

CHAPTER 1

Jake Marden hated the low hill country of north central Florida. He hated the dirt farms and the narrow roads and the marshy land that infested the countryside. He especially hated the town of Starke and nearby Hawthorne and Waldo and Keystone and the rest of the crumbly shitheel burgs with their tourist-hunting cops and dirty gas stations and redneck shacks that the flatheads accepted as restaurants. He hated all these shitheel towns that lived off the institutions dotting the countryside. The biggest of them all sprawled across more than seventy-thousand acres of scrub pine and weak soil. Camp Blanding. A great flat shitheel military training camp for all sorts of high-firepower maneuvers. He hated Blanding and all it stood for. Because there came those times when the good old U.S. Army loaned its Cobras and other killer choppers and hundreds of armed soldiers, loaned these assholes to the other shitheel institutions of the countryside. The prisons. The hardtime prisons. Correctional institutions, they called them. Bullshit. But you name it and north central Florida had it. The whole fucking countryside was a splattering of incarceration camps.

The worst of them all was Old Millford Prison and it was the worst for a whole bunch of reasons, the primary one being that Jake Marden was a return visitor to The Rock. He'd made a trip before to what the crazy-grin cons called Rock Motel. Jake Marden's first visit had been for shit, but then, nobody ever had a good visit, for Christ's sake. He'd been a lot younger then and he'd been wet behind the ears. Brilliant, he was. Pure genius in many ways. If they'd measured his IQ they would have stamped his papers with the word GENIUS. The problem for Jake was that he was also as stupid as all get-out. He was brilliant but he didn't have the common sense to pour piss out of a goblet without a roadmap. He also had the malady common to strapping adolescents. He spent half of every day goaded and driven by a crowbar-stiff erection that seemed to propel him from one hour to the next in search of juice-overflowing pussy. Along with outbreaks of zits went his perpetual hard-on and his ability to perform sexually without respite through several hysterical ejaculations. Jake met his match-or his Waterloo, depending upon the side from which one weighed the matter-in a fluffy little thing by the name of Lisa with a wasp waist, outrageously up thrust breasts, and the blessing of nonstop orgasms that thrilled her soul and body whether she performed vaginally or orally. Lisa and Jake appeared locked in a raw sexual embrace of pleasure and combat in which they were both winners, until that moment that Lisa discovered there was more to physical relationships than being dicked. There was that subtle pleasure of power, and noting Jake's reaction to her absence for even a few days led her to her own daring experiments.

If they hadn't been pounding their loins so wildly it would have been a classic case of cocktease. Lisa sniffed with an elevated nasal posture. "Don't you do anything except screw?" she pouted.

"I never hear you complaining," Jake countered. "I'm not complaining. But a girl's gotta' think about her future, y'know."

Jake had never considered Lisa capable of thinking. Except to remember to remove her clothes before he plunged into her. "No, I don't know," he answered. "Jesus, Lisa, what are you talking about?"

"How are we going to live? I mean, on what?" "That's dumb. Real dumb. Like asshole-dumb," he said with open contempt. "You know what my old man's worth." She knew. Millions. But she was also under the tutelage of her mother. Get control now, Lisa. Get control now and you'll control him later.

"What are you worth? Y'know, what can you do? You got all those computer things, I don't understand them, but what good are they?"

He wasn't about to start school instruction with Lisa. What he liked about her head was her lips and tongue and her mouth and the terrific things she could do with that equipment, but he'd never considered that anything worth mentioning might rest between her ears. "I can do plenty," he said, feeling nettled at her unexpected sharpness. What the hell was she after?

"Could you make money with it? The computers, I mean?"

"Shit, yes."

"How?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Sure I would. What would you do?"

He thought that over. Just outside New Tamiami Airport the Westinghouse corporation had built a sprawling research facility. It was also a main terminus for computer hookup to the rest of Westinghouse, as well as DARPA, the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. It was supposed to have ironclad security, but the people who designed security programs did so for their own ilk, and not streetwise smartasses who were also teenaged electronic geniuses.

"I could make that Westinghouse outfit, you know, down at Tamiami? I could make them pay plenty if I ever got inside."

She laughed at him. At him. She'd never done that before. She teased him and she ridiculed him and he didn't know which would give him more pleasure, fucking her to insensibility or beating her to the same condition. "I'll show you," he said quietly, unaware that those three words had brought more misery to youngsters than any other phrase coined by youth throughout the world.

He and a close friend, Loose Louie, who had a body seemingly composed of flexible rubber and who could squeeze through spaces only a rat should have traversed, broke the security system at the Westinghouse computer center. Louie was an absolute natural for sensing and feeling his way through everything from motion detectors to infrared-activated lasers. He was as adept with alarm systems as Jake Marden was with the main computer systems. They didn't simply break in; that was too clumsy and too prone to failure. They got inside through the contacts of Moishe Green, lawyer for the Marden family, so that Jake and Loose Louie could apply for jobs in the packing and shipping departments of the company. Once inside it didn't take Louie long to plant his equipment and set up his interrupter system on the alarms for the warehouse section of the building. Everything else was like moving down one security domino after another.

Then Jake went to work, installing in hidden places his software trapdoors so that later he could use the computer database system to call in through telephone lines and get just about any information he wanted. Once he accessed the main computer databanks he figured he'd collect some really top secret or sensitive information, present it to their top people, and "sell" what he knew and how he accomplished his task to Westinghouse. Presto; he'd be a hero, Westinghouse would be grateful to plug the holes in their security system, he'd get a bucketful of money and then he'd kick Lisa's beautiful ass up and down the street. Besides, with what he'd probably cop from Westinghouse, he figured it was worth at least a hundred Gs, and he was starting to lose interest in Lisa.

It didn't all work out the way he planned. He couldn't get his software to perform the way he expected, because Westinghouse was using advanced systems still foreign to the outside world. With a touch of anger and a bit of hard desperation, Jake went to breaking into the main hardware systems with his own devices. Loose Louie knocked out the security alarms, Jake tied in beautifully to the Westinghouse hardware, and the whole time they were inside half a dozen video cameras, out of sight and using zoom lenses, made a wonderfully sharp recording of the two teenagers.

So instead of copping a hundred grand-and Westinghouse, if they hadn't had all that video film, would have been glad to pay off in millions to plug their security gaps-young Jake and his cohort found themselves pissing up a long rope held by the law. Westinghouse had had enough of hackers and meanies and bust-ins and they pressed very hard charges with a very tough bunch of legal eagles. Because federal security contracts were involved there simply wasn't any way out. They found their asses nailed to the wall of the federal courthouse.

It could have been worse. The law gave Jake Marden eight hard years. "Mind your manners, son," said the unkindly judge who had the insipid manner of the lecturer who's holding both the bible and the gun, "and you can get parole in three years. Get some religion, boy. Read the good book instead of those computers of yours. Three years or eight years. It's worth thinking about, boy."

Right; sure. They sent him to the Rock Motel where the guests waited with nervous, wet lips for fresh meat like Jake Marden. Twenty-three years old, and to the anxious, horny hardtimers the first sight of the kid as he came shuffling in with the heavy chains about his feet was lovely virginal flesh. Places like Old Millford were whorehouses and it was the filthiest and worst-kept secret of the whole goddamn national

prison system. But to Jake Marden the issue was very local, very immediate, because they were bidding for his ass and that beautiful mouth before the guards ever removed the chains and laughingly sent him off to the "wedding chambers."

Jake didn't get out in three years. No way. Being young and spoiled didn't spell an easy or a soft mark. Jake Marden was anything but. He was a big bastard and in the University of Miami he'd been a top man in just about every sport in the business from football to karate, and he was a skindiver and a skydiver and a boxer and a wrestler and all that crazy stuff. He was also a graduate of Little Havana and some very nasty disputes usually carried out with fists, feet, and knives. For a guy from a nice family he buddied with a lot of nasty scum.

All that barely saved him. Just barely. The Rock's oldtimers with wet lips and hard dicks nailed him in a darkened corridor, four very tough hombres who'd been running the prison system in their wing, and they were all going to enjoy this six-feet-four piece of meat and they promised to fuck his brains out. He fought them, but this was a graduation level notch above even Little Havana. They were tough as concrete and they chopped him in the windpipe to slow him down. A powerful hand clenched his balls and twisted his scrotum to immobilize him while they pulled him down and over a bench and ripped his trousers and his shorts from his

body. An ugly face with zits and scars was close against his and grinning while the others held him down and he knew, he absolutely knew, he must not let this happen or he'd be dead inside himself the rest of his life. He couldn't move his hands or his arms or his legs as they held him in a long-practiced vise of muscle, and the only part of him he could move was his head. He heard the animal behind him grunting at the edge of violent anal penetration and with everything he had left, with his last ounce of strength, he let himself go mad and he lunged forward with his shoulders and his head just enough to reach the zits and scars before him with his teeth.

They didn't expect that. The ugly face smiled and twisted his ears to hold him for a violent kiss and Jake opened his mouth and he screamed and his teeth came down like those of a pit bull, clamping against the lower lips of the subhuman before him, and with the madness upon him Jake ground his teeth together and twisted his own head violently. They heard the scream echoing down the darkened corridor and along the cell blocks. They'd heard that primal scream before and the older prisoners smiled without humor. Screams are old shit in the jungle. They didn't know it was different this time.

The animal jerked backwards with the savaging of his mouth and Jake shook his head like a starving shark holding a great chunk of bloody lips and chin and cheek in his teeth. Hot blood splashed everywhere and Jake yielded to the madness, no longer caring if he lived or died. He hardly felt the nails raking his scrotum as his shoulders, now free, swung around and he got one hand loose so he could jab out with his thumb. He knew this bullshit of fists and punching would only get him raped and maybe killed and his thumb stabbed deep into an eyesocket. He clamped his fingers along the side of the head, grinding into the temple and the eyeball popped out like a great dead white grape trailing slivers of flesh and mucous and more spraying blood and there was a hell of a lot more screaming.

Jake took a foot in the mouth and he felt teeth loosen and he grinned when his own lips split with the blow, because now he had his other hand free and it snapped forward, a striking rattler of hooked bone and nails. Forefinger and middle finger hooked upward into the nostrils of another face and when he felt skin split and sensitive bones breaking he twisted his hand with all his might. With full maniacal strength he twisted the nose completely away from the face.

He didn't bother listening to the terrible shriek. There was still one left, that animal with the tremendous hard-on about to ravage him. The bastard also had a long shiv in his right hand and it came expertly at Jake. He knew he must accept the cut to gain final advantage. His left arm came up to take the blade but the rest of him was inside the swinging arc of the knife. His right hand went down and forward, hooked and rigid as a great claw and he grasped that hard-on and tightened his fingers and in a single snapping downward motion jerked his hand toward himself.

They talked for years about that moment. No one had ever seen a man's dick de-skinned in a single incredible wet snap!

Gasping with the pain now embracing him, Jake tore the blade loose from his arm and flung it away. He

dragged shorts and pants back to his waist and staggered down the corridor. He stopped before stunned guards, swaying, but still on his feet and covered with blood. "Where's my fucking cell?" he rasped in a voice he barely recognized. The blow to his throat would damage him forever and he would always talk in that angry, rasping sound. Without a word, two guards opened the cellblock door and led him to a cell. He stumbled inside, squeezing his arm to stem the pulsing blood and he eased in terrible pain to the floor, back to the wall, staring upward with great unblinking eyes. "Get the fuck outta' here," he snarled. The guards were gone. Red haze and rushing darkness toyed with his brain. He looked up into a black face. "Don't fight me," the voice in the black face said from a hundred miles away. "I'm gonna' help you." Jake nodded and yielded to hands that had fixed many a torn body. He didn't sleep that night. He didn't sleep for three days and for three nights, and the black man, this Sergeant Jubal Bailey whose name he didn't even know yet, guarded him, fed him water and soup. By the time Jake lapsed into sleep the legend was full-blown.

No one ever touched him. Not ever. No one tried. He'd been tested and against all odds, against all reason, he not only survived his savage welcome, but had whipped his tormentors. The man whose face had been torn away died and another spoke forever in a wet, lispng drivel because his face was permanent hamburger. Another was blind in one eye. The last man, the one whose dick he'd de-skinned, stumbled along the cellblock corridor, screaming, until the guards slapped him with a club on the side of his head and strapped him onto an iron cot in the infirmary where he slowly regained penile skin but never his sanity.

On the fifth day he saw the black face clearly. "Who the hell are you?" Jake asked through a throat still clogged with pain.

"Bailey. Sergeant Jubal Bailey. I'm the head nigger, the head man, the head everything on this cellblock and I've been feeding you and taking care of you like a little white baby since you got in here. Man, you look like shit."

Jake blinked. Thoughts whirled through him. Thinking was coming back. Realization; rational thinking. No shit talk anymore. "You saved my life," he said to Sergeant Jubal Bailey.

"Yeah. By the way, call me Jube. You earned it."

"Earned it?"

"Yeah. The scum here call me Mister Bailey. I am a very large, very mean, very dangerous motherfucker. You better get up. The warden wants you for a parade in his office."

He stood in manacles between four guards before the unblinking old hollow eyes of Herbert J. Spunt, longtime warden and shitheel master of Old Millford Prison. Herbert J. Spunt didn't have much of a chin. His lower lip was almost blue in color and it seemed to flow right down the turkey-like skin of his throat and bunched up around his Adam's apple. He had wet lips and thin hair and eyes that were cold and pitiless. "You're a mess," Spunt said. "And you smell. Very badly."

Jake stood before the desk, weaving slightly, missing teeth, his face bruised and his lips hugely scabbed, his arm a giant throb of pain and his scrotum slowly grinding knives in his lower belly, but his brain worked and he pushed aside any stupid ego. "Yes, sir," he said and not a word more. Colorless eyes widened in Spunt's face. No games here today.

"You want the whole story or just the decision, Marden?" Nothing personal. The warden talking to one more useless piece of human shit. If Spunt got crap he dished out terrible punishment. If he got cooperation he went easy. Simple rules.

Spunt looked at the lead guard. "In the hole for a month. Bread and water. Get him out of here. Then send some men in here and fumigate this place." A hand moved limply. "Take him away."

Jake didn't think he'd live out the month. No infirmary. No antibiotics. No decent food. The poison was already in his arm. By the time the month passed it could rot right down to the bone. He sat in his cocoon of pain in the dark cell on the cold and unyielding floor. They shoved a tin cup of water and a chunk of bread through the sliding plate at the bottom of the cell door. Fuck you, Jake said to nobody and everybody. "Eat the fucking bread," his own voice said aloud to him.

That same night the plate slid back. A muffled voice came through. "You still alive?"

"Yeah." Jake was already a different person. He didn't waste his words anymore.

"There's hot food on the floor. Eat it slowly. There's sulfa powder and penicillin tablets. Take them."

"Who the hell are you?"

He recognized Bailey's voice. "God. I'm God," Bailey said. "Don't forget it. I'm your survival, your redemption." The metal plate thumped back into place and the voice was gone. In the darkness Jake ate like an animal with his fingers. He took the antibiotics. He tore open the sulfa powder package with the teeth still together on one side of his face and by feel sprinkled it on the festering arm wound. ¶ A week later, for the first time in a week, he heard Bailey's voice again. "You exercising yet?"

"What?"

"Don't go mind-dumb on me, you asshole. Start exercising. You want to live, you exercise. Otherwise the Hole will beat your white ass." The plate thumped.

He exercised. Slowly, at first, as torn skin readjusted to movement. Knee bends. Just enough room for pushups, grimacing with the pain, working his arm until it wanted to kill him. He did isometrics, he lashed his body with deliberate anger, got his adrenalin pumping, wondered who the hell was this nigger and why he was doing what he did. But he could go crazy thinking like that so he concentrated on exercise and strengthening his body, and the food and medication were miraculous.

A month later they stared at him in amazement. They'd given him an extra week just for the hell of it and they expected an emaciated, hobbling prisoner to emerge from the cell. He came out leaner and meaner than they dreamed possible and he didn't give the guards any shit as they marched him back to Cellblock Nine and opened the barred door and stood aside for him to walk in. Jubal Bailey met him with a brilliant smile and offered him a cigar.

"Graduation day," he offered, holding out a light.

"Why are you doing all this?" Jake took a long, heavenly drag. This was unbelievable.

"What I do is my business. From now on, Marden, all you need to know is you watch my back. All the time. Got it?"

Jake wanted to ask a thousand questions but somehow knew to take it slow. "That's all you want? I'm your man."

"That's enough." Bailey smiled. "For the moment."

"You gonna' get fucked in the head if I ask you some questions?"

Bailey eased onto his bunk and slipped a flat bottle of whiskey from under his mattress. He took a long pull and gave the bottle to Jake who took his own shot before returning the liquid gold. Bailey lit a cigar. He blew out smoke and gestured with the dark tobacco.

"I tell you, it stays with you."

"Yes. You said sergeant. Military?"

"Long time ago. I was a first looie then. Chopper pilot. The sergeant is Florida State Forestry Division. Right out of the army into the woods. Always wanted to live that way. Man and nature. Forest ranger work gives you the best of all worlds." Bailey offered a flash of a grin. "Especially if you don't like being cooped up with people every day." He rolled

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his eyes and gestured with his head to take in the insanity of where he was compared to how he felt.

Jake picked up on it. "I guess you didn't come here by choice," he said carefully.

Bailey's laugh was more grunt. "Engraved invitation. By the time I got my ranger uniform," he went on, "the service had changed whole bunches. I lived in the Ocala forest. It's national and state. Whole goddamned place was like a lemming trek of drug runners. They came in by plane and chopper, on foot and all kinds of vehicles. Moving coke, mainly. But they also planted grass by the acre. Worst of all they had a lot of heavy firepower and they never balked at using it. Tough on just one poor old nigger like me."

"Yeah. Real tough." Jake had the idea it might have been the other way around.

"Some people called me super nigger." Bailey chuckled. "I sort of liked that. I mean, I took this forest ranger uniform real serious. I knew my shit, too. I had a master's degree in what I was doing. And I was real content out there in the dark woods. Did some banjo strumming, had my two hunting dogs with me for company, every now and then a couple of prosties drove into the woods in their rolling pussy wagon

and I got it on with them. A good life. Except for them fucking drugs. It was a snowstorm." Marden knew the score. A lot of people called Miami by the name of Siberia, the snow was so^fucking high. He listened to Jubal Bailey sigh.

"It came apart when I busted a bunch of kids on a coke run. They weren't playing with little baggies. Them fuckers had over a million and a half bucks worth of powder with them. I got them at the end of a twelve-gauge and them dogs of mine and tied them all up and shoved them into the back of a truck and drove the whole lot to the state office in Ocala. Signed 'em in, got my receipt, and went back to the woods to watch the big bust story on the tube." He cocked his head at Marden. "Can you guess what comes next?"

Marden carefully lowered a silvery ash into a tin can. "Uh huh. No news. And that meant bad news." "You got it. No news at all. I got on the horn and called the Ocala office and they like to blew me away. Everybody was

free on bond and the desk lieutenant, he's a bro, he sort of hinted the whole thing was being tucked under a blanket and if I was a smart nigger, like Smokey Bear, I'd forget it ever happened. The next day this big blue chopper rolls in from Tallahassee and these dudes in pointy shoes and dark suits come out, big smiles and handshakes all around. I guess you can call this shit sum and substance. One of them nice white boys was the son of the lieutenant governor. The dudes in the pointy shoes hand me an envelope and say there's ten grand in unmarked bills in there, and if I take the envelope everything will be dropped and I'll go on their private honor roll as a trusted friend. Man, the shit was dripping from the trees."

Marden smiled coldly. "You're not in the woods any more. I guess you weren't a very smart nigger." "Not smart? Hah! Talk about dumb! I got principles! I'm real pissed, man. I busted the nearest guy in the chops. They'd thought of that. They were counting on it, the motherfuckers. They shot my dogs and shot me in the knee and before I could get my hands on my own piece they decked me from behind, and when I was down they stuck a needle in my arm with enough coke to kill a fucking mule. I guess I was an unconscious sack of shit for a long time. When I came around I wasn't a smart or a mean nigger no more. I was a drug user and a pusher and a dealer and a very dumb mother of a nigger. Them fuckers burned my cabin to the ground, dumped all sorts of shit and pills in my truck-

"And they gave you for a Christmas present?"

"Twelve long ones, my white-skinned asshole buddy. Twelve long ones. I done three. Nine to go for the full trip, out in less if I'm a good Yassah, Massa nigger, but I can't cut that shit and that's where you come in."

"I'm all ears."

Jubal Bailey laughed. "You're one lucky motherfucker you still got ears." The laugh fled and Bailey leaned closer. "Straight out, man?"

"You saved my life, Bailey-

"Jube to you, turkey."

"It's Jake."

They held eyes for a long moment and all the necessary meaningful messages went between them. They were tight. They didn't need words to know that.

"All right, Jake. I got a sister, see? Name's Jewel. Pretty little thing. She works in the records office up in the state capitol. She and I love each other. Only family we got left." Bailey sniffed and grinned. "Except, of course, now there's you."

Jake waved two hands in the air. "Hallelujah," he said quietly.

"Your family is big shit down Miami way, Jake." Marden nodded.

"And they got all kinds of beagles. Short, tall, fat, skinny, white, black, brown, spic-y'know, legal beagles."

"Yeah, we got lawyers up the ass." Jake glowered. "Didn't do me much good."

"That's because your old man is a God-fearing dumb Jew son of a bitch. He figured, like the bible says, you do the crime, you do the time."

"That was Baretta and he wasn't no Hebe."

"So what the fuck's the dif, man? You took the fall because your old man is a righteous son of a bitch

aiM-he figured what was good for Moses is good enough for his kid, and here you are learning how to be God-fearing. But if he wanted you'd never have seen the inside of this place. Right, man?"

Jake nodded slowly. "If anybody asks I'm probably going to kill that God-loving motherfucker when I get out of here."

"Can that shit," Bailey protested. "Your pop's a do-gooder. I need a do-gooder who's got money, contacts, religion, and lawyers. It's simple, Jake. The lieutenant governor whose kid I busted is out of office. They lost the elections. No one gives a shit any more if I'm in here or out there. That's why I'm doing the time without ever having done the crime. No one gives a fuck."

"Not true, Jube."

Bailey showed surprise. "How come?"

"This is one dude," Jake tapped his chest, "who has your best interests at heart."

"Then you get the message."

"Uh huh."

"There's hope for the white race yet. You get them to work on my case. New hearing, suppressed evidence; whatever. It may cost."

"My old man's loaded."

"You work on it that way, I keep your white ass alive and I teach you how to climb to the top of the heap in here. Deal?" "Deal." Jake lit his cigar again. "Jewel, that's your sister. How'd she figure in all this?"

"I told you. She works in the capitol in state records. Man, she's inside them computers. I know more about you and your religious freak of a father than you do."

"You're pretty good for a wood-chopping nigger, Jube."

"You ain't bad yourself for a big dumb Jew." Bailey clapped him on the shoulder. "And you're about to get a lot better. You ready for a walk?"

Jake looked at the barred cell door. It might as well have been frozen shut. But he learned fast. Don't ask dumbshit questions. These guys have all the answers. "I'm ready," Jake said. Bailey smiled and stabbed a wall button. Moments later the cell door slid open.

"Neat," Jake said. "Very neat. Must be magic."

They walked out onto the corridor. "I told you, turkey, I run number nine. This whole cellblock. I want out, I tap the button and I'm out. Or a guard is dead by morning. It pays to advertise."

"You run this whole cellblock?"

"Man, you living in some fucking dream? The guards work here. They don't run the place. Old scumhead Spunt-the warden?-he don't do shit we don't allow him to do. Start getting smart, Jake."

"Watch me learn, Jube."

The inmates didn't fuck with Jake Marden again. The word flows swiftly in Old Millford, and the word was out that the big Hebe was crazy and strong as a fucking ox, and he tore off arms and ripped out eyes and his favorite trick was wearing these steel nails, see, and he could de-skin a man's dick without even blinking. Jube Bailey did his part, because even the biggest tree can fall when a lot of woodchoppers get together to cut it down. Bailey passed the word to the Latinos who were all members of the Satans, and the blacks who ran under the banner of God Sucks, and there were the Eyeties, the Italians, who were known simply as The Hand, and all sorts of racial and ethnic groups that banded together and regularly fought and maimed and killed. They were stir-crazy and most had nothing to lose and they were dumb; for a pack of cigarettes and a nod from a gang leader they'd rip out the belly of their own mother. Not a man alive could survive in that kind of jungle unless he had plenty of his own cover. Jake Marden was mean and tough and he was getting better all the time and Jube Bailey and his Cellblock Nine crowd covered his back all the time. It was simple. "You fuck with Marden, you're dead meat, asshole. It's a blood chit on which we always pay."

Marden had always had a lot of muscle in his body and between his ears and Jube honed it all nice and sharp for him. Jake did his next three years boxing, wrestling, working karate and hand-to-hand combat and some verfrmean niggers taught him how to handle cold steel in ways he'd never dreamed. He did road work and track and body building until his reflexes were all big cat and his muscle was water buffalo. He didn't bother getting in touch with that miserable Jew motherfucker who was his father, but he

talked with with Moishe Green, a very sharp lawyer who'd been close with him all the way through high school and college and turned Green loose on Jube's problem. They were making headway when Jake finished his three years and Green had been busy on his case as well and they opened the doors and kissed him goodbye.

He went back to Miami just like it said for him to do in the parole papers. Be good to your web-footed friends, kiss your parole officer's ass and grease his palm, and keep your indiscretions out of the public eye. Not too tough to handle. There was enough money in the family till that belonged to him, and his nasty parent even went along with an extra check to open an electronics shop for Jake to run. It added up to business smarts. That gave him the job he needed for parole, he was learning a trade, as his father spat at him (he still intended to kill the old bastard at the right time), and he was now an ex-con with respectability dribbling from his ears.

That was all great cover for Jake. He hadn't emerged from

The Rock with any Cinderella crap between his ears. He knew he had to be damned capable at what he decided would be his completely visible profession. Electronics and computers; those were the tickets. Not for a nice career and more ass-kissing for the parole people. Screw that; he had that shit under tight control. He wanted his own money. He wanted a hell of a lot of the long green and it had to be accessible to him only. You had a professional calling card and a fat bank account and you could do or buy just about anything. That was how you spelled the word freedom.

Marden Electronics was the perfect cover. He hired a bunch of Cubans who had smarts but the wrong skin color and citizenship and let them run the repair shop, fixing televisions and radios and computers and all sorts of electronic junk. That attended to the ledgers to satisfy the State investigators who came down to make sure he was behaving and to get their monthly envelopes with crisp bills stacked neatly inside. Jake also set up his office for such meetings so that every payoff and every shakedown was recorded in stereo sound and taped in beautiful living color. He considered those his bank withdrawal slips for some uncertain moment in the future.

Then came his real work. "Moishe, you set up the legal structure," he instructed his lawyer. "I want an outfit that's legal for credit references, credit card investigations, computer uplinks with the whole banking system, domestic and foreign."

"You taking over the world, Jake?"

"Up yours, holy one. I need a legal guru, not a suspicious saint."

Green held up both hands. "Perish the thought. What else?"

"Everything tied in to computer scan, request, interrogation and retrieval. Give me enough shit to function as an everyday business. Doesn't matter if it makes money or not, just so long as the stuff is legit and the books add up for the IRS. Okay?"

"Your poppa would be real proud to know what you're-"

Green found himself looking at a dangerous stranger. "Moishe, I'll say this only once. You open your fucking mouth to anyone, to anyone, hear me? and I'll tear out your fucking heart."

Jake meant it and Green knew he meant it, so they got along just terrific from that day on. Free of the complexities of legal coverage, Jake plunged into the meat of what he'd set up so carefully. With a solid year of intense study he'd become an expert in computer operations and one hell of a hacker. He began to manipulate computer systems from blind-alley companies (that vanished with the first whisper of investigation). He shifted credit card accounts and bank accounts through dummy partnerships and companies and within another two years he had over a million dollars clean in a dozen banks throughout the world, all of it manipulated from the sealed back room of his Miami repair shop. He had women, a fatcat parole officer, he was a successful businessman, and he was bored right out of his mind. "

Only one real flash of interest reached him. A telephone call. A woman; he recognized the voice even though Jewel didn't give her name. "Call me tonight at twelve sharp. Use a pay phone." She hung up and at midnight he was at Miami International Airport making the call. "Jube gets out tomorrow," she told him in a voice that should have been elated but was heavy with worry. "He needs you."

"Can he get to a nearby town? Does he have-?"

"I'm picking him up. We have enough money for a while. Two weeks or so, I have him listed for a job,

but-

This time he broke in. "Never mind that." He plumbed his thoughts swiftly. "Drive him to Gainesville. There's a football game tomorrow and the town will be apeshit. They wouldn't notice King Kong if he showed up in a red suit. Get Jube registered in the Bambi Motel. It's a nothing place on the main drag in the south end of town. I'll meet him there tomorrow at ten. The whole town will be drunk by then. And don't worry about jobs or bread."

"I won't. Thanks. Tomorrow night, then." She hung up.

He met them in the motel and embraced Jubal Bailey with more feeling than he'd ever known before.

"Man, just tell me what you need and you got it," Jake said.

"I need a car, clothes, a lot of bread."

"How much?"

"Ten thou, my friend." Jube looked doubtful.

"I brought twenty. Five cash and the rest in traveler's checks. Makes more sense that way. We'll buy a car for cash in Ocala tomorrow. Highway 200's got a thousand of them. Walk in, pay, drive out."

"Thanks for everything but one, Jake. Stay away from me. You leave here tonight. I don't want any connection between us. I'll get in touch with you later."

Jake caught the fearful look from Jewel. "Man, what the fuck you got in mind?" he snapped at Bailey.

"He's got bad debts in his mind," Jewel answered for him. "He figures he's got to do payback before he can live his life again."

Jake swallowed his own protests. "Jewel, he didn't stop and have me fill out any forms when he saved my ass in Millford. I can't do anything less for him now."

She bit her lip. "I know." She lapsed into silence, but she was one frightened lady. Jake knew the wisdom of Bailey's moves. He didn't ask questions. He dropped the money and checks on his blood brother, hugged Jube and kissed Jewel, and went off into the night. He'd just have to wait to see how it all came down.

He itched from head to foot. Jesus Fucking Khee-Rihst, but he was bored. Sucking tit to electronics gadgets was still shit for the libido. He craved action. He needed howling down the avenue of life on one long wheelie of screaming rubber. He went flying again. He dove the reefs of the Bahamas and had knife-fights with barracudas but that was a lot of crap, fighting some dumb-assed fish with big teeth. He bought the biggest Harley he could find and rode with a bunch of madmen and that didn't do much good because whatever it was he was after he wasn't finding himself.

He never got even with that fucking machine that had goaded him into three years in prison. For a while he hadn't even thought about Lisa. He wasn't aware that the Lisa he had known didn't exist any more. Three years up and out from a luscious teenager is everything. What he remembered was the wild and overwhelming success, the incredible orgasms. When he found her he was stunned. In one single swoop the period of three years struck him with almost physical force. Time reared up before Jake and roared.

Lisa had aged twenty years. The girl had vanished. The appeal he once saw had become ragged disease. She'd been buried under an avalanche of drugs she'd poured into her system. She hooked with any male animal who'd pay a few bucks for the goodies that transported her, however briefly, to never-never land. And she had a disease new and strange to Jake, but mention of the word AIDS brought instant fear to anyone within physical reach of the girl. He saw her once, he wouldn't let her touch him, and to keep her from ever getting again into his life, because she would pursue him for money, he arranged for her to have all the heroin she wanted. She was dead in four days. End of game.

Well, Miami, fortunately for the itch he couldn't scratch, was really the capital of the Caribbean. Piss on Havana. Miami was the action. He started listening to certain people who'd been making overtures to him for aKpng time. Especially Pedro Garcia who welcomed him to his penthouse overlooking Miami harbor. "Hey, man, this is real stuff, yloiw? Real business," Garcia said with expansive waves of pure Havana tobacco. "I no say it easy but it ees big." Garcia wore a thousand dollar suit in an apartment with air conditioning on so high the marble statues had icicles on their balls, and still the Cuban sweated all the time. He was hot to trot.

"Big, huh? You know how to spell big?" Jake asked.

"Sure! You think maybe I some kind of spic asshole?" Garcia grinned and scattered ashes as he gestured wildly as he talked. "Big? That is spelled money. Dineros, pesos, escudas, francs, rubles, marks, the green, bread, all them things, no? Big is also she is spelled power. I tell you, my friend, we are talking no little games here. It is for keeps. Governments, lots of people, whole countries." Garcia snapped a swift sharp look at Marden and went on immediately. "I have a customer for you. Someone who needs your special talents."

"I never offered myself as a mercenary," Marden said with a shrug. "And as far as the money is concerned-"

"You mean a man with a gun?" Garcia looked almost incredulous. "Pah! We have all the crazies and the heroes we need who shoot guns. A dime a dozen. No, no, compadre, these people desire your services as a genius of the electronics, of the computer, a man who also has little respect for the law . . ." It was the damndest arrangement Jake ever imagined. He didn't operate in Honduras or Nicaragua or Mexico or any one place. He had the whole banana including Panama and El Salvador and the top stretch of South America through Ecuador and Colombia, Peru and most of Venezuela. Through it all he worked for only one government, a single invisible government of men and women beyond visible politics. An invisible network that hired Jake Marden to slip within their web of power and intrigue and manipulation.

"One year. One year and one million dollars. That is what you will earn and it is after all taxes. For you to keep. We will attend to all costs. You will have all the help you need. All the people you want. We provide you with all the electronics you require. Radar, computers, satellite uplinks for real-time communications anywhere in the world. Weapons. Missiles of almost any land." The man he'd just met smiled comfortably.

"What kind? From where?"

Alvarez smiled. That was the only name Jake had. Just Alvarez. Jake couldn't lock in his background. It didn't matter but it gnawed at him. They'd had their first meeting at a fine hotel in a sleazy bar in Quito, Ecuador. Maybe it was a fine bar in a sleazy hotel. It didn't matter nearly two miles up on the great plateau. The first meeting was all gin and bullshit. Their second meeting was across the middle of a huge abandoned airfield once used by old Nazis who rumbled through South America in ancient German bombers before time and weariness buried men and machines alike.

Now Alvarez held his smile. "Kind? Where?" He laughed softly with subdued power. Like a humming diesel engine. "All kinds. From everywhere. Russian, American, English, French, Chinese, Italian, Brazilian. They are all available. That, my friend, is one of our problems. Much of what we deal with does not mix well. Operational manuals do not translate easily with the so many technical terms. It is too easy to make mistakes. What is called transliteration problems, I think. I know little of such matters. But you are not the fish from out of the water. We need to mix all of these goods. Missiles, computers; everything. We will help you in every way. You will set up electronic command posts. Link them all by satellite. Do you understand?"

Jake stood in the middle of the field lost in time and lit a cigar. He turned his head and body slowly until he caught the glint of reflected metal in the heavy brush a mile away. "You do not trust me," he said at last.

Alvarez chuckled. "Very good. Yes, they are picking up every word from that distance. And neither of us is wired. But it is me they watch, not you. Please continue with what you were going to say."

"All right." Jake made his last self-question on the spot. Screw the games, play it absolutely straight. "I was way ahead of you."

"I am fascinated." Alvarez smiled and waved at men a mile away he could not see.

"You want uplink comsat ties so that you can direct missiles and aircraft from any command center you choose. Distance from command to execute won't matter."

"And-"

"To anticipate your next question, and for the benefit of our unseen audience, yes, I can do it. The question is not can I do it, but how quickly. And," he added suddenly, "it is going to cost."

"We prefer numbers."

"Two hundred mil. Maybe three. It could even be four hundred million."

"Very good!" Alvarez beamed. "We have set aside a billion for the task. You are good business for us, my friend. You recall your fee?"

"One mil clean after all expenses."

"You are right, senor. And for every hundred million under the billion we have allocated, you receive five percent commission. This can be most rewarding for you." Alvarez hesitated a heartbeat. "We wish you to begin at once."

"I need ten days first."

Alvarez frowned. "That may not be--"

"Don't say it, senor. Don't even start to say it," Jake snapped. "Let me tell it to you straight." He looked across the field. "Everybody listen in. I'll do your job for you. You get my absolute attention and loyalty. That's the only way I play the game. But don't bug me. Don't interfere. You'll only fuck it up. I want the ten days to get a few of the very best people together. I want to think, review, study, so that when I come back here there aren't any more questions and I give you everything I've got. We understand each other?"

He laughed at their touch of theatrics. Alvarez remained silent, the sound of a jet helicopter broke across the high jungle and silenced the local bird and animal life, and when it set down a smiling man stepped forth with glasses and iced champagne.

He did more than collect his electronics crew. He got together a mob of bikers and he howled on a chopped hog with the bunch to Daytona Beach. Ninety mean cats and their mommas for a special occasion. On the back of Jake's Harley, her arms wrapped about his waist, was a girl he considered more than beautiful. Justine. A graduate student from University of Miami. Brilliant, gutsy, fast. Beautiful despite the scars she had from wiping out on a heavy bike a few years back. The whole mob went to Daytona Beach where Jake walked one night with Justine on the beach.

"I'm going away for a year. I'd like you to come with me," he told her.

"Is that a proposal or a proposition?"

"I didn't hear the word marriage in here anywhere."

"You didn't answer my question," she reminded him.

"You'd go with me? No questions asked about what, where, why--"

"Try me. All the way, man. No free pussy bullshit. That doesn't carry you through the rough moments."

He stopped to study her. He made up his mind on the spot. "More to you than meets the eye," he said slowly.

"You, too."

"Will you marry me?"

"Fucking double-clutch you bet I will!"

The bikers couldn't believe it. Tie the knot? Jake must be spaced out. But he was serious and they did the thing on the beach at dawn and the bikers hired a banner-towing plane and it flew just east of them, silhouetted against the bright dawn horizon, towing a sign that read SHIT HAPPENS. Everybody has their own way of saying congratulations.

Three days later Jake and Justine were in a Caracas with a small mob of cokehead whizkids and mad geniuses from the aerospace programs which had gone down the tubes from cancelled contracts. The ranks of computer specialists were swollen by the debris of the shuttle Challenger disaster. Cutbacks in satellite programs, cancellations in the planetary and deep-space schedules, had created its own dumpheap of electronics and computer brains with nowhere to go except comparatively menial and unchallenging positions. Jake and Justine passed the word through the computer hackers' bulletin board network of electronics and within a few days they had their pick of men and women willing to go anywhere or do anything to continue working with their precious computer systems.

Justine brought the last names to Jake. "This is crazy," she told him, dropping the list before Jake. "Half these people are barely old enough to shave and they're going to operate systems that cost over a hundred million dollars. Each," she added for emphasis. She kissed the top of Jake's head as she walked

behind and around his desk. "See those names with checkmarks? I did my own private interviews. Every one of them is a cokehead. Hooked with barbed wire right through their brains."

"Can they do their jobs?" he asked. That's all that mattered to him. He didn't care if they raped chickens for kicks.

"Sure can," she confirmed, nodding. "But don't stop now, lover. The checkmarks show you only the snow people. See the others marked with asteriks?"

"So?"

"They're the crazies. They stole from their companies--"

"Shit," he spat angrily. "I don't need genius shoplifters on my--"

Her laughter stopped him. "No. No. Not that kind of stealing. Money doesn't mean anything to them. They steal ideas, concepts, equipment to try experiments. They all want to revolutionize the world and the future. They're, well, they're drunk on their work."

He leaned back, motioned for her to come closer and grabbed Justine onto his lap. He nipped at her earlobe. "Then they're just the kind of people I want. Crazy enough to get into the real thick of things."

She squirmed with pleasure. "What kind of things, lover boy?"

He tapped the papers on his desk. "From what I can figure," he said, sobering suddenly, "about a dozen wars or so."

"Sometimes," she said softly, "you scare me. Like I might not be married long enough before . . . before ..."

He stood up, cradling her in his powerful arms like a child. "You talk too much. If you may not be married long enough, kiddo, the trick is to fill your time with--"

"Why do you still have on your clothes?" she complained.

Jake Marden, with Justine by his side, and their band of crazies, pulled it off. They directed the locations and satellite uplink and downlink communications for missile batteries in places no one ever dreamed they could be found. They located ammo stores and heavy weapons in remote mountain areas. They put high-powered crash boats into rivers and estuaries, out of sight of the world and loaded them with massive firepower, including small but deadly anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles. They then connected all the odd bits and pieces so that everything could be observed from any specified command center at any given time. And could be operated on a real-time functional basis from one of these mountain redoubt command posts.

Neither Jake nor his crews ever fired the weapons. That was their deal and their big safety, their way out of whatever came down heavy on them. They'd set up everything and then they would step back and invite their hosts to step forward and press the magic buttons. Radar systems and computer consoles hundreds of miles away would report their data to a transmit station, kick it upstairs to a comsat orbiting its neat little geosynchronous figure-eight pattern twenty-two thousand miles over the equator, and have it kicked back

downstairs in less than the blink of an eye. There, the people who ran this whole shebang had a grand old time running the real-life equivalent of War Games.

Backed by the Crazies, as they'd come to be known, the man known only as Alvarez, and his many lieutenants (and generals and whatever) began to knock% "lanes and choppers out of the sky wherever they decided they didn't like those particular craft. Their power boats ran up and down coastlines in thick fog and at night and in rotten weather, and with the magic of radar, infrared vision, sonar, and computers, they devastated the coastal and naval forces of whatever opposition they chose. Unseen by the Crazies, political mayhem reigned throughout these areas in what had to be the best-kept secrets of private wars anywhere in the world.

It really was crazy. "Who are we fighting?" Justine asked her husband. "Or who are these people fighting? I haven't the faintest idea who are the good guys and the bad guys."

Jake shrugged. "It's easy. The people who pay us also protect us. Obviously. We're their investment. So they are the good guys. See?"

"Is that a neat morality wrap?"

"Sure is."

"We've knocked down American airplanes, Jake. We've helped kill Americans," she pressed.

Jake looked at her in a long and stabbing gaze. "Ever visit a hard security prison in the United States?"

Justine blinked. "No. I mean, I wouldn't have any occasion to-

"American prisons. Guards. Laws. Statutes. State and federal institutions. Supposed to rehabilitate criminals. Or at least keep them locked up while they serve their time."

"I don't understand-

"Lover, last year more than four hundred prisoners, and guards, and other people, were killed in those prisons. You, ah, write a letter of complaint to the White House?"

She glared at him. "You know fucking well I-

"If you weren't here, right here, sharing in the money we're getting paid, would you even know about what goes on? The attacks, the casualties? Of course you wouldn't. I'm trying to make a point that will penetrate that cocoon of morality you've suddenly wrapped about yourself."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because, despite the fact that I love you, and you're an intelligent, erudite human being, you don't know shit about the real world. You think what we're doing is so bad? How many children died in the last year from starving to death?"

"I don't know!"

"Try fourteen million, kiddo. And they died not because of a lack of food, but because certain political power groups find it expedient to keep that starvation rate going. It's good politics, that's all. The payoff is who sits in the emperor's chair." She started to speak but he gestured her to silence. "Look, baby, what we're doing is simply manipulating some power forces. The number of people who've died because of what we're doing is less than one month of people being torn to pieces and burned to death on our highways. That's all. You got all that straight? If you haven't then maybe you better pack your bags and go on home and wait for me. You can always march in some fucking peace parade or something to stay busy."

She had some good points to make, he admitted to himself, but so what? Everything he had said to her was just as valid as her troublesome conscience, and conscience is a curious human invention with about as much use to a man as his appendix. What was really crazy about the Alvarez operation was that no one seemed to observe nationalities or borders. Jake didn't know for certain what lay behind this surgical destruction of aircraft and ships and military forces, without regard to political alliance or military or national position, but the people who paid the bills were no dummies. So he went about his job of tearing planes and helicopters from the sky with devastating regularity, and the bonuses kept going to his diverse bank accounts. Someone, somewhere, was cleaning up through what he had accomplished. It could have come through insurance or political blackmail; whatever. He didn't know and he really didn't give a shit one way or the other.

Then, just like clockwork, the year ended. He met again with Alvarez, reminded him of their deal, and announced his departure. Those of his crazies who wanted to stay could do whatever they wanted, but he and Justine were flying home. Alvarez cocked his head to one side. He didn't say a word and finally he shrugged. Jake didn't like that kind of diffident gesture. It bespoke of some real heavy shit coming down from somewhere. The hair on the back of his neck stirred alarmingly. Before he had much of an opportunity to dig into the source of his instincts bunching up and starting to scream silently in his head, Justine joined them. Her face was expressionless until she spoke as much to both of them as to Jake directly

"I have our reservations. We leave in four hours." He waited. She was drawing it out, giving him time to think. "There's no money in your accounts, Jake. Everything was withdrawn this morning."

"Say that again."

"It's all gone. They left nothing. Not a dime."

"That is not true, senora. You have your health and your lives and a marvelous experience to take with you. Consider yourself most fortunate, indeed. If your man," he nodded respectfully to Jake, "had not performed for us in so brilliant a fashion, and had his loyalty not been unquestioned, neither of you would be alive now."

"Thanks a fucking heap," Jake said. He knew he had to move very carefully along a narrow strip of reaction. This was enemy turf and he and Justine were at the bottom of a very deep well with these spic motherfuckers holding heavy rocks at the top of the well.

"Just like that," he said slowly to Alvarez, "we fly out of here with the clothes we got on, and that's it?"

"We do not need you no more," Alvarez smiled, and the light gleamed from a blue-white diamond set into one of his front teeth. He looked like some kind of crazyass glass rabbit in a toystore window. "Those tickets your wife described? I am sure you already know they are one way to Miami."

Justine didn't believe this man was her husband. Jake stood before this spic motherfucker and did everything but crawl over his shoes, tongue hanging out to wash the patent leather. She would have bet her life they'd be in real trouble, but from Jake tearing that bastard's head right from his shoulders. Not, of all things, Jake wimping out. It simply was not in that man to ... God, but you're an asshole, Justine! Here you are in the middle of a South American jungle and the dumbest goddamn thing Jake could do is lose his temper and give these people just the chance they want to knock off the both of you. What do you expect Jake to do? Levitate? Fly out of here like some great fucking bird? Play along with him, dummy. Make it look good . . .

"Yes, sir. I understand, Mr. Alvarez. There won't be any trouble. I promise you." Jake let his shoulders droop and tried to work up enough nervous sweat along his upper lip to make it a bit more real. He walked a very tight line. He could reach Alvarez and kill him with a snapped neck before anybody could interfere. And then what? Instant and terminally brief heroics only get your ass killed. Even to shoot off his mouth now was to sign the death warrants of himself and Justine. Never fuck with the troops when you're in their church. One of the primary laws of surviving until it's your turn. So he let himself, well, if not cringe, at least be scared enough to behave. Just enough. He had to remove any belief on their part that the wise way to go was to kill his big white ass. Make them believe you're still on their side, baby. They're big enough assholes to go for it . . .

"You know, Mr. Alvarez, I don't really need all that money we talked about." Jake didn't believe he was actually shuffling his feet. Old Nigger Shuffle. Jube Bailey would have been hysterical with the scene. "I mean, sir, if I could get just a part, you know, not much, but enough to pick up my business, why, that would be great, and you know I'd always be ready to help you whenever you might want me again."

He kept his face a sodden, frightened mask behind which his emotions seethed. I'm going to have to kill this motherfucker slowly, with my own bare hands, to clean all this shit off my soul. Later, later . . .

Alvarez brightened and broke into a huge smile. "Hey, you pretty smart fucker, after all, you know that, man? We figured, like you would be mucho trouble, right? After all, you a big man and you got a real bad rep, right?" Alvarez beamed expansively. "And you very, very good at training.

We gots plenty people you train real good and so it look like maybe you could be mucho more trouble than you are really worth."

Alvarez stood and took the time to deliberately lighj a cigarette, forming new thoughts into a brain that really dsm't move too quickly. "But what you say," he went on, nodding, as if he'd originated all this somewhere within that peabrain, "it's got good points. There's a chance, maybe, sometime in the future, you know, you could do a few favors for us."

Jake stood mute, smiling like an idiot. If he kept up this candyass act and they felt he'd still be pliable if they needed him in the future, well, a greedy fucker is greedy no matter what. It could be safe passage out of this trap and back to Miami. "Yes, yes, what you say makes sense." He came up to Jake and clapped him warmly on the back. "No hard feelings, right, man? And I tell you something. You go home with your lady and we give you a hundred thousand dollars to take with you, all nice and legal. So it is all hokay, right, man?"

They made it out. All the way back to Miami Jake trembled with barely controlled rage. "How long can you keep yourself under control?" Justine wanted to know.

He squeezed her hand and smiled at her. She felt as if she'd had her first experience looking straight into the eyes of a hell serpent. "Long enough, baby," he promised, "long enough."

He had the money from the past few years to do what was needed. They closed the shops in Miami and bought a storage warehouse just north of Kissimmee, on the edge of Orlando and close to the sprawling

entertainment industry of Disney World, Sea World and the huge hotels rising like massive Aztec temples above the flat Florida terrain. Orlando had become a crazy quilt of rednecks, super hotels, entertainment palaces, and a hundred other major attractions in a city growing so rapidly and with such industrial fury it was perfect game for a "specialty electronics and computer development" firm. Justine took care of the paperwork, Moishe Green covered the legal bullshit, and Jake with all the grim doggedness of the pit bulls he kept about as security animals began to sculpt his new "working machinery."

It would take a class-act dummy not to realize that the people behind Alvarez would sooner or later encounter failures in their operations throughout Central and South America. The failures would accumulate because the Latinos had never done anything consistently successful since they first tried to piss in a ceramic latrine. After enough failures they would either have to blame themselves or, as Jake put it to his wife, "they'll come gunning for me as the cause for all their fits."

"It doesn't matter that you're not even involved?" she asked, but they both knew the query was rhetorical. "Hell, no," he grinned. She was grateful for the lopsided grin on that square-jawed face beneath the beard he'd grown since they settled in Orlando. The grin meant he had his temper under control and, more important, that he was about ready to welcome Alvarez and as many thugs as he might send after them. But even she underestimated the fine touch of Jake Marden.

"It's computer time, baby," he finally told Justine. They played it very carefully. Deep within the heart of the warehouse he'd bought, protected by a layering network of repair shops and labs and control rooms, including a private apartment directly above the building center, he had prepared his secret control center. The shops about and above him provided visual and physical cover and also kept up a barrage of electromagnetic hash to blanket completely his inner sanctum.

The key to everything was his Master Data Control. He still held the code key to every computer system he'd set up in Central and South America. He still had the ability to directly access every control system. He had direct comsat uplink and he could spray down commands to the ground equipment through a narrow but widening cone. He could control anything and everything in that jungle-hidden network because that was precisely the manner in which he had set up the whole works.

He programmed the entire series of destruction messages into a command computer. "It's just like the countdown system at the space center," he chuckled to Justine. "All the commands are here in the master data release. That's how a shuttle launch works. For the last six minutes of the count everything comes out of their master computer and the electronic brain sends out all work commands, monitors all systems, and only if it's satisfied does it permit the count to continue. Right on down to blastoff. Just-like-this," he added, and hit the command switch.

A long way south, beyond the borders of the United States, one hundred and seventy-eight missiles on their launch racks ignited with unexpected howls of fire and ripped away toward distant targets packed with people. Airplanes went violently out of control as their autopilots seemed to go berserk. Fuel tanks exploded, homing missiles released with frightening roars from ground and airborne launch racks and homed in on anything airborne, airplane, helicopter, or large bird. When it was over no more than ten minutes later, Jake Marden had utterly wrecked and largely destroyed whatever political organization had so painfully grasped power in the Latin territories.

"What now?" Justine asked quietly. As sure as God made green apples she knew they'd have company.

Jake laughed. "Well, the invitations are out. Now we get ready for visitors."

Danger was so thick you could smell it. She studied her man with no small sense of wonder. Jake loved every moment.

They sent their big guns from Miami to do the job. Colombian narcotics soldiers, the runners, the hit men, the troops who were spawned from drugs and money-protected. They found Jake Marden but it never occurred to them he had never really concealed where he was. He only adjusted the paths they would follow, the trails down which they must journey to reach him and Justine. Before they left Miami he had seven out of ten pegged and the other three were all on the edge of identification and tracking.

"They can't walk to where we are," Jake explained to Justine as they studied a full wall-sized computer graphic of events beyond the building. He'd set up his sensors and cameras and trackers a full three months earlier and now they delivered their data in a steady stream of electrical impulses to the

computers and displayed their messages to him. "See there? When they cross the main road into this industrial

park they trigger the fall systems. There are only three ways in and out of here and we've got them all targeted. They're coming by car, most of them. The few who flew in had to make the trip without guns and they'll pick them up after their arrival. See those vans?" She watched three white vans turning a distant corner. "That's their big stuff. Gelpacks to get the fires going. They've got all sorts of that shit. But they won't use any of it until they're all in position to hit us as hard as they can."

"Why are you letting them get so close?" Justine was amazed with herself. Curiosity outweighed natural fear.

"I don't want any of them getting away."

"Jake, there are at least forty hired killers out there who will do their best to kill both you and me," she said without a rise to her voice, "and your major concern is that they don't get away?"

"Uh huh."

"Have you, perhaps, arranged for the police to-"

"There'll be a couple of accidents and fires across town that will occupy the police. There won't be a cop within a country mile of this place."

She studied the cars and vans parking outside their building, men moving slowly, carefully, removing weapons from canvas bags.

"It's about time," Jake said calmly. "Relax, love. Watch."

A big garbage truck lumbered from the west side of the industrial park. It picked up speed and without wavering to one side or the other smashed into a group of vans. Immediately the hired guns opened fire against the truck, smashing the driver's cab with a torrent of bullets. The truck exploded. At least four of the gunmen died in the blast that hurled flames and debris outward.

"The driver!" Justine screamed. "What about the-"

His huge hand brought her back gently to her chair. "There isn't any driver. The truck is radio-controlled. Here comes the next one." From the opposite side another garbage truck rolled toward the group, glass and metal flying off wildly as bullets smashed into the vehicle. Another fiery explosion and still more casualties.

"I promised the guys they could do this on a personal basis," Jake said with a chuckle. "It's time for magic."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Justine demanded.

Jake looked pained, holding both hands across his chest. "Why, it's magic, like I said. Ever hear of the Merlins? Also known as the Magicians of Motorcycles? They're a new group made up of the absolute best-or the worst, depending upon how you look at it-of a bunch of the old gangs like the Saints, Outlaws, Angels. Old buddies of mine." He pointed to the screen. "Here they come. Two hundred of them and loaded for bear."

The bikers came in with guns, chains, swinging maces; the works. They tore up the industrial lot. They set all the cars and vans afire. Not a body from the original hit team moved when the carnage ended. The bikers waved as they roared off.

"See?" Jake held out his arms in an expansive gesture. "Just a little fun for the boys, and-"

He wasn't watching his screens. Three helicopters came down in swift, steep descending arcs. Each chopper fired a brace of armor-tipped missiles that ripped open Jake's hard defenses like power drills going through a sardine can. The world exploded in flame and blasting explosions and men in full body suits and gas masks came in behind the flame and smoke. Jake took out a bunch with a withering defensive fire of autorifles but he really didn't have much of a chance. When he knew it was hopeless he tried to shove Justine down his escape tunnel, a vacuum tube beneath the floor that came above ground a full quarter-mile away. He almost made it. Two burly figures ripped Justine from his hands and Jake took a slug in a shoulder and somewhere in a leg and with a final desperate move he dove down the tunnel, sucked along like a herring being flung onto a fishing boat. The autodoors slammed shut behind him.

They were very good at their business. They rented an entire wing of the Conquistador Motel on Highway 19 and they turned up ear-blasting rock music that drowned out other sounds and at least a

dozen men raped Justine in her vagina and anus and her mouth and they violated her with bottles and things he never wanted to see again. They broke all her teeth and then they broke her ankles so she couldn't escape no matter how hard she might try. They skinned half of her body and she was still alive. He never knew how they discovered where he was staying with the bikers. But they found out and a UPS truck delivered a video tape of everything they'd done to Justine.

Jake knew he had to kill the woman he loved. It was the one, the only decent act remaining to him. End the horror. Close the switch on the agony he knew continued even then. They knew he'd think that way. They knew he'd come in like Rambo or some heroic shit like that. He didn't. He was going to leave the driving to Greyhound. They expected anything but that. A big damned bus like so many of the other buses pouring tourists into the area. The countryside around Disney and the other tourist attractions were a mass of people moving about in large groups. It didn't attract attention.

Jake worked the initial part of his setup through his company computer system. He communicated by computer with the manager of the Conquistador. He informed them, with all the proper licenses and numbers and authority, that all the three wings of the motel other than the fourth wing occupied by the group from Central America, had been confirmed as leaking radon gas into the rooms and must be emptied immediately. Other rooms had been reserved for them, and the motel construction company (neatly in Jake's pocket as well) would "pick up the tab for whatever you lose for two or three days." They emptied the three other motel wings and the restaurant and most of the motel staff.

Jake timed it as carefully as he could to get the women and the kids and the families and the innocents out of the way. Then he secured himself within a cubicle of armor plating in the back of the bus with a complete set of remote controls, periscopes and video cameras to provide all the forward vision he needed. He put a mannequin that was a neat Fiberglas copy of Jake Marden in the driver's seat; sealed within his cubicle he lined up the bus to clear the curb at precisely the angle he needed and at seventy miles an hour he rammed that bus with its front filled with plastique explosives and jellied napalm and phosgene gas into the motel. He punched over the curb with the engine howling, the mannequin up front dying a hundred deaths from the machine-gun fire ripping into its frame, and the bus tore through bushes smack into Room 126 and as it smashed through bricks and glass he swung the wheel hard left and squeezed the detonator and offered a silent prayer of love for Justine, a hope she would never know what was happening.

She didn't. Twelve hundred pounds of flaming explosives leveled the motel. Flattened the wing with Justine's sadist captors and churned the rest of the place into gyrating wreckage. He never expected to live through the horrendous series of explosions. But he did. The armored casing funneled the blast around him and despite the savaging shock of the explosion that brought blood spouting from his ears and his mouth and nose and anus, he stumbled free of the inferno. He walked through the stunned and screaming people who rushed to the carnage. He sat down on a curb far across the boulevard, skin burned, ears ringing, blood bubbling and dripping from him and he just sat there watching the rubble burn and the napalm licking greedily at the last scraps of fuel. He heard but didn't really hear the sirens and the horns because he didn't care. He hardly knew it when they wrapped chains and manacles about him to drag him away. He didn't know where the hell he was going and he didn't care. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he'd be returning to the System.

The only real argument was whether the State of Florida or the Feds would have the pleasure of locking him up and throwing away the key. They argued about the death penalty but no one doubted he was mad as a hatter and the State got the nod. A somber judge, properly and truly appalled at what this man had done, because he had no way of knowing the truth about the sadistic butchers who'd driven Justine mad, gave Jake Marden three hundred and ninety years with no chance for parole. For the first time he gave outward signs that between his ears he was still alive and functioning. He laughed at the judge. He offered a sardonic chuckle at the insanity of it all, and he never bothered to explain Justine or everything that had led up to the horror inflicted on his beloved. They would never have believed him. They would never have cared. According to the prosecutor representing good old respectable society, Jake Marden had killed thirty-four people in the motel wing; perhaps, more. The blast that demolished the rest of the motel had killed another six-the manager and his skeleton staff remaining on hand to run things. That he

regretted. Another fifty people in the surrounding area went to hospitals but they would all come out okay.

But to the judge, Jake Marden didn't give a shit. No matter that he'd saved a few hundred family members. That didn't count. You don't get brownie points for that sort of stuff. Society doesn't add up its numbers that way.

Old Millford Prison was still the toughest security nut in the state and they wrapped Jake in chains and manacles again and locked him in the back of an armored truck and drove him north, back to the shitheel country of north central Florida, back to the land of Waldo and Hawthorne and Starke and that great flat shitheel army base of Camp Blanding.

When they drove through the gates and the outside world closed behind him he sighed in his festoon of iron. In here, he thought distantly, there'll be peace.

CHAPTER 2

He itched.

A damnable deep-down under-the-skin itch that made a man want to kill his sister. The itch grew legs and crawled about beneath his thick hide with a sudden impulsive life of its own. Arbok reached out with a powerful hand to scratch along the bottom of his rib cage. The sound at least was satisfying, an abrasive scraping of hard flesh. The itch danced away in a wispy maddening torment just beyond his reach. It wriggled around his side to his back and did a slithering subcutaneous crawl between his shoulder blades. There it lodged and dug in, twisting and agonizing him. He cursed to himself. It didn't help. He cursed aloud with vehemence and increasing volume. It didn't help the itch but it brought a scowl of displeasure to the ugly face of a thick-bodied Skringian who'd been watching Arbok with dull-witted stupefaction. The ugliness and dull wit went by the name of Gllant Ytram.

