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V.C. ANDREWS

GODS OF
GREEN MOUNTAIN

Gods of Green Mountain
V.C. Andrews

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A Message to the Readers

Virginia Cleo Andrews, known to you as V.C. Andrews, died in December 1986. Among the many story ideas, completed manuscripts, and outlines was one of her most favorite, called Gods of Green Mountain. She spoke glowingly of the life-giving messages and outstanding guideposts that people currently living on this planet would find motivating.

Our sister believed so strongly in this manuscript that she elicited our solemn promise that we would endeavor to see that Gods of Green Mountain would be published. It is a tale of a distant world she had dreamed about since she was a little girl. She revealed that often, throughout her lifetime, when she was sleeping, she could feel herself leave her body and fly away to this distant planet with the two suns. For several hours, Virginia would regale us about the birth of this planet, the evolution of the inhabitants from minute plant life to an advanced society. She described the character, the animals, the plants, the landscapes and the colors ranging from monochromatic to multifaceted brilliance. Virginia believed in reincarnation and truly felt that she had been to this planet and was looking forward to returning.

Now thanks to Pocket Books and Simon & Schuster, this original, intriguing odyssey is being published as an eBook. We hope you enjoy this exciting adventure as much as she enjoyed writing it.

Sincerely,

Bill and Gene Andrews

Book One
El Sod-a-Por

Prologue

Once, in a time far removed from ours, in a place in the far reaches of our universe, there was a planet called El Dorraine, which meant “the ideal.”

And so it was, or nearly so. It was the most favored planet under all of the suns; however, this was not always the case. In its faraway dark beginnings, it had been named, and properly so, El Sod-a-Por, meaning the ill-favored one—and so it had been, decidedly.

Eons ago, two giant worlds collided in the black infinity of space, and they shattered into trillions of small pieces. The largest bit of all spun off and was captured between the gravities of two small suns.

Thus it was that El Sod-a-Por came into being. And oh, but it was hot on El Sod-a-Por with the two suns to give it light and warmth! No sooner would one sun set behind the Scarlet Mountains, and the black cooling mantle of night settle down upon that heat ravaged land, when the second sun would rise above the Green Mountain, to chase away the comforting darkness. Into the light and heat again the second sun would bring that poor, beleaguered world.

And oh, but it was cold upon El Sod-a-Por at the top and bottom poles! It was a sphere constantly spinning, blazing hot in the bulging middle; freezing cold at the receding, opposite poles. So perfectly was the world balanced between the two suns, no ray of light or warmth was ever allowed to penetrate into the icy darkness of either pole. Both were places of eternal night.

Only on the narrow borderlands between the two extremities could green life survive, under the Gods of Green Mountain. Even there the sizzling hot or numbing cold would sweep in and shrivel the tender, young growing plants. Nevertheless, somehow through the years, some life did persist despite all the obstacles hurled upon it, and resilient, determined, hardy life it was. When the people came—and eventually they did—it took them billions of years to evolve from stationary rooted plants into ambulatory men. They were short, thick people—sturdy as tree trunks, as obstinate, resilient and tenacious as the plant stock from which they had sprung.

To those harassed people, it seemed that nature’s elements waged a relentless, merciless, perpetual battle to stamp them out. Down into the deep bowels of their earth they were forced to dig to find water, and clever

were the ways in which they devised means to bring it to the surface, and irrigate the parched land. Though it rained often on the borderlands between the too hot and the too cold, it was never a gentle, drizzling, soothing and nourishing rain. Oh, no! Sweet and gentle rain was never to be expected. Torrents of driving water hurled down on their land. A drenching downpour accompanied by swirling winds to rip and tear. And when the rain, the winds, were over, the water disappeared as quickly as it had come. Swallowed up thirstily by the cracks and crevices, seeping down through the many orifices in the hard top crust. Down into the dark inner-earth. There were those, many, who argued that beneath this same hard crust was indeed the place where life would be easier. But the majority dissented.

Thoughts of life in the dark caves, the cold burrows and tunnels, was abhorrent to them, the lovers of light and sun.

Their strange land, dominated by two suns, refrigerated at either end, steaming hot in the middle, created through the play of extreme temperatures, acting one on the other, narrow rims between the two climates, rocky lands of crystals of iridescent and radiant beauty. They didn't notice. The struggle to maintain existence was too backbreaking, muscle aching, mind-fatiguing to appreciate what good they might have seen, or found. Theirs was labor that never ended. Never even lessened, no matter how much was accomplished during the long working hours. They were people of one occupation, one profession, one avocation...to raise food, to plant it, to make an effort at harvesting, to keep alive, to endure. To survive.

That was it.

1

Baka the Untiring

On the very edge of the upper temperature zone, nearer the cold side than the hot, lived the most industrious, the most diligent farmer of them all. He was called Baka. When the citizens of that land became aware of just what type of man Baka was, they called him Baka Valente, meaning Baka the Untiring. And in most ways, Baka was, indeed, untiring.

Baka's farm was the largest and most productive. His herds and flocks of animals the hardiest, and seemingly the cleverest at finding forage, whereas the flocks of others could find little, or sometimes none. Baka's house was also the largest, the finest. It was molded of the soft inner-earth, then after shaping, and after hours of baking in the hot scorching suns, the mud became rock hard. It was then covered with the strong, tough puhlet hides to keep the driving waters from softening and washing the house down into mud again.

A baby puhlet was called a puka. They came into their doomed short existence all rosy pink and bare, and so tiny they could be cupped in a human palm. In seven days they would double in size, and would be covered with a fluffy yellow-green fuzz that was not quite feathers, and not quite hair. As a puka grew older, the fuzz gradually turned into thick, silvery, smoke-blue fur. This was the very color all inhabitants of that planet wore. Fortunately for them, its neutral color went well with their pale citron complexions and fiery red hair and deep purple eyes. Once the pukas reached the smoky fur stage, they matured quickly. As they had to. As all life on El Soda-Por had to.

Baka had need of his large fine home, for he had twelve sons and one daughter. His good wife, Lee-La, was strong enough, and willing enough, to give him thirteen more children, if need be. She knew—Baka knew, all Sod-a-Porians knew—that at any moment the storms could take a child or two or even all. That was the way of it. One day you thought you had it all secure, the next, everything was gone. Every crop had to be shielded from the frying winds. Rows and rows of fires had to be made to protect the crops when the cold came. Be it hot, or be it cold, both extremes knew exactly the most vulnerable time of any seed they planted—and that was when the storms were certain to visit! Though either extremity brought some measure of disaster, of grief and loss, it was as nothing as compared to the times when both hot and cold winds raced in and collided! Then

the air would swirl and twirl, spinning faster and faster, until hundreds of wind funnels touched down on the ground, taking all that was before them. Fields of grain, houses, fences, windshields, storage bins, animals, barns, and families. For those that survived, hiding in the underground caverns, all would have to be started over from the beginning.

Hardly ever did Baka permit himself to think of how many beginnings he had made, of how much he had lost. If he had all the children he had sired, he might have fifty. If he had all the sod houses he had built, maybe a hundred. God knows! He didn't keep records. He ploughed on, planning for today, tomorrow, and maybe there was a time in the future when he could sit down and think of how to devise a way to secure all that was his—make it permanently his.

He looked around at the family his third wife had given him, very proud. Twelve sons still alive. That was a feat in itself. One small daughter was left, Bret-Lee, just as industrious as any of her brothers. Side by side she had worked with her mother since the age of three: cooking, cleaning, spinning, weaving, and sewing the dull gray cloth into clothes. Besides a hundred and one other chores she did willingly and well. For the children of El Sod-a-Por, the carefree easy days of childhood were short indeed.

As successful and admired as he was, Baka had one annoying itch that he just couldn't scratch! That dissatisfaction was his youngest son, Far-Awn the shepherd. While his older brothers toiled endlessly in the fields, or industriously burrowed in the depths of the cavernous inner-earth, making every moment of the day count for something, Far-Awn could be counted on to find a way to shirk his share of the daily chores. At least it seemed to Baka that way, and his elder brothers as well. The boy had absolutely no sense of duty, of obligation and responsibility! That a son of his could be lazy smoldered in Baka's brain like a pot of stew always on the stove. Many were the times when Baka would miss his youngest, and after long searching, he would find Far-Awn in some recessed, isolated place, just lying on his back, idly staring up at the violet-blue sky and the drifting long clouds. Fool!

"What's wrong with you, boy?" Baka railed each time, then thoroughly reprimanded him for being lazy, careless, indifferent, irresponsible—didn't he know there was work to do? Didn't he know everyone had to pull his own weight—there were no freeloaders!

"I was thinking," Far-Awn replied, apparently indifferent to his father's wrath. "Look at those rocks over there... the colors in them... look how it stains the earth ... look at the clothes we wear. Dull gray. Wouldn't it be nice if we could somehow use that color to brighten up our clothes?"

“Idiot!” Baka shouted. “What difference does it make what color our clothes are! They keep us warm when it’s cold, and protect us from the suns! What else is needed of clothing?”

“Nothing, I suppose,” answered Far-Awn, subdued into thinking his notions were foolish. Colored clothes or not, it was still a dreary, hateful place he had been born into. Work, work, work, from morning until night. Grab a quick sleep before another day of work began. Surely there could be something more. There wasn’t even time to look at the glorious day dawns, or sun-downings, not if he would live the way his father and family dictated...

Then he smiled at his father, charmingly apologetic.

“What is it you want me to do?”

To Baka, that smile was the most infuriating thing of all—even more so than Far-Awn’s stupid question! What was there to smile about? Was that all that boy thought about, colors? When everywhere there was work to do, and it didn’t require any thinking—it was there, always—waiting, plain to see without thought, without orders. Knowing how to work was bred into them, like the red hair that grew on their heads ... you accepted it, just as you accepted the color of your skin, green!

He looked again at his son, half-pityingly... for Far-Awn’s skin was a pale creamy color, not even tinged with green... and his hair was strange, red-gold, not brick red like everybody else’s... On another day, he went searching for his youngest, strangest, and most unpredictable son. And as was to be expected, he was again sprawled in the shade, on his back, hands tucked beneath his head. “There’s soap to be made, and grain to be harvested, and hams to be smoked ... yet there you lie, flat on your back,” Baka began with heavy sarcasm. “Am I interrupting some heavy thinking?”

“No, Father. I was dreaming!”

As if that were possible—dreaming with the eyes open! Imagine. Not once in all Baka’s life had he dreamed with his eyes wide open, in daylight. Dreams came seldom to him even in his sleep—except for those blissful few times when he had enough to overeat. But those dreams were terrifying experiences.

Certainly nothing a boy would go searching for, and smile when he found them. Baka said with all the patience he could muster, and he was not by nature a patient man, “Son, I am making an effort to understand you. So, if you are sick, then tell me where it hurts, and I’ll do what I can

to help. But if you are well, and are just lying here resting, so you can ‘think’ while the rest of us break our backs working, including your small sister—then, by the gods, I’ll have the hide from your back!”

Very quickly Far-Awn jumped to his feet.

“That’s it, Father—that’s what I was dreaming about. A way for all of us to live without breaking our backs, working from morning until night, too tired to enjoy ourselves, growing old before our time.”

Dumbfounded, Baka stared at his son. Blasphemy!

What other way was there than work? Oh, he was sick! Sick in the head! Sorrow washed through him. Of course, this explained all the boy’s oddness, the way he sometimes laughed. Nobody laughed—except this fool son of his—and at the most unexpected, embarrassing times, letting the neighbors, complete strangers, hear and see him.

Time and again, Baka and Lee-La had to explain their youngest had a touch of the “sunmadness.”

Those who had heard Far-Awn’s laughter would look away and sadly agree this must be the case. Though in secret, these same people went home and conferred with each other, and usually agreed they never before had seen a case of sun-madness take on this particular and peculiar manifestation. Those who knew Baka and his family well suspected it was much more than just a temporary touch of sunmadness which troubled the brain of young Far-Awn.

Secretly they were pleased that Baka had at least one failure in his crop of superb children. For in truth, everyone was envious of Baka, who was more successful in everything than anyone else. Too successful in the opinion of some. Who else had twelve sons? Not one.

Baka guessed what his friends thought of Far-Awn, for he himself was a thousand times more guilty of the same thoughts. But then, he had a thousand times more evidence to convince himself the boy was more than a little mad. He was crazy! To add the crowning touch to a long list of bewildering idiosyncrasies, belonging only to someone severely afflicted, the darn boy was often heard singing! Far-Awn was just as indifferent as to who heard him sing as he was indifferent as to who was watching and learning of his other quirks! Oh, he was something to bear. A curse to punish him. There was no more reason for singing than there was reason for smiling.

Reaching desperately for hope, Baka reasoned that the boy could be just maddened by the blazing suns. It happened occasionally. And his

brain could be so wind-stirred he didn't realize all of life was a desperate battle. No need to show joy or laughter. The Gods already knew they existed. Far-Awn didn't have to call it to their attention. Sooner or later the Gods of that Green Mountain would hear his laughter, or his singing, and in their jealous envy of a mortal's pleasure, they would take it away. Send down the wind funnels to destroy him—and perhaps everyone and everything else! How many times had he warned his most foolish son of this very thing, uselessly it seemed.

Far-Awn never appreciated, or even appeared to take seriously, any of the religious fervors all others so firmly believed. The rest of the family had to make amends for the boy's disrespectful behavior. Woefully their spines would bend in supplication. Sorrowfully their shoulders would sag. Longer than ever their dour expressions became—and all just to convince the Gods they had no real cause for envy. Everyone knew they were being punished. They should have stayed rooted, never sprouted legs and used them. The Gods never moved. They stayed where they were. No wonder they were jealous. Living there, by the Green Mountain, beyond the Scarlet Mountains, awaiting their chance for total revenge. As Baka headed for home, his son following, his head bowed even lower.

Far-Awn the Dreamer

That night, when Baka had all his family asleep and secure on their beds of puhlet hides, he went to stand over Far-Awn, studying the strange young face.

Though he wondered every day why he had been so cursed by this complex, paradoxical son, paradoxical because deep in his most secret heart, for some reason not understood even by himself, he loved this son more than any of the others. Just to stand here and look at him asleep put a glow of warm pleasure in his heart.

Far-Awn was taller and slimmer than his brothers. His movements were quicker and more agile, giving him a singular kind of grace that made all others seem unnaturally clumsy. But it was more than his odd beauty—if it was beauty. There was something in his face, behind his eyes, something different, something unknown, something that hinted of mysterious forces. When the boy was singing, although Baka would never admit it, a heaviness would lift from his spirit. He could almost forget all the troubles and anxieties that besieged him daily. That was the trouble with things like singing: one should never allow this lightness of spirit; it took the mind from current problems.

Forgetting one's troubles made one unprepared—and that was when disaster was sure to come. It had, time and again. Precedent and experience made the truth. Of necessity, to survive, pleasure had to be snuffed out quick. As for Far-Awn, he had none of the conflicting doubts that so plagued his father. He knew from his very first remembering that he was different from all of the others. He was unique unto himself. He didn't have to peer into a pool of underground water to see his reflection to recognize the differences. He felt it inside, deep. Though, loving his father, he would please him by conforming, if he could. When he was very, very young, and very needing of affection, he had struggled mightily to fit the mold his parents would press him into. After a while, he realized he could never be what they wanted, so he gave up trying. Though it pained him to see his parents so distressed, it pained even more to deny the differences that flowered within him.

He knew his older brothers only tolerated him, considering him weak and feeble-minded, if not outright crazy. His slender body was much stronger than any supposed, but who would believe that? Not his father, not his brothers. Condescendingly he was given the easiest of chores;

among them, he was shepherd to Baka's flock of one hundred and forty puhlets. Just to think of the puhlets caused a smile to curve Far-Awn's lips. Of all the farm animals, they were his favorite, his pets. There were other animals, but none had been so successfully domesticated and bred as the sturdy and tractable puhlets. No other animal had evolved so physically advantageously, so they, and they alone were able to survive the sudden and drastic climate changes without one bit of shelter.

And that alone was a marvel.

Sad though, that the very animals he loved most was the main meat supply. From their hides all on El Sod-a-Por fashioned coverings for their houses. They used the hides for beds, for chairs, for coats. Their fur was spun into a coarse cloth and sewed into dull, unimaginative clothes. Their fat was boiled down and made into soap, their hooves and horns into utensils. Oh, they by far contributed more to the survival of those inhabitants than any other single element—with the exception of their own tenacious, diligent nature.

Besides the weather, the puhlets had only one natural enemy—the warfars! Against the warfars' sharp fangs and ripping claws they were defenseless. All they could do was run, bleating pitifully all the way. The slinky dark warfars could race like the wind, and howl like evil spirits of the night. But during the day hours, the warfars were notoriously afraid of men.

One man or boy alone could scare off a whole pack. Yet, in the dark of night, it was a far different story. At night, those that lived on El Sod-a-Por were just as defenseless as any puhlet, even more so. For the puhlets could at least stay awake.

When the burning winds blew from the desert, a remarkable change would occur; the long straight hairs would stand on end, with each hair follicle fluffing out at the end to form a thick brush of many fibers too transparent to be seen. Plus the fur turned silvery white. The intermeshing hair fibers kept the winds from reaching the delicate pink skins. White reflected the heat away. Years of instinctual behavior patterns had taught each puhlet to tuck its head under the thick neck ruff and protect its eyes and the sensitive membranes of its nose.

When the icy winds screamed down from the bleak, black land of Bay Gar, something equally miraculous happened. Their silvery fur would curl tightly upon itself, keeping the strong winds from separating the hairs, and as the hair began to curl, it changed color, turning to ebony black, thus retaining the natural body heat. Again, the thick neck ruff was used to hide

the delicate facial areas. Many a young shepherd had saved his life by lying down with the flock when the devastating winds blew.

Still, a very young puka had a very vulnerable time, just after birth, when they were naked, without even the protection of the yellow-green fuzz. An entire nursery of pukas could be wiped out from the slightest draft, the slightest chill. Too much heat, and they would collapse prostrate, and quickly die. So delicate, so frail, so sensitive were these small creatures at this time, the pukas spent their first few weeks in the sod houses, romping with the human babies.

Because of this intimate closeness, and the daily care of the baby animals, it was a sad and mournful day when the full-grown puhlet had to be slaughtered. So much was this unhappy day dreaded by the tender-hearted natives, often the most compassionate would wait until their animals were old and ready to die anyway before they could bring down the heavy mallet on the paper-thin skulls. The meat was tough and stringy by then. The fur long past its prime. But there was the satisfaction of knowing the animal had reproduced many times, and been allowed to live out its allotted days.

There were many shepherds on El Sod-a-Por, but in all the hills of the borderlands, upper and lower, not one loved his flock of puhlets more than Far-Awn. He talked to them as if they understood; he sang to them as if he knew they enjoyed it, and long were the miles he walked to discover the rare places where the lushest grasses grew. Far-Awn knew the puhlets were grateful for his care and love. They gazed at him with soft violet eyes of devotion, responding in all the quiet ways they could. When Far-Awn lay in a field, dreaming of how life could be different, and better, of how life should be happy and enjoyable, without fear of death always hovering so near, the puhlets grazed contentedly, glancing his way from time to time. Because of his presence, however distracted he grew at times, not once had a warfar stolen a calf, for Far-Awn was quick. In a flashing second he could leap to his feet and hurl a stone, and most of the time it found its mark. Cowardly the warfars slunk away—a stone or a stick was enough weapon during the day.

Leaning back against a burran tree, Far-Awn ate his lunch of cheese and bread, and spoke aloud to Musha, his favorite animal, who also lunched nearby.

“Men shouldn’t have to hide in the ground like dirt diggers—like insects! Why should we grow old so soon, and die so young?—it’s that work!—that everlasting, perpetual work! There ought to be a way, something, that we could devise to keep the weather out. There has to be

some other reason for being alive, other than working—what do you say, Musha?”

Musha bleated, apparently agreeing. Far-Awn turned his head toward the far Green Mountain, where the Gods were reputed to live. Thoughtfully he gazed. Did they really control the weather? Did they really send the storms as a form of punishment because they were rooted in one spot? If gods they were, couldn't they grow legs if they wanted? Of course they could. There was another reason for the storms.

“Before I die, I'm going to find out,” he said to himself, “just who and what lives in that giant green home.”

Musha looked up, still munching on the grass in his mouth. He too turned to stare thoughtfully at the distant Green Mountain. A soft sighing sound came from his throat.

3

Far-Awn Goes Searching

One day three years later, when Far-Awn was ten, he led his flock of puhlets far from the customary grazing grounds. In that year, more storms than usual had devastated the land. More wind funnels had come to denude the fields and hills with repeated demands of tribute for the Gods. It seemed entirely possible that all the tender young grasses had been destroyed.

Only in gullies and other damp recessed areas could any touch of edible food be found. But never were there enough of these areas to satisfy the hunger of each and every one of Far-Awn's animals. What life Far-Awn could find growing, he found nearer the cold side than the hot. So ever closer he led his flock to that icy, bleak black land known as Bay Gar. In the twilight zone between the light and the dark, a narrow band of growth struggled from a crack in the cold ground. Hungrily the puhlets fed upon it. When their appetites were satisfied, the day was gone. The first short darkness of night descended.

With it came panic for Far-Awn! No shepherd stayed out all night with his flock. Always they hurried to be home before dark. In the night, the warfars grew bold, fearless. Well they knew what happened to man when night came. Then they could sneak in and use their fangs and claws to kill and eat what they would, animal and shepherd alike.

"Oh, Gods that be," Far-Awn prayed, "keep us safe from the warfars this one night, and I swear I will never again doubt your existence. I vow I will never again be so careless, so thoughtless. I will struggle to be what my father expects!"

And with that, immediately with full darkness, Far-Awn fell deeply asleep. Such was the way of all those humans that lived there. Sleep had to be grabbed quickly before the first sun arose, and the labors unending began anew. Snug among the resting puhlets, Far-Awn was warm and protected from the cold, if not from the warfars.

In the permanent dusky world near the winterlands, the rays of the first sun's rising penetrated the murkiness only dimly. So it was that Far-Awn slept longer than any other night of his short life.

He awoke suddenly, feeling refreshed and renewed, but strangely lost and disoriented in this hazy, cold place. Sitting up, he looked around and smiled because they had survived the night. There was no blood on the

ground, no torn bodies to horrify his eyes. Perhaps the warfars didn't travel this far north, and confined themselves to the areas where men worked and trod with the puhlets. He said then a quick prayer, thanking the Gods for letting them survive.

He was a far, far walk from home, he knew that. He would have to hurry to reach there by nightfall. And speed was doubly needed for it was nearing the time of birthing for the female puhlets.

For the pukas to come in such a distant, unfriendly cold spot, remote from shelter and human care, would be a tragedy that his father would never forgive. Nor would he be able to forgive himself. How could he have gotten himself and his trusting animals in such a predicament? Oh, no wonder his father thought him a fool, a mockery of what a son should be!

To bring the grazing puhlets close, he sounded a trilling call, for some had wandered away, finding another patch of mossy growth. As they closed about him he counted. Disbelieving, he again counted. Now it was a certain thing—six of the female puhlets were missing! The ground wasn't covered red with blood, so the warfars couldn't have carried any off. Their way was to kill and eat on the spot, and all this could be done without waking Far-Awn. Once asleep, he couldn't awaken until the light came. What to do? How could he go home and face his father's terrible wrath? One animal lost was serious enough, but six?

And the eventual loss would be at least double that, with the pukas due any day now—or any minute. Again and again he sounded his call. Always before, every one of his obedient animals had responded. Always they came running, knowing he knew what was best for them. A sob of panic rose in his throat when the missing failed to respond. Musha rubbed his plush-purple nose consolingly on Far-Awn's hand. "Don't think kindly of me, Musha! It's my fault six of your wives are missing, and the Gods alone know how many of your young!

"I could go and search for them," he pondered aloud, but what to do with the others? Take them with him—risk all their lives, plus the babies due at any time? Or should he send them home alone, take the chance the warfars wouldn't slaughter half the herd?

His thoughts raced, seeking a solution where there appeared to be none. But why had the puhlets led him here in the first place? For when he thought back, yesterday it had been Musha who had done the leading, not himself. How extraordinary for the timid and acquiescent to unexplainably become aggressive—to come to this unknown land in the

first place. And for six to wander off? Could there be a meaning and a purpose to this? If so, was he to let it pass him by? He glanced back at the Green Mountain, frowning with consideration. Good judgment demanded that he lead the one hundred and thirty-four safely home and forget the six lost females. That was the reasonable thing to do. Almost he could hear his father speak these very words, “Use your head, boy! How can you hesitate when comparing the loss of six to one hundred and thirty-four?”—and that was not even speaking of the young so soon expected.

Yet, was he to bypass this unique experience and go meekly home and say, “Yes, I left six. They wandered off, and I didn’t search for them.” No, he could not live with the thought of abandoning them. Right or wrong, he would find the lost six. Out of the dusky coldness he led his charges into the full light of the first sun. He put his hand firmly on Musha’s head.

“Musha, I am trusting you to lead all the flock home. You are to go as fast and as quietly as possible. No bleating, no roaming off the trail to search for grasses. Keep together, the youngest in the center—and go fast! Straight home! And if you see or sense the warfars coming, run like crazy! And strike out with those horns on your head! That’s what they’re there for—weapons! And your hooves, they could do some damage too. Fight back for once! If I can throw a stone and they run, you can show some resistance! And in the daylight, they might not come close.” His lead animal gave him a long searching look, then turned and started down the trail headed for home, going at a fast clip. The remainder of the puhlets began to tentatively follow, looking back in a bewildered way at Far-Awn.

“Go on,” he called, “follow Musha! He is your leader today. He will keep you safe.” Oh, how confidently he said that. What chance did a puhlet have against the long sharp fangs of the warfars? None at all, none at all. Determinedly he resisted the pleading violet eyes that looked back at him.

“Go home!” he ordered sharply, “and go quietly and fast!”

Standing on a hill, he watched until they were out of sight, gaining speed as they disappeared from his view. All heading toward the memoried place of warmth, safety, and grain.

Far-Awn dropped down on his knees, and woefully, for the first time in his life, he prayed in complete and humble supplication to the Gods of Green Mountain to let his puhlets live to reach home; to keep the storms from coming today; to keep the warfars asleep in their dens.

Then he was on his feet and running, back to where the puhlets had fed on the mossy-green growth. His sharp eyes, almost blue,

knowledgeably searched the ground. Soon he found a trail that he thought could be the one left by the missing six puhlets. Only a short way did he follow before he realized, with a sinking heart, that the puhlets were not heading into the day as could be expected! No, instead, every step that he took assured they were going, for a certainty, into those rolling plains of icy inky-dark cold! Why? he wondered. What odor of growing green could have wafted to those puhlets from this place of ice and snow where nothing possibly could grow?

This inexplicable, unexpected turn of events did not lessen his determination. It didn't occur to him to abandon the search and catch up with the main flock. A decision once made in due deliberation was not to be altered. Instead, he followed the faint hoof markings deeper and deeper into the black unexplored wilderness.

Now the frigid air became even more pungent, bitterly sharp. His nose seemed a wide-open door letting in too much air, until his brain numbed and seemingly froze. His coat of puhlet fur he drew closer about him, tugging the collar about his neck and face, pulling down the hood until only his eyes and nose were visible.

Above him stars glittered in an ice-dark sky. The tiny triple moons rotated about each other, and the planet of El Sod-a-Por, giving Far-Awn just enough light to follow the tracks in the snow-covered ice.

Farther and farther he went in. Until the soft snow turned crusty and crunched beneath his furcovered boots. From that it went all slippery bare ice. It became almost impossible to keep his footing. Time and time again he fell. Why, oh why, did those foolish puhlets come here?—and why, by the gods, did they have to wander in so far? The trail of their hoofprints made small indentations in the ice, leading straight and true, as if they were headed toward a known destination. Yet this couldn't be. They had never traveled here before. It gave him a strange, unreal sensation to follow the confident, never deviating trail.

The bitter cold stung his eyes, his cheeks. It prickled his nostrils with a thousand ice needles. His eyes watered; the tears froze on his lashes, making small icicles that jabbed at his face whenever he blinked. His legs became heavy, almost too weighted to lift; still he struggled on. All the while he called himself all the names his father had tagged him with—fool, idiot, besotted, sun-heated, crazy boy! Wind-stirred his brain was! How had he ever convinced himself this was the right thing to do? Never again would he trust his instinct—he would reason as his father did: to keep what you had and forget what you didn't.

Between the curses that he piled one on the other on himself, he found time to pray, to allow his anxiety for the other one hundred and thirty-six puhlets wash over him with great, fresh waves of guilt. Long ago he should have trained his puhlets to be more independent. He shouldn't have enjoyed so much the loving, blind adoration they gave him. Yet, contrarily, look where independence had landed the six lost ones!

Once more he slipped and fell. This time as he struggled to regain his feet, he felt strongly the urge to sleep. Sleep—everyone was instinctually conditioned to sleep immediately at darkness. Though he had been here some time, and just now was sleep overcoming him. Could it be, if one was well rested and well fed, one could deny the darkness and not sleep? He tried this, fighting back the primitive, basic need to close his eyes and escape into oblivion. Into the void where there was no chore undone, no pains of hunger to endure, no gods to please ... where there was nothing but peace. Peace. How nice, how comforting to just lie here and rest... just for a while.

Far-Awn closed his eyes. Dreams came of buildings such as he had never seen before...of roads smooth and even, without rocks ... homes clustered together in multitudes ... flying objects in the air. Other marvels unbelievable visited behind his closed eyes. I am dying, he thought. These are daydreams coming in the dark. It is a gift from the Gods to ease my passing.

Suddenly to his ears, almost closed in death, came the soft rilling of a contented puhlet. Sleepily Far-Awn opened his eyes. Again a puhlet rilled, and so near! Stiffly he pushed himself upright, valiantly found his footing on the ice, and hurried on as fast as he could. And in his head whirled all the colors and impressions of his weird dreams, so that he was, even as he walked, still bedazzled with visions. Then, there they were! In front of him, all six! With their fur black as ink, curled up tight, and sharply etched against a luminous white background, so contentedly the puhlets grazed, as if this alien territory was as familiar to them as any. Munching quietly on the small white flowers and green leaves that sprouted from cracks and crevices in the ice. It was from these flowers that the luminous light emitted, silhouetting the six animals.

Thrilled and overcome with happiness to see them alive, Far-Awn ran forward and hugged each puhlet, scolding them only a little, so delighted he was just to see them again. On impulse, he then dropped down on his knees and leaned to peer closely at the strange little flowers that lived and blossomed in this sterile place of perpetual night. How curious, he thought, plucking one flower and putting it into a coat pocket.

The Birthing Time

On the highest hill of his farmlands, Baka stood peering sharply in all directions. His deep purple eyes scanned the horizon. Hoping to see his youngest son leading home the flock of puhlets. That boy! Staying out all night!

In a lifetime of bizarre behavior, this was the most incredible incident of all! Did that fool boy think he could defend the puhlets while he slept? If there was one thing he had depended on in this son, it was his love for his puhlets. Now, even in this, he had proven himself inadequate.

“Oh fool, fool am I!” Baka shouted out into the air. “I should have tossed him as a babe into the black abyss where all born deformed go!”

But Baka had pitied Far-Awn, loved him despite his strange coloring.

“Such a pretty and sweet little child, with those big violet eyes, almost blue, and that odd red-gold hair and creamy skin. How cruel the Gods could be...to afflict him in appearance, as well as intellectually.”

As Baka stood there, berating himself and Far-Awn, he saw rounding the curve of a hill, the huge male puhlet his son called Musha. In relief, Baka heavily sighed. So, he had survived the night. He knelt and bowed his head to the ground, thanking the Gods of Green Mountain.

In a loose file, the flock straggled after Musha, all tired and bedraggled. Even from where he stood, Baka could see some animals were bloody, with torn hides, and ragged ears almost ripped off. Baka ran forward, hurrying to examine the injured. The warfars had attacked! There was blood and black hair on the horns of Musha! He stared at the blood in disbelief, and then plucked off the stiff coarse hair, sniffing it. Warfar hair...it had an odor, only theirs. Musha had fought back, resisted slaughter. This was unheard of—puhlets didn't fight, they were too timid. He went to the other males and examined them. They too had fought to protect their females, fat with young. How incredible! Baka laughed, then smothered it quickly with his hand, glancing quickly back at Green Mountain ... perhaps the Gods hadn't heard.

Baka straightened and glanced around for his son. Nowhere in sight. Ah, so Far-Awn was dead ... died in defense of his beloved flock. And now his beloved strange son was digesting in the bellies of the warfars. Tears glistened Baka's eyes. Another son gone. How grievously his heart

felt the loss of this one. He had lost other children, so many, but this one had touched him as no other.

Bowed down in grief, Baka led the flock home. Only then did he think to count the members of the flock. One hundred and thirty-one. Nine lost, and his son dead. Sadly he went into his home to tell his wife. “So,” said Lee-La, “Far-Awn is dead. Why aren’t you glad, Baka? Haven’t you said a thousand times he has been nothing but trouble to you? Now your addled mad son is dead and eaten, and will soon fertilize the ground—and rid you of your shame. We will have another son more to your liking, if we are lucky.” Then, in Baka’s arms she was crying.

When her tears were dried, she went to the oven and drew out the baked loaves of bread. She began to prepare another meal. Her daughter came to help. At the dinner table, Baka would tell all his children at once that Far-Awn had died in defense of his flock. Bravely died—now who could be ashamed of that? Hours later, Baka was in a fenced area, tending the wounds of the puhlets, when from behind him sounded the voice of his dead son. Startled and fearful, Baka spun around to see Far-Awn coming with six female puhlets close behind him. Baka thought his eyes might fall out from his head, so hard did he stare.

Speechless he listened to Far-Awn’s tale of how he had wandered far from home, too far to return before night came. And he had fallen asleep on the very rim of Bay Gar.

“And when I wakened in the morning, I found six of the females had wandered away. So I ordered Musha to lead the main flock home, and told him to fight if the warfars attacked. And you see, he did fight, he and the other males. And only three died, and I saved six.”

Baka’s face darkened in rage.

His voice like thunder as he roared, “Risking the lives of the entire flock to save six? Are you mad? Where was your judgment? How can you stand there, a son of mine, and try to explain to me you used any judgment!”

Baka’s huge hands rose to clutch at his own head, to keep them off Far-Awn’s throat.

“But why should I expect anything different from you!”

Still, why should he be surprised again ... anything could be expected from a boy who “thought” so much, who laughed, who sang, who dreamed, and who shirked his duties at every available opportunity!

“Boy,” he began again in continued fierce anger, “just suppose a storm had blown in? Suppose a larger group of warfars had attacked? Suppose the birthing time started so far from home, alone on the trail and far from human assistance? What then would you be saying to me now? How would you justify any of that?”

“But Father...it didn’t happen that way,” Far-Awn said weakly, for he knew every one of his father’s suppositions were true. “And think of how brave Musha was and the other males. They saved all females but three.”

“Three?—stupid boy, the number is twice that at least if you count the young inside them!” So he stormed on, raging at the boy, hiding the knot of grief that had faded in his chest, refusing to acknowledge to Far-Awn how glad he was to see him alive, unharmed, and he had saved the lost six. Braving that frigid devil’s land of Bay Gar. Could I have done that? Baka asked himself.

But while Baka stood there, trapped in the fiery unreasonable temper that was his, continuing to rage, enumerating again all of the disasters that might have happened and probably would occur—if ever his brainless son ever did such a fool, thoughtless thing again—the sky overhead darkened from pale citron green into an ominous umber-gray. The smoke-blue fur of the puhlets vibrated and rippled in uncertainty and apprehension.

The feathered quickets and quackets in their penned yards turned suddenly noiseless, then in haste waddled toward the entrances to their underground shelters. The ceaseless motions of the tree fringes stilled to hang without quiver in the absolute vacuum that settled weightily on the land. The air hung, suspended like a sword.

The hot word half-spoken froze on Baka’s tongue. His head jerked up. His short red beard jutted straight out from his square jaw. His bulbous nose quivered, sniffing the air. Which way? From which direction would it come?

Six of Baka’s sons came running in from the fields, the other five still working in the deep bowels of the inner-earth.

“Tell us, Father,” called out his eldest, due to marry soon, “Will it blow hot, or will it blow cold?”

Truly, Baka thought, the Gods always have perfect timing for their visitations. Then, with second thought, he was ashamed, for his youngest son might still have been on the long trail leading home, and for certain, the storm would have killed them all.

“To the underground!” Baka yelled out to his sons, “whichever way it blows!”

Far-Awn already had the door open to the tunnel, and was leading the puhlets down the slanting descent. The animals stepped daintily, careful, but with confidence, for they had been this way many times. Down into the caverns all went, human and otherwise, to escape the terror of the storm. Hardly was the heavy door closed and bolted behind them when the storm broke with all the frenzied fury of nature gone mad.

The umber-gray sky blackened into night. The winds came, sweeping away the still vacuum, bending low the grasses and the green and violet sproutings just poking their tips out in the fields so carefully tended. Before the fierce wind the young sapling trees bent to the ground. Those trees too old and rigid to yield to the wind’s relentless demands of tribute were yanked up and hurled away, to fall shattered and broken, sometimes miles from where they had rooted. Then, Bret-Lee, the single daughter of the house of Baka, did a reckless thing. She dashed outside to rescue the clothes she had hung out to dry in the dual heat of two suns. The clothes whipped and snapped at her, as if alive and eager to be off and free to fly with the wind. With her arms full of the clothes, she was hurled back at the house. Fortunately, her mother held the door open, or she would have been driven straight through. She was unable to close the door—it was left open, along with the back door opposite it, this giving the wind a clear passage through. Long ago, those harassed people had learned this was the way to do it: submit, open the doors—or gone would be the house.

After the wind came the rain.

Thundering down with the noise of ten thousand running horshets! The water pelted the hide covered homes. It smashed down the tender young plants; it flooded dry gullies and ravines, making them into instant tiger rivers that hungrily devoured the surrounding lands. Those living things that had taken refuge in the recessed places were drowned relentlessly in the fast cascades of rushing waters.

Through the center of Baka’s house, the low center funneled the water through, keeping the rest dry. Baka had been clever in designing his home, and it outwitted the weather in many ways. On the cultivated fields, only the huge overhanging rock boulders, hauled into place and position by hundreds of men, kept every speck of growing life from being washed away.

In the deep underground burrows and caverns that were constantly being expanded by the men and boys of El Sod-a-Por, the humans and domestic farm animals waited for the fury of the Gods' wrath to cease.

Beneath Baka's farm, a female puhlet began a woeful rilling. It was a familiar sound to every person there, announcing to all that the birthing time had begun.

"Wouldn't you just know it would have to happen now?" Baka complained in sour irritation.

"When this storm is over, we'll have to repair the damage done to our fields, and take care of the pukas too!"

He didn't have to order his sons to build fires and stack the piles of wood and balgar nearby; they were already busy doing this. All of their extra supplies were kept underground, although it was cold and damp, and fires had to be kept burning at all times; at least all that they possessed wouldn't be swept away by the wind and rain.

The boys raced about bringing more wood. Far-Awn was sent to carry the message to his mother and sister that the pukas were coming. Everyone's help would be needed, and his mother was especially good at this.

Easily Far-Awn found his mother and sister in the underground room beneath their home. In the weak yellow light of an oil lamp, both were busily knitting, one of the occupations saved for times like this.

"Oh, my son," his mother cried on seeing him, "you are alive!"

"Yes, of course," replied Far-Awn, "did you think I was dead?"

He laughed and hugged his mother close, and kissed her cheek.

"Don't you know I expect to live to be a thousand, at least?"

Fearfully Lee-La whispered, "Son, don't talk like that. That's defiance. You die when the Gods say you die."

Far-Awn smiled and gave her the news of the birthing. Immediately the knitting was put aside as unimportant, and all three gathered up as many blankets as they could carry from the piles just brought down from the house. Far-Awn led his mother and sister back to the large cavern where the puhlets were. Long before they reached there, the painful rilling cries of the females in labor could be heard.

How very much Far-Awn wanted to stay and help. How very much he wanted to cuddle the new little babies against him, but because he was

fleeter of foot, he was sent away again, this time to find his older brothers still working somewhere else.

Through the long dark tunnels he ran, his light throwing weak beams into the darkness. As he raced, he called. His voice echoed and rebounded throughout the many chambers. Finally an answering call responded. Now he had to stop and decide from just which direction the true voice came. Fortunately, he guessed correctly.

When Far-Awn came upon his five older brothers, they were industriously hacking at the rock in the earthen tunnel walls. Each strong young body was covered with black grime, dust from the soft black stone they called balgar, black stone that burned hot and long in their fires, giving off much more heat than wood alone, though wood was used to start the fires.

“The birthing time is here!” Far-Awn sang out loudly. “Father says you are to come at once and bring all the balgar you can carry!” When the five boys heard this news, they threw down their picks and raced toward the underground pool of inky dark water. In minutes they were stripped bare; then all five plunged in, splashing and shouting with the shock of the cold water. They had to wash off the black soot, for the young pukas had to be handled only by clean hands. “And put on clean clothes too,” Far-Awn yelled, before he turned and ran, leaving his brothers still bathing.

When he reached the cavern where his mother and father and Bret-Lee were assisting the females in the process of delivering, all was brightly lit and very warm from the fires attended by the six brothers already there. Already six new pukas were nestled near their resting mothers, too small and too weak yet to stand. Still other pukas were coming. Baka and his wife and daughter were very, very busy. The female puhlets were half the size of the males, and very delicate. Not one gave birth easily, despite the inordinately small size of their young. The expectant mothers not yet ready stood restless and anxious, two young ones particularly nervous. For these two it was their first time. Their fears communicated to the other, older females, and only the oldest and most experienced at birthing could remain sedate and calm. Far-Awn crouched between the two young females, stroking each, murmuring softly into their ears. At his familiar touch, and the sound of his voice, both became calmer, ceasing their pitiful nervous cries. After awhile he ran out of soothing words to say, and he began to sing softly. Every puhlet, even giant Musha, stood still and quiet with ears uplified to catch each note and inflection of his voice. Not one of his brothers, or even Baka, complained this time because he sang. It was plain enough for all to see that his lilting notes gave comfort when

Baka's harsh commands to "Stop making that awful racket" did nothing but add more distress. Baka gave this momentary thought. Could it be there was some practical use to such a frivolous thing as singing?

Then Baka cried out, disturbing the new calmness. "What's this? I have seen many a new puka, but never one such as this!"

He extended his hand for all to see, and cupped in his rough, burly, calloused palm, was a tiny new puka, violet instead of pale pink—and glowing all over with a bluish luminous light!

All of those in the firelit chamber stared at the uniquely bright little fellow, who raised his head alertly, while he struggled to gather minute and delicate legs under enough to stand.

"He seems quite strong," said Lee-La, "but what is wrong with his color?"

"The Gods only know!" was Baka's irritated reply, annoyed by anything he didn't understand. And he was a hundred times more annoyed when something unprecedented happened to an expected normalcy.

The five remaining brothers came running, balgar grime still clinging to the fringes of their clean faces. They too had to stand in awe before the glowing small puka.

Gingerly Baka placed the bright little creature beside its mother. He brushed his hands raspily against his coarse shirt, as if to rid them of some contamination. The mother puhlet didn't seem to notice any abnormal difference in her offspring. She nudged him with her soft purple nose, until he was snug in her fur that covered him almost completely.

In the long hours that followed, five more times did Baka call out, "Why here's another of those shining pukas!" Baka wondered, just what new devilment had been sent to needle him. The pelting rains, the devastating winds, were long gone by the time the last puka was born.

Wearily, Baka and his family emerged from the caverns into the daylight. In the silence bred with long experience with storms, they stood without speaking to survey what was left of their home, their fields, their fences, their barns, and their storage bins. Not much was still standing.

Already the deluge of water had completely disappeared. The cracked crusty surface gave no evidence at all that it had so recently tasted water. In the cultivated meadows where the top crust had been removed, the soft, boggy inner-earth was watered every day by a series of connected irrigation ditches. Now all the little plants that had stood so firm and

straight a few hours ago were flattened down into the mud, or washed away.

No good to stand and sigh or cry, he thought. Baka left his sons to save what they could, while he and his wife and daughter hurried on to see what repairs would be needed on their home.

Left alone in the underground caverns, Far-Awn fed the fires to keep warm the baby puhlets until they were strong enough to walk. Already the little ones who were born first were satisfying their hunger, while the newer ones lay weakly pink without moving, just looking bewilderedly around. That is, all but the six little violet ones who still glowed luminously. They were nursing greedily, able to stand and run about from the very first.

To Far-Awn, there was something familiar about the halo of bluish light that radiated from them. From the pocket of his fur jacket, he pulled out the small white blossom he had plucked from the ice of Bay Gar. It lay in his palm, pure and opalescent white, as fresh as the snow that frosted the peaks of the Scarlet Mountains, although many long hours had passed since he took the flower from the ice.

However, the glowing radiance had faded. This disappointed him. He had intended to show his father the significance between the flower and the shining pukas. Nevertheless, he put the flower back in his pocket for future consideration.

The Beginning of the End

It seemed to all the bedeviled, beleaguered people of El Sod-a-Por that every year the weather grew worse, not better. The horrendous storms blew in with increasing frequency and ferocity. Worse, when they came, they stayed longer. The families waiting for them to abate in the safety of the underground passageways dreaded to go out again into the sunlight and see what had been taken from them, and all that they would have to begin again. Although everyone knew the underground offered only temporary refuge, some gave up life on the surface land and tried to stay under. They dug shafts into the cavern rooms to let in some light, for they knew that without some sunlight, they couldn't live for long. This seemed a solution of a kind, so more and more of the beleaguered people moved down into the dark tunnels. Their fields on the surface were left unattended while they concentrated on growing underground a variety of tortars, a fleshy sort of root vegetable that was able to flourish without sunlight. Unfortunately, tortars were the only edible plant that would.

Only the hardest, the most tenacious of them refused to yield to this easy but unhappy way of living. Those most determined stayed on the crusty dry surface to nurse along their crops and animal herds against all the hazards. Some called them foolhardy—admittedly resilient but fools just the same—to put life in the sun ahead of possessions and safety.

Among those who persisted were Baka and his family, refusing absolutely to consider moving permanently into the dark, cold underground caverns. “It is better to be alive and cold and miserable in the underground dimness,” expounded the new inner-earth dwellers, “than warm and dead in the sunlight.” More than a molecule of truth lay in this statement, for so many died in the wind funnels, so many froze, so many fell stricken from the heat and dust that clogged their lungs. Those who didn't die from the heat or the cold died in the deluging waters or were crushed by falling trees or boulders or were worn down from sheer fatigue, until they sickened into death.

There were so many ways to die on the surface, but there was only one way to die underground. Some whispered that the Gods would have their revenge on Baka, who resisted them at every opportunity. “I will not!” raged Baka when a delegation of his neighbors requested that he sacrifice his most potent male, the one Far-Awn called Musha. “I will give a lesser male to the Gods, but not Musha!” His friends and neighbors scowled: to give a lesser male was not a sacrifice. Only the best would appease the

Gods. They had given their most fertile males, so why should Baka be allowed to give less? Not more than one bag of grain would Baka burn at the altar! He cheated in so many ways, his neighbors whispered among themselves.

Only by wearing his woebegone expression did Baka hope to disguise his antagonism to a religion that demanded the best of everything in sacrifice. Baka grumbled to his wife.

“Next they’ll be asking for my best son to sacrifice ... and then my daughter. Give the priests Musha and there will be no ending to their demands. And how do we know if the Gods even notice?”

“Ssssh!” cautioned Lee-La in a hushed voice of fear, cautiously looking around to see who might have overheard. Then she asked, with strong curiosity on her round pleasant face, “Our ancestors used to give their first son, but if you were forced to sacrifice your best son, which would it be?”

“None!” shouted Baka angrily. “Those days are gone! Of human life we have too little—I won’t give one, the best or the worst!”

“But just for my benefit, tell me which is the best?”

Baka glared at his wife in hot temper, then threw himself down on the bed. The second sun was near the horizon. Soon all would fall into oblivion, but he had the time to wonder briefly which son would he willingly sacrifice—if someday he must: Not one, not one ... not even the worst, who was in some ways the best. I too am a fool, he thought, and then slept untroubled, even by dreams.

It came about in the days that followed that once-friendly neighbors stayed as far from Baka and his family as they could, lest they share in Baka’s special punishment from the Gods when it came. And come it would, sooner or later. Twelve sons alive and healthy—though Far-Awn was doubtful mentally—was sure to be noticed. That woebegone expression of Baka’s could be just the result of overwork and too much mental strain, and not his natural humble expression, as it should be.

Finally, the weather became so unendurable, all but Baka moved underground. He and his family alone were left above to suffer whatever the Gods chose to give him. Those below waited, beginning to feel that Baka and his entire family was indeed just the sacrifice that would appease the Gods who lived on Green Mountain.

That year Far-Awn was twelve. Of necessity he once again led his flock of puhlets far, far from home. The storm-devastated land was stripped almost bare of life. His flock was greatly reduced in numbers, so many of

the pukas had died from the extreme weather changes, despite all that human help and care could provide. The fields couldn't produce grain, the trees weren't allowed to blossom into fruit with so many winds to tear the limbs from the trunks. Now puhlet meat became the staple diet, and soon they too would be gone—if things continued on as they were.

The twisted, gnarled black burran trees grew more profusely (if anything could be said to grow profusely) than any other type of tree on the borderlands. These strong valiant trees were as bare of fringes as any other. Far-Awn felt a deeper sinking of his heart on seeing this. If the burran trees could lose their long, thin crimson fringes, then what other tree could hope to hold its own? Never before had he seen these trees so exposed, without one single rippling fringe to disguise the ugliness of their knobby limbs.

The hide-covered farm homes he passed were leveled to the ground. The once-cultivated fields were now as hard and dry as the crusty, wild and arid countryside. Not one spot of growing green could he see when he looked out over the meadows, plains, and hills. Only in the sheltered places between the high boulders and smaller rocks, and in some of the low ravines, could he find wild grasses for the puhlets to eat, and very meager grazing it was.

Sadly, Far-Awn watched his beloved flock crowd and shove against the rocks, seeking more, as if they could move what even the windstorms couldn't budge. In the underground bins at home, most of the grain was gone. What now would the puhlets eat? What now would any of them eat, except the very animals that were his charges?

But somewhere, someplace, there had to be food for the puhlets, for all of them. So on and on Far-Awn led his flock. A little was found growing between this rock and that. His puhlets even ate some of the dark, bitter greens which grew under the red rocks. The same grasses which in better times had caused them to turn aside their plush-purple noses in disdain. The flock consisted of only twenty, including the six that had glowed luminously bluish at birth. Their inner glow had faded shortly afterward, but it seemed to Far-Awn that these six were different in many small ways from the others. He was certain it was more than just imagination that these six were quicker, stronger, more intelligent. What food that was found now was found by them.

As the puhlets grazed on the dark bitter green they disliked, rilling from time to time in discontent, Far-Awn slowly nibbled on the food his mother had packed for him in a small bag. He ate the little sparingly, knowing this

was the only food he could be assured of for a long, long time. For he wasn't going home, not tonight, or tomorrow night.

He was running away, taking with him the last remaining flock of puhlets left alive on El Sod-a-Por!

6

The Setting of the Second Sun

The day before his decision to leave, Far-Awn overheard his father explain to his mother the reasons that the puhlets would all have to be killed, all but one male, and two females to perpetuate the line for the future: “People are starving. There is no grain to feed the puhlets. The land doesn’t yield wild grasses anymore. The meat is needed. Soon the puhlets would be too thin to be of any use.”

“But Baka,” his mother had asked, “how can seventeen puhlets feed the hundreds that are starving? After they are eaten, they will demand the last three as well—and what will we do when all puhlets are gone?”

For that monumental question, Baka had no answer, except to say, “The flock is starving anyway. Better kill them while there is still some flesh on their bones. Lee-La, are we to stand by and let our neighbors die, while we have meat?”

Horribly distressed, and quite disbelieving, Far-Awn had peeked from his hidden place to see from his father’s expression if he really meant to do such a dreadful deed. His father’s sagging shoulders, his deep revealing sigh, told him that Baka was honestly speaking, and it was not just anxiety speculating.

Yes, what would they do when every puhlet was dead and eaten? To kill all but three of his flock was no solution. He knew his flock, their ways. Keep Musha alive with two females only, with no other males to stimulate his physical needs through rivalry, and there would be no pukas conceived! Musha would grow sick from despondency with two females only, when he was accustomed to having so many! Far-Awn steeled his will against his father, his family, against all the people who had given up and gone to live underground.

“Let them eat tortars! They shall not eat one more of my flock!” he flared aloud, so that Musha lifted his great head and stared at him questioningly. Far-Awn reasoned that his family could live on tortars too, since everyone else was. No sensible reason why his flock should dissipate to zero just because they all had a craving for puhlet meat that tortars couldn’t satisfy. As for himself, he never ate puhlet meat. He lived on the cheeses made from their milk, and he used to eat bread made from grain that didn’t grow anymore, fruit that trees couldn’t yield now, and berries the bushes no longer grew.

On the whole of the upper borderlands, only Far-Awn's flock survived. Of those who lived on the lower borderlands, it had been years and years since one had come through the maze of underground passages to give news of the disasters in that distant, remote place Far-Awn never expected to see. But from what he had heard from the elders, it was not a better place. It was much the same as what was here. Little did his mother suspect, when she prepared his food bag, that he planned not to return in the evening. She kissed his cheek and told him to be careful, as she always did.

"Far-Awn, your father loves you. Never doubt that. Though he calls you idiot and stupid, he doesn't mean it. He is proud that you are the only shepherd to keep his flock alive, but he can't bring himself to say so."

In the pocket of his coat, Far-Awn held the hope of a solution: the star-shaped opalescent flower that grew in the night world of Bay Gar. He would take his flock there, and let them eat of the luminous flowers again. Though it was dangerous, and he might well die in the attempt, for already he was weaker than he had been since his birth. But the puhlets traveled so slowly, wandering off, seeking food. They would never reach even the twilight zone near Bay Gar before the setting of the second sun. Now, as he saw the first sun slide behind the Scarlet Mountains, he wondered, as he wondered every day, just what lay beyond those distant rock mountains. The Green Mountain, of course, but what else? A better place than here? Somewhere there had to be a better place. It would have to be a better, more productive place if the Gods lived there. They would select for themselves the best; it stood to reason this would be so.

Pulling himself from abstract thoughts, Far-Awn sounded a trilling call to pull his flock back together, for the second sun would soon follow the first. With its disappearance would come darkness, and the instant sleep. Slowly the roving puhlets gathered about him, obedient as always.

It would take time to find a sheltered place between the huge overhanging boulders. A place where the storms couldn't deluge them with rain, or the winds couldn't sweep them away in the darkness. But most important, it had to be a safe place where the prowling warfars wouldn't find them, for they had to be as hungry and desperate for food as the puhlets. Finally, after long searching, he came upon a high place with a rock shelf protecting a large cave underneath. To reach there the puhlets wouldn't leave a trail of scent for the warfars to follow, for it was rock all the way. To be so lucky, to find such a perfect place to spend the night gave him joy enough to spill a song from his lips. Singing, he led the way to the cave and ordered Musha to keep the herd there, while he set

off again to find water. He crawled on the ground, feeling with his left palm, his most sensitive one. He felt all the likely places, and from time to time put his nose to the ground and sniffed. Finally his knowing and sensitive hand rested on a cool, damp spot. He quickly leaned to sniff. Yes! It smelled earthy and strong as it should. Water was underneath—and not too far from the cave. But it was too late to start digging. He would have to do that tomorrow. Already the second sun was low, glorifying the heavens with crimson and streaks of vermilion, coloring the clouds violet and orange with outlinings of gold.

Lying down in the cave with his puhlets, Far-Awn watched the sensational ending of the day. Strange, he was the only one who looked upward to enjoy the sunsets. No one else noticed. But of course, he was strange to think colors were beautiful, for they couldn't be eaten, or worn, or burned to make warmth. Soon he would be expected to choose a wife and start a family. Already four of his brothers were married. All of life on El Sod-a-Por was rushed quickly into maturity. No time to dawdle in the foolishness of adolescence. Grow up, take on responsibilities, breed as many children as possible, for half were sure to die—if you were lucky to keep even 50 percent alive.

There was a girl named Santan who lived on the neighboring farm. She was being courted by the brother next to his age. Ah, but she was pretty. But not once had she flashed her purple eyes at him, or pouted her lips prettily, the way girls did to let you know they were interested. Far-Awn doubted that any girl would accept his proposal—he was too well gossiped about as having the sun-madness. He would no doubt die a bachelor, the most despised of all humans, for they contributed nothing and only took from those who reproduced. Far-Awn sighed, then fixed his eyes on the single Green Mountain, higher than all the surrounding Scarlet ones. He prayed to the Gods reputed to live there, for food for the puhlets, for days without storms, for relief from anxieties ... and perpetual hunger, and a future that seemed only bleak from this particular point in time.

“And perhaps, all powerful ones ... a little something extra, such as helping Santan look at me with some warmth, and not as something too odd for her eyes to behold.” Darkness fell like a mantle. Swiftly with night came the onslaught of sudden deep cold. Instantly Far-Awn plunged into the abyss of sleep. Snug against the warm puhlets, he was covered completely by their silky hair. He was protected. He fell into the deep sleep El Sod-a-Porians called the “little death.” Because they were descended from plant life, El Sod-a-Porians couldn't awaken until the sun rose and its rays shone upon them. Even weak and murky sunlight helped unfold them from the arms of the small death that took them every night.

While Far-Awn slept in the cave with the puhlets, far from home, those sleeping in the cold and dank underground burrows needed light from the sun as much as he did. They had to keep a shaft to the surface to let in the morning light. Even so, they withered and died when they stayed too long in the inner-earth dimness. A long-dormant remembrance of their plant-life past would steal into their minds and weaken their ability to walk. Eventually it weakened their will to move. If they stayed underground long enough, they would instinctually burrow their toes into the soft muck until their feet and ankles were buried. Then their arms would slowly fold over their chests, and their eyes would close as they grew rigid in ennuui, waiting without ambition, without desire, without hope.

It was one terrible shock to find a beloved one in this dreaded state of dormancy. The rooted one would have to be rushed up into the sunlight quickly, before they withered more and turned brown and died. Occasionally the sun could cure them, bring them back, but most of the time the rooted ones would stay too long in the dim underworld, and even the brightest of suns couldn't gift them with moving limbs again. Then there was nothing to do but stand and watch the loved one's citron flesh slowly turn bronzy yellow, and from this into dry, corky brown, the color of death and decay.

This was why Baka insisted on keeping his family on the sunlit surface, preferring to risk the known dangers of nature's wrath than to endanger his family's health by exposing them to the insidious despairs that could creep up without warning. But when he lost his eldest son and his wife and new baby, all swept away in a rushing torrent of water, along with their home just newly constructed, his head bowed down in grief and doubt. He saw Lee-La looking at him stark-eyed, a silent question written on her sad face.

"We have lost our eldest, and our youngest," she said in a small voice.

"Didn't I tell you Far-Awn would guess what you intended to do? He can't live out there... he and the puhlets will all die."

"I told you all along the boy was a fool!" shouted Baka with fierce anger. "I wasn't going to kill all the puhlets—but I had to do something to appease the anger of our 'friends'! To please the Gods, they will lay us all out on the altars and slit our throats. I have overheard their mutterings. They say we are challenging fate to stay here on top, while all others have broken in will."

“Suppose we go underground too,” pleaded Lee-La, “maybe then the Gods would be pleased. Hasn’t our teller of tales told us many times it was the Gods’ coming that blew us up from the ground in the first place?”

“Nonsense! The mountain has always been there! Green mountains don’t blow like fringes from the trees!”

“But just suppose some of those ancient folktales are true,” persisted Lee-La in the unwomanly stubborn way that made her husband scowl with disapproval, and darkened his sour mood even more. Wives were to be seen and not heard; wives were to accept and never question; wives were to be used as a man would; wives were, in other words, just another burden until they produced children who were hearty enough to earn their keep. Most of all, wives were never, never to complain! “Baka, don’t sit there and scowl! Answer me! Do you think it truly possible that once we were only green plants?”

Baka rolled his purple eyes upward, expressing profound exasperation. “What a question! How am I to know about the past? Yesterday’s truth was today’s fallacy, so said the wise men, and today’s fallacy is tomorrow’s truth.” What it boiled down to, in Baka’s reasoning, was no one knew anything that was absolute. Here was his reliable trusted wife going heretic on him, believing in superstitions! Men were men, never plants! Yet, he felt trapped by a world set against all mankind; a world without mercy, giving frustrations too huge to overcome. He worked, he slaved, he tried to do his very best, and still, even when he did, everything went wrong. His shaggy red head bowed down in grief. He’d lost two beloved sons in such a short period, plus his first daughter-in-law and his first grandchild.

Where was Far-Awn? Didn’t he have enough anxieties without having to worry over that boy and the only surviving flock of puhlets? To steal the only meat left on all the upper borderlands—that was a crime punishable by death. He didn’t have to actually hear all his neighbors whispering. He saw their hands lifted to shield the movements of their lips. He knew they resented him, and did what they could to avoid him and his family. He saw all those furtive dark looks of resentment. Just as if his family weren’t eating tortars like the others. He was so sick of the things he felt ill just to look at one of the repellent sickly things of a nothing gray color. Oh, Gods of the mountain! Color was one of the things Far-Awn talked about so much. Just another of the unimportant things he thought mattered.

Angry at everything and everyone, Baka jumped to his feet, then stalked to where he could stare out of a small window covered with the thin and transparent skin of puka underbellies. The second sun was

downing, blazing the sky with myriad beautiful colors. Rainbows everywhere he looked. Colors ... Why did Far-Awn think them important? In his mud hut covered by hides, Baka drove a strong fist straight through the window! His wife gave him a long, long look. Was he too losing his mind? She went to him nevertheless and put her thin arms around him.

“I love you, Baka. I’ve never said that before, and you’ve never said it to me. If you were to die tonight. I would go on living feeling half a person.”

He was embarrassed. Love was not a thing to be spoken about. The Gods envied those who lived and loved. Yet he whispered daringly, “I think I may love you too, Lee-La.”

All Hope Gone

Far-Awn was flat on his stomach, stretched out on a rock shelf gazing at the brilliant multicolored sky and admiring the shifting, ever-changing variety of hues sometimes streaked with black. The black in the red heralded the coming of yet another storm. He didn't know that his father was thinking of that storm, and trying to send him thought messages of warning.

“Far-Awn, if you be alive, wherever you are, hide yourself well, and keep those puhlets alive!”

Far-Awn wakened to a new day and a blazing hot sun. His throat was dry and raspy with thirst, and he knew the puhlets suffered the same thirst as he. He didn't take the time to nibble on the food that was left in his bag, but set out immediately to dig for water in the spot he had located the night before. Patiently his animals crowded about and waited.

Once the thick hard top crust was removed from the ground, like a pastry from a soft fruit pie, the rest was easy. From his pack of supplies, Far-Awn removed a bundle of long, tough hollow reeds. One he drove into the soft muck, connecting others as he drove the reeds in deeper and deeper, forming a pipe. When the resistance against this improvised pipeline gave way, he knew he had struck water. It was then he siphoned up first the mud and then pure and clean water, ice cold from an underground pool. He filled his collapsed water bags and found a rock basin, and emptied two bags full, so the puhlets could drink. He went back for more water, and then drank himself. With quenched thirst, he could think now about food.

Without food, some of the weaker females wouldn't make the journey to Bay Gar, and he didn't want to lose even one of them. Giant Musha was the only male left alive, so least of all could he afford to lose him—and it took three times as much food to fill Musha's belly than a much smaller female. It took him half the morning to come upon a deep ravine, overhung by a huge slab of rock, underneath which a slimy moss grew. It repelled Far-Awn to just look at it. But the animals in his starving flock weren't in the least finicky today. While he stood there, pityingly watching his animals eat the sickening mess, he sensed something move in the shadows behind him.

Quickly Far-Awn spun about to catch a glimpse of sleek black fur that ducked furtively into the rock shadows. The warfars had managed to

follow them here, despite all he had done to cover their trail. Not on the rocks could they have left scent—it must have been the wind that betrayed them to their enemies. This complicated an already overwhelming situation. The weakest of his female flock were going to straggle behind the main flock, easy prey.

Musha came to him, woefully rilling. Far-Awn understood the rilling as talk of still unsatisfied hunger. Reproachfully the animal looked at his master. “Well, I’m doing the best I can,” apologized Far-Awn. “I can’t find what isn’t there, now can I? And I’m hungry too.”

Again Musha rilled, this time from nervousness and not reproach. Far-Awn glanced backward. Just as he thought. Six warfars came out into the open, grown unusually bold from hunger. He yelled and shouted and flailed his arms wildly, then swiftly bent and hurled several rocks with savage intent. One rock found its mark. A warfar screamed, and all six ran.

“Cowards!” called out the boy. “Stay and fight in the light! I know you’re waiting for dark—but you won’t get us then either!”

He spoke bravely before he looked at Musha and grinned.

“You see what kind of cowards they are? A little rock sends them screaming for cover. You did a great job defending your harem last time—so keep up the good work.” Far-Awn didn’t speak to Musha about being the only male, no assistance from younger bucks this time. And he himself would be deep asleep after dark. But if Musha didn’t fight exceptionally well, he would never know, for after killing Musha, the warfars would slay him next, and take their time with the murdering of the females and the young within them.

Turning north, Far-Awn took two steps in the direction of Bay Gar, then halted, frozen still by what he saw. Low on the distant horizon a mammoth dark cloud was lifting. Even as he watched, it spread in density, coming closer. A storm from the north! The very worst kind—with the exception of the wind funnels. Oh, what luck he was having today! If he left these hills and headed as fast as possible toward the twilight zone, the storm would find them on flat open terrain, with no shelter, and the warfars on their trail. He had hoped to reach Bay Gar before nightfall, find the flowers for the puhlets to eat, and then hurry out.

Quickly deciding, he headed the puhlets back toward the cave, ordered them inside, and hurried about collecting all the thorny bushes and brambles he could find. The puhlets in the cave mulled about unhappily, wanting to graze and satisfy their hunger. They threw him soft, beseeching looks whenever he came with his arms full of scratchy wild growth.

“I’m sorry,” Far-Awn said, throwing down his burden and going back for more.

Long before the setting of the second sun, Far-Awn had constructed in front of the cave’s entrance a thick barricade of thorny brambles. Once inside the cave, he pulled them snugly into place. Now let the storm come—the warfars, the dark cold night, and whatever it held. He fell asleep assured he and the puhlets would all be safe.

During the night, the warfars came sniffing hungrily at the wall of thick brambles and thorns. They snarled and growled and tore at the bushes with their paws, and screamed out in anger from the cuts the thorns inflicted. The smell of their own blood drove them into a frenzy, and the uninjured warfars turned on those bleeding, and quickly killed and devoured them. Still hungry, those remaining once more turned their attention to the needled barricade. Another pack of roving, starving warfars lifted their noses and caught the scent of death and blood, and ran screaming to join in the attack to pull down the wall of thorns.

In the cave, Far-Awn was fast asleep with seven of the female puhlets cuddled up close to him for warmth. Musha stood up on his feet, lowered his giant head, his horns unsheathed, his front hooves pawing at the rock surface, planning to fight when the wall eventually gave way, though the odds were thirty to one. His customary mild complacent expression changed into one of grim determination. Fighting was new to him, a domestic animal, and he was growing old. The youngest females behind him wailed in fear, while the older ones huddled up close to Far-Awn only lay there, calmly chewing their cud, waiting for whatever fate chose to deliver.

The first sun was due to rise in an hour. That would be an hour too late, for most of the barricade was torn away now from the fierce assault of the nearcrazed warfars who had fallen to fighting and tearing at each other, for by now, all had suffered cuts and were bleeding. It was then the blustering freezing winds from Bay Gar reached the hills. Icy winds that tore at the landscape, whistling with frigid breath that sent the maddened warfars scurrying for cover. Far back in the cave, Musha lay down, and put his huge head on the frail chest of his master, sighing heavily in relief as he closed his eyes.

Outside the deep cave, the strong winds blew, bowing young trees to the ground, snapping off limbs too old to yield before the gale’s strength. Then the sky, colored ebony, released water that froze into sliverlets of ice to pelt relentlessly down. After that came the blizzard of snow.

In only minutes, all was covered with a thick blanket of white.

Deep down in the dark dank caverns and burrows of the upper borderlands, all human life lay held in the still power of the small night death, including Baka and what remained of his large family. Always the best predictor of weather, Baka had taken his family down there, prepared for the worst, but this time, the worst was far worse than even he could have anticipated.

At the hour when the first sun should have risen and driven away the darkness, the dawn was the color of the ink pools of the inner-earth. There was no sunlight to fall into the deep shafts, dug for just this purpose, to wake those sleeping. Unattended fires sputtered low and then went out. The caves and burrows turned extremely cold as the storm raged on and held back the dawning of the second sun. Ever colder grew the underground hide-aways. Even if the fires had burned brightly, emitting warmth, the firelight did not have the life-sustaining power to bring those still, cold unmoving forms into life again. Babies lay stiff and cold in the frigid arms of their mothers. Small animals cuddled close to the children that loved them. Husbands lay with young wives, arms tight about each other. The tenders of the fires sat frozen into statues, their eyes glued shut with ice.

For three days and four nights, the thick murky storm clouds kept out all light from the twin suns. One by one, those frozen in the dark frigid caverns died in their sleep. Others, near death, deep under piles of puhlet hides, unconsciously struggled in their sleep to stay alive. The pet animals, not caught as the humans in the need to sleep during darkness, roamed restlessly, hunger gnawing at their stomachs. They sniffed at the dead bodies, fighting back the temptation to satisfy that hunger with the dead, frozen flesh of those they had once loved.

Lee-La was held tight in the arms of Baka, with opalescent tears frozen on her cheeks. Clutched tight in Baka's fist was a crude primitive idol, dual-headed, representing the Gods of Green Mountain. The cruel, heartless Gods who had never demonstrated even once the least degree of mercy.

Even so, Baka had fallen into sleep with that idol in his hand, and a prayer whispered on his lips. What else was there to do, when all other hope was gone?

Far-Awn Becomes a Man

When Far-Awn awoke, bleary-eyed, weak, and trembling from the overlong, enforced sleep, he saw the thorny barrier had been swept away completely from the cave's entrance.

Spread before him in startling clarity was a world totally changed from the dry, dun-colored earth of his yesterday. A heavy covering of pale, blue-white snow sparkled in the dawning light of the weak first sun. The red-rock hills cast violet shadows on the snow, and the Scarlet Mountains were iced and frosted into glittering rose-pink peaks. The black and gnarled fingers of the burran trees dripped with a million sparkling icicles. As Far-Awn's incredulous eyes jumped from here to there, he heard and saw the snapping and popping as frozen and weighted branches broke and fell to the ground, one after the other.

Storms, many, Far-Awn had seen—and the after-math—but never had he seen such a morning view as this! So far from home, in the highlands looking down, and he was alone. So much awesome beauty and desolation his eyes beheld, enchanting him, chilling his spine with the power of what one single storm from Bay Gar could do! It occurred to him that the same world could look extraordinarily beautiful or desperately frightening, depending on one's vantage point. To his father, down in the lowlands, it wouldn't be beautiful—for all those people down there, this storm was the crowning touch of disaster.

Looking down from his high place into the distant valleys, Far-Awn thought of his father, all of his family and his neighbors, wondering how they were faring. In those low fields, so diligently ploughed by his father and brothers, the neat rows, newly sprouted and hand-watered, would be under feet of snow. All the hopes and dreams sprouted along with the green would be as frozen and dead as the seedlings. The tortars would continue to grow, but oh, so sad to live for the rest of your life with one item on the menu.

