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# Adventure

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# The Visitor

CHAPTER 3

## Of Traders and Traitors

Gerald Perkins, story

Rudi Franke, art

### What Has Gone Before

Four months ago: a trip sideways in time, beginning in a lost development in the hills near San Diego. Five unusual people faced one another in a cool blue room safe from the dry heat of this new ghost town. Three women were exotics: Melissa, lawyer, communicating empath, albino with opaque skin and electric blue eyes; Mary, medical doctor, finder, oversized Negro Amazon with skin the color of soot; Mei Ling, painter, martial artist, psychokinetic, with skin the color of gold leaf on fine leather. The exotics were dressed to reveal, yet the blond, lightly tanned, athletic visitor, dressed in a plain blouse, skirt, and low shoes, was a jungle cat among pampered zoo animals. Strangest, but most ordinary, was the only man, Gray. Tall, slightly stooped, gray, he dominated the room.

Files were examined, a bargain struck, documents signed. The exotics trailed Gray as he escorted the visitor toward the back of the house. Gray stopped before an antique wardrobe at the end of the hall. With a mischievous grin, he directed the visitor inside. Puzzled, she complied. The exotics resisted, but obeyed his command to enter. The inside of the wardrobe was larger than its outside. At the back was a shimmering gray wall of nothingness. All five stripped, then linked hands and stepped through.

The Mount of Winds, a barren ledge on the northwest face: a spot of gray appeared, thickened, spread, and thinned, but did not vanish. Five naked people stood within the haze. Gray and the exotics argued. Gray gestured and the women's forms flowed, shrank. The grayness withdrew from them and three leopards, snow, black, and golden, stalked east down the path passing across the ledge.

A red leopard, badly wounded and carrying a cub, staggered around the corner at the opposite side of the ledge. It died at the feet of Gray and the visitor. The visitor picked up the cub. She and Gray argued briefly. The haze cast them out. It thickened, then faded entirely. A younger, shorter man placed himself on a catamaran framework between two pointed balloons. They spoke. He vanished up the mountain, into the storm there. The visitor picked up the red leopard cub and started down the mountain.

Many days later: The visitor stood in a clearing full of intelligent red leopards. There she was judged and made welcome, and giving the cub, Rusty, to a nursing leopardess. There she made friends with another leopardess, M'reena. To satisfy another guest in the Scarlet Jungle, Orion of Carth, she chose the name "Mgeni," which means "visitor" in the trade tongue. In the month that followed she exchanged her hip covering of uncured skins for a short skirt and halter of well-tanned red leopard skins, and cemented her very different friendships with M'reena and Orion. Together they explored the Scarlet Jungle from its northwestern extremity near the Great Salt Lake to its opposite corner near the Mount of Winds, as well as the western and eastern grazing lands controlled by the leopards. Then, with two leopards for the rotation of the honor guard at the Temple of Bast, they set out for Kyraa.

Two and a half months ago: The companions reached Kyraa, set between the east end of the North Scour and the north east Wall, greatest city of the Land Inside the Walls. Mgeni and M'reena were welcomed and taken into the main Temple of Bast. They made friends and earned the respect accorded them. They learned much of the geography of the Land Inside the Walls and the history of the peoples living there. Mgeni was fascinated to watch two alien species interact and learn from one another as red leopards taught philosophy and learned early Iron Age technology. Together they also learned of a threat to themselves, Kyraa, and all within the walls: a mysterious entity known as the Eater of All Things. Orion learned of the Eater directly. Because of what he learned, he and priests of Set committed sacrilege in the Temple of Bast and then fled south. Mgeni and M'reena pursued.

\* \* \*

[“‘One’ watches.”] M'reena's brick red coat stood out brightly against the mixture of green and sun-browned grass, though she saw only patterns of gray. She lay relaxed, indicating that this hunt was not hers. Still, she watched her friend closely.

[“The same ‘one’ that's been following us off and on?”] Mgeni, half lying, half crouched next to the leopardess would have blended in with the dry grass if she had taken off the short skirt and halter of red leopard pelt she wore. She scanned the gully below them carefully.

[/Affirmation/] M'reena's projection carried a freight of indifference. Mgeni was reminded again of the disparity between human and feline intelligence.

[“Damn it, M'reena, sometimes I wish you had human curiosity! I don't like being watched by someone I don't know and can't account for.”] She had an idea, though. Their mysterious watcher had been careless enough to leave one good print.

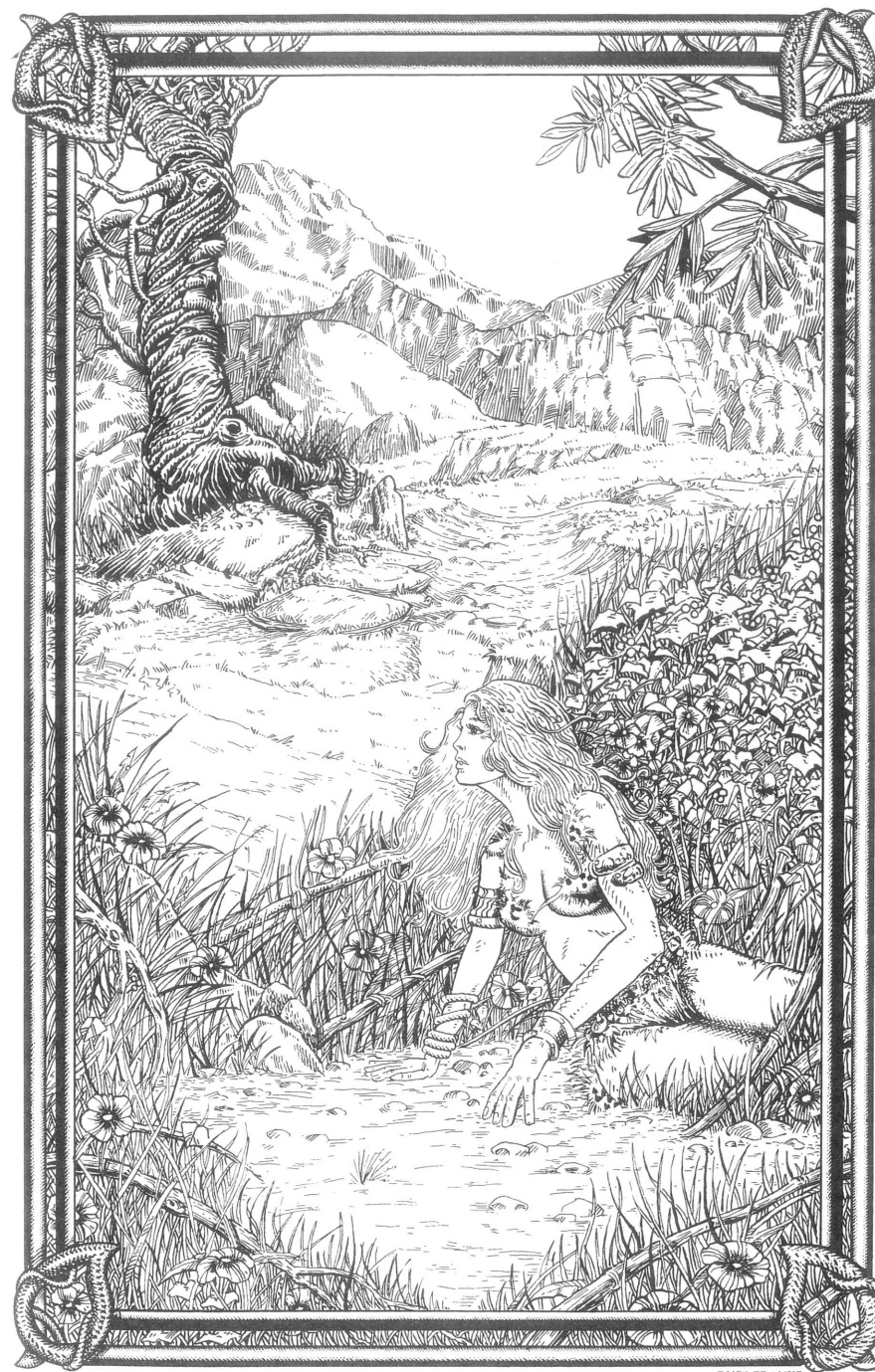
Mgeni sighed to herself. It would be nice to forget why she was hunting river monsters, and to simply strip and enjoy the sun. But the fine hides so carefully gathered in the six weeks since they had arrived at Trade City — the waste of life made her grimace — had not gotten her into the Far Trader's camp. The breeze from the forests and plains to the north and east took the edge off the tropic heat as it swept inward and up to the Mount of Winds.

The breeze had its origin in the far north, at the Mouth of the West Winds. Would these plains, she wondered, be equivalent to the Mara on the Kenya/Tanzania border, or perhaps the Serengeti? The Land Inside the Walls differed from the Africa she knew in more ways than one. Not only was it larger and more circular, but it had a single central point and a coastal ring of unscalable mountains.

The bulk of the Strange Mountains shrugged up westward across the River Lethe. She guessed that the core of the asteroid swarm that had reformed this Africa lay under them. The Mount of Winds, Mother of Storms, was a blue vagueness beyond, rising, fading into a mass of boiling clouds. Stones rattled around a bend in the gully. Mgeni tensed, waiting for her prey to come up from the River.

She thought of it as a “snakipede” from the first time she had heard the trade tongue description of it and seen a piece of skin. Ten or twelve feet long, three feet high, it combined the worst features of a snake and the large, nasty, yellow Australian centipede. Scarlet mandibles projected from a serpentine head. Pairs of insect legs sprouted down its length, golden where they joined the body, scarlet by midpoint. The last pair were turned up to form stingers. There was a spine of some sort connecting the segments because the head weaved about like that of a snake, supported between the base of the skull and the first segment by an ordinary neck. She could see the spiracles open and close along its length, hear the whooshing of breath as separate lungs helped the creature breathe.

Mgeni studied the creature. A well placed knife stroke just in front of the first segment should paralyze and probably kill it with minimal damage to the hide. That hide should gain her entry to the flying traders' encampment. Mgeni looked at M'reena. The



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leopardess yawned. She refused to hunt except for food.

The snakipede undulated along the rocky bottom of the small ravine. Twice its head darted forward. Once there was merely a clattering as a scarlet mandible twitched rocks aside. Once it came up with something small and squealing. The snakipede gave a sinuous toss and the large rodent slid past needle teeth and down its gullet. The monster passed beneath them.

Mgeni's leap was fast and true. Her long knife flashed down even as she straddled the snakipede behind the first legs. The creature went berserk! Head dragging, it writhed and twisted in eerie silence, the body whipping back and forth across the gully with unbelievable speed and force, curling and straightening like one of its tiny cousins. Unable to cling to the narrow body, Mgeni looked frantically for a chance to dismount. Before she could, the stingers, like two hot iron brands, drove into her back.

The world went red. The rattle of stones became a low, hollow booming, the pain far away, unimportant. The snakipede went to its death with dreamlike slowness. The air turned thick. Mgeni felt as though she were swimming through thin syrup. A particularly violent twitch threw her high in the air. She floated up above the edge of the gully, her gymnastic training causing her to automatically tuck and roll as she drifted to the ground. The world shaded down from red to black.

\* \* \*

[/Panic/must breathe/] Mgeni jerked upright, coughing, brushing frantically at her mouth. A strong paw pushed her down while a rough tongue cleared her nose.