Ytram had no idea if Arbok-his full name was Aktuk Yangst Arbok, but all such pronunciations were always at the mercy of uncaring translations-understood his language. There were so many of the Inner World languages that they had for the greatest part adopted a stellar-system common language compatible with just about every known computer-programmed language-teaching process. The use of Galactibase required atmospheric pressure for enunciation as well as instant audiocomputer pickup. Despite the stupendous ability of the computers to sort out the gibberish of a few thousand worlds, translations and barrier-language readout never eliminated all its communications problems.

And that was on a good day with aliens of rather equal smarts. Right now that wasn't the case. Arbok had the smarts.

In fact he had more smarts than your average gnarb with all its cunning, fangs, and terrible claws. Arbok spoke not only his own language and at least two more alien-off-world alien-tongues, but when everything else failed to work, you reverted to Galactibase because almost all worlds included the interstellar trade language as a required course of learning.

Arbok was hot snot in his own planetary system. Most rocket jocks are. They're a breed astonishingly alike anywhere in the galactic band. But at this moment all his flash and speed and wit foundered in the plodding dullness of this idiot Ytram. Ytram spoke Galactibase, but slowly and, Arbok would have bet his last slarn, as stupidly as the look on his face.

Arbok had reasoned correctly. Ytram's home world of Skring counted few among its inhabitants who had any truck with the awesome Traders who boomed down through their atmosphere in ear-battering stage-center arrivals. Ytram's people were not impressed with the flashy Traders and their obnoxious manners, notwithstanding the,astonishment of the Traders that these locals of Skring wereitoo stupid not to beg to go into space. Skringians hated- to leave their home planet and the severe discomfort they suffered off-world fully justified their attitude. Removed from the peculiar subtle radiations of their system star they were b/6set with a whole-body malaise of heroic miseries. ./

At this particular moment Ytram was extremely uncomfortable, moody, angry, ill to his three stomachs and he was homesick. To no small extent his despondency issued from the fact that his nose felt like a

huge slab of disaster beset with the horrible stench arising from just about everything that could waft its way to his tortured nasal passages. Ytram had little experience with alien life forms and the strange, pungent, and often wildly sharp odors, smells, gases, and effluvium their bodies cast off with alarming pressure and quantity. Ytram also came from a world with unreasonably low atmospheric pressure. At six pounds to the square inch, compression of the gases of Skring provided little in the way of painful overpressure; i.e., noise. Now, within the confines of a jail ward of the penal vessel Frarsk, the pressure was an agonizing twenty pounds per square inch. Compression waves translated into devastating volume. Acceptably loud sounds (to other life forms) became explosive eruptions to the delicate acoustical system of Ytram. He had been mistreated, abused, ridiculed, shoved, jammed, force fed and suffered other disgusting indignities performed upon his person as a lifeterm convict, and the last shit he needed now was this lumpskin Arbok bellowing like a wounded brostapg.

Ytram shuddered. This Arbok fellow, or thing, or whatever was his life form-and at least there seemed little question about the he from the sight of huge ballocks and a thick penis with brostapg skin-could at least be identified from his cutaneous structure. Ytram didn't really consider Arbok in so judiciously a manner. But he was beginning to accept inevitable confrontation with Arbok and when you mixed with beings from totally unknown worlds you were wise to at least ponder a moment or two before challenging an unpleasant life form that could in an instant turn hideously dangerous.

But any being's physical presentation gave some form of reliable indicator of their home world. Ytram pondered long and slowly, and he judged accurately that Arbok's home world was either fairly close to its mother star or its radiations were hysterically fierce. Obviously. Any town dunce on Skring could tell at least that much with no more than a good look. The skin structure gave globs of information. Evolution had molded (as evolution always did, or the lifeform would never have survived long enough to be here, now) that skin structure to a specific environment over millions of years. Arbok's race clearly had undergone a period of blistering solar radiations, running the full gamut of ultraviolet down through strong infrared. Thick skin almost of armor-like quality (though expressively pliable), massive ridged eyebrows to protect the optical system from those radiations, but strangely enough, a physical form not massive and bulky. From whatever world Arbok had sprung, Ytram expected something like a brostapg with that skin, like the ugly beast of burden with a horny boneplate for a skull and six massive legs for dragging and pulling.

Ytram stared. This alien was getting noisier all the time. Ytram considered killing him. Nothing personal. It would be like crushing the skull of one of the logbangers from his own planet.

His full name was Aktuk san Yangst Arbok and the name was as much title and clan identification as it was a personal tag on his home world of Makk. One of fourteen planets, Makk orbited its Class G yellow star they called Traik. If you translated from Makkian to English then Traik would simply emerge as the nonterrestrial equivalent of Sol. Better yet, it would be, quite simply, the sun. How many terrestrials (those of Earth, specifically) ever referred to their sun as Sol. Or, for that matter, to their world as Terra? Yet they used the terms terrestrial and extraterrestrial without a second thought rather than to call themselves Earthians. All planets, in their local lingo, were Earth. That was the pattern found everywhere within the inhabited galaxy.

Actually, the sun of Terra (Earth) and of Makk were so alike in stellar structure as to be distinguishable only to astro-physical scrutiny. Yet the difference, subtle as it was, produced vastly different evolutionary results. The orange tint of Traik came from its growth phase so far back in time that it held meaning equally for the astrophysicists and the philosophers who pondered such things. Students of both worlds also underwent such studies but considered the details to be so much crap to be memorized in order to pass final exams.

No one on Makk considered their orange hue to their outer cutaneous structure to be at all unusual, no more than Negroes pondered their varying shades of brown or tan or chocolate or golden hue to blue-black. Besides, the Makkians were all orange-hued, everything from faded whitish-orange to deep rust and autumn hues (or their terrestrial equivalents in shading). Arbok's skin was thick, hard, the consistency of gnarled leather, yet constructed of such interlocking weave he had loose-rag pliability. Whatever were the nature of his genes they carried instructions down through the Makkian generations to

ward off all manner of radiation and yet function as any good skin should perform, for temperature control and kinesthetic sensitivity.

Arbok, and all Makkians, and indeed, every known higher form of intelligent life ever encountered, was an erect biped with the same essential structure of homo sapiens as had evolved on Terra (Earth). All such beings had also developed peculiar and personal characteristics often completely alien to other species.

Makk was an extraordinarily dense world, much like Terra in this respect, but with a surface gravity thirty percent higher than that of the race we identify as human. With millions of years of development, the Makkians had somehow escaped the curse of a high-gravity planet, which almost always produced beings squat and stolid in form and nature, built lower to the ground, evolutionary squashed, as it were, by the thousands of generations trying always to stand taller and straighter. Rather than the form of an oversized dwarf with thick legs and body, the Makkians compensated through superb musculature and bone structure flexibility. They needed, and they had, powerful tendon and sinew development. In sum, the Makkians physically were dangerous and powerful as individuals.

Atop this impressive physical structuring rested a wide and high skull that had always presented a marvelous casing for a developing brain, and on the scale of galactic intelligence, Arbok placed very high. Abiding this intellectual capacity were fingers surprisingly slender and supple that still had the strength of corded cable. Add to this an opposable thumb that worked as a good thumb should perform; the Makkians were among the top ten percent of the galactic intellectual community.

They might have progressed much further had it not been for a number of troublesome characteristics, most of which Arbok possessed. A ferry pilot between planets, he was more a rakish and womanizing flyboy of the spaceways than some mysterious and sinister member of an alien civilization. Irreverence and the fighter-pilot syndrome is like water. It always seeks its own level but somehow manages to cling tenaciously to the heights. And with so many of his kind, Arbok was more jetset hellraiser than steely-eyed veteran of the interplanetary routes (which after a while, being forced to fly along rigid paths of centrifugal force, became mind-numbingly boring). Brilliant, a born pilot and a computer genius, a master of languages and social mores of different worlds, he was also a born leader of those about him. He had one other distinguishing characteristic, already duly noted by the glowering and stolid Gllant Ytram-huge ballocks and a thick penis of leathery skin. That observation was academic to Ytram but of far more intense interest to the sexes of Arbok's own kind; personal and inviting to the females and distressful to the males. It also brought into great dispute Arbok's position of leadership among his jolly spaceflying mates. Especially his copilot, one Atam Hertis, who took violent umbrage at Arbok upon discovering that his captain and spaceferry master was humping all three of Atam's wives and two of his daughters as well. And his mother.

For a long time Atam kept it tightly bottled. On any interplanetary run the captain was absolute master and you did not screw with the captain (even if he were screwing your wives, daughter, and maternal parent) because he could bust your ass physically and career-wise. On landing approach to the lock grid on Orttu, Atam Hertis finally succumbed to the razzing of his captain, who discussed the relative merits of humping age in another's family. With a cry of suddenly uncorked rage Atam sank his teeth about the right ear of Arbok, fully intending to rip the offending appendage from the captain's head.

Wrong time, wrong place. But then, Atam taking on the powerful and experienced form of Arbok would always have been the wrong time and the wrong place. The irreverent and often madcap antics of Arbok served well to conceal the true lethality of the man beneath. He had survived backroom and barroom brawls on a dozen planets. He bore the scars of savage combat with twenty different life forms, some of them only remotely human, but who managed to break through the defenses set up about any Trader ship that made planetfall on a world with many questions unasked, let alone answered, about local life forms and their levels of ferocity and being pissed at intruders, no matter if they were from the bowels of that world or from the stars. There are certain life forms possessed of weaponry and aggressiveness, and no small cunning, that require intellect, speed, courage, skill, and experience in order to survive continued touchdowns on alien worlds.

Arbok was that kind of survivor, including assaults from his own kind, and he bore Atam no grudge for

the explosively sudden venting of his anger. That the place and time were utterly stupid wasn't questioned; you don't mess with eighty thousand tons of ship on its way down a gravity well to the surface of a world. Yet this had happened before to Arbok and his experience and instincts always served him well. Under these conditions, his records showed, his superiors considered him more trouble than his considerable talents in pilotage might counter. Arbok, in short, had unknowingly been on probation for a longer period than he would have dreamed of. In his worst moments.

Arbok knew he was one of the best. The Traders, especially the power cliques of his own world, needed the skills of Arbok and their tight group of truly brilliant and capable pilots. So those skills, and the rewards of continued piloting success by Arbok, had countered the tidal wave of complaints pouring in to his home world by outraged citizens of other worlds who in one small or large way had known the terrible fury of Arbok's fists or who had gnashed their teeth at the sexual satisfaction Arbok had sown among their women. He wrecked bars, broke heads, made incredibly marvelous love to the females of all ages that appealed to him. He was a one-man assault wave of delighted hand-to-hand combat, a fierce drinker and uproarious drunk, and a cocksman of fame among more worlds than anyone deserved. Most of his sexual conquests took place not so much on other planets but aboard the vessels of which he was captain and had absolute authority. The great Trader vessels always had secret rooms where all manner of sexual liaisons, many more weird than "normal," might be pursued in privacy and security.

And it all came to a head as they swung in an easy back-of-the-hand approach to the Orttu landing grid. With Atam's molars grinding on his ear, both men fell across the controls. With a finger movement born of experience, Arbok flipped his controls to full auto and half-turned to deliver the back of a gnarly fist against the already mushy nose of Atam. Gore splashed across the controls. Arbok, having been through similar routines before, stabbed a thumb into Atam's ear. Sudden blinding pain but little physical damage accomplished its purpose. Atam sagged back in his seat, face orange with his pain reactions. Arbok bore his copilot no grudge; this was a matter of bruised ego even if his timing was lousy. Arbok didn't need Atam to land the ship; he'd touched down on enough grids in a skilled solo act to handle the descent and landing by himself.

Atam changed his life forever. His pain subsided sufficiently for him to move physically. For a long moment he studied the powerful form of Arbok, judged correctly that if he attacked Arbok again then he, Atam, might suffer some real physical hurt, and decided to vent his wrath in another manner. In a shout of juvenile rage that has likely been heard moments before disaster from one end of the galaxy to the other, he shouted, "I'll show you!" and slammed full power to the forward attitude thrusters. The nose of the great vessel swung sharply left. Automatic systems yawed desperately to bring her around to the programmed descent, but Atam's move had already initiated a disaster too late to stop. Arbok threw himself from his seat, slipped on the orange blood from Atam, and the ship swung around completely and fell sideways with devastating impact into the grid. Eighty thousand tons crunched a huge portion of the grid, shorted out the electromag system and kicked a tremendous jolt of electrical juice through the ship. It was the first-ever crash landing of a burning spaceship onto the Orttu spaceport and the impact killed ninety-seven assorted members of rather chic civilizations come to Orttu for gambling and sensuous pleasures. You do not knock off ninety-seven big spenders without arousing great wrath.

Arbok survived. Most of the crew, including the feckless Atam, did not. With Atam dead that left Arbok bruised sorely in body and frustrated in spirit, for now he alone was left to take the barb of outraged authority. Whatever had happened at the controls, Arbok was the master of his vessel and he had failed in terrible fashion, and any description or reasoning or explanation was to no avail.

Someone had to pay. Arbok was ship's master and he was alive. Bingo. No matter that he bore no responsibility for the loss of the spaceship or the attendant devastation; there he was, bigger than life. Any protest was laughable. They sentenced Arbok to life imprisonment on a nonhumanoid-controlled prison planet. Once the verdict came down with your destination noted coldly as Sector 18694PO that was the end of that message. But almost all judges, of all races, like to get in the last word, and the Traders, comprised of the most obnoxious and overbearing members of the more advanced galactic worlds, suffered the same ego problems as their ancestors. Proclamations to helpless prisoners is still a fun game. "Whatever truly occurred at the controls of your machine, Aktuk san Yangst Arbok, you have proven

beyond all question your dereliction of duty. It is obvious to this court that you performed with less skill than you possess. The reasons do not matter. What remains of import is that you employed less than your skills and distressingly little of your experience. There has been testimony of personal conflict with your fellow pilot. That does not mitigate the severity of your crime but only serves to condemn you all the more. Duty first and above all else! No matter what happened, even were you attacked, even were you grievously injured, you must yield your safety and your own life to protect the lives of others. You did not do so. Even were you to lose part of your own biological structure, you are fully aware that we could and we would provide you with biofetdiorkam regrowth of any part of your anatomy. Instead of sustaining your responsibility, instead of placing your own loss of life before the loss of the helpless innocents you slaughtered in such number, you chose the path of selfishness, false pride, false ego and in so doing you abandoned your responsibility and you mocked your authority, and you have acted in the manner of a beast concerned only with its self-interests. The consequences of all the above, and the destruction you spread that amounts to billions of galactizars, almost defy accountability here."

GAZONG! went the sentencing chant of the computer and moments later the electromag irons about Arbok clamped tightly and four nonhuman guards led him away to begin the rest of his life in the slammer of a distant world, unknown by name or location except to a coded security forcefield matrix in the galactic databanks.

Gllant Ytram pondered in a slow and arduous process how to eliminate the increasingly severe overpressures from that fool Makkian mouthing explosive sounds and beginning suddenly to slam his hands against the eating-gathering table. Ytram felt there was some sort of pattern to what the alien was doing but the differences in thought processes between himself and his tormentor were so great the Skringian was left over an abyss of confusion. Of course, this alien was different, Ytram concluded finally. There were always differences with somebody from another planet. Ytram knew he was different. The Traders often placed Ytram's people on the same emotional level as a rock. The comparison was unfair but distressingly accurate. Ytram wasn't so much rocklike as he was phlegmatic with an instinctive disposition to be left alone. Gregariousness in any form or language was utterly foreign to him. A race that mates every two years (when passion reached its ultimate heights) and ignores sex the rest of the time simply doesn't produce your typical beer-drinking, ass-grabbing cheery crowd. Life on Skring was hard, its people were content to do no more than survive in their thin gruel of atmosphere, work their way through a plodding and wretched existence, and for the most part they didn't give a wafong for anybody else. They were solitary, moody, sulking, introverted peasants, the dullards of the galaxy, and all those unpleasant traits led to Ytram's undoing.

One of the great Stellars had come trading to Skring. Only the government leaders, who were also the plantation and commerce heads, reacted favorably to these landings. The average Skringian reacted with distaste. Their entire lives were based on the principle of don't make waves, and a descending Stellar whipped up vast waves of overpressure with corresponding discomfort in the atmosphere. They'd sounded their arrival warning, of course, but sometimes the Traders came in ships that whispered down through the thin tendrils of the atmosphere, and at other times their approach and landing was like a mountain falling from the sky.

Ytram never really comprehended that his planet was a freak. A world with almost twice the gravitational pull at its surface of Terra, but hosting a weak and thin atmosphere, was pretty much a bad weed among the more attractive orbs

hanging around the many stars. Usually a planet with that hard a pull at its surface, with all the other ingredients for atmosphere, is the Garden of Eden for its fauna and flora. Skring got the bad roll of the planetary formation dice. It was a rotten world playing an eternally rotten joke on its bipedal inhabitants, its one truly dominant life form. Everything was almost too much effort on Skring, because the planet received its powerful surface gravity not just from its mass but from a really oddball electromagnetic effect emanating from its core. Every cell of every living creature on Skring reacted to that pull so that they endured 1.8 Terrestrial gravity. But it didn't affect the nonlife forms of atmospheric gases, which heaved to lofty heights, and cursed the life forms of Skring with an overwhelming, ceaseless demand for breathing air. And above all for oxygen. No known planet had ever produced a highly motive, intelligent,

creative, aggressive, and dominant life form without the extraordinary energy elements of oxygen and Skring was no exception.

The world was a drag. Comparative planetary structures were a mess. Larger creatures lumbered about in a ceaseless gulping of air to squeeze oxygen from the thin gruel offered up by their garbary world. Skring sounded like a planetary tuberculosis ward of wheezing, gasping, and sucking in of air. The pleasure palaces of Skring offered not females (the term "sex appeal" was a travesty on that world) or drugs but pressurized compartments soaked in oxygen. Give a Skringian a real shot of pure oxygen and he freaked out with pleasure.

But at this moment, despite the extremely high pressure in the prison ship Frarsk, life continued its cruel twists with Ytram. High pressure and low oxygen content combined to keep him as surly and miserable as ever. He kept his heavy eyes on the repulsive lanky armored form of the alien Arbok. He'd been doing his best to dismiss him from existence, to see through him or by fervent prayers to make the Makkian pukehead simply vanish. No such luck. Arbok's cursing was all the louder and his two hands had gone mad banging and crashing against the table. More and more he resembled and sounded like a noisy, nasty wafong that deserved to be slaughtered. Ytram started for Arbok, intending to crush him by squeezing the life from him. He was stayed only by a farther reminder from his plodding subconscious that the oflworlders to Skiing could be unexpectedly, surprisingly dangerous.

Ytram recalled his first direct involvement with a Trader ship that landed on Skiing. He had been distant from the great farm in the high hills and had gone with the convoy of brostapgs pulling their heavy loads of kilarps to central market. It was those damned kilarps that brought the Traders. Nothing else on the entire planet of Skring was worth shipping offworld. But the kilarps were like nothing else known to the Traders. They resembled a yam, breadfruit, turnip, potato, and pineapple all within a single bulbous plant of incredible taste. You simply couldn't eat enough of the damned stuff. No one really understood how a kilarp ignited the taste buds of different life forms, but whatever was that inexplicable electromagnetic field of Skring, it transformed a dull and grey world into a food source of intense interest to Traders and buyers. You could prepare kilarps in almost any fashion; they performed magnificently if roasted, basted, boiled, broiled, grilled, fried, sizzled, barbecued, stewed, or prepared in any imaginable culinary fashion. Even more remarkable, sealed within containers producing a specific wavelength electromagnetic field, ripened kilarps would remain fresh for an indefinite period of time and, at the last moment before they were desired, they could be squeezed into a liquid concoction with a body-siffusing pleasure so close to orgasm as often to be confused by the mind, if not the body.

But carrying kilarps about the vast galactic reaches was an expensive proposition. You couldn't simply stuff them in storage bins or they'd rot. Freezing ruined the taste. The vacuum-packing method turned them into seaweed with the taste of burned rubber. Once they were squeezed into a liquid their taste lasted precisely six minutes and then became rancid brostapg urine-and-milk. So they needed to be loaded from Skring aboard the Trader ships in confined areas of the exact EM pattern. Worst of all, for all concerned, you needed Skringians aboard to tend to the kilarps so that they wouldn't arrive at their destination looking, smelling, and tasting li raw sewage.

Commerce is pretty much the same anywhere life forms trade the galactic routes. Good old supply and demand ran the machine, turned the interplanetary cogs and when the goods were really exotic, kept the starlanes busy between all those bright lights in the skies. It didn't bode well for the Skringians that to the last man (all intelligent creatures chose their own word to represent man) the Traders held the lackluster plodders of Skiing in nose-wrinkling disrepute. Ytram and his people smelled like dead hippos rotting in a hot sun-three days after being disemboweled. Against what the kilarps brought in as interstellar currencies and goods, the Skringians were absolutely and uninhibitedly expendable.

The Traders were very good at their business. They met with the few real leaders of Skring and cut their deal. "We'll create a Skring Empire. You boys run the whole deal. We'll give you the weapons and the power to set up an absolute dictatorship. In return, just sign this little old contract, right here." With the dotted lines properly marked it took little more than baubles to carry out the interplanetary edition of the Indians selling Manhattan Island for a sackful of stringy, colored beads.

In return, the Munificent Emperor of Skring provided for each outward shipment of kilarps a hundred of

his subjects for kilarp caretakers. The choice was strictly impersonal, a newly-royal shrug of stolid shoulders. Among the next batch to embark permanently from Skring was Ytram who, along with his unfortunate comrades, was penned within the trading compound and stripped naked. About the neck of each went a skin-molding collar of electronic alloy. Were Ytram, or anyone else adorned with such a collar, to screw with the Traders he received a jolt of electricity that fried hair from the upper lip right on down to the scrotum. The pain was savage. The collar would activate if forced removal were attempted. The Skringians attending the kilarp crops aboard trading ships make wonderful pets.

Ytram became the first ever to crack the unbreakable circle of merciless slavery. Dull he might be, mental sluggard that he was, he was not stupid. His thought processes moved slowly but with massive conviction. Compared to the average biped of Skring, he was genius quality. He noted, he remembered, he compared, and he judged the future from those efforts. They brought to him the inescapable conclusion that he had always known of his fellows departing Skring. He had never heard of one who returned. Then he had his personal invitation, his ID number so neatly grooved on what the Traders with gusto humor dubbed the "necktie."*

Ytram did not know that shipping out on a Trader-if you were from Skring-tallied a death sentence. Not that the Traders killed their slaves. That would have been economically asinine. You don't haul heavy, nutrient-consuming poundage and throw it away when it can be used as slave labor in the near-zero-overhead asteroid mines or on worlds crackling with energy currents so great neither robot nor android functioned very long. Neither did convict labor, but what the hell. So if you're a Trader you sell, or trade for, self-activated labor. Common sense and several devastating planetary conflicts in the past that made no sense at all had spun off a loose form of interstellar agreement that as bountiful as it might be you did not, ever, dispose casually or otherwise of intelligent beings for which any real use might be found. Higher life forms could be used for medical experiments, erotic playthings, or hard labor, but straight-out genocide was absolutely forbidden. The Traders enforced this home world rule simply but effectively. Any planet with solar system or interstellar reach that flaunted the galactic rule was given over to what amounted to an interstellar alien legion. The IAL had the sole duty to enforce this rule and they had all sorts of nasty devices and weapons with which to do a truly-relished task. Planet-busting was, all things considered, pretty much of a rare event and to be a member of the Legion that carried out such an operation was to assure fame and fortune forever. The Legion could quarantine a planet or sow entire worlds with devastating plagues or even strip a world of its atmosphere. Bucking the system was dumb.

*Terrestrial license is employed here for this somewhat barbaric garment appendage.

So as a matter of common sense and efficiency, genocide was out and slavery was in. That rule came home to Ytram when the delivery trip on which he was a kilarps tender completed its run. Customers waited for their kilarps to be processed into desired form and consumed within the brief period available to achieve the intended gastronomical or orgasmic results, after which the Skringians had become so much excess baggage. They were immediately linked together with neuronic wires to move them in single file to a waiting slaver ship for dispatch to waiting buyers.

Gllant Ytram had always been a grumbler and, in his own way, a dedicated individualist. He paid for those traits. By now he had been shocked so many times with the neck collar and had his spine twisted violently from the neuronic wire that a swift end to pain had become his single greatest desire. Ytram was not stupid and behind his dullard's gaze he had extended a budding imagination in all directions since his incarceration aboard a terrifyingly strange, pain-wracked and utterly alien machine. His mind was almost constantly beset with bewildering emotions. On Skring he had, like his fellows, hewed to the thin gruel of planetary riches and labored equally with his fellow beings. He had never considered himself obedient; he simply did what he was told to do or he knew needed to be done. If you did not move fast enough, or perform well enough, on Skring, you simply slipped down the ladder to more menial and less intellectually demanding tasks. That was the end of it. The planet itself was one vast commune.

Now, he wondered, what was disobedience? It must be a disease he possessed, because he was accused of not moving quickly enough or smartly enough and for this disobedience his neck jerked wildly and his body clawed inwardly with terrible pain at him. The pain, he was as yet unaware, also forced him into this strange new pattern of careful and provocative thought. To remain alive and fettered was not an

unacceptable solution to his life. How do you end your life? He had seen many animals die, as well as many of his fellows, but he had never in his life encountered suicide. Gllant Ytram performed a stupendous mental leap forward with the decision not to live in interminable agony. He felt strange misgivings and a new emotion, shame, at being paraded before a riotous menage of sneering beings while naked, collared, and strung together with others of his kind like so many animals by the horrible neuronc wire.

Ytram and his fellows plodded along a high ledge to the waiting slaveship, carried along by hoots and laughter from diners on safely-distant balconies. Unbidden, the thought eased into his mind and then seemed to explode with some inner light that he was being sent away for a lifetime of pain, living oblivion and then some meaningless, never-noticed death. With that flowering realization, Ytram saw and snatched at his opportunity.

Guards with neuronc twisters moved to his left. Only a low rail separated them from a long fall to the securing pad below. There would be just enough time-instantly he decided, fearful that if he thought long enough about his sudden plan his captors would read his mind and immediately lacerate him with body-twisting pain. Ytram lunged wildly to his left. With all his strength he hurled himself, arms outstretched, at the nearest guard. The guards were swift and a neuronc twister ripped burning steel through his neck and squeezed his heart and rammed icicles deep within his stomach and set a billion blazing slugs eating his brain and he knew his muscles tore and jerked and humped and he screamed and refused to fall, an end-of-life surge carrying his now-helpless form crashing into the guard. Neuronc wires snapped. Ytram and two of his fellows and the Trader guard plunged over the rail to plummet forty feet straight down.

The guard's head struck steelment first. A hush followed the startling SHLANG! of impact. The diners on the balconies strained to see better this rare and delicious moment and for their sudden interest they were rewarded with splintered bone, brains and gooey liquids splashing outward. From the splattering impact the guard's head might just as well have been a hapless watermelon. Upside down, head pulped, the guard's torso poised for a moment in a delicate wet balance. Then its sloppy foundation yielded to gravity and accepted the crumpled form. Scratch one guard. The two Skringians who hurtled downward with Ytram smashed with lethal impact against the steelment. Four other beings died. They were high officials of the Traders' ship, inconveniently (for them) located directly beneath the plummeting mass of Ytram. Frail in comparison to the rhino bulk of Ytram, they were crushed so violently they could have been old cars mashed into a compact bundle in a scrap yard.

Ytram survived virtually unharmed and assuring himself of a change in plans for his future. He had through his deliberate actions killed another intelligent life form. He'd done so thorough a job he'd killed two of his own kind, one guard and four members of the stellar aristocracy. He was still sprawled atop mangled bodies when a narbeam injected a stupefying drug through his skin. From that moment on Ytram could not speak or move a single muscle. His autonomic functions continued and his legs would respond to commands to move, but otherwise he was a legs-alive zombie.

"He smells too bad as a private slave. He's not worth biological dissection. He's a troublemaker. Obviously he's had an overdose of the EM pattern from his sewer of a home planet." The statements went quickly among the justices convened to dispose of the problem. "Execute transfer to X." No one needed any further identification for X. It was the lifetime end of the line. The ultimate slammer, the prison planet without atmosphere or biological guards. And the android keepers received orgasmic electromagnetic stimulation from making the lives of their wards miserable.

Ytram regained his senses aboard Frarsk. It took him days and nights of emerging from the miseries inflicted upon his body to even begin to comprehend where he was, in what, doing what, and whither bound was himself and the whole rotten lot of criminals condemned to the total isolation of an airless world not found on a single hyperdimensional interstellar chart, anywhere. The idea of Frarsk carrying prisoners to worse-than-death punishment couldn't penetrate his already battered, soggy brain. The concept of Planet X was meaningless. He foiled to comprehend any of the higher elements of the new order of his life.

But that he would have to live out what remained of this consciousness with these foul, nasty, noisy,

obnoxious, hypernervous alien beings, ah, that got through. It became a realization after awakening that his name was Gillant Ytram, that he was miserable, that he was surrounded by plastisteel in all directions, that the strange electromagnetic pattern of whatever sealed him in was tying his three stomachs into as many painful knots, that he stank like the worst rotting brostapg that had ever assailed his nose, and that noise, insufferable and unnecessary noise, thundered like breaking metal plates into his skull.

His skull clamored and shrieked for rest from the din. Ytram shook himself free of the stupor that had gripped him as he tried to decide whether this alien before him might be as vicious as he was loud. He no longer cared. Nothing mattered now, in that singular concentration that had led multiple generations before him on Skiing to endure porcine misery by ignoring all save the present instant. Ytram advanced slowly, heavy feet playing slow kettle-drum rumbles on the plastisteel surface beneath him. He stood before the alien, gnarly sounds coming loudly from his mouthplace, and his hands crashing against the table. He had no idea the creature's name was Arbok. He didn't care.

"Stop. Stop now. Stop making all this terrible noise," Ytram commanded in a gravelly voice somewhat deeper than usual from the heavy holding-cell pressure.

The alien cocked his head. He spoke a single word. He said, "What?"

Ytram didn't understand, but then, neither had Arbok. Ytram had spoken in Skiing, and no one who lived on any planet other than Skiing would ever bother to learn that heathen language. The hands kept smashing against the table. Ytram had no way of knowing that the alien was simply expending nervous energy in a tattoo drumming to some musical passage in his head. It was just an intolerable racket.

The alien slowed his hands. "Talk Galactibase," he told Ytram. The Skringian was astonished. The alien spoke in a tongue that was offworld of Skiing but that he had learned in earlier times in school. Ytram made the difficult transition as quickly as his befuddled mind permitted.

"I want you to stop making noise," Ytram spoke slowly but clearly in Galactibase.

Arbok studied the mountain of grey shit before him. "Oh, you mean this?" He half-turned to the table and his hands blurred the air with the speed of their repeated impact against the table.

Ytram clapped hands to his ears, obviously in pain. "Stop! Stop!" he shouted.

The alien stopped. He looked up and smiled. But he wasn't afraid of Ytram. That much the Skringian detected immediately. "What's your name, shitpile?" the alien questioned.

"It is Ytram. It is not shitpile. Your noise," he tapped an ear, "pains one to listen. You must stop or I must hurt you. What is your name, noisemaker?"

"Hot shit. It lumbers, smells, farts, groans, and it complains and it's a wiseass." Arbok grinned. Ytram didn't know if it was a grin. He had no way of telling. He also didn't care. "My name, turdfong, is Arbok. But you, loathsome one, can just call me sir. Or, if you're up to it, master will do quite nicely. Now, get lost."

Master? Master? Slaves called the Traders master or they writhed in horrible agony. But this did not seem to be a master. It was confusing. Ytram's introspection ended with a blistering tattoo of Arbok's hands against the table, accompanied by diddy-bop-de-dats in Makkian singsong.

"No!" Ytram cried out.

Arbok skipped no more than a beat, just long enough in the crack of silence to smile and tell Ytram to "Go fuck yourself, dummy."

Ytram winced. The pain washed over him, unbearable. He had reached his crisis point. Everything in his mind funneled into the one issue before him. The alien shouting at him must have a fantastic lung capacity. Perhaps he used a mechanical bellows of some kind. His voice was devastating in the high pressure of the confinement cubicle. The alien, the Arbok, saw him wince and both hands crashed together against the table. Ytram's skull roared, blood pounded through his ears. He didn't care anymore if the alien was dangerous or if he had huge ballocks and what seemed to be armorlike scaleskin. Gillant Ytram knew he must have quiet or he would go mad. He stumbled forward. He didn't know for certain he was in space or that he had a sense of gravity from an BMP skein pulsating through the ship. He didn't know, he didn't care.

He advanced menacingly to loom over the Makkian. He brought up both arms and closed great fists one against the other, poised them for the blow and started down with a hammerlike smash that would fell a

brostapg dead in its tracks. Arbok had never seen a brostapg and cared never to, but the thickly-hewn alien before him did somewhat resemble what lumbered about Makk as a huge swamp buffsahm. He pondered briefly as to which creature was uglier-this Ytram idiot or the buffsahm, and decided his homegrown fauna might appear more pleasing.

But right then and there Arbok decided the fun and games were over. He'd been in the business too long, had been in too many crazymad spaceport saloon brawls not to recognize the power coming down at him. He moved.

Ytram had made one of the classic asshole decisions when he decided to pound this alien into the deck beneath them. Thick ridged brow or thick hide and heavy scrotum notwithstanding, Arbok had tremendous sinew and astonishing agility to go with knifekeen intelligence. He was also an accomplished close-in battler, skill honed in many a spaceport, and best described in terrestrial terms as a mean mother street fighter.

Ytram's fists came down and Arbok was gone. With accomplished ease he simply sidestepped the blow. Ponderous movement and stentorian bulk brought Ytram's bony fists crashing into unyielding metal. He howled with the sudden pain and as quickly winced from the bellowing roar of his own voice rebounding in the confines of the cubicle.

Arbok studied him casually from his side. "That was really a dumbshit thing to do, honker," he said in Galactibase.

Pain still shooting through his hands galvanized the stolid Ytram to renewed fury. He ignored the clamoring din in his ears as he roared his rage and charged the hateful alien now before him. Arbok grinned and slipped smoothly beneath the oncoming massive arms. With an amused expression on his face he watched Ytram crash into the wall, staggering back with a whirling dizziness. But rage has its moments and Ytram turned quickly to charge in again.

A powerful hand with skin as heavy as flexmetal slapped Ytram a terrible blow across one ear. He was too furious with

anger and pain to realize he had been slapped. Arbok moved precisely and with great awareness of the other alien prisoners now unmoving, silent, watching the huge cat and the rhinolike creature in battle.

Again Ytram charged. Five, six, seven hard stinging blows seemed to come from everywhere. Ytram stopped, confused, and a boulder crashed against the side of his neck. He lurched to one knee. The aliens now looked on with more than curiosity; they were acutely aware that leadership was being dictated right here and now.

For several minutes Ytram charged and each time Arbok's eye-blurring swiftness took its toll. Welts and swelling appeared and dark blood stained Skringian and the floor. It might have gone on for hours until Arbok considered seriously that this idiotic but nonetheless courageous alien might have endurance enough to continue a full clockturn. He must end this nonsense.

He judged the sudden new rush of the maddened alien, slipped to the side and ducked beneath a desperate swing. Out went an armored foot to trip Ytram. Arbok came around in a blur, one hand clutching Ytram's neck and the other suddenly gripping his scrotum. With a great lunge he propelled the helpless alien into the wall with a blow felt all through the cubicle. Ytram fell slowly in a crumpled heap, so much dung flopped together. But he did have that very endurance of which Arbok was suspect.

Ytram started to rise again to his feet and was amazed to find himself pinned helplessly where he stood. His eyes bulged with the sight before him.

From the base of the alien's spine, from the thick bony ridge, a long tendril whipped out, curling in the air, and struck faster than Ytram's eyes could follow. Thin and as strong as steel cabling, the tendril snapped about Ytram's throat and squeezed with brutal force. His eyes bulged, as much from the physical pressure as the sight of the tendril tip moving slowly back and forth between his eyes. He stared at a wickedly barbed dagger tip. Arbok spoke in his own language, incomprehensible to Ytram, then shifted to Galactibase. "You move, pukeball, and you will die. Not now. Many solars from now. The poison in your system will rot you from the inside out. Do you understand?"

Ytram could barely nod but he gave the attempt everything he had. Arbok smiled. The constriction eased a bit. "Good. You accept me as your master?" Ytram had more room in which to nod and his head

bobbed willingly. "Everything I say for you to do, you do instantly." Nod, nod. The tendril released, hovering in air before Ytram.

"Master. You good master."

"If anybody, anybody, ever comes up behind me, ever, you do not hesitate. You kill them. No words. Only kill. Anybody. You will remember?"

"Yes."

The tendril whirred and it was gone. Arbok leaned back against the wall and smiled. The unspoken challenge had gone without acceptance. No other being in the prison cubicle had made a threatening sound or move.

Arbok studied the others. It could happen. It's never happened before but I could make it happen now. All I need to do is get all these naked aliens to work as a team with swift and coordinated action so that we can overcome the deadliest androids in the known galaxy. We're naked, they're armed. We hurt and bleed, they feel no pain. Some of us are fast; the androids are faster. We can't kill them because they're not alive, but they can hurt and kill us.

But I think I can do it.

CHAPTER 3

It was like an old Moody Blues song, only the words were different. The tune drummed away in Jake's head, but instead of Swings and Arrows now it was Chains and Manacles. What the hell, it was Welcome Home time as he watched the great iron gates slide away for the armored truck to enter. The State of Florida was affording Jake all kinds of special privileges.

"You rate, I guess," Wyckowski said. Jake looked at the burly guard who'd accompanied him, along with three other beefy thugs with badges and uniforms, from the holding cell in Orlando all the way to Old Millford. "I mean, you got your own transportation, you got four guys at your beck and call. Even those irons are brand new. We was told to use only new stuff with you, Marden."

"I'm impressed," Jake told him, a wry smile accompanying the words. He still didn't understand everything that was going on. In Orlando, these four had been gorillas right out of a bad Dirty Harry movie. Even chained like a grizzly, Jake Marden could be very bad news. He'd put on a lot of body weight, all muscle, and now he carried better than two hundred sixty pounds on his six-foot-four frame. Worst of all was his reputation. He wondered about that. He didn't recognize any of the screws from his last vacation at The Rock. And the closer they got to Old Millford, the more relaxed became the guards. They were still like Dobermans but at least they weren't snapping at him.

"How long you been here?" Jake asked Wyckowski. "I don't remember you. Or those three," he nodded at the others. "Your uniforms are different and you don't act like you're sitting on your brains."

"Hey, is that supposed to be some kind of compliment?" another guard shot at him.

"Depends," Jake answered.

"It depends upon what, con?" The question came as a snarl.

"On how much of an asshole you are, turdbird." A big hand yanked at a chain, jerking Marden painfully. His grin became broader. "That never worked before," he said quietly. "It won't work now, and when we're all inside I'll remember it."

Wyckowski shoved the other guard back. "Keep your hands off him, Slaughter."

"No fucking con's gonna' tell-"

"Keep your hands off or I'll break them," Wyckowski said ominously. "That's an order, mister."

Jake didn't offer them any rewards of gratitude. Long before this moment he'd made up his mind no one was ever going to hurt him again, physically or emotionally. And he was far stronger in every way now than when he had left this place. It must have been a thousand years. But sights and sounds trigger all sorts of memories you think you've forgotten. You haven't. They're just dormant and they come back in a rush, like a dam breaking and sending a few billion tons of memories cascading over you. Old Millford was going to be different this time. No parole, that was for sure. The only way out of here, ever, was

going to be breakout, or, feet first. It didn't much matter to him at the moment.

They processed him with speed, heavy security, and something he'd never encountered in this castle set amidst the shitheel country. Efficiency. The administrative people didn't wet fingers and thumb through worn cards, or write laboriously with either end of the pencil. They didn't go duh and whatsatyasay? andfuckyoucon. The people on the other side of the steel screens-holy shit, they've even got broads working here!-wore pressed uniforms, badges, nameplates, and sat before wide keyboard consoles. Computers. Jake stared. They were using computers here in Old Millford!

Joe Wyckowski, Guard Level One, went with him through processing. Jake smelled a difference in this man, also. Wyckowski acted like he knew Jake Marden and that was a bunch of bullshit because he'd never seen this screw before.

But he knew about him, Jake concluded quickly. He knows more than he should. He's not being deferential, and I have a bad, bad rep, and this mother is not afraid of me. He's not even sitting on a hotplate waiting for something to bust out. He's . . . wait; that's it. He's comfortable. Jake studied the guard. Hell of a poker player. He ain't giving away even deuces. I'll find out soon enough.

They went through the paperwork in record time, baffling Jake and setting his senses on knife-edge alert. It's all going too easy. Then into medical for some of the more brutal touches for which prisons like Old Millford were infamous. The doctors did everything including rape, but they performed their forced entry with metal probes and internal spreaders and flexible flashlights. Jake stood naked in the medical anteroom, his paperwork in one hand, Wyckowski covering every move. This had been one of the hallmarks of all prisons from the day the first rock was ever rolled against the entrance of the first jail cave: strip a man naked, make him move about naked, and you stripped him naked of dignity and confidence. Jake waited for the two doctors who entered the anteroom to begin their examination. They stopped and looked to Wyckowski. "Marden, give me your papers," Wyckowski ordered Jake. He extended his hand, the guard handed the heavy envelope to the lead doctor. "Pass him," Wyckowski ordered.

"But-"

"Doc, don't even start giving me any shit," Wyckowski ordered in a voice that promised heavy weight behind it. "Sign the papers on the dotted line. Process him into the computer. No medical restrictions on medication. He's got a very bad back. In the records, mister. No physical workloads of any kind, got it?" Jake clamped down on his tongue. This was an acid trip, he figured. It was all very real, but They went from medical to clothing issue. No standing back eight feet and making absolutely certain not to cross the line between the convict and the issue table. Jake walked with Wyckowski to the table with the heavy metal sheeting removed. "Is that him?" the man behind the table asked.

"That's him. Lay it out." Wyckowski ordered.

Jake knew now this was very, very crazy. All his clothing waited for him in a neat stack. "Pick a set," Wyckowski told Jake, and they went into another room where Jake donned a prison uniform that fit so well it must have been . . . goddamn, it was all tailored. He looked up at Wyckowski.

"All right, man. What the fuck is going on? Since when did they make the joint like Disney World?" Wyckowski looked like he was going to choke on the smile he was busy swallowing. "I'm following orders. Tell you as little as possible. Let you see for yourself."

"See what, damnit?"

"Everything." Wyckowski studied Jake. "Everything fit okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Send my tailor an extra twenty. I especially like the buttonhole stitching."

Wyckowski reached into a pocket and extended a thin necklace to Marden. "Put this on. Turn around and I'll seal the lock." Jake held the necklace. It seemed to be burnished gold, but it moved smoothly and twisted as easily as a snake. He started to argue, realized that would be pretty dumb, brought the jewelry around his neck and stood patiently while the guard snapped something closed. "Okay, it's sealed. The only way to get that thing off you will be to cut through with wire cutters."

"Saks Fifth Avenue, right?" Jake said.

Again Wyckowski surprised him. "Better," he said.

"You know, none of this makes any sense," Jake said slowly.

"I guess it seems like it."

"What the hell's going on here?"

"It'll all come together soon enough. Come with me. We're walking through the joint."

Jake's hand shot out and snapped about the guard's wrist. "First, what's with Saks Fifth?"

"It's an electronically coded transmitter."

"It's what?"

"This place has changed, Marden."

"No shit, Lulu Brown."

"We've been made a test prison. A model for the whole country. A test model, anyway," said Wyckowski, "because not everything works so good. But at least these," he pulled aside his collar to reveal the same kind of necklace, "work just

"Before you get out of this room alive, mister, what is it?"

"Like I said, a coded transmitter. Feel the flat spot, just a bit spongy, in front?" Marden fingered his necklace. "Yeah," he confirmed.

"You press that little flat spot, Marden, it'll open any cellblock gate or door in this place. They're all coded to do that."

Marden stared. He couldn't help it. This really was insane. "How come I'm part of the in group?" he demanded.

"You got a friend in here. Very big man, carries all the weight in the world. He set all this up."

Jake's eyes narrowed. He didn't like invisible benefactors. He thought of South America and his muscles tensed. "Like who?" he queried.

"Mister Bailey. Mister Jubal - no, sir, it's Sergeant Jubal Bailey."

"When the hell did Jube get back in here?"

"Fourteen months ago."

"In the old days he ran all of Cellblock Nine. "

"Right now he runs One through Fourteen. He lets the whites run Fifteen through Twenty-Two."

"He always was a generous nigger." Jake laughed aloud. "Where is that son of a bitch? I can hardly wait to see him!"

"When we finish walking. Okay?"

Elation swept through Jake. Incredible; terrific. This was going to be better than he ever dreamed. He left the room with Wyckowski and walked into a new world he'd never expected.

Old Millford had changed. No, that wasn't description enough. Old Millford was gone. In its place was the result of a vast transformation. The Rock had been iron bars and concrete. There was still iron and concrete and stone but that was mainly hidden from view by entire new cellblocks, gleaming steelite floors and walls, recessed lighting, air conditioning throughout the structures, television scanners everywhere, color coding and careful design to eye reaction; he was stunned. Whatever they had done to transform The Rock into a test center it had worked. The powers-that-be had accomplished the miracle, transforming the ancient Celtic-like dungeon into a modernized steel, lexan, steelite, Plexiglas, plastic marvel and, the miracle of all miracles, the whole place was no longer run by vicious guards and psychotics.

According to what Wyckowski told him as they walked through the barely-familiar prison in which he'd lived for years, the biggest changes of all were in management. Psychology had taken over from brutality. True medicine had replaced pill-pushers. Food was processed and cooked instead of being slopped onto tin plates. Jake listened with narrow eyes. He didn't believe it. Bullshit was bullshit and power was power. But he did see the signs that they'd slipped out of the old days into the modern age of electronics and computers. When you got down to electronics you were in the inner domain of one Jake Marden and his practiced eye picked out the telltale signs that would have been completely invisible to the unknowledgeable or casual onlooker. He saw the concealed video eyes and the flat-sensitive microphones that could pick up whispers at a hundred yards and would register even catlike steps as if they were booming cannonades. You didn't sneak around this place any more. Unless you were in control and didn't have to sneak, he appended to himself.

They stopped outside a medical examining room. At least that's what it said on the door. EMERGENCY MED 33G. Wyckowski looked at the door and nodded to Jake. "In there, sir."

"What's this 'sir' shit?" Jake prodded. He still hadn't figured this guard. No wimp here, and yet "I'm a realist, Marden. You'll understand once you go into that room."

Jake hesitated. "You're not coming in with me?"

"Uh uh. From here on in you're on your own." Wyckowski turned, walked away. Moments later he rounded a corner and was gone. Jake looked at the door, shrugged, started to knock-you always knock before opening a door in a tight security prison like The Rock-then changed his mind. Fuck it, he told himself, opened the door and went in.

Instantly he fell into a powerful vise clamping about his arms. "You son of a bitch!" a voice yelled in his ear and he had just enough time to get a closeup of Sergeant Jubal Bailey who was doing his best to smother him with unrestrained greeting. They pounded each other on the back and arms and finally fell into comfortable armchairs each facing the other. "Man, seeing your chalk face is something just great," Bailey said, pouring vodka into glasses on the table between them. "Never thought I'd miss a grey so much, but you sure as hell are a sight for sore eyes." They clinked glasses. "Prosit," Jake said, grinning. "Up yours," Jube answered and they emptied the glasses.

They went right to the business at hand. "What the hell are you doing back here?" Jake demanded. "I thought I'd set it up for you to be gone forever."

"You did, you did. Don't apologize."

"Fuck you! I'm not-"

"Easy, man. You took care of everything I needed, and more. If it wasn't for you, baby, and that Hebe legal eagle, my sister might have done time with me. Moishe Green- what the hell kind of name is Moishe?-kept the law away from her, and she's clean. I owe the man."

"Goddamnit, but what put you back in here? I figured we'd got you clean away. Did the pardon go through?"

"Sure did."

"Then what the hell happened?"

Bailey blinked. "Guess you didn't know. You remember those friendly government people killed my dogs and shot me in the legs, right? Turns out they never really cleaned all the lead from my left foot." Jube Bailey brought his knuckles down hard against his leg and they heard a clang! from metal. "Lost the leg, ace. Nearly died from the blood poisoning. In the hospital I guess I had the weirdies and I began to sing songs with people's names that shouldn't have been said aloud in polite society. Way up there in governor level. Jewel was there and tried to shut me up. They never really gave her the chance. While I was in the sack, full of poison and gangrene and they was cutting off my leg, they raped Jewel. Four of them. Took them all weekend and then they dumped her at the front door of the hospital. They-"

"How is-I mean, where-"

"She's okay, bro," Jube Bailey said quietly, patting Jake's

knee. "She's strong. Anyhow, when it was all over and I was out of the hospital and getting better and we made sure Jewel still had her own mind, it was payback time." Bailey studied his friend. "You, ah, find fault with that, man?"

"Hey, first off, it's not my decision," Jake protested. "Second, if you'd have let me in on what the hell was happening I'd have helped you. What the hell is there to fault?"

"Just like I thought. You dumber than a nigger."

"What happened?" Jake pressed.

Jube Bailey shrugged. "I waited. They were at some big bash in Orlando, and then they took their families and went to some camping island in Disney World. Know where I mean?" Jake nodded. "They got drunk. Scattered in tents and cabins, I went in there alone. Mostly knife and crossbow. The score is even. My sister got raped, I lost a leg, saw the world's two best dogs killed, and they is now missing seven of them."

"How'd they catch you?"

Jube looked offended. "Catch me? You crazy, man. Jewel was still vulnerable. We got her out of the

country and I got in touch with your Hebe and we talked it over. I could have gone to Africa or some of that Islamic bullshit, but I'm one of them crazy niggers that prefers about the worst here to what they call the best over there. Green turned me in after a deal was cut. Lots of the right people in the right places so they couldn't come down on me for good. They were satisfied when I got life plus another hundred years. But from what I been hearing about you," he beamed, "why, man, I'm just an old nigger what is purely amateur."

"Sure, sure," Jake pushed aside the remarks. "Tell me what the hell is going on in this fairyland. And who's running the joint now?"

"You mean the warden, or for real?"

"Start with the warden. Who's the man?"

"Same old asshole. Spunt the Cunt," Bailey grinned.

"He's running this place?"

"You getting soft in the head, baby. He's the warden. He don't run shit. We are running this joint." Bailey sobered. "But it's not all soft lights and chamber music, my friend. This whole setup," he gestured to take in all the prison, "all this technical stuff? They got problems coming and going. I don't know if you can have something like leaks in electronic equipment, but this place is a sieve. Jake, it's a put-on. All their fancy crap is falling apart. I want you to find out for yourself. So it's time to lock up your white ass and let you start from square one. And don't worry about a thing in the blocks we run. They all know who you are. They know we're brothers. They know to fuck with you is to buy an early grave." He shook his head with pleasure. "Man, it is good to see you."

Jake sat in his own private cell and knew the world was upside down. He'd never seen a place like this before. He knew prison reform was a big political football and there had been some test facilities and experimental prisons, but he wasn't prepared for a cell sealed off with armored glass and electronically controlled sliding doors of plastisteel. There had been a television scanner in this cell. It was gone, ripped from the wall high up and the wall neatly patched and sealed. He knew the corridors and central areas of The Rock still had their loudspeakers but he didn't expect individual intercoms. He had a hunch his cell wasn't remotely like more than a few others. Not with a comfortable bed with a heavy wooden frame. Television. A decent bathroom with a privacy curtain so you didn't have to take a shit on a bare porcelain bowl with smirking guards staring at you and razzing your ass. There was more. Armchair. Complete dresser bureau. Steel mirror. Damned good sink. It was air-conditioned. Jube had added his personal touch. Three boxes of cigars. A bottle of vodka and he knew there'd be anything else he wanted. So this was his private palace.

But it's still a cell in a prison and you're a convict, right? He stood up and studied the cell door. We'll see, we'll see ... He walked directly before the door and gripped the bars. Locked. Solid as a mountain. Idly he fingered the snakeiike necklace, felt the flat spot and pressed. With barely a whisper of sound the cell door slid aside. Holy shit! All I need to do is walk out of here!

He tried it. Walked through the open space. No one stopped him. He saw curious faces from behind bars, but that was all. He heard a slight whirring sound and knew what it was before he looked up to find the TV scanner following him. He stood quietly, looking about him. The goddamned place was clean. It didn't even smell bad. Jesus.

But the sounds are the same. Whoever were the cons watching him their curiosity faded swiftly. Old familiar sounds grew in number and volume. The voices of hundreds of men talking, shouting, calling to one another, singing. Radios and televisions blaring. Someone playing a guitar, someone else cutting loose with a trumpet until someone yelled, "Shove that horn up your ass! Who the fuck you think you are, man? Harry James?" Laughter. Not warm and friendly, but convict laughter. Underneath everything else it was still harsh and bitter. They call it the B Sound. Bravado laughter. Whistling in the fucking dark, man.

In the old days, in a truly tough prison, the lesson had always been implicit. The prisoners vastly outnumbered the guards and the administrators and the rest of the official crowd. No matter how strong was that group it couldn't really handle the cons. There was too much power interplay. The pecking orders dictated life and death and all the screws in the world couldn't keep a man alive if he was left mixing with the other prisoners, and someone really wanted his ass dead. It's a bitch to threaten people

who are hard nuts to begin with and have sentences through the next century. What's there to lose? Ah, but the guards had everything to lose. Theirs was a family affair. Family name repetitions through the whole system.

The fancy electronics and all the new science and the psychological ploys hadn't changed anything. The prisoners weren't in any more danger from the system than they had ever been before. That was a fact of life few people could ever have anticipated. And if the cons hadn't taken a back seat to where they were when Old Millford was a rat-infested dungeon, then they were more dangerous than ever before to the permanent staff. The guards had in the past suffered constant fear (justifiable) of riots, knifings, assaults, arson, and unpredictable insanity always ready to explode in their midst. Theirs was a relentless and pervasive fear with its roots deep down into the cracked concrete floors of the prison.

If you looked inside, from outside, everything always seemed to be just the way the books called for events and the press flacks described the joint. And if you were inside you'd find the cons at the top of the heap with servants and toadies and gophers and bodyguards and sweet young things for all manner of perverted sexual pleasure. Bribery made family friends out of the worst screws, and if by chance that system failed, the guard knew his time was very limited. All the prison regulations and the discipline fail beneath juicing up some madman on the toughest drugs there are until he will do anything, anything, including cutting off his own dick with a screwdriver if that's what the top con wants. Sure as hippos piss in a lake he'll kill the guard you point out to him.

So Jake Marden, since long before now, had never given a rat's ass for Herbert J. Spunt or his birdturd screws. In fact, he grinned with the afterthought, it had been quite the other way around.

Jake sobered. Stop screwing with memory lane, you asshole, he ordered himself. There's a key here you're missing. If you find it, you and jube will own this whole place.

Jake went with Jube through the prison. Top to bottom, side to side, inside and out. Into the cable ducts, the vast new computer rooms, power centers, sewage and water flow and climate control and security.

All of it. He found what he sought. That single great flaw. The key to unlock the future.

Old Millford had a prisoner whose name didn't appear on any of the convict lists. No name, no number.

Invisible, but his presence could be found everywhere. Achilles and his fucked-up heel.

Jake made a private bet with himself that the warden would bring Jake-as Spunt had done long ago-to his office for a head-on confrontation. The last time Jake had been smashed and torn to pieces and Spunt was a rotten little fucker who got his kicks from sticking it to cons whom under any other circumstances could have broken the weasel's neck with a satisfying snap. Spunt made his point and they shoved Jake into the hole on bread and water to break his spirit and most likely to have him die in the process from lack of medical attention to grievous wounds. Jube Bailey had saved his life.

This was a new day and a new time and Jake Marden was a new man, and there'd be a confrontation but it sure was going to be different from the past. Jake had found Achilles, hiding everywhere in Old Millford, a vicious sort of ghost more real than mythical. He'd ground his heel into all the new systems.

Old Millford was a rambling supermodern fucked up fake.

The bright boys and the reformers and the blue-lipped liberals had come into Old Millford to rebuild, modernize, electronify, update, scientifically adapt and computerize the whole system. They'd spent God knew how many millions on their revitalization and what they got in return, concealed behind the gleaming lights and plastisteel and computers was a horror.

Almost nothing worked as intended. The place was a screaming monument to Achilles' heel. The computers choked up because of improper wiring, poor soldering connections and flimsy seals that welcomed roaches, rats, crickets, earwigs and an unidentified assortment of vermin that feasted happily on tasty wiring and electronic components. Radiation from weakly-shielded rows of microwave ovens played havoc with electromagnetic systems. The microwave towers for direct telephone, computer, television, and data links to the outside world had virtually no shielding and sprayed body-ripping radiation to anyone exposed to their fierce output for any period of time. Airplanes flying overhead turned on the lights of ungrounded and unshielded electrical systems, slammed and opened doors and closed cellblocks as if ghosts had gone on a mad rampage through the place. The guards were going crazy. TV scanners picked up satellite soap operas instead of providing clear pictures of cells and corridors and the

grounds. The accountants who kept the computers operational-or tried to keep their accounting sane and sensible-were frantic with systems that spit out gibberish amidst showers of sparks. The computerized telephone system would as easily put a local call through to China as it would to Tallahassee. And they were all going bananas from the escape alarms honking and howling at any unexpected moment of day or night. There were a lot of broken bones and bodies from cell doors snapping open and slamming shut with lethal force against hapless prisoners or guards.

Herb Spunt of the wet lips and turkey throat sat behind his shiny new desk and studied Jake Marden. Spunt nodded to the two guards and inclined his head toward the door for them to leave. Jake caught the dim glow above and behind Spunt of the laser beam and knew a Blinder was trained on his eyes and would follow his movements every second in the room. The guards left and Spunt shifted in his chair.

"I knew you'd be back," he began.

"I thought you might have come up with a new speech, warden. Not the same old canned-"

"Don't get lippy with me," Spunt snapped.

"Why not?"

"You're doing forever time, Marden. I can keep you in the hole until your bones bleach."

Jake smiled. "Once upon a time," he started. Then he let it hang between them.

Spunt's eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?" he asked, suspicion moving in a slow visible wave down his face and quivering along his throat.

"It means you could try. It means you could even get me into the hole," Jake said calmly but with an air of absolute conviction. "But unless Jube and a couple more wanted it that way you couldn't keep me there."

"You're just as much a smartass as you were-"

"No. More now than ever before."

Spunt's nerves tightened. "Are you telling me you believe that one-legged nigger and his scum run this place? That land of cheap novel bullshit doesn't go here and-"

"You said the magic word. Bullshit."

Spunt sighed and stared at the prisoner. "I thought we might be able to-"

"Cut a deal, warden?"

Jake reminded himself Spunt still had the power to have him killed. Not even Jube could prevent an act of murder by Spunt and his really tight bunch. He bribed them for their loyalty and it came down to simple numbers. Spunt had more to offer than Bailey. Their power existed in different parts of the prison and under circumstances that shifted like the tides. But at this moment Spunt was in control.

It's his deck, Jake mused, and he's dealing. So now we play the biggest poker game of all. Five cards face up and the winner takes all and it's purgatory for the loser . . .

"All right, Marden. I've had enough."

Jake tensed. He knew Spunt's foot was moving beneath the desk to the concealed floor button. The foot pressed down and the laser Blinder snapped into life. A Blinder beam flashed into Jake's eyes. It should have blinded him for hours to come. Instead, his face bathed in beatific red glow; he smiled at Spunt.

"It won't work, warden. The power rheostat's been cut way down. You couldn't burn a fly's ass with that beam."

Shock to disbelief to open fear and back to shock. Spunt could sure pack a lot of silent but visible emotion into his face in a hell of a short time. He caught up with himself and visibly shook off his dismay.

"How did you do that?" Spunt might have the face of a slimebag but he'd survived the system long enough to know how to land on his feet and get back to basics.

