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WARLORD'S WORLD

Christopher Anvil

Villains With Slick Tricks Met Their Match in the Slicker and Trickier Interstellar Patrol ...

Vaughan Roberts and his two companions had been trapped on a crime-ridden, chaotic planet until they bamboozled the population with a gigantic hoax—which brought them to the attention of the Interstellar Patrol, who were looking for a few good con men, capable of ingenious improvisation and adept at playing dirty tricks on the bad guys. The new recruits acquitted themselves admirably, so they naturally were given more tough nuts to crack, including:

- **Flummoxing an alien empire which has taken a number of human prisoners to gather information prior to an invasion. This has a personal aspect, since the prisoners are from**

**the planet which
Roberts tricked into
reforming...**

- **Stopping a plan by not-so-good Samaritans who are pretending to cure a planetary plague—which they introduced to the planet—with a “miracle” drug which creates an addiction to the same drug, which the schemers will be glad to continue supplying for ever-increasing sums...**
- **Not only rescuing some Patrol personnel taken hostage by fanatics who plan to execute them one at a time until their leader is released, but also convincing other fanatics throughout the galaxy that the consequences of threatening anyone in the Patrol are too terrible even to think about...**
- **Making sure that the rightful heir to a planet’s throne escapes from captivity and overthrows the usurper. This time there’s a complication: Roberts may be falling for the heir’s beautiful sister...**

And much more, including such lethal alien wildlife as banjo birds with rapier-like

beaks, alien caterpillars with flaming dragonlike exhalations, and a cast of thousands of biting, stinging, bloodsucking insects from a host of colony worlds who think humans are the tastiest things they've ever come across...

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I. The Appeal



Vaughan Nathan Roberts was on the fast curving upslide coming out of the Temple of Chance on Tiamaz when he saw the girl.

Roberts, just before that moment, was free of care, his mind cheerfully alternating between curiosity as to the slide's construction—it must be a sequence of gravitors, their fields so angled as to create a strong upward component against the slick, many-colored glowing surface of the slide—and the thought of the steaks awaiting him and his crew at the establishment known as “Chez Dragon.”

Hammell and Morrissey, the two older members of his crew, were well ahead of him on the slide. Dan Bergen, considerably younger, was right beside Roberts, his expression showing his shifting feelings as they shot up toward the flight level.

“Weird effect,” said Bergen.

Roberts himself felt as if he were shooting *down* the slide, until he glanced around at the elaborately curved ruby and emerald pillars that rose from the game floor below to the surface above. “Why?”

“Why,” said Bergen. “It *feels* like we're going down. But I can *see* we're going up.” Ahead, a second slide curved amongst the glinting pillars, to take patrons and sightseers down to the game floor. Just ahead, the two slides passed close together.

“Be glad,” said Roberts, “that we're going *up*. On that one ahead, that goes down, the slide speeds up, and—” Roberts paused, the rest of the sentence forgotten. On the down slide ahead, curving toward him, coming so close that the two slides passed within six to eight feet of one another, Roberts was suddenly aware of one single individual amongst the crowd. It was a girl.

What took place next happened so fast that no thought seemed to be involved. At one instant Roberts saw the face, the honey-blond hair, the dark-blue eyes looking straight into his—he felt the impact of a desperate silent appeal flashed between their locked glances as they stared at each other, were swept toward each other, then curved sharply away.

In that instant, Roberts was aware of the girl as if they were one person—as if he were in two places at once. Then she was past. The last thing that he saw was the look of desperate appeal on her face.

Roberts was near the flickering edge of the slide, by the waist-high silver rail. The up-slide he was riding was higher here by several feet than the down-slide the girl was on.

As the two slides began to diverge, Roberts gripped the silver rail, vaulted onto it, crouched and sprang, the whole action so fast as to seem all one motion, and so spontaneous that he did not realize what he was doing until the three-hundred foot

drop to the floor was beneath him.

He sucked in his breath in silent prayer, the golden rail of the down-slide loomed in front of him, he dropped from the rail to a momentary clear space in the crowd, heard the indrawn gasp behind him, glanced up and saw the staring faces on the up-slide as he shot back through the closest approach of the two slides.

In that instant, he saw something else. On the up-slide, a figure in the multicolored silk clown-suit and silver and gold domino mask of a bar boy from the game floor was aiming toward Roberts a shiny chrome object with a round black hole in the center.

As Roberts dropped, the figure in the domino mask was twisting, and reached out to grip the silver rail as if to try for a better shot. Then the figure was past. Somewhere behind Roberts, there was a yell that faded almost as it began.

Ahead, the slide seemed to slope ever steeper, to almost dip into a vertical drop. The wind blew in Roberts' face. Around him, there was a gasp from the crowd. The gold rail beside him flickered and blurred. Ahead, the game floor enlarged visibly as they rushed toward it.

Roberts stood up. In front of him, the slide leveled out, seemed to press up under his feet, gave the illusion for an instant of climbing steeply—and then he glided out onto the floor, looking quickly around.

The white beam of an idly revolving spotlight paused for an instant, to shine on honey-blonde hair. Roberts thrust through the crowd, leaving behind him a trail of low curses, and his own murmured excuses and apologies.

Ahead of him, two broad-shouldered men in dark evening clothes, their movements brisk and athletic, stepped one to either side of the girl, who drew back, then paused defiantly.

They stepped close, to grip her by the arms, from either side. The taller of the two, to the right, slipped his hand in his pocket. As his hand came out of the pocket, there was the brief flash of a hypodermic.

Roberts had had no time to stop and think since that first glance going up the slide, and he spent no time in thought now. His left hand gripped the taller of the two men at the base of the neck. His right hand clamped the wrist above the other's hand that held the hypodermic. His left hand found the nerve he sought, and his opponent sucked in his breath. The hypodermic dropped to the floor and smashed.

"Let go of her," said Roberts, his voice low and reasonable, "or you will both be dead before seconds pass."

"Who in—"

Roberts' brain now had time to function, and in a brief instant deliver several unpleasant conclusions to him. For a start, it occurred to him suddenly that he was,

in fact, all alone here. Hammell and Morrissey were, at this very moment, doubtless settling pleasantly into their seats, admiring the huge dragon of transparent red and gold glass that formed the central attraction around which the tables of “Chez Dragon” were grouped, and from which the pretty girls, their hair tied back, cheeks flushed from the heat, carried the steaks from the grills. Bergen, for his part, had had no warning, and would have been carried quickly out of reach by the slide.

That meant that Roberts had odds of two-to-one to deal with for a start, with the clown-suited bar boy doubtless approaching the top of the up-slide by now, and heading for the down-slide, which would very shortly land him at Roberts’ back.

Then Roberts remembered the way the spotlight had lingered on the honey-blonde hair, and realized that very possibly he had worse to contend with than that. The management of the casino itself could be involved.

Roberts at once felt the need to fill in his lack of allies, and generate some confusion at the same time. This was made easier for him by the less tall of the two men, whose gaze flicked casually over Roberts. This glance had the bored quality of a technician in an automated packing plant looking over the incoming beef. As the first of the two sank to the polished floor, this second one spoke up.

“Don’t move, poko. You’re covered from all sides.” Roberts could, in fact, sense the likely truth of the comment in his twinging flesh. He could feel the sights of guns centered on his back, neck, and both sides.

“Unfortunate,” Roberts said, “but we have our orders.”

There was a faint flicker of interest in the bored gaze resting on him. “Orders from *who*?”

Roberts’ racing mind sought the vague, the unverifiable and yet alarming, at the same time that his hands sought nerve centers. He considered swiftly the patronage the casinos of Tiamaz received from various aristocrats, titans of trade, and planetary leaders, large and small. Which ones would they least care to antagonize?

“From the King,” said Roberts, his thumb finding the spot he wanted. The girl was suddenly free, staring at him.

The second of the pair who had held the girl had let go and stepped back, staring at Roberts. The two men, Roberts and the girl, were now in the center of a cleared space roughly fifteen feet across. The customers of the casino, taking in the situation, were giving it a wide berth. Bar boys in clown suits and neatly dressed guards in evening clothes were congregated around the little scene, evidently awaiting instructions. Roberts became aware of a peculiar sensation, as if his words had rung in the air, and now echoed back.

“The King,” murmured the less tall of the pair who had held the girl. He looked at Roberts uncertainly. Roberts seized the opportunity.

“Did you actually think,” he said, “that you could get away with this?”

“I—”

Roberts no longer felt that sensation of guns aimed at him. The little circle surrounding him suddenly had a nervous look. Roberts gave the girl his left arm, and as she clung tightly to him he turned toward the surliest face in the circle before him, and walked directly forward. Behind Roberts, someone sucked in his breath.

“Not *likely*. Stop the—”

Dan Bergen’s voice was low, but it carried. “Better not. *The King wouldn’t like it.*”

There was a heavy thump, and the surly face before Roberts changed expression and suddenly there was room for him to pass. In front of Roberts, Hammell’s powerful figure emerged from the crowd just leaving the down-slide. Behind Hammell came Morrissey, taller and more slender, but obviously fit. They glanced questioningly at Roberts.

Roberts, conscious of the recording instruments that might now be focused on him, murmured, “*Bergen?*”

Hammell’s lips scarcely moved. “Coming now.”

Roberts nodded, groped for a way to sow confusion, and kept his voice low. “None of the rest had to break cover. We’ll leave them.”

“Good,” said Hammell, exactly as if he knew what Roberts was talking about. Morrissey nodded, and managed a thin smile.

“Where to?” murmured Hammell.

“Refreshments,” said Roberts, acutely aware of the need to leave the planet as well as the casino, but also aware of the embarrassing non-availability of his ship. The patrol ship was at the spaceport, and was in the guise of a space yacht, since the arrival of Interstellar Patrol ships had a tendency to create more stir than the arrival of a Space Force dreadnought. Small as Roberts’ ship was, its lines would be recognized on sight. And as in the case of a dainty perfume bottle filled with nitroglycerin, it wasn’t the outward *appearance* of the thing that brought on the nervous perspiration, but the realization of what the thing could *do*.

Roberts could hardly wait to get back to his ship. But Tiamaz Quarantine, in addition to the standard tests for disease, periodically claimed to also run an “incubation test” which took a total of seventy-two hours. No one could leave the planet until the results of this test were in. Roberts had been on the planet a little over two and a half days. Until another twelve hours went by, the quarantine sticker would not be removed from Roberts’ “space yacht”. The guards would not admit Roberts to the spaceport where the space yacht was kept, and the okay would not even go out to allow Roberts to enter the shuttle to travel *to* the spaceport.

Very conscious of the girl clinging tightly to his arm, and of the tendency of even

the best bluff to evaporate with time, Roberts stepped off the top of the upslide. He stepped past the first of the fantastic gravcabs waiting nearby, and selected a pumpkin-shaped coach with the name “Cinderella” in an arc of imitation diamonds over the door.

Roberts opened the door, and helped the girl climb in. Once the five of them were all settled inside, the “coachman” turned on his seat to look in through a little grilled opening. Roberts pulled open the small glass window hinged beside the opening, and called loudly, “Palace of Fortune!”

The coachman nodded. “Palace it is!”

The coach began a rocking motion, to simulate the movement of a horse-drawn carriage. Outside the window flashed the golden spires, granite towers, silver minarets, and floating many-hued banners of Tiamaz. The glint of inlaid jewels, glitter of silver and gold, the green of the trees below, the deep violet of the tiled conical roofs—all were a treat for the eye of the spaceman—an explosion of color and form against a turquoise sky where a golden sun blazed down through pure white clouds.

The coachman called in, “Palace!”

Roberts glanced out the little grilled window. “Go to the front entrance, as if to let us out. Stop near that crowd. Then go around in back.”

The coach rocked forward, stopped, then the coachman said, as if surprised, “Oops, sorry, sir. I thought you said the front, not the side.” The rocking began again.

Beside Roberts, the girl still clung to his arm. Her head was bent against his shoulder, and she was trembling. Roberts was aware of a fierce possessive tenderness as he looked down at the honey-gold hair. Across from him Hammell and Morrissey, watching, glanced soberly at each other.

Roberts looked out the window, then spoke through the little grille.

“Don’t stop. Keep going to ‘*Chez Dragon*’.”

“Yes, sir.”

Roberts shut the little window and glanced around uneasily. The need to plan was urgent. But the elaborately cushioned and decorated coach might have concealed a thousand pick-ups. In fact, on Tiamaz, where was the place that didn’t?

The girl looked up at him. Her deep blue eyes were like the sky at dusk. Suddenly, she followed his glance of a moment before. Her lips parted in a sudden flashing smile. Her voice was soft, and faintly husky.

“My brother the King,” she said, her tone quiet and conversational, “is more a warrior in his boyhood than these gamblers in their prime. They have lowered him by their clever debauchery, but—” a faint cold note entered into her voice—“we will show them that the steel of Festhold will cut much deeper than the gold of Tiamaz.”

She tightly held Roberts' arm and said, "I know of your organization—and that the King is in touch with you—but if we are to save the throne and Festhold itself, we must free him from the grip of Tiamaz' advisors at home. His inherited power of decision in a crisis is still strong, but no constitution can endure forever the debasement in which they have entrapped him."

Roberts, filled with delight by the clear sweetness of her voice, realized with a sudden shock that she had just filled in the whole background of the situation—without revealing for an instant that there had been anything false about Roberts' bluff. If anyone were listening, the bluff had suddenly taken on solidity. Roberts, for his part, could now understand the look of nervous sweat on the faces of the guards in the casino.

To seize a blonde-haired girl was one thing. To seize a princess of the Kingdom of Festhold—provided the King was in the power of those who seized the princess—was still not too bad. A gambler might well risk it for high stakes.

But Festhold was one of the largest of the independent human allies of the Federation, and one of the very few that adhered to the ancient code of the warrior. Each male citizen bore arms from childhood, and took his personal sidearms into the flame which consumed his bodily remains at death. The population was made up of warriors, while the kings of Festhold were renowned strategists.

To seize a princess of Festhold, and to have fighting men at once appear on the King's order—there was a situation to chill the blood of the fondest gambler.

She said quietly, looking at Roberts with her deep blue eyes, "Call me Erena." She spoke the name as if it were spelled "Erayna," and added, "Knowing your purpose to free the King, I wish to join your organization. I swear that I have always been true to the Code."

Roberts felt a second shock. Which organization did she "wish to join"?—The mythical organization from Festhold which was pure bluff?—Or the Interstellar Patrol to which Roberts, Hammell, Morrissey, and Bergen belonged? Roberts, being the captain of a patrol ship, had the power to admit whoever he wished to the Patrol—though whoever was admitted must afterward pass through a training course and a series of tests that Roberts did not care to think of, even in retrospect. But Roberts' hesitation lasted less than a fraction of a second.

"I admit you, Erena," he said, "and although I do not need anyone else's agreement, I know that we are all agreed." He glanced at Hammell and Morrissey, then at Bergen, and the smiles that answered his glance also answered his question.

The coachman bent to the little grille. " '*Chez Dragon,*' gentlemen."

Roberts stepped down, and helped Erena to descend. As the cab rocked away, they turned to climb the ramp of New Venusian teak with its rail of jade, toward the huge ivory tusks in the open jaws of the dragon's head. Beyond these jaws they could see the double doors of walnut with their broad hammered iron hinges. But

they had not reached the nostrils from which flames billowed out above the walk when the whole scene became suddenly hazy. The girl gripped Roberts' arm more tightly.

Hammell growled, "Gas."

Roberts suddenly changed his estimate of the opposition, and with this changed estimate he suddenly cared nothing for the concealment he had tried to maintain. Bergen managed a yell of warning.

Out of the corner of his eye, Roberts could see Morrissey grappling with someone in white. Simultaneously, Roberts could feel himself falling, seeking to protect with his body the unconscious girl who had slumped to the dark wooden floor of the ramp.

Roberts' last conscious thought was an intensely focused command:

"Override! *Come!*"

II. IPS 6-107-J



The wind on the spaceport chilled the two men in coveralls who eyed the space yacht. Like a big gently curved ice-cream cone set upside-down, the space yacht was all curving smoothness, a harmless piece of ostentation and luxury which nevertheless had resisted the master signal box, and was now resisting a six-foot tool steel bar with its end in the lip of the hatch.

"Damned thick metal for a yacht," growled one of the workmen.

"Must be some off-standard job. Has kind of stubby lines when you look it over."

"Put your weight onto that bar. The sooner we get this finished, the sooner we get out of this wind."

"What do you think I'm doing?"

As they strained at the bar, several hundred miles away, Roberts was falling. The last thought that passed through Roberts' mind: "Override! *Come!*" triggered a tiny transceiver in his body. An all but imperceptible impulse flashed skyward, was detected by a tiny satellite, retransmitted—

The two workmen paused, exasperated. "Who owns this rig, anyway?"

"Just somebody the big boys want ended. We plant the stuff, and it finishes them after they're off-planet. No trouble. No sweat."

“Well, let’s try a—”

The faint impulse flashed along its tight beam to the ship. Beneath the disguise of the elongated cone-shaped hull, the Interstellar Patrol ship very quietly clicked and murmured. As the signal reached it, the ship was checking its missiles, idling its turrets around to timed signals, and running test problems through the battle computer. A small part of its attention was devoted to the pair straining at the imitation spacelock. A combination of minute traces of gaseous drugs and pseudotelepathic signals was prying information from the pair, while the molecular emplacement of a directed flow of alloy steel further frustrated the struggle at the hatch.

The arrival of the override signal put a sudden end to this cozy house-keeping routine. The ship, unprepared for this signal, wasted a measurable fraction of a second in confusion, its attention and resources scattered—and then made up for it in a hurry.

BAM!

The external camouflage cover exploded in blazing fragments. For a brief instant, the patrol ship, with its two big fusion turrets, its number one snap-beam probe head looming above them, and its movable belt of smaller turrets circling its midsection, stood there unnaturally balanced on its tail amidst the burning fragments.

The two workmen, knocked flat on their mobile ramp by the explosion, stared in a daze at this transformation, and one of them suddenly recognized the letters on the side:

IPS

6

107

J

The workman’s scream was lost in the sudden whine of the patrol ship’s gravitors. The ship sprang skyward. An instant later, the reaction drive nozzles lit. The ship hurtled toward the capital city of Tiamaz.

On the ramp outside “*Chez Dragon*,” the white-jacketed men pulled Roberts, Hammell, and the others to their feet. Behind them, a blue-uniformed figure displayed a badge to a crowd of patrons alighting from an imitation street car.

“Police business,” said the figure in blue. “Just stay back here. Wait until the attendants have these escapees under restraint.—They’re congenital defectives from Happy Hills Training Institute.—Ah, here we go. Just keep back, now. The chemical restraint doesn’t hurt them. It just makes them harmless to normal people.”

Roberts could see the ramp, the staring crowd, and the blue-uniformed figure. It all meant nothing to him. A voice spoke in his ear.

“Walk down the ramp.” Roberts walked down the ramp.

“Now turn right.” Roberts turned right.

Behind him, he could hear similar orders given to Hammell and Morrissey. It didn't mean a thing to Roberts.

Over the horizon to the northwest, a glittering streak hurtled through the midday sky toward the city. A police cruiser on routine patrol spotted it, spun, and flashed the news:

“Unidentified small spaceship leaving vicinity Parking Spaceport Eight on course Tiamaz Center extreme boost we are following request area alert...”

From the police cruiser came the warning: “You are sighted! Decelerate at once to zero! Stand by and open your hatches for boarding!”

From the patrol ship came the answer: “Interstellar Patrol Ship 6-107-J, on Official Patrol Business under Mandate Override Command Authority Paragraph 1064b, Subheading 44p through z, relevant Emergencies to Patrol Personnel On Active Duty, Enabling Authority Subsection J through Q ... *THIS IS A RELEVANT EMERGENCY!* ... Stand by to render assistance on request.”

On the police cruiser, grim purpose dissolved into chaos.

“Holy—It's an I.P. ship!”

“Wait now! How do we *know* it's an I.P.? Just because they say—”

“—What's ‘Mandate Override Command’? *I* never heard of ‘Mandate Override Command.’ Did anybody here ever hear of ‘Mandate Override Command’?”

“They're outdistancing us!”

“Standard regs say we've got to stop *any* ship showing in the inner ring. It doesn't matter if it's the Space Force!”

“Look, what's a ‘relevant emergency’? Did anybody here ever hear of a ‘relevant emergency’?”

“I'm telling you, you don't mess with the I.P.!”

“But how do we know for sure it *is* the I.P.?”

“Pass the message to HQ and let *them* figure it out!”

At Tiamaz Central Police HQ, calm efficiency dissolved into confusion: “Cruiser 89 has a spook in the Inner Ring.”

“Stop and search, or blow it out of the sky.”

“Cruiser 89 reports stop and search order out.”

“Pull the spook in to Central Detention. We’ll want to go over this very carefully. Could be a—”

“*Hold everything! This spook is an I.P. ship!*”

“*Cancel the Stop and Search!*”

“Hold it! Hold it! How do we *know* it’s I.P.? Anybody could say that! Stop it just the same!”

“If it *is* I.P., how do we stop it?”

“This is a General Order: Capital Squadron to maximum alert!”

“Sir—this I.P. ship reports it’s on Official Business acting under Mandate Override Command Authority. It’s an Emergency. They request us to stand by to render assistance!”

“Well—*that*’s different.”

“Wait a minute, Ed. *How* different? How do we *know*—”

“What *is* Mandate Override Command Authority?”

“Get out the space regs.”

“Damn it! Who’s got the authority under Mandate Override?”

“Let’s see that message ... H’m ... This sounds right; they got the subheadings and all...”

“I can’t find the space regs!”

“Well—either it’s the I.P. or it isn’t. If it is, we aren’t going to stop them. They won’t stop, period ... But, if it *isn’t*—”

“Send this reply: ‘Tiamaz Central Police HQ to IPS 6-107-J. We are alerting the Capital Squadron, and standing by to render emergency assistance on request. We request further information regarding nature of this emergency. You are in a Closed Zone, due to sensitive native installations throughout the Capital Area. We are authorized to seize or destroy all ships of whatever nature in this area on sight.’ Send that. That covers everything.”

“We still don’t know who’s got the authority under Mandate Override!”

“Where’s the damned space regs?”

Roberts entered the roofed-over walk that led to the slide entrance and exit in the Temple of Chance. A faintly amused voice said, “Head for the downslide.”

Obediently, Roberts joined the crowd pressing forward at the outcurved head of the slide. The voice beside him murmured, "Halfway down, where the two slideways come closest together, there's a sheet of nonreflective glass that slopes off to the right. Understand?"

Roberts' mind seemed to split in half. "Nonreflective glass?"

"Right. It's sloped to the right. It's thick armorsheet nonreflective glass, curved in a big trough, and it leads off to the right, sloping downward. It's put there to protect anyone who would try to jump from one slideway to the other."

"Oh," said Roberts. He could understand that. The two separated halves of his mind seemed to come together again.

The voice went on: "This armorsheet nonreflective glass slopes off to the right, and takes you to the casino office. When we get to the halfway point, where the two slideways come close, jump down onto the nonreflective glass. You can't see it. Bend your knees a little to take the shock when you hit. You'll drop five to six feet, land on the glass, and slide to the right. Stay seated on the glass slide. Understand?"

Roberts' mind again seemed divided, and one part was trying to tell his consciousness something, but it could not get through to the other part.

"Okay," said the voice, faintly amused. "Here we go now, onto the slide. When we reach the halfway point, vault over the rail and bend your knees. Understand?"

"Yes."

They stepped onto the smoothly downcurving slide, and Roberts glanced over the golden rail. Three hundred feet below, the figures were tiny on the game floor. Somewhere behind him, there was a crash as of heavy thunder.

The Interstellar Patrol ship had crossed the horizon like a meteor, ignoring the police cruisers forming into a circling pattern overhead. The sensitive receptors of the patrol ship were now picking up a faint signal which radiated from a crowd passing under a canted roof gleaming silver under gigantic golden letters reading, "The Temple of Chance."

The patrol ship dove toward the canted roof. Small doors slid back to uncover grilles inset in the ship's flanks. A siren wail split the air, its volume suggestive of a rocket engine being tested to destruction. Below, the crowd stared around, looked up, saw a dazzling red and yellow flash descending, and bolted to get out of the way.

The patrol ship braked with a whine from its gravitors, passed under the canted roof, retracted its probe heads into their wells, and followed the faint signal to the outward slanting entrance of a slide. Here the downward slanting roof overhead, and the protective wall at the edge of the walk, made the distance too small for the patrol

ship to pass.

On the downslide, Roberts saw the slightly higher slide that rose from the game floor approaching. Beside him, the gold rail of the downslide flickered. As the two slides approached, Roberts braced himself.

From somewhere behind him came the wail of a siren, rising louder and louder. The two slides came close.

Beside Roberts, the voice said, "Jump!"

Inside of Roberts' mind, something clamored to speak to him. His mind seemed split in parts, one part unable to communicate with another.

"Jump!" said the voice in his ear.

Roberts gripped the golden rail, and vaulted over it. From behind him came an amused chuckle. Roberts bent his knees to take the shock.

Below him, the little figures were moving on the game floor. He dropped four feet. He braced for the impact. He dropped eight feet.

The tiny figures far below turned small faces upward, apparently attracted by the wail of the siren. Roberts dropped sixteen feet. He was tilting off-balance now. Where was the glass slide?

Below, small dark ovals appeared in the upturned faces—the mouths of the watchers seeing a little figure dropping toward them. Roberts fell thirty-two feet.

Roberts' heart pounded. His lungs sucked in air. The sudden increase in blood pressure and oxygen level seemed to burst the barriers that had split his mind. Abruptly he realized that there was no glass slide, that he had been tricked by casual drugged suggestion into committing suicide.

To either side of him, he could see the curving undersides of the slides, silver for the upslide, gold for the downslide. From the floor below, pillars of synthetic amethyst, ruby, and emerald, climbed toward the ceiling far above, and the silver and gold slides threaded their way between these pillars.

Now, tilting forward, the little figures below running to get out of his way, Roberts realized what had happened. But now, it was too late for him to do anything about it. Roberts fell sixty-four feet.

The patrol ship, its blunt nose over the high parapet, suddenly rotated, swinging the two main fusion turrets in an arc. A dazzling circle of glowing red appeared on the surface of the parapet.

The patrol ship slammed forward, shot down along the edge of the downslide,

eased directly over it, moving in a blur—

Roberts, the game floor rushing up at him, his heart pounding, could feel the smash before it happened—could feel the bones break and the flesh smash into pulp—but, trained beyond the point of giving up, he drew his legs and arms in to speed the rotation of his body. He put out arms and legs in the attempt to land on all fours, arms and legs bent, muscles braced to take the terrific impact, then either roll, or land as flat as possible.

The floor rose beneath him like a swinging giant sledgehammer. Somewhere, someone screamed at the top of his lungs. The pattern of the game floor—tokens, coins, and bills interlocked and interwoven, was suddenly big in Roberts' face. He hit the floor. The impact was crushing. With every ounce of his strength, he struggled to push away the sledge-hammer that was smashing up below him.

For an instant, its bone-breaking power gripped him, crushing, squeezing, ready to burst him to a pulp—and then, somehow, everything swayed in the balance. Roberts' straining muscles held. Then the force against him began to ease.

Incredulous, Roberts glanced up. Over the gold of the downslide, flashed a length of curving metal—the patrol ship.

Behind Roberts, Hammell, his face red and strained, blood vessels standing out, crouched on the polished game floor. Behind Hammell, Morrissey balanced on one foot, and Bergen alighted gently on the shining floor.

The scream sounded again, and now Roberts could place it. It came from the ramp. He took a step toward the ramp, then paused blankly. There was something he wanted to do, but what?

His pulse, slowing now that his feet were firmly on the floor, and his breath, coming more easily now that the strain was over, seemed to be letting doors close between separate parts of Roberts' mind. A vague uncertainty was replacing the sense of urgency.

“*Jump!*” came the remembered order, spoken in his ear. But he *had* jumped.

Blankly, Roberts stood on the game floor, awaiting further orders, as somewhere in the locked compartments of his mind, a memory clamored in vain for attention.

Overhead, siren screaming, red and yellow lights flashing in a blinding dazzle, IPS 6-107-J finished stuffing the last screaming white-coated figure into its materials intake, jammed in beside the rock drills and crusher jaws, and then the doors of the intake slid shut over them.

A voice boomed out, painfully magnified by an apparently defective speaker system:

“...ATTENTION! ... WARA ... COMPLIANCE BLIH SSSSSSTRUCTION

IMMEDIATELY TO THE FULL EXTENT REQUIRED BY ...
RRRTANNACTIVATION! *THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!* ... ZZZZZBBBY
IMMEDIATE COMPLIANCE OR FACE THE FULL AND PROMPT
APPLICATION OF THE EXTREME PENALTY! ... YOUR ATTENTION! ...
WARA ... COMPLIANCE ... SSSSSSSSTRUCTION *IMMEDIATELY!*”

This announcement, containing within itself an additional source of confusion from an overlapping repetition as if two speakers gave the same message at slightly different times, crossed the gap where below the sparkling pillars and curving slides the patrons stared up from the motionless wheels and the oblong and horseshoe-shaped tables. The announcement reached the sheer walls that bordered the game floor like the sides of a canyon, to echo and reecho in a chaos of overlapping, totally incomprehensible commands.

Under the cover of this deafening uproar, in a dazzle of blinding red and yellow flashes, with the siren starting up again in the background, Roberts suddenly found himself rising in the air, halfway up from the game floor, an emerald pillar glittering off to his right, the golden sheathing of the downslide curving through the air before him.

His perceptions were a chaos of overlapping sensations, his senses swamped by the brilliance of the flashes, the volume of the commands, and the nerve-jangling effect of the swelling siren:

FLASH! (RED)

“*ATTENTION!*”

“*IMMEDIATELY!*”

FLASH! (YELLOW)

“REQUIRED BY THIS RRRTAN...”

FLASH! (RED)

FLASH! (YELLOW)

... rrrrrRRRRAAAHRRRRRAA ...

The curving hull of the patrol ship was just above him. The ramp seemed to move under the ship, and then Roberts was dropped, bathed in red and yellow light, reverberating commands, and vibrations that rattled his teeth. From the slanted setback just aft the amidships turret belt, there was a tiny glint of reflected light. Something struck Roberts’ left forearm, and stung like a wasp. A wave of stinging fire went through Roberts, to leave him for an instant totally blank—and then suddenly his awareness returned.

Roberts glanced up at the tapering tail of the patrol ship, crouched, and sprang up to seize the Number One reaction-drive nozzle. He pulled himself up onto the massive fin on which the nozzle was mounted, stepped up atop the Number Two fin, found the entrance hatch forward of the fin solidly locked, snarled under his breath, walked up the setback with the turret belt’s Number Three fusion turret looking him in the eye and walked by the turret with the sleek gray curve of the patrol ship like the back of a metal whale underfoot. Now he saw that the upper snap-beam projector

head had been almost fully retracted into its well. Just behind the head was the motionless Number Three belt turret. Just before the head was the bulge of the main upper turret, which was slowly idling around, swinging around a fusion gun big enough for a man to put his arm in it up to the shoulder.

From somewhere aft came a grunt, and a faint clang, then another grunt and a low curse. Roberts sat down between the main upper fusion turret and the retracted probe head, and leaned around the turret to search the game floor below. All around him now was a weird singing sound, as from behind him came the low growl of Hammell's voice.

"Is that the garbler?"

"If it isn't," said Roberts, "I don't know what it is. Do you see her?"

"Nowhere. They separated her from us right after they hit us."

"Where did they take her?"

"I don't know."

Roberts craned back over his shoulder, to see Morrissey and Bergen standing on the massive horizontal fins, leaning inward against the upper fin, holding on to the upper reaction-drive nozzle.

Morrissey and Bergen looked back at him sadly, and shook their heads. Roberts damned himself, looked urgently around, then heard, through a volley of incomprehensible orders, a faint metallic scrape.

To his left, almost halfway down the curving hull, there slid out of a turret-like bulge in the hull a three-fingered hand on a thick flexible cable.

Roberts growled, "Hang on. Here comes the extrudible arm if you slip."

Hammell looked at the glinting metal fingers, and gripped the thick support of the detector head. The casino seemed to whirl around them. The upslide with its gold rail flashed past below. Directly ahead of them was a circular cut through the high parapet, at the top of the wall above the game floor.

Abruptly, the wall was behind them. The canted roof sheltering the walk and the gravcabs flashed past. They were in the open air. Roberts looked down over the curve of the hull.