Thoughts of tortars, of menu, brought his own hunger into the forefront of his mind. A mind strangely light-headed, so that everything felt unreal, and dreamlike, and with effort he pulled his thoughts into focus. He sighed with the overwhelming ramifications each new day brought, and turned to awaken the puhlets. Startled, his violet, almost blue eyes opened wide, not able to give credence to what they registered! The puhlets were gone, every one! Dead? Eaten by the warfars? No blood did

he see—only a trail in the soft snow, hoof marks, theirs. Again he was surprised as he examined the prints. Musha had led the herd away! His Musha! His most dependable animal had disobeyed him ... taken his wives and led them away!

Hurriedly Far-Awn strapped his bag of supplies on over his coat and set off at a trot to follow where the puhlets led. Many times he stumbled and fell before he remembered he hadn't eaten. He didn't realize how many days had passed since he ate last—he thought only one night had gone by, not four. He fumbled in his coat pocket for the sole remaining piece of cheese, now gone stale, and ate only half the small piece, savoring the cheese in his mouth as long as he could, forbidding his thoughts to linger on what he would eat when this last bit of cheese was gone.

On and on the puhlets led him, down from the highlands, into the low-rolling plains. Never deviating from a set direction, the puhlets traveled in single file. So well did he know his animals, he could recognize each footprint and name the animal it belonged to. It was a set course, all right, true as an arrow, aimed directly at Bay Sol, that terrible land of sands and burning heat! It was all so reminiscent of that time two years previous, when the six female puhlets had entered the ice plains of Bay Gar.

Far-Awn left the snow-covered borderlands behind him. The ground went from hard to soft, powdering beneath his feet. Grainy sharp sands sifted into his hide, fur-covered shoes. He began to perspire. He stopped and took the bag of supplies from his shoulder, and removed his light, but too-hot coat. Again he strapped on his pack but left the fur coat on the sand, weighted down with several heavy rocks so the winds wouldn't blow away so valuable an article.

Weak with hunger, and dry from sudden thirst, he stumbled into the desert wasteland. Scorching hot winds blew incessantly, seeming to suck every drop of moisture from his skin. Constantly he tipped his water bag to his lips, but never was his thirst satisfied, no matter how empty the bag became. He told himself to go easy on the water, to resist the urge to drink ... there was no more water here. He licked his lips to moisten them, until his lips became parched and cracked, and his tongue felt like cotton. He swallowed, and there was nothing to relieve his burning throat.

The two suns were high, blazing down on him with baleful, sneering, orange eyes, one behind, and one before. His twin short shadows fought for domination, trying to confuse him. He thought about lying down in the shade and resting awhile. There was not one lengthy spot of shade the suns would allow.

“This is a hellish place for sure,” he thought aloud, and heard his voice as cracked and old. If my father could see me now, he thought, he too would sneer. There goes my fool son, off again on an idiot journey, bringing back with him only a flower to reward his effort...

Far-Awn sobbed, wishing for his mother’s arms, for the touch of her hands cool on his fevered brow. He thought of the lovely Santan who never looked at him, only his brothers. It wasn’t his fault his skin wasn’t as green as it should be, or his hair wasn’t as red, or the fact he stood too tall and moved too quickly, and he hated to wear a grim, set expression like everyone else’s. If I live through this experience, I won’t dream, laugh, sing...or even think, he vowed to himself. I’ll conform ... I’ll be just like everyone is ... sad. But even as he thought this, he knew it was a vow he couldn’t keep.

The long day grew old. The first sun neared the place of its setting. Violently the sky flared into brilliance, refracting myriad colors down on the sharp, glittering sands. But Far-Awn’s vision was already bedazzled from too much brightness, too glazed with fatigue, with hunger, with thirst to see the first sun’s magnificent leave-taking. His bodily needs cried too loudly for relief for Far-Awn to notice anything but its demands. Far behind him on the trail lay his empty water bottle.

So this was the fabled Bay Sol! The eternal desert of heat, dry, scorching winds, and suns, suns, suns! Nothing moved, except for the sand blowing. Nothing grew, nothing lived ... not a leaf, not a petal, not a twig. There wasn’t even an ant, or a gnat crawling on the ground, or a bird in the sky. There was no sound but the whiz of the wind blowing the sands. Not once had Far-Awn heard of a traveler surviving the desert heat. Why was he here? He tried to recall, but he couldn’t.

Instinct guided him, kept his eyes fastened to the pathlet trail, following blindly, without conscious volition. He fell again and again, and always gained his feet and stumbled on, gasping, half-crying, desperately needing relief from the single sun still remaining. Again he fell. This time, as he struggled to rise, his unfocused eyes fell upon five long shadows in a file. Shade! What he needed, what he wanted, what he had to have! You see, you see, he told himself, when you reach a point of desperation, the Gods do provide! Then his glazed eyes lifted and fixed upon what made the five shadows on the hot burning sand ... and he beheld the most horrible sight he could ever expect to see. He tried to blink away the vision—for it had to be that! His eyes were deceiving him... some devilish trick caused by that cursed sun! But after he had blinked, and shook his head, and fought to clear his reasoning and his sight, the five shadows were still there when

he looked again—and the five standing objects that cast them. He swallowed over the lump of horror in his throat.

Five withered, grotesque things projected from the sand, cork brown and splintered dry as any dead wood ... even so, with their features blurred and fusing together, those five things were still recognizable as once living and moving human beings. Far-Awn had never seen one of his kind in this state before. The shock numbed him. He lay sprawled on the burning sand, his head raised, his mouth gaped open, his eyes wide, as if about to scream. The hot air entered his mouth and stole what moisture he still had left, so he couldn't have managed a scream if he had tried. Who were they? Why were they here? They were all facing the direction from which he had come. Could they possibly be from the lower borderlands? Could they have traveled so far, only to give up and root themselves—to die—so near their goal?

As he stared, speculating on the obscure meanings of why those five men were there, dead, withered brown, a gusting strong wind blew and buffeted the figures. One listed and fell against another—then, in a row, the mummified men all collided, one against the other, shattering to pieces as they fell to the ground. And before Far-Awn's very eyes, the dry limbs, heads, torsos powdered into dust that was swiftly swept away. Now there was nothing left to show they had ever existed and made a valiant attempt to reach the upper borderlands. Staring down at the sand, Far-Awn wondered how many had died in such attempts as this?

“All those dust storms the hot winds blew,” he cried, “dust that comes into our sod homes, through the cracks, crevices, under the door...Is this the dust of the dead? The dust of millions upon millions of dead?”

The fantasy of this caused Far-Awn to jump to his feet! He ran forward like one demented!

“Is this to be my fate too? No! Never will I root my feet in the sand and give up and wait to die! I might die, here, today, or tonight—but I won't be rooted, not in that accepting way!”

He ran, stumbling, falling, tearing the clothes from his body, not once thinking of turning back. Not considering that at all. He was here for a reason—the puhlets were leading him—but why enter so far where nothing grew? Into his heat-crackled brain came the thought that animals were in some ways wiser than men ... they held on to their instinctual behavior and trusted it, never doubting as men did.

He fell for the last time and couldn't rise. He crawled on all fours, like an animal, panting with the effort of every inch gained. The second sun

sank behind the horizon. Once more the sky blazed with a kaleidoscope of shifting, intense, and vibrating colors that were caught and kept in the crystals that abounded everywhere.

With sunlight gone, refrigerated darkness came quickly, closing down on the burning sands. The hot winds chilled. Exhausted, Far-Awn sprawled flat on the sands and slept. Unaware he was cold; unaware he was hungry; unaware he was near the limit of endurance, and very close to death. Before his last consciousness left him, he was aware of only one thing: “At least I did not bury my feet and ankles in the sand to wait for this final, everlasting sleep. I am still a human, almost a man.”

A whisper of pride came with this.

For the first time in his young life, he had a dream—a nighttime dream! He saw Santan the young and beautiful coming slowly toward him, holding out her arms, with a soft shining look in her eyes. What was there about that look that so enchanted him? Oh, he dreamily thought in his sleep, she is looking at me the way my mother looks at my father. It is that mysterious thing called love between man and woman that everyone was so ashamed to feel.

When I am a man it won't be that way for me and my beloved. We will feel proud of whatever it is men and women do to make babies. Certainly they didn't go about it in the same way as the animals? Nobody had ever told him. No one spoke of shameful things like that. No one had time to talk ... maybe that was it. It had to be it.

But as he dreamed on and on, his body woke up as if from a long, long dream, and he would never need to be told the ways of loving a woman. His lips curved upward in his sleep. How dumb not to have known all along, when his body had known since the day he was born.

He changed that night in his dark sleep of desperation. He grew up and became a man and never knew it. He accepted what he was, different, and never questioned the why of what he was. He was, therefore he was important. Otherwise, why else would he be allowed to live at all?

The Gift of the Star-Flowers

The first sun dawned as spectacular in its awakening as it was on leaving. Bemused and weak, Far-Awn sat up and looked around him, confused as to where he was. He lifted trembling hands and rubbed at his eyes, unable to believe that he had survived the night. How? The cold of the darkness should have shriveled him brown, and still he lived. It was then he saw the many hoof marks on the sand. His puhlets had come while he slept and lain down beside him, protecting him from the bitter cold of the desert night. Now they were gone again. He swelled with love for them, grateful they had saved him, but was disappointed they had left without waiting for him to awaken.

Quivering with weakness, he staggered to his feet, and fumbled in his pants pocket for a crumb of any kind—forgetting he had already searched there yesterday. He had to drag his legs, so weighted they were. He sagged forward like an old man, following still the trail of the puhlets.

Their contented rilling came to his ears long before he saw them and made him laugh. His laughter sounded like madness, crackling with insanity and foolishness. Almost crawling, he made it to the top of a sand dune—and on the other side, there they were, all grazing in contentment. They saw him, looked up, and rilled softly in welcome. Musha separated from the females and ran to him. His throat too dry for speech, Far-Awn patted the giant animal's head, and clung to Musha's thick fur as the big, strong male almost dragged him to where the females grazed on the white flowers and green leaves that sprouted from the sand.

The dainty females, fluffed out with white, insulating fur, ate with such obvious pleasure that Far-Awn released his hold on Musha, and fell to his knees, and quickly stuffed a handful of the white blossoms and green leaves into his own ravished and parched mouth. Before he could stop eating, he had greedily consumed several dozen handfuls.

"Why," he said to no one in particular, "the pretty little things taste good!" They had no definable flavor that he could identify, but it was pleasing. What he ate satisfied his hunger, and most remarkably, satisfied his thirst as well! Far-Awn sat back on his heels, reflectively staring at the flowers growing all around him. For the very first time in his life he had a full stomach—one that didn't plead for more. It felt odd to be so satisfied, so full, without the perpetual ache for more food. He had just eaten, for a fact, the most enjoyable meal of his life! Even sitting here in the sizzling

heat, and frying winds, he felt good, happy, expectant. Suddenly he began to laugh—laughter that doubled him over to his knees. Oh, how astonished his father would be to see where he was, sitting in the middle of Bay Sol, and laughing! Two young puhlets came and nuzzled his neck, bringing him back to reality.

The flowers had been here, yet those five men had died. They hadn't found them because they had entered Bay Sol without puhlets to guide them. Far-Awn put a loving arm over Musha's shoulders, as the big animal was standing close, watching his master with large calm eyes, deep with ageless wisdom. Far-Awn met those eyes, trying to delve into just what Musha was thinking, and trying to express without words.

"You are not dumb after all, are you?" asked Far-Awn with new insight. "You are an animal, but you have a brain, and you can think. All these centuries we have taken your kind for granted, and used you in any way that suited our purpose. How can you look at me so kindly?"

Musha made a soft rilling noise deep in his throat, giving Far-Awn a long meaningful look that the boy tried to fathom; then Musha put his nose to the flowers and began to eat.

"I know what you want, Musha," said Far-Awn in deep sincerity. "From now on, life for you and your kind will be different, I'll see to it."

Yes, from now on life would be different for all of them, humans and animals alike. The clever puhlets had found food here on the desert wastelands, just as they had discovered forage on the ice of Bay Gar. Never again would he allow one single soul on El Sod-a-Por to call them stupid again! Why the puhlets were smarter than all of them put together. In gratitude he ran to each animal and caressed it. All the time food was available to all of them. All they had needed was the courage to journey into the unknown and find it!

It was then Far-Awn plucked one small, starshaped blossom and studied it closely. It had five short white pointed petals around a centering cluster of multicolored seeds. Each minute centering seed was of a different hue, and each radiated its own vibrating light. The opalescent white petals glowed with their own luster, and even the green leaves shimmered with iridescence. It was exactly the same flower the puhlets had found in Bay Gar, and he had carried so long in his pocket. All that time he could have planted those seeds!

Far-Awn sat there in the hot sun, unfeeling of the heat and the winds, as the second sun came up and added its heat and bedazzling light. Thoughts like bees whirled in his brain. The star-flowers grew without

water in the terrible heat of the desert. They grew without sunlight in the dark ice of the winterlands. Just what would they do with water, with sunlight, with fertilizer to nourish them? Marvelous visions flashed before his eyes ... daydreams ... things he had seen but never expected to materialize. Flooding with monumental excitement and anticipation, Far-Awn pried a plant loose from the sand, exceedingly careful not to damage the extraordinary long roots that webbed out in every direction. Amazing to see such a small plant with roots thirty times its growth above ground. And when he felt the meshy root growth, they felt damp and cool to his hot hand.

His shirt was hanging in shreds, so he didn't feel the loss when he tore it even more and used the strips as strings to tie bundles of the uprooted plants in the only shade that was available—and that was under the very bellies of the twenty puhlets. He was extremely worried that the hot burning light and intense heat would dry out the delicate, hairlike roots before he reached the borderlands. Far-Awn didn't know then that it wouldn't have mattered. In his arms, he carried as many of the plants as he could, and turning about, he headed back, toward home, toward his father, his mother, his brothers and his one sister.

Funny how quickly he reached the cave, when it had taken him so long to trail the puhlets into the heart of Bay Sol.

"I must hurry home with these plants," he said to Musha, "for they are dying there from starvation, and that blizzard will surely have wiped out all the crops..."

He prepared for the journey, and was ready to leave, when a female puhlet began the mournful rilling that meant her birthing time was near. Frantically Far-Awn put aside his plan to speed quickly home with the life-giving flowers and leaves. He had made a promise to Musha, to all of the puhlets, and he couldn't desert them now. All alone, he assisted nineteen females through the ordeal, many of which were in their first labor. Every young puka came out into his hand violet and shining, and exceptionally strong. In no time they were nursing, and running about all shining and naked.

While Far-Awn waited for the pukas to grow their yellow-green fuzz, he set about digging holes and planting seeds from the white star-flowers. Some he planted where they would receive full sunlight all day. Some seeds went into the ground where they would receive only partial sunlight, and still others he planted in the dim shade of the cave. A few he carried down into the deepest, darkest cavern he could find, and planted the seeds there.

Instinctively he knew the plants would survive anywhere he put them—for hadn't he found them twice in the ultimate extremes of nature?

The pukas took on the yellow-green fuzz, but they were still too young to make the long journey back to the farmlands. Determined to use this time of waiting to the fullest advantage, Far-Awn experimented with the little plants that sprouted quickly from his agriculturing efforts.

He treated each bed of star-flowers differently. Some he gave a full draft of water each day, some only received a light sprinkling, others he deprived of any water at all. Some he lavished with water, enough to drown them. On a wall of the cave he chiseled the date.

Far-Awn's sleep was full of dreams: He saw the future, the way he would make it, the changes in their lives the star-flowers would bring about. He saw many things, but not all.

The Gods never reveal all, even to those they sometimes favor.

And when the pukas were well furred, with silvery smoke-blue, Far-Awn set out for home, trailed by Musha and his nineteen wives and twenty-one offspring. In that flock, Musha had seven new sons. Musha heard his master singing as he led the way. At the very end Musha guarded the rear, keeping a watchful eye out for warfars.

"Musha!" called back Far-Awn, "I'm keeping my word. You and yours are safe. Never again will puhlet meat be served at our tables. Though I find my family starving, they will eat of the flowers, and what they have produced. To you, I will raise a great monument in the heart of a huge city, and puhlets will be cared for with love and respect until they die a natural death."

Musha, far in the back of his wives and children, grunted deep in his throat. A day's journey away, Baka and what remained of his family, sat in the sun, near death from the dimdespairs, from starvation. In deep lethargy, all still alive on the upper borderlands sat and waited. Some had their toes already buried in the earth, even in the sunlight. Food. Oh, Gods of Green Mountain ... have you forsaken us? Where are the puhlets, your gift to us for developing legs and moving ourselves out of the ground?

"What are you thinking?" asked Lee-La of her gaunt husband.

"Of ham," he said weakly, "of a roast hot from the oven. I would sell my soul for a slice of meat."

Book Two
El Dorraine

Prologue

After El Sod-a-Por became known as El Dorraine, a way to record spoken words into written symbols was developed by a man named Sal-Lar. The genius of his discovery elevated him into the honored position of national historian. He could put his pen to paper in a grand and glorious way, swirling his letters with sweeping, flourishing loops that despaired the children of El Dorraine, who sat tediously in school struggling to imitate what came naturally easy to Sal-Lar.

Sal-Lar was still a boy when that most monumental and momentous storm struck from the ice lands of Bay Gar. How many died in the underground caverns was never known, for the population of the upper borderlands had never been counted. There were very few left alive when the people crept out of their holes, weak from hunger, and so caught in the dim-despairs that their limbs were almost too heavy to move. The dead were stacked like logs for burning in a remote dark and cold cave, awaiting the day the living had the strength to bury them.

1

Far-Awn Returns

Baka, grown skeleton thin and facially gaunt, carried his single daughter, Bret-Lee, and laid her down in the sunlight. The ten-year-old girl had paled into tan, and brown was the color of death. Her deep purple eyes were faded and without luster. She couldn't speak, or move, though her toes curled constantly, restlessly seeking to bury themselves in the earth.

"She will die soon, said Lee-La as she knelt beside her husband and studied her daughter's face. "Perhaps it would be kinder to let her root herself into the ground than to keep her here in agony."

"Never!" shouted Baka defiantly, his voice grown small in comparison to the roar that had been his formerly. Already he had lost four sons, a daughter-in-law, two grandsons, and his flock of puhlets. (Two of his boys sent out to search for Far-Awn died on the day of that horrendous storm.) He turned bitterly on his wife.

"Not one of us will root our toes! Hear that?"

Before dark, Bret-Lee was carried into the only house still standing. Tenderly Baka laid her down on her bed, and stood above her with tears in his eyes. He had never appreciated this girl; he had taken her for granted, like she would always be here to fetch and carry, to weave and spin, to clean and cook, and eventually to provide him with multitudes of grandchildren. The day of full sunlight had only tinged her sickly complexion with healthy green.

Rough handling would break off a limb, or a finger, she was that brittle. Turning away, he went stiffly to a chair and carefully lowered himself down to the seat. All is hopeless...we are all too far gone ... even the suns can't save us, ran the flow of his thoughts that he would never speak aloud.

He turned his head, once great and noble, and stared at his wife and what remained of his family, all sitting crouched on the floor, waiting for darkness, for the instant sleep that would take them into oblivion and out of the dreadful need for food in their rumbling stomachs.

It was then a faint scratching was heard on the trapdoor that covered the tunnel to their underground lodgings. The trapdoor was raised a cautious few inches, and a boy's face showed.

“Baka Valente,” began the boy Sal-Lar tentatively, “I have come to bring you very grave news.”

“What other kind is there?” asked Baka sourly. “But come up and tell it, I have grown accustomed to somber news. Good news would shock me.”

“Sir,” began Sal-Lar very respectfully as he glanced at Bret-Lee lying so still on her bed. Deeper anxiety shadowed the boy’s purple eyes. He looked again at Baka. “I risk my life to come and tell you this, but they are whispering in the caves against you. They say everyone is suffering because the Gods are angry with you alone—for you have defied them by refusing to move underground like all of us. They say the Gods want the top of the earth, and the sunlight only for themselves.”

“They say? They say!” Baka snapped. “Who are they?”

“Everybody,” Sal-Lar replied meekly, “even my own grandfather—and all the elders. At this very moment they are in the council room, taking a ballot on whether or not to sacrifice you, and all your family.”

This so sombered Baka, he forgot his weakness, his stiffness, and he jumped to his feet, then howled with the pain of his too quick action.

“Have I not suffered too?” he shouted out angrily. “Have I not lost four sons, plus others—and take a look at my daughter! I have not gone unscathed! My family shared our food—we are as hungry and as desperate as any others!”

Sal-Lar hung his head and awkwardly shuffled his feet on the raw dirt floor.

“They have many faults to find with you and yours. Not the least being your son Far-Awn, who ran off with the last puhlet flock alive—leaving us all to survive on tortar flesh—and you are responsible for Far-Awn’s actions. They say Far-Awn should have been thrown into the abyss soon after birth. He is a freak who has brought the wrath of the Gods down on our heads, so that nothing will grow, can grow with the storms coming so often.”

“So,” said Baka with his eyes hard and bitter, “the cowards below send a boy to tell of their grievances. Why don’t they come here, and look me in the eye, and tell me themselves?”

Lee-La and her sons sat silent, all with their eyes fixed on Baka. Outside the sky blazed with a riot of glorious colors as the first sun hid itself behind the Scarlet Mountains.

“Baka Valente,” Sal-Lar began in a voice he struggled to make manly.

“As I said before, I am risking my life by coming to warn you. I want you to run away and take Bret-Lee—for they are going to put you all to death! They are voting, but already everyone knows the outcome, for they are constructing extra sacrificial altars.”

“Fools!” roared Baka with all his former vigor of vocal power. “They should be using that energy to plough and seed the soil!”

Then his temper simmered down, and he looked with narrowed eyes at the boy standing before him, thin as a rail, and hollow cheeked.

“Why do you care, boy? Why do you risk your life to save us?”

Sal-Lar walked to the bed where Bret-Lee lay without movement, her eyes staring blankly into space. Very lightly Sal-Lar stroked her cheek.

“Bret-Lee and I have been secretly in love for years. I had intended to ask for her hand in marriage when I reached the age of fourteen...”

“How old are you now?” asked Baka, without much interest. What meaning had love when death was around the corner?

“Thirteen. Two months and I will be fourteen.”

Sal-Lar spun about. “But you must run and hide! I’ll go with you, so I can be with Bret-Lee. If she dies, I will not choose another.”

Baka shook his head.

“No, son. I won’t run. There is no place to hide. Twice I have lost wives that I loved, and both times I said I would never take another, yet I did. Life without a wife is no life at all. A man alone is nothing. We are all farmers, meant to sow our seed. If you love Bret-Lee, then kiss her good-bye while she lives ... for by tomorrow this time, she will be dead.

And when this is done, go down below and tell those who wait that Baka’s family will give their lives willingly to save theirs. Though personally, I don’t believe our deaths will appease the Gods. The storms will still come. Our ancestors tried human sacrifice before, and it didn’t work. We have slain our animals on the altar blocks, and that didn’t work either. We have burned the best of our grain—and what good did that do? So go and tell them, Sal-Lar, that we will die for their sakes. I only pray it helps.”

Dejectedly Sal-Lar made his way to the huge cavern where the elders met. He strode boldly into the council room, where only the elders were

allowed, never a boy of his tender years. In a voice cold and loud with abhorrence he interrupted their meeting.

“I have been to Baka Valente and told him what you mean to do. He will not run, or put up any resistance. He says he and all the members of his family will gladly give their lives so that you and yours may be spared. But he also said he doesn’t believe the Gods see your sacrificial offerings. They are meaningless executions, committed only by savages.”

The gray-haired elders turned and stared at the boy who stood so rigidly defiant before them. One very old man lifted his hand and stroked his long white beard. “This is disappointing. We were certain Baka would run, like his cowardly son.”

“Baka Valente is no coward!” Sal-Lar flared passionately. “You are the cowards! You put the blame on Baka for everything that has gone wrong in your lives! For every one of you is jealous that he succeeds when you don’t! Baka’s house is the only one left standing because he constructed it better—not because he connives with evil forces! Far-Awn ran with his flock in order to save their lives, not because he is a coward! In fact, I believe, of us all, he is the bravest. Which one of you has traveled to Bay Gar and lived to tell the tale?” Sal-Lar met then the eyes of one of the elders—his grandfather.

“So, when you spread Baka and his family on the altar blocks and slit their throats in the sun, so that their blood will enrich the ground, put up an extra block, one for me, for today I married Baka’s daughter, Bret-Lee. She is now my wife, and I too am a member of Baka’s family.”

The skin on Sal-Lar’s grandfather’s face turned very pale. His son was already dead of the dimdespairs, and only Sal-Lar and his sister, Santan, remained alive. The old man swallowed twice.

“You lie, Sal-Lar,” he said in a weak and old voice.

“Bret-Lee is too near death to repeat the marriage vows.”

“She managed to say them,” said Sal-Lar.

“I cut her finger and mixed her blood with mine, and she is my wife. I will die when she does.” For long moments all the elders remained quiet. Then one spoke up.

“This changes nothing. If Sal-Lar is fool enough to cast his lot with those ordained to die, then so be it.” The grandfather of Sal-Lar filled with panic. He was too old to father more sons, or even daughters. Sal-Lar represented the last of his line—for Santan was committed to one of

Baka's sons, and she too must die, for it was whispered they had lain together, and she was even now with child.

"We are deciding all this too quickly. Let us sit down and rationalize. Perhaps there is some truth in what Baka says. Perhaps the Gods won't notice our sacrifices, and will continue to send the storms." Like warfars, the rest of the elders turned upon him, snarling out in anger:

"Hah! You seek to save your grandson and granddaughter! You have betrayed us! It was you who sent Sal-Lar to warn Baka and take the surprise from our attack! We don't want sacrificial victims who willingly give their lives as if they were without value! We sacrifice only the strongest and the best—and we believed that of Baka! Why to kill him now would be just another way of allowing him to root his feet in the ground! What irony is this! Baka is too clever for us!"

"Yes," agreed Sal-Lar without thought, "he always has been." A dawning light of comprehension and cunning developed in an elder's eyes.

"Thank you for saying that, Sal-Lar. You are right. Baka has always been the smartest and cleverest, and we were almost taken in by his act. He knew we wouldn't sacrifice those waiting and wanting to die, so he has played a game. Now he has been caught in his own trap—and you with him."

The two suns peaked over the grain fields that yielded nothing now. The fields would not be seeded until the Gods had been appeased with the blood of the sacrificial victims. Earth soaked with fresh blood always gave the most in the past, and those with strong religious fervor believed it would be so in the future. For a land where the weather was almost daily tumultuous, it was uniquely calm, as if the Gods on their distant Green Mountain were indeed attracted to the ceremony that was to take place, and held back their usual wrath.

Already the populace of El Sod-a-Por was pleased. It was going to work, this killing of Baka and all related to him through blood and through marriage. Once more their fields would ripen, and the Gods would send animals, perhaps even more wild puhlets that they could tame into domesticity as their foreparents had. They would begin again, and keep to the old ways: live humbly beneath the ground, and not allow the Gods to see them walk again on the surface in the light from the two suns. A few in the crowd sighed regretfully, thinking back to all the good and kind things Baka and Lee-La had done. But when they gave it more thought, it was Baka's son Far-Awn who had started this disastrous chain of events. He was the troublemaker. A pity he wasn't here to share in his family's

fate. Misshapen and deformed babies were always destroyed. Far-Awn hadn't been misshapen or deformed, only strangely colored, but ugly color was in itself a deformity. Baka had talked them into having mercy then:

“Look at this good baby,” Baka had pleaded when he laid the newborn child naked for the judges to see.

“He is only pale—of a different color—but see what a fine male he is. Why, he could be a changeling sent from the Gods—and they would be angry to see him destroyed.”

So Far-Awn had been permitted to live—and look what had become of it! Bret-Lee was carried out of the sod home of her father, followed by the young husband she had married while unconscious. The comatose girl and Sal-Lar were strapped down side by side on an altar. Standing helplessly, Baka turned his eyes away.

He couldn't watch the sharpened crystal blade that would slash his only daughter's throat. Beside him his wife struggled not to cry, to remain impassive as was the rule, but she failed, and softly began to sob. The women in the crowd started the ceremonial chant. Baka swept his eyes back quickly to the altar. The judges were conferring with the elders in whispers. Progressively Baka's family would be killed, the youngest first, and Baka last.

“Fool boy,” muttered Baka to Lee-La, as he looked pityingly at Sal-Lar.

“He shouldn't have married our daughter. For him there would be another. There is always another.”

“Is there?” asked his wife brokenly, looking up to search his eyes.

“Have I completely wiped from your mind the sweet memories of your first wives?—do you never think of them, or long for them? Does a live son always replace a dead one? Are two of us ever alike?” Baka couldn't reply. He turned his eyes toward the western horizon, staring almost blindly, his legs so weak they began to tremble as the women's voices rose higher in the cry that would bring down the sharp knife. Coming down through the hills, he saw a slow-moving line of small dots.

Heading the line was a tall and slender figure that moved with exceptional agility and grace. Baka's heart jumped upward and began a fierce and excited pounding. No one walked like that but his very own son—his most beloved youngest son! He threw back his head, summoning all the vocal power his weakened body still possessed, and he roared out in a mighty voice:

“Stop this execution! The Gods have answered our prayers! There is no need now for human sacrifices!” Bewildered and surprised, the judges and elders turned to stare at Baka. The death chant of the women dwindled to a faint wail. Baka raised his arm, pointing his finger to the west.

“Look there,” he commanded in a voice of such authority no one could help but look. “There is my son whom you all claim is a runaway coward, who stole our last meat supply. But he has survived weeks in the wilderness, lived through a storm that kept us asleep for four nights and three days, and wiped out three-quarters of our population—yet he is alive, and leading back with him a flock of puhlets much increased in numbers. Now tell me where the right and the wrong belongs: with him, or with what you tried to do today?”

The entire remaining population of the upper borderlands turned and stared at Baka’s youngest son, suddenly grown much taller and very strong-looking as he came running fast, followed by the long line of puhlets and half-grown yearlings. Far-Awn ran straight into his mother’s open arms. Lee-La began to cry.

“My son, my son,” she sobbed, “we believed we would never see you again.”

“Oh, I am not so very easy to kill,” Far-Awn said, smiling at his mother. Then his expression sobered. He looked at his father, thin and gaunt, with new gray sprinkled in this mop of thick brick-red hair. He stared at all of those people there, like living skeletons, their purple eyes far back in their heads. Certainly, he had arrived just at a most auspicious moment. Once more he met his father’s eyes, mixed with emotions.

Baka was greatly relieved that his son was alive, yet he felt some anger too. He wanted to shout and throw accusations at this boy who had been, and always was, the source of so much trouble, and yet he couldn’t. He was too happy. His face became a sunset of changing colors as he struggled to find just the correct way to address this son so unexpectedly returned from the dead. And healthy-looking too—grown into a man in the weeks since he stole away. Baka’s hand stretched out.

“I am glad to see you,” he said, in fierce understatement. A large smile split Far-Awn’s tanned face, shining his white teeth in the sunlight.

“Father, you have said something nice to me! As for me, I am delighted to see you! And my mother, and my brothers ... but they are not all here.” He looked then toward the row of large red boulders in a parallel row, and his brows creased in a frown.

“Why are Bret-Lee and Sal-Lar strapped down on that rock?” No one could answer, though guilt flushed their faces, and they looked uneasily at one another. Far-Awn saw the god’s signs painted on the face of his sister, and also on Sal-Lar. He paled with shock before he spoke.

“Have you all gone mad? Have you started again practicing the evil ways of the ancients?” His incredulous eyes scanned the ragged, starving people.

“Has not the weather killed enough of you, so that you seek now to kill yourselves—like the warfars?”

“Baka’s family is forgiven,” cried out the high elder, throwing down the crystal blade. “They do not have to die now, for there is meat to eat.” No sooner were the words out of his mouth, when a man near-crazed with hunger quickly scooped up the sacrificial knife, and rushed toward the flock of puhlets standing obediently still. Even quicker, Far-Awn moved. He reached Musha, who had his head lowered, about to charge the killer of one of his wives. Far-Awn struck the blade from the man’s hand just before it plunged into the throat of a quivering female puhlet. Swiftly picking up the knife, Far-Awn stood beside Musha, still prepared to attack and defend his family. In a voice as loud as his father’s, Far-Awn said, “These puhlets are not for eating!”

His words stunned the starving population. They were ravenous, near death, and sustenance from the Gods had been sent to deliver them—and a boy with a knife and a crazed male puhlet were keeping them from eating—and living! Baka wiped his brow free from sweat, as stunned as any other. He might have known his feeling of pride in his youngest couldn’t last. He had entirely lost his mind—the puhlets not for eating?—of whatother use were they?

“Far-Awn,” he began gently, the way one speaks to the demented, “I am proud that you have survived life in the wilderness, and alone assisted in the birthing time, but we are starving. The tortars don’t nourish us enough. Look at us, we are skin and bones, and your sister and her new husband lay on a sacrificial altar because of the desperation you see here. The remaining altar blocks were put there for each member of your family. Are you willing to see all of us die to save that flock of yours?”

“I have vowed to Musha that never again will any of his kind be bred for our tables, and I will keep my word.” Baka stared at the giant male animal, who pawed the ground with a fierce glow of anger in eyes that had only been placid and dull before. He swallowed in disbelief. Centuries ago

all wildness and fight had been bred out of the puhlets. They never fought back. Willingly they submitted to their fate.

“Far-Awn, what have you done?” he whispered hoarsely. “You have turned our domestic animals against us. You have betrayed us, to favor them.” Half-turning, Far-Awn began to unstrap a mesh bag that was tied to Musha. Every animal bore such a burden: net bags that bulged full with something the likes of which no one had seen before.

“Look,” said someone, “the idiot son of Baka brings us fruit when we want meat!” Ignoring the remark, Far-Awn displayed before all a fat rosy pink melon with an inch or so of red stem. He used the crystal ceremonial knife to slice the melon open. A delicious aroma wafted through the air, causing everyone’s nose to sniff. Again the shining knife flashed, and Far-Awn handed a slice of the melon to his father.

“Taste it,” he said.

“Go on,” he urged when Baka hesitated, his eyes on the strange fruit. Baka took a small bite and rolled the bit about in his mouth, savoring the flavor on his tongue, and then swallowed. His mouth curved upward in a wide smile.

“By the Gods! Whatever it is, I’ve never eaten anything nearly as good!”

In a moment, the slice of melon in Baka’s hand had disappeared, rind and all. Handing the knife and what remained of the melon to his father, Far-Awn walked over to Bret-Lee, who lay as rigid as a stick of wood, still tied to the altar. Very gently Far-Awn slipped his arm under her head, and tilted his water bag to her lips. A magenta liquid dribbled from her still lips.

“Drink,” ordered Far-Awn softly. “Drink, little sister. You have never tasted anything like this before.”

“She cannot drink,” Lee-La said sadly as she came to stand behind her youngest son.

“The water clocks told us we slept four nights and three days in the caves, and Bret-Lee was overcome by the dimdespairs. Look at her, she is already turning brown.” But Bret-Lee moved. Her eyes fluttered open, and she made an effort to grab the bag from Far-Awn’s hands. He cut her bonds, using his own knife, and held the bottle to her lips, smiling to himself as she drained it dry. He cut all the ropes that bound her, and those of Sal-Lar. His ten-year-old sister, so near death but a moment ago, sat up and rubbed sleepily at her eyes. She gazed solemnly thoughtful at Far-Awn.

“I thought you ran away with the puhlets, but I am happy you are back.” Then she turned her attention to Sal-Lar, who was stiffly sitting up, chafing his wrists that the ropes had burned. Bret-Lee flushed with healthy color to see him so close at her side.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, fluttering her eyelids. Sal-Lar smiled, although smiling wasn’t allowed.

“We are married now, Bret-Lee. You managed to say the words, even when you didn’t know what you were doing.” The full lips of Bret-Lee quivered.

“You mean I missed my own marriage ceremony? And I got married in this old rag I’m wearing? Oh, Mother! How could you allow that to happen?”

No one heard Sal-Lar’s answer through the bedlam that broke loose. The mesh bags of fruit were torn from the backs of the puhlets. The melons were cut open, broken open, smashed open. The fruit of many colors was jammed by the handfuls into eager and ravenous mouths. Even the stems were eaten. They ate until they fell on the ground, their bellies full for the first time in their lives. As Far-Awn stepped over the bodies sprawled on the ground, he noticed smiles on the faces of many. He was smiling too when he reached Musha’s side and patted the great animal’s head.

“See, Musha. It’s exactly as I said it would be. No one will ever want, or need to eat, puhlet meat again. Now you and your family are free.” Musha rilled and looked up at his master. He turned his head in the direction from which he had just come. It had been a long, long journey back to where humans lived and took care of them. Musha looked again at the wilderness where the warfars lived. Then he nuzzled Far-Awn’s hand.

“I understand,” Far-Awn murmured in sympathy. “You have been domesticated and tamed, and have forgotten the old ways of fending for yourselves. So stay here if that is your choice, and I will see to it that puhlet meat is never again eaten. Things here will change. I will see to it.”

Musha looked trustingly at the boy who had cared for him since his birth. He looked at the people lying supine on the ground, the suns beaming bright on their faces. His puhlet brain was not large and given to thinking prolonged thoughts, only impulsive ones. Somewhere though, a little flicker of doubt quivered. Musha moved closer to Far-Awn, deciding to trust.

2

The Annals of Sal-Lar

Sal-Lar married Bret-Lee for a second time, and this time she was aware of the ceremony, and got to wear the first new dress of her life. They lived happily for many years, and when Sal-Lar was an old man and the father of many children, he recorded the beginnings of El Dorraine in his most elegant script:

You here, who have never known hunger, real hunger, the kind that gnaws at your stomach lining, and keeps you always miserable and weak, and sets your mind near crazy for want of nourishment—so much so you could eat the shoes from your feet—you cannot possibly appreciate the thrill and delight that was ours when first we tasted that miraculous fruit of the star-flowers!

The melon Far-Awn gave me had a rosy flesh with a tantalizing flavor, which I was always just on the threshold of identifying, but never quite did. Always another fruit had to be eaten to make certain of the flavor, and I never was. Not then—not now—that was part of its miracle.

We began our education that day when Far-Awn explained how the net bags were made of the webby roots of the strange plants that he had found growing on the desert plains of Bay Sol. So difficult it was for us to believe he had been there, and lived! Then that boy, suddenly grown very authoritative and sure of himself, so that all were impressed, did a most remarkable thing. He took each one of those empty net bags, formerly the containers for the fruits—and he buried them! I began to think he was truly sunmad.

The very next inexplicable act he performed didn't reassure me of his mental capabilities either, not one bit. He took our most precious, clear and purified water and sprinkled it over those dry mesh bags he had just buried! Someone started to object. Baka Valente, Far-Awn's father shut him up.

“Fool!—let that boy do as he wants! What need do we have now for water except for bathing—now that we have melons that are both food and drink to us?”

So another asked very respectfully why he bothered to plant bags made of dry, dead roots. Far-Awn looked up from his work and chuckled. He didn't bother to tell us his reasons, until the last mesh bag of dead roots was planted and watered. Then he sat down, with us all gathered around

him, and told us the whole of his adventure: how he stayed in the cave with the puhlets, fearing the warfars would eat them during the night, and the storm from Bay Gar came and kept him asleep for four nights and three days, the same as it did us. Only he suffered less severely, for he had the warmth of the puhlets snuggled up close to him, while our fires burned low, and then went out.

Sal-Lar paused then in the recording of the story. He sipped of the purple wine his secretary so readily offered. Everyone alive knew the tale almost as well as he—but there would come a day when all alive at that time would be dead... and there should be some permanent record, for tales grew so exaggerated when repeated over and over again by many tongues. He thought again of the time when everyone alive then would be dead, and he sighed. Strange, how the coming of the fruit changed their lives! He wrote:

What a celebration we had that day! For the first time in many months we felt vigorous and strong! But for Far-Awn, we would have made absolute hogs of ourselves. Far-Awn insisted we must eat sparingly of the fruit, for it had to last until he could bring back more from his supply hidden in the cave of the red-rock hills. All the men offered to go with him and help bring back the fruit that made us feel drunk with power. I was fortunate to be one of the men chosen by Far-Awn to accompany him back to the cave. And while we journeyed, as unbelievable as it seemed then, the root bags Far-Awn had planted germinated and started a new crop of food for us. Far-Awn gave each one of us a long and penetrating look.

“Do not think for one minute the fruit of those white star-flowers is ordinary fruit. It is a special gift, sent by the Gods.”

We believed that. Without question.

Ah, those were sun days! And so were all the days that came after. It was a joy to awaken in the mornings, to spend our time discovering the many faceted merits of that superlative fruit! It didn't take us too long to learn what Far-Awn had discovered: It was more than just a fruit—it was every fruit! It was more than just one vegetable—it was every vegetable we had ever known, and some we had never experienced.

We named our new source of sustenance pufars. Half for the puhlets that led Far-Awn to them, and half for the boy. Every day we learned something new about the pufars. Ten thousand and one books could be written on that particular subject, the agriculture, and the multitude of methods for preparing pufars, plus the many other things that can be done

with them outside the realm of food for our stomachs! You who are reading this have experienced all the advantages of that most marvelous fruit. But we of old El Sod-a-Por, we had the fun and adventure of discovering for ourselves!

It was a thrill beyond expressing to wake up to the first sun's light, and know that today something new and totally unexpected might very well be discovered by one's very own self! A spirited competitive rivalry developed among the inspired pufar farmers, to see which of us could develop a new strain, a new flavor, a new use. But all of us were put in the shade by the genius of Far-Awn. He was way ahead of us. We were left stunned by the imagination and talent that boy had—and once we all had considered him crazy and lazy too!

Far-Awn taught us what light could do, and how the quantity and quality of light mattered so much. We didn't ask why of Far-Awn, we just accepted.

If the plants were grown in full sun all day, with a plentiful supply of water, the resulting fruit was bright orange, and it tasted divinely sweet. With full sunlight but a limited supply of water, the fruit became brilliant red, with still another nuance of sugar-sweet flavoring. And in full sunlight without even one drop of water, the fruit turned a deep, rich yellow and developed a thick husky hull, with a sweet-sour mash inside that was delightfully refreshing. Grown in only partial sunlight, with a little water, the fruit was pale and pink. It was this delicately flavored melon that Far-Awn first fed us, and so it was always my favorite.

Other plants were grown in the shade, with only speckled light coming intermittently, and these developed into various shades of green and blue, the color and flavor depending on the degree of shade, the degree of water, the degree of occasional light. But the plants that grew in total darkness gave us our biggest surprise—and to many, our greatest delight!

In the darkness, the fruit developed only a thin brittle purple shell, as fragile as an egg. Inside, the pulp was almost liquid. It could be eaten with a spoon, or strained and made pure liquid to pour in a cup. It had a very pleasant zingy taste.

Someone—I forget just who—was able to resist the temptation of drinking this liquid straight down. That someone kept the purple liquid until it aged into a magenta color and when swallowed, it burned our throats, and warmed our insides. It was unpleasant, rather sour, yet somehow it was very pleasing. It reacted on us strangely. We smiled for the first time in our lives. We quickly hushed, of course, lest the Gods see

they had given us too much. Then and there, there were those who decided to specialize in the cultivation of the grown-in-darkness purple pufars. Many variations of the liquid purple were developed but many have covered that subject far better than I possibly could.

Let me write this, as a man who remembers the past well, that until the coming of the pufars, all that any of us on El Sod-a-Por could think of was food and how to obtain it, of shelter and how to retain it, of all of life and how to sustain it! We were obsessed with the weather, with the perpetual struggle against so many odds. We never thought we could win—we just wanted to hang on! After the pufars came into our dreary, monotonous, hopeless lives, doors swung open that we hadn't even realized were there.

We had food now that grew bountifully, with such little care; we had the time and the energy for discovering the joys of other things. But we were so accustomed to our old obsessions, to our old habits of labor and nothing but endless hard work, that we couldn't readily give them up without making substitutions. The pufar itself became our obsession—and what zealots we were!

I recall my wife, pregnant with our first child, looking at me wistfully.

“Sal-Lar,” she said, “you work as hard now as you did in the underground caverns. Can't you stay home at least one day, and forget your work?”

I gave her an incredulous look.

“Stay home and do nothing all day?” I asked. “What would we do, all day long?”

“We could think of something,” she said rather vaguely, “something we could do that was just fun, and not hard work.”

At that time I could think of only one thing that was fun, and she was already pregnant. So I threw off her ridiculous suggestion that I stay with her and do something that was fun for a full day! I set out at a trot, eager for the factory work that was a challenge to our ingenuity, and found my brother-in-law, Far-Awn, already busy at work. He had not yet married, although every unmarried girl in the upper borderlands was crazy for his attention. There had been a time when I thought he felt some attraction to my sister, Santan, but Santan had married one of Far-Awn's brothers and had two children. I am most proud to write here that I was Far-Awn's very closest friend, so that he could confide in me with perfect reliability that he would marry only when he found just the right girl. That “right

girl” seemed a long time in coming. I felt rather sorry for him that he was so hard to please, for there was much joy in having a wife.

Since our full stomachs gave us a new kind of lusty good health, our energy was boundless. We attacked with full and gusty zeal any challenge given to us by the Gods of the Mountain. We were determined to outdo the expectations of those mighty, unknown ones who lived on the mountain, and our easy successes were indeed a rich and heady wine.

For the first time, we on El Sod-a-Por thought of ourselves as something other than struggling toilers, expendable nothings of no real importance or meaning. For the first time we had the means, we had the strength, we had the will to resist, to fight, to win! We weren’t just going to hang on—we were going to ride! For the first time, we were men! In time, we grew to think of ourselves as even more than men: We had the power now to rival that of the Gods—or so we came to believe foolishly. But I am getting ahead of myself again....

We had ploughed, seeded, planted, and grown, then harvested and eaten. Then came an even greater discovery: Until this time we had been eating the pufars raw, or drinking them down like water or wine, experimenting in all the flavors of their growth. It was my own wife, along with her mother, Lee-La, who accidentally dropped a pufar into the fire. Very upset, the two women hauled the fruit out quickly, for such was our ingrained tendency to waste not, even when there was plenty, and they were afraid the fruit would be spoiled. My wife cut open the fruit with the burned black shell and tentatively tasted of the half-cooked fruit.

That evening when I came home, she greeted me exuberantly.

“Sal-Lar, you’ll never guess! Today I dropped an orange pufar in the fire—quite by accident—and it came out tasting like nothing I have ever eaten before! It was soft, and mushy, and so sweetly divine. Mother and I quickly threw a few more pufars in the fire, and we gave some to Far-Awn, when he stopped by. He loved it! He named it a pudding, and suggested we women start cooking the pufars in different methods.

“Puhlet meat is not the only thing that can be roasted,” he told us, and then he winked his eye. She stopped and smiled sadly.

“You know, I wish he would find a wife. He is growing old, and he doesn’t have a child to inherit his talent.”

Far-Awn was growing old. He was sixteen now, and unmarried, an unheard of age to remain a bachelor. Baka Valente himself once said that at sixteen he had already fathered seven children—few of whom still lived.

“Do I speak overly much of my friendship and closeness to Far-Awn? I hope not, and seek not to impress you with this. But remember, I was the husband of his sister. I was his closest friend. I was his most trusted confidant, more so than any of his brothers, or even his father. The love I had for him was different from the love I had for my wife, but very large, nevertheless. Still, he was for me always an enigma. He could sit staring thoughtfully into the fire, his brows wrinkled in a look of anxiety, when all was going so well. Though he worked as hard as any of us, he was given to overlong periods of just thinking, of daydreaming, of planning for the future when every day was so perfect now. We accepted this oddity of his personality as part of his talent and character, and respected the differences that were his. Still, his thoughtful frowns when he thought of the future put a few thoughts in my own head, trying to ponder on what could be the cause.”

While Far-Awn thought of the future, of ways to defeat the storms when they came, the rest of us combed our brains to devise, invent, and originate different methods of cooking and preparing the pufar fruit. You see, we were very much enthralled with the needs and demands of our stomachs, for never had they been so cherished and delighted before. Into our ovens went the pufars, and they became not fruit or vegetable at all—but the very finest meat! Meat that was as tasty any day as the best puhlet flesh! Fried, the pufar was strongly akin to the best cuts of the quickets! Boiled, baked, stewed, roasted, toasted, or poached—any method at all produced new unique results. Not any one of us could say which flavor was the most pleasing. Even the texture could be altered with the cooking.

So we grated, we ground, we pulverized, mashed, and rolled. We sliced thin and long, short and chunky. We diced, we minced, and we pounded—and then we cooked!

Overnight it seemed we became a nation of chefs of great merit. Overnight we became exacting gourmets to add to our already gourmand appetites. Rivalry between the best cooks began, and juried competitions were an everyday event—and oh, how delightful to be a judge!

We became plump, but never fat, for our old habits of work without play were still very much upon us. Strange, how devoted we were with our obsession for food, for eating, as if that were all there was. So enthralled we were with our cuisine—as if that alone offered us limitless expectations!

Be understanding at this point. From time immemorial, in the aeons since we had uprooted ourselves from the ground, we had been nothing but tillers of the soil, farmers, dirt-dobbers, always on the verge of

starvation, slaving always to nourish our bodies, balancing perpetually on the rim between life and death. Isn't it only natural that once our immediate physical needs were satisfied, we would have the presumption to think—no determined would be a better word—to determine that we would conquer all that had beaten us down in defeat before? Can't you sympathize with our exaltation because at last we were well fed?

The future wasn't ours. That belonged to our children and grandchildren. We had no thoughts of tomorrows—tomorrow could take care of itself. Today was our time to shine. When the tomorrows came, we would be cork brown and dead in our graves.”

So we thought.

3

Far-Awn Meets His Match

A youth discovered one day, just fooling around with a split and hollowed-out fruit hull, that strings could be stretched across the hull and fastened down, and from this primitive instrument, sounds could be made that resembled that of the wind blowing down through the hills. Music was born that day. The youth took his music maker home and played it for his sister.

Her eyes widened in a wondering rapture that jumped her to her feet, and she began to move, fitting her movements to the rhythm of the wind singing through a hollowed-out fruit hull. Dancing was the child of the music. Like everyone there who discovered something new and exciting, the two children rushed to Far-Awn and played and danced for him. A dreamy, faraway look came into Far-Awn's eyes as he watched and listened—for this was not the first time he had heard music—but never before in El Sod-a-Por.

“What are your names?” he asked of the two, for he would tell Sal-Lar so the discovers of music and dancing could be recorded in the book Sal-Lar would compile. The boy answered, awed to be in the presence of Far-Awn,

“I am Mah-Lan, and this is my sister, Mar-Laine. Our father is Hen-Shee; he grows the purple, grown-in-darkness pufars.” It made Far-Awn laugh to hear that. He always laughed more easily than anyone else.

“Perhaps your father's crop accounts for your unusual talent. When you go home, tell your parents how much I enjoyed your music and your dancing. Teach others how to make instruments, and invent different shapes to make new sounds.” Only then did he turn his violet-blue eyes on the lovely girl, Mar-Laine. Her red-gold hair was very much like the color of his own. Her complexion was creamy fair, like his own, without even a hint of green. Thoughtfully, admiringly, he scanned her figure from head to toes, and it was unheard of for a man to be too taken with the beauty of a young girl.

“Are you married?” he asked, his broken heart mending a bit, though he had grieved many a lovelorn day for not having Santan. She shook her head, unable to speak. She marveled that he could look at her so approvingly, when she was just a nobody, and he was the most important person alive.

“Would you mind if I asked how old you are?” She swallowed nervously, for she was middle-aged and not yet married, and certainly he would laugh and be scornful. How could she tell him she had waited all her life for one special man to come and say sweet words, when men weren’t given to saying sweet words, except to domestic animals.

“I am twelve,” she answered shyly, keeping her gaze riveted to the floor.

“That is an advanced age, and not married, tsh, tsh. Are you perhaps disliking of men?” He said all this teasingly, strangely affected by the girl who was like his twin in looks, only of another sex. And he’d never seen anyone dance before—why it was like another form of communication.

“Sir,” she said properly, lifting her head to meet his gaze directly.

“Every day of my life my parents urge me to get married to someone, anyone. But I cannot marry just any man! I want what other women don’t seem to care about! I don’t want just a man to make babies, but a man to love me for what I am, and also not just for what I can do. I want a man who will listen when I speak, and not hush me up like I don’t have a mind at all to think with. I have a very good mind—so if you are not afraid of a woman who dares to be different, I might consent to teaching you how to dance.” He was charmed, bedazzled, especially when she smiled at him flirtatiously.

“And, may I add, sir, you are much older than I am, and not married, nor are you betrothed, to my knowledge.”

“Does everyone know everything about me?”

“No one knows anything about you,” she said tartly.

“But if you think I am unduly impressed with you, think otherwise. You are too much like my mirrored reflection. Except, of course, you do have a few minor differences.”

“Minor?” he asked, taunting her, for he’d never enjoyed a girl so much.

“I call the differences between you and me the most major difference in the world.” She backed off, surprised he thought as she did. Was he like her in all ways but that of gender? Was she no longer to feel an alien in her own world? He came then to her, and caught her hand in his.

“Come dance for me again, Mar-Laine, and teach me to move as you do. I have a strange fluttering in the middle of my chest that says you and

I are destined for one another, and all the tears I shed for another were only wasted.”

Turning, she darted a long look back at him, then skipped off. Leaving Far-Awn sitting in his father’s large, strong house with a head full of romantic notions and not practical ones. Oh, there was a girl like his mother! Not just a female for breeding, but one for loving as well! What miracles the pufars had brought about! On and on he sat, flipping his thoughts away from love and the beauty of Mar-Laine, until he was dreaming of one of the most important of all his innovative inventions. From beginning to end he thought it out, and then he acted. He gathered all the members of his large family, male and female about him and gave them each specific orders. Then he joined in with the work, demonstrating exactly what he wanted done. Mar-Laine stood to the side, invited without explanation.

“What by the Gods are you doing now?” demanded Baka, sitting idly in the sunlight while everyone else worked. In his hand he held a cup of the magenta wine, from which he sipped from time to time. Life was so easy now, he had time for sitting and drinking, and asking querulous questions.

“With so much good food overflowing our storage bins, why waste your time messing about with those rock-hard hulls?” Without interrupting his labor, Far-Awn answered, “These yellow hulls are the toughest material we have. I have thought of a use for them.”

Baka couldn’t begin to imagine why his son would want to use those things—they had a bitter taste, and were tough and stringy when cooked. Indeed, the pufars that were brittle, hard, and yellow, grown in full sunlight and without water, were tough enough to break one’s teeth. But Far-Awn wasn’t dreaming up another recipe. He used a huge stone mallet and brought it down hard on a yellow hull, hammering until the hull was a yellow mash. All day he and his brothers hammered at the hulls until they had a huge amount piled in a heap. This they covered, and pinned down, so in the morning they wouldn’t awaken to find all their fine, golden mash blown away by the winds.

In private, Far-Awn had already done some experimenting, so he knew exactly what to add to the mash to get the consistency he wanted. When he had the mash rolled out, like a huge sheet of dough for baking, Baka barked again, “What, by the gods, are you going to do with that? It’s too large for any of our ovens.”

Far-Awn and his brothers were too busy to answer. Already they had stripped Baka's home free of the puhlet hide covering, and now they took large sheets of the pliable mash-cement, and began covering the sod house. Leaning back comfortably in his chair, Baka stopped fuming, and watched his dull-gray sod home slowly change into a brightly gleaming golden dome. The simmering heat from the suns soon had the mash as hard as metal. Far-Awn looked at his father when the job was done, and slowly smiled.

"Well, Father—do you have anything to say now?" Baka looked the house over, and stated flatly:

"Looks rather pretty, though I suspect the first hard wind and rain will have it down."

"No, Father. This is the house I will live in with my wife."

And with those words, Far-Awn's bachelorhood ended. Not the hardest rain could wash off the golden mash covering that soon protected every home on the upper borderlands! Nor could the strongest winds blow the houses away! Nor could the funneling winds rip up the houses and hurl them miles away and smash them down, or against a mountainside, as the funnels had done in their so recent past. Nor could the sod wash down into mud again. Oh, the joy of it! The thrill of it! The excitement of being innovators, each man, woman, and child! With unlimited food, with energy unrepressed, with rampant hope and enthusiasm, so much those people accomplished in a short while, changes that would have taken a less determined, less industrious populace generations to achieve—they did it all in a matter of years, a few years.

The blustering weather was still their enemy. But now they had the energy, with permanent shelter, with material they could use to protect and shield themselves and their animals. The pulverized tough hulls of the sunbaked pufars were mixed with the juice of the purple melons, and this mixture was shaped into huge blocks, and baked in mammoth mountain ovens. The heat from those ovens was comparable to the fire of a hundred noonday suns! The white-hot sizzling blocks were then cooled in the blue ice taken in great slabs from Bay Gar—and the steam from the cooling blocks rose to the heavens!

Surely the Gods had to see this! When the blocks cooled, again they were heated, and again cooled. Time and again this was done. What had been only nebulously suggested after the first firing and cooling became an awesome reality! Even Far-Awn in his red-hot sizzling love affair with his new wife, had to stand perfectly still and stare at what they had just

created. He put his arm about Mar-Laine's shoulders, and said to no one in particular:

“This is beyond my greatest expectations! For years I have dreamed of something like this—but to see it—to know at last we have the ultimate means of protecting ourselves...” No one quite guessed what he intended to do with the transparent blocks that were stronger than any metal they had yet found in the underground burrows. Far-Awn stood with his arm about his wife, and said, “There, shimmering with a soft luster, is truthfully our salvation. What does it matter now what wraths the Gods aim at us? What angry God can hurl a mighty arrow that can penetrate through these diamond-strong domes we will build over all our land? This transparent dome will not shut out the sunlight, but it will be our shield against the storms.”

Yet, to cover all the land with a dome large enough seemed an impossible task. A meeting was held, and Far-Awn spoke: “We will construct a series of transparent domes, but it is beyond reasoning to protect every house, every farm with planted fields. We must form villages, and surround our homes with farmlands, and over all of that, we will build transparent domes.”

They began the impossible task, and succeeded. For the first time in their known lives, all that they owned, loved, possessed, and held dear was safe from the extremes of weather. They were, at last, in control. Eventually, in time, every village and farm in the upperlands was sheltered under a glistening domed roof. No longer could the driving rain flood away their seedlings. And the rain flooding off the domes was caught in reservoirs and used again.

The people under the domes rejoiced that never again would they have to burrow in the earth like worms, or crawl on their knees like insects, or curl their toes into the earth because of the underground darkness and the dim-despairs that went with it. Free they were to live forever in the lights from two suns. They felt sometimes, almost guiltily, like the Gods themselves. It worried some when they thought long on this subject. Everything was going so well—it wasn't natural. Life wasn't ever easy...

However, anxiety over anything couldn't persist overlong when their small villages expanded into towns, and then into cities, and a way was found to make brilliant dyes from the pufar hulls and the pigmented ground under the crystals. Faster than quickets grabbing up grain, the women seized upon these dyes, and colored the cloth they spun from the webby pufar roots—and soon their clothing rivaled the radiance of the sun-downings, and the glories of the day-startings.

The small golden huts enlarged into multiroomed mansions of any color of their choice. Like walking jewels, they felt full of power, eager and zealous for all the good life now offered, though they still labored hard and long. They were accustomed to work. Now they learned to play just as hard. A council of men headed by Far-Awn met each day, discussing the boundless dreams they meant to magnify into reality.

“We will ribbon our cities with connecting covered highways,” said Far-Awn. “Now it will be easier to soar over the mountains and hills than to curve around them.”

The bridges and flying highways were the greatest challenges to the new young engineers with brains never stymied, as the ingenious paths of talent were many, though untried before. It amazed most that so much of their brains had lain dormant, unused, with abilities not even suspected, except by their leader. In more time, all of Upper and Lower El Sod-a-Por were connected together. One invention inspired another invention, and genius inspired its like, and no one was spared in the challenge of creating the perfect environment. For their children, and the children that came after, they would have a jeweled setting, where there would be time for education, for personal achievements, for the private pursuits of pleasure and happiness.

In fifty years most of the surface of the upper and lower borderlands were changed drastically. Even the weather seemed to dissipate and mellow, withdrawing into the distant hinterlands of the mountains and bays. It was only then that government was thought about seriously. Baka was given the honor of naming the leader nominated. He was old now, very, and walked with a cane, and his once brick red hair was entirely white. Yet he had lived to reach an incredible age—an age unheard of in the old days when all life was a constant struggle. He was ushered respectfully into a room where Far-Awn sat with a grandson on his knee, patiently teaching the child to read.

“Hey, shepherd,” Baka called in his strong voice that hadn’t mellowed with age in the least. “Guess who was nominated—and who was elected by unanimous vote to live in that grand crystal palace so foolishly placed on the highest bluff?”

“Someone I know?” asked Far-Awn, lifting his oldest grandson from his knee and putting him on the floor. Then he raised his handsome head and looked at his father with dancing lights of amusement in the depths of his violet, almost blue eyes. Baka almost let himself smile. He still hadn’t learned to do that easily.

“Yeah ... you know him slightly; no one knows him well. I used to call him an idiot, a weak-minded fool because he daydreamed, and thought, and lay about lazily doing nothing—and making pets out of those fool puhlets. Now it seems, everyone has gone a bit crazy, and they think this very same shepherd will make a great king. They have chosen him to lead them—can you imagine that!”

“I think everyone must be a bit touched with the sun-madness,” replied Far-Awn. “I told them months ago that I didn’t want to be a king. But if they had to have one, I recommended Sal-Lar; he enjoys those formal ceremonies much more than I do... and Bret-Lee would have myriad occasions to wear those elegant clothes she’s so fond of.”

Baka flared hotly, “Who wants a man for king who is so much in love with words? He speaks for hours, and when he is finished, no one knows what they have just heard. It’s you they want. You say concisely what you mean, and be damned to anyone who disagrees. They like that... but in one point they have conceded to your wishes. If you don’t want to be called king, they are going to name you, the Founder.”

“Well, Father, what do you think? Should I accept?”

“Since when have you asked me what I think? Did you ask my permission the day you ran off with the only living flock of puhlets? So why ask now?”

“Since you have no opinion, I think I will accept.”

Far-Awn got up from his chair and went to the window of his grand home, and looked out at the mass of people below his window. They cheered when they saw him, a mighty roar that must have been heard by the Gods of the Mountain. Far-Awn called for his wife and his children and grandchildren, and also his mother, and with them all, he went out on the balcony and made a speech of acceptance. He would be their Founder King.

He looked then at the magnificent crystal palace high on a bluff overlooking what would be the government city. He was going to live in a crystal palace. Funny, he had dreamed that when he was ten years old—but who would have believed it?

Not even himself.

In the Reign of King Ras-Far

Sal-Lar wrote in his record book of the past: “Our artists gave the best of their talents to make our carnival cities beautiful, and not just gaudy as they had been in the beginning. After Far-Awn was named the Founder, our government city took on an air of dignity and elegance. He told us we had to cultivate our artists and craftsmen as one would cultivate a garden of superb and special flowers.

Long ago laws had been made to forbid the killing of puhlets, and if we couldn’t eat them, what to do? We made them pets, and let those who would return again to the wilderness. Most preferred to stay with us, and we built for them a beautiful outdoor sanctuary where they could live without fear from the warfars. We even tamed a few warfars, believe it or not. “However, in our new dignity and arrogance, the name El Sod-a-Por became an embarrassment.

Certainly we were no longer the “ill-favored one.” No indeed! We were, instead, the most favored one! We put it to a vote, with the majority deciding on a new name, El Dorraine, “the ideal.” Sal-Lar closed his book, laid down his pen, and sighed wearily before he closed his eyes. Was anything ever ideal? He was an old man now, far older than he knew, and everything had a flaw. There was a weakness to El Dorraine, he knew it, just felt it in his bones. Everything was going along too smoothly. The Gods still were there, weren’t they? Waiting their chance.

With that frightful thought, he fell asleep. One day, when Far-Awn was an old, old man, though he by no means gave anyone the impression he was more than middle-aged, he deemed what he thought proper and absolutely necessary for an individual of his nature. He talked it over with his wife, and she agreed, for she too was tired. There came a time when life could be a burden when it persisted overlong.

“Just look at the age we have reached, Mar-Laine. In my father’s time, a man was old when he reached thirty, and not many lived to reach even the age of twenty.”

She had shadows in her eyes so much colored like his own, and Far-Awn saw her not as an old, old woman, but as the girl who had danced for him when she was but twelve.

“You don’t have to go with me,” he said with some regrets, for her sake, not his own. He leaned and put kisses on her face that he saw as still lovely, not old and wrinkled.

“I have always wanted to reach the Green Mountain where the Gods live, but I can go that way alone, and you can live out your days here in comfort and luxury.”

Mar-Laine shook her head.

“No. Where you go, I will go. I believe, like you, that to die striving for an objective is better than to just sit and wait.”

Sighing, Far-Awn caught her hand in his, and with her went for the last time to stand on a balcony that overlooked the city. The wraths from the bays came only now and then to buffet against the transparent walls of the cities, before they retreated in defeat to their lairs beyond Bay Sol and Bay Gar. The people were accustomed to the controlled atmosphere of the domed cities. Very seldom did they venture beyond the walls to drink of the old, dry air. All of life’s necessities and most of life’s luxuries were provided for in one way or another, by the pufar flesh, its stems, its hulls.

“It’s a city such as I saw once only in dreams,” Far-Awn said softly to his wife. “I never even dared speak to anyone of my dreams. They seemed so foolish and out of reach.”

His eyes hazed over with abstraction as he pondered a subject that was always with him.

“I fear, though, that life can be too perfect, and lose incentive.” Mar-Laine laughed easily. “Darling, life can never be too perfect, as long as we are alive—we can always think of some way to spoil perfection.”

Soon after that, Far-Awn sat down at his impressive desk made of the pounded pufar hulls and burnished over with a golden metal mined from the inner-earth, and he wrote a long letter to his minister of state. He signed it with a flourish as grand as any Sal-Lar could make, stamped his letter with his seal of authority, and then wrote another, and much longer, letter to his grandson, Ras-Far. His own son, Star-Far, had been killed in an accident.

He signed the letter in a simple way, just “Grandfather,” though he stamped it with his royal seal to give it legality. He rolled the letter into a neat tube, and over it he slipped his jeweled ring that signified might and power. In the quiet of a dark and still night, while the tiny triple moons crept cautiously from one stringy cloud to another, Far-Awn and his wife, dressed now in simple clothing, slipped unseen from the crystal palace.

With them they carried only two small bags, containing a single change of clothing for each, a concentrated supply of food, and two small packets of pufar seeds to scatter as they traveled toward the Green Mountain. Following closely behind them were four puhlets with smoke-blue fur, with plush purple noses on violet faces.

Both Far-Awn and his wife realized it wasn't likely they would live to reach the Green Mountain—not at their advanced ages. But they weren't needed now, and Ras-Far had to have his chance. He would make a good king, and he was young, not yet weary of life with its problems to solve and decisions to make. Long ago, the sophisticated populace of El Dorraine had outgrown the rustic, primitive need for immediate sleep at nightfall. Now they could turn the night into day, and day into night, whenever they wished, merely by flicking a switch. Clusters of the luminous pufar seeds lit the city.

Machines toiled for men now, so that days were free of labor, though many chose to work because they still liked it—and men had to make the machines from the plans other men designed. In order to become skilled enough to design and construct machines there were long years of study in advance, and for many, the acquiring of new knowledge became the everlasting pursuit. On reaching the top of a distant hill, the Founder King and his queen, with the four puhlets, turned and looked back at the great city. Far-Awn rested his hand on the giant head of the male puhlet at his side, one of Musha's descendants.

As he stood there, looking back, Far-Awn recalled this was the exact place from which he had viewed the government city in his youthful forecasting dream. How strange life was. How odd the way it worked out. Then he turned, and with Mar-Laine's hand in his, they glided silently into the outer-regions.

“Promise me you will go on to the Green Mountain if I can't make it,” Mar-Laine said, but Far-Awn couldn't promise.

In his visions of the future, he had seen a girl there. That was the way it had to be. One day, in the reign of King Ras-Far, grandson of Far-Awn, the king was having breakfast with his wife. Ras-Far had been king for some years now, long enough to become accustomed to the long days of royal duties and responsibilities. He was very much like his grandfather in appearance, though his hair was flame red, and his jaw was square but not bearded. And he was much taller than Far-Awn had been.

He ate with gusto his breakfast of quicket eggs and sizzled ham, his attention divided between his meal, the wall news-reflector, and the prattle of his wife. A sudden sharp pain in his stomach diverted his thoughts from all three. He suffered in silence, trying hard not to see the mountainous pile of official documents stacked neatly on his desk in the adjoining room, all awaiting his considerations, decisions, and signature.

“Sometimes I think the old simple life of El Sod-a-Por had a few advantages that we don’t. At least one could eat a meal in peace, without watching people make idiots of themselves, it turns the stomach.”

His wife, La Bara, smiled his way indulgently. “If you are speaking of the news-reflector, dear, you can always turn it off. And besides, I think at times, it is such fun to play the idiot.”

Her heavily ringed hand reached up automatically to adjust her crown. Ras-Far thought it was idiotic to wear a crown at the breakfast table, with the two of them eating alone, but the only time she took off the crown was when she was in bed.

“War is not fun, La Bara, even for idiots!” Ras-Far replied coldly.

He gave her a hard, chastising look, rose to his feet, and stomped from the room, slamming the door of his office behind him. Blessed were the olden days, when no one knew how to read or write, he thought sourly. Why, the problems presented him in one letter alone were enough to drive a man out onto the unshielded bays. Thinking of the bays brought his grandfather to mind, and he wondered again, as he had wondered so many times, just why his grandfather, Far-Awn, had chosen that particular way to end his life.

Many old people were choosing all sorts of ways to pass from here, into the unknown, the black eternity from which they had sprung. He sighed, putting that sort of speculation from him, and turned his full attention to the work on his desk. Each letter he read contained a request, at least a half-dozen complaints, or an urgent petition that demanded an immediate solution. A new pain burned behind his eyes, blending with the familiar one that ached in his stomach. Was there no one satisfied? Was no one happy? He turned to another pile of mail. It seemed of utmost importance for his royal presence to attend seventeen parties, three balls, twelve banquets for visiting officials, seven court sessions, two groundbreaking, and one sky-flitter launching.

It was only the usual, and natural expectation to find all these occasions, so needing of him, were all within the same week. Ras-Far checked his calendar, every day noted fully with reminders. Wistfully he

thought of a day with nothing at all to do but sit, and think, and take a nap ... and maybe walk through the palace gardens with his daughter. La Bara bustled into his office without knocking, carrying in her arms three glorious and glittering ball-gowns. An expression of extreme anxiety clouded her lush purple eyes, and frowned her plump, creamy face, so that most of her beauty was lost.

“Dear, you must help me to decide!” she said to him in her excited breathless way. “Which one shall I wear to the ball tonight?”

The three gowns were spread before him on the desk, brushing many of the official documents and letters to the floor.

“The blue one is just fine,” Ras-Far answered, as he stooped to gather up the fallen papers. His wife gave him a look of annoyed impatience.

“You said that too quickly, without thought. You know I wore a blue gown last night! Didn’t you notice?”

“Then wear the red one; you know I like red.”

“If you like red so much, then why did you tell me to wear the blue one first?” she asked.

Ras-Far was still on his hands and knees, gathering up the papers as he replied to this: “My dear wife, it may not occur to you that I have other, and much more important, things to decide than select a gown for a ball that you called stupid only this morning, and which you stated, incidentally, that you positively would rather die than attend.”

“But, darling, I said that before breakfast! You know how I am before breakfast.”

She frowned at him as he got to his feet. “Your trouble is, Ras-Far, you just don’t care what I wear! If you cared the least little bit about my appearance, you would tell me which one of these gowns is the most flattering.”