Jake brought his forefinger level with his eyebrows. "You," Jake said slowly, carefully, "are up to here with the most expensive, complicated, advanced, super-sophisticated, totally fucked-up electronics and computer system nightmare ever assembled by a bunch of lunatics. And when they got through putting their whole mess together they assembled it as part-and-parcel of this new prison and stuck you with it. It's high-grade, triple-sophisticated junk and you're losing control. If it falls apart at the rate it's going there'll be a mass escape, a lot of killing, and they'll fry your ass on the hottest carpet in Tallahassee those barn-burners can find."

Spunt made a steeple of his fingers; wet eyes peered through his leathery digits at this extraordinary mass

killer before him. He'd noticed the changes in Marden; the body so much heavier in its thick-set torso, the massive muscles, the older eyes but above all a comprehension of the world about him. "Very admirable," Spunt responded slowly. "Any other conclusions?"

"You've been warden here for twenty-eight years. Two more to go and you have full retirement on that lake in Minnesota, //what I just said doesn't come to pass."

The stepple unfolded and the leathery digits slipped a cigarette between tight lips; still dewy, but tighter. The pack slid across the desk to Marden. He took one and lit the cigarette with a solid-gold Dunhill. Spunt's eyes narrowed. It didn't take him any longer than that motion to understand the picture.

"I begin to believe you already know what I want, Marden."

"You've checked my records."

"Thoroughly."

"I'm the best."

"I've gone through your records a dozen times. I wish to hell you weren't on the wrong side of the bars." Warden Spunt spoke like a man for the first time since Jake Marden had known him.

"Inside these walls we're all on the wrong side of the bars."

"You can make it right?"

"Absolutely."

"I run the show, Marden."

"As far as the world knows," Jake said carefully, "you're the warden and I'm a convict sentenced forever to purgatory."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Jesus, what would you rather be? Dressed for dinner with nothing to eat or dining at a king's table wearing rags?"

"I didn't know you were so poetic."

"Let's get the rest of it out between us," Jake said with sudden impatience.

"All right. You run the whole gamut from the simple bread-boards to superchips and the best computers we've got."

"And the ancillary robotics."

"We get along?"

Jake nodded. "Asshole buddies, sir, your honor, your worship."

"Two years to retirement. A lot of fish are waiting for me in that lake." Spunt drifted off to Minnesota and floated back inside Old Millford. "I stink of prison life. My lungs are caked with it."

"We still don't have it spelled out, sir."

"I want to go fishing on a full retirement, Marden."

"Yes, sir."

"You put this place back together the way it belongs. Let me lay it on the line. You're the best. But can you do it?"

"Yes."

"How long to straighten out the bad curves?"

"Some results in seventy-two hours." Jake chewed his lip. "Enough to make a difference."

"And? After that?"

"A month from now this place hums like a gang of nuns at Christmas with vibrators."

"Tell me what you want, Marden."

"What are you giving?"

"Bullcock." Spunt's hand slapped his desk hard as he leaned forward, the frustration pushing him to the edge of temper. "What the fuck do you think we're doing here? Jewing down the price of cucumbers in a fucking Italian grocery?"

Marden studied the opposition. Too many metaphors and he's got the shakes. He's on the edge of either giving it all up and saying fuck it and quitting, or- Put the deck cards up on the table, you asshole!

"I'll tell you first what I won't do."

Spunt gestured for him to go on.

"I won't break out of here. Hell, I won't even try."

"Strange as it seems, Marden, I believe you."

"To the outside world, or anyone who comes in here, I'm a con and you're the chief Indian."

"Good."

"Understand I could bust out of this joint any time I wanted."

"Really?" A touch of the Spunt Sneer was back.

"Listen, man," Jake said with sudden disdain that not even Spunt could miss, "the way this place is so fucked with your computers I could walk out of here with a dozen men on each side of me and we wouldn't have to bother breaking out. We'd be doing the Easter parade and your computers would be singing our song."

Spunt grimaced. "I believe the last part of what you said," he added with distaste.

"You better believe it all. We have a deal?" Jake didn't wait for Spunt to reply. "The day I come to you," he went on, "and tell you I've withdrawn my word I'm giving you right now, then you start worrying. But until that time I'll stay put. You'll always know where to find me." His knuckles rapped the desk. "Right here, warden. Right here. Home, sweet, home."

Spunt scratched his crotch with sudden discomfort. Jake knew his man. The moment of truth was at hand. "You haven't told me everything," Spunt complained. "What else-"

Jake knew the moment was right now. He struck like a viper. "I stay here," he reaffirmed. "And, I don't let anyone else break out."

"You're too good to me. Goddamn you, what do you want to be, Santa Claus?"

"I run Old Millford."

"You what?"

"I run the joint. No ifs, ands, or buts."

"Fuck you!" Spunt turned crimson. "I'm the goddamned warden here and I'll-"

"You're the warden in name only," Jake snapped. He was fed up with word games. "If you don't buy this deal, Mister Spunt, you'd better have me killed before I get back to my cell. If you don't this whole place comes apart like a busted spring. Spunt, you don't understand, you shithead. I've already been into the computers. I'm locked into every element of this fucking electronic palace. And you know what, warden? This is a nightmare beyond your worst dreams. And-"

Jake stood up. "Ahh, fuck it," he said tiredly. "Do your worst, warden. I advise you to grab your ankles and kiss your ass goodbye because-"

"Who else besides you is in on this?" The turnaround came much faster than Jake could have anticipated, and he grabbed the moment.

"Jube Bailey. A few more. All tight. Consider them as being deaf, dumb, and blind."

"Who?"

"You get the list in forty-eight hours."

Spunt's eyes narrowed. Shit, he really does look like a goddamn puff adder. "One last question, Marden. You give me a straight answer and we deal." He held the question. Jake kept his silence. He'd let Spunt fill the gap.

"What do you really get out of this?" Spunt asked with sudden calm. "Deep down, gut-deep down."

"That's easy. I'm king of Old Millford. And while I'm king, to the rest of the world you're the smartest, fastest, best goddamned modern warden in the whole prison system. You stay out of my fucking way and you're a fucking genius."

Spunt's face went through twisting emotions. He was pale when he spoke again.

"Do it," he said.

The king smiled.

CHAPTER 4

Arbok shoved his studded back up against the corner walls of the group cell within which he and five

other bipedal life forms were being held while the penal vessel Frarsk raced with unknown velocity on an unknown trajectory to an unknown planet that had a number instead of a name and which would be his last pinpoint of life occupancy until he died, which was one more unknown. He forced his thoughts from the unknowns over which he had no control and were therefore of scant interest to him, and bound his hopes along what might, what just incredibly might be, more profitable lines. He figured the odds were about a billion to one against his being able to alter the course of events an entire galactic trading empire had imposed upon him. But then, he mused brightly, odds are like genetic helixes. They twist and turn unexpectedly and they have breaks along their structure, and where there's a break there's always the opportunity to add a new twist to things.

So he thought about stars and planets. He needed to do that to project himself into a future of uncertain possibilities. If a wild scheme growing in his rocket-jockey brain would have a phlart's eyewhisker of a chance of seeing reality, he had to get his thought processes in order and transfer what occupied the forefront of his thoughts to immediate availability in his memory banks, but still out of his way.

His plan was simple. He'd use these miserable wretches of what were dubiously considered higher, intelligent life forms to break the chain that no one had ever broken. A different kind of break. A prison break.

From a penal vessel howling through interstellar space with unknown speed to an unknown planet with unknown-Stop the shit, he ordered himself in the same mental tone and phrasing that identified jet and rocket jockeys the galaxy over. What he needed was a slam-crash-bang plan of operations that, were his billion-to-one-odds crazy scheme come to pass, he could implement about as fast as his hands could move on certain controls of this pissboat Frarsk. Because that's where he instantly began to change the odds. He wasn't some slimebag like that waddling Ytram whose main talent in life seemed to be oozing biological grease. Screw that; he was a rocket jock and he knew how to fly these giant buckets of bolts and angled iron that creaked and groaned along the spaceways.

Right there he had the advantage no one could ever have forecast for him. Including himseE He wasn't the average criminal type who was most likely to end up in penal solitude. In fact, he'd never heard of any rocket jock going up for the long fall due to anything he had done in his capacity as a pilot. That, he mused, was his biggest advantage and a possible fat heel in their Achilles. He would not be expected to function with the mindset of a cunning, brilliant, capable rocket pilot. He would be expected to act as did the other prisoners; a worthless chunk of slimeslag to be put away forever or, if no one was looking, to be used for sport or biological experiment.

Arbok, like so many other pilots of his brand, always had the choice of dabbling in a dozen different activities through their positions as pilots, which were illegal actions but also combined high gain with little risk. For whatever the reason, Arbok had always refused to indulge. He was proud to be what he was; superjock, if that's what you wanted to call it. It took a special breed of man to handle the giant ships riding the gravity reefs up and down into and out of planetary fields. In some untranslatable homily of his own kind, Arbok hewed to the principle that it's a dirty sparrow that shits in its own bed, and he preferred clean, cool sheets, thank you. So he stayed clean. He didn't do the drugs and he didn't touch trying to screw his way past customs.

But that didn't mean he had to be the equivalent of a galactic boy scout! Or some bug-eyed wimp who'd suck the dick of anything with two legs that could walk or stumble. The pilots built their own code and as thin as it stretched across the vast distances between stars, it was stronger than any bond known.

Irreverence was their byword, arrogance their flag, exquisite skills their banner, and unquestioned honesty and reliability their lifeline.

So they took no shit from anyone. Because if any of the Trader groups or a planetary combine messed with the pilots, the word went out swiftly, and it didn't take long for a cold shoulder from the confederacy of rocket jocks to seal off a world. Oh, the top shots from a Trader group might force a pilot to carry on his work through threat of mangling his family, but that worked only for a while, and the harder the big outfits came down on the pilots, the tougher and nastier the reaction from all the rocket jocks. They were, in the true sense of the word, the real buccaneers in a galactic system so huge the very idea of free-booting, swash-buckling individualism seemed impossible.

Which made their goal all the more desirable and necessary. They hewed to no political line. Ethic distinctions were ludicrous among the stars. Religion was a hodge-podge of individual beliefs; on some planets feces were regarded with awe because they fertilized the soil. On others the godheads were invisible mumbly pegs that satisfied the locals. So none of that mattered and the rocket jocks moved through it all with the ease of a giant asteroid borer through whipped mahring.

And if anyone had a shot at breaking the long-standing record of never busting free of a penal ship, it was none other than Arbok. No galactic criminal mind had his spectacular talents.

He knew the Frarsk had somersaulted or inverse-twisted or done whatever it was a ship did when it whacked into hyperspace; no one really knew just what did happen when a ship broke the weave of spacetime fabric and short-circuited the grand-plan structure of the universe, except that with the right computers and sufficient power used in precisely the right way, you zapped out of existence plane into something where spacetime fabric folded in and upon and throughout itself. If you were what they grinningly called a master tailor you knew how to use all that twisted fabric and turn a flight of hundreds of years at UL velocities into an AL trip of only days or weeks. UnderLight shots through vacuum were strictly for shifting from one planet to another or riding cometary tails; you saved the AboveLight trips for the long hauls, which is how you changed them from long hauls in time to relatively brief sojourns by the clock, but that still chopped away huge blocks of distance between stars.

So, Arbok mused to himself, once they performed the miracle of taking over a ship that was untouchable by its verminous human criminal cargo, and they got rid of their android overlords who (that?) were invincible, then he'd have only the scantest of times to figure out how the controls worked, and, what to do to them to make them work the way he wanted them to. He snapped powerful fingers together and the sound came forth like a shot from a starter pistol. Ytram winced and the other four convicts remained stolid and frozen-faced. The key, thought Arbok. The key was to make the basic star selection now. All these ships had instant availability readouts of stellar types, and any three-horned blasphrip worth a side fang knew you had to have a G-type star if you had any hopes of finding an alien Home, Sweet Home out there in the great beyond.

He would need to find a star like his home planetary furnace of Traik. If he could do that, and after pulling off a string of miracles that would make the compilers of three dozen worldly bibles blush with envy to take over this ship, then he must aim toward a star just like the one that had warmed his ass all his life. Well, it didn't have to be exactly like Traik but the categorization was clear enough. It must be a G-type star.*

It wasn't enough to go gallivanting out there across the galaxy by no more navigation than pointing the ship along whatever hyperspace convolutions it would follow, at just any old bright light in the universal sky. He might home in on a

*License is taken to assume the reader is aware that translation of language, including stellar banding identification, has been accomplished to facilitate easier perusal for the reader.

K star which could have fourteen planets outward from the star, at the same distance his world, Makk, was from his own sun, and he would end up being absolutely shit out of luck. Because the K is a hell of a lot more orange than the G and it's also only half as efficient in dishing out energy to its planetary family.

Ergo: only the planets close in get a decent share of solar energy and along with that energy is the problem of close proximity, which means a lot of mean radiation along with weak sunlight.

Arbok smiled to himself. Sometimes it could be so easy. The Great Being had even color-coded his stars so simpletons like the so-called advanced life forms could quickly and more easily tap a figurative finger on each type of star. Out there in the Great Beyond, if your spectral instruments looked at a star and proclaimed "you've got a real blue orb out there, baby," you knew that blue meant the hottest star type. Too hot, in fact. It blistered the planetary family and even their more distant cousins, proclaiming incineration before any life form buried in the original creation debris might ooze from its primordial compacted dust and gases.

Now, on the other side of the scale were the truly red giants. They screwed up all the definitions of stars because they were so incredibly huge they spanned diameters of many billions of miles, and their outer edges were as nebulous and tenuous with their heated gases as hard vacuum itself. Where, went the old

question, does the edge of the star end and space itself begin? There was no hard answer, and the only thing you could be sure of with a giant red was that the stellar atmosphere extended to incredibly far out from the core that no planets could be found that weren't orbiting within the star's gaseous envelope, and that was automatic exclusion from any sensible or even remote chance for any advanced life forms even to get a fang or claw grip on future life.

Down from the massive blues were the whites and the yellow-whites, and they were also so damn hot and monstrous that life was a happenstance freak rather than a pattern. Life developed on die planetary bodies that whipped about such stars, but only Me in its most primitive stages-of biological interest only. Things that never advanced beyond mindless squish and spludge hardly excited the younger generations of any race, and those planets were so horribly short of the raw materials to sustain evolution that they went into the vast computer banks and were largely ignored. Why mess around with boring oddities when there were so many millions of planets teeming with advanced stages of life?

One of the problems Arbok pondered was that he must concentrate on the yellow G stars much like Traik. Scientists figured that life had crawled around on Makk since shortly after its formation some five billion years in the past, and it had taken a few billion years for anything except aggravated slime to emerge. So the really hot stars like the great blues or the blue-whites were eliminated from the life form sweepstakes. It took billions of years for life to develop. The pattern had been so long established, and no one had ever found a variation to that theme, that whatever science there was to be found anywhere in the galaxy accepted that rule as sacrament. The Great Being tossed his bleached bones of chance and the stars ignited from debris so old it defied description, and the universe had long been a graveyard of the massive blues, whites, blue-whites, and yellow-whites. Some of the more massive stars ignited, flared, held center stage for a million years or so, and died out to become white dwarfs or neutron stars or even to wink out into dark cesspools, the black holes that defied time, space and any mind yet evolved. In their short existence, life couldn't even initiate a feeble squish.

Other massive stars burned two to five million years and went down the chute of stellar burnout or oblivion. Some massive stars exploded in a final fury of self-mutilation. Others clung grimly to life for even a hundred million years. Ah, bitter frustration, thought Arbok. Did stars wish for their outflung debris to bring forth sentient beings of bone and sinew and leathery skin and claw and fang and optic nerve and pitiful dreams? Did stars think? Feel? Know a oneness with the universe? Well, the ones that lasted a mere hundred million years were littler more than a blush on the ass cheek of time and the universe, gone in less than a wink. Then there were the stars that hung on for a billion years or so, burning their mass with something less than a frantic screaming pace of the blue-whites, but even a billion years isn't enough for muck and slime to mix with proteins and acids and the life-giving lash of lightning reaching down from the domed planetary firmament.

There were also the crazy stars, warped travesties of what a healthy, steady-burning stellar furnace should be. They pulsed and peaked and then blew in supernovas. Other stars formed clusters of twos and threes and raced about each other in a crazyquilt of groaning gravitational pull and ebb, and they ate their planets in vises of gravity and sudden sputum of solar eruptions like some insane tafly pull of the gods.

Arbok sighed. Concentrate on what counts, you idiot, he chastised himself. And what counts are the G-class yellows because they are main sequencers, good old reliable, well-balanced, well-nourished, proper-radiation, stable-temperature lanterns lighting the way for life forms on one or more of their various worlds. They had been around for billions of years, and once they managed to survive the inherent stellar instabilities that wrecked so many stars, they kept pumping out a constant flow of energy that brought life rushing hysterically through slime and then chemicals and lightning Sashes and gloppy soup and finally water.

Ah, smiled Arbok, the universal life-givers. Sufficient gravity; proper distance from the sun for light and warmth and energy; a fortunate combination of gases acreting from the primal soup; a necessary spin to create an atmospheric engine; thundering friction in that atmosphere to bring forth hammer blows of lightning and the assembly of water vapor and the mixing of gases and with enough water the planets began to feed upon themselves and lo! life arose. Gravity and pressure are different everywhere in the

universe only to the extent of their extremes. All the glues and paints Arbok had just run through his facile mind were employed with almost wasteful strokes by the Cosmic Artist. The palette is found everywhere and the Artist must long ago have been annoyed no end by the many names and titles heaped onto his brush-work. Arbok chuckled and pitied the Great Being. It must be damned difficult to get proper credit when you're known as Mukdora, God, Great Being, Finkelstein, Grangesh, Allastam and an endless babbling variety. Give some slime half a chance to crawl out of the planetary bedrock and before a galaxy can wheel halfway about its center, temples and altars will spring up on a million planets.

A million planets . . . Arbok sighed. To be a prisoner in a confined space when you've seen the firmament was just too much. No wonder the spaceways and bars were rife with stories of men who'd sailed the seas of spacewarp and other-times and then fallen within the clutches of a prison world, and lost no time in taking their own lives. Better to gamble, they felt, on a spirit knowing an instant of final freedom than to spend all the eternities there were sealed upon an airless and uncaring world lost forever to contact from a galaxy of thinking beings.

Arbok wasn't really thinking in specific terms about Makk or any of the other pleasure and trade planets orbiting Traik. What the hell; his own star was even less than the tiniest glowing pinpoint against the splattering coruscation of the thickest spiral arm of the Milky Way Galaxy. Arbok had never envisioned the term Milky Way. If the term ever was brought to him he would have considered it unspeakably stupid. He had never seen his own galaxy from so far out as to make it visible as a thin glowing band across the heavens, To Arbok and his land the galaxy from close in to the center was a vast, eye-burning, shining, coruscating mass of mighty stellar engines beneath or within which night could never exist. His own star, Traik, was an insignificant mote against red giants trillions of miles thick or against pulsars so angry in their violence they equalled a billion blue-white stars in their singular cry of visible light. One star surpassing a billion and it was common. White dwarfs and purple balloon stars, stellar gourds and thinpink gushers and green nova and oblong hammers and raging black holes that crushed light with impunity, all these and a thousand more stars were common enough to the Inner Galactic Worlds.

Arbok, you glitz, get with it! He even sat straighter with his inner remonstrations. He concentrated on what he must find. First the best of the yellow stars of G spectral band, and then, a nonself-luminous body. The old-fashioned planetary model with sufficient density to have heaved across its surface all the elements that would one day-this day, swore Arbok- make it welcome to Arbok and his kind. But there are so many he shouted in silent self-protest. Well, true enough. Not only were there stars out there in such a mind-twisting oppression of numbers, there were an equally unknown number of planets as well. The Makkian astronomers, having plumbed the depths with defonzoid radiative astronomy, had counted within this one galaxy no less than seventeen billion planets. At least eight hundred million harbored some form of life. Using the disdain of conservatism, that still left an estimated three million Makkian-type worlds on which higher life forms had sprung dominant and were struggling like galactic lice to crawl from one solar system to another.

No matter what he did his thoughts dribbled past his defenses to return to Makk. Damn all the gods and the devils and the mygrimalds and their bastard offspring, but he was going to miss Makk. He'd walked the surfaces of many worlds and hopped across asteroid bodies and pulsed through dust accretions and moons and craggy rock lumps and dodged and twisted in the agile laserboats through the wide and glorious rings of the great gas planets. And no less than two comets as well. He'd served both in the Starfleet Command and the Offworld Commerce Agency of Makk that had finally merged into a single conglomerate of all national interests thrown into a pretty respectable space force. Enough to keep the Traders treading cautiously in their presence. Because every rocket jock from Makk had to have a half-dozen degrees in advanced sciences. First the brain and then the zap; that was the rule. The hard-drinking, hump-anything pervasive behavior of the jocks like Arbok concealed very well their intrinsic superscience and engineering acumen.

Would it be different out there in the far-flung spiral arms of the galaxy? He pondered that possibility because he knew he must go outward, lose himself there, instead of back to galactic center. Let there be the first whisper that convicts had overpowered their guards and taken command of a penal vessel and the Traders would spare no cost or effort to hunt them down and destroy them. You did not fuck with

the Grand Master Plan of the galaxy, a primary element of which was never to upset the boat of rules governing the laws that bound worlds together and prevented them from savage conflict with one another. It was all too easy for planet-busting to become a new art form. So it had to be the outer spiral arms for Arbok; no one from the Inner Galaxy, or more simply, the Core, gave a damn for whatever might go on "way out there."

Arbok permitted himself one last indulgence of memory of things past, for in moments he knew he must close out forever any threads or ties to his named existence. He was really trying as hard as he could to envision a desert of stars, like a single tree on an entire planet, and there might be only one such tree on any one thousand planets, and if you had that kind of system, why, it would be, comparatively, a thick forest compared to the stars in the Outer Galaxy. Space "out there" was so fucking empty! But in the Inner Galaxy he knew so well, ah, he thought of stars and worlds and music floated through his tortured mind. It was a completely different universe he would be leaving behind. The stars, oh, Great One, the stars! Clusters, balloroids of stars and globular patterns and the great chandeliers, the whirlamongs and the gourds and the whirlers, the spinners and stars that spattered and just plain old clumps and batteries of stars and all their planets.

AboveLight transport had created avenues and communication between such worlds. There had been those first few thousand years of claw and fang climbing upward through atmosphere with fusion bombs and hyperlasers, and worlds tore up one another, until finally as a simple matter of survival it was agreed upon throughout the worlds that anything of this sort was absolutely insane. The only rules anyone tried to impose across the galactic mantle were an absolute prohibition against planet busters or star disrupters or any other potentially genocidal device. Any use of such devices would instantly bring forth the combined might of all the other worlds, a tribal galactic gathering, so to speak.

The other rule was that no intelligent being, once condemned to life imprisonment on a droid planet, could ever leave that world. A violation of such rules brought instant retaliation by the Traders, who were already everywhere and had the ability to communicate swiftly, and thus avoid for any convict interlopers safety that might otherwise be found in the vastness of space itself.

The laws were rigid and by their own nature and rigidity they permitted the freelancing of raiders throughout the entire Inner Galaxy, so long as they dared not violate the use of the so-called Absolute Weapons. Putting it bluntly, the galaxy-or at least the heavily populated areas where commerce and trade were big business-was absolutely spitting full of pirates. It made for lively maneuvers over long distances and often raised the going price for scarce goods made scarcer by successful freebooters. The whole concept was marvelous for space opera buffs but it was a crock and everyone knew it. The costs of the advanced drive systems and the close-in weapons, the computers and everything that went with a base of operations, could never be accomplished by individuals, no matter how freebooting and adventuresome they might be. The pirating business was big business and giant organizations were needed to run them. A man in a single lifeboat, his ass crammed hard against survival equipment and desperately glad to survive anywhere, is not your Captain Courageous by any stretch of lurid imagination. That was standard fare for the hypnovisions and pill-trippers who'd whack off to a fere thee well and when they ejaculated wildly their whole system would short-circuit and in the space of seconds they could "live through" whatever grand adventure had been served up to them in chemical form. Stinking wimps Enough!

Query your new "friends," Arbok. Time runs from you. Arbok touched a hand to his forehead and yielded to the inevitable.

"You are?"

The alien grated-gargled-snarled.

Arbok groaned. "Speak base tongue," he snapped. He noticed the careful response. This alien was not frightened of him despite the walloping Arbok had given the far more massive Ytram.

"Brist Mullongptu."

"Your life form?"

"You speak like an overseer." The words carried conflict within them.

"I don't mean to be. I ask because I have a plan. I ask you first," Arbok said carefully, "because your shape and your gaze hold promise."

"If you have a plan aboard this dung vessel you are either a primitive, an idiot, or a genius who should never be here at all," Brist retorted.

"Agreed. With everything you say. I promise to explain after the questions."

"Agreed," said Brist Mullongptu.

The snake that led Eve astray in the terrestrial biblical Eden of the ancient Hebrews apparently had its counterpart on the planet Llongctik, home world to Brist. Like Earth, Llongctik was the third world from its yellow/G star, hi evolved an oxygen-adequate atmosphere, had many things in common with Earth and yet was so vastly different in many ways one could hardly confuse one planet with the other.

Llongctik was one of the great rarities of the galaxy; a planet with enormous amounts of surface water. But right there its seemingly wonderful advantage over most other worlds bogged down; a measure of expression appropriate for Llongctik with a planetary sea brackish with sulfur, shallow and muddy and host to all manner of disgusting mudfish creatures fouling the water as well as the air above. And what fauna dumped into the sea and into the air, noxious as it was, represented only part of the processes that painted the world's sky a thick dung yellow and made the worst paper-processing plant on Earth smell, in comparison, like a rose garden.

Whatever had been the mechanisms that freed liquid water on Earth in its clear, wonderful, life-giving fluidic form failed to arise on Brist's world. Swift currents did not exist. A global exchange of liquids to purify and cleanse died out in thick mudflats and massive silt. There was water aplenty, but it stank and it was miserable. Llongctik had a planetary surface of surprising rigidity, lacking the flow and wandering habits of the tectonic plates of many other worlds that produced mantle ripping and thus deep oceans and a planetary weather engine of cleansing and replacing. Llongctik lacked a single great mountain worthy of the name and foul-smelling gases heaved from the crust into the murky seas and astonishingly mucky atmosphere. Yet nature was not to be denied; the strange chemicals of the planet reacting beneath a beneficial sun "saved the day." Gucky mud-yellow sky and noxious gases notwithstanding, genetic machinery works its strange wonders; the foul and noxious gases in the catalytic reactions of direct sunlight from the local star produced a planetwide riot of flora. Which, unfortunately, stank like a great muddy pigsty.

Worlds like Llongctik lay scattered like huge mudballs across the galaxy, risen haphazardly about stars of varying form, density, size, and radiation. On some of these planets the desire and often the desperate need for clear water was met easily enough as industry and technology and science and biofarming developed to effective strata for that individual planet. But not until such systems became available could a brackish planet emerge from the clutching morass of its own guck. With technology risen from the ooze flats, so to speak, transformation from pukish glack to sparkling water was but a matter of effort and time. Brist's people never saw that moment in their history.

Back, then, to that snake. It didn't induce the Llongctikian Eve to chomp her apple. It knocked off Adam and humped Eve and of all wonders, conception took place, and the result in that swampish glop covering the world was a bipedal life form. After the obligatory few hundred million years of evolution the bipedal form appeared, fully mobile and intelligent with acceptable cranial capacity. But with an internal body fluid system as much chlorophyll as a dusky form of blood filled with cells that manufactured pure oxygen with riotous abandon. The bizarre combination was a powerfully intelligent, culturally advanced plant. Brist was Flora taken to its ultimate. He was no freakish mutation but a natural progressive creation of planetary conditions. In short, the most advanced creature on his world, whose race swiftly achieved domination. Llongctik was a disaster for food production until the dominant life form developed curing and storage, the pattern that attended every culturally advanced intelligent race. It was a simple matter of food availability through storage to make time available for curiosity to sprout and be rewarded with even more curiosity. Development led to advanced genetic cultivation and Llongctik became a vast enriched swamp producing the usual staggering variety of life forms. Denied heavy ores and subsequent metals, Brist's race created ceramics unknown anywhere else and that, fortunately, were discovered by the Traders, "who just happened to have a ready market for so alien and durable a product." Once it was discovered that the Llongctik ceramics would not break down under the hellish temperatures and radiative ablating of ship's thrusters, the planet was dragged immediately into the galactic trading family.

There was yet another unexpected value. What grew on Llongctik was superbly adapted to planets with swarming flora but no fauna. The Llongctik variety once introduced to other worlds overwhelmed the native flora and began to produce planets with acceptable breathing air and food supplies for the crazies who liked to feed their wanderlust in the hopes of building their own total empires that were literally planetwide. Dreams confined to planetary bubbles hurt no one.

Out of all this myriad development emerged Brist and his kind; bipedal creatures of great durability, strength and intelligence. Brist could breathe almost any land of atmosphere and he had the autonomic ability to extract needed oxygen and chemicals for photosynthesis from almost any combination of liquids and gases. Brist was a creature of marvelous survivability. He could be dumped into a malignant planetary swamp that would destroy almost any unprotected bipedal creature. Brist would instead thrive on any kind of soupy marine or vegetative glop, the liquid and tiny animal organisms that infest such swampland. His system was a conversion machine; period.

Brist didn't look a highly intelligent being. His outer layer (it was not skin) seemed a coating of greenish rubbery cactus for his epidermal structure. Maybe his hide was best described as analogous to a radial tire with steel belting interwoven through subcutaneous structure. His was a system genetically evolved to survive almost any climatic conditions of extreme heat to cold, from sopping wet to arid. His bipedal form was similar to that of almost all other thinking creatures, but in this respect he was like the terrestrial shark that looks to be a fish but really isn't. Both shark and Brist's race lacked skeletal structure: they were both cartilaginous throughout. Of course in reality a shark is far more akin to fish than this plant-man was to Arbok.

The normal face prevailed, with Arbok and Brist as it did almost everywhere. Nasal passages, optic system, the natural evolutionary principle of sensibility producing the greatest overall reliability and flexibility. Eyes, ears, nose, mouth, chin, structure for head covering (Brist inexplicably grew hair); the normal biological structuring.

Arbok, by contrast, had a smoothly, snakelike epidermis. He stood just under six feet tall and seemed to be composed entirely of slabs of muscle in his torso and sinewy limbs. His eyes gleamed black, his teeth surprisingly white, his ears flattened to his head. He lacked body hair.

Brist was fluid cactus and tough hemp stalk, every part of his frame tough and virtually imperious to water. His fingers were thick and short and functioned as webbing. Where Arbok had an orange-brown hue to his skin, Brist was a pale, almost ghostly green. He seemed badly in need of a good tan. His chin was broad and solid, the facial features squared off and he looked at Arbok with eyes of bright green, a handoff from his particular physiology. He stood slightly taller than Arbok; both men carried the same weight at two hundred (earth) pounds.

Brist rarely showed emotions, not because he lacked them but due to his features that seemed almost frozen. Everything in nature is a tradeoff and Brist traded solid strength and durability for overt emotion. There was no such thing among his race as a raised eyebrow or the tic of a cheek muscle. Emotions were packed inside. Brist's race was inelegant in language, speaking with a harsh sound and making such flat-toned statements as to make every utterance fixed-in-concrete dogma. Brist's world also lacked advanced technological machinery. There was a planet of commonality between and among all creatures. Everything was part and parcel of everything else. Fire was rare and suffered badly from the prevailing surface conditions. On Llongctik, the people grew their homes and boats and propulsion systems and tools and food. It was a marvelous symbiosis producing a planetary togetherness with much to be admired, for Brist's people were astonishingly non-warlike. They were far from placid, but limited their competition to nonfatal exchanges.

That was to be praised and in yet another way to be condemned, for not all planetary systems give rise to the Easter bunny, and interstellar Traders were fiercely competitive and demanding. Brist's people accepted the Outworlders with so little resistance they fell almost immediate prey to outworlder greed. The first Traders to descend on Llongctik were stunned to find a race so willing to cooperate with these strange beings from the stars; they were convinced that indentured servitude was an honorable status. To the Traders they had found a mecca of willing commercial slaves.

Simplicity in planetary exchange has always worked the best. The Traders who came to Llongctik

followed a pattern as old as all life forms themselves. Hit where the weakness is greatest and introduce new elements to overwhelm the locals without the need to fight them. Fiery liquor with chemicals starkly effective to Brist's race created an insatiable demand for more of the same, and greed sprang up on Llongctik. Aphrodisiacs were unknown on this world until the Trader's liquor went down local gullets. Intoxication, greed, rape, and anger sprang up like dragon's teeth, and a people basically sound and honest were herded easily like dumbfounded sheep.

Brist found himself on worlds staggering to even his phlegmatic imagination. He was finally sold for a handsome price to planetary gun runners for whom he worked as a lowly slave and who abused him with poor food and terrible living quarters. Deprivation meant little to Brist. He simply "turned off" in his head and his marvelous physiology met even substandard food and drink with immediate autonomic functioning to whatever Brist's body demanded. But even placid temperament under the worst of conditions had its weaknesses and Brist suffered the misfortune to be in the midst of a struggle between his master and a nasty competitor. Faced with being skewered in an old-fashioned knife fight, his owner screamed to Brist to kill. Brist complied. His hands, powerful as battering rams, crushed the skull not only of his master's would-be carver, but of everyone else within sight or reach.

When he was through he was laser-narced, a dose not even his marvelous system could withstand. Physically unable to command his own body he went through charges of murder and immediate incarceration and transshipment to the penal vessel Frarsk.

The convict, Brist, was not the same being who had blindly followed so many orders in the past. Brist was placid, but not stupid, and his placidity was not limitless. Flung into the slammer, listening to descriptions of what his future would be like, his brain whipped into overdrive and an intelligent being emerged. Had he been this way back on Llongctik he would have swiftly risen to leadership and power. But Llongctik was gone forever, and now he faced this strange alien, Arbok.

"If I give you orders," Arbok spoke carefully, "will you follow them? Immediately, completely?"

"No orders. I am a prisoner now, but nevermore a slave," came the carefully considered reply.

"Orders to an equal bear no shame," Arbok said, and he was convincing because he believed.

"Orders to what purpose?"

"To do the impossible. Take control of this ship."

"And then?"

"Anything, my friend, is better than life imprisonment on the world to which we are bound. If we succeed, we go-I don't know; anywhere-but we go as free men."

Brist nodded somberly. "Agreed."

Arbok had placed another piece in his growing plans. Dalliance with the impossible might yet have its chance.

"What do you know of that one?" Arbok tilted his head toward a dark-skinned alien, an autumn brown of coloration, with fierce countenance. Brooding eyes, unmistakable suspicion, wariness ever-present. In short, a fighter, judged Arbok. Brist confirmed his feelings.

"I know him. They call that one Grangles. That is the only name I know, and that he comes from the planet Ishban. He is a killer. It is his nature."

"Will he share with us?" Arbok queried.

"If he so wishes. I believe he will. A prison planet to that one is worse than death."

Arbok knew of Ishban. Stories in spaceport bars. He'd seen some of Grangles' people before. They stalked and stormed and swept through life and they were always armed with all manner of weapons visible and concealed. If what Arbok had heard bore truth to it, Grangles was his man for what lay ahead.

Ishban was one of those unfortunate worlds caught between foot-dragging social sciences and the juggernaut of advanced technology. Ishban bore close resemblance to Earth and Makk; it was also the sole planet of its solar system on which intelligent life forms had survived the mathematical odds of planetary formation, stellar radiance, and the proper distance from its sun. Its atmosphere was stormy but essentially predictable, but something was lacking. Since none of the Traders bothered to educate the locals on Ishban, those same locals never knew that the gods had dealt Ishban a shitty deal. Whatever

stellar debris made up the elements of the Ishban surface they existed in a proportion that made of this world a near-Earth. With a diameter of barely seven thousand miles and a distance from its star of eighty-one million miles, Ishban wasted its carbon dioxide and liquid water and a brief-lived abundance of oxygen, raced through its "wet" period (geologically speaking, that is) and due to the perturbations of a rogue star sweeping through this particular galactic sector, flinging gravitational mayhem in its path and its wake, Ishban was thrown back into its earlier history of massive volcanic activity.

The gods threw the dice and they came up craps. Just as a brilliant race appeared, diversified, developed trade and languages and culture and science, it began to choke on the ash of a mantle cracking everywhere like planetary athlete's foot, releasing dense clouds to blanket the world in life-robbing opacity. Cultural and scientific advancement stumbled as Ishban became a desert planet, a world dying of ash and smoke and strewn with incredible fields of gemstones hurled upward from the savage pressures and heat of submantle lava.

It was too much to expect the Traders to hew to Galactic rules or ethics. The planetary leagues expected Traders not to touch down on a planet when that visit could totally wreck local culture and choke its development. Orbiting the world and scaring hell out of the locals went on freely enough (giving rise on hundreds of so-called undeveloped worlds to mysticism and religions) but touchdown could bring severe reprisals from the bigger gangs that made up the leagues. But this was a world dying. Ishban had perhaps a hundred, maybe even five hundred years, before its atmosphere would no longer support life. So what rules were there to break? The untapped patient was already choking to death.

The infamous Camtok Traders made their move. They declared the dying world open territory. No arguments arose; no self-serving moral bullshit disturbed the communications subspace lines. Where was there a rescue force to snatch from the jaws of death nearly a billion souls? Where would they be taken, or settled, or fed and clothed and launched on a new path of survival and growth? Planets lived and they died just like the life forms to which they gave birth. Tough titty was the name of that game.

There was yet another problem to justify the Camtok moves. The occupants of Ishban by necessity had become fierce and hardy souls in their battle to stay alive as long as was possible. They had become the Ishban equivalent of Terrestrial Bedouins with the social mores befitting Attila or Genghis. Ishban offered choking air and death. Grangles and his people survived beneath ever-fiercer volcanic eruptions, ashstorms worse than sandstorms, and howling gales that could drive any life form to madness.

Grangles, and any member of his global tribe, would do anything to survive. Killing was as natural as spitting out ash. When the Camtok Traders descended through the screaming gales to grab the extraordinary gemstones of Ishban (and ostensibly to rescue a few souls here and there to stay within the good graces of Temporal Review at Galactic Core), they expected decimated tribes stumbling about in their ultimate misfortune.

Grangles' encampment of ten thousand souls was a city of caves along steep slopes in the midst of uncounted gemstones known nowhere else in the tradelanes. No matter what might be created in laboratories or transmuted in special chambers, "natural" gems remained in vogue and galaxy-wide-demand. Three great Camtok ships came down amidst crackling lightning and savage blasts of static electricity; two landed on extendable legs thrust downward from enormous rounded rims. The third ship remained aloft, snarling with energy and creating its own violent lightning storm. The Camtok were Traders but they were not fools. The galactic equivalent of heavily armed, no-nonsense frontier businessmen with the scruples of gone-bad hard-shelled Baptists, they kept one eye peeled for trouble and the other three resting firmly within the computeronic seeker sights.

Grangles and his warriors shook their fists at the interlopers as they approached. They also grabbed every weapon within reach and signalled for every reinforcement from every direction. They should have been terrified. They'd never seen or imagined anything even remotely like the great Camtok ships. But flight in the savage atmosphere of Ishban was so insane as never to be truly considered, and what appeared in the ash-swirled skies must be gods or devils. If they were gods they could not be harmed by mere mortals. If they were devils they must be attacked with absolute fury, and so with this conviction guiding his spirit, Grangles led the assault.

These were fierce warriors. The Camtok expectation of a helpless and decimated straggle of tribes was a

terrible error. They could not anticipate that the concept of a dying world to the hardy nomadic souls still alive on Ishban meant little because it could be neither conceived nor believed.

The concept of a vast vacuum ocean filled with trillions of blazing stars and planets simply did not, could not, exist. No man or woman of Ishban had ever seen through the thick ash and dust mantle of their world. No man or woman had ever seen a star. Even the sun was a pallid and ghostly lantern only rarely visible. Day and night were so alike as to be more friends than strangers. The three moons of Ishban had been invisible from the surface for uncounted decades.

"Hold the heavy weapons!" Grangles ordered, and the order passed swiftly among the fierce warriors infesting from bottom to top the great slopes that made the valley in which the Camtoks descended.

"Wait until the devils are fastened by the earth. When their legs lock to ground, strike!"

The bedouins of Ishban had more than muskets and swords. As the two Camtok ships settled and stopped their movement they knew a strange silence, except for the howling of wind and thrumming of volcanic ash against their ships. Then they felt the deep rumbling, the vibration. None of the Camtok sensors revealed the great rocks about to be removed from cave openings until the rocks moved, and within seconds of such movement, from three sides of the slopes, huge lava cannon squeezed fiery liquid rock in devastating streams directly against the Camtok vessels.

Grangles led a mob of screaming desert warriors against one ship, already listing badly from a landing leg shattered by the fusilade of fiery lava. Three Traders were still scrambling through the last open hatch when grappling hooks flew through the air to snag the hatch. Instantly the gunners well up on the hillsides released a horizontal tornado of blazing lava into the hatch. That the fiery mass killed more than a hundred of Grangles' men meant nothing; on Ishban assaults never considered losses. When a world is dying about you, values change. The lava exploded within the Camtok vessel with ghastly effect, killing almost every man and woman aboard and splitting open the great vessel like a huge tortoise that's swallowed a ticking grenade.

It was the only defeat for the invaders-cum-saviours, for now the Camtok had the legal right fully to return the Ishban favors. They savaged the mountain redoubt, slaughtered the locals with relish, and sent forth their fighting androids to scoop up precious stones and capture as many of the locals as possible for curiosity or slavery or whatever pleased them. They lifted the one ship from the surface and with the two surviving vessels safely beyond Ishban atmosphere, dispatched a homing missile with a seven-megaton warhead to totally obliterate their own vessel. In the long run it added some more ash to what the planet was already spewing forth in such abandon.

Had Grangles been captured by a raiding party on Earth they would never have questioned their prey as a true desert warrior. Except for the deeper orange-hue of his skin and minor facial oddities he seemed cut from prime Mediterranean stock, hawk-nosed, tall and thin and wiry, looking upon the world with a baleful eye and waiting for his chance to die like a true Ishban.

Opportunity appeared at a Trader port. Grangles was led from the ship with other prisoners, their compliant behavior assured by the body-wrenching impulse of their neuronics shackles. Grangles longed for his shatar, his great six-legged desert beast with splayed hooves and two taloned front limbs and a curving unicorn-like hornspike. No fool, this man of Ishban. A man's death in preference to a slave's life was now his goal. The moment came, a fleeting instant that demanded instant action on his part. A Camtok guard had his attention diverted; Grangles spun on one foot and in a single explosive move his left hand tore away the guard's eyes and his right hand slashed open the throat. Blood, gristle, and a gargling scream told Grangles of his success and a moment later he writhed in agony on the landing surface. Behind his howl of pain, for no man could remain silent when the neuronics twister savaged his soul, there was a ghost of a smile.

Grangles had killed in full view of the leading members of nineteen worlds. The law would be obeyed implicitly. Grangles would neither be killed nor condemned to slavery. He would be banished to a prison planet. One way or the other he would find his path to die with honor. He would kill whomever, whatever might come within his own taloned hands. And he would die and his soul would float freely across the Highest Desert.

All that changed.

He talked with Aktuk san Yangst Arbok.

And the alien Arbok had a plan.

The egg thickened, the plot within starting to hatch.

Six prisoners.

Four had never been offworld except as baggage, slave or prisoner. Two had flown as spacejocks, as they called themselves in their different tongues.

Barq el Quatrane was the one man beside Arbok who was an experienced journeyman between star systems. He was, however, a scienceer, a combination of scientist and engineer who attended to the extra-ordinarily complex and often-failing machinery that drove and guided ships between worlds and kept their systems functioning so that the occupants might survive and perhaps even enjoy their travels. It is the lot of all vessels whatever the medium they ply and no matter the inhuman perfection of their machining to endure the insult, of time and stress from sailing vessels to mile-long starfleet warp vessels. And as always, a good mechanic was often the most valuable crewman aboard any ship. El Quatrane held that distinction.

He hailed from Sagandrin, fourth world from his sun, and a good world as such orbs go. Like most planets, and very much unlike Earth (Terra) with its priceless seas and oceans, Sagandrin was cruelly in short supply of such liquid wonders. Barq's race had come to miracles of technology in creating liquid water through the mass liquifying of atmospheric gases and the extraction of hydrogen from surface materials. Vast irrigation projects and highly efficient solar energy systems provided excellent sustenance on a world that so easily-once they had disturbed the biological status quo with agriculture- might have degenerated into a short-lived nightmare for its inhabitants.

Sagandrin was named for its one and only true God-the spices produced in the chemically-rich strata bubbling upward from the unique arrangements of surface and subsurface chemicals. In the formation of any world, beginning with the basics of thick hydrogen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide as thickening atmosphere, and the organic liquid soup that made up a world's first liquid bodies, luck plays the greatest role in determining future dominance of any flora. As well as fauna, and the silent explosion that takes place in the braincase of any race, marking supergrowth of convoluted brain material, happened unusually early in the growth of Sagandrin's bipedal forms.

They needed every break they could get, for theirs was a poverty-stricken world in terms of massive supplies of heavy elements. The scientists of Sagandrin swiftly advanced to near-perfection in their ability to perform mass conversions of anything containing hydrogen to pure water. Their chemical transformations advanced to genetically altered flora within their slushy surface to produce enormous quantities of sparkling water from the gases about them in both liquid and gaseous form.

So was it that a world that might never have known space-flight was visited by a Trader ship, whose top command recognized instantly the true riches available from this lonely slush planet. The flora of Sagandrin could be maintained on a trigger-ready basis for water production aboard virtually any type of spacecraft. They could also be kept in beautiful floral arrangements for esthetic purposes, to feed aquatic creatures carried for food production, and, when separated in special tanks rich with andrin chemicals, they provided a constant supply of fresh water that after use could be reconstituted back to fresh water. There existed in all the galaxy no single more precious commodity than what Sagandrin offered and, wisely, the Traders purchased most fairly the goods and services of this surprising world.

Barq served as one of the team specialists hired out by his ruling government to service the great space vessels of other worlds on their long runs between stellar systems. He savored the category of both high crew and ultimate passenger, with his only duties to attend the Sagandrinite flora and its water production and reprocessing. Life was tranquil and yet exciting for Barq and his lifemate, Eyela, and another couple from their world, as they came to know many races and many planets. Being a mechanic of living systems was a marvelous stellar passport.

Barq and his kind were gentle people, sinuous, a genetic equation of watery mammals and bipedal forms going through their strange DNA ballets of some distant past. Their fingers especially were exquisite, slender and sinewy, able to stretch to varying lengths for extraordinary work on living jewelry fashioned from strange flora, a hobby pastime they developed on long journeys that produced marvelous

fluorescing necklaces and other ornamental wonders highly coveted by the beings encountered on visited planets.

Their gentleness proved their undoing, as a Vigsurd ship on which they journeyed settled to an outworld moon to obtain a cargo of a rare mineral that could be mixed with ores of yet other worlds. Eyela went wide-eyed onworld to the mines and was promptly snatched from sight by the miners, scraggly and gnarled bipeds barely higher on the genetic scale than aggressive simians fortune had favored with an opposable thumb. Eyela was raped repeatedly and far beyond her sanity. Her savaged body was found, mindless but biologically alive, and rushed back to the ship's medical bay. The Eldorns of Vigsurd were fiercely bound to their standards of justice.

"You may choose, Barq el Quatrane. Choose the punishment. Revenge, torture, annihilation; any and all are yours to choose and we shall inflict." But no one expected the gentle and sinuous Barq to select violence, and one and all knew that annihilation-the execution of the miners-was not permissible. Barq chose none of these.

"I wish only that her spirit is kept alive and in good company when we depart this accursed moon," he told the Eldorns. "In honor of my lifemate, in honor of the love and life she carried here that has been torn from her, I wish to leave behind what this world does not possess. The flora of my own world. It may change these sad and terrible creatures to something better."

His wishes were granted instantly. Dozens of assistants brought into the deep subsurface mines hundreds of plants, sweet of smell and pleasing to the eye, that would flower perhaps one month after the great ship departed.

One month later, the Vigsurd vessel far elsewhere in the galaxy, flower they did, to pour into the mine shafts a most wonderful fragrance, not unlike the orange blossoms of the Terrestrial southern regions, but which had the ability-soon established-to swell the mucous membranes of any living creature to monstrous proportions.

It took more than two years before they arrested Barq for the brutal and agonizing murder of more than fifteen hundred miners on a world with a name he had stricken from his mind, and they packed this gentle soul off to the penal vessel Frarsk. There, in the prisoner cell, he was studied carefully by Arbok and Brist.

"That one can be life itself," Brist told Arbok.

"A good fighter?" Arbok asked.

Brist offered his snarly equivalent of a chuckle. "No, no. He is as gentle as a phlorm. But his world is famous. That man can extract water and food from what grows on any world we may find, if your insane plan has even the most insane fraction of a chance to succeed, and if-"

"I know, I know," Arbok said acidly. "I understand." He nodded at the sixth and final being. "What of him?"

"Mad."

"Mad? His name?"

"No," Brist said. "His name is, well, the best I can do is, um, Drong the Kurd. He is a fighter. But he is mad. His whole world is mad."

"Perfect," Arbok said.

Drong the Kurd. A freakish similarity in pronunciation of alien tongues between two worlds totally unknown to one another, and yet with a destiny between the two defying all odds. Drong the Kurd would have sounded familiar to a long-established Terrestrial tribe. There was yet a second similarity and again it was nature playing one of those wild tosses of God's dice. Drong was of a warrior band on a planet with a name impossible to pronounce in English, but had the roughly equivalent meaning of Asgard. The past tense reference to The Hall had even more meaning in that The Hall no longer existed. One Asgard was myth; the other, dust. Drong's world, closest to its sun, was a miserable place of extreme heat and cold, vicious terrain, uproarious volcanism, yet abundant in minerals and fauna and high intelligence of its most dominant life forms-the bipeds that always emerged from the global flotsam with comparatively tightly-packed brains and opposable thumbs and fire mastery and all those things that make one race unquestionably king of the hill. No one knew if Asgard had any true commercial value, but it had once

been visited by the Eldorn, come to determine if the nasty locals had anything to feed into the trading hopper of the galaxy.

What Asgard did have was unbridled ferocity and a technology on the edge of nuclear weapons. No doubt existed on the part of the Eldorn that once this race had nuclear materials, and it was rich in the heavy elements, they would build superbombs and blow themselves to hell and gone.

The Eldorn took in all this reality with a great passivity. Normally no one cared a wet belch when a world passed from the scene. But Asgard, despite its propensity of all life forms for killing, had something desired on all worlds. Theirs was almost a mockery of the Grand Design. Savage, ferocious, wanton killers, they also had a biological gift usually afforded only through the most advanced and complex genetic medicine of the more advanced races. The ability to replace organs and graft-working limbs was part and parcel of the medical scene but at its best it remained a mechanical process and couldn't come a country parsec within what the cantankerous members of Drong's people enjoyed as an unheralded blessing.

On this world where dinosaur-like creatures still shared the squalling surface with snarling and deadly men, where life was a horrifying jumble of constant battle and evolution gone mad, Drong's people could be torn nearly to bits and sooner or later return to battle whole in limbs and sound of mind.

The Eldorn watched all this in stunned disbelief. In the steep mountain country the great creatures with spike teeth of the long-vanished Tyrannosaurus Rex of Terra abounded in great numbers. They were warm-blooded, covered with thick hair, of great cunning and wile, and were both massive and nimble. They suffered the metabolism of furry creatures far smaller, and they lived their lives at breakneck speed, impelled by high body temperature and the need to consume huge amounts of meat. They were possessed of insatiable voracious appetites. They were always hunting. They hunted anything and everything. They ran with locomotive speed and with their combined intelligence and howling appetite they tore down trees and climbed mountains to rip open caves and smash in fortified structures. They had but one saving grace. They were edible and to the taste of Drong's people, they made terrific steaks and stews.

Battle over the centuries tilted slowly but inevitably in favor of men, for as the bipeds (the smaller ones) advanced swiftly through iron and mechanical ages and they developed weapons of large caliber and explosive yield, the end was clearly in sight for the huge killers of Asgard. That the triceragrawls tasted just as delicious after being blown to large chunks only hastened their demise. That they had endured as long as they did, into the ages of powerful weapons, they owed to their ability to regrow limbs and intestines and eyes and bones. You could eat half a triceragrawl and if you left the still-attached remains of the other half in the field, and it was not found by scavengers, the damned thing in a few weeks would be a smaller version of the same ravenous hunting killer-in fine fettle. The Eldorn found men and triceragrawls still battling; evolution was a sad mutancy on this world of Asgard.

Vet there were no cripples among the men who fought not only the creatures large and small, but each other as well. The numbers of wounded, injured, maimed, clawed, bitten, slashed and sliced men who lived was utterly ridiculous. What at first had seemed a planet better left to its own self-destruction held the key to possible longevity so great, and in such perfect physical shape, that its secret must be discovered, and carried away, at any cost.

A Trader vessel of the Eldorn went down to test the waters. Instantly they were swarmed upon by the locals with bombs, bullets, rockets, poisonous gases, fire, acid-anything destructive. But the locals were sparrows trying to drown a great white shark. Defensive force fields, trackers and homers, laser barriers and the like kept the Traders safe, but still they were awed by such unbridled ferocity. Where the ship had landed, the locals attacked so blindly that finally all but one-Drong the Kurd-had fallen.

Ben Wa Mikt of the Eldorn signalled to drop the barriers. The security chief of the Trader ship, he took it upon himself to test the strange powers of these Asgard barbarians. He stepped across the barrier curtain and a savage roar met him as Drong the Kurd charged wildly, swinging a great battle axe. For his pains, Drong saw his hand clutching the axe severed neatly by a neuronc vibrator blade. Blood gushed, the severed hand and axe spun away, the Eldorn waited for Drong to fall and were stunned as the one-armed barbarian rushed inside the sweep of the supersword and gave the heroic Ben Wa Mikt a

tremendous kick in the groin. As the Eldorn doubled up in agony a booted foot, weighted with a heavy stone in its tip, arced upward to cave in the Eldorn's skull. From their ship, on screens everywhere, the Eldorn stared in disbelief at Drong.

No longer did the severed arm bleed; the stump had closed off all the vessels. He seemed in little pain and he had pulled the axe handle from his severed hand and was charging the ship itself. That was enough even for the super-powerful Eldorn. They let fly a homing plastilaser net to tie Drong like a helpless kewpie doll and hauled him aboard their ship for closer study by excited medical scientists.

Three weeks later their prisoner, still raging and foaming at the mouth for battle, had grown a new and perfectly formed and functional hand. This planet Asgard, with all its rotten deals for its inhabitants, had provided in its seesawing evolutionary struggle a force never before known in any high-intelligence bipedal life form.

Regeneration: swift, efficient, and complete. The Asgards were a living biological miracle. If this particular Eldorn ship could identify, isolate, and control this regenerative ability, they would, without a single aggressive act, control all the galaxy within their reach. But first, they concluded drily, "We must classify this savage as fully human. He must be taught, trained, compelled, led, whatever, to cooperate with us of his own will. This is nothing we can extract by force of any kind."

Drong the Kurd took to their learning like a dehydrated fish to water. If nothing else he was cunning and swift, attributes essential to the longevity he had established in mortal combat among his own kind and the toothy monsters wandering his angry world. He understood that as quickly as his captors considered him safe enough to be unrestrained in their company they would regard him as a compliant guinea pig, or whatever passed among these insipid weakling intellects as the equivalent of a laboratory animal.

Drong's intrinsic survival cunning kept the Eldorn doctors and scientists always on the edge, eager to gain his trust but still wary of his explosive unpredictability. He brought them to believe that with just a bit more effort and trust on their part Drong would cooperate in aiding them to discover his biological secret that they, in turn, would use to improve the quality of and extend the life of key figures in galactic political control. Here, in this savage creature, lay the Rosetta Stone of extreme long life and power across billions of suns.

Drong learned their ways and rules and finally they bit their own bullet and accepted this Asgardian native as sufficiently trustworthy to be without constant neuronic fetters.

Left alone with three of the leading scientists of the Eldorn, a jubilant Drong in a sudden fury of killing lust snapped back the head of the nearest scientist and with powerful jaws tore out the Eldorn's throat. He never stopped moving, snapping the spine of his second victim and then, pinning his third quarry, slowly twisted that victim's head from his shoulders. And sat grinning among the terrible gore and flesh.

The Eldorn sighed and narked Drong. They spread-eagled him on an absorbent glassine slab with neuronic clamps and then slowly and deliberately they had at him. One by one they removed his fingers, and then all his toes, and then proceeded to amputate his nose and his ears and lips and tongue and all his teeth, and then they removed his testicles and his penis, making certain he felt every last shred and ounce of agony. Finally they used their androids to twist off each arm and leg, one by one until only the mute, helpless torso of shuddering agony remained. They saved his eyes for last pulling them out slowly until the optic nerves twanged like slim metal cables and finally broke loose.

They followed the law. They did not kill Drong. They poured acid onto the stump torso and head and then they hurled his carcass into a deep garbage and sewage pit to be forgotten forever. The stories were too extreme to be buried and planetary security forces on the next world visited heard the tales, applied neuronic amplifiers to several Eldorn and learned where the remains had been dumped.

The creature was still alive. There was great embarrassment all around, but because the staggering bribes were greater than the embarrassment, all records were purged and what had been an Asgard warrior and was now a lump of biological debris, was sealed within a dungeon cell. Rules are rules. Without rhyme or reason, food was shoved into that cell just like all other cells.

In time he was forgotten. Not his presence but who and what he was. Fourteen years later the incarceration block was destined for demolition and rebuilding, and orders went out to remove and transfer all prisoners.

They opened this one cell door with its unknown prisoner. They found, blinking at them, a full and normal bipedal being of what they considered barely human intelligence, snarling like some strange, fanged animal. The only remaining records showed that he had committed murder, so they passed new sentence. "He goes on the next penal vessel," they decided, and that vessel was Frarsk, and Drong the Kurd, who had all those fourteen years to learn the need to reserve his killing instincts for only those moments when he would not suffer total helplessness immediately afterward, sat on his haunches in a corner of the holding cell aboard the prison ship and studied the two aliens so carefully studying him.

They sat in a circle, six aliens facing one another, utterly unlike, from diverse worlds and cultures, yet with an absolute goal they all shared. The impossible. Escape from the ultimate confinement. As best they could they spoke in Galactibase. With all its clumsiness they could communicate to meet their immediate needs. Their problem and its solution, no matter how mathematically insane as to be impossible, provided sufficient common ground.

"How many guards?" Arbok queried, looking from one alien to the other.

"Four," Barq answered immediately.

"How do you know that?" Drong shot back.

"I traveled for years on many ships," Barq replied. "I learned of the prison ships, like this one," he gestured to take in Frarsk. "They are all of the same pattern. Four androids. No life forms except the prisoners. In an emergency they can blow all atmosphere from the ship. Life forms need air. Androids do not. It is an effective system."

"And if they blow the air?" Grangles snarled. "What then? Do we hold our breath? That is stupid."

"I know something of these ships as well," Arbok said quickly. "I've been aboard them before. In fact, I ferried one with a human crew. No prisoners. A delivery flight. I learned some of the systems."

Drong fingered the neck collar. They all wore the electronic painstabbers. "And these? If we cut them the droids will know at once. They will act."

"But only if we cut them," Brist said. "What these androids can do is limited. These ships are not designed for anything but to transport prisoners. Their electronics are old. Much of their equipment does not work well."

"You have a way?" Arbok asked with sudden hope.

Brist nodded slowly. "I have been preparing. I know how to remove them without cutting." They stared as he reached up and removed his collar. He brought the two open ends together between his fingers and squeezed. The opened ends sealed shut.

"How . . . how did you do that?" Ytram asked with a sudden but still ponderous curiosity.

Brist looked at Arbok. "The best word in all our languages would be," he said carefully, "burning liquid. Acid. It has many names. A corrosive liquid that eats through metal."

"You carry this in your body?" Drong asked.

"No," Brist said quickly. "But I can bring together different chemicals in my system. They squeeze through pores. When they combine, a catalytic reaction is immediate. This burning liquid is the result. It cuts through this metal collar and seals the ends of the system inside so that there is no break in the transmitted signal. The droids even now do not know mine is removed."

Immediately Drong was by his side. "Remove mine," he snapped. Brist, fortunately, understood a desperate plea for freedom and did not regard the harsh words as an order. "There will be pain," Brist warned.

