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WORLDS OF THE SEX GATES

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Dedication

To my wife Betty, my one true love, and the most wonderful, caring woman in the whole wide world. We have been married almost thirty years now and her beauty still inspires me, her gift of compassion astounds me, her innate sense of what is right and wrong constantly amazes me and her ability to overlook my failings is almost unbelievable. I am forever grateful that she chose me to share the second half of her life, though I'll be damned if I can figure out why. Whatever, I love and cherish her and cannot imagine life without her. She is my sweetheart, my friend, my lover, my companion, and all too often, my conscience. Every man should be so lucky.

—Darrell Bain

With special thanks to Pat, my husband and my favorite fan. He kept asking me if this book was finished yet—so here it is!

—Jeanine Berry

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CHAPTER ONE

"Donna wants to have a baby," Rissa announced.
I smiled, picturing my best friend holding a baby in her arms. "That'

s
wonderful!" I said. Then I remembered Rita, my love, back on Earth. I
had left her
alone and carrying our baby. A wave of intense sorrow engulfed me, but I
managed to keep the smile on my face for Rissa's sake.
"She says she's ready for motherhood, or as ready as someone who w
as
born male can ever be." Rissa smiled and tilted her head to one side, letting
her
long, blonde hair sweep over a bare shoulder.
As usual, I marveled at the complexities the sex gates had brought into
our lives. A hint of the perfume Rissa wore drifted my way on a warm bre
eze. I
eyed her cleavage and asked the obvious question. "Are you planning
to father
this baby?"
"Not in my present condition." Rissa cupped her hands under her tw
o
lovely breasts, as if I hadn't noticed them. For our outing, she'd conjured up
a
skimpy halter-top sundress of greens and yellows and blues. Her twin mou
nds
threatened to spill out of the two slashes of fabric that held them in place.
The
soft folds of the dress draped around her curves as if the cloth were alive,
the
luminous colors shifting and merging with every breath she took. As soon
as she
saw she'd grabbed my attention with her breasts, she clutched the hem with her
scarlet nails and hiked it to the top of her slender thighs. She winked
at me as I
eyed this further proof of her femininity. When Russell changed into a w
oman he
turned into flirt.
I coughed to clear my throat. "Nothing wrong with your present condit
ion
that I can see." My fingers itched to reach over and stroke the warm flesh of
her
thighs. It was a beautiful day in the Nexus, perfect for a tumble on the
grass. My
mood perked up a little at the thought of forgetting my problems between
Rissa's

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thighs. The lewd sparkle in her dark blue eyes told me she was horny. Mo
st
people are after a trip through a gate.
"Do you think I look good as a woman?" That was a silly question,
but like
most women Rissa loved a compliment. She patted her golden curls and arc
hed
her back slightly to display her breasts to greater advantage.
"I think you're sexy as hell and I'm prepared to prove it."
I shot a torrid grin
at her and put my arm around her slim waist. Taking the hint, she cuddle

d close.

I'm not a very big man but Rissa still felt small and fragile and very feminine against me. It was intriguing, since when he was a man he was about my size.

The two of us sat on a round stone, perched on the edge of a cliff. A towering tree with leaves like the blue-green feathers of a Mallard Duck cast its

shade over us as we looked down into the valley where a city of living crystal

towers held the secrets of the sex gates—and probably many more secrets as well.

The towers sparkled in the bright sunlight. I could swear I could see some

of them growing. They were not straight like buildings made by man, but more like trees, sprouting out of the ground and branching into the sky. Whenever I got

fooled by the green grass or blue sky and thought for a moment I was back on Earth, a glance at the city cured me.

From the distance, it looked enchanting, like Dorothy's Emerald City in Oz. But when we were inside those towers Rissa and I struggled with seemingly

unending problems. That's why I liked to leave it behind, wander across the meadows, and climb the hill to the cliff that overlooked the valley where the city

sat. Sitting perched on the edge, I found a sense of perspective at last. Or maybe

what I really found was a false sense of power. Living in the city of the masters

frightened me at times—looking down on it from the edge of this cliff it seemed

smaller and I had a momentary illusion of control.

Power is a funny thing. Even when you have it, you can't always do what

you want to do. And even when you can, it's not always such a bright idea. Most

of my life, male or female, I've had a habit of acting before I stopped to think it

through. Ever since Messler had left me in charge of the Nexus, I found myself

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thinking a lot, perhaps too much. Having awesome power dumped on your shoulders will do that to you.

Russell and I faced a momentous choice soon—it was no exaggeration to say that we held the fate of millions in our hands. I was determined to think any

proposed plan of action out thoroughly before I made a final decision. Hence this

trip up the hillside for a heart-to-heart with Russell, who happened to be female

today.

Then Rissa's unexpected announcement about Donna had sidetracked our discussion.

Not that I cared. I welcomed some good news. I had to decide soon what

to do about all the humans who had vanished while going through the sex gates on Earth—and who were now held in stasis on this Nexus world—but that pressing problem could wait while I shared my friend's pleasure. I couldn't help but notice that the thought of knocking up Donna had gotten her excited. Her nipples had hardened under the thin fabric of her sundress. "When do you plan to get Donna pregnant?" I aimed a good-natured leer in Rissa's direction. Rissa shook her head and patted my hand. "We're still discussing that question. It's a big step and I don't like bringing a baby into a situation as unsettled as this one is." Her remark sent my thoughts spinning back to Rita. An ache started somewhere under my chest bone. I won't be dramatic and claim a broken heart, but I didn't like my forced exile from Rita one bit. I was stuck in the Nexus and Rita was on Earth. Unfortunately, because of the way the sex gates operate, we had no other choice. Rita and I both wanted our baby and she couldn't use a gate to come to the Nexus while she was pregnant. Meanwhile, Messler had dumped the responsibility for watching over the gates on my head and gone merrily off in search of the gate masters. I had to stay in the Nexus to solve the problem of those locked in stasis.

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I almost laughed at Rissa's hope for stability. I didn't expect stability in my life anytime soon. The whole world had been in upheaval ever since the day the sex gates first appeared on Earth.

"You're right," I agreed. "It's not a good situation at the moment."

Rissa sighed. "Spoken like a rational male. Donna doesn't agree. She wants a baby now. If I didn't know better, I'd say her biological clock is ticking."

I snorted. The idea of a biological clock was ridiculous for Seconders. We could go through a gate whenever we wanted, which meant we could change our sex and become young again whenever the whim struck.

"The number of trips through a gate isn't infinite," Rissa said as if reading my thoughts. She probably was. All Seconders were telepathic to some extent and I wasn't making any attempt to shield what I was thinking. "And Donna has preferred to stay female for the most part."

That was true. On the day that the gates appeared years ago, Donna had been Don, my best friend. The four of us—me, Russell, Don and Rita—had been walking home from our college classes when a gate materialized right in front of

us. On an impulse, he'd gone through—that was before anyone knew what they

did, of course. I could still remember the shock when he emerged as Donna.

"So you're saying she's thinking like a woman about this," I ventured.

"Some of the differences between the sexes are real," Rissa commented.

"I mean besides the obvious ones." She snickered slightly and glanced down at her breasts. When you were born a male and still spend most of your time that way, it's hard to get over the sight of two huge mounds of soft flesh on your chest. She cupped them again, making them jiggle, and looked thoughtful.

"Women have a definite nesting instinct. Donna's has apparently kicked in."

"But you'd prefer to wait?"

Rissa nodded. "At least until we figure out what to do about these people

in stasis. That problem could get nasty."

"So tell her she has to wait." Rita always accuses me of being naïve, if not

downright simpleminded. I guess it's true. Rissa only laughed at my suggestion.

Her eyes sparkled as she poked me in the thigh with one painted fingernail.

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"I can't do that, not if I want to be the father. And I do. No offense to you."

I frowned. "Why should I be offended?"

"Because you're her second choice."

"Hey, wait a minute." I raised my hands. "I have quite enough going on in the baby department already."

Rissa chuckled. "That's what I figured. Don't worry. I'll make the sacrifice and do the deed."

We both laughed and sat for a moment in companionable male silence.

Not that I'd forgotten for a moment that Rissa was in a female body.

Russell

seldom stayed female, and I made the most of those occasions when they happened. The majority of the time, he preferred to be a male, just as Donna

liked being female. Even in her x-rated female form, most of Rissa's thinking remained male. I reached over and patted her on the thigh. That was a mistake. Her smooth skin was like hot liquid silk under the palm of my hand.

I snatched my hand away. If Rissa and Donna were planning on a baby, I needed to back off and allow them to bond as a couple. The ache beneath my

chest bone started up again. It was lonely on the Nexus world without Rita. I needed both of my friends, needed the warm comfort of their bodies too.

My face always shows my feelings. Or maybe I was radiating them like a dark cloud. Rissa aimed a bright smile my way. "Why so glum?"

"Just doing some thinking, as usual," I lied.

She grabbed one of my hands in both of her small ones and squeezed.

"Thinking shouldn't make you sad. For the look on your face, I'd say you were

debating with yourself over whether or not to jump off a cliff."

She sent a mental image into my mind. I saw myself, all long limbs and disheveled reddish brown hair, plunging over a rocky prominence and falling, falling down toward jagged rocks below. I shivered and pulled her closer. She

laughed.

"See? That's how despondent you looked."

She pressed her head against my chest. The heat of her soft body seemed to ease the ache. I inhaled the sweet perfume of her hair. The scent was

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elusive and light. Rita preferred deeper, richer scents—musk and jasmine and other exotic aromas. I swallowed a lump in my throat. Even smells were making me think of my lost love.

I decided it was high time to change the subject. "Well, hell's bells,

Russ—I mean Rissa. This whole stasis situation is getting to me. I just can't decide what to do—and time is pressing. There's not that much longer before I have to make a decision about those people."

She knew who I meant. All the ones in limbo. When Messler left the Nexus to search for the masters, he left me in charge since he insisted on believing that

I have a gift for leadership. Fortunately, I was not alone on this alternate Earth.

Russell and Donna had lived in the Nexus for years, ever since they'd vanished

when entering a sex gate on Earth.

A few months ago Messler had transported me to the Nexus where I'd learned the truth about the entities who'd sent the sex gates to Earth—they were

humans from an alternate world who had discovered the simple steps of the scientific method while humans were still trying to figure out how to hunt down

and kill mammoths without losing half the tribe in the process. They were as

human as we were then, right down to fleas and dandruff and trying to figure out

a better way of killing their rivals and stealing their women. But while we spent

thousands of years floundering around in the Dark Ages, they made steady progress.

I'd like to ask them a lot more about that. Unfortunately, the gate masters are gone now, into some unfathomable dimension they discovered through their invention of the sex gates. In their wake, we humans of Earth dig through the toys they'd left behind, trying to figure out how they worked. Since the masters

were geniuses, it demanded a brilliant mind.

Not that I was brilliant—I was nowhere near as bright as Rissa, for instance. And I lacked the gift for empathy that Rita had. But I was one of the first

humans on earth to become a Secondar, one who could pass through a sex gate

more than once, changing gender each time. Changing gender was almost a side effect though. As we'd gradually discovered, the real difference the sex

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gates made was a mental one. Ironically, that effect might have been unintended by the masters.

Intended or not, with each passage through a gate, a Secondar became smarter, able to think quicker and better. And like most Seconders I had developed a prodigy-like talent, a specialty if you will, where my increased brain power really went to work. My talent was seeing patterns in events while others were still barely aware of the actions. Other Seconders developed different idiot savant abilities—without becoming idiots. Hardly any were as far along as me and Rita, though, and therein dwelled part of the problem I had hiked up here to think about.

Rissa must have seen that I was slipping into gloom again. She stood up and took both my hands in hers. I enjoyed the pixyish look on her face. It wasn't an expression you usually saw on the face of one of Earth's most brilliant physicists. For Russell, being Rissa was a vacation from a life of almost continual pressure. The smile on her lips was both radiant and intriguing.

"Come with me, Lee. I have some news that might cheer you up a little."

Shucks, I would have gone with her regardless. Anything was better than spending the afternoon sitting on a rock brooding. And the way she glanced up at me as we strode off gave me the whole pattern. She did have more news to tell me, important news, but she wanted me in a good mood before she gave it to me. To confirm my impression, I touched her surface thoughts. They swirled with desire and an eagerness to please me.

Tugging my hand, she led me down the hillside and back toward the crystal city of the now vanished masters. As we walked across the valley, she moved slightly ahead of me. I couldn't help thinking she did it on purpose so I could get a good glimpse of the delightful way her hips swayed when she walked.

For someone who spent very little time as a female, Rissa had certainly mastered the intricacies of the feminine walk. Watching her wiggle her way toward the city would have given a dead man a hard on.

As we approached the crystal towers, Rissa fell into step beside me and slid an arm around my waist. Her elusive scent surrounded me again as she

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brushed her long, silky hair against my shoulder and leaned into me. My pants started to feel uncomfortably tight. Rissa, for her part, radiated a low, pleasant hum of mounting sensuality, almost like a cat's purr. I sensed contentment and a

gentle, playful sort of pleasure whenever her body bumped mine as we walked. Something was definitely on her mind and growing stronger as we got closer to the buildings. I call them buildings for lack of a better word, although they were never built that we could see. They were more organic than anything. They seemed to grow out of the earth like a crystalline plant. Whatever material they were made of, it was incredibly responsive to quantum manipulation. Inside, we used our advanced Second abilities to reshape the rooms into whatever we needed at the moment.

Although I'd lived in the city for months, it was still startling to walk right through the wall, but this was a city without doors. We emerged in a room Rissa had probably created before coming out to get me. It contained a queen-sized bed, covered with silken sheets. Little carved tables stood on each side and held pitchers beaded with moisture. Gold-rimmed glasses sat beside the pitchers, waiting to be filled. After our walk, I was ready for a drink, but Rissa had other ideas first, as I already knew.

Soft music began to play, the sound flowing out of the walls. Rissa turned and reached up to curl her arms around my neck. I put my hands on her hips, feeling the almost impossible softness of the material of her dress as I smoothed it against her skin, then suddenly the material was gone, vanished in a blink, and my hands were roving over the warm silk of her bare skin. The dress hadn't really been there at all.

She snuggled closer to me and laughed, a merry tinkling sound. Her eyebrows drew together in a frown of concentration and my shirt disappeared. Her nipples stiffened into taut pink nubs and made little up and down movements against the skin of my chest as her breasts rose and fell with her excited breathing. I got goose bumps simply from their touch. I was about to make my pants vanish when I remembered Donna.

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"What about you and Donna and the baby?" I asked.

Rissa stroked her fingers through the hair on my chest, sending rivers of fire down to my aroused cock. "I'm going to go ahead and make her pregnant. It's what Donna wants and I love Donna." Her soft mouth curved into a sensual smile as she stood up on her tiptoes and pressed a hot, demanding kiss to my lips. Her tongue came out, probing, demanding entrance into my mouth. I was

forced into silence for a long moment as our two tongues tangled in an ancient

dance. Then I came up for air.

"So should we be doing this?"

Rissa's blue eyes sparkled with amusement. "Lee! Don't tell me you're

turning straitlaced in your old age."

"I don't want to start any trouble between you and Donna, that's all."

Rissa wiggled her hips, bumping her pelvis against mine. I bit down on my lip as her hot, naked skin pressed against my already aroused member. She

lifted a teasing eyebrow. "If I'm going to be a dad, I'm going to have to change

back to a male and stay that way for quite a while. Are you going to deny me one

last fling as a female—especially when I know you're more than able to please me."

I stared down at her perky breasts and licked my lips. Her nipples jutted

out, begging for my touch. Breasts like that deserved some tender attention, especially when they were about to vanish in Rissa's next trip through a sex gate.

"What about you, Lee?" Rissa purred. "What about you and Rita?"

I knew she was teasing me now. It was just like Russell to enjoy trapping

me in my own logic. Rita was my one true love, whether she was a beautiful

woman, as she was now, or in her male guise as Rez. We'd both had many

lovers, but we always came back to each other. Fortunately, Rita was an open

minded woman when it came to sex and never displayed the slightest hint of jealousy. If anything, I was the one who could become jealous from time to time.

Of course, I couldn't tell Rissa I'd much rather be holding Rita in my arms. Instead, I slid my hands over the satin smooth curve of her hips and up her sides

to cup her breasts. Once I had captured her twin treasures, I squeezed them soft

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flesh and used my thumbs to gently tickle her nipples. They jutted out under my

touch, thrusting proudly into the air.

"Oh, god, suck me!" Rissa tossed back her blonde hair and arched her

breasts higher, at the same time grabbing my head with both hands and pulling it

down. I didn't need to be asked twice. My mouth found one nipple and sucked it

in while my finger tweaked the other one.

"Ohh!" She let go of my head and grabbed my buttocks with both hands,

ramming me into her pelvis and grinding herself against me with fierce

urgency. I
clung to her breast and sucked harder, feeling her body shudder as my tongue
laved her nipple.
"The bed," she gasped, pulling me over and down. Trust a scientist
to
always keep the goal in mind. We rolled onto the silken sheets and she leaned
back, drawing me with her. I followed the desires of her mind, desires that
were
for all practical purposes the same as mine.
Her breasts were two round globes topped with erect nipples. I teased
them with my tongue, and kissed my way down her ribcage to her flat abdomen.
Her whole body shuddered with delight as I licked around her navel and then
lower, approaching her intimate flesh. Her white thighs parted as I drew
closer,
inviting me to explore her most private parts. I stroked the soft patch of
hair
between her legs and slid a finger into the hot moist flesh below. Her inner
thighs
were damp with her dew as she welcomed me.
An impatient groan broke from her lips. She bucked her hips upward and
drew me over her and I slipped deliciously into her hot depths.
Take me, Lee, take me. Her mind spoke to mine and more than her mind.
Her emotions washed over me in a chaos of longing and desire. Her aching
need
beckoned me, urging me to thrust deeper into her, to kindle the flame that
would
consume us both. Our bodies merged in the age old motions of coupling, but
it
was our minds that carried us together to a world of bliss that normal humans
never knew, a place where our every movement and desire and want was
orchestrated by each other's thoughts.

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Now her thoughts thundered in my mind in a simple cadence—deeper,
harder, faster—an ancient female demand to be possessed. And my own body
and mind responded with a fierce male passion, driving into her, wanting
to
consume her, all of her. Our desires became one as I pounded into her
welcoming flesh. Only our voices were separate as we vocalized all the
wonderful sensations, so intense as to be almost akin to pain.
The soaring pleasure became more than I could endure. Beneath me, I
felt Rissa's body stiffen as the walls of her pussy convulsed around me. I
lost
myself in her depths and our thoughts merged as we climaxed together.
The sex was wonderful, but I enjoy the afterglow, exchanging sweet words
of love with my lovers, almost as much. I lay in the cozy bed, curved around
Rissa's luscious body. My hands stroked her silky hair and her satiny
skin. It was
only when my hand passed over her flat abdomen that I thought again of Rita
and wondered if her body had started to swell with my child.
"You're thinking about Rita. You radiate so much loving energy when

n you
think of her." There was no rebuke in Rissa's voice. We were old friends. She
knew and loved Rita too. She understood. I kissed her shoulder in gratitude
and
voiced some of my feelings.
"It's like being caught in that old Catch-22 of legend. Whatever I choose to
do, it has bad consequences."
Rissa turned in the bed to face me. She caught my face in her hands.
"Does it help to talk about it?"
I shrugged. "It's not like there's any easy answer. Rita can't come here to
the Nexus because she's pregnant." We both knew what happened to pregnant
women who entered a sex gate. They became men-creatures with no way to
carry a baby. The fetus disappeared, gone forever.
Rissa stroked my cheek and looked deep into my eyes. I realized she was
about to tell me her good news. "I've made another leap forward in
my own
development after my last few passages through the gate." A confident smile
curved her lips. "I feel certain I've learned how to handle the quantum flux
much
the way Messler did. Chances are pretty good I could get you back to Earth."

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I laughed but there was no humor in the sound. "Sounds like a good plan,
but Rita is against it."
It had been one of our last arguments right before I left to come back to
the Nexus. As I did almost every day, I had reassured Rita that I would find a
way
to return to Earth and rejoin her before the baby was born. Since traveling in the
quantum flux with a gate enabled me to move in time too, I intended to return
while she was still pregnant. I didn't want to be like so many dads,
missing the
birth of their child.
"I've been thinking about that," Rita had said on the night before I left. "I
don't want you to risk it."
"No risk. I won't come unless I'm sure I can make it."
"That's not it." Her dark eyes held a serious look. "It's not the making it
I'm
worried about. It's what the trip will do to you."
Now I looked at Rissa and voiced Rita's worry aloud. "What happens
to
the brain, the mind, the soul each time we go through a sex gate? We know
there
are small but still incremental changes. When do we change enough to cease
being human?"
Rissa's soft eyes gazed into mine. "I thought you didn't believe in the soul,
Lee."
"I don't. But I do believe in whatever it is that makes us human, and that
does change each time we change gender by going through a sex gate."

Rissa attempted a smile. "We all need to be worried then."

I brushed a wisp of hair out of her eyes. When Rissa was Russell, her brilliant mind kept people at a distance. As a woman, she had a new softness and vulnerability. I wanted to protect her. It was a human instinct, one of many I

treasured and didn't want to lose. "I don't mean to scare you.

You've gone

through the gates so seldom. It's a long time before you'll have to worry. But I'm

close to some irrevocable change—I know it."

"Poor Lee!" Rissa wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me close. But what I really wanted right now was Rita, her feminine softness, her goodness and caring and her love for me. I wanted to make love to her, to run

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my fingers through her glossy locks of thick dark hair, to hold her breasts in my

hands, to feel the touch of her fingers and mouth on me, to merge my body with hers in the unalloyed joy of sexual love with the person I care about more than

anyone else in the world. What could ever be better than that?

The woman I held in my arms was more than willing to help me reach my lost love. She and I could get up from the bed where we'd just made love and go

outside. It wasn't far to where a sex gate stood on a patch of level ground. I could

see it from the window Rissa had created. Like all the gates, it was a turquoise

bright arch twenty feet high and ten thick with a green nimbus filling the inside. I

could enter there, and use the power of our joint minds to hold off the change from male to female long enough to orient myself. Russell had just told me he'd

learned how to guide me through the quantum possibilities within the gate so that

I would come out on Earth—something only Messler could do before.

I'd arrive on Earth changed to female, of course, but that wouldn't bother Rita, nor me either. We could still make love. And if I wanted, I could pick the

time to emerge, at any stage of her pregnancy. And once on earth, I could

chance another passage to become male again.

But at what cost? My telepathic abilities with Rita would be enhanced even more, but I might also become less human, as Messler had. Although he gave us

good reasons for leaving the Nexus, in my heart I feared he'd no longer felt a

kinship to the human race. That was the real reason he went in search of the gate masters. How long before the same thing happened to me?

Rita had begged me not to take the risk, to stay away from the gates. She

told me she didn't want me to come back until I was ready to remain on Earth and never leave again.

No wonder the ache in my heart refused to stop.

CHAPTER TWO

Rissa enfolded me in her embrace while I worked through my grief. She refused to be upset or jealous about my longing for Rita. The four of us—Russell, Donna, Rita and I—had gone through so much together that I doubted if even a nuclear bomb could blast us apart. Besides, as Russell, she'd made love to Rita, too. She cared for us both. After a while the ache receded. I knew it would never go away entirely until I was reunited with my love. Meanwhile, though, our problems in the Nexus remained unsolved.

Rissa puffed up the big pillows on the bed and the two of us lay back in comfort while we sipped some alcoholic concoction. The taste reminded me of our days together in college years ago, days when we loved rum and vied to come up with yet another creative combination that would enhance the taste and increase the kick.

Rissa lifted her glass and drained it dry. I watched in admiration as her tongue flicked out to wipe the last drop from her lips. She was talented with that tongue.

Supporting myself on one elbow, I turned so that I could admire her trim body. Her wavy golden hair spilled down to her shoulders and spread out over the pillow, making a rich contrast with the red pillowcase. A faint upward tilt at the corners of her lips gave her a dreamy expression. She was lightly tanned over her whole body.

Only her nipples and areoles were pink, topping the rise of her breasts like the last rays of sunset hitting the tips of twin mountains. As she lolled in the bed, she raised one leg slightly, revealing the glistening moisture on her inner thigh left from our love-making.

For the first time in weeks, I began to relax. She reminded me of a satiated kitten ready for a nap. I opened my mind and touched hers to send her that teasing thought. A small smile of triumph touched her lips, as I sighed and collapsed into the pillows at her side. It occurred to me that maybe she'd seduced me to get me relaxed. It was the kind of logical course Russell would pursue. I didn't care. It was wonderful to let my concerns slip away. Our minds played tag as we lay there, little darts of thought weaving in and out of the overall gestalt

beginning to form. We exchanged mental images, memories of our shared past, silly jokes that only we understood. After a few good chuckles Rissa sat up straighter, plumping the pillows behind her. She started sending me some of her tentative theories about the Nexus, and I knew she was ready to switch to words. She could probably have made me understand what was on her mind without them, but when you're discussing a complex subject, words help clarify and define it. She sipped at her potent drink, then set the glass back on the bedside table and turned to face me. She was ready to broach the subject that had been simmering in the back of her mind all day. "I've finally found the key to the sex gates," she said. "What?" I gaped at her while I waited for the trumpets to blare. That was incredible. Such a discovery might be the greatest breakthrough in the history of the human race. Rissa stared at me, not even blinking. "I said, I've found the key to mastering the sex gates." The intonation of her voice was that of some woman announcing she'd found a great new facial cleanser. "What key?" For a second, I actually pictured some huge key, maybe hidden keep in the recesses of the crystal city. That's why Russell does the science and I stick to seeing patterns. "I know how to use the gates to achieve various results. I'm confident that I—we—can use them routinely in many of the same ways the gate masters did." I didn't quite get it despite my talent for patterns, mainly because the motives of the gate masters were still incomprehensible to everyone, even Russ—Rissa—and Messler, the two greatest minds produced on Earth since Einstein. I missed Messler, that contrary genius whose penchant for intrigue had played such a huge part in our lives—and the lives of practically everyone alive. You don't see Messler's sort but once in centuries, if that often. He'd chosen me as his successor because I was the only one close to him in number of mind-enhancing trips through the gates—apart from Rita. Messler and I were alike in that we were both changed by our many passages, yet there were

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profound differences between us. Messler was a bold thinker willing to follow the path into the unknown opened up by the gate masters. Finding them had become

his passion and he devoted everything to that pursuit, even accepting the possible loss of his humanity. But then Messler always did act with a confidence that approached arrogance, sure that his great mind could cope with anything the gate masters threw at him. On the day he left, he promised us that he would return with whatever knowledge he gained, but so far he hadn't come back. I doubted that he would. That left me holding the destiny of millions of people in my hands, a role I never asked for and didn't want. There was a limit to the amount of time that those who had failed a second passage for one reason or another could spend in stasis. Soon it would be up. Someone had to decide what to do with them. That someone was me. Sighing, I put aside the memories and studied Rissa's face. She stared back at me and worried her lower lip with her teeth, frustrated by my lack of understanding. I tried to focus, but my gaze kept drifting down to check if the sheet had fallen away from her breasts. She had a magnificent mind, but my very male consciousness found the slim, curved body that concealed it far more fascinating. It was hard to believe someone this beautiful had ever set foot in a laboratory. Rissa laughed out loud. "Poor Lee. I swear, you've still got the old Southern mentality. Women on a pedestal, and so forth. But never mind; it's an appealing trait." My hand wandered over her hip and started making circles on the smooth skin of her belly. "Tell me more." "About your mentality?" I tickled her ribs, knowing she could stand it for mere seconds before going into hysterical laughter. "Wait, stop! I was kidding." I stopped. "This breakthrough has a lot of repercussions." She wagged a finger at me, and made a serious pout with her lips. "With practice, we should be able to go through the gates and come out where and when we please, like Messler." An image of Rita's face rose up in my mind. I could return to her if I was willing to risk yet another change that would take me even further from my humanity.

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"That means we can journey to Earth, of course. Anything else?" I thought I knew already, but I wanted to hear Rissa say it. "Alternate worlds. We can start exploring them. Eventually, we can use some of them for our own purposes, the ones that aren't inhabited." "How many?" "How many atoms are there in the universe?" "I still don't see—" "There's more! I've spent the last month working with my team to pinpoint how much longer the crystals can hold those who vanished from Earth in

suspension."

I nodded, only half listening. There it was, my never-ending problem, back again. "I feel sorry for those people, even if some of them don't deserve a second

chance. They are truly in limbo. They're cursed by the gods, if anyone ever was."

Rissa shook her head. "I don't believe in gods. As a human, it's my duty to try

and find a way to set them free."

"I agree. But only a god—if there is such a being—can know where their souls are. The crystals simply store their genetic makeup."

My bed partner shrugged. "I'm not going to worry about their souls. We need to find a way to set them free from those crystals before they overload."

I straightened my shoulders, feeling the heavy weight of that responsibility. The humans in stasis included men and women of every race, every age. They had one thing in common—they had attempted a passage through the sex gate

s and

failed. Some had vanished the first time they tried to go through a gate because they

didn't meet the criteria the gate used to let people through, criteria the human race

discovered only by trial and error. Others had disappeared attempting to make it

through a second time. At first, that happened to everyone who tried. Eventually, the

world discovered that a rare few could make the second trip. But no one knew why

Seconders succeeded. The secret was our latent propensity for telepathic ability, an

ability we kept hidden for as long as we could.

Rissa's eyes held a detached look. "Right now these people aren't suffering,

because they're not conscious. I would prefer to leave them that way until we make

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contact with the gate masters. But we can't. The crystals can only absorb so much

genetic information, and we are fast approaching crisis levels. If we don't act soon,

the master system controlling the storage crystals will. It will dispose of them or

disgorge them on this world."

I swallowed. I didn't want them to die, even if most of them were lowlifes of various stripes. And there was the matter of what Rita wanted to consider, too. She

insisted I find a way to free them, which was not surprising because Rita cares for everyone.

Fine, but I didn't want them on this Nexus. I had to find someplace else to put

them. Earth might be the obvious answer, but I didn't want to dump them willy-nilly

on Earth, either. Too many of them were misfits, criminals. Earth was better off

without them. No, we needed some neutral place where we could process them. Luckily, once people realized the parameters for going through the gates, the number of those who vanished dropped off sharply. Nevertheless, there were probably a million or more people in stasis. How could we even begin to help them with our limited resources? I rubbed a hand across my forehead. "Here's the catch. I know, from my enhanced sense of patterns, that releasing them will be a catastrophe." I braced myself for an argument. "I agree." Rissa looked at me as if expecting more. I sputtered, caught by surprise. "Hell, releasing them might even lead to my death, to all of our deaths, if they get out of hand. A lot of them are dangerous people." "Tell me." Worry clouded Rissa's eyes. "Anyone who failed to make the passage through the gates had something wrong with them. They include psychopaths, religious fanatics, criminals, sexual predators, prostitutes of both sexes, and other riffraff of society—plus a group of innocents who were too old and sick to make the passage." I could see Rissa had given the problem some serious thought. What would happen if I decided to set them free? Letting those people out on this world would create a microcosm of the worst of Earth's society, even though the players would

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come out with their gender changed. Or so we assumed. I shuddered to think of what female psychopaths might be like. I found myself balancing the potential for mayhem against the possibility of losing Rita's love if I didn't act. Know what? I'm not a goddamned saint. I would let them loose rather than lose Rita, and to hell with the consequences. Except I had to find a place to put them. And I had to get together with some of the other brains and figure out an infrastructure to care for the released people in their teeming millions. One thing for sure: I didn't want the decision to be totally mine. "We'd be taking a big risk," I said. "Maybe not as big as all that." For the first time, Rissa grinned. I saw the self-satisfied look on her face and made a wild guess. "Did you make a breakthrough there, too?" Her grin stretched from ear to ear. "I've finally discovered a way to distinguish them from each other." I blinked and tried to take in what she'd told me. "What do you mean? You can tell who's who and where they're stored in the crystals?" Some days I'm slower than other days. I should have seen it immediately, but

every time I looked at Rissa I forgot about the implications of what she was saying and concentrated instead on the cute little jiggle in her breasts when she drew a deep breath to talk. Rissa pinched my ribs.

"Ouch!"

"You've got nothing but sex on your mind, and here I'm trying to impart stupendously important information into that little bitty teensy part of your brain that thinks big ideas are more important than big tits. Don't you get it yet?"

"The big tits? You betcha!" I leaned over to nuzzle her breasts. They weren't big, but they were certainly ample.

She laughed and grabbed my ears and pulled my head up. "Well, if that's the way you think, we can put the women with big tits on one world and the ones with medium-sized on another and—"

And suddenly it came together. I sat bolt upright in the bed. "Of course! If we can separate the people in stasis out, we can put them on any number of alternate

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worlds. We can put psychos on one world, criminals on another, politicians on one by themselves." A big grin split my face, too. "Boy, that would be a world, wouldn't it? Not one I'd want to live on, though. And what about a world full of lawyers. I can see that, too—all the lawyers who didn't make it through the gate the first time will have to live by suing each other. Wow!" I was being facetious, but I realized in one whole big gulp of knowledge that if Rissa could do what she said, then at least part of the problem would be solved. For long weeks I'd pictured opening the crystals and letting the people out on to some other world, only to watch as psychopathic killers preyed on women and children who had vanished going through because they were too ill for even the gates to heal them. A lot of innocents were mixed up with the criminals. Hell, I didn't particularly love lawyers—except for Messler's incredible legal duo, Randy and Terri, who I'd come to love—but I wouldn't want to throw them to the psychopaths either. The alternate worlds were our answer. Quantum theory was mind boggling in the extreme, and so was this whole concept of alternate worlds. Apparently the two theories went hand in hand—that is, a quantum universe meant there had to be alternate worlds. Basically, the theory stated the number of alternate worlds could approach infinity. Of course, worlds that were close to each other, dime

nsionally
speaking, would be more alike while worlds that had diverged from Earth's
timeline
long ago would grow more and more different.
Thinking about those alternate realities tended to make me dizzy. I got even
dizzier when Rissa claimed that if you weren't careful going through the gates
you
could drift into one of those worlds and maybe meet yourself. I didn'
t like to think
about that either.
I went back to planning how to use the alternate worlds to help the peop
le in
stasis. We could put the psychopathic killers together on one world and let
them
stalk each other, and to hell with all of them. And the same for other deviant
types,
habitual criminals for instance. Man, wouldn't that make a world; one where no
one
wanted to work for a living and everyone wanted to steal from each other
! My mind
raced with the implications of being able to sort personalities before freeing
them
from the stasis state within the crystals; it raced so fast that I could
almost smell

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neurons scorching as I realized something was missing from the pattern,
and
brought my mind to a screeching halt. It took only seconds for me to identify
what it
was.
Rissa caught my mental image and nodded soberly. "That's one thing
I don't
have a clue about. What will happen when people who were so old they did
n't make
it through on the first pass come out? Will they go through the gender change,
but
remain old? Or will the gate find a way to make them young again?"
I didn't have a clue either. Nor did I know what would happen to the ones who
were too sick to make it through the first passage. The old Chinese curs
e again:
there were going to be interesting times ahead.
"There'll be problems. We'll have to work through them as they
come up," I
said at last. "At least with your breakthrough we can find other worl
ds and set the
people in stasis free."
"Finding those worlds will be a major undertaking," Rissa pointed
out.
"If you've discovered how to move to other alternate worlds using the gates,
can't you teach me?"
Rissa laughed. "I'd hoped you'd want to learn. Messler helped y
ou make the
journey here and return to Earth. It will continue to take the power to two
minds to

reach an alternate world."

"You and me, baby?" I wiggled my eyebrows suggestively, and leered at her.

"As much as I'd love that, my research keeps me here. But I do have

someone on my team who would make a perfect partner for you. With your great mental power and her skill at direction, I'm confident you'll be able to reach an alternate Earth."

I nodded, realizing Rissa had planned this out already. I covered her hand

with mine and gave it a squeeze. "I'll be glad to scout out the alternate Earths, but

whoever goes with me needs to know there's a big risk involved."

The laughter in Rissa's eyes died. "You're the one facing the greatest danger.

You've had the most trips through the gate."

I caught my lip between my teeth as I contemplated the risk. Rita would be horrified if she knew I was contemplating making more trips through the gate. But

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this was different than a trip back to see her, however pleasurable that might be.

Lives were at stake. Only a coward would refuse to face the danger.

"Who'll be going with me?"

"Amanda Severson. She's a new arrival from Earth, a social biologist. She's got a special gift for working with the quantum flux. It takes a certain skill to operate on the level of quantum reality."

"Skill and a belief in mystical mumbo jumbo."

Like most men who preferred a rational view of the world, I found the chaos of the quantum universe disconcerting. I liked my reality to stay put, but in that world,

where all things existed in potential, you could bring things into being by believing

they existed—or vanish them by ceasing to believe in them. It was downright scary

at times what we were learning to do.

"Amanda is excited about working with you. If you'll come to the control room with me, I'll introduce you and you can get started."

I flopped back on the pillows, and eyed Rissa. "You're not wasting any time."

She bent over me, her breasts swaying above my chest. "Believe me, I'd love

to waste some more time with you. It's the people in stasis who have no time to

waste. We need to find some worlds to put them on, and find them fast."

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CHAPTER THREE

An hour later I strolled into the control room with Rissa. We called it that, although we had no real idea what the gate masters had used it for. It was a huge, vaulted chamber flooded with a radiant light that seemed to come from everywhere. Crystals grew out of the walls—most of them with purposes we didn't have a clue about—but the most important feature to us was the gate that stood in the center, on a slab of black marble. It was the only gate inside a tower, a fact that probably had some significance that eluded us. Because of its convenience, it was the gate we used for our experiments. Something else caught my eye as I entered, though. A tall, curvy brunette stood in front of the mysterious arch, obviously waiting for me. My heart skipped a beat as I surveyed my new partner. She had the kind of body men salivate over and long, sexy legs that wouldn't stop. Working together with this woman was going to be an experience—I was sure of that already. Physically, she looked about nineteen, but as I got closer I saw the quick intelligence in her deep blue eyes and revised my estimate of her actual age sharply higher. She stood with her chin tilted upward and her lips pressed together in a firm line. I got the impression she was accustomed to running things wherever she came from. Not for the first time, I pondered how deceptive the young bodies given to us by the sex gates could be to those around us. The consciousness behind this curvy young thing might well be that of a savvy eighty-year-old man. I wondered if I would have to fight her for the leadership of our team. "Lee, this is Amanda," Rissa said. Amanda gave me a sharp nod and held out her hand. "I hear you're going to be my teacher." As I shook hands, I offered her my best Texas good-old-boy grin. Her determined gaze flicked over my body as though I were some object she was considering purchasing. From the look on her face, she didn't find me much of a bargain. "So I've been told. I've been working with Rissa, concentrating on developing techniques to help us explore the alternate worlds."

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"That's important work."

"Thanks. But Rissa thinks I need the power of your mind to provide stability when I'm within the gate." A slight sniff at the end of this sentence made it clear she didn't agree.

I slid Rissa a glance. Enthusiastic, my hind left foot! I shot at her, mind to mind.

Rissa shrugged with a sheepish grin. Sorry! I'm good with research not with people. But I still think you two will make a great team.

