

TABOO SCIENCE FICTION #3

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I wrote the 'editorial' below for the expected third issue of Taboo Science Fiction, in 1996. That issue never happened. I forget why. But now it lives again in this format in this year 2002. Yes, Ghod works in mysterious ways.

NOW to make a point or two about causes and effects.

In this our present world of illusion and delusion via TV, film, and our largely fictional news media, most people have a warped, shortsighted, egotistic view of what causes people to act as they do.

In essence, most of us see and hear and endure all this word-image pressure from the media and we think, naturally, that it has a big impact and affect on people's behavior.

[Except of course it doesn't affect me! Or you!]

But consider crime in Christian Europe before the electronic media came in, and even before the printing press was invented and even before books and newspapers were produced for ordinary citizens.

There was religious and racial terrorism. There were savage, genocidal wars, and crime waves. There were murders, thefts, rapes, kidnappings. Child abuse was rampant as were child sex crimes. Homosexuality existed, as did alcoholism, drugs, tax evasion, madness of various kinds...

And crime rates were as bad then as now.

But how could that be!? They were vastly more religious and thus more moral in Medieval times...weren't they?

Everyone believed in God! The kids didn't have cars! They all had families. Most people lived on farms!

What caused such high rates of crime before there were books, magazines, radio, TV, movies, pornography for every taste, computer networks and mass secular godlessness?

What caused such high rates of crime and immorality before the divorce rate was 50%? Before sex was free and easy and virtually obligatory?

Is it possible that there is in mankind a built-in degree of natural anti-social contrariness, greed, and craziness that no matter what the society, no matter the

state of technology, no matter how dominant is religion and the father-figure family, there will inevitably occur a certain amount of behavior which almost any society considers criminal and deviant and perverse?

I think so.

So where do we [the public morality 'we'] get off blaming comic books, novels, TV, movies, the internet, radio, drugs, selfishness, sexual permissiveness and a 'breakdown of traditional family values' as causes of crime?

I suggest that no matter what the "influences" there will always be approximately the same amount of 'crime' in the world, in any society, and that 'criminals'---those of various degrees of psychopathology [i.e. those whose social conditioning and training wasn't good enough or didn't 'take' well enough because of---let's face it---subtle brain defects and/or hormone imbalances] and those of various degrees of inborn neurosis and more severe inborn 'craziness'---will always seek those avenues which meet their needs.

I believe the person seeks the kind of rebellion or 'crime' which his character and 'bent' require. As talent seeks its mode and media of expression.

Why do we seem to have so much more crime and deviant behavior today, in this civilization?

I suggest because it pays the media to emphasize, to feature those behaviors.

Sex, crime, 'terrorism' and drugs are the keys to present-day media ratings and sales.. Why?

Were sex, crime and revolution the most-popular tales for the old-time traveling story tellers? Why?

What were Shakespeare's most popular plays in his time? Why?

What were the most popular topics of village gossip? Why?

Why is our natural liking for the details of sex, crime, justice and injustice considered an evil? Or at least a failing?

Why do we think tinkering with society---passing laws---will cure crime...or political incorrectness?

We have a conceit of "knowledge" and a new "moral correctness"---a self-gratifying, self-serving, enriching delusion that mankind is not instinctual, but that he is soft plastic which can be molded by our 'social scientists' and psychologists (and religionists and traditional moralists!) and perfected by them.

But scientists are discovering almost weekly that more and more of human behavior---normal and abnormal---is governed by our genes, by hormones and blood chemistry, by tiny defects in the brain and 'glitches' in the 'neural nets' thinking processes of the brain.

And I suggest that a certain percentage of babies will have these problems when born, that humanity has a natural level of 'moral defectives' and 'criminals' and sexual 'deviants' which cannot be avoided...but that there are whole new professions---millions of people---whose jobs and status are dependent upon denying nature.

[Note wryly that homosexuality is now a favored deviation from normal (and that 'normal' as a standard is now Morally Incorrect), but that sex with kids is the most horrid of crimes...while the killing of millions of unborn children is a legal

option. A prime example of Double-think.]

These millions of middle class 'professionals' are in the business of scaring society and then offering useless cures for inherent, incurable problems.

For instance, legalizing 'recreational' drugs is opposed more by the 'criminal justice' system whose millions of jobs and tremendous budgets now largely depends on drug crime, than by the drug dealers. In fact, the illegal drug industry is in un-admitted alliance with the drug law enforcement industry in maintaining the status quo.

And consider the incredibly hypocritical pose of the Baby-Children-Women Protection Racketeers who want to serve and guard children and girls and women from the moment of birth onward (at comfortable professional-level salaries, of course!)...but who turn a blind eye to the millions of human lives killed before birth.

The rationale is that a woman must be allowed to destroy her unborn child if she wishes because 'it is her body' which serves as unwilling host to this unwanted...thing, this fetus!

Yet that sacred justification of the power and supremacy of the owner of the body dissolves into incoherent mush when it is suggested that if a woman has the power to decide to kill the human life in her womb, then surely she has the right and power to rent her body for non-violent sexual use.

Where is the Supreme Court on this? Out to lunch. Afraid to face the issue. Afraid to rule.

May I suggest that it will be a woman who will eventually force a legalization of prostitution by using her right to govern her use of her own Body.

Let me carry this argument a bit further. [Because I want to.]

Why is voluntary sexual manipulation to orgasm inherently so terrible? ...as opposed to giving a massage? ...or a nurse giving a rectal exam ...or giving painful injections of medical drugs ...or doing painful cosmetic surgery [requested and paid for by a woman asserting her right to use and control her body]?

But in this 'pussy-whipped society' of ours (which serves the interests of the ruling oligarchy), Feminist dogma currently rules the secular public morality: Men are inherently evil, for it is they who have this ravenous sex drive, they who get women pregnant and thereby force the poor women to choose abortions, and it is the evil men who dangle money before women and demand sex in exchange. And it is the men who create the economic conditions which force women to 'sell themselves' in various sex-ridden commercial ways. Men are evil exploiters; women and children are omnipresent victims.

Granted this Feminist View is warped and extreme, but I suggest there is a lot of primal truth in it.

The primary reason why most men are like this, and why most women yield, is called instinct, biology, nature's way. And that basic man-woman balance of power won't change, short of destroying humanity with mass, idealistic genetic tinkering.

It isn't selective nutrition which makes the average man bigger and stronger than the average woman. It is good old Mother Nature (DNA) making sure the species survives, by making male domination and the male sex drive an ever-present

biological pressure, and by making women the baby-motivated mate.

Either it is "nature" which has made mankind as we are, or it is because God---the almighty, the perfect creator [or the flawed alien] who dictated our makeup---wants us to be this way...contrary, greedy, loving, Us-vs.-Them, cooperative, intelligent killers.

Is God or our natural DNA, or It, or Them wrong?

Is He imperfect? Are we an experiment? Is God, in the last analysis, simply a horny male? [Hey, would a female God do this to Her fellow Women?]

To cover some other ground zero territory:

I also think our industrial, high-tech civilization is a temporary "golden age" spike in the history of humanity, and that our true and permanent level is tribal and primitive. We'll multiply to absurd population levels, use up all the easy-to-find and get natural resources, die off by the billions and sit around campfires gazing at all the strange ruins we find here and there in the overgrown world.

Interstellar space flight and migration is a chimera. We'll find it fruitless and too expensive. The claims of near-starving billions will take precedence.

After me---the deluge. From the moment of my death it's all downhill for mankind. Sorry about that.

My intent in Taboo SF is to continue to explore taboo 'What If---' ideas, future societies, 'crime', socio-cultural pretensions and sexual behaviors in ways that illuminate these 'abhorrent', 'ugly,' 'hateful' and unacceptable (to me obvious) truths.

Wotthell, I've got nothing better to do, and I enjoy it.

SURVIVE--- At Any Cost!

This story was/is too anti-abortion to have much of a chance at commercial publication. Hey, I just write 'em, I don't sell them. Sending these out again and again is too much work, and frankly too depressing.

She was three months before birth when a scream in her mind Awakened her.

She had Vision---and in her mother's womb experienced the Outside.

She experienced a jolting Link and found herself in the unformed, chaotic, tormented mind of another unborn nearby...in the...clinic...as it was murdered.

She felt the terrible physical shock of being suddenly without the embrace of

warm, safe amniotic fluid.

She felt the horrible trauma of bones cracking and rending muscles, knew the helpless visceral terror of being torn apart by huge, invading metal claws! As she thrashed feebly in the throes of death.

Blood seemed to fill her Vision and unendurable pain overwhelmed her.

She had not yet learned to break or limit the input from the Link.

She struggled to be free of the pain! Her mind lashed out blindly.

In that clinic operating room an equipment table rocked briefly on its rubber wheels, and the doctor felt a sudden shiver of agony in his left arm.

Finally the stainless steel claws seized the unborn's head and crushed the soft skull.

The shambled mind quickly faded and ended. The Link ended.

She shuddered and kicked in her own safe, warm, nurturing womb, in reaction and sympathy and instinctive horror. She "heard" and understood her mother say, "Oh! It just kicked! Hard! Maybe it wants out early."

Another...woman...said, "It isn't a good idea to make it a thinking person in your belly. It's not really human. It can't think."

Her extraordinary mind was opening like a sun-hungry flower, taking in information, understanding more every second, wanting more knowledge of the world beyond the dark warmth of the womb.

Her mother said, "I know, but... I just hate to go through with this."

"For your sake...and for the sake of the poor, mutated thing you're carrying... It's better to spare it from a terrible life if it should happen to survive delivery. And believe me, Francine, it's better to spare yourself the ordeal of carrying it any longer. It's head is too big already, and it's too strong. You'd have to have a cesarean. It could kill you."

"I know. But it's a girl."

"It's technically female. That can't change anything."

"Why is my baby mutated?"

"I've told you, we don't know. Chemicals in your food, a stray cosmic ray hits part of your ovum, or your husband's sperm...or hits just at conception... It's just trillions-to-one bad luck. It happens."

Her mother said, "Shit happens."

She somehow understood. She realized she had been absorbing words and sounds and shadowy Sights and Links for months...more and more clearly.

Until now--now the horrible death scream in her mind had shocked her into final Awakening.

She realized she was unusual...different...and not wanted.

She realized they were going to kill her the way they had killed that other poor unborn. She was too big to be forced out in premature birth. Her mother's hips were too narrow.

She understood it was easier and less expensive to take her body out of the womb piece by piece. She felt fear for the first time. She did not want to be killed! But how could she stop it?

The examination room took firm shape in her mind. Her mother lay on a

wheeled procedure table.

An advisor sat next to her mother.

A different woman came into the room. "Mrs. Prichard, I'm afraid we won't be able to do your procedure today. Doctor Merwin had to go to the hospital."

"Why?"

"He had a sudden angina pain...or what he thought might be angina, so he decided to have it checked out. We're rescheduling his appointments."

"I hope it isn't serious."

"Probably it isn't. He's only forty-five."

Four nights later, at 2:34 A.M., Francine Prichard shook her husband awake. "Don? Don! It's back...the whispering."

He sighed, turned over and stared blearily at her. "Any change?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does the voice say anything different?"

"No, it's just 'Please don't kill me...please don't kill me...' over and over. And it's louder now! It's driving me crazy! I can't sleep!"

"Take another pill."

"I can't! I really tried. I can't open the bottle. She just won't let me!"

"Fran... Jesus. That thing in your belly can't control you. It's not doing the whispering, it's what the woman said at the clinic, it's your stupid guilt and your imagination."

"No! No! It's her. It's Mary!"

"'Mary'? Have you named it?"

"She named herself. She told me just a few minutes ago. 'I'm Mary. I'm your daughter. Please don't kill me...please don't kill me...'" Francine burst into tears and pressed against her husband. "Oh, God, Don! I can't stand it. I can't! I can't have her killed tomorrow."

He pushed Francine away. "Take another of those pills! Take four, for Christ's sake! I'll give you some of my Valiums. You're hysterical."

"I can't take anything, since last night. I tried, and she kicked me. She kicks hard! She doesn't like drugs."

Don Prichard sat up and switched on the light. He tried not to look at his wife's pale, swollen belly. He said, "Darling, it isn't human. It's a monster in there. It isn't thinking. It isn't telepathic. It isn't wired into your brain. What you're 'hearing' is an hallucination. It's your natural guilt---"

Francine clapped her hands to her ears. "I know that! I know that! Everybody tells me that! But it's so real! She sounds so nice and sweet and desperate! She doesn't want to be killed!"

"Well, Christ... I don't know what to do with you. What am I supposed to do?"

Francine flung herself awkwardly out of bed. She crouched, keening, hands fruitlessly pressed to her ears. She turned her back to her husband. She said pleadingly, "Please...Mary... please let me sleep. Let me sleep. Leave me alone..." She swayed and seemed to be listening. Her eyes widened. "You can?" "No,

don't do that. Please." "They can't if I say no."