Drong laughed. "You do not know pain," he said simply and bent his head to expose his neck. Brist's hand and fingers moved, they smelled burning flesh and watched smoke wisp upward. The collar separated and Drong removed it cautiously from his neck. He studied it for a moment. Brist held out his hand for the collar. "Quickly," he warned. "We can't afford a warning signal." Again he squeezed his fingers and a different liquid, adhesive this time, flowed onto the metal

He's a damned chemical factory, Arbok thought in wonder. Between him and Ytram and the others, we may just be able to pull off this miracle . . .

Soon they stood in a group, all of them free of their terrible collars. "What we do," Arbok said carefully,

"must happen quickly or it will fail. We must all move together. We must perform as if we had been friends forever." . "What? What?" Drong demanded.

Arbok looked to Barq. "You're familiar with the droids. This entire ship is in a gravbend so we have artificial gravity, and that applies to the droids as well." Barq nodded. "What happens, then," Arbok went on, "if they can't get their footing?"

"I don't understand."

"If they cannot maintain friction and pressure underfoot," Arbok said patiently.

"Ah," Barq said as he understood. "Their systems are limited. They are designed strictly for their work aboard this vessel. Not the fully optimized biodroid systems."

"Which means?" Arbok asked hopefully.

"They can lose their main gyros. Recovery is built in, but there is a time lag-"

"How long?" Arbok said, almost demanding his answer.

"A minute. Maybe two."

Arbok banged a fist against his chest. "It's enough," he said grimly. He turned to the others. "You all know what to do?" They nodded assent.

Arbok nodded to Ytram. "Start your release. The rest of you, including myself, will help."

Ten minutes later the entire floor area immediately by the polarizing entryway was covered with a thin grease. The elephantine Ytram was in some ways physiologically similar to Brist in that he had extensive control of certain internal body fluid systems. On his home world, even for bipedal forms with three stomachs and massive bulk, there were long periods without consistent food input. Nature adapted, as it usually does (if it doesn't the life form simply dies out). In each Skring body chemical processes built up an enormous reserve of fat for longterm energy. Ytram could draw on this fat just as does the camel on Terra; that's the purpose of its enormous hump. It's a fat reservoir and not a collection bag for water, as many think. But there was still a long distance

between the thick layers of fat within Ytram and the grease they needed for the floor.

They watched, fascinated, as Brist first paralyzed a portion of Ytram's epidermis. When Ytram could not feel sharp prodding, Arbok moved in closer. The steel cable-like tendril slid from his spine and a tip as hard and sharp as a stiletto sliced neatly into the quivering mass of Ytram. Into the yawning cavity went chemicals from Brist. They dragged Ytram across the floor; virtually paralyzed in mind and body he offered neither cooperation nor objection. Then, the others squeezed carefully. A thin, greasy, liquid flowed steadily from his tissues and the alien group spread it carefully on the floor so that whoever entered the holding cell must cross the now-slippery surface. Moments later Brist sealed the incision, left a local anesthetic in the area, and brought Ytram out of his mental fog.

"Now," Arbok announced, "we need to get all four of those droids down here."

"To do that," Barq said, "we must talk to the master computer."

"How?" the others asked.

"Simple," Arbok grinned. "We open one of the computer service panels, right over there," he pointed, "and we code an order sequence."

"How do we open the panel?"

"Brist eats his way through the metal. With body acid, I mean."

"And who talks to the computer?" Grangles demanded.

"I do," Arbok told him. "These ships all have the same control system. They make these things as cheaply as possible. If they break down what's there to lose? Condemned criminals? No one really cares. So the computer systems are so much cheese, plastic, and shit wiring. Brist opens it, I get to the panel, and I use Calactibase to give the orders. The droids are ordered to come in here in a group. They won't be told why and they won't ask. On a penal ship all the droids are merely extensions of the computer.

Broadband wave transmission throughout."

They nodded. "You all know what to do?" Arbok asked the final question.

Grangles flexed his muscles. Drong snarled with the smell of impending battle. The others, less savage in their approach, nodded.

The entry door snapped open. Four droids in steel-blue alloy poised, optical sensors taking in the scene

and flashing their reports to computer central. Arbok felt his heart leap. The metal was stained and chipped and flaky. These systems were old and likely to be hesitant and unreliable. He tapped in a command message for the droids to enter the prison cell to remove Number Five. That would be Barq, waiting in full view at the far end of the cell.

"Prisoners, remain in place!" a creaky, scratchy voice ground out from the lead droid.

They remained frozen for a moment, then Barq bolted to one side. Androids act by response.

Immediately all four rushed toward him to seize and immobilize the prisoner. Rushed forward onto a greasy floor over which their plastimetal feet went flying. Their forward momentum carried them into the room in helpless tumbling. Six prisoners moved with precision. The first droid was snatched up by arms and legs, its gyros whirling helplessly as its systems tried to swing back to balance. Two powerful aliens ran toward the far end of the cell to hurl the droid headfirst into hard carbsteeloid. An android skull shattered. Parts sprang loose like demented nuts and bolts. Drong seized one arm and twisted violently. A moment later he had a club in his hand and smashed it with all his strength into a second droid, cracking the skull and hurling it back to the floor. Arbok's tendril whipped forward to stab into the stomach cavity. Where there should have been a stomach. In a droid that's where the computer mechanism is emplaced. The tendril stabbed through, lashed wildly within the droid. Sparks and flames splattered outward. Arbok cursed with the sudden pain and snapped his tendril free.

Two down; two to go, and getting back their balance. Ytram hurled himself at the legs of one, throwing it wildly off balance again. Another wild swing with a severed arm by Drong, another stab by Arbok and another cry of pain. One more to go, a neuronic twister ripping into Grangles to bring forth a shriek of agony. The twister blazed forth a second time. Ytram howled and was sent writhing to the cell floor, Arbok threw himself at the control panel and hit a master switch. Gravbend vanished; they were weightless. The droid fired again and tumbled wildly, spinning in weightlessness, his neuronic charge blasting wildly and ineffectively. Drong had braced himself against a far wall. Powerful legs unleashed muscles. He shot across the cell, his arms clamping beneath a droid chin and an ankle. He snapped the droid into a bow and arrow hold. The droid was infinitely more powerful, but for this moment, only this moment, he was totally off balance. That was all they needed.

The tendril stabbed again, systems flashed and arced. Brist flailed wildly to reach the droid, grabbed an arm, swung in tight and thrust his hand within the cavity opened by Arbok. Acid poured in a tight but devastating stream into the computer systems. The droid "died."

Arbok struggled back to the computer, thanking all the gods and devils he'd ever known that this was the same control panel he'd seen on a dozen cheaply-structured spacecraft. He tapped buttons in rapid sequence. Gravbend snapped on again; they had gravity. Next came the message that all was under control. No problems. No emergency measures necessary. Accept biological life form input. An acceptance light glowed purple.

Arbok turned in triumph. "By all the gods, we've done it!" he shouted.

They gathered in Master Control, the first life form occupants of that sacrosanct flight deck ever to be in that position on an active prisoner delivery run.

"We have the ship," Brist said to them all. "Now what do we do?"

"I've been planning for that," Arbok said.

"Hopefully," Barq offered.

"If only we had an enemy to fight!" Drong snarled.

"We may yet," Arbok replied. "But first we've got to get the ship out of this galactic sector. We've got to go outbound. There are no Trader or Fleet vessels that have ever gone there and returned. We look for a G-type star, feed the data into the computer and take our chance with whatever looks best."

Barq had experience with deep-space vessels. "Warp shift?"

Arbok nodded. "No other way."

"Careful, careful," Brist said softly. "You know the dangers?"

"Yes, yes," Arbok answered with some impatience. He'd done nothing but think of such moments as this.

"Each of these ships has a thantrum device aboard. It's set to detonate whenever certain power and control sequences are not followed in a precise order. Detonation is equal to about ninety megatons."

Since such sequences were only possible in deep space the risk to potential bystanders was considered acceptable.

"There won't be an atom left of any of us," Grangles said by way of useless comment.

"Yes, but the system has no safeguards against that thantrum bomb being removed from this ship and kicked out into space."

Five aliens stared with renewed hope at Arbok. "You mean-" Ytram always was slow.

"That's right," Arbok told him. "We take the thantrum, put it into a capsule, rig up a propulsion system, make sure all the proper radio frequencies are working, and heave the son of a bitch way out there. It doesn't matter where, just so long as it's far away enough from us not to harm this ship when it blows."

Barq smiled. "Marvelous," he said in a whisper tinged with wonder. "That frequency, the detonation, will be picked up on the nearest droid monitoring base-"

"And the signal will be warped to the nearest Trader station that this vessel exploded."

"And nothing could possibly survive a thantrum," Grangles

"To them," Drong asked, "we would be all dead?"

"Free-floating electrons, my friend," Grangles told him with a broad smile.

"Then what?" Drong continued his questions.

"Then," Arbok answered, pointing ahead, "we kick into warp shift and we throw the bones. The computer is mindless. It can pick out the most likely star for us to come out of shift. Just beyond the outermost edge of the most likely system."

"Can we ever go back?" They turned to Barq, the only truly gentle soul among them.

"No," Arbok told them all. "There's another precaution built into these ships. Once we break the pattern the computer will destroy the star charts in all dimensions. From then on, my friends, we fly blind."

"What do we look for?" Ytram asked slowly.

"A world for us to live on," Brist said.

"We're going into the outworlds," Arbok cautioned. "It has taken star formation and planetary growth longer to develop out here than in the galactic core. Most likely the most advanced worlds will have crude planetary drives only. They'll never have seen a starship."

"Good!" exclaimed Drong. "We are outcasts, criminals, convicts, worse than dead from the inner worlds. Give me a new world to fight! We will win; we will conquer!"

"You have high hopes," Grangles said with a touch of sarcasm.

"Oh, I don't know," Arbok told him. "Ill wager you a knid to a galat that he may just be right." He looked about him. "Let us get to work. The thantrum first, if you please."

Four days later ninety million tons of explosive power in a package the size of a baseball exploded in empty space, ripping spacetime fabric and rippling the relativity constant.

Thousands of light years distant, the tiny spark was inferred and noted, the frequency checked, and an Eldorn administrator entered into the computer records that the penal vessel Frarsk had detonated on its way to a prison planet.

"Good riddance," he murmured to himself.

CHAPTER5

"How'd it go with old Spunt the Cunt?" Sergeant Jubal Bailey sliced a chunk of venison from a thick slab, stuffed it into his cheek and wet down the meat with a heavy slug of Suntory vodka. The big black man eased back in a lounge chair, bare feet crossed at the ankles, completely at luxuriant ease with the world. Jake Marden slid into a seat before a table rich with mouthwatering foodstuffs and a wide selection of smooth, fine liquors. He passed the hard stuff and pulled a can of Coors Lite from the bucket. He didn't answer Bailey at once, taking the time to select his favorites from the table. Sliced Virginia ham, done neatly to a brown edge and burned on the outside, soaked in pineapple. Marden would eat the entire portion on his plate, including all the cloves. He chewed a large chunk of ham and took a long belt from the Coors, swallowed and fired off a huge raucous belch. He sighed with satisfaction and tore off another

chunk of ham. He looked about the room.

They'd done a hell of a job here on what was formerly the medical dispensary. You came in the front swinging doors and you were still in the dispensary emergency room. Good old used shit; chrome and aluminum piping that had gone to sour colors, walls with streaks of rust and chemicals, a floor with warped tiles, curtains piss-stained and crumbling, debris on the floor. Good old medical prison caliber. The swinging doors that opened to other examination rooms and the old medical wards had windows frosted over and yellowed with age to the point where they'd become opaque. That was no accident. It had been carefully done by one of the prison artists. As were the warning signs about the herpes patients and the AIDS wing and the sexually transmitted disease wards beyond the swinging doors. A huge metal bar, bolted and welded to the doors, closed them off to entry. A sign warned that the whole damn place beyond those doors was quarantined. In smaller print the sign carried a litany of disease that would have felled an entire army.

At this moment Jake Marden and Jubal Bailey, and the servant cons who hovered about them like nervous little mice to do their bidding, sprawled comfortably in the huge gathering room on the far side of those bolted swinging doors. They'd torn down walls, put up false and misleading ones, and you got in or out of the air-conditioned hidden palace only through walls that pivoted out of the way if you knew where and how to work the secret electronic controls. And when you went through that coded sequence you came to the master's touch. You needed to pull down and twist two ways to work a manually operated lever. All the electronics did was to set up stumbling blocks before you got to the manual keyhole, so to speak.

Inside was a pleasure palace, not for sumptuous luxury but for full-man enjoyment. Couches, lounges, huge tables, refrigerators and freezers and a small electronic kitchen and enough whiskey to last a dozen men a dozen years. Television to the outside world and direct communications with the rest of the Old Millford and just about anywhere else you wanted. Jacuzzis, hot baths, massage rooms, private bedrooms for the broads they brought in every few days in the false sides of delivery trucks.

The one thing Jube would not allow, and it was on pain of some really bad shit, was the dream stuff. No drugs came into this super-private retreat. No drugs. It was litany and holy grail and the ultimate sin. It was also like spraying gasoline on a fire that burned hotly but beneath any surface that was visible. Old Millford or any other prison was a giant conduit, an invisible and sometimes openly wanton sluice for all manner of narcotics. Men kept their sanity through drugs because it enabled them to abandon their sanity for brief excursions in the lifeboats of dreams and mind-numbness. If you didn't feel, you didn't hurt. If you didn't care, the prison bars didn't mean shit.

And if that's the route you went you were also totally and completely unreliable. Never mind reaching the shattering bullshit of the junkies. "A man gets his ass strung out and he comes up a junkie;" Jube Bailey ordained, "that motherfucker is worse than dead. He's worse than your worst enemy because the junkie ain't got no brain left. He's got erratic auto between his ears. Tunnel vision to fill his ass and mind and belly full of that crap, and he has nothing left but to come down with more of the shit. He'll pan broil his momma's left tit to get a fix when the time comes. He got no loyalty, he got no honesty, he'd kill himself just to get on with it. I want everybody to understand me. Get it straight, people, because the first time you bring anybody in here who's on the need, you answer to me. Both you and the shitbird you bring with you."

Not everyone believed Jube Bailey. His pronouncements sounded like a court-ordained warning couched in street jive and that didn't cut much mustard. How could anybody who was real come down like that on a little escape? "Old Jube, he don't mean that shit," Abe Moran told his cronies. "He can't mean it. Half this fucking place full of people whose brains and bellies full of shit. They don't get it they become real mean motherfuckers, right? They get bad, man. Real bad, and Jube's right. They'll kill or fuck a dog or anything. So the smart thing is to keep everybody supplied, man. Keep 'em happy, keep 'em quiet, keep 'em wrapped."

No one really understood Abe Moran. You didn't find too many black Jews around. He called himself a black Jew because he'd run a hell of a racket on the outside. He made a killing running with an Israeli bunch and bushwhacking Arab drug-runners. Not because he was black or greedy. Said his mother was

an Ethiopian Jew, even if he didn't know shit about being one or even how to talk or act like one. Abe Moran was as full of shit as a hog that lived its whole life in a pen with camel crap three times a day. He really didn't believe Jube Bailey's death words. Moran was part of the inner circle that ran Old Millford. He served his purpose in the drug pipeline into the prison. But like Jube said, the drugs were for a purpose. Money and control,

money and control of those cons who weren't worth the price of a week-old breakfast.

By the time Jake Marden returned to the Rock, Abe Moran was history. The way Jube told it the whole thing was a matter of erasing vermin, "just like he was a big fucking rat. The shithead came in here with Parker. You know him? Crazy bastard. Doing hard time because he cut up a bunch of people with an axe and a hacksaw. But he was crazy, man, and," Bailey said with disgust piled atop emphasis, "he was strung out like a wet noodle. He didn't get his fix on time he'd do anything. Cut off his own nicking dick to boost or he'd scream about rats eating him from the inside out. Moral brings him along and I figured the nigger Hebe was, you know, like testing me. I set the rules and he was telling my black ass he didn't need anybody's fucking rules."

Marden finished the beer with a long sucking sound, crumpled the can and tossed it carelessly over his shoulder. One of the "girls" hit the spot like a flash to scoop up the can. Human vacuum cleaners always ready to please the Big Man, Marden held out his hand and another beer appeared almost magically as another "girl" thrust the opened can within his grasp. "No more Moran, I guess," Jake Marden said casually,

"No more Moran," Bailey echoed. He offered a lopsided grin at his friend.

"You just didn't waste him," Marden said. There wasn't any question in his words.

"Shee-yit, no," Bailey scowled. "Never waste an object lesson, right?" He chuckled. "We-"

"Let me guess," Marden broke in before Bailey could | any further. Bailey smiled, nodding.

"You took them both out of here. My guess would be center cell, third level. Most of the wing's got a clear view of that cell."

"You're good," Bailey said admiringly.

"You stripped them both."

"Naked as the day their mommas popped 'em free," Bailey confirmed. "Then what?" / "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Sure. Object lesson. Before long, this crazy fucker, Parker, he's hanging by a thread over the cuff. Eyes bulging, stomach trying to turn itself inside out, sweat and piss everywhere."

"And the Jew nigger screaming to let him out," Bailey laughed.

"How long did it go?"

"Two days."

"You emptied the cell?"

"You got it. Three walls and the bars."

"Moran tried to kill him before Parker went bananas."

"He waited too long," Bailey said with satisfaction.

"You fill in the rest," Marden said. He didn't want to bust into Bailey's pleasure at story-telling.

"You ever try to kill a crazy man? With your bare hands?" Bailey said, relishing the memory. "Parker was crazy. He was burned through and through. After the first day he began to scream. Not what you'd expect, though," he said thought-fully. "Not this jungle animal shit. Whimper screams. Little sharp sounds, like he was blowing all the air out of his lungs when he made those noises. I guess that's when Black Moses decided he'd better end it as fast as he could. Parker was sitting on his bare ass, rocking back and forth, those sounds coming out of him. Moran grabbed him in a death lock from behind," Bailey gestured, "you know, like this, one forearm under the throat, crossing the hands over and one behind the neck. The more you struggle the tighter it gets. It almost worked. We had a camera right in front of the cell so we could make a good video of the whole thing. Like I say, Moran almost got him, and Parker was spitting up foam and blood and thrashing around like a fucking fish. He got one hand back and he ripped open his nuts. Just tore open his sack and ripped out a testicle. Now, that, my friend, was a real genuine scream. He lost his grip and by now Parker was real gone, over the edge. Wasn't even human

any more. His eyes rolled around like crazy and he grabbed Moran's ears and kept slamming his head against the floor. Then he dragged Moran, he was all busted up around the skull, to the bars and stuck his arms through one at a time and he broke them all to shit. You know how he killed him?" Marden kept the beer can against his lips and shook his head slowly.

"He ate the fucker."

The beer can came down in slow-motion. "He what?"

"He ate him, goddamnit." Bailey shook his head and laughed. "With his arms busted the Hebe couldn't do shit, and Parker, now he was really shrieking and screeching like a fucking baboon or something, he throws Moran on his back and kicks him in the throat, and his head is busted open anyway ai his arms, they're broken, and Parker gets his dick in his teeth and he worries it back and forth, you know, like one of them fucking sharks, and he chewed Moran's cock all to hell and then he ripped it right in half. This place was a hell of a sight. Everyone is yelling and hollering and Moran is screaming /and there's Parker with this bloody stump of a prick in his mouth and he throws it through the bars and then he tears out the Hebe's throat with his teeth."

"It must be a hell of a movie," Marden said, not committing himself further.

"Five stars, old buddy. Pure Oscar shit. Anyway, Parker chewed off his ears and then his nose and his lips and he (hold of his tongue and chewed that up and he bit off his nipples, but I guess Moran had the last laugh." Bailey chuckled again. "If you want to call it that."

"How do you mean?"

"Parker, he choked on a nipple. It came out, you know, all bloody and stringy, like tough spaghetti or celery, whatever, but Parker was screaming and laughing while he was chewing and biting and one of them nipples, and all that shit hanging on to it, well, it stuck in Parker's throat and he choked to death. Took about ten minutes. It's a hell of a movie." Jube went suddenly quiet, studying Marden.

"What do you think?" he shot the question to Marden.

"I think," Jake Marden said slowly, "that no one's going to bring any hopheads in here again."

Bailey roared with laughter, slapping his knee with a sharp

cracking sound. "You bet your sweet honky ass they won't!" He eased back in his seat, tossing aside his shot glass and taking a long gurgling pull from the Suntory bottle. He belched wetly and then put aside the bottle. He drew himself up into a sitting position close to Marden.

"All right, Jake, that takes care of the fun and games." In that same swift shifting mood Marden had experienced before with Bailey, he knew his friend was as sober as a stone and anxious to get down to the business at hand. "You were going to tell me about your little chat with Spunt," he added slowly.

Marden leaned back again in his seat. "Clear the place," he said quietly to Bailey.

Bailey studied this man to whom he owed everything and nodded. He turned to the others in the room. "Everybody out. Now. Nobody comes back in until I say so." Thirty seconds later the room was empty of everyone save Marden and Bailey.

"We take over," Marden said.

"We already have this fucking place," Bailey reminded him.

Marden shook his head. "No. Not yet. Right now it's a standoff, Jube. Call it a truce, an armistice; whatever you like. But Spunt isn't folding his cards yet. He retires in two years, if he can keep his nose and his ass clean. He's in trouble, he knows it, but he's like a rat holed up in a corner, and he's so close to the edge a wrong move could bring him to fuck it up for everybody."

"He goes first," Bailey glowered.

"That won't do us a shitpot worth of good," Marden said immediately and critically. "Goddamnit, Jube, we don't want to beat Spunt. We want to help him run this joint and while we're doing it we really lock up the keys. In a month, maybe two, it won't matter what Spunt does. We'll have him in a vise."

"What do we do?"

"We let him know who's in charge. He'll go along with that. He wants to know who makes up our front team. That's okay by me. In fact, it's what I want. I want Spunt to feel he's really in the know so we don't catch him by surprise."

"Front team, huh?"

"Yep. People we can absolutely count on to deliver, no matter what we do or want done. People with brains and balls, Charley Brown. People who can do things on their own without our giving orders all the time. When I say team, I mean just that."

"You, ah, have them picked out?"

"You know better than that. I have some ideas."

"Yeah. Me, too."

"So it's heads together, Jube. We make our pick now. We don't have time to waste."

"You sound all hot and bothered to trot," Bailey observed, a bit taken aback.

Marden locked eyes with Bailey. "You trust me, Jube. I know that. Now I'm asking you to trust my judgement. What I want is for me, for you, for us, to do more than run this place because we have muscle or a threat. I want us to have absolute control."

"No argument, white man."

"First, can you set me up another place like this one?" Marden asked, knowing the question wasn't necessary but also knowing it had to be asked. "Not above ground, Jube. Down deep."

"You sound like you're a talking command post."

Marden grinned. "You bet your sweet ass. Now, let's get our people together."

Bailey smiled thinly.

"I got just what we need," he said.

When you have hundreds of skilled laborers with no place to go and maddeningly little to do, and you have all the supplies and raw materials you need, you can build just about anything. Jake could have had his workers build an airplane that's what he wanted. They had the computers to access data banks for the proper airfoils and design elements, they had metal shops and plastic fabrication and they could get engines by the dozen if they wanted. They could have done all these things and more but it wasn't what Jake and Jube Bailey preferred to do because it didn't mean diddly-shit. Escape, once the magic word, had become less than meaningless now.

Escape to what? They had the most precious jewels in life in their grasp.

Freedom any time they wanted, and, even more valuable, they had power. They ruled their roost. Iron hands and lethal psychology and they were totally uninhibited to maintain that control. On one hand they had Spunt, near crazy as a hound dog with heat stroke to hang on long enough to get his coveted retirement, so he cooperated fully with them; on the other hand they had a magnificent and tyrannical empire within prison walls to do as they pleased. The walls meant nothing because of their access through computers, through guards and politicians they owned, through money and drugs and hookers and whatever the market called for. When you have that kind of power and you have the street smarts and the field experience, you dig in.

Jube Bailey figured it right. Jake wanted a command post with meaning. "We got to blind the place off," he told Jube. "Block it off from electronic hash and interference. What goes in or out goes only through our cables."

"You want to surround the thing with lead?" Jube queried.

"Don't need to," Jake told him. "Water does fine."

"You fucking crazy? Water?"

Jake laughed. "Water," he emphasized. "We build the whole place underground. We surround it on all four sides and on the top with two feet of water. Along the floor, this foundation, here," he tapped sketches he'd made swiftly as they talked, "we set up a big goddamn tube that runs straight up into the CP. See here? You got to come underneath in this tunnel, and then you go up. The tunnel is what gets lined with lead and steel-reinforced concrete. We build three tunnels away from the vertical shot, we have three different ways in and out. But the CP is crammed full with the computer terminals and the other stuff we need, and it's all surrounded with water. You can set up the security for reaching the outside ends of the tunnel to get in here."

Jube leaned back, a tight smile thinning his dark lips. "When you want all this shit?"

"Yesterday, of course. Why, you got union troubles?"

"All that water's making you a real commedian, man."

"Funny, funny. I suppose you got rhythm with all that softshoe patter."

"Best damn footwork in the joint." "Then kick ass, Jube. It's time."

Bailey sobered. "I'll take care of it. You forget it except for a list of what you want and how and where you want it."

"You know Luther Cogswell, right?"

"Know him? He's one of the few people I know who scares me, he's so fucking smart. Tough to figure. You know he's mixed blood?"

"I don't give a shit if he has a purple dick. He knows electronics. A genius."

"I said he was fucking smart, didn't I?"

"You did. He's in charge of the electronics and computers."

Jube smiled. "Ahh, you're a sneaky motherfucker, Jake. He wouldn't be part of the, ah, front team?"

"Smart nigger, ain't you?"

"I'll have the boys send him down for a talk."

"He's not here."

A bushy eyebrow rose. "So? Where?"

"Atlanta."

"You shittin' me, whitey?"

"Hell, no. He's dressed up all nice and pretty, got all the right cards with him, driver's license, all that stuff. I sent him up to Macronics to order a bunch of electronic stuff. Computers, radios; bunch of shit. He places the order, Macronics runs it through the computers back here to Old Millford, and we confirm the order with Spunt's personal authorization. Very legal."

"And you're not even a bit worried he might keep on going?"

"No way, Jube. Luther's ready to start ruling the world, and he starts right here. You couldn't keep him out of this place."

Bailey laughed. "I like your touch, baby."

Luther Cogswell had been a legend in Old Millford for better than eight years. He had half the cons in the joint scared silly of him. He was the man with eyes in front of his head and in the back of his head and the more superstitious

cats in the jbin said he had an eye that floated above him that turned in all different directions whenever Cogswell wanted a real good look at something. Or somebody.

"Don't fuck with that one," the hardtimers told the green boys when they came to The Rock. "You fuck with him and you a dead motherfucker and you never know when it going to happen, man. You may be sleepin' in your cell or chewin' on bread or takin' a crap, when he use this voodoo shit of his, and your whole body, it's like on fire, and you throw your arms and legs around so much you bust the bones and your throat likes to screw itself inside out, and you dead. And if you ain't, you wish you was. I seen it myself, man."

There had been some unexplained deaths tied in with Luther Cogswell, because there'd been some Haitian prisoners who believed body and soul in voodoo and the black arts, and Cogswell kept a whole shelf full of dolls with clay faces he could change with magic fingernails to look like anyone he wanted. One man died in his sleep. Another, healthy and rugged, dropped dead in the exercise yard from a heart attack. A third choked to death drinking water. Cogswell took credit for them all. The legend kept growing.

Luther Cogswell liked that just fine. The stories about him were so wild he knew he didn't have to watch his back anywhere in Old Millford, He had crazies ready to do anything to curry his favor. "You want me to kill that motherfucker, Mister Cogswell? Just say the word." "You want a blowjob every night, sir? Boy, girl, man, woman, you just names it, sir. . ."

They watched out for Old Luther. Called him the Devil. The word was out that if something bad happened to Luther, why, there were at least a half-dozen of those damn devil dolls hidden somewhere in The Rock, and the men they represented would die horribly right after Luther met his end. Those who feared Luther, or suspected they might have a lifemate in one of those dolls, they protected Luther. Now this Mister Cogswell, sir, he was a mix of white, Haitian, Cuban, Chinese, and only God knew

what else was in his blood. When he was on the outside he'd started as a junkman. Not a junkie; a junkman. He dealt in war surplus salvage. Real big time. He had bulldozers and road scrapers and that led to armored cars and old tanks, and he had planes of every land stashed all around the damn world. He had rifles, machine guns, grenades, rockets, small arms, missiles, even ships that could do sixty knots to run blockades. Cogswell had grown up in an auto junkyard and by the time he was ten years old he could fix anything. He was pure genius when it came to things mechanical or electrical and that led to electronics. Got a car that wouldn't run? In a week he'd have it doing ninety on a dirt road. T.V. busted all to shit? It would be color in three days. Gun no good? He'd do crazy things in his machine shop and that old piece of shit would be full autorifle in a day or two. Got old computers? He made them better than new. He could do all this, but he wanted his big time worldwide operation.

It didn't take a genius to figure that either somebody was bankrolling Luther or he got his bread on his own. There's more than one way to spell money, and Luther, he spelled it heroin. He was a specialist in every different kind of heroin. He could produce heroin of varying flavors, density, packaging and effects. He specialized. He was as much a chemist as he was a genius with his old junkyards and electrical systems and electronics and in no time at all he had a worldwide clientele. He was also smarter than your average bear dealing in dark goods. He didn't want his pay in cash. Not that much, anyway. He took his pay in the dark goods. The heroin for the equipment. The magic dust for the guns. The powder for the bullets. He got himself world licenses and his money could be moved visibly and he paid his taxes and that was the smartest thing he did, because even though the drug people were after him, as well as the DEA and the FBI and a half-dozen other federal agencies, the IRS couldn't touch him.

The drug people had a bitch of a time. Voodoo is voodoo to the believers, and when Luther Cogswell wanted someone taken out of the society of the living he did it with superb finesse. Chemicals and poisons administered in such a way that his victims died either spectacularly or slowly and horribly but with a hell of a lot of attention. The word went out not to mess with this man, because he'd sit somewhere out of sight with a picture of a man or a piece of hair or a shirt and he'd have a doll of you, man, and he had these black magic pins and he could turn your liver into a fireball from hundred miles away. It was a good life that Luther lived.

Luther had a weakness that was a beaut, and when one of your heels is named Achilles, sooner or later the system gets to you. Emotion overcomes fear and without fear anything can happen.

Luther liked little boys. He also liked little girls and the only thing he liked more than a little boy or a little girl was a bunch of little boys and girls crawling all over his naked body. He wasn't dumb enough to play rough where children were concerned because parents can get so goddamned distressed that they forget they're supposed to be scared shitless, and they start screaming. To anyone, and especially the cops. So Luther paid great sums of money for the little boys and girls he had, and enjoyed, and he treated them wonderfully, and their parents took the money and went to church and said a couple of Hail Marys or whatever it was they did to absolve their sins, and everything was just dandy.

But kids talk. If not to their folks they talk to other kids and those kids run home to talk to their mommies and daddies, and it's a great story to tell, and there was a hell of a lot of telling, and with all that talk it drifted back to the law. They started taking a long hard look at Luther Cogswell, the man who ran an enormous heroin trade beyond their grasp and who was Mr. Clean with the IRS.

It wasn't no goddamned spic or mommy or daddy that got old Luther. It was damned good scientific police work and a lot of digging and hanging in there no matter how slim the lead. Science got Luther Cogswell.

He was at home in the center of one of his great junkyards, secure with huge walls of tangled metal as well as armed guards and a whole damn bunch of savage pit bulls, and he'd spent a great night with the little boys and girls, and now it was five in the morning and the kids were all asleep and, following the same routine he'd followed for years, Luther sat before his television set, a cold beer in one hand, watching the morning news. Like to keep in touch with what was going on, he did.

The law had learned his routine. They also knew that

Luther's television was on cable. And they knew something else. Luther's daddy and his brother were epileptics, and they figured the same streak ran in Luther. They tapped into his television cable and when

he watched his set he saw the news, but he didn't see the flicker pattern just a tad faster than the eye can make out. A flickering pattern called photic simulation, also known as flicker vertigo. It wasn't new; just little known. The Romans had used this same system a couple of thousand years before. They'd build a fire and spin a spoked wheel over the fire and force a slave to stare down into the fire. If he was epileptic the flickering pattern would stab right into his brain. He'd pass out or go into wild twisting body motions, foaming at the mouth and choking.

That's what they did to Luther. He looked at his set and the next morning he was twisted like a rubber pretzel and foam and blood spitting from his mouth, and his guards and the housekeepers were scared shitless and they reacted. They got on the phone and they screamed for an ambulance.

The cops were right there in that ambulance. The driver was a cop and the two medics were cops and they came in to help poor old Luther Cogswell. They nailed him with a hypodermic to calm him down. It also made him pass out, and his body trembled and shook as if the devil himself was rattling his bones.

"We've got to get him to the hospital," they told the guards, and the guards nodded fearfully. "Sure, sure, man," they said. "We'll help you."

They rolled Luther into the ambulance and as soon as it went through the outside gate six heavily armed helicopters and four big SWAT team trucks busted into the yard. They killed half the guards and all the dogs and they went inside and grabbed the little boys and girls. Treated them as nice as could be, and when the kids were in another hospital they began to tell terrific stories. The cops brought in their parents and everyone faced long prison sentences and everybody was so desperate to talk it was like the Tower of Babel.

Luther got a hundred and thirty years and there wasn't a lawyer slick enough, anywhere in the country, to get him or to plead, or anything else. It was a century plus thirty years and that was that, and Luther made the trip up to Old e sYttueed philosophically because what will be

^=-^ (tm)"_3Sfc.-- S~ ^ will be, and he still had his connections and when you have a few million bucks planted here and there you can get just about anything you want. Besides, look what he had in Old Millford. A whole bunch of sweet young boys and he prettied them up with lipstick and perfume and apricot oil and he went right on having himself a terrific time.

He figured he'd spend the rest of his life getting blown and laid with his coterie of lovers, so who cared what the fuck happened outside?

Then he got the summons to meet with The Jube and Big Jake. That puzzled him. Luther Cogswell kept pretty much to his own circle, his bunch of knife-happy killers who feared and guarded him, his defensive perimeter of loonies he kept supplied with narcotics and his greased-up faggot kids. No one, no one, ever sent for Luther Cogswell.

"Tell them I said to go fuck themselves," he told the messenger, and for good measure he had his boys rape the man. When they were through, and the messenger was through screaming, Luther added to his message. "You tell them yardbirds they want to talk to me to come and get me."

Big mistake. Very big. Suddenly cell doors wouldn't open. Killers with shivs and bad habits couldn't get out of their cells. The delivery boys couldn't get into the wing on the third floor. Luther became aware that there was a hell of a lot going on in Old Millfbrd he didn't know about and that he was up against some very bad, very professional, very dangerous people.

They came to get him. First they opened two cells and the knife-slashers came out screaming to defend Luther and they died no more than three feet in front of their cell doors, cut down by M-16's with silencers. Quick, deadly, over with. There was a lot of screaming from the junkies who couldn't get their fix, but that only added to the normal din of a prison wing filled with crazies.

Jube opened Luther's cell. Personally. Luther studied the man carefully. "You're the Big Nigger," he said. "And you're almost dead," Jube told him, smiling. "You want to be dead, man?"

"No." No one ever said Luther was a dummy.

"Jake wants to talk to you."

"You got it, man."

"You learn quick."

"Yes, sir."

"You so much as fart, man, I promise you it's very, very slow before it's over."

"I read you, man."

They met in a sealed room, just the three of them. Luther figured they had a plan for busting out; he learned quickly they had nothing of the sort in mind. Jake asked him questions with machine-gun speed. The more they put him on the spot with the fast questions about mechanical systems and electronics and machinery and computers, the broader grew Luther's smile. He didn't fuck around. He played it absolutely straight. He didn't know where Big Jake had learned his shit, but Luther had never met anyone who knew more about these systems than himself. He learned also that his contacts with weapons suppliers was most likely what had kept him alive.

Then Jake told him what they planned. The computer system to absolutely take over The Rock. The command post underground in its bastion of shielding water. "You're on this thing around the clock from now on," Jake told him. "You move to this wing. No pretty boys until everything is set up perfect, understand?"

Luther nodded.

"You do what we want you to do," Jube Bailey added, "and you're on the inside. You fuck up, just once, and you're mine. Got it?"

"Got it. I'm your man," Luther said.

"You bet your life," Jake told him. "Because you are."

Luther could have shouted for joy. Behind his granite expression his emotions seethed with hope and pleasure. Somewhere down the line, with this land of control at hand, with his knowledge of all the systems, there'd be a way out of this place. And there was a whole world out there in which to disappear.

In the meantime "Tell me where to start," he said.

Jube Bailey riffled the personnel sheets in his hands. He glanced up from the papers to Jake, then rolled the papers

tightly. "I don't get you, man," Jube said after a long and thoughtful pause. "You didn't come from where all the turds in this joint came from. I didn't, either. We're not street scum. We weren't, for want of a better phrase, and it's all this nigger can think of for the moment, involved from the beginning in criminal enterprise. So we're special. I mean that. We're smarter than the average bear and we can even spell the word morality."

Jake smiled. Even when he tried his hardest to remain a backwoods-talking nigger with barely enough sense to come in out of the rain, the deeper part of Jubal Bailey forced itself to the surface and the keen intelligence held captive struggled visibly to break free.

"Jube, I haven't heard you make a speech that long in years," Jake responded, laughing.

"Speech, shit!" Jube shouted, banging the rolled papers onto the food table. He waved the papers in the air above his head. "You got a fucking politician here!" The rolled papers came down slowly as Jube studied his friend. "What the hell are you up to, man? You know what put me in here in the first place. Politicians, that's what!"

Jake remembered. A very, very sore spot. "I know," he said softly.

"Scumbags, whores, thieves, cocksuckers-you name it and they are it," Bailey finished, his face contorted with the sudden anger he couldn't keep shoved down.

"There's a difference with Jeff Maddox," Jake said quietly.

"Bullshit, man," Jube snapped. "They're all the same."

"Like all niggers?"

"If they're nigger politicians, you're goddamned right they're all the same!" Jube shouted anew.

Jake couldn't help the laughter that spilled from him; moments later Jube chuckled, his own remarks patently absurd and transparent to himself. "Well, almost all niggers," Jube tacked on to his words. He tossed the papers onto the table. He took the time out to snap his fingers for a cold brew; an ever-eager faggot pushed the opened can into his hand. "All right, you bastard," he said to Jake, not

unkindly, "lay your shit on me about what makes this scumbag so special."

"He got nailed the same way you did," Jake said with deliberate understatement to his words.

Jube came upright slowly. "Say, say again?"

"He got sandbagged, man, that's what," Jake said. "He bucked the system. He was one of them real crazy politicians, Honest; a real down-to-earth honest son of a bitch who bucked the system, and they nailed his hide and soul to the biggest cross they could build."

"We talkin' about the same Maddox?" Jube's eyes narrowed as he searched his memory. "That governor from up Carolina way?"

"State senator. He didn't make governor. In fact, he ran for the senate in Washington. Almost made it. He had to step outside the party system and go it alone. He wouldn't play ball with the big boys."

"So they nailed him."

"Uh huh. It was an almost thing, Jube. Maddox was goddamned good, and he was strong, and he had terrific connections around the country and the world." Jake reflected on the details from the past. "It's those connections that interest me. He had contacts everywhere. The same contacts w need."

"Keep it tight and let me have it."

"Maddox sat in the state senate in North Carolina. He's tough and he's hard and he's got supersmarts. Only dumb thing he ever did, as far as I can tell, is to go up against the system in the wrong place and at the wrong time."

Jube nodded. "I can understand the timing. Sorry. Go on."

"He was fifty-one years old. Before his getting into the political sewer he was, well, you'd understand this part him. I call him an old warrior. Special forces. Twenty years in uniform and he went all the way to brigadier general. He earned his star. Lots of small wars around the world; that sort of stuff."

A light began to gleam in Jube Bailey's dark eyes. He was beginning to establish a connection with the man Jake Marden was describing. He nodded slowly.

"Twenty years of hardass military mixed with political in trigue, you know, special forces, like I said, and he waltzed right into the state senate seat. He wasn't there long when all hell broke loose in North Carolina. You recollect that big story when the extremists tried to take over the state capitol? Whole bunch of Nazi pukes and Aryan shithheads got together; right-wing loonies. They stormed the capitol building and took a bunch of hostages and ran up their own flag and announced that they wanted separate country status for North Carolina."

"Sounds familiar," Jube shrugged. "The liberals suck their dicks and give in to them?"

Jake's own shrug was a silent echo of Jube's move. "What else? Bleeding hearts everywhere. Protests and marches immediately. You'd have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to recognize the whole thing was set up ahead of time. Maddox saw what was happening, but hardly anyone else did. Standoff time. Then they raped one of the women hostages, right in front of a big open window, and when they finished they threw her-alive-out that damn window. She lived. Busted skull, pelvis, legs; you can imagine the rest. Before anyone did anything they stretched two more women naked in front of windows and said they'd cut off their heads in twenty-four hours unless the state government recognized them. State; feds, whatever."

Jube scratched his chin. "I think I can hear Maddox coming into the scene."

"Well, he pulled off a dandy," Jake said, smiling in memory admiration. "He knew talking wouldn't do any good. He knew those fuckers were going to kill a bunch of people no matter who talked about what. So speed and surprise were everything. But he still had to get through the walls. Laws, statutes, ordinances, bleeding hearts, lawyers-the whole shmeat."

"Jesus, man, get to the point, will you?" Jube demanded.

Jake snapped his fingers for a cold one and the brew appeared magically. He slugged down a long draft, belched and wiped his mouth before he went on. "Well, old Maddox was still a brigadier general in the state guard. He got the governor, who was scared shitless by now, to sign the paper that declared martial law for the state. That let Maddox call himself up to active duty and he went at it with everything full out."

I

"Military hardware?"

"You bet your sweet black ass it was military hardware," Jake emphasized. "He rolled in armored cars because they were a lot faster than tanks. Bunch of personnel carriers with the new M4 heavy machine guns, lots of rockets, shit like that."

"I'm getting to like this cat more and more," Jube murmured.

"It gets better. He knew he couldn't storm the place without the loonies killing off the hostages. It didn't take genius to figure they had everybody by the throat. So he needed to knock everyone out at the same time, even if it meant hurting a lot of people."

Jube's eyes gleamed. "Man, let me guess, let me guess," he said quickly, holding up a hand to forestall further explanation. He reviewed the situation in his mind, then nodded his head and grinned. "The big knockout drop," Jube said, snapping his fingers. "Concussion."

"You win a free beer," Jake told him. "Maddox put on a big show in front of the building. Armored cars and choppers making a racket; you know the scene. It was like a fucking war, man. This was Irangate time and the country was fucking up with shady deals and traitors and all that shit, so a lot of people pulled for Maddox to do his thing. Everything came to a boil when the loonies announced through radio stations and loudspeakers that unless Maddox pulled back all his hardware they'd start cutting throats at the rate of one every minute."

"The old man sucker them in?"

"Sure did. He made a big show of backing up all his forces, One helicopter crashed and the crew barely got out before it burned. It was a setup to attract attention. It worked. Way upstairs he had a couple of other ships, Mohawks, and they let fly with six missiles. Everything was laser guided. They got the missiles all round the building at the same height, at the same instant, and fired off the warheads. Pure concussion stuff. Blast wave. It whacked in all the windows and knocked almost everyone senseless. Maddox hit them like a machine. Smoke and vomiting gas right behind the concussion and his troops went in like gangbusters. They had fifty or so hostages. About ten of them were killed in the blast or by the loonies."

"But forty survived?"

"Uh huh. Some of'em hurt bad, but they survived."

"How many loonies in there?"

"Over a hundred."

Jube smiled. "How many of them survived?"

"Three."

"Hey, that's good. Maddox's people wasted them quick, I would guess."

"You guess good. He went in with a wave of his men and he lined up those fuckers and they blew their heads off. All but three for the trial he figured the state deserved for everything he cost them."

"Uh oh. I smell it coming."

"Right on, babe. The ACLU and every bleeding heart liberal in the fucking country got on that one. They brought charges against Maddox for murder, insurrection, denial of civil rights to those people he'd killed or had killed-shit, man, you know the litany."

"I'm afraid to ask. They make it stick?"

"It's the same old story. He could fight wars all over the world and he was pure hero. He saved forty innocent people but that didn't count up there in Carolina, because he'd killed nearly a hundred of those motherfuckers who'd been-" Jake finished off his beer in a brief silence. "To wrap it up they slandered him, they charged him, they convicted him, and worst of all, they harassed his family so bad his wife committed suicide."

"What's a Carolina con doing in Florida?" Jube asked.

Jake smiled to himself. Jubal Bailey didn't miss even the small points. "They figured if he stayed in Carolina he'd probably start his own insurrection with all the cons who'd follow him anywhere. The states traded off. One motherfucker for another. Now we got Jeff Maddox."

"And you want him on the inside with us."

"He's had plastic surgery. We even altered his fingerprints. His own mother or the FBI couldn't recognize him. I got the boys making up all sorts of ID, and the computers are being rigged for a name and a

history he'll use on the outside. Like I said, he has contacts everywhere. Between Maddox and Cogswell we can get to almost anybody, anywhere. In the world," Jake finished with a flourish. Jube rose slowly from his lounge chair. He cracked his | knuckles one by one with sharp reports. He looked about their gathering room, really unseeing of what lay about him. He saw far beyond, a swirling mixture of people and places and events, kaleidoscopic in nature, turbulent in human emotions, unpredictable as to outcome. Fuck the future, he mused. It's never clear and the weather's always for shit. But, he smiled, you can always try to tilt the odds in your own favor.

He turned back to his closest friend. "Jake, old boy, we got me, we got you, we got the junkman and now we got the senator. Luther Cogswell's a coyote and the senator can be the smoothie we'll need. But we need more than that. We need a rat and we need a pit bull."

Jake laughed. "I got one pit bull and two rats."

"Even money," Jube smiled, "I know your pit bull."

"No bet," Jake told him.

Alfredo Guccioni was never offered a bet he wouldn't take. Someone, somewhere, was always available to lay on or to take the low end of the odds. Always. Life was a gamble, the whole fucking world was a gamble, and without a gamble, even with his own life at stake, Alfredo Guccioni was fucking bored, man. No risk, no joy. No danger, no life. Got to gamble, got to take the long shot. It was everything to him. He loved it. It was religion and family and lust and all of life.

Alfredo was what people called all good and all bad. Nothing in between. The good or the bad depended upon on what side of Alfredo you found yourself to be. No matter where you were, though, you never wanted to be under his three hundred and fifty pounds of massive bulk and muscle. He wasn't fat. A lot of people who judged him fat and took on Momma Guccioni's boy lost their gamble. It was a good way to wake up very dead. All bloody and silent.

Alfredo Guccioni spent his youth, what little there was of it, working the alleys and side streets of downtown Las Vegas where he unloaded garbage cans and dumpsters until he knew every nook and cranny of every filthy passageway. He made his entry into the world of casino gambling through this darkwater approach. Garbage tells you almost everything a smart operator needs to know about a business, and Alfredo's break came when he collected old decks of cards until he found what he was looking for. Marked decks, shaved cards, stuff that showed up only in ultraviolet light or with infrared when wearing glasses with tiny cylindrical batteries in them. He waited until the top man of the Lodestone in downtown Vegas was on the scene, and he showed up in the casino in work clothes and stinking so badly he wrinkled suits as well as noses. They moved to throw him out but he held up a hand.

"Tell D'Amoto I want to see him," he growled to the pit boss.

"Get the fuck outta' here before you need a garbage truck to haul your fat ass away," was the answer.

"See this sweater?" Alfredo smiled. "There's seven sticks of dynamite under it with a battery and an igniter. Go ahead* prick. Push. We all go to heaven together. Or maybe hell. Who gives a shit. Tell Big D to come here now."

It wasn't worth making that kind of test. Big D came down from his penthouse. He stared at Guccioni and he held a perfumed handkerchief to his face. "What in the name of fuck is this?" he asked his pit boss. Lew Weinberg shrugged. "He says a couple of things, Mr. D. He says he wants to talk to you. He says he has seven sticks of dynamite under his sweater. He says we don't bring you down to talk he sets it off and we all go to heaven or hell. He says--"

"Shut up," Mr. D'Amoto said to Weinberg. He looked again at the huge bulk of the evil-smelling man.

"Name?"

"Alfredo Guccioni."

"All right, Alfredo, what do you want? You know you're crazy to put the arm on us like this. Win or lose you're dead."

"It's no arm, Mr. D."

A perfect eyebrow raised. "I'm listening."

"Tell your shithead to set up four decks on the table for blackjack."

"He's crazy!" Weinberg burst out.

"Shut up," Mr. D'Amoto said to Weinberg. He snapped his fingers. Four dealers stood on the opposite side of the craps table, each with a single deck. "Deal," said Mr. D'Amoto.

"Five players each deck," Alfredo added.

The cards went down. Alfredo smiled and reached beneath his sweater. Men moved back instinctively. Not D'Amoto. Nothing bothered the old pro. He watched Alfredo Guccioni remove a pair of horn-rimmed glasses from the sweater and shove them on his face.

"First deck on the left," he said to D'Amoto.

"I'm listening," D'Amoto said.

Alfredo called off every card in rapid succession. Every card that was face down. D'Amoto gestured with a single finger movement. The cards went face up.

"Next deck, if you don't mind," D'Amoto said to Alfredo. "Wait," he amended. He turned to two very large, very wide men with stone faces and unblinking eyes. "Nothing happens to him, understand? Nothing."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir."

"Go ahead. Second deck."

Alfredo called them all off for all the decks.

"May I try those glasses, please?" D'Amoto asked.

"Yes, sir," Alfredo said, knowing he had scored very big. D'Amoto looked from one deck to another. He removed the glasses and picked up a card and studied it closely and then replaced the glasses. He removed them again and tapped his teeth gently with the glasses.

"I am indebted to you, Alfredo."

Guccioni wasn't that dumb to even comment. He kept his silence. "I would appreciate talking to you in my office upstairs."

"Yes, sir."

D'Amoto turned and made a strange signal with one hand. No one needed a guide book to understand that the hotel's full security force was already in place. "Everyone here goes to the private dining room," D'Amoto said quietly. He gestured to Alfredo. "You come with me, please," he told the foul-smelling man. The two hulks fell in behind them.

A brief ride up a private elevator and they stepped out into D'Amoto's private retreat in the penthouse. A man moved forward to pat down Guccioni. D'Amoto waggled a finger.

"Don't touch him," he said. The security man stepped back impassively.

They ended up in D'Amoto's office. Alfredo stood like a huge slab of beef before his desk.

"Tell me about it," he heard.

"I found the cards in a dumpster outside. They was shredded up real bad. I had a hunch about this casino. Assholes talk too much. I listen to assholes who also got big mouths. I saved the cards. Put all the pieces together, you know, like a jigsaw. Then I began to try all different kinds of lights. Couldn't find anything. So I made experiments. I tried different kinds of lights. I found you needed both infrared and ultraviolet on a flickering wavelength to see anything. That's why all your normal detectors ain't worth shit. You got to know, well, it's like a frequency combination, y'know? When you put it all together you can read every card you got in this joint."

"Yes, I saw that," D'Amoto said amiably. "Where do they make the glasses?"

"That was the tough part. I checked every source. Nothing. It took me a year of going through garbage. Airport, casinos, restaurants, train station, bus depots; wherever it stinks that's where I was. These glasses? Silicon Valley in California."

"Yes," D'Amoto agreed. "Palo Alto and the stink."

"You can't fake the stink," Alfredo said. "It's like a piece of the truth. It got me attention when I came in."

"Very wise," D'Amoto agreed. "Do you have any idea who is involved?"

"No, sir. That's way over my head. I've told you what I know."

"How much money do you want for what you gave me tonight? You may have saved me millions."

"I don't want no money, Mr. D."

For the second time the perfect eyebrow raised. "That is interesting. That is unusual. What do you want? What would you like?"

"I want to work for you. I want to get out of the stinking garbage business. I want to learn the business from the best. You're the best. Tonight, Mr. D., I prove to you what I can do. I show you I ain't smart, I am like a bloodhound, I work very, very hard, and I am loyal." "You are my employee."

"Thank you, sir."

"Stay here tonight. You'll have a room. A shower with all the soap and hot water-never mind. I will have some young women scrub away that horrible smell. You will have all new clothes by morning."

"Yes, sir."

"You will be paid very well. I will also teach you this business. I have only one more-no; two more questions."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you trust me, Alfredo?"

"Yes, sir. I must."

"Very wise. The last question."

Alfredo smiled and lifted up the front of his sweater. D'Amato stared long and silently at the seven sticks of dynamite, the wiring and the straps, and the blinking light that showed him the batteries were very much alive. A trip wire ran from the igniter to Alfredo's pocket.

"Thank you, Alfredo."

"Yes, sir."

It was a hell of a start. It also began an all-new legend in a business that was legendary for the reach it had throughout the entire world. Alfredo gave D'Amato total loyalty and in turn became a "favored son" for the elderly power. He went to schools to handle every gaming table that might be found in any casino; his street cunning and swift wit moved him rapidly to a position of meaningful knowledge and casino wisdom that pleased his superiors.

Not too many people had seen the dark side of Alfredo Guccioni. He issued from a small, mean, dirty, and harsh town on the Mexican border where life was spelled survival. At thirteen years of age he weighed two hundred pounds and knew the alleys and streets as well as any hoodlum twice his age. He grew up with a knife in one hand and a club in another. At seventeen he was an experienced nightclub bouncer and a strongarm mugger. He weighed three hundred pounds and he was incredibly strong and he started getting smart just about that time. Why carry a weapon for which the law could put you away when you have the physical strength of a gorilla? If he was going to rip someone off it was easier to deliver a punch to a man or a woman's chest that caved in bone and tissue and brought a heart to a bubbling, frothy stop. One blow from Alfredo could break a man's neck. From that moment of understanding he never carried a gun or a knife.

He understood a man must above all else count on himself. Street smarts weren't enough. Physical bulk and strength weren't enough. He needed the ability to expertly handle a half-dozen thugs doing their best to take him out. There's no better rough-and-tumble school than professional wrestling to teach you how to absorb punishment as well as to dish it out. He trained and he wrestled for a year and he went to private schools for martial arts skills and when he wrapped it up he was meaner than a water buffalo in a tight closet.

He managed casinos in Vegas and in Reno and Atlantic City; he did the run through the Bahamas and other favorite gaming spots of the world. He got to know his business inside out and he made the right contacts and when the wrong people pressured him, Alfredo Guccioni became his self-appointed executioner. He could kill with a single blow to the throat or the heart or the neck. He could kick a man to death with one mighty swipe of a booted foot. He could stand behind a man, grasp his head and chin and twist mightily and it was like breaking the neck of a helpless chicken.

He was one mean son of a bitch, and when he figured his rep was bad enough he went to D'Amato, retired and frail but still with the power of the organization. D'Amato looked fondly upon this giant of a man and arranged for whatever loans Alfredo required to open his own casino. He had never crossed

swords with the law in the United States; a clean record on the police blotters and some friends in the right places gave him his licenses and he opened business under the glittering name of the Last Frontier Casino and Saloon.

Alfredo Guccioni had realized his boyhood dreams. He sent for his sister who still lived and worked in their little shit town on the Mexican border where she labored as an accountant for a local irrigation company; Maria was important to him for the trust she guaranteed with his ledgers. The Guccionis prospered and some of the smart boys figured him for a big asshole guinea who would never have climbed out of the garbage dumpsters without the protective halo of D'Amato, and they went after the cream pouring through the gaming ladles of the Last Frontier. Alfredo caught his lead pit boss dipping into the till and dipping his wick into his sister as well, who hated Alfredo and who had enthusiastically gone along with all the dipping, fiscally and physically. There were bad words and his pit boss, backed up by a bunch of nasties, threatened Alfredo. His sister joined in and called him lots of names that covered everything from a faggot cocksucker to a greasy pig. Alfredo didn't much care about the names. He .didn't care much about the long green, either.

What mattered was where he, Alfredo Guccioni, stood against the shit rabble pulling off this heavy pickpocket crap. Alfredo saw spaghetti red in the encounter they had at four o'clock in the morning in one of the motel suites behind the casino. First he killed his sister. Even though she was a pig and treacherous to her own blood she was still his sister, so he disposed of her quickly. His crashing blow with stiffened fingers to her rib cage broke in her ribs and punctured her lung and sliced a bone against her heart and she died gurgling and strangling, her feet drumming like a toy too tightly wound up before the last blood spurted and her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

Alfredo made a terrible mistake with Tony Matthews. Alfredo decided he wanted this one very special. When he advanced on Tony the latter smiled and emptied a Ruger P85 into Alfredo's chest and stomach. Fifteen rounds went into the double-thickness bulletproof vest and Alfredo kept smiling and advancing on the stunned and then horrified Tony. First he broke both his arms. Snap, crack. Then one leg. Then he crushed his testicles. No mistake yet. For the first time, Alfredo went emotional. He decided to do a special cutting job on Tony. The thought of Tony's people receiving their top man in neatly sliced pieces was too much to resist. Alfredo went all the way, packaging hands, feet, penis, eye balls, skull, and other assorted parts and pieces in dry ice and delivered by Federal Express.

The next morning, barely minutes after completing the shipment to the Express office, a black limo pulled up before his casino office. A man came in quickly, handed Alfredo a note.

"four motel suite bugged. Law has everything on tape. On way now by car. four only out is rooftop. Chopper on way." It was signed with a scrawled "D."

No one ever said Big Al was slow. He didn't bother playing games with his safe. Fucking with the combination was totally asshole. He yanked open the bottom right drawer to his desk, snatched up fifty grand in cash and a slim stack of negotiable documents worth a million and he was in his private elevator twenty seconds later. Twenty minutes after that he was in a leased jet he had a crew keep fueled, powered up, and always ready to move out. The drug people didn't spend much time looking for jets hurtling south into Mexico and Guccioni went deep south at nearly six hundred miles an hour, climbing to fifty thousand feet. His pilots set up entry into Caracas hi Venezuela. That night the negotiable documents went to work and the next day Alfredo Guccioni was skipper of a hunter-killer boat that moved up and down rivers in Colombia on the lookout for drug freebooters hot after the coke processing plants of the big pros in the business.

They liked Alfredo and they figured he was more valuable to them off the boat and hi dark streets of various cities and ports of Central and South America. Alfredo soothed his still-rankled ego from being forced out of Vegas and he took his spittle out on anybody within reach. He also became very slick. The locals taught him well and he learned swiftly and he enjoyed his personal scorecard by killing in every different manner he could visualize.

"It's a game," he told the cronies who feared him as much as they did the eternally-present cutthroats trying to slice into the action. "I knock off people with my fists, my fingers, my feet. That's good. I kill one broad by banging my head against hers so hard so many times I bust open

her skull. Real neat. Another one I kill when I drop my pants and sit on her face and I take a shit and she chokes to death. Bitch bit me on the ass, too, but what the hell, that's the price you pay for variety. Lots of other ways. Automatics and pistols, right? Rifles and machine guns. Even used bazookas and small rockets. Then I burn a lot of them shits. I like to see them run. We made a lot of side bets how far they'd go before they fall down. Won a lot of money. I used crossbows and spears and blowguns and stakes and even drowned them, sometimes in a big bucket, sometimes with a hose down their throat until they bust like a watermelon. All sorts of ways. I am very serious about my business."

He progressed from drug-runners to revolutionaries and that was dumb, because even his best friends in the revolutionary business meant what they were doing and Alfredo Guccioni was pure scumrat from the beginning. An awful lot of people wanted his big fat ass and when they couldn't get him with hired guns they looked for and found his Achilles' heel. A man with a crewcut and huge muscles and a bad rep met with Alfredo in the jungle.

"They sent me here to talk with you, Big Al."

"Who the fuck is they?"

"Special committee in the senate. They got full power to pardon every fuckin' thing you ever done or never did, if you'll appear before the committee and give them the low-down on the commie cocksuckers you been fightin' here in this garbage dump."

"Bullshit."

"What they want is bigger than anything you ever done. They need what you got, Al. With what you can tell those boys on the hill they got a lock on getting elected again. That's worth millions to 'em. You're their ticket, man. You get full protection as special witness for the United States Senate. You're absolved of every fuckin' thing you can dream up.

Alfredo Guccioni dreamed about it for a couple of days.