The green of the trees, the deep violet of roofs, the flashing silver and gold spires looked up at him. How long ago had it been that Roberts, perfectly content, had been on the upslide coming out of the Temple of Chance?

Now, still in the same day, he felt mentally blackjacked and, far worse, had an aching sensation that some part of himself had been cut off.

Where was the girl? Who had her? What were they doing to her?

Roberts banged his fist on the hull. “Open up. We’ve got to go back there!” But IPS 6-107-J didn’t answer, and didn’t open the hatch. Instead, the wind whistled past ever louder, and the scene below shifted in a rapid flow, as to either side and above the big police cruisers sought to match the pace.

III. “Personal Considerations Are Not Important”



As Roberts and his crew clung to the hull, the tiny satellite that earlier had relayed Roberts’ call to the patrol ship now relayed the patrol ship’s report, sending it to a second tiny satellite, which flashed it on to a little sphere drifting outside the plane of the ecliptic in an orbit gradually drawing closer to the planet. From this little sphere, the message flashed straight to its destination, a region of space where nothing at all was visible, but where the usual standard massometer would have run its needle off the spaceship scale.

Somewhat off-center in this invisible mass, a spare athletic individual, with colonel’s eagles and crew-cut hair, impatiently paced in a small neat room.

“Damn it,” he said, “we don’t get a reading like that on the emotional probe without good and sufficient cause. It *never* fails when it’s that extreme.”

The bulkhead which served as one wall of the room had a solid enough appearance by the cot, whose post came within a yard or so of touching the massive desk in the corner. But adjacent to the desk, the bulkhead seemed to have vanished, to show a strongly built man with piercing blue eyes sitting back, frowning, behind a desk similar to the colonel’s.

“*If* there’s something, we should find it.”

“There’s no ‘if,’ ” said the colonel. “There’s *got* to be something there.”

“I have to admit, the e-probe suggests the *intent*, and with the amount of money that passes through that gamblers’ paradise, there’s bound to be the opportunity.”

The colonel shook his head.

“It’s worse than that. The emotional probe is no more perfect than any other instrument, but we don’t get this reading from *intent* alone.”

“Extreme intent—a strong lust for power—”

“No. As a matter of experience, we’ve found no degree of desire or determination that produces this reading. There has to be *belief in the imminent attainment of the objective*. That’s for the *degree* of the reading. Next we have the bandwidth. That implies an *organization* of individuals all sharing this belief.”

“H’m ... well—we’ve had three crews in there—there’s no indication of secret armaments—there’s nothing to suggest that Tiamaz is any different than it ever was.”

“Except,” said the colonel, “a gradual steady rise in the probe reading.”

“It’s getting *worse*?”

“Correct.”

Beside the colonel’s desk, the lid of a pneumatic chute popped open, a shiny metallic cylinder popped partway out, opened, and ejected a message spool. A voice said, “Communications monitor. This is a message to Colonel Valentine Sanders, from J-Class ship 6-107. Please acknowledge receipt and read immediately.”

The colonel frowned. “I acknowledge receipt.” He reached for the message.

“And,” said the voice meticulously, “you are the aforesaid Colonel Valentine Sanders?”

The colonel snarled, “I am the aforesaid Colonel Valentine Sanders.” He unfolded the message and read aloud.

“IPS 6-107-J to SymComp (copy). IPS 6-107-J to Colonel Valentine Sanders, Chief, Operations Section (message). Current Code 060479.

“Crew of this ship attacked with intent to kill, in or near Temple of Chance, in Planetary Capital of Tiamaz. Crew previously drugged. Code 66 suspected. Crew is now safe and three assassins are in protective custody, following memory simulation and deep mental examination. Summarized results of this examination are as follows:

“The three prisoners are professional killers, currently in the pay of one ‘Marius Caesar,’ who controls a gambling syndicate on Tiamaz. Marius Caesar has seized Erena, sister of the hereditary ruler of Festhold, and is apparently holding her as a means of coercing Festhold. For whatever reason, the three killers are all convinced that Marius Caesar, as he calls himself, aims to become the ruler of Festhold, as a means to seizing further power.

“The crew of this ship became involved in this situation as follows:

“1) Vaughan N. Roberts, Captain, saw the Festhold princess being taken under guard into the Temple of Chance. Roberts risked death by vaulting across a three hundred foot drop from one gravitic ramp to another, freed the girl from two thugs, found himself ringed by other thugs, and presented himself to them as an agent of the Festhold ruler. Roberts warned them that they faced instantaneous death, and taking the princess on his arm, walked through the ring.

“2) Dan Bergen, Crewman, seeing Roberts vault onto the opposite ramp, and seeing an assassin take aim at Roberts, overpowered the killer, knocked him unconscious, appropriated his weapons, secreted the unconscious assassin in a trash can, and went down the gravitic ramp into the Temple of Chance. He arrived just as Roberts bluffed the ring of hired killers, one of whom began to call Roberts’

bluff. Bergen at once knocked this killer senseless.

“3) Crewmen Hammell and Morrissey, meanwhile, had been alerted by Crewman Bergen, and stepped off the descending ramp just as Roberts, with the princess, approached the ascending ramp.

“4) This whole sequence of events was viewed by the management of the Temple of Chance, which is owned by Marius Caesar. Three groups of four hired killers each were dispatched to overtake Roberts, his crew, and the girl, who meanwhile had left by gravcab. Roberts succeeded in leading two groups of the killers to the wrong places, but was caught by the third group on entering ‘Chez Dragon,’ a restaurant near the Temple of Chance. An airborne drug was administered to Roberts, his crew, and the girl. The girl was taken into the Temple of Chance by another entrance. Roberts and his crewmen were deceived into jumping from the gravitic ramps at a height of about three hundred feet above the floor of the gaming room.

“5) Apparently at the moment of the attack by gas, Captain Roberts sent the override command. IPS 6-107-J arrived barely in time to save Crewmen Hammell, Morrissey, and Bergen, by use of tractor beams. Captain Roberts was already striking the floor. A tractor beam was used, however, on the principle that everything should be done until it is proved impossible to save the crewman. For some reason that is not known, Roberts survived this fall, apparently without serious injury.

“6) Discussion between Roberts and Hammell following administration of antidote shows that Roberts has one thought—to free the girl. He had given orders that IPS 6-107-J admit him and his crew, in order to return to the planetary capital.

“7) In view of the fact that this may have been a Code 66 drug, IPS 6-107-J requests instructions whether to readmit the crew.

“8) IPS 6-107-J requests instructions as to the disposal of the captured assassins.

“IPS 6-107-J to Colonel V. Sanders, copy to SymComp Current Code 060479. Message ends.”

The colonel looked up. Behind the other desk, the strongly built figure with piercing blue eyes sat tilted back in his chair, thumb and forefinger to chin, frowning thoughtfully. Abruptly, he sat up.

“Someone’s out of his head.”

The colonel glanced back over the message, and nodded. “It must be that the killers have a false picture of what is actually taking place. To *them*, it seems that the princess—what’s her name?—Erena—is being held hostage. But that doesn’t fit.”

“No. That play would work *some* places. But not with Festhold. You might as well grab a bear’s cub, and then tell the bear to act right or you’ll start chopping up the cub. You’d never live long enough to get the threat completely formulated.”

“And this J-class ship’s symbiotic computer has that information. It knows it as well as we do.”

“Come to think of it, Val, there’s a peculiar tone to the whole message. It’s stilted.”

The colonel scowled, pulled out his chair, sat down at his desk frowning, and reread the message. He shook his head. “There’s something here I don’t follow. But while we grapple with it, Roberts is apparently stuck outside hanging onto a fin.” The colonel reached out to a dial on the wall, and quickly tapped out a call number and his own identification code. A brisk voice spoke: “Communications Monitor.”

“Colonel Valentine Sanders to IPS 6-107-J.”

“Do you wish this message to be sent as you speak, or to be held for rereading and correction?”

“Hold it for correction. Put the copy to SymComp, current code, and so on, in the heading.”

“One moment. That is done. You may proceed.”

The colonel glanced at the sheet of message paper. “In reply to your message Current Code 060479, the situation you mention highly important, but suggest some data still missing. Admit Roberts and crew—Repeat, admit Roberts and crew—regardless Code 66 risk. I take responsibility for full restoration of command authority. Repeat—I take responsibility for full restoration of command authority.”

The colonel glanced over the message. “Regarding disposal of the captured assassins, refer this question to Roberts.”

The colonel glanced at the ceiling. “Monitor—Let’s hear that.”

He sat listening thoughtfully, then said, “Insert the name ‘Roberts’ before the words ‘command authority’.—In both places where the words ‘command authority’ are used.”

The Communications Monitor said primly, “The *possessive case* of the proper noun ‘Roberts’?”

The colonel opened his mouth, repressed a snarl, and repeated, “Yes, the *possessive case* of the proper noun ‘Roberts’.”

“Very well. Then that is the message?”

“It is. Put the usual close on it, and send it out right away.”

“Very well.” There was a *click*. The colonel’s lips drew back from his teeth.

Across the two desks, which in the illusion of closeness created by the ship’s communications system appeared to be in contact, the strongly built figure was leaning back, grinning.

“—Do you have the impression now and then that this whole symbiotic computer set-up is somehow female?”

“*Phew!*” The colonel sat up. “Possessive case of the proper noun, Roberts.” He glanced across the desks, and suddenly looked startled, “ ‘Female’?” He looked at the message from the patrol ship. Before him, the words stood out: “Discussion between Roberts and Hammell following administration of antidote show that Roberts has one thought—to free the girl.”

The colonel bit his lip, looked back in the message, and read: “Roberts risked death by vaulting across a three hundred foot drop ... freed the girl from two thugs, found himself ringed by other thugs ... and taking the princess on one arm—” He looked up. “You’re right. That must be what we’re up against. Roberts has fallen in love with this girl! Every time something like that happens, we have a weird response from any patrol ship involved. You might almost say they get jealous!”

“What sort *is* Roberts? Is he going to want a quick whirl with this princess? Festhold is the Federation’s main ally in this region, you know. And the Festholders have very stern views. Or is he going to want to marry her? I’m assuming the girl might be willing. But, even so, do you know what is required of someone who wants to marry a princess of Festhold? It looks to me as if there’s the possibility of quite a stew here ... Say, Val—*You* took full responsibility for putting him back in charge of that J-ship, remember?”

* * *

Hammell, seated behind Roberts, clinging to the support of the detector head, said, “Hey, the hatch is opening up!”

Roberts craned around, watched Bergen and Morrissey come quickly and carefully up the thick slanting fins, and drop in through the hatch.

Roberts murmured, “After you.”

Hammell twisted around, crouched, stepped down the slanting set-back just aft the turret belt, and dropped through the hatch.

Roberts took a quick look around at blue sky, drifting white clouds, and dark green forest below, then followed Hammell through the hatch, which immediately clanged shut behind him.

Roberts pulled the hatch lever down, spun the lockwheel clockwise, and shoved the clamp tight. He went down several steps out of the cramped aft section of ship, passed the bunks, ducked under the three-foot-thick shiny cylinder that ran the length of the ship, and slid into the control seat. A quick glance at the external screen showed drifting clouds above, green forest below, all gradually shifting left, which told him that the patrol ship was circling to the right.

On the battle screen, little symbols showed Roberts his own ship slowly circling

above a wild section of the planet, while behind him an array of police cruisers blocked him off from the capital of Tiamaz, with its endless gambling houses and pleasure palaces.

Roberts, frowning, pressed a button to the left of the instrument panel, near a glowing lens lettered "Smb Cmp."

"What," he said, "is the make-up of the government of Festhold?"

The symbiotic computer replied, "Festhold is at present in the control of a regent, acting for The King, who will assume control on reaching his twenty-first birthday. The government of Festhold is a hereditary monarchy, and descends from father to son, always in the male line, provided the heir passes two tests.

"The first test is religious, or moral. The King must be able to withdraw a particular broadsword from a large dull crystalline rock situated near the altar in the Cathedral of Truth. It is assumed by foreigners that some device controlled by the priesthood decides whether or not the sword can be withdrawn from the crystal. This would enable the priesthood to pass on the fitness of the heir to the throne.

"The second test is political. The heir apparent must meet with the assembled nobility of the realm, address them, and receive the approval of at least two-thirds of the nobility.

"If the heir apparent fails either test, he is stripped of royal rank, and becomes the lowest nobleman of the realm. The tests are then repeated for those who stand next in line.

"If all the males of the ruling family should fail, the tests are repeated throughout the nobility in order of rank. Any nobleman may take the test, or decline. Each nobleman who fails becomes a commoner. The first man who passes both tests becomes King. The full title is 'Ruler and Warlord, King and Emperor of Festhold.' The King is a constitutional ruler in peacetime, and has dictatorial powers in wartime. He rules through a Council responsible to him, a Lords' Chamber responsible to the nobility, and an Assembly of the Commons responsible to the general population.

"The rulers have all come from the same family for the past hundred and sixty years. This family, by a series of fatal accidents, is now reduced to the heir apparent, Prince Harold William, and several princesses. The actual control of the country is in the hands of the Regent, Duke Marius Romeigne, who is the highest member of the peerage.

"It is taken for granted by the population that Prince Harold William will pass both tests and become King, and he is referred to commonly as 'The King.' He is now four months short of twenty-one years old."

The symbiotic computer came to the end of its explanation. There was a silence. Hammell, Morrissey, and Bergen, grouped nearby, listening, glanced at Roberts.

Roberts said, "Name the princesses of the royal family."

“Erena, Catherine, Eloise.”

“What rank or power do they have?”

“None save the title, ‘Princess of Festhold,’ an allowance, and a small personal retinue. Their husbands acquire no rank in marrying them, but their children, if of age, are considered members of the royal family and eligible to be tested for the throne if all members of the direct male line are wiped out.”

“H’m.”

The symbiotic computer added drily, “To marry a Princess of Festhold, the suitor must be able to withdraw the sword from the crystal.”

Roberts looked up sharply. Morrissey winced. Hammell coughed. Bergen looked concerned.

“Suppose,” said Roberts, his voice even, “that he fails?”

“He is banished without further sight of the princess. He is forbidden to return.”

Roberts’ fingers tightened on the arm of the control seat. He drew a deep careful breath, then with an effort of will relaxed one group of muscles after another. His voice sounded reasonably normal when he spoke.

“In the Temple of Chance, I met someone who called herself ‘Erena.’ She is a little taller than my shoulder, has blonde hair and deep-blue eyes. She has great presence of mind, and after Bergen and I got her out of the Temple of Chance with the help of Hammell and Morrissey, she said—” Roberts frowned.

“Let’s see, she said—” Roberts cleared his throat, and repeated slowly:

“ ‘My brother The King is more a warrior in his boyhood than these gamblers in their prime. They have lowered him by their cunning debaucheries, but we will show them the steel of Festhold cuts deeper than the gold of Tiamaz.’ ”

There was a momentary silence, then the voice of the symbiotic computer spoke. Now, for some reason, the stiffness was gone, and this voice had more of its usual characteristic ring: “This is the exact wording, or a free rendering of the same?”

Roberts glanced at this crew. “I think it’s close to exact—but I can’t swear to it.”

Morrissey said, “It sounds word-for-word to me.”

Hammell shook his head. “It’s close, but there’s a slight difference somewhere.”

Bergen said, “She put more emphasis on Festhold being stronger than Tiamaz. She said Festhold will cut much deeper than Tiamaz.”

Roberts said, “I think that’s right.” The symbiotic computer was momentarily silent.

Roberts said, “It sounds to me as if this Regent aims to disqualify the King, and

take over himself. No one so unprincipled is safe to have as King of a place like Festhold.”

The symbiotic computer replied matter of factly, “That is correct.”

“Before we do anything else,” said Roberts, “we need to get Erena out of that casino.”

“It is not known that she is in the casino.”

“Then we have to find out.”

“This is inaccurate. No *necessity* to do this exists.”

Roberts said stubbornly, “I’m not *leaving* her there. I’ll get her out of there or die trying.”

The symbiotic computer said tonelessly, “This is not necessary. The princess should be in no immediate danger. The true problem is on Festhold, not here.”

Hammell and Morrissey glanced uneasily at each other. Bergen shook out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

Roberts said flatly, “There isn’t any choice in the matter. We’re going back.”

The symbiotic computer did not sound convinced. “The need is unproven.”

Roberts took hold of the drive controls. The controls resisted his pressure. The muscles of Roberts’ arms stood out. The gravitor control yielded grudgingly to the strain. The outside viewscreen showed the increase in speed as the landscape slid back below the bow.

The gravitor control began to pull with increasing force against Roberts’ grip. Roberts gripped the control harder. The ship continued to accelerate.

The battle screen began enlarging one after another of the police cruisers, as if to emphasize the danger. Roberts changed hands on the gravitor control, and reached for the firing controls. Hammell murmured fervently under his breath.

Roberts felt the resistance in the firing controls, and snarled, “Crew to battle stations! Prepare to fire by manual control!”

Hammell, Morrissey, and Bergen were gone in a flash. Hammell and Morrissey to the main fusion turrets, Bergen to the manual control station governing the missile bay and belt turrets. There remained a number of smaller turrets that, for sheer lack of hands, could not be brought under manual control.

The voice of the symbiotic spoke disapprovingly. “This is an attack on a legal planetary authority without justification. A patrol ship cannot be used for unauthorized personal ends. Moreover, this approach is stupid. Personal considerations are not important enough to justify illegal and stupid actions.”

The gravitor control began to pull with compounding force against Roberts' grip. Grimly, he held the control in place. But, while he held it, it was becoming clear to Roberts just how ineffective a fight he could put up in a ship with the guns worked manually, and the flying controls fighting him every step of the way. This was, moreover, as Roberts knew, only the first hint of what the symbiotic computer could do. Already, there was a faint suggestion of a close stuffiness in the air. That would follow from shutdown of the air system. To partly compensate for that, the entrance hatch would have to be propped open. And since that hatch had an automatic open-and-shut control as well as the manual lock, merely keeping the hatch open was going to be no small problem in itself.

Roberts, with straining muscles, held the controls in place, and glanced at the battle screen. The police cruisers were swinging into position as if to block him. The communicator buzzed imperatively.

"Police Cruiser 187 to IPS 6-107-J. You are approaching the border of the Greater Capital City Metropolitan Area. We warn you that intrusion on this border is forbidden except in case of a justified emergency situation, and we order you to stop under penalty of arrest, fine, and punitive detention."

Roberts released the gravitor control, which went all the way to its centering stop with a sledgehammer thud. He spoke politely.

"IPS 6-107-J to Police Cruiser 187. We regret to inform you that this is a serious emergency situation. Five members of the crew of this ship were attacked, gassed, and detained in the vicinity of the Temple of Chance inside the Capital City Metropolitan Area. Four members of the crew have been recovered, but one remains a prisoner. We wish to recover our missing crewman."

"PC 187 to IPS 6-107-J. No ship of your designation has officially been admitted to any entry port on the planet."

"IPS 6-107-J to PC 187. We entered under the guise of a space yacht, the *Gala IV*."

Around Roberts, the stuffiness of the air was increasing. From time to time, the lighting system flickered.

The voice from the police cruiser burst out, "Well, what the devil do you claim happened? Did one of your crew give birth, or what? *Four* of you went in. *Four* of you came out. Where's the problem?"

Roberts said evenly, "While on the planet, we accepted a volunteer."

There was a further silence, then, "Are you authorized—"

"The captain of an Interstellar Patrol ship is fully authorized to accept and enlist volunteers. I did so accept and enlist one volunteer, who thus became a candidate member in good standing in the Interstellar Patrol. This crewman, after enlistment, was illegally attacked, illegally seized, and is now being illegally held captive on your

planet. I want this crewman released.”

“Well, I—can you identify this volunteer—this crewman?”

“Certainly. Princess Erena of Festhold. She has blonde hair, her eyes are blue, her height is approximately—”

“Princess Erena of Festhold! You can’t enlist—”

Roberts’ voice grated. “Can’t I?”

There was a silence. Roberts hadn’t been aware that the lights in the ship had gradually dimmed. He only realized it when abruptly they came back to full power. The stuffiness in the air was suddenly gone.

Abruptly Hammell reported, “Full power on this turret!”

Morrissey’s voice repeated from a different station, “Full power on this turret.”

Bergen’s voice was eager. “*Missile bay and turret belt!* Full power on automatic control!”

Roberts checked the control board, found it worked easily, and said by routine, “Acknowledge. Stand by at battle stations.” He spoke coldly into the communicator pick-up. “Are *you* deciding the enlistment policies of the Interstellar Patrol?”

“I—” Paralysis seemed to set in after the one word. It dawned on Roberts that the police officer on the other end of this hook-up had undoubtedly overheard Hammell, Morrissey, and Bergen, and Roberts’ own order to, “Stand by at battle stations.” Anyone on Police Cruiser 187 would find it logical to think the Interstellar Patrol ship was preparing to attack.

Roberts’ voice was courteous but definite: “Princess Erena of Festhold voluntarily requested to join our organization. I am fully qualified to pass on the fitness of any volunteer, and I adjudged this volunteer to be qualified. I accepted her. She thereby became a candidate-member of the Interstellar Patrol. I have three witnesses here to back up my word. Now, are you, or are you not, going to recover this crewman for me?”

“But she’s a subject of Festhold!—And a member of the ruling family! We can’t—”

“That,” said Roberts, “is a problem you will have to settle with the Warlord of Festhold. I am sure he will feel the same way about this abduction as I do. But what Festhold does to punish the crime and avenge the insult is entirely up to Festhold. *My* problem has to do with a missing crewman. Either I get this crewman back unharmed, or I will take the matter up with Sector Headquarters, and you can deal with them. Now, do I get my crewman back, or not?”

“I’ll have to contact Tiamaz Central Police Headquarters—but I don’t think we can—”

From a previously unused speaker to the left of the instrument panel came a harsh voice: "Office of the Sector Controller, C. D. Johnson speaking. Captain, I have a routine communications-monitor intercept keyed by the words 'abduction' and 'candidate-member.' Do I understand correctly that a member of the Interstellar Patrol has actually been *abducted* on a Federation planet?"

Roberts realized with a start that the patrol ship was now backing him up. He glanced at the coldly angry face on one of the small auxiliary screens to the right of the communications screen.

"Yes, sir," said Roberts. "We were hit with a gas attack in the planet's capital district, where we supposedly were under police protection, and were not supposed to carry arms. Only the intervention of my patrol ship saved me and three of my crew members from being killed. Our recruit was seized, and the local authorities seem very reluctant to do anything about it."

C. D. Johnson's voice was flat.

"What planet is this?"

"Tiamaz."

"Tiamaz, eh? All right, Captain. I'll handle this direct through the Planetary Manager's office. Stand by to serve as message-relay station, and to either pick up the patrolman or emplace the quarantine satellites."

Roberts, who had not the faintest idea what all this meant said promptly, "Yes, *sir*."

A few minutes of total silence passed, each individual second of which seemed to take its own good time in passing, then two faces appeared before him on the divided communications screen. One face was that of "C. D. Johnson." The other was that of a lean, imperturbable-seeming man whose finely chiseled and aristocratic features expressed distaste.

"You understand," said Johnson, "this was a *member* of the Interstellar Patrol, Mr. Roman."

"This is an unproven allegation," said the aristocrat, one nostril twitching, as at an unpleasant odor. "The matter will be investigated in due course by the appropriate authorities. I certainly shall not interfere in any way to speed or slow the investigation. When the investigation is completed, *then* we will notify you of the result. Not before."

"You realize that *five members of the Interstellar Patrol* were attacked, that murder was attempted against four of them, and that one has been abducted—"

"I reject this entire fabrication of allegations out of hand. Such things don't happen here. Very likely your crewmen were drunk or under the influence of drugs. As for this so-called 'princess,' more likely she was some ordinary lady of light

virtue your crewmen had engaged for the evening, and who left when she found their company boring. But the allegation, however transparently false, will be investigated in due course. I trust that is satisfactory. Now, I'm afraid I have rather a pressing engagement. Was there anything else?"

Johnson leaned forward. "Do you have any conception, Roman, of the people who take an interest in Tiamaz, but who hesitate to do anything because they know that the Space Police, the Space Force, and the Interstellar Patrol, are all backing up your local police?"

"I'm sure I couldn't care less. Good day, Policeman!" The aristocrat's half of the communications screen went blank.

A moment later, Johnson's half of the screen went blank, and his face appeared on one of the small auxiliary screens to the side.

"Roberts."

Roberts, who was beginning to wonder if "C.D. Johnson" was a bluff by the patrol ship, or might be real after all, said "Yes, sir?"

"Deploy three I.P. Planetary Quarantine satellites, and report to your Chief of Operations."

Roberts said, "I hesitate to leave a—a good recruit in their hands, sir."

"I fully agree with your sentiments, but we've done everything we can for the moment. Any overt attempt to free the recruit might boomerang."

Roberts nodded.

"I'll deploy the satellites."

"Good."

The small auxiliary screen went blank. Roberts pushed the button near the glowing amber lens lettered "Smb Cmp."

"Do we have three I.P. Planetary Quarantine Satellites on board?"

The voice of the symbiotic computer replied, "They are now being fabricated."

"What will they do?"

"These satellites warn approaching ships that the protection of the Interstellar Patrol has been withdrawn from the planet involved."

"What is to prevent the planet involved from knocking the satellites out of orbit?"

"Over the short run, the danger that such an attempt would involve. Over the long run, the fact that something unfortunate will have happened to the governing authorities of the quarantined planet. Satellites are never emplaced except at a planet governed by individuals seriously involved in underhanded manipulations."

“C. D. Johnson,” said Roberts, “did not say it was necessary to report *in person* to the Chief of O-Section.”

“That is correct.”

“It might,” said Roberts, “be a good idea to send in a brief report, and then go back down to Tiamaz, and try to find our—our missing crewman.”

“It *might* be,” said the symbiotic computer, “except that this planet is already heavily infiltrated in the attempt to determine the cause of an abnormally high emotional probe reading. Once the information from your conversation with the Princess Erena was forwarded, the cause for the e-probe reading was clear: A cabal has been formed for the purpose of seizing the government of Festhold, which is an important Federation ally. An immediate check was carried out to determine the location of the Princess Erena.”

“*And?*” said Roberts.

“Immediately following her recapture, she was removed from the planet.”

With an effort, Roberts forced himself to stay seated. “She was put on a ship—”

“Yes.”

“Where is she?”

“We do not yet have this information. Tiamaz is located near the junction of important trade routes. Princess Erena was removed to the nearby Space Center. We have no definite information as yet regarding the flight she followed from this point.”

Roberts exhaled slowly. “We’re sure she’s not on the planet?”

“This is certain.”

“But she could be *brought back*.”

“That is correct. But it appears unlikely. There is no perceptible gain for the opposition in that course of action.”

“All right,” said Roberts. “Let’s get the satellites in place. Then I’ll report to O-Section. There must be some way to straighten this out.”

IV. The Inside Job



Roberts, his gaze intent, stood before the desk in the office of Colonel Valentine Sanders, Chief of Operations Branch. Colonel Sanders frowned as he finished reading the last page of a thin sheaf of papers, gave a low growl of irritation, tossed

the papers on his desk, and looked up.

“Have a seat, Roberts.”

Roberts pulled over a straight-backed chair from near the wall, and sat down.

The colonel said, “You know, Roberts, we have been going over Tiamaz with a fine-toothed comb, trying to find out just what caused the emotional probe on the planet to wrap its needle around the pin. And we had gotten nowhere. *You* walked in to enjoy a little diversion and some good food following a successful job elsewhere—and in well under seventy-two hours, you had the solution.”

Roberts said, “Dumb luck, sir.”

“Have you considered any alternative?”

“No, sir. There is exactly one thing in which I am interested. That is getting Erena free of that collection of crooks.”

The colonel said thoughtfully, “ ‘*Erena.*’ You realize you are speaking of a Princess of Festhold, sister to the Heir Presumptive himself?”

Roberts said, “I know it, sir, but I’m thinking of the girl, not the title.”

“If you end up with one hand on that sword hilt, you’ll appreciate the significance of the title.”

Roberts nodded. “I suppose if the local priests push a switch that turns on the electromagnets and keeps the sword stuck inside the crystal, I *will* feel pretty foolish.”

The colonel watched him alertly, and then smiled.

“Well, I’m glad to see that your intentions are honorable. On Festhold, they have a high regard for honor. And don’t be too sure they use electromagnets in that crystal. We’ve had some peculiar reports on the subject.” The colonel frowned. “But let’s get back to the question of an alternative explanation for this incident. Has it occurred to you that the whole scene could have been faked for our benefit?”

Roberts shook his head.

The colonel said, “Why not?”

“I don’t say it couldn’t have. I only say it hadn’t occurred to me.”

“What do you now think of the possibility?”

Roberts thought it over carefully. “It *is* peculiar that it worked out as it did—that I happened to be coming out of the Temple of Chance as Erena was going in, and that what she said to me answered a question you were working on that I didn’t even know about. But as for its having been a put-up job—No, sir. I don’t believe it.”

“Why not?”

“In the first place, I don’t think we were known to be on the planet. In the second place, I don’t see how they could have timed it so that Erena and I would reach the spot where the upslide passes near the down slide. Next, they couldn’t know that I’d be looking in her direction. Finally, they couldn’t know in advance that I’d jump to the other slide—it was pure impulse. *If* they were using her to pass information to me, they gave a convincing imitation of being prepared to stop me until I happened to say the right words when I got Erena away from them. And they would still have stopped me, except that Bergen showed up just in time.”

“They could merely have *sounded* rough.”

“Yes, but now we come to the most convincing proof, at least to me. *After* Erena had passed her message to us, *then* they recaptured her, and came within a hair’s breath of disposing of the rest of us.”

“According to the patrol ship, you survived that fall on your own.”

“No, sir.”

“The ship should know.”

“The fright from that fall temporarily cleared my head, and I was determined to survive if I could. I don’t know if it was owing to the drug, or if it just followed from the situation, but time seemed to slow down. I did everything I could to break the force of the fall, and to distribute the impact, but I could tell that it was all going to work out the same way in the end—and then something happened to ease the pressure. The patrol ship had gotten there, and was using its gravitor beams. Now—it may be that if I hadn’t tried, the ship couldn’t have broken the fall. But if the ship hadn’t gotten there, what I was able to do wouldn’t have been enough either. I wouldn’t have survived that fall.”

The colonel nodded slowly. He cleared his throat. “It was either an *extremely* clever method of planting information; or else it was what it seemed to be—a stroke of pure luck for us.”

Roberts nodded. “And I don’t think it was cleverness.”

The colonel said, “All right. I agree. Now, Roberts, we have a peculiar situation here. As you know, Festhold is not part of the Federation. Here and there, there are individual planets, and even star systems, which are independent. Festhold is one of the largest and most formidable of these. Strictly speaking, we have no right to intrude in Festhold’s internal affairs.”

Roberts said, “Neither does Tiamaz.”

“Exactly. That’s the other half of the dilemma. We have no *right* to intrude. But whether we have a *right* or not, we have to intrude. Festhold is too important to permit outsiders to intervene while we stand by with our thumb in our mouth. If a combine from Tiamaz, for instance, should get control of Festhold, we would have a combination of the financial power of Tiamaz with the military power of Festhold.

Now—since Festhold is not a part of the Federation, Festhold is theoretically free to make alliances where it will. It has always, *so far*, been allied to the Federation of Humanity. But if it should choose to join with some alien outfit, it would be completely within its rights. But we couldn't afford that."

"Therefore, Festhold *must* be influenced?"

The colonel nodded, and picked up the report he had been reading when Roberts came in. "Festhold must be influenced. Yet, no proofs can remain that Festhold *has* been influenced. And Festhold is highly developed technologically. Crude interference would risk creating a serious reaction against us. Festhold is therefore subject only to occasional and very careful influence." The colonel looked Roberts directly in the eye. "Nearly always, Roberts, we are forced to rely on an *inside* job."

Roberts noted the colonel's emphasis, but looked blank. "I'm not familiar—"

"I know it. But when this job is over with, you *will* be, believe me."

Roberts straightened alertly. "Sir, I'm sorry, but—"

"Never mind that, Roberts. This—"

Roberts voice stayed polite and respectful, but took on an undertone of stubborn and unyielding determination. "Sir, excuse me, but I have to say this."

The colonel started to speak, but Roberts spoke first: "*I have to find Erena.*"

The colonel straightened in his chair as if drawn up by a hand at the back of his neck. He grinned suddenly, and raised his right hand, palm out.

