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**WAS SHE WOMAN — OR SPACE MONSTER?**

**D-453**

# **THE GAMES OF NEITH**

**MARGARET ST. CLAIR**



**First Book  
Publication**



## DID SHE HOLD THE KEY TO ECSTASY—OR TO HORROR?

The people of Gwethym were highly intelligent, rational beings. They worshipped the goddess Neith, not because they believed in such a golden-haired being, but because they recognized the need for religion as a counterbalance to human passions.

So when trouble struck their planet, when they discovered an energy leak which was slowly destroying their world, the Gwethymians turned to science for their answer. If their world was to be saved, the solution must come from the logicians.

Or so they thought, until one day a woman, the image of their goddess Neith, *walked across the waters of the harbor and into their city!* Then their trouble was two-fold. Would there be anything left to save of their world if they waited for the scientists? And if they didn't, if they put their trust in this goddess whom logic told them could not even exist, would they just be sealing their doom that much quicker?

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Margaret St. Clair has had close to a hundred of her short stories published in such leading magazines as *Galaxy*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Esquire*, etc., and a good many of them have found their way into anthologies here and abroad. As often as not, she is likely to be using the pseudonym of Idris Seabright for these tales.

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Previous novels of hers in Ace Books have included **AGENT OF THE UNKNOWN (D-150)** and **THE GREEN QUEEN (D-176)**.

# THE GAMES OF NEITH

by

MARGARET ST. CLAIR

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For Eric

*Militiae species amor est*

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THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

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THROUGH the long range windows, facing to the south, the summer air of Gwethym, bland and fresh, came nimbly in. Anassa had been standing looking out over the harbor, feeling the wind's exquisite touch along her body, while she talked to Wan. Now, as she turned to face the room again, strands of her long hair blew out behind her in the salt-sweet air.

She picked up her narrow tunic from a chair and let it slip over her head. Indistinctly, through the folds of her yellow silk, she said, "The committee rejected it because they thought it was too farfetched."

Wan was lying on the *k'ang* smoking a tiny pipe. "It's not farfetched, actually," he answered. "Few things are more certain than that the universe will eventually reach a dead level of energy. When that time comes, no action at all will be possible because every particle in the universe will have exactly as much energy as every other particle. It's called the heat death."

Anassa fastened the tunic on the side. "I thought that Hoyle—"

Wan shook his head. He was a stocky, broad-shouldered young man, sinewy and compact, wholly Chinese in appearance except for the startlingly blue eyes a Norwegian grandmother had given him. "The steady-state universe is a fairy tale," he said. "No competent astrophysicist believes in Hoyle's theories any more."

"Oh." The girl sat down at her dressing table and began combing her heavy amber-colored hair. "Even so," she said, "the ritual you wrote for us is wildly unsuitable. Don't you remember what the temple's charter says about the purpose

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of the Games? They are to 'uplift the spirit, refresh the mind, open the heart.' How could four hours of poetry—it's splendid poetry, Wan, I don't deny that—but how could four hours of poetry about the heat death of the universe uplift anybody's spirit? And what has this heat death to do with us on Gwethym? It won't happen for billions upon billions of years."

"Um." Wan answered. He knocked out his pipe and filled it again.

"Don't you really see it, Wan?" the priestess asked a little plaintively. "We couldn't possibly have produced your ritual for this years' Games. It's not only farfetched, and depressing, but you didn't give the dancers anything at all to do. They'd have had to spin around like tops for the first half-hour or so, and then gradually stop moving. During the whole last half, they'd just stand motionless. What kind of a ritual would that have been? How could we have produced it?"

"Um," Wan said once more. He reached over the edge of the *k'ang* and patted Baldur on the head.

"On top of that," she continued, "it's particularly important that the Games be celebrated splendidly this year. There are plenty of adherents of the old persuasion around, and they're gaining influence. The worship of Neith is supposed to act as a counterweight to the old Jovis worship—to keep the excesses of the Jovis migration from repeating themselves."

"Nobody really believes in Neith, though," Wan said. He yawned and stretched.

"No, of course they don't," the girl answered. "We don't really want them to. If they did, the same thing might happen with Neith that happened with Jovis. It doesn't make much difference, ethically speaking, what the name of the god is to whom one offers human sacrifice."



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"How odd, really, that the blending of three ethnic stocks, two of which are famed for phlegm—Norwegian and Chinese—and only one of which, the French, is moderately excitable, should have produced, on Gwethym, a population that is addicted to religious passion and excess! On Terra, the Chinese were never actually religious at all."

"Phlegm is where you find it," Wan answered. "I remember my great-grandfather telling me, when I was a boy, about how he'd been involved in the Oslo riots. During the fighting somebody threw a grenade at him, and he just managed to chuck it out of the way in time. He was so overcome he had to stagger off to the side and vomit."

"A good samaritan, who'd been looking on at the riot interestedly, offered him a drink of aquavit. Great-grandad accepted with gratitude. After he'd drunk, the Norwegian said, 'I didn't know a Chinese would be so bothered by a close escape. I've always heard that life was cheap in the Orient.'"

"Grandad knew enough of the lingo to be able to answer him. He said, 'Not when it's *my* life.'"

Anassa gave a rueful chuckle. "Speaking of life, did I tell you somebody tried to poison me again?"

Wan sat up abruptly. "Again?" he said. "That's the second time in six months. I don't like this, Anassa. I don't like this at all. You must be careful."

"Oh, I am. There's not much danger, actually, as long as Baldur is with me."

"I hope so. What happened this time?"

"It was at the evening meal in the courtyard with the temple attendants. I'd just picked up my rice bowl and was poking around in it with my chopsticks when Baldur jumped up and knocked the bowl out of my hands. It fell on the tiles and broke. I was just about to scold him when I noticed that the temple doves, who'd flown down to pick up

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the rice, were fluttering wildly. In no time at all three of the doves were dead."

Wan gave a deep sigh. "I wonder how he knows?" he said. "That's the second time he's saved you."

"He must smell the poison. Of course I reported it to the *sureté*, but I don't suppose they'll find who did it. They didn't the other time."

"You think it was one of the Jovis people?"

"Who else could it be? If they're really serious about killing me, though, I don't see why they don't just stick a knife in my ribs. Baldur couldn't smell *that*."

Wan shivered. "Priestess of Neith sounds like such a cushy job," he observed. "Who'd ever think that being priestess of a synthetic goddess, rationalized and secular, would be so dangerous?"

"It wouldn't be, except on Gwethym. But now you see one of the reasons why I want a good ritual for this year's Games."

"Yes." Baldur had put his head against Wan's knee and was looking up at him with dark, intelligent eyes. "Good boy," said Wan, pulling the animal's ears. "Take good care of her, old fellow. She belongs to us."

Baldur wagged his tail.

"He will," Anassa said confidently. "The ritual we finally selected, Wan, isn't half so good from a literary standpoint as yours, but it's more appropriate. It's about the Oslo dock-side riots during the migration, the fighting your grandfather was in, and how Brun appears and calms everybody down by getting them to shouting, 'Jovis is a first class god!'"

"Hm. I shouldn't think this would exactly soothe the feelings of any members of the old persuasion who are still with us."

"Not in itself. But of course we're supposed to choose an incident from folk history, and this one was relatively harm-

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less. And the theme of the thing is reconciliation, the laying aside of old hatreds. It might help."

She had finished dressing her hair. She went over to the rack on the wall, her tawny thighs flashing out through the deep slits in the sides of her tunic, and took down a *kin*.

"Good," said Wan. "You're going to play."

Anassa nodded. She tuned the *kin* in orthodox Chinese fashion, testing the strings against each other. But what she played on it was not the classical Chinese theme one might have expected, but an old French marching song, clearly recognizable through the sliding, liquid Eastern harmonies with which she embellished it.

Anassa sang, "*Que donneriez-vous, ma belle, pour voir votre mari?*" and she answered herself, in the next verse, with, "*Je donnerais Versailles, Paris, et St. Denis . . .*"

Wan laughed. When she had finished singing, he said, "At the present moment I have little use even for the most beautiful woman in the world. Nevertheless, for you, 'Na, I would give not merely Paris, St. Denis, and the kingdom of my royal father and mother, but Gwethym, Terra, and every planet in the galaxy. Heat death or no heat death!"

"What a pretty speech!" She laid the *kin* aside and kissed him on the mouth. "I meant to ask you, though. What gave you the idea for your ritual in the first place, Wan? It's certainly not an obvious theme. I'd never have expected the physicist-in-residence at Sun Yat-sen University to come up with it."

Wan considered, rubbing his nose. "I think the basic idea came from a conversation I had with a sailor in a bar, two or three years ago. He'd been on a voyage to the Polar Islands and had had to spend several months there all alone.

"He said that the sun—in those latitudes, you know, the sun neither rises nor sets; it moves in a circle around the horizon, and it's always twilight—he said that the sun

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seemed to take weeks to make its course around the sky. He felt that all his bodily processes had slowed down. He said that it seemed to take him hours to walk from one side of his cabin to the other, and that minutes elapsed between successive beats of his heart."

"Was he frightened?" the priestess asked curiously.

"No, I don't think so. He was too numb, too remote for emotion. He was too slowed down to care.

"I think that's where the basic idea of my ritual came from—the idea of a world where everything is running down. But I really didn't write it. It wrote itself. I got the whole thing done in a couple of evenings. It came up from the depths."

She nodded. "I knew a woman who had an experience like that of your sailor. She and her husband had gone in a sloop to the Li Tai Po Archipelago to do some archaeological work. They found more of interest there than they had expected, and by the time they were ready to leave the hurricane season had begun.

"They decided they'd better stay where they were until a better season of the year for sailing. In the meantime, she'd become pregnant, and she had her baby on one of the bigger islands.

"She said it seemed that she was pregnant for two or three years, and that her labor lasted for a week. Hours seemed to pass between each separate contraction of her uterus.

"I asked her whether she'd been frightened, and she said no, she was too far away to have any emotion. But she said, 'Even now that I'm back in New Christiana, things still feel far away. I'm a sort of ghost.'"

Wan's face wore an intent frown. "And where did you say this happened?"

"In the Li Tai Po Archipelago. Why? I shouldn't think the

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location would make any difference. It was the isolation and the fact of her pregnancy that made her have an experience like your sailor's."

Wan did not answer. Anassa was still looking at him, puzzled, when the note of a gong, deep and tremulous, filled the room with a silvery vibration of sound.

The girl sprang to her feet. "The evening service for Neith," she said. "I didn't know it was so late. I must go."

From her dressing table she took a slender golden chain with a huge amethyst pendant carved in the form of a bee—the badge of her office—and clasped it around her neck. She touched her throat with perfume, thrust her feet into slippers, and put a cloak of heavy gold brocade around her throat.

From the door she said, "Good-by, Wan. I shan't be long. Are you all right? Why don't you say good-by?"

Wan turned on her the look of a man struggling upward from the depths of a heavy sleep. "Yes, I'm all right. It's only—"

"Only what?" the girl cried. "I've got to go!"

"Only that I'm wondering whether my ritual was so far-fetched after all."

## 2

AS ALWAYS when she passed from the dim corridor to the flickering lights of Neith's temple, Anassa had a moment of dazzlement. She stood on the threshold, letting her eyes adjust themselves. Then she tossed her gold cloak to an attendant and moved forward with her taut, precise dancer's step through the priestess' door.

Her entrance was the signal for the choir to begin. A fourth of the original colonists of Gwethym had been Nor-

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wegians who, before they had been converted to belief in Jovis, had been Lutherans; what the choir sang, though accompanied by a Chinese orchestra, was not too remote from Bach's *Durch viele Trubsal*.

Anassa waited until the point in the music was reached when it was proper for her to step forward to the altar and salute the statue of Neith. When the worship of Neith had been instituted, fifty or sixty years ago, a plebiscite had been held to determine what the attributes, the appearance, and even the name of the synthetic divinity should be.

The results of the voting had indicated that the new deity should be primarily a sea goddess, but one who also patronized farming and sericulture. She should be the patroness of love, both sacred and profane, and at the same time a strong defender of the state against its enemies, internal and external alike. She should be represented naked, for the sake of her beauty, and clothed, for the sake of modesty. And her name should be Neith.

Faced with these difficult and somewhat contradictory requirements, Siegfried Moy, the sculptor who had been commissioned to make Neith's statue, had thought for a long time. Then, since he was a man of talent and originality, he had come up with a conception of the divine personality that was an oddly convincing one.

He had modeled Neith naked and beautiful, nearly eight feet tall, and had cast his statue from an alloy of copper and titanium whose soft luster and pale-gold color pleased him.

He had taken care of the requirement of modesty by projecting a wavering zone of milky, blue-green light around the lower part of the statue; Neith seemed to be standing naked in cloudy, sparkle-shot sea water, whose level might rise nearly to her breasts or sink below her knees, but which never quite retreated from her.

In her left hand she held the distaff and spindle of the

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Gwethymian silk industry (it specialized in hand-produced luxury fabrics for the Earth trade). In her right, Moy had set the handled cross of the little paralyzer gun that the Gwethymians, then a persecuted religious minority on Terra, had developed in self-defense.

And about his lady's head, seemingly hovering in free flight, Moy had put a double circlet of tiny golden bees, like a halo. He knew that no Gwethymian could see the statue without thinking of Anton Chou's famous poem whose first lines, in rough translation, run, "My honey-girl, my bee, don't sting! Be sweet! / There's nothing in a hive so sweet as you, / So sweet as love . . ." From the bees' metal wings the temple lights were reflected in a thousand tiny glints.

Anassa raised her hand in grave salute to the image. Two of the temple dancers came forward, one from either side, and the three girls began an intricate choreographic pattern before the statue. Then they broke apart, the dancers whirling off to either side. Anassa said, "Lady Neith, be pleased to accept our sacrifice."

The dancers had come back, one with a bowl of rice, one with a flask of oil. Anassa scooped rice from the bowl out onto the flat surface of the altar. She poured oil over it. She picked up a smoldering stick of incense and blew on it until the resins in it began to smoke and flare. With the dripping flame she set fire to the oil on the rice. The smoke of bloodless sacrifice rolled toward the roof.

Anassa said, "The sacrifice is made, La—"

She must have heard the whir of the missile in the air. She winced aside, and the dart went past, but not harmlessly. It left a long gash on her temple. Had she not moved, it would have gone straight into her eye.

Anassa thought she heard somebody shouting. The words were without meaning to her, though she was to remember them later. She raised one hand to her face, and saw the

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fingers wet with blood. She felt blood running along her cheek and dripping down on her neck. She struggled to remember what the next words were that she should speak, what her next movement in the ritual of sacrifice should be, but the temple lights were growing dim. She could no longer see Neith's image. Her knees bent under her, and she fell at the altar's foot.

The dart that had struck her was still quivering in the rear wall of the temple, where it had thudded home.

Wan had been sitting on the edge of the *k'ang*, his head in his hands, scarcely breathing in the intensity of his concentrated thought. He had not noticed Baldur's restless padding about the room at all. Now, when the door of the apartment was thrown open and Anassa was carried in, pale and motionless in the arms of two of the temple guards, he started up with an astonished cry.

"Anassa! What is it? Are you all right?"

"A criminal struck at the lady," the captain of the guards told him grimly. "He struck at her with a woman's spindle, when she was standing before Neith's altar. If the Lady Anassa had not moved, he would have killed her. We caught him, though. He'll pay for what he did."

The temple surgeon had followed the guards in. He called for water, washed the blood from the wound, and sterilized it. Then, taking advantage of the girl's unconsciousness, he took three stitches in the gash.

"She'll be all right," he told Wan as he was putting the bandage in place. "She's had a shock, she's lost some blood. She must be quiet for the next few days. But she'll be all right." He held an aromatic stimulant to Anassa's nose.

The girl coughed and stirred. "Where am I?" she asked. "What happened? I—"

"You're in your own apartments," the doctor told her. "A



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man tried to kill you while you were at the altar. But you're safe now."

The girl put her hand to her head and frowned. "He said something," she murmured plaintively. "I heard him say something, just as the dart went by."

"Don't try to remember, Lady Anassa," the doctor said. "You must rest." He gave a few simple instructions to Wan, and went out.

"I wish I could remember what he shouted," the girl said when the surgeon and the guards had gone. "It might be important."

"You've got to rest," Wan told her. He pressed her hand.

There was a silence. Then Anassa said, "Now I remember. What he said was, 'Things are running down!'"

"The assassin?" Wan asked keenly.

"Yes." She stirred restlessly on the couch. "I wonder why he said that."

"Do you feel well enough to talk?" Wan asked her.

"I think so." Color was coming back to her cheeks. "I wonder if things really *are* running down."

"I hope you're well enough for this," Wan said anxiously. "The doctor said you musn't be excited. But I think you're right. On Gwethym—*from* Gwethym—there's an energy leak. That's how I happened to write my ritual, and wrote it so easily. Unconsciously I realized what was happening, and presented it as poetry."

"An energy leak?" Anassa said questioningly. "I'm not even sure I know what the words would mean. But what makes you think this, Wan? What the sailor in the bar told you? That wouldn't mean much. He could just have been a little out of his head with isolation and loneliness."

"Yes, of course, 'Na. But you see, there've been similar reports from, oh, at least a dozen sources. For instance, there have been a whole bunch of papers lately by Gwethymian

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biologists about the oddly high incidence of juvenile forms of insects on some of the islands. There are islands where a mature moth is a rarity. Medical reports on human beings, too. It's only that until now nobody has happened to add up the various things."

"But an energy leak to where? If energy is leaking out, it must be going somewhere."

"Um. Speculative physicists have sometimes wondered whether there isn't, parallel to this vast universe of ours, with its planets, its suns, and its billions of galaxies—whether there isn't, parallel to it but, so to speak, vertically arranged, a whole series of other universes, some on a higher energy level, some on a lower one. If energy is leaking from our universe, it is leaking into one of a lower energy level. Energy can only flow one way."

Anassa sighed. "This reminds me, somehow, of a statement in a textbook we had in school. It was by an old writer, a man named Gamow, and it was to the effect that ordinary matter, the kind we are familiar with, is underlaid everywhere by *extraordinary* matter. He said that a complete vacuum is full of the extraordinary sort of matter. But I must say, Wan, that I never understood this very well."

Wan laughed.

"But even if it's so, what could be causing it? People have lived on Terra for hundreds of thousands of years, to mention only the history of our own species. Nobody ever heard of a leak of energy from one universe into another, even assuming that there are other universes than ours. What would the cause of a leak like that be?"

There was a silence. Wan's face wore an indrawn look. Then he said, "It is because of the use of the space warp."

"What?"

"Yes. I realized it when you asked me that perfectly reasonable question." He began to walk up and down the room,

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his hands clasped behind his back. A light breeze came through the windows and ruffled his hair. "The equations," he said. "Yes, it works."

"You'd better explain," Anassa said, laughing. "I've heard our galactic commerce blamed for all sorts of things, including the moral degradation of the native inhabitants of this or that planet. But I never heard the space warp blamed for anything before." She made a little face. "When I laugh," she complained, "it hurts my head."

"Don't laugh, darling," Wan said absently. "About the space warp—you know, 'Na, that it is usually explained by the analogy of a piece of paper. Two points on the paper might be ten inches apart. But the paper can be bent so that the two points are only a sixteenth of an inch distant from each other."

"Yes, they taught us that in school."

"Well, the analogy is only an analogy. But there is no doubt that the space warp actually warps—bends—space. Now, to use another analogy, if you keep bending a piece of thin metal in the same place, over and over again, it will eventually break. There will be a crack in the metal. And I think this is what has happened here. The galactic commerce makes use of the space warp constantly. I don't know how many ships apply it in the course of a day. But a crack has occurred. It has occurred on Gwethym. Through the crack, energy is leaking into the universe next below us in the vertical series. At present it is only leaking out. Eventually it will pour."

Anassa said, "If this is really true, Wan, then our representatives in the Gal-par must report it to the Boulé immediately."

Wan said, "I sincerely believe that it is true. But what chance would our two representatives in the Gal-par have? There are less than twelve million people on Gwethym, and

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our planet has no rich endowment of nuclear or even fossil fuels to help its voice be heard.

"The shipping interest are extremely powerful. Even if we could prove that Gwethym is suffering, our complaint would be quietly burked. The representatives of planets with billions of inhabitants, rich in power resources, would consider Gwethym quite expendable."

"But wouldn't this affect everyone eventually? Surely an energy leak from one universe into another would not remain confined to just one planet."

Wan was pinching his lower lip. "You're quite right, 'Na. Eventually, everything will flatten out, with the energy level in our universe and in that below us identical. Life in our universe would become extinct, and probably the energy leak would be fatal to life in the lower energy-universe too.

"But do you think the Gal-par would act on this probability now? The danger to the more populous worlds would not become acute for several hundred years. You've studied history, Anassa. You know that on Terra nobody ever took a danger seriously until it was at their very throats. The population crises of the twenty-first century are an example. People knew about the danger for at least a hundred years before it became acute. But nobody did anything. This seems to be the way the minds of human beings work."

"But surely something can be done!" Anassa cried. She stirred on the couch. "If the galactic parliament won't help, we can help ourselves. You're a physicist. Wan. Couldn't you get a commission of scientific people together to study the danger and decide what should be done?"

"Yes," Wan answered. His tone was dissatisfied. "I'll present a paper on this at the next GAAS convention. That's three months from now. If I convince them, and I do a good deal of lobbying, I may be able to get the GAAS board of governors to set up a commission to study the possibility of

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an energy leak. That would take about six months. Then the commission would spend six months more in investigation.

"By the time it got its recommendations ready to present to our Gwethymian Storting, at least a year and a half would have passed. I don't like it. Too much could happen between then and now."

There was a knock at the door. "Come in," Anassa called.

The captain of the temple guards entered. "Lady Anassa," he said formally, "the criminal who tried to kill you insists that he wants to speak to you before we take him before the magistrate."

Anassa glanced at Wan. He nodded. "He might have something to tell us."

"Bring the man in," the girl told the captain of the guards.

Anassa's would-be assassin was handcuffed between two brawny temple guards. His handcuffs did not seem to be bothering him, but he looked small and helpless between the two broadshouldered men. He was a middle-aged man, dark-skinned, below ordinary height, who looked of un-mixed Chinese descent. His small face seemed to have grown wizened, like an apple, and hard, like a nut. He wore the customary working clothes of jacket and baggy trousers of blue cloth.

The guards stopped with him directly in front of Anassa. "Go on, speak to the lady," the guard on the left said. "You made enough of a row about it." He gave his prisoner's handcuff a rough jerk.

The man's dark face worked, but he did not speak. Then his mouth puckered up, his lips moved, and he spat straight at Anassa's face.

The blob of saliva fell short and landed on the floor.

Anassa was more surprised than outraged, but the guards did not take it so calmly. One of them gave the prisoner a blow in the face that would have sent him sprawling if he

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hadn't been held up by the handcuffs, and the other burst into a stream of profanity.

"Your pardon, Lady Anassa," the captain said. "We did not know what was in the mind of this filth. We'll take him away."

"No, wait," the priestess answered, putting out a restraining hand. "Now that he's here, I should like to speak to him."

"Very well, Lady Anassa. But he does not deserve that Neith's priestess should speak to him."

Anassa said, "Why did you spit at me? Why did you try to kill me in the temple? Why do you hate me so much?"

The man said, in a flat echoing voice, "It is the fault of you gold ones."

"What do you mean, we gold ones? Who are we? And what is our fault?"

He looked at her with his flat dark eyes. "My wife died," he answered. "It was her spindle that I threw at you." He seemed to think this was a complete explanation, for he cast down his eyes and was silent.

The guard gave him an impatient jerk. "Speak up," he said. "The lady asked you a question."

"It was her spindle," the prisoner repeated. His talking was like an ill-made mechanism that goes in fits and jerks. "After she died, I sharpened the point. And I practiced for hours, throwing it. I practiced for hours, day after day."

"Why did you try to kill me?" Anassa asked again.

"It was your fault that she died."

"My fault? How did she die?"

"She said life was leaving her," the man answered. "She said she felt like a ghost. I used to watch her—it took her minutes to put out her hand to a pot or a dish. She said she felt no pain, but that life was flowing out of her body. The color left her eyes. Then she died."

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"Did you take her to the clinic?" Anassa asked practically. "She must have had some disease."

"They said she had no disease," the small man answered. "They could find nothing wrong with her, except that her heartbeat and breathing were abnormally slow. But she died."

"I am sorry that you lost your wife," Anassa replied slowly. "But why do you think it was my fault? Why do you blame me for her death?"

The man laughed. It was a shocking sound. "You killed her, you and that gold one in the temple. A naked yellow slut !The false image of a lying worship! Faugh!"

He might have had spitting in mind again, but the guard on the left gave him a preventative shake.

"You mean that Neith's worship killed your wife?" Anassa asked. "How?"

"Not Neith's worship," the man replied confidently. "Neith couldn't kill anybody. There is nobody there, just a graven image. What killed Ai-ling is that Jovis isn't worshipped any more. And people like you are responsible for that."

"Now I understand," Anassa said. "You think it is because the worship of Jovis has been abandoned that the life went out of your wife."

"Yes, of course," the man answered. He seemed mildly surprised that this explicit formulation was necessary. "When the old worship was celebrated, things went well. The life stayed in them. What we need is to have the victim on the altar again, with his cut-out still-beating heart."

Anassa looked down, sighing. She said, "Human sacrifice to Jovis wasn't known until we came to Gwethym. There was nothing like it in the first years."

