

EUTOPIA

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“Gif thit nafn!”

The Danska words barked from the car radio as a jet whine cut across the hum of motor and tires. “Identify yourself!” Jason Philippou cast a look skyward through the bubbletop. He saw a strip of blue between two ragged green walls where pine forest lined the road. Sun-light struck off the flanks of the killer machine up there. It wailed, came about, and made a circle over him.

Sweat started cold from his armpits and ran down his ribs. *I will not panic*, he thought in a corner of his brain. *May the God help me now*. But it was his training he invoked. Psychosomatics: control the symptoms, keep the breath steady, command the pulse to slow, and the fear of death becomes something you can handle. He was young, and thus had much to lose. But the philosophers of Eutopia schooled well the children given into their care. You will be a man, they had told him, and the pride of humanity is that we are not bound by instinct and reflex; we are free because we can master ourselves.

He couldn't pass as an ordinary citizen (no, they said mootman here) of Norland. If nothing else, his Hellenic accent was too strong. But he might fool yonder pilot, for just a few minutes, into believing he was from some other domain of this history. He roughened his tone, as a partial disguise, and assumed the expected arrogance.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“Runoif Einarsson, captain in the hird of Ottar Thorkeisson, the Lawman of Norland. I pursue one who has brought feud on his own head. Give me your name.”

Runoif, Jason thought. *Why, yes, I remember you well, dark and erect with the Tyrker side of your heritage, but you have blue eyes that came long ago from Thule.* In that detached part of him which stood aside watching: *No, here I scramble my histories. I would call the autochihons Erythrai, and you call the country of your European ancestors Danarik.*

“I hight Xipec, a trader from Meyaco,” he said. He did not slow down. The border was not many stadia away, so furiously had he driven through the night since he escaped from the Lawman's castle. He had small hope of getting that far, but each turn of the wheels brought him nearer. The forest was blurred with his speed.

“If so be, of course I am sorry to halt you,” Runoff's voice crackled. “Call the Lawman and he will send swift gild for the overtreading of your rights. Yet I must have you stop and leave your car, so I may turn the farseer on your face.”

“Why?” Another second or two gained.

“There was a visitor from Homeland”—Europe—”who came to Ernvik. Ottar Thorkeisson gusted him freely. In return, he did a thing that only his death can make clean again. Rather than meet Otter on the Valfield, he stole a car, the same make as yours, and fled.”

“Would it not serve to call him a nothing before the folk?” *I have learned this much of their barbaric customs, anyhow!*

“Now that is a strange thing for a Meyacan to say. Stop at once and get out, or I open fire.”

Jason realized his teeth were clenched till they hurt. How in Hades could a man remember the hundreds of little regions, each with its own ways, into which the continent lay divided? Westfall was a more fantastic jumble than all Earth in that history where they called the place America. *Well, he thought, now we discover what the odds are of my hearing it named Eutopia again.*

“Very well,” he said. “You leave me no choice. But I shall indeed want compensation for this insult.”

He braked as slowly as he dared. The road was a hard black rib-bon before him, slashed through an immensity of trees. He didn't know if these woods had ever been logged. Perhaps so, when white men first sailed through the Pentaimne (calling them the Five Seas) to found Ernvik where Duluth stood in America and Lykopolis in Eutopia. In those days Norland had spread mightily across the lake country. But then came wars with Dakotas and Magyars, to set a limit; and the development of trade—more recently of synthetics—enabled the people to use their hinterland for the hunting they so savagely loved. Three hundred years could re-establish a climax forest.

Sharply before him stood the vision of this area as he had known it at home: ordered groves and gardens, villages planned for beauty as well as use, lithe brown bodies on the athletic fields, music under moonlight . . . Even America the dreadful was more human than a wilderness.

They were gone, lost in the multiple dimensions of space-time, he was alone and death walked the sky. *And no self-pity, you idiot! Spend energy for survival.*

The car stopped, hard by the road edge. Jason gathered his thews, opened the door, and sprang.

Perhaps the radio behind him uttered a curse. The jet slewed around and swooped like a hawk. Bullets sleeted at his heels.