“But Bara, my love, I do care, very much. As I just told you, wear the red. It is an absolutely stunning gown!”

He carried the papers to a table, far from the heap of ball gowns, and smiled at her in a most charming way. She knew him too well to be consoled by a smile.

“How do you know this red gown is becoming? Have you seen me model it? You know perfectly well that red is not my color! It makes me look green!”

Ras-Far put his elbows on his desk, resting his chin on his clasped hands, wearily explaining, “Darling, we all used to be green, and proud of it too!”

“But red makes me look too florid! I want to look ivory like Sharita.”

“Then, by all the Gods that live on that mountain, wear the gold gown! Hopefully, it will reflect on your skin and give you a lighter complexion.”

“But the gold one is too tight across the bust—and too large in the hips, and it makes me look fat!”

The king couldn’t help it if this time his voice became a shade too loud, and was edged with impatience: “If something is wrong with each one of these gowns, then why did you bother to bring them to me for a selection?”

Ras-Far’s wife’s look told him he was being annoyingly obtuse.

“They are all new, and all so beautiful... I can’t help it if I just can’t make up my mind, and you, dear, have such excellent taste.”

“La Bara, if I possess the excellent good taste you credit me with, then please wear the white gown you wore two nights ago. You were positively ravishing in that one.”

“You see! I knew it! You don’t care! You never notice anything—I wore that white gown twice already! Here I have three lovely, brand new gowns, never worn, and you tell me to wear an old rag to the most important ball of the season! A fine husband you are! You know blue is my most becoming color!”

La Bara then snatched up her three new gowns and stormed from the room, slamming hard the door behind her. The room quivered with the new silence while Ras-Far thought there should be a law made that kept wives in bed until the setting of the first sun. The door opened again. This time the minister of state, Gar-Rab, entered and bowed very low. Ras-Far glanced at his clock. So soon it had reached the time of this daily conference with a man he barely tolerated.

“Your majesty, I have a matter of extreme importance to discuss with you.”

“Of course you have. What is it today?”

“Begging your indulgence, sire, perhaps it’s not my place to speak of it, but it’s your daughter, Princess Sharita.” As if he had any other daughter.

“There are rumors drifting about the palace that say she will not attend the ball given in her honor tonight.” Ninety percent of the palace rumors concerned Ras-Far’s daughter.

“Another ball. Can’t anyone think of a different way to pass the time pleurably?”

“But sire, everyone likes to dance, and the princess refuses to go. At least that is what I’ve heard whispered about, and she must go. Absolutely.”

“And why must a princess go anywhere, absolutely?”

“Why I thought you knew,” continued Gar-Rab, not in the least upset by the king’s sarcasm.

“Sire, the bakaret of the largest province in Lower Dorraine has brought his only son to our city especially to meet the Princess Sharita. For her to skip this particular ball, like she has others will bring about a political crisis. You are aware those upstarts down there are just looking for some excuse to come out into open rebellion.” Ras-Far nodded in tired agreement.

“Yes, I am aware. My desk this morning is piled high with their complaints and petitions. According to them, they are the most unjustly treated people of all time. The more we do, the less we seem to please.” Solemnly Gar-Rab nodded.

“The situation won’t be improved if the princess slights this ball.” In a quandary, Ras-Far reached for his cup, forgetting it was empty. He touched a little buzzer that would bring a footman.

“Well, Gar-Rab, you know how my daughter intensely dislikes attending these nightly balls. She says they are overdone, and I am inclined to agree with her. Who is giving this ball in her honor, and where is it to be held?”

His minister looked at him with veiled surprise.

“Why you are, sire. You and the queen are giving the ball, in the main hall of the palace.”

“Me? How could I forget that? It’s not her birthday.”

Faintly smiling, the minister explained; “It was the queen, sire, who planned this special ball. It seems she had three ball gowns designed of such sumptuous splendor, she couldn’t think of a ball important enough, or with the lavish background they deserved, other than in this palace

itself. For two weeks the servants have been planning the decor to blend with the color of her gown. The caterers have been cooking and baking like mad, you must recall—she told you about it the other day at breakfast—but perhaps you weren't listening."

"That woman just wasted one half hour of my valuable time with silly talk of colors—when she knew all along just which gown she would wear!"

"I know just how you feel, sire. My wife often plays the same sort of games with me." Ras-Far looked at his minister with a sudden feeling of kinship—then he laughed. Of necessity, Gar-Rab was forced to laugh too.

"There is one more thing, sire. Since the princess will not attend any ball but the one honoring her birthday, her majesty thought having a ball in the palace would force the princess to be more sociable. It was I, sire, who suggested that we make this a ball to introduce the Bakaret's son to our nobility. The princess cannot very well ignore a ball held in her own home, can she, sire?"

"By the gods! It would be of some small consideration if you would inform me of your plans! The princess made arrangements for us to do something together this evening—I can't recall what. You know of course, my daughter is going to be furious when she learns of her mother's and your contrived plans." Ras-Far stood up and began to pace his office, arms behind his back.

"Nevertheless, it is a good idea. Clever of you, Gar-Rab, for we do need to stretch out our hands to those of Lower Dorraine, and make a greater effort to be friendlier." The king looked at his minister with a great deal more respect. Gar-Rab smiled widely in appreciation for winning the king's approval, which was not often his. This gave him the determination to speak further, and very honestly.

"I am sure, sire, that your noble powers of persuasion will convince the princess of the importance of this particular ball."

Hesitating noticeably, Gar-Rab hurried on while he had the confidence, though he still had the tact to speak cautiously. "I do hope the Princess Sharita will be pleasant to this young son of Ron Ka, for he has expressed a special desire to meet her." Ras-Far darkly scowled, his thick red brows meeting.

"Are you implying, Minister Gar-Rab, that my daughter is not always pleasant? Are you presuming to inform me that my daughter doesn't have social tact?"

“Oh, no, your majesty! I would not dare to infer, or presume to criticize her conduct. I am merely saying that sometimes the princess can be distant, high-handed, perhaps too cool and detached.”

With this, the wary minister quickly backed toward the door as the king opened his mouth to speak angry, hot words. Temper that was expertly smothered. The office door closed quietly behind Gar-Rab. Distant indeed! High-handed! A bit too cool and detached! His daughter could be anything she wanted to be! She was a princess. If she was arrogant, that was her right!

Dislike for Gar-Rab came again as Ras-Far fell in a chair and sprawled out his long legs. Then, thinking in greater consideration and with more objectivity, Ras-Far knew Gar-Rab was correct in his opinion of Sharita’s behavior. She was his only child, the third of three daughters, the first two having died in an accident. And he had passed a law that only three children were allowed a married couple. He would never have a son. The most he could hope for now was a grandson and a son-in-law he could respect and like as a son.

It was time Sharita took a husband. Ras-Far strode through the shimmering long halls, passing sentinels in blue-and-violet uniforms, trimmed with gold. When he reached his daughter’s apartment, situated on the loftiest, terraced pinnacle of the crystal palace, the first sun was almost directly overhead, while the second sun was only dawning. Sunbeams from the double suns refracted through the transparent dome high above, scattering thousands of miniature rainbows throughout the avenues and gardens below. Colored lights that turned the most ordinary of objects into visual treats of rare beauty.

But there was no beauty man-made that could compare to that of his daughter as she sat on a low velvet cushion, idly strumming a musical instrument, with a small pet bird perched on her shoulder. Her perfect beauty caught at his heart, as always, twanging it with a chord of bittersweet sadness, as if sounding a warning that loveliness such as hers was too transient to hold for long.

Her hair was waist length of a color not silver or gold, but something in between, and shadowed in the depths with amber-rose. She turned his way as he neared, so the dome-scattered rainbows caught in her hair, and etched the creamy perfection of her exquisite face. She shone on him such a devastating smile of sweetness that again, his chord of sadness twanged, already aching for her loss.

“Good light to you, Father,” she called out gaily, in a voice like music winging. “I was hoping you would find time to come and visit me today.”

Her large violet-blue eyes, dark and luxuriantly fringed with long lashes lifted to his. “Why is it you always look at me in such a sad way?” Gracefully she rose to her feet, laying aside the musical instrument, and came to kiss his cheek.

“And why should I look at you sadly, my all-seeing, all-knowing, daughter?”

“You fear I may suddenly vaporize and disappear. I see that suspicion in your eyes. My two sisters were killed because they flitted around so much. I intend to keep myself safe, so always you can climb the stairs to my tower and find me here waiting.”

She kissed him again, as if to reassure him of this.

“Father, you are stuck with me, now and forever!” She tilted her head sideways, in a manner Ras-Far found charming, and eyed him quizzically.

“Now and forever?” he said mockingly light. “You say that to me, when already this morning, seven young men have pleaded for you in marriage.”

“And what answers did you give for me?” she teased, knowing very well what answers he would give.

“I give them all the standard reply: that their proposals will be given due consideration.” She laughed, then sobered.

“But Father, your tact is without consideration. You know what I will decide, and it is not fair for you to keep them hoping.”

He said it, though he wished longingly that he didn’t have to: “Someday soon, Sharita, whether you believe it or not, you will of necessity have to say yes to one of them.”

“Father, someday I will say yes. Someday when I find a very special someone to love. And it will be only love that I respond to, not political convenience. I will not have you use me as a tool.”

There was a warning in her voice, a show of strong character that wouldn’t easily bend from outside pressure, even his. Then she smiled on him with warmth and chattered on of the activities and details that filled her day. And he was charmed, as always, for she could make the most mundane things seem exciting, whereas from lips other than hers, he would be bored.

But he hadn't come just to be entertained, so he drew her with him to a padded bench that was near the balcony balustrade, and fixed his eyes on the city far below. He told her of the governor and his son, and the purpose of their trip. He spoke matter-of-factly, as if there was no possible way in which she could dodge the issue. Sharita pulled away from him, to the far end of the bench, her beautiful eyes wide with shocked amazement.

"Is not this bakaret the one named Ron Ka, from the province of Rai-Caitin? Are they not the very ones who violate our national laws for the protection of our animals? Are they not the ones who set the puhlets loose on the wildlands, and then hunt them for sport? Are they not the very same people who eat the puhlets, and wear their furs and hides for clothing, like we used to do in the old days? Of all of the provinces, they are the worst offenders! Do you think I don't keep up on these things? The inhabitants of Rai-Caitin break every law, they defy your authority at every opportunity, as if deliberately seeking to undermine our society!"

She glared at him, her customarily soft eyes gone hard and defiant.

"And now you come to me and demand that I attend a ball given in their honor! I can guess their purpose—they want a look at me, so I can be examined and considered for marriage to a barbarian! Why, it is an insult to even have them housed in our palace!"

Sharita jumped to her feet, and walked far from her father, her agitation leaving her pale and trembling. Ras-Far leaned on the balcony railing, drumming his fingertips.

"Daughter, you are being overly dramatic," he said quietly, well accustomed to her sudden flashes of simmering temper. She looked as delicate as a slender flower bending in a summer breeze, but she was underneath as tough as any burran tree. "Keep in mind, this is only a presentation ball; he will be introduced to you, and you will be introduced to him. Marriage has not been mentioned."

"There is never a mention of marriage until the official proposal," she flared hotly.

"If a marriage offer is presented, it will be put aside with all the others, to await my due consideration."

Ras-Far got up and walked to her side and spoke in his most persuading tones, and he was noted for his oratory.

"Your appearance at this ball is required, Sharita, only to establish a friendly and cooperative atmosphere. Consider the results if you insult Ron Ka's son by not showing up at the ball. Don't you realize we must

establish some affable ground on which to build a better mutual understanding?”

“Is it your habit now, Father, to appease criminals?” she said with scorn, looking him directly in the eyes. “Is it now going to be your custom to use your daughter as a lure to enmesh your political enemies? They won’t like anything about me. So you give me too much credit. You think I am exquisitely beautiful because you love me. They will think I am strange-looking, pale and weak, with odd coloring. Upper Dorrainians admire me, yes, because they recall my great-grandfather, and to them he was the epitome of everything beautiful and noble, but the Lowers have never had the same respect for our Founder, you know that. I am ashamed of you, and your conniving schemes, Father.”

As usual, Sharita had aimed her arrows straight and true. Her words wounded Ras-Far’s conscience with guilt. He did intend to use the power of her beauty, perhaps only subconsciously, but the thought had been there nevertheless. And how ridiculous that she could think anyone alive could fail to find her less than perfection! Every other maneuver had failed to pacify the flaunting opposition into at least a compromise. He had thought to delay an open confrontation with anticipations long on marriage between the Upper and Lower Dorraines, but short on fulfillment. Could he be that desperate?

“Sharita, I am ashamed to admit your accusations are true,” he said in a sad way. “I must be desperate indeed to consider using my only daughter as a pawn, in hopes of achieving harmony. So, have it your way. Don’t go to the ball. I will struggle to find some other way to please Ron Ka. For one thing, I could introduce him to your cousin, Lor-Ann. Next to you, she is the prettiest girl in our lands, and very charming, and wealthy, and her father is a nobleman.”

“But Lor-Ann is a silly, lightweight, shallow fool,” Sharita objected.

“She is very pretty, yes, and charming too—as long as she talks of the weather, of clothes, and the games she likes to play. But give her a subject with any depth and she will stare blankly and giggle. But of course, most men like that type of woman; it boosts their male egos to outthink a mere female. And a man who would want someone like Lor-Ann would curl my toes into the ground!”

Ras-Far half-smiled but quickly he saddened his expression.

“But what am I to do then, Sharita? Every other method of reconciliation has been tried with Lower Dorraine and proven fruitless. They will not sit down and reason with us. Our disciplinary actions have

brought about even stronger rebellion. We can't allow civil disobedience to our laws... yet, it seems to me, leniency is the sole remaining path to follow. It very well could lead to an understanding, a willingness on their part to admit we have tried, even if we haven't succeeded."

"In my opinion, this leniency you speak of will be interpreted as weakness," said Sharita shrewdly.

"And if there is one thing I know about those people down there, they have no respect at all for weakness. Give in to them one more time, and Ron Ka will be sitting on your throne!"

Ras-Far sighed, turning away to stride to a distant balustrade. The city of Far-Awndra spread below him, a glistening bright jewel in the suns. The rounded domes and layered spirals and high-rise buildings glowed with a soft luster. The lush green and violet lawns were backgrounds for mazes of intricate, intertwining flower beds and meandering trails for those who liked to stroll in the moonlight. The burran trees, and all the other varieties developed from them, grew straight and strong. No longer were there strong winds to buffet them into twisted, gnarled, and pleading pitiful forms.

The spiraling highways, and low ways soared through the city, joining eventually with the covered ones that spun out over the countryside, connecting one city to another with transparent tubes. Peace, beauty, and dignity were all here—or was it only a facade? Once they had been drones, burrowing in the earth, and now they were educated and cultured. So far in their climb to the top, they hadn't experienced the pure bestial animal life. They had skipped over violence, battle, one man against another, blood, rape and plunder.

Ras-Far walked again on the long terrace, looking now in another direction. Through the transparent dome, he could look now beyond the city, out over the vast wild spaces still untamed and uncivilized. El Sod-a-Por still lived out there. It was still the same arid and barren, sterile rocky land that had beaten down his ancestors, so they fell in exhaustion at the first darkness. No time, and no energy left over from the struggle for daily existence to think of wars, of coveting what your neighbor had.

They had shed some blood in sacrificial offerings to the Gods in the beginning, but that had been done in good faith, reluctantly, not in joy, or sensual pleasure in giving pain. He stared now at the same Scarlet Mountains, jagged and rough, and that same single Green Mountain was there, so rounded and smooth. The home of Gods. Wonder who had dreamed that up? Perhaps he should pray more, have more faith, really

believe Gods lived there. In every folklore tale there was some grain of truth hidden beneath all the nonsense. Out there the burran trees still groveled to the ground; the sparse growth of the vegetation wouldn't cover his dinner plate. Could anyone, in all truth, really desire to return to that?

True, the storms had abated and withdrawn somewhat. But that could be just an illusion, because they were shielded and so well protected, and the fierceness of the storms couldn't easily be determined when one sat comfortably ensconced watching the wall-reflectors' colorful entertainment. A small delicate hand covered his that rested on the railing, twining her slim fingers in between his thick blunt ones.

Sharita asked in a soft voice, "Where did we go wrong, Father? Why do they hate us so much?"

These same questions haunted his nights, and prowled his feet restlessly through the long palace corridors, seeking answers for riddles of the past. He had his own private theory that he had discussed with his cabinet ministers a few days ago. They had nodded, depressingly agreeing that his hypothesis could be the correct one. It began way back, in the time after the Founder Far-Awn first discovered the miraculous pufars. Caught up in the exhilarating momentum of the event, and all that followed, not one person on Upper Sod-a-Por had thought to crawl through those long and dark mazes of tortuous tunnels to reach the lower borderlands. It had been so many years since the last killing journey had been made by either side, the lower people seemed unreal and shadowed in memory.

Always it had been a treacherous journey, risking one's life with the dangers of the dim-despairs that were lurking, always ready to creep upon one who stayed too long underground. When the trip was finally made—a courier sent by Far-Awn—he carried with him a torch made of the star-flower seeds that couldn't be extinguished by the cold sweeping drafts that constantly whistled through the eerie tunnels.

This news bearer had taken with him as much of the pufar fruit as possible, and many packets of seeds. While those of the lower regions were only starting their first crops of pufars, already those on the upper borderlands were living in villages protected from the storms. The fruit and the seeds had been accepted gratefully. Quickly the crops of pufars produced fruit, and soon all down there were delighted to be well fed at last. No one there had questioned why the seeds and fruit had not been brought sooner; they seemed to understand they had been only overlooked in the thrill and excitement of so much good luck all at once.

Never could those of the lowerlands catch up with the advances made by the first planters. What discoveries they made were only a repeat of what had been discovered before. What uses they found for the pufars were already surpassed by the first innovators. The Lower Dorrainians didn't have the thrill of inventing, the excitement of originally creating. They were not the explorers; they were only the tag-alongs. Their cities never reached the magnificent splendor of those on the upperlands. Through the years an attitude developed: "The younger son would never reach the goals of achievement set by the elder, for he had a head start."

Readily they gave into their own pronouncement, their own judgment, and accepted the role of the follower, not the leader. Upper Dorraine happily, confidently led the way, and not selfishly. Each and every success they shared with their less adventuresome brothers. The people of Lower Dorraine did not have to expend their intellectual capacities and physical energies devising methods to do things better and more efficiently. Upper Dorraine did that for them.

So Upper Dorraine became the working and thinking machine, and Lower Dorraine became the pleasure-seeking beneficiary. In the pursuit of self-gratification, however, Lower Dorraine became the acknowledged leader. Its cities took on a holiday design and a carnival atmosphere. The people stopped trying to compete with the upperlands in science, manufacturing, agriculture, but they developed instead thousands of ways to be entertained while being indolent. In their joyful, carefree pursuit of pleasure, they didn't have the time or inclination to keep their homes and buildings in repair.

Their once rich and bright cities declined into a kind of slovenly, garish, former grandeur. Each year that passed added to the differences between the two halves of the same whole. Between them a strained, annoyed relationship developed, like a once happy family split by bitter quarrels over minor issues. To be regarded with good-humored indulgence, however brotherly concerned, was considered by the Lowers as patronizing condescension. The recipients became bitter, angry; the bestower became bewildered, wondering why generosity had become a thing to cause animosity.

Now, in his own reign, King Ras-Far had to concede that the covert antagonism was out in the open, needle sharp and pricking! He wondered how many days would pass before the needles became knives, and the needle pricks, open bloody wounds. Already several minor provinces were battling over trifling issues, such as fences, and an inch or two of ground. El Dorraine had not known a real war, not in Far-Awn's long reign. And

not in his time would Ras-Far allow blood spilled on the ground to spoil the God-given blessings that were theirs. His long, grim face made the princess place her hand consolingly on his arm, interrupting Ras-Far's flowing river of anxieties.

"Father, you look so troubled and sad. Is the situation really that serious? Hate was much too strong a word for me to use. Maybe only dislike would be more appropriate."

She smiled and looked at him with so much loving warmth, Ras-Far smiled too.

"And Father, I will go to that ball after all. To take that sad grim look from your face, and give you perhaps happier days ahead, I will be as sweet as honeyed jelly to one and all! Hidden inside of me is a whole storage bin of grace and charm that shall radiate throughout the ballroom. I've been saving it for something special, and maybe this is the occasion. The shining light of my favor will erase completely the thoughts I've overheard some express, that your daughter is haughty and arrogant, remote and cold, without sensitivity or heart."

Both of the king's large hands were caught in her small ones, and she whirled him around the terrace.

"I will dance with every country bumpkin, and flirt with every petty official, even if he has warts on his chin, and hair flowing from his nose. I will be so dazzling that only son of the bakaret from Rai-Caitin, will feel a flame of desire for me blaze so raging high it will never be blown out, even from the fiercest winds sent from both bays!"

"There is no reason for you to pump your balloon so high, Sharita," Ras-Far stated drily, though secretly he was amused and pleased. "Just being your normal polite and friendly self will be sufficient."

"Normal and polite friendly self—when, if ever, did that kind of personality ensnare a man, especially one of his ilk?"

"Ilk?" snapped Ras-Far.

"They are not barbarians—they only wish to make us think they are! And don't you dare try to ensnare that poor boy—that is the last complication I want. You know I don't want you to marry one of them."

Sharita laughed at the paradox Ras-Far gave her.

"But I thought that was the purpose of this ball. And I think you are much too generous with them, Father. Personally, I consider them uncivilized, degenerate, and uncouth—why they possibly even smell bad!"

For the first time in many days, the king threw back his head and roared with laughter; delighted to see his daughter so animated and alive—even if it was only in bad temper, for it made her human. This way she wasn't a cold, detached, remote princess on a pedestal.

“My dear girl, to my knowledge, you have never met a person from Lower Dorraine. How can you possibly know what they are like?”

“People talk, Father, and I do have ears. The news-reflector shows, Father, and I do have eyes. And with the knowledge gained by my ears and eyes, I do have a brain that can assimilate facts and form conclusions.”

This time Ras-Far refused to be charmed, and he spoke with gravity: “Now, I am very serious, Sharita. This is not a matter of levity, and I am going to speak to you honestly. You are a beautiful, intelligent, and charming person—when you choose to be. Unfortunately, you don't often choose to be. You are much too exclusive here on your high pinnacle with your little pets for friends. Your apartment sees too much of you, and we on the lower levels see too little. Come down and join us, maybe you'll discover those that live on lower levels are not mere insects, but as intelligent and human as you are. Let our peoples know you, learn to know them; after all, one day you will be their queen.”

He turned his eyes away, for she appeared hurt, injured by the one person she fully trusted.

“And Sharita, never pass your judgment on anyone, or anything, until you yourself have seen and listened with those so-observing eyes, and so discerning ears. Seek the truth for yourself, and ignore the gossip and rumors, and what you see on the news reflector. Remember that it too can be biased in our favor, since we control it. And when your eyes and ears have given you the facts, use your heart as well as your brain when you draw conclusions.

“Try sometimes putting yourself in the place of a Lower Dorrainian, and thinking about us from their vantage point. We are inclined to think of the Founder as all perfect. But Grandfather Far-Awn was only human too. He made mistakes. When he came back with the pufars, immediately a delegation should have been sent underground to the lowerlands, taking with them a huge supply of the fruit and seeds. Instead, everyone here became so enthralled with the good life that those poor starving people below us were completely forgotten. I can't blame them for feeling some resentment. We should have worked together in those first days, growing side by side in equal ratio. If we could turn back the clock and do things over, that's the way I would have it.”

During all of this, Sharita bowed her head, feeling contrite and ashamed. When her father finished speaking, she raised her head with tears in her eyes.

“You are right, Father, about everything. I will try to be different, and see their point of view.”

Through her tears she smiled radiantly, throwing her arms about Ras-Far and looking up into his face.

“You are a very wise man, and deserve to be king. I hope you reign forever!”

Ras-Far looked down at her lovely face, a queer queasiness in the pit of his stomach. Forever was such a long, long time. That night, Ras-Far and La Bara sat on twin golden thrones on a dais at the far end of a mammoth oval ballroom. Stylized versions of the fluted pufar leaves shaped the high backs of the thrones, and clever carvings of the puhlet features designed the arms and legs of the splendid gleaming chairs. La Bara wore the scarlet gown, though it did make her look greener, and she was magnificently royal in her shimmering gown, her sparkling jewels, and the high diamond crown.

Beneath that impressive crown was the reddest and thickest hair in all of Upper and Lower El Dorraine. The slick, mirror-bright floor was of iridescent crystal, rocks that abounded naturally all over the wild countryside. Chains of sparkling raindrop crystals were draped across the spacious room, casting and reflecting the glimmerings of ten thousand burning candles, for it was agreed by everyone there were no lights as romantic and festive as candles burning.

Triple tiers of balconies rimmed the oval room, and three flights of winged spiraling staircases fanned gracefully to the three levels. Crimson, scarlet, rose, and pink flowers were banked in lush profusion under tall gold-framed mirrors. The footmen and official palace guards wore brilliant uniforms of red, gold, and white. Red was the color of the evening’s decor, to flatter the queen’s scarlet gown. Splendid white marble columns rose to towering heights to support a vaulted ceiling painted with murals.

But there were skylight openings in between the colorful scenes so the purple-plum heavens could be seen. The sky glittered with twinkling stars. The tiny triple moons beamed their rays of bluish green silver, gilding each rooftop, leaf, and petal. Beautifully gowned women danced in the arms of equally glorious males, for a palace ball was the time to wear the best one had. Liting music played from the first balcony orchestra, while two other orchestras awaited their turns.

This was the scene that Ras-Far watched as he sat on his throne and waited for the bakaret from Rai-Caitin, with his son. Sharita had not yet made her appearance. Ras-Far chewed his lower lip with the fear that she might not show up at all; though she had promised, she was also capricious, willful, and totally spoiled. If she disappointed him tonight, by the Gods, he would marry her off to the first man that asked tomorrow!

At the Ball

Standing at the top of the stairs centering the ballroom, Dray-Gon was nervously overwhelmed by the magnificence of the scene spread below. He had come, against his will, prepared for opulent grandeur, but what he saw went far beyond his wildest expectations. Compared to this regal elegance, he could understand now what was meant when some said that Lower Dorraine was somewhat gauche and garish. He felt a fool in the clothes he wore, wishing now he had held back more stubbornly when his father talked him into this. His father, Ron Ka, nudged him sharply, and whispered, "Hold on to yourself, boy! You are too obviously impressed. We didn't come here for that!"

Because they were there at the stairs, almost ready to descend, an unseen signal was given, and blaring horns sounded. The dance below drew abruptly to an end. The milling crowd assembled swiftly into long double rows leading from the center staircase to the throned dais. The palace guests stood quietly poised as the royal purple was spread on the glimmering opaline floor. Every face lifted to Ron Ka and his son. The deep booming voice of the palace steward proclaimed loud and clear:

"Presenting the bakaret Ron Ka from the province of Rai-Caitin, and his son, Dray-Gon." With his father, Dray-Gon slowly descended the winged staircase, very conscious of the many pairs of eyes directed solely on them. Eyes he knew that were critical and disapproving.

"Do everything slowly," his father had instructed, "and don't look from right to left. For some reason that is frowned upon." His father had been to Far-Awndra often, and knew their strange, formal ways. In unison, side by side, Ron Ka and Dray-Gon marched down the royal purple aisle to the foot of the dais, where they both bowed very low before they were introduced once again, this time solely to the king and queen. Ron Ka and his son bowed once more with stiff reluctance. Their reluctance to give this sign of obeisance was noticed, of course, by everyone.

Ras-Far chose to ignore it, and spoke in very cordial, friendly tones: "We welcome you once again to our city, Ron Ka. And Dray-Gon, it is with great pleasure we meet you for the first time ... and I am hopeful it will not be the last." Ron Ka was not to be deceived by the warmth of the king's reception and his easy smile that seemed genuine. He responded in a loud, hard voice, "We are grateful to be allowed here. My son is most

anxious to meet the Princess Sharita, whose beauty we have heard much of.” Ron Ka glanced significantly at the smaller throne place next to the king’s, where no one sat.

“I see that she is not here, as usual. Perhaps she is only a myth after all.” The listening audience, ears keened forward, all gasped in shocked unison! How crude! How forward to ignore the social amenities! How base and unpolished to speak so directly! The absence of the princess should have been politely ignored. But of course, considering who they were, it was only to be expected.

Appearing unruffled, Ras-Far spoke again, with just as much friendly warmth: “My daughter will be very flattered when she learns that her beauty is praised in Lower Dorraine.” He smiled with great charm, and said in a lower, more intimate way, “However, Sharita is a typical female, seeking always to draw attention to herself by being the last to enter.” Ras-Far did not flicker an eyelash when he uttered this untruth. The late arrival wasn’t contrived, for he knew his daughter despised the practiced maneuvers of the female coquette...at least until now, he had believed she did.

The trumpeting horns sounded again. All heads turned again toward the centering staircase as the booming voice of the palace steward proclaimed: “Presenting the Princess Sharita, great-granddaughter of the Founder King, daughter to our King Ras-Far, and heir to the throne of Upper and Lower Dorraine.” As all faces tilted upward, awaiting her arrival, retainers in their splendid uniforms of red, gold, and white swung open high-arched double doors, and a slender figure appeared and glided to the head of the staircase.

She paused dramatically, giving time for everyone to appraise her thoroughly. Not a single pair of eyes devoured her more hungrily than did those of Dray-Gon. Never had he seen anyone so breathtakingly lovely, so exquisitely beautiful! She was a thousand times more ravishing in life than in the hundreds of pictures he had seen of her. Suddenly he was very glad to be here, though his heart hesitated and almost stopped before it began anew, racing hard and fast.

Sharita was dressed all in white, with only a rim of silver edging the fluted hem of her long skirt, and silver delicately banded her small waist. Her hair was so pale and lustrous, it caught colors from the crystal refractions, appearing to the dazzled eyes of Dray-Gon to be made of gossamer fire opals. Gracefully slow, she descended the stairs, and with the deliberate practice of majesty, she glided toward him on the path of royal purple.

Now Dray-Gon could see that her eyes were violet, almost blue ... and her skin a pale saffron cream. So it was true; her fabled complexion was not citron like all others. Caught in the heady spell of enchantment, Dray-Gon could only stare at the vision that was to him all that was beautiful and exotic—and out of his reach.

His father whispered in his ear, loud enough for everyone nearby to hear, “She is far too pale—looks unhealthy to me.” Preoccupied with far different thoughts, Dray-Gon didn’t hear.

“She’s skinny too—look at those narrow hips—giving birth would kill her,” whispered Ron Ka again, even louder, making sure eager ears would hear. Sharita heard, as did the king and queen, and others. Inwardly Ras-Far groaned. He had to hand it to Ron Ka; he was an expert at being obnoxious. Ignoring Ron Ka and his son, the princess greeted her parents with two graceful curtsies, then seated herself on the small empty throne beside her father’s. Her small glittering crown was only one-third the size of her mother’s. The minister of protocol stepped forward then to make the formal introductions, interrupting Ron Ka’s whispered comment on how a strong wind would floor the princess. The greetings exchanged were as tree fringes rustling in the winds, for Dray-Gon’s head and heart were awl. He heard only the soft low tones of the princess—not the words, just the lyrical sound.

“Say something, Dray-Gon!” ordered his father in a harsh impatient whisper. But his son was speechless. His father swore softly in the long, intense, and awkward silence.

“Say anything, idiot! Don’t just stand there!” Frantically Dray-Gon made an attempt. All the phrases so carefully rehearsed went fluttering by as he blanked out totally. He stammered, he blushed, he grew more confused with each horrible silent passing moment. He wished lightning would strike and he could sink through the floor, and run from the fool he was making of himself. This was worse than any nightmare he had suffered as a child.

“Why, this is a comic parody,” Sharita thought.

“He actually is the country bumpkin!” Her scornful eyes flicked to meet with her father’s. His stern commanding look spoke in a way she clearly understood. Moving her eyes once more to Dray-Gon, Sharita felt a touch of compassion. He was so obviously embarrassed, and thousands of people were watching, judging. Her eyes swept over his face, his figure, noticing his broad shoulders, his slim hips and long legs—and dreadful clothes. His hair was such a dark auburn it appeared almost plum-black in

the shadows. His discomfort grew even worse under her discerning survey, so that beads of perspiration stood out on his brow. She sighed, for him, for herself. Well, even puffed murderers were human—and more than a little bit handsome.

“The son of bakaret Ron Ka must feel as uncomfortable as I do when so many curious and strange eyes are watching his every movement. That is the very reason why balls like this are such rare occasions in my life. Customarily I prefer my private rooms. But now I feel very much like dancing. Will you dare to dance with an awkward princess, Dray-Gon, who will probably step on your toes a number of times?” Then, without waiting for his response, perhaps afraid he still couldn’t manage a voice, she rose and offered him her hand. At last Dray-Gon could speak.

“You couldn’t possibly be anything but graceful, your highness.” Sharita held to Dray-Gon’s arm as they walked to the center of the ballroom floor. Ras-Far signaled a conductor, and the music began. Protocol ruled that royalty dance alone for the first three minutes, and it was only then that other dancers joined them in the execution of some rather fancy steps.

“Your son may not be an articulate courtier, Ron Ka,” Ras-Far observed, “but he is certainly a very graceful and talented dancer.”

“Of course, your majesty. We in Lower Dorraine are all gifted in frivolous lines.”

“But they do make a lovely couple,” La Bara said in her breathless way. “I am crazy about tall men. I recall the first time I saw my husband. He towered above everyone else, and he had the most beautiful smile. He didn’t seem at all like a prince.”

“Is that a compliment?” asked the king teasingly.

“Of course it’s a compliment,” La Bara replied, “I thought you would be stiff and boring; instead you were shy and charming, and I think I loved you right from the start. Oh, how I wish I were as young as Sharita is now, and you were dancing with me for the first time.” She heavily sighed, for Ras-Far refused to dance now, claiming he was too old, when she knew different.

“In your scarlet gown, La Bara, you look as lovely and young as any woman should,” Ras-Far complimented lightly.

“But after years and years of nightly balls, I have grown weary of the pastime: why not dance with an expert? I’m sure Ron Ka would enjoy a twirl around the floor to show off his expertise.”

“Really!” his wife’s eyes scolded him. Ras-Far knew he would hear more of this later. Silently, without grace, Ron Ka extended his arm and led the queen to the floor, saying nothing as he caught her in his arms and vigorously exerted his skill. Despite her reluctance to dance with this man, La Bara began to enjoy herself, following skillfully every one of his efforts to make her appear clumsy.

“Well, I didn’t think you had it in you,” said Ron Ka drily when the dance was over, and everyone was applauding. La Bara laughed, smiling at the bakaret in an appealing, girlish way.

“You are truly an excellent dancer. I enjoyed every minute. Ask me yourself the next time.” When the queen looked around, her daughter and her dance partner were nowhere to be seen. The invited guests were all very much aware of this, and whispered speculations flew from ear to ear.

The Courtship of Princess Sharita

In one of the palace gardens, Princess Sharita and Dray-Gon were strolling. Sharita did most of the talking, touching lightly on many subjects, seeking desperately to find a theme they could share, and enlarge upon. Dray-Gon heard only the sweetness of her voice; her words were there, but without meaning for him. The unexpectedness of the turbulent, strong emotions her close presence fired within him made his replies brief. To keep the conversation alive, she was forced to ask direct questions, then set off on a different track altogether, again searching for some common bond that would hopefully give him a way in which to reveal himself to advantage. His taciturn quality was self-defeating. How difficult it is to be charming and sweet, or even gracious when every question is responded to with one short syllable! she thought impatiently before she fell into silence, refusing to make further efforts. If he wanted silence, he could have it! It had seemed, while they danced, that there might be some hope for him—but obviously he was all physical. Give him a thought to express, and he stumbled and fumbled, and tied his tongue in knots. Unexpectedly Dray-Gon spoke:

“They say that humming insects were not known on El Sod-a-Por. Score one black mark against the pufars.” So—they were to talk about bugs! Almost she laughed. Certainly she would tell her father about this!

“Why do you say score one black mark against the pufars? I say score another mark for them. I rather like the way they sound... it’s like the night is singing, and nature is the orchestra.” She stopped walking, and rested her hand on his arm, compelling him to stop too.

“Listen ... and then tell me if their noises don’t sound like singing.” Dray-Gon lifted his head, and tried to hear the incessant humming of the night-crawlers and fliers as singing. The night had an illusive darkness under the transparent dome. In the bejeweled sky, the tiny triple moons were bright, and the star-flowers planted everywhere threw off their own soft luminous glow. A dark-flier lit on Dray-Gon’s neck, and he brushed it off.

“All right, princess, their noise does give one the impression of singing, if you want to feel romantic about them. I find them a nuisance, and you would too, if you ever slept out all night. And tell me this—just what does a bug have to sing about?” Her laugh was soft.

“That is such an easy question! They sing because they are alive; because they have grass to eat, and honey to taste, and a safe place to sit in the sun ... and tomorrow may offer something very pleasing.”

“Do you sing because you have these things, and life offers those expectations?”

“Occasionally I do, but not incessantly like them. But then I am much more complex than they are. I want so much, much more.” It was she who took his hand and drew him to a white bench, where they sat and the moonlight haloed her fair hair, and lustered his darker head.

“What can a princess want that she doesn’t already have?” asked Dray-Gon, appearing serious, though his eyes caught the moonlight and danced sparkles of amusement there. He thinks I have everything, Sharita thought. Seriously she considered before replying.

“In truth, I have asked myself that same question many times. Let me tell you how I spend my days, and then you might be able to understand why I might not have as much as you think. First, I am awakened very early in the morning, because I have a succession of tutors that come one after the other. A princess has to be prepared to be a ruler, so I have to learn all the provincial languages—yours included, which I speak rather well, don’t you think?” He nodded, half smiling.

“Then,” Sharita continued, “I must keep abreast of the news, so I read at least twenty newspapers a day, and several hundred books per month. And I am supposed to be knowledgeable about most every subject, so that keeps me busy. I don’t really give a damn about the way bygar is made, but I must know, so I won’t appear stupid if ever the subject comes up. Like tonight; I can tell you that a few humming insects did live on old El Sod-a-Por. No one ever noticed, because they were deep asleep.” She gave him a flashing smile.

“Do you want to hear more about my day?”

“Everything... every detail!” he stated so emphatically that it caused her to smile again.

“Well, it will be a long telling, so I’ll give you only a brief outline. After a full morning of tutors educating me on every subject, I grab a hurried bite of lunch, so I can be ready for the afternoon’s activities. You see, a princess must always, at all times, look beautiful and well groomed, and that means hours and hours of standing and having clothes fitted, and while I do this, I dictate letters to my secretary in reply to hundreds of letters I receive each day from people I have never met. I think it is nice

that they write, but I wish sometimes they had other things to do. Then I waste other hours while my hair is washed and brushed and curled, and my nails are done, and I am oiled and perfumed, and made to feel uncomfortable if I sit down and wrinkle my dress. Then there are certain social functions that I can't escape, or else someone will be very insulted, so I go, hating every minute of it. I have two days a week that are really my own, in which I can walk about my apartment as casually dressed as I wish, and that is where I stay on those days, because only up there can I be really free to be me: just a girl, who would like very much to be like other girls, without every moment planned in advance.

"Nothing unexpected ever happens to me. Though everyone thinks I lead a glamorous life, it is really the life of a drone: study, study, study, and prepare for the day when I will rule. And study again to always be polite, and more study on how to converse with people when they don't want to listen, and how to smile when I feel like crying, and how to look comfortable when my feet are killing me from standing for hours in the hot sunlight watching a parade I don't want to see.

"So, on my free days, I stay with little pets who expect nothing of me at all, but love, food, and water." During this long recitation, Dray-Gon had fully relaxed, and sat now with his arm stretched along the back of the bench, his fingertips just lightly touching Sharita's shoulder.

"You make it all sound very dull, I admit. But you still haven't told me what you want that you don't have."

"It's funny," she said in the easy manner in which she talked to her father, "I know so much better what I don't want than what I do."

"Then, by listing what you don't want, by the process of elimination, we will perhaps discover what is left over for you to desire."

"Oh, that would take too long!" Sharita laughed, beginning to enjoy herself. "You would end up either extremely bored by my extensive list, or would consider me very ungrateful, spoiled, and totally uncompromising." Dray-Gon smiled widely, his strong teeth shining in the moonlight.

"I could never be bored with you, princess. And I can't imagine that you are any one of those three unpleasant things."

"But I am," she said truthfully, "not only one, but all three ... and I have other unpleasant personality traits too. Just this morning I heard from my father about them. He lectured me thoroughly, so I felt humbled when he left..."

“Did he ask you to be nice to me?” asked Dray-Gon in a soft voice, his hand moving to stroke her bare back.

“If he hadn’t asked you to be pleasant, you wouldn’t be sitting here with me now, would you?” With that, he quickly seized her in a strong grasp, and drew her hard against him, crushing his lips down hard on hers. A long, thorough kiss that Sharita tried futilely to avoid, as she struggled to push him away. She had been kissed before, but never like this. Not so ruthlessly, so demandingly. She was gasping, breathless, with her heart pounding when his lips traveled lower, to her neck, to her bosom. Summoning all her strength, she shoved him away, jumped to her feet, and ran back toward the palace stairs that led to the terraces and the ballroom beyond. Dray-Gon caught her roughly by the arm, halfway there.

“Why are you running? Are you afraid of me? I thought a princess never lost her control—and there you are, running away like a common schoolgirl!” She tore her arm free from his strong grasp, and spat at him passionately, “Why did you wear that coat?” He was taken aback. Surprised. For a moment he couldn’t understand what she meant. He glanced down at his jacket, lifting his brows to eye her quizzically.

“What’s wrong with this coat? It is a very good coat. Warm enough when it’s cold. Cool enough when it’s hot.”

“It’s a coat made of puhlet fur!” Sharita flared angrily, her eyes snapping with fire. “You wore it here deliberately as a direct insult to my father, to all Upper Dorrainians, and to me!”

“Upper Dorrainians were not too proud to wear puhlet fur when they needed to...” Dray-Gon said in the beginnings of his own anger.

“That is exactly the point I am making! We wore puhlet fur when we needed to! When we had no other source of clothing warmth. Now we wear manufactured clothes. We don’t kill our animals; most especially we don’t kill the puhlets, who were responsible for all our good fortune!”

“That, my dear princess, is a debatable point!”

“Then by all means, let us debate! My mother is a native of Bari-Bar, and I have inherited some of what they have in excess. So go on ... make your point!”

“Here and now, princess? This hardly seems the proper time and place. I had hoped for a less formidable pastime.” He grinned at her in a rakish, bedeviling way. “I don’t think my kisses were nearly as unappreciated as you pretend. Thinking back, I recall you responded, so you are not made of ice as I’ve heard.” Sharita’s eyes darkened with rage.

“That is exactly the fault with you Lower Dorrainians! You refuse to be serious, ever, on any subject but play! Ask a direct question, and a Lower will always find some way to be evasive! I had hoped a direct confrontation would compel an honest explanation of that coat—but what do I get? Just a supercilious comment about kisses!” He bowed very low before her, in an exaggerated demonstration of respect and subjugation.

“You are so right, princess,” he said sneeringly.

“I stand accused. All of Lower Dorraine stands accused and found guilty. We are evasive, slippery, devious, incapable of being straightforward, honest, and sincere! We leave all those commendable character builders to the intelligent and superior people of Upper El Dorraine!”

“You are altogether impossible! I knew you would be!”

“Quite naturally I am altogether impossible—considering who and what I am!” She glared at him, almost breathless, surprised to find her small foot raising and stomping hard on the ground like a child.

“You are a crude, uncouth barbarian! A savage!”

“Can I help that? I am from Lower Dorraine. What other way can I be?”

“I suggest you and your father leave immediately!”

“No! No one gives me orders. I didn’t plan to come and do it this way—I had my own way planned, but my father insisted I come along with him, instead of by myself, so I could be formally presented. But I have no intentions of leaving until I have what I came for, and that, my dear Sharita, is you!” The princess paled and backed away a few steps.

“How many wives do you have now?” she asked in scornful contempt.

“I can’t recall—I think one for each night in the week.”

“Then you don’t need another!” she flared, her face flaming with color now as she began to tremble. “That is another detestable thing about you barbarians—more than one wife at a time! It is sinful!”

“Why?” he bit back, thrusting his strong face close to hers. “More females are born than males, and if we don’t have more than one wife, some women will go through life without a husband—and we live a mighty long time to be tied to one tiresome woman forever.”

“Oh, but you are one degenerate, despicable man! Do you realize how abhorrent that sounds to me? I will never, never be a member of any man’s harem!”

“Never is a great big absolute word, princess, and you can play your game of resisting, for it lends to the excitement of the conquest. And you may have forgotten that our “kind” are expert at playing games—it is our one forte—and we seldom, if ever, lose.” Sharita swallowed, refusing to back away another step, though his hands gripped her shoulders so hard she was certain to be bruised.

“I don’t believe you at all...” she stammered in disbelief. “A few minutes ago, when we were introduced, you stood there speechless, quivering like an inexperienced, callow boy, and now you tell me you have so many wives you can’t recall the number.”

“I was struck dumb by your beauty. I knew you were beautiful, but I never guessed how you would make me feel. I felt like a callow youth when you looked at me with those haughty arrogant eyes. Then you looked me over, just as thoroughly as a man looks over a woman he hopes to bed, and I realized you were human after all, not some vision too heavenly to touch.” The princess lifted her hand and slapped Dray-Gon’s face, leaving the red print of her palm on his cheek. He looked angry enough to slap back, but he smiled instead.

“Sharita, for you I will divorce all my other wives,” he said in a voice so low and soft it seemed a purr. Then he was laughing as Sharita turned about and ran, forgetting entirely her instructions on courtly and royal dignity, that she should never, under any circumstances, run. Ras-Far spotted his daughter coming toward him, and he smiled. Wanting to question her as she sat again at his side, but the set expression on her face warned she would harbor no inquiries. Tomorrow he would ask, when they were alone in her apartment, and her little pets were about her, she would turn to him, be needing of his understanding. A few minutes only passed before a handsome young nobleman from nearby Bar-Troth swept a low bow before the princess.

“I would be very honored if the most beautiful girl in the world would dance with me.”

Sharita threw Dray-Gon, who had followed, a devastating hard look, plainly letting him know this was how a gentleman acted. The young man before her was the same man who had been treated very coolly only months before at her birthday ball. But this time she smiled and responded in her most charming way. Floating off on his arm, without looking at

Dray-Gon, who was now with his father. Once more the music soared; once more the flashing dancers spun to its delight. Previously closed doors were opened to reveal long rows of tables spread with an array of epicurean delights, and fountains flowed with the red, purple, and clarified white wines of the pufars grown in darkness.

Overhead, through the skylights, the transparent dome revealed the plum night sky. No one looked up to see the stars vanish one by one. Not one of the dancers trembled when the dark clouds swept in and swallowed each of the triple moons. Out on the wild plains, the tender young trees again were forced to bow to the ground, groveling before the mighty, blustering cold winds from Bay Gar. All of the tree fringes so newly sprouted were torn without mercy from the pleading limbs. The sky opened, and a torrent of water spilled. The winds took the rain and drove it rapier sharp at the hills, at the dry dun-colored earth, at the shimmering domes of the cities. The sluicing waters gouged through the ravines, through the earth crevices, washing them clean of what life had started there, and what animal life had hidden there. The playfulness of Bay Gar seemed to arouse the sleeping giant of Bay Sol. It arose, stretching and yawning, eager for the game. Ominously it spun, gathering power as it raced in a headlong, pell-mell fashion, baring its teeth and snarling as it headed toward El Dorraine.

Over the upper borderlands, the hot winds charged and clashed with the cold winds. The crackling thunder of their meeting split the heavens, and rocked the ground below! The weather seemed to draw back, and then charge forward once more, making a second attempt to create the most thunderous crescendo ever heard! Jagged yellow fire arrows sizzled down and spat on the mountains; upon the hills. They sliced huge boulders apart as neatly as a sharp knife separates soft melon fruit! The split boulders tumbled, taking others with them, and the rock fall grew into a swelling avalanche. The rushing waters loosened those boulders that might have held. The firearms of the Gods struck again and again. Many found their target the very shimmering dome that protected the capital city of Far-Awndra.

This stupendous display could hardly be ignored by the palace revelers, distracted by gaiety and food and drink as they were. The music died to a nervous twang. The dancers paused, turning their faces upward toward the ceiling skylights. Those that crowded around the tables choked on the food in their mouths, and hastily swallowed what liquid they had just sipped. Terrifyingly arrested with this violent reminder of their not-too-distant past, they rushed from the ballroom, out onto the encircling terraces. There they could view this splendid wrathful show of might

without obstruction. The vengeful spitting fire balls—yellow, blue, and red—charged against the dome, flaring out a network of blue electricity. Meeting and joining, one with the other, until the whole of the city dome was one mammoth, sparkling flame of fire!

“Oh, how glorious! How exciting! What a magnificent fillip for the closing of the ball! How clever of the king to arrange it so!” were some of the remarks of the exhilarated guests. And not one truthfully mentioned his or her own inner flutter of panic that beat sickeningly against the facade of calmness. Sharita stood far from the crowd, alone, her arms crossed over her breast, hugging fears to herself. Someone came and put his arm over her shoulders and drew her against a coat made of soft, smoke-blue puhlet fur.

“Afraid, little princess?” he asked in a voice now tender, instead of angry and sarcastic.

“No, Dray-Gon,” Sharita answered. “I am never afraid.”

“Then why do you tremble?”

“It’s cold out here.” He chuckled in a wicked way and put both his arms around her, drawing her back against his chest, so that with his fur-covered arms about her, she no longer shivered. Both were silent as they watched the lightning play like arteries and veins on fire, making Sharita think of blood, of accidents, of ways to die, pleasant, and unpleasant. I have a long way to go, she thought. Many years ahead, time enough to find what she was looking for. Someone special, something special, a life with a real meaning.

“I wish you weren’t a princess,” murmured Dray-Gon with his face lowered into her sweet smelling hair, free now of the small crown that she had carelessly taken off and laid aside somewhere.

“If I weren’t, what difference would it make?” she asked sleepily, resting her head back against him.

“If you weren’t, I could just take you to your mother and father, and proclaim I loved you, and wanted you... and you could say the same about me... and we would be married, as in the old days.”

“But I am a princess, and the old days, and old ways are gone forever, and you are already married, with too many wives. I want a man who loves only me. So let go of me, Dray-Gon, and go wed my cousin, and have two wives for each night of the week.” She tried to pull away, but his strong arms kept her there.

“If you say you are jealous, I will tell you the truth. I am not married at all. I don’t even have one wife.”

“What difference,” Sharita said coldly, “you have had many women. I can tell from your easy confidence. You deliberately deceived me in the beginning. You have a glib tongue when it suits your purpose.”

“If you prefer me as the tongue-tied, stumbling, stammering fool, I’ll adjust to your needs.”

“I have no need of you at all!” she snapped. “Now release me before I scream for help.”

“You have so many lovers that you don’t need another?” She heard the mockery in his voice, raised her foot, and with all her force, she drove the hard heel of her shoe down on his foot. He howled, swore, and cursed as he released her.

“Damn you! Tonight you have slapped me, and driven your shoe like a nail through my foot. Sharita, one day you’re going to pay for this!”

“What will you do?” she taunted, seeing with oblique vision four red, gold, and white uniformed guards standing less than ten feet away. Close enough for her to be very brave.

“Will you come and steal me from my bed, and carry me off into the wildlands, and ravish me there?”

“You have named it!” he said with dark anger.

“That is exactly what I will do! And when I have finished with you, I will take you to Lower Dorraine, and set you up in a hut, and let you wear rags, and build fires, and do your own cooking and washing, and scrub your own floors, and you can crawl to me and beg for mercy when I visit once in a while to see if you have learned some humility.”

“Oh, you are so funny!” she said with laughter breaking her voice.

“You could do all of those things to me, but I would never crawl to you or learn humility from you, for you have no humility yourself!” Then, in front of the four uniformed palace guards, and all the guests, Dray-Gon seized her in his arms, and kissed her roughly, and all the attention of the guests was turned from the storm to them. Ras-Far too saw his daughter being kissed and roughly handled by Dray-Gon. He nudged Ron Ka who was at his side.

“Look—it seems our children are getting to know one another very well, and very quickly.”

“You don’t seem to mind,” Ron Ka said with some surprise.

“No, I don’t. My daughter has been courted by elegant, well-spoken, mannerly noblemen since she came of age, and not once have I seen her cheeks so glowing with color, or her eyes so sparkled with excitement. She may need the wildness your son exhibits.” While they watched, the princess broke free from Dray-Gon’s embrace, raised her hand, and started to slap his face again. But he caught her wrist, slightly twisting her arm, so she winced in pain.

“Smile at me sweetly, and say, “Good night, Dray-Gon, I am delighted to have you in my life at last.” Sharita glared, saying nothing even as he twisted her arm more.

“Go on, break it, and I will still refuse to have you order me to do anything. I expected you to act like a savage, so I am not disappointed.” Her arm was released. With dignity she turned and walked toward the ballroom, her head held high. Ras-Far sighed, and then turned to his guest Ron Ka.

“I do hope, on this night of all nights, that none of our people are actively demonstrating their desires to return to the old ways of living outside of the domes, for I pity anyone caught out in this.”

Both older men stared out into the fiery, tempestuous night. The thunder and lightning had moved on; now the sky was inky black ... and moving toward them were luminous swirls of twisting sand, picked up by the whirlwind funnels that destroyed everything they touched down on. Ron Ka was silent.

In his heart he was fearful. Some of his people might very well be out on the unshielded wildplains. It was now the current passion of the young and restless, with too much energy and nothing to do with it, to rebel against the luxurious life within the glistening and safe glass domes. Neither the king nor his governor, Ron Ka, were aware that this was a most momentous night.

Not only because of the wild, ravaging storm they were at this moment witnessing. Another and much more devastating happening had already begun in the city of Bari-Bar: an event so hideous and catastrophic it made everything evil weather had done before, even to those of El Sod-a-Por, seem like the naughty misbehavior of a small child.

The Slaughter of the Bari-Barians

Far from the might, power, and splendor of the government city of Far-Awndra, under a much smaller dome, the people of Bari-Bar were to experience that night another and different kind of terror: a horror so hideous in its implications, it was of far greater importance to the city dwellers than any wild storm ever wielded against the primitive innocents of old El Sod-a-Por. Inside the protective transparent walls of Bari-Bar, more a village than a city, there lived equal proportions of Upper and Lower Dorrainians. It was the only city that didn't have a minority of one side or the other. Isolated and remote, Bari-Bar had no particular charm or appeal to attract tourists, or those seeking entertainment in one form or another. Because of this, it was connected to the rest of the world by only one covered highway.

Beyond the village dome, large fields of the pufars grew. The farmers of Bari-Bar specialized in the easy agriculture of the hard, yellow, sun-baked, waterless variety of pufars that required no care whatsoever. Because this easy crop was costless, the profits were tremendous, which gave the growers a great deal of leisure time, as well as great wealth, which, because of their nature, the villagers didn't know how to use. The demand for the hulls of the yellow pufars was ceaseless, as the mash made from the hulls, and combined with this and that, was the main base of all the hard and durable materials made in both Dorraines. Even the metals and ores mined in the depths of the nearest mountains could not equal the strength and versatility of those hard, golden hulls. And for some inexplicable reason, the arid dun earth near Bari-Bar produced the toughest hulls.

A most peculiar trait afflicted the population of Bari-Bar that had given King Ras-Far his wife, La Bara. Long ago, the queen had moved her nearest and dearest relatives to the capital city, but she had distant relatives still there. Perhaps their unique idiosyncrasy was cultivated more by habit than by environment or inheritance. Whatever the cause, each and every person of Bari-Bar, young and old, handsome or ugly, had more than a fair share of it—some more, some less. The intelligent and highly educated were as guilty of this fault as any uncouth, unlearned farmer. It drew them to one another, gave them all a common bond, and seldom did a native of Bari-Bar wish to move to a more cultured and larger city. They were debaters! Constant, unceasing, deliberate and arguing. From the time of

the first sun's rising, to the hour of the second sun's departure, when sleep took them into dreams and oblivion, they discussed; they took issue; they disputed; they quibbled. The subject could be of the most trifling nature, or of overwhelming importance... it didn't matter. What did matter was presenting the opposing point of view! Contrarily, they were not miserable or unhappy people. Indeed, they had a great zest for living. They simply enjoyed tremendously, more than anything, the art of "constructive criticism." They desired always to be "fair." To be "just," and how could a considered, qualified opinion be decided upon without first examining minutely every side of the argument?

"After all," so they would say, one to the other, "Every front has a back, and every back has a front! And that was not speaking at all of a box, which has many, inside and out!" They said this so often, it became rather a joke to the other provinces that covertly condescended to those poor deluded fools who believed the best in life came from constant discussion. To say repeatedly that every front had a back, and vice versa, was just one of the many reasons they gave to "outsiders" who dared to object, or complain about hearing from them so many "opinionated opinions!" So, it was no wonder, only one highway led in and out of Bari-Bar.

No one really cared to go there. Although every home in Upper and Lower Dorraine, every city, town, or village; every building, shop, or tavern, had upon the wall in at least one room, a news-reflector, the sole exception was Bari-Bar. In all of Bari-Bar, there was but one, single, solitary reflector! And when some outsider dared to comment on this unique fact, the Bari-Barian would say proudly, challenging with every inflected tone: "We may have only one—but it is the biggest, and the best news-reflector in all Upper and Lower Dorraine!"

And the native Bari-Barian's eyes would flash, just waiting for that statement to be disputed, doubted, or denied. Not many chose to pick up the argument, but meekly agreed, yes, it was the biggest and the best.

"Well, how do you know it's so big, and so good? Have you seen it, and judged for yourself? Are you going to take my word for it? Why the one in your living room might be better, and larger, though I doubt it."

"But you are all so rich," some foolish visitor might reply, "why don't you have your own, personal reflectors in your own home?"

"Who says we are rich? Do we look rich? Do we live in large, fine homes? And just why do we need a private news-reflector, when we have a huge one at our disposal? And who wants to sit just with your own family and stare at pictures on the wall? Only fools! It is much more enjoyable in

the company of others.” Yes, the visitor would agree if he were wise, and wiser still, he would back away and leave the city. But someone ignorant, not knowledgeable of the legendary Bari-Barians’ peculiarity, might stand there and question how anyone could be happy living in such a small, shoddy place, while they hoarded their money frugally.

“So you think our city is shoddy? That we are stingy? So you think it’s easy to grow yellow pufars? Try it sometime! Go out there in the fields and start picking the fruit with the heat of two suns burning down on you—see how long you would last!” A foolish someone could mention the harvesting machines that could be sent out to automatically pick the fruit.

“By the Gods! Do you think we would be so wasteful? Machines leave half the fruit on the ground or it’s rolled over and crushed, wasted! There is no machine that can perform as well as human hands and minds!”

Usually by this time, the foolish visitor had learned to keep his opinions to himself, and not speak of the calculating machines that could outthink one hundred men—and what difference did it make if a few hulls were smashed and left wasted on the ground, when they grew so abundantly and easily. This much-touted monumental wall news reflector covered one entire wall in the local wine tavern, owned and managed by the only person in Bari-Bar who never took issue, never argued, never debated or so much as quibbled, and he was a native, and had never once left Bari-Bar. His name was Parl-Ar.

In his very early youth, he had mistakenly swallowed a bottle of lye, so his throat and larynx were so severely burned, he could never speak again. He made the perfect host. Early in the evening, every evening, the entire population would gather together in Parl-Ar’s tavern to sip the wines, to view the reflector, and to intently listen, to observantly, discerningly see. So that later on, when the reflector was dimmed and quiet after the news, for that was all that they cared to view, those in the tavern would then discuss what they had seen and heard. They were experts in dissecting every nuance of meaning, of innuendo, of detecting the slightest flicker of facial expression.

The double entendre was never lost or wasted upon them. They could quadruple the double meaning. Only those very young children under the age of four years were not allowed in the tavern. The very young were decidedly not welcome! For the too young cried, they demanded, they needed, they wanted, and all their wants and needs were so distracting. Of necessity, the unlucky mothers of these youngest were denied the nightly pleasures of the very audible evenings. Enjoyment that the young fathers

would in no way miss, short of death or extreme illness. On the night of the grand ball in the distant city of Far-Awndra, while the great and the grand danced and supped in elegant splendor, the small and the insignificant gathered together as usual in the single wine tavern in all the village of Bari-Bar.

The gigantic wall-reflector flashed out the pictures in brilliant colors. The unseen voice of the news resounded with implied speculations. The voice told of the ball, of the introduction and presentation of Ron Ka's only son to the Princess Sharita: the princess who never attended any ball but the one given in honor of her birthday. The beautiful face of the princess was flashed in living color upon the screen, and the handsome face of Dray-Gon. Talk of the ball concluded with this remark: "And who knows what may become of this meeting between our princess and this handsome young man? Perhaps, a Lower Dorrainian may sit on the throne of El Dorraine after all." No one spoke in the tavern.

Next, scenes were shown of the capital city where the food and water reserve had been raided and looted by masked and hooded, armed thieves. Food and water that belonged to the peoples of both Upper and Lower Dorraine. The scene changed, showing a monument made of the Founder King, Far-Awn. The people in the tavern gasped! The revered statue of their first leader had been defiled and defaced. One arm was broken off entirely, the nose smashed, and the big male puhlet known as Musha, at the Founder King's side, was missing its tail. Refuse was smeared all over the statue of the king and his pet animal. Vandals had also broken into the homes of several noblemen and ruined the walls, furniture, besides inflicting pain upon the inhabitants of the homes.

Now the news was over. Off the reflector was switched. The debate was on! The tavern was large, with many tables and booths, and waiters in smart uniforms served the wines on silver trays, and pretty girls in short costumes played softly on stringed instruments. The three hundred plus six in the room were in top form. In the privacy of their homes, each had previously rehearsed for any contingency in rebuff that might arise. They were all quick, articulate speakers, with a fluent command of ready words. The small city of Bari-Bar had contributed more than its share of political legislators to the government (much to the king's dismay). The Bari-Barians were noted for their quick ability to immediately switch to the opposite side of the argument that had just been skillfully presented, at the very moment of the opponent's capitulation.

"Every front has a back—and every back has a front," so they would again explain. For anyone who didn't come from Bari-Bar, one of these

debates could be devastatingly disturbing—for one could never win or make a point that wasn't overruled by continued argument. Parl-Ar, standing silent behind the bar, mutely wiping fingerprints from sparkling glasses, grew weary of the long, tempestuous arguments. He earned a very good living for his wife and family, but he paid a huge price, for he had a tongue eager to speak—and not a word could he say. He knew without doubt that given the ability to speak, there was no one anywhere who could win over his oratory. It seethed unused within him, frustrating him, so often he slapped his wife when she opened the front door of his home and welcomed him with a smile. Then she, not afflicted with muteness as he, would flash with fiery temper, and the flowing river of words from her throat would steal his confidence that he had any latent speaking ability at all. Then he would sit despondent, while his children battled between them, using words his scarred throat and tongue would never speak. Even his pet scant could make noise. Listening to the disputes, juxtapositioning one on the other, gave Parl-Ar a mighty headache, causing him to slip out of the tavern, unnoticed by the heated debaters.

He clattered down the cellar stairs, making as much noise with his clunky shoes as possible, as a substitute for a missing voice maker. He lifted from a shelf a heavy wine cask, for outpouring words soon emptied a glass. In the cool dark wine cellar, Parl-Ar did not notice a broken bottle on the shelf above the wine kegs. Nor did he notice either that some of the broken bottle's white, powdery contents had sifted down and dusted the wine casks below. The powder had liquefied on the moistness of the kegs, and seeped into the wood of the casks. When the golden, sun-baked pufar hulls were crushed and molded, then baked many times over, a residue of white ash was left in the giant mountain ovens. For years the ash had been discarded as useless. Until one day, quite by accident, in the way of most great discoveries, the ash had been found to have miraculous medicinal properties.

Just as it was, the white ash could be sprinkled lightly over an open wound. Almost at once, the raw bleeding flesh would shrink and pull together. The ash astringent could seal a wound as perfect and unbroken and unscarred as the skin had been at birth. This was only one of the many uses of the white ash... there were many others just as marvelous. However, used externally, the ash had many goodly powers that had saved the lives of many, and kept them from being severely scarred. But taken internally, the powder raced directly to the brain.

Once there it nibbled at the chains of restraint; it chewed on rationality; it devoured reason until sanity liquefied into flooding hatred! Parl-Ar didn't know, when he carried up that white dusted cask of wine into his

tavern, that he was bringing with him death for himself, and to all of Bari-Bar. And just possibly, to all of Upper and Lower Dorraine. He lifted the heavy keg to the counter. Wiped his sweating brow, for he was overweight, and any exertion made him excessively perspire. He blotted his round full face with ruddy cheeks of healthy color beneath the green. He glanced at the clock. Soon he would close down the tavern, and he would go home, and if his wife didn't speak to him in a voice that he wished were hers, he would kiss her, and perhaps from there, go on to something more. And afterward, he would fall asleep and dream that he was the greatest orator of all times, putting even the king to shame, and Ras-Far was the best speaker in all the country.

Some people were born lucky, with everything, and some were like him, making do with what they had, the best way they could. And hoping all the while that the miracle of the pufars would someday solve and cure his affliction. It wasn't an impossible dream. No, not at all. Impossible dreams came true almost every day because of those pufars. Thank the Gods of Green Mountain for them! And he had time, plenty of time, for the miracle medicine that would heal his throat, and he could speak out and let the world hear what he had hoarded for so many long years.

Parl-Ar smiled broadly, thinking of that future day when he spoke, when he asked his patient wife to forgive him for all the blows of frustration he had battered her with. Tears of self-pity came to his eyes as he turned the handle of the wine cask spigot, and wine, the color of rose, seeped delicately into clear crystal glasses. The three hundred plus six sounded opposing views, and between their own part in the many disputes and opinions, they sipped the polluted wine. They grew increasingly hot and agitated, and pulled at the tight collars about their necks. Some unbuttoned their shirts, stripping to the waist. They lost control of their voices, so they shouted. Their thoughts mired in murky quibbling waters, so they couldn't think cohesively, and just before all sanity flew before the onslaught, everyone in the tavern marveled at the potency of the wine tonight! Parl-Ar, who was himself allergic to wine, and never, never drank, watched in incredulous disbelief as his patrons, his neighbors, the friends of his childhood, turned upon one another, smashing strong fists into noses, breaking them. He heard the crunch of broken bones, the screams of pain and terror as men and women clawed and fought at each other.

Oh, mountainous Gods, what is this madness? he thought, and turned his eyes all over the room, seeking the reason. He looked at the last wine keg brought up from the cellar, and for the first time noticed the powdery white ash. Leaning closer he sniffed. The acrid, bitter scent was familiar to him. His purple eyes widened in horror. Oh, Gods! What had he done! He

threw a last long look at the murder going on behind him, and grabbed for his coat, and ran from the tavern. Someone saw him leave and screamed his name with such loathing, Parl-Ar shuddered even as he ran. But they caught him as once warfars had caught an overgrown, heavy puhlet with no natural defense.

“Please, don’t!” Parl-Ar tried to cry out, but his mouth only opened. It stayed that way, never to close. In the frenzied slaughter that followed, no one was forgotten. Everyone who had ever annoyed or irritated, or even looked hard at another, was sought out and torn apart. Those who hadn’t drunk of the poisoned wine ran through the night, seeking a way to escape, wondering what hell had been let loose. Asleep in her bed, Parl-Ar’s wife heard the front door of her home open.

“Is that you, Parl-Ar?” she called out, and when no one banged on the wall, her husband’s way of responding, she got up and drew on a robe. Stamped up her stairs were animals she couldn’t recognize as human. She screamed, and screamed, and screamed. And her mouth was still open when she died. An hour later, those that still lived ran, frothing at the mouth, screaming for revenge not yet satisfied.

Discord in Far-Awndra

In the underground mines of Brail-Lee on the outskirts of Bari-Bar, the conveyor belts transported heaped-up streams of the golden-yellow pufar hulls, scooped free of mushy fruit. At the end of the line, they were dumped into giant vats, where huge crushers came down and pulverized them into minute particles. Long ago, Far-Awn and his brothers had done this all by hand, with stone mallets and backbreaking effort. That was the original raw beginning. This was the polished, smooth ending, all done by machines.

“What is this?” roared Barkan, over the noise of the conveyors, as he spied one long brown ribbon belt that carried not one single yellow sunbaked hull. “What has happened to those argumentative fools of Bari-Bar?” he continued on in his raspy, too-loud voice that nearly deafened everyone else when he was away from the factory. The conveyer belt from Bari-Bar wasn’t bringing in one single hull—and they had a signed contract that demanded four bruns of hulls to arrive by the second sunup. Already it was way past that time. Barkan, a huge, burly man with fierce dark eyes, turned and barked at his assistant: “Call those fools down there, ask if they are debating so keenly now they can’t tend to their business! You tell them to get those hulls here—and quick!”

The young assistant hurried off, to return in minutes with a very odd report: “Sir, it is most strange. No one responds. I turned on the scanner and viewed their loading rooms. They are full of hulls all ready to be loaded on the belts, but not one worker in sight.” This was incredible! Things didn’t go wrong like this on Upper Dorraine; in Lower Dorraine, such as this could be expected as the natural routine. Barkan blazed his eyes at his young, trembling assistant, as if all this were his fault. The Bari-Barians were a queer lot, but dependable. They had quick, snappish tongues, foul tempers, but they were hard workers.

By the Gods, this was so unusual, it was unreal! Barkan was not foreman of his plant because he left anything difficult to someone else. He would see to this matter himself, and show those farmers down there who had a real temper! And there wouldn’t be any debating just plain orders, get them here or else! Barkan stalked in a determined way to a conveyor constructed to hold men instead of fruit, and he rode it to the telescope, and jumped off with considerable agility. There he put his eye to the instrument and thoroughly scanned the hull-loading rooms of Bari-Bar.

He covered every inch twice over, paused and thought about it, and then sounded an alarm buzzer that should wake up the dead in Bari-Bar. No one answered. He impatiently pushed every button on the panel of many that kept Bari-Bar in contact with the rest of El Dorraine. He knew personally several of the headmen there, so he called their homes. He was met with defeat there too. No one responded to his urgent ringings.

“This is indeed one mystery,” he said in an unusually quiet and thoughtful manner, so that his tender assistant had to ask twice for him to repeat his statement. The enigma grew in breadth and scope as the silence from Bari-Bar continued. Barkan contacted the officials of his city. They called the officials of other cities, and many theories were expounded over the communication wires.

“Someone ought to go there...” a reluctant official said, someone besides himself. If there was one kind of person he didn’t want to meet, it was someone from Bari-Bar.

“That is a very good idea,” said the voice on the other end of the line, most cheerfully, “and since it is your idea, you go.”

“Now listen here,” said Barkan, who was on a third line, “I need those hulls. I’ve got contracts to deliver them in six different mixtures by tomorrow’s second sun-downing, or else people in both your cities are going to start complaining because their homes won’t be finished on time. So if you can’t decide what to do, call Far-Awndra. No one hesitates there. They know what to do.”

Yes, the city officials of Far-Awndra knew exactly what to do. They contacted Brail-Lee. “Since you are closer than anyone else, send a delegation there and find out what is the matter, and report back to us whatever you discover. Official orders of the king.” It was too late in the day to make the journey to Bari-Bar and be back before dark. So it was decided to leave early in the morning.