"Yes, I know. But Gwethym is different. Sacrifice is necessary here. But I'm not afraid. Jovis is coming again! I've heard the prophecy. Jovis is coming back!"

He began to shiver and laugh. Anassa said, "You might

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as well take him away, to the magistrate. There is nothing useful to be learned from him."

"Yes, Lady." The captain and the guards moved with their prisoner toward the door.

Baldur barred the way. Throughout the interview with the prisoner he had been lying quietly at the foot of Anassa's couch. Now he stood in the doorway. He was quiet, he did not growl or move. But the brindle hair along his back was erect.

"Lady Anassa," said the captain, "please call your cyon out of the way. He won't let us pass."

"Baldur!" Anassa called.

The big doglike animal wagged his tail briefly. He remained standing in the way.

"Baldur!" she called once more. When he still did not move, she began to frown. "I wonder if he—cyons are very intelligent. Captain Chan, bring the prisoner back."

When the small man was standing in front of her once more, she said, "You think that if the human sacrifices to Jovis were reinstituted, the leak of life out of things would stop." Her words came slowly, as if she were feeling her way. "That can't possibly be true. But do you have any idea of another way in which the leak from things could be stopped?"

The prisoner looked at her slyly. He gave a cunning laugh, but made no other reply.

Anassa said, "You hate me because I am Neith's priestess. But I am a woman of Gwethym before I am a priestess. My forebears suffered persecution on Terra for their beliefs, just as yours did. They knew what it was to hide in a ditch, praying to Jovis that the man who was hunting them with the sliver gun wouldn't find them. And some of them took part in the sacrifices to Jovis after we came here.

"If you know something by which the leak you speak of can be stopped, it is your duty to speak. If there is a real



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danger, you *must* speak, in justice to all of us who call Gwethym home."

Anassa had spoken with great authority, and the prisoner seemed unwillingly impressed. "If—no, I won't! And have that gold slut in the temple get all the credit? No!"

"The 'gold slut', as you call her, stands in the temple because the people of Gwethym wanted her to," Anassa said. "I did not invent the attributes of Neith. She will get no credit for what you say. But the lives of some Gwethymians might be saved."

The prisoner said, "It would be better to sacrifice to Jovis again. But if something could be put in the leak . . . We lived, my wife and I, on an island in the Nansen group, near the Li Tai Po Archipelago. We raised silkworms and made silk.

"The leak is there, between the islands. The fishermen know it. If something could be put in the place where it is, something not like the stuff our world is made of, the leak might be stopped. But it would be better, of course, to sacrifice to Jovis again. He is a first-class god. He would make it stop."

"Where could such a stuff, not like the stuff our world is made of, be found?" Wan asked, leaning forward. "And what would it be like?"

The prisoner shook his head. "I don't know. The fishermen might know. They fish off lots of islands, and land on many of them. But I think it would have to be something strange that would stop the leak—something dead but not dead."

"What makes you think it exists somewhere and can be found?" Wan wanted to know.

The dark man looked confused. "I don't know. I've heard stories about strange islands . . . The sure way to stop the

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leak would be to sacrifice to Jovis again. He is a first-class god."

Anassa looked toward the door. Baldur was no longer barring the way. He was lying beside her couch, his nose between his paws. "You might as well take this man to the magistrate," she told the guards. "I recommend that a sanity hearing be given him."

"Yes, Lady, of course."

There was a silence after the guards had gone out. At last Wan said, "You know, 'Na, we learned a lot from that man."

"What? That there's a prophecy current among the people that Jovis is coming again?"

Wan laughed. "No, not that. He told us where the energy leak is occurring and what, in his opinion, can be done to stop the leak."

"My head's beginning to ache. Could you pour me out some of that stuff the surgeon left, Wan? Thank you."

When she had drunk, the girl said, "Wan, you surprise me. He *may* have told us where the energy leak's occurring, since he seems to have lived near where it is. On the other hand, he's obviously unbalanced. There may be no leak there at all; his wife may have died a natural death, and he may have imagined the whole thing. Or he may never have had a wife at all.

"Beyond that—how could he possibly be reliable? He's only a silk farmer, and a religious fanatic besides. I wasn't at all impressed with his answers to my questions. I'm surprised that you were."

"He could even have a religious psychosis," Wan answered, "and yet that wouldn't affect the reliability of his observation in nonreligious matters."

Anassa made an impatient noise. "What did he say, actually? That he'd heard vague stories from fishermen about strange islands."

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"He said something more, 'Na. He said he thought the leak could be stopped by putting in it something that was 'dead and not dead.'"

"What is his opinion worth. He's not an expert. Besides, it's all too pat. An energy leak is occurring; it must be stopped; and he tells us that something 'dead and not dead' exists that *will* stop it. Do you see what I mean, darling? It's too pat. Why should such stuff as he described exist? For one thing, where would it have come from?"

"Um. Yes, I see what you mean about being too pat," Wan answered. He began to walk up and down restlessly. "And of course I may tend to believe what he said because I want it to be true. That's certainly a possibility.

"But as to where the stuff he was talking about could have come from, I do have an idea. You know, dear, that we aren't the first humanoid people to live on Gwethym. Ever since we settled here we've found traces which indicate that a very highly developed people, scientifically speaking, lived here before us.

"We don't know much about them—we don't even know what they looked like, or why they aren't here any more. Cyons are the highest native life form that we've ever found on Gwethym. But the old inhabitants *might* be responsible for the existence of the stuff your would-be assassin tried to describe."

There was a lengthy pause. Then Wan said, "'Na, could you get a leave of absence from your duties in the temple?"

"I suppose so, though it wouldn't be easy. Why?"

"I want you to go on a cruise with me on the *Basset*."

"The *Basset* is a delightful little ship," Anassa answered. "I'd certainly enjoy a cruise on her. But what for?"

"I want to talk to the fishermen in and around the Li Tai Po Islands, and see if I can locate the stuff that is 'dead and not dead' the silk farmer spoke of."

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"Why would you need me for that? I mean, I'd love to go with you, but my first duty is here, in the temple. Especially if there really is a prophecy current among the people that a second coming of Jovis is at hand."

"I want you to come along to help get the fishermen to talk. You're the priestess of Neith, and even though people don't actually believe in her, you have some authority. Everyone on Gwethym knows about the Games of Neith and the priestess of Neith."

"I'm a civil servant, really," Anassa said, smiling. "I got my job by placing highest in a series of competitive tests—choreography, ability to improvise, histrionic talent, intelligence, personal appearance, and so on."

"That's irrelevant," Wan answered. "Get the leave of absence, 'Na, and we'll see what we can find out."

"No. I can't." Her face, under the bandage, was distressed.

Her lover looked at her incredulously. "Why not? It's your duty to help stop the energy leak."

"Because I daren't be away from the temple now. Don't you see? If I'm gone, the followers of Jovis will have a free hand."

"The energy leak may exist. The stuff the silk farmer told us about *might* be the means of stopping it. But if I go away for very long now, there's all too good a chance that there will be civil war."

"I'm in love with you, Wan. I'd love to go with you on the *Basset*. But I can't do it. I can't. I won't."

### 3

BALDUR trotted briskly along the water front. His broad silver collar, engraved with the Chinese characters that meant, *This unworthy one is the wholly debased and un-*

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*satisfactory animal-companion of Anassa, priestess of Neith*, winked brightly in the light of the noon sun. Without a glance, he passed Fisherman's Wharf, where the sloops, smacks and trawlers that supply so much or the food of New Christiana anchor. He seemed busy and occupied, with some definite business on his mind.

As he went by the little wine shop on the corner of Firth and Piperik, one of the customers, looking idly out into the street, saw him. "That's a fine-looking cyon," he said to the shop owner.

The owner followed the direction of the sailor's gaze. "Yeah. He belongs to Anassa, the priestess of Neith. She comes down here sometimes for a walk. I don't think I've ever seen him without her before."

"That so?" answered the customer. "You can tell he's a good one, with that big, domed head and the wide space between the eyes. My sister Selma used to raise cyons. She always said the good ones had that big high head."

"I guess they're pretty intelligent," the wine shop owner answered, yawning. He began to work on his back teeth with a toothpick, covering his mouth daintily with his left hand.

"Oh, sure. Selma used to say she wasn't sure but they could reason and follow conversations and count. They can be dumb, though. Say, I think I'll have another ladle of that tiger-bone wine."

Baldur trotted briskly on. He came at last to the big wood-lined slips where the vessels of heavier tonnage that visit New Christiana berth. He stood on the edge of one of the slips for quite a long time, twitching his ears and sniffing the air intently. Then he jumped into the water with hardly a splash and began to paddle purposefully away from the shore.

His goal appeared to be a small, battered sloop that was

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anchored some two li out. She seemed to have been through a bad storm; her sails, even close reefed, were patently tattered, and there appeared to be something wrong with her rudder.

Baldur swam around the little craft twice. Then, as if he saw no better way of proceeding, he made a grab at her mooring rope with his teeth.

He swung wildly, his hind legs still in the water. He managed to dig his sharp hind claws into the wood of the vessel below the water line. Thus braced, he caught hold of the mooring rope higher up, and in this precarious and unlikely fashion at last levered himself up on the deck of the sloop. He padded around for a moment, sniffing. Then, as if satisfied, he lay down by the vessel's wheel. The three sailors who constituted the *Hwa Mei's* crew found him there when they came on deck a half-hour later.

"Look what we've got here!" said the youngest of the three, a man named Feng. He approached Baldur warily and patted him on the head. "I wonder how he got here."

"Swam," said the oldest of the crew, a morose character called Knut. "How else?"

"From shore?"

"Either that, or he fell off a boat. You don't think he dropped down from the sky, do you?"

"No, but—well, how'd he get on board?" Feng examined the mooring rope and saw the traces of Baldur's teeth on it. "He must have climbed up the cable, somehow. What'd he want on board the *Hwa Mei*, anyhow?"

"How should I know?" Knut answered. He spat over the side. "Throw him back in the drink. We haven't food enough to keep ourselves, let alone a big useless animal that size."

Feng was rubbing Baldur behind the ears. "He's a fine cyon," he said. "Listen to what his collar says." He read the characters aloud for them.

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The third member of the crew, Peder, said slowly, "We need cash."

"What a brain!" Knut said mockingly. " 'We need cash.' "

"Well, we do," Peder said, undisturbed. "I mean, that collar he's wearing might be worth a little bit."

Feng held up his hand. "Not the collar," he protested. "That would only fetch a few cents. But the cyon himself must be valuable, and he belongs to somebody important. Neith's priestess must be *rich*."

"Well?"

"I should think she'd be glad to pay a nice fat reward to have him back."

"He's not lost," Peder said thick-wittedly.

"If he's not lost, what's he doing on the *Hwa Mei*? Of course he's lost."

"Hm," said Knut. "How would you get him to shore, though? None of us can swim, and the *Hwa Mei* handles too badly to try to take her close in."

"Hire a boat," Feng answered. "I can tell the boatman I'll pay him after I get the reward."

Thus it was that, some two hours after he had left the water front, Baldur was returned to it. Feng had fastened a rope to his collar and Baldur, who could have crunched the rope in two with one snap of his massive jaws, endured it politely. As they approached the temple, Baldur began to hang back and fight the rope, but he did it playfully. All the same, Feng was glad to reach the temple gate.

"Where'd you get the cyon?" the guard on duty said as they came by. "That's Her Ladyship Anassa's animal."

"Found him," Feng answered briefly. "I brought him back to get the reward."

"Found him!" the guard said, staring. "Why, it's only a couple of hours since I saw him trotting out the temple gate. He wasn't lost. You must have stolen him."

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Feng began to sweat. He got out his bandana and wiped his head. "I didn't steal him," he said, his voice starting to rise. "How could I steal a big animal like that? We found him on board our ship."

"On board your *ship*?" the guard asked.

"Sure. Out there." Feng pointed. "He was sitting beside the wheel when we came out on deck."

"I never heard such nonsense in my life," the guard answered. "Give him to me." He made a grab at Baldur's collar, but the animal dodged adroitly.

"I did *not* steal him," Feng said with desperate sincerity. "Why would I make up a story like that? It's the absolute truth. I don't know how he got on the ship, but there he was. I want the reward."

"Who said anything about a reward?" the guard retorted. He chewed his lip. "I'll call one of the temple dancers," he said finally, "and let her decide what to do about you."

The temple dancer was a small, dark, lively girl in a tunic of pale-yellow silk. "He was on your *ship*?" she said when she had listened to Feng's story.

Continued incredulity was getting on Feng's nerves. Once more he mopped his face. "It's true, miss," he said. "I didn't realize how unlikely it would sound."

The girl studied him intently. Then she smiled. "Come along," she said. "I'll take you to the Lady Anassa."

She led Feng through the gate and into a walled courtyard that was ablaze with roses. They went through another gate, walked the length of another enclosure that had been cunningly landscaped to make it look three times its actual size, and at last entered a long, dim corridor.

The girl stopped before a door and knocked. "Come in," Anassa's voice called after a moment.

"Lady Anassa," the girl said formally, "this man says he



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found your cyon on board his ship. He brought him back for a reward." She bowed and left.

Anassa put her brush down—she had been reading and annotating the choreographic script for the ritual of this year's Games—and looked at Feng. "I didn't know Baldur was missing," she said. "How did you happen to find him?"

Feng explained. "... and there he was on deck when we came out from lunch in the galley," he finished. "My mates and I thought—we hoped—there might be a reward for him. I had to hire a boat to bring him ashore. We're back from a bad voyage."

Anassa got a small gold coin from a drawer and gave it to Feng. He untied the rope from Baldur's collar and started to go, murmuring thanks. "Wait," she said. "Tell me about your bad voyage. Were you in the Li Tai Po Islands?"

"No, ma'am. We never go there. No trading, and the fish you catch are no good. Flabby and soft."

"You're fishermen, then?"

"Well, sometimes we do a little line fishing, and salt down our catch. But mainly we do small trading. We might pick up a bale of silk, or a few sacks of barley, or some soy oil. Small stuff, too small for the government traders to bother with."

Anassa glanced at Baldur. He was stretched out on the floor in his accustomed place at her feet. "Sit down," she said. "Tell me about your voyage. Tell me all about it. What made it so bad?"

Feng seated himself uneasily on the edge of a carved chair. "We got blown off course," he said, "in a bad storm. We heard the storm warning, of course, but we just didn't have enough fuel oil to get away from it. Fuel oil costs so much.

"It was a white devil of a storm. We ran before it, but our sails began to go. We were sure the next land we would

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see would be at the bottom. Then we sighted an island off ahead."

"What island?" Anassa wanted to know.

Feng shook his head. "I don't know, Your Ladyship," he answered. "We'd been blown off course, and we hadn't been able to take an observation for days. It was somewhere between 42 and 36 degrees north.

"We heard the breakers roaring, but there was a little bay on the south. It was by the skin of our teeth that we were able to get in and anchor in it.

"As soon as we got our breath back, we jumped over the bow and waded through the surf to land. It was a small island, about ten li across, and covered down to the shore with grape vines that had small seedless grapes on them. The vines looked like somebody had taken care of them. There were a lot of sea birds flying about.

"About a li from the shore, we found a little weather-beaten hut. It was built in a hollow, sheltered from the wind.

"We went in. Nobody was home. There was a bed on the floor, a table, a cooking place. And in the corner there was a big wooden cask of wine."

Feng threw his hands apart in a gesture like a shrug. "Well, what would you have done? They say sailors will drink anything. We had some of the wine.

"Beat as we were, and thirsty, we could see it was terrible wine. It was sweet and tasteless all at the same time. The only thing you could possibly say in its favor was that it was alcoholic. But we kept on drinking it.

"The next thing I knew, somebody was shaking me by the shoulder and saying, 'Wake up, stupid. What are you doing here?'

"I opened my eyes. Even moving my eyelids made my head hurt. 'Huh?' I said. It was an old man in ragged blue clothes.

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"Wake up. What are you and those other pigs doing here?"

"The storm blew us here,' I said. I sat up.

"Well, you'll have to go away again,' the old man said. Hospitality was his middle name.

"I staggered over to the door and looked out. It was still blowing like mad. 'How can we?' I asked. 'We'd be at the bottom in an hour.'

"Hm.' Now that I had my eyes uncrossed a little, I could see the old gent was holding a paralyzer gun. 'Wake up the others,' he told me. 'Now that you're here, you might as well do a little useful work.'

"He watched while I roused Peder and Knut. Then, sick and miserable as we were, he drove us out into that roaring storm, and set us to work hoeing his blasted vines.

"It was the worst day I ever spent in my life. We all had terrible headaches, and the storm drenched us to the skin. The old gent didn't seem to mind the weather; I guess he was used to it.

"After a couple of hours we got to a place where there wasn't anything at all growing. It was a level, rectangular space about the size of this room, covered over with plain white sand.

"Why do you keep it cleared off?' I asked the old man. He seemed to tolerate me a little better than my mates.

"I don't clear it,' he said. He gave a nasty little laugh. 'There's treasure under the sand, the treasure of the Old Ones. Nothing will grow near it.'

"Treasure?' I asked, leaning on my hoe. I was glad of an excuse to rest.

"Yes. Try to get nearer to it.' I tried, and found that though I could see the sand, I couldn't push past where it began. There was a sort of invisible wall around the place.

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" 'Nobody can get near it,' he told me, 'and even if they could, it's not real treasure. It's just stuff like dirt.'

" 'If you can't get near it, how do you know it's the Old One's treasure?' I asked him. 'How do you know it's worthless?'

"He giggled. 'A little cyon told me,' he said."

"A little cyon told him?" Anassa repeated wonderingly.

"Yes, that's what he said. I asked him if he had a cyon, and he said there hadn't been a cyon on the island for thirty years.

"We went on working. It began to get dark. The three of us had exchanged signs and gestures when the old man wasn't looking. At a signal from Peder, who'd managed to work in behind the old coot in the dusk, Knut began to jump around and yell. The old man started toward him, and Peder jumped him from the rear. I took the gun away from him.

"He was too old to put up much of a fight. We took him back to the hut and tied him up. We cooked up some barley groats we found in a tin for supper. Then we went to sleep. It seemed all right.

"But we hadn't tied him up tight enough. He was old, and we hadn't wanted to hurt him. Next morning he was gone.

"We weren't much worried. We had his gun, and he was old. It was still blowing too hard for us to leave. We went back to the place where he said the treasure was, and poked about with shovels. Once a puff of black stuff, like smoke, came out of the hole we were digging, but that was all. We couldn't get in to it.

"We were standing around discussing it when the old man appeared on a rise above us. He had a big shiny disk, about a foot across, in his hands. 'You'll be sorry,' he yelled at us. He laughed.

"We started toward him. He did something with the disk.

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Suddenly we couldn't move. It was like full shock from a paralyzer gun.

"He fidgeted with a lever on the edge of the disk. 'Now you can walk,' he told us. 'Get on back to the hut.'

"We didn't move. Why should we? We didn't know what he was going to do.

"Our standing there made him furious. His face twisted up with rage. He pushed the lever all the way down.

"I wouldn't have thought anything could hurt so much. All my muscles started fighting each other. My body started bending backward, like a bow. I thought my spine was going to break.

"Just at the last minute he turned the power down. 'Now move,' he said, showing his teeth. This time we went.

When we got back to the hut, he paralyzed Peder all over, so he was as stiff as a board. He set the disk down carefully on the table. He pushed Peder over on the floor.

"I'd have been shaking like a leaf, except that I was paralyzed. I could move my mouth a little, enough to mumble a few words. 'What are you going to do to us?' I asked the old maniac.

" 'Eat you,' he said. He sounded pleased as punch. 'I wonder that I didn't think of it before. I haven't had meat for years, except those vine-eating rabbits. And you're all nice and fat.'

"He wasn't kidding. He got a rusty ax and started putting an edge on it. I guess he was going to chop Peder's head off, though it would have made an awful mess on the floor.

"I said, 'Sir, don't you think you ought to give him a drink before you kill him? It wouldn't be right to kill a man without giving him a drink. And it's mighty good wine.'

"That pleased him. He said, 'Young man, you have good manners. Just for that, I'll do you a favor. I'll eat you last.'

"He played the disk over us again, to make sure we were

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safely paralyzed. Then he filled a tumbler with wine, knelt astride Peder, and poured it down his throat.

"Peder managed to swallow. He said afterward that he thought that if his head didn't get chopped off, he was going to have another terrible hangover. I mumbled to the old man, 'Why don't you have a little of that fine wine yourself?'

"The old lunatic hesitated. But he filled the tumbler from the cask, and gulped away at it while he worked. Once, when he slowed down, I said, 'You can't have too good an edge on an ax.'

"At last he was ready. He'd drunk three glasses full of that awful wine. He put his feet apart, judged his distance, and swung at Peder. I closed my eyes.

"When I opened them again, he was tugging at the ax, which was stuck deep in the boards of the floor, and swearing. He'd cut a long gash in Peder's shoulder and Peder, who couldn't move or speak, was bleeding like a pig.

"Finally he got the ax out of the floor boards. But by then some of my paralysis was wearing off. As he hurried toward Peder, I put out my foot and tripped him. He went over right on his head.

"The ax fell out of his hand and hit the table. The table top, which was only resting on a trestle, jumped, and the disk on it bounced off and hit the floor. It broke with a noiseless puff, like a bubble exploding. Little pieces of silver dust from it floated in the air.

"The old man was still unconscious. As soon as Knut and I could move, we tied him up good and solid, and patched up Peder's wound. He'd lost quite a lot of blood. The wind had stopped blowing, but it was almost dark.

"When the old man came to, he started gnashing his teeth and frothing at the mouth. He was so mad he could hardly talk. We asked him where he had got the disk from, but he just giggled and said, 'Jovis knows.'

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"We stood watch over him all night. As soon as it was light we loosened his ropes a little and told him we were leaving the island. He glared at us and said, 'I wish you pigs a happy drowning.' He was one hospitable man.

"On the way back we had more bad weather. We just managed to limp into port. And our cargo, bales of raw silk, was so badly watter-spotted we almost had to give it away. It was a rotten voyage, Your Ladyship."

Feng stopped talking. Anassa said, "Thank you for your story. I found it highly interesting." She gave him another gold piece, considerably larger than the first.

"Thank you, Lady Anassa." He halted at the threshold of the door. "Could you give me Neith's blessing, Lady?" he asked, a little shyly.

"Neith isn't really a goddess," she answered, smiling. "The people of Gwethym invented her."

"I know. But I should like your blessing anyway." Feng was politely resolute.

"Very well." Anassa hunted for the proper words. "Neith's priestess wishes you fair voyages and good luck," she said at last.

"Thank you, priestess of Neith."

As Feng passed through the courtyard with the roses, he saw the little dancer sitting on a bench amid the flowers. He stopped beside her. "Beautiful weather, isn't it, miss?" he said, clearing his throat.

"Perfectly lovely," she replied. She smiled.

Anassa, after Feng had left, sat motionless for a considerable while. Baldur was lying with his head against her feet, snoring gently.

"Baldur, did you—" she said, and then stopped. The big animal's tail wagged, but he did not open his eyes.

At last the girl picked up a brush and wrote a quick note in the "grass" script. When she had finished she called an

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attendant and gave the note to him. "Take this to Ehr-li Wan, at the university," she said.

Wan, fifteen minutes later, read, *Dearest Wan—I think I was wrong to refuse to go with you on the Basset. I'll go.* As if she felt that her religious duties were somehow involved in her belated acquiescence, she had signed herself, formally, *Anassa, priestess of Neith.*

### 4

"FENG struck me as a level-headed fellow," Wan said. He glanced at the compass and shifted the *Basset's* helm a little. "I talked to him and his mates for a long time, you know, trying to get as definite as possible a location for the island. I think, when we do get there, we'll find he described it—and the so-called treasure—quite accurately."

Anassa sighed. She was sitting cross-legged on the deck near the winch, Baldur beside her. She had abandoned her gold silk tunic and sacredotal ornaments for the baggy blue trousers and frogged jacket that were the universal working costume of Gwethym. Only her slender figure and heavy coils of amber hair distinguished her from any woman on a ship.

"I wish I could stop being so anxious," she said. "The energy leak isn't what's worrying me. It's something closer. Did you hear what that dockside loafer said when you were working the *Basset* away from her berth in the harbor? He said, 'Rats leave a sinking ship.' And he meant me to hear. He hated me for going away.

"What's the maximum time, Wan, it will take us to find the island? If we have bad luck?"

"I told you before. Five weeks. We're sectioning the area systematically."



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"A lot can happen in five weeks," the girl replied, sighing.

"Don't you like sailing, 'Na?"

"Of course. I love it."

"Then try to enjoy it," Wan advised practically. "You're not responsible for what's going on in New Christiana. As the girl in the story said, 'When you're getting raped, you might as well get what you can out of it.'"

Anassa laughed. She got up from where she was sitting and came over to Wan. "Not quite rape," she said. She put one arm around his shoulders. "Do you think you could put the ship on automatic pilot for a while sweetheart?"

Wan looked at her sharply. Then he smiled. "Sure," he said.

When they came out of the tiny cabin again, the sun was almost directly overhead. Anassa, under Wan's direction, took the little ship's wheel, while he threw a couple of lines over the side to see what he could catch for their lunch. At the end of half an hour he had caught six nice squid. He gutted them and turned them over to Anassa to cook.

They had their lunch on deck. The squid, fried in batter and served on a bed of noodles, were delicious. "One thing I like about you, 'Na, is you can cook," Wan said. He mopped the last bit of noodle around in the gravy in his bowl and swallowed it appreciatively.