Then he was in among the trees. They roofed him with sun-speckled shadow. Their trunks stood in massive masculine strength, their branches breathed fragrance a woman might envy. Fallen needles softened his foot-thud, a thrush warbled, a light wind cooled his cheeks. He threw himself beneath the shelter of one bole and lay in a gasping and heartbeat which all but drowned the sinister whistle above.

Presently it went away. Runoff must have called back to his lord. Ottar would fly horses and hounds to this place, the only way of pur-suit. But Jason had a few hours' grace.

After that—He rallied his training, sat up and thought. If Socrates, feeling the hemlock's chill, could speak wisdom to the young men of Athens, Jason Philippou could assess his own chances. For he wasn't dead yet.

He numbered his assets. A pistol of the local slug-throwing type; a compass; a pocketful of gold and

silver coins; a cloak that might double as a blanket, above the tunic-trousers-boots costume of central Westfall. *And* himself, the ultimate instrument. His body was tall and broad—together with fair hair and short nose, an inheritance from Gaulle ancestors—and had been trained by men who won wreaths at the Olympeion. His mind, his entire nervous system, counted for still more. The pedagogues of Eutopia had made logic, semantic con-sciousness, perspective as natural to him as breathing; his memory was under such control that he had no need of a map; despite one calamitous mistake, he knew he was trained to deal with the most out-landish manifestations of the human spirit.

And, yes, before all else, he had reason to live. It went beyond any blind wish to continue an identity; that was only something the DNA molecule had elaborated in order to make more DNA molecules. He had his beloved to return to. He had his country: Eutopia, the Good Land, which his people had founded two thousand years ago on a new continent, leaving behind the hatreds and horrors of Europe, taking along the work of Aristotle, and writing at last in their Syntagma, “The national purpose is the attainment of universal sanity.”

Jason Philippou was bound home.

He rose and started walking south.

That was on Tetrade, which his hunters called Onsdag. Some thirty-six hours later, he knew he was not in Pentade but near sunset of Thorsdag. For he lurched through the wood, mouth filled with mummy dust, belly a cavern of emptiness, knees shaking beneath him, flies a thundercloud about the sweat dried on his skin, and heard the distant belling of hounds.

A horn responded, long brazen snarl through the leaf arches. They had gotten his scent, he could not outrun horsemen and he would not see the stars again.

One hand dropped to his gun. *I'll take a couple of them with me.*

No. He was still a Hellene, who did not kill uselessly, not even barbarians who meant to slay him because he had broken a taboo of theirs. *I will stand under an open sky, take their bullets, and go down into darkness remembering Eutopia and all my friends and Niki whom I love.*

Realization came, dimly, that he had left the pine forest and was in a second growth of beeches. Light gilded their leaves and caressed the slim white trunks. And what was that growl up ahead?

He stopped. A portal might remain. He had driven himself near collapse; but the organism has a reserve which the fully integrated man may call upon. From consciousness he abolished the sound of dogs, every ache and exhaustion. He drew breath after breath of air, noting its calm and purity, visualizing the oxygen atoms that poured through his starved tissues. He made the heartbeat quit racketing, go over to a deep slow pulse; he tensed and relaxed muscles until each functioned smoothly again; pain ceased to feed on itself and died away; despair gave place to calm and calculation. He trod forth.

Plowlands rolled southward before him, their young grain vivid in the light that slanted gold from the west. Not far off stood a cluster of farm buildings, long, low, and peak-roofed. Chimney smoke stained heaven. But his eyes went first to the man closer by. The fellow was cultivating with a tractor. Though the dielectric motor had been invented in this world, its use had not yet spread this far north, and gasoline fumes caught at Jason's nostrils. He had thought that stench one of the worst abominations in America—that hogpen they called Los Angeles!—but now it came to him clean and strong, for it was his

hope.

