



The Sex Gates

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Dedication:

To my son Allan, the bulletproof man.
Darrell Bain

To my husband Pat, who helped me achieve my dreams.
Jeanine Berry

BOOK I

MARS



Chapter One

All our lives changed forever the day the gates appeared. They brought riots, chaos, and war, and eventually they changed the future of the human race.

But for ordinary people—for my friends and me—the gates brought an awesome choice—whether or not to go through.

That day, I was walking down the street on the new North Houston college campus with two of my friends, Don Wesley and Russell Borderlon, and my girl, Rita Hernandez. None of us suspected that the world was about to change. It was a Sunday, during spring break, and unusually cold weather for Texas had cleared the skies of their normal polluted haze. We were on our way back home after eating lunch at the campus beanery. The food there wasn't anything to brag about, but it was convenient and came with the tuition, so we all ate there a lot. Besides none of us were very good cooks.

The campus was almost deserted because of spring break. Most of the students were gone, heading down to Galveston or Corpus Christi. The ones who could afford it, and didn't mind the risk, flew to Mexico.

Those of us who remained were enjoying a lazy Sunday. Don and Russell were walking in front of Rita and me. Russell had his palm computer out and was arguing with Don over some physics problem. I was saying something I have long since forgotten to Rita, using it as an excuse to blow in her ear.

I heard a gasp from Russell.

"Hey! I'll be goddamned!" Don said.

I looked up just in time to keep from bumping into them.

A gate had materialized almost on top of us. It appeared on the grassy



lawn at the east corner of the campus, adjacent to Romania Street where we always turned when going home from the cafeteria. Russell later told me that its appearance was instantaneous as far as he could tell. One moment there was only grass and a paved street in front of us, and the next moment the path was blocked by the gate, a glowing green arch darkening to dull turquoise inward from the edges and toward the space in between. Though it was only about twenty feet high and maybe ten feet across at its base, we were so close it seemed to tower over us.

We untangled ourselves and stood gaping up at it in amazement.

“Where on earth did that come from?” Rita demanded. She stared up at the gate with huge black eyes as wide open as a frightened owl.

I was frightened, too. Years of reading science fiction told me that the gate was clearly alien. I slipped a protective arm around her waist.

“It came out of nowhere,” Don said, awed. “I almost ran into it.” He stood with his hands on his hips, head tilted to one side as if he were examining a blackboard problem in one of his math classes.

“Impossible.” Russell shoved his handheld computer back in his pocket. He glared at the gate as if it were defying some natural law.

“It did!” Don repeated.

“What in Christ is it?” Rita asked. I could feel her shivering inside the circle of my arm. She crossed her own arms against her chest in a defensive posture, flattening her breasts into the crook of her elbows.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” Don said. This was typical. He tended to view life as nothing more than a complex math problem he could solve with a minimum of effort if he could only find the right approach. He took a step toward the gate, hands outstretched.

“Don, don’t! It might be dangerous.” Even as he spoke, Russell reached out to grab the back of Don’s windbreaker.

He was too late. Don was already walking forward. Three quick steps brought him into the edge of a faint nimbus extending from the darker turquoise inner portion. For a second I could see him there, frozen, one leg lifted for the next step. Then he disappeared as abruptly as a popped soap bubble.

“Don! Come back!” Rita screamed. She broke free of my arm and took a step forward.



For a second I froze, stunned by the sight of Don vanishing. Then my body reacted, and I grabbed Rita, catching the belt of her toga. I yanked her backward just as she reached the edge of the nimbus where Don had disappeared.

Rita stumbled and fell against me, and I held her tight, frightened at how close she'd come to that strange haze. She pressed her hands to her face in horror, her eyes wide with panic.

"Let me go!" Her voice rose in a panic as she struggled to get free of my grip. Her coffee-and-cream-colored complexion paled to a sickly yellowish gray, draining all the beauty from her face.

I shook her. "Rita, calm down! We're okay."

"This is impossible—Don has to be here!" Russell's dark blue eyes glittered with curiosity. Keeping well away from the entrance, he began edging around the side of the arch, as if by stepping off its dimensions he could measure it and assign it to a category within the physics he loved so much.

"Omigod!"

That scream was a startled soprano voice. It came from the other side of the arch. Some other woman, as frightened as Rita, was losing control.

That thought lasted only a second. The voice came again, louder and shriller, with an overtone of horrified surprise. "My God, what's happened to me? My God! Lee! Russell! Where are you?"

Russell and I both bolted around to the other side of the arch. On edge, it was less than ten feet wide. Three or four quick steps and we were around the corner. Russell pulled to a hasty halt and I ran full tilt into him.

My momentum knocked us both to the ground. I rolled over and found myself flat on my back staring up at a totally naked woman. She stood a foot away from my head, her legs spread apart as if she needed all the support she could get to stay standing. Her head was bent and she was clutching both her breasts, staring at them as if they were two strange parasites suddenly attached to her body. A mass of curly brown hair blew around her shoulders.

I stared, fascinated. It wasn't her nudity that grabbed my attention, as you might expect, but the horror-struck expression on her face.



She raised her head, looking bewildered, like a child too young to understand who had just caught a glimpse of her distorted reflection in a funhouse mirror.

“My God!” Her hands left her breasts and began scrabbling through the bushy triangle of brown hair between her thighs in a frantic search. As she looked down, she noticed me lying at her feet.

“Lee! What’s happened to me?” Her voice broke. Suddenly she moaned and hunched up, trying to cover both breasts and pubic area with her arms and hands.

Russell was already standing up again, starting at the strange woman with his mouth open.

I heard another sharp intake of breath and looked up to see Rita standing on my other side. Her eyes were still wide with fear, but I knew seeing another woman in distress would distract her from her own worries. Rita was usually a picture of calm competence, and her life was dedicated to helping other people. Seeing a naked woman in front of her, she snapped into action. “Lee, get up and give me your jacket,” she said, beginning to peel hers off.

The woman was muttering to herself as if she were about to lose it, but Rita was accustomed to encountering strange behavior as a psychology major. Now she calmly ignored the eerily glowing gate behind her and walked up to the naked woman, holding out her jacket.

I got to my feet and shucked out of my own jacket while she was wrapping hers around the woman’s hips. She grabbed mine and threw it over the woman’s shoulders.

Meanwhile, Russell continued to stare at the woman with amazement. “Don? Is that you?” He moved forward, as cautious as a cat approaching an unknown danger.

“It’s me. I’m Don. Oh, Lord love the pope, look what that thing did to me.”

“Lord love the pope” was one of Don’s favorite expressions. I should know. He was my best friend, closer than my brother. I must have heard him say those words a million times in the past few years.

I was still stunned, but hearing “Lord love the pope” come from the woman’s mouth made me start to believe; that is, if we weren’t dreaming the whole thing. Besides, I was beginning to notice that this



woman resembled Don, in the same way that Don's eighteen-year-old sister might have.

Rita looked worried. "Well, we can't stand here. Whatever this thing is, it's dangerous. Let's get her to your house, Lee, then figure it out. Come on, dear." She grabbed the woman's hand, tugging her away from the gate.

"Don't call me 'dear,' damn it. I'm a man!" Don, if that's who it was, pushed Rita away. She hadn't had time to zip up the jacket and the violent shove made her breasts pop up. If she was a man, you sure couldn't prove it by her anatomy.

The sight of those round breasts seemed to break Russell out of his trance. "Please, I'm not sure who you are, but we need to get away from this thing before it grabs someone else. If you come with us, we'll take care of you."

The woman clutched the jacket closed again and with a reluctant nod went along with Russell and Rita as they started back to my house. She didn't say anything else as we walked along. She seemed to be concentrating on her walking, like a neophyte sailor on her first cruise in choppy seas. Her eyes were the same dark brown as Don's but they appeared glassy, as if she were coming out from a heavy doping session.

The few students we saw were all shouting and running in the opposite direction, toward the new gate. I looked back over my shoulder, half expecting it to be gone, but it was still there. Already a small crowd was gathering, coming from all directions. There was little traffic on the street, and the few strollers we passed on the sidewalk were staring ahead at the gate. Besides, they were used to seeing students in odd raiment; probably they thought the girl with the jacket tied around her hips by the sleeves and another hanging over her shoulders was the victim of a new clothing fad.

Rita stayed close to this stranger who claimed to be Don while Russell and I hung back. Russell didn't say a word to me—he was too deep in thought. Well, I was thinking too, but I doubt my thoughts were as profound as Russell's. Mostly, my mind circled round and round one incredible idea: was it possible that weird green arch could change a man into a woman?

It sounded like a wild science fiction tale, one I would read in a book but never expected to see materialize right before my eyes. My mind kept replaying the picture of the gate appearing out of nowhere, but my astonished disbelief refused to vanish. It wasn't possible.



As I watched the woman struggling to walk, I felt a pang of guilt at my relief that it was Don who had gone through the gate rather than me. How would I react if it sucked me in and turned me into a woman? I didn't want to pursue that thought. Fortunately, I didn't have to, as my house came into view, sitting like a sanctuary on its spacious corner lot, and we turned into the drive.

I rented this house, which was a post-Millennium modular located only a few blocks from the college campus. It was solid on the outside, but it was easy to rearrange the rooms on the inside. Don and Russell lived there with me, and I'd spent the past several weeks trying to talk Rita into moving in too.

I told the door to open, and Rita hustled the girl into Don's bedroom. Russell snapped out of his reverie as we entered, and we both headed straight for the bar at the far end of the great room. This room was comfortably furnished with a couple of loungers and the two wall screens that connected us to the media and the web.

I don't usually drink much, but I still kept the bar well stocked for parties and for the others in the house. Russell hardly drank at all, but he didn't object when I poured us both a double shot of Jack Daniels and dropped a couple of ice cubes into the glasses. We sat down on the little lounge and propped our feet up, trying to pretend we weren't straining our ears at mumbled sounds coming from the bedroom. I couldn't make out what Rita and Don were saying, other than a strained curse or two from the strange young woman claiming to be Don.

I leaned back in my chair, already aware that the life I had known until now was about to change forever. Before the arrival of the gates, I was more or less a perpetual student. I had already earned degrees in journalism and biology at North Houston College, but I was still taking undergraduate courses (all that were offered at North Houston at the time) in psychology, business, sociology and anything else that took my fancy.

It probably sounds like I was leading a spoiled life of leisure, doing as I pleased, while other students had to struggle after the last of the federal loan programs were cancelled. I have my grandfather to thank for that.

My grandfather, Mosby Stuart, was an eclectic jack-of-all-trades who was relatively uneducated but self-taught in a number of subjects, most notably electronics. My parents claim I take after him. My dad described him as a visionary, a dreamer who wandered all over the



South for years, seeking a niche and dragging his family along with him while he looked. He finally found a place for himself during the electronics explosion back before the Millennium, making his fortune designing software for some of the early computers.

He retired to eastern Texas where he spent a lot of time sitting in front of the keyboard or browsing through his vast library. Dad used to tell me stories of how Grandpa and Grandma argued over all the space the books took up in the house, especially his collection of science fiction, which I later inherited. That was before e-books became wildly popular, of course.

I wish I had known him better, but Dad was in the military while I was growing up, and we didn't get back to Texas that often. Grandpa was a Civil War buff, and Dad told me I was named after Grandpa's favorite general, but only after Grandpa promised a hefty donation to the disabled veterans of America, Dad's favorite charity. Mom and Dad had a disagreement about whether to call me Jackson or Lee, or so I heard from my older brother, Derek. Mom won, because as far back as I can remember everyone has called me Lee.

Grandpa and Grandma were killed in a car crash while I was still in my teens. Grandpa's will left his house to my Dad. Each of us kids got a trust fund. I started drawing my annuity on my eighteenth birthday, a few months before I was ready to start college. For a young kid, it was more than enough. I was able to afford the rent on a four-bedroom home off campus, a new car every couple of years, and still had plenty left over to enjoy life.

Rita was the greatest joy of my life in North Houston. I had originally chosen to go to that college because it was close to my family. Mom and Dad had moved into Grandpa's house only thirty miles further north on the NAFTA highway. In the two years before I started college, I grew to love that old place and the piney woods it was set in, a few miles out from the little town of Ruston. Now, with Rita in my life, I had a whole new reason to love living in Texas.

Russell and I had time to finish our drinks before Rita and the strange woman came out of the bedroom. The woman was dressed in a pair of loose slacks and one of Don's shirts. Her face wore a stunned looked, but the dark brown eyes were all-too familiar. They were Don's eyes.

"I could use one of those," Rita said, spotting the glass in my hand. She left the woman sitting on the large lounge while she made them both a drink.



Don—to make things easier, I’m going to call the woman Don for the time being—slugged his down and then doubled over in a fit of coughing.

“God,” he finally said in a strangled voice when the coughing stopped. “That burnt my throat. What did you put in there?”

“The usual.” Rita gave him a worried look. “If that body is brand new, maybe it’s never tasted liquor before. Better take it easy.” She took the glass and made him another drink, but I noticed she added only a bare minimum of liquor to the mix.

Don took a tentative slip and seemed to relax a bit. He—no, I guess I’d better call him ‘she,’ since her body certainly left no doubt about gender—she finished what was in the glass, then sat slumped over as if trying to hide her new breasts behind the oversized shirt.

I was still struggling to sort out my thoughts. Don had been my best friend for years. We enjoyed the easy, comfortable friendship of two people who thought alike, were both crazy about science fiction, played the same web games and helped each other in classes. Don was my tutor when I struggled with math, and I helped him when he had to write a paper. We had grown close, almost like brothers. In fact, many times I had found myself wishing he actually were my brother rather than the one I had. I had never been comfortable around Derek, even when we were young. And since he had come out and told the folks and me he was a transsexual, I hadn’t had much to say to him. Every time I thought about his claim that he was a woman trapped in a man’s body, I became queasy.

Russell’s blonde eyebrows creased in a frown. He looked at Don, glanced away from where she sat, and then forced his gaze back to her.

“Uh, Don, do you remember what happened to you when you went into that, uh, gate I guess we can call it?”

“I don’t remember a damn thing. One second I was walking toward the arch, and the next thing I remember is coming out on the other side like this.” She looked down at her body, then got up and stalked over to the bar again. I couldn’t help notice how her hips swayed as she walked. I looked away, taking a deep breath. This was crazy.

By this time I had abandoned the idea that I might be dreaming. The whole scenario was too clear and defined, too logically linear once the basic assumption of that gate, as Russell called it, was stipulated. I had two thoughts in rapid succession.



“How do we know you’re really Don?” That was the first one.

“Et tu, Brute?” She looked pained.

As much as I loved Don, I needed to make sure this was really him. Maybe I had read too much science fiction, but I couldn’t help wondering if some strange force inside the gate had made an exchange.

The woman who claimed to be my best friend seemed to read my thoughts. She glared at me and snapped out a few words like a challenge. “Willy’s Arcade. The redheaded stripper.”

I blushed, remembering the incident, and Rita turned to give me a curious stare. I had never told anyone about that episode except Don.

She leaned close and whispered something to him. This time she blushed. She looked over at us. “She’s Don, all right. I have to believe it now.”

“Don’t call me ‘she,’” Don snapped.

“I still say it’s impossible,” Russell said. “Something like this violates all the known laws of physics. Maybe we’ve all been hypnotized or drugged.”

Rita shook her head, making her thick black hair dance around her shoulders. “I don’t think so. This isn’t how hypnotism works.”

“How do you know?” Don got up and poured another two fingers of whiskey. She almost dropped the bottle when she picked it up to pour. She was drinking way too much, especially if her body wasn’t used to it, but I could hardly blame her.

“Remember, I took a course in clinical hypnosis last semester.”

Hypnosis hadn’t been my second thought, but it was close enough not to matter. “Suppose the, uh, entity inside the gate stole your, or Don’s, thoughts and transferred them into another body?”

“I didn’t see any entity, and I’ll guarantee you I’m still me, even if I am in this fucking female body.” Don slugged down his drink and endured another coughing fit. I couldn’t help notice how his breasts jiggled with each cough.

Rita gave him an odd, almost angry stare. He should have known



better than to say something like that, but I guess I might have, too, under the circumstances.

“How can you guarantee that?” Russell said.

Don plunked her glass down on the bar, her soft red mouth trembling as she fought back tears. She leaned away from the barstool she had been propping her arm on and wobbled a step or two toward the bathroom. “Because I have to piss, God damn it, and I don’t know how!” Her features twisted and I thought she was about to cry.

Rita rushed over and led her to the bathroom, keeping an arm around her waist.

For a moment after they left, Russell and I sat in dead silence. Then Russell spoke up. “Hey I wonder if there’s anything on the news about this?”

I don’t know why we hadn’t thought of that sooner.

“On!” I told the wall screen. The screen lit up and we were looking at a shot of a bright green arch. A mob surged around it, held back by policemen. I noticed immediately from the buildings in the background that it wasn’t the same gate we had seen on campus, not unless it had moved in the meantime.

The volume came up and we heard a newscaster’s voice, shaking with emotion. “You are looking at the gate that a young woman passed through shortly before police arrived. She vanished, but now a man who appeared naked on the other side is claiming to be that same woman. He says his sex was changed by the gate.”

And that, of course, is how the term sex gates came into being.

Chapter Two

While the news anchor was still blathering about “this unique event” and “awesome phenomena,” I unhooked my phone from its belt latch and glanced at the charge. It still had almost twenty-four hours left on it so I didn’t bother to plug in. I pointed it at the other screen on the



adjacent wall and zapped into the web to see what was happening there, then asked for two minute scans from my favorite web sites.

Coverage on the web wasn't much better than the networks. The first two showed scenes similar to what the networks were displaying. Just before the screen changed to the third, Rita and Don came back out of the bathroom.

Don was still feeling the effects of her three quick drinks. "Look, ma. No cavities!" She grinned, showing a set of perfect teeth.

I looked. Don had had a gold crown, and it was missing. Maybe this wasn't Don after all. Then I remembered that stripper incident. If this woman wasn't Don, how could she know about that?

"And look here! My scar is gone." She pulled up one pants leg to display her shin, where Don had a scar from a cleating accident in high school. It was gone, too. I stared, still feeling a sense of unreality, and couldn't help but notice the shapely curve of her calf. She dropped the pants leg and headed back to the bar.

I got up and followed her. We stood next to each other at the counter. I was aware that this new body was soft and slender and wonderfully shaped, and that awareness made me squirm. This was my friend—my male friend! I tried to think of something to make her feel better.

"If you had to change into a woman, at least that gate made you into a pretty one," I said. It was true. Don was a good-looking man; as a woman (if it was really him), she was gorgeous.

She glared at me. "I don't give a damn. And stop staring at these." She folded her arms across her breasts. "I'm not going to have them much longer."

"What? You're not?"

She tipped her glass and swallowed half the contents. "Damn right. I've figured it out. It's simple enough. If going into that gate turned me into a woman, then going back through it ought to make me a man again."

Russell, on his way over to join us, overheard the comment. "That doesn't necessarily follow."

"You got any better ideas?" Don demanded.

"Don—" I hesitated. I was still having trouble thinking of her as my



best friend, but I was concerned for her, nevertheless. “Why don’t you wait a bit? Like Russell says, you don’t know that would work.”

“I don’t care. How would you like to have to squat to pee?” She swallowed hard as a sudden thought occurred to her. “Or, Jesus Christ, what if I have a period?” She set her glass down, and turned toward the door, her face desperate.

Rita’s yelp stopped her. “Hey, listen! A man who was changed is trying to go back through the gate! Right now, live!”

We all hurried over to the lounge where we could get a better view of the screen.

“What happened? Did he come back out?” Excitement, or maybe the liquor she was still drinking, slurred Don’s voice.

“Not yet,” Rita said. “Be quiet and listen.”

The report was coming in over the CNN network.

“...two minutes now and so far he has not come out the other side, nor has any sign been seen of her, or I should say him, as he was male before the change. Going through the first time is almost instantaneous, so this may be a bad sign. It may mean that the sex gates are a one-way proposition, but, of course, it is too soon to say for certain. And as hard as it may be for you to believe, some people do want to change their sex. Already, we have one report of a police guard set up around the gate near the Presidio to keep a crowd of men and women from going –”

“Aw, smash it to hell!” That was another one of Don’s favorite expressions. She turned away from the screen, her face filled with despair. I could see she was discarding the notion of trying to go back through a gate, at least for the time being.

Instead, she sat with the rest of us through the afternoon and on into the evening, watching the screens and listening to more and more information pour in from the web and networks. In that, we were not alone. Most of the people in America sat down and watched the news that night as the gates began to change our world forever.

I sent out for pizza. Don ate enough to soak up some of the whiskey and topped it with a Nohang pill to ease her transition back to sobriety.

Secretly, I’d been worried that the government would soon block



access to the gates, stopping Don from going back through even if she wanted to. But it quickly became obvious that the military and police, no matter how hard they tried, were going to be unable to stop people from using the gates; there were simply too many of them.

As reports came in, we learned there were thousands now in place around the world. They had appeared all over the planet at exactly the same time (or as near as anyone had been able to figure). The largest numbers materialized where the most people lived, suggesting some sort of knowledge about earth's population density on the part of the originators of the gates. The networks were soon displaying a giant world map, with different colors depicting population gradients and white dots representing the location of every gate known to exist up until that moment.

Another startling development (besides the sex change) was announced as we were polishing off the last of the pizza. This time the network news was ahead of the webs. The elderly anchor, retired but brought back for commentary, was as excited as a child on the way to Disney World.

“So far, every person who has gone through the gate has reappeared as a young man or woman in vibrant health, no matter what age they were when they entered. Are these gates the long-sought fountain of youth? It appears that they are, if you don't mind changing your gender along the way. Not only are those who go through emerging on the other side young, initial reports indicate when they go through the gate they come out with whatever ailments they might have had cured! No more arthritis or failing eyesight! No more senility or incurable cancer! This could be a boon for humanity, the dawning of a wonderful new age, a precious gift brought to us by the benevolence of unknown—”

The network cut him off as he began to ramble euphorically, not making much sense. If I had to bet, I would put money on him heading for a sex gate straight from the studio.

“See?” Rita said to Don. “Maybe it's not as bad as you've been making it out to be.”

Don pursed her lips and looked thoughtful. She had told me once that her family had a genetic predisposition to vascular disease, one of the illnesses still not curable by gene therapy. Her dad had died of it a year after we met.

“That's wonderful for old people. But damn it, I don't want to be a woman. I'm a man.” She tossed her thick brown hair back over her



shoulders with an annoyed flick of her hands.

“Why do you feel that way?” Rita looked curious. It’s obvious to me why she’s a psychology major; she’s always asking people about their feelings. At the moment, she was cuddling next to me on the lounge, but she leaned forward to listen to Don’s answer.

Don was sitting by herself in my easy chair. “How would you like it if you were wearing the wrong body? Everything is heavier. I almost dropped the Jack Daniels bottle. And my hips seem like they’re out of joint when I walk. Besides that, I feel top-heavy.” She grunted a small smile. I could understand that, at least. My eyes strayed to her full breasts. I tried to imagine what it would feel like to walk with a couple of weights swinging from my chest.

Rita went over and scrunched into the seat with her. She patted Don’s cheek, and turned on the sympathy. “Don’t worry. You’ll get used to all that.” I knew from personal experience Rita was good-hearted and optimistic, otherwise I would have thought she was overdoing the empathy.

“Maybe,” Don admitted. “I still don’t like it.”

I believed her. Don had never impressed me as the least bit feminine. I still didn’t know how to treat her, and I was worried about how we could stay close friends if the change proved to be permanent. I guess she had noticed my reluctance to even speak to her, because she suddenly pinned me with a stare.

“Lee, you’re not saying much.”

I shrugged and felt my fingers tighten around the arm of my chair where I had been resting my hand. “I don’t know what to say. This is like something out of a science fiction book.”

“Yeah, with me as the alien.”

“At least you’re not a BEM,” I said.

“What’s a BEM?” Russell asked.

“Bug-eyed monster. It’s a science fiction term for a nasty alien.” Don didn’t look happy about the comparison.

“Would anyone like some wine?” Rita was an expert at diffusing tension. We nodded. She opened a bottle of Texas Valley Chablis, and poured us all a drink while we continued to watch the news.



Of course, the gates weren't on earth for more than an hour before the politicians started making pronouncements. President Forbes made a brief address from the Oval Office. He asked for calm and said the government was attempting to communicate with the entities controlling the gates. He assured us that there had been no sign of hostility from any gate so far. During the shock of the first appearances, a few soldiers had panicked and attacked one gate, but there had been no reaction. He warned against trying to pass through a gate until a thorough study of long-term effects was completed.

It was about what you could expect from a politician. He probably hadn't gotten his daily webpoll yet. Even if he had, he may as well have been talking to the wind. The people weren't listening.

Right after his speech, the networks showed shots of older citizens, most walking but some in wheelchairs. They were lining up and entering any gate they could find that wasn't guarded by soldiers or police. They were even rushing some of the ones that were. One memorable shot showed an old woman beating a soldier over the head with her cane, then limping past him and disappearing into the gate. The shot shifted to the other side of the gate and caught a young man emerging, his arms uplifted in victory. The once-old woman was grinning and the camera made no attempt to avoid showing his well-muscled nude body.

By now the people coming out of the gate weren't looking bewildered or acting hysterical, the way that Don had. They knew what to expect.

While I chuckled with the others at the sight of the soldier getting caned by the old lady, I couldn't stop thinking about the gate that was attacked early on. So far, they hadn't shown any clips on that, but about halfway through the second bottle of Texas Valley, a replay came on.

As usual, someone with a camera had been close enough to film the event. However, the camera was far enough away that even the close-ups were fuzzy. A contrail from a military jet descended from the sky, leveled out, then curved back up. Out in front of the contrail, a bright green speck glittered on a low hill surrounded by what looked like Fourth World shanties. Presumably, the squatters had been ousted from their shacks before the bombing run, but they might not have been. Governments at that time didn't pay much attention to the bottom fourth of their population.

You could barely discern the curve of the arch from the distance, but that peculiar green color was unmistakable. Suddenly, there was an



explosion and a black cloud ballooned up around it, obscuring it from sight. We watched as the smoke thinned. The gate was still intact. In fact, it didn't appear to have been touched by the blast at all, though you couldn't say the same for the hovels clinging to the sides of the hill. So much for explosives.

"They shouldn't have done that." The words came out of my mouth before I thought about it.

"Why not?" Russell asked.

I paused for a moment to marshal my thoughts. "Hasn't anyone noticed that we haven't heard a single word about who or what put the gates here? My bet is they came from technologically superior beings from somewhere else in the galaxy."

"You and your science fiction," Russell said. "Why not from another dimension?"

"Same difference."

"Maybe God put them here," Rita said.

"Don't tell me you believe in that nonsense." Again, I was speaking without thinking, and my words came out sounding harsher than I intended. Still, an uneducated person living from hand-to-mouth might be tempted to believe that a superior being is watching over them and directing their lives, but Rita is well educated, and living in relative comfort. In fact, her parents in California are fairly wealthy.

"I'm open-minded about the possibility. There's no proof either way. I like to believe there is some purpose behind all of this."

No, there was no proof. Nonetheless, I didn't believe in a personal God, or in any entity guiding our fates, for that matter. If there is a God taking care of us, he sure picks peculiar ways of doing it. Rita and I had had this argument before. She was a loving person who wanted to help others, and I think that fact made her want to believe that some higher power worked for the good of everyone and maybe even intervened in human affairs. Still, she didn't subscribe to any particular religion; her faith was more like the New Age beliefs of years past that all would eventually work out for the best. Thank God (yes, I do invoke the deity when swearing—a cultural habit) for small favors.

"Even if there is no proof, I don't think there is any purpose behind this universe. Everything is random."



Rita looked stubborn. And I have to admit in most ways she understood human nature better than me. She pointed at the screen where long lines were beginning to form in front of one gate. "I bet lots of people will believe the gates came from God, especially those who are still arguing that Christ will return soon even though the Millennium is behind us now."

She had a good point. The Christians were still claiming the end of the world was at hand, even though the Millennium was years in the past. As it turned out, she was prophetic, though none of us there, or anywhere else for that matter, foresaw the religious uproar that the appearance of the gates would cause.

"Why do you think that gate shouldn't have been bombed?" Don asked me. I tried to meet her gaze, but I couldn't look at her face for long. I still couldn't think of her as Don, my friend. Every time I heard her clear soprano voice, my first thought was to look around and check out the new girl.

Getting sidetracked on the subject of God had given me time to consider the reasons behind my impromptu outburst. "Think about it. Whoever or whatever sent the gates is clearly superior to us. They must have a reason and purpose in mind. These gates are some kind of test, maybe. If we get belligerent and start attacking them, they may decide we are too dangerous to let live, and start fighting back."

Rita got up to open another bottle. Unfortunately, there wasn't any more Texas Valley. I keep the bar stocked, but not that well. She found some California Chablis and opened that. I think she was enjoying our reactions and conversations, maybe even planning a psychology paper: *First reactions of a random group of college students to appearance of the sex gates, with interaction of one male-to-female interposed* or something along that line. I love Rita, but even then I thought she sometimes went a little overboard with her psychology. I've taken a couple of psych courses, and as far as I'm concerned, it runs a close race with economics as the most inexact science.

Don's Nohang pill had worn off, or more probably it couldn't handle all the wine we were drinking. She was becoming more and more animated and seemed to be less aware of the fact that she was a male inhabiting a female body. I still kept my distance, though, while at the same time feeling ashamed of my squeamishness around her. By now I was almost certain it was Don sitting there as a female. She had too many of his mannerisms and memories and speech habits for it to be otherwise, unless the aliens controlling the gates had stolen her memories and plunked them into new body.



And even if that were the case, what was the difference? It would still be Don, like in the science fiction stories where complete personalities are recorded, converted to electronic data, and then booted into a high-capacity computer.

I was finally and completely convinced when one of the web casts we were watching was interrupted. (It was showing a huge crowd waiting outside the Vatican for the pope to come out. Rumors had spread over the web that he was getting ready to declare a miracle.)

“...reliable analysis from several sources confirms what many of us have already suspected. When the gates change a person’s gender, they emerge looking the way they might have developed had they been born of the opposite sex. Gene analysis proves that the same person who goes into a gate comes out. Only the sex determinate chromosome is replaced. Still unanswered is how or why the transformation process takes place, though it is almost certain from these reports that all disease-producing alleles, both dominant and recessive, have been eliminated and replaced with normal genes. Stand by now for a statement from the pope.”

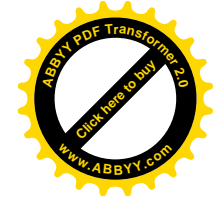
But the pope never did come out that day, even though the crowd grew to huge proportions. Other religious figures did. Some were for the gates, some against, but I’ll get to that later.

Though my memories of that first day and night are still sharp and clear, it’s hard to convey the crazy, mixed-up emotions of those first stunning hours. What still amazes me is how soon the world accepted the presence of the gates. (Not their reactions; those were as varied as the colors of an art program.) The four of us stayed up all night watching and listening and drinking enough wine to float a yacht.

More facts emerged, coming in bits and pieces, mostly reported first on web sites, though the old networks did themselves proud, I thought. They suspended all commercials while they did their best to keep the news rolling. If you don’t know what a commercial is, look it up in the history books. It’s too complicated to explain here.

As the hours passed, we learned the facts that would affect our lives in dramatic ways in the years to come. The good news was that every single person emerging from the gates came out with a young, perfectly healthy body no matter how old or sick they were when entering.

Soon, however, we began to hear bad news: Some went in and didn’t come out, even the first time. No one had yet made it through twice. A



pattern began to emerge. The older and/or sicker a person was, the less chance they had of re-emerging. Almost anyone could make it through up until the age of about seventy, so long as they were in fair health. But after that the chances declined. At eighty or so the odds were about fifty-fifty and fell off rapidly after that. Illness lowered the probability of a successful transition; the sicker a person was, the less chance they had.

Children could go through the gates, too. Already some parents were pushing through children who were sick with incurable illnesses. The despairing parents were willing to accept the gender change in order to save their lives. Most made it; as I said, age was a factor.

As the hours of that first incredible day wore on, no one going into a gate a second time came out, and eventually most stopped trying. I could see the hope fading in Don's eyes, hour by hour, as this fact became clearer. It was beginning to look like he was stuck as a woman.

The gates were impervious to any form of attack. Even an atomic bomb exploded by a Shanghai warlord did no damage. When the smoke cleared, there was the gate, sitting green and shiny at the bottom of a new crater.

In many places, police and military personnel were forced to abandon all attempts to control access to the gates. There were simply too many of gates, thousands upon thousands, to guard, and most were located in densely populated areas. By the end of the week, in the United States, at least, the only gates still guarded were those reserved for study by scientists.

Looking back from years later, it could be that I am misunderstanding the motives of the governments of that era. In those days, democracies still existed. In those countries, the people made their voices heard, particularly older people who almost immediately realized the gates could offer them renewed youth and health. Perhaps it was public opinion that forced the governments to withdraw the guards, though there is no way to be sure. It doesn't matter now anyway.

We stayed up all night and into the next day. I tried to send out to McDonald's for breakfast, but their delivery service wasn't operating. Russell was the only one of us with any cooking skills worthy of the name, a peculiar talent for a physicist major. He scrambled eggs and fixed toast.

We were almost done eating when the president came online again. I



zapped the table back into its overhead recess, and we sat back down to hear his speech.

Unfortunately, Forbes said more or less what he had told the country the day before, including the fact that scientists were still trying to communicate with whatever aliens were responsible for the gates. He assured us that the government would soon announce a policy for dealing with the gates. (How the government was going to form a policy when we didn't know where the gates came from, how long they would be around, why they were here, and who or what was controlling them wasn't mentioned.) After that, he proclaimed a national holiday, and pleaded for everyone to go back to work the following day.

Well, that part made sense. If people didn't get back to work, the whole economy would go into free fall.

Watching these dramatic events unfold over two screens was mesmerizing, but a body can stay awake only so long. Besides that, we were out of wine. I yawned, loud enough to drown out the screen voices for a second.

Rita sat up from where she had been half-dozing against my shoulder. Given the panic surrounding the appearance of the gates, I wanted her to stay with me where I knew she was safe. Besides, she was already spending several nights a week sleeping at my place and kept some clothes in my closet. Moving in was the next logical step. Now, I expected the appearance of the gates would make that happen.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm ready for some sleep." She stretched her arms over her head and wriggled her shoulders.

"Me, too," I agreed. "If the world comes to an end, wake me up; otherwise, we'll see you later."

Don got to her feet and swallowed hard. I could tell she didn't like the idea of being alone without the TV or other people to distract her from the unpleasant reality of her strange new body.

Russell noticed, too. "Hey, I'm going to stay up a little while longer and watch some more news, maybe fall asleep in front of the screens."

Relief filled Don's eyes. He sat down again.

The way I had my house arranged at that time, it consisted of an



entrance alcove, then a big circular area known as the great room, containing loungers, chairs, and the bar and kitchen, with the four bedroom/baths radiating out from it. Russell and Don each had a room. Of course, Rita and I slept together. The last bedroom was used as a study.

“God, I’m tired,” Rita said as she closed our door. She stretched again. “What a day. This will be something to tell our grandchildren about.”

“If we have any.”

“What!”

We had agreed to have a couple of kids one day. I laughed. “The gates. Today they’re changing the gender of people who want to go through them. Tomorrow we might be required to march through one.” My mouth was running away with my brain again.

“And if you were turned into a woman, you wouldn’t want to have my babies, is that it?” Her words held a challenge.

Now there was a thought that had never entered my mind. Me have a baby? Me become a woman? No way! I stood speechless, shirt dangling from my hand.

Rita continued undressing. She discarded her blouse and sat down on the bed to pull off her jeans. Usually, this process absorbed my entire attention, but tonight I realized I needed to think of an answer that wouldn’t make her mad.

She looked at me. “Well?”

“Just kidding.” I tried a smile.

Rita stood up and stepped out of her panties. She scrutinized me from head to toe, like a butcher examining a side of beef. She smiled. “I wonder what you would look like as a woman? I bet you would be cute.”

“I doubt it, and I don’t want to ever find out.” I wasn’t a particularly good-looking man, and as a woman I might be downright ugly. I had rust-colored hair and my eyes were the faded blue of old blue jeans. That’s not even considering how clumsy I was. Don had trouble walking as a woman; I would probably have to crawl around.

Rita raised a dark black eyebrow. “I still think you would be cute,



maybe even pretty, but never mind. Let's go to bed."

That suited me. One look at Rita naked made me eternally grateful to be a man. I decided I would rather die of old age than ever go through a gate, even if they were still around when I got old enough to worry about the decision.

Rita snuggled up against me, resting her head on my shoulder with her soft breasts pressing against my side. Ordinarily that's enough to get me going, but for once I wasn't in the mood. I felt drained. She probably felt the same way because after a few minutes her breathing became slow and regular.

Just as I was dozing off, I thought I heard someone cry out in surprise in the great room. I couldn't tell for certain if it was Don or Russell because of the soundproofing, and I was too sleepy to worry about it. A moment later I was snoring alongside Rita.

Chapter Three

I woke up late that evening to the sound of the shower running. I tossed back the sheet and sat up. That's when my head banged against a brick wall. Too much wine and not enough sleep equals one hell of a hangover.

I fumbled in the drawer of the bedside caddy and found a Nohang pill, while wishing I had thought to take it before going to bed. I swallowed the pill. A jabbing pain in my temples made me decide to take another one. My stomach rumbled a protest, but the pills stayed down. I reached back in the drawer for cigarettes and couldn't find any. From the taste in my mouth, I concluded I had smoked all that I had on hand. Oh, well, I was trying to quit anyway.

I stripped off my shorts and carried them into the bathroom. I must have pissed out a quart of wine while listening to the sounds Rita was making in the shower. I gargled with some Listerine plus. I knew brushing my teeth would make me gag. What wine hadn't come out one end would spout from the other. I slid the far end of the shower door open and stepped inside.



Rita stood naked under the showerhead with her thick lustrous hair slick with water and plastered against her neck. As sick as I felt, I still enjoyed the sight. She is small and petite, so she makes me feel tall and muscular despite my lean frame. As she twisted her upper body to soap herself, I caught a glimpse of her small tan nipples erect from the lukewarm water. Her breasts were almost as tanned as the rest of her body; you could see that she often swam topless. She had a small waist and slim hips. A narrow strip of pale skin formed the outline of the thong she wore when sunbathing in public.

I slipped my arms around her waist and reached up to cup her breasts. Suddenly, I felt much better. The Nohang was beginning to work.

Rita shivered with pleasure. "I didn't think you would be feeling so spry this morning."

I nuzzled her neck. She turned around to face me, and I ran my hands up and down her back. "Neither did I a few minutes ago."

She helped me wash. We towed each other off and hurried back to bed. Rita isn't like some women I've known. She's always ready for sex and never loathe to experiment. I don't know if her psychology studies had anything to do with it, but they might have. I know my parents' generation was prudish about engaging in intercourse with multiple partners because of sexual diseases. If you can imagine it, people in the last century actually risked their lives when they made love. But in the last few years, medicine has eliminated that problem. Nowadays, psychologists are encouraging engaging in sex as a way to get to know a person.

Rita treated me to a few quick lubricating licks, and then slipped me inside her. She stretched out on top of me and began moving her hips while propped on her elbows. She moved slowly at first, then faster. Her breasts rubbed against my chest as her pelvis moved. I watched as her nipples hardened to tight little points and lifted my hands to stroke the greater softness beneath.

Her hips moved faster and faster, and I exploded inside her. She cried out and collapsed over me, shivering and mouthing short little moans of pleasure.

When she felt me softening, she rolled off and went back into the bathroom. I got up and called up the weather on the bedroom screen. The front had stalled, then dissipated. It was warm outside. I gathered up fresh jeans and a shirt and pulled them on, not bothering with a



jacket. Rita came out dressed in a pink spring toga with one shoulder left bare. She slung her bag while I picked up my phone and hung it from a loop of my jeans.

Don was already up when we came out. Seeing his female body again was a shock. I'd half talked myself into believing I'd dreamed the whole thing. But there he was, or there she was, I should say. Russell wasn't with him.

"Is Russell still sleeping?" I asked.

Don pointed to a note on the table. *Gone to the lab. See you later. Russ.* I wondered what he thought he could accomplish there, although I knew his advisor would come up with something for him to do. Physicists were going to go crazy trying to figure out the gates.

Don was dressed in a baggy pair of shorts and a pullover, but the loose clothes did nothing to conceal her figure.

"I hope you're doing okay this morning." I tried to sound casual. I was still getting an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach every time I saw Don's hot new female body. The clothes she was wearing today bothered me because it looked as if she—still a "he" to me—wanted to look feminine. Why else would she wear shorts and show all that luscious leg.

Don glanced at Rita, a pleading look in her eyes. "I was thinking about going out today and getting some female clothes. But I have no idea where to start."

That seemed strange to me. I knew Don hated to shop as much as I do. And why go shopping today, of all days? He caught my quizzical expression. "Well, I can't keep wearing baggy shorts and pants for the rest of my life. They're too large for me anyway, and they don't fit right."

Well, why not? I kept that thought to myself and looked down at the floor to hide my reaction. I couldn't picture Don in the women's section of a store selecting skirts or togas. Or picking out panties and bras. Well, panties, anyway. She wasn't wearing a bra.

"Hey, Lee!"

I looked up at her, but my eyes were headed straight for forbidden territory, so I glanced away.

"Look, I didn't ask for this." I could hear the hurt in her voice. "It



happened. I'm going to have to get used to it, and so will you. As a first step, you can call me Donna instead of Don."

That startled me. I stared at her. My mind buzzed like a swarm of bees looking for a new hive. "Wait, Don..."

"Donna," she insisted. "I don't want to see people staring at me when someone calls me by a male name."

I still couldn't say it. I changed the subject. "Has anyone checked the news this morning yet? Maybe..."

"I've already looked. It's still the same. No one has made it through a gate the second time."

Lord help her. What could she do? Still, a suspicious part of me couldn't help wondering if this sudden change in attitude had anything to do with that cry in the night I had heard just before going to sleep. It had sounded very much like a cry of passion. Had Don and Russell decided to experiment with her new body? It was hard to imagine Don and Russell making out, but one thing I have learned is that you can never predict what might turn other people on sexually. For a citizen of the twenty-first century, I thought of myself as sexually free, but looking back now, I can see I was a bit of a prude.

Rita elbowed me in the ribs. "We'll go with you, Donna. Won't we, Lee?"

We sure would. Rita didn't get that tone in her voice very often, but when she did, I had learned not to argue. We left.

It was only a short walk to the nearest department store, a Trends outlet that catered to the college crowd. Rita gripped my hand so I couldn't escape when we entered the women's clothes department. She parked me by the lingerie and told me to stay put, then took Donna into a measuring booth.

While I waited, I wandered over to look at the display screens. I wished I could afford screen three-D at home. The graphic models were so lifelike I expected to see one of them come waltzing out of the screen to talk to me. In fact, the models in the lingerie section were so real I got an erection from looking at them. One in particular captured my attention, a tall blonde modeling translucent yellow glitter panties and nothing else.



Rita emerged from the booth with Donna in time to notice my reaction. She laughed. "Ready for a change?" She glanced down at the bulge in my jeans.

"Only if you go to blonde." For once, I managed a right answer.

She punched my arm and smiled. "Come on, let's go see if Donna is finished before you change your mind."

The shop's computer had already measured Donna. (That name still seemed wrong to me.) Soon, she was busy selecting clothes from the nearby screens, with lots of advice from Rita. Within minutes, articles of clothing began dropping into the delivery chute, funneled there from the racks of clothing buried in the bowels of the store.

"Now for underwear," Rita said. Donna blushed. I may have, too.

The two of them huddled over the lingerie screen, and before long they were both giggling. I turned away in disgust. Not only was Don a female, it seemed as if he were starting to enjoy it. It was enough to make you wonder how he'd felt before the change. I shuddered.

Suddenly, Rita was at my side again, her sharp eyes taking in my reaction. "Why not try making some selections on your own now, Donna. Lee has been tempted enough."

Donna gave me a questioning glance. I shrugged.

While Donna turned her attention back to the screen, Rita pulled me out of earshot and took me to task. "Lee, Donna is doing her best to adjust. Can't you be more help? The next time you speak to her, I'm going to be very upset with you if you don't call her by her new name."

"I'll try." Maybe I could get used to it.

She frowned. "You'd better do more than try. I want you to quit treating her as if she's a freak. Can't you see how hurt she is?"

I hadn't noticed. Don—Donna hurt? By me? I thought back over the last thirty-six hours. Well, maybe. I had barely talked to her, but that was because I didn't know what to say. How do you go about nudging your best friend and asking him how it feels to pick out lingerie?

"I'm sorry." I really was. I just didn't know how to behave. "I didn't realize that was how I was acting."

"Well, you were. Listen, try treating her like an old girlfriend you're



still on good terms with.”

“Maryanne?”

“Damn your eyes, Lee, no!” She tried to look mad, but dissolved into giggles instead. “All right, you can even use her if it will help. Now get with it; here she comes.”

“All finished?” I asked brightly. Rita glared at me.

“I’m done,” Donna’s face looked strained. “Who would have thought buying underwear was so complicated when you’re a female. And the price of those silky nothings is unbelievable!”

“We have—had it made didn’t we, Donna?” I forced her new name out as naturally as I could. “No overpriced clothes for us, just to keep up with the fashions.” Damn. I was speaking to her as if she were still a man.

She didn’t seem to mind. “Yeah. Where to now?”

I pinched my thumb and forefinger together to check the time. My thumbnail watch said eight-thirty. It would be dark outside by now. “Why don’t we stop by the campus and see what’s going on with the gate there? We can grab a burger at the Dagwood if it’s open.” The Dagwood’s burgers were always good, and it was right across the street from where the gate was.

“Good idea,” Donna said.

Rita squeezed my hand. She certainly didn’t realize how uncomfortable I still felt about the situation. At least I had said Donna’s name. I hoped it made her happy.

Strolling under the cypress trees along Leyland Boulevard, walking toward the campus, we were almost alone on the sidewalk. Most people must have still been home with their eyes and ears tuned to their screens. I was tempted to scan some of the news sites with my phone, but no one else seemed interested so I didn’t.

As we neared the college, I began to hear a peculiar noise, like the muttering of a distant thunderstorm. But the sound had its own cadence. I knew it couldn’t be natural.

“What’s that?” Donna asked.

Rita stopped, and I did too. She frowned, squinting her eyes, as if that



would help her hear. After a moment she said, “Sounds like that class I was in last year when the prof failed everyone.”

Donna shook her head. “No, it’s rhythmic. Like someone chanting.”

Listening closely, I agreed with her. We walked on. The noise became louder. Now I could tell it was composed of voices, yelling back and forth.

We turned a corner, and the gate came into view. It looked as alien and strange as I remembered, a massive green arch plunked down on our world with no clue as to its real purpose. There was a crowd around it, split into two groups, one large one on one side of the gate and one smaller one on the other side. Police in riot gear were keeping the groups apart. Floodlights from nearby squad cars illuminated the side of the gate where most of the crowd was gathered.

The two groups were shouting at each other and at a line of people, old and young, who were attempting to run the gauntlet between the groups. The cops were having a hard time holding back the opposing forces so the people in line could reach the gate.

Some of protesters shouldered hastily constructed signs sporting a variety of opinions and waved them at each other: **SEXUAL FREEDOM NOW! YOUTH FOR THE ELDERLY! THESE ARE THE DEVIL’S GATES! GOD SAYS: THREEScore AND TEN!**

There weren’t nearly enough cops to control the demonstrators, and I didn’t like the looks of the yelling mobs. Most of them were dressed in ragged jeans or the cheap jumpsuits the Fourth Worlders from Old Houston favored.

“Wait up,” I said. I patted at my pocket for the little automatic I was licensed to carry, knowing it wasn’t there. Right after I was issued my permit, I took it everywhere with me, but I had gradually gotten out of the habit. Nothing requiring a firearm ever happened in North Houston, and I rarely went anywhere except to class or a bookstore.

“There are cops there,” Donna said. “Come on.” I suspected she wanted to get close to a gate again, in case a miracle might happen and someone would make it through twice.

I wanted to hang back, but I followed Rita when she began to move forward again. The chanting became louder, but I couldn’t tell what they were shouting because of the noise.



I suggested that we angle around to approach the gate from the end where the smallest crowd was gathered. I guess I'm not very brave. As we got close, a nude woman emerged from the gate. She was short and stocky and not very pretty except for the glossy red hair flowing down to her shoulders.

"There's one!" a male voice shouted. The demonstrators who were opposing the use of the gate surged forward. A shield went flying into the air as a cop was bowled over. The open path narrowed, then closed completely as the cops were buried under a writhing tangle of bodies.

"Help! Help me!" A woman's shrill scream rose over the tumult. "Hel—" Her voice cut off.

"I got 'er, I got 'er!" I could hear the drug-roughened voice shouting in triumph, even over the cursing cops and the screams and grunted obscenities of the tangled mob. People were fighting now with clubs and fists.

Before any of us could stop her, Donna ran straight into the mob. The struggling bodies swallowed her up.

"Christ! " I cursed. My knees buckled like warm taffy as an adrenaline surge spread through my body. I would have fallen if Rita hadn't been holding onto me. I took a step forward while my heart hammered in my chest, expecting violent action but not getting it. Another step and my legs stiffened.

"Stay here!" I yelled to Rita and plunged into the mob. I could have saved my breath; she was right behind me.

A siren warbled in the distance. I struggled to find Donna. I forced my way through a forest of thick burly necks and breasts jouncing under pullovers and worn jumpsuits. Grimacing faces with teeth bared crossed and re-crossed in front of my eyes, dipping and weaving. Fists and clubs were swinging. I caught a blow on the side of my head and another in the ribs.

Dazed, I swung a balled fist at the nearest dirty face. The woman dropped out of sight and another replaced her. She was waving a paring knife, but her arm was entangled with two others.

Another blow to the head sent me reeling. Undulating above the noise, the sound of the siren came closer and closer. I felt a stab of terror—the subsonics must be beating on my brain. It was all I could do to keep from turning tail and running.



“Rita! Where are you? Donna!”

All around me, people were covering their ears to keep out the undercurrent of subsonic compulsion. I ignored it as best I could; it helped that I knew what it was. A grubby man was bending over in front of me. Just beyond him, I caught a glimpse of Rita. She was struggling with another woman, trying to pull her away from a prone figure. The man in front of me jumped up, still holding his ears. I kicked him in the crotch, and he went down, sucking in a gasp of pain. I stepped over him just as Rita knocked down her opponent. She tripped her to the bloody grass and kicked her in the stomach, then stopped to stare at what was laying on the ground in front of her.

The mob was beginning to disperse by the time I got a look. The homely redheaded woman was barely recognizable. Blood and dirt and grass stains covered her body. Her one remaining eye stared at nothing. She was very dead.

A hand grabbed my arm from behind and twisted it up against my shoulder blades. “You’re under arrest!”

“No! No! We were trying to help her!” Donna struggled to her feet from where she’d fallen. Her top was hanging in tatters over her heaving breasts and tears were streaming down her face. It was the first time I had ever seen Don—Donna cry.

The pressure on my arm eased. Beside me, Rita spoke to the cop. “Honest, officer, that’s what we were doing. Oh, that poor woman.”

The cop let go of me. “Let’s see some ID.”