"Only one?" she answered teasingly.

"Only one I'm interested in at present. Look at those birds."

She followed the direction of his glance. "What are they?" she asked. "They're awfully big."

"Gwethymian albatrosses. I never saw them fly like that before, though. Usually they're the most graceful things on two wings."

The birds, it was true, were flying oddly and awkwardly. Instead of hovering steadily over the water, motionless except for an occasional expert movement of the wings, they

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were flapping and tumbling as clumsily as if they had forgotten how to fly.

"Does their being here mean we're near land?" Anassa asked.

Wan shook his head. "I don't think so. They're wonderful flyers, and the land they came from could be hundreds of li away. They—*look out!*"

One of the birds, perhaps attracted by the smell of squid from the food bowl Anassa was still holding in her hands, was diving directly down on her.

She uttered a cry and ducked. The bird, missing its aim, landed on deck with an audible thud. Before Wan could make a move to capture it, Baldur had leaped on it and caught it at the nape of the neck. He held on steadily, despite the buffeting he got from the enormous wings.

"Is it rabid?" Anassa asked, straightening up. "It startled me."

"No," Wan answered. "Only mammals carry that virus. It may be sick, though. Let it go, Baldur. I want to look at it."

The cyon obeyed. Wan caught the bird under one of his arms, around the wings. He studied it. After a moment he laughed. "It's not sick," he said. "But this is a very unusual bird, 'Na. It's drunk."

"What? You're joking."

"No, I'm not. Smell for yourself." He pried the big bird's beak open. The girl bent her head toward it.

"Yes, you're right," she said. "But I don't understand. How could birds possibly be drunk? Where would they get the liquor from?"

"Where, indeed?" Wan answered. He rubbed his nose pensively. "They can't have flown very far, or they wouldn't have been so drunk. Anassa, what direction do you think the birds were flying from?"

The girl pointed. Wan nodded. He released the albatross

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—it flopped over to the railing and roosted on it miserably, its wings trailing—and went to the Basset's wheel.

"You're laying a new course," the girl said. "Why?"

Wan glanced up at the sails. "Because," he said, "the birds got drunk somewhere. And the only place I can think of for them to do it is Feng's island. The island where the inhospitable old man made so much bad wine."

The girl drew a deep breath. "Then you think we'll get to the island soon?"

"Could be. At any rate, we now have a much smaller area to search in."

The albatross was still sitting on the railing. In addition to being drunk, it seemed to be seasick. A more miserable bird it would be hard to imagine. Anassa said, "Suppose we do find the island, and the 'treasure' seems to be the stuff we're looking for. Feng said there was a wall around it. How are we going to get through to it?"

"Take the helm for a minute," Wan said. He went to the bowsprit box. "That depends on what sort of a wall it is. If it's a rather feeble force field, I may be able to break it down with more force. That's why I brought so many extra fuel cells along. If it's something else, the old man may be able to help us. He obviously knows something."

"Help us?" Anassa answered, staring. "Didn't you hear how Feng described him? The old maniac is more likely to try to cut our throats."

"That's where you come in," answered Wan. "I want you to make like a priestess when we get there—yellow robe, amethyst bee, high-toned manners and all. You may be able to work him around to helping us."

"You have more confidence in me than I have in myself," she replied.

"Um. I do have quite a lot of confidence in you, at that, my dear."

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It was about three-thirty next morning, when Wan was standing his trick at the wheel, that the signal on the radar installation rang. Anassa, asleep in the cabin, heard it and came out on deck immediately. Baldur padded at her heels.

"Is it the island?" she asked sleepily.

"I think so. Look at the pips on the screen. But I can't be sure. It's a beastly dark night."

"What are you going to do?"

"Head for it and then beat back and forth until it gets light. I'm not going to try to land on an unknown island when I can't see my hand in front of my face. Go back to bed, 'Na, and get some more sleep. You may need to be rested and fresh."

When the girl came on deck again, a little before five, it was beginning to get light. "It's certainly the island," Wan said. "Look." He handed her the glasses. "You can see the little bay Feng was telling about. In about ten minutes I'm going to take the *Basset* in and anchor."

"All right." Anassa went into the galley. She came back with coffee and sweet buns stuffed with bean pulp. "You'd better eat," she told her lover. "We don't know when we'll get a chance at another meal." She gave Baldur his ration of protein meal moistened with cold tea.

They ate standing. Then Wan worked the *Basset* into the little bay and put down her anchor. They were there.

"Do you want me to dress up now?" Anassa asked, eying the water at the ship's bow discontentedly. "My clothes will get sopping wet."

He pinched his lip. "No. Put your stuff in one of those plastic bags and put the bag inside your jacket. That way you'll be able to dazzle him."

Anassa did as he suggested. Then, disliking to get her cotten trousers wet unnecessarily, she took them off and

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stuffed them under her jacket too. "Amazing costume," Wan said, eying her. "You ought to go around like that more often. But I didn't realize you were so bosomy."

She made a face at him. Wan had already let himself down over the ship's side. "Cold," he said, looking up at her, "but only waist deep. Come on." He held out a hand.

They splashed through the surf toward the land. "Where's Baldur?" Wan asked.

Anassa shook her head. "He didn't want to come. He's acting dopey-sleepy and queer."

"Sick?"

"No—I don't know what, exactly. His nose is cool. I think he'll be all right."

As they reached land and started to walk through the grapevines, the girl stopped to put her trousers on. "That's the hut Feng mentioned," Wan said, pointing. "It seems to me I can smell the wine even from here. But I don't see any smoke coming from the chimney. Of course, he may prefer a liquid breakfast."

A rabbit bobbed through the vines in front of them. The hut, when they reached it, was empty, and the door was ajar. A rich, vinous smell hovered over everything. The level space in front of the hut was dotted with scraps and bits of coarse barley bread.

"He seems to have been feeding the birds bread soaked in wine," Wan observed, prodding one of the pieces with his toe. "But he certainly isn't here now."

"He must be somewhere on the island," Anassa answered. "Let's try to find the bare space Feng told us about."

They walked on slowly, crisscrossing the island, and in a little more than an hour they found the place. It was exactly as Feng had described it—rectangular, flat, covered with shining white sand.

Wan walked around the perimeter. "It's not an ordinary

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force field," he said when he came back to the girl. "Put your hand out to it."

"It tingles," Anassa said, complying. "It feels a little warm, and it gives."

"Yes. And yet I think it's some sort of field, and not a material barrier." He stood silent, frowning. At last he said, "Well, let's find the old coot. He's probably dead drunk somewhere among the vines. When he gets sobered up, you can dazzle him."

They began their tour of the island once more. Anassa said, "I wish we had Baldur."

"Why? He didn't want to come."

"I know. But I don't like this island. It's not a nice place."

It was almost noon when they found the island's sole inhabitant. He was lying among the vines, just as Wan had predicted, but he wasn't dead drunk. Even before they got up to him the faint smell told them. He was dead.

"We're too late, 'Na," Wan said, rising from his knees. "He's been dead for, oh, more than a day."

"What killed him?" she asked, a little fearfully.

Wan shrugged. "Heart attack, probably. He was old. Maybe he passed out and didn't have strength enough to get back to his hut. I'm sure it was a natural death. We can bury him later. But now we'll never know . . ."

"Know what?" she demanded.

"Know what he meant when he said it was a little cyon who told him the treasure of the Old Ones was like dirt."

## 5

WAN GAVE the pile of exhausted fuel cells a morose kick. "Well, I certainly acted like a genius," he said. "I've left the *Basset* exactly four undischarged fuel cells. And the field

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around the treasure didn't even waver. All the juice I could throw in didn't even tickle it. I ought to have realized sooner that it wouldn't work."

"How could you be sure until you tried it?" Anassa answered. She was sitting on a stack of the exhausted cells close to the white rectangle of sand. "Are four cells all the power the *Basset* has left?"

"Well, she still has two barrels of diesel oil, and her sails. I just hope we don't run into a storm. What makes me sore is that I worked so hard carrying those blasted cells up through the surf from the ship to try them out on the force field here."

"Um. You know, Wan, one thing's been puzzling me. Why, if the treasure isn't really a treasure—the old man told Feng it was just stuff like dirt—why did they bother putting a field around it? What would be the point?"

"That's a good comment," Wan said. He sat down beside her on the cells and loaded his tiny pipe. "Human nature reacts so automatically to the word 'treasure' that it didn't occur to me to wonder about it before."

"Well, I suppose the force field might have been set in order to protect people on the island from some dangerous property of the stuff that's inside the field. In that case, we'd better be careful when—or if—we ever break it down. Or the field might have been set in order to protect its contents, worthless though they might be in any ordinary sense, from being scattered and lost."

"Well, I don't suppose it matters why they set the field, as long as we can't get to the stuff inside it," Anassa said, sighing.

"Yep."

There was a discouraged silence. Then the girl said, "Mightn't there be a way of shutting the field off? The old man talked as if he knew what was inside it. And that big

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disk he had, the one he paralyzed Peder with—where did he get it? I never heard of anything like it before. Our stun and paralyzer guns aren't like that."

"What are you getting at, 'Na?"

"Well, I mean it sounds as if the old man had found something. The disk sounds like something the Old Ones of Gwethym might have made, long ago, before we terrestrials came here in the Jovis migration. Perhaps the old man had found a cave, or something of that sort, with the disk and the means of shutting off the force field in it."

Wan was gnawing his lip. "I doubt it would be a cave," he said. There was a note of excitement in his voice. "You don't get much in the way of caves on a small island, only clefts eroded by the sea. But he might have found something buried in the soil, some sort of a cache, when he was planting his grapevines. In that case . . ."

He knocked out his little pipe and got to his feet. "It's worth trying, I think," he said after a moment.

"What is? We can't dig up the whole island."

"No. But a cache of the sort I'm thinking of would pretty certainly contain metal objects. And metal objects can be detected, with suitable equipment, from the surface, provided they're not buried too deep. It's an old dodge."

"Suitable equipment? Did you bring anything like that?"

"No, but I think I can rig up something. I can send a beam of impulses down through the soil and gauge from the way they bounce back what's underneath. While I'm about it, I'll see if I can't set up some sort of solar mirror and try to recharge a few of these fuel cells. We're going to need power."

"Come on, 'Na. We're going back to the ship."

He started down the slope. The girl sighed and followed him.

Wan's detector for metal was not impressive to the eye. It



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consisted of a three-foot-long metal rod, the upper end of which bore a flat surface with a bank of dials, a pack of fuel cells that he carried on his back, and earphones and a large metal mirror for his head..

"It ought to work," he said at last, putting down the soldering iron. "Providing, that is, there really is anything buried in the soil of this blasted island. You carry the phones and the mirror, 'Na. None of this stuff is supposed to get wet."

"What if it rains?" she asked, beginning to wade through the surf toward the island.

"We'll worry about that when it happens." They splashed toward the shore. When they reached the first row of grapevines, he made the final screw connections on his equipment. He put the pack on his back, took the rod in his hand, and strapped the phones and mirror on his head. He began to walk forward slowly, inserting the rod into the soil as far as it would go every few feet.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" Anassa asked after she had tagged behind him for some two hundred yards.

"No, not now. This is slow work."

By the end of the day he had been over nearly a third of the little island. "Getting discouraged, 'Na?" he asked as they started back to the *Basset* for their evening meal. "You're awfully quiet."

"No, not exactly discouraged. But I can't help wondering what's happening back in New Christiana. And I'm not any use to you in the sort of thing you were doing today."

"You're useful just being here," he told her. "We'll leave this stuff at the hut, instead of taking it back to the ship. After supper tonight, Anassa, play your *kin* for me."

"I really don't play very well."

"I know. But I like to hear you anyhow."

Next day Wan continued his slow tour of the island. The

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hours passed, and he never found anything that was not, at most, a buried rock. By the end of the day they were standing on the stony shingle at the other end of the island, and they still had found nothing at all. Gulls screamed over their heads.

Wan unstrapped the pack of fuel cells from his back. He laid them down on a wave-beaten rock. "Well, that's that," he said. "Now what do we do next?"

Anassa laced her fingers together. "I'm been thinking about what the old man told Feng," she said. "You remember, Feng asked him how he knew what was inside the force field, and he answered, 'A little cyon told me.'"

"Yes."

"Well, what if he were telling the exact truth? Or pretty near the truth?"

"You mean a cyon really told him? Anassa, you're tired."

She laughed. "No, not a cyon. People usually say, 'A little *bird* told me.' What if the old man meant exactly that? He used to feed the birds, you know."

"But—what—"

"It's getting dark. But tomorrow we'll come back to this part of the island—there are more birds here than anywhere else—and see if we can find a place that the birds especially favor. A rocky ledge. A rift among the rocks. Or even a cave made by the waves."

He looked at her. "All right," he said.

In the broad light of day, Anassa's idea seemed a little ridiculous to her. Wan was looking at her with a smile that she found faintly annoying. All the same, she unfolded the blanket she had brought from the ship and spread it out over the pebbles. "Let's sit down and just watch for a while," she said.

It was hard to see any immediate pattern in the birds'

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behavior. The air was full of gulls and terns and rarer larger fowl, but they scarcely seemed to prefer one rock to another. The noise of their cries made Anassa feel dizzy and half deaf.

The blanket was thin and the pebbles underneath it hard. After three-quarters of an hour or so, Anassa was on the point of suggesting that she and Wan leave the beach, when the young man turned to her excitedly.

"Look over there, at that flat rock near the water. See that bird land on it? Now watch."

The bird landed. It took three or four hops to the left. Then it fluttered up to the rock behind and above the one on which it had originally landed. Here it made three or four hops to the right. Then it flew upward for perhaps five or six feet and disappeared in a cleft in the rock.

"What's so remarkable about that?" asked Anassa.

"Keep watching," Wan told her.

Another bird landed on the flat rock. Hops to the left, a short flight up, hops to the right, and final flight into the rift in the rock.

Anassa shot an inquiring glance at her lover. "Just keep on watching," he said.

A third bird, and a fourth and a fifth. "How very odd!" the girl said. "It's as if they were following some sort of trail up into the rock. Why do they do it, do you suppose?"

"I don't know. Somebody may have trained them, though I don't know who or why. But let's try to follow the birds up and see what's there."

He helped Anassa up on the first flat rock. It was streaked gray and white with old and new bird droppings, and the girl made a disgusted face. Then she made a scraping motion with her shoe. "There's something under all this stuff that isn't rock," she said. "It feels like a metal plate."

"Hm. Can you make it up to the next rock? Wait a min-

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ute, though. I don't see any birds coming *out*. This might be dangerous."

"I think they're flying out through a crack back in the rock," she said, tipping her head back. "I think I recognize that gull with the cracked beak."

"All right, then." He pulled himself up beside her and, taking the lead, clambered up on the second rock and held out a hand to her. "More metal here," he reported. "Now for the next rock."

This was more difficult. He had to dig in with his nails, and Anassa had two long scratches on her forearms before they managed to reach the cleft.

It was narrow at the front, so that they had to turn sideways to get in, but it widened soon. Four or five birds were standing just inside, their heads pressed up against the side. Their eyes half closed, and their wings drooped.

"What are they *doing*?" Anassa asked, stopping to stare. "I never saw birds act like that before."

"I'm not sure," Wan answered, "but I think there's a current coming through that metal plate that stimulates the pleasure-producing areas of their little brains. The round-about route they took to get here suggests that they've been trained to operate a mechanism that produces the pleasure-giving current. Come on, though. The cleft widens out in back."

They stepped over the birds, which paid no attention to them, and walked toward the back. The floor was dotted here and there with bird excrement and strewn with shards of silvered glass.

"Those pieces remind me of Feng's description of the disk the old man used on his prisoners," Wan said. "There doesn't seem to be anything else here, though. No, wait. It's hard to see. But look there."

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He pointed. Anassa saw, in the dim light, a metal lever protruding through a slit in the solid rock.

"Is that the—the—" she asked.

"It could be. We'll soon find out." Wan pulled on the lever. It did not move. "Setting probably hasn't been changed for a good many years," he said. He pulled again, this time with all his strength.

Slowly the lever moved down to the end of its slot. "Is that all?" the girl asked. "I mean, nothing has happened."

"We wouldn't notice it here, if it did shut off the force field. Let's go back to the plot of white sand."

As they hurried along, she said, "Why were the birds trained to do that? I mean, they certainly weren't taught to hop around and so on, just so we'd be able to find the lever that shuts off the force field."

"My first guess would be that it was part of an experiment, like training rats to go through a maze for a bit of food. My second guess would be that they were trained as part of a festival or religious ceremony. It's probably just coincidence that the lever was in the same place."

"Where does the power for this and the force field come from?" Anassa asked.

"Probably an atomic motor buried in the middle of that plot of sand. There *are* radioactive deposits on Gwethym, though they're so low-grade that getting them out isn't economically worthwhile. The installations on this island strike me as a curious blend of naiveté in physics, and biological sophistication. . . . Here we are."

The plot of white sand looked just the same. Wan hesitated. Then he pulled a scintillation counter from his pocket and with his eyes on it walked slowly forward. Without resistance he walked into the middle of the space.

"That was it," he said. His tone was jubilant. "No radiation, either."

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He picked up the spade he had optimistically brought from the *Basset* four or five days ago, and began to dig. "Might as well start in the middle," he said.

Anassa watched him. "I wonder what the stuff we're hunting—the X-stuff—will be like," she said.

"Like dirt," he answered abstractedly. He was concentrating on his work.

An hour or so passed. Wan dug steadily on. He had taken off his jacket, and his naked torso glistened with sweat. Anassa, tired out from suspense, was dozing in the sun, her arm over her eyes.

She was roused by a great shout. She jumped up and ran over the sand. Wan was standing waist deep in the hole he had dug.

"It's in a sort of chest," he told her, grinning. "It may be quite a job getting it out, for it's about five feet long."

"Let me help," said the girl. "I want to do something." She took the shovel and began throwing sand away from the sides, while Wan, down in the hole, dug with his hands.

The chest was made of brownish metal. As soon as Wan had one end clear, he put his hands under and tugged at it. To his surprise, the chest came clear easily, and the force of his pull sent him rolling over on his back at the edge of the hole.

"It doesn't seem to weigh anything at all," he said, picking himself up. Anassa came to help, and together they pushed the box up on the sand.

"And now we'll try to open it," the young man said. He ran his hands around the edges of the chest.

Anassa could see no sign of a seam, or the edges of a lid. But as Wan touched the box, the top surface slowly and silently rose. Standing side by side, they looked down into it.

The chest was filled almost to the top with tiny purplish-

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brown granules. The surface was even, but the grains crawled and moved over each other as if they had an odd, nonanimate life of their own.

Wan let out a great breath. "Not *quite* like dirt after all," he said.

### 6

Wan looked up from the microscope. As soon as they had got back to the *Basset* with the chest, he had begun a series of tests on a sample of the purplish-brown material. Now he said, "I can't give a really positive answer, Anassa. I'm neither a biologist nor a chemist. But I think that the stuff in the chest is a virus that has managed to build its microcrystalline structure up into crystals that aren't, actually, much smaller than those of common table salt."

"A virus?" the girl said. She was lying on one of the bunks in the tiny cabin, watching him. "A virus of what?"

"I don't know."

"Is it dangerous?"

Wan shook his head. "I'm almost certain it's not. And for an odd reason. Do you remember that the man who tried to assassinate you in New Christiana said that the energy leak could be plugged by stuff 'not like the stuff of our world'?"

"Yes."

"Well, if protein molecules are broken down into their constituent amino acids—and a virus is a protein, of course—they invariably rotate the plane of polarization of polarized light in a direction that corresponds to molecules of left-handed symmetry. The few trifling exceptions to this rule only make it more sure. But the virus we have here is composed of amino acids on the right-handed order. They're dextro amino acids, instead of levo.

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"I don't think this virus, injected into a suitable host and in a suitable medium, would be able to do anything at all unless the host were also composed of molecules of the dextro sort. On life as we know it, it probably wouldn't have even an irritating effect."

"What makes the granules, or crystals, or whatever they are, crawl around like that?"

"I think about half of them are carrying an electric charge, and they repel crystals with the same charge on them."

Wan began disassembling his equipment and packing it back in its wooden boxes. "What I'm worried about," he said, "is fuel. To get those discharged cells up full again, in any reasonable space of time, would take a couple of hundred acres of solar mirrors. I've managed to charge up four more cells. That makes eight altogether, and two drums of fuel oil. It's not enough."

"Are you worried about a storm?"

"Partly. There's another thing, though." He got up and began to pace around the tiny cabin. "We can get to the Li Tai Po Islands just with sails, of course. But it would take too long. The longer the energy leak from there goes on, the more difficult—and dangerous—plugging it up is apt to be."

"Dangerous?" she asked. "You mean we might be carried into a universe with a lower energy-level?"

He laughed. "I don't think so. But you remember that people who've been in those islands for very long seem to have been permanently affected by their experience, and that the man who tried to kill you blamed his wife's death on the energy leak. If bodily processes are slowed down enough, human beings can't live."

"Um. But where could we get fuel? It would take too long to go back to our port."

Wan got an atlas of charts from a drawer and started leafing through it. "Yes," he said after a minute. "Dieudonne



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Island is about two days from us, and it's only a little off the course I'd naturally set for the Li Tai Po Islands. I think we'll put in there and try to persuade the islanders to let us have some drums of fuel oil."

"You don't sound very optimistic about it, somehow."

"I'm not. You see, the government launches come around once a year to these little islands and leave the inhabitants enough oil to last till next time. No matter how much we offer to pay for it, they'll hesitate. But we can try."

He tossed the volume of charts back in the drawer. "Might as well get the anchor up," he said.

Dieudonne Island, two days later, was not impressive. It was two or three times bigger than the island Anassa and Wan had just left, but even its center was low-lying and there was little vegetation on it. Anassa thought it would be badly beaten by storms when the winter season came.

"Rotten anchorage," Wan said. "I don't dare take the *Basset* in another inch. If anything like a blow comes up, we'll have to be on our way. A gale would take the *Basset* right over the top of the island." He looked with dissatisfaction at the shore.

"They don't seem to be paying much attention to us," Anassa said, regarding the silent cluster of huts.

"I'll see if I can rout them out." Wan got a megaphone and began to bellow powerfully, "Dieudonne Island, ahoy! Dieudonne Island, ahoy!"

After the third shout, two men appeared on the beach. Anassa, who was watching them through glasses, thought that their faces had an odd quality. Remote? Secretive? Indrawn? She didn't know what the word for it was.

"What do you want?" one of the men shouted through his cupped hands.

"Fuel oil!" Wan yelled.

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"No fuel oil," the man shouted back.

"We want to *buy* it!" Wan yelled desperately. "A fine price!"

Both the men shook their heads. "Not for sale!" They turned around and left the beach.

Wan glared at their backs. "Friendly as clams," he said. "You'd think they'd at least be interested enough to launch a boat. Well, I'll swim in and see if I can do anything with them."

He went into the cabin and came back in swimming trunks. "They may weaken," he said as he put money inside a waterproof pocket, "when they see the cash."

He was gone a long time. Anassa, watching, saw him go in a hut with a man, come out after a while and enter another hut. A discussion seemed to be going on, with Wan making gestures and offering them money, and the islanders obdurately saying, "No." Once Wan looked up inquiringly at the sky.

After a while the girl grew bored. She began to walk up and down the deck of the *Basset* restlessly. In one of her peregrinations she caught her trousers on a cleat and tore a long gash in the cloth.

She went into the cabin to mend the garment. When she had the rent stitched up, she was suddenly reluctant to put the trousers on again. Wan had said something once about her impressing people in her role of priestess. Very well, then, she would dress herself as what she was.

She put on the gold silk tunic, clasped the chain with its amethyst pendant about her throat, and slipped gold bangles over her wrists. She started to dress her hair in its customary heavy coils. Then she paused, reflecting that it might be more striking left loose around her shoulders. She combed it out so that it hung in a golden cloud and then, in her golden sandals, went on deck.

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As she approached the bow of the ship she saw Wan and the two men standing by the edge of the water, still arguing. She couldn't, of course, hear what they were saying. Wan made a wide gesture in the direction of the *Basset*, and the men looked out over the water toward it. They must, she thought, have seen her standing there.

For a moment they stood absolutely motionless. Then they turned back toward the island, with Wan at their heels. In ten minutes or so a dozen men were rolling drums of fuel oil down toward the beach.

Anassa looked on, astonished, as a small boat was launched into the surf with the two drums of oil, three men, and Wan. As the boat neared the *Basset*, she saw Wan make a signal to her with his eyes. She didn't know what he meant, so she stood quiet and motionless while the men, under Wan's direction, put the oil with the other drums.

As the men were leaving the ship, the oldest of them approached her. "Lady," he said, "will you give our island the blessing of the mistress you serve?"

"I—" said Anassa, and stopped. She realized that this was no moment in which to propagandize for rationality. "The priestess of the great Neith gives her blessing to Dieudonne and its people," she said.

The man's face lit up. He bowed and hurried off after the others, almost as if he were too moved to speak.

"What's been going on?" the girl said to Wan, who had come up from the engine room. "I don't understand what this means."

"I can tell you what's been happening," her lover answered, "but I don't know what it means, either. The barometer's down; I want to get out of here."

The winch began to whine. "Blast that anchor," Wan said. "No, here it comes."

"Well, at first they simply wouldn't listen. I told them I

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was on a government mission, which is more or less true, and that the welfare of the people of Gwethym was involved in my success.