["What? M'reena? What are you doing?"]

["Be quiet. /Concern/impatience/uncertainty/wordless emotion/ Swallow this, then breathe. Tell me how you feel."] Something sticky hit her face, dribbled onto her lips. Mgeni licked at the substance. Her eyes were closed against the sun, but she could smell M'reena's distinctive cat odor and a sour earth-reek over the pungent scent of the wild honey.

["What are you doing, M'reena?"]

["The /thing that was too long/too big/unnatural like a snake/worm, but neither/ touched you with its rear legs. Then you began to /mouse frantically leaping every which way to avoid a hunting kitten/. Eat more."] Mgeni swallowed more of the honey. This time a little bitter tasting dirt went with it. ["Afterward you lay very still. /Shallow, rapid breathing/profuse sweat/high temperature/sour death smell/"]

["Long ago, when I was a kitten, I found a tree an elephant had broken open where the black stingers nest. I tried some of the /sweet/sticky/. . ."]

["Honey."]

["Honey. I ran about the Scarlet Jungle like the black stingers . . ."]

["Bees."]

[" . . . were after me. I defeated one who had always bullied me. I thought that if honey could make me do that, perhaps it could help you when you were already moving too fast. I think /smugness/ it worked."]

"M'reena, you are a wonder!"

["I know."]

"Aye!" Mgeni sat up with a groan. "I feel like someone worked me over with rubber hoses." She looked at her friend and laughed.

M'reena was a sorry sight. Her glossy coat was well plastered with gray river mud. Her face was at once comic and fierce, her jaws held wide by the huge piece of honey comb she carried. Honey and saliva mixed and ran down her chin, making fat plopping sounds in the dusty grass at her feet. She panted lightly.

["Take this!"] Mgeni caught the comb M'reena dropped. She promptly began cramming chunks into her mouth, spitting out the wax when she had sucked out the life-giving energy. Satisfied, M'reena applied her tongue to a forepaw.

[/Disgust! Bitter, foul taste!/]

["M'reena, don't!"]

[/?/]

"That's river mud, right?"

[/Assent/]

"It's poisonous. The River Lethe runs out of the Strange Mountains. I know it carries a lot of heavy metals. I can't begin to guess what organic poisons it carries, maybe even something from the Eater of All Things."

M'reena backed away as though she would crawl out of her own skin.

Mgeni chuckled. "Hold on until I can skin the snakipede. We'll go to the spring where we slept last night to wash."

[/Reluctant assent/]

"Ow!" Mgeni staggered as she rose to her feet. "I must have strained every muscle in my body. Snakipede poison must kill mammals by speeding up nerves and muscles until the victim tears itself apart. If I didn't heal so fast . . . Ugh, I must have hit something and didn't realize it. Feels like I cracked a rib."

["'One' was here. She was pushing on your chest, listening, pushing again. Look."]

Mgeni looked. Outlined in dirt and bruises, two paw prints marked her ribs just below her breasts. A cat that knew the basics of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation? Suspicion grew toward certainty.

Shadow was already filling the ravine when Mgeni began skinning the snakipede. She was exceedingly careful not to let any of its flesh or blood touch her cuts. M'reena helped, but Mgeni insisted she use only her dextrous, long-toed forefeet. They washed thoroughly in the outflow of a spring well away from the river; Mgeni zealously scrubbing M'reena's fur until the leopardess threatened to drown her. Mgeni started a fire. M'reena brought in a small antelope, careful not to damage the hide. After they had eaten, Mgeni staked both hides out for the insects to clean, then washed carefully again. Both slept, confident that the fire and their own senses would protect them. Both were violently ill that night. They stayed by the water hole the next day recovering from the poisons of the snakipede and the lethal river.

\* \* \*

"You actually killed one of the river monsters for its hide?" Raista, chief priestess to the Temple of Bast in Trade City was incredulous.

[/Foolishness/] The male of the pair of red leopards that served and learned in Trade City as the "Children of Bast" was incredulous.

"I agree, Kranna." The priestess was perhaps forty. Her mixed Kyraan and Black heritage showed in her kinky hair and thin nose. She had never been beautiful, but none could doubt the force, or kindness, of her personality. "For what purpose? To sell to Jomo?" She studied Mgeni shrewdly. "Or do you hope it will get you into the sky traders' camp?"

Five of them, Raista, Kranna and his mate Oree, Mgeni, and M'reena, sat in the private ante room of the chief priestess. Symbols of both Bast and her rival cat deity, Sekhet, hung on the wall and were woven into the woolen rugs on the floor.

Sunlight worked its way through the slats of the west window. Sound and smells of Trade City came in more easily on the desultory breeze. Mgeni could see strips of the sprawling wood and adobe town. Twenty thousand people, and uncounted animals, could raise quite a racket. With primitive, if stringently enforced, sanitary controls, they could also raise quite a stench.

Wide open, the other window looked east to the edge of the jungle, five miles or more away. Farther still, the Wall rose in misty shadow. Smoke from cooking fires marked the traders' camp, a mile into the jungle. Four rounded, silvery shapes showed above the trees like the backs of basking whales . . . dirigibles tied to the massive trees there. Mgeni smiled mirthlessly.

"Raista, I didn't expect to find these traders here, now, but somehow I'm not sur-

prised that the priests of Set took Orion there. I'm sure that the hierarchy of Set and the Temple of Sekhet in Kyraa are under the control of the Eater of All Things. Orion is either under the control of the Eater or a traitor to the human species."

"So you have said." The priestess studied Mgeni for a moment. "All the way from Kyraa in three weeks, on foot," she said wonderingly. Mgeni slipped her hand between her sandal and her foot. She had worn out three pairs on her run halfway down the continent before abandoning them, trusting that her healing ability would grow callus fast enough to protect her. M'reena had run her pads bloody keeping up. Still, they could not outrun a mounted party; not when fresh horses showed up every day or two.

"Well, this Orion would not be the first. Are you sure he is in the traders' camp?"

"I tracked his party right up to that damnable electric fence they have. What do you mean he would not be the first?"

Raista sighed. "We live too close to the Strange Mountains. We trade with the twisted men, or perhaps not-men, that mine the metals there. Few will admit it, but that is where the bulk of our wealth comes from, not from the forest, not from our flocks, not from other trade around the Land.

"Where there is wealth, there is power." The priestess shrugged. "If the Eater exists, it controls the mountains and therefore us. A man may betray his kin for power. The Servants of Set would do it for spite. The Temple of Ra is fat and lazy and Thoth is so deep in its esoteric studies that the priests there are oblivious to the real world. There is no other single force in Trade City stronger than the servants of the Ladies." Raista inclined her head respectfully to statues of both Bast and Sekhet. "And we dare not go against the major traders."

"The civil authorities?"

"Powerless before the trading houses, barely able to keep the peace. The houses either curry favor with the outland traders or hate them. Either way, they want what the traders will not give."

"Damn, damn, damn!" Mgeni pounded her knee. "I *must* get into that camp! If Orion is what I think he is, if the Eater is what I fear it is, if the traders are what I know they must be . . . Damn!

"Raista, I would lay down my life for the Land Inside the Walls, but I would sacrifice everything within the Walls gladly to save the world." She shuddered, remembering the unhuman evil she had felt in Orion after he met the Servants of Set. And remembering, too, the unholy thing he had done in the Temple of Bast in Kyraa.

The priestess raised her eyebrows. *She doesn't believe me, Mgeni thought, but a lifetime on the battle line can produce a narrow vision as dangerous as ignorance. These people have both. And what do I have? Why do I care?* The silent query went unanswered.

\* \* \*

It wasn't her hair or light skin that made people step aside for her, Mgeni reflected as she strode the bustling, dusty streets of Trade City. No, Carthians were rare, seldom venturing this far south and east of their mountain strongholds, but they were not unknown. Nor was the reason her knives or the temple porters that carried her harvest of hides to the master leather trader. No, it was the fact that M'reena padded at her side and that she wore red leopard skin at her hip and breast that caused the respectful, annoying, distance around her. She wondered again if she should have chosen a different guise for her mission.

They slowed as the street emptied into a busy market square. Mgeni's eyes narrowed at the sound of a heated argument on the far side.

["M'reena, guard the porters on the way to Jomo's. Take your time."]

[/?/]

["I have some business. I won't be long, but I may have to leave in a hurry."]

Mgeni grabbed one of the long pieces of cloth worn here by both sexes and wrapped it around herself, flipping one corner up as a head covering. There was nothing she

could do about her arms or ankles. She silenced the stall owner with a coin bearing the imprint of Bast. She purchased a leaf napkin filled with a fruit confection, spearing chunks with the tip of her short knife as she matched her pace to that of the crowd. She stopped at the edge of the crowd around the ironmonger's stand.

"What you ask is out of the question!" The smith was selling his own wares. Huge muscles jumped in his arms and his face was flushed darker than normal with his vehemence.

"Oh, come now. This steel is far better than anything you can make." The speaker was a shade darker than some of the crowd around him, but his straight hair and aquiline nose marked him as one of the flying traders. He looked casual, almost elegant in loose trousers and shirt, when compared to the smith or the crowd in their wraps. He wore a broad, plain belt which supported a pouch of some sort, a utilitarian dagger, and a holster from which protruded the smooth, businesslike butt of a gun. Rumor said it shot fire. No one said anything about noise or smoke. A laser? Mgeni flicked a seed out of her treat.

The steel under discussion consisted of a double dozen knives laid on a cloth on the counter between the smith and the trader. Their perfect surfaces caught the sun's glare. One of the trader's companions said something in their own language. Another laughed. The smith looked, if possible, more stubborn than before.

"The quality means nothing if I cannot sell these . . ." Two of the traders tensed very slightly as his hand waved over the cutlery, ". . . at a price my customers can afford! My offer stands."

Though people kept a polite distance, Mgeni read dislike and a little fear in many faces. More than one person looked avariciously at the traders' holstered weapons. None dared touch them, though. The bodies of two thieves, with pieces of the self-destructing



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weapons showing clearly, had been laid on the public punishment grounds.

The trader sighed and began rolling the knives back into their display cloth. Mgeni finished her sweet and vanished into the crowd.

\* \* \*

"Is Trader Jomo in?" The clerk, sitting in the shade of the open-front leather shop, jumped, then flashed a large white smile. He was young, but Jomo considered him promising.

"Yes, Mgeni, he is." The man rose from the accounting scrolls he had been updating. He bowed to Mgeni. "Greetings, Lady." And to M'reena, "Greetings, revered child."

[/Hmph/]

Mgeni grinned.

"Greetings. And good greeting from M'reena. Would we be disturbing the Trader if we asked to talk with him now?"

"Not at all, Lady Mgeni, not at all," boomed Jomo. The clerk jumped again as his employer entered from the rear, then grinned and rolled his eyes. He bowed briefly to Trader Jomo, before returning to his scrolls.

Mgeni smiled at Jomo. He winked. Where the coffee-colored clerk wore the universal wrap, the obsidian giant before her disdained more than a brief kilt and sandals during working hours. A single gold ring glinted in his left nostril.

"What have you brought me today?" Mgeni gestured at the pack sitting behind her on her folded wrap. "Well, let's take it to the grading room and look at it." Stooping, Jomo picked up with one hand the bundle of furs that had taken two strong porters to carry.