He'd be cleaner than a teenage tit. Full protection. And he'd be a hero. Serving his country. A real motherfucking patriot. Besides, there were problems. He had jungle rot. His crotch looked like a bad dream in bright technicolor. He had all sorts of fungi shit growing in his ears and his asshole. He had the clap and a couple of mysterious sores on his dick that could have won an Oscar for special effects they was so bad, He needed to get home badly, but only he knew the real reasons when he nodded and said, "Let's go."

The combination of ego and crotch rot overwhelmed his deeply innate sense of survival. Whatever he ate on the chopper out of the jungle knocked him colder than a glacier-frozen mackerel. He woke up in the first-class seat of a big Lockheed just touching down in Miami, and as he felt his clothes and his middle he knew they'd sewn a shitload of heroin and coke into his clothes and they had him by a steel claw right around his blistered dick. So he figured he'd go down in a final blaze of glory and he came out of his seat like an enraged grizzly and threw up all over the first-class section of the airliner. He stumbled about wildly, arms flailing, puking violently. The waves of nausea ripped through him mercilessly and vertigo slapped him across the side of the head like a goddamn axe handle and he went down on the carpet, sliding and rolling in his own puke and screaming with the fear of falling endlessly.

He was yet to learn just how good the opposition was. He had so much heroin in his system he was hooked. He was being eaten within with crack. And they had a radio receiver in his fucking stomach! Every time they turned on the juice savage nausea tore through him to bring on that explosive retching and his inner ear gurgled and splashed its liquids and down he went. It was the deadliest, worst and most terribly effective weapon for controlling a man.

Alfredo Guccioni was cooked goose. Everybody wanted a piece of the meat. The state of Florida got him first because they had a red-hot arrest with coke and horse and a hundred and twenty-nine other charges. The feds went along with it and they gave the now-haggard fat man three hundred and seventy-two years in Old Millfbrd, which was sort of funny, because the way he'd been fucking puking up his life he'd

wanted to die anyway. When they took off the chains he sat in his cell and he got a shiv and he ripped open his own stomach and reached inside to grab that unholy radio receiver and he crushed it in his teeth

as he lay sprawled on the concrete floor dumping blood and piss and shit on himself and the concrete and finally he passed out from loss of blood.

Three weeks later, an ugly scar proudly marking self-surgery, he was back in his cell. On his first day out he busted up three cons just trying to get through them to reach two guards, which he did with admirable dispatch, and beat them both to a bloody pulp. They firehosed him back into his cell. They sealed him off finally in a big cage with thick walls and small bars and left him there, because all Big Al Guccioni ever wanted to do was to kill anyone from the straight world.

Jube Bailey smiled at Jake Marden. "He'll do just fine," he said.

Major Carlos Martinez smiled as he reached for the cigar box held out by Jube Bailey. He took two Petrofino cigars of Jamaican leaf, removed a cutter from one pocket and neatly clipped the ends from the cigars. He was still smiling as he turned to his right to hand one cigar to a thickset man with a stubbled face so phlegmatic he seemed empty of emotion. Both men lit up and Martinez sniffed the rich aroma of the cigar. He nodded to Bailey and then to Marden. "Thank you," he said quietly, and then he and his companion, Major Vasily Korolov, formerly of the GRU national police of the USSR and of the KGB secret police—same basic crowd—sat and waited.

Jake Marden glanced to his right to offer a knowing look to Jube Bailey. "We got a mystery here," Jake said finally to his closest friend.

"Seems that way." Jube wasn't smiling. He wasn't angry or upset, either. These two fascinated him. It was the first time in years he'd been honestly intrigued. "Whatever we're seeing is not what's before us."

Martinez and Korolov glanced at each other, holding poker faces, then both men looked back to Jake and Jube.

"They don't belong here," Jake said slowly. Like Jube he

had his thinking cap going full throttle. Everything about these two men was wrong.

"Right off," Jake said abruptly, looking more to Martinez than the Russian, "I want you to have a full understanding of what's going on here." A flicker of a question showed in Martinez's eyes. That pleased Jake. This one was a thinker and a doer and he also knew how and when to keep his mouth shut. When Jake gave the signal Martinez would talk. How much he'd talk depended upon just how well he understood the silent but vast shift in power control at Old Millford. And as Jake had told Jube, if he were right about these two, they had some real prizes on their hands.

Martinez looked and was different from other men. Jake had known his type before. Tremendously capable, professional, thorough, dedicated in what they did. His Latin name also offered a bit of raw nerves because he wasn't a typical Latin, if there was such a thing. Martinez had a touch of, hell, quality was the word, about him, though it was not the sort of quality you might expect. He was pure Argentinian but he lacked any of the old-world Spanish flair one expected of the landed gentry of that group. Carlos Martinez, except for the thin slash of lips and the penetrating eyes, was physically a throwback to a Neanderthal brute. Jake smiled to himself; the brutish Neanderthal from whose body almost all the hair had been scraped and sandpapered away. What was left was a huge stubby albino-like barrel of a man with a shocking thick black moustache in the most villanous fashion of the stereotypical Mexican bandito. It was all show and it worked. Carlos was a scary sight.

His companion, a walking wide-bodied Mack truck, didn't look Russian. There is a Russian look, Jake mused. Thick-hewn, gravid, grey, devoid of humor, piggy eyes, huge hands, skin like leather, uncompromising, and utterly phlegmatic. That was the Russian who filled the ranks of the choice selectees of their national and secret police and it was this role so well filled by Korolov. He had less expression than the front end of a Mack truck where you could at least find headlights, running lights, turn signals, windshield wipers—things that moved, breathed, functioned. Korolov never expended an unnecessary calorie, seeming to keep everything

in maximum reserve for those moments when he exploded into whatever action might be called for.

But he didn't belong here; even less so than his Argentinian companion. Jake had voiced aloud that conclusion to Jube Bailey and Jube didn't argue, so that meant agreement. Supernigger instincts are great backups, to a hard, suspicious killer Jew.

Jake picked up his conversation where he'd left off. "Do you people know what's come down in this

stone palace?"

Martinez held his eyes. "I have an excellent idea."

"Go on."

"It's simple. Takeover. Very well done, too. Very thorough." Martinez offered a ghost of a smile from the lips that slashed his mouth; Jake made a mental note to look for any future smiles in the wrinkles about the man's eyes. "But its not complete yet. You're close."

"He's a smart mother," Jube offered from the side. He looked directly to the Argentinian. "How come you know so much about all this shit?"

"You want straight answers, no?"

"I want straight answers, yes," Jube said quietly, "or your momma is childless."

"You would, ah," Martinez gestured casually, "kill us?"

Bailey shrugged. "Of course," he said, showing surprise at the question. "Where the heO you think you are, man? Morality Manor?"

"Straight answers, then," Martinez went on quickly, gaining a swift and accurate appraisal of just where he and his phlegmatic borscht drinker stood. "I, we," he jerked a thumb at Korolov, "have long been in the business of learning things, knowing things. There are signs everywhere in the world if only you know how to read them. Your signs are not difficult to read."

"Spell that out," Jake ordered.

"We are not criminals," Martinez said.

"Oh, shit," Jube popped out the words, "another simon-pure among us."

"I don't mean it the way you think," Martinez broke in quickly. "We are not criminals," he amended his own words, "who have been tried, convicted, and sentenced. Our place, here, in this prison, is part of a great arrangement. A deal. On one side it is considered protective custody, and-

"Being in the middle of this fucking joint full of mad dogs is what you call protective?" Bailey stared and then broke out in sarcastic laughter.

"Yes, Mister Bailey," Martinez said, and he was very cool in demeanor and words. Not frightened; cool.

"Outside, in that other world, because of the physical appearance we present, we could only hide for several years until the ah, heat, is off from us, no? It is not worth living that way. So two governments make a deal. We cop a false confession to a crime that is meaningless and that we are never involved with, and we get seven years. We will be out in two years, maybe three. While we are here, our families are very well taken care of and we are paid forty thousand dollars a year. Your mad dogs do not bother us, Mister Bailey. But why do I tell you that? You already know it. Our first week here we each kill three men with our hands only. The guards are ordered to see nothing, to solve nothing. But we make our mark and nobody fucks with us no more." The smile zipped in and out. "Until now." Martinez sighed. More from relief that their secret was out, noted Jake, than from acceptance of new problems.

"Don't stop now," he told Martinez, "unless the tank sitting next to you wants to get into this act."

Vasily Korolov turned to look into the eyes of Jake Marden and in that instant, Jake noted and confirmed to himself never to play down to this chunk of granite again. The eyes told it all. Alive, deep, certain, knowledgeable; the eyes of a man who has always gone straight up against anything the world might have to offer. "He speaks well," Korolov said of his companion and lapsed back into zero sound again.

"Why do you ask us so many of these questions?" Martinez queried Marden.

"That's pretty obvious, even to a spic," Bailey answered, sliding the needle where he thought it might provoke some uncontrolled reaction. These cats were just too fucking cool for the way Bailey wanted things to go.

"Man, you say to us, speak the truth," Martinez shot back, "and so we speak the truth." Martinez looked directly at Bailey.

"If you know something about us, you would know that we know how you do what you do. You have the complete computer printout on us. You make access to NCIC files. You get into the FBI files. Somehow, somewhere, you got a contact with CIA and NSA. You know we are here for the reasons I

tell you but you don't come right out and be honest."

Jube Bailey thought of his sister and the contacts she'd set up long ago. His face betrayed none of his inner thoughts.

"Okay, okay," Marden said, sliding into a comfortable chair so he could face the two men directly. "What nasty things did you two do?" He gestured to hold off Martinez's reply. "No more games. This is straight arrow. It's, obvious you two worked the international scene. But for who and what and why and where we don't know. Think you can wrap up the scene in a hurry?"

"You want it tight," Martinez shrugged, "you got it tight, First, you know what is a hit man. We all know. Then there is the assassin. The hit man kills for money. The assassin kills for emotion, for country, for ideals, good or bad. Then there is the third type of man. That is us. We are assassins for a special group that works for both the United States and the Soviet Union."

Bailey stared at Jake Marden. "Is he fucking serious?"

Jake nodded slowly. "Hang in. Let him speak," he said to hold off further comment from Jube. He nodded to Martinez to go ahead.

Martinez shrugged. "There is no real complication to this," he said easily. "America and Russia, a long time now they been talking war and atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs. All this shit with biological weapons and chemical agents and-

"He talks pretty fucking smart for a spic who can't pour piss out of a boot without a roadmap," Bailey snapped, suddenly angry with the shift in Martinez's words when the moment called for deeper intelligence to emerge.

"Never mind the fancy shit," Marden warned Martinez, following immediately on Bailey's angry retort. "Just cut the mustard."

For the first time, Martinez glanced at Korolov before speaking. The Russian nodded in the briefest physical movement. "Certain peoples in the world are problems," Martinez went on with a slight shrug. "Maybe a political leader. Maybe someone big like Castro. Or some big shit in South Africa. Or like that crazy Libyan fucker. Or it could be a group that takes over power somewhere. We get the assignment. This one or that one of this whole bunch or that whole bunch. Take them out." Martinez permitted himself a smile. "We take them out."

"What's your MO?" Bailey asked at once.

Martinez blinked. "Whatever the game calls for, man. They don't care, we maybe shoot his ass and make it look like a bad drug deal. They want an accident, there's an accident. They want a plane to fall on his house and kill everybody, we do that, too. Sometimes a lot of people who ain't even involved are caught in the middle-

"Example," Jake said.

"There was this ferryboat in the Philippines. We were to get four people. Communist insurgent leaders. Very well protected. Not easy to move around in that country without being spotted. We got their routine. They were on the ferryboat. We took it out with a mine."

"I heard about that one," Jake said, very softly. "Seven hundred people died."

"Seven hundred and two. We lost two of our guys."

Bailey broke out laughing as he signalled for a beer. "Hey, Jake, they're up there in your league. Seven hundred in one shot." He held up the beer as a salute. "Tell me, man, what was your cover?"

"International traders in textiles. Out of Switzerland, Pakistan, and Hong Kong."

Bailey drank deeply and belched. "Yeah, I can see that. Both of you clowns. Real typical rug salesmen." He grinned at Marden.

"What brought you in here?" Jake asked Martinez.

"There was a takeover, a revolution, in Zimbabwe. Financed by the Russians. But not all the Russians. Those people, with the Americans, they do war games scenarios, you know? The computers tell them this new group is too dangerous. They really going to go places. Shift the whole power structure not of just Zimbabwe, but all of Africa. It's what they call the tilt table. It tilts too much, you looking at a war. These people, they got atomic bombs. Crude, but they work. There was no question they would use them. So we got our orders. Take them out."

"How many?" Jake queried.

"One hundred eighteen."

"You do the job?" Bailey broke in.

"We kill all hundred and eighteen niggers," Martinez said to Bailey's face. Jube didn't flicker an eyelash.

"There were more," Jake Marden added.

"Oh, sure," Martinez said easily. "The hundred eighteen were the targets. We start a military uprising and when everybody is drunk and they are raping and looting and having a grand time we take out the whole town. It is the only way to be sure."

Jube blinked. "The whole town?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Three, four thousand."

Jake smiled. "One gets you ten," he said slowly to the group, "they used ES Nine Forty-One."

"What the fuck is that?" Jube demanded to know.

"Well, the town they hit was in a low valley," Jake said, and watched both Martinez and Korolov smile.

"They let the party get going down in the town and then they turned on the valves of tanks in trucks they'd set up around the town. There's an inert gas, much heavier than air. Tasteless and odorless and it looks like a thin fog. It rolls downhill and fills the valley. When the concentration is great enough they turn a switch. In the town somewhere there's an electrostatic generator on the same frequency of the gas to disrupt its molecular structure."

Bailey smiled. "I get the rest. Boom."

"Boom fucking boom," Martinez added.

"Everybody got it first shot?" Bailey pressed.

"Yes," Martinez said. "Every man, woman, child, dog, rat, roach, cow, water buffalo, cat-if it breathed, it was dead."

"Who fingered you?" Jake asked.

"We don't know. But whoever it was, he'll be dead. It's not important to us. But they had to get us out of circulation. Too many people knew it was us. So we make the plea and we are here in this crazy house. In another year there will be a prison riot and our names will be listed among the casualties, and then we are gone."

"That's a neat plan," Marden said.

"Yes. We agree," Martinez replied.

"Carlos, I got news for you," Jake said, smiling. "Your whole plan has turned to shit."

Bailey rubbed his hands. "You bet your sweet spic ass," he said, laughing. "Consider yourself to be in a whole new ball game."

Martinez didn't bother asking polite questions. "You going to fuck us up?"

"Your virgin days are behind you," Bailey said.

"You said you could get out of here any time," Jake reminded Carlos Martinez. "Go ahead. Try it. We won't stop you. If you can get out of here, you two are free to vamoose."

"You are serious?" Martinez's face had become stone.

"My word," Jake said, and he saw that Martinez accepted it.

"I'm with him," Bailey added. "He cuts you two assholes free you got yourself a bus ticket to the whole world. Go on; try it."

Martinez stood up. He stretched slowly. "I need a phone. I need computer access."

"Anything your little old heart desires," Jake said with a grandiose gesture. He called out to several men by a communications panel. "Mike! Snake! Let him use the stuff. Anything he wants."

Martinez and Korolov crossed the room. Jake Marden and Jube Bailey exchanged a long glance. That huge spic albino with a skull of granite slid into the programmer seat of the computer console like he was born to it. His fingers flew as he accessed secret codes and telephone numbers. Or he tried to access the numbers that would, that were supposed to open wide the gates to freedom.

The phone calls didn't go through. A computer panel barked its message back to Martinez. TELECOM

ACCESS REQUIRED.

CALLS DENIED.

Martinez went after their personnel records. SECURITY ACCESS CODE REQUIRED FOR DATA. REQUEST REFUSED.

Martinez chased the security codes, the telephone access lines, the warden, the guard main office-everything. He came up empty-handed, and turned slowly in his seat to face Marden.

"You can't get a message out of here to Garcia or anybody or anywhere," Jake said quietly. "You can't open any wing dividers. Once you're back in your cell you can't open the door if the place is on fire. You can't even find out if you're dead or alive."

"You're ours," Bailey added, without a trace of a smile. "Everybody in here is ours."

"The warden, he is in this with you?" Martinez asked.

"The warden is a faggot cunt," Bailey said. "We say shit and he squats and asks how much."

"How about your own personal security?" Martinez asked. "You don't look like you got much protection."

Jube stiffened. Not from anger; full readiness. Jake didn't move a muscle. He'd been prepared for this all along.

"Try it," Jube said, very quietly.

No one moved.

"Hey, man, I know you're very, very good," Bailey added finally. "Like I said, try it."

Martinez didn't move. But Vasily Korolov had all he could take. His rhino brain went into full action, he turned the switches in his head and transformed himself into a machine, a wild animal, with only one purpose in life. An all-out blood lust to get to and kill Jube Bailey.

Korolov came out of his seat by Martinez with an incredible blur of speed for so huge a man, rushing at Jube.

Bailey smiled and pressed his middle finger against his thumb. In between the skin of finger and thumb was an almost invisible microchip; when Jube pressed together his finger and thumb he closed a selected circuit. Vasily Korolov twisted violently, agony flooding his limbs and his brain, as an electric shock ripped upward from the floor into his body. He spun about in helpless confusion, his brain reeling, limbs fluttering with muscles gone crazy. He tried but couldn't walk or even stand erect. Spittle flew from his mouth.

"That's for starters," Jube smiled at Martinez. "Now we just demonstrate, baby."

More finger manipulation. A laser beam snapped from the wall and flame licked about Korolov's right ankle. He bellowed in renewed pain and fell to his knee. Another beam sliced along his back, burning his shirt and slicing a shallow furrow through his skin. Jake gestured to Jube.

"Enough, man."

Jube smiled. The room fell silent except for the labored breathing of Korolov on the floor. "You understand," Jube said to Martinez, "that was only a demo? We could have put one of those beams into his heart or his skull."

Martinez nodded, and then went to help Korolov to his feet. He held up the devastated Russian and looked calmly at Bailey and Marden.

"We would like very much," and his smile was genuine as he spoke, "to work with you."

"Welcome aboard," Jake said. He turned to Jube. "They're the last ones. We got the team."

CHAPTER 6

"We have a problem." Drong the Kurd stood wide-1 before Aktuk san Yangst Arbok and Barq el Quatrane. Behind the two men of differing worlds, the control panels and computers to run Frarsk spread left and right. Until a few short hours before, the viewsheld of the universe outside of the penal ship had been sealed with the kraid matter-deflection shield. Now the shield was up. What the droids needed was computer input and not optical satisfaction. To spacefaring men like Arbok and Barq, just

the thought of plowing through uncharted space, blind, optics useless and sensors meaningful only to electronic matrix force cones was beyond acceptance, It irritated them, brought on nervous sweating and anxious moments of fretful anger. It also took the two men, despite Arbok's lifelong experience with running manned spacecraft, to find the computer controls to raise the shield.

At that moment they knew anything and everything they had risked was worth the risk a thousand times over. They were masters of this vessel, and they plunged outward from the massive, star-thick galactic core toward one of the great spiral arms. Their speed had been so great, as they raced toward their penal planet, that Frarsk was higher than the median level of the galactic plane of the ecliptic, and so vast were the distances visible before them that the spiraling arm of this part of the galaxy had become a fantasy of glowing jewels, of every color and hue and brilliance. For several minutes the two men, aliens to one another in worlds and culture and biology, stared in awe and, finally, turned to one another and each saw the other's face break out in what could only have been a broad, free smile. Their arms moved and each clasped the forearm of the other, space brothers on an ultimate journey, unknowingly matching precisely the comrade-in-arms clasp of an ancient race on a distant planet; the Roman legions of Earth.

One glance at the control systems told much to Arbok; the same glance was meaningful to Barq but less informative. "Look here," Arbok spoke in Galactibase, at which the six creatures from six worlds had become strikingly proficient. Arbok ran a long finger across the angled panels to leave behind a streak through dust. "They've let this ship go to garbage," he said in disgust.

Barq was more philosophical. "Garbage in, garbage out, garbage en route. You, me," he shrugged, "the others, all the countless ones who made the last trip before us. Worthless, meaningless, forgotten always. What did you expect, my captain, intensive preparation for a shakedown inspection by the new crew?" Arbok laughed; a hand rested briefly on Barq's shoulder. "You told me well. That's what I get for forgetting my place. My ships were like surgical bays. I'd break a man for being slovenly."

"You can't do that now," Barq reminded him. "You're the only true voyager among us in terms of crew. I was a journeyman and through much idle time and curiosity I learned much. But without you," he shrugged a gentle and sinuous shoulder, "we don't have a chance." Large, deep-green liquid eyes looked warmly upon this man of such enormous strength and killing power that Barq stood helpless before him. "Like it or not, my armored friend, you bear responsibility for all of us."

"You're going to make this a miserable experience if you keep throwing gangril bouquets at me every time we speak," Arbok growled. Barq was still trying to find the difference between snarl and smile from this walking lethal weapon with the incredible skills of the true, experienced space jockey. Their immediate future was going to be very interesting. He had started to answer when Drong entered the master control cubicle to make his announcement of a problem.

For a moment the two men studied Drong. His physical differences meant little to them beyond honest curiosity. When you're a member of a galactic trading group, life forms are interesting or attractive or repelling, but they are rarely, if ever, frightening because of any alien appearance or nature. Drong was a fighter, he was all fighter, and in his past they knew he'd been cut, sliced, slashed, mutilated, burned, hacked, shot, pummeled, pierced, broken, blinded, crippled, and just about every other description they had for physical savaging. It mattered little in the long run. Drong's genetic structure was the finest biological memory and biological computer system ever known and he would regrow just about anything that was trashed by all manner of weapons or direct punishment. Obviously he had ripped apart furnishings and equipment better to suit his immediate psychological needs. He wore a turbaned loincloth affair with a wide belt from which hung a huge sword, fashioned from some metal structure, bent and shaped and its edge sharpened. That Drong had absolutely no use for such a weapon had nothing to do with his necessity for its presence always by his hand. A weapon to a Kurd was as necessary as an arm or a leg. It was the ultimate pacifier.

Arbok afforded him the courtesy of a decent response. "A problem, you say. Does it involve the safety or the operation of this ship?"

"In an indirect manner," Drong said seriously. "At first it remains indirect. With time, and I cannot compute how much time is or will be involved, but I fear the worst, it will decide whether or not you

continue to command this ship." His face screwed up with a question he was posing to himself. "Command?" he muttered aloud. He shook his head. "The words in this accursed Galactibase are difficult. I call you Captain. That is what you do. You, ah, I have the word! You operate this ship. You fly it. That is the proper description?"

Arbok nodded. "Yes. Drong, what is the problem?"

"The ship is trying to rebuild the robot guards. The droids."

Arbok and Barq stared in sudden disbelief at one another and both men turned their attention back to Drong. "Rebuild them?" Barq asked in repetition of Drong's words.

"Yes. I have discovered this. The small robosweeps. I saw them moving through the ship like rats. Scuttling along. They are, of course, extensions of the master computer. I don't understand how such things work. I am a warrior, not a technician or an engineer, but I can detect this kind of problem instantly. It is as much an instinct as an art."

"Tell me more," Arbok bade Drong.

"It must be in what I have heard you call the master program," Drong went on. "The computer is likened to a high intelligence, but it is a driven intelligence. It knows only what it is supposed to do. It can be in-inn-diff-"

"Innovative?" Barq offered.

"Yes. It can be innovative only for whatever it has been programmed or ordered to do."

"We also call that the prime directive. The ultimate responsibility," Arbok offered. "Does that help?"

"Very much," Drong said affably. "It is what the computer is doing now. It has a mission. Run this ship and take the prisoners to the prison world. Everything else is only a part of that mission. What you call the prime directive. So the androids are only machines. Unusual machines, deadly to life forms, but still machines. They can be taken apart and reassembled?"

"Yes," Arbok confirmed.

"That is what the ship is doing now."

Arbok stiffened. "You're certain?"

"Why would I waste words and time?" Drong queried, honestly puzzled with the question.

Arbok chose his words carefully. "How are the droids-no; sorry. Let me start over. How is the ship rebuilding the droids?" For a moment Arbok shuddered at the thought of suddenly facing completely reformed android guards with only one new assignment-^to kill every biological thing aboard Frank.

"The robosweeps search the ship for every part and piece of the droids we killed. Everything, pieces of skin and bones, tatters of flesh, nails, teeth, eyeballs, hair, internal systems, like wiring and fluid movers and the parts of their brains, the power receptors that can serve without an internal power system."

"Like a remote heartbeat," Barq said, almost breathing the words.

"Yes," Drong confirmed. "I do not know how long it will take the ship computer to do this work. But I have the

instinct for such things. It will not be long. We will not surprise them again as we did before when you led us, Arbok."

"You're right," Arbok confirmed. "Everything we did before, the computer now has in its memory and it will eliminate the chance for repetition."

"Another danger," Barq said, then hesitated. He looked about him anxiously, then pointed to his lips and made motions of speaking but without sound, then tapped his ears and pointed to the walls and the ship about him. Drong stared, confused, but Arbok caught the message immediately. The ship had sensors everywhere, like a huge basic brain, to pick up what everybody said. They had gotten away with tearing up the droids before because what they said and did had no precedent in the computer memory. Now the computer had programmed itself to recognize in the biological forms a grave danger and it would listen, record, and try to comprehend within its own limits what the words meant.

But there was another means of communication. They had no writing implements since the droids, or any part of this ship, had no use for such clumsy implements. Everything was electronic and computerized. But aboard manned spacecraft, when different races were involved and there was always the danger of

mistaken verbiage, the flight crews had developed an elaborate and extremely effective sign language, as though they were deaf mutes communicating with one another. It was a superb outgrowth of the hand signals of early ships and aircraft before radio and other electrical transceiver systems. Arbok knew the language intimately, Barq less so since his presence aboard the flight decks of small or great starliners was always as an observer or a supernumerary. But he was keen of intelligence and endowed with wondrous memory.

He pantomimed his message, his left hand with its tendril-like fingers curled about a throttle that he moved forward steadily. His right hand pointed forward of his standing position, and then as his left hand continued forward, he appeared to stumble backwards until he stood flattened against a back bulkhead, legs and arms spread wide and seemingly pinned to the bulkhead like an insect lanced with a specimen needle.

Arbok studied him and then he nodded slowly. He understood all too well. The computer that ran the ship was as yet unfamiliar with many of the characteristics of bipedal life forms, and though its maneuvering and acceleration parameters were clearly defined for a maximum of three gravities at any one time, it lacked—because it never needed—any reasoning or justification for knowing why it had those parameters in its memory and instruction matrix banks.

But the moment it was able to accomplish anything even remotely resembling creative deduction on the basis of new data, Arbok and the others were doomed. What kept them alive at this moment, despite the Frarsk brain working constantly and under full impetus to salvage its mission—its prime directive—was that the ship's brain was lacking sorely in knowledge of the bipedal biological systems. Men.

All that big glop of electronic garbage has to do, Arbok thought furiously, is go to full acceleration and we have all bought a one-way ticket to the Lombardosian hunting grounds. We'd be under fifty or a hundred gees before we'd have time to squat. There'd be just enough time for everything inside us to come flying out in one stinking phlart and we'd all be ooze . . . Arbok half-spun to Drong. "Listen carefully." A ridged brow frowned back at him. Drong always listened carefully. It was the only way to stay alive on his world. For a moment, annoyance cruised through his brain. He had to remind himself he wasn't on Asgard any more, fighting every day of his life in a gloriously lusting struggle to stay alive. This was all new, this was utterly alien. He pushed aside resentment at what to him was a waste of words and listened for orders from Arbok. Arbok was his leader, his commander, and he gave orders. That was good enough for Drong the Kurd.

"Tell the others," Arbok spoke slowly, "to help you round up all the robosweeps you can find. They, ah," he thought of the computer system listening to every word, "need to be serviced and that's your job. Gather them up. Do not harm them. Do not injure them. Protect the robosweeps. Gather them where they are temporarily immobile, and keep them there until the computer issues final orders for all of us." He was trying desperately to get Drong to understand the need to avoid any overt destructive or damaging action against the robosweeps, which the ship's computer could assess as being dangerous to itself, since the robosweeps were simply extensions of the ship. He needed them to be immobilized without "alarming" the electronic brain.

"Do you understand, Drong?" he asked when he finished his instructions. "Everyone must obey these orders. It's extremely vital that they do so."

"Then," Drong frowned, "it may be necessary to use discipline. They may not understand. They may not like your orders."

"Then use discipline," Arbok snapped, harsher than he intended. "You're a warrior, Drong, and warriors always carry out their orders precisely. I don't care if you have to lop off a head with that oversized razor of yours, but you are under orders to prevent harm from anyone against the robosweeps. There's no time to waste, Drong. Go."

He saw no animosity or resentment on the part of Drong. The scarred and furrowed face looked back at him with complete acceptance. Drong left at a run.

Arbok turned to Barq. He spoke clearly, choosing every word with the greatest care. "There's a serious problem in the drive system of this ship."

"Yes. I studied the power readings. A bad fluctuation. And enough hard radiation to seriously damage

the biodroids."

"Well have to shut down the drive long enough for the master computer to find the problem and fix it."

Arbok turned to the command console and switched to what was obviously manual input to the computer. He selected Galactibase for the keyboard and steadied himself before the keys. If he and Barq were right in their judgment of the ship's operation, then the Frarsk's electronic brain had already absorbed their conversation and would have in its memory matrix the problem of an aberrant propulsion drive, That in itself would clear the neurodroid pathways for any necessary repairs.

Arbok's six fingers on each hand, long accustomed to such systems in the ships he'd flown as master, flew across the keyboard.

MANUAL COMMUNICATION NECESSARY USING GALACTIBASE FORM AND SCREEN PRINTOUT FOR CONSOLE OPERATOR. CONFIRM.

The screen flashed out a flickering message. Arbok glanced at Barq. No one had used these circuits, perhaps for centuries. Dust, moisture, bugs, chemical breakdown; any and all of it would be affecting the system. The printout flashed, then stuttered and jumped as it completed the response.

CONFIRM MANUAL TRANSCIVE AND PRINTOUT. PROVIDE ID CODE FOR CONTINUING EXCHANGE.

Arbok's fingers were barely behind his thoughts. SHIPMASTER IS CODE. AUTHORITY IS CAMTOK HEADQUARTERS. CONFIRM ACCEPTANCE AND ADHERENCE CAMTOK AUTHORITY. REPLY IMMEDIATELY.

Flashing, stuttering effects. CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER ACCEPTED. PROCEED.

SEVERE POWER FLUCTUATIONS IN FRARSK MAIN POWER DRIVE SYSTEM. REQUIRE YOUR SHUTTING DOWN DRIVE WITH MANUAL CONTROLS FOR REPAIRS. SAFETY INTERLOCK NECESSARY. ONCE SHUT DOWN ONLY MANUAL INTERLOCK SWITCH MAY REACTIVATE POWER DRIVE SYSTEM. THIS PROCEDURE APPROVED CAMTOK AUTHORITY FOR EMERGENCY SITUATION. IMMEDIATE COMPLIANCE IMPERATIVE.

They heard circuits running to near overload. Finally the response stuttered before them. DELAY. NO PRECEDENCE. "Shit!" Arbok's hands raced across the keys. DELAY NOT

ACCEPTABLE. PRECEDENCE IN MEMORY BANKS REFERENCE CAMTOK STARFLEET REGISTER SIX NINE YANGARD MODEL FOUR TWO SEVEN VESSEL NAME GNARB. COMPLIANCE FAILURE THAT EVENT CAUSED LOSS OF VESSEL, ALL HANDS AND PASSENGERS AND BIODROIDS. CRITICAL YOUR FULL COMPLIANCE TO PREVENT REPETITION.

More stuttering, flashing, wisps of smoke. NO RECORD, NO RECORD.

CAMTOK AUTHORITY PROVIDES MEMORY RECORD UNNECESSARY FOR COMPLIANCE. EMERGENCY SITUATION NOW EXISTS. TO PREVENT DESTRUCTION OF THIS VESSEL AND MISSION FAILURE YOU MUST COMPLY IMMEDIATELY PRIME DIRECTIVE CALLING FOR ALL ACTION MODELS TO COMPLETE ASSIGNED MISSION. YOU ARE ORDERED TO FOLLOW PRIME DIRECTIVE. SHUT DOWN MAIN DRIVE IMMEDIATELY.

No delay this time. Even before the message flashed on the screen they felt the slightest variation in a thrumming that had always been sensed through the ship. Barq's supple fingers gripped Arbok's shoulder as the words flickered and

flashed before them. PRIME DIRECTIVE FOLLOWED. MAIN DRIVE SHUT DOWN.

Arbok judged time to be critical before the computer went through all its memories and came up with some kind of crap to override the emergency situation. His fingers moved again on the keys.

IDENTIFY LOCATION MANUAL OVERRIDE.

MASTER CONTROL CONSOLE POSITION ONE FOUR ONE EIGHT EIGHT, CONTROLLER ENGINEER POSITION SIX THREE. SYSTEM IS SEALED. UNSEAL AND MAKE AVAILABLE MANUAL TEST. Metal creaked to their right. A panel seemed to bulge, metal fasteners unmoved for

decades or perhaps centuries burst from their screwdown-and-lock positions, and the panel fell away to reveal a manual grip within. Arbok studied it carefully, went back to the keyboard.

DESCRIBE MANUAL GRIP OPERATION TO IMMOBILIZE MAIN POWER DRIVE SYSTEM. MASTER GRIP PUSH IN, HOLD IN, PULL DOWN TO STOP. HOLD STOP. PLACE LOCKING PIN POSITION TWO THREE SIX.

Arbok motioned to Barq. "Do it."

Slim tendrils moved among the controls. Moments later, still holding his breath, Barq nodded. "Done," he said. Arbok hit the keys. REPORT STATUS MAIN POWER DRIVE SYSTEM.

MAIN POWER DRIVE SYSTEM INACTIVATED. MASTER COMPUTERS CONTROL DISCONNECT COMPLETE. MAIN POWER DRIVE SYSTEM MANUAL OPERATION ONLY. CHANGE IN SYSTEM OPERATION PERMISSIBLE ONLY WITH COMMAND OF CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER.

Arbok grinned. CONTINUE PRESENT ARTIFICIAL GEE STATUS FRARSK.

CONFIRM. ARTIFICIAL GEE ONE POINT ONE SIX NINE MAIN GALACTIC PLANETARY MEDIAN.

CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER COMMANDS DISCONNECT MAIN AND SECONDARY POWER CABLE FEED FROM NUCLEONIC REACTOR TO MAIN POWER DRIVE SYSTEM. TO PREVENT OVERLOAD AND VIOLATION OF FRARSK PRIME DIRECTIVE YOU WILL NOT RECONNECT THIS POWER FEED SYSTEM WITHOUT MANUAL COMMUNICATION FROM CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER. CONFIRM. CONFIRMED.

Arbok grinned at Barq, who was signalling with arms and hands flailing the air. He pointed to his mouth and then to

his ears, his sinewy hands making flapping motions to simulate talking, and then he grasped an ear and moved it back and forth. Barq jabbed a finger at the master control panel, again touched his lips and his ear, and drew a tendril-thin finger across his throat in a gesture unmistakable on any world.

KiU the aural and visual monitoring systems! he seemed to shout.

Arbok turned back to the keyboard and his fingers blurred. As fast as he tapped across the keys with the barest fingertip pressure, the words glowed on the monitoring screen.

COMMAND ORDER FROM CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER. SIGNAL READINESS COPY AND COMPLIANCE.

Instant response. READY.

MISINTERPRETATION OF CERTAIN AURAL AND VISUAL MONITORING SYSTEMS JUDGED A STRONG DANGER TO FRARSK SECURITY. DISCONNECT ALL MONITORING BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS ABOARD THIS VESSEL. COMPLIANCE IMMEDIATE. CONFIRM.

The electronic systems seemed to falter, then words chattered into view. MONITORING SYSTEMS SHUTDOWN COMPROMISES

PENAL SECURITY. DECISION DELAYED FOR DATA SEARCH.

Arbok cursed beneath his breath and again his fingers spoke for him.

CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER HAS COMMAND DECISION OVERRIDE PENAL SECURITY. CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER INVOKES FRARSK PRIME DIRECTIVE TO PROTECT VESSEL AT ALL COSTS. DISCONNECT ALL MONITORING BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS ABOARD THIS VESSEL OR PRIME DIRECTIVE IS SEVERELY COMPROMISED. COMPLY IMMEDIATELY. CONFIRM.

Another pause, then with much flickering the words came, a bit slower this time but unmistakable.

CONFIRM DISCONNECT

MONITORING OF BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS.

Arbok repressed a whoop of joy. CONTINUE PRESENT COURSE

SECONDARY DRIVE. MAINTAIN ESTABLISHED INTERIOR GEE. MAINTAIN ALL NECESSARY SYSTEMS TO SUSTAIN BIOLOGICAL LIFE FORMS. PERMIT NO CHANGES

TO STANDING OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS OR ORDERS WITHOUT DIRECT INPUT AND COMMAND FROM CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER. THIS CONCLUDES THIS EXCHANGE. CONFIRM. ORDERS CONFIRMED. COMPLIANCE ASSURED. SENSOR BANKS AND PROBES WILL REMAIN ON STANDBY ALERT INPUT CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER.

Arbok stepped back and looked up at the master panel. "Hey, you asshole Frarsk computer piece of shit! Go fuck yourself! You hear me, you electronic turd of a swamp buffsahm! Answer me, phlart-face!" Barq grinned at him. "He's not answering. There's a name for this, Arbok. What would you rocket jocks call it?"

Arbok laughed anew. "The lights are on upstairs but there's nobody home."

"That, my friend, describes this computer system very well." Barq rubbed his long, thin hands together in anticipation. "I believe it's time to get rid of some robosweeps and those oversize rutchcats we call droids."

"I do believe Brist and Drong are going to be pleased with that assignment," Arbok said. "They're itching from head to foot to kill something, anything."

"This is the most frustrating, exasperating, dumb, diety-screwed up search I've ever been on! I've hunted sand rats and snakes and cyclops lizards, I've gone after scuttlebirds and dazzlefricks that can bend sunlight about themselves, but never have I chased more ghosts than on this piece of shit garbage dump of a spaceship!"

They looked with open-mouthed astonishment at Grangles. The orange-skinned warrior from planet Ishban had turned slowly to an angry blotch of red and white hues from frustration. Jetblack eyes gleamed with a lust for killing. In each hand he held a weapon fashioned from parts and pieces of the ship; a massive club with razor-like projections to stab into the metal shells of the scuttling robosweeps, and in his other hand a heavy net woven of metal to trap the infuriating things.

"We've been in and out and through this ship a dozen times and all we've nailed is one lousy robosweep," Grangles snarled. "At this rate they'll put together all those triple-cursed droids and we'll be fighting just to stay alive on a ship they know a hundred times better than we know this scab-bellied scow because they're all parts of the ship. They are the ship! They can bushwhack us once they're put together and this time all the odds are on their side."

Grangles pointed the knobby weapon at Arbok. "You're our space hero, Aktuk san Yangst Arbok," he said with sudden solemnity. "As one who has spent all his life fighting either on foot or from the spiny back of a putrid-smelling shatar, I'm warning you that we are in serious trouble. You've got to get those things out in the open so we can bash them into bits and pieces!"

"Easier said than done, my friend," Barq answered quickly. "They follow the prime directive of the ship. Rebuild the droids and they will follow their prime directive."

The greenish, rubbery cactus sprawled on the floor in a corner of the cubicle they'd adopted for eating, sleeping, and meeting, so that someone would always be on alert for the others, moved slowly. Brist Mullongptu almost always startled his comrades. Unless he moved or spoke with a specific purpose he reverted back to just what he appeared to be; a huge cactus plant with an outer skin of greenish rubbery thorns, a cross between a plant and a spiked steel radial racing tire. Beneath his skin he was a mobile chemical factory, as they had discovered to their everlasting delight when acid squeezed through his fingertips had rid them of the electronic control collars placed permanently about their necks. Collars with neuronics twisters that with a single soundless blast of energy could break a man's back from internal violence.

"I suggest something," said the spiked steel radial tire. He fascinated them. His mouth seemed invisible unless he spoke and then his lips and other facial elements seemed to extend from the cactus stalk of a thick face.

"Tell us," Arbok replied, following the mannerisms of Brist.

"Get them all together. Robosweeps and whatever they have made of the droids," Brist said slowly, his voice carrying an inescapable similarity to tree branches in a blowing wind. "Get them all together and

finish them off."

"Tough to do," Barq said carefully. "They'll stay away from us like poison. We represent a violation of their prime directive. They have only one goal. To kill us."

"The only reason they haven't done so through the ship by mashing us down to soup by high gees," Arbok added, "is because I've taken over master control of the ship in the manual mode. It's the same reason they haven't dumped all

the air . . ." His voice trailed away as his eyes widened. He slammed a leathery fist against the nearest bulkhead in sudden revelation. The crashing sound of a gong brought pain stabbing across the face of Gllant Ytram, still suffering from what was normal pressure to the others but headache-blinding overpressure to Ytram. Yet ever since his confrontation with Arbok, and being slammed and hurled about their prison cubicle like a helpless thick-lipped logbanger that flopped about the swamps of his home world, Skring, he had remained true to his word. Absolute obedience and servitude. Yet the wince was reaction, as much as the helpless, guilty look he offered in compensation.

They paid scant attention to the huge misshapen form of Ytram. He was too big, too dumb, too slow and dense, a humanoid hippo and capybara with brain cells as heavy as lead. They watched Arbok with a sudden intensity shared by all. In their still comparatively brief time together they recognized the cerebral qualities of the alien man they'd all selected, or at least accepted, as their leader.

"Your face says much. Tell us," Drong asked.

Arbok shook his head. A number of things had occurred to him almost simultaneously and he cursed himself for a fool of the lowest sewer depths. He had ordered the ship under Master Camtok Authority to shut down all its sensors that could pick up on their verbal exchanges and also monitor their actions through concealed scanners. The ship's master computer, which was the ship itself, complied, even verifying the command. But what if the Prime Directive to this ship carried with it an unbreakable subdirective that the ship was never to yield to any biological form, no matter what the circumstances! And that it was deliberately to lull biological forms into a false sense of security by imparting to them false information? Erroneous data. The computers can't lie but they can follow orders. He cursed himself for every kind of an idiot. Even while they were so triple-damned self-congratulatory on taking over the Frask, the ship was working overtime to clean their clocks, permanently.

There was no time to waste. Arbok spun about to point a finger to Brist and Barq. "You two. Do not argue with what I tell you to do." His facial expression spoke louder than his words. "Body bags for all of us," he ordered. "Simple, with minimal but effective pressure bracing. Oxy tanks at least four hours each suit. To hell with temp controls or clear faceplates. Brist, you'll have to produce a sealer with body liquids. Can you seal whatever you and the others come up with so that you can make an airtight pressure garment? The only thing it will really need is a flapper valve exhaust port for body temperatures and moisture dump."

"There is a cubicle the overseers used when they boarded this ship while it was in dock," Barq said. "I've been to it. They kept many plants there for oxygen freshening. It has . . . yes," he said with sudden triumph. "All manner of synthetics for flooring and seating."

"Get to it now," Arbok said with renewed urgency. "Make them up as fast as you can. You have a few hours and that's all. Go!"

Incredible. They had no zippers, no fasteners, but Brist could exude a biological glue strong enough to lock massive steel beams together. That would be the seals for the seams and connecting panels. He ignored what else they must do. They would do it; that's all that counted. They took Ytram with them. If nothing else he was a mobile battering ram to tear things apart they would need.

"Grangles, Drong; come with me," Arbok said, and left the gathering cubicle at a fast walk, heading for the command bridge. By hand motions and signs he made it clear to them that they must separate what he would now say into what he meant and what he would say to lull the ship computer into a false security. The two men were far from engineers, but they both were enormously successful fighters and survivors, and that meant a hell of a lot of common sense.

On the bridge, Arbok spoke carefully. "There's a short in a main power cable terminal," he said aloud.

"We need to find that short and then temporarily cut power to that system so we can make the necessary

repairs. The droids would normally attend to this problem but they're, ah, busy elsewhere." He took a deep breath. "We need to repair the power system so that the master computer of this vessel will be able to carry out its prime directive of delivery of the ship's contents to the penal site. Do you understand?" Grangles stared without facial expression. Drong shook his head slowly. They'd picked up on the need not to say anything that might identify precisely what they were doing that might damage or otherwise interfere with Frarsk operations. That posed no difficulty; they hadn't the slightest idea of what Arbok wanted them to do.

"Follow my directions," Arbok added. "No questions. We must not disturb the ship."

Their facial expressions now showed they understood, or at least believed, Arbok to have gone around the bend. But they had no choice. He understood these insane machines and he apparently had judged great danger to them. They hated but understood little; therefore they would do exactly as they were told. Arbok opened access panels along a bulkhead he'd already confirmed as cover for heavy power cabling. He motioned for Grangles and Drong to do the same. Twenty minutes later they had half the bulkhead panels removed. They looked at several main terminals until Arbok confirmed the electrical blocks into which cables fed and then branched out again to various parts of the bridge systems.

Arbok crossed mental fingers, four on each hand, and spoke aloud. CAMTOK AUTHORITY MASTER REQUIRES DIRECT TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION FRARSK MASTER COMPUTER. USE AURAL VOICE RESPONSE. CONFIRM.

A deep and scratchy groan built slowly from speakers that likely hadn't been used for centuries, or at least since this ship was built and its systems tested and checked out before its first flight. The scratchiness and laboring voice, distorted as much as it came across clearly, confirmed to Arbok that computers like all other systems, require a lot of care and tenderness. Only a space pilot could think of a mass of machinery and electronics and force fields in such terms, but then, he was one of those space jocks.

The computer replied in a language he didn't recognize. REPLY IN GALACTIBASE, Arbok snapped. The voice forced and whined its response. DIRECT TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION ESTABLISHED. MASTER POWER CUBE NUMBER, A H, SIX TWO TWO FIVE NINE

EIGHT SHOWS SEVERE ARCING, Arbok announced slowly. OUR TESTS INDICATE POSSIBILITY OF FIRE AT EIGHT NINE POINT SIX PERCENT. IMMEDIATE REPAIRS URGENT. FRARSK AUTOSYSTEMS COMPROMISED. MASTER AUTHORITY CAMTOK REQUESTS SHUTDOWN POWER LINES TWO, THREE, TWELVE AT BOTH BASIC POWER SOURCE AND THIS TERMINAL. RELEASE TWIST INTERLOCKS NOW. ACTIVATE AND CONFIRM.

Arbok turned to Drong. He tapped the huge sword the man wore at his side, then pointed to a bright bronze-colored cable, and mimicked the sword slicing into the cable. Drong nodded, held up the sword and jammed it into the cable. Sparks spattered and smoke whirled out and Drong vibrated as electrical current speared through the sword to his hands. Arbok was ready and waiting. He hurled himself at Drong and hit the Asgardian with Arbok's body free of touching any part of the ship to avoid closing any current connection. They tumbled to the deck, the two men grinning at one another. Arbok scrambled to his feet, pointing to the sword thrust into the cabling. Grangles followed his lead, throwing himself through the air, and bringing down his arm in a mighty sweep to free the sword. It clanged loudly to the deck, free of the cabling.

Arbok spoke to thin air. CONFIRM ELECTRICAL SHORT, CABLE DAMAGE, ARCING, SPARKING, COMBUSTION PRODUCTS VISIBLE. PROBABILITY OF FIRE NOW NINE NINE POINT FOUR PERCENT. EMERGENCY SHUTDOWN CRITICAL. ACTIVATE!

They heard relays and solenoids snapping and banging doused. Before their eyes, thick cables twisted and rotated at their ends, visibly separating from their connections. Arbok knew every such cable had at least three backups but he was hoping the Frarsk computer wouldn't realize what Arbok knew. If that were the case, the computer would go along with whatever they were doing because it would judge itself and

the ship as still in complete command.

POWER LINES TWO, THREE, TWELVE ELECTRICAL FLOW SHUT DOWN, announced the computer.

RELEASE ALL LOCKS AND SECURHEGRIPS LINES TWO, THREE, AND TWELVE SO WE MAY REMOVE THEM FROM SYSTEM AND REPLACE WITH SECURE CABLING. ACTIVATE IMMEDIATELY.

Arbok signalled Grangles and Drong. "Grab those cables and start hauling," he ordered. Ten minutes later they had

better than two hundred feet of cabling on the deck about them.

SCHEDULE CABLE REPLACEMENT SHIP TIME FOUR HOURS FROM NOW, Arbok told the computer.

CONFIRM CABLE REPLACEMENT FOUR HOURS, the voice groaned IDENTIFY EMERGENCY AIR PRESSURE DUMP VALVES CONTROLS

THIS BRIDGE AND-Arbok glanced up at the thick twistdoors to the airlock just beyond-AIRLOCK BRIDGE six. OPEN ACCESS PANELS FOR MANUAL OVERRIDE. ACTIVATE AND CONFIRM.

To their left, red lights glowed and two panels slid aside. Arbok studied them. They followed the pattern of most ships. "You can use a spike insert if you're a droid," he explained to the two men watching him, "or, here, and don't touch this now, you grasp this D-handle, punch it in, twist one half circle to the right, then pull. When you do that you dump all the air pressure on the bridge. If you do the same with the second panel, there, you dump the airlock pressure at the same time."

"All twistdoors operate together?" Drong asked.

Arbok nodded. He spoke very carefully. "You understand what will be required on my command?"

Drong and Grangles looked at each other. They both nodded, turned to Arbok and nodded again.

"Very good," Arbok said. "Now, our job is to help this ship get all its robosweeps and droids in perfect operating condition." He lifted his head slightly. COMPUTER, DID YOU UNDERSTAND THAT LAST ORDER TO THE BIOSYSTEMS? CONFIRM.

UNDERSTAND. BIOSYSTEMS WILL REASSEMBLE DROIDS TO OPERATING STATUS.

Arbok risked a fast grin. VERY GOOD, OLD BUDDY. WE REQUIRE COOPERATION OF FRAHSK COMPUTER TO MEET PRIME DIRECTIVE. COMPUTER IS TO COMMAND ROBOSWEEPS TO BRING ALL DROID PARTS, ASSEMBLIES, SUBASSEMBLIES TO THIS BRIDGE AND INTO AIRLOCK BRIDGE SIX. BIOSYSTEMS ARE GATHERING TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT TO RESTORE ALL DROIDS FULL OPERATING STATUS. INITIATE COMMAND ACTION IMMEDIATELY. CONFIRM.

UNUSUAL REQUEST. DATA CONTRADICTORY.

COMMAND IS NOT A REQUEST. COMMAND IS A COMMAND TO SUPPORT PRIME DIRECTIVE. ACTIVATE IMMEDIATELY.

They sweated out the sounds from behind the bulkheads of

old, unused electrical connections clacking and groaning, and then came the response Arbok wanted so desperately. COMMAND ACCEPTED. ALL ROBOSWEEPS AND DROID COMPONENTS WILL BE DELIVERED TO BRIDGE DECK AND AIRLOCK BRIDGE SIX.

"Grangles, get your sandy ass down to that meeting room where Barq took the others. Bring up everything they've done so far with those bags. Make damned sure they pick up the oxygen bottles from the equipment cubicle and check the bottles. They may not have been refilled for a hundred years for all we know, and we'll need the full supply and pressure nozzles that work. Get back here as fast as you can with everybody and their gear. Go, go."

Arbok turned to Drong. "Get a cable around that equipment over there," he pointed to a secondary console. Tie that mother as if your life depended on it holding under great pressure because it will. Then run another two cables, anywhere else on this bridge, but in that area to our left. Got it? Leave enough slack for some more tie connections on this end. Do it, please, as fast as you can."

Drong went to work, Arbok stood before the control panels with their plates removed. Again and again

he looked at the controls and mechanisms and ran through the steps he'd have to take in his head. Drong interrupted him by appearing at his side.

"Done," he announced without emotion.

"Okay. We're running a test. Wrap a cable around your body like a harness. I'll do the same, and then we wrap cabling through each other's harness. Just like we're made for one another," he added with a grin. They wrapped the cables about their bodies and then connected each to the other, bracing themselves and pulling with all their strength. "Okay," Arbok ended the test. "Once we're in suits everybody gets tied up like we just did and then everybody gets connected to one another. I'm going to be right over there," he tapped the control panel with the pressure controls, "and you've got to blasphemously tie me with a real vengeance."

Sounds of men approaching reached them. They turned to see the four remaining prisoners, loaded down with clumsy bags, makeshift helmets and faceplates, oxygen tanks and lines. Arbok didn't waste time asking how things went. They'd

find out soon enough. If they went right they'd be alive. If they didn't, well, dead men ask no questions.

"Any sign of the sweeps or the droids?" he asked Barq.

"There's a whole parade of them coming up through the ship right now," Barq told him.

Arbok had the dreadful feeling of them running away from him. "What shape are the droids?" he asked.

"Two or three hours," Barq told him grimly, "and they'll be after us with everything they've got." His face took on a peculiar expression. "I don't understand all this, Arbok. Bringing them near us where a single droid could activate his weapons. We won't stand a chance."

"You said at least two hours?" Arbok pushed.

"Yes," Barq said.

Arbok turned to the group. "Everybody into your suit bags now," he ordered. "Help each other. Check the seals on the suits. Leave your faceplates open so we can talk and have your oxygen valves in your hands as soon as you can. When that's done get those cables secured. Don't waste time and-" He paused as the sound of clanking and banging metal reached them.

"The sweeps," Brist said. "They're dragging the droids or their parts. They're almost here."

COMPUTER! Arbok barked loudly to the bridge. ORDER FROM CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER. CONFIRM READINESS RECEIPT AND COMPLIANCE.

CONFIRMED. PROCEED. The voice was worse than ever.

WE HAVE PLACED ALL NECESSARY PARTS AND SUBASSEMBLIES FOR DROID REBUILD IN AIRLOCK BRIDGE SIX. DIRECT SWEEPS AND DROIDS AND ALL EQUIPMENT BRIDGE SIX FOR MAXIMUM EFFICIENCY AND MINIMUM TIME REBUILD AND REACTIVATION OF DROIDS. CONFIRM. OPEN TWISTDOORS TO AIRLOCK BRIDGE SIX TO FACILITATE ORDERED MOVEMENT. CONFIRM AND ACTIVATE. PRIME DIRECTIVE IS AUTHORITY.

The first sweeps clattered and banged like huge robot roaches onto the bridge, dragging or carrying droids in various stages of rebuilding and assembly. It was an incredible, bizarre sight. Arms and legs moved slowly or twisted in the air, heads craned on metal necks and eyes gleamed and glowed as the smashed and broken parts, already close to full

operational status, moved in a garish parade onto the bridge. At the same time, the twistlock doors to the airlock spun open. Holding their breath, desperate not to create any disturbance to the ghastly trundling of machinery that in a short time would become savage, dedicated killers, the six prisoners remained frozen where they were. What seemed like hours took only minutes. Arbok gasped for breath. He signalled the others to close their faceplates and turn on oxygen valves. Drong slipped over to Arbok to wrap additional power cabling about his body and secure him to the master control console. They watched the airlock doors close.

COMPUTER, CAMTOK AUTHORITY IS INCREASING BRIDGE AND AIRLOCK ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE TO FACILITATE DROID RECONSTRUCTION. CONFIRM RECEIPT OF MESSAGE.

CONFIRMED. APPROVED.

Approved? That fucker is regaining control of itself . . .

COMPUTER, WHAT IS CURRENT PRESSURE BRIDGE AND AIRLOCK SIX?

ONE THREE POINT EIGHT PSI. INCREASE PRESSURE TO TWO EIGHT POINT ZERO PSI IMMEDIATELY.

They felt the air pouring into the bridge, squeezing the clumsy bagsuits against their bodies. A deep groan of pain issued from Ytram. They ignored him.

COMPUTER! EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY! PRIME DIRECTIVE ENDANGERED. CAMTOK AUTHORITY SHIPMASTER ORDERS ARTIFICIAL GEE CANCELLED IMMEDIATELY! COMPLY!

There was no reason for the computer no* to comply. Instantly they felt their bodies start to rise or twist under zero gravity conditions. The cables secured them tightly to bulkhead equipment and to one another. Arbok offered up every prayer he knew to every diety he had ever imagined, slammed his faceplate down and locked, twisted his oxygen valve, snapped a finger at Drong, and inserted his own hand within the manual override control to the twistlock doors separating bridge from airlock. A huge iris whipped through its circular motion and all pressure at twenty-eight pounds per square inch equalized between the bridge and the airlock.

"Do it!" Arbok roared to Drong. The Asgardian warrior's hand gripped the controls to the outer doors of the airlock,

shoved forward on the handle, twisted it half a circle to the right, and yanked with all his strength.

The outer iris twistlock doors to Airlock Six spun wide open.

An explosion of violent decompression punched through the bridge and the airlock. Fog erupted, blinding everyone.

Fog cleared. Invisible hands snatched at the bodies of the six prisoners, hauled violently to erupt them from the ship behind the explosive expulsion of robosweeps and parts and pieces of all the droids. A shower of sputum tore away from Frarsk, and in that period of time of no longer than six seconds every remote mobile subsystem of Frarsk became useless debris showering outward into void, never to be seen or reclaimed again.

Arbok signalled to Drong and he reversed the airlock door procedures; the outer iris clanged shut, the impact thudding through the bulkheads and deck of the bridge. Arbok twisted his own controls to seal the inner twistlock doors between the airlock and the bridge. He and Drong made their next move with precision, jamming a piece of metal into each twist control of the airlock door system, effectively jamming the system. Not even the ship computer could open these particular doors now.

With only vacuum in the bridge Arbok, couldn't talk to the computer. Clumsy in his suitbag, he slammed a finger against the control marked EMERGENCY PRESSURIZATION. Again the computer had no reason to delay or interfere and air under pressure boomed back into the bridge and the outer airlock chamber.

Arbok threw back his bloated helmet and faceplate, ready for the moment he'd prepared for many days before. He whipped a cadbar chip card from a pocket, slipped it into the navigational command slot, closed the panel, banged his fist on the ACTIVATE button control and lifted his head.

EMERGENCY. EMERGENCY. THIS VESSEL IS UNDER ATTACK BY PIRATE VESSELS UNKNOWN ORIGIN. DETECTORS SHOW MISSILE HOMING ATTACK WITH THANTRON DEVICES. YOU HAVE EMERGENCY NAVIGATIONAL COMMANDS IN YOUR SYSTEM. ACTIVATE IMMEDIATELY,

REPEAT, TO ASSURE PRIME DIRECTIVE SURVIVAL THIS VESSEL ACTIVATE IMMEDIATELY. CAMTOK AUTHORITY

NOW RESTORES MAIN DRIVE. His hand moved swiftly, closed several twistlocks, slapped a connection tight, and the ship had full power again.

Acceleration slammed them against the bulkheads. Only the restraining cables saved them from a terrible battering. "Hang on!" Arbok yelled. "We're on our way! We're going into full warp overdrive in twenty seconds!"

Drong stared in disbelief. So did the others. "Where in the name of seven hells are we going!" Drong bellowed.

Arbok flung an arm upward and to the side despite the tremendous acceleration. They heard the warp overdrive coming on line, a deep groan that shivered bones and eyeballs and testicles and bubbled body liquids. "We're going out!" Arbok shouted. "Out there, a yellow star with a confirmed planetary system." He gasped for air. "Ten seconds!"

They tried to talk, but it was all too mad, too sudden, even to think. There was just time enough for one last shout. Arbok grinned against the terrible acceleration and the violent forces tearing through their bodies.

"It's your last chance! Kiss your ass goodbye!"

Pain tore through them and the universe became blood-red as they spun into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 7

"You know, for a smart honky, sometimes you do some pretty dumb things, Marden." Jube Bailey chewed on a strip of venison and chugged cold beer while he tried to rattle his friend's cage.

Jake lifted an eyebrow and turned his head to study the black man who'd become closer to him than anyone else in his life. Jake sighed and pushed his chair back from the computer console where he'd been programming the system with new capabilities to link up with other computers beyond Old Millford.

"Okay, bluebelly, what's your pitch this time?" Jake threw back to Jube.

"Bluebelly?" Jube blinked at the name. "Why bluebelly?"

"Because it sounds better than niggergut and I'm trying my best to be nice to a poor ol' darky."

"Your momma," Jube laughed. "What I was wondering about was how you could be so damn dumb as to turn loose that mixed blood. Old Luther, man, to you he's a genius with all that electronics shit. To me he's one smart voodoo fucker. Half the people in this joint really believe he's got that third eye. They're scared shitless of him."