"One of the men said, 'You got nerve, trying to get our fuel oil away from us. How would you like to spend a winter on this island with neither heat nor light?'

"I offered them five and then ten times what the oil had cost, and they only laughed at me. Then I said something about the *Basset*, and motioned toward it. They looked up and saw you.

"They seemed thunderstruck. Then the taller man, the one with the wart on his nose, said, 'The goddess has come back. Our mistress has come back. We thought she had gone to the God-place.'

"I was too surprised to be tactful. I said, 'That's not a goddess, it's a woman. It's Anassa, priestess of Neith.'

" 'Priestess or goddess, what does it matter?' he answered. 'It's *her* priestess. Does *she* want us to give you our fuel oil?'

" 'Of course,' I said.

" 'All right, then, come along. We'll get it for you.' He started up from the beach."

"But what did he mean?" Anassa asked.

"I don't know. As I tagged along after him, I said, 'Has Neith really been here? On this island?'

"He gave me a slightly dirty look. 'If that girl is really Neith's priestess,' he said, 'she ought to know about it.' I didn't want to rock the boat, so I shut up. I was afraid he might change his mind about the oil. I had to force them to take the money for it, by the way."

Anassa pinched her lip reflectively. "I wonder who was on the island."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm going to cut the motor in a minute, and get some canvas on. It's coming on to blow."

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For a day and most of a night the *Basset* ran before a favoring wind over full seas. She was making a fine run and saving on the precious oil. Then Anassa, off watch and sleeping, was thrown violently from her bunk.

She picked herself up and ran out on deck. The night was almost pitch black. "Wan!" she called anxiously. "Wan! What happened? Are you hurt?"

A disgruntled growl answered her from the darkness. "I'm all right. We hit something, probably a derelict. Take the wheel for a minute, 'Na, and try to hold her steady while I turn on the floods and see what we've hooked."

The girl complied. As the floodlights came on, the other ship sprang into sight.

The *Basset* had struck her admiships, penetrating her hull for several feet. The other ship was only a little larger than the *Basset*, neatly painted, with a trim green line running around her. She did not look at all like a derelict.

"Is the *Basset* hurt?" Anassa called from her post.

"I don't think so. She's very stoutly built, and the bow of a ship is always her strongest point. The other ship is. She'll go down like a cow when we get loose."

He came back to the wheel. "I'm going to try to jar us apart," he said. "First full astern and then full forward. But I fear we may be stuck."

There began a series of racking jars. The *Basset's* motor toiled nobly. Nothing happened. The sun rose. The other ship clung to her unwilling partner like a leech.

"What's the other ship's name?" Anassa asked, sipping the coffee she had brought from the galley.

"*Snekkjur*, I think. Damn her. I wonder what she was doing here. We're using up altogether too much oil trying to get loose."

About ten o'clock Wan called a halt. "This is just no use," he said. "We'll have to try something else."

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After a thoughtful pause, during which Anassa looked at him anxiously, he said, "I'm going over on the *Snekkjur* and see how her motor is."

He clambored over on the deck of the other ship and went below. "It's all right," he said, emerging in a few minutes. "The *Basset* didn't hit anything vital. Fill a can with fuel oil, 'Na, and pass it over to me. I'm going to start her up."

As she handed him the oil, he said, "I'll try the same thing with this tub that I tried with the *Basset*. Forward and back, I mean. Now, the minute I give a blast on her whistle, I want you to throw all the *Basset's* power into full astern. Maybe the combination of motions will get us loose. Understand, the *minute* you hear the whistle. Keep it up while you count to five. Then cut the power and let her drift."

After a moment Anassa heard the muted thud of a diesel engine. Wan came back on deck and waved to her. He took his place at the *Snekkjur's* helm.

The *Snekkjur* moved forward a few feet, carrying the *Basset* with her, and then reluctantly started back. Simultaneously with the latter motion, her whistle gave an ear-splitting blast.

Anassa pulled the lever down instantly. The *Basset* shuddered and then moved back.

The girl counted toward five, her nails digging into her palms. She had got to four when the two craft came apart. Water began to run, and then to pour, into the *Snekkjur's* side.

"Wan!" the girl cried. "We're loose! Come back!"

He gave her a reassuring wave and disappeared into the *Snekkjur's* cabin. She could not imagine what he was doing.

The two craft had moved a considerable distance apart by now, and the *Snekkjur* was beginning to list badly. Anassa did not know what to do. She would have liked to bring the *Basset* nearer to the sinking ship, but Wan had told her to let

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it drift. On the other hand, if he delayed much longer, he might be caught in the undertow as the derelict went down. Baldur, who was standing beside her, gave an anxious whine.

She was just about to blow the *Basset's* whistle when Wan appeared on deck again. He ran to the side, jumped over, and swam toward the *Basset* with powerful strokes. He had covered perhaps half the distance when the *Snekkjur* rolled over on her side. For a long moment she seemed to hesitate. Then, bow foremost, she plunged straight down.

Anassa had run to let over a rope ladder for Wan. As he clambored up on the *Basset's* deck, she said, "What made you stay so long? I was frightened."

"It wasn't really dangerous," he answered. He took off his dripping garments and deftly wrung them out over the side. "I thought there was something odd about the ship, and I wanted to get a last look at her."

"And was there? Something odd, I mean."

"Yes. There wasn't a drop of fuel oil on that ship—her drums were completely dry—and she'd have needed a crew of three men, at least, to handle her sails."

"But her galley was well-stocked. All sorts of stores, and plenty of fresh water. What happened to the men?"

"Well?"

"I went into her cabin. There were three bunks there. Only one of them had been used."

"On the pillow I found—" He shook out his damp jacket and fumbled in the pocket. "Yes, here it is."

"On the pillow I found this," he finished triumphantly.

He held it out for Anassa to see. It was a long strand of four or five brilliantly golden hairs.

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### 7

WAN STOOD at the *Basset's* wheel. Ever since her encounter with the derelict, she had run lightly over violet seas with a leaning wind and a radiant sky. The clouds that made the horizon rich never came near her. She moved through a wide-horized world of her own, her white wake stretching out behind her, her cordage creaking from time to time. At night the stars were big and brilliant in the soft black velvet of the sky.

"You musn't think of it as a physical leak," he said to Anassa. "There is no actual lesion anywhere in our own world. You could sail over the site of the energy leak—or through it—and notice no change at all in the appearance of things.

"The other universe into which energy from our own is seeping isn't above us or below us or beside us. In a sense, it isn't anywhere at all with reference to our world."

The girl twisted a bangle on her wrist. "Then where is it?"

"It's hard to explain. It isn't a spatial relationship." He cleared his throat. "In the early days of quantum mechanics, it used to be said that what made the subject difficult to talk about was that we were discussing small events in language appropriate to a macroscopic world. Here, I think just the opposite is true. We could discuss these extremely macroscopic things intelligently only in the language appropriate to quantum events."

"I suppose you think *that* made it clear," she said, laughing.

"No, I don't. I just keep hoping. Now, though the leak isn't a physical thing, it does have a physical site. Gwethym is continually in motion around its primary, our sun. Our sun is in motion in a long rotation of its own galaxy. And



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the galaxy itself is moving, with the other galaxies, in the rotation of the metagalaxy. Yet, for all the various motions, the site of the energy leak from our universe is a definite spot on the surface of our own not-very-impressive planet. It is that spot we have to find."

"How will we know when we've found it?" she asked.

"Well, we have an approximate idea of where to look. Beyond that, it depends partly on what form the energy that is seeping out is taking. If it were going in the form of thermal energy—I don't think it is, from the reports—finding it would be fairly simple. I've brought thermometers, but I doubt we'll need them.

"Of course, thermal energy would leak through too, sooner or later. But at present, judging from what we've heard, chemical energy—and perhaps electrical, too—is what's going on out.

"As we get nearer to the site of the leak, I expect to find chemical reactions slowing down. A chemical reaction takes such and such a length of time to go to completion, at such and such a temperature. As we approach the site, the elapsed time ought to be longer and longer.

"Perhaps, at the very spot of the leak, a chemical phenomenon, such as combustion, wouldn't occur at all. Or, if it did, it might go so slowly that wood couldn't be said to burn. One would have to say that the wood rusts."

"Can't we tell when we've got there from the way we feel?"

"Possibly, but I hope not. If the effect of the leak were that marked and immediate, it would be dangerous."

"When do you think we'll get there?"

"Day after tomorrow, if this wind holds on. I'm going to try beating around near the Nansen group first. That's where your assassin came from."

"Yes, I know."

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Toward noon the next day, the wind that had carried them so faithfully died down. Wan had to start up the diesel. "Not much pep," he said, listening critically. "The cycle ought to be more lively than that."

"Do you think that's caused by the loss of chemical energy you were speaking about?" Anassa asked. She had followed him into the engine room.

"Could be. We're getting pretty near. On the other hand, it might be just the quality of the oil. This is one of the drums we got on Dieudonne Island."

Early next afternoon they entered the stretch of waters between the Nansen group and the Li Tai Po archipelago. By now the beat of the engine was definitely slower than usual. "How do you feel, 'Na?" Wan asked the girl.

"Fine. Just a trifle languid."

"Me too. We must be nearing the energy leak."

About an hour later they picked up the first of the Nansen Islands. Anassa, who was watching through glasses, said, "I don't see any sign of life on this one. On the next island, though, there seems to be a sort of hut. There might be a flag flying. I can't be sure. There's no wind."

"All right. I think that's Fridtjof Island. If there's anybody on it, they might be able to tell us something. I'd give a lot for a little wind right now."

For all the diesel's listlessness, they reached Fridtjof within an hour. "That is a flag," Anassa reported. "And there're letters on it. Look." She handed the glasses to Wan.

"SOS," he said softly. He put the glasses down. He and the girl exchanged glances. "Must be something wrong," he said.

On the north side of the island they found a little jetty. Wan was able to anchor the *Basset* in ten feet of water. It was the easiest anchorage they had had yet. Before they

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left the ship—Baldur electing to accompany them—Wan picked up a case of first-aid stuff and medicines. Anassa watched him without comment.

The hut was on a little rise, with a fine view of the distant Li Tai Po Islands. No smoke was coming from it, but as Anassa practically observed, there was no reason to have a fire at this hour on such a fine day.

Wan rapped on the rough wood of the door of the hut. There was no answer. He rapped again. He was just about to open the door unbidden when a very low voice from within said, "Come."

"Hello," he said, stepping inside. The hut was so dark that at first he could see nothing at all. "Is there anything wrong?"

"On . . . vacation," the voice answered. Wan made out the dim outline of a man lying on a rude bunk. "Sick." It was hard to understand him, for he spoke the tongue of Gwethym with an accent, and on top of that the tempo of his words was exceedingly slow. "Sick."

Wan and Anassa exchanged glances. "Do you have any fever?" Wan asked. "Are you in pain?"

"No. Neither. Tired. And slow. So slow. Slow."

Wan hesitated. But there was, after all, no good reason for not telling the vacationer what was wrong with him. "I don't believe you're sick, sir," he told the man. "I believe you're suffering from a sort of energy leak that affects people on these islands."

"Leak?" the man in the bunk answered. There was something exceedingly odd in his tone.

"Yes. It affects animals, too. This lady and I have come here in connection with it.

"As soon as we can get our work here done, we'll take you back to New Christiana with us on our ship. You musn't stay here. Meantime, we'll make you as comfortable as we can."

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"Oh." The man's hands moved slowly under the coarse blanket that covered him. "Water. On that shelf. Please."

"Of course." Wan turned toward the shelf, Anassa helpfully beside him.

He had just put out his hand to pick up the water carafe when he felt, over his back, the cold, hateful tickle of a shock from a paralyzer gun.

Wan's first emotion was one of absolute astonishment. Why had the vacationer, alone and in need of help, elected to paralyze him? (Presumably he had paralyzed Anassa and Baldur too, in the "shotgun" effect of which a paralyzer gun was capable, since there was no sound from either of them.) The man must have fired through the blankets that covered him. But why? Does a sinking ship fire on the rescuers?

Astonishment was succeeded by helpless rage. Wan had received a considerable shock; he couldn't wriggle a finger or twitch an eyelid. He had to stand, slightly humped over, with one hand stretched out, while he heard the vacationer very slowly get out of bed and walk toward the door.

The door opened. Exceedingly slow footsteps on the path outside. And still Wan had to remain motionless, almost too rigid to be able to breathe.

The moments passed. Wan heard the sound of the *Basset's* diesel being started and, much later, the noise of her winch. Still he could only stand there, one hand stretched out.

It is characteristic of paralyzer-gun shock that it wears off abruptly. Suddenly Wan could move again.

He ran out the door and down the path. The *Basset* was no longer anchored at the jetty. She was about three hundred yards from the shore, turning idly in the water, presenting first her bow and then her stern to the land. The vacationer lay face down on the deck. Her engine seemed to have died.

Wan hesitated. The man might still be capable of firing at

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him, and a shock from a paralyzer, to a swimmer, would certainly be fatal. But if the *Basset* got much further out, he and Anassa would be hopelessly marooned on Fridtjof Island. There was no help for it. He'd have to try.

He tore off his clothes and dived from the edge of the little pier. As quietly as he was able, he approached the ship.

He was within two yards of the vessel's dangling mooring cable when he heard Anassa's terrified voice, "Look out! The gun!"

Instantly Wan dived. There was a roaring in his ears. He couldn't tell whether the cold tingle he felt between his shoulders was merely the rush of the water, or the faint lash of the paralyzer gun's charge.

He came up at the other end of the *Basset*. Anassa yelled, "He's firing!" Once more Wan dived.

This time he felt no tingle from the gun. He knew that a paralyzer quickly loses charge. When he neared the mooring cable again, he caught hold of it and swung himself up hand over hand.

He reached the deck without interference. The vacationer had collapsed over the star bulwark, and as Wan came running up to him, the gun dropped from his hand.

Wan knelt beside him and felt for his heart. There was no pulsation at all; but, fumbling inside his shirt, Wan found a bulky envelope stuffed with closely written sheets.

He riffled through them hastily and raised his eyebrows. But Anassa was watching him anxiously from the pier, and the *Basset* was drifting further out with every minute. He started up the diesel and headed the little craft toward the island again.

"Is he dead?" the girl asked when he had made the *Basset* fast once more.

"Yes. His name was Tom Wentworth; there was some sort of report inside his shirt. I'm going back to the cabin for the

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first-aid kit, 'Na, and I'll see if I can find any other papers he may have left."

He jumped ashore and trotted up the path. When he came back ten minutes or so later, Anassa, Baldur beside her, was still standing on the jetty.

"I didn't want to be alone on the *Basset* with the body," she said in explanation. "Did you find anything else?"

"I found his diary. I haven't had time to do more than look at it. But it appears he was an agent of the GSSC."

Anassa's eyes opened wide. "The big spaceship combine! What was he doing here?"

"Whatever it was, it wasn't merely vacationing."

Later that evening, in the cabin, they read Wentworth's report and his diary. (Wentworth himself, neatly stitched up in a tarpaulin, had been taken out to deep water and slid over the side.)

"You were right, Wan," Anassa said at last, closing the diary. "He was an agent of the GSSC. They sent him here to investigate persistent rumors that Gwethym was the site of an energy leak. After he got done investigating, he managed to hit a rock with his little sloop and sink her. That's how he happened to be marooned on Fridtjof."

"Yes. He was to investigate, and then make a report. Did you notice the tone of his report, 'Na? It was defensive and deprecatory. As if he were saying, 'In the first place, there probably isn't an energy leak. But if there is, it isn't serious.'"

Anassa looked puzzled. "But his non-serious energy leak killed him, in the end. Why did he try to kill us and steal our ship?"

"What else could he do? He was a good company man. When he heard other people knew about the leak, his first impulse was to keep it quiet. He probably didn't realize himself how serious his condition was. Actually, he killed himself by overdriving his weakened heart."

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There was a silence. Wan was reading Wentworth's report again. He referred from the report to the diary and back to the report. At last he said, "He tells us, you know." There was excitement in his voice.

"Tells us what?"

"Tells us where the site of the maximum leak is to be found. Look here." He pointed to a passage in the report. "Now, compare that with this."

"Oh. But where is it?"

"About fifteen li from here." He scribbled on a bit of paper. "These are the co-ordinates."

He grinned at her. "We're making progress, jade girl. Now we know where the leak is. All we have to do is to stop it up."

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WAN LAID the sextant down. "We'll never get a better fix than that," he said. "Conditions couldn't be better. We're at the absolute center of the leak, give or take less than a li. That's pretty darned good."

The air was utterly still, the sea was level as a piece of glass. The regular dull whoomp of the *Basset's* diesel had ceased long ago. Anassa said, "This feels like the center of something."

"Yes." Wan fished in his jacket and drew out a pocket magnifier. "Watch this."

He found a scrap of paper and focussed the sun's light into a tiny brilliant spot on it. The moments passed. The spot of light stayed steady. At last Anassa said, "It doesn't burn."

"No. In two or three hours it might begin to smoke a little. But combustion, as we can see with the diesel, is difficult here."

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"And now, it's time for Ehr-li Wan, boy genius and physicist-in-residence at San Yat-sen University, to give a convincing imitation of a man who knows what he's doing.

"You wanted to know what I was up to, all those hours I spent glass-blowing and soldering, when I wasn't on watch. I'll bring my creation out on deck and assemble it."

He started toward the cabin. The girl said, "Wan, are you moving more slowly than you usually do?"

"I don't think—" he said, and then stopped. They looked at each other. "I probably am," he said. "And it seemed to me, when you were getting breakfast this morning, that it took you an unusually long time.

"Well, it was to be expected. We'll have to try to get our job here done as soon as we can, that's all."

The fruit of Wan's hours of glass-blowing and soldering, when he had it assembled, was worth looking at. Two U-tubes of glass led into four tiny glass helices whose ends were connected in pairs to a big glass fan. From the crenulated edges of the fan some fifty slender wires ran into a ring of metal which, in turn, narrowed into a longer, slender metal snout.

"That's the jet," Wan said, explaining. "It's powered from those two fuel cells that are connected to the inside ends of the U-tubes."

"What is it, though? What's it meant to do?"

"It's designed to generate a very small ionizing jet."

"I should think you'd need lots of power for that."

"If it used much power, you and I both would have to wear lead-lined suits and work behind a shield. Even as it is, I'm going to wear a lead-lined apron and gloves."

"How is it supposed to work?"

"The jet should pick up the crystals of virus one or two at a time, ionize them, and 'plate' them over the leak. It would take far more power than we have available to do this, ex-



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cept that there are theoretical reasons for believing that once the process starts it will carry on sequentially, with only a slight assist from my jet."

"How will we know whether the leak is really being filled?"

"There's no actual leak in the physical sense, no lesion, as I told you before. But if the plating process is successful, the virus crystals ought to disappear. I don't mean become invisible, or be transformed into energy or broken down into simpler molecular states. I mean they ought to cease to exist, as far as we here can tell."

"Where will the crystals go, then? Into the other lower energy level universe?"

"Not at all. That would only be another form of energy leak. They won't *be* anywhere. They will have ceased to exist.

"Don't look so depressed. This only seems difficult because we're not using the right words to talk about it. And now, I'm going down in the hold and bring up the chest with the virus."

He took off the hatch cover and lowered himself into the hold. A moment later he gave a startled shout.

"'Nal The chest is empty! The virus isn't here!"

The girl ran to the hatch and looked down into the hold.

"Come on down," Wan said. His face was white. "The stuff's gone."

The chest had been tied to a bulkhead with heavy rope to keep it from shifting. Wan had untied the rope and thrown back the lid of the chest. "It's like a magical trick," he told the girl, pointing to the empty chest. "There's nothing there."

"How *can* it be gone?" she demanded. "One solid can't pass through another."

"It can if it changes state," Wan said. "If you put a piece of dry ice in a closed box, it will be gone in an hour. Some-

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thing like that must have happened here. And yet, it doesn't seem reasonable that those crys—"

Anassa interrupted him with a cry. "Look there, along the frames! What's that purple stuff?"

His eyes followed her gesture. He whistled. He hurried to the spot and bent over it.

"Yes, it's the virus crystals," he said. "They're lying all along the frames of the hull, in little heaps and drifts. There doesn't seem to be much, if any, of the stuff gone."

"Aren't the individual crystals a little larger than they were?" she asked. "I don't remember being able to see them as individual crystals before. They were too small."

"Yes. I think they've grown. I suppose that's what the force field around the chest on the island was for—to keep the crystals from leaking out. I don't know, though, why they haven't leaked on out through the hull of the *Basset*. Perhaps we caught them before they had time."

"Why are they bigger than they were?" the girl wanted to know.

Wan shook his head. "Some of the crystals may be growing at the expense of the others. Or, possibly, they may be taking up energy from the energy that is in motion out past them through the leak.

"That's just a guess, and I don't think it matters. The thing to do now is to get the crystals back together in the chest, or some other container, so I can try the ionising jet on them. For the process to carry through, all the crystals ought to be in physical contact. I don't think it would work on separated drifts and heaps."

"How are we going to get them back in the chest?" she asked.

"Wait." He put his hands on the edges of the hatch and levered himself up on deck. Anassa, watching, thought how slowly he moved. She was left alone in the hold to watch

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the tiny, uncanny motion of the crystals over each other.

Wan came back with a long-handled brush, a dustpan and a broom. "We'll try sweeping it up," he said.

He gave the broom to Anassa. She took it, and began to sweep a particularly large heap of the brownish crystals away from the frame toward the dustpan.

The results were unexpected. Part of the heap moved away from the broom as if repelled by it. Other particles clung to the bristles of the implement. None at all went into the dustpan.

Anassa gave a gasp of annoyance. She swept harder. The crystals flew up from the broom in a little glistening cloud. Some of them settled four or five inches away from the broom. Others hovered above it and then came down along the fibers. As before, none landed in the dustpan.

"What is it?" she demanded of Wan, who was having his troubles with the brush. "The stuff acts like it's bewitched."

"No, it's carrying an electrical charge. Try shaking the broom out over the chest. You may get some of the crystals in it that way."

Anassa obeyed. A powdering of crystals went into the chest. Most of them stayed on the broom.

"I'm going to get the shovels," Wan told her. "Perhaps we can shovel it up."

The shovels, brought down into the hold, proved to be even less efficient than the fiber implements. All the crystals retreated rapidly from the metal of the blades.

"The broom and brush are our best bet, I guess," Wan said. "We may be able to corral some of the stuff, anyhow."

The two settled down in grim silence to the unproductive task of chasing grains of the crystallized virus about in the hold of the *Basset*. At the end of three hours of infuriating work, the crystals in the chest were rather less than an inch

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deep. The others lay in heaps and drifts along the *Basset's* frame.

Anassa began to giggle hysterically. "This isn't going to work, Wan," she said. "It's like a nightmare. I think we could chase these crystals around for days, and we'd never get more than a few of them into the chest. It just won't work. It makes me feel like a fool."

Wan leaned on the handle of his brush and looked at her. "Yes, you're right," he said. "It isn't going to work. And we're using up a lot of physical energy trying it, energy we haven't got to spare.

"I'm going to bring the ironizing equipment down here in the hold. I may be able to plate a few of the crystals over the leak. Once the process starts, it might just possibly go on by itself."

They went on deck. The sun had almost set. Baldur, glad to see them, wagged his tail but did not get up from where he was lying. "He's feeling it too," Wan commented.

Painfully—for by now all their movements were languid and slow—they moved the fragile apparatus down into the hold. Wan donned lead-lined apron and gloves. "Stay on deck," he told the girl. "You can't help me."

"I want to be with you," she answered, and followed him.

It was dark in the hold. Wan turned on a light. Feeble as it was, it seemed to cause more shadows than it dispelled.

Wan turned a switch. A very faint blue glow came from the end of the long metal snout. Then it died away, and the young man began to play the invisible stream over the piles and drifts of crystals where they lay.

His movements were slow. Once he looked at a dial he had fixed to the leads from the fuel cells, and shook his head. He went on slowly moving the nozzle back and forth.

"Are the crystals disappearing?" Anassa asked.

"I don't think so," he answered,

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At last he laid the nozzle down. "All the juice in the cells is gone," he told her. "Nothing has happened."

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

He looked at her without speaking. His face was lined with fatigue, and his skin was a dirty gray.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I'm too tired to think."

"Let's go up, and have supper," Anassa suggested. "We can have something cold. Perhaps food and sleep will help. Tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow is another day," Wan interrupted, smiling tiredly. "But tonight, 'Na, tonight it looks as if we have failed."

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ANASSA WAS a long time in falling asleep. Wan's admission of failure had impressed her deeply, and she was painfully aware of the increasing erosion of physical vitality from which both he and she were suffering. Lying alone in the narrow bunk, she felt a cold torpor invade her that was the opposite of the soft relaxation of natural sleep.

She heard Wan turning in his bunk, and knew he was as wakeful as she. She would have given much to lie down beside him, feel his arms embrace her, and be comforted by his warmth and proximity. But the bunks on the *Basset* were too narrow to accommodate two people for sleeping. She could only sigh and feel the cold moments pass.

Baldur was padding softly about the cabin. At last he came and stretched out beside the girl's bunk. She put one hand out and let it rest gently on his head, and in this position drifted into a light sleep.

Her dreams were bad. The feeling of failure and anxiety she had had when awake deepened, in sleep, to a guilty

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horror. She was driven to the edge of a precipice, swam through raging seas, was the target for ravening bolts of lightning. And in every case she had brought the disaster upon herself, the fault and guilt were hers.