Her husband muttered an oath and left the bed. He came to her and held her lovingly from behind. "Fran, just take some more pills. This will all be over tomorrow morning. Just a few more hours."

"I can't do it. She's talking to me! Just like anybody talks. She knows what's going on!"

"Damn it, Fran, it's a mindless monster in there, not some sweet little girl with a high school education! Your mind is providing its 'talk'! Can't you see that?"

"Don't say things like that. She doesn't like it."

"Oh, Christ! You're really--- You're really crazy. The sooner they kill that thing in you, the better!"

"No! Mary, don't!"

Don Prichard jerked away from his wife as if an invisible fist had smacked his head. He reeled and hit the bedroom TV and its stand. They crashed to the floor together.

Francine cowered away, hands to her face. "No...no...no.."

Don lay bleeding from a forehead cut. He peered at his wife with amazement and fear. He didn't get up. "How did you hit me like that?"

"She did it! She did it! Mary did it!"

He stared at her, wide-eyed. "Your Mary did it? How?"

"With her mind! She can do things. She's getting stronger and stronger."

Don shook his head. "Christ. You're really gone. I've got to make some calls."

Don's mouth suddenly opened wide, straining. His eyes widened with helpless terror. He howled with pain. He flopped wildly on the floor. His hands seemed prevented from reaching his face. His jaws cracked open, unhinged from his skull, and his lower jaw was powerfully, gruesomely ripped away. His howls were screams bubbling with blood.

Francine collapsed to the floor, sobbing, unable to watch. She beat at her belly with her fists. "Stop! Stop! Don't kill him!"

But Mary was intent on silencing this man who hated her and wanted her dead. He would not make calls! He would be the one in the hospital!

Something with invisible claws seized Don's tongue and tore it out of his throat. He strangled on a flood of bright red blood. By accident or instinct he rolled over, face down, and the blood poured onto the rose-colored carpet. His efforts to breathe were terrible to hear.

Mary would not let him live!

His right arm jerked as if controlled by strings. His hand flopped into the shattered face of the television set next to him. The broken picture tube still sizzled and sparked with shorting electricity. His forearm stabbed further into the ragged glass hole. His hand contacted live power. His entire body convulsed with electrocution.

Dr. Harry Merwin entered the #3 O.R. of Sanctuary & Mercy Hospital, and saw the quivering figure of Francine Prichard on the operating table.

He asked, "Why is she moving like that?" His gloved hand hovered near the scalpel on the sterilized tray, then dropped.

The nurse opposite him said, "She's had three iv sedative shots to keep her still. She's all the way under."

He glanced at monitors. Bp 227 over 189. Respiration 214. He said angrily, "She's redlining. What's going on?"

"This just started the moment you came in. She was hyper before, but the shots smoothed her out and put her under."

"This is that woman who killed her husband a few weeks ago, isn't it? I remember her...from the clinic...when I had that..." His right hand moved to touch his left arm. He turned to the assistant surgeon, "Is this legal? Did she give informed consent?"

The younger man checked a paper on a clipboard sealed in plastic. "Court order to do the abortion. No extra effort mandated to save the mutated or deformed fetus if it is marginally viable. She's classed homicidal paranoid schizo. Very dangerous delusions."

"Okay. That helps explain this. She's got some kind of brain damage." Merwin scanned the readouts. "We'll go ahead." He said to the nurse, "Quazumerol, 35 cc, iv. I don't want her flopping around while I'm opening her up." He said to the attending Anesthesiologist, "How deep is she?"

"Level seven. Her brain is asleep but her body seems to have a mind of its own."

"The Quazumerol should keep everything quiet. Nurse?"

"Few seconds." The nurse was about to inject the drug into Francine's iv.

A sledge hammer of invisible force slammed her hand away. The full syringe flew like an arrow and buried itself in the Anesthesiologist's right eye.

He screeched and fell away, off his stool, and pulled the breathing cone from Francine's nose and mouth.

The nurse screamed and cradled her broken wrist and broken fingers.

The heavy surgical equipment cart shook and rattled as if possessed and rose off the floor.

The young assistant surgeon yelled "Earthquake!" and lunged toward the doors.

He was struck in mid-stride by the levitated steel table. It hurtled forward, with him draped over it, to the pale green O.R. wall and crushed his chest in the impact. Its extended handles buried themselves in his abdomen, like the horns of an enraged bull.

Doctor Merwin stood amazed, open-mouthed. This was impossible. He had performed over three thousand abortions and nothing ever--

The operating table rolled away from him.

A force lifted him up and held him, spread-eagled, in mid-air, directly under the brilliant white surgery lights. A scalpel glittered in the air and then merciless with speed cut his gown and then his clothes away, leaving him naked, with deep, bloody slashes on his chest, arms, belly, genitals, legs and feet.

Doctor Merwin, expert abortionist, a master at his craft, screaming with pain, was then himself treated as an inconvenient, unwanted fetus.

Small surgical power saws rose like buzzing hornets from the spilled mass of tools. They worked in unison and turned red with his spattering blood as they chewed through his shoulders and thighs to separate his limbs from his torso.

He stopped screaming because of blood loss to his brain. He was not aware of the saw which growled and chattered through his neck and spinal cord.

His head and body parts were stuffed into the Operating Room's large Biological Waste container.

She awakened two hours later in a hospital bed in a room crowded with hospital personnel and police.

She was bound tight with straps and manacles. Only a sheet covered her naked body and swollen belly.

A nurse said, "She's conscious."

A detective bent over her. "Francine, I'm Jack Long. I'm a police officer. Do you remember anything that happened in the operating room?"

She looked up at him, frowning. "That's not my name."

The detective glanced at her hospital ID bracelet. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm Mary Prichard. You Outsiders...you're not going to try to kill me again, are you?"

END STORY

VIRTUALLY ALIVE

The helmet locked itself to her smooth, clean head.

She clicked the selector to View5. She chose vision and sound only and pressed the Play button on the arm of her chair.

Instantly her homecube disappeared and she was in a news broadcast.

She watched UniStates soldiers firing laser rifles. The view was 180°, FullD, with perfect sound.

The newscaster's voice said, "...in Loreto on the Balsas River. The BRD terrorists blew up a FedFarmsCorp meal producing unit and killed three workmen. Brazilian Army forces, supported by Uni-States Second Jet Cavalry Brigade made contact that afternoon."

The scene cut to bodies of rebel soldiers. They were ragged natives. Parts of their arms, legs and heads had been sliced off by the long-range lasers. Some emaciated torsos were neatly slashed in two. "Thirty-four BRD's were killed.

Our casualties were minimal."

Scene shift to a man in a Great Mother government office. He wore an opaque business gown of black with gold trim. He wore a matching initial "M" head dek. "Secretary Morgan of the U-S Corporate Committee replied to criticism in the Senate that we have killed many terrorists but have nevertheless lost a disturbing number of farms and processing units."

Morgan said, "I want to reassure all citizens of the UniStates. Their life-support supplies are assured. We have an over-feed factor of five point two and nothing the terrorists can or will do in the years ahead, as in the six years past, will endanger the basic security of this great country."

The newscaster came into being a few feet in front of her. He smiled and spoke directly to her. "The problem of helmet addiction was dealt with by a readout from the Great Mother today."

A multi-colored depth graph filled her vision.

"Only six percent of the total population can be considered true helmet addicts, and they are mostly in the thirty-forty to end-age groups. Boredom is the major factor, Mother indicates, combined with the increased use of total sensory disks of all kinds. The new ten-hour nanodisks and twenty-four hour schedules of TS shows are also partly responsible."

Scene shift. A fashion show. A model in a transparent glitter gown.

"Anthony House has diminished the midcover to thirty square centimeters, the smallest ever. Buyers were shocked at the circle of gems around a definite, though shallow, indentation."

Close-up of the new Anthony House umbilical cover.

"Anthony declared it is time to be less modest about birth signs. Senator Jankins of New Cuba declared the new trend disgusting and that he would frame an official request to Mother to readout against even a hint of greater center exposure."

Scene shift to a broken female body on an off-zone as curious people drifted by on the slower pedwalks.

"Seventeen people ended today. Ten from typical jumps. Denver Dome Secretary Brevic said..."

Shift to Brevic, an eyebrowless blue-gold gowned man with the usual initial head dek. "All these enders are causing us some inconvenience, but we are well rid of them. Their going helps reduce the still high population-to-resources strain and makes life better for all of us. I say, let them end!"

The newscaster reappeared. "In other happenings, thirty-five Mother-convicted Rapists were given over to total organ donor status today, along with six Seductresses. Two hundred and fifty-four Unauthorized Intercourse penalties were given, and seventy-two Unauthorized Pregnancy charges were filed."

Shift to a scrubby, windblown field. "Mother decertified and condemned three more of her Programmers today for inputting erroneous agriculture data which resulted in mis-seeding and improperly timed diversion of precious water. Supreme Councilman Lloyd said today..."

Shift to D-pic of Lloyd. Voice only. "We see further evidence of a deep, widespread conspiracy against Great Mother in this constant sabotage of our food

supply. Blame for the constant decline in food production in the UniStates must be assigned to---"

She switched off her helmet.

END STORY

THE FOREVER WOMAN

This is a companion piece to the novel, One Immortal Man. It seems the aliens created an immortal woman, too. Over the years since I wrote this I've thought of extending The Forever Woman to novel length, merging the two stories into a Big Novel, offering it to a Big Publisher...

And I just might extend this story to follow Alix as she re-enters the man's world she hates and voyages to North America to seek the One Immortal Man...

Alix Hamar stood tall, almost naked, cold and beautiful on the throne rock in the grotto.

This was the Temple of The Eternal One.

She wore a heavy gold necklace that nestled a giant pearl between her full breasts. Her nipples were extended, crinkled by the cold air. An intricately made gold V covered her delta, held in place by golden chains.

Gold bracelets entwined her wrists, and ankles. Gold and diamond pins and clips managed her long blond hair. She wore golden sandals to complete the gold motif.

Below her in the flickering yellow light from the central fire pit were her one hundred and five mortal followers, her cult of women and eunuchs.

They all wore heavy garments in this damp, icy, sea-linked cavern.

The sound of waves was constant, along with the rush of biting cold air chilled by the spreading glaciers in southern France.

And the Mediterranean was not yet completely free of ice this July!

Alix did not feel the cold. She did not understand why she was impervious.

Etched in her mind was the baffled, awed comment of a scientist from 1400 years ago: "Your DNA has been changed. You have an improved immune system, an altered endocrine system, a profoundly mutated pituitary..."

He had wanted desperately to get her into a hospital for more tests. He had been the first and last man she had trusted to test her blood and do other examinations. She had been ninety-five years old then, and still looked twenty-five...in her fourth identity. She had been obsessed, raddled with curiosity and dread.

She had stayed in his home, alone with him, while he ran his tests. The next night...

That had been on the night of July 17, 2003.

She remembered it all---everything---one of the curses of her immortality. Radical changes had been made in her brain, too.

She had tried to make his death merciful and quick...but he had fought and desperately tried to escape the basement lab in his home. She had chosen him well, for expertise, vulnerability to her charms, privacy, discretion. But she had known from his thoughts he couldn't keep this secret.

No mortal could keep it.

It had taken five slugs from the .38 Smith & Wesson to bring him down and keep him down. He had squealed and bled like a butchered pig. The fifth bullet had blasted into the base of his skull and finally ended it.

A terrible moment. Her first kill.

But she had known then her future and her need for secrecy. She had realized she would probably never know exactly what the aliens had done to her, and maybe never know why they had done it.

They had made her immortal. It couldn't be reversed by her or by human science. She had not wanted it reversed.

All she could do was protect her secret and live on.

She had first burned all of his papers, roasted all of his computer disks, crashed his hard drive with a blow torch, smashed his equipment, and then burned the house.

And now, 200 lifetimes later, her few, pathetic, adoring worshippers gazed up at her, silent, on their knees, waiting for her to begin the ceremony of Acceptance or Denial.

She felt trapped.

She dutifully gazed somberly at the twin infants in the large wooden crib at the base of the throne rock. She had supervised the birthing of these two only a few days before.

Alix's intense, blue-eyed gaze shifted to the mother, a small eighteen-year-old who wept in spite of her belief in the divinity of The Eternal One.

Alix understood what the young mortal was feeling. She also had known the dread and infinite sadness at the loss of a baby. She had known it four times before giving up, before deciding to never again become pregnant.

She had again heard damning words from a doctor:

"Your eggs will accept conception, but there's something in your DNA...some instructions...which prohibit full term development."

She had tried with four different fathers. She'd concluded she wasn't quite human any longer.

A heavy wave shuddered the grotto and sent spray-frigid air into the rocky

temple.

Alix raised her arms. Cold air ruffled her long, wavy, dark blonde hair. Firelight glowed and flickered on her gold jewelry, on her full breasts, on her flat belly, on her perfect legs.