We produced our student cards. The cop accepted them, all except for Donna’s. “That’s not you,” he said. He dropped his hand down to his belted sidearm.

“Yes it is. I stumbled through this same gate yesterday when it first appeared.”

The policeman sighed. “All right. Better get your picture changed soon as the college opens again, if it does. God knows what’s going to happen if this keeps up.”

We stumbled away. I had a gash on my ribcage, but I had enough med supplies back at the house to take care of it. The other two only had bruises and scratches. I was still a little dizzy from the two blows to the head and my swirling thoughts didn’t make me any steadier. Was



this a typical example of how people were going to react to the gates or only an aberration? I remembered what the cop had said. "...if this keeps up..." Then I thought of all those Fourth World goons. I didn't credit them with organizing the demonstration; seeing them this far into North Houston meant they must have been hired and transported in to take care of the rough work.

I felt sick. I don't mind people supporting causes I disagree with, but my God, why do they have to resort to violence? I wondered how much mayhem was going on elsewhere. Suddenly, I wanted to get home and catch up on the news.

Chapter Four

Modern medicine is wonderful. I don't know how people used to put up with visits to a doctor for every little thing that went wrong. They even had to get permission before buying anything more complex than aspirin.

I straddled a straight-backed chair in the study while Rita applied a germicide and taped my ribs. Donna was beginning to show purple bruises all over her upper body. She stripped off her tattered top and let Rita rub some hemacylin over her back. I looked away when Rita began working on her breasts.

I stood up and bent over, sideways and as far back as I could. I didn't feel any grating or pain like I remembered from the time when I cracked one of my ribs falling off a horse.

"Now let's get the news," Donna said, pulling on one of her brand-new tops. To my surprise, her new clothes came through the riot without a tear. When she plunged into the mob, she dropped her bundle, and no one bothered it.

"Go ahead, I'll be there in a minute," I said.

Glancing from me to Rita, she shrugged and left.

"Is anything else wrong?" Rita looked at me with curious eyes.

"No. Come on." I led her into our room and pulled open the bottom drawer of the bedside caddy. I picked up the little automatic nestled



in its holster and slid it out. I scooped up the two extra clips lying beside it, too.

“Lee...”

“Don’t argue with me about this, Rita. I’m not going anyplace anymore unless I’m armed, except bed. And I want you to move in here, right away, so I can be sure you’re safe.”

It took me at least a half hour to stop trembling after the mob dispersed. I was still scared, and I guess it showed on my face.

“Okay, maybe you’re right.”

I was surprised at how quickly she agreed, but relieved, too.

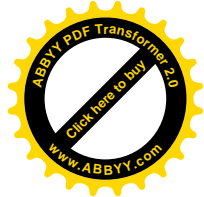
“But be careful with that thing.” Rita didn’t like guns. She didn’t believe in the death penalty, either, but then she had never lived anywhere but in safe middle-class neighborhoods. Same thing for Donna, although back when she was Don I’d taught her to shoot a gun and she’d gotten a license. But generally, as a man, Don was a quiet guy. He was the one you loved to hate in all your classes, the A student who lived at the library and preferred keeping his nose in his math books to going out and carousing. Now that she was a woman, I couldn’t understand how she had gathered the courage to plunge into that boiling mob while I was still stupefied with fear.

“I’ll be careful.” I picked out the lightest windbreaker I owned from the closet and shoved the automatic in one side pocket and the spare clips in the other. Secretly, I hoped I could make myself use it if I had to.

When we returned to the great room, Donna had both screens on. Russell still hadn’t come home. I wondered if he was learning anything new about the gates. Surely someone was, somewhere, but if so, neither the networks nor the webs were telling us about it. There was plenty of other news, though.

All over the world, the sick, the elderly, and a surprising number of people who weren’t happy with their present sex were clamoring to enter the gates, while at the same time governments were pleading for them to wait until more was known about the aftereffects. Their admonitions fell on deaf ears. Wherever the government tried to control access, mobs swarmed over the guards and swept them aside.

While some were struggling to get to the gates, a groundswell of religious opposition was building, especially in America. We saw



throngs of protesters waving signs and shouting out slogans. They yelled that the sex gates were an abomination, and accused those who entered with making a pact with the devil.

There were riots and looting in many of the larger cities, including Old Houston. The Fourth Worlders weren't protesting anything. Instead, they were using the massive disorganization caused by the gates as an excuse to steal and burn, and while the police and military were busy, to kill. We saw one broadcast of a videotape that showed a carload of upper-class businessmen who made the mistake of driving into a Fourth World ghetto. They were pulled from their vehicle and slaughtered by an angry mob.

On one level I could understand the Fourth Worlders' resentment. Most of them were old enough to remember when the state and federal governments still supported the poorer classes. They were outraged that the well had finally run dry. Government had run out of the money needed to keep the growing lower class on the public dole.

But that's no excuse for looting or killing. Sure, the standards are stringent, but if a person is truly unable to work, they can still get a stipend from Washington, enough to keep food in their bellies. And the public hospices will take in anyone so ill that over-the-counter drugs don't help.

The elderly, those over seventy, can still draw Social Security, too, even if the amount isn't what it used to be. On one of the older networks, two commentators were discussing that and other subjects. I couldn't tell whether they were real or graphics. Probably they were actual people; I doubted that many graphics programmers were on the job at the moment. At any rate, they were finding problems everywhere. One of them was pointing to a chart.

"...obvious that if enough of the elderly opt to change their sex and become young again, their Social Security checks will have to be cut off; otherwise the government will run out of money soon. Also..."

"...and think about this: the world is already under tremendous population pressure. Now the elderly can choose to stay with us in new bodies. And how can we possibly feed everyone if these new young men and women decide to have babies?"

"...enough jobs to support them all. Unemployment already..."

They blabbed on and on. Everyone was alarmed by the changes the gates were bringing, but there was no way to control them. There were simply too many, all over the world.



If the social order was upset in a liberal country like America, you can imagine what was happening elsewhere. In a broadcast from a conservative Middle Eastern country, we saw crowds of veiled women in traditional black chadors trying to break through to a gate. A ring of angry men held them back. While we watched, the number of women swelled. A few minutes later, they swarmed over the guards and surged up to the gate. In the crush, some were pushed into the gate and blinked out of existence. The camera moved to the other side of the gate and we saw naked men bursting into view like commuters scrambling out of a levitrain. They stumbled, fell, got up and fled in all directions, chased by shouting men waving sticks.

Rita cheered. "Good for them! I hope they get away. They can infiltrate the ranks of those fanatical fundamentalists and turn their world upside down. Maybe they'll even push some Arab men through a gate and then force them into one of those damn black tents. See how they like it!"

I hadn't realized Rita was a feminist. Or maybe she wasn't. I wondered how I would feel if I had to wear those hot black clothes and veil and be sequestered away from everything important. I couldn't imagine it, but it did make me think of one thing the commentators hadn't touched on. Because men and women are treated equally in America, we tend to think that the same must be true in the rest of the world. It doesn't make any difference how many times you see evidence to the contrary or whether you're a man or a woman. Like racial prejudice, you can't understand it until you are on the receiving end. I thought Rita's outburst was a spontaneous reaction to the scene we'd watched, plus her own knowledge of the terrible way Muslim religious fanatics treated females. But I was wrong. I soon heard another web report. Some bright webster had gathered enough statistics to show that a lot of middle-aged women were choosing to go through the gates, even here.

"Why do you think that's happening?" I asked Rita.

"If you don't know, I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't understand. Let it go for now."

I shut up, but I didn't stop thinking about it. Were there that many women who didn't like being female? Or was there some other reason?



I got up and rummaged in the cooler, looking for something simple to munch on before bedtime. There wasn't much there; a few days of staying glued to the screen had depleted supplies.

"I'm going to the store to get us something to eat. Anyone else want to tag along?"

"I'll go." Donna stood up.

I had expected Rita to offer to go with me. Donna's offer was a surprise. I started to tell her I could manage, but then I saw a warning look in Rita's eyes. I was supposed to be treating Donna like an old girlfriend.

"Okay, thanks, Donna." I pulled out my automatic and chambered a round, then clicked on the safety and put it back in my pocket. Donna raised an eyebrow.

I shrugged. "Just a precaution."

"Bring back some more wine," Rita called as we walked out the door. She winked at Donna, making Donna blush. Some secret female signal, no doubt. I closed the door and clicked on the security system.

The streets were deserted, but it was getting late and they might have been anyway, gates or no gates. Fortunately, it wasn't far to the neighborhood Quickshop. During the last energy crisis, neighborhood stores had made a comeback.

We walked along side by side. I tried to stay a little in front so I wouldn't have to watch Donna's breasts bounce with each step.

"Lee, I want to thank you for coming to my rescue when I tried to help that poor girl back at the gate," Donna said.

"No problem. But why did you try? You might have been really hurt."

"It was an impulse, but I'd do it again if I had to."

"Why?"

"Sympathy, I guess."

"You didn't even know her."

"Yeah, but it seemed like she was a sister of sorts. You know?"



“Oh. Sure.” Made sense. They’d both experienced the change.

“I’m not sure you do.” Donna turned her head to stare at me. “You can’t understand what it’s like to have a man’s mind in a woman’s body. I can barely cope myself.” She hesitated, twisting her hands together before continuing. “For instance, you’re avoiding my eyes. Do you think I’m going to come on to you?”

Was that what had been making me so uneasy around her? I didn’t think so. It was just...oh, hell, I didn’t know what it was, but certainly not that.

Donna saw my troubled expression. “Relax, Lee. I may have a woman’s body, but I still have a man’s mind. You know?”

“But Russell! Last night, after Rita and I went to bed, I heard...” My big mouth again.

Suddenly, Donna blushed. “What did you hear? No, don’t answer that.” She looked away and we walked in silence for about a block, then she spoke again. “I guess you heard me cry out in surprise. Russell and I were talking about what sex might be like as a woman and I let him touch my nipples. I had no idea the sensation would be so intense. But that’s as far as we went.”

Now it was my turn to squirm. “You mean you and Russell are...Never mind. None of my business.” I wasn’t used to talking to a strange woman about sex. I felt like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Donna forced out a laugh, but there was no humor in her eyes. “It’s weird having the mind of a man and the desires of a female body, I’ll tell you that much. I let curiosity get the best of me, probably because I had so much wine last night.”

“I’m surprised Russell went along. I didn’t know he was inclined that way.”

“He’s not—not interested in other men, that is. I do have a beautiful female body, after all.” She smiled but it was a painful smile. “I guess you could say he only wanted me for my body. He was trying to help me get used to being a woman, then what with all that wine we sort of got carried away. Besides, it was a scientific thing to do—or so we thought at the time.”

“Be damned.” That was all I could think of to say, but I couldn’t help wondering what it had been like. The sensation of feeling your nipples



touched for the first time must be unforgettable. A part of me almost envied Don the experience he was having. The rest of me was damn glad he was the one who had rushed into the gate first.

Donna continued on, as if she were still my old male friend. “The longer I stay in this female body, the more sexual desires are surfacing. I can almost feel the hormones working on my mind, making me want to do things I never imagined. And I am beginning to suspect that sex is very different for a woman than for a man. When I was a man, I never thought about that.”

I recalled my sexual encounters with Rita. Sure, I noticed when she had an orgasm, or when she was excited and how and where she liked to be touched and stroked, but it was all like feedback while playing at a virtual arcade. You relate almost entirely to the sensations you’re feeling and never consider how the game characters might feel while getting excited or hurt or mad. Of course, the characters aren’t real, but that’s my point. Have you ever wondered what your partner in a virtual sex scene is experiencing? Of course not. You’re too involved with your own sensations. I wondered if women felt the same way. Something else came to mind. I didn’t know exactly how to say it.

“Uh, Donna do you think you’ll ever try to have sex all the way, you know?”

I stole a glance sideways at Donna’s face. She was frowning.

“Do you mean will I ever try sleeping with a man? Christ, Lee, I don’t know. Right now I can’t imagine wanting to do it with a man, but I haven’t been a woman very long. And if I don’t want to stay celibate for the rest of my life, what choice will I have? Those damn gates are only one-way, for now, anyway. So ask me again in a few months.”

I was glad to hear that she wasn’t considering the idea right now. It made me feel a whole lot better.

The liquor store was still open, and we stocked up on munchies. We decided to wait until daylight to shop for more substantial food. The clerk kept giving Donna the eye while we waited for my phone to connect with the store’s computer. It made me wonder if he were gay until I came back to earth. Ordinarily, it should have taken only a few seconds for my phone to mesh with his computer but minutes passed before it finally confirmed that I was solvent.

“It’s been slow all evening.” The clerk scanned the length of Donna’s

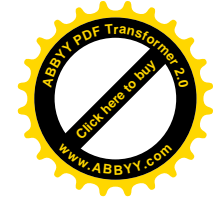


figure.

Donna smiled. “No problem.”

We picked up our packages and left. I could feel the clerk watching Donna as we walked out the door. Once outside and out of hearing, she laughed, her voice shaky. “That’s going to take some getting used to. I felt like a piece of meat hanging on a rack—a naked piece of meat.”

I wanted to go back and punch that clerk. He had no business staring at her like that.

We got back to the house in time to learn another interesting fact about the gates. While Rita was cracking a bottle of Texas Valley, a webporter broke away from the crowds around the Vatican. They were larger than ever and still waiting on the pope to tell them what to think.

“...definitely confirmed. Pregnant women can enter the sex gates and walk out as a man with no problem. The fetus, however, is lost in the change. This presents an interesting point. How many desperate women all over the world will enter the gates in order to terminate an unwanted pregnancy? Will the cost of becoming a male deter them? Now stand by for a statement from the pope.”

“If I were destitute, it wouldn’t deter me.” Rita sounded certain.

“Do you really mean that?” Curiosity is my middle name.

Rita’s face was set in grim lines. “I certainly do. You would, too, if you’d worked at a hospice like I once did and saw those poor girls coming in with nothing more than skin and bones holding them together. And the poor babies. We couldn’t afford to even try to save most of them, not that it would do any good. Most of them are addicted to greenweed when they’re born.”

I knew about that. Greenweed was the drug of choice for our Fourth Worlders. It was cheap and not that addictive for adults. For them, it had little side effect other than hyperactivity during the euphoria. Children were another case. Up until puberty, the weed was highly addictive and passed easily through the placental barrier during pregnancy. Once addicted, kids became lethargic and even suffered brain damage. After a while, they turned into vegetables without even the will to live.



We stayed up as late as we could, hoping that one of the webs or nets would come on with an explanation of who or what was responsible for the gates, but none ever did. Oh, a few of the wilder webs claimed exclusive, definite proof that God, the Devil or aliens were behind the gates.

The president came on and announced that the crisis was under control, and everyone should go back to work the next day. I wondered if that applied to school. If so, Donna would have an afternoon in-person class to attend while Rita and I could plug in from home. I doubted Donna would go; I didn't think she was ready yet to face the world as a woman.

At last we were tired enough to go to bed. Rita and I showered together and took the opportunity to examine each other's bruises. They were fading, and when I washed off the bandage, I saw that the gash on my ribcage was almost healed.

I hadn't shaved the previous morning. I picked up a beard cloth and wiped my whiskers off. Rita doesn't like bristles.

"Any of it left?"

I rinsed the cloth out and passed it to her. She wiped her legs and under her arms and tossed the used cloth into the compost chute.

As worn out as I was, I still couldn't sleep once we were in bed. I kept thinking about Donna and Russell experimenting together the other night. I wondered what Rita knew about it. She had already been asleep when I heard that cry the night before. I decided to ask her in a roundabout way.

"Have you noticed that Donna seems to be adapting pretty well, considering her circumstances?"

Rita shifted her body closer to me. "Why shouldn't she be?"

"Well, considering that she was a man only a day or two ago, and the way she acted at first, I wouldn't have expected it."

"It's not a crime to be a woman. Or the worse thing that can happen to you, either."

"I didn't say that."



“You were acting like it, at first. But you’re doing better.” She reached over and patted my tummy.

“Russell seems to be accepting the change in Donna without any trouble.”

Rita sat up in bed. I watched her breasts jiggle in the dim light as she adjusted her position. “Lee, sometimes I think you’re retarded. Are you trying to ask me whether I’m aware that Donna and Russell might decide to have sex with each other?”

“It was on my mind,” I admitted.

“Don’t tell me you’re bothered by it. I know better.” There was no arguing with that. She knew I’d tried a few kinky things myself when it came to sex. Like most people, I’d let the urge to experience a new sexual sensation overcome my normally conservative views. A few months ago we’d had a house party, and she and I and a female guest had wound up in bed together. I thought the girl was more interested in Rita than me, but I enjoyed it nevertheless. I still remembered how excited I got while watching the other woman kiss and fondle Rita. Unfortunately, I drank too much that night and my other recollections were vague. Rita told me about it though. According to her, she tried it because she wanted the experience, at least once, but she admitted to enjoying it.

“I’m not bothered. I’m curious, that’s all.” She always seems to be one step ahead of me.

“Well, put your curiosity to bed. I’m sleepy.” She leaned down to kiss me, then stretched out and snuggled her back up against me. I slid my hand across her waist and up to cup her soft, warm breast. Sleep came easily after that.

Chapter Five

Rita was already up when I finally woke the next morning. I checked the time and saw that it was after nine, way past the time I’m usually up and around.



I threw off the covers and hurried to the bathroom. All I really needed was a piss and some listerpaste for my teeth. I grabbed a package, opened it and bit down. My gums tingled as it bubbled away the overnight accumulation of gook. While it was working, I ran a brush through my abominable hair. I hate the ugly rust color of my hair, so I keep it cut short. Some deodorant, a quick rinse to wash away the listerpaste, and I was done.

I saw the laundry was piling up. I threw on my last pair of clean jeans (my dress-up pair with the red piping) and pulled on a square-cut jean jirt with rolled-up sleeves and side pockets. I snapped the two bottom closures so my gun wouldn't drag the pocket down so obviously. I transferred it and the clips to the jirt, clipped on my phone and hurried out to the great room, ready for breakfast. I felt as hungry as a hyperactive shrew.

Russell was back, and bless his soul, he had stopped by McDonald's on the way and bought breakfast. He was already cramming sausage and biscuits into his mouth like some Fourth World starvation victim.

"Russell! What's going on?" I was excited to see him, even if his wrinkled clothes, blonde stubble and tangled hair did make him look like a homeless drunk after a three-day binge.

"Mmph," he answered around a mouthful of biscuit and sausage. He swallowed it whole, then spat out some words. "Lots. Let's eat first, and I'll tell you."

I bent over to kiss Rita and sat down on the carpet. I think some refugee family must have owned the house before I rented it. The table only has one setting, low to the floor, and you have to sit on the carpet to eat.

I dug in. Russell had splurged on real pork sausage rather than the usual wheat and soybean synthetic. He must have been starving.

Rita and Donna were taking it slower, being careful not to dribble on their clothes. Rita was the only one in street dress. She was wearing red slacks and a white short-sleeved silkskin blouse. Not many women can get away with silkskin garments, especially on top. The stuff is flimsy and clings to the skin. It's not quite transparent, but with every curve revealed it's hard to tell the difference. Only nubile young women and older women who had visited a surgeon first wore it. Any sag or abnormality was instantly noticeable. Rita liked showing off those firm breasts I loved.



Donna was wearing something she bought the day before, a shimmering, translucent blue wrap. It clung to her curves, at least the ones I could see. I wondered how she felt wearing sexy clothes. I love the sensuous feel of a woman's body beneath satin or silkskin; but I can't imagine wearing it. My friend was on a strange journey.

Russell polished off the last biscuit, then covered his mouth and yawned. "Wow, I think I could sleep til doomsday."

"Not yet you can't," I said. "I want to hear what you've been doing first."

"Nothing as exciting as what you guys have been up to." Evidently, the girls had already told him about getting caught up in the riot at the campus gate. He glanced over at Donna and smiled. "Okay, if someone will make a pot of coffee, I'll fill you in. Not that I know much."

By the time we cleared off the table, the coffee was ready.

Russell took a sip of his. "Gah. I've drank too much of this stuff. It's starting to taste like scorched cabbage."

"That's your problem. Come on, give," I said.

He looked pensive. "I might start over and go for a doctorate in electronics instead of physics."

"Why do you say that?" Rita asked.

"Because I've found out that I don't know a damn thing about physics. Anything I thought I knew has turned out to be wrong."

"In what way?" I asked.

"For one thing, the gates appeared instantaneously, all over the world, at exactly the same time. We can't slow the pics down enough to show a bit of difference."

"Another thing—there's obviously not enough room inside to hold all the people going in. And they come out the other side at the exact moment they go in, as near as we can tell. By the way, most of this information came in over the web. We haven't been doing anything at the lab yet other than trying to correlate and organize the data. What we are postulating is that the inside of the gates must be folded into some sort of hyperspace where the sex changes and medical cures take place. Time must move at a different rate there, too."



“Why do you think that?”

He looked pained. “Sorry. It’s a theory. For all I know Santa Claus may be whisking them to the North Pole and letting his elves do the work. So far, we think the gates are indestructible, at least by any means we know of. Nothing hurts them. No one has even managed to get a sample of the material. Nothing will penetrate the surface, not even tungsten drill bits.”

“Can’t you try something else, like x-ray diffraction?”

“We’ve tried everything. That’s what’s so frustrating. We can’t measure anything.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. They don’t reflect or emit any kind of radiation.”

I was no scientist, but even I knew better than that. “They must reflect light. We can see them.”

“They don’t reflect anything! Not radar, not light waves, not sonar, not shortwave or anything else that’s been tried. They don’t emit anything, either.”

“That’s impossible.” I realized I was echoing Russell’s exact words when we first saw the gate.

“Yeah, so is the square root of minus one.”

“They must be solid, though,” Donna commented. “I saw a club bounce off when we got into the riot.”

“Yup, as solid as granite, and as insubstantial as a rainbow. More. We know what causes a rainbow.”

I thought it over. “What you’re telling us then is that we’re imagining them?”

“I’ll guarantee you we’re not,” Donna said. “Look at me.”

Russell turned and gave her a long stare, not trying to avoid the obvious. He wasn’t having any problem accepting her as a woman. “Yeah, and guess what? Nothing, and I mean nothing, can enter the gate except humans and whatever they’re wearing or carrying at the time, and all that comes out is a naked person. Scientists are going



crazy. The best idea we've come up with so far is that aliens sent the gates here. If that's true, we must seem like dumb animals to them. But that answer only raises more problems."

"Has anyone succeeded in communicating with the gates?" Rita asked. "The government keeps talking about it."

Russell shrugged, his eyes tired. "How can you communicate when there's no spectrum known to man that affects them? Point a radar, radio or sound wave at them and it's like they're not even there."

"How about telepathy?" Rita believed in it; I didn't.

"You're welcome to try. Others already have. No results; not unless you believe the tabwebs." His grin turned into another yawn. "Look, guys, that's all I can tell you. I'm going to get some sleep."

He drained the last of his coffee, grimaced at the taste and headed off to his room. He paused at the door and turned around. "Oh, I almost forgot. There's one more thing: the sats have pieced together pictures of all the landmass on earth now. They've counted almost a million of the damn things."

That didn't make sense. "How did the satellites manage to take pictures if the gates don't reflect light?"

"You tell me. I know lots of people who would be interested in your explanation." Russell closed the door behind him.

I poured another cup of coffee and sat down by Rita, admiring the way the silkskin blouse clung to her breasts. Donna turned on the screen. I watched flames rising from the Fourth World section of a large city. I couldn't tell where it was, and the graphie doing the commentary didn't say.

"These gates are still causing riots everywhere," Rita said.

I nodded at the screen. "Maybe we should stay inside. People are freaking out all over the place."

"Someone has to go shopping."

I leered at her silkskin blouse. "If you go out looking like that, someone is going to be shopping for you."

"They couldn't afford me." But she smiled at the compliment.



“Still, I don’t think...” My phone spoke to me.

“Lee, are you there?” I recognized Dad’s voice.

“Here, Pop.” I suddenly realized that I should have called and let the folks know we were okay. They must have been worried.

“I think you had better come home.” Dad sounded upset. I wondered if some webporter had caught a shot of one of us during the fighting around the campus gate.

“We’re all fine here. No problems.”

“I’m glad to hear it. We’ve got problems here, though. Please, son, come on up, for a day or so, anyway.”

“Are you hurt? Or sick? Is Mom okay?” I felt my heartbeat speed up. It could be illness, maybe Dad’s heart acting up again. I couldn’t imagine any other sort of problem in Ruston. The worst thing that ever happened there was a losing football season.

“No, we’re both fine.”

“Then what’s wrong?” It wasn’t like him to be so secretive.

“I’d rather wait until you get here to explain. Trust me, it’s important.”

When Dad said something was important, I had to believe him. Normally, it would take an earthquake to upset him.

“Okay, give me a couple of hours.” It was only an hour trip up there, but I had promised Rita already that I would help her move the rest of her stuff over. Dad knew by my tone that I had something else important to do too.

“Fine. Drive careful.” He always said that.

Rita had been listening. “Do you want me to go with you?”

I considered the idea. She’d gone home with me a few times, but this sounded like a strictly family get-together. On the other hand, I didn’t want to leave her unprotected when there were riots taking place in Old Houston, a mere half hour south of us. Before I could make up my mind, she noticed my hesitation.

“Never mind. It sounds like a family problem of some sort. As soon as



we get my stuff moved, you go on up alone.”

“No!” My voice sounded sharp.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.”

“I don’t care. There’s too many nuts running around right now.”

“Jackson Lee Stuart, don’t argue with me. I’m not going to be alone here. And Russell didn’t mention seeing any trouble on the way home.”

That was true, but that didn’t mean the craziers had all become model citizens either. After a moment’s thought, I pulled my pistol out of my pocket. “All right, but only if you carry this. And don’t hesitate to use it if you have to.” Knowing she had protection would make me feel better. I already knew I wasn’t going to change her mind—not when she calls me by my full name.

Rita made a face but took it. She thought the country would be better off if there weren’t so many licensed gun owners. I disagreed. She hadn’t read as much history as I had. Back before the Supreme Court finally came down solidly in favor of the twenty-ninth amendment, a person couldn’t even take a stroll in a park without risking life and limb. Well, a lot places you still couldn’t, but at least it’s now legal to fight back.

The events of the day before had opened her mind. I showed her how to load and unload the gun and where the safety was located. She found a red jirt to go with her pants and stuck it in the pocket.

As expected, it only took us an hour or two to move her clothes and other belongings over to my house. Watching her hips sway as she moved around our bedroom settling in, I wanted very much to stay home. But the tension in Dad’s voice kept coming back to haunt me.

“Don’t go out alone,” I warned before I left. I was five miles away on the NAFTA highway before I remembered that Donna knew how to handle a firearm and would be less reluctant to use it if the need arose. After all, she still thought like a man. I should have given it to her instead and insisted that they only go out together.

The NAFTA highway runs along old US 59. Ordinarily it is packed with commuters in the morning, coming in from the country to workplaces in North and Old Houston, but today traffic was sparse, as if it were the Sunday afternoon of a Super Bowl. The highway engineers were still trying to perfect the much ballyhooed auto-



control system; I had to use manual control. I plugged my phone in to let it charge and hear the news about the gates; I left the screen off, like I always do since the time I almost ran off the road while watching the beach patrol attempting to arrest a bevy of topless bathers on the family beach at Galveston.

Soon I heard a report from Los Angeles South. One of the juvenile gangs there had captured a half-dozen members of an opposing gang and decided it would be fun to force them through a gate and turn them into girls. Three of their prisoners made the change; the other three never came out. The gang lord and his two top henchmen had been arrested and charged with murder. I wondered how that would work with no bodies to present as proof of death. But the interesting part, the announcer said, was that preliminary statistics revealed some types of criminals (rapists, murderers, pedophiles, enforcers, etc.) had only about a fifty percent chance of making it through a gate.

I wondered if that was why some supposedly normal people never came out of the gates. Rita told me once that studies show the threat of punishment is the only thing stopping better than ten percent of the population from violent and/or sexual crimes. Either that, or some of those entering the gates were criminals who hadn't been caught yet.

There was some other news. Another war was breaking out in Africa. There was always a war going on somewhere on that ravaged continent. I couldn't figure out why; there wasn't that much there left to fight over, except the chromium mines. We still had troops guarding those.

Our armed forces had been placed on alert and some National Guard units had been called up (not because of Africa; they were needed to keep order in the cities here). Despite the president's request, most people still weren't returning to work. Martial law might be declared. The stock markets were down across the board with the exception of companies specializing in the teenage and youth markets. They were up and still climbing.

I was concentrating on the news so hard that I almost missed my exit. It's easy to do when you're driving an electrobile. They are so silent that your mind tends to wander.

Grandpa's old house was three or four miles past Ruston, going east after the turnoff. As I drove over the ramp, I could see downtown Ruston, a few old buildings clustered together, with others thinning away to homes within a few hundred yards. The elementary school was the largest building in town. From above, I could see the glittering arch of a gate sitting in the middle of the ball field. Two



patrol cars were parked nearby. They were the sum total of Ruston law enforcement vehicles, if you didn't count the county sheriff. A few people were standing around the gate, not doing anything except staring.

I was surprised to see Derek's car in the driveway. The last time I saw him was Thanksgiving of the year before, the third anniversary of his announcement that he was a transsexual, a female trapped in a male body. Other than that he had only been home for Christmas the last two years, and I hadn't had much to say to him on either occasion.

Mom met me at the door with a hug; she must have seen me drive up. I could hear Derek and Dad talking in the den, right off the entry hall.

She looked worried. "You go on in, Lee. Maybe you can talk him out of it."

"Talk who out of what?"

"Your brother. He came home to tell us he intends to go through the gate."

So that was it. I tried to imagine having a son, then being told he was a transsexual, then having him turn into a female. I couldn't do it. No wonder Dad had sounded upset.

"Hello, Lee." Derek got to his feet as I came in. I shook his hand, then dropped it to give Dad a hug.

Derek sat back down. He was taller and more muscular than me and had Dad's blonde good looks rather than taking after Mom like I do. I took a seat across the den from him, next to Dad. I couldn't help but wonder what he would look like as a woman; the thought made me shudder.

"I heard what Mom told you. You're not going to talk me out of it, so save the effort."

"Lee, tell him how dangerous it is." Dad looked upset.

Was it? Derek was young and healthy and didn't have any criminal tendencies. But I had to help my parents. "Some people have gone in and not come out," I warned.

Dad nodded. "That's my point. "Besides, no one knows what the long-term effects might be. What if something worse happened than..." Dad couldn't finish the sentence. He would be losing his firstborn son.



The woman who came out would be a stranger. I didn't like the idea either, although Derek and I were already strangers.

"What could be worse than being a woman trapped in a male body?" Derek folded his arms across his chest, his face set in stubborn lines.

"You're not a woman!" Dad shouted.

"In my head I am."

"Son, please don't. At least wait a while until we know more about those things."

"What happens if they disappear as quickly as they showed up? I'll miss my chance. I'll be back to facing years of surgery and hormones."

Dad got out his old pipe and lit it. He had quit several years ago. I could imagine what the tobacco must taste like by this time. "Listen, your mother and I accepted it when you first told us you were a transsexual. We love you anyway."

"Anyway. See, you haven't really accepted it. Neither has Lee." He looked over at me. I couldn't argue. I was struggling with Don's change, and he had been normal to begin with. I turned my eyes away from Derek's accusing gaze. How would I feel if I were forced into a woman's body, to live a lifetime there? Would I have turned out as well as Derek had? Aside from his sexual identity problems, he was a good brother. He was gentle, soft-spoken and earned a good living. I thought of the times when I was growing up that he had helped me with my problems.

I forced myself to look at him. His face mirrored his desperation. How would he act if he were free to express the feminine nature he felt was his true self? I didn't know, couldn't know. I was more concerned about Mom and Dad. Both of them were frantic with worry, the way they'd been when Derek was drafted during the Mexican war.

Derek got to his feet. "It's no use arguing. I'm going now, while the gates are still here."

"Please wait, Son. I'll go with you." That was Mom. She had been standing by the entrance to the den, listening to us.

I saw Dad's face fall. He knew he was defeated. "All right, Son, if you think you have to, I'll go, too. Lee?"



We all left together. Mom picked up one of her old wraparounds as we left.

The Ruston gate looked like a twin of the one on campus and the others on the news. The only difference was that I knew the few people standing around it.

Mom and Dad avoided the eyes of their friends. Their rigid faces showed they weren't in a mood to visit. I nodded to a fellow I had known in high school, then was sorry I had when he smirked at Derek.

Derek ignored everyone. His shining eyes were fixed on the gate. He strode forward, head high, and emerged at once from the other side, no longer male. I felt a stab of horror as I looked at my brother's nude female body and turned away. When I turned back, Mom was draping him with the wrap she'd brought along. I saw that his blonde hair was longer, and he was shorter. He looked like a small, attractive young woman. I shivered.

Derek and I each left Ruston that afternoon in our own cars. There hadn't been much to say after she came out of the gate; everything after that was anticlimactic.

Dad and Mom seemed smaller and older as they stood together and waved good-bye. I wondered how many other families in America were going through the same thing.

Chapter Six

I noticed that there was more traffic on the way home. Even with a world-shaking event like the gates, people have to shop, run errands, or go back to work. I kept the news on.

I caught the tail end of the major event of the day. The pope had spoken in Rome. He told the masses that after days of praying for



guidance, God told him that the gates were manifestations of Satan, brought to earth to tempt the faithful into living beyond their allotted lifespan and in a state not ordained by God. By this, the announcer explained, the pope meant it was sinful to change from the sex God chose for you at the moment you were conceived. The pope announced that anyone willfully entering a gate would be automatically excommunicated.

Some of the more liberal cardinals and priests were protesting the pope's decree. I doubted that it would make much difference in America. Catholics here usually go their own way regardless of orders from the Vatican. Besides, Catholicism isn't much of a social force anymore, though it is still one of the largest religious denominations. Most American Catholics go through the motions, but do what they want.

The Catholics weren't the only ones dealing with the religious implications of the gates, though. The Methodists were still praying and assuring their flocks that God would soon reveal the purpose of the gates. The Baptists were split, some accepting; some calling them abominations. And as usual, the web evangelists were calling down God's wrath on the sinful and asking for even more donations so that they could remain on the webworks and bring the very latest word of God concerning the gates to the faithful.

It always surprises me what violent emotions religious convictions can evoke. Confrontations, demonstrations, fighting and even murder by the pro and anti-abortionists have gone on as far back as I can remember and they are still going on; in fact, the violence would probably get worse now that it was known pregnant women who go through emerge as baby-free men.

The possibilities interested me enough that I began to think about writing an article on the gates. The webs were bound to be receptive to the subject for a long time to come, and there were always newspapers and magazines. After getting my second degree in journalism I had had some small success with a few science articles (mostly of the Sunday supplement variety) and had sold a few short stories.

I switched off the news and began creating a file on the subject of the gates, with subcategories for each of the ideas I wanted to write about. Within a few minutes I had to back up and rearrange the data in my phone; ideas were coming so thick and fast I couldn't talk fast enough to keep up. By the time I pulled into our driveway, my enthusiasm was running wild. Parking the car, I rushed inside, eager to share my newfound calling with Rita.



Donna and Russell were locked together in an embrace on the small lounge. Donna's toga was around her waist, and Russell was caressing her bare breasts while they kissed.

I stopped, shocked. They hadn't noticed me. As I watched, Russell moved his hand to Donna's waist and began sliding her toga down over her hips. They broke the kiss and Donna shifted, intending to help Russell finish undressing her. But when she moved, she saw me standing there.

"Oh!" I saw that her face was flushed with sexual heat.

Russell took his hands off Donna's body and turned around. "Lee! We didn't hear you come in." He didn't seem to be embarrassed at all. If I knew him, he probably viewed it as an interesting experiment.

I was more worried about what was going through Donna's mind. I'd thought his male mind in a female body would reject sex with another man, but it was beginning to look like the female sexual needs of that body were stronger than his earlier conditioning. I guess I couldn't blame her. If she tried to find a woman lover, her sexual options would be limited. And I couldn't expect her to live a celibate life. Still, Don and Russell? Maybe the sex gate had affected more than his body.

While these thoughts flashed through my mind, Donna yanked her toga up over her breasts. "Don't look so stupefied, Lee. What am I supposed to do? Stop feeling anything sexual for the rest of my life?"

"No, of course not." I didn't want to tell her what I was thinking. I'd caught quite a view of her breasts just before she yanked up the toga. I turned away to hide my erection.

What would Rita think if she knew? Probably it would amuse her; one of the advanced psych courses she was taking this semester was on the male sexual response.

"Is anyone else home?" I asked.

"Rita took my car a while ago to get some groceries. She should be back any time now," Russell said.

Three hours later, she still hadn't returned.

"I'm getting worried." I was pacing around the living room.. Why had



they let her go out by herself? No, why hadn't I taken her with me?

Russell took a logical approach. He turned to Donna. "Did she say where else she might go besides the grocery store?"

"Oh, hell, I remember now. She said she might stop by campus and see if anything new was happening at the gate. I'm sorry, Lee. It slipped my mind until Russell mentioned it."

"You stay here. Come on, Lee, let's go." Russell always could think faster than me.

We hurried outside, zapping the security system on behind us. I ran for my car and pawed in the glove compartment for my spare gun. We were rolling before I realized I should have brought the rifle from my room. Russell had never applied for a license, not that it mattered much in Texas. He was never interested in carrying.

As we neared the gate, it became clear that yet another confrontation was going on. The college gate seemed to be a special focal point for demonstrators. The police were clearly overwhelmed by this latest struggle. Rita should have known better than to return here, but with her sheltered upbringing, she wasn't used to violence, or the idea of danger.

The whole area around the gate was in chaos. We had to park the car and run the last block or so to get there. At first sight, I thought it was some Fourth Worlders from Old Houston causing all the commotion around the gate, but it was the way they were dressed in leather and silkskin, which confused me. A small group of radicals were causing the trouble. They were fighting with some conservatives and several people were stretched unconscious on the grass. Others had split lips or bloody heads. Only one or two conservatives were still on their feet, trying to stop the radicals from reaching the gate.

There's no telling what rads will do when they decide to cause trouble. They are devotees of the new braindrug. It may put you in a state of bliss, but it also lowers your inhibitions to the level of a rabid dog.

One of the rads was laughing like a braying donkey. He'd captured one of the spectators—a girl—and was forcing her toward the gate. The girl's face was twisted with terror.

Russell swore and ran toward them. I froze in shock. Was that Rita?

Russell hit the man from the side. He fell away from the gate,



dragging the girl down with him. She screamed. It was Rita! I knew that scream, even though her face was hidden from view.

I didn't even think about the gun I was carrying. I ran toward Rita, who was struggling to get away. The rad pushed her face into the grass and kicked out at Russell's legs. He went down. I chopped at the rad's head but missed. Someone shoved me from behind, and I went down. I struggled back up to my knees just in time to take a boot in the belly that doubled me up, gasping for breath.

"Throw them in, too!"

Hands clawed at my back. I clutched my gut and tried to suck in some air. My fingers touched the hard contours of the pistol in my pocket. I grabbed the butt as rough hands yanked me upright by my jirt collar. Russell went down again. I thumbed the safety off and fired twice at two rads who were kicking him in the ribs and head. Both went down.

For once, my slight stature worked to my advantage. I'm slender, but I work out. I bent forward and twisted violently sideways, breaking free of the man holding me by my jirt collar. I shot him, too.

Russell tackled one who was going after Rita again. She managed to struggle loose and crawled away. As I ran to her, I saw Russell going down for the third time from a wild swing. Blood was streaming from both his nostrils. I fired and his attacker slumped to the ground. Dad had taught me to handle firearms well. I hadn't missed once. The rest of the gang broke and ran after my last shot.

"Lee, thank God! Oh, thank God, you came." Rita was blubbering like a fundamentalist at the Rapture. I folded her in my arms. I was trembling worse than she was. A siren warbled in the distance.

Russell got to his feet, wiping at his bloody nose. A red froth bubbled from his split lips. "Come on, let's get out of here!"

My legs felt shaky. I was about to collapse. I looked around and saw the four men I'd shot. One of them was moaning; the other three were still, their eyes open and unseeing in death. I leaned hard against Rita, and we stumbled away from the gate. People backed off, letting us go, as we headed down the block to the car.

Russell got behind the wheel, spitting out blood. I looked back as he drove away. The conservatives were still there, tending to their comrades. The screaming sirens were getting closer. I prayed that none of them had taken down my license number. Maybe someone had taped the action. If so, I could claim self-defense if the cops



investigated. Probably they would say good riddance and leave it at that; they didn't like the radicals any more than anyone else did.

Back at the house, Rita tended to Russell's wounds. Her only injuries were a sore shoulder and abrasions on one cheek from falling to the ground. I was bruised, but not bloody. I described what had happened while Donna made a round of drinks and Rita worked on Russell. If this kept up, we were all going to wind up alcoholics.

"What in hell were you doing around that gate?" I asked. "Didn't you get enough excitement the other day?"

Rita reached for her drink with a trembling hand, her face subdued. "I wanted to take some notes for class. I got a little too close and got grabbed."

"Why didn't you use the gun I gave you?"

"I tried to."

"Well, what happened?"

"It didn't work."

"What!" I stared at her. I keep my weapons in perfect condition.

She looked away, her voice dropping to a whisper. "I forgot to take the safety off."

"It's a good thing Lee and Russell found you in time; otherwise you would have wound up like me." Donna looked more upset than any of us. She knew from personal experience how it felt to have your life turned inside out.

"Lee's glad I didn't," Rita answered.

Glad? Glad didn't begin to cover it. I couldn't even imagine Rita as a man. I could never relate to her the way Russell was doing with Donna. "I don't even want to think about it," I said.

Donna lifted her head a fraction, her eyes defensive. "I'm trying to make it work." She shot a desperate glance at Russell and got a warm smile in return.

Rita and I hit the shower and then stretched out in bed. I turned on



the screen and began searching for something besides news to help us relax, but there was still nothing on except commentary. Saturation news coverage is fine for unprecedented phenomena like the appearance of the gates, but anything gets old after a while. It made me long for the days when I kept my games, movies and mood programs on ROMS. In fact, I still had my old computer and a lot of programs, but they were all back at Grandpa's house in my old room. I left the screen on, just loud enough for us to hear in case anything interesting happened.

While we snuggled, I told Rita about the bright idea I had had on the drive back.

She gave me a peck on the cheek. "I've wanted to see you write for a long time. This is the perfect topic."

"That's what I think too. People will want to read about the human side of the gates. Something besides more commentary, I hope."

"Maybe you should aim for the countries where people don't have access to the web like we do. Printed matter still goes over big in those areas."

Right. The webs and 'works didn't depend on cable anymore; everything was relayed by satellite directly to phones or home and office computers. The old Internet still worked, but communications companies had stopped servicing the wires and cables it depended on. This left Third and Fourth Worlders who were unable to afford receivers, not to mention phones, less and less able to relate to the world; print and what was left of the Internet were their only means of communication. It left them as cut off from the modern world as political prisoners in Siberia. For those unfortunates, interactive webs and works hadn't come close to replacing the printed word yet, though it was coming. Books and magazines were still being published, but not newspapers; they were in a steep decline in the civilized world, although they could still be found in primitive areas.

From all the web programming I've described, you'd think everyone in the world knew exactly what was happening with the gates. That wasn't true. Despite all the frenzied reporting, there hadn't been much news from those parts of China controlled by fractious warlords, and parts of India may as well have been swallowed by a black hole for all we knew from there. News from the Middle East was spotty, and of course there wasn't much left of Africa to get news from. Disease, wars, plagues, global warming and industrial pollution had devastated that continent, leaving the birthplace of the human race a barren wasteland.



Even where we did know what was going on, chaos and confusion was the rule rather than the exception. Except for France. The French embraced the gates as if they were a huge joke being played on the rest of the world.

There still had not been any confirmed communication with the denizens inhabiting the gates, if they were inhabited, and we still knew nothing about their purpose.

Our own government was struggling to formulate a policy. Apparently, lawmakers were beginning to realize the gates might be here permanently.

The FBI had been ordered to help make a positive identification of sex-changed individuals. They were doing it through fingerprint confirmation after writing a new program that figured in the size differences of the prints of the new individual, depending on whether the switch was to male or female.

Congress was considering a number of new laws. They wanted to suspend Social Security payments and Medicare to older individuals who changed sex after a six-month grace period; a similar law would do the same for retirees from government and the military. For once, something Congress proposed made sense to me.

A few congressmen also wanted to make it a crime to prevent anyone from passing through a gate, similar to the old abortion clinic laws. I had my doubts that one would pass, or be effective if it did, considering what I had seen so far. There were too many gates, too many anti-gate factions. Other bills would never fly. Mandatory birth control? Preventing pregnant women from passing through the gates? No chance, I thought.

I turned the screen off. It had been a long day.

Rita ran her hand up and down my chest, then caught hold of my chin and turned my face around for a kiss. "I still haven't thanked you for saving me, Lee. I was that close to being pushed through the gate."

"Russell's the one who saved you. If he hadn't reacted so quickly, you would have gone through."

"I'm glad. I'm not ready for that yet."

I stared at her. "Not ready? You mean you're actually considering it? Changing into a man?"



“Oh, not yet. I want to have a couple of babies first, then maybe wait until they’re grown.” She chuckled. “How do you think you would like me as a man? Would you still love me?”

“How could I love a man?” I couldn’t believe we were having this conversation.

“Oh, men! Lee, I’m not talking about sex. I’m talking about love.”

I didn’t know how to separate the two, especially with her. I said so.

“Sometimes I wonder why I put up with you. Listen, what would you do if you suddenly came down with an incurable disease? Roll over and die, or go through a gate?”

What a choice. I didn’t want to think about it. “What would you do?”

“Take a chance on a gate, of course. I’m not in a hurry to die. Besides, don’t you know that every woman in the world fantasizes about becoming a man, at least once in a while?”

“They have? I mean, they do? Why?” It was news to me.

“Oh, we don’t really want to be men. But it’s a pleasant fantasy. Think about the life most women still live, doing dirty dishes and diapers and cooking three meals a day and holding down a job for a lot less money than a man would make. Even with all that, women in America are pretty well off, but think of the rest of the world. Remember those Muslim women storming the gate? They hate the way they are treated—”

I held up my hands. “So you want to be a man?”

She laughed. “No way! It’s a fantasy like I said. Being a woman has advantages men can’t imagine. We were just discussing whether we’d even consider making a change, remember?”

We were back to that. I still didn’t want to talk about it. “I feel the same way about being a man that you do about being a woman. To me, we have all the advantages.”

Rita smiled. “Then neither one of us is going to be heading through the gate anytime soon.”

I was glad to hear that. “Count on it.”



We lay side by side in silence for a moment. I wondered if she was angry that I didn't have any desire to be a woman. I decided to offer an olive branch. "At least a woman can have a man she wants, whenever she wants, without having to go through all the preliminaries like a man has to."

Rita rolled over to stare at me. "You think so, huh? It doesn't work like that for a woman. Women don't think about sex that way: see a man, get wet, and pull him into bed. There has to be some emotional involvement for a woman to even get interested, and so far as that goes, we don't get the man we want every bit as often as a man doesn't get a woman he gets turned on by."

I took her hand in mine. "I guess men and women are different." It was about as inadequate a statement as I have ever made.

She pulled her hand free and rolled away from me, pulling the blanket over her shoulder. "You are so right. You don't know how different."

Maybe so, but she was beginning to give me an idea. We didn't make love that night.

Chapter Seven

I never heard anything about the four men I shot. Apparently, no one with a recorder was nearby; either that or the authorities were too busy with other matters to worry about a few rads getting shot. It didn't bother me, other than a few bad dreams; as far as I was concerned, I had done what I had to.

Over the next few months the world, or at least the more advanced portion of it, gradually began getting back to normal—or as normal as possible under the circumstances. The gates, over a hundred thousand of them, remained as enigmatic and inscrutable as ever.

I didn't go back to any of my classes when the college re-opened, though the others did. Instead, I began submitting articles and stories to the web and zines. At first I didn't have much success, so it was a good thing I didn't need the money. When not attempting to break into print, I concentrated on research and added to my files, which were growing like Florida algae.



With society in an uproar and the future uncertain, financial markets in the advanced countries teetered and tottered but never quite collapsed. I missed one annuity payment completely, and the next one barely made a discernible blip on my credit balance, but after that the amount gradually increased to almost half of what it had been before the gates.

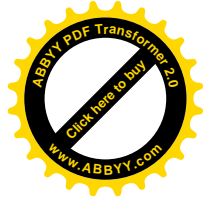
Pope Luke was assassinated. The new pope's first act was to rescind Pope Luke's encyclical, with one reservation: pregnant women were still forbidden to pass through a gate. Most Catholics were no longer excommunicated if they waited until the age of sixty or had an incurable illness before attempting the passage. Cardinals, priests and nuns were forbidden to go through the gate under any circumstances. Many resigned in protest, and some churches and dioceses had to close for lack of personnel.

Protestants were still divided; fundamentalist sects railed against the gates; liberal sects accepted them. Demonstrators continued to protest, but were no longer quite so violent. Automatic recording devices were set up around every gate in America. After a few protestors went to jail or were executed for assaulting or murdering individuals attempting to go through the gates, the violence slowed to a near halt.

Almost half the population of the country over seventy took a chance on the gates. Most of them made it through and emerged with healthy young bodies of a different sex. More than three-quarters of those over eighty opted to try the gates even though their chances of success were lower the older and/or sicker they were. The black shadow of death had the power to move the old to take their chances in the gate. The lure of another forty or fifty years of life was too strong, even if it did mean switching sex.

The medical profession was beginning to suffer from unemployment as hospitals and doctors' offices closed. The preliminary reports that changed individuals now had perfect health proved correct: so far not a single illness had been detected in a sex-changed person. It was too soon to tell yet whether the new young people were aging, though a few scientists claimed to have measured a shortening of the chromosomes of telomeres on some chromosomes after cellular division, which would indicate a normal aging process. Others thought the new bodies would last far into the future. I reserved my opinion.

A large percentage of the physically impaired population, paraplegics, quadriplegics, the blind and deaf and those missing



limbs or scarred by burns opted for the gates. Almost all of them reappeared in healthy new bodies. As soon as news of this got around, parents of mentally retarded children began bringing them to the gates. This proved more dangerous. Many of them never came out again. Those who did, however, were normal. Scientists and statisticians were desperately trying to find out what the defining characteristics for a successful passage were.

The Supreme Court ruled that same sex individuals had a constitutional right to a legally binding marriage, upholding laws already passed by most states. The court was simply accepting reality. People were learning that when they changed sex physically, their sexual orientation stayed the same at first, then slowly started to shift, but never completely. Some of the original orientation always remained. A debate was raging about why sexual orientation should change at all. Some attributed it to the hormonal changes, others said the opportunity to experience sex from the other side was too tempting. It was obvious that huge transformations in how we humans viewed sexuality were looming, although no one yet knew quite what to expect.

By the time the first surveys were conducted, almost half of the changed persons had experimented, or were planning to experiment, with the opposite sex. That fact was going to cause me trouble, though I didn't know it yet.

Meanwhile, the four of us were still living together, even after the spring semester ended and Rita graduated.

Rita got her degree in psychology. She had already been accepted for an internship at a sexual therapy clinic in Old Houston, but the gates were changing that profession, too. If humans were confused about sex before the gates, the situation was a thousand times worse afterward. While doctors had less to do, sex therapists were putting in double overtime. It looked as if Rita was going to be busy exploring on the cutting edge of a new world.