At last she dreamed that she stood alone in the center of a vast plain. She was frightened, and after a moment realized that it was because the air was so thin that she could hardly breathe. Her lungs ached, her heart beat wildly. There was nothing for her lungs and her laboring heart to take hold of. There, alone in the desolate gloom, she was dying, she would die. There was no air; it was her fault that there was no air.

She awoke with a cry. For a moment she did not know where she was. The cabin was filled with a strange ashen light.

"What's the matter, 'Na?" Wan asked from his bunk. Bal-dur was growling softly.

"I don't know, I had a bad dream, I—what's making that light?"

The spirit of her dream was still upon her. She heard Wan leave his bunk and go to the cabin door. He gave a startled gasp and shut it instantly.

"That stuff's swelled up during the night," he said. "It's all over the ship."

She got out of her bunk and dressed as quickly as she could. It was the sun's rays, she supposed, that, filtering through the mass of cloudy crystals, gave the strange ashen quality to the light.

"I'm going to open the door again," Wan said. He had been dressing too. Cautiously he turned the handle and stepped out.

Anassa followed him. She saw that the *Basset's* deck was covered with the crystals, now as large as the width of a man's hand, and that they had drifted high up over the

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cabin and were beginning to arch up over the bulwarks and down the vessel's sides. Where the sun's rays struck them they were a mass of brownish-purple glints that moved in an uncanny travesty of life.

"What made them grow?" she asked, trembling. "How did they get out of the hold?"

"They pushed the hatch cover aside," he answered. "They don't seem to be exerting any pressure, though—if they were pushing very hard, we'd hear the *Basset's* timber creak.

"I don't know what made them grow. It may have been the ionizing jet, but I doubt it. They'd begun to expand before I played it on them."

She gave a quavering sigh. "What shall we do, Wan? The crystals are bigger now than when we came out. I'm afraid they'll take over the whole ship."

"We'll have to try to shovel them up and drop them off over the side," he said, pinching his lip.

He got the shovels from the locker. The unpleasant comedy of the day before was now repeated on a larger and more alarming scale. The crystals retreated from the shovels, but clung insistently, in long loose strings and chains, to the wooden deck and sides of the ship.

Wan had found, on his way to the locker for the shovels, that if he walked slowly the crystals would move away in front of him and leave the deck bare for his feet. Now Anassa, in a fit of exasperation, threw the shovel down and tried to pick up the pale, glinting things in her hands. Again and again they crept away from her and left her with nothing in her grasp.

"Why can't I pick them up?" she asked. "Are they alive?"

"Of course not. The metal of the shovels and the flesh of your body repel them, that's all. But they're attracted by wood or fiber, like the bristles of the broom."

Once more Anassa made futile scraping motions along

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the deck with the shovel. The crystals, larger than ever, moved aside easily.

Tears had begun to flow down the girl's cheeks. She let the handle of the shovel fall with a bang on the deck. Baldur, inside the cabin, was howling. For a moment she stood motionless. Then she hurried as fast as she could to the locker where the life raft was kept.

Wan caught her by the elbow. "Where are you going?"

"For the life raft."

"Why?"

"We've got to abandon ship. There's room enough on the raft for you and me and Baldur, and we can take food. We've got to get away from here while we still can."

"Why? What will happen if we don't?"

She stared at him. "Why—we'll be overwhelmed. The *Basset* will sink under the weight of the crystals. We won't be able to breathe. It's like the mill in the fairy tale that ground out salt until the house burst with it."

Wan laughed. "How will we be overwhelmed? Look around. The *Basset* isn't riding an inch lower in the water than she usually does. The crystals may be all over the ship, down the sides and even under the keel, but they aren't weighing us down. As to breathing, you see yourself how they draw aside from us."

"But the mass of them is increasing! They may leave a space of a few inches around us, but eventually they'll be up as high as our heads. Then they'll flow over us completely." She remembered the dreadful airlessness of her dream.

"The bulk of the crystals *was* increasing for a while," Wan answered. "But for the last half hour or so, it's remained exactly the same. I've been watching carefully."

"But the crystals are growing in size!"

"Yes."



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"Then the bulk of the crystals, as a whole, must be increasing too," Anassa said triumphantly.

"Logically, it ought to be. But something odd is happening. Do you see those four crystals in a row there, between the bulwark and the deckhouse?"

"Yes."

"Well, when I was looking at them a moment ago, there were five of them. I took my eyes away for a minute. When I looked at the spot again there were four larger crystals where the five had been, filling exactly the same space. One of them had gone."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. One peculiar thing is that if you fixate an individual crystal with your eyes, it just quietly goes on growing. But if you take your eyes away for an instant and then look back, one of the crystals will have disappeared."

The girl sighed. "But what are we to do? Just stay here waiting while the crystals grow fewer and fewer in number and larger and larger in size?"

"There's nothing much else we can do," Wan answered. "There's no wind at all, and chemical reactions are so slowed down that our fuel won't ignite. Let's sit down on the deck and rest. The sun's well up, and I'm tired."

They seated themselves on the deck, while the crystals, now nearly the size of a man's head, sluggishly withdrew for them. Anassa, now that she was no longer excited and active, felt a cold torpor again invading her.

"What will happen when all the crystals except one or two have disappeared?" she asked slowly.

"They'll disappear too."

"And after that?"

"It depends on where they have disappeared to. Until then, all we can do is wait."

Anassa felt that her heartbeat and breathing had grown

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extremely slow. Her thoughts were as quick as ever, but the movements of her body were under a heavy drag. She thought it would take her minutes to close her eyes or move the fingers of her hand.

She saw, without much emotion, that the whole portion of the *Basset* in front of her was occupied by two enormous crystals. Sluggishly they rolled apart from each other. Then—had she moved her eyes a trifle—they were both gone.

"Gone," she said. "Where did they go?"

"I think," Wan answered slowly, "they may have gone to plug up the energy leak.

"You see, 'Na, we may have been wrong in thinking we had to do something to the X-stuff to get it to act. Perhaps the Old Ones set it up so that, when it was brought to the site of the energy leak, it would act by itself."

There was a long silence. Anassa felt a cold, remote misery. The world around her seemed unreal, and she herself a ghost.

She did not know how long she sat there, chilled and alienated. The sun was low in the west.

Suddenly, cutting across her apathy, there came a sound she had not heard for two full days. It was the soft *whump-whump* of the *Basset's* diesel. "What—?" she asked.

"The leak is plugged," Wan said, getting slowly to his feet. "Energy from the rest of Gwethym is flowing back here. And our fuel oil will burn again."

## 10

"OF COURSE it's important," Halliday said annoyedly. "Few things are more important than avoiding bad publicity."

"Yes, sir," his radio technician answered. "You mean that if it were known—"

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"I mean that Wentworth isn't on Fridtjof Island. You followed his traces into thirty fathoms of water. Whether he was alive or dead when he was put there, I don't know—the *Starborne* hasn't any diving equipment, so I can't send one of the men down to find out. But he certainly didn't go there under his own power.

"We saw his sunken ship on the south side of the island. Was it scuttled? And his papers and notes are gone. Somebody took them. And that means that somebody, some quite unauthorized person, knows that Tom Wentworth, an employee of the GSSC, was investigating the so-called energy leak.

"That's the kind of publicity we don't want. No big concern likes loose talk. I want you to pick up those people's traces in the chronichnion and follow them to where they are now."

"Yes, sir. It won't be easy, sir. The reason I could pick up Wentworth's traces was that I had a pretty accurate spacial fix on him initially—his bunk in the hut. I haven't any idea where these other people were in either time or space. I can't pick up their blips."

"Never mind that," said the master of the *Starborne*. "They must have got near Wentworth, at some point. Hunt around on both sides of his time-space traces. You'll pick them up eventually."

"Yes, sir, I'll try."

"Don't try," Halliday answered irritably. His heavy face was flushed. "Do it!"

For two days the *Starborne* swung idly at anchor beside the jetty of Fridtjof Island while the technician walked slowly up and down the path from the hut to the water, his head and back bent under the weight of the elaborate apparatus of a space-time tracing machine. He had no success.

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Early in the morning of the third day, Budd, the technician, knocked on Halliday's door. "SOS, sir," he said, entering.

"What makes you think I'm interested in an SOS?" Halliday asked irritably. He had been interrupted in a delicate part of his toilet. "The *Starborne* isn't in the business of rescuing people."

"Yes, sir, I know. But this SOS sounds as if it might be from the people whose traces we're trying to pick up." He handed the flimsy bit of plastic tape to his captain.

*Sailing yacht Basset, Halliday read, in distress. Too weak to work ship. Will all craft receiving this message please relay to New Christiana and ask government cutter with physician to be sent out. We are at 177° 20' 3" west and 44° 4' north, off Tu Fu Island. Help urgent. Ehr-li Wan, skipper of the Basset.*

"Hm," said Halliday. "What makes you think this is the people we're hunting? It sounds like a pleasure yacht where somebody's gotten sick."

"Yes, sir. But look where the ship is." He pointed to the map. "That's only about three days' sail from here. There's very little traffic in these waters. And he doesn't say they're sick, he says they're too weak to work the ship. If they had been poking about near the site of, ah, the so-called energy leak—"

"I'm inclined to think the energy leak never existed," Halliday said abstractedly. "Certainly nobody on the *Starborne* has been noticeably affected by it. But radio them help is on the way."

"Yes, sir. Shall I relay the message to New Christiana? The *Basset's* signal was awfully weak. Only an ultrasensitive receiver like ours could have picked it up."

"No, don't bother. It isn't necessary to bring New Christiana into this. And don't talk to anyone about this, Budd.

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We'll handle this ourselves." Halliday pushed the buzzer that would summon his first mate to the intercom.

The *Starborne* was not subject to the limitations of power that had so harrassed the *Basset*. She had atomic engines, and in the atomic fuel for them she had, practically speaking, an inexhaustible source of power. In less than two days from the time Budd had brought the SOS to his superior, the *Starborne* was anchoring near the *Basset* off Tu Fu Island. The smaller craft was flying a distress signal.

"*Basset* ahoy!" Halliday shouted through an amplifier. There was no answer. Halliday went into his cabin and, rather ostentatiously, came out with a medical kit. There were two considerably less ostentatious bulges over his hips that meant he was wearing side arms.

The *Basset*, because of her lesser draft, was anchored closer inshore than the *Starborne* could get. Halliday had a boat lowered and, with Budd for his only companion, took it across to the little ship.

Halliday, whatever his commitments to the GSSC might have been, was a good sailor. He snaked a rope up over the *Basset's* bulwark, made his craft fast, and shinnied up the rope to the deck. Budd, less adroitly, followed him.

It was immediately obvious that there was nobody on board the *Basset*. Her cabin was as empty as her deck had been. Halliday stood looking about him, regarding the two narrow berths, the piece of board that had served Wan as laboratory bench and writing desk, and the tiny galley. Then we went over to the writing board and started rummaging through the pigeon holes above it.

Wentworth's report and diary were almost the first things he found. Budd, who was standing behind him, saw his neck turn red.

"Yes, these are the people we've been hunting," he said

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in a choking voice. "These are poor old Wentworth's papers. They killed him and took his papers away from him. And they wanted a government cutter sent out for them from New Christiana! People like that don't deserve any consideration. They're thieves, common thieves, and murderers!"

He strode purposively out of the cabin. "They must be on the island," he said. "I wonder why, if they were so weak that they had to send out a distress signal, they went to the exertion of going ashore. But we'll find them and settle with them."

"Well, sir," Budd said, replying to his superior's implied question, "they may have gone ashore hoping there was someone on the island who could help them."

"Help them!" Halliday replied angrily. "People like that aren't entitled to help. They're murderers!"

Budd nodded. He did not think it politic to interrupt Halliday's self-righteous anger by pointing out that Wentworth, who had been investigating the site of the "so-called energy leak" for several months, might have been dying or dead before even the the *Basset* was heard of. Halliday, a good company man, had reason for wanting to believe that the people who had Wentworth's papers—and hence knew about the existence of the energy leak—were murderers. It is not murder to kill murderers.

"Be careful," Halliday said as he ran his boat up on the beach. "These people may be dangerous. I'd not be surprised if the whole thing, SOS and all, were a trap. These people are obviously fanatics who have some morbid reason for hating the GSSC." He was, Budd perceived, deliberately working himself into a state of mind where any action would seem a just vengeance to him.

They did not have to look far to find the people who had been on the *Basset*. They had collapsed a few yards from the beach, just within the shadow of the trees. They were

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quite near to each other. There was a big cyon by their side.

The man's mouth was open and his eyes were glazed. The girl's long amber hair was still beautiful, but her face was the face of a woman at the gates of death.

For a minute or two Halliday did not move. Then he picked up the man's hand and felt at the wrist for a pulse.

He let the hand drop. "It won't be necessary to settle with them," he said in a tone of heavy satisfaction. "He's almost gone."

"Aren't you going to—" said Budd, and then stopped. He didn't know what he had been going to ask Halliday. It wasn't his place to make suggestions to his superior, whether of compassion or of homicide.

"No. It won't be necessary. I shan't have to soil my hands."

He might be sincere, Budd reflected as he followed Halliday's broad back down to the beach. Even a good company man may prefer to have some things taken out of his hands.

Wan lay in a stupor. He had been aware neither of Halliday's coming nor of his departure. He did not hear the distant sounds of the *Starborne* as she weighed anchor. His senses were wrapped in mist.

At the back of his mind, very remote by now, was regret for having brought Anassa here to die. In the days after they had left the place where the energy leak had been, when it had become plain to both of them that they had been damaged beyond their ability to survive, he had tried painfully to tell her how sorry he was. She had been too weak to do more than touch his hand and try to smile. But even now he felt a dim wonder that he could so fatally have underestimated the danger.

He felt that he was sinking slowly into cold waters. Back-

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ward into the black. He knew what waters they were. The bottomless dark well.

He did not know when a hand was laid on his forehead. But after a moment he became aware of a light, icy tingle that raced along his body and ran deep into his nerves.

He opened his eyes. He felt amazement that he could open them.

A woman was bending over him. A woman? He had seen the statue in the temple too many times not to know her. It was Neith!

### 11

"SHE OUGHTN'T to have gone off and left us," said the proprietor of the waterfront wine shop. "A vacation at this time—there's bound to be trouble. The Jovists are getting bolder every day."

"Was it really a vacation?" the customer answered. "Maybe she went on important business. The Lady Anassa always seemed a responsible person to me."

"Well, it looked like a vacation," Hu-shih answered.

"She's sure to be back in time for the Games," said the customer. "As I said, she's serious and responsible."

"Maybe she is. But I very much doubt there'll be any Games celebrated this year. Besides, all this unrest is bad for business."

"I should have thought people would drink more when they were worried."

"Not with this kind of worry. People aren't drinking, they're laying in arms. It gives me the shivers. Nothing in the world could be so bad for Gwethym as a civil war."

The customer had backed away a little from the wine counter. Perhaps he felt that for a wine-shop owner to be



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telling his troubles to a customer was contrary to nature. "I've got to be getting back to—"

Hu-shih wasn't listening. "What's that spot out on the water?" he said. "That sort of glittering?"

"I don't see anything."

"You're not looking in the right place." He pointed. "Over there."

"Oh. It looks like—"

Hu-shih and the customer exchanged glances. "It looks like a woman," the customer said.

Lightly, with swift delicate footsteps, a woman was walking over the surface of the water toward the shore. As she advanced, the shipping of the port froze into immobility around her. And as she moved forward there followed in her train the babble of astonished voices that was to be her constant accompaniment during the hours she spent in New Christiana.

"She's walking over the water! She's made of gold!" Hu-shih cried. He gulped. "It's Neith."

"Neith isn't real."

"You fool, who else would be walking over the water? Besides, I've seen her image often enough in the temple. I want to be the first—" The wine-shop owner threw up the flap of his wine counter and ran out. The customer, more slowly, followed him.

By the time the woman was climbing up a ladder on the side of one of the piers, half the population of the waterfront was waiting to welcome her. They drew back, murmuring, as she stepped out on the concrete.

Seen up close, her physical beauty was incredible, astonishing. She wore the thinnest of white shifts, through which the golden flesh of her body seemed to glow. Her hair, loose around her shoulders, was a darker, molten gold. Her eyes were an intense, almost burning aquamarine.

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When he got home that night, he said to his wife, "This will put a stop to that Jovis nonsense, anyhow."

"Why?" asked his wife, who could be rather an annoying person.

"Why? Hyacinth, you surprise me. Neith herself has visited her own city. The Jovists haven't a leg to stand on. Things are going to be all right."

"She didn't really do anything, though," his wife objected.

"Didn't she? Anybody her shadow fell on is fortunate. You know that cough I used to have? It's gone. I won't wake you up any more at night with that cough."

"Well, I hope not," said his wife.

Chryse, on board the *Jade Phoenix*, seemed to listen. She hesitated. She listened again. Then she very slightly changed the ship's course.

It was a little more than thirty-six hours from the time she had left the seaport to the time she reached Tu Fu Island. She moored the *Jade Phoenix* beside the *Basset*. Just as Hal-liday had done, she walked up from the beach to where the trees began. She bent over Wan and touched his forehead with her hand.

## 12

ANASSA CAME back to life reluctantly. The dark waters had almost closed over her head. The touch that Wan had perceived as an icy tingle seemed to her at first a dull vexation, and then a stringing torment. Feebly she tried to move to escape it. It followed her. At last, bitterly, she opened her eyes.

The girl called Chryse was kneeling beside her, lightly and delicately stroking her shoulders and arms. The stinging

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pain was in her touch. But Anassa knew her face. "You . . . Neith," she croaked. Her tongue was thick in her mouth.

The girl frowned. Afterwards, it was to seem to Anassa that the most human emotion she ever saw Chryse display was her annoyance at being perpetually mistaken for Neith. "No," she said. "My name is Chryse, which means gold. I am a woman like yourself."

Anassa tried to laugh. Speech was coming back to her. "Like me? Is my flesh like glowing gold? Could my touch bring a dead woman back to life? I've been dead, you know."

"Perhaps not like you, then," Chryse conceded. "But I am no goddess, certainly."

Anassa raised herself on one arm. For a moment she dismissed the question of the girl's identity. "I'm hungry," she said.

Chryse smiled. "So was he," she said. She indicated Wan, who was kneeling at Anassa's other side. "You were harder to bring back. The cyon was the easiest of all. Here." She offered Anassa a piece of bread dipped in wine.

The priestess ate it greedily. "It tastes good," she said. "Don't you eat too, Chryse?"

"Not this food," Chryse said, a little sadly. "I brought this food from your ship."

"Oh." Anassa finished the bread. She sank back on her arm. "How strange everything looks," she said. "Fresh and new. Trees and water and the sky. Different from the way I remembered it."

"That's because you were so nearly dead."

"Yes. You know, I don't think I wanted to come back to living. It hurt. I resented it."

"Didn't you want to come back to life for me, Anassa?" Wan asked. He pressed her hand.

"I had gone too far. I had forgotten you."

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"In our world," said Chryse, "we say that energy always seeks to lose itself."

"In your world?" Anassa asked. "You're so beautiful! You *must* be Neith."

"No."

"How did you get here, then?"

Chryse hesitated. "The energy leak you experienced here," she said, "had its counterpart in a universe above you. The use of the space warp had its effect there, too."

"It's so different! There, energy is personal, energy is people. There is nothing that you would call material."

Anassa had a momentary vision of a universe aflame with vast incomprehensible energies, finer spun and more ardent than the burning of the hottest sun. "But you're material," she said.

"Here and now, yes. I have clothed myself . . . But when we knew that the stuff of our world was leaking out, we had to stop it. I volunteered."

"You slipped through the gap?" Wan asked.

"It was deliberate and necessary," said Chryse. "But I should like to get back to my own place."

Wan released Annassa's hand. He drew a notebook from his pocket and began to write in it. He frowned at his equations. At last he said, "I don't believe it could be done, Chryse. If all the power of our universe could be rolled into one ball and used to send you home, it wouldn't be enough. The difference in level is too great."

Chryse bowed her beautiful head. Neither Wan nor Anassa realized that she had heard her death warrant. "That's what Larsen said," she answered. She sighed.

"Larsen? You've been to New Christiana?"

"Yes. I've been many places in your world. He told me you were more interested in speculative subjects than he had had opportunity to be. So I set out to find you. I heard

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your distress signal when the *Jade Phoneix* wasn't far out."

"Was it you who visited Dieudonne Island?" Anassa wanted to know.

"Yes. When I first reached your world, I tried to find someone who could help me. I asked a fisherman for his boat, the *Snekkjur*, and started for Dieudonne Island, the nearest land the chart showed. But I had bad weather, and the oil ran out. So I had to walk to the island."

Wan and Anassa exchanged glances. "You walked?" Wan said.

"Yes. Can't you do that?"

"Certainly not."

"Oh. That explains why everyone was so surprised. When I got there, they called me 'Neith' and begged me to stay with them. I helped some sick people, but I couldn't stay. I asked them where the scientists of Gwethym were to be found.

"They must have misunderstood me. They sent me to a strange place, an island that is sometimes above water and sometimes under it."

"They thought you were asking them to direct you to the place of the gods," Wan interrupted.

"So that's why they sent me to the island." Chryse seemed to be amused by this explanation. "But when I got there," she went on, "I found nothing useful. So I went to New Christiana next."

"What happened to the fisherman whose boat you took?" Anassa asked. She disliked to think that someone so beautiful as Chryse could be capable of callousness.

"I left him and his mates on a tiny island waiting for the government launch. They said it would come in a couple of days. They begged me to take the *Snekkjur*, you know."

"I'm sure they did," Wan said soberly.

"Yes, they were kind. They asked me to touch them, and

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then they said they would live forever. But that's not true. Everything ends and dies."

Baldur came up to Anassa and pressed his head against her side. She was still weak, but she patted his head and pulled his ears. "Good old boy," she said.

"Was it you two who stopped the leak of energy from your level?" Chryse asked. "Larsen hinted at that. He did not seem to take it very seriously."

Wan made a grimace. "I gather Larsen thinks I'm brilliant but unreliable," he said. "Yes, I suppose we stopped it. Or at least, we facilitated the stopping."

He told Chryse of their discovery of the chest on the island with the grapevines, and of what had happened afterwards. "It seemed to be automatic, actually," he finished. "All we did was to bring the chest and its contents near to the physical site of the leak."

The girl nodded. "You know, of course, that you people who live on Gwethym now aren't the first intelligent beings to inhabit it."

"Yes. We've found some evidences of them. We call them the Old Ones. We don't know what they looked like, though."

Chryse seemed about to speak and then checked herself. "I found a great deal about them on the island where the people of Dieudonne sent me. The Dieudonneans knew about the island as a sort of myth, I suppose, but it actually exists."

"The science of you Gwethymians is founded on physics. isn't it, Wan?"

The question took the young man by surprise. "Why, I suppose you could say so. Certainly terrestrial science—and we originated on Terra—tried to deal with problems of physics long before it dealt with those of biology or psychology. Science advances on a broad front, of course. But our scientists knew that the Earth moved about the sun a

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considerable while before they were aware of the circulation of the blood."

"I believe something different was the case with the Old Ones," Chryse said. "Biology was their most advanced science. Their physics was relatively much less developed. That's why, when they might have an energy leak from their world to handle, they resorted to a particular kind of virus molecule as a means of stopping it."

"Did they use the space warp?" Anassa wanted to know. "Was that what caused their energy leak?"

Chryse said, "This is a guess. But I believe their physics was not far enough developed for them to use the space warp as your commerce uses it."

"Then what caused their leak?" the priestess asked.

"I believe they wanted to have a means of controlling a possible contingency, not dealing with an actual emergency."

Once more Chryse seemed to check herself. After a pause, she said, "But at least you two have the leak stopped."

"Yes," Wan answered.

"Have you thought, Anassa and Wan, of what will happen if the space warp continues to be used?"

They looked at each other. Finally Wan said, "Presumably, the leak will be opened up again."

"Yes, I think so. It might happen very quickly, it might take a hundred years. But your universe would be once more in danger. And so would mine. And this time the leak would be more difficult to stop."

"But what can we do?" cried Anassa. "We can't ask the big shipping combines to please stop using the warp. The commerce of the galaxy depends on it."

Chryse said, "You say, the space warp warps space. But another way of expressing it would be to say that the space warp acts as a lever by means of which a ship is moved out of normal space into hyperspace and back into normal space

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again. Isn't that right, Wan? Larsen said something like that."

"Substantially, yes."

"The fulcrum against which the space warp presses must be rendered unusable. Then there will be no question of using the lever again."

"How is this to be done?" Wan asked. He was watching Chryse closely, his blue eyes narrow and intent.

She did not answer immediately. "We must go to the island of the Old Ones," she replied at last. "That's the first step, I think."

"But after that?" Wan insisted.

This time Chryse did not answer at all. Baldur had gone up to her and was standing with his head against her knee. She bent over him and looked deep into his eyes.

Wan felt an involuntary tingle of superstitious fear run along his spine. He glanced toward Anassa. She too was looking at Chryse, her lips apart. Then his eyes and Anassa's met. And he knew that he and his mistress both shared the same wild surmise.

### 13

WAN WHISTLED as he steered. The *Basset* had made good time from Tu Fu Island. The *Jade Phoenix* had been left behind, swinging at anchor in the little bay, when Chryse had indicated her preference for the smaller, quicker vessel. They had taken the *Phoenix*' fuel oil on board the smaller ship, and now, four days later, they were getting near the enigmatic island they sought.

