

Seas of Ernathe

Star Rigger, #1

by Jeffrey Carver, 1949–

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For Dad

Introduction

There are probably more good new writers in the science fiction field today than at any time in the history of the genre. I'm not completely sure why this should be, though obviously such factors as the burgeoning quality and popularity of science fiction have a lot to do with it: not only are there more people reading sf today (and hence becoming interested in writing it), but the stories they're reading must be providing higher standards at which to aim than did such stories of earlier eras as, say, *Captain Future and the Space Emperor*.

Whatever the reason, I find that I get a lot of manuscripts from new writers that would make the established professionals of science fiction's pulp era flush green with envy. And whenever I get a manuscript that shows so much talent, whether or not I feel I can buy it for one of my anthologies, I try to let the writer know I appreciate what he or she has done, and I ask for more stories.

Jeffrey Carver was one of these writers: a couple of years ago I received two stories from him that raised my eyebrows. Neither struck me as completely successful, but as I read them I became intensely aware that I was meeting a writer of real talent; and when I regretfully returned the manuscripts I said, "What I like in these stories are your descriptive powers, which are considerable; I can *see* and *feel* these scenes." I asked where he'd sold stories so far, and was surprised to get a letter in return saying that he was just beginning and hadn't sold anything yet.

Since then Jeff Carver has sold articles and stories to such markets as *Fiction Magazine* and *Galaxy*; and now he's written a full-length novel that fulfills all the promise of his early stories, and then some.

Seas of Ernathe shows Carver's descriptive powers at their best: he brings the people and places of an alien world to life on the page and presents us with a well-thought-out alien society in conflict with visitors from Earth. He has an engrossing story to tell, too.

Science fiction is a strangely hybrid field of writing, as its very name suggests. *Science*: rationality, logic, the belief that all of reality can be understood in these terms. *Fiction*: imagination, wonder, the realization that strange things will happen in an infinite universe.

If we want to, we can polarize sf writers according to which end of the description their works usually fit. Heinlein, Asimov, Clement and Clarke are at home in the rationalists' camp; at the other end are people like Vance, Brackett, Zelazny and Norton. Talented writers all—and popular ones, too.

I think Jeffrey Carver's name will soon take its place among the latter group of writers: he imagines wonders, and allows us to share his vision. *Seas of Ernathe* is one such vision, and I think you'll enjoy it.

—Terry Carr

Chapter 1

The starship labored in the uncertain currents of flux-space. Its course took it through unknown realms, bypassing the emptiness between the stars, until, in nearing the end of its journey, WARMSTORM had effectively dodged seventy-four light-years of normal-space distance from the Cluster Central Worlds. But the journey, if quick by the standards of interstellar distances, was perilously draining. WARMSTORM had strained to the limits of its endurance by the time, finally, that it wrenched free of the queer existence of flux-space and leaped, like a terrified fish bursting over a dam, into normal space.

A sculpted drop of quicksilver, WARMSTORM hurtled on through the dark of space toward the golden sun Lambern and its second planet, Ernathe, where a troubled colony awaited assistance. From the darkened control pit, communication channels grumbled forthrightly between starship and colony as the ship decelerated toward orbit. With due concern for identification, the colony demanded and received clearance codes; then WARMSTORM's master was advised that planetary defenses had been neutralized and that the ship was free, to approach. WARMSTORM slowed and orbited.

Ernathe turned slowly on the control pit viewscreens: a misty planet, a world of spiderweb land masses, glistening clouds and green and blue seas. Ernathe the sea-planet. Somewhere in the clouds and the maze, tracked by signal but lost to the eye, were the tiny twin settlements, Lambrose and Lernick. They were the only human claim to this world but an important claim, indeed, to warrant a planetary mission from the busy Central Worlds.

Silent in the gloom of the control pit, Pilot Second Seth Perland monitored his screens and made ready to assist the Pilot First as the latter began the approach and descent sequence. Noting a red spark crossing his mainscreen, the Pilot Second signaled the Captain to advise him of imminent danger—and then allowed himself a breath of astonishment.

WARMSTORM had been fired upon. A pulse-packet attack burst, apparently from the colony, was streaking out of the atmosphere toward the starship.

The Captain's voice murmured in his earset; and the Pilot Second touched two parted fingers to two plates on the control panel.

The starship's weapons-fire streamed sparkling across the emptiness of space and rained lazily into the closing pulse-packet pinwheel. *Strange*, the Pilot Second

thought, *that if they're going to attack at all they should launch only a single burst.* He watched the deadly play on his screen and remained ready to double his fire if necessary.

The pinwheel brightened, absorbing the defensive fire. It overloaded white... blue... pulsing indigo... then flared into a harmless nova and faded silently into space.

The danger had passed, with scarcely a word spoken aboard ship. While WARMSTORM hovered, though, the communication channels came alive. Pilot Second Perland keyed in and listened. "Ernathe, explain, explain!" The Captain himself came on the circuit: "You will tell us, Ernathe, what in *hell* is going on!"—and the only answers were more confusion and consternation. The officers held the ship at battle readiness—prepared, if necessary, for pinpoint bombardment. Did an enemy hold the colony?

"Please hold, WARMSTORM, please hold! We are trying to get you an explanation, we do not know why you were fired upon!" The explanation, when it came, was no explanation at all. It had been an accident, a mortifying fluke—a *prank*, the Ernathene operator stammered, on the part of a native life form. *"We do, repeat do have full control over systems again. All weaponry has, ah, been disconnected from power. You are cleared, repeat cleared to land!"*

The Pilot Second shook his head in disbelief—anger was impossible, that would imply belief—and waited while the Captain presumably mulled the situation over. He merely shrugged to himself when the order was given to resume the landing approach, with all weapons at ready.

Its journey nearing an end, the starship flashed gleaming through the planet's atmosphere, over seas glowing in the sun, and down finally to an uneventful landing on the Lambrose-Lernick spacepad. If there was an enemy waiting to greet the ship, he remained hidden. Only welcoming and profusely apologetic Ernathenes came forward to greet the starship crew.

So began WARMSTORM's planetary mission on Ernathe.

* * * * *

Seth Perland sat against the rocks of the seashore and stared wonderingly out to sea, his thoughts torn between delight at the view laid open before him and bewilderment over the words he had just heard. He grunted unbelievably. "The sea-people simply strolled into the defense battery when no one was looking, set off an orbit-burst, and wandered back out? No one watching, when there's a bloody *starship* landing?" He looked dubiously at the speaker, and turned his gaze back to the water. The sea was clear and empty and green, stretching from the ragged shore, and flat beneath the airborne tufts of sea-mist that glittered in the sun here and there across the expanse. A few kilometers out, another arm of the coast jutted across the water to break up the open view.

The sea-people. The "Nale'nid." According to the Ernathenes, they moved before one's eyes like shadows of fish beneath the water, like the tricky play of golden Lambern over the sea.

"Well, nevertheless it seems to be true," answered Seth's Ernathene guide of the last two days. "If we understood how and why the Nale'nid do what they do, we

wouldn't have had to ask the Cluster Council for help. We were doing quite well without it, until recently."

Racart Bonhof was a small fellow—tan complexioned, with dark straight hair and intelligent green eyes that flashed brightly at Seth, then veered away with a far-off, dreamy intensity. He struck Seth as being a capable man among a capable people; and yet their difficulties here were so strange as to require help from the Central Worlds. Well, they deserved it. For Seth himself, it was purely coincidence that he had drawn a mission to a planet and colony whose activities were so close to his heart.

Seth rocked thoughtfully on the spray-smoothed stone, stretching. He was a young man, perhaps a year or two older than Racart, but he did not feel it at the moment; forty-some days in a starship had left him sadly in need of outdoor exercise, and the several kilometers they had hiked from the settlement had only begun to loosen his muscles. He rubbed his short brown hair, smoothed his hands on the cool stone surface, and stared into the sea. It was misty emerald. The rocky bank was visible beneath the surface for some distance, sloping steeply, startlingly into the depths. Nothing moved except a few bits of floating detritus and the translucent fuzz of the plankton.

"I'm going to have to see these Nale'nid soon," Seth declared. He was anxious to accomplish something; the WARMSTORM mission crew under Captain Gorges and Planetary Mission Officer Richel Mondreau was still up in arms about the attack on the ship. But even just seeing the Nale'nid might be a difficult problem; according to Racart, one saw the sea-people solely at their own pleasure. Even the Ernathenes could say little about them with certainty—except that until recently they had been a pleasant but harmless enigma of this world, rarely appearing at all, and never entering the human settlements. What had caused the change no one knew; but whatever the reason it was disastrous to the functioning of the colony.

Seth wanted, indeed, to see these curious marauders. It could be called duty—now that he was under the orders, strictly speaking, of the Planetary Mission rather than Captain Gorges—but it was really a matter of his natural instinct for a mystery.

Racart slapped his arm. "Let's hike farther up the coast, then. The chances will be better there." With that, he set off, Seth wincing and trying to favor both legs at once as he followed. Hiking up the coast was no simple matter. The terrain was torturous, a maze of lagoons and promontories and pools, bridged and framed by rock and weatherworn *krael* growth. Everywhere they walked, sea-mist floated just above the water or land, twinkling like fallen bits of cirrus cloud and making it impossible to see the overall landscape at a glance. The sea-mist, Racart had explained, was very common at these southern latitudes, disappearing and reappearing at a whim or a wrong word. Where there was no mist, Lambern glowed amber and red upon the rocky network and shone glassily upon the water. A handful of the brightest stars was visible in the sky.

Racart led the way with practiced ease, but Seth lagged behind frequently, nervous at treading the slippery rocks. At one point he skidded, and yelped as one foot landed with a cold splash in a pool. He stepped back onto dry surface, chagrined; but as he plodded after Racart—who had grinned but not said a word—

he congratulated himself for not having fallen headlong. Not that he was so sure he wouldn't the next time.

They wound inland, and then back toward the sea, making a gradual path northward from Lambrose. They stopped again near the end of a raised promontory, which they reached by scrambling up the side of a high, steep outcropping. The vantage point was excellent and the view superb—which Seth appreciated once he had stopped wheezing from the climb. The mist, for the moment, had disappeared.

"There's the Lambrose pier," Racart said, pointing back southward to the left. A small hump was visible in the distance, but that was all that could be seen of the unloading facility for the plankton-harvesters that operated out of Lambrose. Hidden completely was the processing facility, where the plankton was processed for food and synthetics, and for the precious drugbase *mynalar*. The *mynalars*, the several derivatives of the drugbase exported to Rethmere and from there to other worlds of the Cluster, were the reason for the colony's very existence, and the crux of the current difficulty. Seth looked, and nodded.

Southward, toward the mouth of the bay, was a large moving dot: a harvester making its slow way east to the port of Lambrose.

And to the north: Racart said, pointing, "It becomes wilder and hotter as you move toward the equator. That area was explored at one time, I suppose, but no one's been far up that way since the early days of the colony. No *mynella*. Somewhere in that direction, we think, is the homeland of the Nale'nid—another reason for our not meddling." Most of Ernathe, he explained, was unsuited for settlement—too hot and too little land vegetation. Ernathe was an old world, not nearly as full of life as in the past; but this was in part due to an unstable, variable sun, whose fits and flares and fluctuations raked the planet from time to time with fearsome radiations. The remainder of the planet, largely intertwined ocean and barren land, belonged to whatever wildlife existed—and to the Nale'nid.

A pair of *skrells* squawked high in the air, circling and shouting at one another as they roamed in search of prey. Shrieking, one following the other, the winged creatures banked and plummeted like missiles into the water. A moment later they erupted into the air, one with a mouthful of wriggling fish and the other with a howl.

"I assume there will be a search for the Nale'nid's home," Racart said abruptly. "What will happen then?"

Seth gestured ignorance. "I'm not in charge of the mission."

"But an attack on a starship is not apt to go unpunished. Not to mention the sabotage in Lambrose and Lernick," Racart said, sounding surprisingly bitter. "Isn't that true?"

Seth showed his surprise. "Probably—but I think you overestimate our capabilities. The ship's weaponry, which is probably what you are thinking of, is designed mainly to protect the ship. Besides, are you defending the Nale'nid now, after they've ruined your entire production? And senselessly endangered lives?" According to the settlement's reports, not a week had gone by in the last year without the Nale'nid causing one or another kind of disruption. However intrigued Seth might be by stories of the sea-people, he hardly thought they were in need of

sympathy. Why should Racart, whose people had suffered far more, feel differently?

Racart did not face him. "I don't know. I don't know why they left us alone for so many years, and then suddenly started all this trouble. I just don't. Dammit, we don't know anything about them—except that this is really their world, not ours. We may have upset a natural balance of some kind."

Seth acknowledged without answering. Racart normally worked aboard a harvester at sea; whether his ideas were typical or not Seth did not know, though he would certainly find out. Then, too, Seth had his own personal interest in seeing the production of mynalar restored—but his thoughts at the moment were more on the sea-people themselves, the puzzle. "Perhaps," he said to Racart, for want of an answer. "If you have, the ecologists haven't noticed, and everyone else is stumped. I guess we'll have to ask the Nale'nid."

Racart grunted.

Seth knelt and peered cautiously over the edge of the rocks to the water below. The sea welled beautifully downward to a deepening and finally impenetrable green. Salt smell washed into the air, cool moist vapors faintly tart with the odor, somewhere, of seaweed. He wondered if the precious phytoplankton *mynella* were present in this water. Instead of voicing that question, however, he asked, "How deeply has this part of the sea been explored?" There were submersibles at Lambrose, he knew.

Receiving no answer, he looked up. Racart was standing very still, gazing to the northwest over the water. "Look," he said softly, raising his arm to point.

Seth followed his gaze. A front of dense sea-mist was gliding across the water toward them. There was no apparent breeze, but it lapped silently against the shore in eddies of silvery smoke. There was a scent of rock-dampness and sea-moss in the air, as if driven by the fog. "Sit down and keep your eyes open," Racart advised, and Seth obeyed without hesitation. The fog swept quickly toward the promontory, its forward edge curling under like a willowy, ghostly half-track.

The bank surrounded them, troops massing in the quiet afternoon. Seth felt instinctively for the security of the rock beneath him, as mist swirled tickling about his ears and nose. His sight was obscured momentarily, and then it opened again as the front passed, leaving patches of visibility over the flat gray water.

He squinted through the wafting scud and sat upright, stunned. Across the water, several darkish shapes were moving within the silvery earthly nebula like shadows of trees or persons. They were vague, roving figures, which without being distinguishable made him think instantly of the sea-people. His blood pounded with curiosity as he hunched forward, staring intently until the bank coalesced again and blocked his view. "The Nale'nid?" he asked Racart. His voice sounded wiry and strange against the solitude of fog.

The answer was slow, in an awed and amused voice thinned as if by distance. "Perhaps. Keep watching."

The mist paled, whitened, robbing the world of its last remaining color—and then it broke, shifted, and with a swirl reopened. Three distant but distinct figures moved across the water: two men and a young woman, human-figures but slenderer, smoother, fairer, and clad in the simplest fashion with dark glittering scales. They danced upon the water, stopped, twirled, and winked at him—and

then the men whirled while the girl winked again. Seth was captured by astonishment and infatuation; they were distant as stage players set in another world, but every movement leapt to his eye as if fractured and magnified through a crystal. *How could he see so clearly?* They glided like skaters over the water, their blades the thinnest slips of mist. Laughter tinkled softly, distantly, as if spilled from the lips of others beneath the waves. They moved maddeningly fast, with the grace of deepwater fishes.

However lucid Seth had felt earlier, he now stared as if in a dream, rapt by the vision of the sea-girl, of her men turning about her in nodding circles. Before Seth could breathe and decide if he were entranced in a hallucinatory vision, the mists closed again and moments later reopened—revealing soft, driftglass green water, and moving beneath it, closer now, three shadows like courtly humanfish. The silhouettes slowed for a moment of still-life, two sea-men and one sea-woman, who then danced in a lyrical flurry and fled, leaving only the green-glass memory of their presence.

Too astonished to move or make a sound, Seth stared at the empty water and tried to hold the fading image in his mind. Its vividness vanished with the mist, and by the time he had sorted the impressions from his expectations he was hardly sure that he had seen anything at all, shadows or people. His hands pressed the rock, cold with airy dampness; the mist tickled again as its tail drifted past, and then suddenly it too was gone, receding across the water to the south. Seth slouched in the golden sunshine, letting its warmth drench his skin before he finally sighed, and turned to his friend. "They—"

His words stopped in his throat. He blinked. Racart was gone.

Now where? Seth twisted around to look, but his friend was nowhere on the promontory summit. "Racart!" He scrambled to his feet, walked along the edge of the summit, and looked down and around in all directions—but there was no sign of the Ernathene. "Racart!"

Was this a prank? It would hardly befit Racart. Could he somehow have fallen into the water? No; Seth would have heard a splash. "Where are you?" he bellowed.

The answer was a sigh of air over the water, and the soft lap of the sea against the rock face below. The outcropping tumbled to water on one end and to rock and moss on the other; Seth could not see any likely place of concealment. Kneeling at the seaward end, he gazed down carefully into the water, probing it with his eyes. There were no obstructions, so even if Racart had fallen he should have been uninjured and able to swim clear. An uncertain fear nudged Seth's mind, and sweat began to trickle down his neck as he swayed, standing. "Racart!" The call rang across the water and died.

A lone skrell freewheeled into view, circled above the water at Seth's height and cried mournfully. Why would he be hiding, testing him? No, it was preposterous to consider that. Could the Nale'nid have done something? Perhaps, but what?

He climbed down from the outcropping and scouted in a semicircle around the base of the promontory, inspecting every crevice and break in the rock. Something, he decided, must have happened *to* Racart—but nothing so simple as falling from the rocks. Uncertainty tugged at him, a feeling that there was something he was failing to consider, some danger he was overlooking. He was kilometers from the settlement. He could probably find his way back alone—but what would he do if

he found Racart seriously injured... or would he be able to return in time with a proper search party?

Damn it, had the *mist* snatched him away?

Seth moved through the maze around the pools and channels to the landward of the promontory, looking into each pool one by one, into each stream, as if he might find the grinning face of his friend, laid to rest by some dreadful assassin. He saw only dark-bottomed and mossy-edged pools, and cutting flows of water seeking the sea. He slipped; one knee banged hard on the rock, and his leg was soaked again. Water sopped coldly in his shoe, and his knee ached fiercely as he straightened it. Determinedly, he ignored the pain.

He called, again and again. No answer... and the appearance of more sea-mist made even the attempt seem hopeless. Lamborn turned a deeper gold as it sank lower in the sky, and he realized grimly that he would probably have to return alone and simply hope for the best—either that Racart would make his own way back or that a search party would find him.

For a last look, he scrambled back onto the outcropping and searched anxiously in all directions. "Racart!" He stared, puzzled and frightened, into the water; the reeling sensation of depth reminded him curiously of his vision of the Nale'nid. There was no evidence that the sea-people were involved; but as a starpilot he depended professionally on intuition. A feeling that could not be ignored... and with a moment's reflection on it he was possessed of a strange peace of mind amid his disquiet.

He moved down from the outcropping. Whether his friend was safe or not—and with the sea-people, who could tell?—it was past time to start the trek back.

Chapter 2

Finding the way back to Lambrose was not easy. The broken, indented shoreline and the drifting bits of sea-mist made it impossible to get a clear view of where he was going; Seth felt he was trying to negotiate a maze with bleary, sleep-filled eyes. He detoured inland to skirt a rugged lagoon, and then hesitated, unsure whether to angle back toward the sea where he could keep the Lambrose pier in sight, or to keep inland to avoid blind avenues onto outjutting peninsulas. He wished he had paid greater attention to the route when he had been with Racart.

He turned seaward to follow the line of the shore; it seemed wiser to keep his destination in view as much as possible. But the groundrock dipped and rose in a clay-sculpture profile, so even that route provided a challenge. Perseverance brought him near to the actual coastline and directly into a silvery thick mass of sea-mist. *Again?* he wondered uncomfortably—but he shrugged and moved on along his path into the fog, changing his gait to a slow, cautious shuffle. His skin tingled, sensitive to the touch of the flowing mist, as if a mild electric current were charging the mass. The sounds of his shuffle were clear but muted. He stooped and strained forward with all his senses to detect any obstacles or pitfalls before his feet.

He thought about Racart, who might be anywhere. Soon he was so lost in contemplation, and so keyed to the sound of his own movement, that when he heard other sounds he straightened with a start. *Pat, pat* of footfalls, a ripple of faint laughter like the chortle of a stream. The sounds were quiet, but very clear and very close. It seemed he was being shadowed. He stopped instantly and strained his ears to hear more.

Nale'nid?

There was no further sound. Hesitantly, he called out, "Hello? Who's there? Hello!" Silence answered. He tried again and received the same answer. Sea-mist had made the world a fuzz of soft gray, the landscape an indistinct montage of darker shapes. He looked around slowly, taking care not to lose his bearings. "Racart! Racart!"

When he gave up and moved on, he was more uncertain of his position than ever. Someone was playing a game at his expense, but he could not tell whether it was a malicious game or a friendly one. There was little else to do but continue walking. He heard the *pat, pat* of feet once more, and—he thought—a murmur of voices. Breaking through the mist once was a bright female voice, just a bit too fluttered, a bit too quick to be like any of the human voices he knew. The brief flurry of words, if "words" were what they were, fell in a strange tongue, enchanting—and he felt a sudden urge to abandon his path, to seek the voice's source. Could it be the girl he had seen earlier, could she know something of Racart?

He caught himself in the act of moving that way—and firmly set his feet back on his own path. He called again, however—several times. When there was no response, he decided it would be useless to blunder after someone who did not wish to be seen, and he forced himself to move on.

The sounds continued with him for a good distance, until the veil of mist shimmered with sunlight, and thinned, and finally parted to reveal the calm sea and the flattened path of rock along its edge. Lamborn glowed golden and brown upon the coast, but it was lower in the sky than Seth had expected and he hurried along the shore path—feeling both anxiety and relief at the sight of Lambrose still several kilometers distant. He glanced quickly about, but all that was visible beneath the sky were the rocks, the sea, and mist in scattered fluffs. The mysterious sounds were gone.

Here the path was familiar; it ran in a ledge just above water level, alongside an uplift to the left, and then ahead some distance it curved around the seaward side of a massive granite outcropping like the one from which Racart had disappeared. Seth was breathing hard, jogging now, but he did not slow as he rounded the outcropping. He slammed headlong into someone coming the other way, flailed off-balance, and toppled toward the water.

An arm shot out to grab him, and before he could utter a cry Racart had pulled him back to safety.

"Ahh!" Seth stumbled against the granite face and clutched hard for support. "Racart!" He stared at his friend in astonishment. "What?"

Racart slumped wearily and returned Seth's look of amazement; then he leaned against the granite himself, stared out to sea; and chuckled. "Ho, brother! I was

afraid I'd have to bring the whole town out looking for you—but you do pretty well, for a space pilot."

"Where the hell have you been? You mean you took off—"

"No," Racart interrupted softly. "I did not leave you on purpose. At least not *my* purpose."

"Then the Nale'nid—"

"Yes. And beyond that I don't know what to tell you." The calm left his face, to be replaced by an expression of pain, of confusion badly masked by his distant and intense gaze over the sea. When Racart turned to face the pilot, Seth saw the exhaustion drawn in the lines of his friend's face; Racart's eyes seemed as misty as the sea, and wearily unfocused. "There were others," Racart said dully, "not just the three you and I were watching. They came in the fog and took me... places... before they left me—farther up the way."

Seth hesitated, wanting to ask *where* and *how* and a dozen other questions, but uncertain if he should press. "What places?" he said finally, softly.

"Don't ask. Not yet." Racart looked at him for a long moment, then tossed his head southward and said, "Let's head back. It's starting to get chilly."

Seth nodded and fell in behind him, or beside him when the path allowed. They walked mostly in silence; but when Racart asked if he had had any difficulties of his own, Seth described his search and his hike, and the sounds he had heard from the Nale'nid. "Different people," Racart declared firmly, but beyond that he would not go.

Seth was concerned about Racart's reticence, but was afraid to disturb him further. Nevertheless, as they approached the Lambrose perimeter, the dwellings and shops and conversion-plants a welcome sight ahead, Seth reflected that the story would have to be heard, and soon. The *mynalar* problem involved not only Ernathe but the entire Cluster—and in the end that problem meant the Nale'nid. The decision of what to do would demand every available bit of information.

He watched Racart swinging his small torso in a long, easy stride, his mouth set in a curious grimness, his eyes set straight ahead. Something Racart knew did not speak lightly of the Nale'nid; and that was too bad, because Seth would have preferred to believe that they were a friendly people. The memory of the sea-woman fluttered through his mind. He firmly tried to ignore it, to chase it away.

The perimeter watch strolled by to greet them as they passed into the town, and with a gesture of exaggerated officiality checked their names off against the outbound list. They headed immediately for shelter and food.

* * * * *

"You're really sure, are you, that this *mynalar* is so important?" Racart asked furiously. He smote the table with a fist and ale sloshed over the rims of the two mugs...

Seth looked around the bar with a wary eye, hoping no one would heed them. Tired and aching, he had suggested relaxing in the bar, with the intent of drawing Racart out on the afternoon's mysterious events. Instead he had elicited anger. Against all visible logic, Racart was defending the Nale'nid against the presumed danger of his own people. He seemed wholly unaware of the real importance of the colony, of the reason his people were here at the Cluster Council's expense. But

then, he had been born here and had never had to concern himself with such matters.

"Yes," said Seth.

"Why? Just so the elite on a dozen worlds can be treated to longer lifetimes than the rest of us have?" Racart asked sarcastically. He snorted and drank from his ale.

"No." Seth kept his face purposely expressionless. "Only the *mynalar-e* is used for the nerve regeneration—though you're partly right, it was originally the only *mynalar*. It's valuable, sure, and it's not used only for the old and the elite, by the way. But the truly important drug is *mynalar-g*." Racart looked blank. "It hasn't actually been used successfully yet."

"So?"

"It's a—hallucinogen. An unusual, and actually rather mild hallucinogen." Seth chose his words very carefully, trying to explain in a straightforward manner. "All right, let me go back a bit. You know that we, and I mean the council as well as the Transport Guild, have been trying to duplicate the old techniques of star-flight. Or maybe you don't know. Our flux-drive ships do the job, they tie some of the worlds together—but they're terribly, terribly inefficient. They bludgeon and struggle their way between the stars like fish trying to walk between streams.

"The Old Cluster had a better way—starship-rigging. Most of the actual technology has been preserved, but it's really the art that was lost, not the science. And what an art—sailing huge vessels on the winds and tides and currents of flux-space, guided by nothing more than the pilot's mind! It was graceful and efficient, *and we don't know how to do it*.

"We need it, Racart—we need to learn it again, it's the only way we can bring all the worlds of the Cluster back together."

"Need?" Racart asked doubtfully. "Or *want*?"

Seth breathed sharply and looked straight into his friend's eyes. "*Need*. There are only fourteen star systems joined now, and shakily at that, by the biggest fleet we can manage. Fourteen, out of nearly a hundred before the entropy wars—and that in the Cluster alone, never mind the Beyond. We've been to other systems, many of them still civilized if not spacefaring. Most of them would like to join the Cluster or could be persuaded, but we haven't the strength to bring them together, the distances are too great."

"You spoke of *need*," Racart reminded him. His mouth and brows were set in stubborn resistance, barely softened by the gloom of the bar.

"Yes—because *if we don't do it now we may never have another chance*." Seth was frustrated; he knew he was speaking of something that seemed to be beyond Racart's world. But it did matter to Racart and to Ernathe. "I don't know how much history or news reaches you here, but there are bad relations in the Cluster—races that would like us to fail. Holdover from the entropy wars, I suppose. The Lacenthi, who were human-friends in the Old Cluster, aren't anymore. And the Querlin have always been enemies—not just of humans but of all mammaloids. Racart, in not too many years this universe is coming alive in full bloom again, and *we'd* better have some accord when it happens—and not be just dozens of scattered worlds."

Racart stared at him thoughtfully, his eyes not denying Seth's words, but also not yet conceding their importance. He clenched his mug with interlocking fingers and lowered his eyes to the table. "The council protects us here on Ernathe, doesn't it?"

"There is a Lacenthi system only half a dozen light-years from here," Seth said, shrugging.

"Okay, so maybe the Cluster has to be reunited—don't ask me, mind you, Ernathe is the only place I know—but supposing you're right. What does that have to do with us, with *mynalar*, with the Nale'nid?" Racart's eyes were directed into his ale, and his voice was low, seeking.

Seth frowned, realized he had lost his original track. "*Mynalar-g* may be the answer to starship-rigging—or at least a part of it. The drug, itself, sets the mind free to ramble and blunder about in a fantasy world. And according to what we know that's the beginning of learning to fly a rigger-ship."

He hesitated. The real argument had been made. Did Racart want to hear, now, about starpiloting? "It was the pilot who counted in those ships, Racart—not a machine, but a man who reached into the flux with his own mind through a sensory net, a sail. He visualized the tides between the stars and steered like a sailor on the sea, with rudder and keel and oars. He flew by building a fantasy—an image so real that it matched the real currents and storms of flux-space. That's all the flux is, Racart—a deep, unbottled fantasy that happens to be real.

"You couldn't take any man and teach him to fly—no, he had to have the gift of imaging, he had to be crazy enough and sane enough to run in the fantasy and carry a ship on his back. And it worked, that's how this Cluster was settled, and how the galaxy beyond it was settled!" Seth's eyes blurred. A painting vibrated in his mind, a painting from a gallery on Venicite: a gleaming graceful ship of the past, gliding gull-like, submarinelike through the flux that underlay the cold and the empty blackness of space itself.

"Ah!" Racart said, his face suddenly alight, his brows furrowed with interest. He stabbed with a finger at Seth's heart. "Then I can forget this stuff about the Cluster and we can talk about the important things. You want this *yourself*, don't you?" He nodded to his own question, not expecting Seth to answer. "Have you taken the drug yet?" His eyes flashed bright, green, intent upon Seth's.

The pilot was startled by Racart's bluntness. He should have guessed—Racart wanted to hear about a friend, not about politics out among the worlds. "Yes," he said, "I have taken it. I'm not sure how to describe it. Frightening, terrifying. Exhilarating. Mind-twistingly strange." He frowned, lost again in the powerful, disturbing memories of the drug: tumultuous visions hurled bright against the black emptiness of space, dashed against the diamond maelstrom of stars; soul-aching longings fulfilled for the briefest of moments and then wrenched away to leave bare, cold sweating reality.

He nodded. "I've taken it, and it failed for me. At least it failed in what we wanted it to do—but I hope not forever. One day a man will find a harness for that drug, and the techs will harness *him* into a ship's rig—and we'll have our new way to fly the stars. And then another man will learn to do it without the drug. And maybe I'll get a chance, again, and maybe all those other things will happen, too."

He tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the table. "After that—who knows?" He drank his lukewarm ale, suddenly embarrassed by his own speech.

Racart was silent, pondering; but he was obviously impressed. When he spoke, his voice was so soft that Seth had to strain to hear. "I have always had a good feeling toward the Nale'nid, and I guess I still do." He smiled faintly, his expression changing. "But you'll have to know what happened today, if you and we are to decide where to go from here. *Mynalar* means our way of life, too, though I think we could find a way of life without it, if necessary. I don't know why the Nale'nid are keeping us from the *mynalar*, but I do know that we've a people out there whom we must understand." His eyes flickered across Seth's gaze and took on their more usual dream-reflecting intensity.

His next words were drowned in a clatter.

A stutter of pulsed air-bursts rocked the lounge, echoed through the street outside: *pok-a-pok-a-pok-a-pok!* The bar was instantly still, a dozen faces staring at one another from the crouched or flattened positions that every person had taken instinctively. The stutter repeated itself and whined off to the sound of a dying pulse-generator. A border-weapon coughed, and then the air was still. Seth looked at Racart in astonishment and horror—and received in return a gesture of bewilderment. Someone near the exit crept to the door and cautiously peered out. "Looks okay," the man said. "People are moving out into the street." He glanced back, shrugged, and went outside himself.

Seth and Racart followed, looking carefully up and down the street. The sun was liquid red just above the western horizon, and the street awash in its glow suddenly began filling up again with the people of Lambrose. Two uniformed perimeter guards made their way down the street, one of them shouting reassuringly, "The Nale'nid set off the perimeter defenses! No one was hurt, and we're back under control!" That seemed to satisfy most of the Ernathenes, who apparently were used to this sort of thing. But Seth saw several of the starship personnel staring about in disbelief, and he had to share their feeling; it seemed that anytime a defense battery went off in this town it was the Nale'nid who were doing the shooting. Perhaps, he thought, the solution was simply to dismantle the defenses.

The worry on Racart's face told him that not every Ernathene was satisfied. And his own officers, he knew, would be incredulous at this new episode.

"I think it's time we checked in," he said, and nudged Racart in the direction of the Planetary Mission's headquarters. Racart could tell his story to everyone at once.

What he found when he arrived, though, was not ready and willing listeners, but more disturbing news.