We saw little of Russell. Or I did, anyway. When he was home, he spent most of his time with Donna. But most days and nights he was at his lab, working on his doctorate. He had had to start all over with another thesis after the gates proved his old one wrong, but he didn't seem to mind. The physics department had set up all sorts of instruments by the gate on campus, and he spent a lot of time there, taking measurements (or as he ruefully told me, more often recording the absence of any). It was the kind of scut work that all doctoral candidates are forced to tolerate. We got the most reliable news on the nature of the gates from him (such as it was; most of the data was



negative—things we didn't know.)

As the weeks passed, I remained uncomfortable around Donna. Her gender change no longer bothered me like it had at first—after all, it wasn't anything she chose to do—but I found it hard to accept her need to explore what it would mean to live the rest of her life as a woman.

Maybe it was a natural result of missing my good friend, Don, but I hated watching her begin to act more and more like a woman. Considering how she had to live, it was a natural development, but it put even more stress on our friendship. I couldn't talk to her about her periods, or what kind of makeup went best with her hair, or how her sexual life was going. Oh, she was willing to talk about those things, but when she brought them into our conversation I backed off or changed the subject. I acted (or tried to act) as if she were a female friend—if friendship between the sexes really exists. If she hadn't once been male, and my closest friend, I wouldn't even have tried. Don was handsome; Donna was just short of beautiful but with no idea what an impact her exquisite body had on men. It was next to impossible to be a friend with her because my normal male instincts would kick in, and then I would feel queasy when I remembered she was once a man.

In addition to all my other problems with Donna's change, I've never been entirely comfortable around beautiful women, especially those who exude sexuality. Donna was a sexy woman who had no idea she was radiating sex appeal. I watched lots of men become attracted to her, only to be shocked when she suddenly acted like a man. She got better at behaving like a woman as time passed. Both Rita and Russell helped coach her in appropriate behavior.

Unfortunately, as she got better, I found myself starting to react to her physically, especially when she paraded around the house half-naked. The tension between us grew, but I didn't want to ask her to move. She was going through enough turmoil. Instead, I made every effort to keep my sexual distance.

We were finally getting something over the web besides news. Rita and I were tucked away for the night watching a film. Naturally, it was about a couple who went through the gate together and their problems getting used to their changed sexuality. After watching for a few minutes, we began interacting. As was our custom, we took turns changing the script. That's usually good for a lot of laughs and should have been this time, especially as the program was designed to be a comedy. It wasn't. I kept trying to get the new male interested in women and at the same time I was sympathizing with the male mind



in the new female body.

“Lee, you’re going to be the death of me yet,” Rita said after I steered the female character into the arms of a good-looking blonde at a party. She changed the blonde into a male who looked somewhat like me.

“Hey, wait,” I said. “At least let them finish.”

“You didn’t let me.”

True, but watching men kiss puts me off, not to mention other things. I changed the program so the male character came into the room where they were hiding and broke it up. Rita immediately had him making out with his erstwhile partner.

I could watch that with no problem, so long as I didn’t identify with the female, who had been male at the start of the program. The whole story made me uncomfortable, though. Rita saw that I was losing interest and switched the screen off.

“Lee, you are so provincial.” She didn’t sound angry, only disappointed. She half turned in my arms so that one of her breasts was pressed against my side and the other hanging free over my chest. I cupped the free one in my hand, admiring its perfection. If there is a God, he knew what he was up to when he created women.

“Maybe so.” I didn’t want to argue, but I suspected most people were as conservative as me when it came to changing sex, as long as they weren’t driven to change by age or illness. You hardly ever saw any young and healthy people going through the gates. “Look at Donna; she didn’t start running after men five minutes after she changed. But that’s what you made your character do. “

“Maybe not, but her sexual orientation has been changing, or haven’t you noticed? For your information, she went for an implant last week when she borrowed your car.”

“What!” I couldn’t believe it. Or maybe I didn’t want to believe it. There was only one reason I could think of for her to get an implant to prevent pregnancy. “Is she sleeping with someone? Are her and Russell getting it on?”

“No, silly, but she is becoming a normal woman. And a normal woman wants this.” She reached down and enfolded my penis, which had become engorged as soon as her nipple touched my palm.



“So Donna is actually thinking about having sex with a man?” I couldn’t quite form the picture in my mind. I was having problems envisioning the male who would introduce Donna to the joys of sex.

“Lee, you’re still living in the last century. Why shouldn’t she act like any normal female?”

“She isn’t a normal female.”

“True. But she’s trying to adjust to her female body. Try to remember that this situation wasn’t her choice. Haven’t you ever thought of what it would be like if you had been born female instead of male?”

“No.” Truthfully, I hadn’t. I had always been satisfied with my sex. Maybe I wished once in awhile that I was stronger or better looking, but doesn’t everyone? The only thing I really didn’t like about myself was my rust-colored hair. If I were better looking, I wouldn’t have any problem attracting women and making out. If Rita hadn’t practically tripped me, I would probably still be admiring her from a distance. I don’t know what she saw in me.

She rolled her eyes, then relented. “Poor Lee. Maybe that’s why your stuff isn’t selling. You don’t understand the female viewpoint.”

“I understand this much.” I bent down to nuzzle her breasts.

“Mmm. So you do. Hey, why don’t we collaborate on a program or two and see what happens?”

Now that was an idea. I was planning to do some traveling on a project I was researching, but I hate to leave familiar surroundings or go anywhere alone. That would suit me fine, and I said so.

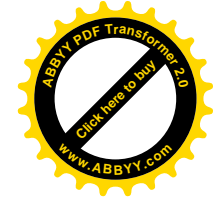
“Good, that’s settled. I was planning on going with you anyway, but I’m glad you like the idea.”

I wondered what Donna would be doing while we were gone. “When is Donna planning on the big experiment?”

“Not for a week or two, anyway. She’ll have to wait that long to be certain the implant is effective.”

“I wonder if she’ll bring her fellow here.” The idea still seemed strange to me.

“Why don’t you wait and see? In the meantime, try to be nice to her. She’s more than a little scared.”



I really didn't understand women. Here Rita had just told me that Donna wanted to have sex, and with the next breath she was saying that she was frightened. "I don't understand."

"You're impossible. Just be nice to her, okay?"

"I will. I always am, aren't I?" Despite my conflicting feelings, Donna was still my friend.

"You're nice to everyone once you disconnect your brain from your testicles. Come here." She pulled me over her, and I quit thinking about Donna.

We began packing for our trip the next morning. I didn't pack much as I didn't intend to be gone long. I wouldn't have made the trip at all, but the webworks wanted spontaneity. They demanded live interviews and action shots. I had managed to get an appointment in Lufkin, up the NAFTA a hundred miles or so, with a female evangelist who was making some big waves in Texas and was getting ready to branch out into neighboring states.

While I'm no expert on religion, this woman sounded like she would make a fascinating interview. In a nation full of middle-aged male evangelists, she was young, somewhere in her early twenties, with dark red hair and a voluptuous figure. Besides that, she was starting a brand new church. Her "Church of the Gates" declared that each gate was a separate manifestation of God and worshipping and believing in them assured that a person entering a gate the second time would immediately be transported to heaven. (At that time, no one had yet come back from a second attempt to pass through the gates. In fact, there had been very few individuals who had even tried—not after the first few failures. I only knew that occasionally someone had from Russell).

I still don't know where she got her so-called revelation. But it certainly met a growing need. Science couldn't explain the gates, not yet anyway, and the old religions held no place for them either. It was a time for something new.

By the time we were packed and ready to go, Russell was already gone to the lab. Only Donna was there to see us off. She was in the study, working on math problems with an AI. It really wasn't an artificial



intelligence, of course, but with those kind of dedicated programs it was extremely difficult to tell the difference. As we came in, she put a hold on the graphie, which had been explaining some esoteric equation.

Are you leaving already?"

"I thought we'd stop and see the folks since we're passing through on the way," I explained.

"Well, tell them hello for me." Donna (as Don) knew my mom and dad. I had long since told them of her unintentional sex change, but she hadn't seen them since it happened. I had only been up once, myself, with Rita.

"I will." I wondered what they would think if they could see her now. She was dressed in tight gold jeans and a satiny white top that ended well above her navel. She jiggled as she got up to tell us good-bye; she never had gotten into the habit of wearing a bra.

"You be careful, now. There are still lots of crazies hanging around the gates."

"Don't worry. You be careful, too. Keep the security on while you're here by yourself."

"I will." She gave Rita a brief hug, then embraced me. It was the first time she had done so. Before I knew what was happening, she kissed me full on the mouth, patted me on the cheek and turned back to her math problems. I felt my face get hot. I was glad she had her back to me. Rita noticed, though. I could tell by her elfish smile.

As soon as we were on the way, I called home to let the folks know we were coming. Dad answered the phone. He sounded tired.

"It will be good to see you, Son. You, too, Rita," he added, knowing that my car had a speaker circuit built into it. "I was going to call you, so this works out fine."

I wondered why he had been planning on calling. Was there some sort of problem with Derek? So far as I knew, my brother was getting along fine in his new female form. I hadn't talked to him, but he had left a brief message once while I was out.



It wasn't Derek. It was Dad.

He waited until after Mom poured coffee and we were all four sitting around the old kitchen table before he made his announcement. His voice dragged, as if he were reluctant to say anything at all. He held his unlit pipe in his hand as if it were a talisman.

"Son, your mother and I are going to go through the gate as soon as you leave."

I couldn't have been more astounded if he had said they were going to the moon. I sat with my mouth hanging open, trying to make sense of his words.

"Dad, you're kidding," I managed at last.

He shook his head. "No."

I looked at Mom. She nodded agreement.

"But why? What could possibly make you want to..."

Dad touched his chest. "I saw Doctor Davis yesterday. He told me that my heart is getting worse."

"Doctor Davis? But, Dad, he could be wrong! I mean I like him, but...look, at least get another opinion."

"He already has," Mom said. "Doctor Davis has added a consult room since you saw him last. The North Houston heart center agrees with his diagnosis."

"Can't you get an artificial heart?" That seemed like the simple solution to me. How could I stand seeing my dad change into a woman? And Mom—why her?

"Too risky. I have other complications that make me a poor candidate for surgery."

I swallowed hard. Maybe Dad had no choice. That still didn't explain why Mom was going into the gate with him.

She didn't wait for me to ask. "We don't want to be separated, Lee, not after almost forty years." She gazed at Dad, love shining in her eyes.



I could understand that. My parents were a close couple. I had never once heard them exchange a cross word, not even when Dad volunteered for duty in the Middle East when I was a youngster. It didn't make this decision any easier.

"I'll cancel my appointment and stay here." I dreaded seeing the change, but I didn't want to leave them either.

"No, Son. We'd rather you not. If we come out safely, it's going to be confusing to us for a while. We'd prefer to be alone until we get used to our new bodies and the changes they will bring."

I protested a few times, because I thought I should. Inside, I wanted to run from this nightmare. No more hugs from Mom? No more squirrel hunting with Dad on crisp fall mornings?

Rita sat in silence as we talked, even though she could have spoken up if she had wanted to. The folks knew how close we were and that we were already planning a family in the near future. Or at least we had been; we hadn't talked about it since the gates started demanding most of our attention.

We all hugged good-bye as Rita and I left, the four of us pressing our bodies together as if we might never see each other again.

"You'll call?" I asked Dad.

"As soon as we get home."

If they got home. I didn't mention that possibility and neither did they. As soon as we were out of sight of the house, I stopped the car at a little roadside park where we had picnicked many times. I leaned my head on the steering wheel and cried. Rita wrapped her arms around me and cried too. After a while, we brushed our tears away and drove on.

Chapter Eight

Over the last decade or so, Lufkin had grown from a small rural city to a fair-sized industrial center. I could see the haze generated by its factories from miles away. Many of Old Houston's plants had been moving further north for years in order to escape the floods and



hurricanes which occurred there with increasing frequency as sea levels rose in response to global warming. The long-predicted disaster was not a theory any more but hard fact; the Antarctic icepacks were breaking up. Eventually, North Houston might suffer the same flooding, though the theorists differed on how far in the future that might be.

It had been a few years since I had visited Lufkin. New construction was everywhere, and thoroughfares where none had existed in the past made it hard to locate the Church of the Gates temple. I would probably still be looking if it weren't for Rita. I have absolutely no sense of direction, which is one reason I don't like to travel.

We arrived a few minutes early. I had been jumpy for the last half hour, waiting on the call from my folks. I was afraid they might call in the middle of my interview, but I certainly didn't want to miss them. We solved that problem by merging our phones so Rita could answer my incoming calls. I left my phone on mute with instructions to answer if Rita demanded it, in case something terrible happened.

Mom and Dad were both nearing sixty. Except for Dad's heart problem, their chances of making it through were excellent. Mom would almost certainly make it through, but Dad was taking a real risk. The scientists were still trying to correlate the various illnesses with age and the probability of success.

I tore my thoughts away from worries about my parents and focused on the interview ahead. The Church of the Gates temple was brand-new, of course, and constructed to resemble a gate, though larger. The greenish composite material was a poor match to the real thing, but a holographic projection at the front entrance created an eerie impression of a gate face. Both of us hesitated for a brief moment before walking through the gateway.

Once inside, a young man sporting a neatly trimmed beard greeted us. "Yes, how may I help you?"

"I'm Lee Stuart. I have a three o'clock appointment with Messilinda." That was how the new evangelist billed herself: Messilinda, no last name. It was a strange name, but then I figured you had to be half nuts already to become an evangelist.

"Oh, yes." He glanced up at a wall clock in the shape of a gate. "She is expecting you. Come with me."

Rita was told to wait in the lobby. Ordinarily I would have made a fuss, but the folks still hadn't called. I asked her if she minded.



“Of course not. Go ahead.” She could tell I was worried.

The pictures of Messilinda on the web programs didn’t do her justice. She was far more beautiful than any of her photographs. She rose from a workstation where she had been manipulating pictures of a worshipful crowd surrounding a gate and held out her hand in greeting. I ignored it, not because I wanted to be rude, but because my attention was riveted to her body.

She was dressed in a filmy white shift, translucent on top, fading to opaqueness around her hips, then flaring gracefully translucent again from her thighs. Her hair was a glorious flame and her full lips were painted a pouty red.

“Mr. Stuart. How good to see you. Our church is blessed with your presence.” Her startlingly green eyes looked deep into my own.

Huh? I didn’t see how I blessed it, not when the thoughts running through my mind would have earned an X rating on any children’s program in the world.

“Uh, thank you,” I managed. She was still holding out her hand. I took it with an embarrassed smile.

She squeezed my hand, and intertwined her fingers with mine as she led me through a door behind the workstation and into a smaller room.

“Please sit down.” She indicated a spot on a long couch, fronted by a coffee table. There was a caddy at one end of the couch. Those three items were all the furniture the room contained, other than an oversized screen on one wall. “I like my guests to be comfortable. Would you like a drink?” She sat down at the end of the couch where the caddy was located.

“Whatever you’re drinking.”

She dispensed a pink concoction from the caddy, then leaned back and crossed long, slender legs. She faced me with perfect confidence, not in the least intimidated by the coming interview. I wondered how a woman so young had gained such experience in handling reporters.

She licked her lips and aimed a warm smile at me. “What would you like to talk about?” Not about what I was thinking, that’s for sure. I sipped at the pink fluid in my glass. It tasted sweet, but it had a kick. I took a bigger swallow.



“Why don’t we start with an overview of your revelation.”

“Certainly.” She folded her hands in her lap and beamed at me, her face full of divine peace. “I believe that the gates are a direct manifestation of God in all his wonderful mercy. Only his love for humanity could possibly be responsible for the blessing of renewed life and vigor. He saw how divided and fractious we were, how males were too aggressive, females too submissive. The gates represent his desire to allow us to perceive ourselves from the viewpoint of the opposite sex so that we may finally understand ourselves and at last bring peace to the tortured earth.”

As she spoke, she leaned toward me, her face earnest. It looked as if she really believed in what she was saying.

It still sounded like a sermon to me. “What about those people who enter the gates and don’t return? What happens to their chance to look at things differently?”

“They are the doubly blessed. Those who don’t return are united with God immediately.”

“The criminals, too? From what I understand, a high percentage of those who don’t make it through are criminals.”

“That’s what’s so wonderful. God has forgiven them their sins, as he will all of us eventually.”

“And how long will that take?” I couldn’t keep a hint of skepticism out of my voice. Like most religious people, she had a quick explanation for everything, if you were willing to twist reality.

“Why, no longer than the timespan until you enter the heavenly gates for the second time. All who believe will be forgiven and taken to heaven.”

Now I thought I had her. “Then why not go through once, turn right around and go through the second time? Why wait?”

“Isn’t it obvious? When God’s gates miraculously change our gender, he is instructing us to live out another life on earth before entering heaven. He wants us to lead others to the light. Just as Jesus’ disciples stayed behind after his ascension to spread the gospel, so must we.” A sweet smile touched those full lips.

I shook my head. I couldn’t help feeling she was enjoying our debate.



There was a quick mind behind that sexy exterior. “For the sake of argument, suppose an alien race with advanced technology is responsible for the gates rather than God. Doesn’t that make as much sense?”

“If you believe that, you must not have done your homework. Don’t you know researchers are saying the gates are immaterial? No physics ever imagined can explain them.”

That was a good point. But I had an answer. I quoted from an old adage first formalized by a science fiction writer of the last century. “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

“Arthur C. Clarke.” She laughed at my surprise. I hadn’t expected someone so young to know Clarke. But now that I thought about it, how old was she, really? On the webs she had appeared to be somewhere in her twenties. Close up, she didn’t look a day over eighteen. A chill ran up my spine as I guessed the truth. She must have made a passage through a gate, turning from male to female. She must have been a damned handsome guy, because she’d turned into one gorgeous female.

“You’ve been through a gate.” I stated it as a fact.

Her eyes flickered with alarm before her usual calm expression returned. “Can I persuade you not to publicize that conjecture?”

“Why do you want to keep it a secret?” I leaned forward, feeling a rush of excitement. Until that moment, the interview was going nowhere. I could have stayed home and watched her preach on the web for all the fresh material I was getting. She’d merely been sprouting her usual sermon.

“I don’t really, but I must in order to bring more souls to the light. Many people resent those of us who have been changed. How did you know?”

My experience with Donna had helped. As beautiful and feminine as Messilinda was, I had caught nuances of her former male persona in her speech and mannerisms.

“It doesn’t matter. You are in the public eye now. You won’t be able to keep this secret for long. If I don’t break the news, someone else will find out very soon, perhaps someone not as sympathetic as I am.”

She frowned, making faint lines appear on her flawless brow, then



leaned back and flashed a radiant smile at me. “Well, in that case, I suppose I’ll have to live up to the revelation. God knows what he’s doing. In any case, since you’re the first to know, I grant you permission to use the knowledge.”

I smiled back, inwardly rubbing my mental hands together in glee. This would be a great story. I pumped her for her former name, birth date and other biographical data. As she talked, I let her hear me tell the phone to run confirmation checks on the data. It didn’t faze her in the least, so I assumed she was telling the truth. What was astounding is that she had been born almost a hundred years ago, making her the oldest person I knew of who had made the change.

No wonder she thought God was responsible.

When we finished, I stood up. We hadn’t talked long, but I was anxious to get back out to the lobby and see if Rita had heard from the folks yet.

Messilinda stood, too, and took both my hands. She pulled me close to her. I was surprised, but she was a beautiful woman, so a part of me was more than willing to embrace her. As I looked down at a perfect view, she put her arms around my neck. Up close I could smell her subtle perfume and feel the heat of her breasts pressed against my chest. It was easy to forget that she had once been a man. I’d never known her as anything but a woman.

Her lips parted and her tongue darted into my mouth with an eagerness that had lots of practice behind it. Lost in her scent, I pulled her closer. She lifted one arm and reached behind her. I felt the fabric of her dress under my hands go slack.

I forgot all about Rita. There’s nothing so imperative to a man with a hard on as finding some place to put it. Messilinda squirmed, and her dress fell to the floor. She stepped out of it, and I kicked it away.

A short time later, I slunk out of Messilinda’s office feeling like a kid who has spent his church offering on candy. Why Messilinda had wanted to seduce me was a mystery. It certainly couldn’t have been because of my looks. Perhaps she was hoping the act would persuade me to put a favorable slant on my exclusive.

Rita jumped up as soon as I came into the lobby. “Lee! Your dad called. They made it!”

Her obvious joy made me feel even worse. “What did they say?”



“They sent their love and said don’t call for a few days, but not to worry; they’re fine. I’m so glad, Lee. I was afraid your dad might not make it.”

“Me, too. Come on, I’ve got some stuff here that won’t wait.”

As soon as we got to the car, I asked Rita to drive while I plugged in my phone and began transferring the recording of the interview to my agent, flagging it with an “urgent” icon and asking her to put it out for bids. I used the car screen to make minor revisions as it unwound. I didn’t want to take a lot of time to edit it for fear of being scooped. This news was bound to be worth a lot of money.

Unfortunately, I had forgotten to turn my phone off when the seduction began. “Whoops!” I said, feeling as foolish as a lineman recovering a fumble and then running the wrong way. I cut the recording.

Rita was staring straight ahead at the road. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“It happened so quickly I don’t remember.” That part was true. It had happened quickly.

“I’ll bet you don’t. My, and with a former man, too. Donna may have some hope after all.”

“Donna? What’s she got to do with it?” I didn’t understand. But I’ve already mentioned that I don’t understand women.

“Nothing, nothing. Just so long as Messilinda didn’t convert you.”

I could reassure her on that point. As for the rest, she suggested we play the seduction portion of the recording when we were home in bed to see if she could learn any new techniques. I said that she already knew more than enough to satisfy me, and besides, I doubted the phone had caught much of the visual since it was down around my ankles most of the time.

She laughed. Even though sexual jealousy is considered old-fashioned nowadays, I was still glad to hear that laugh. Lucky for me, Rita was like most people in my generation and enjoyed a variety of lovers. After the universal viricide was invented, sexual mores had relaxed to a degree that our parents still had trouble believing.

After we got home, Rita did her best to wear me out, and I cooperated until she succeeded. Why is it that a little strange sex makes you hornier than ever for your regular partner? Between one of our



couplings, I asked Rita if psychologists had anything to say on the subject.

“They say men are rabbits in disguise and there’s no cure for the condition. Shut up and fuck me again.”

The Messilinda interview (minus the unreported portion) got a big play in Texas and the surrounding states and even a bit of national publicity. It also brought in quite a lot of money, enough to keep us in beans for a while.

Messilinda’s reputation didn’t seem to suffer from the revelation that she had been a hundred-year-old man before founding her new religion. On the contrary, it enhanced her status. True believers were more convinced than ever that God had called her to start their religion. The number of her converts continued to grow. Of course, there were more debunkers, too, but that only helped keep her in the public eye.

While the interview helped build my reputation as a reporter, it had other, unexpected, results at home. Rita blabbed to Donna about how the interview ended with my making love to a woman who was once a man. Within a few days, Donna began overwhelming me with attention. One night I mentioned I was tired, and she offered to give me a backrub. At first the feel of her strong fingers kneading my sore shoulders was pleasant, but soon I became all too aware of her full breasts pressing against my back. I finally had to tell her to stop. Next, she began wearing provocative clothes, especially if we were home alone, and touching me when no touch was called for. When Rita wasn’t around, she would sit next to me, smiling in an inviting way and batting her big brown eyes at me.

It became obvious she’d chosen me to initiate her into sex—probably because Russell was so seldom home. Perhaps in tune with his dedication to science, Russell was a real freethinker when it came to sex, and I suspected there was something going on between them. But Russell had reached a critical point in his work and was spending almost every moment at the lab.

I didn’t know how to deal with Donna’s sexual advances. First I tried to laugh it off, but soon I was watching so I wasn’t left alone with her. I thought her actions must be obvious to Rita, but she never seemed to notice it, which led me to believe I was probably letting my imagination get the better of me. It was hard to believe my one-time best male friend was trying to seduce me.



The whole thing finally came to a head one afternoon when Donna and I were home alone. I was in the lounging room, sitting down and reviewing some notes on the screen there while having a small drink.

Donna must have heard me stirring. She came out of her room dressed in a tight tee shirt and short shorts with the top button unbuttoned and the zipper half way down. I couldn't see a panty line. She sat down beside me, closer than was really necessary.

I was careful to keep my eyes focused on the screen. "Hi, Donna. Did I wake you up?"

"No, I wasn't sleeping." She scrunched closer and put a hand on my thigh. "Actually, I was thinking about you."

"Me?" I refused to look at her.

"Yes, you, Lee. Why are you avoiding me?"

"I'm not." A pure lie.

"Yes, you are. You won't even look at me."

I forced myself to turn and face her. Her eyes were damp. As I watched, a tear broke loose and trickled down her cheek.

"Donna, what is it?" The sight of her tear-streaked face frightened me.

She hesitated, watching me from under thick lashes damp with tears, then took the plunge.

"Rita told you I have an implant, didn't she?"

Where was Rita when I needed her? I didn't want to talk to Donna about sex, and especially not if I was her target. "Yes, she did. Look, Donna, if that's what you want to do, you don't need my approval. There are plenty of men out there who will find you attractive."

"But I do need your approval. Don't you understand? I don't want my first time to be with any man. It's got to be someone I know I can trust with my heart and soul. It's you I want to try it with."

"Oh, hell." I picked up my drink and took a big swallow.



“Please, Lee. Don’t you see? This is a big step for me. I have a man’s memories and a woman’s desires. I’m scared. Won’t you help me?”

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I looked away, my mind whirling as I tried to think of a way out of the situation. While my eyes were turned, she slid right up against me. When I turned back, she grabbed my face with both hands and kissed me on the mouth. Her lips were soft and full, like the lips of any desirable woman. For what seemed like an eternity, we kissed while images of the old Don and the new Donna raced through my mind. I felt the beginning of an erection and drew back, half-rising to my feet.

“No, damn it. Donna, you’re my friend, not my lover!”

“Am I your friend?” Her voice sounded as forlorn as a funeral dirge. Another tear glistened on her cheek.

“Yes!” What else was there to say? I walked away, leaving her sitting there crying.

Chapter Nine

Even after I rejected her attempt at seduction with such finality, Donna continued to treat me with warm affection. Her obvious love made me feel even worse, if possible. She didn’t mention the subject again, and I certainly didn’t.

I hoped she would drop the idea of trying sex with me and find another man, but I saw no signs of it. She was taking all her classes at home so there was no need for her to go to the campus. Mostly she stayed home and studied. The main difference I noticed was that she didn’t laugh or smile as much as she had before. I felt as if that was my fault, I but didn’t know what to do about it so I let it go, hoping she would cheer up. The one thing she wanted, I wasn’t prepared to give.

This situation went on for several days. I didn’t think anyone else knew what was causing Donna’s mood of perpetual gloom until Rita broached the subject.

We were sitting out on the front porch enjoying after-breakfast coffee and early morning sunshine. I like being outside so long as I’m around my own digs, but in southern Texas in the summertime you



have to get your porch sitting done early. The heat and humidity will run you inside by midmorning.

I finished my cup and picked up the carafe to fill it again. "More?" I said to Rita.

"No thanks. Lee, I want to talk to you."

Uh-oh. The words every man dreads hearing. I could tell she was upset with me by the tone of her voice.

"What about?" Already, I was beginning to suspect what the subject of our discussion would be.

"You know what about. I can't believe you were so horrible to Donna."

"Me? What did I do?"

"You hurt her feelings. Badly. If I were her, I wouldn't even be speaking to you."

"Are you talking about the way she was coming on to me last week?"

"No, I'm talking specifically about four days ago when she asked you to make love to her and you refused. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Do you two talk about every damn thing that happens around here?" It was a feeble attempt to get the conversation going in another direction.

"Of course we do, with anything that matters. Didn't you and Donna used to gab about everything before the gates?"

True, but he had been Don then. Before Donna changed, we had discussed every aspect of our lives, especially women, including Rita, and whichever girlfriend he was seeing at the moment.

"Well, yes, now that you mention it, but it's different now."

"It sure is. Donna has a broken heart. Your friend needs your help and you are ignoring the pain you are causing her."

"Oh, come on now. I am not the only man in the world. If Donna wants to discover what it's like to be a woman in every way, I am sure someone else will be glad to help her out. Why doesn't she get on the



phone and demand that Russell take a break from the lab? I've got a feeling he'd be more than happy to be her first."

Rita looked stubborn. "I wouldn't be surprised if she doesn't end up with Russell eventually. But right now he isn't available. And she wants someone who has been her friend for years to help her through this critical moment of her life. That's you. I want you to make up with her."

"Make up with her? We haven't even had a fight."

"You hurt her. Why are you so impossibly stubborn sometimes? And so dense, I might add."

"Dense in what way?" We seemed to be talking in circles. I couldn't understand what she was talking about.

"Can't you tell how Donna feels about you? Couldn't you at least have tried? Even if you don't feel the same way she does, you could have done that much for her."

"Rita, please, let's drop the subject. I don't tell you who to have sex with, do I? Donna was the best friend I've ever had. We practically lived together from our sophomore year on. I'd like to stay friends."

"You sure pick strange ways of going about it."

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't feel right having sex with her. It would be like—like..."

"Like going to bed with a man, right?"

"Sort of."

"And yet you don't see a thing wrong with women making love to each other, do you? You enjoyed watching the night I had sex with another woman."

"I can't help the way I was brought up." Besides, Rita, of all people, should know that when it came to sex, we humans were full of contradictory behavior.

"Don't blame it on your upbringing. Another thing, you didn't have any trouble with that hennaed redheaded evangelist did you? She only spent about a hundred years as a man." Rita's voice rose. She was about as angry as I had ever seen her, and she had nailed me good, right below the waterline.



“I’m sorry about that.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. Any male who could resist that flame-top needs to have his hormone levels checked. I only mentioned it to show you that your argument about Donna once being a man doesn’t make much sense.”

“Donna will get over it.” Maybe it didn’t make sense, but the thought of making love with my former best friend was still making me squirm.

“Yes, she will, eventually. But you’re not going to be very popular around here for a while.” She stood up, and turned to go back inside.

“Wait. Listen, I’ll talk to Donna and explain.”

“Explain what? That you have bricks in your head?”

“About how I feel. About how she feels.”

“Lee, you evidently haven’t got a clue about how she feels.”

“Yes I do,” I argued. “I’ve known her longer than you have.”

Rita closed her eyes and clenched her fists. She stood like that a moment, then opened her eyes and stared at me as if I were a student who had failed to grasp a problem after a dozen explanations. “You know her that well, do you? Then I guess you must know that she’s fallen in love with you.”

She turned on her heel and left me sitting out in the sun with an ache in my chest that wouldn’t go away.

I guess Rita really did love me. When I went back into the house, she acted as if nothing had happened between us. I retreated into the study and got online with my agent. I had never met her in person, but the big screen in the study made it seem as if we were in the same room together. Mary Wright doesn’t look as if she could convince any editor to buy from her. She is a small, dumpy woman in her mid-forties who dresses as if she were one step up from joining the Fourth Worlders. She had gotten a good price for the Messilinda program, though, much more than I had expected.

“You’ve made a name for yourself, Lee. Now we need to exploit your



reputation while you're hot," she told me.

"I was lucky."

"Never mind that. Now you're marketable. What else do you have on tap?"

"Nothing much." The professionals were covering the gate news much better than I could. I was only a fair amateur.

"Let me give you a project, then. The webs and zines have been saturated with the sex change aspects of the gates. Now they're looking for some scientific information, preferably from a personal angle. You already have a few science credits to your name so it should be an easy sell. Do you know any scientists?"

Did I know any scientists? I had one living in my house. Russell would be glad to help, I thought. "Sure do. Let me check and get back to you. Okay?"

"Great. See you later." She was already taking another call as she cut the connection.

I wanted to see Russell right away. As I came out of the study, Rita and Donna were sitting down with their heads together. They looked up. I tried to act nonchalant.

"I'm going to run over to the campus and talk to Russell."

"Tell him to come home occasionally, will you?" Donna said.

"Sure. I will." I gave Rita a quick kiss and bracing myself, pecked Donna on the cheek. A smile brightened her face. I hoped she wouldn't read anything into it that wasn't there.

When I walked into Russell's lab, I found him standing in front of a screen with his back to me, watching the results of what appeared to be some experiment playing out. There were lots of graphs, lines and symbols flashing on the screen.

Somehow, Russell sensed my presence. He turned around. "Hi, Lee. What brings you here?"

"Something you may be able to help me with. I can come back later if you're busy."



“No problem. These results can wait awhile.”

I wanted privacy to talk to him. “Can we go into your office? Is it free?”

“It is until the night shift comes on.” He had to share the little office with another doctoral candidate.

“What’s your problem?” Russell asked as soon as he had cleared a stack of books and papers filled with equations from the other chair.

“No problem; my agent suggested I should talk to a scientist.”

“What about?”

“Oh, how the brains are going about exploring the gates, what problems you’re having, and what you’re planning on next; I’m looking for anything you’ve found out that hasn’t already been reported a million times.”

Russell laughed. “You’ve come to the wrong department. Philosophy is the next hall over.”

“Not interested. They have as many opinions as economists do, all of them contradictory.”

“Physicists are fast joining their ranks. Actually, you should be talking to the genetics department. They’ve come up with a prize. A friend of mine was telling me about it right before you arrived.”

“So tell me, too.”

Russell gazed at the ceiling. “A brand new projection. Average lifespan of sex-changed individuals should amount to well over a hundred years, give or take a few. And nothing but old age to slow them down.”

That was about fifteen more than the lifespan tables were giving us at the time, and the last decade or so was likely to be plagued with ailments. “Nice. Once that news gets out, a few extra doubters will take the plunge.”

“More than a few, I think. I’m going to have to get a new adviser. Doctor Holt went through yesterday and took off for Mexico this morning to start enjoying all that money he’s saved up.”



I hadn't told Russell I was recording. I wanted him to act natural. I would let him know before using any footage, of course. "That's great. Tell me more."

He spread his hands, palms up. "We still don't know a damn thing. All we can do is act like that character in *Alice in Wonderland* who tried to believe several impossible things before breakfast."

"Such as?" I prodded.

"How about little green men from Mars? At least the color matches. Lee, when you have a phenomenon you can't measure, all you can do is speculate. One theory is as likely to be right as the next one. Or as wrong."

"What's your opinion?" I was forgetting this was for potential publication. Talking to Russell was always fascinating.

"My opinion? For what it's worth, I don't think God has anything to do with the gates. I'd rather believe in the Martians."

"Seriously?"

"No, of course not."

I grinned. "Actually, there was both a book and a movie back before the Millennium about little green men from Mars invading earth. They couldn't be measured, either." I was talking about one of Grandpa's old science fiction novels. It was called *Martians go home* . Those aliens were obnoxious little gremlins.

"Really? What was the final explanation?"

I grinned some more. "There wasn't any. One day they went back where they came from."

"Maybe the gates will, too. Seriously, Lee, most scientists don't like to go out on a limb without some data."

"How do you expect to get any?"

"Easy. I'll use the tabwebs for evidence."

We both laughed. The tabs had been crazy about aliens for the last thirty years, at least, without a single fact to back them up. They still wrote about the Roswell crash as if it had actually happened.



We talked a while longer, relating stories we had each heard about the gates. I actually had more to tell than he did. He hadn't watched nearly as much news as I had.

I told him about the fundamentalist Muslim country in the Middle East where they were executing any woman caught going through a gate. But the gates were so well guarded there now—surrounded constantly by religious fanatics—that that wasn't likely to happen.

He told me that none of the astronomical or weather satellites had recorded so much as a blip at the time the gates appeared. If they came from outer space, it was by some means other than distortion of space or the electromagnetic spectrum.

Then he wanted to hear more about Messilinda. He rolled his eyes when I described her seducing me. "Some guys have all the luck. I barely have time to eat right now, much less have a sex life. For the life of me, though, I can't see anything special about you that would cause her to drop her panties the first time you met."

"Actually, she wasn't wearing any. Did you hear about Forbes asking Congress to start up the clipper production line again?"

"About time," Russell grumbled. I agreed with his sentiments. As a kid, I had wanted to be an astronaut, but the financial crisis a few years ago had killed manned space travel. Now the mystery of the gates was stirring interest in outer space again.

"Indonesia is threatening to invade the Philippines."

"I heard about that. Muslims versus Catholics. Nothing new there. What I'm worried about is all the religious mania right here at home."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Bible-belt mentality never dies. If we knew anything about what happens to people who don't come out of the gates, we could..."

Russell snapped his fingers. "Hey! Here's a story I'll bet you haven't heard. There was this doctor from the Temple medical center. He went through a gate a few months back. New life, right? Then one night he got mugged. The 'worlders poured acid over his face for fun. Blinded him. He was so depressed he walked into a gate again."

"What happened?" I knew the answer even as I asked the question. I felt a thrill somewhere between anticipation and fear. Just when you thought you understood the gates, something unusual would happen.



“He came out the other side, perfectly normal, except that he had changed gender again.”

Now that was really news. People had stopped trying a second passage because no one had ever returned from the attempt.

“Has it been verified?” I could hear my voice rising with excitement.

“Yup. Matter of fact, I went to school with one of his kids. I called him and he told me it’s the straight truth.”

“Give me his name. And his address, if you know it.”

“His name is Walter Renfrow, but it won’t do you any good to talk to him. He’s claiming he doesn’t remember a thing about what happened, other than that he can see again. But...”

“But what?”

“But some of his friends think he’s holding back. I’d like to know myself. Here, don’t let on where you got this from.” He pulled up the name and address from his phone and transferred it to mine.

After that, I was in a hurry to leave. I only stayed long enough to tell him that Donna and Rita wanted to see him a little more often. He said he would make an effort to spend a more time with Donna. No doubt he was planning a scientific investigation of her adjustment.

I almost ran home, intending to pack a bag and head for Temple the same day. I wanted to ask Rita to go with me, but when I arrived home, there was no one around that I could see. I was disappointed that Rita wasn’t handy, but decided leave her a note. I intended to get up there and see that doctor before word got out. The first person to make two trips through a gate!

I headed for my room, which was across the hall from Donna’s. As I passed, I noticed her door was half open. My stride shortened and something impelled me to peek inside.

Donna was lying on top of the sheets with her head propped up on a couple of pillows, watching a women’s fashion program. All she was wearing was a filmy nightgown. The thin silk covered her, but revealed every curve.

I was standing in the doorway, frozen, staring at the soft swell of her breasts when she looked away from the screen and saw me. The moment stretched into eternity, but I couldn’t seem to make my legs



move.

“Why hello, Lee. Come on in.” Donna’s voice was low and seductive. She stretched her body, arching her back so that her breasts lifted towards me, their fullness straining against the thin nightgown. She slid one hand across the silken sheets in an inviting gesture.

My legs started working again. I staggered over to the bed, moving like someone in a dream. The closer I got, the more disoriented I became, as if I were breathing in pure oxygen. I felt dizzy. My eyes drank in her voluptuous breasts, slim waist and long legs. Her liquid brown eyes watched my approach with suppressed anticipation.

I sat down on the edge of the bed. She reached out and took my hand. Her touch was like an electric shock, sending tingles up my arm.

“Donna, I—you—my God, you’re beautiful. You’re as lovely a sight as I’ve ever seen.” Why had I never realized how desirable she was until this moment?

An eager excitement lit up her face. She tugged at my hand. I kicked off my shoes and lay down beside her. My mind was buzzing with desire. I couldn’t tear my gaze away from her.

“Lee, are you sure?”

“Oh, yes!”

I reached out to touch her and suddenly her body was pressed against mine. Our lips met and it seemed as if I tasted the nectar of the gods. I searched for her breasts and found them, firmly pliant beneath their flimsy covering. Her nipples became erect against the palms of my hands, sending waves of desire coursing through my body. She was a warm, desirable woman and I would let nothing on earth prevent me from possessing her, not even the thought of who she once was.

She sat up and pulled the nightgown over her head, revealing her naked body to the feel of my hands and the taste of my lips. I felt my erection surge and become cramped inside my pants. I stripped them off, and my penis came free, hard and erect, pulsing with exquisite expectation. She brought my head down to her breasts and moaned softly as I took them each in turn into my mouth, exulting in the feel of my tongue twirling around the hard little buttons of her nipples. The thought of stopping never entered my mind; my body was in total control, and all I knew or felt was concentrated in my groin.

Donna reached down and took me in her hand, and I was lost in a



whirlpool of exquisite sensation. Somewhere off in the far distance a voice was shouting a warning that she had taken a pheromone, one of the very few proscribed drugs, and that this lust I felt was a trick of chemistry. I ignored it. She was my world, my utmost fantasy, the girl of a hundred adolescent dreams. She pulled me over her, thighs spread and ready, and guided me inside her. My last coherent thought was that if using a pheromone on me was cheating, I was grateful to be tricked.

Chapter Ten

Our lovemaking went on for hours—I'm not sure how many. I ravished her. I couldn't get enough of her. And I told her I loved her, again and again, even while I knew it was the pheromone talking. She cried. She cried out at the pleasure she was giving and receiving. She told me she loved me, and I believed her, in the deepest depths of my soul. It was impossible not to believe her.

Hours later we both collapsed into the bed, exhausted, as the effects began to wane. As I slowly came to my senses, I realized my body was shaking. I couldn't help wondering about side effects. The pheromones were illegal, so I doubted much research had been done. Of course, that didn't stop them from being used, especially by the rich looking for a new thrill.

Like most males, I've fantasized about using a pheromone on a girl, but that's all it amounted to: fantasy. I would never want to trick someone into sex, and I never expected a friend of mine to do it to me. Now that I was thinking rationally again, it hurt to realize that Donna, my old friend, would tamper with my mind.

Donna was curled up on her side, lost in a deep sleep. That was one side effect, one that hit the person taking the pheromone. She would be unconscious for several hours.

I eased out of her bed, gathered up my discarded clothes and shoes, and crept back to my own bedroom, struggling to think through a haze of exhausted satiation. Mostly I was amazed that Donna would risk using a pheromone to seduce me. Possession carries a long prison sentence. And where would she get her hands on the powders? North Houston has less drug use than most areas of the country. The few illegal mood changers were almost never seen here.



As I slumped into my own bed, I didn't know whether to be sorry or glad that she had used it on me. A part of me hated her for tricking me, yet images from our hours of passionate lovemaking continued to flash through my mind. I craved more. That's one of the other side effects. It creates an attraction, acts like a bonding agent between two people. But did it create it from nothing, or had I felt something for Donna before?

I would never know the truth now. But I also knew that Donna and I would become regular lovers. My inhibitions about touching her had been burned to ash in the flame of our desire. The memory of her soft skin, her warm mouth, her full breasts, would draw me back to her. I lay in the bed with my eyes half closed, picturing her nude body moving above mine as we made love, and my heart pounded with desire.

Some distant corner of my mind stopped the images long enough to remind me about Rita. How would this affect my relationship with her? Sure, she had encouraged me to sleep with Donna, but I was sure she'd never imagined that Donna would seduce me with pheromones.

Despite these worries, I must have fallen into an exhausted sleep, because when I woke up, Rita was in bed beside me. I sat up, startled, and she opened her eyes and smiled.

"You were snoring. You only do that when you're really tired." She giggled, like someone with a secret.

"What do you mean?" Guilt made me feel defensive.

"Don't worry. I know you had sex with Donna."

I searched her face in the shadows but saw no sign of anger.

A feeling of relief swept over me. I found that I wanted to talk about my incredible experience. "You don't sound angry."

"Why should I be? I've told you from the start that you should make love to her."

"Now that it's happened, I'm not sure how I feel about it." I shook my head and told her about the pheromones. She listened, her expression serious, and immediately reassured me on one point anyway.

"The bonding effects wear off in a few days. One of my psychology professors did some research on it, even though the drug is illegal. In



a week or so, you'll know what you really feel for Donna. Meanwhile, the ice is broken, so to speak."

That wasn't all that was broken. In the course of our passion, I had learned that when a man went through the gate, it did a complete job of creating a woman. I felt tenderness toward Donna, knowing I'd been her first, and compassion and love for Rita, for her openness and generous heart. Would I have been so generous?

A paranoid thought occurred to me. Was she encouraging Donna and me to get together because she wanted some distance between us? I hesitated, but had to ask. "Do you still love me?"

She threw an arm over my chest. "More than ever, you dope. I don't ever want to be separated from you. Or Donna, either."

A sense of relief flooded through me, and I missed the inclusion of Donna in her affirmation. I sighed. "I'm glad. I feel the same way. I only hope I can forgive Donna."

"For what, Mr. Stud?"

"For seducing me with a pheromone. That still bothers me."

Rita laughed and threw me a playful wink. "But she didn't. I slipped it into her caddy before I left. I knew she would have a nightcap before going to sleep."

I sat bolt upright, forgetting all about my tired body. "You did! Why?"

She shrugged as if she had done nothing worse than give Donna a backrub before leaving. "I got tired of waiting on you to come to your senses. Don't try to tell me you're sorry it happened."

Now I was really shaken. Donna was innocent. And Rita said she was only trying to help us both. Was I getting to be that stodgy about sex?

It was more than I wanted to think about. "I can't say I didn't enjoy the experience, but it will take me a few days to process it. Besides that, you took a big risk. What if you had gotten caught with an illegal drug?"

"Why, I would have swallowed it down, seduced the cop and made my getaway. Don't you know that women will do all sorts of crazy things when they're in love?"

"I didn't, but I think I'm learning." I dropped the subject. I was



exhausted, but still thinking well enough to realize an argument would only result in two women mad at me.

Fortunately, I had a new subject to distract Rita. “Would you like to go to Temple with me in the morning?”

“Sure, why not? What’s going on there?”

“I’ll tell you in the morning. Let’s get some sleep, or I’ll never be able to drive.”

I curled up against Rita and dozed right off. My dreams were beautiful.

Donna was still asleep when we left the next morning, and we didn’t try to wake her up, knowing that the aftereffects of the pheromone would probably keep her in bed until noon. To reassure her, I left her a long note telling her I couldn’t wait to see her again.

Russell wasn’t there, either. The way he was practically living at the lab, I was beginning to feel guilty charging him rent. But maybe it was just as well he wasn’t around much right now, while I worked out my relationship with Donna.

It was going to change—that much I knew for sure. Somehow while I was sleeping, my mind had cleared and I saw things differently. Don was gone forever and Donna was one beautiful woman. I found myself wanting to get my business taken care of as soon as possible so that I could get back and see her again.

I splurged on two complete natural breakfasts for me and Rita at McDonald’s, then we got on the road. Temple is way up in northeast Texas, a three-hour drive about on the NAFTA, then another half hour or so on a state highway. On the way, I told Rita about the doctor who had managed what had heretofore been considered impossible, a second successful passage through a gate. She was as eager as I was to talk to him, though neither of us had figured out yet how to go about seeing him.

“I should have bought two doses of pheromone,” Rita joked. “That way I could slip it in his coffee or something and get the information out of him in bed.”

“We don’t know that he has any new information, yet.”



“He must. He’s the only person that we know of so far who has managed two passages. Just examining his new body or talking to him ought to tell us something.”

“Okay, let’s make that our strategy. All we want is a little time with him. We’ll even offer him payment, if that’s what he wants.”

“You’ll have to do the offering. I spent all my money on Donna yesterday.”

I grinned. “Fine. I’ll offer money; you offer him your tender young body.”

“Don’t joke. If it comes to that, I might.”

I couldn’t decide whether she was kidding me or not.

As it turned out, it made no difference. We were too late by several hours. I managed a few words with his son by mentioning that we had a mutual friend (without ever telling him who it was). He was too distraught to ask. During the night a squad of Secret Service agents had arrived and whisked his father away, citing some obscure national security code. Their lawyer had been unable to find out where he was being held.

I recorded our brief conversation, added the necessary background information, and forwarded the packet to Mary while we made the drive back.

Although I was disappointed, I still had a scoop. I knew Mary would find me an editor who would pay top dollar for the news that someone had gone through the gates twice. Besides, the drive itself was pleasant. The East Texas piney woods are still relatively unspoiled; in fact, since composite materials had become so universally used in construction, much of the old logged-over timber was making a comeback.

I was feeling mellow and pleasantly satisfied, so much so that I decided to call Dad and Mom and see how they were doing and if they were agreeable to us stopping on the way back.

I didn’t recognize Dad’s voice when he answered the phone, of course. He had to tell me twice that it was really him before I got it into my feeble mind that he was now not only young again, but female besides. He laughed about it and told us to come on by.

They must have realized it would be strange seeing them for the first



time. They were waiting on the lawn when I drove up—a young man and a young woman waving at my car. At first I wondered who the heck was standing in my parents' yard, then I knew. It was them.

After the first shock wore off, I decided they looked like a couple of my cousins. They still retained a faint resemblance to old photos of when they were young, but it was like a distorted mirror image because each of them looked the way they would have if they had been born a different sex.

I greeted them in the yard with a guarded smile, as if I were meeting two strangers. Rita was the one who got out and hugged them both. Yet I couldn't deny that these were my parents. The feeling of blood was still strong between us.

Soon we were inside, sitting at the kitchen table. It felt surreal to sit in these familiar surroundings and watch two people younger than me act exactly like my parents. Dad was brimming with energy and chattered on about the change as he puttered around the kitchen, making coffee and setting out snacks. (I had to keep reminding myself this was my dad. He had always left the kitchen chores to Mom.)

"Son, you and Rita can't possibly imagine how good I feel now. You'll have to grow old and feeble yourselves before you understand how old age drains the sap from your body."

"You always told me that experience compensated for age."

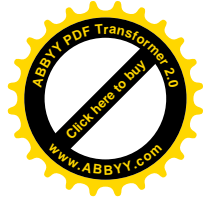
"It does, but retaining all that knowledge and experience in a young body is sort of like how I felt when I switched from a typewriter to a computer. It's wonderful!" He danced a little step by the kitchen stove. "I feel like I could fight a cage full of tigers!"

"How about you, Mr. Stuart?" Rita asked.

Mom smiled and rubbed at the whiskers on her face. Evidently, she hadn't gotten into the habit of wiping her beard off every morning yet. "I guess I am the mister now, aren't I? But please don't call us Mr. and Mrs. Stuart. I've told you that before, and it sounds silly now when we're younger than you are. Anyway, physically, it's like Edie says, but I'm still having trouble adjusting to this body."

"Edie? Are you changing your names, too?"

Dad shrugged her slender shoulders and grinned. "Take a good look at me and see how you would like being called Ed."



I did. He resembled nothing so much as a young girl ready to graduate from high school. I looked at Mom, a solid young man dressed in new jeans and long-sleeved work shirt with rolled-up sleeves, just the way Dad used to dress. “Are you taking a new name, too, Mom?”

“Yes. I guess we were lucky already having names that were easy to change. You can call me Bert now instead of Bertha or Mom. “ He smiled gently at me, as if he knew how disoriented I must be. I wondered how Grandpa would have felt had he still been around.

Edie poured coffee and set out a plate of old-fashioned molasses cookies. (I began calling the folks by their new names during that visit. To tell the truth, it helped. I started to think of them as someone else than my parents, as a brother and sister who were very close to me. Call it denial if you want, but life had not prepared me to be older than my folks.)