The driver saw him, halted, and unshipped a rifle. Jason approached with palms held forward in token of peace. The driver relaxed. He was a typical Magyar: burly, high in the cheekbones, his beard braided, his tunic colorfully embroidered. *So I did cross the border!* Jason ex-ulted. *I'm out of Norland and into the Voivodate of Dakoty.*

Before they sent him here, the anthropologists of the Parachronic Research Institute had of course given him an electrochemical inculca-tion in the principal languages of Westfall. (Pity they hadn't been more thorough about teaching him the mores. But then, he had been hastily recruited for the Norland post after Megasthenes' accidental death; and it was assumed that his experience in America gave him special qualifications for this history, which was also non-Alexandrine; and, to be sure, the whole object of missions like his was to learn just how societies on the different Earths did vary.) He formed the Ural-Altaic words with ease:

"Greeting to you. I come as a supplicant."

The farmer sat quiet, tense, looking down on him and listening to the dogs far off in the forest. His rifle stayed ready. "Are you an out-law?" he asked.

"Not in this realm, freeman." (Still another name and concept for "citizen"!) "I was a peaceful trader from Homeland, visiting Lawman Ottar Thorkelsson in Ernvik. His anger fell upon me, so great that he broke sacred hospitality and sought the life of me, his guest. Now his hunters are on my trail. You hear them yonder."

"Norlanders? But this is Dakoty."

Jason nodded. He let his teeth show, in the grime and stubble of his face. "Right. They've entered your country without so much as a by--your-leave. If you stand idle, they'll ride onto your freehold and slay me, who asks your help."

The farmer hefted his gun. "How do I know you speak truth?"

"Take me to the Voivode," Jason said. "Thus you keep both the law and your honor." Very carefully, he unholstered his pistol and offered it butt foremost. "I am forever your debtor."

Doubt, fear and anger pursued each other across the face of the man on the tractor. He did not take the weapon. Jason waited. *If I've read him correctly, I've gained some hours of life. Perhaps more. That will depend on the Voivode. My whole chance lies in using their own barbarism—their division into petty states, their crazy idea of honor, their fetish of property and privacy—to harness them.*

If I fail, then I shall die like a civilized man. That they cannot take away from me.

"The hounds have winded you. They'll be here before we can es-cape," said the Magyar uneasily.

Relief made Jason dizzy. He fought down the reaction and said:

"We can take care of them for a time. Let me have some gasoline."

"Ah . . . thus!" The other man chuckled and jumped to earth. "Good thinking, stranger. And thanks, by

the way. Life has been dull hereabouts for too many years.”

He had a spare can of fuel on his machine. They lugged it back along Jason’s trail for a considerable distance, dousing soil and trees. If that didn’t throw the pack off, nothing would.

“Now, hurry!” The Magyar led the way at a trot.

His farmstead was built around an open courtyard. Sweet scents of hay and livestock came from the barns. Several children ran forth to gape. The wife shooed them back inside, took her husband’s rifle, and mounted guard at the door with small change of expression.

Their house was solid, roomy, aesthetically pleasing if you could accept the unrestrained tapestries and painted pillars. Above the fire-place was a niche for a family altar. Though most people in Westfall had left myth long behind them, these peasants still seemed to adore the Triple God Odin-Attila-Maniton. But the man went to a sophisticated radiophone. “I don’t have an aircraft myself,” he said, “but I can get one.”

Jason sat down to wait. A girl neared him shyly with a beaker of beer and a slab of cheese on coarse dark bread. “Be you guest-holy,” she said.

“May my blood be yours,” Jason answered by rote. He managed to take the refreshment not quite like a wolf.

The farmer came back. “A few more minutes,” he said. “I am Arpad, son of Kalman.”

“Jason Philippou.” It seemed wrong to give a false name. The hand he clasped was hard and warm.

“What made you fall afoul of old Ottar?” Arpad inquired.

“I was lured,” Jason said bitterly. “Seeing how free the unwed women were-”

“Ah, indeed. They’re a lickerish lot, those Danskar. Nigh as shame-less as Tyrkers.” Arpad got pipe and tobacco pouch off a shelf. “Smoke?”

“No, thank you.” *We don’t degrade ourselves with drugs in Eutopla.*

The hounds drew close. Their chant broke into confused yelps. Horns shrilled. Arpad stuffed his pipe as coolly as if this were a show. “How they must be swearing!” he grinned. “I’ll give the Danskar credit for being poets, also in their oaths. And brave men, to be sure. I was up that way ten years back, when Voivode Bela sent people to help them after the floods they’d suffered. I saw them laugh as they fought the wild water. And then, their sort gave us a hard time in the old wars.”