All over El Dorraine the news spread: Total silence from Bari-Bar. The loading rooms scanned, and not one worker seen. Vanished! No one responding to the house calls. Oh, this was strange! This unprecedented news brought apprehension to many, and laughter from a few who wondered about the rousing good argument those notorious debaters were having in front of their giant news-reflector! No doubt, they were all drunk, for they liked the wines as much as they liked the arguments.

The rosy glow of the first sun’s dawning was barely coloring the sky when the three officials of Brail-Lee entered a small airship called a sky-fitter and headed toward the outpost of Bari-Bar. Riding smoothly, the

three men were very quiet with unvoiced fears. The ancient beat of their inheritance filled them with an inner precognition that something unparalleled was before them. They were not accustomed to life going wrong. For them, everything went smoothly, efficiently, timed to the exact second.

Outside the gleaming transparent tube that spiraled like a shimmering, glass-fluted ribbon, the last vintages of the blizzard that had followed the funneling winds of the night before last, lay melting on the ground. Only wet puddles where fifteen feet of snow had lain, so quickly did the arid earth swallow up the moisture. So greedy even now, the earth sucked up the puddles, and soon even the damp darkness wasn't left to give evidence of the Gods' recent offering of moisture. It was a long, tiresome journey to a city hardly more than a village, even with the considerable speed of the flitter.

The trip seemed longer than it was, because of the anxiety and fearful apprehension felt by all three men. Unanswerable questions rolled in their heads: they thought of the Gods, wondering if they could be a bit angry at the apparent security of human life sheltered inside the domes. Some of the old people still believed life was not supposed to be comfortable and secure, but always precarious, on the brink of extinction. Only the Gods themselves were deserving of real security. Could they have thought of some new, unheard of catastrophe to bring them low again? The small airship arrived at Bari-Bar, and the flitter zoomed out of the highway tube and flew randomly over the city below. The disbelieving eyes of three men stared down at the devastation! Black smoke curled lazily from fire-gutted buildings and homes.

Small sputtering flames licked hungry little orange tongues, seeking to taste every remaining morsel. Nothing living moved. There was only the smoke, the guttering flames, and everywhere, the charred and skeleton ruins! Fire? This was the last of what they had expected. Not even accidentally could a fire like this happen. One of the first things the Founder thought of when he ordered the domes constructed was fire and ways to prevent it. Had all the automatic safety devices failed, just when they were supposed to prevent this very contingency? The sky-flitter was perched on a resting platform, and the three officials from Brail-Lee descended to ground level. No fiery-spirited Bari-Barian came running to complain of the carelessness of their landing. No one demanded an explanation for the unexpectedness of their visit, for visitors weren't really welcome here, and soon made to feel it. All was silent, save for their own coughing and choking and the crackling of the dying fires.

“Before we investigate farther, we had better see to the city fire safety systems, and turn on the air purifier, before we go brown from this lung congesting smoke,” sputtered Fawn-El, the captain of this small expedition.

All three were familiar with the city, and they entered cautiously what remained of the largest public building. In the ruins of the basement, in quite good condition, they found the main city safety controls. The protective cover over the panel was smashed! Every circuit and connector had been ripped and torn free from the complicated chain of devices that would have kept a fire like this from gaining any headway. Why this was incredulous! Deliberately the safety system had been destroyed! Who could have done such a foolhardy thing, and why? Why, was the most demanding question. With the safety system demolished, a fire under a dome was catastrophe personified! So easily this could have been prevented by releasing the extinguishing gases. Not once in all the history of the domed cities had any fire lasted longer than a few seconds.

“Now we have to find out why the safety system was destroyed,” said Fawn-El in a troubled voice. He was young and inexperienced in leading men, yet he was eager to make a good impression on those higher up. He didn’t want to report back without answers to all the questions that would be asked of him. A different way was found to leave the basement. Partway up the stairs, a sprawled body blocked the way. Carefully, with repugnance, Fawn-El stooped to roll the body over on its back. Horrified, Fawn-El stared down at a face he had seen before in life: the eldest son of the tavern keeper Parl-Ar. A nice young man who didn’t drink the wines his father sold, having grown disgusted with waiting on the tables all his life. A young man eager to leave this city where everyone disputed from morning until night, and over nothing most of the time.

“Oh, how I yearn to see the Princess Sharita,” he had confided to Fawn El on his last visit here.

“Do you think she can possibly be as beautiful as the reflector shows her?” Fawn-El was thinking of this as he gazed down with saddened eyes at the boy’s battered and bloodied face, almost unrecognizable. The wounds in the dead body were many, and still oozed a thick, dark blood.

“I think this boy was running to turn on the fire-safety system,” he said pensively, “and he was stopped. There is no lingering smell of liquor on him ... and I know he didn’t drink the wines ... and look, whoever killed him seemed to wish to tear him limb from limb.”

All three men stood there, shocked. This was murder. They were not accustomed to crime against one another. Who had killed him, and why? They looked at each other, and then climbed the stairs, wondering if there was one single living soul who could answer the question that tore most at their hearts. Once more in the sunshine, they set out on foot, breathing in the air that was hazy with smoke. Every home, every building, every corner and crevice throughout the small city was thoroughly searched. Answers were sought for the unanswerable. They delved for clues for the reasons behind this ugly, sense-less, and needless slaughter that they found everywhere.

“Oh, what kind of madness occasioned this?” cried out Fawn-El when he viewed an entire family—mother, father, and children—mutilated in their home. It seemed the father killed his family before someone killed him. “I have heard,” said Fawn-El thoughtfully, “that when a mind goes suddenly over the brink of sanity, it seeks to kill the very ones that are loved the most. Is this not a cruel and ironic thing?”

So they looked. So they found every man, every woman, every child, and every babe in its crib, dead. Every animal in its pen, every pet in its small home, or yard, every bird in its cage, and every plant in its pot, all dead. Destroyed. Worst of all, ravaged! The pieces of the puzzle were fitted together. Those apparently sane had tried to run, to hide, to put up barriers to defend themselves, but behind their barriers of piled-up furniture, hidden down in basements, the fires had caught them, and their bodies lay, black and crisp in awkward positions only the dead could assume. A city gone mad. A city of madmen and maniacs, deliberately destroying themselves and all they possessed. Who could understand it? It was beyond comprehension! Nothing had ever stained their history books so elegantly hand-scripted by Sal-Lar, with anything as shamefully monstrous as this! The three who wandered in a dazed way had stayed too long already. They were giddy with the smoke and horror of what they had seen.

Eager to be gone, the three hurried back to the lift, and rose to the landing platform. They were ashamed and sickened, and very fearful of revealing too much of what they felt, lest they be considered unmanly. Sitting silently in the sky-flitter that flew them back to civilization and sanity, they wondered what this horrendous thing would bring about. No one was going to like hearing their news, neither Upper nor Lower. In the pocket of his coat, Fawn-El had a camera that had recorded all permanently for the records. Ugly, brutal pictures no one would enjoy viewing. He sighed, thinking of his young and pretty wife, and their small

son. Was there anything that could make him act upon those he loved in the way of the men back there?

If so, then by all the Gods of that far green mountain, give him back the raging wraths of the bays! Give him back the dark days of living in the underground burrows! Restore to him the dimdespairs and the rumbling belly ever hungry. Or let the prowling warfars destroy him—that he could understand. All of the past Fawn-El would desire a million times over than the abomination he had just witnessed, and was fresh and bleeding in his heart and mind. He glanced at the two others, sitting just as grim and silent as himself, and thought it was true indeed what the now-extinct Bari-Barians had so often expounded.

“Every front did have a back.” And the pufars were not quite the salvation they had seemed. The first sun had retired behind the Scarlet Mountains. The second sun was settling low, rhapsodizing the sky with harmonizing colors enough to lift the soul, though the king in his office was too busy to glance toward the windows. He signed the last of the official documents, stamped it with his royal seal of purple, and leaned back to heavily sigh. It had been a long day, and Ras-Far was exceptionally tired. He didn’t like his head very much anymore, for too often it ached, and he was hungry. He didn’t want to think beyond dinner to the theater and the late supper following, though he could be grateful the evening didn’t contain another ball.

He longed to slip into old clothes, and worn slippers, and sit for a while quietly on a private terrace with a glass of the sweet rose wine in his hand, and enjoy the peaceful downing of the last sun. He thought enviously of those lesser men without his importance, who could have, if they so choose, all of the simple things that were so often denied to him. Inwardly he smiled when he thought of those visiting dignitaries who would be so shocked to discover what an average man he was, nothing special at all. If he could put back the clock and choose his own destiny, he would be a simple farmer, growing the pufars that thrived in sun and shadows. The kind he liked most.

But then, he reasoned, that life could become dull too, and he wouldn’t be the father of a daughter like Sharita, whom he couldn’t picture living in a simple farmer’s hut. She was a born aristocrat, from outside in. Even as a child she’d had more poise than most of her elders, and knew exactly the right way to act, and the correct words to say. He had lost two daughters; to have the third, and best of the lot, remain gave his days the happiest moments he experienced. Particularly lately. She had come alive, vibrantly, willingly attending the most arduous state functions, and presided over

them with so much grace and charm, the dullness was replaced with excitement. Everyone was speaking of the change in her, and wondering, too, what had brought it about. Why he could be happy right this minute, if he didn't have this plaguing concern that had nagged at him all day: the strange reports about Bari-Bar. As if in response to his thoughts, a rapping sounded on his office door, just as he was about to leave and change his clothes for dinner. The three city officials of Brail-Lee were ushered into his office, preceded by his minister of state, Gar-Rab.

“As you requested, sire, I brought the three investigators here, so you can hear firsthand their report.” Though Ras-Far considered himself an ordinary, average man, he was far from that. He had the innate ability to immediately read a person's secret self, with eyes so keenly observant of the least detail, he could intuitively guess phrases before they were spoken. The controlled expressions of shock and grief on the three faces from Brail-Lee warned him in advance that he was about to hear of some horror unprecedented. Fatigue lifted from his shoulders, and alertly he leaned forward and acknowledged the introductions.

“We have met before, Fawn-El,” he said, in the easy way that made all his subjects respect and admire him for never forgetting a face, and giving it the correct name and title. “About a year go, you married my kitchen steward's daughter. As I recall, her name was Ha-Lan, and a very pretty girl too.”

Imagine that! Fawn-El was amazed and thrilled that the king could recall him after only one previous meeting, and that had been an accidental one. The king had come upon him with Ha-Lan when they had stolen a kiss in a darkened back hall. With all the polite amenities over, as spokesman, Fawn-El told his tale of horror with respectful reticence, stumbling over the most hideous details, and skipping entirely over some he thought too ugly to speak of aloud, and when the film was shown, the king would see for himself. When the film was done, a long silence followed, while the three officials of Brail-Lee, and the minister of state waited respectfully for the king to respond. Ras-Far stared out over their heads, his eyes fixed on the distant green mountain. Looking, but not seeing. So, this was the way it would begin, what had been forecast—and how now could he prevent the ending? If only that wise man on the highest pinnacle had foreseen more, had been more explicit, then perhaps this tragedy could have been prevented. His aching head bowed down into his waiting hands.

He drew in a deep breath that was almost a sigh. Only for a second did he allow himself a private moment of withdrawal, before his head lifted

and he asked, “Were there no clues at all, to suggest how this terrible thing started?”

“There was nothing,” said Fawn-El in a voice that tried to stay strong. “Only murder and death everywhere. All the buildings were destroyed by fire, though the basements and deepest cellars came through in rather good shape—but the people who hid down there died from the inhaled smoke. However, those people untouched by the flames didn’t escape wanton mutilation. I expect tonight when I go to sleep, I will dream of the sickening things I saw done to those dead bodies. It was like a wild pack of savage animals had been turned loose. We thought of “outsiders” who might have stolen in, and sought some revenge, for as you know, the natives of Bari-Bar are not generally well thought of. They were so wealthy, and they did nothing with their wealth except construct that gigantic wall news-reflector in the most elegant tavern in both El Dorraines. However, there were at least a hundred bodies so burned they weren’t recognizable, so the possibility still exists that some band of outlaws could have started the slaughter in order to steal the money most people believe is kept there in secret safes.”

The king shook his head. “The people of Bari-Bar weren’t fools. They realized they weren’t well liked, so their main wealth is stored right here in Far-Awndra, where it is well protected and insured. And I don’t believe any of our people are murderers—or that insane, not even the bands of outlaws that live outside the domes. No, there must be a logical cause for this horrendous tragedy! And we will find it!” cried out the king vehemently.

The king’s dinner was quickly eaten in his office, not in the state dining room. Plans for the theater and late supper were canceled so a delegation of scientists, physicians, and notable mind probers could be assembled in the king’s office. Ras-Far told them exactly what he wanted done.

“In every hurricane, there is an eye. Find that eye: where the slaughter started. Bring back bodies so we can have them analyzed, the contents of their stomachs tested. Take samples of the earth. Make a map of the most devastated area, where there was a concentration of murder... don’t overlook the slightest detail.” Once again, a sky-flitter was sent forth to Bari-Bar; this time, four others followed, filled with some of the greatest minds in all El Dorraine, Upper and Lower. In the last flitter rode the three officials of Brail-Lee. They rode in the night, this cavalcade seeking the truth behind madness. Those inside the small airships were not comforted by the artificial lights inside the bright highway tubes. They were still too close to their old heritage to feel anything but uneasy so far

from home during the dark hours. One hour before the first sun's dawning, they reached Brail-Lee and quickly snatched a light meal before they hurried on toward Bari-Bar. Brail-Lee was but minutes behind them, when the highway shuddered violently, rocking the air around them! Then came an ear-rending explosion! The forward propulsion of their cars halted momentarily before they were all hurled backward! Spinning, the ships headed toward the walls, and toward each other. The pilots of the flitters frantically sought ways from colliding with each other, or into the rock-hard transparent walls. It was skill only that kept all those important men from dying and adding to the tragedy of Bari-Bar.

After the explosion, the highway pulsed as a giant ribbon shaken by a giant hand! Surely it would crack and break! The flitters, now under control, rested inches above the concave floor, waiting for the trembling to cease. Enin-Sti, Upper Dorraine's most noted inventor and scientist, stated quietly into a speaker that kept him in contact with the king, "Your majesty, it is a certainty now, that none of our questions will be answered. Bari-Bar is gone."

Still they had to be sure, so they flew on. The covered highway ended abruptly. Here it had broken! That the hardness of their manufactured, shimmering bygar material could be assaulted and defeated was a disquieting thought. Out of the shattered highway and into the hot dry air the five small airships flew. This was a far different type of flying. Gone was the smooth, even glide on cushioned air. Now air currents caught their light little ships and tossed them about like balloons roughly handled, for the flitters were not constructed for use outside of the glass tubes.

However, it was not the nature of a Dorrainian, Upper or Lower, to turn back from what had been started. Bouncing as rubber balls, the flitters struggled ahead, following the trail of the far-flung pieces of shimmering bygar, once a highway, until they came upon a large splotch of blackened ground that told them this once was the place of a small city called Bari-Bar. In entirety, the city was gone now. Nothing left. The mystery and horror of Bari-Bar's demise struck those on El Dorraine as nothing ever had before.

They were children of the suns; the lovers of light and life; every form of life was as precious to them as their own. Not one could step on an ant, or swat a fly on the table, or brush a gnat from an arm, without an unhappy twinge of conscience. There were crimes in their history, a few, the exception, not the rule. They were fiery people, with passions unlimited for loving and learning and working. When one struck out in the hot-white heat of anger against another, it was in retaliation for some believed

injustice, never in considered, deliberate murder. As a rule, they were very much in control of themselves, and strove to suppress violence of a physical nature, preferring to lash out with words instead of weapons. Even a condemned murderer was not put to death—he was sentenced to live outside of their city domes, an exile, to live and survive, if he could, alone in the wilds of the unshielded areas.

“Let nature and the ruthless Gods of the mountain wield the hand of justice.” It was known the condemned murderers banded together and often raided some small city to steal supplies, to steal wives for themselves. It was considered by many of the young, romantic girls as the most intriguing thing that could possibly happen to them: to be so kidnapped and carried away on a white horshet, into the unknown, to face life as their foreparents had known it. Even the Princess Sharita, in her very early youth, had done some dreaming along these lines. For her it grew dull and tiresome to always be so well guarded, so protected, so regimented, with her life divided up into small portions to give to this, to that, with nothing unexpected interrupting to relieve the monotony of it all. And now something terrible had happened to relieve the monotony of it all.

“How could that happen, Father? For people to turn upon themselves, and slaughter even their sleeping babies, and their trusting animals? How can we lay this massacre at the feet of the Gods and say it is their fault?” Ras-Far took his shivering daughter in his arms and turned his eyes toward the mountain.

“This time, Sharita, we must put the blame where it is: with us. This infamous deed is man’s alone. The Gods would punish with gigantic fists that don’t aim at one small city. They would flail their arms at every city! They would torture the wildlands as much as our domes.” In the streets and private homes of those who lived in Far-Awndra, it was openly voiced that it must have been those troublemakers from the lower borderlands who brought upon them this horror! They were malcontents, never satisfied, however much bounty was bestowed upon them. They were no doubt responsible for that final and devastating debate in Bari-Bar!

“Why, my wife had a cousin who lived there, and she wrote that her neighbor, a roughneck Lower, was always thieving the clothes from her line.” Those in the lower lands, rumbled against the smug superiority and high-handedness of those who lived above. Surely it was those Uppers who stomped just one time too many with their patronizing condescension!

“You know, it is us that they blame for everything that goes wrong. If a bolt is loose, they look for one of us to accuse. We are square cubes in

their world of round holes. We don't fit in, and never will, unless we carve off our edges of difference. And I happen to like what I am! I don't know about you. By the Gods, I don't want to work from suns up, to suns down, the way they do! If we like subsisting in the easiest possible way, what's wrong with that?"

The whispered, private conjectures grew into loud, overt accusations when an Upper and a Lower met publicly. Eventually, raging words were not enough; hands clenched into fists that were smashed into noses and jaws. Mobs formed to watch, and some to join in the fray. Someone picked up a stone and hurled it at a shop window belonging to an Upper. Then another someone picked up a larger stone and smashed store windows belonging to a Lower. Then someone drew a secreted knife and heedlessly slashed out with it. For the first time, blood spilled on the smooth pavements of the cities. High above the now bloody avenues of Far-Awndra, in his crystal palace surrounded and protected by a greatly enlarged army of palace guards, Ras-Far watched the news-reflector with increasing anxiety and concern. He could hardly believe his eyes, or his ears. What was happening to his people? To his nation? What new road were they on?

"This is unbelievable," he muttered aloud, so his wife tore her eyes from the screen and looked at him with tears on her cheeks. "Ras-Far, you've got to stop it!" La Bara complained.

"My mother called today and said someone broke all the windows in her home, and she is part of the royal family! Next, they'll be coming here, and breaking our windows!"

"You speak to me of broken windows, La Bara? Look on that screen! People are killing each other in our streets!"

"But my mother, my father," cried the queen, "I care about them! I don't want them to die, and that could come next!"

"Yes, it could come next," Ras-Far scowled darkly. "I'll see to it that they are brought here, so forget that concern, dear," he said more kindly.

That very day, the king's mother-and father-in-law were installed in the palace, and royal guards were stationed outside of their empty home to see that it wasn't looted or burned to the ground. Ras-Far rode the uplifting shaft to his daughter's apartment, to find her watching the news reflector too. All her small pets were loose from their cages and sat near her on the floor, or the birds perched somewhere on her person.

“Good light to you, Father,” she greeted, and smiled at him warmly. “I have been watching what is going on in the city—and it seems more like a nightmare than reality.”

“It’s not just going on here,” the king said wearily, “it’s happening wherever Uppers and Loweres meet... in all our cities.”

“What are we to do to stop it?” she asked, getting to her feet to come and sit at his side.

That was indeed the appropriate question. It would be nice if they could return to the days before the death of Bari-Bar, and wipe that bloody stain from all living memories, but that was only wishful thinking. If the mystery of Bari-Bar could be solved, that would help console his nation in their grief. As it was, only time could salve the wound, and no one was willing to wait for time to heal.

Every day created newer and fresher wounds, and more to come, he feared. They seemed to be on a path from which there was no turning—unless, somehow, a way could be found to divert them onto a brighter road. Ras-Far mused aloud to his daughter, who curled up close at his side, “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and reading of our history books. Our first ancestors evolved from rooted plants. We became dirt-dobbers in the mud, farmers who tilled the soil, and from that we made a leap into golden homes and crystal palaces.

“Maybe it was too great a jump forward. We skipped right over the pure animal life of struggling one against the other, like the animals not domesticated do. Perhaps, in all of us, we that call ourselves human, there lies deep within, dormant and unused, a great deal of the warfar, longing to use its teeth and fangs, and that is what we are going through at this very moment. We are filling in the gap, from primitive peoples, into creatures near godlike.” Sharita met his eyes, delving deep into his, wondering if he could be serious.

“Father, that is a very frightening theory, and are we near Gods?”

Could he tell her? No! Definitely not yet! Ras-Far thought; someday when she was older, he would tell her all he feared, and hoped wasn’t true.

Tenderly he brushed her satin-smooth cheek. He would give his everlasting soul to make everything perfect for this girl that was dearer to him than his life. He kissed her cheek and said good night, and told her not to dream, except perhaps of romance in the garden with some handsome young man—she did have a handsome young man to dream about, didn’t she? Color flooded her cheeks before she hugged him tight.

“Good night to you, Father, and don’t you dream at all. You looked so tired, and so worried. Go to bed and forget all your troubles. Haven’t you always told me that tangled yarn has a way of unknotting itself if you just shake it up a bit?”

Shake it up a bit? Ras-Far smiled. Oh, she did have a way with her, better than ten sons! The exact solution! He would shake up the whole of Upper and Lower Dorraine and give them something new to think about!

Book Three
The Journey

Prologue

There was a man, older than the hills, perhaps as old as the Green Mountain itself. He lived alone, the life of a hermit, on the topmost pinnacle of the crystal palace, just a wee bit taller than that of the Princess Sharita. Occasionally, when she was on her terrace balcony, and he was on his, they could just faintly see each other. The princess would always lift her hand and wave, just as he always did. Sometimes she blew him a kiss, and he would pretend to catch it and send it back to her. Sometimes if this old, old man listened most keenly, he could hear her voice as she called to him a greeting, but his voice was too small to reach her ears. The hand he lifted to wave to her was twisted and gnarled with age, with ugly raised veins, like a relief map of his life.

He was known to everyone as Es-Trall, the Star Drinker. For he was wise, as if he had drunk heavily of the wisdom of the stars. Once he had stood tall, in his youth; now he was small and wizened, with a white beard that almost touched his feet. But his eyes were as young and bright as the stars he studied and noted upon in his huge black book. It was to him the king was going, as he trod the long bluish corridors of the palace until he came upon a secret place where the twisting stairs were, stairs so steep and spiraling, it was no wonder Es-Trall stayed up where he was.

The king would have made a liftshaft for his use, if Es-Trall wanted. But the wise old man thought it better to make it as difficult as possible for anyone to find him, and as difficult as possible for himself to resist the temptation that once in a while came—to be again a part of the life that went on below. It was Es-Trall who could reach in the configurations of the heavens all that was foreordained for mankind. It was he who had first talked to Ras-Far of the “war” that was coming to El Dorraine: a civil war, the very worst kind of war.

The Challenge of the King

The king found the old man crouched low before his telescope, leaving only to note down with practiced precision the paths of the stars.

“Good light to you, Ras-Far,” Es-Trall greeted without turning away from his occupation.

“I heard your steps coming up my stairs—there is no one who walks quite the way you do.” This was the only person in all the lands, with the exception of the queen, who dared to use such familiarity with his royal majesty. But then, Es-Trall was already an old man when the king was but a child chasing bees from flower to flower.

“I can never take you by surprise,” answered the king as he fell wearily into a chair. “As for me, I have surprises every day of my life.”

“Of course, my son, your troubles are familiar to me, and unfortunately, here on this chart I have mapped out other surprises for you.” He turned to give the king a toothless smile that twinkled his bright eyes, and lent his ancient face a kind of touching charm.

“Do you care to hear about them now, or shall we save them for tomorrow?” The king sighed.

“Fire away, Es-Trall. Since I have already climbed those stairs, I might as well listen, or else I will stay awake all night wondering what you have to say.” Es-Trall perched himself upon a high stool so he appeared an old eagle, ready to fly, and when he had finished his long and very ominous prophecy for the future, Ras-Far sat very quietly, his long face pale and grim. The wisdom of long years lay deep in the depths of the wise old man’s rather remarkable eyes. There was love there too. He reached out to touch the king with his warped hand.

“I am sorry I could not give you a better report, but many times I have gone over my charts, and always I come up with the same facts.”

“Es-Trall, I believe you are an extremely gifted man. I always have. I suspect I always will. Perhaps the stars speak sincerely. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to believe men cannot alter their course and change their destination. Certainly we don’t have to follow a path just because it is there.”

“Ah, my dear son, that is not at all what I am implying. That is why I speak, else I would keep my forecast of doomsday to myself, and let it come about. When we know a drink is poisoned, do we have to lift the cup to our lips and swallow the contents?” The king leaned forward, clasping his hands together above his knees.

“All right, fate is handing us a poisoned cup. So it is written in the stars. If then we can alter the course of our destination by refusing to drink the wine, of what use then are your charts, what is the use of all your study? If we can avoid the foreordained, then what is written in the stars means nothing.”

“Oh, Ras-Far, you are tired and not thinking well. And you, my very best student! I am disappointed!” As old as he was, Es-Trall jumped down from the stool and bounced over to a huge chart on the wall. He picked up a long, slick white stick and pointed to a spot on the dark blue paper where two white stars were sure to collide!

“See there!” said the Star Drinker.

“That represents Upper and Lower Dorraine headed on a collision course. But for every path marked out in the sky, there is always at least one alternative, for the winds of fate are fickle, capricious, and do not always blow with consistency. We always have a choice of paths to follow. Right now our people are choosing the wrong path. If they continue, this is the inevitable result.”

His slick white pointer halted on a burst of color—the collision point—the color of blood. “The stars are our guideposts, if we allow them to point the way. But, as always, even guideposts can be interpreted in several ways. So that is why you and I have brains. We take what the Gods give us to see, and use what the Gods gave us to think with, and we combine what our eyes see with the knowledge our brains have stored, and we seek a solution to avoid the inevitable.”

“How reasonable that all sounds,” said Ras-Far with an ironic smile.

“As one of us, Es-Trall, you know we are a stubborn race. We are not the kind to be easily diverted from a decision once made, but, I really don’t believe a firm commitment has been made yet by either side. So there is some hope. I have resolved that war will not come to El Dorraine in my time, and I too am a stubborn man. So let us put our heads together, Es-Trall, and see what we can come up with. I am determined that Sharita shall sit on the throne in my place one day, for I can grow as weary of

responsibility as anyone else, and she is young and more qualified than either you or I, or even she suspects.”

“Ah, but she is too lovely to have brains as well,” said Es-Trall somewhat cynically.

“Often I watch her through my telescope, and never have these old eyes of mine rested on anyone as beautiful as she. She has combined in her the best in all of us.” The king smiled widely, knowing much better than Es-Trall just what his only daughter possessed.

“In a few years, I’ll bring Sharita up here with me, and I’ll tell her who you are, and for yourself, you will find out that she is not just a pretty picture, with nothing behind that perfect face and exquisite form.” Es-Trall sighed heavily this time.

“Ah, to be young again, with the prospects of having a girl like Sharita for a wife. It grows lonely in a tower, all alone.” And here the old man’s voice choked up, and he looked toward a picture of a woman he had once loved.

“Death is a long time in coming for me,” he almost whispered, “but I would see Sharita before that long-awaited day, so I will hold on until then.” Getting to his feet, Ras-Far went to the small, crooked figure and embraced him.

“Es-Trall, if I have my way, you will hold on through all of Sharita’s reign. You have been invaluable to mine, and you will be to hers, and those of her children.” Es-Trall gave the king a long and very troubled look.

“Don’t worry,” said Ras-Far with understanding.

“I have my very best scientists working on that problem, and they are making some advances. If they but had a better thinking machine that they could feed with more complex facts. But our young men are bright, and there are a few who know the full truth about our future. They are as anxious as you or I to see it solved. So, do hold on, Es-Trall, as long as it takes. The pufars have supplied us with everything. They will supply us with the answer to our greatest riddle as well.”

The first dawn was rosy over the Scarlet Mountains before Ras-Far descended the steep spiraling staircase and stumbled exhausted to his waiting bed. He snatched a few hours of sleep before he was up and dressed and calling for a meeting of all the major and minor provinces of El Dorraine. The twenty bakarets met in the circular rotunda of the crystal

palace two days later. It seemed, just viewing them, that both sides were determined to show defiance to the other. Never had the king seen his governors of the upper borderlands so richly dressed for an official meeting. They sported their very best clothing, as if going to a ball, glittering with jewelry. It angered Ras-Far just to see them, while he himself was plainly dressed, though on his bright red hair he did wear his crown. In contrast to the rich, glittering clothes made of the pufar roots and spun into luxurious fabrics, the Lowers wore the old-styled clothes of El Sod-a-Por.

Rough, coarse cloth, dun colored, homespun, and crudely made, and their costumes were topped off with coats made of puhlet hides or furs. He swore to himself, outraged that they could do this—grown men acting like children! And this was a momentous meeting. He saw the way his upper governors looked sneeringly down their noses at the lower bakarets, clearly demonstrating their contempt for such crudeness, such barbaric behavior. The Lowers glared back at their disdain with hostile, challenging eyes. Ras-Far scanned his eyes over all in a chastising way before he assumed his place at the head of the long, long table. Only for a moment did he remain seated, just long enough for all the bakarets to sit. Then rising to his feet again, he held his hand up, a signal that they were to remain seated. In a calm voice, the king began his address, speaking with serious intensity. Despite themselves, the worst of his opponents could not fail to perceive his dignity and his strength, nor could they fail to see his great love and concern for all of his peoples. Ras-Far spoke from his heart, forgetting the carefully plotted phrases he and Es-Trall had compiled until the wee hours of the morning. He began:

“That this meeting today is necessary distresses me greatly. It is not a fitting time for chastisement, since we are in the midst of our most fearful grief, and also in the midst of the most catastrophic trouble ever to have fallen upon our land. And we are not inexperienced with disaster and harassment. The Gods of the Mountain never inflicted on our most ancient ancestors a tragedy more devastating to our souls, or to the peace of our conscience, than this terrible and shocking atrocity that happened at Bari-Bar.

“We look now, you and I, from one to the other, and seek a place to lay the guilt—to rid ourselves of the responsibility. And we are, oh, so very ready to believe it was a fault of one side or the other. In fact, we want to believe it is someone’s fault, not our own.

“But there is no one here, Upper or Lower, who can tell us what really occurred on that most infamous of all nights! None of us will never know the truth of that evil story—not you, not I, or our children, or our grandchildren, for all that could have answered are dead and destroyed.

“So, what happened at Bari-Bar is beyond recompense. We can cry, we can moan, and we can bewail—but it is over and done and will never be undone. Now, are we, the living, willing to destroy each other in revenge? Is revenge ours to take? Is not punishment of this most inauspicious kind reserved for the Gods alone to deliver? Do we not risk a greater retaliation from those same Gods if we presume upon what is rightfully theirs?”

The twenty important men at that table glanced fearfully about. Secretly many made the old thumb signal of benediction under the shield of the table, even those most sophisticated. Only one man was not disquieted. Ron Ka jumped to his feet and pointed an accusing finger at the king, and shouted out in a loud angry voice:

“Do not try to turn us away from what we mean to do, with threats of retaliation from the Gods! Too long we have remained quiet and servile under your domination! We on the lower borderlands will be free men, ruled by no one! Mark this, King Ras-Far, from this day forward, we of Lower El Dorraine will be subject only to ourselves! We cut the tie, here and today; we are no longer one nation under your rule!” An extenuated silence followed this hot and venomous speech, as all the bakarets sat stunned. The words had been spoken! The break was in the open—this had not been planned in advance. Even the lower bakarets turned their eyes on their fiery leader, taken aback that he could act without their consent. No longer were there hopes for a compromise, for a consolidation... they had to stand behind him... he was the most powerful bakaret of Lower Dorraine. Without anger, the king spoke slowly:

“Bakaret Ron Ka, I find it strange that you speak of being “free men” when all of us here on El Dorraine have always considered ourselves nothing but free. Our rules were composed and written down by both Upper and Lower Dorrainians. We do not have separate and unequal rules for the lower borderlands. We are, and have always been, two halves of the same fruit.” Ras-Far continued:

“Yet, despite this very fact you consider yourselves unequal and treated unfairly and servile and under domination—all states clearly that perhaps you do have some just cause for complaint. If so, then let us—at this time, at this table, on this day—speak out in complete candor. Lay upon this

table now your reasons for believing yourselves unfairly governed. Then let the sunshine of reason and sanity heal our wounds, and our differences, and our grudges, so that we can sit down together and compromise, and change the laws that make you feel as you do. Let us talk as brothers of the same family, with the same common background, so that we can leave this room today, a whole and united kingdom.”

But Ron Ka would not hear the reason, the compassion, or the love in the king’s pleas. Angrily he led his followers against the king, until even the most reluctant were fully persuaded they were in the right. All nine followers jumped to their feet, supporting Ron Ka, throwing hot scathing words across the table at the ten bakarets of Upper Dorraine and the king. Hard, ugly, angry, and thoughtless accusations, rapier sharp and stabbing.

“You know who ordered the slaughter of Bari-Bar!” shouted out Ron Ka above the noise and confusion at the table, glaring at the king. “It was you who sent your palace guards there in the middle of the night, while I was here attending a ball with my son! You had those helpless people killed as a lesson of discipline for us of Lower Dorraine! Those people leaned more to our ways than to yours, and they have always been an annoyance to you. Those men of Bari-Bar are the only ones here who can debate on your level!”

“Sit down!” commanded the king in a cold firm voice of authority, as his hand raised, signaling silence. He was tall, while all others there were short and stocky. Every ounce of his bearing displayed dignity and power. Not one man there could fail to see his strong resemblance to the Founder King. So they sat down, smothering hot unspoken words—even Ron Ka. The king, still standing, looked down at Ron Ka with eyes as cold and hard as the ice of Bay Gar.

“Now hear me, Ron Ka, and everyone here who thinks as he does! In my rule I have brought death to no one, not even inadvertently. If, when I am gone from this earth, and I am renowned but for one thing, let it be written that I would not in my reign permit a war between our two halves to ravage our country or the blood of our sons to despoil our land. To suggest that I would send palace guards to kill the populace of Bari-Bar is so childishly inane, I will dismiss it as a moment of insanity on your part, Ron Ka. Have you forgotten one very important fact? My wife had members of her family that were slaughtered on that night! And in case you have forgotten this too, Ron Ka, half the populace of Bari-Bar were Upper Dorrainians.

“I think you take me for a fool, Ron Ka! You stand and shout at me, and point your jabbing finger, hoping you will provoke me into anger, and I will speak some command to silence you, and your followers, and from that insult, there will be no retreat except to fight. “So, I will hear no more of your accusations, for the ugly deed is thrown from side to side like a ball that no one wants to catch! If we have to settle the guilt, the responsibility for that atrocity, there is still one place, and one place only, which can place the guilt where it belongs.” The men sitting taut at the table looked at him in amazement, not understanding.

“Has your great and farsighted seer, whom you keep hidden in your palace, given you an answer?” sneered Ron Ka. “If so, I shall double over in laughter at your gullibility!”

Ras-Far met the scornful eyes of Ron Ka calmly.

“Yes, Ron Ka, this time you are at least partially correct. It was Es-Trall who reminded me that truth can always be found if one will search long and far enough.” Then the king spun about, dramatically raising his arm and pointing out a window.

“Look there!” he cried. “Look to the Mountain!” The baffled men followed the lead of his finger, staring through the window and out through the shimmering walls of bygar.

Again the king spoke, resoundingly, his voice like a loud bell: “We will send an official delegation to that far-distant Green Mountain, and ask the Gods who see and know everything just who, or what, is responsible for the death of Bari-Bar!”

Ask the Gods? When, if ever, had the Gods responded to their prayers, to their pleas? Not even when they sacrificed what they most dearly loved. Many raised these doubts, speaking them aloud, while Ron Ka sat looking at the king with a puzzled, unhappy face. The king responded to all their voiced and unvoiced doubts and fears.

“There is no doubt that Gods live there. Es-Trall has assured me that they do, and he is the wisest man alive today. And if they have not in the past responded to our pleas, or our prayers, it is because we pleaded with them from afar. This time it will be different. Our delegation of chosen men will cross the desert lands, pass through the Scarlet Mountains, and reach that Green Mountain where the Gods live. In their very presence, the Gods cannot help but hear this time. This time they will be forced to listen, and to answer.”

“And if there are no Gods there, what then?” asked Ron Ka, recovered now from shock.

“They are there,” said the king firmly, “since we are here. There can be no men without Gods, no Gods without men, just as there can be no child without a man and a woman.” He continued on, speaking without hesitation, allowing no space for anyone to question or to doubt again.

“We will send one strong young man from each province, so that each will hear the truth from the Gods themselves. They will all have to be young and strong men, the best we have, for it will be a long and arduous journey through Bay Sol, and then back again. During the past generations, we have developed many skills, and devised many ways of protecting ourselves from the elements. Our young men will not go into Bay Sol as did my grandfather, Far-Awn, at the age of twelve, completely unshielded, without even a bite of food in his pocket or water to last. And we do have his record of what to expect. Our delegation will take with them supplies enough to last throughout the journey.

“While our young men make the odyssey into the unknown, unexplored territory beyond the Scarlet Mountains, we will live as brothers in complete harmony, as one family waiting for the safe return of our children. We will not speak of retaliation of one kind or another in revenge for Bari-Bar, for to do so may influence the Gods.” The king was facing his governors now, moving his eyes to meet with all of those that sat at his council table. His voice dropped to a lower, deeper register now:

“And if the Gods lay the responsibility for the tragedy of Bari-Bar on us of Upper Dorraine, then I will step down from the throne, and the dynasty created by our Founder King will end. I will take my wife and my daughter and we will leave. You will not see any of us again. With the throne empty, the peoples of both Dorraines can then select, through a vote of majority, who will govern in my place. For despite all this talk of being free men, none of us is ever totally free from duties, and responsibilities, even a king.

It may surprise you to learn that my working hours are much longer than those of the miners who work underground. I live in lavish surroundings, yes, but there is a price to pay for luxury. My daughter is not nearly as free as your daughters. She does not have one dialect to learn, she has twenty. She has no freedom at all to do as she would like, but she accepts who she is, and prepares herself for the day when she may reign, just as I did. I am not seeking your pity by telling you this, but your

understanding. For I have to admit now, there is a joy in being useful, in doing your job well, and I have believed until recently that I have been a fair and unbiased ruler.” Now the king thoroughly shocked the bakarets sitting so quietly respectful. “And if the Gods in their righteous decisions place the fault for the demise of Bari-Bar with those of Lower Dorraine, still I will abdicate the throne of Far-Awndra.” The men at the table gasped... why should he do that?

“If there is a human fault, a guilt on either side, then I, as the leader and the ruler of both sides, assume the full guilt. I alone will be punished and judged guilty—there will be no cause for dispute, or war. Only if the Gods state the destruction of Bari-Bar cannot be laid to one side or the other will I or my descendants continue to rule—and then, only at your request.”

Ras-Far sat down. Silence dominated the table while the bakarets stared at him in disbelief, and some with shame. They had never been so impressed with the majesty of their ruler as they were at this very moment. Then in a sudden burst, like fast-rushing waters breaking through a dam, everyone began to talk at once, excitedly. They were awed with the improbabilities of the quest to talk to the Gods—yet so intrigued! Deep in the hearts of every man in the room, and in every soul in both Dorraines, was the longing to know for a certainty if actually Gods did exist on that far Green Mountain—and if they did not—what then?

“Is it possible, do you think? Could our sons live to reach the Mountain? It’s damn hot on that desert, the sands whirling about all the time! Still, with thought, we could devise a way. It would be a challenge.” Ras-Far leaned back in his chair. He knew they were ingenious men who preferred a challenge above all else. He saw Ron Ka looking at him with a strange, admiring smile.

He leaned closer to the king and said in a low voice, “My congratulations. I underestimated you Ras-Far. I thought I had you cornered, and my chance to sit on your throne was in the near future. Yet you divert us with our one weakness: a challenge to do the impossible.”

“You may still have your chance to sit where I am, Ron Ka,” the king said in return, faintly smiling. “And if that time ever comes, may you enjoy every minute of the long, long days, while I take my family off to some remote place and laze about, reading books that I don’t have time to open now.”

“And you would hate every moment of those idle, useless days,” smiled Ran Ka. “I am not deceived; I have a certain amount of power myself—and by the Gods, it’s damned enjoyable, despite the hard work.”

The king leaned closer to Ron Ka, so that no one sitting close could overhear: “I don’t expect to lose my throne, for as you said, power has its own reward. Time alone will tell us whether you or I will occupy this chair in the future.”

Sharita's Decision

All through the remainder of that day, and on through the night, the debate within the palace council room lasted. By the time the first sun glowed above the horizon, it had been decided: They would risk the lives of twenty men, and this was better by far than to endanger the lives of all with a war to decide who was guilty of destroying Bari-Bar. The twenty bakarets stumbled wearily to their beds, guests of the king, and fell down upon those beds, to reach without dreams the bone-exhaustion unconsciousness known so well on old El Sod-a-Por. This news of the decision made by their leaders raced throughout all of El Dorraine. Ask the Gods such a question? Who but a descendant of the Founder King would dare such a presumption? How improbable to think a journey like that could be made at all! Those twenty young men would die—and their deaths could be added to those already dead.

Still, the thought was exciting. To know, at last, so many things! Their king was not a fool; if he thought Gods really existed... maybe they really did. And everyone had heard of the superior wisdom of that old, old man, Es-Trall, though no one had ever seen him except the king. There were some that thought Es-Trall didn't exist at all, that he was only a figment contrived to suit the king's use, so he could hesitate indecisively and use conferences with Es-Strall as an excuse. Dray-Gon said as much to the princess when he met her by accident in one of the palace corridors.

“How dare you imply that my father is a liar!” Sharita flared. “Why you are as impossible as your father! I have seen that old man from my apartment terrace. We wave to each other. He has a long, long white beard that almost touches the floor, and sometimes I believe he spies on me through his telescope, so I am grateful my bathing pool is on the other side of the pinnacle.”

“Oh... that is interesting to find out,” Dray-Gon teased, “is there a pinnacle from which one may spy on your bathing pool?”

Sharita glared at him, her eyes snapping with sparks. “No! And why don't you and your father go back to where you came from? It seems every time I put foot outside of my rooms, I bump into you. Have you nothing better to do than loiter about the halls?” Mockingly Dray-Gon leaned

against a wall, his arm stretched out to the opposite wall, blocking Sharita's passage, unless she retreated, and she wasn't one to do that.

"You could ask me into your apartment, and introduce me to your pets, and then I would have something better to do than flirt with the pretty servant girls who wait on you."

"Flirt with them all you want, I don't care!" Sharita said coldly, then struck down his restricting arm with a strong blow that surprised Dray-Gon. Swiftly she gained a lift-shaft, and from there she flashed him her own mocking smile.

"You see, Dray-Gon, I am not as easily trapped as you think." With that, she disappeared through the floor that opened automatically. Frustrated in all his attempts to catch the princess alone, Dray-Gon left the palace where he and his father were houseguests, and he wandered out onto the streets of the capital city. There was a buzz of excitement out there, a busy hum of activity. The wine taverns were crowded with people discussing the new trail the king had set them upon.

"Why this is the most challenging thing that has happened to us in years!" he overheard someone say. Another commented, "But it would be a sad thing to lose twenty of our best young men, and I don't possibly see how they can survive." Dray-Gon knew that all the best and inventive minds were seeking the best ways to see that those young men survived. He himself attended the meetings, at the king's request.

"I have been watching and evaluating you, Dray-Gon, and I think you yourself may come up with some useful ideas. Have you not spent a great deal of your time on the wildlands?"

Yes, he had. Life inside the city domes grew too dull for him, and he enjoyed the thrill of not knowing what to expect when he was outside the cities, where the winds could blow suddenly frigid, or burning hot, and there were wild creatures with teeth and claws to add to the thrill of adventure. Why once he had even come across a wild puhlet, so big and so fierce he couldn't believe that animal had once been domesticated enough to play with babies. As he sat there in the tavern, sipping wine with friends, he saw come into the tavern a beautiful girl with long red hair, and he stared at her long and thoughtfully before he rose to his feet and made his way to her table, where she sat alone.

"Have we met before?" he asked, seating himself at her table without waiting for an invitation.

“We met at a palace ball,” she said to him, flirting with her dark purple eyes.

“Oh no, we couldn’t have. I would recall meeting someone like you.”

“You were very absorbed with the princess. You didn’t look my way,” and then she giggled in a girlish way. “I wasn’t a guest, not grand enough to be invited. I am only one of the girls who wait on the tables.” Dray-Gon leaned closer to peer at her in the dim light. She seemed familiar somehow, yet he couldn’t place her, and he wasn’t one to overlook a very beautiful girl.

“There is a carnival in town tonight... come with me, for it is not much fun to go by oneself..”

“But you are a bakaret’s son ... I am only a serving girl,” she said shyly, lowering her eyes. “And someone has told me you are in love with the Princess Sharita.” She had an odd dialect that puzzled Dray-Gon; he had never heard one exactly the same.

“The princess is as cold as ice, though she is exceptionally beautiful. And arrogant too, unbelievably so. Why there are times when I would like to turn her over my knee and paddle her bottom in the way her father should have years ago. Now tell me your name, because you will go with me to the carnival, won’t you?” Her name she gave him in a small, meek voice.

“Ray-Mon,” she almost whispered, “and what you just said, about spanking the princess, you could be thrown in jail for that.”

“Are you going to tell?” She shook her head, and then smiled beguilingly before she put out her hand.

“Yes, I will go with you. I have never been to a carnival, believe it or not. I hear they have very strange-looking creatures there. And I have never ridden on one of those rides that spin round and round. In fact, I have never done anything much that was very exciting.”

Dray-Gon laughed happily, clasping her offered hand in his.

“All right. We’ll make up for lost time, and do everything tonight—and that princess can sit in her damned apartment alone and wave to an old, old man with a long white beard.”

“Serves her right for being a princess,” Ray-Mon agreed, smiling as she rose to her feet, still holding onto his hand. Together, she and Dray-Gon

set out for the carnival grounds. While Dray-Gon spent his money on childish, playful things and gave Ray-Mon the time of her life, all about them was talk about the journey to see and talk to the Gods. It seemed the greatest issue was who would go—just which young men would form the delegation? During the next few days, this proved not to be a difficult problem for a sometimes practical, reasoning populace to decide. Since the twenty bakarets had agreed to the king's risky proposition in the first place, let it be their best and strongest sons that made the perilous journey to visit the Gods of Green Mountain! Many grumbled on hearing this.

The city of Far-Awndra was by far the largest and most powerful area in either of the Dorraines, and who would represent them? It was an easy thing for the king to risk the lives of other men's sons, seeking a solution for his problem. He had the most to win or lose, yet the king risked nothing of himself! The swell of their mutterings grew into a tidal wave, and they went in great force to the crystal palace, and demanded entrance, and an audience with the king! Ras-Far was eating breakfast when he heard the commotion out in his gardens. He went to a window and looked out to see his best flowers trampled underfoot, as if they were a cushion for walking.

“Look at that,” he said to his wife and daughter, “they are crushing our most beautiful blossoms without regard. I think I might as well go out on the balcony, before they storm inside the palace and crush underfoot what they find here.”

He went out on the balcony and gazed down on the rowdy, milling crowd that shouted his name. He only stood there, with his arms crossed, waiting for silence. It wasn't long in coming as the quality of his presence, and his regal bearing, quickly stilled their restless movements and quieted their voices, and those standing in the flower beds hurriedly stepped back onto the paths. All faces tilted upward to stare at the king, momentarily speechless. An old woman, bent and brushed the crushed flowers until they stood upright again.

“There, there,” she soothed. “You are all right. It only hurt for a little while.”

Now that they were quiet and attentive, the king spoke in a voice he saved for tense situations, a voice that boomed like a great bell.

“You have called out in loud angry voices for your king. Now that I am here, speak out, and state your reasons for coming and trampling down my best flowers.” No one could speak. They could only stare up at him,

overwhelmed and overawed, for there was in all the Founder's descendants a strangeness, a compelling something that was different from any others—and despite the unwillingness of some to be impressed, they were. Only one small child was unafraid. He called out in his high treble voice:

“They are angry because all of the provinces of El Dorraine have a bakaret's son to represent them before the Gods. Yet the great city of Far-Awndra has no one to represent them, and we are by far more powerful than all the cities of other provinces put together.” The king stood there looking down at the boy thoughtfully.

“How is it, son, that you have a voice to speak, when all around you is silent? Tell me your name so that I may have it recorded and take note of you in the future. There is always need for a fearless man, and I don't doubt that is what you will be.”

“I am Garron, the son of Brash, one of the dome builders,” replied the boy. Behind the king, his secretary wrote down the name. The mob was now ashamed of their timorous behavior, and they repeated the words of the boy.

“Send a man to represent us,” cried a native of Far-Awndra. “We have a right to be represented there, when the others speak with the Gods.”

Ras-Far replied: “If I had a son to send, his name would already head the list. As you know, my only child is a daughter. If you insist that the city of Far-Awndra should send a man, then select a man of the people and let him travel with the others to the Mountain.” A growl of disapproval sounded from the throats of those in the crowd who were from the lower borderlands.

“No!” they cried out.

“If Far-Awndra sends a man, then there will be ten from Lower Dorraine, and eleven from Upper Dorraine—and that imbalance we will not stand for!”

“And that is exactly why, in the first place, I did not choose to have Far-Awndra represented,” responded the king drily. It was then that the Princess Sharita, who had stood inside the palace, quietly listening, stepped out on the balcony and stood beside her father. The crowd below gasped to see her. Many there had never beheld her, and they murmured, causing a ripple of compliments as she stood tall and slim, bright and glowing, with the sunlight haloing her pale hair.

“There is a way for Far-Awndra to be represented without sending a man,” Sharita said in a clear voice that carried to all.

“Far-Awndra shall send a woman! As the daughter of the King of El Dorraine, Upper and Lower, I am the one to go!” The people gathered together below the balcony were stunned. Then, in delighted acceptance, they roared their approval, tossing their hats into the air—even those from Lower Dorraine. No one was more stunned than the king, unless it was Dray-Gon, who was a member of the crowd on the ground. Ras-Far turned to his daughter and said in a low voice,

“No, Sharita, you cannot go! How dare you come out here and put me in this awkward position? I will not allow you to go—and I have to tell them that now. You have turned a bad situation into an impossible one—you are my only child! I cannot risk your life!” On the ground, the people were still cheering as Sharita answered:

“But Father, I want to go. And besides, they have already accepted my proposal, and see how happy they are. And I am of royal blood too; once I have made a firm statement, can I back out?” Ras-Far turned from her and stared down at the people dancing and cheering, full of delight to have the princess as their emissary. An overwhelming sadness washed over the king, so that he felt like weeping. Why had he not foreseen this eventuality? Why had not Es-Trall warned him? Already he had lost two daughters ... and now a third was to endanger herself?

Ras-Far didn’t speak those thoughts; instead, he placed his arm over his daughter’s slight shoulders and nodded his approval. Sharita would go.

Dray-Gon Beseeches

Later on that same day, Dray-Gon stormed into the king's rooms, demanding an audience. Politely he was refused. The king was busy. If he wanted to see him, he would have to place his name on a long waiting list, and perchance, in a week or so, he would gain an audience.

"By the Gods! I'll see him today, and now!" Dray-Gon announced, and shoved the king's secretary from his path. He stalked toward the king's office. Two uniformed guards pointed their weapons directly at his heart.

"Halt!" he was commanded, "or we'll fire, and you will be paralyzed for several hours, and placed in a cell until you come to your senses." So swiftly did Dray-Gon move, he was but a blur. Both guards were left stunned and on the floor, as Dray-Gon threw open the king's office door. The king glanced up from his work on the desk, startled to see Dray-Gon come in unannounced.

"Your guards are not very effective, your majesty," said Dray-Gon.

"I suggest that you let me give them some instructions on self-defense. We Lowerers are, as you have accused often, of a physical nature, and could teach you Uppers a thing or two about the many ways of using one's body as a weapon." Ras-Far waved his hand, dismissing the two red-faced guards that came up behind Dray-Gon.

"If it was that easy for you to get in, then I will take you up on your offer—except I suspect my guards held back out of respect for your father's office." The king put aside his official documents and gave Ron Ka's son his full attention, speaking with a hint of laughter in his eyes.

"It has been reported to me that you ceaselessly prowl the palace halls, seeking to find the way to my daughter's apartment—and you have not succeeded in defeating her guards." Dray-Gon's face flooded with embarrassed color before he spoke quickly.

"That is why I am here. Your majesty, you cannot permit your daughter to travel with us to the Mountain! She is but a girl! She will never survive that trip, as delicate and frail as she is, and spoiled and pampered as well! Only the favors of the Gods will see any one of us through and back to

Dorraine again!” The king studied the agitated young man very observantly, seeing more than Dray-Gon knew.

“I have said almost exactly the same words to her myself, and she refuses to listen. She is determined to go, and frail or not, she has the will of ten men like you or I.”

“Then she is just being obstinate and stubborn! She can’t go! Twenty young men with only one girl. Can you imagine all the trouble she will cause? Why every one of us will be fighting each other to win her favor!”

Ras-Far smiled.

“I don’t think fisticuffs will win Sharita’s favor, and since you are so concerned about her safety, I could put you in charge of her defense.”

“And what would those ten men from Upper El Dorriane think of having me, a Lower, named protector of their princess? I don’t want her to go under any circumstances. Let me see her, sire, let me try to convince her to stay here and wait.”

Why not? Ras-Far thought, narrowing his eyes and studying Dray-Gon thoughtfully. Getting to his feet, he gestured to Dray-Don to follow, and he led the way through the complicated maze of palace corridors that were planned to be a puzzle to anyone not familiar with the palace.

“I am trusting you, Dray-Gon, not to reveal the route to my daughter’s rooms to any of my enemies, as they would have her kidnapped, and so force me to yield to their demands.” Dray-Gon appeared thoroughly shocked.

“Has that been threatened?”

“I have heard rumors that the outlaws on the wildlands have talked of doing this. It seems, living out there, those men have gone as savage as any animal, and I would not like to see my daughter in their hands.”

“Nor would I!” Dray-Gon stated with grim vehemence. But he could see, as he followed the king, that the princess was very well protected, not only with triple numbers of the guards that protected the king, but with secret doors and panels that would open only when the king inserted his crested royal ring into a small opening. And though he tried to remember the way, it was so twisting and complicated, he became confused and displaced. At length they came to the high pinnacle of her terraced apartment, to find Sharita feeding the small birds she kept in golden cages, while other small pets followed her about playfully pawing at the flowing

fabric of her gown. She spun about, startled to have her father come so quietly into her apartment ... and with Dray-Gon in tow!

“Father,” she scolded, “when you bring a visitor, you should have yourself announced! Look at me, I am not dressed appropriately to receive guests!”

“You look beautiful, as always,” said the king lightly, watching Dray-Gon as his eyes scanned over the princess’s brief attire. She was wearing a very short brief gown underneath a long flowing robe of some thin transparent material, and her remarkable shimmering hair was loose and cascading down her back, and her feet were bare.

“Dray-Gon wished to talk to you in private, and you are much less formidable in your private rooms, without those pompous clothes on, and that crown upon your head. As for myself, I have always found a barefooted girl very appealing.” In fact, she was dressed exactly as he had hoped.

Immediately, Sharita found slippers and put them upon her feet, and looked up to say stiffly, “Good light to you, Dray-Gon, son of Ron Ka.”

“I am flattered that you still remember my name, princess.”

“You needn’t be. My recall is of that strange type that cannot help itself, it remembers everything, trivial or not.”

“You are honest, princess, if not very tactful... and I expected better of you.”

“And you, Dray-Gon, have certainly grown more proficient with replies—are the delights of our city making you a bit more sophisticated?”

The king interrupted the two, who seemed to have forgotten his presence: “It seems I am not needed here. I concede the battle to you, Dray-Gon. When you are ready to leave, I will inform one of the guards on the outside to lead you back to your suite.” Ras-Far turned about and left the room, a smile playing on his face for the first time in many days.

“Whatever does he mean,” Sharita asked when her father was out of hearing, “that he concedes the battle to you?”

“Why, that is how we converse, isn’t it, princess? We don’t talk, we wage war! The last time we met, you almost broke my arm. Who taught you to do that?” She made a gesture toward a delicate white and gold chair, and curled up on another across from him.

“Lately we have not run into each other in the corridors—have you found more entertaining ways to keep yourself busy than searching for my rooms?”

“So, you have missed me,” he said mockingly, and pleased.

“I have been informed that you are seeing a servant girl very often. Not that I care, but this palace abounds with gossip. Nothing goes unobserved or speculated upon. And no, I have not missed you, why should I?”

“No reason at all why you should miss me, or why I should miss you. I am seeing a servant girl. She is exceptionally beautiful, almost as pretty as you are, and much friendlier.”

“Aren’t you embarrassed to be seen with a person below your station?”

“No. She is so lovely, and so warm, I don’t care what she is. I grow tired of stiff, cold women who hold you off at arm’s length. With her I can relax and put down my guard.” Sharita frowned and pulled the folds of her robe together to conceal her long, beautifully shaped legs.

“I suppose you are falling in love with her.”

“I haven’t come here to discuss with you my romantic life,” said Dray-Gon impatiently. He turned his head, discerningly looking over her rooms, one joining the other. Exquisitely beautiful rooms, with every lavish comfort and convenience.

“You are going to miss all of this, Sharita, when you set forth on a journey from which you may not return.” She flung her hands wide, lightly dismissing her style of living.

“I won’t miss this at all! I have lived here for eight plus ten years, and I have looked every day to the Green Mountain. Now I have my opportunity at last to see it up close, and to learn for a certainty what it means... and losing a few comforts is not going to prevent me from going!” He looked at her pityingly... with some wistfulness.

“Sharita, don’t you know we will never reach there? I have talked to the other men going with me and we have all agreed our chances are very, very slim. Nevertheless we will all make a sincere effort. No one has ever survived but a few days on Bay Sol.”

“Far-Awn did!” she threw back quickly.

“Yes, he had the luck of the Gods with him, and the puhlets to guide him to the star-flowers—and even so, he was there but two days. It will

take us two hundred days, or maybe more, to reach that mountain!” Dray-Gon leaned forward, intently pleading with his eyes.

“Don’t go, Sharita. Let someone else take your place. You will be nothing but a burden to us. There are outlaws hiding in the wildlands. If they know you are with our caravan, they could well raid our party, and try to steal you away. With you in their hands, they could force your father to concede to any demand!”

She laughed at him, getting up and dancing out onto a terrace, where she kicked off her blue slippers and twirled about before she threw herself down on a long blue couch. Dray-Gon followed and stood beside the couch, staring down at her, wishing he could shake some sense into her beautiful head. She surprised him by reaching out to catch his hand, drawing him down to the couch.

“Ah, Dray-Gon,” she began softly, in a way in which she had never spoken to him before, “you have no faith, while I do. My father and Es-Trall say it is possible to reach the Mountain, and I believe them. The outlaws may attack, but I have twenty of our strongest and bravest young men to defend me, and our weapons are much superior to their contrived bows and arrows. We will reach that mountain, and we will talk to the Gods! I know we will, and what’s more, we’ll live to reach home again.” Oh, but she was one stubborn, hardheaded, beguiling woman. He could almost believe her, she seemed so certain.

“Sharita, how can you speak so positively? How can you possibly be so certain? When I think about it, I see nothing ahead but impossible obstacles to overcome, and I don’t want you to die in the attempt.” Sharita looked at him strangely, her violet, almost blue eyes shadowing.

“I don’t know why I believe, yet I do.” She rose from the sofa and strolled to the farthest end of the long terrace, where she could see best the mountain that was pale blue-green in the distance. Rounded at the top, behind the jagged peaks of the Scarlet Mountains, it seemed from her vantage point perhaps a million miles away... as distant almost as a star. She felt Dray-Gon’s presence as he came to stand at her side, placing his hand on her balustrade next to hers.

“We may never stand here together, like this again,” he said in a wistful voice, wishing they had a different kind of future ahead. Her eyes met his.

“Would it matter? You have your servant girl, who is warm, where I am cold. She will probably yield to all your persuasions, and you will have

no need of me.” He glared at her, anger darkening his eyes. Then he seized her in his arms and brutally kissed her.

“There,” he said, throwing her down on the blue couch, “it seems you don’t want tenderness. You want to fight, and be taken ruthlessly. Maybe when the outlaws attack, we’ll just throw you to them, and say good riddance while we ride off on our way without the nuisance of some damned silly princess who has always gotten her own way in everything! Good-bye, Sharita, I’m off to see my servant girl! She is a thousand times sweeter than you are!”

The triple moons, rotating about each other as they encircled the planet, had made the journey one hundred plus two and twenty days, before the caravan of twenty plus one was ready for the long trip across the dry plains of Bay Sol. During that time, every person, young or old, of both Dorraines had helped to plan and prepare for that long and dangerous quest into the unknown. There were no differences now between the two halves of the whole. United in cause, they stood behind the unprecedented journey. In unison they shared the concern for the safety of the twenty sons of the Upper and Lower bakarets and for the princess.

Though never, really, did they quite believe that elusive, remote, and beautiful princess, accustomed to all the luxuries the crystal palace provided, would actually follow through and keep her promise. She would turn coward at the end, and cling to the safety of her high tower, protected by guards. She wouldn’t have the nerve to face the wilderness and all the discomforts, and even the pain it might provide. Nor did they for one minute think the king would not find a way to free the princess of her obligation, and keep her safe at his side. They knew what she was to him—his single remaining link to the future, and to eternity, for the laws forbade that even a king could reproduce himself more than three times, so crowded were the domed cities already.

Nor could they, in some ways, condemn the king for wanting to keep his only child safe. They would do the same. At the last moment the princess would be sick, unable to travel, or she would stumble and break a leg, some grand excuse, something sure to eliminate her. Some met in the wine taverns and placed wagers: the odds were one hundred to one. The last evening before that fateful departure to conquer the impossible, and to face the Gods with a question, Dray-Gon met in secret with the lovely servant girl Ray-Mon. Through the darkness she came running to

him in one of the isolated, most private of the palace gardens, where they embraced and kissed, and she clung to him with tears in her eyes.

“Please let no harm come to you, Dray-Gon,” she whispered, tattooing kisses all over his face.

“But even if you survive, and I pray you do, you will come back to me a different man.”

“No, I will be the same,” he said gently, stroking her silky red hair. But Ray-Mon shook her head, denying this.

“No, you are bound to change. You will ride off with the princess, the kind of woman meant for a man of your station, and you will forget me.”

“Don’t say that. I will never forget you, Ray-Mon!” Dray-Gon vowed.

“You are all the soft and sweet feminine things that the princess doesn’t know the least thing about. I fear she is just meant for taking, not for giving.” His eyes grew bitter as he thought of the princess.

“Besides, I have nineteen others who are competing for her favors. She cares nothing at all for me.”

“Then she is a fool!” declared Ray-Mon, and flung her arms around his neck, pressing on his lips a long, passionate kiss. When the kiss was over, they both stood looking at each other, in a kind of double shock. She was the first to recover, and slipped on the smallest finger of his left hand a silver ring with a small blue stone.

“This is for good luck,” she whispered, her purple eyes swimming with tears.

“Wear it until we meet again.” It was then that Dray-Gon draped over Ray-Mon’s head a silver chain with a large heart-shaped pendant, centered with a very valuable blue diamond.

“This is for your good luck,” he said before he kissed her again.

“Wear it forever, so that it will always remind you of me, and the sweet times we have enjoyed together.”

The morning came too soon. The gaily decorated horshets were mounted, and the puhlet flock was herded, and the twenty young men and the single girl rode out through the shimmering gates of Far-Awndra. Cheering behind them were the voices of thousands upon thousands of people. The princess had not retreated! She was actually going! The twenty

young men were all dressed in smoke blue, with trimmings of the purple plum of night, and edgings of gold for the day.

The Princess Sharita wore a uniform too, like those of the twenty young men, with a few alterations to fit her more abundant curves. Only her uniform was pure white, with blue piping and gold buttons, and a cap to match. Her magnificent hair flowed down her back in rippling waves. She turned and waved back to the cheering crowd, smiling at them with more gracious and genuine warmth than any had suspected she had. Now they were sorry to have misjudged her, and sorry she was riding away into the wildlands, into Bay Sol, risking her life, so that they might never see her again, or have the chance to know and love her.

Many in the crowd began to cry, for her, for every one of those brave young men. Dray-Gon turned and looked back too, raking his eyes over the crowd, searching to see Ray-Mon. But there were too many there with red hair and citron faces. He couldn't pick her out from the crowd. Ras-Far stood with his wife beside him, with the other parents of the twenty young travelers, and waved good-bye as cheerfully as any other. The king took pains to hide the tear that insisted on slipping down his cheek, traveling slowly to drop on the ground.

The Attack of the Outlaws

Each rider had two horshets apiece. One to ride, and one to use later when the first was tired. With them they had a flock of twenty puhlets, for that had been the charmed number for Far-Awn, and would be perhaps for them as well. They had five supply wagons, and a special wagon that would be a home for the princess. Each of the six wagons was pulled by a team of four horshets. The young sons of the bakarets took turns driving the wagons. The wagons held a huge supply of water, plus quantities of concentrated and expandable food, enough to last for a year, if it took that long.

The wagons were made of shimmering bygar, opaque, not transparent, of a smoke blue color like the puhlets. When the blustering, blazing, hot winds of Bay Sol blew, they would form an oblong with these wagons, lower protective shields over the wheels, and raise other shields over the wagons to form a pointed roof. Inside of their simulated, odd-shaped pyramid, they would take refuge with their animals when necessary. The wagons were equipped with machines that would heat, and others that would cool. They would survive! They would live! They were, each and every one, determined to reach that far Green Mountain!

The sensitive eyes of their horshets were shielded with a nonglare film. The puhlets were so uniquely evolved that they needed no extra man-made help. The riders of the horshets would shield their own eyes also from the white-hot glare of the dual suns on the white sands. Their long wagons were awkward to handle over the rough terrain, though they rode smoothly enough, for the wheels were cushioned with springs. Every trail had to be closely inspected by the scouts that were sent ahead to find the easiest route to travel, for the ruts and crevices could break the axles or mire a wheel.

The first night they drew their wagons into the rectangular shape, and lowered the shields to protect the wheels, but they did not raise the roof. All chose to look up and see the moons and the stars. They were terribly excited and talkative as they sat about their fires, groups of four individually cooking and preparing their own meals. It had been decided beforehand that the princess would eat her breakfast and noonday meal in her wagon, but the evening meal she would be the guest of one group of

four alternately. As chance would have it, for Sharita had reached into a hat and pulled out a number, it was Dray-Gon's group with whom she shared her first evening meal. Enviously the other men looked to their campfire, where Sharita sat on a cushion, daintily eating a meal that was scorched, or on the other hand, not well done. She thought that tomorrow night, she would offer to assist in the preparation of the meal, and be hopeful that it turned out better than this one.

"What's the matter, princess?" asked Dray-Gon, "you're not eating well. Are you already discovering that you would rather be home, in your exclusive apartment?"

"It's a delicious meal," she answered, smiling at a fellow named Arth-Rin, who had prepared it. "I don't have much appetite because I foolishly ate a few sweets not long ago."

The young chef of the meal beamed happily, although he himself was having difficulty chewing the stringy meat. He reasoned that royal teeth must be better and sharper than his own.

"How do you like the pudding?" Dray-Gon asked again of Sharita, who was forcing herself to swallow the lumpy, burned mess. If he weren't watching her so closely, she would quickly dump the contents of the bowl into the crevice directly in back of where she was sitting, but Dray-Gon didn't allow her that opportunity. She smiled at her tormentor charmingly.

"Did you prepare this?—it tastes like something you would make," she asked of him.

"You mean you don't like it?" he asked innocently. Sharita glanced at Arth-Rin, who anxiously awaited her opinion.

"No, I like it very much." Quickly she ate all that remained of the pudding, swallowing before she could taste it.

"Since you like it so much, I'll make it again the next time we're honored with your company," Dray-Gon said.

"In fact, I won't forget the lumps either..." She gave him a hard glare and then rose to her feet, saying she was tired, and would see them early in the morning. Dray-Gon called after, "We're leaving at the crack of dawn, princess—the first dawn—so don't sleep late." For an answer, she slammed the door of her wagon. Inside her elaborately outfitted wagon, she quickly bathed and washed her hair, and fell wearily asleep. It seemed she had hardly closed her eyes when someone was rapping on her door,

calling out, “Time to get up, princess.” Hurriedly Sharita dressed and ate a small meal of prepared food, and then joined the men who were saddling the horshets. Dray-Gon was buckling on the saddle of her own special white horshet.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said to him sharply. “I can do it for myself.” Quicker than she could object, he had the saddle off the animal’s back and thrown on the ground.

“If that’s the way you want it, as captain of this expedition—appointed by your father—from now on, it’s against the rules for any man here to assist you in anything.”

“My father didn’t tell me he appointed you captain!” Sharita flared, her face flushed and angry.

“Whether he informed you or not, he did name me captain, and you, dear princess, are as much subject to my rule as any other here.” And with this Dray-Gon extended his hand, showing her a crested ring, similar to the larger one the king wore. Sharita paled, then turned to pick up the saddle. It was heavier than she had supposed. Though she had seen it done many times, the effort of lifting the saddle and slinging it over the horshet’s high back threw her to the ground. Quickly she got up and tried again. This time she managed to keep her balance, but she used too much effort, and the saddle ended up on the other side of the horshet, once more on the ground. Behind her, several of the young men were laughing. She pivoted around sharply to see who it was. She couldn’t tell, for all faces sobered immediately.

“If you ask prettily, I may saddle your animal for you,” Dray-Gon said with hardly any sarcasm. She refused to reply, but stalked around to the other side of the restless horshet, and again picked up the saddle. This time it seemed even heavier, and she had managed to get it quite dirty, and now the seat of her pristine white uniform would be soiled. She tossed the saddle recklessly on the horshet’s back, and somehow, for some reason, this time it stayed. Sighing, she reached under the horshet and found the right strap. Her horshet, Singer, began to prance about, unhappy with her clumsy handling, and her small hands, inexperienced at the task, couldn’t buckle the cinch.

“It seems we will be here all day if I don’t help,” said Dray-Gon, pushing her roughly aside. “The clumsy way you put on this saddle will have you dumped off in a ditch later on—and I swore to your father I

would bring you back unharmed, or else I would let you end up in a ditch, broken legs and all.”

“Why would my father ask for such a vow from you—when there are ten men here from Upper Dorraine, more dependable than any barbarian?”

“Bad judgment on his part, I suppose,” replied Dray-Gon.

“Then too, he may have thought a barbarian like me has more experience at this sort of adventure than any of your upperland dandies.” Just to the back of her, Sharita heard several men draw in their breaths, as if ready to take offense. She turned to see several of the young men she had known since childhood, squaring off, as if to fight with several of Dray-Gon’s friends.

“La-Don,” called Sharita, “come assist me up on my horshet... we have to be on our way.”

The handsome young man came willingly, smiling in triumph as he gallantly assisted the princess up, and at the same time, throwing Dray-Gon a look of disdain. The princess sighed in relief once they were under way, the first crisis averted. The day was long and tiresome, and grew hotter as they approached Bay Sol. The large, clumsy wagons slowed their progress considerably, so that by nightfall they had only reached the rim of the bay, and there they settled down for the night.