Chapter 3

"The Chief-of-arms says the confusion was so widespread, he's relieved that only one Nale'nid was killed. The guard apparently only wanted to frighten it away, but the shot caught the creature squarely. He said another sea-person distracted him

as he was firing a warning at the first." Richel Mondreau sighed grimly. He was a tall, stiff-featured man; the hard lines of his face met in acute angles, running in jigsaw fashion from his cheekbones down to the scrape-shaven chin, and up again through the zigzag mouth and sharp nose to the bronzed-gray eyes, which settled in turn upon each of the younger men. The eyes left Seth, finally, and fixed upon Captain Jondrel Gorges, master of WARMSTORM. "We'll send these two off to inspect the damage, then, and have a look at the body, eh, Captain?"

Seth started to speak, but held back when Gorges nodded slowly in approval and addressed him in a tone that was grave and yet managed at the same time to sound sleepy. "You will of course inspect things closely, Pilot Second, before you go to sea. Richel here has the greatest confidence in you, though he would never admit it to himself." Mondreau scowled at the latter remark.

To sea? Seth wondered queasily. He answered, "Very well, Captain. But before we go—" and he glanced at Racart, standing gloomily beside him—"perhaps we, Racart especially, should explain something that happened earlier today. We feel it may be important."

Mondreau swung to face Seth. "Fine," he said shortly. "Later, though. You're leaving on a harvest ship in two hours, traveling as observer. Mr. Bonhof has been assigned by his people to help you learn how things operate around here. We'll tie in anything else you know later."

Seth nodded uncomfortably. He supposed Racart's story could wait. "We'll head over to the plant, then," he said, and motioned to Racart. The Ernathene said nothing until they were in the street again; then with a few short words he cursed the killing of the Nale'nid. Seth sympathized. "This is hardly going to create a climate for diplomatic understanding."

Racart answered, "That wasn't what I was thinking of. I don't think the Nale'nid themselves will be too upset about it. I'm worried about its effect right here—among your people, and especially among mine. It's going to raise havoc with our good intentions. People who have been tolerating the trouble will feel that the dam has been broken, that a violent precedent deserves a violent follow-up. Others will say, *Now we've done it, we have no legitimate claim here so let's get out before the Nale'nid rightfully explode.*" Racart walked quickly, in this agitation. He rounded a corner abruptly and Seth had to hurry to follow.

"Which point will you take?" Seth asked, catching up.

Racart shot him a glance that told nothing and marched straight ahead. "Hah!" he muttered fiercely. His brows were furrowed and his eyes narrow and determined. His previous mood of intimacy had vanished altogether.

They walked through the clustered, radiation-shielded family domes, and down the main harbor avenue among the shops and public gathering houses. There were many pedestrians in the street but almost no vehicles, except for an occasional utility van. Lambrose was laid out neatly in small town fashion, expanding away from the harbor according to the whim and variegation of the land. Home and recreational buildings were grouped generally in a northeasterly fan, while the *mynella* and food conversion plants were set inland at a southerly angle. The spaceport, planetary defense batteries, and satellite control all were located at the end of a road to the east—the third point in the triangle comprising Lambrose and Lernick.

Seth and Racart turned left near the harbor and headed back inland along the "industrial park." The sun had already set over the water, and its fading light left a sheen in the sky, a mottled orange and red backdrop for ship silhouettes. Stars were prickling into view in a few cloudless patches, making Seth wish for just a few minutes of completely clear sky, so that he might see the entire spectacle.

The *mynella-mynalar* facility was the final segment of a long plankton receiving and conversion plant. At the wharf was the loading pier where the harvesters emptied their slurry-cargoes. Separators divided the *mynella* organisms from the others; then the conveyor line split, the larger one carrying the bulk of the harvest for food and synthetics conversion, and the smaller one carrying *mynella* to the drug-extraction facility at the end of the line. This was a flat-roofed building surrounded by roadway and several stands of carefully nurtured trees. Early evening floodlighting cast a pleasant aura about the building.

They were met at the door by a security man. "You'll be wanting to see the Nale'nid first, I imagine." He led the way past rows of great stainless vats, mixers, and centrifuges. Another man joined them—Andol Holme, Crew-Exec of WARMSTORM, a lean but hulking blond. Seth was glad to see him; Holme was one of his closest friends and advisors.

"Have you seen Richel and the Captain yet?" Holme inquired.

Seth nodded. "They're not happy. Mondreau's starting with a scattergun survey—he's sending us off on a harvester as soon as we're done here, and I gather he has some of his researchers just about everywhere right now."

Holme clucked, nodding. "You'll be busy, all right—we all will—and this sight is not going to make you feel easier." His face curled into a grimace, and as they swung into a side corridor, Seth saw why. His stomach knotted. Racart exhaled with a whisper.

The Nale'nid stretched on the floor was a fair, slender-faced man who, but for the sleekness of his face and mossily smoothed hair, and the translucent fronds draped about him as garments, could have been mistaken for any man in the settlement. His face held a curious mixture of expressions; his forehead was silk smooth, peaceful, but his mouth was twisted in gruesome pain. His left side was cratered and fused black by the explosive heat of a pulse-weapon. The flesh, fatally destroyed by the single burst, had been so instantly cauterized that the visible damage was confined to a fifteen-centimeter concave mass of char; a severed garment frond was neatly scorched on either side of the wound. The smell of burnt flesh forced Seth to choke back a retch.

He finally looked away, up at the Crew-Exec. Holme grunted an appreciation of his feelings and said, "No one knows why the weapon was set for a full charge, least of all the guard who was using it. Possibly with all the fooling around one of the Nale'nid themselves might have changed the setting—but that hardly makes sense does it? But then what sense for them to come in here in the first place, and to take over the border defenses and shoot off all the weapons into the air? Nothing about them makes much sense so far."

Racart stirred but kept his silence. Seth glanced at him nervously, saw that he was strangely calm. Seth asked his question of Holme, however, and of the guard, who was standing silent. "Then they got control of all the defense systems again?" He shook his head at what that implied about the defense security—and yet he

knew that security had been tightened considerably after the incident with WARMSTORM.

"They seem to... just appear when you're not looking... whether you're actually looking or not," the guard said, talking to no one in particular. His eyes glazed with recall. "Even when you *think* you're being watchful, they sneak by as if they were made of air. One walked right in front of me, and he was nearly past before I even noticed him."

"Yes," Racart said, startling Seth. "They do that, don't they?"

"Though I've never seen one hurt a person," the guard concluded. Racart's eyes clouded at that, but he shook his head and gave Seth a glance that said, *not now*.

"Let's make that tour, shall we?" Holme suggested. The guard nodded and gestured to two others who had arrived to senso-record and remove the body. He led the three men back through the plant, to the primary reducers where the incoming slurry of *mynella* was thickened and ground to a paste. Workers were clustered around the wide tanks, inspecting beneath cowlings and under the tank lids. The supervisor glanced up at their approach and shook her head; everything there was normal. Seth and Holme poked about for a moment, then followed the others down the line, to the first of the chemical-process converters. Here, also, a work crew was checking, and drawing out material for testing. So far, nothing was wrong.

"So where's the problem?" asked Seth.

"Patience," said the guard. "We already know there's a foul-up at the end—I just wanted to see if anything more had been found." They passed the secondary reducers and came to the *mynalar* end of the facility where the crude drug was refined and purified before packaging and sealing. Here a number of people were gloomily examining a powdery material in a small stainless vat. A middle-aged woman, a chemist, told them what had been found.

"This batch has been ruined. We don't know yet about the others. And we don't know how it was done. We never know how it was done." She looked tired, but when Seth glanced questioningly at the chemical plumbing she anticipated his query. "There's nothing wrong with the equipment. The batch was half run, and doing fine, when the Nale'nid came."

Seth stepped closer to inspect the equipment, and listened casually to the conversation of the workers nearby. He was startled to hear them discussing, not the loss of the drug batch, but the death of the Nale'nid. *They're really getting used to this business*, he thought, *but not to people getting hurt over it. Do they know what this could mean to their whole future here?* The mood was one of anxiety, of bewilderment, of concern about the reaction of the Nale'nid people to the death of one of their own.

"There may be people asking for shutdown of operations. Or of the defense batteries," the guard said, unhappily.

Racart answered without hesitation. "It won't matter, either way." He looked at Seth probingly. "It won't matter at all."

Seth shook his head. It had to matter. But it could hardly be to the general good.

* * * * *

Seth and Racart returned to their respective quarters to pack sea-bags, then parted with Andol Holme in the WARMSTORM compound. Before heading off to make his report to Gorges and Mondreau, Holme had offered Seth a bit of advice: "Listen to these sailors. If anyone can tell you how the Ernathenes feel, it will be them—none of this official falderal. And they'll probably tell you more than you want to know about the Nale'nid, too." With that, he had given Racart a pleasant nod and Seth a slap on the back, and the two had headed for the docks.

The activity there was quiet but constant; supplies for up to twenty days at sea were being loaded, though the average run was only three to five days. ARDELLO was a great broad-nosed floating allosteel iceberg, filtering systems and holding tanks constituting much of its bulk, with the crew's quarters located on the upper decks. While Racart went in search of an officer to assign them quarters, Seth stood at the rail amidships, looking down at the water slapping between the wharf and the hull. He had been on only one sea-going ship in his life—a huge stabilized liner on the Sladar Ocean of Rethmere—and the prospect now of a week on a rumbling work ship was enough to make him wish he were back in space. Several passing crewmen nodded cordially to him; nevertheless, he felt wholly out of place. Racart, of course, would be quite at home; he regularly sailed on a sister ship of ARDELLO.

"Mr. Perland, would you come with me?" asked a voice behind him. A young man Racart's size put out his hand. "I'm Ferris Tarn, filter hand third—I'll show you to your bunk. Racart will meet you later." Seth shook hands and lugged his bag after the sailor. They went down a companionway in the after deckhouse and made their way through several cabins to the male bunkroom. Tarn pointed to a third-level bunk and a small stowage compartment and said, "You sleep there and keep your things here. The head is up forward." The bunk was tiny, even smaller than Seth's bunk on WARMSTORM, and there was about half a meter of headroom between it and the ceiling. He envisioned bashing his head into the ceiling several times a night.

Tarn introduced him to several of the crew, then offered to take him on a tour of the ship. Seth readily agreed, and they spent the next half hour exploring the interior levels, much of it at first glance meaningless to Seth, and then above decks in and around the superstructure. At night the top deck was a gleaming array of strange shapes in unequal pools and splashes of light; the air was chilly and salty, and Seth felt as if they were already at sea.

They descended again to the crew's level, and Tarn took him past the female section. "Just so you'll know where it is," Tarn remarked with a grin.

"There you are!" Racart called. He was standing in the shadows of the passageway with a young woman. Seth waved his thanks to Tarn and joined them. The girl was a golden-skinned Ernathene, apparently in her early twenties, and a regular ARDELLO crewmember. Her name was Mona Tremont, and she greeted Seth with a smile but, he thought, something less than total enthusiasm. "Mona is a sonar tech."

"And you are the starpilot," Mona said, not quite interrupting Racart, but giving Seth no chance to respond, either. Her tone was ambiguous, suggesting either admiration or cloaked derision, but Seth could not tell which. "Are you going to study us, or the Nale'nid?" she asked, this time in a lighter voice.

Seth shrugged. "Both, I suppose. I want to see your operation in action, but the main reason I'm along is to learn about the Nale'nid—if they make an appearance."

"They will," said Mona. "After what happened at the plant, I don't know why we're even making this run. But we're inviting trouble of some sort, for sure." Her eyes carried a dark cynicism that was roughly disguised in her voice. "I hope your 'planetary mission'—isn't that what you call it?—doesn't blow its top and start muscling about with the Nale'nid. It will only make things worse, you know. Racart, see you later." With that, she disappeared into the woman's quarters, leaving Racart and Seth alone in the passageway.

Racart smiled shakily. "She was one of the ones I was afraid would not be too sympathetic to your cause. Don't worry, you'll like her, but it might take a while." Seth accepted that noncommittally; he wondered just what Racart's relationship with Mona was, but decided to ask at another time.

Later they went topside to watch the departure. Seth felt a sense of loss in watching the lights of the colony recede against the shore; Lambrose was his only point of reference on this world. Racart was glad to be back at sea, and Seth envied his enthusiasm; it was the way he felt when lifting for a new flight on WARMSTORM. The air was breezy and cool at the rail, and he was glad Racart had advised him to wear a jacket. ARDELLO quivered, its great scoop nose plunging through the sea. The electroturbines powering the ship were quiet, but there were the many noises of the sea as well as of ventilators and creaking steel. Few of the sounds were immediately identifiable to Seth; this was so wholly unlike what he was accustomed to calling a ship that he had to listen carefully to pinpoint the sources of the noise. ARDELLO thundered and thumped, and rolled slightly, its spotlighted structure moving ponderously against the nighttime horizon.

Racart took him to the port side and pointed across the water to the south. "That's Lernick," he said. Seth squinted and stared before finally pinpointing a faint haze of light beyond the end of the visible shore. Lambrose, in contrast, was still an intricate assortment of lights behind the stern. ARDELLO was moving across the bay to the west and south, toward the "open sea"; the mouth of the bay was only a blur of deeper darkness against the mixed shadows and grays of the horizon. The sky was mostly cloud-obscured, but the starry brilliance of the surrounding globular cluster backed the clouds with a baleful, ghostly sheen that appeared to waver and crawl as the clouds shifted across the sky. Toward the west, a rift opened in the clouds: an open doorway into the jeweled darkness of the Cluster.

Seth leaned over the rail, breathing the wet, briny air. It had been a long day, and the salt air was a potent refresher. Along the rushing prow, there was a constant sparkling green phosphorescence from plankton caught in the turbulent slipstream. Everywhere he looked, it seemed, light sparkled or shone on this world, whether from the sky or the sea.

"Let's head below," Racart said, and Seth followed him astern and down the companionway to the crew's cabin. Most of the off-duty crew were asleep, and Seth was more than ready to follow. He hardly noticed the cramped quarters as he climbed into the high bunk. Once he was off his feet, his muscles grew leaden with relief, and he stretched on the simple foam mattress with a great feeling of luxury.

As he was beginning to doze, it occurred to him that he had failed to learn from Racart what had happened that afternoon. He opened his eyes, and focused for a moment on the ceiling just over his head. *Well*, he thought with some difficulty, *tomorrow will be in plenty of time*. His thoughts faded, and he slept.

Chapter 4

Ship routine was well underway when Seth ventured topside in the morning. He felt that he could sleep easily for another eight hours, but a hot brew from the galley and a generous porridge breakfast revived him to a semblance of consciousness. The deck was drenched with morning sunshine. Moving quickly in high altitude winds were a few clouds, and a steady breeze cooled the deck. The ship was cruising slowly parallel to the coast, in what was called the "outer sea"—actually just the next sea, of several, out from the bay of Lernick and Lambrose. The coast, to starboard, was a green gray margin binding the sky with the sea. Seth was disconcerted to notice its slow rise and fall as the ship rolled steadily through the waves.

Racart called to him from the bridge, and he climbed the wheelhouse steps to join him. ARDELLO's captain was there, a short, silver-blond man named Sergei Fenrose, who greeted Seth with sober enthusiasm. "If you can make some sense of this craziness," Captain Fenrose declared, "you'll be doing better than the best of us. That business last night, back in the town—no good. You don't go around shooting people, even if it's by accident. No one's been shot like that for as long as I can remember, sea-people or otherwise. Don't even know why we keep weapons on the planet." Shaking his head, he turned for a moment to watch the sonar display beside the pilot. He issued instructions for a course change, and then turned again to Seth, with a humorous wave. "Oh, I know, I know, we need them in case we need them. But the Nale'nid seem to be getting more target practice with the big guns than our own folks." His eyes sparkled, a touch of silver glitter in their green irises.

Seth answered dryly, "I noticed." He liked the man at once, decided that he was quite a bit like Jondrel Gorges—a good man to have on his side.

Fenrose chatted genially for a few minutes, then said, "Bonhof—you going to show him the ship's operations?" Racart bowed low and set about showing Seth the equipment on the bridge—the ship-control systems first, then the water-sampler readouts and sonar water-probe and bottom tracers. When everything in sight had been pointed out, he suggested that they go below to observe the actual harvesting.

They walked the ship from prow to stern and keel to topdeck, Racart pointing and naming, and Seth asking questions of his friend or of the other crew. The ship was filled with noises and smells and drafts of air, something different in each compartment. Even in the lowest decks, Seth smelled the salt dankness of the sea; and the coated metal gleam of the compartments and passageways could not entirely alleviate the feeling that in this vessel he was exposed to elements he could not control nor quite trust. Every movement of the deck, every shudder,

every thrum of unfamiliar machinery was a reminder that only an allosteel hull shielded him from the elements of the sea and the wind. The same could be said of WARMSTORM and space, of course, but space was different—he knew space but he did not know the sea.

Racart interrupted his thoughts. This is the station I'm usually working." They were amidships on deck C, where the water feed was diverted into filtering channels; inside the pressure-tight clearplex housings, moving turbinelike membranes shunted plankton-thick seawater from channel to channel, concentrating it into a slurry for transfer to the cargo tanks. A young woman monitoring the operation stepped aside to let Racart demonstrate the controls to Seth. "The valves here—" he pointed to a set of servo-knobs—"control the income and outgo flows. This is one of four parallel stations, so if you're going to make any drastic changes in flow rates, it has to be done in coordination with the others." Ahead of the filtering station in the intake line was the fish harvest stage, where edible fish drawn into the system were sorted and retained. They had already seen that. Behind the plankton-filter stage was the mineral-extraction stage, which produced small but usable quantities of heavy metals from the water to supplement that produced at the shore stations. They had already seen that, too. Seth suspected that Racart had saved his "own" station for last, so that he could discourse at length about it. The place was noisy with rushing water, both beneath the hull and in the clearplex plumbing. Other pipework ran overhead, in fact all around the wide compartment; the operator smiled at Seth as he looked all around, half listening to Racart's lecture. "The pitch of the filter membranes increases when the ship is passing through plankton-thin water—are you listening?" Seth nodded absently and grinned at the woman.

Eventually, Racart tired, and they went to get some lunch.

The day passed quickly enough for Seth. The harvesting sections ceased work shortly after sundown, and the ship slowed for transition to its nighttime bottom-sounding activities. Though most of the plankton in the sea actually rose nearer to the surface at night, a few species, including *mynella*, descended out of reach of the harvester.

Most of the day crew gathered after hours in the mess, and when Seth arrived he found himself drawn almost at once into a lively, and uncomfortable, discussion. Mona Tremont was disagreeing vehemently with a statement Seth had missed; she barely glanced at him as he and Racart took seats nearby. But when she spoke he knew that she was in large measure addressing him. "We don't need a lot more people coming in, trying to *outwit* them. What we need is less confusion—and less trouble. We've had enough trouble." She suddenly fixed Seth with a discomfiting stare.

Seth raised his eyebrows; this was the first overt hostility he had encountered from an Ernathene, and he wasn't quite sure what to make of it. "Have we done anything yet to cause more trouble?" he asked, thinking it a safe, if noncommittal reply. He glanced at Racart but could not read his expression.

Mona simply stared, her eyes glazed with heat or cold—he could not be sure which. When she looked away, finally, she spoke with an indifferent tone of voice: "A Nale'nid was killed yesterday. I call that trouble."

Seth considered that. Was she holding him personally accountable? He asked, not only of Mona but of all the handful of crewmembers listening, "Was your relationship with the Nale'nid really better before WARMSTORM came?" He sensed, gratefully, that Racart approved of that tack; but he studied the other faces carefully, gauging their reactions.

One crewmember, a man in his thirties, nodded soberly—a long, slow nod directed at no one in particular. "Once," he said, "we didn't bother the Nale'nid and they didn't bother us. That was quite some time ago, now—and things have changed—suddenly, but not too suddenly. That's surely not this man's fault, and maybe not our own, either. But then, who knows what's gotten these sea-people riled?"

Mona glared at the man. "Okay, Joe," she grumbled.

He continued, "Consider, years ago, it was a rare thing for a sea-person even to be seen by a human. When Nale'nid *were* sighted, they almost always disappeared. Without a trace. No interest, it seemed, in communication. So later, when there was occasional contact, it was a special sort of thing. Peaceful. At least, no madness and no shooting.

"It never happened often. And never any actual communication. But at least there were times when people saw the Nale'nid, and the Nale'nid saw people, and *nobody was hostile*. Now? Heavens—who knows?"

Mona's manner, now, had changed. She said, "I saw one myself—oh, two years ago. On the outback east of town. A single sea-man, walking along a lagoon like a bit of mist, and I stepped away from the people I was with and went to a place where the sea-man would pass, and when he did he—" she stopped suddenly, searching for words, "he gave me a look that told me he meant no harm, and he seemed to shimmer for a second, as if he were—somewhere else at the same time—and he gave me what might have been a smile—and then again it might have been a laugh or a frown, really." She paused, and Seth thought she was finished, and then she said, "Whatever it was, it was neither unfriendly nor troublesome, and I choose to believe that it was a gesture of...?" She shook her head in confusion and left the sentence unfinished. She was watching Racart, now, whose face was impenetrable, his eyes focused elsewhere.

"Is that the only contact you've had yourself?" Seth asked, drawing her attention back.

Mona shrugged. "Until the trouble started, yes. Since then we've all seen them—but of course that's different. Something has turned them destructive. Our harvesting, maybe? Our building? Our presence?" She was mild for a moment, wistful.

"There were attempts to communicate, weren't there?" Seth asked. "Didn't the original colonists try to determine if they were intruding on the Nale'nid?"

"Try, try," Mona scoffed, eyeing him intensely again. "So no one ever got through to them—that should be our problem, not theirs. And here we are, mining a drug for *your* people and now fighting with the Nale'nid and probably set to go after them for good. Are you going to try and tell me differently?" She accused him with a stare.

Something ticked in his head, and he realized that Racart, the day before, had asked him very nearly the same question. Apparently, judging from the faces

around him, there were many here who felt as Mona did. Finally he said quietly, "I don't know."

Silence blanketed the room, and he was suddenly conscious that virtually everyone in the room was listening. Eventually, the conversation picked up on other topics, and Seth excused himself. He walked outside on the deck for a while, thinking, and finally gave up and went to bed.

* * * * *

He slept poorly, tossing until morning. When he awoke, he discovered that the ship, as well, was unsettled. He took only a light breakfast and went topside. The weather had turned threatening; the sea was gray and kicked with chop, and ARDELLO shuddered audibly through the white-capped turbulence. Great sheets of foam thumped and plunged continually from the bow. The wind chilled him immediately, and he headed directly for the bridge.

There it was warmer, but not much quieter. Captain Fenrose was busily snapping orders, as the pilot crew was in transition from mapping chores to harvesting. Fenrose nodded to Seth without pausing. "Danjy, what have you got for me on the phones?"

"Scattered, Skipper—no mass yet." The man speaking had his head encased in earphones, a tiny mike at his throat.

"Helm, come ten degrees starboard."

"Aye."

"Skipper, tracings on the wide-scan, roughly a kilometer straight starboard," said another engineer, hunched over a printout bank.

"Resolution?"

"Not yet, clearing a bit, now."

"Steady straight, helm."

"Bright echoes, now, Skip—pelagic, thin population."

"Tracing confirmed now. We've got density ahead. That is confirmed. Recommend starboard zig commencing one-half kilometer."

"Range, MARK."

Seth stirred, watching the relaxed calm in the crew's concentration. Captain Fenrose gazed forward, scanning every dial from what Seth would have called an impossible distance. The hull noise increased, as if the ship had encountered greater turbulence, and Seth thought he detected a rise in the sound of the wind outside.

"What's the surface condition, Lon?"

"Increasing to five, Cap'. Wind speed hiking—*Skipper, we're losing right rudder control.*"

Fenrose turned sharply. "Servo? Hydro?"

The helmsman stabbed several buttons in rapid sequence. "All clear on servo and hydro." He flipped off the test lights and tried again; same result.

Fenrose was already on the phone. He spoke for a moment, listened, then barked to the Second Officer: "Coley, we've got a broken rudder linkage in the engine room. They say a piece is *missing*. I don't know what the hell that means, but get on down there and find out! And I think Mr. Perland would like to go with you. Right, Seth?"

Startled, Seth agreed and hurried after Coley, who had darted from the bridge. The wind assaulted him the instant he was out the door, and he nearly stumbled down the wheelhouse steps with the ship's roll. The sky was angry, dark, and clearly worsening. He passed Racart, heading the other way, but had no time for more than a shout and a head-shaking glance overhead. He followed Coley down a rear companionway, shivering, thankful to have walls around him again. In fact, if there was going to be a storm, he would be happy to stay as far below decks as possible.

The ship heaved suddenly; his foot touched the bottom step and then skipped past it to meet the rising deck with a spine-jarring thump. He did not lose his balance, quite, but he collided with Coley and knocked the other man into a bulkhead. The engineer shot Seth an alarmed glance and said, "That was a power cut! Let's go!" Coley literally dove down the passageway and the remaining stairwells. The General Quarters klaxon hooted deafeningly.

The engine room was in chaos, crewmembers shouting and dashing about in apparently total confusion. Power was gone in the starboard engine, and that, with the loss of one rudder control, had crippled the ship's maneuvering ability. The Engine Chief was raging. "Damn them!" he shouted, with only a glance at Coley.

The deck groaned as the ship slewed sluggishly. The telephone was flashing, and Coley slipped past several confounded crewmen to answer it. He shouted to the Chief over the clamor, "Can you shut power to the port engine?"

"What?"

"Bridge has lost control over both engines!"

"Hell, all right—I don't know if we can shut it off or not, they've scrambled the whole works!" the Chief bellowed, and disappeared across the engine room.

There was a pop and a purple flash, and ozone stung the air. When the Chief returned, his face was white. He clutched a stanchion and caught his breath. "They've shorted that, too—I could have been fried! Carlo, hit the main breaker—kill *everything* in here, and get the emergency lights on!" There was a *chunk*, and the lights shut down; then a pinkish-orange glow filled the darkness. "All right," the Chief growled, "let's stop those bastards before they take the ship apart!"

Seth got it into his head, finally, that the sea-people were at work. It seemed they had caused a link in the starboard rudder control to *disappear*, just like that, just a sea-man hunched over a steel rod and, *zam*, both gone. But after that there was no shortage of Nale'nid popping up, vanishing, fooling with equipment and generally raising an incredible commotion. Coley was trying to relay this information to the bridge now, but he slammed the receiver furiously; the connection had been lost.

"Coley, get down here and help!" the Chief shouted. He was squeezed midway between the massive servopower unit and a gearbox below deck level. Seth followed and squatted, wondering what he could do to be useful. The Chief had his head up under the servo, and was trying to point something out to Coley.

The deck suddenly shifted, catching Seth utterly off balance. He banged headfirst into the servo, and then tumbled backwards across the deck, and slammed up short against a far bulkhead. He lay breathless, reeling, pain splitting his head. The commotion told him nothing; but the ship was listing, and it showed no signs of righting.

He edged painfully across the deck. "Coley! Chief! Are you hurt?" A gasp told him that *someone* was hurt, and then he saw that the Chief was already out from under the machinery and was steadying Coley. The officer was holding his head, grimacing.

"Get the medi—" the Chief started.

"Hey!" someone yelled. Seth whirled, and saw behind him a sea-man reaching high on the bulkhead and twisting the wheel of a pipeline valve. Seth lurched, half jumping and half falling—but he slammed with outstretched arms into the wall. The Nale'nid had vanished. Seth reached for the valve himself and twisted it back in the opposite direction. The pipe was trembling with rushing water, but the trembling slowed, and a crewman quickly joined him to wrench the valve closed.

"That's a ballast inflow pipe," the man muttered. He stopped short, apparently with the same thought Seth had. The ship's list—could the Nale'nid have fouled the ship's ballasting system? If so, they could be in danger of foundering. For an instant, the engine room seemed silent, the air acrid with ozone and fear; no one moved, while the reality of what was happening flashed like a wave through the crew. A moan from an injured man broke the spell.

"There's one!" another crewman cried, and someone lunged at a sea-man darting across the compartment. Moments later a Nale'nid was sighted at a circuit board, and two men had to rush to reset the circuitry to prevent massive overloads throughout the ship. The bridge was on the phone again, suddenly, and the news was shouted that the ship was flooding in several ballast compartments. "Skipper says give him power in at least one engine and in pumps, Chief!" the man on the phone yelled urgently.

"Sure! Olson, check out that board and stay on it—I'll tell you when I want power on. Jeli, see to Coley. Seling, check the pumps and get Freda to ballast control—*find out if we have to dump cargo and be ready to do it.* You—" and his finger stabbed at Seth—"patrol this area and keep those bastards out of the works!"

Seth unsteadily took up a watchdog position. The deck was shifting more perilously than ever; apparently the ship was rolling in the swells, and with each cycle it rolled more ponderously to starboard. Seth clung to a stanchion and crouched to look and be ready to act. The deck lurched again, and suddenly a sea-man raced by him, then was gone, then was visible farther down darting sideways out of sight. Seth pursued, his feet skidding treacherously. Amid the racket of pumps and hammers and wrenches, in the cavelike gloom of the emergency lights, he bounded like a man flying through a small hurricane. He halted where the Nale'nid had disappeared. There was no sign of him. A whisper at his ear—he whirled, and the same man or another was scampering back in the way he had just come, yanking an unidentified lever as he ran. Seth dashed after him and righted the lever, thinking, *the bloody creature was smiling*—and then looked in vain for another sight of him.

"Get him away from that—"

Seth heard the cry from astern and ran to assist, only to see another sea-man dance away and vanish in the gloom. *How do they do that!* he hissed in frustration. He was not the only one voicing that question.

"Seling, get a dump on that cargo!" the Chief called. There was a whine of pumps, starting deep and climbing to an awesome wail, and after long, long minutes the slope of the deck began gradually to ease toward the level. Seth was holding his breath . . . and then he was gulping lungfuls of air, stale salty oily air, and he shivered in awe of his own fear, a fear he had kept bottled in his excitement, and which was now rising to overwhelm him. The air was thick, hot, and hammering noises rang through his skull. He stood mutely, watching the others working around him, and he marveled at the efficiency of their activity.

"Come on, man! Did you hear me?" The Chief had his arm in a vise-grip and was shaking him. "I said I want you to get to the bridge—the phone is out!" Seth looked at him in amazement; his surroundings crystallized suddenly—and he blinked and nodded. "All right, tell the Captain we can give him power and port rudder now, and we'll have starboard rudder soon—we've found the missing part. Go!"

Seth ducked from the room. They had found the missing part? The way he had found Racart—and where *was* Racart? He took the companionway at a run.

The topdeck was ominous and gray, but salt spray stinging his face cleared his senses. The sea was ragged, covered with flying spume and rushing, gusting shreds of mist. The wind lashed coldly, and the deck was treacherous with spilling water. The ship wallowed in a sickening rolling motion, but a shudder from below indicated that power was being fed to at least one engine, and as he staggered along the rail he noted the bow beginning to turn back into the heaviest seas. Except for one or two men dashing forward of the bridge there was no one else on the deck, and Seth hurried, feeling uncomfortably alone.

He was breathing heavily when the wheelhouse door slammed shut behind him, and he leaned against a bulkhead in relief. Captain Fenrose ignored him for a minute, then turned suddenly. "Your message arrived ahead of you," the Captain said. "The phones are back, and engine room says they're getting things calmed down. Those sea-griffs had us running, but it looks as though they've tired, now."

Seth sighed agreement and took several minutes to regain his equilibrium, simply watching the bridge crew at work restabilizing the ship's vital systems. The heaving of the deck subsided as ballast was brought back under control; and it seemed the worst of the crisis had passed, though main power and steering capacity were still at a bare minimum. He started to relax, for the first time since the madness had begun.

Fenrose turned to him again. "Your friend Bonhof still helping out down in the engine room?"

Seth tensed. "*Engine room?* Last I saw, he was headed *this* way, when I was on my way down!"

Fenrose scowled. "He didn't join you down there?"

"Not that I saw. Things were awfully confused."

The skipper nodded. He stood behind the bridge officers, studying the instruments, the sky, and the sea. He picked up the phone and issued a general broadcast for all stations to report systems and crew status. Then, while one of the officers handled those incoming calls, Fenrose rang the engine room. He hung up a moment later, with a worried expression on his face.

The officer made his report: one serious injury, half a dozen moderately serious (of which Second Officer Coley was one), and countless minor ones; most ship systems were returning to normal. "And," he added soberly, "two deck crewmen unaccounted for. Both were last seen above decks. Possibly overboard." He glanced at Seth.

The starpilot was stunned. "Is Racart—?"

Fenrose cut him off. "Make an all-ship call for those two men, and also for Racart Bonhof." The officer turned back to the phone. "Helm! As soon as you have steerage, prepare to come about for search. Danjy, get on the radio and try to raise port." He stood grimly steady as the orders were carried out. Seth waited in silence, keeping a tight lid on his worry.

There was a response to the general call—one of the men was safe on A-deck, Racart and the other were still unaccounted for. Fenrose ordered a station by station search. Danjy reported no success on the radio, which surprised no one; Ernathe radio transmission was usually limited to line of sight. The station-by-station search reported no success. Fenrose himself took the all-ship phone, and his voice blared like a klaxon: "*All hands to search stations. All hands to search stations. Drone control make ready to launch.*"

Seth was holding his breath. The Captain said bluntly, "For the moment, we'll have to assume the worst. If they aren't found on board soon, they *have* to be overboard."