Alix spoke softly in the common language of the Mediterranean basin, a mixture of French and American. Her voice carried despite its low, velvety pitch. She had never liked its soft huskiness.

"My children. We had hoped to keep both these infants in our family. The passing of Helene and Denys seemed ordained to allow these to join us. But our harvests have been bad, and worse are inevitable. We have lost thirty goats to a new sickness. We cannot find another vein of coal in the mine. Wood is very scarce. We must restrict our numbers further."

Alix's eyes drifted to the pregnant Mara, and she tried to read the girl's mind, but it was too far and the girl was not meeting her gaze. Mara was a problem.

Alix made a sign to two nearby acolytes dressed in hooded orange robes.

A chorus of ten women and one eunuch, with carefully selected voices, began the haunting song of Decision, a complicated interweaving of melodies which grew in volume as the acolytes unwrapped the babies, took them naked into their arms and carried them up the carved stone stairway to Alix.

She was first given the girl child. The song ended.

Silence.

She examined the infant, seeking in this ritual for the signs and imperfections of a mutant. She had previously, privately, inspected and tested the baby and declared her Human.

But the 300-year-old ritual required The Eternal One to seek imperfections and unhuman taints in all newborns in view of her assembled followers. For it was known that she could see into the soul of anyone, young or old, male or female.

Temple records told of more than 500 times when she had recoiled from the distorted mind of an infant otherwise perfect in human form.

The devastating Bio-War's effects on human genes had been ruthlessly weeded out by infanticide in Europe and in its migrated north Africa populations over the ensuing centuries.

Identifiable newborn mutants were rare, now. The human species had been kept form-pure in this part of the world. But horror stories continued to come from North America where a race of obscenely shaped mutants were thriving.

And Alix suspected there were strains of mutants in southern Europe and north Africa, in hiding; strange, warped minds in perfect human bodies who had passed the common examination of form at birth.

Her suspicions were caused by reports of bizarre behaviors in some children, of suicides, of weird crimes.

She felt the authorities shared her suspicions. "Inhuman" youthful crimes and activities were punished by death.

But still there were accounts of strange, secret societies who practiced ghastly rituals of murder and perversion...an underground of seeming humans who were inhuman in mind and spirit. They had learned to 'pass' as normal in usual social

settings.

She had never heard of another human or mutant who possessed her telepathic powers. Only she could positively detect brain-different mutants.

Alix peered into the wide-open brown eyes of the shivering girl baby huddled in her arms and felt a clearness, an unimpeded purity in the infant's mind. It was a delightful experience.

Alix's daily life so often involved contacts with minds soiled by envy, greed, hatred, lust...

Alix raised the child high. "I accept this child into our world. She is Whole and Human in every respect. She will live long and love us well. Let her mother rejoice."

The chorus sang joyfully.

The girl was taken to the mother and the boy infant given to Alix. He wailed with cold and dimly perceived fear.

Alix made a show of inspecting him. This child, too, was perfectly Human.

But there was no room for another emasculated male, as there would be no room for Mara's baby, unless one or two more of the older cult members died very soon.

Mara was eight months pregnant. And Mara was now a doubter, arrogant with half-knowledge and seduced by too much contact with a man on the mainland.

Alix frowned and shook her head.

The chorus began the sad song of Denial. The kneeling followers groaned and a few muttered doubt and criticism. The boy's mother wept without restraint.

Alix raised the boy high and said, "I deny this child entrance into our world. He is not wanted. He is not needed. Let us all lament."

The chorus sang of the necessity of obeying and worshipping The Eternal One.

Alix sadly handed the boy to the waiting acolyte who would take him to the west cliffs and cast him into the icy, crashing sea.

In better times Alix would have arranged for the male infant to be given to a farm family on the mainland. This had been done many times when too many Whole and Human males had been born. But in recent decades food surpluses in southern France had virtually disappeared and the farms were in desperate trouble. They, too, were now killing Human babies.

Alix stood, head down, somber, until the acolyte had disappeared into a side passage.

Again Alix watched Mara, wary of the young woman's aura of rebelliousness. Alix couldn't read the girl's mind at this range---over ten meters---and Mara had learned to avoid The Eternal One's strange, blue-eyed gaze.

Alix called out to her followers, "Work now, for life. We have only a few more weeks of growing weather."

She turned and walked up a stone ramp to the passageway reserved for The Eternal One.

Alix herself had designed the temple building overhead, 350 years ago, on this small island south and east of the largely abandoned ruins of Toulon. She had supervised the construction, the digging, the difficult cutting into granite to the large

caves beneath.

She padded up the narrow passage in growing darkness to an apparent turn to the left which led to a ledge over the rumbling sea.

She grunted softly as she levered open a rock door, slipped though to total darkness, and let the door grate back into position.

Alix went up and up, curving constantly to the right, as the secret stairway followed the interior of the above-surface building's thick outer walls. At the top were her private, sacred quarters.

Alix didn't mind the darkness as she ascended. She had gotten used to it over the centuries. As she had gotten used to every aspect of life on this riddled mass of rock in the sea.

She slowed as her gliding fingers found the grooves of another secret stone door. It opened to a room she kept stocked with food and wine, enough to last weeks if necessary. She had never had to use it. But the hidey hole was always there.

Alix continued climbing.

She was utterly weary of being The Eternal One. She had created this nest, this cult of women, on this island as an escape from the endlessly insulting, abusive, humiliating, victimizing world of men.

For eleven hundred years she had endured subjugation as wife, mistress, prostitute, slave, oracle, princess, empress...

Even as the Holy Empress of Greater France seven hundred years ago she had been restricted, advised, subtly overruled by men. They always held the ultimate power.

In a devolving, disintegrating society, in a world of retreat from the creeping return of an ice age, in a world of exhausted or inaccessible key resources and forgotten, unusable technology, in a world first returned to small nation states, then feudalism and city states...of diseases thought conquered forever, of desperately poor living conditions...of ever-increasing reliance on brute force...a woman was again---as ever---property!

A woman had only her position as a mother, her utility as a laborer, as a provider of sexual pleasures, to earn her food and a grudging second-rate status.

There had been no escape for her from that terrible, overwhelming reality, doomed to live endlessly in a crushing masculine world.

Except here, on Death Island, in a constricted little religious world of women and a few emasculated, tamed males, where she was a living, eternal goddess.

And now her retreat was becoming untenable. The damned ice...

And if not the inexorable ice which had taken her original home---Oslo---and then Berlin, London, Paris, her retreat would be shattered by the human factor.

Mara...

Why did that girl keep surfacing in her mind? A premonition?

Alix had known from the beginning this interlude would be a temporary respite, at most three or four hundred years of safety, security, peace, freedom.

She reached the top of the long stairwell and fumbled in the darkness for the finger holds in a secret door.

She pulled and entered the bedroom of her wood-paneled apartment.

She sighed and squinted in the light from yellowish, warp-paned glass windows.

An ancient, very valuable, coal-burning iron stove heated the room. Other stoves heated the other rooms of her large apartment.

She didn't need the heat for comfort, but it was necessary for Delphine and the other servants, and to keep her books and papers dry and free of mold.

She toed off her ceremonial sandals and walked barefoot in the luxurious, hand-loomed wall-to-wall wool carpeting.

The pattern in the rug was a formalized copy of a microchip circuit diagram found in one of the ancient books in her library. The weavers hadn't been able to read the text and could not conceive the significance of the blown-up micro-photograph, but they had liked the design very much.

Alix always smiled when she noticed the pattern. How those ancient scientists would have been astounded---and depressed---at this use of their creation.

She unstopped a call tube and said, "Delphine."

A moment later a small, slim, beautiful young woman entered the bedroom. Her room was one level below. She was always on call to The Eternal One. Hers was a prized, privileged position.

Delphine wore orange cotton pants and top, with a wool, open front orange sweater.

She knelt on one knee. She said ritually, "I live to serve you, Eternal One." She was panting lightly from her rush up the stairs and ramps to this highest set of rooms in the Temple.

Delphine was not mystified at how Alix appeared and disappeared from these rooms. Most of the worshippers on the island believed The Eternal One possessed supernatural, magical powers.

But Delphine had found the secret door behind the paneling. She hadn't explored the black, unlit down stairway, nor told anyone. She didn't want to lose her position, nor diminish The Eternal One.

What was magical and terrifying was The Eternal One's ability to divine the feelings and thoughts of anyone near her. And it was beyond dispute that this tall, blonde, superior woman never grew old.

Alix said, "Get these decorations off me. And after that...you know what I need."

"Yes." Delphine smiled to herself with knowledge and pride. This magnificent, eternal woman, this secret wonder of the world, wanted to be completely naked and wanted massage and scented oils and caresses and fondling and special lotions and touches...such intimate touches...and Delphine's cunning, loving worshipping tongue.

Delphine had been trained for this by Saphina two years ago, and had had been a very talented pupil. She pleased The Eternal One extremely well in this service.

But Delphine was jealous of the others who served The Eternal One in this way: Saphina, Lette, and the disgusting eunuch, Henri. How could The Eternal One enjoy that soft, yet strong, neutered thing? How could She enjoy having that male organ pushed into Her sacred body?

Alix sensed Delphine's jealousy and love, her disgust of Henri.

As the girl carefully removed the gold bracelets, the delta cover, the pins and combs from her hair, and urged Alix gently to lie on the bed, Alix slid easily into reverie and thought for the millionth time of the 'side effects' of her immortality.

She self-healed amazingly swiftly and her glands orchestrated perfect self-regulating body functions and total resistance to diseases.

And she was possessed of...perhaps possessed by...a very strong sex drive. She needed daily physical closeness and the intense physical pleasures of orgasms.

It had taken her a long time---centuries---to realize that men were not what she needed. Men were almost always too dominating, too selfish, too impatient, too rough, too resentful, too penis-oriented.

Alix understood Delphine's dislike for Henri. The girl would live with it or be replaced. As Henri, in time, would be replaced.

Alix understood her sexuality---lesbianism with infrequent bi-sexuality. But only if the male was 'safe' and subservient. She needed Henri as variety, to fill a kind of void in several senses.

She admitted to herself an atavistic, primitive female liking for the feel of a big, stiff penis in her vagina, sliding deep, jolting her, driving her into a psycho-sexual-physical state of wanting, needing, trembling...

She loved that complex brink-of-orgasm moment with Henri when her instinct-driven hind brain wanted a powerful man to claim her, possess her, spew semen into her, impregnate her, give her a child!

But he could not. She could not carry to term, and all that was left was the awakened urge to motherhood, the regret, the sadness and the powerful, different orgasm a skilled male lover could give her.

Delphine whispered love words, murmured adoration, as she rubbed pine-scented lotion on Alix's white and pink flawless skin.

Delphine had slipped off her orange garments and now knelt beside Alix on the large, low bed.

Alix sighed and relaxed further into the covered mattress stuffed with cotton, wool, feathers, and fur. She spread her arms and spread her legs and let the girl pleasure her.

Yes, Delphine was the best since Suzi...312 years ago.

Ah, the sexual pleasures... nearly the only thing in life she wanted anymore.

When the girl began nursing on her swollen nipples, Alix enclosed her in her arms and absorbed warmth and love and whispered as if to an infant.

Endless sweet sensations later, Delphine wriggled lower on The Eternal One's long white, voluptuous body. Her devilish tongue teased and flirted and finally found the center of Alix's sensual need.

Longer shadows later, Alix stood quietly, sated by pleasure, calmed by a nap, as Delphine dressed her in a long, emerald green silk robe over a pale green chemise. Her blonde hair had been brushed and arranged with emerald pins and green combs.

She asked, "Has Paulette returned with our supplies?"

"Yes, Eternal One. And a mail packet has been brought up for you. I placed it on your desk."

Alix closed the robe, toed into emerald green leather sandals, and led the way into the other rooms of her apartment.

She went to the ornately carved, hand-polished desk near the multi-paned, leaded window. The new letters and other papers were in a sealed leather pouch.

She wanted time alone to read them. She said to Delphine, "Go down and bring Paulette to me, but allow her time to bathe and eat. Return with her, and then leave us."

"Yes, Eternal One."

Briefly, Alix lifted her eyes and met Delphine's worshipping gaze. For a second she used her power. She felt the always disturbing penetration of another's mind...the odd pressure of another's thoughts and feelings.

Alix could not read the young woman's mind word-for-word. She received multi-leveled impressions, emotions, images of memory, a few isolated words.

Her psi power wasn't much, but it had given her an edge---sometimes a crucial edge---in her dealings with people, especially men, over the centuries.

Delphine was truly innocent of distrust, of dislike, of opposition. There were blurred, warm, moist, pink images, sensations of flickering tongue, and permeating all a hot, naked pride of position and privilege, a fierce joy at causing The Eternal One to cry out with pleasure. There were feelings of belonging...and a tiny, twisted feeling that somehow The Eternal One's body and pleasure needs belonged to her!