Sharita ate her second evening meal with a different group of four men, these from the upper borderlands, and since she had assisted with the meal preparation, this time it turned out slightly better. Two of her fingers were burned, and she had broken three long nails. That night after she was in bed, she studied a cookbook... the first she had ever read, or else she was going to end up skinny as a stick, for her own cooking wasn’t much better than what the men managed to throw together. Her light attracted someone, for he knocked on her window.

“Time to turn out your light, princess, or you won’t be able to get up.”

“Go to bed, Dray-Gon,” she snapped back. “Don’t keep your eyes on me every second of the day, and the night too!” She heard his soft chuckle.

“I give you ten seconds, princess, or else I will come in and turn off the light for you.”

“That is one thing you cannot do, Captain! I have the door locked!”

“Sharita,” he called softly, very close to her window, “I have the master key that unlocks all the wagon doors...”

The count was nine when she snapped off the light, and then she heard his footsteps walk away. Why, her father must have been mad to have named him captain! He was a tyrant! A bully! He gave her absolutely no freedom! No privacy! He treated her like a spoiled, pampered, idiot child! Such were Sharita’s thoughts as she fell asleep. Captain Dray-Gon was up early, rousing the other men, and barking commands right and left, for they were still within the unpoliced territory controlled by the many bands of outlaws, and he would have them out of here as soon as possible.

“Hitch the horshets to the wagons,” he ordered as one born to be in authority, “round up the puhlets and eat your breakfast.” When all this was done, he called out, “Let’s roll!” It was then his first lieutenant Raykin, spoke: “Shouldn’t the princess be awakened, Captain?”

“She seemed overly tired last night,” answered Dray-Gon, peering this way and that to see that everything was done correctly, “and there is no reason why she has to ride with us, and leave the comfort of her wagon.” Again Raykin expressed his opinion: “But she isn’t going to like being treated with patronizing condescension.” Sharply Dray-Gon cut his eyes to this handsome young man from Bar-Troth, an upperland province. This was the very elegant young dandy he had seen dance most often with the princess at the court ball. With intuitive recognition he guessed that Raykin was his most formidable opponent in the competition to win the love of the princess. The thought scowled his dark brows in a close knit.

“Do you know the princess so well and so intimately that you can determine what she will consider patronizing and condescending?” Raykin grinned in a challenging, snide way.

“Her parents and my parents have always been the closest of friends—so Sharita and I have known each other since childhood.” As the two young men stood there, sizing each other up, each determined to win the same woman’s favor, suddenly from the surrounding hills, came a large booming voice: “Hail there, fool sons of bakarets! I am Sintar, chief of the outlaws. You trespass upon my territory—and I demand tribute if you are to continue on with your absurd journey to speak with gods that don’t exist!”

Dray-Gon spun about, keenly alert as he faced the voice that called, though the speaker was hidden behind large boulders, and he could see no one.

“Hail to you, Sintar, chief of the outlaws,” he called back in response.

“I am Dray-Gon, captain of this fool expedition to speak with the Gods, whether or not they exist. Step out and show yourself like a man when you make demands of tribute!”

From the hills came a roll of booming laughter.

“Step out and show myself, did you say? Do you consider me as large a fool as yourself, Captain Dray-Gon? I have no wish to be paralyzed for several hours—so hidden here behind the rocks you have no target for your weapons to aim at. But believe this, sons of noblemen, you are completely surrounded by my men, and you cannot escape, even with your paralyzing weapons, for just beyond the curve of the hill ahead, we have built a strong barrier of boulders through which your wagons cannot pass without my consent. Turn over to me the tribute I demand, and we will allow you to pass.”

“Name the tribute!” Dray-Gon called, putting one hand behind his back and signaling to Arth-Rin and Ral-Bar, friends of his youth. The two young men from the lowerlands understood his gestures, and quietly, unobtrusively, stepped backward, slipping out of sight behind the horshets all readied for mounting.

“We demand but one thing,” called the outlaw chieftain Sintar, “and we will permit you to pass on. Otherwise, we will rain down on your wagons and animals an avalanche of rocks, and we can slay your horshets one by one with our arrows. So don’t think you can outwit us with your guns and your superior weapons. Primitive weapons can kill too!”

“How can we consider your demand until you name it?” Dray-Gon answered in his own loud voice, and then whispered to Raykin, “When I give the word, be prepared to jump onto the driver’s seat of the princess’s wagon—and drive like the demons of hell are pursuing you...”

“But how can we ride over the barrier of rocks ahead?” whispered back Raykin. Dray-Gon smiled.

“I have taken care of that; even as we talk, Arth-Rin and Ral-Bar are readying the disintegrating guns that will burn those boulders into dust.”

From the shadowed hills, again boomed Sintar’s voice: “Turn over to us the Princess Sharita, and we will allow you to travel on your way unharmed.” All of the young men sucked in their breaths in surprise and shock. Dray-Gon laughed.

“Sintar—what kind of men do you think we are? Each one of us would die before we would turn our princess over to the likes of you. But how can we turn over tribute that we don’t have? The princess is not with us, but back at the palace, safely guarded.”

“You lie, son of Ron Ka!” roared Sintar’s voice, from a particular spot that Dray-Gon had located, and watched with narrowed eyes. “We know for a fact that the princess rides within one of those blue wagons! So turn her over to us, and then proceed on your way.”

“I have heard of you, Sintar,” called back Dray-Gon. “You killed a man when you caught him assaulting your young daughter. So you must have some sympathy for a young girl like our princess. And you are not an uneducated man, so you cannot believe the king would be so foolhardy as to risk the life and safety of his only remaining child by allowing her to travel with us. Late last night, the king sent a patrol of palace guards here, and they took the princess with them, back to the palace, so she could be slipped inside and hidden away, and the people will only believe she is with us.” Silence came back from the hills as this untruth was digested, and apparently discussed. Then, from the hills, Sintar’s strong voice boomed again:

“You are a clever man, Dray-Gon—and I don’t believe you! We have our own knowledge. The princess is inside one of those wagons! King Ras-Far would not deceive his people! If he says the princess will go to the Green Mountain, then she will go!”

“Ha!” scoffed Dray-Gon with disdain. “He may be a king, but he is still a man, and a father who cares more for the safety of his daughter than he does for keeping his word.” Arth-Rin slipped close to Dray-Gon and whispered in his ear that all was ready. Inside her wagon, the princess awakened to loud voices, and the nervous braying of the horshets, and the panicky rilling of puhlets. When she looked outside a wagon window, all the young men were rushing about in apparent confusion. Hurriedly Sharita drew on a long robe over her short sleeping gown and she left the wagon and ran over to where she saw Dray-Gon clustered with several of his officers.

“What is wrong?” she asked breathlessly of Dray-Gon before she recalled she had vowed to herself that she wouldn’t speak, or even so much as look at him today. He turned to give her a short look of exasperation before he softly swore.

“Damn! You certainly timed your appearance beautifully, princess! Just when I had them halfway convinced you weren’t here, you come running out of your wagon! Why couldn’t you have overslept?” Sharita couldn’t understand the way he blazed at her, or why the other men looked so upset. She took a quick look around, trying to see for herself what was causing so much agitation, while the wind snapped her long hair about her face, and whipped her robe form-fittingly against her body.

Out of the hills roared the voice of Sintar: “Aha! Dray-Gon, you are the deceitful one! Who is that tempting little beauty that runs out in her nightclothes but the princess? What other wench has hair the color of hers? Send her out to us, and we will let the rest of you go unharmed, but if you make an attempt to fire your weapons, we will crush all of you, including the princess, under an avalanche of rocks!”

“Get back in your wagon!” Dray-Gon hissed at Sharita, but she shook her head, defying him, and stood looking toward the boulder that shielded Sintar from view.

“All right, Sintar,” the captain of the expedition called, “this is the princess. Before I turn her over to you... tell me first what you will do with her.” He said then in a low voice, hardly moving his lips, “All of you men prepare to mount, and those assigned to drive the wagons, slip as furtively close to them as you can without drawing attention to yourselves. Sharita, let the wind open your robe so the outlaws will be diverted by staring at you while we attempt to break free of this mess.”

Sintar’s voice sounded again.

“Captain, unjust laws made a criminal of me, drove me out onto the wildlands because I killed in defense of my daughter. I sired my allotted three children, and had to leave them and my wife behind, but there are many here who have not fathered one child, and the laws of our lands decree we must live as exiles, without names, without shelter, without wives, or the ability to produce children—for that natural right was taken from us before we were released. So we try to defeat the laws and steal what women we can from the small unguarded cities, and we bring these women back to our caves and force them to submit to us and try to make them love us. But women are a strange breed. They have only scorn and contempt for men who can only plant dead seed in their bodies—and soon they hate us and seek to escape. Those women who try to run are usually caught, and we punish them in the most brutal ways you can conceive—for men without loving women soon turn into animals.

That is what we are now: beasts. And when we have that fair and beautiful princess, the daughter of the ruler who has established these inhuman laws, then we will make her pay for every lonely, frustrated, miserable moment we have lived as animals! And when we have used her, and dehumanized her, and made her crawl and beg and plead, we will notify the king we have his daughter. If he wants her back, he will have to change the laws that banish a man to live as we do, as shadows without substance, as beasts without heart or soul or compassion.”

Sharita turned to Dray-Gon and clung to him, trembling from head to toe, as he covered her ears with his hands so she couldn't hear more of the obscenities the other outlaws shouted, speaking of the ways in which they would degrade her.

“Sintar!” shouted Dray-Gon in red-hot temper. “Each one of us will die before we turn the princess over to the likes of you, as I said before—and she will die too, before I will see her so defiled—so what you are asking is death for you and your companions!”

“Will you kill us, Captain?” shouted back Sintar. “If you do, then you too will be an outlaw, and you too will be banished and made sterile! So, do your damnedest to save your princess, and use your ingenious weapons against our rocks, our bows and arrows—but you too, all of you, will be considered murderers, no matter how justified—and you will be sent out to live as we do, and if there is one of us left alive after this battle today, we will tear you limb from limb on the day of your exilement!” No sooner had the last word left his lips when an arrow whizzed by Sharita's cheek, so close she felt the breeze. Dray-Gon threw her to the ground and fell on top of her, as Sintar shouted out:

“That arrow wasn't meant for you, princess, for we will take you alive to use for our pleasure—we will kill your captain first!” A rain of arrows shot out from the surrounding hills, and struck on the ground, or battered harmlessly against the sides of the armorlike wagons.

“You see, little one, why you should have stayed safely in your wagon?” whispered Dray-Gon. Then he hastily kissed her pale lips, even as one of his hands lifted and signaled to Arth-Rin. “While the men mount the horshets, you crawl under your wagon, and enter it through the trapdoor underneath—and you stay inside there until I say you can come out again!”

Without any objection, she did this, feeling ridiculous on her hands and knees, but in this way, she wasn't giving anyone a chance to aim an arrow her way. Once inside her wagon, with the secret trapdoor latched, she

opened a window just a fraction to hear what was going on. She heard Dray-Gon order the men to ride like the wind, the drivers of the wagons to use the whips.

“And we will go in double file,” he yelled, “and try to keep our animals herded in between, and shoot at the targets I have named, for it will work if we gain enough speed.” He then ran to a wagon across the way from Sharita’s, and swiftly climbed to the top where he could lie flat, partially protected behind a raised shield.

“Ride on!” he ordered in sharp command. The wagons began to roll, with the riders keeping the extra horshets and puhlets corralled between the double file of wagons, as they urged them on to a faster clip. Ahead of the caravan was the huge barrier of stones piled by the outlaws in the night, and they were all racing pell-mell directly at it, even as the outlaws began to roll the boulders down! Several struck Sharita’s wagon, and bounced off, like rubber balls striking something unyielding... yet, if one of the huge boulders struck the running horshets, it would be another story. As Sharita watched, staring in fascination out of a wagon window, she saw Dray-Gon aim a long barrel-like thing at the stone barrier—the extinguisher! He splayed the burning light on the rock barricade and where it had been, there was now only powdery dust blowing in the wind, allowing the lead horshets to plunge on ahead, unheeded. The men driving the wagons and those on horshetback cheered.

“Great shot, Captain!” Raykin congratulated from his seat on Sharita’s wagon. Then, from a higher hill just ahead, a mammoth boulder came tumbling, gathering force as it rolled, heading straight for the wagon in which Sharita rode. She saw Dray-Gon again take careful aim and fire. A sizzling flash of light, and the boulder was gone... but in its previous course, the boulder had dislodged smaller rocks and they came tumbling down, keeping all of the men riding atop the wagons busy firing and turning them into powdery dust. The outlaws hiding in the hills abandoned the avalanche attack as useless, and began to aim their arrows at the racing horshets pulling the wagons.

It was then that Dray-Don called out, “Now is the time to use our alternate strategy!”

Even as he spoke, he was picking up another type of weapon, and lying prone to take careful aim, not at an outlaw as Sharita expected, but at huge boulders high above their positioning on a shelf terrace. This weapon didn’t disintegrate the boulder into dust—instead the beam of fiery red

light split it apart so that it careened down, taking other boulders with it, showering down on the hidden outlaws, and driving them out into the open where the men on horshetback could now use their paralyzing guns—which hardly seemed necessary now.

The roar of the falling rocks almost drowned out the screams of the outlaws as they ran before the onslaught of rocks not meant to be used against them. A ragged man came running like crazy down from the hills, flailing his arms and legs so fast they seemed a rotating blur in his effort to escape a mammoth boulder that was sure to catch him. At the last possible moment, he took a quick glance behind, then dove sideways, rolling over and over and falling into a ravine—perhaps hurt, but alive. And now, that very same boulder was coming directly at the dual file of wagons! To use a disintegrating weapon now would kill the driver of the first wagon, and his horshets...

Sharita drew in her breath sharply, almost paralyzed with fear when she saw whose wagon it was sure to strike—hers! Dray-Gon saw too the target the tumbling boulder was headed for, and leaping down from the wagon he rode, he sped across the open space toward the wagon of the princess, ploughing his way heedlessly through the spare horshets and the racing puhlets. It seemed that it took forever for him to reach her wagon; years it took to jump up on the seat beside Raykin, and use an extra whip to slap down on the backs of the horshets already galloping and blowing steam.

“Faster! Faster!” he urged, bringing the whip down hard again, so the terrified horshets, seldom used brutally, leaped ahead with such vigor Sharita was thrown off her feet and fell to the floor. She fell in such a way that her leg twisted beneath her, and she screamed out with the pain, then lay there panting as the wagon bounced over rocks and ruts, almost jolting the insides from her, with each jar adding to the pain of her ankle. The pretty dishes in her cupboards crashed together and broke; her toilet articles pitched onto the floor and rolled erratically about, breaking as they collided with this or that.

A rolling bottle of shampoo met with a flying jar of cold cream, and the collision sprayed a sticky goo all over the princess sprawled miserably on the floor. A battered doll that she had kept with her always since the age of two fell to the floor and shattered, and the loss of that beloved old doll brought more tears to her eyes than the pain of her ankle. She felt sick and ready to throw up by the time the wagon slowed to a normal pace,

and Dray-Gon was coming in through the side door, laughing to see her sprawled so undignified on the floor.

“Oh—what a sight you are, princess!” he mocked, standing with his strong legs spread apart, and his hands on his hips, apparently enjoying the humiliation she was suffering. Every inch of her disheveled appearance was thoroughly gone over by his eyes several times. In the rubble of her beautiful possessions, she glared at him, too angry to speak and make the effort to stand at the same time. Being the barbarian he was, he made no courtly effort to help her, just stood and watched as she struggled to stand, and then cried out, before she fell again. Despite her will, she began to cry, like a child, certainly not the way a princess should behave in the presence of someone so detested.

Then, even worse, she was really wailing... Dray-Gon went and knelt at her side, sober faced now that he knew she was hurt. Tenderly he slipped an arm under her shoulders and another under her knees, picking her up and carrying her to the bed, where he laid her down gently, and skillfully felt her bones to see which one was broken.

“It is my ankle, damn you!” she flared when his examination became too complete.

“Nasty temper you have, princess,” he replied calmly, and then jeeringly: “Why didn’t you speak up sooner?”

Insinuating in such an insulting way, Sharita reached her hand out for something hard to hurl at him. He laughed as he seized her wrist and used enough pressure to force her fingers to release the object.

“Behave yourself, princess,” he said in the tight-lipped, soothing, indulgent way one speaks to an unruly, spoiled child that really needs a slap that is being held back with great restraint.

“If you are a good little girl, I will go for the one doctor we have—and for your sake, I hope he is a good one.” Of course he was a good doctor—her father had seen to that! But Sharita couldn’t speak; the pain of her throbbing ankle gritted her teeth together. Benlon, a slight man with remarkably gentle hands, came and examined her ankle, and then taped it securely, and issued instructions for her to stay off of her feet and keep the injured ankle propped high on pillows. During all of this, Dray-Gon had stood silent in the background, not speaking until the young doctor was gone.

“Now we have the perfect excuse to send you back to the palace, princess.”

“No! If my leg were broken, instead of only a sprained ankle, I would still go on! And you, Captain, can carry me back and forth to my horshet until my ankle is healed—since it is your fault I fell anyway!” Frowning, uninvited, Dray-Gon sat on the side of her narrow bed.

“Sharita, I am serious. This is no journey for you to make. You call me a barbarian, a savage, but you have just met up with real savages. You heard what those outlaws said they would do if you fell into their hands. And incidentally, I saved your life. But for me that boulder would have crashed into your wagon and turned it over—there was a precipice on the other side which you may not have noticed.”

“Raykin is a perfectly capable driver,” she snapped back angrily.

“Your trouble is you want to take the credit for everything. Now leave my wagon, Captain, for in here, I am still above your station—and in here, I give the orders!” He stood up and backed out, and at the door bowed to her in mock humility and obeisance. Hardly had the door closed behind him when Sharita was weeping—not because her ankle hurt but because she was dependent on him! She was acting so hateful and unappreciative, and she didn’t know how to stop without giving him the impression that she was backing down in weakness and defeat, in the way of most women confronted with a male’s strength.

It was only then Sharita realized she hadn’t yet had anything to eat; she was still in her nightclothes, and hadn’t so much as combed her hair, or washed her face. And now she was lame, handicapped, and had no one to do anything to assist her—except men. Even Benlon looked at her as a possible suitor and lover, and not just as a detached doctor. An unladylike curse escaped her lips, one just learned from overhearing the rough talk of the men when they weren’t aware she was listening. Then, partially amused with her awkward situation, she crawled from the bed, and on hands and knees, dragging her injured leg, she set about washing herself as best she could, and finding clothes she could pull on.

When she was dressed, and somewhat sloppily presentable, she gained her feet, and hopped about on one leg in the unsteady, rocking wagon, and made an effort to prepare breakfast. The wagon swayed unexpectedly to the right—and scalding hot water spilled to burn her sandaled foot. While she stared down in dismay at her burned foot, the wagon jarred to the left, and her just prepared breakfast went sliding to the floor. In tears

now, frustrated and helpless feeling, she sat down on the floor, scooped her food back on the plate, and ate it.

Her meal was combined with dirt, cold cream, and shampoo, and yet she was so hungry, none of that mattered. Ruefully determined, she told herself she would endure whatever hardships lay ahead without one single complaint! Dray-Gon would not see tears on her face again! She would show him that a princess could have as much stamina as any servant girl! Then she was crawling about, picking up pieces of the broken clay doll, making an attempt to glue the doll together and make it whole again as if this were a matter of life and death. All during the day, no one came to see how she fared. No one offered to help with her lunch. No one seemed to care if she ate at all.

By now the caravan of emissaries to speak with the Gods had reached the sands of Bay Sol, where the cooling machines in the wagons had to be switched on. The riders of the horshets were as hot, dry, and miserable as they had expected to be. The wheels of the wagons were broad, to keep them from miring in the soft sand, yet the wagons didn't travel well, only slowly, ever so slowly. There was no need to send out scouts to find an appropriate place for spending the night, for the terrain all looked alike—barren, desolate, unwelcoming. It whispered of legends past; it screamed of today's torments that would be delivered unmercifully. As soon as both suns were behind the mountains, night quickly descended. Settling down like a cold, unfriendly blanket of discomfort in a different way; snuffing out the burning heat; giving momentary relief only before shivering began. The heat in the wagons was turned on.

“Let us use the roof and wheel shields, and make ourselves snug and cozy, and open the doors of our wagons so our animals will be warmed too,” suggested Dray-Gon to the men who crowded about him, awaiting orders. He glanced then at the wagon that housed the princess, and knew that tonight she was due to eat at another table, not his.

“Let us join all our small tables together and form one large one, and all eat together instead of separately—that way, at each dinner, we can all enjoy the company of the princess.” This was readily, enthusiastically agreed on, and every man began to eagerly clean and refresh themselves, so they would be at their best when the princess made her appearance. Wearing his best uniform, Dray-Gon went to rap lightly on the blue door of the princess's wagon.

“Are you ready for dinner?” he called. She answered something in a weak way that he didn’t understand. So he opened her door and went in, to see her standing slouched by the door of her wardrobe, disheveled and trembling, her color pallid.

“Whatever is wrong?” he asked. “Weren’t you supposed to stay off your feet—why aren’t you on your bed?”

Sharita raised her drooping head, with her hair streaming wildly about her face, and looked at him with the wide, teary, and reproachful eyes of a hurt child.

“I tried to dress for dinner... and my gown got caught in the wardrobe door, and I couldn’t free myself... and I’ve been caught like this for several hours ... hoping somebody would remember I might need some help. Do you know what it feels like to stand for hours and hours on one leg?” He went and quickly freed her, then picked her up and carried her to the bed. He sighed heavily as he sat down and held her on his lap like the child she was acting now.

“I left you alone because you always want to be so damned independent. Several times I started to come and see how you were making out, and I ordered the others to leave you alone when they wanted to check. So it’s my fault, and I’m sorry. We made a mistake in our planing. You should have a maid to wait on you, especially now.”

“I don’t need a maid!” she almost wailed. “But I’m so hungry! I haven’t had anything to eat but a breakfast I spilled on the floor, and look at me, I’m an absolute mess!”

So was her wagon, Dray-Gon thought, as he looked around and saw the clutter of broken dishes, and spilled food, and clothes she had dropped and just left.

“We’re all eating dinner at one long table tonight,” he said as he picked up a brush and began to use it on her hair. “They’re waiting for you to make your appearance before they sit down to eat. So tell me what I can do to help you get ready.”

“I’ve talked to you so ugly today—why do you want to help?”

He shrugged. Then he brought what she needed and turned his back while she briefly washed her face and pulled on fresh clothes. There before him on a small table were the pieces of a broken clay doll—an old, old doll—the kind the ancients had played with. He sat looking at it, feeling

puzzled that a princess of immense wealth would have with her such a shoddy toy, even if it weren't broken.

"Sharita, this doll here. I see you have tried to patch it together. Is it important to you?"

She spoke from behind a screen where she was dressing: "That clay doll belonged to my great-grandmother, then my grandmother, my mother, and my older sisters. Now it is mine. And it has never been broken before. There is a superstition about ancient things handed down from one generation to another: as long as it stays whole, the family unit stays united, without a serious loss. I don't want to be the one responsible for bringing unhappiness into our family."

"Don't tell me that you, a sophisticated, intelligent Upper believe in such nonsense." The princess came from behind the screen, where he could have watched her dress through a reflecting mirror, if he had been so inclined, and she looked as fresh and lovely as he had seen her in the splendor of the crystal palace, though her complexion was still wan. She looked at him, then at the shattered doll.

"I believe in a great many things, Dray-Gon, not in the least being the legends that go along with old, old family possessions. I would sleep much more comfortably tonight if I could put back that doll together again, as it had been." Dray-Gon stood up, and gathered the pieces of clay together, and wrapped them carefully in a cloth before he stuffed this into a large pocket of his uniform jacket.

"I'm pretty good at patching up broken things. Let me try my luck with your doll." She stood looking at him, trying to picture him in his wagon, along with the three others who shared the space with him, and he would have to explain gluing together a broken doll. The thought made her smile.

"Thank you, Captain." When Dray-Gon carried her out of the wagon and sat her in the chair at the head of the tables joined together, the nineteen young men stood and cheered.

"Three cheers for the princess! May her sprained ankle heal soon!"

One asked if he could wait on the princess the next day, and fetch and carry for her and do whatever else she needed, and then they squabbled, each one wanting that privilege.

"There is no argument here," Dray-Gon said from the opposite end of the table. "The king put me in charge of his daughter, and I will do all the

fetching and carrying, as long as she needs it. The only man allowed in her wagon, except myself, is Doctor Benlon, and he isn't to go in alone."

Disgruntled, the nineteen raised some objection, but they could all see the ring he wore on his finger, and a smaller silver one with a blue stone on the same hand. Sharita saw that ring too. All the men ate as hungrily of the ill-prepared food as did Sharita, for tonight she could eat anything, she was that ravenous. On that night, a stranger looking at them, all dressed alike, would have found it impossible to tell an Upper from a Lower. Excitedly they talked back and forth across the table.

"By the Gods, it has been one good day," commented Arth-Rin, a plump, round-faced boy from the lower borderlands.

"We wake up to bandits shooting arrows, hurling rocks, demanding that we give up our princess to be held for ransom—just as if we would do such an insane thing! Then we have an excellent chance to use our weapons! Did you see those laser beams slice those rocks? Then down comes the split boulders, and then the rocks falling smack on the outlaws! Then we have to run for our lives, before they smash us as well! And then we're heading on to Bay Sol, where I never dreamed to ever go! I've never been so hot and miserable or tired in my whole life. And I've never been happier."

"You know, I feel the same way," said another, this one from the upper lands. Everyone agreed this had been the most exciting event of their lives. Too bad they hadn't run into warfars or some other dangerous animals. Now they had nothing but dullness ahead, just hot, dry, arid land with two burning suns, not much excitement in that. And the Gods, if they lived to reach them, would probably be bores. Dull old men, like judges in court. The princess sat and listened with amazement. They called this fun? She learned if she hadn't been along, they would have enjoyed hand-to-hand combat with the outlaws, but they didn't want to risk her capture.

"You know, it just didn't seem fair, us turning our highly scientific weapons on men with only bows and arrows, and rocks to hurl. Maybe on our way back, we can send the princess on ahead and fight in the old way, fist to fist."

"Are you enjoying yourself, and learning anything?" asked Dray-Gon of the princess, after he had waited outside of her wagon, until she was ready to be helped into bed.

“Yes,” she said sleepily, curling up on her side, and snuggling her face on her folded arm, so that lying there, she was all soft curves without an angle displeasing.

“I am finding out that men are very strange creatures. Beneath all my fine, rich, young noblemen, there is a primitive animal.”

“I believe you are right,” answered Dray-Gon softly. Then he leaned and pressed his lips on hers. “Good night, my princess, and I’ll be in first thing in the morning to awaken you in the same way—for I wouldn’t want you to get hung up on the closet door again.”

“Do you dream at night of your servant girl?” she asked with her eyes closed. He swore softly.

“What do you know about her?” he demanded. Her eyelids fluttered open.

“Palace gossip—didn’t I tell you they know everything?” The look he gave her was solemn and long before he stood.

“Yes, Sharita, I dream of her, and think of her often during the day. She has something very sweet that you don’t have—and you have something she doesn’t have...”

“Yes, I know what it is,” Sharita agreed. “I have behind me a throne, a kingdom, and great wealth, plus power unlimited. I suspect when you look at me, that is all you see—and that is all you want.” Angry red color flooded his face.

“Sharita! I could wring your pretty neck! Before this trip is over, I suspect you are going to goad me so much, I am going to make a certain part of your anatomy black and blue!” And with that, he suddenly reached and smacked hard that certain part of her anatomy—so hard she cried out,

“How dare you do that? Don’t you ever touch me again unless I order you to!”

“My princess, you are going to be forced to order me to touch you! You won’t see me tomorrow in here. I’ll send Doctor Benlon to assist you in whatever you need—maybe he will please you more!”

The door of her wagon slammed hard behind him, before she could say anyone would please her more. The key was turned in her lock... then she looked to see he had taken her key too—so she was locked in! A

prisoner! And the trapdoor under the rug was of no use... for the same door key unlocked that too!

Two days later the broken clay doll appeared mysteriously on her bed, restored as good as new. She had to look very closely to see the faint lines where it had been joined together.

The Journey Hardens

Keeping his promise, or threat, Dray-Gon stayed out of Sharita's wagon. It was Doctor Benlon who came to help her to the small bath, to bring her clothes, to help her tidy the wagon, which had grown into a terrible mess, for she knew little about doing for herself. He helped with her breakfast, with her lunch, and carried her to the dinner table in the evenings.

Dray-Gon only nodded coolly when he saw her. The princess was hotter, dirtier, and more uncomfortable than she had ever been. Her muscles pained, her very bones ached from the constant jolting, for she insisted on riding a horshet, instead of being alone all day in the wagon. When she sat, she hurt. When she stood, her ankle throbbled. Yet, in some ways, she was like the men; she had never been happier, or felt more fulfilled.

The Mountain was before them, no closer than before, but it was there, a goal, a promise, and a reason. And in her small, private kitchen, she was learning to cook. She made special dishes, and sent them out to the men with her compliments. No chef anywhere ever received more praise, except from Dray-Gon. He said nothing. On the fifth day in Bay Sol, the bright day sky darkened into brackish brown. The sands lifted in the strong winds, so the twin shining orbs in the sky faded into obscurity. Small whirlwinds twisted the sands into funnels. In haste, the drivers of the wagons turned them into the planned formation, and gathered in all the straggling animals. The wheel shields were lowered, and the pointed roof raised. Then they waited. Flying, spiraling sand beat upon their improvised shelter. In minutes they would have been covered and buried beneath the sand, but for the foresighted vision of the planners of this expedition. Hundreds of tiny, whirring vibrators sluiced the sand from the shelter, preventing it from settling heavily.

None of them had experienced a sandstorm like this in the very heart of Bay Sol. They didn't know what to expect—or how long it would last. If it lasted too long, they could run out of oxygen. With the noise of the machines, the vibrators, the winds driving the sands, they couldn't hear themselves speak. They sat in silence, huddled with the horshets and the puhlets, to give the animals comfort and to comfort themselves. Sharita

put her arms around a special puhlet that she had made her pet, and buried her face deep in the sweet-smelling smoke-blue fur. She thought of her great-great-grandfather, Baka and his wife, Lee-La. She thought of Far-Awn, and how he had risked his life out here just to follow where the puhlets led. She raised her head and gazed into the soft, liquid, plush-purple eyes that looked so sadly into hers. Why did all animals except mankind look sad? Could she ask the Gods that when she met them? "Cannot you smile, or ever feel happy?" she murmured to the small, delicate female puhlet she called Ramaran. She put a kiss on the nose of the puhlet. Someone sighed behind her in the sudden silence of the storm. She looked behind her to see Dray-Gon leaning against her wagon, his thumbs hooked into his belt. Their eyes met and clung, as the others shouted out the storm was over! Hooray! "Have you ever heard such a racket?" someone asked. "No!" replied someone else.

"It was like thunder from the Gods sent to herald our coming!" The welcome relief of silence from the noise that had battered their ears for hours sent them all into an exhilarated, happy mood. Dray-Gon ordered the protective shields lowered and tucked away, so they could continue on toward the Mountain. Now they could look beyond their wagons and see the high, sloping walls of sand that encircled and entrapped them. However, no one panicked, for this event had been anticipated, and huge fans were attached to the tops of the wagons so they could blow and scatter the sands ahead, and make a level road for the wagons and animals to travel.

While the fans blew, several men brought out musical instruments and began to play and dance with each other. Sharita sat on the step of her wagon, her feet itching to dance too, as she kept time to the music by tapping her good foot. After the dancing, Arth-Rin began to sing a love song, sad and wistful and full of dreams as he cast his eyes shyly from time to time at Sharita. She knew at home in her father's desk was Arth-Rin's written proposal, put aside for "due consideration." Somewhat embarrassed by the song so obviously addressed to her Sharita turned her head to meet again Dray-Gon's eyes. He was close enough for her to ask in a low voice, "Do you always have to stand around staring at me? Look somewhere else!"

His lips quirked. Not smiling, or frowning.

"How many of these men are in love with you, Sharita?"

She didn't like it when he looked so hard and savage, so she turned her eyes on Arth-Rin, who was now just strumming his instrument.

"Every man here—with the exception of you," she answered.

"It must make you feel very elevated to be so admired and wanted."

"Not particularly. Not one of them wants me for myself, only for the high position I hold."

"I think you underestimate yourself, Sharita. If you were but a scullery maid, your beauty would make any man love you." She turned her gaze on him again, feeling disappointed.

"Beauty can be admired... it's not necessarily lovable."

"There may be logic in that, but I would choose a flower over a weed any day." Squarely she looked him in the eyes.

"Then why isn't your formal proposal of marriage in my father's desk along with the others?" He laughed as he came closer and fell on the step at her side, sprawling his legs before him.

"If ever I should propose to you, Sharita, it won't be through your father. I'll ask you directly, when I find out if there's some fire beneath all that ice. Your hot temper doesn't signify too much, since we all have a great deal of that, and your mother was from Bari-Bar. Every time I remind myself of that, my feelings for you cool off, for I don't want to go through my life arguing with a woman who hurls and throws every object in the house she can pick up."

The face of the princess flamed with angry color. "I suppose your servant girl told you that," she stormed, glaring at him. "When I'm back at the palace, I'll have her fired!"

"By the Gods—everyone told me you were pale and insipid like your hair coloring, and with me, you are in a constant state of temper! You must bleach your hair. I'm sure if I looked, I would find fiery red roots—like your mother's!"

"Don't talk to me about odd hair coloring—look at yours! Almost black it's that dark—and your skin, it's not green at all, but bronze!"

"I am just sitting here wondering," Dray-Gon said in a musing way, ignoring her ire as if it mattered not in the least, "just what sort of children you and I would produce... something very strange, probably." Stunned in disbelief, Sharita's eyes widened. He was a savage—a barbarian! The

cultured people of the upper borderlands never spoke openly of such things: only behind closed bedroom doors did they speak of reproduction. Then Dray-Gon was laughing at the expression on her face, calling her “a prude.”

“Don’t we have the same background and heritage? Farmers all, princess. Breeders of animals! Dirtdobbers spreading manure! Only lately have we begun to think of ourselves as intellectuals and scientists. Once all a man and woman had to do as a marriage ceremony was declare their love for each other in front of two parents. To my way of thinking, that’s enough. Or better yet, lovers could say it only to each other—and then do what comes naturally.”

Sharita jumped to her feet and hobbled into her wagon, slamming the door. Dray-Gon was still laughing as he walked away. When enough of the wall of sand ahead was scattered before the strong gusts from the fans, once more they traveled on, with Dray-Gon and two of his friends leading the way on horshetback.

“I really can’t understand why the planners of this fool expedition didn’t give us sky-flitters to ride in,” complained Raykin. “Here we are with wagons pulled by horshets, with a flock of puhlets—it all reeks disgustingly of old El Sod-a-Por!”

Dray-Gon laughed before he began his explanation.

“I told you to quit playing around with the girls and attend the lectures, or else you would know all the answers. One windy storm alone, and the sand would clog the motor of a sky-flitter or air-cart. That is, if we could fly long enough to experience a storm, this dry air would evaporate our fuel almost immediately.”

“Ah, come on, we have a liquid to prevent evaporation. Even I know that.”

“We do, yes, but added to our fuel out here, it would freeze overnight.”

“You mean, they actually did know what they were doing when they sent us out? I thought this journey was just a political maneuver to get the king out of a tight spot.”

“I believe there are some political motivations involved too,” agreed Dray-Gon as he took off his hat and fanned his flushed face, mopping perspiration from his brow, “but primitive as this transportation is, the

horshets do have endurance—whereas the skyflitters caught in this desert air would fly apart under the stress.”

Arth-Rin was riding to the left of Dray-Gon, and he grinned wickedly, teasing.

“Well, I am surprised, Dray-Gon. You did learn something all those weeks you spent in the palace with the scientists and planners. Suspicious old me, I thought you hung around there only as an excuse to be near the princess.” He was given a scornful look.

“Do I need an excuse for wanting to live? Why do you think I was appointed captain? I never missed a meeting. I wanted to learn all there was to know, and learn if we really did have a chance of surviving this trip!”

“And of course the beautiful princess had nothing to do with it?” asked Raykin, also mopping his dripping face.

Turning in his saddle, Dray-Gon looked backward toward the wagon where the princess rode, for she had succumbed to the constant heat, and Doctor Benlon had ordered her to stay in her wagon with the cooling machine turned on.

“She has everything to do with it,” he answered simply. “If I hadn’t found out we have a slight chance of surviving, I would have kidnapped her, and hidden her away in a cave until her father came to his senses! Keeping her alive is more important to me than finding out what happened that night in Bari-Bar.”

“And then there would have been a civil war, for sure!” stated Raykin gravely. “Whenever I think of the madness of this trip, I think of the alternative, and I think too of how silly we all were, squabbling over trifles all these years. You’re not so bad a captain, Dray-Gon, considering you’re a Lower.”

“And you’re not so bad a lieutenant, Raykin—considering you are only an Upper, accustomed to spending your days with your nose stuck in a book.”

“You think that’s easy? To my way of thinking, this trip is easier than passing an exam! Try it sometime, Dray-Gon!”

“I have tried it,” Dray-Gon said drily.

“A long time ago, I got the notion in my head I was traveling north—on my way to being the husband of the most gorgeous female that exists, and she wouldn’t be too impressed with a country bumpkin who didn’t know how to express himself.”

Now both his companions broke into laughter, recalling his first appearance at the ball, when he had stood inarticulate, and shuffling, unable to speak. Behind them, the whole line of riders started laughing, for words carried easily in the dry clear air—and all knew Dray-Gon had made a fool of himself that night. The princess in her wagon had briefly opened a window, and heard the laughter, and wondered what was so funny. She felt light-headed and rather woozy, and went again to lie on her bed, wishing for the first time that she were back in the palace, snug in her beautiful apartment. Soon her father would enter, and smile at her in that special way he had of showing his love. If she didn’t return, he would die.

Twenty days passed, and eleven storms they survived. And then the white, sharp, and glistening sands of Bay Sol ended abruptly! The riders of the horshets drew together, startled! It had been presumed the desert would go on until they reached the Scarlet Mountains, and look what was before them! Something totally unexpected and unplanned! Spread before them was a jet-black, rocky, and pitted terrain, crusty, like it had been charcoaled. Strange twisted things, like trees that had died a million years ago and turned to stone, projected grotesquely from the ebony encrustation.

The bleached skeletons of those stone trees pleaded with white bony fingers, as if for mercy, toward an unseeing, uncaring, indifferent sky. Mammoth craters pitted the black ground. Some of the cavern bowls seemed large enough to swallow several cities like Far-Awndra, and still have room for more. Whispers of wind spiraled up black dust in small funnels, so they appeared to be shadow figures walking... it shivered the spine to see the black ghosts of day.

“How are we going to travel over that?” asked Raykin, a queer, scared note in his voice. Dray-Gon swung a leg over his horshet, and jumped to the ground; running forward, he tentatively put his foot on the black crusty surface. It crackled beneath his boot, and he was holding back his full weight. The ground seemed hollow beneath the top surface, yet when he dared to step fully upon it, he sank down only a few inches and stood on something solid. He sighed in relief. Yet, how could the wagons travel over such a surface? As he crunched along, sinking down sometimes to

ankle depth, other times to his knees, he envisioned falling through into a bottomless pit.

“By the Gods, Dray-Gon, take care!” called his friend, Arth-Rin, and he heard other voices adding their cries.

“It’s all right,” he called back. “The ground is hollow beneath the top surface, but here and there are hard veins of stone ... narrow, but we could keep to them single file, riding on the horshets.” He turned and went back to the white sand, shifting, but more dependable than the ebony earth ahead.

“We will have to abandon the wagons and load what supplies we can on the backs of the horshets. The puhlets can support a sling of water bags.” The men turned their eyes on the high Green Mountain beyond the treacherous black ground, halfhidden by the Scarlet Mountains... and it was only a fraction closer. Closely Dray-Gon studied their expressions. Already they were swamped with fatigue, with burning eyes from looking too long at white sands under two glaring suns, with skins lacerated and cut from winds incessantly blowing. For a brief moment a sense of hopeless frustration against what seemed insurmountable obstacles left Dray-Gon as silent as every other man.

“Mount your horshets,” he commanded, “and we’ll ride back and tell the princess.”

“What about the princess?” asked Benlon, the only one with medical training. “She has just recovered from that sprained ankle, and she is running a slight fever from heat exhaustion. We can’t take her with us across that black land.”

“Of course we can’t,” Dray-Gon said in a firm voice.

“We’ll leave her here. You, Benlon, can stay and take care of her, along with three other men.”

“She’s not going to like that,” said Arth-Rin, “and neither are the planners of this journey. We are all supposed to reach the Gods!”

“Now look,” said Dray-Gon, turning to stare hard into the face of each man, “if we leave four men here, two Uppers, and two Lower, we will still be equally proportioned when we reach the Mountain. And we don’t have to tell those people in Far-Awndra that we left the princess here along with four of our men. Do you want to risk her life just to satisfy a nation that doesn’t know what we’re doing anyway?”

A vote was taken. The princess and four men would be left with the wagons until the remainder of the men, sent on ahead, returned after seeing and talking to the Gods.

Sharita's Fever

"Enter," responded Sharita when Dray-Gon tapped on her blue wagon door.

He opened the door and stood there dumbfounded, as he feasted his eyes on a rare sight. On hands and knees the princess was scrubbing the floor of her wagon! The expensive rugs were rolled up and put to the side. Busily she worked, not pausing, as Dray-Gon just stood there and stared in fascinated astonishment—nor did she glance around to see who it was. That she could be so casual about who saw her doing this brought a smile to his lips. Her long hair was pinned carelessly high on her head, so that scant lengths escaped to fall over her face and shoulders. She wore something that seemed a skimpy undergarment, now sloshed and stained with dirty water, and she was barefoot.

"Close the door," she said to him, "you are letting out all my cool air." Obediently he closed the door and found his voice.

"Benlon told me you were running a slight fever. What the devil are you doing scrubbing the floor? Why aren't you following his orders, and lying down and resting?"

"So it's you," she said, still not looking around. "As I lay on my bed resting, I looked about and saw what a mess this wagon was—so I decided to do something about it. This is the first time I have scrubbed a floor, and I have only seen it done in pictures. Always my apartment was cleaned when I was off in a classroom studying boring subjects." She threw him a quick glance over her shoulder.

"You could help, you know, instead of just standing there and gawking at me! If it isn't beneath your dignity." He was astounded she would suggest such a thing!

"It is beneath my dignity, princess—and yours too! I know nothing whatsoever about scrubbing floors! Now get on your feet and pay attention to my report." Instead of getting on her feet, she knelt and sat back on her heels, brushing back long strands of hair from her face. She looked a mess, and he smothered another smile and the impulse to tell her this.

“Now you listen to me, Captain Dray-Gon! Outside of this wagon, you are the leader, and I follow orders, just like the others. But this is my home, my tower, and my substitute crystal palace, and in here, I am the boss! I am of royal blood, and you are only a subject! So get down on your knees and help me finish cleaning this floor!”

He looked down at this clean uniform, put on fresh just for this occasion, and he had bathed and brushed his hair, and sprayed himself with a scent to take away the odor of horshet flesh. He had never scrubbed a floor in his life and he didn’t intend to.

“Well, Captain?” she asked mockingly, “are you just going to stand there? Keep in mind, there will come a day, when I will be a princess all the time—not just when I’m in a rustic wagon.”

“This is my best uniform,” he offered as a lame excuse.

“Then take it off—I’ll give you something to wear.”

She gave him a towel to place about his hips to hide his nakedness, and he set to with the brush and soap, as messy and inexpert as she was. Then, when the floor was clean and dried, he helped her spread the rugs and arrange the furnishings.

“Now,” she said, looking around, very pleased, “doesn’t it look nice?” Warily, Dray-Gon fell in a chair, while she perched on the edge of the bed, and pulled the pins from her hair, and began to brush it. In seconds she looked herself again, even wearing the stained garment. Her violet, almost blue eyes scanned over his broad, strong bare chest, and then down to his powerful legs.

“Captain, I have never been so impressed with you before. You look stunning wearing nothing but a towel.”

“I am more impressive with nothing on. Shall I oblige?” She flushed and looked away.

“I presume you came here for a reason. And I can tell by your gloomy expression that you are not the bearer of glad tidings. I suppose there is another dust storm ahead, and it will creep in through the windows, and under the door, and spoil everything I have just done. Oh, I will be glad when I have servants again to do all these unending chores, but it does look so much better. Thank you very much for helping, Dray-Gon.”

“Anytime,” he said. “I would appreciate very much a glass of wine and a bite of something to eat, before I spill my bad news—and it isn’t a dust

storm. In fact, little princess, you may consider dust storms a pleasantry when you see what is ahead—at least we are prepared for storms, and can hide from them.”

She was off the bed and getting the wine and small cakes before he had finished speaking. She pattered to him on bare feet, and sat on the arm of his chair while he sipped and ate greedily. The desert air gave them all ravenous appetites and thirst that was never quenched. As he explained the surprise of the black, crusty ground ahead and what it would mean, she was getting more food and wine, which she sipped and nibbled on while he talked. When he stopped talking, she put aside her glass and plate, and daintily wiped her lips. She casually brushed crumbs from her lap to the floor, and then bent over and picked them up. She looked up with a laughing face.

“I forgot I was my own maid. Next time, remind me before I brush off crumbs.”

“Sharita, have you listened to one word I just said?”

“I always listen most intently when you speak, Captain. But I don’t see any real cause for so much concern. So we will leave the wagons here, and journey on horshetback. I doubt that the outlaws have followed and will steal them... so they will wait patiently until we return.”

“Now you listen to me, Sharita,” Dray-Gon began, leaning forward and seeking to intimidate her with his hard, commanding glare.

“I swore to your father to keep you safe and alive, and I intend to keep my vow! He seemed to believe I cared more about you than the others—and that is why he gave me the title of captain, in full charge of this expedition. You are going to stay here with the wagons, with Benlon and three others, and wait for the rest of us to return after we talk to the Gods. And if we don’t return within a stated number of days, they are to take you back to Far-Awndra! So, there is no need for you to scowl and offer some ridiculous debate. It has already been decided. You have no voice in the matter—and no vote!” She rose then, assuming her full slender height, her regal posture echoing that of her father.

“You can’t order me to stay, Captain! I am as much a part of this expedition as you are, as any of you are. I am an able and skilled rider, I have already proven that!” Dray-Gon stood, turned his back, threw off the towel and started to dress.

“You are staying, princess, so save your energy and strength. Take a look at yourself in a mirror—you look pale and half-sick.”

“Which of the men do you plan to leave with me?” she asked in a cold haughty voice.

“The best of my men... the ones I can trust. Arth-Rin, Benlon, Raykin, and Mark-Kan volunteered.”

“I don’t like Mark-Kan... he stares at me all the time, and sends shivers down my spine.”

“All the men stare at you all the time,” Dray-Gon said sarcastically, “and if Mark-Kan sends shivers down your spine, maybe you’re attracted to him.”

“You idiot,” she flared, stomping her foot and forgetting she wasn’t wearing shoes, so her foot hurt. “He doesn’t look at me that way—his look is cold and calculating!”

“It’s your overworked imagination—you’re delirious from fever,” was her captain’s unconcerned answer as he buckled on his belt, and then drew on his uniform coat, turning to face her again. He smartly saluted, and started to leave. Sharita ran up and pounded on his chest until he caught her hands.

“Dray-Gon, if you leave me here, I’ll bribe those men with anything I have to, and I’ll follow!”

He stared at her hard. “What do you mean, anything you have to?”

“Anything—including accepting one of their proposals... maybe Benlon’s or Raykin’s... and if that doesn’t work I’ll promise them a huge fortune—and they’ll let me go anywhere I want to!” Almost he laughed, but a thoughtful look came to his face. He released her hands and caught her shoulders.

“Sharita, please try for once to use some common sense. You don’t look well, and if you stay here, you can live in comfort until we come back—and no one in Far-Awndra will know. All the men have sworn they won’t tell.”

“You will make them into liars?”

“I would make them into liars, thieves—anything to keep you safe.”

“Then you stay here with me,” she said, putting her arms around his waist and looking up into his face pleadingly. “My father trusted you to take care of me, not Arth-Rin, or Raykin, or Mark-Kan, or Benlon... only you.”

Anger darkened his expression. “No! I’ve got to be there when the question is asked!” Her arms slid up around his neck. “Then take me with you. Don’t leave me here alone with those four men. I don’t trust anyone but you, not even Benlon.” She rose on tiptoe and pressed her lips softly against his.

“Dray-Gon, don’t leave me here, please don’t. And have I thanked you yet for repairing my doll?”

“By the Gods, you are feverish!” he cried, shoving her away before he grabbed her shoulders and shook her roughly.

“We are breaking camp in a few minutes, and I’m locking your wagon door, and turning the key over to Benlon. So promise any one of them anything you want to! Give yourself to one of them—or all, if that’s what you want! But I’m going on, and you’re staying here! For I’d rather see you ravished than dead!” Sharita backed up against the bed, beginning to tremble.

“You deceitful liar! You vowed to my father you would see me through to the Mountain, and now you are breaking your promise! So go on your way, and leave me here... but I’ll find a way to escape and follow you...on foot, if I have to, and alone! And if on your way back, after talking to the Gods, you find my bones on the trail, you can explain that to my father!”

“By the Gods, you are the world’s most bullheaded, stubborn woman! You stand there telling me what you’re going to do, looking like a feather could blow you over, but being what you are, I guess you would be stupid enough to try and follow, and alone!” They stood there, shooting fierce arrows at each other with their eyes, until Arth-Rin came and knocked on the door.

“Dray-Gon,” he called, “they are all set to go...”

The spare horshets carried as much water, food, and other protective necessities as they could, and even the puhlets were burdened lightly. The six wagons were left in the storm formation, with the wheel shields lowered and the pointed roof raised, a solid fortress which everyone missed before it was even out of sight. As Dray-Gon had already discovered, the charred black ground was solid in places, deceptively

hollow in others. A danger for the heavily burdened hooved horshets. The sure-footed, lighter puhlets were sent out ahead to select the trail. Daintily the smokeblue animals picked their way between the craters, with Dray-Gon directly behind them... and somewhere near the very end of the line, rode the princess.

They had been perhaps two hours on the crusty ebony when a hollow crust broke, and a supply horshet slipped and fell over a crater rim, screaming with cries almost human as it tumbled over and over, and finally thudded to the bottom with a sickening squashy sound. Tears came trickling down Sharita's cheeks. It was their first serious accident, resulting in death for one of them. No one said anything aloud, though many made the thumb signal of benediction as they rode on, carefully slow.

The dual suns beat down as relentlessly here as on the barren desert plains, though the wind was much less, perhaps broken by the strange, twisted things that rose up from the ground everywhere. It was terrain such as one sees in a nightmare, an unworldly devil's place. Sharita shuddered as she wondered where they would camp tonight, without heat, without any of the comforts left behind in the wagons. From time to time, as the file of riders curved a huge crater, she saw Dray-Gon turn in his saddle and glance back at her. She didn't wave, only pretended not to notice. He had placed himself deliberately in the lead, behind the puhlets, so if the crust broke, he would be the one to die.

"Heroic to the end," she thought bitterly. Their progress was torturously slow. So slow, Sharita thought she might bake sitting in the saddle and adhere, so she would have to be pried loose.

"Is there an end anywhere in sight?" called out one of the men to their captain.

"Can't see any yet," he called back, causing Sharita's shoulders to sag even more. The narrow rock rims between the craters that the puhlets chose were so slim, there wasn't room to descend from the horshets and take a rest break. So they ate and drank as they traveled, reaching cautiously into the pouches slung just behind the saddles.

"Everyone sit tall, and don't list to the right or left!" called back Dray-Gon just as Sharita swayed, almost falling asleep.

"Do what you can to assist the horshet in keeping their balance. It's tricky riding here. One mis-step, and that's it." As the first sun sank to

near its place of sleeping, Sharita felt her slight fever rising. From time to time she lifted a hand to her forehead as a throbbing headache began.

“I’m going to be sick,” she thought, “really sick. Maybe Dray-Gon was right. I should have stayed with the wagons.” Directly ahead of her rode Doctor Benlon, and he too glanced back at her often.

“Are you feeling all right, princess?” he asked, concern on his kindly face.

“Yes, I feel fine.”

From his expression, he didn’t believe her, but he didn’t comment. This time Dray-Gon called back that he was searching for a place to spend the night. Looking about, Sharita couldn’t see even a single space wide enough to even descend from a horshet. She had lain down almost, with her arms wrapped around the neck of the beast, clinging on desperately, as she felt delirium from the fever take her into unreality.

From far away she heard Dray-Gon’s voice call out there wasn’t any recourse but to descend into one of the craters and sleep down there. Sharita hung on, desperately clinging to the horshet, allowing it to follow as it would the lead of the others. She heard Benlon say he would give her medicine as soon as they could dismount, but her tongue was too dry to reply.

“It won’t be long now, princess,” he encouraged. “We are almost at the bottom.”

She knew Mark-Kan was behind her, and he too said encouraging things that she didn’t understand. She forced herself to sit up, and hold her eyes open. The sky was ablaze with the setting of the second sun, streaking the sky with banners of gold, crimson, scarlet, and deep purple. The shimmering ebony crystals of some of the larger rocks caught and held the colors of the retreating sun. For a short while, there existed in this bleak, black eerie world a weird sort of haunting beauty. I am going to recall all this one day, and put it in a picture, so Father can see, Sharita told herself, for all ladies of her social stature took painting lessons as a matter of course, along with music and dancing lessons.

Lessons, all my life has been a series of lessons on how to live, and I’ve never really lived until now were Sharita’s thoughts as she determinedly forced herself to stay awake and fight the fever that had her clothes sopping wet, and her thoughts whirling around like horshets chasing each other. The bone-weary men, with muscles cramped and aching from the

daylong ride in the saddle, cheered as they reached the bottom of the cavern bowl.

“It wasn’t so bad,” said Arth-Rin, looking back at the trail they had followed, spiraling down layers that seemed the stairway of a giant. Before the last of the riders reached the crater bottom, Dray-Gon had the first men setting up camp.

“Pitch the tent for the princess first,” he ordered. The planners of the expedition had tried to think of every contingency, so they had sufficient tents of shimmering pufar fabric to house them all. Other men began to feed and water the puhlets and horshets as they were unloaded, and fires were started from material they had brought with them. Sharita, on her horshet, was one of the last to limp into camp. She slumped there, her arms dangling loosely, too fevered and weak to dismount. Dray-Gon reached her before Benlon.

“Have you enjoyed your day, princess?” he asked, reaching up to assist her down. She gave him one long dazed, unfocused look, then fell into his arms in a dead faint.

“Give her to me,” cried Benlon, “I have just the medicine to have her feeling fine by tomorrow morning.”

“Then get it out, while I carry her into her tent,” snapped Dray-Gon. “Why the devil didn’t you give her some of that medicine before this?”

“She didn’t need it before this!” answered Benlon in a testy way, as he followed Dray-Gon into the special tent set up for the princess. He put down his bag and opened it up, glancing at Dray-Gon, who had laid the princess on a cot.

“Now get out, Captain, so I can tend to her.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m a doctor, remember? I know what to do. I’ll take her temperature, her pulse, take off those wet clothes, and put on dry ones, after she’s dosed with this.” He held up a bottle of dark red liquid.

“She really needs to be bathed off with cold water, but I suspect she won’t like knowing I did it.”

“Do what you have to,” Dray-Gon said stiffly, his eyes on Sharita, who tossed restlessly on the cot, “and she won’t have to know, but damn you, don’t you take advantage of her while she’s unconscious!”

“What the devil do you think I am?” flared Benlon, his face very red.

“Do you think I don’t care about her just as much as you do? All day she’s clung to that horshet, and never complained once!”

“Hah! Just wait until she’s feeling better! She’ll have plenty to say!” With that, Dray-Gon threw Sharita a last parting look before he left the tent. Someone tried to force her to eat and drink, but she wouldn’t. Someone patted her head and said she would be better in the morning. In the night she grew cold, and made sick little whimpering sounds, as the frigid winds above the crater blew, and an even more intense cold settled down in the depths of the pit. Shivering and half crying, Sharita curled up into a tight ball, disoriented and miserable. There came a rustling noise at the flap of her tent, and the soft riling of the puhlets, and Dray-Gon’s voice speaking softly as he picked her up and wrapped her in a blanket before he laid her on the floor.

“The puhlets kept your ancestor Far-Awn from freezing, Sharita, they’ll do the same for you... and for the rest of us.” She felt his kiss upon her forehead, then on her lips.

“Good night, darling,” he whispered, and was then gone. Comfortably she fell asleep within the circle of puhlets, their long hair and body heat warming better than the machines of the wagons. Not long after that, she was again half wakened, as arms picked her up and carried her outside.

“Dray-Gon?” she asked in a small hoarse voice.

“Yes,” he whispered back, “I’m taking you to a better place.” His voice sounded funny, and she wanted to ask where a better place was, but she couldn’t think clearly. She passed out. From time to time she wakened, and sensed she was riding on a horshet, with someone behind holding her on. She tried to orient that with her memories of descending into a crater, and she was sick.

“I want to go back and sleep with the puhlets,” she said in a mumbling way, “I feel cold.”

“Tsk, tsk,” he said, “that’s too bad, princess, but from now on, you don’t get what you want.” This time she recognized his voice. It wasn’t Dray-Gon! She opened her mouth to scream, but a hard, gloved hand clamped down over her mouth, shutting off her cries.

“Don’t struggle, princess! We’re riding on a rim, and any resistance on your part will have us both falling over, and remember how that horshet

screamed. I'm taking you back to the wagons." He laughed in an exhilarated way.

"This black land was an unexpected miracle! Every day I've waited for my chance to do this, but I couldn't get to you as long as you were locked in that wagon! Princess, you are going to make me the richest man in all of Upper and Lower El Dorraine!"

The Rage of Mark-Kan

Before the first sun cracked the sky with color, Dray-Gon was up and dressed, and breaking camp. Tossing orders right and left. "Prepare a hearty breakfast," he said to Arth-Rin, who was chief cook today, "for I want the princess to eat well before we set off again."

He thought he would let her sleep until the last possible moment, and ordered the men to work as quietly as possible, leaving her tent until last. It was then he saw Doctor Benlon hurrying to him, almost at a run.

"Captain," he called out as he came, "I checked the tent of the princess, and she isn't there!"

"What do you mean, she isn't there?" Dray-Gon quickly scanned his eyes about. It wasn't necessary for her to sneak off for privacy to do some intimate thing, her tent was fully equipped to take care of her needs.

"She's gone, Dray-Gon," said Benlon as he neared. "Even the blanket I covered her with."

"By the Gods! Do you suppose she wandered off, delirious?" Benlon shook his head.

"No, she wouldn't be delirious now. The last time I checked on her, she was sleeping on the floor with four puhlets, and seemed quite normal. No fever, not too cold." During this, Raykin had been checking over the horshets.

"Dray-Gon, six of our horshets are missing, and I had to round these up. It seems someone deliberately unhitched them, and forced them to scatter!"

"Who isn't here?" barked Dray-Gon, turning about in a circle to discover for himself who was missing. As familiar as he was with the men he had been traveling with for so many days, it took only a few seconds to know. Mark-Kan! He swore to himself.

"Arth-Rin, Raykin, saddle three horshets, we're going after them!" He turned to Benlon.

"Set the tents up again, and wait for us here. No doubt Mark-Kan has headed back toward the wagons, since he took enough horshets to pull

one.” Dray-Gon stuffed into his belt one of the laser beam weapons, and told Arth-Rin and Raykin to do the same.

“Why did he take the princess?” asked Benlon, bewildered-appearing.

“What do you think? If he turns her over to the outlaws, she’ll be worth a king’s ransom. And do you know what else, since Mark-Kan is one of our men, the Uppers will think we were all in the plot! And the war the king tried to prevent by distracting us with this fool trip will begin!”

“Then we will all go, to save the princess, to stop the war!” cried out Benlon, and behind him all the men shouted they were willing, eager... say the word. To Dray-Gon’s reasoning, three men would travel faster than nineteen, and someone had to stay and care for the extra horseshets and round them up, and see they didn’t wander away.

“Don’t worry... we have the weapons, Mark-Kan doesn’t have any!”

He didn’t speak of the ring of wagon keys that were missing. In another few minutes, the three men left, carrying with them a light supply of food and wine. Alone in her wagon, bound hand and foot, but not gagged, Sharita tossed and squirmed, trying to wiggle out of the ropes that held her. After the long, tiresome journey back to the wagons, Mark-Kan had thrown her heedlessly on her own bed, and then left to eat and quench his thirst with the large supply of food and wine left in another wagon. In an hour or so, he lurched back, staggering to her bedside and staring down at her, reeking of wine, his pupils wide and unfocused as he sat on the bed and reached for her. Quickly squirming out of his reach, Sharita thrust her bound legs forward, aiming at his most vulnerable area, but he dodged her kick just in time, and slapped her so viciously her vision blurred!

“Now hear this, princess,” he began in a slurred voice, “right now you are no king’s brat! You are just another woman. During all of this trip, you have never looked at me one time, like I wasn’t good enough. Well, I am every bit as good as Dray-Gon any day! My father is a bakaret just like his, and if you had treated me nicer, maybe you wouldn’t be in the position you are in now. When I’ve finished with you, I am driving this wagon back to the borderlands, and turning you over to the outlaws. And then I am staying just long enough to collect my share of the ransom.” His drunken laughter sounded dry and throaty, terrifying, as once more he reached for her. This time she didn’t move, only waited.

“This is nice,” he purred, “but don’t you have anything to say?” Asking as he leaned above to stroke her hair, a wild tumbled mess, before his hand moved lower, to her throat.

“I think you are an animal, a beast! I hope Dray-Gon slits your throat!” she said coldly arrogant, disregarding his insulting caresses. He sneered:

“Do you think he loves you, princess? Dray-Gon has a servant girl he gives his love to; you he uses to get to the throne. He and his father plotted all this very carefully: make a lot of trouble, make the king think a civil war was inevitable, and he would marry you off to Dray-Gon so the lowerlands would be appeased with one of their own as your husband. Your mother wasn’t a true native of Bari-Bar, all her ancestors were Uppers! Anybody can grow rich farming in Bari-Bar—or they could, until they all died... so mysteriously.”

“What do you know about that?” asked Sharita in a shocked whisper. Mark-Kan laughed wildly, apparently too intoxicated to think clearly. Then he bent over to kiss her. Using all her strength, Sharita thrust her head forward, butting her forehead forcefully against Mark-Kan’s mouth. He screamed out as blood and teeth flew from his bleeding lips. Now furiously enraged, cursing and yelling obscenities, he began to beat her, with his fists, with slaps against one side of her face and then the other. Then he seized a handful of her hair, and smashed his fist against her jaw so her head jerked backward, and almost she lost consciousness. She willed herself to stay awake, to protect herself. He said, “I don’t want to ugly you up too much, princess,” and then he was surveying what damage he had already inflicted, “or else it won’t be any pleasure making love to you.”

It was then he tore off her nightgown. Wary as a wild animal at bay, the princess cringed on the bed, drawing her knees, shielding her nudity with her bound arms, as one of her eyes began to swell. Mark-Kan began taking off his own clothes. When he had finished, he came toward her, smiling a big, drunken, confident grin. She waited until he was positioned just right, and then came up with both knees directly into his groin. He screamed and fell backward, rolling to the floor, writhing in agony. Sharita threw herself off the bed, and began to inch her way toward a drawer where she knew a knife was. Somehow she opened that drawer; her fumbling, trembling hands found the knife, and holding the weapon clenched between her knees, she started sawing at the ropes that bound her wrists together. Frantically fast she worked, careless as she moved her

arms back and forth, with her eyes on Mark-Kan, so the knife cut her flesh as well as the ropes.

“By the Gods, this time I might just well kill you, princess!” Mark-Kan gasped as he began to recover. He tried to stand straight, but couldn’t. Doubled over in a crouch, he came at her again. Wild with fear, Sharita sawed at the ropes as Mark-Kan lurched forward and fell on her. She screamed and then he screamed! Suddenly blood was everywhere! Warm, sticky—she was bathed in it. The terrible weight of Mark-Kan lay heavy on her. As she struggled to wiggle from beneath him, he gave a gurgling groan, and rolled off to heavily sigh. It was then she saw what she had done. The knife held tightly between her knees had plunged up to the hilt in Mark-Kan’s abdomen, and in trying to wiggle free, she had screwed in the knife even farther. She doubled over and began to retch. She had killed a man! A horrible, obscene man, but still a human being! For a long time she cried. Her hands were still bound; her ankles still lashed together, and she was naked lying beside a naked dead man, with her knife in his belly. Closing her eyes, she grasped the bloody knife handle and tugged it free. It made a sucking, sickening noise as it came free, a sound she would never forget. A slow ooze of blood followed the blade’s departure. Dazed, disoriented, in pain, she automatically wiped the blade on his clothes on the floor, and started sawing at her wrist ropes again. When she was finally free, she staggered to her feet and into the small bath where she washed off Mark-Kan’s blood in the shower, crying all the while. The battered face she saw in the mirror wasn’t hers. It belonged to some horrible ugly woman, all red and swollen, with puffed-out bleeding lips, one eye entirely closed. Sobbing, she dressed, keeping her eyes averted from the dead man.

“I have to see this through to the end,” she told herself, “and go alone back to the black lands.”

Thoughts came of her father, her mother, of Dray-Gon and what Mark-Kan had said about Ron Ka plotting with his son. Then she remembered that faint suggestion that Mark-Kan knew what had happened at Bari-Bar. The three rode over the black crusty earth less carefully than when they had entered, and on reaching the white sands, they used the whips on the racing horshets, something they had never done before. The terrified animals tried to run faster, but it wasn’t easy, for their hooves dug deep into the loose sand. Dray-Gon was far ahead of Arth-Rin and Raykin, and it was he who saw her first, heading away from the wagons. He drew his horshet in so abruptly, it reared high, almost throwing him off.

“Sharita?” he asked, a tight knot coming in his throat when he saw her condition. She stared at him with dead eyes, her face all bruised and swollen, and her hair still glued together with blood the shower had failed to remove.

“I killed him,” she said tonelessly. “I just finished burying him in the sand.”

“You killed Mark-Kan?” Dray-Gon asked incredulously, scanning his eyes down over her body. “Did he hurt you?”

“He beat me,” she answered without any inflection, as if it didn’t matter.

“Anything else?” he asked, not meaning just the injuries he saw.

“That’s when I killed him,” she said simply, not looking at him, but into space. “Here are the keys Mark-Kan stole,” she said, putting in his hand the key ring.

“Ah, Sharita, I don’t believe that! He’s twice your size! How could you kill him?” Automatically he hitched the ring of the keys to his belt. She turned her eyes on him, one almost closed shut.

“He was going to use me, then turn me over to the outlaws to hold for ransom, so I kicked him with my knees and found a knife and sawed at the ropes while he groaned and writhed on the floor. I had the knife gripped between my knees when he came at me again, and he tripped and fell—right on the knife. His blood went all over me.” Her face crumpled pitifully. “Now my wagon, which was so nice and clean, is covered with blood. I didn’t want to leave him in there, so I dragged him out by his feet.”

Then she began sobbing again.

Arth-Rin and Raykin had reached them in time to hear most of her story. Solemnly, compassionately they watched as Dray-Gon sprang down from his horshet and went to lift the collapsing princess from hers. He held her for a moment tight in his embrace, despite the two men who were watching, and stroked her hair, speaking in the soft, soothing way he had spoken to her before.

“It’s all right, Sharita. You told me Mark-Kan watched you all the time, and I ignored that, so it was my fault. I should have kept you better guarded—though I never suspected he would try anything like this. Why, I grew up knowing him...” He tilted up her battered, swollen face and

kissed her bruises, her puffed-up eye, and her cut and stillbleeding lips. She stared at him in a dazed way, hardly feeling anything. Then he placed her on his horshet, and mounted to ride behind her, as Raykin lashed together all six of the horshets Mark Kan had stolen.

“Come on, we’re going back to the others,” he said to Arth-Rin and Raykin. As they headed back to the black pit where the others waited, he comforted the princess.

“Soon as Doctor Benlon sees you, he’ll treat you with the pufar ash healer, and soon you’ll be beautiful again. He didn’t really hurt you, did he? I mean, he didn’t...?”

“If you’re trying to ask if he raped me, no, he didn’t. He was drunk and naked when he fell on top of me and killed himself.” She turned and tried to see what he was thinking. “If he had succeeded, would it have mattered? What would you have done?”

“I would have gone back and dug him up, and killed him again!” he said with so much vehemence, it sounded believable. Sharita kept looking at him. She tried to push back all the insidious suspicions about Dray-Gon and his father: the contrived threats of civil war to be used as a form of blackmail to force her father to give her to a man in marriage she might not have otherwise wanted...

Into the Green Canyon

It was the next morning, early, before they again broke camp and rode up and out of the black crater, for Benlon ordered the princess to bed on her return, gave her a sedative, and treated her wounds. When she awakened, her cuts had healed, and her swollen face and eye were normal-appearing again, and hunger growled her stomach. The nineteen men had stood and cheered when she made her appearance at their dinner table, all of them looking at her with a new respect.

This time as they traveled on through the eerie, creepy black land, she rode directly behind Dray-Gon, and behind her was Arth-Rin. Sharita felt well enough to give this alien terrain her full attention. She presumed at some ancient time a fire must have ravished this land, and she looked pityingly at the bleak skeleton trees that raised begging stone arms toward the sky. They rode past giant black onyx boulders that glittered like faceted jewels, and several of the men left their horshets long enough to fill their pockets with smaller pieces of this black rock.

For five nights they slept uncomfortably in a succession of frigid cold crater bottoms. On the fifth morning, Sharita awakened, startled to hear all the commotion outside her tent. The inky blackness of night was barely dimming, the first sun's rays just beginning to peek over the crater rim, and too sleepy to question the movements outside of her tent, she closed her eyes and sank into sleep again. Voices came loud into her dreams, excited and dashing madly about—noise that she tried to shut out so she could sleep just a bit longer.

She told herself she was only dreaming, and there was nothing to be afraid of, for Dray-Gon pitched his tent directly opposite hers, so close he had said he could hear her breathing—though she doubted that—unless she snored, and she didn't believe that either. Finally she could feign sleep no longer, or pretend the commotion was but a dream, and she hurried out of the tent fully dressed, for they all slept that way now, to keep warmer, to be ready to move instantly, without wasting time. The young men were scattered all over the crater, searching in a frantic way.

“What has happened?” she called out to the nearest one.

“The animals!” he yelled back.

“Princess, the puhlets, and the horshets—they have all disappeared, every one!”

“Where could they go?” she called out again. Her question was answered with a perplexed shrug.

“The Gods only know!” came his answer.

The loss of the animals was an overwhelming catastrophe! First they were forced to abandon the comfortable, homelike wagons, now their only means of transportation, except for their legs, was gone. All their supplies were stacked on the ground, waiting to be strapped on the supply horshets. Without the animals, the Green Mountain would never be reached! And from where she stood, in the black bottom of nowhere, Sharita couldn’t even see the Mountain.

She looked around for Dray-Gon, but all the men were so distant, she couldn’t tell one from another in their alike uniforms, grown black and sooty from the loose black particles that where everywhere. She was as grimy as any of them. It was Ral-Bar, from the province of Shal-Bretta, who found the high crack in the face of the black rock, three giant steps up from the bottom.

“Look here,” he called back to the three men closest. “There’s a tunnel going through to somewhere, and there’s evidence on the floor that the animals went this way.”

The three men behind him scampered up to his level and followed Ral-Bar inside the long, dark, cavernous tunnel. It was darker than a thousand moonless, starless nights inside of that crater pocket. So Dray-Gon pulled out his pocket illuminator and beamed it on the ground, as did the others. He felt the black rock, different here than on the crusty top surface. Here it was as hard as crystal, and his hand came away clean. But they had to step carefully, for the tunnel was pitted, dropping off sharply when least expected.