"Are you prepared, Roberts, to risk your life for this girl?"

"Yes."

"You realize she is part of a royal family in a place where royalty commands respect?"

"Yes."

"Will you, if necessary, resign from the Patrol?"

"If I have to, to get freedom of action."

The colonel tossed across the desk the report he had been reading. Roberts glanced from the colonel to the report, and picked up the report, to read:

TIAMAZ REPORT—SUMMARY:

1. Routine emotional probe of this planet revealed (see sequence list for dates) presence of a group engaged in profoundly illegal and apparently dangerous cabal.
2. Repeated attempts to identify the individuals involved failed, although they were

localized in the Tiamaz Capital District—the main gambling district as well as the administrative center of the planet.

3. An off-duty I.P. captain and crew, in a casino on the planet purely for pleasure, accidentally encountered the Princess Erena of Festhold, who in some still undetermined way appealed for their help. They responded at once, and spirited her out of the grip of the casino employees.

4. Princess Erena stated that a Tiamaz cabal had control of her brother, the heir-apparent of Festhold, and ...

Roberts skimmed the description of what he already knew, flipped to the next page, and suddenly stopped.

7. Princess Erena, still drugged, was rushed to the nearby Space Station. Checks at further stops, boardings, and transelectronic surveillance, show that she was put aboard a fast liner bound for Festhold, with only two stops on the way. This liner is being shadowed by an I-class patrol ship,

8. A preliminary emotional probe of Festhold reveals two distinct spectra, one intense, and the other faint but detectable. The distinct spectrum has the usual characteristics of Festhold. The faint spectrum closely matched that found on Tiamaz.

9. The conclusion seems inescapable that the two are connected, and that a group based partly on Tiamaz is attempting to gain control of Festhold.

10. Owing to the seclusion of the crown prince of Festhold, it has so far proved difficult to ...

Roberts looked up, and drew a deep breath. He handed the report to the colonel, and cleared his throat. “So, Erena is being taken back to Festhold?”

“Evidently.” The colonel tossed the report in a wire basket at the corner of his desk.

Roberts said, “Sir, I would like to get her away from them.”

The colonel briefly had the look of a farmer whose pet bull has just knocked the rails loose from the fence. The colonel’s expression was alert, and extremely calculating. Then slowly, he sat back. His expression became frank and open.

“I don’t blame you, Roberts. But the girl is, of course, bait.”

Roberts looked startled. “Why do you say that, sir?”

“The *manner* in which Tiamaz refused our demand for the girl was provocative in the extreme. It was an invitation to us to take severe measures. And this princess was already on the way to Festhold by the fastest available transportation. Why to Festhold?” The colonel leaned forward. “Any seizure of the princess by outsiders from the Federation would raise feelings *against* the Federation.”

Roberts winced. “And we’re already on record—”

“Right. And bear in mind, if what we think is true, the cabal will want some

excuse to pry Festhold loose from its traditional automatic alliance with the Federation.”

Roberts sat back. The colonel said quietly, “I don’t think an outright seizure of this princess would be a good idea.”

Roberts nodded, then frowned. “But suppose this clique should *fake* a kidnapping, and blame us for it?”

The colonel smiled. “Exactly why we have our ‘I’-class ship on the spot.”

Roberts smiled, then thought it over a second time. “People,” he said, thinking of the deep blue eyes and the honey-blond hair, “might get hurt in the process.”

The colonel said carefully, “I’m more worried, myself, about what might happen to her *after* she gets there. We can shadow the ship, but we can’t provide protection once she’s on the planet. Everything *there* is under control of the Realm of Festhold.”

Roberts felt the overpowering urge to do something. The colonel sat back, frowning, and said carefully, “It will *have* to be an inside job. I had intended to offer this job to you, Roberts. Among other things, it would have put you where you could almost certainly keep an eye on Erena. But since you seem to feel that only direct intervention would work—”

Roberts had a vivid picture of a little pea disappearing under a walnut shell, which, being rapidly switched with another shell, and another, suddenly presented him with a blank row of shells, while the pea itself was now elsewhere.

Roberts looked at the expressionless face of the colonel. Roberts smiled. “I’d say it was under the center shell, sir—if, that is, you haven’t palmed it.”

The colonel looked blank. Roberts leaned forward, his voice quiet. “I want to see her again, and I want to see her unhurt. If this ‘inside job’ will help me do it, I’m interested. You don’t have to bait the hook with fresh worms, or spin me around blindfolded half-a-dozen times to get me off-balance. What do you have in mind?”

The colonel grinned, and sat back. “Nevertheless, Roberts, it would be one hell of a spot for you, if you’re in love with this princess.”

“I’d be where I could see her?”

“Oh, yes.”

“And block any attempt to hurt her?”

“Very possibly.”

Roberts frowned. “I don’t see the drawback.”

The colonel said drily, “You would even be free to *love* her—”

Roberts looked at him sharply. The colonel smiled angelically, and finished the sentence: “—as a brother.”

Roberts frowned, then felt the sudden chill as a hint came to him of just what an “inside job” might be.

He sat up straighter, and his voice came out in a growl. “Don’t stop there. What *is* it?”

The colonel dropped all pretense, and began to explain.

V. Reborn



The high whine of the equipment, the white-swathed figures bending over him, the voice calling methodically in the background, all began to fade as the helmet was lowered carefully over his head. On the screen within the helmet, before his eyes, two faint dots merged into one, and the one expanded, faded, formed a tiny dim distant scene, as of a room seen through a pinhole, and then faded again. Then Roberts felt as if this room rushed toward him, and he toward it, and then painfully the motion ceased, and began again, and stopped. Then, after an indeterminate expanse of time, suddenly the scene began to come into focus, the universe seemed to flow past and through him in a rush, there was a sensation as of a faint *click* suggesting something locking in place, and Roberts, head aching, body as heavy as lead, looked dizzily around a room brightly lit by moonlight. One thought spun through his mind:

“Thank God! It’s *over* with!” Exhausted, he fell asleep.

Somewhere, birds were singing. In the distance, a bugle call sounded sharply, and was methodically repeated. There was a faint murmur of voices.

There was a casual double rap on a door, a high-pitched exchange of laughter, and Roberts was jarred awake. He saw, first, a wide window made of many small panes of glass, beyond which moved a branch bearing many large light-purple flowers with yellow centers. Beyond the lightly moving branch was a pale blue sky with a few high distant clouds.

The branch was bathed in sunlight, which shone into the room on a far less pleasant scene. There was a pile of dirty clothes below the window. A stack of books leaned against the wall beside the window, and a second stack had fallen over onto the floor. In the corner, a steel clothes locker stood open, to show half-a-dozen uniforms on hangers. Against the side of the clothes locker leaned a businesslike

sword. In a rack on the wall beside the locker were two well-oiled rifles and a handgun.

The room was a corner room, and the other wall had a second large window, through which bright daylight flooded a desk littered with crumpled papers, its finish marked with innumerable rings where glasses had been set down. Beside the desk was a large wastebasket filled to overflowing with empty bottles.

Beside the desk stood a girl of eighteen or nineteen, heavy, wearing a tight pink skirt and a tight flowered blouse, her light-brown hair carelessly pulled back. In her left hand she carried a silver tray bearing an assortment of dishes, glasses, flavorings, and a white linen napkin which stood up in a tentlike peak.

“Well, good morning, Charmer,” she said irritably, looking around. “Where do you want this?”

Roberts tried to sit up, and lay back with a gasp. The girl looked at him, put the tray on the edge of the bed, set her hands on her hips, and burst out laughing.

“What a sight! Gahr, you really laid it on last night, didn’t you! Well, there’s the twist on the tray under the napkin. You *wanted* it, so there it is. You’ve tried everything else, so I suppose you might as well try that. But don’t say I didn’t warn you—the shape you’re in, Charmie Boy, it will blow your brains right out your ears, Duke Marius will crack your knuckles again when you come around.”

She turned to leave, paused, and said, “In case you’re interested, the tutor will be here in an hour.”

The door shut with a thud and a click, and Roberts lay with the room swimming around him, a blinding headache, and a sense of feverish unreality.

The colonel’s words came back to Roberts, sharply emphasized by what had happened so far: “An ‘inside job,’ ” the colonel had said, “is no bed of roses, Roberts. And tough as I know you are, I’m not so sure you won’t find this to be a little more than you bargained for. But somebody has to do it, and you have a personal interest in what happens to Princess Erena. If you want to do it, I will be very happy to have this problem taken off my hands.”

Roberts had said, “I still don’t *know* what the job is.”

“The information you gave us dovetails with other information that we hadn’t added up. A series of accidents—each one perfectly understandable—eliminated all but one of the direct male line of the present royal family of Festhold. The Duke of Romeigne was chosen as Regent, and incidentally took over the guardianship of the heir, Prince Harold William. Our information is that the heir has acquired a reputation amongst the higher nobility as a ne’er-do-well. The Regent isn’t blamed for this. But what you’ve been told suggests that the Regent may very well be responsible. It looks like a case of destroying the heir in order for the Regent to become King. The Regent is evidently part of the cabal we’re trying to stop. If we can save the heir, we

derail the whole cabal.”

“I follow that,” said Roberts. “But if I understand this correctly, the heir is tested when he reaches twenty-one.”

“That’s right.”

“And he is now four months short of being twenty-one years old?”

The colonel nodded. Roberts said, “How long has this Duke of Romeigne been undermining the crown prince?”

“Since shortly after the death of King Charles William of Festhold, at the Battle of the Ring Nebula, when the prince was nearly eighteen years old.”

Roberts thought it over. “Up to that time, the prince was considered to be all right?” The colonel nodded.

Roberts said, “In that case, I’d think conceivably it *could* be done—but four months is a short time to train someone who has been systematically *untrained* for about three years. The worst part of it is, how do we reach him?”

“Exactly why it has to be an inside job.”

“We’re back to that again.”

“It’s the only way we can find to handle this.”

Roberts sat up exasperatedly. “What *is* it?”

The colonel glanced off at a distant corner of the room. “To explain the process is beyond me. But I can tell you what happens. You will go down the hall to M-Section, having bathed thoroughly, shaved, and received a haircut, and wearing a hospital gown, you will be wheeled on a stretcher into a totally aseptic room where a sort of helmet will be lowered over your head. You will see a scene indistinctly, and when this scene finally becomes clear to you—assuming it does—you will find yourself apparently transformed into Harold William, heir to the throne of Festhold.”

Roberts say up straight. “You mean, *my* consciousness will somehow be translated into *his* body?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to avoid saying. But that is substantially it. Your consciousness will be operating his body—and from the information we have about the shape this prince is in, that will be no picnic.”

“M’m. The idea is, to put someone already trained on the spot, to train the prince under the nose of the Regent?”

“Exactly. Or rather, that’s *half* of it.”

Roberts said, “And where is the prince’s consciousness. Do the two egos share the same body, or—”

“The prince’s consciousness will be here, Roberts. Try to think of the physical body as the old metaphysicists spoke of it, as a ‘vehicle.’ You will be operating the prince’s vehicle. The prince—”

Roberts said flatly, “No.”

The colonel smiled. “I see you now have the picture.”

Roberts drew a deep breath, and let it out slowly. The colonel said, “You see why it is going to be no easy job to find a volunteer.”

Roberts said, with feeling, “I see *that*.”

The colonel nodded. “I suppose I will end up with the job. I can tell you, I don’t relish it.”

“Is there an actual transfer of—of soul or spirit—or is it a form of overriding signal by which one individual here, controls the other’s physical mechanism there, and vice versa?”

The colonel shook his head. “There are two explanations, a scientific explanation, and a metaphysical explanation, and frankly I don’t fully understand either of them. As far as *I’m* concerned, the process isn’t actually understood. For convenience in thinking of it, I look on it as switching pilots from one ship to another, or drivers from one ground vehicle to another. But that’s not all of it because, if one of the two bodies involved should be fatally injured, the ‘driver’ in the *other* one dies.”

Roberts looked blank. “That is, the *original* ego—or the other?”

“The original.”

“So if I should go along with this, and the prince falls out a window, that kills *me*?”

The colonel frowned. “Let’s be sure we have this straight. To start with, there are Roberts and Harold William, the prince.”

Roberts said drily, “I can follow it that far.”

“All right, now by my simplified approach to this, we need to distinguish only two parts to each individual. The official explanations are a lot more complicated, believe me; but as far as I’m concerned, two parts are enough. Call them ‘vehicle’ and ‘driver.’ ”

“All right.”

“Now, suppose we abbreviate ‘Roberts’ as ‘R’, and ‘Harold William’ as ‘HW.’ And abbreviate ‘driver’ as ‘D’ and ‘vehicle’ as ‘V’. We then have four parts, RD, RV, HWD, and HWV. Now, regardless of which driver is in control of which vehicle, if RV is fatally injured, that finishes RD. If HWV is fatally injured, *that* finishes HWD. Don’t ask me why.”

“That,” said Roberts, “gives me a profound desire to keep RD in charge of RV.”

Colonel Valentine Sanders nodded glumly. “I have the same urge to keep VSD running VSV. But I’m afraid it isn’t going to work out.”

“What happens when this spoiled prince takes over the ‘vehicle’ of whoever volunteers for this? Is this ne’er-do-well free to amuse himself as he wishes?”

The colonel looked shocked. “That way, we would throw away half of our advantage. No, he will be put through a rigorous course of training, and watched every second.”

Roberts thought it over. “I still don’t like it.”

“Who would?”

“Suppose the ne’er-do-well declines to cooperate?”

The colonel smiled. “Believe me, Roberts, we can *guarantee* cooperation. But I don’t think that difficulty is likely. The prince comes from a long line of able warriors, and in my opinion he will respond to the right impulses. He’s just been kept carefully isolated *from* the right impulses.”

Roberts was thinking of Erena, completely under the control of the members of the cabal, and being sent back to a place where she had no one to protect her except a brother kept carefully incapable of protecting anyone. Once again he saw, and felt, her look of appeal.

Roberts said, “I’ll do it.”

And now, with the click of the door in his ear, the headache throbbing in time with his pulse, and the room swimming around him, Roberts’ right hand—or rather Prince Harold William’s right hand—reached out, pushed aside the napkin on the tray, and picked up the twisted bit of paper.

VI. “Indisposed?”



Roberts, startled, watched the hand, faintly trembling, open the paper, and shake the contents into a tall glass of water on the tray. The hand then picked up the glass of water, and approached the Prince’s lips.

Roberts clamped his—Harold William’s—jaws and lips tightly shut, and stopped the hand partway from the tray.

“...drink...” said a small voice clearly in his ear.

The hand began to approach with the glass. The small voice spoke again clearly in his ear.

“...You will drink ... your hand will shake the powder into the glass...” said the small voice ... “and then the hand will carry the glass to your mouth, your lips will open, and you will swallow, again and again ... you will drink the draught...” said the small voice ... “you will drink it to the end...”

Roberts' lips trembled. The hand approached with the drink. Roberts glanced around. No one was in the room with him. The voice had spoken *in his ear*—almost as if it were inside his head. Roberts stopped the approaching hand.

“...You *will* drink...” said the small voice ... “your lips will open and you will drink ... The hand will carry the glass to your mouth, your lips will open, and...”

Roberts concentrated on the hand, moving it further away. He tipped the glass and deliberately emptied it onto the scratched hardwood floor. When the glass was empty, he turned it upside down, and put it on the tray. The voice was abruptly silent. The headache was gone.

Roberts carefully swung his—that is, the prince's—feet to the floor. He got up, and became conscious of a profound weakness. Roberts seemed to be operating an ungainly piece of apparatus, rather than merely walking across the room.

Around the corner of the room was a door to a small bathroom. Roberts got a towel, and mopped up the pool on the floor, being careful to get none of it on his hands. What the active ingredient of “twist” might be, Roberts didn't know, and he wasn't certain whether it might leave a tell-tale, incriminating stain on his hands. He put the sodden towel in the flush toilet, held on to the dry end, and pressed the button that worked the toilet.

The outside door of the bedroom came open, and the same female voice called in, the words faintly sarcastic, “Tutor in half-an-hour, Charm.”

Roberts, frowning, released the button, went out to the door of the room and looked it over. The door was held by three hinges on the left, and had no lock, keyhole, chain, or other device on the right to keep it shut, except a knob. The knob was placed unusually high. Roberts, still with the sensation that he must force each ungainly motion, brought the chair over from the paper-cluttered desk, and set it by the door. The chair back was eight inches below the knob. Roberts put the chair back by the desk, went into the bathroom, finished with the towel, washed, came out and looked over the breakfast on the tray.

Methodically, tasting each bite cautiously, he ate two slices of toast, a small container of a kind of dark-purple jam, and drank a small glass of clear pinkish juice that was sweet and faintly astringent. He reached for the milk on the tray, in its tall dark-brown glass, and then hesitated.

He took the small clear empty glass that had held the juice, rinsed it, considered

the milk for a moment, then poured part of it slowly into the juice glass.

The milk poured out with a peculiar suggestion of foam—yet there was no foam. Roberts, frowning, emptied the small glass carefully into the sink, caught his breath, and put a finger in the milk.

There was a faintly gritty feel, as of countless very tiny grains or capsules, that crushed between his fingers to form a faintly sticky slime. Roberts emptied most of the milk from the glass, put the glass back on the tray, and rinsed the sink.

There was brisk knock on the door. A voice, high-pitched, with a peculiar catch, called out, “Lessons, Your Ex!”

Roberts stood up slowly, and looked at the door. He spoke carefully, and the prince’s voice came out, deep, with a pleasant timbre.

“Come in.”

The door opened. A short, plump, red-faced, perspiring man of about thirty, his head completely shaven, stepped in and cast a quick perceptive glance at the tray, and then at the figure of Prince Harold William, standing silently before him.

The tutor shut the door and snickered. “How is it, Ex?”

Roberts was unconsciously adding up the maid’s dress and manner, the small voice in his ear, the “twist”, the tiny capsules in the milk, and now the tutor’s appearance and way of speaking. The tutor giggled again.

“Can’t move, eh? Oh, but Duke Marius will be displeased!” The tutor wagged his forefinger. His grin widened. “Naughty, naughty, fellow! Well—what shall we learn today?” He came closer, grinning widely, his teeth shining, his expression archly mischievous.

Roberts, groping amongst the unpromising bits and pieces of what he had experienced so far, felt a profound desire to deal out a few blows for a change.

“Strange,” said Roberts, casting the prince’s expressive voice in a slightly lower pitch.

The tutor paused, glanced at the tray, and giggled. “Yes—that’s the only drawback—it’s unpredictable. But such *wonderful* visions, sometimes. Mystic experiences, actually. What are you seeing?”

“A throne,” said Roberts carefully, “a throne, and someone is seated upon it.”

The tutor’s brows arched upward. His eyes blinked rapidly. “Who, Your Ex?”

“I know the face,” said Roberts, keeping his voice low, and gazing across the room as if he actually saw something there beside the closed door.

“*Whose* face?” demanded the tutor curiously.

“He is speaking,” said Roberts slowly. “Why—it is the *King!*”

The tutor blinked. His eyes blazed. “*What king? Duke Marius?*”

Roberts spoke carefully. The trance-like tone he was trying for came out naturally, helped by what was apparently the natural lassitude of the prince.

“Yes,” said Roberts slowly, looking at the door, “but I thought—I thought it was an accident ... then, that is *treason* ... I did not know...”

The tutor whirled, stared at the door. Robert went on, “Then they are murderers, and we must have vengeance ... I will block the traitor’s way to the throne at all cost...”

The tutor spoke nervously. “Here—here now, Ex—I mean, Your—Your Excellency—you’ve having a bit of a bad time, that’s all. This vision will go away, and you will have another—*God! Who would have thought it!*—take it easy, now—you’ll be all right!”

Roberts turned, and walked carefully across the room to the locker. He picked up the sword, still sheathed, and turned. The tutor blinked, then backed toward the door. There was a harsh rap on the door. The tutor gasped. The door opened.

A tall dark-haired figure stepped in, wearing a jacket of black velvet with a gold chain around his neck supporting a gold eagle emblem, and also wearing blue trousers with vertical gold stripes at the sides. Directly behind him were two officers in dark green uniforms, one carrying a slender gold baton decorated with eagles and oak leaves.

The tall man looked ironically at the prince and bowed with flawless grace. His voice was gravely deferent.

“Your Excellency, as you mount the throne in less than four months, I deemed it urgent that you make the acquaintance of Field Marshal du Beck, and of General Hugens, our Chief of the General Staff. I—” He paused, and his voice became smoothly considerate. “I assume you are not—not *indisposed*.”

The tutor began urgently, “Your Grace, he—”

Roberts was finding considerable difficulty in operating the prince’s vocal organs. But, once started, the resonant voice silenced the tutor in mid-sentence.

“I am delighted,” said Roberts, and the voice came out grave and majestic, and seemed to fill the room. “I am delighted and honored to meet two such distinguished soldiers.”

Roberts set the sheathed sword carefully against the locker, and turned toward the three in the doorway. Duke Marius was looking blankly at the tutor. The tutor, perspiring heavily, had his mouth open, but no words were coming out.

Field Marshal du Beck had been looking over the pile of papers on the desk, and

the stack of bottles bulging out of the waste basket, while General Hugens' gaze was fixed on the oiled guns in the rack. At the prince's voice, the expressions of both officers cleared. They smiled, reddened slightly, and bowed.

"I appreciate your concern, Marius," the prince's voice went on, filling the room with its tones of majesty and power, "but I could never be too indisposed to see Field Marshal du Beck and General Hugens. I particularly wish to see them today. I want their advice on two subjects. Pray come in, gentlemen."

Field Marshal du Beck, and General Hugens, clearly pleased and flattered, stepped in,

Duke Marius took the tutor urgently by the arm. Roberts, aware that for the moment he had the initiative, did not hesitate to wring the last ounce from it. The prince's voice took on a hint of displeasure. "*Marius.*"

The Duke looked up in surprise and perplexity. The faces of Field Marshal du Beck and General Hugens expressed a quiet contentment, which suggested to Roberts that the two officers were not part of the cabal, and were not overly fond of the regent.

The tutor sucked in his breath, and burst out, "He's *drugged*, Your Grace!"

The prince's voice filled the room with quiet majesty as Roberts faced the startled officers. "That is the first point, gentlemen, on which I require your assistance. But first—" Roberts glanced at the duke, whose composure had returned. The prince's voice now held an audible undertone of disapproval.

"Have you finished whispering with the tutor, Marius?"

The duke had plainly recovered from his surprise. His eyes glinted. His voice was pitying. "I am concerned about your progress, Harold."

The prince's voice filled the room majestically. "That concern, Marius, is one which I share. I again ask if you are finished with this tutor. If so, he is dismissed."

The duke put his hand on the tutor's arm. The tutor looked as if he wished he could vanish. The duke looked gravely at the prince.

"The charge," said the duke silkily, "is most serious, Harold. Perhaps you should answer it."

"If Field Marshal du Beck or General Hugens would pour that milk from its glass into the smaller glass on that tray," said the resonant voice, "and observe if there is something unusual about it, that will help me to determine whether I *have* been drugged."

Field Marshal du Beck cast an intent glance at Duke Marius and the tutor, then looked at the overflowing wastebasket, and hesitated. General Hugens glanced at the oiled weapons in their rack, and looked the prince in the eye.

The prince said, "Pour it slowly, General, and observe if there is what *appears* to be a foam."

The general set his gloves by the tray, and poured slowly.

Duke Marius said, "Foam is not unusual on milk."

Roberts didn't answer. He was wondering if the grit or tiny capsules might by now have dissolved in the milk. The tutor edged toward the door.

General Hugens said, in a low voice, "Look here."

Field Marshal du Beck put his gloves by the tray, and bent over. "H'm. It is like a very fine sand."

Roberts, relieved, glanced at the tutor, who was now at the door. The prince's majestic voice again filled the room.

"You will remain here, tutor, unless—" Roberts glanced at the duke—"unless, Marius, for some reason you now have changed your mind and *wish* him to leave."

Before the duke could reply, Roberts spoke to the two officers. "It was my experience that whatever is in that milk has a mildly gritty feel to the fingers and, when crushed, has the feeling of a glue or sticky paste."

General Hugens at once put his thumb and forefinger into the milk, rubbed thumb and forefinger together, eyed the ceiling thoughtfully, and handed the glass to the field marshal, who repeated the experiment. Duke Marius glanced uneasily at the generals with their fingers in the milk.

"Gentlemen, this situation is becoming ridiculous."

Roberts said at once, "It was *your* idea, Marius."

The duke turned angrily. His voice was like the crack of a whip. "Henceforth *you* will speak respectfully! Your tutor has something to say which is very serious, Harold."

Prince Harold William's magnificent voice created a contrast in tone which made the duke sound peevish. To Roberts' delight, the sarcasm of his own words was translated by the prince's voice into a crushing rebuke:

" 'Henceforth' is a very long time, Marius. Does your authority extend beyond four months?"

Duke Marius stiffened, paled, swallowed, then smiled and relaxed. He glanced at the tutor. "Twist *is* unpredictable. It's said, you know, that our ancestors called it 'courage in a pipe.' "

The tutor said nervously to the duke, "May I go now?"

Roberts said to the two officers, "Gentlemen, have you any opinion to offer on

that substance.”

Duke Marius crossed the room before they could answer, picked up the water glass on the tray, and sniffed sharply. “There you are, gentlemen. The odor is faint but distinctive. *Twist*. Here. Smell it for yourself.”

The general and the field marshal each sniffed sharply, and looked troubled.

Roberts ignored the duke, and said, “*Is it twist?*” The prince’s voice sounded concerned and curious, but nothing more. The field marshal’s frown vanished.

“I should say so, Your Majesty. As for this other substance, I suspect a sedative of some kind. You see, these innumerable tiny capsules have walls of different thicknesses, which successively dissolve away over a period of time. It is even possible, using drugs of different types in capsules of different wall thickness, to have roughly timed drug effects. We have used this in prisoner interrogation. The prisoner, not realizing that his body is being subjected to drugs of carefully selected types, believes that *he himself* is, for example, losing his nerve—it is quite possible to cause him to tremble involuntarily, for instance.”

Roberts said, “Could this be used to create a feeling of fatigue?”

“Yes, Sir. The sensations of the prisoner subjected to this can be manipulated almost at will.”

Duke Marius motioned the perspiring tutor to leave the room. As the door closed behind him, Roberts said, “The most important duties of a ruler, if his realm is well organized, are military. Whatever else he may know, he *must* understand the art of war, or he is unfit to lead.”

The field marshal nodded and smiled. The general said approvingly, “That is true, Your Majesty.”

Duke Marius said in irritation, “Let me point out, he is not yet king. Do not address him as ‘Your Majesty.’ If he fails—”

Roberts said coldly, “But he won’t.”

The effect of these three simple words, in Prince Harold William’s majestic voice, momentarily gave even Roberts pause. The words seemed to ring in the air, an inviolate statement that could not even be questioned.

Duke Marius’ mouth came open. A fine perspiration appeared on his brow. He turned as if to answer, but his voice failed to function, and his gaze fell as if his lids had grown heavy.

Roberts suppressed a sudden elation, and said gravely, “Gentlemen, I regret to have to say this, but facts are facts. That milk is apparently drugged. Evidently there was twist in the water glass. These are by no means the only peculiar manifestations I have noticed recently, but these things we have physically before us. I think you will understand when I say that I want a complete change of staff here, at once, and

that I want a military guard unit I can call upon at any time. Other male members of my family have died in the comparatively recent past. *Apparently*, their deaths were accidental. But if an attempt is being made to tamper with the throne—” Roberts looked directly at Duke Marius—“I intend to unmask the traitors and kill them.”

Field Marshal du Beck, watching intently, was the first to regain his voice. “Argent Company of the Royal Guard will be sent here at once, Your Majesty, with a mess unit to cook your meals. The Royal Guard is of course directly under your personal command. You are the colonel of the regiment, and have been, by direct line of inheritance, since the death of the King, your father.”

Roberts had vainly been trying to unlock certain memories that must be available to Prince Harold William himself, but having had no practice with the technique, Roberts had had no success. He cleared his throat, and spoke carefully. “Excellent. There is another point—”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

Duke Marius looked up, but managed only an incredulous stare at the two officers, who paid no attention.

Roberts said, “It seems to me that by accident or design, my military education has been neglected. I want to repair this neglect. Can you find someone capable of acting as a teacher—”

Field Marshal du Beck beamed. “I would myself accept the great honor, but the military situation at the moment requires my full attention. Our Stath opponents are much encouraged by the recent cuts in our fleet strength. But General Hugens has an excellent deputy, who—”

General Hugens looked indignant. Field Marshal du Beck concluded—“who can take over for the general to permit him personally to act as your tutor. General Hugens is, in fact, an excellent teacher, twice assigned to the War College.” General Hugens beamed.

Roberts—with troops of the Royal Guard at his command, with the Chief of the General Staff to act as his personal tutor, and incidentally as a direct link with the top command of Festhold’s armed forces—Roberts, too, beamed cheerfully. “Wonderful,” he said. “I could ask for nothing better.”

It seemed to Roberts that—barely at the beginning of his assignment—he had already won. But, as they shook hands and exchanged pleasantries at the door, Roberts noted a vicious little smile on Duke Marius’ face.

The duke’s gaze slid away as Roberts looked directly at him—but the little smile stayed there. It appeared to be a smile of *anticipation*.

VII. Cleaning House



As the door shut behind them, Roberts asked himself what would justify that smile. Either Marius had already compromised the prince before Roberts had gotten here, or else Marius planned to do something before the troops took over from the present staff.

Roberts walked over to the locker, and discovered that he could move more easily. The leaden heaviness seemed to be very slowly passing away. Leaning against the locker was the plain businesslike sword, and Roberts now slid it from its sheath. The sword came out easily, the blade surprisingly light, the hilt so shaped that it seemed almost a part of his hand.

Roberts reached left-handedly for the handgun on the rack. He had scarcely closed his hand around it when the unlockable door across the room came open. Two burly men, wearing close black garments that fitted like a second skin, walked in, ignored the threat of the two weapons, and strode purposefully toward the prince.

Roberts felt a sense of paralysis—an unspoken warning as to what would happen if he should defend himself. By an effort of will, he raised the handgun and pointed it. The burly pair didn't hesitate. Roberts squeezed the trigger. The gun clicked. Roberts changed position, his right side forward, the swordpoint raised. The first of the two black-clothed figures reached up and closed his hand on the blade. The second stepped to the side, reached out to grip the prince—

Roberts reacted automatically, jerked back the sword, thrust at the closer of the two, backed the slight remaining distance to the wall, turned slightly, and thrust at his other assailant.

The sword moved like a weightless extension of his arm. The blade flashed. The black cloth reddened at the right shoulder of each man. The right hand of the first assailant dripped blood.

Roberts, crowded into the narrow space between the wall and the front of the locker, waited, the sword point raised. The two black-clothed figures stood motionless. The first glanced at his hand, red with blood where he had gripped the sword. The second made a hesitant gesture as if to bend forward and lunge ... The swordpoint moved. Roberts held it directly before the eyes of his assailant.

Outdoors, approaching, came the quiet rap of a drum. There was the tramp of feet, a called command—"Platoon *Halt!*"

The swordpoint with great delicacy and precision, was cutting the black fabric in a straight line across the chest of one of his assailants as Roberts sought to cut the cloth but not the flesh. The prince's two assailants began to edge backward.

From the door came an impatient voice. "Come on in there, hurry it up! They're

out here already!”

A third black-clad figure appeared in the doorway. His eyes widened. Roberts aimed the gun.

“Don’t move.”

The black-clad figure dove headlong out of the room. There was a hasty scramble, then the sound of running feet echoed in the hall. The two black-clad assailants in front of Roberts backed and whirled to run. The sword flashed as Roberts struck carefully at the backs of their legs. They gasped, staggered, and fell.

From the corridor came a yell, a thud, and the sound of many running feet. Roberts watched the door, the sword at his side, but ready. The doorway filled suddenly with a huge, white-haired giant in dark-green uniform, with sergeant’s stripes and a loop of silver braid at the shoulder. “First Squad A to me! *First Squad A to me!* Here’s the King and two stranglers!” The building shook.

The doorway was suddenly jammed with armed men, and Roberts noted with surprise that each was white-haired, rough, athletic; their faces were grim as they stared at the pair on the floor.

In the doorway, the sergeant came to attention, and the men followed his example.

“At ease, men,” said Roberts, and the prince’s majestic voice projected the cheer Roberts felt on seeing these veterans. “If you will remove these uninvited guests, to be held for questioning. But take care. Each of them is unarmed, hamstrung in the left leg and cut in the right shoulder. But they may bite for all I know.”