Seth met the Captain's eyes, then looked away. Racart overboard? Perhaps. But hopefully not. Where the Nale'nid were involved, he suspected that the simplest answer was not necessarily the correct one.

He waited and watched. Beyond the glassed-in bridge the sea fumed white and gray, practically indistinguishable from the sky. Voices murmured about him, but he paid little heed, his attention on the sea and down on the deck. Crewmen were already at the railings to act as spotters, though the ship was only now regaining headway. Four flying drones lofted noisily from the fantail and dispersed over the water—four bits of metal vanishing, then glinting, then vanishing again in the confusion of sky and sea.

ARDELLO came about under full power, finally, and began her own slow search.

Chapter 5

Drone-control was a very small and very gloomy compartment in the after section of A-deck, lighted now only by the glow of video and scanner monitors. Several people were crowded inside the station, among them Mona Tremont. Seth made a small gesture of greeting and received only a biting glance. She flashed her eyes back to the screen without a word. Seth squeezed in beside her, into the only available space. Mona recoiled at his presence, making him acutely aware of her hostility, her body tense and hard beside him. She was the least of his worries, though; and, with an effort, he ignored her and kept his eyes fixed on the infrared video images from the drones.

Chopped, frothy water, dark and empty. The search was in its third hour—well beyond the time that an unprotected man would be expected to survive in the sea—and there was an unspoken knowledge in the room, fairly permeating the air, that if no sign of the men was discovered soon the search would be curtailed.

Another hour passed, with no talk in the compartment other than low-toned communications with the bridge.

Seth became aware that his fingers and palms were painfully cramped, outstretched at his sides. They were involuntarily rigid, waiting to stab control plates that were not his to stab; he was no longer in WARMSTORM's control pit. He pressed his hands to his stomach and kneaded them slowly, one against the other, the pain only a shadow across his dark thoughts of frustration and helplessness.

The screens showed tossing sea, and nothing more.

* * * * *

"Damn you and your people!" Mona whispered, hissed, spitting like an enraged shreelcat. "Nothing like this happened before you came!" Her eyes were lances of fire, sweeping around and about Seth like the circling buzzing drones that had fallen grudgingly into the sea for recovery. Her eye-pupils dilated in despair, and then, as she seemed to regain control over her body if not her emotions, they shrank suddenly to hard daggers, riveted to his breast.

Seth breathed with difficulty. The finding and the recovery of the deck crewman's body, five hours into the search, had been a grisly, shocking experience for everyone aboard the ship. Bad enough in itself, it had made Racart's fate seem only that much more obvious. If one man had fallen overboard, why not two? The final blow, after several more hours, had been the Captain's order to end the search and to turn the ship, cargoless, toward home. At first Mona had stood silent, unmoving, her face turned inward, not acknowledging the implicit pronouncement of Racart's death. When she did speak, it was to Seth, with blunt anger and hatred. And he had no answer to give, even if she were listening.

"No—now he's gone, and someone else too—drowned—because people couldn't leave well enough alone!" She turned and stalked away down the corridor; but then she came back and faced him again, her fury unspent. There was defiance in her eyes, and the first hint of grief-tears. She shook her head painfully. "He called you a friend." Her headshake became violent, interfering with her words. "Two days—he knew—and now he's—gone." Her head stopped shaking; her eyes were blurry now with tears. Seth stared back helplessly, searching for words to express his own grief. Yes, they had been friends—friends for two days, actually four. What could he say, when his own sense of loss was numbing every nerve of his body?

"We don't know for sure," he whispered, trying to speak it aloud.

Mona stared at him contemptuously and turned away, to leave him standing alone and helpless in the middle of the corridor.

Perhaps, he thought dimly, perhaps it's true. That we really don't know what happened. The thought seemed empty.

He made a decision, and looked for a phone to call the Captain.

* * * * *

Sergei Fenrose worried his mouth around a piece of sojo candy and scrutinized Seth with a scowl. "How certain are you, now, of what you're saying?" His eyes were alert but traced with thin red veins of weariness. His desk was littered, the only disorderly thing in his cabin, and he hunched over it as he studied the starpilot.

Seth answered slowly, "I'm certain that he was once taken—without warning—by several of the sea-people. And that he was returned unharmed." He choked a little on that last word, but decided that it was basically truthful. "That, when you get right down to it, is all that I am certain of. I have no *reason* to believe that it happened again, other than the fact that it happened once before." He shrugged.

The Captain nodded, and sat back. "Well. If you're right, then there's probably nothing we can do. Except not give up hope. Or do you have any other suggestions?"

The starpilot gestured helplessly. "No." He thought. "Captain—"

"Mm."

"Do you happen to know what Racart's relationship was—*is*—with Mona Tremont?"

Fenrose looked surprised. "Why, it was my understanding that they were to be lifemated soon. Didn't they tell you themselves?"

Seth shook his head, stunned. "No, they didn't." He rose awkwardly to leave. "Thank you, Captain." He turned back, halfway out the door, and repeated softly, thoughtfully, "Thank you."

He wandered aimlessly about the decks for a time. Heading, eventually, for the crew quarters, he encountered Ferris Tarn, the young crewman. On an impulse, he stopped the man. "Ferris, have you seen Mona Tremont?"

Tarn looked at him uncertainly. "No," he said. "Wait—yes—I saw her go into the women's quarters about an hour ago." He seemed puzzled, or perhaps embarrassed. "I've heard she said some pretty harsh things to you—she must be hit awfully hard by Racart's... death. I doubt she meant half of what she said." He shuffled, seemed to want to say more.

Seth agreed. "She was hit hard. But she may have given up too soon." Seeing Tarn's startled look, he knew he should have kept silent. "Never mind, Ferris. Thanks." He hurried on, his blood pounding.

A female crewmember met him at the entrance to the women's quarters, and hesitated when he asked if he might see Mona. After a moment, she said, "Okay—but I hope you know what you're doing." She let him pass.

The woman spoke to Mona briefly, then left Seth alone with her. Mona's expression, fixed somewhere on the lower part of her bunk partition, made it plain that she did not wish for his company. Nevertheless, Seth settled on the edge of another bunk, not quite facing her. He ran his fingers lightly up and down his soiled trouser leg. Softly, he said, "Mona, there are many things Racart never had a chance to tell me. One of them was about you—and him." Her only reaction was a silent shiver. Seth hesitated, then continued. "He *was* my friend, for four days. And I haven't given up on him, and you shouldn't either. There's a chance—a good one, I think—that he's still alive."

Still, she did not look at him or answer. He sighed, knotted his fists on his knees, and said loudly, "Mona, did he tell you what happened the other day—up on the coast—with the Nale'nid?"

"Mona!"

She turned at last, slowly, her face devoid of any emotion he could name. "He started to," she said in a ragged voice. "He never finished. Does it matter?" She looked away.

"It matters. If the same thing happened today, it matters for all the world. If. No promises." He blinked. Was it right for him to create hope—possibly false hope? But he had already told the Captain, and Fenrose seemed to believe it a reasonable possibility.

He told the story, as much of it as he knew. "I never got to hear it all, either. But the Nale'nid took him—captured him, then released him. We can't be sure they didn't do it again today." Saying it, he bitterly wished he had learned the entirety of the story from Racart. Perhaps it would have supplied some clue. "That's all I can say, Mona—it's possible. Isn't that something, at least?"

Mona stared at the deck, moving one foot forward and back. She somehow seemed younger, now, than he had previously thought; perhaps twenty. With obvious great effort, she said, "What about Panlon?"

The other crewman. Seth choked silently. "Accidents happen at sea, don't they?" His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. "We don't know that he and Racart were together. Something entirely different could have happened to Racart."

Mona nodded. She looked at him again, finally. "I don't know whether or not to tell you to hope," Seth said. *Yes. Damn it, yes, hope!*

She nodded again, attempted a smile and failed miserably. She started to weep and choked it off herself. "All right," she managed. She raised her eyes, then dropped them. "All right. I guess. Now please let me be, for a while."

Seth left, wondering if he could believe it himself.

* * * * *

ARDELLO reached port the next day, and it was only a matter of hours before officials from Lernick, Lambrose, and the WARMSTORM Mission were brought together in tense conference. Richel Mondreau of WARMSTORM and Kenelee Savage, Manager of the Ernathe Colony, agreed in principle that a representative of the sea-people must be secured—presumably by capture, since no alternatives suggested themselves. The upshot of the meeting was that air, sea, and land search would be undertaken, simultaneously, to the maximum extent feasible by the joint personnel of Ernathe and WARMSTORM. Stunning weapons would be issued to all parties, and it was intended that they be used. Any Nale'nid sighted would be a target for capture.

Mondreau delivered general instructions to the Warmstorm complement and dismissed them to join their Ernathene counterparts for individual search party planning sessions. He called Seth inside. The starpilot eyed him wearily but respectfully; he had hardly slept, and he hoped that he was not about to be grilled. Still, among the Warmstorm personnel he was the only one—through accident or design—who had had repeated and fairly close contact with the Nale'nid, and he

knew he was expected to offer useful information. At the moment, he could hardly even think.

"Perland, you and your friend Bonhof had some things to tell us, before we hustled you off. Do you want to give us a rundown now?" Mondreau spoke briskly, not acknowledging Seth's obvious exhaustion. Captain Gorges listened on, a faint smile flickering across his broad face.

Seth groaned inwardly, and swallowed. "I can't, I'm afraid. Racart never had the chance to tell *me* precisely what went on." He related what he knew, concluding with his belief that Racart might be alive in the hands of the sea-people. "I would hope that if it is true, the Nale'nid will make the fact known at some point."

Mondreau considered that, and conferred with Gorges. He turned back to Seth. "Well, since you seem to have an unusual facility for attracting these people, we're going to send you along on one of the land parties. Maybe you can help us net an emissary."

"Very well," Seth replied. He was repelled by the man's glibness on the subject of the Nale'nid, but he had no real objections to the plan. Perhaps if he were not so tired—

"I know," Mondreau cautioned, "that you will be tempted to turn this into a search for your friend. Remember, please, that you're going out to find and bring back a sea-person or persons. And that is your only responsibility."

Seth shrugged. "I wouldn't know how to go about searching for Racart if you wanted me to. Sir."

Mondreau looked at him sharply, but dismissed him without comment. Seth returned to the WARMSTORM crew's quarters and went to sleep without speaking to another soul.

* * * * *

Seth's party assembled two days later, the last of the expeditions to set out. As the seven men gathered and sorted their equipment for the last time, the bad weather of the previous day subsided. The leader, Marq Senrith, paid particular attention to Seth and the other Warmstorm representative, Andol Holme (*chosen to keep an eye on me?* Seth had wondered, though not unhappily), making sure that they had their gear packed and secured properly, and repeating the cautions he had given several times already—primarily, *don't get separated from the group*. Seth thought mutely of Racart's experience and nodded assent.

One of the Ernathenes, Coleman, was from Lernick; he had not previously been acquainted with the Lambrosians, but he joined with them in harboring reservations, not completely disguised, about the starmen's capacities for a lengthy trek on foot. Coleman was slightly paler than the Lambrosians; and like Damon, Reese, and Lanka, the other three, he was small by the standards of most worlds Seth knew, but lean, muscular, and weathered. Andol Holme was actually the largest of the group, rising slightly over Marq Senrith.

"Ready for another round of this?" he asked Seth, who was still feeling rather bedraggled. He received a squint in reply and laughed. "You look like a scurv-otter who's gotten washed over a waterfall and left in the sun to dry. And that's a compliment."

"Wrong planet," said Seth. "That is, I think so. But then, who knows? Around here, they just *might* have scurv-otters. Strange, isn't it, how little wildlife there is?"

"The wildlife probably just avoids humans like the black Querlin death." Holme slung his pack and hiked it into a comfortable position on his back, then helped Seth. "Ready to go, looks like." The other five men were taking position, and Seth and Holme fell into line just ahead of Lanka, who was bringing up the rear. When Senrith was satisfied that the party was in order, he led them out of town, to the north—the same direction Seth had traveled with Racart.

Lambern was out, pouring its morning light around the broken bits of cloud drifting eastward in the sky. The bay flashed and sparkled to their left, passing in and out of view as they marched out of town along a path which, from the outset, was torturous. Seth was overly warm almost immediately, and he loosened the front of his windbreaker to let a cool breeze fan across his chest. His thoughts went back to Mona; she had departed last night on another cruise aboard ARDELLO, and before leaving she had visited Seth to apologize for her earlier unpleasantness. She had sat, awkwardly, knowing she was interrupting Seth's preparations but looking desperately as though she wanted to give him encouraging words of her own. In the end, she had found none and had simply forced a farewell smile, touched his hand gently, and left to board ARDELLO. How would she feel if Racart did *not* return, Seth wondered, on this cruise or at all? And what was he, Seth, likely to accomplish gamboling about in the wilderness with six other equally helpless men?

He picked up his pace to keep up with Holme and the rest. They were cutting inland now, from the shore route—or what Seth thought of as the shore—to take a path along a series of lagoons and channels, a twisty terrain, which to his eyes was impenetrable. After only a few hours travel, he gave up trying to maintain any sense of bearing with respect to Lambrose and the sea. In fact, sea-mist was beginning to move thickly enough across the landscape to give an impression of the land itself being in constant flux. "This is worse than a nest of serpents," Holme grumbled, waving Seth ahead of him over a narrow ledge, which broke off on one side to a treacherous-looking stream. "I've been through some mightily rugged terrain on Bargosi and Kormante, but nothing that seemed so endlessly *chaotic*. And so biologically wasteful."

"That's at least partly due to the radiation cycle of Lambern," Lanka answered, trudging behind Holme. "Massive increases in the solar radiation—irregular, but averaging every couple hundred years or so—that has something to do with the influences of the heavy planets and the nearest stars. That's probably killed off many evolutionary lines before they could really much get started."

Seth glanced back. "At least we're starting to see some plant life." He pointed ahead, to where some large bushes, rather like stunted trees, spotted the rock-maze at closer intervals. To Seth it was a welcome sight; he was growing weary of the desolation. The mist was thickening also, however, so that some of the trees vanished from time to time, or poked upward out of wispy white pools.

The company broke for lunch, then moved on under a sky that was graying and beginning to sink groundward. Seth walked behind Holme and talked to Lanka for a while, but as the afternoon wore on they walked with long periods of silence.

Even the whisper of the wind was muffled by the pools and shreds of ground fog. At times, the men looked to Seth like a company of soldiers fording a vaporous, smoking river, where the water parted just frequently enough to betray the path in its bed. Senrith had indicated that if the fog became much worse they would be forced to band together with lines, but for the sake of easy movement and speed he preferred to proceed unencumbered for as long a time as possible.

So far, there had been not a hint of the Nale'nid.

Chapter 6

The fog worsened quickly. Seth was staring, with great concentration, diagonally to his left across a wide, bowl-shaped depression, where he had thought for an instant he had seen something moving. Trees obscured the far background, making it impossible to distinguish anything clearly, and he could only guess at what he might have seen.

He turned to alert the others; but they had already moved on into the mist. Seth had not even been conscious of stopping, but he realized now that he had in fact stepped away from the path. Silvery vapor curled about him, reaching to touch his waist, and obliterating the topography. "Lanka!" he called, moving hesitantly in the direction that seemed to be the correct one. "Andol! Lanka! Hold it a minute!"

He repeated the cry—and when there was no answer he thought quickly, and nervously, that the last thing he wanted was a repeat of his experience with Racart. When the group found him missing, though, they would surely retrace their path—but, in this confusion of land and mist, could they really backtrack flawlessly? Perhaps; but more likely not. Still, it was probably best to stay put, and not try blindly to catch them.

After a minute of prolonged shouting, the only other sound he had heard was the cry of a wheeling skrell overhead. Fog lay over the land like snow, but above knee-height it moved in great curling masses, sometimes permitting a view and sometimes not; it seemed to absorb the sound of Seth's shouts like a wreath of insulation. Seth wished devoutly for a reliable communicator, but so erratic were the transmitting conditions in this country that only one had been provided for the party—and that with no great hopes for successful use.

But he did carry flares.

He quickly unslung his pack and unfastened the top. Sliding his hand along the inside surface of the fabric, he groped for the distress signals—and as he did so he looked up, across the rock hollow, and was startled to see the mists part to reveal a moving figure, or several.

The mists closed.

The figures, he was sure, had been Nale'nid.

He located the flares, and pulled them out of the pack. Should he use them and perhaps alarm the Nale'nid—or would it be better to investigate while he could, and hope later to attract the attention of the others? No, he decided, he could not afford to let the party get too far away. And, for all he knew, the flares would attract rather than frighten the Nale'nid.

The first flare, when he snapped the trigger, shot upward in a blossom of light, and as it settled into position high above Seth's head it commenced a loud, whistling wail. Seth crouched, and listened as the signal passed through a startling range of pitches, stuttering and ululating and hooting; the fire itself blazed pulsatingly from red to white and back. After a minute or so, the tirade collapsed, the light went out, and the empty casing fluttered lightly to the ground just beyond a small rise. Seth looked about, and waited. Presumably, if the flare had been heard or seen it would be answered.

The silence was unstimulating, and Seth took time to unwrap a biscuit-ration and drink from his canteen. The biscuit was dense and chewy, but he was hungrier than he had realized, and he gnawed at it vigorously until it was gone. The land was quiet, perhaps illusorily so; through the gauzy, and now thinning, mist to his left he saw a glint of water, perhaps another lagoon or a stream. He could not believe that the others—who could not, after all, be that far away—had not heard his signal or seen his flare. But on Ernathe nothing was to be taken for granted, seemingly. The mists, perhaps, had swallowed the sound of his signal as they had swallowed his companions.

Could he truly be lost? He triggered off two more flares, one by one, and waited futilely for a sign of notice.

Apprehension began to prey at him again, so he stood up for the sake of doing something, and paced carefully back and forth along a small and, by now, well-scouted length of rock path; and he studied the area in which he had seen the Nale'nid. If, indeed, he had seen them. There seemed to be more trees away from the path than he had realized, and they seemed fuller and darker now in the dissipating mist. Or was he imagining that, also?

He gazed for a time, not really thinking beyond his immediate hope of being found—and was shocked suddenly to hear the sound of soft female laughter, familiar laughter. Without another thought, he shouldered his pack and stepped off the trail, determined to have a look at this Nale'nid female, regardless of the consequences. The ground tumbled slightly, and he scrambled downward to find a series of pools, which he had to circumnavigate to continue... west? A ridge bristling with squat-shaped trees jutted into his path to the left; and the sound of voices, like a rustle of musical-toned leaves, seemed to come from the far side of the ridge. He moved toward the sound.

The air cleared before him, the last of the mist scattered as though by a clean, unfelt breeze, and when he rounded the point of the ridge he found the sun shining down softly into a tree-nestled hollow, containing a lagoon edged in large part itself by a dense border of the same dark kind of tree. Shreds of mist were interwoven through the border and lay in laces across the water, but left large open spaces through which the blue-green clarity of the water shone clearly. Seth breathed deeply: salt air. The sun and the clear arid tart air were as invigorating to his muddled brain as a clear draft of ale.

A movement on the left caught his eye. But when he turned, there was nothing. He looked carefully up and down the shore, and blinked uncertainly.

A girl moved out from the tree and stepped to the water, fifty meters away. He came about quickly, but she seemed not to notice him. Then another figure joined her, a sea-man. Seth held his breath. It was difficult to be sure, but they looked to

be two of the three Nale'nid he had seen on the shore with Racart. His blood raced, and he prepared to move closer; but he hesitated, feeling a ridiculous bashfulness, akin to his feelings as a young man in approaching girls. The sea-girl intrigued him as much as any female he could remember; yet at that moment he could not move, and his face burned with irresolution.

A third figure stepped out of a swatch of mist—and then he *knew* that these were the same three. The last figure looked up at him and made some gesture to the others; their voices murmured. He moved closer, finally, then stopped behind a stunted tree, his hands fidgeting with the waist-high upper branches.

Come. The girl turned; suddenly all three were watching him.

Seth stood rigid, startled. The voice in his mind had been that of the girl. He was sure. It called again, pleasantly: *Come.* Not a sound, precisely, but something which conveyed the word, and a softness and a welcome. The voice spoke a third time, the same message, and with the voice there was a momentary presence in his mind, a presence uncertain and faintly shy (reflecting, perhaps, his own confusion? he wondered).

How to reply to such a voice? With the larynx, with the mind? Seth stared at the girl, but could not move; his muscles ignored his wishes. *Do not be... afraid,* beckoned the silent voice, faintly troubled, and yet responsive to his constrained eagerness. The girl's face was slightly averted, but her eyes flickered to meet his, and from a distance their gazes locked.

"Hello!" Seth called, and wondered if he sounded silly.

Hello.

He walked slowly down the embankment to the water, and then along its edge toward the Nale'nid trio. He did not want to remove his gaze from them for a moment, and yet the bank was tricky and he had to step carefully to keep from stumbling. Amidst the gleaming sun, the brooding low trees along the shore, the red and brown rock, the clear glowing water of the lagoon—his eyes scarcely saw that world for their focus upon the slender figure of the sea-woman, fair, beautifully bronze-haired, and clothed in a satinlike sheen. And behind her the two male Nale'nid. It occurred to him for a moment, as a ludicrous thought, that he was supposed to capture these people, to team with his search party and shoot them with stunners. He chuckled.

He approached to within a few meters of the Nale'nid and stopped. They were small figures, as small as adolescent Ernathenes; but they stood with poise, and with dignity, and appeared to be lost in contemplation.

"Hello," he said again, tentatively. A curious sensation of warmth arose in him; he was beginning to feel that something enchanted was going on here—and he suspected that he was blushing.

You are Seth? The woman scarcely stirred.

"Yes. How did you know? Do you read all my thoughts?" A moment of apprehension, panic.

It was at the front of your thoughts. Yes. Yes, so it had been, he realized. A part of him had been sternly self-conscious, and she wouldn't have had to probe deeply into his thoughts to learn his identity. That was a relief.

"I am Seth. Who are you? Do you have a name?"

The sea-woman tilted her head, her large-irised eyes shining, pleasantly setting off her hair with their greenish brown glow. *I am Lo'ela. My... brothers... are Al'ym and Ga'yl. We are of Pal'onar, which you would call, I think, South City of the Nale'nid. You are surprised to see us?*

Seth was flustered, forgetting and then remembering that he had in fact come here with the expressed purpose of finding Nale'nid. "I... I don't know," he stammered. His original purpose paled, faded to insignificance in the back of his thoughts, giving way to others. It was strange, speaking aloud and then hearing the answers in his mind. He was no telepath; it was an experience he had never known. It was curious and delightful, as this mind-speaking woman was curious and delightful in her own right. "Can your brothers speak to me in this way, also?" he said.

No. At this time I alone can reach you. Lo'ela spoke aloud suddenly, in the melodious voice he had heard previously; it did not, he realized with surprise, sound to his inner ear much like her mind voice. Still, it was quite pleasing. She spoke quickly, incomprehensibly, and it took Seth a minute to realize that she was speaking, not to him, but to Al'ym and Ga'yl. Several times, he heard a word that sounded in a transmogrified way like his own name.

The two sea-men answered her in rapid tones, and she turned her attention back to Seth. *My brothers find you of interest, but they cannot reach you. Al'ym... focuses... upon the circulation, the deep fluids of the trees and the waters and the air, and of you and me. Ga'yl focuses upon color, colors, all the colors of the world.* Her eyes widened, and fixed liquidly upon Seth's.

Fluids, colors? he thought wonderingly. What was that supposed to mean? He said, "And you, Lo'ela—what do you *focus* upon?"

I, Lo'ela—(was that a teasing tone in her voice?)—focus upon a stranger from beyond the sky, Seth Perland, a stranger whose thoughts meet mine. The eyes flickered—changing color?—and closed. Lo'ela stood peacefully before him, eyelids shut, as if purposely allowing him to study her, to carefully satisfy his curiosity without the distraction of her captivating eyes. Her expression was disconcertingly innocent; she was a delicate-framed girl, with slender hips, smooth and pale legs and arms, and breasts hardly more than round bumps beneath the top of her curious garment. Seth glanced at Al'ym and Ga'yl; they were watching him intently, but betrayed nothing in their faces. He looked back at Lo'ela, her half-smiling features, which among his own people might have been those of a girl fourteen—but the thoughts of Lo'ela struck him as those of a mature young woman. (But what is a mature Nale'nid? he wondered.)

Was he supposed to reach with his own thoughts to touch hers?

Lo'ela opened her eyes. She looked, it seemed, faintly hurt. *The stranger does not focus upon me.* A statement, not a question.

And yet Seth felt compelled to answer. "If I am the stranger—" and he smiled awkwardly at the absurd qualifier, "I am not certain of what you mean, *focus*. And I am not sure it's something I can do."

Lo'ela swayed contemplatively, her face relaxed again. *Our word is something different, which you would not understand at all. Can you speak to me with your thoughts?*

"I don't know." Seth concentrated, found his thoughts growing erratic the instant he tried to concentrate. He tried to frame words, finally managed to think sequentially: *I find you intriguing. I would like to understand you.*

Lo'ela blinked. Seth shrugged. *You speak very confusedly with your thoughts,* Lo'ela said, but offered no elaboration on what she had or had not understood. Seth nodded.

A skrell shrieked overhead. Seth looked up, startled, and watched it dive like a bolt into the lagoon. Moments later it erupted from the water into sunshine, a silvery fish glinting in its mouth. It spiraled upward over the watery ripples of its exit, its black leathery wings beating solemnly. Another skrell cried in a wounded, angry voice and joined it in flight.

Mists again began to move, to close over the reflecting surface of the lagoon.

What now? Seth wondered, looking restlessly back at Lo'ela. They couldn't stand here all day.

Lo'ela broke the silence to speak briefly with her brothers. She turned to Seth again. *Where beyond the sky, stranger starman Seth, do you come from?* she asked.

"Rorcan. Venicite. Rethmere. The central worlds of the Cluster," he answered, unhesitatingly, though he was surprised by the apparent sophistication of her question. He pointed to the sky; a few stars were visible along with the afternoon sun, Lambern.

Yes, she said brightly, though he sensed that his answer had failed to convey its entire meaning to her. *Would you like to see our home?*

"This is your home. Ernathe."

This is our world. Would you like to see our home? she said, chuckling.

Seth hesitated for a fraction of a second; his thoughts flashed to the ship that was as much a home as his homeworlds, and to Racart, and to the search team he had lost. "Of course," he said with a nod, and those other thoughts lost themselves in the warm confused glow of this new encounter. "Yes, Lo'ela. I would."

The Nale'nid woman spoke to Al'ym and Ga'yl. She stepped forward and touched Seth lightly on the chest; suddenly the two sea-men were on either side of him, touching his arms gently with dry, cool hands. He breathed nervously and, despite his best efforts lost his smile.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, twinkling, a flush of mist obscured his sight of Lo'ela like a cataract, an impenetrable fog gathering between him and the other. He started to speak, but now every sound around him was muffled, and he forgot the impulse. Twisting slightly, he felt the three hands still touching him like the pads of soft, gentle paws. Though they touched rather than held him, he sensed that he was nevertheless held within a grip, that an unbreakable if undetectable bond held them woven together. The mist shimmered and drove inward coiling into his eyes, splitting his vision into fragments of fuming chaotic movement. He huffed in confusion but did not move... and then he felt a skidding movement beneath his feet as if he were adrift upon glassily wet ice beneath the sea-mist. Trying to recover, without knowing from what, he spun—and sank through the ice into a milky gloom, half liquid, half vapor, a realm of dreamy transient quiet in which he instantly felt at home. He was no longer aware of the Nale'nid with him, and he sleepily wondered if he had been abandoned, turned free, to the tides of this curious land; but he wondered without fear, with merely a

sense of relaxed bewilderment. When the milky quiet caved into dark oblivion he was saddened and perplexed.

Darkness swarmed and buzzed. His ears hurt, briefly, until someone removed the pain. The darkness lifted, collapsed into brilliant stunning light, and voices whispered at him and about him, and touched him like soft plucking fingers.

He squinted. The light was not so bright as he had thought, but it bathed him with liquid blue radiance, cool, consoling. A dome, clear but traced with a woven pattern, held an ocean—a real ocean of water—serenely secure over his head and entirely about him. The air seemed almost liquid in his throat, denser than a mere single atmosphere. He was reclining, staring upward. He turned his head and found the Nale'nid girl, Lo'ela, sitting patiently beside him, her delicate hand resting lightly upon his shoulder.

Stirring, he blinked, felt the muscles come alive in his arms and legs. He was dry; and yet he was in a dwelling beneath the sea. Outside this dome, in the near ocean distance, there was a number of apparently similar domes, magnificent with ghostly translucence. Looking at Lo'ela, he asked, "What, please tell me, have I just been through?" He blinked again.

Lo'ela removed her hand with a smile and a little laugh. *We are here.*

Chapter 7

Overhead, a trio of mellings glided to and fro in the sunlight, sculling the air rhythmically with treacherous looking tails. Racart Bonhof scowled until the creatures disappeared and traced a hand absently over the cool rock wall of the labyrinth in which he was lost. He looked wearily both ways down the passage, but there was no hint of the secret of the maze.

Taking me nowhere, he decided. He had thought, originally, that he was making progress in escaping from the forest labyrinth, but all he had actually accomplished was to wander out of the forest and into the depths of a series of rock-gully passages with insurmountably steep walls. It did not seem an improvement. But at least he was cool now, carrying his jacket over his shoulder; and the constant if narrow overhead view of the sky was some slight comfort, some familiar reference to reassure him that he was not going mad, at least not yet.

He settled, now, on backtracking through the passage. The perspective, the dwindling of the passage in the distance, induced fantasy rather than claustrophobia; he imagined he was treading the basin of some long-abandoned stone aqueduct, which in another time had swirled with fast-running water. Actually, the watercourse appeared carved by natural forces; the walls and even the stone floor were fluted and asymmetrical, exposing slanting clay sediment layers in various browns and yellows and reds. His footsteps echoed coolly down the passage. Racart followed two left turns and one right; then he stopped in confusion at an intersection. He vaguely remembered the juncture, but all the passages looked different when faced from the opposite direction. He started up the far left path, then changed his mind and took the next one over. This seemed familiar, and he walked quickly.

After a time, as he looked up, he began to see the heads of trees peering shyly over the tops of the channel walls—and he knew that, if not precisely retracing his steps, he was at least returning to the forest. The passageway took several sharp bends (and he realized now that he was not on the same path, but it hardly seemed to matter), and the tops of the walls sloped lower and became thicker with trees. Unfortunately, when he reached a point at which, by jumping, he could sight over the walls, the tree trunks appeared too closely spaced to penetrate. He tried anyway, stuffing his jacket up first; he muscled himself onto the top ledge, and with a spine-wrenching twist angled himself head first between two oddly curved trunks. He got his arms through, then pulled and wriggled. Knobs of wood dug painfully into his chest and back, caught on his tunic, and gouged his hips. He cursed, ignored the pain, and struggled through and out, rolling clear onto sodden earth; then he picked himself and his jacket up, brushed feebly at the clay staining his clothes, and finally looked around.

His hopes sank. Two dense thickets of trees bracketed a wide pathway winding off into the forest. The sky shimmered overhead. The spot was virtually indistinguishable from the one in which he had first rubbed his eyes that morning, following a daze of blurry dreams and strange memories. Now, almost a day later, he scarcely remembered his actual arrival; and only with great effort could he recall the events preceding—a foundering ship, thunderous seas, panic and bewilderment. Hardly real; hardly a true or credible story. He started walking again.

Lambrose had burned fiercely, but its rays were easing as the day wore on. He was reasonably sure that he was in a tropical or semi-tropical region, though he had no real experience on which to base the judgment. He was thirsty. His throat hurt, and his skin was so hot it ached. But there was no more a sign of fresh water here than there was of a purpose to the whole bizarre ordeal. He had simply accepted it from the beginning, and walked, hoping to find... he could not imagine what, except an end to the maze.

The forest was not an entirely natural feature of the land, he had decided early on—yet who had created it, the Nale'nid? He had been astonished to find so many trees; that, more than anything else, was beyond his experience. He had seen pictures from other worlds; but the Ernathe he knew supported only token flora, and the sight and smell of such lush verdancy had nearly overwhelmed him. That the forest was laid in an intricate maze, that the trees were high-trunked as if sculpted specifically to discourage climbers—these had been only secondary mysteries.

He trudged, not concerning himself about the direction. He plodded, pounded his fists against tree trunks as he passed, and cursed whatever quality within him had led the Nale'nid to single him out. The path wound, intersected, and moved on beneath the sun and the trees. Racart followed. And followed.