There was green mold on some of the rocks that reeked unpleasantly. As quickly as they dared and considered safe, the four men followed the animal tracks, not permitting themselves to think of the inevitable results if the animals were permanently lost. Suddenly there was light ahead, and Arth-Rin laughed. Raykin swore when he twisted his ankle from stepping on a stone that turned. Out of the blackened tunnel they came into the open day. High above them was the rosy sky of very early morning; there was no wind, for they were in a canyon between high, towering dark walls.

The ground beneath their feet was surprisingly padded and soft. Blue-green grass beneath their boots! Imagine that! It had been so long since they had seen grass—since they had walked on anything so plush and yielding—and cool! The four men looked at each other and then laughed happily.

Well! some good fortune, at last! The Gods were smiling upon them! And there before them were the puhlets and horshets, munching contentedly in the long valley nestled between the lofty enclosing walls. A different kind of green sprouting grew here and there, some even projecting from crevices in the black canyon rock face, growing a green that was very familiar to all of them. Tiny greenish-yellow melons clung to the rosy stems. Pufars growing here, of all places! Right away, Arth-Rin split open a melon and began to eat, while Dray-Gon set off with Raykin to examine the valley, and where it might possibly lead.

“It’s headed in the right direction,” commented Dray-Gon, “arrowed straight at the Green Mountain.”

“Sure,” said Raykin. “It is headed where we want to go—but suppose it rains? One of those gully washers—this looks like a dry river bottom—and down would come a river, right on us!”

“But just think of the smooth, easy ride we would have, so much less dangerous than picking a path between those black craters” was Ral-Bar’s more optimistic comment. Dray-Gon turned about, seriously considering.

“If it did rain, we could climb those walls, using the little niches for footholds, and the horshets and puhlets are excellent swimmers.”

“Hah!” Raykin snorted, “loaded down like they will be, the horshets would sink like stones! I’m for the top! Sun, wind, craters, crusty hollow earth and all!”

“But it would be safer, as long as it doesn’t rain and more pleasant, and we could keep an eye on the weather,” Dray-Gon went on in an objective way, “and if we see a storm approaching, we could hurriedly seek a way to lead the animals into one of those caves.” Here he pointed toward one of the many dark holes in the canyon face.

“See—there are narrow ledges we could use...”

“I’m against it!” Raykin declared, scowled up darkly.

“I’m for it!” Arth-Rin stated just as firmly, plucking another melon and breaking it open to eat more of the sour-sweet fruit.

“Why, we might come across some other variety of pufar, and enjoy fresh fruit for a change.”

“Eat, eat, that’s all you think of!” Dray-Gon threw the officers under his command a sour look.

“There are pros and cons for choosing this way, or riding the top. Let’s go back for the others and lead them all here, and we’ll take a vote.” It was Ral-Bar he ordered back to fetch the others. “And bring the princess too; her life is involved in this just as much as ours.”

When all nineteen men and the single girl were gathered together in the gorge, Dray-Gon thoroughly explained the hazards of traveling the deep passageway, as compared to the hazards they already knew only too well.

“I don’t want to influence anyone with my choice, but I am for chancing the risks down here. It won’t be impossible to scale those walls, if we see a storm threatening, and I don’t anticipate any other kind of danger.”

So they voted verbally, ending up with a vote of ten for the top crust, and nine for risking the chances that it wouldn’t rain, or if it did, they could find sanctuary in a high cave.

“Well, it’s up to you, princess, to make it a tie, or to swing the weight in the other direction,” said Dray-Gon with a wry smile, as if he anticipated she would go against him, as she usually did.

She refused to meet his eyes, but turned hers upward to study the almost perpendicular walls, with only the narrow ledges and notches to assist them upward if a deluge began. She didn’t know if storms from Bay Gar could travel this far, but well they might, for they came with power unlimited and might well encircle the whole globe. And if it did rain, they would surely drown. There wouldn’t be time to climb those sheer walls to reach the safety of the dark caves, which Dray-Gon had pointed out to her. But riding above held as many risks as riding here in the cool, refreshing shade.

Here, no animal could slip and fall to its death, or take one or more of the riders with them. The blasting hot winds couldn’t sweep them down into a crater bottom, and there was fresh grass for the animals to eat, and fresh melons for them. There was also needed relief from the glare of the two hot suns. Her small pet female puhlet came running to her, nuzzling its soft nose against her hand. Sharita bowed her head and petted

Ramaran's head. She looked up and met Dray-Gon's cynical eyes, narrowed as he waited for her decision.

"Many years ago, the Founder, Far-Awn, was led onto the ice fields of Bay Gar by the puhlets, and he survived. Two years later, the puhlets led Far-Awn into Bay Sol, and he survived that, coming back to help all our peoples survive. It occurs to me that the puhlets are destined to always select the right way for us. So why should we reject now this straight and even passageway leading to the Gods when it is chosen by the animals who have always saved us?"

"She is right!" cried Raykin, who had led the opposition against using the deep canyon.

"I change my vote! We will go this way, our destined way, with Far-Awn's great-granddaughter to lead us!" A new vote was taken, and this time all chose the valley between the towering walls.

Once more the supplies were loaded on the horshets, and soon they were on their way, headed again toward the home of the Gods. The ride was better here, in a hundred ways. It was cool, it was patterned with light and shade, and the winds didn't blow, and they could travel faster, without caution, and ride abreast, if they chose. Somehow, without planning, Sharita found herself riding side by side with Dray-Gon, ahead of all the others.

"Do you know, Sharita, you and I have finally agreed about something? It's a very pleasing change. I thank you for your help." She turned her face toward him, with her long, silvery blond hair moving lightly in the wake of their forward motion, and smiled in a slow, bedazzling way that made Dray-Gon put out his hand, unconsciously wanting to touch her. Just as naturally, she put her hand in his as he reined his mount in closer to hers. She looked down at their hands linked together, seeing the two rings on his fingers.

"I find it paradoxical that you wear a royal crest of authority on the same hand you wear a cheap little ring made of imitation metal and a simulated jewel." He released her hand, and directed his horse different, so yards were between them, instead of only inches.

"That cheap little ring was given to me as a good luck charm, and I intend to keep it for the rest of my life," he said stiffly.

"Why? Was the giver of that ring so important to you?"

“In some ways, yes. It may be that with that ring she gave me more than you ever would.”

“Then you must believe I could give you only the imitation of something real.” Dray-Gon laughed harshly.

“Princess, as I said on the first night we met, I came to Far-Awndra for something that I thought I really wanted, especially after I’d seen you. It chills my spine sometimes to think all your beauty is on the outside, and inside you are a political machine, programmed to speak and act for the good of your country.

“Why, you have even inherited some of your father’s noted rhetoric. You could at some later date put your arms around me and kiss my lips, and convince me with kisses and sweet words into believing you loved me. And all the while I thrilled to having you in my arms, I’d be wondering just what motivations you had: if you really wanted me or just a kingdom without rebellion.”

“And you, of course, came to Far-Awndra with no political schemes? You loved and wanted me sight unseen! The reports of my beauty and cold, aloof, arrogant nature didn’t turn you away at all. You headed straight toward your objective of obtaining power, even if you had to marry it!”

“Perhaps I believed I could break through your shell, and turn you into a human being!”

“So did your countryman, Mark-Kan—his way was to beat me into submission! And while he was slamming his fists into my face, he was yelling at me, telling me whom you really loved! He implied a great many things, Dray-Gon! I stay awake at night, wondering if they’re true.”

“What kinds of things?” he snapped, turning to glare hard at her. She had stayed awake enough nights thinking about all that Mark-Kan had implied to have a ready long list on the tip of her tongue. Instead, a lump came in her throat, and tears into her eyes, and she sobbed. Pulling hard on the reins, she turned her horshet about and galloped back to ride between Benlon and Raykin.

“Are you feeling well, Princess?” asked Benlon, his eyes soft with love as they saw her tears.

“I am feeling fine. Never better!” To prove this, she swiped the tears from her face with an impatient fist and began to sing. Arth-Rin grinned and lifted the stringed musical instrument he kept always attached to his

saddle, and began to play and sing with her. Soon they were all singing, except Dray-Gon. He led the way, just behind the puhlets, not singing or smiling. The days passed. Straight and true, the deep ravine led to the Green Mountain, although they could not see its rounded smooth top above the towering walls.

They bedded by night in one of the many caves. Always selecting carefully, always keeping in mind the dangers a heavy rain would bring, and always choosing a cave high enough for the rays of the first sun to find. That was the most difficult part, for sunbeams only managed to straggle briefly into the shaded canyon. It became their habit to sing as they rode, and Sharita's habit to help prepare all the meals, charmingly flirting with every one of the young men, all in love with her already. After dinner in one of the huge caves, she would suggest dancing as a way to pass the time, and that became a habit too.

Only Dray-Gon refused to join in their revelry. He sat remote and gloomy-looking, whittling a chunk of wood into the rough form of a puhlet. He ignored the small skirmishes of jealousy that Sharita's flirtations caused, and the small injuries, such as black eyes, that Benlon doctored.

"You are doing a great job, Princess," he said to her bitterly one night, as she curled up in her blankets to sleep. "Just keep playing one man against the other, and we'll end up killing each other." Her eyes widened and she suddenly looked like a lost and forlorn child.

"I'm sorry, if that's what I'm doing. It was just my way to keep them happy."

"Happy! Look at Ral-Bar with a broken arm—does he look happy? Princess, lay off the charm and warmth and draw back into your cold shell again, until we're back in your palace—and then you can do anything you please!"

"Sleep near me tonight," she whispered. "Someone tried to molest me last night. I don't know who it was."

"It serves you right!" But nevertheless, he lay down upon his blanket near her side, keeping any other man from that position, for Sharita was against a wall. In the morning, he held her blanket as a shield so she could undress behind it, and do a bit of washing, before she changed into clean clothes.

"Hurry up," he ordered as his arms grew tired, stretched out sideways so long, resisting the temptation to look over his shoulder and see what

the devil took her so long. Sharita sat quiet and subdued in the evenings now, refusing to join in when the men danced to Arth-Rin's music. She watched Dray-Gon's primitive little carving shape up into a small work of art.

"What are you going to do with it?" she asked.

"Why do you ask?" he questioned in return.

"Just wondering. I would like very much to have it, something to remember you by, when you go back and marry your servant girl."

"Don't call her that!" he said sharply.

"And you can have this thing if you want it. It's just something to do, and I was going to give it to you anyway. I used Ramaran as a model, because you love her most, because she's most like you, graceful, delicate, and sweet when she wants to be." Sharita looked at him oddly, her eyes deep and dark in the shadows of the cave.

"Ramaran is always sweet, unlike me," and she took the little model and stroked it with her fingertips, and went to sleep with it held tight in her hand. They still sang as they rode, ever closer to the mountain. It seemed the worst of the trip was over. The Gods were near. Welcoming them with a smoother, less harassed, beleaguered way—seemingly given as a benediction.

The plant inheritance of Sod-a-Por was forgotten, a part of the past they didn't have to fear, so long they had lived in safety beneath the transparent domes of the cities. The ancient need for long hours of sunlight lay dormant, lulled and soothed, but there. Weeks passed as they traveled there, in comfort, in shade, in safety. It didn't rain. No horrors came upon them in the night. Fully now they were assured of the friendliness of the Gods, and even put aside their fears of a sudden deluge. If they were unwelcome, they would not have been permitted to come this far—so they innocently reasoned. Insidiously, so slowly and so uniformly, a change came over them, so that not one saw a difference. Their desire to sing was lost.

This was reasoned away as monotony; it grew dull, boring to do the same thing. They became sleepy, listless, apathetic as they swayed in their saddles. This, they reasoned, was mere exhaustion from the long, tiresome journey. There was nothing strange about the despairing way they felt, it was only to be expected.

So they slept without fires, too fatigued to make them, and nibbled without appetite at food ill-prepared. Then one night came the long-delayed storm from Bay Gar. The gusting frigid winds blew, the rains dumped down, the waters sluiced down into the deep ravine, a roaring, raging, rushing torrent drowning all that lay in its path. Deeply asleep in their high and dry cave, the travelers slept, lucky it wasn't day, and they were down below. They slept, wrapped in blankets, with the puhlets among them for warmth, and the horshets staked down and covered with blankets too. Although none of those sleeping in the cave knew it then, the same river tearing down the gulley where they traveled during the day hours would eventually join with all the other underground rivers that arteried through the inner-earth of El Dorraine.

For three days the driving rain needled the earth. The deep ravine denied those sleeping in the cave the brightness of day, and the short direct beams of sunlight from the high suns when they shone directly down into the canyon. They would awaken briefly, look about, see the rain, hear the rushing torrent of water below, and go back to sleep, as their ancestors had. In sleep there was comfort, dreams, and best of all, complete oblivion. On the fourth day, the soft and moist noses of the puhlets tried to nudge them into wakefulness. Ramaran was the most persistent, rilling and crying like the near baby she was, pushing at Sharita until she sat up and sleepily rubbed at her eyes.

“Oh, you must be hungry,” murmured the princess, moving slow and lethargically to open a bag of grain.

But her strength was so small she couldn't lift the bag to empty it for the puhlets to eat. Dray-Gon was near, curled up on his side, a beard sprouting from his face. She stared at his reddish stubble, lighter than his hair, bedazedly realizing she had never seen him unshaven before, for he was meticulous at keeping himself always looking his best. That was a lot of hair to come on a face overnight. She slowly turned her head to gaze at the other sleeping men, and all of them were just as grizzled with facial hair growth. It was then she knew! They had slept for more than one night ... perhaps many! Her hand rose to cover her mouth that gaped open in surprise and horror. She fell on her knees beside Dray-Gon, gripping his shoulders and shaking him as forcefully as she could manage.

“Wake up, Dray-Gon!” He groaned, and tried to turn over, resisting her efforts.

“Please, please wake up!” she pleaded, and slapped his face, then shook him again. He partially opened his eyes and struggled to focus his gaze, telling her to leave him alone... he was still tired, did she have to be a nuisance morning, noon, and night? More violently she shook him.

“Damn you, barbarian! Wake, up, you uncouth, unmannered, uncivilized savage!” That opened his eyes fully. Anger flooded them, as he reached as if to slap her. She seized his hand and kissed it.

“Dray-Gon, I didn’t mean any of that, but you’ve got to get on your feet and start to move! The others are all asleep too! The dim-despairs are overtaking us! We forgot we might still be subject to them. Please wake up and help me with them, or soon we’ll all be curling our toes into the earth!” Sluggishly limp, he struggled to sit up, while she grasped his hands and tugged. He stared at her in a disinterested, uncomprehending way.

“Did you hear what I said?” she yelled.

“We have slept for more than one night!” Only a flicker of understanding changed his expression. She threw her arms around him, raining kisses all over his scratchy face. Then his arms moved, clasping her hand against him, and his mouth closed down over hers. Laughing, half-crying, she pulled away. So, that was the way to wake him up.

“Do you want to die here, Captain Dray-Gon, before we even have a chance to know if we love each other?” Small twin flames jumped into his disoriented eyes.

“No, I don’t think I’m ready yet to depart this world,” he gasped as he hauled himself upright, clinging to her frail shoulders.

“There might be still a few pleasures ahead.” Then, together, they wakened the other men, shaking shoulders, slapping faces, coaxing, pleading, explaining what was happening to them.

Finally everyone was on their feet, staggering about, trying to eat and drink, and feed and water the animals. They looked at each other, bearded and hollow-eyed, and shaken thoroughly with what might have happened. Dray-Gon walked to the rim of the cave, looking down into the abyss. Down there a tiger river raged, seething with white water that cascaded over the rocks. He looked upward toward a sky that no longer poured rain, but there was no way to reach the top from where they were.

They couldn’t climb the insurmountable—or descend to the unnavigable! They were trapped in the dim and dark cold cave... and they

had the desperate need now for full sunlight. Up there was a sky with two suns, life-giving twin orbs of light, but they had no way to benefit from them. He turned to Sharita, who stood at his side, and tightly embraced her.

“We are going to die here, all of us. It will take days for that river to recede!” She put her arms around him, tilting back her head.

“No, your mind is befuddled. We have the puhlets. They have led us into this canyon, and they can lead us out. All of this black land is riddled with hollow tunnels and tubes. There will be one tunnel at least that will travel upward into the light.” His smile was slow and crooked.

“By the Gods, you do believe in them! I was hopefully thinking while we were feeling so desperate you might make an unconsidered declaration of some kind.” Laughing, Sharita drew him by the hand back to the others. Rule number one her father had taught her: Never make an unconsidered declaration of any kind. The horshets were roped and linked together, and Sharita urged the lead male puhlet on into the depths of the cave.

“Go on,” she pleaded patting the animal’s head, for she could make them do what the men couldn’t, since she had played around with them more, and they loved her most.

“Find us a way out of this dim dark place. Lead us up into the sunlight where the grass grows.”

Dray-Gon wanted to tell her to just order them, not talk to them as if they could understand, but kept quiet since she was holding tight to his hand, showing some affection that she had held in restraint before. With their illuminating lights held high, all followed the lead of the puhlets. Needing to crawl in some places, forcing the horshets down on their knees and dragging them forcefully through the lowest places while the horshets cried out in hurtful protest. Then from the darkness ahead, a sudden commotion among the puhlets!

From the leading male came a bull-like roar as he angered, and clawed his hooves on the stone surface. Sharita saw—and she screamed! Clarified by the lights they held was a huge wormlike thing, horned and clay white, with two bulging eyes that caught light in a thousand facets—and a gaping mouth that incessantly ground—and in that terrifying mouth was Ramaran! Sharita sobbed as Ramaran was chewed and swallowed, and the thing sluggishly humped its back to reach for another tidbit. Dragging a weapon from his belt with hands trembling and weak from the overlong

sleep, Dray-Gon aimed his laser light. The pencil-thin beam struck the tunnel wall, slicing it, causing smoke—but he had missed! The worm thing turned its head their way, sensing danger apparently, and not just food.

“Use my shoulder to steady your aim,” whispered Sharita, stepping in front of him. Closer the thing humped, its head turning right, left, appearing near blind, and the projecting things on its head that they had considered only horns were feelers used to guide it, for they vibrated as it inched closer. Placing his weapon on Sharita’s shoulder, Dray-Gon took more careful aim this time, waiting until the monstrous head turned fully their way, and then he fired. The beam of light split the head into two sections, and blood and brains flew everywhere as a momentary bright orange light lit the tunnel. Hugging Sharita tight against him, Dray-Gon asked, “Well, what do you think?”

“I think I need a bath,” she said, looking down at the mess that adhered to her clothes. Someone laughed.

“The princess needs a bath!” Suddenly they were all laughing, almost hysterically.

“By the Gods, it looks like a maggot, or an insect larva,” said Dray-Gon in awe as they crept past the pudding-like mess that had devoured Sharita’s pet puhlet. They all agreed: a giant larva of some kind.

“I hope we don’t meet up with other members of the same family,” said Raykin, casting his light everywhere. Somberly, fearful with every foot they took forward, they crept on, following the puhlets that rilled, as if crying.

At the Feet of the Gods

Hours later, they emerged and turned their faces upward to drink greedily of the lights of the two suns in a sky of brilliant turquoise. We are alive! thought Dray-Gon, despite everything, we are alive! It was a good feeling. Then he sobered, seeing Sharita sitting slumped over with the small image of Ramaran cupped in her palm, the one he had so patiently whittled as a small gift for her, not knowing when he made it how it would end for that small, dainty pet of hers.

“I’m sorry, Sharita,” he said, very low and soft. “I wish it had been another, not the one you loved so much.”

“I’ve got a little bit of her. See how you captured her expression, and the way she held her head.” And then she was crying, turning to lay her head on his shoulder.

“Princess, don’t cry!” called out Arth-Rin. “Look around and see where we are!”

Without realizing it, they had reached the Scarlet Mountains! They were now in the very midst of them, sitting in a lush green valley, surrounded by jagged red mountain peaks! The red foothills of the Gods! They had come upon them at last! The green home of the Gods rose tall and mighty just beyond them, very close. It was frightening, sobering, awesome. From afar they had viewed the Green Mountain every day of their lives, and wondered.

Up close, they were fearful. Fascination rounded their eyes as they marveled at its smooth, rounded top, so different from the pointed jaggedness of the mountains before it. So near they were, so close to the Gods. They looked at each other speechless, quelled and cowed with the utter insignificance of being only what they were. They were hungry, and thirsty, and they ate and drank in silence as their animals grazed about them. While they ate, drank, their eyes never left the Green Mountain.

“I thought that when we were near it, it would be as most everything else is: less than perfect,” whispered Raykin, as if the Gods would hear his remark and take offense.

“Even up close, it is still smooth and glossy, without a flaw.”

“It’s almost not a mountain at all,” mused Dray-Gon.

“Well, of course, it is not just an ordinary mountain,” said Sharita in the lowest possible voice, “that is why we have always known Gods lived there. They would choose the best.”

“So they would, so would I, if I were a God, which, at this very moment, I am glad that I am not. At this very moment, I am very glad to be me.” Dray-Gon leaped to his feet with surprising agility, considering that only hours ago Sharita had to pull him to his feet.

“Let us ride on and see if the Gods are at home.”

With that, he extended his hand down to Sharita and assisted her up on her mount. For a second her hand rested lightly on his head, as her eyes searched his face, and then she smiled so tenderly, his heart lurched upward. Stronger now, invigorated, full of vitality and restored youth and zest, they rode on with high expectations. To speak at last with Gods—their Gods! It was a thought to intoxicate the brain, like too much wine, and music, and beautiful dancing girls throwing provocative glances, like when he was a boy first experiencing the heady adult life.

Dray-Gon cast his eyes to the princess. Her silvery, almost gold hair caught the sunlight, shimmered with it. She radiated, though she was dirty, covered with black soot, nasty green slime, and blood from that underground thing, like they all were. She was still the most beautiful thing his eyes had ever rested on. For a moment, his thoughts took wing back to Ray-Mon, and how she had said he would change. He looked down at the cheap silver-like ring on his finger with the small blue stone, and an ache started in his heart. At that moment Sharita looked at him, seeing where his eyes were fastened. The happy smile left her face. The words she had started to say she kept unsaid. Maybe I will never say them, she thought.

Traveling slowly, not from caution, but from respectful awe, they curved down a mountainside, constantly winding down lower and lower. More and more of the home of the Gods was revealed to them. Since childhood they had looked here, toward the Mountain, fearing its power, worshipping its might, respecting and believing in the rightness and the justice of its decisions. Even when they suffered, they had kept the faith, doubting only once in a while. Now, in entirety, they could see every bit of the Mountain, from the monumental swelling top, to the flat level bottom—to the four shining silver legs that supported it! Legs. Four silver legs. This caused them to rein in their horshets and stare in stunned

surprise! They were legs of a kind, weren't they? A mountain on legs? A rounded, smooth, glossy, green mountain supported by four silver legs. Oh, yes! Now, indeed, for a certainty they knew—this had to be the home of the Gods!

“But it is not a mountain of earth at all, or even stone,” cried out Sharita. “It is a green, metallic thing!”

“Well, why not metallic?” answered Dray-Gon, imitating her manner.

“Don't we prefer to construct our homes of something better than dirt and stone?” That was reasonable, good logic. Yet, they had not suspected this. Raykin rode up alongside of Dray-Gon.

“So, we have reached the Green Mountain. Look what we have. Now tell me, Captain, how are we going to climb those long, slick, slanting legs, to knock upon that green door?” It was Arth-Rin's turn now.

“Why should we have to knock upon their door? They are Gods. They see and know everything. So it is reasonable to presume they are looking at us this very minute. We will wait for them to speak to us.”

This was discussed. They were not, any of them, too certain of the soundness, or protocol, of Arth-Rin's theory. They would obey the rules of etiquette, if only they knew the rules. However, they had no other solution as yet—and the silver legs were indeed a most formidable obstacle! Sharita looked down at herself, shuddering at what she saw. Hoping very much the Gods in their high home would be looking in another direction this very moment, and would give her time to bathe and change into clean clothes before she was invited inside. She had a special gown packed carefully for the occasion.

Upon a high level plateau they hurriedly set up camp, the big tent for the princess first, so she could take that bath, and wash her hair, and make herself presentable with the jewels and crown appropriate for this presentation that went beyond imagination. They staked the horshets with long ropes so they could graze, and allowed the tractable puhlets to amble about as they would. There was verdant growth everywhere, between the rocks, on the ground, even sprouting long around the silver legs. For the remainder of the day they waited for the Gods in their green home to see them, to take some notice of them, sitting so respectfully quiet in their clean and very best clothes.

The gold and silver on the smoke-blue uniforms sparkled in the dying sunlight. The crystal crown, studded with jewels, shimmered a myriad of

colors on the beautifully coiffured head of the princess. At first they stood and waited to be seen and invited inside, but soon that grew tiresome. Then they sat on camp chairs that could be folded compactly. As the two sunsets flared brilliant, and then blackened into night, they knelt and prayed, and politely suggested an audience. Not demanding, not speaking of the long, arduous journey to get here, just reminding that they were here.

“Tomorrow,” said Sharita. “It’s too late now. Let us go to bed, and do this all over again tomorrow.”

Up early, they ate hurriedly, bathed, combed, brushed, cleaned teeth, and made themselves as presentable as yesterday, wearing again their very best.

“Are you beginning to feel like a fool?” whispered Raykin to Arth-Rin.

“No, just tired and bored.”

“Tired and bored, I am disappointed,” said Sharita crossly. “I hate wearing a crown, it tires my neck. And this gown fits so tight, I feel uncomfortable.” She looked reproachfully at Dray-Gon.

“Do something!”

“What?” he asked, as tired and bored and disappointed as any of them. Sharita pouted her lips, growing impatient. She wasn’t accustomed to being ignored! She had thought the Gods would welcome them, at least in some small way, and recognize their unprecedented daring and courage for braving this long dangerous journey—to say nothing of their untiring quest for the truth. She threw an angry look at the high green home on silver legs, and jumped to her feet.

“I’ve had enough of sitting around and waiting! Let’s eat our dinner and go to bed! At our palace, we never kept our guests waiting outdoors!”

Retiring to their tents, they ate, grumbling at each other. To go through so much, and to have no reward. Yet, when it was dark and Sharita lay on her bed, she had a secret hope the Gods would not choose this time to invite them inside their high green home and hold an inquisition. Five days and six nights passed while they waited for an audience, and the Gods in their fourlegged green mountain home did not deign to see, or to hear them. They made fires, and dampened them with wet cloths, so that smoke rose dark and curling.

They made other fires and smothered them alternately, so the smoke rose fat, white, and billowing. They kept fires burning all night, huge fires that kept them slaving to feed them, and still the Gods didn't see! They prayed long hours, on their knees, even the princess, reverent, respectful prayers, and received absolutely no response. Their prayers became louder, and more demanding, and less respectful, and even impatient and a bit irritated, and nothing happened! Nothing!

Now they were annoyed, angry, filled with frustration and a sense of hopelessness and defeat. Had they traveled so far, and suffered so much, for nothing? Were they to sit here until they grew old and withered, and browned into eternity? No! Damned if they would! They had come to question the Gods—and question they would! But still the problem was there, despite their tenacious resolve. How? They had prayed from afar, and the Gods didn't hear, their ancestors had sacrificed without results, and here they were, so near, and as ineffective as ever.

“But we will find a way! There has to be a way!” said Dray-Gon. Somehow, there had to be a way to force the Gods to hear them. Again they broke camp, packed the supply horshets, and descended from the high level where they had been on eye level with the Gods—if they even had a window. They hadn't seen any—but it was so huge, their mountain home. They reached the flat plain where the Gods' home rose on its towering sliver legs, and set up a new camp at the foot of one of these giant spindles.

“Aha!” cried Raykin in satisfaction, vindicated as he peered closely at the leg. “It is as I supposed—not so perfect after all! Look—up close it has brown rusty splotches, and charred places!”

He made Sharita laugh, for he was a notorious complainer, and could find fault with any- and everything. She stepped up very close to the stocky young man in a uniform no longer so splendid, but beginning to show signs of wear and tear.

“Look me over closely, Raykin, and tell me what faults you find.” He blushed and stammered and shuffled his feet, and hung his head in humility.

“I really can't say that you have any,” he muttered in embarrassment.

“Yes, I do. Of course I do. Everyone has faults. I've heard those very words from your own lips. Now tell me truthfully, as if I were just any ordinary girl, and not a princess.”

“Yeah, Raykin,” encouraged Dray-Gon, “tell the princess how she could improve herself.” He flashed Sharita a mocking grin, suggesting she was asking for it. Challenged, Raykin looked up.

“All right, Princess, you have one damn, great big flaw that makes me so mad, sometimes I toss and turn on my bed all night because of it!”

“Oh,” murmured Sharita, taken aback and wishing now she hadn’t asked, but bravely she said nevertheless:

“Go on, tell me what it is, and I will try to rid myself of that fault.” Rankin flushed as he spoke, his eyes turned to study the ground at her feet.

“It’s your eyes. They never look at me. All they seem to see is Dray-Gon. And he is not one bit better-looking than I am—nor is his position one bit higher than mine. I am as qualified to be your husband as he is, and my marriage proposal has been in your father’s office longer than anyone’s.” Ashamed, and ill at ease, with all the young men watching and listening to hear her reply, she put her hands on Raykin’s shoulders.

“Raykin, you and I grew up knowing each other. We attended many of the same school classes, and you were at every one of my birthday balls, and though I like you very much, you seem more like a brother, and I love you in that way.”

Then she kissed him on the lips in a sisterly way that made Raykin break free and turn and run into a tent. Now everyone was embarrassed, and they set to with grim determination to find the way to attract the attention of the Gods. It was decided to construct a huge hammer. When they had, it took three men to lift and swing it, and then they appointed teams to swing it, and strike hard against the silver leg. To them the blows of their giant hammer resounded with a thundering noise that hurt their ears. But some voiced the opinion that to the Gods in their high home, it might be only a small tapping, hardly discernible. Not once did they consider that it might not be heard at all.

All day they beat upon the leg with timed and repeated rhythm. When one team tired, an alternate team took over. Their meals, their exercises, the order of their lives were scheduled so that one single beat wouldn’t be missed.

Only at night did they cease, to begin again at the first sun’s dawning. If the Gods couldn’t be attracted with respectful prayers and smoke signals, they would attract them with annoyance, at the risk of ire, anger,

or their destructful wrath. Anything would be better than the ignominy of being ignored! For days and days and days they hammered on the silver leg, until arms ached, and heads ached, and ears hurt. Not ceasing from the first sun's upping to the second sun's downing.

Week after week they hammered, banging with impatient temper, angry now at Gods who were so damned indifferent! Then one day it happened! An ear-rending squealing and grinding emitted from the Gods' high home. Something huge, long, and dark, and quite indefinable reached out of the green home above and sucked them upward! They were as ants swept into a paper bag! Sharita, on the ground, saw the opening in the Green Mountain close, and Dray-Gon along with five others was gone—plus the huge hammer! She screamed and screamed until she had no voice left to cry out again. The young men who remained tried to comfort her. She turned on them angrily.

“Oh, I am not afraid for them! I am just so angry! Here I am, left standing on the outside, when I wanted to be there! Oh, it is just not fair!”

Book Four
To Speak with The Gods

Prologue

Inside the Green Mountain home of the Gods, six of the young men from El Dorraine, Uppers and Lower, were carried, heaped in an undignified, ungraceful, unprepossessing pile, and without ceremony they were dumped on a broad and flat shining surface! Immediately all six scrambled to their feet, discomfited and trembling. They straightened their clothes and quickly assumed what dignity and authority they could muster under the circumstances.

Dray-Gon, Arth-Rin, Raykin, Ral-Bar, and two others were there. They looked at each other, then turned to see where they were. All they could see was a tremendous space with giant, shadowy objects with large lights of many colors racing up and down and crossways, as if chasing each other. Never ceasing, constantly changing colors, dazzling their eyes with rainbows that fatigued their brains with colors too bright and too intense...

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The Lord God Laughs

Something mammoth, something beyond their comprehension, moved behind the transparent film that enclosed them. They were as insects under a bowl! Each was filled with fear, and fully acknowledged it!

“Well, at least we have been noticed!” spoke Dray-Gon in a voice that quaked just a bit.

“Yes, more is the pity, now that it has happened!” expressed Arth-Rin, trembling all over on hearing the crashing noises coming from everywhere. Secretly he wished he were home again, safe in his warm bed with the covers pulled up high.

“You know something,” said Raykin, “half the time, I doubted there were Gods at all. I thought this mountain was just another of our freaky nature’s tricks.” Then booming noises nearly deafened them, causing them to cover their ears with their hands. The thundering rolled over them, assaulting their senses until they felt as stretched thin as a wire and ready to pop!

“Oh, what voices these Gods have!” cried out Ral-Bar, when the noise was over and they could hear their own voices again, and reason and sanity could return.

In the comforting silence, they grew bold enough to search for a way out of the bowl that contained them—but there was no way out. So they waited. They grew tired of standing fearfully, so they sat and waited, less fearfully. They talked among themselves, growing impatient, wondering about the princess, and if she was safe, and if she was frightened. Dray-Gon wondered if she missed him and needed him, and he became aware now that he was important in her life.

Time passed, boringly, uncomfortably. They grew tired and hungry, and lay down to sleep on the hard, unyielding, miserable surface. They awoke after a while and waited again, with hunger pains intensified, and thirst unquenched. They talked, and grew tired of conversation that consisted mainly of speculations, so they slept again. They waked again only to complain. Oh, how inhospitably slow were these Gods of the Green Mountain! Deeply asleep for a third time, they were awakened

suddenly by the sound of a mighty, roaring voice. Instantly they sprang to their feet and stood at attention.

“What tiny creatures you are!” bellowed out the thundering voice of a God. Oh, the princess should be here and hear the welcome of Gods! Dray-Gon thought. And she considered Lowers uncouth and unmannerly!

“We are not ‘creatures,’ Lord God,” answered Dray-Gon stiffly, with some anger showing in his voice.

“We are men of El Dorraine.” The voice beyond the inverted bowl rang out again, louder than ever, and like thunderbolts clashing, it couldn’t be understood. The loud voice softened, and said in a more gentle, quieter tone, “Forgive me, ‘men’ of El Dorraine, I did not recognize you as such at first. I looked and saw some little things squiggling around, and thought you were only bugs. But I am very intrigued. Repeat what you called me. Just what do you think I am?” Imagine that—he didn’t know!

“You are, of course, a God of the Mountain—one of our Gods!” replied Dray-Gon.

“Yes, so I have gathered from listening to your conversations.”

“If you knew, then why did you ask?”

“What audacity for a man so small! Surely you are afraid just a little?”

“We are more than just a little afraid. Truthfully, it is very terrifying to be in the presence of a God. But we came for this purpose, so we will not cower and act timid. Nor will we be awed because you are so mammoth.” A terrible, ear-battering noise began—and was quickly hushed as if the God knew it hurt their ears.

“Thank you, Lord God. You have a terrible earrending voice, so please don’t laugh again, or we will all be deafened and unable to hear your reply to our question.”

“I will endeavor to keep my humor under control,” promised the voice of the God.

“Thank you, Lord God. We do not wish to appear audacious, but since we have never been in the presence of a God before, we are not well versed in the protocol of such lordly proportions,” Dray-Gon continued, “and in all honesty, we are tired and hungry, and in need of water, and your floor makes for very uncomfortable sleeping. Yet we will endure all

of this, since we are accustomed to discomforts, if you will but answer our question.”

“It must be a very important question.”

“Indeed! For us, it is the most important question of our time, and we have traveled far to hear your answer. Of course, now that we are here, and we look around, and hear that you see us as only bugs, you will no doubt think our question a triviality. But, Lord God, trivial or not to you, try to see us as men, and our most ancient ancestors have reported from the very beginning that we are built in your image.”

“Ah, that suggests that they have seen me.”

“So our tale tellers have said; long ago, our ancestors saw two Gods.”

“How long ago?” asked the God, in a rather sad voice.

“Long, long, long ago, older than the hills, when we were but plants growing in the ground, it was reported by some that two giants walked on our earth, and made the Green Mountain their home.”

Behind the transparent wall came a long, extenuated silence. Then the booming voice spoke again:

“Soon you will be fed, and I will supply you with comforts, though what I have here will be outsize for any of you—but ask me first this most momentous question that put your feet on such a courageous journey.”

It was then that Dray-Gon spilled out the story of Bari-Bar, and how it died, and how all of El Dorraine was on the verge of rebellion and war—if the fault for the death of Bari-Bar couldn’t be found. Behind the thick wall of obscurity, the God listened to Dray-Gon’s well-told tale of Bari-Bar, and when he had finished speaking, he asked many questions. At length, he extracted from Dray-Gon the entire history of El Sod-a-Por, and how it changed into El Dorraine. Raykin, who had listened very carefully to both the questions and the answers, growing braver, and tired simultaneously, could not help but interrupt:

“Excuse me, Lord God, or sire, or whichever you prefer as title—but how is it that you ask so many questions? As a God, certainly you must know already the entire history of our ancestry! We came for an answer, and you confuse the issue with questions.”

“Oh, but this is amusing!” said the God, just short of expressing laughter.

“Such impertinence! Such presumption! On such an equal basis you speak to me—your God!” And despite his promise not to laugh and split their ear drums, the space around them thundered with rolling peals of noise that they presumed was laughter. Raykin whispered to Dray-Gon,

“He seems a jolly sort, but I wish his humor would stay under control, my head is splitting!”

“Sssh,” cautioned Dray-Gon.

“Be grateful he hasn’t smashed his fist down on the table like the king does when he’s amused.”

“Tell me, little men, just what do you think of me, now that you are in my home, and heard my voice?”

“That is most difficult to say, Lord God, since we can only hear your voice in great thundering rolls of sound, and our eyes cannot contain your size. Your appearance is beyond our comprehension. But you seem kind. You speak as we do, as a man, only in Godlike size. Being small, we can only speak to you on our lowly level, not your lordly one.”

“And I,” began the God, “have already gained my impression of you: that it is just as impossible for ant-size men to be humble, even in the presence of a god, as it is for lordly size men to be humble in the presence of anyone. Though I myself have never met face-to-face any sort of god, so you are blessed in a way that I have not been. At least not yet. But all this difference in size makes conversation most difficult, for your voices are but tiny pipsqueaks to me. I am now going to eliminate this problem of size, so do not fear anything that may happen.”

Again there were loud, rumbling noises, crashing bangs, and blurred movements, and the racing colored lights went crazy on the wall! They felt themselves being picked up and carried. Whatever contained them was set down. Before them appeared a wall, very thick. Behind its transparency was a huge bright light, growing ever smaller and smaller. Another light was beamed directly on them. As they watched the large light in the thick wall shrink in size, very slowly an image came into focus ... growing ever smaller, until they saw clearly—a figure! This time the voice of the God spoke in the equivalent to their own.

“Well now, little men, we are all of an equal size and sound. This reducing glass has made me as small as you—and the enlarging glass has made you the equal to me from my side of the glass. What now do you

think of your God?” Dray-Gon seriously studied the image in the thick glass.

“You seem to me now, very much a man like us. With the exception that your skin is strangely pale and colorless—and never before have we seen hair the color of night with silver streaks in it, and your eyes are oddly sky blue—but still, all in all, you are very much like us.”

The God laughed again, and this time it was pleasant to hear, and comforting.

“How alike we are in our comparisons. I myself have never seen men with such greenish complexions, and one with bronze. Nor have I seen such splendid heads of red hair before, of so many different shades—or such fine, purple eyes, like amethysts sparkling with life and vitality. I am very impressed, for if I had imagined such complexions, with such eyes and hair, I would have thought the combination gaudy, or garish, but somehow, it is pleasing. Like flowers you are.”

“Like men we are—flowers we were once, but now we walk about, no longer rooted in the ground!”

“You take offense, where I meant none. In your own particular ways, you are very handsome, and most colorful. No wonder you find my coloring pale and without excitement. However, I have seen red hair before.”

“We have, all of us, various shades of red hair and greenish complexions, with the exception of one. The Princess Sharita has hair of another color, and skin of another hue.”

“Oh? I am fascinated. While I sat quietly, tuned in to hear your conversations, I heard mention of this princess many times over. And just what color is her hair, and her skin?”

“Lord God, you will gasp when you see her, she is that beautiful. Her hair is not silver, or not gold, but is something in between, and her complexion is a pale saffron, like rich cream, and perfectly without flaws, and her eyes are inclined to be a bit like yours—violet, on the verge of being blue.”

“Ah, she does indeed sound lovely, and someday I must see this rare hair. Such a complexion as you describe sounds unbelievable. Can it be that you see her with eyes of love?” Dray-Gon felt his face heat with excess blood.

“I love her, yes. But she is not without faults—she has one terrible hot temper that should go with fiery red hair like Raykin’s here. But then again, she can be as cold as ice, and that suits her pale hair very well. She is a very complex woman; she turns you on; she turns you off; you hate her one minute, and love her madly the next. You can look at her and find her so lovely she takes your breath and look at her again and find her beauty so cold it is inhuman—until she smiles.”

A haunted look came to the blue eyes of the God, and sadness sagged his posture.

“Yes, I understand what you mean. I have known a woman such as you describe. The very best kind to know, for you never know what to expect, except you can expect never to be bored.” And suddenly the God smiled, and sadness departed.

“Enough now of small talk, for you are hungry, thirsty, and tired, and no doubt longing to see again this remarkable princess. But before you do, speak to me in all honesty, now that you see me just as I am—do you still believe I am a god?”

“But of course you are!” replied Dray-Gon with enthusiasm.

“Who but a god would live in this high and huge mountain home? Who but a god could pick us up like ants! And who but a god could change the large into small, and the small into large, just by using a wall of glass with lights?”

“Tell me then, Dray-Gon, for I have heard your name spoken—if you swept up one of your ants into your hand, and held above it a magnifying glass, would you then be the God and the ant your subject?”

“If you are suggesting, Lord God, that God is merely relative, and only a matter of size and strength over smallness and weakness, then I would say, yes, I am a god to the ant, and able to let it live, or give it death. But death is an easy thing for any man to give—or even some animals. Only life is the gift of Gods. To you, I am the ant—to me, you are only a god if you are more than size and strength.

“You see, our tale tellers say it was you who came with another God and caused such powerful, funneling winds that we were uprooted from the ground and left weak and dying with our roots exposed. But naturally since I am here, since we are all here, some of us lived as the weak ones died off. We taught ourselves ways to keep alive without rooting ourselves in the ground again, for it was enjoyable to be ambulatory.

“So, it is you, with the other God, whom we credit for making us into men, and not just flowers. Even so, we had to make ourselves have faith that Gods existed at all, and that they were superior beings, better than us. We heaped everything on you, considering you loving, caring, concerned, and giving—the ideal of what we would be. You were our benefactors, our judges, our executioners, our redeemers, our chastisers, and our deliverers. And I have to confess now, your judgments and your chastisements have not always been kind—but just the opposite. Still, we deemed them justified, and right, even when we suffered and died.”

“So,” said the God in a considering, thoughtful way that puckered his dark brows, “if I now reach out and sweep your domed cities into rubble with the flick of my smallest finger, without any thought, or justification, would you still consider me a god and give me the respect and awe required by a god?”

“You could do that, I’m sure, and if you did so thoughtlessly, without justification, it would be because you didn’t realize fully the reason for delivering your justice—but the reason would be there, lying in the rubble, and you would have performed rightly, since you are a god.” The God in the wall of glass smiled and chuckled.

“Dray-Gon, are you sure you are not an escaped refugee from that doomed city of Bari-Bar? Your reasoning impresses me at the same time it leaves me baffled. And I have a story of my own to tell, a long one. But you are all tired and ill at ease. So, I will allow you a period of rest, and time to eat and drink—and that will also give me time to consider an answer for your very weighty problem, to place the blame for such a horrendous deed is in itself a problem for a god.” Dray-Gon stepped forward as the God began to retreat into the thick magnifying glass.

“Please, Lord God, we cannot rest here, or eat, or drink, or listen to your story, without our princess, and the other men who traveled to talk to you, and hear your considered opinion.” The figure in the glass nodded his head—and disappeared.

“This is hardly what I expected,” said Raykin, “but then, nothing ever is. And time means nothing to that God. We stand, we sit, we sleep, and wake up to another day without nourishment!”

“I could eat grass!” declared Arth-Rin.

“So let us sleep, and wait, and perhaps a meal will come, eventually.”

The God's Tale

In the darkness of the night, which was to the God but a flickering dimness lasting momentarily, the God reached out of his high green home and manipulated long mechanical arms and tonglike hands. He lifted, and carried most carefully, a clod of earth on which minute tents were raised, housing the remainder of the expedition from El Dorraine. On her bed, the Princess Sharita never stirred, so smooth was the transition. Dray-Gon awoke to the sound of rilling puhlets, and the braying of the horshets.

He couldn't believe his ears when he had oriented himself to where he was. Oh, that man in the glass was a god all right! He sprang to his feet, and raced to the shimmering tent that raised the royal blue-and-purple emblem of the princess. She was still asleep, half on her side, half on her back, an enticing flow of feminine curves. Dray-Gon stood and silently feasted his eyes, before he sat on her bed, and lightly traced his forefinger over her smooth saffron brow, down over her small exquisite nose, and then over the soft curve of her pink lips.

How sweet, he thought, to have a proportional dream to cling to. Sharita half-wakened, sleepily lifting longlashed eyelids—and so quickly did her eyes widen in disbelief, and then flooded with delighted happiness! She sat up and threw her arms about him, without any reserve, meeting and responding to his hungry, demanding kisses, until they were both breathless and laughing, and both trying to talk at once between kisses, between caresses, and between gasping explanations of where they were, and what had happened, and how much he had missed her, and she had missed him and how exhilarating it was to be together like this—at last!

“And you are bearded again,” she said, stroking gently his face. “Hasn't that God supplied any of you with conveniences?” To think of the size of the God's razor split Dray-Gon's face with a large smile. “And look at me: I am dressed only in my nightgown. Oh, I must hurry and dress, and do my hair.”

“Silly little princess, the God supplied me with you—what I really need—and look about, you are in your own tent, with all our animals outside grazing on grass. You know, he picked up a mile or two of our

earth and set it down inside of his home. On Sharita, now he is a god! That is a god!”

“But look at me—my hair is a tangle, my gown transparent—my father would be shocked and ashamed if the God saw me first like this!” Grinning, Dray-Gon suppressed the words that would say the God might very well appreciate seeing her just the way she was. He said instead:

“All right, I will leave and let you do all those things to ready yourself, and I will start meal preparations, for six of us are starving at least!”

All the young men patiently waited until the princess came flying out of her tent, dressed in her best, wearing her small crown and jewels, and hastily they all sat down to eat and drink, and talk excitedly, not fully believing any of this was really happening. The princess scanned her eyes over them, freshly shaven and bathed, wearing their best uniforms, and felt an overwhelming pride in everyone.

“But we are unbalanced,” complained Ral-Bar.

“There were supposed to be ten from Upper Dorraine, and ten from Lower Dorraine, and see, now there are eleven representing the upperlands.”

“Not really,” calculated Sharita quickly. “While we are here, there are no Uppers and no Loweres, we are all just citizens of El Dorraine.” Then she had hold of Dray-Gon’s hand, her eyes soft as she asked:

“Is there only one God—not two? What does he look like? What happened at Bari-Bar? Why is he so cruel to punish our lands with so many storms? Do I look all right? Is my hairstyle becoming—or should I brush it out long and loose and take off the crown? And why didn’t you make him bring us in much sooner, so we too could hear everything from the beginning?”

“Sharita, you go too fast with so many inquiries. With Gods, you don’t make too many requests, you tread carefully. You look beautiful, as always, and he may be listening this very minute, for he has powers beyond imagination!” The meal over, all hurried out of the tent, and set up the folding chairs in order to be comfortable when listening to the God’s long story, for if he considered it long, it would be for them a tale of many days! Sharita said to Dray-Gon:

“But if you told him of Bari-Bar, why hasn’t he given you an immediate answer? Why does he keep us waiting so long? Why does he have to stop

and consider? Doesn't he know?" The rumbling deep voice of the God was heard chuckling.

"Your lovely princess is uniquely all woman! Can it be, all females, large or small, are cast in the same mold? Tall as a mountain, or small as an ant—they are insistent, impatient, and not to be distracted from a determined goal!"

Before her, Sharita saw the image of the God, hazily shimmering in the thick wall of glass, and slightly unfocused. She squinted her eyes to see him better. He was only a man, like any man. Somehow she was disappointed. She rose to her feet, as did all her young men.

"Good light to you, Lord God," she greeted in the salutation all Dorrainians used, offering the wish for the best the day could bring.

"I don't know of your kind of lordly women—but in our world, we believe that woman is made to balance man. We aim at one goal, while our men would pursue every goal in sight, and all at the same time, if we would let them." She half-turned and threw Dray-Gon a teasing, challenging smile, daring him to deny anything she had just said. But Dray-Gon was too happy to deny anything she would say, at least, not today.

"Princess," began the God, "I will concede your point—men too could all be cast in the same adventuresome goal, and have the need occasionally for some restraint—but only occasionally. And you do have the most remarkable hair—as I watch, it changes color in an iridescent way—quite unbelievable!" Here the God sighed rather wistfully.

"And I do admire you, coming on such an odyssey, to seek the truth, and establish the guilt for the demise of Bari-Bar. But even for a god such as I, it takes time to make a considered opinion. To my way of thinking, since it is done and over, the truth may better stay hidden." Sharita replied:

"I too have thought much on the same subject, for it was hinted to me once by a very evil man that those on the lower borderlands deliberately did something to make all of the citizens of Bari-Bar go crazy and kill each other." She didn't look at Dray-Gon as she said this, but straight into the God's eyes.

"This was done so the people of Lower El Dorraine would rise up against my father, the king, and snatch the throne from under him—and put Dray-Gon's father, Ron Ka, in my father's place." Dray-Gon gasped, turning to stare at her as if she had stabbed him in the back.

“But I don’t believe anything that man said! I believe now that those on the lower borderlands would not condone such a horror—and if such a terrible thing was done, it was done furtively, without the knowledge of Ron Ka or his son. I have traveled a long way with a man I have learned to love and to trust, so if you say to me later on that those of the lowerlands are guilty—I won’t believe it!” Forgetting the presence of the mighty God, Dray-Gon seized the princess by the shoulders and shook her angrily.

“Sharita, if Mark-Kan hinted all those things to you, why didn’t you tell me? Why did you wait until this moment to speak out?” She fell against him, pressing her face against his uniformed chest.

“I didn’t trust you then. I thought you loved someone else. I thought you were only using me to gain power in your own way, through me.” Dray-Gon thrust her away, and stepped backward, his face very pale.

“We will settle this later, princess. Now, as your subject, I concede all power and authority to you, and make you the spokesman.”

“At ease, Dray-Gon,” said the God in a compassionate way, “woman is always contrary, even the most beautiful ones—in fact, they are the most complex, for if you love them for their beauty, they think you don’t appreciate their intelligence. And if you love them for their minds, they think they are not feminine and seductive, and you are unappreciative of their beauty. It is best to find one only moderately pretty and only moderately intelligent—and then you can feel secure in your masculinity.” Sharita stomped her foot!

“What kind of talk is this, coming from a god? You are supposed to be impartial! Keep this up, and I will believe you are only a man after all just a big one, of another size and color!”

“How paradoxical you are, princess!” the God complained in bewilderment.

“What is it you would have me say? You tell me you love Dray-Gon of the lower borderlands, and you don’t believe his people are guilty. Would you have me say your own people of the upperlands are the guilty ones?”

“I will have the truth—whichever way it falls! But the upperlands are not the guilty ones either, for I know them well. They would not have the citizens of Bari-Bar murdered. My own mother is from there!” The God in the glass shook his head as if annoyed by gnats. His tone of voice peculiar as he spoke again;

“In my lowly reasoning, your quest for the truth could have been settled with much less effort. However, since you have traveled so far, and endured so much, I promise to quell your doubts before you leave, after you have told me much more about your historic rise from the depths of dark burrows to your high shimmering cities under glass domes. But first, you must hear my story, and understand just who and what I am. So sit yourselves down, and make yourselves comfortable, and eat and drink when you are thirsty or hungry. But don’t fall asleep. Hear every word, and I will try to speak as rapidly as possible, without going into too much detail.” Thus he began:

“Mine is a story a bit different from yours, so perhaps when I have finished my tale, you will need to decide if I am a god at all—or only an ant of another size and color...” and here the manlike god in the glass smiled kindly and sat himself down, and crossed his legs, and lifted something to his lips. He made a small fire, and put it to the stick in his mouth, and blew out smoke. Oh! A miracle indeed! A god who breathed fire!

“I was born on a large planet,” continued the God, “hundreds of light years away from here, using my calendar, not yours. We had only one sun, and only one moon, and our years were divided into twelve sections, and those sections into smaller sections called weeks and days. Unlike you who are evolved from plants, we believed ourselves evolved from animals we called apes. Our planet was much more favored than your small one. We had everything you have here, only much more, with more variety in the terrain. Our storms were as nothing compared to those you describe. And our deserts were small compared to Bay Sol. And our poles of ice were minor, compared to your icelands.

“We had mountains too—green, brown, red—of earth and rocks. We had oceans, lakes, rivers, ponds, streams, and brooks—but on the surface, not just underground. We had rolling plains of lush grasses and broad flat stretches of farmland, fertile land that would grow anything and everything, and only once in a while did we suffer a really severe storm—nothing comparable to what you suffer. There were clouds in our sky to protect us from the strong ultraviolet rays of our single sun, and an ozone layer to keep us from being burned, and gentle rains to water our lands. Oh, by far, it was a more godly place than you have here.

“We had at one time a society similar to yours, and raised great cities, and buried our dead in pointed buildings so the souls of the dead could

live on forever in comfort. We surpassed the science of your time, and our genius changed our world for the better. Or so we thought.

“In the beginning, there was wilderness all around us, and wild animals, and primitive peoples who waged wars among themselves. We ignored those small primitives, and we the giants made a world that pleased us, ruling over everything and everyone. We were clever, and arrogant, and we felt supreme, like we would always be the conquerors. We used those smaller, more ignorant peoples, and the lands, and the waters, and the animals, and we drained most of the good our world contained.

“But there were some of us more foresighted than others and far wiser, who saw what we were doing, that we were depleting our world. So we tried to restrain the momentum of our scientific rush into the future, but we were as a snowball rushing downhill. We couldn’t stop. So we set our sights on other planets, which we could see and examine through our powerful telescopes. We built ships that would jet out with a monumental force from our world, beyond the gravity that kept our earth in place—and we jumped into the black infinity of space.

“While our universe was searched for other inhabitable worlds, stations were constructed, like small moons to encircle our earth, which kept control over the weather. Those eyes in the sky we also used for dominion over the lesser peoples who would pull us down if they could, and destroy us all. From where I am, at this particular point in time, I can’t say that I blame them. We thought that with so many space stations we could prevent quarrels and quibblings that were constantly breaking out into minor wars. But it was difficult to punish the offender without destroying the innocent—even when we could discover which was which, and that was seldom.

“Our society squandered themselves on the luxuries of self-gratifications of senses and appetites, and while they did, we who flew those ships into space explored farther and farther until we eventually went beyond our own universe, and into another.

“We had a god too, the God of our ancestors, like you. But when we grew powerful, we relegated our God and his powers to the pages of our books, which we forgot to read. We kept ourselves busy feeding our egos, sparing nothing, for we were certain to find a new and better world than the one we were using up. We contaminated our waters, our air, our earth, so that one by one our animal species began to die off. And then our grain wouldn’t grow, and the lesser peoples began to die of starvation, and

finally, even we, the controllers, the giants, the all powerful began to feel the gnawing of hunger.

“Then, as if our God of old was at last repelled, he hurled a giant red planet our way. It came out of nowhere, rushing at us to occupy our place in the universe! We couldn’t believe it! Everyone watched it coming ever closer, turning our oceans red in reflected color, and pulling up the seas so they flowed over the lands, drowning cities! The red planet spun so close to our green world that the top crust of our earth cracked and split open, before it snapped back into place. By then, everything that had been was gone—or most of it. A little remained. Our largest, most important cities had crumbled into dust, and when the earth opened, it swallowed whole countries! Our lands became ocean bottoms, our mountain peaks islands in the sea, and what had been the bottom of the sea became our lands, and lush plains turned into deserts where nothing would grow.

“Now, you might ask at this point, how I know all of this, and am still alive, sitting here talking to you. And I will answer as truthfully as I can. I was one of those pilots sent out into space to search our universe, and all others that I could enter. My mission was to find an inhabitable planet as good as the one we were forced to leave. And not one single planet did I find that could equal the one we had spoiled.

“With me, was a copilot, a black man with black hair, and dark eyes. We had in our world peoples of many different skin colors, and hair of yellow, black, brown, red, gray, white, and varieties in between, though not one hair color was as spectacular as that which the princess grows on her head—nor was there a skin color nearly as beautiful as that saffron shade. But we had beautiful women too, and handsome men and children that we hoped to save.

“My copilot and I were returning from a space exploration when we saw that red planet hurtling straight at our home, spinning directly into the orbit of our earth—where our families lived! We watched, appalled, as that red planet neared our green world—and we saw our atmosphere and blue oceans turn as red as blood. The red planet barely skimmed by without colliding, but that didn’t matter, for the effect of its near passing was utter catastrophe.

“In our spaceship we had to flee or be caught in the magnetism of the red planet’s long, burning wake. We jetted away, carelessly using every bit of energy—not really caring anymore what happened to us.

“So excessive was the power we spent wastefully, we shot right out of our galaxy and into another far beyond any we had yet explored. We had only a little fuel left, so we couldn’t return to our place in space, and had no desire to. Rather than drift on forever in the perpetual blackness of those outer limits, we settled our ship down on the first likely planet we found.

“Our chosen little planet had a dry, crusty surface. And several times we were forced to try different landing spots, for the legs of our ship, when we extended them, would sink into the hollow earth. We left the footprints of our landing attempts all over the surface of this small, arid planet, and our last jetting fuel blackened the land where we tried to find a secure place to rest down. Finally we did set down here, to our relief, and the earth held us, though I think we tilted this world a bit in so doing. It just happened to be your little star that we found.

“And that is my story. Finished. You may ask questions now, and tell me what you think—tell me now if I am an ant of another size and color, the same as you. Or tell me instead that you believe me still your God.” The twenty young people before him sat stunned and silent with the enormity of what they had just heard. They had seen the charred, blackened land with the crater footprints where this green spaceship had tried to land. They had slept many nights in those very black pits. They had crossed over the barren black lands leveled and charcoaled by the fires of that same ship, fires that had destroyed the trees, and turned them into bony skeletons. It occurred to Dray-Gon that this very God, sitting with his legs crossed, and smoking on a small stick, could be responsible for so much of their evil weather and bad luck.

“Before we can decide just what you are—how long ago was it that you landed here?”

“Ah, Dray-Gon, how can I say? I have tried through the years to measure your fleeting years, as compared to my calendar. But I have never quite figured out the schedule. Your days are but fleeting blinks to my eyes, and your nights but a brief shadow. It seems to me out there only grayness. But I can tell you by my calendar that I have been here for six years, plus two months.”

“But that is incredible!” cried Dray-Gon.

“Not possible at all that such a short time has passed! You were here when our very first, most ancient ancestors walked upon the upper and lower borderlands... always your ship was here beyond the Scarlet

Mountains.” The God smiled, and snuffed out the smoking thing he toyed with in his hand, and in his mouth.

“My dear small friend, you are measuring my time by your own standards. Your years are but minutes to me. Your Scarlet Mountains are to me just a pile of rocks.”

“But this is too perplexing, too overwhelming. I cannot relate to so much difference in time and size!”

“No, nor could I,” said the God in a kindly way, “without the aid of my thinking machine, which you may have noticed as flashing colored lights on the wall. However, in order for it to give answers, it has to be fed facts, and the true facts I don’t have to give. However, this machine did serve me well, and also you, for it was the machine that signaled out a slight difference. I would never have heard the slight tappings you made with your hammer. The calculator sees and hears and notes down every little nuance of difference—you little fellows tugged it into awareness, and it sounded an alarm that something was nibbling at one of the ship’s legs. It guided me to the source of irritation, and I reached out and sucked you up with a vacuum, and deposited you beneath a microscope. With my eyes alone, you are as tiny little insects, without much form.

“And while you and your friends were under my microscope, talking and jabbering in tiny pipsqueaks, I recorded your conversations, then fed them into the computer brain, and it translated your words and taught them to me.”

“To be so quick to learn is a godly thing in itself,” said Sharita as she inched her chair closer to Dray-Gon’s and reached for his hand. But he pulled his hand sharply away and refused to look at her.

“But, Lord God, something bothers me still. If our days are but seconds to you, how is it that we can communicate at all? I, and my companions should be old men before you finish a sentence.”

“You are a quick little fellow, for sure, and you are right. To make it simple, I have sublimated my body in a state of dormancy, with the assistance of some very rare drugs and complex machines. I have speeded up my bodily processes, so they are racing now at an even keel with yours. So I too am growing old as I speak. These same drugs and machines were used to accomplish the opposite effect when I and my copilot searched for other worlds, or else we would have gone back to our families so changed no one would recognize us. And what you see on the screen

before you are thought projections of myself, my voice an audio projection.”

“Then you are not really like us at all?” Sharita asked.

“What you see is a faithful reproduction of what I am, and my way of acting. I am, as you have observed before, very much like all of you.” Again the princess spoke up:

“But where is the other God—your copilot?” Now the God’s expression pained, and his voice came sad and melancholy.

“Shortly after we landed here, a sickness overtook my companion, very much like your ‘dim-despairs.’ It saddened him with hopelessness. He was disconsolate when he thought of his wife and children who were dead. He saw nothing here to cheer him, and he grew tired of saying to me the same things and eating each day the same foods and drinking the same liquids. He knew sooner or later our supply would give out. So he gave up, he refused to eat, and in time he weakened into death.

“I buried him out there,” and the image in the glass wall gestured. “I carried him out and dug a grave, and piled upon his grave to mark the spot a giant stack of red rocks. I believe you refer to his grave as your ‘Scarlet Mountains.’”

In appalled horror, Sharita screamed and almost fainted into Dray-Gon’s arms. He held her, looking beyond her head into the eyes of Arth-Rin, and then Raykin. They had crawled through a grave! Through so many twisting, narrow tunnels, like arteries and veins, and had come upon a larva-like maggot! The eaters of men after death! Sharita was sobbing, and he tried to console her, whispering soft little words to steal the horror from what they had done innocently.

“Take me away!” sobbed the princess. “Put me in my tent and on my bed. Let me sleep. Let me forget.”

The God rose to his feet and lifted his hand in a gesture that dismissed them, and he vanished. Dray-Gon lifted and carried the princess back to her tent, and laid her down.

“Don’t go,” she pleaded. “Lie down with me, and hold me in your arms, and help me forget. I don’t want to remember what we did, and where we were. Take the horror away, Dray-Gon.”

After a while they slept. Wrapped in each other’s arms, and they had found a kind of peace in belonging to each other. Sharita awakened and

looked at Dray-Gon asleep at her side and shuddered with the overwhelming complexities of it all. Lying there, she thought back to the crystal palace that was home, and her father and mother waiting there anxiously for her return. In a deluge of homesickness, she wanted them more than she wanted anything else except... Here she turned on her side and softly kissed Dray-Gon's lips. He muttered something sleepily. What she understood as a name, not hers but the servant girl's:

“Ray-Mon.” She got up and went into the tent that served as their kitchen and prepared herself a snack to eat, which she carried out so she could sit in a chair facing the thick wall where the image of the God was now sitting again. Daintily, self-consciously, she ate while he closely watched her without speaking, but his eyes kept meeting with hers, and she saw something wistfully longing in them, something shadowed and hurting. She asked: “You must be very lonely. I wonder how it is you survive, when your friend gave up and died.” He smiled then, which somehow reminded Sharita of her father.

“Princess, I have sat here and asked myself that same question. And yes, I am lonely, very lonely, but for some reason I kept on wanting to live, even if I lived out long, long years by myself. I kept telling myself there is a reason and a purpose for everything that happens in one's life, and I was here for a special purpose, that would be revealed at some point. And of course, now I know what that purpose is. For if I seem as a god to you, every one of you come as a miracle to me.

“In my world that was, there were many beautiful women, and we had legends of great beauties who drove men to madness and wars in order to possess them. I have never believed this kind of divine and perfect beauty existed anywhere, and women like that were but a myth—yet you yourself are of such a beauty that legends are made of. Are there many like you in El Dorraine?”

Now how could she answer a question like that? It had been reported to her always, from those who considered themselves connoisseurs of beauty, that she was uniquely one of a kind, a different and new kind of species.

“I don't know. I have not seen all the women in El Dorraine, though it has been said I am the only one colored as I am—just as Dray-Gon is the only one colored as he is. His skin is bronze, with hair so deeply red, it is almost as dark as yours. My great-grandfather was of a different sort too. But is one flower in a garden more beautiful than the others?” The

God sat silent, thinking about that as he looked her over from head to toe, and to himself he thought, yes, in some gardens there grew only one rose.

“You do not look happy, princess, though but a while ago, I saw you and your captain, Dray-Gon, look at each other with eyes of love.”

“Love is like a garden too: there are always a few thorns there,” said Sharita, with eyes dark and troubled.

“Sometimes lovers play too many games and unnecessarily complicate things. And then too I am in very serious trouble. Awhile back, I caused a man’s death—and when I looked at him dead and bleeding, I was glad he was dead. When I go back to my father’s council room, I will have to tell of that, and it is our first and most important law, that we never kill another person, even in self-defense. And the man who died didn’t have any weapon but his hands and his body, and I had a knife that he tripped and fell on. But even so, I was the instrument of his death, and our laws are very strict.”

“But you are the king’s daughter—his only child, so you have said. The law will pass lightly over you.” Sharita shook her head.

“No. I will be judged just as any other. My father would lean over backward to see that justice is impartial.”

“And if found guilty, what would be your punishment?” asked the God, leaning forward and looking at her with intense concern. Sharita turned her eyes away, thinking of the punishment.

“We don’t take a life for a life. I would be banished to live outside of the cities, in the wildlands, with the other criminals. And those men have turned to animals who steal women from the cities when they can, and use them brutally. To live out there, and to be used in such ways, I would prefer to be dead.” The God rose to his feet.

“No! Tell the men in the council room that I will tear down their cities if they do such to you!” The princess rose to her feet as well, and walked very close to the wall of glass, and tried to peer at the God more closely. On his side, he saw her grow larger and larger—until she seemed even larger than himself. She raised her arms and put both her palms flat on the glass as if she would touch him. A faint whisper of a smile flickered on her face.

“No, I won’t tell them that, for the people would turn against my father, and would hate him. And for another reason, I won’t use you to back me up.”

“Why not?” the God asked angrily.

“Let us say that fate placed me here just to save you from such dire chastisement for an accidental murder!” The princess looked at the image in the glass with very soft eyes.

“You are not a god but in size. You are only a man from another world. I can see it in your eyes as you look at me. But I won’t tell the others; when we go back, I will swear you are God!” Taken aback in surprise, the God almost laughed.

“But little princess, you have come here for an answer. Are you expecting me, only a man, to give you the answer to a riddle only a god could solve?” She looked him over, as observantly as he had looked her over, and said: “I think you are a kind and very wise man, like our Es-Trall; somehow you will come up with just the right answer to save us all.”

Farewell to Green Mountain

For many days the delegation of twenty visited with the God. He talked and they listened; they questioned and he answered. They asked as many questions as they had. One day he called them all together and said he had solved the doubt about the death of Bari-Bar. Held spellbound, they listened as he expounded his theory that left them breathless with wonder. Oh, such a wise man he was indeed! Truly a god, so that even the princess bowed her head and went down on her knees for giving to them such a perfect solution.

“I am sorry I doubted you,” she said most humbly. “You are truly a god to have such wisdom. We would never have thought of that!”

But he was one contrary God! Completely unsatisfied to have them believe he was more than just a man of another size and color and from another world. Nothing he said would convince them otherwise now. He was far too wise to be just a man, and if he tried to deny his lordliness, they allowed for this, for even Gods would have their foibles and inconsistencies!

“But Gods are immortal!” thundered out the God in his most terrible and mighty voice, not reduced in scale so it wouldn’t deafen them. “I will lay me down and die one day... and you will see, I was but a man after all!”

So they prepared to leave, and grievously sorry, the God sat and watched them fold their shimmering tents, and pack their supplies on horshetback, and round up the puhlets, and he pleaded with them to return again, for the years were long and lonely for him here all alone. His blue eyes met sadly with the violet, almost blue eyes of the princess.

“Most especially I would see you again, Sharita, and when you have children, bring them along, for I am sure one day you will make an easy road to my home.” Then he added, in a less serious tone, “Now, I myself have one last question, for on the balance scales of our conversations, I am heavily weighted on the answering side. Explain to me how it is, that in your entire world of red-haired people with greenish skins, there is only one little person with skin of saffron cream and hair not silver or gold, but in between, hair that glistens almost opalescent.”

“Lord God,” said Sharita, “I will speak, since that is a very personal question about me, and the others would be embarrassed to answer.” She could see their flushed faces. “This is a question that has perplexed our people since I was born, for they would have me be the same as all others—even Dray-Gon is less different than I am.” She smiled at her captain, and held tight to his hand as she continued.

“Of course, there is no real answer, for we are for certain only human, whereas you are in doubt about yourself. Our most wise man, Es-Trall, has a hypothesis. And since we have no other explanation, our educators consider it, at least those who make an attempt to look over and beyond the ruts of familiarity.

“Es-Trall believes that all life forms are constantly changing and evolving, striving always toward the ultimate perfection, which, he also says will never be reached in all probability because everything else is also changing, creating new requirements that demand new and different adaptations. So it is, mankind is forever crossing over a stream, stepping from stone to stone, striving always to reach the other side where perfection lies. Those who will not step forward and change fall off into the stream, and are washed away in the river of time and are forgotten.

“But the changes are too slight in ten generations to even be noticed, except for now and then when a ‘stone’ is placed out of order in the proper succession of things. And that is why I am different, and Dray-Gon is somewhat different, and my great-grandfather, Far-Awn was different. We are heraldings of the future generations to come. Someday, Es-Trall reasons, all the peoples of El Dorraine will be changed into what I am now or what Dray-Gon is now, or what Far-Awn was, for there are many roads and stones to reach the other side.

“There are many people who aren’t happy with his theory. It quakes their egos to think they have not gained the other side of the stream, and there is need in them for improvement. Also, they are, as I am, disquieted by the enormity of striving always for an unreachable quest.” The God stood very quiet, regarding her, as if deeply pondering.

Dray-Gon spoke then. “There are differences in our princess of which she has not spoken, for sometimes she can be a little modest.” Here he threw Sharita a teasing look.

“There are other things about her that are different besides her beautiful coloring: she has a more defined strength of character. For instance, our princess was the only one of us able to resist the depressions

of the ‘dim-despairs,’ and it was she who woke us all up and saved our lives.”

“Who is this wise man of yours?—this most profound, ponderous thinker?” questioned the God.

“I would like to meet and talk with him, for I am very impressed with his theory.”

“No one knows, Lord God, just who he is,” answered Sharita. “He showed up one day, and spoke in private to my father ... and my father gave him a tower in the palace as his very own to use as his laboratory. His pinnacle is directly across from mine, and I see him from a distance, and he is so very, very old, he could never make the journey here, though he has said to my father that he would die happy if he could.”

“That is too bad,” said the God, “for I might die happy myself to talk with such a wise man.” The nineteen young men mounted their horseshets, and the princess was already atop hers. Already the God was lonely, missing them before their departure.