“What are your plans now?” I asked. Of course, Dad’s military retirement checks wouldn’t stop for six months, but that still might leave them short before too long. Grandpa had left them a lot of money, but not enough to support them through a whole new life, especially the way the markets were reacting to the changes wrought by the gates.

“We’re thinking of going back into the military if they ever decide to accept the sex-changed population.”

That made some sense. The military had been Dad’s whole life until he retired, and being female would present no hindrance. He had worked in weapons testing at first and later, as he rose in rank, procurement.

“Sounds like a good idea. Will you sell the house?” I hoped not. Every time I came back to visit, it was like leaving the twenty-first century and traveling back in time to a gentler, more reasonable society.

Edie rubbed her chin as if feeling for whiskers, a male mannerism she hadn’t abandoned yet. “I hope we don’t ever have to. In fact, we’ve been talking about asking you and Rita to move back here after you’ve finished with school, whether we go anywhere or not. Let me show you something.”

She got up from the table and fetched a magazine from her study. I recognized it at once:*National Geographic* , the one national magazine that never seemed to falter, regardless of how much the media changed. I had grown up with it, and part of my interest in



general science derived from it.

She thumbed through the pages until she found the article she was looking for, then handed it to me. Rita bent her head to study it with me. It was another article about global warming. I scanned through it, noting that the author emphasized the prominence of the scientists he quoted. There was a map projecting the prospective new coastlines of the world, including America, and this issue focused on the Gulf Coast.

The map displayed the Gulf of Mexico grown larger, with fingers extending well into Old Houston. The rising waters even took in bits of North Houston, like amoeba pseudopods searching out new territory. The date at the top of the map was not that many years in the future.

“With all the turmoil from the gates, people have forgotten about other problems,” Edie said, “but that doesn’t mean global warming is going away. You kids,” he smiled when he said that, looking over at his young partner, “might be much safer here than in North Houston before too much longer.”

I could imagine. Where would all the Fourth Worlders of Old Houston go when the waters covered their city? How would they feed themselves or earn a living? The city was already at the boiling point with unrest caused by high unemployment and diminution of government handouts.

Rita looked thoughtful. I studied the map with a sense of foreboding. The gates had already taught me that life could change in unexpected ways.

“We’ll certainly consider it. If we do, there might be more than just, um, Rita and I.”

“No problem. I’m planning on renovating and enlarging the place anyway, while money is still worth something.”

“Do you think there’s going to be another financial crisis?” My mind snapped into high gear, reviewing where I had my money invested.

Edie rubbed her chin again. “I don’t see how we can avoid it. The gates have the whole world in an uproar, for all the good they do.” Dad had always been very smart with money; I saw no reason to disbelieve him.

We visited a while longer, then got back on the road. “Funny, “ I



remarked after we turned onto the NAFTA and headed south, “that was like meeting old friends you haven’t seen for a while. It’s going to take me some time to get used to them as they are now.”

“You’re not alone. People all over the world are going through the same adjustments. It’s probably every bit as strange to them as it is to you.”

Mary certainly worked fast. As we left Ruston, my latest scoop came on the webs. Almost all of them carried it. Rita hugged me as if I had won the Medal of Honor. She was a little premature with her congratulations. The program was abruptly cancelled and replaced with other ‘ports, and the Secret Service was waiting on us when we pulled into my driveway.

Neither Rita nor I had ever been arrested, so it was a new experience for both of us, even though the agents didn’t call it an arrest. Their spokesman said it was “protective custody.” They hustled us into a government van while Donna watched from the front porch. There wasn’t even any time to speak to her.

“I want a lawyer,” I said to the chief agent, who had introduced himself as Whitley Hertz. He was seated in the captain’s chair right in front of us. I twisted my wrists against the tight plastic bonds.

“Mr. Stuart, let me inform you: Under national security directive 3011-4A, signed into law this morning by President Forbes, you are not entitled to legal representation. We are allowed to hold you sixty days before taking you to court and another sixty with a judge’s concurrence.”

“That’s not fair!” Rita cried.

Perhaps not, but I decided not to argue. Besides all the laws passed after the constitutional amendment of the Bill of Rights, many laws were being passed and signed by the president concerning the gates in one fashion or another. I couldn’t keep up with all of them. And I already was sure about the reason we had been arrested: Doctor Walter Renfrow, the first person known to have passed successfully through a gate twice.

I used both my bound hands to touch Rita for reassurance. “Don’t worry, hon. We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“That remains to be seen,” Hertz said. He wasn’t smiling. No one said



anything else.

The drive didn't take long; they took us to the new federal building near the center of North Houston. We were separated almost at once. I protested and was told to shut up.

I was placed in a small holding room and left alone for an hour or so. There was nothing else in the room except a hard wooden bench. I sat for a while then got up and paced, gnawing nervously at the plastic cuffs still holding my wrists together while I wondered and worried about what they were doing to Rita.

An ordinary-looking young man in a white coat finally came for me, accompanied by two huskies dressed in business suits. I was led into another bare but larger room and strapped into an upright chair. As uncomfortable as it was, I'm sure a Spanish inquisitor used it sometime in the past. Visions of torture flashed through my mind, but fortunately, there are less painful methods of eliciting information nowadays. The man in the white coat attached wires and leads to various portions of my anatomy with clips and tape. He started an IV in my right arm, adjusted the drip, and injected a syringe of something into the drug port.

"Veronal," he said, the last thing I clearly remember.

I have a vague impression of questions being asked, but can remember very little of what I said. An indeterminable time later, I became aware that my thoughts were becoming clear. I focused my eyes on a figure standing in front of me.

Hortz stared at me like a bug under a microscope. Government agents weren't very polite back in those days, not after all the constitutional amendments had been ratified.

"Mr. Stuart, It is my determination that you and Miss Hernandez present no threat to the country at the present time. Let me be very frank, though. There will be no more information distributed by you to the webs concerning Doctor Renfrow, not now, nor in the future. In fact, you are instructed under the provisions of security directive 3017- 7B to cease all investigation of persons now or in the future who may pass through a gate for the second time. Is that clear?"

"But why? What is wrong with them?"

"Is that clear?" he repeated, ignoring my question.

"Yes." What else could I say?



“See that you remember.” He turned and left without another word. Someone had already unstrapped my arms and taken off the instrument leads. I pulled myself to my feet, although I was still shaking from the effects of the veronal. Another agent opened the door.

“Come with me,” he said. I followed without arguing. My coordination was still not back to normal, and it was all I could do to stay on my feet. He walked me back by the route we had followed on the way in. We wound up at the entrance to the federal building. Rita was waiting for me there, half supported by a female agent. Her eyes were as glassy as new marbles.

“Lee!” She came into my arms and began crying. I patted her back and kneaded her shoulders.

“If you feel stable enough, you’re free to go,” the female agent said. She didn’t have to tell me twice. There was nothing I wanted more in the world right then than to get away from that place and back home to my family.

It was at that point that I began thinking of Donna and Russell as family. The thought of seeing them and getting Rita safely back home made me feel like a combat soldier suddenly being told that his suicide mission had been cancelled.

It took a few minutes to catch a cruising taxi. I held Rita in my arms and let her cry herself out as the driver followed my instruction back to the house. On the way we passed a gate sitting like a lonely artifact on the turf of central park, sparkling in the bright sunlight. There were only a couple of people approaching it as if they intended to enter. Nearby, a delegation of several young men and women in conservative white dress smiled and encouraged them. They wore bright red circular emblems on their chests with a neat CG in white letters centered inside the circles, the icon of Messilinda’s Church of the Gates. Her religion was really catching fire.

Homecoming was like the first day of semester break after you’ve been assured that you passed all the final exams. I threw open the front door and drank in the sight of the great room, feeling dizzy with relief. For once, Russell was there, comforting Donna while they both waited for news about us.

After we’d finished hugging, we sat and talked late into the night, worried about what the feds might do next. But, as Russell observed, we didn’t have enough data to come to any firm conclusions.



Finally, Russell left for his bedroom. He had to be at the lab by six in the morning. Rita and I decided to call it quits for the night, too, but when we staggered together into our bedroom, Donna followed us inside as if she belonged there.

Chapter Eleven

If I thought for even a second about ordering Donna to leave, the love and pleading in her big brown eyes changed my mind. While I stood staring, my exhausted mind still not functioning properly, Donna embraced me in a tight hug, then stepped back and began stripping off her clothes. Rita got a wicked grin on her face and soon clothes were flying all over the room.

I'm afraid I acted like a kid with a brand-new baseball mitt he can't wait to try, and Rita behaved like a girl who had been given a new doll for Christmas. Donna wanted only to make us both happy, separately and together. How long had Rita had the hots for Donna? Or had our session together provoked her desire? Or did the fact that Donna had once been a male incite Rita's desire? The changes the gate had brought were making life complex—and interesting.

At one point during our lovemaking, I watched in fascination as Rita lay in Donna's arms, shuddering as Donna kissed her breasts. Moments later, she took Donna's breasts in her hands and teased the nipples until they stood erect. As far as I knew, Rita had only been to bed with a woman once before, and she had never expressed a desire to repeat the experience. Now she couldn't seem to get enough. Her hands and mouth explored the soft mounds of Donna's breasts, fondling and kissing them and taking the nipples into her mouth like a hungry baby.

Like any man, I had to pause and recover from time to time, but the women were insatiable. Then, too, I was noticing that the gate might have turned Donna into a beautiful woman, but she still acted like a man in bed. She was aggressive and quick to assume the dominant role, with both Rita and me. To my surprise, I enjoyed it. Because of my mediocre looks, I've never been a big on the male macho thing. So I found it strangely exciting to submit to the desires of an attractive



woman. I let her do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted, and so did Rita. Rita was never one of those sweet little Southern belles who wait on the man to make the first move (I think they only exist in myth nowadays), but even she was learning things from our new bedmate.

When both of them made love to me at once, I closed my eyes and drowned in the wild sensations; I moaned each time Rita moved her lips slowly and sensually down over my penis, while at the same time Donna leaned over me with one of her breasts tucked in my mouth and the other in my hand. Waves of pleasure ran through my body, and I felt as if I were being washed to the shores of a heavenly paradise. When I finally fell into a thoroughly satiated sleep, they were still going at it.

When I awoke after my night of pleasure, the reality of my arrest hit me twice as hard. I could tell Rita was having problems adjusting too. We spent most of the day hanging around the house, reluctant to venture too far from familiar ground. When Russell got back from the lab that night, he tried to help me remember some of the questions my interrogators had asked. All I could recall was vague voices coming to me from what seemed like a great distance.

“There’s something peculiar going on,” he said, as if we hadn’t already been given ample demonstration of the fact.

“Yeah. They’re treating Doctor Renfrow as he had changed into a little green Martian while he was in the gate.”

Russell’s brow creased in a frown. “You know, maybe that’s what they do think.”

“That he turned into an alien? Come on, Russ, be serious.”

“Not really an alien, but I am being serious. I’ll bet there’s something about him that has the government upset. If the first trip changes your sex, what might the second trip change?”

“Well, it changes you back. And he looked normal, according to his son,” I reminded him.

“A spayed cat looks normal on the outside, too, but that doesn’t mean it is.”

I shrugged. “Whatever, I’ve been told to leave it alone. I intend to do



as I was told. I don't want to ever go to jail again." One experience was enough to last me a lifetime.

"They won't be able to keep it secret," Russell declared. "Scientists talk. I'll find out what it's all about before the week is out."

I had to agree with him there. The government may be able to cancel web or network programs they disagree with, but web communications between individuals are impossible to control, let alone censor.

Russell was on campus during much of the next several days. It gave Rita, Donna and I a lot of time to explore our three-way relationship. I asked Rita once what it was about Donna that had drawn her into the sexual relationship.

"Don't tell me you're against it." She lifted an eyebrow and smiled.

"Not at all. Just curious." I was, too.

"Let's put it like this: I always cared about Don, partly because I loved you so much and he was your friend, but also because he was an attractive, sexy guy in his own right. Then, when Don became Donna and fell in love with you, I naturally got even closer to her."

"Why closer?"

She grinned wickedly. "Maybe it's the perverted psych major in me. But I wanted to see how a man in a woman's body would make love—and how better than to be in bed with him and a man."

I stared at her, and she met my gaze without flinching. Who would have guessed Rita would be so brazen about sex? "I never suspected you were that way."

"I'm not 'that way,' as you put it. It was more than an experiment. I care about Donna."

"A lot of people would think that was strange."

Rita's eyes flashed. "For your information, women have loved each other since we came down out of the trees. Finally, our culture is reaching a level where it can be expressed more or less openly, and not necessarily in a physical sense. Why do men always have to think of women in terms of sex?"



“Because you’re sexy, I guess.”

Her anger vanished. “Lee, you’re so typically male I should write a paper on you.” She wrapped an arm around my neck and hugged me, taking the sting out of her words. I touched her lips, thinking how lucky I was.

My curiosity wasn’t quite satisfied, though. Thinking quickly over what she had said, I asked, “What about Russell? Are you going to fall in love with him, too?”

“Now what brought that up?”

“Well,” I hesitated. I was learning that Rita didn’t need much encouragement to talk when it came to sex. “When we got back from being under arrest, I had a strong feeling that the four of us were like a family now.”

Rita looked thoughtful. “I felt the same way. And I know Donna thinks Russell is sexy in his own quiet way.”

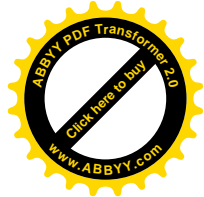
For an instant, I felt angry. Donna was my lover. Then I remembered that Donna was only now learning what it meant to be a woman. And she deserved someone who would be as committed to her as I was to Rita. But then, would we still stay lovers? Would Russell be open to a foursome? For that matter, did Russell still think of Donna as a man, or did he see the attractive woman she was becoming?

I couldn’t figure out all the nuances; the gate was bringing too many mindbending changes. Besides, I didn’t really care who had sex with whom. But I didn’t want to see anyone get hurt.

Rita mussed my hair and smiled enigmatically. “Don’t worry about it. One of these days when you’re old and gray and decide to go through a gate you’ll discover more about women than you ever thought possible.”

I left it at that. I didn’t tell her that I wasn’t planning on going through a gate when I got old. I liked being male too much, especially right now.

The government’s secret soon came out the way Russell predicted it would. One evening ten days after our arrest, he came home from school with a big grin on his face. He grabbed Rita first, then Donna,



kissed them both with a loud smack, then still keeping an arm around Donna's waist, said, "Gather 'round, folks, I've got some news!"

Letting go of Donna, he sprawled into the depths of the big easy chair. He took her drink from her and drained it.

"Must be important," I said, sitting down across from him and leaning forward.

"Remember that doc who went through the gate twice, then got arrested by the Secret Service?"

As if I could forget. Russell was only teasing me—he laughed and went on. "They didn't get a damn thing out of him! Veronal, scopalamine, pentathol, hypnosis, you name it, they came up blank. And it finally got out, just like I told you it would. The web is warping with the story."

I didn't get it. "What's the big deal if he doesn't know anything, other than that he managed to come out of a gate twice?"

"The big deal is that none of the drugs had any effect on him. It was like trying to question a catatonic. He never said word one. Not only that. They took him to some government lab and tested him physically forty ways from zero. He's perfectly normal and human; gene analysis matches his original identity exactly, allowing for the elimination of some detrimental recessives."

"Have they let him go?" Maybe I could get that interview now.

"Nope, but they probably will, eventually. The private lines are talking about a couple of other similar cases. One of them was kinda cute. This Arab woman sneaked out of her house, bribed a guard and went through a gate. Naturally, she turned into a male. The way the story reads, her husband grabbed her and tossed her back into the gate. She made it through the second time and came back out a woman again."

"I'll bet she's mad as hell," Rita said.

"That's not the story we're getting. She didn't seem to mind at all and went right along with the inevitable questioning; she offered no resistance, the same as our case. But she didn't talk, either."

"Could this be the beginning of a trend?" Donna seemed interested, but not anxious. A few months ago she would have bolted for the gate, but I think she was beginning to enjoy being a woman by then.



“I doubt it, though it’s a little early to tell yet. Statistically, ninety-nine point et cetera percent of those who have tried a second passage never come back. Even if it is a trend, at this rate, it will take years to gather enough of a statistical universe to understand why a few make it but the vast majority don’t. Shucks, we’re still not even sure why some don’t come back from the first attempt.”

“There’s still something peculiar about this,” I said. “Whoever heard of a person able to clam up under veronal?”

“Name me one thing that isn’t peculiar about the gates,” Russell challenged. “This is one more puzzle to add to all the others.”

I nodded my head. “So what else have you heard?”

“Probably not much that you haven’t. Our funding got cut, though.”

“How come?”

Russell waved the hand holding his drink. “Something about Congress not being able to come up with the money next year. We’re going on half rations now so we can keep operating if that turns out to be the case.”

Rita looked skeptical. “I would think the government would have plenty of money. Social Security and Medicare payments must be way down.”

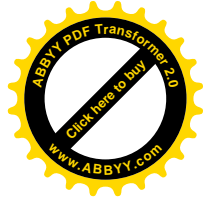
“You haven’t been keeping up with the news,” I said. “What they’ve saved, they’ve spent on the military, gate research and the space program.”

“Yeah, isn’t that great?” Russell said. “After all this time, they’ve finally decided to fund every kind of space research and production imaginable. Hell, they’re even talking about reviving the Nerva and Orion projects.”

Neither of the women knew what he was referring to. I might not have if I hadn’t been such a science fiction buff. Nerva and Orion were both nuclear-propelled rocket projects cancelled way back before the Millennium.

I frowned. “If that’s the case, Washington must be swinging toward the alien origin of the gates.”

“That’s what I hear, though what purpose our dinky little space



programs will serve in figuring out anything about the gate technology, I have no idea."

"Can I quote you as an 'informed source' on this?" Mary was agitating for another piece from me ever since the last one was pulled.

"Hell, you can quote me by name if you want to. Scientists are webbing all over the place about it, for and against."

"Which position do you favor?"

"Oh, well, I say go for it. For all we know, the gates may disappear tomorrow, and we'd be that far ahead at least. If the damn dumb politicians had spent the money in the first place, we'd have so much industry in space by this time that we could support every Fourth Worlder on earth, whether they ever worked a lick or not."

I agreed. Democracy has many virtues, but foresight isn't often one of them.

Russell leaned back and sighed, his exhaustion showing on his face. "Well, that's my scoop for the day. What are you folks hearing?"

I wondered whimsically whether anyone in the physics department ever turned on a news program. If they did, you couldn't prove it by Russell.

"Men are beginning to outnumber women, in this country anyway, and probably in most of the others regardless of what they're saying. If that keeps on, the gates may wind up solving the overpopulation problem," Rita said.

"Messilinda's Gate Church is still gaining converts. They've gone national and are beginning to pick candidates to run in the next election," I said.

Russell made a face. "How can people believe in that nonsense?"

Donna shook her head at him. "The same way they've been believing ever since the Neanderthal age. Everyone isn't as rational as you are."

"Yeah, but damn all..."

I laughed. "Russ, we must have gone over this a thousand times. Most people cling to the idea of a God because they can't face the fact that they are going to die. For that matter, they can't stay alive without



thinking there is a purpose for their existence. Why bring it up again?"

"For one thing, if those damn Gaters have their way, there wouldn't be any more scientific research. They think the gates have all the answers to the inscrutable."

"I doubt that it will go that far."

"I hope not." Russell yawned. "Tell me the rest in short sentences. I'm ready for bed."

By this time, the gates had been around for nearly two years, and you would think people would have learned to live with their presence, but that wasn't the case, any more than the country had ever compromised on the abortion issue or the everlasting racial problems, not to mention religion and politics. We have always been a fractious country, and the gates just gave more ammunition to the divisions.

By now, several main factions were contending for control of the gates (or for the power to form policy about them). The most unusual was Messilinda's rapidly growing Church of the Gates (though it took her a few days to come up with an explanation of why God had rejected a few of the heaven bound). They wanted us to worship the gates and ascend into heaven after the first rejuvenation ran out. They opposed any form of research on the gates and were against most other scientific research, too. Of course, the other religions disagreed. I find it amazing that they insist on holding such varying beliefs about abortion, birth control, homosexuality, and so forth, beliefs that keep them at one another's throats.

To the Fourth World population, the gates seemed like an indulgence of the idle rich. What difference did it make which sex you were when you were starving and jobless? They were hungry and penniless and getting more so each day. Every day it seemed Fourth Worlders were rioting somewhere for jobs and a return of government handouts.

The military continued their buildup, expecting trouble at any moment. They already had the Fourth Worlder riots to contend with. There was also the possibility of another country invading us because they hated how America allowed free access to the gates, or even—although I didn't take it seriously—the chance of an alien invasion. Daily, the tabwebs got more and more hysterical about the supposed alien menace behind the gates. When the news got out about the second passage individuals being resistant to drug interrogation, they really went wild.



Unemployment in the medical profession and allied industries was eating into the banking system's cash reserves as jobless persons drew down their savings or borrowed against their credit limits. There had already been a number of bank failures.

Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii were all threatening to succeed from the Union and the Texas legislature was close to having enough votes to exercise their constitutional right to split into four states.

To top it all off, my dad (and the *National Geographic* article he showed me) proved to be right. Most of the governors and mayors of threatened areas were demanding that the government begin building inland cities for the population threatened with displacement by the rising oceans.

It was obvious the world was dangerously close to chaos and the gates had only made things worse. More and more, I wanted to get away from the bigger cities. As we sat and talked, I decided to tell the others about Dad's offer for us to move into Grandpa's house as soon as the renovation was finished.

"I'm for it," Donna said at once. She was stretched out on the long lounge with her head in my lap while Rita sat upright next to me. I was resting one hand on her breast and squeezed it gently in appreciation.

"I don't like the mood the country is in," she added, "and I think it's likely to get worse before it gets better. That's not even considering the rise in sea level, and we know that's going to continue."

"How can you be so sure?" Rita asked. "Lots of scientists say the worst is over now, and they won't rise much further."

"That's government propaganda," Russell said. "The ice caps are still melting. You've been listening to too much political comment. None of the inland congress critters want to spend their tax money on supporting a bunch of Fourth Worlders."

"It won't just be the Fourths," Rita contradicted.

I knew more political theory than she did. "You're right, hon, but most people can afford to move themselves when the time comes, and the Third Worlders at least try to support themselves. Russ is right. Any inland politician who advocates spending anything more than token money on relocating the Fourths would get kicked out of office."



“So what? It’s the right thing to do. They should realize that.”

How do you explain to a political novice that representatives, with a very few exceptions, always vote in a way that will assure their re-election? It’s an instinct as old as the jungle and survival of the fittest. Protect your turf. Take a walk through any middle-class neighborhood and observe how carefully fences and hedges delineate each individual home, or think how women so often dominate the decor and arrangements inside a home.

Donna spoke up. She may not have understood politics, but she knew how contrary human nature could be. “Rita, hon, Lee is right. There won’t be any moves until the last moment and anything could happen then.”

“I sure would hate to leave school.” That was no surprise. Russell was practically married to his lab.

“Better than get killed in a riot when Old Houston starts moving north,” I said.

“I suppose you’re right. I guess I could commute back and forth for the lab. How will we support ourselves, though? It’s not like Ruston is advertising for professionals to come to work there.”

“I’ll put some of my money with Dad—Edie’s. We’ll build in a big enough home office so that we can work from it. And there’s always farming.”

“Ugh,” Donna grimaced.

I molded her breast in my hand. “If things get bad, it might come to that. Better a well-fed farmer than a hungry mathematician.”

Russell covered his mouth as he yawned again. “If we’re all agreed, I’m for bed.” He got to his feet.

I thought about inviting him into the bedroom with us, then caught Rita’s slight shake of her head. I knew she was a better judge than me. She would know when the time was ripe.

The three of us were soon headed for bed, too. As we were undressing, Donna turned to Rita. “I know you’re devoting your life to helping others with your psychology. But I’m afraid you’re being too optimistic and trusting. The world is changing for the worse and we’re in for a rude awakening before it’s all over.”



None of us imagined how soon that awakening would come.

Chapter Twelve

Over the next several weeks, the country remained in more or less the same shape: shaky, but still holding together, although when the stories Russell had related broke there was some localized insanity. After the webs began playing stories about second passers—they were soon known as Seconders—I called Hertz at the federal building to see if I could do some pieces of my own. I had a devil of a time tracking him down; he had left North Houston for Washington. I finally located him there and got his permission, subject to censorship by the local office.

They didn't bother me much, and Mary soon placed a couple of my stories. I sent the money to Edie with instructions to use it to begin construction of a home office. She was tickled that I was planning to move back to Ruston. I hadn't mentioned yet that there might several of us. Rita was still debating about the prospective move. With her job working in the sex clinic, she had the most to leave behind. Russell didn't mind commuting since he would stay at the lab for days at a time—something he was doing already.

I couldn't see any of us leaving Rita behind—especially me—but I was confident I would be able to convince her, especially after an incident that took place a few weeks after my arrest.

Russell was working at his lab. Donna was off shopping. I found it amusing that Donna had taken up the female habit of shopping as quickly as a hound dog snapping up a hushpuppy. When she was a man, she was a typical male. She had to be forced into a store.

Rita came home from work and dropped her briefcase by the door. She let loose an exasperated sigh.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey, Lee. What are you drinking?"

"Nothing right now, but I'll fix us one if you like."



“I like. Make it a strong one. This hasn’t been a good day.” She plopped down on the same lounge I had been using.

“What went wrong?” I got busy behind the bar concocting my favorite rum whatnots.

“One of our therapists went through the gate, and now her—his—clients are confused. I spent half the day calming people down.”

“Sorry. “ I handed her a glass and sat down beside her.

“Thanks.” She leaned her head against my shoulder. Strands of ebony black hair tickled my upper arm. “Where is Donna?”

“On the perennial female quest: shopping for new clothes. At least I think that’s what she’s after.”

She smiled. “You’re the one who needs new clothes.” She fingered the worn threads of my shirt, then chugged her drink down and held out her glass for a refill.

“Better take it easy,” I warned. “This stuff packs enough punch to make a cat chase a dog.”

“Good. That’s what I need.”

I shrugged and poured us each another. She took the next one a little slower, but not by much. Then she stood up, stretching the tension out of her muscles.

“Excuse me a minute. I want to change.” She departed for her room, unbuttoning her blouse as she went. She returned a few minutes later, wearing a short black nightgown with a row of tiny white touchtabs running down the center. It looked good on her, accenting her slim waist. It was short enough to display most of her shapely thighs.

“That’s something new, isn’t it?” I suppressed the urge to whistle. It looked great on her.

“Yup. First time I’ve worn it.” She fingered the hem of the material between two fingers. “Here, feel. It’s made out of that new velvetin.”

I bunched a fold of the cloth covering her upper thigh in my hand and rubbed it between my fingers. It felt like the thinnest and softest velvet ever devised.



“Nice.” My hand strayed from the material to the warm skin of her thigh.

She finished her drink and leaned all her weight against my side. “I’m glad to see you appreciate beautiful things, Lee.” She ran her hand up and down the soft fabric of my old pair of jeans, stopping each time just below my crotch.

I began to get an erection. The way that dress clung to Rita made it easy to imagine her naked. She curled an arm around my neck and drew my face down to hers. She parted her lips as I yielded to the pressure of her hand and brought my lips down to meet hers.

Her tongue was hungry in my mouth.

She caught my hand and brought it to her breasts. I could feel her heart pounding through the thin fabric. I slipped the straps down over her shoulders and the silky garment fell away, exposing her nipples.

I heard a car door slam and snatched my hand away as the door opened and Donna came into the room, carrying a couple of shopping bags. She spotted us on the lounge, and then her gaze took in Rita’s half-naked condition.

She lifted an eyebrow. “Am I interrupting?”

Rita laughed, making no effort to cover herself. “You know better than that. Why not join us?”

Donna didn’t need to be asked twice. She dropped her shopping bags and joined us on the lounge. Since Rita was already half undressed, we concentrated on her, kissing her face and shoulders and then slipping the nightie up over her head. She was wearing nothing at all underneath.

Donna began unbuttoning her own blouse. As usual she was braless, and I could see that her nipples were already erect with excitement. I stood up, unzipped my jeans and let them fall to the ground.

“Oops! Excuse me!”

I turned to see Russell standing in the doorway, a red flush on his cheeks. His eyes were riveted on Donna’s bare breasts.

Behind me, Rita giggled and gave Donna a small push. With a seductive smile, Donna got up and walked toward Russell, meanwhile



taking her blouse completely off and letting it fall to the floor. She was naked from the waist up and as she reached him, her fingers undid the touch tabs on his shirt and pushed it away from his chest. She ran her fingers through his chest hair, then took his face in her hands and kissed him hard on the lips.

“Russell...” Her voice was a low, seductive murmur. “You’ve been spending way too much time in the lab lately. Why not join the family?”

I saw his eyes turn dark with desire. “Why not.”

“Come on, then. Hurry!” She tugged him toward her room with one hand and ran her fingers down the clasps of her skirt with the other. It dropped away from her and floated to the floor like a discarded handkerchief.

Rita and I were cuddling together in bed when I heard voices outside my door. I suddenly realized we had been indulging ourselves for hours. It was probably well past supptime.

Rita heard too. She kissed me and then sat up. “Come on; I’m hungry. Maybe they’ve fixed something to eat.”

She was out of the door before I was. Of course, all she had to put back on was her wrap. I got into jeans and shirt and followed her out a minute later.

Russell and Donna were sitting at the table, holding hands, gazing at each other like two teenagers with their first crush. Russell glanced up as we came in and grinned. For the first time I wondered if he had been spending so much time in the lab because he felt left out of our threesome. Well, that wasn’t going to be a problem anymore.

A cheese and sausage pizza lay on the table. I helped myself to a slice, got a beer out of the fridge, and sat down by Donna. She smiled and gave me a peck on the lips, then patted my thigh affectionately, as if I had done something nice for her. I wondered if I would ever learn to understand women. Or men who had become women.

The big screen was already on. China was in the news this time, or at least pieces of it. The country had broken apart several years ago, and now various warlords controlled different areas. The old policy of one birth per family was still enforced in some places; amended in others. In this case we heard that if the first child was a girl, a family could try



a second time for a boy, but only once. Gender selection was still almost unavailable, unlike here and in other countries. Since the arrival of the gates, second (and many first) girl children were forced through to become boys. I wondered what would happen when all those boys reached adolescence with so few girls around. I could imagine ravening hordes of males invading neighboring countries in search of females a few years down the line.

“They are being ridiculous.” Donna tossed her head as she listened to a warlord explain the new policy. “What’s wrong with girl babies?”

I knew something about the reasons from my history studies. “Nothing, except that better than half the population of Asia are still Fourth Worlders, even peasantry. A son is the assurance the parents will be taken care of in their old age.”

“Don’t they even have Social Security?”

“Not as we think of it.”

“Well, I think it’s horrible. What will all those boys do when they grow up?”

“Think of the girls. They’ll certainly have a choice,” Rita said.

I shook my head. “More likely, we’ll see more sex slavery than any time since Genghis Khan went on a rampage, not to mention invasions of their neighbors. But that’s years in the future.”

Rita handed me a slice of pizza. Maybe she wanted me to shut up or change the subject. At that moment, another news bulletin flashed on the screen. Several riots were happening at once. Blacks, Hispanics and a few whites were overrunning the few federalized guards stationed at the gates, posted there to guarantee passage. As we watched, the live broadcast, female guards were taken prisoner; the male guards were tossed into the gates, then taken prisoner a moment later when they emerged as naked females. The live camera turned away from the horrifying scenes that followed. It was several moments before the city was identified: Los Angeles again. That polyglot city would riot at the drop of a hat.

“What on earth do they think they’re doing?” Rita asked.

No one said anything. The newshead answered her question. It was a citywide Fourth Worlder uprising. They were attempting to capture all the gates in the city and control entry for ransom. Food and jobs were their main demands. Food the country could manage, but I



wondered where they thought jobs would come from when they had no skills. The gap between Fourth Worlder knowledge and education and that of the rest of the population was as wide as that between a feudal baron and his serfs. The problem had been growing for decades, and there was no solution in sight. There was certainly no money for make-work jobs. The country had supported too many elderly and supposedly indigent for too many years until it went broke. We were still suffering the pains of the financial crash that resulted. Facts wouldn't stop a mob, though, and never had. It would just have to play itself out.

As we watched, the scene flicked to another city. I recognized the Denver city center immediately. Fourth Worlders had caught the mania there, too, though they didn't seem to be quite so organized as the ones in Los Angeles. That made sense, since their gangs weren't nearly so monolithic as those in the bigger city.

Rita watched the turmoil with dismayed compassion. "Those poor people. Don't they know they can't possibly win? They'll only make things worse for themselves."

"It's frustration and resentment," Donna said. "They don't have anything to lose, so it's easy to lash out."

I agreed with her. If I had been raised in the Fourth World, I might be out there rioting myself, even if I knew it wouldn't solve anything. At least I could express my rage that way.

Russell watched the riots unfold, but he wore the distracted look of someone who has just fallen in love. He kept turning away from the screen to stare at Donna.

"I thought you'd be back at the lab by now," Rita said, teasing him.

Of course, Russell took her seriously. "Problems with the instruments. Dr. Jones doesn't know as much about gravity as he thinks he does. That's why I came home early today." He turned his attention back to the screen. "Looks like riots are breaking out in a couple of cities."

As it turned out, it was more than a couple. Scenes from Baton Rouge came on the screen next. That city's population had been swollen the last few years by refugees heading north as New Orleans slowly flooded, and it looked as if every single one of them were joining in the riots. Recruits from the Church of the Gates were battling them. We saw a brief flash of Messilinda urging her followers to help the police and militia. If Baton Rouge was typical, the Gaters were turning



out to defend the gates with a will.

President Forbes used the national webworks to break in with a ten-minute exhortation, pleading for calmness and consideration. He added that he was federalizing National Guard units in the states where unrest was occurring.

“These goddamned gates!” Russell exploded. “What in hell is behind them? All they’ve caused so far is chaos.”

“And a second chance at life for a lot of old people.” Trust Rita to notice when people were helped.

“Not to mention a chance for women in oppressive countries to get out from under the yoke,” Donna added. I think she was finally realizing that females in other parts of the globe didn’t have it as easy as she did.

I chewed thoughtfully on my pizza. “Good and bad. Life’s been topsyturvy since they appeared.”

“Yeah, and whoever or whatever put the gates here must have known they would rock our civilization,” Russell said.

I disagreed. “How can you say that? Maybe this is like a game to them, like Chaos Calling.” That was a popular web game at the time. The idea was to dream up a random factor and toss it into a given situation, scoring points for the most change you could induce.

“Whatever. You’re right, Lee. We still don’t know a damn thing. That’s a good analogy, though.”

I could understand Russell frustration. The gates had turned his chosen field upside down, but even after years of study scientists couldn’t get a handle on how or why they worked.

“I still think God must have something to do with them,” Rita said.

That upset me. I stared at her. “You’re not going to become a Gater, are you?”

“No, of course not. I would never pretend I know what God is or what he or she is thinking. I don’t think aliens did it, though. Aliens advanced enough to create these gates wouldn’t be interested in our petty civilization. “

“Damn it, the gates are like an unbreakable code.” Russell ran his



hands through his hair. “Why do they only affect humans, for example? Why not chimpanzees, or Chihuahuas?”

I laughed, but Russell didn’t. “That fact alone makes me think they must be the product of an alien race. The gates are aimed specifically at humans, the only self-aware species on this planet, if you don’t count the crazy dogs and cats the gene engineers are fooling around with.”

“Maybe they found Earth and didn’t like the way humans were developing,” Donna suggested.

“In what way?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Maybe they think separate sexes are the reason behind the constant turmoil on this planet. Maybe they think we are too polarized and need to learn to handle both male and female energies. Maybe they think the gates will steer us in another direction.”

“They certainly will do that. In fact, it’s already happening.” Rita winked in Donna’s direction. “Whether that is their intent or not though, who knows?”

I turned to her. “Why do you think the race will go off in a different direction? We’re still human, after all. You told me yourself that persons changed by the gates retain the same basic drives we’ve always had.”

“So we do, but there hasn’t been enough time yet to see how it will play out. Once the majority of the population has experienced living in bodies of each gender for a time, the basic gestalt of the race is bound to change in some ways.”

“There’s a flaw in your thinking,” I said.

“What’s that, smarty?”

“For one thing, gender-changed individuals will never make up the majority of the population. Some people don’t want to change their sex no matter what benefits it offers. Almost thirty percent of the oldsters still refuse to enter a gate, even when they know they’re dying.”

Rita looked smug. “That will change over time. We’re already seeing a slight decline in their numbers. Besides, the ones who do change have had a lifetime of experience, not to mention a lifetime to accumulate



assets. They will ultimately wind up controlling our destiny. They are natural leaders, and they have the wealth to influence society.”

After a while, the news got old, especially when the ubiquitous commentators and politicians started in with their blather. We kept one screen on with the sound turned down low just in case anything new turned up. Our serious discussion gradually turned into an impromptu party to celebrate Russell’s entrance into our threesome, and then almost degenerated into an orgy. Rita, who always seemed to be the one initiating sexual experimentation, started it off by flirting with Russell. Donna was still lusting after me. And since Rita was busy elsewhere, I did my best to satisfy her.

Suddenly, all the barriers were down. Russell and Rita, Rita and me, Donna and Russell, Donna and Rita, me and Donna. The combinations kept changing. All the bedroom doors were left open as the four of us experienced sexual freedom with each other. I remember thinking how much I loved them all, and telling Rita of my discovery.

“You’re growing up,” she said. I think that’s what she said. That’s about the last thing I clearly remember.

I was the first one up the next morning, mainly because I had forgotten to take a Nohang pill. I woke up with a pounding head and a mouth that felt like a garbage disposal looks after all the recyclables have been eliminated. I stumbled out of the bedroom, leaving Donna sleeping peacefully behind me and found the pills. I shook out a double dose, thinking that if we had another night like the one just finished, someone was going to have to go to the pharmacy.

While I was alternating orange juice with coffee, I stared at the screen. No one had ever turned it off. As the Nohang gradually started to work, I suddenly realized that the mayor of North Houston was speaking. I told the volume to increase until I could hear what she was saying.

“...will not be tolerated here. The council is expected to act on my recommendation within the hour. Thank you.”

Recommendation? I wondered what she had recommended. I left the volume up, filtering out comments that were mostly repeats of what we had heard the previous evening.

My phone beeped. “Lee,” I croaked.



“Lee? Is that you?” I didn’t recognize the voice.

“Yes, it is.”

“This is Edie. Are you sick, Son? You don’t sound good.”

“Hi, Dad—Edie, I mean. No, I feel fine. Not enough sleep.” I was feeling better by then, so it wasn’t a complete falsehood.

“Good. Listen, Lee, I’ve been called back to active duty. We have to leave for El Paso this afternoon.”

“We? Is Mom—I mean Bert—going with you?”

“He wants to, but we need someone to look after the house. Are you and Rita ready to move yet?”

This was sooner than what I had anticipated, but not impossible. However...

“Uh, there may be four of us coming up. We’ve sort of formed a, well, a family.”

There was a pause, then, “Whatever you want to do, Lee. Being young and healthy again has given me a new outlook on life. I feel the same way you young people must feel now.”

We talked for a few more minutes before I broke the connection. As I clipped the phone back to my belt, Rita put her arms around me and nuzzled the back of my neck.

“Good morning.” I twisted around to meet her embrace. Russell was right behind her. He had a silly grin on his face. A vague memory of them in my bedroom together surfaced. I twitched it, and nothing happened to upset me.

“What’s going on?” Russell asked, nodding his head at the screen. Even as he spoke, the mayor appeared, replacing a shot of a mob running through the downtown streets of Old Houston. She looked tense, but her voice was firm as she announced that all licensed carriers were being drafted into the militia. It took a moment for it to register. That meant me. And Donna.



Chapter Thirteen

Rita put her arms around me and hugged me hard. I could feel tears on her lashes as they brushed my cheek. Russell and Donna stared at each other with disbelief and shock.

I patted Rita's behind. "Don't get so upset. The mayor is probably activating the militia as a precautionary measure. In fact, I heard her say so a few minutes ago."

"I don't care. I'm scared." She shivered in my arms, like a puppy that has been left out in the cold and is now trying to get warm again.

"There's no way to get out of it." When I applied for my license, militia service was the furthest thing from my mind, even though I knew it made me subject to being called up if the need ever arose. The Supreme Court legalized city and county militias shortly after Orange County in California used them to put down riots during the financial panic.

"When do you think you'll have to report?" Russell asked. He seemed bewildered by the whole thing. If it didn't pertain to sex or physics, he wasn't interested.

I shrugged, or tried to; Rita was still clinging to me, making movement difficult. "As soon as the captains get their orders. Maybe today, almost certainly by tomorrow. We'd better start packing a kit." As a soldier in the militia reserves, I was required to keep a few items on hand, like medicines, ammunition for my gun, and a few other items I couldn't bring to mind immediately. They would be listed in my phone files.

Donna got up and began making breakfast. She broke eggs into a pan, set them on the range and turned to ask, "What's that going to do to our move?"

I had forgotten all about Edie's call. "Thanks for reminding me." I turned to bring everyone up to date. "The folks called a little while ago. Dad—Edie—has been called back to active duty. He wanted us to come on up right away and keep the house open while they're gone."

"Gone? Where are they going?" Donna popped toast in the toaster as she spoke.

"El Paso."



“El Paso? Is Mexico really going to try to succeed?” Rita had a personal interest in the question. Her folks still lived in Baja, California.

“I think the government is conducting some troop movements to discourage the idea. A state can’t secede once it’s in the Union.” I didn’t think it could, anyway. Strange things were happening all over since the gates had arrived. “Anyway, we still need to take care of the house.”

“I’m not going to leave you,” Rita protested.

“I’m not going to run off and leave Donna, either,” Russell declared.

Donna looked thoughtful, but kept her thoughts to herself. I wondered what was going through her mind. She had gotten her license while she was still a man. The idea had appealed to her then. She (or he at the time) had even thought about one day serving in the militia—the old male territorial instinct again.

I disentangled myself from Rita and tried to think. I certainly didn’t want to be called up. Would I have to fight and possibly even kill someone, like that time by the gate? My stomach turned over at the thought. I could see the dead bodies at my feet again, their eyes staring sightlessly up at me.

But I would have no choice. I would be getting my orders shortly.

I spoke, trying to sound sensible. “Hey, look, guys, we were planning on moving anyway, weren’t we? This just hurries it up.”

“How can it hurry it up when we’re in the militia and can’t go anywhere?” Donna brought eggs and a plate of toast to the table.

“Well, there’s no reason Russell and Rita can’t go on up.” I looked at Russell and avoided Rita’s eyes. “Donna and I can follow as soon as things calm down.”

“Calm down? When there are riots going on all over the country?” Rita flung a hand out toward the screen. It was muted, but a map was being displayed, with little flickering flames winking beside a half dozen large cities.

“You know it won’t last long. Riots never do.” I was trying to reassure myself as much as her. I was getting scared already.



“These may be different.”

I took her back in my arms. “Sweetheart, you know the Fourth Worlders don’t have a chance. They never do. Besides, look at it this way: You couldn’t come along with us, and regardless, if I have to be away from you, I would feel a heck of a lot better knowing you’re safe in Ruston rather than this close to Old Houston.”

Russell rubbed his chin, scratching at his stubble. “Lee, I hate to admit it, but I think you’re probably right. We could be getting the home office set up and have it ready as soon as you’re released.” He sat down by Donna at the table and clasped her hand. Donna brought it to her cheek and rubbed it back and forth. If I didn’t want to go, she must be even more reluctant. After all, she was still discovering what it was like to be a woman, and she was newly in love with two men. Going off to fight in the militia was the last thing she wanted to do.

I shut up after that and let Russell convince Rita to leave with him. I was glad he thought so logically; in his position, I doubt if I could have done the same.

By the time we finished eating, we were all in agreement. Russell and Rita would leave as soon as they could after Donna and I got our call.

Russell left to see if he could find a rental truck while Donna and I got our kits, spare clothing, and other necessities ready. Rita followed me around the house like a two-year-old hanging onto her mother’s skirts. I didn’t mind a bit. I dreaded the thought of being separated from her almost as much as I dreaded the prospect of possible fighting. I knew I would miss Russell, too. He was turning into a good friend, more like a brother. You can’t share your woman with another man without caring a whole lot for him. For the first time since I had gotten up, I probed the memories of the previous night. Still no jealousy. If anything, I felt like Russell was now my brother in an expanded family, even if it didn’t have any legal basis.

It took Russell until almost noon to find something to rent, an old gas-powered moving van, larger than we really needed since there was no furniture to haul. With us carrying while the women packed, we had everything except what we might need that night loaded and ready to go by evening. Periodically, we caught snatches of news as we passed back and forth from the bedrooms to the outside.

The regular army was already on duty in many places, and federalized guard units were beginning to arrive in others, but so far neither had made an appearance in Old Houston. Here, the outnumbered police, augmented by Messilinda’s Gaters, were still on



their own and having a hard time of it. Many of the Gaters were erstwhile pacifists and not very well armed. Later, we learned that President Forbes and cohorts of his party had made a cold-blooded political decision to let the Gaters and Fourthers fight it out in Texas (excluding El Paso), Oklahoma, and Arkansas where the Gaters had rapidly become a political force to contend with in the upcoming elections.

I didn't know that then. I thought the army had temporarily dropped the ball.

I sent out for Vietnamese food from McDonald's once the loading was finished. While we were waiting for it to arrive, we all hit the showers to wash off the sweat.

The hot water felt good as it steamed away the sweat and grime. The massage Rita gave me while washing my back was pleasant, too. I had been neglecting my workouts lately and my back hurt. I pulled on an old pair of cutoffs after toweling down and left it at that. Rita put on one of my old soft long-tailed shirts and rolled up the sleeves. Before leaving the room, I pulled her to me for a kiss. She knew I liked to see her in that old shirt. Somehow it enhanced her femininity, in the same way that a pilot wearing a silk scarf looks more masculine than ever.

Rita was the one who started us eating Vietnamese cuisine. It was popular in California. McDonald's added oriental dishes to their menu at college outlets and were making a bundle. Orientals made up a high proportion of the student body ever since they began arriving in substantial numbers the century before.

We still hadn't gotten our militia call-up, but I expected it at any time. The situation in Old Houston was deteriorating rapidly. The police and Gaters were both outmatched and outnumbered by the Fourth Worlders. I wondered why the mayor was waiting to act.

My phone and Donna's beeped almost in tangent, waking me from a dream where I was being smothered by hot feather pillows. The receiver didn't hear me the first time, and I had to speak up again before the lights brightened the room. As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw the reason for my dream. I was sandwiched between Rita and Donna, our legs and arms entwined in a warm and loving pile. Russell lay on the other side of Donna. We'd decided earlier to spend what was probably our last night together in the same bed.



I reached over Rita's shoulder and plucked the phone from the caddy, knowing who was calling even before I answered. The North Houston militia was on the line. I sat up and handed Donna's phone to her so she could stifle its noise.

We were both ordered to report to a marshalling area; for us that meant the geostadium grounds of North Houston College, contingency headquarters for student carriers (I had never gotten around to notifying anyone that I had dropped out of school. There hadn't seemed to be any hurry about it, and there was always the possibility I might decide to re-enroll).

Donna and I pulled on our uniforms and boots and carried our kits out into the great room. Donna looked small and lost, and there was a barely perceptible tremble to her lower lip.

Rita and Russell hurried to pull on their own clothes and followed us outside. I tossed our gear into the trunk of my car and shut the lid.

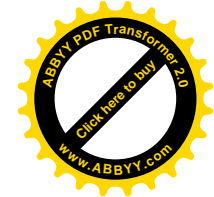
Rita hugged me in a fierce grip. "Let me know what you're doing as soon as you can. Please," she whispered. I could barely hear her.

"I will." I had no idea when that would be. I knew that as soon as we reported, a military suppressor program would be placed in our phones, requiring a code before communication outside militia channels was possible. We parted and a minute later I drove away, watching in the rear view mirror until I rounded a corner, and they disappeared from my sight.

Captain Rhymes was well organized. Our phones were adjusted and mission orders inserted as we and other students and faculty were funneled through the one geodome entrance left accessible, like sand through an hourglass.

Inside, tables were set up, loaded with mounds of sausage biscuits from McDonald's. It was a nice touch, I thought, but Medford Rhymes was an old retired Marine colonel. He probably knew exactly what he was doing. We each grabbed a handful and wandered over to seat ourselves in the stands among the troops, greeting a few here and there as we recognized classmates and professors. After we were seated, I glanced around the crowd. I saw people I would never have guessed were licensed gun carriers. And there were a few people I could think of who I was sure were licensed but who weren't there.

We were all reserve militia, of course. The regulars, the ones who were trained, were probably already on duty somewhere. I wondered what they would find for us to do. I soon found out.



Captain Rhymes glanced at his old-fashioned wristwatch and decided that it was time to begin. He stared up at us, standing with his feet planted apart and hands on hips, resplendent in a crisply pressed militia uniform like our own except for twin silver lightning streaks painted on each shoulder of his shirt. His weathered face held not even a hint of humor.

“Give me your attention.” He spoke in a deep, firm voice. Most of us shut up, but there were still a few whisperers. Abruptly all our phones screeched, a high sound like a fingernail scraping a blackboard. We shut up. I didn’t know how he made the phones make that sound, but it got results.

Rhymes waited a moment for utter silence before speaking. No greetings, no homilies.

“You people have been called in as backup for the regular militia. Those troops are already on duty along the border between Old and North cities. Our primary mission is to guard the campus of North Houston College and vital installations nearby in order to prevent damage. Our secondary mission is to preserve access to the s—the gate located here on campus.” That was the only miscue of his short statement. Almost certainly he had started to call it “the sex gate,” then reconsidered.

He continued, “Our tertiary mission is to preserve order within the confines of our assigned areas.” Here he paused for a moment to transmit a map of the area we would be responsible for to our phones.

“I have selected squad and platoon leaders based on my review of your personnel files.” At the words “squad” and “platoon,” a dozen or so phones among the crowd notified the honorees. To my surprise, my phone beeped, and said, “Jackson Stuart. squad leader, third squad, third platoon.” I glanced at Donna seated at my side. She grinned. I squirmed. I had only a vague notion of military organization, gleaned from the data given to me after I got my carrier’s license. I made a note to pull up the file and review it at the first opportunity.

Rhymes voice took on a stern note. “I am your company commander. As commander, it is my duty to remind you that you are all under military discipline. Orders from squad and platoon leaders are to be obeyed without question. Failure to do so may result in a summary court-martial. If you are convicted, you will be shot by a firing squad or such other punishment as I may direct.”



That sobered us up in a hurry. Firing squad? What had I gotten myself into? I vowed to pay very particular attention to anything said by him and whoever my superior in the third platoon was. I had no idea what kind of orders a squad leader was expected to give, but decided to save that question for another time. Right now the captain was speaking.

He pointed to entrances below the stands, out of sight from where we were sitting, and sounded off. "First platoon, muster at entrance A, second platoon, entrance B, third platoon entrance C, and fourth platoon entrance D. Now. Dismissed." A medley of phone voices sounded.

Donna and I were both assigned to the third platoon, though in different squads. We hurried down the steps, looking for entrance C. This was our first order, and I was determined to show prompt obedience.