"The two of you will make a great team," Rissa repeated aloud, ignoring my skeptical look. "I'm eager to hear what you find out there."

I turned to Amanda. "You realize this is dangerous."

I didn't like the fact she had reservations about working with me. The sex gates were dangerous enough. I didn't need a partner I didn't fully trust. Maybe if I gave her a strong warning about the perils ahead, she'd back out. Rissa could find someone else to teach me. Hell, Rissa could teach me and I'd go on my own.

"I would never have come to the Nexus in the first place if I feared danger." Amanda shook off my warning with a faint smile. "I'm prepared to take any risk to

learn to master the gates. The gates are our future."

As she spoke, the fire of inner passion burned in her eyes. I was relieved to

see her determined attitude, although it was obvious she would have preferred to

work alone. I couldn't help but notice, however, that she hadn't mentioned any desire

to help the people in stasis.

"On our first few trips, we'll be looking for worlds for a specific purpose," I said.

Her lips curled slightly. "Ah, yes. I heard you'd decided to try and save the

people trapped in stasis."

"You don't agree?"

"No." She spoke with surprising firmness. "I believe in achievement, hard

work, and doing your best. The people in stasis are failures."

"That's a little harsh." In fact, I probably would have agreed with her at one

time, before Rita taught me to appreciate the value of compassion. But I wasn't

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about to admit that.

Amanda shrugged. "It's your decision. You asked my opinion. That's it. The

gates work according to established principles of evolution—the survival of the

fittest. Those people failed that test."

"Yet the gate masters didn't eliminate them," I pointed out. "If they wanted

these people to vanish, why did they preserve their genetic blueprints in the crystals here?"

Amanda lifted an eyebrow. "Perhaps they wished to study defective subjects." I was puzzled by her attitude. "If you feel that way, why are you willing to help

me find worlds for them?"

She looked surprised. "At the moment, your goals and mine coincide. We

both want to master quantum travel. Rissa thinks I need the extra power of your

mind while I'm learning to manipulate the quantum chaos, so I'm willing to try it."

I wasn't thrilled by her lack of enthusiasm, but it was a reasonable answer.

"This trip isn't going to be any joyride," I warned.

She nodded. "Understood. However, I think you'll find I generally succeed at

whatever I do. I have a passionate belief in excellence."

"Great!"

Another scientific overachiever. Well, Rissa was an overachiever, too, and I couldn't complain about that. Her expertise was saving our butts at the moment.

"Amanda can be blunt, but she's the best." Rissa patted my arm and offered a

soothing smile. "I'm confident the two of you will succeed in finding the worlds we

need."

"I can certainly think of better uses for uninhabited alternate worlds,"

Amanda

said, with a haughty lift of her chin. "I'd like to see an experiment where we place

superior humans on such a world and see what kind of society they create."

Obviously, Amanda considered herself one of those superior humans. I

struggled to hide a smile. "Maybe someday. I'm for progress, too, you know."

Her eyes brightened. "I'm glad to hear it. I believe the gates could

be used to

speed up human evolution. The alternate worlds are an ideal place for such an

experiment. As for these people in stasis, they belong back on Earth."

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"The problem is, no one on Earth wants them. We Seconders would make a

lot of enemies if we sent the criminals back there." I raised a questioning eyebrow at

Rissa, although I already knew her opinion.

Rissa shook her head. "I'm against trying to send them to Earth, too. Once people start coming out of stasis, the process will be continuous. Earth wouldn't

appreciate us dumping a load of criminals and mentally ill on them without warning."

"Good. So what's the plan?"

Rissa rubbed her hands together, a sure sign she was about to launch into a

lecture. "We know that the gate masters chose this Nexus world because human life never developed here and it's close, dimensionally speaking, to Earth. They used it

as a staging world for sending the gates to our planet. So, it occurs to me that this

might not be their only staging world."

"You mean there might be other Nexus worlds out there?"

"Exactly. And if there are, there will be other crystal cities."

I nodded, excited at this idea. "That would mean we'd have ready-built cities for the people in stasis as they emerge. What are our chances of finding an alternate

Nexus world?"

"You should have some idea by now of how the quantum flux works,"

Amanda said. "The gate throws us into a state of potential. Where we go from there

depends on our own mental powers. Since clear visualization is a key, we will have

an advantage if we can visualize an alternate reality close to this one."

"No problem."

I knew the drill. I'd traveled from world to world before, although only with the

help of Messler. I'm sure that experience was the reason Rissa wanted me to partner with Amanda. Of course, I was the one at risk. But it was a risk I was willing

to assume.

Amanda shot me an assessing look, as if doubting my ability to hold any thought in focus for long. As I've said, my physical appearance as a male is not that

impressive. I had the feeling Amanda had spent a long lifetime as a man, and a powerful one at that.

"Let's get going, then, shall we?"

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"After you." I made a sweeping gesture toward the glowing gate, and the two

of us stepped through the arch, into the green fog.

An ordinary person who enters a gate will experience an instantaneous transformation into the opposite sex. They step in, and the next thing they know

they're out again, with no memory of whatever happened in-between. But there is an

in-between, a dimension beyond space and time where the forces that shape what we call reality are laid naked to any consciousness advanced enough to perceive

them. If the universe is indeed a vast thought, this is the place where thought

originates. And here, by shaping energy with powerful intent, it is possible to move

from one alternate reality to another.

This was the process Rissa had mastered and taught to Amanda. She possessed the crystal clarity of mind needed to reach a destination; I possessed the

raw power. As we stepped through the arch, the usual transformation began, but we

resisted it together. As we oriented ourselves in the green fog, I prepared to mesh minds so that we could work as a unit toward our joint goal. I was more than a little intrigued at the thought of touching Amanda's mind. Rita would have probably laughed at this change in my usual priorities. Normally, I'm more interested in making the acquaintance of a sexy young body than the mind behind it. But the intensity this woman radiated fascinated me. I reached out with my thoughts—and struck a protective wall. Where another thought should have met and intertwined with mine, I encountered a hard barrier. And then, her thought rang in my mind: Direct your energy through me. Anger exploded inside me. She wanted to take my energy without giving me any insight into how she was zeroing in on an alternate world. I was in no mood to trail after her like some obedient puppy, supplying her with energy while she controlled our travels. And I was rapidly tiring of her superior attitude. I sent her an ultimatum: I want to see how your mind works as you direct our journey, so I can do it myself the next time. I don't like the thought of someone rummaging through my mind, as if I were hosting a garage sale of mental abilities, she shot back.

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No doubt about it. Amanda might have a sexy young body, but she had the personality of an old man who was used to bossing people around. Maybe it was time to show her who was the boss in the Nexus. I gathered my thoughts to myself, and then reached out to touch her mind with the strength that came from my many trips. The mental barrier that blocked my way rang like crystal as I crashed into it. The blow set up vibrations that rippled and sang through the mysterious dimension where we hung, seeking our path. Stop! Frightened by my power, she sent her thoughts out to meet mine. It was a forced surrender and when our thoughts touched, hers were as cold as the ice frozen in the heart of the Arctic. She opened a tunnel into her consciousness, but it was only a narrow entrance. She showed me what I needed to know, no more. It was enough. As long as I could see how her mind worked to shape the quantum reality and allow us to travel, I had no complaint. I would satisfy my curiosity about what made her tick another day. As I watched, she shaped an image of a possible alternative Nexus in her mind, working from data we'd gathered from our own Nexus. As her image took form, I added my energy, doing my part to turn potential into reality. At this

level,
thought and will and expectations were tied together. I poured the energy of
my mind
into Amanda. Tremendous forces stirred to life around us both. Another world
shone
like a diamond in the polished mirror of controlled thought that was Amanda's
mind.
The energy within the gate mounted to a peak, and I knew we could not hold
back
the transformation any longer. Our bodies dissolved and reformed as the
gate
recreated us from our DNA, changing only the genes that determined sex. As the
green fog flared and filled with light, we stumbled out on the grass of
another world.
The sex change is a fascinating process. It's always staggering to wi
tness. I
remembered the first time I'd seen it—I'd watched Don totter ou
t of a gate as a
woman and start screaming—not an unusual reaction. A lot of people went into
uncontrolled hysterics in those first hours when the world was learning what
the
gates did.
By the end of the first day, scientists were hard at work studying the
phenomenon. They soon discovered that the gates change a person's sex, but
the

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transformation, for the most part, leaves the genes alone. Your sex is
determined by
the addition or subtraction of a chromosome, nothing more. Since your ge
netic
makeup stays basically the same, you come out of a sex gate looking like
yourself—
or rather, as you would have looked if you'd been born the opposite sex.
However,
the gates do make some changes in our genes—they eliminate any that are
defective. That was why the gates cured the sick. Inferior genes vanish with
your
first passage, if you make it at all, and you emerge in glowing health with an
unbeatable immune system.
I came out of the gate a young woman of eighteen, bursting with energy. We
were on a new world at midday. I clasped my arms across my breasts and s
hook my
long auburn hair around my shoulders as I stared at the handsome male who
stood
a few feet away from me, surveying his surroundings with an air of possessive
pride.
"We've reached an alternate world," he gloated, casting a look of triumph my
way.
His intense blue gaze lingered for a moment on my bare flesh, and then
moved to catalogue the landmarks around us. The feminine part of me want
ed to be
piqued at his blatant disregard of my rather (at the moment) obvious charms,
but my
more practical side agreed it was wiser to scout out the territory first, in

case we had
come out in some dangerous place.
"This doesn't appear to be a sister world to the Nexus," I pointed out.
We stood a few paces away from the gate that had expelled us. Since nothing comes through the gate except the human body, we were both nude. A cold breeze made goose bumps stand up on my bare skin. The gate on this world was set high
on a hill and we could see the land stretched out for miles around us. Despite the
cold wind, it reminded me of a desert landscape. Rocks and dirt, a few shrubs
clinging to the hillside, and no sign whatsoever of any civilization, much less the
advanced technology of the gate masters.
"Looks like you missed on the first attempt." I couldn't resist
a bit of a jab at
my companion's ego after his obnoxious display of superiority earlier. I placed one
hand on my hip and struck a pose, as if I were about to strut my stuff. The man turned to me. He was tall—taller even than Amanda had been—with

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the same icy blue eyes, set now in a lean, aristocratic face. His body was
unblemished, of course, but he reminded me of some swordsman of old, razor-sharp, light on his feet, ready for a duel. I studied his determined mouth and
stubborn chin, then let my gaze drop lower to take in his powerful chest
, tapering
hips and long, muscular legs. Even the way he stood, weight balanced, ready for
action, told me that he had spent many years as a man. I wondered if he'd always
been a scientist. Many Seconders started new careers after their change, and he
had the air of someone who had once held some position of power.
"So, Amanda," I said, eyeing the proof of the sex change that jutted out between his legs. "What do I call you now?"
"Andrew will do," he snapped, swiveling once more to take in the complete
view of our surroundings.
"Not Andy?"
"Andy." He laughed. "I'm afraid not. I'm no Andy."
I had to agree. In his masculine form, his natural authority was even more
evident. Already, I could feel my female hormones kicking in, responding to the
strong male vibe he emitted. The sand and rock around us looked mighty uncomfortable, but that didn't stop me from thinking about getting him down on the
ground and mounting him. If he was only half as good as he no doubt thought he
was ...

"There's nothing here." Andrew jerked his head at the barren landscape. "We have to try again."

Disappointment tugged at me. He was far more attractive as a male. It suited his virile nature. When we emerged from the gate again, he'd be Amanda once more. And I would become Lee, my sexual cravings for this man unsatisfied. For the moment, I told myself.

There was no time to indulge myself. The stasis set up by the gate masters

was overloaded and doomed to fail. We had to find some alternative worlds—and

soon. Without a word, I turned and plunged once more between the glowing arches.

This time we skipped the mental battle and went right to work. I had to admit Andrew was good. Once again that diamond-bright mind shaped the image of an

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alternate Nexus while I poured energy into its creation. The tremendous forces around us surged with a creative tempus as we combined our wills to a single purpose. Green light flared and we stumbled from the gate—

Regaining my balance, I looked around and knew our second attempt had succeeded. We stood on a cliff overlooking a lush green valley. A city of shining

towers lay nestled in the curve of the hills on the opposite side of the valley.

"It's bigger than the city in our Nexus," I said, surveying the alien metropolis.

Twice as big, I estimated.

"This place—it has an old feel," Amanda said, planting her hands on her hips and tilting her head to one side as if listening for something.

As much as I wanted to listen, too, I found her stance extremely distracting. Her nude body glistened in the sunlight of this new world and I feasted my eyes. She

had a tall, lean beauty of her own, from her small breasts to her slim hips, to her

long, well-shaped legs. Despite her nakedness, she managed to look elegant—even

regal.

Aware that I was probably radiating sexual desire, I forced myself to look away and examine the world around me. I suspected it was empty—I sensed no trace of consciousness beyond our two minds. Yet, as Amanda said, a sense of a

once powerful presence, now long gone, seemed to hang in the air like the scent left

behind by a rose as its petals drift to the ground.

A chill raced down my spine at that image. I couldn't say why, but a feeling of

deep melancholy swept over me, although I'm normally an optimistic guy. I gazed at

the distant towers and felt an unexpected reluctance to venture between their silent

walls. From the troubled look on Amanda's face, I knew she was experiencing the

same premonition of trouble. My pattern sense set off alarm bells in my head, telling

me I was about to find out something I'd rather not know. There are some

secrets
you wish you had never heard, and I knew with deadly certainty that such a
secret
lay in the city at the far end of the valley.
The light blurred around Amanda's body for an instant as she conjured a
toga-like dress and sandals out of the quantum level of reality. As much as I
enjoyed
ogling her naked body, I saw her point. We had a long walk ahead of us.
I furrowed

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my brow in concentration and looked down. I was wearing a t-shirt, jeans
and tennis
shoes. We exchanged a glance and without a word started down the rough path
that
hugged the side of the cliff.
The silence around us only deepened as we approached the city. My scalp
prickled.
"Hey, quick question," I said.
"What?" Amanda's glance darted from building to building, but the only sound
was the wind moaning between the towers.
"If this is an alternate world, then the gate masters that built this Nexus
aren't
the same as the ones that built our Nexus, right?"
"Correct." The superior tone was back in her voice. "I'm no expert on quantum
theory, but that much seems obvious."
I remembered Rissa remarking that she was a social biologist.
"Don't you study the evolution of societies? The alternate universes must be
perfect for your research."
"Exactly." She actually unbent enough to smile at me. "I have a
always been
fascinated by evolution. If there is a master consciousness underlying quantum
reality, evolution is its tool for shaping the future."
"You must appreciate the effect the sex gates have on Seconders, then."
"I do." For the first time she seemed excited. "By eliminating defective genes
and improving our minds, they have advanced our evolution by perhaps millions
of
years."
"There's a limit, though."
An amused laugh rippled out of her mouth. "Only if you wish to remain
human."
"Sorry, but I do." I dropped the subject, sensing another argument. "But what
about this world. Do you think evolution here was radically different?"
"Hard to say without some more evidence. We know this world and ours were
once the same, but at some point in its timeline, the gate masters made a
decision
that resulted in this alternate universe with its own evolutionary path. To
actually
pinpoint that moment of decision and then to follow the diverging paths ..." Her
eyes

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glowed with enthusiasm.

"Great stuff," I broke in. "My point, though, is that we need to approach these towers with caution. It looks like our city, but that doesn't mean it's the same."

"I agree. I can sense the differences already." She was back to her superior attitude.

We'd reached the first of the towers. I stopped to wipe the sweat off my brow

and stared back along the path we'd taken to the cliff where the gate stood. The

bright green arch glowed out against the blue of a cloudless sky.

"Okay. We need to be cautious. That's all I'm saying." I turned back to the

wall and without hesitating walked into it.

Wham! I slammed into the solid surface with a jolt that shook me clear down

to my toenails. The wall in front of me flashed, changing color from crystalline blue to

blood red. There was a sharp crack of thunder and lightning danced between the buildings. I staggered back and regained my balance, rubbing my forehead where I'd

smacked it a good one against solid stone. I wanted to dance around, rub various

injured parts and spew out a string of curses, but damned if I was going to give

Amanda that satisfaction. Her gloating look was bad enough.

"Some of the difference may be more subtle than others," she said with a straight face.

If she meant to hurt my feelings, because I'd failed to see that one coming,

she goofed. Instead of getting angry, I laughed. A reluctant answering smile twitched

on her lips. I started to wonder if she had a sense of humor after all.

I smiled back. I could hear Rita's voice inside my head, urging me to give her

another chance. Hell, Rita would probably want me to sleep with her to get to know

her better. Of course, Rita had a heart as big as Texas, but maybe it was starting to

rub off on me.

A rumbling sound echoed across the valley. We both whirled around in time

to see the sex gate on the hill blink out of existence.

"Goddamnit!"

This was a fine state of affairs. Our ride home had vanished into thin air.

Meanwhile, a quick scan of the towers confirmed they were the same as those on

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our Nexus in one important way—they had no doors. If you couldn't simply walk

inside, how the hell did you get in there?
"Goddamnit is right!" Amanda's mouth hardened into a grim line.
For the first time, we were in complete agreement.

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CHAPTER FOUR

"There have to be more gates inside the buildings," I said, mostly to reassure myself.

I pictured the arch inside our control room of our Nexus. That was the problem—we weren't on our Nexus.

"I'm certain there are."

Amanda stretched out a tentative finger and touched the wall in front of us, which glowed bright red where I'd walked right into it. At her touch light flared up the

tower again and lanced from building to building like lightning. Another loud rumble split the sky.

"I hope that wasn't a second sex gate disappearing," I muttered.

"It's some sort of alarm system. It might be on automatic. This alternate world

must be very close to ours. It looks like the gate masters also abandoned this world,

but in this case they left behind a system to guard the city. I'm guessing it's a fairly

sophisticated computer, and it made the gate vanish so we wouldn't be able to bring

any more invaders through it."

Amanda's theory made sense when I ran it through a quick pattern analysis.

"So the computer is assuming we're hostile? Why would it assume that?"

She shot me another smug look. "Where's your pattern sense? These gate

masters built a Nexus, which means they sent gates to an alternate Earth."

I glared at Amanda. My pattern sense was fine. My problem lay elsewhere.

I

kept getting horny whenever I thought about how she'd looked naked, which was about once every thirty seconds. That's the problem with coming out of the gate—

you're bursting with sexual energy. I was aching for a chance to get to know her, up

close and personal, but first we had to find a way out of this situation . I gave my

pattern sense free rein and saw at once what she was driving at.

"The gate masters left defenses here. The alternate Earth where they sent their gates didn't welcome their arrival."

She smiled at me. When she bothered to smile, she was a beauty. "Right!

They didn't like the idea of aliens interfering with their society. So they struck back."

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I beamed at her like some kid who had won the prize at the county fair.
"The
military took over the gates."
"Now you're cooking. I'm surprised it didn't happen on our world."
I knew the answer to that one. "That's because Messler founded the Church
of the Gates, and made access to the gates a religious issue. That didn'
t happen on
this alternate Earth. The military took over and eventually learned that some
people
can become Seconders. The next logical step would be to develop a race o
f soldiers
that could reach the Nexus as we did--"
"They attacked the gate masters." Amanda nodded, her face aglow. I
sensed
from her jubilant thoughts that she enjoyed these developments more than the
ones
on our own planet—not that we'd lacked for power grabs on Earth. "Who won,
though? The city appears deserted." She frowned at me.
I thought through the rest of the pattern. "Looks as if the gate masters won
and drove the invaders back to their Earth. They probably removed the gates
from
that world, declared it a failed experiment, and abandoned the Nexus. But
first they
put a computer system in place, in case the invaders one day developed their
own
gate and reached this world."
"And the computer was designed to destroy whatever gate they used to
get
here." Some of the glee died out of Amanda's eyes.
Chill bumps ran up my arms. Were we fighting an intelligent computer lef
t
behind by the gate masters? Had it had already destroyed the gates outside of
the
city so we couldn't use them? If so, we had to gain entrance into the
towers or we
would be stranded on this Nexus.
Amanda had reached the same conclusion. Her face paled. We fell into a
gloomy silence as we walked down the wide, grassy lanes between the various
outcroppings of crystal, hoping to spot some kind of doorway. But the walls of
the
featureless towers were smooth and hard. After about a half hour, I tired of
aimless
walking between the buildings.
"Okay, this isn't working." I stopped to stare up at a vast expanse of crystal
towering into the air over my head. "If we touch the buildings this computer
or
whatever the gate masters left behind thinks we're invaders and triggers
defensive

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measures."
Amanda planted her hands on her hips and stared at me as if I were the
village idiot. "True. But how do you get into a building without touc
hing it in some
way?"

A grin twitched on my mouth as I tapped a finger to the side of my head. "By using the old noggin, my dear."

That made her angry. Her eyes flashed and her breasts heaved as she drew in an outraged breath. I took a moment to enjoy the picture before continuing my explanation.

"You're thinking like a normal human. Instead, we need to think in terms of the quantum beings we are rapidly becoming. Why is it that we can walk through the walls on our Nexus in the first place?"

"Because they were designed by the gate masters to function on a quantum level where they are both energy and matter in constant flux. At the moment we walk through they become energy and let us pass."

It was my turn to look smug. "So if this wall insists on staying solid, the answer is for us to become energy and pass through."

She maintained her haughty look, but I saw a shadow of fear deep in her icy blue gaze. I guessed she had pushed her development as a Second by going through the gates as often as possible. That made sense given her obsessive interest in evolution. But our powers were still new to her.

She licked her lips. "Is that possible outside the gates?"

"Hey," I joked. "Mere atoms do it all the time. They exist in the physical world, become a pure energy wave and exist in the physical world again before even a millisecond passes. Your body is nothing but a collection of atoms."

I leered as I said that last sentence to take away the sting. Amanda's feminine hormones must have kicked in at last because she welcomed the leer and patted her hair. "A lot of atoms. Controlling them will be the tricky part."

"A quantum exercise in will and intent," I said. "Surely someone with your intellectual gifts is more than up to it."

"I don't know. I haven't made the hundreds of trips through the gates that you

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have."

Her sudden vulnerability touched me, and my male protective genes took over. I stepped closer to her and put an arm around her shoulders, drawing her into an embrace. "You can do it. If you'll let me touch your mind, I can impart whatever knowledge you'll need."

She pressed her hand against my chest. I wondered if she could feel the thud of my heart under her outspread palm. The soft curves of her body melted against me. As her face lifted to gaze up into mine, it seemed only natural to bend over and

plant a comforting kiss on her lips.
I was more than a little surprised when her moist, wet mouth opened and welcomed in my tongue. Suddenly, her mind was dead last on the list of things I wanted to touch. My hands grabbed her hips, then swept upward over her rib cage to her firm young breasts. As I cupped them, she wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed closer. Damn! The woman was as horny as I was. My hands squeezed her breasts and her nipples hardened to tight little nubs under the silken fabric of the toga she wore.
We might be marooned on an abandoned world, but I had to seize this moment. I might never get a chance at Amanda again. I kept on kissing her as I pulled her down into the lush grass that grew between the crystal towers. The desperation of our situation vanished from my mind along with rational thought. I concentrated on the only important thing—finding the way to undress her as quickly as possible. I found the belt that held the toga together and unfastened it. The two halves fell apart, exposing her nakedness as she lay back in the thick grass. The smell of growing things surrounded us, along with older, deeper smells—the rich scent of the fertile earth and the musky scent of a woman ready for a man. She was completely nude under the toga. I like a woman who doesn't bother with panties or bra. I made my own clothes vanish as I surveyed her body. Her white flesh gleamed against the dark green of the grass. The lush growth made a comfortable carpet as we lay together side by side. I stroked her body and was surprised when she responded by pressing closer to me. With a smile, I bent over her breasts and took one taut nipple into my mouth. I

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sucked slowly and gently, while her soft moans of pleasure echoed off the tall, alien towers. I played with her other breast with one hand and explored the silky smooth flesh of her inner thighs with the other. As she grew more aroused, I stroked upward until my wandering fingers found the apex of her thighs. She shuddered with pleasure and opened her legs wide. Taking that for an invitation, I began exploring.
She was ready for me. I moved my body over hers and her eyes opened wide. She placed a restraining hand on my chest.
"Lee, there's something you need to know."
"What's that?" I wanted to silence her with a hard kiss, but the urgent look in her eyes told me she had to speak.
"I've had a long lifetime as a man. It's only since I've come to the Nexus

that
I've spent any time as a woman." She bit down on her lip and glanced up at me from beneath thick lashes, watching for my reaction. Tenderness washed over me, as I understood part of the reason she clung so desperately to her superior attitude. She was afraid, as so many of us had been afraid when we faced the tremendous changes the sex gates brought to our sexuality. She had gone through the gates many times, becoming a woman over and over again to develop her Second abilities to the level where she could come to the Nexus. Yet in all that time, she'd never dared to experience sex as a woman. I knew exactly how she felt. Once, I too, had been afraid to experience the throes of passion as a woman. My sweet Rita—transformed to the handsome Rez by the gates—had made tender love to me then, teaching me that our shared desire could transcend the forms our bodies took. "Don't worry. You're a beautiful woman. And your body is about to take you places beyond your imagination." I stroked her thick mane of hair back from her face and planted a tender kiss on her soft lips. Damn, she was one luscious and tempting woman once her guard was down. Hungry for more of her, I kissed my way down her neck to the stiff peaks of her breasts. As I sucked her nipples, she began thrashing in desire. Eager to please, I turned my attention lower. I could hear her breath quicken in anticipation. My tongue slid inside her and found a sensitive spot.

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"Lee! Lee!" She shouted my name and her fingernails dug deep into my back as I plundered her, teasing and stroking her with my tongue until her back arched and her entire body shook and heaved with the strength of her orgasm. As she sank back into the grass, I straddled her and thrust into her. Her hands clutched the grass and tore up great clumps as she shuddered with desire. "Oh, God!" she cried, shouting her pleasure to the sky. She gasped with delight and wrapped her long legs around me, tilting her hips so I could enter her deeper still. Her blazing heat drew me in, and I lost awareness of anything but the driving need to possess her. A loud hum filled my ears as I exploded with ecstasy. Incredible sensations swept through my body in intense spasms. As the waves of fire receded back into my belly, I opened my eyes again and became aware that the humming was more than the sound of the blood roaring through my veins—it filled the air around us. "What the—!" I rolled away from her and sat up on one elbow, staring wildly around me.

Amanda sat, too. Her breasts bounced from the quick movement. My sense of alarm vanished as I focused in on that soft flesh. Both mounds were rosy with the flush of her fierce climax. It appeared her first sexual experience as a woman had been a satisfactory one. The sight of that glowing skin and her stiff nipples almost made me forget the humming sound—but not quite. A glowing light appeared in the air a few feet away. We scrambled to our feet as the light flared and coalesced into the form of a human male. He was tall and well-built with short dark hair and stunning green eyes. He wore a one-piece jumpsuit that shimmered in the sunlight. Dumbfounded, I reached out to touch him and my hand passed right through his body. "Greetings!" The single word was recognizable as English although the pronunciation was unusual, distorted somehow. "Uh, hello?" I passed my hand through his body again. Obviously, he was some sort of holographic projection. My pattern sense told me we were looking at the gate

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masters' computer. A halo of light surrounded his body. He studied us with a calm gaze and I swear he smirked. "Welcome to the Nexus. I had originally classified you as invaders with hostile intent, but watching your lovemaking has convinced me you are a civilized people." Amanda brushed a leaf from her hair and smiled. From the satisfied look on her face, you would have thought the whole thing was her idea. "Indeed, we are." "You are not from Earth?" That question threw me for a moment, but I realized he meant the alternate Earth that had attacked his Nexus. "No. We are humans from another timeline—a friendly timeline, I assure you." "You are welcome, then." I decided it was time to try making some sort of demand. "We don't feel too welcome when we're locked outside." A pained look flashed across the holographic face. "I regret that. I am programmed to repel attempts to enter the city until I determine the intent of the visitor." "I hope you got it straight now." To make my point, I reached up and rubbed the sore spot on my forehead. A distressed look appeared on the holographic face. I almost started to feel sorry for the guy—he seemed so human. "Listen, ah, do you have a name?" He drew himself up. "I am the Elite Three Thousand Ten Series Quantum Holographic Computer with Interactive Matrix."

"That's a mouthful, Mr. Holographic Computer. How about I call you H.C.?"
"If you wish."
"This planet seems deserted. Are you the only one here?"
The light around his holographic body dimmed as he stared at me. "I am. I have waited alone in this city for nearly nine hundred years. I was left behind to guard this place and its technology from intruders who might use the knowledge here to harm my masters."
"The masters of the gates, you mean?"

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My heart thumped with a rush of adrenaline. I was speaking to a computer that had known the masters. I shot Amanda a look of triumph. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement, too. We knew the masters were human and evolved far beyond us—but little else.
"What can you tell us about them?" Amanda blurted.
H.C. shook his head. "Nothing. I am programmed to remain silent about the masters."
My sudden hope vanished. "What! That's stupid. If they've been gone almost a thousand years, what can it matter?"
"The masters knew that others might use the quantum nature of the gates to travel here one day. They have left this world behind and do not wish to be followed."
Amanda's chin quivered. "What if we only want to sit at their feet and learn from their great wisdom?"
H.C. regarded her with a solemn look. "You remain human. The masters have gone beyond humanity and its concerns, and they no longer wish to look back. More than that I cannot tell you."
It was useless to argue with a computer. Forcing myself to concentrate on the current problem, I pointed at one of the towers.
"Can we get inside, H.C.?"
"Certainly. I will no longer stop you." H.C. gestured toward the tower. Taking him at his word, I steeled myself for another blow to the head and strode straight at the wall. I won't claim I didn't flinch at the last moment, but I did pass through like a knife through butter. I found myself inside a vast chamber much like the one I'd left behind. To my utter relief, a sex gate stood in the center under a curved crystal ceiling.
"Thank whatever gods there be!" Amanda exclaimed, as she came through the wall to stand at my side. "Our way home."
I heard the eagerness in her voice and knew she wanted to get back before the holographic computer changed its mind and we reverted to enemy status. But my pattern sense warned me not to miss a great opportunity. A slow glow lit up the

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crystal wall as H.C. reappeared inside. As he turned to us, I spoke.
"Are you capable of telepathic communication?"
"That is how my masters communicated," H.C. said with a delighted smile.
"Great!"
I took a deep breath and began sending mental images his way.
Communicating mind to mind is infinitely faster than the clumsy words humans struggle with day after day. In no time, I had filled him in on how events had unfolded on our alternate Earth, including the problem we faced in finding a way to free the people trapped in the Nexus.
"Can you help us?" I finished.
"I can." His face took on a stern majesty. "The gate masters left me in charge of this entire city. I can shape and reform it however I wish. I would be glad to offer this world as a refuge for some of the people in stasis."
"You can't take them all?"
H.C. shrugged his shoulders and looked regretful. "I am but one computer. I can only support so many living beings."
Disappointment washed over me, but I fought it off. We'd found one Nexus on an alternate world. Given the infinite nature of the multidimensional reality, there would be more, maybe even more holographic computers to help us out when the refugees emerged from stasis.
Meanwhile, H.C. babbled on. He seemed happy to have someone to converse with after hundreds of years of silence. I imagined he'd originally been programmed to be social. The centuries he spent alone must have been difficult.
"I will prepare these towers to house those who will be emerging from stasis. I can provide them with food and clothing, as well, while you deal with whatever personal crises their transition might bring."
My heart soared. This was more than I had hoped for. The thought of finding and preparing a number of alternate worlds had been daunting, even to someone as relentlessly optimistic as me.
"Done deal!"
I held out my hand. The holograph smiled as his light fingers passed through

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mine. It was good enough for me.
A few hours later, Amanda and I stumbled out of the gate on our Nexus and looked around the control room. It was empty and the lights were dim.
"It must be nighttime," I said. Day and night were out of synch on the two worlds, but that was a minor inconvenience compared to the fabulous good fortune

we'd had.
"Um, how convenient." Amanda moved closer to me, her eyes darkening with desire. "Want to come to my room?"
I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a kiss that I hoped promised much more to come. "That would be great, but first I want to find Russ and tell him about this discovery. He'll be thrilled."
Amanda's body stiffened. She pulled away. "Have you got a thing for Russ? I notice he's become Rissa a lot lately."
I laughed. "Me and Russ? We're lovers, true, but Rita is my one true love." I smiled as I thought of her. I wondered how she looked now, carrying our baby.
"Your true love?" Amanda's voice quivered with anger. "I thought you left her behind on Earth."
"I had to because of her pregnancy. I'll go back as soon as I can."
"I see."
Amanda turned away from me. Her jealousy surprised me. It wasn't an emotion you saw much among Seconders. Maybe it was a mood swing. After all, we'd just changed sex several times. I figured she'd soon get over it.
With a shrug, I dismissed her from my mind. I don't like touchy females. Besides, she'd made it clear she considered herself superior to me. She might have used my body to discover her female sexuality, but that didn't mean a relationship between us would work. I was as blind as most males can be, but not that blind.
"Thanks for the trip!" I said, heading toward a corridor that led to Russ's suite of rooms.
Not bothering to answer, she stalked away in the other direction. When I reached Russ's suite, I found him in the bedroom—or to be more precise I found Rissa in the bedroom.

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Naturally, I spent the first half hour of our reunion filling her in on our discovery and what it meant to our future. When I finally caught my breath, I couldn't help but notice the skimpy robe she wore. The dim light from the walls shone right through the thin material, outlining her lush curves. She smiled at the change in my expression and batted her eyelashes.
"Why, Lee, I do believe you've noticed I'm a woman."
"I'm not complaining, but I thought you and Donna—well, you know."
She jiggled her eyebrows with amusement. "Oh, we'll get to it shortly, never fear. I've put it off for a few days because of exciting new developments in my

quantum research."

My ears perked up. "What developments?"

Her eyes danced as she leaned toward me. "Why are you here and not with

Rita, Lee?"

I drew back, hurt by the question. "You know why. Rita is afraid I'll lose my humanity if I make too many more trips through the gates. She'd be madder than hell if she knew what I just did."

"Hey!" Rissa held up her hands. "I only let you go, because I knew I was close

to another breakthrough. I've found a way to prevent mental changes when you travel through a gate. That means we can travel through the gates whenever we want. You can return to Earth without risk."

My jaw dropped. "Oh, Rissa!" Overjoyed, I swept her up in my arms and

planted a big kiss on her mouth. She chuckled when we finally broke apart and patted me on the back.

"I'm glad to see you happy."

"Happy? I'm ecstatic. I want to go back and see her right away!"

"Don't forget the people in stasis," Rissa interrupted. "We need to solve that problem first."

Impatience gripped me. I could see Rita again. Nothing else mattered.

"Amanda and I made a good start. We have at least three worlds to put them on."

"We need more. These people are too dangerous to stay on one planet.

We

need to find more worlds, and then decide how to divide them up and who will watch

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over which group."

"Fine." I rubbed my hands together. "Let's make a plan. As soon as it's in place, I can go back to see Rita."

"Yes, a planning committee is exactly what we need. How about Donna, Randy and Terri, and Amanda."

As I nodded my agreement, Rissa knitted her brows together and squinted. She looked as cute as a bug. Once the mental summons was sent, she smiled. "I

know how much this means to you, Lee. I'm glad we could be alone when I told you."

Reverting back to her flirtatious female nature, she batted her eyelashes at me and smiled, creating a dimple on each cheek. It occurred to me that Russell had

a lot of fun with his Rissa persona. Having two bodies certainly expanded a person's

horizons. Although Russell liked to stay male, he seemed happier as a female.

Another of the many mysteries that came with the sex gates. A trip through one was

never simple. You ended up questioning everything—your sexual identity and what it

meant, most of all.

Like many scientists, Russell was a loner of sorts. As a female, she almost

always sought me out first rather than one of the other men. I liked to pride myself on my abilities in bed as much as any man, but it was more than that. There was a special bond between Rita, Russell, Donna, and me. We were friends, and lovers, and family. The four of us had been in college, walking home from classes, on the day the sex gates first appeared. That was the day Don became Donna. Russell didn't go through, but he did spend years holed up in a laboratory trying to unlock the gates' secrets. The four of us became roommates and later moved to my parents' house in Ruston, Texas. Then, I had to rush Rita through a gate to save her life after an assailant stabbed her. We became Rez and Li and learned to love each other in our new roles—until the horrible day when the United States and Brazil engaged in a brief nuclear war. The four of us were exposed to lethal doses of radiation and had to chance a trip through the gates. That's when Rita and I discovered we were Seconders—and Russell and Donna both vanished.

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Rita and I were devastated. We thought Donna and Russell had vanished forever, but when Messler learned how to journey to the Nexus, he found them here. Seems Russell's brilliant mind figured it out on the first trip through. Sometimes I wondered what capricious fate set me down in the middle of two of the greatest geniuses the human race had ever produced. If the idea was to keep me humble, it was working. I once asked Russell which sex he preferred. He shrugged. "I like either one so far as the sex goes, but I find I can I work with the sex gates better as a male." Maybe he did. I could hardly discourage his perception since I benefited from his brilliance. But Rissa was happier—and cuter. I kept my thoughts to myself. Instead, I took her hand and led her over to the bed. I owed her a few more kisses while we waited for the others to show up. We cuddled together on the big bed. As I began to relax, my thoughts drifted back to how I came to be here on this alternate world. Originally, the gate masters had set it up as the Nexus and control center for the sex gates on Earth. We still didn't know why the gate masters sent the sex gates to Earth in the hundreds of thousands. The popular theory was that they wanted to try and save our world, which was coming apart at the seams from pollution and other social disasters. The gates brought violent upheavals, some of which were still playing

themselves out. But they also fostered a rebirth of science as well as new and flexible attitudes in society that made the world a better place to live. So they'd helped us out, but they remained a mystery. Since coming to the Nexus we'd found records the gate masters had left behind. We, at least, knew that they were—or had been—human once upon a time.

Think of the incredible advancements in the last few hundred years as a result of the scientific method, then think how technologically advanced the human race might be if the principles of the scientific method had been discovered three or four thousand years earlier than they were on Earth. Such a technology would seem like magic to us, just as the sex gates did when they first appeared. I remember my own astonishment, shock and even horror when Don went through the green nimbus beneath one of those glowing turquoise arches and came out an instant later as an

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eighteen-year-old woman.

The appearance of the sex gates revolutionized society in so many ways that, for a time, I made a decent living writing about the ramifications. On the down side, there were several occasions when I almost lost my life because of the changes they brought. Not everyone who fell into—or was thrown through—a sex gate welcomed the change. Some went through because they were old and wanted to be young again, some because they were dying and wanted to live. Once they had a new body, they tried to go through again, to get their original sex back. It wasn't that simple. For a long time, anyone who attempted a second trip through to reverse the change didn't make it; they simply vanished, seemingly forever. Eventually (because we Seconders are rare), a few people made it. One of them was Messler Scribner, a hundred-year-old man. He beat the odds by making it through the first time; no one else that old ever did. And then he beat the odds again and survived a second trip.