In time, the pattern of the forest changed; the trees were spaced farther apart, and he could look through the thickets—to more forest. He seemed amidst a company of soldiers frozen in the act of falling out: gray-green, stooping torsos topped by leaf-camouflaged helmets. The uniform, thin-leafed stuff carpeting the ground was becoming a jumble of mixed species, some of them buttoned with blue and purple and yellow blossoms. Racart stopped and once more took stock of the

surroundings. Was he out of the maze? Probably not. He could abandon the path, find his own way through the woods. Might be tricky, depending on what surprises, if any, his captors had prepared. Perhaps escape lay in striking off on his own—or in playing their game straight. Or in neither. Perhaps he was meant to be trapped here forever, wandering in endless spirals and zigzags, for *someone's* amusement.

The memory of his previous abduction rushed into his mind, images he had forgotten: *Stolen from Seth's side, a cataclysm, a whirlwind of changing sights and sensations—(like Seth's dosage of the strange mynalar-g?)—and dashed rudely to earth on the shore of a freezing, tempestuous sea. But not to stay there, wherever there was—he was yanked silently and with laughter in his ears to another place... grottoes: caverns and dripping rock formations, ghostly illumination and Nale'rid, sea-people scurrying around and about, never seeming to remain in one place, except...*

except a long-jawed smiling sea-man who danced ritualistically around him, beaming at his fellows and then at Racart. Another man, smaller, more subdued in his movements, but shifting in a curious motionless way from one side of Racart to the other, and occasionally jabbing an arm at him in a strange but apparently serious gesture. Trying to frighten me? he wondered. Why—because they are angry? Would they tell him why? No, but for minutes, hours he was scrutinized, his very thoughts invaded and searched with humiliating disregard for his privacy. Then...

stolen away as suddenly as before, there were fragments of landscape flashing and vanishing, flashing and vanishing, as if he were being transported by someone unsure just where to go. He landed dizzy, exhausted, and alone on the northern seashore—shaken to the bones. In the grip of a calm that he knew was only shock, he set off in search of Seth.

Racart shook his head determinedly, filing the memory. This new experience was to be different, evidently. Left on his own, thirsty and hungry. A test? Damn them, then; he would be tested on his terms.

He plunged away from the path and stalked furiously through the unblazed woods. Anger and frustration kept him going, but he was seriously weakened by sun and exhaustion, more so than he realized. When his anger began to fade, his pace slowed as well. From a jog, he slipped to a desperate, slumping walk, pushing himself from bole to bole, but unwilling to yield to fatigue.

The trees fell away, and he was fuzzily aware that he was in a clearing, a glade; and he heard the sound of nearby running water. His eyes blinked open—he had been dozing as he walked—and he caught a sparkle of light off to his right. He hurried, dropping his jacket, and fell to his knees at the edge of a marvelous, clear-running spring. He sprawled on the bank, on the wet stone, and scooped his hands slowly into the water, not quite believing it real. Crystalline and cool, not cold. He rinsed the dried clay from his hands, and splashed his face, sputtering, murmured aloud at the coolness, the wetness. He rubbed his hands on the wet stones, sighed, and rubbed them again as though absorbing strength from the rock itself. And he wondered: *Was this planned, too?*

Finally, he drank—slowly, in small sips, grimacing at a terrible temptation to gulp quickly and to slake his thirst. When he finished, he got to his feet to look around. A clearing. A glade—small, verdant, beautiful. He had never seen a place

quite like it, would never have guessed that such places existed. Woods surrounded the grass floor in a sheltering but not confining way; several flying animals moved about, neither skrells nor mellings, and even more astonishing, a four-legged *ground* animal browsed casually along the limits of the trees. Before he could move closer, the animal vanished into the woods.

Several of the trees bore brightly colored objects upon their branches—some of them reddish-orange and spongy-hard, others small green fleshy fingers nestled among great clusters of leaves. He touched the fruits thoughtfully. He had heard of fruits. Another test? He knew nothing of the safety or hazard of such things, but since some of the pieces seemed gnawed and nibbled upon by animals he reasoned that they were probably edible. And if not, what alternative? Starvation?

He grasped one of the red orbs and pulled it clumsily from its branch, then with only a moment's hesitation took a bite. It was sweet, juicy, and tart; delicious. He finished it quickly, finding a seed in the middle, which he inspected, gnawed, and threw away; then he took another and ate it more slowly. Next he went to try the green fruit. It was crisply tender, hollow in the center with clusters of small, bitter seeds. He ate three and was startled to realize that his stomach was tight and full; though he still felt hungry. He walked away before he could start eating again, and cut across the clearing to explore further.

He froze.

Standing on a small knoll just above the spring, motionless as the trees, were two Nale'nid. Racart took a step that way, and then stopped, thinking: *Why should I? If this is their doing, let them come.* The Nale'nid did not move however. It seemed they still planned to keep their purpose secret. A confused effort to communicate... to understand human ways... to intimidate? Racart shook his head and determined to stop worrying about it. He stared at the two Nale'nid, and they appeared to stare at him. *Stalemate.*

He turned around, reached, and tore a red fruit from a nearby branch. Biting it deeply, he closed his eyes to appreciate its juicy sweetness, and sucked it slowly, before turning his eyes back to the Nale'nid.

They were gone.

Annoyed, he cast his gaze up and down along the edges of the meadow, but if they were there at all they were lost in the shadows. Probably they had been following and watching for as long as he had been in this forest, and in the labyrinth. He shrugged, and went back to his eating, and his browsing.

* * * * *

Later, considerably refreshed, he decided to press on. The Nale'nid had shown no inclination to interfere with his journey, and there appeared to be several more hours of daylight in which he could travel. Pleasant as this glade was, there was no point in remaining. He retrieved his jacket and wrapped in it several pieces of each kind of fruit. Then he glanced quickly to choose a heading, settled on the direction of the declining sun, and marched into the woods. Surrounded by trees again, he felt less uncomfortable than before but no less unsettled as to a goal. *To get out. But to where?* He sighed. This time he moved leisurely, stopping at times to examine an unfamiliar plant, or to admire the solid dignity of an aging tree. Almost before he knew it, he had moved into an area of sparser growth, and,

paradoxically, he found himself back in a pathway. The trees were not crowded together in a wall, but were arranged in a curving linear fashion, with the pathway marked only by a slightly wider spacing than among the trees generally. He followed it.

The woods was breaking open, exposing its ground and its terrain to view, while Lambern moved lower and lower, losing power in its golden illumination. A reddish glow suffused the woods, lighting the ground in rich browns, and turning the trees into somber giants brooding over an autumnal scene. Racart walked slowly, unnerved by the deepening colors. If someone were shadowing him, this was surely the place to do it. Slowly, though, as Lambern became visible beneath the treetops as a flattened, glowing orb, he felt himself drawn onward toward the sight itself, through the dwindling woods.

He emerged from the forest, and stood awestricken. The sun Lambern lay before him, beautiful, warm and crimson—half sunk behind a tumbling, painted landscape of rocky wildlands—the sun half sunk, and sinking, so that its blood-red light pooled into the craggy, canyoned wilderness but gave up growing shards of it to half-light and darkness. Racart stood on a plateau of rock, grass covered and shrubbed, and gazed outward and downward to a land which he knew had never before been seen by Ernathene human eyes.

He was still standing, staring, when he felt the arms of the Nale'nid touch lightly upon his shoulders and his arms. He never succeeded in turning his head to look. The plateau shook, and mist filled the tortured wilderness. His vision shimmered, and he sensed motion, fleeting motion beneath his feet, then the sight was lost to him... and he knew that he was once more on his way.

He knew, also, that he had solved the escape riddle of the labyrinth—if *solution* it could be called.

* * * * *

Richel Mondreau looked at Holme with an expression suggesting annoyance, skepticism, and a touch of upper-rank contempt. "Very well, then," he said, "since Mr. Senrith concurs that the fog was a prime factor in Perland's disappearance, I'll accept your explanation as a working hypothesis. But unless someone has a brilliant idea, it's going to be damned impossible to find the man. Good pilot, too, I understand. Eh, Jondrel?"

Captain Gorges smiled slowly and sympathetically, but at Andol Holme, not at Mondreau. "Yes, Richel. He is a good pilot, and considerably more than that. But it would seem, from past experience, that the man is a magnet for Nale'nid shenanigans—so I shouldn't be surprised to learn of their involvement here, as well."

"I agree," Holme said forcefully. "Seth is too careful a person to have let this happen unless something extraordinary were going on. And, since we found the flare casings, it's clear he must either have walked away of his own free will or been taken."

"So we put him in the same category as that Ernathene fellow, Bonhof," Mondreau said. "Conditionally lost."

Holme shrugged, and agreed.

Mondreau turned to discuss strategy with Gorges and Kenelee Savage, who had just finished going over another party member's report. Aside from the disappearance of the starpilot, nothing of note had occurred during the search. Holme, though not specifically invited, stayed around and absorbed the exchange among the three officers. Savage suggested a wait-and-see approach, noting that there was no reasonable action they could take that would be likely to impress the sea-culture (presuming that there *was* an actual culture among the sea-people), and meanwhile the latest batch of process-*mynalar* was being run without difficulty, with unarmed guards stationed heavily about the plant.

Mondreau was distinctly dissatisfied with that proposal. "At the very least," he said, "we ought to have more parties out searching. We know—" and he pinched his eyebrows together to emphasize the point, "we know how effective security measures have been. With all respect, Kenelee." To which the Ernathe Manager made no reply.

Again, Holme spoke up. "Isn't one of the search ships due soon, with some kind of report of a sighting?" He looked questioningly at Savage.

"Should be docking now," Savage acknowledged. "They got through enough of a radio report to say that they had found something." He turned up empty palms. "So let's see what they have."

"You won't have long to wait," said an Ernathene aide from near the window. "Here comes an officer from ORREGI, now. It's Jonas."

The officer entered and reported. Sonar probes had found hollow structures, apparently chambers, on or near the seafloor in two different locations. "Both clusters of structures were located by probe-dragging drones, about two thousand kilometers to the northwest," he said, pointing out the coordinates on a chart. "That's the Jamean Sea, about four days' journey by surface ship. We have only rudimentary details on the sightings, since they were made by roving drones, and by the time we had analyzed the recordings it was too late, fuel-wise, to send them back for another look. But the structures seem too regular, too perfect to be natural. They could be Nale'nid dwellings."

"On the seafloor?" Mondreau asked skeptically.

"Yes sir. There were unconfirmed reports of Nale'nid dwellings underwater from the original hemisphere surveys. Though those reports placed them even nearer the equator than the ones we found." Jonas hesitated. "No doubt, sir, you're wondering how a nontechnological people would be living in structures underwater. Well, we'd like to know, too."

"There's a lot we'd like to know," Savage said softly. His voice hardened. "Barring objections from our WARMSTORM friends, then, I'll instruct the masters of ORREGI and BARSUTHE to prepare for another trip north to examine the sightings in detail. BARSUTHE will carry two subs for a good close look if her master deems it advisable. Richel?"

Mondreau scowled. "Can you airlift a search? Four days there and four back is a long time."

Savage scratched his throat thoughtfully. "Well, we have two seafliers available; we'd have to send both for safety, which would leave us without an air backup here. Still, they could make sonar mappings, and relay them by line-o-sight to the ships. Save some time. All right."

"You can't make a submergence?"

"The subs can only go by ship—and that leaves divers," Savage said. "How deep were those sightings—fifty-three meters? No, I won't risk divers—not until we know more."

Savage was firm on the point, and though Mondreau was nominally the senior officer, he could not very well order Savage with respect to his own men. The meeting broke up with little more discussion. Holme left, moodily, with Captain Gorges. "It's the Ernathenes' job, now, I suppose," he muttered. "Beginning to wonder just what good we're doing here."

The Captain walked silently, and stopped near the spacepad shuttle-van. "Well now," he offered, "just remember what Perland's attitude was about his friend, that fellow Racart. If there's nothing you can do, you might as well simply hope for the best and trust the Nale'nid." He nodded genially and entered the van before Holme could even begin to think of an answer.

* * * * *

Crossing the harbor avenue, Holme came out of his reverie to notice a familiar young woman angling across the street toward him; familiar, though he could not quite place her. The woman met his gaze and approached. She seemed nervous. "You're Seth's friend, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes—yes, I am. Andol Holme. I'm afraid I've forgotten your name, though," he said awkwardly.

"Mona. You haven't actually met me—"

"Of course. Racart's—"

Her jaw became rigid for a moment: an acknowledgement. Holme pressed his lips together sympathetically. "You've heard about Seth, then?" Mona nodded, her face darkening. He went, "I guess that you and Seth had a disagreement of some sort, but that can't be as important as the fact that he's—"

"No, no! Yes, we did have at first—or I did—but that doesn't matter. You were there—do you think he was taken by the same people who took Racart?"

Her hopeful tone made Holme a bit wary, but he answered truthfully that he didn't know. He could only hope, as she did. Mona accepted that thoughtfully. She seemed to be considering what next to say. Holme prompted her.

"It was the way Racart talked," she said, frowning, "when he spoke about the afternoon he spent out with Seth. He didn't say a lot, but it was enough that I knew something important had happened, something that he was too nervous about to tell me right then—and he hadn't told Seth, either, so Seth couldn't have really known what it was all about. But that something changed, somehow, the way Racart felt about the Nale'nid."

"How do you mean? For them? Against them?"

Mona sighed. "I don't know, and that's part of what is bothering me. I think his feelings were divided and he didn't know quite how to handle them. A part of his sympathies were with the Nale'nid, and a part of them with Seth, with you people. And I suppose that includes us, as well."

Holme was silent, considering for a moment her unflattering appraisal of the relationship between Ernathe and the Mission; he decided that she had not meant it to be insulting. "I would like to think," he said, "that the interests of Ernathe and

the whole Cluster are the same—and that they're not irreconcilable with the interests of the Nale'nid. Perhaps that's naive. And, since your people so rarely go offworld, maybe you can't easily appreciate the value of interworld exchange." He paused, thought again, and gestured helplessly. "Perhaps a lot of things."

For the first time, Mona laughed, though gloomily. "Okay, your intentions are good. I guess I can believe that." Her face dropped. "But it doesn't help about my worry—and that's Racart."

"It doesn't much help Seth, either," Holme reminded her.

She looked up again. "Guess I'm worried about Seth, too. And I know Racart would be."

"Then let's go worry together over a solid meal, okay?"

"Right," she said, with the closest thing yet to a smile.

Chapter 8

Pal'onar was an impossibility, Seth had decided at one point; but the judgment hadn't lasted—the city was too real, too visible outside Lo'ela and her brothers' fragile-looking dome. He was in a fishbowl looking out, his mind filled with question after question, and no answers. He wished that Lo'ela would hurry and return—from tasks having to do, he had gathered, with the communal harvesting of food. Seth put on his jacket. The dwelling was chilly; there was apparently little more to it than the protective bubble, the floor and several partitions, and two portals, one to the city and one directly out to the sea. There were few furnishings—sleeping mats, some bowls, a basin of fresh water (brought from where, he didn't know), some garments and personal items he had refrained from handling.

He wondered what time it was here. He wore his timepiece, still, but had no idea of the city's longitude on the globe; as nearly as he could guess, it was midafternoon. The blue light percolating downward through the sea was steady and, in its diffuse way, full; but he judged it to be somewhat less intense than a while ago. The scene outside was still, though occasionally a few fish, or a school, would pass within his sight. From time to time, when he looked carefully, he could glimpse sea-people moving about inside the shadowy worlds of the other seafloor domes; and occasionally he would see Nale'nid swimming in the sea—in a leisurely, fishlike fashion, from place to place or from dome to dome, or just moving about on the bottom. The sight was puzzling, to say the least. The Nale'nid wore no swimming equipment, no breathing aids, and they did not—Lo'ela had assured him—hold their breaths while swimming. What then? Did they breathe water? Another of the questions he would have to ask, probably several times.

He became engrossed in the undersea view and totally failed to notice Lo'ela's approach. When she stirred at his side, he was so startled that she said: *Don't be afraid!*

He turned, laughing, and answered, "I wasn't afraid—only startled."

You noticed me very suddenly?

"Yes. Yes, wouldn't that startle you, also?"

Startle? Lo'ela studied him with keen eyes, flickering; her face was framed by wet brown hair, as if she had been swimming. *No, not startle... we notice things slowly, not suddenly.*

Seth looked at her in amusement.

You are different... interesting.

Reddening, Seth looked out again. "Is that why you... *focused* on me?"

Of course.

"Of course," he mimicked, and could not help laughing again. Lo'ela laughed, too (shyly, he thought), and walked across to a point under the dome from which the densest part of the city could be viewed. Seth stood a little behind her, gazing into the sunlighted mist of the ocean. He experienced, curiously, the feeling that she had turned to face him, though she had not in fact moved. Perhaps, he thought wonderingly, he was beginning to grow more adept at reading her attention. Or her focus.

You are hungry. Would you like to eat and see the city? This time she really did turn to him. Her face was pixielike—a young girl asking her older man-friend to go for a stroll.

"Yes—both. Will I have to swim?"

Not immediately. She led him out of the dome and into another, connecting dome and then through a series of large, echoing passageways to what Seth had to think of as a "hall"—a much larger dome-section divided by partitions and scaffolds of various sorts, mostly made, as were the dome structures themselves, from a plasticlike seaweed product Lo'ela called *glid*. Seth had yet to find out how *glid* was made; he was beginning to wonder, actually, how many of his questions might never be answered. As they walked through the hall he felt that he was strolling through a transmogrified seafloor garden, flowering with great rigid fronds, smooth and glossily translucent, and with hanging filmy sheets fairly frosted with particles of sea-growth. There were also several alcoves exiting to the sea: open wells in the floor from which occasionally a Nale'nid would emerge, shedding water, or into which someone would drop as nonchalantly as Seth would walk through a door, and disappear with barely a ripple.

Mostly, the other Nale'nid either ignored Seth or observed him with indifferent curiosity. There were many of the people moving about in the hall, and he was disconcerted by the casual reception. Couldn't they see that he was of the outside race—weren't they supposed to have some quarrel with him? The fact was, though, that he could not gauge the reactions of the Nale'nid with any precision. Though apparently quite human, they had facial and muscular expressions that he found incomprehensible—an assortment of quick feature-changes and ripples of the skin. Only Lo'ela communicated with him in recognizable smiles and lopsided grins—the execution of which she was mastering rapidly as she spent time with Seth.

She gave him one of her flashing smiles now and hopped up to a higher deck, nearly a full meter above the floor. Her jump was light, effortless, causing her thin wraparound garment to swirl and cling softly against her figure. *Come up.* She grinned down at him, beckoning.

"Uh, sure," he mumbled, and boosted himself up clumsily onto his knees, then clambered to his feet. "Now what?"

The next step was not quite so high, and Lo'ela brought him around a partition to an alcove, where an aged sea-man sat, overseeing several large baskets of shellfish, and several more baskets of fruits, which apparently had been harvested from benthic plants. Lo'ela made a silent gesture to the man, as she told Seth, *Sit on the cushions and prepare yourself to eat.* Seth obeyed, though he had not the faintest idea what she meant by "prepare yourself." The cushions she indicated were stiff but comfortable, leathery and slick on the surfaces—apparently also of seaweed origin.

Lo'ela brought a handful of the fruits, put them before Seth, and returned for two bowls of shellfish, which the old sea-man had quickly and expertly shucked. She seated herself beside Seth, looked at him quickly without speaking, then shifted her position nervously, crossing one leg over the other. A moment later she shifted again, rather awkwardly, and finally settled into what appeared a relaxed attitude, legs drawn up and crossed beneath her. She glanced at him again, but still did not speak.

Though somewhat puzzled by her behavior, Seth picked up a fruit and rubbed it on his sleeve until it shone. He hesitated. Finally it dawned on him; what Lo'ela probably was doing was refocusing her attention from him to the food, or to the act of eating. He wondered if he should refrain from speaking. Perhaps she always ate in silence. Or perhaps she thought he did. Best to play it safe and keep quiet, he decided.

He bit the fruit, took a good mouthful; it was soft inside and watery sweet. *Malan*, he was told. He smiled to himself, stealing a glance at his concentrating friend, and consumed the fruit with relish. Next, following Lo'ela's example, he tasted the shellfish, and found that a different matter altogether—it was raw, tough, and gaggingly bitter. Seth steeled himself, and gulped it down. He gasped at the burning aftertaste. *Bollins*, he was told, sorrowfully. Apparently Lo'ela, despite her concentration, was still sensitive to his reactions, which was always reassuring in case he became ill from the food. He ate one more *bollins*, to prove he was made of strong stuff, and he glared indignantly when Lo'ela's chuckle filled his head.

"Fine... food," he choked with mocking enthusiasm. Lo'ela's face darkened, filled with uncertainty. He hastily explained that he was joking, good naturedly. She relaxed and hummed softly in his mind. She still was learning basic things about him; but he was beginning to realize what a good companion she was.

Thank you.

Thank you? he wondered, startled. He asked, suspiciously, "Did I transmit—*focus*—that thought to you?" Her chuckle filled his head again, and he grinned helplessly. Apparently Lo'ela was not the only one learning and adapting. When are we going to see the city? he wondered. No reply. Oh well. "When are we going to see the city?" he asked.

As soon as you eat that other malan you are hungry for.

Seth ate.

* * * * *

When they began touring the city, finally, Seth could not contain his wonder. It was one thing to see myriad shapes in the distance, blurred by seawater—but

quite another to actually walk through dome after dome, all thirty to forty meters (he estimated) beneath the surface of the sea. This was not the work of a primitive or undeveloped folk, as his own people considered the Nale'nid. But neither was it the work of a technological people. What was it, then—aside from a marvel?

Though most of the dwellings were clear domes, some were opaque or translucent. Interior illumination in the opaque structures was provided by bioluminous, anemonelike animals, which were kept and nurtured in many clear *glid* basins; it was not bright illumination but it was sufficient. Many of the structures were not domes at all, but spheroids or toroids. Many were unconnected by the main passageways, and apparently only accessible by water; others began above the seafloor and extended downward, straight into bedrock. Seth stopped in a passageway, pressed his face to the *glid* wall, and looked down at one such burrowing structure.

Many craft-focusers live there, Lo'ela said, anticipating his question.

"They are builders?"

Yes, many of them.

"But they don't have machinery, do they, Lo'ela? How do they build structures like this? Our engineers couldn't do what your people have done—not with seaweed, for heaven's sake." Seth shook his head, and tapped on the rigid *glid* surface. He ran his fingers along the fused seams of the woven ribbons. The material was moist and cool.

Focus. I can't tell you, because I know little of their craft.

"But—" Seth sighed. He could see from the wrinkles of confusion in her face that he was unlikely to get farther on that tack. Still—"Lo'ela, if there is no machinery, how do you get your air and circulate it through the domes?" He had wondered about that often. From time to time he was still conscious of the effort he constantly put forth in breathing, of the considerable density of the air at this depth and pressure.

Lo'ela tapped the *glid* wall. *From the water. We do not need machinery. The wall lets in good air, releases bad.*

A selectively permeable membrane? Conceivable, in a laboratory. But here? "Lo'ela."

"Yes?" she said aloud.

"We're going to—" He stopped. "Did you just say *yes*?" Lo'ela was grinning mischievously. "Oh. And I was just getting used to your speaking the other way."

Yes, I like this better, too.

"Lo'ela, please stay serious for a minute. There are a lot of things confusing me, but right now I want to know about this *focus* business."

Of course.

"Yeh. Good. Now, you keep bringing it up, but you never explain what you mean by it. Focus. You said that you were the only one of your people to have *focused* upon me, that that was the reason you were the only one who could speak to me, and understand me."

Yes. That may mean, I think, that I am in love with you.

"Hah?" That remark stopped him. He decided to sidestep it, but couldn't remember, for a moment, what he was going to say. "Uh. Okay. That is, if you say so."

Yes. She was grinning again.

Seth coughed. "Yes. All right. But what has that to do with, oh, *craft-focus*, or—what was it you said Al'ym and Ga'yl *focused* on?"

It is the same, only those people find different foci. Craft-focusers are able to create things—artifices, homes, useful objects. Others focus upon plants, or sea animals, and grow with them and cause them to grow in new ways, or old ways.

"You mean that people have specialties—things that they're especially good at? My own people are like that."

No, no. Much more. It is, oh... perceptual focus... focus of the senses, and the thought, and the body. She frowned gravely. It is a way of seeing the world. The way, though we each may change our way, and do. It is what is natural, it is the view from the world within the world.

Seth was losing ground rapidly. "The world within—? This is something which helps your craftsmen build?"

Naturally. That is where power is wielded.

"Lo'ela." He felt his voice beginning to run away without him. "You're going to have to start over. Um—tell me of another sea-person's *focus*."

Perhaps I can show you.

Seth agreed, lightheadedly, and she led him by the hand down several corridors and into a large living sphere near her own home. She ushered him into a curtained-off section, a sitting area sided by the dome wall itself. It looked out, not onto the topography of the city, but onto an upward scaling rock slope. The room was gloomy, and Seth looked twice before even noticing the several sea-people lounging near one corner; one was a woman much older than Lo'ela, another a girl perhaps Lo'ela's age, and the third—was Al'ym, Lo'ela's brother. All three were sitting silently, looking at one another, and now they moved their eyes slowly to watch the newcomers.

They made no attempt to greet Seth and Lo'ela, but as the two seated themselves on empty nearby cushions, Lo'ela spoke several words in her own tongue. No one spoke in return; nevertheless, she seemed satisfied. Seth, watching, felt distinctly uncomfortable, and he wondered what had just passed among the sea-people. Lo'ela addressed him: *This will be difficult for me. Please be attentive and don't wander from me if I falter.* She was clearly rather nervous, and Seth wondered how much of that was a reflection of his own high strung feelings. He spoke no answer, but tried to settle his thoughts and relax the tenseness in his body—and to open himself for whatever was to follow.

A glimmer of gratitude came into his mind; and he guessed that he had satisfied Lo'ela's request so far. Perceiving, then, that he was to receive mental images from his friend, he bent his thoughts toward her; he tried, as though he were gazing at a starship's flickering control panel, to focus attention upon the information, the thoughts he knew to be reaching for him. Sensations touched him and grew like a welling bowl of spring water: the concentration of a young sea-woman, gently touching one thought-flow with a nervous and curious man of a different world, while reaching with another to touch someone elsewhere, someone close, familiar... brushing, touching the surface impressions of...

Images coalesced like fine, settling grains of colored sand. Forming, shifting, reforming: a human-shaped figure, inhumanly colored and patterned, and fuzzed

outwardly by convection swirls. The body was a network of pulsing fluids, rivers channeling in a maze, propelled by a force centered in the chest, an invisible force—fluid pooling, surging into another pool, and spurting in a magically powered stream into the maze of unceasing flow. And weaker streams—free-flowing but slower, and seeping. The viewpoint shifted inward, magnifying—amidst the clutter of heavy streams were smaller ones, and within those others smaller still. Densely branched webs of liquid motion, leading to obscure but ubiquitous seepages, transfers—and takeups, merging back again into the primary streams. Tributaries upon tributaries. And gaseous interfaces so intricate, so saturating the pattern as to be visible only on a polarized viewpoint, tuning the liquids out of focus. Always there was movement, exchanges, transfers of fluid and particles, moving, always moving. Then in an eye-blink, the viewpoint shifted outward, wide: the human figure was only one in a sea of atmospheric convections, airy convections entering the body at only one point, rhythmically, but everywhere drawing heat energy from it. Four human figures in all, each similar to the first but with differences of size, energies, pressures of fluids. Two, side by side—one intense and controlled, the other pulsing with greater excitement, the excitement rising now...

Withdrawing momentarily from the thought-images, Seth opened his eyes with effort to see Al'ym staring intently at him, his eyes sparkling with energy, his face relaxed with concentration. It was Al'ym's vision, then—his *focus*, read and conveyed by Lo'ela. How hard must it be for her to *focus* telepathically upon both Al'ym and...

New images cascaded upon him, startlingly different. In the darkness: four human figures, each haloed by an auroral glow, colors radiating in diffuse spikes both inside and outside the bodies. This time, Seth was a more objective observer. The human auras, lighted by the energy-potentials within the bodies—perhaps not so different, he thought, from the circulatory flows and the external convections of Al'ym's perception—and yet, after all, very different, static, colors waxing and ebbing in intensity only slowly if at all. One pair drew his attention, a small person rimmed with subdued, almost monochromatic violet, a cool purple corona reaching toward the viewing point and toward the larger person nearby, whose halo was fired by flecks of crimson and ochre and green, discharging in seemingly random confusion. The two haloes touched and mingled, a still-life frame of captured blending color...

Seth withdrew again from the vision and studied the old sea-woman watching him with quiet, smiling eyes. He wondered what resided behind that smile. He felt Lo'ela stir beside him, drawing herself slowly out of the link. Silently, she rose and slowly turned to leave, though she had not shown him the third *focus*. Seth followed hurriedly, rubbing a hand over his brow to clear his vision; he nodded and half shrugged to the other Nale'nid, none of whom gave any sign of notice.

Lo'ela did not stop to face him until they were well away from the area, and back near the portal leading from the dome. She stood silent, watching him, touched her hands to his arms and then dropped them again. She seemed pale, though that might have been the changing sunlight filtering its way into the dome. Her eyes were quick, but tender as if testing a wound. Seth breathed with sudden

difficulty, not entirely due to the air. He laid a hand on her shoulder. "That was—" he started. "Was it hard for you?"—though he knew the answer.

She hesitated, and seemed to regain strength. *Challenging*, she told him, with a touch of impetuosity he found a relief. He squeezed her delicate shoulder blades with impulsive affection; he was beginning to feel quite close to this gentle Nale'nid.

"You do not do that often," he said, trying to steady his voice and failing.

No, she answered. No. A flicker of a smile lit her face, and the color in her skin deepened—but rather than turning away in embarrassment, as he half expected, she gazed deeply and steadily into his eyes. Seth was the one, finally, who blushed and looked away.

Do you understand, now?

"Well—better, anyway." He considered. "Is that the way those people see the world at all times?" The idea was rather much to accept; surely the images would become overwhelming.

Most of the time. Some have only one real focus, others have several at different times. There are many more. Some see all things as mechanical-crystalline structures. Some see geometric patterns, or colors. Some focus upon plants, some animals. Some, individual people. She smiled shyly, and went on. Sometimes sound, or feelings—as you would say, intuition. Sometimes motion of matter, momentum-energy. Or time, stability.

She stopped. Seth had raised his hand to halt the list. "Uh-huh. I think I get the idea." Which was true, but it was more than he could assimilate at once. The demonstration had given him plenty to think over, and it had been draining for him, as well as for Lo'ela. "Why don't we go do some more looking," he suggested. Lo'ela agreed and towed him off for further sights of the city.

They toured a line of dwelling-domes suspended like a string of beads in the water, and they walked in several layers of what Seth dubbed the "wall scraper," a structure that rose vertically along the seawall and also descended a good distance into the rock of the seabed. Seth hesitated to go very far up or down, for fear of possible decompression illness. This was the first time that the matter of decompression had even occurred to him, and now that it had it worried him considerably. Sooner or later he would want to go out of the city. Lo'ela acceded gently to his caution, though she assured him that there would be no problem. Seth filed that worry for future consideration.

He noticed that they had encountered virtually no Nale'nid children—only one or two in the company of adults—and he finally questioned Lo'ela on that fact. She explained that most of the children (there were not many, and fewer every year) lived in a different common area, where they were cared for and taught by those who *focused* upon such activities. "Family" relationships were established as a matter of *focus* compatibility, during childhood. This was somewhat analogous to the choosing of mates, in that it depended as much upon the presence of harmonious differences between individuals as upon similarities. Birth parentage was irrelevant, and Lo'ela was surprised that Seth even asked about it. She herself had never had "parents," which made her unusual but not extraordinary. Her "brothers" both had "parents," though they did not have the same ones.

"Why are the numbers declining?" Seth asked cautiously.

Fewer people focusing on child-bearing.

That seemed sad, but his interest in the children was piqued. "Could we visit the place where they live?" he suggested.

Lo'ela smiled suggestively. *Better not, yet, she advised. It could be... awkward... if one of the children should focus on you. It can happen that quickly. Are you ready to be a parent?*

Seth cleared his throat briskly. "Let's, ah, head on back to your place, shall we?"

Lo'ela laughed. They returned to her home-dwelling, and while Seth sprawled wearily on one of the mats, she went to find more food.

They relaxed for a time, eating the fruits, talking, and just resting. Eventually, though, Seth got around to asking two of the questions most bothering him: How did the Nale'nid live with equal ease in the air and in water? And how, by what magical means, had they brought him here in the first place?

Lo'ela was surprised. *I already explained that.*

"You did. You did? You explained *focus*..."

Same thing.

Seth eyeballed her with one eye shut. He thought quickly—in circles. Finally he sighed and reached for another malan, and wished it were a draught of ale.

Chapter 9

The next day, Seth rolled out of his hiking blanket to follow Lo'ela for a quick plunge in and out of the water in the sea entry well. The sea, surprisingly, was comfortably warm, but it woke him enough to feel like pouring a large bowl of fresh water over his head before dressing again. He joined Lo'ela for a pleasant breakfast under a clear blue morning sea, during which he found himself on the receiving end of the questions, for a change.