Jomo maintained his curing and tanning sheds well outside the city, claiming the place stank badly enough without his contributing to it. The warehouses and his shop, however, he kept in a walled area separate from, but adjacent to, his home in the southern section of the city. The passed through darkened rooms where hides and pelts hung on racks or lay on tables in carefully sorted and graded piles. The pungence of cured leather and the musk of furs fought for recognition through the smoke from coils of incense that discouraged insects and other vermin. M'reena sneezed irritably.

The grading room had whitewashed walls and no roof. The sun shone brightly on the tables that lined the edges of the room. Jomo tossed the bundle easily onto a table.

"I'll repeat my offer, Mgeni: second wife with all the honors and more freedom than most." He looked solemnly at her.

"Nope, nothing less than first wife and freedom to come or go as I please."

"T'la would kill us both." Jomo sighed theatrically. "Poor thing, she'd probably kill herself right afterwards. What's a man to do?"

"You could look at my catch, you fraud! You only want me so that I would have to lead your trappers. That way you wouldn't have to pay me for the furs I bring you."

Jomo sighed and snapped the thongs holding the bundle. There followed an hour of hard bargaining, with neither succeeding in getting the better of the other. Finally there was one particularly fine lion skin left.

"I'm surprised that you would bring me a cat skin." He regarded her keenly.

"He wanted our dinner."

Jomo frowned. "There's not a mark on the pelt." He looked doubtfully from Mgeni to M'reena and back.

"I stabbed him in the eye."

"I see." Jomo placed his hands on the table and leaned forward on them, bringing his eyes close to her own. The sounds of the city filtered into the silence between them. M'reena sneezed as a wisp of incense found her. "If you could bring me a pelt like the one you are wearing . . ."

"No, Jomo. The Children hold the bodies of their dead in no reverence, but I doubt that they would sell you pelts. I would not care to risk their friendship trying to get you some." The table creaked as Jomo stood up again. He nodded.

"Fair enough. I couldn't sell them to anyone but those damned outland traders if you did bring me some." He smiled broadly. "I may have something to surprise you when you come next, though. There is the great grandfather of all black leopards out there. He's escaped or destroyed all my traps so far, but I'll have him! I only hope I get him before some herder butchers him to protect his flocks."

Mgeni felt something cold stir her spine. Premonition turned to certainty in her mind. "No, Jomo. Shake out the lion pelt." Puzzled, he did as she said. A roll of scarlet fell amid the other furs.

"I will give you that for your promise that the black will not be harmed. She is not dangerous to you or to any man who doesn't bother her. I'm sure she had ample opportunity to kill your hunters, good as they are, and did not. Understand me: She is under the protection of the Temple and Children of Bast. She is under *my* protection. The person that harms her will wish he had fallen to the mercies of the Eater."

Jomo pursed his lips in a silent whistle, but he nodded slowly. His expression turned to amazement as he snapped the cords on the scarlet package. Four strips of scaled, scarlet hide, each the length of his arm, tapering from the width of his biceps to the width of his wrist, lay before him. He snatched one up, examined it closely in a patch of sunlight, smelled it, almost went so far as to taste it.

He scowled at Mgeni. "This isn't off some snakipede that died of injury or disease, this is fresh!" Mgeni nodded. "How in the name of all that's holy did you manage to do that? How could you kill one of the river monsters, even with the help of a Child of Bast? It's not possible!" Mgeni looked at the table, the picture of modesty.

Jomo began to chuckle. His booming laugh filled the roofless room, overflowed into the courtyard, startling birds into flight. With a speed that confounded his bulk, he leaned across the table and kissed her with a bruising force.

An aborted leap brought M'reena down on a pile of furs at the far end of the table. She slid half its length until she bumped into Jomo and Mgeni. Jomo planted a kiss squarely between M'reena's eyes. Mgeni fell back into the furs, laughing helplessly.

[/Rrrr!]

["Hush, M'reena. He means no harm."]

["I can see that! Two-leggers! I'll never understand them."]

"Oh, no! If I took two such she-cats as you into my kraal, I'd soon be a second husband! No, no, with or without the snakipede leg hide, the grandfather — grandmother you say? — leopard has the protection of Jomo and his hunters. I'd not care to anger the Lady Mgeni or her companion . . . or," he grinned slyly, "risk not seeing the rest of the snakipede skin."

"Then, Trader Jomo," said a clipped voice from the sheds, "assure the Lady that the black leopard has my protection, also."

Mgeni whirled and Jomo turned slowly, to look at the slender, dapper man in loose silks and a snowy turban standing in the shade of the sheds. From behind the newcomer, the clerk coughed nervously, "Trader Jomo, Lady Mgeni, the Trader Prahnapurna."

\* \* \*

Mgeni fumed as the oxcart she had hired squealed and bumped its way through the cool of late evening. *A week! It had taken her a whole damned week since she met Prahnapurna to get an invitation to the traders' encampment. And how was she going? As a huntress, a businesswoman with rare hides to sell? No, she was going to dinner! Be fair: As much business was conducted over dinner as across desks. Still . . .*

["M'reena, I don't think I've been so mad at a man, or attracted to one, since I was a teenager."] Mgeni caught herself as one wheel of the cart dropped into a rut. ["Ever since Jomo's, he has been running hot and cold: praising my pelts, then not bothering to bargain, sending little gifts, but always to 'the best huntress inside the Walls.' Is he trying to get me into his pocket or into his bed?"] In the grass, downwind of the cart, M'reena yawned.

["What does he want me to do, bring him the snakipede hide as a courting gift? I want inside that camp! It's my best chance to find out about the world outside the Walls. Hell, he's got me so bothered that I could almost forget about Orion and the Eater."]

[/Cold/clarity/completeness/suspicion./] Mgeni stiffened, one hand pressing on the back of the driver's seat. He reined the buffalo to a halt. "Unless that's what he wants. Damn!" [/Admiration./] Mgeni ignored the driver's puzzled look. "That's *exactly* what he wants."

The buffalo whuffed as M'reena stepped onto the road. Mgeni stared off into space. M'reena laid her ears back.

["Don't do that!"]

["Do what?"]

["You went away?"]

["I went where?"]

["Away. You started to think, then went away?"]

["It's called intuition, M'reena. All humans have it. I thought The People did too."]

[/Doubt/]

"Lady," the driver was having trouble with his beast, "will you be leaving now?" Mgeni started, then smiled and handed him the agreed upon amount. The faint haze of the traders' fence was less than a mile away. Cart and driver vanished from her mind as she and M'reena started off at a brisk walk.

["I don't think the Eater is behind Prahnapurna's interest at all. And I'm not so sure he's after my body, or," she grinned crookedly, "just after my body."]

[/?/]

"Never mind."

\* \* \*

The guard at the barrier bowed courteously to them, speaking into a device on his wrist. Hindi, Mgeni thought, or one of its thousand cousins. She couldn't make out what he said, but the accent was odd, almost British. No, not British. Prahnapurna had the same accent when he spoke the trade tongue. It was almost as though they came from — no, it couldn't be — from Australia? Now, that was an interesting thought; almost as interesting as the semi-circular hole that appeared in the vague glitter of the fence. The guard hadn't done anything, so there must be a central control. Then why guards, unless the fence could be breached? Woman and cat stepped forward to meet the escort that approached through the trees.

The two escorts were courteous, but silent. They were caught by surprise when Mgeni stopped suddenly at the edge of the clearing. M'reena vanished into the night.

The clearing was fully a half mile across. The dense trees inside the fence had concealed it well. Big as it was, the clearing was dominated by the silvery bulk of four dirigibles. Cut off trees served as mooring posts for them though other cables, looking like strings from this distance, linked their sides to the ground. An elevator cage swayed as it descended from one of the behemoths. Mgeni observed wryly that her entrance was on the far side of the camp from the air ships.

It wasn't until they had actually started across the grass toward the nearest group of tents that she noticed the lights. Most were clustered around the work under the dirigibles, but other parts of the camp was softly lit with electric lights! She listened: no sound of generators, just faint shouts from the workers. Mgeni glanced up as they passed through a forest of posts, each bearing what had to be a solar collector.

The trader was waiting for them by a large tent set apart from the others. The lambent glow of a rectangle above the table beside him gave vivid life to the colors of his trousers, loose white silk shirt, and embroidered open vest. The jewel in his turban winked as he bowed.

"You are beautiful, Lady Mgeni."

A jungle cat among house dogs, she acknowledged his presence with the slightest

nod. She was aware of how the light glowed on her skin and turned her hair the color of new gold. The acolytes at the temple had done wonders with the best of her outfits. Skirt and halter, gifts of the red leopards of the Scarlet Jungle, held the light until the rosettes of spots seemed to float on ruby wine. Someone had found gilded sandals with garnet fastenings. The strip of snakipede leg skin on the wrist burned in the light. She hoped she was distraction enough so that he wouldn't miss M'reena.

"Thank you, Trader Prahnapurna. It is kind of you to invite a mere hunter to your table."

"A 'mere' hunter?" Prahnapurna smiled. "Somehow I doubt that." He snapped his fingers. A servant brought cold soup and another a light white wine. "An excellent vintage; one of the best the Barossa Valley has produced since the drought. No, no 'mere' hunter could tell Trader Jomo what not to hunt, or travel with one of the fabulous Children of Bast." He looked about as though just missing M'reena.

So much for that. This man played games. And something about the way he held himself, the way he moved, made her very aware of his maleness. The wine? Not likely. Anything that would affect her, she could taste. Besides, this had been growing daily almost since the day they first met at Jomo's.

"She did not like the sharp smell in the air or the odd lights."

"Pity. I had the cook prepare a well-aged haunch of gazelle for her. Ah well, perhaps the men will feed her if she finds her friend."

"Her friend, Trader Prahnapurna? Do you travel with the Children of Bast?" The soup was delicious and the wine as good as claimed. She hadn't realized how she missed the niceties of civilization.

"No, the big black. I thought you knew that one. My men have made something of a pet of her, though how she gets through the fence is a mystery."

"I do not know her. I think she is a Child of Bast, but we haven't met."

"I would have thought your friend would have told you about her."

Mgeni allowed herself a laugh of genuine amusement. "Then, Trader Prahnapurna, you do not know cats!"

"I can see that's true. Please, 'Trader Prahnapurna' is overly long and formal. My name is William. What may I call you?"

Mgeni hid her surprise. What was an Indian doing with an English name and an Australian accent?

"I am called Mgeni."

"That's not a name!" Prahnapurna leaned back to let his servants exchange salads for the empty soup dishes. "I can't go on calling you 'Visitor' for Vishnu's sake!"

"So people have been telling me." Mgeni's smile was of delighted mischief. "Then I have no name. What name would you give me?"

"Why," said Prahnapurna with mock seriousness, "perhaps 'Lady Jane Greystoke' would suit you." At Mgeni's raised eyebrow he explained. "Lord Greystoke was abandoned as a child in the jungles of South America when his parents died. Lady Jane was with the expedition that found him as a man. They married and Lady Jane used the Greystoke family fortune to carve out quite a little empire there. That was before the plague, of course."

"I do not like 'Jane,' and 'Lady Greystoke' is as difficult as 'Trader Prahnapurna.' Call me Mgeni. What is South America? Is there truly a land beyond the Walls? There must be, since none of the Trade City folk have seen the like of your people and they are the second greatest travelers in side the Walls."