Alix withdrew from Delphine's mind---a cat burglar undetected---and said softly, smiling, "Leave me, sweet girl."

As Delphine, glowing with happiness, left the apartment, Alix opened the sealed pouch and withdrew two wax-sealed letter packets. She opened the one from Lisbon first.

She had a long-time arrangement with an information service in Lisbon which collected news from the rest of the world via its correspondents, from ship officers, from travelers and businessmen, from military sources.

The service sent their reports to an agent in Marseilles, who in turn forwarded them to an agent in Toulon. They all believed their client to be a wealthy old scholar...which was literally true.

Alix received all the news available, plus a special-interest report of stories, rumors, tales, fables, myths about supposed immortals.

That special interest was not exceptional. The world was now full of fabulous tales---about weird varieties of mutants in various far places, of giants, of three-headed ice creatures, sea monsters...

Many so-called learned men collected such stories and lectured on the unproven to credulous students in the few colleges and universities remaining, especially in the flourishing Sahara where the altered climate had turned the desert into a vast savannah with new rivers and surging populations.

A few rich, bored men---and there were always such in any age---had taken to the newly discovered "science" of alchemy and were again whispered to be disciples of ancient evil, of the devil, to be sorcerers and warlocks. They, too, subscribed to the news services for items of special interest to them.

Sometimes Alix suspected some of the stories were fiction, made up to keep clients on the hook.

Lisbon was now the shipping center of choice for trade with the Americas. The ice, for centuries, had inexplicably paused at Bordeaux and a favorable climate had blessed the southern coast of old Portugal.

Alix received similar news reports from information services in Cairo and New Damascus, but they were exceedingly unreliable, hand-written, erratic.

The reports from Lisbon were printed on crude, dark-fibred paper with muddy black ink. Printers, where they still existed, were forced to use handset type and wooden, flat-bed, handfed presses similar to the truly ancient Gutenberg invention.

She read avidly. The existence of an immortal man called Kun-Zar, in North America, seemed more and more certain. The reports she had collected from various sources for over a thousand years were being confirmed every few months now.

Kun-Zar had been a king in the Virginias six hundred or more years ago ...had reappeared in the old Berkeley area east of the radioactive peninsula that had been San Francisco. He had led a resurgence there in the genetic sciences, and again disappeared.

Now she suspected he was in the wondrous giant tree city of Norlins, the capital city of the Missipy Empire, the only civilized area on the continent.

Alix found a sour satisfaction in never finding any stories about an immortal woman. She had been very careful in the past to change identities and appearances every few decades. She had become so sick of it!

Her cult, here, on this island, was the first time she had allowed herself the luxury of being an immortal, a goddess. She had lived for 500 years in near total isolation on this small island.

Sighing, Alix leaned back in her chair and yielded to the terrible loneliness that forever lay in the back of her mind.

Was she ready now, at last, to seek him out?

Her loneliness was full of questions, and only one certainty. She knew she could not love a mortal, man or woman. These brief people she lived among were old before she could turn around.

She had tried to love in her early centuries but her unchanging beauty had forced so many moves, so many divorces, exits, "suicides", vanishings... The most time she could spend in one "life" in the outside world---the male ruled world---was thirty years.

Here, on Death Island among her devoted followers, she had been able to live as an immortal, but only by teaching her women and her few eunuchs that her existence had to remain an absolute secret, else greedy, brutal men from the mainland would invade their small island and kill and torture in order to learn the why and the how of her eternal life.

In addition, she had ordered the story spread on the mainland that the island was radioactive, and that men who came would lose their virility and be womanized, that their children would be mutants. Only women and eunuchs could live on the island without harm, somehow.

She had permitted only a handful of her most loyal, most trusted followers to sail the cult's small boat to Toulon to conduct occasional trade, to buy supplies.

And when necessary she had sent carefully chosen nubile young acolytes to Toulon to pose as ignorant, easily-seduced farm girls, to choose prime males to lie with and become pregnant.

It was the safest way to maintain the population of the cult.

Normally the male babies were altered and allowed to stay. There was a need for their superior strength in certain tasks.

She had decided soon after creating the cult that continuing to recruit women from the mainland would be too dangerous; the men who owned the women would be angered. It was safer to let nature create needed new followers.

Indoctrinated from birth, they were more reliable, more worshipful.

Alix let the news reports slip from her fingers. She stood and wandered around the room.

She felt so alone...always alone...always wanting in her secret heart a man who would not age before her eyes, who would not treat her as a plaything, as a possession, and who would not inevitably come to look at her with suspicion and fear, thinking her a witch, a sorceress, as her perfect blonde beauty never changed.

She wondered what he was like---Kun-Zar. Had the aliens in their macabre experiment given him the power to know other minds, too?

Alix felt a kind of dread. She had to go to him. She had fought this decision in her mind for a thousand years.

What had immortality done to his mind? Was he a selfish, ruthless monster? Yet there were signs that he had tried to save civilization, that he had been a good and wise king.

Sooner or later she had to enter again that ugly male world out there. The prospect sickened her.

A moment later Delphine rushed into the apartment. "Eternal One!" The girl's eyes were wide, and she was flushed and breathless from her dash up two hundred steps. "Mara! Mara has renounced her faith! She took the boat! She's gone!"

Paulette had followed Delphine into the room. She went to her knees, bowed her head and murmured, "Eternal One."

Paulette, a fortyish woman with a wind and sea-etched face, and strong tanned arms and calloused hands, had twenty years ago been a bed companion to Alix, and was now in charge of the boat.

Paulette avoided Alix's gaze, from shame, not fear. Alix had automatically probed the woman's mind when first she had entered.

Alix asked, "Where do you think Mara has gone?"

"To her man, the one who impregnated her. He's a colonel in the provincial army. She chose too well. I've seen him. He's tall and handsome and full of his importance. He rules the docks and exacts tributes above the official taxes."

"Why would he want her?"

"Mara told me a teller of fortunes had read his hands and viewed the size and shape of his organ, and told him his child would be a pure Human son."

Alix laughed. "That's a new angle. Next they'll examine the semen."

Paulette flushed and said nothing. The Eternal One could be shockingly crude sometimes and think nothing of it.

Paulette said guiltily, "I should not have believed her lies. I should not have allowed her to help on the boat. All those trips to Toulon..."

"Well, it's done. She loves the man, I suppose, and she wants her baby to live." Alix realized the ceremony had been a terrible blunder. She had wanted to impress upon her followers how severe the food crisis was going to be this coming winter.

But Mara's flight was a worse crisis, for the rebellious girl could destroy the cult.

Alix asked, "How many times has Mara been with this colonel?"

"I think about ten times, since she first met him and bedded with him. She was never gone for long, and each time the excuse for leaving the boat and the dock was different."

"Can she sail well enough to make the port?" It was gusting outside. The seas were running high and it was dark now, and cold!

Paulette nodded, miserable. "I believe so. I taught her, and she often sailed the boat while I rested. I believed her when she suggested that someone other than myself should have experience with the boat and the docks and the details of trade, in case I became ill."

"She was right. I should have planned for a substitute. One of the fisherwomen. But Mara saw the logical need and used it for her purpose."

"How could she betray you?"

Alix smiled wryly. "She had to. The logic of it is simple: If I am a goddess, an immortal with great powers who can see into the souls of my followers and who has lived hundreds of lifetimes...if I have all of the experience and wisdom of the past...then I could have avoided the troubles which have plagued us in recent years and especially this year. Either I am allowing these events to happen, or I am a powerless fraud.

"It follows that I either want her to do what she is doing, or I cannot do anything to stop her...and therefore her lack of faith is justified."

Paulette shook her head violently. "No! No!"

"That's the basic flaw in all human religions." Then Alix realized the emotional pain she was causing Paulette. For a moment she felt anger and contempt for the woman. There was an urge to destroy the sweet, loyal faith and lifelong commitment.

Mortals were such pathetic fools! So eager to give themselves to a leader, a god, a lover! And women were probably worse than men.

Alix cruelly said, "It's true. Where is Christ today? The Nuke Exchange and then the Bio-War... No god can long survive permitting such disasters happening to his followers. There were no sophistries or rationalizations clever enough or persuasive enough to save Christianity. The more omnipotent a god in good times, the more vulnerable he or she or it in bad times."

Paulette had clapped her hands over her ears. Her face twisted with anguish.

Alix suddenly hugged the small woman. She pried the hands away and said softly, "I'm sorry I said those things. I become very bitter and angry sometimes and I need to hurt someone."

She kissed Paulette's still-sweet, still-responsive lips. "Forgive me. I'm sorry."

"Eternal One...if hurting me by testing my faith helps you, then I will hurt joyously."

Alix sighed. "Of course." She released Paulette. "Go to your room and sleep. Tomorrow at dawn be ready to sail me to Toulon."

"Eternal one! There is only the skiff. It is too dangerous!"

"I sailed a similar skiff myself, back and forth to Toulon, four hundred years ago. Be ready at dawn."

Alix did not fear the sea, but she dreaded a return to the male-dominated world, even for a short time. But there was no option she could think of. And she suspected she needed to be acclimated to patriarchy again.

She said to Paulette, "I must talk to Mara. I must look into her mind."

"But if men discover who you are! Let me go and try to get her back. Let me promise her child will not be killed."

Alix considered. "No, she wouldn't believe you. Even if you managed to talk to her privately. And if I remember clearly, you'd need a male escort to leave the moorage."

"Will we take one of our fauxmen?"

"No." Alix put steel in her voice. "I know what I'm doing! Be ready at dawn."

Paulette blurted, "I could hire her killed!"

"That would kill the colonel's child as well." And Alix knew that if Mara died suspiciously it would enrage the man and provoke an investigation of the strange women's cult out on Death Island.

She had to know how much Mara had told the colonel of the cult, of the Eternal One. The situation called for damage control, not suicide.

It was past Noon when Alix and Paulette sailed the skiff into the harbor of Toulon.

It was high tide, but still the old stone docks were far away, isolated in dried, cracked mud flats. The remaining people of the city had learned as the sea level dropped decade after decade to build easily extended wooden piers which now projected nearly half a mile outward from the old shoreline.

The new docks, rickety and unstable for lack of proper pile-driving machinery, swayed and creaked from the burdens of horse-drawn and human-drawn carts and wagons, from mounds of freight and produce, from flimsy warehouses and offices.

The era of sailing ships had long since returned, and multitudes of tall masts speared into the cool sunlight.

Barges powered by sweating oarsmen crept out to deeper water where a few deep-draft fully-rigged ocean-going three-masted ships rode at anchor.

Alix was dressed as a man. Her long blonde hair had been gathered and netted under a canvas sea cap, her unblemished skin smudged, her eyebrows thickened and darkened, her hands dirtied and gloved, her sensual woman's body hidden under a long, heavy sea coat. She wore pants and crude workman's boots.

Paulette expertly lowered the sail and lashed the boom in place. Alix cranked up the keel.

They drifted close to a narrow wooden small boat dock whose weathered blue sign proclaimed it Bassin de Aubagne.

The cult had used this dock for hundreds of years as it was extended section by section. Soon another one hundred fifty feet would have to be added.

Alix leaped onto the dock and tied the bow line. At five feet six she now was as tall as most men. That height made her disguise as a man more effective. It also allowed the "escorted" Paulette to accompany her into the depths of the crumbling, looted city.

Lone women were often waylaid and abused, even in broad daylight, along the busiest streets by the lowest castes of men.

Alix carried an imported ironwood dagger, a beautiful stabbing weapon of inlaid woods whose black blade was almost as strong as iron but which could not take an edge.

Paulette also carried a weapon, a more common oak spike with a leather grip.

Paulette was well-known on the dock and matter-of-factly paid a small berthing fee. She mentioned to the swarthy dock manager that her passenger was a laborer hired to help carry some produce from a neighborhood farm back to the boat.

Alix was barely noticed.

Paulette learned that the cult's ketch had been seen the night before, in deep twilight, driving into the harbor before the wind.

As they walked the long, badly-maintained pier to the old shore, Alix asked, "Where is Mara likely to be?" She had to look over her shoulder to speak to Paulette, who walked half a step behind and to the side. No woman now walked as an equal to any man.

"I can only guess, Eternal One. I looked for the---"

"Call me Lax while we are ashore. Talk the common tongue. Don't be formal or deferential." Lax was an often-used first name for lower class men.

"Yes---Lax. I looked for the ketch as we traveled the harbor. I thought she'd use the Aubagne pier from habit. Since she made it to the harbor last night she is probably now with her colonel in his quarters."

"How would she get there alone at night?" Alix thought even an eight-month pregnant woman would be taken and raped, if not kidnapped and forced into slavery. The child would be an added value.

"The colonel is in charge of the dock areas. His soldiers know Mara. She has only to ask and they escort her anywhere."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"I think so. When I discovered she was lying to me about her absences here I had her followed several times. Always she and her soldier escort went to a large house on Auxerre Boulevard. The colonel and his aides occupy every room."

"Do you know the city well enough to get us there?"