I knew our platoon leader, though I didn't recognize him immediately; he had been a female the last time I saw him. It wasn't until after he had led us up a ramp and into the alcoves of an abandoned refreshment stand that it finally dawned on me. Then he introduced himself. Randy Grayson, formerly Randi Grayson, had been in several classes with me. I remembered her as a tall blonde girl with a plain face and slender figure. She had been an outstanding student in every class. I hoped that wasn't what they were using as criteria for leadership positions.

While she outlined our platoon's area of responsibility, I wondered what had induced her to change her sex. Illness? Accident? Impromptu bravado such as Don had shown when the gates first appeared? I decided not to ask.

Third platoon was tasked with guarding the gate located on the edge of the campus, McDonald's, a few other nearby businesses, and several blocks of rental homes on that side of the campus.

We headquartered in a row of commandeered homes on the outer perimeter of our area, not as fancy as I was used to, but probably better than most lower-ranking soldiers enjoyed. Randy kept us all together on the front yard of the home he had chosen for our headquarters for three hours, giving us rudimentary lessons in squad and platoon tactics, probably learned a few hours before from Captain Rhymes. After that, he assigned houses to each squad and told the squad leaders to report back to him in a half hour.

I had twenty-three men and women assigned to me, and had about as



much notion of what to do with them as a kid with a set of toy soldiers. About the only thing I got accomplished in that half hour was breaking up a couple of arguments about who got to sleep where. Five minutes ahead of time, I hurried back to see what the new Mr. Randy Grayson had in mind.

Not much, it turned out. He simply wanted to meet us personally and get the guard posts entered in our phones. Grayson told us to call him Randy (for some obscure reason, there were no militia ranks in the reserves below captain), then told us official guard duty would begin at 0800 (eight in the morning in civilian terms). My squad drew the third rotation, naturally, which would put on from midnight until eight the next morning. One squad rotated as reserve, on call as needed, and was to be inserted into the rotation so that each squad's hours of duty would change every couple of days.

Once our meeting was over with, I hurried back to our house, brimming with responsibility and with no clear idea of how to carry it out. For the next few hours, I tried to get acquainted with my troops and studied the military lore I had downloaded into my phone.

That first night I stood with my weapon and started at shadows and barking dogs. I damn near shot Captain Rhymes as he was making rounds before he identified himself. He didn't get angry; pleased was more like it. He spoke to me for a couple of minutes before moving on. The four hours seemed endless.

The next morning Randy called me on the carpet. Squad leaders weren't required to stand guard themselves. Their responsibility was to pick a sergeant of the guard and have him make rounds to see that everyone else was awake. Squad leaders were supposed to remain at their headquarters and stay alert for trouble. No one had told me this in the hurry to get us organized.

As it turned out, Captain Rhymes wasn't nearly the martinet he first appeared to be. He had simply wanted to establish his authority. Once that was settled, he was friendly, but maintained a definite distance and never let an opportunity pass to emphasize in little ways how important strict obedience and quick reaction to orders could be. He was a real commander; he learned all the names of my squad members before I did and began greeting us by name. He only made a round of the outposts once each night; during the day he gave classes in military tactics to the off squads. Some of the troops grumbled, but I didn't mind; it helped with the boredom. There weren't any screens in the commandeered homes, whether by accident or design I never



found out, but it made for long days and nights. What news we got was dispensed at the head of his lectures or demonstrations, or at squad and platoon briefings each day.

I wondered how soldiers could spend years doing this sort of thing between wars. Several days passed with nothing happening to break the monotony, not even a paper book to read. Then all hell broke loose.

Chapter Fourteen

Perhaps there was a reason for not letting the green troops listen to any news, but if so, it was a mistake. We might not have been taken so utterly by surprise if we had known what was happening in Old Houston. The rampaging Fourth Worlders made up a majority of the population of Old Houston, and without the army or National Guard troops there to back them up, the police and Gaters were overwhelmed, driven back, chased off, taken prisoner or simply executed after surrendering. Within a couple of days, the rioters controlled all the gates and most of the territory in the city. It might have been possible to negotiate with them had they stopped while they were ahead; it had happened before. They didn't stop, though. Flushed with success, their leaders decided to invade North Houston and capture it as well.

In fact, their invasion was well planned, with picked objectives to capture, like the power plant, police headquarters, and the university grounds. But all I knew about at the time was the battle my squad faced.

We were on guard for the four-to-midnight shift. The first indication of trouble was a popping noise in the far distance, sounding like an erratic drumbeat. It was several moments before I realized I was hearing gunfire. I considered reporting the noise to Randy, but decided against it, assuming he could hear it as well as me. I didn't stop to think that he might be sleeping. The other squad and platoon leaders were as inexperienced as me and made the same mistake.

Soon a shout came in over my phone, and I realized trouble was brewing.

"Movement, post five!"



“Movement, post seven!”

I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. All I could think of was to get in touch with the sergeant of the guard. I got his circuit up. “Bill? Bill?”

There was no answer. By then, he was already dead. A rattle of gunfire overrode the distant drumming, and I heard someone shouting, “We’re being hit! Danny—ugghh.” His voice faded away.

Fear knifed through me and my mind froze. It took a moment to remember what I was supposed to do. The reserve squad! They were there for backup and on duty with Randy. My hands were shaking so hard that it took me three tries to get the right circuit.

“Randy, squad three! We’re under attack!”

“Get on it,” he said. “Stay in contact and report back. I’ll have the reserves ready.”

He should have already been sending the reserve squad forward, but he was no more a soldier than I was. I thumbed the safety off my rifle, checked to see that my little handgun was in its holster and ran out the door. Posts five and seven were the only ones which had reported in, but loud sharp cracks and muzzle flashes told me that at least some of the other guard posts were in action. Not knowing what else to do, I ran toward five, a house on the corner of one of the blocks of homes.

I was across the street, running upright, when a shadowy figure emerged from around the corner of the house and stumbled in my direction. I skidded to a halt and saw the figure fall to the ground as if pole-axed. Moonlight illuminated four or five more. One stopped, aimed a pistol point-blank at the prone figure and fired twice. All that saved me was the light from the full moon. I could see that they weren’t militia.

I raised my rifle and fired in a blind panic, emptying a whole clip. One man fell while the others dropped to the earth seeking cover. I ran back the way I had come, got behind a house across the street and began running through the backyard parallel to the street, looking for any members of my squad. Never had I felt so completely alone.

I collided with someone as I broke through a hedge into the next yard. I was grappling him to the ground when I recognized his face. It was one of my guards. I pulled him down beside me behind the hedge.



“Gil, where is everyone?” More gunfire erupted, all up and down the street.

“Don’t know. Francis is dead. What do we do now?”

Randy’s voice came over my phone just then. “Third squad, report!”

I took a deep breath. “I have at least two dead. I think five, six, and seven have had it. I’m at, uh, nine, I think. One survivor here.”

“They’re trying to roll you up from the end. Pull your men back toward the higher-numbered posts and try to make a stand. Reserve squad is on the way.”

Higher numbered? With two guards per post we only had twelve. Were they all gone already?

“Acknowledged!” I touched Gil on the shoulder. “Come on. Back this way.”

We ran hunched over. I heard whipping noises passing scant inches above my head as we angled for the alley. I peeked from behind a garage, saw no one in sight and began running, trying to remember to count houses so that we could stop at each post. Ten was deserted. I picked up the guards at eleven, and we joined the other two at twelve. All the time, the crackle of gunfire rose and fell, coming in erratic waves of sound. I arranged us in a semblance of a firing line behind a rock garden and gazebo, and reported back to Randy.

“We’re at twelve. I have five effectives.”

“Okay, hold tight there. You’ll have company in a moment. Remember the password.”

The password! My mind groped for the answer. Boots stamped the pavement behind us, and I shouted it out into the dark. I raised my rifle, ready to fire if the proper response didn’t come back. When it did, I remembered to breath again.

The reserve squad spread out on either side of us in time to respond to a burst of gunfire. When I tried to fire back, all I got was a click of the firing pin. I had never replaced the empty clip.

I’ve tried my best to forget what happened during the next day or two. I found out that I’m not a brave person, nor a good leader, either. As soon as Captain Rhymes took command of the situation, we began to



rout the rioters, but that didn't keep my gut from twisting with fear every time he ordered an advance, nor did it stop me from shivering as I relayed his or Randy's orders to my squad members, knowing that death lurked in every sentence.

I vomited twice as we pushed back up the street and found the bodies of men and women I had been talking to only hours before lying where they had fallen when their posts were captured. We found only two more of my squad alive; a man and woman who had holed up in the top floor of a two-story home and fought from there.

Seeing the bodies sprawled like bloody broken dolls enraged my fellow militia members, turning them into merciless killers. I was torn with worry about Donna. If she had been killed, I wasn't sure I would want to live.

Captain Rhymes ran by once. He halted for a moment to point out a center of resistance he wanted attacked, then went on. I shouted at his back, thinking he must know if Donna was still alive. He went on without answering, ducking and weaving.

Our company contained the invaders and then slowly enveloped them with flanking attacks orchestrated by Rhymes. By midmorning we had them in a pocket where they couldn't retreat. Most of them surrendered, leaving only a few holdouts. Rhymes called in a police helicopter with sound bombs. It only took one to finish them off. My ears hurt for days afterward.

It was late afternoon, nearing dusk, before I was able to find out anything about Donna, even though she was part of the militia company.

Half the company was relieved, third and fourth squad, while the rest remained on alert in case of another incursion. We could still hear fighting not too far away. I ordered the four men I had left to replenish their ammunition and to get something to eat, then scooped up some more clips for my rifle (I had never fired the pistol) and went looking, dreading what I might find.

She wasn't with the relieved squads. I ran back toward the front, my heart trying to jump out of my throat. A few inquiries told me she wasn't on duty, either.

"Try the treatment area. If she's not there, check the morgue," Dr. Rawlings, one of my old professors, suggested, his voice ragged with exhaustion. His beard was matted with blood, whether his own or his patients' I couldn't say.



Oh, Lord, no.

I stood there, stunned, rifle drooping from my hand. “What, I mean, where...” I couldn’t say it.

“The geodome.” Rawlings pointed, seeing my confusion. I left at a fast walk, without even a thank you. Soon I began to trot, then run. I was gasping for breath by the time the white, section-walled dome came into sight.

I grabbed the first medic I spotted standing among a row of cots. After calming me down, he led me to where Donna lay. Her face was as white as paste.

Fear gripped my heart and tears sprang to my eyes, blurring my vision. I leaned over Donna. She was motionless with her eyes closed. I reached out to touch her face. She blinked, and focused her gaze on me.

“Lee? Is that really you?” She reached up to touch me.

“Yes, yes,” I sobbed, openly and unashamed. Donna sighed, withdrew her hand and closed her eyes again. I looked at the medic, lifting my eyebrows in an unspoken question. He drew me a short distance away.

“She’ll be okay. She’s in shock. I gave her a shot a few minutes ago.”

“What happened?”

“There was some close-in fighting in her squad. She was forced to shoot someone she knew, an old girlfriend who decided to help the Fourth Worlders.”

“God damn it!” I had never stopped to think after the militia call-up that some of the people of North Houston would actually take the side of the Fourth Worlders. But it happened.

I stayed at Donna’s side until she slipped into a deep sleep from the shot. I kept shifting my eyes away from draped figures lying on the turf in another section of the geodome. They didn’t look big enough to be human, but I knew they were.

Our company didn’t see any more action, but we were held ready for



two more days until the army arrived and began pushing into Old Houston. Once they regained control, we were discharged. I called Rita the minute the militia program was purged from my phone and told her that we were fine and would be home as soon as we could get there.

I had to wait around one more day until Donna was discharged from the makeshift hospital. I kept her company when she wasn't sleeping, trying to reassure her that she had done only what she had to.

"It doesn't matter," she told me. "I'm going to turn in my license. I'll never forget how Mikka looked at me before she died. I didn't even know it was her until after I shot her. It was awful."

She burst into tears and clung to me like a hurt child. I felt helpless, but promised myself that I would spend as much time as I could with her when we got home.

We left around noon. Smoke was still rising from the boundary line between North and Old Houston where we had fought, and bigger palls of smoke darkened the sky farther south. I took one long look at the twin cities, trying to imagine the damage, then left them behind and concentrated on getting us away from there. I didn't think I would want to go back, ever.

There was a wild reunion after we arrived, tempered only by Donna's still evident depression. Rita and Russell took turns hugging and kissing us as if we had come back from the dead. In a sense, I suppose we had. Between embraces, I looked askance at the old homestead. My parents had done so much remodeling I hardly recognized it. The den had been expanded into a great room and more loungers and chairs moved in, placed so as not to block the lower portions of the shelves filled with Grandpa's old books. An extra wall screen had been hung on one wall, replacing a portion of shelves there.

As soon as I could get my breath back from Russell's embrace and back pounding, I held up my hands. "Hey, let us go wash some of the crud off, Okay?"

Donna and Russell headed into a one room, and I made tracks for another, peeling off my clothes as I went. Rita followed me inside and right into the shower. For one of the few times in my life, I didn't do anything about an erection except ignore it until it went away. I was too anxious to get back outside so we could all be together. I didn't want to think about sex, regardless of what my body was telling me.



Yet once we were all together I found it difficult to talk about the action we'd seen. I avoided answering questions, and so did Donna.

That's when Russell and Rita mixed an extra-large pitcher of drinks. Rita brought a brim-full mug to the lounge where I sat with my legs outstretched and put it into my hand. I drained half of it in one long gulp. Whew!

It took two drinks before we all began to settle down. Finally, Russell asked, "What's the latest in the cities that you know of? Does it jibe with what we've been hearing?"

I laughed out loud, knowing he was referring to Houston. "Are you kidding? We haven't heard a thing except rumors since we were mobilized. The only thing we know for sure is what took place right near the campus."

"Was there any damage there?"

"None to the school that I know of."

"Good. That's what the news was saying, but I wanted to be sure. We lost contact for two days while the power was out there. We knew what was happening in the rest of the country, but the only thing coming in from the cities was from individuals so it was hard to get a complete picture."

"So what's happening?" Donna and I asked the question simultaneously.

Russell got up and poured more drinks before answering. "Most of the rioting has been put down, and the army is busy turning things back over to locals. The government is sending a lot of troops to Mexico. A lot of Fourth Worlders and Gaters died. Congress is calling for an investigation of President Forbes because of his delay in sending troops to our area. There's some talk of impeachment, but the political commentators say there aren't nearly enough votes to make it stick."

I could have told him that. Forbes' party held a majority of votes, and I doubted either of the other parties could agree on whether the sun would rise the next morning.

"What about the markets?" The thought came suddenly. I had spent a lot of my credit on remodeling this place.



Rita answered, knowing Russell never paid attention to his own finances, let alone the rest of the world. "The stock market is way down, almost by half. The webmarket fell the first couple of days after the riots started, but it's back up now."

That bit of news made me feel better. Grandpa may have been old, but so far as the web went he had been as modern as kid playing virtual batman. Most of the credit my annuity earned came from the web.

Rita continued, "As soon as you get around to checking the backlog on your phone, you'll find a message there from Mary. She wants another story on Messilinda soonest."

"What kind of story?"

"The church's reaction to all the casualties they suffered during the riots. And another on the definitive Gater position on Seconders."

"Okay, I'll start trying to arrange it tomorrow

"We will, you mean." Rita pinched my thigh. Oh, well.

I turned back to Russell. Since he had elected himself bartender, I held out my glass for a refill. While he was pouring, I asked, "What about the rest of the world?"

He shrugged. "Same as usual. Every country is still in turmoil over the gates. In South America, they've taken to rounding up any Seconders they can find. No one seems to know what they're going to do with them. In the parts of Asia that aren't Muslim, they're worshipping them. In the Mideast, anyone who emerges as a woman is thrown into a harem. The femweb is calling for a boycott of exports from there. The Buddhist leadership has decided that the gates represent another aspect of the wheel of life. In this country, the Seconders are being watched and monitored. They're still claiming they don't know anything. Anyway, the world is split about evenly; half the people think aliens brought the gates, the other half blame them on God."

"Religion!" I spat out the word.

That drew a rebuke from Rita.

"People have to have hope, Lee. Not everyone can be as strong-minded as you."



I nodded, even though I have never understood how so many people are able to rationalize the myriad contradictions the various religions of the world present. That mind-set was incomprehensible to me, and I never considered myself to be particularly strong-minded.

“What else?” I asked.

“There are still several wars going on, but I guess that’s nothing unusual.”

“So long as I don’t have to fight.” I wasn’t at all sure I could go through anything like that again.

“We’re not at war with anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about, unless you want to count Mexico. There’s been some fighting there, but the army is trying to keep it quiet.”

“Haven’t they learned yet?”

“That kind of mentality never learns,” Rita said. “If there were only a few gates, they would keep them surrounded, cover them up and make anyone who ever saw one take an oath of secrecy never to tell on pain of death.”

“Speaking of gates, have you learned anything more about them. Anything at all?”

“Not a blasted thing.” Frustration showed on Russell’s face. “There they sit, an open challenge to our best minds, and we don’t know any more about them than we ever did.”

He took a sip of his drink, looking thoughtful. “One good thing, trying to figure them out is generating a lot of serious thinking and speculation into new areas. They are forcing us to think about possibilities we would have dismissed as impossible a few years ago. As a matter of fact, I’ve come up with a couple of ideas I want to explore. Rita is interested in them, too.”

“Rita?” I turned and stared at her. “What do you know about physics?”

“Not much, but one or two of his ideas might have implications for psychology, or sociology, to be more accurate.”

“What are they?” I asked, looking from one to another. I was intrigued.



“Too soon to talk,” Rita said. “Let it be for now. I will say, if even one of them pans out, it might do something for the Fourth World problem.”

“Really? That would be wonderful!” Donna’s face brightened for the first time that evening. She grabbed Russell and kissed him.

Despite our questions, Russell wouldn’t give us a hint and Rita clammed up, too. It was as if they were afraid of jinxing the idea. We let it be, but I realized for the first time that Russell truly was brilliant.

It’s a good thing someone invented Nohang pills, otherwise I’m afraid we would all have fallen into a drunken stupor in the great room before the evening’s celebration really got started. As is, we took enough to keep a buzz going while enjoying our drinks and letting our hair down.

When we did finally call it a night, Donna retreated into a bedroom and pointedly closed the door. We understood. She needed some time to be alone. Russell would probably have come to bed with Rita and me, but the NHU web came back online. He took some extra Nohang and stayed up discussing developments with his colleagues, as happy as a ten-year-old boy with a new pellet rifle.

I’d already found out it was true that combat veterans don’t like to talk about their experiences. That night I discovered another rumor about war was true: there’s nothing like being shot at to kick up the old biological urge. Rita and I didn’t stop our frenzied lovemaking until near daylight.

Chapter Fifteen

I managed to arrange another interview with Messilinda on Wednesday of the next week—a coup that made Mary happy. I wasn’t that enthused myself, because Messilinda insisted that we talk in person at a gate near the boundary of North and Old Houston. Mary told me that Messilinda wouldn’t say why, but I figured she probably intended to preach a sermon about unity, charity, and the need for brotherly love.

Such a speech was needed, of course. The destruction caused by the



riots in so many cities finally caused Congress and President Forbes to consider amending the nation's generation-long love affair with fiscal conservatism and self-responsibility. While those policies worked well for the middle and upper class, they only stimulated the development of an enlarged Fourth World population.

The president didn't propose going back to exorbitant handouts, the mistake politicians made in the twentieth century. Instead, he made some sensible recommendations.

Basically, Forbes proposed a minimum national medical care system for everyone, using the old veteran's medical facilities as a base for those with no money. In addition, he suggested constructing minimum shelters for the homeless nationwide, hiring them (under professional supervision) to do the construction. The old food stamp scandals had been so ugly that he didn't dare bring those back, but he did propose handouts of basic foodstuffs purchased by the government for the unemployed and those earning a minimum wage.

It wasn't all that much, but it was a hell of a lot better than what the Fourth Worlders had been getting the last decade or two so no one expected them to complain. The national sales tax was raised a half percentage point to keep the budget within the constrictions of the thirty-ninth amendment.

Messilinda threw the weight of the Church of the Gates behind these proposals and soon after the independent party fell in behind the president, too. That was probably the result of some closed-door conferences. The country must have been close to collapse during the riots for such a radical change in policy to be proposed almost overnight.

Rita was pleased with the president's proposal after we watched a network program on the details. With her generous heart, she'd always been concerned about caring for whoever was hurting and the horror of the riots had only made her more committed to helping those in need.

"I never thought any good could possibly have resulted from all that horror," she whispered as she cuddled against me in the lounge. "I hope it will all come to pass. If the Fourth Worlders know they can count on the basic minimum of services, I believe more of them will begin thinking of education and working rather than fighting and stealing and drugs."

"I think so, too," Donna agreed. "We went too far once and killed most incentive to work, but this sounds about right to me. Enough



services so that they don't go hungry or without some kind of shelter; then they will know the rest of the country cares, but not enough to make it worthwhile to stay home and loaf."

I hoped it would work out, and Rita wouldn't be disappointed. Hell, if I thought it would help, I would join her in prayer. Once in awhile, Rita talked about her clients. Many of them had come up from the Fourth World and were having troubles adjusting. I was always amazed at the obstacles they had to overcome to get where they were. Had I been born into those circumstances, I don't know whether I could have done what they accomplished.

The next day Rita and I found ourselves watching Messilinda as she preached to a large crowd. She was standing on a stage at the bottom of a low hill with the shining green gate immediately behind her. A crowd of people clustered on the hill and looked down into a natural amphitheatre. It was an appropriate stage setting for her sermon. She stood before a green podium shaped like a miniature gate, the dramatic backdrop making her clearly visible in her long white robe.

Naturally, she'd attracted a herd of reporters, too. They were scattered through the throng, some concentrating on her, others going for individual reactions. We stayed on the outskirts while we recorded. I didn't want to get caught up in the crush that was sure to come after she finished speaking.

Messilinda had perfected her technique since I saw her last. Her white robe was sculpted onto her superb figure like a second skin, revealing her sensuous body yet covering her at the same time. She was a vision of suppressed sexuality that had most of the men in the crowd drooling.

She kept her voice low and intimate, relying on the amplifiers to bring her words to the people. The effect was electric; it was as if she were speaking to you one-on-one. Lifting her hands to heaven, she endorsed President Forbes' program, giving God the credit for inspiring him. Her tone grew serious as she reminded her audience of the wonderful gifts of new life and health that came from the gates—a gift of divine love from the Supreme Being. As she spoke, she seemed to be looking at each one of us in turn, drawing us closer to her.

"Always remember, my friends, what a great gift you have received and be thankful to your Creator." Messilinda lifted her hands again in a kind of benediction, and the crowd cheered. She gestured for silence, and I thought she was about to start praying. As she opened



her mouth, I heard a sharp crack, and a red splotch blossomed like an ugly weed above her left breast.

The impact of the high-velocity slug threw her off the stage and straight into the invisible portal of the gate. She blinked out of existence like a diver plunging into the water from a backward dive.

For a moment we all sat frozen in shock. Then the screams and shouts started. The crowd surged forward in a pandemonium of noise and confusion, trying to comprehend what had happened. She was gone in the blink of an eye, and quite a few of the flock didn't realize at first that she had been shot.

"Oh, no!" Rita gasped beside me. Messilinda's shooting and disappearance into the gate was starting a stampede. People were running towards the stage to see what had happened to her. From our vantage point far back in the crowd, I could see that those further back were pressing those in front of the crowd inexorably toward the gate. Those who were almost there screamed, but their voices were lost in the general uproar. As they were pushed into the gate, they disappeared.

As those behind them begin to realize what was happening they started fighting to avoid being shoved forward themselves. Screams and yells drowned out any possibility of telling where the shot had come from. The assassin was never caught.

We couldn't see what was going on behind the gate, but the tapes later showed naked young men and women emerging from the other side as fast as the panicked crowd pushed them through the front entrance. In a stroke of luck for the newscasts, there were several 'porters on the far side of the gate, waiting to record the expressions of the faithful who intended to enter after Messilinda's prayer.

Later I saw the tape where Messilinda came out the other side as a young male with a muscled nude body and a bewildered look on his face. The 'porters closed around him at once, hiding him from sight. All that the crowd saw was an occasional glimpse of the top of his head. Amazingly, Messilinda had beaten the odds the first time by making it through the gate at an advanced age, and now she'd done it again by becoming a Second.

Meanwhile, Rita and I were both in shock, staring at each other. Rita went pale and grabbed hold of me, clutching so tight that I found it hard to breath. I held her, neither of us saying anything, until police began dispersing the crowd.



Finally, we were standing alone on the hillside, looking down on the flashing lights of the police cars around the gate, glad we had stayed away from the front of the crowd. I shuddered to think what would happen if I were a woman and Rita a male. "Come on," I said. "There's nothing else here for us."

I took her hand and we walked back to my car and drove away.

When we got home, Russell and Donna were seated in front of the great room screens, watching the news reports of the shooting. I imagine the gunman was surprised when his attempt to kill Messilinda only turned her back into a male again.

Russell looked up with a grin as we came in the door. "Hey, glad to see y'all! We were hoping you hadn't gotten caught up in that crowd."

We were seeing a lot more of Russell now that he was an active part of our lovemaking. Besides that, he was spending long hours in our new study room working on his doctorate and his and Rita's project, whatever that was. He wanted very badly to begin commuting back to the lab at NHU occasionally, but the campus was still closed.

"No problem. We were on the outskirts. Anything new?" Rita and I hadn't even plugged in a phone on the drive back.

"Mostly they're running the shooting scene over and over. Messilinda isn't giving out any interviews."

Of course not. None of the Seconders ever gave interviews. Our scheduled interview had been cancelled, of course. I wondered how her shooting and rejuvenation as a man would affect the faith of the Gaters. As I recalled, the last time an evangelist had died and been resurrected, it had sent the world into a two-thousand-year uproar. I hoped the reaction would be more rational this time. There were plenty of other interviews and commentary, though. Mostly it was wild speculation and tabweb junk.

My phone beeped. I plugged into the small screen. Mary Wright's face came into focus. Her hair was in its usual tangle, and she was more agitated than usual.

"Lee! There you are! Listen, I need an eyewitness account immediately. You did see it, didn't you?" There was no need for her to say what she was talking about. It was about the only subject going at the moment.



“I didn’t see much. You would probably be better off getting a story from someone who was close in or behind the gate when she—he came out.”

“Negative. I’ve already put out teasers about the interview you had scheduled before all this happened. It has to have your name and picture with it. God, what a story!”

I let her talk me into it. Somehow, I had become the expert on Messilinda and the Church of the Gates.

“’scuse me guys. I can’t talk for a little while. Mary wants a story right now.” I used the small screen to pull up my files on the subject in order to jog my memory, and wrote my story while taking occasional peeks at the big screen for the latest updates. It only took an hour or so to finish. I sent it off and closed down the files.

Everyone was discussing what the attempted assassination meant. While no one was certain if the bullet had actually killed her before she went flying through the gate, Messilinda’s gender change was sensational enough, and that, plus the fact that she had survived a second passage through a gate was the subject of our talk. We didn’t reach any concrete conclusions, nor did we have to. An hour later Messilinda (or Messler Scribner—she returned to her original name) gave out a brief statement.

He appeared on screen looking directly into the cameras with those startlingly beautiful emerald eyes I remembered so well. I could see that something had changed. Despite his good looks and youthful appearance, his determined expression revealed a mature individual who knew his own mind and was about to act on his beliefs.

“This will be my first and only statement.” He paused for a heartbeat, then continued. “Like every other person who has passed through a gate twice, I have no memory of the experience. I have no new information to impart on that subject. As for my future plans, I now wish to be left alone. Therefore, I am resigning as the leader of the Church of the Gates, effective immediately. I am not renouncing the church, nor am I endorsing it. My position is entirely neutral. I am leaving for my home. I will have nothing further to say on any subject. Thank you.” He turned abruptly and hurried away, flanked by a contingent of bodyguards.

“Well, so much for that.” Rita seemed saddened by his words. She wasn’t a Gater, but she still wanted to believe the gates were a part of some higher power’s plan for humanity.



“Damn!” Russell cursed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“The same old thing. Every Secnder claims not to remember anything that might have happened while inside the gate. Something does happen, though. Those people come out changed. If we had even an inkling of what’s in their minds, it might give us a handle on what the gates are, even if we can’t do anything about them.”

“Maybe they’ve been turned into gods,” Donna said.

That struck me as a bizarre idea. Even if it were true and they were new gods, they certainly didn’t seem inclined to influence earthly affairs one way or another.

“The psychologists aren’t getting much, either,” Rita said. “They act perfectly normal. With one exception, that is.”

I knew what she was talking about. I was still spending a lot of time poring over the data on the gates. “They don’t seem to be as interested in sex as they were before.”

“That depends.” An elfish smile crossed Rita’s face.

“On what?” What had I missed?

“Sorry, I meant to tell you yesterday, and it slipped my mind. While I was online with the department, we got a report from a source who doesn’t want to be named.”

“Why not? And what did he find out?”

“He recognized the profiles of a couple of Seconders, a man and woman, who had gotten together. While they were out, he wired their house, illegally, of course. They are certainly still interested. More so, if anything.”

“Be damned,” Russell said. “I’ll bet the NSC already knew about it, though; they won’t give out anything without a court order.”

“Whatever. I don’t think it’s wise to draw any conclusions from one case, but it will be interesting to watch and see if any other Seconders get together. If I found a pair, I’d be tempted to bug them myself, out of curiosity.”



“You and me, both,” Russell said. “Maybe that’s the best way to study the gates: indirectly.”

“It’s the only way, so far,” Rita reminded him.

And it was.

With Messler Scribner’s withdrawal from the Church of the Gates, the movement topped out and began a slow, gradual decline. It didn’t stop other cults from growing up around the gates, though, everything from Satanism to tree-huggers to Suiciders, either individuals or as organized clubs.

The Suiciders were sensational news for a while. It was an easy way to go, they claimed. Walk through the gate, come around to the other side, walk through again and disappear forever. No fuss, no muss, no bother. Whether it was really an easy method of self-destruction was debatable, though. No one knew what happened to those who didn’t make it through the gates. I did a story on the subject for Mary, which she sold with no problem. I emphasized the fact that so far, no Suicider had ever come out as a Seconder, and less than half even managed the first passage. I suggested that perhaps they belonged in a subcategory of those who never came back even the first time.

Their movement had an unexpected side effect. Almost immediately, legislators began proposing the gates as a humane method of execution. They were opposed by those groups who believed that the vanished went on to a better life elsewhere. They didn’t want criminals cluttering up their supposed heaven. That motivated me to write my first attempt at humor, and Mary said it went over fairly well.

The NHU physical plant re-opened and Russell began traveling back and forth, staying away several days in some cases before coming home to rest and get re-acquainted with the family.

Rita went with him now and then, but rarely stayed the night. With Russell gone, I was left with two beautiful women. Most of the time it was a male paradise, living with two loving, accommodating women, but sometimes Donna simply wore me out. She’d fully accepted the fact of her woman’s body and she couldn’t seem to get enough of me—or Russell. I looked forward to his return so I could get some rest.

Pending Edie and Bert’s arrival back home, we had the use of the huge old mattresses in the master bedroom and sometimes we all



piled in there together. That was always fun. When I was temporarily down for the count, all it took was watching the girls go at it to get me back in the game.

Despite Messilinda's attempted assassination, President Forbes' legislation passed both houses of Congress, and he signed it into law. Construction soon began on simple single and family housing units. It was all controlled at the local level, with state delegations forming an oversight committee to root out fraud or abuse. No one wanted a repetition of the old days where a sore toe might earn years of government benefits.

Rita volunteered for one of the local committees and began spending some of her time at the single small construction and food-distributing center in Ruston. She always returned home with a big smile on her face. I was happy for her. Her generous spirit finally had an outlet. One day, she came home almost bubbling with pleasure.

"Hey, girl, you look as happy as I did the day I discovered sex!" Donna called to her from the kitchen, where she was making sandwiches for supper.

"Oh, I am! Guess what? Construction of the shelter is almost finished. We'll be having an open house this weekend, and I want you all to come!"

"Wonderful!" Donna said. "We'll be there, for certain."

"Great. Oh, I hope Russ is home then. I want him to come see."

"Come see what?" Russell closed the door behind him and set his overnight bag on the floor.

Rita told him her news, while pushing him down on a lounge and adding a hug and a kiss.

"That's great. I've got some news, too. Let me get cleaned up and have something to eat, and I'll spill it."

Donna volunteered to help him with his shower, and Rita and I finished fixing some sandwiches.

He re-emerged in an old robe and wolfed down sandwiches as if he hadn't eaten in three days. Sometimes he did forget to eat when he was really involved at the lab. He got up and emptied the crumbs from



his plate, then poured himself a drink, an anticipatory grin on his face like a boy getting ready to dig into a cookie jar.

“Okay, here it is. We’ve known about Seconders for some time, of course. Now we have someone who’s made it through the third time. And fourth. And fifth, and—”

“Whoa!” I exclaimed. “Back up and tell it in detail. When and where did all this happen?”

He grinned at me. “You may have been responsible for it, Lee, in a small way.”

“What! “ I couldn’t imagine how I would have had anything to do with it.

Russell grinned some more. “You remember that piece you did on the Suiciders? It gave some of the big boys ideas. Of course, the Suiciders never come back, but how about if a Secnder tried going through again?”

“I take it one did.” Rita gripped my hand.

“Yeah. Remember old Doc Renfrow? Well, even after the NSC finally released him, they kept him under surveillance. I suspect they are watching most of the Seconders. Anyway, he was in an auto accident a few weeks ago and suffered a terrible head injury. He was given no chance to live, and lacking any other option, his family chose to put him through a gate for the third time. He came out healthy, and back in a young male body.” Russell stopped to take a big gulp of his drink.

Donna looked impatient. “Wait a minute. You said something about a fourth and fifth time. How did that happen?”

Russell turned serious. “Look, this can’t go any further than this room. It came in to the physweb in a roundabout fashion, and someone could be in big-time trouble if the NSC discovers that we know. Anyway, they took Renfrow into protective custody again and studied him for a week or two. Same deal. He didn’t remember anything, and there were no detectable changes from the human form. Apparently, one of big boys got so frustrated after all the tests were completed that he convinced the other members of the team to shove him through a gate again to see what would happen.”

“And?”

“He came out again. And again. And again, changing gender each



time.”

It took me a moment to grasp the implications. Each time through the gate you would become young again.

“Immortality. Effective immortality.”

Rita’s iron-tight grip on my hand relaxed. “Only if you make it through a gate the second time.”

“Oh!” I felt stupid. In my excitement, I had forgotten that point. Then I deflated further. I wasn’t about to go through a gate even once, so what did it mean to me?

“It will make a great story anyway,” she said.

“Yeah, if I can do it without revealing Russell’s source or getting that damned Horst guy down on me again.”

“Cheer up!” Russell drained his glass. “I also heard that Renfrow’s family is getting an injunction. They will probably have to let him loose before long. Even if they don’t, someone in his family will leak the news.”

“I wonder if any of us will ever live long enough to find out the purpose behind all this.”

“I surely hope so,” Russell said. “And guess who will get the first opportunity?” He looked at Donna.

“Why me? Oh!”

“Yup, you. When we get old, the rest of us will only be going in for the first time. You’ll be on your second go-round.” He spoke as if we’d already decided to grow old together, then go through the gates for a rejuvenation and not incidentally, a sex change. I decided to let it be and not provoke an argument. Old age was a long time off, after all.

Rita and I slept together by ourselves that night. It had been a noteworthy day. It seemed to make Rita especially passionate during our lovemaking. At least that’s what I thought it was until she told me the real reason.



During our second bout of foreplay, she held my head in a tender embrace while I was giving my devoted attention to her breasts, holding and caressing one while I sucked and nuzzled and teased the nipple of the other. Her breathing became faster and faster until finally she took her hand from my neck and drew me over her. She guided me inside and wrapped her arms and legs around me. I gazed down at her sweet face and began kissing her flushed cheeks, the tip of her nose, and finally her soft lips, while beginning to make those first slow, sensuous movements that would arouse her to renewed passion. She pressed me against her and opened her eyes.

“I love you.” She raised her hips to meet my slow thrusts.

“I love you, too,” I whispered.

“Is there room for three?”

Huh? Did she want one of the others in bed with us now? I stopped moving. If that was what she wanted, I wouldn’t object, though I would have preferred to finish what I was doing first.

She giggled and pulled my lips down to the hollow of her throat, knowing I had misinterpreted her question. “My implant runs out in a week or two. Should I renew it?”

I moved my lips over the soft skin of her neck. We had been talking about it before the gates appeared, but dropped the idea because of the disruption they caused. Now, though, the country seemed to be settling down. Why not?

I brushed a damp curl off her forehead. “I hope it’s a girl. If it is, I want her to look just like you.”

If it weren’t for the implant, we surely would have conceived that night.

Chapter Sixteen

Three days later the story about Renfrow broke. The tabwebs had a fit with it. So did the regular webworks and news networks. There was such a groundswell of interest and enthusiasm over the prospect of immortality that Congress, paying attention to the polls, passed a bill



appropriating even more money for gate study. They also passed a resolution urging all Seconders to cooperate in the studies.

Those who wanted to die naturally found themselves in a minority. General public opinion held that if enough money and scientists were hurled into the research to find out why so few individuals were able to make a second passage through the gates, the problem was certain to be solved.

The scientists, of course, weren't certain at all. We heard about their opinions from Russell.

It was a great story and held the public interest for weeks. Unfortunately, I was still under Horst's injunction not to write anything about Seconders, let alone those who went through a third time. I got really annoyed and spent some credits on a good lawyer. He had a federal judge in his pocket, but even so, it took three days before Horst capitulated. Bureaucracy can sometimes be as mindless and stupid as a flatworm.

Once I got my final release from the NSC, I used Russell's source (without naming names, of course) to get in on the action. Fortunately, with Mary's help, my pieces had no trouble selling.

By this time, I was really enjoying my career as a webporter, and seemed to have found my niche writing offbeat news about the gates. After the hoorah about the Renfrew began to die down, I started using my time to search out sociological and psychological trends resulting from the presence of the gates on earth. Those 'ports took Rita and me on several trips together. She was back in school, working on her doctorate in psychology, but she still had time to accompany me on my trips, which often related to her doctoral research.

I still didn't like traveling and hated to fly. I presented this problem to Mary. She cussed and pulled her hair, but set me up with some stringers in other parts of the country, and gave me access to a truly wizard graphics technician. He could make an interview from a thousand miles away look as if it were taking place in the next room.

One of the major stories I did (with Rita's invaluable help—she put me in touch with sources from her work as a sex therapist) was on the sudden drop in the birthrate. I was ahead of everyone else on this one, and it made me a bundle. I didn't even have to pay a commission to a stringer.

The gates had been around for almost three years when I broke the story. I already had it on file, and had for weeks, for the simple reason



that I trusted Rita's intuition.

"The birth rate is about due to start dropping," she said to me one day as we were driving back from Dallas, not one of my favorite trips. There was no good way to get from there to Ruston without taking a few secondary roads.

"Why do you say that?" I glanced over at her. She was doing the driving.

"Can't you guess?"

I thought about it. Nothing obvious came to mind. "No."

"Simple. First, most of the individuals who have gone through the gates have been older, but a substantial minority of younger people has gone through, too. Some were young but suffering with debilitating diseases or crippled in accidents. Others were forced through during the riots. And a few simply thought it would be exciting to change sex."

"So?" I still didn't get it.

"First of all, the older people aren't going to be interested in having children. They've already done the family thing. And how many of the men-turned-into-women are going to want to get pregnant and have a baby? How about you? Suppose you had been forced through a gate? Would you consider the idea?" She turned her head and gave me a know-it-all smile.

"No." I didn't even have to think about that one.

"See? Let's face it; all those new women still retain a male outlook. They've all either heard or seen the pain women go through during childbirth. And they weren't raised with the desire to be a mother."

I thought it over. "You're probably right. That doesn't speak very well of men, does it?"

She reached over and patted me on the thigh. "Don't let it bother you. Men can't help being what they are. Besides, the drop will only be temporary. Eventually, the women who turned into men will go through a second time and turn back into women. What's more, if we really are on the verge of immortality, babies might become obsolete. No need to create a new generation when the old one is never going away."



That startled me. “What about ours?”

Rita laughed. “Don’t worry. I have it scheduled in for next year sometime.”

“Has your implant expired yet?”

“I think so. I may already be vulnerable.”

**I put my arm around her and nuzzled the side of her neck.
“Good.” “Hey! Don’t make me wreck the car!” She grabbed my knee and shook it, laughing.**

I didn’t mind the rest of the drive at all, country roads or not.

We made the announcement to Russell and Donna that night while Russell was there. We had been waiting for his return.

We both got enough hugs and kisses and congratulations to last until the next Millennium.

“Hey, I wondered why y’all have been being so exclusive lately. No wonder!” Russell’s grin replaced the slightly puzzled look he’d worn the last week or two. I hadn’t thought about it at the time, but I now realized he was feeling left out. Although I’m not sure why—Donna had certainly been giving him enough attention. I think Rita clued her in on our plans earlier. Now I got it. Rita had been way ahead of me, as usual.

We had a celebration that night. No one bothered to cook, and eventually we sent out for loads of pizza to soak up the booze. It was cold so I built a fire in the big great room fireplace. We threw thick comforters and blankets and rugs in front of it and laughed and talked. We even managed to agree on an entertainment program, a modern remake of an old film about genetically enhanced pets and the havoc they wreaked on earth. It seemed tame now in comparison to what the gates were doing, but there were some erotic sex scenes, including one sensuous lesbian interlude. Watching it revived Russell and me just when we thought we were finished for the night. It may even have done something for the girls. They giggled and tried to reproduce it for our benefit, then got carried away and ignored us. Finally, we parted company. Rita and I went to our room.

We both took Nohang pills and showered together while they worked overtime neutralizing all the alcohol we had absorbed. Afterward, we



lay side by side and made slow, easy love for what seemed like hours.

“I love you so much, Lee. I wish this could go on forever,” Rita murmured, stroking my back in time to my short, easy strokes into her body.

“Mmm, me too.” I leaned away from her far enough to bring my hand to her breast. She pulled me back to her, leaving my hand where it was.

We went to sleep in that position.

I remember the following week as one of the happiest of my life. Rita told me that she had conceived. I like to think that it was the night of the celebration, but it could have been a day or two later. No matter, I was as pleased and proud as a politician coming from behind to win his first election, and the others shared my feelings wholeheartedly. We had agreed long ago that when the time came we wouldn't select our first progeny for sex, but just take what came. As soon as Rita told the others, good-natured speculation began, as well as a friendly pool, which included the possibility of twins or triplets.

We even began talking about names. I favored a junior if it were a boy, even though I hated my first name. Rita wanted to name her Rikki if it were a girl. She always thought ahead. If someday our child decided to go through a gate, there wouldn't be any problem about names.

While the friendly bantering was going on, Mary called again. She wanted me to try more humor. She already had a contract ready for me, a series of amusing anecdotes and pratfalls concerning the gates. It appealed to me so I okayed the contract and promised her to get started on it in a few more days, as soon as the opening day festivities of the Ruston shelter and food center were over with.

“You will all be seated right down in front with the mayor and police chief and county commissioner,” Rita announced early that morning. She was all bubbles and excitement. She had a right to be. In addition to working on her doctorate and traveling with me, she had put in a lot of hours during the shelter's construction and added more helping to organize the opening.

“How large a crowd are you expecting?” I didn't really care but



wanted to distract her and calm her down.

“Oh, well, all our Fourth Worlders will be there, of course, along with the school board and all the members of the Chamber of Commerce and oh, lots more. All our neighbors, and the ranchers and farmers are coming in to see. The local ministers and their congregations. It’s going to be wonderful!” She twirled in a circle, sending her skirt flying up around her thighs and giving us a glimpse of her panties.

“Don’t do that at the ceremonies,” Russell said. “You’ll stop them in their tracks.” He was joking, of course. We were happy for her and her success with the project.

I was proud of our little town, too. Businessmen and laborers alike had volunteered their time and money to make sure the shelter was a success, and the churches had contributed even more. Of course, the churches had a vested interest; in the last decade or two it had fallen mostly to their charity work to keep the destitute fed and sheltered and provided with emergency medical care. It would be a load off their shoulders. Nevertheless, I couldn’t fault the effort they had put out. According to Rita, they had done more than their share.

“When should we head out?” I wanted to get there a little early. I was planning to write a piece on the opening since it was one of the first.

“I have to leave now. You guys can come along in about an hour. Don’t be late.” She gave us each a quick kiss and ran out the door, like a young doe at her first mating call.

“I wish I could tell her now, but I’m afraid she’s already excited enough,” Donna said, watching her disappear through the still open door.

“Tell her what?”

“Russell thinks he may have made a breakthrough with some of the work he’s been doing. It may turn out to help the Fourth Worlders as much as anything the government is doing.”

“What? Have you found out something about the gates?” After all this time!

He quickly disillusioned me. “No, the gates themselves are as enigmatic as ever. But you remember me telling you how studying them was inciting some really wild thinking? Well, we may have one of our first payoffs if everything goes like we think it will in the lab next week.”



“Great. Can you tell us what it is?”

“Not the theory; that involves too much math, and I don’t want to get into trying to tell you in English until the experiments are over with. It’s looking good, though.” He glanced at his watch. “Shucks, I can’t stand waiting around here on pins and needles. Why don’t we go on?”

“Suits me.” I raised my brows at Donna.

“Give us a minute or two,” Dona said. She disappeared into one of the bedrooms.

A few minutes later she returned, wearing a dress toga with shoulder wrap. The ceremony was going to be held outside. The shelter had been built right beside one side of the sports field, only a few hundred feet from where the Ruston gate still sat and maintained its dark secrets. A local businessman had donated the land, even though the government would have bought it from him. The facility would be named after him.

Ruston didn’t have a lot of Fourth Worlders in proportion to the larger cities, but we had our share, and it looked as if they were all on hand. A few representatives had been picked to sit with the other dignitaries on the small raised platform. The rest were scattered through the crowd, clustering together in little groups.

We mingled with our neighbors for a half hour or so, then began working our way forward to the reserved seats in front of the stand. Rita spotted us and came down.

“Hi, guys! Isn’t this great. I think nearly the whole county is here.” She was dressed in a simple conservative white suit with red piping along the seams and looked as pretty as a spring flower.

The band struck a chord. “Oh, we’re getting ready to start. You sit down, and I’ll join you as soon as my part is finished.”

“Don’t you want to stay up there with all the nabobs?” I teased.

“Of course, but there’s too many of us. We have to rotate. ‘Bye for now.” She was right. Some of the dignitaries were sitting in the first row, right in front of us. The empty seats presumably belonged to individuals already seated on the platform.

The high school band struck up a tune. It wasn’t good, but it was enthusiastic. Most of the band members were Fourth Worlders, as



were most of the students. Parents who could afford it had their kids educated through the web and with private instructors where necessary. Public schooling was abysmal, but it was all they had. Taxpayers had long ago gotten fed up with the lack of results and quit voting for anything other than minimal funding for public schooling.

The mayor made a speech, mercifully short, followed by the commissioner, the police chief, the high school principal, a dignitary from Washington, and a host of others. Most I don't remember. Then came an interlude where the volunteers were introduced. At last Rita's turn to speak came.

"Thank you," she said with quiet dignity. "Thank you all. I hope and pray that what we have begun here today will be only the beginning of a new era in our beloved country, an era where everyone will have a chance to participate to the full extent of their abilities in our society. Please, all of you, remember and hold in your minds the memories of how we have worked so hard together these last few months." A tear trickled down her cheek. A ball of emotion grew in my throat until I thought it would choke me. I was so proud of her. I felt tears began to gather in my eyelashes, blurring my vision. From beside me, I heard Donna choking back happy tears.

Rita couldn't go on. "Thank you. May God bless you." She wiped her eyes and hurried off the stand and began working her way down to the second row of seats where we were waiting. She looked down at a scruffy white male with braided hair, one of the Fourth World representatives. I recognized him as a groundskeeper who had recently been laid off.

"Excuse me," I heard her say. The man moved his legs to let her pass. As she stepped in front of him, he jumped to his feet. I saw something glinting in his hand as he brought back his arm, then swung it forward.

"Rich bitch! Motherfucking uppity cunt!" He buried the knife up to the hilt just under her left shoulder blade.

"Rita!" I screamed. I swung a balled fist and shoved people out of my way in my rush to get to her side. Behind me, I could hear Russell pushing his way through the screaming crowd, too, yelling out Rita's name.

Blood was gushing from her mouth by the time we got to her. Someone bent over her, blocking my vision. I kicked him in the side, sending him sprawling.



“Doctor, let the doctor through!” someone shouted.

A lane parted as spectators kicked away overturned chairs. Old Doc Tyson, ran down the lane. Russell almost slugged him, before he saw who it was.

Tyson bent over Rita’s body. Blood was still pouring from her mouth and nostrils. She was already turning white.

The doctor took one look and shook his head. “I can’t save her. It’s in her heart. She’ll never make it to the hospital.” Nevertheless, he bent over her, yanked the knife loose and gathered folds of her blouse to try to staunch the bleeding.

His words hit me like a sledgehammer. I felt gorge rise in my stomach. Rita retched and more blood poured out of her mouth. I looked up in anguish, and saw the glittering green facade of the gate, no more than two hundred feet away. Suddenly, I knew what we had to do.

Russell was trembling and looked as if he were about to collapse on top of Rita. His eyes were darting around, searching for her assailant. He spotted him, being restrained and cuffed by a pair of policemen. He uttered a strangled oath. I knew where he would head in the next second, if I didn’t stop him.

“Russell! Help me!” I bent and shoved my arms under Rita’s legs and back and lifted her up. Her head rolled forward as I picked her up, pouring a swath of blood down my chest. I thought I felt her go slack, but then she retched again and sprayed more of her blood over me.

“Russell!” I shouted again. “The gate! We have to get her to the gate. Help me.” I began to run with her in my arms.

Russell came to his senses and moved to take her feet so that we could hurry. I felt her body go slack.

“She’s stopped breathing. Help, her, Russ, help her breathe.” I didn’t slow down. Russell tried to breathe for her as I ran, but he couldn’t keep his mouth on hers.

“Please, Rita, don’t leave us! Don’t leave. Hang on, please, just a few more seconds.” I was babbling like a madman.

I kept running. Even if Rita had stopped breathing, there was still a chance. Her brain wouldn’t die from lack of oxygen for a few minutes. All I had to do was get her to the gate in time. I felt my heart and lungs



straining with the effort of carrying her body, but I could no more slow down than a runaway train going down the side of a mountain.

I staggered the last few steps to the gate on sheer will power. I gasped and stopped, intending to push her limp body into the gate. I was covered with blood. It had run all down my front and covered my boots with a sticky red film.

Some of the Gaters had built an attractive little flagstone walk the last few yards, pointing the way into the entrance side of the gate. I gasped and tried to hold Rita upright so I could give her a shove. Her upper body was a dead weight in my arms. I looked frantically for Russell and saw him sprawled yards away where he had tripped in his hurry. Donna moved beside me to help.

Just as we were getting Rita in position to give her a shove forward, my foot slipped on the bloody flagstone. My feet begin to slide out from under me. Rita pitched forward as I fell against Donna. Rita disappeared into the gate, and Donna began to fall backward toward it. Donna reached out a frantic hand, and I grabbed at it to keep her from falling into the green nothingness behind her.