“Do you think there will ever be wars again?” Jason asked. Mostly he wanted to avoid speaking further of his troubles. He wasn’t sure how his host might react.

“Not in Westfall. Too much work to do. If young blood isn’t cooled enough by a duel now and then, why, there’re wars to hire out for, among the barbarians overseas. Or else the planets. My oldest boy champs to go there.”

Jason recalled that several realms further south were pooling their resources for astronomical work. Being approximately at the techno-logical level of the American history, and not required to maintain huge

military or social programs, they had put a base on the moon and sent expeditions to Ares. In time, he supposed, they would do what the Hellenes had done a thousand years ago, and make Aphrodite into a new Earth. But would they have a true civilization—be rational men in a rationally planned society—by then? Wearily, he doubted it.

A roar outside brought Arpad to his feet. “There’s your wagon,” he said. “Best you go. Red Horse will fly you to Varady.”

“The Danskar will surely come here soon,” Jason worried.

“Let them,” Arpad shrugged. “I’ll alert the neighborhood, and they’re not so stupid that they won’t know I have. We’ll hold a slanging match, and then I’ll order them off my land. Farewell, guest.”

“I . . . I wish I could repay your kindness.”

“Bah! Was fun. Also, a chance to be a man before my sons.”

Jason went out. The aircraft was a helicopter—they hadn’t discovered gravitics here—piloted by a taciturn young autochthon. He explained that he was a stockbreeder, and that he was conveying the stranger less as a favor to Arpad than as an answer to the Norlander im-pudence of entering Dakoty unbidden. Jason was just as happy to be free of conversation.

The machine whirred aloft. As it drove south he saw clustered hamlets, the occasional hall of some magnate, otherwise only rich undulant plains. They kept the population within bounds in Westfall as in Eutopia. But not because they knew that men need space and clean air, Jason thought. No, they acted from greed on behalf of the reified family. A father did not wish to divide his possessions among many children.

The sun went down and a nearly full moon climbed huge and pump-kin-colored over the eastern rim of the world. Jason sat back, feeling the engine’s throb in his bones, almost savoring his fatigue, and watched. No sign of the lunar base was visible. He must return home before he could see the moon glitter with cities.

And home was more than infinitely remote. He could travel to the farthest of those stars which had begun twinkling forth against purple dusk—were it possible to exceed the speed of light—and not find Eutopia. It lay sundered from him by dimensions and destiny. Nothing but the warpfields of a parachronion might take him across the time lines to his own.

He wondered about the why. That was an empty speculation, but his tired brain found relief in childishness. Why had the God willed that time branch and rebranch, enormous, shadowy, bearing universes like the Yggdrasil of Danskar legend? Was it so that man could realize every potentiality there was in him?

Surely not. So many of them were utter horror.

Suppose Alexander the Conqueror had not recovered from the fever that smote him in Babylon. Suppose, instead of being chastened thereby, so that he spent the rest of a long life making firm the foundations of his empire—suppose he had died?

Well, *it did* happen, and probably in more histories than not. There the empire went down in mad-dog wars of succession. Hellas and the Orient broke apart. Nascent science withered away into metaphysics,

eventually outright mysticism. A convulsed Mediterranean world was swept up piecemeal by the Romans: cold, cruel, uncreative, claiming to be the heirs of Hellas even as they destroyed Corinth. A heretical Jewish prophet founded a mystery cult which took root everywhere, for men despaired of this life. And that cult knew not the name of tolerance. Its priests denied all but one of the manifold ways in which the God is seen; they cut down the holy groves, took from the house its humble idols, and martyred the last men whose souls were free.

Oh yes, Jason thought, in time they lost their grip. Science could be born, almost two millennia later than ours. But the poison remained: the idea that men must conform not only in behavior but in belief. Now, in America, they call it totalitarianism. And because of it, the nuclear rockets have had their nightmare hatching.

I hated that history, its filth, its waste, its ugliness, its restriction, its hypocrisy, its insanity. I will never have a harder task than when I pretended to be an American that I might see from within how they thought they were ordering their lives. But tonight.. I pity you, poor raped world. I do not know whether to wish you soon dead, as you likeliest will be, or hope that one day your descendants can struggle to what we achieved an age ago.