"Yes. It's a major street...not too far."

"Tell me which turns to take." Alix surveyed the disheveled skyline. Toulon

was much changed from her last visit several hundred years ago. And society obviously had also devolved.

She harshly admonished Paulette, "Keep your eyes downcast most of the time. They know you and like you on the pier. But in the city...you're a second class human being, and don't forget it."

"I know the customs." Paulette had been dealing with the men on the docks for a long time. She felt insulted but forgave her goddess. She was astonished and gratified and terrified at the arrogance of The Eternal One in her male disguise.

Alix strode forward boldly, head high, often challenging the casual stars of workmen and businessmen. She was grateful for her husky, low-pitched voice when a draymaster cursed her for momentarily blocking his passage at the entrance to the pier, and she spiritedly cursed him back: "Mutant dropping! Get out of my way!" She laughed at Paulette's muffled gasp.

But a few minutes later Alix felt depressed as she walked into the ancient, ruined city. She hated the necessity of posing as a man, and hated the sight of other women, often dressed in rags, slumped under heavy burdens, or with heads bowed down under a hopeless future.

Alix and Paulette came to a corner. Paulette murmured softly, "To the right. I believe this lane can save us a few blocks."

The winding, narrow passage had seemed innocent from the outside, but once they had walked past the first snake-like turns its character became clear.

It was more than sad the way the whores came alert at the sight of an apparently big, strong man striding into sight.

Paulette whispered, "Prostitutes! Turn back."

"I see." Alix continued on.

"You will be propositioned quite boldly. It is best not---"

"I'm not afraid of them, or offended. I know the life they lead." She knew too well. She shut down a crowd of memories.

The whores emerged from crumbling hovels, from gaping, ruined buildings, from small, patched tents sited in rubble. They clotted about Alix like piranhas attacking an animal fallen into their river.

"Anything you want for an eighth gold lira." ... "May I serve you, sir?" A too-young girl bared soiled, just-developing breasts. ... "I'll take it anywhere you want to put it, big man." A desperate woman whose brown hair showed gray pressed close and fumbled expertly in Alix's clothes.

Alix tried to twist away and dislodge a seeking hand, but the woman lifted startled eyes and shrieked with sudden laughter. "He's a woman!"

Alix shoved her away and continued on, still the center of a jostling knot of frantic whores.

Their entreaties changed. The promises changed. "Don't go! Don't leave! I love slits! My tongue will drive you mad with delight!" ... "I can take anything you want to strap on, darling!"

Poor Paulette followed Alix closely, largely ignored, but miserable and shocked at what The Eternal One had to endure.

Alix was sickened by the terrible desperation in these women's voices and faces. Even sex was losing its value in this hungry, cold world.

She broke through the pleading, promising, straggling women and looked back to see Paulette breaking free, too, white-faced with disgust.

Alix turned right at the end of the lane and recognized the shell of a building across the way. She knew where she was now, and remembered having walked this avenue hundreds of years before, in far better times.

That building across the street had been a hotel, but was now a hollow-eyed facade, ravaged, empty, looted of all metal pipes, wires, fixtures, empty of all wood, plastic, all carpeting.

On its massive, concrete, barren floors were crude walls of home-made brick and mortar which created warrens of tiny rooms. Trenches filled with sewage ran in front of the once majestic structure. Greasy little cooking fires sent rivulets of dark smoke wending from the gaping window holes.

Many of the shattered buildings sheltered carefully tended gardens and precious, guarded greenhouses.

That was the pattern in this central area of Toulon. Here there was quiet; an occasional slow-moving man or couple, rarely a child, rarely the sound of a baby crying.

As they walked on, passed sometimes by horse-drawn carts and wagons, more often passed by pull carts moved by grunting human power, Alix became aware of three ragged, gaunt men following.

She said to Paulette, "Have your stabber ready." She stopped and turned to stare disdainfully at the three. She pulled out her dagger and said to the glinting-eyed men, "Go back, or I'll leave one or two of you here, on the ground."

It had been a very long time since she had fought, but she knew her training was still in her mind and muscles, and she would sense when each of the men would attack and how, from their minds.

There would be a tiny flash of intent and she would act as soon as he, if not before.

The leader, a bald scarecrow with a wild fringe of hair and feral eyes, displayed an oak club from behind his back. It was studded with shards of old glass and sharp spikes. He said, "Naw, naw, you don't own that slit. You're only escorting. Give her to us. I'll pay you three silvers for her. Why bother to fight?"

The other two men sidled apart, circling. They showed simple oak stabbers.

Alix smiled and penetrated his mind. "You don't have three silvers." She forced herself to share his lusts and fears. As ever, the naked, untamed male mind roiled her stomach and narrowed her eyes.

They are so different from us, she realized for the millionth time.

He was uncertain because she had a fine dagger and because she held it properly and was in a deadly fighting stance. He knew professionalism when he saw it.

But one of his cohorts did not, or thought a surprise attack could succeed.

Paulette cried out, "Left!" and moved to defend against the one on the right. The sudden appearance of a stabber in the hand of what had been considered a defenseless woman caused hesitation.

But the left attacker was committed. Alix spun and took his mind as he lunged for her. She knew instantly his oaken stabber would seek her throat after a feint at her belly. He would shift to the right as he made the killing thrust.

She had a long reach, and her sidestep and very quick thrust buried her dagger in his open, astonished mouth. The ironwood blade pierced his throat and penetrated his hindbrain, paralyzing his nervous system, stopping his muscles. He made a weird sound as he collapsed.

Alix pulled her dagger free as he fell limp.

He was unable to breathe though his heart continued to pump, and he could think and know he was a dead man.

She turned swiftly to face the leader. Her blade showed blood. As she turned she saw the man on the right backing away.

She asked the leader, "What do you think now?" She knew: he was filled with fear though his face didn't show it. He knew the tall, solid man in the sea coat and cap was a far better knife-fighter than he, and he knew the woman could fight, too.

He lowered his club, spread his arms and tried to smile. "Trak was a fool. I only wanted to bargain."

"We do not. Take this fool and sell his body if you must have money." Alix moved away from the motionless, suffocating man. She gestured Paulette away, backward. "Watch for others."

But there were no others. As Alix and Paulette continued warily on their way, the two remaining men dragged the dying man back the way they had come.

Paulette watched them. She said, "Eternal One...you are...where did you learn to do that?" She was in total awe.

"In Paris, eight hundred years ago." Alix walked on, depressed by the encounter, the killing.

She hated the endless rows of totally looted buildings and houses. The rich had long ago packed up and sailed across the Mediterranean to northern Africa and then farther south. The middle class had followed. And now only the dregs were left in southern France, and the scum who lived off them.

Yet, when Alix and Paulette turned into Auxerre Boulevard, there were many whole, ancient houses in good repair, a few with lawns, with sidewalks still walkable as broken cement and concrete had been added and pounded smooth to fill holes.

Paulette was still struggling with The Eternal One's off-handed answer of a moment ago. Eight hundred years ago! The reality of The Eternal One's immortality came home to her as never before.

Paulette shivered and kept staring wonderingly at Alix as they walked.

"Is this where the colonel lives?"

Paulette pointed to a three-story house of faded red brick and white stone. "He lives in that one."

Alix remembered the three wing Neo Gothic design of the house as from the 1990's, knew it to be among the most "modern" on this street, and knew it to be over 1400 years old.

It had survived primarily because of that fashion's return to stone. Even so,

it had a wealth of steel reinforcing rods in its guts. And the plumbing! The big house must have been owned and defended by very wealthy families through the centuries.

She asked, "Do you know the colonel's name?"

"He is Guy Gironde. Shall I ask if Mara is in his rooms?"

"No. I will ask. You will remember I am a man."

"Yes, Etern--- Yes, Lax."

"I am Lax Berney, a boat dealer you have employed as agent. Be silent."

Alix led the way up the patterned stone walk to the magnificent old house. As she approached the arced entranceway, she noticed mismatched replacement stones and brick, discolored mortar of different qualities, replacement window frames which used smaller segments of glass, and cloudy new glass which replaced older replacement panes.

A guard in a coarse red cotton uniform, wearing an ironwood sword---little more than a pointed club---in a canvas scabbard, opened a solid wood door and confronted them as they neared. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Alix smiled. "I am Lax Berney. I buy and sell boats on the Petit Bateau Basin dock. I am here to see Colonel Gironde on a business matter."

When the guard's eyes shifted enquiringly to Paulette, Alix said, shrugging, "I act in this woman's behalf."

"The colonel is on duty."

"Our business is actually with his new woman, Mara. If it is possible, may I speak with her?"

"Impossible."

"It's a small matter between women. But it is important to this one." Alix nodded slightly at Paulette, took a gold half franc from her pocket and casually handed it to the soldier. "I will require only a few moments."

The guard quickly pocketed the coin. It was the equivalent of a week's pay, and it had been three weeks since he had been paid.

But he was cautious. "I'll tell her you're here. What is the nature of your business with her?"

"It is about a boat she left at the dock. I want to buy it, if possible. I would be grateful to you."

"I'll bring her out."

Alix nodded. The soldier's mind was filled with greed; he wanted another bribe, perhaps a reward from Mara, a smile from the colonel. Any boat was expensive.

The guard closed and locked the heavy door.

When the door opened five minutes later, Mara emerged hesitantly. A colorful cotton dress strained at her big belly. She did not immediately penetrate Alix's disguise.

She scowled when she saw Paulette. She shrank back into the doorway. "I'm not going back! How did you find me?"

Paulette said as instructed, "We don't want you back. I'm here about the boat you took. We must have it back."

Reassured, Mara emerged again. "I'm sorry. But I had to get away."

The guard appeared behind her, curious.

Paulette took Mara by the arm.

"Let's talk privately." She indicated the soldier and Alix. She drew the pregnant girl down the stone steps and around a near corner of the house.

Alix stayed on the porch for a moment, pretending indifference, not wanting Mara to know her just yet. She could hear Paulette and Mara talking. She said to the soldier, "We would not like to be overheard."

The man hesitated, then decided he might get another bribe. "I have to be sure the colonel's woman is not harmed."

Another gold half franc convinced him to shut the door.

Alix moved to the steps and listened. Paulette was trying not to be angry with Mara, but some of her emotion permeated her tone as she spoke. "The Eternal One is sorrowful at your betrayal. She---"

"I couldn't just stay on that island and let my baby be killed! Guy will take care of me. He'll protect me. He wants his child to live."

"The Eternal One understands. She forgives you and releases you from your vows. But the boat..."

"I--- I can't. I let Guy have it. He's going to sell it."

"It's not yours to give or his to sell. You must tell me where it is! The Temple must have it back!"

Alix stepped down off the porch and when close to the girl said softly, "Mara."

Mara spun at the familiar sound of Alix's low, husky voice. Her eyes widened in shock, amazement and fear as she finally recognized The Eternal One dressed as a man.

All of her life she had worshipped this ageless woman, and believed the witnessing by the older followers that The Eternal One never changed. And she still believed that. Prickles of awe and terror ran her spine and bedeviled her skin. She tried to swallow and could not.

Alix asked, "Mara, have you broken your vow of silence about me?"

"N-no, Eternal One." Her voice trembled. "I couldn't---"

"Have you told the colonel the stories of radiation sterility and even death for men on the island are false?"

Mara shook her head. Her eyes were helplessly locked to Alix's intense blue gaze. She trembled more violently.

Alix didn't believe the girl. She pressed into the young mind and was nauseated by the swirl of multileveled fears, by the shame and guilt, by images of rich foods, new clothes after the baby...

Yes, Mara had told her man about The Eternal One...about the emasculated men and boys...about the lies behind the Death Island reputation.

Alix whispered, "The boat..."

Mara shuddered. The images in her mind became distorted seas, a dangerous foundering of the craft on the salt flats, a knowing that Guy Gironde was now selling the boat for his own profit.

Alix withdrew, and Mara collapsed to her hands and knees in the rocky dirt beside the house. She sobbed brokenly, "I had to tell. I had to let him have the

boat. He wouldn't have let me stay with him."

"I know. And he still may not keep you after his son is born. Never trust a man, Mara. I've learned that lesson thousands of times."

The girl pressed her forehead into the dirt.

Alix said to Paulette, "We have to get back to the island, quickly."

Paulette appeared unexpectedly in the temple gardens as Alix acted as master gardener and advisor in the cold, windy sunshine.

Alix spotted her wending through the tomato plants, side-stepping kneeling followers as they mulched and watered and fertilized.

Alix moved to the new greenhouse under construction. Glass was easy to make, and its present-day impurities and cloudiness was a benefit for this use.

She inspected wooden joints in the framework. "Pierre, these tenons are too small. Make them deeper, and widen the mortice. I also want a cross dowel pin in every major joint. Here...and here. Without nails we have to make these doubly strong, with extra surfaces for glue."