"He's a damn good psychologist," Jake said.

"He's better than that. He's even got you snowed. Hell, he's got long green stashed all around the country. Got contacts all over the world, and-"

"I know that, Jube. What's the bitch?"

"You send his brown ass to Atlanta, right? Buy a bunch of equipment, okay. He does that. He picks up all the goods you want and he orders it sent down here. I understand all that. You should have gone instead of him."

"First rule, Jube. One man can't do it all. It's the team that counts."

"What the hell kind of team is it when the man with the third eye is going to split? He's history, Jake."

Bailey was dead serious. "He'll leave a visible trail to throw everybody off and then he's gone. He's got passports in a dozen different names and a dozen different countries. That son of a bitch can be a whitey or a nigger or a brown or anything he wants to be. He's a fat cat, man, so why should he come back here?"

Jake smiled and held out his hand for a beer; as usual, one of the faggots rushed to place a cold brew in his hand. "Because," Jake spoke without missing a beat in his response, "this is the only place in die whole damned world where Luther Cogswell is appreciated for what's folded up so neatly between his ears. Just about everybody out there," he referred with unconcealed disgust for the straight world, "judges old Luther the way he's always wanted them to see him. The sharpie, the fat cat, the man with the supplies, the cat with the bread, the voodoo priest with the hex, the arm with the muscle, the junkman, the mechanic, and key-puncher, the man with the right contacts, the fixer, the briber-"

Bailey held up both hands to stem the verbal onslaught. "Okay, okay, I get your drift, man. You telling me Luther is more interested in staying behind these walls because you recognize him as a real brain?"

Jake was hard serious. "You're damned right, Jube. There isn't that much money in the world for a man to buy respect for what he's held in the highest esteem within himself. He's a goddamned Einstein in a

dozen different directions. Shit, Jube, he can always bust out of here! He can always go anywhere he wants, and then he's either just one more junk dealer or a witch doctor with chicken blood and shit on his baggy pants. / respect Luther Cogswell. And because I do, you also respect him."

"Say who?" Jube demanded.

"Say me, old buddy." Jake chuckled. "Besides, there's a new kind of challenge here."

"Lay it on me, bro."

"Can the shit, Jube. You know it. What the hell's this dumb old nigger routine from you? From this place, Luther's

putting on the biggest scam of his life. Out there, the feds and the law is smug as shit about how they caught the voodoo man and busted his ass for a century plus. And here he is having the time of his life, going where and when, being respected for his genius, and looking forward to a dream he's been playing up to for weeks now."

"This time you're beyond what I know," Jube said seriously. "What dream?"

"An empire. Luther and I talked about it all one night. He started talking over what he could have on the outside. Broads, money, whiskey, luxury homes and cars and suddenly he said it all had gone flat. A couple of things were missing."

"I get one guess?" Jube asked.

Jake grinned. "Go ahead. Read his mind."

"No friends. Not in the real sense." He watched Jake nod. "Can't eat more than one meal at a time."

"Bingo. You still got the floor."

"My momma used to tell me sunset was always something special when you shared it with someone else."

"Your momma was a smart lady."

"And it ain't much fun climbing to the top of the mountain and finding out there's nobody up there you can trust, which means you have just become the only man left in the whole world. It all goes hollow from there on."

"But if the voodoo man uses his potential to the best-"

"How come you forgot how to talk dumb nigger?"

"Shut up, Jake. He really means it about the empire, doesn't he?"

"Yep."

"Not drugs or that shit."

"Nope."

"I think I've got it."

"Let's see how good your momma taught you."

"He wants," Jube said slowly and carefully, "to bring the whole damn prison system into what you're doing right here in Old Milliard. Set up a network through your computers. Tie it all in together. Mass power, personnel, banking, records, manipulating just about everything."

"You had a right smart momma, Jube."

Jube Bailey's eyes widened. "Why, that mixed nigger blood son of a bitch," he said, his voice almost a hoarse whisper. "Control the prisons and you can control almost anyone, and that means ..." His voice trailed off.

"Political power," Jake finished for him. "Big political power."

"Can he do it?" Jube asked.

"Uh huh. With help."

"We going to help the witch doctor?"

"I sure as hell hope so," they heard from the entryway. They turned to see Luther Cogswell in a dapper gray flannel business suit, silk fedora, gleaming shoes, and a cigar jutting from a solid gold holder. Luther joined them in the lounge chairs. He glanced at one of the cringing "girls." "Scotch and soda. Very neat. Got it? Prechill the glass or I'll cut your fucking heart out."

"Now, that's style," Jube laughed.

"I heard a bunch of what you two were saying," Luther told the two men. He looked straight at Bailey.

"You're the head nigger here in more ways than color. You got any questions about me, big man, do us all a favor and hit me with them now. If we is going to do all these things you've been talking about, there ain't no halfway measures. Got to be total trust."

"Should I trust you?" Jube asked, not smiling.

"That's a bullshit question. I know you people." He nodded at Jake Marden. "He trusts me. So you trust me, right?"

"Only one thing you got to get straight yet," Jube said.

"I'm listening."

"I'm the head nigger, just like you say," Jube said, and all shadow of humor was gone. "I'm the executioner. It's real important you understand that. This man, this Jake Marden, he's got more deep brains than you and me and Maddox and the rest of us put together. Maybe not the kind of smarts that wins the Nobel Prize, but a hundred of them wouldn't last ten minutes against him alone. We understand one another, voodoo man? He runs the show. / decide who fucks up. When they do, I don't ask Jake and he don't question me. It's execution time."

A huge smile appeared on Luther Cogswell's face. "Hell, man, that's great. Besides, I'll always know what you're doing, Bailey. Remember me?" He held two fingers above his forehead to represent horns.

"I'm the man with the third eye, sees all, knows all." He held up his glass in a toast.

They'd sealed the deal. "Now," Luther said to Jake Marden, "you are not going to fucking believe the new stuff they've developed out there."

"Such as?"

"Ever hear of the Max Headroom Special?"

"Uh uh."

"Not on the market. Very hush-hush. Made by Hanover-Pikke, they're the same people builds them cesium time systems and anti-ballistic missile radars they test out in the Pacific, on Kwajalein and them islands. They got all sorts of contracts with CIA and NSA and all them top government agencies. Well, they come up with this Max Headroom Special. It's a computer system. You feed into it, well, take Spunt."

"You take the fucking warden," Bailey growled.

"Figure of speech, Jube, figure of speech," Cogswell said to ease Bailey's reaction. "Let's say we need to talk to somebody in government." He shook his head. "No, I mean, we want Spunt to talk in his position of warden, okay?"

"He'll do what we say right now," Bailey reminded him.

"Sure, sure, but it may not always be that way. He's hair-trigger. He's pussy-whipped. He is fucking no* reliable, man."

"Stay with that Special," Jake told him.

"I am," Luther insisted. "That's the whole point of this, You take this Max Headroom Special-it's a model HP 7088H, by the way-and you start programming it with Spunt. Still pictures, video film, motion pictures; anything and everything. You get him talking, sleeping, pissing, eating, walking, getting up and down, humping his old lady, kicking his dog- everything about him. It goes into the 7088 and the computer there builds up a terrific four-dimensional matrix of the old bastard. Seen from every angle as well as-

"Four-dimensional?" Jube broke in, genuinely puzzled.

"Yes, sir, four. Ain't enough to have everything I said, you got to have a proper speed for all his motions, talking, tones, mannerisms, nose-picking; whatever. So the speed and the pace at which he does his shit, that's as important as anything

else. Like his voice. Too fast and it's a screech. If it's too slow he sounds like turds falling out of an elephant's ass. It don't sound like him."

Bailey nodded, satisfied.

"Anyway, once we have it all in there, and that includes his whole family, because you never know when you need them to verify or prove something about Spunt himself, the operator becomes Spunt. He sits down before a television scanner, see? Say it's Jake, here, and he wants to talk to the warden at a prison

in Georgia. He can talk by phone or, what's lots better, we makes sure the Georgia warden, he's got one of these computer-linked videophones. He sits in front of his phone and scanner and Jake does the same here. Jake sees the Georgia warden, but the man in Georgia, uh uh, he don't see no Jake. Jake's picture and voice goes into our computer, this Max Headroom Special, see? And then the signal goes out on the computer link to Georgia, and the big man up there, why, he sees, he listens, he knows it's Spunt he's talking to, because he knows Spunt and he's seeing the same old asshole he's known all these years. In fact, if he wants to transfer a prisoner from Georgia to here, let's say you got special interest in someone, the Georgia warden can even watch Jake, who comes across as Spunt, signing his name. No matter what Jake writes on the paper here, by the time it comes out on their machine in Georgia it is Spunt's signature, only it's the seven oh eighty eight what's really doin' the signing."

Jube Bailey was all attention, tight as a snare drum as Luther Cogswell wove his electronics spell. "Hold on, voodoo man. You're telling us that you can do this with anybody we want?"

Cogswell nodded with enthusiasm. "It is the damndest thing you have ever seen. They use computer enhancement in their new system so that the picture becomes a video or film of the person you're creating. That's why the input is so important. This enhancement shit, it comes from all them spy satellites taking pictures of the earth, you know, military stuff. Also, the techniques the space agency people developed for the pictures coming back from the other planets. Man, some of those signals come back here as low as a

billionth of a watt, and they can dump it into a big cryogenic tank and keep boosting it until they get the original picture that was sent from a billion or a couple of billion miles away. So just figure what they can do with stuff that's clean and clear to begin with."

Jube was leaning forward, massive arms resting on his knees. He sat up suddenly, turning to the other people in the room. "Hey, all you motherfuckers, clear outta' here right now! Move your asses and don't come back until you hear me calling you. Move!" He turned back to Jake and Luther. "Less fucking people hear all this the better. Now, voodoo man, this means we can do this with anybody, like you said."

"Just so long as we got input, especially clean voice tapes and good film or video, yes, sir, we can bring anybody to life in that seven oh eighty eight. Jube, man, I can do you so good that if / was talking through the system, your own mother couldn't tell it wasn't you."

"Almost, almost," Jake broke in. "Some things only his mother and Jube would know. If she asked something that was that personal, the operator wouldn't be able to answer."

"That's a real problem and that's why all the data available has got to go into the compufiles for each individual. Also," Luther added, "it ain't difficult to figure out what shit to stay away from. You got to play it careful, but with the exception of something damned personal, known only to two or three people, it works."

Jake leaned back in his seat, a smile playing about the edges of his mouth. Luther nudged Jube Bailey and nodded at Jake. "You see canary feathers, man?"

"Yeah. He's thinking up a storm."

"We put Maddox in charge of this program," Jake announced. "He's got the political contacts. Most important, he's still got contacts in security agencies, and above all, he knows a hell of a lot of people in the news media. They got video files up the ass on politicians, public officials-the works. And whoever we don't have, it's easy enough to send out a TV news crew for an interview."

"Only they don't know what they're being interviewed for," Jube said, grinning.

"That's the pitch," Jake confirmed. "It's like we can have any one of a couple of hundred people in real power seats speaking for us, saying exactly what we want, and doing exactly what we want. And between Martinez and Korolov we can start the international contacts. Some of this shit's going to cost a bundle. The man with the third eye, here, he's perfect for that."

"Oh?" Luther Cogswell kept a perplexed look on his face.

"Just think of all the drug deals you're going to handle, and all the bread that's involved, when you can be anybody you want, voodoo man. Then we set up the bank accounts and the finances through a couple of

dozen banks inside and outside the country, and we are in business." Jake went quiet for a few moments.

"Luther, how long before we get this new equipment?"

"Maybe ten days. Truck delivery right to our door."

"How long to set it up?"

"Week, maybe two. Then another week or two to learn how to run it. I got to have a couple of bodies with real sharp brains to work on this stuff so we can keep the input going right around the clock."

Jake had the smile of a big cat on his face. "You know what they call this shit we're doing?"

They waited for him to go on.

"It's called Takeover."

They'd never worked harder in their lives. The infusion of goals and purpose worked like an on-going injection of adrenalin. Theirs was a multi-pronged assault on the elements they considered most necessary to establish a hard base of security and operations, consolidating as they went along and continually building up additional strength and flexibility of movement in the outside world.

They gave Jeff Maddox the job Jake Marden had already selected for him. Build up within the Hewlett-Packard 7088H the computerized presentations of key people. Beginning with their own warden, after which they would electronically replicate his family. The top security people of Old Millford. They found less difficulty than anticipated in bagging the governor and the lieutenant-governor, imbued as were those two worthies with soaring political ambitions and the accompanying blizzard of public appearances in person and on television. With clear audio tracks and extensive video and film, with their own film crews filling in whatever blanks complained about by the computer, Maddox and his team soon were able to produce top political figures on a television screen that were literally exact reproductions of the people they'd captured electronically. They still had a very long way to go, with a list of governors, the cadre of key figures in the White House, the most influential of the underworld's legions, and anyone else they felt would slide within the embrace of their needs.

Luther Cogswell, under Jake's tutelage as well as his own experience in laundering vast sums of money through the drug cartels and military weapons suppliers of the globe, began the careful buildup of storing funds in key financial institutions on four continents. At any time they could draw down on millions of dollars, and with Cogswell's skill and contacts in moving small mountains of cocaine and huge packets of heroin, he regained control of the vast, seedy empire of drug operations he had established through much of the world. Often this enabled them to trade the drugs for goods or deeds and thus avoid the always ticklish activity of shifting enough money to draw attention from the straight world-which included the powerful military establishments that could always bring them devilish problems.

"I want you to do the people job," Jake informed Jube Bailey.

"What am I, a fucking personnel department?" Bailey bitched.

Jake nodded. "No one else can handle people better than you, Jube. Get down with it, Jube, damnit.

This isn't a game. You've got to handle it."

Jube offered a sour look. "Lay it on me," he sighed.

"Clean the human garbage out of this place," Jake told him, and Jube no longer doubted just how earnest his friend meant his directions. "Look, we got a pile of walking shit all over this joint. Zombies all fucked out in the head from drugs. Weirdos and crazies. Old humpheads can't take care of themselves. We got faggots coming out of the walls. We got madmen; Jesus, Jube, we got everything here we don't need.

We can't use any of them except for garbage jobs. You know, messhall and sewage and janitorial. Keep the big strong dumbies for that, but get rid of the rest of them. We've got the moxie to do that now. Do it under Spunt's name. Use the prison board, the state group in Tallahassee, to start the switch."

"Out with the bad and in with the good, huh? Jake, Jake, this is a goddamned prison, not a society ward!"

"I never said out with the bad. I want every son of a bitch with AIDS the hell out of here now. They got the clap or syph or whatever, they got hepatitis, they're strung out on shit, get rid of them. They got pneumonia or TB, boot 'em out. Bring in the best and the smartest and the strongest and the healthiest. Like I say, now we've got the moxie to do it."

Jube shrugged. "Consider it done."

"I want you to start it," Jake added hastily. "Not get locked into it. Oversee it. Play shotgun. Give the daily grind to people who've got the smarts to know what to do and be loyal to us."

"Okay, okay," Jube shrugged. "Oh, while we're at it, you got anything else special in mind for me?"

Jake grinned. "Sure. You know the towns of High Springs, Hawthorne, Alachua, Chiefland, Newberry, the whole bunch of them?"

"Yeah. Starke, Melrose-so what? This a road map contest?"

"No, it's going to be a political campaign. We buy the slots for the cops. That's for starters. I don't give a shit what it costs. You know the routine. Luther and Maddox know it inside out. Start putting the right people in the right places, or buy out the ones who are already in." Jake smiled. "Remember us? We're taking over. We're going to own the countryside and we're going to be invisible while we're doing it."

"And I thought staying in prison was going to be a vacation," Jube grumbled. But he was grinning back at Jake.

"How many rocket launchers you want?" Major Carlos Martinez turned slowly in his swivel chair before his computer keyboard to face Jake Marden. To Martinez's left, Vasily Korolov was his usual phlegmatic self but no longer

with a cast-iron stove lid for a face. He held a small computer in his left hand and his right, with thick stubs for fingers, had somehow become magically endowed with the ability to move with blurring speed on the small keys clasped in his grizzly-like hand.

"Fifty," Jake said, his own face set for a head-on exchange. He believed in Martinez and Korolov, but the easy grace with which the huge Argentinian officer attended to weapons gathering defied a sense of reality.

"You want them big enough to stop a tank? Patton? Churchill? T-Seventy Two?"

"The biggest," Jake told him. Carlos Martinez spun about and his fingers tip-tapped the keys. He came around again. "How many rounds for each?"

"One hundred. All the stuff has to be shoulder-fired." "Of course," Martinez said and turned again to the keyboard. He turned about once more. "Okay. Five thousand rounds. It's done. What about stuff for aircraft?" "You mean like Stingers?"

"Stingers, Redeyes, Whackers, whatever you want, man, you got. The best is the Stinger Mark Three. It's so new they didn't even come up with a name for it. But it's hot. It will chase a plane right down a goddamn railroad tunnel or a chopper through the trees. It's got radar signature lockon and infrared."

Jake blinked. "Thirty should do. Twenty rounds per piece." Martinez nodded to the Russian. "Mark down forty and we go for thirty rounds each. Um, add ten training rounds for every piece we get, ground or air."

Korolov made his notations on his hand computer and said, "Uh."

"Look, Jake, you wasting a lot of time. I know what the fuck we need here. Heavy stuff, light stuff; the works. Flamethrowers, grenade launchers, homers, fletchets, daisy cutters; all of it. Why don't you leave it to me?"

Jake held up both hands. "You got it." He didn't want to interfere in any way with Martinez. He was doing an incredible job. "One question." "Hey, shoot, man."

"We need a couple of choppers here on the grounds. And under cover."

"Got it all set, man. Four of them new Boeing killers. Better than the Hughes. They carry everything. Hot-snot ships. I've already ordered one of the gyms broken up for a hangar, fuel supply, weapons, the whole works. You know we got twenty-seven guys in this place who are all top chopper jocks?"

"I know," Jake said quietly. "Next question and I'll leave you alone."

"You ain't ask one yet I can no handle, right, man?"

"Right on, Carlos," Jake told him. "What about the heavy choppers?"

"We got them on six airfields within fifty miles of here. I even got some farmland-Maddox took care of it-right outside that Camp Blanding. They're in barns and garages, same colors as the army ships, and you can't tell them apart. Then we got some in commercial colors. Real pretty. We got them rigged to snap on external loads. One moment they carrying tourists, right? You land and throw out the tourists and snap on the gunpacks. Catlings, rocket pods, everything, and you're in business."

Jake gestured casually. "Stay with it, man. You're liable to make corporal yet, Carlos."

"Thank you, sir!" Martinez shot back with a grin and a sloppy salute.

Jake took the long way through the prison to return to the underground, underwater command post. The changes were visible. Old Millford was cleaner, tighter, neater, sharper, and you didn't hear crazies screaming day and night any more. He chuckled. When the state started out to make Old Millford into a model prison of the modern age, they never dreamed what they would create.

"Warden, that's the way it's going to be. No; let me correct myself," Jake added to his own words.

"That's the way it is. You and your family are going to live inside these walls from now on. You, your wife, and your two kids. Inside," Jake repeated.

Herbert J Spunt turned purple. "That's not our deal," he said through clenched teeth.

"That's the deal now," Jake said harshly.

"You're holding my family hostage!" Spunt was beginning to shake with rage and frustration for having stepped willingly, almost eagerly, into the trap. Jake Marden stopped him short.

"Spunt, let me tell you something that I don't want you to forget." Jake paused. "Sit down and listen to me, and-"

"I'll do anything you want me to do, Marden, but you've got to leave my wife and kids out of this!"

"Sit down before I hogtie you in that chair," Jake snapped. "And listen." He watched Spunt ease himself back into his seat, gripping the armrests. Jesus, he's going to hyperventilate and fucking pass out on me.

"Warden, despite all that shit that ever went between us, I never broke my word to you once I gave it. Is that right?"

Spunt's face worked a mess of writhing muscles and tics. His upper lip showed beads of sweat and he was pale. "Y-yes."

"Then I'm giving you my word, we have no intention of harming one hair on your kids or your wife.

You've got to understand that. We mean them no harm and they won't ever be hurt by anybody in here.

Just the opposite, man, just the opposite. You'll use your office just like you always did, You and yours will live in a furnished apartment. Your kids will go to school, inside here, with a private tutor. We can tell them anything you want about the need for their security. Escaped cons from here or any other prison.

Their safety is compromised outside. They're in here to be protected."

"Some protection!" Spunt shouted.

Jake eased into his own chair. "Warden," he said, quietly. "Think about it. Where would they be safer? Those people out there," he pointed to include the population of Old Millford, "they all rest a lot easier knowing the warden and his family are inside with them. They feel secure. If they feel secure, they're going to make damned sure your family is always okay. If you don't understand this, all you're going to do is make it tough on everybody. If you do understand it, you'll recognize everything I'm saying is true.

We do not

make war on women and children. Period. I give you my word, once again, that's the way it is."

For several minutes Spunt worked himself down from his plateau of emotional near-explosion. Several times he started to speak, thought better of it while he was still gasping for air. Finally he was down, breathing steadily and deeply. "Your word, Marden?"

"Yes."

"H-how do I tell them? I mean, there's got to be questions-"

"There won't be anything you can't answer, Warden."

"When does this all happen?"

"It's already happened. They're here. In that apartment."

"What? You kidnapped my family?" Spunt's eyes opened wide. He looked like a gasping fish again.

"No kidnap. They were told there was a problem and that you wanted them here. They brought all their clothes, their personal stuff, the kids brought their books and games and anything they wanted. They believe they're here because you want them here."

"Th-they're not frightened?"

"Why should they be? You're a good husband and father who's protecting them."

"Can I see them?" Spunt was already standing, wanting desperately to believe.

"Hell, yes, you can see them. Right now, in fact. One thing. All they know about me is that I'm a trustee. Clean record all the way. They don't know a thing about my background, or that of Bailey. Nothing. They are not afraid of us. Just the opposite."

"Let's go, damnit," Spunt said, desperately eager to calm his inside terror.

They left his office, walking together. The uniformed guards acknowledged their presence, nodding to or saluting Spunt as they went by. It was incredibly calm, efficient, thorough. Heavy barred gates slid aside on cue. Armed guards kept their distance. Then they went through sliding doors of thick armored glass.

"This is the main entrance to your apartment."

Down another long hall, a corridor gleaming along the floor, clean as a hound's tooth along the walls.

They stopped

before a heavy wooden door. Spunt turned to Marden. "In there?"

"In there. And for Christ's sake, Spunt, remember-you're the boss man and I'm the trustee. Got it?"

They rang the bell. A portly black woman in a wide apron opened the door. She could have stepped out of an Aunt Jemima picture on a pancake box. She smiled, a blast of white teeth in a gleaming black face.

"You're the warden," she said warmly, and opened the door wide for him. Her face clouded as she looked at the huge, looming figure of Jake Marden. "Who's he?" she demanded defensively.

"Oh, this is, ah, Marden. He's ah, my trustee. My bodyguard. He's-it's all right for him to come in." Spunt was gaining swift control of himself. "What's your name?"

The smile returned. "I'm Corrie, Warden. I'm your housekeeper here. I cook, clean, babysit and I don't let nobody, least of all no overgrown cons," she glared at Marden, "mess with my people."

They walked inside and Corrie closed the door behind them. "My wife?" Spunt asked Corrie.

"In the kitchen, sir."

"My children? Nancy and Chuck?"

"They is in the television room, Warden. I'll let your wife know you're here. What do you want to do with this big lummo?"

Jake looked positively servile. "I'd like to wait for the warden in the television room with his children."

Corrie looked at Spunt and he nodded. Corrie pointed. "Kitchen's down that hall and to the left. You," she pointed to Marden, "come with me." She led the way to a large room with sofas and bean bags scattered about. He knew the children; Nancy was sixteen and Chuck fourteen. Bright kids. They were watching a news program. Marden's interest quickened. "I'll wait here for the warden," he told Corrie.

She nodded cautiously. "The warden says you're all right. But you mind your manners, hear?"

"Yes, ma'am." He waited until she left, then eased onto a sofa.

"Hey, kids, what's going on?" he asked softly. "Seems like everyone on that program is excited."

The girl turned to him. "Boy, you better believe they're excited."

"Yeah, they're going crazy out there," Chuck added, eager to join in.

"What's happening?" Marden asked.

"Ah, it's that same old UFO stuff," Chuck said with an air of superiority. "You know, people are seeing things in the sky that really aren't there." He offered a knowing teenaged sneer to emphasize his point.

Jake laughed with him.

Nancy didn't share their humor. Fists on her hips she glared at her brother. "Boy, you're really a nerd, you know that?" The girl with bright green eyes and auburn hair and a woman's figure turned to Jake. "He thinks he's so smart. But he isn't, really. And he can't get anything straight, either."

She plopped down on a bean bag before the television. "See? Chucky Nerd talks about people seeing things in the sky. But they're not. It's not in the sky. Our atmosphere, I mean."

"Here we go again!" Chuck sang out, doing his best to needle his sister before this huge man in their midst. "Miss Einstein, if you please," he continued needling, now in a singsong voice.

Nancy adopted a prim attitude. "I'll ignore him if you will, too," she told Marden.

Jake looked at the boy and winked. "Sure," he said to Nancy. "We'll just pretend he's not here." He gestured to the television screen. "You said it's not UFO's?"

"That's right," she answered, her excitement growing immediately in response to an adult considering her

seriously. "UFO's are, well, you know, people see all sorts of things in the sky. Lights, objects, discs. They could be planes or balloons or even a planet under unusual seeing conditions, but they're exactly what UFO means. Objects that are unidentified."

Chuck tried to slip into the adult conversation. "The other ones she calls IFO's."

"For Identified Flying Objects," Nancy asked.

"And this isn't a UFO or an IFO?" Jake queried. He was thoroughly enjoying this bright youngster.

"No, sir," she said seriously. "It's way out in space and it shouldn't be there. I mean, when scientists first detected it, it was because instruments aboard our satellites went, well, sort of crazy."

"What kind of crazy?"

"Like a great pulse." Her face screwed up in confusion. "I'm not sure of what they meant, but," she brightened, "I don't think they're sure. One scientist they interviewed said it was sort of a super-colossal EMP, you know, an electromagnetic pulse?"

Jake nodded. "Yes, I know. A sudden release of great energy tears up the electromagnetic pulse of the earth, breaks up the bow wave between us and the sun."

"You a scientist or something? What are you doing in prison?"

"I'm not a scientist, but I remember when we exploded hydrogen bombs over the Pacific Ocean, and the tremendous burst of energy created strange lights and auroras over most of the world. It was a huge electrical storm."

"Uh huh, that's what a few scientists have been saying on t.v. But they say it's all wrong, because it's coming from the other side. I mean, not from the sun, but opposite, like here's the sun," she held up her fist, "and here's the earth, and now, going right on out past the earth, far, far out in space, there's this terrific burst of energy."

"Yeah, and a whole bunch of scientists said it was impossible. So, there," Chuck threw at his sister.

"Well, it may be impossible," Nancy said, drawing up her chin just a bit to remain the older and superior member of her family, "but they're telling people to be ready for some really big disturbances in our own electrical atmosphere. You know, like a super solar storm? If it happens, they say it will knock out radio and television all over the world, that planes won't be able to navigate. Stuff like that, and-

Warden Spunt came quietly into the room, his look of affection for his children shifting to concern as quickly as he turned his gaze to Marden, then back to his youngsters. "Having fun, kids?" he asked.

Nancy clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, yes! And, Daddy, you know what?"

"What?"

"Your friend, here," she said, her eyes bright, "he's so smart! He knows all about this stuff. It's nice to have another adult to talk to!"

Marden coughed to hide his smile behind his hand.

Jube Bailey put off his usual banter of greeting as he sat on the couch beside Jake Marden. The big man leaned forward, elbows planted on his knees, chin resting on two huge hands rolled into fists. He kept his eyes glued to the television.

"You been looking at the tube for three solid hours, man," Jube said quietly, taking advantage of a commercial.

"Yeah," Jake said heavily, still engrossed in his thoughts. "I'm taping it also. Hey, hang in here. I been needing to piss for an hour."

He came back while CNN was still running through a commercial. "What's this shit all about, anyway?"

Jube asked. "UFO's or flying saucers. I hear the guys talking crazy stuff. Little green men and all that shit. It must be heavy to come through these walls. Takes a lot to interest these mothers."

"Jube, it hasn't got diddly-shit to do with anything you just said. No freaks or whizzy dooflops or any of that crap, no flying saucers or Howard the Schmuck." He gestured at the television. "Put it this way, Jube. CNN has had this stuff on solid for nearly five hours." He glanced at his friend. "Think that's important enough?"

"Whoa! Hold on, fall back, man. Time to get my thinking cap back on. Speak in tiny syllable words. Okay, now. They tracking something out there?" Jube gestured idly by bringing his arm over his head,

forefinger pointing up.

"There's a sudden appearance of something out there."

Bailey looked disgusted. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Okay, okay, look at it this way. According to the people working the big telescopes, the optical and the radio frequencies, several days ago, maybe a few weeks ago-it takes the effect that long to reach us-an object, or a mass of some kind, of a density no one's ever conceived, just appeared somewhere beyond the outer reaches of the solar system."

"A ship?" Bailey's face showed his complete rejection of that idea.

"Most likely not," Jake said. "It would have to be too big.

The mass is too great. I mean, the damn thing would have to be bigger than the nucleus of Halley's Comet, and that sucker was over ten miles long and made of solid rock."

"So?" Jube said, and waited. He got tired of waiting. "What's your guess? You've been hot spot on this far-out shit."

"From what I've heard, and I'm squeezing it all down-

"Thanks for small favors."

"-something of enormous mass, or of enormous energy, which can have the same effect on our instruments, has literally appeared out of nowhere, a couple of billion miles beyond the orbit of Pluto. The only things we know of that far out are some oddball comets that don't amount to dust rags."

"If it ain't a ship is it a planet? Or something like a small moon?"

"It can't be," Jake said, his perplexity mirrored in the deep creases of his brow. "I mean, its density is far greater than any land of planet. It's like a dark star, a collapsed star, maybe even some kind of neutron star."

"You are losing me but fast," Jube warned.

"Okay, okay, you get something called a white dwarf star. It's like our sun cooling off and squeezing itself down to the size of the earth. The sun is over eighty thousand miles in diameter. Now picture it squeezed down to the size of the earth-

"Eight thousand miles diameter?"

"Right. But it's got the same mass. Now, if the star goes through an absolute rip-roarer of a collapse, it squeezes together all its subatomic particles. Everything turns into neutrons and the star is only about eight or ten miles in diameter. But it's got the mass of a huge star. That kind of mass, appearing suddenly, really fucks up the fabric of space. It rips space and time like it was a curtain caught in a shredder."

"What the fuck is this twisting space and time shit?"

"They're one and the same, Jube. It's tough to see it like that, so why don't you just take my word for it?"

"I'll sure as shit try," Jube grumbled, "but I ain't making no promises. You sound like you got a bunch of squeezed down marbles between your ears as it is." He opened two cold ones and shoved a brew at Jake.

"But you don't think it's a superstar or some shit like that, do you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"If it came out of nowhere, or what will do for nowhere, and it was a dense or a neutron star, the energy required to move it so fast and stop it so fast-like it was being warped through another dimension-is just too big to calculate."

Jube looked up at the ceiling. "Hey, God, you want a beer? You listen to his shit much longer, you gonna have one hell of a fucking heavenly headache!" He turned back to Jake. "Spare me all this shit. What do you think it is?"

"I'll be fucked if I know."

"Now that's the first intelligent thing you've said all night!"

CHAPTER 8

Drong the Kurd sprawled in the wide chair of synthetic fur in the observation and data studies bridge of Frarsk. He'd been here the equivalent of several days and nights working closely with Aktuk san Yangst Arbok, who had risen through the same characteristics of boiling steam climbing through grates and pores to his present position as their captain. No anger or resentment attended that catapulting ascension, rare as it was for five separate races, separate of both planetary and stellar composition and backgrounds, to so willingly accept in yet another race a position of dominant leadership. Yet they all understood just how critical that choice must be and was. Once they'd warped out of transspace, or what some of the more poetic clouts considered hyperspace, and gone through the eyeball-strangling hideous pain and mental twisting of normal space-time, they were gone forever from the opportunity to seek out their home worlds. Their computer, Arbok had explained to him with great patience, "has clawed open its stomach lining, reached inside its stomach cavity with nails of steel, and haphazardly ripped away its twisting, winding, infolding innards. In effect, you might say," Arbok smiled, "the computer is devouring its own intestines."

"I hope it pukes," Drong snarled.

"Metaphorically or electronically speaking, it is not only puking violently, it also has a shattering headache, a sphincter muscle that refuses to function, and a refuse-diminishing system that has gone into paralytic emotional shock."

"You mean it's all fucked up," Drong said carefully.

"A splendid summation," Arbok grinned. "More to the point, Drong, except for manual control of the computer where it runs this ship, it's brought its ghost. It's almost a body without substance. It's hanging on by its electronic fingernails. That isn't much but it permits us control and power as we need it and I intend to keep it that way."

Arbok wished for a Makkian cigar. Wished for it desperately. Even one of those putrid, shit-green cigars from Brist's home world of Llongctik, smelling and tasting as they did of multiple-reclaimed rubberized plastic, was preferable to no cigar. He sighed and pushed away the thought with one final picture in his mind. What's a space jock without a cigar? Much the same as a stud blasphemous of his own world. Three horns or not, without a dick he wasn't worth more than the meat on his hideous hide. A space jock without a cigar-why, it was sacrilegious.

Shut up and get to work, he snarled to himself, and tried to radiate a wave of psychic cooperation that would envelop Drong and perhaps penetrate his brain with its wildly mutating genetic structure.

"We've spent nearly a full chang studying this system," Drong said. He turned his chair slowly, aware the others had joined them on the data bridge. Ytram was unmistakable, smelling as he did like the rotted dumpballs of a long-dead swamp buffsaam. Every time his massive foot thudded against the metalform deck, beads of sweat and particles of dirt jumped into the air about him in an odiferous cloud that could choke off the blast tubes of a planet shuttle. The others had their own peculiarities. Brist squeaked; not from his mouth orifice or his breathing but because he was filled with liquid to such an extraordinary degree. To Drong, he was a walking sneaker filled with water from several days of raging rainfall.

Grangles swished, covered from head to foot with an extraordinary layer of clothing he'd made from sundered furniture and whatever else he could find on a ship run by robots and sweeps and a mad computer. And Barq; ah, that one was a pleasure to have around. He moved with the sound of a gentle wind and his was a soul truly warm and directly reaching the gods. To Drong, Barq el Quatrane was a magnificent token of good fortune, and Barq remained unaware that Drong had sworn at all costs to protect this marvelous water creature of the world Sagandrin.

"Like I said," Drong repeated as the others made them selves comfortable, "we've gone through a full chang studying the solar system the ship's computer dumped us in, and dumped is the right word. I'm not your best man to explain what's out there. My own travel between one planet and another was zippo until I killed a Camtok Trader, and then the high council of the Eldorn sentenced my ass forever to prison. I have a feel for what we'll find. Arbok tells me it's the unique nature of my genetic makeup. That one way I'm able to mutate and regrow so swiftly is a sort of psychic symbiosis within my genetic system. That's behind me. I'm happy just to take a healthy dump every morning and that's as much as I ever knew until I got on this shitship and Arbok began stuffing ideas into my head. The reason I'm saying all this is that

whatever I have felt or sensed, I brought to Arbok and Barq, and they've been piecing it all together." Drong sat back exhausted after completing the longest speech he'd ever made in his life. He also became aware this was one of the very major changes in himself that Arbok was trying to point out. Drong was a perfect example of swift adaptability to whatever new survival mode was necessary to meet a new survival-necessary environment. Until now he had never needed to communicate so extensively; now the need was becoming apparent, if not to Drong's thinking mind, at least to his unique genetic structure and that was dictating how he would act and react. He sat quietly, stunned and awed at and with himself.

"What do we have out there?" Brist inquired, gesturing with an arm of greenish radial-tire skin. Until now Brist had offered no ideas nor asked any questions, but the time had come to piece together what could well be the solar system not necessarily of their choice, but for the rest of their lives.

"Well, it sure isn't your top-quality bunch of worlds," Drong added in a final paroxysm of thinking.

Brist started to remind Drong he hadn't asked him what this system was not, but he thought better of it. He understood the vast churnings with Drong, and Brist was willing to afford him the benefit of all doubts until his fiery DNA code settled down to a comfortable boil. Brist offered a quizzical look to Arbok, an unspoken transfer of his query.

"He's right," Arbok said with a deep sigh. He'd hoped

Drong would speak at somewhat greater length and with certainly more than a single dour sentence, but it wasn't to be. "We've been scanning the system. This ship isn't your best exploration vessel, but even this shitbarge requires some method of evading unexpected mass or fbrcekraks in deep space. So it's got search-and-pick radar that can get back detailed pulses of its target."

"You already know we've got a stable, G-type star before us, Barq added, "and that's a tremendous advantage because the radiations are acceptable to us all." He waited as a murmur of approval went through the group, except for Ytram, who didn't much care one way or the other and was much more interested in sniffing out the remains of a devastating fart he'd cut loose during the exchange. In desperation, Arbok hit the switch that would swiftly exchange their rotten atmosphere for machine-cleansed air.

"But as solar systems go," Barq continued, "the gods have dumped on this one. I mean, most of the planets, especially the bigger ones, are primitive gas balloons. Some are hot with fierce atmospheric disturbances that go on all the time. They even lack what we could consider a surface, and except for the most basic forms of life constantly swarming with changing chemicals and blasted night and day by lightning, their only interest to us is that, if you're interested in that sort of thing, they're different. There are some other worlds that are covered with oceans, but the stuff is awful, putrid, poisonous, savagely cold-need I go on?"

"Tell us something good, in the name of the great sand gods!" cried Grangles.

"Let me get through the drill," Barq insisted. "Twelve planets in all, but three of them are so far out they also fit the charts as misbegotten comets or planetoids and they don't amount to a row of chockrins. Worthless, barren, lifeless. They're beyond the photic exosphere of the star. Colorless crap. There's nine main planets, most of them gas balloon types, and those are on the outer shell of the system. It's got your normal dishdown center at solar core and a plane of the ecliptic that swoops upward from the center as you go out. There are four inner worlds, the closest to the sun. Forget the first one. We could land on its terminator but that would

really be dumb, dumb dumb. It's got a terminator because it keeps one side facing the star and metal boils away constantly. The other side is colder than an asteroid miner's ass in winter. We'd survive longer on this ship than we would making planetfall on that turd of a world."

"The second world," Arbok picked up the descriptions, "had a shot at being a real world, but somewhere along the line it gave up the ghost. It's a desert world-"

Grangles was fully alert. "Desert, you say? Sand? Rocky sand? High winds? Would I like it? Could I fit in with the locals?"

"Grangles, the worst of your home planet, Ishban, is a paradise compared to the second world out from this sun," Arbok said to cut off the rising excitement in Grangles. "Oh, it's a desert world, all right, but the pressure is about a hundred times greater at its surface than on Ishban. You know what that means? It's

like living a couple of thousand feet beneath a liquid water ocean, or trying to walk through the worst sludge or mud. Nothing grows there, and the temperature is so great that many metals run liquid and vaporize. The damned planet turns so slowly on its axis that you've got fantastic winds all the time and-Grangles, forget it. A droid couldn't survive down there."

Grangles slumped in his seat, grumbling. Arbok grinned at him. "I'm going to the fourth planet out-" "What's wrong with the third?" Drong broke in.

"The third world out is interesting. In more ways than we could ever imagine," Arbok told him. "But let's get rid of the last world that might even be considered-putting aside, as I said, number three. The fourth planet is more like Ishban, Grangle's world. It's all desert, canyons, rilles, cavities, and enormous volcanoes. It's got water ice frozen at its poles, although it looks at one time that it actually had running water. That was many millions of years ago. Nothing we can detect grows there now. Grangles, don't get your hopes up, damnit! You look like a schoolgirl about to get laid for the first time in your life!"

"You lead me a false trail, Makkian," Grangles snarled, anger and frustration boiling to the top of his limited emotionalism.

"Never," Arbok answered, carefully without rancor. "I have made certain you understood from the start that the fourth planet has gone through a devastating loss of what began as a great promise, just as we found on thousands of worlds in the inner galaxy. Look, Grangles, its gravity is barely thirty percent of my own world, Makk. The molecular energy of atmospheric gases is so great that all but the heaviest elements long ago whirled off into vacuum. Today the air is the thinnest wisp of pressure. There isn't enough oxygen to sustain biological combustion. Carbon dioxide rules that world-and only in the thinnest concentrations. Most of the great volcanoes are dormant; the few that are still alive pump precious little new materials into the atmosphere. The place is bone dry. Rocks and surface debris everywhere. It's a ghost of a world, my friend. It would take massive planetrip to open its buried and frozen water and before you did that we'd need the really big engines to churn out a meaningful atmosphere so that any water wouldn't sublimate immediately. Even with all your incredible resistance to fierce planetary surface conditions, you wouldn't be alive an hour after you walked the surface without a pressure suit and other protection. No false trail here; just a cruel mockery of what might have been."

"All right, all right," the Ishbanian warrior snarled. "That leaves one world left. I suppose it's some kind of miracle planet, hey?"

Arbok looked slowly from one face to the other without answering. He wanted every pair of eyes to meet his before he replied. Then he returned his gaze to Grangles.

"You're absolutely right," Arbok said in a voice barely loud enough for the others to hear. He accomplished what he wished; they were all leaning forward, straining to hear every word.

"A miracle planet?" Brist asked with a touch of genuine excitement.

"Deserts? Living deserts, not a planetary corpse?" Grangles burst out.

"A nice place?" Ytram asked with stolid slowness.

"Deserts, mountains, oceans, plains, massive land masses, great islands, huge ice sheets, weather of every kind ..." Barq said softly.

"Life forms?" Drong's question was as much plea as inquiry.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Arbok cautioned.

"Answer my goddamned question!" Drong roared.

"All right. I wanted to take this in a certain order but you're entitled to an answer. Yes, it has life forms."

"Uh, not just bugs or squishy things or those hardshelled little fuckers that eat shoes or blast tubes?"

"It's got those but not just those."

"Why are you being so blasted coy?" Brist demanded. "That isn't like you, Arbok. You're a mean goddamned lizoid fighter, a space jock, a warrior, a member of a leading race-"

"Oh, shut up, Brist," Arbok broke in impatiently. "I'm not being coy. If I just blurted out the things we've already discovered on the third world you'd all accuse me of tumbling my gyros."

"It's that unusual?" Drong asked.

"I'll answer for him," Barq el Quatrane slipped in. "It is not unusual. The third world is fantastic, unlike anything else that either myself or Arbok have ever known. It's got a mixture of just about everything you

might expect, ever to find on a single planet. It's as if the Great One got tired of planet-tripping and just threw all His dice in one shot onto that place."

Ytram farted and grinned. "Sound good, sound good!"

"Shut up," Grangles spat at Ytram, "and by the Holy One, stick your ass out in vacuum before you cut another slitherer like that last one. You could warp carbsteel!"

Brist looked carefully at Arbok. "Let me ask one question and then I will keep my silence until you finish, or, you desire us to query you. It has higher life forms?"

"Yes," Arbok said.

"Land creatures?"

"Yes."

"Are there oceans?"

"Up the yingyang."

"Creatures live in the water?"

"More creatures in that water than stars in all the galaxy."

"There's good atmosphere?"

"Thick, rich, turbulent, lightning-producing, high electrical activity, brimming over with oxygen and full natural replenishment."

Excitement gripped them all, even the bloated gaseous form of Ytram. The questions flew forth.

"Advanced life forms that fly?"

"Uhhuh."

"Amphibious?"

"Triphibious."

"What kind of locomotion?"

"They walk in bipedal fashion. They walk on all fours. They run on two legs, they run on four legs, they hop, skitter, jump, leap, dash, fling, whirl, hurl, swim, slither, wiggle, dig, roll, tumble, fly, skim, bellyflop, airglide, sail-and I'm just getting started"

They stared at one another. Grangles moved cautiously to the question in all of them. "Human life forms?"

"You got it, friend."

"In the many thousands?"

"More."

"Millions?"

"More."

Gasps. "Hundreds of millions?"

"Uh uh. Billions."

"I don't believe it!"

"That's not all you're not going to believe," Arbok told them.

"Civilization? Technology?"

"After a fashion," Barq answered for Arbok.

"What the hell does that mean?" Drong demanded.

"Precisely what he said," Arbok joined in. "There's an advanced technology down there. There's also vast areas of tens of millions of people living in stone-age cultures."

"That's impossible! I know societal cultural patterns and-

"Forget everything you ever knew," Arbok said impatiently. "Will you creatures of the interstellar zoo let me get on with it?"

Since he was included in his last description, his remark brought forth tension-releasing chuckles and laughter. Brist rose. "You have great patience with us, Captain Arbok," he said solemnly, so that the others would recognize this was a

moment of re-establishing unquestioned leadership. "Please proceed. I am grateful for your information."

"You're a regular public relations trader whiz, Brist," Arbok told him.

"On Asgard we always spoke well of those we killed," Brist said, "but after we put them to the blade."

He bowed to Arbok.

"All right," Arbok said. "First, I'd like something to drink. Water pitcher to go around, please. Grangles, would you?"

Grangles returned with a huge pitcher and six plastic mugs, poured water for them all. Brist drank slowly with a sour face. "The reclamation system on this barge is going to hell. This stuff tastes like Skringian piss."

Ytram nodded enthusiastically. "Yes! Is good, no?"

"Please, Arbok," Grangles said on the edge of begging.

"I must start at the beginning," Arbok said, insisting that he'd bloody well tell this tale in his own manner.

"Of course," Brist said; brightly but also doubtfully. The mention of vast quantities of water, not some stinking sludge, had both Brist and Barq trembling with excitement.

"All right," Arbok sighed. "Look, there's the basic premise first. You know we're way out in one of the galactic spiral arms. The Camtok Traders have never been anywhere even remotely near here because the place is a damned stellar desert. Everything is so few and far between. For example, the star closet to this one, here," he jerked a thumb in the direction of the sun, "is more than four light years distant."

"There's nothing in between?" Grangles asked.

"Sure there is," Arbok admitted. "A smattering of hydrogen, a bunch of comet fuzballs, and some chunks of rock caught in the gravitational matrix between the two stars. But as to how much? If we removed everything from the interior of this ship but the residue of one of those nose-busting farts from Ytram, it would still be more crowded with stink molecules than all the space between here and that next star."

He dumped a cup of water down his throat. "We think that probably this world—all these planets are included, but only the third has life forms advanced enough or even existing, to acknowledge their presence—was scouted by the Eldorn. For the last few thousand years they've been throwing those probes out in all directions from Galactic Center. The Eldorns are an inquisitive bunch of cats and they're rich enough to indulge themselves this way. Maybe one out of every thousand probes ever reports back. Anyway, since this star has all these planetary bodies, it's probably received its dose of probes. // the technical groups on world three were far enough along to detect and wonder about the probes, which can be concealed behind lights and variable shapes, then they've also likely produced a couple of wild religious group variations. We don't know for sure. That's a wildassed conjecture but it follows other probe patterns, so I threw it in as a possibility."

"Fuck the religions!" Brist shouted.

"Tell us about the goddamned planet!" Drong snarled.

"Can the fifty-credit tour and give us the details!" Grangles complained.

"Hit them with it," Barq recommended.

Arbok had their total attention. "In one very special way the third world orbiting this sun is an absolute gem. In fact, I've never heard of any other planet like it. You'd think that with a galaxy teeming and splotchy with so many planets and evolutionary patterns we'd be running over with water planets, but—" Brist was on his feet, staring, his normally radial-tire expression replaced with a bubbling eruption of emotion. "A water world?" he said, gasping for air. Brist was almost in shock.

Barq gestured for their attention. "You know what my home planet is like. Sagandrin is an ocean world. Our land masses float on the liquid surface. They drift about the entire globe. But the only pure water is what we synthesized. Not a drop exists in pure form. Whatever we do produce is priceless. In fact, our entire existence is measured about what pure water we do turn out. Our skills made us valuable to the Endorn. That's why we were always so protected by the Traders on their ships. We could always extract pure water." Barq pointed behind him, his arm and hand referencing the third planet about the nearby star. "That is the only true water world I have ever known about."

"It has oceans," Arbok said, "that are deeper than the

highest mountains anywhere on Makk. You," he pointed to Drong. "Think of the mountain ranges on your world of Asgard, or whatever you call it in your tongue. These oceans here are deeper and they are all water."

"We're talking about water water?" Brist broke in. "Hydrogen, oxygen, the normals—"

"There's a heavy sodium content in the larger masses but that's easily removed," Barq explained. "There are elements leached from the land and there are life forms indigenous to the oceans, but on a general basis, including the sweet-water bodies, this planet is fantastic. Yes, it's a genuine water world."

"Arbok, you said there were billions of beings down there. Are you including the animals?" Drong asked.

"No, no," Arbok said quickly. "The billions refer to the dominant life form. Bipedal, essentially the same as all life forms we've found everywhere. The variations are minor. But the dominant form on this place has more variations than exist between us. If you want to consider the animals you're up in many multiples of billions. Too much even for me to grasp. I suggest you put the numbers aside for the moment."

"It sounds like you've found some kind of miracle world," Brist said.

Arbok frowned and his expression caught them unawares. "Or a nightmare planet," Arbok said darkly.

*"

Grangles cracked his neck bones with sharp splintering sounds. "Spell that out, lizoid," he grumbled.

"Barq and I have been monitoring the expected electromagnetic frequencies from the planet," Arbok explained. "These people are hysterically mad about broadcasting energy. Wasting it in incredible quantities. Every frequency from the low to thft highest is a nightmare babble of languages, songs, music, announcements, messages, codes, data transmissions-

"Wait, wait," Brist said anxiously. "Most of us have different languages on our worlds. Why do you make so much of these people?"

• Arbok grinned and looked like a small-scale tyrannosaurus. "How many languages on your Llongctik?" he asked Brist.

"Why, we have the global, of course. But at least a dozen more, if you break down some of the dialects as languages."

"Brist, my friend, on this world they speak in several hundred tongues."

"They what?"

"Their main languages, the dominant languages, count over fifty or sixty that we've determined. If you break it down further to dialects the whole thing becomes hideous."

"Let me get back to their broadcasts we've been monitoring," Arbok went on after the long pause he expected while the others stared in disbelief at one another. "Over here," he patted a computer console. They gathered about him and the screen flashed an astounding list of frequencies and modulations and carriers and subcarriers and patterns they'd never even dreamed could exist. Assorted whistles and exclamations and another blistering fart from Ytram met the presentation. Only their intense interest in Arbok's explanation kept Drong from sinking his teeth into the greasy flesh of Ytram's neck.

"See? They're kicking out transmissions through the whole hydrogen band," Arbok explained. "And look here. Everything up and down the scale from the extreme subblows all the way to really intense micro patterns in macro burst emissions." While Arbok spoke he employed the computer to demonstrate the scales to which he referred.

"They must be the worst kind of garbage people," Barq said. "Look at how they crap up their frequencies. They just don't emit or broadcast. They overlap like mad as if they're having a constant radiative war of some kind. But it's a normal mode for them."

Arbok shut down the display and turned to the others. "Don't you see it yet?" Except for Barq they stared blankly back at him. "You haven't recognized the obvious," Arbok said as a reprimand. "We are out here in the galactic shithouse, and we've stumbled on a planet with a dominant life form sufficiently advanced for all this electronic puke they're sending out. They have advanced atmospheric transportation. They've got rudimentary flight beyond the planet, primitive probes to the other planets-and they've managed to get some of their men from their world out to their moon, which, considering their technological level, took one hell of a lot of engineering."

Arbok swung about and sprawled across a bench they'd

assembled from various pieces of dismantled equipment. The others drifted nearby, waiting for him to drop another bombshell or two. "Look, you can usually judge a planet's technological levels through its electromagnetic emissions. It's like a needle pointing to certain levels of competence. What I've seen tells us a hell of a lot. It means video presentations, which will tell us a hell of a lot more, but so far we haven't

worked out their visualization transmissions, although the computer will have that down pat soon enough, and we'll be able to assemble any land of receiving and display equipment we wish. So put that aside for the moment and let me give you my conclusions."

"I wish you would," Drong said. "You sound like a politician, Arbok."

"One of the curses of leading a cast of characters from an interplanetary zoo," Arbok shot back, and the two men grinned-hideously to most observers-at one another.

"Okay. What it comes down to," Arbok began, ticking off each point of his twelve fingers, "that on that planet we've got food, water, drinks of every kind, refrigeration and all manner of thermal equipment. That means all kinds of power sources, machinery, building facilities-what you might expect, strangely enough, of a very advanced civilization."

"What makes you say that?" Brist queried.

"Their diversity. Bear with me; I'll be back to this matter of what I call extreme competitive diversity."

Brist nodded his agreement and Arbok went on. "Among other things it means there'll be females."

A light seemed to dawn over the group. They had for so long pushed the concept of females out of their thinking that even with mention of desirable-or undesirable; who gave a damn!-females with which to couple, the thoughts rushed through them with the impact of electric shock.

"I'll wager a bottle of the best you can buy anywhere in the galaxy," Arbok offered slowly "that we'll find enough people in all the primitive societies who'll regard us as gods from the stars."

They stared at him; another concept that they had not yet contemplated. Ytram let loose a shattering blast from his

posterior and the group moaned. "There goes the chosen god," Grangles said with his nose buried in his forearm.

"They'll probably burn him alive if he does that down there," Drong added. "Even in the most primitive society."

"Every world," Barq countered, "must have some laws against polluting the atmosphere. Ytram's safe enough against being broiled while still kicking." They broke up in between gasps and chuckles.

Arbok sat up straight and held out both arms, his hands splayed in a gesture for their attention. "Now let's look at the dark side of all this," he said, with a clear note of warning in his voice.

"Dark side? From a primitive world? Against the power of this ship?" The questions of disbelief and rejection poured from Drong. "They're primitives, Arbok! They'll never stand up against what we can bring against th-

"Drong, in the name of the seven-balled god of the thyrites, please shut up and let me finish?" Drong gestured his apology and Arbok continued with as grave a tone as they'd ever heard from him since he had threatened so long ago to kill Ytram.

"I still need to get some qualifications to what I'm going to tell you, but I don't believe there's any question to the general conclusions I've drawn from what I've already learned about that world. We have just run into something that is unique in all the known populated galaxy."

"You mean the water world?" Brist broke in.

"This has nothing to do with water or planetary features. Listen to me, damnit," he said, leaning forward.

"You all know that anywhere a dominant life form has developed on a planet, unless that life form fuses into a single basic culture, then the societies that develop in unchecked competition always end up the same way. They tear themselves to pieces. It's never failed to happen. Blaster weapons, torture and murder, runaway mutations and biological warfare, chemicals, huge masses of manpower, cannibalism, madness, and the nuclear stuff. On every world where the planetary culture did not take over, the ultimate result is always, has always, been doom. Not a single one of those worlds ever survived. I mean that, in most respects, literally. We've found planets

sterilized forever. Others cracked open. Others burned to cinders. Some were radioactive slag, and some became asteroid belts. The worst of the worlds we found were filled with insane mutations that didn't even resemble thinking creatures- planets of biological, self-destructive, mindless slime. Being incinerated in the nuclear fire," he thought reflectively, "is much to be preferred."

Grangles leaned back on one elbow and locked eyes with Arbok. "So?" he said.

"If what we've learned so far from the frequencies is correct," Arbok answered, "and the odds are very high for our being correct, we have just run into the one exception to the galactic rule. Everything that Barq and I found in the transmissions from this world indicates the wild mob of different languages, including the most advanced technological country units. I hope you really understand what that means. Massive diversity on a level we've never conceived. Incredible breeding power that goes on day and night."

"Great!" Drong cried.

Arbok ignored the lustful shout. "Total competition. Unremitting warfare. Societies totally oriented to weapons, hate, greed, rape--"

"Sounds like home," Grangles and Drong said almost simultaneously, laughing.

"You're both from warrior races," Arbok said, his head cocked to one side.

"Yes," Drong told him seriously. "And yourself, Arbok? Your planet, all the worlds of your system, produced warrior types. You went beyond that to technology. But your own genetic makeup lets you understand us."

"True," Arbok told him. "And that's why I'm in a position to tell you that neither you, Drong, nor myself, nor Grangles, who would rather fight than hump, can hold a candle to those people down there."

Drong sat bolt upright. "That's ridiculous."

"Perhaps," Arbok said, "but it is also very true."

"Has he gone crazy?" Grangles asked of Barq.

"No. He's right. I know it's so hard to believe, but he's right."

"But how can you say that!" Drong shouted.

"Those people, my stubborn friend, have gone beyond the stage of massive thermonuclear weapons and they're still proliferating like mad on a planet torn apart by political, cultural, emotional, and a dozen other forces."

"That can't be," Brist added to the exchange. "It simply cannot be. It's impossible. No society can survive planetwide insanity. Especially with the thermonukes--"

"They can. They do. They are," Arbok said. "Now, look. Let's not spend our time arguing over this. I've given you enough background to let you understand that the worst thing we could do is just go busting into their madhouse and thumping our chests that we're gods. They'd bow down to us, take a second look, and rip our asses into little chunks. That's what they like best of all. Fighting, nicking, and more fighting. From what I've been able to pick up they haven't had a whole century without fifty wars going on at any one time, and they're just getting up steam now."

"So here's what we do. We'll be getting clearer transmissions as well as coordinated audio and video, very soon. The next time block or two and the computer will have it all worked out for us. Then we separate those languages and dialects and we find out which group is the toughest, meanest, richest, and the most powerful, and we learn their language. We learn it intimately. The basic form, the idioms and nuances and the subtleties, and everything we can until we can all communicate with each other in that language, and we can communicate with this ship's computer in that language."

"After language comes total indoctrination. We get the graston frequencies and the computer will set up the massblock learning techniques. Full hypnotic cramming for every moment from then on. We absolutely must have fluency. Then we'll select about the next half-dozen power groups and get the basics of those languages. Once we've done that, we can make a sensible decision about where to land, and how to handle the whole approach and contact."

He studied the face of every man in the flight computer deck. "We've got to work out a way to take control of wherever we go. And never forget for a single moment what we are, because our thinking works that way and it's going to be

tough to change our own psyche. We're convicts. In a way, that could be a break."

Grangles laughed harshly. "That's a new approach."

"My friend," Arbok said with a smile, "let me explain. There are more convicts in prisons on that world down there than the total population of your home world. Will that do for starters?"

"You're serious?"

"Yes."

"Holy shit."

"That, too," Arbok said.

CHAPTER 9

Jake Marden sat on the edge of the sofa, his huge hands balled into fists, and his knuckles jammed as hard as he could hold them against the sides of his head. Jube Bailey watched him with a concern he'd never revealed before; he'd emerged from his constant bantering conversation for a no-nonsense talk with Marden. At the moment he sat in silence, as he watched Jake go pale with a sudden wave of pain that brought a gasp from the big man.

Jake opened his fists and slowly lowered his hands. He looked with haggard eyes at his friend. "Jesus," Jake said, sucking in great lungfuls of air. "That was a beaut."

"Man, you look like a walking corpse," Jube said anxiously. "What the hell is it, Jake? It's more than a headache. I can see that, for Christ's sake." Jube frowned. "You bust a blood vessel or something up there in your head? Don't look at me like I'm crazy, Jake. I've seen that kind of stuff before. Pressure on the brain, that kind of shit." He rested a heavy hand gently on Jake's shoulder. "Hey, man, don't let nothing happen to you, I hate saying this but you are all my family now." Jube Bailey felt clumsy and helpless. "You see Doc Barnes?"

Jake nodded slowly, not wanting his head to topple completely from his shoulders. "I saw Doc Barnes. I even went down to Shands Hospital in Gainesville. Maddox had me down there as a prisoner so I'd get immediate attention. They've got the best equipment in the country. I'm pleased to tell you that while my skull is made of concrete everything inside is working properly. They did a CATscan on me, they did everything. The EEC came out perfect. They did-Jesus, they did it all."

"So outside of feeling like somebody left an axe halfway down your skull, you feel just great, right?" Jube asked softly.

"That and the needles someone left in my eyeballs. And my teeth feel like they want to tear themselves out of my head and run away."

"Jake? Is there anything I can do."

Jake offered him a crooked grin. "Well, yeah. You can keep from laughing or telling me I'm all fucked up in the head when I tell you what I think is happening."

"Try me. My humor button ain't working when it comes to this."