Tell me about starship flying, she began with a huge, expectant grin. She wanted to hear, not only about his actual job as a pilot second, but also everything he knew to tell about all the worlds he had visited, the worlds he had not visited, and about the Star Cluster itself (who the Lacenthi were, and the Querlin, why he called them a "threat," what the Cluster Council was all about, and how the human worlds had managed to build themselves—again—an interstellar society, if a struggling one). Seth told her of his home worlds Rorcan and Venecite, the former a mighty industrial planet of great endless mines and foundries, the latter the home world of much of the scientific and intellectual expertise of the Central Worlds. He told her of Rethmere, the political and financial nerve center of the Cluster, and the home port of his own ship, Warmstorm. And he told her of the Galaxy Beyond, now all but forgotten—where, by the accounting of some historians, humankind first arose, and perhaps lingered even today.

Lo'ela kept him talking constantly, so long that he had hardly an inkling of the passage of time. Seth was exuberant in speaking of such matters, and was slightly astonished to realize how completely, for a day or more, they had slipped from his mind. He vowed not to allow such a lapse again and reminded himself sternly of

his WARMSTORM mission—to find a means of dealing with the Nale'nid. Which of course, he told himself, was precisely what he was doing.

Lo'ela got him back to the actual flying of the starship. *You do not travel as we travel?*

Seth tapped his cheek. "No," he said weightily, "the distances are very, very much greater—and we are dependent upon machines."

You do not like dependence upon machines.

"They do their job as well as can be expected, and actually I'm rather fond of them, but—" but there was always that uncertainty, the marginal control of the human operator. In the control pit of a starship, when everything had been done that could be done, when the normal-space trajectory was optimal and the probability-probe signaled *on* to the fluxdrive... in that moment, the ship was already beyond the help of human control and interference. It trembled and shuddered to its core, and plunged into the cold, light-dark realm of flux-space, where both men and instruments were for all important purposes blind, and only the guess-factoring of the probe could guide the ship intact through to normal-space. The pilots, even the Captain, had no important duties except riding herd on the wildcatting, consuming flux-fires carried in the ship's belly. The levels of space reached by the brutish fluxdrive were cold, resisting, a biting psychic darkness which—even as it skirted the appalling interstellar distances of normal-space—exacted a fearsome toll in return. For the machine—an incredible energy drain, tearing at the fabric of the ship itself. For the crew—a toll of the mind, the terrible fear of misplotting, of winding forever downward into the shifting, coruscated nexus of dimensions that was flux-space; and the demand, even with the crew at their most helpless, of sorting reality from unreality, of remembering location-sense and geometric sanity even as the ship itself shimmied in grotesque self-distortions. And, ultimately, the awful surrender of judgment to the machine, the probability-probe, which used not human wisdom but guesswork and sub-particle harmonics to determine, to order the course itself and the final retreat. And only when it was done, only when the ship coasted easily again in normal-space, could control revert at last to the human crew.

But what, Seth wondered aloud—what of the other regions of flux-space, beyond or beneath the terrors of the realm reached by fluxdrive?

The promised regions, deeper and more smoothly flowing regions—where the currents and ways were clearly visible to eyes that could see them, where the landscaped fantasies of the mind became one with topographic reality. The realm in which the rigger-ships once flew, coasted, and sailed.

"We have hopes," Seth said, and then stopped. It was the hope that had brought all of them to Ernathe—and had sent him on an expedition to find the Nale'nid. For contact and capture. Well, he had communication, if not capture—but it would behoove him to keep perspective of his situation here. And he had to find out if there was news to be learned of Racart; poor Racart, he had nearly forgotten about him!

What, what? What hopes? Lo'ela prodded. Her face had been alight with awe and terror during his description of fluxdrive travel, and now her stare urged him on. Seth put his intruding thoughts aside. "Sorry," he said. He explained to her the proposed methods of starship-rigging, as deduced by theory and history. He told

her just as he once told Racart, including his participation in the unsuccessful *mynalar-g* experiments.

Lo'ela listened closely and sympathetically, but for some reason seemed less moved than she had been only moments earlier. Seth studied her quizzically. "I'll bet you'd make a good rigger," he said half seriously.

Lo'ela tilted her head playfully. *Thanks.* She frowned. *Would you like to see the other parts of our world, since you have shown me your worlds with your word-thoughts?* Her face wrinkled and brightened alternately and intently.

Seth was caught off guard by the change of subject; but he was becoming used to her unsettling conversational habits. "Does that mean you are going to let me into your thoughts for a look?" he asked cautiously. "So far you've never done anything like that."

"No, yet... *not yet,*" Lo'ela said, speaking aloud for the second time. She seemed to enjoy trying out verbal speech, and she continued: "May be later I can." *When I first saw you, you know, I could read only your very most surface thoughts. I drew your personality, your intents and your meanings only from my focus. But we are learning, together.*

Seth agreed with her there. Indeed, he had the feeling that he would soon be opening his chosen thoughts for her direct inspection. If he were not already. "How will you show me your world, then? Not in person."

Of course. Lo'ela got to her feet.

He might have known. The sea-girl disappeared briefly and returned with Ga'yl. The older, male Nale'nid observed Seth with deference if not overt friendliness. He stood alertly, but reservedly so, as if a part of his concentration were elsewhere, on other matters. Lo'ela spoke with him at length in her own tongue, beaming every so often in Seth's direction. But if her glances were intended to be reassuring, they had precisely the opposite effect. Seth took this time to wonder just what was going on, and to worry. He had such a hard time keeping his mind on what he was *supposed* to be doing! Did it make sense, now, to go off on some expedition with Lo'ela? Shouldn't he be asking to meet with the Nale'nid leaders? Except, it didn't seem that they had leaders. Well, then, what of Lo'ela herself—what sort of relationship was he getting himself into, anyway?

As a kind of role-sorting exercise, he tried to splice together two mental images he carried of himself: starpilot striving for the limits of his profession—and—friend of Lo'ela, guest of the Nale'nid. He shook his head; he could not put the roles together, and he did not know anymore which was closer to the real Seth Perland. He glanced about at the almost magical pressed-seaweed dwelling, at the open well where he had dunked himself into the sea. Could he not be a friend here, and still get on with business?

Starman Seth. Are you ready?

Jerked back to the moment, he looked up with consternation. Lo'ela was smiling broadly and expectantly. Well—why not? He nodded.

Good. Lo'ela moved to one side of him, Ga'yl to the other. They touched his arms, and Lo'ela thought a calming thought to him, adding: *Keep breathing.*

"Huh? Hey!" He was suddenly alarmed. "What about decompression?" He looked up through the *glid* bubble, through the many meters of pressing ocean, and he envisioned himself crippled by the bends.

Do not worry. But keep breathing. It will be easier for me that way.

He gulped and complied, breathing quickly, nervously, now that he had thought—not only of the bends—but of the danger of air expanding in his lungs.

The world disrupted around him.

The transition seemed gentler this time. There was a swirling of rainstorm-gray cloud, horizontally about him. He felt air puffing from his lungs and squeaking from his ears, and he had a sense of slipping, turning once, twice, and rocketing wildly for about half a second... then settling as gently as a leaf to a new and firm ground. The cloudiness cleared for an instant, revealing:

A white, sculptured vista, bitterly cold, moaningly windy. A blast of icy snow raked across his face without warning like a freezing sandstorm. The gust lasted for only a long moment, and then vanished to reveal the frozen landscape unchanged—but by then he was hunched in a reflexive crouch. He shuddered, from the cold, from the unexpected assault; he drew his breath in tight, shivering gasps. Almost peripherally, he was awed. It was a magnificent sight, but the freezing cold was draining the life from his body even as he blinked painfully to look and find his companions at his side. Lo'ela was speaking. He could hear, or feel the anxious mutter of her thoughts in his head, but it was noise—he could not make out a thing through the terrible blur of pain, the terrible loss of heat from his body's core. As the pain turned quickly to numbness he became slowly, dreamily more capable of appreciating the arctic white dust, the glittering crystal in the fore-distance, the gray blur in the far-distance giving way to blue gray sky and the shrouded glow of Lambern. His knees buckled, and as he sank the landscape shimmered, went smoky, and passed like the wind...

his knees hit steaming foliage—and he would have toppled, helpless, had he not been supported by a strong arm at either side. He looked up, and even as the sight of simmering foliage struck his eyes he lapsed into a series of bone-shaking shivers, and he choked on the thick, humid air hot with plant-decay, and his arm, neck and jaw muscles shivered with tight, spastic seizures. A cooling rush of breathy music streamed over his mind, calmed him slowly as he struggled to control his body's chaotic acceptance of heat into its chilled core. When his tremors subsided, he felt the soothing notes form themselves into thought, and he turned, suddenly aware of Lo'ela supporting him, watching him with frightened, intense green-gold eyes. Heat and cold still washed alternately along the nerves of his spine, but he managed to respond with a nod and answer the query, *Are you hurt, are you better?* with a hoarse, "I'm... I'm all right. I think. What are you *doing?*"

Finally, he could look around for himself to see what she was doing.

They were in what had to be the deepest tropics; Lambern blazed sullenly, high overhead, and he blinked in pain. The vegetation was the densest he had seen anywhere on Ernathe—thick with greenery and bizarre flowers and crawling vines, but nothing taller than a meter. The air buzzed with heat and stank of sweet decay. Hardly any two plants seemed alike. There were spiked leaves probing through soft circular ones and sprawling threads, and blossoms of astonishing colors, from brilliant scarlet to darkly menacing indigo.

"What—" he choked—"are you *doing?*" The heat was of wilting intensity, and was enough in itself to make each breath nearly impossible.

You do not adapt to our places, she replied sadly, almost accusingly. *You do not find them pleasing.*

Seth choked, not entirely from the air. He shook his head heavily; his muscles would hardly respond. He found his voice again. "No—yes. Yes, it's impressive—but how can you expect me to jump from—to—" he waved limply at the scenery, "without practically... killing myself?" And how, he thought, thunderstruck, did you adapt so incredibly fast yourselves? What were they, these Nale'nid?

Lo'ela looked away, nodding somberly. "I thought you would, I did not know it would be this way with you." Her voice carried clear-toned regret; she had learned her human speech well. "Would you... like to see more?" *I, we, will try to make it easier for you.*

Seth hesitated. "All right," he said, "but nothing so drastic." He was sweating heavily and panting still, in the humidity. He was anxious to move on, even to another shock.

He did...

and was speechless and gratified to feel driving rain wash in great pelts across his shoulders, drenching and cooling and soothing—and finally making him stumble from its sheer weighty intensity. It was a monsoon, apparently—where on Ernathe he could not guess, but surely far from the territory he knew. Nothing stirred except rain, and beyond it more rain. Through the slanted, thundering blur, he could just make out the shapes of hunched, humble trees, stooping almost to the ground. He turned in the muck, only to be blinded by the rain. He began to feel that it was not raining *hard* so much as *endlessly*, and he began to worry, to fear that it would drench him literally to the bones, that the soggiess would penetrate to the center of his brain, that he might simply soften and collapse under the continuing downpour. The drumming on the top of his head was no longer refreshing—it was warm, or cold, or both, and it so dulled his senses that even the two standing figures beside him were no more than grayish upright blurs, and the silent mutter of a friend's thoughts in his head was utterly lost in the din of cascading pellets of water. *Enough!* he thought, and...

stood in the center of a flaming, bowl-shaped desert...

felt Lo'ela's arm locked securely in his as he stared from the summit of an icy peak over a starlit, stunningly crazed landscape of mountains, the illumination of the stars as bright here as the three blazing moons of Farecogh, the ever-light planet...

gulped seawater and choked because there was no air to be inhaled, felt his diaphragm heave in panic, and struggled to subdue his gag reflex until...

the walls of Lo'ela's home shielded him from the evening sea and kept him on his feet as he leaned—choking, choking violently—and gasped air back into his windpipe. Lo'ela was nearly in tears, or so he thought when he came to his senses and saw her gazing into his face. Her eyes held bewilderment and fear, and for long minutes she seemed unable to communicate. She went over to where Seth's backpack lay, picked up his blanket and brought it to him; and only then did he realize that he was soaked to the skin and shivering. Gratefully, he wrapped it across his shoulders, sank to sit on a mat, and studied Lo'ela. She sat directly in front of him. *You are all right? You are safe?* she blurted anxiously into his mind.

Seth blinked, and nodded. He was too exhausted, still too much in shock to speak. Lo'ela seemed to understand. She brought him a fruit, and sat quietly with him for perhaps half an hour while he rested, huddled in the blanket. Finally he got up to change into his one dry set of clothes, and then he sat again, Lo'ela as quiet as ever before him. He glanced at his timepiece and was shocked to discover that the better part of a day had passed during their excursion.

"I feel better now," he said, though he was still weak. But he felt like talking. Now that he was clearheaded enough to think about it, he was incredulous and mystified by the places they had seen. Did the Ernathenes know that such places existed? he wondered. But never mind that. Lo'ela's face was lined with worry, but not at all with discomfort or strain from the harsh environments they had faced. "Lo'ela," he said, really quite unsure how to frame his question—"Lo'ela, you didn't seem bothered—you didn't even flinch—when we went to those places."

But they were only places, only different experiences!

"But they didn't affect you! They weren't illusions, were they—were they real?"

Yes, yes, of course they were real! Did you not feel them?

"Yeah," he said. "I felt them. Just wanted to be sure."

You are confused?

He looked at her with his best expression of irony. "Uh, you guessed that, did you?" He looked tiredly around her dwelling. He was hungry. Ga'y'l had left like a breath of air, almost as soon as they had returned here. Briefly his thoughts went to Racart, about whom he'd not yet asked. Later. "Lo'ela. *Why* could you withstand those things? Freezing cold. Frying heat. Water. *How?*" He was beginning to feel punch-happy, and he knew that he should wait and ask again tomorrow.

"You would like me to try and explain again?" she asked aloud. Her voice was clear and soft, catlike. He decided that he liked it. As he liked Lo'ela. And he was finding her sturdy, delicate appearance more and more persuasively attractive. With a strong sigh, he reached out and placed his hand, with the slightest bit of shakiness, on hers.

"Later," he said. "Plenty of time later."

Lo'ela smiled, a perfect smile, and her eyes grew wide and pale and clear as she twisted her palm around to link her fingers with his.

Chapter 10

As day after day passed with not so much as a breath to suggest an improvement in the situation, the atmosphere in Mission Headquarters had deteriorated steadily. Even the weather was ugly: unseasonably heavy rains, winds, and electrical activity—all prompting speculation that Lamborn was entering a new period of high solar activity. (The fact that satellite monitors gave no such indication only made the idea that much more menacing in the minds of the speculators.) Tempers in all quarters were frayed, and with each petty incident concerning the Nale'nid, differences of opinion among the Mission personnel and the Ernathenes flared more sharply—not always divided along company lines. Confusion and unrelieved frustration generated endless quarrels, and supervisors

such as Andol Holme were constantly on edge trying to maintain a semblance of peace and decorum among their respective crews.

By no means were all the Nale'nid incidents petty. The entire plankton production chain had been disrupted by several new intrusions. Production was shut down altogether, and the harvesters remained port-bound. This was a state of affairs which could not long be tolerated. A solid plankton harvest was essential to assure the colony a sufficiency of food and materials; however, peak plankton-bloom would be occurring within two weeks, and the next season would not begin for another one hundred twenty days.

And finally, yesterday there had been a second fatal shooting—two Nale'nid killed by security guards during a disturbance in the wharf area. The weapons used, pulse-guns from the WARMSTORM arms lockers, had ostensibly been secured at *stun* settings; but they had caused far greater damage than a harmless "stun." Two Nale'nid, a male and a female, had been killed instantly, charred. Recriminations abounded as to who had failed to properly lock the weapons settings, and two WARMSTORM technicians had been relieved of sensitive duties.

Still there had not been a capture of a live Nale'nid, and no one had any better idea than before of the reason for the Nale'nid's strange behavior, or of how that answer could be found.

Adding further to the confusion was the peculiar affair of the missing Racart Bonhof. Twice in the last week, Racart had appeared in the middle of a Lambrose street—"materialized," according to witnesses—both times in the company, more probably the control, of two male Nale'nid. The first time, few people had been present to notice. A woman who had known Racart from childhood swore that she had clearly seen him step from a puff of sea-mist, a Nale'nid holding each of his arms, and stand in the open for about five seconds before vanishing once again. Though he was obviously conscious, she said, he had neither spoken nor given the slightest sign of recognition—of her, of anyone else, or even of the town. He had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared—into the mist. The woman could not say *how* he had vanished, nor could any of the corroborating witnesses. But vanished, he had.

News of that event quickly reached Mona Tremont, who was understandably both overjoyed and distressed. She was nearby, herself, during a second appearance the following day. Hearing shouts of Racart's name, she sprinted into the street, gasped and halted, finding people gathered discussing Racart's second disappearance. Some believed it to have been an image, an illusion. Mona denied that, and maintained that she had seen him—albeit from a distance. But whatever the "facts" of his appearance, no rational explanation for it could be put forward.

Mona, at least, was comforted in having found a friend in Andol Holme. He seemed to be the one official in the WARMSTORM Mission who was as worried about Racart and Seth as about the *mynalar* production. They met often to exchange such news as there was and to bolster one another's morale. But Holme was chronically troubled; he was not at all sure that his senior officers, particularly Mondreau, were paying due concern to Seth's and Racart's safety as they considered their possible courses of action.

Holme found Mondreau in a particularly stiff mood as staff meetings got underway to consider the latest information and to finalize strategy. He caught

Mondreau's eye, entering Mission Headquarters, and with a head-shake signaled his failure to locate a young weapons tech Mondreau had wanted to see. The scowl he got in return did nothing to ease the knot in his stomach.

"You haven't ordered her to report?" Mondreau said.

"I haven't *found* her. The last time she was seen, apparently, was last night when she went off with an Ernathene woman, supposedly to a discussion group of some sort." Holme paused unhappily. He doubted that the young crew-woman had deliberately stayed off duty, but people were reacting so strangely around this place—some older Ernathenes wanted simply to pick up and leave the planet, for instance—and Holme was beginning to wonder if anyone could be trusted to behave in a consistent manner. And now Mondreau's stare suggested that Holme was personally to blame for the chaos.

Perhaps, in a sense, he was. He was trying to understand the Ernathene state of mind, and the Nale'nid state of mind—and he had made no secret of his disapproval of the decision to arm Ernathene ships.

"The order is out for her to report," he said brusquely, and stepped from Mondreau's desk over to the planning table, to see what had happened in his absence. A full report on the undersea scouting survey had arrived, flown in by aircraft from the ships still stationed in the Jamean Sea. That would be presented shortly.

An atmosphere of tension, of deliberation, of uncertain and confused perceptions pervaded all of the headquarters. Partly to combat this aura, the afternoon planning session was called to order early. Kenelee Savage, with several aides, summarized the findings of the Jamean Sea expedition:

The aerial sonic sweep had identified two large and two small clusters of hollow, hard structures along the seafloor, thereby confirming the earlier drone reports. There existed on the seafloor a fabulous complex—what amounted to an entire undersea city—an assortment of air-filled domes and globes and cylinders of undeterminable construction, all of which were linked, with humanlike figures clearly visible inside. All of this had been captured on senso-record, including the amazing sight of individual Nale'nid moving freely about, *outside* the protection of the domes, using no visible life-support apparatus whatever. The Nale'nid, even those swimming in the open, gave no indication of noticing the probes.

The senso-recordings were replayed for the group in edited form; they were clear and impressive—stunningly so. The overall estimation, based on the number of structures observed, was that perhaps half a thousand or a thousand Nale'nid lived in the city—and they were apparently socially, or scientifically, advanced in ways heretofore unsuspected.

The question, now, was what to do with that knowledge.

Mondreau took the floor. He briefly reviewed the two principal suggestions as to course of action. "The first, essentially, is inaction. That is, hold tight and try to learn, if possible, how to negotiate with the Nale'nid. To determine of this colony is materially impinging upon the sea-community. To learn if plankton-utilization is detrimental to the ecology in a hitherto-unknown fashion. In short, to devote all our energies to studying the matter, and to hope that meanwhile the sea-people desist from what I think can fairly be called hostile activities. In essence, to do

what we have been doing." He paused, his expression making it clear how he felt about this first proposal.

"The alternative—forceful and positive action. As you know, weapon-launchers are now being installed on selected ships, and when practicable will be installed on the submarines and the aircraft. We are taking every available precaution to tamperproof the systems, including the addition of multiple simultaneous-safety switches. The proposal is for a show of force at the site of the Jamean Sea community—force sufficiently persuasive to end the immediate threat, that is, to plankton harvesting and production. Discussion?"

Response from the floor was immediately and fiercely argumentative. A substantial number of persons considered the proposal for force to be hazardous, provocative, unwise, unnecessary, and in almost all respects thoroughly reprehensible. Several took the floor to add that any initiation of violence would almost certainly endanger the two (presumed) Nale'nid captives, Perland and Bonhof. Holme was relieved to hear others making this protest; he had already spoken to the point too many times for his voice to be effective now.

Kenelee Savage responded, with obvious distaste for what he had to say. "I think most of you know how I feel. That the use of force carries a great risk of being counterproductive, and should be avoided if at all possible. The fact remains, though, that if the colony is to be sure of survival, we must resume harvesting before the peak of the plankton-bloom. There is no other reliable source of food, or of raw materials for synthetics. Probably we could last for a season, through strict rationing. But there would be no guarantee of freedom to harvest again next season, and at that point we would have no reserves. We must face facts—this colony is in serious danger, and that consideration overrides all others."

Mondreau backed him up quickly. "Let's not forget that there is danger here from more than one quarter. Need I remind the people of Ernathe of the importance of their world to the growth and security of *all* the Cluster Worlds. Your *mynalar-g* may well be one of the keys to better starflight and to the breaking of those barriers that hold our worlds apart, and which also make them vulnerable. The Lacenthi and the Querlin are preying races. With the supply of *mynalar-g* we may well achieve techniques that were lost to us in the entropy wars. But without it, our hopes would dim, and the future of all the worlds would become uncertain—and that includes the future of Ernathe. You are the only supplier of *mynalar-g*. You know that, it was why your fathers came to this world.

"Please do not forget it. The Querlin will not, should they learn of the fact. The Lacenthi will not. More than one Cluster starship has already been lost in battle to keep this part of space clear of those enemies.

"But it may all be lost if we allow a race of this planet to interrupt us; a race that ignores even the most unmistakable attempts to communicate. We do not propose aggression, we do not propose war. We *do* propose a simple demonstration of our urgency and our determination.

"And that is what we will do. Should the opportunity present itself, we will send envoys into the Nale'nid city itself—but not without some assurance for their safe conduct. We have lost two valuable men already, who came too closely into contact with the sea-people."

The discussion did not end there, but it was clear that belief in the necessity of action was to prevail. Even Andol Holme, concerned as he was about the possible threat to Seth and Racart, was forced to admit privately that he could offer no better plan. The colony could not afford to risk further delay. Nevertheless, he was far from happy in his own mind with the inevitable decision.

* * * * *

He took the news, later, to Mona. She listened quietly as he talked; it had come as no surprise. But Holme was left wondering how much longer she could hold her emotions somberly in check. She continued moving about her kitchen—thoughtfully, unperturbedly preparing her dinner.

"ARDELLO is to be flagship," he said. "And I'll be going along aboard one of the ships, though in what capacity I don't know. Captain Gorges insisted upon that—said I should be there. I don't think he approves of the plan, really, either. But he has no authority in that regard, and I suppose he knows how far to push his advisory status without losing it."

He realized that Mona had hardly heard a word. She was staring at him and nodding, but her gaze was somewhere else entirely.

* * * * *

For what seemed an eternity Racart had waited, frozen in open-mouthed agony, with a fire in the cortex of his brain. He had waited, and not been able to scream and not dared think of relief. But to his huge surprise relief did come; it came as a startling psychic implosion, a crazed storm of random stimuli, marvelous shocks of light and a war of exploding colors behind his eyelids, breezy aromas of red fruit and mintleaf and the sea, and the tang of sour acid and ozone, washed with spume and mist-borne salt. Iced droplets of music sputtered and choked the quick hurtful violet, the burning flame, and drowned it in a chorus of thunder, of drowsing rainfalls and sheets of pummeling cool rain... which in time faded to white noise, gray sunshine, and no-pain. The confusion wound slowly down, giving way to quietude, and recovery.

In time, he opened his eyes and became, after a fashion, aware. He was lying inside a cavern; location unknown. (Had he been here before?) His trial, if that was what it was, was turning into a lengthy affair. Since his emergence from the labyrinth he had seen locations uncounted and unimagined; he had been shocked, broiled, frozen, sprayed, battered, and drenched by the elements in a dozen or a hundred ways—and he was utterly and incontrovertibly exhausted. He was numb. He had long since lost track of time and was only vacantly aware that day and night in any case had no meaning, so many times had he been skipped around the globe. Twice—(or was it three times, four? One?)—he had dazedly looked to discover his own town before him, his people, and once even the sound of Mona's voice. Could they have been real? No, far likelier hallucinations. The town, or the vision, had winked out like an extinguished light and he had traveled on to other lands, and thoughts unknown.

* * * * *

He heard a tapping sound, *tink tink tink*. He gathered his wits sufficiently to realize that he was lying on a smooth, cold rock slab, that the only illumination

around him was a shimmering watery blue from somewhere beyond his feet, and that the tapping sound was being made by one of the sea-people farther back in the cavern. Despite aching, bone-deep weariness, he forced himself to sit up and look around. The cavern recesses were gloomy, shadowy; he could just discern the outline of a Nale'nid, the smaller of his two captors, he thought, rapping with a tool against something in the rock wall. *Tink tink tink*. The "something" broke away from the wall with a crick, and the Nale'nid picked it up and carried it to Racart.

He seemed mildly surprised that Racart was watching him.

"What's that?" Racart asked dully. At one time he might have felt outrage, or even mild annoyance—but all that had been drained from him, and he felt little beyond wondering where he was, and what was happening.

The sea-man gave his question no immediate notice, which did not particularly surprise Racart. It was unlikely that the Nale'nid could understand his language, but he tried again, hoping at least to get some attention. He failed.

The object was a large piece of raw crystal, perhaps silica, and the sea-man was placing it carefully at the end of the stone slab. "What is that? What are you doing?" Racart demanded.

This time he got a response. The Nale'nid spoke, or whistled, and was quickly joined by the other, the larger of the two captors. The two sea-men looked at him with what he took to be curiosity, with sharp, steady eyes that seemed not merely to acknowledge him, but to burrow into his gaze, to brush the fine nervous tracings behind his eyes and touch something within. He felt a curious twinge, a heady sensation of energy, and then the thought grew in his mind—not as from another source, but as a conclusion from some intuitive, deductive process—*You are alert. That is interesting; unexpected.*

That shook him a little. It was communication, for real, and for the first time. He was surprised by the cold impersonality behind it.

"Yes," he said loudly. "Yes, and I would like to know what it is you plan to do with me."

Wordless amusement, not his.

That angered him, but before he could speak or move, the smaller Nale'nid stepped up and pushed the crystal in front of him. He resisted looking at it, and stared instead at the two Nale'nid faces; but he felt a quick pressure in his head, a sensation that was neither quite physical, nor quite mental, urging his gaze lower, a steady magnetic coercion forcing him to turn his eyes to the rock, to stare—to stare without focus or definition, to lose his attention in the facets of the rough crystal and to lose himself...

He was wandering bodiless in a refractory maze, of elements, of planes, of lights. A great hall of mirrors and lenses—clear or broken or smoky or silvery. Tripping, skipping, he wound farther and deeper until he had forgotten his origin, or purpose if there was one... and then he realized that he was not alone. Two others, moving bodiless as he, shadowed him with a muttering kind of insistence and, when he glanced quickly enough, laid bare parts of their souls in flickerings and flashes of light. Curiosity, curiosity. Animosity? Perhaps, perhaps no. Uncertain. Stumblings, probings, testings and trials. *Curiosity*. Angling his attention sneakily closer, but not too close, he saw more of their souls, and clearly—and he was thunderingly bewildered. *There was no other motive...*

The vision in the crystal crumbled to powder, and Racart looked up in wonder into the eyes of the Nale'nid, probing and hypnotic. He relaxed.

And then, slowly began the chill, the freeze. Even as he met the gaze of the Nale'nid he sensed distance, their distance. Quite suddenly he was alone, trapped within thoughts that were slowed—sluggish, stiff, missing a part of the life-force, the field. At first it was merely confusing; he saw the Nale'nid but they were not there, he felt no *presence*, they were dead things shifting in the wind, and whistling. But the change was in him, and he knew that it was not of his doing. There was a draining of his energy, a seeping of life from his cells; or perhaps it was a closing, a sealing in. He could not be sure. Synapses closed. Opened. Chattered, uncertain. Colors, rhythms, voices in his soul were being forcibly and mercilessly subdued. There was light around him, but he was imprisoned within himself, surrounded by darkness.

He tried to speak but his voice failed as a moan in the dying reality around him. A final journey was beginning, it seemed, and from this one he could see no return. He felt a queer numbness in his toes and legs, his arms, his chest and throat; and then he was no longer aware.

Chapter 11

Seth was beginning to understand the Nale'nid. At least the explanations he had come up with made sense to him, he decided, watching Lo'ela pucker and pop her lips, a nervous habit she had picked up from him. The problem at first had been his failure to realize the extent to which this *perception-focus* was a totally integral element of the Nale'nid makeup, both physiologically and psychologically. It comprised far more than just a set of perceptual viewpoints; it was more than an extreme case of specialized personal world views.

Nale'nid survived freezing cold climates without protection, without discomfort. *Focus:* upon the heat, the molecular kinetic energy, the radiant warmth of the sun to whatever extent it was present. Upon drawing heat from the surroundings, *even if the surroundings were colder*. This was not a trick to be accomplished without a rather fancy sidestepping of the laws of thermodynamics of normal-space.

Nale'nid lived and breathed in water without air-carrying apparatus, without gills, and with no obvious strain. *Focus:* upon the oxygen richness of the water, upon efficient use of body energy.

Nale'nid, upon appearing in the Ernathene settlements and ships, remained inconspicuous at need, almost to the point of invisibility. *Focus:* upon suppression of the sea-human aura, the electric field of the living body that betrays that body's presence non-visually and non-audibly, that signals to other bodies, "*There is someone here.*"

Nale'nid moved to and from the high-pressure environment of the undersea city without a trace of decompression sickness. *Focus:* upon control of the physiological balance, upon containment and orderly removal of unwanted gases from within the bodily tissues.

Nale'nid traveled virtually anywhere in their world; at the speed of a whisper and an eyeblink. *Focus...*

Ah, this was the perplexing one, the exciting one, the giveaway to all the rest.

It was dizzying to think about, but Seth was beginning to get used to the dizziness.

"You travel through flux-space, don't you?" he asked Lo'ela, and felt that for the first time he was asking an educated question.

That is what you call it, the world within the world? Yes, then, we do. She lightly rubbed the top of his right hand and reached to give him a quick tickle in the ribs; this was a trick she had just learned, and she thought it great fun.

"Stop that!" he shouted, squirming and slapping at her hand.

"Ha-ha, ho!" she said, going after him again. He could not keep from laughing this time, but he shook a warning finger at her.

She fell suddenly sober, solemn. *You wish to learn more of this "flux" business.*

"It could be very important."

Whether, maybe, it is the same as the "flux" business of your own people?

Seth nodded.

I don't know. Perhaps if you told me more of it, so that I could gather an image as you talk.

He considered that. "All right." And he talked, much as before, about the flux-space in which his ship and others operated—what was known of it, what not known, how it was thought that it might be mastered more efficiently, the currents and energies harnessed...

Yes. Yes, Starman Friend, it is the same. But this travel from world to world—that is something of which we know nothing. We do not build ships, we build homes and things of this world. Lo'ela gazed at him with a deeply interested frown.

"Then—" and he stopped. The thought went no further. What was it he ought to be thinking of?

The watery light outside the dome was fading to a somber indigo blue, as evening settled downward through the sea to the ocean-floor city of the Nale'nid. Pal'onar was an assortment of gloomy, gray shapes on the darkening seabed—and though Seth could no longer actually see the movements of people in the other domes, he knew that life and movement went on as always. Soon the soft glow of the luminescent sea-mosses and the cultured anemones would begin to appear, to gently push back the cold dark of night from the bottom of the sea.

"Is flux—is it the source of your other powers, also?" he asked softly.

Lo'ela looked at him with uncertain eyes. A welter of perplexed thoughts struck him, rattled around, and subsided. Lo'ela suddenly became shy. *How can I say, without better knowing your ways of thinking? But I believe, yes, you might call it a "source"—or, perhaps better, a "focus."* She sighed, her eyes wide.

Seth realized that questions-and-answers would only take him so far; the best he might do would be to puzzle out as much as possible himself, and meanwhile to immerse himself in Nale'nid ways, until he knew he understood. But then, that was what he wanted to do, anyway. He gazed at the sea-girl and accepted her smiling stare in return. Lo'ela was, he realized, beginning to *focus* more keenly upon him than ever before. But he would not yet admit that the same might be true of him, as well.

* * * * *

Later, he asked Lo'ela to tell him something of the history of her people.