Prahnapurna frowned. "Come, Mgeni, or whoever you really are, you don't expect me to believe such nonsense from an Anglo-American! Your trade tongue is nearly perfect, but you are as much from beyond the Walls as I. Uh . . ."

Prahnapurna sat very still, the tines of Mgeni's fork pressing lightly against his larynx. Her movement had been so natural and quick that she had caught everyone off

balance. She knew that the shadows held guards and the guards held guns, but not to have reacted would have been false to her presumed character.

"I will take your food," she said evenly, "despite your unseemly behavior in the city, if it is offered in friendship. I will not take your insults or your foreign names!"

To give him credit, Prahnpapurna did not flinch. He disguised the hand signals he gave the guards with a restrained shrug. And somehow, an attitude, a subtle flinching of muscles, made her still more aware that she was very close to a desirable man. He looked mildly puzzled.

"I most humbly apologize. You have the appearance and demeanor of an advance scout of the greatest rivals of my people." Mgeni relaxed. She took a bite of salad.

"Tell me about the lands beyond the Walls."

Through the remnants of salad and most of the main course, Mgeni finally learned something of the history of this alternate Earth. Prahnpapurna was obviously a well-educated man. He sketched a geography and a history that paralleled hers until the First World War. There were differences, of course. The major one being that Africa had remained inaccessible, altering the thrust of empire building in this world to the Americas sooner, and to Asia in greater depth, than in hers.

Technology, too, had followed slightly differing paths. Einstein turned some of his genius toward crystalline structures and an organic chemist named Fleury developed a fluid that could be converted to a very light, noncombustible gas and back again. From these inventions came cheap, clean electric power, high density power storage, and the age of the great lighter than air ships.

World War I was never completed. No one knew where the hemorrhagic fever came from, but it was deadly. Slow to develop, quick to kill, it devastated civilization. The doctors had a Latin name for it. Most called it the Red Death. It killed half the world.

Empires died with their administrators. The greatest of them, and the most humane, disintegrated almost gently. Freed of the dual burdens of British rule and its overwhelming population, India became a modern country in three generations. By the 1930s it controlled Southeast Asia and had planted a thriving colony in Northwest Australia. Through the 1940s it watched with avarice the chaos in China, but wisely turned its attention to Indonesia and Australia. In 1955, the Rajanates of Australia became a semi-independent entity.

Europe united. The Russian Empire never existed. The Americas north of the Rio Grande became one, sparsely populated country, with strong ties to Britain. Mexico, the Mideast, and China remained fragmented and poor. South America and the steppes west of the Urals and north of the Black Sea stayed uninhabited.

After almost four generations of painful recovery, empires were again on the verge of conflict. So far the battle raged only in board rooms and trading exchanges. However, the first to control the resources of Africa, South America, or the markets of Asia, would dominate the world. The maverick Australians opted for Africa.

"Of course, it's strictly a commercial venture. The government, such as it is, has merely turned a blind eye to what we're doing." Only a few pieces of fruit remained. Both had eaten well, neither heavily. The servant poured a dessert wine and vanished. The guards disappeared with him. "But surely, this recitation has bored you."

"No, William, I find it fascinating. The scholars will either hang on my words or dismiss them as a woman's fantasies." Their fingers touched as he handed her a glass of wine. Something like a mild electric shock ran down her arm, kindling a fire in her loins. Their eyes locked for a moment. *This is incredible! What is it about this man?* "But how did you get here?"

"Why, in those, of course." Prahnpapurna waved toward the dirigibles, his face innocent. Mgeni leaned forward, scowling. "Peace, peace!" Prahnpapurna laughed, palms out toward her, but his eyes were watchful.

"There is a break in the mountains, the 'Wall,' well south of here."



"The Mouth of the East Wind."

"Yes. It's not much of a break, barely below the top altitude of our best ships. It's broader than the gap up north and the winds there are merely terrible rather than impossible." His expression became remote. "We lost two ships there; 200 good men" Silence lay between them. A clock on the other side of the camp chimed ten times.

Mgeni broke the silence. "Carth is a loose group of city states in the mountains north of the North Scour," she began. "Our scholars have long speculated about the possibility of lands beyond the Walls. Legend has it that our ancestors came over them, but if they did, the way is long lost or destroyed." *Orion should verify that; he told me.*

Prahnpapurna nodded. "There are some ancient ruins in the strip of desert between the outside of the Wall and the sea. I understand that at one time a small river flowed out of the mountains."

"The scholars will want to talk with you! I should accompany you back to Carth, but then I would fail my Scholar's Trials." *And tonight's story, kiddies, is . . .* Mgeni stretched. Her leg brushed Prahnpapurna's under the table. *Damn! I haven't wanted a man this badly since . . . when?* She made a wry face to cover her discomfort.

"Few women even try to become scholars. I chose to study people and their languages. My trial is to learn, if I can, one of the languages of the City of Wizards." *Will Orion back me on this when Prahnpapurna questions him? Does he even know about the Wizards?*

"The what?"

"A city, smaller than Great Kyraa, but walled all in metal. It sits on a western tributary of the River Lethe in the plains south of the Strange Mountains. I'm surprised you didn't see it from your air ships."



"We were badly damaged and low on power when we fought free of the Mouth. It was all we could do to stay aloft, drifting in an eddy, until we saw a place to land for repairs. Tell me about this City of Wizards."

For the next hour Mgeni spun tales of the Land Inside the Walls. She embroidered things she had read in the library of the Kyraan Temple of Bast with tales hunters and traders told. Prahnapurna was . . . attentive. She wove a fantasy from hints dropped by traders who had been to the City of Wizards. *Scheherazade, eat your heart out.* Finally she yawned and stretched again.

"I humbly beg your pardon!" Prahnapurna flowed to his feet. *The man's a cat; a tom cat.* "I have kept you late." He sidestepped the table, offering her his hand. "Let me call one of my men to escort you to the gate."

Instead, they went to his tent.

\* \* \*

Someone scratched on the tent. Prahnapurna stopped what he was doing. The light from the votive candle beyond the bed gilded his face.

"Yes?" The answer was in his own language. Though the words were spoken quietly, Prahnapurna slid quickly from her arms. Gathering his trousers, he slipped outside. The conversation was brief and urgent. Prahnapurna put his head through the door flap.

"Your pardon, Mgeni, but something has come up. You may remain here, or I will send an escort."

"Mmm." Prahnapurna smiled and vanished.

Mgeni eased from the bed to the desk on the opposite side of the tent, careful not to cast a revealing shadow. Nothing on top, and the drawers were locked. The next shape nearest the door turned out to be a traveler's wardrobe holding only a few changes of clothing. The heavy, brass-bound trunk next to the door was also locked. That left only the tiny altar at the far end of the tent. She returned to the bed, then sat up normally.

The drawers contained some joss sticks and extra candles. There were padded depressions shaped to hold the ikon and the book that sat on top. The ikon was beautifully made and explicitly erotic. The book, bound in fine leather, showed evidence of frequent reading. She opened it at random.

Mgeni thought she had forgotten how to blush. The paper was heavy, the printing beautiful, and the art exquisitely pornographic. She deeply regretted at that moment that she had never learned to read modern Sanscrit. The book was obviously of a quality too fine to be used merely for nightly fantasies, and its placement on the altar no chance. She turned to the front of the book, examined several basic drawings closely, studied a beautiful mandala and the single phrase opposite it, and glanced at a section of abstract figures. She nodded her head. Prahnapurna *had* been after her body. And he had paid her the highest of compliments by his beliefs.

Someone scratched on the tent. She whirled, replacing the book and grabbing her skirt in one motion. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she called out, "Enter." The servant kept his eyes politely averted as he set basin, pitcher, and towel on the chest. She was washed and dressed by the time Prahnapurna returned.

"I am sorry, Mgeni," he said formally. "You have given me honor and pleasure tonight, but I must ask you to leave. There is trouble in the town, a killing, and I must see to the safety of my men. I hope that we can dine again soon."

M'reena sniffed when they met at the edge of the trees. The escort was heavily armed this time and there was a pause before the fence shimmered open. One of the previously silent guards spoke after the fence was again in place.

"I would avoid the city tonight."

\* \* \*

Mgeni had no intention of returning to the city, though her curiosity nagged at her. Instead, they turned north, running parallel to the edge of the forest until they were well away from most of the small farm holdings.

["I thought it was not your time."]

[/?/]

["You were not in heat, yet you bred. Why?"]

["Humans don't go into heat. We can enjoy it at any time."]

["Enjoy?"] [!/]

["What did you learn?"]

["Nothing."]

["Nothing! How could you learn nothing?"]

[/Bright lights/loud sounds/bad smelling things and two-leggers./] M'reena projected a full sensory image. [/Lack of understanding/bored/]

[/Amusement/ "I'm sorry, M'reena, I asked you to look for things you have no experience to judge."]

[/Condescending forgiveness/ "Stong mind/Father/ said I would see strange things and learn much with you. I have. Will you explain what I /saw/sensed/?"]

["When we get home and we can go into full rapport. Did you find Orion?"]

[/Bad/bitter smell/danger!/ Yes. Others smelled of the same taint. /Danger!]

["I was afraid of that. Could you tell if any of them were in position of authority?"]

[/Incomprehension/ "Yes."]

["Explain!"]

["'One' was there. She told me and warned me away. /Disdain/ As if I couldn't trust my own nose!"]

["The big black? You talked to her?"]

["Of course."]

False dawn glimmered in the sky by the time they left the forest. The banyan tree didn't really belong there, but somehow a seed had found root at the edge of a water hole. Mgeni had found it during the run down from Kyraa. She shunned the stink of city except for business. Instead, she had brought mats and over the weeks had woven them with vines to make a snug hut among the broad tree branches. Leopard scent kept the monkeys away. Mgeni was ready to pull herself onto the branch in front of the hut when M'reena spoke.

["'One' waits."]

Mgeni looked at the hut. Two green eyes, set wide apart, glowed in the doorway.

["What's a white girl like you doing in a place like this?"] demanded a mocking voice in her head.

"Hello, Mary." Mgeni gained the branch in front of the door. "What brings you here?"

[/Amusement/approval/ "Four cat feet and an intuition. How 'bout you?"]

"Gray promised me a challenge to test my limits. Instead I have two. I'm not doing too well on either."

["Yeah; those dudes in the balloons and that little Greek guy an' his bad smelling friends."]

["Three, then; three very different, interrelated problems."] Mgeni pushed past the big black leopardess into the shelter. M'reena followed.

["Three?"]

"M'reena's people."

["Oh, yeah. Well, let's talk."]

Mgeni reached for a tiny lamp. Instead, she yawned and stretched until her joints popped. "Later. I'm exhausted."

Mary leaned close, sniffing. [/Undecipherable/ "You been busy."]

[/Bright anger!/ "None of your business!"]

"Rrr." ["Back off, girl. Those weird Indians . . ."]

"Australians."

["Whatever, they're trouble or in trouble, or maybe both, an' you just got outta the sack with their head honcho. We're together in this; you, me, Melissa, an' Mei. Gray

saw to that. It's my business, all right.”]

Mgeni's eyes narrowed, then a ghost of a smile touched her lips.

“It hasn't been easy, has it? By the way, one doctor to another, thanks for the CPR.”