They were luckier here. I must admit that. Christendom fell before the onslaught of Arab, Viking and Magyar. Afterward the Islamic Empire killed itself in civil wars and the barbarians of Europe could go their own way. When they crossed the Atlantic, a thousand years back, they had not the power to commit genocide on the natives; they must come to terms. They had not the industry, then, to gut the hemi-sphere; perforce they grew into the land slowly, taking it as a man takes his bride.

But those vast dark forests, mournful plains, unpeopled deserts and mountains where the wild goats run. . . those entered their souls. They will always, inwardly, be savages.

He sighed, settled down, and made himself sleep. Niki haunted his dreams.

Where a waterfall marked the head of navigation on that great river known variously as the Zeus, Mississippi and Longflood, a basically agricultural people who had not developed air transport as far as in Eutopia were sure to build a city. Trade and military power brought with them government, art, science and education. Varady housed a hundred thousand or so—they didn't take censuses in Westfall—whose inward-turning homes surrounded the castle towers of the Voivode. Waking, Jason walked out on his balcony and heard the traffic rumble. Beyond roofs lay the defensive outworks. He wondered if a peace founded on the balance of power between statelets could endure.

But the morning was too cool and bright for such musings. He was here, safe, cleansed and rested. There had been little talk when he arrived. Seeing the condition of the fugitive who sought him, Bela Zsolt's son had given him dinner and sent him to bed.

Soon we'll confer, Jason understood, and I'll have to be most careful if I'm to live. But the health which had been restored to him glowed so strong that he felt no need to suppress worry.

A bell chimed within. He re-entered the room, which was spacious and airy however over-ornamented. Recalling that custom disapproved of nudity, he threw on a robe, not without wincing at its zigzag pattern. "Be welcome," he called in Magyar.

The door opened and a young woman wheeled in his breakfast. "Good luck to you, guest," she said with an accent; she was a Tyrker, and even wore the beaded and fringed dress of her people. "Did you

sleep well?"

"Like Coyote after a prank," he laughed.

She smiled back, pleased at his reference, and set a table. She joined him too. Guests did not eat alone. He found venison a rather strong dish this early in the day, but the coffee was delicious and the girl chattered charmingly. She was employed as a maid, she told him, and saving her money for a marriage portion when she returned to Cherokee land.

"Will the Voivode see me?" Jason asked after they had finished.

"He awaits your pleasure." Her lashes fluttered. "But we have no haste." She began to untie her belt.

Hospitality so lavish must be the result of customal superimposition, the easygoing Danskar and still freer Tyrker mores influencing the austere Magyars. Jason felt almost as if he were now home, in a world where individuals found delight in each other as they saw fit. He was tempted, too—that broad smooth brow reminded him of Niki. But no. He had little time. Unless he established his position unbreakably firm before Ottar thought to call Bela, he was trapped.

He leaned across the table and patted one small hand. "I thank you, lovely," he said, "but I am under vow."

She took the answer as naturally as she had posed the question. This world, which had the means to unify, chose as if deliberately to remain in shards of separate culture. Something of his alienation came back to him as he watched her sway out the door. For he had only glimpsed a small liberty. Life in Westfall remained a labyrinth of tradition, manner, law and taboo.

Which had well-nigh cost him his life, he reflected; and might yet. Best hurry!

He tumbled into the clothes laid out for him and made his way down long stone halls. Another servant directed him to the Voivode's seat. Several people waited outside to have complaints heard or disputes adjudicated. But when he announced himself, Jason was passed through immediately.

The room beyond was the most ancient part of the building. Age--cracked timber columns, grotesquely carved with gods and heroes, up-held a low roof. A fire pit in the floor curled smoke toward a hole; enough stayed behind for Jason's eyes to sting. They could easily have given their chief magistrate a modern office, he thought—but no, because his ancestors had judged in this kennel, so must he.

Light filtering through slit windows touched the craggy features of Bela and lost itself in shadow. The Voivode was thickset and gray-haired; his features bespoke a considerable admixture of Tyrker chromosomes. He sat a wooden throne, his body wrapped in a blanket, horns and feathers on his head. His left hand bore a horse-tailed staff and a drawn saber was laid across his lap.

