suitcase shut. “You and Lanon will be taking over for me.” “What?” they both said in unison.

“That’s right.” He reached for his over-nighter and started packing it with shaving gear and toiletries. “The two of you are now co-administrators of the continental Jural Colony Project.”

“Have you talked to the Board about this?” Lanon inquired. “What do they say about it?”

“The Board is individually and collectively tuned in to their own Monitors and couldn’t be more pleased with all these latest developments. I tell you, you won’t *believe* the strides we’ve made since you’ve been gone!”

He zipped the over-nighter shut and Audley took it, asking, “Like what?”

Lanon picked up Jessie’s suitcase and they both followed him into the office.

Then, as Jessie packed his valise, he explained, “Well, for one thing, Zenton has assigned a Probation Auditor to Penn State Reserve. Since then, Phillip reports that PSR has exceeded its own expectations. Three of the guests have applied to go through the Portal, inspiring a whole new course of study in metaphysics.”

“That’s one way to get out of jail!” Audley laughed.

“There are two new Midway Colonies in operation, with two more under construction to accommodate the number of anticipated grads in the next few years.” He turned to Audley. “I tell you this especially because Sylvia is one of our most prodigious workers. She



has become a master gardener and has been able to work miracles of development with the women and children of Midway through the simple act of planting seeds."

"I don't recall Sylvia having such a green thumb," Audley observed.

Lanon interjected, "Seems to me it was Sylvia who saved the life of your plants on more than one occasion."

"Oh, yeah, my coleus. So true," she admitted. "What else?"

"Well, before Brad was smitten with Shakespeare, he taught Oscar how to modify all the TASCs throughout the colonies, so everybody is getting to know their personal Monitor, and that has given new impetus to many of the Zooid projects that we have underway. Plus, Brad saved the IOF from extinction by introducing the manufacture of the viso-phone. They are being mass produced and introduced by major telephone companies on the outside."

"Did I hear you say Oscar is still around?" Lanon asked.

Jessie nodded, giving his desk a last minute check. "Oscar is a new person. He and Ellen announced their intent to Unite almost from the start; they are devoted to each other. While they have been attending Marriage School, both of them have been working with Samuel in Sales and Resources. Incidentally, Brad has been working with celestial artisans to elevate the level of plays and pageantry, and they have been very entertaining!" He packed his portable TASC into the side pocket of his suitcase and checked his watch.

"Evidently, then, Supernal visitors are still coming around," Audley noted.

Jessie led his entourage with the luggage into the livingroom and fixed them all a tall glass of something cool and refreshing. "Not a day goes by that we don't have a new contact. The universe seems to be delighted with the work the Zooids are doing. They help us in ways we would never have dreamed."

"The Board members are all taking this in stride?" Lanon asked, amused.



"Oh, Thomas gets his dander up sometimes, but he's just naturally contrary. He is having as much fun as the rest of them."

"Them', Jessie?" Audley probed. "Aren't you having fun?"

As she asked, Lanon peered at a spot in the distance, watching as it approached.

"Of course I am!" he grinned. "It just took some getting used to. I had to go through some personal adjustments when I saw that I wasn't going to be in control of everything all the time. But once it all started happening, once I realized I had no choice but to let it happen, it has been one incredible adventure after the other." His eyes sought the horizon.

"Any news from Angus?" Lanon asked, watching the spot in the distance distinguish itself as a ship. "I've missed him." Audley followed Lanon's gaze and saw it coming.

"He's been back twice since he left in Zenith. And Flora plans to return in Ascent when the wildflowers are in bloom." The ship set down in the sand immediately outside of Gateway.

"It would appear as though your flight is ready," Lanon said with a grin.

Jessie quickly grabbed up his luggage. "I'd stay and visit longer," he said, "but ... duty calls!" The smile on his face was a sight to behold. "Audley, the instructions are in the TASC. And Lanon, you'll know what to do."

The hatch of the ship opened and a small metal ladder extended to the ground.

"Bye," Audley said, "Thanks for everything."

Lanon embraced his friend, "Thanks for the life!"

As Jessie disappeared into the elevator, Audley and Lanon watched as Cybelle stepped out of the ship and descended the ladder onto the sand. In a moment, they saw Jessie stride forward, drop his suitcase and take Cybelle into his arms. He swung her around until they were both enveloped in the cape of her beautiful copper-colored hair. In another moment, they were inside the ship and it was hurtling through the universe to the site of the future International



School of Zooids, in Switzerland.

For a long time then, Audley and Lanon stood side by side looking out at the planet of their mutual assignment. Together they would face their task of seeing old become new, of bridging this world to the next.

Shadows deepened, sunset hovered, and a lone star appeared. As the psychedelic rain of eventide came upon them, Lanon turned to Audley. Assured of her full attention, he asked, "Now can we make love?"

She opened to him, the whole woman. "Yes," she smiled. "Now we can make love."

Kissing her, he lifted her up, then carried her in, and laid her in the center of the king-sized bed.

The End



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The seed for this work was planted in the mind of **Karen Elaine Rice** in Makiki Heights, Oahu, Hawaii, in 1969. Within two years, its premise began to emerge.

**Mrs. Alan F. Smith** cultivated the concept in Southern California, through Nevada and into New Mexico where the saga developed and grew, sometimes requiring massive amounts of fertilizer to instill growth, sometimes requiring serious pruning to trim away useless branches.

Twenty years later, **Ms. Smith's** creative seed attained full manuscript status.

Over the next decade, from Southeastern Idaho to Western Pennsylvania, from the Idaho Panhandle to Washington State, **Miss O'Dell's** ideas, ideals and perceptions were taken, shaken, weighed, tested and corrected until finally ... in 2002 ... both the author and her creation were deemed ready for publication.

**Karen O'Dell Bowen** lives with her husband, Angus, in the Great Southwest.

The supernals know her as "**Gerdean**".



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