[“By the way! Oh, hell, it comes with the job. Thank your friend; the honey was a stroke of genius.” Mary looked away. [“No, not easy. On top o' everything else . . . You know what it's like, wanting it, needing it, 'til you'd swear you'd kill to get the next male to come along? An' then hating and loathing the very thought of it? Not to mention being scared spitless of being pregnant — with *kittens*, for God's sake! Lucky me: I'm bigger an' badder than anything likely to come my way.”]

[/Warm sympathy/ “I do know, Mary. M'reena's no fit company during her time.”] Mgeni knelt, hugging Mary's massive head. Without thinking about it, she began scratching her behind one ear.

[/Pleasure/] Mary rumbled a purr. [“I'll give you an hour to stop that.”]

“Ha, ha!” Mgeni rocked back on her heels. She cuffed Mary lightly, Mary licked her wrist gently. The heavy mood broken, Mgeni yawned again. “Scoot, you two. I really am worn out.”

[“O.K., but we gotta talk. C'mon, M'reena, I left an antelope hanging on the other side. It's a little fresh, but I'm hungry.”]

[“You /doubt/ are a two-legger changed to one of the People?”]

[“Yeah.”]

[“Tell me about it!”]

[“O.K. Oh, 'Visitor,' or whatever you call yourself, I can 'find' you and Mei Ling sharp as anything. Melissa's gone fuzzy. She stayed on the mountain.”]

Despite the shock of that announcement, Mgeni fell into a deep and dreamless sleep as soon as her head touched her pallet. The first light of dawn slipped unnoticed through chinks in the vine and mat walls.

\* \* \*

Clack! Mary gave the spit of the solar cooker a nudge. She wondered if Mgeni had the ratchet that kept the split from slipping specially designed for M'reena. The smell of roasting meat made her mouth water. She hoped Mgeni and M'reena would get done with their seance before the sun set.

On the shady side of the great banyan, grey human eyes gazed deeply into amber-rimmed oval pools of feline darkness.

[/Blacks and grays, more light than a human would easily recognize in the dark of the forest. Three humans walking away; two unknown males and a female scent/mind that had come to mean deep friendship. Looking up at them as they left the trees./]

[/Thanks/M'reena/friend/]

[/Irritation/direction/memory/attention/]

[/Black shapes against gray. Weave through trees and brush along the edge of the clearing. Sound: pad of feet, light scrape as fur catches on bush, night creatures, general humming background with occasional sharp sounds from the far side of huge clearing. Scent: agrees, but wind is nearly still; local smells only. Mind touch: small creatures nearby, two-leggers farther away, a Person? Annoyance: sun/bright/heat and nothing learned. Shame before friend. Odd smell of friend as she left. Annoyance!]

[/Break into trot: sight/sound/scent flow together in passage. Feel of muscles in supple motion, forest mulch cool and moist beneath pads, leaves against coat, touch of whisker ends that guides direction. Mild irritation under tail; bad time, ignore it.]

[/The cool/bright lights are near. The sounds are clearer, but completely confusing. Why must two-leggers communicate only by mouth? Do so few really have The Speech?]

[/Scent is nearly as useless. What do they mean, the flat smells, the hot smells, the oily smells, the sharp smells? Watch: identify sight to sound to smell for Mgeni/friend.]

[/Many males. Only males? Yes. Why? Busy as army ants, they smell different from Kyraans or Trade City folk, different from the smell of farmers and hunters along the

road, different from Mgeni/friend and Orion/friend/enemy. Orion! Bitter, corrupt smell! Yes, it is here, faint among the other scents. Find nim!

[/People scent! Excitement/relax, it's female, the big black./]

[“Greetings /big/black/female/strange smell/Person/.”]

[“Greetings /unusual/spotted/female/strange smell/Person (?). Our mutual friend /?!/ turn you loose to scout this madhouse?”]

[/?/ /Caution/]

[“Don't blame you. For what it's worth, my name's Mary.”]

[“My mouth name is M'reena. Mgeni asked me to learn what I can while she breeds with the leader of these strange two-leggers. /Confusion!/”]

[/Amusement/ “Well, if anybody can keep him busy, she can. C'mon, I'll *really* confuse you.”]

[/Sights/sounds/smells/words/associations/concepts/ /Alien!/ /Meaningless!/ /Frustrating!/ “Row!”]

[“Back down, kitty cat! You don't have to understand, just remember and report. Now 'cause of your noise I'm gonna have to make an appearance. Watch what I do, where I go, and how those dudes react. You'll learn who's dangerous and who's not.”]

[/Admiration/respect/ Mary/Person saunters into camp as though she owns it. Two-leggers call her. Their mouth sounds are friendly, though some speak of fear with their bodies. Mary is gentle with those. One of the unafraid ones tries to become too familiar. Mary gives him an easyswipe that knocks him almost into a fire. There is laughter at that. Some of the strangers try to come close to Mary, but she avoids them, pointedly. There is no laughter at that. They are the ones with the bitter smell and dark minds.]

Mgeni sighed. M'reena sneezed. “Thank you, M'reena. I know that was hard for you.” M'reena butted her gently under the chin.

[“Come and get it 'fore I eat it myself!”]

“Oh, hush, Mary.”

\* \* \*

[“They're in trouble, sure.”] Mary and Mgeni trotted south in the fading light of day.

[“Yes, that's clear. The passage through the Mouth of the East Wind caused more damage than William let on. From what you say and what M'reena showed me, though, they're almost ready to leave. Damn! And I didn't even get close to discussing Orion.”]

[“The little Greek guy with the bad smell? I don't know what's wrong with him but I wouldn't trust him farther than I could throw him. /Wry amusement/ Well, farther than he could throw me.”]

“Ha!” [“That's the one. He's from the city states of Carth up in the North Wall. He's the first human I met after Gray left. He's either insane or taken over by the Eater.”]

[/Fury!/]

[/?/]

[“Tryin' to figure out what's going on. You ever been in a place where you didn't know any of the lingo?”]

[“Often.”]

[“Where no one'd even try to teach you? Where everyone tried to either kill or catch you on sight? I get holda Gray, I'm gonna put claw marks all over his bod!”]

[“Oh, really? Think you can?”]

“Row! Hsaaa!” Mgeni danced aside as Mary bounced to a stop, fur bristling. She watched calmly until Mary relaxed.

[“No. Ain't no way I can touch the Boss, even if I wanted to. What he does, he does with a reason. I guess I'm just worried about Melissa /beloved younger sister/”]

They were silent for awhile as they ran through the sunset.

[“I thought Carthage was settled by Phonecians.”]

[/!/] Mgeni missed a step. [“It was. The Carthians, though, seem closer to our Greeks. Where did you learn ancient history?”]

["Hon, I'm big and I'm black and I come from the wrong part of town, but I'm not stupid. I read a lot when I was a kid. You don't make too many friends when you're as big as I was and don't have clothes to wear in the summer 'cause you're savin' 'em for school. I took some history classes as electives in pre-med school, too. Now you tell me: What's 'William' to you?"]

["A fascinating person, a source of information, a possible friend . . ."]

[/Scorn/ "He seduce you or vice versa?"]

["Oh, he seduced me. Quite a compliment, really, considering he's an adept at Tantra Yoga. He's a rascal, but not, I think, a villain. His masters may be, but they're not our immediate concern."]



["What in hell's Tantra Yoga?"]

["A series of beliefs that teaches enlightenment through understanding the world. The uninitiated make a lot of the sex exercises. I'm not sure how important that is here."]

["They should try being cats. I'm glad M'reena had sense enough to stay behind. She'd have been either running to and from that big tom lives in the temple in the city."]

["It's the Temple of Bast, the city is Trade City, the tom is Kranna . . . Look, I'll try to stay open to you all the time we're in the city. You can understand what's being said and perhaps learn the language. OK?"]

["Fair 'nough. But, if the Australians aren't our main problem, what is?"] So Mgeni told her what she knew or suspected about the Eater of All Things.

["That's it, I resign! I'm a doctor, a detective with the ESP ability to find things, a travel agent, an' part of a placement bureau for super heroes. I fought real wizards and real warriors and some things you wouldn't believe. Last job, I damned near lost my life, maybe my soul, and those of my friends to something like this Eater, but not as powerful. Let Gray go back to being God if he wants to save worlds. I'll go back to the emergency room!"]

["Mary, just who, or what, is Gray?"] Mary told her. They were practically under the walls of Trade City by the time she was done.

["If I hadn't lived through these past months, Mary, I'd call you the Queen of Liars. As it is . . . Let's see if I can get us inside tonight."]

People moved through the streets of Trade City with the slow aimlessness of mash in hot ferment. Bubbles of rumor kept them agitated. Mgeni and Mary had little trouble entering, but once in were forced to move at the speed of the crowds, first inward, then out toward the Temple. Even a melanistic Child of Bast earned no special passage.

["Hot time in the ol' town tonight."]

["One spark, one leader, and this crowd will be a mob."]

["Nah, not tonight. One more thing, though, and all bets are off."] A swirl in the crowd forced them near a tavern. ["Wonder if I can get a beer? 'Hey, sailor, buy a girl a drink?' Somehow I doubt it."] However, no one tried to stop them when Mary slipped behind the bar. She backed out, the neck of a large clay jug held carefully in her jaws. Mgeni took it from her before the porous material crumbled. The tavern keeper didn't even try to bargain.

["How do you know the crowd won't catch fire?"]

["Don't - not for sure. Maybe some of Melissa's /sister/worry/ empathic talent rubbed off on me."]

["You're better than I am. All I'm getting is a headache."]

["Why did you look at me like that when I asked for a beer?"]

["Orion liked beer."]

\* \* \*

The streets near the Temple of Bast were less crowded. Inside the temple compound, some tranquility remained. A lone figure leaving the infirmary stumbled and caught herself. Mgeni hurried over.

"T'la, are you well?"

"Oh! Lady Mgeni, you startled me!" Tall, regal, T'la was as remarkable as Trader Jomo. As first wife she controlled his household with firmness and fairness, even advising him on his business. Her plain wrap could not conceal her quiet beauty. Yet she walked the streets without servants of fear. Rumor had it that she won most of the infrequent, but tempestuous, battles with her spouse.

"No, I am not well." She smiled warmly nonetheless. "I have had a fever and now there is a sharp pain here." She placed her hand on her abdomen just above her right hip. "I have seen the healer. I think her herbs will help. I feel a little better already."

"Can we help you home?"

"No, thank you. I believe Raista wants to see you and . . . Why, this isn't M'reena!"

"Mary, say hello to the Lady T'la." Mary had been immediately behind Mgeni, yet she seemed more to materialize from the night than step into the torch light.

["Can I?"]

["I doubt it. Let her see you and touch you if she wants to."]

["GREETINGS, LADY T'LA."]

"I heard that!" Wonder and awe removed any trace of pain from T'la's face. "A child of Bast spoke to me!" She would have kneeled. Instead, Mary gave her trembling hand a brief lick. They left her there.

["Are you a psychologist, too?"]

["Bedside manners, Doc. You should know. Why?"]

["M'reena is very good with people. How sick is T'la, or do you know?"]

["You want a second opinion? She has appendicitis. Unless she's strong and lucky, she'll need surgery."]

["Hmm, perhaps I can get William to lend us his flight surgeon. It's been awhile since I operated on humans. Jomo's important and T'la's popular. That might make up for whatever happened. Ouch! I wonder if they have something like aspirin here."]

[/?/]

["You nearly took my head off with that shout."]

["This doctor recommends a beer, even if it is warm."]