"Greeting, Jason Philippou," he said gravely. He gestured at a stool. "Be seated."

"I thank my lord." The Eutopian remembered how his own people had outgrown titles.

"Are you prepared to speak truth?"

"Yes."

“Good.” Abruptly the figure relaxed, crossed legs and extracted a cigar from beneath the blanket. “Smoke? No? Well, I will.” A smile meshed the leathery face in wrinkles. “You being a foreigner, I needn’t keep up this damned ceremony.”

Jason tried to reply in kind. “That’s a relief. We haven’t much in the Peloponnesian Republic.”

“Your home country, eh? I hear things aren’t going so well there.”

“No. Homeland grows old. We look to Westfall for our tomorrows.”

“You said last night that you came to Norland as a trader.”

“To negotiate a commercial agreement.” Jason was staying as near his cover story as possible. You couldn’t tell different histories that the Hellenes had invented the parachronion. Besides changing the very conditions that were being studied, it would be too cruel to let men know that other men lived in perfection. “My country is interested in buying lumber and furs.”

“Jah. So Ottar invited you to stay with him. I can grasp why. We don’t see many Homelanderers. But one day he was after your blood. What happened?”

Jason might have claimed privacy, but that wouldn’t have sat well. And an outright lie was dangerous; before this throne, one was auto-matically under oath. “To a degree, no doubt, the fault was mine,” he said. “One of his family, almost grown, was attracted to me and—I had been long away from my wife, and everyone had told me the Danskar hold with freedom before marriage, and—well, I meant no harm. I merely encouraged—But Ottar found out, and challenged me.”

“Why did you not meet him?”

No use to say that a civilized man did not engage in violence when any alternative existed. “Consider, my lord,” Jason said. “If I lost, I’d be dead. If I won, that would be the end of my company’s project. The Ottarssons would never have taken weregild, would they? No, at the bare least they’d ban us all from their land. And Peloponnesus needs that timber. I thought I’d do best to escape. Later my associates could disown me before Norland.”

“Strange reasoning. But you’re loyal, anyhow. What do you ask of me?”

“Only safe conduct to—Steinvik.” Jason almost said “Neathenai.” He checked his eagerness. “We have a factor there, and a ship.”

Bela streamed smoke from his mouth and scowled at the glowing cigar end. “I’d like to know why Ottar grew wrathful. Doesn’t sound like him. Though I suppose, when a man’s daughter is involved, he doesn’t feel so lenient.” He hunched forward. “For me,” he said harshly, “the important thing is that armed Norlanders crossed my border without asking.”

“A grievous violation of your rights, true.”

Bela uttered a horseman’s obscenity. “You don’t understand, you. Borders aren’t sacred because Attila wills it, whatever the shamans prate. They’re sacred because that’s the only way to keep the peace. If I don’t openly resent this crossing, and punish Ottar for it, some hothead might well someday be tempted; and now everyone has nuclear weapons.”

“I don’t want war on my account!” Jason exclaimed, appalled. “Send me back to him first!”

“Oh no, no such nonsense. Ottar’s punishment shall be that I deny him his revenge, regardless of the rights and wrongs of your case. He’ll swallow that.”

Bela rose. He put his cigar in an ashtray, lifted the saber, and all at once he was transfigured. A heathen god might have spoken: “Hence-forward, Jason Philippou, you are peace-holy in Dakoty. While you remain beneath our shield, ill done you is ill done me, my house and my people. So help me the Three!”

Self-command broke down. Jason went on his knees and gasped his thanks.

“Enough,” Bela grunted. “Let’s arrange for your transportation as fast as may be. I’ll send you by air, with a military squadron. But of course I’ll need permission from the realms you’ll cross. That will take time. Go back, relax, I’ll have you called when everything’s ready.”

Jason left, still shivering.

He spent a pleasant couple of hours adrift in the castle and its courtyards. The young men of Bela’s retinue were eager to show off before a Homelander. He had to grant the picturesqueness of their riding, wrestling, shooting and riddling contests; something stirred in him as he listened to tales of faring over the plains and into the forests and by river to Unnborg’s fabled metropolis; the chant of a bard awakened glories which went deeper than the history told, down to the instincts of man the killer ape.