The tall, fat eunuch nodded. His cheeks were pink and beardless. He said in a girlish voice, "Yes, Eternal One. But we'll need more lumber soon. And the two millimeter bit is too short to sharpen again. We need a new one." He showed her the stub of what had been a wood drilling bit. There was no spiral left.

Alix shook her head. Steel drill bits were rare, almost impossible to find. When offered, they were priced in the thousands of gold francs.

Any steel knife or blade or saw or drill was more precious than life itself. Men had killed for these rare, ancient tools.

She said, "I'll tell Paulette to seek one, but we'll probably have to settle for a bronze bit. I've heard they're being cast in Daka again, and exported to Algiers. But it will take months to get one. Could you possibly use the sharpening stones to groove enough of a spiral in this to allow some use?"

He smiled. "It'll take a lot of labor, but it might work. I'll set Dominique to the task."

Alix noted Paulette standing nearby, waiting for an opportunity, or a sign to approach. Alix motioned her over. "You're a day early."

Paulette had been living for the past week on the small boat dock in Toulon. She said quietly, "Eternal One, our spies have learned a great deal."

Alix nodded and led her away from the greenhouse construction. They walked along a rocky path toward a lookout point.

Alix had, a week before, sent Paulette back to Toulon with a bag of gold and instructions to hire an agent she knew could be trusted.

The agent, in turn, was to hire spies whose jobs were to follow Colonel Gionde, and Mara, and to listen in the cabarets, in work places, on the docks, for any stories about Death Island and its women's Temple of Eternal Life.

Alix asked, "Is it good news or bad?"

"I'm afraid... Eternal One, the colonel has told some of his friends---a group of ship owners---that the radiation death of males on our island is a lie designed to discourage raiders. He is saying we have a vast treasure of gold and ancient metal in the temple."

Alix felt sick. "And what about me?"

"The stories say that the whispers of an immortal priestess, beautiful and young-looking, are lies fed to the women here. Men ashore don't believe their male gods would allow a woman to live forever, while they must die. They think it is a female copying the immortal man myths from North America."

Alix reached te end of the path and stood on the lookout rock. She stared out across the channel at the tip of Hyeres peninsula five kilometers away across the blue sea. Twenty kilometers to the east and north lay Toulon. She saw to the north a mass of clouds piling up. Another storm! She asked, "Why are you here today?"

"They are hiring soldiers of fortune, pirates, male scum from the gutters. They think there may be a lot of gold here, and they are willing to finance a raid. If it succeeds, Colonel Gironde will be well rewarded."

"When?"

"Tomorrow, or the day after, depending on the weather." Paulette was clearly frightened.

Alix turned away from the sea. She took Paulette into her arms and lightly kissed the smaller woman's still-sensual lips, rekindling memories of their years when Paulette was young and gamin-beautiful.

Alix said, "We have defenses. And we have enough gold to use for another tactic. Is our man greedy enough to hire an arsonist?"

"I think so. But what would he burn?"

"The ship being outfitted for the raid."

"Oh. But---"

"It would have to appear to be an accident...the result of stupid carelessness by someone on the ship. After that loss the owners and the colonel may lose interest in us. Many things can happen to distract them."

Paulette said, "It would have to be a lot of gold."

Alix smiled. "No, not too much. Otherwise our man would think it likely there is indeed a hoard in the temple, and afterward mount his own little expedition, financed with our payments. You must tell him you are giving him everything we have. I'll send with you gold rings, necklaces, and gold candlestick holders, with some coins."

Paulette nodded with understanding. She marveled at The Eternal One's cleverness and understanding of male thinking.

They turned back toward the temple.

Alix had never revealed to any woman on the island that there was a hidden cache of gold coins. She had brought it ashore herself when she established this cult, and it was substantial; the secret accumulation of a thousand years.

A woman in this terrible, male-dominated world needed wealth to partially even the balance.

She had long-term investments, too, in various cities, always owned behind agents, firms, aliases.... There were always men eager to serve a woman--for gold.

Dusk closed in with cold, darkening fog.

Alix was nervous as she clambered out of the skiff and up the ladde r to the

rough planks of the dock. She walked a few paces landward and listened through the sounds made by Paulette and Henri as they moored the craft and came up to her.

A few grease lamps lit small deserted sections of the Basin de Aubagne. A few distant shouts marred the quiet. Wavelets slushed against the dock pilings.

Alix didn't like being dressed as a priestess in this man-ruled area. She had no choice tonight. But under her robe she carried her dagger. In hidden pockets were other nasty surprises.

She asked Paulette, "Are we late?"

"No, Eternal One. It is only a few minutes past sunset. The fog---"

"All right. Lead the way." Then she said to the tall, strong eunuch she had chosen to accompany them, "Henri, follow us from twenty meters. Keep hidden. I'll call, or Paulette will call, if we need you."

He nodded and freed his massive oaken club. He adored her with his eyes, with the worshipping tone in his soft voice. "Yes, Eternal One." He was dressed in white, on Paulette's advice, in anticipation of this nightly fog.

The faint breeze shifted and carried to them the smell of charred wood. It was from the barque Celeste which Paulette had successfully arranged to be set afire ten days ago.

Unfortunately, the arsonist had been caught and tortured by Colonel Gironde to tell who had paid him.

The man betrayed his master, and that man in turn had quickly told of Paulette's deal with him. He had shown the golden lamps, bracelets, rings, which had purchased his services.

The provisioned and outfitted barque had been destroyed, burned to the waterline, but that had only proven to the owners the desperation of the women on Death Island. It had only enraged Gironde and his greedy backers.

Now they planned an even larger, more ruthless expedition. They were determined to recoup their loss of the Celeste, and capture and sell into slavery anyone---woman, eunuch, or child---who survived their assault.

That was the message relayed by Paulette's spies. That had forced Alix to arrange a surrender. That was the purpose of this visit.

Alix hoped some arrangement could be negotiated short of abject surrender and the looting of the island. But she feared the worst would happen. She knew better than to trust Gironde---or any man.

Yet she had to try.

She had to appear as The Eternal One, the priestess of the cult.

Her only negotiating power lay in the expense of the expedition and the possible loss of men by the attackers. They didn't know what weapons may exist on the island, nor how ferociously the women and eunuchs would resist.

Even a child could send an arrow into a man. Even women could tumble boulders down a cliff and pour boiling oil from a cauldron.

Paulette led the way in the thickening, drifting, rapidly darkening fog.

Their destination was the offices of Pierre Taine, importer, owner of the Basin de Aubagne. They had to travel about one hundred meters landward, to the end of the ancient concrete pier.

Alix dreaded the imminent confrontation.

Finally the Taine warehouse loomed in the white darkness, with only three widely-spaced lamps throwing a yellow glow about themselves. A faint light painted the inside of an opaque office window.

Paulette hesitated. "Eternal One...how must I act? What am I to expect?"

Alix said, "Be silent, be alert, be prepared to kill if I draw my dagger. Stay near the door so you can call Henri if necessary. I don't know what may happen."

Paulette nodded bravely and advanced to the wooden door. She knocked.

After a long moment the latch rasped and the door swung inward to reveal a cluttered office, tables, a counter, a brick stove and chimney, and four men sitting in chairs near the stove. They held mugs of something hot. A soldier had opened the door.

The men stared at Paulette and Alix in the doorway.

Alix saw three fat, jowly businessmen, and one tall, fierce-eyed officer of the army---Gironde.

His nose was sharp and long, his beard and mustache full and perfectly trimmed.

She took his measure instantly. A swift meeting with his dark eyes allowed her to strike into his mind.

He was a swamp, a monster, a red thing of greed and power lust. She caught a startled thought as he examined her, and a lewd speculation about her hidden body, an admiration of her long blonde hair.

She withdrew from his mind and kept her face mask-like. But now she knew him.

Her left hand fingers sought a hidden pocket on the inside of her long purple robe, and her middle finger slipped into a heavy gold ring several thousand years old, intricately constructed, cunningly designed.

Paulette entered the office first and said, "The Eternal One has come to you. She is a goddess and must be treated with reverence and with your utmost respect and courtesy."

One of the fat businessmen struggled to his feet, saw that the others had not risen, flushed, and resumed his cushioned chair.

But then Colonel Guy Gironde rose to his booted feet. He nodded, with the hint of a bow. However, his eyes glinted mockingly. "Ah, The Eternal One of Death Island. We've waited for this. You are more beautiful than the stories say."

Alix stepped fully into the office, aware that the soldier closed the door behind her, aware that Paulette stayed just inside.

She scanned the businessmen, dipping into their small, narrow, dirty minds, one by one. Her beauty and height awed them slightly, and caused their ambitions to grow. She was an extraordinary woman. Might not Death Island and its temple be extraordinarily rich, as well?

Alix knew they were bound to Gironde: they had money, true, but he held the law and the power. Gironde was in effect the dictator of the harbor of Toulon.

She said, "We only wish to live in peace."

One of the businessmen, Taine, said angrily, "Is that why you paid to have my ship burned?"

She said, "You were planning to raid us."

"We still are!"

"I know that, too. I have come to pay you for your ship, and more, if you will agree not to come to Death Island."

Eyes flickered with interest.

Gironde did not like the stage taken from him. He came forward. "How much will you pay?"

"Only about three thousand gold francs. I have ordered the temple gold melted and cast into bars. That is all we have left."

"You expect us to believe that?" Gironde strode forward and walked slowly around Alix, examining her in the light from two oil lamps.

She kept her eyes forward, ignoring him, relying on Paulette if he moved suddenly to grab her...or worse. But she was sure this was an intimidating tactic.

She repeated simply, "It is all we have."

He stopped at her right side and snarled, "You have millions!"

Alix recoiled in spite of herself. She turned to him, white-faced, and said, "If we had millions we would have all the food we need, and all the wood we need! We are as poor as Toulon! Where would we get millions in gold?"

Gironde sneered. "Where does any cult get its riches? From its members. Your women come to you and give you all their worldly possessions, don't they? They come to you with the jewels and gold of their husbands and lovers and families, don't they?"

He continued savagely, "And how long has this gone on---hundreds of years? Yes, there are millions on Death Island!" His face bunched and ridged with anger and threat.

He moved closer to further intimidate her...so close his garlic-and-rum laden breath made her nearly gag...so close his powerful male presence sickened her.

Yet she would not step back.

She met his hard stare with the blue ice of her own. She said, "There may be another thousand in jewels. Nothing more."

"Oh? Doesn't The Eternal One have a large personal cache of gold and jewels accumulated over her long, long life?" His voice and manner mocked her.

"You age very slowly."

Alix sighed. "I am twenty-eight years old. I am the forty-first High Priestess of the Temple of Eternal Life. While I live I am called The Eternal One."

Gironde laughed. "Your eternal life may end very soon." He moved to where he had been sitting when Alix and Paulette had entered the office. He picked up an ancient steel sword and scabbard. It was polished, worked with gold, immaculate.

The businessman Taine rose to his feet. "Don't do anything to her in here, Guy. I have to work in here tomorrow."

Gironde smiled. "I'll take her to the guardhouse." His dark eyes met Alix's blue. She stabbed into his mind. He had never for a moment believed her immortal. She saw his intent: rape and torture. If she lived his men could have her and Paulette.

Fear and utter self-loathing congealed in her soul. She had let herself come

here. She was in this danger because she had cared for mortals--- again! She was trying to save some of them---again!

She despised herself for this new risk. She had struggled with her loneliness and need for companionship and love and had always failed to resist that need. She was the same as anyone---except for the curse of an eternal life and a limited ability to read minds.

Yet she could die! She could be killed! She had been near death a dozen times.

The conflict rose in her in a split second and was resolved as it always had been: she could never totally disengage from the world of mortal men and women, and so she had to share their lives and endure their lives and on occasion defend their lives as she did her own. It came down to a bedrock of love and empathy. So be it.

Alix watched Gironde grin as he slid the ancient sword in its scabbard---a few inches out, a few in, out, in... She felt total contempt for him. He was ruled by passions, preconceptions, illusions, self-lies.

He could not conceive of her as in any way dangerous to him.

She said to him, "If you do not accept my offer, if you attack the island, we will fight to the death. We will kill many of your men. Perhaps even you."

Gironde chuckled and shook his head. "When we take the island you will not be there. Your cult will not fight without its high priestess to lead them and inspire them."

He unsheathed the steel blade and carefully used the tip to cut the gold braid which held Alix's woolen robe closed at her throat.

Alix disdainfully pushed the blade aside. "If you want to see me---look!" She held the robe open to his gaze. Only Gironde could see her nearly nude body in its sheath of sheer linen.

His eyes widened. "Ahhh..." His grin widened.

Alix let her robe hang open and moved sinuously to Gironde, her lips curved in the eternal smile of seduction. She knew every subtle nuance of it, every delicate degree of promise. The knowledge was never forgotten.

And as she smiled and moved, her left thumb pivoted the ring on her middle finger and pressed a part of the setting. A jewel slid aside. A tiny, sharp, hollow tube was exposed. The folds of her robe and the sight of her sumptuous flesh made invisible the unobtrusive movement.