“Stay a moment longer,” he pleaded, “and tell me, princess, how it feels to be a ‘stepping stone’ pointing the way to the future.” Sharita looked his way, feeling his need to have them stay, though he had not asked this of them, and she smiled, wishing he could come out from behind the glass and she could really see and touch him.

“I used to think it was a very lonely point of isolation and difference, so I kept mostly to my own rooms, so people would not look on me, and comment on my strangeness. Now I have changed my mind. There are goals that can be reached, and happiness that can be enjoyed, even with the rushing waters of time and change all around.”

No one there doubted at all what she meant, when she looked at Dray-Gon, who rode next to her.

“Good-bye, Lord God,” they all called out, as the God helped them out of his high, tall home, and lifted them over the Scarlet Mountains, so they would not this time have to travel through the grave of his friend, the copilot.

Weeks later, they reached the six waiting wagons, and reality was waiting there too. Reality that Sharita would have to face up to: Her wagon was covered with dried blood from Mark-Kan’s body.

“We must leave it so,” Dray-Gon said gravely. “It is evidence that the judges will have to see.”

And here he turned and gripped Sharita’s shoulders, and delved deep in her eyes with his.

“And when we reach home, you will not say one word about your involvement in Mark-Kan’s death. I will say I fought with him in an argument over you—and Mark-Kan was accidentally killed.”

He turned then and looked back at the other men, who stood and listened. “Who here will tell the truth—will you, or will you not stand behind me and protect the princess?”

“We all will!” they cried out in unison. “We will not have the princess given over to the wildlands and the outlaws who live there!”

“So be it!” declared Dray-Gon.

“No! I won’t have it that way,” Sharita cried, “if you tell that version of Mark-Kan’s death, they will banish you to the wildlands.” He laughed shortly.

“Sharita, much better it be I out there than you.”

“No,” she said just as firmly grave as he. “I will tell the truth, exactly as it happened, and if I am banished, I will make my way, if possible, back to where the God lives, and stay with him.” Again Dray-Gon laughed, short and hard, and utterly cynical and bitter.

“Fool girl! Alone you could never make it! The outlaws would gain news of your banishment, and be waiting for you beyond the walls. They would fall on you like a pack of warfars. You will keep your mouth shut, and let me have this my way!”

“And then you will be killed, for they hate you now, Dray-Gon, for using the laser beams and causing the avalanche that killed so many of them.”

“I will survive. I will find a way to live without you.” Sharita gave him a long, hard look.

“So, perhaps that is the way you would choose to live: the savage, wild life of a barbarian, an outlaw. Perhaps you will be their leader, and perhaps you will take the girl Ray-Mon with you!” His eyes turned hard.

“Perhaps I will! At least she won’t quibble and argue with me for the rest of my life—the way you would!”

“That is what you want, isn’t it?” Sharita spat out. “A milksop who always agrees with you, and says, yes, yes, yes, Lord and master! I am your slave!”

“At least she won’t be a spoiled, pampered, royal brat, with an ugly, sharp tongue!”

“Now wait a minute,” said Arth-Rin as the two who had been billing and cooing just a few minutes ago squared off for a real fight. “You are both going at this from the wrong direction. When we are back in the palace, we will tell all in the council room, that Mark-Kan was riding his horshet on one of the black crater rims, when his mount slipped and they both fell over to their deaths.” His pleasant, round face broke into a pleased smile, satisfied with the way he had solved everyone’s problems. He looked at the other men gathered around.

“Isn’t that the way Mark-Kan died?” The men agreed, yes, it was a terrible thing to see Mark-Kan fall to his death. Pale-faced and grim, Sharita faced them all.

“And you will all be telling lies!”

“Lie or not, that will be our story,” stated Dray-Gon, glaring hard at her.

“And who will know the difference?” She whispered then, “The God will. I told him I was directly responsible for Mark-Kan’s death.” The men stared at her, thoroughly shocked.

“Oh, Sharita, how could you be so foolish?” cried out Dray-Gon. “You know the God has requested for another delegation to visit him! And they will learn the truth of Mark-Kan’s death!” When Dray-Gon reached to take her in his arms, Sharita backed off, rage on her face.

“I have stood here and listened to all you men have said—and not once have a one of you mentioned the unfairness of that rule that would banish me to the wildlands! I accidentally killed a man who was trying to rape me, and then turn me over to outlaws who would brutally assault me, and then hold me for ransom! Has any one of you mentioned that? No! Why? Because I am only a woman! Even though I am a princess, of royal blood, I am supposed to submit to any man who forcefully tries to take me, rather than kill him to protect myself!

“There comes a time when old laws are outdated—and that time is here! Ninety-nine percent of my life I have been locked away in a high tower, so no man could get to me, and when I was out of that tower, I was followed about by guards, to see I was protected! I have been a prisoner all my life, so that men can walk around and do as they want, with any woman they want, if they are of that kind of lustful nature! So when we are in that council room, I will tell the truth before all, and if I am banished—so be it! At least I will have struck my blow for the freedom of all women!”

“Sharita, you will lie!” stormed Dray-Gon, his face dark with passion.

“Dray-Gon, I will tell the truth!”

“It is an old, old law, one of our most ancient ones. You cannot take a life, whatever the cause, and Mark-Kan was without a weapon to threaten your life. No one will see it your way,” Dray-Gon concluded grimly.

Very quietly, Sharita queried, “Do you see it my way?”

He stood looking at her, his thoughts racing. He had never questioned that law, just accepted it. If women were used against their will from time to time, it was a black mark against the man, but nothing could equal the sin of taking another’s life. And it was commonly believed by most of the men that in the depths of their secret hearts, most women wanted to be taken brutally, especially those of the common variety—though he realized with a delicately bred girl of Sharita’s heritage, it might be different. He chewed his lower lip thoughtfully, regarding her pale face, and beautiful eyes that glared at him, as if thinking he had taken many a woman against her will, and laughed when he reported his conquests to his friends.

“How many women have you raped, Dray-Gon?” she asked, confirming his speculations.

“None! I have never needed to. The idea of taking a woman by force has never appealed to me.” The princess spun about and scanned her eyes over each and every man there.

“We have come a long way together, and traveled on an equal basis, and most of you have treated me very respectfully, and only one has made furtive, sneaky advances to me while I was asleep. And which one of you that was, I don’t know. I suspect you treated me as well as you did because I am royal, and each of you have requested my hand in marriage, and

attacking me would spoil your chances of my acceptance, for my father will choose for my husband only a man of my choice.

“We have agreed on that a long time ago; unlike other fathers, he will not marry me off just for political reasons to a man I detest. I choose this time to thank you for your respect, and your control over lusts that you would let loose on some other, lesser woman than myself. But when I am banished, exiled out to the wildlands, I will be stripped of royalty and royal protection. I will be as any other woman, at the mercy of any man who is ruthless enough to take her. Think about that—and how you would feel to be a woman so vulnerable—if you can.”

Here she broke, and sobbed before she turned and ran, and hid herself in Dray-Gon’s wagon, which had been turned over to her. She left behind her a group of silent and very reflective young men.

The Return

Every day in the morning, in the afternoon, and just before the last sun downing, the king stood on his daughter's high terrace and looked out over the hills and valleys. He looked to the rounded dome of the Green Mountain. So long they had been gone—an eternity. In his sometimes despairing thoughts he could picture all of them lying somewhere, brown, dry, dead—or else rooted into the ground in the death seeking way of old.

“Oh, Gods of the Mountain,” he prayed, “keep them safe! Let them all return home alive and well!”

He didn't speak special prayers for the one he loved most, for that wouldn't be suitably impartial. He liked it best up here, in her rooms, where he could feel her presence, and sniff the elusive flowering scent that still clung to her belongings. From his busy schedule he took time to feed her little birds, and clean their cages, just as he cared for her other small pets—not trusting servants to give them the loving care he would, the kind of care they were accustomed to. But for him, as kind as he was, the animals were not lavish with their responding warmth and love—not as they were with her. Sharita's pets all drooped a little, missing her, just as he did. All of El Dorraine, Upper and Lower, was tired of waiting.

“Where are our sons?” they cried out in force before his palace. “You sent them out on an impossible quest! An unreasonable journey! They will never return! How much better if we had forgotten and forgiven the horror of Bari-Bar! How we have sacrificed our best young people—and for no purpose! Your majesty, how could you have such bad judgment!”

“Ah, but it is difficult,” Ras-Far complained to Es-Trall when he paid him his daily visit, “to know when right is wrong, and when wrong is right!” Es-Trall paid no heed. He was busy, as always, peering through his telescope, noting down this or that, occupying every second of his days with something he considered of momentous importance.

“Tell me, Es-Trall, what do the stars say? Tell me when they will return.” For that was all Ras-Far was really interested in. Then Es-Trall would clasp his gnarled hands together, in his own private expression for a subject so to his liking—the topic of stars—and their meaning. An overwhelming explanation of the complexities of the juxtapositions of this

star, upon that of another star, would begin, and there were at least two dozen interpretations, enough to set the king's head awl. Truly, it was said, if one threw a splinter to Es-Trall, he would throw back a tree! And just you try and find that splinter again!

"They are on their way back. The stars say so," said Es-Trall, seeing the king's impatience.

"They have been to the Green Mountain and are coming home. That is all I can say."

"Are they alive—everyone?" asked the king fearfully. Es-Trall grew very pensive, screwing his prunewrinkled face into a small tight ball.

"The stars say one is dead ... one human, two animals."

"Oh, dear Gods! is the human male or female?"

"The stars don't speak so minutely—male or female is of no difference to them."

"Hah!" Ras-Far slammed down his hand hard on the table piled high with rolled-up charts of the heavenly bodies.

"You are no good to me whatsoever, Es-Trall, if you cannot read the charts more accurately! Look again—see if one of the dead is female!"

"'Tis better not to know so much," quavered Es-Trall in a tired voice, for the king kept him busy night and day, scouring for details written in the sky. But a king was a king, even for a very special person, such as the wisest man in all El Dorraine, so Es-Trall turned again to the telescope, and squinted his best eye, and stared out into space. His was not an exact science, it was a combination of intuition and calculated knowledge, not only of the stars, but what he knew of human nature.

"I see a small bit of powdery dust. It could mean one of the dead is female, but then again, it might not." The king would grind his fist right through the table! He squinted both his eyes in exasperation.

"What color is the dust you just now see?" Es-Trall squinted too, and peered ever closer.

"It appears to be of many colors."

Oh! That was very bad to hear. Bowed down by the weight of what might be, the king descended the spiraling steep stairs, and returned to his office, and began the daily routine. And all the days passed so slowly dull,

so much the same, as if all life hung and waited for a reason to go on. Ras-Far had lost enthusiasm for meals, for official meetings, for making speeches, for launching new sky-flitters, for looking at his wife, for opening letters, for signing papers, even for bathing and combing his hair.

He read a list of long-winded requests from the lower borderlands and heavily yawned. The heavy ache in the center of his chest was turning to stone, so that it would stay there always if she didn't return. Three wives a man was allowed, and three children only. A wife for the days of his youth, a wife for the middle years, a wife for old age. La Bara was his wife of old age, and Sharita his last daughter to be born of that wife. A son he would never have, except through Sharita and it could be her dust in the sky. In the old days, a man had as many wives as died young and forced him into taking another. A man could make as many children as he was capable of, and each child was needed desperately. In those days, as in these, three times as many girls were born as boys: expendable girls.

Lucky had been Baka to have twelve sons and only one daughter. And I have produced through three wives, three girls, thought Ras-Far, but not with bitterness. To him, Sharita was both son and daughter, friend and companion, child and peer, giving to him everything that soothed his heart, and gave him peace. Strange too, that she should come from La Bara, who could irritate him beyond belief at times and other times, be so sweet and yielding that she was a delight.

The wife of his youth had never answered him back, meek and docile, pretty and almost speechless—and that too could be dull. His middleyears wife he had loved in a desperate way ... for at that time he had feared growing old and impotent, resentful he had yet another daughter from her. He thought of Sharita, who said she would have a man who would keep her as his wife all the days of his life.

“The rules and laws of El Dorraine are so unjust to women, Father. If a man can have three wives, one at a time, then why not let each woman have three husbands?” How unheard of! Ridiculous for her to say such a thing! It wouldn't balance out that way: too many women, not enough men. And women were notorious for not needing men as much as they were needed by men. Indeed, his daughter could come up with uncommon thoughts. A commotion outside of his office interrupted his thoughts. La Bara burst into his office, terribly excited! Her round, greenish face lit up, so her purple eyes flashed.

“Ras-Far, you must come with me to the tower! Es-Trall has spotted something moving on the wildplains!”

“Bay Sol?” he asked, his heart leaping upward and beginning to race.

“What other do we care about?” she asked. And jumping to his feet, scattering official papers to the floor, the king raced after his wife’s already disappearing figure. He ran, in an undignified, non majestic way, after his wife, and soon overtook her and sped on ahead, reaching the secret staircase, and bounding up the stairs three at a time. Crouched in a chair, Es-Trall was napping, totally unconcerned. His many notes littered a floor that was never anything but covered with papers. The king went directly to the view-spotter. He stooped to put his eye to it, for he was much taller than Es-Trall, and the telescope was already directed correctly at Bay Sol. He fiddled with the lens while the queen nudged him impatiently.

“Hurry, dear. I can’t wait to know! Look and see. Is it them? Is our daughter coming home at last?” She couldn’t wait! What an understatement! Carefully he focused in, and slowly scanned the distant plains of Bay Sol. The surrounding hills kept him from having a broad scope, but there was a small file of moving dots! He fiddled again with the lens, and managed to bring the dark dots into closer and larger perspective.

“La Bara,” he said excitedly, “I am sure it is them! I can see the wagons, and the men on horshetback!” And valiantly he tried to count the riders, but it wasn’t possible. Considerately, Ras-Far turned the lens over to his wife, so she too could see.

“Oh, my darling, my precious daughter, she is coming home! Ras-Far, I have been so frightened, so afraid for her, so scared we would never see her again! You have had three children, but I have had only one, and I love her so much, and I thought if she died, I would never forgive you for letting her go away on such a ridiculous trip! A girl of Sharita’s breeding, alone with twenty young men? What do you think they have done to her all these many months?”

How many times the king had wondered about the same thing, though he replied easily, confidently, “They are all responsible, respectable young men from the very best families, and I thoroughly instructed them on how they were to treat our daughter. Plus, I commissioned Dray-Gon to take particular, personal care of her.”

“Him?” flared La Bara, again shocked by his choice. “Why not Raykin? Why did you choose a man from the lower borderlands, and not one of our own?” The king looked very stern.

“Now listen to me, La Bara. You are a woman and no judge of men. I happen to be a very good judge of men—you can’t deny that! I have the facility to look right through a false facade and almost read minds—and Dray-Gon sincerely loves Sharita. Besides, he is rough, and accustomed to living in a primitive way, and whether you know it or not, our daughter is greatly attracted to Dray-Gon.”

The king’s eyes sparkled with amusement, for he had some hidden knowledge that he hadn’t revealed to his wife. Minutes later, all of El Dorraine was alerted. Their children were coming home! From out of the provinces came all the parents, rushing through the ribboned highways to Far-Awndra. Following the parents came aunts and uncles, grandparents and cousins, neighbors and friends, plus all those others who had to be in the capital city for the rousing welcoming ceremony! It became necessary for the king to send out a warning, flashed over the news-reflectors.

“Every soul in El Dorraine must not try to crowd under the single dome of Far-Awndra! There is not room for any more! Stay at home and watch the celebration in the comfort of your homes, or else you will end up sleeping in the parks!”

Day by day, the dark moving spots on the desert grew larger and larger. Sometimes the roll of the land would hide them from view for long periods of time, and then they would reappear, much closer than before. The king sent soldier outriders to protect the returning delegation from being attacked by the outlaws, as they had been attacked when they left, for Es-Trall had reported that to the king, shocking him.

“You mean, those men I banished to live outside the domes would attack a cavalcade including my daughter—after I saved their lives?—when they were murderers? Are there some who never learn?”

The slow progress of the returning caravan gave time to plan and prepare for the greatest celebration El Dorraine had ever known. Every banner, flag, ribbon, and streamer was pulled from closets and cupboards and draped across the avenues. The pots boiled and the ovens baked, for nothing was too good, or too much trouble, to prepare for the seekers for truth and justice: their own brave, wonderful young people!

The great arching doors of Far-Awndra were swung open, and crowds ran out onto the hot unshielded area, many for the first time in their lives. They ran in competition to see who would reach the returning cavalcade first. They stopped running when they saw the first of the returning riders, carrying a long pole with the purple-and-blue flag emblazoned with gold for the house of Far-Awn, and waving next to it was another flag, green for the Gods of the Mountain! Their pre-arranged signal: the green banner of accomplishment!

They had been to the Mountain and talked to the Gods, and had lived to tell the incredible tale! The impossible quest had been fulfilled—it was beyond belief. It was more than they had expected. Just as happy they would have been to have them home again only, alive and well. Stunned with awe, they were at first silent. Then someone less timorous cheered. Then all were cheering, shouting, throwing their hats in the air! The people counted the mounted riders as they straggled in, hot and tired-looking, their uniforms faded and torn and dirty, and the men were unshaven, though smiling and happy-looking. The men were counted two or three times by everyone. One was missing. This sobered them.

They counted the wagons... six... all there. The animals were counted. One horshet missing, and one puhlet. Three dead. Three were not returning. Saddened, the cheering ended. They were idealists. They would have it all so perfect. Not easily did they let one life dim into eternal darkness without a share of mournful respect and regret. A mother screamed when she saw it was her son that was missing. A father caught her sagging form in his arms and tried to comfort her. Sharita heard the scream, and she turned her head to see Mark-Kan's parents and shivered inside even as tears rose to her eyes. Oh, it wasn't going to be easy to explain. It was going to be an ordeal worse than facing that huge God. Someone rode up close to her mount and whispered,

“Brace up, princess ... and consider again telling a lie. Old ways of thinking are not easily put aside for new causes. No one will know. All the men have sworn to back up the story of Mark-Kan falling into a black cavern, and that will explain the loss of the horshet too.” Unknown to the princess, her wagon had been scrubbed clean. How nice to do as he wanted. How simple to just lie. Her eyes met with Dray-Gon's.

“Will you meet again with Ray-Mon?” she asked quietly.

“By the Gods, Sharita,” Dray-Gon hissed, while he kept a smile attached to his face, “you are the most exasperating woman! At a time like this, what difference does that make?”

“I saw your eyes scan the crowd, as if you were looking for her.” Something like a growl rumbled in Dray-Gon’s throat.

“Sharita, one of your most annoying traits is your effort to finger your way through a man’s mind, and seek out every hidden little corner. There is a part of me that belongs to myself alone!”

Sharita kept her eyes straight ahead, though she too smiled and bowed her head to the right, to the left when someone greeted her. She thought back to the night when she and Dray-Gon had been most carried away in their love for each other, and yet he had whispered Ray-Mon’s name in his sleep. Ras-Far had eyes only for his daughter, as dirty, tired, and rumpled-looking as the other travelers, and he had never loved her more. He watched as the son of Ron Ka assisted Sharita down from her horshet, and heard the crowd sigh and then cheer, for they were romantics as well as idealists.

From this simple act, he knew his daughter had changed, for never before had she allowed anyone to aid her in the slightest way. And in what other ways had she changed? he wondered, as his heart gladdened. Straight to him, Sharita ran; without dignity or poise she flung herself into her father’s waiting arms, and he was at last a whole man again. The hollow ache in Ras-Far’s chest filled with joy overflowing. Then the princess was embracing her mother ... and even the minister, Gar-Rab, who became a study of ruffled and flustered expressions that finally ended in tears trickling from his eyes. Then she came back to him, and stood with her arms about her mother and her father, and watched as every son in blue hurried to his own delegation of waiting relatives and friends. Sharita tried not to look at Mark-Kan’s parents, at his brother and sister, his uncles, aunts, and grandparents who only stood forlorn and lost in a crowd of so many that were happy.

The exhausted travelers were given time to rest, bathe, refresh themselves from the dust and grime of Bay Sol; then all came down into the great oval council rotunda, and sat with the leaders of twenty provinces, with the king and all his ministers. In the tiered balconies that rimmed the oval room, the families and close friends of the returned delegation to the Gods also sat and waited to hear of their adventures. Breathlessly waited, all very much aware that this was a historic day that

would be written about for years and years to come. No one raised a voice to dispute the right of Ron Ka's son when he assumed to speak for the other travelers.

He had been the captain... he had led them to the Gods, and back again. And oh, it was one strange and fascinating story he told. They had not in their minds pictured what or who a god was. The compounding complexities of that fantasizing had always left them floundering helplessly, without even an image in mind. Now, they were forced to shift and rearrange their nebulous meanderings into a more defined quintessence. The Green Mountain—not a mountain at all!—but a metallic ship of space, from another, and greater, world than their own!

Not once had they looked up at the twinkling, glittering stars and even considered there could be other living life on them. Their yesterdays had been too occupied with scuttling on the ground like bugs searching for a bite to eat, or looking for a hole to hide in. During the days of building and reshaping their lives inside the transparent domes, not once had they expanded their thinking to look outward into the dark regions of outer space—that abstraction had eluded them. Not even Es-Trall had expressed belief in other peoples, other life upon the stars. All alone they had hitherto believed themselves in the competition against the elements for survival. Oh, yes, truly, this was a wondrous, exciting road without limits for dreams to travel upon! With difficulty, those in the council room brought their thoughts back to the long table. These were steady men, who took one step at a time, or so they considered themselves.

“Tell us, Dray-Gon, son of Ron Ka, in whose hands did the God place the guilt for the death of Bari-Bar?” Dray-Gon who was standing, looked down at Sharita, sitting close, and he placed his hand over hers lying on the table, and squeezed her fingers tight. Successfully he had come through explaining Mark-Kan's death, now he must successfully tell this other difficult part of their narrative.

“He was not a God the like of which I expected, absolute and all-knowing, as I had presumed he would be. He is like us, considering when he makes a decision. He made it very clear that he did not and could not know of Bari-Bar, just as he knew nothing of all El Dorraine, or any of us, until we came and tapped on that towering, silver leg of his green ship.

He, of his enormous size, knew nothing of our small, minute existence.” Some people in the room paled on hearing that, so Dray-Gon quickly said, “But didn't we always suspect that possibly the Gods didn't

see us? They never responded to our prayers or our pleas. Still we kept on believing, for we knew truthfully in our hearts they were there—and they were—two at one time, now only one. And he is a God of such a size it can't be comprehended, so his wisdom is of that proportional size also. He has seen things we have never thought or dreamed of. He pictured his world for us—and what a size it must have been! It still is, somewhere.

“They had so many problems on his gigantic green and blue world that we don't have,” Dray-Gon continued. “We have the pufars, a blessing that would have saved them from depleting their world of natural resources in order to feed and care for themselves. They expended everything, without thought of repletion, and wallowed in ways of self-gratification in efforts to satisfy every sense and every appetite. They made their mistakes and paid dearly for them. Now, the God in his wisdom of past experience, says we, too, are making our mistakes, and will pay dearly for them as well.”

Even the king pulled in his breath on hearing this. But no one spoke, just continued to listen attentively as Dray-Gon continued:

“Our God says that man was not meant to live beneath a bowl, even a transparent one that allows the lights of our suns to penetrate. He says we have constructed havens of safety for ourselves, and forgotten the needs of the wildlands. It is his theory that the people of Bari-Bar developed their peculiar trait of arguing and quibbling over trivialities out of idleness and boredom, and in this way added needed excitement to their lives. But incessant arguing causes hidden resentments and hostilities that must at some time surface. On that tragic night, the God says, something triggered all that latent anger, smothered hostilities, and resentments—and they ran forth into the night and slaughtered themselves in a frenzy of madness.

“That most wise God, who would insist he is only a man of another size and color, says that in each of us, there is a bit of animal, a touch of the warfar that seeks to kill and destroy, unless we keep our minds always on high ideals. He said the pufars were sent as a gift to set us free—instead we used them to build cages for ourselves. Then we walked into our cages and told ourselves we were happy to be so imprisoned. We have managed to keep the bad weather out—and in so doing, have locked ourselves in! He believes we have made a huge mistake to sit back and be satisfied with our lives under our pretty protective domes, while we look at our desolate, barren lands and do nothing to save or change them. We took a gift offered by Bay Gar and Bay Sol—and we have given to them nothing in

return! So, the God says, we are all guilty of the death of Bari-Bar—every one of us who is so shortsighted, has blood upon his or her hands.”

Very much taken aback, the men at the long table sat silent, stunned and surprised. Long minutes of contemplation passed before someone said, “Then it is Upper Dorraine’s fault, for they built the first domes—they are responsible more so than Lower Dorraine!” This was immediately, hotly rebuffed.

“But for we Uppers, the pufar would never have been discovered, and we would all be dead—think of that!” In a commanding gesture, similar to that used by the king, Dray-Gon raised his hand for silence.

“We are dealing now with the present, with today, not with the past—we cannot change that. The domes were constructed at a time when we needed them. In the beginning, it was not wrong to do—it is only that we have lived too long in them, and have been too satisfied and cozy within our limited, enclosed horizons. We failed to see beyond our own immediate needs, to the needs of our lands—our wildlands, our bays.”

How strange for the God to speak so, some thought. What had the land ever done for them but hold them back and woe them down with neverending work and grief. But a god was a god, even if he was but a giant man from another world, so they would think about it. It was at this point, in the lull of heavy pondering, that the Princess Sharita rose to her feet. She disregarded Dray-Gon’s whispers that told her to sit down and keep her mouth shut, everything was going well, she didn’t have to risk spoiling everything. Regally straight-backed, the princess commanded everyone’s attention as she addressed her father:

“Your majesty, I would speak now on another subject that has been passed over lightly.”

The king narrowed his eyes, seeing Dray-Gon’s agitation, so he quietly asked, “Is it important, and relevant to the subject at hand?”

“Only if you consider your wife, daughter, mother, sisters, and all other women important.”

Dray-Gon leaned forward and whispered quickly to the king, “Do not allow her to speak!—or you will be as sorry as I!”

In a quandary, the king inclined his head and quietly considered. Then he addressed Sharita: “Tomorrow we will meet again in this council room, all those who are here today, and we will give you the floor so you may

speak out on this important and relevant matter that concerns all the women of El Dorraine.”

“Thank you, Father.”

Ron Ka immediately rose to his feet and objected. “Your majesty, it is against all protocol for a woman to speak in this council room!” Ras-Far half-smiled.

“Is that a rule, Ron Ka? If so, it will be broken tomorrow for the first time. Think ahead to the days when my daughter will be your queen, and she will sit in the chair I now occupy—and I assure you, she will speak out then, just as she will have her turn tomorrow.”

The king stood, as did everyone else instantly, for it was the worst possible taste and breach of etiquette to remain seated while royalty stood. The princess rushed from the room, causing Dray-Gon to hurry after, but she was more familiar with the palace than he, and disappeared before he could break through the crowd that surrounded him and hindered his progress.

In Defense of the Princess

The populace of El Dorraine went to bed that night with new thoughts reeling in their minds and awakened them in the morning, still demanding. It seemed that all the nebulous, mythological nuances that had been threading their minds were actually the glitterings of a light shining on genuine reality! All the time it had been there, a switch, a light, just waiting for their fumbling, hesitating, fearful hands to flick it on and light up the way to their future destiny! Since their first recollections, they had believed that Gods lived on that distant Green Mountain—and there were—it had been proven. Once there had been two Gods, now only one, but he was real, tangible, not just a dream of religious zealots!

Of course they had in their primitive, ignorant despairs named him responsible for their many woes, for their blustering storms, for the main source of all their sorrows, and their sometimes, but too brief, joys. The Gods had been responsible! Even when the Gods were not aware of what they were doing, to those they didn't know existed, they had still been responsible! The Gods had footprinted their land, and charcoaled it black with their spaceship, then blown their planted ancestors up by the roots, after which they developed legs! Oh, the marvel of it all! It was strange, though, this truth come so newly on.

While they had speculated, questioned, doubted, groveling in fear, truth had been waiting. They were minute little nothings situated on a fleck of dry dust spinning in the black enormity of infinite space—but they had at last found the truth. They had a God of their own! So now they could be strong and daring, whereas they had been weak and fearful. No quest would ever be too much for them to risk again. But on his bed, in the night, Dray-Gon lay restless, sleepless, tossing from side to side, his head filled with suspicion, with fears of another, less abstract kind.

He had found a God and was about to lose the love of his life! Oh, that girl! That stubborn, hardheaded, tenacious, determined slip of a girl, who could drive him up the wall with her willful, rebellious ways. A witch she was! A sorceress who gave him no peace. She would speak the truth and spoil everything! And so needlessly, for he had explained Mark-Kan's death in a way that everyone accepted without doubt or question—and all for nothing! There were those from the lower borderlands, his father

included, who would feel no mercy, who would close their minds to what fate awaited a mere girl when she was exiled beyond the city domes, left in the open for the outlaws to use as they would.

He slammed his fist hard into the pillow, so hard it burst open, and quacket feathers flew everywhere. Springing from his bed, he pulled on a robe, and on bare feet he stole out of his room and down the long quiet corridors of the sleeping palace. He went cautiously, avoiding all the sentries who would question why he rambled about when he should be asleep. Desperately he flipped through his pages of memories, trying to recall the complex, bewildering path that would lead him to the hidden door that would take him up to Sharita's apartment. Though he looked long and thoroughly, always he ended up in the very hall from which he had started. He swore! Damn this place that shielded her so well!

Deep in despair, fearing the consequences of what tomorrow would bring, and aching to hold Sharita in his arms, Dray-Gon sought to thought-wave his warning to Sharita, knowing that those closely knit often could transfer words in this mysterious way. Eventually he fell asleep, but he resolved a plan that would save Sharita, despite what she confessed. So they met once more, all the officials, all the important dignitaries and noblemen, with their families seated above in the tiered balconies of the grand oval council room.

And very proudly the king ushered in his beautiful daughter, splendidly gowned in blue trimmed with fine lacings of silver and gold, and on her magnificent hair she wore the tiniest of crowns. The queen, seated upon the first balcony, surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting, beamed with a pride equal to her husband's. She was applauded after her father's introduction, and stood very solemnly looking over the many faces at the council table, though she refused to let her eyes meet with those who challenged her to stop, think, consider. She heard him whisper, "Please, Sharita, think of our future together."

Even to that she closed her mind. She would have her say, regardless of what happened next. With great difficulty and stumbling words, she began her story of ugly horror and saw the faces about her turn grim and chastising, not wanting to listen, not wanting to hear, not wanting to believe she was in any way justified for what she had done. The face of her beloved father turned almost gray, and his hand lifted to his forehead as if he had an overwhelming headache. She pitied him, loved him, cried for him, knowing well what he was suffering now.

“So,” Sharita concluded, “now you know the true story of why Mark-Kan didn’t return. His was no heroic death! He brought about his own end by falling on the knife I held clenched fast between my knees, while I attempted to saw the ropes apart that bound my wrists.

“You may wonder why I didn’t let this ugliness stay hidden behind the considerate story Captain Dray-Gon concocted to protect me. Yet I cannot do that, remain quiet like all the other passive, unresisting women who allow this crime against their bodies, rather than strike out and protect themselves. I am compelled to speak out and tell the truth, in an effort to make all of you here see that some of our rules are unjust to women. It has always been so, since the very beginning. My grandmothers were forced into marriage at the earliest possible ages, ten, eleven, twelve. And once married to a man chosen by their fathers, whether or not they wanted that husband, they were expected to bear as many children as possible, one after another. And who cared if those young women died from the complications of so much childbearing? No one cared. Always female babies have outnumbered males. My sex has always been considered expendable, of no intrinsic value! What made Baka a man famous in our history? Was it that he fathered Far-Awn? Or was it that he was, and still is, the only man who has fathered twelve sons in succession, with only one daughter to spoil his record?

“Which of you really care now about the violence that was done to me? Brutality that was committed while I was sick and half-sedated with medicine. You say to yourselves now, because I see it on your faces, that I should have submitted, and yielded to Mark-Kan, and said nothing to no one, because rape is a common little offense committed every day against some woman. And if she isn’t your daughter or your wife or your sister or niece or mother—then none of you care! And how are these men punished, who force women to submit against their will? They are taken out in a public square and given ten lashes on their bare backs!—and the next day they go out and do the same thing over again, and it is considered a joke, an honor to receive as many public whippings as possible!”

“You are a killer!” someone yelled when the princess paused for breath. “A murderess! You deserve the same punishment as any killer! Exile the princess, throw her out on the wildlands, let her survive—if she can!”

“Silence!” roared the king, slamming down his fist on the table.

“My daughter has the floor. Let her finish her speech—and if anyone interrupts, they will be thrown into the dungeons!” Sharita glanced about, her face gone very pale, and slightly she trembled.

“You have heard me called a murderess, for even though I am a princess, I am still just a woman, with no right to resist a man’s lust, or make an attempt at protecting myself.” Now she looked directly at Mark-Kan’s grim-faced father.

“I am sorry Mark-Kan is dead. I am sorry I was the one to bring about his ultimate fate. But he was the one who planned in advance to kidnap me and turn me over to the outlaws to hold for ransom, a ransom that he expected to share. He even hinted that you, his father, knew and approved of his plan.”

“You lie!” shouted Mark-Kan’s father.

“Quiet!” ordered the king. “Let Her Highness finish—or I will do as I threatened.”

“Mark-Kan’s crime was not one of passion and lust. It was calculated, an idea conceived to cause the worst possible friction between Upper and Lower El Dorraine. I think if my father investigates further into the political reasons behind my attempted abduction, he will find a few here at this table guilty. But that is my father’s dilemma. Mine is an attempt to change the laws of our land, so that a woman won’t have to stay hidden and guarded in her own home, so that she can walk down our avenues not afraid every second she is going to be brutally attacked, while secretly, all you men believe it is not brutality at all, that there are women who actually enjoy this sort of degradation. Well, I am one who does not enjoy it, and if ever again I find myself in the same position, I will pick up the nearest weapon, and I will use it!” The princess sat down, as all others jumped to their feet, yelling, screaming out angry accusations, and no one yelled louder than Mark-Kan’s father. He called out for her to be tried and judged, and banished to live outside of the city domes!

“She has killed my first son! Death is the ultimate crime—whether or not it is accidental!” The king signaled his guards, and they advanced now with their weapons pointed, weapons that would paralyze the nervous system temporarily, not kill. In the face of these pointed weapons, the uproar in the council room dwindled to whispers, and the whispers into silence. Now, in the deadly quiet, Dray-Gon stood.

“Your majesty, I would like now to correct a few errors in the Princess Sharita’s story. Will you give me the opportunity?”

“Go ahead,” said the king drily, thinking nothing could make the situation worse. Sharita glared at Dray-Gon as he began, but he heeded her no more than she had heeded him.

“Everything is true the princess said, except for a few minor details. Mark-Kan did steal her from her tent while she was sick and sedated. He did carry her back to where we had left the wagons, but the Princess did not kill Mark-Kan. I did. She was struggling with him when I entered her wagon, and it was I who used the knife. She has confessed to killing Mark-Kan so that I would not be judged and sentenced to exile. Being a princess, she did not think you would treat her in the same way as a common criminal. She foolishly believed you would find some admirable justification in a woman making an attempt to defend herself and her virtue, but nevertheless it was I who wielded the murder weapon!”

“You lie!” cried out Sharita, rising to her feet, and putting her small hands on Dray-Gon’s shoulders, and trying to shake him forcefully from his story. “How dare you do this? I won’t let you! You weren’t there at all the hour Mark-Kan died!”

“You see,” said Dray-Gon in a calm way as he grasped her hands and pulled her into his tight embrace, “the princess loves me and would protect me, but I will not hide behind her skirts and let her be punished when I am the murderer!” Again the king was forced to call for silence.

“Where is the truth in all of this?” Ras-Far asked in great agitation, his head a mountain of growing pain. Arth-Rin gained his feet and spoke in deep earnestness:

“Your majesty, it is as Captain Dray-Gon says. He was the one who killed Mark-Kan. Ask my man here who traveled with us to the Mountain, and they will tell you: It was our captain and not the princess who slew Mark-Kan, though we will also tell you, we believe that too was an accidental murder, not premeditated or contrived but entirely justified.” Each emissary to talk with the Gods was queried, and each swore he told the truth.

“Yes, it was Captain Dray-Gon who killed Mark-Kan when he tried to rape our princess, after he had kidnapped her.” Then it was Mark-Kan’s father who jumped again to his feet, his face purple with rage as his eyes snapped:

“Oh, what foolery is this! First it is reported my son fell with his horshet over a crater rim—and then the princess says he kidnapped her, then beat her and she slew him. Then all this is denied, and Ron Ka’s son rises to tell us he is the killer of my son! Lies, all lies! How are we to believe any of their tales now? How do we know they really did reach the Green Mountain and talked to a huge god? A god with an incredible tale to tell! And what is more, that this God has reasoned that we are all responsible for the demise of Bari-Bar, and that we must cultivate our wildlands and make them a part of our civilization. Why? Well, I will tell you why just so the princess and her captain can’t be banished to the wildlands to live as outlaws for killing my son! There is no god living in that Green Mountain! It is all a falsehood conceived to protect the killer of my son!” Dray-Gon turned to face the father of Mark-Kan.

“Are you standing there and telling me to my face that I have lied, that the princess has lied, that all the sons of the most eminent men of Upper and Lower El Dorraine have lied when they said they spoke to the God?”

“Yes!” flared Mark-Kan’s father. “Your story is all too pat, to save your own skin!”

“Suppose I can prove to you there is a god, taller than a mountain, would you then believe I am the genuine killer of your son? I am perfectly willing to be banished to live out my life as an outlaw—and you can, if you choose, deny all that the God has proclaimed about turning our wildlands into cultivated fields. Or you can wait until you hear that I am dead before you begin to follow his instructions.” Tumescient emotions suffused the face of Mark-Kan’s father. He floundered helplessly before he broke, and tears streamed from his eyes.

“Whatever proof you show me will not bring back my son!” he choked. The king spoke in gentle tones:

“Yes, this is true, Rallo Kan. The dead don’t return, even if the guilty are punished. Still I myself would very much like to see this proof that Captain Dray-Gon speaks of, though I believe every word of his story, without the proof.”

Dray-Gon signaled to Raykin, and all eighteen of the bakaret’s sons excused themselves and left the table. While they waited for their return, Sharita tried desperately to force Dray-Gon’s eyes to meet with hers, but he stared solemnly over the heads of everyone as all waited in pregnant silence. Then, through the great open doors of the council room, entered the eighteen young travelers, so recently returned from the Green

Mountain. Borne on their shoulders was a huge platform, and on the center of that was a most mammoth round ring, with a sparkling ruby stone.

“It is the god’s gift to you, your majesty,” said Dray-Gon, “a ring from his smallest finger, for he feared that some here might not believe our story. And on that platform, please notice that long length of what appears to be wire—it is a dark hair from his head, the ultimate proof that he does exist.” This was proof no one could deny, not even Mark-Kan’s father, who stood and quaked at the size of that ring, and that single hair.

“What does this solve, except that there is a God? Will the murderer of my son go unpunished?” he cried.

“The murderer will be tried and punished,” said the king. “It is the law, and even the decisions of gods have to wait until men change the laws and write new ones.” Feeling trapped, helpless, and betrayed, Sharita watched as Dray-Gon was led away surrounded by palace guards. The cabinet ministers and bakarets at the council table came and patted shoulders in fatherly, comforting ways, speaking of how brave and unselfish she was, to try and protect the man she loved. Indeed, they were proud to have her for their princess. Sharita turned her teary eyes on her father.

“Your majesty, Father, do I ever lie?” she asked as tears spilled over her cheeks.

“Sssh,” he cautioned. “We will speak of this later.”

Dray-Gon Banished

With the word of eighteen young men to swear that Captain Dray-Gon was guilty of the murder of Mark-Kan, though each stated passionately it was unequivocal, justifiable murder, and not premeditated—Dray-Gon was found guilty, and sentenced to live out the remainder of his life outside of the city domes on the wildlands, with the other outlaws. Kept a prisoner in her tower apartment, the princess could only hear of Dray-Gon’s trial secondhand, through the king.

“Father, he isn’t guilty!” she cried out time and time again, while the king turned deaf ears her way. “Mark-Kan was dead long before Dray-Gon rode up with Arth-Rin and Raykin to rescue me!”

Ras-Far pitied her, comforted her, tried to soothe her, and rationalized it was far, far better for a strong young man like Dray-Gon to be banished to the mercies of the wildlands than a mere girl, who would soon be captured and made a slave to the outlaws.

“My darling, sweet, only child, give me some relief! Can I turn you out, and deny Dray-Gon this magnanimous, self-sacrificing gesture he is making on your behalf? I know he is not guilty. I know you too are not guilty of Mark-Kan’s death. But I will not see you punished for an accidental murder that Mark-Kan well deserved. Give me time, and I will solve this problem, and reunite you with Dray-Gon.”

“But the outlaws will hear of his trial, they will be waiting outside the city gates, and they will tear him limb from limb! You will reunite me with a dead man.”

“I will do the best I can for him, to see that he has means of survival,” said the king, grown tired and on edge from facing one impossible situation after another.

“Then let me go with him,” pleaded Sharita, “we can both return to the home of the God and live there with him in safety.”

“Impossible!” Ras-Far roared, out of patience. “How could the two of you make it there alone? And I will not have you go so far from me! You are my solace and my comfort in my old age, Sharita. Think once in a while about my happiness!”

She looked her father over, strong and tall, not much different than he had been when she was a small child, and could only think of Dray-Gon living alone, without comforts, his life threatened every day, not only by the outlaws but by the ruthless forces of nature, and the hopeless despairs that come from living without others to care and love. So she continued to storm, to rage, to plead, to cry.

“Father, there is no life and no happiness for me without him. So turn him out, and make him sterile as you did Sintar and the other outlaws, so they cannot produce children to live as wild beasts, and then I will close my doors to you, and I will never speak another word to you, nor will you see me. And if you try to force me, then I will destroy myself!”

“That is a sin unforgivable!” shouted the king, now thoroughly enraged and caught in frustration.

“You have a duty and obligation to me, and to our people, and you will fulfill it, regardless of your cruel threats! It will take time, but I vow I will bring Dray-Gon back unharmed. The fear of castration has deterred more crimes than any other form of punishment, even exile!”

Pivoting about, Sharita turned her back to him and clamped her lips tight together. She strode away, to her most private chamber, where she bathed and performed intimate, private things—where even a king and a father could not follow in decency. And if he should dare, he did not doubt that she would do just as she said and take her life.

“Sharita,” he pleaded outside of the closed and locked door, “don’t do this to me. You are making it so much more difficult.”

The chamber behind the closed door gave back to him only silence. And the next day, it was the same, and the next, and the next. Disconsolate and miserably unhappy, the king returned to his own private chambers, and when he entered, his wife got up to leave.

“La Bara,” he called out, “what is this nonsense? Every time I enter the room, you take yourself from it.” La Bara turned her large amethyst eyes on him, as hard and cold as her daughter’s.

“Your majesty, I am in agreement with my daughter. The punishment inflicted upon Dray-Gon is too severe, when all he did was protect the person of the girl he loved—who just happens to be our daughter. The daughter of a lesser family than Sharita can be beaten and raped, and the offender would go free after ten weak lashes in a public square. It is time

for a change in our laws so that a woman has the right to defend herself, even if it means she has to use a weapon.”

Wearily the king dropped into a chair and propped up his feet. “I am doing all that I can, but the wheels of change grind slowly.”

The queen looked at him with a small smile. “I have spoken with a few other women, Ras-Far, and we have discovered a way to make the wheels of change speed exceedingly fast.”

“So? Tell me what women can do to make stubborn men move, when I cannot.”

“You will find out, Ras-Far,” the queen replied enigmatically before she retired from the room, leaving the king alone, when he would have her stay and talk to him. Several nights later, Dray-Gon was awakened, and led by two palace guards up out of the dungeons, and out onto the palace grounds. Furtively he was guided to a remote, hidden gate, where the king waited. He looked at Dray-Gon with pain and regret and deep compassion before he dismissed the two guards, and he and the prisoner were left alone.

“There are some who are clamoring that you begin your sentence, Dray-Gon, and since you have been judged guilty, I must comply. However, I have chosen the dead of night for you to leave, for even outlaws don’t roam now in fear of the warfars. And I have broken a few of our laws to favor you, such as giving you a horshet, so that you may ride fast and far. And your mount is fully packed with supplies—pufar seeds you can plant and always have a supply of food, and a paralyzing weapon to use for your protection. As you know, a common criminal is turned out with only the clothes on his back.”

“Thank you, your majesty,” replied Dray-Gon stiffly, deeply disappointed that Sharita wasn’t here to bid him farewell, and kiss him good-bye.

“Has not the princess sent me any sort of message?” Ras-Far snorted.

“Hah! The princess refuses to speak to me, as does her mother. Sharita eats alone in her rooms, refuses to see anyone, and when I enter her apartment, she hides herself behind a locked door. But I will tell you truthfully, before she resorted to this silent way of punishing me, she wept many bitter tears for your sacrifice, and pleaded with me to be allowed to marry you in a secret ceremony or let her go with you unmarried.

But as much as I love her, and would do what I could to give her—and you—a few days of happiness, Sharita has duties and obligations here. She must marry within this year, though she vows she will wed no one but you. I have been considering your friend Arth-Rin as the right man to be her husband.” The tiny triple moons cast pale moonlight to reveal Dray-Gon’s shocked expression, with color departed from his face. He swallowed over the raw lump that rose and choked his throat.

“You have chosen well. Arth-Rin is a good man.” The king observed his reaction and then nodded.

“It is, perhaps, a cruel thing that I tell you this now, on the night of your departure, but you may hear rumors of her betrothal even out there, and I want you to understand she is pushing me into making this decision. It has been reported to me that she is refusing to eat, and I will not have her starve herself to death. A husband can go where I cannot, and force food down her throat. Arth-Rin swears that he loves her, Sharita will forget you, and I hope you will forget her and find another.” Bitterly Dray-Gon smiled.

“Yes, I can steal a woman from the outlaws I suppose, or sneak into a small city, and kidnap a girl like the other criminals do!” The king laid his hand on Dray-Gon’s shoulder.

“Do not speak so bitterly. All is not hopeless for you. I am working night and day to find a way to bring you back into our society, and when I succeed, and succeed I will, I will have the royal flag flown from the high tower where Es-Trall lives. It will be my secret signal to you that it is safe to return. And if Sharita will begin to eat again, I will stall in announcing her engagement to Arth-Rin.” Hope, like a kindled spark rising, flared in Dray-Gon.

“Will it take long before you fly that flag?” The king couldn’t answer that, though a strange look came to his eyes when he thought of the women of Far-Awndra, and their ways of making the wheels of change begin to roll very fast.

“I will do my very best,” he promised, and then embraced Dray-Gon like a son.

Then he turned over Sharita’s letter to Dray-Gon, along with the illuminator light from his pocket. He stepped back into the shadows to give Dray-Gon privacy while he read the letter. Sharita had written:

To my barbarian, my savage, my captain, my love: So you have saved me, and lost yourself. So you will go, and I will stay. So what have you solved? We are apart, and my father will have me wed Arth-Rin. But his way is not my way. I am not my mother, or my grandmother, and I will not be forced to go against my heart. So, heed me closely, and speak not to my father of what I write next. I have been to Es-Trall, and he has told me of a safe place for you to live. Follow the directions I write down, and if you love me and want to give me any peace of mind, go to that place and wait. Be of good cheer, for there is a way for us to be together...

Dray-Gon finished reading Sharita's letter, then neatly folded it and stuffed it into his pocket. His eyes were glowing as he smiled at the king, and thanked him again for all he had done. Then swinging onto the saddle of his mount, he rode off into the black of night while the king watched until he was out of sight. Ras-Far sighed heavily, wishing it could have been different.

Now he would have to go back to the palace and tap on that locked door in Sharita's apartment and tell her that the man she loved was exiled, perhaps never to return. Once they had only warfars to fear on the wildlands; now they had wildmen, turned into animals a thousand times more vicious than any beast. Now that he had a goal, given to him in Sharita's letter, a heavy load lifted from Dray-Gon's heart. He urged his mount on to a fast gallop, heading toward that distant place of safety her letter had named. All about him were the terrifying, haunting cries of the hunting warfars as they caught his scent and set out to follow. In one hand he kept the paralyzing weapon gripped, and grateful he was the king had thought to include it. Twice he had to fire the weapon, bringing down a dark slinky form that was immediately torn apart and eaten by its own kind.

By dawn, he reached the high cave where many, many years ago, Far-Awn had camped with his twenty puhlets and slept for four nights while that most historic storm from Bay Gar raged and killed two-thirds of the population on El Sod-a-Por. Deep into the dark depths of the cave, Dray-Gon led his mount, following the complex directions given to Sharita by that wisest and oldest of all men, Es-Trall. Much to his surprise, he came out of the black tunnels into the bright sunlight, and below him spread a small valley, lush with green grass, and with a variety of pufars already growing. Pufars of all colors. The valley was an enclosed bowl, surrounded by towering mountain peaks. A perfect place, a sanctuary in the heart of the wilderness. Ah, that princess, always she could find a way. A new way

of living developed for Dray-Gon. A life of lonely, long days during which he planted the pufar seeds from the packet the king had given him.

Though there was really no need, it was something to do. He bathed and swam in a small rock basin that caught water from an underground river before the water once more cascaded down into the earth. He made primitive musical instruments out of hollow pufar gourds, stretched strings across them, and entertained himself by singing and playing in the way of Arth-Rin. Then he saddened and grew bitter thinking of Sharita, and the possibility she might be forced into marriage to his best friend. In the evenings, when it was too dark to do much else, he sat before a small fire and whittled miniature animal forms from wood. He found himself talking aloud to the only companion he had, the horshet he called Moonbeam. Days passed, a week, a month.

Every day he climbed to the highest peak and peered through a telescope the king had provided, toward the distant palace, and the tower that would wave a royal flag and send him a signal that it was safe to return. And every day he descended from the mountain peak, despondent, despairing, disappointed. The long lonely days became an intolerable burden. He was not only lonely but bored, full of frustrations, and within him an impatient anger grew. He looked around the small, safe, comfortable valley full of discontent. Knowing himself well, he knew soon he would leave here and seek companionship, his own kind, even if they welcomed him with knives, arrows, and hurled stones. Yet, when he read again Sharita's letter, now dirty and ragged from so much handling, he stayed on, waiting. Hoping. The second sun flared into brilliance before it sank quickly behind the mountainous walls that enclosed the valley, and Dray-Gon sat slouched before his small fire, bearded, and uncaring about his appearance.

The tediousness of each boring day had even dulled his appetite, and his wits too, so he thought. Still, when he heard his horshet sound a bray of alarm, quick like a savage, he had his weapon in hand, and he hid himself behind a shelf of rocks, but the little fire was still burning. Above him, a figure leading a horshet came out of the same dark tunnel he had used, and behind them trailed two puhlets. The cloaked human form was too small to be an adult man and too large to be a child. Dray-Gon felt his heart flutter in anticipation as he watched the figure come cautiously down the zigzagging footpath into the valley.

A few feet from his fire, the figure stopped and looked around, and softly called, “Dray-Gon?”

He got to his feet, about to hurry forward, when small pale hands were lifted, and the hood was removed from a head of brilliant red hair, and the firelight gleamed on citron skin. Vitality again sagged in him, as he recognized the servant girl, Ray-Mon; the girl he had taken to a carnival so many moons ago, in the days when Sharita had treated him with cold, aloof scorn. He couldn’t hide his disappointment, or make himself move forward, so she came to him, smiling, shy, her eyes dark and purple, glittering in the firelight. A few inches away she stopped and looked up into his face.

“Aren’t you glad to see me?” she asked in her slightly husky voice. All he could think of to ask was:

“How did you know where to find me?”

“The Princess Sharita told me. She sent me here to live with you.” Stunned, surprised, and suddenly very angry he almost yelled, “She sent you? Why didn’t she come herself?” Ray-Mon backed away, clutching the long cloak about her. In a small voice she answered:

“The princess is kept under lock and key and sees no one. It is easy for a servant girl to slip out of the palace, and out of the city unseen.”

“You traveled here alone?” he asked, disbelieving she would have the courage.

“Yes, alone, and only at night. I hid during the day.” He glared at her bitterly.

“I will take you back tomorrow. This is no place for you to be, and soon I will leave this valley.”

“No, you can’t. The princess says you must stay here.”

“Be damned to what the princess says I must do! She sends me a servant girl to take her place, so that she can live in safety in the palace, and be a queen! That’s the kind of love she has for me!” The deep purple eyes scanned over his angry face.

“If she had come, would you be happier?”

Dray-Gon pounded his right fist into his left palm, wanting to strike something violently.

“Yes!” he flared bitterly.

“I would be happier, but I would take her back tomorrow to the palace. This is no place for her or for you to be confined within walls, to see no one but yourself and hear no voice but your own, is no life at all.”

Now she came slowly toward him.

“But with me here, it will be different, Dray-Gon. See,” she said, allowing the cloak to fall to the grass, “I have worn the necklace you gave me every day, praying for your safety, because I love you. I have loved you from the first day we met.”

She was beautiful in her own way, and had all the curves and charms of Sharita, yet he turned away and sat again before the fire, and picked up his knife to whittle fiercely on the small figure, so fiercely, he ruined his work.

“Tomorrow I take you back to the palace,” he said harshly, “and you can tell the princess I don’t want her conciliatory gift. You don’t love me, Ray-Mon; you don’t know me well enough to feel anything but a kind of infatuation. Love doesn’t spurt up like an instant bonfire, consuming all reason, it flickers and falters, and sometimes almost goes out. The fact that it doesn’t go out, despite all the rain that falls on it—that’s love. Now bed yourself down and go to sleep, for tomorrow night early, I’m taking you back.”

Hunching down by the fire, she took over the meal he was preparing in a small pot, and from his supplies, she added a pinch of this and that to his stew, and silently served it to him when it was done. He ate it, acknowledging it was better than anything he had prepared yet for himself. Yet, he didn’t thank her. She ate silently as he did. Raising her eyes only occasionally to look at him. He wouldn’t meet her eyes. While they ate, their two horshets were nuzzling and becoming acquainted with one another. The male and female puhlet were nestling down together, making small throat noises as they rubbed against one another.

Reunited

As the small fire sputtered out, and the night grew cold, Ray-Mon timidly asked: "Where am I to sleep?"

"Anywhere you want! The tent—I will sleep out here."

"But there is a dampness to this valley, and the ground will be wet with dew in the morning. You will catch cold." Alertly Dray-Gon lifted his head to stare at her.

"How would you know that?" Color flooded her face.

"The princess told me from Es-Trall's descriptions of how it would be living here."

"All right," he agreed. "I will set up another tent, since you brought one with you."

As he unpacked her bags of supplies, he was amazed to see how well she had planned for this trip, just as if she had given it much thought. Then he realized what he was doing, and hastily put all her things back in the bags. She was leaving tomorrow. Definitely! He put up her tent, and placed a cot, and mutely gestured to her that all was ready. Just as silently, she left the dying warmth of the fire and entered the tent to undress. Illuminated in her tent, every movement she made was sharply silhouetted as this article of clothing was taken off, and then that.

Naked, she slipped into bed, but not before she had given Dray-Gon ample opportunity to see how beautifully she was formed beneath those shabby, cheap, ill-fitting clothes. Deliberately she had done that! Why he had never even seen Sharita without clothes, not even silhouetted through the golden cloth of a tent. A few times he had seen her in a transparent nightgown—briefly seen, never enough. He angrily threw dirt on the guttering fire, and then threw a disgusted look at the two horshets so contentedly amorous.

He stripped off his clothes, bathed in the rock basin pool, and before a mirror in his tent, he shaved his face. Mocking himself as he did. He thought of Sharita locked in her rooms, refusing to eat; waiting for her wedding day to Arth-Rin—and she had sent him a substitute bride! Damn her! The trip to the Gods had changed nothing! It was still the same old

war between men and women! Partially asleep, Dray-Gon heard the flap of his tent move, and then the whisper of perfumed scent. Ray-Mon was close. It was very dim in the tent, but he could see well enough to observe she wore nothing but the silver-chained pendant around her neck—the one he had given her long ago.

“I don’t love you, Ray-Mon,” he murmured, even as he lifted his covers and invited her into his bed. And she came, willingly slipping in beside him, pressing close, covering his lips with hers, and filling him with so much instant passion, the rest became a blur of ecstasy saved up for a princess, and given to a servant girl. In the morning she was up and had breakfast going before he came out of the tent. His clothes she had washed in the pool, and they were hung up to dry on a line he had strung.

He saw his boots clean and shining from freshly applied polish, and a flat rock was spread with a tablecloth, and star-flowers were in a small vase centering the improvised table. Imagine, she had brought a vase... As she worked, he couldn’t see her face too well, for her long silken red hair kept falling forward to conceal her profile. Already she had made a home out of a barren valley. The breakfast she prepared was the most delicious meal he had eaten in weeks and weeks. Repleted, he guiltily tried not to think of Sharita locked in her room and refusing to eat. After breakfast, he set out as customary, to climb the highest mountain and use the telescope to check the palace tower, and see if the royal flag flew there today. But Ray-Mon came and stayed him.

“Let this be our day, for you will take me back tonight, and you do care for me just a little bit more today than yesterday, no?”

He looked at her, torn with indecision. But she ran, throwing off her clothes as she did, looking back over her shoulder and challenging him to catch her. Then he was running after her, throwing off his clothes, catching her, and throwing her on the ground, both laughing like children until lust came and took them both again. Then he would continue the play and start to toss her in the pool... but she backed away, suddenly terrified-looking. He taunted, teased. Oh, she was afraid of water, was she? Didn’t she know how to swim? Then he would teach her to swim before the day was over. With that he ran and caught her, and threw her into the rock basin pool.

She screamed with the shock of the cold water coming from deep inside the inner-earth. Dray-Gon jumped in to save her—but it wasn’t needed! She could swim better and faster than he could. Out of the

daylight she swam, following the stream of water as it entered into a mountain, and into darkness. He caught hold of her flashing foot and hauled her back, roughly holding her as she struggled to free herself.

“What’s the matter?” he managed to blurt, throwing water from his head and mouth. “Why are you so afraid—I’m only playing!”

“Let me go, let me go!” she cried, fighting him. “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s a man who uses his strength on a woman.”

Into the sunlit pool he swam, hauling her along by her long hair. By the Gods, she was almost drowning him in her efforts to get away, when only a few minutes ago they had met in joy and passion, and she had held nothing back.

She broke from his grasp, and quickly sprang from the pool, and ran naked over the grass. Only seconds was she free before he caught her again, and threw her down on the grass. Straddling her, he looked down in shocked amazement. She was smeared with red dye, streaking her body. Grabbing up an article of clothing she had discarded, Dray-Gon roughly began to dry her hair. The cloth came away as scarlet as blood—and tinged with green stain from her skin. With her eyes wide and half-frightened, she allowed him to finish what he had started. Then her hair was all wild about her cleaned face, almost silver, almost gold, and tinged pink where the dye still clung.

“You fool!” he cried. “You wonderful, beautiful, crazy girl! Why did you do it this way? Your eyes—I can understand the temporary hair dye, and the stained skin—but your purple eyes?” Sitting up, she flung her arms about him.

“Does it matter? I love you, and now I know you really love me, and not some silly little shallow light-headed servant girl who wore your pendant every day since you hung it about her neck.” From the pocket of her discarded skirt, she took the sparkling pendant he had given Ray-Mon, and fitted over it, the royal crest of the house of Far-Awn. The same created pendant he had seen about her neck every day. Then, bowing her head, she lifted her hands and used something to take from her eyes two small round disks colored purple. Again he was staring at her, looking now into eyes violet, almost blue.

“It was you—all the time—at the carnival too?” Nodding and laughing, she hugged him tight, then laid her head on his shoulder.

“It was my way to find out what you were really like—to escape the palace and the guards who always follow me about. And it was a wonderful day—and the other times we met, just as wonderful. They were the only days of my life that I have lived just as an ordinary person, and experienced city life on the streets, or else I would never know. Es-Trall made for me the disks to change my eye color. He is the most marvelous little old man, and was so pleased to assist me in deceiving you. He thought it very romantic.” Dray-Gon broke in here,

“But you tricked me! Deliberately set out to deceive me! Sharita, I can understand why you disguised yourself and sought to discover what I was like with a girl not a princess, but last night I wanted you so badly that I took Ray-Mon into my bed and made myself think it was you!” He seized her shoulders, shaking her, strong emotions shifting on his face like sands blown by the winds.

“Even this morning, eating breakfast, I felt so guilty, thinking of you, starving yourself, locked up in your rooms! Damn it! Why couldn’t you have told me sooner?” Kisses she put on his face until all his anger simmered down.

“Darling, I did it my way so you could find out whom you preferred, Ray-Mon or me. So what did I find out? Last night you whispered Sharita several times,” and here her eyes teased mockingly, “but there was another night when you made love to a princess, and you whispered a servant girl’s name.” Glowering he thrust her away and began pulling on his clothes.

“I’m taking you back, princess! So get dressed, and quick! You’ve made a fool of me, pulling a deceitful, sneaky trick ... and I don’t like it!”

“Dray-Gon,” Sharita began in her most haughty tone, not picking up one article of clothing so she could dress. “Now you sit there and listen to me! I am a princess, with a limited number of men to choose from—the sons of twenty bakarets only. And to me, you seemed the least likely, coming from a barbaric province that allows men to have more than one wife at a time. And I’d heard rumors about you and your wild ways, and everything I heard convinced me you were a savage. Yet, when I met you, determined as I was to hate you, I couldn’t. So I set out to find out what you were like as a man with a pretty girl, and not as a bakaret’s son with a princess. And I must say, you treated that little servant girl with much more gallantry and sweetness than you have ever treated me!” He had only his boots and his shirt on as he glared at her.

“Oh, is that so? Well let me tell you something. That little nothing servant girl was a gay, charming, pleasing, soft, and gentle loving girl while a certain cold and arrogant princess has turned me off completely!”

“If you want a meek, timid, docile wife, then don’t marry me!”

“Have I asked you to marry me? Is my formal proposal on your father’s desk—or hidden away inside it? Have you forgotten I am an exile and can’t marry anyone! I am a nothing now. I don’t exist. My name has been wiped from all the record books. When our trip to talk with the Gods is recorded, I won’t be mentioned. How do you think that makes me feel?” He stepped into his pants and drew them up, his eyes flashing with anger and frustration. He bent to sweep up her shabby clothes and threw them at her.

“Get dressed, my high and mighty princess—for I am taking you back so you can marry Arth-Rin!”

“I will never marry Arth-Rin,” she said calmly in the face of all his temper.

“You will marry whom your father tells you to marry! You could do worse!”

“And I can do better too. So if you try to force me to leave here, when we are outside of this cave, I will scream and scream until the outlaws hear me ... and then they will discover us both, and we will both die, for if they kill you, I will kill myself.” She held out her arms to him.

“Dray-Gon, this may well be the only time you and I have all to ourselves, without any responsibilities. Can’t we think of something else to do besides fight?” For a moment he held back; then he dropped down beside her and gathered her in his arms.

“We are going to have a wonderful life, darling,” she whispered, “never a dull moment. Just wait until my father learns he is about to become a grandfather. He will move Bay Gar and Bay Sol to hold that baby in his arms, and he won’t, unless he finds a way to exonerate both you and me from any guilt for Mark-Kan’s death.”

His eyes he swept down over her figure, so that’s why she appeared a little changed from the slim girl he remembered.

“The baby—that night in the God’s home?” She nodded.

“Dray-Gon, you are not going to believe this, but I could possibly be the only pregnant woman in all Far-Awndra or at least, newly pregnant. There is not a wife who will allow her husband entrance to her bed until the laws are changed. All the women are pulling for us—for you and for me! You have never seen such dour, sour faces sitting at a council table!

“Why the ministers and bakarets are working from sunup, to way past the last sundowning, to change a few unjust laws! Right this minute, my father is probably pleading outside of my private chambers, begging me to let him in, pleading for me to eat, but when he’s not there, he’s snapping the whip in the council room. And he’s got the words of the God to back him up. Oh, Dray-Gon, you should hear him! He is one magnificent, powerful speaker! He could move mountains and change the desert into the ocean with the mere spell he can create with his oratory.

“I have sneaked out of my rooms many times, to hide myself and listen. Why that God in his high, green home could take lessons from my father when it comes to pleading a cause.” Subdued somewhat from so much enthusiasm, Dray-Gon wondered how he could compete, when she had a father like that. But when he met her eyes, he realized that was a competition in which he had already won.

“Well, seductive witch, shall I climb now and see if we can return to the palace?”

“Later,” she said, “later...” The secure little valley that had given Dray-Gon safety and beauty, but no comfort and no solace, only loneliness and remorse for all that could have been and was lost, now gave him everything. He sat relaxed and glowing before a fire he had made, and watched a princess prepare an evening meal in ways not much different from those of a servant girl—except for the glances she cast his way from time to time, not shy or timid or insecure.

To win the love of a small, fearfully shy creature was quite another variety of sensation than this love of meeting and overcoming the strong, demanding challenge of someone his equal, and better. He felt intoxicated. Drunk with wines he hadn’t tasted until today. She had defied the king to steal away to him; risked her life traveling alone through the wildlands with only two puhlets and why she had brought them along still hadn’t been explained. She stirred the contents in a gleaming pot, her face flushed from the heat, and tasted of the stew. The jeweled pendant he had given a servant girl sparkled about her neck, not hidden by a covering royal crest,

and on a silver chain girdling her waist dangled a miniature puhlet whittled from a block of wood—his gift to a princess.

“I have never given you anything,” she said after they had eaten, just before she draped over his head a pendant of her own giving and design. Made of twenty silver links, and a glittering pendant centered with two oval jewels the exact shade of her eyes. The significance of the two oval jewels made his breath catch—for oval was the promise and symbol of perfect fidelity. Oval could rock, but it couldn’t roll away like a sphere capriciously willful to obey every whim, nor could it sit solidly dull like a square trapped by its own form, and unable to leave, and oval didn’t point ambiguously toward a third direction like a triangle, and oval went round and round, always meeting and changing position somewhat but true always to its symbol.

“When you don’t love me anymore, and want another, take this off and return it to me without any explanations... just go, and we will never meet or see each other again, but the child within me will be mine, for it is the law, since you are allowed two others.”

“I will never take off this pendant!” he vowed. She looked down at the one she wore around her neck, centered with a deep blue round stone that was valuable, but signified nothing permanent. When she lifted her eyes, he was smiling at her in an odd way.

“Someday I will give you another shaped oval.”

“All right. I can wait,” she agreed, as his smile spread broader, as if he had scored another point. Minutes later, he spread their blankets on the ground, under a starry plum-colored sky, so she could experience sleeping out of doors without a sheltering dome, or protecting cover of any kind: something he had done often, something she had never expected to do. While they lay there wrapped together, looking up at the stars, he told her of his boyhood, and his life in a military school that had stressed physical fitness and sent their students outside of the protective city domes to live in the old ways and test their endurance against nature’s elements.

“And it was fun, Sharita, believe it or not—and there really are wild puhlets! Once I met a giant horned bull, shaggy-furred and almost as fierce as any warfar, and he lowered his great head and came at me—to protect his females and young, for they don’t eat meat. But I didn’t kill him. You see, Far-Awn has always been a hero of mine, and I admired his big Musha, and to see a wild animal that we believed extinct was for me an uplifting

thrill. So you see, we lowlanders aren't as insensitive and barbaric as you believe."

"Believed," she corrected. Yet, even so, he did have a difference that set him apart from the young men of the upperlands—and it was this very difference that was his special magnetism.

"I ought to tell you," she began, "of your father's visit to my apartment tower while I was planning and preparing for my escape. And though I refuse to see my own father, I allowed yours to enter. Ron-Ka seemed broken and very subdued, and so dejected when he asked me to tell him truthfully if his only son was a murderer."

"And of course, you just had to tell him the truth!" he flared.

"Of course I did! And he was so relieved—you should have seen his face brighten, and then, you know what? He took me in his arms and almost sobbed, and said he had never been prouder of you for giving your life, and saving mine, but then he really broke down, really crying because now he would never have any grandchildren."

"Did you tell him the truth about that too?"

"Oh no, for I wasn't sure then, and I had to tell you first, and then my own father." Her eyes met his, deep and troubled dark.

"How fortunate we started a child before that unfeeling law took away your ability to sire children—so now at least you will be a father one time." So ... she had traveled to him alone, believing he wasn't a whole man, and still she had loved him enough.

"If you keep me as the wife of your youth only, that one child would be all we would make together anyway—so what is the difference?" He laughed exultantly as he held her closer, this quixotic girl who changed to fit any of his moods.

"My princess, don't you know your father at all? Our laws controlling exiles are very strict, so they won't breed children to live as beasts on the wildlands. But all the judges agreed that banishment alone would be enough punishment for me, a man who had killed to protect their princess—and who convinced them of this? King Ras-Far; he himself pleaded my case, and very adroitly too—though this part of my sentence was kept secret... for I believe your father has got the notion in his head that you want to bear three children by the same man and you were less likely to try and escape the palace, if you thought me so flawed..."

All about them the dark-fliers were singing, and the night crawlers hummed, and Dray-Gon even dared to speak again those same words, as he had on their first night of meeting. It made her laugh to think such a subject would start a romance like theirs.

“Poor father,” she said with a sigh, “I can see him now, prowling restlessly the palace halls, frustrated at every turn, by his wife, by his bullheaded daughter, by all his stiff-necked cabinet members who refuse to yield to new ways and discard old laws meant for another kind of society than what we have now... and here we are, you and I, experiencing the happiest, most fulfilling days of our lives. It hardly seems fair, does it?”

“No, Sharita, the most fulfilling days are yet to come. I wonder just what kind of children you and I will make.”

“Children?”

“Did I say that?”

“Yes, you did!”

“Time will tell, princess. Can’t you wait for anything?”

The New Laws

The queen was in her parlor, indolently popping chocolates in her mouth, her eyes on the wall news reflector until, occasionally, she turned her attention to the tapestry she was weaving with intricate, tiny stitches, using silken threads of many shades and hues. The subject of her wall-hanging depicted the journey of twenty young men, and one young girl, to visit the Gods. When finished, it would be a work of art of impressive dimensions, and represent many years of her life. It was La Bara's tangible gift to posterity, and undaunted by the long years of labor ahead, she worked toward its completion. After a long and tiresome day, the king strode in and made an attempt to kiss her cheek, but La Bara jerked away before his kiss could touch her flesh. And as if he weren't there at all, she unhurriedly began to gather up all her paraphernalia. He could slap her, shout at her, let her know she was really getting to him, but that was not his way.

"It's very good to see you again, dear," Ras-Far said in a pleasant, smiling way. "And I must say, you are looking exceptionally attractive—you have styled your hair in a new way, and it is so becoming."

La Bara leaned to close the lid on her box of chocolates as if she were without ears, and picking that last remaining item up, she headed toward a distant door. The king had fallen into a chair and wearily sprawled his long legs before him, while his eyes followed his wife's leisurely, insulting departure. A scowl darkened his expression. He spoke then, not raising his voice, just changing his friendly tone to one of sharp command, and no one could speak with his authority in a voice so well modulated:

"Halt! La Bara! Enough of this nonsense. I have news to report if you care to stay and hear it, good news, for a change." She halted. But didn't turn about to face him, just waited, forcing him to issue another command.

"Turn about, wife, and look at me. I have no intention of addressing your back." When she had obediently turned, still refusing to meet his eyes, still treating him as a shadow without substance, he ordered her to sit. She sat.