The sergeant stared at him, then grinned and said, “Lord bless you, Sir, these are vowed assassins. They kill with their victim’s fear and their own hands, and they will *never* talk.” After a moment he added, “But we *can* try.” He glanced around, gave quick orders, and suddenly the room was empty. A powerfully built officer of perhaps sixty-five then looked into the room, snapped to attention, and brought his hand up in salute.

Roberts, without thinking, returned the salute with the sword, and at once wondered if the Festholders saluted with a sword, if their sword salute was the same as he had learned long ago. If not, what would the officer across the room think? But the officer appeared to notice nothing unusual.

“Lieutenant-Colonel Stran du Morgan, Your Majesty. I am your second-in-command, and will handle all the routine of the Regiment, unless you wish otherwise. Argent Company is in the building, Company Or is digging in on the hall, and Cuivre Company is settling down amongst the bushes and trees outside. General Hugens said that you wanted real security, and be damned with appearances.”

Roberts himself had not the faintest idea of the significance of the terms “Cuivre Company”, “Company Or,” or “Argent Company,” but he detected a faint flicker of

meaning that he was unable to grasp. This must be knowledge that Prince Harold William possessed—but again, Roberts could not acquire it.

“Fine,” he said, in the prince’s magnificent voice. “Colonel, there is another matter which concerns me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“The Princess Erena. There have been many untoward accidents in my family in recent years, and I no longer believe they were accidental. Have you any knowledge of the location of the Princess?”

Colonel du Morgan’s eyes narrowed slightly. “It is strange, sir, that you should ask. The Princess returned only last night, amidst rumors that her ship had been shadowed by some unknown vessel, possibly Stath.”

“She returned from where?”

“A visit to Tiamaz.”

“And she is now?”

“In an apartment adjoining that of the Regent, Duke Marius. He is her guardian, and—”

“I do not trust Duke Marius.”

The colonel blinked. “Does Your Majesty really think—”

“Drugged food preceded Duke Marius’ visit to me, poisoned insinuations accompanied it, and two assassins followed it. I do not trust the Duke. How is the Princess guarded?”

“The Duke’s own men guard the apartment.”

“How numerous are they? And how well armed?”

“There are, I should think, possibly fifty of them. Ordinarily, a dozen are sufficient. But, for some reason, the Duke recently brought in more men. As for weapons—” The colonel frowned—“I would say they are about as well armed as most regular troops.”

Prince Harold William’s memory for the first time provided Roberts with a few bits of information. The Royal Guard was made of men selected from the armed forces of all Festhold, and grouped by age into three companies. The youngest went into Cuivre Company, and those in their prime into Company Or. Argent Company was made up of picked veterans of long service. Each company was maintained overstrength. The normal Festhold infantry company was made up of three platoons, each of which contained three sections of three squads each. But the Companies of the Royal Guard were made up of four platoons, each of which contained four sections of four squads apiece. As the standard peacetime squad contained twelve men, this meant that one platoon of the Royal Guard contained about two hundred

men.

Then one more bit of information came to Roberts. There should be one more company, Company Fer, equipped with heavy weapons. Roberts glanced at Colonel du Morgan.

“Where is Company Fer?”

Du Morgan hesitated. “The Regent requested that it be used as a demonstration unit—”

“And it is now far from here?”

“It entrained this morning for the run to Schnyvasserport, to go from there by water to the training camp outside Haraldsburg.”

“Can Company Fer be brought back?”

“Yes, sir. If you so command, I will send the orders at once.”

“Good. Bring them back. And as soon as those orders are sent—”

“Yes, sir?”

“I will want to visit Princess Erena.”

VIII. Just a Friendly Visit



The gate at the entrance of the Duke’s apartments was of iron, tipped with imitation spear points at a height of eight feet. Behind this hinged grille was a closed door of polished glass. Before the iron gate stood two armed guards, one of whom returned a little handset to its small roofed box atop a vertical black pipe to the right of the gate.

“Sorry, sir,” said the guard. “No one is to see Princess Erena. Her Highness is indisposed.”

Roberts looked the guard over carefully. The second guard looked on indifferently, cradling a short-barreled large-bored fusion gun.

Roberts spoke quietly, and Prince Harold William’s voice rendered what he said as a quiet but unmistakable threat.

“Guard.”

The guard looked momentarily blank. “Sir?”

“I did not ask *permission* to see my sister.”

“I’m afraid I don’t—”

“I said, ‘I am here to see my sister’.”

“Sorry, sir,” said the guard promptly. “No one gets in without a special clearance in advance. Duke’s orders.”

“I see,” said Roberts.

The guard said, “No one’s allowed in. And no one’s allowed to loiter at the gate. Sorry, sir.” He gave a jerk of his head, signifying that the Prince should leave.

The Prince’s right hand, moving of its own accord, flashed to the sword at his left side, and closed on the hilt. The sword hissed from its sheath, flashed in the sunlight, and the point dropped to the guard’s throat.

Roberts barely had control of the sword hand as the point drew a drop of blood from the suddenly pale guard. The Prince’s voice was clear and carrying: “When you address a fighting man of Festhold, speak politely, Gambler.”

The second guard swung up his fusion gun.

Crack!

The line of light seemed to hang in the air for an instant, leading from the center of the guard’s forehead back to one of the clumps of brush that dotted the rolling, neatly clipped grasslands that gave seclusion to the elegant apartments. The guard dropped. The fusion gun clattered on the flagstoned walk.

Roberts said, and the Prince’s voice was courteous, “Guard, I am here to see my sister.”

“The Duke—”

Very slightly, the sword point quivered. The guard stood perfectly still.

“The Duke’s authority,” said Roberts carefully, “does not extend to controlling arbitrarily the movements of the Royal Family—or, in fact, the movements of any private citizen whatever. Even the King,” said Roberts pointedly, “cannot do that in peacetime. If the Duke is holding my sister prisoner, it will be cause for his dismissal from office. As the Duke, therefore, has no authority to *give* the order, you have no authority to carry it out. *Open the gate!*”

The guard, his expression dazed, took out a set of keys, unlocked the gate using two separate keys in the gate’s two locks, and stepped back to let Roberts enter. Roberts stayed where he was. From the road leading to the apartments, came the sound of bootheels.

Roberts said, “Open the inner door.”

The guard hesitated, looking toward the road. “Who—”

Roberts said quietly, “*Open the inner door.*”

A magnificently uniformed captain, tall and powerfully built, wearing sword and pistol, appeared around the tall hedge that bordered the road to the left, and started up the walk to the apartments. Following the captain came an equally handsome and powerfully built lieutenant, and three sergeants in battle dress, armed to the teeth. Despite their size, they all moved lightly, with an athletic spring to their step. The guard, perspiring, opened the inner door.

Roberts said to the guard, “You will kindly lead me to the apartment of the Princess.”

“I must stay at the gate!”

“No necessity at all. My men will guard it.”

Behind the three sergeants came three open columns of men in camouflage battle dress, heavily armed, weapons at the ready.

The guard swallowed, and turned. “This way.”

Roberts’ sword was still in his hand. He brought it up carefully so that the flat of the blade rested lightly against his shoulder. The Captain and the Lieutenant, observing that their Prince had his sword in hand, each drew their own swords. The three sergeants glanced around alertly.

The Duke’s guard, sweating profusely, opened the door of an elevator, and bowed slightly, for Roberts to enter.

Roberts said, “On what floor is the Princess’ apartment?”

“The sixth floor, Your—er—Your Highness.”

“Are there stairs?”

“It would be much quicker—”

Beside Roberts, the Captain said shortly, “*His Majesty asked you a question.*”

The guard stiffened. “There are two sets of stairs. One in the front of the building and one in the back.”

“Where,” said Roberts, “are the entrances to these stairs?” The guard pointed out two corridors leading in opposite directions.

The Captain turned and raised his voice. “A Squad and follow-up, down that corridor to the north steps. Three men in at a time, watch for grenades, and secure each floor both up and down to the first cross-corridor. B Squad and follow-up, down *that* corridor to the south steps. Same procedure. When all floors are secure to the first cross-corridor, report in by handset. Let’s go!”

Roberts turned to the guard. “Is there also a set of service stairs?”

The guard stared at the door, where more men were coming in. He gave his head a little shake, and relaxed. “Duke Marius isn’t going to like this.”

Roberts said politely, “He should have obeyed the law. To hold a Princess of Festhold prisoner is a serious offense.”

The Captain spoke sharply. “His Majesty asked you a question! One more delay, and I won’t answer for your life!”

For emphasis he reached out, gripped the guard by the front of his jacket, lifted him bodily off the floor, and smashed him back against the wall.

“Is there a set of service stairs?”

“Y-Yes. You get into them from the basement.”

Roberts said, “Why not this floor?”

“It’s—quicker—the other way.”

“Where’s the guardroom?”

The guard swallowed. The Captain glanced at Roberts.

Roberts said, “Of course, we want in no way to cause any difficulty here. But in the event all the Duke’s guards should be as uncooperative as this one, we may have to protect ourselves. Have C Squad secure those service stairs from *this* floor, then we’ll go up.”

“Sir, I don’t trust this elevator.”

“Neither do I.” Roberts glanced at the guard. “There’s no gravshaft?”

“No. The Duke likes his visitors a few at a time.”

Roberts glanced at the Captain. “I’m going to use it, because seconds may count.” He nodded to the Lieutenant. “If you will accompany me—”

The lieutenant nodded obediently, and gestured to the guard. “Step in. And at the first sign of anything wrong, you will be forever beyond the Duke’s power to reward you.”

The guard stepped in, and gripped the controls. The elevator lifted, rose smoothly, and slowed to a stop. A sharp voice spoke from a grille at the center of the ceiling. “No visitors on this floor. That’s Duke’s orders.” The guard perspired.

“This is Prince Harold William himself.” The guard’s voice took on a peculiar inflection. “I thought the Duke would *want* to see him.” There was a little pause.

“All right. Send him in.”

IX. Dear Brother



The elevator slid open, and Roberts found himself looking at two tough uniformed armed guards and a faintly smiling sergeant, standing in a small, thickly carpeted, elegantly appointed room with hanging gold-colored drapes to either side of the elevator. The guard in the elevator with Roberts sucked in his breath.

“*Quick!* They—”

There was a sudden brief indrawing of breath, a sound as of a loose armload of firewood dumped on the floor, and then the lieutenant was beside Roberts, absently wiping his sword on the gold-colored drapes.

The two guards, at the door across the room, stood momentarily paralyzed. The sergeant’s eyes widened and his face paled. Whatever scene had taken place behind Roberts had temporarily immobilized all three of the guards, and it was entirely possible that if Roberts had seen it, he would be immobilized himself.

The lieutenant said shortly, “The Warlord of Festhold demands admittance to the chambers of his sister. Will you stand aside, or will you join your fellow in hell?”

Roberts spoke flatly, and Prince Harold William’s voice translated the ordinary words into an iron command which rang in the air like a sentence of doom: “*Open that door.*”

The tip of the lieutenant’s sword flicked out, and lightly pressed the sergeant’s tunic. The guards stared at the sergeant for instructions. The sergeant, brow beaded with sweat, nodded ever so slightly.

The guards flung open the door, and stood at attention. One of them, lance-corporal’s insignia on his sleeve, sucked in his breath and announced: “The Warlord of Festhold!”

Behind Roberts, there was a solid *thud*, and another sound as of a load dropping to the floor. The lieutenant spoke in a low voice to the guards: “When he comes to, remind him that a bump on the head is only temporary. If any of you intrude, you will have more permanent difficulties.”

The door shut. Roberts looked around. Directly in front of him was a long white-carpeted corridor, the woodwork painted gold and ivory, with a rich light-colored wallpaper depicting a hunting scene done in tones of silver and gray. A door to Roberts’ right was marked with a golden ducal coronet. There was no sound from behind this door. From the distance, down the hall, came a faint brief high-pitched sound which instantly faded.

Roberts started down the corridor. The lieutenant strode fast, and caught up as

they rounded a corner to the right. Directly in front of them, back to the door, stood a tough-looking guard, a faint grin on his face. The lieutenant spoke.

“Open for the Warlord of Festhold!”

The guard blinked. Roberts tried the doorknob. The door was solidly locked.

From the other side, Erena screamed, a cry of defiance mingled with dread. The lieutenant said sharply, “Guard! *Can you open this?*”

“It—it’s locked from inside.”

Roberts, half-crouched, raised and bent his right leg, and kicked hard with the flat of his boot at about six inches above the doorknob. The door shook in its frame. Roberts kicked again. There was a loud *crack!* With the third blow, the door flew open.

Duke Marius, his face totally blank, stared at them from a shambles of a room, where the furniture was overturned, the drapes half-torn from the windows, the mattress thrown from the bed onto the floor—and Princess Erena, her face and bare arms bruised, stood gripping a slender leg apparently broken from some overturned piece of furniture. Behind Roberts, there was a thud and a ripping of cloth.

Erena stared at her brother, and cried out, “Oh, thank God!”

Duke Marius made an abortive gesture, as if to draw some hidden weapon. Prince Harold William’s left hand went to his holster, withdrew the pistol, and had it aimed before the regent could complete whatever he intended to do.

“So,” said Prince Harold William’s iron voice, “this is how the Regent of Festhold carries out his trust?”

The gun spoke once, twice, three times, four times—Duke Marius jerked like a marionette, and fell to the floor.

X. A Hitch Has Developed In Our Plans



Prince Harold William was asleep, his lungs drawing in the deep calm breaths of the righteous and the just.

Vaughan Nathan Roberts was awake, trying despite a bad case of nerves to hold his attention on a tiny, barely audible tone that he seemed to hear, then lose, then hear again. It was a varying tone that almost sounded, now and then, like words, occasionally the whistle of steam from a tea kettle, or the brief scrape of branches against the wall outside the Prince’s room. Roberts listened closely, clinging mentally

to this varying tone as the murmur became clearer, and then out of the murmur came the voice of Colonel Valentine Sanders, and Roberts' chief in the Interstellar Patrol was saying methodically:

"Roberts—do you hear me?—Come in, Roberts ... We have your—"

"Right here," murmured Roberts, pronouncing the words mentally, but not operating the Prince's vocal cords.

"Roberts?"

"Right here."

"Good. Can you hear me clearly?"

"Yes."

"Roberts—ah—how are things going?"

"The Prince is asleep. *I'm* lying here in a cold sweat. Is that possible?"

"If you're doing it, it's possible." The colonel cleared his throat, and the sound came across with a peculiar self-conscious emphasis. "Ah—*Roberts*—?"

"Sir?"

"How—ah—how—?"

Roberts decided that he would have to speak frankly. "Sir, this situation is fairly confused. And if you don't mind, I want to ask a few questions."

"Go ahead."

"Do you have Prince Harold William on your end?"

There was a brief pause. "I mean," said Roberts, "his mind—his consciousness?"

"No," said the colonel.

"I see. All right, what *do* you have on your end?"

"Your body, Roberts, is lying here in some sort of stasis. This is the first time we've ever had anything like this. The only thing I can think of is that the Prince has been reduced to a vegetable, and there was no—ah—no mental function—no *personality* to come through. Wait a minute. What I'm trying to say is the complex electromagnetic function the technicians speak of has put in no appearance on this end; we therefore assume that it must have been destroyed, or reduced to so low a level that we can't detect it."

"I see," said Roberts tightly.

"How are things on your end, Roberts?"

“Prince Harold William this afternoon shot the regent in both shoulders and both knees; and if I hadn’t—”

“Wait a minute, Roberts, keep the description clear. You mean, *you*, controlling the Prince’s actions, shot the regent—”

“No,” said Roberts. “I mean what I said. This degenerate, drugged hulk of a royal playboy has reflexes like chain lightning, and put four bullets into Duke Marius before I had time to think. The next two bullets were for the duke’s right and left eyes, but I managed to override that.”

There was a silence. Roberts became vaguely aware of the Prince’s calm peaceful breathing, and went on. “Listen, when this technique is used on someone heavily sedated against his will, what happens?”

“I think this is the first time we’ve ever run into it.”

“Well, if the Prince hasn’t shown up on your end, I think I know why. He’s still *here*.”

There was another little pause. “I see,” said the colonel.

“The impression I have,” said Roberts, “is that most of the time, I’m running things, but every now and then, things happen so fast I don’t know what’s taking place. Moreover, I am not getting much cooperation from Harold William’s memory.”

“*What?*”

“The Prince’s memory isn’t open to me. Occasionally, a few items of information come across, but not very often.”

“That’s not normal. The usual case is that the impressed personality becomes immersed in the memory and details of the subject’s life.”

“Then this isn’t the usual case.”

Another silence developed, and Roberts broke it by saying, “This is quite a handicap, if you see what I mean. I can control the Prince’s *actions*, unless he suddenly decides to take over. But unfortunately, since I’m not in touch with his memory, I don’t know what I’m doing. And there’s another question. What about the Prince himself? His consciousness evidently is still here, on the spot. How does all this strike *him*?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to take this up with the experts.”

“There’s another point. Are these Festholders particularly bloodthirsty?”

“No—Wait a minute. You have to remember, Roberts, that they’re in a very exposed position, and have been fighting the Stath for a long time. The Stath are not nice adversaries.”

“I see.”

“The Festholders loathe traitors, and are merciless with them. Whoever breaks his word on Festhold gets very short shrift.”

Roberts considered the events of the day, and said, “Well, that fits. All right, I’ll tell you what happened.” Carefully, he described what had taken place, in minute detail. At the end, the colonel said, “Roberts—were *you* in charge most of the time, or—”

“I was. Why?”

“It seems to me things have moved pretty fast.”

“The regent was closing in to finally discredit the Prince.”

“H’m. Yes, that’s true.”

“There wasn’t much *choice*.”

“All right. Where is the regent now?”

“On a cot, done up in bandages, in a dressing station run by the Royal Guard.”

“And Princess Erena?”

“With her two sisters, Catherine and Eloise. She’s in an apartment in this building, heavily guarded.”

“Good. Now, about Erena—you have to be careful—”

“The Prince,” said Roberts drily, “is a lot more protective of the two younger sisters. Erena was his older sister, and when they’re face-to-face, they get along like cats and dogs.”

“Well, that’s good. That—”

“Isn’t it?” said Roberts drily. “Now, sir—what are we going to do about this mess? I have the impression that as the drug they’ve been using on the Prince wears off, I’m going to have more and more trouble.”

“Roberts, we *could* break contact, and then try again. But I hesitate to suggest it, because the second try might fail entirely. You’ve done all right, so far—”

“The situation is getting more complicated by the minute.”

“Just do your best, and we’ll move up reinforcements, just in case. Now, we don’t claim to understand it, but you’re going to need sleep, or your control will suffer.”

“Okay,” said Roberts. “As long as you see the situation here.”

“I see it,” said the colonel. “It represents an unexpected hitch in the plans, but I think we can get around it.”

The colonel's voice faded, and there was only a varying tone that itself dwindled. Then there was the scrape of branches against the wall, and Roberts knocked the pillow into a more comfortable shape, and fell asleep.

He seemed scarcely to have rested his head against the pillow when the room was suddenly filled with light, and an urgent voice was speaking: "You Majesty—Duke Marius has escaped!"

XI. How To Kill Kings With Pictures



Roberts sat up, noting the early morning sun that lit the silvery dew on the lawn outside. For the first time, he had a sense of bodily well being. The drugged sense of having to force each motion was gone.

"Impossible," said Roberts, "because the Regent was not a prisoner here. Ask Colonel du Morgan to come to me as soon as is convenient for him."

Roberts got up, showered briskly, and briefly studied the Prince's physique in the bathroom mirror. The Festhold heir presented an odd effect of well-developed muscles under a pasty complexion and a thin layer of fat. His face presented the same peculiar effect of strong bone structure and formidable character—coupled with the suggestion of a sallow dissolute look. If the Prince' faint look of dissipation resulted from prolonged sabotage by Duke Marius, there obviously had been some force resisting this dissipation.

Roberts toweled briskly, dressed, and noted with approval the new lock on the room's hall door. He was just clasping the leather belt that held the sword when there was a knock at the door. Roberts opened the door.

"Ah, come in, Colonel!"

Colonel du Morgan, his face grave, his air faintly embarrassed, stepped inside. "I am afraid the Regent left us during the night."

The Prince's voice said, "I regret that I didn't kill him."

The colonel looked surprised, but nodded. "You would have been fully justified."

Roberts, who was more surprised than the colonel to hear the Prince's comment, said carefully, "To have killed him would have been justified, but we may better bring his whole treasonous plan, and his accomplices, into the open with the Regent alive but crippled."

The colonel nodded grimly. "He is, at least, crippled. Your Majesty is a deadly

and extremely fast shot.”

The Prince’s voice replied on its own, “Long practice, Colonel. Since I was old enough to think, I have aimed to be a fighting man and a leader of fighting men, and have trained to acquire their skills.”

The Colonel again looked surprised, and an expression of wonder crossed his face. The Prince spoke again, and Roberts listened, seeing no point in trying to intervene.

“Duke Marius,” said the Prince, “has well deserved to be crippled. With deep cunning, while in the guise of my guardian, *he* tried to cripple *me*.”

The words seemed to smolder in the air after they were spoken, and the Colonel nodded and sighed. “I am afraid, Your Majesty, that he has finally succeeded.”

“What do you mean?”

Colonel du Morgan held out, face down, a small packet of photographs. The Prince reached out, took them, and turned them over. The sense of pain was instantaneous, as severe as the sudden pain of a sensitive tooth exposed to heat or cold.

The top picture was damning, a pose of the Prince, the tutor, and the maid who had brought the drugged food. The room seemed to spin around Roberts, who immediately sucked in a sharp breath, and as the grip of the Prince’s hand loosened, Roberts tightened it again.

“Well, well,” said Roberts, and the Prince’s voice translated the words into a sound of grim satisfaction. “So, we have forced him to reveal his hand at last!”

The colonel looked blank. “Sir?”

Roberts looked the Colonel in the eye. “Can you conceive, Colonel, of the damage these would have done if released just before the Lords’ Chamber? Would they grant the crown to anyone so debased as this?”

The Colonel looked totally blank. “I—No. But—”

Roberts forced the fingers of the Prince to steadily and carefully leaf through the damning photographs one-by-one. Roberts had thought the first one might be the worst, but the Colonel had apparently tried to spare his feelings. What followed was indescribable. Roberts looked up, with a sensation of having wallowed in garbage.

“What you have been trying to tell me, Colonel, is that Duke Marius *was freed by my own men*?”

The colonel was watching him with a look of wonder. With a start, he answered. “Yes, Sir.”

“Assemble the officers and non-commissioned officers in the courtyard. Those who can be spared from guard duty. There must be no laxness at all, despite this

very clever move. Where is Company Fer?"

"At this moment, they are detraining for the march here."

"Nothing must happen to prevent their reaching here. Check on them, and have those officers and non-coms in the courtyard as soon as possible. Let me know when they are there."

The colonel straightened. "Yes, Sir."

The ranks were stiff, and the faces expressionless as Roberts strode with slow and careful step past them, his tread echoing from the walls that surrounded the courtyard with its fountain and its banks of flowers. Roberts halted near the fountain, turned, looked at the hard faces briefly, and spoke. The Prince's voice, calm and cool, said the words.

"At ease, men."

In front of him, their faces expressionless, the officers and the non-commissioned officers of the Royal Guard relaxed, but their faces remained cold.

"A few minutes ago," said Roberts, and the Prince's magnificent voice spoke with grim satisfaction, "Colonel du Morgan gave me the most pleasant news I have had in some years.

"Colonel du Morgan told me that the Duke Marius had been aided to escape by my own men—" There was a low angry murmur, which Roberts ignored—"and that by some coincidence, damning photographs, supposedly of the future Warlord of Festhold, had been circulated amongst the Royal Guard. Pictures," said Roberts, and the Prince's voice translated his scorn, "like these which Colonel du Morgan gave to me."

Roberts looked directly at the ranked officers and non-commissioned officers, and saw their puzzled but stubborn look. He spoke with careful emphasis.

"Gentlemen, I will not waste our time by loudly denying what is set forth in these pictures. That they may be clever fakes is obvious. But it was only yesterday morning that General Hugens and Field Marshal du Beck confirmed for me that there were minute capsules—apparently of drugs—in a glass of milk brought to me by the servants of this same Duke Marius. Who knows what depravity may be arranged for a man under the influence of secretly administered drugs? But is the man then guilty? Or is he guilty who administered the drugs?

"I know this: I have no memory of any such incidents as shown on these photographs. But I wonder not only at these scenes, but at the mind and aims of the person who would *record* them. Is there any of us so free of blame that he could afford to have all the incidents of his life freely revealed? But fortunately, there is no

one hiding there to record the incidents. When there is someone hiding there, *why* is he hiding there?"

Across from Roberts, the Guards officers and noncoms were frowning in thought. But, Roberts noticed, one or two of them glanced covertly at something held in their hands, and their expressions hardened.

Roberts could talk, but the thought was clear in his mind that the same man cannot be the object of deep contempt and be the King, both at the same time. Again, Roberts could feel the pain of the Prince. But Roberts paid no attention.

"So," he said, "while I remember no such incidents, and while all this trash may be completely faked, nevertheless I wonder at the aims of whoever distributed it. And it was this, gentlemen, which gave me great pleasure."

He had their attention now. He could see it in the alert faces, in the eyes turned toward him or staring judiciously at the wall opposite. Roberts lowered his voice, and the words came out with great intensity.

"How many of my line have died of strange 'accidents'? Where is my father, the King? Where are my brothers? Why am I the last of the line? *And why am I, the last of the line, to be branded with this depravity?*

"He who would destroy a royal family, root and branch, and take the throne for himself, must not only kill its members, but must turn its followers against it. How better to do that than by taking the last surviving heir, when supposedly too young to defend himself, and either sinking him in the foulest sin, or *creating that appearance* ?

"What the Duke did not know was that his drugs would be found, at that worst of all times when Field Marshal du Beck could confirm it for himself, and carry out my request to replace the Duke's guards with my own men.

"Yet this Regent did not stop there. Very plausibly, Company Fer was detached from the Royal Guard. Quickly, two assassins turned up here. Next, an attempt was made against Princess Erena, by this selfsame Duke Marius."

From the group of officers, the Lieutenant of the day before spoke in a clear level voice: "I saw that. And the King instantly drew left-handed, and shot him four times cleanly while the Duke grabbed for his hidden gun."

There was a murmur. The murmur went on, and suddenly there was a laugh, and Roberts could feel the change in the atmosphere. To these warriors, Duke Marius was suddenly absurd.

Roberts spoke, and the Prince's voice contained a trace of grim humor: "So, after the drugs, the assassins, the detachment of Company Fer, and the attempt against a Princess of Festhold by this Regent, I could not help but wonder, 'What next?' He was helpless, shot in both shoulders and knees, but might have new and undreamed-of treacheries already in motion. It was then that Colonel du Morgan

showed me this little handful of pictures, and that much was clear.

“Marius could gain the kingdom only by stopping me first. I must, therefore, fail either to draw the sword from the crystal, or to gain the support of the nobles. Either one would do the job. Prudence would suggest that he try to do *both*. Whether he has found some way to influence the crystal—or to somehow counterfeit the result—I cannot claim to know. *But he has been forced to reveal too soon his plan to influence the nobles.*”

“This little pack of pictures, gentlemen, was not meant for you. He couldn’t even know you would be here. These pictures originally had another purpose: To so shock and antagonize the nobility that the last male member of the royal family would become the lowest and most despised of all the nobles, *while the next choice necessarily fell to Marius.*”

The silence in the courtyard when Roberts stopped speaking was broken by the sudden sound of ripping pictures. The leaders of the Royal Guard were methodically tearing the damning photographs to bits. As Roberts watched, they passed the bits from hand to hand, and the officers at the head of the ranks made a little pile, and struck a light to it.

In the quiet, the faint tramp of feet could heard, and for an instant Roberts thought of Company Fer. But it was too soon for that.

“*Open,*” said a voice, small but clearly audible, “*in the name of the Regent!*”

“The traitor’s troops,” said Roberts. “Quick! Back to your men!”

The courtyard emptied in a flash. There was a blast of whistles, the shout of commands. On the flagstones, the flame flickered, consuming the torn photographs as Roberts ran past into the building.

XII. The Guard Does Not Surrender



Colonel du Morgan blocked the entrance, shouting to Roberts, “Back, Your Majesty! *They’re inside the gate!*”

The sword was in the Prince’s hand before Roberts could decide what to do. The Prince was past du Morgan, and threw open the front doors of the building. One quick glance showed the Royal Guard in disarray, officers, and noncoms shouting at sullen men. On the walk regular Festhold infantry, glancing uneasily around, backed up an officer in general’s uniform arguing vehemently with the Lieutenant who had accompanied Roberts the day before. Their voices were plainly to be heard.

The general shouted, "It is the Regent's order! This has the force of Royal Command!"

"The Regent," snarled the Lieutenant, "is a traitor and a murderer! With my own eyes I saw this famous Regent attack Princess Erena! I saw this Regent turn in the presence of the King, and grab for a concealed weapon! I saw the King draw and strike this same Regent to the earth with four blows before this imitation warlord could get his hand on a weapon. Now *you* tell *me* that the Royal Guard will stand aside and hand the true Warlord of Festhold over to this toothless wonder, this lying poisonous murdering hypocritical simulacrum of a Regent built up out of moldy dung? I say you are badly mistaken, general! I say you had better get your troops out of here before we *throw* them out!"

The general said shortly, "I have my orders! You will obey, Lieutenant, or face the consequences!"

"Be damned with the consequences!"

The Lieutenant whipped out his sword. The General clamped a whistle between his teeth. Prince Harold William, obviously ready for a fight, evidently could find nothing to say in this impasse. Roberts at once raised the Prince's voice.

"One moment, gentlemen!"

The General shouted, "There he is! You are under arrest for attempted regicide!"

"By whose order?"

"By command of Duke Marius Romeigne, Regent of Festhold, who stands in the place of the Ruler and Warlord, King and Emperor of Festhold! By that authority, and in that name, the Regent hereby places you, Harold William, *under arrest!* Throw down your arms, and go humbly to judgment!"

Roberts spoke politely. "Are we at war?"

"WHAT?"

"Is the Kingdom of Festhold at war?"

The General for an instant looked blank. Then his face suffused with rage. "*Drag that dog to me in chains!*"

The Lieutenant pivoted on his right heel. His left fist smashed the General in the face, throwing him back into the arms of the men behind him. Blood welled from the General's nose and mouth.

Roberts spoke, and the Prince's voice was clear, calm, and carrying: "In time of peace, no one, neither King nor Regent, can arbitrarily arrest another. The Regent has no right to order anyone to arrest me. But I have every right to defend myself from unlawful arrest. *And I will do it.*"

This was all Roberts had intended to say. The General dizzily staring at him,

seemed to have comprehended the point. The Lieutenant, sword in one hand and gun in the other, was a visible demonstration that the Prince would not fight alone.

But now, from well back in the ranks before them came a loud voice, freely speaking unspeakable slurs, damning Harold William by all the names that could be applied to anyone about whom such pictures could be circulated as had been made of the Prince.

And suddenly the Prince's voice was answering, the pain evident in his voice, but something else evident under the pain: "Then Marius has won, and I may never be King! But you will learn now who is the Warlord of Festhold! Get *back* beyond that gate!"

The regular troops, confused, simply stared as Harold William advanced. The Royal Guard, seeing their leader advance alone and single-handed against such numbers, abruptly comprehended what their officers had been trying to tell them—the pictures could *not* sum up the Prince! And in that case, it was a moral certainty that the *Regent* was a traitor.

Roberts heard the shout, but could no more influence the actions of Harold William than he could have as a spectator. The Prince's sword flashed out, the flat of the blade striking the side of the General's head.

"Get these men out of here before I kill them, *and you with them!*"

From somewhere in the rear of the Regent's troops came a shout: "Forward! In the name of the Regent. *Forward!*"

A fusillade of shots smashed windows and powdered brickwork across the face of the building. A fusion beam lanced out and struck the building. There was a shower of white-hot glass and exploding brickwork.

Someone yelled, "Show the Prince what blood looks like!" A grenade arched forward and blew up over the heads of the Royal Guard. From well behind the troops of the Regent came another shout: "Death to the Royal Coward!"

The General, staring at the Prince's expression, suddenly reached for his gun. Harold William went berserk.