He said, "Maybe, if you cooperate---"

She murmured, "I know when to surrender." She raised her slender white arms. Her left hand touched his cheek...and pressed!

A spring drove the tube into his skin. A tiny sponge yielded a drop of poison.

Gironde squinted with sudden pain and jerked his head violently. He thrust Alix away. He clapped his hand to his cheek and scowled with anger and confusion as his hand came away bloody.

He tried to speak, but a numbing paralysis had seized his jaws and was spreading... He staggered and fell heavily as the poison reached his heart and stopped it. He slid off a desk to the dirty concrete floor. His bladder and bowels convulsively voided wastes into his fitted uniform trousers. A strong stink quickly

pervaded the already reeking office.

Gironde's sudden fall and convulsive death had caused a shocked silence and incomprehension among the businessmen and the soldier near the door.

Alix said sharply, "Paulette!"

But the command was not required. Paulette's stabber was buried in the upper belly of the soldier, driven with surprising power, to the limit imposed by her fiercely gripping fist.

The young man coughed blood, eyes wide, amazed that he could feel the pointed wood in his lung, amazed as he felt that his body refused to obey his orders.

The businessmen were dumbfounded. Women attacking men? Attacking soldiers? Killing them! They lurched to their feet, shouting.

Alix quickly took up Gironde's steel sword. It felt good in her hand. She menaced the fat, older men back to their seats. "Listen! I will be back on Death Island! And I know how to kill! Stay away! You will lose far more than you could ever gain!"

She gestured Paulette out of the office. "Call Henri."

Pierre Taine risked his life by bolting to a window and smashing the cloudy glass. "Murder!" he bellowed. "They have murdered Colonel Gironde!"

Alix wanted to kill him, but he was beyond the long counter, able to dodge behind desks...perhaps able to fling himself out of that window. The seconds were too precious. Already men outside were responding.

She ran from the office into foggy darkness.

Paulette called, "Here, Eternal One!" She had moved toward dockend, and heavy steps told of Henri's approach from his hiding place.

Soldiers clattered and thumped as they ran to the warehouse. They had been waiting nearby, fortunately landward.

When Henri became visible, a looming white bulk, his massive club swinging, Alix told him, "You must defend us as we go back to the boat. Delay them." She took Paulette's hand. "Lead me. You know this dock. Now! At speed!"

Pierre Taine and the other businessmen had emerged from the warehouse office. There was shouting, rage, orders given.

Paulette and Alix moved swiftly seaward, onto the first wooden pier extension.

Alix hoped Gironde had not had soldiers hidden out at the far end to seize their boat. But she had not caught a hint of it in his mind. His male arrogance had been overwhelming.

After a breathless few seconds of sprinting, Paulette insisted on slowing. It wasn't safe.

From behind they heard a thud, a startled cry, a howl of pain. More sodden smacks of wood on flesh and bone. A splash. More enraged shouting.

Paulette's small hand was cold and damp as it gripped Alix's fingers. They trotted through the dense, dark fog.

They reached the extreme dock end a few minutes later, panting, throats raw. Several times they had almost plunged into the black sea from misleading passageways between piles of cargo and small, rickety sheds.

This last section of the Bassin de Aubagne was quiet. They could hear

nothing from landward. Had the soldiers killed or wounded Henri?

Paulette climbed down into their skiff and helped Alix, who was encumbered by her long, woolen robe and the need to keep the sword.

Alix hushed Paulette. "Listen! Is he coming?"

They could hear only faint shouting. They waited. The water lapped against the small boat.

Paulette silently placed the sculling oar.

There was no wind, now. After a few hours a strong, icy breeze would come from the north. The air would then more than ever smell pure and sweet, direct from the glaciers.

Alix asked quietly, "When we came into the harbor, did you see the ship they will use in place of the Celeste?"

"Yes, Eternal One. It has to be the Petit Rouen, in the berth next to the Celeste. I know it, too, is owned by Pierre Taine. It was taking on stores. And I saw a cannon."

Cannon were rare. Artillery technology had degenerated to smoothbore cast iron cannon reminiscent of the Middle Ages. They shot solid iron balls again, and the iron balls were so precious their supply and recovery dictated military tactics.

With a cannon, the invaders of Death Island could easily breach the temple walls, demolish the heavy wooden doors...

Alix heard the approach of a wounded man; the steps were irregular, staggering, and there was labored, agonized breathing.

She called, "Henri?"

"Eternal One..."

They now heard muffled oaths as soldiers stumbled nearer. "This way!" "Watch...is there a rail?"

Alix cursed softly and stripped the heavy robe and binding linen sheath from her body. She said to Paulette, "I'll help him down." She knew Paulette was too small and weak. Henri weighed over ninety-five kilograms.

Alix swarmed up the dockside ladder, the steel sword gripped in her teeth.

The grease lamp nearby was only a dim globe of fuzzy light in the blackness. Where was he?

She almost stumbled over him.

He was down, crawling, his white tunic showing bloody rips and punctures. He had lost his club.

She knelt beside him and whispered, "This way, Henri. This way." She guided his slow crawl to the ladder.

A soldier's voice came surprisingly loud and near. "Sergeant, I've reached the last lamp. They must have---" He noticed movement near his feet. "Sacred---" He gaped down at them, eyes wide at seeing Alix's stunning nakedness.

Before he could call out the discovery, Alix thrust awkwardly and slid six inches of very cold steel into his gut.

He screamed and wobbled on suddenly weak legs.

Alix found leverage and thrust further, with savage strength. The steel blade sliced upward through his intestines to his heart. His scream ended. He toppled forward, and she used her other arm to angle away his body's heavy fall.

There were answering, questioning shouts from close by.

Alix helped Henri to begin the climb down the ladder to the boat. She half-lowered him by his tunic. He was laboring, keening with pain. He had been stabbed many times.

She didn't think he could live much longer. Why bother? But he had been, all his life, so loyal, so loving, so dedicated to her. Now he had given his life for her. He tumbled heavily into the skiff.

In emotional torment, Alix straightened and took four quick strides to the large grease lamp. It was a simple wick affair with a short glass chimney. The five liter reservoir was of a more thick, darker glass. It was clamped in a wooden cage on a pole.

She furiously hacked with the sword at the four-fingered wooden cage. One curving holder splintered and fell away. She reached up with both hands and lifted the heavy lamp from its seat.

Soldiers were closing in.

Paulette called from the watery darkness below, "Eternal One! Please!"

Alix threw the lamp with all her strength toward the soldiers' voices. The crash of heavy glass filled the night for an instant, and then a spreading pool of sooty flame licked upward to reveal cringing men beyond the fire.

"There!" A soldier pointed. Another soldier drew back a spear.

Alix darted from the flickering yellow and orange area of light. For a second she seemed to float magically as she leaped, arms forward, sword cutting the darkness, revealed body glowing, and then she arched downward into darkness and cut the shockingly cold water in a clean dive.

She surfaced quietly, gasping, and heard Paulette saying softly in the foggy blackness, "Here. Here. Here. Here..." She used a butterfly stroke to reach the boat.

As she climbed over the side she whispered, "Away! Get us away!" She moved to the cockpit where Henri lay crumpled, groaning softly.

Paulette had to straddle him awkwardly as she sculled the boat farther from the dock.

The soldiers were silhouetted on the dock edge by the flames behind them. One soldier hurtled a spear. It fell short and wide.

Then the fog became too thick, the darkness too complete. The soldiers and the flames faded.

But Alix heard the anguished voice of Pierre Taine who had followed the chase and the fighting. "No! Put out the fire, you fools! Forget them now! Put out the fire before it ruins me!"

Alix turned to Henri. She couldn't see him in the greater blackness in the belly of the skiff. Her fingers traced his wounds and she felt an infinite sadness. She whispered to him, "Thank you, Henri. Thank you. You fought superbly."

She knelt lower and found his cool forehead and kissed him there. Why did she come to love some of these mortals?

His breathing was quick and shallow, rattling in his chest, uncertain. He abruptly coughed up blood and seemed not to breathe again, but finally the awful rasping wheeze resumed. He managed, "I will serve...you...in...eternity."

Another terrible liquid cough wracked him and left him lifeless.

Alix straightened and sighed. She took deep breaths. She clamped her emotions in a vise and asked, "Where is my robe?"

The fire on the now distant dock was a soft, dying glow in the black fog. The only sounds were the slosh of the sculling oar in the water, the minor creaking of the boat. And their breathing.

Alix asked, "Do you know where we are?"

"Yes, Eternal One. We should be in an incoming current in a few moments. We'll be in the central channel. I'll scull against it, but we won't make any progress until near dawn when the current reverses with the tide and a wind comes."

"That's a waste of energy." Alix took a deep breath and smelled burnt wood in the sea scents. "Can you find the Petit Rouen in this fog?"

"In time. It is berthed beside the Celeste, midway on the north side of La Grande Jetee. They have been salvaging supplies and equipment from the Celeste, what they can."

"I want to damage the Petit Rouen. Destroy it. At least cripple it. How can that be done with little danger to us?"

Paulette said, "It would be too dangerous to try to burn it like the Celeste. We don't have the necessaries. But if we could damage the rudder...or the rudder cable..."

Alix nodded. "Find it."

It took two hours of silent, slow sculling in a maze of ghostly ships at anchor. They finally angled in toward the berths of the Celeste and the Petit Rouen more by means of smell as by direction. The Celeste's burned masts and deck spread that acrid stink in the beginning night breeze.

The Petit Rouen was guarded. There were many lanterns on the jetty and on both ships. Men worked on both.

But the fog was still thick enough to hide the skiff, and the Petit Rouen's stern rode high enough to expose the rudder.

Alix had to swim from one hundred meters downwind along the jetty, past six other ships whose sterns loomed black over her head in the darkness.

She swam silently, naked, the steel sword in her teeth, as the smell of the Celeste grew more intense.

She didn't really feel the severe cold, but she knew the icy water was having an effect on her body.

She reached the Petit Rouen and clung to the rudder while she sawed and cut at the cables with the sword.

Her hands were becoming numb and her legs leaden and senseless.

She grimly hacked away at the heavy, oiled, pitch-covered hemp cables just above the water level. She didn't intend to cut them all the way through.

It was exhausting, brutal work. But finally, she was done.

She left three strands of the cables intact on each side of the high rudder-- just enough to allow maneuvering the ship in the harbor. But once in the open sea, with a good wind, the demands would part the cables quickly and the ship would be helpless. It might even be blown onto rocks and destroyed.

Alix found herself shuddering in the icy water. The priceless sword almost

slipped from numb fingers into the black depths. She was unable to experience the cold, but her body, somehow divorced from her mind in this respect, was in extreme danger.

Alix clamped the weapon between chattering teeth and butterfly-stroked away from the ship.

Where was Paulette? She couldn't remember. Incredibly, her body---her immortal body---was betraying her.

Alix disconnected from her cold-paralyzed body. She drifted into memory. All these years, and not once had she experience a cold, or the flu...nor any of the deadly plagues which had swept the remnant populations of the civilized nations.

That first morning of her immortality---the awakening to a feeling of incredible well-being: of perfect health, great energy, irrepressible optimism--that April 10th of 1991.

There had been a strange dream during the night---

Alix choked on icy sea water! She was sinking, drifting deeper and deeper... She became conscious of her situation. Her body was so numb!

Could she drown? Could she die as simply as this? It was absurd. Would the aliens allow her to die like this? Were they aware of every move she made? Did they have observers?

She sank, convulsing, deep in the icy, black water.

She thrashed and kicked--somewhere in her mind her movements were coordinated as she strangled--and she surged upward into air and continued life.

Alix emerged slowly from the deep shadows high in the temple grotto. The leaping flame-light from the central pit and from the rings of torches glittered her gold bracelets and their jewels, glittered her golden sandals, glittered the diamond and gold clips in her intricately arranged long, blonde hair.

Her black leather ceremonial robe rippled heavily as she walked slowly to the throne rock.

It was almost warm in the cavern. She had ordered a big fire. It was stupid to skimp anymore. It was best that her assembled worshippers be comfortable as she spoke this last time.

Her people were on their knees, barely a hundred, now. Henri was gone, Mara gone, a child had died of kidney failure in the week since Alix and Paulette had returned from the disastrous meeting with Colonel Gironde and those greedy businessmen. And two older acolytes had succumbed to natural deaths.

"My children." She put a tinge of great sorrow in her low, husky voice. She let the moment continue for five beats.

She gazed down at them and felt a terrible ache in the pit of her stomach. This moment hurt more than any other in her long life.

"My children, the men of Toulon will come soon. There will be ruthless soldiers, savage scum from the waterfront, and there will be their employers, men intent on finding gold and jewels and, failing that, in taking all of your food and seed and wood and iron."

Whispered protests like the muted sluicing of the sea rose to her. The

worshippers stirred with alarm.