The beer was cool and strong. Unfortunately, it did nothing to cure Mgeni's headache. She nursed a cup of beer while Mary happily lapped the rest from a shallow bowl in the Chief Priestess' sitting room.

"Murder?" Mgeni feigned surprise.

"A risk a play girl takes with every customer." Raista managed to look disgusted and resigned at the same time. "It was 'who' killed her and how she was killed that makes the difference. One of the Far Traders cut her almost in half with his flame weapon."

["Oh, boy. 'At's different from punishing a couple of thieves, all right." "Burp!" Mary managed a yawn and a sleepy cat look that dared them to accuse her of rudeness.

"It's not right that men have Wizard power and Wizard weapons, and not share them." Raista set her cup of wine down forcefully. "That and their arrogance . . ."

"The Wizards exist?" ["Do the same traders cause the trouble all the time?"] "And have similar weapons?" ["If not, are the same ones always around when trouble happens?"] Mary and Mgeni's questions collided in the warm night air. They looked at each other, each guessing the thrust of the other's inquiry.

"Different men are the focus of each upset." As a Child of Bast, Mary automatically received Raista's first attention. "And that *is* odd. There are only a few traders that come into town."

["Uh, huh. I'll bet that the same junior officers come again and again. I'll also bet that one of the bad smelling ones is in every troublesome group."]

["Most two-leggers smell bad."] Kranna and Oree walked into the room. ["You are correct, though,"] Kranna continued, ["one of the bitter ones is always with each group of the new folk. It was not always so."]

Kranna and Oree approached Mary. Mgeni saw her muscles tense. Mary was a quarter again as big as Kranna, but she had also just consumed over a quart of strong beer. Oree and Mary touched noses.

[/Greetings/Sister/stranger/]

["Hi yourself, Oree. What's your old man think he's doing?"] Kranna had come close to Mary when Oree greeted her. Now he was sniffing along her flank.

["You are not one of The People."]

["Right."]

["You have been with one. She was in heat."]

["So?"]

Kranna did not reply. He and Oree settled on either side of Raista's chair. They regarded the other two calmly. Mary relaxed.

"I thought you were different!" Raista leaned forward eagerly. "Who are you? Where did you come from?"

["No offense, Lady Priestess, but that's a stranger story than you'd believe and too long to tell now. What about this City of Wizards? Mgeni, what are you thinking?"]

"I'm thinking that what I believed to be fairy tales might be real. I'm thinking there might be a source of high technology inside the Walls, that's why the Trade City Folk aren't over awed by the Australian traders." Mgeni noticed Raista's start at her naming the traders. Raista did not comment, however. "I'm wondering why the Eater hasn't taken them over or whether it might already have done so."

"The City of Wizards has always been there. They have fire weapons and flying craft like and unlike the traders."

"But they won't sell you any of them, will they?"

"No. Food, cloth, plants of various sorts, and raw metals go in. We get a few marvelous gems, luxury cloth, and alloys we can't make in return."

Mary thought of the solar cooker and wondered. ["Anyone ever seen one of these Wizards?"]

"No, the ones who come out wear heavy cloaks."

["I'm not surprised."]

"Could any of them be the Eater, or part of it?"

"They warned us of the Eater of All Things," but Raista sounded uncertain.

"That's just fine! That gets us exactly nowhere!" Mgeni staggered as she got to her feet. "Oh!" She touched her forehead, giving Mary a venomous glare. ["The doctor's recommendation stinks!"] Raista, with your permission, I'm going to bed. Maybe I can learn something on the streets tomorrow."

\* \* \*

The Australians stayed in camp the next day. Mgeni, Mary, Kranna, and Oree walked the streets of Trade City listening more than they talked. The city was seething, but waiting.

The second day, William Prahnapurna and his four captains arrived at the town meeting hall. They came at mid-morning, unarmed and bearing gifts, and left before noon. By siesta time, rumor told that the traders had offered weregild, but claimed not to know which of them had killed the prostitute. Many did not believe them.

The next morning the civil authorities and the Guild Council announced that they believed Prahnapurna, and that the weregild had been paid. There were some caustic opinions about distributing that much wealth to a prostitute's family. Calm voices were heard, though, saying that it *was* possible Prahnapurna did not know which of his men was the murderer.

That afternoon Prahnapurna brought silk to trade with a noted rug weaver. He dealt sharply, but fairly. City guards were stationed prominently among the crowd. They almost had their hands full when one of the traders looked too long at a pretty young girl.

On the fourth day, four parties of Australian traders entered Trade City. They dealt fairly, but the old arrogance was back in two of them. The city held its temper. That evening Mgeni and Mary called on Trader Jomo.

The main room of Jomo's house was decorated in Spartan good taste. Colorful rugs and a few tables were sprinkled around the polished hardwood floor. Piles of cushions made islands of comfort for guests to sit or recline, and it was lit by the warm effulgence of many candles in wall brackets. The servant coughed at the door. Jomo rose from the three-legged stool where he had been reading. The servant left.

"Welcome, Mgeni!" he boomed. "What brings you here?"

"The traders, the city. Jomo, there's more at stake than you know."

"I suppose you would know about that." Jomo held a serious expression just long enough to worry her. Then he winked. Mgeni couldn't repress a wry smile. The man's good humor was irresistible.

"Does the whole of Trade City know about my visit?"

"Neither you or Trader Prahnapurna made any secret of it. And the trail to the camp is closely watched, of course."

["Told you it made a difference who you slept with."] Mary did her materializing trick again. Jomo's eyes grew wide.

"Is this the one . . . ?"

["This the dude . . . ?"]

"Yes," Mgeni answered both questions with the one word. "Mary, Trader Jomo."

Jomo, Mary. You two know each other by reputation.”

Mary stalked into the room. Jomo held his ground. When she was nearly at his feet, Mary reared up, resting a paw on each shoulder, and staring him in the eye for a long moment. Jomo cocked an eyebrow and grinned. Mary snorted gently. As she settled back, she lashed out with a padded paw. Jomo, for all his bulk, was thrown against the wall. He picked himself up, still grinning. He towered over Mary, hands on hips. With a speed that matched hers, he gave her a clout behind one ear.

“Stop it! Stop it right now!”

Mgeni jumped; Jomo and Mary froze. Barefoot, disheveled, wearing an old wrap, T’la filled the room with her presence. Mgeni wondered how she had been able to come up to them without being noticed.

“What do you think you are doing? Jomo? Child?”

Jomo and Mary slowly parted. He hung his head sheepishly like a boy caught in the sweets jar. Mary rolled on her back, waving all four paws in the air.

“That’s better. If you two want each other’s skin, settle it outside, or better yet, outside the city. Ah . . .” T’la sagged, one hand gripping the door frame until the knuckles turned pale.

Mgeni was at her side in a moment and put a supporting hand under T’la’s shoulder. Jomo crossed the room in three strides, gently folding his wife to him. Mary thrust her head close to T’la, sniffing loudly.

[“Better get your boyfriend’s surgeon.”]

[“Has her appendix burst?”]

[“Not yet, I think. I can’t smell the poison, but any time, any minute.”]

[“Stay here. Explain.”]

Mgeni was running for the east gate before Mary could frame a frantic, [“How?”]

The guards at the encampment didn’t want to let her in, of course. However, after an interminable ten minutes, the fence shimmered. Mgeni walked through the ring of forest and the field of solar collectors with the best compromise dignity and haste would allow. Prahnapurna stood in front of his tent.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” he asked, his voice carefully neutral.

“William, if you want to recover from all the blunders you’ve made, send your ship’s surgeon and some assistants with me right now.”

Prahnapurna reared back as though struck. “Only an Anglo-American would have the bare-faced effrontery to come here now, with a demand like that!” His face twisted into something ugly. “You damned, sanctimonious, greedy bastards!” Mgeni took a step back, her hands falling near her knives. “I invite you here, treat you more than civilly, even let your cats spy for you – oh, yes, the Greek warned me about them! – and you return to your stinking town with its stupid, hard-headed people. But, let something happen, something you can’t cure with your ‘unspoiled, primitive life’ and you come running back to me. Well, I wouldn’t help you if I could!”

Mgeni studied him for a moment. The outburst felt . . . wrong to her limited empathic sense. An act? For whom? She felt an urge to run far and fast. Instead she spoke reasonably.

“William, it’s T’la, first wife of Trader Jomo, that needs you help. She’s dying of appendicitis. If you can save her, you will have gone a long way toward gaining respect in Trade City.” Prahnapurna slumped.

“I can’t, Mgeni,” he said in a more normal voice. “My surgeon and most of my medical supplies are at the bottom of the Mouth of the East Wind. I have barely enough supplies for my own men, maybe not enough. The Greek says that the inhabitants of this City of Wizards you talked about might help us. We’ll be leaving in a few days.”

“William,” said Mgeni, quietly, urgently, “you and your expedition are in deadly danger. The Wizards will rebuff you at best. If you want to save yourself, kill Orion and his friends. I’m sure you know the ones I mean. Then turn your biggest gun on them

and calcine their bones.” Prahnapurna looked stricken.

“I cannot,” he whispered. “They are all crucial personnel.”

“You won’t leave The Land Inside the Walls alive with them. If you try, I will find a way to stop you.”

“The Greek warned me about you!” Prahnapurna’s voice rose nearly to a scream. “Get out! Go back to your black lover and your treacherous cats!”

“Meet me tomorrow at my tree, alone.” Mgeni whirled and stalked off. It was a lonely, tiring jog back to the city. She wasn’t surprised to see the Temple healer at Jomo’s when she returned. T’la was stable. Mgeni collapsed onto the cushions in the front room and slept.

\* \* \*

[“One comes.”]

[“Only one?”]

[“There are others under the trees. I cannot tell how many, only sense several lives. The leader of the outlanders is almost here. Shall I stop him?”]

[“Is he clean?”] Silence. [“M’reena?”]

[“Wait. The wind changed. He does not have the bitter scent of the dark mind.”]

[“Thank goodness! OK, make yourself scarce. I don’t think William trusts you.”]

[“You do not need my protection?”]

[“I’m a big girl now.”] Mgeni heard the scratch of claws on bark and the rattle of sticks on the roof. [“M’reena?”]

[“He will not see or hear me unless you call. You two-leggers have a lousy sense of smell.”]

Mgeni sighed and threw down a rope for Prahnapurna. He looked carefully around as he sat on the cushion she had borrowed from the Temple.

“Tidy,” was all he said.

“I told you to come alone.”

“Did one of your cats tell you? If I had left alone, there would have been suspicion. And if I *had* left alone, I probably would never return. Tell me why you believe I’m in danger.”

“Can you trust your guard?”

“As much as anyone.”

“Tell me why you think you’re in danger.” Prahnapurna gave her a hard look. He shrugged his shoulders.

“This expedition has been a disaster from the start. My Rajah made a wrong calculation and had to bow to others to save face. It was to be a quick exploratory trip, six airships, minimum crew, maximum bonus. We were to come in, look, map, and get out as best we could. We didn’t expect to find a living land, and we certainly didn’t expect people. We could not have expected the ferocity of the storms in the Mouth of the East Wind.”

“We lost our surgery and our machine shop. The Mouth couldn’t have bitten us harder. We brought very few trade goods. How could we know that the natives would not be awed by light weapons and flight? We could not, of course, trade them any of our technology. We have too little edge as it is.”