Chryse was standing on the port side of the *Basset*, with Baldur at her side. Having a demigoddess on board the *Basset*—whatever Chryse might be, she was certainly more than a woman—had proved less disturbing than one would



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have thought. She spent most of her time looking out over the water, with Baldur beside her. A deep, wordless communication seemed to have established itself between her and the big animal.

Suddenly Chryse raised her hands to her eyes to shade them. A moment later she called to the two at the helm, "There's a big ship coming out from behind that tiny island."

Anassa picked up the binoculars and focussed them. "So there is," she said after a minute. "Her name's the *Kwan-yin*. And there are a lot of men on her deck, fifteen or twenty of them."

Wan frowned. "I don't like this," he said. "What's a craft that size doing here? There's no fishing and no traffic in these waters. Is she flying a merchant flag?"

"No flag at all," the girl reported after a further inspection.

"Hm. I'm going to try to outrun her."

The *Basset* shot ahead. In this moment Anassa realized how poorly equipped they were to resist any sort of aggression. They had one of the tiny cross-handled paralyzer guns, and there was a long sharp knife in the galley. That was all. It wasn't much of an armament.

Well, they had Chryse. The golden girl might be worth a dozen stun guns in an emergency. She glanced toward the spot where Chryse had been standing. Astonishment paralyzed her. Chryse was gone! Baldur was standing alone, quietly looking out over the bulwark, his ears pricked.

Anassa stood staring. Where could Chryse have gone? Then she ran into the cabin and came back with the gun and the knife. She gave the knife to Wan and kept the gun for herself.

The *Kwan-yin* was getting within hailing distance. "*Basset* ahoy!" came the cry from her deck.

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"What do you want?" Wan yelled within turning his head from the wheel.

"We're going to board you," the *Kwan-yin* replied.

"We'll see about that," Wan said between his teeth. To Anassa he said, "Get Chryse. She ought to be able to overawe them."

"I can't. She's gone."

"Where?"

"I don't know. She's not in the cabin, and she can't be in the hold."

"Damn!"

The *Basset* was a fast little ship, and Wan was a brilliant helmsman. She ran like a rabbit from a hound. In the ensuing half-hour, there were moments when it actually seemed she might outdistance her pursuer and escape. Anassa clutched the rail, her heart in her mouth. But in the end the *Kwan-yin's* superior speed told. She cast grappling lines across to the panting *Basset* and made fast her prey.

"What the devil do you want?" Wan asked, coming forward. He was carrying the knife from the galley tucked under his sleeve; but, since there were two paralyzer guns and one of those peculiarly vicious sliver guns trained on him, he saw no immediate chance of using it. "We're not carrying cargo or anything of value. What's the meaning of this?"

The captain of the *Kwan-yin* laughed at him. He was a young man with a good-humored, indolent, devil-may-care face. Only the odd glitter in his eyes warned that he might be dangerous. "We're not after loot," he said. "Did you think we were pirates? We just want you—you personally. Your persons, I mean."

Indefinite thoughts of slavery or being held for ransom raced through Wan's mind. "What for?" he said finally.

"I don't suppose there's any harm in telling you. We want you to sacrifice."

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Wan's jaw had dropped. He looked so surprised that the captain of the *Kwan-yin* laughed. Wan threw the kitchen knife at the man who had the sliver gun and, in the same motion, launched himself at the captain's throat.

The captain, caught off-balance, went reeling back. The dart from the sliver gun stuck quivering in the deck. Wan hit his opponent so hard on the chin that his head rocked on his neck, and followed this with a brutal blow to the pit of the stomach. It is obviously impossible for an unarmed man to kill a bigger one with his bare hands. But Wan was making a good try.

The fight lasted longer than one would have thought. The crewmen of the *Kwan-yin* were reluctant to use their guns for fear of hitting their own man. Then four of them piled on the fighters simultaneously, and Wan and his opponent went down.

"Baldur!" Anassa cried. "Go help Wan!"

The big animal looked at her. He wagged his tail briefly. He did not move.

Anassa felt a throb of despair. During the *Kwan-yin's* pursuit of the *Basset* she had run to the radio and tried to send out a message. The *Kwan-yin* had been jamming the *Basset's* frequency. Now Baldur—Baldur, who had guarded her faithfully for five years, who had saved her life at least twice—Baldur refused to obey a simple command. And where had Chryse gone?

The tiny cross-handled paralyzer gun Anassa held differed from the bigger paralyzers such as the crew of the *Kwan-yin* had in that it was a miniature weapon, designed strictly for self-defense. It could deliver six paralyzing shocks in a row, or one lethal one. Then it was exhausted, and had to be recharged from an electrical source.

What could she do? To kill one man, or paralyze six, wouldn't help her any. Even if Baldur had helped, a man, a

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woman and a cyon couldn't overcome fifteen or twenty well-armed men. She swallowed and tried to collect herself.

Wan, still struggling, was being tied up. Baldur was looking on interestedly. Anassa stepped forward. "You must let us go," she said to the captain with what authority she could muster. "I am Anassa, priestess of Neith."

The captain was rubbing the lump on his jaw, but he managed to smile. "I've heard of you," he said. "I imagine Jovis will be especially pleased at having Neith's priestess sacrificed to him."

"Are you going to sacrifice us to Jovis?" Anassa cried.

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Then there is no need of sacrifice," Anassa said, trying to control the trembling of her voice. "Some of the Jovists want to bring back the old worship on Gwethym because they think things here are running down.

"It's true, there was a leakage of energy from our planet. But he and I"—she pointed to Wan, who was looking at her rather blankly—"managed to stop it. There's no need to sacrifice anybody. Gwethym is safe."

"I wasn't aware it was in any danger," said the captain. "Actually, we're not going to kill you primarily for religious reasons."

"Then why—"

"We're going to sacrifice you for the pleasure we get out of it."

"You have a sadistic—you get a sadistic pleasure—"

"We don't get the pleasure unassisted." The captain cleared his throat. "We're going to take you to an island that's not far from here," he said. "Sometimes it's above water and sometimes not. If it's not, we'll wait.

"This island must have belonged to the Old Ones. There are all sorts of things on it, various instructive and interesting pictures and carvings, and some apparatus.

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"I found, oh, four or five years ago, that if a human being was killed in a certain spot on this island, with certain machines running, that the killer and those around him derived an absolutely indescribable amount of pleasure from the death.

"Once you've tasted a pleasure like that, everything else in life becomes empty. I don't know how it works or what the machines are. I'm no biologist. From what I've read on the subject, I imagine it's something that stimulates the pleasure-producing areas of the brain directly." The fantastic gleam in his eye had grown more pronounced.

"At any rate, it's the finest thing I've ever experienced. We don't bear you or your man any ill will personally. He's quite a fighter. But we intend to sacrifice you for the premium pleasure we'll get out of it. There's no point in your arguing."

Anassa's legs were trembling so she could hardly stand. She had a terrible vision of the victim on the altar—herself or Wan—and of the torn-open body and the torn-out, still-beating heart. She tried to lick her lips. She could not speak.

"Tie her up," the captain said to his men. "Do a good job, but don't hurt her. I don't like to inflict pain pointlessly."

Anassa managed to stun a couple of the *Kwan-yin's* crew before they got the little paralyzer gun away from her. Then she was tied up neatly and carried into the *Basset's* cabin, while Baldur looked on with interest.

"You, Li, take the wheel," the captain ordered. "A nice little ship like this will come in handy."

Wan had been carried into the cabin too and dumped unceremoniously beside her on the floor. Lying in their bonds, Wan and Anassa heard the *Basset's* engine begin to turn over. The little ship was once more under way.

Anassa began to weep. Underneath her fear there was a profound and almost bitter sense of betrayal. "Baldur," she

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said. "I thought he loved me. I thought he'd have died for me. He let them tie me up without even showing his teeth.

"And Chryse—why didn't she help us? Maybe she couldn't have saved us, but at least she could have tried.

"Why did she desert us? We came on this voyage because she wanted us to. Where is she? Why did she abandon us?"

"Hush," Wan said softly into her ear. "Baldur and Chryse can talk together, I think. Perhaps she told him not to fight."

"But where—"

"Hush," he said again. "I don't think the *Kwan-yin's* crew realizes there were three people on the *Basset*. Chryse may be hiding for reasons of her own.

"She saved our lives once before. I don't think she'd abandon us now."

### 14

"WE CALL IT Slippery Island," the captain said. He was steering the *Basset* toward an anchorage off the island Wan and Anassa had been sailing toward when their ship was captured. He was talking to Anassa, who was standing, though her hands and feet were tied, beside him on the deck of the little ship. He had had her beside him most of the morning. He seemed, in fact, to have taken a fancy to her.

Anassa, for her part, was so nervous that she could feel her jacket and trousers wet with sweat. But she tried to respond to the captain's amiable-seeming remarks with remarks of her own. She had an irrational hope that if he liked her he would let her and Wan go. Calmer thought would have told her that to be liked by a man like the captain would be quite as dangerous as being a sacrificial victim to him.

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She had to lick her lips before she could reply. "Why do you call it that?" she managed to get out.

"We never can tell when it's going to be here."

"Isn't— isn't there any rule to its appearances?" she said in a croak.

"Well, it usually seems to be above water when both the moons are full at the same time. That only happens about every six months, though. And it's been here sometimes when there was no moon at all."

"Does it sink suddenly?"

"No, it goes down quite gradually." He shouted across to the *Kwan-yin*, which had anchored beside them. "Li, lower the boat and help me put the victims in it."

When the boat reached the *Basset*, the captain picked the girl up as impersonally as if she had been a bundle of sticks and handed her over the side to Li. Wan in his turn was handed down. "We ought to call it Picture-Book-Island," the captain said as Li rowed toward the shore. "The whole thing is one big picture gallery."

Shuddering, Anassa looked toward the island. It was about two miles across, covered with round, flat-roofed buildings. The prevailing color impression it made was of red.

She heard a splash from behind her. Baldur had jumped from the deck of the *Basset* and was swimming after the rowboat.

"I thought cyons were intelligent," the captain said. "This one of yours seems a perfect fool."

"He's always been stupid," Anassa heard herself saying. Wan, sitting beside her, gave a sort of sigh.

The boat beached on the island. Seen close, the red tint of the buildings turned out to be the result of continuous painted murals, the predominant tint of which was red. "How bright the pictures are!" Anassa said, faintly interested

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in spite of herself. "How can they keep their colors and be so much of the time under the water?"

"I don't know," the captain answered. "It must be several thousand years, at least, since they were painted. Look at the details when we get closer. They'll interest you."

Anassa was lifted out of the boat and the ties on her feet loosened a little. Two boatloads of sailors from the *Kwan-yin* had landed. With two of the men prodding her in the back with the noses of stun guns, she was forced along the path toward the largest of the buildings, a round windowless structure with engaged columns all around it.

Her first impression was of how wet everything was. The ground beneath her smelled of the sea. A little fish, only recently dead, lay beside the path. Then, as she got nearer to the pictures, she saw what the prevailing red tint was.

Over and over the walls repeated a hideous story of blood. Blood dyed the hands of the figures who moved along the frescoes, it stained their garments, it lay in pools on tables or dripped down to the floor.

Anassa tried to close her eyes, to faint, to—she leaned a little forward and began to vomit where she stood. Her guards waited for her without comment. When the fit was over, they prodded her to make her move on.

"I won't," she said in a high voice. She looked at the captain with wild eyes. "They can't make me move. Let them kill me here. Anything's better than—like that."

"Miss Priestess," the captain said in his pleasant voice, "I advise you to co-operate. It is true that the death you are going to experience is somewhat painful and protracted. But in the building to the left"—he pointed—"there are machines which can inflict suffering so extreme that having your chest cut open with a sharp knife will seem quite pleasant in comparison. I myself am no sadist. But some of my crew do have such leanings. I have no deep objection to gratifying them."



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The girl made no further objection. Trembling woefully she tottered on. She caught a glimpse of Wan, beside her, and saw he was as pale and feeble as she.

"Notice the build of the figures in the frescoes," the captain said. "They're definitely humanoid. They have prognathous faces—snouts, really—and small ears set very close to their heads, and they're never pictured wearing clothing. But other than that, they look quite human. Odd, isn't it? All over the galaxy we find humanoid types."

Anassa made no reply. At the threshold of the biggest building her strength failed her completely and she had to be carried in. She was not unconscious, though, and as Wan stumbled past the man who was carrying her, she thought she heard a breath of sound from his mouth. It might have been the first syllable of "Chryse."

Hope revived faintly in her. Had she imagined it, or had Wan meant to tell her what he had told her before, that he did not think Chryse had abandoned them? But what could one girl—even a golden girl—do against armed men, in any case? After the tiny drop of hope in her heart, Anassa felt more than ever sick with despair.

The big building was lighted by luminescent panels set in the ceiling. "Photoluminescent, I think," the captain commented. He seemed to have a fondness for explaining things to Anassa. "Notice the frescoes. That's how I first realized what the installation in the central room was."

Anassa closed her eyes instantly, but not before she had received a scalding impression of the humanoid figures gathered around a table that bore a victim from whose violated chest the living heart had been cut out. Wires went to the heads of the figures, and their snouty faces wore masterfully rendered expressions of a pleasure so intense that it could only be called ecstasy.

Anassa must have fainted. When she came to herself

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again, the captain was holding a stimulant under her nose. and she had been strapped to a table in the big central room. Here the light was as bright as noonday. It was the light of an operating theater.

Around the table the sailors from the *Kwan-yin* were standing. They were picking up pairs of electrodes that dangled from long wires near the ceiling, and fitting their their cushioned surfaces to their heads.

"All set?" the captain asked in his pleasant voice. "I'll go turn the current on. It ought to warm up for a bit." He walked over behind a screen of metal. Anassa heard a machine begin to hum.

He returned to his place beside the table and adjusted a pair of the electrodes to his head. After a moment he nodded. One of the sailors handed him a knife.

Anassa felt an insane wish to scream, *It hasn't been sterilized!* Tears were pouring down her face. She thought of Wan, she thought of Baldur, she thought of Chryse. But most of all she longed for her heart to stop beating of itself, so that she could die painlessly.

The captain raised his hand. Anassa couldn't keep her eyes closed. Suddenly from somewhere inside the building she heard Baldur begin to bark.

The captain jumped. The cyon was barking furiously, desperately, in what seemed a paroxysm of rage. The room rang with it. For a moment all eyes turned in the direction of the sound. And in that moment Anassa thought she saw a shadow slip along the wall.

"Damn the brute," the captain of the *Kwan-yin* said in his most pleasant voice. "Remind me, Li, to take care of him when this is over." Once more he raised the knife.

The lights in the room went out.

Anassa couldn't imagine what was happening. Baldur had stopped barking, and in the silent blackness she heard a

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series of heavy exhalations of breath, and then slow, heavy slidings. "Wan!" she cried. "Wan! What is it? What's going on?"

Before he could answer, the lights came on again. Anassa saw that nobody was standing near the table and that the electrodes were dangling aimlessly from their wires, but she couldn't move enough to see where the sailors were. Then Chryse, looking rather pale in spite of her golden skin, stepped out from behind the metal screen.

"They're dead," she said. "I sent the whole force of the machine into them."

She picked up the knife the captain had been holding, and cut Anassa's bonds. Then, stepping delicately over the bodies on the floor, she went to Wan and cut his ropes too.

Anassa tried to sit up, but the emotions of the day had been too much for her, and she fainted once more.

When she recovered her senses, she had been carried outside the round building and was lying on the damp sand of the island's beach. Baldur was nuzzling her hand and Chryse, bending over her, stroked her hand with the same gentle, delicate touch she had used on Tu Fu Island when, once before, she had recalled Anassa from death. Wan had his arm around her shoulders, supporting her.

"Chrysel" Anassa cried. She began to weep, the tears flowing gently down her face without any contraction of her features. "I've been so frightened! I was sure we were both going to die. Where were you? What's been happening?"

"When I saw how many men there were on the *Kwan-yin*," Chryse said, "I was afraid I wouldn't be able to make any impression on them even if I deliberately masqueraded as Neith. They weren't simple, good-hearted people like the fishermen or the inhabitants of Dieudonne Island. And they didn't have any half-belief in the powers of the goddess as

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the sophisticated city-dwellers of New Christiana did. So I hid myself.

"When I heard the captain talking, I knew I had been right. The crew of the *Kwan-yin* were, practically speaking, drug addicts. They lived in a world of their own, on which no 'miracle' of mine could have any effect."

"Where did you hide, though?" Anassa asked. "We couldn't imagine what had become of you."

"In the cabin of the *Basset*."

"In the cabin? Where? A mouse couldn't have hidden itself there."

"I was lying underneath the mattress on your bunk."

"How could you breathe?"

"I don't really have to breathe, you know. My body can get along without your air."

"Oh."

"When I heard the captain saying what he planned to do with you, I thought I might be able to save you. I'd been to this island before, you know, and knew what it was like. I'd seen the table for the victim, the electrodes for the spectators, and the machine. I talked to Baldur—"

"Can you read minds?" Anassa interrupted.

"Not yours. I can only get what you verbalize and are willing to communicate. I can pick up some types of radio waves. And of course I don't really 'talk' to you. I send my thoughts into your mind. That's how the people on Dieu-donne Island misunderstood what I wanted from them. But Baldur and I can communicate."

"Baldur!" said Anassa. She hugged the big head to her. "Poor old fellow, how I misjudged you. It hurt more than anything, to think you'd deserted me."

"He hadn't," Chryse said, smiling. "But we decided he musn't make the *Kwan-yin's* crew suspicious by resisting. He

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had to be loose so he could distract their attention at the crucial time by barking.

"When I heard you and Wan talking in the cabin, after the pirates had tied you up, I longed to tell you that I hadn't abandoned you. I didn't dare to, though.

"For you and Wan to be badly frightened, considering the circumstances, was natural. If you'd known you might be rescued, you wouldn't have shown the fear the pirates would expect their victims to show. And if they'd begun to suspect that you had some reason for optimism, they'd have searched the *Basset*. I wasn't very well hidden. I did not dare to trust to your acting ability. If they'd found me, our last hope would have been gone."

"Can you be killed, Chryse?" Anassa asked.

"I don't know. I can be destroyed, certainly."

"I ought to have had more confidence in you," Anassa said, trying to smile. "Wan did."

"I wasn't exactly optimistic about it," Wan answered. He pulled Anassa's head onto his shoulder and began kissing her face. "But it's over now, anyhow. Try to realize that."

Anassa drew a shuddering breath. It seemed to her that some part of her was still lying on the table in the round building, awaiting the stroke of the captain's knife. She had been so dreadfully *there*, so sorely physically present, beyond any possibility of escape, that she could not believe that all had been changed. The investment of fear that she had made in her own death still kept her lying fatally bound on the table of death.

"Yes, it's over," Chryse agreed. "And now I must tell you what this island really is."

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### 15

"THE OLD ONES, the original inhabitants of Gwethym," Chryse said, "were brilliant biologists. I believe that their biological techniques were far in advance of those which most of the galaxy can command even today."

Anassa was to remember this conversation with Chryse, and its astonishing climax, all her life. The details burned themselves into her memory—the buildings at her back, with their terrible freight of pictures, the sea birds crying overhead, and her own mind, still so darkened with terror that now and again she had trouble in following the meaning of Chryse's words.

"They had a rich and powerful culture," Chryse continued. Her shadow, with its rainbow nimbus, lay along the damp sand. "At the time of which I am speaking, the land area of Gwethym was much larger than it is today, and the population was nearly ten times as great. And, along with their biological skill and their high culture, there went much cruelty.

"Perhaps their innate cruelty was one of the reasons for their progress in biology. I don't know. It may be that some experiments in biology require, if not precisely sadism, at least a considerable degree of callousness on the part of the experimenter. But that the Old Ones were actually a cruel people, who found gratification in inflicting suffering, no one who has seen the pictures and carvings on this island can doubt.

"Part of the time their cruelty wore a religious cloak. This island—it was not an island then, but part of a great land mass—was the seat of the climax of their religious sadism. Here, at roughly four-year intervals, great religious Games were held, with lesser qualifying ones preceding them. The

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contestants in these games were chosen by lot from the population of Gwethym."

"Is there some connection between the intervals at which these games were held and the way in which the island is sometimes above water and sometimes under it?" Wan asked.

"Some connection, yes. Of course, at that time it wasn't an island. The date at which the Games were held was partly arrived at by astronomical considerations, and it is astronomical factors, primarily the movements of Gwethym's two moons, that determine whether or not the island is above water."

"You mean that tidal factors, plus movements in the planet's crust, are responsible for whether or not the island is visible?" Wan asked.

"Yes. The effect here is more noticeable than at any other spot on Gwethym. The position of the other planets in Gwethym's solar system may be involved too. I'm not sure about that.

"But however that may be, it was here that the Games were held. The contestants in them passed through various trials. At each stage those who lost were—well, they died agonized, protracted deaths as a penalty for having lost. The machinery for those deaths is to be found in some of the other buildings on this island."

Anassa swallowed painfully. "That was what the captain meant," she said.

"Yes. The final victor—the one individual who came through all the ordeals successfully—was sacrificed at the place from which I rescued Anassa. That was his reward for having won—a relatively quick and painless death."

"And this was all *religious*?" Wan asked.

"I believe so. I think they advanced as a justification for all that they did that it was pleasing to their gods."

"I don't understand how they could have had such a high

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culture and yet have practiced human sacrifice," Anassa said. Her body was shaken by recurrent fits of shuddering. "I would have thought the two were incompatible."

"I'm not so sure, 'Na," said Wan thoughtfully. "I don't know much about the history of the Western Hemisphere on Terra. But I seem to have read that a people in South America practiced human sacrifice to the tune of forty thousand victims a year. They even sold human flesh in the market place. And yet they had a pretty high material culture, with a complex social organization and big cities and skilled workers in metal and stone."

"You must be thinking about ancient Mexico," Anassa said. "It's true, they had an empire. But they lacked two of the basic inventions of civilization, writing and the wheel. In Europe, at any rate, human sacrifice hasn't been practiced for the last thirty-five hundred years."

"Perhaps not under a religious guise," Wan said. "But you remember, 'Na, that a European people, in the last of the great wars on Terra, deliberately murdered some twelve million civilians. They had great furnaces to burn their bodies in. And yet these murderers were among the most advanced of Europeans, technologically."

Anassa gave a strangled cry. "Be quiet," she said. "I can't stand any more horror. I've been too close to it."

Chryse touched her hand lightly. "I shan't tell you more horrors," she said. "But I must finish the history of the Old Ones.

"Their population was growing. I don't suppose their Games made any great dent in their numbers, and the land area of Gwethym, though much greater than it is today, was still limited. Potentially, they could support an even greater population than the one they had. But for that, they needed more power.

"Perhaps their biological triumphs had made them inso-



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lent, overconfident. At any rate, instead of trying to exploit the power resources that Gwethym actually had—some fossil fuels, fair deposits of radioactive materials, and solar power—they looked about for a power source that would be unlimited.

"Their physics was more speculative than realistic. Their experts in this subject told them that if they could break down the barriers that separated the energy-universe in which they lived from the ones directly above it and below it in the series, they would have unlimited power from the stream of energy that would be flowing through their universe."

"Whew!" said Wan. "What a grandiose ideal!"

"Yes, and a fatal one."

"What means did they adopt to realize it?"

"They had some theoretical knowledge of the space warp, though they had never used it. They decided that if the space warp could be properly applied, it would break the natural barriers between the various energy-level universes."

"In other words, they tried to do deliberately what happened with us accidentally."

"Yes. Of course, before they actually tried to open up the barriers to start the energy flow, they developed what they thought might be a means of restoring the barriers again if it should be necessary. They worked on it for a considerable time. The fruit of this work was the virus with its molecules of the right-handed symmetry that you found on the island of the grapevines."

Wan and Anassa looked at each other. "Was there any connection between the virus and the way Baldur behaved when we were anchored off that island?" Anassa asked. "He wouldn't go ashore with us, you know. He seemed to be sick, except that he had no fever."

"I believe he was reacting to the force field around the

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virus," Chryse replied. "While the right-handed virus was being developed, the island—let's call it Virus Island, to distinguish it—the island was off limits to all except project personnel. The work was felt to be dangerous. And the prohibition was reinforced by the force field, to whose fringe effects the old Gwethymians were highly sensitive."

Wan frowned but said nothing. Chryse continued, "While work with the space-warping installations was going on, the old Gwethymians continued their physiological studies. They wanted to create a subspecies of Gwethymians who would be able to live and work in the ambience of the new energy flow through their universe without being affected by it.

"The day arrived when the attempt to break the barriers between the various energy-level universes was made. And it didn't work."

"You mean nothing happened?" Wan asked.

"A great deal happened, but it wasn't what they had wanted or meant. The energy that ought to have gone into the actual warping of space was released against Gwethym itself. The first of several unexpected results was the melting of the planet's two polar icecaps.

"The level of the seas of Gwethym began to rise. The vast majority of their cities—like those of Terra—were coastal. The melting took time, of course. But within a year the land area of Gwethym had been reduced to a fifth of its former size, and all the big cities had been drowned.

"The Gwethymians made efforts to save themselves, of course. They evacuated what they could of their population to higher ground, and they made abortive attempts to rid themselves of the surplus water. Meantime, their innate sadism not only broke out in the form of civil war, but led them into ever-increasing orgies of human sacrifice to appease their gods.

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"They might have saved a fifth or a sixth of their people, even at that. But then the plague began."

"Plague?" said Wan. "With such good biologists?"