I can find someone who knows of it, if you would like, she responded brightly. That surprised him, but she explained that there were relatively few persons who *focused* upon such matters as history, parentage, and the like. *There are a few things I can tell you, though,* she added on second thought. *We came to live beneath the sea many generations ago, but not beyond the memory of our learned rememberers. We came because the sun was harming us, and we were a failing people. We learned not to fail here.*

Learned to *focus* beneath the sea? Seth wondered. Unstable Lambern—yes, and some day it would act up again and drench the Ernathe landscape with killing or mutating radiation. Was that it, then, was *focus* a result of forced evolution? "Many generations" ago could have been near the time of the entropy wars. Had Ernathe been settled at that time, a planet whose danger was never suspected? Were the Nale'nid evolved humans, an offshoot of his own people?

That, Lo'ela did not know.

But it made the entire human-Nale'nid confrontation seem that much more ludicrous. Though when he considered the matter, he thought of the Nale'nid as "people"—regardless of whether or not they were of "true human" origin.

It was time, perhaps, that he asked the questions he had been putting off for so long. "Lo'ela, why are your people at war with my people? What have we done that has so disturbed you—or the others?"

War? Disturbed? She blinked rapidly.

"The things they are doing to our settlements, disrupting production plants, and harvesting ships. And—" suddenly it came back, in a nerve-jarring rush—"Lo'ela, when my own ship was arriving, coming to land on this planet—you, somebody, some of the sea-people attacked us."

Lo'ela looked at him blankly, wonderingly.

"They took over the defenses that protect the planet from intruders, they took over those weapons and attacked us. My ship, Lo'ela. We weren't harmed, fortunately, but we might well have been destroyed.

"Why?" he demanded softly, only half trying to keep the until-now repressed anger from his voice.

Lo'ela's face changed slowly, to an expression of concentration. *Well,* she thought slowly and very deliberately, *I do not know of these things, myself, so I can only tell you why they would have occurred if in fact I did know of them.*

"Yes, please."

Curiosity.

He stared. "Curiosity? That's all? Curiosity?" What madness was this? Shooting at starships, sabotaging ocean-ships—out of curiosity?

Curiosity, yes. To learn of your kind, to experiment. I have heard it said by others of my own that you seem such structured creatures. That has been found remarkable—your human unadaptability. She swallowed uncomfortably and looked as though she wanted to get off the subject. A Nale'nid reaction, or a human one?

Seth's mouth froze in a crooked, disbelieving gape—while his thoughts churned. Well, he'd wanted to know, so he had it coming. "Are you all in on this?" he asked tightly, sounding a bit more paranoid than he had intended.

Oh no, no. I am not certain, even, just who is involved. Only those who—
"—focus," he said sourly, even as she finished the thought.

She grinned uncertainly.

Seth sighed. "Lo'ela, I have a friend. An Ernathene. His name is Racart, and—"
I do not know.

"You—"

I do not know if he is with my people. Or if he is safe. That is what you wonder.
I—

"Can you find out? It is very important." He told her of Racart's first abduction and return, and of the affair on the harvester ARDELLO. "Of course it is possible that he may have come back to the settlement by now."

She listened thoughtfully. She seemed saddened by the tale, and worried that it had upset Seth. *I will ask Al'ym and Ga'yl to ask of people they know. Perhaps we can learn of your Racart that way.*

Seth relaxed somewhat. For reasons undefined, he felt no genuine urgency; he knew that time was slipping by, that he should report to his people, find Racart, make arrangements—but there was much to be done here, as well, and time seemed not so important as continuity, balance, and finding his way into the many-layered ways of Nale'nid thinking, Nale'nid being. And, there was Lo'ela.

He would remain here a while, doing what he was doing. That resolution gave him a quiet, and an unfamiliar, peace of mind.

He said, touching her cheek, "I suppose we will find these things out if we are patient."

Lo'ela said nothing, but once again she was smiling.

* * * * *

Later, she asked if they might go together to look at the stars. Seth agreed willingly enough but asked her, as she touched him to begin the "flux" journey, if she had not already seen the stars many times. *It never occurred to me to notice them,* she answered. *Now come—you are attuned enough that we should no longer need Al'ym or Ga'yl to travel.*

Quickly, quietly, they traveled from the city to a place on the nightside surface. It was cloudy; blanketed. They moved again. And again. The third time landed them on a high, flat promontory—under a sky fantastically showered with rivets of flame, the fires of a hundred thousand Cluster suns.

Lo'ela stared up at the sight, reacting slowly, her thoughts concentrating on Seth's and slowly filling with her own sense of awe as she absorbed his fascination. It had been weeks since Ernathe's cloudy skies had given Seth such a splendid view of the Cluster. Scattered fragments of cloud framed the sky near the horizon and a few scudded high overhead, lending perspective and depth to the clear, unparalleled spectacle. No part of the sky was without stars, but they concentrated smoothly, gradually, toward the central regions of the Cluster, which from this vantage point appeared slightly to one side of the zenith. Here the bits of flame clustered so densely as to merge into smudges of bright color. Looser and lonelier suns were flung in raindrop spatters against darkness, or against the glittery blur of dimmer, distant light.

Automatically, Seth searched for the suns of the Central Worlds, but it was an impossible effort; they were hopelessly lost in the sea of pointed lights. Lo'ela stirred against him, pressing close to his side. Her face was turned upward, her mouth open wide, her left arm half raised to point at the stars, her right arm tightly linked in Seth's. Her mind touched his with raw emotional static; she was experiencing joy, terror, awe, lust—perhaps it was just the winds of idle thoughts touching him, subdued emotions scattering free in confusing signals. Seth couldn't be sure, but he felt a kinship in everything he sensed from her, and in answer he moved his arm around her waist and squeezed affectionately, surprised again by the suppleness of her body beneath the curious, silken garment.

She pressed closer and said, so softly he did not know whether it was a whisper or a thought, "*Your worlds?*"

The memory of his homeworlds rushed over him in a swirl and rumbled away lost behind the sensation of the sea-woman at his side, and he pointed awkwardly, just to the right of the thickest concentration of stars, and said, "There... somewhere there."

It is so difficult to tell?

"Very difficult, Lo'ela." He gazed at her and knew that he was drifting into a deadly and beautiful state of mind, and he cared not at all that he knew it. Looking up from her eyes, back into the sky, with blurry eyes of his own, he felt his mind opening in a great rush and a hopeless scramble. In it and around it was the presence of Lo'ela the sea-woman, the Nale'nid. Her thoughts touched and danced about, and filled his, and sighed within his mind; and he held her tightly, then, hugging as she put her arms around his neck. For the moment he knew that he had found unexpected happiness, and he determined that, as long as he knew the presence of her human, Nale'nid love, gentle as the caress of her thoughts, this was something with which he would never willingly part.

Chapter 12

On a later day, Lo'ela announced that it was time, if Seth was willing, to travel to witness the "grotto-heralding." She gaily refused to give any details, and simply insisted that it would be an experience different from any he had had so far among the Nale'nid. She said it would help him to make sense of his ideas about her people. They would be underwater, *in* the water, most of the day—so Seth would be wearing underwater breathing equipment, to keep matters simpler.

Seth examined the diving gear with great care; it had been "secured" for him by Ga'yl, in a trip the Nale'nid had made to Lambrose. (That gave Seth a bad moment of suspicion as to Ga'yl's possible role in some of the Nale'nid disturbances, but Lo'ela assured him that her brother was innocent of such matters.) Lo'ela explained to him that the gear would make his safety easier to ensure. *I could see to your air-needs as I have in the past to your tissue gases—bends?—but it would be tiring, and for such a long time your own methods are more suitable.* She waited expectantly while he fitted the tubes of the film-mask together with the air-

extraction regulator and tiny reserve bottles and then sat back to study the assembled contrivance.

Though he had dived before, he had never used a device quite like this, and he was slightly unnerved by its apparent simplicity.

"All right," he said, "I guess I'm all set." He was already stripped down to the simple wrap-on shorts Lo'ela had given him. She herself was wearing very little, just two stretchy swaths that offered modest protection but no more, and that only at Seth's rather distracted request; with her lightly tanned flanks exposed, she looked more than ever like an adolescent girl, but in her carriage she was as graceful as an adult dancer. Seth cleared his throat and looked back to the details of his gear.

First he put on the light, skintight jacket, with the accompanying buoyancy-control belt. Then he strapped the regulator and two miniature bottles to his waist, switched on the breather unit and checked a small gauge for proper airflow before fitting the featherweight film-mask over his face and head. The transition to breathing inside the glovelike mask was so easy as to be unnoticeable; the diaphragm-film covering his mouth and nose flexed gently with his breath and with the surge of circulating air. His voice was only slightly distorted by the diaphragm as he spoke. "Okay. I think." As a sudden afterthought, he stooped and picked up the foot fins lying beside him on the floor.

We'll be on land, first, so you can wait for those, Lo'ela said. She called out in her Nale'nid language, and Ga'yl came into the dome, dressed in shorts like Seth's. His body was slim and muscular; he beamed at both of them with an expression of readiness.

They traveled. Together, the three arrived on a rocky shoreline beneath a burning sun. One of the endless seas of Ernathe gleamed and flashed beneath the spanking rays, blue tropical water stirred only by the faintest whisper of a breeze. Lo'ela had said that the place was not far from the city; but as far as Seth could tell it might have been half a kilometer or a thousand. He squinted through the faint distortion caused by the dry film-mask, and guessed that they must be relatively near the Ernathene equator. Lo'ela and Ga'yl spoke briefly, gesturing toward the water; they waited, while Seth put on his foot fins.

You will like the water?

"Of course. I hope so," he grunted through the mask. Standing awkwardly, first on one foot and then on the other, he stretched the fins into place over his feet. He nodded.

Lo'ela touched his hand, and dove smoothly and effortlessly into the water, hardly disturbing the surface as she plunged. Ga'yl waited. After a moment, Seth followed Lo'ela's example by launching himself in a clumsy, shallow dive. Water crashed and muttered about his ears, and the sea closed over his head with a sparkle and a rush, and carried him gently over a mounded reef before he regained his sense of stability and control. He descended feet first, pinching his nostrils together to coax air into his middle ears, and looked up to see the shimmering mirror of the surface falling away from him as he came down along the bottom line of near-shore reef.

Ga'yl was beside Lo'ela now, both of them watching him silently, their mouths open breathing seawater; Lo'ela was lithe and slim as a true sea-creature, her hair

blossomed out like fine ochre-brown plant fronds, her eyes bright and sharp blue. She asked: *Are you comfortable? Is the water cold for you?*

"Yes and no," Seth said, drawing close, his voice booming queerly through the water. "You are very beautiful."

Come—with a trace of laughter.

He followed with energetic fin strokes as Lo'ela and Ga'yl moved quickly and easily through the water. He felt clumsy at first, but breathing in the mask was so effortless that he quickly began to feel at home in the water, and he enjoyed the weightlessness. His ears popped and squeaked as he descended, but he felt nothing else unusual; he concentrated on the view, and the feel of smooth and rhythmical movements. The water was relaxing, warm but not suffocatingly so. Blue sunlight, filtered from Lambern's gold, streamed in great dancing beams through the water, turning deeper and bluer until it splashed suddenly white and brown against the bottom sand, and yellow against the outcroppings of skeletal *krael* reef.

Seth's hands, sticking from the sleeves of his jacket, were pale in the altered light. On Lo'ela, the effect seemed healthy and (of course, he thought) Nale'nid-like. He hurried and caught her extended hand, held it and her glance for a moment, and followed her beckoning tug. The outcropping was a comforting cupped hand rising beside them, and they followed the edge of sand beneath its bold overhang while Ga'yl led the way some distance ahead of them, a small figure gliding with quick breast-stroke surges beneath the elkhorn eaves of *krael*. Seth marveled at Ga'yl's fishlike movements, among the lazy clusters of reef fish crossing and re-crossing their paths. Lo'ela, it was clear, loved the water as her home—but for Ga'yl it was more than a love, more than a belonging, it was clearly a *focus*, an intense and irrepressible *focus*, a communion with the sea on the most bare and basic levels of his existence. For Seth it was a marvelous and awesome trait to observe. The understanding of it came so naturally that he was hardly aware of his own growing attunement to the Nale'nid way of thinking.

Lo'ela spoke without turning, swimming smoothly ahead of him. *He wishes us to hurry, he is impatient to see the grotto-heralding.*

Coming, love.

Lo'ela stopped and turned to him with a delighted smile—and only then he realized that he had just addressed her without speaking aloud. Yes, he thought to her—and shrugged, because he knew that it had not worked that time. "Yes. Yes, indeed," he croaked through his plastic mask. Ga'yl, ahead, glanced back at the sound; the voice had traveled far through the water. Seth, however, had his eyes on Lo'ela, and was startled to find himself not the least bit embarrassed at the thought that had slipped. Her face was pleasantly framed by flying hair and blue mist, her limbs dark and lithe and smooth—a beautiful not-quite-human, who was very human indeed. Love? Yes, the thought fit.

Her smile flashed and vanished, and she was off again, with Seth swimming hard close behind. They moved quickly, Seth puffing inside his plastic headgear; they skimmed beneath the *krael* reef-edge like eels, Lo'ela happily breathing water and pointing first one way and then another at reef formations, schooling fishes and solitary lurkers in the crevices and shadows of the *krael*. Sand and water and distance fell away behind them, well beyond Seth's ability to measure.

Ga'yl, always at a considerable lead, took them through tall, clustering formations that seemed a queer animal-plant hybrid of *krael* and kelp, and then upward along a smooth-bottomed incline until the surface once again flashed close and silvery over their heads. Seth's ears creaked like rusted hinges as they ascended; he hoped that Lo'ela was remembering to *focus* within his body and do whatever she did to prevent nitrogen from bubbling in his blood.

They swam around an enormous *krael* mount, and then dived back downward alongside a tumbling palisade, which turned in sharp angles as it fell, and drew them like a magnet around its corners into a breathtaking deepsea-blue basin. Seth stopped kicking and slowly sank, astonished speechless, oblivious to Ga'yl's intent grin and Lo'ela's quirky smile. They were at the mouth of a great deep undersea lagoon, an enormous bowl, which was like a sea within the sea, encircled at its rim with forests of horny *krael* that stood so boldly against the lighted surface they seemed to stand against the sky—though even the highest of the features were many meters removed from the world of air. Submerged though they were already, Seth and the two Nale'nid were poised at the shores of another, a deeper crystal-water sea.

They sank, swooping and gliding in exhilaration.

The basin initially seemed dark, but as Seth's eyes adjusted to the relative gloom, he could see well enough to realize that they had company—or they were company. The Grotto Gateway, as Lo'ela named it, was swarming with Nale'nid. Sea-people came to this place from all the cities, she had said, and Seth believed it; they flocked like fishes, swimming laterally across the wide basin or lazing upward past the descending trio. A very young, small Nale'nid darted downward past them out of nowhere, followed by an older sea-girl, less hurried. An adult male-female pair gazed curiously at Seth and Lo'ela, but did not alter their leisurely course, which carried them over the heads of the three and off into the edge of gloom. The water grew slightly cooler in stages, but even the coolness of depth was dispelled, at least in Seth's mind, by the crystal clarity of the water and the magnificently blued sunlight that, now that his eyes had adjusted, seemed to sparkle and penetrate everywhere with its cerulean illumination. Even the reds and yellows, which were at this depth absent from the light altogether, were restored to his vision by memory, imagination, and guesswork.

The basin, flattened at the bottom, was paved with stone and white sand. Ga'yl led the way, with an easy, fluid style Seth matched with a hard, steady fin kick. He glided playfully with his nose flying just above the sand, and looked up occasionally to check for Lo'ela's presence or to gauge the flow of traffic of Nale'nid toward the other end of the basin. Amidst the random-seeming movements of the sea-people, there was a general migration toward a narrowing point where the basin appeared to become a valley of sorts, channeling into a break in the far wall.

Ga'yl took them straight through the gateway and into a dark cavern or tunnel, through which Nale'nid moved like vehicles in a two-way flow. Seth shuddered a bit at the forbidding appearance of the channel walls, and for the first time felt a sense of claustrophobia, of discomfort with the weightlessness of immersion and with the weight of the water he knew to be pressing against his face. The feeling passed, as the tunnel gave way to a true open cavern, mammoth and lighted softly and indistinctly with an apparently source-less yellowish glow. It took him several

minutes of staring about, past the swarming and congregating Nale'nid, to gain a sense of the cathedral formation. The light, he realized, came from the nooks and crevices of the cavern walls. Many of the luminous plants and animals used by the Nale'nid for night lighting in their city were tucked discreetly out of view.

They did not stay long in this chamber, however. Ga'yl and Lo'ela took him straight through, across its length, and into another, wider, lighter tunnel, which slanted upward, twisted and crooked, and spilled into a great sunlit pool, a clear shallow sea whose surface danced brightly and gaily only ten meters or so overhead.

It was an amphitheater, an arena beneath the sea.

They stopped here, finally, and Seth was able to look about; he estimated that well over a hundred Nale'nid were present, most of them gliding about like theatergoers, or simply relaxing and drifting without effort. The sky above the sea must have been clear, because the light, even after his eyes readjusted, was dazzling; in fact, when he rolled on his back and looked carefully, he could see—through the half-silver, mirror of the surface—the fuzzy white shapes of a few scattered clouds. That other world, that sky, seemed alien to him now.

Some sort of activity seemed about to get underway—Seth recognized this without any overt signals from Lo'ela, but he decided that he was picking up hints or at least moods and expectations from her on a subverbal level—and he followed his two hosts around the outside of the arena to find a better place to settle in. Along the perimeter of the area there were a great many caves and archways and entrances to large grotto chambers. Lo'ela informed him that they would visit some of these later. Presently, they found a niche in the rock basin where the crowd was relatively sparse, and there waited and relaxed; and Seth took time to pay more attention to Lo'ela. She looked better than ever: bright, alert, and happy. She beamed right back at him, and intertwined her fingers with his.

Something was happening down in the arena's center. A pathway was opening among the sea-people closest to the sandy "stage." A nude female Nale'nid came into view from the misty edges of the space, swimming leisurely to the center—and following her was a long, slithering creature, an eel of some sort, and behind it another eel, and then two more—and bringing up the rear a male Nale'nid, also nude. Seth crossed his legs and sat, valving off some buoyancy-gas from his belt, to watch. The short parade concluded at center stage, a circle of two Nale'nid and four eels. They floated, nearly still, all seemingly aware only of each other. A general stillness came over the amphitheater—no one was moving—and an air of tense anticipation struck Seth as surely as though he actually knew what was to take place. Was this the grotto-heralding?

Yes.

He nodded, smiling to himself, and waited, imagining what kind of music might fit this scene. Something slow, perhaps, a contained, restrained rhythm. And then, hardly had the thought crossed his mind when a low drumming sounded through the water—a curious sound, muted, like the synchronized thrumming of a troop of bellows-fishes, which perhaps, he realized, was actually the source. The drumming was quickly joined by a second, a watery popping sound, *pôk-pôk-pôk-pôk-pôk*, like sonar pulses. The rhythms of the two sounds were at first dissonant, uncoordinated, but after a minute they began to coalesce, to match in tempo, and

from that point on were never out of phase regardless of the patterns and syncopations chosen by the separate sources.

At the first coordinated refrain, the performers on stage began to move, at first in a limited and constrained pattern, back and forth, back and forth, side to side; and then in more intricate modes, the Nale'nid swaying legs and heads and arms with only the hips remaining stationary, and the eels undulating in place and then forward and backward from the center of the circle in a suggestively controlled dance. The movements became energetic as the drumming quickened, and soon grew to a form of violent thrashing, always perfectly controlled, but straining at the edge of that control and threatening...

The movements stopped, and the musicians fell silent. A moment passed, and a half of another, and without warning one eel from each side of the circle streaked smoothly into the center—and fell to war. Each connected on its first strike and rebounded and slashed with flashing teeth, striking, striking, lashing with convulsive tail jerks—and when for a split second they parted and circled and recircled it was plain that neither had been harmed, neither cut—and then one fainted and the other dived, and they locked into a gyrating tangle, which like a tiny storm drifted about the arena center as it spun, an impersonal dervish that occasionally touched bottom, flicking little spumes of white sand up into the blue water. The eels broke, and weaved like spent runners.

Then the circling and the fighting began once more.

Not a sound marred the intensity of the performance. Seth allowed a small fraction of his own attention to wander over the audience; everyone, *everyone*, was staring raptly at the demonstration of speed, agility, viciousness and stamina being played out in the arena center. Even Lo'ela seemed to have forgotten him, her hand limp in his. Seth brought that fraction of his viewing attention back to join the rest watching the skirmish, the brawl of the eels.

The creatures held forth their battle with the grace and intricacy of dancers and the ruthless ferocity of the animals that they were. One seemed to tire, to break from the struggle more desperately than the other and to rejoin with greater reluctance—but as the second lashed harder to gain an edge the first returned with astonishing energy and threatened to tear off its foe's head with a single convulsion. And so the struggle mounted and seesawed in its course, and yet never was there a sign of a cut or a slash-mark on either of the eels. Never, that is, until the forgotten two of the four joined in, one following the other, and raised the tempo of the battle to a blinding, terrifying blur.

Now there was no respite, there were no breakaways. There was only motion, whirling motion: it was a ball of flying pieces floating suspended in blue watery space, now and then dropping low enough to kick gusts of sand to cloud the water. And then the bits of flesh began to fly. First ragged little chunks, timed with the glitter of knifing teeth, and then smaller bits, powder-like, and leaking circulatory fluids. The water around the battling four grew hazy with shredded bits of eel, and the struggle took on an aspect of gruesome reality, a chilling, grim, and terrifying promise of death.

It lasted only moments longer. The entangled mass disintegrated, fell away into a number of torn pieces, some still and some wriggling but none intact. Amidst the slowly clearing cloud of organic debris, those pieces that were still moving were

slowly consumed by death—and when they drifted asunder, the performance was over. The two Nale'nid, forgotten for a time as the second two eels had been, moved to one side, but did not leave until a small school of thin-bodied gray fish emerged from the entrance path, picked at the pieces of eel until all were gone, and then departed the way they had come. The Nale'nid, too, then departed the way they had come.

For Seth, the scene was not yet over. The audience of sea-people was left quiet, entranced by the now-completed performance. They stared as if battle still raged; their faces were tense, intent, focused upon the terror, the cruelty enacted for their benefit. Was this the grotto-heralding? The battle, the destruction of four small creatures by the controlling Nale'nid had been the sole end-goal of the heralding, so far as Seth could tell. He looked at Lo'ela. She was as mesmerized as the rest, but she was starting to come out of it, now, perhaps stimulated by Seth's eyes upon her, and she quickly returned to full alertness, full concentration, full focus upon her friend lover, Seth. He said nothing. He could only stare, not certain if he wanted to believe the apparent meaning of the eel fight he had just watched.

Lo'ela frowned, seeming to read his thoughts, and her eyes told him that he had interpreted the situation correctly.

Focus. They had *focused* upon the blind cruelty, the vicious desperation of the eels. Many of them still *focused* upon it, or upon the memory afterimage. That was the motive, the only motive. To become so intensely involved in the power, the emotion for good or evil of the moment's display—to *focus* upon the consuming and single-minded extinction of the energies of the eels' lives.

No other purpose. To see, to feel, to understand and embrace.

Seth shook, as Lo'ela gripped his hand and pulled him forward to a horizontal swimming position. He was shocked to be reminded that he was still underwater, to be aware of his weightlessness again; and that distracted him enough to pull his thoughts back to a reasonable semblance of calm. But he was almost afraid to see where Lo'ela might take him next.

Leaving Ga'yl, they swam upward to the *krael*-encrusted rim of the amphitheater and along the edge of the intricately eroded grottoes that bordered it. Seth followed clumsily, waiting for Lo'ela to make up her mind—they glided back and forth, the sea-girl gazing into several of the openings—and then he nodded, with some slight hesitation, as Lo'ela indicated an archway, wide and beaming in the sun.

This you will find quiet, pleasant. Perhaps it will help you to find our grotto less distressing.

It was the first time that she had spoken to him since—and he was astonished on glancing at his timepiece—since two hours before, just prior to the start of the grotto-heralding. There was a deep gentleness to her thought, but no explanation as to her feelings. And Seth remained silent, requesting none. Whatever sense he made of this place he would have to make on his own.

The archway opened into a small, skylighted basin or pool. The bottom here was a multicolored mixture of fine-grained sands; and a number of marine plants stood incongruously, but not unattractively, in the center of the space. One aged male Nale'nid hovered about the bases of the plants, and several other sea-people

were just leaving the place. The old sea-man ignored Seth and Lo'ela completely, devoting his full attention to the plants which, Seth gathered, were his *focus*.

Seth felt a wave of mood cross him—Lo'ela's; she was letting him sense her frame of mind. Watchfulness. Expectancy of pleasure. Impressibility. She did not look at him, but a slight twist of her body toward him made it plain that she wanted him to join her in her concentration.

Curiously, he felt an urge to resist. It was not a rebellion against Lo'ela that he felt, but a hesitation about what was happening to him here. For a moment, he remembered his starship, his homeworld, his home in space, the people he was supposed to be helping. He experienced a vertiginous surge of guilt; he struggled for the briefest of instants to reassemble the motivations swirling in his head—and in his confusion was thrust for a moment back into the cataclysmic trauma of the *mynalar-g* so long ago, seemingly centuries: the ripping of the fabric of his mind, the shredding of the reality with which he formulated his world, and the awful plummeting into the frigid chaos of flux-space, the world within the world... and then it passed like a dying roar of wind in his ears, the pounding of blood, and he focused his eyes suddenly again on Lo'ela, on the bright watery pool of the sea-grotto, on the Nale'nid and their crazy inexplicable games of the senses. *Focus*. The word was a rending thought in his brain. A vital, a precious word. A word he had to learn to accept.

A gnawing sense of loss caught him, churned at his stomach, pressed the plastic film of his mask tight against his face until he felt he could not breathe. He choked, suffocated. And then he was free again, remembering where he was. But something else, though, nagged at him—a worry, a fear, perhaps a host of fears. Something he meant to think, meant to do; a responsibility. It had passed, now; it was submerged. He looked at Lo'ela, sensed concern in her even as she pored over the sight of the old Nale'nid and his sea-plants.

He joined her in looking.

The plants were a sculpture—living sculpture. Fernlike, kelplike, a strange combination of the two; rooted in the sand of the grotto, they spired and bulged upward, buoyed but not controlled by the water. It was the man who controlled them, the old Nale'nid. A picture rushed Seth's mind, an encapsulated memory: the old sea-man laboriously molding the plants, wielding control by the power of his thoughts, of his *focus*. Tiny plants sprouted, shot upward in an accelerated, time-compressed growth. The shape grew—was strengthened here, made delicate there—forming itself with asymmetrical precision. No, not precision, quite, but a randomness brought together with exquisite care. A joint project, the man and the self-willed plants.

They drifted slightly, swayed with the movement of the water. They were red-flushed green, shiny and soft. Hard, where the sculpture needed to be hard. They might have been an elaborate growth of crystals, grown in a zero gravity melting pot. They were beautiful—astonishingly, and stunningly so.

An edge of clarity grew in Seth's mind; and he knew that he was quite uncomfortable here in the presence of the Nale'nid. (Except for Lo'ela, though—always except for Lo'ela.)

The intensity of emotion, of understanding, of seeing. That was *focus* for the Nale'nid, whether eels or plants or colors or humans. Cruelty or kindness, beauty

or appalling ugliness, brutality. In *focus* there was no morality, no accepted standards of right or wrong. Meaningless terms. *Experience* mattered, intensity of experience. Life had merely to be interesting, and interest could be found in anything.

Yes. Your words have confused me: right and wrong. Peripherally, he heard Lo'ela's thought addressing him. *Perhaps you can make them clear for me?*

Seth hesitated. The thoughts, worries of the last moment were buzzing unresolved, but they were slipping to the back edges of his mind—to be displaced by more Nale'nidlike thoughts. And again he was ready to follow Lo'ela through the grotto. Lo'ela, the sea-girl who loved him. It occurred to him that her *focus* may have been more than she had bargained for.

They toured other parts of the grotto. They witnessed a builder creating materials, and pressing artifacts from sea-kelp. Cloths, parts of domes, small items for touching and handling. They entered a dark cavern and watched an "aura play"—Nale'nid with their outward aura manifestations accentuated so that they were lightning-ghosts, moving figures of color, of shimmering and wavering electro-organic energy.

Eventually Seth began to feel chilled by the water, and they both became weary. They rejoined Ga'yl, and traveled again back to the city Pal'onar. Seth relaxed with Lo'ela in her home the remainder of the day, a great many wondering thoughts burning through the daze within his mind.

* * * * *

Lo'ela again that night wanted to see the stars. Seth obliged, and once more they stood in a pleasant darkened land, Seth pointing to the sights in the fiery sky, Lo'ela touching him frequently and gently to bring him back to the realm of her presence. *You are bewildered, my starman, but that is all right.* Seth tightened his arm around her and did not answer, but he wondered just how it was that he had gotten here, and where it was he was going. *If you find out, I would like to go with you.* Laughing, he met her flashing, starlike eyes and held her more closely still, her body a glowing warmth in his arms.

And later, much later, he decided that it was the going itself, rather than the arriving, for which he cared.

Chapter 13

Lo'ela eyed Seth wonderingly. He had awakened this morning bursting with a great enthusiasm for returning to the grottoes. Yesterday's negative feelings had vanished altogether, and in fact he was confused now as to why he had been so upset by the fascinating grotto displays. The emotional intensity of the eel drama, and the aura plays, the sculpture—all were bright, illuminating memories, flooding him with new energy. Perhaps he perceived them now in light of Lo'ela's thinking, or perhaps his own feelings had matured—but either way the memories were now powerful, exhilarating. He was so anxious to return he practically demanded that Lo'ela take him back today.

You have changed quickly, friend Seth, she observed, thrusting a piece of fruit forcibly into his hand. *I wonder at that—it surprises me.*

"Me too," Seth admitted, but that did not change his desire.

We will go, then. There was no hesitation on Lo'ela's part, but she seemed less eager; there was perhaps a trace of suspicion, of unease in her thoughts. Nevertheless, she got Seth's diving gear from its storage place, and—after insisting that he eat his fill—helped him put it on. She scrutinized him after he was geared up, ignoring his impatient grunts, and then when she was satisfied that he was properly set, said, *We will go quickly, directly.*

Traveling, they arrived on dry shoreland. She gave Seth no chance to look around, but nudged him immediately into the water. They sank quickly, comfortably, coolly through the evening-blue depths and came to the Grotto Gateway. They swam in through the front cavern and into the amphitheater, where a number of Nale'nid were present, though nothing specific was going on, around to the far side of the arena and to what Seth thought of as the "back set" of grottoes. Here, they plied back and forth for a while, peering into various chambers. The plant-sculpture was still there, somewhat larger than yesterday; and in one of the darkened chambers another variation of the aura-viewing had drawn many interested spectators. Lo'ela and Seth did not remain in any of these places, but instead looked for something new.

Seth had his mind on yesterday's grotto-heralding, the eel-fight. He wanted to again see something driving, exciting, something violent. He was not beyond feeling surprise at his new frame of mind, but he was happy with it, and even impatient with Lo'ela's cautiousness. Her attitude surprised him more than anything else, actually—and he wondered if she had somehow managed to assimilate the shock, bordering on revulsion really, which he had so absurdly felt yesterday. It would be ironic, would it not, if he the human *focused* upon the emotionally intense plays of the grottoes while Lo'ela, the Nale'nid, shied away from them. Perhaps, he reflected, it was just a matter of an equal and opposite reaction. Or perhaps she was just worried about *him*, though why that should be he couldn't imagine.

"You are subdued today, Lo'ela," he said, coming to a gentle, weightless rest by a krael archway. He touched the flexible bulge covering his mouth, felt a momentary urge to tear it away, to free himself of the strictures of the divesuit. He made a face.

I am focusing on you, love. To learn what it is, exactly, you feel. She opened her mouth wide, staring at him from within a suspended halo of golden-brown hair. She tilted her head slightly, and finally broke into a helpless grin. *You are a most curious human, Starman.*

"Am I?" he said dryly, mockingly. "Am I, indeed?" He extended a hand to touch her, to cradle her cool shoulder. He remembered last night's touching, and on an impulse moved his hand through her flowing strands of hair. What would she learn about him? he wondered. That he had found the meaning, for himself, of "focus"? That he had lost his awareness, except in the intellectual sense, of hurt, of pain, of the distinction between wondrous pleasure and wondrous torture, wondrous excitement? That he had learned that there need be no value distinction?

That he now understood why the Nale'nid were so mischievous among the humans, and that it no longer mattered—*because he understood?*

"Let us go find a drama," he said, letting all those thoughts fly away like bits of kelp loosed in a current.

Anger-drama, Lo'ela said calmly, and with a sharp scissors-kick towed him away from his resting place and propelled him toward a grotto entrance, partway down the slope of the amphitheater. Despite its being inconspicuous, the opening was fairly large and only moderately dark inside. When they entered it, Seth could see that it was the start of a wide and curiously formed tunnel giving access to an entire hidden series of chambers and passageways, many of them little more than arched alcoves or arterial channels, and all of them illuminated by indirect sunlight that seemed to sparkle luminously from even the dullest surfaces of krael and stone. Lo'ela shushed Seth, who was remarking at each new sight, and guided him down a sloping passage and into a larger chamber.