I caught her hand and yanked hard, spinning her away from the gate. But the force of my movement hurled me in the other direction.

I fought to regain my balance, but a shimmering green wall was rushing toward me. I was still falling. I closed my eyes in horror as it enveloped me.

BOOK II



VENUS



Chapter Seventeen

I felt myself fall into the shimmering green face of the gate. But before I could so much as blink I was standing upright, stunned into immobility. In front of me, a tall, naked man with black hair twisted around to stare at me. He looked familiar, but I wasn't concerned with him; Rita was the only person on my mind.

I heard running steps behind and to my right. I turned and saw Russell racing toward me from around the edge of the gate. He looked bigger somehow.

"Russell! Where's Rita?" My voice sounded strange and shrill, as if my throat was raw, though I felt no pain.

He scanned the area, his eyes frantic with worry, then stared at me and the naked man behind me.

"Oh, God!" His body staggered and he gripped a nearby light pole for support.

"Where's Rita?" I took a step toward him. Something bounced on my chest, and I looked down, startled.

Behind me, the naked man said, "Oh, no! Lee, is that you?"

I turned around. The man had one hand covering his genitals and the other hand pressed against his mouth. His eyes were wide with disbelief.

I felt goose bumps popping up on my body as a breeze rushed over my bare skin. I wrapped my arms around myself, and felt soft warm flesh yielding to the pressure of my arms. I stared down at my chest and



saw two breasts. The world swam as I looked down at the pink nipples, but I fought off the dizziness. I remembered falling into the gate.

My God, I was a woman!

Russell let go of the lamppost and took a step toward the two of us, his eyes darting back and forth as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

My concern for Rita was the only thing that kept me sane. She had gone through the gate before me. Where was she?

“I was standing right here, and these two were the only ones who came out,” I heard an adolescent voice say.

“You’re certain? No one else came out?” I yelled the questions at the boy.

“No madam, I didn’t see anyone else, and I was looking right at the gate when you two came out.”

He pointed at me and the nude young man at my side. He blushed as he pointed in my direction and averted his eyes. Like everyone else who had ever gone through a gate, I was now completely naked, but that was the least of my worries.

The naked man shivered. Someone threw a cloak around my shoulders. I pulled it closed, not from embarrassment but because I was trembling in the chill wind. I murmured my thanks.

Another Gater approached the nude man, with a cloak to cover his body. He took it, all the time looking at me, his dark eyes full of sorrow and fear. Wrapping the cloak around his shoulders, he approached me and spoke in a low, urgent voice. “Lee? Don’t you know me?”

Now that he was closer, I could see the intelligence in his eyes, and the spark of a soul I knew and loved. I moaned softly, unable to deny the truth any longer. It was Rita I saw in those eyes. But Rita, the woman, was gone. I felt as if my whole world was exploding around me.

Tears filled Rita’s eyes. “I’m a man now and you’re a woman,” he whispered and started to sob. He put one arm around my shoulders and another around Russell’s. I fought the urge to pull away. Part of me was frightened by this stranger, but another part knew it was Rita,



who I loved.

Rita and Russell and I stood in a tight knot together, clinging to each other, letting the tears come. Suddenly, Donna was there, too, her hand gentle on my shoulder.

“Come on,” she said. “There’s nothing more for us here. At least the gate saved Rita’s life. Always remember that.”

Many of Rita’s friends from the shelter had followed us on our wild run after the stabbing and now were standing around staring. Knowing from her own experience that we would want to be alone, Donna urged us toward where my car was parked.

I stumbled along. The sidewalk was level, but it felt as if I were on the deck of a boat. I rolled, or seemed to, as I walked, feeling the unusual motion coming from inside me, as if it were localized in my hip joints. My breasts jiggled. I leaned backward with each step, trying to make them stop their constant motion. I felt as if insects were crawling on my shoulders and reached up to brush them off. Instead I felt thick strands of long hair hanging down my back.

Staggering along on the other side of Donna, the man who had been my Rita seemed to be having similar problems adjusting to his new body. Tears were streaming down his face. My own eyes were damp, and I choked down my sobs.

Poor Rita. The man who knifed her must have been insane. She was such a loving person. Oh, God, please save the love we share now that we are different sexes.

I think that was the first sincere prayer I had uttered since childhood, but I had no idea who or what I was praying to.

Donna handed us into the car, insisting that I sit up front with her. Why, I don’t know, unless it was so I could have a chance to get used to my own change, but I found strength in looking at her and remembering that she had gone through the same experience. Still, my stomach was twisting with waves of fear and horror. I felt lost, stranded in my mind, alienated from the body that held my consciousness.

Donna reached over to touch my leg, trying to comfort me, no doubt. I brushed her hand away. In the back seat, Russell was holding Rita, whose crying finally tapered off into an occasional sob. I stole a glance at Donna. There were dried tear streaks on her cheeks. Her face was pale and drawn with her lips set in a grim line. I realized with a start



that I was not the only one who had a reason to grieve. All of our lives were once again in turmoil because of the gates.

I reached over and squeezed her hand, then dropped it and snatched my hand back. My grip didn't feel right. It was weak and small. I leaned over the back seat and said something to Russell and Rita, I don't remember what. When I look back now on those first moments as a woman, I remember only my total confusion and shock and sense of deep loss. I had lost Rita (as a woman) and I had lost myself. Suddenly, I had no idea who I was, and the future stretched ahead like some bleak landscape.

Donna parked the car and got us inside, like a mother hen herding her chicks. As she closed the door, her phone beeped. She didn't bother plugging in, but answered with voice only.

"Yes, what is it? No, none of us know why he would have done something like that. Please, let it wait until tomorrow, can't you? In the morning? No, wait until evening, please. Call me back, and we'll set up a time. You will? Thank you, chief. Good night."

She explained. "That was Chief Martin. He needs a statement from you about your attacker, Rita, but he'll wait until tomorrow. Come with me, Lee, and let me get you something to put on. Rita, you go with Russell."

I was glad to let her take charge. Already I could feel a surly resentment at my fate mixing in with my grief. Further fueling my anger was that madman's completely unprovoked attack on Rita. We had just been celebrating her conception and now she was a man. No wonder she was sobbing so hard. Our baby was gone.

Donna pulled a silk robe from her closet and helped me into it. I avoided looking at my image in the mirror. I didn't want to see the female body I was now trapped in.

"Come on, dear. I think we all need a drink." She took my hand, and I let her lead me back into the great room. Rita was already there, wrapped in one of Russell's old robes. She/he looked at me with a shaky smile as I entered the room. I tried to return it, but I could feel my own mouth tremble. The changes were almost too much to handle. I wanted to sit beside Rita and hold her, but "Rita" was gone. This man was both my lover and a stranger.

As if she sensed my inner turmoil, Donna pulled me over to the lounge where Rita sat. I slid down to the far end. Donna left us and went to the bar to fix drinks. No rum this time. She poured Jack



Daniels into short fat glasses, added a couple of ice cubes to each and distributed them. I drank half of mine in three gulps.

Donna took a seat by Russell and took his hand, holding it as she spoke. "Lee, I will do all I can to help you by telling you how it was for me. Rita, you will be better off getting your advice from Russell. He can probably help you more than I can."

I downed more bourbon. "Damn your help! Our baby is dead. I'm a woman. Rita is a man. Our whole world has been destroyed! Don't sit there and tell me that your advice will fix things."

The look of shocked pain of Donna's face told me I'd gone too far.

"Sorry. That was a cruel thing to say. I'm not myself." I forced a bitter smile to my lips.

Her hurt look disappeared. "I know you didn't mean it, dear. We're all overwhelmed by shock. And these tremendous changes."

Russell nodded at her words and brushed at his eyes with his shirtsleeve.

I thought of the prayer I had voiced to myself. Surely, if there was a God who cared at all about humanity, our baby was with him. I finished the first bourbon and got up to make another. My breasts swayed beneath the silk wrap as I crossed the room. How long would it be before I got use to that?

I caught Donna eying me as I poured my glass almost full. She gave me a warning look. "Careful. You won't be able to drink as much now that you're a woman."

What? Oh. I must weigh less now. The same volume of alcohol would hit me harder. "I'll worry about it tomorrow, not tonight."

I didn't, either. I had several more drinks while Donna did most of the talking, trying to soothe us in our new bodies. Once, I had to excuse myself to use the bathroom. I was standing in front of the stool when I remembered just in time through the fog of the bourbon that I had better sit down. I did, and in a few seconds discovered why females need to use tissue after peeing. I felt the wetness but didn't look down when I wiped. I felt my face flush as I came back into the room.

"You two need to pick new names," Donna said as I sat back down.



The thought made me feel rebellious. “I don’t want a new name. In fact, I think tomorrow I’m going to go back through the gate and see if I come out. I want to be a man again.”

“No!” They all yelled it at once. Russell’s shout was louder than anyone else’s.

“Why not?” I said belligerently.

“Because of the odds, you idiot!” Rita yelled at me. “We lost our baby today. I don’t want to lose you, too.”

I looked at her new male body and swallowed hard, fighting my tears, tears that seemed to be flowing with unaccustomed easiness. But that was because the baby was gone. A few hours ago we’d been so happy. All that was gone now unless I—no, damn it, I didn’t even want to think of that possibility. Nor, I admitted to myself, did I really want to chance the thousands to one odds of success if I went through the gate again. I wasn’t that brave. That didn’t leave a whole lot of options.

I folded my arms and glared at Donna. “I don’t want a new name.”

“I don’t see why we can’t keep on calling you Lee. You can spell it like the Chinese do, with an i.”

I shrugged my assent. Li. At least it would sound like my original name.

“How about you, Rita?”

He started to brush his hair back behind his ears, then looked annoyed when his fingers met thin air. He frowned in thought, for a moment before brightening. “How about Ruez? That has a Spanish sound to go with Hernandez, and it’s alliterative besides. You can call me Rez for short.”

Ruez. Rez. I rolled the names silently on my tongue. They seemed to fit, not only with his last name but also with his Latin countenance. I took another slug of the bourbon and met his gaze. He was as handsome as Rita had been pretty, with a classical straight nose, short, straight black hair, and long-lashed black eyes. He winked at me.

I dropped my gaze, surprised to feel heat burning on my cheeks. “It sounds fine to me.”

“Good, that’s settled. What next?” Donna said.



I sure as hell didn't know, so I got up and poured another glass of bourbon. By that time it was beginning to taste like soda pop, and I was wobbling when I walked.

Donna pinched her thumb to check the time. None of us had even suggested turning on a screen. The attack on Rita was probably on the news and none of us could bear to see that. "It's getting late. Why don't we all take some Nohang and start over in the morning?"

That suited me. I got up and began moving toward my bedroom, until a sudden thought stopped me. God! Rez would be in there, too.

Donna caught my eye.

"Why don't you sleep with me tonight, Li? Russell and Rez can bunk together. That way, each of you will have someone of the same sex near to help you along."

I agreed, feeling a sense of relief. Rez hesitated, looking at me with longing in his eyes, but finally went along with the idea. We went off to our rooms.

Donna made sure I took a double dose of Nohang. My voice was beginning to slur by then. I unwrapped myself from Donna's silken gown and fell into bed. The world spun for a few minutes until the pills began taking effect.

Donna was a familiar body. As soon as my head started to clear up, I snuggled next to her. It was comforting, except that my breasts kept getting in the way.

I woke up the next morning with my back up against Donna's body. Her arm was curled comfortably around my waist. I heard her soft breathing and felt the gentle waft of each exhale tickling my neck. For a moment I didn't remember what had happened.

I thought about turning over and waking her in the best way, but there was no affirming pulse from my penis. What? Oh, damn. Damn it all. I would never feel that welcome expansive surge of blood flowing into my organ again.

I eased myself out from under her arm and tiptoed into the bathroom. I flicked on the light, not looking at anything except my head at first. I ran my fingers back through the waves of hair hanging



to my shoulders. My hair felt loose and springy and soft as a kitten's fur. I lowered my eyes down over the reflection of my body in the full-length mirror, marveling at the full breasts and slim waist, the long thighs and small feet. My mouth hung open as I stared at myself.

God! I was beautiful! If it had been possible, I would have gotten a raging erection from looking at myself. The rusty, off-color hair I had always hated was replaced with long wavy locks of purest auburn, dancing with golden highlights. My square male face now was thinner and heart-shaped with high cheekbones. The pale blue of my eyes had deepened into the dark of the northern seas, set beneath fine brows of auburn. I blinked and thick eyelashes fluttered at me in the mirror. There was a faint sprinkling of freckles across my nose and cheeks, my lips were full without being overly sultry, and when I smiled a dimple appeared.

But, of course, my new breasts fascinated me the most. They were full and firm and each was tipped with a dark pink virginal nipple. As I touched them with my fingertips, admiring this newly discovered treasure, the nipples hardened and tingled with a warm sensuous pleasure.

I snatched my hands away, my heart pounding. This woman's body was sexual, too, but in a wholly different way. I felt a strange tightening in my lower body and looked down. My pubic hair was a darker auburn triangle of tight curls nestling at the junction of my thighs. The whole area had started aching when I touched my breasts. I shivered, and the woman in the mirror looked back at me, hunger glowing in her eyes. For the first time, I realized that this new body would be my greatest teacher.

Tearing myself away from the mirror, I took care of necessities before stepping into the shower. Bathing was a new experience. I was still reluctant to touch the sensitive area between my legs, but I could feel it throb each time I soaped a breast or passed my hands over my sleek, wet curves. This was going to take some getting used to.

I was toweling myself dry when Donna knocked on the door and came on in without waiting for me to answer. She smiled at me. "Good morning."

"Good morning, if you can call it good." I held the towel up like a barrier between us. I felt my face getting red.

"Poor Li. You look as if you've lost your last friend."

"I feel like I've lost myself."



“I know. And it may sound trite right now. But believe me, you will adjust. Why don’t you go on and get dressed? I think most of Rita’s clothes will fit you. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Dressing was a chore. Poking through Rita’s drawers and closet made me feel like a transvestite, especially when I got into the lingerie. I felt a stubborn urge to wear my own shorts, but I could see immediately that they wouldn’t fit. I chose a pair of plain panties and put them on. They hugged my hips instead of my waist. I kept tugging at them; they felt as if they were going to fall off. Her jeans were a size or so too large, but they would do for now. I held up a bra, looked at it and flung it down on the bed without even trying it on, not that I would have known how to adjust it if I had. I pulled out a blouse from her closet and was putting my arm through the first sleeve when Donna came back into the room.

Her glance took in my bare breasts. She pointed to the discarded bra, crumpled on the bed.

“So, you decided against a bra, huh? Those breasts are firm enough that you can get away without one.” She began pulling on casual clothes.

I had trouble buttoning the old-fashioned blouse until I realized the fastenings were on the wrong side. I decided right then that I would wear touch tab clothes from now on. I sat down on the edge of the bed, thinking gloomy thoughts while Donna finished dressing. I wondered how Rez was making out. Probably better than I was. Rita was always been a practical person. There was no reason why that would change. I doubted that she—he—would be in the kind of funk I was.

“Ready?” Donna said.

“I guess.” I got to my feet, feeling reluctant to go out and face the others. I stood motionless by the bed until Donna came over and put her arms around me.

“Li, please don’t take this so hard. I promise, it’s not all that bad.”

“I’ll try, but I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it.”

“Of course you will. I’ll help. Remember Don, your old friend? I’m still in here. Now that we’re both women, maybe we can sit and talk like friends again, the way we used to. We can let our hair down and talk men-talk, just between us girls.”



I had to laugh at that, and felt better for it. I returned her embrace and kissed her, as I had been doing for months. She responded enthusiastically for a moment then broke away from me.

“Let’s save this for later, huh? Boy, have you got some revelations coming.” She smiled as if she knew the answers to an exam in advance.

I wondered what she meant, but other problems were demanding more attention. We left the bedroom.

Breakfast smells brought Russell and Rez out into the great room. Rez was dressed in some of Russell’s old clothes. They fit him better than Rita’s fit me.

“Good morning.” Rez seemed nervous, and I remembered how I had slid away from him the night before on the lounge.

Talking with Donna had helped my attitude some. I went over to him, put my arms around his neck and pecked him on the lips. “Good morning.”

Standing next to him, I felt short. He towered over me. I didn’t linger in the embrace, stepping away as I felt his hands touch my waist.

Russell watched us like a scientist observing a particularly interesting experiment. He and Donna would be able to resume their growing relationship with no problem, but what about Rita and me?

The first thing we did after breakfast was to go back to the gate. There was a couple of porters hanging around, but we ignored them, or tried to: they were persistent. I felt for my gun, intending to use it to wave them away. The damn female blouse didn’t have pockets, and I sure as hell wasn’t carrying a purse. Donna pulled hers out far enough to show the porters that we didn’t intend to be bothered. They retreated, but I suppose they were still recording. We laid a wreath of flowers nearby in memory of our baby and cried together until we could no longer stand it. After that we went back home.

None of us wanted to catch the news. Instead, we had a light lunch. As soon as we were done eating, Russell and Donna excused themselves and went into his bedroom together. I think they left Rez and me alone so we could begin getting used to our change, but I’m sure that wasn’t the only reason: They were lovers, after all.



I sat down by Rez on the small lounge. His eyes were wet with unshed tears.

“Are you still thinking about the baby?” I asked.

“Yes!” He burst into full-blown tears. “Oh, Li.”

My immediate reaction was to do what I would have done the day before: I pulled him into my arms. That didn’t work too well; I had forgotten the disparity in our sizes again. We fumbled for a moment, and he wound up with his arms around me. I felt small and vulnerable and helpless. What do you say to a woman who has lost a baby, especially to a woman who has suddenly become a man?

Eventually, he wiped away the tears and let go of me. “I’m sorry, Li. I won’t do that again.”

“It’s all right.”

“It’s not all right, but I’ll get over it. Please be patient with me.”

“I will.” I tried to sound positive, even though I was still filled with fears of my own.

“I hope so. I need you now more than I ever thought I would need anyone.”

I needed someone, too, but it was Rita I wanted, not Rez. I couldn’t reconcile the man sitting beside me with Rita, even though I knew she was still there, inside that male body. I didn’t know what to say, let alone what to do.

“This is hard on you, isn’t it?” Rez looked me straight in the eye. Rita had always been direct.

“No more so than it must be for you.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. I’ll get used to it quicker than you will.” He patted one of my shapely thighs. “It will come, though. Spend some time with Donna. She’ll help you along. Don’t forget who I really am, though. I’m Rita. And I love you as much as ever.”

That was the thing. I still loved Rita, too, but I couldn’t feel her presence like I wanted to, not when “she” was hidden in that male body. It was like seeing someone dressed up in a costume. You kept



waiting for them to take it off and return to normal.

We spent the afternoon talking and walking around the house, trying to get adjusted to our new bodies. After a couple of hours, I was able to converse more comfortably with Rez. For one thing, we were both experiencing adjusting to our new bodies, and our movements were often awkward and jerky, making us laugh together. It seemed like my breasts got in my way whenever I moved, and Rez couldn't seem to stop trying to brush back his nonexistent long hair.

The third or fourth time Rez laughed at me, I glared at him, trying to look angry. He only laughed harder. "Think of me," he said through a fresh burst of giggles. "I woke up this morning with an erection and didn't know what to do to make it go down."

That almost floored me. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. It went away after I sat on the pottie." She giggled again, almost like a woman. "I haven't learned to aim straight yet, either."

Now I had to laugh. I wasn't the only one having problems. Poor Rez wasn't used to a penis. And after I got used to looking at him, I could detect a faint sway of hips when he walked. He was going to have to correct that or gay men would start following him in droves.

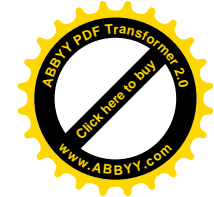
Russell and Donna joined us again after a few hours. Russell looked much better. "I'm going back to the lab," he said.

"Do you have to so soon?" I asked.

"I want to. There are things I need to check up on. I'll be back in a day or two."

He left a few minutes later after giving me a hug. I didn't let it last long. Every time either he or Rez hugged me, I could feel the yielding pressure of my breasts against their chests, a sensation I found disturbing.

Rez went to bed early, sleeping alone in Russell's room. I remembered his remark about my needing to spend time with Donna. Besides, he knew as certainly as the wind blows from the north in winter that I wasn't ready to sleep with a man yet. I didn't know if I ever would be.



Chapter Eighteen

I woke up the next morning in the middle of a dream. I was a man again, and about to make love to Rita. As I came to conscious awareness, the dream vanished as soon as I recognized the body next to me. Donna's back pressed up against mine. I had an arm around her and my hand was cupping her breast. I think that was what woke me. It felt larger than it should, and I couldn't figure it out. Rita's breasts were larger than any of the other girls, and I couldn't imagine who else would be in bed with me. It took a few seconds to realize that Donna was the same size as ever; it was my hand that was smaller.

If I hadn't needed to get up and go to the bathroom, the dream might have progressed on into reality. As it was, I slid my hand away and rolled out of bed. As usual, I was the first person awake. I stood there for a moment, looking down at Donna. The sheet had slid down around her hips, and her upper body was bare. I felt a sexual arousal surge through my body, making my breasts and thighs feel warmer than they should. Looking at her told me that my male mind was still working fine, but I couldn't help wondering if Donna found me attractive as a female. I thought it probably wouldn't be long before I found out, but right now I had to go.

Donna was still making the decisions. After breakfast, Rez wanted to go on into North Houston to see Russell about his project, but Donna insisted that we go shopping for new clothes and accessories before he left.

Rez took longer to pick out clothes than any man I had ever met, but I guess he came by it naturally, since he had spent all of his previous life as a female. Both Donna and I offered advice from the male perspective. It took three times longer to get him outfitted than I thought it should. I got impatient and even a little annoyed at the time it took him to select a few pair of jeans, shirts and jirts. Finally it was over! I breathed a sigh of relief when Rez left her bundles with us and took off for North Houston. I thought the rest of the shopping expedition would take only a few minutes. That shows what I knew about being a woman.

After the booth took my measurements, Donna insisted on paying for a graphics program. Together we examined my image on the screen while it tried on every single garment we selected.

I wanted to keep it simple, but Donna wouldn't let me. She kept saying, "No, no, Li. That won't go with your hair," or "No, those don't



match. Let's try another set."

She made me buy some things in silkskin and velvetin and clingtight, even though I kept telling her I would never wear them. "Yes, you will," she insisted, and I finally let her have her way. It was only money, and I had plenty of that, but I still didn't intend to wear them.

I enjoyed the lingerie selection more, simply because I still couldn't identify the auburn-haired beauty on the screen with myself. I enjoyed seeing her get dressed and undressed again and again while Donna made the decisions. Again, I tried to pick out simple things, but she wouldn't let me. "Oh, no," she would say. "This is much sexier," or "Wow, wait until Rez and Russell see you in this!" I had no intention of walking around in front of the men wearing a few ounces of nothing; I knew how they would react, and I wouldn't blame them if they did. Personal experience told me how men thought when they saw a nearly nude female body, and I didn't intend to let them get bothered watching me when I wasn't going to let them do anything about it. I have to admit, though, she knew what she was doing. Every single garment made me look so sexy I was getting myself aroused.

That gave me pause for thought. I could be raped now. The mere possibility made me shudder. I must never forget to carry my gun again.

As soon as we were done shopping, Donna had another stop in mind. "Where are we going now?" I asked.

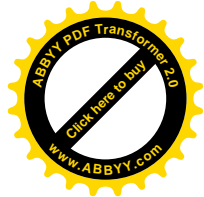
"Last stop before home. We have to get you an implant."

I stared at her in disbelief. Implant? I hadn't even thought about such a thing. "No. I don't think I'll be needing one."

"You might surprise yourself. Besides, what if you got raped? Or someone slipped you some pheromones? It happens, you know." A gentle smile tugged at her lips.

I had already thought of the possibility, but not in those terms. I shuddered. What if it did happen, and I got pregnant? There were abortion pills, of course, but who wanted an abortion if they could avoid it? I followed Donna into the clinic.

It was very embarrassing, since old Doc Tyler, who I had known all my life, insisted on a pelvic exam first. It was habit on his part, or the age-old doctor's reflex to do every test to avoid being sued. No new female fresh out of a gate needed an exam; she was invariably healthy.



While my legs were up in the stirrups, Donna was in the examining room with me, holding my hand. I was glad she came along. Knowing that she had gone through the same procedure made it a little easier, although no less humiliating. Right then I would have liked to have words with whoever was responsible for designing the female body. That damn speculum was as cold as ice, and it seemed as if it was in there for hours. Tyson didn't talk much during the proceedings, except toward the end.

"Would you like me to remove the hymen while I'm at it?"

"No!" I was so damned uncomfortable I wanted him out of there.

"Yes," Donna said. She squeezed my hand when I started to argue with her. When I didn't speak up again, he took my silence for assent. I felt a sharp little prick of pain, but not enough to really bother me. After that was over with, he used a little handheld injection gun to do the implant. He held it against my outer thigh. There was a snap like the sound of a rubber band thwacking a piece of paper.

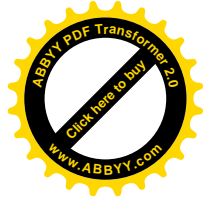
"Ouch. That hurt."

"It's all over with. Don't have intercourse until after your next period and you should be as safe as a baby girl." He laughed as he left the room. I didn't see anything funny, especially when he mentioned my next period. Next? I hadn't even had my first one yet, and I damn sure wasn't looking forward to it. I decided that no matter how much it embarrassed me, I had better ask Donna about the mechanics of coping with it before it snuck up on me and embarrassed me even more.

Donna had bought a few things of her own while we were shopping, and after we returned home, she insisted that we try on our new clothes. I was curious about how they would fit and feel.

Donna laid the clothes out on the bed. We undressed down to panties and began trying on our new outfits. The silkskin items surprised me the most. I could see where the name originated. The blouses and dress melded to my contours like a second skin, outlining the curves of my body like a perfectly fitted glove. When I ran my hands over my hips, it was almost like touching my own skin.

The velvetin tops and trousers didn't cling quite so closely, but they felt like downy feathers caressing my body. I wondered why they never made men's clothing as sensual as these garments. Was it some



macho thing that men wouldn't wear anything that was slinky or silky? I had no idea, but it gave me an idea for an article.

I put each item of clothing away after trying it on, either in a drawer or hanging in the closet. I think I blushed when it came to the nightgowns. I felt like a transvestite again, especially with Donna whistling or making cute remarks when I tried them on. She had long since finished with the few items she bought, but hadn't gotten dressed yet. There was only one thing left to try and that was the bras Donna had insisted I buy, in several different styles and colors.

"Now, let's see how you look in these," Donna said, plucking one of them from the bed. I put my arms through the straps and tried to hook it in back. I quickly found that there was a definite technique to getting in and out of the damned things. She showed me how to adjust it, and guided my fingers and arms through several repetitions until I thought I could do it by myself.

"You're doing fine." She picked up the last bra. "Now this one closes in front. It should be easier to handle."

Well, at least I could see what I was doing. I wondered why they didn't make them all like that. I thought there was probably some arcane female reason.

"You look good enough to eat," Donna said, stepping back to admire me in the new undies. I didn't know quite how to take that.

"It needs just a wee bit of adjusting." She stepped around behind me and did something to the straps in back then came back around to stand in front of me. "Perfect. Now let's see you take it off."

I unhooked it. Donna was standing very close. All the time we had been dressing and undressing, my eyes kept straying to Donna's seminude body, and my male mind kept telling me to take her in my arms and smother her with kisses. There's nothing so stimulating to the male mind as a woman dressed only in a pair of low-cut panties, with her breasts bare.

She saw the way I was looking at her, and took a step closer. My breasts brushed against hers, and I felt my nipples hardening, a sensation somewhat like two tiny erections at the tips of my breasts, and spreading a suffused warm fullness to them. I felt the muscles in my belly tighten and the insides of my thighs ached. I put my hands around her waist and pulled her to me. Our lips met, hers already open and willing, an entrance to the liquid dance of her tongue.



Donna let me lead, understanding perfectly that my mind was still locked into the male mode of making love. I eased her down onto the bed and began caressing and kissing her as though nothing had changed between us. I kissed and fondled her breasts and ran my hands over her body until she was moaning with anticipation. I slid her panties off and removed my own. I let my tongue wander down the smooth length of her body, stopping at the juncture of her thighs. She spread her legs eagerly. My tongue touched the little button buried there. I felt her fingers moving through my hair, then grasping at my neck and shoulders as her hips rose to meet my mouth, every muscle taunt. She held, held, stiffened, and cried out again and again.

Donna's cries seemed to echo through my own body, sending undulating waves of tense, excited expectation coursing through me. As she sank back down, I moved up over her, between her legs. I was breathing as heavily as if I were running a race. I could feel the need inside of me, but I had no way to satisfy it. I became frantic for release, pumping my hips hard against her, almost crying with the need to complete the act. But I was missing the most vital ingredient.

Finally, exhausted, still unsatisfied, I collapsed on top of her, tears in my eyes.

"Let me," Donna whispered. She rolled me off and began kissing me the same way I had kissed her, but she didn't spend nearly as much time. I had barely begun to thrill to the unusual sensation of having my breasts handled and caressed and feeling my nipples being sucked into her mouth when she left them and worked her lips down my body. I spread my legs open for her, and a moment later felt the exquisite touch of her tongue. Again I felt the rising, barely endurable excitement, but this time it went to completion, like a racing car finally topping a hill. I screamed as my whole body was engulfed in a shuddering, muscle-locking orgasm. I lost track of time, of light and darkness, of the whole universe.

When I came back to my senses, Donna was up beside me again, gently caressing me with feathery soft fingers.

"Wow," I said. "That was like going over a cliff backwards and falling a thousand miles."

Donna leaned over and kissed me. "Wait til you try it with a man. It's even better."

"It couldn't be."



“Mmm. You’ll see.” She rested her head on my breast. I ran my fingers through her hair, thinking that it couldn’t possibly get any more intense than what I had already felt. While I would never have willingly gone through the gate, I was now in the enviable position of knowing what both sexes experience with an orgasm. And as males have long suspected, the female orgasm is superior. It involves the whole body, whereas the regular male climax is mostly centered in the penis and groin.

Later, we did it again. And again. I wished briefly that I could experience it with Rita as a female, but I quickly put that idea out of my mind. It could never happen. She was male, now.

The thought wouldn’t go away. What would it be like with Rez? Could I do it? I didn’t know, but I decided that eventually I would have to try it, if for no other reason than that I loved Rita, her mind and personality, even if it was locked in a male body now. I owed him that much, anyway.

Late that evening, Chief Martin called. We had to get dressed and plug in vision so that the recording of our testimony would be legal. It didn’t take long.

The man who attacked Rita was tried and convicted a few weeks later. He was a typical Fourth Worlder who got involved with drugs. Ironically, he was exactly the kind of person the shelter was intended to help. He never gave a coherent reason for his actions, which was probably just as well. Nothing he could have said would have brought our baby back, or given Rez and I back our own bodies. We were forced to testify at the trial—which was a nightmare for Rita—but none of us bothered to attend his sentencing.

During those weeks, I gradually began getting used to the body I was wearing. The worse part was my first period. I hated the whole messy proceeding, but it wasn’t as if I were alone in the world; half of humanity had the same problem. I slept alone those nights, insisting that Donna spend some time with Rez, and Russell when he was there. I knew that Rez would have sex with Donna. They had enjoyed themselves when both were female, and Donna now enjoyed swinging in either direction. Besides, if I ever decided to have sex with Rez, I wanted him to have some experience first. No use having us both fumbling things up at the same time.

Russell was seldom home; he was still spending much of his time on campus, working on that project he was so enthusiastic about. Rez



made occasional trips in to check with him, and Donna managed to attend all her classes over the web.

I began watching the news again, gathering data and anecdotes about the gates for possible stories to sell. There wasn't much new. The world was adjusting to their presence.

The United States, France, and Australia were the only countries where the majority of the population accepted the gates with no strings attached, and tried to guarantee unimpeded access, the nationwide riots in America notwithstanding. They had mostly been triggered by Fourth Worlder frustration and racial tensions breaking into the open.

In most other countries, control of one sort or another was attempted, without much success. The Germans, with their usual Teutonic thoroughness, tried a unique solution: they began building cement walls around each gate, then wiring them with powerful electric currents. As each barrier was completed, permits were required to enter. For once, the German people revolted against their bureaucrats. Organized mobs went from gate to gate, overcame the guards, and blew holes in the barriers. Finally, the government gave up and simply required permits, "in order to record sociologically useful statistics." The citizens quickly went back to their usual obedient ways, paying the permit fees with no objections.

I did a story on that last item, from the ordinary citizen's viewpoint and it sold pretty well, though my German stringer held Mary up for a hefty percentage of the royalties.

On the rare occasions he came home, Russell looked tired again, and discouraged. His project, whatever it was, wasn't working out as quickly as he had predicted. One evening he came in as the three of us were finishing dinner. He threw his jacket into a corner and slumped down beside Donna on the big lounge.

"Damn it, something is wrong, and I can't figure it out!" His voice was almost a growl of frustration.

Chapter Nineteen

"Don't you have any ideas at all?" Rez shot Russell a worried look. I



was sitting beside him on the small lounge. As he asked his question, I got up and went over to Russell.

“Turn around,” I said. Looking puzzled, he turned. I began kneading his shoulders and back. His muscles were knotted up as tight as a sailor’s half-hitch. As I worked my fingers into the hard muscles, I couldn’t help thinking of how big men still seemed to me.

“Ahh. Thanks, Li. That feels good.” He straightened back up. “As to your question, Rez, no, I don’t have a goddamned clue. According to all our calculations, the experiments we’ve been running should have worked, but they haven’t, and we can’t figure out why.”

“What are you going to do now?” Rez asked. He put an arm around me when I went back to sit beside him. I had been forcing myself to get used to casual intimacy from him and Russell. It wasn’t easy. Being touched by a man still made me squirm, especially with the way both of them stared at my body whenever they thought I wasn’t noticing. I knew I would have to get used to it, though, especially since I was planning on traveling.

Russell shrugged. “Back up and punt. Start all over and see where we made our mistake, or mistakes. There must be some error in the calculations, or maybe even the theory itself.”

“How long will it take?” Rez started kneading my shoulder. I leaned against his arm, trying to relax and enjoy the sensation. I had loved Rez when he was Rita. Why should I shrink from his touch now?

“We’ve been working six months on the theory. Give us another three or four to go back over everything, then rebuild the apparatus and check it for errors. Six months? A year? I can’t say right now. Sorry, Rez. I know you were hoping for faster results, but that’s how science goes.”

“Neither of you has ever said what it is you’ve been working on.” I lifted a questioning eyebrow. The mystery was beginning to arouse my reporter’s instincts.

Rez’s hand came down over my shoulder and rested tentatively on my breast. Instinctively, I tensed, but slowly forced myself to relax when he made no other move. Donna smiled in our direction from her seat beside Russell.

“We wanted it to be a surprise, because it could help improve the lot of the Fourth Worlders.” Despite the attack that had cost us our baby, Rez was still working to help Fourth Worlders make a better life.



“I guess it can’t hurt to tell you something about it,” Russell said. “Basically, it’s a new theory of light and how it can be manipulated, or how we thought it could be manipulated.”

“How was that going to help the Fourth Worlders?” I couldn’t see where a new theory of light would provide jobs and education or provide financing for their entry into the vast web resources of information.

“We were hoping for a completely new line of phones, with receivers so cheap anyone could afford them. And other things, of course; it wouldn’t stop there by any means.”

I thought about it. Fourth Worlders got that designation because they were left out of the information age, especially in our country with the near-collapse of public education after the financial crash. But would cheap phones for everyone (and the money to support them) really change the world that much? It would depend on what they were used for. I thought Russell and Rez were being overly optimistic.

I felt Rez’s fingers curl underneath the slope of my left breast, his fingers warm over the thin cloth of my blouse. I jumped to my feet and went looking for something to drink. I wasn’t ready for a man, no matter how often Donna encouraged me to try it. I brought a cup of coffee back and entwined my fingers with Rez’s to keep his where they belonged. For now, anyway.

Russell winked at Donna. “I’ve got to get a shower and some sleep. I’m exhausted.”

As I half expected, Donna followed him into their room, leaving Rez and me alone.

The moment they left I slid down on the lounge and turned to face Rez. Rita had certainly turned into a handsome man. Unfortunately for him, I still wanted a woman. He seemed to realize what I was thinking.

“You’re still scared of me, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not scared of you. I can’t get used to your body, that’s all.”

He shrugged, his eyes scanning my body. “How about your own?”

“I don’t have a choice about that.”



“Neither do I. I still love you, Li. In fact, I think I love you even more now. You’re beautiful.”

“That’s sex talking.” I knew that was true. I was beautiful, and his male body was reacting to it, even if his mind was still female. I also knew I was still the person he’d loved, and he was the person I’d loved. The conflict I felt almost made me wish my new female hormones would hurry up and overcome my male orientation, speeding me toward adjustment, the way they had with Donna. But apparently my conditioning was stronger.

“Please don’t say that, Li. Sure, sex is part of it. You can’t separate it from love between a man and woman, but that’s not everything. I want you to be open with me again. You’re still treating me like a friendly ogre, harmless so long as you don’t provoke him.”

“Damn it, I’ve been trying.” Unaccountably, I burst into tears. Coping with female hormones was a constant nightmare for me. I was becoming aware of nuances of emotions I hadn’t even known about before my change.

He slid down next to me and put his arm around me again. I put my face against his broad chest to hide the tears.

“Poor dear, I know you have. I’m sorry. I guess I’m trying to rush you.”

I sniffed and lifted my head. “Damn, I don’t know why I’m crying. I never used to cry.”

He patted my back. “Hormones, pure and simple. You cry easier than you used to; I don’t cry as much. Our sex hormones have a lot to do with how we feel and think. I miss all that emotion now. The world is a duller place.”

“Really?” I found that hard to believe. The constant ebb and flow of emotion wore me out. Despite my struggle to accept this female body, I still felt ashamed of myself. Rez was being so patient with me, and I was giving him hardly any encouragement at all.

“You want to watch anything?” He nodded at the screen.

“Not any news. Maybe a movie, but I’d rather watch movies in bed, so I can nod off when I’m sleepy.”

“That can be arranged.” He gave me a friendly leer.



I realized what I had said and backpeddled as quick as I could. “I don’t think that would be a good idea. It would be hard for you to sleep with a woman who isn’t interested in sex.”

“I could always jack off.”

I giggled. Giggling was something new, too. Hormones, again?

“Seriously,” he continued, “I’d rather watch entertainment in bed, too.”

I didn’t say anything.

He still had his arm around me. He leaned down and kissed me on the lips. “I promise not to rape you.”

I didn’t answer. After a moment I got up and put my empty coffee cup in the sink. Rez waited patiently, allowing me time to think. I sat back down.

I was beginning to change my mind. I really didn’t want to sleep alone, but I wasn’t sure Rez would behave. On the other hand, I could always ask him to leave if sleeping together made me really uncomfortable. I still wasn’t planning on having sex with him. I wished suddenly that Russell hadn’t come home. If he were at the lab, I could have asked Donna to join us.

“A penny?”

“What? Oh, nothing. I was thinking.”

I leaned back against his shoulder, feeling the warmth of his body through my clothes. He put his arm around me again and his hand settled on my breast. I was reaching up to remove it when I changed my mind.

After a moment I took a deep breath and spoke. “This feels so odd.”

“How so?”

“I can’t get used to the sensations I feel when you touch me here.”

“Why not relax? I used to enjoy being held by a man. I still miss it.”

“You do?”

“Of course. Remember, I’ve still got a female mind even though I’m



trying to act like a male, since that's what I am."

I leaned closer into his embrace. "Maybe I should try to act more like a woman." I had to admit the feeling of his hand against my breast was provoking pleasurable warmth throughout my body. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad when the time came.

For the first time since the change, I felt relaxed with him. We began to discuss the differences we were both having troubles with, me more so than him. After laughing together, it didn't seem quite so odd to touch each other. This strange male was no longer such a stranger. He was Rita, and I loved her and wanted her. My mind and emotions struggled with the confusion of feeling a female's desire for the woman I loved in a man's body.

Finally, he squeezed me, his own eyes hungry with his longing for more closeness. "Want to go to bed now and watch a movie?"

"All right! Just be nice." I knew I was treading on dangerous ground, but suddenly I wanted to know what was going to happen between Rez and me.

I went into the bathroom first, carrying a nightgown I picked out for its opaqueness. It wasn't until I undressed and slipped it on that I noticed how well Donna had chosen. The soft velvet fabric clung to my body and thighs in a way that was more provocative than something transparent would have been. Well, it was too late to find something else now. I left it on and came out and gave the bed instructions to make us a backrest while Rez undressed down to his shorts.

We leaned back against the pillowed supports. He already knew my favorite programs. He turned one on—The Pet Plague Universe. The old Tom that hung around the house and accepted shelter and food on cold nights was almost a duplicate in color of one of the intelligent cats in the story.

"Do you want to interact?" he asked.

"Mmm. Why not just make it a random program, and let's see how it comes out this time."

"Suits me." He started the program. I still think he cheated. The two chief female protagonists didn't lose any time getting involved with each other, and the male protagonist didn't make an appearance until I had already gotten horny watching the women.



As the story progressed, it became more and more sexually stimulating. When I felt Rez's hand brush against my arm, I wasn't surprised. What did surprise me was that I let him pull me over to him. I leaned against his shoulder with my left hand on his bare thigh. His arm was around me again, and I didn't try to prevent him from stroking my breast with his hand.

I glanced down and saw the unmistakable swell of an erection beneath his shorts. Now what?

Would he really go jack off? I looked back up at the screen. There was plenty of action, but I couldn't seem to concentrate on it with Rez's hand molded around my breast, squeezing and teasing the taut nipple.

"Rez..."

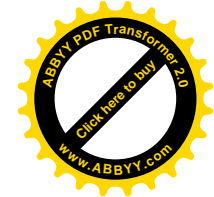
"Hmm?" He twisted his upper body toward me. His face hovered close to my own, his expression serious. His eyes were huge and dark and full of love. I intended to tell him to stop, but he put his other arm around my waist and lowered his lips to mine before I could say anything.

It wasn't the first time we had kissed, but it was the first one that was overtly sexual. I tried to relax in his embrace, thinking I would break away in another moment, but somehow I couldn't. I slid my hand around his neck and parted my lips, intending to make it a goodnight kiss. He deftly parted the fabric of my gown and slid his hand inside. His hand closed over my breast and suddenly I didn't want the kiss to end. Waves of pleasure were coursing through me as his large male hands roved my body. I wanted him to continue, to move those hands further down.

"Oh, Li, I want you so bad." His voice was hoarse with desire and love. The screen shut off as the story ended.

I didn't know what to say or do. I wanted the intense pleasure I was feeling to go on, I wanted to make love to Rita again, even if she was male, and I was female. But another part of my mind was screaming. How could I be doing this with a man?

While I was debating with my schizophrenic self, Rez told the bed to make the backrests into pillows again, and as they lowered, his lips descended over mine. I let it go on. He parted the rest of the gown's touch tabs and ran his hand over the curve of my hip and along my thighs and back to my breasts, bare now to his touch. First I would feel myself beginning to respond, then the sensation would vanish as I



thought of what was happening.

On the next upswing, while I was feeling a surge of desire, I ran my hand down the length of his body without thinking, as if I were searching a woman's thighs with the intent of parting them. My hand met the bulge beneath his shorts. He reached down and pushed them over his hips, freeing his penis. It sprang up, hard and erect.

Curiosity got the best of me. I wanted to see if touching his penis would feel any different than when I had handled my own. It did. It was an alien object, the skin stretched to a satiny smoothness almost like velvetin. I curled my fingers around the hard shaft. The area between my legs ached with a need to be filled. I made a sudden decision to go on with the act. I wondered if I was wet enough for him to enter me without hurting, and the thought came immediately that there was a sure cure for that.

I took a deep breath and slid down on the bed, feeling the waves of my hair brushing his belly as it trailed behind me. How bad could it be? Billions of people had done it before, and all I intended was to lubricate it a little. I raised my head and slid my lips down over his erect penis. I heard him gasp as it entered my mouth and knew exactly how he felt: a sudden delicious wet warmth was enveloping him and exploding into his groin.

All I intended was to get him wet, but I got carried away with this new sensation. His penis was both soft and hard, a double sensation that was curious and compelling. I moved my lips back up the shaft and then slowly down on him again, feeling the bumpy ridge of the crown part my lips wider for a second as they slid past it, then the fullness of the length of it crowding my mouth. I was so lost in my own exploration that I completely forgot what the end result was bound to be, and I didn't even consider that he might not have learned to hold back yet. I felt it jerk in my mouth and heard him cry out at the same time. A sudden surge of warm semen filled the back of my throat. His hands were grasping my neck and shoulders, holding me there. More semen flooded into my mouth, and I swallowed involuntarily, tasting the saltiness now, and feeling it spreading to the inside of my lips and onto my tongue like a film of thick brandy.

I wanted to withdraw but remembered how often Rita had done this for me. I knew what he was feeling now and how awful it would be to have it interrupted. Finally, it tapered off to a few weak spurts as his organism ended.

I held him in my mouth a few more moments while I swallowed the last of his semen and his cries died down to long moans of relief. I let



him go and crawled up beside him. He hugged me to him so tightly I could hardly breathe.

After a few minutes, he started to stroke my body again. His intentions were plain. Considering what I had done already, I couldn't see any point in not going the rest of the way.

I was still apprehensive, even though I tried to relax and enjoy the foreplay. I was worried about what it was going to feel like having him inside me, and that made me tense as he entered me for the first time. I was inhibited enough that I failed to reach an orgasm before he did. His thrusting still sent pleasant sensations through my whole body, though, awakening a longing to experience more.

The second time started out slow and built to an amazing climax. I was more relaxed and enjoyed the slow beginning thrusts, meeting each one with an upward surge of my hips, using my legs and arms locked around him for leverage. As his passion mounted and his rhythm increased, I simply held on, moaning with pleasure each time he drove deep into me. As I man, I had never dreamed how wonderful it would feel to open myself to a lover in this way. As he pounded into me faster and faster, my whole body vibrated in tune to the beat of his body drumming between my legs. I heard a shrill screaming noise and realized it was my own voice calling out as fiery passion swept over my body, burning me to ash in its flame.

I don't even know when it ended. I gradually became aware of his weight pressing me into the bed and the slickness of sweat between us. I was still locked around him, breasts flattened against his chest with my nipples still partially erect and tingling with a residue of pleasure. I sighed, wondering why on earth I had waited so long.

Rez raised his head from where it had been buried in my neck and kissed me. "I love you Li. I'll love you forever."

I murmured the same words to him. It sounded fine to me.

Chapter Twenty

If it seems like we were obsessed with sex in those days, we were. All over the world, sex became even more fascinating, if that were possible. It was the sex changes, of course, in others no less than our



family, and the fact that there were so many more young healthy bodies with hormones surging through them than there had ever been before, mine among them.

I never lost my male attraction to women, and Donna was always happy to oblige. The funny thing is, I never did develop an urge to experiment with any men other than Rez and Russell (though on a couple of trips by myself I did spend a night or two with another woman), and Russell wasn't home often enough for me to get to really know him in bed for a long time. It was over a month after my first time with Rez before we slept together.

It was fine, and I enjoyed making love with him, but Rez was still my first love. We became even closer than we had been before the change although we still sometimes shared the bed with Donna. She was as sweet and compliant as ever, my best friend and my female lover. Our only problem was figuring out who would take the dominant role each time.

I still hated to travel, but some of the stories Mary contracted for me to do required it. Rez usually went with me. One story we did was about the Fourth Worlder reaction to the new federal welfare program. That one didn't sell so well; once things quieted down, the upper class didn't want to hear about their problems anymore, and the Fourthers had only limited funds to spend on entertainment.

With the country so heavily divided by the recent social upheavals, the presidential election was thrown into the House that year. It took a number of votes before Denton Jones was finally elected.

Jones was a strong supporter of the space program, since he believed in the theory that the gates had an alien origin. Over the protests of environmentalists, an Orion was launched. Construction on a second Orion was begun, and combined with the clippers rolling off the assembly lines, a manned presence in space began to seem like a permanent possibility. The government never really made clear the purpose of all the expenditures on the space program, but there were few complaints. Most people now believed that the gates came from an advanced alien technology, especially since the decline of the Church of the Gates helped convince people God wasn't responsible (though the Gaters remained a force in politics). The space program was promoted as a way to "catch up." It didn't matter how many times scientists tried to explain how far beyond us the gate technology was, the populace refused to understand. They wanted us to do something to compete.

The tabwebs didn't help; they were always coming out with



“scientific” explanations of how we were learning to understand the gates, and how we would soon meet their creators out in space. It is always amazing when you learn all over again how ignorant the general public is about science, or even what “science” really consists of.

After the trauma of our latest sex changes, an uneventful three years passed while our family grew closer together. We were happy and prosperous, and we all had interesting work to occupy our time. Rez and Donna earned advanced degrees in psychology and mathematics. Donna’s thesis was beyond my poor abilities to understand, but Rez’s was interesting—more speculation on the coming steep decline in the birth rate and the male sexual orientation which was causing it.

I never asked him if he included me in his thesis that males in female bodies simply weren’t going to have babies in any great numbers. If he had asked, I would have been honest: as a female, I had no great yearning to get pregnant. The only time the subject came up in a serious discussion between us, I offered to contribute an egg for a host mother; Rez refused without making a fuss about it.

If this sounds like the world was settling down into a peaceful co-existence with the gates, it is only because the gates were mentioned less often in the news. They were still as controversial and as unexplainable as ever, and continued to be the proximate cause of enough wars, rebellions, and social unrest to make the last century seem like a child’s Sunday school picnic. Nothing new was learned about them. There they sat, over a million of them, with no clue to their purpose or origin. They were certainly changing the world though, if that was the result that the source of the gates intended.

The gates did stimulate a bonanza of new inventions and innovations, simply by upsetting conventional notions and turning thoughts and speculations into new areas. The new technology generated a slow financial upswing in the markets but left the Fourth Worlders little better off, or anyone else for that matter.

Global warming continued and the Antarctic ice sheets were still melting. Much of the added revenue governments gained from increased employment went towards relocating seacoast residents. The North Houston militia began to drill regularly as more and more of Old Houston became uninhabitable. Many of the Fourth Worlders began rebuilding their shanties on the edges of our city, refusing to move north into the relocation camps. I can’t say I blamed them much. The Midwest camps were beginning to get a bad reputation.

I made sure we had plenty of arms and ammunition on hand, and we



all got a lot of exercise fireproofing the old house and building and then prettifying revetments around it. I didn't like having so many Fourth Worlders nearby, and I didn't trust the Luddite philosophy of the Gaters among them.

Really, the only thing which marred our happiness during those years was the fact that poor Russell was still working on his theory as tenaciously as a bulldog with his teeth locked in the throat of a larger opponent, hanging on but unable to bring him down. His working hypothesis had been reviewed again and again and never a flaw found; yet each time an apparatus was constructed to test the theory, it failed to work. It was driving him to distraction. Almost always, he came home haggard and had to be careful not to transfer his irritability to the rest of us. Donna took on the nurturing role in their relationship and usually managed to send him back to the lab refreshed and ready to work even harder.

One afternoon, almost three-and-a-half years after he had said "six months, maybe," he returned with a smile on his face and a spring in his step. He greeted us with hugs and kisses, practically oozing confidence.