“We lost a few men to disease. Maybe our flight surgeon could have helped, maybe not. But over the past six weeks about a fifth of the crew have fallen sick with a mild fever and recovered – changed. You say the Greek is responsible?” Mgeni nodded. “I should have guessed when those priests delivered him, but never came back.” Mgeni frowned, snapped her fingers in irritation. Prahnapurna looked at her questioningly.

[“M’reena, can you contact someone in the city? I need to know if any of the Priests of Set have developed the bitter smell or the dark mind since we checked them. I also need to know if any of them have been stirring up bad feelings toward the outland traders.”]

[“I will try. Mary hunts between us. She can relay.”] An instant later, she said,

["Kranna says, 'No,' and, 'Of course.'"]

"So much for that idea. The Priests of Set, roughly equivalent to Shiva, but with strictly negative connotations, gave you Orion then began stirring up bad feelings toward you."

"Why?"

Mgeni told him about the Eater of All Things. When she was done, Prahnapurna was nearly as light in color as she.

"Vishnu, Preserver, help us all!"

"Amen. It's a good thing you can't leave. I'd hate to see you give the Eater a toehold in the outside world."

"We might, Mgeni."

"You lost two ships on the way in! Do you really think you can fight the storms and the prevailing winds on the way out?"

"There has to be another Mouth, or perhaps an Ass."

"Uh, uh. The Mouth of the West Wind's worse by far."

"Then where does all this air go?"

"Right up the middle, friend. Right up the Mount of Winds and out through the high stratosphere."

"Now I know you are Anglo-American! These people couldn't have the concept of atmospheric layers without flight."

"You'd be amazed. But I'm not Anglo-American or anything you know. I came from farther away and by stranger means than you could conceive."

"I suppose you're one of the so-called Wizards, then?"

"Not me." Mgeni managed a grin. "But my transport certainly qualifies. I wonder what he'll do when he comes back. Will he meet the Wizards? That's an interesting thought." Her grin turned feral. Prahnapurna hid his incomprehension. "Between them, they could probably take the Eater. And then maybe they couldn't. I can't take the chance; I'll have to keep looking for a solution. Like I said, it's lucky you're trapped here with me."

"We are not, though." Mgeni's fighting grin vanished when she heard the despair in Prahnapurna's voice. "The ships were designed so that we could dump everything but the engines, navigation equipment, and solar collectors. I think we could ride the back eddies out of the Mouth of the East Wind."

"Then you'd better find a way to prevent it."

They sat in silence until Mgeni spoke.

"I'm surprised that you swear by Vishnu."

"Ah?"

"I thought that you practiced Tantra Yoga. By the way, I'm flattered that you chose me to worship with you."

"I am flattered that you agreed. But there is no conflict between Vishnu and The Way."

"Hmm."

"Mgeni, I have lost my balance. I fear I have lost The Way. There are no devotees in the crew and no women at all. I cannot bring myself to take one of the pleasure women from the city. They are so, so ignorant." Prahnapurna looked at her beseechingly. "Will you help me back to The Way?"

Mgeni looked at the shadows outside. "I could use a little balance myself." She was tender and she was wild. When they were done, they both felt better for sharing the moment of opening ecstasy that is one step along that Way.

\* \* \*

The evening shadows gave birth, and Mary trotted alongside her. They ran together for a while before either spoke.

["Have a good time?"]

["Yes. You?"]

["I got tired of the stink of that place."]

["M'reena said you were hunting."]

[/Query/]

["She still has a couple of days before she's safe."]

["Oh. Yeah, I've been huntin'. Doctors learn to listen to the body or they don't last long. Cats hunt, so I hunt."]

["How are you holding up?"]

[/?/] ["OK. I've seen stranger an' this is only for a year and a day. Gray's like that, you know: got a dry sense of humor. A year an' a day's the traditional time a 'prentice serves a master magician. Gotta admit I never *been* as strange."] Mgeni nodded.

["Can you call Kranna or Oree from here? I'd like to know how T'la is doing."]

["Can't you?"] Mgeni shook her head. ["OK. Christ! She's delirious. I told Kranna to tell them to cool her as best they can and restrain her gently. Don't you run!"]

[?]

If she dies while we're out here, she dies, an' there's nothin' we can do. If she's still alive when we get back, but you're too tired an' skaky to operate, she dies with our help."]

[/!?!/Rebellion!/]

["I'm a doctor, damn it, when I'm not being somethin' weird. So are you, if you'll remember. We've both done appendectomies under conditions worse'n this. Now shut up while I tell Kranna what to do. And keep joggin'."]

There was a sullen crowd outside Jomo's compound when they arrived. There was resistance and mutterings of "Traitoress!" until Mary roared.

"Mgeni, did you bring the outland healer?" Jomo met them at the house door, dithering uncharacteristically.

"No. He died in the East Mouth. They have no medicines to spare." Jomo's face turned to stone. "I am a doctor, as is the Child. What preparations have you made?"

"We have the Temple healer here, but I don't understand some of the things Kranna insists on. Boiled cloths, yes, but flaying knives? Strong spirits? Outland thread and a seamstress?" Jomo grabbed her arms, shaking her with each question. "What are you planning to do to T'la?"

"There is poison in her, Jomo," Mgeni said as gently as she could. "I know what kind and where, as does Mary. We are going to have to cut it out. I just pray we aren't too late."

"No!" She stood passively in his grip. "You will not cut my T'la!"

"Then she will surely die, Trader Jomo." Jomo turned to look at the healer. "I have heard of something like this being done in Kyraa. Usually the patient dies, but sometimes she lives. It is T'la's only chance. Never before have we had a Child of Bast who knows medicine." Slowly, Jomo's grip relaxed. He stalked woodenly out the door.

["Get a quick bath, then do some relaxation exercises if you know any"], came the commanding voice of Mary. ["I'll call you when it's time to scrub."] Mgeni obeyed.

The back bedroom had been turned into a crude surgery. Rugs, hangings, everything but two padded tables had been removed. The room stank of camphor. Muslin sheets had been fastened over open windows, but the heat from the multitude of candles and the kettles of hot cloths was nearly overpowering. T'la was stretched out on the lower table, and two temple acolytes were bathing her with distilled liquor. Mary crouched on the taller table. She looked ridiculous in loose cotton robes. Only her eyes showed. Mgeni left her garments at the door. She accepted the still-hot wrap from a servant and began sponging her arms and hands with the whiskey. The servant tied a cloth over her hair. The healer turned from her simples, a tiny muslin bag of herbs in her hand.

["OK. Healer, put the bag in her mouth. Monitor her pulse and tell us when she's completely out. You got the stimulant ready?"] The healer nodded. ["Good. Don't for-

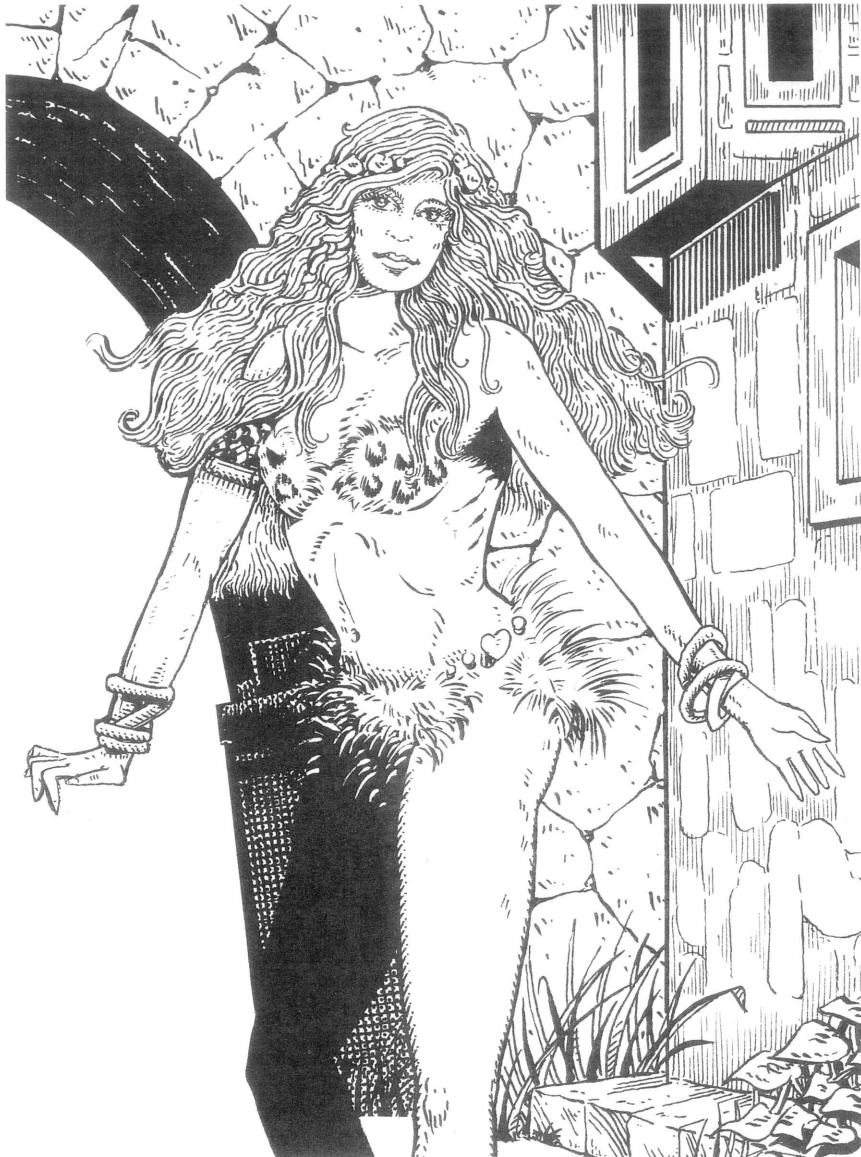
get what I told you to do if she stops breathing or if her heart stops. You two know how to help?"] The acolytes looked at one another, then nodded.

"T'la is unconscious, Oh Child."

["Can the titles. Mgeni, the knives are behind you."] Mary's awareness touched them all, making a word, a gesture communicate volumes. Mgeni was surprised at how calm she felt.

Everyone stopped breathing for an instant when blood spurted from the first incision. The acolytes quickly wiped it away. Through the skin, through the fat, to the muscle wall. The seamstress pinned back the flaps of skin with neat loops.

["So far, so good. There's going to be some real blood now. Everyone ready?"]



Mgeni took up a heavier knife. She mentally blessed the seamstress for her calm skill as they found and sutured arteries. The acolytes placed pads soaked in a mild coagulant herb at Mgeni's direction. Then the appendix was exposed. Distended, throbbing, its yellowish color made it look foreign among the loops of gray and pink intestines.

Mgeni took a thread from the seamstress. She looped it around the appendix as close to the intestine as possible. "We're not going to be able to get it all, but if we can remove the source of the infection, T'la has a chance."

There was an eruption of sound from outside the compound.

["Ignore that! Seamstress, can you put another loop in there without breaking anything open? I want it the width of our thinnest knife from the first one."]

The seamstress nodded. One of the acolytes wiped sweat from her forehead. Mgeni suddenly noticed the acolyte who had been wiping her when not handing her tools. She smiled with her eyes at the frightened girl.

["Yeah, we're the finest surgical team inside the Walls; probably the only one. You ready, Doctor?"]