Messler was a towering genius and a master of intuition. He had made a huge fortune playing hunches. He used his wealth to protect himself and a few others who managed a second pass through a gate. Along the way, the media named us 'Seconders'. In those early years, our primary enemy was the government. As usual, the powers-that-be couldn't abide a few people being able to do something that they

couldn't. We kept the other powers we were developing as a result of multiple passages a secret. We were able to read the surface thoughts and emotions of others. We would face a backlash of fear if that became common knowledge. As it turned out, it hardly mattered—we were hunted, harassed, killed, and imprisoned. Jealousy and fear are terrible human emotions, and we had triggered them both. Our ability to use the sex gates made us effectively immortal. Sure, you could shoot us dead, but if we grew old or sick and could make it to a sex gate—a new life began. The normals hated us. As if having the government after us wasn't bad enough, the churches got into the act. The Church of the Gates became our sworn enemy—an ironic fact since Messler had originally founded that church to provide an umbrella of religious

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protection that would ensure free access to the gates. He made the gates a part of his new religion, effectively protecting the gates under the Constitution. But after Messler became a Secunder he abandoned the church and, in time, it turned against Seconders.

Laws were passed against us everywhere and many Seconders lost their freedom. Messler's fortune protected him until finally he chanced the sex gates once too often—and joined the ranks of those who had vanished. Messler was not the sort to go quietly into the night, though. He left behind explicit instructions in case he ever vanished. To my surprise, he left his fortune to me, with Rita as his secondary beneficiary.

Lots of people in the church and the government probably burned the midnight oil wondering why Messler had left his wealth to a moderately successful

Texas journalist who made his living writing about the sex gates. But Messler had always believed Rita and I were special in some way—another of his hunches.

"It's a good thing Messler is so intuitive, isn't it?"

Rissa had been following my thoughts. She wasn't as good at it as some of

the others, simply because her telepathic abilities hadn't been enhanced by as many

passages through the sex gates as most of us. On the other hand, she didn't really

need much more mind power.

"Yeah, he thought of a lot of things."

And he was a cantankerous old fart. I kept that thought to myself. Truth was, I

missed him. Hell, I'd even had sex with him once, years ago, when he was a woman and I was a reporter interviewing him. Messler always got a kick out of the fact that he'd seduced me. I'd give anything to hear his sly laughter again.

I had too many decisions to make that could use his experience.

"He was-is-a great man," Rissa said.

I raised my brows in question. "Do you think he's alive?"

"Depends on what you mean by living."

"Able to, oh, let's see-able to do this."

I surrounded one of her firm breasts with my hand and molded it into the curve of my palm. Rissa closed her eyes, a delighted expression on her face. I toyed

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with her nipple and watched it harden. She opened her eyes again and grinned at me.

"Believe me, I wish we could, but Donna and the others will be here in a second."

Smiling, I caressed her breast. She shook her head, but closed her eyes again and arched her back, purring like a kitten getting her fur stroked.

"I expect Messler to return some day," she added.

"Really?"

"Probably. Especially in light of another attribute of the gates I've discovered."

"Oh?"

"Mm. Don't stop. We have at least another minute-and that's a long time."

She covered the hand I had on her breast with her own, pressing it into the resilient

softness. "I might think better as a man-when it comes to mathematics-but I so enjoy being a woman."

Laughing, I bent over, pushed the silk away and took her nipple into my mouth. I sucked at the stiff flesh and was rewarded with a hiss of pure pleasure. She pushed my head away.

"Stop that! Now I can't think at all. I'm trying to say something serious here. I

believe there's an upper limit to how much our intelligence and savant abilities can

develop. There's a point that's like a barrier."

I watched her breast jiggle as she pulled the sheet up around her. "And no

Passing Go, no matter what the dice show?"

Rissa laughed. "Not without going to jail-and in this game, I doubt there would be a Get Out Of Jail Free card. That's where the change into something not

human occurs, the change we've sensed can happen."

My good mood vanished. "Maybe that's what happened to the ones who are stuck in limbo. They changed into something that isn't human."

Rissa shook her pretty head. "I sort of doubt it, but we'll see be

fore long. The
time is close when they either have to be turned loose or—"Die?"
"Something like that. Whatever happens, I know that if we don't get them out

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we'll never see them again. Never."

I remembered a pair of big, dark eyes, shining with compassion. My Rita's eyes. I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Rita would never forgive me for that."

Rissa's voice turned gentle. "I know, Lee. Most of us agree with Rita. It's the logistics we're worried about, not to mention what they will be like when we release them."

"You have no idea?"

"None that I'm sure enough of to share. They may come out perfectly fine, but it's more likely they will be changed, or dead, or come out as something we haven't thought of."

She shrugged, forgetting to hold on to the sheet. I grinned as her breasts appeared again. Her nipples were taut with desire. I was horny from my last passage and wondered if there was time to mount an assault, but she turned her head as if listening to something.

"They're almost here. Maybe together we can come up with a new idea or two."

She pulled me out of the bed and twitched her nose in a conscious parody of an old flat media character named Janie or Jeannie who could work magic. Only her magic was of the quantum kind. The bed vanished and loungers appeared.

I blinked in surprise. The room had a new shape. It resembled my old house near the campus of North Houston University, the one we lived in way back when the sex gates first appeared. Even the big cooler and bar separating it and the kitchen area from the lounging area was the same. My mouth dropped open when I spotted my old beat-up bar stools, pulled up to the bar where a pass-through to the kitchen allowed me to set drinks and meals on the countertop without going around.

Rissa laughed at the expression on my face. Russell never had much of a sense of humor, but as Rissa, she constantly surprised me. We were laughing together when the others arrived.

Rissa used her talent for manipulating the quantum flux to recreate the iridescent sundress she'd worn the other day. I struggled to make some clothes appear on my body. I succeeded, but Donna covered her eyes when she came

through the wall and saw me.
"Oh, my God!" she screeched. "Call the fashion police."
I looked down. I was wearing a pair of slacks adorned with pictures of writhing snakes and a shirt covered with fuzzy caterpillars. Now where in hell had I dredged that apparition from my mind?
"Oops! Sorry, Donna."
Feeling embarrassed, I tried again. A nimbus of light sprang up around my body. I swept a casual glance downward and found myself dressed in a purple gown with spaghetti straps.
I looked up at the sound of feminine giggles. Randy, Terri, and Amanda had followed Donna through the wall. At the sight of me in a dress, Terri clapped her hand over her mouth, but couldn't control her giggles. Her shoulders shook and the mass of blonde curls that surrounded her face vibrated as she tried to contain her fit of laughter. It was unusual for one of Messler's cool corporate lawyers to lose control, but I couldn't blame her. At her side, Randy lifted both eyebrows and wiggled them in an amused fashion, but managed not to laugh. He was the other half of the legal team that once served Messler. They became my lawyers—and then friends and lovers—when I inherited Messler's wealth.
Amanda threw a look of amused superiority my way and strode over to a lounge, ignoring all of us. I narrowed my eyes at her, troubled by the glow on her skin. It was the look of someone fresh from a sex gate. Had she made another trip in the brief time we'd been apart? It was dangerous to go through the gate too often, or too soon after a previous trip. I was starting to worry about her obsessive pursuit of perfection.
Terri threw her arms around me for a hug, still giggling, and distracted me with a warm kiss. "You look like some cross-dresser," she chuckled.
"Lee, Lee." Rissa clucked her tongue at me like a mother hen. Shaking her head, she waved her hand. I found myself wearing a pair of cutoffs and a brown pullover, which almost matched my rust-colored hair.
I tugged down on the pullover, a little peeved that we had to bother with clothes anyway. We didn't need clothes in the temperature-controlled world of the Nexus, but Rissa

wanted to have a serious discussion and didn't want our libidos to get in the way.

"Have a look," Rissa invited, and a mirror appeared on the wall. I frowned at my reflection. I might not be a hunk as a man but I'm a damned good-looking woman. I save my mirror-gazing time for days when I'm female. Donna passed by the mirror, patting her bouncy curls into place, and grabbed my shoulders. "One of these days you have to learn how to dress yourself," she joked, with a saucy grin. She planted a wet kiss on my mouth, gave my behind a familiar squeeze, and plopped down on a lounge beside Rissa. "Hello, love." Rissa's voice purred with tenderness as she welcomed Donna.

The two of them leaned into a lip-lock, while Randy and Terri sauntered over to the bar and poured some drinks for us.

"So, what's up?" Randy asked with his usual directness, while he handed out the drinks.

Randy and Terri were new on the Nexus, having just arrived from Earth. Although they'd proven their loyalty to me several times in the past few months, they both wanted to find their former employer, Messler, again. They'd come to the Nexus

to develop their powers so they could search for him.

Donna accepted a drink and cuddled close to Rissa. I sat down and pondered

the memories this room brought back. I thought about Don's horror when he'd first

turned into Donna and smiled to see her vibrant sexuality now. The sex gates made

us reexamine our attitudes about sexuality. Mostly the change brought us more pleasure. Why live as one sex when you're happier as the other? Of course, most of

humanity only got one chance to change.

Rissa finished kissing Donna and accepted a drink from Randy. When she crossed her legs, her iridescent sundress did interesting things, giving me a momentary glimpse of her bare thighs. She grinned impishly, but then sobered. She

had things to say.

Randy raised his glass in a toast. "Here's to the gates: may they endure."

We drank, and Rissa began reporting on her discoveries and my journey to a second Nexus with Amanda. The others were excited to hear about this new world.

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"But that's not all," she continued. "We're learning things about the gates every day. We're making progress much faster than anyone ever envisioned possible—even Messler. He'd be pleased with the advances we've achieved since he left."

Randy and Terri exchanged a glance at the mention of Messler's name. I fought down an unusual twinge of jealousy. I'd made love to both of them as a male and as a female. I cared for them, and I knew they cared for me. But Messler commanded their loyalty by sheer force of personality even while gone. When I compared myself to him, I despaired of ever becoming a true leader. I shook off the self-pity and concentrated on Rissa's words. "We can manipulate the sex gates in several ways. We've learned how to send them to other worlds and how to make them disappear from other worlds, like Earth."

I grinned, remembering how we'd used that trick—making the gates disappear—to persuade the U.S. government to accede to our demands and stop persecuting Seconders. The alternative was to watch the gates vanish one by one, and face old age and illness without them. "But I've called you together to discuss our latest discoveries. We've determined that there's an ultimate limit to the changes. You can only go through a certain number of times if you want to stay human."

Randy nodded. "We've always thought that. We don't know the upper limit for trips, but at some point we'll have to stop."

Amanda had been sitting quietly, toying with her drink. She looked up at that. "It's only a limit if the idea of evolving beyond humanity frightens you. No species can survive if it remains static."

"That's probably true, but I like being a human," I said.

"You would." Amanda snorted.

Rissa held up a hand. "This argument isn't necessary. We've found out something else—something really important. It's possible to resist the changes. That means we can bump the limit. Perhaps so high it makes no practical difference, and we can go through a gate as often as we want. It might even be possible to reverse

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some of the changes, although I'm not sure why anyone would want to."

I whistled. That was indeed important, particularly since I was near the limit myself and Rita wasn't far behind me. If Rissa was correct, I could go back to Earth anytime. My pulse beat faster as I thought about seeing Rita again. The separation had lasted several months from my point of view in the Nexus, but maybe I could go back earlier in her timeline and share most of her pregnancy. Donna caught my thought and grinned at me. The glow of anticipation in her eyes told me she was thinking about her plans to become pregnant. I reac

hed over
and squeezed her hand, goofy with happiness at the thought of seeing Rita again.
Rissa kept on talking.
"Of course, I'll have to be a guide and teach you how to resist at first, but that shouldn't be any problem. That's the good news." She paused, waiting.
Some of my newfound joy faded. She looked somber. I bit.
"And what's the bad news?"
"Those poor sick people in limbo." Rissa shook her head. "And the old ones.
I'm prepared to let the criminals and the deviants take their chances, but I'm worried about the others. If they come through unchanged, we'll have our hands full."
Randy shot a grim look at Rissa over the rim of his glass. He was the really practical one of the group. "It's natural for you to worry about the old and sick, but our real problems are going to come from the criminals and other low-life types. If we let them out, what will we do with them?"
I chuckled. Rissa was two steps ahead of everyone else as usual.
"Well, I—we—can manipulate the gates to sort them out into categories, broadly speaking, and assign specific groups to specific worlds, if we want to. That way, they can only hurt themselves. Lee's found several such worlds and there are bound to be more out there."
I threw a challenging look at Amanda. "I can go out looking again tomorrow."
"No problem," she said. "I welcome another trip."
Rissa frowned at me. "I don't want you going out again until you learn my new technique. You've taken enough risks. Amanda learned a lot from you. She should be able to do travel on her own now. I need you here to help with planning."

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For once I was too tired to argue. "Fine."
Rissa held up her fingers and began ticking off her thoughts. "We could put the killer psychopaths on the same world and let them see how they would function as females. That's if they come out as females. Which I assume they will."
"Why—oh, I see. Most violent psychopaths were male, weren't they?"
That was Terri chipping in. As a lawyer, she kept up on criminal statistics. And what she said was true. Better than 90 percent of the psychopaths who kill are male.
Of course, Rita once told me that some studies have shown that a large minority of psychopaths are female; females take their deviant personalities in less

violent
directions, mostly using sex as a weapon the way males use guns and knives. You
learn the strangest things living with a psychologist.
"Yes, I suppose so," Rissa said. "Psychology isn't my field; I'm going by a
sampling I took of the people who are currently stored in stasis. Of course a
majority
of thieves are male, but not by that much. We could put them on a world with
nothing
to steal."
"If we can find some more Nexus worlds, that will work," I said. "They might
steal, but where would they take it?"
"True. Maybe we should get really mean and supply them with such a
plethora of goods that there would be no need or reason to steal. Wouldn't
that be a
fitting punishment?"
I was beginning to think Rissa's brilliant mind harbored more than a
touch of
the diabolical. I had to admit she was right. The crooks would probably
be bored to
death with no reason to steal. I nodded agreement.
Donna piped up, "I'd like to see the religious nuts put together by
themselves.
Wouldn't that be a madhouse? They could spend the rest of their lives trying
to
convert each other."
I laughed along with everyone else. None of us were religious, or perhaps I
should say none of us had inherited the dominant belief genes most humans
possess, the ones that precondition us to have faith in something.
Randy, always the practical one, asked, "Could we let out a sample of
each
first to see what happens before we go ahead and turn the rest loose?"

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Rissa shook her head. "No, it's an all-or-nothing proposition. When we break
up the stasis we can sort them out and send them where we want, but that's as
much as we can do. Once the process starts, it has to go on to completion."
"I thought you could do just about anything with the sex gates," Donna
protested.
Rissa shook her head. Her blond tresses rippled around her neck and
shoulders. "Compared to what's still to be learned, I'm an idiot."
"It doesn't sound that way to me," Donna said.
Rissa leaned forward like a teacher who'd arrived at an interesting point in a
lecture. "Think of it this way: back in the old West, the Indians learned how
to use
firearms almost as well as the settlers. They even figured out how to make
repairs
and service their weapons. But did they really know anything about firearms? None
of them knew how gunpowder worked, or why it worked. They used the guns,
but

they didn't understand them. That's about the stage we're at: we can use the gates, but the technology behind them is a mystery."

"Do you think we'll ever understand them?" I asked.

Rissa got a determined look on her face. "I'm certainly going to keep trying. Eventually I think we'll come to understand how they work—and maybe how to build our own."

"Whew!" Randy clapped his hands and started a round of applause. Rissa blushed. "That calls for a toast," I said. "Who's ready?"

"I'm ready," Donna said. She held up her glass. "This is my last drinking session for a while. I'm going on the straight and narrow." She winked at Rissa who beamed back at her with a tender look. I realized

Rissa would probably be changing back to Russell within the next day or so. Donna obviously was in a hurry to get going on the baby project. Eyeing Rissa's alluring curves, I wondered how she'd feel about one last fling as a female before she did.

We sat around together enjoying drinks and discussing the ramifications of the new developments in our knowledge of the sex gates for several hours. Amanda left first. Finally, Randy and Terri grew tired, and said their farewells. Donna had put away a lot of alcohol by now. She patted Rissa's hand and got to her feet.

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"Believe it or not, this little girl is going to bed—all by herself."

I rose to give her a kiss. "Have a good sleep."

She leaned close to me and lowered her voice to a whisper. "She's mine after tonight, Lee. So have fun!"

Chuckling at some private joke, she wiggled her way through the wall. I watched Donna's cute little butt disappear with a smile. My best friend wanted to

give me one last chance to make Rissa happy as a woman. When I turned from the wall, I saw the loungers had vanished and the bed was back.

"Wow, just the two of us." Rissa reclined on the satin sheets, her back against the headboard. Her dress disappeared.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather go through the gate and join Donna for the night?" I asked. I didn't want to come between two people who were about to have a baby together.

"I want to be with you tonight, Lee. I know you'll want to go back to Rita as soon as you can. Donna and I will have plenty of nights together."

I relaxed. Plenty was the key word with the sex gates. Plenty of youth, and plenty of time. With plenty for everyone, there wasn't much room for old-fashioned

jealousy. Besides, who was I to argue with the wishes of two women I loved?

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CHAPTER FIVE

I woke up the next morning with Rissa nestled against me, one arm across my chest and wisps of her hair tickling my ear. I blinked and looked around. The

room had shrunk back to its normal size, and so had I.

I eased out from under Rissa's arm. I tried not to wake her, but I was too

clumsy to succeed. She opened her eyes, looked at me sleepily, and yawned.

"Good morning."

"It's a great morning," I corrected.

I had to give Rissa credit for some of my happiness. My whole body tingled with contentment. But what really made the difference in my mood was the knowledge that I might be going home to Rita soon.

I had remembered to take a Nohang pill before going to sleep so I woke up

without even a hint of a hangover. The team that invented those pills should be

given a congressional gold medal for meritorious achievement. Except our congress

gives those awards to their big donors, not necessarily those who have earned the

honor. Oh, well. When it comes to politics human nature is much the same

, regardless of the sex gates.

"So it is," Rissa agreed, following my meandering mind. "And now, it's time to

get to work. Are you ready?" She sat up. The sheet dropped down to her waist,

revealing her firm young breasts.

"I'm always ready," I said, eyeing her with male bravado.

She touched my mind with a scene from late last night. I blushed. Amazing

what a little alcohol can do sometimes. I wasn't sure I could top myself sober.

"Well, almost," I said. "Anyway, what kind of work?"

Rissa shook her head. "Poor Lee. It's been so long since he's done any real

work he's forgotten how."

I whopped her with a pillow to conceal the burst of pure joy that surged through me. Rissa could only mean I was to go into 'training' today. And that meant I

was a giant step closer to seeing Rita again.

Rissa explained that she planned to train me along with Randy and Terri.

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Rissa thought they had a lot of potential. As she discussed her plans, I realized I'd be going through a gate and would emerge a female. I considered that pretty good timing since Rissa was about to become a male again. And, of course, I couldn't forget Randy. He and Terri had been working almost nonstop since coming to the Nexus. He needed a break and I was willing.

Emerald City, as we jokingly called the crystal towers, extended for miles in every direction. Both Messler and Russell theorized that the gate masters used advanced quantum techniques to build the city. Some of it, the tall spirals of towers in particular, appeared to be permanent structures; other parts were rooted in a more indeterminate reality and could be manipulated by those who had enough knowledge of quantum theory. Fortunately for me, you don't have to understand math to deal with quantum theory. Hardly anyone except those on a level with Russell's intellect (and those were few indeed) understood the math. What you do need, though, is something else that might be equally as rare as mathematical genius. After all, the human mind has been trained for thousands upon thousands of years to believe that reality is fixed and unchangeable. So it takes a special kind of flexible, adaptable mind that believes in the theory and is also powerful enough to be capable of grasping possibilities and turning them into realities. To my amazement, I qualified, although there was no doubt my abilities only came as a result of my many trips through the gate. And even with that advantage, I often goofed when my mind couldn't hold fast to the idea I was trying to manifest—for instance, when I made myself a dress instead of slacks. After sharing breakfast, Rissa and I headed for the control center. As usual, the gate dominated the center of the room. Rissa waved her hand over a crystal set into the surface of one of the machines that seemed to grow out from the wall in an organic fashion. Several large loungers rose from the floor, covered in a shimmering fabric that was the same deep turquoise as the sex gate. The rest of the room was a mixture of soft pastels. Their gentle colors pleased the eye and created a soothing sense of peace despite the gate and the mysterious machines. And perhaps other

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factors were at work, too. A sense of confidence welled up within me as I stared at the gate. I'd been through many times. I could handle whatever was coming. I chose a lounge and seated myself. The lounge immediately reshaped itself, remodeling its contours to fit my body. Feeling wonderfully comfortable, I watched as Randy and Terri arrived through an archway.

"Hi!"

Terri beamed her bright smile at me, and waved. Randy couldn't take his eyes off the machines that filled the room. I should have known Rissa would invite them to the first session. The three of us shared a rather unique accomplishment.

Randy and Terri had made their second passage through a gate together and, against all odds, both had made it. The same thing had happened to Rita and me years earlier when we'd been forced to make a second passage after the nuclear war. We'd both come through, too. So far, we were the only ones—it was one of the reasons Messler thought we were unique.

Messler always insisted that Rita and I were special for that reason alone. At first I doubted him, but Messler made his fortune with hunches, and gradually I had come to believe that perhaps we were special—and that Randy and Terri were, too.

And obviously Rissa believed it, otherwise they wouldn't have been here so soon; there were certainly other, more experienced Seconders she could have chosen to teach instead.

"Hi, guys," Rissa said. "Welcome to my workshop. Have a seat."

She grinned and waved them into lounges. Both of us caught their humorous thoughts as they speculated about what kind of 'workshop' this was. I could sympathize. It looked like no working area I had ever seen.

Terri settled into one of the lounges and crossed her long, tanned legs. She was wearing a little wisp of a dress and sandals that laced up her calves. She looked delicious. I knew I was going to have a tough time concentrating on quantum theory with her stretched out next to me.

"What's this?" she asked. "I thought we were going to go through a gate while you taught us how to resist the mental changes. Although I don't know whether I want to resist getting smarter. It's fun being really intelligent."

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I chuckled at that. My idea of fun ran in another direction. Besides, Terri had been a near genius before the gates ever appeared. Anyone who worked for Messler had to be tops in his or her field. I guess even smart people like to be

smarter. Me, I just let things happen as they will; I've never been a big talker or gatherer anyway.

Rissa looked pleased by Terri's question. "You've brought up an interesting point. You and Randy don't really have to worry about resisting change yet since you are such new Seconders. You simply haven't been through the gate often enough to be concerned. But I know you want to go through as much as possible so you can reach the point where you can begin a search for Messler. You'll need this technique before long, so I thought you may as well learn while I'm teaching Lee. And looking at the immediate future, you may have to go through a lot of gates fairly soon."

"Why?"

"Oh. Thought you knew. I want you two to help Amanda in her search for more alternate worlds. We will be forced to release the people in stasis before long. Lee and I can't do all this ourselves; we'll need help. And remember, I can't predict what shape the people will be in when they emerge. How about you, Lee? Do you sense a pattern yet?"

"Only a sense of foreboding. I can't tell you more than that."

Rissa's smile disappeared. Like all the other Seconders, she had come to respect my savant talent of pattern analysis. "Well, we're committed, more or less, even though I agree with you. So why don't we get started. Let's begin by merging our minds."

"What's going to happen then?" Randy asked. I was curious, too.

"Sorry. Sometimes I assume too much. I want us to merge so I can assess the extent of the changes you've already undergone in your journeys through the gate. That will help me determine how to lead each of you, and all of us together, when we enter this gate." She gestured to the arch.

"Great!" Terri's eyes glittered with anticipation. "I can't wait to change sex again."

I shot another admiring glance at her legs. Personally, I'd rather see her stay

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a female most of the time, since I prefer to be a male. But the sex gates are about freedom of choice. Terri loved switching back and forth from male to female, as often as possible.

"Soon, but first—"

Ever since Messler helped me find my way to the Nexus the first time, I had been astounded anew at the depth and power of Rissa's mind. Of course, as

Russell

she'd built an enviable reputation as a genius, the one person beside Messler who seemed to understand the sex gates. Russell proved his abilities when he found his

way to the Nexus the first time he entered a gate.

As soon as we began, I felt the force of Rissa's mental powers. Her touch

was somewhat clumsier than my own, or those of more experienced Seconders, but that clumsiness was overshadowed by her pure, unadulterated strength.

Although I've made my living as a writer, it's difficult to describe the experience of merging my thoughts with those of several other human beings. I was

no longer one person; I was several people at once, yet without the confusion you

might imagine. It was as if I was pure consciousness, and floated from mind to mind.

Each mind acted like a lens, showing me reality in a different way. I looked

through each as I pleased and enjoyed the view. Each mind was unique, each

intriguing in its own way. Rissa's was a powerful force-field, bringing us together

under her tent. Terri's mind bubbled and darted here and there, so full of curiosity

that it kept in constant motion trying to grasp every nuance around it.

Randy's mind

was serious and direct, almost plodding as he drove his thoughts on a straight path,

examining each new concept. The others became a mirror that allowed me to look

into my own mind and see it as they saw it. I was surprised at the amount of

experience that filled my consciousness—the result of my years as a Seconder, no

doubt—and noticed for the first time the way my mind seemed to see everything at a

slightly askew angle.

Rissa kept us together in that state of merged consciousness for what seemed like hours, although I later realized it was only minutes. Time stopped as we

searched through the rich bounty of each other's thoughts. As our minds flowed back and forth washing over each other like a great sea, we began to share our

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hopes and dreams. In each mind, I found in a rich treasure of knowledge that I added to my own; at the same time, I could sense the others reveling in things they

found in my consciousness. Our thought patterns vibrated in unison, intertwining

together, becoming more and more alike. The whole experience was very pleasant.

If it hadn't been so serious it would have been fun.

As our merger deepened, the satisfaction that flowed from the group mind

became intense. Although we knew we had to separate, we hesitated. It was like leaving a warm fireside to venture out into the cold and dark—a hostile world where we would be alone once more. In the end, Rissa had to give each of us a little mental push. A shock ran through me as I disengaged from the other minds, and opened my eyes to a world viewed only through my eyes again. I started, and looked around at the others. Randy and Terri seemed a bit confused, but not alarmed. Rissa smiled at me, a satisfied look on her face, so I assumed the experiment had gone well. She confirmed it with a thought, then stood up.

"Okay, kids, now comes the hard part. Through the gates we go."

"With a hi-ho-hi-ho," Terri exclaimed. I grinned, recognizing the adventurous spirit I'd shared in the group gestalt.

"I want us to merge again. Then hang onto my mind as we go through,"

Rissa said. "I'm going to slow down the change while we're transiting—and I want you to watch what I do, and help me do it. That's how you're going to learn. Especially you, Lee. You must share my consciousness completely as I show you how to prevent any more changes to your mind."

"I'm ready." I gave her a thumbs up.

"Me, too," Randy agreed.

"And I make three," Terri chimed in, grinning.

Rissa reached for my hand. She squeezed my fingers in a surprisingly strong grip. With her other hand, she reached out for Terri. Randy stepped between Terri and me and joined hands with both of us. Linked in a tight little circle, we approached the sex gate until we were positioned so that we could step into the green fog that filled the green arch at the same moment. We took that step and—

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—the green mist surrounded us, engulfed us, as we transformed into pure energy and became a living part of that green nimbus within the gate. I stayed connected to the others' consciousness by sheer force of will. The gate tried to push us through and change our sex. Normally, the process was instantaneous. Most people would never be aware of what I was experiencing. To stop the change, I moved our minds outside of space and time, helped by Rissa. It was hard, but not as hard as it had been on my first attempts. I relaxed into the process and focused on helping Rissa guide Randy and Terri, who were both novices at this. With our joint consciousness suspended outside of space

and time,
we hung in a limbo. Our transit had stopped.
Fantastic!
Incredible!
Excited thoughts from Terri and Randy bubbled around me and Rissa. We were pure energy, without bodies. I'd read somewhere once that humans were both pure energy and matter oscillating back and forth so fast that our human minds could only grasp the material world. Now we hung in that other realm beyond the material, a realm where our minds were set free to realize their almost godlike powers.
For the first time, I got a glimmer of how the gates worked. Insights about how to control the passage and learn from it rushed over me like a great wave. I knew the source of that wave was sheer energy mingling with mine—and that was Rissa's doing. She held us frozen in our new state of energy, giving us a chance to explore this awesome universe that under-girded the reality we knew every day. Surprisingly, I did not even miss my body. My mind was clear. This was the answer—to keep my mind inviolate in this place beyond our universe while my body made the customary change.
Now that I understood how to protect my humanity, I began to eagerly explore this unknown realm. My mind expanded in several directions, absorbing a multitude of strange and wonderful sensations.
I sensed Rissa at my side (although I had no side, of course), guiding me, showing me discoveries she had already made. I became aware of multitudes of

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energy patterns—personalities—that hung in a timeless quantum flux. Rissa's consciousness explained we were inside the crystals, on a quantum level.
I reached out to join my consciousness with theirs and met only blankness. Their minds were as quiet as a stagnant pool. Around them, I sensed an enormous pressure. Energy bubbled like a pressure cooker with no safety valve. For the first time since entering the gate, I knew fear. If something wasn't done soon, there would be an explosion.
There was much more to learn, but I was fast approaching the limits of assimilation. The overload of information impinging on my senses jumbled together.
A pang shot through me as Randy and Terri's minds separated from mine, then Rissa was gone and I was alone in the quantum flux, knowing that the sex

change
was very near. I held it off for a second longer, probing the strange realm for one last
time with my consciousness extended as far as I dared. A renewed sense of
foreboding poured over me like a dark wave. I tried to pinpoint its source, but then
everything dissolved around me. Green light flashed in front of my eyes as I returned
to my body. I stumbled and staggered out the other side of the sex gate. I looked
down and saw my boobs. I was a female.
I took a step, feeling the cool tiles of the floor under my bare feet. I moved
with great care, knowing from experience how wobbly I would be. When you are used to walking about as a man, it's trickier than it looks to manage a pair of curved
hips and two bouncing breasts. It all tends to throw you off balance. The mind is the
same, and tries to move the body that it remembers. I moved with care for the first
few steps, adjusting to the different parameters of my new female body, but after
minute I was fine. I had gone through this process many times.
We emerged from the gate naked, of course. I shivered, as I stumbled about in my new female body. I envisioned a warm, fluffy robe around me. The robe
materialized, and I wrapped it close.
Russell grinned. "Hey, not fair! I was enjoying the free look."
"You can look anytime, buddy." I flipped the robe open, flashing him.
I pivoted around and saw Randi and Terry had emerged as well. They were novices when it came to manipulating quantum reality, though, without the expertise
to materialize a robe out of the flux. I suppose I could have helped them out. Instead,

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I licked my lips and enjoyed the view. As a woman, Randi was every bit as beautiful
as she'd been handsome as a male. Since I tend to look at life from the male
viewpoint, even when female, I felt an immediate attraction. I couldn't help but notice
Terry, too. His sensitive blue eyes stared at me with obvious longing. I'd made love
to him when he was a female, but never in our reversed roles of me as a female and
him as a male. For a long time, I'd only wanted Rita, in her male persona as Rez, to
make love to me when I was female. Then I'd accepted Russell into my bed. Maybe
it was time to expand my boundaries even more and explore the erotic promises I
saw shining in Terry's eyes.

He caught my appraising glance and brightened. "Hi, Li!"
As he hurried toward me, I admired his masculine form. He was tall with long, muscular legs and a hard chest. I imagined his strong body leaning over mine in a bed and shivered as pleasurable sensations stirred between my legs. That wasn't all that was stirring, either. Since he was nude, Terry couldn't hide his reaction to my female body as he stopped in front of me.

"Terry!"

I had to stand on tiptoe to kiss him. His blue eyes widened at the bold smooch I planted on his lips. I let my robe fall open and my breasts spilled out, brushing against his chest. I swiveled my hips, bumping my stomach into him. I quivered with desire to feel his arms around me. As usual, I'd emerged from the sex gate as horny as only a healthy eighteen-year-old can be. Russell laughed at the sight of the two of us teasing each other.

"Get a room, you sex maniacs!"

I arched an eyebrow at Terry. "What do you think? I've owed you a roll in the hay for a long time."

Randi sashayed over to Russell, her voluptuous breasts bouncing with every step. She slipped her arm through his and smiled at Terry. "Don't worry about me, big boy. Run along and have fun if you like. I'll stay here with Russell and help him with his, ah, research."

Russell leered at us, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "Yeah, with Randi's help, I intend to penetrate the deeper levels of quantum reality."

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If the jokes were juvenile, my only excuse is that we were, too. There's no feeling anywhere that compares to the rush of youth surging through your veins after you go through a sex gate. My whole body tingled with life—and a longing to be laid. I tugged on Terry's arm, and together we stepped on a nearby slidewalk and let it whisk us away from the control room. We stepped off deeper into the building where empty rooms galore stood ready to be transformed into love nests. I picked one at random and we walked through the wall. Using my quantum abilities, I filled the small room with light, then added a huge bed covered with silken sheets.

I let the robe slip off my shoulders to the floor and strolled over to the bed, my hips swaying. Terry was right behind me. We rolled onto the sheets and into each other's arms.

Generally, lawyers aren't my favorite people, but I long ago learned to make an exception for Randi and Terry. And I'll say this for the breed--when they put their mind to doing something, they give it their full concentration. Terry's hands slid over my skin, sending shivers of delight straight down to my toes. His hands cupped my breasts and gave them a gentle squeeze.

"Um, that feels good," I said.

Terry laughed. "That's the advantage of becoming both sexes--you know exactly what feels good for a woman or a man." To prove his point, he bent his head and licked my nipple. It hardened under his tongue, thrusting upward. I snuggled close to his hard body, delighting in the strength of the arms that surrounded me. I had been yearning to be a woman again now that I had learned to enjoy it, and I was eager to be taken any way Terry wanted it.

The first time I became a woman I had feared to let Rez touch me. I'd been afraid to let go of the inhibitions programmed into us by society, so I could enjoy the fact that I was a woman. I'd been so rigid back then. Lucky for me, Rez was as loving, patient, and gentle as a man as he was when he was Rita. He had slowly seduced me step by step into his bed. Now I delighted in the differences. It amazed me how natural it was to want to experience being taken, instead of being the one who conquered. Sure, I could be aggressive in bed as a woman and demand my own satisfaction, but I had to admit I

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really enjoyed a man who knew what he wanted and dominated the lovemaking. Terry was almost too gentle for my taste. I made allowances, knowing this was only his third time as a man. He had yet to experience the full extent of the mental changes that come on gradually as the hormones in the new body have a chance to work. He made love to me with much of the innate gentleness he had when he was a woman, but his attentions were thorough and prolonged. In fact, his foreplay went on for so long that my mind became fuzzy with wanting. The age-old complaint of women is that men are too quick, but there's such a thing as too long, too. Finally, I caught his head between my hands, gave him a long, soulful kiss and practically dragged his body on top of me. When I parted my thighs and r

eached
down to guide him into me, he got the hint.
"Sorry, baby," he whispered. "Guess I got way too fascinated with those
wonderful breasts of yours."
I laughed. Women often fixate on breasts when they become men, more so
even than men do, if that's possible. They tell me there's something
incredibly
exciting about seeing boobs bouncing on someone else's chest and feel
ing attracted
to them for the first time.
"There are other parts of me that are equally fascinating," I murmured,
guiding
him inside me.
"I'll say," he sighed, as he sank deeper.
Then he began thrusting into me, each powerful stroke sending waves of
pleasure bursting like fireworks from my inner core down to my toes. I s
hut my eyes
to savor the rush of delightful sensations and lifted my hips, inviting him to
explore
my depths. The room fell silent except for our harsh breathing and groans as
he
thrust faster and faster. I dug my nails into his back and hung on, hopi
ng it would
never end.
It did, of course. As always. I wore him out, and he collapsed in the be
d
beside me, his chest and shoulders damp with sweat. I took a deep breath,
enjoying
the heady mixture of scents from our sweaty bodies and our sex. I stretched,
expecting to relax and fall into a contented sleep as I always did after
lovemaking.
Instead, without warning, a sense of dark foreboding washed over me. My

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heart started to pound with an inner fear that had no rhyme or reason. Yet I
knew it
did, knew that this sense of mounting doom wasn't going to go away again. This
intense feeling had something to do with the people in stasis. Maybe I w
as picking
up on the turmoil of energy within the crystals themselves as they neared
maximum
capacity. I had touched the interior of those crystals with my mind while
going
through the gates. Maybe I had unwittingly established some sort of link
.
I wanted to do something, but without a clue as to their condition, I didn't
yet
dare to act. I had to hope I could learn more as my powers continued to
expand. In
the meantime, I decided to keep plugging along with Russell, learning the new
techniques he had developed. The gate masters had been dedicated to the
scientific
method. Knowledge seemed to be the key to unraveling their mysteries. At each
step along the way, our discoveries had shown them to be a reasonable, logical
race. It seemed more than probable that they had provided a way to safel

y release
those locked in stasis.
I lay wrapped in Terry's arms as he slept the sleep of the innocent,
telling
myself over and over that it would be okay. My heart refused to believe.
I was sure
there would be problems, many of them.
"What's wrong?" Terry stirred to wakefulness and eyed me with a
sleepy
gaze. I realized I must be broadcasting worried thoughts like an alarm s
iren.
"I'm sorry," I muttered, putting up my mental shields.
"Hey!" Terry gave me his sweet smile. One hand gently caressed my
breast.
"I was one of Messler's advisors, remember. You can tell me anythi
ng."
"Don't, you'll get me going again," I protested, swatting at him, although
not
hard. "And I know you're done for a while."
"That may be, but you're not."
I giggled, something I was never prone to as a man. Then I got serious.
"I'm
afraid we're going to encounter more problems than any of us can imagine
yet-but I
haven't a shred of proof."
"What kind of problems?"
"That's the hell of it. I can't predict what kind. And there's no way to
prepare
ahead of time because when we release the stasis, everyone comes out at
once.

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According to Russ anyway."
"He should know if anyone does. He certainly impressed the hell out o
f me
with his ability to manipulate the quantum flux within the gates today."
He'd impressed me, too. Thinking about Russell's abilities cheered me up. I
grinned at Terry with some of my usual good humor.
"Yes, Russell is something else. It's hard to argue with success."
"Right. Now let me ask you something. Can you stop the changes in you
r
mind if you go through the gates more times?"
"Yes, with Russ guiding me, that wasn't too hard to learn. Why?"
"Because I love you dearly, Li, we all do. But I think you're goin
g to become
too...unworldly, if you keep on."
His eyes met mine and I could see his genuine worry. Well, I was a littl
e
worried, but not that much. Not about that, anyway.
I pushed him back on the bed and began kissing my way down his body whil
e
using mind touch to reassure him that I was as human as he. It turned ou
t that he
wasn't quite finished yet, not after I found him with my mouth.

CHAPTER SIX

I left poor Terry sleeping—or maybe just too exhausted to move—and went looking for Russell. I wanted to talk to him about what had gone on while we were in transit through the gate. The more I thought about it, the less I liked the sense of impending trouble that had settled over my mind ever since my experience inside the gate. It wasn't the learning experience that troubled me—on the contrary, I was excited about what I could do now that I could travel through the gates without worrying about further erosion of my humanity. No, it was my sense for patterns that was giving me fits, jumping around in my mind like popcorn in a skillet, yet getting nowhere.