"Yes. They were living under demoralized conditions. Many of their ordinary biological precautions had been relaxed. Also, the temperature was higher than it had been.

"The virus with molecules of the right-handed symmetry that they had created as a means of handling the breaks in the energy barriers had been originally a virus of a deadly respiratory disease. I mean, of course, in its normal, unselected left-handed form.

"Perhaps somebody cracked a test tube. At any rate, the deadly left-handed virus was soon abroad in the land. Ordinarily the Gwethymians would have been able to immunize against it. Now to the flooding of the cities and civil war was added a series of severe earthquakes. Inside of a week from the time the left-handed virus escaped from the laboratory, every single one of the old Gwethymians was dead.

"They left few material traces of their occupancy of Gwethym. Their cities were drowned under many hundreds of feet of water, and there have been many seismic disturbances of Gwethym's crust since then. But that is what the people who lived on Gwethym before you, Anassa and Wan, were like."

There was a silence. Then Wan said, "Chryse, how do you know all this? You haven't found any written records, have you?" His blue eyes were intent.

"No."

"And those frescoes"—he pointed at the buildings behind them, with their red-spotted facades—"don't convey very much in the way of information except that the Old Ones delighted in cruelty."

"Yes, that's right. The buildings on this island were

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erected before there was any attempt to break the barrier between the different energy-level universes."

"Then how do you know?"

"Part of it's conjectural, of course. I hope to be able to check on the correctness of my conjectures very soon. But most of the things I told you I know because Baldur told me."

"*Baldur* told you?"

"Yes. He and I can communicate. I told you that before."

"But how does he know anything about all this? He's only a cyon, after all."

"What is a cyon?" Chryse replied with a smile.

"Why, it's a faithful, intelligent, co-operative, doglike animal. They are the highest life form we've ever found on Gwethym. Our first settlers called them cyons after the Greek word for dog," Anassa said.

"That's a true definition, as far as it goes. But you miss the heart of the matter. A cyon is the direct descendant, somewhat changed physically, of the old Gwethymians."

"I thought you said they all died in the plague," Anassa protested.

"Don't you remember that I told you the Old Ones had been trying to create a subspecies of Gwethymians who would be able to live and work within the ambience of the energy flow through their universe? Baldur and his people are what remain of that attempt after three thousand years of time. The cyons didn't die in the plague because the changes the Gwethymians had already produced in them had made them immune to what was so deadly to their fellows."

"But he doesn't look anything like the Gwethymians in the frescoes," Anassa said.

"He looks a little like them, 'Na," Wan said judicially. "They had prognathous faces and small, high, close-set ears."

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If Baldur walked on his hind legs, he might resemble them somewhat."

"His nature's not like theirs," Anassa said stubbornly. She patted Baldur's big head. "And he walks on four feet and can't talk and doesn't have hands. Could humanoids change so much in just three thousand years? Humans on Terra haven't changed at all physically in the last twenty thousand."

"His temperament is certainly very different from that of his forebears," Chryse replied. "The Gwethymian biologists appear to have recognized, when they were creating their new subspecies, that their innate sadism had its disadvantages. They tried to make the new sort of Gwethymian very much less bloodthirsty than they were."

"As to the other physical changes you mention, Baldur and his people were designed to be a quick-maturing, quick-breeding race. There are three human generations in a century. There are twenty generations of cyons in the same time."

"In other words," Wan said, "three thousand years to them has been like twenty thousand years to us."

"But, as Anassa says, they've lost the power of speech, and the humanoid posture, and they have no hands. I don't want to be unduly skeptical, Chryse, but all this is, ah, somewhat hard to believe."

"They don't especially need speech, since they are somewhat telepathic," Chryse said. "The things Baldur told me have been handed down among his people as a folk tradition for thousands of generations."

"As to the other things . . . Baldur, put up your paw."

The big animal squatted on his rump and extended his right foot toward Chryse. "Look at it carefully," the golden girl told them.

"He has four toes and a dewclaw," Wan said after a moment.

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"Yes. Now show them, Baldur. This is a little hard for him to do."

The dewclaw twitched. Slowly, painfully, it moved backward, toward the thick pads on the undersides of Baldur's toes.

He was visibly straining. In a series of tiny jerks the dewclaw moved backward. Baldur's teeth showed with the effort he was making. But at last the tip of the dewclaw touched the thick pad on the end of his third toe, as if it had been a thumb.

Wan drew in his breath. His glance met Anassa's. The girl was pale and her eyes were shining.

"You see," Chryse said softly and reverentially, "he used to have hands."

### 16

"Yes, there is another way of doing it," Chryse said.

Anassa drew a deep breath. "Then why not take that way? Why are you asking us to destroy you, Chryse?"

They were sitting in the *Basset's* little cabin, still anchored off the island with the frescoes. The *Kwan-yin* was gone; Wan, at Anassa's insistence, had deliberately scuttled the pirate ship.

Wan and Anassa each sat on one of the bunks, while Chryse had been given the place of honor, the *Basset's* only deck chair. Baldur lay peacefully snoring at Anassa's feet.

"Why are you asking us to destroy you?" the priestess repeated.

"You are free to chose whichever way you like," Chryse said. "But before you can choose intelligently, you must understand what is involved.

"What we are trying to do is to make further use of the

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space warp impossible. Now, there are two ways of doing this. One is to affect the properties of normal space. The other is to change the properties of hyperspace."

Anassa was frowning. "What she means, 'Na," said Wan, coming to the rescue, "is that you can either regard the space warp as affecting the properties of normal space, or as utilizing the properties of hyperspace."

Anassa's frown deepened. "It's still not very clear," she said.

"Um. Well, people say the warp—and incidentally, it's applied a hundred times a day and takes very little power to use—they say that the warp brings two distant points of normal space close together. If you start out from Terra for Proxima Centauri, you get a suitable distance out from the solar system on planetary drive. Then you apply the warp. That brings Proxima right on top of where you are. You've warped space, moved two points in normal space through hyperspace into contiguity. Or you can say that you moved your ship *out through* normal space into hyperspace and back into normal space again.

"In the first of these views, you can say that space itself is moved—or bent—while the ship remains motionless. In the second one, you can say the ship moves through hyperspace, while normal space itself does not move at all."

"It sounds like two different processes to me."

"No, it's all relative. It depends on which you choose to think of as moving. The equations for the warp are the same in either case.

"Basically, the warp depends on the nature of hyperspace. Every parcel of normal space in our universe is surrounded by—swims in—a sort of bath of hyperspace. And any point of hyperspace is, simultaneously, in contact with *all* points of normal space."

Anassa was pleating the folds of her tunic. "Is hyper-

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space the same as the universe Chryse came from?" she said.

"No. Each of the various energy-level universes has its own hyperspace. When our universe had its energy leak, it was not a leak into hyperspace, but into a universe with a lower level of energy."

"What connection has this with what Chryse is asking us to do?" Anassa said.

"If I am destroyed," Chryse answered, "the energy of the destruction of my being will be propagated instantly through the normal space of your universe."

"When a ship moves from normal space into hyperspace and out again, it uses normal space as a fulcrum against which to lever itself. My destruction would, so to speak, put the fulcrum up so high that the lever could no longer make contact with it."

"Are you so different from ourselves as all that, Chryse?" Anassa said, trying to laugh. "Human beings die constantly, but our death doesn't change the properties of normal space."

"I didn't say die, I said destroyed," Chryse corrected her. "And yes, I am very different from you in some ways. My being has much more inherent energy than yours."

"I don't understand," Anassa said.

"She means that she differs from you in the same way that you differ from a rose bush. Both you and the plant are alive. But you are far more alive than it is," Wan explained.

"Then if she is made of energy so much stronger than ours, I should think her destruction would destroy our universe," Anassa said.

Chryse made a small, annoyed face. "If all the energeticness of my destruction were to be concentrated in one spot, I am sure it would be greatly deleterious. But it will be instantly propagated throughout the whole of the normal space of this universe." She smiled. "You needn't be afraid that



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there will be any noticeable changes. The only difference will be that the space warp can't be used.

"The idea of killing me, to put it in human terms, seems to be bothering you and Wan very much. But I think you should realize that life in your universe is for me nothing but a slow kind of dying.

"I can't eat your food or drink your water or, actually, breathe your air. I have no possible source from which to renew my energy. I can't sleep, though I may lie down for a few hours, as I did on the *Snekkjur*. I can only feel my energy seep out, little by little, into your energy-empty world."

"Chryse," Wan said slowly, "do you really want us to destroy you? Do you want to die?"

The gold girl's eyes moved. "No," she said honestly. "I want to go on living, even in this queer place, as long as I can. Everything here is odd and dim to me, even the light of your sun. But it's interesting. I'd like to go on living in it."

"How long would it take you to die?" Wan asked.

"I don't know. It might take a year. Or even years."

"In other words," Wan said shrewdly, "your case is different from ours only in degree. In our world all life can say of itself, 'Death is only a matter of time.'"

"Yes."

"What's the other way of making the space warp unusable?" Anassa asked.

"The other way is to change the properties of hyperspace. Hyperspace is empty in a way that normal space never is. Normal space, though it may be emptier than the highest vacuum a scientist can produce, always contains a few molecules of hydrogen in a cubic meter. Hyperspace is absolutely empty. That is why material objects, like ships, can move through it."

"Well?" Anassa asked.

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"If hyperspace can be made to receive a content, objects from normal space could no longer enter it."

"When ships from our space enter it, aren't they a content?" Anassa asked.

"Not in the sense that I mean. Besides, the content would have to be something in which the molecules are not rigidly held. It would have to be a liquid or a gas."

"And do you have any particular liquid or gaseous content in mind?" Wan asked her.

"Yes."

"What?"

"The water that used to compose Gwethym's polar ice-caps."

Wan whistled. "I must say, Chryse, you do come up with large ideas."

The girl smiled. "It's not my idea originally," she answered. "From what Baldur told me, the Old Ones thought of this way of getting rid of their surplus water, and even set up some machinery for it in their last days. They waited too long, though. Their first approach to any problem was always biological."

"Then there's no need to destroy Chrysel" Anassa cried joyously. "This would work just as well."

"Yes, Anassa. But it would also mean uncovering the cities and the culture of the Old Ones for the people of Gwethym to be corrupted by," Chryse said.

"You think they would be corrupted?" Wan asked.

"It is possible. The danger is one that Anassa must weigh."

"Anassa?" said Wan.

"Yes. She is the one who must decide whether the space warp shall be rendered unusable by my destruction, or by removing much of the water of Gwethym and bringing the hidden past once more to light."

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"Why must *I* decide?" Anassa asked rebelliously. "This is a matter for the whole people of Gwethym to decide."

"Yes, if there were time for the issues to be explained to them," Chryse answered. "Every day that the shipping companies of the galaxy use the space warp increases the danger of another energy leak."

"But why do I have to be the one? The president of our Storting—"

"Chryse's right," Wan said. "You represent the people of Gwethym in a way that even the Storting president doesn't. You're the priestess of Neith."

"A made-up goddess! A divinity nobody believes in!"

"Yes. And a projection of the ethical feelings, and the ethical aspirations, of the whole population of Gwethym. *Noblesse oblige*, 'Na. You'll have to decide."

"Is it so awfully important to stop using the warp?" Anassa asked. "I mean, the commerce of the galaxy depends on it. If they have to stop using it abruptly, a lot of people may go hungry. Some might even starve."

"It's not very likely," Wan replied. "The commerce of the galaxy is mainly luxury items. Our own silk trade with Terra might be affected for a while. But we could certainly work it out."

Anassa gave a piteous sigh. "I don't want to have to decide," she explained unnecessarily.

"Obviously." Wan smiled.

"How *can* I decide?" she protested. "It's too evenly balanced. On the one hand there's destroying Chryse. She's saved my life twice. But she's willing to die and says she's dying slowly anyhow."

"On the other hand, there's bringing the culture of the Old Ones back to Gwethym. That's wholly bad, but it might mean saving Chryse."

"It might not be wholly bad, 'Na." Wan said. "If more of

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Gwethym were above water, we'd have some fossil fuels and radioactive ores. Gwethym needs power. And the Old Ones' biological achievements would be of enormous interest to scientists."

"You think it would be all right, then?" Anassa asked hopefully.

Wan shrugged. "I don't know. You saw the effect that finding the paintings and the torture machines and so on had on the men who captured us. It's true they weren't people who to begin with amounted to much. But there's no doubt that the sadism of the Old Ones brought out and intensified something that might have been merely latent in them."

"How can I decide, then? It's too evenly balanced."

"I think you can," Chryse said. Lightly she touched Anassa's hand. "Sleep on it," she said. "Tomorrow morning you can tell me what your decision is."

"Where are you going?" Anassa asked.

"To the island. I want to look closely at the machinery the Old Ones left for producing their space warp." They heard the faint splash of her footsteps over the water.

"Wan," said Anassa, "How can I decide?"

He took her in his arms and kissed her. "I'm sorry for you, 'Na. I can't help you. You have all the facts. You know what it would be like to lose Chryse, and you know what the people of Gwethym are like. I don't suppose we're any more sadistic than any population of Terrestrial origin. But we had human sacrifice on our planet once."

"Would we have it again?" she asked, clinging to him.

"I don't know. My poor jade girl, you'll have to decide."

She drew a long breath. "I'm going out on deck, Wan. You go to bed. Try to sleep."

"All right."

Anassa left the cabin. The bigger of Gwethym's two moons

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was rising. It made a silver track over the water, and as she watched it she wished she could walk over the water as Chryse did, away from the *Basset* and tomorrow and the pain of decision.

The moon rose higher. Anassa had begun to walk up and down the deck, keeping her back to the island. But as she turned in her path she caught involuntary glimpses of its buildings, and it seemed to her that even by moonlight she could see how their walls were defiled with the painted patches of red.

She turned to face the island deliberately, her hands gripping the railing. Except for the patches on the walls, it looked peaceful enough in the flat moonlight. Oh, was it really there that she had suffered such anguish? Had all that terror really existed? Had she really lain bound on the table where a thousand other victims had lain?

Yes, oh yes. The moonlight could not deny it. Whatever the future might hold, the terror of the past had been.

She turned from the bulwark and began to walk up and down once more. It was over now, she must stop thinking about it. But if the level of Gwethym's seas fell, the past would rise up again.

For a moment she thought hopefully of what Wan had said, that to have the submerged land recovered wouldn't be all bad. Surely they could resist the cruelty of the past, take from it what had been good, build better than the Old Ones of Gwethym had done.

But if the foundations ail, how shall what is built upon them abide?

She looked up at the sky, sighing. How tired she was! It had been a long time since morning. At last she sat down on the deck, her back against the railing. She heard the padding of footsteps and the sound of breathing. Baldur had come out of the cabin to be near her.

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"What shall I do, Baldur?" she asked him childishly. She fondled the big head. His tail wagged. He lay down beside her, his nose against her thigh.

Her thoughts went on. If Chryse were to be sacrificed . . .

Chryse had said she wanted to live. Twice Chryse had saved her life. Could Anassa repay her by asking her to be destroyed for a mere possibility? For it wasn't certain, after all, that if the past came back to light the people of Gwethym would be overwhelmed by it.

It seemed to Anassa that Chryse meant something—beauty, wisdom, goodness, power—that she had been seeking all her life. It was this hunger that had led her, though laughingly, to compete in the examinations that had led to her becoming priestess of Neith.

The moon had begun to wester. The sky in the east was still pitch black. But Anassa knew that in an hour or so it would be dawn.

She got to her feet and once more looked out over the rail. The island with its burden of buildings was still there. Was it a little lower in the water than it had been?

The noise of a footstep made her turn. It was Wan, coming out of the cabin. "I couldn't sleep," he said. "What a bad night this has been."

"Yes." She was silent.

"Have you decided?" he asked at last.

"Yes."

There was the faintest hint of a lightening in the east. "Well?" he said.

"Here comes Chryse," she said, relieved not to have to tell him. "Walking over the water from the island."

Wan put out his hand and helped the girl over the side of the ship. "Tell us both," he said.

Now that the moment had come, Anassa found she was dry-eyed. "I can't take the chance," she said, almost tone-

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lessly. "Chryse, I—I have chosen your destruction. Your death."

Chryse touched her wrist. "Lady Anassa," she said formally, "you made the choice I wished you to make. You chose for Gwethym, not for yourself."

She was smiling. Peering at her in the imperfect light, Anassa felt she saw the face of which the image in the temple was but a feeble shadow. Beauty, wisdom, goodness, power. The face of Neith.

### 17

"So THEY SURVIVED," Halliday said. He was a little pale. "Why didn't you tell me before?" He walked over to the porthole and looked out absently at the ships in the harbor.

"I only just heard of it myself, sir," Budd replied. "Water-front gossip. As soon as I thought it might be our men, I went to visit them in jail.

"Excuse me, sir, but it's not absolutely certain that the two people we left on Tu Fu Island did survive. All the sailors know is that they didn't find any traces of them."

"You'd better tell me the whole thing from the beginning."

"Yes, sir." Budd arranged his thoughts. "Well, sir," he said, "as soon as we got into port here, at New Christiana, I began to hear about the woman—they call her Neith—who'd been here a week ago and done so many miraculous things. You must have heard the stories yourself, sir. The town's full of them."

"Yes. Go on."

"But I didn't connect the stories with our two men who'd jumped ship when we were thirty-six hours off Tu Fu."

"Well, what's the connection?"

"Today I heard that two men who claimed to have found

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a deserted ship at Tu Fu Island were in jail for stealing it. So I went to visit them."

"You said that before, Budd," Halliday commented irritably.

"Yes, sir. Well, it was our two men, Niels and Thibault. I had a long talk with them.

"They say that after the *Starborne* left Tu Fu Island they got to thinking that it was a great shame to leave such a nice little ship as the *Basset* just lying at anchor there. They weren't any too satisfied with life on the *Starborne*. They decided to jump ship, desert.

"With the connivance of their mates, they lowered one of the *Starborne's* boats and went back to the island. Part of the time they rowed; when the wind was favorable, they used a rigged-up sail. Thibault can navigate a little."

Halliday was pursing his lips. "Mr. Ames is responsible for this. I'll see he never gets another berth as mate. It's the mate's job to maintain proper discipline."

"Yes, sir. Well, Niels and Thibault got back to the island, they found the ship they had left there was gone. Instead there was another craft, the *Jade Phoenix*, at anchorage.

"They couldn't imagine what had happened. They'd heard—you know how things get out—that we'd left the owner of the *Basset* dead on the island. Now that the ship was gone and there was another one in her place.

"Niels and Thibault beached their boat. They hunted all over the island. They didn't find anybody, alive or dead, and no sign of anybody. They didn't even find a grave."

"Why were they so thorough?" Halliday wanted to know.

"I asked them that, and they said, 'If you take a ship that doesn't belong to anybody, that's salvage. But if the owner is around, it's stealing.'"

"Rather an elastic view of maritime law," Halliday said acidly. "Go on."



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"They decided to take the *Jade Phoenix* back to New Christiana and sell her, on the quiet, for whatever she would fetch. As soon as they got into N.C., though, the craft was recognized. The owner—he's a merchant—said he'd loaned it to the woman they call Neith. The sailors said they'd never heard of her. So the merchant had them popped into jail for theft."

"What happened to Neith?" Halliday asked.

"That's the whole point. If she went to Tu Fu Island—and she must have; the *Phoenix* was there—she must have found the two people we left there."

"Well?"

"People here say she healed the sick."

"And you think she may have raised the dead, Budd?" asked Halliday sarcastically.

"I don't think anything about it, sir," Budd replied. Color had risen in his cheeks. "All we know is that the sailors found the *Basset* gone and nobody on the island. Perhaps this woman found them dead, took their bodies on board the *Basset*, and dropped them over the side after she was out at sea."

"Unlikely," Halliday said. He chewed his lips. "Send Mr. Ames to me," he ordered. "We're going to Tu Fu Island. After we get there, I want you to pick up these people's blips on the chronichnion. It oughtn't to be difficult. You've got a pretty accurate time-space fix on them to begin with."

"Minkowski space," Budd commented. "Yes, sir, I'll try."

"I've got their blips, sir," Budd reported considerably later. He rubbed his forehead, where the weight of the chronichnion had made a red mark. "Good and strong, too. Not the sort of blips you get from people who are ready to die."

"Hm. Do you find any trace of this woman called Neith?"

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"I keep getting something," Budd replied cautiously. "Hard to tell what it is."

"I thought blips were highly individual."

"They are, sir. Just like fingerprints. But you can't tell anything about a person from his fingerprint—his age or sex or occupation—unless you know whose fingerprint it is already. Blips are like that."

"You can follow their blips to where they are now?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, we'll have to sail rather slowly."

"That's all right." Halliday's gaze moved absently over the rocks and trees of Tu Fu Island. "The important thing is to find them. I never thought they—if there's one thing I hate, it's loose talk."

"This is odd, sir," Budd said about noon of the next day. The *Starborne* was proceeding at about half her normal speed. He was standing beside Halliday on the bridge.

"What's odd? Are you having trouble with their blips?"

"No, sir. I meant their course."

"You see, sir, they were headed for New Christiana when they had to put in at Tu Fu Island. When they get to feeling better, though, they don't go back to N.C. They take a course on which, according to the chart, there's no land for hundreds and hundreds of miles."

Halliday had a certain respect for Budd's intelligence. "What do you make of it?" he asked grudgingly.

"Well, this man, Ehr-li Wan—he sent out the original SOS that took us to Tu Fu Island—this man is a physics professor at the university. We first picked up his blip at Fridtjof Island, near the site of the energy leak."

"The *so-called* energy leak," Halliday corrected, frowning.

"Near the site of the so-called energy leak. Was he there by accident? A physics professor? He must have been investigating it."

"But he doesn't go back to N.C. and tell them what he's

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found, if anything. He and the girl and that woman, the one they call Neith, are heading straight out into nothing. I wonder why."

"Perhaps he's trying to stop the so-called leak," Halliday answered. He gave a short chuckle. "I've no objection to that."

"Yes, sir. Or—"

"Have you something in mind?"

"Well, sir, he's got this woman with him, the one they say can work miracles. And you know what some people say might possibly be the cause of the so-called energy leak."

"Yes, I know. Utter nonsense." Halliday frowned. A dim surmise was stirring at the back of his mind. "So you think that he and this woman—"

"I don't think anything at all, sir. Excuse me, sir. It's just that their course is odd."

"Yes." Halliday was mentally checking over the *Starborne's* armament. "Yes, it is odd."

Three days later they picked up the *Basset*.

"That's it," Halliday said with a touch of jubilation. He was looking through binoculars. "Same ship we left off Tu Fu. Same man and woman, too. I'd know that hair anywhere. Wonder where the miracle worker is?"

"Maybe she's on the island," Budd answered. He was looking through his own glasses. "No wonder it's not on the chart. It's a tiny thing, only about a quarter of a mile across."

"Seems to be a building on it, though. That round business with the columns," Halliday answered. He lowered his glasses. "Well, we'll anchor beside her. This time—I hate loose talk." He gave orders to the helmsman.

"*Basset* ahoy!" he shouted when the bigger craft had been made fast.

The man on the *Basset's* deck—obviously Ehr-li Wan—

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had been regarding them intently. Now he seemed to speak to the woman. She answered him without turning from the rail, where she was looking fixedly, and it seemed anxiously, toward the tiny island.

"*Starborne* ahoy! What do you want?"

"Business interview!" Halliday shouted back.

The thoroughly respectable appearance of the *Starborne* seemed to reassure the master of the *Basset*. "Come ahead!" he yelled.

Halliday and Budd were rowed over by two crewmen. The skipper of the *Basset* let down a rope ladder for them. "I'm Ehr-li Wan," he said, introducing himself. "And you're —?"

"Halliday, master and owner of the *Starborne*." He swallowed. Budd, looking at him obliquely, thought that it was always a little difficult for the big man to work himself up to action. "I want to talk to you about the murder of Wentworth."

"Murder?" Ehr-li Wan stared at them. He was obviously surprised. "He wasn't murdered. Why, he tried to kill us. Shot us with a paralyzer gun and tried to steal our ship. He was half-dead when we found him. He died a natural death."

"That's your story," said Halliday. His face was getting red. "I think you're a murderer."

"Well, I'm not. If there's trouble over it, this lady will bear me out." Ehr-li Wan indicated the woman, still standing rigidly by the rail.

Halliday was temporarily taken aback. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "Where's the other woman who came with you?"

"What's it to you?" replied the *Basset's* skipper. "Who are you, anyhow? Men from the GSSC? They're the only ones who'd be interested in Wentworth."

There was a tiny pause. "We're people who don't like

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murderers," Halliday said. He drew his gun. "I'm covering you," he said to Wan. "Mr. Budd, go find the other woman."

Budd did not move. "I imagine she's on the island," he said after a moment.

"Well, go and get her. Then we'll take the whole murdering crew back to the *Starborne*." Halliday may have been reflecting that prisoners can always be shot while attempting to escape.

Budd remained motionless. "Go on," Halliday told him impatiently.

"I'm not going. Do your own dirty work."

Halliday was trembling with rage. "Mr. Budd, this is mutiny. I trust you understand the seriousness of a seaman's refusing to obey his captain's orders."

"I suppose it is mutiny," Budd said in a faintly surprised voice. "Well, all right. Let it be. I've taken orders from you long enough."

Halliday had turned deathly pale. For a moment it seemed even money whether he would shoot Budd where he stood, or throw the gun down on the deck. He controlled himself. "I'd like to point out to you, Budd, that if what you hinted at to me on our way here is true, your refusal to obey may mean the end of the GSSC as an entity. In other words, neither you nor I nor anyone else who works for the combine will have a job."