Roberts, like a passive spectator at a horror show, could only watch as the Prince waded into a chaos of guns, flashes, spurting blood and shattered bone. Explosions deafened him, and a flaming bar of white heat seared his left side. An eruption of flame burst in his face. Time passed in heavy shocks and boiling smoke. The ground jumped underfoot. Pain incarnate knit through the lower left side of his chest. Then clever staring faces briefly appeared before him, hands were flung up, and the faces dissolved into the bloody chaos that ringed the Prince of Festhold.

A familiar voice shouted urgently. The Prince, dragging in great breaths of reeking air, turned to see Colonel du Morgan.

“Take cover, Sir! We’ve cleared them back—but they’re sending tanks!” The Prince turned, and Roberts was presented with the sight of a hideous shambles of broken weapons and shattered bodies.

From the distance came a clank and roar of tanks, and the Prince turned to face the tanks, wide and low, looming through the smoke. The Prince’s thought was plain to Roberts: “I will never back nor bow to any of these dogs.”

With a violent effort, Roberts got momentary control of the Prince’s limbs, and dove head-first into a nearby crater.

Roberts hit the stony dirt in an explosion of pain from his left side. Now that the Prince was no longer concentrating on killing enemies, Roberts became aware that his whole left side seemed to be on fire, and his chest felt as though iron hooks were imbedded in it. A wave of weakness and weariness swept over him. He pressed his head into the damp stony dirt.

There was a heavy blast that jarred the earth under him. Then there was a clank that sounded almost over his head. The blast and roar died away. Roberts opened his eyes to see nothing but blackness, then a brilliant white light that faded away. It came to Roberts that he had passed out—must, in fact, have slept, and now it was night.

A loudspeaker roared: “Guard!”

There was an answering, more distant voice, and Roberts recognized Colonel du Morgan: “We’re listening, Traitor.”

“*Yield!*”

“Never. God save King Harold!”

“The Coward Prince is dead!”

Colonel du Morgan laughed. “The Warlord may be dead or alive, but if he was a coward, you are less than rotten wood.”

“Yield! Your leader, whatever you call him, is dead! And you can’t withstand our armor forever!”

“The Guard may die, Traitor. But only Harold William may command us to lay down our arms!”

Roberts, lying motionless in the crater, sensed that the Prince was conscious. Roberts could detect the Prince’s wonder at Colonel du Morgan’s words. It dawned on Roberts that the Prince had expected no such support. Roberts became aware that the heir to Festhold’s throne was now dominated by some powerful emotion. Roberts could feel the quicker respiration, could sense the increased blood pressure—but he did not know what the emotion was.

Just above, the loudspeaker roared again: “We attack in four hours! You will never outlast it! Surrender, or—”

Roberts’ whole left side burst into one fiery agony. His chest felt as if stitched together with huge and rusty staples. The Prince rushed up the bank in the darkness, swung the sword like an axe.

The loudspeaker was roaring: “—we will pound you into—”

The sword struck with a jar that traveled up his arm. Roberts was standing upright on some sort of slanting plate that apparently covered one of the tank’s tracks. The abrupt silence told him that the Prince must have just cut the wire to the loudspeaker.

Roberts, unable to see a thing, wondered that the Prince stood motionless, waiting. Then from far away, a sound reached his ear, a low distant whine. Through the pain of burns and untreated wounds, Roberts could sense the Prince intently listening. Suddenly, a thought came through to Roberts: “That whine is an antigrav transport unit, such as Fer Company uses for the automatic artillery. *Could it be?*”

Roberts, inescapably aware of the Prince’s wounds, wondered at this continuing concentration on the fight. Was Harold William *that* tough?

“Ah, the *hatch*.”

The faint grating noise came through to Roberts a moment later, followed by a murmur: “Put that light out! You want to be blown to hell? Now—careful—wire feels all right, so far.”

“Maybe the whole damn speaker fell off. There was some kind of thud.”

“*I* didn’t feel any thud.”

“Well, I did.”

A third voice murmured, “Keep your voices down. *Hst!* What’s that?”

Across the cratered and invisible landscape came the sound of a signal whistle.

“Funny. That’s practically right on top of the Guards!”

“They aren’t firing.”

“No.”

“Listen!”

A brief alternation of silvery liquid notes on some sort of trumpet reached across the field, to be answered instantly by another, from a slightly different direction.

“That’s the royalhorn!”

“*Both* of them were royalhorns!”

“What the *hell!* It’s reinforcements, then!”

“Back this thing up! We’ve got to get out of here.”

The prince spoke, his voice silky and menacing. “One moment, gentlemen. I am the Warlord. And if you move a finger, you are dead.”

There was a tense silence, broken only by the faint but steadily approaching whine from the distance. The Prince’s voice was calm. “I do not ask that you *yield*. I command that you return this instant to your true allegiance.” Roberts could hear a ragged indrawn breath.

“If,” said the Prince, “you wish to live and obey me, *say so now!*”

“Yes,” came a shaking voice. Two other voices trod on the heels of the first. “Yes!” “Yes, *Sir!*”

“How many of you are there here? This is an XS12 with a normal crew of five. Are the others inside?”

“No, Sir. We’re all there is. We’re running with a bare crew.”

“Why?”

“To get maximum force on the line, the Regent put in the spares at the beginning.”

“I see. All right, fix that loudspeaker.”

“Ah—Sir, every minute here is dangerous. They’re probably—”

The Prince’s voice was flat. “I said, *fix that wire.*” There was a brief pause. His tone became humorous. “We might as well die now, as some other time, eh?” For some reason, the men all laughed.

“Here,” said one of them. “The wire’s all right to here. And—wait!—*Here* we are. We’ll have to splice.” There was a tense silence, and the blast of a whistle from the distance.

“All right,” said one of the men.

The Prince said, “Can you hand up the microphone to me?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“All of you, get inside, and hand it up.”

There was a scrape of boots slipping on metal, then the Prince reached out his hand, and Roberts felt the fingers close on something round and ridged—a handle of some kind. The Prince raised it to his lips. His voice boomed out in the quiet.

“Colonel du Morgan!”

There was a bare moment’s hesitation. “*Sir?*” The voice expressed shock.

“I am bringing in an XS12. One only.”

“Y-Yes, Sir!”

There was a click. The Prince leaned into the hatch. “We are on the lip of a crater. Back. Go left around it, then straight ahead. Speed twelve—”

“Hadn’t you better get inside, Sir?”

“I like the air out here. ‘Tis cooler.”

There was a second round of subdued but delighted laughter. The Prince, Roberts thought drily, seemed to have just the right sense of humor for this planet.

Conscious of his own total lack of protection, with the XS12 tilting underfoot, with his side on fire and each breath agony, Roberts felt more than saw the position of the landscape shift around him. The Prince sat, legs dangling, atop the big turret in the darkness. Ahead, finally, there was a faint blue light that flashed and disappeared.

The Prince turned and called in a low clear voice, “Speed Three.” They at once slowed to a crawl. Straight ahead, the blue light flashed again.

The Prince called, “Du Morgan?”

“Here, Sir!”

The Prince turned. “*Stop! Engines off!*” They stopped. A moment later, the throb died away.

The Prince turned to look into the darkness. “The three men in this tank have returned to their true allegiance. See that they get food and a place to sleep as soon as their machine is under cover.”

Du Morgan gave brief orders to someone nearby. The Prince slid over the side, and dropped to the ground. The pain was breathtaking, but his voice didn’t waver.

“Company Fer is here?”

“Yes, Sir. They’re just setting up.”

“Is there an aid station nearby?”

“Yes—you’re wounded?”

The Prince’s voice was dry. “Slightly.”

“M’m. Right over here, Sir. Squint your eyes when we go in ... Careful as we go down, here ... Now, through two doors, and this light is bright, now ... My God!”

Directly in front of Roberts in the dazzling light was a sort of high cot with a clean white sheet over it; a man in a white uniform, eyes wide and jaw clenched, and a nurse in white, her hand to her mouth. An orderly, his back turned, was just carrying out a mop and a bucket.

The Prince said quietly, “The burn is from a flame gun—I suppose a Mark X. Then I think I ran into two or three solid shots from an explosive whip. I think they went through, but I’m not sure. The pain of the burn is intense, and continuous. The shot is particularly bad when I breathe.”

The doctor said, “Nurse, a syringe—”

The Prince interrupted, and his voice was irritable. “No anesthetic. I am telling you this simply to explain what happened.” He glanced at du Morgan. “Colonel.”

Colonel du Morgan stiffened. “Yes, Sir?”

“There is to be no amputation. Not so much as a finger or a toe. If I die of this, that is unfortunate; but it is honorable, and I will take the risk. If there should *be* an amputation, contrary to my will, I will have the head of the doctor who carried it out. See that this is clearly understood. Now, while the doctor carries out his examination, get me a position map.”

“Yes, sir.” The Colonel turned and went out.

The Prince looked at the doctor. “How bad does this seem? Be truthful.”

The doctor said, “I don’t see how—” He paused and began again. “It is very unusual to see anyone in such condition on his feet.”

“Since I have not yet killed the traitor, I must remain on my feet. Is there anything you can do to keep down infection?”

The doctor approached, and very cautiously examined the Prince’s left side. Next, he studied the Prince’s chest, gingerly lifting away layers of clothing. “Fortunately, the slugs went clean through. But—in all honesty—you should be in the restitution baths.”

The door opened, and the Colonel came in with a captain and two sergeants, carrying a large map on a stand. The map bore little symbols in red and green.

“Ah,” said the Prince. “Good.” He walked over. “How accurate is this?”

“As of now,” said the Colonel, “I believe it is substantially correct. We sent up drones at dusk, and have heard little movement from them since then.”

The Prince touched his finger to a small purple oval well back on the map. “Are we sure the Traitor is here?”

“He was seen there yesterday afternoon. A special medical unit is attached to him.”

“Curious that he is here, where he could conceivably be wounded.”

“What regular leader of troops can he trust with such a task as this? He *has* to be here.”

The Prince nodded, and leaned forward. On the map, the positions of the little symbols resembled a circle within a larger semicircle of enemy troops, with a still larger oblong coming down the road from the north, and the little purple oval on the far side of the semicircle from the circle that showed the position of the Royal Guard. The road came down from the top of the map, passed through the semicircle to the north, passed through the circle representing the Guard, and bent off toward the southeast. The Prince straightened.

“It is true that they are not yet across the road to the southeast?”

“They were, but Company Fer passed that way.”

“And this juggernaut coming down the road from the north?”

“The regent’s reinforcements. Once they get here, we will be in a bad way.”

The Prince glanced at the measure showing the scale of the map. He looked at the road, then back at the purple oval on the far side of the semicircle and distinctly to the east of the reinforcements on the road.

“To wait for the reinforcements to arrive,” said the Prince, “would be mere suicide. To move cross-country to the southwest would be to flee, with no hope of victory. We might attack the center of this half-ring of disloyal troops, but that would warn the Traitor, and his reinforcements are nearby on the road. What hour is it?”

“A little before one, Sir.”

The Prince considered the map. “Suppose we move out, very quietly, along the road to the southeast? At best, they may not know we are gone. At worst, they will overhear us. But if they overhear us, what will they think?”

“That we are in retreat.”

“The troops at the end of this semicircle were roughly handled?”

The Colonel smiled. “Company Fer was not gentle with them.”

“Then they should be tired, and not eager to intervene. If we are in retreat, what will they care?”

“It is impossible to be sure,” said the colonel, “but I would expect them to do nothing.”

“Now, suppose that we move southeast along the road until we are well past the end of their line, and then swing north, across country. By dawn, the Traitor, if he is still where this map shows him to be, will have his half-ring of besieging troops to the southwest, his host of reinforcements to the west—and *us to the east.*”

The Prince traced the movement on the map with his forefinger, and there was a low involuntary murmur from the captain and the two sergeants.

The Colonel said, “If we could get there by dawn—”

The Prince nodded. “Then we could attack with the sun behind us, shining in their eyes. And if the reinforcements should be called in, they will be equally blinded.”

“We will do it! But Your Majesty must remain here, to be treated—”

“No treatment will do me any good until we end this traitor. Let us waste no time. We have to be there before this situation changes.”

XIII. The Regent’s Unlucky Day



Roberts, aware of a ceaseless searing agony, and a sense that to breathe was to drag massive hooks through his chest, saw the dawn through eyes that swam with fatigue and poisons pumped through his system from the wounds and burns. The Prince, who must be aware of the same endless pain and fatigue, merely murmured, “There—a little to the south—”

Roberts caught the brief flash in the almost level rays of the sun, that lit brightly the flat green ground with its occasional clumps of trees.

Colonel du Morgan said, “Yes, I believe—it is! That is the window of a headquarters trailer!” The Colonel handed him the field glasses. A few moments of careful examination showed a small complex of low sand-colored buildings, with a flagpole in the center.

“We *may* be mistaken.” said the Prince. “However, turn the column by platoons, and we will see what we catch in the net.”

The Colonel passed his orders back, and the men spread out, and then the Royal Guard was a thin scattering of men in camouflage suits who blended into the scenery. A low whine from the rear told of Fer Company’s transportation.

Ahead of them, a little speck rose jerkily above one the low brown shapes. The Prince raised the binoculars. It was a flag, going up the pole in the center of the little cluster of temporary buildings. The flag was of dark-blue edged in purple, with a golden circlet in the center. For an instant, the flag stood out almost straight, and Roberts could see that the circlet was a coronet.

“Duke Marius’ own flag,” growled the Prince, “with a royal edging. Ah, if only he is there!”

The low buildings very gradually loomed larger. The sides of trees and shrubs toward them were lit brightly in the rising sun. Ahead, a voice shouted warningly:

“Who goes! *Halt!* By command of the Regent!”

A nearer, louder voice answered, “Isn’t this General du Fenn’s headquarters?”

“It is the Headquarters of the Regent himself!”

“What. The *Regent*? Is he there?”

“He is!”

The Prince growled, “Sound the attack.”

The Colonel turned, and a moment later a silvery note sounded, rose abruptly higher, and repeated again and again. The Prince sprang atop the captured tank as it trundled up from the rear. To either side, men were running forward in long, well spread-out lines. Behind them, the low whine rose to a howl.

The sand-colored buildings were close now. The guards stared, saw the courtyard suddenly thick with enemies, and threw down their weapons. The Prince dropped from the back of the tank, walked toward the largest of the buildings, as his men appeared everywhere, and threw open the door.

A white-coated officer spoke angrily. “Out! You can’t come in here!”

The Prince stepped in, sword in one hand, gun in the other. “Where is Marius?”

The officer looked blank. “I—Who—?”

The Prince’s voice had its usual effect. “I am the Warlord. Where is the Regent?”

“I—he—through that door, Sir.”

“Lead the way.”

The terrified officer pushed open the door, and voices were heard in calm discussion. “Toward noon?” said the Regent’s voice.

“Yes, Sir. The reinforcements will be in position then. The rebels will be wiped out.”

“Excellent ... yes, Doctor?”

The trembling doctor stepped aside, and the Prince walked in, closely followed by armed men. The Regent, heavily bandaged, was sitting up in bed. His eyes widened. The Prince’s voice was quiet, but it spread out through the room, and left no doubt that what it said was final.

“You may surrender, Marius, in which case you may live, for the time. Or you may choose to *not* surrender, and I will shoot you through the head.”

The Regent averted his eyes, and drew a slow breath. He said bitterly, “So I am surrounded? By *what*?”

The Prince, watching closely, didn’t answer, and Colonel du Morgan said, “By

the Royal Guard.”

“By an element—what, a section?—of the Royal Guards.”

Beside the Regent’s bed, the officer in general’s uniform who had been talking to the Regent spoke sharply, “It could hardly be even that. More likely a squad. Nothing more could slip through the lines. *Guard!*”

Several more of the Prince’s soldiers answered this invitation, and came in. More followed. The room grew crowded. The general stared, and abruptly turned away.

The Prince said quietly, “What have you decided, Marius?”

The Regent slowly shut his eyes. “I surrender.”

XIV. A Job Well Done



The agony of being lowered into the tank was as nothing compared with the slow, cautious removal of the charred cloth. But this was part of the Festhold process of treating severe burns, and there was nothing Roberts could do to escape it. Nothing, that is, until the Prince, exhausted, passed out, and Roberts instantly did the same.

Roberts could feel himself spin into blackness, but much too soon he could feel himself again returning to consciousness. He fought to prevent it, failed, and became aware that he was lying between clean sheets.

He waited for the pain, but felt only a sense of calm rested well-being. Puzzled, he opened his eyes. He found himself looking at a white ceiling, in a dimly lit room with blank white walls.

Roberts sat up, felt his side, and then noticed *something*. There was a different bodily tone, a different feel, a something different—familiar yet strange. Roberts got out of bed, jerked open a door thinking it would lead into a corridor, and found himself in a small bathroom. A glance in a mirror showed him himself—not Prince Harold William.

Roberts stood frowning for an instant, uncertain whether he was dreaming now, had been dreaming before, was out of his head, or was wide-awake and in his right senses. Back in the small room he had come from, there was the brief crackle of a wall communicator. The voice of Colonel Valentine Sanders reached him.

“*Roberts?*”

Roberts made the mental adjustment from Prince to captain in the Interstellar Patrol.

“Here, sir.”

“When did you get back?”

“A few minutes ago. Is *this* how it usually works?”

“No. How do you feel?”

“Unnatural. In a dream.”

“Stay right there. Turn on all the lights, and move around. I’ll be right with you.”

Roberts wandered around the two small rooms, and snapped on all the lights. This helped some, but he still seemed to be moving in a dream. The door from the corridor opened, and Colonel Valentine Sanders, lean and tough, his hair close-cropped, stepped in. His voice sounded relieved.

“How do you feel now?”

“Unreal.”

“M’m.” The colonel glanced around the bare room with its blank walls and white cot. “I feel a little unnatural in here myself.” His voice echoed faintly. “Can you walk all right?”

“I’ve been able to so far.”

“Let’s go down the hall to my office. I never did care for inside jobs, and this one is even more peculiar than the usual.”

The colonel opened the door, and led the way down the corridor. Roberts followed, still with the impression that he was dreaming. The colonel opened a door marked, “Chief, O-Branch,” and stepped back to let Roberts precede him. The colonel shut the door, pulled out a chair for Roberts, went around behind the desk, and sat back.

“What happened since the last time you reported in?”

Roberts, in careful detail, described everything that had happened since he had been awakened with the words, “Your Majesty, Duke Marius has escaped.” He told of the pictures, the attempt to arrest him, the battle, and the surrender of the Regent.

The colonel, increasingly wide-eyed, listened intently. At the end, he sat up, frowned, and very carefully sat back again.

“Where the devil does this leave us?”

Roberts shook his head. “I haven’t the faintest idea.”

The colonel frowned, and sat unmoving. Finally, he cleared his throat.

“What is your reaction to this prince?”

“Harold William?”

“Yes.”

“Every time he was attacked morally, he folded up and I had to take over. Then they attacked him physically, and there was no stopping him.”

The colonel sounded exasperated. “But what does *that* mean?”

Roberts thought it over. “It seems to me that he has been very cleverly drugged, in such a way as to make him detest his own reactions. He has no confidence in himself—he is ashamed of himself—morally.”

“That doesn’t fit with the rest of his actions.”

“When I first got there, his room was a shambles, he was almost out on his feet, his servants or subordinates treated him with an insulting familiarity, the Regent dealt with him as if he were a nonentity—but in the midst of this ruin, there was a rack of well-oiled weapons. Even when he is to all intents and purposes unconscious, his reflexes are such that the weapons are like extensions of his limbs. When he decides to *do* something, his motions with weapons are like lightning. It seems to me that can only follow from hereditary aptitude and long training. In fact, he said to the officer who is second-in-command of the Royal Guard, that since he was old enough to think he had ‘aimed to be a fighting man,’ and had trained to acquire the necessary skills.”

The colonel sat back, frowning. “The weapons you speak of were right there, in his room?”

“Yes.”

“How fast did he seem to recover from the drugs?”

“Very fast.”

“By your description of his actions, he sounds almost superhuman.”

“Either that, or he had almost superhuman motivation—to nail the Regent.”

“All right, now let’s think this thing through. Suppose *you* hadn’t been there. Would he have done as well?”

Roberts considered the question. “He would have folded up any number of times. First, he would have used this drug, ‘Twist’—whatever that is. I don’t know just what would have taken place with the tutor. Next, the Regent burst in unannounced with two members of Festhold’s high command. The Regent’s manner was full of slurs and insinuations. When the Regent went out, two assassins came in, and the Prince made no voluntary motion to defend himself. I doubt that he would have gotten through the situation on his own. The next day, he wilted when the photographs were sprung on him—I could *feel* the pain it caused him—and I think he would simply have turned his back on the whole situation. What would have happened when they came to take him prisoner, I don’t know. If he had still been under the influence of the drugs, I suppose he wouldn’t have resisted then, either.”

“How was his judgment in battle?”

“Good. But since I could only occasionally catch his thoughts, I can only judge by results. He outfought and outmaneuvered the Regent as if the Regent had been asleep. But the Regent had already been shot through both arms and legs, so he couldn’t have been in good shape. Still—”

“What’s your overall conclusion, Roberts?”

“I think Prince Harold William is exactly what he claims to be, and what he wanted to be. He hasn’t been proclaimed *King*—but by his own actions, I think he has won the right to the title of ‘Warlord of Festhold.’ And on a planet that reveres fighting ability, that should count for a lot.”

“Yes, but what about this sense of guilt?” The colonel frowned in thought. “Of course, he may, having fought, and having been badly wounded—”

Roberts nodded. The colonel said, “This brings us back to where we started. What the deuce *is* the situation there now?”

“You mean, legally?”

“Practically. Let’s see now. The Prince, who is heir to the throne, but not yet of age—”

“Supposedly heir to the throne.”

“Yes,” said the colonel, “there’s that. Well, the Prince, supposedly heir to the throne, discovers the Regent, who stands in the place of the King, dishonorably occupied with the Prince’s sister—”

“Who,” said Roberts, “was the Regent’s ward.”

“M’m. Yes. And the Prince shoots the Regent—”

Roberts said, “In self-defense as much as anger. The Regent was reaching for his own weapon, at the time.”

“I see. Then the Prince takes the Regent prisoner—”

“Not exactly. He took him to his own aid station for treatment. He gave no orders that the Regent was to be held prisoner.”

“Roberts,” said the colonel exasperatedly, “I admit, you were there, you saw it, so this is how it actually happened. But consider how it is going to *look*. The Prince, backed by a small army, forces an entrance to the Regent’s apartment, catches the Regent with the Princess, shoots him, drags him out, and that night the Regent escapes. The Regent comes back with troops, a battle erupts, the Prince beats the Regent in battle, *and the Regent*,—who stands in the place of the king—*surrenders to the Prince*. What is that? Has the government changed hands? Is the Prince guilty of rebellion? What *is* the situation?”

Roberts shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Well,” said the colonel drily, “all I have to say, Roberts, is that this is an extremely inconvenient time for you to lose contact with the situation.”

“Sorry, sir,” said Roberts, “but as I think of the Prince in that ‘restitution bath’—it strikes me that this is a pretty good time to be here. And just incidentally, there *is* something we have yet to clear up.”

“What’s that?”

“Erena.”

“Roberts,” said the colonel exasperatedly, “for all you know, the girl doesn’t care for you. After all, you appeared as her rescuer, at an appropriate time—naturally, she—”

The colonel paused, frowning. He leaned forward. “Let’s hear that again, Roberts. How did you know she needed help?”

“She was on the downslide, sir, going into the casino. I was on the upslide.”

“And?”

“Sir?”

“What happened?”

Roberts frowned. “I don’t know. I looked at her. There was a—it was as if she made an *appeal*.”

“Did she *say* anything?”

“No, sir.”

“This all passed in a *look*?”

“Yes, sir. It was obvious.”

“And suppose I say you are to keep away from this princess, and forget the incident—?”

Roberts looked at the colonel, and smiled very slightly.

The colonel grinned. “The question was rhetorical, Roberts. No need to slice my head off.” The colonel thought intently, then smiled. “Roberts, *if* Festhold wins his crown, and *if* Festhold remains firmly allied to the Federation, *then* it strikes me that if your name appears before the Warlord, in a request for permission to see the Princess, then you having influence at court, might be able to move the Warlord to say ‘Yes.’—After that, you’re on your own.”

XV. The Baths of the Damned



Roberts put in a day of increasingly strenuous exercise, and ended up feeling almost like himself. He slept soundly, to wake up with a helmet on his head, and on the screen within the helmet, before his eyes, two faint dots that merged into one, and the one expanded, faded, formed a tiny distant scene, as of an underwater view which began to expand, and grow definite, then fade again, and then again to expand. The scene was suddenly in focus, clear, wavering before and around him, and he was conscious of one inescapable sensation.

Cold. Around him was a fluid, tinged very faintly pink, in which tiny crystals moved. Above him, a brilliant light shone down, its heat lost in the cold fluid that bathed him. The cold did not end at his skin, but moved slowly through his veins—an icy chill that seemed to reach the core of his being, to immerse him completely, inside and out, in bone-chilling cold.

To his left, something moved, and now he could see the monstrous half-men's head, shoulders, and arms alone—appearing at his left side, their eyes intent behind the lenses that formed the eyes of their grotesque white-plastic heads. Carefully, they examined Roberts' left side—and it slowly came to him that this must be the 'restitution baths' the doctor had spoken of earlier.

The Prince, surely, must be unconscious. But the Prince's eyes were partly open, and Roberts was treated to the sight of the surgeons working in this hydraulic womb to correct the damage done in battle.

Roberts tried to disconnect himself from the Prince—and couldn't do it. Time crept past. Despite the chill, Roberts could faintly feel the surgeons at work. The tone of the Prince's body—or rather the lack of it—began to impress itself on him.

Gradually, he became aware of the burn—somehow muted by the chill—that covered the left side of his body. It occurred to Roberts that he was, for practical purposes, in a form of purgatory. Why had they had to send him back *now*?

Then he recognized the symptoms of gathering hysteria, knew from experience there was no relief in that direction, and settled down grimly to endure what was inescapable. It seemed to go on for a long, long time.

Somewhere, in the distance, birds were singing. A quiet male voice said, "He is in here, Your Excellencies, but he regains consciousness only at long intervals."

A voice replied with a note like a mosquito, "The just reward of sin."

The first voice said, "The process of recovery is still in some doubt. Physically, most of the gross damage has been overcome. But there is a severe psychic drain with such wounds as these."

“We want to see how the prisoner has been marked.”

Light blinded him as the eyelids opened. The dazzle faded away, as the eyes nearly shut, and through the slit Roberts could see a severely plain white room, with slightly open window looking out across the tops of trees to a brick building several hundred feet away.

Back over his right shoulder, the mosquito-voice was disappointed: “I understood the flesh was burned away on the left side of his face.”

A second and similar voice put in: “The left side of the *body* is completely burned to the bone, is it not?”

Two men perhaps in their late sixties, robed in dark crimson with dark-blue cowls, stood beside the bed, their probing gaze hungrily searching the face and the form under the thin blanket.

An embarrassed doctor said, “The wounds were severe, Your Excellencies. Of course, the tank breakage caused trouble, but—”

The first turned to him. “Draw back the covers. This is Holy Business.”

The doctor hesitated.

The Prince’s voice, low but clear, suddenly dominated the room. “Take these vultures out of here, Doctor.”

The robed figures jerked back. The doctor looked startled.

The Prince drew a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Roberts could feel the two legs flex, the right arm bend and extend, the left bend and extend. There was no sense of pain, but a faint stiffness. The first of the robed visitors raised a hand, palm out, and began to gesture in the air, as if warding off evil spirits.

The doctor said uneasily, “Perhaps, Your Excellencies, it would be better if—”

The wounds in the chest were scars—mere dimples to be felt with the fingertips. The Prince’s voice was suddenly jovial.

“On second thought, Doctor, let them stay. These are, I’m sure, the Regent’s *tame* theologians?” The robed figures drew themselves erect. Their eyes glittered.

“You blaspheme!”

Roberts, trying to quiet the Prince, found himself a mere spectator. The Prince sat up.

“To blaspheme is to claim godhood, or to be irreverent toward holy things. I claim no godhood. I am merely the Warlord!”

“*You lie!*”

The second robed figure made a sweeping gesture of the outstretched hand. “In

the name of the Holy Crystal, curse your blasphemies! You are sworn condemned! In the Crystal Light, you are a sinner and less!”

The doctor wrung his hands. “Your Excellencies, the patient—”

The eyes of the two cowed figures glinted. Their hands traced figures in the air. Their lips murmured. Their fingers pointed to the Prince’s eyes and teeth, to his arms and legs. An air of smoking witchcraft emanated from the pair. Occasionally recognizable words could be heard.

“...wither and shrink ... eyes water and vision fade ... teeth do ache and pain ... trembling palsied hands ... uncertain gait...”

Roberts could feel the shock. The room seemed to swim before him. With an effort of will, Roberts drew in a deep breath, exhaled forcibly. The room steadied around him.

Before him, an unholy glee lit the two faces, their teeth bared, fingers pointed successively at his eyes, his mouth, his arms, his legs—

Roberts drew another breath. The Prince’s voice was august, said: “Doctor—”

The doctor, trembling, his face pale, eyes blinking, swallowed and turned. Roberts spoke carefully, “Close and lock that door.”

The tone of the order left no possibility of disobedience. The doctor obeyed. Roberts drew another careful breath, and stood up. The faces of the gesticulating pair before him contorted with rage. Their gestures grew more emphatic, their murmurings more incisive. Roberts spoke carefully, and the Prince’s voice was an iron and unbreakable command: “*Be still.*”

The two voices ceased to function. Roberts spoke carefully: “Remove your cloaks.”

The words seemed to echo in the room, filled with a restrained but terrible power. Uncertainly, faces showing evidence of struggle, they removed the cloaks, and stood holding them. Suddenly, they were plainly gripped by fear.

Roberts spoke carefully: “Bow once to the Warlord.”

Teeth clicking together, the two figures trembled and bowed. Roberts turned slightly toward the door.

“Unlock that door, Doctor, and open it wide.”

There was a click, and the faint squeal of a hinge. Roberts turned to the two figures shaking uncontrollably before him.

“Leave this room, and thank the Almighty Power that you still live.”

Shaking, they backed to the door, turned, and the sounds of running feet dwindled down the corridor. Roberts breathed carefully.

“Close that door, Doctor.” The door clicked shut.

“Come here.”

The doctor, jaw clamped shut, eyes wide, obediently approached. Roberts could feel a knot of cold terror within him slowly relax. Roberts sat on the edge of the bed, and spoke more easily.

“Now that the hirelings of the Regent are gone, we can speak less formally. The forces of the Traitor have now been defeated in personal combat, defeated on the field of battle, and defeated by spiritual power. What is the *legal* situation?”

The doctor hesitated. “I—until a few minutes ago, I had no doubts—” He swallowed. “I understand simply that the Regent had been ambushed, that there had been a local uprising, and the—the degenerate youngest son of the royal family had been captured, badly wounded, when the Regent put down the uprising.”

Briefly, Roberts thought back. “And have there been no rumors?”

“Oh, there have been fantastic rumors! The Prince and the Regent have fought a duel. The Prince has declared himself Warlord. The Regent and the Prince have fought a pitched battle. It was only when the Regent gave a personal address and released the official report that the rumors died down.”

“And the troops on the field of battle?”

The doctor looked blank.

Roberts said carefully, “What you have heard, Doctor, has been a carefully made lie. In this case, the rumors were much closer to the truth. The rumors could never have died down, or the lie been accepted—if *the troops who knew the truth first-hand could tell it.*”

The doctor blinked. “But—oh, I see.” He turned, to look directly at Roberts. “But the troops were off-lifted because of the Emergency!”

“And what pretext was there for an Emergency?”

“There was the rumor of a Stath invasion fleet.”

Not for the first time, Roberts was regretting that he had not let the Prince finish off the Regent when he had the chance.

“Has *this* rumor proved true?”

“No, but the Regent has warned that every precaution must be taken until we can be certain of Stath good-will.”

“Ah,” said Roberts. “And has any misfortune to any of the troops been reported?”

“I—not that I know of.”

“The obvious thing would be to kill the witnesses. But in this case, the witnesses are armed and no doubt suspicious. How long have I been under treatment?”

“Here? Or before the accident?”

Roberts looked at the doctor. “What accident are you speaking of?”

“When the restitution tank broke.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Oh, that was—months ago. We had to start all over again.”

“I suppose healing was almost complete, when the tank accidentally broke?”