The crystal city of the masters was huge, but I had no doubt I would find Russell before long, simply because I was letting a little bit of quantum indetermination play around in my mind. It would lead me to him if I didn't force it.

The universe has a surprising way of giving us what we most desire—unfortunately, what we desire and what makes us happy often turn out to be horses of a different color.

I needed to think. Knowing I would find Russell before long, I took a stroll outside. It was a beautiful morning in the Nexus. We usually woke up to sunny skies. On alternate days, usually late in the afternoon, white clouds would come rolling in over the hillsides and a gentle rain would fall for 20 minutes or so, watering the lush green grass that grew ankle-deep everywhere. The grass never needed cutting, which was yet another mystery, although I assumed the masters had genetically engineered it with that trait. The thought passed my mind that we could export that grass to Earth and make a fortune.

A series of sculptures lined the pathways out of the city. On a whim, I chose a direction I had never gone before while I admired the sculptures. When it came to art, the masters had obviously gone in a different direction than most Earth cultures. They seemed to eschew any images of themselves. Nor did they go for the random freedom that characterized so much modern art—or what some people call art. More often it looked like hen scratching or debris from a windstorm to me. Rather, the

masters' works seemed based on some higher mathematics. As the mathematician in our group, Donna was fascinated by it and could spend hours expounding on the possible meaning behind these sculptures.

I was pondering the mathematical precision all around me when I heard a cheerful wolf whistle from beside the path. I looked around and saw one of the Second scientist Russ had brought over from Earth to help him with the sex gates. The man waved and grinned as he passed by, probably on his way to another

day of exploring various wonders in the city. In total, there were about 20 scientists

working under Russell, although, from what I had observed most of the 'help' was

window dressing. Russell was the creative thinker—he came up with the groundbreaking concepts needed to understand the masters, and then let them sort out details.

I appreciated the whistle—what woman doesn't like admiration from the opposite sex?—but it reminded me that I had forgotten to dress before leaving Terri.

Feeling a bit chagrined, I waved back at the scientist. As a man, I had gotten into the

habit of wandering around nude quite a bit. The unending good weather of the

Nexus encouraged that habit. The old nudity taboos were almost non-existent here,

and were gradually disappearing back on Earth, albeit not without resistance from

the major religions and their fundamentalist adherents. The powers that be in the

religious communities knew that controlling sexual attitudes meant controlling their

believers, as surely as computers are controlled by electrons.

But as a woman, I much preferred to wear clothes. As much as we men love to ogle the naked female form, I think we'd agree that women are sexier half-

dressed than nude. Once I had existed as a woman a time or two I knew that truth

down to my very bones, knew the sexual enticement I could create with a few

clinging garments. Believe it or not, I even developed a love of shopping, or at least

for shopping for alluring clothes to wear. Here, with no stores, I concentrated, and let

the quantum magic do its work. Shortly I was strolling along in a pale blue toga,

which clung to my hips and breasts as if the material was living stuff—and perhaps it

was, in a way. At any rate, I immediately felt more comfortable, and more female. I

enjoyed the slight bounce of my breasts and the wiggle in my hips.

Quite soon, I was on the outskirts of the crystal city, heading toward a line of trees that marked the beginning of a vast forest. I'd never entered the forest before, and I felt my curiosity grow. Although it was early morning, the alien sun beat down on me from a clear sky. The climate in and around the city was always the same, controlled exactly by the Nexus, but the further out you walked the more natural the environment became. None of us ever ventured too far despite the many discoveries we knew might await us out there—too many other problems had occupied my thoughts since my arrival. My attention of necessity had focused on Earth and its problems.

"Hi, Li." Russ emerged from the trees ahead of me. I gaped at him, surprised, although I shouldn't have been. "Hey, Russ. I was looking for you." He was bare to the waist, but wore soft old jeans, which looked as if they had been washed a hundred times. A pair of comfy leather sandals encased his feet.

"Yes, I know. You want to be careful when you're wandering near this forest. It's the home to some carnivores that are fairly large, and they have no respect for humans."

As if to show that he was telling the truth, a huge lion-like mammal chose that moment to jump from concealment behind a tree. Growling, it bounded in our direction, visions of haunch of human on its menu for supper. My hand grabbed for my gun and encountered only the soft blue fabric of my dress. My heart almost leapt out of my chest. Goddamnit, I wasn't carrying! A gun had never seemed necessary

here. Since nothing material could come with you through the gates, I would have had to create it out of the quantum flux. Too late now!

I turned to run, hesitated, then whirled around again to grab Russ who hadn't yet moved. Scientific curiosity is one thing, but standing and staring while a dangerous beast stalks you borders on plain stupidity. As I clapped a hand on

Russell's shoulder, the cat-like animal snarled and leapt at us. I yanked at Russ and

we staggered back a step. The beast stopped in mid-leap, a loud whacking sound

rang out, and the creature slid down the air to the ground. Confused, it backed up,

growling at some invisible foe, and tried another half-hearted leap. I winced as it

crashed into the invisible barrier again. It lay stunned for a long moment, then struggled to its feet, shook itself in disgust, and limped back into the trees.

"You have to learn to think fast if you're going to wander this way," Russ said, with a grin. "I found that out on a previous visit. That experience taught me to program my mind. My subconscious knows it must create a quantum barrier between me, and any attacking animal. We were never in any danger."

I gasped with relief, even though my heart pounded against my ribcage. "Maybe not, but I damn near ruined my new toga, and embarrassed myself at the same time."

"Not to worry. Sit down, Li, and let's talk."

I nodded and led the way. The path curved away from the forest and up to the top of a hill. A huge boulder, already warmed by the sun, provided a comfy perch overlooking the city. I sat down and dangled my feet. In the distance, the crystal

towers glittered in the sunlight, spires twisting upward as if it weren't a city, but rather some giant plant seeking the light. In many ways, it was a living thing. I always half expected to hear a voice speak to me out of thin air.

Russ frowned in concentration as he sat down beside me and a pitcher appeared on the rock surface between us, its surface beaded with cold moisture.

Two iced glasses sat beside it, filled with liquid. Smiling my thanks, I picked one up and took a sip. Long Island had its famous iced tea, but this concoction put it to shame. I coughed as it burned down my throat.

I grinned at him. "What's up, Russ?"

"Mm. I want to talk to you." He got that spaced out look on his face, as if his mind was an eternity away from mundane affairs. I waited patiently, and presently he

came back to reality. "Sorry. Lots of things to think about, besides the sex gates, the stasis situation, and what's happening on Earth."

"So what else is so momentous that it overshadows those things? Are aliens invading?"

That was a poor jest. The sex gates had been around for years and they were as alien as anything humans had ever imagined.

"Remember what I told you the other day about Donna wanting to have a

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baby?"

"Sure do. I'm happy for you both."

The mention of babies made me think of Rita. Lately everything made me

think of Rita, and how much I missed her. Now that I could navigate the gates without danger of further losing my humanity, I longed to return to her. I wondered if I dared to risk a quick trip to Earth despite the time pressures we faced in the Nexus.

Russ gripped the edge of the rock with his big hands as if searching for some stability.

"We're both really excited about the baby, Li. We've decided to go the whole

route—you know, live together, try to be a family unit."

His face got a dreamy look on it, as if he could already see the child being

born. I wondered if he thought I might be jealous. I'll admit to a tiny bit of jealousy

that he was here with Donna, while Rita and I remained separated. But I was glad

for Donna's sake—and for Rita's. They wanted babies very much.

Personally, I

couldn't imagine wanting to have a baby, not even when I was a woman.

For one

thing, as much as I hate to admit it, I'm scared out of my wits by just the thought of

the pain of childbirth, and secondly, there is too much of the male in my outlook,

regardless of which sex I am, to want children. Or let me amend that—to want to

bear a child.

As a male, I looked forward to the joys of fatherhood. I didn't know if Rita was

carrying a boy or a girl, but I knew I would treasure a child of either sex.

After all, I'd

been both. And I suspected someday in the future our son or daughter would change sexes as well. Sex no longer mattered as much. The idea of creating a new

life was what overwhelmed me. I was as excited and enthralled at the prospect of

becoming a father as she was about becoming a mother.

"Cat got your tongue?"

Maybe my mouth was hanging open; I don't recall. I was lost in the past. I

shook my head and blinked at Russell.

"I was thinking about Rita and the baby we're going to have. I want to get back to her soon. I don't know what kind of a family unit Seconders will

eventually

come up with, but I do know a kid needs both parents around."

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"Amen to that, brother." Russell clapped me on the back. "Hope you don't

mind my claiming exclusive rights to Donna for a while."

"Of course not. I want to see you two as happy as Rita and I are."

I loved Donna and would do anything for her. If she wanted to have a baby

with Russ, I was glad to step out of the picture for as long as it took. As

Don, she'd been my best friend long before the sex gates appeared, and as Donna she was a sweet and wonderful lover. I looked out over the valley and thought of the past.

"The only thing I regret is how stupidly I acted when Don became Donna."

"Don't fault yourself," Russell said. "We were new to the idea of sex changes back then. I could have done more to help her make the transition too, but I was so damned busy investigating the things."

I remembered the long, agonized looks of love and longing Donna had sent my way. She'd wanted me to be her first lover, but I'd been totally turned off by the idea of sleeping with my best male buddy.

I chuckled. "Rita still teases me about how she had to slip an aphrodisiac into both our drinks to get us together."

Trust Rita to find a way to encourage love. I loved her for many things, and especially for the fact that she didn't have a jealous bone in her body. She knew I loved her and was never afraid to expand the circle of our love.

"It worked. In fact, I've always wanted to thank Rita for that. Donna's first experience with sex as a woman was so terrific that she's stayed female most of the time since. I appreciate that, since I prefer to remain male." Russell gave me a sly grin.

My mouth twitched. "I don't know. I like you best as Rissa."

"That's because you're Lee most of the time." His gaze dropped to my chest where the wind molded the soft blue cloth to the outline of my breasts. My nipples hardened and not because of the chill in the wind. "Russell and Li works too," he murmured, setting down his glass and leaning over to kiss me.

Our lips met and then his tongue demanded entrance. I tasted sweet rum and spices from the tea. His hands cupped my breasts, squeezing the soft flesh, his thumbs moving to tweak the already rigid nipples.

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"You're way too distracting as a female," he said, breaking off the kiss and running his fingers through the thick, auburn waves of my hair.

"Not half as distracting as you are as a male." I punched a playful fist into his shoulder. "But we have serious matters to discuss."

The light in Russell's eyes dimmed. "Too true. I've spent a lot of time thinking about the difficulties ahead of us. As a scientist, it bothers me that we are operating on so little data. I think you and I should tackle a gate again. And again. There's

something funny I'm sensing, but it keeps escaping me. And you've said you also

sense a problem, a foreboding of some sort. Maybe your pattern analysis can find

the missing piece of the puzzle if we're not distracted by anyone else."

I ran a hand down Russell's cheek, feeling the rough stubble of beard. He hadn't shaved and I enjoyed the prickling of his beard. "I was hoping to stay female

for a couple of weeks, at least."

"That's no problem now that you've mastered controlling the mental changes. You can go through as often as you want."

I'd lived with the fear of what the gates might be doing to my soul for so long

that it was hard to shake it. "When do you want to go through again?"

"No time like the present."

We hiked back down the trail. I was glad to see the native wildlife gave us a

wide berth. When we reached the edge of the city proper, a moving pathway appeared. Russ certainly knew the trick of manipulating the quantum instabilities; he

brought improbability into certainty with the ease of a driver changing lanes on a

crowded freeway. He made it look simple, but in reality it was incredibly complicated,

demanding a level of genius far above the normal human mind. Even with the mental expansion the gates had provided, it remained a trick I hadn't mastered yet—

and I suspected no one else had, either, with the possible exception of Messler. I

followed Russell off the walkway into the entrance to one of the spires, and from

there, to what appeared to be the same control room where we had gone through the sex gate the last time. Hand in hand, we approached the bright turquoise-green

arch and stepped confidently into it.

You'd think we would have both learned by now—never take a sex gate for

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granted. They hold more mysteries than we can begin to imagine. The first step into

the gate was completely normal. The turquoise-green fog that filled the entrance

engulfed us and became the entire universe. With the ease of long practice, I resisted the gate's attempts to complete my transformation and turned my mind toward

the inner workings of the sex gate, as I tried to learn more.

Power hummed through the green mist around me, more power than I ever remembered feeling before. I sent a mental question toward Russell and met only a

blank wall. Russell's energy pattern had vanished. Shocked, I whirled around,

searching the mist, but my consciousness could find no trace of it here inside the

gate. Somehow the fog had become literal, interfering with my perceptions. It

had
swallowed everything up.
That's when I panicked. I took a deep mental breath and forced my mind to
concentrate. I'd been through the gates many times without Russell. I could
handle
it. And I was sure Russell could take care of himself, whatever had happened.
I expanded my mental awareness into a circle around me and felt the familiar
tug toward the sex change, but that was easy to resist. I hardly gave it a
thought.
Something else tugged at my consciousness, a steady but determined pressure that
wanted to pull me in a different direction, deeper into the impenetrable mist.
Alarms went off in my mind as my ability to discern patterns warned me of
impending danger. I struggled with my fears and thought of simply letting the sex
change take over. That would pop me right out of the gate. Then I remembered
Russell's words about the dangers of not having enough data. Ignoring the
sense of
impending danger, I followed the faint tug, sensing that this phenomenon
was
somehow linked to the stasis situation.
As I drew closer, a voice started to mutter deep in my mind. Someone was
sending knowledge directly to my consciousness by a telepathic process and my
mind was interpreting it as best as it knew how—as words barely heard. I
strained to
catch the meaning.
Help! Save us! Set us free!
My heart ached to hear the fading voices of those millions of souls locked in
stasis. Some force whispered deep inside me, telling me that I alone had
the ability

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to help those unfortunates who hadn't made the first passage. My sense of
danger
grew, as the alarm bells turned to warning cannon blasts. The voice inside me
continued to whisper. For the first time, I wondered if I would have to allow
the gates
to make more changes in my mind in order to succeed. Fear stabbed through me—
such changes would bring me perilously close to losing my humanity forever.
Clamping down hard on my fears, I persisted. Those lost voices haunted me.
I knew I would never forget their cries if I deserted them. The voice deep in
my mind
grew louder, urging me to take the final step beyond humanity for their sake.
Don't be afraid. Allow me to increase your mental powers.
The alien presence in my mind whispered reassurance to me as I hung there
in green nothingness. Taking the last few steps would be simple. All I had to do was
ease forward and—a wrenching mental battle erupted like a storm around me.
"Li! Don't!" Russell's mind again connected with mine. "Not that way!"

His mental command rang through my mind. I knew that urgency, had heard it before as I'd fought in the streets of Houston. It was the voice of an infantry commander being assailed on every side, but standing his ground. His energy pattern reappeared out of the fog as it roiled around us, the very flux within the gate disturbed by his battle with the force that was using its siren song and the cries of those in need to entice me away from his presence. His hand raked through the air, trying to grab my shoulder although, strictly speaking, neither of us was physical anymore. We were within the gate, in some in-between state, our minds supplying images that we could relate to. His mouth moved in silence, yet I heard his mental shout. "No! Li, don't go that way!" His warning hauled me back from the edge where I tottered. In another instant, I would have gone over and become another kind of being—no longer Jackson Lee Stuart, but something else entirely, something not entirely human. That being would have the ability to free those trapped in stasis without difficulty. They could emerge, but it would pay the price, would be forever separated from normal humanity. I halted at the very edge, as if on a cliff, torn two different ways. I teetered

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above an abyss of human oblivion, confused and lost in the fog, deafened by the voice that shouted in my mind. Only someone such as Russell, with his mental power and understanding of the quantum world, could ever have brought me back. Russell held tightly to my consciousness and guided me away from the danger. Like one blind I followed him, letting go, and letting the sex change began. The green fog rose up to engulf me, and I stumbled out of the sex gate as a male. I stood steps away from the entrance, shaking like a leaf in a hurricane. Russell—now Rissa—helped me to stand erect until the trembling stopped. Goddamn, what kind of trap had I blundered into inside the gate? My mind gibbered like a frightened animal. "Stay here. Don't move," Rissa commanded. She left me and hurried around to the other side of the gate. Fear stabbed through me at the risk she was taking, but seconds later (by my reckoning), Russell stepped out. "Come on. Let's get out of here before you get tempted." Was he crazy? Damned if I wanted to go through that again. And yet—and yet—it had been like being offered a crown of power and all that went with it. The part of my mind not consumed by fear continued to process the information I'd received from the whispering voice. I knew if I'd gone through with the change

I
would possess incredible powers, including the mental strength to cure
whatever
might ail the people in stasis when they were released. I bit my lip as
the stunning
truth burst over me: if I needed these powers for the transition to succeed,
without
them the people would be hurt, wounded in some way when they were freed. There
was no question about it now, though Russell and I had both already suspected
that
would be the case. I was human, but as a human being, could I walk away
from
such a gift knowing that if I refused it, others would pay the price in
suffering and
pain?
Russell and I left the control room and headed out into the open air out
side
the spire. I paced around until I calmed down enough to materialize some
clothes
and ask Russell where we were going.
"Off to see the wizards," he said.

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At first I had no idea what he meant. Then it became clear. "The othe
r
scientists in your group?"
"Yup. They aren't nearly as far advanced as we are in controlling
the gates,
but they are smart people. We could use some new viewpoints to stimulate our
thinking."
"After what just happened, I don't think I'm such a hot prospect for
controlling
the gates, either. Whatever that was leading me on, it damn near had my mind
for
supper."
"It was the gate masters, I think," Russell said.
"I thought they were long gone. Messler went looking for them, for Christ's
sake!"
"I know. Looks like he headed in the wrong direction," Russell adm
itted with a
wry grin. "They may have been watching us this whole time. That prove
s something
or other, but damned if I know what."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Whenever Russell's group got together I knew how a caveman must feel
dropped into the twenty-first century. I admired them. They were a conclave of
the
best and brightest of Earth. I'm fairly bright, but compared to that group I

was like the
runt of a litter; special, maybe, but not nearly as large as the rest.
Even Donna outranked me in intellect; she was a superb mathematician.
Since coming to the Nexus, she'd made several passages through the gates. Those
trips had enhanced her natural mathematical talent to a whole new level—that
of a
savant. What she possessed was a gift, like mine for sensing patterns. In that
she
was unique. So far as I knew no one else had developed a savant talent in a
field
where they were already proficient, except her. It was one more puzzle of the
sex
gates to go along with the long list of others.
Randy and Terri attended the gathering, too, only now they were Randi and
Terry. Neither one made any claim to particular brilliance, although I thought
both
were far too modest. You didn't get to be Messler's lawyers and co
nfidants by being
stupid. But mainly Russell wanted them present, because they represented
another
anomaly, something else about the gates we didn't understand. Like Rita and
me,
they'd gone through the gates together and become Seconders together. We were
the only couples that had ever done that.
Terry looked disappointed to see that I was male, but when I explained what
happened, he could only shake his head in dismay. "That's scary, Lee.
This stasis
business is turning out to be more dangerous than I ever dreamed."
I could only agree. The babble of voices around us died down, as Russell
made a gesture and people started finding seats. I grabbed a drink from the
bar in
one corner of the room and took a seat. I took a gulp, welcoming the burn from
the
alcohol as it went down my throat. There are days when you need something
to
numb the shock.
Someone next to me lit a cigarette. After nearly vanishing, cigarettes had
made a comeback among Seconders. How could cigarettes hurt us when we could
always go through a gate and become young and healthy again? I turned to
my

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neighbor.
"Mind if I have one?"
He handed over a white tube with a smile. I lit up with the urgency of a
heroin
addict a day past his last fix. As the smoke filled my lungs, I surrendered
to the bliss
without guilt. Then I remembered that I was in no particular hurry to go
through a sex
gate again—not until we figured out what had attacked me. Groaning to
myself, I
took one more soul-satisfying drag and snuffed it out. Better not to sta

rt the habit
again.

We sat down in a circle, an even baker's dozen of us. Amanda had come in a little earlier. I'd started in her direction to talk to her, but she'd turned away and struck up a conversation with someone else. I'd been about to find out why when Donna had caught my arm and dragged me over to talk to Russell. Now Russell folded his arms and glanced from face to face, his serious expression warning us that this would be an intense discussion. Without preamble, he began describing what had happened to us with words, and mind to mind. Like the scientist he was, he kept it brief and organized with barely a mention of the main thing that stayed in my memory—an overwhelming fear. I watched conflicting emotions flit across the faces of the others as he talked: fear, anxiety, disbelief, anger, fascination. Russell droned on, describing how some unknown entity had tried (and damn near succeeded) to entice me into allowing a transformation of my being to a higher level of intellect and knowledge. Several listeners shuddered as he emphasized that the change would almost certainly have ended my humanity. That was something everyone feared; a worry we thought we'd conquered, now back to haunt us again. My pulse started to race. Donna, who was sitting right beside me, squeezed my hand sympathetically. Russell leaned forward, gathering their attention with his eyes. "What caused this phenomenon? I believe it could only be one thing—the voice Lee heard was that of a gate master." "The gate masters!" Donna jerked in surprise, and shot a speculative look my way. "Why were they after Lee?" Russell folded his arms, his expression grim. "I can only conclude that at they

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are watching us. With their mastery of the gates and the alternate realities, spying on us is probably child's play. They must know that Messler left Lee in charge. To all intents and purposes, he is our leader." "Why don't they bring back Messler, then?" Randy asked. I wasn't surprised that was the first thought that popped into his mind. Both he and Terri were devoted to their former boss. "If they haven't really vanished, they must know he is looking for them."

Russell bit his lip. "I assume that they don't want to be found by us, or they could easily have contacted Messler. Or maybe they prefer to deal with Lee." I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or an insult. Maybe the masters thought I'd be easier to handle than Messler. I knew for damned sure if Russell hadn't gotten through to me at the last second I'd no longer be human. I took another gulp of my drink.

"What is obvious," Russell continued, "is that this entity wants us to continue to use the gates to evolve, whereas we have chosen to stop and remain human. The masters must want to create an enhanced mind—we know that they chose to take that course. The conclusion would be that they themselves are no longer human."

"They have a good reason, though," Donna pointed out in gentle tones. "They seem to be concerned about those poor souls in stasis. The entity implied it will take an enhanced mind to cure them, or help them, or do whatever it is we need to do to set them free."

"They should have thought about that before they sent them there with their damned gates!" Terry looked angry, but I knew he was really afraid for me.

"I doubt they realized how many humans would fail to meet the minimal standards for a successful passage through the gates. They were too far ahead of us to understand us anymore. The number of souls in stasis is probably a shock to them, too."

"So they're trying to help," Donna said.

"Apparently, but at a great price." Russell leaned back in his seat with a heavy sigh. "I wish we could be more definite. We lack data."

"I appreciate your theory." That was Stephen Johnson, a scientist from Dallas

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who had worked with Russell long ago on the gate project. "But we have no real proof the masters are involved. For all we know, Lee might have contacted three-headed aliens from Beetlejuice."

Amanda frowned. "I agree. It's a shame we didn't find out more while we had the chance." She turned cold blue eyes on me. "You should have agreed to the change, Lee. Then we would have someone who would have the necessary abilities to help those people when they are released."

Damn easy for her to say! I stared at her as if she were a piece of bait on a hook, challenging her with both my mind and eyes. The intensity of my mental thrust

frightened her. The confidence drained from her face. She wiggled like a worm, as I half rose from my chair. "I've got a better idea," I snarled. "Since you think so highly of changing into something no longer quite human, why don't you do it?" It had been a long time since I'd raised my voice at someone in anger. Rita had had a good influence on me that way. But this anger was clean, justified. This woman had no right to volunteer my humanity for her own purposes. She didn't answer, but she didn't back down either. She folded her arms across her chest and glared at me. I sensed indignation radiating off her as if I had done something wrong. I groped at the edges of her mind, trying to understand, and picked up an image: I was a fool who didn't recognize the opportunity of a lifetime. I stared at her in astonishment. Where did she get such an idea about me? Was she that willing to sacrifice her humanity—or was it mine she wanted to put up for grabs? Where did she get off having such a cavalier attitude toward throwing me—or anyone else—into that sort of cauldron? Apparently, Seconders had improved minds, but the same couldn't always be said about their souls—or whatever you want to call the essence that makes us human. I sat down again, clenching my hands into fists with frustration. Someone cleared their throat on the other side of the circle. Derrick Batson, a physicist, spoke up. "Lee, as I understand it, you're way too close to the edge to risk taking another shot at trying to contact this entity. I'm willing to go with Russ next time and

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see how I come out." His dark brown gaze roved around the table, judging other reactions, particularly Amanda's. Russell ran a hand through his hair. "Thanks, Derrick, but there's a catch: the time for releasing the people in stasis is running out; I don't know if you'd have time to get up to Lee's level. It's going to take someone with a certain amount of mental strength to contract these entities, whoever they are. I'd try, but that would be hubris. I'm as vulnerable as anyone. It will take at least two of us to try and communicate with them." "Can't we do like we did when Lee went back to Earth to stop the attack on the Seconders?" Terry asked.

Some people looked puzzled, but I knew exactly what he meant. I'd come to the Nexus seeking help to fight those on Earth who were persecuting the Seconders. After I'd learned how to fight them I'd gone back to Earth to the exact time and place I'd first left from, so that I could reemerge in time to join the battle then taking place around Messler's old hideaway. Terry wondered why we couldn't do the same thing now—solve the problem at our own pace and then go back in time via the gates to release the people before it was too late.

"Sorry, things don't work the same way in the Nexus," Russ told him. "This alternate world has some unique rules of its own. It's why we can reach the level of quantum reality so easily. But that very characteristic means that time is different here and time travel won't work. I estimate that we have only two weeks, or possibly three, before we have to make the decision."

"What decision?" Amanda tossed her head, and aimed another glare at me. "You've already decided to let those people out, haven't you? Even though you have no idea how to help them if they emerge as flawed as they were when they entered."

The scorn in her voice made her position clear. We were idiots to even consider such a course. I started to speak, but Russ beat me to it.

"Actually, we haven't absolutely decided to go ahead and release them. We'd like to, of course, if we can work out a safe way to do it. That's why I've called this meeting—to decide how best to go about it when—and if—we do, especially in light of this new, unknown, presence."

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Amanda gawked at him as if he were speaking gibberish. "What do you mean, how to go about it? It's simple enough. If we must do it, we let them loose on the alternate world we found and we provide for them."

I hid a smile behind my hand. Amanda must have had some talent or mental ability I wasn't aware of, but whatever it was, she wasn't using it for thinking things through. Russ nodded to me. I forced the smirk off my face, lowered my head and laid out the problems.

"First, if you do your math, you will soon discover that the logistics of organizing and providing for so many people at once will be stupendous. No one knows for certain how many people are locked in stasis, but estimates run in the millions. That's a lot of people, even with the help of the supercomputer we found. Meanwhile, as far as warm bodies go, our resources are limited to the group

you see
sitting here in this room." I looked around the circle. Most were nod-
ding solemnly,
seeing my point. "Secondly, we've found a couple of alternate worlds that will
work,
but we need more. Not everyone caught in stasis is an innocent. Let's
not forget that
many, many bad people got stuck. In fact, probably the majority of those who
didn't
make it through were criminals or mentally defective. What will we do with
them? I
can't see mixing the true innocents up with the others. Probably the innocent
should
go to the alternate Nexus we found, where they will get the best care. We need
more
worlds—"

"You're forgetting something," Amanda interrupted. "The majority of those
criminals were male. Surely they will be changed for the better by becom-
ing
women—and you know, as well as the rest of us, that most of the psychopaths
and
deviant personalities were men, too, so they will come out as women."
My jaw dropped open. I couldn't believe I was hearing this kind of se-
xist
nonsense from a Second. We'd all been both sexes—some of us many
times by
now. We knew that hormones had an influence on our behavior, but our essential
nature remained unchanged.

"We don't know that for certain," Russ said quietly, understating as always.
His confident declaration quieted Amanda down.

"Well, what is your plan, then?"

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Russell smiled. He was a gifted natural teacher and always enjoyed
explaining his ideas. "First we need to find a few more alternate Earths we
can reach
from this Nexus. I'm putting you in charge of that project, Amanda, since you
already
have one trip under your belt. We need to find worlds that are unoccu-
pied by
humans, but which have operating sex gates. And if we can find more worlds
with a
functioning supercomputer, so much the better. Our plan is to divide up the
people
by categories. That will be tricky, but worth our best shot. Personally,
I'm very
adamant about separating out the extreme types and letting them loose onto
separate worlds."

A movement caught my eye. Another of the scientists, Sophie Podkayne,
fiddled with her long braid of red hair as she leaned forward to speak.
"That seems
reasonable, but what happens if, after they're released, some of them are able
to go
through a gate again and become Seconders. If they do that, their mental
abilities

will increase and they may find their way here. The bad ones, I mean. Are we going to have to have a police force?" Her voice trembled as she voiced this last possibility.

"I doubt very much any of them will qualify as Seconders. But just in case, I'll work out a way to fix their sex gates so that they can't use them to reach this Nexus."

I noticed a tired slump to Russell's shoulders as he took on yet another problem, but I think I was the only one to see it. My old friend Russ was certainly taking a lot on himself. I believed he could handle any sort of technical problem in physics, given enough time, but these unending problems were bound to wear him down. It made me want to get on with the program so he could go back to doing what he did best.

After a lot of discussion, both vocal and mental, Russ finally drew the meeting to a close—although a consensus had become fairly obvious by then. "We're agreed that we should separate them out by types and send each type to their own world. Is that right?"

Only Amanda disagreed. She continued to oppose the whole release, although she seemed willing to help search for more alternate Earths. This provoked

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another mental sigh from Russ. I think Terry and Randi caught a hint of it this time.

"Okay, is there anyone who feels strongly enough about helping these people to volunteer to go where Lee almost did? Remember, when you emerge, you probably won't be altogether human anymore."

No one volunteered, which didn't surprise me. I had given everyone a very vivid mental image of what Russ and I had gone through. I caught the dithering of Amanda's mind as she considered it, then decided against risking her own humanity.

The others decided their best course was to continue taking lessons in how to manipulate the gates and the quantum flux. Russ and I couldn't get around the simple fact that it would take time—a great deal of time—for them to reach our level.

At least they could make some progress between now and the deadline, so that whatever happened, we would be as prepared as possible. Our hope was to have a

few advanced Seconders besides Russ and me to supervise the newly emerged people when that became necessary.

With that decided, we trooped en masse back to the control room where the

sex gate waited for us in towering silence. Since Russ had to do most of the training, he'd decided the most efficient method was for everyone to go through together.

As it turned out, my next trip through wasn't quite so bad. I'll admit that my

knees might have knocked together once or twice as I stepped into the gate.

Maybe

I expected the entity I contacted to pounce on me and haul me off. The entity—

whatever it was—was there. I could feel it probing the edges of my consciousness,

as if taking my temperature. Helped by Russell, I hauled up my mental barriers and

told it to get lost. It pressed hard against my barrier for a moment, then faded away. I

dared to hope it had gotten my message, via Russ: I wanted to stay human ! The

metaphorical siren song ceased, leaving me floating at peace in the time less green

flux.

The others in our group didn't even sense the entity's touch. Russell rounded them up with a mental command, and we hung together in the green quantum flux like a litter of nursing puppies, exploring and learning. We did most of the learning

and he did the exploring.

By the time we staggered out of the gate after our session, we were

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exhausted. I was once again Li, and I was interested in finding a man. Russell

emerged as Rissa, but took another quick trip through so he could become Russell. I

assumed he belonged to Donna now, but she was temporarily Don. We decided to

go through the gate for another lesson later that day. As we stood around talking,

Don came up to me and touched my hand.

"I might as well stay a man if we're going back through later today," he told

me. "And Russell—well, he needs to be Russell full-time right now. I think I'm going

to go catch a nap. I'll see you later."

As he turned to go, he gave me a friendly leer. I knew exactly what he was

telling me—Russell was mine for the rest of the day if I wanted him. Already the

other members of the group were pairing off—it was only natural after a trip through

a gate. Sexual energy filled the control room. I noticed Terri and Randy standing in a

far corner, busy making eyes at each other. As Don headed out one door, Russell

tapped me on the shoulder.

"Want to get a bite to eat and relax?" he asked.

I nodded. We slipped away and found an unoccupied room where Russell summoned up a gourmet lunch. Afterward, I lay back on the bed, stuffed, and not sure I would ever move again, but thanks to the gate, I was young and healthy. All it took was the sight of Russell stripping off the blue jeans he wore to reactivate my interest in life. A new sexual partner when you're young and horny always props you up for a while. Rissa and I had made love quite often, but I was seldom together with Russ. He was usually too busy with his work when he was a man. Donna got him almost by default since she was around him, working side by side on his projects. Maybe that was why she was willing to give him up for me now. I smiled as I watched him fold up his jeans and lay them carefully on a chair. Even with the ability to vanish or create any object in the room, he remained careful and methodical about everything around him. Whatever he did, he always gave it his full attention. I shivered at the realization that he was about to turn that focus on my naked body. I'd already gotten rid of the robe I wore. My heartbeat quickened, as he

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approached the bed and lay down beside me. I forgot about his brilliant mind—his masculine body was far more interesting. I ran a hand over his broad shoulders and down his muscled arm. He smiled as he leaned over and pressed his lips to mine in a long and tender kiss. It was a hoot to see him concentrating on something besides science, and even more fun since I was the one he was devoting his attention to. It was as strange to think that a couple of days ago I'd entered his body. Now he was about to enter mine. I shivered with anticipation as his fingertips traced a line of fire from my neck down to my navel. Too horny for foreplay, I opened my thighs and invited him to explore. I had forgotten how dedicated he could be to when it came to exploration. The next thing I knew, his head was between my legs and his tongue was probing me. I arched my back as his hands forced my thighs further apart and his talented tongue did amazing things. "Oh, my!" I buried my fingers in his thick hair and delighted in the inner explosions created by his tongue. I should have known a scientist would go straight to

the heart
of the matter. My body buckled with passion as he took me to new heights
with his
caresses. He lifted his head and grinned at me as his finger continued to work
their
magic on my body.
"Oh, my god!" I came up off the bed as his skilled touch set off a
n avalanche
of sensation that ran from my toes clear up to my eyeballs.
"Have you suddenly gotten religion, Li?" Russell laughed out loud.
I didn't have any time to pout at his teasing, though, because a seco
nd later
he straddled my body and thrust into me. I wrapped my legs around his hi
ps and did
my best to keep him absorbed in the love making until it suddenly dawned
on me
that he was the one keeping me absorbed! Russell really was a good lover,
almost
as good as Rez.
By the time we got up to tackle the sex gate again, my whole body was li
mp
and relaxed and my mind hummed with sensual pleasure. As it turned out,
that was
a mistake. This close to the deadline for dealing with the stasis problem, I
should

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have been letting my pattern sense work overtime; instead my thoughts co
ncerned
Russell and how he'd felt on top of me while he was loving me to piec
es.
As much as I enjoyed bedding Russell, it wasn't practical to spend the rest
of
our lives cuddled together. Maybe there's an alternate Earth where life works
that
way. If so, I'd like to find it. When we finally abandoned our warm b
ed, the sense of
foreboding, which had been haunting me lately swept over me again. Why t
hen, I
don't know; perhaps my pattern sense began working overtime to make u
p for the
hours when my thoughts had focused on other matters.
Our trip into and out of the sex gate was quite rapid. Not only was Russ
ell a
great teacher, but also Seconders, as a group, possess the ability to absorb
information at a phenomenal rate. It didn't take long for Russ to demonstrate
the
method he proposed to separate people as they came out of stasis and channel
them to the various worlds set aside for them. Even as he taught us, I c
ontinued to
sense that entity in the background keeping watch. It didn't contact me mind
to mind
again, but I knew in my heart it continued to believe we were unprepared for
the task
we were about to undertake. To my dismay, my pattern sense confirmed, almost

as
a certainty, that the release would be fraught with peril; to them, to us, and
perhaps
even to Earth.

As soon as we were safely out of the gate, Rissa grabbed my arm, not ev
en
taking a moment to go back through and become Russell. I only had a seco
nd to
glimpse the stunned expression on her face before she pulled me away from the
others.

"What is it?" I asked.

She drew her brows together, a puzzled look in her eyes. Fear shot through
me. If our brightest mind couldn't handle this transition, we were lo
st.

"I discovered something new on this trip," she said in a dazed voice. "About
Earth. It contains the potential to become a Nexus world, like this one."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

I had plenty to think about over the next few days. I spent most of the
time
meeting with Russell and his group. Meanwhile, Amanda did as we'd asked and
used the gates to scout out alternative Earths where we could place the
refuges
from stasis once they were released. We also kept busy debating exactly how we
wanted to divide up the people.
First, we decided to put the 'too old' and 'too sick' group
on their own world.
We figured their problems would be different than the others. And they were
innocents, caught up in stasis only by an accident of fate. That decisio
n was a
simple one. What to do about criminals, those with mental problems—a whole
host
of defectives—was more challenging. Did we dump the criminals together or
divide
them up by crimes? And what about multiple offenders, some of whom were also
mentally ill?
After a long day of arguing about who to put where I needed a break. I r
etired
to my quarters in a section of one of the towers. I'd spent a lot of
time working on
learning to manipulate the quantum flux, and the result was a series of rooms
that
looked somewhat like the old homestead in Ruston. Lately, I'd regretted making
it so
much like home. It only made me more homesick than ever for Rita.
I kicked off the pair of soft sandals I wore inside, and poured myself a
drink
while I contemplated changing it into a luxury suite. I could materialize
rooms that
would cost a fortune to build on Earth. I could let my fantasies take over. I
pictured a
domed entranceway with double staircases sweeping upward and a waterfall in
the
middle. A knock interrupted my plans.

Mostly, people don't knock in the Nexus. We can sense the mood someone is in from outside, so we either walk through the wall or go away. That alone told me who was waiting outside. Donna tended to be a little old-fashioned. She was back in her female form now that Russell had finished his lessons. As soon as I opened the door I saw the glow on her face. "You look gorgeous," I said, as I ushered her over to a chair and offered her a drink.

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She looked around at the furnishings in appreciation. "You've recreated our old home."

I shrugged and headed for the bar. "We had some happy times there."

"Yes, we were a family together." Her smile got wider. "By the way, no alcohol in that drink, please."

I turned back to her with a big grin. "Do you have some good news for me?"

Pure joy glowed on her face. "Oh, Lee. I'm so happy. Russell and I are having a baby."

I swept her up in my arms and gave her an enthusiastic hug, then followed it with a long, tender kiss. When I stepped back, she laughed in delight. "Can you believe it? We've only been trying for a few days."

"It's not surprising," I said. "You've got an eighteen-year-old body with no imperfections. A hot glance is probably enough to knock you up."

She flushed, and I caught a mental glimpse of the nonstop marathon of lovemaking that had resulted in her pregnancy.

"We conceived last night." She looked at me with a sly grin, and giggled. She knew I'd picked up on her memories. "We're going to have twins; a boy and a girl."