The knife was part of a broken razor. Hardly any pus escaped as she cut between the two circles of silk. With the utmost care she lifted the appendix out of T'la's abdominal cavity. It burst in her hands as she placed it in the garbage bowl. The smell was vile.

"Keep swabbing in there! I want every bit of infection you can see removed." Mgeni began to step away, but the acolyte was already bringing a rag wet with whiskey for her hands.

["Not bad for amateurs."]

["Thank you, Doctor."]

"Now comes the hard part. It will take the utmost of all our skills to sew the arteries back together quickly and correctly." The next hour and a half was the most delicate, frustrating work Mgeni had ever done. Then it was done.

"Great. Everybody clear out. Get a drink, get a bath, get some rest. Healer, can you monitor the patient for a while? I've got to stretch. I'll send one of the girls back in a little, and then relieve you myself."

The healer nodded. The servants were already cleaning the room. Mgeni handed them her wrap and head cloth, then helped unwrap Mary. The gust of cat odor and alcohol made her step back.

["Damned near suffocated in there."] Mary leaped easily to the floor, stretching fore then aft. ["That feels good. C'mon, let's find out what the commotion was."]

Mgeni wrapped her skirt around her and donned her red fur halter as they walked into the relative coolness of the next room. A servant stood aside from the opposite door, something akin to worship in his eyes.

["What do you think her chances are, Mary?"]

["Sixty-forty. It'd have been better if we'd gone in earlier, but she's strong. She'd have to be to keep up with that husband of hers; lucky bitch."] They stepped out onto the veranda.

["I wonder where he's gone. I would think he would be hovering around the door."]

["That ain't all: Hear how quiet the town is? Check it out. I have to stay here to monitor T'la."] Mgeni started out the gate as Mary rounded a corner of the house. ["Hell, I wonder where the sandbox is around here."]

The town *was* unnaturally quiet. Mgeni shook off her weariness and began walking toward the main market square. A baby cried. A dog barked somewhere. An old man hobbled along a street. An old woman ducked into a doorway. Nowhere did she find an able-bodied adult.

["Kranna? Oree? /Identification: Mgeni/ Can you hear me? Do you know what is happening."]

[/Identification: Oree/ "Most of the Trade City folk are hiding in their dens. But Kranna is with a pack on the trail to the strangers' place."]

["How many are there?"]

["A ten of ten of forepaws."]

*A ten of ten of forepaws? A leopard has ten forepaws. That's a thousand towns-people! Why?* She feared she knew. ["Oree, what are they doing?"]

["Walking fast; talking loudly. Kranna says they are angry."]

["Is Trader Jomo with them?"]

[/Mixed emotions/ "Yes."]

["Warn Raista they are going to attack the Traders' camp! Have her rouse the guard. Get as many people out of town as possible."] As an afterthought: ["Have everyone who stays draw water and keep it by their homes."] Then she ran.

Fool! Fool! Fool! The word beat in her head with each step. The Australians' ignorance and arrogance, the deaths of the thieves and the prostitute, Orion bringing the Eater an unexpected opportunity, the Servants of Set working quietly in the background, all that she might have countered. But Jomo, powerful and respected, believing that his popular first wife was dying because the traders refused aid, that was too much. While she dallied with Prahnapurna, the final straw was added. Now the Australians must flee, taking the Eater with them. Fool! Fool! Fool!

Mgeni saw the torches before she heard the mob. She half expected to see the bright flash of laser weapons. There were occasional sparks and howls of pain, but so far the fence held. She had passed several stragglers when the archway went up. A fortune in hand wrought chain, supported on ironwood poles, intersected the glimmering field. There were hardly any sparks, but the chain began to glow. The brave or fool-hardy ran through the opening as ripples of light spread away from the chain. The fence failed. Mgeni cursed.

She forced her way along the path, tripping or shoving aside any who impeded her. The solar collectors were gone. A tent burst into flame as she watched. The mob spilled onto the huge grassy clearing, on the far side of what had been officers' tents. There was a ripple of laser fire like heat lightning. Men, and some women, screamed. The mob spread out. She saw bows and an occasional crossbow. There were a few cries from the defenders. She saw Jomo.

"Jomo! T'la lives!" The huge trader carried a spear, a sword, and a trapper's net. He didn't hear her. "Jomo!" Hot death passed between them, setting the grass a-smoulder. Mgeni realized suddenly that her lighter color made her a target against the dark behind her. "Jomo!" she called once more. "T'la lives; will live!" Jomo turned, blocking the sight of the battle beyond.

"She lives?" He sounded bemused. There was a snapping, hissing sound and cries from the Australians. Arrows and hand lasers had the same effective range.

"Yes! She lives! She needs you!"

"Too late." Jomo turned away. Mgeni could see a half-dozen Australians running for the landing areas. None made it.

"Jomo! Get your hunters. Find the Carthian and bring him to me! He is responsible for this!"

"What?" Jomo's bellow made heads turn. "One man? A Carthian caused this?"

"He is a slave of the Eater! Capture him if you can. Net him. Try not to touch him. If any defend him, kill without mercy!"

Jomo ran after the mob, shouting the names of his men. Mgeni dashed toward the north side of the clearing where M'reena had seen Orion. A second defense line with heavier weapons was forming. The bright flashes were taking a terrible toll. Mgeni closed her ears to the screams of the dying.

Someone loomed out of the dark. An Australian, unwounded. Mgeni *felt* the wave of alien darkness in him. Her short knife plunged into the thing's heart while her long knife hit its neck with a blow that severed its spine. She plunged her knives into the turf to clean them and ran on.

The humming grew louder, higher pitched. The repair crew scrambled for shelter as the air crew began to turn. Brilliant light made silhouettes of the attackers as one, two, three searchlights came on. Over the edge of her arm, Mgeni saw glowing coils on the long mounts that held the lights. She dived for a shadow, praying that it was more. The gunners focused their weapons. Three beams of coherent light plowed glowing furrows in the ground.

Mgeni hugged the bank of the streamlet in which she lay. The searing heat passed her leaving the bitter reek of molten earth and burning vegetation behind. There were screams but they seemed more of fear and surprise than pain. Something ahead of her exploded. The Australians were ignoring the attackers, destroying anything they must leave. Prahnapurna, she wondered? The terrible lights snapped off. Mgeni raised her head.

Half a corpse faced her, features locked in a rictus of shock. Beyond, where tents and workshops had stood, the ground glowed a dull red. Smoky fires sputtered here and there in the grass. An archer lit an arrow at one and fired at the lowest of the dirigibles. His pitiful shaft arched upward. A single pencil of light pierced him. The skins of all four ships turned bright silver, but they were already well beyond bowshot. They rose majestically, turning slowly westward.

"The city!" It was a cry of despair. Mgeni found herself running for the forest edge again.

The dirigibles were dark bulks against the night sky, their minimal running lights faint, moving stars. The survivors held their breaths as the chevron formation of doom drove slowly toward their loved ones. Two bolts spat from the lead ship. The second ship fired once across the bow of the first. The hum of engines faded into the west.

"Why?" Jomo indicated the forest, city, and the now empty sky with a gesture of his hands.

"Trader Prahnapurna is an honorable man. He defended himself, but would not attack the helpless," Mgeni replied.

"Hear me!" Men jumped at Jomo's bellow. "We have been played for fools tonight. Gather the dead and the wounded, but touch none of the Far Traders you find." He looked at Mgeni. She nodded. The crowd moved slowly back toward the scene of battle.

["Can you explain what has happened?"] Kranna sat next to a tree, out of any traffic.

["Later. Now I need your nose."]

They gathered the dead; amazingly few considering. The wounded were either given quick mercy or helped back to the city. There were no injuries requiring hard decisions. Lasers kill or cauterize. Kranna identified only the thing Mgeni had killed as being of the Eater. They heaped debris over the very ordinary corpse and set it afire. It was dawn before they staggered through the gate to Jomo's home. Jomo went to see his wife. Mgeni collapsed in the front room, again.

They met at Jomo's home that evening; heads of the traders' guilds, city authorities, and representatives of all the temples save Set. (No one doubted Set was there.) T'la presided over the servants from a couch against one wall. When all were settled, Mgeni began talking.

She outlined her meeting with Orion and the red leopards in their home in the Scarlet Jungle. She sketched the happenings in Kyraa, concentrating on the currents of fear and how the Servants of Set used them. She detailed how she believed Orion was taken over and what he did in the main Temple of Bast. M'reena, through Raista, verified Mgeni's tale.

Mgeni told an edited version of what she learned from Prahnapurna. She emphasized that he and his men were victims. Mary, again through Raista, corroborated as much of Mgeni's speculations as she could from her observations.

["And how *did* you get through the fence?"]

["The stream. If I got real wet and went through quick, it wasn't bad."]

There was much discussion then, but no decisions. In truth, there was little the



people of Trade City could do. They could and would send out messages by drum and runner, but who would believe them? If the Australians were headed for the Mount of Winds or the Strange Mountains, they were just taking the infection back to its source. If they could fight their way out through the Mouth of the East Wind, no one here could stop them.

“Could they go to the City of Wizards?”

“I rather hope they do,” replied a Priest of Thoth. “It is the Wizards who first warned us of the Eater of All Things. They will receive no welcome there.” The rest agreed with him.

[“Hell with them, we’re going!”]

[/?/]

[“Melissa.”]

[!/!]

When the rest had left, Mgeni stood and began to pace. Jomo, T’la, the four leopards, and Raista watched her attentively.

“Jomo, I’m going to have to leave tomorrow. Thank you for your hospitality, but I think I’d better stay at the Temple tonight.”

T’la spoke first. “Honor us with your presence this last night.”

“I will have the acolytes prepare your travel gear,” said Raista.

Jomo simply asked, “Why?”

“Thank you T’la, Raista.” Mgeni stopped with her back to them, staring out a window. She turned back. “I must follow the air ships. I don’t know that I can do any more about them than your warriors, but I feel I must try. Orion was a friend before the Eater took him. Mary tells me that another friend is lost in the Strange Mountains. I feel, somehow, personally responsible.”

[“Come off it!”]

[/Fierce demand!/ “Can you swear Gray knew nothing of the Eater when he brought us?”]

[/Undecipherable/]

[“Then I/we may be!

[“Kranna, Oree, this is not your hunt. Defend this city from those the Eater has taken. Warn your replacements. Tell Strong Mind all that has happened when you return home.

[“M’reena, /sister/friend/ I think you should stay, too.”]

[/Negative!/] Mgeni smiled.

“Stay till noon, Mgeni,” rumbled Jomo. “I have a company leaving for the City of Wizards tomorrow.”

“I can travel faster alone.”

“Into unknown territory?” Jomo’s thick brows rose questioningly. “Crossing the River Lethe is more dangerous than you think.” He saw Mgeni’s stubborn expression. “As you will. I will give you maps.”

“Go with her, husband.”

“No,” said Mgeni and Jomo together.

“I will not leave you now.”

“I will go with the company. There is no way I can catch the Australians, so a day or two won’t make much difference.”

[“You been had.”]

[“Shut up, Mary.”]

“Tomorrow, then. The caravan master is a good man.”

Mary, M’reena, and Mgeni stayed well away from the train of pack buffalo as they left Trade City the next noon. It wasn’t until they were an hour out that Mgeni realized that the murmur of thought from Mary was a song.

[We’re off to see the Wizards . . .”]

*To be continued* □

## a CHFC mini art portfolio