“Well, not complete, but coming right along. You’d been several weeks in the tank.”

“I see.” Roberts thought it over. If he remembered correctly, the Prince was to be tested for his fitness to rule in *four months*. That had been back before the battle with the Regent. Thanks to the ‘accident’ with the tank, the time had been disposed of nicely. The Regent had meanwhile established his own story of what had happened. That was bound to be ruinous for the Prince. Roberts cleared his throat.

“Where are we?”

“This is Capital General Hospital. I am Doctor du Beck, and I’ve been in charge of the case since the accident.”

Roberts said carefully, “You’re no relation of Field Marshal du Beck, I suppose?”

The doctor looked tense. “Yes, sir. He is my cousin. But I assure you, I am in no way implicated—After all, that involved only the military.”

Roberts said carefully, “Remember, I have been unconscious—or only occasionally conscious—for quite a while. Field Marshal du Beck was in good repute the last I knew.”

“Yes—yes, that’s true. But *that* was before the Emergency was declared! Field Marshal du Beck and several members of the General Staff were found to be in secret contact with the Stath.”

Roberts nodded. “I see. Now, who guards this building?”

“The Regent’s own Household Guard.”

“And what is that building over there?”

“The City Palace—I believe, strictly speaking, it’s the Capital City Administration Building, but everyone calls it the City Palace.”

“The Regent’s headquarters?”

“Yes.”

“Now, is the Regent to be notified as soon as I come to?”

“Why, yes, that’s correct.”

“All right. Now, doctor, is your cousin’s—disgrace—a burden on your mind?”

“It is a—the name—” The doctor couldn’t go on.

Roberts nodded. “It was, of course, basically your cousin’s word against the Regent’s.”

The doctor blinked.

Roberts said, “You have already seen what the Regent’s *spiritual* advisors are like.”

The doctor swallowed.

Roberts went on, “In every contest so far between Duke Marius and me, Duke Marius has been defeated. Unfortunately, the Regent still has the power of the state at his disposal. But the time remaining to him as Regent is now short. Field Marshal du Beck is a witness, as was General Hugens—”

“*Hugens!*” said the doctor. “He was the go-between!”

Roberts said patiently, “The guilt of your cousin and General Hugens consists in their being witnesses that I was drugged while under the care of the Regent. Now, would you like to have your name freed of this suggestion of treason?”

The doctor’s eyes suddenly filled with tears. With an effort, he looked away. He stood up, and after a moment, turned to face the Prince. “What can I do?”

XVI. Everyone Has His Reasons



The voice of the guard said, “But we have no order to let you in!”

“I repeat,” said Dr. du Beck, “the Regent *told me personally* that he wished to see this patient *as soon as possible* after he awakened—That was the Regent’s *order*.”

“Yes, sir—”

Roberts looked around from the stretcher. From this angle, he had a view of a long, wide, high-ceilinged and immaculate hall with high double doors that opened off to either side. At the head and the foot of the stretcher bored burly orderlies held

the grips, and waited. “My dear sir,” said Doctor du Back, “if *you* wish to block the orders of the Regent—”

“Wait right here,” said the guard. He turned and ran with a clink of metal and rap of heels down the corridor to the door at the far end.

Dr. du Beck glanced at Roberts. Roberts nodded toward the far end of the hall.

Dr. du Beck growled, “Damn these military, anyway! One says one thing, then another says something else, and—why do we have to wait *here* all day? The Regent outranks the guard, doesn’t he?—Let’s go!”

Both orderlies gave approving grunts, and followed the doctor down the long hall. As they approached the far end, they could hear the guard’s trembling explanation, and the angry voice of the Regent.

“No,” said the Regent flatly. “*Get out of here.*” The guard backed out the door.

Dr. du Beck knocked both doors open wide, and said loudly, “Your excellency, I have obeyed your command precisely.”

The guard sucked in his breath. The orderlies shoved their way past.

Ahead of them, beside a door at the end of a short entry hall, the Regent opened his mouth speechlessly. The doctor, the orderlies, and the pale immobile figure on the stretcher—all were now inside the Regent’s office.

Across the room, bound tightly to a high-backed chair, sat the Princess Erena. The doctor paused, speechless. The orderlies blinked and looked again.

The Regent said shortly, “You are intruding in a matter of high State policy! *Who ordered you—*”

Dr. du Beck said, “You wished to see the prisoner as soon as he regained consciousness. Here he is.”

The Regent looked at the Prince, and Roberts allowed his eyelids to shut, then raised them again.

“H’m,” said the Regent. “Very well, Doctor. This is inconvenient in its way, but possibly some use can be made of it, after all. Leave the patient with me. I will have my—personal doctors—care for him.”

Dr. du Beck bowed stiffly. “Set the stretcher down, orderlies, and come with me.” The two orderlies eyed the beautiful woman tied to the chair, and hesitated.

Princess Erena smiled. “Don’t try to help me. He has a guard outside, two more in the hall, half-a-dozen at the desk downstairs, and the rest of a fifty-man section of guards in quarters on the top floor. In any case, I am not worried now that my brother is here.”

The orderlies glanced at the pale figure motionless on the stretcher. They looked

at each other embarrassedly, and glanced at the doctor, who jerked his head toward the outside. The inner door closed behind them. A moment later, the outer doors banged shut. There was a sound of footsteps going down the hall.

The Regent exhaled, and sat on a corner of the desk. “So, Harold, even your vitality has its limits.”

Roberts forced the eyelids open, then let them drop. The Regent sighed.

“Life is a curious thing. We act—for what reason?—and the act binds us. A motive is assumed. And if we cannot prove a different motive, we are bound by that one. We acquire a reputation, and our actions are interpreted in accordance with that reputation, and motives assigned to us that match the reputation. One man runs and he is a coward. Another runs, and he is going to get reinforcements. It is unfair, and yet it is often true. We shape the mold by our actions, and the mold we have made then shapes our actions. And it is a strong man who can break that mold, once it is formed.”

Roberts sighed, but said nothing.

The Regent said, “*Why* should your family have such vitality? *Why* should they command and others obey? *Why* should I feel pain to see you lying there? *Why*, moreover, should I waste my effort with this sister of yours, seeking to gain approval when approval from her is forever denied me? Fool that I am, I would marry her if she would have me, and rear new little Harold Williams of the same breed, and then nothing at all would be changed.”

Erena said quietly, “Duke Marius believes that our family is bad for Festhold.” She glanced at the Regent. “But the kings of our line have been good rulers.”

The Regent said, “I don’t know why I should want to convince you. It is, of course, impossible. *Certainly* the kings have been good—as *kings*. If they had been bad, I would not have to end the line. The trouble is that they *have* been good. They have given validity to a form of government which otherwise would be invalid. My difficulty is that I must *prove* its invalidity. Yet—after three years of the most painstaking psychological sabotage—your brother—one of this abnormal line—at the very moment towards which all the preparation has been aimed—at this precise moment, your brother reverts to type. He regains his strength, outwits me, convinces the High Command itself, stands suddenly surrounded and protected by his own Guard, destroys the effect of a plan worked out over a period of years, and all at once to put him down is a matter that requires armed force. *Then* he becomes in actual fact the Warlord of Festhold, leads an attack straight into the teeth of an overpowering force, scatters it, captures a tank single-handed, goes back as much dead as alive, removes his troops from the trap I am preparing, and outflanks and captures *me*. Such a person may not be allowed to live!”

Princess Erena said exasperatedly, “*Why?* That is exactly how the King of Festhold is *supposed* to act!”

“Because,” the Regent burst out, “it is *unfair*! The top should be open to *anyone*! Why should I, the second greatest in the realm, be barred off from the top by this—this barrier of royalty?” He whirled suddenly, and bent by the stretcher.

“How are you, Harold?”

Roberts murmured, “Harold?”

The Regent carefully drew down the blankets. “Agh! What a burn that was! The mind connected to the nerve-endings that felt that burn must have gone through hell! And here—” He drew aside the hospital gown. “—Yes, three such wounds as those—*plus* the burn—were you conscious when the restitution tank broke?”

“Broke?” murmured Roberts.

Across the room, Princess Erena began to cry. The Regent pulled back the hospital gown, and drew the covers up into place. He straightened.

Roberts, the surgical scalpel in his right hand, close to his side, lay still, but forced his eyes open. He looked blankly at Duke Marius. The Regent nodded slowly.

“It may turn out, after all. The rumors, of course, may never die completely. But it is the official history that counts, and I will control that.” He nodded, and turned to the quietly sobbing Erena.

“Very well, my dear. He may have his public Trial, as the law requires. And afterward,—” The Regent hesitated, then spoke generously, “you may even go to visit him. Do not complain. You have lost. But you have not lost everything. And it will be best for the country, too. You will see.”

The Regent hesitated, then added, “*Actually*, that is why I am doing this.”

XVII. The Trial



The roll of drums and blast of trumpets, the snap of smartly handled weapons, the ground-shaking tramp of boot heels striking in unison—all were silenced at last as the procession halted in the high open-sided “Cathedral of Truth.” The tall doors along the sides folded back between the massive pillars to allow a view of the proceedings to the ranked array outside, on the gently sloping rise of ground.

In front of Roberts loomed a plain altar. To the right of the altar, overhead lights came on, to illuminate a massive black square-edged opaque block lying tilted up at a slight angle on a strong wooden frame.

Before the altar, a dark-haired, dark-bearded man in dark crimson robe with dark-blue cowl thrown back, spoke quietly. “Our prayers for true guidance, and for a true sign, have been made, and the time is now come for the trial. Step forward, Harold William, and halt before the stone.”

Roberts, who had expected to see a large quartzlike crystal, with the sword projecting upright, found himself instead before a sort of flat slate block with a hemispherical recess a foot across in the end of the block facing him. Inside this hemispherical recess, the hilt of a plain business-like sword could be seen.

The figure before the altar spoke again: “That all may know the outcome of this trial, let the Speaker step forward, and give true and just account.”

A massive figure in dark crimson robe and dark-blue cowl approached with stately tread from Roberts’ right and halted oppressively close to him.

The figure before the altar said, “Let the heir seek to draw the blade from the rock.”

Roberts, puzzled at the utilitarian look of the block and the sword, leaned slightly forward, and found the “speaker” slightly blocking him.

At the same moment, three things happened. Roberts, in leaning forward, was struck by the reflection from the end face of the block, which showed him a narrow horizontal line reaching out from either side of the hemispherical hollow. The line suggested a cleavage in the block, which would enable it to be opened up along the plane of the cavity in which the sword must lie.

As Roberts leaned slightly forward, the speaker beside him intoned, “The heir is trembling. *He falls!*”

At the same instant, Roberts felt a piercing sensation in his right arm—a sensation like the sting of a wasp. The cathedral spun around him, turned end-for-end ... The speaker’s voice was the last thing he heard.

“The rock has spoken—*‘I reject him!’*”

Roberts felt the impact of the hard stones of the cathedral floor, and then nothing.

XVIII. The Lowest Nobleman of the Realm



There was a singing in his ears. At last, the singing died away to be replaced by a voice, and the voice faded into a desolate sobbing. He opened his eyes.

Erena, head bent, hands over her eyes, cried as if the world could never be right again. He sat up dizzily, and there was a rustle and crackle, and the faint stiffness of the cloth on his chest.

Puzzled, he felt his chest, found a piece of stiff paper, and tried vainly to remove it. Erena saw his movement, swallowed, and said, "Lie back, William. You—You're faint, still."

He saw her, and he heard her voice, but as if coming from a distance. His fingers found the head of a large pin, and he drew it out.

The paper—or card—fell loose, and lay face-up on the ground:

Patent of Nobility

Know all men by this document that we, the Lords Spiritual of the Holy Temple of Festhold, do hereby warrant that Harold William (formerly of the Royal Family of Festhold) is, of a right, and by ancient usage, secured, he and his heirs and assigns forever, full title to the Baronage of Scrattel and is to be known in future in the style of the Baron of Scrattel, which rank and privilege is and shall rank behind, beneath, and below, the rank and privilege of each and every other Festhold title of nobility at present existing, including but not limited to the former lowest rank of nobility, the Baronage of Foulmarsh.

Done this day, by accord with ancient usage.

From the bowl-shaped hollow surrounding the Cathedral of Truth came a quiet shout—and then a curious sound, like a drawn-out moan. Roberts, heart beating fast, looked up dizzily from the paper. He was aware that, as he looked up, Erena looked up too, at a crimson-robed dark blue-cowled figure which laid a hand on her shoulder.

"The Regent commands your presence, Erena. It is not proper that one of your rank should consort with the lower ranks of lesser nobles."

Roberts, feeling urgently at his belt, discovered that the sword he had worn to the ceremony was there—the same sword, apparently, with which he—or rather, the Prince—had fought several months before.

A voice was intoning from the Cathedral: "The sword moves! But now—something seems to draw it back—now the Regent strengthens his grasp—the cloth tightens at his arm—"

Roberts glanced at the watchful crimson-robed figure, listened to the voice, and suddenly laughed. He bowed slightly. "By your permission, Your Worship."

He glanced at Princess Erena. "If Your Highness will for a moment condescend to the lowest of the nobles—"

He took off robe and shirt. The crimson-robed watcher sucked in his breath. “It is forbidden for a male to disrobe before a Royal Princess!”

Princess Erena’s eyes flashed, and her lips tightened. “What is it, William?”

“I am curious about the ‘wasp’ which stung me when the ‘speaker’ in there brushed my arm. Is there a swelling?—In the right arm.”

The crimson-robed figure stepped forward authoritatively, blocked the princess with his arm—Erena’s mouth came open. She gasped—and then crumpled to the ground.

The priest snarled, “You have shocked her! *Go!*” He raised his arm and pointed.

From the Cathedral of Truth, the voice of the speaker intoned: “Now—*now* it begins to draw out—but no—some malign force draws it back ... The Regent, his great muscles distended—”

Roberts decided that the sword in the stone was at least the equal of Duke Marius, even if it had been slit open and half-a-dozen electromagnets planted in it by the temple priests. That left Roberts time for a more pressing question. He stepped forward, hit the crimson-robed figure across the face, jerked off the robe, and spotted the wrist strap with the round disk, a pointed needle protruding from its center.

“Now, by the Almighty Power—” said a familiar voice, and suddenly Roberts recognized the voice.

Prince Harold William, now the Baron of Scrattel, had the proof plainly before him of what must have happened. Too late, it dawned on Roberts that the Prince would have been far more overawed, and hence less capable of realizing what had been done to him, inside the Cathedral of Truth. But he knew now.

As the “speaker” intoned from within, describing further struggle between Duke Marius and the recalcitrant Sword, and as a low moan and a stamping of feet seized the assembled crowd, the Prince drew his own sword from its sheath, and spoke flatly: “One act of disobedience and your life ends here. Put on your cloak.”

The Prince’s sword reached out and lightly touched the strap on the temple priest’s wrist. The strap parted, and the device fell to the ground.

The priest hesitated, looking at the very light line of blood droplets forming where the sword had touched him. Suddenly he began to tremble, and put on the crimson robe.

The Prince spoke coldly, and the words were an iron command: “Lift and carry the Princess.”

The scarlet robed figure obeyed.

“Walk straight to the main door of the Cathedral.” The Prince, sword drawn,

followed close behind. Ahead of them, the tall doors stood open.

XIX. The Warlord's Challenge



The standing space of wide high-vaulted interior was filled, and the aisles clogged with armed noblemen straining to see better what was taking place up front.

The “speaker” was intoning: “...Now ... now! ... *Now!* Now the stone yields! The sword begins to draw forth ... Hold! ... Something draws it back!...”

The impatience of the crowd was evident in the murmurings, jostlings, and occasional tramping of feet that started up from one or another quarter of the crowd. The temple priest halted.

“We can’t get through.”

The Prince drew in his breath. His voice suddenly dominated the gathering, silencing the “speaker”, stopping the disorder of the crowd, turning faces all over the cathedral. The command, loud, clear and carrying, seemed to remain, somehow echoing in the silence, after the words had been spoken: “**MAKE WAY FOR THE WARLORD!**”

As the crowd craned, the Prince spoke more quietly, but his voice still carried: “Step aside, gentlemen. We will end this farce, now and forever!”

Preceded by the temple priest carrying the unconscious girl, the Prince paced slowly up the aisle, the bare sword in his hand, as the curious nobles moved out of the way. At the front of the cathedral, there was silence as the temple priests and the Regent looked on, as much at a loss as everyone else.

Suddenly one of the temple priests smiled. His voice, amused and contemptuous rang out: “Why look! It is the Baron of Scrattel!”

Roberts could feel the sudden pain of the Prince, and realized that this insignificant blow had found the joint in the Prince’s armor. Roberts didn’t wait for the Prince to recover. He spoke carefully, and the magnificent voice rose over the crowd:

“**IT IS THE WARLORD.**”

The statement rang in the air, flat, final, and definite.

Roberts suddenly could feel the change in the atmosphere. A murmur passed through the crowd, followed by intense silence. Ahead of him, the aisle opened up.

At the front of the Cathedral of Truth, the temple priests stood staring. The

Regent, slightly bent over, drenched in sweat, one hand in the hemisphere of the crystal, looked on with a ludicrous expression of disbelief.

The scarlet-robed figure carrying the Princess now reached the head of the aisle. The Prince said, "Turn and face the assembly." His voice carried. The temple priest turned around, holding the Princess.

"My lords and gentlemen," said the Prince, facing still toward the head of the aisle, "I trust you will forgive my speaking with my back to you, but it is unsafe to take one's eyes from these clever hirelings who masquerade in the cloth of our Church, though they are in reality servants of this false and regicide regent. The same who is still struggling here to draw the sword!"

Well above the level of the aisle, a white-haired, white-bearded figure in faded scarlet robes looked down from a little balcony, and a grim smile crossed his face. The Regent straightened, let go of the hilt of the sword still in the crystal, and began to speak.

The Prince abruptly stepped forward, his voice cut the Regent short. "Observe, my lords and gentlemen!"

With two quick strokes, he slit the back and then the arm of the 'speaker's' crimson cloak, reached out with his free hand, and tore the rest of the sleeve loose. Under the cloth was the same round device the other temple priest had worn.

"*Raise,*" said the Prince—and the sting of a wasp burst at his chest into spreading waves of agony. For the second time the cathedral spun around him. White-hot fire seemed to bathe his body.

The Prince fought off the pain, and sucked in a deep breath. His voice rose over the assemblage:

"KILL ME THESE SCARLET HIRELINGS—AND THIS REGICIDE TRAITOR!"

Then the drug was swept on to his brain, and the last thing he heard was the shout of the crowd.

XX. The Regent's Reply



Somewhere, once again, birds were singing.

"Well, well," said a coarse feminine voice, "I see you're coming around, Charmer. Too bad your little dream didn't work out. But you've still got us."

The Prince's eyes opened. Beside the head of the bed stood a girl of nineteen or so, heavy, wearing a tight black skirt and a tight pink blouse. Near the foot of the bed, lips warped up in a smile that bared a lot of teeth, stood the short plump red-faced tutor.

“Well, Ex—about that twist—you always wanted—”

Roberts braced himself, heard the girl say insinuatingly, “After all, you're just the Baron of Scrattel now. You might as well enjoy yourself—”

The tutor added, faintly smiling, “—while His Majesty wins the hand of fair Erena—No relation to you any more, of course—”

The Prince tried to get up. The ropes held him where he was. The tutor glanced at the girl, and bared his teeth in a smile.

The Prince sucked in a deep breath. He wrenched, twisted. The blood pounded in his ears. The girl screamed. The tutor shouted, “*Get the hypo!*” The ropes broke.

The tutor jumped back, eyes staring, jerked out a knife—The Prince reached out, gripped an unlit lamp on a table, threw it hard—The lamp hit the tutor squarely in the chest, knocked him against the wall. He banged his head, fell to the floor—

The girl rushed in carrying the hypodermic. The Prince's voice was an iron command; “*Inject the tutor.*”

The girl swallowed, tried to speak, looked blank, turned, knelt by the tutor, and pulled back his sleeve. She pushed the hypodermic into the flesh, and slowly pressed the plunger. She withdrew the hypodermic, stood up trembling, wiped her upper lip and then her forehead, dropped the hypodermic, turned, and suddenly left the room.

The Prince knelt by the tutor, and pried the knife from his fingers. He went out the door, and found himself in a rough room about twelve feet square, with a table in the center, an oil lamp with badly trimmed wick smoking on the table. Beside the lamp was the Patent of Nobility guaranteeing to Harold William the Baronage of Scrattel.

The Prince glanced briefly at the paper, then walked to what appeared to be the outer door of the room. Holding the knife by his side, the blade turned back out of sight, he pulled the door open with his left hand.

A burly guard, carrying a rifle in his right hand, turned around. His heavy brows came together to form a flat line over clear and startled eyes.

“Say, now—where do you think *you're* going?”

He planted his big left hand flat on the Prince's chest, and shoved. The Prince pressed his own left hand hard over the hand on his chest, pinning it there, and bowed, bending the hand sharply back on the wrist. The guard sucked in his breath, and went to his knees. The gun crashed on the floor.

“A slight motion,” said the Prince gently, pinning the captive hand, bowing just a bit more, and showing the knife, “and your life’s blood flows out on this dirt.”

“No—”

“Who do you serve?”

“The Regent.”

“Serve now Harold William, Lord Scrattel, Warlord of Festhold, or—”

“Your lordship is not as the Regent described. I transfer my allegiance. The Regent lied.”

The Prince straightened. “And what did the Regent say?”

“He said you were a debauchee given to fits of fainting, living only for dope and depravity.” The guard massaged his wrist. “No self-respecting freeman could willingly serve such a person, even were he the Lord of Scrattel himself. The Regent said it was not for long, and I would get two minims a week for each report.”

“No reason why not,” said the Prince, studying the guard’s face. “Come to me, and we will work the reports out together. I must fail rapidly in these reports—but not so that I do not have time to deal with this Regent.”

“But how will your lordship do that?”

“Surely the Baronage of Scrattel, though it is not the greatest on the planet, has weapons for the service of its lord?”

“Aye—There’s Salver, the great sword of the Third Lord, and there’s the Gun in the Great House, where it is always kept. But—”

“But what?”

“How will my lord *reach* the Regent?”

“If you can send reports to him, I can reach him by the same road as the messenger who bears the reports.”

The guard shook his head. “If your lordship has the time—I might show the nature of the difficulty.”

The Prince nodded. “Good. But first, is there some weapon here? If the Regent has other guards—”

“No—or rather, I am in charge of such others as there are. The Regent wished to leave some of his own men on guard, but they swore that they would die out of his presence, and he finally decided that I could do it, with such freemen of Scrattel as I could muster. To watch such as he described—” The guard shrugged.

“Still, I would like a weapon.”

“In the cupboard behind the door, there should be a hogsticker. One moment, my lord, I’ll go look.”

The guard led the way in, turned the lamp way down, growled, “What a fearful waste of oil,” went into the darkest corner of the room, wrenched and twisted at what appeared to be the wall itself—then something gave a loud squeak, and the guard staggered back, grunted in satisfaction, then swore.

“Ah, well—here we are.”

Prince Harold William stepped back as a large rat bolted past him for the open door. Then the guard appeared, carrying a short heavy spear.

“For such as we are likely to run into, this should be enough.”

The Prince took the spear. “Do you have trouble with the rats here?”

“The cats are afraid of ‘em, my lord. We can’t seem to put them down. But the wild hogs are worse.”

“M’m. Well, lead the way.”

The guard swung his gun so as to have it ready, and led the way down a path that led through heavy brush into a field high with hay. He pointed as he walked. “Yon’s the Great House.”

The Prince glanced at a sort of low stone barn covered with moss, and combined with a square tower at one corner. Roberts, seeing the same things that the Prince was seeing, asked himself what the history of Festhold must be for it to have such a place in it as the Baronage of Scrattel. Roberts had the sensation of being in a backwater of time itself.

The Prince growled, “Only show me the road out of here—”

The guard put his hand on the Prince’s arm. “Careful, my lord. Every few years, we lose a child this way.”

He pushed aside a dense growth of brush, and the Prince pressed forward, then abruptly stopped. The woods ended in empty air. He looked down to see the edge of a cliff. He leaned slightly forward. Hundreds of feet below, blue water sparkled.

As he pressed back the brush to see more clearly, his gaze followed the blue water, out and out—to the horizon.

XXI. Restlessness In Festhold

Colonel Valentine Sanders sat back, and ran a hand through his close-cropped iron-gray hair. “I have to admit, Roberts, I owe you a debt of gratitude for taking on this job. If there is anything I hate, it’s an inside job—and this one tops the average by a long distance.”

Roberts said exasperatedly, “No matter what I do, or what the Prince decides to do, Duke Marius had already worked out some low blow or dirty trick to nullify it.”

The colonel’s eyes narrowed. “Nevertheless, it has gained time for us—four months of unexpected surprises for the Festhold Regent.”

“Who,” asked Roberts. “is now king?”

“According to the Lords Spiritual of the Holy Temple of Festhold...”

“What about the nobility?”

“According to these same Lords Spiritual, the Regent was tacitly approved by a two-thirds majority of the nobility at the ceremony in which the Regent drew the sword from the stone.”

“ ‘Tacitly’?—Isn’t there supposed to be a formal vote?”

“Their constitution doesn’t lay it down definitely.”

“He *did* finally draw the sword?”

The colonel smiled. “By now, Roberts, we have crucial spots on the planet well saturated with parasite circuits. The technology of Festhold is highly developed, but one of the things they aren’t familiar with is a spy-device that amounts to little more than a charged dust-particle. I doubt that it occurs to them that such a thing could be possible. We already had the parasite circuits there, and the micro-relays sowed, when the Prince went to draw the sword from the stone. We were watching when the ‘speaker’ bumped the Prince with his arm. We were unseen observers when Duke Marius got a grip on the sword and tried to draw it from the rock, and when the Prince, preceded by the temple priest carrying Princess Erena, came back into the Cathedral of Truth. As for whether the Regent finally managed to draw the sword—well, he drew a sword, Roberts, and brandished it over his head.”

“What sword was this?”

The colonel swiveled his chair, picked up a little pamphlet, and tossed it on his desk. Roberts found himself looking at a nicely printed booklet with the title in large red letters:

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE TRIAL

Roberts opened the booklet, to look at a remarkably well drawn sketch showing the Prince standing before the stone, with the “speaker” approaching from the side.

Beneath the sketch was a single sentence: “Never before has a ‘speaker’ joined in a Trial.”

Roberts turned the page, to read:

WHY WAS THE SPEAKER THERE?

On the opposite page, a sketch showed the Prince beginning to reach out to the stone, and also showed the “speaker” bumping the Prince.

Roberts turned the page, to see the Prince falling to the floor over the caption, “The heir is trembling. *He falls!*”

The next sketch showed the speaker’s arm enlarged, his cloak cut away as if by a pair of scissors. Strapped to his arm was a round device with a sharp needle in the center. Roberts turned the page, to see the speaker faintly smiling as the Prince was carried out.

On the next page, the Regent, faintly smiling, reached out to grip the hilt of the sword in the stone. The next four pages, in realistic detail, were devoted to a progressively more disheveled and desperate Regent straining to draw the sword from the stone, as a progressively less confident “speaker” intoned:

“The sword moves!”

“The Regent strengthens his grasp...”

“Some malign force draws it back...”

“The Regent, his great muscles distended—”

The following two pages showed the Regent, the speaker, and the temple priests drawn back in horror, as the Prince, sword drawn, advanced up the aisle, preceded by a temple priest carrying Princess Erena.

Next came a view of a different temple priest crouched on a balcony aiming a long gun with large sights, and then a scene showing the Prince falling.

Following that, a crowd of temple priests stood around the fallen Prince, blocking the view, as other temple priests rushed up in a body to further block the view of the stone. Yet another, carrying something under his cloak, hurried toward the stone itself.

The next scene, magnificently detailed, showed the Regent, his expression relieved, drawing out a sword, the scabbard of which was held close underneath the rock by a crouching temple priest. When the Regent triumphantly waved the drawn sword overhead in the following scene, the sword had apparently been drawn from the stone itself.

Beneath the sketch were the words: “*Thus* he drew the sword.”

The final sketch showed the Regent, still waving the sword, shouting at the blank-faced and confused nobles. The caption beneath read: “Thus he was approved by the nobles.”

The last page bore the words:

IS DUKE MARIUS KING??

Roberts leafed carefully through the booklet once again, smiled, and handed it back to the colonel.

The colonel said, “A print shop set up very quietly on the planet, a few years back, turned this pamphlet out by the hundreds of thousands of copies. I think it’s fair to say that there is now a certain amount of restlessness in the Kingdom of Festhold.”

“Where is Erena?”

“She’s the Regent’s guest in his City Palace.”

“How far are we from Festhold right now?”

The colonel smiled. “Just outside massometer detection range of the nearest Festhold warship.”

“And where is the Festhold Royal Guard?”

“Loaded into transports and being shuttled from one destination to another,”

“I see.”

“What do you have in mind, Roberts?”

“I think we’ve gone about as far as an ‘inside job’ is likely to take us—unless *someone* wants to do an inside job on Duke Marius—”

The colonel shook his head. “Theoretically, there seems to be no reason why not. But in practice, something goes wrong—assuming we find a volunteer willing to let someone like Duke Marius—ah—‘drive’ the volunteer’s ‘vehicle’ during his own absence.”

Roberts said, “How many such volunteers are there?”

“For that assignment, we’d be doing well to locate anyone who would listen past the first three sentences. In all ways, it seems to work best if there is at least *some* compatibility in character,”

“So that approach is out?”

The colonel said irritably, “Roberts, *I* am not volunteering. Are *you*?”

“No, sir,” said Roberts flatly.

“Then,” said the colonel, “I think we can safely say that approach *is* out.”

“All right, then we had better approach this from the outside.”

The colonel frowned, “The natural result will be a head-on clash between Duke Marius’ supporters and whoever will rally to Harold William. This could result in a lot of casualties—and incidentally lose us Harold William.”

Roberts said, “I think I see a way to avoid that.”

The colonel looked interested. “What do you have in mind, Roberts?”

“Of course, it’s only the beginning of an idea—”

The colonel leaned forward. “Never mind that. Possibly we can develop it. Let’s hear it.”

XXII. The Outside Job



Roberts carefully looked over the filled-in message blank, sat back in the patrol ship’s control seat, and read intently:

MESSAGE BEGINS
HM FORCES CONTROL
FESTHOLD CAPITOL

TO COMMANDING OFFICER
OUTER DEFENSE COMMAND
SECTOR U3R

URGENT
ULTIMATE SECRET
TOP PRIORITY

EMBARK ROYAL GUARD REGIMENT AT ONCE
DESTINATION FESTHOLD CAPITOL
BY COMMAND THE REGENT

TOP PRIORITY

ULTIMATE SECRET
URGENT

MESSAGE ENDS

Roberts pressed a button to the left of the instrument panel, near a glowing amber lens lettered "Sym Cmp."

Roberts said, "This order to the Commanding Officer of Festhold's outer Defense Command will be sent by S-Wave?"

"That is correct," said the blank voice of the symbiotic computer. "A communications probe will enter and transmit from the nearby Festhold communications node."

Roberts said uneasily, "Is this in the usual style of Festhold military commands? For instance, there's no *name* for this commanding officer."

"Owing to the rapid depletion of manpower in Sector U3R," said the symbiotic computer, "this is customary. Festhold commanders usually lead their troops in person. In Sector U3R, which is in close contact with the Stath, the life expectancy of a Festhold military commander is low."

"Even at the top?"

"Average life expectancy of commanding officers in this sector is 4.9 weeks during active combat. Combat is now exceptionally severe."

"I thought the Stath were secretly negotiating with the Regent."

"This is the Stath manner of negotiating."

Roberts frowned, and glanced again at the message. "This is classified 'Ultimate Secret,' yet we're going to send it by S-Wave from a communications probe?"

The symbiotic computer sounded noticeably smug. "A Festhold encoder was covertly removed by one of our I-Class ships from a ruined Festhold command center following a recent heavy Stath raid. We have the encoder and the code-of-the-day signal."

"So this command will go out in code, by the usual military channel?"

"That is correct."

"It's sent on the authority of 'The Regent.' Hasn't he claimed to be king?"

"A peculiar situation exists. To the Festhold Armed Forces, 'the King' still means Harold William. To avoid confusion, Duke Marius is still using his title of Regent in military communications."