"I can stand it," Budd answered. His hands were in his pockets. "I've hated my job for years. If I don't go to jail for mutiny, I can find something else. So can the rest of the combine's employees. I never was a company man. The hell with it."

Halliday drew a deep breath. "Very well," he said tonelessly. He gave the gun he had been holding to one of the seamen. "Keep these people covered," he said. "If any of them moves, shoot with full charge. I'll take the responsi-

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bility." To the other seaman, he said, "Come along, Mei. I want you to row me to the island."

Ehr-li Wan stepped forward. His hands were above his head, though rather negligently so. "Mr. Halliday," he said, "don't go to the island now. It's dangerous."

"Why?" Halliday asked. He had already descended the rope ladder and was untying the dinghy.

"Something's going to happen in the next few minutes," Ehr-li Wan said. "I don't quite know what—it may be an earthquake, or an explosion, or a lot of underwater disturbance. But you can't destroy somebody like Chryse without using a lot of power, and when the water hits those wires with the cracked insulation, there'll be fireworks. Not to mention the dangers inherent in her mere destruction. The island's sinking. Don't go any nearer than you are now. Even on the *Basset*, we're none too safe."

Halliday, in the boat, made a grimace at him. "You can't frighten me with fairy tales," he said. "Pick up those oars, Mie. Get going."

The boat moved away from the *Basset*. There was nothing wrong with Mei's hearing, and he may have been more impressed with Wan's warning than Halliday was. At any rate, he rowed rather slowly. The boat had covered about a third of the distance between the *Basset* and the island when Halliday, looking toward the big pillars of the round building saw them suddenly crowned with an intense glow of turquoise light.

The light burned serenely for a fraction of a second. Then the pillars of the building moved slowly outward, as if impelled by the force of an explosion behind them. There was a grinding noise of riven stone. Abruptly, fragments of rock and mortar were flying through the air.

The building was settling slowly into a rubble heap. The turquoise glow had been succeeded by a beautiful rosy-

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purple light. Halliday, watching transfixed, felt the most delicate and powerful of tingles run along his nerves. What he felt, though he did not know it, was the one palpable sign that the energy in Chryse's being was being propagated at an infinite speed throughout the universe.

The rosy light died away. There was an appalling hiss of steam. The tiny island seemed to shake in a fury of destruction. The air was black with flying masonry.

Mei, frightened, had long since ceased to row. The water was boiling under the keel of the boat. Halliday tried to say something over the din. Then one of the fragments of masonry hit him on the temple and he slumped back, unconscious, against the seat.

The water had almost risen over the island. It seemed to hesitate, a curved glinting line in the last of the daylight. There was a final enormous rumble of steam. Then with a rush the waters closed over where the island had been.

The boat rocked wildly in the surge. Mei was screaming. He grabbed wildly at the sides of the boat. A pair of angry waterspouts appeared from nowhere and danced mindlessly over the water. The boat shuddered, twisted half about, and capsized.

Wan, watching from the deck of the *Basset*, made a disgusted noise. He stripped off his clothes, yelled, "Come on, boy!" to Baldur, and jumped over the side. The seaman who was supposed to be covering him watched fascinatedly.

Wan and the cyon, swimming strongly, reached the overturned boat. Mei was clinging to it, despite its lurchings, but Halliday had gone down like a stone. "Hold the hair on the back of the cyon's neck and paddle!" Wan yelled to Mei. "Head back for the ship!" He drew a deep breath and dived after Halliday.

Halliday was not quite unconscious. He was struggling a little. Wan caught him by the collar of his uniform, surfaced

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with a trail of bubbles, and began to swim lopsidedly through the rough water back toward the *Basset*.

"Line!" he yelled when he was near enough to be heard.

Budd was looking on idly, his hands in his pockets, but the seaman from the *Starborne* roused himself enough from his trance of spectatorship to throw out a rope to Wan for Halliday.

Anassa had run to help. She threw out another line to Wan himself, and the young man and his rescue arrived at the *Basset* at almost the same time. Wan came up the rope ladder, but Halliday had to be hauled. Mei, holding to the big cyon, arrived a minute later.

The fury of the sea was dying down. The sunset air began to be filled with tiny whitish particles, like snow, that glinted as bright as fire in the last light. They fell in tiny bright drifts on the deck and lay there a moment before they disappeared.

"What's that?" Anassa said to Wan, who was putting on his clothes.

"The last of Chryse, I think. I mean, the last of the human envelope she had put about herself.

Anassa put out her hand. Some of the bright snow fell on it and clung to it a second before it vanished.

"That's all that's left of her, then," she said. Her voice trembled. "A little snow, like fire, that melts on my hand. Chryse . . ." Her eyes filled with tears.

For a moment Wan embraced her comfortingly. Then he turned to Halliday, who was stretched unconscious on the deck.

The big man was breathing, though raggedly. When Wan turned him on his side, there was a gush of water from his mouth. Wan got a capsule of stimulant from the cabin and held it under his nose.

Halliday coughed, choked, and sat up. "What—" he said.



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He grabbed the bulwark and pulled himself into an upright position. "Oh," he said stupidly. "The island's gone."

"Yes, it's gone," Wan answered. His face was lightly touched by the flush of victory. "I'm afraid you were right in your prediction to Budd, Mr. Halliday. From now on, the space warp is unusable. And, as you foresaw, the whole GSSC is out of a job."

### 18

THE AMPHITEATER was set in the slope of the hill behind the temple of Neith. Tonight, the last night of the Games, it had begun to fill early. The ritual that was being presented was the one Anassa had discussed with Wan some months before—*The Riots at the Leaving of Earth*. By the time the great dance drama was ready to begin, the last of the fifteen thousand stone seats of the amphitheater had been taken, and people were standing up around the rim of the theater.

Wan was standing beside Anassa in the proscenium building. The performance, he thought, was going well. It had been impossible, of course, to present adequately and clearly the doctrinal differences that had underlain the Oslo riots, but the writer of the ritual had done his best with his theme, and the inherent drama of the riots was keeping the big audience entranced.

The white-clad figures who represented the false prophets had spoken their lines, tried to reconcile or inflame the emotions of the Jovists, and been swept away by the fury of their followers. The civil authorities of Oslo were helpless. It was time for Brun, whose absence had started all the trouble among his followers, to appear.

The actor who was playing the part of Brun had a splendid baritone voice. The historical Brun had been part char-

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latan, part genius, and a desperate though intermittent alcoholic. For the purpose of the ritual, of course, he was being presented as a truly heroic figure.

"Brothers!" the actor called in his splendid voice. He was standing on the balcony of the proscenium building that, tonight, represented the warehouse where the historical Brun had appeared to his embattled cohorts. "Brothers! Jovis men!"

The highly realistic fighting on the stage below him slackened a little. "Men of Jovis! Remember who you are!"

The groups of combatants began to break apart. "Remember the oath you took!" Brun shouted. "Remember our enemies and our struggles! Remember the victories we won together! You are brothers!" And then, more calmly, "Men of Jovis, lay down your arms."

There was a long, dramatic moment of hesitation. Then the fighting stopped. The rioters began to look at each other. "Tomorrow we leave for a new world," the actor said impressively. "Tonight, remember that Jovis is a first-class god."

The shouted slogan began to answer him. "Jovis! Jovis! Jovis is a first-class god!"

The erstwhile rioters began to embrace each other. Brun, raising his hands in benediction, left the balcony. It was time for Anassa and her train of dancers to come on.

Anxiously Wan watched her move out on the stage. Ever since they had returned to New Christiana she had been losing weight and sleeping badly. The temple surgeon, examining her, had pursed his lips and said that Lady Anassa needed a rest, not medicine. Anassa had laughed and said that she couldn't rest when the Games were only a few weeks off. She had gone on with her duties. But tonight, the last of the four strenuous days of the Games, Wan knew how tired she was.

The intricate movements of the dance began. Once

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Anassa missed a step, but she retrieved it instantly, and the audience seemed not to know.

She whirled away from the dancers. They had separated into two groups and were beginning to dance a choric version of the struggle that had just been presented on the stage. Anassa stood motionless for a moment, waiting for the music that would give her her cue.

Wan, watching intently, saw something flash out like a silver dart from the row of seats nearest the stage. There was a whir in the air. Anassa staggered and fell, holding her right side with one hand.

There was an instant of silence. The spectators did not at once realize what had happened. In the interval, the man who had thrown the knife jumped up and ran toward an exit. Before he could reach it a dozen men had left their seats and were after him. He tripped over a thrust-out foot and rolled in the aisle.

All over the amphitheater people were beginning to stand up and shout. The temple guards had come running up and were trying to get the assassin away from the men who had piled on his prone body.

The knot of struggling men grew bigger. Whistles blew. Angry cries of "Kill him! Kill the mother-raper!" and an occasional "Jovis is a first-class god!" rang through the air.

Wan had hurried out on the stage after Anassa. She was leaning on the arm of one of the dancers. "Are you hurt?" he demanded. "Where did he get you? I'll kill him myself."

"No, I'm not hurt," she answered. "He only grazed my ribs. It was the shock that knocked me down. Can't this be stopped, Wan? This is supposed to be a day of peace." She was very pale.

He looked about him. The confusion had not quite reached the proportions of a riot, but it was getting there. The temple guards had formed a wedge around their prisoner and

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were trying to get him out through the angry crowd. Private fist-fights were breaking out all over the theater. Wan heard a man, with three attackers on top of him, saying, "Stop! I'm not a Jovist! Help me, Neith!"

"I don't think *we* can stop it," he said after a minute. "The police will soon be here. Things may quiet down after they get that fellow out."

She nodded. The disorder was growing; there seemed to be no hope of going on with the performance of the ritual. Over the tumult they heard the shrilling of sirens. A squadron of the city police moved in, swinging short clubs impartially.

The temple guards and their prisoner managed to reach one of the exits. Here there was another riot, but at last, with the city police running interference, the guards got their man out.

The tumult in the theater did not abate. The police, after futile attempts to quiet it, seemed to decide that half-measures were hopeless. They began to clear the building forcibly.

The amphitheater emptied slowly. Even then, it was not until the last spectator had been ejected that quiet returned. Wan and Anassa could hear the noise of fighting continuing outside.

Anassa drew a deep breath. "That's the end of this year's Games," she said.

"Depressed, 'Na?"

"Yes."

"You oughtn't to be. The temper of the audience was overwhelmingly pro-Neith. The fighting started because Neith's priestess had been attacked."

"I suppose so. The Jovists are certainly in retreat. What bothered me was everybody's readiness to assume that the man next to him was a Jovist and start hitting him. We've

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got to learn to live in peace with each other. Let's go back to my rooms. I'm tired."

Most of the actors and dancers had already gone. Wan and Anassa walked slowly along the curving uphill path that led from the back of the amphitheater to the temple buildings. The girl kept stopping to rest.

"Lie down," Wan said when they reached her apartment. "I'll get you some wine."

"Thank you." She took the glass from him. Baldur had jumped up on the couch beside her and was lying with his head against her knee. Absently she fondled the big brindle head. "I wish we'd got to finish the ritual," she said. "The choreography for the last part was beautiful. Oh, well."

"What's bothering you, sweetheart?"

"Oh, a lot of things. And then, I've been thinking about Baldur a good deal."

"Baldur? Why? He's getting along all right."

"Yes. But you see, Chryse showed us what the cyons really are. He's almost as intelligent as we. If he could use his paws for what they really are, hands . . ."

"Well?"

"I'm wondering if we oughtn't to help the cyons to grow back into what they once were—a humanoid people who had speech and could use tools. I don't think they'd be cruel as the Old Ones were."

"I mean, if a breeding program were started—why, within a hundred years they'd be human again."

Wan was frowning intently. "Are you trying to get them all killed, Anassa?" he asked.

She looked at him, startled. "Of course not. What do you mean by that?"

"Why, I mean that the present population of Gwethym would never tolerate serious rivals to itself."

"I have a good deal of confidence in our people's basic

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good sense. The fighting tonight started because they felt something precious to them was being attacked, not because they're so savage at heart. But it has never happened in the history of any planet that two equally intelligent but biologically different humanoid races have managed to exist side by side. If a breeding program like the one you suggest were started, the cyons would be doomed. The very people who like them so much today would go after them with knives and stun guns."

Anassa sighed. "It doesn't seem fair," she said. "They used to have hands."

Wan laughed. "Why don't you ask Baldur what he thinks about it?" he said. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the increasing noise of the fighting that was still going on outside. "Perhaps he doesn't want to be different from what he is."

She looked down at the big animal. "Baldur, can you understand me?" she asked.

The cyon's tail thumped. He raised his head and looked directly into her eyes. Then he touched his pink tongue twice, lightly and delicately, to the back of her wrist.

"Yes, he understands," Wan said. "Ask him, jade girl."

"Baldur, what do you want for yourself and the other cyons?" Anassa said. "Do you want us to help you get your hands back? Do you want to be what you were once?"

The cyon was looking straight into her eyes. For a moment it seemed to her that she could feel the tendrils of her mind meet and mesh with his—a mind unlike hers, deeply alien, but of high intelligence. Then he lowered his head and pressed it deliberately against her thigh. He closed his eyes.

"You see," Wan said, smiling. "He wants to go on being your cyon. He doesn't want to change. It's all right."

"Yes. . . . What is all that noise? It's getting nearer. It sounds as if it were coming up the temple hill."

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She ran to the window and looked out. By leaning far out over the sill she could see the slope of the hill to the right, and the lower part of Neith's temple.

"It's men," she said, "people with torches, hundreds of people. They've got somebody with them, a man in the middle, being dragged along."

Wan was looking out too. "I think it's the man who tried to kill you," he said. "He's wearing handcuffs. There's blood on his face. He looks half-dead. They must have raided the jail."

"But why?" Anassa demanded. She was almost shouting to make herself heard. "Why have they brought him here? What do they want?"

Wan was chewing his lip. His eyes were hard. "Hurry, 'Na," he said. "You've got to stop them. I think they've brought him here to kill him on the altar. They mean to sacrifice him to Neith."

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"How CAN I stop them?" the girl asked wildly. "How can I make them stop?" She was almost wringing her hands.

"Go out and speak to them," Wan told her. "You're the only human being on Gwethym who could stop that mob. Hurry! The temple guards are only putting up a token resistance. Hurry!" He pushed her toward the door.

"Why is it *my* place to stop them?" she asked over the tumult. "The police—"

"The police are helpless. You're the priestess. Do you want Neith's altar to be defiled with human sacrifice? You've got to act!" He gave her another push.

Anassa's eyes blazed. For a moment it seemed she was

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going to strike him. Then she drew a deep, shuddering breath. "All right," she said, and ran toward the door.

Wan followed at her heels. "I'll keep you covered with a stun gun!" he shouted. "You'll be safe!"

"All right!"

When she reached the priestess' door she hesitated momentarily. She could see the writhing knot of men before the altar, the mob behind them with torches, and some of the temple guards, still resisting. Then she drew herself up to her full height and walked slowly in front of the image.

As she walked forward the air around her was suddenly clamorous with the low, thrilling vibration of the deep-throated temple gongs. Wan, she thought, must have struck the gongs to attract the attention of the mob.

The group around the altar had drawn back a little at her entrance. Anassa saw that they had hoisted the victim up on its surface and were holding him spread-eagled, with men pinning down his legs and his manacled arms. One of the men who held him was a temple guard. And at the victim's head was a wild-eyed woman who clutched a knife.

Another gong stroke, and another. The sound died away. The action around the altar had frozen into a temporary immobility at the noise. Anassa knew she must speak now. If she lost this moment, nothing could stop the sacrifice.

"People of Gwethym," she said, trying to make her voice clear and ringing, "I am Neith's priestess. For years I have served in her temple. I speak in her name.

"Why have you put a human victim on the altar that has never known anything except bloodless sacrifice?"

"Lady Anassa," said the temple guard, "we are avenging sacrilege."

The woman with the knife giggled. "He's got to die," she told them. "He's a bad man."

"Neith can avenge herself," Anassa answered. "This man



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struck me, the goddess' priestess, with a knife. But I tell you that you must take him back to his cell in jail, to wait for the justice of Gwethym. To soil *her* altar"—she gestured toward the beautiful benignant statue—"with his blood would be real sacrilege."

The men who were holding the victim looked at each other. "An eye for an eye," said the temple guard, "and a tooth for a tooth. That's justice."

"The justice of Jovis," the girl answered. "Neith wants none of it!"

The tension around the altar had lessened at Anassa's words. Now the mob behind began to press forward, as if it sensed its leaders' hesitation and meant to override it. "Kill him," somebody yelled, "go ahead and kill him. Don't let her talk you out of it. What are you waiting for?"

Other voices took up the cry. The woman with the knife was giggling again. Anassa felt a moment of despair. What more could she say than what she had already said? How could she make them stop?

She thought of Chryse as she had first seen her, and how she had thought her face the very face of Neith.

"People of Gwethym," she cried, "do you know what you are doing? Do you want us all to be cursed? If this sacrifice is made, Gwethym will never prosper again. The stain can never be wiped out. We will be polluted in our hearts. All our good will be gone. And Neith will be no better than Jovis was."

She had been walking forward as she spoke. Now she reached out across the altar and, with unexpected strength, plucked the knife from the wild-eyed woman's hands.

"Go home," she told them clearly. She dropped the knife with a clatter on the stone floor. "Go in peace. Rejoice as you go. For the goddess has saved you. She dismisses you with clean hands."

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There was a murmuring and shuffling of feet from the crowd. Most of the torches had gone out. Anassa beckoned to the temple guards, who had reformed themselves, and the victim was lifted down. Reluctantly, with backward glances, the invaders of the temple began to move towards the doors.

The woman who had held the knife was among the last to leave. "He's a bad man," she told Anassa doubtfully. She shook her head. Then she too went through the door.

Anassa remained standing beside the altar. The victim, only half-conscious, was held upright between two of the guards. "Have the police been called?" she said to them.

"Yes, Lady. I think I hear the sirens now."

"Good. When they come, give the prisoner to them. I don't think there'll be more trouble. But they must guard him more carefully this time."

She turned to go. Wan came hurrying up. He put his arm around her. "You were wonderful, 'Na," he said. "You said exactly the right things. Nobody else could have done it. You were wonderful."

"Was I? I feel sick."

Half supporting her, half carrying her, he helped her back to her apartment. He put her down on the couch. After a silence, she said, "Wan, I can't stand any more of this. I'm going to resign my job."

"Well, I don't know that I blame you for getting tired of attempted assassinations. Tonight was the last one, though, I think."

"Oh, it's not that." She tried to arrange her thoughts. "After we got back from the island of the Old Ones," she said, "I tried to think things were going to be all right. Gwethym was safe, and the buildings on the island had been blown to bits when Chryse was destroyed."

"I thought that the reason why Gwethym had had the

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human sacrifice to Jovis had been the influence of the island. People *did* know about it, vaguely, though the stories were always dismissed as folklore.

"I thought that the island had corrupted us without anyone's actually realizing the source of the corruption. The prophecy of the second coming of Jovis, for example—that might have been started by fishermen who happened to find the island above water. And so on."

"You're probably right," Wan said judicially. "It accounts for why the settlers behaved as they did."

"Yes. But tonight, half the population of New Christiana tried to kill a man on the altar of Neith. On the altar of *Neith*."

"They didn't, though. You stopped them. The point is, they could be stopped."

"I had to talk to them as if Neith were actually a goddess, instead of something the people of Gwethym had made up," she said a little bitterly.

"You could hardly have done otherwise. Most people in N.C. think they saw Neith 'in visible presence,' walking over the water and healing the sick.

"The average person can accept the actual visit of a god more easily than he can a visitor from a higher energy-level universe."

She sighed. "As soon as they think Neith is real, they're ready to start sacrificing victims to her."

"No, they're not. Don't you realize, sweetheart, that what happened tonight was the result of the combination of several unusual things? Chryse's visit, the attack on you, and the keyed-up mood of the last day of the Games?

"The thing to remember isn't that they tried to sacrifice somebody, but that you were able to stop them. And you stopped them not by a display of supernatural terrors, but by an appeal to ethical and moral considerations.

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"I don't think you ought to quit your job, 'Na. At least not now, though it might be wise to work for the abolition of the Games. But you can help the people of Gwethym a lot."

"Can I?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes. You can."

"I don't—"

There came a rap at the door. "Come in," Anassa called.

It was one of the temple guards. After a moment she recognized him as the one who had helped to hold the victim on the altar of Neith.

"Lady Anassa . . ."

"Go on," the priestess said.

"When you made us stop, I was angry," the guard said. His head was bent. "I thought you were a fool who didn't know what she was doing. Justice is justice, and right's right.

"But then I got to thinking. I don't know whether or not I believe in Neith. My brother says he saw her walking over the water, but I didn't. But I don't think it matters.

"I mean, you were right to stop us. It was really ourselves stopping us. I'm glad you didn't let us soil our hands."

He coughed, bobbed his head, and hurried out.

"You see," Wan said. "He was glad."

"I suppose so." She was sitting up on the couch, her back bowed. "I think, that until now, I've been rather a superficial person," she said slowly.

"Oh, I knew evil and pain existed. Everybody's life shows him that. And my grandfather—did I ever tell you this, Wan?—my grandfather actually served as priest at one of the Jovis sacrifices.

"But it didn't seem real, somehow. Evil and pain were something far off. Even though I knew cruelty existed, it didn't have anything to do with me.

"But then we went to the Old Ones' island. I saw the

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buildings and the pictures. And I almost died under the captain's knife.

"I can't forget it. When I look out over the water of the harbor, I think of what lies under it. Of all the buried horror, of the suffering and anguish the Old Ones inflicted.

"I'm haunted by it. What if that dreadfulness should rise out of the depths? An abyss has opened under my feet."

He sat down beside her and embraced her. "It won't rise up, Anassa. The sea is wide. The horror of the past is safely buried under its weight."

She clung to him. "What a long night it's been," she said, trying to laugh. "The sky is getting pink."

"Come over to the window," he said. "Isn't it a beautiful sight?"

"Yes. But in the depths—"

"It *remains* in the depths. Do you remember, Anassa, when we went to Lovelace Island, two years ago?"

"Yes. That was a happy time."

"Well, we've both been working hard. I've been investigating some ideas I got on the Old Ones' Island about the use of organic copper compounds, but it would do me good to leave it for a while. And you're worn out.

"Tomorrow I'll get the *Basset* ready for a cruise. We'll leave the harbor here at sundown. The stars will come out. And, in the *Basset's* cabin, with the sound of the water along her sides to lull you, you'll be able to sleep.

"All night long I'll hold the ship on her course for the island. And when the dawn comes, we'll be there."

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She cast a shadow, so she must have been material; but about the edges of the shape there glowed a nimbus of rainbow hues.

She was smiling gently. The crowd had drawn back from her in awe. Then somebody, greatly daring, said, "Welcome, Queen Neith."

The woman frowned a little. "I'm not Neith," she said. "My name is Chryse. Gold."

"Be greeted by whatever name may please you, mistress," the brave voice answered, though it quivered a little. "The gods may bear what names they choose."

The woman looked down. She seemed to sigh. Then she asked a question which Hu-shih heard as, "Where is Neith's temple?" and the customer, who had a skeptical temperament, perceived as an inquiry as to where people who studied the structure of matter could be found.

A hundred voices shouted information. The woman started up the hill to the temple of Neith.

She was there only a little while. When she came out, the courtyards were black with people. A way cleared before her magically, and she walked over the ridge of the hill to where the buildings of Sun Yat-sen University were.

Here she had an interview with Larsen, the head of the physics department of the university.

She was closeted with him for a long time. When she came out, her face wore a sober look. The interview was presumably somewhat more satisfactory to him than it had been to her, since he subsequently wrote a highly successful popular book about it, as well as a rather apologetic paper for a scientific journal under the title of *Some Speculations on the Possibility of Multilevel Energy Universes*.

By now traffic in half of New Christiana had come to an absolute standstill. The news that Neith had come walking over the water to her city had spread to the remotest suburb.

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Not everyone believed it, but everyone wanted to see. Yet still, wherever Chryse went, a passage was opened before her almost magically.

She was walking more slowly now. She turned her footsteps toward the water front. Here she walked along the piers and wharves and stopped at last beside a trim little ship.

She asked a question of its owner. The people around her reported her words differently. But whatever they may have been, the owner of the craft, bent almost to the ground in reverence and trembling with emotion, implored her to take it. "A blessing," he babbled, "a blessing and the highest of honors, Mighty Lady, Neith all-glorious, that you lower yourself to take my wretched, my most worthless ship."

"I am not Neith," she is reported to have said. "But for what it may be worth, I thank you and wish you well."

Alone, without anybody to help her, she loosed the ship from its moorings. While the pier threatened momentarily to collapse under the weight of the spectators, Chryse maneuvered the *Jade Phoenix* through the shipping of the harbor. The woman who could walk over the water had been in New Christiana just five hours.

When she was gone, the city drew a deep, astonished breath. It was immediately obvious that the population of New Christiana was divided into three groups: those who'd actually seen Neith, those who hadn't but lied and said they had, and those who were too honest to lie.

Hu-shih, the wine-shop keeper, was unquestionably a member of the first section. When he had seen the hull of the *Jade Phoenix* vanish over the horizon, he turned back to his wine shop with lagging steps. Business was good the rest of the day: those who had seen her wanted a drink to celebrate; and those who hadn't, wanted a drink to console themselves.