Rez threw an arm over his shoulder. "If you don't have good news this time, you can't tell it from the way you're acting. Something must have worked right on that last contraption you built."

He grinned. "Nope, it failed again like always."

"What's all the joy about, then?" I rubbed my cheek against the three-days growth of whiskers he was wearing. He smelled of sweat and burnt coffee.

"Because I know what's been causing the problem, now. Next time it will work, believe me."

"What was it?" Rez looked unconvinced. His enthusiasm for the project had faded after so many failures, and nowadays he concentrated on his own research.

Russell glanced around as if he expected a squad of 'porters to materialize in the room with us. "I don't want to say anything else about it right now. I'll tell you once we've rewired everything and tested it again. I wanted to come home and tell you the good news, though, and spend a few days relaxing before starting over again."



Donna kissed him. “So relax!”

Russell focused on the rest of us for the first time. . “Hey, you girls look great!”

Even after three years, I found myself looking around to see what girls he meant. When I realized he meant Donna and me, I laughed to myself. I was wearing shorts and a clingtight sleeveless blouse. When I looked down, I could see my nipples making little tents where the fabric clung to my breasts, outlining their twin forms so perfectly that the fabric might have been painted on. I went over and hugged his neck again, feeling the pleasant little sway and jiggle as I moved. My female body felt young and healthy and sexy, and I no longer worried about showing it off; in fact I had begun to enjoy it. I never had much use for a bra, though. The damn things felt like a straightjacket.

As we settled down, I plopped myself next to Rez. He nuzzled my neck and began exploring my breasts as shamelessly as a cat in heat. I nipped at his ear to make him stop, at the same time whispering a promise for the night to come. My orientation and personal beliefs had certainly undergone a vast transformation since my change. He didn't object to my suggestion.

“So what's new here?” As usual, Russell depended on us for news from the rest of the world.

Donna was snuggled up next to him. “I heard the floods won't get much higher.”

“The next Orion is almost ready for launch,” I said, knowing he always wanted to hear about the space program.

“A tinker toy. It will be obsolete before it gets into orbit, even if they complete it.”

“Your theory again?”

“Not just mine. We've all worked on it.”

Russell was modest. I was sure that the original notion, whatever it turned out to be, had originated in his mind.

“Whatever. That's what you meant, though?”

“Yup. When it proves out this time, there may be no limit to the applications. The new computers Rez wants to see will be the least of what we'll be able to accomplish. I think the real theorists may get



practical faster than light travel out of it.” He looked around the room with a devilish grin, enjoying the effects of his bombshell.

I jumped to my feet. “Are you serious?” FTL was the dream of every boy and man and woman who had ever read a science fiction novel! “Yup, I think so. Too soon to be certain yet, but that’s what I’m thinking.”

My imagination soared, picturing faraway planets, orbiting stars throughout the galaxy, strange alien creatures, and fantastic new discoveries, as if the possibility of faster than light travel wasn’t already enough for one day. No wonder he was downplaying computer applications. Why, with FTL on the horizon, there could be fresh new land, new frontiers and a hope for every downtrodden Fourth Worlder on the planet. Once America was the brave new world where Europeans immigrated to escape starvation and famine and religious prosecution. Now the stars would be a vast new frontier!

Donna threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him so hard that he couldn’t speak again until she let him come up for breath.

“Don’t mention any of this to anyone. We don’t want it getting out yet, and the tests still have to prove the theory. They will, though; they will.”

I couldn’t understand how he could be so confident after so many failures, but there was no doubting his certainty. “So how much longer now?”

He hugged Donna and beamed at all of us. “No more than two or three weeks, I would say. Stick close to home so you’ll be here when I come back. We’ll really celebrate then!”

After Russell’s revelation, I called Mary and asked her to cancel a contract I had signed to do a story over in Louisiana among the Cajuns, one area of the country where the gates had been accepted almost as quickly and enthusiastically as they had in France. She tore her hair and cursed like a sailor, but I was adamant. She could either assign it to someone else or I would drop it and pay the penalty. Muttering under her breath that this would give me a bad name, she said she would get someone else to do it and to forget about the penalty. I felt a mild regret; I had been looking forward to the trip and a chance to consort with the Cajun ladies, but there was no way I was going to chance not being home the next time Russell returned.



We waited anxiously over the next two weeks, then with even more anxiety as more days passed. It was like counting down for a rocket launch where the seconds had become days before the next tick of the clock. When Russell finally did get back, it wasn't anything at all like the triumphant return we had been expecting.

Chapter Twenty-one

I came awake with someone shaking my shoulder.

"What is it," I muttered, glancing at the clock. It read three-thirty in the morning. I sat up in bed and told the lights to come on.

Russell was standing by the bed, holding a carrying bag in one hand. His hair was singed and his face blackened with soot. But his eyes were what shocked me awake. They held the frightened look of a wild animal fleeing for its life with the hunters in hot pursuit. Behind his opened jean jacket I could see burned places on his shirt.

"Russ, what happened?" I was stupefied.

Behind me on the bed, Rez and Donna sat up, still half-asleep. I saw their eyes opened wide as they stared at the same apparition.

"Get up, all of you. We may be in danger." He turned away and began peeling off his jacket as he left the room. His shirt was in tatters.

I jumped out of bed and threw on a pair of jeans and shirt and boots. At the first mention of danger, I had felt for my gun in the drawer of the caddy. I buckled it on while the others were getting dressed. We all hurried out into the great room.

Russell was sitting on the lounge holding his head in his hands. He looked up as we entered. Tears were glimmering in his eyes.

I switched the security system over to the highest setting. Now a stray mouse couldn't twitch its whiskers without setting off an alarm. That done, I put on coffee. Donna took one look at Russell and led him protesting into the bedroom, leaving the door open. We heard water running while we waited to hear what had happened.



The coffee was ready when Donna and Russell came back in. He was dressed in fresh clothes. His hair was still glistening darkly from the shower, and a fresh bandage had been stuck on his neck over the worst burn. I took out a bottle of brandy, added a dollop to each cup with an extra one for Russell and handed it to him. He sipped at it, then swallowed, sucking in his breath as the hot beverage burned his tongue.

“It’s gone, the lab is gone,” he said.

“Gone? What do you mean?” Rez laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Blown up. Burned. The Gaters did it.”

“What! Why would they do something like that?” Ever since Messilinda deserted them, the Gaters had been dwindling in numbers, fading away to become another one of the seemingly endless small religious sects that dotted the American landscape, but the remaining believers were action-oriented, much like the old Right To Life activists before they were finally subdued.

“I guess they didn’t agree with our research. That’s what has been going wrong the last few years. We had a ringer in the lab, and no one knew it. He’s the one who’s been writing the programs for the instrument tests, and he would always insert an error before we got ready for a run. We never suspected him until a few weeks ago.” Russell’s voice shook as he spoke. He sounded as if his best friend had betrayed him—maybe he had. He spent most of his time at the lab. I supposed he was close to the people there.

“You found him out then. That’s why you were so fired up last time you were home?”

“Yeah. I finally got smart and checked the program one night when I was there by myself. I found the error, but it was too late to stop the last test. Besides, I didn’t know who else might have been in on it. This time I wrote a little program myself that would cancel the error and sneaked it in where he couldn’t discover it. Our test run worked perfectly. Our theories are proved.”

That obviously wasn’t the whole story. I waited to hear the rest.

Russell went on, “We wanted to do another run or two with slightly altered parameters before writing up the results. I came back to the lab last night—this morning, I mean, after we had all gone out to eat. I was intending to go over everything again. I got there just as this same



guy was sneaking out. I called him down, and he denied everything except being a Gater, so I let him go, thinking that would be the end of it. Oh, fuck it all, why didn't I check around? I might have found the bomb he set."

"Do you mean to tell me that the Gaters blew up your whole lab?" I could hardly believe it.

Russell buried his face in his hands and sobbed. He looked up at us, tears streaming down his face. "They did. The bomb went off as we were making another run this evening. Everyone was killed except me."

"My God. You mean all your work is gone? Your whole team is dead?" Horror turned Rez's eyes into black marbles.

Russell shook his head and dragged a hand across his tearstained cheek. "No, I did one thing right, anyway." He tapped the suitcase by his side. "I had been constructing a prototype light computer. On a hunch, I took it and stuffed it in here, along with a set of notes on our work that I pulled from the files. I had gone to my office to get it because I wanted to have it ready to leave right after the run. They started a little earlier than I thought. I was entering the lab, down at the far end, when the explosion went off. It knocked me off my feet, but didn't really hurt me. When I got up and couldn't find anyone else breathing and heard the sirens, I grabbed my bag and left."

"May that traitor be damned to hell." It was an oath I truly meant, from the bottom of my soul. Suddenly I remembered the first thing Russell had said: "We may all be in danger."

"Why did you say we might be in danger? Do they know you got away with all the notes?"

"I don't know about that, but they will surely learn that I wasn't one of the casualties, and they are bound to think of the possibility, or at least decide to come after me in order to eliminate the last member of the team. We've held this whole thing pretty close to the vest and so far as I know, there isn't any similar research going on anywhere. I wouldn't even have come back here except that I doubt that my staying away would give you any protection. If I disappeared, they would come after you to try to find my whereabouts." Pulling a kleenex from his pocket, he blew his nose and wiped his eyes. Tearstains were still visible on his cheeks.

His reasoning made sense. I picked up the phone and called Chief Wilson at home. His sleepy voice answered after several repeated



beeps, without visual. I kept mine on so he could see that it was really me speaking. “Chief, would you trust me on an urgent matter, without asking a lot of questions?”

“I guess so, Li. At least for the time being.”

“Good. Would you send a patrol car out to our place as soon as possible? With as many men as you can spare? Tell them that we may all be in danger, and that no one is to approach our house without our specific permission. I’ll explain later, or it may already be on the news. You know Russell? He was the only one who escaped the explosion earlier today at North Houston University Laboratory.”

“Good God! No, I hadn’t heard. I’ll get the patrol on the way out immediately. Call me back in an hour or two if I haven’t come out to check on you personally by then.”

“Thanks, chief.” I clicked off.

A few minutes later the big screen sounded off and a blinking icon come on, telling me to check one of the long-distance infrared scanners. I put it on the screen. Two hundred yards away, at the point where our driveway turned onto the blacktop of the road, I saw several figures jump from a van and go to ground at the intersection, apparently to block any stray traffic coming that way. Their rifles glowed a faint red in the scanners, barely above ambient temperature. A dozen figures began running down the drive toward the house. I guess they thought the sound of a car might alert us prematurely to their presence. That was the only thing that saved us.

Not again! My heart sank as memories of the battle I had once fought flashed through my mind. My hands began to shake, but there was no time to spare. No other icon was blinking, so that told me this was the only gang of intruders so far. My whole body was trembling, but I managed to spit out orders, thanking all the gods that I was a squad leader during the riots; it had prepared me, at least a little, for quick decisions.

“Out the back way, quick!” I ordered. “Grab your guns on the way.” Russell wasn’t a carrier. He snatched up his suitcase. I gave him a shove. “Get going. We’ll be right behind you.”

Donna and Rez paused only long enough to arm themselves before we ran out the backdoor. We headed for the woods, keeping the house between the driveway and us. As we gained the concealment of the trees, a flash of light blossomed back toward town, followed a few seconds later by the clap of an explosion. The patrol car! I cursed as I



realized I'd funneled several good men straight to their deaths. Somehow whoever was attacking us must have tapped into my conversation with the chief, either that or been extraordinarily well prepared; perhaps both. At any rate, that left no doubt in my mind that if we were caught, we would end up as dead as those poor patrolmen.

I knew the woods, even in the dark, from all my teenage ramblings through it. We hurried down a deer trail, not stopping until we were well away from the house. Behind us, I heard crashing noises and gunshots as the Gaters began neutralizing the security system and breaking inside. I was sorry then that I hadn't put out the money for a mankiller bond with the system. Those bastards deserved to die if anyone did.

When I heard Russell began to gasp for breath, I called a halt; his endless hours in the lab had left him out of shape.

Russell dropped to his knees, sucking in huge lungfuls of air. "God, I didn't know they would be so close behind me."

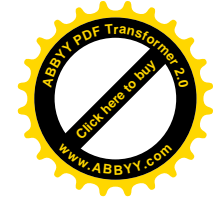
"We were lucky." I touched my pistol to make sure it was still in its holster.

"What do we do now?" Rez asked, deferring to me.

I tried to make my mind work. It was a cinch the Gaters knew who we were, and they were certain to pass the information on to their cohorts. There was no chance of getting far without being recognized, and by all indications, a hunt was being conducted without worrying about the consequences. They would shoot Russell on sight. If Russ were missing, they would capture the rest of us to lure him out, and then kill us all.

The night was quiet. The sounds of them breaking into our home had stopped. That was not a good sign. By now, they knew we had run out the back way and into the woods. They would be on our heels in a few minutes. Even as I struggled to come up with a plan, they were probably calling in extra help to surround this section of woods and hunt us down. The woods weren't that extensive. Farms or ranches were located on three sides of the strip of forest, and it ended inside a half mile at another ranch.

What to do? What to do? This was a rural area. Even if the chief called out the militia, it would take many hours for help to reach us. And if they stopped at our house first, they would think we had been captured and hauled away.



Suddenly, a name popped into my head. Whitley Horst, the NSC agent, my old nemesis. Would he send a team out if I called and told him I had vital information? Probably, but could they get here in time? Besides that, I was sure the Gaters were monitoring my phone code. If I called anyone, they could locate our position almost immediately from the satellite data. I didn't see any other choice, though.

"Li? What are we going to do? We can't just stand here." Donna's voice was shrill with fear.

"I know. I'm calling the NSC. Horst may be able to help."

"That bastard!" Rez spat.

"I know, but he may be our only chance." I racked my brain, trying to remember the code number. It had been too long; it was lost. I called the North Houston federal building and got a night operator. I wasted precious minutes convincing her that I had a national emergency and that she should immediately contact Whitney Horst. She relented only after I mentioned the explosion at the lab; apparently she had already heard about it.

A few minutes later, Horst was on the phone. He already knew about the attack on the lab. I told him that Russ was with us, that we were fleeing my house after an attack by Gators, and that Russ carried information that could shake the world. When Horst heard that, he made me wait for several seconds while he activated a scrambler circuit so that only we could understand each other.

"If you don't hurry, none of us will be here when you arrive," I snapped as soon as the circuit kicked in.

"All right," he said. "I'm convinced. Hide as best you can. Security code will be Eagle Hawk. Got it? Eagle Hawk. I'll get a team on the way."

"Let's go," I said to the others. I remembered a little gully where I used to squirrel hunt. It was the best cover I could think of. I led the way. The gully was near the end of the stretch of forest, where a blacktop farm road separated it from the adjoining ranch. A few minutes later we were hidden below its banks, waiting for whatever would happen next. I was trembling and feared I wouldn't be able to hold my gun steady if I had to shoot.

It wasn't long before the test came. The shadowy head and shoulders



of a dark figure appeared silhouetted against the skyline at the top of the bank of the gully. Friend or foe? Surely the NSC couldn't be here already. As I watched him edge closer, I realized that as soon as the Gaters found the gully, it would strike them as an obvious place to hide. We would have been better off crouched in the woods somewhere.

I fired over the figure's head and shouted, "Eagle!" hoping desperately for an answering "Hawk." Instead, the shadowy shape flipped its rifle down in my direction and fired off a full clip. The shots went over my head. I pointed my gun and fired back twice, and the Gater toppled backwards. From above, I heard shouts of "Over here!" and nervous gunfire.

We were hiding near the head of the gully. I debated whether to begin making a retreat toward the other end when from that direction came a voice. "Eagle," it said, barely loud enough for me to hear.

"Hawk," I returned, relief washing over me like a warm shower after being out in a cold wind. How had they gotten here so fast? A man and a woman ran up to us, crouched low.

"This way," the man said. "Hurry. Stay down." he spotted Russell's suitcase. "Is this your data?"

"Yes," Russell said.

"Good, give it to me and come on."

Russell handed it over without hesitation.

We began running down the bottom of the gully where water had washed a path free of vines and brush. A ripping sound of gunfire followed our retreat and limbs and branches shattered above our heads.

Two more men joined us at the end of the gully. One of them took the suitcase and hurried away. He dropped to the ground and crawled over the bank on his stomach. I lost sight of him as he slithered away. The other three stayed behind, urging us to cover behind a tangled heap of trees, probably washed there by a spring flood. I was wondering why we all hadn't gone with the other man, but I forgot all about him as a withering volley of gunfire raked into the logs, sending woodchips flying.

"Stay down, don't risk yourselves unless they charge," the leader said. "Help is on the way."



I hoped he was right. We kept our heads down while a constant barrage of gunfire from the Gaters chewed at the logs like energetic beavers.

“They’re going to charge,” he warned. “Get ready.” I wondered how he could be so certain, but he was right. They came directly at us, over both banks of the gully and along the dry streambed, firing wildly. Fortunately, most Gaters aren’t carriers; these must have been newly armed. Most of the bullets went zinging off into the forest. We stopped the first charge dead in its tracks, dropping a number of them, and causing the rest to scramble for concealment.

A few minutes later, the man gave us a second warning. “They’re getting ready again. This time keep your heads down.”

Keep down? If we kept down they would overrun us for sure. I started to rise up and a strong muscular hand shoved my face into the dirt. I sputtered and spat, struggling to get away. From behind us, I heard the bursting rattle of mob guns firing in unison and screams of terror and pain in front of us.

Abruptly, the hand was gone from my neck. I looked up just in time to see the three men and the woman who had saved us scurrying away, miraculously dodging the bullets that chewed up the earth around them. They vanished around the curve in the gully bottom just as a gang of agents poured over the edge of the wall above us, shouting, “Eagle, Eagle!”

The NSC reinforcements, or what I thought were reinforcements, had arrived just in time. They surrounded us, three of them forming a tight shield around Russell. My sides heaved as I tried to catch my breath.

“All right, let’s go,” one of the men said.

“Wait a minute. I want to thank the other men. They saved our lives.” I looked around in the moonlight, wondering where they had run off to and why.

“What other men?” a flinty voice demanded. “We’re the only NSC agents here.”

“Then who...?” I forgot the matter as I heard Donna moan. I twirled and saw her gripping her arm. Blood was dripping from it, dark drops appearing almost black in the wan light. I broke away from the hands trying to restrain me and went to her. Her left forearm was shattered,



but the bullet hadn't torn it up too much; she was in pain and going into shock.

I refused to say anything else until they got us out of the woods. They evacuated us in a helicopter and even then, all I could tell them was that four unidentified figures, three men and a woman, had come upon us, given the codeword and led us in the fight.

Three hours later I was still trying to explain it to Whitney Horst. He was furious when Russell told him that he had given away the suitcase with the model light computer and all the painfully preserved notes of his experiments and calculations. Our four unidentified saviors had made a clean getaway. Horst grilled us for several more hours until I finally told him that we weren't answering any more questions. There was nothing left to tell.

I picked Donna up from the hospital as soon as her surgery was over and took her home. She had a cast on her arm and was dozey from the anesthesia and bone-healing injection Otherwise, Tyson said, she was fine—no permanent damage had been done. We put her to bed, only too glad to turn in to try to get some sleep ourselves. We didn't have to worry about another attack. There were enough NSC agents surrounding the house to break a battalion.

Horst came back the next morning for more debriefing, interrupting us as we were trying to repair some of the damage done by the Gaters when they broke in. I had already called our security service to get the system re-installed and working again. This time I put up the bond for their mankiller system.

Horst was still furious that the suitcase had slipped through his hands. After another hour of questioning, he gave up. "I don't understand it," he confessed. "Who the hell were they? How did they manage to get our code? And how did they manage to get away so easily?"

When he finished cursing, he put Russell under arrest. But he soon discovered that it no longer mattered.

Chapter Twenty-two

Long after that terrible night, we found out that it was a consortium



of Seconders who pulled off the coup. All we knew at the time—soon after the attack—was that an anonymous group posted all of Russell's notes and designs on the web, designating them as public domain. At the same time, they disclosed that a militant sub-branch of the Gater church was behind the sabotage at the university laboratory.

The Gater militants had converted one of Russell's team to their brand of Luddite theology. He, in turn, had fouled up their tests and passed on the information to superiors. When Russell found out what they were doing, they were forced to strike, determined to prevent any hint of the possibility of faster than light travel being made public. I thought of Messilinda, and her gentle way of espousing her teachings; she had never preached violence, nor resistance to others doing scientific research; she had simply believed that it was irrelevant to their beliefs.

I wondered where she (or he, now) was and whether he had been behind our rescue. He was one of the slowly increasing numbers of Seconders. They were still viewed with suspicion by authorities, though none of them had ever posed any kind of threat to the government. However, the government's suspicion and resentment was normal, considering the second passers were potentially immortal (based on limited data, of course), and immune to questioning.

For the next several days, until the security system was again up and working, I insisted that one of us remain awake at night to monitor the screens; the NSC agents had been withdrawn soon after Russell's data was made public. Donna was exempted; she would be dozey for another week until the bones in her arm were fully healed.

On my night of monitor duty, I wrote up our exploits for the adventureweb. It was an immediate bestseller in North America, making me a wealthy woman.

The second evening, after the security system was back up, and I knew we could all go to bed that night without worrying, I declared a celebration. Well-armed and wary, I ventured out for the first time to restock our supply of rum and mix, but the streets were peaceful.

We had batted around the happenings after the lab explosion at the



university among ourselves, but not as a group. When I returned, Russell had a scienceweb program on, turned low. It was far more technical than my Sunday supplement pieces, but not so mired in jargon that a person of average education couldn't follow it. On screen, a graphie was explaining, using other graphics, what some of the new technology growing out of Russell's light research would mean.

"See that?" He gestured at the screen, where the graphie (depicted as a curvaceous young lady) was wearing the prospective light computer on a chain around her neck. It was smaller than the palm of my hand. She gave it orders and a visual display appeared in midair, a comfortable viewing distance from her eyes. She switched by voice to various web programs, called up files, and talked. Her words appeared immediately on the display.

"Impressive," I admitted, "but computers that small with projected holovision screens have been in the planning stages for years."

He waved a hand. "Keep watching."

I did. Another graphie, a male this time, appeared alongside the first, with a background clearly indicating that he was on Mars. They began talking—with no time lag.

"How do they manage that?" Rez asked.

"They don't, yet. This is simulated, but it won't be long, now. My notes were clear, and I heard earlier this evening that all the computer companies are rushing to get a version on the market first."

I sipped at the rum, savoring the tart sweetness of the mix. This would be a revolution, not having to carry around a phone nor having to hook into a screen for visual—and communicating faster than light. "How much do you think they'll cost? For that matter, how long will a charge last?"

Russell grinned. "With all the companies competing, and as simple as the concept is—now that we understand it—they should cost a lot less than phones do. As far as the power source goes, I've suggested inductive body heat. Shucks, they could even be implanted. Then you wouldn't even need to remember to carry them, or take them off at night for sleeping or, um, other things." He ran his hands up and down Donna's shapely thigh. She leaned against him with her eyes closed, awake, but not taking part in the conversation.



“Amazing. How do they work?” Rez should have known better than to ask that question. I hadn’t bothered, knowing there was no way I would understand the theory.

“Why don’t we just say that we didn’t understand the properties of the photon nearly as well as we thought we did. That same misunderstanding is going to give us faster than light travel within a year or two.”

“I’m more interested in how this is going to affect the Fourth Worlders,” Rez said.

“To start with, phones will soon be as obsolete as a twentieth-century computer. I suspect someone will come up with the idea of distributing them free to the needy. That will open up the web to the Fourth Worlders at last. I can only hope once they are on the web, they’ll make some use of the educational opportunities. Public schools will snap the phones up, too; as a result, education will get better, even with the miserable funding you see now. And, oh, I don’t know, there are so many possibilities. It will take time for the changes, though. Don’t expect results overnight.”

Rez beamed a grateful smile in Russell’s direction. “I don’t know why we can’t. Just getting those poor folks into the web is a big step in the right direction, if for no other reason than the availability of cheap entertainment. That may put a stop to a lot of drug use.”

“Let’s hope so. At any rate, changes are coming.”

I’m not as much of an idealist as Rez. I confess that I was much more interested in the prospects of interstellar travel. “Russ, you said the new computers would be cheap. How about FTL? Will it cost enough that it will have to be a government program?”

“Nope, it shouldn’t. Oh, I’m sure some governments will get involved, but so should a lot of private investors. The best thing about it is that takeoff can be arranged from earth. No gravity well to fight. Then, too, think of all the raw materials available in the asteroids or on the moons of the heavy planets.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I thought we were talking about FTL.”

“We are. Saturn, Sirius, the center of the galaxy, or a whole new galaxy. There shouldn’t be any limitations.” He grinned like a three-year-old with a bright, shiny new toy to play with.

That called for another drink. If what he was saying turned out to be



true... I stared up at the ceiling, my mind already in outer space, imagining some incredible adventures as I soared to new worlds in my trusty ship. Rez recognized my expression. It was the same one I often wore after reading or watching a good science fiction program.

“Come back to earth, Ms. Star Trek.” He shook his head at me. “Haven’t you had enough adventures lately?”

He had something there. Did I really want to go out into space, exploring new worlds and possibly fighting for my life against some ten-eyed monstrosity? Now that fiction was turning into fact, I didn’t know if I really had the guts to go first. But if not first, maybe later. To have the opportunity to find out what was out there in the galaxy would be like a Fourth Worlder winning the lottery, a wildly improbable occurrence suddenly coming true.

I came back over and sat back down by him. I took a good pull from my drink and stretched out with my head in his lap. He began trailing his fingers lightly over my bare midriff, then slid his hand under the loose bottom hem of my blouse and rested it on my breast.

“If I got a chance to go on a starship, would you go with me?” I asked. I looked up into his face where a faint shadow of whiskers was growing. A beard was one thing I didn’t miss now that I was a woman.

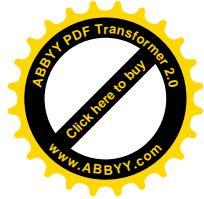
“Why don’t we wait and see what develops first? Russ, how long do you think it will be?”

“Oh, a year or two, I should think, then you’ll be seeing all kinds of spaceships being built.”

My heart jumped with excitement. “How fast will they go?”

For the first time that evening, Russell didn’t either smile or grin when he answered a question. “Trust you to put a finger on the one thing we’re not sure of. We’re certain the theory works. We’re certain that FTL will work. What we don’t know, and can’t predict until someone actually goes out and comes back, is what the upper limits are. I may have erred when I said something about other galaxies. Then again, maybe not. I’m optimistic, but why worry? We’ll know soon enough.”

As it turned out, Russell was indeed a little optimistic. It took almost four years before the first starship took off from earth, disappearing instantly from its berth at the Gila Bend testing facilities. The delay



was caused by the need to develop pinpoint accuracy in the guidance mechanisms. America's lead in nano-electronics helped enormously in getting our craft off first.

Other governments, racing to catch up, launched other ships. They should have waited. None of theirs ever returned. A few private consortiums, more interested in near-space, built smaller and simpler ships, and they worked fine. Others began building, and the competition to exploit the solar system and nearby stars began to get under way.

In the meantime, Russell's other predictions were more on the mark. The new computers were low-priced and quickly replaced the old phones. I wore mine on a neck chain disguised as a gold sand dollar. They were amazing. It took some time to get used to having a display instantly available wherever I wanted one, but eventually it began to seem normal. I was even beginning to think of getting one implanted.

Fourth Worlders all over the globe snapped up the old phones, which were distributed free in some areas like our own country, and Rez's analysis proved to be pretty much on the mark. Crime and unrest began decreasing and some Fourth Worlders began doing any kind of work they could find to earn the money to convert from phones to bodycoms.

By this time, I was making so much money from my writing that we could all live comfortably without leaving home unless we wanted to. Russell did go back to work as soon as a temporary lab was erected, and helped design the new permanent buildings. Rez continued his research, and I continued to write stories about the gates simply because I was still so fascinated with them.

I did one serious program on the Seconders. It was informed speculation, and Rez helped on it. We noted the statistics: only about one in a hundred thousand persons managed a successful second passage. We got into the mental orientation of those who did. There wasn't much positive correlation with any particular aspect of a person's personality, and what little there was could still be wrong, given the small sample population and the reluctance of Seconders to be interviewed. One thing became clear, though: a rigid belief system of any kind seemed to preclude passage. That made me wonder how serious Messilinda had been with her new religion. Had that hundred-year-old man played a huge joke on the world after coming back as a woman? I put that in as a teaser.

Negative correlations were many: psychopaths, criminal mentalities, very low intelligence, an excessive number of harmful genes, either



recessive or dominant, extremes of physical endowment, and (I thought) any kind of dogmatist propensities. I couldn't prove the last one; I simply extrapolated from the fact that extreme religionists never passed through the gates a second time.

When that fact became general knowledge, two conflicting trends emerged: some people begin to loosen up on their religious convictions, embracing a broader, more tolerant faith, while others attributed the gates to the work of the devil trying to lead the faithful astray and became more rigid than ever. It would have been laughable if the reactions weren't thousands of years old, repeated over and over in various guises.

There were fewer wars now, but some were still fought, mostly due to conflicts over control of the gates or their supposed origin and purpose. I commented about it one day while Rez and I were researching a story.

"I guess the gates have become a normal part of the world," I said, "Even though people still fight over them once in awhile. But there aren't nearly as many wars now. At least they've done that much for us."

"Indirectly."

"How so?"

"You're still a man inside, but try to guess anyway."

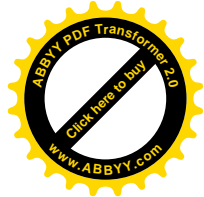
I rolled my hips in a teasing way. "You should know better than me what I am inside."

That earned me a big grin. "True. Never mind about guessing; I'll tell you. The female psyche never has been as territorial as the male's. Since the arrival of the gates, a lot of women have become men—which makes it easier for them to get elected. The result is we now have male leaders who are still female in attitude, and consequently, less squabbling over territory. Simple, huh?" He tilted my chin up for a kiss.

"It sounds logical." I put my arms around him and leaned against his chest. "Why not go further, though? Males changing to females might be losing some of the territorial instinct."

"Do you think you have?"

"I'm not a proper judge." I felt the beginnings of an erection against



my belly. “Had enough research for awhile?”

Rez chuckled. “You haven’t lost much. You’re still always making the first move.”

I put my hand on his erection and squeezed. “Come on, and bring your tea.”

I guess I proved him right, not that I hadn’t already many times before. As a female, I was as sexually aggressive as I had always been (after getting used to a particular woman). The talk had stimulated me, and I rode him to exhaustion.

But sexually aggressive or not, especially with Donna, I found that watching our amateur recordings of myself making love with any of my partners stimulated me like nothing else. I still had the male voyeuristic tendency—even looking at myself in the mirror, was a titillating experience. The woman in the recordings didn’t even seem like me; rather she appeared to be an extremely attractive, almost-redheaded exhibitionist, with firm, pink-tipped breasts any man would go crazy over. I always admired her antics, especially with Donna, or in a three- or four-way combination, and that night was no exception.

While we still knew almost nothing about the gates, I did write a speculative piece where I wondered if the controlling entities might be preparing the human race for some as yet unknown future status. Membership in a galactic society? A world without privation or war? Preparation to replace some other race as rulers of the universe? Partnership with the originators of the gates? I let myself go wild, knowing that nothing could be proved one way or another.

Or so I thought.

About the time it was getting a good play on the web, our first interstellar ship came home.

Their report was disconcerting. The ship traveled hundreds of light years to several stars with marginally inhabitable planets and a couple which looked suitable for human colonization, but no extra-solar intelligence was discovered on any of them. No intelligent life at all, as a matter of fact. If the gate entities were out there, they were sure as hell keeping out of sight.

We all gathered in the great room to watch the documentary on the



exploration. Russell and I were both as excited as boy scouts on their first camping trip, Rez and Donna less so.

The marginal planets didn't sport much in the way of higher life, and what was there was seemed to be antagonistic toward humans. Several of the explorers were killed. The unfamiliar vistas and exotic flora and fauna were disconcerting, like watching a science fiction webadventure, yet at the same time knowing that the settings were taken from real life; no graphics here.

Two of the promising planets did have higher life forms, some of them similar to mammals in some ways yet wildly different in others. One in particular got to me. There was no precautionary warning; kids saw much worse violence in graphics almost indistinguishable from reality every day. The alien creature had an elephant-like head, complete with trunk, set atop a squatty body with crab-like appendages, which it used to get around and grasp objects. It moved slowly, almost as if it didn't care about its surroundings.

As we watched, two men edged up to it. The creature stopped and waved a few of its limbs. It made no sound. Both men inched closer, keeping out of reach of the three-clawed pinchers. When the creature made no hostile moves, the men let down their guard and began examining its body parts. The alien beast remained still, letting them run their hands over it like an aloof cat permitting a bit of petting. This continued for some time, until I wondered when they were going to show something else.

The men grew careless. One was standing near that appeared to be the creature's front, doing the recording, while the other was clipping off bits of a shaggy mane resembling a cross between feathers and pork bristles. Abruptly, the trunk shot straight out, knocking away the recorder pointed at it and attached itself to the other man's chest. He screamed as he tried to drag himself away. Within seconds, the trunk bulged with blood being sucked from his body. He gurgled as he collapsed, and the trunk followed him to the ground still attached to his chest.

The other man backed away, fumbling for his handgun. He pumped shot after shot into the alien life form before it sank down with its legs tucked beneath it, like a huge dead spider. His partner was beyond help by that time.

The scene switched to a dissecting table set up in the camp. The spaceship was visible in the background on top of a small rise where spike-like vegetation was growing.



The trunk was sliced open, starting at the tip. The orifice showed a black tearing-and-grinding apparatus concealed beneath the glabrous covering, leading on to a muscled tube used for sucking out juices from its prey.

I turned away, not wanting to see the rest. I felt sick, as though I had eaten a meal of boiled caterpillars.

Rez faced me, her own face twisted with revulsion. “Still want to go colonizing?” Both horror and concern were mixed in the question.

“Not there, and not right away. God, that was horrible.”

He gripped my hand tight enough to hurt. “Good. I don’t want to even think about it. Not now.”

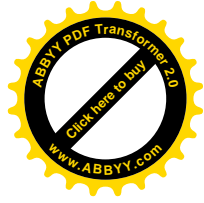
We turned back to the screen. (Big screens were still in use for group viewing or when one needed or wanted views larger than the bodycomps could provide as yet.)

The rest of the program was tame by comparison, but that one episode had made a believer out of me. If ever I did go into space, to another planet, I wanted it to be very thoroughly explored first. I had horrible dreams that night.

The year after our narrow escape from the Gater death squad, I bought up the land surrounding the house and placed sensors in various spots, tied into our home security. I also paid to have the place fortified so even if the security system were breached; it would still be difficult to get inside. I made certain that we kept weapons, ammunition and a good store of supplies on hand. I didn’t ever want to have to run from our home again. I was prepared for anything—except a nuclear war.

Chapter Twenty-three

With his work now reality, Russell finally decided to take a short vacation. All four of us drove over to the Creative Anachronism Festival about an hour’s drive toward San Antonio to relax and enjoy ourselves. We reserved a double luxury suite in the castle, one with all



the modern conveniences rather than realistic anachronistic accommodations featuring corn shuck mattresses, chamber pots, and the like. The festival was a fascinating experience as always, but when I get ready to turn in for the night, I want all the comfort money can buy.

For three days we had a rousing good time, watching the jousting, sword fighting, bow and arrow shooting, eating medieval food and washing it all down with dark English ale. The participants in the various feats and exhibitions were experts at the arcane arts and put on good shows. They were all real practitioners; there were no hired actors. I admired their dedication, though I had no desire to emulate them. Give me an automatic handgun with Kevlex cutter loads any day in place of a yewbow. I carried my gun with me, and kept plenty of re-loads in the car and on my person, and made sure that Rez and Donna carried theirs as well.

A couple of times I had trouble concealing my gun, because of the way I dressed. It was warm and over the years since the change I had become comfortable in scanty clothing; in fact, sometimes I wore less on purpose; I had learned to enjoy showing off my body. I got plenty of admiring glances and some outright leers, but I was still faithful to Rez and Russell, with no desire to try out other men. Women were something else. I saw a few who reciprocated my admiration, and I would have loved to try out a tumble with them. I figured that most of them were changers like me. Despite the attractive diversions, I never got around to forming a liaison there, and my family kept me so busy I didn't miss getting a little on the side.

After a fun but exhausting day of walking around the fair, sampling the pleasures, we were all eager to get back to the suites and luxuriate in the big hot tub before piling into the huge beds. My only complaint is that the castle didn't provide us with quite enough hand towels, but both bathrooms had bidets, so it wasn't that great a problem.

The last evening we went to a huge outdoor dinner celebration. It drizzled a bit, but the area where the rough-hewn wooden benches and tables were set up was covered with attached canopies, open at the sides to allow the breeze to come through, so it didn't matter. Dinner featured big joints of beef and pork and mutton seared over an open wood fire.

While the show was taking place on a wooden stage, the serving wenches hurried to keep us supplied with tankard after tankard of dark warm ale, and then added to the entertainment by sitting in our laps and fooling around as if they were dying to take us off to bed. Maybe they were for all I know, but none of us were interested in



doing anything more than enjoying their company. They topped the evening by dancing on the oaken table, shedding most of their clothes as they did.

Once we got back to our suite, we were ready for fun and games in the hot tubs and beds. It was very late when we finally went to sleep.

It was pitch dark in the room when I woke up. As I rolled over in the bed, I could feel the castle shaking and swaying. A rumbling sound like an avalanche coming down a mountain penetrated the walls. I was still half-asleep, wondering whether I was dreaming, when a loud crash from the bathroom shocked me wide awake.

Beside me, Rez sat up and grabbed me to keep from being shaken off the bed.

“Li, what is it! What’s happening?” I could hear fear in his voice.

Damned if I knew. I told the lights to come on while I tried to get myself together. Earthquake? They were a rare event in Texas, but the rising seawaters were upsetting isostatic pressures almost everywhere on the globe. It was possible. A bomb? God, I hoped not.

The rumbling stopped. Rez and I got up, looking around for a clue. Except for some items that had fallen off of shelves, the room seemed normal.

After throwing on my clothes, I tried to pull in some webnews. All I got was the eerie sonic wail of an emergency broadcast signal, like a jet plane descending too fast. As I was pulling on my boots, the wailing stopped and a male voice began to speak. Whoever was speaking, he totally lacked the usual calm confidence of an announcer. His voice wavered as he shouted his message.

“Emergency warning! Emergency warning! This is not a test! Explosions, probably nuclear in origin, have been detected over several American cities. Emergency warning! Take shelter immediately. Take shelter immediately, wherever you are. Stay tuned to this website for emergency news and information. Repeat! This is not a test. Nuclear explosions have been detected in the United States. The country is under attack. Take shelter immediately.”

The wailing began again. If I hadn’t felt the castle shaking and heard the rumble of the ground shockwave passing, I wouldn’t have believed it. I wasn’t sure I still did until I heard shouts and screams outside our



doorway. Then it finally began to sink in.

I lowered the volume on my bodycomp while I strapped on my gun, in plain sight now. Russell burst into the room.

“Li, Rez, did you hear? We’re being—oh!” His voice cut off as he saw that we were already dressed.

“Get Donna dressed,” I ordered. “Grab any luggage you can’t spare, and let’s get out of here. That must have been San Antonio that was hit. We may be in the fallout pattern.”

Those were my first thoughts: get away, back to our securely fortified home, like an escaped pet fleeing back home after it found that the outside world held terrors never dreamed of. I had to repeat myself to be heard over Russell’s wailing phone.

Donna came in, dressed and wearing her weapon openly as I was. A voice on the emergency website began repeating its urgent message.

“Ready?” I asked. They nodded. I cracked the door and peered cautiously out into the hall, bag in one hand and my pistol in the other. I looked in both directions. The two or three persons I could see were hurrying on errands of their own and didn’t appear to be armed. While I watched, one gave up on the elevator and ran for the stairs.

I took that as a signal that the elevator wasn’t working. We were on the fourth floor of the castle; getting to the ground floor shouldn’t be a problem.

“Come on. Be cautious. Watch everyone.” I was remembering all the disaster novels I had read as a kid. After a nuclear war, the law of the jungle soon ruled. I didn’t know whether that would hold true or not, but I wasn’t taking chances.

I led the way down the four flights of stairs, my senses keyed up and alert.

The lobby was a madhouse, full of tangled knots of frightened people. Fortunately, the stairs came out near a side entrance. We followed others who were breaking away from the throng in the lobby and emerged outside.

A horrendous red glow lit the sky to our southeast, huge flames coursing and twisting a darker red within the glow. It was San Antonio, all right; it could be nothing else. I looked back to the east.



Nothing there. So far Houston had been spared.

We ran through the parking lot for the car, hurrying past others with the same thought: get away. Get home. I saw several drawn guns, but no one threatened us. We gained the security of my new van, bought a few weeks previously when we decided to attend the festival. I put Russell in the driver's seat since he wasn't armed. I took the shotgun position, with Rez and Donna in back.

Already cars were fighting for position on the road, horns honking and tires squealing. While Russell tried to get us untangled from the jam, I kept a wary eye on nearby vehicles and pedestrians. I asked Donna to watch the emergency webnews to see what else she could find out. I didn't want either Russell or I to be distracted.

"Only three cities have been hit so far," Donna reported after a few minutes. "In this country, anyway. They're saying there are explosions in other places, though."

"Keep listening," I said. Russell gained a few yards, then another few, and finally had a clear path out of the parking lot jam. Just as we were pulling away from the castle, a tremendous thump shook the roof of the van. Donna screamed. I looked up to see dust sifting down through cracks in the roof.

"Where did that come from?" Rez asked, her voice shaking.

"Don't know, but so long as it didn't hurt us, let's not worry. Keep going, Russell." I pulled up a map from my bodycomp files and took a chance on a quick glance at it. I directed Russell toward a route that would take us home by side roads. It was a snap decision.

I thought that the side roads might be marginally safer than the main routes. Traffic was certain to be thick on the main roads with refugees everywhere fleeing potential target cities, and with a good chance of accidents tying up us up in knots. The side roads left more opportunity for attack if people went wild, but we were well armed, and I had had the van equipped with long-range infrared gear. I had never forgotten our narrow escape from the Gater assault.

Once away from the festival area, we made good time. The situation looked even better after the sun came up and visibility improved.

"Now they're saying that it was Brazil who started it," Rez said. "They bombed China and India, too, and now they're fighting each other."

Where had our intelligence service been? After the revelation of



Gater involvement with the attempt to destroy Russell's research into light theory, the Church of the Gates had declined drastically in our country, but the militant branch had moved to Brazil and began growing again. Hell, even I knew that.

Brazil had always been an anomaly in South America, the largest and most powerful country on the continent, but using Portuguese as their primary language rather than Spanish. It tended to make them think of themselves as unique and superior to other countries down there, even though they shared the same Catholicism. Evidently, the Gaters had found fertile ground. They must have infiltrated the current military government and induced it to start a war after the first interstellar ship returned, hoping the resulting chaos would preclude any further development of star travel.

I didn't worry about India and China. Both had been decimated by AIDS II, III, and IV even before the global warming upset their agricultural production, leading to millions of starvation deaths. Refugees from the coastal flood plains had caused further death, destruction, and chaos. Both countries had fractured into quarreling Third World states years ago, and I didn't see where a few A-Bombs lobbed back and forth would hurt them much more.

So long as their war didn't spread, that is, and so far, that didn't appear to be happening. It couldn't go on too long in any case. Nuclear weapons were supposed to have been banned completely a few years ago, but it was common knowledge that most countries had fudged on the treaty, keeping enough in stock to retaliate if the need arose.

It took us almost seven hours to get back home, normally not much more than an hour's drive. We had only one spot of trouble, an attempted roadblock which I spotted long before we were in any danger. A few well-aimed shots from a rifle sent the neophyte bandits scurrying for cover, and we drove on through.

Donna continued to monitor the net. On the way back she passed on the latest. Brazil had been thoroughly bombed from space, targeting industrial complexes, military bases and sites from which missiles had been launched. So, I thought, the United States had sent more into orbit than the Orion and clippers and the new FTL ships.

For once, I was grateful to the military thinkers, even if their intelligence did fail to predict the takeover of Brazil by the Gaters and their subsequent launching of nuclear missiles. At least they had prevented any more from being fired off. So far only San Antonio, Los Angeles, and the Cheyenne mountain military deep shelter in Colorado had been bombed in our country. We could recover from



that, and forgive me for saying so, but Los Angeles was no great loss.

I could see from the overpass as we pulled into town that lights were burning in homes and businesses all over Ruston where everyone was staying up to catch the latest news, but otherwise it was quiet, and the lighted downtown streets were deserted.

I have never been so glad to see Grandpa's old homestead as I was that day, even though with all the renovations, he would never have recognized it. Russell parked the van, and we hurried into the house with what luggage we had brought.

I got the big screen on line with my bodycomp while Rez and Donna threw together a scratch meal and coffee.

It was a marathon session in front of the screen. Some of the clips of casualties were bad enough to make me cringe. The horribly burned, wounded and radiation-poisoned flocked to the gates where they stood or lay in long lines, waiting for a chance to pass through and be healed. They were in excruciating pain with no hope of medical attention because doctors and hospitals were totally overwhelmed by the thousands of injured. So the prospect of a sex change was the least of their worries.

Early the next morning, our government delivered an ultimatum to India and China warlords to cease use of nuclear weapons or meet the same fate as Brazil. A few hours later, they capitulated, what was left of them, and the worst was over except for cleaning up our three bombed cities and sorting out the disruption of financial losses.

By the day after that, those who wanted to had managed to get through a gate. Most of them came out young and healthy and grateful for their healed bodies, regardless of the resulting change in sex. Armageddon had come, but it was less than final. Our country would recover and continue exploring space. Finally, we all went to bed for some much-needed sleep. All of us were feeling tired and sick by then, even though we had been taking stimulants to stay awake.

The day after that, we all began running at both ends, vomiting and diarrhea, and our skin began showing purple blotches from internal bleeding.

God help me, none of us had even thought about that piece of debris that had landed on the van. It must have been thrown into the air from the San Antonio blast and carried by thermal currents all the way to the castle parking lot. The dust loaded with radioactivity fell into the van from the cracks in the roof.



When I realized what had happened, I blamed myself for not considering the possibility. I was the one who had read all the disaster novels.

Rez gathered me into her arms after I made that confession and hugged me while we both retched. “It’s not your fault, Li. How were you to know?”

“I should have thought of it.” I ran for the bathroom as I felt another bowel spasm.

The bowl filled with bloody mucous while I vomited into the trashcan. I finished and came back out feeling shaky and sick, as if I had the worst hangover in the world and no pills to take for it.

“We’d better get to the clinic,” Rez said. “I’m feeling worse by the minute.” He turned and vomited a thin thread of bloody mucous into a pan he was holding.

“Me, too,” Russell said. “Come on, Donna. Can you make it?”

“I’ll try.” Donna looked sicker than any of the rest of us. Russell helped her to her feet and out to the car while Rez and I supported each other.

Thank God, it was only a couple of miles to old Doc Tyson’s clinic. I retched nonstop on the way, and by the time we pulled into the clinic parking lot each of us had to be helped into his office.

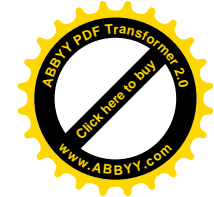
He took one look at us and knew what the problem was. He never asked a question, simply hurrying us one by one into the diagnostic booth.

A few minutes later he was shaking his head. “Nothing I can do. You all got too much of a dose. Your only chance is to try the gate.”

The gate! There was one chance in ten thousand of Rez, Donna and I coming out alive as Seconders. Since it would be his first time through, Russell stood a better chance, if his radiation sickness hadn’t progressed too far.

We stared at each other. Rez struggled to his feet with a wan smile. “Well, it looks like we’re all liable to find out what happens to the people who don’t come back out.”

“Come on, let’s hurry,” Tyson said. “Any of you might pop a major



vessel and bleed to death any moment.”

I let myself be carried out to the ambulance, keeping my eyes on Rez all the way. If this was going to be our last few minutes together, I wanted to stay as close to him as possible. Donna and Russell appeared to feel the same way about each other.

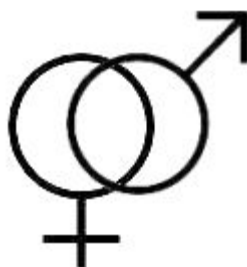
The four of us huddled together in the back. We were all violently ill, but kept struggling to touch each other for one last time.

The ambulance pulled up in front of the gate, siren warbling. We were helped out and carried up to where the strange green wall loomed over us.

“I’ll go first,” I said. “My fault.” I could feel my bowels rumbling and a sudden sharp pain coursed through my belly, doubling me over. The ambulance attendant straightened me up and gave me a shove. I fell into the enveloping green nimbus, thinking how easy it was to die.

BOOK III

MARS/VENUS



Chapter Twenty-four

I blinked and stumbled, my body suddenly off balance. I felt



different, bulkier, as if I were bundled up for a winter storm. I regained my footing and looked up. The first thing I saw was the Ruston water tower. *My God, I had made it!*

My mind struggled with conflicting sensory information. A moment ago I felt sicker than a snake-bit dog. Now I could feel healthy vitality coursing through my strong young body. I also noticed some abstract patterns impinging on my peripheral vision. I shook off the sensation and turned around, searching for Rez—or Rita.

She popped into existence, her beautiful body naked against the shiny green background of the gate. She looked just as I remembered her from years ago, but younger.

Sudden tears filled her eyes as she recognized me. She ran into my arms. I held her close to me, grateful beyond words to the gods of luck and chance that we both made it through the gate. As our bare bodies pressed together, I experienced a momentary sensation that we were one person. I felt her tears as if they were my own and imagined I could feel the faint sandpapery sensation of my beard against her cheek. The curious double awareness faded when she stepped away from me.

She brushed at her eyes. “Lee. Oh, God, Lee, I never thought we would make it.”

“Me either.” I looked over her shoulder at the weird green edifice we had passed through, my heart pounding with dread. Russell and Donna should have popped out by now.

Rita became aware of why I was standing so still. She turned, taking hold of my hand. We stood side by side, waiting. And waiting.

My mind was a blank. I don’t know how long we stood and watched, hands locked together, expecting Russell and Donna to suddenly appear before us, healthy and smiling.

It was Rita who finally broke the silent vigil. “Lee, I don’t think they made it.” She clenched one hand, her knuckles white with pressure when her fist was doubled.

“Let’s wait a bit longer.” I was unwilling to give them up, to believe they were gone, taken by the same gate that had unaccountably spared our lives.

“It only takes a microsecond to pass through the gates.” Rita’s voice broke, but her training as a therapist made it easier for her to face the



truth.

I felt the sadness and remorse filling her mind, as if it was my own, tinged with my lingering guilt that I had not thought of radioactivity when the debris struck the van.

From nearby, the gate guard approached us. I felt his presence before I turned around.

“Are you folks all right?”

“Yes, we’re fine.” My voice was dull with grief.

Doc Tyson and the two ambulance attendants joined the guard. The paramedics stared at our nakedness. I paid no attention to them. A sudden wild hope hit me. Maybe our friends had never entered the gate!