Twins! That called for another hug. I squeezed her tight. If the touch of her soft flesh brought back a few memories of my own, it was only natural. We shared a second kiss, one that went on for quite a while before we broke apart. "Congratulations," I said at last. "You and Russell are a great team, and you'll make wonderful parents."

"So will you and Rita."

I swallowed hard on that one. So far Rita had spent most of her pregnancy alone. Of course, I could use the gates to arrive back with her in what was the past to me, but it felt like cheating somehow.

"Now that it's happened, I feel a little scared," Donna added.

"Join the crowd," I assured her.

We laughed together. I poured her a glass of orange juice, but added a shot of vodka to mine and we shared a toast to our new babies. Donna sipped her juice as she wandered around my rooms. I could tell from the teary-eyed look she got

that

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the sight of the old homestead brought back a lot of memories.
"I never had a chance to say goodbye to this, you know," she said, gesturing to the rooms. "We came down with radiation sickness so fast and then we rushed to the gate for a cure—and poof! Russell and I ended up here."
I thought of the years Rita and I had spent going through the gates, developing our powers as Seconders in the hope that we might be able to solve their mystery someday and find her and Russell again. And against the odds—or so it seemed—we'd succeeded. Or had the gate masters manipulated us from behind the scenes? If so, things had worked out fine in the end. Was I making a mistake by resisting their urgings now?
I shook my head. I'd come to my rooms to get away from those questions.
Donna walked back into the living room and collapsed into a seat. I noticed how her right hand settled over her stomach with a gentle rubbing motion.
"Do you feel okay so far?" I asked.
She laughed, a happy tinkling sound that told me exactly how she was feeling—or as near as I would ever get to knowing, since I had no intention of becoming pregnant. "Well, I'm committed, regardless of what happens. And I feel great."
"You look great, too."
I sat down beside her and patted her hand. I recognized her glow. Rita had the same look. To keep my mind off Rita, I started rubbing Donna's back. She moved her shoulders and leaned forward so I could reach more of her back.
"Um, that feels wonderful. Can I pay you to show up in my bedroom every night?"
"Tell you what, I'll teach Russell how to do this. That's only fair, after the teaching he's done for us lately."
Her hand reached out to caress my knee. "After this stasis problem is solved, I suppose you'll be going back to Earth and Rita, right?"
I nodded. I pulled her silky hair together and pushed it to one side so I could massage her shoulders. At the same moment, the garment she wore vanished. That made sense. It was the easy way to get it out of my way. I stared down at her naked

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back and the way her body curved into a slim waist, then flared out again for the curve of her hips.

"You two will be busy with your baby, and Russell and I will have our s..." her voice trailed away, but I got the impression she was hinting at something.

"With Russell's latest discoveries, it's going to be easier to travel between the two worlds," I assured her.

She turned to me, her eyes huge in her face. "Whatever happens with this release, our lives are going to change. It seems like change is the only constant with the gates. I missed saying goodbye to this place." She glanced around the rooms with a smile, then turned her attention back to me. Her eyes sparkled with desire. "I don't want to do the same with you."

I chose my words with care. "Russell said you two intended to be a pair—because of the baby-babies, I mean." I corrected myself, remembering that twins were coming.

Her expression softened. "That's true. Once the babies are here we're going to raise them together. But that doesn't mean we won't have room in our lives for the people we've always loved. I wanted to be sure Russell was the father, of course."

She looked at me and raised a slim eyebrow. "However, I don't have to worry about that any more—"

She leaned toward me, her lips slightly parted. I knew an invitation when I heard one. And truth to tell, next to Rita, Donna was my dearest love. I kissed her long and deep, and then took her hand and led her into my bedroom and on to a duplicate of the big extra-sized playground of a bed I kept in the master bedroom back home on earth. Donna and Rita and I had shared many a night on that bed. I let go of her hand and pulled down the covers.

When I turned back, Donna had materialized a cream-colored nightie with tiny buttons up the front. She knew, as well as Rita, how much I like to fumble around with the fastenings of women's nightclothes. I took pleasure in the anticipation, in feeling the soft swell of breasts under my palms and fingers as I slowly undid the little cloth-covered buttons. I approached her with a smile and commenced teasing both of us. I laid her down on the bed and toyed with the buttons. My fingers were

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purposefully clumsy and sometimes strayed to brush against her nipples, already erect under the thin fabric. She moaned and writhed under me as the tension mounted between us in a long, rising tide of desire. At last, I uncovered her breasts and caressed the silken skin with my hands and mouth, wetting her nipples and drawing little gasps of pleasure as I blew puffs of air on them after they became slickly erect.

Donna's fingers were busy, too. She loved being a woman and her every touch showed it. Unlike some men who have become women, she displayed no reluctance about holding and playing with me, knowing from experience how good her hands and especially her mouth felt on me.

"Oh, I love you, Donna," I gasped, running my fingers through her hair with

one hand and fondling a breast with my other hand while she was busy.

She didn't even come up for air, but simply returned the sentiment with a

mind touch filled with sweetness and love and anticipation of my impending orgasm.

The very image in her mind brought it on, and I went away to whatever place it is

that you disappear into in the throes of a climax.

Knowing that I had the support of both Donna and Russell helped me to get

through the next several days. They were friends and lovers. I knew I could count on

them. And I trusted Randy and Terri in the same way. As much as I continued to

miss Rita, I no longer felt so alone.

We continued to go through the sex gates as often as possible, although it was a terrible strain on everyone. There was always that possibility in the back of

our minds that one or more of us might simply vanish. It had happened to others

who had challenged the sex gates too often. We assumed they were held in stasis

with the others. When we released them, they would join the group we had designated the innocents. Meanwhile, the deadline for the release loomed closer,

creating an increasing tension among our group as we struggled to prepare for the

huge influx of people we anticipated.

Finally, tempers started to flare. I declared a holiday. I had to talk Russell into it.

He wanted to keep going right up to the last minute, but I insisted that everyone

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needed a rest. Donna and Randy and Terri backed me up, for which I was grateful.

Randy declared that a party was in order.

It shows the strain we were under by this time that despite our physical youth and health, the party ended up as a quiet discussion over drinks. But that was just

as well. It gave everyone a chance to step back and see where we were.

The night of the party, I happened to be female. Russell was male. I sat on

one side of him in a big double lounger while Donna managed to cuddle in on the

other side. The rest of the crowd, mostly couples, settled into various loungers that

were arranged in an arc so that we could see each other.

People talked to their neighbors and helped themselves to drinks at a bar in

the back of the room. Russ toyed idly (or maybe not so idly) with my breasts where

his arm was around me. I was resting my left hand on his thigh, tickling the hairy part

of his leg below the shorts he was wearing, and using my right hand to sip at a

strong rum and coke. I wore a soft old long-tailed man's shirt, which appeared to

have been washed so many times that it felt like the softest and thinnest linen ever

created. Russell's hand strayed upward to caress my breast through the cloth.

I gave him an indulgent grin.

"Naughty," I whispered. "Others are watching."

"If you don't want to be touched, go back through the gate and come out a

male," Russell said. "Otherwise, you're asking too much of any man."

I smiled at this compliment and patted my hair. When I'm a male I hardly care

about my appearance, but as a female I tend toward vanity. Maybe it's because I

never expected to be such a good-looking dame. What a difference one little chromosome can make.

Donna sat on Russell's other side. She leaned over him and winked at me.

"Trust a scientist to take the hands-on approach," she teased.

"On the contrary, I'm a theorist." Russell took his science seriously.

Donna patted her belly, and giggled. "Some theory we've got going here, big boy."

I leaned back in the lounger, pleased to hear their banter. People were relaxing at last after a tough couple of weeks. My gaze wandered over the crowd.

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Many were wearing clothes of their own creation, some of them quite outlandish, if not downright bizarre. Others chose to wear nothing. Nudity never went out of

style

among the group of human inhabiting the Nexus. I wondered what the masters thought of that if they were indeed spying on us.

As for us, no one cared if someone chose to go naked. The whole area around the crystal city was climate and temperature controlled. I enjoyed living in

such a free environment.

Back on Earth, freedom seemed to go in cycles as the liberals and conservatives fought their never-ending battles. Some places on Earth were as free

as the Nexus, and others remained locked in the grip of past belief systems. There

were religious gurus in my neck of the woods who were still squabbling over how

much skin was proper to display in church. Some even wanted women to wear hats

and dresses only—no pants. That always puzzled me since pants actually cover

more skin than a dress, but as usual religious logic is too deep for me.

Meanwhile, the Biblical experts kept busy arguing even more forcefully over nudity at beaches and swimming pools and so forth, using the same tired old

interpretation of 'holy' scriptures written thousands of years before and translated so

many times that the original meanings might have been the opposite of what was said today. I had to admit that there was less of it now than before the advent of the

sex gates; much less. Maybe one day...

Next to me, Russell sipped his drink and closed his eyes with a contented

sigh. I worried about how tired he looked. It was mostly for his sake that I had

demand we take a break. I sent out a tendril of mental energy, trying to find out

what was bothering him (other than the usual problems), but his mind was elsewhere. I sensed his brain churning away at top speed, as usual. When he opened his eyes again, he glanced around the room as if he were a general inspecting his army. In a sense, I guess he was. He poured himself a dollop of

amber liquid from a flask and drank half of it. If that was Jack Daniels he was

drinking, something really troubling was in the works.

My sense of relaxation vanished as quickly as it had come. Foreboding settled around my heart like a dark fog. I sent more mental energy toward Russ's

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mind, determined to know what troubled him. This time I got a response, although

not one I particularly wanted. He aimed a thin smile in my direction to acknowledge

my unspoken question before tilting his glass and finishing off what was left. His

mental shields lowered and I saw that he had recalibrated his calculations on the

stasis. Conditions were worsening. The people would need to be released even sooner than anticipated. We weren't quite ready.

His mind was so powerful that other people caught his thought. The joy in the room vanished as everyone sat up straighter. Everyone except Amanda—or I should say Andrew, since she was a male. As a man, he was a big hulking brunnette. I had to admit he was handsome. Yet I wasn't attracted to him, although as I usually found most men attractive. His self-centered absorption turned me off. I was surprised, though, to see Derrick sitting next to him. The two of us had become close friends after he volunteered to take my place and take that step beyond with the entity. Even though he wasn't yet advanced enough to do that, the courage of his offer had been genuine.

Today, Derrick was a female. He used the name Derrie when he was a woman. I wondered if she found Andrew attractive. I could tell from the expression on her face that she was off in her own little world. I didn't probe either one of them to see if anything was going on between them; a person is entitled to privacy. I didn't like it, though. I thought they made a rather improbable pair, and Derrie certainly deserved better.

Russell's voice broke into my thoughts. "Folks, I'm sorry, but it appears as if I have miscalculated. The people being held in stasis have to be let loose, and soon; otherwise we'll lose them. We can't wait another week or ten days as I thought."

"How long?" I had a very good reason for asking.

Russell folded his hands together and bowed his head. I knew he was making the calculations one last time. Finally, he spoke.

"The situation is very unstable. The uncertainty principle is coming into play here. My best guess is that the stasis field will boil over in about seventy-two hours. We have to be primed and ready when it does."

His words send a chill snaking down my spine. "What do you mean?"

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"I mean we have to be ready to act at any time. I wanted to give the situation more thought before making the final assignments, but it can't wait. We need to agree on how to classify the people in stasis, decide which alternate world will get which group, and finally, which of us will go to which world to help those coming out

of limbo."

Whew! No wonder he looked worried. He and I had talked privately about some of those questions, but we had reached only tentative decisions. We had

agreed on a loose framework for the project, though. We'd decided to limit the release to only seven worlds. More than that stretched the limits of our small group

of Seconders too far. We'd divided the worlds up into the innocents, those accused

or convicted to minor crimes, major criminals, psychopaths, those with minor mental

and emotional illnesses, those with religious obsessions, and sexual deviants. We'd

also determined that couples from our group of advanced Seconders would go to those worlds at the release time, or shortly before.

"Are you asking for volunteers?" Andrew asked.

"I thought you didn't approve of releasing these people. Are you volunteering for a particular group?"

Andrew took a deep breath, a serious look on his face. Outwardly, he radiated concern, but I sensed that he wasn't as sincere as he looked. I was about to probe

deeper when Derrie distracted me from his surface thoughts by speaking up.

"Amanda—Andrew, I mean—and I will take the innocents if that's okay with everyone else."

I was puzzled. "Why the innocents?"

"If any of these misfits in stasis deserve to survive this release, it's them. Yet I

suspect they face the worse odds of all."

Russell nodded agreement. "You may be right. The criminals, and the others,

were physically healthy. But this group—too old—too sick—I've always had my

doubts they'll survive the transition."

"We have to try," I protested.

"Perhaps if you'd accepted the invitation of the entity and changed some more, you'd be able to handle it." The look Andrew gave me brimmed with sheer

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disgust. "Since you didn't, whatever happens to these poor people will be your responsibility."

"Hold on!" Donna pointed a finger at Andrew. "Lee didn't ask these people to

go through a gate and end up in stasis, and he didn't ask for the responsibility of dealing with this either."

"Peace!" I held up both hands. "Let's drop the accusations and concentrate on helping these people." I glared at Andrew. "If you think a superhuman can help them,

be my guest."

"I'm not afraid. There isn't enough time for me to make that many trips through the gates, though."

"Too bad for you," I said, in a tone that let him know the discussion was over.

Russell cleared his throat and resumed speaking. "We will be grouping those who were too old to make it through when they entered the sex gates with those who were too sick physically. And those who simply went through once too often. We expect their problems will be similar." I pitied the 'innocents' if Andrew was going to help them. On the other hand, I expected them to be easier to handle than the criminals. Our main concern was their physical condition. The group would also include otherwise normal people who went through the gate once too often. Gangs on Earth used to amuse themselves by tossing victims through a gate, for instance. It was a good way to get rid of the evidence. I'd expected Andrew to go for the minor criminals—they seemed more his type—to each his or her own. Maybe Derrie was influencing him. Or maybe—I stiffened as a sense of foreboding washed over me like a great wave. I couldn't pin it down, not certainly. Russell's hand on my breast tightened in an unconsciously protective gesture as he caught the wisps of my thought. He still retained a good bit of the Southern male over-protectiveness he was brought up with. So did I, for that matter. Russell's touch distracted me for a second and then Randy spoke up, volunteering for one of the criminal worlds. I thought Randy and Terri were good choices for the world of minor criminals. As lawyers, they had the mental toughness

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necessary. On the negative side, they had spent their long lives before entering the gates as an extremely wealthy couple, and their experience was with corporate law, not criminal. I didn't want to see them in over their heads. Minor criminals seemed about right for them.

Donna was out, of course, being pregnant. Russell and I could have partnered up, but we agreed Russell needed to stay loose and monitor the overall situation. That left me without an immediate partner, but that was how I wanted it. I had already told Russ where I intended to go. Now I told the rest of the m.

"We'll have one world for psychopathic criminals—they're the worst of a bad lot. I'll take charge of that world. And I don't want a partner." I noticed that quite a few of the scientists looked relieved. They were generally a mild mannered lot. On the other hand, I was the most advanced Second, other than Russ. It made sense for me to take on the risk of dealing with

the most dangerous of our proposed worlds.

Andrew shot me a quick look. Some emotion flickered across his face. I tried to nail down his thought, but it slipped away.

"I suppose you'll be a male for the big event. Looking forward to going man-to-man with the psychos? Or is it that you want those women without any morals for yourself."

I stared at him in astonishment. Did he imagine for a moment that I wanted the psychos?

"Let's face it, none of these assignments is going to be any pleasure trip," Russell said, in his best no-nonsense voice. "Even with the help of the computers on

some of the Nexus worlds, it's going to be tricky and you'll have to do a lot of

thinking on your feet. Remember, you can always come back for help if you need it."

"How about the religious nuts? What world do they go on?"

I sighed. "You shouldn't call them nuts. Please."

Unfortunately, we were expecting a large group of those people. The gates were originally programmed by the masters, who had a logical society—or so we assumed since their whole culture was built around the scientific method

Accordingly, the gates had apparently interpreted any excessive zeal for religion as

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a mental illness, and whisked the zealot off to stasis.

Donna smiled her sweet smile. "Try to think of them as very sincere and well-

intentioned people, even if some of them are mistaken."

Mistaken. I stifled a laugh. That was a mild word for jokers who advocated

state religions, a society that banned abortion even to save the life of a mother, not

to mention other Luddite ideas like banning cloning of any sort, and going back to

'natural' farming. With ideas straight out of the dark ages like those, they would

quickly starve half the world, but they never seemed to worry about predictable

disaster so long as their religious dogma was followed.

I had other thoughts, too, but kept them to myself. Donna meant well. She wanted to encourage tolerance, and I didn't want to undercut her. Besides, there

was no sense getting into philosophical arguments when we were going to become

very busy, very soon. Instead, I pasted a sweet smile on my face, too, and nodded

as if I agreed with Donna one hundred percent.

Donna beamed me a mental thank you—she knew how I really thought. We'd

been friends for too long for her not to know. Across from me, Andrew frowned and

folded his arms across his chest. He threw me a disgusted look and I cau

ght his
exasperation, as if he had primed himself for a good argument, but was left
without
an opponent when I refused to get involved. I grinned, feeling even bet
ter about
staying quiet. Sometimes silence is the best medicine for know-it-alls.
"We'll go to the religious world."
Todd Henderson raised his hand. He and his wife, Sophie, were the only
married couple in our group. They were both Protestants, though not
proselytizers,
and very nice people. Both were dark haired and brown-skinned. They look
ed like
that mixture of many ancestors which you see often in Hawaii and Polynesian
states.
I hadn't had a lot to do with them, but in the few encounters we had shared I
found
their minds and personalities to be more or less reflective of middle-class
America.
As I stared into Todd's dark eyes, I had a fleeting sense that he would
encounter
difficulties. By now my sense of foreboding was so pervasive that I simply
laughed it
off. We all were going to encounter difficulties. How could Todd and Sop
hie have an
easy time working with people from dozens of different fanatical religions?

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We assigned some of the other worlds and came at last to the final choice—
the world where Russell and I had decided to put the sexual deviants. Th
ere was
some overlap between these in other criminals, but we had decided to focus on
those people who used sex for power over their victims and nothing else. These
were the pedophiles, sadists and masochists, and those others with their
sexual
identity so fouled up that they never let their neighbors know what they were
up to.
This group included many elite members of society, as well as the dregs, and
various classes in between. Most of them were not physically violent; they
were just
sadly sick so far as normal sex went.
Rita and I had discussed this class of people in other, better times whe
n we
were sitting around our house relaxing. As a psychologist, she liked to
theorize
about how criminals and others might eventually emerge if the gates ever
released
them. Ever the optimist, Rita believed that a change of sex might cure most of
them.
I thought not. For one thing, if a simple sex change would have been eno
ugh to jolt
them out of their pathology, the gates would have let them go right though. We
had
no way to know anything about an individual's previous life before they
entered
stasis. All we could do was note the problems that had caused them to fail to

make it through a gate the first time. But when it came to sexual offenders, I believed their behavior patterns were pretty well fixed. I doubted a gender change would help much.

Jenny Roberts and Harry Jones volunteered for this last group. They seemed like a logical choice, as well. Jenny was a psychiatrist and Harry had a PhD in psychology. Personally, I don't have much use for either field—as you can imagine, that attitude of mine had provoked a lot of arguments with Rita. I knew Rita wanted to help people, and had a heart of gold. I was even willing to grant that most psychologists and psychiatrists had similar hearts of gold. But that didn't change the fact that their so-called science was bunk. A lot of things bothered me about their profession. For one thing, they changed their theories about as often as women change clothing styles, and they never admitted how wrong they were before—or what damage their oddball treatments might have done either through commission or omission. In my time, I've

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seen everything from Primal Scream therapy, to Rebirth treatments, to Touch Therapy. Touch therapy was an especial favorite of mine. Thousands of doctors and practitioners swore it worked until an eight-year-old girl proved it wrong in a science project.

I could go on and on, but personally, if I ever think I need counseling, I'll talk to a computer; it's more likely to help than some of the weird stuff dreamed up by that science—if you want to call it a science. It's about as accurate as economic theory to my mind, which ought to tell you something. Once again I kept my opinions to myself. Jenny and Harry were welcome to their challenge. I had my own

Russell squeezed my hand, and I smiled. The worlds were chosen and the groups selected. We had done what we could to prepare. I set down my drink and rose to my feet.

"Going somewhere?" Andrew asked.

He flashed me a friendly smile, but I wasn't fooled. I considered taking a deeper look into his mind, but I was in a hurry.

"We have at least seventy-two hours," I said. "Since there's nothing more I can do here, I'm going to take a quick trip back to Earth and visit Rita while I have a chance."

"Oh, Li!" Donna jumped up, and hugged me. "Give her a big kiss for me."

"I will."

Suddenly I wanted to be out of the Nexus and its problems. I waved goodbye to the group and headed through the tower to the control room where the sex gate

waited. I disposed of my clothes along the way, though why I did that, I have no

idea. They wouldn't have come with me anyway.

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CHAPTER NINE

I knew leaving the Nexus at this critical juncture wasn't a good idea, but a desperate need to see Rita gripped my soul. I hurried to the control room, my mind

occupied with thoughts of her, of her gentle heart and her unswerving love. I can't

deny that I thought about her body, too—she had a regal Spanish beauty with her

dark eyes, dark hair, and her coffee-and-cream complexion. But I craved her mind

and her love as much as if not more than her body. We had grown so close over the

last few years. I trusted her as I trusted no one else. I hoped that seeing her would

help me straighten out my thoughts, and put a face on that sense of impending doom—no, not doom, but a dark presence looming in the foreground, some warning that eluded me. Rita had a way of calming me down and keeping me grounded.

Maybe, I thought the two of us could figure out what was going to happen if events

unfolded as planned.

The journey through the gate only took an instant of time. I emerged on Earth,

inside a barn, of all things. Back when the gates first appeared, this particular gate

materialized on Messler's country retreat in the Ozark Mountains. With his usual

quick thinking, he'd thrown up a barn around it, thus concealing it from the rest of the

world and preserving it as his own private gate.

After Messler's disappearance through the gate (before I found him again in the Nexus) I had inherited control of his property, including that same country

retreat. The persecution of Seconders by the public at large was rapidly increasing

at the time. Seeking safety, I had gathered a group of us together on the estate. Our

secret purpose was to develop our mental powers and learn to control the gates.

The Church of the Gates found out about us, and fearing their own loss of control,

decided to attack us.

With the Gaters closing in on us I was forced to bargain with Stephen Hess, a

government agent, for help. Desperate, I told him we Seconders could stop the disappearance of the gates. At the time, gates were randomly disappearing in

various countries. I had no idea why, or how to stop it. I was bluffing. In the midst of the attack I journeyed to the Nexus for the first time. There I

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found Messler, and learned that he was behind the disappearing gates. Now able to control the appearance or disappearance of the gates in truth, I returned to Earth and forced Hess to agree to my demands for the protection of the Seconders. In return, I agreed to leave the gates on Earth. I'd left for the Nexus confident the situation was under control.

The interior of the barn was dim and quiet, lit only by the green glow of the gate. I spotted a coat rack standing against one wall, with a set of my clothes hanging there, ready for my return. I recognized thoughtfulness at work. I dressed quickly, humming to myself. Putting on clothes qualified as a wasted effort when I'd only want to take them off again the moment I found Rita. It seemed as if ages had passed since we had been together. In reality, I had been in the Nexus for quite a few weeks. If I had judged the passage right on my return, our separation wouldn't be nearly that long for her. I had tried my best to manipulate the flux so I would emerge from the gate soon after I had left. I couldn't bear to think of Rita facing her pregnancy without me at her side as much as possible.

I patted my clothes into place and opened the door to an underground tunnel between the barn and the main house. A security guard stood on the other side. Hearing me, he whirled around, startled, and started to draw his weapon.

"Hold it! I'm Lee Stuart."

He scrutinized me, with his hand hovering inside his jacket. "I'll never get used to you people going back and forth through these damn things like a revolving door."

"Take it easy with that gun; you could hurt someone," I told him. I didn't

recognize the man, but assumed from his uniform that he was a member of the military assigned by Hess to guard the gate.

"Are you the Lee Stuart, the leader of this group of Seconders?" He narrowed his eyes at me.

"That's me, back from the Nexus." The thought of seeing Rita again was making me cheerful.

"Mr. Hess will want to see you at once."

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"I'm sure he does, but I have someone more important that I want to see first."

I moved to step around him.

"Hold it!" In one quick motion, the guard drew his gun.

I didn't need my pattern sense to tell me something was wrong. I stopped,

and stared the guard straight in the eye. "You don't want to detain me, soldier," I

said, making it a command.

At the same time, I reached out and touched his chest. That one touch was all

I needed. Normally, he would never have let me near him, but he knew I'd come

through a gate and was unarmed. He made the mistake of thinking I wasn't dangerous. As I touched him, he toppled over. I'd sent pure energy through that

touch, overloading his body's system. He'd be unconscious for a while.

Leaving him behind me on the floor, I hurried on down the connecting passage toward the main building. This whole estate was originally one of Messler's

many 'safe houses', places he kept as secret retreats. He owned them through so

many dummies that they could never be traced back to him. That might sound

paranoid, but the truth was, over a hundred years of living had left him with a lot of

people who really were out to get him, even before he started that Church of the

Gates business.

Well, the secret was out. Both the government and the Gaters knew that I had brought a group of Seconders here. I'd wanted to create a research center where

Seconders would gather to explore our new powers. But once you drag the government into something, it's almost impossible to get it out again. I'd brought

them in to protect us—from the reaction of the guard a moment ago, I knew that somehow the tables had turned.

I opened the tunnel door on the other end of the passage and stepped out into a hallway inside the house. A few steps took me into the central gathering room

on the main floor. It was a beautiful room, with 30-foot high ceilings, a balcony

running around the second level, and a huge stone fireplace on the far wall. Comfortable couches and chairs were grouped in front of the fireplace.

I stopped in the wide, arched doorway and looked around. The room was quiet. No one seemed to be about. Then I corrected my first impression.

A slim foot

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dangled over the edge of one couch, although the rest of the body was hidden by

the tall back. Relief surged through me as I reached out and touched a man and that I

knew as well as my own.

I half expected the body on the couch to leap up with a shout at my mind touch, but surprisingly, nothing happened. Puzzled, I edged closer and peered over

the top of the couch. Rita lay there, curled up, her eyes closed, doing nothing much

but breathing. I reached out and touched her shoulder, and suddenly she sat up.

"Lee! Oh, my god, I thought I was dreaming you were here—but it's really you!"

Rita's face lit up like runaway Christmas tree lights. She sprang to her feet as

I came around the couch and swept her into my waiting arms. I pressed her close,

savoring the warmth of her body, the sweet, clean scent of her hair, the satiny touch

of her skin. She threw her arms around my neck and we kissed, our hungry mouths

exploring, devouring each other as if our frenzied kisses could make up for the

weeks apart.

I don't know how long we simply clung to each other, kissing and hugging

while our minds murmured almost incoherent words of love to each other.

Finally,

she broke away, gasping slightly.

"Lee, I can't breathe!" She smiled at me. "Not that I care. But I want to take a

look at you."

Even as she spoke, her eyes drank me in. I devoured her with my gaze, too,

feeling as if I could never get enough of looking at her lovely face. My heart swelled

with joy at the love I saw shining in her eyes, a love that matched my own. Every

time I saw her after being separated from her for even a short time, I fell deeper in

love, exactly as I'd fallen in love the first moment I saw her.

Rita took one of my hands in both of hers, kissed it, and used it to tug me

back to the couch. She drew me down beside her. I kissed her hungrily, running my

fingers through her raven locks. She curled against me with a small, contented sigh

and I wondered, as I always did, what this beautiful, loving woman saw in me. I knew

that I was incredibly lucky to have her for my life's companion.

Quite a long stretch of time passed as we cuddled and caressed each other's

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bodies, and murmured the kind of endearments lovers murmur to each other when

they have been apart, whether for an hour or a year. Once I finally got used to being in her presence again, I frowned. I looked around at the empty room. "Where is everyone? And what were you doing sitting here by yourself?" "Everyone else is attending a meeting with Hess." I'd forgotten the guard in the joy of seeing Rita. He'd wanted to take me to Hess. "How is my favorite government agent?" I asked. "Is he behaving himself?" Rita frowned. "I'm afraid not, Lee. We should have known that the government can't be trusted." My heart sank. As if I didn't have enough problems back in the Nexus. I shook my head and took Rita's hand. "What's going on?" "The usual. The government sees our abilities as a threat so they fear us, but at the same time they want to control us in the hope we can show them how to control the gates. Hess has cut us off from the world while he hammers us for our secrets." My stomach twisted remembering how the government used drugs on us before to try and learn the truth. "They haven't—" Rita patted my knee. "So far they are trying to brainwash us into cooperating with endless meetings. I didn't feel too well this morning—just a bit of morning sickness, nothing to worry about—" she said quickly seeing the worry on my face. "Anyway, I decided to skip this meeting. They're pretty much the same anyway. We argue with Hess about how much to let the public know about the true nature of Seconders. None of it makes much sense to me, anyway. I hate secrecy." At that particular moment, I didn't care about the government or Seconders either, other than Rita. All my concerns about the government faded into insignificance with her words about sickness. I started to babble. "Morning sickness? Is it bad? Are you having problems? When did you see a doctor last? What—" Rita put a hand over my mouth. "Lee, relax. A little morning sickness is

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normal for this stage of a pregnancy. And a woman is certainly allowed a bout of the doldrums now and then whether she's pregnant or not." "You said 'this stage.' Damn, it's early yet. Why are you getting sick so soon?" Rita cuddled closer and gave me a strange look. "How long do you think you've been gone?" "I've been in the Nexus for several weeks, but I shouldn't have been gone more than a few hours on this world if I calculated right." One of her gorgeous smiles lit up her face. "Sorry, you didn't, but then you never have been very good at math, super genius or not. Lee, sweetheart, it's been

four weeks since you left and it feels like four months—or four years. I don't think I

can stand another seven or eight months of being separated."

I was speechless. Math wasn't really the problem, it was direction. Or so Russ

had tried to explain when we had discussed the quantum aspects of travel back

through time via a sex gate, a phenomena achievable only to and from the Nexus,

and not easily even then—as I had just proved. Damn, there went my good

intentions.

"Forgive me!" I shook my head. "I didn't want to make you spend four weeks alone. I miscalculated somehow."

"It's all right. I'm a big girl." Rita touched my cheek with tender fingertips.

"You're still learning to control the gates—that you were able to return is a miracle to me."

Her fingers left my cheek to caress my arm, then went lower still, making me gasp with delight.

"Um, keep doing that," I murmured.

It was a pleasant promise of things to come. Her hand stroked me through the

fabric. Her eyes took on the old, provocative gleam I knew so well.

Two could play at this game. I cupped her breasts and felt a surge of pleasure at her tremulous intake of breath. Moving my thumbs gently across the tips, I teased

her nipples into taut little nubs. Then I smiled at her.

"I'd take you up to our rooms for some long overdue togetherness, but I

thought you said you were having morning sickness."

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Rita's lips curled in an impish grin. "I was, but you've cured me. Let's go, big boy."

For the first time in our love life, Rita exhausted herself first. Most times she

could reduce me to a mass of quivering jelly while still going strong. Maybe being

pregnant slowed her down, or perhaps she caught the sense of foreboding that filled

my being, although I tried to conceal it from her.

Not that I'm complaining about our lovemaking. We were two healthy, young adults and we came together with the passion of our long absence. Rita always liked

to be on top, and that was truer than ever since she had had an opportunity to experience sex as a man. I think that experience gave her an appreciation of how

ravishing the female form can look when seen from a certain angle.

She enjoyed touching my thoughts as she rode me, sharing my joy in watching her, head thrown back and moving from side to side, wavy locks of hair

swirling around her neck and shoulders and brown breasts bobbing as she

moved to
the tune of our merged minds. She came near to exhausting me as she tried to drive
the edges of darkness and worry from my mind. She damn near succeeded, but not quite.

Later, we stretched out side by side, facing each other. She was bursting to know what I had been doing. Her mind teemed with questions about what the Nexus
was like, and her compassionate heart wanted to know what decisions we'd reached
about the people in stasis. I began to describe how we were going to separate the
people there out by types onto different worlds.

"We're shorthanded, so we've limited the number of worlds to seven. Most worlds will have two people overseeing the release, but I've decided to work without

a partner. I'll be going to the psychopath world by myself and—"

"You're going to what? Say that again, Lee!" I said it again. She sat up, and poked a finger in my chest. "Like hell you are going by yourself! You need more than

one Seconder to keep those people in line."

"Now, now—" I should have known trying to calm Rita down when she feels

strongly about something is a waste of breath. She rolled right over my words.

"Besides, you idiot, you don't know how to handle those kinds of people.

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They're dangerous and unpredictable and you can't even carry a gun through the
gates to protect yourself."

As soon as she realized what she'd said, she covered her mouth with her hands. Rita hates guns, notwithstanding the fact that I've saved her life a couple of

times by carrying one. Maybe my trips through the gates really had upped my

intelligence, because I was smart enough not to gloat over her reluctant admission

that a firearm is necessary sometimes.

"I admit I have no idea of how to handle them," I said, reaching up to draw her

hands down from her face. "But when did you learn how to turn a psychopathic killer

into a reputable citizen? The truth is, no one knows how to deal with those people. A

normal person simply can't comprehend their cold-blooded lack of emotion. But

someone has to try. Otherwise, we'll be forced to leave them in stasis to die."

She snatched her hands out of my grip and pressed them to her ears. "You're not going by yourself. I'm not listening to any arguments. I'm going with you."

I stared at her in shock. "You can't."

"Who's more likely to know how to deal with them, you or me? At least I'm trained in psychology. And another thing, most psychopaths are men so when

they
come out of stasis, you'll have a planet full of women. Want to face
that alone?"
I tried to make a joke out of it. "Ah, ha! You're trying to keep me from
temptation, aren't you?"
My teasing bounced right off her. She jutted out her chin, looking stubborn.
"I
don't want you alone. Not on that world."
"But Rita, you know you can't go, even if you wanted to. The baby—
"
"Oh!"
She stopped, a stunned look on her face. Swept up by her fierce need to
protect me, she'd forgotten about the baby. We Seconders might have vastly
increased intelligence, but we too can forget the obvious on occasion. She
swallowed hard, and searched my face with a desperate look. Real fear shone in
her
eyes as she faced me—fear for me.
"Lee, you can't go there alone. Can't you or Russell figure out some way to
let
me go with you, without..."

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Her voice trailed off. We sat in silence, knowing the terrible result if she
tried
to come back to the Nexus with me: a fetus—no matter how far along it
was—would
not survive a trip through a sex gate. A man had no place in his body fo
r a fetus. The
child simply disappeared. It was an unalterable fact, and she knew it. B
ut Rita's
middle name was stubborn, and I knew she wouldn't give up until she f
ound a way to
protect me. Her chin went up another notch, as she stared at me. Her min
d raged
against the terrible fact, telling me to do something, anything.
"The gates are the problem," I said.
I was babbling again, trying to keep her from seeing into my mind and
knowing there was one thing I could do—or try to do—but I sure did
n't want to, and I
didn't think Rita would want to, either. Rita was far too skilled at tracking
my thoughts
to miss my idea no matter how much I tried to distract her. Her eyes
brightened as
she picked up my thought that there was one possibility.
"How do you know I wouldn't want to?" she said, giving me a piercing look. "I
want to know what this plan is."
"No you don't. It would put our son in danger. We'd have to tak
e him with
us—which would change him into our daughter. And later when we returned to
Earth
we would have to take him through a gate again. Do you really want to ri
sk that?"
I knew she wouldn't do anything that would risk the baby's life.
Suddenly I realized I had said 'son'. The idea had come from her m
ind. I

stared at her in astonishment.

"Rita! Is it going to be a boy?"

"Yes, of course, it's a boy."

Speechless with delight, I grabbed her and kissed her. When I released her,

she giggled.

"Oh—I forgot I hadn't told you yet. Yes, we're having a son.

But what

difference does it make? If I were going to have a litter of boys—or girls, for that

matter—it wouldn't change a thing. If you insist on going to that

damned psycho

world, then I insist that you find a way to take us with you." Sometimes women demand magic, pregnant or not, and this was one of those times. Her lip

quivered a

little, but her unyielding stare didn't waiver. "Come on. I saw a hint in your mind.

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You've got some sort of idea. Spill it."

"It's like this: I'll go back to the Nexus and make another time travel attempt,

but this time I'll go forward into the future. I'll arrive back here after our son is born.

Babies can go through the gate and come out okay on the other side. Then the three

of us can go back to the Nexus in present time. The baby can stay in the Nexus with

Donna while we go on to the psycho world."

I thought for sure she would change her mind when she heard about taking the baby through the gate. That was a risk. Who knows what powerful effect the gate

transition would have on a newborn mind? But I should have known better.

By

revealing that my mastery of the gates included the ability to time travel I'd opened

up a whole new world of possibilities. Once she's set on a course, Rita sticks to it.

She started asking questions.

"Are you sure you could arrive in the future without danger to yourself."

"I made it here, didn't I? This is the past for me. Travel is no harder in one

direction than another."

A cute little frown appeared on her face as she pondered the permutation s. "If

you travel into the future, doesn't that mean from my perspective, I'll be left alone

here to finish the rest of my pregnancy by myself?"

"I suppose so." My mind started to get dizzy, as I pictured myself traveling back and forth through time, meeting myself coming and going.

"The big question, though, is whether or not we should risk taking our son

through a gate at a very young age." Her frown deepened.

I shrugged. "There's not much data on that sort of thing. Most babies who are pushed through a gate have congenital defects and the parents want them cured

so
badly they don't mind the change of gender. But none of them have reached adulthood yet, so we don't really know the ultimate effect on them. And none of them
were the children of Seconders. Our child will be unique in many ways."
Rita's hand fell protectively to her stomach. "What happens when we want to leave the Nexus again? The baby would have to go through a gate to return to Earth.
You know as well as I do what the odds of anyone making it through on a second
passage are millions to one against."