Roberts nodded, and looked at the second message:

MESSAGE BEGINS
HM FORCES CONTROL
FESTHOLD CAPITOL

TO SECOND-IN-COMMAND
ROYAL GUARD REGIMENT
URGENT
ULTIMATE SECRET
TOP PRIORITY
PERSONAL TO SC RGR
CHANGE IN CODE

SITUATION HERE REQUIRES TOTAL DEVOTION TO THE REALM
YOU MUST BE PREPARED FOR DIRECT ORDER TO CARRY OUT
TASK OF EXTREME DIFFICULTY AND DANGER
I COUNT ON YOU AND ON EACH GUARDSMAN PERSONALLY
BY COMMAND
HAROLD WILLIAM
CO RGR
WARLORD OF FESTHOLD

CHANGE IN CODE
PERSONAL TO SC RGR
TOP PRIORITY
ULTIMATE SECRET
URGENT

MESSAGE ENDS

Roberts said, “This ‘change in code’—”

The symbiotic computer’s voice used the tone of a teacher explaining the alphabet. “Each Festhold soldier has a personal code. This is in order that personal information may be sent to him in privacy. When the message reaches its destination and is deciphered, and then decoded, that portion of the message between the words ‘change in code’ is left untouched. Any routine code-machine’s attempt to interpret the personal message will produce gibberish, or occasionally, a completely false message. A—ah—‘inside job’—has now been completed within the Festhold Inner Message Center, and the personal code-setting of Lieutenant-Colonel Stran du Morgan is now known to us. This code-setting is an instruction to be given to the code-machine, the so-called ‘Festhold encoder.’ The code-machine will then reduce the personal section of the message to the same form as the remainder of the message. The further application of the code-of-the-day setting will then decode the personal message. But this can only be done by someone knowing the personal code of the second-in-command of the Royal Guard Regiment.”

“And if meanwhile he’s been killed?”

“In that event, the message could not be decoded.”

Roberts said exasperatedly, “The message isn’t addressed to Colonel du Morgan. It’s addressed to the ‘second-in-command.’ ”

“Colonel du Morgan *is* the second-in-command.”

“Yes, but if the casualty rate is so high—”

“The Festhold Royal Guard will reach this sector only shortly after the message reaches it. Because of a subspace anomaly, it is possible to reach the Outer Defense Command quickly from Festhold. The clique of Duke Marius now controls the High Command of Festhold. This clique has been keeping the Royal Guard in motion, to prevent the Guardsmen from fraternizing with other military units. By doing so, they would spread the truth about the battle against Duke Marius.”

“It would seem to me,” said Roberts, “that the place for the Regent to have put them, from the first, would have been where the fighting was so heavy that they would be quickly killed off.”

“This is correct.”

“Then—”

“The clique of Duke Marius, the Regent, was nervous and unhinged following the battle, and later the confrontation at the Cathedral of Truth. They have only by stages recovered sufficiently to dare to do this.”

Roberts, having seen things only from the viewpoint of Harold William, said, “It seemed to me that they came out on top without much trouble. No matter *what* the Prince did.”

The voice of the symbiotic computer held a kind of grim satisfaction. “They expected *no* trouble from the Prince. They did *not* win easily. At each unexpected clash, they only won by a narrow margin. At the Cathedral of Truth, for instance, there were actually nobles who drew their weapons and started forward to obey the Prince’s command.”

After an instant’s silence, the symbiotic computer added, “The aim of the Regent was to convince everyone that the Prince was unfit. Instead, there are now contrary rumors of all kinds. There is persistent unrest, and there are many actual witnesses that the Regent’s claim to the throne is false.”

Roberts smiled and nodded. “Okay. Send the messages. Then we have to find out what’s taking place with the Prince.”

XXIII. The Sailors



Harold William, Baron of Scrattel, glanced from the compass to the horizon, then once again looked at the chart in the old encyclopedia. The deck, if he could call it that, was moving around continuously underfoot, there was a ceaseless sloshing of water against the hull, and an endlessly repeated splash as buckets of water were poured overboard. The sails flapped occasionally, but the noise was apparently due to the motion of the boat, not the wind. The wind had given out shortly after they left the island-barony of Scrattel, and they had had to use the engine alone. The engine had failed shortly after taking them out of sight of Scrattel. As Harold William was aware, the next thing to give out would probably be the drinking water.

There was a clearing of the throat, and the former guard, who had turned out to be named Bor, was standing oppressively close in the still, humid air.

Harold William kept his voice level and his tone courteous. “What is it, Bor?”

“It’s the men, Your Lordship.”

There was another splash of water from up forward as another bucket of water was dumped over. “What about them?”

“They want to go back, begging your pardon, my lord.”

Harold William glanced back, squinting his eyes against the glare of the sun on the slight roll of the sea.

“H’m.” He tapped the compass repeatedly and the needle swung around fifteen degrees by small stages.

“Perhaps your eyes are better than mine, Bor. Can you see Scrattel?”

“No, sir. And I haint since yesterday.”

Harold William looked up forward, where Rig Strun and Mak Stran bailed methodically. By the engine, Dar Strun patiently screwed the single spark plug back in, stood up, and put his foot on the starting lever. He straightened his leg with an effort.

Er-er-er-er-er

The engine didn’t catch. The water sloshed and splashed against the hull. The sun beat down. *Splash*—another bucket of water went over the side.

Bor was apologetic, “The men, m’lord—they want to go home.”

Harold William left the diluted glare where the worn strip of canvas partly covered the cockpit in which the warped engine cover had been lifted aside, and stepped out in the full sun.

Up ahead, Rig Strun, gnarled and aged, raised up and shouted, “*Bek! Canna gun! Nae gut!*”

After two days of this, Harold William could laboriously translate the words: “*Back! Can’t go on! No good!*”

But after two days of it, he waited until he reached partial shade cast by the big—and motionless—sail further aft. Then he crouched, and spoke slowly and carefully: “*Canna gae bed. Need’s rae gut t’find.*”

This sounded to Harold William like a clear rendering of “*Can’t go back. Needle*” the local word for compass “*is no good to find.*”

But Rig Strun—and also his brawny grandson, Mak, who had paused to listen—took several minutes for a rapid-fire and incomprehensible exchange of dialect before Rig Strun turned to Harold William, and pointed ahead.

“*Nae thin.*” He pointed back, roughly in the direction of the island.

“*Smeh. Gae clash, us smeh the Oyl.*”

Harold William laboriously translated the first comment into ordinary speech: “*No thing.*” Rig argued that there was no land ahead.

So much for that. Now, what might “*smeh*” mean? After a long silent struggle in which both Struns resumed bailing, Harold William found a combination that seemed to make sense: “*Smell. Go close, us smell the Isle.*”

Harold William was laboriously composing a reply when a loud noise made him jump. BANG!

Back by the engine, Dar Strun waved his arms excitedly. BANG!

Bor, at the tiller, shouted to Harold William. “*T’needle, m’lord!*” BANG!

There was a cool breeze as the boat gathered speed. BANG!

Harold William tapped the needle, and found it was reading true. BANG!

With that vibration, there was no need to tap the needle. BANG!

The boat nearly cleaved the calm water. A wake showed up behind it. BANG!

Harold William pointed slightly to the north. Bor turned the tiller a fraction. The boat heeled slightly, swung a little northward.

Behind them, the wake stretched out. Dar Strun, listening anxiously to the deafening bang, nodded enthusiastically, and took hold of the warped cover. BANG!

Bor shouted, “*Tiller, m’lord. I’ll help Dar!*” Harold William held the tiller steady. Bor sprang forward to help with the engine cover. BANG!

The wake seemed now to stretch out to the horizon. Rig and Mak Strun began to take in the useless sails. BANG!

Bor and Dar lowered the engine cover. Rig pulled back a small lever that started the bilge pump. BAM!

Faintly muffled by the engine cover, the noise was still an assault on the ears and a delight at the same time. BAM!

Harold William, expecting some argument in favor of going back, saw with astonishment Rig, Mak, and Dar go forward to the bow, and stand there beaming. Rig and Mak enthusiastically banged Dar on the back. BAM!

Harold William turned in bafflement to Bor, who grinned, and shouted: “The world is different when your engine works!”

Harold William nodded, beamed, looked ahead, and then checked the compass. Suddenly he looked up again, and peered intently forward. Dimly, on the horizon, he could see a low dark line.

XXIV. The Rivals



Vaughan Roberts, keeping his muscles relaxed with an effort, watched the spy screen that was set up in the forward part of the patrol ship, on the upward-warped deck over the missile bay. On the screen, Duke Marius smiled at Princess Erena, and the Regent’s smile had improved of late. It had less of a sickly cast, and was much more a smile than a grimace. Roberts intently disliked this smile.

“You must understand, Erena,” said the Regent, “that what I have done, I have done for our country.”

Erena looked away, and said nothing. Roberts breathed a little more easily.

“I have,” said the Regent, “become King to free Festhold of outworn superstition, and to bring the dawn of a new age to this outmoded land.”

Princess Erena said quietly, “Superstition is undesirable because it is false, not because it is outmoded. Truth is never outmoded.”

The Regent frowned, then suddenly laughed.

“Erena?”

She looked at him.

He said, “It is a proved scientific fact that ‘acquired characteristics cannot be

inherited.’ Were you aware of that?”

She frowned. “I leave such things to men. All I know of science is that it is useful, and it is dangerous.”

He nodded, still watching her with a smile. It was a smile that transformed his face, and Roberts growled, “Where’s the Prince?”

Morrissey said, “His boat landed about two hours ago.”

“Where is he *now*?”

“We’ve got a poor view through that forest. The last we saw, he was on a dirt road headed west.” Roberts growled exasperatedly.

On the screen, the Regent was saying, “Since acquired traits cannot be inherited, your family must have experienced a mutation of the logical faculty in the past. In your father and your brothers, it had a terrible effect. In you, this logical insight is”—he smiled—“charming. There is not one woman in twenty thousand who has it.”

Erena said stiffly, “Thank you for reminding me of my father and brothers.”

“Erena,” he said earnestly, “I faithfully served your father, and was as stunned by the misfortunes of your brothers as anyone could have been. The error of your logical faculty is that it jumps too soon to the belief in cause and effect. Yes, by your family’s ill-fortune, I have profited. But I profit only for the benefit of the nation itself. The universe is ruled as much by pure chance as by this cause and effect you assume. You unfairly slander me by believing that where I profit, it is because I have sought profit. Have you seen, *yourself*, that what I say is false?”

She hesitated.

Roberts straightened, and banged his head on the three-foot-thick mirror-like cylinder that ran down the axis of the ship.

On the screen, the Regent said earnestly, “I could not love you if I did not love all your family, Erena. The woman has the same genes, the same chromosomes—is the same *thing*—with but a slight change, an insignificant alteration on one chromosome. But in you—”

Roberts snarled, “Bergen!”

Dan Bergen, further aft, in the control seat, said, “*Sir*?”

“Find out from the symbiotic computer if we can continue to avoid detection while we camouflage the ship’s hull. Or will the camouflage interfere, and make us visible to their detectors?”

There followed a low exchange between Bergen and the symbiotic computer, drowned out for Roberts by the Regent’s impassioned plea to Erena, for understanding. Behind Roberts, Hammell said absently, “You know, the guy’s sort

of convincing, at that.”

Roberts bit off the reply that came to him, and then Bergen called, “We can do it, but *why?*”

On the screen, the Regent took Erena’s hand. Erena withdrew her hand, but slowly, her expression thoughtful. The Regent’s eyes flashed, and his smile broadened.

Roberts turned and banged Hammell accidentally. He snarled, “Excuse me,” and went back to the control seat. Bergen started to get up, but Roberts put a hand on his shoulder.

The voice of the symbiotic computer spoke from a little grille to the left of the external viewscreen. “Effective non-detectability may be maintained during and after normal alteration of the ship’s appearance. Why should we do this, however?”

“The Regent of Festhold—”

“Correction, this is now Duke Marius. The Regent of Festhold has broken numerous laws, and betrayed his trust. His regency officially ended with the first betrayal of his trust.”

“As far as the population of Festhold knows, he is now not only Regent but King!”

“The population is not informed.”

“All right. The Re—”

“Duke Marius.”

Roberts waited a moment, until his head cleared, then said carefully, “Duke Marius is trying to win Princess Erena over to him. If he can do that, and if she marries him, *then* to a large part of the population his position will be legitimized. The followers of Harold William’s family will be split.”

There was a brief silence. The voice of the symbiotic computer said, “This is at least partly correct.”

“Moreover, such a marriage might badly damage Harold William’s confidence. He could see it as meaning that his own sister had betrayed him.”

“This appears to be true.” The symbiotic computer hesitated, “This probability that the Princess will mate with Duke Marius is what?”

Roberts said carefully, “I don’t know. And the word isn’t ‘mate’, but ‘marry.’ ”

“Another opinion on this subject might be advisable.”

Roberts snarled, “Hammell!”

Hammell jumped. “Sir?”

“The symbiotic computer wants your opinion.”

“What’s the question?”

The voice was louder, and now came from somewhere overhead, about half-way between Roberts and Hammell. “The probability that the Princess Erena will marry with the Duke Marius is, namely:—*What?*” Hammell looked blank, then grinned. “No man could answer that question. With women, how can you tell?”

“This is prejudice.”

“No,” said Hammell, “that’s not it. Men often marry women that *other* women regard as unworthy, and the same holds for women marrying men that other men dislike. These marriages are influenced by—ah—how do I explain—the *attraction* between men and women. And a man, not *being* a woman, can’t judge the strength of the attraction another man has on a woman. So I can’t tell you *what* chance there is that Erena will marry him.”

The symbiotic computer was silent. Roberts, frowning in thought, decided to try a new tack. “The Patrol is low on personnel.”

“This is correct. However, what connection—?”

“Princess Erena is a candidate-member of the Interstellar Patrol. If she marries Duke Marius, who has broken his trust, won’t that disqualify her?”

There was another brief silence. “That is also correct.”

“So there are several reasons to prevent the marriage.”

“How do you intend to do this?”

“On Tiamaz, Princess Erena appeared to—that is, to some extent, she seemed—” Roberts hesitated.

The symbiotic computer prompted him: “She seemed to wish to mate with you instead of with Duke Marius?”

Hammell grinned. Bergen beat his head, and shook silently. From overhead, Morrissey, holding a wrench, leaned down grinning to look at Roberts’ expression. Roberts drew a breath of air, and said carefully, “There seemed to be some attraction.”

“Then,” said the symbiotic computer, “if you were closer, *this* attraction might draw the Princess away from Duke Marius? This seems logical.”

Roberts said exasperatedly, “Now that we’ve got that out of the way—”

The symbiotic computer cut him off. “The plan is specifically what?”

“To put a strain on Duke Marius’ arrangements, take up his time, try to keep him from making headway with Princess Erena—and allow some time to get the Prince

and the Royal Guard here.”

“How is this to be done?”

“Duke Marius is now formally the Chief of State of Festhold?”

“That is correct.”

“And the Chief of State *has* to welcome exalted visitors or give offense. Isn’t that right?”

“It is, if the visitors are sufficiently exalted.”

“In the past, Hammell, Morrissey, and I have played the parts of some very exalted—ah—visitors. If we drop in on Duke Marius now, we *ought* to be able to tie him in knots.”

The symbiotic computer suddenly sounded almost friendly. “This is an excellent idea. The camouflage will be emplaced at once.”

XXV. The Sovereigns’ League



Marius, Duke of Rennel, Earl of Estmaertz, known to some as His Highness the Regent, to others as His Majesty the King, and to still others by shorter and less courteous titles—Marius turned from Princess Erena to the door. “*Who is it?*”

Princess Erena stood up and faced the door.

“Colonel du Berrin, Your Highness.”

“Come in, Colonel.” The Regent turned to Princess Erena. “Pardon me, my dear.”

Princess Erena inclined her head, and stayed where she was.

The door opened, to admit a well built nobleman in the uniform of a colonel of mountain troops, who bowed to Princess Erena, then turned to the Regent.

“Your Highness, we have an exasperating little contretemps to contend with.”

The Regent frowned. “What has happened?”

“The Baron of Scrattel has landed on the mainland.”

The Princess straightened, her eyes glanced quickly at the Regent, then she clasped her hands and stood intently silent. The Regent stiffened.

“Impossible. That backwater had no way out. Moreover, he was left guarded,

and, in fact—” The Regent suddenly glanced at Erena, and stopped in mid-sentence. “Even the reports,” he began again, “on his welfare and progress were to be picked up periodically by armed courier-boats. He could *not* escape.”

Colonel du Berrin said apologetically, “Nevertheless, Sir, we have the report. It seems that he came ashore in an antiquated boat used for local fishing by the goodfolk of Scrattel. He landed with several followers, and set out on the ring road, which in this locality is unimproved. On the way, they met a regiment of the Imperial Division, headed east to embark for the Outer Defense Command.”

“What happened?”

“The Baron drew his sword, and saluted the regimental standard. The regimental commander apparently noticed the way the baron handled his steel, and called out to learn his name.”

“And—”

“The Baron replied, ‘Baron of Scrattel.’ ”

“Then what?”

“The regiment cheered, the standard-bearer dipped the standard, and the regimental commander saluted.”

“The standard can only be dipped to the sovereign.”

“I know it, Sir. I only repeat what was reported to us by the local Chief of Constabulary, who had it from one of his men.”

“These people are reliable?”

“The Chief of Constabulary is. I can’t vouch for his men, but apparently he does.”

“And what did the Baron of Scrattel do?”

“Waved, and went on his way.”

The Regent slowly relaxed. Colonel du Berrin said hesitantly, “Your Highness knows that the Imperial Division was second only to the Royal Guard in its devotion to the Royal Family.”

“I am aware of it. Where is the rest of this division?”

“Strung out along the ring road on the way to the embarkation point.”

“On foot?”

“Yes, Sir. Due to the—the unrest—they hadn’t had time for their monthly training march, and are taking it *en route*.”

“So there are *other* regiments of this division coming along on this road?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“The Baron of Scrattel will meet them one-by-one?”

“Under normal circumstances, Sir—yes, he will.”

“What have you done about this?”

“Reported it to you at once, Sir.”

The Regent frowned, glanced briefly at Erena standing straight and silent. Then his brows came together in a straight black line, he put his hand on the colonel’s arm, as if to guide him outside. There was a harsh rap at the door.

The Regent called, “Who is it?”

“Captain Stang, Sir. Urgent message for Colonel du Berrin.”

“Come in!”

A burly young captain came in, went straight to Colonel du Berrin, clicked his heels, saluted, and held out a long strip of yellow message paper unevenly torn at the top. The colonel took the paper, stared at it, then at the captain, and a fast low-voiced exchange followed. The colonel delivered himself of a choice epithet, turned to the Regent, saw Princess Erena, apologized, and again faced the Regent.

“Sir, I regret—”

“*Now* what? Has Baron Scrattel—”

“No, Sir. This has to do with—to begin—His Royal and Imperial Majesty, Vaughan the First, surnamed The Terrible—” The colonel glanced at the message paper—“Also, with His Royal Excellence, Rasgarrd Seraak. Adjunct-Coordinate to the Empire, Galactic East. Next, Prince Gdazzrik of the March, Imperial Hoheit of the Imperium of Schnarzz.”

“Who the devil—” began the Regent, then paused, turned to Erena, and bowed. “I beg your pardon, my dear.”

Colonel du Berrin went on, “Last we have His Imperial Majesty, Sarkonnian the Second, Lord Auxiliary of the Realm to the West.”

“Well, what has all this—”

“These—”

“I never heard of *any* of them!”

Colonel du Berrin turned to the captain. “Have you identified these individuals?”

“The first—yes, sir.”

The Regent said, “Which one was that?”

“His Royal and Imperial Majesty, Vaughan the First.” The captain hesitated and felt his pockets.

“Well,” said Colonel du Berrin impatiently. “Let’s have it.”

“I took the liberty of running the reference through the duplicator—ah, *here we are!*”

The captain took from a pocket of his tunic a large sheet of paper, which he methodically unfolded. He cleared his throat.

“ ‘Eminent Personages,’ latest edition—let’s see—here it is: ‘Vaughan the First, also known as Duke of Trasimere; the Duke Vaughan. Full title: Vaughan the First, King and Emperor, Duke of Trasimere, Earl of Aurizont; surnamed: The Terrible. For associates, see: Personages of Paradise. Also: H.I.H. Ewald, Duke of Greme; H.I.H., Percy, Duke of Malafont; also: Oggbad, Prince of the Empire, Premier Peer of the Kingdom, High Master of the Unseen Realms. See also: The Empire; Earldom-designate of Paradise, Imperial Trasimere; Paradise; Boschock III; Flanders Foundation ...’ ”

The Regent said, “Seems well documented. This was in ‘Eminent Personages?’ ”

“Yes, sir.”

Colonel du Berrin said, “Cut out the nonessentials and let’s have the meat of this.”

“Yes, sir. Here we are: ‘By force, Duke Vaughan then seized the Chief of Planet (see Glinderen, Philip W.), personally executed a Mr. Peen and one unnamed associate (see Krojac, Nels), and ...’ ”

Colonel du Barren said exasperatedly, “Let’s have that.” He took the sheet of paper, scanned it thoughtfully, then slowly read: “Vaughan the First, Full title, King and Emperor, Duke of Trasimere, Earl of Aurizont; surnamed The Terrible.

“Vaughan’s claim to be the Sovereign of a large and formidable interstellar empire is backed by the now-known facts that:

“1) This personage appeared off the planet Boschock III, commonly and ironically called—because of the conditions on the planet—‘Paradise,’ and seized control of the Planetary government. He then organized the defense of Paradise City against an attack by an entity named Oggbad. After defeating Oggbad, word reached Vaughan that he had been chosen ruler of The Empire.

“2) On Vaughan’s departure, this planet, which was then a member of the Federation of Humanity, was placed by the Federation under the administrative control of P. W. Glinderen as Chief of Planet. Glinderen attempted to arrest Vaughan upon Vaughan’s return. When Vaughan instead arrested Glinderen, Glinderen sent for the Space Force. Vaughan nevertheless dismissed Glinderen, and reestablished personal rule over the planet.

“3) A large force of planetary raiders, believed to be under the leadership of Maury (q.v.) attacked the planet, and were severely mauled by Vaughan’s warship and the reinforced Planetary defenses. The raiders withdrew on the approach of the Space Force fleet sent for by P. W. Glinderen, Chief of Planet.

“4) Vaughan’s own space fleet now began to arrive, backed up by a sizable force containing at least one warship corresponding to the superdreadnought class. Vaughan faced the approaching Space Force fleet, and compelled it to withdraw.

“5) Although Vaughan is not known to have returned to Paradise, the planet is governed strictly in accordance with his regulations, by duly appointed nobles previously chosen by him personally. This planet has become a formidable power in its section of space.

“The conclusion appears inescapable that Vaughan is the ruler of a large, formidable, but distant empire. Rumor holds that special navigating devices are required to reach these remote regions.

“Alternative theories for Vaughan’s actions and evident powers have been advanced, including the thesis that this was an operation carried out by the semi-clandestine Interstellar Patrol; but this is believed to be merely a cover to explain away the backing down of the Federation Space Force before the Imperial Fleet.

“Vaughan’s rank is provisionally rated as being formally equal to that of—say—the President of the Elective Council of the Federation of Humanity. In reality, Vaughan appears to exercise personal control over a powerful Empire whose actual size, however, we cannot accurately estimate. We can only rate him as a Chief of State of the first rank.” The colonel lowered the paper.

“H’m,” said the Regent. “What about these others—there was a—ah—Adjunct Coordinator, or some such thing—”

“Yes, sir. I didn’t take time to look them up.”

“Well?” said the Regent. “Now we know who one of them is, at any rate. But what is it all about?”

The colonel glanced at the captain. The captain said uneasily, “Sir, they’re coming for a visit.”

“What—*now*?”

“Yes, sir.”

“*When*?”

“This afternoon.”

The colonel swore. The Regent delivered himself of a sizzling oath. The colonel and the Regent then both turned and apologized to Erena. Erena, smiling faintly,

accepted the apologies.

“This is,” said the colonel, “a highly inconvenient time. We’ve got the coronation coming up shortly. The Baron of Scrattel is loose on the coast. The—”

“What?” said the captain. He glanced quickly at the Regent. “The Baron of—”

“*Scrattel*,” snarled the colonel. “And the whole damned Imperial Division—Pardon me, Princess—is on the same road. On top of that, the Royal Guard has disappeared from the plot somewhere out at the rim, and we think the damned—I beg your Pardon, Your Highness—Stath have got away with an encoder. Everything is up in the air. The last thing we need is this collection of potentates—”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said the captain stubbornly, “they didn’t offer us a great deal of choice.” He read aloud from the message form:

“...PURSUANT TO OUR MESSAGES NUMBER 106 AND 107: WE THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL OF THE LEAGUE OF SOVEREIGN STATES AGAIN OUR ROYAL WILL TO END THIS PLAGUE IF NEEDS WE MUST BY BLOOD AND STEEL...”

The Regent said angrily, “*What* Messages 106 and 107?”

The captain shrugged. “We never got them, Sir. But *they* don’t know that. Then there’s this passage:

“...THE COMBINED IMPERIAL FLEETS OF THE LEAGUE WILL IF WE SO COMMAND LEND FORCE TO OUR PREVIOUS MILD REQUEST...”

The colonel swallowed and looked at the ceiling. “This is a poor time for it. We’ve already got the Stath stuck crossways of our jaws. The last cut in fleet strength—”

“*Silence!*” snapped the Regent. “Let’s see that message!” He read the message intently, then looked up.

“Have you replied to this?”

“No, Sir,” said the captain. “I didn’t even know who they were. I just looked up King Vaughan, and then got up here fast.”

“All right. Send: ‘I shall be delighted to welcome Vaughan, Rasgarrd, Gdazzrik, and Sarkonnian to the Kingdom of Festhold. But I must warn that my forces, now partly engaged in combat with the Stath Confederacy, may be even more heavily engaged in the near future. If peace cannot be arranged with this opponent, I will have little to spare for joint ventures with my fellow sovereigns. If, however, you will send copies of your messages number 106 and 107, which have not reached us, we will examine them at once.’ Sign it ‘Marius,’ and send it out.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the captain turned to go, there was another pounding of fists on the door. “

Who is it now?” roared the Regent.

“Lieutenant Ritts, Sir. To see Captain Stang!”

“Come in!”

Stang said urgently, “What is it, Ritts?”

“The League ship, sir! They’re small, and even closer than we thought. Covered with gold and platinum, sir, and they bristle with fusion guns. There’s a fleet of prelaunched missiles apparently fed off beamed power from the ship. I hope I did right to give them landing permission, sir. They were pretty short about it.”

“What?—you talked to them direct? What language—”

“Standard Terran, sir. It was all clear enough, but they’ve got a different way of putting things, and—”

“And you told them to land?”

“It was either that or war!”

The captain stepped back and turned to the colonel. The colonel let his breath out and looked at the Regent. The Regent put his hand to his head, then nodded. “All right, get an honor guard out—”

“Sir, they came down at the Old Palace field—Western Imperial Space Facility.”

“*What?*”

The colonel snarled, “For God’s sake! We haven’t used that in—” His face blanked, and he bowed to Erena. “I beg your pardon, Your Highness.” He glanced back at the lieutenant, and his face grew congested. “Listen, did you—”

“I tried to get them into a temporary holding pattern, sir. We’ve got military traffic over Capital Spaceport six deep. Before I could get through to the Slot Controller at Capital, one of these monsters got impatient—”

The Regent said, “*Monsters?*”

“They were transmitting with vision, sir. One of these creatures looks like a—some kind of shark—crossed with a giant squid. That doesn’t cover it, but it gives you an idea. And he said something like, ‘Durst these poltroons treat us to another delay?’ and the one that looked human said, ‘Let it not disturb us. There is a suitable field.’ That’s when they headed for Old Palace.”

“You had already given landing permission?”

“Yes, sir. But I had requested that they hold off until we could fit them in.”

The Regent said abruptly. “Colonel du Berrin, I trust you to see to it that the Baron of Scrattel is transported back to his island—unhurt, if possible. I will take care of these foreign guests, myself. *Captain!*”

“Sir?”

“Call out a regiment of the Parashock Division to serve as honor guard.”

The colonel said, “Pardon, sir. The Parashock Division had that little disturbance when their officers got back from the ceremony at the Cathedral of Truth. Following your standing order, General Mertz sent them to the Stath front as soon as the shipping schedule permitted, and the last units left the day before yesterday.”

“Then send a regiment of the Capital Division.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a hammering at the door. The Regent, the colonel, the captain, and the lieutenant turned to look.

The Regent snarled, “Now what?” He raised his voice. “*Who is it?*”

“Sergeant Ayns, Sir! For Lieutenant Ritts!”

“Come in!”

The sergeant thrust inside, stared at the officers, saluted, and at once spoke to the lieutenant. The sergeant’s voice carried. “They haven’t landed at the Old Palace after all, sir.”

“No?” said the lieutenant, his voice alarmed.

“No, sir.”

“Well, don’t stand there hoarding trouble! Let’s have it! Are they down?”

“Oh—Aye, sir, they’re down, all right.”

“*Where?*”

“They didn’t like the look of the Old Palace when they got close, sir. Too broke up. Place was all deserted. The one with all the teeth said he’d as soon land in a salt marsh as there. The human-looking one tried to calm them down. You know, sir, one of them things is in a kind of armored tank with—”

The lieutenant said impatiently, “Will you come to the *point*? They *are* down, are they?”

“Oh, yes, sir. They’re down, all right.”

“*Where?*”

“Well, they looked at this, and they looked at that, and for one reason this wouldn’t do, and for another that was no good, and they finally set down on the ring road—”

The colonel said, “The ring road!—*Where* on the ring road?”

“Just about sixty-five and one-half feet from the Baron of Scrattel, sir, according to the escort boat following them down.”

The Regent shut his eyes, the colonel swallowed hard, and the captain barked, “Well, don’t stop there! *Then* what? What happened *then*?”

The sergeant said blandly, “Why, I dunno, sir. I left just then, sir. I figured you’d want to hear about it, sir.”

XXVI. The Warlord’s Army



Roberts was first out of the ship, wearing battle armor that blazed in silver and gold, the peak of his helmet adorned with a tapering spire, a coat of arms flashing on his breastplate.

Harold William, Baron of Scrattel, put out a hand to hold back his two rough companions, and advanced over the dirt. A little dust still drifted past from the feet of the regiment that had just marched by.

Roberts spoke, and his voice was amplified by the armor: “Is this, then, the Kingdom of Festhold?”

Harold William, whose voice needed no amplifier, spoke in the carrying tone of finality Roberts was so used to hearing: “This is Festhold. Who are you?”

Up the road, the regiment was becoming aware that something was taking place behind it. The shouts of officers and the shrill blasts of signal whistles split the air.

Roberts said, his voice carrying, “In this region of space, I am nothing but a visitor. Elsewhere, there are those who call me king. My name is Vaughan. And who might you be?”

Harold William laughed, “Here, there are those who call *me* king, and others who say I am the lowest noble in the realm. We are, it seems, well matched. My name is Harold.”

Roberts advanced, his armored hand outstretched.

“Welcome, Harold to the League of Sovereigns! Fear not the grip of this iron fist—I’ll leave my hand relaxed—I am here with some friends seeking wrongs to right—a royal diversion—and the white-livered poltroons of yon city durst ignore my first two messages. Bedamned with them! The plague of unchallenged evil is spreading over this whole realm of space. Are we of the Empire to let it creep slowly upon us unchallenged? Or should we seek it out, smash its skull and rip its limbs apart ‘ere it breeds fresh troubles? What think you, Harold?”

Roberts' voice, carrying, was reaching the wide-eyed troops who had halted and faced about, and their officers who were now hurrying to the head of the column.

Harold William's voice was enthusiastic, but faintly tinged with sadness: "I agree with you, Vaughan! I would that I were a king. But I have found that evil, well established, has many strings to its bow. I can claim one title only, but that title I *do* claim: *I am the Warlord of Festhold.*"

Harold William's voice rang in the air, and suddenly the closest of the troops shouted. Those further back joined in. Then the whole regiment was cheering.

Roberts' voice, amplified, carried loud and clear: "Well said, Warlord of Festhold! Then let us all of good will unite, and meet the might of evil head-on, smash their bones and break their skulls, and hurl the false tyrants from their thrones!"

Roberts had been trying to frame his reply to suit the taste of the warlike subjects of Festhold. But what came out sounded considerably stronger than he'd intended. The troops, however, gave a roaring cheer, the officers drew their swords and waved them overhead, then the cheering settled into a thunderous chant:

"Harold to the throne! ... *Harold to the throne!* ... Long live King Harold!"