"It feels," Jake said slowly and with great caution to his words, "like somebody is talking to me." He took a deep breath and grimaced. "But they're talking to me inside my head."

Jube didn't laugh. "You ain't gonna" get pissed at me if I ask some questions?"

Jake started to shake his head but grabbed it with both hands. "No," he said between his lips mashed together by his hands.

"We all hear voices in our head sometimes, man," Jube said. "It's terrific what a bottle of whiskey can do."

"It's not those kind of voices. And I'm not tripping on acid and I'm not sucking horse or-"

"I know that," Jube said quietly. "And I don't think a couple of brews is gonna' do it."

"Jube, it's just not the voice. It's talking to me in a language I never heard."

"What's it saying?"

"How the fuck do I know! I just told you-ouch, damnit-I can't understand the words!"

"Maybe whoever's talking to you is talking in pictures?"

Jake studied his friend. "You're a sharp nigger, Jube. That's just what happened after a while. The words began to fade and I started seeing images."

"You recognize anything?"

"Hard to say. It's crazy."

"Okay, so it's crazy. One way or the other we're all crazy." Jube snapped his fingers. "Maybe the

voodoo man is putting his third eye on you."

"Oh, for shit's sake, Jube-

"If he's even thinking that way I'll rip his balls out with my bare hands-

"Forget it, Jube. Nice try, but that isn't it."

"What the hell do you see, man?"

"You ready for this?"

"Tell me anything."

"The earth."

"The earth?"

"From way out. Way out in space. Pictures of the earth from way out in space."

"That ain't crazy, Jake. There's been enough pictures of this world from far out. You know, the astros who went to the moon? All kinds of pictures. Still pictures. Movies. Video. So that makes sense."

"No, it doesn't. Who's sending?"

"You got any ideas?"

"Fuzzy. Crazy. I get a hazy picture of a ship's bridge. You know, all sorts of instruments, shining metal, big windows. Big goddamn ship."

"What about the people?"

"It's crazy."

"Okay. You're crazy. Tell me about the people?"

"I can't. They're not people. Not really."

"You mean, like ghosts?"

"Uh uh."

"Speak to me, man."

"They're . . . they're not like anything. Except maybe some crazy stuff I've seen in some science fiction movies. It just doesn't make any sense. And I keep hearing this voice in that insane language, like it's trying to talk to me, to tell me something, and none of the words make sense, and then the words fade out and I get those pictures, and my fucking head is fucking killing me!"

Jube went to the fridge and came back with two cold brews; he opened them both and handed one to Jake. Marden held the cold metal against his forehead, rolling it back and forth slowly.

Jube looked up as the entry-permission buzzer sounded. He and Jake were locked within the command center deep

beneath the prison. Jube looked at the TV monitors. "It's Voodoo and Maddox. The Cyclops and the governor. I'll tell 'em to come back later."

"No; let them in. Maddox was going to bring me the latest reports on that crazy stuff out in space."

"Shit, Jake, let it wait! Cut yourself some slack, man."

"No," Jake said, his voice deep and threatening. He surprised himself as much as he did Jube Bailey.

"Hell, I didn't mean-

"Right now, baby, I'd forgive you anything," Jube told him. He hit the buttons to open the outer doors for Cogswell and Maddox to join them.

Jake moved the beer from his forehead to his mouth and took a long swallow. The cold brew eased down his throat and into his body like the caress of an icebound angel. He looked up at the two men, but directed his question to Jeff Maddox.

"What's the latest?" Jake inquired.

"It's a banana farm out there," Maddox said as he eased to a seat and lit a long cigar. "The scientists are all fighting with each other about what showed up so suddenly. Half of them argue it's a solid mass of what they call indescribable density. The other half, who seem to have wild eyes and frizzled hair, say it's a breach in the space-time continuum, and both sides would like to kill off the other."

"They haven't come to any conclusion?"

"In a way, sure," Maddox said. "The general consensus leads to a solid mass that's been thrust by tremendous energy into where we are. Where our space is, I mean. It's like you've got a big lake that's absolutely calm and you drop a steel ball in the middle of it. The ball may be only an inch in diameter and

the lake's a mile, but the effect of the ball dropping will create a wave effect that will be felt all across the lake. If you're close to the steel ball you get one hell of an effect. If you're on the far shore, it's only a few ripples. The word is we're almost on top of whatever dropped into our space-time."

"You all sound like a bunch of lunatics," Jube told them.

"It makes sense to me," said Luther Cogswell. "The Bible's been talking about this for centuries. All the bibles. Makes sense, all right. You all know that God left us to our own devices a long time ago. Left His Son behind to sorta' look after things, and we took the poor fella' and busted His legs and whipped His ass and then strung Him up on a bunch of firewood." Cogswell rolled his eyes to a heavenly vision. "Now He's coming back, God is, and there's gonna' be the big roll call and the accountin' for all the ftickin' and friggin' and feudin' we been doin' to one's another, and-"

"Voodoo man, you don't shut up I'm gonna' cut your nicking throat," Jube said ominously.

"Really, Jube?"

"Really."

Cogswell grinned. Instantly the singsong tone was gone and he eased back on his couch. "You got it, Jube."

"Do you believe that shit, Cyclops Man?"

"Hell, nol You think I'm crazy? But it's what the people out there," Cogswell gestured, "they like to hear more than any of this scientific nonsense. Goddamn scientists don't know shit. This is the time for the temple priests to come forward and relieve all them sorry folk what been sinnin' of all them heavy shekles. Praise the Lord!"

Jube laughed. "Now that's the Luther Cogswell / know!"

Jake did his best to ignore the wild exchange between the two men. He gestured for Maddox's attention.

"Jeff, you're on top of this sort of thing. What's your feelings?"

"My feelings don't count," Maddox answered. "But I've got lines into the air defense command tracking centers as well as the big radio telescopes. Everything is turned toward this thing, and while they're not telling the public, there's no doubt it's a physical mass of some kind. It's too far out and it's not big enough to get any optical tracking but they've already had some radar bounce from the really big radars. It's beyond the orbit of Pluto. They've confirmed that and-"

"Is it moving inward? Toward the sun?" Jake asked.

Maddox looked surprised. "How'd you know that? Not one official word's been said about that. It's moving sunward, all right. It's on an inward spiral that will give it a rough rendezvous with earth. With us. And that's scaring the shit out of Washington, to say nothing of Moscow and London and everywhere else. But they're keeping quiet about it. The public is seeing all kinds of things in the sky. You know, UFO's and

angels and the kind of crap Luther just gave us a show about. They're letting that go on. Religious revivals and people climbing mountaintops and blinking lights. No harm in that. Lets off a lot of steam. But it sure is packing the churches."

"It hasn't got shit to do with angels or God," Jake said.

"How do you know that?" Cogswell snapped the question.

"Never mind how he knows," Jube broke in. "He knows."

"It's a ship," Jake said slowly. "They'll confirm that soon enough. It's a ship, an unmanned probe or maybe it's manned, I don't know, but it sure isn't from this solar system. And it's going to come a lot closer."

"You're sure of all that, too?" Cogswell asked, honestly intrigued.

Jake held his gaze. "Yes, Luther. I'm sure of it. And I don't know how or why. And I've got the strangest feeling. I can't shake it. It's a feeling that gets stronger and stronger all the time."

He looked from one man to the other. "Somehow we're going to be right in the middle of all ... whatever this is."

"From a fucking prison?" Jube Bailey burst out. "How the hell is that going to happen?"

Jake brought both hands to his head. Pain washed through him like a physical force. "I told you, goddammit," he snarled, "I don't know how!"

CHAPTER 10

Barq turned from the computer console to face Arbok and the others. He gestured to the readouts. "The new data's in the memory banks. We'll have updated readouts in a few minutes. I sure hope we like what we-"

Arbok broke in with an angry gesture. "Damn you, Barq, I've told you and the others. Forget you ever spoke Galactibase. Just forget it! From now on, goddamnit, we speak only the Domlang!"

"What in the hell is the Domlang?" Drong asked, as puzzled as the others.

"Dominant language," Brist said in English. "Our glorious leader," he continued in English, "is very big on neat phrases." He looked perplexed. "Or is that a catchy phrase? Or, a turn of the phrase. You know something, Arbok? I've had my brain stuffed into that computer day and night, day and night, if there was a day and night here, which there isn't, and my brain is screaming for me to leave it alone. It wants to rest. Fuck your Domlang, your shlang, your computer, and fuck you, too."

Arbok grinned. "Hey, that's good. Very good. You make one hell of a student, Brist."

"I'm supposed to be insulting you!" Brist shouted.

"And the better you insult me the better it shows me how well you're doing in English." Arbok looked at the others. "I know this isn't easy. We're trying to cram as much as we can into our skulls in as short a time as possible. But it's absolutely necessary if we're going to survive on that crazy world we're going to."

"Maybe I don't like this world," Ytram grunted.

"Tough shit. Tough titty. Get stuffed. Fuck your uncle. Up yours. Piss off." Grangles ran the phrases like a ticker tape from his head to his voice. He looked with open strain to Arbok. "I'm not supposed to say all those things at one time, am I?"

"Well, you told him off," Arbok said. "A lot of overkill, though. That's why we can't speak anything but English. It's the only way we'll get through the nuances and all that stuff. Practice and more practice, mates."

"Ytram has a point," Drong broke in. "Who says we're going to like this planet? Earth or Terra-"

"Use Earth. Terra is a scientific term. Most people confuse it with other words," Arbok said.

"What if it's a Shitworld? How's that, Boss Man?" Drong went on, laughing at himself and the words spilling forth. "But seriously, what if we say piss on this place and let's take a shot at another solar system?"

"No way, no way," Arbok told him, Barq nodding vigorously by his side. "Look, we're committed to this volblock-"

"Volume cube of space," Barq added by way of instant explanation.

"When we came out of hypervel-"

"Hypervelocity," Barq slipped in. "Possible only in warp dimension." He smiled toothily at Arbok, who lifted a snarly lip in response.

"There's no way we'll ever get back to hypervel without a massive modification, repair and rebuilding of the computer," Arbok went on. "We just can't ignore the quantestor limits-"

He stopped to wait for a remark from Barq, who shrugged. "No English equivalent. Space roadblock is the closest I can come to it."

"Forget it," Arbok told him.

"Forget, hell," Grangles sang out. "Why can't we just modify or rebuild the computer ourselves and go where we please?"

"He right," Ytram rumbled. "Maybe not like Earth. Maybe shit planet. Maybe no good night life and not fun."

Drong jerked a thumb at Ytram. "I found out why he might not like our new home," said Drong. "It's amazing what sticking your head into an instructional computer will do. Especially what it tells you about animals. The big cats on

this earth world are fascinating. Some of them are meaner than glangshit on a wet morning. You guys recall the name jaguar when you were getting your brains scrambled?"

"Yes, I do," Barq said. "A remarkable cat. It can do seventy-five in second gear and it hugs the road-"

"Cat, not a goddamned car!" Drong shouted. "You know, fur, big teeth, four feet?"

"Oh, that kind of cat," Barq said. "I do remember something- about it. Big predator in the hemisphere below- beneath?-the equator."

"That's close enough," Drong said, pleased. "It's probably the nastiest big cat on the whole planet. A real mean sucker. And Ytram is right in the same class."

"Me?" Ytram beamed like a hippo with a mouthful of loose but still plentiful teeth. "Me like jaguar. That is good. Jaguar beautiful cat."

"You know why he's so mean?" Drong dictated the query to Ytram.

Ytram shook his head, a major physical movement requiring time and great effort. "No," he said finally.

"Because he only gets laid once every two years. Just like you asshole Skringians."

"Will you all shut the hell up?" Arbok said sarcastically. "Didn't the computer teach you nonstop bullshitting isn't necessary?"

Grangles shook his head, smiling. "No, but this English gives us possibilities I never dreamed of. What words!" He gestured an apology to Arbok. "Look, you were trying to answer Drong's questions on why we can't rebuild the computer, and then we got off on Ytram's storing his snuff for two years before-"

"That's the problem," Drong said. "He doesn't get off. He ought to stick his dick in one of the iris doors. When that thing closes he'll have a purple shlong that ..." His eyes widened and he clapped a hand over his mouth; he was obviously trying to stop his sudden acquisition of motormouth linguistics. He motioned wildly for Arbok to go ahead.

"The computer has the control pattern for hypervel flight," Arbok said finally. "And so do the droids."

"But we took good care of the droids," Barq reminded them. "Whoosh. Gone forever in the vacuum sea of dreams."

Arbok shook his head in near-despair. "Even if the droids were still with us and cooperating it wouldn't have done us any good," he told the others. "They're all built with safety planks-"

"Circuitry," Barq said.

"-with safety features," Arbok added slowly. "If they tried to pass on that kind of data to any biological creature, like us, they self-destruct. So don't lose any sleep over that little item. It could never have happened. Now, damnit, stick with me. Unless we find a means on that world down there where their science, compared to the science that built this ship, is still splashing in the mud, we can't travel at hypervel. In this part of the galaxy that means we are both nowhere. Does everybody get my message? Have I reached all you dearheartsr He stabbed a finger in the direction of the vuescreen shimmering in three-dimensional presentation, then ran the fingers of one hand across the keyboard. A digital representation of the nearby solar system churned into view. "See that star over there? You better hang a mental sign on it. Home Sweet Home. That's another of their-now our-quaint little expressions. That's our home."

The giddiness of conversing in the alien tongue was ebbing and their own thought processes swiftly adapting for fall control again. Brist was the first to emerge from their fog of the verbal runs. "You have a plan, Arbok. I've been too whacked out even to ask you about it. I'm asking now."

The relief on Arbok's face was almost that of a revelation. He nodded slowly. His expression grew serious. At least they thought it was serious. It was still too difficult for six aliens who spoke six different native tongues and had been communicating in a galactic language to have shifted once more to another language utterly foreign and alien to them, to be certain just what the thought processes in English would produce in the way of facial expression. But Arbok's tone sounded serious, and he'd been pissed at the whole bunch of them, and the reality of being time-and-distance trapped in this system was getting through, so they did their best to get their act together. They listened carefully.

"You know we're falling on a calculated inward spiral toward the sun," Arbok said, testing his audience. They nodded, all

but Ytram, and he didn't matter much when it came to brainwork. "We'll get a crude rendezvous with

Earth, or rather, the Earth and its moon. As the computer picks up greater detail on solar and planetary mass and other characteristics, it will give us the numbers for a very high elliptical orbit about the planet. It will take us in close along the perigee, which should give the natives-especially the Americans and the Russians-the opportunity to decide whether to test their space weapons against us. That would be dumb on their part but one of the things we need to learn is whether they will. At the same time, as we swing outward on a high orbit loop well beyond their moon, they'll be able to compute our orbit and that will give them time to figure out how, or rather, what, they plan to do about us. And just as obviously, the computer remains on full alert for any object that may originate from the planet headed toward us. We can't take any chances on meeting up with something like that."

"It might be a message probe," Brist suggested.

"Brist, you'd better adapt to the way the people down there think. They are devious and scheming beyond all conception. The only message they'd ever send that way, when they have all manner of transmission ability, would be a very nasty package indeed that could obliterate us."

Grangles knitted his brows over the words he'd heard. "You're telling us that a primitive society like those skin monkeys down there could smear this ship?"

"Grangles, tell me what you know about that could stand up at close range to a thantrum device."

The Ishbanian shook his head. "Nothing could."

"They've got bombs that make the thantrum device that was aboard this ship, before we dumped it, look like a wet firecracker. Any more questions about what they can do?"

Drong gestured. "I have one. What about our shields? when we go to hypervel-Barq was explaining this to me-we have to put up an anti-matter shield. He said that as we accelerate to near light velocity, coming up or down, hitting a dust particle with all that mass is the same as hitting a mountain. Wouldn't that deflect-"

"No," Arbok said, breaking in. "The shield is against mass unto itself. Anything like a thantrum detonating breaks up the

grid of space itself. The energy pulse, the EM slash, all those effects, would go through our shield like a needle through your eye. The shield could stop a mountain but not the pulse, so we've got to remember what those primitives can do when they really want to."

"The plan, the plan," Brist insisted.

"We stay with the instruction program. Don't look so miserable. You've got the language. Everything now is a matter of refining, getting the small elements into place. That, and stuffing as much data about this place and its people into our heads as we can. This planet is a million times more complex and complicated than we ever dreamed of. In our new language terms, every normal day is like Dante's Inferno. Hell, Hades, the Nether Regions. Just think of the worst damnation you've ever known in any language. That's a normal day for these people, and we've got to adapt to it. Or at least be able to handle it."

"How much time do we have?"

"The faster we cut the mustard," Arbok said, and he frowned because he knew that mustard was a foodstuff but he hadn't the faintest notion of what it did or what it tasted like, but the expression leaped up from his computer-hammered brain and new memories, "uh, well, the faster we're in a position to decide just what to do, the better off we are."

Arbok scratched his chin; the sound was like that of a large file scraping away at an elephant's foot. "I'm beginning to think, the more I get to know these Earth people, what they're like, that coming down in their midst as gods might be a really horrible mistake."

"Why?" he heard in a chorus.

"Study their religions. They're zealots beyond all belief. To them suffering is its own ultimate reward. The more they love someone the more horrible they are to them. Their idea of absolute love is to burn people alive, mutilate their bodies, torture them in every way imaginable, and then kill them as painfully and as slowly as possible. If you have any idea of what that's like, or you'd care to know, ask Drong. It's happened to him, but it sure wasn't out of love. Drong, your memory banks still have what was done to you when you got chopped into hamburger?"

Drong's eyes were battle-red. "Yes," he growled.

"Well, these people do this all the time. It's their favorite way to have fun." Arbok sighed. "Which means that being gods just won't do. We've got to outsmart them. And we just can't mix with them, because at our very best our differences physically are like the differences between a young gelfling and Ytram, there. Nothing like standing out in a crowd like a burstflare on a dark night."

"That is all very poetic," Brist acknowledged, "but--"

"Yes, yes; I know, and I apologize for rambling on like this," Arbok said quickly. He sighed. "I seem to have been injected with the same motormouth drugs. But there's so damned much to do and so little time--"

"The plan! The fucking plan!" Brist yelled.

Arbok clamped his jaw shut. Lizoid eyes narrowed to a hostile green. Then he banged his hand against the side of his head. "Sorry," he apologized again. "The plan. I'm looking for something down there on earth that I've decided we are absolutely going to need."

"What? What?" they asked in a loose chorus.

"An ally."

"A what?"

"An ally, damnit. Someone with whom we can make friends."

"Among those lunatics?"

"Yes."

"You're out of your goddamned mind, Arbok!"

Arbok felt his pulses pounding. "Don't remind me," he told them, and stalked off to the cubicle he'd designed to be sealed off from the rest of the ship. He had to keep sending out his message. And pray for a response. It was really their only hope.

CHAPTER 11

Jake Marden chewed the end of his cigar and rolled it from the right to the left side of his mouth, spilling heavy ash in a grey swath across the blueprints covering the worktable before him. He felt terrific. He still had the blinding headaches but they had decreased both in intensity and the pain drilling through his skull. Clarity had begun to push confusion out of his brain. He couldn't believe the incredible change because someone was still trying to fuck around inside his head. The biggest change came in the messages. He had begun to understand. The totally alien tongues and intent of message had shifted. He still couldn't get a full grasp on what was happening, but he no longer doubted that someone, somewhere, was trying desperately to reach him through a blind telepathic contact. He had no idea of who or what or from where, but there remained that nagging conviction that everything was still tied up with that crazy ship spiraling inward through the solar system with ever-increasing velocity.

He took a deep breath. That was his goddamned problem. He had so many things whirling and racing through his mind that subconsciously he'd begun to pursue everything all at the same time, and he felt forces jerking and twisting within his head. He had to slow down. When he tried to get a grip on everything at once he tensed up and his body began to go rigid and he held his breath so damned long colored lights danced before his eyes. It took a panicky jerk from his self-inflicted momentary hypnosis to remind him that he wasn't breathing. He berated himself mercilessly and commanded analytical thinking within his own head. Take it one step at a time, asshole, was the message he repeated over and over again. It began to work. He could almost visualize a small army inside his skull pushing one dominant thought to the forefront of his thinking, and shoving everything else into neatly stacked boxes, waiting to be released when there was proper thinking room up front. It was a ridiculous concept but he didn't give a damn just so long as it worked.

But always lurking in a corner of his mind was that insidious push of someone, something, trying to make direct contact. Jake would often retreat to his apartment within the prison wing, shut down all lights and sound, and let his receptivity to--well, to whatever it was, open up. Some strange understanding, like

forms taking shape from mental fog, began to appear before his inner vision. Deeper and more meaningful understanding came when he reached a decision that there wasn't anyone or anything out there trying to reach him specifically. In sum, the name and person of Jake Marden meant nothing in this whole gambit of mental billiards. Someone, lashed on by some desperate need, was broadband-broadcasting a message in the thinking spectrum. Telepathic? He didn't know. He didn't know beans from squash about being able to send messages from one mind to another. Marden's world of communications covered three basic areas. The first was electronic-mechanical. You used the telephone or the computer, or you waved flags or used blinker lights or whatever, but some sort of device, from the pencil to the word processor, was necessary.

Then there was the direct human approach. You shoved a .357 magnum in someone's face and you cocked back the hammer and your finger tightened on the trigger, and you didn't need bells and whistles to get across that message. In the same category was a violent kick to the nuts or a verbalized threat. He considered this his sticks, bricks, and hollow-point rounds means of getting across a message.

The closest to nonverbal, nonmechanical, nonviolent communication was a combination of great subtleties and body language. The distance between your body and that of another man told volumes. Talking to someone across a table was one thing. Standing close to the other man with noses just about butting was scary and intimidating; you couldn't see what the other guy's hands were doing. You could sit across a room and play with the loading mechanism of a .380

automatic and you'd damned well be giving a message. Honing a knife did the same. A side movement of the eyes, a barely discernible tightening of the muscles, a certain type of look; all these gave messages louder and more threatening than any shout. Or even going dead-still in both verbalization and body movement carried its weight in ominous threat.

All these things and more Jake Marden understood. He'd stared down human killers and fangs-baring dogs with no more than his eyes, a set expression, and an inner confidence that radiated almost a physical force of personality. Where, then, was the bridge that crossed over from these moments to direct mental contact? The hard truth of the matter was that Jake Marden, pragmatic almost to an ultimate fault, didn't buy the ability to deliberately control psionics skills. // that was what they were.

The headaches came when he forced himself to admit that someone had slipped a joker into the deck. Someone, somehow, was communicating with him-intruding is a better choice of words, he judged-but in the blind. So they were kicking out some kind of energy to carry a message and hope that, in the billions of the dominant life forms on the planet, at least one and perhaps more than one of those life forms would be an antenna receptive to the signal.

Obviously, Jake Marden was an antenna. He was receiving. It gave him those blinding headaches. The messages were confusing and only when the sender (could that be plural?) quit his bullshit of trying to send in an indecipherable language did some clarity start to come through. The incredible vista of the solar system, computer-modified to eliminate the vast distances that made the planets invisible or meaningless dots, well, that one frizzled up his brain cells and punched in those devastating headaches. But whoever (whatever?) was sending was cleaning up their act. Wild swings of messages or intents of messages were diminishing and a sense of purposeful intent began to come through.

The most startling change came about when Jake found himself no longer objecting to the intrusions of his mind. With lessening pain came increasing interest until he discovered, to his astonishment, that he'd begun to look forward to

the "signal" improving to the point where sensibility emerged from the vast wash of energy thumping behind his eyeballs.

It didn't take a genius to begin to fit certain pieces together. First there'd been the world standing on its ear with the disruption of the fabric of space (or whatever; he left that to the astrophysicists who were engaged in screaming word duels and fistfights at their meetings). Then with the diminishing of shock by the world scientific community, and the realization that enormous energy or mass, or both, had intruded the space beyond the reaches of Plutonian orbit, the scientists got down to the nitty-gritty. There was an object out there and it was moving closer and closer to the inner realms of the solar system. The incredible tearing of space-time (if that really was what happened) was now a past event. It had

happened and it was over, but the object was still there, still spiraling inward and without massive disruption of physical reality.

Jake Marden laughed at the enormous avalanche of theories hurled at the world. He ignored the religious zealots and their field day of donations, and the millions of people scraping ground with their foreheads. The lowing of cattle had never interested him. The driving hysteria of the scientists to be recognized for their own particular pet theories was both surprising and amusing, but sensibility began to punch through. Unless the gods were engaged in a massive rock-throwing donneybrook in adjacent dimensions, and their rock flinging had punched through some space-time continuum diaphragm (Stop that shit, Marden! You're starting to sound like them!), that was a ship out there. He didn't believe it was a probe. Too much energy expenditure and the way things had happened, the exit door seemed to have closed behind the ship. Whatever happened to bring them here, it didn't matter. They were here and they were getting closer, and the thoughts within Jake's skull were becoming clearer.

Then, in an incredible, dazzling insight, he knew. He knew the mental contact was real. Cerebral wash was reality. Cerebral wash? What the hell was that? He didn't know but he did know that whoever was sending-whatever was sending- used a term common enough to them.

Jake took a wild shot. He threw all his eggs of sanity into

one lousy basket. He waited until he was relaxed, on the edge of sleep but his thinking cap still brightly lit, and the incoming visualizations were the sharpest yet, and he gritted his teeth and concentrated as hard as he could and he sent his own message. He hoped.

Who the fuck are you?

He started to ask himself questions. If this really was a mind-to-mind contact and the transceiver was aboard that ship way "out there," then telepathic link was possible, actual, and very much alive and well. It also meant it didn't take more power than the single brain could produce. He had enough of a smattering of biological science to understand that the human body generated radio signals on a very weak band from one to thirty hertz. The brain did a hell of a lot better. -It sent out an incredible signal, and like everything else in the human body, it originated anything it sent out as a mixture of chemical glop to produce an electrical spark that raged through the neuron pathways of the brain. It was like a single electrical pulse starting southward along the Nile River and fanning out through all of Africa as fast as you could picture the event taking place, only that same event took place several hundred thousand times a second and that was only the mainline event, and there were other simultaneous splash transmissions within the brain that added up to a few hundred thousand additional events.

Yet, and he'd always marveled at such things, if you wanted to use the electrical energy transmitted through a shaved skull to wires that were in turn connected to a tiny flashlight bulb, you'd have to draw energy simultaneously through twenty-five thousand living and working human skulls just to light that one tiny bulb.

So whatever was happening was beyond him and A picture grew out of swirling mists and disjointed forms in his mind. He lacked details but what he saw, unquestionably, was a superadvanced (to him) computer, an incredible power system, and an antenna directed toward . . . toward . . . Earth leaped brilliantly, closeup, into view. And then he recognized a pattern that had eluded him. The only time this view of Earth could be seen clearly was when the hemisphere of the North and South American continents was facing in

that direction of the ship/object/whatever in space spiraling inward along its invisible coil of gravitational energy toward solar system center.

So there was some direction to all this!

Yet he felt devastating disappointment. A fucking computer! He had no interest in talking to or with a goddamned machine, and no matter how advanced, how incredible it might be, to Jake Marden a computer was still nothing more than superpuke with a hell of a lot of smart connections inside it. He started to block the incoming visualizations.

A sense of frantic anxiety enveloped Jake. He felt a desperation for him not to turn his mental back on the origin of the signal. Jake let his own confusion carry him along. Why would a machine evince disappointment? That didn't make any sense. Mist whirled within his thoughts and visualizations twisted

and wound within one another and then he had a picture of two brains—a massive computer and, as if he were seeing through a transparent skull, a human brain. There was some kind of connection between the two, and the answer to his own question followed immediately. The computer wasn't being used as a computer. It's a fucking booster. He's using it as a power coil to boost his signal.

A thundering chorus of YES! YES! YES! hit the inside of his skull like a brick thrown through a window. Holy shit . . . this is turning into two-way ...

He created his own image of a computer facility, row upon row, bank upon bank, of computers, all connected to the raging power of a nuclear reactor, and a man seated alone in the control room, electrodes running between his head and the computer, and then he concentrated on sending out that picture.

Arbok dampened his amusement at the image fashioning itself within his mind. The picture he saw was of a vast array of computer equipment and that antique furnace with all those clumsy wires . . . but the alien at the other end of that message was, comparatively speaking, advancing at a far greater rate than was Arbok himself. What kinds of minds did these creatures have? The majority of the natives on that third world were hardly beyond the stage of Ytram, a huge, gross vegetable made up of meat protein and gobs of fat. And yet here was this one mind with whom he had found . . . he searched for the word, he searched his own mind and sifted through the swarm of data shoved into his skull in the hypno-teaching sessions, and he thought of empathy and simpatico and he knew he was on the right track. He settled down to improve the details of the message picture he had sent . . .

Jake understood. The vast computer array was no bigger than a telephone booth and even most of that bulk was taken up in the sensors that extended from the computer throughout the ship so that the computer was the ship. It performed a dazzling variety of other functions, including being a power-boosting relay for Arbok's desperate attempts to send some kind of telepathic signal. Not to anyone. The receiver had to fall within a narrow band of receptivity and Jake Marden happened to be one of the few who did. Arbok stayed with this particular alien because there were all manner of overtones that established the-sympatico again rose up through his thoughts.

Now Jake understood more and more. He had a picture of Arbok, not in detail, but as a being seated in the computer chamber. No wires. A force field between the brain and the computer was all that was necessary.

There was still no conversational ability. They still groped and struggled through the mists of utterly alien concepts, one to the other, and they began to improve the speed with which they communicated in their visualizations of objects and motion and events.

The breakthrough came when Arbok signalled Jake Marden that he, Arbok, knew basically, what Jake Marden looked like. Not Jake Marden individually. Jake Marden, alien. Jake Marden, human. No, no, that was wrong.

Jake Marden, human alien.

That was the first time that Jake realized there are two sides to every individual, and every race to the other races is alien.

Jake found a crazyquilt pattern of television-screen scenes crawling around inside his head. A pattern emerged; more and more the television images showed men and then close tips of the faces of men, then broke to full-figure scenes and many action scenes. Jake understood almost immediately what was happening. The alien aboard that ship (funny; I've accepted that without even realizing / no longer question any of this) was able to receive television programs broadcast so wildly and with such energy, and they had watched thousands of human figures on their receivers. Watched, and listened. No wonder the alien's grasp and use of the English language was improving so swiftly! Not so much in words but in clarity of the intended messages.

Jake had a burning desire to know what his alien correspondent looked like. The alien was sure as hell one up on him, as he had indicated (the son of a bitch is straight, he judged). Sure. Television images without limitation. Speech, mannerisms, actions, diversity, dress—it was all there. The urge to specify Jake Marden out of the multitude became stronger.

Jake sat before a mirror. Full face. He kept his eyes open as he stared at the mirror and tried as hard as he could to project what he saw.

He kept staring at the mirror. It seemed to shimmer and blur before his eyes. Jake's image faded and in its place he saw a powerful face looking back at him. Orange skin . . . leathery. Basic human facial forms. The two eyes, nose, mouth; nature seemed to follow similar paths, he thought immediately. Massive ridged eyebrows, eyes gleaming, ears more flattened than he expected. A powerful squared jaw. Then he saw what was missing.

The face of the alien had no hair. Not the first sign. No hair on his head, leathery and almost plated, yet fully flexible and normally rounded. A wide and powerful head; obviously evolved for a large braincase. No eyebrows. No moustache. No-Jake laughed. He must present one hell of a sight. He blinked. His own image returned and there was a sense of puzzled humor. Jake studied his wild mane of hair, bushy eyebrows, his thick salt-and-pepper beard.

At least they knew what each other looked like. The images tinged with humor crossed billions of miles as fast as minds created them.

Jake looked again in the mirror. Lines and shapes twisted within and about themselves and slowly a pattern began to emerge. It was an effort of tremendous labor. He felt that; he simply knew it. The alien face appeared again, the lips open this time, showing powerful teeth, an expression faintly reptilian. The son of a bitch is smiling, Jake knew. The pattern grew stronger. Jake read the word ARBOK beneath the face.

His name! Of course! His name was Arbok!

Excitement tore through Jake. He concentrated fiercely on his own image, stopped, tore open a drawer and found a marker pen, and wrote the name JAKE across the bottom of the mirror.

The images appeared, faded, reappeared until he saw the alien face once more, and a ghost of sound crawled into Jake's head, a message of some kind, and he tried desperately to push everything else out of his mind, and then he heard the two words, whispered almost to inaudibility, but a sound he swore he felt, or heard.

HELLO, JAKE.

Jake Marden roared with laughter and triumph.

The next step, Jake spoke to himself, is to let this Arbok character know where I am. If I'm right, they're on a one-way trip in that ship out there and they've got to land sooner or later, and likely what they need is planetfall a lot sooner than later. There'd be a matter of supplies, tools-he had a fuzzy but unquestioned sense that major repairs or modifications to the ship were also necessary.

Also, if Arbok communicates with me, then the odds are he'll want to continue to develop that communication. Two guys who grin at one another haven't got too great a distance between them, no matter how many millions or billions of miles are involved. Physical distance doesn't make or break a relationship. There was also that constant presence of empathy between the two, as if they shared something unusual and yet similar, a blending, a bonding between them. It was going to be a beaut when he found out, and Jake felt, and he hoped the same senses were felt within Arbok, they shared something. Perhaps many things, but a sharing there was,

and it was unquestionable. / like the son of a bitch, Jake mused, and realized that, too, was true.

A pilot knows another pilot. The empathy, the understanding, is real. Sharing the same space, speed, challenge and dangers and flying-living on the thin edge of disaster heightens a man's senses, quickens his sensitivity, lets him see and feel things most men don't even understand. Jake had been a pilot most of his life, flying everything from standard aircraft to jets to choppers and gliders; his was the approach and the demeanor of the fighter jock. Why did he feel the closeness in that respect, at least, toward this alien with no hair and the powerful face? If Jake had someone to make the bet with he'd have put his money down that Arbok was a pilot of some kind. Astronaut was just a fancy word for the pilot who flies higher and faster. That doesn't necessarily include the people aboard your ship who strap into passenger seats and go along for the ride. The man, or men, at the controls are the separate breed, the race apart, and they're the same in all races and colors on earth. So why would that change because you went across the star-strewn sky instead of across a political or a language barrier?

It wouldn't change one damn bit. Jake settled down to some heavy thinking. He tried to place himself in the shoes (if the alien wore shoes, that is) of Arbok. He accepted he would need to bring his ship down to the earth's surface. That meant, one, he needed to know where to go. As they continued their exchanges, Jake developed an improved system of "transmitting information" to Arbok. That episode with the mirror had worked so well he decided to give it another shot. He placed on the wall by the mirror a well-illuminated map of the globe with the North and South American continents dominating the map. Next, he prepared a map of North America alone. He accepted that Arbok would have some means aboard his vessel of long-distance surveillance, that whatever science had produced a starship sure as hell could produce working zoom lenses. The map of North America gave way to the southeastern United States. Jake made certain that none of his maps showed political boundaries, which would have been a really dumbass move on his part. They neither existed on any visual observation of Earth from space, nor could they have meaning of any value to Arbok. But he made a garish circle around that area covering northcentral Florida. And the map that followed after that one showed the local towns and the major highways and the large lakes and airports, all features clearly distinguishable from afar or up close, all relating to one another, so that they formed unquestioned references for the observer on his way down.

Then he sat before the maps and concentrated on them one at a time. On each occasion that he stared at a map and tried to communicate what he saw, there came a period when he had a feeling he couldn't shake, and that he couldn't deny, that the information had been received and he could now proceed to the next map. By the time he was through he knew that Arbok, who could study the globe easily enough, would know that this terrestrial alien with whom he was communicating, would know where Jake was located, right down to the exact spot of Old Millford, which was big enough and covered enough ground to be a major landmark of its own. In short, Jake had created a flight chart for Arbok to zero right in to Old Millford.

Next, Jake prepared an aerial photograph of the area about Old Millford, showing all the local terrain features and other distinct markings that left no question that this was the place. He plunged ahead with his communications and maps and charts, never quite sure why he was so absolutely convinced this was the proper thing to do and the proper way to go about it. He needed some way to get that starship, when the time came, unerringly to Old Millford. The best way was a homing beacon but Even as he let that thought drift through his mind he felt it seized upon, and a sense of jubilation filled him. So Arbok went for that idea. Of course! They had the means to use radio, television, and homing devices, and they could communicate directly and he could set up a beacon on any frequency or a dozen of them Don't be an asshole, Marden. His own voice speaking to him, warning him with the common sense and the animal cunning that had kept him alive through so many years. You set up direct communications link with your space buddy and

half the earth will be on your ass faster than you could ever dream of it happening. What the hell's the matter with you? Every country in the world has got every radio telescope, every antenna, every computer, working its ass off trying to get a lock on that machine. And you, smartass, are going to set up an electronics system giving them everything on a silver platter. The Russians have three separate mobs up there in their Salyut and two Mirs and they're working around the clock to get hard data on Arbok and his bunch. The moment they find out you're communicating with Arbok, or just the ship, they'll wait right beyond the horizon for the ship to come down and then they'll come in with every goddamned weapon and force they have, and He knew what man was. Anything strange, different, alien, or even the tiniest and remote possibility of being superior, must be crushed and destroyed instantly.

Jake thought of the movies he'd seen titled Alien and then Aliens and he knew that was precisely how the world would consider that ship and its occupants.

Sure, there were movies that handled this issue in just the opposite way. ET was the prime example. The ExtraTerrestrial. Real cute little shit with his bug eyes and cute little bunny-rabbit head cocked to the side and those small animal noises, and that glowing fingertip that banished pain and cured anything. Cute as hell. Ate candy. Slept in closets. Dressed in kid's clothes. Real cute. But strictly a movie. Jake laughed to himself. He pictured a farmer rounding his woodshed and coming upon this leathery little shit with the

crazy head and extendable neck, and before ET could scamper a dozen feet back into the cornstalks, the farmer would either gut him with a pitchfork or blow his ass and cute little cocked head to smithereens with a blast from a 12-gauge. The harsh reality of life, and there was nothing wrong with it when you judged the moment from the survivability of the planet with lesser technology, was that any risk you took carried all the elements of devastating backfire.

Taking a chance would be mad. They could have weapons that would blow up this planet. They probably want to rape our young girls. Just imagine the terrible diseases, the epidemics they could release against this world . . .

"This whole fucking planet is fucking sick," Jake said aloud to himself. He felt a guilty moment. Was that message also sent across space to the ship? He didn't know. No response of any kind and Jake felt grateful for that. Apparently meandering within his own thoughts didn't leak out.

But he knew what he needed to do, how to work out what had to be done. First, however, he needed some more information. If the ship came in to Old Millford, well, that demanded some damned solid work well ahead of time and it demanded security and "I've got to know more about Arbok and his bunch," Jake said aloud to himself. "And the best way seems to be to tell them more about me first..." The first thing to do first, Jake mumbled to himself within his head, following his practice of either vocal or silent verbalization, is to give Arbok some scale. That way we can both get some idea of sizing . . . But what could he use for the yardstick? A measuring rod that he could transfer in terms of concept across space to an alien he didn't know with whom he was communicating on some weirdo hit-or-miss mental exchange boosted by a computer Keep it simple, Harden. Think of something very simple. It's the only way this will work.

Never forgetting the awesome difficulty of their bootleg communications, with all the incredible errors that likely lurked about every corner of that effort, Jake knew standard yardsticks were worthless. Or, in other words, he needed a yardstick meaningful to them both. A visualization of himself didn't mean a thing. How big was big, how tall was tall, and how diminutive was small? A foot, a yard, an inch, a hand, a furlong, a meter, a kilometer, a mile or a nautical mile—the list was extensive enough but it didn't mean anything because they lacked the mutual yardstick. He thought of those tools and the datum any navigator would see. Sure, he was a pilot and Arbok obviously was a space pilot and that meant he could (or should be able to) navigate by astrophysics. A second of arc, so much percent of a light second, the spectrum of helium—all these would work if they could do more than throw ghostly images at one another. If he could communicate by computer he could use all sorts of illustrations and measurements that Arbok could see and convert to meaningful comparators. But the first signal he tried to kick out into space with that kind of message would be like firing a giant flare in Stygian darkness and Of course! Television! he shouted with exultation as the idea hit him. All you need is a thin slice of meaningful memory. He grabbed the day's newspaper and checked the television listings. There it was. The same program was broadcast every morning during the week at seven sharp. A half-hour show, one of those educational programs for kids. The Big and the Little of It All and it went out locally over television station WCJB from nearby Gainesville.

This would take some doing. Keep it simple, he reminded himself. He placed a television set under a bright light directly before his seat. This was a position he knew that Arbok, and almost surely whoever was with (whoever? Whatever . . .) Arbok, had become familiar with. Watching television by the hour, hour after hour studying the people, animals, buildings, traffic (crime, sex, scandal, killing, traffic, war, and the impossible-to-comprehend vagaries and storylines, both fiction and actual) of the occupants of the planet they (almost) certainly planned to land upon. It would show them transportations-technology, manners of life, weaponry, religious elements—television was a strange and warped mirror but it would show them the things they could never learn otherwise, from X-rated films to great white sharks to 747's and, well, everything television had to show.

Now he wanted desperately for Arbok to watch this one specific station; this one specific show. You don't move up in the technological culture of any society without being able to understand certain basics. Up is up and down is down, there's life and there's death, on a technological planet you need to move masses of people and cargo, and you do by every means possible, from sailing ships to supersonic

jetliners. Highways with millions of cars and trucks, carrying humans within them, are undeniably just what they seem to be. Laws of motion, commerce, trade, and finance have generally similar patterns anywhere in the galaxy, judged Marden.

If Arbok came from a society so vastly different then they never would have made their contact in the first place. There was ever-present in Jake's thinking that he and this alien Arbok had something very special in common. Arbok was an alien; that didn't mean he was alien.

By now, with all the advantages of their extraordinary computer ability to guide him through the thickets, Arbok knew the language, the basic customs, the communications, transportation and the base of the social structure not simply of this planet he observed, but specifically of one of its nation states, the United States of America, and Jake had zeroed in to a specific area of Old Millford. Since the prison area fell under the broadcast range of WCJB-TV in nearby Gainesville, that could be considered close enough to include Old Millford. Jake prepared a simple sign in block letters: WCJB-TV. He didn't bother with any times of broadcast for what he wanted Arbok to watch. If Arbok got the message, then he'd have the computer search out that station, get its broadcast signal wavelength, and just tune in. If Arbok had the smarts for which Jake gave him credit, he'd be sharp enough to record everything the station broadcast over a period of several days, and then he would speed-scan the video recording. It was hardly a tough act to stop dead at the show, *The Big and Little of It All*.

Which was that educational program to teach youngsters about size and measurements and comparison. With that tape as a guide, and the computer to sort out the wrinkles, Arbok would be able to compare what he used for measurements against that broadcast in the program.

He would have his yardstick. It might just turn out that six blocks, or whatever it might be, was pretty much the same as six feet. It didn't matter. The educational program of sizes and measurements was the Rosetta Stone.

Jake sat before the television set under a bright light, the letters WCJB staring boldly at him, and he concentrated as hard as he could on what he saw. He repeated this same procedure every hour for ten minutes at a time.

On the third day he had the strangest feeling the message had been received and understood. He had only that feeling; it was a hunch as solid as granite. And if he were right, he'd have some whingding of a response, and then some fast work to do.

"You've lost your marbles, that's what." Jube Bailey glared across the wide table covered with drawings and blueprints and specifications. He stabbed a finger at Jake, glanced a moment to Jeff Maddox, who'd been reacting with unconcealed amusement to Bailey's frustrations and outbursts, and concentrated again on Jake. "Look at this shit," Jube exclaimed. "What the hell do you plan to do? Rebuild this whole goddamned place?" He slammed a hand against the table. Pencils and pens jumped and several clattered to the floor. They ignored the small details. "This is going to take two hundred men, for Christ's sake!" Bailey went on. "And you know something else-"

"Hold it, hold it," Jake said with a voice subdued but not without the power to which Jube was accustomed. "I don't give a shit how many men it takes or what it costs. What difference does it make? We've rebuilt this whole place, we've-"

"But there was a reason for all that!" Jube shouted. "The computers, the security setup, the whole goddamned shmear. This," and again a large dark hand banged against the table, "don't make one fucking ounce of sense!"

"It does," Jake said quietly.

"Sure, sure, you want to get ready for visitors," Jube said with dark sarcasm. He turned to Maddox.

"Senator, tell this bushy-headed bastard he's off his rocker, will you?"

Maddox knew when to walk a very straight line between two powerful and opposing forces. "Well, his story's thin," Maddox conceded, "but not his convictions. You want my opinion? Straight objectivity, right?"

"Can the nicking speech and get to it," Bailey growled.

"Then I say go with it," Maddox concluded.

Jake's face was hair-covered granite; the set of his eyes and lips said it all. "I don't need no fucking caucus," he said coldly to Jube. "Maddox, nice as it is I also do not need your vote or that of anyone else. Butt out."

Maddox leaned back in his seat, both hands held up, palms out.

"You put two fucking greys together against one nigger and right away we got a political party," Jube told the other two men.

"Never mind that shit," Jake said. A heavy ringer tapped the papers. "You and I, man, we don't do nothing without each other. That's the deal, remember?"

"It's cut in stone," Jube agreed. He fell silent, staring at the heavy paperwork and drawings.

"Like I say, you've lost your marbles," he said again, but the bite was gone from his voice. "Whole fucking world is standing on its ear and now my best friend goes bananas. You gonna' tell me why you want all this shit done? And why you're such hot snot to run with it?"

"I told you," Jake hammered back. "I can't give you numbers, dates, names; whatever you want. All I got is a feeling in here," he tapped his head, "that I absolutely believe. And now I'm asking you to believe me."

"Why don't you get drunk with the voodoo man?" Bailey offered. "Or get laid. Or go kill a whole bunch of people. It'll make you feel better."

"You're funny," Jake told him. "Like the clap."

"At least I can take a shot to make my dick better," Jube snapped back, grinning. He sighed. "All right, Jake. You're the Mad Hatter. That's all there is to it. But you got it."

Jake nodded. "Good," he said quietly.

"That's all? No huzzahs, no fireworks, no let's have a drink or nothing?" Jube asked, eyes wide, mouth open in mockery.

"Fuck you," Jake told him.

"Well, he's still here with us," Jube said to Maddox. "All right. Senator, you're all his. You know this kind of shit, right?"

Maddox leaned forward, a subtle rejoining of these two. "I know it. I handled a lot of construction. What he wants is, well, it's a bit odd--"

"Sure as shit," Jube agreed, reaching for a beer.

"--but it's nothing we can't handle." He moved papers, jabbed his finger on one blueprint. "He wants the west wall of the prison moved back," he glanced at Jake, "right?"

"Hundred and sixty feet," Jake agreed.

"That's stone and concrete and steel rod work. Easy enough," Maddox said, all business. "The wiring, plumbing; it's all

stock stuff. You add the wall at the end and you build up the side walls, and you add the guard towers and the rest of the basic requirements. When that's up you take down the inside wall. Unless you're inside this place or looking down from a copter or a plane, you wouldn't even know what was going on." He pulled another sheet out to place it atop the stack. "We can lower the floor of this section of the yard, just so long as we're sure to attend to drainage and sideslip. Again it's a basic construction job. Steel rod reinforcement, walls go down deep, we run the power cables, water and sewer lines here and match them into the regular system."

He studied another paper. "You're sure about this power source, here?" he asked, studying Jake.

"Yeah. I want power from several sources," Jake explained, his finger tracing lines on the papers. "First, a real powerful turbine, here, completely separate from the prison. We get our power from the outside lines. I want that strictly as a backup. All the power for--" he hesitated.

"For what?" Jube lashed out like a hungry shark.

"For here," Jake went on with a poker face. "None of this power goes out of this area without my okay. You got that?"

Maddox nodded, listening as Jake went on. "Those lights atop the new section? Sodium vapor. I want alternating blue-whites and ambers. None of them facing up. Angled, just like I show here. Then I want those lights outside the prison, the flashing lights you see for final approach at airports. That's strictly a

temporary installation. Lay 'em out, have two power sources ready for them, and the moment I'm finished with them, you get them up and remove all signs they were ever there"

Maddox nodded. "Got it. Let me doublecheck this item, here," he said, shuffling more papers. "You want telescoping rods that come up out of the walls, here, here, and urn, these two places?"

"Right on. They come up, lifting the camouflage netting, and they hinge here. Use the restraining cables also. They hinge here and bend over, carrying the netting with them. Soon as that's up, everything visible from the outside shuts down. Later, I want to bring in these panels. We-"

"Those panels are clumsy, Jake. They won't take any real storm activity," Maddox broke in.

"Got a better idea?"

"Uh huh. Mirrored plastic. As strong as armored glass but only about a fiftieth of the weight. You can do wonders with it."

"Does it contain or disperse heat to another location?"

"Sure. You can feed whatever internal heat you produce to a smokestack, here. It'll be a dummy except for that purpose."

Jake studied Maddox carefully. This mother was a hell of a lot sharper than he'd figured, and he already knew Maddox was slick and swift. Jake leaned back. "You got a handle on the rest of it?"

Maddox held his questioning gaze. "I got it, Jake," he said softly. "In fact, I'd like to recommend something."

Jake hesitated but a moment. "Do it," he said.

"Obviously you want to conceal whatever's going to be in the yard," Maddox continued.

"Any asshole can figure that," Jube snickered.

"So you want shadows," Maddox went on, grinning at Jube's digs.

Jake thought over Maddox's remark. "Good thinking, Senator. Of course. We don't get shadows the infrared signature will be like a beacon at night, and during the day, the perfect sun angle could turn that thing into a giant mirror. Take care of it and anything else you come up with."

Jake rose to his feet and started for the door. "Where the hell you going now?" Jube sang out.

"Down below," Jake told him, referring to their underground master control room. "The voodoo man's putting together some special electronics gear for me."

"You wouldn't be tapping in to the boys at Cheyenne, now, would you?" Jube had the smile of a fox with a key to the henhouse.

"What gives you that idea?" Jake shot back, but they were both grinning. Jake waved his goodbye.

"You see this big screen here?" Luther Cogswell fussed over the small mountain of computers and electronic screens he'd jury-rigged in a separate cubicle of their underground center. "Now, the big screen here on the left," he said slowly to Jake, "this duplicates NORAD and NASA deepspace tracking. You get Cheyenne Mountain direct for NORAD, and all of the NASA tracking stations feed into this computer. It puts together all the pertinent data, matches it with NORAD, and you get a clean presentation on the screen."

"Where's the callup button for data and times?"

"Right, heah. Punch it in on that button and it wipes the screen clean and you get the numbers. You want both digital presentation of tracking and data readout, you slap your finger on this button, and screens one and two are activated. Now, the beauty of all this shit," Cogswell said with obvious pride, "is that screen number four, over heah, is a realtime input from all sources. Anything from the Russians, or them British tracking stations, whoever or whatever, comes in from everywhere in the world and you gets the presentation there. When it goes to overload it feeds it all into the memory system, and you can scan the data as fast or slow as you want. If it's in reference to that crazy ship out there what's got everybody in their big flap, you'll get a red screamer light and a tone alert as well."

Jake nodded. "I'm impressed, Luther. For a fucking witch doctor you're a marvel."

"Uh huh," Luther agreed. "Don't hurt to have a third eye."

"Why don't you can that shit?" Marden pushed him.

"Because you're doin' the same thing, man," Luther said with a laugh. "I got the third eye in heah," he tapped the side of his head, "and what do you think all this shit is for you?" He gestured to the array of

computers and screens. "Man, that is your third eye. You just a hell of a lot more obvious about it. But look, Jake, you see in space what your eyes can't see, right? You tracking something you don't even know what the hell it is or where it is or what it's doin' and you got constant readouts all the time. You blind as shit when it comes to deepspace tracking and yet you're right on top of it. You understand mass and inertia and so you know that sucker, it's got to fly along centrifugal spirals, so you can even anticipate the limits of what it can or can't do, right? And you do all this shit in a room that's under the ground and surrounded by water, and you tell me I'm fuckin' with voodoo? Jake, if anybody around here is the witch doctor, it's you."

Jake studied Luther. He didn't answer him. Too much of what the old cuttlefish of the junk world was saying had a ring of truth to it. Jake didn't like people figuring out what he was doing.

Luther smiled at him. "You talk to them boys up there yet?" he asked, and he smiled broadly as he presented the question.

"You looking through your third eye, Luther?"

"You bet your sweet ass, Jake."

CHAPTER 12

"We've been orbiting the planet now for one full revolution of their moon," Barq noted to Arbok.

Grangles stood to the side, not understanding everything he heard, but he followed Arbok's orders and at least listened to every word. He couldn't help his thoughts drifting. The strange words and concepts thrown back and forth between these two aliens were too much for him. Grangles was pure and simple a warrior. There existed no technological evolutionary line on Ishban. On that global desert of a world those who still survived the paroxysms of the dying planet fought each other savagely for precious food and water and shelter, and that was all that made up life. Ferocious, aggressive, savage; those were the norms, just as were killing and dying. If there existed a single religion on Ishban it was fatalism. The end was in sight although no man could measure it in terms of time. Volcanic explosions roared and thundered day and night. Violent electrostatic forces brought lightning bolts ripping from the boiling cauldron of the sky into the midst of the embattled people, as if the gods mocked them all by indifferent electrical savagery of their own that killed men, women, and children by the dozens with crackling roars.

Against that kind of life numbers, technology, science- phaph! It meant nothing. Grangles understood the knife, fighting, strength, and leadership. So he understood Arbok. He held him in tremendous admiration since that time he had whipped up on that slobbering idiot, Ytram. He'd handled Ytram's ponderous mass, as dangerous as the creature was stupid, with lethal smoothness that at any time Arbok wished could have ended the slobberer's life. Arbok had thrown the gauntlet at them all, Grangles had accepted leadership

instead of combat (inwardly he was immensely grateful for the leadership Arbok offered and that Grangles was so desperate to have), and now his entire existence was loyalty to Arbok.

That didn't prevent confusion and questions. "Arbok, tell me why you wish me to listen to all you and Barq say to each other. Your words fly over my head like rocks in a windstorm. I understand hardly any of them."

The powerful alien rested a hand on Grangle's shoulder. "Because, my headstrong friend," Arbok told him, "it's necessary that you be familiar with the terms we use. I don't want you confused by hearing something you don't understand, just at that moment when I require both your full attention and whatever action I order. You see, you're the most unusual of all six of us. In terms of this new world, that is."

Grangles felt more confusion. To him, unusual always came across in fighting ability and very little else.

Arbok had come to recognize his expressions, and he led Grangles before a mirror so they both saw their reflections. "Look at yourself, Grangles. Do you know what / see?"

"Two men. Men from two different worlds. I see my leader. What else," asked Grangles heavily, "is there to see?"

"On that world they call Earth," Arbok gestured to the planet now clearly visible in its brilliant

blue-and-white hues of atmosphere and oceans, "there are many, many different types of people."

"It's a confusing world," Grangles admitted.

"More than you can yet imagine," Arbok emphasized. "Men from different parts of the world look different from men of other parts. They have a dazzling variety of skin colors, for example. Even their growth of that strange stuff they call hair has great variations. They differ in size and weight and, well, many of them have facial and other features that mark them clearly from certain parts of the planet."

Arbok directed Grangles' attention again to the mirror. "We lack the clothes to help you fit the part," he told Grangles. "But with the proper clothes, and some practice in your speech, you could pass easily for any member of a group of tribes from that area they call the Mediterranean. The area includes the northern rim of a great continent and spills over

to other land areas and many islands. There's one group especially. Desert people like yourself.

Generally, they come under the group known as Arabs. They have other names, but desert people says it best. With the right clothes, as I say, you could pass for one of them. Do you understand?"

"Not yet." Grangles' speech was always direct.

"When we first meet the people from that world," Arbok went on patiently, "I want you to be the first person they see. Do you understand now?"

Understanding of something less than combat was difficult for Grangles, but he'd had long preparation from Arbok. He nodded his head slowly, the autumn-hued skin as swarthy as any sun-hammered Bedouin of the African tribes. The black piercing eyes and the great hooked beak of a nose were as common through the African and Indo-European land masses as any native. Arbok had studied clothes and social mores and presentations carefully. Put Arab dress on this man, dark glasses if it fit the moment, and Grangles could walk the streets of Cairo or Jerusalem or Tehran and not draw a second glance.

"Yes," Grangles said carefully, choosing his response. "They see what I see in this mirror. A reflection of themselves. They will not be afraid of ... of... strangeness."

Arbok's powerful hand clapped his back warmly. "Excellent!"

And so Grangles had become what Arbok wished during these final periods of orbiting the strange world on which they would soon land. They had little choice. Their food was running scarce. The automatic equipment was starting to break down. Water reclamation systems had choked and the ship had begun to smell like a urinal. Without Barq el Quatrane's chemical miracles with old water and body wastes they would have been in serious trouble long before now. And Barq, as Grangles had heard Arbok say with a grim look on his lizoid features, was running out of miracles.

So Grangles stood close by and he listened and he did the best he could to stuff knowledge into his aching head.

"We'll be down before we complete another revolution. What they call a month," Arbok said to Barq as the two men stared at the shining blue-and-white sphere suspended against a velvet black wall of infinity. "The planet rotates fully, one night and one day, for what they call a period of twenty-four hours. That makes up their full day. They're confusing, Barq. Day to them means the period of twenty-four hours. It also means the period on any part of the world where they have direct solar radiation, and they interchange without the blink of an eye. But if you consider the day as being a full planetary rotation, then in seven of those days, what they call a week, I expect us to be on the way down."

"It can't be soon enough," Barq said darkly.

"I know, I know. Even Ytram, who can live in a sewer without wrinkling his nose, is starting to complain about his own farts."

"No one bathes," Barq said unnecessarily.

"And we all stink," Arbok laughed.

"Let us land!" Barq half-shouted, and they shared laughter.

"We will, my friend," Arbok said. "One week. Seven days. We have much to do in that time. We cannot just descend and set down. We are aliens, Barq."

"So are they," Barq said, miffed. "What makes us so different?"

"There are six of us. There are more than five billion of them. They are antagonistic, aggressive, liars, killers, predators, murderers, thieves, perverts, insane, mad-"

"I get your point."

"And they have a special madness for killing anything strange."

"Us," Barq said, with sudden gloom.

"Which is why we have gone to such extreme pains to prepare for our landing. Upon which, if everything in my head is not the result of strange radiations from that star out there, and it has some sense to it, we shall conveniently disappear within the embrace of a friendly group."

"Friendly? Them? Those same bloodthirsty savages with fusion weapons you just described?" Barq didn't hide his disbelief. "What on Ishban could make them friendly!"

Arbok smiled, but with barely a touch of humor. "Common interests, my gentle friend, common interests."

The penal vessel floated down a long, gentle gravity trough from behind the moon, swinging wide to escape capture by

the airless, scabrous satellite of Earth. Arbok had worked out the details of their downward sling through the centrifugal reefs of flight through opposing gravitational forces to bring the ship on its continuing spiral to the planet. Every measurable detail of the world they approached had long before been entered into the Frarsk computer; gravitational pull at surface, atmospheric depth and composition, electrical atmosphere, gravity mass of the earth-moon system, tidal forces-a litany of detail kept in exquisite balance by the electronic brain. It would all be balanced with the mass of Frarsk and the thruster controls adjusted and fired accordingly to the downward avenue desired by Arbok, with the computer providing a constant updating of progress and allowing for immediate changes to hew to the original goals. Arbok would not physically take the controls of the ship in a manual mode until they were close to planetfall; at that point the unpredictable elements of flight overwhelmed the computer and demanded man-thought-and-decision.

There was a rule that applied to all pilots of all planets. During takeoff and approach and touchdown there were times when the only right thing to do to escape or survive an emergency was the wrong thing. Computers didn't do that. They didn't make decisions as to whether they should drive right through a moose or a brostagp that wandered onto an approach platform or a runway. But until those delicate moments arrived, the computer could handle the ship better than any human pilot. The latter worked best in that mode where atmospheric forces acted upon and interacted with the ship.

Those were the times when a sensitive ass was more valuable than all the electronic computations that might ever be made.

"They've got us on every radar set on that planet," Barq observed, watching the computer data presentation of electromagnetic energy beamed at them from every visible part of the planet's surface.

"To say nothing of their satellites. Look at the pings we're getting. They're studying us in visible light, infrared, ultraviolet, up and down the whole radio spectrum; anything and everything."