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I sighed. "It's a big risk; maybe too big."
She rubbed her stomach, a faraway look in her eyes as if she were consulting
the baby growing within her. "Yet our child will inherit our genes. Isn't it likely he'll
inherit the telepathic ability that made it possible for us to become Seconders?
Remember, we are one of the few couples to survive a passage through the gates together."
"Sweetheart, there's simply no way of knowing. There isn't enough data. Suppose that our telepathic ability is hereditary if you inherit a dominant gene, but
suppose we both carry a recessive allele and he got them both. Then what? No, the
risk is too great."
I raked my fingers through my hair in frustration. This whole conversation was
bizarre. Normally, I argued in favor of some risk and Rita opposed it—and especially
where our baby was concerned. Yet, this time, she was blithely considering the
unthinkable. Had she missed me that much? Or did she sense that some terrible
doom might await me on that psycho world?
She tilted her head to one side, and smiled. "You're forgetting something,
Lee. Suppose he didn't make it? Wouldn't he go into stasis like the others? And
aren't you going to free those people?"
"Well...yes, but it's not that simple. We're—I mean, I'm going to the psycho world. Our son wouldn't come out with those people."
"True." Rita sighed, unable to see a way around this argument. "
The risks for
the baby would be huge for a second trip through the gates, at least until we know if
he's inherited our telepathic ability." She brightened. "But one trip should be okay.
What does it matter if we have a son or a daughter? Or if she grows up in the Nexus?"
I'd been looking forward to some father-son bonding, but Rita had a point.
The baby might change its sex in the future, and so would we for that matter.

tter. Hell, I
could become a female, and we could enjoy mother-daughter bonding. That
brought
a smile. I could never claim to be the baby's mother, although even a
s a female I'd
still be its father. And I thought the sex gates made life complicated before!
"Okay." Her eyes flashed, as she reached a decision. "I think y
ou're going to

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need me on the psycho world. Promise me you'll make that trip into th
e future, and
take the two of us to the Nexus."
"Fine. No problem, if that's what you want."
I made soothing noises and slipped an arm around her shoulder to draw he
r
close. It was easy enough to agree with her request. I was confident that the
alternate Nexus world chosen for the psychos would keep them segregated and
out
of trouble, and the baby would be safe on our Nexus, in Donna's care.
My only
worry, really, was how to manage the time travel trick. I counted on Rus
sell's help
there. I hoped that together we could pull it off—and what a mind-blowing
adventure
that would be!
Rita cuddled up against me, and stroked my hair. "If things start to
go on
wrong with your psychos, I want to be at your side. I'm sure someone will
watch over
Justin while I'm gone."
"Justin?"
Her smile turned shy. "That's the name I picked for the baby. Alth
ough I
guess we are going to need a girl's name too."
"Justina," I said automatically.
She fluttered her long eyelashes at me. "Oh, pretty! I never even tho
ught
about that. Is Justin and Justina all right with you?"
I squeezed her tight. "Of course it is. Hey, we could call him or her
Justin Lee
or Justina Li."
We laughed together at that. The laughter felt good after our tense discussion
about the baby. As we grew quiet again, I heard the low murmur of voices out
in the
hall. Rita heard them, too. I saw her body stiffen.
"Hess must have found out you're back," she whispered.
The alarm in her voice surprised me. Maybe my weeks in the Nexus learnin
g
new mental powers had made me overconfident, but I wasn't really worried about
any tricks that Hess might pull. I grinned to show my nonchalance.
"I passed a guard on my way up to the house. He tried to stop me, so
I put
him to sleep for a while. He probably woke up and spread the word."
Rita bit her lip and tilted her head to one side as she listened with her

ears

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and her expanded mental powers. "Those are security people gathering outside. They're waiting for Hess before making a move."

I stared at her blankly. "Move? What move?"

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CHAPTER TEN

"I told you weeks ago that Hess wasn't trustworthy."

Rita made it a simple statement, without condemnation. She wasn't trying to assign blame; she was discussing the facts. I reached out with my mind toward the men in the hall. They'd fallen quiet, but I knew they were there, waiting for their boss to appear and give them direction. They were after me. I took Rita's hand and tried to think of a way to get past them and reach the sex gate in the barn. But, no, I couldn't do that—Rita couldn't go through the gate.

"You can escape, and come back for me later," Rita whispered. "You're needed in the Nexus. Hess hasn't changed—he wants to lock the Seconders up, and study our mental powers. He's restricted our freedom already. With you back, he probably plans to turn the place into a big prison."

"Why didn't you tell me this was getting serious?"

But thinking back, I realized she had. I ignored it in my joy at seeing her again. She touched my cheek with gentle fingers.

"I know you can't stay here and fight our battles, Lee. You have to go back. He's not trying to harm us. I'll be okay until you can come and get me in the future. Right now, you have to get out of here."

"I'm not leaving you like this," I muttered. "Hess made me a promise. Hell, the government made me a promise. They're going to pay."

I kicked off the covers, realizing I'd been a fool to trust any government agent. Back when the Seconders came under attack by the Church of the Gates, I'd convinced Hess I could make the gates disappear if I wished. In return for leaving them on Earth, I'd extracted his promise of government protection for the Seconders. I'd bluffed him once. I'd do it again. Only this time I'd find a way to keep him honest after I left.

Rita jerked her thumb at the door. Sliding out of the bed, she tiptoed over, and locked it. She pointed to where our clothes lay in a heap on the floor and we got dressed. A calm determination filled me. Hess was not going to win this one. Beckoning me with her finger, Rita drew me over to the wall away from the

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door, and whispered, "After you left, things were okay for a while. He even let Randy and Terri leave to go to the Nexus, too."

I nodded. That's why I'd had no sense of alarm about the situation on Earth. "I think he got pressured by higher-ups. They knew with you gone, we couldn't make the gates vanish, and it might be their one chance to study us."

"Goddamit!" I don't usually swear. But with the deadline on the Nexus looming over me, I didn't need trouble on both worlds.

"A bunch of government bigwigs came here to meet us about a week ago, and after that Hess got antsy," Rita murmured. "I knew he was plotting something.

As much as I hated to violate anyone's mental privacy I was set to take a look in his devious little mind—only I waited too long to do it."

"What do you mean?"

My hand patted my pockets. Out of sheer habit, I was looking for the small pistol I usually carry. I came up empty, and my heart sank. When I'd said goodbye to Earth the last time, I'd left my gun with Rita—and Rita didn't believe in weapons.

"He agreed to tell the world about Seconders—that we were harmless," I snapped, remembering the promises he'd made after I'd scared the hell out of him by making a gate disappear and reappear.

Hess was merely a puppet of the politicians, of course, and they were terrified enough to agree to anything once they were convinced I could make the gates vanish at will. They needed those gates on Earth in case they became ill—and for certain when they became old. Rita stroked my shoulder and made a soothing sound.

"At first he did try to get more information about Seconders and what we were like. I actually thought he was planning to release information about us to the public at large—and put us in a good light after the scary rumors people have heard for the past year or so."

The Church of the Gates was responsible for most of those rumors. They'd run a coordinated campaign to convince the public that Seconders were dangerous telepaths out to read people's minds. As a result, we'd been stripped of our

rights in many states, Texas among them, although the Supreme Court had struck down

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those laws. But more persecution was certain unless we could reverse the tide of public opinion. Hess had promised that the U.S. government would protect us. "I was naïve, too," Rita murmured. "I thought they were scared enough to keep their promises. But fear only makes a cornered animal fight harder to protect its territory. Instead of releasing positive information about us, Hess took whatever we told him and passed it up to his superiors. Oh, they're protecting us, but only because they want to keep us locked up, and our powers under their control." She shivered. I pulled her close, while tears stung my eyes. I'd thought I'd left her safe. Instead, I'd gone blithely off to the Nexus and left her to face the manipulations of a government gone mad with the hunger for power. As I bent over to kiss her forehead, the nightstand next to the bed caught my eye. Of course! I'd forgotten in the weeks away, but I kept a gun there. I stepped over to the drawer and pulled it open, my fingers groping inside for the sensitive spot that made the bottom slide back into the desk. I found the concealed switch and the mechanism whirled into action, revealing a space where I kept my .45 arm y automatic, one of the best overall handguns ever manufactured, all things considered. And right now I was considering stopping power, which it had. I reached into the space where it should have been. There was nothing there, but the few little trinkets and gewgaws I kept as a disguise for the bottom compartment. I gaped at Rita in astonishment. She shrugged. "They came through the building a week ago and took everyone's weapons. They did it without warning, so we couldn't read their minds and warn each other." The goddamned fools! I swear I'll never understand the mentality of the intelligence mavens. Intelligent is the last thing I would call them. The muscles in my jaw began to ache as I ground my teeth together. They had put me in a bind, and already my pattern sense knew what the next step would be. Someone in the government had decided to call my bluff about being a ble to control the gates. Hess would try to take me prisoner, as well. They had probably concluded that if they held me hostage, those in the Nexus would have to surrender to their demands. The government wanted to control the sex gates and I had made it obvious

that that meant controlling the Seconders first. Rita was right. We were both naïve—way too naïve to be playing power games with politicians who had made a lifelong study of keeping all the power in their slimy little hands. I should have known better, but I never have been able to delve very far into the political mind. I don't possess the necessary hunger for power.

I took a deep breath. Hell, what was done was done. Now to undo it.

Rita gazed at me in sympathy, as she communicated even worse news. Other world leaders had reneged on their agreements, too, following the lead of the United States. As a result, the situation in many countries was again becoming dangerous for Seconders, and that damned Church of the Gates was causing problems, too. As we conferred, I heard the voices in the hallway grow louder. We were almost out of time. My mind spun as I tried to formulate a plan. I grabbed Rita's arm.

"Go to the far corner and stay out of the line of fire. Keep your mind merged with mine; I'm going to need some extra mental power to bring this off—if I can."

To Rita's great credit, she didn't ask what I had planned. She simply kissed me and ran to a corner lounge turned half away from most of the room, where she would be unobtrusive and out of play—or so the national security agents would believe. They didn't know enough about telepathy to realize we could coordinate our attack via our minds. Part of their ignorance was due to me. I had worked hard to convince them and the public that Seconders weren't really fully telepathic. I told

Hess that at the most we could only read emotions and surface thoughts.

I heard a deeper voice outside, the voice of authority. Hess! My heart started to pound with adrenaline. A fist hammered on the door. I froze, waiting, girding my mind for the challenge ahead. I did a mind touch with Rita, and our thoughts melded.

The fist hammered on the door a second time, even harder.

"I know you're in there, Lee!" Hess shouted. "And I suspect

Rita's told you about the changes here. Believe me, they are for your ultimate good. Open this door and we'll talk about it."

My ultimate good—the excuse the government used every time it wanted to pull a fast one on its citizens. I put my hand in my jacket pocket—the force of habit

was hard to break. Then I realized Hess knew I normally carried a gun. He couldn't completely discount the possibility that I might have managed to bring one through the gate with me. Maybe I could pull off another bluff. I stuck my hand deep into my pocket, went to the door and flipped the lock, then stood aside.

The door was flung open with a bang. Hess strode into the room, accompanied by two of his henchmen. Not hesitating for a moment, he headed

straight for me. His eyes darted to my hand, hidden inside the pocket of my jacket.

Cursing, he tried a quick disarming maneuver. I saw his plan in his mind a split

second before he executed it. I moved as he did, anticipating his every action. There

was a blur of motion and I was behind him, holding him in a grip designed to shatter

fingers if he attempted to break it. He didn't. Instead, he shouted to his cohorts.

"Cover him, and get the girl. Quick"

One of the agents ran around the side of the room toward Rita, the other dodged behind me. I braced my body against his attack and took a deep breath to

steady my concentration. My mind leapt into high gear. Time slowed to a crawl as I

explored the quantum possibilities and probabilities. A million possibilities flashed

before me in an instant. I made a tremendous effort and seized upon one as most

advantageous. In the midst of my mental gymnastics I became aware of Rita's mind

supporting mine, helping me decide.

Time stopped. For an infinity that lasted less than a heartbeat I faced my attackers. Sneers of triumph were frozen on the faces of Hess's henchmen. Then an

earthquake rocked the room as my mental powers exploded into action. I spun as if

in a whirlwind. Abruptly, everything went still again. Hess and his two henchmen lay

tangled up together in a heap in front of me. My head pounded.

I looked down at my hands and saw they were shaking. I had changed reality,

rewound Hess's entrance. Instead of rushing me, Hess had tripped on the carpet as

he came in the door. His two henchmen had gotten their feet tangled up with his.

The three of them collapsed into a heap, their guns flying out of their hands and

landing at my feet.

I shivered with relief. I'd used quantum mechanics and the uncertainty

principle in ways I didn't begin to understand with my conscious mind. But somehow

my Seconder powers had accessed the situation, and given me what I needed.

"Oh, Lee!"

Across the room, Rita stared at me, wide-eyed with pure amazement. I turned and forced a smile. I didn't want her to know how much I'd scared myself. Such powers were almost inhuman. I remembered the invitation of the entity and shuddered. Forcing that fear from my mind, I bent to pick up one of the guns.

It was

a relief to have the weight of a weapon in my hand again.

"We're in control of this room at least," I said, pointing it at the three men who

were untangling themselves from their heap. "No sudden movements there," I added

to them, as Hess shot me a venomous look.

My nerves were on edge. It took an effort to keep my hand from shaking.

For

one thing, I was worried that in shifting time I might have created a whole new

world—an alternate universe of my own devising. When you start messing with quantum mechanics, very strange things can happen. According to theory, I'd created a new quantum pathway that left us in new situation, but in the same world

as we had started. I thought.

The three men had managed to untangle themselves, but they were still on the floor, looking confused and shaken. Good, I wanted them that way.

"Stay where you are. Don't move," I ordered.

They quit moving, but Hess lifted his head and glared at me with the hatred

and fear of an animal caught in a trap. "How the hell did you do that?"

"Easy enough," I said, as if throwing men and guns around a room as an

everyday occurrence. "Now, slowly get up, and make yourself comfortable on a lounge over against the wall, so we can talk."

Hess began getting up in a peculiar fashion. Rita shrieked a warning.

"Lee! He's—"

Crouching over, Hess reached for his spare gun hidden in an ankle holster.

My mind was one step ahead. Without thinking, I fired through the pocket of my jacket. I was a very good shot with a pistol. The bullet went through his hand and

into the fleshy part of his leg.

"Oh, goddamn!" he screamed. "You sonofabitch!!!"

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"Yeah. I'm a real bad ass, aren't I?"

I reached down and yanked him to his feet, and placed the muzzle of the gun

to the side of his head. He blanched, but there was still some fight in him.

"Maybe you can kill me, Lee, but you can't get away. The agency controls this

estate. Make it easy on yourself before you get into a lot of trouble."

He gritted his teeth as the pain from his wounds began to register, but I felt

a
surge of hope in his thoughts. At the same moment I heard voices outside the door. I
took a second to gauge the number and positions of the other agents outside. Turning my head, I smiled at Rita.
"Hold the fort, sweetheart. We're going to be gone a minute."
I concentrated again. To my delight, I found it easier this time now that I knew
it was possible. My brow furrowed as I visualized the outcome I wanted. The world
twisted around us. Hess and I stood behind four men and women with guns drawn. As I caught my breath, I realized they were debating whether to break into the room
after hearing the shot.
"Behind you," I said.
They whirled around, astounded expressions on their faces as they saw me standing behind their boss with a gun pointed at his head.
"How—"
"There's no exit from in there. He couldn't have—"
"Mister Hess! Are you all right?"
"He's fine," I told them. "Now shut up, put your guns away, and let us reason together." I bumped Hess' temple with the muzzle of my gun. "Right, Mister Hess?"
I'll give Hess this much, he kept his voice calm despite having a gun shoved
to his head. "Do as he says. He's learned some new tricks."
"Open the door, and go into the bedroom," I commanded.
Rita's eyes opened wide as she saw me enter behind my latest captives
, with
my gun pointed to Hess's head. The agents appeared dumfounded as they
huddled
together near the foot of the bed. They had no idea how I had pulled off the trick.
Actually, I had no idea myself; I only knew I could do it, not how.
"Sit down, all of you. But first, I would appreciate it if you put your firearms on

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the dresser over there, one by one, please."
I watched closely as they each walked over to the dresser and disarmed. Rita
moved over to stand guard beside what turned out to be quite a pile of various
armaments, while I kept my gun pointed at Hess. Looking glum, the last agent
to
disarm rejoined his comrades in the huddle. A swift mental touch confirmed
that they
were willing—well, resigned, maybe—to sit quietly for a while. I shoved Hess into a
chair against one wall of the room and glared down at him.
"So what did you think you were about to do?"
His face was pale, but his glittering eyes revealed a mind hard at work.
"I'm
an agent, Lee. I work for the government. I follow orders. The powers you displayed

the last time you visited Earth terrified the politicians. They want you brought under control so they can learn what you're capable of."

I gave him a fierce grin. "Bringing me under control isn't going to be easy, Hess."

He relaxed slightly, and grinned himself. "I can see that. You've learned some new tricks while you were in the Nexus."

"I've managed to stay ahead of you, anyway."

It was my turn to sneer. I wanted to gloat, to flaunt my new powers in front of him, to make their guns vanish, and maybe their clothes, too. A need to humiliate these lesser creatures who had dared to defy me filled my heart. I caught Rita staring at me with a shocked look, and reined in my emotions. With an effort, I turned my attention back to Hess.

"Why did you renege on our agreement? Damn it, I can't be coming back here every other day to get you back on course. I've got other things to do. And you have really pissed me off by threatening my woman."

For the first time he looked frightened. "I wasn't going to hurt you—or Rita. You're both far too valuable."

I touched his mind and caught a glimpse of his intentions. "Oh, no, you were going to hold us at gunpoint, then drug us up so we couldn't fight back with our newfound mental powers. I suppose we'd have spent the rest of our lives drugged to the teeth in some government institution."

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His eyes flashed with defiance. "It's the best way to control some one like you."

"You're damned lucky I only wounded you instead of putting a bullet through your head."

"I didn't renege," he said, throwing a nervous glance at the other agents. "The government decided it wasn't politically expedient to give out too much information about you Seconders at once."

"In other words, the powers that be don't want the electorate to know there are people on this planet that they can't control."

I was astounded at my own rage. The human race stood at the threshold of its greatest evolution ever, and these petty bastards only cared about protecting their position.

"It wasn't my decision; I follow orders."

"That's what they all say. And besides, you're lying." I knew from touching his mind that he'd urged the politicians to bring us under control, hoping to get a promotion, and to hell with the lives it might affect.

"You goddamn freak!"

He started to rise from the lounge despite his wounded leg. His face twisted in rage, as he realized that I knew his every thought. A sharp crack split the air as I put a bullet into the lounge beside him. Rita screamed and the agents jumped. Hess flinched and eased back down, staring daggers at me. I held the gun steady on Hess while I pondered my next move. I'd thought the Seconders on Earth were safe the last time I'd left for the Nexus. I had to do something that would guarantee their safety for sure this time before I dared to leave again. Reaching out, I touched Rita's mind. We conversed telepathically while the NSA agents stared at us, wondering what we were up to. Outside the door, footsteps pounded down the hallway. A beefy man burst into the room, his fists up as if ready for a fight. "Lee!" He spotted the gun in my hand, and lowered his fists while a big grin stretched across his face. "Hi, Carl."

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Relief swept over me. Carl was Messler's old chief of security, and he'd become mine after I inherited Messler's wealth. I was glad to see him. He could watch the government goons while Rita and I got our plan rolling. I nodded to the pile of guns on the dresser. "How about you help yourself to one and keep these guys covered for me?" Carl looked embarrassed as he grabbed a gun from the pile. "You sure you don't want to fire me first? I should never have let these agents take over—they caught me completely off guard." I shrugged. "If it's anyone's fault it's mine. I was stupid enough to trust the word of a government agent." A delighted look appeared on Carl's face as he pointed the gun at Hess. "How'd you know I was back?" "I didn't. When these agents found out you were here they escorted the Seconders to their rooms and locked them in. I heard a gunshot. So I broke out, and came looking for the action." "Glad to see you." I clapped him on the shoulder and turned my attention to Rita. "What do you think? Will our plan work?" She smiled at me, her big dark eyes bright with the shining optimism that never failed to boost my spirits. "Ignorance is what feeds fear. People might not like the truth about us at first, but in the end they'll understand we're not out to harm

them."

"Okay. Let's do it."

Rita turned to a side panel and began bringing the main computer and wall

screen unit in the bedroom fully on line. I watched as her flying fingers set it up to

take continuous dictation with full video and sound. We had decided I would be the

one to speak. My words would be recorded by the computer and simultaneously

broadcast to the web worldwide. With the reputation I had established as a web journalist before I had to go into hiding as a Second, my words would carry

credibility—enough to ensure other reporters would investigate and find out the full

truth for themselves.

"Greetings to everyone listening to this web cast in the United States of America and around the world," I began. "I am Jackson Lee Stuart. Many of you

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know me as a web broadcaster who specialized in stories about the gates. What you

might not have known is that I'm also a Second. I'm speaking to you tonight

because the time has come for the world to know the truth about Seconders—"

I heard a shocked hiss behind me. Glancing away from the wall screen, I saw

Hess glaring at me with his mouth wide open. If I spilled the beans on the worldwide

web, it would mean the end of his career as a security agent and he knew it. Too

bad for him. Suppressing a smile, I turned back to the screen.

"You may have heard rumors and accusations about the Seconders especially from members of the Church of the Gates, but tonight I'm here to give you

the unvarnished facts."

"No!" Hess shouted behind me.

Bam! My ears rang with the loud report of a gun. Rita screamed. I whirled around. Hess stood upright, a gun in his outstretched hand pointed at me . His two

eyes bulged while a third eye blossomed between them. His hand went limp and the

gun fell from his fingers. With a last sigh, he sank to a heap on the floor. No one else moved.

I stared at Carl. He stood rock steady, the pistol that had killed Hess in his

hand, pointed at the other agents. Not one of them moved.

"Care to make the same mistake your boss did?" he growled.

I read the fear in their minds and knew the fight had gone out of them. "Good work," I told Carl, turning back to the screen.

"Please forgive the scene of violence you witnessed," I said. "What you saw

was but one more attempt by agents of the U. S. government to keep the truth

about
the Seconders from you. They would rather kill me than let you know how
they have
hidden the facts about us in a desperate attempt to preserve their power and
keep
the sex gates for their own use."

I glanced at a corner of the screen where the computer was monitoring how
many people were tuning in to my broadcast. As usual, news had spread li
ke wildfire
on the web. The numbers were spinning steadily upward on the screen. Squaring
my shoulders, I continued to talk.
"You see how the security agents of our government are trying to deceive

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you. Their actions cannot stand the light of day. They were prepared to
go to any
lengths, even murder, to keep the facts about the gates from becoming known to
you, the very people who pay their salaries." I looked them over, let
ting my glance
flick down to Hess's body and back to them. I had no doubt that they
would confirm
whatever I said.
Knowing my back was guarded by Carl, I sat in front of the computer, my
gaze fixed on the camera. "The sex gates were sent here by highly adv
anced
humans from an alternate Earth. They believed this Earth was doomed because we
had taken the wrong path long ago. Their purpose was to shake up our soc
iety, and
perhaps save us in the process. What they did not know was that their gates
would
trigger an evolutionary process in the human race on this Earth due to the
fact that
some humans on our world have telepathic powers. These humans are the on
es
who are able to go through the gates twice and become Seconders. Something in
the transformation process expands these powers."
I kept talking, watching the numbers climb to astronomical heights. "The
government wants to control the gates and the Seconders for their own selfish
purposes. But I believe, with the help of the Seconders, the gates can be
adjusted
so that everyone on this planet can use them, if they wish, without fear and
for as
many times as they wish to."

When I finished two hours later, my throat hurt from nonstop talking, bu
t I had
covered everything we knew about the sex gates, the Nexus, and various points
between. Best of all, the numbers on the side of the screen indicated that
people
had listened to my words worldwide. Rita sat at a desk to one side of the
bedroom,
bent over a keyboard while she monitored various sites and web boards fo
r the
response to my talk. The smile on her face told me the initial reaction
was good.
Stretching my cramped shoulders, I eyed the security agents who sat on t

he
bed under Carl's watchful eye and gun. We would have to lock them up
somewhere
while the other Seconders were rearmed, then send them packing. I knew the
government could easily recapture and imprison us if they wished, but I hoped
the
worldwide furor sure to follow my talk would prevent that.
I wondered which of my revelations would stir up the most controversy. I had

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freely admitted that we Seconders had developed superior mental powers. Almost
in
the same breath I had reassured my audience that we remained human, and we
were the world's best hope for learning how to operate the gates and use them
to
visit unlimited alternate worlds. Clean new worlds were out there, waiting for
the
teeming billions on this polluted planet. Normal humans might fear us, but
they
would want the gifts only we could provide.
In addition to this, I had dangled another carrot. We Seconders were wor
king
day and night to understand the operation of the gates. We hoped soon to find
a way
for others to go through more than once. They too could have the benefits of
eternal
youth, perfect health, and increased intelligence if they would trust us to
find the
secret.
I had another exciting gift to offer them, too. I revealed what had happened
to
those who had disappeared while trying to go through the gates. Their lo
ved ones
weren't dead, and we planned to release them from their stasis. Rita and I had
suffered an agony of suspense wondering what had happened to Russell and
Donna. We could imagine the unbridled joy in homes around the globe when
people
heard their lost loved ones hadn't disappeared forever. I told them the full
truth,
too—that we had no idea what condition the old and sick would be in w
hen they
emerged. We could only promise we would do our best to save them.
Likewise, we did not know if criminals, drug addicts, the mentally ill, and
even
psychopaths would emerge cured or not. Again, I assured them that we would do
our best. Seconders would be monitoring them and trying to help them adjust.
It was a big dose of data to swallow, in addition to the dribble that ha
d already
been fed to the public, especially since I released it to the world uncu
t, and
uncensored. How it would play out I would have to wait and see, although my
pattern sense suggested that people were sick of the lies of their governments
and
ready for the truth.
I glanced down on the floor where Hess's body lay sprawled in a pool

of
blood. I waited for guilt or regret to strike, but none came. The man had
betrayed my
trust. He would have used Rita and me like research animals, milking us
for every
drop of knowledge about the gates, then flinging us aside like so much
garbage.

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Staring down at him, I focused on thoughts of a reality without his body
baring my
way—a better reality. The air around his body flickered as if in a he
at wave, and he
vanished.
“Okay.” I turned to Carl with grim purpose. “Let’s get these guys locked up.”
While we marched them down to the basement and locked them in a storage
room, Carl filled me in on events from his perspective as head of securi
ty. The
government agents had overpowered and disarmed him along with the other
Seconders, and then had ordered the security staff under Carl’s command to
leave.
They’d kept Carl under guard and ordered the Seconders to continue their
research
into the gate. But since they had Rita, and since Rita and I were clearly the
most
advanced of the Seconders, there was little doubt their main purpose was to
have
hostages ready when I returned. Only no one had expected me to return fo
ur weeks
after I’d departed. They thought it would be months before I mastered the
gates
enough to return. Their lax security around the gate had given me the ch
ance to find
out what was happening and fight back.
With the agents safety locked up, Carl and I spread through the house an
d
the guest houses around it, releasing the Seconders who were routinely k
ept locked
in their rooms when not under the watchful eye of a federal agent. Most of
them
already knew what had happened—while I spoke worldwide on the net Rit
a had
been busy contacting each one mind-to-mind and bringing them up to date.
“We didn’t really try to fight back,” Carl told me, as we walked together back
to the house after setting the last of the Seconders free. “We knew the
government
would send more agents if we fought, and we knew you would be back event
ually.
Rita was confident you would know how to handle the situation, and it turns
out she
was right.”
“I hope I handled it,” I said.
I wasn’t quite as confident as Carl. So far, the world’s reaction to the truth
seemed good, but then I’d thought things were under control the last time I
left, too.

Not for the first time, I wondered why I was so trustful. I see myself as a bit of a cynic, but Rita tells me I'm the exact opposite—far too trusting and naïve. I've always had a live-and-let-live attitude and can't seem to grasp why everyone else

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doesn't feel the same.

As a former newshound, I wanted to stay on Earth to keep on top of developments after my revelations. I can't recall any time in history when government officials were exposed so openly in the middle of one of their plots.

Heads would roll, of course, but I would bet money that the spin machines of every government in the world were already working overtime to put the best light on what

I had broadcast.

Leaving Carl with a group of Seconders to start reestablishing a guard perimeter around the estate, I hurried back up to our bedroom. Rita was seated in

front of a portable terminal at the desk, her back to the door. I noticed bloodstains on

the rug where Hess had fallen. I applied another dose of quantum adjustment to the

area and they disappeared. Hearing my steps, Rita turned to greet me with her radiant smile.

"The net is practically on overload, so many people are online discussing your speech. I think you may have set an all-time record for listeners. It's astounding!"

"What's the reaction?"

"Good. People are a little leery of Seconders, of course. They'd rather we didn't have powers they don't have. But the idea that we might be able to make the

gates available to everyone without fear of vanishing—why, I think we'd beat Santa

Claus in a popularity contest right now."

I gathered her in my arms. "I hope we can keep my promises."

She looked up at me, her beautiful dark eyes shining with faith. "If you said it's

possible, I know you'll find a way. You've never failed me—or anyone—yet. I don't

think you have the faintest idea how remarkable you are." My cheeks started to burn.

"Look at you, blushing like a boy." Rita's eyes sparkled.

"I'll show you who's a boy," I growled.

Catching her head between my hands, I slanted my mouth across hers in a hungry kiss. I traced the outline of her lush lips with my tongue, then began a slow,

sensual exploration of her mouth. My blush subsided as a different kind of heat

began to burn under my skin. The taste of Rita's lips, the scent of her hair, and the

satiny texture of her skin all combined to fan the inner fire of desire that she never

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failed to kindle inside me.
I tugged her over to the bed and we collapsed on it in a giggling heap.
As my
nimble fingers worked on unfastening her clothes, memories of Russell and Donna
and Randy and Terri flashed through my mind. They were wonderful lovers,
every
one of them, but Rita was the best, beyond compare. I loved her in a special
way,
like no other.
For the first time I wondered if the two of us should consider some sort of
formal arrangement like marriage, especially considering that we had a baby on
the
way. I didn't want to limit Rita's freedom, but I did want to reassure her of
my
undying devotion and commitment to her and our child. At the thought, my sense
of
foreboding deepened. Troubled times lay ahead. I knew that for a certainty. I
needed
to return to the Nexus and handle the problems there before I could honestly
offer
Rita the kind of life I wanted to give her—a safe and secure life with a
predictable
future.
We spent a night together, locked in each other's arms, making tender love to
one another. The next morning I met with the Seconders who remained. Two
of
them, Barbara Woods and Betty Masterson, were the most advanced, except for
Rita who couldn't go through the gates because of her pregnancy. It took
several
hours of intense coaching, but by afternoon I felt confident they could make
it to the
Nexus if necessary to fetch me if I were needed again before I was ready
to come
back for Rita.
As hard as it was to leave Rita the first time, it was twice as hard knowing
the
unsettled situation. But I didn't see any other choice, but to finish the work
I needed
to do in the Nexus. I had to fulfill my promises of the night before to assure
safety for
Seconders everywhere. The longer I stayed, the less my directional sense in
the
quantum flux was dependable, or so I thought. Rita accompanied me alone
to the
barn where we shared a long farewell kiss, and I stepped into the gate once
more.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

My accuracy needed work, but I wasn't too far off—I arrived back at the Nexus a dozen or more hours after I had left. Less than two days remained before we had to do something about the people in stasis; actually, it was possible we had less time than that because we weren't absolutely certain of the timing, as Russell had proved already. And each of the teams had to arrive on its alternate world in advance of the release to prepare for the onrush of people. We assumed the people would have no idea how long they had been in stasis or even, perhaps, what had happened to them. Their last memory would be entering the gates—or in some cases being thrown into the gates. They would be naked, confused, and in a new body. We would have to provide clothing, food, drink, shelter, and waste disposal for an unknown number of prospective residents. Fortunately, we had identified the alternate worlds we wanted to use. Amanda had managed to find seven worlds where the gate masters had left computers like H.C. behind. Those computers were a great help in getting the worlds ready. I wished we had about fifty more trained people to help handle the actual release, but people were one thing we couldn't produce out of the quantum flux. I had a violent crowd, but at least there would be fewer of them. It had become apparent soon after the sex gates appeared that violent psychopathic criminals rarely, if ever, made it through a gate. Consequently they had stopped trying. Psychopaths might be a lot of things, but generally they aren't dumb. Nevertheless, we were dealing with a worldwide phenomenon, so I expected I would have enough of them to keep me busy. I spent a frantic few hours working with Russell and Donna making sure we'd thought of every aspect we could control. That left me with only one chore before going to the alternate world—it was time to attempt my first trip into the future to get Rita and our new son Justin. Theoretically, a trip to the future wouldn't be that different from a trip into the past. Theory aside, the idea of traveling into the unknown frightened me despite my determination to keep my promise to Rita. As I did whenever I faced any problem with the Nexus, I conferred with

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Russell. He offered to accompany me through the gate to help guide me. I knew his plate was full, if not overloaded already, but that didn't stop me from taking

him up
on the offer. If anyone could pinpoint that moment in the future, it was him.
As
usual, Russ shrugged off my thanks. As much as I appreciated his brilliance, I loved
him for his good heart even more.
We prepared ourselves and headed for the nearest gate, while I thought how
crazy this whole thing sounded. At the same time, Russ strode along at my side,
perfectly calm. The reverberations from his mind told me he found nothing
unusual
about an attempt to travel into the future. That was Russ all over. If it was
scientifically possible, then that was it—a simple done deal, no matter how the
average person might boggle at the thought. And perhaps it was a simple deal.
H hadn't he told me once, when I first found my way to him and Messler and the
Nexus, that the whole universe may be nothing more than thought?
I wiped my sweaty hands against my jeans as we neared the control room,
and tried to master the rapid beating of my heart. I had promised Rita to
bring her
and Justin to the Nexus, and I would. I hoped she would have the sense to
stay here
with the baby, but I knew she intended to come with me.
"Ready?"
We had reached the gate. Russ grinned at me with a reckless gleam in his
eye. The theories worked out, but this was his chance to put it to the test—the
moment of scientific truth. He was a happy man, and I was petrified.
"Wait a minute," I stuttered. "I've had a terrible thought. What if I create
another alternate world by traveling to the future?"
Russ laughed. "Relax. I know quantum theory is a bit beyond you so you
u'll
have to take my word for it, but we're safe. The Nexus is designed to prevent
such
things from happening. The masters knew what they were doing and—"
He went on happily babbling, but that was the last word I really understood.
The rest of what he said might as well have been in Martian—or whatever
language
the masters spoke. I shook my head. It was too late not to trust Russ. He'd
taught
me to manipulate quantum possibilities. He knew what he was doing. I let it go
at that.
Before we left the Nexus, Russ and I went through the gate once to become

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female. That way, we would emerge on Earth as males in case the situation there
had deteriorated and we needed some male muscle. I didn't anticipate
any
problems—I was sure Betty or Barbara would have gotten a message off
to me
somehow if something had happened, but I'd learned the hard way it was best to
be

prepared.

On our second trip, we launched off toward the future. This time I actively participated, learning more and more about the manipulation of quantum reality that

Russ was already so familiar with. As we hung inside that familiar green unreality, he

taught me mind to mind in an amazing exchange of concepts that went far beyond the power of words. What had seemed mere babble to me before became clear as Russ fed his hard won knowledge directly into my consciousness. He showed me

where my directional sense needed to be adjusted and warned once more that I

must be careful not to bump through the limits or else I would be in danger of changing into something more than human.

At last we were ready. We let the gate set us in motion and emerged through

the green fog to find ourselves in the familiar barn on Earth.

This time the huge interior where Messler's "secret" sex gate resided was

unguarded. As before, a set of clothes in my size hung on the clothes rack. It also

held several all-purpose wraps of various sizes and colors. That was reassuring. It

told me the Seconders on the estate were using the gate regularly to study the

quantum reality on their own and increase their mental powers.

Russ claimed one of the wraps while I dressed in my regular jeans, shirt and jacket. A small pistol resided comfortably in the side pocket where I had left it the

other day—over seven months ago by Earth time. I patted it comfortably after

shrugging on the jacket.

Russ slipped on sandals while telling me he preferred his old jeans from college days.

"Why don't you create them, then?"

He looked bemused for a moment then shook his head. "It's best not to try too

much of that outside the Nexus—too easy to slip up and wind up in a different reality."

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I shuddered and decided not to tell him the full story of what I did the last time

I visited Earth. A chill shot down my spine as another thought occurred to me. "Would we know if we did?"

"It would depend on how much change occurred. It might be major, or it might be so minor you'd never notice. Personally, I would prefer not to find out. Come on,

let's go see if there's a decent cook around here."

That remark made me grin. If Russell was hungry, chances were we'd make it

back to the right reality.

Since I was the one who was armed, I led the way. I didn't sense any danger

but I was ever mindful that circumstances could have changed since I was here

last.

We emerged from the tunnel and into the house. Russell whistled in appreciation as he glanced around at the luxurious setting. It took me a second to remember that he had never been to this house before. He'd vanished from Earth years ago when we lived in Texas.

We reached the great room. A fire was blazing in the two-story fireplace. I spotted Betty and Barb sitting on one of the couches with hands twined together.

Forgetting caution, I hurried toward them.

The sound of my boots on the hardwood floors alerted Barbara. She looked up and her mouth opened in a round "O" of surprise then changed to a big grin.

"Lee! You're back!"

"Where's Rita?" I couldn't wait for anything else.

Both of them jumped up, eager to claim the privilege of taking me to Rita. Their minds bubbled with excitement as they envisioned me meeting my son for the first time. I gathered the whole group of Seconders had been looking forward to this event.

"So did you do it? Did you actually travel in time?" Betty wanted to know as

we climbed the stairs. "Or did you wait seven months in the Nexus."

I shook my head. "No. It's only been a day or so in my frame of reference since I left. How have things gone here?"

Betty laughed. The gay little sound told me everything was under control

"We've had some problems. The government isn't going to give up control that easily

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and they've tried to put their own spin on things. But we've held on to a position of power, because the people want to see if you can keep your promise and make the gates work without making people vanish."

Russ shot me a startled look. I hadn't had time to mention my promises to

him. "What? You promised what?"

"Hey, old buddy, you've worked miracles already. What's one more?" I left

him looking slightly bewildered at the top of the stairs. Betty promised to show him

around the complex while I had my reunion with Rita. My jubilant mood faded as I

wondered how long and difficult the seven months had been for her.

When I reached our old suite of rooms, I didn't bother knocking. I knew Rita had already sensed my presence. Instead, I threw open the door and walked in, a

wide grin stretching my face.

Rita sat in a chair near the window, our newborn son cradled in her arms. If I

had expected her to jump up and fly at me in welcome I would have been

disappointed, but I didn't. I could see she was busy with vitally important business.

"Lee!" she cried with delight. "Oh, I knew you would succeed."

A second mind intruded itself on my consciousness, a mind that had no awareness of me. It was totally concentrated on satisfying its hunger. To my surprise, tears came into my eyes. I blinked and tip-toed closer to Rita as if afraid that any noise from me would startle our son. He continued to ignore me. He was busy nursing at her breast, his tiny little mind concentrating on the task of bringing milk from the nipple with the simple determination of the newborn. It was gratifying and overwhelming to touch Rita's mind with my own as hers was absorbed partly with our son's—Justin's—greedy little feasting.

I sat down beside her and cupped her face with my hands, as I drank in the warmth that shone in her dark, beautiful eyes. A deep happiness dwelled there, almost sensuous in nature as Justin nursed. I smiled as she shared the sensation of his small mouth sucking at her nipple with me. As a Second, I could experience the wonder of nursing through her mind. Hardly able to believe the three of us were together at last, I reached out with tentative fingers to touch the baby's silky dark hair and his flawless skin. For his part, he continued to ignore me, his total concentration

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focused on drawing the sweet milk from his mother's breast.

"Hi, Justin," I whispered. "I'm your daddy."

Rita chuckled, her smile warm with affection. "He's his daddy's son. The only thing he's interested in is my nipple."

"Not true," I protested. "I love every part of you."