The chamber was dark walled and smooth, and illuminated almost entirely by hazy bioluminescence from recessed sills along the walls. It was a comfortable place—roomy, but small enough that the far wall was quite clearly visible even through the slight mistiness of the water. As Seth glided after Lo'ela to a position alongside other Nale'nid waiting by the walls, he wondered how such a comforting, secure place could qualify as a setting for an "anger-drama."

Follow the players along the floor and ceiling, Lo'ela told him, closing her hand tightly about his.

Okay, he thought—but he was not sure which direction was the floor and which the ceiling; the apparent references seemed queerly tilted, especially when he tried to gauge the vertical by the faint upward tug of the air in his film-mask. No matter, he decided—perhaps that was intended as part of the effect. He set himself comfortably, bumping against the hard, smooth wall, and adopted a set of references based upon the scattering of Nale'nid around what seemed as good a horizontal plane as any.

Here... now. Lo'ela's second signal made him aware of two male Nale'nid approaching each other from opposite ends of the grotto, one at the top and one at the bottom. The players, apparently. The entrance made his blood pound faster, and he shivered in the chill of the water, wondering if this would be a sea-human variation on the eel-fight.

He was not to be disappointed. But the first action, when it came, was not visible at all. It was a thought-scream of outrage from the spectators—dissonant mistuned chimes, and bashing cymbals, and piercing horns all hurling their awful cry directly into his skull. Seth reeled; the outcry drilled, and drilled, and echoed and drilled in his head without letup. Finally, he shouted back, exploding in anger at the pain in his skull, the blinding, deafening pain—but his cry fell deadened, he had neither the skill nor the power to muster a telepathic cry. Lo'ela, beside him, touched his hurt nerves, ready to intervene to mute the deafening shrill at its receiving point—him—but he shouted back her help, he would have no relief without wresting it for himself.

He bellowed his pain, his voice a watery moan... and the clamor died. But not on his account; the two players had been primed, loosened, and now they fell to in their roles, circling one another in their projected thoughts, circling, playing and

toying, and toying and waiting for openings. If Seth expected a physical demonstration, he was in that regard disappointed. The assault when it was launched was mental—but none the less brutal for that. Sem'bol had challenged A'nit, and the challenge was joined—it would be a test of unleashed wills, bloodied emotions, crimson dark hate: the anger-drama. A match of treachery, of panic, of betrayal.

A'nit led with a taunt, an awful feedback screech that rocked Seth to his bones—and summoned forth a thundering vision of mountain peaks quaking in concussions of sound, escarpments trembling and shivering and slowly, helplessly coming apart as the whole mountains disintegrated in endless avalanches. Sem'bol maintained dignified silence for the moment, withstanding the cataclysmic noise tearing at his strength; he allowed his anger to build, like tectonic strain, beneath the smooth surface of his outer calm. A'nit paused for a moment to consider the effects of his efforts—and that was when Sem'bol exploded, driving lances of derisive fire into A'nit's smug calm, lightning bolts crackling in a dry forest kindling the primal fury of consuming fire. Burning, dark choking vengeance, while Sem'bol strutted high in the clouds crowing his riposte, his quick victory over the attacker.

The return of A'nit was slow, as he seemingly gathered himself, weeping and broken, from the ashes of debacle. But quietly, into the deep flowing currents of ground water, he poured the venom of his anger, his humiliation, his spite. And as Sem'bol danced his satisfaction, the winds buffeting with his laughter, he grew thirsty, and after a time came to earth and drank deeply from the sweet valley wells. Slowly, in a trickle of pain, of numbness and horrible dizziness, he became aware of the treachery, of his folly in trusting the very earth beneath him—while in the breezes of the air now was heard the shrieking laughter of A'nit, the trickster, the foe. And Sem'bol's reply was shattering—the explosion of the earth, the wind, the end of all that was, in the heat and tidal fury of a passing rogue sun. The shock waves boomed, reverberated nonsensically in the darkness, and the smoke of vengeance.

Armies collided on the night plains of unknown worlds, stirring Seth the watcher to the darkest abyss of his own soul, releasing a swirling flood of hatred from noisome reservoirs, and without being aware of it Seth was growling, spitting, screaming his own bitterness, his own venom at faceless assailants. The storm of blood-lust around him, of aroused dark souls, grew in orchestration—the energies mushrooming in sweetly bitter musical *focus*, in violently conceived kinetic-motion *focus*, in the liquid aching beauty of anger-hatred *focus*.

There was no way of knowing the time for which the drama played, or when it might end—the laughter and the strutting, the undercutting and bludgeoning. He lost knowledge of time and place in a frenetic eagerness for violence, the will to destroy with his thoughts, with his soul. Only when he heard the rasp of his own shriek over the background mutter, the hoarse cry of his own bloodied brain, did he slowly, confusedly become aware that the energy, the source of the hatred had died, had withered and gone away. And then he knew that the drama had ended, it was over, and that all were quiet except him...

...and that Lo'ela was shaking him, trying to reach him through his insensible shouting. *It has ended, it has ended!* And there was the sea-woman floating before

him in the mist, her hair any like gold-dust, her eyes wide and frightened and staring, reaching.

He brought himself to a shuddering silence, held every muscle of his body rigid until he felt calm taking hold. He swallowed hard. "Yes," he managed, suddenly half laughing, half crying, spirit pouring out of him in enormous relief. He was floating upside-down, though he had felt no motion, no turning. The chamber was dark and quiet, still—no players in sight—and the rest of the Nale'nid were already leaving or were gone.

He nodded, still laboring sternly to control himself. "Yes, I see," he said. It was a shock to realize that he was still underwater, still encased in a divesuit. He had forgotten. "Who won?" he said—and forced a grin.

No winners, Lo'ela said. *Come*. She swam off toward the exit of the chamber, ignoring Seth's querying expression. What was the matter? he wondered. Why was she upset? But he had no time to ask as he hurried, kicking his fins to follow. No doubt she would let him know in her own time.

He had completely lost his bearings by the time Lo'ela took him to a higher place, which gave way to another cavern, much larger and almost as dark as the last one. Wheeling lightly in mid-space for a quick survey of this new place, Seth was surprised to see the shimmering mirror of an air-water interface. They were, apparently, back in the high chambers of the grotto. Lo'ela headed with one sharp, smooth kick to the surface. Seth followed.

Water broke around his head and ran in rivulets down the outside of his film-mask, and he struggled ridiculously for a moment, discomfited by the feeling of his heavy head pushing him back down into the water; then he breathed easily once he got his water-sense back and sculled quietly after Lo'ela to the nearby solid rock bank, which turned out to be the edge of a broad ledge or floor extending some distance back into the cavern. He heaved himself out of the water with a great show of clumsiness, and a good natured grumble about the ease with which Lo'ela had accomplished the same thing. He stood, dripping and shivering, and said, "What now?"

You may take off your diving suit here. She was already reaching to assist him.

Seth was glad to be rid of the suit for a while, minor encumbrance though it was. He breathed sharply and rubbed his arms, trying to get his circulation back to normal both for full gravity and for the damp, chilly air. "You set?" Lo'ela asked aloud, studiously. Seth nodded, and they set off back into the cavern. He was amazed at how clearly he suddenly could see; the faint mistiness of the water was coming to seem natural to him. As usual, the illumination was apparently from indirect bioluminous sources—or perhaps it was indirect sunlight, he was finding it hard anymore to tell.

A number of Nale'nid were congregated in a narrower off-shooting cave, and they went to investigate. Seth peered through the group eagerly, his senses warmed up for something intense like the anger-drama. "What is it? Can you tell?" he asked Lo'ela with a quick sideways glance. She had squeezed close to him, and he slipped an arm around her waist. She acknowledged the action with a tight glance, but she was tense.

"You—" she started, then switched back, *you may not like this*.

"Oh?" He stared at her, and shrugged. "Well, let's find out." Whatever had tempered Lo'ela's enthusiasm had not affected his own, so he pushed forward with her into the crowd until they found a spot from which they could see.

The view was not particularly upsetting: a young Nale'nid girl was reclining on a flat, smooth stone slab, and standing next to her were a sea-man and a sea-woman. Doing nothing, apparently. Seth stared, whispered sideways, "What are they doing?" Lo'ela gulped, watched, and said nothing. "What's happening?" he whispered insistently.

Her focus, came the answer, finally, though Lo'ela kept her eyes fixed straight ahead, is upon the senses beneath her aura, the senses stripped bare—and the others are suppressing her aura, depriving her of it to help her focus. They have only just begun.

Seth rolled that answer over in his mind, and decided that it was an intriguing idea, though surely it must be traumatic in execution—being stripped of the most basic outward manifestations of self, being left without aura-contact with others or with the physical world. The result surely would be, at the least, dreadful fear and loneliness—and perhaps irreparable autism, or catatonia. And yet it was a voluntary thing; it apparently was what she wanted, and whether or not she would still wish it after a prolonged time was a moot point. Interesting; he decided he would like to see more, perhaps something developed to a higher extreme.

But Lo'ela—she was so subdued. Was she developing a conscience—that most unNale'nidlike of faculties—even while Seth was losing his?

"Let's move on," he urged. "Is there something further advanced that we can see?" Lo'ela gave him a thoughtful look, and reluctantly agreed. They went deeper into the cave, which turned out not to dead-end but rather to continue for some distance. There were noises, not quite identifiable, coming from the deeper chambers. They stopped to listen more carefully. The sounds wailed, echoing queerly from the convolutions of the walls, so queerly in fact that it took Seth a minute longer to realize that it was a voice, a peculiarly tortured voice—like the howl of a demented cat, or an enraged grissom pony. It reverberated quaveringly, making Seth shudder, even as it quickened his interest.

He urged Lo'ela forward, hurried with her around a bend. The wail was peaking—its source was clearly undergoing exquisite torment—and for a moment Seth was afraid that it would halt, or the victim would pass out or die before he could get close enough to watch and to feed on the intensity of its pain. There was another crowd in the chamber ahead, and he made ready to push by anyone in the way. His heart was racing, his neck muscles tense, quivering—was this another aura-deprivation, a victim driven all the way to gibbering insanity?—but as he tugged forward, Lo'ela resisted. He wheeled irritably, and was shocked for just a moment by the dread filling her eyes. Then: "What?" he demanded impatiently.

She shrank from him. *I am afraid of this.*

Still holding her hand, he edged sideways, trying to see what was happening beyond the crowd as he spoke to Lo'ela. The wailing trailed off to a moan.

You—you will not like this!

"These are your own people!" he rasped. He let go Lo'ela's hand and pushed forward through the crowd. They were an equally determined audience, so finally

he had to be content to stretch high and peer over the front lines of watchers. The setting was the same as that of the other aura-deprivation, except that here two sea-men were standing over a third man on the stone slab. The subject at the moment was lying motionless, unprotesting; but his face was utterly masked by horror, by naked emotional stress, and he was breathing in strange, inhumanly melancholy tones.

Seth stared intently, absorbing the scene, *focusing* on the torment being wrung from the victim's soul. And then he froze, paralyzed in a half step forward.

The man was not a Nale'nid at all. It was Racart.

Curious thoughts engaged in Seth's mind as he tried to react to this revelation. His excitement remained strong, but it was suspended in a timeless moment of horror and of guilt; the energy of his body was directed toward the focus, and a part of his mind clung tightly to that even as his deeper thoughts churned in a terrible quandary.

Where did he stand! Racart's face was a contortion, a caricature, the face of a man driven to the edge of a bottomless psychosis. *My friend! My friend whom I'd nearly forgotten! Lo'ela, how could you have made me forget him?*

Racart, what have they done to you?

Racart's head turned slightly, his eyes lifted, flickered, as if he had heard Seth's unspoken cry. Stricken with grief and hope Seth stared past the sea-people at him; and some inner restraint parted, unleashing a fury that was no Nale'nid *focus* but the blind rage of a human grievously wounded—no matter that it was by forces beyond his control and understanding. "RACART!" he bellowed, stunning the crowd into attention.

He pushed forward roughly, elbowing past the sea-people to reach his friend's side. Only Racart's breathy moan, now subdued, filled the silence. The Ernathene showed no signs of consciousness, but something in his face seemed to have eased. "Racart!" urged Seth, leaning close—"Come out of it!" There was no response from his friend except a fluttering tic in his left eye; his gaze was straight upward, his eyes dilated, unfocused. Seth's blood flowed hotter, and he turned with a cry back to face the Nale'nid audience.

With no more thought than warning he leaped into the crowd, swinging wildly. His fists rained blows onto people he could scarcely see for the blur clouding his vision—and several went down as he jumped sideways, and back, turned and leaped forward again, his arms wind-milling brutally. He screamed as he swung, his wordless cry as hideous as Racart's had been just moments before. The crowd edged away. Most of the Nale'nid were merely confused, and neither defensive nor sympathetic; they stepped clear of Seth's attack only as a kind of delayed reflex. When a space had cleared so that he was swinging at empty air, Seth suddenly stopped. He stared at them all in stupefied silence.

"What have you done?" he croaked after a minute. He turned back to Racart—and noticed the two Nale'nid standing nearby. These, then, these were the people who had tortured his friend. Racart made no sound, no sign of wakefulness. "You!" Seth called, gesturing vaguely at the two Nale'nid. "Why have you done this?" His voice dropped sharply, guilt and anger mixing turbulently in his thoughts; he knew quite well why they had done it.

"Seth!"

He heard his name in his ears, shook his head.

"Seth!" The cry was insistent. Lo'ela was standing behind him, nervously, at a distance. He scowled as he turned, focusing his eyes slowly on the sea-girl.

Seth. She started to approach, hesitated, then mustered her courage and very deliberately took the steps forward. She was trembling, quaking. She opened her mouth, trying to form words; she seemed unable, so she spoke directly. *This was the focus you wanted. Thought you wanted.*

He glared threateningly. His anger was so great that he felt an urge strike again, against her—but he clutched his arms together across his breast and said, shaking, "What I wanted? What I wanted!" His self-control broke, and he grabbed her and shook her so violently she cried, helplessly, "Ai, ai, ai, ai!"—even as she pleaded with her mind.

Seth—yes! My people did it, and you wanted it too! If not to your friend then to someone else! Can you have forgotten? Her mind-voice was anguished, begging for recognition, for understanding. She was right and he knew it, and he knew it hurt her to say it, hurt her human feelings. He had wanted it: the anguish, the intensity of torment. Lo'ela's eyes were blinking wildly, her hair was tangled and pushed to one side, her mouth was twisted in fear.

What woman was this, a Nale'nid who reached to him with human fear, human terror he could understand in the bottom of his soul? *Is this the woman, the Nale'nid I love? Yes... no... I don't know. Is that why she resisted, she knew that Racart was here?*

I did not know—but I sensed something, yes.

Seth stared dumbly, bewitched by her power to read his thoughts at their most desperate. Lo'ela clung to him hard, her face, her hair, her breasts pressed to his bare, shivering chest. Then she tore free and ran past him to the two Nale'nid who were with Racart. Seth heard her cry in her rapid, incomprehensible tongue—then he forgot them and hurried back to Racart. His friend was still, his eyes blank, and Seth suddenly wondered if his own presence, his aura, might possibly be harmful to Racart.

He frowned, and placed a hand gently on Racart's right arm, and felt for a pulse—rapid, weak. He pushed Racart's hair lightly back from his forehead. The Ernathene's eyes flickered; he was breathing more quietly, but he remained lost in whatever world had captured him. Seth spoke softly: "I have not forgotten you, Racart, no." Not really, he thought, gritting his teeth. "I'm here with you now."

Utterly drained of energy, he stood for what seemed an endless time, all others forgotten—until Lo'ela appeared at his side, clutching his arm tightly. Several other Nale'nid, including the two who had been working on Racart, surrounded the Ernathene and touched hands to him. Seth began to protest, but Lo'ela stopped him. *Stand quietly for a moment, my starman.*

Seth glowered but obeyed. The cavern silently dissolved into the chaos of the world within the world, and when that disappeared they were standing once more in Lo'ela's dwelling in the city beneath the sea.

His legs buckled without warning, and he staggered in Lo'ela's tight grip. He lost awareness before he touched the floor.

Chapter 14

Andol Holme stood at the railing of the harvester MORGENDALE, where he had stood for most of the afternoon staring out over moving water. The sky seemed moody to him, as it had all day—changing from gray to blue to gray nearly as often as he glanced up. The sun, when it was out, was hot, burning.

The flotilla had been underway for three days, now, and although Holme was ready to perform as necessary, he still had not completely reconciled himself to the actions to come. His actual duties were relatively ambiguous; he was the exec of the handful of WARMSTORM crewmen on board, but with the exception of the weaponry crew the WARMSTORM personnel were present as a formality mainly—they watched the Ernathene crews at their work and assisted in small ways when possible. The mood of the MORGENDALE crew was subdued and apprehensive, and he rather suspected that the same was true throughout the flotilla. There reigned an unspoken fear that the mission was pursuing a deadly course: with every vessel armed and capable in one fashion or another of destroying underwater targets, the flotilla wielded frightening power. But to what end? They could (probably) destroy the Nale'nid city if they wished—which they didn't—but could they *intimidate* the sea-people, induce them to change their behavior? Some thought yes; more, it seemed, thought no.

Weaponry technicians were still busily installing and tuning delivery systems, adjusting control-locks, and tinkering to devise new protections against Nale'nid meddling. The weapons would be hellishly complex to fire, what with multiple combination locks on the vital controls and safety systems requiring simultaneous count-sequences; but it was hoped that the systems would deter even the cleverest of the sea-people from causing malicious firings. Holme had objected to the inclusion of explosive projectiles among the armaments, maintaining that intense light charges could effectively scare the Nale'nid without necessarily being destructive or fatal; but the point had been overruled by Mondreau, who insisted upon a full range of choices. There was logic in that, of course; but Holme was less than fully convinced as to the effectiveness of the safeguards.

He watched the passing lands and sea. Water plunged noisily under the harvester's wide bow, and rushed past the hull like crumpled cellophane, blue green and brilliant in the sun. As the flotilla had progressed northward from one semi-enclosed sea to another, the waters had changed to a clearer, deeper blue, relatively devoid of the plankton haze. The seas ranged deeper, with steeper and more irregular bottom profiles, while the land masses here were narrower and more twisted, more like island chains. They were venturing into unfamiliar territory, not only to the star-crew but to the Ernathenes as well. The rules of the sea might well be different here—weather, sea conditions... and inhabitants.

Holme could not help silently comparing the number of unknowns with the probability of trouble. He rather wished that he were aboard the flagship ARDELLO, where he would at least be more immediate to the crucial decision-making. The shores were angling closer, now, suggesting the approach of yet another strait. Holme leaned out over the rail to look ahead and back, and he saw that the flotilla was being stretched along its length to negotiate the narrows. He

had the feeling that he was back on his home world, Rorcan, on just one ship of a steady traffic flow: hulking gray merchantmen crushing the waves both to the fore and aft, laden with ores for the foundries of the continent. His thoughts came moodily back to the present. Though he was glum about the prospects of this mission, he was still quite curious about the Nale'nid and their home—and if nothing else he was moving closer to them. Then, too, there was Seth's fate, and Racart's, to worry about—and the chances for their survival. He remembered Mona's stoic expression as she had boarded ARDELLO, her eyes alert but withdrawn, her mouth set in a straight line. As part of the sonar crew, she could well be called to contribute to action endangering Racart; yet she would not have stayed behind in Lambrose if ordered.

"Mr. Holme?" A crewman was at his elbow—Stanton, one of his own men. He looked disturbed. "Word just came down from the bridge, Mr. Holme. Line-of-sight from the air units—they've completed all the sonar mapping and survey, and have pinpointed targets. The implication was that flag-command is considering a demonstrative strike to pay them back for that ruckus on board BARSUTHE." That ship, with ORREGI, was still in the Jamean Sea; the Nale'nid had recently invaded it in a manner reminiscent of the ARDELLO incident. Stanton added, "No word on sending a contact party."

Holme nodded, unsurprised. He looked at the sky, saw that it was clouding, this time with dark, angry clouds from the northeast. "Rough weather coming," he said, scowling. It occurred to him that the flotilla was right now militarily at its most vulnerable—strung out to navigate the strait. ARDELLO was probably already in the narrows. How easy it would be for the Nale'nid to strike, to throw the fleet into chaos—they could have every one of the Ernathene ships on the rocks with only minor effort.

But then, it did not seem as though the Nale'nid worked that way, or even thought that way. *Did they?*

The fleet continued on through that strait, and the next, and the next, toward the rendezvous with ORREGI and BARSUTHE. There was no harassment, nor sign that the approach had been noted by the Nale'nid.

But the weather, as Holme had predicted, turned bitter and turbulent. The following day, as it sailed into the southern limits of the Jamean Sea, the flotilla received a taste of tropical electrical storms. High chop frosted the water, and winds gusted alarmingly, bringing lightning and rain combined with steamy, oppressive heat. Altogether it was strange weather, and more than one sailor's thoughts drifted back to the weather that had afflicted Lambrose for a time and the speculation that had caused concerning the sun.

Nonetheless, the way ahead seemed clearer, and the fleet continued sailing, undelayed, toward the waters of the undersea city.

* * * * *

A wordless gabbling filled his cranium, the echoes of a mind awash in fear. For a time, as he wandered into the dark of an unrestful sleep, Seth thought that the fear was his own. That it was his soul that was weeping. Later, he drifted higher in the dark seas and, just before breaking the fragile surface to consciousness, perceived that the sounds were not his own, but another's. Later still, he opened

his eyes. The inside of a dome curved like an eggshell over his head, transparent and green and full of light in the undersea morning. The mat beneath him was hard, uncomfortable, and cool; and he wondered how he had managed to sleep so soundly, or at all. It took a minute more to notice the soft, strange quilt covering him, and even longer to remember Lo'ela's catching him, as he was falling unconscious. He still felt drained, barely awake.

He turned his head, recalling the unhappiness that had stirred him to awakening. Lo'ela sat near his feet. She was hunched over, her back to him, crying, and trying to stifle the sound of her sobs. Seth looked at her in confusion, turned his head back to stare up at the top of the dome, and tried to sort things out. Lo'ela's crying. His feeling as though he had made six flux-drive passages in one night, and then fallen over a cliff at the end. So far, they wouldn't sort. Racart—

Where was Racart?

He rolled his head the other way. Racart was lying on a mat on a higher floor-level. Apparently he was asleep. That seemed satisfactory, no problem. What should he be thinking of, then?

As though a switch had clicked closed, images flashed on in his mind. Lambrose: baffled people shaking their heads at another ruined batch of *mynalar*, guards struggling with their own rebellious, deadly weapons. The scarred dead man, the Nale'nid. ARDELLO: chaos, rollicking Nale'nid. The WARMSTORM Mission: not understanding—not without help, his help. Racart: aura-deprivation, terror. And him; the control pit of WARMSTORM, or the rig of a new kind of ship, *mynalar-g* pulling him into the deadly, precarious dreamland of flux-space, the splintering, sparkling, misty world within the world, *between* the worlds.

Or was it to be the caverns of the Nale'nid, *focusing* upon the dramas? The image of Racart, again: suffering.

And what of Lo'ela, caught as he was between two worlds?

As sharply as the images flickered, almost cinematically, across his mind, came a striking realization. That the Nale'nid world was an alien world to him. He had flirted with the Nale'nid reality—but did he want it, really, did he want it even with Lo'ela?

She called him her "starman"—because she knew what he was, and what he would remain.

Lo'ela's sobs broke through his thoughts, and finally he understood why she was crying. He sat up, dizzily, and said, "Lo'ela." He had spoken too softly, so he called again, louder, "Lo'ela." She did not respond, except to cry harder. Moving awkwardly to sit beside her, he touched her bare shoulder with just his fingertips. She trembled at the touch, but though she kept her head averted, she did not pull away. He sighed, and closed his eyes wearily. *Lo'ela, Lo'ela. I do still—*

I have lost you, she told him flatly.

He blinked his eyes open. "Have you?" he said. He was quite unsure, himself. He resisted an urge to put his arms around her and instead got shakily to his feet. *Haven't I?* she questioned, looking up at him for the first time. Her face was dark, streaked with tears; she astonished him with the hurt she displayed, the fear. Was this the way a Nale'nid would react? *It is part of my focus, starman*, she advised him coldly.

He nodded, knowing that the statement was true, but not in the way that she meant him to believe it. She was far more, now, than just a Nale'nid. Seth scowled. "Lo'ela, damn it, there's more to this than you and me!" Thinking of the havoc that rocked the Ernathene colony, that had assailed Racart's mind, he knew that he had been failing in his duty—or he would fail if he did not return to it now. He could feel guilty for having accomplished nothing, or he could set to work with the understanding he had gained. The Nale'nid—damn them, they would have to be made to comprehend the *damage* they were doing, and the very meaning of the word.

He gazed down at Lo'ela, wondering how to start, what to say.

Lo'ela did it for him. She stood, came to him, raised her hands to touch his cheeks. Tilting her head slightly, she blinked wet eyelids and almost smiled, painfully. *There is much to be done, is there not?* said her eyes and her thoughts. *My people must learn of yours—as you have of them.*

"You do very well at reading my thoughts," he answered. "But I can't teach them, or return to their—your—ways."

"No," Lo'ela said very firmly. *But perhaps I can.*

Seth looked at her questioningly. She averted her eyes to watch Racart, motionless on the mat nearby. A clear expression of pain gripped her, and she waited for it to pass before she looked back at Seth.

What I have learned from you, they can learn from me. I know the meaning of pain, of hurt. Of those words as you know them. I must go, now, to find a way to make it clear for them, to give them that focus. She stepped back from him and looked him up and down carefully. Then she turned and walked quickly from the dome.

Seth stared after her for a long time, wondering what she would do, wondering if she was right—that he had, in fact, lost her. Finally, he shook the thought from his head and went over to look at Racart. His friend was quiet, his face washed of color in the blue light penetrating the sea; he was in a state that seemed more trance-like than sleep-like. The Ernathene's eyelids slid slowly open and closed, at intervals of a few seconds. Seth was puzzled at this, and for a while he did nothing except watch Racart's eyes. He *seemed* to be blinking, but as if in greatly slowed motion. A consequence of whatever strange realm he was trapped in—time itself perhaps flowing at an altered rate of speed? Cautiously, Seth felt Racart's forehead; it was cool, unfevered. His face and neck muscles seemed relaxed, except for occasional slow, exaggerated twinges.

Racart's eyes suddenly flicked open, fluttered in a blur of speed, and settled open again, staring directly, startlingly up into Seth's. "Racart?" he called softly. "Are you waking?" Racart's sea-green irises constricted and dilated uncertainly, as if homing in on their proper setting. It was not clear whether or not he was aware of Seth—until he spoke: "I am not sure that it is something I wish to leave." He gazed narrowly, closely, at Seth and then immediately focused elsewhere.

"Racart," Seth called, shaking him gently. "Racart!"

The Ernathene gave no response, though his lips moved silently, while his eyes stared up through the starman. Whatever he was saying, or thinking, it was not for his friend. Finally, he focused, again, on Seth and murmured, "You will return

to your stars, then. Your Cluster. Your ship." Stated, not asked. "That must be expected."

Seth was taken aback. Had Racart been awake, earlier, listening? Or had he another way of deducing Seth's intentions? Was he feverish, delirious, were his eyes wandering incoherently? No. "Racart," Seth said, "will you feel well enough to return with me? To Lambrose?" He studied his friend closely.

Racart watched right back. He seemed fully conscious, but his face was dark, brooding. He closed his eyes, then, as if to sleep, as if everything were settled. "Your people," he said in a conversational tone, "are over our heads right now." His voice became strained. "They will, I think, take the next action soon."

Seth stared in surprise. Racart had gone immediately to sleep—real sleep, it appeared. But what had he meant: "*Your* people—"? "Over our heads"? Meaning: "Beyond our control"? Or had a party come to rescue them? Or had Racart lost reign of his senses after all?

Pacing along the other side of the dwelling, Seth gazed out through the ribbon-welded, glid walls of the dome, seeing the network of bubbles and tubes of the Nale'nid city as the fragile and complex structure that it was. Where was Lo'ela? Was she accomplishing anything among the Nale'nid, or would it matter in the end? Perhaps as a society the Nale'nid were incompatible with humankind as he knew it; perhaps his own kind would have to leave this planet altogether, or—more likely, since they were not about to give up the only available supply of *mynalarg*—simply eliminate the Nale'nid, ruthlessly and regretfully, as a nuisance.

"Lo'ela," he said softly, "can you do it in time? Can you do it at all?" And he remembered then, and wondered how it could possibly have taken so long to penetrate his mind, that the Nale'nid were not merely some remarkable (and easily underestimated) people. They were the masters of flux-space—they were unthinkable, natural navigators of the "world within the world."

If anyone could sail the flux-space between the stars, could not the Nale'nid?

Perhaps they were descendants of flux-riggers of the past, lost and abandoned on this world in the forgotten years of entropy wars. Perhaps not—it hardly mattered—perhaps their skills had evolved right here on this world.

Lo'ela had said that they did not build ships, did not travel from their own world. But would they take to the stars now, if given the chance?

Surely. Surely they must. Lo'ela, have you seen that in my thoughts—even when I did not? He pressed his hands to the shell of the dome, put his face close to the glid, and stared into the blue green mist of the Ernathene sea, and over the intricacies of the Nale'nid cityscape, wishing that his gaze and his thought alone could summon the attention of his *focus-friend* Lo'ela.

* * * * *

He sat by Racart for a long while, after that, watching the still face, the even rise and fall of the breast. The Ernathene remained deep in the shadows of sleep, with only an occasional flicker of expression crossing his brow. Seth, after a time, got up again and helped himself to several pieces of the fruit that Lo'ela had left in a bowl. He wished that he could do something constructive; but, after all, there was little that *could* be done until Lo'ela returned from her efforts. Still, he felt useless, and wished that something would happen.

Hearing Racart stir, Seth hurried back to his friend's side. Racart had not awakened, but his facial expression had changed; his brow was creased, his lips tight but stretched into a slight scowl, and the tic had returned to his left eye. What, Seth wondered, could he be dreaming of?

Seth glanced up and saw a movement outside the dome, across the city. He went over to the *glid* wall to look more closely; whatever was moving in the still mist was too large to be a swimming person. He squinted; it moved closer. "A submarine!" he exclaimed softly. "I'll be damned." It *was* a sub, a small Ernathene vessel. Had the city been found, then, and a contact mission sent? Had Racart really known what he was saying when he said that his people were overhead? He watched in astonishment and wonder.

A small, dark shadow, the sub glided slowly around the outer edge of the city, its headlight flashing visibly now as it moved in Seth's general direction. "Keep coming," Seth urged softly, coaxing it forward. Perhaps, if it were a lookout sub, divers would come from it to enter the city. The sub was closer, now, and clearly visible. It halted, hovered. "Come *on!*" Seth muttered.

The sub turned in place. It spat a small object from its bow, and half a moment later a bubble-dwelling exploded in a blue flash and a boiling froth of water and air. Seth stared, disbelieving. "My—" A concussion clapped the *glid* dome and rocked him off his feet. He sprawled backwards to the floor—catching himself to get to his feet again as the shock wave rumbled off into the distance. "Damn!" he breathed. He spun, saw no damage to the dome around him, saw that Racart seemed undisturbed, and rushed back to the wall. The sub was backing away. Where the bubble-dwelling had been, there were only shards and bits of ruin; a cloud of turbidity drifted slowly away from the site, carried by the bottom current. "No," he whispered. "No." He was too horrified, too stunned to say or think more.

Turning smoothly again, the sub moved off in the direction from which it had come, and sped silently into the distance. The city was as it had been—a maze-pattern of gleaming structures in the still blue mist—with a single component of the maze destroyed, devastated, lifeless.

Chapter 15

The afternoon was drawing into its late hours when Seth became aware that he had been sitting, motionless, staring at the site of the attack, for a good part of that afternoon. Racart was still asleep, and it did not seem wise to attempt to awaken him. What would be the point, in any case? What good *could* Seth do? He recalled bitterly Racart's prediction that the Ernathenes and the Warmstorm people would be the next to act. *Well, Perland? What will be the next prediction? Destruction of the city, perhaps?* It had not escaped his notice that he and Racart had apparently been declared expendable; well, that was understandable enough, if one accepted the notion that such violence was necessary in the first place. And apparently the Mission had.

The important question was: how were the Nale'nid reacting to all this?

Seth heard a sound and looked up. Al'ym and Ga'yl had come home. He stumbled to his feet to greet them, and instantly felt his face growing red. Here were two Nale'nid to answer his question. The two stood in the center of the dome and observed him unconcernedly, though they did acknowledge his presence with vaguely courteous nods. Lo'ela's influence, at least, had apparently reached them; it was the first such acknowledgement Seth could recall from any sea-person other than Lo'ela.

"Did you see what happened?" he asked, pointing toward the view of the demolished dwelling. He spoke awkwardly but very deliberately, hoping that perhaps enough of Lo'ela's focus had reached them to allow them to understand.