"Now hear this, La Bara. All has been settled. Captain Dray-Gon has been pardoned for a crime he never committed in the first place. Our

daughter has been exonerated for all guilt in the accidental death of Mark-Kan. Hear that? Accidental death. We have established there are no wildlands in our country anymore—so even murderers cannot be banished to live there. What we will do with those outlaws out there, and how we will now punish murderers, is a problem for tomorrow. But that too will be resolved after long-winded discussions, while you sit here and pleasantly enjoy yourself and inwardly gloat in denying me my husbandly rights.”

The box of chocolates was placed once more on a low table, opened, and a very tasty piece selected and enjoyed while the king glared hard at her. Was it only weeks ago when he would have relished a quiet, restful evening when his wife didn't prattle on incessantly, only stopping to grab a breath? He wondered how she managed it. How she could sit there unspeaking when he knew she was bursting with curiosity to hear it all.

With the help of the chocolates, and the colored threads that she began to spread about her, she managed very well to contain her silence, and seemingly, to disregard his presence. A needle was threaded with scarlet, four meticulous stitches taken, and then a needle was threaded with blue. Another chocolate entered her mouth; her fingertips were daintily wiped on a slip of silk. If she ate just one more chocolate, and threaded one more needle, and took one more stitch, that would be it! A new law he would write, allowing a fourth wife for old, old age!

“Oh, did I forget?” he asked. “There was one more item decided today: A new law written down in our books—it is now a criminal offense, a serious criminal offense, punishable by imprisonment behind bars—if a man forces himself on a woman against her will. Of course, it will have to be proven a genuine case of rape, or else all our men will end up in jail or in the dungeons.” For the first time in endless days, the queen allowed her eyes to meet with his. She spoke.

“How long will a man like Mark-Kan be punished—in a case like what he did to our daughter?”

“In a case of kidnapping, physical assault, with rape in mind, probably life imprisonment. All the details haven't been decided yet. We are taking one step at a time, not leaping ahead in bounds. But I have every magistrate's signature. It will now be safe for a woman to walk our streets at night alone, without a guard.” He was given a brilliant, charming smile, and La Bara sat on his lap and gave him a long, very warm kiss on the lips

before she pulled away. He tried to pull her back, but she had surprising strength.

“Have you told Sharita?”

“I came to tell you first,” he replied, knowing this would please her. He was rewarded with another long kiss, and she whispered in his ear something he wanted to hear, and then they were both on their feet, hurrying down the long corridors to inform their daughter of the new laws before she starved herself to death. Rushing into his daughter’s apartment, Ras-Far dismissed her ladies-in-waiting with an imperial gesture of his hand. He pounded on the door of Sharita’s most private chamber.

“Sharita,” he called, “open the door! You have won—Dray-Gon has been pardoned, we are flying a flag now to bring him back. Every one of your demands have been met and made into law this very day—so you can come out and eat before you turn into a skeleton!”

Slight movements were heard behind the locked door, the sound of water running; then it was turned off. Music began to play, and Sharita was humming. She could be as irritating as her mother!

“You have been secretly feeding her, haven’t you, La Bara?” he accused, knowing damn well that girl couldn’t have gone all this time without food.

“What do you mean, feeding her? Of course food is brought up to her every day—but she doesn’t eat it! It sits outside that door untouched.”

“Then someone else is feeding her, sneaking it in...” La Bara gave him a look of impatience, and then she called her daughter.

“Darling, please open the door. Your father has arranged everything. You don’t have to marry Arth-Rin. The man you love is coming back. We will have palace guards sent out to ensure his safe return. No woman will ever again be assaulted and beaten as you were without the most severe punishment—now, darling, please come out.”

From behind the door, the humming continued. Then footsteps sounded, her light ones, walking away! With growing annoyance, the king waited. He pounded on the door again, impatience booming his voice.

“Sharita, I am not requesting now—I am ordering you to come out, or I will have that door torn down!” Exactly what he had to order done. For his willful daughter didn’t respond, just kept on humming or singing, or running bath water. Well, she was asking for it—even if the men battering

on the door caught her in the midst of a bath! However, the door was made of the bygar material and resisted the most determined assaults of six men. The king threw up his hands in disgust.

“Tear down the wall, but get in, however you have to do it!” When there was a hole large enough in the wall for the king to step through, he glanced around the spacious room, luxuriously appointed, with colorful cushions on the floor, mirrors everywhere to reflect her beauty. She wasn’t in the terrace bathing pool surrounded by living flowers and plants. Nor was she stretched out on the billowing couch sunbathing, but her voice kept right on humming, and then he heard her footsteps behind him. He spun about and saw nothing.

“By the Gods!” he roared. “That ingenious, trickster of a wench has made a fool of me! All this time I thought her locked in here—she has been playing a recording!” He shook his fist at his wife, angrier than he had ever been with Sharita.

“When I get my hands on her, I am going to give that girl the thrashing of her life! Now, La Bara, where is she?” The queen’s face clouded over with anxiety.

“Ras-Far, do you think she would confide in me? Between the two of us, whom does she love and trust most?” This wasn’t asked in resentment, or jealousy; La Bara was just speaking of what she knew for a fact. A worried frown creased the king’s brow: that daughter of his was going to put gray in his hair yet! He said, without too much consideration:

“No doubt she has gone with that young man of hers, somehow managed to follow him. And they are out there together, struggling to survive, with outlaws all around, with the warfars ready to tear them apart while they sleep. By the Gods, La Bara, we’ve got to send out a rescue party right away!” The king started off at a fast clip, then turned to his wife.

“Now you remind me—no matter how glad I am to see her safely returned—that I am going to give her the worst spanking of her life!”

“Thrashing is what you threatened, sire,” responded his wife, “and I will remind you, never fear.” Two days later the king stood on the steps of the palace, watching the patrol of palace guards as they escorted home the two refugees who had failed to check every day to see if it was safe to return.

“Look at them,” whispered the queen into the king’s ear, “they don’t look like they have suffered much. Why Sharita has even taken on some weight—but don’t forget that thrashing in your pleasure at having her back.”

“First thing I’ll do when we’re alone,” the king whispered back, his smile beginning as he saw his daughter well and healthy-looking. Outside the palace gates a mob had gathered, and cheered as they saw Dray-Gon quickly dismount, and hurry to assist the princess from her horshet. Both Sharita and Dray-Gon turned to wave to them, before they solemnly ascended the stairs, holding hands. Meekly the princess curtsied to her father, to her mother, as Dray-Gon bowed low from the waist. Sharita raised her eyes, meeting her father’s grim look of smoldering anger. Like sun and shadows, her faltering, unsure smile struggled to become confident. He had never glared at her so fiercely before.

“Your majesty,” she began in a humble way...

“Go immediately to your rooms and stay there!” Ras-Far ordered coldly. Obediently Sharita entered the palace, still holding to Dray-Gon’s hand. From behind them, the king spoke authoritatively again,

“Just a minute, Captain, I ordered my daughter to her rooms—not you.” At that, the young man turned and looked at the king squarely.

“From now on, where Sharita goes, I go.”

“Then if you want to come upstairs, to her tower, and watch while she is punished, I will allow that, but then you will leave and go to your room and stay there until I send for you.”

“Sire, I hate for our new relationship to start off on such a bad footing—but you are not going to punish my wife! I am not going to allow that.” The false anger on the king’s face floundered and broke.

“Your wife? When were you married?” Dray-Gon’s arm lifted to encircle Sharita’s shoulder.

“By the old laws of El Sod-a-Por, there were several marriage ceremonies. Of course I know they are outdated now and considered old-fashioned. But there was a night in the God’s home when your daughter reached out and asked me to spend the night with her—that was once the most primitive marriage ceremony—especially when that night resulted in conceiving a child. I don’t think that old law has been recorded down in

your latest law books—but you can easily have it arranged tomorrow.” Tears were in the queen’s eyes. She ran to Sharita and embraced her.

“Darling, you mean ... really? A baby? Oh, it’s been so long since there was a baby in this palace!” She turned to the king, her round pretty face beaming.

“Ras-Far, we’re going to be grandparents!”

“I am thinking of the embarrassment,” but nevertheless, the king went to his daughter and embraced her. He shook Dray-Gon’s hand.

“Congratulations,” he said, “under the circumstances, a grandchild conceived in the God’s home? Well, you’re a better man than me.”

It was then that Sharita went into her father’s arms and shone on him her most loving smile, washing away all his problems, his anxieties, with such little effort. Her hand lifted to caress his cheek, before she stroked his hair, and then lightly kissed him.

“Father, Dray-Gon and I hid away in the prettiest little green valley, and it was like a wedding holiday. And while we were there, we decided to name our son after your father. Star-Far... he is going to be the most exceptional child ever born! Just wait until you hold him, and he smiles up at you.” Inwardly Ras-Far smiled, already convinced it would be an exceptional child. No doubt it would be a boy; his daughter usually got what she wanted; she made it happen. Then he sobered, and looked toward his new son-in-law.

“My son, before you decide to make this marriage officially legal, there are a few facts you have to learn about your wife’s heritage.” Then he hesitated and shrugged with the futility. It was already too late for warnings. As he studied the two happy faces before him, he realized it had always been too late for them. What other choice did they have—except the way they took?

So he wore a smile, and told of the wedding announcement he would make today, and tomorrow they would start on the formal wedding preparations: a grand, opulent wedding, to please his people, to give them something to remember And tomorrow could take care of itself.

The Royal Princes

After the spectacular marriage of the Princess Sharita to Ron Ka's son—a nobleman of the lower borderlands—the people of all El Dorraine became as one, no Uppers, no Loweres. Just Dorrainians. There was but one land, and this they determined to blend together without even a boundary line. The shimmering, lofty, arching doors of the domed cities were opened wide, and the residents of those cities marched out onto the unshielded, barren wasteland, risking the storms, the outlaws, the warfars, everything. And they planted.

All along they had known the simplicity of it all, and just fooled themselves into thinking it was more complex. Everything started with the seed, with the green life, with the growing life, with the giving life. From the earth to the seed to the plant that bore the flower and then the fruit. Even the outlaws came to help, as if they too had been waiting for some miracle to give them back a meaning for living. In time, in a great deal of time, every square inch of their plains was planted. Long before that was accomplished, Sharita gave birth to her first child, a boy, just as she had known it would be. Proudly she laid her child in her father's arms.

“Look, Father, he has blue eyes—really blue eyes—like the God's!” Ras-Far couldn't be truly surprised anymore; the unprecedented became the natural, expected order of the way it was. He looked down at the beautiful child in his arms, with hair the spectacular color of his mother's and skin of saffron cream. An exceptional baby, as he would have to be. However, sadness was in his eyes as he said to Sharita in warning:

“Keep in mind, daughter, that a man is allowed three children during his life span—if Dray-Gon chooses for himself a new wife for his middle years, she will give him his second child—and the new law that allows a woman three husbands in her life span may not do you any good, for men are notorious for choosing women much younger than themselves.” His daughter's violet, almost blue eyes clouded over as she looked to her husband, now with his first son in his arms. His strong bronze finger was clasped by the baby's tiny pale fist. Dray-Gon caught his wife's gaze and slowly smiled.

“Yes, I have been thinking lately of that wife of my middle years. A beautiful flame-haired girl I once knew named Ray-Mon—she will give me another son, or perhaps a daughter the exact duplicate of herself—that I would like very much.” La Bara looked up from her tapestry work, thinking this the first cruel, heartless remark her son-in-law had ever made in her presence, and she felt some anger toward him. Yet, for some reason Ras-Far was smiling, as was her daughter—and she had thought Sharita and Dray-Gon still madly in love... so much so, that sometimes it was embarrassing.

“Let’s see,” said the king thoughtfully, “the name Ray-Mon is somewhat familiar to me. In my desk in a secret report about that servant girl—she sneaked out of the palace and met a bakaret’s son. And they had a day of fun at a carnival, and there were several other meetings too. That girl really did give my security agents a run for their money and managed to cleverly evade them several times.” Both Sharita and Dray-Gon looked at the king in surprise, and some little embarrassment.

“Father—you knew all the time?” whispered Sharita.

The king laughed. “I knew about that, yes, for when I was a young prince, I too often grew tired and restless with the many rules and regulations that routined my life, and I would disguise myself in plain clothes and do small things to change my appearance, so I could go out on the city streets and find out what life for a commoner was all about. And believe it or not, there were many pleasing aspects to being an average, everyday man, to do with your life as you will, to a certain degree.

In fact, Sharita, that was the very way I found your mother. She was visiting in Far-Awndra with her parents and had stolen out of her home without a guardian and was sitting on a park bench, looking very young and scared, not knowing what to do with her freedom when she had it, and I came along and sat down to talk with her. Never in the least did I guess that someday she would be my third wife—and my very best wife.”

Tears came into La Bara’s eyes, for he had never hinted that he felt this way. But when she looked at Sharita, she knew why her husband had said what he did: She had given him Sharita, the joy of his life. She trailed behind, after the grandson now. But her hands didn’t quiver as she skillfully applied the needle, and made the daintiest of stitches in the picture that was inching toward completion. To be a small part of Ras-Far’s life was enough.

“Put down your work, La Bara,” said the king, and came to take her hand and draw her with him to the nearest terrace balustrade, where they could see out through the transparent dome to the surrounding countryside.

Sharita and Dray-Gon came too, with the baby held in his arms. It was a far different scene that met their eyes now—the wildlands were wild no more. The starflowers grew quickly, and worked their miracles—and soon all the city domes would be torn down, and no longer would they see a view slightly unfocused. The roots of the marvel plants reached down deep into the inner-earth, and spread their webby network of absorbing tentacles, bringing moisture to the dry, crusty surface.

When the deluges came from the worst blustering storms, the roots caught and held the water, and seeped it out later to the top surface—and now there was dampness to change what had been desert land. At last! The suns shone on the new wetness, and vapor rose to form soft, billowing white clouds, the kind of clouds they had never seen before: a kind of shield between the earth and the relentless sunlights from dual glowing stars.

Years passed before the star-flowers pushed back the bays of Gar and Sol, nibbling upon them, then taking great bites, then huge mouthfuls, until the bays were eventually swallowed up by the spreading green growth. The blue ice of Bay Gar melted ever so slowly, and trickled into the waiting gullies and ravines, filling the underground rivers to overflowing, until they, at long last, came to the surface. The melting ice caps caused the planet to tip bit by bit, until all that melting water emptied into the sunken plains of the bay of Sol. So they had an ocean now. Their first, and their last. It was the king’s comment that one ocean was enough, considering the size.

“And just think,” he said to his first grandson, Star-Far, “that ocean floor was once Bay Sol, and your mother and father traveled across that bay to meet with Gods, and they crawled through a god’s grave to get to his home.” The boy’s blue eyes grew very large.

“Is the God still living there?” he asked, very awed, as he was always awed when the God was mentioned. “Will I see him one day?”

“Certainly,” said the king, “he has requested often to see you—since you were conceived in his very home. He knows you have his blue eyes, and your mother’s beautiful hair and saffron cream skin, and he was much impressed.” Star-Far was impressed with himself too when he looked in a

mirror. Was it true, what everyone said, that he was the most handsome man alive? For he didn't think of himself as a boy anymore, now that he had reached the age of twelve.

That was Far-Awn's age when he found the star-flowers growing in Bay Sol. That was a man's age in old El Sod-a-Por, but not much of an age now, he had to sadly admit. Now he was just a boy and forbidden he was to marry until he was twenty. When he looked at his grandfather, he couldn't believe his incredible age—so old—but not nearly as old as Es-Trall! Far-Awndra was an oceanside city, with sea breezes to stir Sharita's long silver-gilt hair, with waving depths of amber, when she held her second son in her arms. His small head was covered with dark, almost black ringlets, and his violet, almost blue eyes were turning to a dark plum color.

"Sharita," Dray-Gon complained, "when are you going to have a son that looks like me? Now we only have one child left to go... and that must be a girl exactly like you! See if you can't plan things a bit better from now on, for if she comes looking like me, I'm going to be really disappointed!"

"Well, his skin is your color," said Sharita in defense of this small dark-haired son that already had her heart, but she understood her husband's desire to have a son exactly like himself.

"Let us go to Es-Trall and make him change that law forbidding only three children per married couple—after all, we don't live under city domes now, so we can't overpopulate our planet." But Es-Trall shook his wizened head.

"No!" he flatly stated. "If I relax the law for you two, then others will demand more children, and in no time our planet will be overcrowded. Though I admit I am very sorry, for the two of you produce remarkable children—each different from any species yet."

"Species?" questioned Dray-Gon. "Are we species now, instead of men?"

"Merely a way of speaking," said Es-Trall quickly. "Look around, and you'll see what I mean. Once all of us had only red hair and purple eyes."

While the new queen and her king rejoiced in the birth of their second son, the retired king and queen wandered on a long journey to look over their changed world, to visit with the God in his lofty green home. And indeed, it was a changed world, incredible to Ras-Far when he looked down at the ground from the airship window. Out of the star-flowered

plants, a variety of other life had developed. New types of bushes and scrubs, trees thick and chunky, and other trees tall and slender, and numerous insects followed, and birds of all colors to feed on them, and soon other types of animals to catch what they could.

“Look down there, La Bara—can you believe any of what you see?” La Bara shook her head, just as amazed as Ras-Far. She didn’t talk incessantly now, for her beauty, youth, and vigor were draining away. She was growing old much quicker than her husband ... and to think she was but eighteen when he married her, and Ras-Far had been already in his first years of old age, though not in appearance. In appearance he hardly changed from what he had been then. That this was so puzzled her, and saddened him, so that he said to her in a very kind voice,

“Perhaps, dear, it is time we went home.” La Bara nodded; she had met the God once, that was enough.

“I think when we reach home, Ras-Far, I will lay me down to sleep.” Tears came in her husband’s eyes.

“Darling, no! Not yet!—stay awhile longer, please.” But a longing for sleep brings it on, and no more would La Bara annoy her husband with too much talk, and now he could only wish that she were here to do just that. However, Ras-Far was to see the God in his great green home many times over. When they first began their great explorations and developments, the father of Sharita had gone on every journey that was made to visit and converse with their great and wise God—once only a man, for he kept insisting on saying that, as insistent as they were persistent in not believing. For they would have him what they wanted to believe he was.

Once a century Ras-Far traveled that way to pay his respects, for it had been figured out, more or less, the relationship of the God’s time, in comparison to theirs. And indeed, a hundred years was for all of them an endless, long wait for such a momentous occasion. But to their God it was a matter of but days. Ras-Far began to suspect that a delegation of magistrates of high officials of state could be somewhat offensive if they came more often than ten days apart. Then, most regretfully, he ordered the visits spaced even further apart, for something was happening as the years passed, something strange and unexpected. This made the former king smile to himself a bit uneasily. There were times when he just wasn’t comfortable when he looked at his own personal calendar and figured out

his tremendous age, and as for Es-Trall—who was ever going to believe it? Ras-Far spoke to his daughter when he returned home.

“You and Dray-Gon must go on the next visit, and forget all your official responsibilities. As incredible as this may sound, the God does not look well to me. It seems to me, though speak of it to no one else, that he is not as sharp of wit as he was.” It was true these delegations from the capital city extracted so much from the God that often he felt a bit depleted and drained when the minute questioners departed. He would sit for hours, not moving, restoring himself and wondering about the changes that time was giving to the “ant”-size men that had first visited him.

They were no longer insect size, but growing steadily larger. And surely, when he looked out of his round window, it seemed to the God that the red rocks mounding the grave of his countryman, the ones they called their “Scarlet Mountains,” were not as lowly as once they had been. Even his intelligent small worshippers had casually mentioned his “Green Mountain” home was not the tremendous monumental ship it had once seemed to be.

“Our wise man, Es-Trall, has theorized the quality of life and death and decaying matter is changing and enlarging the size of our small world and peoples much more quickly than he had anticipated.”

“Cannot Es-Trall himself come at least once to visit me?” asked the God rather peevishly.

“It seems it could be arranged, even if he is so old he might break like a stick. You could transport him carefully.” It was King Dray-Gon he talked to this time, and Dray-Gon laughed.

“Lord God, not I, not my wife, not even you can tell Es-Trall what to do with his time. He has every second of his days filled to the brim, and in odd moments of his schedule, he falls asleep. He refuses to take the long sleep, for he is keeper of the records since Sal-Lar died.” The king looked at his wife, who sat very silent and subdued, studying the imaged face of the God in the wall of glass.

“Why do you look so sad, lovely Sharita?” asked the God, the question Dray-Gon was too polite to ask.

“I don’t know. It is just that sitting here, looking at you, I fear this may be the last time we meet.” For it was true; in the sky blue of the God’s eyes, so like her first son’s, there was a haunted, shadowed look, the same

look she had observed in her mother's eyes before they were closed permanently.

“So we have met, and we have looked, and we have talked over many things, but we have never touched, except spiritually. Isn't that enough?” asked the God. Sharita held tight to Dray-Gon's hand as they headed home, toward Far-Awndra, and thought to herself, no, it wasn't enough. How horrible to be only an image in a wall of glass, beyond the reach of a hand to clasp yours. The mighty God of indescribable size had the very same thought in mind as he sat alone after the departure of his royal guests. Heavily he sighed, and made his decision.

They didn't need him now, though once he knew from the tales of their history that they had needed him desperately. Now he could do them a favor. He knew better than they that all the curses of weather, charred and blackened earth, and dry land that wouldn't produce could be laid on his doorstep. He sat there, quiet, pondering, refusing to lift his hand and push the button that would energize his ship by pulling up strength from the earth beneath the silver legs. A revitalizing strength, which, withheld, depleted his mechanical, calculating brain behind the racing colored lights, so that one by one the lights faded and went dark. Now, without that energy supplied to him, his own life could no longer be sustained.

Now the ship's energizers did not jet-stream air, hot and cold, out in blustering torrents of winds to skim over the poles and harass the minute people, and their cities, and ruin their glowing green fields—which were difficult to ruin now, and that made him faintly smile, a little enviously. Slowly, bit by bit, he was dying. He so longed and yearned to see the bright, hot light of his own single yellow sun. He fell asleep and dreamed of the silver moon and how it had lit the nights on his planet, and he could see again a girl he had strolled with there in his youth. Sometimes, if he could meditate deeply enough, he could almost feel the bite of twangy mountain air in his nose, and smell the briny air of the sea. Ah, that was a dream he would never realize. His world was gone, under the water, and an ocean had sprung up in its place. Still, El Dorraine had suns and moons, three of them.

Often he had watched them flitter briefly by in the gray blackness. Even two tiny suns, and three grape-size moons, would be a little reminiscent of his own larger ones. So, when he felt his time was near, he donned his silver suit, put on his protective helmet and all the other gear that would help him breathe in the thin air outside of his green ship. Then

he opened the door, rusty with disuse. He lowered the ladder and most carefully descended to the ground. He didn't want to jar the land and split it open with earthquakes.

Though as careful as he was, those living in far away Far-Awndra felt their earth quiver as the winds rose and blew. Sharita was combing her long, long hair, and her hands stilled, and the sentence half-spoken froze on her tongue. The God was thinking of her as for the second time, in the while he had been a guest on this small planet, he walked on the surface of El Dorraine. Very lightly he treaded a distance from his ship, and with utmost ease, he lowered himself down on the ground, stretching out beside the long pile of red rocks that he had stacked there himself. When he had himself settled fully, the way he wanted to be, he opened the visor of his helmet.

The thin air of El Dorraine entered his lungs and nourished him not. His blue eyes caught the bright gleamings of the twin suns as they hurried by, and he saw the rise of the triple moons, and there were faint, rainbowed sun-risings and sunsets. Over and over again repeating, up then down, the moons spinning about themselves as they made the larger orbit around the planet—and they all came and went so fast, so very fast! He grew weary of watching, and closed his eyes, very tired. The now and then warmth he felt on his skin, then the chills of the quick nights, too short for him to really sleep and fall into dreams of his own world, his own people and then, of his own God. He began a prayer, a prayer from his childhood, for memories of other prayers were all slipping away.

And even with that familiar prayer, he had difficulty recalling the complexities of his own native language. His voice came to him hoarse, alien, touched with the accent of his small visitors. That caused him to smile with the humor of it all. They called him a God. The slight smile was still on his face as his blue eyes opened and glazed over before they rolled backward. He expelled his last breath, and he was dead. Sharita was still sitting quiet and unmoving, as was her husband. They raised their eyes and looked at each other.

“Something has happened,” she said in a hushed, awed tone. “Something is missing.”

“I wonder what?” her husband replied. Then he got up and went to stare out the window toward the Scarlet Mountains. The Green Mountain home was almost concealed now.

The lights of the twin suns, the tiny triple moons, were caught and reflected in the glazed blue pools, many, many times over, before the officials from El Dorraine came upon the God lying there. Shocked and stunned, they could only stare. Their God was dead! They had thought he would never die! A God went on forever, into everlasting eternity. They looked at each other with eyes gone doubting, and faces gone pale. Could it be, then, that he had spoken the truth? Had he been, after all, just a man? A man of another size and color?

But for the first time in their long, long relationship, they could see him in full extension. Not reduced this time in proportion behind the shrinking glass. Oh, what a God he had been! Sadly, depressed, they journeyed back to Far-Awndra and held a meeting in the council room, and discussed seriously the meaning of the God's death. Had the God really been once only a man? Was it possible for only men to achieve that exalted state? That was a thought to dwell and ponder on. But unhappily they all agreed: They had wanted a God—not a man—whatever the size.

"Why isn't Es-Trall here?" someone asked of the queen sitting at the head of the table where her father once sat. Beside her was her husband, both sharing equally the crown and the responsibilities.

"Unfortunately, Es-Trall is too brittle to descend the spiraling staircase," she offered as an excuse, not the real truth. A way could be found to bring Es-Trall down, if he would have it that way, but he wouldn't.

"He is the stubbornest old man you would ever want to meet," opined King Dray-Gon, "but he has good reasons for being the way he is, for coming into this room would distract him in too many directions, and he has his feet now on one path."

"Does he know now the whole truth?" asked one of the ministers. "Can he just look at one of us, and say definitely which is which?"

"Not yet," answered Dray-Gon.

"He says it is difficult to tell." Everyone in the room sighed deeply, with the exception of the king and queen.

"Let us talk now about the God's funeral," said Sharita.

"He was a most gracious God, refusing to be patronizing and condescending, but willing to demean himself and come down to our level. So we must honor him in death as much as we did in life."

This was agreed on with willing alacrity, and all the people of El Dorraine came to honor and bury the giant God. Over his mammoth body they spread a cloth made of the golden pufars, embroidered painstakingly with silver and scarlet and green for his mountain home. Once he was so covered, huge red boulders were lifted and piled over him. No easy job, even with the assistance of the machines designed just for this purpose. For not even with machines were they the rock piler he had been for his copilot. But they managed, just as they always managed.

Years passed before the burial was completed. Now they had a second range of Scarlet Mountains, parallel to the first. Now that the God was completely covered over, they performed the ritual the God had mentioned was customary on his green-blue planet, spinning somewhere in its own universe, far, far away. They repeated the prayers he had taught them were said for this occasion of grief and sorrow. They were recited by everyone who lived in El Dorraine.

“Let us keep these prayers for our own use when our dear ones go into the deep sleep.” A suggestion from the queen, deeply affected by the loss of the God, especially so when she looked at her father. Ras-Far had lost his zest for living, for eating, for doing anything.

“It’s my time too, Sharita,” he said as she tried to encourage him on. “Seek not to hold me here, when I have grown tired of the days, and weary of all that life can offer now.”

“Father!” she cried in great distress. “Have you grown weary of me? Of your grandchildren? Hasn’t Dray-Gon been a good son to you? Have you seen yet the child of my old age? Think back to when our foreparents died in their twenties—and consider what we have now a blessing!”

If anyone could hold him here, she could. Yet there were so many he missed, La Bara especially—his first two wives he could hardly remember, or his first two daughters; they were lost so far back in the past. He even missed Ron Ka and all the spirited disputes they had over the proper way to raise their grandchildren. He held Sharita’s hand firmly in his.

“Daughter, would you have me linger on and on in the way of Es-Trall and turn into a withered old weed that doesn’t know when winter comes? You and I will meet again—perhaps.” It was the “perhaps” that troubled Sharita, so she cried as she and her father clung together, saying good-bye.

It was the law now; if one so chose, they could go into the deep sleep when life became a burden and not a joy—and now Sharita regretted

putting her signature and royal seal on that document. She said then with the sweet charm that made her so beloved to him, “I will have Es-Trall take careful note of the length of your slumber, and time your awakening to coincide with mine and Dray-Gon’s, for we have vowed to each other to lie down together in our last sleep.”

Ras-Far hid some cynicism that was his. Es-Trall’s theories he swallowed with a grain of salt, unlike his daughter who believed faithfully in that wizened old man. Just as faithfully as she had believed in that mammoth God. It was then she shocked him.

“Father, Logan says he will travel to the home of the God one day, that he will find it—however far off it is. Can’t you wait for that day? Don’t you want to be here?” So! Another thing she would believe! She was still as a child, seeking always something large and powerful to cling to. His second grandson would reach the God’s planet? How impossible! How improbable!

“And besides, Father. Dray-Gon and I need you. Es-Trall needs you! Think of him, always alone in his tower, charting the sky, the stars, looking for that galaxy Logan will find one day—two minds are better than one, right?” He had to smile then at her logic, and then he laughed, agreeing. But was there room on one planet for two Es-Tralls?

“You really think it is possible?” asked Star-Far of his younger brother, more than a bit enviously. Since he was next in line for the throne, he wasn’t allowed to be as adventuresome as the second son.

“I mean, you could just be wasting your time and effort—and look what we have all around us to enjoy.”

Logan had the unfocused eyes of a dreamer, a mind as sharp as a rapier; he didn’t look at anyone, he looked through them—an ability inherited from his grandfather. His hair was night-colored, almost midnight blue. His eyes were brown—dark reddish brown, his skin bronze, the exact shade of his father’s. He was as the night—and Star-Far, with his coloring, was as the day. The young girls of El Dorraine couldn’t decide which young prince was the handsomer, though definitely Star-Far had the largest claim on charm—his smiles coming easily, his gallantry naturally. Logan seldom smiled, for he was deep in a world of his own, solving problems that would have baffled Star-Far, who cared not at all for deep thinking or problem solving.

The younger brother wouldn't attend a palace ball without a direct command from his parents—and Star-Far couldn't attend enough balls, as he would dance through life, and romance every beautiful girl he met along the way. And while he was doing this, in a high tower, alone with the oldest man alive, Logan read from cover to cover every book ever written, and stored there. With Es-Trall coaching him, Logan pored over the heavenly charts, and asked ten million questions.

For hours on end, he could peer through the telescope that had evolved through the years into one of gigantic size and immense power. Through Logan's mind raced legion after legion of speculations, as he read and questioned all the words that mammoth god had left recorded. In that green spaceship were all the God's charts still—based on facts—and his maps were there, charted from experience, and his calculator was more complex and ingenious than theirs. When Logan passed through the magnificent halls of the palace, with music resounding from the ballroom, he didn't hear it. He merely ran as fast as his long legs could take him down all the long corridors to the high apartment his parents shared, bursting in on them...

“Father! Mother! It is possible! We can get there from here! Turn that green spaceship over to me—and men who think as I think—and we will have a highway to travel on that will have no ending! There will be no boredom, ever! Will you do it—allow the God's home to be mine? Please!” His father smiled.

“Your mother and I were just speaking of you, and wondering when you would ask for that museum piece as your own private toy to tinker with. So take your scientists, your physicist friends. The ship is yours, and your mother and I agree, the God would be pleased.” This was by far, Logan's utmost happiest moment! A smile broke on his face, like sunlight after a long, cloudy storm—a smile much more impressive since it came so seldom.

“I must go tell Grandfather!” he called, before he turned and again sped down the long halls to his grandfather's rooms, bursting in without any announcement to find his grandfather attended by two beautiful young servant girls, who brushed his grandfather's silvery hair, and shaved his face. Beautiful girls that Logan completely disregarded, as if they were shadows, without any meaning for him.

“Grandfather, excuse me for interrupting your toilet—but the spaceship of the God is mine! So there is no long sleep in store for you

yet! When we come back from the God's planet, you must promise that you will be here waiting for me!"

His grandfather smiled crookedly, thinking of how capriciously fate knotted the twine. It should be Star-Far, who had started his swim toward life in that very ship, who would seek the goal that was Logan's main interest in life.

"Good luck to you, Logan. As for my being here, I may well be..." And his eyes twinkled as he looked at the two girls who had shyly withdrawn to stand in the shadows. Two girls that were a gift from his daughter to replace the young men who had waited on him formerly.

"They came of their own choice, Father... to serve you out of respect and admiration—through no coercion of mine. My birthday gift to you made my husband laugh! I will never give him such a gift!"

With young Logan, all the top brains of El Dorraine journeyed forth again to the Green Mountain, as they still called it that. The flying ships they used now were strong, so powerfully constructed they could have easily withstood the historic bay storms of yesteryear. The storms that came now were as but kittens compared to the tigers that had ravished El Sod-a-Por. Right through the open door of the green spaceship those airships flew. The huge maps of deep blue with the white avenues were laid on the floor of the God's ship, as if one day he knew they would have a need for them, and he had considerately placed everything convenient for their small size.

Though they were not now, by any means, of the minute smallness when the God had last viewed them. Their small ships flew over the maps, taking pictures, so they could later make smaller exact duplicates, easy to handle and study. The giant pages of his books were turned one by one, so they too could be reproduced in miniature scale. Very much Logan wanted to use that giant calculating machine of racing lights on the wall—almost he was tempted to use the nose of his plane to push one of the buttons that would bring those lights into brightness again, and see what would happen.

But judiciousness won out over temptation. It grew tiresome, a waste of time, to fly back and forth to Far-Awndra, across the ocean, so the scholarly young men turned the God's former home into a university. In that seat of learning, there was but one subject, one goal in mind, though it took a thousand roads to reach there. Included in the student body were

a few young women of serious intent, and they were as dedicated as any of the young men.

Logan would have had it otherwise, and kept them out—sent all females back to the cities where they could dance and flirt, and keep their pretty noses and hands out of his affairs. He had a short, impatient way with all of them. And though he was handsome, like every member of his family, he was soon disliked by every girl there but one. That one clung to him like a burr, always choosing the seat just before his, so she could half-turn, smile at him, and posture herself in seductive ways that showed her figure to advantage.

Logan ignored the fluttering of her dark long lashes, the way she would raise her arms to lift her heavy dark hair from her neck, and tease him in every coquettish way a certain book had guaranteed would work on the most reluctant male, unless he was a blind, sexless eunuch. This girl with the dark, curling hair and violet eyes stared at Logan often, wondering if such an accident could have happened to him—and that was what made him so resistant to her charms, which she knew she had.

However, her eyes were attentive to the least detail about his appearance, and his form-fitting clothes revealed he hadn't suffered such an accident. Nothing, absolutely nothing she did made him see her—to him, she was like air to see through—and the more he ignored her, the more determined she became. Thoughts of how to capture his interest kept her awake at night, and she was running out of ideas. One day Logan was passing by her worktable, in a hurry as usual, his arms loaded with books and rolled-up charts, when she quickly put out her foot and tripped him. He sprawled on the floor in a very undignified way, his charts, and books, pencils, scattering everywhere.

“Look what you did!” he flared in a rare burst of uncontrolled bad temper. “But for you and your inane, stupid posturing, this ship we’re planning would be off the ground, instead of just a design on paper! Women weren’t meant for anything but play—so why don’t you go home and learn how to cook, and clean house, and how to handle your legs so they don’t get in everyone’s way!”

“It wasn’t my leg—it was my foot.”

“Then keep your damn feet under your table where they belong!”

“Damn you for your snooty, higher-than-thou attitude!” she flared back just as hotly.

“I am a distant cousin of yours—so there is no reason for you to look down your princely nose at me!” For the first time Logan really saw her.

“A distant cousin?” he asked vaguely. It was hard for him to remember names and faces of cousins; he had too many, and he never attended family reunions if he could in any way find a reasonable excuse not to.

“Yes, Prince Logan, I am a distant cousin of yours. My name is Lamar, and we met once a long time ago. I doubt you would remember. You had your nose in a book while everyone else was dancing and singing. Your great-great-grandfather Far-Awn’s sister married one of my grandfathers—his name was Sal-Lar.”

“Oh, I know Sal-Lar!” responded Logan with enthusiasm, as if Sal-Lar were an old and good friend, and not dust in the ground. “I read his history books when I was a boy. Sal-Lar married Bret-Lee when she was comatose, and he was going to be sacrificed, just when Far-Awn came back with the puhlets and pufars!”

Lamar didn’t doubt for a moment that Logan had read every history book ever written. It was a wonder his eyes weren’t reddened and dull-looking from so much reading and studying, instead of flashing and dark, and so intensely alive it made her heart thud loud when he scanned his eyes down over her ... and then up to stare at her face. He was really seeing her at last!—and she, stupidly, couldn’t think now of a word to say, and her face seemed frozen so she couldn’t even move and put to good use that smile she had practiced before the mirror for so long. Instead of speaking, or smiling, she got down on her hands and knees and helped him gather up his armload of supplies. By the time this had been accomplished, she had recovered some of her poise, and sweetly charming, she handed to him the last spilled item.

“I hate to tell you this, Prince Logan, but I don’t think you are human,” she said, looking directly into his beautiful dark eyes.

“You are like that thing up there on the wall—with thoughts racing around inside your brain, flashing your eyes—but you are only a calculating machine walking blindly about on two legs. You are programmed to reach the God’s home, and nothing else. You are not a man at all. Have you ever stopped and thought about what you will do after you accomplish your goal? There will be nothing left for you. Do you know what I think?”

“And of course, you don’t want to know what I think, because you don’t care about anyone’s thoughts but your own. When we come back from the God’s home planet, you will dry up like a dead leaf of fall, or curl into an old dry claw, like Es-Trall!”

Stunned, Prince Logan was left with his arms carelessly stacked with books and rolled-up charts, and his brain awl with bewilderment. Why, what had he done to cause all that anger and resentment, and ugly words, when she had been the one to trip him! He was the one who had taken that hard fall and wrenched his knee, and she was angry! By the Gods, he would never understand women!

What Star-Far saw in girls was beyond him! Not that his older brother had any intention of marrying a girl anytime soon. It was Star-Far’s oft-repeated remark that he was saving all three wives for his old age, and while he was young and middle-aged, he would sample all the cups of wine. Wine? Why the devil would anyone compare women to wine? More like poison! Yet, in the days that came after, he began to watch Lamar, though he took care not to let her know he was looking.

On a day of great excitement, when their first spaceship was finished, he smiled at Lamar and shyly asked, “I’m going home for a short visit. My parents are always complaining they don’t see enough of me. So I was wondering ... I thought, well, that maybe... I mean, you wouldn’t want to... would you?”

“Oh yes, I’d love to! I thought you would never ask!” In his own flying ship, Logan flew Lamar to the crystal palace, and introduced her to his parents and to his new little sister, called Roseanne, and of course, to Star-Far. Immediately attentive, Star-Far turned on the charm.

“We haven’t met before, have we?” he asked, raking his sky-blue eyes over her nubile figure, and then back to the lovely pale face framed in soft dark hair, and rare violet eyes. Star-Far glanced at his mother, whom he thought the most beautiful woman alive—and yet, here before him was an entirely different type, and just as breathtakingly lovely in her own special way. While Logan rhapsodized to his parents about the splendid, powerful ship they had now—vastly superior to any of the smaller ones made and tested—Star-Far closed in on Lamar, and backed her into a corner.

“You are not really going on that fool trip, are you?” he asked, looking at her in his special way reserved for only the most beautiful and appealing girls.

“A beauty like you, that sort of thing is for dull, ugly girls who can’t catch a man and must find some other reason for staying alive.” Trapped against the wall, with two powerful arms barring her escape, Lamar marveled on how two brothers could be so different.

“Prince Star-Far,” she replied coolly, “I assure you that I am going. I haven’t spent half my life studying and preparing for that journey just to be turned aside because I happen not to be dull and ugly. I would rather go with your brother, Logan, on that trip than dance through a thousand balls with you.”

Very gently she pushed him away, and walked to where she could sit close at Logan’s side. From there she smiled benevolently, charmingly at Star-Far. Her look and her attitude implying that he was a mischievous little boy who had to be tolerated but not enjoyed. The crown prince stood stunned, shocked, and quite angry. Girls didn’t treat him that way! Not once had he been rejected, or even rebuffed! The queen had taken all this in, and later reported the incident to her husband.

“Dray-Gon, it was marvelous what that girl did to Star-Far! All along I have been hoping some girl would put him in his place. He has an exalted opinion of himself, believing he is irresistible.” Then Sharita was laughing.

“You know, our first son is almost as intolerable as you were when we first met. I took one look at that darned puhlet fur jacket you were wearing and wanted to slap your face—and you stood there foolishly gawking at me for so long, pretending to be dazzled, and all along you were only mocking, and trying to be as insulting as possible.”

The king had in his hands the model of the spaceship Logan had brought, as he stared down at the beautiful baby girl in her crib, draped about with shimmering pink cloth and filmy lace. A daughter at last—like her mother—only this one had hair silver-pink, and highlighted with gold—but her eyes were the same almost blue color of Sharita’s. Their last child, the child of their old age, yet when he turned and looked at his wife, she had hardly changed at all, except, in his eyes, to grow more beautiful.

All these years she had managed to keep him intoxicated so that he hadn’t turned his eyes toward other, younger women as did many other men his age. He couldn’t imagine a life without Sharita beside him. Trying to think back to that long-ago evening when they had first met, he didn’t recall any effort to be mocking—but insulting, yes.

“Darling, if you are trying to chew over old cud, and start some argument, save it for tomorrow night. I’m not in the mood now. I am just too happy, what with my new baby daughter and this ship Logan has built. Look at this, Sharita! I believe this ship of his is designed just right, and it is so simple—like a child’s top to spin! This one is going to work. I feel it in my bones!” He set the model aside, and came to pick up his wife of so many years, and he spun her about as her arms clung round his neck.

“Just think of the enormity of it! Our son is going to the God’s giant green planet! Can you believe that? Recall when we traveled there, just across the desert of Bay Sol, and thought we were making a real contribution? And look where Logan is going—out of our galaxy and into another! I wish we were going too, you and I. I wish we weren’t held here by so many duties and responsibilities.”

They kissed several times before Sharita was set upon her feet and drawn out on the terrace where they could see the stars in the dark plum night sky. Both were thinking the same thoughts, of their journey to the God’s home... But Logan would cross through outer space, enter another galaxy, to reach a great world whereon lived giants of unknown character... if indeed any were left.

“You know, Sharita, it seemed at the time that ours was a fabulous, incredible odyssey—but when compared to Logan’s, it will be but a stroll down a garden path.” Sharita was thinking everything was relative. Their trip hadn’t been any stroll down a garden path. There came to her still nights when she had dreams that woke her up trembling, with her heart pumping fast and hard, and glad she was to turn over and find in her bed the man who made all this worthwhile. Looking out there, into the dark night and all that space, and to realize it went on and on and on into infinity made her shiver. At least they had been able to look ahead and see their goal.

Yet, she wasn’t disbelieving Logan could do it. For that reason he was born, as she and Dray-Gon had been born for their journey, and to give to their world what they had. Very tightly she embraced her husband, laying her head against his chest, wondering how those distant giants would welcome her son and his party of young space travelers.

“Dray...” she began in a small faltering voice, “the God said he left his world in ruins—but some just as large as he could still be there. What if they don’t want or don’t need what we are sending?”

That made Dray-Gon laugh heartily. “Oh, they will! Only fools wouldn’t accept a gift such as we will deliver!”

Epilogue

Smaller spaceships had been built and tested, but this was their first important ship. It jetted out of the cavernous mouth of the Green Mountain to reach beyond the clouds, traveling higher and higher, until their own small planet was revealed as a glowing jewel, all green, violet, and red set against black velvet. To inch their way off their own star made all of El Dorraine cheer madly with the enormity of this accomplishment. Other ships were constructed, each larger, and farther and farther they reached out into space, skimming through the black vacuum. In his ultimate and best blue ship, Logan, as captain, searched all their own galaxy and found nothing at all like themselves, or even growing life. He wasn't disappointed nor despondent as he flashed back the news to those waiting on El Dorraine.

“Mother, Father, you know the God said this was the way of things. That growing life is unique, and extremely difficult to find, and everything up here looks the same when viewed from a distance. We have to close in to see any differences—and so far, we are alone in our galaxy.” Back to El Dorraine zoomed the spaceship of blue, to study again the giant charts of the Gods.

“Look,” said Logan to Lamar, who was always just a step ahead of him, behind him, or to his side, “our God reached our planet by accident, not by design. None of his charts indicate the way from his planet to ours, so they are of no real value until we find his galaxy. But, if an accident of fortuitous discovery can happen once, it can happen fortuitously twice! Doesn't Es-Trall proclaim that happenstance makes for the greatest discoveries and inventions?”

Lamar stared up at him, awestruck by his wisdom and confidence. For if Es-Trall did the thinking in his distant high tower, it was Logan who turned the visions into reality, and worked out all the minor details that were beneath Es-Trall's lofty philosophy and technical ability.

“If we are to attain the power to jet our ship beyond the control of our galaxy, then we are going to need a ship just as large as this one the God came in ... and just as powerful,” she contributed. “Your design is perfect, Logan, it just doesn't have the power.”

Together they put their heads, making notes, comparing ideas and conjectures, until Lamar grew so sleepy her head began to sag... and then she was nodding. Logan was startled to discover for the past ten minutes he had been talking to a girl who wasn't hearing a word. He picked her up and carried her to the small cubicle that was hers, bare of any luxuries, and gently laid her on her narrow bed. He stood staring down at her, wondering why she was so persistent, so determined, when most of the other girls had long ago dropped out of the mission, one by one.

Her dark, soft hair was spread all over her pillow like a sensuous cloud to sleep on, and when he reached to touch it, a tendril curled about his finger like a ring, like a wedding band. Logan had it in his mind that he would never marry, that he would devote his life to science and let Star-Far make the three children he was allotted—giving Star-Far a total of six. But looking now at Lamar sleeping, he knew Star-Far wasn't going to make his children—he was going to make them himself, and with this very girl so set on winning him.

Not that he would let her know it yet. So easy it would be to fall into a pit of lovemaking, like Star-Far was already submerged in, and he might never be able to climb out and fulfill the destiny he believed was his alone. He leaned to kiss Lamar's lips, so that she only stirred in her sleep and whispered his name, as if in her dreams she knew whose lips touched hers.

The next spaceship constructed was of a mammoth size, blue, like all the others, and emblazoned with the purple and blue and gold standard for the royal house of Far-Awn. Into the storage bins of the ship went a generous supply of pufar seeds, and even some of the star-flower plants themselves, grown in pots, to give the favored planet of their dead God a quicker start toward all the glories and miracles the pufars could bring about. They themselves had created a paradise out of nothing.

Turning themselves from dirt-dobbers seeking only to feed and keep themselves alive into people in control—not just actors playing out their parts against a beautifully designed and painted backdrop and manipulated against their wills. Their lives were their own; they wrote the script, directed the play, acted out the parts ... and when the last curtain went down, they too would swing the counterweights and make even that decision.

Perennials, some to bloom again. Annuals, some to bloom but once. And only Es-Trall knew which was which, and he wouldn't tell... Only they, in all the worlds that were, had the particular blessing of the star-

flowers. Their dead God had told them this. To honor him, and the other sleeping God in the first Scarlet Mountains, they would bestow their blessing on that distant, blue-green planet that was called Earth.

Years passed as the gleaming blue ship sped on toward the planet of the dead Gods. Inside were Logan and Lamar, as his first lieutenant, and nineteen other young men, annuals and perennials. No longer were any of them able to sink into the dim-despairs, for the promise started in Sharita had blossomed into reality for all. Darkness could be resisted now, no matter how long it lasted, and they could come out of it alert, cheerful, smiling. It was Logan who spotted it first, glowing bluish green in the enormity of ebony all around. It had but one sun, but one moon; there were five oceans of deepest blue, and the ground was a patchwork of browns, golds, and greens. Oh yes! So exactly it fitted the God's description—it had to be the correct one! Besides, it was so overwhelmingly large!

Joyous, exhilarated, everyone, the message was beamed back to their home planet: "We are here at last, in sight of the God's green earth!"

Captain Logan's announcement was recorded in their history books. His mother and father embraced, tears in their eyes—and Logan's grandfather, Ras-Far, sat very quiet, realizing he had reached the ultimate peak in his life. The time for sleeping was now, for dormancy, for rejuvenation. To awaken at some far distant time a babe again, with a new life and a new body, and a new zest for going on.

He was a perennial and would come again, as would Sharita and Dray-Gon, and Star-Far and Logan—and Es-Trall, the one who had started it all on the day he had discovered the starflowers and had thrust them greedily into his mouth. But he was a secret known only by himself, his daughter, and her husband. On his wedding day Star-Far would be told—if he ever had a wedding day. It would take a clever, exceptional girl to catch and hold him. Somehow fate had mixed up the brothers. It should be Logan who would inherit the throne and the responsibilities.

"Well, nothing is perfect," said Dray-Gon pragmatically, "even for us." Sharita had to laugh, for he sounded so much like Raykin, their minister of state for so many years. Logan directed his ship lower, into the gravity field of the huge planet. Then, under the layers of clouds the ship soared, able now to observe what had only been briefly glimpsed before. The captain's dark eyes met with the violet ones of his first lieutenant, both pairs shining with excitement and a happiness that was close to ecstatic

rapture. For the first time their lips met in a real kiss, passionate and simmering with inner fires.

“Wow!” exclaimed Lamar in breathless wonder when their lips separated. “You don’t do badly for just a beginner!”

Logan reasoned it was all the restraint, held back so long it had built up into an explosive force, and Lamar laughed happily at his consistency, so that even romance could be turned into a form of physics. Down even lower drifted the blue ship from El Dorraine, so those on board could view the rivers, mountains, lakes—and huge cities. Cities? This surprised them. So, the cracking of the earth’s surface and the deluge that came after the close passing of the red planet had not exterminated all of their giant God’s kind; they had risen again—and in force!

Cities crowded the land edges near the seas, and pushed inward to the plains. Everywhere cities, pushing one on the other, with small space in between. Down lower they went. Now they could see tall buildings and streets, and long highways that flowed and crisscrossed everywhere. Through the eyes of their telescopes they could see ripe golden grains blowing in the wind, and lush fields of grasses, and beasts enclosed by the thousands within pens—and people moving about like frantic “ants” here and there. There was great agitation in their actions, not understandable. As those in the ship watched, they saw small spitting fires and bursts of smoke, and buildings that collapsed into dust... and some of the running people fell and lay still. Disturbed, Logan signaled for the ship to be lifted beyond the layers of cloud banks.

“Recall how the God spoke of wars? That must be what is going on down there. We have come at an inopportune time.”

All their brilliant young heads were put together, and this was talked over seriously. What should they do after traveling so far, and after searching for so long, and building toward this moment for so many years? For the first time Logan had doubts about the mission of this journey, and about the reception they would receive. The natives of their God’s world were not the domestic, primitive farmers of old El Sod-a-Por, nor were they the sensitive intellectuals and sensualists of El Dorraine—they were something in between, eager for killing, for taking. And perhaps after all, after seeing their lush fields and golden grains, the pufars weren’t needed. Had they come so far to give, when already gifts had been lavishly bestowed?

This was no barren, arid El Sod-a-Por. This was a world already rich in material things. Logan momentarily frowned and looked somehow a combination of his father and his maternal grandfather. Between them they had such a close communication, Lamar could read his thoughts.

“Those penned animals down there must be meant for slaughter,” she reminded him, “such as we used to do with the puhlets and quickets and quackets. And if you noticed, there are a few places down there where the ground is not fertile-looking—the pufars could benefit those people. Yet, there are so many people down there. It may not be wise to give them the means to live as long as we do. We can hold down our population—but can they?”

Another young man expressed his opinion:

“But look at us—we who are the best have evolved from annuals into perennials, and the quality of what we are does the deciding, not our own choice. The pufars know how to keep the scales balanced. And those peoples down there are not stupid—they too will become wise in ways of control, just as we have. And to let a great genius die and never live again is a sin of irresponsible waste. The seeds of the flowers themselves know in which soil they thrive best, and they do their own selecting, and impart to a chosen few the best of everything. But even the annuals are given special blessings of extraordinary good health and above-average appearance, and sometimes they too are spectacularly beautiful, so no one is ever certain which species he or she is—that’s the beauty of it—and to hold on to youth and vigor for so long, isn’t that alone a miracle in itself? Don’t those struggling, warring peoples down there deserve the chance to develop into what we are?”

It was voted upon and unanimously agreed. It would be unfair to leave and not bestow their gifts, needed or not. The star-flowers were wise—they would decide if they would flourish and give lavishly, or die without bestowing one thing. As Logan looked the great world over, searching for just the right place to land their ship safely and scatter the seeds, and put their plants into the soil, he didn’t know his ship was being observed too. Not one on that blue spaceship realized that they themselves were partly responsible for the frenzied activity going on below. Those in the ship didn’t hear the screams of terror, the broadcasts of UFOs quickly denied by all those in authority.

“You are not seeing a spaceship ... what you are seeing can be explained as a natural phenomenon caused by the play of light and atmosphere peculiarities that happen on rare occasions.”

Over a huge dun-colored plain the blue spaceship skimmed, very reminiscent to the space travelers of their old Bay Sol. They looked at each other and smiled. A desert—though not as barren as Bay Sol, for even here some living growth reached toward the sun. A perfect place! However, clued as they were to the nature of the people who inhabited the earth below, Logan kept his ship high until all was ready for the landing. He chose the very early day, just before the dawning of the single sun, while the fierce inhabitants of this warring world were still sleeping.

But those in control on the ground were not sleeping; very much they were aware of the hovering blue spaceship that filled them with apprehensions unlimited, with fears rampant, with speculations wild and fanciful. Hotlines were ringing, and leaders of nations were conversing in excited voices while the news media tried to soothe the public into believing they weren't really seeing a UFO—just a strange and rare atmospheric condition. Even a president took to the airways, soothing, calming, rationalizing...no reason to panic—everything was under control.

“Flying saucers just don't exist!” Just before dawn, on a broad flat sweep of the Arizona desert, Logan sat his ship down as lightly as a feather. As their captain and the great-great-grandson of Far-Awn, it was his honor to be the first one to set foot on the homeland of their god. Just behind him came Lamar in her white uniform, with her dark hair concealed beneath a white helmet blazed with gold. They were not the pint-sized men and women the mountain God had known just before his death. If he could have seen them now, he would have judged them as half his size. Even they didn't realize how rapidly they grew in proportion to every other thing that grew on their planet.

“Look how curious these things are,” said Lamar, glancing toward the multiarmed, ruttled green things that jutted straight up out of the ground. “And look, Logan—everything here wears a coat of armor made of needles!” She would wander off and look over everything closely, but Logan caught her arm restraining her.

“No. We will plant and we will seed, and then hurry from this place, and be finished before the sun is up fully and the giants awoken. I have an uneasy feeling, like we aren't welcome.”

Standing very still and close to him, Lamar could sense it too. But her sparkling amethyst eyes scanning quickly around saw nothing dangerous, or anything that moved or threatened. She shrugged off the eerie disquietness that was stealing from this momentous occasion the pleasure they should be experiencing. Keeping close to Logan's side, she began digging little holes for the star-flower plants.

When all were in the ground, for good measure they dumped every bag of seeds, scattering them widely without any pains in their hurry to get away. There was no need for water—the plants would grow under any circumstances if they chose to, and if so, they would automatically adjust in proportion to their surroundings. The single sun was just peeking over the eastern horizon by the time they had finished. All about them they sensed a tension, taut threatening, but they had their ritual to follow, and follow they would. So they knelt on the ground in a circle and repeated the prayer their god had taught them before he died.

“Our father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...” So it was done.

“Let's go!” called out Logan, ordering everyone to pick up their tools and hurry back to the waiting ship. Once they were aboard the ship, it was lifted into the air very quietly, whispering up into the clouds, higher and higher. There they hovered before igniting full power, so they could beam back a triumphant message to those waiting far, far away.

“Your majesties, our quest is accomplished! The star-flowers are planted. The seeds are scattered on the ground where once our dead Gods walked!” It was only then the sun children of El Dorraine noticed in their rampant enthusiasm to finish quickly, they had used every bag of seeds, including one they had planned to save and use on the moon, for that gray-white desolate place really had a need for them.

“Oh well,” reasoned Logan, “it will be only a matter of time before the giants themselves will reach their moon, and they can plant them, and the starflowers will make oxygen where there is none, and give forth their own nourishing atmosphere. You know, if there are true gods, we have just finished planting and seeding them.” It was then he turned his attention to Lamar, broadly smiling as he did.

“Hey, Lieutenant, since our mission is accomplished, I thought I might casually mention that I love you ... and as soon as we are home again, we could plan our wedding.” She stared at him, going very pale, and taken aback from the suddenness of his proposal—or was it a proposal?

“Logan ... are you serious?—I might very well be just an annual...”

“What’s the difference? I love you ... I think you love me, and if you are but an annual, would you care to spend that single season with me?” Her hand fluttered to her heart that was racing madly, then up to cover her smile of delight... and then both arms were flung around his neck.

“With you? What have I been trying to tell you over the years? That you are the only one I want—and I was scared to death you would never want me!”

On distant El Dorraine, the message of success was flashed out on all the news-reflectors. Joyfully the people took to the streets, cheering in gratification. It was done! It had taken them years and years of hard work, dedication, and determination, and undaunted faith—and they had succeeded! They had repaid their Gods at last for blowing them up from the ground and making them into ambulatory men. And those very same gods had given them another, even greater gift, by wiping away all the gossamer cobwebs of doubts that had whispered in their minds and ached in their hearts.

They were not meaningless, biological accidents, with no other destiny but to live, work, and reproduce and then die, forever lost. They were here to acquire knowledge, so they would come again, better than before. They were in the image of the Gods themselves, with great purpose, and unlimited reasons for perpetuating their lines. Though now their last God had been dead several hundred years, they were not desolate or depleted—for he had lent them his god. Someday, however long it took, they would find him too. Of that they were sure.

Had not some of them once stood on the very palm of their giant god—would not someday the same experience happen again? And while they were searching the stars looking for him, and exploring each universe, they would plant and sow—be it near their own sun, or ever so far. Be it too hot, or be it too cold, or too dry—it wouldn’t make a bit of difference. The starflower plants could grow from a rock. The queen, Sharita, went to her father, who sat very still and silent, and knelt at his side.

“Father, aren’t you happy? Logan has done it. His mission is fulfilled. All his life he has worked toward this day, to give to our god’s home planet growth that will keep it from ever being depleted again, however insatiable the appetites there.”

“Ah, girl,” groused Ras-Far, “of course I am happy that our young people have accomplished the impossible, when most believed it highly improbable—but Es-Trall has tricked me! When I went to tell him the news, he heaved a great sigh and lay back on his bed, and went into the deep sleep! I seized his shoulders and tried to shake him awake, but he went into wood before my very eyes so I had him sent underground to rejuvenate in dormancy, without any fuss and ceremony, for he commanded that it be that way ... and no one outside of our family is to know. Star-Far carried him down there. You know, this is the first time I have seen that grandson of mine look serious.”

Tears swam in Sharita’s violet, almost blue eyes. Her face shadowed with grief for losing Es-Trall, so long a part of her life.

“Did you tell Star-Far who he was?”

“Of course I told him! It’s time he knew his destiny. It’s time that boy married and produced a child, instead of frittering his life away the way he is. It is a fine and wonderful thing to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh—but that is not all there is to life!” The king had heard all of this too, and Dray-Gon came to sit near his father-in-law.

“The loss of Es-Trall is indeed regrettable, especially at this time—but someone must take his place and carry on his name and tradition. And you know, as well as Sharita and I know, just who that someone is.”

“No!” stormed Ras-Far.

“I too can grow weary. As soon as Logan returns, I was planning on laying me down to sleep.”

“But Father,” Sharita pleaded, clutching his hand to her heart. “Think of how much older Es-Trall was than you, and think of all the pleasure he gained from contributing so much.”

“But I had hoped to avoid such old age as his,” said Ras-Far wearily, turning his handsome gray head toward the windows.

“I would pass from here without experiencing that kind of wizened old age.” The room was silent. His was no light decision to make—to take Es-Trall’s place so that no one would ever know the change of one man into another. Finally Sharita could bear the suspense no longer.

“Father, speak to me now truly—was Es-Trall really your grandfather—was he Far-Awn, come back after his wife Mar-Laine died?”

If he was, think of how incredibly old he was!” Ras-Far’s dark purple eyes shadowed even more.

“Sharita, what can I say, but what I have said before. One day an old man came to me and said he was my grandfather Far-Awn, and he had the right color eyes, and he knew intimate family details that no one else could possibly know—he could even quote the personal letter my grandfather wrote to me, and rolled up and slipped over it the royal crested ring, and no one has ever read that but myself. So, yes, he must have been Far-Awn. He told me the tale of how he and his wife tried to reach the Green Mountain, but she fell sick, and then stumbled and broke her leg, and shortly afterward died and how Far-Awn lost all desire to go on to the Green Mountain alone. He said he lived for a while in a small green valley where he had buried Mar-Laine... and then he came back to tell me his story.

“I believed him then; I believe him now; I have never been wrong in reading truth in a man’s eyes.” And here the former king smiled lovingly at his still beautiful daughter.

“And besides, Sharita, his eyes were the same color as yours, and his skin the same tone. You are both rare flowers of exceptional beauty, for he was beautiful once too. I can recall him that way. Don’t you see, my love? Why I would go before I turn into an old withered stick?”

Sharita hugged him close.

“Father, you are not keeping up with our latest medical discoveries. Es-Trall aged the way he did because he failed to sleep enough. So long our scientists have searched for a solution to the problem of aging, and there it was, right in front of us, so simple. A short nap once in a while is not enough for the kind of people we are—we need long hours of sleep. We will not allow you to stay awake day after day, and grab only naps like Es-Trall. Our new Es-Trall will be assisted so he can sleep and keep his handsome good looks forever and ever—if he so chooses—and if you do not, then someone else will take up where you leave off.”

It was then that Dray-Gon came and clasped Ras-Far’s hand.

“I am here, Father, for you have been a real father to me since my own went into the deep sleep, and I can spell you from time to time, as will Sharita, and later Logan or Star-Far. Far-Awn grieved too much for Mar-Laine—we will see that you are not alone in that tower as he was. We can’t abandon our project now. Someone has to chart the stars and assist Logan

to find other planets where our gift is needed, for we will not pass by the God's home galaxy again."

Thoughtfully Ras-Far bowed his head. Then he slowly lifted it, staring toward the immense tapestry created by La Bara. He would never see her again, even in another life... she was an annual. He sighed, and nodded his head.

"Call me Es-Trall from this day on. Ras-Far died today."

On the planet of Earth, the gleaming blue ship was still under surveillance by the fearful people on the ground. Hidden in ditches, and gullies, and behind rocks, blue, green, gray, brown, and hazel eyes had all watched as the small alien people had left their huge ship and descended to the ground. They had seen them put the plants in the ground and scatter the seeds, and heard them repeat the strange, unintelligible prayer while they knelt with bowed heads.

Spellbound and caught in awe, they had wondered what it all meant. Who were they? What was their purpose? What were they planting? As soon as the blue ship lifted, men ran to telephones. Messages raced back and forth across their lands. Waiting officials conferred, and a hasty, unconsidered decision was made. Worldwide emergencies demanded, commanded, immediate and drastic measures.

"Is that ship still within firing range?"

"Yes. For some reason, they are hovering up there beyond the clouds, as if reluctant to leave—we have the feeling they are planning something else." The order was given.

"Take no chances." So a long shiny metal finger was aimed at the blue ship that thought itself unobserved and safe just before Logan ordered full speed ahead. Carefully, precisely, the spaceship was focused directly in the center of the fine crosshairs of the gun sight—and then that immense missile was fired! Aboard the ship, Lamar had changed from her white lieutenant's uniform into a long gown. She danced up to Logan, pivoting around, smiling at him teasingly.

"See, I brought along a wedding gown. I don't want to wait all those years just so we can have a grand royal wedding in the crystal palace. Let us marry here, today, and enjoy our trip home sharing the same room and bed, and perhaps, if we are lucky, by the time we reach El Dorraine, we will have a baby...or one started."

In a happy, playful mood, Logan reached for her, and she skipped away, luring him on while the other men on board laughed. Then, tripping on the long skirt of the gown, Lamar fell against the control panel. In her efforts to keep her balance, and keep from tearing her wedding gown, she clutched desperately for anything to support herself. A dozen or so switches were thrown out of position. Logan yelled, and Lamar screamed! All bedlam broke loose as the ship rocketed sideways, and with such tremendous force everyone not seated was thrown to the floor, and it seemed the forward propulsion might pull out their insides and splatter them on the walls.

“By the Gods, what have we done!” flared Logan, seeing everything go past him in a blur, while just to the side of their porthole window something whizzed by like a beam of light. Very softly someone said:

“Those people on Earth—they fired at us. We brought them the ultimate gift—and they sought to kill us.”

This soft-spoken young man came to assist Lamar to her feet, while Logan scrambled to his. The fired rocket could be seen far to the side of them, blazing a long red tail as it faded into the distance. Logan put his arm around Lamar and drew her into his embrace, grateful once again she was such an everlasting tease and flirt, the eternal woman, taking this auspicious time to try on a dress and flit around. She managed in her innocence somehow to save them all from being but bits of disintegrated dust. She was trembling, near tears, but she didn’t cry even as the third in command spoke in a calm voice laid thinly over nervousness:

“Captain, we have jettisoned far beyond our fuel capacity to reach home. Our navigators don’t have the least idea of where we are.”

Turning his attention to the charts, and comparing them with the complex system of dials on the panels, Logan glanced at Lamar, who was checking just as intensely as he was. He faced to address all of those who anxiously awaited his opinion:

“Well, it seems we are now in the same position as the two gods when they ran before the passing of the red planet about to collide with their Earth. We have to find a place to set down, and quickly, or float around, forever adrift in space. But first, I’ll contact El Dorraine and tell them of our situation.”

Silently, attentively, his companions watched as he did all the right things, pushed all the right buttons, and activated the right levers—but

nothing happened. He didn't panic. Logan was much too controlled for that. He repeated the procedure with more care given to details, and still no voice responded to his beamed messages. Now truly they were lost, out of touch with home base and those who waited there.

"All right, you know what this means as well as I. This communicator will have to be repaired as soon as we touch down somewhere. We will figure out something, and if we fail to contact El Dorraine, they will send a spaceship out to search for us. We don't have all the brains on this ship, thank the God that be, and at least we have accomplished our goal. We have given the greatest gift of all to the homelands of our gods. How many are there anywhere who can boast of that?"

Hours later, just as the last of their fuel was used, they found an unlikely planet to set down—isolated and desolate, presenting them with an eerie landscape when they peered to look out. No one was cheered: twenty young men in their prime and one young girl in hers. Someone laughed nervously and said they should have brought along more women so the time could pass more enjoyably. Captain Logan snapped:

"We will consider passing our time enjoyably after we have passed it constructively and repaired the damaged communicator." When his men were working on this project, Logan drew Lamar aside.

"I want you to keep out of sight as much as possible until we are again in contact with our leaders. I don't like some of the grumbling I've heard." She whispered to him:

"Darling, have you forgotten Es-Trall? Whether or not we contact home, he has his sky charts, and knows expertly how to read them. He will have followed our ship on his scanning machine."

Immediately Logan felt happier. She was right, one could depend on Es-Trall to do his job well, and jot it all down so less talented minds could see what only he could.

"He's a marvel, isn't he, that old man? Let us pray that he hasn't gone into the deep sleep as yet, for some day he must."

He regretted saying that the minute the words left his mouth, for Lamar's complacent look vanished, and she struggled to stay aloof. He quickly kissed her.

"Silly girl, there are no fears for us. Back in that crystal palace are others who care very much about all of us, as much as Es-Trall, who kept himself

alive so many years for our benefit. Someone else will take over when he dies.”

“Is it death, then, the deep sleep?” she asked, violet eyes wide. Logan gave to her then the only answer he could in honesty, with love, compassion, and understanding in his eyes as dark as the plum night sky that surrounded them: “For some it is.”

The earthmen on the ground saw that they had missed, and frantically they fired again at the shimmering blue ship that shot erratically sideways like a sudden bolt of lightning, quickly out of range. Greatly disappointed, they turned their attention to the contaminated ground. They had another type of weapon to use here, and it was positioned and used with care. The seeded and planted ground was razed with fire until it was black and charred—for Lord knows what those strange little devils had put there!

When it was over, and not one green leaf or star-shaped white opalescent flower showed, some looked with satisfaction. A few doubted that it had been really necessary, the minority. But what is a minority when the majority has the louder voice? But when, in a few days, the blackened earth was checked, and tender yellow-green was seen peeking upward, even the doubters became assured. A normal plant wouldn’t survive such severe treatment—growing there in the blackened earth was something uncanny, something weird, something devilish and unholy!

Once more the extinguisher was rolled into place, and this time they took greater pains to burn the ground thoroughly—and long. Uniformed guards were stationed around the blackened, ruined earth to keep the sightseers away, the souvenir hunters who tried to salvage a dead or burned leaf, and one man was sent to jail for stealing a flower that was immediately destroyed. Now they waited, not really too confident the darn things were defeated. And they weren’t!

In another few days, they were peeking up again, seeking the sun, and rapidly growing toward it. This was a real contingency to send even the most skeptical into a flux of frightening, fearful speculations! Why, the damned things must have long, long, indestructible roots! Why, they could overtake the desert, and eventually the whole continent from the rapid pace at which they grew! The president met with his cabinet and other world leaders, and a few of the more daring scientists risked suggesting a few of the plants be saved for specimens.

“Why not? We don’t know if they are harmful.”

“But they are blooming already with eerie little white flowers that glow luminously in the night!”

“Is that such a dreadful thing?” Apparently it was. Perhaps if they hadn’t grown so rapidly, so determinedly, so beautifully luminous and opalescent, giving them an unworldly appearance that was too ghostly different from anything seen before, someone would have looked closely and seen the clustering center seeds as sparkling as any jewel that decorated a lady’s finger. But no one was given this chance. Who could feel secure in a world where such as that grew? Stubborn, tenacious plants like that had to be wiped out, exterminated, eradicated, no matter how deeply those roots extended down into the earth!

Of course, that would mean sacrificing the surrounding cities, and destroying millions of dollars’ worth of someone else’s property, and the land would be spoiled for decades—but cities and homes and land were expendable. The people were ordered from the cities, given just enough time to pack a few personal belongings. Patients were rushed out of the hospitals in ambulances; factories closed forever, and a dam just newly constructed at the cost of millions would be destroyed too, along with all the cheap electrical energy it would supply.

“My God, would you look?” said one guard to another, his eyes wide in fear—for as unbelievable as it sounded, those flowering plants were already producing fruit, curled-up small pinkish gourds, or crescent melons.

“Look at the forms,” whispered one of the higher officials, “that little peachy melon—it almost looks like a luminous human fetus.”

“What an imagination!” someone else laughed, though he too stared.

“What say we back off some?”

This time a plane was sent high into the air. Over their target, a bomb was dropped. It detonated directly on target. Good drop. A mammoth crater was bitten into the desert floor, causing a cloud to mushroom up into the bright sunny sky, and for a moment, it blacked out the sun. The danger of radiation fallout was immense, but it had to be risked. Now, everyone agreed, there wasn’t a plant anywhere in this world, or any other, that could resist or survive that! This time they were right. This time they had done a superb job. The star-flowering plants had liked that rich desert floor waiting for millions of years to receive something like them.

That single hot sun blazing down would have been so much more nourishing than the tiny twin orbs of El Dorraine. The pufars would have given so much, much more, if but allowed the chance. They were only plants, but they knew they weren't wanted; the dim-despairs overtook them, and they didn't struggle to live this time. They were extinguished, gone down in defeat. Every molecule, every atom, every spore.

They would not grow here under this sun again.