But these are precisely the bright temptations that we have turned our backs on in Eutopia. For we deny that we are apes. We are men who can reason. In that lies our manhood.

I am going home. I am going home. I am going home.

A servant tapped his arm. “The Voivode wants you.” It was a frightened voice.

Jason hastened back. What had gone wrong? He was not taken to the room of the high seat. Instead, Bela awaited him on a parapet. Two men-at-arms stood at attention behind, faces blank under the plumed helmets.

The day and the breeze were mocked by Bela’s look. He spat on Jason’s feet. “Ottar has called me,” he said.

“I— Did he say—”

“And I thought you were only trying to bed a girl! Not seeking to destroy the house that befriended you!”

“My lord—”

“Have no fears. You sucked my oath out of me. Now I must spend years trying to make amends to Ottar for cheating him.”

“But—” *Calm! Calm! You might have expected this.*

“You will not ride in a warcraft. You’ll have your escort, yes. But the machine that carries you must be burned afterward. Now go wait by the stables, next to the dung heap, till we’re ready.”

“I meant no harm,” Jason protested. “I did not know.”

“Take him away before I kill him,” Bela ordered.

Steinvik was old. These narrow cobbled streets, these gaunt houses, had seen dragon ships. But the same wind blew off the Atlantic, salt and fresh, to drive from Jason the last hurt of that sullenness which had ridden here with him. He pushed whistling through the crowds.

A man of Westfall, or America, would have slunk back. Had he not failed? Must he not be replaced by someone whose cover story bore no hint of Hellas? But they saw with clear eyes in Eutopia. His failure was due to an honest mistake: a mistake he would not have made had they taught him more carefully before sending him out. One learns by error.

The memory of people in Ernvik and Varady—gusty, generous people whose friendship he would have liked to keep—had nagged him awhile. But he put that aside too. There were other worlds, an endlessness of them.

A signboard creaked in the wind. The Brotherhood of Hunyadi and Ivar, Shipfolk. Good camouflage, that, in a town where every second enterprise was bent seaward. He ran to the second floor. The stairs clattered under his boots.

He spread his palm before a chart on the wall. A hidden scanner identified his fingerpatterns and a hidden door opened. The room beyond was wainscoted in local fashion. But its clean proportions spoke of home; and a Nike statuette spread wings on a shelf.

Nike. . . Niki . . . I'm coming back to you! The heart leaped in him.

Daimonax Aristides looked up from his desk. Jason sometimes wondered if anything could rock the calm of that man. “Rejoice!” the deep voice boomed. “What brings you here?”

“Bad news, I’m afraid.”

“So? Your attitude suggests the matter isn’t catastrophic.” Daimonax’s big frame left his chair, went to the wine cabinet, filled a pair of chaste and beautiful goblets, and relaxed on a couch. “Come, tell me.”

Jason joined him. “Unknowingly,” he said, “I violated what appears to be a prime taboo. I was lucky to get away alive.”

“Eh.” Daimonax stroked his iron-gray beard. “Not the first such turn, or the last. We fumble our way toward knowledge, but reality will always surprise us. . . . Well, congratulations on your whole skin. I’d have hated to mourn you.”

Solemnly, they poured a libation before they drank. The rational man recognizes his own need for ceremony; and why not draw it from otherwise outgrown myth? Besides, the floor was stainproof.

“Do you feel ready to report?” Daimonax asked.

“Yes, I ordered the data in my head on the way here.”

Daimonax switched on a recorder, spoke a few cataloguing words and said, "Proceed."

Jason flattered himself that his statement was well arranged: clear, frank and full. But as he spoke, against his will experience came back to him, not in the brain but in the guts. He saw waves sparkle on that greatest of the Pentelime; he walked the halls of Ernvik castle with eager and wondering young Leif; he faced an Ottar become beast; he stole from the keep and overpowered a guard and by-passed the controls of a car with shaking fingers; he fled down an empty road and stumbled through an empty forest; Bela spat and his triumph was suddenly ashen. At the end, he could not refrain:

"Why wasn't I informed? I'd have taken care. But they said this was a free and healthy folk, before marriage anyway. How could I know?"