Our lips met. I could feel hers tremble with happiness that I was at long last back with her. I have to confess that my lips trembled, too, even though the time apart had been shorter for me. The circumstances made it seem like we'd been

separated for an eternity.

When I was finally able to move my lips from hers I looked down at our son

again. He had finished his meal and was drifting off into sleep. His mind touched

mine briefly as Rita relayed the information that I was his father, but he was already

half asleep. His mouth slipped off the nipple of Rita's swollen breast and milk

drooled down his cheek. I watched with fascination as Rita burped him and then

eased him down to the layer of soft pillows on the lounger she had ready for him.

"My love, I can't remember when I've been so happy," I whispered.

Rita laughed gently. "You don't have to whisper; he's a good sleeper."

"That's great," I whispered, unable to help myself as I glanced down at the sleeping child. The only baby I had been around for any length of time was my cousin Tom and I barely remembered those days. Besides, this was something different. Justin belonged to me—to us. I was surprised at the fierce and protective love that filled my heart at the sight of his small, defenseless body. "How long has it been?"

"He was born two days ago. You timed your arrival pretty close. I was beginning to get worried."

"Can we leave Justin on these pillows?" I asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

"He won't roll off?" I was already worried about him and hadn't known him five minutes!

"No, silly. See the big pillow in front of him? Besides, if he gets restless, I'll

know. Motherhood is so much easier when you're a Second. We can know what a

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baby wants without having to guess. And our mental attitudes will be a guide for him

as he grows. He'll be able to feel our love."

"He will?"

"Of course he will. Why—oh, I see. You didn't pick up on it."

"Pick up on what?" About the only thing I was picking up on at the moment

was how beautiful Rita looked despite just having given birth. Motherhood had left a

lovely glow about her. I wanted to tumble her down on the bed but knew it was far

too soon.

"Our son is a natural Second, Lee. He was born with our telepathic gifts. He can feel my thoughts and I sensed him feeling yours. Of course he is only a baby.

He doesn't even have language yet. He thinks in feelings and images.

He can't

interpret anything but the most primitive of emotions like love and happiness. But as

he grows, the link between the three of us will strengthen. He'll know how loved he

is. Think how well-adjusted he'll be."

I had some thoughts about that, but I kept them to myself. No matter how well

adjusted a kid is, he has to find his own identity eventually. It's a part of growing up.

But those problems lay far in the future. No need to worry about them for a long

time.

As we talked, we moved toward the bed and began removing our clothes. Both of us had a need to get physically close, even though Rita wasn't ready for intercourse yet. Soon we lay side by side. With a gentle smile, Rita guided my lips to her breasts. I smelled the sweet smell of her milk as she urged me to take the nipple that Justin had been using into my mouth. I fastened my lips around the taut little nub and sucked, tasting her warm milk. Her body stiffened with pleasure and she groaned out loud. "That's enough," I said, feeling her arousal begin. She clutched my head with both hands and pressed me to her breasts. "I want you inside me." "In a couple of weeks—" I began. She sat up, nearly throwing me off the bed. "Sooner than that! Tomorrow when I go through the gate. I'll come out a man, but I can go through again and have

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with a whole new body—ready for you." "No, Rita!" I grabbed her arm. "You'll lose your milk." I hadn't even thought about that. Her face fell. She hadn't thought of it either. After a moment, she perked up. "If I have to, I have to. I'm going back to the Nexus with you no matter what." I cuddled close to her and stroked her cheek. "Hey, the baby will be fine with formula. He has a wonderful mother." "Lee, you're so sweet." Her voice trembled with warmth as she hugged me to her. I guess I hadn't realized how stressful the last few weeks, and in particular, the last few days had been. I rested my head on the soft pillow of flesh she provided and fell asleep. *** The sound of a baby crying woke me up. Rita stood bent over a crib next to our bed with Justin in her arms. "Time for another meal?" I asked, my mind half filled with cobwebs from sleep. "He's better than an alarm clock," Rita assured me as she sat down in the lounge and bared her breast to our son's hungry stare. He clamped on and began sucking, filling the room with loud, smacking sounds. "Must be hollow inside," I commented. A knock sounded on the door. "You guys decent?" a familiar voice asked. "As decent as I'll ever be." Rita laughed and made no effort to cover her exposed breast. She and Russ had been lovers years ago before he'd di

sappeared
into the gates.
"Rita!" He strode into the room, his face beaming with happiness. Belatedly, I remembered that while I had been back and forth to the Nexus this was the first time
Rita and Russ had seen each other since his disappearance.
"Oh, Russ." Even hampered by the baby, she managed to hook an arm around his neck and drag him close for a long welcoming kiss. When they broke
apart, Russ dragged over a chair and we sat in a little circle, enjoying the warmth of
old friends reunited.

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After Russ had spent the mandatory time admiring the baby and Rita had finished pumping him with questions about life in the Nexus, we began to talk about
the present situation. I wanted to know how Earth had reacted to my disclosures
several months ago. As it turned out, Russ was a fountain of information. While I had
been sleeping, he had been busy catching up on the happenings here. Since this
was his first visit back to our Earth he was really interested. While Rita finished
feeding the baby, he rhapsodized about the changes.
"It's amazing what the truth will do sometimes. I wouldn't have believed it."
"Believed what?"
Russ looked at me with a curious expression on his face. "Why, the changes
that have occurred in the last six months or so. You should know; you and Rita are
the ones who are responsible for them!"
"I haven't heard about any changes yet," I said, not a real canard. "I've been
too busy getting to know my son." I decided not to mention the restless sleep I had
gotten as Russ appeared not to have slept at all.
"Well, I think it's great. Here in the states, there's been an election, but I
guess you knew that was coming."
"Uh, no. Frankly, the problems in the Nexus have dominated my thinking for the past few weeks. My pattern sense seems to have locked in on that to the
exclusion of everything else."
"Interesting. Anyway, a lot of the old scoundrels got thrown out of office. There's a whole new set of scoundrels running the country—but maybe they won't be so bad. Over half of them are people who have been through a gate, and as you
know that experience mellows most people a bit. But here's the great news: a Secunder was actually elected to the Senate."
Rita held Justin up to her shoulder and began gently patting him on the back.
A loud burp was her reward. "Really? I've been so busy getting ready for the baby, I

missed that news myself."

"How in hell did they ever get a Secondar to run?" I asked.

Russ laughed and poked me in the ribs with his elbow. "That's the best part.

They didn't. He was a write in."

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That told me everything I wanted to know. If a Secondar could be elected to a national office in America, home of religious fundamentalists, then the heat must be off.

"Oh, yes, it is," Rita assured me, catching my thought. "You'll notice there

aren't any NSA agents around the place anymore. You radiated sincerity the night

you spoke on the worldwide web and people believed you. When the government tried to take control of us again, there was such an outpouring of rage from voters

that they had to back off. We've been left pretty much alone ever since. The world

knows Secondars here and in the Nexus are looking for the answers and they're waiting to see what happens."

I swallowed hard. The pressure was on. We had to come through.

Russ nodded. "I watched a replay of your speech on the web. I was moved,

buddy. And the part where Carl shot Hess—talk about drama. The evil government agent trying to shoot you in the back, but stopped by the loyal employee. You gotta

love it. And people did. Plus, you got extra points for being honest and telling it like it

is rather than scheming to further your own ends."

Rita got up from the lounge and moved over to the crib to change Justin's diaper. "You do have diapers in the Nexus, don't you?" she asked as she worked.

Russ and I exchanged a grin. "I'll make a room full of them for you," I promised.

She picked Justin up again. "Thanks. That will be about a month's supply at the rate this little character uses them up."

Her smile grew sad as she handed the baby to me. "Do you want to say goodbye to your son? In another couple of minutes he'll be your daughter."

I took the small, warm bundle into my arms. "Does it matter? The essence inside will stay the same whatever the outside wrapping."

Rita took my arm and looked around the bedroom one last time. "Okay, I'm ready. Let's go."

We found a group of Secondars waiting for us downstairs in the great room. Of course, everyone wanted to hold the baby one last time and say goodbye to Rita.

I stood around feeling awkward as Rita collected hugs and kisses and people wiped

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tears from their cheeks. Everyone loved Rita but respected her decision to be close

at hand in the Nexus in case I needed her help.

We left the others behind in the great room at last and walked down the tunnel to the gate. As we walked, I couldn't help but think how brave Rita was and

how much she must love me to travel with me to a world she'd never seen, taking

our newborn child with her.

I reached out and slipped one finger into Justin's little hand. His tiny fingers

gripped my single finger. I wondered what lay ahead and how long I'd be away from

him on the psychopath world. I wanted to be with my family, to spend time with

them, and instead we would soon be torn apart again.

Rita looked grim too now that the time had come. I knew it was breaking her heart to have to leave him in the care of someone else. Our minds touched and she

nodded, as if to say, "Let's get on with it."

My heart swelled with pride and I took her hand. Rita has the kind of courage that isn't obvious but is always there when needed. Through my various adventures,

she'd been at my side, helping and encouraging me, keeping me compassionate

and human with her own brave heart. That's the kind of courage I mean. She will

always do what needs to be done, come what may.

We entered the room and without hesitating, we went into the gate.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Russ guided us back without any problems. Both Justin and Rita made the trip without mishap. I was fairly certain that would be the case, since the baby was

exhibiting telepathic abilities already. Nonetheless, it was a relief to step out the

other side and see Rez and Justina emerge a second later.

"Wow!" was all Rez could say, as he took in the crystal city.

Russ had purposefully guided us in the flux so that we emerged through a different gate than usual, a gate on a hill overlooking the city. In fact, it was the same

gate I'd come through the first time I arrived in the Nexus. It gave Rez a sweeping

view of his new world—the green valley, the bubbling stream, and the strange crystal city rising in the distance.

"I feel like Dorothy did when she woke up in Oz," Rez said, after spending a minute taking in the phenomenal view. "You never told me how beautiful it was."

"Mostly I've been too busy to appreciate the beauty," I said. "

It seems like I've had a deadline looming over my head since the moment I first arrived." "Ah, yes, the deadline." Rez's beautiful dark eyes gazed at me with sympathy. Usually I'd be busy admiring the rest of his handsome male body, but there's no point craving what you can't have. He handed Justina over to me, then stepped back through the gate. Rita wanted to remain a female for Justina, but she didn't want to take the risk of sending our baby through the gate a second time, no matter how sure we might be that she would come through okay. I reached out and touched Justina's little mind, but caught no hint of upset in the baby from the transition. The change in her body was minor from the baby's point of view, since she was young and healthy and years away from caring what sex she belonged to. Yet I did notice one subtle difference, a slight but perceptible sense of confusion filled the baby's mind when Rez held her, a confusion that disappeared when Rita came back. I handed Justina to Rita and went through the gate myself, changing to male. I was enjoying the father role. Rissa joined me on the second trip to become Russell again. Once we had our sexes straightened out, Russell and I materialized some

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clothes out of the quantum flux, impressing Rita in the process. Then we led her on a brief tour of the crystal city. She laughed when we showed her the trick of walking through the walls. The strange machines and glowing crystals held little interest for her, though. Rita is a people person. As we walked, Russ and I sent out mental messages to the other Seconders in the Nexus that we were back, and that they should come to the central chamber to meet Rita and the baby at 1500 hours. Russell left us to check in with his group, while I took Rita and Justin to see the suite of rooms I had prepared for their stay in the Nexus. "Oh, how beautiful!" Rita cried, as we came through the wall. Our private retreat looked like the suite of some luxury hotel with thick carpets, polished furniture made from exquisitely finished woods, and a huge double bed piled high with rich linens and plump pillows. A crib with lacy pink blankets stood in the far corner. She put Justina down for her nap, and turned to me. "You thought of everything, Lee. I love you." "Come here." I opened my arms. We had a good two hours until the meeting and I took full advantage of them. When we arrived at the central room, we both had big grins on our faces. Russell chuckled and gave me the thumbs-up sign. Messler had created the central room some time ago. It served as a gathering place where we could come together for fun and games, and to mingle and talk.

Most of the Seconders in the Nexus were friends of Russell's, fellow scientists he had recruited to join him. By agreement, we kept the room more or less the same, although I noticed some differences every time I went to it. There was certainly a difference this time; Justina was the only child to ever come to the gate master's world and everyone, men and women alike, gathered to witness the event. Donna was first in line to greet us. I had to hold Justina again while she hugged Rita and the two of them burst into tears of joy. A great deal of kissing and hugging later, Donna took little Justina in her arms and cooed with delight, as she smiled down at the baby's face. "She's perfect, Rita, absolutely perfect." Rita beamed and patted Donna's stomach. "I hear you have one in the oven,

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too."

"Yes." Donna glowed with happiness. "I only just caught, though."

While the two of them huddled together to talk about babies, I held Justina and endured the sight of usually staid scientists turning into blubbering idiots. Every last one of them oohed, and ahed, and made silly noises at our baby, until I began to suspect that something in the air was affecting their minds. But Rita assured me that anyone who was normal did the same thing. Russell gave everyone plenty of time to meet the new additions to the crystal city, and then he called us to order. This would be our last planning session before we departed for our assignments on the other worlds.

I found a comfortable lounge for Rita and Justina, and sat down beside them. Others found their own chairs. Russell stood in front, counting noses as the chatter died down. After a moment, a puzzled frown crossed his face. "Where are Amanda and Derrick?" he demanded.

I reached out with my mind, seeking a sense of their presence somewhere in the city. My mental touch came back empty.

"I'm afraid they've left already," Randy said.

Russell's face darkened. "That was foolish. I've got a great deal more to convey about handling the transfer."

"They said it was more important to get their world in order, and time was limited." Randy shot an apologetic glance my way. "Amanda seemed impatient to get started."

I held up a hand against a murmur of angry voices. "That was a mistake, but what is done is done. I'm not about to act like some sort of cop and go after them. They'll have to handle the transition in their world as best they can without the most

up-to-date information."

Russ folded his arms as the others quieted down. "Okay, people. Listen up. What we're about to try won't be easy. No one knows how many souls are in stasis at the moment, maybe millions, and we won't be able to save them all."

A twinge of guilt passed through me. I still struggled with conflicting feelings about the entity who'd reached out to me in the gate, offering me vast powers in

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exchange for my humanity. With such powers I could save many more. Either Russ caught my thought or he was thinking along the same lines. His expression grew even more serious.

"This stasis environment was set up by the masters to hold those the gate could not handle. It's my belief that the masters fully intended that these people be released eventually. This is why there is a limit to how long stasis can hold them—a limit we are rapidly approaching."

"Less than twenty-four hours remaining, by latest estimate," Donna added.

Russ lifted his chin a notch, and his eyes flashed. "We're going to do our best,

I know. If we lose people—and we will—I want you to remember that what is

happening is not our fault. The blame lies with the gate masters. When they sent

their gates to Earth, they made some terrible miscalculations. Because we are an

alternate world that is close to their own timeline, they expected we would react like

them, but we didn't."

"What do you mean?" Rita asked.

"They thought we would sacrifice our humanity to our evolution, as they did."

A look of grim satisfaction passed over Russ's face. "We fooled them, and I'm glad.

I'm a scientist myself—I've dedicated my life to understanding the world in an ordered, rational way. But that doesn't mean I'm prepared to give up my humanity,

and its tremendous gifts—including the most important gift, the ability to love."

He smiled at Rita and me for a moment, but his tender gaze came to rest on

Donna. Her own eyes shone with love as she watched him.

"They miscalculated," he continued. "They didn't understand our emotional,

intuitive side. They expected that those of us who were able to go through the gates

more than once would evolve in intelligence, but they never dreamed we would

develop intuitive powers as well. They thought we would sacrifice our emotional side

to pursue an ever-increasing intelligence. We Seconders were meant to be come

gate masters, able to release those in stasis. Instead, we have chosen to remain human."

"And that's the right choice." Rita stood up, her eyes flashing. "Don't ever doubt it, whatever may happen in the next few hours."

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Russ nodded. "I agree. It's the right choice. There've been hints, though, that the gate masters continue to watch our progress. Some entity tried to contract Lee during a gate passage. It may be the masters are not pleased with the choice we've made. We need to stay alert."

"Do you think they'll interfere?" I asked.

"Depends on how things go. The masters knew the gates could handle physical problems, as long as they weren't too far gone, but psychological problems are more subtle and not necessarily physically based. I can only conjecture that if

we'd gone the step beyond humanity we'd have mental powers that would enable us

to either cure or control these people—perhaps in ways that would be repugnant to a

human being."

"Psychological control of their minds, you mean." Rita shook her head, her

mane of dark curls bouncing around her shoulders. "That's unacceptable."

"To you and me. Perhaps to the gate masters it's the only rational course."

"Do you think they might try to control our minds?" An icy river of fear ran down my spine at the thought.

Russ tried to smile, but didn't quite succeed. "It's possible. We haven't taken

the last step to change into what they are. Perhaps they intend to force us to do so."

My temples started to throb with the beginnings of a headache. The sense of impending doom that never left me nowadays crystallized, and I knew Russ's words

were chillingly accurate. The gate masters did plan to interfere with humanity, but

they intended to use human agents to do so—or more accurately, humans who were

no longer human, who had betrayed their own kind and taken that final step as the

gate masters had planned all along.

With a rush, the pattern came together. Amanda and Derrick! The two names pulsed like strobe lights in my mind in time to the pounding headache that erupted

out of nowhere. Why hadn't I seen it sooner? Amanda had dropped some clues, but

I'd been too busy thinking with the wrong part of my anatomy.

In the distance I heard Russ's voice droning on. He was explaining how the

team staying in the Nexus planned to release those locked in stasis onto the various

worlds using the sex gates. He had set up an order for release, with the innocents

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scheduled first, followed by those with minor mental illnesses. Next he would release

those who had committed minor crimes, and the religious fanatics. Those who had

committed major crimes, sexual deviants, and my assignment—psychopaths—would be released last.

My pattern sense continued to go off, warning me that Amanda had sacrificed

her humanity to follow the path of the gate masters. Perhaps she'd convinced Derrick to do the same. I almost wished they would stay missing, but I suspected

that Amanda intended to confront me with one last plea to give up my humanity and

join her in the quest for superiority. What better way to convince me than to make

the release a disaster in some way, so that I had to change to save human lives?

Or maybe what she really wanted was to see me go down in crushing defeat.

That would give her an excuse to step in, save the day with whatever new powers

her change gave her, and try to convert the other Seconders to her way of thinking.

My stomach knotted with fear. Of all the terrible events we'd faced since the appearance of the gates, the worst might lie a few hours ahead of us.

"Are you okay, Lee?" Rita whispered. Her eyes filled with concern as she stared at me. "You don't look good."

"I'm fine," I lied. But I could tell she saw right through it.

At the front of the room Russell finished his briefing, and began answering questions. I flashed what I hoped was a cheerful smile at Rita and bent over the

baby, who lay sleeping in her arms. So far Justina didn't appear to be too impressed

by the Nexus. She'd slept through the tour and Russ's briefing. I watched her little

face scrunch up, and her eyes move behind her eyelids. She was dreaming. What did babies dream about? I started to reach out and touch her mind, then stopped.

We needed to respect her privacy. Besides, she looked so peaceful. I hated to

disturb her.

I stroked her little hand, marveling at each tiny finger. Son or daughter,

Justina was perfect. I wanted her to grow up in a world that valued humanity. A

sudden babble of voices announced the end of the briefing. Swallowing a lump in my

throat, I looked up at Rita.

"I need to leave tonight for the alternate Nexus where the psychopaths will

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emerge. I think it would be best if you stayed here with Justina." Rita's arms tightened around Justina. The baby gave a little warning cry and stirred in her sleep. "That wasn't our plan." "I know, but I'm worried that Amanda and Derrick are up to something. I don't want both of us to be at risk." Speaking quickly, I filled her in on my past experiences with Amanda. "If there might be trouble, I want to be there," Rita said. "And I want you to stay here." Rita lifted her chin, a sure sign her stubbornness genes were kicking in. "You need me, Lee. How do you plan to handle these psychopaths?" I realized Rita had missed our discussions in the Nexus, and I'd barely had time to fill her in on our plans. "Since their problem is a mental or emotional one, I expect they will emerge from stasis healthy. They will emerge on Nexus Six—" "Nexus Six?" Rita interrupted. "Our designation for the psycho world. There are seven worlds altogether. That's the maximum number we could handle. They'll emerge through a gate, but it will only operate one way, so they won't be able to leave." "In other words, you've set up a fancy prison." I shrugged. "These are people who would be, or should be, in a prison on Earth. We both know the gates don't make mistakes. They are people without conscience, capable of any crime. And we will try to help them once things settle down. With our ability to read their minds, perhaps we can find some way to reach them." "A whole new kind of therapy." Rita gave me an incredulous look. "Are you planning to try this on your own?" Donna walked over to where we sat in time to hear this last remark. "He'd be a fool if he did. You have a special touch with people, Rita. Lee just wants you to wait until things have settled down to come to Nexus Six. The next few days are going to be nuts." "I know I'll be lost without your help," I agreed, taking her hand. "I want to make sure the situation is safe, first, before you come, that's all. Trying to help these

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people won't be easy. We may have to leave them isolated on Nexus Six to fight things out among themselves."

Donna shuddered. "That won't be pretty."
"Maybe it's what they deserve."
Rita shook her head, and smiled her gentle smile. "You don't really think that,
Lee. You're stressing out from overload at the moment. If the gates have taught us
anything, it's that we have the ability to change—sometimes in ways we never
imagined. I'm not going to give up on any of these people."
I rolled my eyes. "The gates want to change us into something more than
human. These psychopaths are less than human. It should be interesting."
Rita and Donna exchanged a look, although it was Donna who spoke. "You
don't sound like you have much sympathy for your future patients."
I shrugged. "I took this world, because it's going to be a tough one to handle. I
never said I liked it."
A second look flew between Rita and Donna. They were doing that feminine
thing, talking without words, although they might have shared a mental touch,
for all I
knew. Maybe women learned to read each other's minds long before the sex
gates. I
picked up some of that ability when I was a woman, but since I was a man at
the
moment, I had to guess what they were thinking. Donna turned to Rita and
stretched
out her arms.
"Can I hold Justina for a little bit, while you talk to Lee?"
"Sure."
Rita handed over the baby, although not without five minutes of kissing and
cooing first. Remarkably, Justina never stirred. While Donna walked off
with her
precious burden, Rita turned on me, a determined look in her eye.
"You're going to take me with you. That was the plan."
"What about the baby?"
"I'm confident she'll be safe here. Donna can watch over her."
"She needs her mother."
"She needs both of her parents. That's why I intend to come with you and
make sure you get back safely. Face it, Lee, besides housing and feeding
them, you

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have no idea what to do with a world full of psychopaths."
"And you do?"
"At least I have the training to know when they're trying to scam
me."
She had a point there. I bit my lip and tried to think of another argument. "You
need to stay behind, in case something does happen to me. If Justina loses both her
parents, she'll be an orphan."
Rita folded her arms and jutted out her jaw. "You're not scaring me. The best
way to stop that from happening is to go with you. All the other teams have

two
people."
"Except Russell," I pointed out. "Donna can't go because she
's pregnant."
"Which works out great for us. Donna can watch the baby."
I sighed. I knew there was no arguing with Rita when she was in this mood. I
just hoped I was wrong about Amanda. But if worse came to worse, we coul
d always
escape through the gates.
Donna must have sensed that Rita had won the argument. She came back,
holding Justina. The baby was awake at last and regarded us with big blue
eyes.
"Donna," Rita began, "could you—"
Donna kissed the top of the baby's head, and smiled. "Don't even ask. I would
be thrilled to take care of Justina while you're gone."
Russell came over to join us, as the last of the stragglers left the room.
"What's your pattern sense telling you?" he asked.
I chewed on my lip. "I don't like it. Something's wrong. Amanda
and Derrick
are up to no good—I'd bet my fortune on it. And the gate masters h
ave plans of their
own."
Russ sighed. I noticed dark smudges under his eyes even though he had a
new, youthful body as a result of our passage. Normally, the four of us would
be
piled in bed, venting our excess sexual energy. Instead, we were poised on the
verge of some great change. Apprehension churned in my gut. Beside me, Rita
took
Justina into her arms and gave her a tender farewell kiss.
"We won't be long," she promised the baby.
I only hoped we could keep that promise.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Darkness had fallen on Nexus One, a merciful darkness that hid the scene of
pain and suffering that spread out before me. I knelt in front of the gate, as
the old
and sick and dying emerged from stasis. The choices were all heartbreaking,
but I
could only help one at a time. Blinking back unaccustomed tears I wrappe
d my arms
around the frail body of a little girl with copper-colored curls. A mind touch
told me
she was suffering from a terminal brain tumor.
I carried her past groups of sick and dying people, and into one of the
crystal
towers where I found her an empty bed. This whole tower had been converted
into a
hospital/hospice for those who made it out of stasis alive. They weren't many.
Most
of the old and dying were perishing, many falling out of the gate already
dead. It was
a nightmare worst than any I had ever experienced. I laid the child's
almost
weightless body down on the bed, and tucked the sheets up around her thi

n
shoulders.
"I want to go home," she muttered, grabbing my arm. "Can you take me home?"
My heart ached for her. She was six years old and dying. How could I explain to her that years had passed since the day her desperate parents had urged her to enter one of the gates on Earth? Most likely, her mother and father were alive and would welcome her back with open arms despite the heartbreak of getting her back only to watch her die. Russell had sworn he would concentrate on finding a way to transport these people safely through a gate back to Earth. But we didn't know for sure if that was possible, or how long it might take him to find a way. And even if we could take these people home again, they would only be returning to die. Nothing could prevent that tragedy. Maybe it was for the best that their loved ones on Earth were being spared this horrible sight.
Nexus One was the first of our alternate worlds, where the release of those we had dubbed 'Innocents' had started a few hours earlier. The ills of the very old and the extremely sick were beyond the capabilities of the gates' technology. As the release from stasis began the Innocents came out unchanged except for their sex—

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still gasping for breath, in pain, confused, dying, some of them even dead, as if the passage through the gate had shocked the last of the life out of their bodies. In a matter of hours Nexus One had turned into a vast hospital world, but it was a world that offered little hope of recovery for its terminally ill patients. "Someone will be coming soon to take care of you, sweetie," I promised.
The holographic computer on this world had manufactured hospital androids who would care for the dying. That was the best we could do. The gates that had cured so many had failed these people. But I couldn't find it in me to blame the technology. A part of me knew that these people had reached a crucial point in their struggle against old age or disease—they no longer possessed enough life energy—whatever it is—to enable the gate to disassemble and recreate their bodies new and whole. Instead, the defects remained. And the knowledge of why it had happened offered no comfort.

I took the little girl's hand and squeezed it. "Will you wait here and try to get some sleep?"

One of the men in Russell's group who had some medical training affirmed that none of these people were going to live long. He predicted most of them would be dead by morning. The old were going the fastest—we separated them on a different floor so the others couldn't see how fast they were dying. The gates had squeezed the last of life out of them, I guess.

The terminally ill adults were alive, but most of them hadn't long to go. Too many had delayed their passage through the gate until the last moment, not wanting to risk it until all other hope had failed. I had passed many of them sitting in huddled groups near the gate. Their last hope was gone and they were struggling to accept their awful fate. Many sobbed, or cursed anyone who came near to help them. Guilt tormented me whenever I looked at them. Yet our only choice had been all or nothing—let all of the people in stasis out or let them all perish. If I hadn't authorized this release, the people now emerging on the other Nexus worlds would have been lost...

I left the little girl to sleep if she could, and staggered back toward the gate. I was drenched with sweat, and dead on my feet from exhaustion. All night long the

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dead and the dying had emerged from the gate, like some scene from hell. I helped in my way—moving dead bodies and taking the sick to beds.

I reached the doorway of the hospital. Beyond, I could see a green, glowing arch. Someone leaned against the wall on one side of the door, quietly crying. I walked closer and saw it was Rita. As she turned to me, her pain poured down the telepathic link between us, nearly overwhelming me. I choked back my own sobs as I took her in my arms. She pressed her face to my chest, her shoulders shaking.

"Hush, it's almost over," I whispered, stroking her thick hair.

"You mean they'll be dead soon." Rita's voice was bitter.

"They knew their situation was hopeless when they walked into the gates on Earth."

"They took a gamble that they would emerge cured or vanish forever. They never dreamed they would die on an alien planet far from home. We should have let

them perish in stasis. It would have been kinder."
"We didn't know," I muttered, as the guilt choked my throat. "
They might have
come out cured. We couldn't predict. And we've saved some."
She sighed and lifted her face. Tears glistened in her eyes. "I saw t
he little girl
in your arms. I couldn't help but think of Justina."
I swallowed a heavy lump in my throat. "There was nothing I could do for her.
The nursing androids will give her medication to ease her pain. I can on
ly hope she
will fall asleep and slip away into death."
Her eyes widened at the despair in my voice. She gripped my arm, her nai
ls
digging into my flesh. "You did your best."
"Did I?"
I bit my lip, as I glanced over her shoulder at the pathetic group of people
hunched around the gate, refusing to move, simply wanting to die where t
hey had
fallen. Could I have saved some of these people if I had listened to the voice
of the
entity and let myself become more than human? Was my humanity purchased at the
price of their lives? I didn't have to speak. Rita knew my thoughts,
tasted my guilt.
"Nonsense. These people were doomed. There was too much degeneration
in their bodies."

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I nodded, too weary to argue. It was a good theory, and the truth was we
would never know. I had made my choice. This was the reality that choice
had
brought.
The gate stood a few yards away, casting an eerie green light over the f
aces
of the dying. I noticed that no one had emerged for several minutes.
"Have we released the last of the Innocents?" I wondered aloud.
"It looks like it."
"Not so very many came through alive," I muttered. "Maybe that's a blessing."
I'd used my quantum powers to move the bodies away from the gate area
. I didn't
know what we would do about burying them. A gigantic funeral pyre seemed
appropriate.
Numbness gripped my heart. I didn't want to think about it anymore. I
f the
other worlds went as badly as this one had...I couldn't bear that th
ought either.
"Where do you suppose Amanda and Derrick have run off to?" I asked
instead.
Their betrayal stung like a whiplash across open wounds. This was the wo
rld
they were supposed to handle. Instead, they'd gone missing, leaving the rest
of us to
do what we could. Both Russell and I had probed the quantum flux trying
to find a
trace of their minds, without success.
The green fog within the arches of the gate stirred and flashed a pea-colored

light over our faces as Russell stepped out. His questing mind found us even though we stood hidden in the shadows near the doorway. Ignoring the dead and dying, he came straight to us. The dark circles under his eyes had grown deeper. "We're done releasing people to this world," he said, without preamble. "I've started the release on Earth Two." "How's that going?" I asked out of duty. I was too tired to care. Russell laughed, although there was no joy in the sound. "Petty criminals must go to the same school or something—they're all feeding us pretty much the same line, as if it were rehearsed." "What's that?" Rita wanted to know. Russell laughed again, and launched into his best imitation of a Fourth World

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accent. "Waking up here is a way-rad shock to the brain cells, man. I know I've changed, yessa. That gate, it's juggled my genes, for sure. I'm gonna start a new life and never steal from no one, no how, no way." "That's piling it a little high and deep, isn't it?" "Maybe they mean it," Rita said, ever the optimist. Russell shrugged his big shoulders. "I suppose they could argue that they've served whatever time they had coming while they were in stasis." "Hey, they went through the gate of their own free will." After holding dying children in my arms, I had no pity for any criminal types. Most of them had soon learned it was dangerous to enter a gate and stayed away. The ones on Earth Two were either the first, or the most stupid. "Now, Lee!" Rita wagged a finger at me. I recognized the tone of her voice. She was in psychologist mode. "They might be telling the truth. It's entirely possible that some physical problem—some chemical imbalance—triggered their life of crime. If so, a trip through the gate might very well have cured it." "If it were that simple, why didn't the gate spit them out again?" I challenged. Russell held up both hands. "Hey, you two, peace. Rita's right about the chemical imbalance thing, learning disabilities that might be related to brain malfunctions, a host of things that could have triggered a life of crime. Whether the gate measures something deeper—say the quality of a soul—I don't think any of us know." I stared at Russ, unable to believe he'd used the word soul. That came close to heresy in any scientist's vocabulary, nor was I that fond of it myself. This terrible night must have shaken him as much as it had shaken me. But Rita looked pleased. "Exactly. We need to stay hopeful." She turned to Russell. "Don

't your
quantum studies show that attitude and intent influences reality?"
"Yes, that's true."
I slipped an arm around Rita's shoulders and hugged her. I thought she was
way too hopeful, but I had to love her positive spirit. "So what's the next
step?"
Russ swept a hand through his tangled hair. "The Seconders in charge
on
Earth Two are bringing the people up to date on events on Earth since their

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disappearance. They're not happy to be isolated on an alien world, of course,
but
we're making it clear that we expect good behavior and their cooperation in
building
a viable society. None of them will go back to Earth—if and when I find
a way—
unless they show good behavior."
I nodded. I couldn't let the people trapped in stasis die, but that didn't mean I
was going to be responsible for swamping Earth with millions of misfits. Russ
leaned
against the wall, his shoulders sagging.
"The dying here are our first priority. Thanks for your help. I know
you have
your own problem world you should be worrying about instead. When we find
Amanda and Derrick, I plan to wring both their necks."
"You need to rest."
"No time. We're almost finished releasing the major criminals on Nexus
Three."
There would be no fooling around on Nexus Three. We'd fenced in several
towers around the gate to create a self-contained prison. We planned to
consider
everyone who came through the gate guilty until proven otherwise. It might not
be
the American way, but as shorthanded as we were, it was the best we could do.
After my experiences on Nexus One, I wanted to lean my back against the wall,
slide
down to the ground, and go to sleep. But I couldn't desert Russell.
"Need help on Three?"
"Actually, it's under control. Our new inhabitants are so amazed by the sex
change and so horny after several years in stasis, that crime is the furthest
thing
from their minds. As long as gang wars don't break out, we should be
okay."
That was good news. I glanced at Rita. "We should leave for Six if you're
about to start releasing on Four. I want to take a last minute look around before
the
psychopaths start arriving."
Russ wiped his hands against his jeans. "About that, would you mind stopping

at Four on your way—it's Rita's area of expertise."
I clapped him on the shoulder. "Sure. A visit with the mentally ill will be a good warm up for the psychopaths."
"And then stop on Five, too."

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"What! That's one world I don't want to visit."
Russell turned to Rita for support. "I have a feeling Todd and Sophie on Five are going to need some help."
"Exactly who is going on Five?" Rita asked.
"That's the religious nuts," I supplied.
"Now, Lee—" Russ started.
I held up a hand. "Hey, I didn't decide they had a problem. The gates did. But if you insist, we'll stop there, too."
We hugged Russ goodbye and headed into the gate. By now, Rita was quite impressed with my ability to navigate between alternate worlds. It's true what they say about practice. We emerged on Nexus Four along with the first few people coming through the gate. Tom Hansen, who was in charge, laughed when he saw us.
"Are you part of the group, or on a tour of inspection?"
I stuck out my tongue at him. Rita looked around at the bewildered people, her face warm with compassion, and began moving among them explaining what had happened to them. I knew I could forget about sleep for a while.
To my surprise, Nexus Four turned out to be perhaps the most hopeful world of all. These people were not to blame for their mental imbalances, as Rita repeatedly pointed out to me. Plus, many of them also suffered from chemical imbalances and were markedly improved when they emerged from the gate. But the crucial factor was the sex change. Many mental problems can be traced back to rigid or erroneous thinking patterns, and there is nothing like a sex change to shake up your world, and teach you the meaning of flexibility. In our brief visit there we heard many of them describe this as a new start. I can't say they were happy to find themselves on a strange world, but they were prepared to work on making a new beginning until the day we found a way to get them back to Earth.
Rita would have preferred to stay on Four longer, but I'd promised Russ we'd make a brief visit to see how things were going on Five. By the time we came through the gate, most of the people assigned to that world had already arrived out of stasis and, true to form, were already busy arguing with each other. I doubted

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Five was going to see much peace now that the religious zealots had landed. Todd and Sophie were doing their best to keep the arguments under control, but I could see the strain on their faces already. They filled both of us in mentally as soon as we stepped out of the gate. Sophie was surrounded by a group of Moslems who were insisting that they be given the tower on the edge of the city that faced east. The Gaters were demanding free access to the gate—not that any of them dared to use it again. It was the principle of the thing. That’s the way with religion, of course. Lots of unbending principles that start lots of wars. Meanwhile, the Christian fundamentalists huddled in their own group as far away from the evil, Satanic gate as possible. At least we didn’t have to worry about them trying to use the gate as a means of escape from Five. Already they were busy screaming at each other. I felt sorry for Todd and Sophie, but didn’t see much I could do.

“Keep doing what you’re doing,” I told Todd. “Keep the groups separated, or there will be trouble. I’m not sure giving each one their own tower is enough. Maybe we can find a few other cities.”

Todd rolled his eyes heavenward. “Maybe we should have given each religion its own planet.”

“What’s the point?” I shook my head. “Odds are, within a week they would have had a split about something, and started fighting again.”

“Lee, you’re such a cynic,” Rita said, but even she looked discouraged by the loud bickering going on around us.

“Cynic or not, I’m beginning to think I can do more good on the psychopath world.”