Al'ym turned around in a full circle, perplexedly, while Ga'yl tilted his head and suddenly, maddeningly grinned. Seth frowned. "*There.*" He exaggerated his pronunciation—"They-air—" and pointed repeatedly and forcefully out into the sea. "*There. Did you see?*"

Ga'yl watched him with seeming interest, but no other reaction. After a minute, Seth realized that there would be none. Ga'yl was simply studying him, probably in his color *focus*. Al'ym had moved away completely, his attention glancing randomly about the dome. Obviously, neither had the slightest notion what Seth was trying to say, nor did either betray the least concern about the attack. Seth was stumped. And then it occurred to him that it all made sense. He should not have expected them to show concern—they were Nale'nid.

Waking suddenly, Racart sat up on his mat. Seth hurried to him, though still keeping half an eye on Lo'ela's brothers. Seth's first worry was about his friend's physical well-being; but Racart seemed fully alert and undistressed. He smiled furtively and nodded. "They don't understand," he told Seth quietly, as if making an aside in an ongoing conversation.

Seth was completely bewildered. "I know that," he said, staring. "Are you all right? Do you know some way of getting across to them?"

Racart lifted his eyebrows. "What do you want to get across?"

The starpilot scowled. "Do you know what happened?" Yes, obviously he did. "I have to get back to Lambrose somehow—or if there are ships in the area I have to get to one of them." For the moment, he was prepared to accept unquestioningly Racart's lucid, seemingly omniscient presence.

Racart nodded. Seth hardly even registered surprise when the Ernathene began to speak, without a halt or a stutter, in the Nale'nid tongue. He talked for a minute or so, and when he had finished the two sea-men looked at each other knowingly, then came to Seth's side. Each took one of Seth's arms. Apparently they were going to take him. Seth quickly said, "Tell Lo'ela. And *are* you all right?" He squinted.

Racart lay down again. "Yes."

Seth suddenly thought, and shouted, "Tell them to decompress me!" He looked at Lo'ela's brothers nervously.

Racart did not sit up again. "They know," he said. "By the way, two Nale'nid died in the attack."

Seth blinked. Then his vision shimmered, and the world he knew was gone.

* * * * *

At the ship's railing, Andol Holme stared moodily across the gray, mist-sheeted water. He turned—and his face twisted in shock to see Seth and the two Nale'nid standing before him. Seth was only slightly less surprised, and it took him a moment to orient himself to the moving deck of a ship.

"*Seth!* Well—" Holme said with feigned nonchalance. "I see you are here. And you weren't hurt in our little—" he gestured vaguely over the water, with a grimace. Then he gazed at Seth with fresh astonishment, and his composure broke altogether. He grabbed Seth by the shoulders and wheeled him around and pummeled him in disbelief. "By the name of the—" and he started laughing and punching him again.

Seth broke apart himself. "Okay, okay! Stop! I'm fine!" He caught his breath and gathered himself together with a broad grin, then he gestured to the two Nale'nid. "This is Ga'yl, and this is Al'ym. Friends."

The sea-men were alert and watchful, but they made no response. Holme gazed at the two curiously. Wonder crossed his face, then concern. He said gravely, "You know about the... *first engagement*—as Richel so quaintly called it? The report I had said only that we destroyed some sort of Nale'nid building on the seafloor. We didn't know if you were in the city or not."

"That *some sort of building* was a Nale'nid home," Seth said quietly. "Two persons died in it. I watched it happen, from another home. Where's Mondreau? What in hell was he thinking? Is he here?" His relief at seeing Holme had evaporated in urgency.

"He's on the flagship, and so is Mona Tremont." He pointed across the water, to the portside, where several harvesters and smaller ships rode the waves. The ship Holme pointed to was ARDELLO. He frowned at Seth. "Did you learn anything about Racart?"

"Racart's all right. That is, I think so. But we've got to put a stop to this madness. We don't need a war." Seth hesitated. A crowd of ship's crewmembers had gathered around, looking curiously at both him and the two Nale'nid. "Can you get me in touch with Mondreau right now?"

"Let's go." Holme led the way through the crowd, seizing someone's arm in the process and telling her to call the captain to the deck immediately. They headed forward, toward the bridge.

The captain and second officer met them halfway. The captain listened to Seth's very brief summary of the situation, then ordered the second officer to ready a launch immediately while a message was sent off to ARDELLO. Seth thanked him; but, when he watched the launch being lowered abaft of the deckhouse, his resolution foundered in a rush of queasiness. The sea was far rougher than he had thought. High-peaked waves impacted awesomely against the hull, thumping great sheets of spray up past the railing. The wind moaned in his ears, and as he swayed with the deck roll he noticed dizzily the darkening sky and the lines of white turbulence that crossed and crisscrossed the ragged sea, almost swallowing the profiles of the other ships in gray and black and white obscurity. It would be dark in the city now, he thought, picturing the seafloor with its myriad domes. The wind abruptly caught a burst of spray and swept it over the deck; Seth staggered backwards, blinded and wet, and would have tumbled if not caught by the quick arm of a crewman.

"Secure the launch!" the captain shouted. The craft was swinging perilously. "Hold the operation until this blows over," he instructed the second officer; then he herded everyone else to a place of greater shelter. Crewmen dashed to couple the launch to its railing halfway-cradle, while Seth and Holme peered out anxiously.

"This has been happening all the time," Holme cried, over the rising wind. "Gusts out of nowhere, seas rising faster than any sea I've ever seen. I doubt the message got to ARDELLO—radio has been about as bad." Seth grunted, holding tight to a stanchion. The sea and air were playing tricks, then—or were the Nale'nid?

"Andol—Captain!" he shouted close to their ears. "I'm not sure—but I think I can get to ARDELLO the same way I got here! At least I can try!" He ignored their questioning looks and turned instead to the two Nale'nid. He pointed boldly, deliberately, calling their names. Ga'yl noticed him first, and met his gaze with eyes that were lost in a *focus*. Seth pointed across the water to ARDELLO, plowing and rolling heavily in the seas. He started to speak again, then thought better of it. Instead, he moved between the two sea-men, grasped their arms, and with very great effort forced his mind into *focus*...

Richel Mondreau's expression filled his thoughts, a face hardened in its angular lines by bureaucratic fear and genuine responsibility, by experience from missions on a dozen worlds. There was understanding but little patience borne by the large, cool eyes set deep in his face, and in the forward thrust of his head no hint of irresolution. Behind him, as in a superimposed picture, ARDELLO and her captain and crew...

Mondreau gaped at Seth in astonishment, a mug of hot brew halfway to his mouth. Seth cleared his throat uncomfortably and looked around. He was standing, with the two Nale'nid, in the officer's wardroom of ARDELLO. Sergei Fenrose of ARDELLO, Kenelee Savage of Lambrose, and several junior officers were present—all staring in astonishment. "Stay right there!" Mondreau commanded sharply, the first to recover.

"What?"

"Don't disappear!" Mondreau frowned, taking stock. When Seth looked at him inquisitively, he said, "Well, Perland—we weren't expecting you."

"No, sir."

Sergei Fenrose stepped forward to greet him more warmly. "Glad to see you, Seth. You are well?" Seth nodded and smiled. "You have been a prisoner, or—?"

"I've been a guest." Seth quickly introduced Al'ym and Ga'yl as friends of his, and then quickly got down to business. He summarized the important events since his separation from the land search party, skipping lightly over his relationship with Lo'ela; he concentrated on trying to explain the Nale'nid ways of thinking and behaving, as he understood them. It was rather more difficult than he had expected. But with Al'ym and Ga'yl at his side, each lost in his own focus, he tried to describe what he meant by "perception-focus." He recounted his experiences in the Grotto, as illustration, but omitted for the moment any reference to Racart.

"That's quite interesting, no doubt," Mondreau acknowledged. "But how can we make use of the information? We have had many serious incidents with these people, and at the moment the survival of the Ernathe colony is at stake. Yes, indeed." He paused. "Can you communicate and *negotiate* with them?" He glanced

dubiously at Al'ym and Ga'yl, who ignored him in return. "Or have you forgotten why you're here?"

Seth bristled, but suppressed his anger. "I have not forgotten. Nor have I forgotten the wanton destruction of a Nale'nid home and the deaths of two Nale'nid."

"*Wanton?* That's a strong word." Mondreau eyed him. "Let me state quite clearly, for your benefit, that our relationship with the Nale'nid is at this time an adversary relationship. If they do not desist in their interference with our affairs, we will stop them by force." His face relaxed slightly, while Seth stiffened. "Now. If you have practical objections to our pursuing such a course, this is the time to state them."

"Several," Seth answered immediately, ticking his fingers while he thought rapidly. "One, the Nale'nid are the prior inhabitants of this planet, and therefore have legitimate first claim. What's more, they are probably descendants of our own people from before the entropy wars. If so, they have adapted in a remarkable way to life on this planet." Mondreau remained expressionless.

"Two, they have never understood just what it was, in *our* terms, that they were doing to us. My friend Lo'ela, the sister of Al'ym and Ga'yl here, understands. She is right now trying to communicate that understanding to the others." He crossed his fingers mentally. "The fact is that only a relatively few of them were involved—and even their intentions were never malicious. It sounds strange—but they were simply curious, they were testing us to see how we would respond. They do not, by nature, think in terms of *right* and *wrong*, or *moral* and *amoral*. Or, for that matter, *harm* and *benefit*. Lo'ela can persuade them, if anyone can, of the mutual benefit of their respecting our *focus*."

"Wishful thinking?" asked Mondreau.

"I don't believe so. Third. Racart Bonhof is alive and unharmed in their undersea city, and any further military action will endanger him." The Ernathenes responded happily to that announcement, but Mondreau maintained a stolid expression.

"Fourth—" Seth took a breath—"the Nale'nid are natural users of flux-space. You saw the way I arrived in this room. They travel that way frequently; I have done so myself, with their help." He met Mondreau's stare determinedly. "If they are willing and interested, if they come to view us as friends and fellow worthwhile creatures, I believe that they can do what the best of our pilots cannot—and without the aid, so far as I know, of *mynalar-g* or any other drug. They travel about this world without ships. Think what they might do in a rigger net.

"These people may be our new starship pilots. Let's give them the chance."

* * * * *

Mondreau reacted slowly but visibly. The lines and angles of his face moved and flexed like so many joints as he absorbed Seth's words. Savage and Fenrose were nodding almost imperceptibly.

There was a knock at the door. A junior officer went to answer it, spoke to someone for a moment, then turned and said, "Mr. Andol Holme has arrived by launch, and Mona Tremont is here with him. Shall I let them in?" Mondreau seemed not to hear the man, but Fenrose gestured affirmatively.

Mona hurried to Seth's side and gripped his arms with a huge smile. "You *are* all right! Is it true about Racart—that he's safe? Oh, Seth, I knew you both would be!" She hugged him tightly, then stood away, slightly embarrassed. She glanced wonderingly at the two Nale'nid.

"Yes, he's safe, Mona. At least for the moment. But that will depend somewhat on the decision taken here now."

Mondreau regarded him silently. Then he stood, nodded to the other officers. "If my colleagues approve," he said at last, "we will suspend further action against the Nale'nid for the time being. Presuming that *they* refrain, as well. Perland, have you proposed to the Nale'nid this scheme of yours regarding starflight?"

Seth swallowed. "Ah—no, sir."

"Why the bloody hell not?" Mondreau looked disgusted.

"Well—sir—the opportunity didn't arise."

Mondreau looked more disgusted. "Perland."

"Yes, sir."

"You will return to their city. Can you take others with you?"

"I don't think so."

"Then you will, yourself, attempt to establish negotiations between our two peoples. You will attempt to interest the Nale'nid in your idea." Another, only slightly less dubious, glance at Al'ym and Ga'yl. "And—you will—attempt to secure the safe passage of Racart Bonhof. And you will report back here at the earliest opportunity. That does not mean ten or twenty days from now. Questions?"

"No questions. I'll do everything I can." Seth did not mention his own reservations; no need to create further doubt. He nodded to his friends in the room. Then he nudged Al'ym and Ga'yl and began to bend his thoughts to the Nale'nid home.

* * * * *

Racart was awake when Seth arrived back in the dome, blinking in the dim light. But he hardly showed interest as Seth related his fortunes; rather, he sat looking darkly, broodingly into the sea. Seth could not get him to speak of himself, and so could only guess worriedly at the thoughts of his troubled friend. Finally, Racart said off-handedly, "You'll be wanting to find Lo'ela. Try the common lounge about nine domes straight across."

Seth stared. "Did you see her?" he asked cautiously. Racart shook his head, barely. "How do you know?"

Racart stared into the sea. "Auras. Interference patterns." He would say no more.

Seth sighed and followed the advice. Remembering how he and Lo'ela had parted, he was a little afraid of what her feelings would be—but when he found her in the lounge, exactly as Racart had predicted, she appeared calm and confident. She moved him off to a corner to talk, but even so many Nale'nid walked by, and—strangely—most of them nodded recognition to Seth.

"How did—?" he began, but was interrupted by a long, hard kiss from Lo'ela. He was startled for a moment, then he reciprocated. "Okay, okay," he said, laughing. Lo'ela blew on his nose, grinning, then sat back. Seth took a deep breath. "Did you get anywhere?"

Lo'ela placed a finger on his chest. *Perhaps. Many people seemed interested—in exploring what you would call "peaceful" relations with your people—and, mmm, in flying to your other stars. If you will have them. I showed some of them the stars you came from, and they saw something of my focus.* Her green eyes studied him sharply. "Did I guess you correctly that you wished that?" she asked.

Seth nodded, and chuckled helplessly. She had judged him very well, indeed, and he did not know which relieved him more—the fact that she had made more progress with the Nale'nid than he had dared hope, or the fact that she really knew him so well and still was with him. And they truly wanted to fly to the stars! *They really do want to?*

The thought-communication had come effortlessly.

Yes, indeed—they are fascinated.

And what of the... the... "What of the attack—on the dome—and the people killed?"

It stirred their curiosity about your kind. Her face clouded. *It did not disturb them as it did you. And me. Those killed knew an assault was coming—and they wanted to know how it would feel.*

"Many of your people die for curiosity, don't they?" Seth asked softly.

Yes. Sadly.

Perhaps those who would fly to the stars will not feel that so necessary.

She smiled a little. *Perhaps not.*

He held her gaze gently, squeezing her hands.

They were—curious—that a people so rigid as to require a drug to see the world-within-the-world should spring back so excitedly at a few jovial pranks. Lo'ela tilted her head. *They find you people very curious, my starman.*

* * * * *

Seth returned with Lo'ela to ARDELLO and faced a skeptical Mondreau with the story of Lo'ela's progress. His arm never left the sea-girl's waist as he stood before the officers, and he answered Mondreau's query as to the nature of their relationship with the statement, "I think the best way to put it is... that we have found a *focus* in one another."

Mondreau scowled, and pointedly ignored the mirth visible on several other faces. "Now just what the hell does that mean, Perland? Are you trying to say that you are in love with the girl?"

Seth thought it over for a moment. "I guess you could put it that way, too," he acknowledged.

"Then why didn't you just say so?" Mondreau sighed and looked around the room. "Well, maybe that's not so bad, actually."

"I don't think so, sir."

"Who asked you?" Humming raspily, he rapped his knuckles on the wardroom table. "Did you wish to make another recommendation, then?"

"Um, yes. I suggest that the ships return to Lambrose. Disarm. Give us time to find sea-people willing to learn about starflight. Let us settle the people down and help them find less disruptive ways of *focusing* on humans—that is, *our* humans." Seth met Lo'ela's glance. *Can we do it?*

You've done very well so far. If this man is anything like you.

Mondreau still looked skeptical. "That's quite a lot you're proposing. Is your friend—Lo'ela?—competent to speak for her people?"

"No one can speak for all the Nale'nid. That's part of the way they are. But I think we can influence them."

"Without a military presence?"

"Mr. Mondreau—I can't stress too highly—the military presence *intrigues* them. They think it's *curious* that we reacted violently. The worst thing we could possibly do would be to encourage them to *focus* on our violent behavior. They would only want to provoke more of it. Better that they should *focus* as Lo'ela has, or even lose interest altogether."

"Perland, can your friend Lo'ela speak our language?"

"A little. She understands me, and speaks sometimes—but mostly she communicates by telepathy. At least I think it's telepathy." *Lo'ela?*

"I am learning your language," Lo'ela said carefully.

Kenelee Savage seemed surprised and delighted. "The Nale'nid are telepathic? That could be a tremendous help."

"Well, not altogether," Seth cautioned. "I think it's mainly a matter of *focus*. I haven't communicated directly with any of the others."

"Yes," said Lo'ela.

Mondreau and Savage digested that, and spoke together in low voices. While they conferred, Lo'ela and Seth stood to the side and exchanged what thoughts they had in wordless glances.

"All right," Mondreau said, turning back to them. "We will accept and follow your suggestions for the time being. Conditional on your assurance of proper Nale'nid behavior."

Seth nodded, with mixed feelings. What if the Nale'nid did not cooperate?

"And Perland? You *will* bring Mr. Bonhof back?"

"I'll speak to him, sir." And that, he reflected, was no surer a thing than convincing the Nale'nid.

Chapter 16

Lo'ela and Seth returned to the undersea city with a busy time ahead of them. It was mostly Lo'ela's work that had to be done, but Seth accompanied her as she made rounds of many of the people she knew. Often, as he looked on while Lo'ela talked, he had the feeling that the eyes of the listening Nale'nid were, if not actually *focused* upon him, at least alight with interest. Lo'ela talked speedily, softly, in the Nale'nid tongue—first to a blonde waif of a girl living in a nearby bubble-dome; then to a man in the lower levels of the city who reminded Seth of Andol Holme, with features very dense and rugged for a sea-person; then to a woman with dark, reserved eyes, who to all outward appearances was paying not the slightest attention to either of them; then to others, and still others. Seth began to feel lost in the process; but the indications he received from Lo'ela were relaxed and hopeful. Those whom she had convinced, she said, were themselves going on to talk to others.

We are not without civilizing influences, my Seth, she said, trying to ease his concern. We do not harm one another without willing permission, and we do help each other as your people do. My problem is trying to convince my people that your people are people.

"Uh-huh," said Seth, and waved her onward.

Racart still worried him. The Ernathene remained brooding and uncommunicative, and Lo'ela could offer no insight beyond saying that he had "not yet returned." He had refused either to speak or to listen when the two had come back from ARDELLO, and Seth was beginning to wonder if the Ernathene would ever want to accompany them home to Lambrose.

Upon retiring from a day's trek about the city, they found Racart, still as though in a dark trance, staring out into the sea. Seth stood beside him. "Mona wanted me to say that she misses you," he said.

Racart did not stir. His gaze was apparently fixed, beyond the *glid* dome, on the tumbled rocky slope where the bottom fell away beneath the city. The sunlight was growing dim, and the more distant parts of the city were lost in ocean shadows. Even looking upward toward the surface, the water was a deep, darkening blue. Soon the soft glow of bioluminescence would begin to spring into visibility throughout the city.

"She's very anxious about you," Seth said.

Racart stared. His eyelids barely flickered. Presently, he turned. "Yes," he said, almost inaudibly. "You will have many people to go with you when you return to your starship."

"Perhaps. We're going to Lambrose soon. Will you come with us?" *Or are your thoughts so darkened that they will not let us—or even Mona—reach you?*

Racart's eyes refocused, and for a moment Seth thought that he had made contact. But Racart suddenly rose, and without a word or a sign walked out of the dome.

He did not return that night, nor the next day, nor at all during the days before the journey to Lambrose.

* * * * *

Seth held Lo'ela's hand and took a last gaze around her dwelling before they traveled no-distance in almost no-time to the Ernathene settlement. They arrived in Lambrose in the street alongside the wharf, and from there walked through the center of town toward the Warmstorm Mission Headquarters. The one Ernathene who recognized Seth on the street greeted him rather solemnly and a bit suspiciously, with a cautiously neutral, sidelong look at Lo'ela. But in fact few people were wandering about, as all major production activities had been resumed, and most able workers were at their jobs. It was a breezy and, for Ernathe, sunny day, and Seth enjoyed the walk and the fresh look at the city he had left a good many days before (he never had gotten around to asking just how many days before). The street seemed brighter, clearer, and the small shops and homes and the large processing buildings particularly hard-edged; three dimensional. Colors leapt to Seth's eye—the reds and yellows on buildings, in peoples' clothes, and the blazing gold of Lambrose—colors practically absent on the seafloor.

They turned off the main street and proceeded along a side avenue to Mission Headquarters. Sea-people were now arriving on either side of their path, and when Seth glanced behind he saw a number following, as well. The air was beginning to fill with glinting sea-mist, making numbers difficult to judge; but he estimated that roughly forty to fifty Nale'nid actually entered Headquarters behind him and Lo'ela.

One of the last to enter was Racart. He walked directly into the midst of the waiting Nale'nid, remaining conspicuously out of reach of the many people who recognized and hailed him. Seth was surprised—and happy—to see him; but he failed in an attempt to catch his eye, and he feared that Racart was no readier than before to join the company of his own people. Aside from his presence in Lambrose, he seemed little changed from the last time Seth had seen him.

Richel Mondreau stepped out onto center stage, but he had to call at once to Seth and Lo'ela for help in asking the milling Nale'nid to settle in the empty seats. Racart remained where he was, in the middle of the group, making everyone on stage nervous with his unseeing stare. Mondreau began speaking as soon as the room was quiet. The communication was at best awkward—Mondreau to Seth to Lo'ela to the other Nale'nid; but Mondreau nevertheless spoke with solemn concentration, as if addressing his own crew. Seth visualized, for Lo'ela to relay, Mondreau's surprisingly concise description of flux-travel as it was to the starmen, what they hoped to accomplish, and where they had failed. He called upon Seth for elaboration, and even upon WARMSTORM's, master, Captain Gorges, who spoke with a jovial smile from the rear of the stage. Mondreau stressed the need of his people for *mynalar* (*mynalar-e* for medical purposes, *mynalar-g* for starflight); he stressed the need for Nale'nid cooperation on Ernathe, as well as (possibly) in space.

The Nale'nid gazed lightly at Lo'ela and chatted quietly among themselves as the speech proceeded. Seth had the impression he was watching two superimposed, but entirely separate meetings. It was an unsettling feeling; he wondered if the Nale'nid were listening. Glancing at Racart, he saw that the Ernathene's expression was indistinguishable from the Nale'nids.

It goes well, Lo'ela told him.

Mondreau went on: "There are two other races. One called the Lacenthi, one called the Querlin. Neither is human, neither is friendly, and both are growing and expanding in the Cluster. They will try, if they can, to overwhelm us. To smother us. To crowd us out of existence. With our present techniques we cannot hope to counter them, or to develop the vitality among all the human worlds to stand strong before them..."

Seth was beginning to have trouble keeping the words centered in his thoughts for Lo'ela to absorb. (He suspected that she was able to translate most of it without assistance, anyway.) He was surprised when Lo'ela advised him: *He is losing their attention, too.* Seth gazed into the faces of the Nale'nid and gained an immediate sense of *disinterest*. He nodded to himself, realizing that he should have anticipated it and warned Mondreau. What interest would the Nale'nid have in stories of hostile races—except perhaps as a matter of mischief and curiosity?

When Mondreau came to a pause, Seth leaned close and murmured, "I think you had better stick with the starship-rigging aspect. They don't seem overly impressed about the Querlin and Lacenthi."

Mondreau glanced at him and cleared his throat.

Before he could resume, however, a Nale'nid man spoke up. His softly musical voice rode clearly over the background of mumblings. "We har entrested, uh-yes, hin your flying of ships hin the stars. That we have never done, and we find hit a fine good *focus*." He smiled broadly, and settled back in his chair.

Seth and Mondreau stared for a moment, then as one turned to Lo'ela. "Do they all feel this way?" asked Seth.

Lo'ela's eyes darkened with concentration. She spoke a few words in her own tongue, and listened to some quiet mutterings. Her eyes turned bright. Yes, it seems so. *Je'le is the only one who focused on your language well enough to speak. But many will go.*

"Can you repeat that aloud?" Seth asked, with a glance at Mondreau and back at Gorges.

Lo'ela did so, clearly.

She had barely stopped speaking, when loud rumblings outside shuddered through the building. The sounds of a sudden-breaking storm. The walls trembled in gusting winds, and from outdoors came the sounds of shouts and of banging doors. A moan resonated from the roof and chorused through the room. "Those sound like gale-force winds," Kenelee Savage said worriedly from a side window. The building tremored again—with rain pelting thunderously down on the roof and battering on the north and west walls.

Seth looked darkly at Lo'ela. *Is this something your people are doing?*

Mondreau saw his glance and tensely asked the same question.

Lo'ela flinched, and Seth caught no words but only a whirl of confused, conflicting thoughts. He looked at Mondreau anxiously.

"Well?" Mondreau roared.

Seth shrugged, helplessly. The tumult continued for a minute, then tapered—and as suddenly as it had struck, the storm ended. Rainwater could be heard running down gutters along the roof. A phone shrilled.

Lo'ela gathered her nerve and said loudly, in a strained voice, "Some of the people have sent their greetings!" She gazed at Seth nervously and avoided Mondreau's stare altogether. "They say they no longer will interfere."

Savage raised his voice: "Nale'nid have been reported all over town, in and out of the plant, and running in the rain." He looked outside, saw that there was no more rain. He listened on the phone for another moment. "No reports of actual trouble, though."

Grumblings from about the stage indicated that a number of people were having second thoughts. "It strikes me," called Londel, First Officer of WARMSTORM, "that the people we are trying to recruit as starship pilots—note that—*starship pilots*—seem to possess something less than the requisite emotional stability. Are they children? What have they been doing? What have they done to that gentleman, Racart Bonhof? What has that man been through, that he sits there not speaking?"

Seth rose to answer the challenge, but he was forestalled by another interruption. Mona Tremont burst into the room, followed closely by Andol Holme. She spotted Racart in the group, but paused to address the stage. "You might have told me he was here!" she yelled coldly. "If Andol hadn't come and gotten me, I'd be boarding a ship right now." She scowled at Mondreau, then pushed through the crowd of Nale'nid to Racart and almost knocked him from his seat with her embrace. Andol caught Seth's eye and winked. Seth grinned, despite the angry officer beside him, and nodded approvingly.

Mondreau fumed and shouted for order. He was almost ignored, at first, but eventually he got everyone's attention except, perhaps, Racart's and Mona's. "Now then," he bellowed. "We have a question on the floor regarding the Nale'nid, and whether or not they are taking our offer seriously." The Nale'nid watched him placidly. He scowled. "I, for one, have my doubts. Comments?"

Again, Seth took a breath to answer—just how, he wasn't sure—and again he had no chance. Racart broke the silence, astonishing everyone, including Seth. "Comment," he growled. He stood, gently disengaged himself from Mona so that he could face the stage, and took her hand as she stood beside him, glaring darkly herself at Mondreau. "All right. I've been listening to talk about the Nale'nid. About the way they've treated you, the way they've treated me." He glanced quickly at Seth, then turned his scowl upon First Officer Londel. "Yes. I've been through something the rest of you can only guess at—Seth could guess better than anyone else, I imagine—and someday maybe I'll tell you about it. Let's talk about these people, some of the things Seth has been trying to tell you but you won't listen.

"Well, they're different. They're Nale'nid. Different ways, different values—*no* values, some of you would say. Different abilities. Yes, they can fly your starships. Yes, they can build underwater cities. Yes, they can explore worlds *you* didn't even know *existed*." He paused, breathing with difficulty. "Forgive me—this *focus* is not an easy one to hold."

Seth waited. Racart said, "I have returned here to speak with you. I shall soon go back to the Nale'nid city, Pal'onar, to live. With Mona, if she also would like to learn of the Nale'nid." He turned to Mona; she squeezed his hand visibly for all to see, and displayed no obvious concern about the suddenness of the decision.

"Do you wish to be a cultural ambassador to the Nale'nid?" Kenelee Savage queried.

"If you must phrase it that way," Racart said easily. "But, for the sake of my friend Seth, and his and Mona's friend, Andol Holme, I wish first that I could find a convincing expression to ease your fears about your new future starpilots." He fell silent, though, apparently searching for the words.

Seth stood with enormous and grateful relief. Racart was a changed man, no question; but he had reaffirmed a friendship, and that was all he needed to say. "I ought to point out," Seth said, "that I am risking my own position, since these people may well make me useless, along with all my fellow pilots. I wouldn't do that for a bad risk.

"You're concerned about not understanding *their* ways, and their not understanding *ours*. But you've overlooked something." He looked at Lo'ela. Yes?

Yes. She blinked, touched his arm.

"Lo'ela and I have already managed it. We've met somewhere in the middle, we've crossed that barrier on both sides—we've shown that a starman and a Nale'nid can not only understand one another, they can love one another. *Focus*, Mr. Mondreau, Mr. Savage. *Focus*, Captain Gorges, Mr. Londel."

He eyed Lo'ela. "*Focus*."

There was a long silence—and at the end of it even Richel Mondreau's perpetual scowl was beginning to fade.

Chapter 17

"Mondreau admitted that for a starpilot I wasn't really all that bad a planetary mission officer," Seth said wryly. "That's something, I guess. Maybe he's actually convinced."

"Wouldn't be taking the people on if he weren't," Racart said, squinting across the water to the far land segments.

"It would have been difficult to oppose, once Captain Gorges came out squarely in favor of it." Seth shifted on the rocks, repositioned his shoulder under Lo'ela's resting head, and ran his fingers through her golden-brown hair. "Think you'll like traveling to Rethmere, Lo'ela?"

She looked up mischievously. "No!" she said. She was still for a moment before laughing. *I am still focused on you, starman. And I want to see your worlds.*

And fly a starship?

Perhaps. If we can be a team. Perhaps I will leave that to my other people. She looked down into the water. She seemed to be expecting something.

Two pairs of skrells screeched raucously overhead. It was a fine, almost clear day outside Lambrose—the sea green and translucent and flashing, the sky steel blue with bits and pieces of high-level cloud and Lamborn burning golden and bright. Shielding his eyes from the sun, Seth wondered how it must have looked when it last flared with deadly, radiation, and he marveled that a people—of whatever race—could have escaped and adapted as had the Nale'nid. Lo'ela caught his thought and touched him with her mind, caressing gently, saying nothing.

Mona stirred, near Racart, and looked northward over the water. The others followed her stare. There was a wave of sea-mist advancing slowly over the water, along the shore. The front of mist looked no different from any other, but something told Seth that it *was* different, that it was like a mist front he had seen earlier.

Something more than mist.

They watched in silence as it advanced, first to encircle and then to enshroud them. Lo'ela and Racart seemed utterly relaxed, while Mona and Seth regarded the mist with uncertainty. The air about them turned slowly silver and white and glittery, as if filled with pinpoints of light from stars not in the sky overhead but in, or through, the world within the world. Images of flux-space filled Seth's mind: turbulent currents of color and light, and flickering landscapes of the darting, fearful, joyous inner mind; the tides flowing beneath the world and between the worlds, between all worlds of all suns—interstellar space a convective ocean of

movement, of free flowing tappable energy. A world he had glimpsed only in his dreams and in his travels with the Nale'nid. Would he see it from the control pit... no, from the rigger-net of a speeding starship? With *mynalar-g*, or without the drug but with *focusing* Nale'nid at his sides, in his thoughts?

We will try, my starman, we will try. Lo'ela nudged him.

When the mists parted, Lo'ela was already rising to greet Al'ym and Ga'yl, come to make their farewell. And Racart, too, was rising to greet the two Nale'nid of whom he had once been a captive. Seth nodded unsurely to all four of the new arrivals; he had never learned the names of Racart's friends, and perhaps now he never would. Lo'ela spoke quickly with her brothers for a few minutes; then she spoke with Seth. *We have made our farewells.* Sadness traced her mind-voice. She said aloud, to all, "They have said, 'We welcome Mona and Racart to our city. We wish Seth success and happiness in his journey among the stars with our sister. We hope we have properly conceived of ourselves in your human terms.'" She smiled and turned again to her brothers.

To Seth, Al'ym and Ga'yl appeared to recede as in a dream; they danced and skated backwards on the water, gleaming beneath their feet like ice, and in a moment fresh mist wrapped itself about them, and they were gone.

Seth faced Racart, sadness welling abruptly, forcibly in his throat. He found it quite impossible to speak for a period of many heartbeats. How long had he actually known Racart?—and yet it seemed so very much longer. It seemed fitting that, as he himself departed with a Nale'nid woman, Racart should be departing, in his own fashion, for a whole Nale'nid people.

"You will be back," Racart predicted, emotion tingeing his voice only slightly. "You will return to persuade more of these people to join you—and who knows?—I might be ready to join you myself."

Seth nodded. It was unlikely—but as Racart had said, who could know? "Don't forget your own people, now. And—" He broke off and shook Racart's hand firmly, for a long second; then he turned and gave Mona a close hug and kiss. Before he could think of anything more to say, his Ernathene friends had linked arms with the two Nale'nid men, and vanished as quickly—more quickly—than Al'ym and Ga'yl. He looked after them, over the sea, and wished that he could have said a better farewell.

Come, starman. Lo'ela drew him to her side, and turned with him to walk back to Lambrose, to the waiting WARMSTORM.