Up the road, a body of troops tramping on in clouds of dust heard the cheer, caught the words, and broke into enthusiastic shouts. The words echoed back from the distance: "Long live King Harold!" Harold William glanced intently all around, stepped forward, caught hold of Roberts' arm and pointed. "It is at such times as this, when I appear to have a chance to win, that some unfortunate thing takes place—and next I wake up helpless in a medical vat or marooned on an island. Do you see that speck on the horizon, Vaughan?"

"I see it."

"Do you notice also that dot in the sky overhead?"

"I see that, too."

"The dot is a patrol ship of some kind, which is undoubtedly relaying word of everything which takes place here. The speck, you notice, is growing larger, and dividing into several smaller individual parts. That will be air-borne troops. These troops here are the Imperial Division. They are among the toughest fighters in the Realm of Festhold—but they are unprepared, strung out on a training march, and in no shape to put up a fight. We are far from the Capital. My enemy is right there at the center of power, and manipulates the levers of control at his will. There is only one way to beat him, and that is not to strike at his hand or his armored glove, but at the nerve center of the whole conspiracy, Duke Marius himself. Is your ship fast?"

"It is."

"Then leave me here to head these troops. *You* go straight to the Capital! As you

are head of a foreign power, you can demand to see Duke Marius. Only keep him away from controlling the levers of power for an hour or so, and I will turn this world upside down and dump him out of it!”

Roberts said, “I can give you armor—”

“Thank you, Vaughan, but keep the armor. The troops have to recognize me. I could kill them by the hundreds and never win. But let me talk to any true warrior of Festhold for one minute, and I will end the hold of this false Duke who serves as Regent—only just keep the Regent occupied! He can’t fight, but he is a genius at trickery!”

Roberts growled, “I’ll do my best.” He raised his voice. “Then I’ll do as you suggest, Warlord! Good luck!”

The troops, meanwhile, had followed the gesture of Harold William, seen the coming transports, and the officers had exchanged a few words. Now, the blast of signal whistles cut through the din of the approaching aircraft.

As Roberts waved briefly to Harold William before dropping into the ship, the troops spread out. The standard bearer ran up to plant the regimental standard beside Harold William. The regimental commander spoke into a handset, then stood, hands clasped, directly behind the Prince. Out of the center of the column of fast-dispersing troops glided a monster fusion cannon, apparently moving on antigravs, which settled down beside the standard, elevated its blunt muzzle, and with short sharp motions shifted from target to target amongst the approaching boxy aircraft. Along the road, in either direction, low clouds of dust spread out, and indistinct blobs began to resolve themselves into fast-moving tanks and gun-carriers.

Roberts settled into the control seat, carefully took the controls with his armored hand, slowly lifted the ship, and aimed its prow directly at the airborne troop carriers. Moving slowly, he headed directly amongst them, and watched on the outside viewscreen.

The screen presented him with a view taken from one of the prelaunched missiles that floated apart from the patrol ship, and that added a special flavor to the experience of the troops in the transports; the missiles, most of them being slim, and suggestive of the gigantic power let loose in interstellar wars, floated over, under, and through the formations of lightly armored transports. One of them, as if giving a pointed hint, lingered behind the rest, floated protectively above Harold William, then slowly passed directly through the formation of transports filled with nervously sweating troops. The patrol ship itself, flashing in accents of gold, silver, and platinum, emblazoned with dazzling coats of arms, moved daintily in the center of this armada of destruction. The eyes of the troops, nervously squinted against the dull glint of the slowly drifting missiles, turned their heads to be blinded by the blazing flash of silver and gold.

Meanwhile, the officers of the airlifted regiment, glancing alternately at the fusion cannon beside Harold William, his obviously loyal troops already spread out and

under cover, the clouds of dust from reinforcements fast approaching from up and down the road, the standard beside him glittering with battle stars, and then—glancing up backwards over their shoulders at a drifting interstellar missile suggestively lingering on the scene—these officers were not in the best frame of mind to carry out the order they had just been given:

“Seize by force the false pretender incorrectly known as Harold William, Prince of Festhold—who is actually the insane Baron of Scrattel—and return this lunatic baron to the island of Scrattel, unhurt if conditions permit.”

While the men sweated and the officers uneasily glanced at each other, a clear compelling voice rose to greet them. It was a voice that carried, and that seemed to ring in the air: “Soldiers of the Capital Division! We see and recognize your emblem! We see it ringed with stars for battles you have fought for king and country! Will you still fight for the Realm? Do your swords and guns still belong to the Rulers and Warlords who have led you in a hundred battles for Right and Justice? Will you still rally to the Warlord of Festhold when his voice calls to you?

“Or are you held in chains by the false regicide who calls himself the ‘Regent’ of Festhold?—He who has killed your King—who has arranged ‘accidents’ for your King’s sons, he who tries now to disinherit the last of the line of Festhold!

“Men of the Capital Division! I have defeated this false traitor in combat man-to-man! I have defeated him in fair and open war against the odds of heavy numbers! I have demanded the surrender of this so-called Regent at the point of sword and gun, and received it! Twice I have spared his life! And twice he has paid his debt with treachery!

“No regicide, no traitor, no liar, however clever, can rule over Festhold! Such a creature has no power to command any warrior of Festhold! You have no duty to this lying murderous tyrant! Your duty is to the Warlord of Festhold! I am now going to throw this dog from the throne! Warriors of the Capital Division! *Are you with me?*”

Roberts, watching the outside viewscreen, could see the soldiers in the hovering transports seem to go crazy. They yelled, banged each other the back, waved their weapons in the air, and shouted: “Long live the Warlord of Festhold!”

The regimental officers were beaming, and the commander turned to give his orders. His transport separated from the others, and sank to the ground. The commander stepped out, approached the Warlord of Festhold, and saluted.

Watching the screen, Roberts relaxed. “Now he’s got an army ... Morrissey!”

Toward the bow of the patrol boat, where the deck warped up over the missile bay, a thing turned that looked like a muscular sea horse in an armored tank.

“Sir?” said Morrissey’s voice.

“Does the spy-screen show us anything about the Regent?”

“Yes, sir. He’s just entering his Command Center with a colonel, a captain, a lieutenant, a sergeant, and a corporal.”

“Fine. We’ve been neglecting the Regent. Now’s the time to send a message.”

XXVII. A Rough Day at the Com Center



Yes, sir,” Lance Corporal Zarn reported, “the command went out exactly as you called it in, sir. Third Regiment of the Capital Division went right out to nail the boozer to the wall, sir.”

“Good,” said Captain Stang.

Colonel du Berrin snarled, “I’ll thank you, Lance Corporal, not to refer to a nobleman, however low, as ‘the boozer.’ This is the kind of practice that promotes confusion. Refer to him by name or title.”

“The Baron of Scrattel, sir.”

“That’s better. All right, what reports have we on it?”

“Sir, I’ve been doing three men’s work here, and there’s some kind of confusion, because we’ve got a message from a General Harmer, to the effect that he will comply with the Regent’s order concerning the Royal Guard.”

The Regent said, “What about that ship of the Sovereign’s League?”

“Private Beckel has been following that, sir.”

A worn-looking individual, rushing nervously from one message-machine to another, said, “They took off, sir.”

“With or without the Baron of Scrattel?”

“Without, Sir.”

“Scrattel stayed on the ground?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Has the Capital Division gotten there?”

“Yes, sir. Regiment 3 CD got there just as the Sovereign League ship took off.”

“Good, good. What does the Regiment report?”

“Nothing direct as yet, sir. We had a report from a boat that trailed them out from the spaceport. Just as it started back, sir, it reported that the regimental commander

was approaching Baron Scrattel.”

Colonel du Berrin looked approving. The Regent nodded. “All right. Then that’s under control.”

Lance Corporal Zarn spoke up stubbornly, “Begging your pardon, Sir. There’s some confusion somewhere in this message from General Harmer, sir.” The Regent frowned at the lance corporal as if he were a form of peculiar insect.

Colonel du Berrin said drily, “Pray enlighten us, Lance Corporal.”

“Yes, sir. General Harmer only took over this morning. We just got the death notice on General du Streck.”

Private Beckel spoke up knowledgeably, “Head blowed off by an air-drop drifter mine. Begging your pardons, sirs.”

Colonel du Berrin’s brows came together. He and Captain Strang turned at the same time toward the private; but at the apologetic ending of the private’s remarks, they turned away again.

Lance Corporal Zarn said, “General du Streck already acknowledged the order about the Royal Guard, sir. Yesterday.”

Colonel du Berrin frowned. “It *is* odd that Harmer should acknowledge it.”

Colonel du Berrin thought a moment, and shook his head. “Du Streck’s acknowledgment would have been clamped to the original message, and our coded ‘Ack Received’ response would have been clipped to the back of the acknowledgement itself.”

The Regent said, “I still don’t see what harm the extra acknowledgement does.”

The Lance Corporal glanced at Colonel du Berrin. The colonel uneasily cleared his throat. “I think, sir, that what we have here is the possibility of a *second* order to the Royal Guard. General du Streck acknowledged the first order—the order we *know* about, because we sent it. Now General Harmer acknowledges a *second* order.”

The Regent looked sharply at Colonel du Berrin, then glanced intently at the Lance Corporal, who nodded. “Yes, sir. Because with standard MR routine, Sir, they wouldn’t acknowledge *twice*—unless they’d been shot up, Sir, and we’ve got no word about that. This acknowledgement just fit right in, Sir, so it looks like—”

Private Beckel was still rushing from machine to machine as the various officers and noncoms delayed returning to their machines in order the better to hear what was going on. Private Beckel suddenly paused. There was the twice repeated sound of ripping paper.

“From the Sovereign’s League, Sir! And here’s one from the watch ship, sir! Watch ship reports the Sovereign’s League ship headed for Capital at low elevation

and high speed. The Sovereign's League says—I guess you'll want to read that for yourself, Sir.”

The Regent took the paper from Private Beckel, to skip the heading, and read:

WE VAUGHAN RASGAARD GDAZZRIK AND SARKONNIAN ACCEPT
WHOLEHEARTEDLY YOUR GRACIOUS WELCOME TO THE KINGDOM
OF FESTHOLD.

SUBSTANCE OF OUR MESSAGES 106 AND 107

HEREWITH BEGINS 106

WE THE COMBINED RULERS OF THE LEAGUE OF SOVEREIGNS BEING
DETERMINED TO STAMP OUT THE LICENTIOUS WAYS OF ILL
ORDERED OUTSPACE REALMS ERE BY THEIR EXAMPLE THEY
CONTAMINATE OUR OWN KINGDOMS

WE HEREBY CALL UPON THE RIGHTFUL SOVEREIGN OF FESTHOLD TO
JOIN WITH US IN CRUSHING THIS FOUL EVIL

106 ENDS

107 BEGINS

WE HAVE RECEIVED NO REPLY TO OUR MESSAGE 106

WE REPEAT OUR CALL TO YOU TO JOIN US

DO NOT FEAR TO JOIN WITH US

WE ARE TRAVELING AS BEFITS LEADERS IN ADVANCE OF OUR MAIN
FORCES IN HOPE TO TEMPT SOME FOUL PIRATE OR OTHER DOG TO
ATTACK US BUT OUR GUARD FORCE COMES CLOSE BEHIND TO
SHARE IN THE KILL AS WE REND THESE VERMIN AND BEHIND THE
GUARD FORCE COMES THE COMBINED FLEETS OF THE IMPERIAL
VENGEANCE FORCE IN HOPES WE CAN SCARE THESE WHELPS INTO
JOINING TOGETHER—AND KILL THE LOT

WE DO NOT OUT OF WEAKNESS CALL TO YOU FOR AID OR SUPPORT

WE ASK INSTEAD THAT YOU JOIN IN CLEARING OUT THESE RATS AS
FARMERS RIP UP SPREADING WEEDS FROM THEIR ADJOINING FIELDS

JOIN WITH US NOW THAT WE MAY KNOW YOU ARE FOR AND NOT
AGAINST US

107 ENDS

KNOW NOW THAT HIS ROYAL AND IMPERIAL MAJESTY HAS HIMSELF
BEEN ATTACKED BY THESE PIRATES AND HIS SUBJECTS HAVE BEEN
CAPTURED BY THEM

KNOW THAT HIS ROYAL EXCELLENCE HIS IMPERIAL HIGHNESS AND
HIS IMPERIAL HOHEIT HAVE BEEN TEMPORARILY CAPTURED BY
ALIEN ENTITIES WHO INFEST THE OUTSPACE REGIONS

WE KNOW WELL HOW TO DEAL WITH SUCH AS THESE AND WE NOW
AGAIN CALL UPON YOU TO JOIN US

The Regent handed the message to Colonel du Berrin, who read rapidly, looked up, and nodded. “It's these damned commerce raiders, Sir. The Federation is thick

with them, and we aren't perfect ourselves."

"What's this about 'alien entities?' "

"No doubt the Stath—or possibly some Crustaxans. If these kings ran into them across the Federation boundary—Which bunch is worse, I don't know."

"Have we actually *seen* any of these other warships?"

"No, sir. But evidently they're relying on concealment to trap the commerce raiders."

"Then," said the Regent, "these monarchs are completely *alone* now? Do I understand that?"

Colonel du Berrin looked puzzled. "Yes, sir. They're alone, as I understand it—running ahead of the main forces."

The Regent nodded. "Send another message of welcome. And since their ship is small, bring them down in the Royal Park. Have another regiment of the Capital Division there to welcome them."

"Sir, as I read these messages, only you can welcome them, without danger of giving offense. And let me respectfully point out, successful camouflage in space is evidence of high technological capability. I make no claim to understand the situation, but it is plainly filled with uncertainties and dangers."

Lance Corporal Zarn said respectfully, "General Harmer's acknowledgement—"

Private Beckel tore off another sheet of paper. "Sir, they're coming down in the terrace of the City Palace."

Colonel du Berrin glanced around, and suddenly roared, "What the devil are you all standing around for? Do you want the private to do all the work here? *Get back to your posts!*" The corporal, the sergeant, the lieutenant, and the captain sprang to their separate machines. Private Beckel said, "Another message here, sir. From the Inner Defense Sphere commander. He says 'IDS drone massometer probes indicate presence of masses unaccounted for by any charted natural objects or known derelicts, or otherwise-detectable ships.' "

"Sir," said Captain Stang in an odd voice, "we have here a routine duplicate of a communications order—Divisional airborne transport to report to Positions XK9-.2 on the ring road, to pick up the Imperial Division."

"Well," said Colonel du Berrin, "that's unusual, but—"

"Sir,—it's signed 'By authority of Harold William, Warlord of Festhold!' " The Regent, turning to leave, spun on his heel.

Lance Corporal Zarn's machine chattered, and he said, "I *knew* it! There's been a slip-up somewhere! Sir, here's a message from Lieutenant-Colonel Stran du Morgan, Second-In-Command, the Royal guard! He's skipping the landing pattern

entirely, and coming down in the Royal Park!—I don't understand this, sir. At the end of the message, it says: 'Death to traitors! Long live the Warlord!' ” Colonel du Berrin stood motionless.

The Regent said, “Alert the Parashock Division!”

“Sir,” said Colonel du Berrin, “the Parashock Division is in the Outer Defense Command. They were unreliable.”

Sergeant Ayn, his voice toneless, dry, noncommittal, said aloud:

“ ‘General Order Number One. By Authority of Harold William, Warlord of Festhold. To all Units Festhold Armed Forces.

“ ‘1) As of the time of receipt of this General Order, the governing authority of the former Regent, Marius, Duke of Rennel, is summarily ended, by command of the Warlord.

“ ‘2) All lawful governing authority within the Realm of Festhold will henceforth emanate directly from Harold William, Warlord of Festhold, and from the duly constituted organs of government.’

“ ‘3) The said Marius, Duke of Rennel, is hereby stripped of all command power over any and all men and officers, commissioned and noncommissioned, of whatever rank, unit, or duty, wherever situated, either within the Realm of Festhold, or in its conquered or occupied districts.

“ ‘4) The said Marius is believed to be allied to alien forces opposed to the well-being of our Realm.

“ ‘5) Whosoever obeys the orders of the aforesaid Marius does so in defiance of the direct command of the Warlord, and at the peril of his life.

“ ‘By authority of

“ ‘Harold William

“ ‘Warlord of Festhold’ ”

Duke Marius stood as if paralyzed, then glanced at Colonel du Berrin, as if to see his reaction. Colonel du Berrin, without meeting this questioning gaze, moved a little away from Duke Marius. Duke Marius instantly noted the colonel's reaction, relaxed with an effort, and laughed.

“The Baron of Scrattel is as insane as I thought. My authority derives from passing the two tests required of any Ruler of Festhold—drawing the sword from the stone, and meeting the approval of the nobles. The weak-willed Harold passed out on the floor. *I* kept at it till I won! *I* am the Warlord of Festhold!”

The Sergeant eyed the dog-eared corner of a little pamphlet sticking out from

under his communications machine, and said nothing. The colonel frowned, and stepped over to the sergeant's machine to read the message himself. From outside came the blast of signal whistles and the heavy tramp of feet. Duke Marius suddenly whirled and left the room.

XXVIII. The Guests



As seen in the spy screens in Interstellar Patrol Ship 6-107-J, the Capital Division controlled the spaceport and communications centers. The Imperial Division was camped in the Royal Park with more and more units being lifted in. The Royal Guard, under command of the Warlord, had the City Palace surrounded, and also controlled everything in it from the subbasement up to and including the fifteenth floor. The populace was in the streets, eagerly awaiting the latest news.

On the sixteenth floor of the City Palace, an uneasy truce held between the armed guards of Duke Marius and the Royal Guard, facing each other halfway down a gorgeously decorated hall, at the end of which a gilded elevator led to the seventeenth and eighteenth floors of the building.

“Just stay right there,” warned the commander of the guards. “Otherwise the Duke kills the Princess. You don't want that, do you?”

Roberts, still in his armor, glanced from one screen to another, and growled, “We'll take care of that.”

Morrissey, who appeared to be a kind of armored muscular sea horse looking out of an armored tank, said, “And what if that's the thing that sets off this maniac?”

“How could it?” said Roberts. “We're his only hope.”

Hammell, in the guise of a giant armored python, gave a little laugh, but said nothing. Overhead, in the space devoted to the big upper fusion turrets, a tangle of glittering armored tentacles showed where Bergen was also saying nothing, but waiting patiently.

Roberts slid into the control seat, snapped on the gravitors, and rose steadily up the side of the Duke's “City Palace.”

Morrissey, watching the spy screen, said, “He's glancing around out the window—looking for some unit loyal to him, I suppose. There—he sees the ship.”

Roberts slowed the climb of the patrol ship, and spoke through the outside speaker: “I am Vaughan. Are you the Ruler of Festhold?”

Duke Marius' eyes glittered. “Yes, but some disloyal local troops have me

temporarily besieged here.”

“We cannot intrude in the fight—but if you seek transportation—”

“Yes!—For myself and my fiancée!”

“We are always glad to help a fellow sovereign. Would that we could fight in this conflict, but we may not do it.”

“If you will just bring your ship closer—”

Roberts raised the ship, and swung it close to the building. Duke Marius turned toward the inside, and gestured. Two guards appeared with the struggling Erena, who looked grimly at the ship, then glanced far down at the ground below.

Roberts spoke, his voice carefully expressionless. “You will be safe aboard this ship, Princess.”

Erena stood still, listening, glanced wonderingly at the ship, and suddenly reached out. She steadied herself against the curving flank of the ship as she stepped onto the gently sloping fin. Carefully, she climbed the fin toward the hatch. Duke Marius followed, and though his weight, in comparison to that of the ship, was not greatly more than that of Princess Erena, the ship seemed to dip noticeably beneath him as he stepped on the fin. The surface of the fin, apparently slightly rough beneath Princess Erena’s feet—and hence offering a safe grip—seemed somehow slick under Duke Marius.

The Duke, teetering dangerously, reached out to steady himself against the flank of the ship. The flank of the ship delivered a blue-white spark about a quarter of an inch long. In the control seat, Roberts shut off the outside speaker, and punched the button near an amber glowing lens.

“We can’t get the answers from this Duke if we drop him sixteen stories into the courtyard.”

The symbiotic computer said regretfully, “That is correct.”

Roberts glanced at the viewscreen, and noted that Duke Marius, perspiring freely, was now able to pick his way warily along the fin. Princess Erena had almost reached the hatch. Carefully she climbed up.

Roberts left the control seat, ducked under the three-foot thick mirrorlike cylinder that ran down the axis of the ship, and then paused. Back toward the drive units, Princess Erena stood just beneath the hatchway, her clear blue eyes wide, one hand raised to brush back her honey-blond hair.

Roberts, paralyzed for an instant, recovered control of himself, and spoke quietly. “My colleagues may at first seem somewhat strange to you, Princess—but though they may appear alien, their hearts are true. Do not let the illusion of their outward form alarm you.”

Roberts held out his hand, and the armor flashed in the overhead light. Erena stepped forward, carefully took his hand, smiled, and let him lead her further into the ship. For an instant, she paused, gripping the armor.

Hammell, in the guise of an armored snake of formidable proportions, graciously bowed with the upper—or uncoiled—portion of his body.

“Delighted to meet you, Princess. I am Prince Gdazzrik of the March.”

The monster sea horse behind Hammell bowed suavely, and spoke in Morrissey’s voice, “Sarkonnian the Second.”

As Princess Erena’s grip on Roberts’ arm tightened, there came a flexing of tentacles from overhead, and the voice of Dan Bergen said politely, “Rasgaard Seraak, Adjunct-Coordinate to the Empire, Galactic East.”

There was a heavy thud from aft in the ship, then the *clang!* as the hatch slammed shut. Duke Marius wiped his forehead. “Vaughan, I am truly indebted to you and your colleagues. If you will merely take me to System Command Center One, which I can locate for you very quickly, we will end this nonsense.”

Just then, the Duke caught sight of Hammell, and suddenly stopped talking.

Princess Erena said earnestly, “I appeal to you Vaughan, on behalf of my brother, the true ruler of Festhold. This man is a traitor. He is clever. He is foresighted. But he is a traitor!”

Duke Marius straightened and smiled. “Come, come, my dear, you are overtired. King Vaughan knows a revolt when he sees it!”

Roberts said, “Princess, you have my pledged word that you will be safe aboard this ship. Do you feel unsafe in the presence of this man?”

“Yes!”

Roberts at once came between Duke Marius and the girl. There was a faint hiss of metallic scales as Prince Gdazzrik of the March uncoiled ten or twelve feet of length and appeared at Roberts’ side. Sarkonnian the Second added to the congestion in the already confined space by rolling up on caterpillar treads and resting a tree-trunk arm on Roberts’ shoulder.

“Is it revolt?—Or an uprising against false tyranny?”

From up in the forward fusion turret, a number of armored tentacles reached down and visibly flexed. Bergen’s voice was cheerful: “ ‘Twould not be meet that the Princess observe the means by which ‘tis done—but I’ll warrant to have the truth out of this fellow in the blink of an eye.”

As Duke Marius glanced back at the hatch, Roberts said soothingly, “I fear we sovereigns are a suspicious lot. You know—The thought of treachery is the common nightmare of kings. You have but to clear up the matter for us. We wish

merely to be certain we are on the right side. Once we are sure—”

Duke Marius whirled, and tried to get out the hatch.

XXIX. Steel and Gold



Roberts stood before the desk of Colonel Valentine Sanders, who sat back, his hands clasped behind his head, listening closely.

“So,” said Roberts, “to sum up the cause of the trouble, Festhold has a royal family, and a series of noble families. Two generations ago the head of the wealthy number-one noble family decided to take over the throne. The eldest son—Duke Marius—stayed home. The second son emigrated to Tiamaz. The third son joined the temple priesthood.

“Because of their wealth, rank, and their native ability, they each soon had a group of followers, all working toward the same end—the elimination of the royal family and the substitution of their own family in its place. At home, they carefully arranged accidents. On Tiamaz they raised money, in return for the promise of Festhold protection once the Regent became King. At that point, the other brothers would have become members of the new royal family, which would rule Festhold, run Tiamaz, and also control the temple priesthood.

“As Regent, meanwhile, Duke Marius had made a carefully timed deal with Festhold’s Stath enemies. Provided they would agree to settle down, he would cut the appropriation for the Festhold fleet, so that they, in turn, could afford to relax. He was sure that they would doublecross him, which would provide a crisis just when he was ready to take over the government. The crisis would unite the country behind him, and incidentally give him an excuse to get rid of any stubborn military units that showed support for the Prince. They would be sent into the worst of the battle, and be ground up fighting the Stath.”

The colonel shook his head.

“All the details were nicely worked out. What was the Command Center One the Regent wanted to go to when you ‘rescued’ him?”

“He had arranged that any commands to distant military units must pass through Command Center One. Command Center One was staffed with his own people, and was to act as a filter. Most orders got only a casual glance and then were relayed. But when Harold William gave his order commanding the Festhold Armed Forces to rally to him, Command Center One filtered out that order. It got no further. The normal arrangements for relaying such communications all fed through Command Center One.”

“So that—”

“So that Harold William gained the support of the troops on Festhold—a total of some five or six divisions—while the enormous majority of the other troops, plus the bulk of the Festhold fleet, knew nothing at all of what had happened. From Command Center One, Duke Marius could then send out a false account of what had happened, bring down the fleet, and blast Harold to bits before he knew what had happened. Also, once at Command Center One, Duke Marius could fake messages of loyalty from the fleet to Harold William, so that Harold William would be unprepared for what would happen when the Fleet actually came down.”

The colonel glanced at the ceiling, then shook his head. “I happen to have an idea that Maury and his commerce raiders are about to hit Tiamaz. I was thinking that it might be a nice idea to let Marius ‘escape’ to Tiamaz just before the raid.”

Roberts shook his head. “They want him on Festhold.”

“Yes—and besides, what if Maury captured him? He’d be Maury’s idea-man in no time. No, Maury is tough enough as it is. We’ll leave the problem of Duke Marius to Festhold.”

Roberts said quietly, “I think they can solve it.”

The colonel nodded, then smiled. “And what about you, Roberts? You seem to have formed the habit of associating with royalty. What about this Princess?”

Roberts looked at him blandly. “Princess?”

The colonel frowned. “Princess Erena.”

“Ah, Private Erena, my probationary crewman.”

The colonel sat up. “Listen, Roberts—what in—”

Roberts smiled and said, “You didn’t expect me to propose on the spot, then go to the Cathedral of Truth with Harold William and take a second crack at drawing the sword all on my own?”

“No, I admit, that would have been rushing things, but I assumed—”

“Erena *recognized my voice*. She knew whoever had gotten her out of the Temple of Chance on Tiamaz had reappeared on Festhold in the guise of His Royal and Imperial Majesty, Vaughan the First.”

“Well,” said the colonel, smiling, “that must have made you an eminently eligible suitor.”

Roberts said drily, “And then afterward?”

The colonel innocently spread his hands. “For better or for worse—”

“Well,” said Roberts, smiling, “the first chance I had, I explained the situation.”

“What did she—”

“She said that, in her opinion, if I wanted to I could claim royal rank by virtue of the situation on Paradise—but that she thought it would simplify everything if instead she was in the Patrol.”

The colonel’s brows came together. “Listen, Roberts, it may simplify things for *her*—and for *you*—but—”

“And, sir, the Patrol is on record with Tiamaz—accepting Princess Erena as a candidate-member of the Interstellar Patrol—and incidentally as a member of my crew.”

“I have the feeling, Roberts, that the records of that call have mysteriously vanished from Tiamaz’ files.”

Roberts smiled. “But not from *our* files.”

The colonel said grudgingly, “That’s true.” He frowned. “But look, Roberts, do you have the faintest idea what this—ah—pampered princess would have to go through to achieve full membership. The requirements for women are as tough, proportionately, as they are for men. And women recruits *invariably* make problems! Marry this princess if you’ve got to, but, for the love of—” He cut himself off, studying Roberts’ expression. His own face showed a rapid succession of emotions. Abruptly he smiled, stood up, and thrust out his hand.

“Well done, Roberts—whatever happens—and good luck!”

Roberts shook hands, took one step back, saluted, turned, and went out. Ordinary prudence told him to leave before the colonel assigned him to some other little problem. The oversight would not be forgotten for long, if it was an oversight.

He stepped out into the corridor to see Erena, the neat uniform of the Patrol at once modest and perfectly suited to her blue eyes and honey-blonde hair. With her in the hall stood a captain, two lieutenants, and a major, all trying to elbow each other aside as they smiled charmingly at Erena. None of them were pleased at the approach of Roberts, all murmuring politely as she said good-bye and took Roberts’ arm—and all looking after him with a “What’s he got?” expression plain on their faces.

At the desk inside the office, Colonel Valentine Sanders finished punching the call number, waited frowning for the response, then turned at the sudden transparency of the bulkhead nearby. The wall screen showed a strongly built man with piercing blue eyes, who frowned now in faint puzzlement.

“Yes, Val? What is it? We’ve finally got this business with Festhold all wrapped up, correct?”

The colonel glanced at the door by which Roberts had just gone out. On the wall

screen, the piercing gaze sharpened.

“Festhold *is* all clear, isn’t it?”

“The last word,” said the colonel, “is that the Warlord has drawn the sword from the stone, met with the nobles, spoken to them, and been thunderously acclaimed. Duke Marius is still imprisoned. Maury’s commerce raiders are approaching Tiamaz, and we’ve withdrawn our teams from Tiamaz. Roberts has just reported from Festhold. His ship and crew are back.”

“Ah—good. Then—” The piercing gaze sharpened again. “It’s all cleared up, then?”

The left side of the colonel’s lean face bent up in a brief smile. The right side stayed somber. “There’s the question of Roberts and Princess Erena.”

The figure on the wall screen briefly studied the colonel’s expression. “M’m. Yes, that’s right. Well—” The strongly built figure was momentarily silent, motionless. Then one of the hands resting palm-down on the desktop came up, turned—

“Well, Val, what can we do about it? Our man’s overmatched, that’s all. He shouldn’t go around falling in love with princesses. Obviously, *someone* was going to get hurt. He’ll get over it.”

“That isn’t what I—”

“At least, we haven’t lost him.”

“No, but—”

“Try to look at it this way. If he’d stayed there, she’d have come to see him not as her rescuer but as a nameless untitled figure—with a certain heroic aspect, yes, but heroes are commonplace on Festhold. And he would never reveal what he had done unless and until they’d married. But before that, he has to win her. So, he’d either have acted dishonorably by Festhold standards—and the consequences of that aren’t worth thinking about—or, more likely, he’d have tried to draw this sword from the stone, if he ever got that far. And the odds are, he couldn’t do it. And afterwards, what? He emigrates to Festhold? Or he goes renegade, and kidnaps the Warlord’s sister? And *we* get stuck with the blame?”

The sharp eyes looked suddenly thoughtful. “And that isn’t the worst, Val. *Theoretically*, you recall, this princess is a candidate-member of the Patrol. Now, if you want to try to visualize some real diplomatic and personnel problems, just imagine what *could* have happened.”

The colonel’s haunted expression showed that that was exactly what he *was* imagining. The figure on the screen smiled benevolently.

“So—we’d better leave well enough alone. Right, Val?”

The colonel drew a deep breath, and came to his feet. He crossed the office, and came back again. He spoke quietly and respectfully. “Sir?”

A look of alarm flashed across the strong-featured face on the screen. It was the look of the superior who knows that orders go *down*, but problems come *up*. Then the face quickly composed itself. The eyes were faintly narrowed and sharply focused. The chin jutted. The voice was quiet and considerate.

“Yes?”

“There are certain problems I am not cleared to handle.”

“Such as?”

“O-Branch merely handles *operations*. Entanglements with foreign powers that are not members of the Federation, dealings with outraged emperors, matters of high protocol—these are all outside my range of action.”

“Yes, but what—”

“Selection of personnel, advice to the lovelorn, disentanglement of sixteen fire-breathing Interstellar Patrolmen all interested in the same girl, explanations of the fine points of the situation to naïve computers, ship and job assignments complicated by personal attachments as airy as thistledown and as strong as steel cables. Last but not least, marriage counseling—all this, too, sir, is out of my line.”

“Yeah—Listen, you don’t mean—”

“That is exactly what I *do* mean.

“Oh.”

In the office, the Interstellar Patrol thought deeply.

In the corridor outside, Roberts looked down at the honey-gold hair of the girl walking close beside him, and he squeezed her hand more tightly.

Erena looked up, and smiled.

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