Rita took my hand. “I’m ready. But I’m warning you, Jackson Lee Stuart, you’ve got a lot to learn about psychopaths. You might wish you were back here before long!”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The gate on Nexus Six stood in the middle of a huge park, surrounded by an eight-foot fence. The fence wasn’t really necessary—where could the psychopaths go?—but I wanted to convey the idea that they were subject to our authority from the start. When Rita saw it, she laughed and mumbled something about my controlling

tendencies, but I noticed she didn't insist on taking it down. The fence also surrounded a number of the towers that I had set aside to house the psychopaths. This was the first world Amanda and I had found. H.C. would look after the physical needs of the psychopaths and see they were fed and clothed, while Rita and I tried to find a way to fix whatever was wrong inside their heads. As much as I'd argued with Rita about coming, I was glad she was as there to keep an eye out for any developing problems in handling this dangerous group. When we arrived on this Nexus the towers stood dark against a star-strewn sky, but now a glorious sunrise sparkled over their crystal walls. It seemed a good omen for the great experiment that was about to begin. I stood on a balcony overlooking the gate, ready to address the psychopaths as they emerged. Rita stood at my side. I expected them to be disorientated and confused. Not only were they waking up after years of unconscious oblivion, they would also emerge as a different sex—most of them female. I put an arm around Rita's shoulders and kissed her forehead. The green fog within the gate swirled in mysterious patterns. We strained our eyes to see the first sign of movement. "What the—?" A naked woman burst out of the mist, a stream of curse words falling from her lips. She took two steps onto the green grass and stopped. Tilting back her head, she looked up at the alien towers and her jaw dropped. Then she looked down at her body and screamed. "Calm down!" I shouted from above her. "It's the sex gate!" I pointed behind her. She whirled around and I could see the memory come back to her. I

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wondered why she'd entered the gate all those years ago, but there was no time to ask. Two more women popped out of the gate and then a naked man. "Move away from the gate!" I shouted, but already they were babbling to each other and ignoring me. I sighed. "I need your help, H.C." Obediently, H.C. appeared in the midst of the psychopaths milling in front of the sex gate. They screamed and backed away, but soon realized that he was not solid or real. Still, he had an imposing presence and a loud voice—the two things that were needed at the moment. "To the right!" he thundered, the majestic sound echoing around the park. He waved his hands, and to my surprise soon had people moving away from the gate to make room for new arrivals. My heart sank as the crowd grew bigger and

bigger. This world would probably be the most difficult one to help, and I had hoped that at least the number of people involved would be small. Estimates of the number of psychopaths in the general population vary widely from less than three percent, up to thirty percent. Below me, a steady stream of men and women emerged from the gate—although the women outnumbered the men by three to one. H.C. moved among them, a shining beacon of light, answering their most urgent questions. "There must be five thousand out there already," I said, unable to hide my dismay. The psychopaths on Earth had quickly learned about the danger of the gates, so I had hoped there would only be a few in stasis. Rita laid a comforting hand on my arm. "Do you see why I wanted to be here with you, Lee? I suspected the psychopathic personality wouldn't be able to resist the lure of the sex gates." "What do you mean?" "Psychopaths can't feel real emotion, so they crave power instead. The sex gates offer power." I was puzzled. "They offer a new body, a new sex, health maybe if you're sick." "And that is power—the power to be strong and invincible." Rita shook her head at me. "Don't you get it? You're too nice to be on this world. These people want

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anything that will give them the edge over others—and a young, healthy, sexy body will do exactly that." I saw her point. A new body and a psychopathic personality might indeed be a lethal combination. After an hour or so, people finally stopped coming through. H.C. used his stentorian voice to quiet them down, and I spoke to them from the balcony. "Welcome to Nexus Six. This is a world in an alternate universe, far from Earth." That simple announcement set them off again. There were shouts and catcalls, but I simply waited, my hands resting on the railing, until they settled down. "You are here because when you entered the gate on Earth you vanished. Your essence was stored in crystals on a Nexus world. We believe the gate masters intended for you to remain stored until a way was found to cure your mental disorder. However, because the gates found so many incurables on Earth, the storage crystals became full, and we were forced to begin a release. All of you on this world are psychopaths." I paused for breath and eyed the crowd below me. They

had fallen silent, but their faces showed their unhappiness. "I'm a Secondar. Some of you vanished before Seconders came into being. We have the ability to go through the gates more than once, due to certain special powers we possess. I intend to use those powers to try and cure you of your psychopathic tendencies. H.C. has divided you into groups. You will proceed to assigned towers where you will live until your turn comes. If treatment is successful, you will be able to create a new world here. In addition, we hope someday to find a way to return you to Earth. That's it for now."

A low grumble rose up from below, but I wasn't about to stand there and listen to their complaints. They were psychopaths. They were damned lucky I hadn't let them vanish when the crystals reached capacity. Taking Rita's arm, I led her off the balcony and into the tower that was ours alone. H.C. would keep us safe there while he allowed the psychopaths to approach and enter for treatment. To succeed we had to find something that would help them en masse, but until we did we would experiment with various techniques one-on-one.

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I gave them most of the day to get settled in their quarters and adjust to their new bodies before I contacted H.C. and told him to send the first one in to us. As distasteful as I found these people, I was eager to see if my new mental abilities would allow me to explore their cunning minds and find a way to cure their distorted thinking.

"What are our chances?" I asked Rita, as we waited for the subject H.C. had selected to appear. We were relaxing in a garden room with a sunroof overhead, and a gently cascading fountain behind us. Lush greenery surrounded the small table where we shared coffee together. Rita sat across from me, wearing a sexy little red dress, with her long dark hair loose and cascading across her shoulders. I traced the path of one luxuriant lock with my glance. It curled to an end on the soft swell of one lovely breast.

"Your chances are pretty good."

Her eyes sparkled as she sensed my sexual arousal. We'd passed through the gates several times on our journey to Nexus Five and I was horny as hell. But the thousands of psychopaths outside our tower demanded our attention. I eyed

her
luscious lips and cursed my duty.
"I mean with the psychopaths."
Her face sobered. "Not so good. I'm not sure if what they have can
be
treated."
"What do you mean?"
She toyed with her hair and looked uncertain, which wasn't like Rita. "I had a
professor who worked with these people. He spent years trying to understand
why
they did the heartless and violent things they do. In the end, he concluded
that they
lack a soul."
"What?" I snorted. "That doesn't sound very scientific."
"Maybe not." She shot me a worried look. "But what if the gates
can't replace
whatever it is they are missing? What if it is a soul—for lack of a better
word?"
I waved a hand, refusing to be depressed when we were together again and
she looked so gorgeous. "If it comes to that, we'll leave them on
this world. They

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can't get off and H.C. can keep them supplied with food and water until the
end of
time, if need be."
Rita shuddered. "Can you imagine the horror of living in any society they
would create?"
"Not my problem."
"It wouldn't be humane to leave them here to prey on one another."
She looked so stricken that I was touched, despite my attempt to stay co
ld-
hearted about these scum. Rita always managed to see the good, even in people
I
considered evil. I often disagreed with her, but I treasured her loving heart.
I didn't
want her to change.
"We're going to do our best to help them," I promised.
The light brightened as H.C. entered, leading a young woman. She was
healthy and athletic looking, with the innocent face of an angel. That
innocence was
accented by curly golden hair that hung in a flowing mane down her back
and
enormous blue eyes. I had to remind myself that until the release she'
d been a male,
and a dangerous one at that.
"This is Joseph Hendricks," H.C. announced. "He's chosen to
go by the name
of Josie as a woman."
"Have a seat, Josie." I gestured to the third chair at our table,
and poured
some coffee into a delicate china cup.
Josie sat down, flouncing her skirt to reveal a bit of thigh as she did so,
and
batted her eyelashes at me. "I'm so flattered to be the first of

our-um-exclusive
group to get to talk to you."
"We've called you in here today, because we need your help in find
ing a
cure," I said.
Her hands twisted in the hem of her skirt, hiking it higher. I caught a
glimpse
of lace panties. "A cure? What do you mean by that?"
"Try to relax. We intend to try and eliminate your criminal tendencies. As
Seconders, Rita and I have the ability to read your mind, but I wanted to get
to know
you a little by more conventional methods first."
She stiffened and I saw that far from relaxing, my attempt at a chat was
only

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upsetting her. "I heard rumors that the Seconders could read minds before I
went
through the Gate." She tilted her head to one side, and frowned up at me. "But
what
if I don't want you poking around in my head."
"We're doing it for your own good," I assured her. She really d
id have a sweet
young face.
"Well, maybe I wouldn't object to having you in my head." She b
roke into a
charming smile, and leaned toward me. "But do I really need two of yo
u in there?"
"Rita's the expert. She's a trained psychologist."
"Really?" Her smile deepened as she crossed her legs. I couldn'
t help but
admire her shapely calves. "What if I told you that I dislike the idea of
having a
woman in my head?"
"You are a woman now," I pointed out.
"Pardon me, sir," H.C. interrupted. "There's a minor emergency. One of the
psychopaths on the third floor of Tower Two seems to be suffering some s
ort of
breakdown."
The computer was monitoring the towers through sensors located in the
walls.
"What's going on?"
"The subject woke up this morning apparently all right, but became
increasingly withdrawn. About three hours ago she started to cry, and she
seems
unable to stop."
"Sounds like a severe reaction to stress," Rita said, half rising to her feet.
"You'd better go take a look at her," I agreed. "H.C., see that she's moved to
a
room by herself."
I didn't want Rita to have to go into the tower among the other inmat
es. They
were too dangerous. H.C. vanished to do my bidding.
"Be careful," I warned Rita. "Remember if she makes any move, y
ou can go

through the wall, and she can't."

Rita laughed. "I'm not likely to forget that trick." She threw a last measuring glance at Josie. "Are you going to go ahead without me?"

I waved a hand. "I may start exploring her mind, just to get a head start. But

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I'll wait for you to come back before attempting to make any changes in her thought patterns."

Josie giggled. Something about her giggle made me uneasy. I remembered Rita telling me that psychopaths were often social charmers. They knew how to manipulate people to get their way. I glanced at Rita and caught a look of approval in her eye as she followed my thoughts.

"I'll try to be quick," she promised, bending over me for a farewell kiss. "Watch out for this one."

I could tell that she didn't like Josie, which was unusual for Rita. I wondered if having a baby had made her more protective of me. It was a sweet thought, but I was the one who was supposed to be doing the protecting. Call me old-fashioned, but I wanted Rita safe back at the original Nexus, not here fussing over me. I decided I'd try to see what I could do with Josie and show her that everything was under control.

"Are you going to take away my dark side?" Josie asked, as Rita disappeared down the hallway.

"Do you have a dark side?" I raised my eyebrows.

Josie shrugged. "The gate put me here. But how do we know this alien device is always right? Used to be a person was innocent until proven guilty."

I shook my head. "I doubt the sex gates made a mistake. The race that created them is far superior to ours."

Josie made a face. "But they're not human. Maybe they don't know everything about how humans tick."

I was a bit taken aback by that. She was here because the gates had declared her a psychopath, yet the gate masters had made mistakes. The gates had some unexpected effects on humanity. We Seconders were one result of that. I scratched my head.

"If there's nothing wrong with you, you should be happy to let me explore your mind and prove it."

"Right here?" Josie wiggled nervously in her chair. "Is that dratted computer watching, too? I feel like I'm on exhibit." She made a cute pout with her lips.

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I decided to give a little to encourage her cooperation. "H.C., turn off all the monitors on this floor," I ordered. "I'll try not to embarrass you," I added, "even though my mental probe might have to go deep into your mind." "Oh, good. I like things that go deep." Josie licked her lips and crossed her legs. I caught a glimpse of even more luscious thigh. "You have a problem that defies conventional treatment. That's why we feel justified in trying this approach." Josie slid a flirtatious glance my way. "Oh, I'm starting to think letting you mess around in my psyche will be fun. How deep do you like to go?" The garden room was getting hot. I'd have to speak to H.C. later about temperature control. I wiped the palms of my hands on my thighs and concentrated on sticking to the subject. "My plan is to attempt to insert some new postulates within your mental processes that might change rigid or self-centered concepts." She lowered her lashes, veiling her eyes. "I guess I don't have a choice, do I?" If you're going to do it, let's get it done." "Fine." I was nervous about probing the mind of a psychopath, but we had to try, or abandon them to this world, a world they would swiftly turn into a living hell. Josie jumped to her feet and started pacing. "Do I have to be sitting down for this to work? Ever since I came through the gate, I've been full of energy. I can hardly hold still." "It would help. Reading your mind requires a lot of concentration." She smiled and flounced the skirt of her dress, drawing attention to her slim, shapely legs. "You know, I've thought of something." "What's that?" "I have a woman's mind now. Isn't that going to change the way I think?" "Eventually, but it takes a while for the hormones to kick in." I'd had personal experience with that. "Um, I've wonder if my hormones aren't stronger than most. I've felt a lot different ever since I became a woman." Her soft red lips made another sensual pout.

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"That's normal. Besides, you're young and healthy again, too." "Yes, and it's true what they say-going through the gate makes you incredibly horny. It's a shame I haven't had a chance to find out what being a woman is really like." She stepped closer to me and dropped her voice to a seductive whisper. "I really, really want to find out what it feels like." I stood up, intending to grab her arm and guide her back into her chair.

"Sorry, I can't help you."
It was a shame those soft lips had to wait to be properly kissed, but I had a whole planet full of psychopaths to help. At this rate, Justina would be a teenager, ready to date, before I finished. She opened her eyes wide and leaned closer. I caught a hint of the sweet, clean smell of her hair.
"How about one kiss? One long kiss—it will put me in the right mood to let you into my mind."
I saw a hint of tears glistening in those deep blue eyes. Funny, Rita had claimed psychopaths didn't feel emotion, but Josie's reactions seemed normal enough. It gave me hope that I would be successful in my first attempt. Besides, what could one kiss hurt?
"I'd be honored." I grinned at her.
"Wonderful!"
She threw herself at me, her lips curving in a delighted smile. Her arms went round my neck as she drew me close. I bent over to kiss her. She pinched the base of my neck, and an intense pain shot through me. I fell into blackness.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I awoke to agony. My right temple throbbed with a steady ache and my muscles screamed with cramping pain. As the fog in my brain cleared, I became aware that my whole body hurt. I was stretched full length on my side, bound hand and foot. My arms and hands and my whole right side were numb. I opened my eyes and saw I was lying on the hard dirt floor of a small cave, little more than a deep hollow under the crest of a hillside. Josie stood a few feet away, looking out into the blinding sunlight around the mouth of the cave. My mouth felt dry as cotton after a long drought. I licked my lips and struggled to get words out of my aching throat.
"What's going on?"
"What's going on? I've outsmarted you, Mr. Know-it-All Secondar, that's what's going on."
Josie turned toward me with a smirk on her pretty face. Her blonde curls bounced around her head like a halo, but it was clear she was no angel. I tried to move my head and a river of agonizing fire shot down my spine.
"I'd take it easy if I were you," she added, as I bit back a cry. "I used a variation of a very effective nerve pinch to knock you out. Your right side is going to feel numb for quite a while."
"Where am I?"
Josie laughed. "That's the million-dollar question. When I go back to the towers and tell your beautiful young lady and your fancy holographic computer

that I
have you captive—and they don't know where you are—the bargaining will begin."
My heart sank as I pictured Rita's reaction to the news I'd been taken captive
by this deranged psychopath. "What did you do, sling me over your shoulder and
march out of the tower? Someone must have seen you," I bluffed.
"It was damned hard work," Josie said, flexing her arm. "It's a good thing
you're not a real big man. But I know for a fact no one saw me, because you
told the
computer to turn off its sensors. Your computer and your girl friend were busy
elsewhere."
I groaned as that memory came back. Stupid! I'd fallen for Josie's

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psychopathic charm and walked right into this one. I'd been so focused on trying to
convince Rita I could take care of myself that I'd missed the details that
would have
alerted my pattern sense. I put on a bold face.
"Yeah, well, you can't have gotten too far from the towers. They'
ll come
looking."
"Who'll come looking? That computer? I don't think it can leave
the city. Rita
by herself? Not likely."
I yanked at my bonds, but they only bit deeper into my flesh. I tried to
conjure
up some quantum magic by making them disappear, but the moment I tried to
focus,
an incredible pain shot through my head. I moaned, certain my skull was
going to
burst.
Josie giggled. "I wouldn't try to break those bonds if I were you, Lee. I've
tied
you up with a vine I found growing on the trees. It shrinks back tighter
whenever it's
yanked like that. And sorry about the headache. I think I banged your skull
against a
rock setting you down."
That explained the sluggishness of my thoughts. I probably had a concussion
on top of everything else. "You're not going to get away with this," I
growled, trying to
wiggle around so I could see outside the cave. If I could get a mental image of my
surroundings, I could send it to Rita telepathically.
"Oh, I think I am. They don't get you back until they agree to transport me to
Earth, and I only reveal your location when I'm safely home."
"That's it?" I gaped at her in surprise. I'd expected more demands. "What
about your fellow psychopaths?"
Josie tossed her golden curls. "What about them? Let them come up with
their own plan."
Josie's complete lack of concern for anyone else was a chilling revelation.

Rita was right. These people were totally devoid of feeling. Maybe I was incredibly naïve to think I could help them at all. I wiggled away from a stone that was digging into my hip and tried to think through the pounding in my head. "Listen, if you untie me, I promise not to take any retribution for what you've done. I'll treat you like anyone else, and try to help you."

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"You don't get it, do you? I don't want help. I have no intention of releasing you. In fact, I'm going to enjoy the reaction of your woman when I tell her that I have you captive."

"You'll be sorry," I warned. "Rita will know where I am the minute you talk to her."

Josie folded her arms and glared at me, as I struggled to sit up. "How's that?"

"Seconders are telepathic. She'll read your mind."

A worried look crossed her face. "You weren't bullshitting about probing my mind?"

"Why would I bullshit you about that?"

"I figure you Seconders are using us as an experiment. You're probably going to push us through the gates again to see what else they can do to people."

The idea was so horrible only a psychopath could have thought of it. I shook my head. "No, we're trying to help you."

"Yeah, well, I don't need someone messing around in my mind. As for reading it, I'd like to see you try."

She notched up her chin and gave me a challenging grin. Now was the moment to whip out my quantum superpowers and blow away the arrogance of this cold-blooded female, forcing her to release me. Unfortunately, my powers, such as they were, were not particularly impressive at the moment. My head hurt like bloody hell. The intense pain made it impossible to concentrate. Plus, my mind reading abilities functioned best Secunder-to-Secunder, or inside the city where the masters had carefully constructed optimum conditions for using the quantum flux. Reality was more fluid there. Nevertheless, I had to try. I knit my brows together and struggled to concentrate. The pain in my head ratcheted up a notch, and I cried out. "You fraud!" A sandaled foot kicked me in the stomach. "Ooph!" The air rushed out of my lungs. I fought to breathe, unable to speak.

"I know what you intended, even if you won't admit it. You were going to control me with your mind, take away my free will."

I suppose it was natural for a psychopath to believe the worst. I found

my
breath at last. "I know what you're thinking," I wheezed. "You're thinking
what an

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asshole you are."
"Ve-ry funny!"
Josie kicked me again, hard, in the stomach. I screamed and doubled up,
fighting my bonds. Stars danced on the dark roof of the cave. When I finally
caught

my breath again, Josie stood over me.

"I'm leaving you here, no food, no water," she said. "You'
d better hope your

girlfriend and her pal computer cooperate. Be good 'til I get back."

With a mocking wave, she strode into the bright sunlight at the entrance to
the

cave and disappeared. As her footsteps faded, I lay still and tried to think
of a way to

escape. I'd had some military training years ago, when I'd fought in the
militia

against the rampaging Fourth Worlders in Old Houston. That training had
included

tying people up, but not how to get out of the ropes myself. So much for the
physical

approach. Time to call on the old superpowers again, although they had just
failed

me rather drastically. But then Josie hadn't given me much of a chanc
e to probe her

mind, the sweetheart.

I tugged at my bonds and winced as they dug into the already swollen fle
sh

around my wrists, but the thought that Josie was headed back to Rita drove me
on.

She was a vicious character, capable of anything. My only consolation was that
Rita

had spotted her for what she was. She would have her guard up.

Meanwhile, I had to find a solution, and quantum chaos looked like my be
st

bet. If you don't like the reality you're in, create another one.

Only it's a bit more

complicated than that. There were aspects of this reality I certainly didn't
want to

lose—Rita and Justina. I had to be careful and only imagine the sligh
test possible

variance. My bonds were the obvious place to begin. The vine was too tou
gh to

break. I pictured it made of a weaker fiber and then hesitated. Would a change
in

one plant change the whole evolution of this Nexus? If I made a change i
n the

present, would it change the past? What else might spring from my tampering
with

reality? Russell might know the answers, but I didn't.

The more I thought about it, the more dangerous it seemed. Messing with
quantum reality is not an activity for the faint of heart. Fighting back a

sense of
panic, I decided on another approach. I pictured the knots tied in a certain
way, a

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way that would give if I applied sufficient pressure. I squeezed my eyes
shut and
concentrated on an image of Josie tying my hands and feet while my mind
guided
her as she tied the knots—
With a violent yank, I broke free. Struggling into a sitting position, I
reached
down to untie my feet.

"Good work, Lee!" said a female voice.

I froze as fear stabbed through me. But the voice didn't belong to Jo
sie.
Glancing up, I saw Amanda standing in the entrance to the cave. Her arms
were
folded across her chest and she had a smug look on her face as she eyed
my
attempts to free myself.

"Where the devil did you come from?" I snapped.

First she'd deserted her post on her assigned world, and then she had
the
nerve to show up on mine. If she'd appeared a few minutes earlier, I
might have
been happy to see her, but I no longer needed a rescue. I tore the last
scraps of vine
away from my ankles and hauled myself to my feet. It took an effort to s
tand. My
legs were numb and my back muscles cramped with pain. I had two goals in
mind—
to get back to the tower and deal with Josie, and to go through a gate a
nd get a new
body.

"I've been monitoring the release from a distance." Amanda took a step
toward me. "It's gone better than I would have predicted."

"No thanks to you. You were assigned to help the Innocents on Nexus 0
ne.

What happened?"

"I got sidetracked by more important matters."

I stopped brushing the dirt off my pants and gave her the once over. She
didn't look any different at first glance, but something about her tone
triggered my
pattern sense into full warning mode. The sense of impending danger I'
d felt for so
long was suddenly back, full force. I began to wonder how she'd found
me in this
cave. How had she known my location?

"What's going on?" I demanded.

She sniffed. "Your feeble attempt to change reality started a series of
vibrations throughout the flux that led me to you. Beings evolved enough to

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consciously manipulate the quantum potential are quite rare."

"I don't feel particularly evolved at the moment."

I tried to laugh, but it was too painful. Instead, I plucked a leaf from my hair.

Not content with banging my head against a rock, Josie must have thrown me down

on some bushes, too, judging by the scratches on my arms. Amanda lifted an eyebrow.

"You're not that evolved—in fact, you and Russell have barely scratched the surface of what is possible. But you've gone as far as you're ever going to go. Your

fear holds you back."

"Sometimes fear is a healthy thing." I didn't like the direction this conversation was taking.

"Lee, you poor, provincial Texas cowboy. You have no idea what you're missing, do you?"

I braced myself as I stared into her face, looking for a trace of something I

knew she had lost, utterly and forever—her humanity. She met my gaze with cold

indifference. I shuddered at the pools of darkness deep in her eyes.

"What have you done?" I whispered in horror.

"I decided to lead the way for the rest of the Seconders, instead of encouraging them to hold back. I took the step you were afraid to take. I went

through the sex gates and expanded my consciousness to the edge of what a human mind can handle, and then beyond. It is no worse than shedding an old coat."

"Yeah. I can see what a snazzy new being you are." I started edging around her toward the entrance of the cave.

"I can operate on the quantum level in ways you cannot even begin to imagine."

She made a quick gesture, and the air around her began to brighten. In another second she was surrounded by a pulsing halo of golden light. I threw up my

hand to shield my eyes.

"What are you trying to do? Look like a god? Impress the mere mortal?"

"You are no mere mortal." Her voice took on a pleading note. "You're almost there. You could join me."

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"No thanks."

I edged closer to the entrance. Would she let me go, or was she planning to

kidnap me, too? Getting kidnapped twice in one day seemed a bit much—it was

enough to make me wonder if someone—or something—was messing with

my
reality.
Bingo! I'd found the truth. My pattern sense quivered like a dog on point.
Amanda had used her new powers to control Josie. Josie was only a tool to get me
out here. Amanda chuckled, and I knew she'd been following my thoughts.
"I didn't want to face both you and Rita. Together you might defeat me. But it
was easy to suggest an escape plan to Josie's already diabolical mind
. Besides, I
needed to get you away from Rita and her simpering humanity, so you would
listen
to what you're missing."
"I'm not missing one damned thing."
"You're throwing away a chance to become godlike. Why? To live your life
among sniveling humans who will always fear and despise you because you
are
different than they are?" Although she spoke with cold logic, I heard the echo
of old
hurts in her words.
"And what about you?" I challenged. "You've sacrificed your humanity. Where
will you go, where will you live, and who will you call your people?"
"I've made contact with the entity who wanted to help you change." Triumph
flared to life on her face.
"One of the gate masters?"
My heart sank. They were back. Would they return to the Nexus and reclaim
their technology, just when we were starting to learn their secrets? Was this
whole
episode nothing but another twist in whatever experiment they were running
with the
human race as their guinea pigs? Her answer surprised me.
"No, the entity is not a gate master. The gate masters have evolved beyond
this level of reality, as Messler guessed. This entity belongs to another
race, one that
has also achieved quantum consciousness. It has viewed our blundering around at
the edges of its domain with both amusement and concern—if such human emotions
can be ascribed to a creature that is nothing like us. It attempted to contact
you,

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because it wished to help humanity."
"Humanity has had too much help lately," I said. "The human race is never
going to be the same."
She smiled. It looked like a human smile, a curving of the lips, and a
radiant
flash of white teeth. But nothing happened in her eyes. They were cold and
focused.
"It can help us by showing us how to become more like it. Its consciousness
is far above ours. If we insist on remaining human beings, barely able to
peer over
the edge of the quantum sphere of consciousness, we will only irritate it. We

cannot
remain stagnant. We must evolve. To turn down such a gift is a crime against
life
itself. Life grows and evolves."
It was a noble little speech, but I wasn't buying it. I remembered Me
ssler's
theory that the human race was evolving in a different direction than the gate
masters because we had developed intuition, whereas they had developed logic.
They had tried to make our world more like theirs by sending us their se
x gates. Now
this entity wanted us to become more like it. My whole being rebelled at
the idea. It
was one thing to learn to be flexible about gender identity. It was another to
give up
my humanity altogether. I was human and I intended to stay that way.
"I'll pass," I said.
"Don't be foolish," Amanda whispered.
I saw a flash of emotion deep in her eyes. Loneliness? Fear? Desperation?
Those were human feelings. She claimed to be beyond that. Yet every creature
must retain some emotion if only the desire to survive. She grabbed my
arm. Her
sharp nails dug into me.
"Touch my consciousness if you dare, and see what you're missing."
My skin crawled at her touch. The longer I spoke to her the less human she
seemed. I yanked my arm free and straightened my shoulders.
"If you want."
Our gazes locked. The light vanished. I fell into a black hole, a place
where
relentless forces clashed in seeming chaos. A mind reached out to touch
mine, its
thoughts as clear as crystal, and as cold. This being existed wholly without
emotion,
untouched by human desire, without that sense of self that makes us unique.
And

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deep within its vast consciousness lay what was left of Amanda. She was
little more
than a memory of what once was, consumed by this larger entity. Her soul was
gone. Her knowledge fed this other being.
I recoiled in horror. The power within the entity's mind was terrifying. Its
thoughts could bend space and time, remold reality, make the sun halt in
the sky—
so much power belonged only in the hands of a god. But I'd rejected t
he idea of a
god long ago. I wanted my human freedom. I wanted to continue to feel—
even to
feel the pain now splitting my head—not become like this icy, relentless
intellect that
measured us with a dispassionate gaze and lived complete within itself,
unmoved by
our plight.
"No!" I broke free of her mind touch, and staggered toward the entrance of the
cave. "Let me go."
"You are a coward, Lee." She stepped in front of me, blocking my p

ath.

I stopped and glared at her. She was a shell of a human being. "Call me what

you want. I choose to keep my humanity. I think you'll find most of us will make that same choice."

This last sentence I addressed to the entity I knew lived within Amanda. In our

brief touch, I'd sensed its hunger.

"Your race does not deserve the treasures the sex gates have brought you." Amanda—or the thing that possessed her—spat the words at me. "You toy with quantum reality on the whim of some passing emotion, never dreaming how dangerous your actions can be to the balance of the entire universe."

"We do what we have to do to survive."

Her eyes narrowed, as she examined me like some specimen under a microscope. "You play with concepts you do not understand, using mental powers the gate masters never intended for you to develop. This situation cannot be allowed

to continue."

"What do you intend to do about it?"

"I'll remove the gates from Earth, and then use my quantum powers to control the populace. I will bring peace to your planet at last."

Shock left me speechless. I stared at her openmouthed. My pattern sense

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warned me that this entity could indeed do such a thing.

"Nothing to say," she taunted.

"You can't!"

"I can. Do you think you or any of your feeble kind can stop me?"

A thousand memories flashed through my mind. I thought of the wonders the

sex gates had brought to humanity—of minds opened to new experiences by changing

sexes, of bodies healed, of youth reborn, and finally the ability to travel to other

worlds, to travel in time itself.

"The gate masters intended for you to experience the sex change, nothing

more," Amanda said. "The Seconders are an aberration. The gates are an

experiment gone awry. It must be stopped."

I clenched my fists at my side, as a dangerous plan rushed through my head.

I could join Amanda, become like her, fight this entity from the inside, and stop it

from taking the sex gates away from us...

I saw Rita's face, remembered the feel of Justina's little cheek pressed

against mine. No! The price was too high. I could not survive losing Rita and Justina.

"Are you afraid of us?" I sneered. "Why should a being with your powers care about a second-rate race like ours?"

The glow around her body brightened. "I don't care, as long as you stay on

your backwater planet and behave. You made a mistake when you came out t

O

where the big boys play. Next time don't stick your nose out the door until you're strong enough to join in the game."

A form appeared at the entrance to the cave. I squinted, unable to make out who it was in the bright light. Fortunately, Amanda was facing me, busy gloating over her triumph. I kept talking to hold her attention.

"Thanks for the advice, but we'll make our own decisions."

The figure stepped closer and raised one arm. I could see the rock clutched in her hand. Maybe my eyes widened. Maybe I gasped at the last second. Something warned Amanda and she whirled around, but it was too late. Josie was already bringing down the rock in a terrible blow. It struck Amanda with a sickening crunch and she crumbled to the ground. I dropped to my knees at her side and pressed my

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fingers to the pulse at her neck. She was dead. I looked up at Josie, fully expecting a second blow—this one fatal—to fall on my already bruised head, but to my surprise she giggled, and dropped the rock.

"Guess I fixed her," she said. "That will teach her to mess around in my mind."

"You knew she'd controlled you mentally?"

Josie kicked Amanda's body, her face twisted with contempt. "Not until I left you here. I guess she got so busy arguing with you that she forgot to keep tabs on my mind. I was halfway to the Nexus city when I realized I was free again. I wasn't going to let her get away with trying to control me."

I remembered what Rita had told me—psychopaths craved power. They wanted to be in charge. Amanda had chosen the wrong person for her first experiment in mind control. Or the alien entity had. I staggered to my feet. I could barely stand, and I had two problems to solve—Josie, and the entity who had threatened to remove the sex gates from Earth.

"Let me help you." Josie reached out to grab my elbow.

"Aren't you going to tie me up again?"

"Hey, that was Amanda's idea. I'm smart enough to know I'm stuck on this world until one of you Seconders finds a way to let us go through the sex gates a second time. As far as I'm concerned, we're on the same side."

I slumped against the cave wall in relief. One problem solved, it seemed. That left the entity, and its ominous threat.

With Josie's help I limped back to the Nexus city. The going was slow—my head hurt too much for me to move fast—but eventually we topped a hill and saw the towers spread out before us. As soon as I got close, H.C. materialized in

front of
us.
"Tell Rita I'm okay, and show Josie the way back to her tower,"
I ordered. "I'm
headed for the sex gate first. I need a new body."
It only took H.C. a moment to give Rita the good news, and then he
reappeared to guide Josie away. I didn't trust my charming psychopath, but I
had to
admit she'd come down squarely on the side of humanity. Maybe there was hope
for
these people, after all.

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While I waited for Rita, I limped into the gate room and made a quick journey
through, on guard for any attack by the entity the whole time. But there
was no sign
of the being within the quantum flux. I emerged as a woman, feeling one
thousand
percent better. Rita was waiting for me, as I came out of the gate.
"You're safe." Her voice quivered with relief. We'd barely had time for a
passionate kiss when Russ came through the gate and joined us.
"Russ!" There was no one in all the alternate universes I more wan
ted to see
at the moment. "We've had a bit of a problem here."
"I know." He shot me a grim look. "Derrick showed up back in th
e original
Nexus and told me what Amanda was planning."
"He didn't join her?"
"No. He intended to. She'd talked him into it. But at the last minute, he
couldn't face losing his humanity."
"I'm glad, but we still have one awfully big problem."
"I know. The entity." Russell's eyes flashed. "We'll get all the Seconders on
the Nexus worlds together, make the biggest group mind ever seen, and teach
that
so-and-so a thing or two about messing with humanity."
"I'm surprised it hasn't moved against us already," I said,
remembering the
tremendous power I'd sensed through Amanda. "Maybe we should do a
little
reconnoitering first."
Rita clutched my arm. "Oh, Li, be careful."
I pulled her close and gave her a reassuring kiss. The sensation of my
breasts pressing against hers was distracting, but for once I had something
more
important on my mind.
Russell and I plunged back into the gate and united our minds. Together
we
made a careful sweep of the quantum flux, searching for any trace of the
entity's
thoughts. Yet even as we searched I was aware that the sense of dread that had
haunted me each time I'd entered the gate for months was gone at last
.
I hope that's a good sign!
Our thoughts were so linked that I wasn't sure if I thought that or Russ.
Together we searched through the quantum state that held us, but found

nothing.

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We were about to give up when I sensed a familiar vibration somewhere in the far
expanse of the quantum chaos. Russell and I reinforced our mental bond, and
carefully sent a delicate mental probe out toward the unknown the being.
Terror! I recoiled from the dark thoughts that tumbled through both our minds.
Russ's shudder came to me down the mental link. The being was in a state of
terror.
Whatever was going on, we had to know more. Our minds were in
instantaneous agreement as we braced ourselves and reached out again. This
time I
caught the being's thoughts beneath the unending terror—thoughts that repeated
over and over. I probed deeper and images filled my mind. I was standing in a
cave
facing a young man with rust-colored hair. I saw something in his eyes,
a glimmer
that warned me and I whirled around, already knowing it was too late, already
flooded with terror. Pain erupted through my whole being and utter black
ness swept
over me... then the blackness receded and the images formed again, but they were
the same images. I was standing in a cave facing a young man with rust-c
olored
hair. I saw something in his eyes, a glimmer that warned me, and I whirl
ed around,
already knowing it was too late, already flooded with terror. Pain...
Lee! It's some sort of mental loop. When Amanda died this being experienced
death, too, and it overwhelmed its defenses.
I seemed to hear Russ's thought from far away, even though our minds
were
joined. With an effort I blocked out the terror and pain. Slowly, Russ and I
pulled
ourselves free of the mental loop that trapped the entity. Our mind touc
h had gone
unnoticed. The being floated in the green mist, eternally trapped in the
horrible
moment of Amanda's death.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rita and I ended up spending several months on the various Nexus worlds
helping the people who'd come out of stasis adjust to their new lives
. Try as we
might, we couldn't find a way to help the psychopaths, and finally we
reluctantly left
them to work out their own society. For now, they would remain isolated on
their
Nexus.
Eventually, we returned to our home in Ruston, Texas. By we, I mean the four

of us who had become so close we were one family—plus the new additions. Rita and I had added Justina to the family, now Justin once more. Russell and Donna were the proud parents of twins—a son and daughter, who became a daughter and a son upon our return to Earth. We moved back into the old homestead and contemplated the new life we were about to begin. It was a relief to settle down in familiar surroundings. For a happy week or two I pretended that life was going to return to normal. But that was never to be. For one thing, I still controlled Messler's estate, and its billions of dollars. That was a huge responsibility. And then there was the research project into the Seconders and their powers that I had started at Messler's old retreat in the Ozarks. The government wanted that to continue. As usual, they were looking for any angle they could use to gain more power, and people with supernormal abilities definitely qualified. We were lucky they didn't stamp us 'top secret' and tuck us away some place, but after my last broadcast on the net, they didn't dare. And, of course, there was a final, huge obstacle to normalcy—the never-ending question of the sex gates. We'd proven they could be used for far more than changing your sex—they were literally a gateway to the stars. But could they ever be made safe? Could we find a way to let people besides Seconders go through more than once? Russell was chosen to look for that answer, of course. Logically, we should have settled in Houston or at the research project in the Ozarks. But I insisted on coming home to Ruston. The others agreed with my decision. Fortunately, given

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Russell's unique status as a Seconder scientist who had actually seen the Nexus, the government was willing to build him whatever facilities he needed right next to our house. "So what are our chances of finding a way for normal people to go through the gates at will?" I asked him over breakfast on our second day back at the old homestead. Russell gave me a strange look. "You want an answer today?" I almost choked on my coffee. "Not today. No one expects you to be that quick."

"I mean, are you asking what I think my chances are today? Because you already asked me that yesterday, and the day before and the day before." I set my cup down and crunched up my napkin. "I get the point. Sorry if I'm bugging you."

Rita winked at Russell from across the table where she was feeding the baby his morning bottle. Donna had already finished feeding her son, and was rocking him in her arms. Her daughter slept soundly in a baby carrier next to her chair. "Don't believe him. He's not a bit sorry. He'll keep asking you every day until you find an answer."

"Don't worry. It will happen one day, maybe sooner than you think."

Russ's confident smile reassured me.

Rita picked up the baby and began burping him. We stopped talking and waited for the first little belch. When it came, I smiled at Rita. She looked relaxed and happy sitting in the bright Texas sunlight pouring through the window behind our kitchen eating nook. It was spring, and yesterday she'd been out in the yard planting flowers. She was more than ready to settle down and build a happy nest for me, and Justin in Ruston.

I wanted that, too. I intended to do my best to create a normal life—providing I could remember what that was. But this morning I'd awakened with a stuffed up nose, the beginning of a cold. As soon as breakfast was over, I planned a trip through the Reston gate for an instant cure.

"If there's anything you need for the laboratory—" I began.

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I had Messler's billions; I might as well put them to good use. Russ waved a hand.

"Don't worry. The government's picking up the full tab on everything. They're almost begging me to spend more, they're so eager to see the sex gate work for everyone."

"Just so they don't try to keep a lock on the technology once it's developed," I muttered. I had no particular reason to trust the government, and lots of reasons not to.

"I don't think they dare to keep any discoveries to themselves, not with the Church of the Gates and most of the countries in the world keeping a sharp eye on our progress."

I chuckled at the mention of the church. "Messler may be gone, but his work lives on."

"Think he'll be surprised to find his church still in business when he comes back?" Donna tucked away the last of her omelet as she spoke. "He'll probably come back with some surprises of his own." Russ grinned.

"Da da!" Justin announced giving me a big, beautiful baby smile. "Come to Daddy." I took him from Rita and bounced him on my knee, producing shrieks of delight. "Not so hard, Lee! You'll have him upchucking over you." I thought of the bottle of milk Justin had consumed for breakfast and stopped the bouncing.

"Da da!" Justin demanded, waving his fists in the air. "That's one smart little boy," Russ observed. "Genetics pure and simple." I beamed.

"You don't think the fact he went through a gate twice at such an early age had anything to do with it?"

I made a face at Justin, and got a delighted giggle as my reward. "The government is studying everything about the gates, including what happens to babies that have gone through. Someday they'll let us know the results." I put Justin down on the floor and watched as he practiced crawling across

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the tiles. He moved fast. In another month, he'd be walking. Soon, he'd have Donna's babies for playmates, but a brother or a sister might be nice, too. "Got to go get busy on the project," Russ said, rising to his feet.

I eyed Rita. Making a baby wasn't exactly hard work, but it did require some quality time alone together. Donna and Rita exchanged a look. Even when they aren't Seconders, women seem to have special radar. When they are...look out, your thoughts are never yours alone.

"I'll watch the babies," Donna said, getting up from her chair. "Thanks!" I reached out, and took Rita's hand. "Where we going, Lee?" A dimple appeared as she flashed a smile at me.

As I looked into her loving eyes I realized the sex gates hardly mattered compared to the wealth I already had. If Rita was willing to kiss me when I was coming down with a cold, I was a blessed man indeed. And with the sex gates still on Earth, the future seemed limitless.

"Back to bed," I said, and smiled. Heck, who knows, maybe the next time I'll have the baby.

THE END

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