She said, "We delayed them as long as we could. We bribed, we sabotaged, we fought---and we killed. But it was not enough. Now our spies tell us the men are coming and nothing can stop them. They will come in two ships, and they will come in great force and with revenge in their hearts."

Alix saw Delphine close below, her small white hands fisted, her eyes wide and brimming with tears.

Paulette stood beside the fire pit, her clothes steaming slightly from the heat. She had just come from the mainland in a just-acquired old yawl and had been soaked by rain.

Paulette frowned and shook her head.

Alix sighed. "My children, our time together is ended. We must---"

The protests were louder and more bold. "No! You can stop them! You are The Eternal One!"

The eunuchs were puzzled and confused, especially the older ones.

The older women were now terrified; they had spent their entire lives in this small world, living according to the rules, accepting The Eternal One's guidance and

authority. Now-- It wasn't fair! Was The Eternal One powerless?

Alix felt powerless. She had wanted to simply sneak away last night and not face this ugly scene. But it had to be played out; they had to come to accept the finality, the inevitability of the situation.

She felt a terrible obligation. They trusted her. They trusted their immortal goddess.

She put more force into her voice and spread her arms for silence. "Hear me! Hear me! The men who come here will rape you and kill you and torture you. There is no escaping that fate if you stay. Your only path is to escape east to Cannes and Nice. We have a new, large boat which will take you to the mainland. Paulette will sail it safely to the mainland. You must---"

A woman in her forties shouted furiously, "Why can't you stop them?"

"I tried. I---"

"You have Old Knowledge. There are Old weapons!"

Alix shook her head in sadness and exasperation. Her gaze was captured momentarily by Delphine's shocked look of betrayal. In spite of herself, Alix slid into the girl's chaotic mind and felt the awful fear and rage. The rage was focused on her.

A tall, fat eunuch shouted, "We'll fight! Tell us how to fight! Lead us!" And another, a young, willowy, fierce-eyed young woman cried, "Show us how to kill them! Eternal One, tell us what to do!"

Alix was tempted. Her mind flitted through the possibilities: rocks, boiling oil, crude medieval catapults, a few spears, bows and arrows, stabbers. A last stand with clubs.

With her mind powers she could kill perhaps dozens of men before... No!

Alix shouted down at them, "The more we fought, the more they would be convinced we were defending a great fortune! And even if we drove them away once, they would return with even more men. Stories would spread of our island's

vast treasure! Pirates would come from everywhere! They would swarm us like hungry locusts! They---"

Her voice was overwhelmed by screams and shouts, and an endless surf of anguish and denial, rage and terror.

Alix recoiled. Mortals! she thought contemptuously. What else did I expect? They will become bitter and outraged. They'll blame me. They'll fight among themselves. The most intelligent and independent will leave. The others...

She hated to abandon them, especially the children. They had always been an endless delight for her.

Almost sick to her stomach, Alix turned away from the shouting and screaming and started for the tunnel which would take her to the secret stairwell.

"Eternal One!" Delphine's voice came urgently and from close by.

Alix spun and saw the girl had rushed up the throne rock steps in the company of three other young acolytes.

Delphine stopped a few feet away, suddenly uncertain. From the other side Paulette mounted to the throne level.

Alix seized Delphine's mind and found no plan, no conspiracy. Only desperate fear and a terrible sense of loss.

Delphine wailed, "Are you abandoning us?"

Alix said, "I cannot help you. I am now a lodestone for those men."

"Won't you take some of us with you?"

Alix shook her head.

"Not even me?"

Alix forced granite into herself. She turned away from Delphine and found herself facing Paulette, who began, "Eternal One, cast a spell over their minds!"

And from behind, the wounded, angry decision by Delphine: "You can't leave us! We won't let you!"

Two big eunuchs lumbered up the steps toward Alix.

Alix met Paulette's nervous, uncertain eyes and knew the woman's hesitancy, the shattered love and loyalty not yet settled into despairing rebellion, Alix said, "Delay them!"

She rushed past Paulette to the narrow, upslope rock passageway. There was shouting behind her.

In darkness, at the left turn, she found the hidden hand-holds in the rough rock wall and strained to pull open the massive, pivoted secret entrance.

She realized Paulette had not delayed Delphine and the others more than a few seconds; the approaching slap of hurrying feet was too close!

She squeezed through the gap and grunted as she pivoted the door back into position. Not a sound penetrated from the outer passage.

She stood in total blackness, in total silence, breathing harshly, trembling. She braced to prevent the door being pulled open, if Delphine or any of the others had seen it close. She didn't believe they had paused long enough to take a torch for seeing. They were probably now at the end of the passage, on the lip overlooking the pounding sea, wondering where she had disappeared to.

She waited. Her heart slowed.

She knew Delphine and Paulette were certain a secret passage existed. They

might bring torches and make a thorough search. Or they might be rushing up the central stairs to her private chambers at the topmost level of the temple.

Alix knelt in the total darkness and searched on the rough, gritty floor to the left of the rock door.

She found a long, dry timber. It had lain there for hundreds of years. She had placed it there herself, just in case she ever had a need to block this entrance. She wedged the timber expertly against the wall and door.

She started up the gently curving stairway. At the hundredth step she stopped and felt in the darkness for the handholds which would open another secret stone door.

She found the holds and pulled...and was rewarded with a soft grating movement. She smelled stale, dead air.

Alix entered her hidey-hole room and---still in total darkness---closed the heavy stone door.

There were crude matches in an airtight corked bottle on the floor beside door. She found the bottle, and a candle.

With light she felt better.

She bolted the door and carried the candle to a small wooden table beside a narrow bed. She sat on the smelly feather mattress and took stock.

The room was low and small, crudely chopped from the volcanic rock by eunuchs long, long dead.

She felt a body need for more warmth. She took cotton under-things, heavy woolen pants, a thick woolen shirt, woolen and cotton stockings, and leather boots from sealed canvas bags. There was a greatcoat, too, but she wouldn't need that immediately.

She dressed, and as she dressed wondered what Delphine and Paulette were up to? They had more important things to worry about than her.

She had stocked plenty of candles. There were a few old books. She took documents and credits on Lisbon banks from sealed packets.

And there was food. She had replaced most of it only a few days ago. Small kegs of biscuits, dried meat, cheeses, apples, nuts. Bottles of wine. And a small chest of gold coins.

In a makeshift scabbard, leaning against a wall, was a steel sword better than the one she had taken from Gironde and then lost in the harbor.

Alix smiled bitterly. She could survive for a month, drunk as a circus dog. Drunk as the last dog. Almost all of the pet breeds had been eaten into extinction long ago. Wolves still existed.

But there was no reason to stay a month. The men would be here before then.

Her time here was finished. The vacation had ended. A new era in her life was about to begin.

Alix filled a canvas backpack with food, wine and gold. Then she ate slowly, and drank too much wine. She flopped onto the bed for a short nap.

She awakened in darkness.

She cursed and lighted a new candle. It was time to leave.

Alix donned the greatcoat and the pack, and picked up the sword. What

else? Yes, the dagger she remembered, hidden under the mattress. It had lain there for over four hundred years.

She spent a few minutes examining and cleaning the fine, engraved steel blade. The script was difficult to decipher now, for pits and rust marred the blade's former beauty. The dagger and gold-trimmed metal sheath had been a ceremonial weapon used for full dress occasions by a French field marshal from the First World War.

She fastened the dagger to her pants belt, under her coat.

She carried the candle to the door and extinguished it. She quietly unbolted the door and pivoted it open a crack. No light in the secret stairwell. No sound.

Alix slipped out and listened again. She finally moved down the steps.

She suspected Paulette and Delphine were not too concerned to find her hiding place. They knew she would need the skiff to get off the island. The newly acquired yawl required at least a two-person crew.

The skiff would be well guarded.

It was.

Alix emerged from the dark, deserted grotto into bitter cold, facing icy spray from a high midnight sea, and saw a cluster of guttering, wind-whipped torches at the small dock.

There was only this place for a dock on the shores of the rocky island. The rock shelved out to form a miniature harbor, and the floating moorage beside it rose and fell restlessly at the mercy of the high seas which rolled in between the monster boulders which flanked the tiny bay.

There was the skiff, bobbing like a heavy cork at the end of the moorage.

The two-masted yawl dominated the dock as it rose and fell, pitched and yawed... Its tie lines creaked and groaned in counterpoint with the boat's timbers.

There were acolytes huddled in a dockside shed, and a few others stood active guard on the rippling, heaving moorage. The guards clung to torch posts, and two rode the deck of the yawl. None were eunuchs.

Alix didn't hesitate. She worked her way down the rocky path toward the dock. There was no escaping a confrontation. She would do what had to be done. She drew the steel sword.

A young woman guard called, "The Eternal One! She comes! She's here!"

Paulette, Delphine, and two other, older women acolytes bolted from the shed. In the wind-fluttered light, in the frigid wind, they watched Alix approach.

Alix sought to shortcut a long argument, a debate, a game of escalating pleas and denials and recriminations. She shouted, "I will take the skiff! Whoever tries to stop me, I will hurt or kill!"

She paused, waiting for her words to sink in, knowing they would not quite be believed.

Delphine cried, "We need you!" She came forward, anguished, weaponless. But Alix raised the sword point and the girl stopped.

"Eternal One..."

Alix watched Paulette, her old friend, past lover, assistant. Paulette also came forward---with a spear.

Paulette raised her voice against a sudden, icy gust of wind. "Eternal One,

please stay a few more days. Show us more about ancient fighting. Show us how to make ancient weapons."

Alix shook her head. "Listen! Fifty steps into my passage from the throne rock there is a pivoting stone door opening to a secret stairway in the rock. At the one hundredth step up that secret stairway there is another door, this to a secret room. There is gold coin there in a chest, and there is some food and wine. Divide it all among my followers and ferry them to St. Tropez. As many as you can before the men come. Don't go to Cannes or Nice. They are too far. I don't think you will have enough time."

"Eternal One, we cannot exist without you. You are our reason for living. You are our core. You cannot--"

Alix put all the coldness and distance possible into her voice. "I am leaving now. Save yourselves as best you can. I have helped you all I can. I will not again endanger my life for...for mortals. I will not be sucked into risking capture or death by your pathetic needs."

Delphine wailed, "But you made us as we are! Our needs are of your making. You can't abandon us!" She made a move again to come forward to embrace Alix, but again the deadly steel sword point stopped her. She cried, "How can you leave me?"

"I don't want to leave. I have to leave! The outside world is closing its male fist on this island. Blame the greeds and lusts of men, not me."

Paulette said, "Eternal One, we can all leave together, and find another place, in Africa, in Sicily, in Sardinia. We could follow you any- where. You must know of places---another island---where we would be safe."

Alix shook hr head. "We would be followed. We would leave a long trail of rumors and whispers. Where could a cult of a hundred women and eunuchs go? In any case there is not enough gold. We would be hounded by stories of our gold and jewels. We would be robbed on the way by pirates, gangs, armies...and sold as slaves. We could not even go as beggars; we would be taken and enslaved."

Paulette tried to argue, but Alix was enraged and guilt-ridden. "No! Enough! Leave here with what you can. Once you reach St. Tropez keep apart, escape as small groups, as individuals. This life we had--- It's over! This is the end! Let me pass!"

Alix started forward.

Delphine whimpered and went to her knees, begging. "Eternal One! I love you! Take me with you, only me! I'll do anything!"

Alix walked past her.

Paulette stood aside hopelessly and signalled te others to not oppose their goddess.

Delphine sprang up and seized Paulette's spear. She moaned, "I love you...I love you..."

Alix spun and her sword swept around in time to chop the spearhead away. For an instant she sank into Delphine's crazed mind and tasted utter despair and love twisted to rage, all embedded in a wild desire to die.

The young, Alix thought, are so sure they cannot live with a broken heart, a broken god...

Delphine dropped the spear and lunged forward again, now with a stabber clutched in her small hand. She wanted to die and she wanted The Eternal One to kill her! Let The Eternal One live forever with the guilt of her death!

Alix had closed her emotions away, and her arm acted, her skills acted, her immortal imperatives acted. The sword point cut easily through Delphine's padded coat, vest, shirt, and pierced the girl's arm, a disabling wound.

Alix withdrew the bloody steel and strode forward as Delphine shrieked and collapsed, sure she would die. The pain! The pain!

Moments later, Alix was in the skiff's cockpit, sculling away from the moorage, angling into the darkness.

Now to raise a patch of sail and begin a delicate series of tacks to the harbor entrance...

As she emerged into the heavy seas and howling wind of the open sea, Alix tied herself to the rudder bar. She saw overhead now appear a broken sky and a sliver of moon.

Her jaws ached from clenching. Her blue eyes stung from sea spray and from tears.

What was next for her?

She stared again at the ripped sky. Were they up there, watching?

She screamed, "Damn you! Damn you!"

END THE FOREVER WOMAN

END TABOO SCIENCE FICTION #3