“Doc, did Russell and Donna follow us into the gate?”

He saw the forlorn hope that was gripping me. He shook his head and gazed down at the ground. “I’m sorry, Lee. They went in. They didn’t come out.” He looked back up. “I think it’s a miracle that two of you made it. How do you feel? Any different?”

I did, somehow, but I said, “No, Doc, other than it feels a little odd to be back in a male body again.”

“Same here,” Rita said. Her fingers gripped my hand as tightly as small woman holding a Doberman’s leash.

One of the paramedics left us for a moment and returned carrying sheets from the ambulance. He extended one to each of us, averting his eyes from Rita as he gave hers to her.

“I’m as sorry as I can be, but there’s nothing more to be done here,” Tyson said. “Come on. I’ll give you a lift back to the clinic.”

It turned out that he had followed the ambulance in his own car, though I had been so sick that I didn’t remember it. He got us settled in the back seat and drove off. Presently, he asked again, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“We’re sure, Doc,” I answered for both of us, though in truth, my mind still seemed to be playing tricks on me. When I closed my eyes, I could still feel the presence of Rita and Tyson in the car, almost like ghosts were haunting his vehicle.



“I’m glad. I had my doubts that any of you would even live to get to the gate. You were all hemorrhaging internally by then.”

“Thank you for acting so quickly,” Rita said.

“That’s what I’m there for, though I’ll confess, I don’t react nearly as well now as I did when I was young. I’ll have to be thinking about going through a gate myself before long.”

That remark was what I needed to take my mind off Russell and Donna, at least momentarily. I couldn’t imagine the old doctor as a fresh eighteen-year-old girl. He was already an old man when I was a kid.

Rita apparently had the same reaction. She smiled sadly, but said nothing.

“Would you like me to examine you before you go?” Tyson asked as he pulled up at the clinic.

“No, thanks,” we both said at the same moment.

“I didn’t think you would. But it’s my duty to ask.”

“Thanks, Doc, but we’re fine,” I said.

My car was still at the clinic. I drove us home in silence, each of us mourning our loss in our own way, though I still thought I could almost feel Rita’s emotion. I had to concentrate on driving at first, unused to my old new body’s different dimensions.

Rita and I smiled at each other as we searched for some of our old clothes to put on. We found jeans and shirts in the back of the closet, and our old sandals.

“How about a drink?” I asked, the first words either of us had spoken since leaving the clinic. I didn’t know about her, but I sure needed one.

“Make it a strong one. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but I still don’t feel like myself. I keep having this sensation of you being almost a part of me, almost as if you were in my mind.”

“You, too?” Curious. We headed for the bar.

I poured bourbon and added a little water and some ice. We sat down



together and sipped at our drinks. The Jack Daniels bit at my tongue and slid down into my gut. Presently, I could feel the first effects, a warm, faintly tingly flush spreading through my body. I turned to Rita.

There were tears in her eyes. "It's hard to believe they're really gone. Damn it, why us and not them?"

"Maybe they're not dead. Maybe the gates hold the people who don't come back in stasis or something until a later date."

"Science fiction." Her voice choked as she said it. I could feel her grief like a blow to my gut.

"What are the gates? Something the Easter bunny left?"

"Touché. Sorry, hon. You know how much I want to think that they aren't really gone, but rather waiting somewhere on us."

"Me, too," I said. "And maybe they are. Who knows? The gates are as much of a puzzle as they've ever been." Somehow saying those words made me feel better. Besides, a sudden disappearance, leaving no body behind, didn't quite seem as final as death as I had known it. It gave room for hope.

We sat together in silence for a while, lost in memories of Russell and Donna. I could hear their voices echoing in my mind, and a part of me refused to believe they were dead. I knew Rita felt the same way.

Finally, I sighed and set the memories aside. I knew I would be mourning their loss for months to come, but right now, I needed to think of the new adjustments Rita and I would have to make.

At the same moment, Rita spoke.

"Speaking of puzzles, how did it happen that we managed to come through a second time, and together at that? I've never heard of that happening before, and just figuring the chance likelihood, that would be odds of something like, uh, one in ten million."

"One in a hundred million," I corrected her. Rita never could keep her decimal points straight.

"Whatever. It's still astronomical odds."

I shrugged. "Better minds than ours have been trying to figure out the gates for years. Why wonder? Maybe one day we'll know."



We sat and talked while the shadows outside deepened in the gathering dusk. I tried to describe the feeling I was experiencing of being aware of her presence at all times whether I was looking at her or not. Words wouldn't quite fit, and she had no more success than I did, though we both agreed that being back in our original bodies (albeit a few years younger than before) wasn't exactly the same as it had been.

"Why don't we get in touch with some other Seconders and ask them about it?" Rita suggested.

"Good idea. Maybe there's even a story in it. No Secunder has ever described anything like what we're feeling." I spoke the words from habit; I knew there would be no story. Seconders didn't give interviews. They couldn't talk about it to normal humans. But what did they say to each other?

As if on cue, my bodycom beeped. I answered it with the small screen, to avoid turning away from Rita. I was enjoying the sensation of being male again and having her warm body near me.

Whitney Horst's angular face came into view. "I hear that you and your girlfriend passed through a gate together, both for the second time. How did you manage that?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. It was the only chance we had to live, so we took it."

"Do you remember anything about it?"

"Nothing. One moment I was pushed into the gate, sick as a dog, and the next thing I knew I was outside and back in my old body."

"Same here," Rita agreed.

He almost snarled. "I don't believe it. There's something awful goddamned weird about you Seconders. One of these days I'm going to find out what it is."

"Believe what you want," I told him. "I can't tell you anything else. And so far as us making it together, we were just calculating the odds of that happening."

"So did I. Pretty improbable, to say the least."

I shrugged. "Sorry. That's all we know."



He looked almost as disgusted as he had the night the unknown parties had gotten away with Russell's goodies. "All right. I may want you to come in for questioning, though. In the meantime, if you remember anything, contact me." He disconnected without saying good-bye.

Rita turned to me. "I don't think I want him questioning me, even if he did help save our lives when the Gaters attacked us."

I drew her into my arms, feeling the spreading softness of her breasts against me. "Don't worry. Seconders can't be effectively questioned, remember?"

"Maybe we're unique. There's never been a couple pass through a gate at the same time, and so far as I know, no Seconder ever knew any of the others beforehand."

I caught the hint of worry in her mind and kissed her. "If we're unique, I like it."

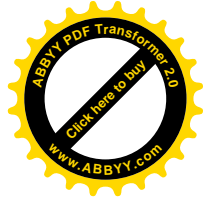
She responded and again I could feel that surge of desire in my groin. I had almost forgotten what it felt like. I touched her breasts, and it was almost as if my own were being caressed. Certainly, I remembered the sensation from a short time ago, but it was more than that. Our lips parted and our eyes met in mutual desire.

"Come on." I took her hand and helped her up. We almost ran to the bedroom.

As we came together on the bed, and our bare skin touched, it was like a surge of sensual electricity sparking between us. Her nipples pressed against my chest, two hard points of erotic flame that I could feel as if they were originating from inside my own body. Rita's lips parted against my own and an eager moan of pleasure escaped before our tongues wound together. Her nails dug into my back, urging, pulling me over her. She spread her legs and I slipped inside her soft, warm depths.

Unity. Oneness. Twins. Merging. A melding of minds and bodies so intricately entwined that it made no difference who was in which, nor was it possible to tell the difference.

Pleasure, a pleasure so intense that it was almost bitter. Every nerve end of both our bodies radiated waves of ecstatic, sensual



anticipation.

Sensations. Plunging engorged penis sinking and rising with the movement of hips. Friction exciting the throbbing clitoris with every movement.

Awareness. Arms and legs wrapped around a body, holding it in a fiercely tight contact. Fingers digging into a back. Arms under a back, gripping shoulders. Softness of flattened breasts against muscular chest and erect nipples, two spreading, burning areas of intense sensual warmth. Groin and belly smacking together.

Noise. A rising cry of voices uttering unintelligible screams of utterly unendurable pleasure in time with ever-quickenings movements.

A slope, a rising hill, a peak, a ride up and up to fiery heights where we paused, both of us hanging on the brink of ecstasy, then plunging down into depths where vast explosions of pleasure surrounded us, a part of us, breaking us into pieces, into bits, to molecules, to the very atoms of our bodies, loosening all consciousness and awareness of anything except the incredible orgasm of mind and body and soul.

Lee, oh, Lee, my love. My heart, my soul.

Rita, I love you. Oh, I love you.

Still united, I could hear her thoughts as clearly as words, and I knew she could hear mine. In fact, there was no difference. The voices were our minds, speaking together as one.

We slowly came back down to normal consciousness, exchanging endearments, sometimes with murmured words, sometimes with exchanged thoughts. It didn't matter. We were one.

When at last we separated, our minds remained in contact, though our bodily sensations became our own again. Our eyes met in the semidarkness, adoring each other. We touched and felt of each other and moved our lips over the other's body, reveling in the sensation of feeling the reaction of the other as if it were our own.

We coupled again, and again. Each time was better, more intense, as we began learning to use our minds as well as we had already known how to use our bodies.

At last we lay apart.



“No wonder the Seconders don’t want to talk,” Rita said. I heard the words in my mind, but from habit we both spoke aloud. We continued our conversation, each originating thoughts which immediately became mutual.

“Horst was right to be suspicious. Seconders are different. If this ever got out, we would be mobbed.”

“Telepathy. I always thought it was a fraud, something invented by charlatans and science fiction writers.”

A laugh. “It’s real. I wonder if it’s only us or all Seconders.”

“We’ll have to find out. I wonder if we can read other people’s thoughts.”

“Or maybe we’re limited to Seconders’ thoughts.” I didn’t know where that came from, but I was suddenly very glad of all the money I had paid to have the bedroom secure from bugs. I had assumed Horst would bug the house but damned if I wanted him in our bedrooms!

Our minds might have merged, but our bodies still had their individual needs. I felt the urge and got up to go to the bathroom. As I closed the door, I felt Rita’s thoughts become less clear, though I could still sense her presence in the bedroom, her thoughts and feelings now like a fog that slipped away from me and dissolved into mist.

Rita also felt the slippage, and it impelled us to experiment. We found that as we practiced our bond grew stronger; we could tell where and what the other was doing from any place in the house, and even catch occasional thoughts.

We didn’t sleep at all that night. We pranced and giggled and played mind jokes and games with each other until the sun rose again. As we were eating breakfast, I began to sense a mental orientation, as if my mind was becoming something solid, unbreachable unless I held it open. Perhaps this was why Seconders were immune to grilling.

There were a lot of questions I wanted to ask of Seconders. The problem was, I didn’t know how to get into touch with any of them. They were reclusive, reluctant to come out into the open, and now I could see why. The human race always exhibited racial or cultural suspicion of anyone who was different from the norm. Going through



the gate and getting a new body was bad enough, but telepathy confined to a few select would be a bombshell. If the vast majority of the population suspected that Seconders were mind readers, they would never let us live in peace. Worse, we might be hated, feared and persecuted for our difference. At least we would be if other Seconders were feeling the same effects we were.

Rita helped explain why to me (what I didn't already know). Everyone has secrets, fantasies, thoughts that are mostly normal but never voiced or acted on. Real opinions of people are seldom given face to face. Salesmen, preachers, politicians and the like would never feel safe with telepaths around, nor would so-called normal people. There is too much secret baggage carried around in the human mind.

"Can you imagine," Rita said, "how men and women would act in sexual encounters if either thought the other could read their minds?"

I sure could. "I remember when I was a boy, or actually a young man, meeting a girl and imagining all kinds of things about her, some of them not so nice."

She grinned at me. "Don't think that's a male exclusive. Women do the same thing, though perhaps they don't visualize it quite so explicitly as men do."

"Really?" I caught the assent in her mind from across the room. With practice, we were getting better able to sense attitudes even when separated.

"Really. Or what about insurance salesmen or lawyers? Why, they would go bankrupt in a week!"

I burst out laughing. Wouldn't that be a comeuppance for a lawyer, having someone read his or her every thought? Still...

"We don't know yet that we can read anyone else's mind."

"Why don't we take a walk, or ride into town, and find out?"

"Good idea." I was unbearably curious.

My bodycomp buzzed. I told it I would take the call. The display materialized in front of me and I found myself staring at Messler Scribner, the young man who once was Messilinda. He grinned at me, his eyes alight with some secret joke.

"Hello, Lee. Is Rita there?"



“She’s listening.”

“Fine. Welcome to the club.”

Chapter Twenty-five

“The club? What kind of club?” I wondered what he was up to.

“The Seconders, of course. We’re pretty exclusive, as you well know.”

“You mean you think we belong to some kind of a fraternity? Sorry, we had nothing to do with becoming Seconders. Besides...”

“Besides, your damned church almost got us killed,” Rita finished for me.

He frowned, creating creases in his smooth forehead. “Haven’t you had sex yet?”

“It’s none of your damned business!” Rita exploded.

“Wait, Rita.” I could sense a purpose behind his questions and I thought I knew what it was, but I didn’t want to say it aloud. Horst might very well have our circuits under surveillance. Instead, I asked, “Do you think something special happens when Seconders have sex?”

He caught my circumlocution immediately. He smiled. “Relax, Lee. We can’t be overheard. I have one of the best programmers in the world monitoring us. Yes, I’m talking about something special, like being able to read your partner’s mind, among other things.”

“What other things?” So, all the Seconders could read minds, not just Rita and me.

“We’ll get to that. First, I wanted to touch base with you and warn you not to try getting in touch with other Seconders right away. We don’t want to attract any more attention to ourselves than we already have by congregating together.”



My heart jumped. “We’ve already attracted attention. An NSC agent by the name of Whitney Horst called a while ago and said he may want to question us.”

Messler nodded. “I figured he would. So far as we know, you’re the first pair of lovers ever to become Seconders, not to mention going through the gate at the same time. If he comes around, act innocent and go along with him, no matter what he does.”

“Easy for you to say. You weren’t tortured. I’ve heard some Seconders have been, especially in other countries.”

“It doesn’t really matter, although we can’t help you if you’re brought in. A Seconder is immune to questioning under any circumstances. You might wind up with some scars, or even be killed, but you’ll never talk under duress, no matter how severe. We know.”

Beside me, Rita shivered and changed the subject. “Does it mean anything that we came through the gate together?”

Messler spread his hands. “So far as I know, it was pure coincidence, though you both must have minds similar to other Seconders to have come through at all. By the way, I’m sorry your friends didn’t make it.”

“Thanks. We keep hoping that they will turn up someday. Something inside us refuses to believe they are dead. “

“It may be more than a hope, but don’t quote me, and please don’t do a story speculating about the possibility.”

I stared at him, wishing I could grab hold of his image and shake the truth out of him. “How much do you Seconders know about the gates?”

“Not much more than anyone else. We may have a hint of something, but I’d rather not go into it yet.”

“I want to know. When can I see you?” If there was any possibility at all of a reunion with Russell and Donna, I wanted the information right now.

Messler grinned. “Looking for a re-match?”

I think I blushed, remembering our liaison when he was female. His teasing remark managed to divert my attention, anyway. “Sorry, I don’t swing that way.”



“Actually, neither do I. My inclinations were canalized too long ago to change now, though I did get an idea of how the other side operates while I was a woman.” He grinned some more.

Rita’s frown had returned. She leaned forward, as if coming closer to the screen might intimidate him. “I have a question. What on earth did you think you were doing when you started that Church of the Gates? They almost started a nuclear war, and two of our friends are dead as a result.”

Messler’s eyes filled with regret. “You’ll have to chalk that up to the folly of an old man. I was trying to help.”

“Help? I don’t call what they did helping,” Rita snarled.

“Well, it did help at first, and it wasn’t that much of a folly, though if I had it to do over I would try a different approach. After I re-gained my youth, I was scared that the government would close off the gates, or make them exclusive, or slap taxes on them so high that only the rich could afford passage; something along those lines. You know how governments are. I gave it some thought and came up with the idea of starting a religion to support free access to them. It worked, too. Look at how some other countries are regulating access, or trying to. Unfortunately, the militant branch got out of hand when your friend discovered a way to get us out to the stars. I had no way to know such a breakthrough would take place. Russell was brilliant.” His shoulders slumped as he looked down at his hands and I could sense his frustration and pain even through the screen.

Rita’s frown softened and disappeared except for a couple of up and down thought lines between her eyebrows.

“Did you Seconders have anything to do with rescuing us that time we were attacked? Are you the one who published Russell’s notes?”

Messler nodded. “I wasn’t going to mention it for fear you would think I was trying to absolve myself, but yes, I did. Even after I resigned from the church, I kept some contacts. I’m sorry we weren’t in time to save his friends. We did save you, though.”

“Yes, I suppose you did. And I know enough about history to realize the Gaters probably did play an important role in keeping the gates open. If they hadn’t been, Lee and I would probably be dead from radiation poisoning.”

He waved a hand, disclaiming any credit. “Might have beens never



prove anything. Who knows? If there hadn't been a church, San Antonio might never have been bombed."

"True," Rita admitted. "I guess you did what you thought best. Let's drop the subject. I want to know more about the Seconders."

"So do I," I said.

Messler glanced at his thumb watch. "In good time. I'd better cut this off for now. Even with the programmer I've got working, if we stay connected long enough someone may hack in. Remember, be discrete about contacting any of us. Any hint that we're organized, even indirect evidence, and the government will surely crack down. President Jones is an ex-general, you know, and the military is still scared shitless of whatever is behind the gates."

"All right," I agreed. "Get back to us, though. I still have a lot of questions."

"So do we all." He disconnected.

Rita giggled.

"What?"

"Scared shitless! I haven't heard that expression since I was a little girl, and then it was in colloquial language study." She laughed some more.

"Well, he is over a hundred years old, after all. Do you still want to go to town?"

"Sure, why not?"

An NSC car blocked the road before we got to town. Another pulled in behind it, and Whitney Horst got out, accompanied by two rough-looking men in semi-military tunics.

"Hello, Horst." I stared at him without enthusiasm.

He pointed to the back seat of the big government sedan. "Get in."

"Where are we going?" Rita asked, all innocent voice and big black eyes.



“You’ll see. Get in, I said.”

We got. I could sense that he intended to question us under drugs again, but there was a hint of something else in his mind, not yet come to fruition, or perhaps not decided yet. I realized then that though I couldn’t read his direct thoughts, I could get an idea of his intentions and the general direction of his thoughts. My mind blurred at the thought, as if it were trying to conceal any overt indication of my new knowledge. When I stopped thinking of him, my mind cleared up again.

Horst took us all the way to North Houston, and I found myself back in the same rundown lockup being questioned by the same personnel as last time, using the same old methods. At first, I shuddered involuntarily when I sensed the cheerful malice in the mind of our old white-jacketed friend. His hands felt cold and clammy as he fastened the restraints.

Sometime later I became aware that I was coming out from under the effects of a veronal injection, or whatever serum they used. I pinched my thumb to verify the time, squinting through my fuzzy vision to read the numbers. Three and a half hours, about the same as before.

I expected to be unstrapped and freed from the chair, but the man in the white coat left me securely restrained when he left the room, leaving only Horst and me there together. Horst had a sour look on his face, as if he had bitten into a crabapple. He avoided my gaze, and I wondered what he was up to now. I was still too drugged to gauge his intentions. Then they brought Rita in on a gurney.

She was awake, but groggy and helpless. Horst sent everyone else out of the room, locked the door and walked back over to her gurney, a strange look on his face. As I slowly became aware something terrible was about to happen, he began cutting her clothes off.

“Hey!” I yelled at him. “What do you think you’re doing?”

He continued without answering until Rita was totally naked. As she squirmed against her straps and looked at me with frightened eyes, he turned to me. “We’ve tried everything else to find out what you damned Seconders are hiding. Maybe this will work.” He reached over and squeezed her breast cruelly, while staring at me to gauge my reaction.

I don’t remember anything else. Apparently, what Messler said was correct. No matter what the duress, questioning a Seconder was useless. When I came back to consciousness, Horst was busy tucking



his shirt back into his trousers. I checked my thumb watch. Another hour had passed.

Rita was also coming back to her senses. Horst had released her restraints, and she sat up unsteadily on the gurney, then became aware of her nakedness. She started to cover her breasts, but decided that ignoring Horst was a better way of showing her contempt. She looked down at her naked thighs. I followed her gaze. We both saw the drying semen at the same time. She looked over at me with a grim smile.

Her thoughts were almost as clear to me as if we were pressed together. Disgust, not rage. I commiserated with her in our new silent communion, mingling my sympathy for her with my own rage and vows of revenge against Horst. She sent her love back, but her thoughts warned me not to get violent and put us in further danger; she wasn't hurt and didn't remember anything about the rape.

Horst left without another word, the mental morass of a rigidly sick mind trailing behind him like a shroud.

A few minutes later the man in the white coat came in and handed Rita her clothes, then released my restraints.

We knew the way out of the building this time and couldn't leave it fast enough. I called for a limousine from the lobby, and we spent the time on the way back to Ruston in a mutually healing embrace, our minds like two streams flowing together into a vast ocean of love.

Two days later, Messler called again. I had been waiting, wanting to express my outrage at Horst's treatment of us, and demand Messler use his money and influence to do something about Horst's rape of Rita. He interrupted my tirade before I had barely begun.

"Lee, I'm sorry for what happened to you, and especially to Rita. Back when I was younger, the government couldn't have gotten away with that sort of thing."

"That doesn't make it any easier to take now."

"Perhaps not, but you'll never be bothered by Horst again, I promise you that much."

"Can you guarantee that?" I only half-believed him.



Messler smiled, his expression grim. "I think so. It seems that Mr. Horst had a tragic accident yesterday. He lost control of his car and went off a cliff. He was dead long before the medics could get him to a gate, not that I think it would have done any good. His was the type of mentality which seems to preclude even a first passage."

Now, how had Messler managed that? Then I thought of our rescue, and again of the way Rita and I were increasingly able to sense the mental state of ordinary persons, even from a fair distance. I decided not to ask.

"Thanks. If thanks are in order. But won't someone get suspicious?"

"They might, except for the fact that the postmortem showed that he had taken an aphrodisiac. You know how that distracts a person. He shouldn't have been driving with a shot of that stuff in his system."

A perfect cover-up. Nothing else needed to be said about Whitney Horst. I felt a grim satisfaction and hoped he was burning in whatever hell there might be.

"I see. Well, so much for that. I still want to get together with you, though. I have a lot of questions."

"What's wrong with this? Our circuit is secure."

Rita decided to join the conversation. "For one thing, I can't kiss you through a screen."

Messler considered. "I generally try to avoid meeting with other Seconders in person, to keep from arousing suspicion, but in your case, I'm willing to make an exception. You're an exceptional couple. I have plans to be in North Houston next week on business. Why don't we get together then?"

"Fine. How do we manage it?"

He rubbed his chin as if his sparse whiskers were bothering him. "Why don't I arrange for your agent fly to North Houston to meet with several of her 'porters? That would be a perfect cover for you to come here."

"Mary hates to fly."

Messler smiled. "I think a sufficient amount of money will set her mind at ease."



I thought of the fortune he had accumulated over a hundred years of living and decided that if he couldn't persuade Mary to fly down here no one could.

"Okay. Let us know when and where."

"Will do." He disconnected.

While we were waiting, we enjoyed exploring all the wonderful sensations of having sex while both of us were aware of the other's every thought and feeling. It only got better and better. The melding of our minds while our bodies were connected was more stimulating than any aphrodisiac ever invented. As one, our bodies worked together in perfect unison, mounting steadily toward earth-shattering climaxes. Those climaxes were now amazingly intense, and always simultaneous. Once while we were in the beginning throes of foreplay, my mind wondered what three or four Seconders in bed together would be like. I doubted that I would be able to stand it.

Rita enfolded the thought with her mind, caressing it, then sent it back to me with conditional approval, her own thoughts touched with amusement about the way men forever want more than one sex partner.

We spent some time wandering around the few streets of downtown Ruston, practicing our newfound abilities by seeing how well and from how far we could gauge what a normal person was intending to do. We got better as time passed, but eventually reached a plateau. There were limits, but I now knew how Messler's agents had managed to elude the NSC team and so escape without being shot. Being able to sense another person's presence, and his intentions, was like having four arms in a wrestling contest.

We also went over some of the questions we wanted to put to Messler. I wanted to know what he meant when he said they had a hint about the purpose of the gates. If they did, it was more than I had been able to gather, for all of my time spent doing research and stories on the gates. What I really wanted to know, was why the gate entities or powers, or whatever, constructed the Seconders' new minds in a way which kept them from revealing any information to normals. Rita and I had discussed the subject and agreed that there must be some sort of continuing purpose and guiding direction connected to the changes that occurred with a gate passage, especially the way that Seconders became telepaths, at least between lovers. We also wanted to know whether Seconders could comprehend the thoughts of other



Seconders. We still hadn't met any in person since our conversion.

And the sex. Was the incredibly heightened, almost unbearably intense ecstasy of orgasm by design or merely a result of the new telepathic powers? I really doubted that we would get any definite answers, but I surely hoped so. I was as curious and bemused with the changes as a cat in a roomful of catnip-scented puppies.

Chapter Twenty-six

"Congratulations, Lee. You too, Rita," Mary said, running her fingers through her disorderly hair.

Messler had reserved a conference room for her at the North Houston First National Web Bank building. She sat at the head of the long table and stared at us with frank curiosity.

"Congratulations for what?" I felt uneasy, knowing she was upset with me.

"For being alive, I suppose. When are you going to do that story for me?"

Mary had called several times, leaving messages when I wouldn't accept her calls. She wanted a human-interest story from Rita and me on our second change. In fact, she was desperate for one. One of her other 'porters had broken the news of our narrow escape and subsequent simultaneous change. With my reputation and following, she was outraged that I wasn't writing my own firsthand report and earning a huge amount of money from it.

"I'm sorry, Mary. I've decided not to do any more 'porting or 'cording."

She jumped to her feet and pulled at her hair as if she were trying to yank knots out of it. Well, maybe she was. "You can't do this to me! When you said you would come to this conference I promised three different 'webs and one 'work I'd have something for them within twenty-four hours!"



The other 'porters seated at the table stared at me as if I had refused an invitation from President Jones to do an interview.

Messler had given me instructions about how to handle her. Our presence at this meeting was nothing but a blind to enable us to meet with him in person.

"I'm sorry," I said again. "I only came as a personal courtesy to you, because of our past relationship. You've always been good to me, and I wanted to thank you personally."

Mary buried her head in her hands, strands of tangled hair falling forward. She shook her head in disgust and tears filled her eyes.

"Good-bye." I smiled to myself as I sensed her real mood. Already, her mind was skittering around possible alternatives to the stories she had promised, perhaps even a special on this very meeting. The tears were a last attempt to sway me, and they were as fake as the graphie 'porters she loved so much.

I took Rita's hand and we departed, trying to look as upset as Mary was pretending to be.

We didn't worry too much about being tailed by the NSC, FBI or maybe even military intelligence agents. Messler owned the bank building, and I suspected the few individuals we passed were Seconders. A private elevator took us up to the penthouse where a stunning redhead greeted us and led us through the maze of rooms. I was getting vibrations of sexual attraction from her, but couldn't attribute it to my new powers. The frank sexual way she looked me over left no doubt about what she was thinking. She led us into another conference room where Messler was waiting for us, then left with one last sultry smile.

Messler was standing in front of a window overlooking the city. He hurried over to take our hands, each in turn. Behind his easy smile, I sensed a mind that was as tight and disciplined as a logic professor's.

"It's good to see you again, Lee. I still have fond memories of our last encounter. Rita, I hope you bear me no ill will over that little episode. It was all in fun." His unforgettable green eyes twinkled like stars on a misty night.

"My only regret is that you failed to include me." Rita smiled and leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek.

Messler laughed, amusement sparkling through his mind pattern like



a display of the northern lights. But that was all that came through. The rest of his mind pattern was a blank to me. "It's a mistake I will never repeat, now that I've met you. But let's get down to business. Please sit down." Messler indicated a group of executive loungers off to one side.

They were so comfortable that I decided immediately that we needed some back home. Messler had style as well as substance. Each was equipped with a caddy and lap table. I fiddled with some buttons trying to call up the bar menu, then got smart and told it what I wanted.

After adjusting his chair, Messler spoke. "In case you're wondering, I've hired actors to double for you while we're having this meeting. They're down in the Houston lounge having a good time. You can change places with them later, then go on home and no one will be the wiser."

"Smart." I nodded my appreciation of his forethought.

"Necessary. I've learned a few things the last hundred years. One of them is to always assume that you're being watched. Another is that history always repeats itself, though not exactly in the same fashion." He paused for effect.

I took the bait. "So what's going to repeat this time?"

He laced his fingers together. "The more removed from normal a person or group is, the more likelihood there is that they will be ostracized, persecuted, perhaps hunted down and eliminated. Seconders will be no exception."

With that statement, Messler's attitude became much more serious. Indeed, his whole personality underwent a transformation. When he glanced over at me, I saw that his eyes lacked the amused sparkle they possessed earlier; now they were compelling in their intensity, drawing me to look deeper and deeper into their depths. I struggled to understand what had changed about his eyes, then realized that I could now see pure intelligence staring at me out of those emerald depths. His gaze was filled with wisdom and understanding, yet as he looked calmly at me, I began to know how a mouse must feel under the detached examination of a scientist.

After a moment, he began to speak and I noticed that his voice had changed as well. It became less resonant but that didn't distract from its commanding tone; instead it became focused, forceful, almost mesmerizing. "Those who cannot understand us will come to hate us



and will try to hurt us in any way they can.”

“We’ve had an inkling of that already. Horst.” Rita spoke with blunt honesty.

“There will be worse. The government isn’t making their interest in Seconders public yet, but it may come to that soon. Even if the government says out of it, the public will start turning on us eventually as some of the implications sink in, especially if the gates stay with us. For instance, can you imagine how you would feel if a very small minority of people were able to live practically forever and you couldn’t?”

I nodded. I’d already thought about that.

Messler continued, “That’s one of the factors which will make itself felt, though not immediately. Those who have gone through the gates only once won’t kick up too much of a fuss until they begin growing old. Or getting sick. Then watch out. Or suppose we had an epidemic, like the Shivas Prion that cropped up in India a few years ago? How many millions died then? Seconders can cure themselves simply by going through a gate again; most of those who’ve been through once already know they are risking everything to go through again—the odds are they will vanish.”

“Are you saying that we may have to go into hiding?” Rita leaned forward, concern evident on her face.

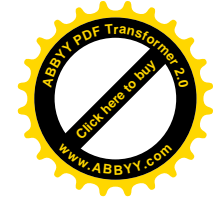
“Some may, eventually. In fact, in many countries, we’re already seeing it happen. That’s no long-term solution, though. It’s impossible to hide in our society. Identification is too easy these days, and computers track us everywhere. It’s not like it was back before the Millennium.”

“So what is the solution?”

“Bear with me. You agree that Seconders will be feared and resented more and more as time passes?”

“Resented, maybe,” Rita said.

“Ever hear about the Salem witch trials? Or about the Spanish Inquisition? The Holocaust? Have you studied the origins of the race problem in this country? Oh, we’ll be feared, all right. There are some smart analysts in the government. Eventually, they’ll ferret out our secret, simply by observing us and putting a pattern analysis computer to work. Then watch out. We’ll be corralled like sheep, and



either put to work, or possibly eliminated, like a few already have been in Russia.”

Despite her natural inclination to think the best of people, Rita saw our point. “All right. I have trouble with the concept, but I’ll take your word for it. But—” She looked around me, as if appealing for help. “Isn’t there something we can do to stop this reaction before it happens?”

“Don’t make waves,” Messler said. “Never let on how different you are, or do anything to take advantage of your difference, like, for instance, hanging around a broker and sensing when he’s ready to jump on a winner. Don’t congregate in groups or form organizations. That’s a sure-fire way to draw attention to yourselves.”

He was telling us to lay low and keep quiet. I didn’t think that would do much good in the long run. I said so.

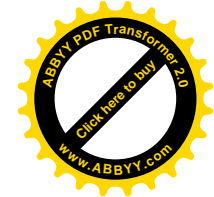
Messler smiled. “You’re right. Acting normal can delay things a bit, though. And I can help personally. Money is still good for a number of things, like paying for spinweb slots to counteract public opinion. Or making sure that government reports and research comes out skewed. For instance, I’ve helped make sure the government doesn’t learn why Seconders can’t be questioned. The real reason is that our minds go into a sort of autistic state under coercion., but the NSC thinks it’s something else.” His smile broadened.

“You can do that? Buy off government researchers?” It was a stupid remark. Of course he could. Things like that went on all the time. Money has limits, though. There’s always someone willing to offer more money for the other side.

“For a while. The autistic angle is something important, something we need to conceal as long as we can. Have you ever heard of the term Idiot Savant? Some autistics are like that. There are indications that after numerous gate passages we may develop unusual talents like they have—without becoming either idiots or autistic.”

I voiced my worries. “But what if someone finds out you are bribing people and offers more money?”

Messler took it in stride. “There aren’t many people with enough money to outbid me. And remember this: I’ve lived more than a century now. You would be amazed at the number of friends and agents and contacts a man makes or can plug into key positions over that stretch of time, especially a wealthy man. Trust me. I can control public opinion for a good long while, in this country anyway, and



perhaps in others.”

Rita reflected. “A good long while. How long is that.”

“Long enough, I hope, but again, that’s no permanent solution, as Lee says. That’s where you two come in.”

He paused for a moment, looking us over. “You two beat stupendous odds. You came through the gates twice, alone and as paired partners. I don’t think that’s happened to anyone else. You are unique.”

I was willing to take Messler’s word for it, though I had no idea of what the significance of our achievement was yet, if any. In a vast and seemingly random universe, and against tremendous odds, Rita and I had managed to stay together. It made me grateful, and if there turned out to be a god, I would willingly thank him. I only wished Donna and Russell had shared our good fortune.

“We’re glad,” I said, squeezing Rita’s hand. She leaned against me, nodding agreement.

“You’ve also developed a sensitivity to the thoughts of other people.” He said that as an obvious statement, something we already knew.

“Is that normal for Seconders?” I asked.

Messler smiled, giving us a hint of his old personality. “You must know that it is, but there’s more. What else have you noticed?”

I tried but couldn’t think of anything else of real significance. Rita could, though, even if she hadn’t mentioned it to me. “We’re smarter than we were. I’ve noticed it more and more lately. I’m seeing correlations and finding errors I wouldn’t have picked up before.

Suddenly I knew she was right. I thought of how easily I had been delving the nuances of the newscasts lately where before it had taken some brainpower. “What does it mean? Will we keep on getting smarter and more sensitive to each other?”

Messler smiled, looking almost like his old self again. “You will if you keep going through the gates like I have.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Flies might have made a home in my mouth before I got it closed, but Rita took it in stride.

“How many times have you gone through?” she asked, speaking as nonchalantly as if we were discussing a routine shopping trip.

“Several times.” Messler glanced away, and I knew we weren’t going to get a solid number out of him.

“But why?” I asked. “Did you get hurt or sick? Or did you want to try changing your sex again?” I knew, of course, that the NSC had forced poor Renfrow to go through the gates several times, and quite a few Seconders had gone through a third time after suffering radiation poisoning in the attack on San Antonio—as we had. But no one that I knew went through the gates for the hell of it—they were still too much of an unknown—too alien.

Messler regarded us with a solemn expression for a moment before explaining. “I think the first time I went through again after becoming a Seconder was a combination of curiosity and a simple hunch that I might make it through for the third time. Remember, I’ve made fortunes playing hunches, and this was one I really felt impelled to try, especially since I was smart enough by then to suspect I might find out something important about the gates if I kept going through them.”

All I could do was take my hat off to his hunches—and his courage. In the silence after his startling revelation I began to realize that Messler was one of the more brilliant minds of our age, even before he went through the gates numerous times; he possessed one of those intellects that only come around once a generation or even once a century.

Rita finally broke the silence. “And you did find something.”

Messler nodded. “Yes. After the third time through, my intellect went up another notch, and while the sex change was as instantaneous as before, I found that by an effort of will I could delay my reappearance for a number of seconds. I might mention that was something I intended to try doing beforehand. I didn’t learn much that time, but I waited until several days later, knowing what happened to Renfrow, then tried again. Again. That time I was able to hold on for a considerable time—several minutes in fact.”



“What was it like?” I leaned forward, full of curiosity. If you’ve ever been through a gate, you know how frustrating it is—you fall toward the green mist, and then—nothing! You’re on the other side.

Messler shrugged. “As you might expect, it’s like being enveloped in a thick green mist so far as normal senses go. But mentally, I found I could sense other phenomena occurring around me. I felt forces as work, engaging in the operation of the gates, and I was sure I also sensed the entities responsible for them. And it became easier with every passage.”

He stopped at that point, got up out of his lounge and strode over to the window where he grasped his hands behind his back and stared out over the city. It was almost as if he were acting—and probably he was. “Several times” he had said. By now his intellect must be far beyond ours. Something in his manner made me wonder if he were still completely human. The thought sent a brief shiver over my skin. I glanced over at Rita and saw my fear mirrored in her eyes too.

Still, I was forced to admire his courage in experimenting with the gates in a way no one else had dared. Renfrow had been forced to do what he did by the government. And rumor that it that after several quick, forced passages he became an idiot. No, Messler was unique.

I spoke to his back. “Who are they? Where do they come from? How do the gates work? Why did...” I ran out of breath, even though I was still bursting with questions.

Messler turned and came back to where Rita and I were sitting. He stood looking down at us, his eyes troubled, as if searching for words simple enough to convey the truth to minds that must seem childlike in comparison with his own.

“In the first place, you can’t properly call them a ‘they.’ An ‘it’ would be more accurate,” he said at last. But that really doesn’t describe them either—and I’m saying ‘them’ on purpose. It’s easier on the mind. The Gate Master—or Masters if you like, appears to be part of a race—or a shared group of minds—or a single mind—that was once a planetary species much like us. But they are incredibly more advanced and infinitely older. I know I am being a bit confusing here, but our minds can barely grasp the level of reality inhabited by this mind or minds I’m talking about.”

I swallowed hard. Aliens it was, then, but aliens so far beyond the usual BEM as to be incomprehensible to mere humans.

Messler was still speaking. “Also I believe that the entity I will call the



Gate Master, for lack of a better term, is only a very small segment of the overall entity—and that our Gate Master is interested in what is happening with humans, but from its own viewpoint, and what interests it is not what interests us. What I mean is, I believe it isn't even aware of what's happening with Seconders, and doesn't know we are experiencing this telepathy and increased mind power. Perhaps the overall entity might catch on, but this portion of it—our Gate Master—isn't aware. That's one reason I think I can sense it without being swatted: I'm using a portion of my mind it doesn't understand, a portion that wasn't even active until I became a Seconder."

"Are you telling us that you can control the gates now?" Rita was squeezing my hand so tightly that it hurt. I knew that she was thinking the same thing I was thinking: if he could control the gates, he could bring back Russ and Donna!

"Oh no, or not yet anyway. I'll have to pass through the gates many more times before that's possible—if indeed it is possible—and even so, I'll need a lot of help to manage it."

Rita was ahead of me again. "That's why you agreed to see us."

Messler nodded, a sad, faraway look in his eyes. "Yes, you two are strongly linked together already. Once you start to go through the gates again, the sky may be the limit for you both. You see, I've found that as Seconders go through the gates again and again, they become more and more able to merge their minds—and the merging is even more intense when lovers enter the equation, somewhat like a synergistic effect."

My nose for news made me sense that there was more here than he was telling us yet. I asked my main question rhetorically. "Okay, so let's say that Seconders go through the gates numerous times. We get real smart and one day we take control of them. Won't the Gate Master who put them here have something to say about us taking his toys away from him?"

Messler smiled, but there was nothing human in his smile. It was icy cold. "Toys. Now there's a word. Can you remember when you were a boy and tried pushing a toy truck or car off a table to see if it would break? And you, Rita, did you ever try dressing a pet kitten or puppy up in doll clothes to see what they would look like?"

I was speechless at what Messler was implying. Rita was aghast. "Do you mean that some—some intergalactic juvenile delinquent *isplaying* with us? God, I don't believe it!"



A memory flashed through my mind of once suggesting something like that myself, way back before my first change. Of course, I was joking at the time. My God!

“Now, hold on,” Messler admonished. “I didn’t say it was some alien child getting his jollies by dressing up Muffin or playing with toy trucks. That’s just an analogy, and maybe it’s a poor one. However, I did get the impression that the entity responsible for the gates is a much younger segment of the overall intelligence of which it is a part—and that it has been doing a bit of experimenting on the human race, using the sex gates as an instrument, so to speak. It could be the Gate Master is more like an intern studying under a great physician, or an apprentice to a great wizard. I really can’t say.”

I shuddered at the thought. Bad enough to be the subject of alien manipulation, but to think that much more might be yet to come—from an even more powerful alien mind—was enough to give anyone the shakes.

Messler frowned. “What I do believe is that once enough Seconders pass through the gates enough times, and enough of us merge our minds, we can take control of the gates—and send the entity packing.”

“Flash Gordon to the rescue,” I muttered.

Messler’s eyes flashed. “This is serious business, Lee. We are now different from most of the people on this planet, and we are nothing like the Gate Masters. But if we can convince the normal humans that we’ve saved the gates and kept them for the human race, it will go a long way toward eliminating that resentment against Seconders we talked about earlier.”

“But how sure are you that the—uh, the kiddo—won’t be doing anything about us in the meantime? Seems to me that if I were dressing Muffin and she scratched me I’d swat her. Hard.”

“Good point. I can’t promise any of this will be easy. But remember there are always unexpected consequences to about anything a person—or entity—does. And in this case, the Gate Master never considered that the Seconders’ might develop some unexpected mind power, or that they would continue to increase that power with subsequent passages.”

“By what factor does intelligence increase?” I wondered.

His eyes looked away again. Obviously, there was still a lot he didn’t want to tell us. “So far as I can glean, the part of the intelligence we’re



dealing with doesn't have a clue yet that this is happening," he added, ignoring my question.

Rita caught his evasion. "There's a catch," she said with her usual directness.

Messler laced his fingers together and sighed, then gazed at each of us in turn. Finally he spoke. "Yes, there's a catch. You're sitting here listening to me talk and still thinking of me as human. I'm not anymore. I've become something more—and perhaps less—than human. It is very hard to put into mere words. Suffice to say that much of what you believe to be the essential you—your soul if you want to think of it that way—will be irrevocably changed. You won't think the same way. You won't relate to each other the same way."

Now his green eyes were glowing with emerald flame. But his blazing intensity frightened me. "You will become as far removed from the essence of what you are now as a pupa does when it becomes a butterfly. But you will also become able to fly."

We will?

The thought belonged to me and to Rita, at the same time. Messler was talking as if we had both agreed to jump through the gates again. I hadn't agreed to anything, and I wasn't about to yet. Questions raced through my mind. Would I still love Rita if we did what Messler wanted us to? Would I still like to write? Would I want to read and re-read my favorite books? The more I thought, the more I realized what a plethora of pleasant things there were to being human.

Rita shared my thoughts, of course. She shook her head at Messler. "Couldn't we stop part way through the process and still be able to help—and yet still be human—be ourselves?"

Messler thought, then shrugged. "It's possible I suppose, but not likely. What you experience within the gate, once you are able to stay there for even a few moments, will change you forever. By the time you've gone through the gate a few more times, you'll almost certainly begin wanting to keep the kid from shoving the truck off the table—or perhaps deciding to hit it with a hammer to see if it will break. That's how I felt and how the others I'm in contact with felt. The ones who made it, that is."

Uh oh. Another glitch.

Messler saw our expressions and nodded. "Yes, some Seconders, or Thirder or Fourthers don't come back. That's what happened to a



couple of Seconders the NSC experimented with after they were done with Renfrow, and why they eventually stopped. I personally think the process must be taken in slow steps, like I've done. Also, there are two areas where I have little or no data. One is from some foreign countries where I suspect Seconders are being experimented on. And I have no data at all on lovers who have become Seconders together like you. For all I know you might go in an entirely new direction."

"What makes a Seconder, anyway?" Rita wanted to know. "Have you discovered that, at least?"

For the first time Messler smiled as if something were really funny. "Yes," he said, and waited.

"Well?" I demanded.

He grinned. "It is so obvious it took me several passages through the gates to figure it out. Seconders become Seconders because they have an inherent propensity for telepathy."

The shocked looks on our faces must have amused him even more because he chuckled. "I see I've given you enough to think about for one day. Why don't you two go home and ponder what I've told you. In the meantime, I'll be working on another opportunity for us to get together without arousing suspicion."

Rita and I stood up and shook his hand in farewell. Both of us were suddenly anxious to go. Messler sensed how uncomfortable we felt and did nothing to prevent us leaving. As we got to the door I turned, a final question suddenly popping into my mind.

"Suppose becoming Seconders and going on from there is still a bit of experimenting? Suppose the entity is aware of what is happening but is making you think it isn't for the sake of the experiment. What then?"

The green eyes looked over my head, at some point in infinity. "Then we are lost, Lee. But I believe the entity doesn't know, and we can win."

The last I saw of him that day was his sad smile as he shut the door.

I took a deep breath. Don't ask a question if you don't want to hear the answer. We would have to be satisfied with that. For now, anyway.

Shaking off my dismay, I turned and pulled Rita into my arms,



suddenly wanting more than anything to be locked in a safe and warm embrace that drove away the fears Messler's words had brought.

After a few minutes, we felt strong enough to break apart and make our way out of the bank building. But it was a somber trip home. We rode in virtual silence, our thoughts tumbling together as we shot our troubling questions back and forth at each other

Should we go through the gates again?

Does Messler really need us to learn how to control the gates?

If we go through too many times, will we lose our humanity? Do you think we should wait? Then if Messler finds Russell and Donna, we can help them, and perhaps teach them to meld their minds with ours.

But what if we are the only ones who are able to find Russell and Donna? Or who care too?

At what price? Do we really want change into something no longer human?

It was an awesome decision. As Grandpa's old homestead came into view, I had the feeling I was about to leave my past forever behind.

That was two months ago. Rita and I spent the next few days and nights in a constant debate. Not that we were arguing—we were too close for that. It was more like one person, carrying on a constant inner conversation, searching for the right decision. Finally, we decided that we could not abandon Russell and Donna if there was any chance, no matter how remote, that our going through the gates and learning to control the passage would eventually save them. Our lives—our humanity—were not too much to risk for the missing members of our family.

The next night after we reached that decision we drove over to the Ruston gate. Not wanting to call attention to our undergoing yet another sex change, we went long after midnight, when no one was around. We stood for a long few minutes in front of the portal, looking into those luminous green depths. I was holding Rita's hand, painfully aware that neither one of us had ever gone through a gate of our own free will. The first time Rita's attacker had forced us through,



and the second time it was the gate or death. Now a force even stronger than death—our love for Russell and Donna—drove us on.

I turned to her. “Ready?”

She nodded, and as one we stepped into the gate for the third time.

As always before, the transition was instantaneous. We popped out on the other side, and I was once again Li and she was Rez. I took a step and felt the bounce of my breasts once again. Rez looked down at the penis between his legs and sent me a wicked grin.

But for once my thoughts were elsewhere. *Feel any smarter?* Messler had assured us that after the third time we would really start to notice the difference.

Smart enough to know what I’m going to be doing before too long! But underneath the leering response to my question, I caught the touch of a mind that was quicker and keener than it had been before. I could feel it somehow—as if Rez’s mind were turned up a notch, running at top speed.

I can feel it too. His big black eyes stared into mine, surprised.

We were on our way.

We decided to wait several weeks before trying our fourth trip through the gates, and also took the precaution of leaving town before anyone saw us in our new bodies. We drove to a different gate in another city. We made our fourth passage there and then continued traveling for two more weeks, making one more passage on that trip.

Before finally returning home, we stopped at one of the gates in North Houston. As usual, we were making the trip late at night. At the moment, I was female and Rita was male, but we planned to go through one more time so we could arrive home as we had left—as Lee and Rita.

Only this time, for the first time, we both felt sure we would be able to maintain our mental focus and stay inside the gate for a few seconds.

We took the now familiar step into the green mist. As I sent my questing thoughts out, I did not know what to expect, but almost instantly I felt my first faint impression of something alien. At first it felt as nebulous and unreal as the green mist still surrounding me—a directionless sense of some irritation in the mind pulling at my consciousness, the way a sore tooth keeps nagging at your attention



until you probe it with your tongue. There was nothing particular in the sensation that was frightening, except that it was so obviously alien.

A dim echo of something that might have been amusement or maybe only infinite condescension ran through my mind. Another concept went hurling through my brain—a vague image of a scientist taking measurements and writing up a report, satisfied with the research so far. I seemed to see an infinite ladder stretching up into a vast sky, and I felt a strong sense that the human race had moved somehow from the ground unto the first rung of that ladder.

That was all. The sense of an alien presence in vanished. I had barely touched the alien mind and I was sure it had not noticed us at all.

Pop! I staggered out again into the cold night air as Lee, and Rita emerged wonderfully female. Both of us were grinning from ear to ear, and not only because we were safely through. We had succeeded in staying inside the gate for a few moments. It meant we really could play a part in finding out more about the Gate Master—and about the fate of Russell and Donna and all the other untold thousands of humans who'd gone into the gates and vanished. Were they waiting for us inside the gates? Or were they being stored somewhere, like rolls of coins, not useful for much, but still too valuable to discard? Were they transported somewhere to populate a new planet, or repopulate an old one? Or did they die, their bodies dissolved by the gates and the atoms scattered to the far winds of the universe?

Rita and I were determined to find out. As Messler had warned us, the hunt for the entities inside the gate was becoming addictive.

The night wind was cold. Rita hurried over to collect our clothes from where we'd left them piled in front of the gate. I stood and stared up at the stars spread in a band of light across the vast Texas sky, feeling my anger growing. How dare this cold, alien intelligence play with us as if we were mice in a cage? What was the point of all the struggles and suffering and growth of humanity over thousands of years? Was the human race going to end as nothing but a footnote in some alien study on the responses of inferior races to the gate technology?

Rita sensed my mood without either of us speaking a word. She came up to my side and put her arms around me, squeezing my shoulders. I took her in my arms and we held each other tight, sharing our warmth, our bodies speaking in a language older than time.

After awhile, we released each other and started putting our clothes back on. Rita frowned, searching her memories, and started to talk



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aloud about what we'd sensed inside the gate this time. "The Gate Master thinks of us as less than animals. I suspect all the criminals and degenerates who have entered the gates have simply winked out of existence. The entity would consider it was doing us a favor to get rid of them for us. But the ones who made it through the first time ... they were different."

"Russ was different, too," I interrupted. It was unbelievable that a genius like Russ would have failed to make it through even once when so many thousands had succeeded.

"Exactly," Rita said. "The very fact that he didn't make it through when by every criteria we know of he should have makes me certain that he and Donna were transported somewhere else."

A chill of anticipation sliced through me at the thought. As long as the gates remained on earth, we were immortal. There would be plenty of time to explore, learn about the entity—and find our friends.

I remembered Don striding into the gate when it first appeared, unafraid and ready for adventure. I understood that feeling now. Perhaps we were only an experiment to the aliens, but with the help of their gates, we were going to grow and evolve until we staked our own claim on that river of stars high above my head.

Rita and I exchanged determined looks. We would keep walking through that gate as long as it took to find our lovers again. One day, the gate would show us the way.

THE END

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