"An oversight," Daimonax agreed. "But we haven't been in this business so long that we don't still tend to take too much for granted."

"Why are we here? What have we to learn from these barbarians? With infinity to explore, why are we wasting ourselves on the second most ghastly world we've found?"

Daimonax turned off the recorder. For a time there was silence between the men. Wheels trundled outside, laughter and a snatch of song drifted through the window, the ocean blazed under a low sun.

"You do not know?" Daimonax asked at last, softly.

"Well . . . scientific interest, of course—" Jason swallowed. "I'm sorry. The Institute works for sound reasons. In the American history we're observing ways that man can go wrong. I suppose here also."

Daimonax shook his head. "No."

"What?"

"We are learning something far too precious to give up," Daimonax said. "The lesson is humbling, but our smug Eutopia will be the better for some humility. You weren't aware of it, because to date we haven't sufficient hard facts to publish any conclusions. And then, you are new in the profession, and your first assignment was elsewhere. But you see, we have excellent reason to believe that Westfall is also the Good Land."

"Impossible," Jason whispered.

Daimonax smiled and took a sip of wine. "Think," he said. "What does man require? First, the biological necessities, food, shelter, medicine, sex, a healthful and reasonably safe environment in which to raise his children. Second, the special human need to strive, learn, create. Well, don't they have these things here?"

"One could say the same for any Stone Age tribe. You can't equate contentment with happiness."

"Of course not. And if anything, is not ordered, unified, planned Eutopia the country of the cows? We have ended every conflict, to the very conflict of man with his own soul; we have mastered the planets; the stars are too distant; were the God not so good as to make possible the parachronion, what would be left for us?"

“Do you mean—” Jason groped after words. He reminded himself that it was not sane to take umbrage at any mere statement, however outrageous. “Without fighting, clannishness, superstition, ritual and taboo . . . man has nothing?”

“More or less that. Society must have structure and meaning. But nature does not dictate what structure or what meaning. Our rational-ism is a non-rational choice. Our leashing of the purely animal within us is simply another taboo. We may love as we please, but not hate as we please. So are we more free than men in Westfall?”

“But surely some cultures are better than others!”

“I do not deny that,” Daimonax said; “I only point out that each has its price. For what we enjoy at home, we pay dearly. We do not allow ourselves a single unthinking, merely felt impulse. By excluding danger and hardship, by eliminating distinctions between men, we leave no hopes of victory. Worst, perhaps, is this: that we have become pure individuals. We belong to no one. Our sole obligation is negative, not to compel any other individual. The state—an engineered organiza-tion, a faceless undemanding mechanism—takes care of each need and each hurt. Where is loyalty unto death? Where is the intimacy of an entire shared lifetime? We play at ceremonies, but because we know they are arbitrary gestures, what is their value? Because we have made our world one, where are color and contrast, where is pride in being peculiarly ourselves?”

“Now these Westfall people, with all their faults, do know who they are, what they are, what they belong to and what belongs to them. Tradition is not buried in books but is part of life; and so their dead remain with them in loving memory. Their problems are real; hence their successes are real. They believe in their rites. The family, the kingdom, the race is something to live and die for. They use their brains less, perhaps—though even that I am not pertain of—but they use nerves, glands, muscles more. So they know an aspect of being human which our careful world has denied itself.

“If they have kept this while creating science and machine tech-nology, should we not try to learn from them?”

Jason had no answer.

Eventually Daimonax said he might as well return to Eutopia. After a vacation, he could be reassigned to some history he might find more congenial. They parted in friendly wise.

The parachronion hummed. Energies pulsed between the universes. The gate opened and Jason stepped through.

He entered a glazed colonnade. White Neathenai swept in grace and serenity down to the water. The man who received him was a philos-opher. Decent tunic and sandals hung ready to be donned. From somewhere resounded a lyre.

Joy trembled in Jason. Leif Ottarsson fell out of memory. He had only been tempted in his loneliness by a chance resemblance to his beloved. Now he was home. And Niki waited for him, Nikias Demostheneou, most beautiful and enchanting of boys.