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"Can they get a good lock on us?" Barq asked, frowning. "No way," Arbok offered with solid confidence. "Even a penal ship like this barge has to anticipate all sorts of problems, including the galactic pirates and raiders. So it's equipped to create electromagnetic bubbles that give off false returns and shapes. We can even create false ships all about us which," he added, nodding, "we certainly are going to do." "And they'll end up tracking those, right?" "They'll end up with headaches," Arbok promised. "They'll see everything except us."

Two decoys slipped away from Frarsk on the computer-mandated schedule of their flight. Several miles to each side of Frarsk and increasing distance steadily, each along a different flight path, they broadcast their "electromagnetic bubble" pulses simultaneously with engine ignition, the latter more pyrotechnic than required for thrusting. Each decoy, approximately fourteen feet in length, appeared on radar screens as two hundred feet wide, two hundred feet deep and seventeen hundred feet long. Flames spewed from each for more than a mile, the signature so familiar to terrestrial astronauts-a long single needle of flame

straight back from the engine nozzle and the huge plasma sheath erupting in a giant semicircle from the rounded edges of the engine. From Earth, on the planet's darkside, the lights appeared to float gently through the sky, creatures of green and violet and yellow adrift in the heavens and coming awake with some unknown destination suddenly in mind.

The fires in the skies enchanted most observers but had far less poetic value to the army of technicians, engineers, scientists, and military radar crews on full alert for the sudden appearance or movement of anything in space that hadn't been launched from Earth. By now, or long before this moment, only the most vociferous creationists still insisted that the object being tracked in space was not an artifact built and controlled by an advanced civilization come here for reasons unknown. God occupied less and less of the spotlight except for those temple priests and electronic evangelists skilled at swift turnover, who now proclaimed the glories of God in bringing together His flock from different parts of the universe. Except for the multitudes desperate for leadership and

bereft of their own ability to think, the harsh reality of the machine intruding terrestrial space, with all its awesome potential for destruction, occupied stage center.

The machine altered its inward spiral; the world of science, technology, and military might twitched. There appeared the huge lances and bowls of flame; those same worlds convulsed. The two "ships" offering solid, huge radar returns, also clearly visible for a while to the naked eye and much longer to optical telescopes, accelerated with tremendous speed toward the moon, howled into an outward curving path and set course for a swift and potentially short flight to bring them to the planet Mars.

Frarsk's computer dallied with the elemental forces of space maneuvers, decelerated the penal ship, and eased it into an accelerating curving fall that would take it to a block of space-and the upper fringes of Earth's atmosphere, somewhere over the southern Atlantic Ocean. Just before it brushed the higher reaches of the air ocean, the computer released a swarm of twenty small decoys to scatter them on bursts of green flame in all directions about the planned descent route. Each decoy flashed a powerful electromagnetic signal, jamming every radar tracking Frarsk and sending the computers attending the radar into fits. In effect, the decoys blew huge glaring bowls of energy along the top of Earth's atmosphere. Somewhere within that magnificent disturbance, Frarsk vanished to optical tracking and radar search. It was as if the ghostly vessel had never been.

Arbok strapped himself in securely to the pilot's seat that had not been used for actual flight for nearly two hundred years, since the initial proving test of Frarsk. Autolocks secured his feet to the rudder pedals, webbing of banded steelcloth snugged his torso to the seat through a six-point harness. He preferred not to wear a crash helmet because even the connotation of the word repelled him. Then he thought of the lighting conditions he might encounter and he sighed and brought the helmet onto his head, snugged it tight and activated the powerpak. Now with no more than the blink of an eye or the tip of his bright red tongue against a reacting sensor he could see in visible light, in light boosted a thousandfold from what would otherwise be darkness, in infrared, ultraviolet, and a mixed band of the spectrum that would give him good vision in anything short of a huge tank of asphalt.

He had a series of controls with which to defy the cumbersome mass of Frarsk in alien atmosphere. Coming into the atmosphere the computers would run at full speed, tasting and testing friction resistance, rising temperatures and other features. The trick was not to burn off the enormous energy of the penal vessel through reentry friction. That was energy-conservative but it was terribly clumsy; it dictated its own flight path, it would leave an incredible ionized trail three times around the globe because of the enormous mass of Frarsk, and they might as well fire flares to pinpoint their descending position to the enormous technical army straining to find even a glimpse of their presence. Instead, using one of the EM bubble decoy bursts of the smaller missiles already fired, the computer would sense atmosphere and fire a short but steady blast from the main engines. This would decelerate Frarsk and cause it to plunge steeply into atmosphere where all the control elements would be brought into play-a bewildering combination of gyros, thrusters, and aerodynamic controls no different than those used to crack through the atmosphere of any planet.

Barq sat alongside Arbok, also strapped in, but even more tightly, in response to his own natural fears at

the dangers they were about to dare. To Arbok's left, Grangles also sat cocooned within his harness and straps, but with far less understanding than the others as to what was happening. He was totally out of his element and he began to wonder if fierce wishing-hoping-praying with his eyes squeezed tightly shut might not invoke the gods he had left far behind so long ago on Ishban.

Behind these three, Ytram, Brist, and Drong were festooned within jury-rigged seats and harnesses, hanging on for dear life to those seats, and utterly helpless to do anything but endure.

Barq motioned through the front transparent shields. "Those lights. Flickers of fire," he said. "What are they?"

"Thunderstorms. Enormous clouds. The fire you see is great lightning bolts. This world has thousands of them going on all the time."

Grangles showed interest. His desert world played host to enormous grinding, sliding friction forces and opposites of electrical charges, and he was well accustomed to lightning ripping down from clouds. But his was a dry desert world; this planet was wet everywhere. Strange and mysterious, he thought, changing his mind about any questions he might voice. Leave Arbok alone. He's got to save our lives.

Barq always asked questions. "Will we be affected by those storms?"

"I sure hope so," Arbok told him. "Can you see the line of ocean to land, just to our left? We're going in there." He paused as strings of blue-white and yellow-orange fire flickered and spat across an area of hundreds of miles.

"We're going in there?" Barq was aghast. "But . . . won't that be dangerous?"

"Sure will," Arbok answered, his old phlegmatic self at flying in dangerous conditions coming to the fore. He cracked ten fingers and two thumbs, the snapping sound of hand bones matching the feeling of new flexibility in his fingers. "But once we're inside-it's what they call a squall line there-that long stretch of thunderstorms, they'll never know we're there. Heavy rains, high winds, tremendous lightning discharges, some real crazy electrostatic forces, night darkness- I've been hoping for just those conditions."

Barq swallowed. "This vessel . . . can it handle all that?"

Arbok grinned, the fighter jock spitting-anxious to join battle with the elements. "We're going to find out soon enough."

"But, I mean, from everything I know, it's not designed, it's never been intended, to fly under such conditions!"

"You got it," Arbok agreed. The grin remained. "As far as a spaceship goes," Arbok continued, "this thing is a clumsy barge. It's a slimepig or the closest thing to it I've ever seen. It's got all sorts of crazy angles and sharp edges and blunt areas that make it a horror for atmospheric work. It was never designed to fly in atmosphere. When it hit a planet with atmosphere, it came down on an easy curving descent, decelerated all the way by power and none of this shit of getting rid of kinetic energy by burning heat off your nose, belly, and ass."

"Uh, Arbok, I hope you don't mind my asking this? Have you, uh, ever flown one of these in atmosphere before?"

"Nope," Arbok said cheerfully.

"Then how-"

Arbok broke in with a laugh. "Mister Barq el Quatrane, you have a personal diety, a god, a supreme being in your life?"

The question seemed to calm Barq. "Yes," he said quietly. "Why?"

"Well, you'd better pray that I learn very damned fast, and that I'm better than good," Arbok offered, "or you're going to meet your god a hell of a lot sooner than you planned."

Frask reeled violently, without warning, throwing them against their harnesses and bringing forth an explosion of curses, grunts, and gasps.

"Whoops!" Arbok cried, hands and feet on the controls, "here we go!"

Frask plunged into the top of a monster thunderstorm booming better than a hundred thousand feet over Georgia.

All hell broke loose.

In the huge high-security prison located just outside the city of Starke, lying between Gainesville and

Jacksonville in northern Florida, an air of dangerous expectancy became almost a physical force throughout the corridors and cells containing hundreds of hardened, convicted criminals. The approaching squall line brought with it violent wind gusts, torrential down-pours and an almost nonstop barrage of explosive lightning strikes. Overhead lights flickered, sometimes dimming, as lightning tore into power lines and relay stations. Guard Kilburn Wade looked at his watch and nodded to two other guards down the cell corridor. It was time to do it; switches closed, handles moved, twenty-nine cell doors opened. Everyone was primed, everyone had his role arranged, small flasks of kerosene emptied on mattresses, lighters flared, flames and smoke rose. Men cursed and shouted, blazing mattresses sailed out across the corridor railings down to the next level. In less than sixty seconds the Starke prison was pandemonium. Full security went into effect immediately, searchlights glared through the driving rain, sirens wailed into the wind, and in the top-security room the word went out by telephone and radio that a huge prison break was already under way.

Not one prisoner moved or attempted to move from Starke. They followed the game plan. Make it look real good, boys. Everybody gets his stuff, compliments of the top man. Just make it look good.

Every available lawman from the state highway patrol, local county sheriff's offices, city and town police picked up their weapons, set up roadblocks, brought out the dogs, and rushed to reinforce the guards at Starke prison to control the explosive prison riot and breakout that wasn't taking place.

But seemed as if it was, and so tied up every available cop for miles around, jammed traffic, overloaded the communications systems, and put the security emergency plans for the area into a beautiful, storm-worsened gridlock.

The timing was impeccable. Ten minutes after the first blazing mattress hurtled out over the cell corridor balcony, Arbok shouted, "Whoops! Here we go!"

No one below, about the high security prison, gave the first thought to what might be happening a hundred thousand feet above them.

Not all the police forces in the local countryside went tearing off to Starke. At Gainesville Regional Airport, a huge group of law-enforcement officers from local and county police, Customs, DEA, FBI and other state and federal agencies lay in wait for the biggest load of cocaine ever reported to be moving into Gainesville. The tip had come from one of the best undercover agents in the business, using his ultrasecret identifier codes. No one in law enforcement knew their man had been made long before, and his identification and his code left alone until it might be used for maximum benefit. Luther Cogswell passed down the word. "Tonight's the night. You know what to do. Good old G-ville's the place. You let them know that a blue suit reserve unit is scheduled to do some fancy instrument training tonight. But, m'man, you pass on the word that the airplane's been hijacked by the Medellin

group and they're using that Charley One Thirty to bring in four tons of white dynamite. Got it? The weather's bad, it's the perfect time for it, and this is their chance to be bigtime Captain Marvel heroes."

By the time the U.S. Air Force Reserve C-130 turboprop transport punched and fought its way through the heavy storms raging across Florida, their only goal in life was to get to the ground safely at Gainesville Regional Airport. Air Traffic Control gave them unexpected priority as if the skids were greased and all commercial traffic had suddenly been given a back seat. Radar vectored them around the worst thunderstorm cells and lined them up for a long straight-in approach out of the west direct to Runway 10. Rocking and trembling violently from the storm, but under capable control of its experienced crew, the C-130 thundered to the long runway. The pilots walked the rudder madly in the gusting winds, went to full reverse on the big props and felt the airplane shudder to a grinding, stumbling halt as twenty federal officers emptied the clips of their automatic weapons into the fuselage and nosewheel tires of the airplane. Moments later three SWAT trucks blocked the runway, fire engines hurled a mountain of foam about the cockpit to blind the crew, and an army of lawmen shot their way into the airplane.

Two of the six air force reservists were shot to death without knowing why.

To the north, seen for the first time on air traffic control radar as an intermittent, fading-in-and-out reflected target, Frarsk lurched free of a huge cumulonimbus cell, gave its six occupants a brief respite, and then plunged into another cell that greeted them with a blinding strike of lightning across the bow of the ship that had never been intended for flight under such hellish conditions.

The lightning strike erased the intermittent blip on ATC radar. The traffic controller on duty hadn't paid it much attention, anyway. Commercial airliners didn't fly at eighty thousand feet, and the goddamned radar was old and not worth a rat's ass for tracking anything that didn't kick out its own return transponder signal.

To the south of Gainesville, Highway 441 lit up police stations in Ocala and other communities as off-duty officers were called in for emergency duty. Most had to be notified by radio. A race riot in the black community of Ocala tied up every police car for many miles around. Telephone and power lines went down along remote roads and across desolate fields. A tremendous nine-car-and-truck smashup on Highway 1-75, with a tanker burning and exploding, snared vehicle traffic in a gruesome chokehold. Reports of shootings, knifings, robberies, and other mayhem came in by what phone lines remained, or by terrified citizens who'd raced to police stations to report ghoulish crimes. A huge fire burned despite the heavy rains in Ocala National Forest and reports trickled in that an airliner had crashed. Several thousand teenagers rampaged through Daytona Beach, their partying enthusiasm fired up by free handouts of cocaine, PCP, and LSD. They overturned and torched cars and buses, wrecked bars, and jammed the bridges in and out of the beachside partytown. Along the coastal waterways, oil and gasoline from punctured fuel tanks drifted along canals and rivers and then burst mysteriously into raging flames. A race riot erupted in Cocoa and two biker gangs joined forces to invade Disney World, violating the holiest of sacrosanct sites in central Florida.

Nobody, but nobody, gave a damn what might be happening in the storm-lashed skies over northcentral Florida.

Brist clung with powerful hands to his jury-rigged seat in the aft section of the flight deck of Frarsk, his legs locked around metal supports, his fear of being helpless as the ship underwent its terrible battering barely under control. He glanced at Drong, teeth set grimly, his own powerful hands gripping his seat, hanging on for dear life. Before them, through the transparent vueshield, they caught glimpses of towering clouds in between the blinding sheets and rivers of lightning. Static electricity crackled and spit wildly through the flight deck. St. Elmo's fire danced along the computer and control consoles, raced and flashed in blue flame along the metal deck, stabbing and biting at their legs and wreathing their heads in fearful electrical fire, far more frightening than dan gerous, but bad enough to scare the hell out of any helpless victim strapped and tied to his seat.

A gurgling shriek and drawn-out gasp drew their attention as the metal supports securing Ytram to the deck gave way before the violent back-and-forth thrusting of Ytram's mass of flab. Ytram yelled in terror and urinated violently as both the seat supports and his bladder failed him. His howling ended only when another vicious blow against the ship mercifully slammed the thick skull of Ytram against an unyielding bulkhead. Unconscious, bleeding, stained with urine, his body, still tied to the broken supports, thumped and crashed back and forth in the aft part of the flight deck, a huge mass that at any moment, as Frarsk succumbed to violent downdrafts, could become a destructive hippo-like missile.

Barq hung on for dear life, terrified. "I-I can't believe this!" he managed to shout to Arbok. He gasped for air, his lungs more than once emptied as the terrible forces hurled him from side to side, up and down, and whirled him about crazily-as it did the ship itself.

"It gets worse before it gets better!" Arbok shouted back. He gloried in the tempestuous violence, in the sheer screaming energy of wind and rain and lightning all about him. Pitted against elements totally new to him he was in his real domain-a pilot's skill pitted against all that the gods might throw at him. He laughed as a demon might howl with joy as the latter sped through curling flames of Hell; this was challenge at its finest. The huge mass of Frarsk was no match for the violence of this line of storms. Arbok didn't worry about the lightning strikes. Any ship that can take warp speed and the fierce electrical storms streaming from rogue stars and the violent fields of energy between planets much too close to one another for safety, could withstand lightning. Frarsk had also been designed to ward off stray chunks of pit-sized space debris from dust to rocks; its first line of defense was the powerful force shield that protected the ship in the form of an invisible bubble. That was now gone; activating the force field within atmosphere, even calm atmosphere, created huge interplays of electrical and magnetic forces that could tear any ship into strips of metal as if it were paper. But the hull itself

could withstand tremendous meteoric impacts and Arbok felt safe enough from that danger. Lightning wreathed the ship again, attracted almost as a lover to this marvelous target within the grasp of the storm. For nearly thirty seconds a huge horizontal stroke wrapped about Frarsk, exploding electrical currents through the ship and nearly blinding the stunned, disbelieving men from five different worlds (the sixth was still mercifully unconscious).

"Warning light!" Barq managed to shout.

Arbok scanned the gauges and cursed. The gyros were giving way. The constant violent motion, the effect of flying through a huge waterfall, the winds, the incessant pounding and rocking, and the electrical fields coursing savagely through the ship overloaded the gyros, heated them violently, and sent the equivalent of blinding headaches and terror to the computer. If a computer could be said to be upset, puzzled, frustrated, mauled and pummeled, and fearful, then the Frarsk computer was hellishly close to that moment. It had kept up a running spattering of flame thrusting from different attitude thrusters to keep a modicum of balance, but the storm of this strange world was overcoming the power of the ship itself. The more they descended into thickening atmosphere the less effective were the space controls, and the more desperately the computer needed the experience and skills of Arbok at the atmospheric controls to supply the major part of their continued operation under control.

Arbok took her down steadily, using the thrusters as much as he could, bleeding off speed. He felt a terrible shudder that scared the hell out of his fellow passengers but brought him to emit a grunt of satisfaction; he knew they had now slowed sufficiently to drop below the speed of sound in this atmosphere. Some of the effects of shock waves would now abate. The violence remained but the controls reacting to the forces of swiftly flowing air had become more effective.

All north Florida and southern Georgia had for hours been standing on tornado alert. In the midst of slashing rain and clouds down to the ground they were invisible to the eye; they registered on radar but Frarsk lacked such instruments and devices built specifically for this atmosphere and its insane forces. Arbok called out to Barq: "Things are getting better!" he shouted.

Barq fought to keep from throwing up all across the controls. "You're crazy!" he managed to shout back. "No! It really is better!" Arbok sang out. "Look, we're below the speed of sound! Better control response-" He hesitated as the ship whirled about suddenly and stood on its left side, ready to fall helplessly earthward. Arbok fought her back to essentially level attitude, then dropped the nose to continue their descent. He had to time everything perfectly and he started looking for the lights he needed desperately to land not only safely, but within the cocoon of protection an alien named Jake, whom he had never met and had seen only in a dreamlike vision in a telepathic mirror, had prepared for them.

"It's just great!" Barq shouted-gurgled.

"We're only two miles up!" Arbok shouted. "I'm going to open the air vents! There's enough air now to breathe!"

He stabbed a control button. All through the ship ports opened and stale atmosphere gushed away from Frarsk. An incredible smell of cold, wet, fresh, wonderful air poured into the flight deck. Brist and Barq, both from worlds where water and water vapor meant everything to evolution and life, were startled and amazed by the density and the incredible richness of humidity, and for the moment they lost their fears.

"It's . . . it's wonderful!" Brist cried out from behind Barq. Barq nodded; Brist couldn't tell if he had agreed with him or had been battered unconscious and his head was rolling around on his neck.

"There!" Jake shouted to the men crowded about him in the darkened room, the group's attention riveted to the circular glowing radar screen. "That's them! It's the goddamned alien ship!"

Jube Bailey pressed closer, peering at the glowing scope. "How the hell do you tell that shit?" he demanded. "All you got is a dumb blip there."

"Because there's nothing else that will give back a return ijUo tV.ot " Takp snanned. "The size-"

"Jake, easy, easy," Jeff Maddox broke in. "It's too early to tell. All you've got is skin tracking in this godawful weather. Without a coded transponder-"

Jake looked up, ready to snarl, his temper flaring. As quickly as it appeared he shoved it down. "Damnit, Maddox, you're right. But that return is as big as a seven-forty-seven, and if it keeps coming in this close I don't know what else it could be."

"What else?" Jube demanded of Maddox. He saw the concern on the senator's face. "Shit fire!" Jube yelled. "Jake ain't no goddamn schoolgirl. Talk up!"

"It's big enough," Maddox said quickly, "to be a jumbo jet. Normally, they're never this low around this area. It could be a big military ship. Big tanker, or a C-Five, or a One-Forty-One, something like that. But to come down this low, well, it's that storm out there. We'll know soon enough," he added. "It seems to be on a definite curving path toward us and there isn't an airfield near us to handle equipment that big." Jube patted Jake's shoulder. "Stay with it, man. You give the word and we're ready to pop."

Jake shot Jube a grateful look. He pounded a fist on the radar panel. "Damnit, I know, / feel it's him\"

"Him?" Jube blinked. "Who the hell is him?" He shook his head. "Man, you been talking to somebody in particular?"

"I'll tell you about it one day," Jake said sourly. He kept his eyes glued to the scope. "There . . . see? It's that same curving path. He's down to about three thousand feet now, and his angle, it keeps coming dead on to us."

"How far out?" Jube demanded.

"Ten miles."

"Can he see the lights we got?"

"Any moment, Jube-"

"Jesus Christ!" They glanced at Maddox, whose finger stabbed against the scope. "See that hook?" A line of yellow-green began curving in a hook on the scope.

"He's got to go through that," Maddox added.

"Can you see the lights yet?" Barq asked, squinting through rain and lightning-pierced darkness. "Not yet," Arbok answered, the first sign of a frown showing on his face. Perspiration steamed from him. The humidity was crazy. With the vents open to ambient pressure, the ship's system wasn't doing a thing about water-soaked atmosphere. And they should see the lights at any moment. His finger stabbed the computer panel for second-by-second updates on their flight path and proximity to his target. "By local measurements . . . using miles," he said, his body weary from his constant battle with the elements. "Ten miles out. Just a few minutes more. We should have the lights any moment and-"

"What's that?" Barq yelled.

They turned to where he pointed. For the first time they heard a strangled sound from Grangles. Emerging from the darkness was a great whirling shape, reaching upward from the ground to disappear into the clouds. Blue light glowed everywhere and about the thick, funnel shape lightning spattered crazily, reaching into and through and about the funnel.

"It's what they call a tornado," Arbok said slowly, his shoulders slumping, a barely visible move that neither Barq nor Grangles missed.

"We have them at home," Grangles said. "Devils of the storm. Pillars of the gods. The spear of the-"

"Shut your fucking mouth," Arbok snapped. He spoke now to both Barq and Grangles. "If we get hit with that... I don't know if even this ship can take it. The winds inside that thing . . . five hundred miles an hour ..."

"We can't handle that," Barq said quietly, still half-choking from breathing through his physical pummeling.

"And we can't go anywhere else," Arbok said. "It's either go through it, or around it, or I go to main engines and we kick back away from the planet and out into vacuum. I don't recommend the latter because-" He made a sudden decision. "We're going through, I'll use full power from the main engines. Hang on-we've got to risk it!"

"They're going straight into that funnel!" Jake said in disbelief. "If they come out they'll need-" He spun about. "Jube, give me something we've got! Now!"

Jube Bailey held up a powerful black fist, watched by a "".. ,,,, u^ Uoiimrod. The men standing by electrical switches and handles swung immediately into action, throwing circuit breakers and solenoids, set up and waiting for this instant. All about the outer boundaries of Old Millford Prison dazzling lights snapped on, lighting the upper edges of the prison, shining down into the huge courtyard so recently expanded at Jake's orders. Six powerful searchlights fired their beams straight up. Along the direction of the approaching ship, a thousand feet of brilliant approach lights flared into being, intense max-visibility

strobes flashing in sequence toward the courtyard, now a huge splash of light in the night storm. Leaving nothing to chance, two powerful laser beam generators were thrown to "on," each beam weaving a circle from the top of the prison and creating constant ovoids of dazzling green and yellow lights through the storm. Their effect was as brilliant as all the strobes combined.

Jube stared out a window. "Holy shit," he said quietly, "a blind man could find this place now."

"They're about to hit that tornado!" Jeff Maddox yelled from the radar console. They rushed back to study the screen.

"Jesus," someone said, as the blip and the glowing hook merged.

"The poor son of a bitch," Maddox said, quietly. "I'll bet they don't even know what they're getting into."

Jake turned to look at Maddox. "Mister, I'll take that bet. How much?"

The huge funnel spat blue fire. Yellow flames raced in a gigantic whirlwind at speeds incomprehensible to Arbok and the others. For a thousand feet in every direction the sky crackled and glowed with tendrils of lightning and electricity, the effects reflected in the wind-lashed storm of rain. The first brushes of superviolent winds punched at Frarsk, adding a different feel and sway to the heavy ship that seemed to feel lighter with every increasing blow of this maddening world.

"I think we will die," Grangles said with an air of quiet acceptance. He released his arms from the holding straps and struggled to withdraw his great sword. Once in both hands he held the sword vertically and went rigid in a warrior's death stance. Arbok paid no attention and Barq couldn't have cared less for the hook-nosed theatrics, no matter how serious they might be to Grangles.

In that brief instant that Barq glanced at Grangles, the ship passed from free air into the edge of the shrieking, fire-spitting funnel. Just as the nose pitched violently and began an uncontrollable swing to the side, Arbok slammed the throttles forward, pushed forward on the control stick by his right console, stamped left rudder and gritted his teeth.

A Niagara of violet flame erupted behind Frarsk. The acceleration hammered the men savagely as a million pounds of blazing thrust boomed the ship forward. Not a man could move a muscle as acceleration glued them to their seats. Ytram's still-unconscious form tumbled against the aft bulkhead where the acceleration pinned him like a fly nailed to a board. No one saw the hippo-like Skringian in his helpless state. They couldn't turn their heads.

It was a final do-or-die last-gasp attempt. Balls to the wall. A sheet of flame erupted behind Frarsk. The few people still out in the open despite the screaming tornado associated the flaming blast as a combination of the pounding rain, the screaming tornado, and relentless lightning.

What no one saw was the great craft plunge into the tornado funnel and, of course, no one saw it emerge.

Inside the whirling tower of flaming blue electricity, with winds of five hundred miles an hour tearing at the ship, Arbok held grimly to the controls. Surprisingly there was no explosive turbulence, but an eerie thrumming of energy that seemed to rip through their bodies as much as to encase them all in writhing cocoons of electrical energy.

A final explosion; the raw power of the huge space engines hurled Frarsk through the tornado as if it were a spear thrown through electrical fog. Nothing else would have carried them through. Once again the pure instinct and experience of the fighter jock carried them all swiftly through what appeared imminent destruction and on to survival.

They erupted from the funnel cloud; in the same instant Arbok and Barq saw the thin lines of laser beams whirling through clouds and rain. "There!" Barq screamed in an agony of air expelled violently from his lungs. "The lights! I see the

For a moment Arbok didn't answer; he was too busy cutting power, switching from main drive to maneuvering thrust-ers so he could continue flight through the storm and have the attitude thrusters with their variable power available to bring the great ship to a hover. Flame vanished; Frarsk decelerated with a crash that snapped them forward in their seats and hurled the battered, seat-strapped mass of Ytram into a computer console, tearing a new gash in his already abused unconscious form.

Brist looked with disgust at the Skringian. Speaking as much with relief at knowing they were still alive as with the contempt he felt for the fat slob in their midst, he glanced at Drong. "The fat pig leaves grease

smear everywhere he goes."

Drong nodded. "For a while back there the fat was almost in the fire." He laughed uproariously and Brist stared at him without understanding. Drong sighed. That's what happened when you cracked witticisms with an alien from a water world. Nothing.

"Holy shit! Did you see that?"

"What the hell was it?"

"It looked like a small atomic bomb, for Christ's sake. Was that a fireball?"

They turned to Jake Marden who had dashed madly from the radar room to an observation platform that from outside appearances looked exactly like a guard tower. Jake stood outside on the balcony ledge, oblivious to the wind lashing his face and body with driving rain. The others stood by him, straining to see through the storm, trying to separate the reflection of their own lights from the rain so they might spot the ship they all accepted now as driving straight for Old Millford.

Jake looked down; several of their picked men were still in the yard, milling about, waiting. Jake reached for a microphone through a window in the tower and switched on the loudspeakers for the yard. "You men, in the yard! Get the hell out of there! Move it, now!" He released the talk switch and looked at Jube. "They stay down there and we can count on fricaseed con."

"Is that how they're going to land? Thrusters?"

"Got to be, Jube. No rotors; nothing like that. And that kind of ship must have come down on power beams, so it's set up for a landing straight down. No beams here so they've got to use their own thrusters, and-"

"There it is!"

They didn't know who shouted, but emerging from the storm, catching the distant reach of the flashing strobes, an incredible machine moved majestically into view. No one knew what to expect, what the mystery ship might look like. Science fiction had shaped their images for them with sleek, curving lines, with upswept sharp noses and soaring fins.

The last thing they expected was a huge mass of crazy angles, of heavy bulk, of what appeared to be massive iron plates welded together carelessly, of a flight deck with a madcap arrangement of windshields resembling an ancient Ford Trimotor from the 'twenties. But that's what they faced, flames ripping downward to sustain altitude, the alien spacecraft ominous, majestic and almost medieval in its appearance. It descended slowly, directly along the line of flashing strobes, aiming for the long courtyard with its halogen lights making the night as bright as sunlit day.

"Get into the room!" Jake yelled. "There's going to be a hell of a lot of fire and-" No one was left to talk with as the others raced into the protection of the observation platform, staring with mingled awe and disbelief as the huge bulk of Frarsk poured a dozen lances of fire straight down and to the sides, the flames lengthening and diminishing as its pilot jockeyed the thrusters. Then all forward motion was gone and the massive bulk descended slowly, straight down. Lightning flashed and exploded in a final paroxysm of the storm cheated of its near-victim, flames splashed into the yard and burst away in all directions, shooting upwards along the inside walls. In its blaze of ultimate glory, the misshapen hulk of Frarsk, looking for all the world like a Jules Verne submarine from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, hovered inches above the ground, then fell as if it had exhausted its last vestiges of energy and gambled on surviving this final ignominy of a gravity-induced dump to close its epochal journey.

The flames were gone, the fury stinging echoes in the ear, the visual shriek of raw energy ghostly afterimages of the eye. The ugly, huge, startling shape hulked, ominous, steaming from the rain, in the courtyard of a prison.

The dreams of mankind were realized. The incredible had emerged from fantasy to reality.

The first alien spaceship was down.

But it had not used its landing support legs for at least two hundred years. The telescoping mechanisms for Frarsk's emergency landing systems were not only ancient, but had been left without service or maintenance all that time.

The greatest wonder of all the ages gave forth a sudden loud CRAAACK! as a support leg folded in upon itself, and alien metal snapped in two.

Frask had journeyed more than forty thousand light years from the inner galaxy to this hallowed moment. It lurched as the leg snapped, and sagged onto the side of its belly like a ruptured hog.

CHAPTER 13

"Shut 'em down!"

Jube Bailey's voice boomed from loudspeakers through the courtyard and carried to the power control rooms. At his command, men reversed their switches activated earlier. The powerful halogen lights atop the courtyard walls faded swiftly to pale blue and dimmed from sight as men cut their power. A single bright flash marked the approach strobes shutting down with a final pulse of energy. Laser beams streaking through the clouds vanished as if by magic. Thirty seconds after Bailey's command rang out, all lights and beams used to guide in the alien machine were off. Jube Bailey was just getting started.

Whatever Jake had done to bring all this about was still as much a mystery to him as when it all started, but Jube understood action and the need to do whatever was necessary at certain times. He grabbed a communications mike that carried his voice to crews waiting by trucks in the prison garage.

"Hey, you guys assigned to the approach lights!" Jube sang out. "Move your asses! Get out there and clean up the works!"

Trucks started, men piled aboard, garage doors opened and armed guards went along, just in case any local citizens or lawmen who hadn't been brought into the fold stumbled across a mob of convicts in work trucks doing emergency "repairs" in the middle of the night without any armed presence to prevent them from "busting away." The crews lined up the trucks along the approach lights, disconnected power cables and released lockpins and restraining devices. Twenty minutes later the long approach strobe equipment was locked within twelve trucks, all marked with the name of a civilian airport service company, and were on their way to Tampa where they would disappear within the equipment list of that city's huge international airport. Several trucks remained behind, turning across the soaked fields, obliterating all signs of what had been. When they returned to the garage within the prison, not a shred of evidence existed that brilliant approach strobes had ever been there.

Bailey's loudspeakered command to "Shut 'em down!" initiated more than these few storms of activity; rather, it was the order to commence a well-drilled series of actions. As fast as the halogens along the upper courtyard walls came down at the hands of a team of ten men, with more on the surface carting away the equipment to storage, Jake Marden and Jeff Maddox personally led the group that would block view of the courtyard and the huge Frask from the outside world.

Maddox studied the courtyard from the observation post with powerful binoculars. Two men assigned to the same duty walked along the wall rims, removing canvas and plastic covers from equipment recessed within the walls. When they reached the far end they called Jake by walkie-talkie. "All clear both sides," they confirmed.

Jake nodded to himself, then spoke into his radio. "Get a couple more bodies up there," he ordered. "If anything jams because of this wind I want to be ready for it."

"Yes, sir. Got it."

Five minutes later telescoping steel rods rose from their recesses within the walls, and began to bend over from each rim toward the courtyard center, high above and across the huge bulking shape of the alien spacecraft below. The rods met neatly in the center and high above the courtyard, the left units sliding into the right and clamping tight. A green light came on in the control room to indicate the maneuver was completed successfully. "Get the covers out!" Jake ordered, and other men passed along the word. This was the tricky part; moving the heavy tarps and plastic out into the open in the face of the heavy rain and wind. Under the flash of lightning casting blinding light and then dark shadows, the canvas and plastic moved along the rods like an umbrella folding inward from left and right.

Ten minutes later a reflective, watertight, secure dome, much longer than wide, covered the courtyard and removed it from sight. Beneath the artificial surface Frask lay hidden from the outside world.

Jake took a deep breath and turned to Jube Bailey and Jeff Maddox. "Funny," he said.

"What's funny?" Jube demanded in his usual no-nonsense response.

"For a long time science fiction writers have been telling just this kind of story," Jake said, feeling more apprehensive and excited than he had ever believed possible. "You know, the first time people of Earth meet up with aliens from somewhere out in the universe."

"What the hell are you, some kind of poet?" Jube demanded, but there was no harshness in his voice.

"Get going, man."

Jake nodded. He still couldn't believe this was actually happening. Not to him.

He was the first terrestrial about to make First Contact.

Major Carlos Martinez and Vasily Korolov followed their orders exactly. "When that ship comes down and we seal the place," Jake ordered, "I want you two, and maybe a couple more people you trust absolutely, to go over every part of the ship you can, but without fucking with anything-got that? Go over it with geiger counters and anything else that will pick up radiation. I don't know what the hell that thing runs on. Fission, fusion, camel shit; but you do a thorough job on a radiation scan. Bring all the records with you to control down below and feed them into the computer. And while you're at it, leave a few monitors around that will let us know at any time that thing ever starts to kick out some ionizing radiation."

"Got it," Martinez said, keeping comment to its absolute minimum. As usual, Korolov nodded like a dumbass, except for the gleam in his eyes that always sounded its silent alarm that a brain was hard at work back there.

Jake had set up a long checklist of requirements. "You got the Jew ready?" he pressed Jube Bailey.

"He's ready, he's ready," Jube said wearily. "You act like you're ready to make this a costume party."

How come all the

tailoring shit? You're getting to sound like a salesman for Brooks Brothers."

Jake shook his head. "I don't know," he said candidly.

"One of them hunches that keeps kicking you between the ears?"

Jake nodded. "Sort of. I keep getting this feeling that whoever's aboard that ship, when it gets here, if it gets here, well, they're going to be buckassed naked."

"That's crazy."

"So it's crazy. So are these feelings." Jake always held back enough of the details of the tremendously strong impressions he'd gotten from Arbok. And the sense of nakedness, not from shame or embarrassment, but from need, remained strong with him. He tried to place himself in the alien vessel. He had no idea of what had happened to create the nakedness, or why, but then, it didn't really matter because he'd find out soon enough. But he did understand, or feel, or rationalize, or whatever, that some attire, clothing, would be needed. He also had the feeling, as strong as any of the others, that variety was as important as material or anything else. So he lined up the Jew. Selig Goldman. Tailor extraordinary. So good, that for six years Selig had concealed super-slim packets of cocaine and heroin within different articles of clothing. No bulge, no wrinkles, no sound. Cocaine and heroin and bills of very large denominations. The latter was really Selig's specialty. You could use machines and dogs to sniff out drugs, but they hadn't come up with a set of nostrils, natural or artificial, that could smell out thousand-dollar bills. And he could conceal fifty to a hundred of them in any suit.

Sooner or later they nailed one of the couriers. Sooner or later a courier sings like a canary with the drizzle shits in order to keep his confinement to its lowest. A canary sang, they nailed Selig with the goods, they clipped him with the RICO Act, and he got eighteen years.

And became the personal tailor to the "in" group of Old Millford. But he'd never had an order like this one! "How many warm bodies, Jake?" he asked. "Don't know. Figure at least four and maybe as many as twenty."

"You can't do better than that? What am I? A tailor for a

game of Blind Man's Buff? Find the naked ass and stick a suit on it or something?"

"Four to twenty, Selig."

"All right, so it's okay. Four to twenty. Sounds like Vegas odds, you know?" Selig tilted his head and

looked at Jake like an Afghan hound. "What kind of material?"

"Stop asking. Just be ready for anything, Selig."

"I got a dozen apprentice tailors ready and waiting. Sewing machines, pressing machines. I got canvas, cotton, twill, leather, suede, gabardine, khaki, jeans, denim--"

"Shut up, Selig."

"But I got to know something!"

"As soon as I know, you know."

"I stand on one foot and wait?"

"I can arrange that," Jake said, a touch too hard.

"Thanks a million. I bet you would, too."

"Be ready, Selig."

"You're a lousy customer, Jake. I'll bet you want to put it all on a credit card, too." He smiled at his idea of levity. "By the by, you didn't mention something, Jake."

"What?"

"These people got feet?"

"What?"

"Shoes, boots, slippers, clogs, slops, sneakers--"

"Get a supply of the smallest to the largest. Be prepared to put together some makeshift boots if we need them. Suede, I guess."

"Like for King Arthur's Court, maybe?"

"If necessary," Jake glowered.

"I got another question, Jake."

"I may kill you today, Selig."

"Don't do me no favors, smartypants. You forgot something else, maybe?"

It wouldn't do to forget anything, Jake knew, and Selig had already caught him (God forgive me for the pun, Jake grimaced) with his pants down. "What," he asked wearily, "is it this time?"

"Men only?" Selig asked. "They have women, perhaps?" Jake stared. He'd never considered the thought!

"Children? You know, boys, girls?"

"I-I don't know," Jake admitted.

"Hah!" Selig shouted in triumph. He'd made his point. "Don't worry about a thing, Jake. You should have me as your worst problem. Me and my boys, we'll be ready for anything."

Jake uttered a silent thanks that Selig hadn't brought up the subject of underwear ...

Some of the pieces coming together took more doing than others and had to be addressed in technical and engineering terms. Jake found Jeff Maddox his best disciple in this area. "You know what I'm expecting from that ship?" he told Maddox.

"I know there's intelligent life in it," Maddox said cautiously.

"For Christ's sake, loosen up!" Jake shouted, exasperation with the endless details running over him.

"No," Maddox said by way of cautioning Jake. "Don't make any assumptions, Jake--"

"Bullshit. I can assume they need to eat. Drink. Dispose of body wastes. Breathe. Damn it, Jeff, there are basics!"

Jeff Maddox nodded. "Okay, I take it back. Some of it. But not much. Whatever you do, don't make your decisions based on our life forms."

"What do you recommend?" Jake said sarcastically. "Do I expect a centaur? A minotaur? A flopping jellyfish? That's a machine we're talking about. It's made of metal. It's got an advanced-an extremely advanced-propulsion system. It's got to have computers. Videos and audio. If they don't see in visible light, but I'll bet they do, there's UV and IR or a combination. And to run a machine you follow certain basic rules and I don't give a shit where they're from! Up is up and down is down, goddamnit! And I think we're going to find a rule that won't go away."

Jeff Maddox waited. "Which is?" he said finally.

"There'll be men inside."

"Men? They're aliens!"

"What are we to them?"

Maddox stared; a moment later a smile grew across his face. "Point made." He wet his forefinger and stabbed an imaginary bulletin board in the air. "One for you."

"What we need first of all is to communicate with them," Jake said. "And let them know we're friendly."

"I hope they know that," Maddox came back. "God only knows what kinds of weapons they have and-"
"If weapons were the big issue," Jake said, again impatient, "they wouldn't come to us. They'd be off in some remote area-"

"What makes you so sure they are coming to us? That they came to us?"

"I know."

"But-"

"Take my fucking word for it, will you!" Jake snapped.

Jeff Maddox knew when to back off. He did just that. "You got it, Jake. I haven't caught you wrong yet," he added. "So I'm not buttering you up."

Jake studied him. "Why the hell do you think I picked you? You can think, you son of a bitch."

"Let's think about communicating."

"Direct broadcast. This close up, range don't matter. I know they pick up our television signals. So I figure let's use a transmitter that covers all the basic TV channels. No matter what they're tuned to they'll pick us up. We can do the same with them."

"Okay. I figured the same way myself. Everything is set up for a direct transmit to them. Pickup the same way. I've got the cameras and receivers set up around the courtyard. But my guess is we work toward the prow. Where we'd expect to find a flight deck."

"Good. Talking with them won't be a problem."

"I suppose you know that, too."

"Yes. Damnit, Jeff, if you were coming down to this planet wouldn't you monitor all signals? How long do you think it would take you to figure the dominant language is English? The proof of that is that they didn't come down to Kiev or Leningrad. They came here. They're coming here, and-"

"I got your drift, Jake. After we have two-way, what next?" Jake offered him a sheepish look. "That's when the fun starts. The fucking list is as long as my arm." "I can guess a few of them. What's first?" "We agree with each other to keep all necessary communication lines open all the time. Like a red phone hotline between us," Jake said, re-thinking his original concepts, finding that he'd been on the right track so far.

"Good. And always have someone on each end. With something as-as-well, as alien as that thing,"

Maddox said, "an emergency could come up at any moment. And emergencies don't respect clocks."

"It would help," Jake growled, "if we could figure what the hell to expect."

"You said you had a list as long as your arm."

"Part and parcel of the whole package," Jake sighed. "Let's go back to basics. They'll need water, they'll need food-"

"And they've got to work out if the food we offer is safe for them to eat," Maddox appended.

Jake nodded. "There's that old saw about the real earth monsters, Jeff. Science fiction come home to roost. No dinosaurs or mythological beasts. The tiniest of all the creatures. Bacteria and viruses. You ever look through a microscope at a sample of clear drinking water? You'd drink straight alcohol the rest of your life."

"Water? Me drink water?" Maddox asked, hands held against his chest to show his incredulity. "Do I hear that from the man who tells everyone that drinking water is a filthy habit?"

"Yeah," Jake grinned. "Fish fuck in it. But like I was saying, senator. The stuff floating around in water-"

"Hey, you want to know what I think?" Maddox broke in. "There won't be a world anywhere in the universe," he gestured, "out there that doesn't have these same conditions. If you've got life forms you've got a world absolutely drowning in the bacteria and the viruses and creatures on down to amoeba level. You've got to in order for life to start. So if there's high life, there's low life-"

"You sound like you're advertising a night club," Jake dug at Maddox.

"Hell, yes! Everyone's welcome and the drinks are the same for everyone. If they're smart enough to

bring a starship down here, then they're smart enough to know what to expect from life forms right on down to the disgusting little nasties we have in our bodies, water, air, food-

"You got it," Jake said, dismissing the problem. "All we can do is warn them. They want to boil or irradiate the shit, that's up to them. I remember reading something about household mites. It told people not to look under their beds in the carpet. In every square inch of every average household there was about forty thousand mites. In every square inch! And that didn't take in what was under the carpet, or in the ground, or in the air-

"Or in the bed or in the people in the bed," Maddox added.

"Okay. We tell them. They die? Fuck 'em," Jake finished.

"Let me add something. Our diseases."

"I'd hoped you wouldn't bring that up," Jake said. "Because I already did. To myself, I mean. And it is a bummer, my friend."

"It's an impressive list," Maddox agreed. "Smallpox, chicken pox, tuberculosis, pneumonia, mumps, measles-

"Syphillis-

"You planning a big party?"

"Not hardly. But the shit's there. Just like polio and AIDS and diphtheria-

"Swamp fever, anthrax, encephalitis, malaria, yellow fever, dysentery-

"Don't forget the good old common cold."

"Ah, the bugs and parasites. Of course. Black plague-is that the same as bubonic?"

"Damned if I know. Don't matter when you die from it," Jake said. "Some names that I remember easily, well, there's also typhoid and typhus, and cholera and tetanus toxoid-

"That's enough! I'm getting queasy," Maddox laughed. "But there's another point to all this."

"If it helps, tell me. If it doesn't, don't say a word," Jake told Maddox.

"Do you believe there would be a civilization out there," again Maddox's hand went up in a now common gesture to encompass the rest of the universe, "that was starhopping and didn't work out some sort of master medical plan for a case like the one we're considering? If they've gone from world to world then they've also run into more diseases, infections, rot, scum, bacteria, and viruses than we could dream up in a lifetime."

"To say nothing of the different races-from different worlds-intermixing every which way except maybe genetically all the time," Jake added thoughtfully. "You've got to be right. It's a hell of a problem that was solved long before they ever showed up here."

"Jake," Maddox said slowly, "worlds are round and hard-ons have no conscience."

"That the word from On High?"

"Straight from God," Maddox said. "She told me herself. In whatever form that different races take, and I'm assuming nature has enough smarts to always go the route best for any individual race, the similarities are bound to be more common than the differences. You agree?"

"Yep."

"Know what that means?"

"Yep. Friggin' in the riggin'."

"You want physical variations? Take a nigger dwarf sixteen inches high and the white fat lady at the circus six feet tall and what weighs eight hundred pounds. That poor little nigger would be crushed in the cheeks of her ass, let alone flattened like a steamroller between her thighs."

"But they still do it. Even if the poor little nigger's got to climb inside and give the lady her jollies by kicking clit and letting loose with a fire extinguisher."

"So, assuming that lust flowers happily within the various galaxies," Maddox said, rolling his eyes to heaven, "they've faced that problem before. That means they've mashed sweat against bodies, swapped spit, and deposited vaginal and pecker juices with each other to a fare-thee-well."

"Let's let their computer worry about it," Jake concluded. "It's too big a problem for me. For us. We could argue this point for ten years and come up with nothing except a headache."

"Agreed," Maddox sighed. "They're the ones with experience at this sort of stuff, not us."

"What's next?"

"We'll set out water. And plenty of food."

"Make it a wide variety," Jake said. "Fruits, breads, nuts, vegetables--"

"You're avoiding meat, I see," Maddox said.

"You tell me that's not a ship full of vegetarians."

"I can't do that," Maddox protested.

"So they won't get pissed off about an apple or a bean sprout," Jake told him, ".but they sure as hell could get ticked if we offer them the equivalent of their Uncle Willy with a pineapple up his ass."

"Point made. After we talk we'll go deeper into foodstuffs," Maddox agreed.

"Okay, that's all shit detail," Jake said, lighting a cigar and leaning back in his seat. "Other details like heat or air conditioning or whatever, they'll have to tell us."

"Okay."

"Sooner or later we can hook their computer up to ours and we can get some meaningful readouts that way," Jake went on.

"I hadn't thought of that. Hell of an idea," Maddox offered by way of compliment.

"But not yet," Jake cautioned. "We'll see who controls who aboard that tub. Man or machine. We don't know yet."

"After all this, you still want that television-on-television instead of a personal meet to open things?"

Jake frowned. "No. The more I think about that I want to modify that idea. I want to meet their head man face to face. One on one. We'll televise it to both sides. They can see and hear everything that goes on and we keep any dangerous situations to a minimum. I don't know about the others, but I'm sure I'll get along with Arbok just--"

Silence hung between them.

"Who?" Maddox asked.

"Nothing."

"You said someone's name." ,

"I did? Must have slipped or--"

"Arbok."

Jake shrugged.

"That's his name, isn't it?" Maddox said very quietly. "Jube's been convinced that somehow this alien and you have been communicating with--"

"Don't make a big thing out of it, Jeff," Jake sounded a sudden warning. "I'm serious. We've managed a very hazy level--"

"You're not shitting me, are you, man?"

"No."

"But. . . that's terrific!" Maddox was jubilant. "It's fantastic ... wonderful!"

"It's low key, man. I'm trying to tell you that. It is very low key. We've managed feelings more than anything else. He uses the ship's computer for amplifying what he tries to tell me. Finally we began to get some hazy pictures and--"

"Does he know what you look like?"

"I think so."

"What does he, this--"

"Arbok. He's obviously their head honcho."

"What does Arbok look like?"

"Powerful. Very powerful physically. His skin is hard, leathery, real tough. No hair. Funny about that. I got the feeling that when he saw my beard and hair it flipped him out."

"How the hell could he see--"

"In a moment. He's got bony ridges or plates where he'd have thick eyebrows. Skin's an autumn color. Burnished orange."

"Jube will love that."

"Yeah. I had the feeling he was as much reptilian as mammalian."

"How did he see you and how did you see him?"

"We concentrated. I sat before a mirror. Central light. I kept staring into the mirror and trying to 'send' a picture of what my eyes saw. Then I got this crazy feeling, like a tickle, inside my head that he understood. Then," Jake grinned, "and this is really crazy, the picture I was looking at, well, it blurred and seemed to dissolve, and I knew I was looking at Arbok. He'd been doing the same thing in that ship of his that I was doing. Staring at his reflection and sending."

"Jake, you're driving me crazy. What did-"

"Easy, Senator; you'll bust a gusset."

"What the fuck does he look like!" Maddox shouted.

"I told you-"

"You know what the hell I mean!"

Jake smiled; he'd enjoyed stretching it out. "It seems, Jeff, there's a universal law of genetic development. Nature follows what works best for her best results. Basic elongated skull like ours. Two eyes because that gives us stereo vision. Single nose; in Arbok's case it appears more heavily boned for strength and structure. His cheekbones are high and strong. Oh; the nose. Normal for his face. Somewhat distended, I couldn't tell from the blurry vision, for the two nostrils. Lips like ours, but tightly set. It could be an individual or a racial characteristic; that's all I know. Strong neck, strong shoulders. He has eyes-again I'm limited-that promise both strength and intelligence. I'd bet my bottom dollar he's a pilot. We have that kind of feel for each other."

"The rest of him?"

"I haven't seen that yet. But odds are we have a bipedal creature of basic form, like ourselves, with genetic adaptation to local stellar radiation and planetary conditions."

Maddox stared at Jake Marden. "You know something, Jake?"

"What?"

"I've been talking to a man I never knew existed. YOM ."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake. You're a longterm con who's a crazy killer with a rep that makes Atilla the Hun look like a weak-kneed fag, this whole place looks on you as walking nitro, you're a trained killer and . . . and underneath it all there's one hell of a brain. No," Maddox corrected himself quickly, "a mind. It takes a lot of cerebral shit to pick up on and slip into this alien concept and you've done it as slick as I've ever seen anything done."

"All that, I suppose, is a compliment."

"You bet your ass it is, Marden."

"Thanks, but save the hearts and flowers until we get through this. Because a couple of things disturb me."

"Lay it out fast. Time rips, friend."

"You've worked with military crews before, Jeff. Or even civilian crews, like a bunch that flies an airliner. Everyone is part of a team, a unit. They identify with one another. They're in the same outfit. You get what I'm driving at?"

"Yes."

"I don't get even the slightest hint of that with this bunch. If there were even a ghost of a suggestion from Arbok that he was lead man in a team, I'd know it. What I do get is a blank."

"Want my opinion?"

"Yes."

"Drop it. Forget it. You're too close to actual encounter. All those things will come across soon enough. Clear your mind. As soon as we take care of the last details, that is."

Jake Marden nodded. "Good thinking. Jesus, I'm glad you're in on this. You don't spook so easy yourself, mister."

"Okay. We'll congratulate each other later. What's next on the list?"

"Power. They're going to need power. I don't know if that ship uses alternating or direct current. I don't

know watts, volts, amps, joules; anything. We'll have to find out from them. Maybe the computer, on their ship, I mean, can have a bunch of our cables plugged into a waybox so it can test the power we send in, and they can let us know what they need. They'll have to get ambient pressure or a hell of a lot of internal atmosphere control, and all that calls for power and we don't know their source of energy. I could be barking up the wrong tree. I don't know. Maybe that sucker ties in to galactic electromagnetic streams or it's got an endless conveyor belt of energy, like power flowing freely on some kind of absolute zero temperature on a moebius strip."

"Wait, Jake."

"You're right," Jake sighed.

"Question."

"Go."

"How are they able to measure their things against ours? The matter of sizing and measurement?"

"I had them monitor a kid's educational program that's all about sizes and measurements and comparisons. They use English so they can understand the real solid basics. The moment they have a comparator yardstick, there's no great trick in carrying it forward. Let's say six of our feet equals four glocks. Something like that. Easy enough once you have the yardstick. No tougher than running back-and-forth conversions between our measurements and metric."

"Okay. Did you get anything back from Carlos and Vasily on their radiation checks?"

Jake nodded. "That ship is as clean as a whistle. As far as radiation is concerned, that is. And those two guys used to search out heavily-shielded nuclear weapons. If there was anything there that our instruments could measure, they'd have found it."

"That helps," Maddox said. "All we need is a rumor of a ship pouring radiation into this place and you're on the edge of all-out panic."

"Well, it's no problem." Jake lit his cigar again, thought for several moments. "Shit fire, Jeff, let's do it."

Maddox grinned. "Step one?"

"I talk to their computer. Printout message. Set up the details for the meeting. You work with Jube and make sure this whole place, all of Old Millford, is sealed tighter than a drum."

"Jube's already done it. Cogswell's got the place spooked. They're scared to move out of their cells. You know, BEMs."

"BEMs?"

"Bug-eyed monsters."

"For Christ's sake-"

"Old Luther, he's playing it for all it's worth. He's got them almost ready to pour into his voodoo church."

Jake laughed. "That's another point-"

"You mean our friends in the ship and religion?"

"Could be very interesting. You might say," Jake offered, "that they've been out there in God's bigger valleys."

Maddox grimaced. "I'll pass. I got my own deal with God."

"Which is?"

"She doesn't mess with me and I play straight with Her."

"Fair enough. Let's go. To the control room downstairs."

They walked together, catching up on final details. "One thing amazes me," Maddox said as they worked their way underground. "That ship. You ever see the old Jules Verne submarines? Thick plates bolted together, crazy angles? That's what this thing looks like. I thought maybe it would be a sphere or an ovoid or-"

"If it flies in vacuum it doesn't need that," Jake offered as mild criticism.

"Sure, but the sphere, that's the perfect shape for maximum interior volume-"

"You're thinking limited power and limited ships," Jake broke in. "If power's no problem you can build any size you want. If you descend and ascend vertically, you don't need slick surfaces. If you can build all the ships you want then you can build them any shape you want. All the rules for designing ships, except usefulness, don't count for beans with those people. Let it rest, man."

They went through the security grid and emerged within the master control facility deep under both ground and water. Jake wanted a final personal open-eyeballs check of all equipment and monitoring. Everything was set with a half-dozen cameras and recorders for his initial meeting with Arbok- with what he hoped would be Arbok.

"All cameras ready?" he sounded his crews.

Jim Isert moved forward. "It's all set, Mr. Marden. We're shooting regular light on three cameras. We're also shooting in infrared and ultraviolet in separate cameras. I got one set up to do superfast film recording so we can play it back in super slow-mo. Whatever we might miss will show up on that. Or," he amended, "it should."

Jake turned to Harry Berg. "All power recordings set to go?"

"They fart one electron, I record it," Berg said.

"Who's got sound?" Jake asked.

"That's me." Jake turned to Willy Jackson, a slim dark man with huge hands and fingers. "I'll get everything from a whisper to a nuke. I'm recording regular sound, and on the bottom sound, I'll be able to pick up infrasound rumbles if they go that low. On the high side we go right up off the scale. We're so high on the pickup we're dancing between sound and extremely low radio waves."

"Okay," Jake told them, taking the seat before the master computer. "We hooked up to the ship?"

Tim Haggerty appeared by his side. The beefy Irishman knew computers better than his favorite whiskey. "You're locked in. You talk with your board here and we get readouts, and we print, also, at least here, but the readout is simultaneous both here and what they get in the room set up outside the ship's door. Or whatever it is they call a door, or a hatch, or whatever."

"They are reading the screen?"

"Yes, sir. Sure are. Every fifteen minutes we pop their computer with a time update and a standby, with a number for consecutive reading, and their electronic whoziwhatzit is right there on the money."

Jake cracked his knuckles. "HOST CONTROL TO SHIP. PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE."

"SHIP ACKNOWLEDGES."

"HOST DESIRES DIRECT CONTACT SHIP PILOT. MANUAL EXCHANGE VIA THIS CONTACT SYSTEM."

"STAND BY. "

Jake waited. Several moments later the screen came to life again.

"PILOT HERE. GO AHEAD."

"THIS is JAKE."

"THIS is ARBOK."

"I PROPOSE A CHANGE IN OUR ORIGINAL FIRST CONTACT. ARE YOU READY TO CONSIDER?"

"YES. PROCEED."

"THIS IS JAKE. I PROPOSE ARBOK MEETS ME IN THE ROOM WE HAVE SET UP OUTSIDE YOUR EXIT HATCH. YOU CAN SEE BY YOUR MONITOR SCREEN WHAT WE HAVE ARRANGED. A TABLE AND TWO CHAIRS. WE WILL SIT ACROSS FROM EACH OTHER AND MEET DIRECTLY."

"I ACCEPT. BY YOUR TIMING, WHEN?"

"TWENTY MINUTES FROM RIGHT NOW."

"I ACCEPT. A CONDITION, PLEASE."

"GO AHEAD."

"NO WEAPONS FOR EITHER PERSON."

"AGREED."

"THE MEETING MAY BE ENDED AT ANY TIME BY EITHER SIDE. "

Jake judged that as fair enough. "AGREED," he tapped out. "QUESTION."

"PROCEED."

"DO YOU NEED WATER? WE CAN PROVIDE SAMPLES OF WATER, DIFFERENT FOOD SAMPLES, OR WHATEVER YOU NEED FOR YOU TO TEST FOR YOUR SAFETY."

"WE NEED WATER. WE NEED FOODSTUFFS. WE NEED OTHER SUPPLIES. WE WILL DELAY ALL SUCH OFFERINGS UNTIL WE MEET."

Jake started to query Arbok about clothing, but sensed

from the exchange Arbok wished to delay everything until their first encounter. "THIS is JAKE. I WILL SIGN OFF NOW AND PROCEED TO THE MEETING SPACE. FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE I WILL ENTER FIRST AND CLOSE THE DOOR BEHIND ME. I WILL STAND BEHIND MY SIDE OF THE TABLE AND AWAIT YOUR PRESENCE. QUESTION."

"AGREED TO YOUR POINTS. PROCEED QUESTION." "WE DID NOT CONSIDER YOUR VISUAL LEVELS. ARE THE LIGHTS AND INTENSITY NOW IN THE MEETING ROOM SATISFACTORY?" "YES. MAY I SIGN OFF NOW AND PREPARE?" "YES. THANK YOU. THIS IS JAKE. SIGNING OFF." "AGREED. SIGNING OFF. ARBOK."

The screens stopped moving. Jake climbed from his chair and started for the meeting room.

"You got everything ready?" Jube Bailey's powerful arm reached out to grasp the thick wrist of Alfredo Guccioni. It was the wrong thing for Jube to do, because the beefy Italian killer always judged a hands-on move as a contest, and right now Jube had no time for contests. Alfredo didn't answer Jube's question. He threw all his mental powers into his own wrist and Jube's powerful grip. All that mattered now was that he break the black-fingered vise on his wrist. He had to do that to show his dominant strength. He smiled a gap-toothed, wide-chinned smile and began to twist. Jube's fingers slipped but he held relentlessly to his grip.

"This is dumb, you guinea bastard," Jube grunted. "You making this a fucking contest and all I want is an answer."

"Talk different to me, you sumbitch," Guccioni grunted. By his tone and his demeanor he made it clear they'd come a cropper. It was time to topple the leader.

"Just answer . . . the question ..." Jube grunted through his own outpouring of energy into his grip. The unspoken rules dictated he not use two hands, that he not move his feet an inch. Neither must Guccioni, huge and powerful, greasy and without morals or scruples. The rules; one always played by the rules. This was a test, knew Guccioni. He grinned through gritted teeth. This fucking nigger was stronger than he'd ever dreamed. But it was like back in Vegas. You played by the rules. He had it all figured. Ever since this crazy

bullshit with that crazy nicking ship, Jube Bailey, he don't have his fucking mind about him. It was a weakness Guccioni spotted instantly, a flaw glaring to his feral instinct. He would best the nigger in a test of strength before the whole fucking prison and then he'd "We're playing this by the rules, you fucking guinea?" Bailey forced out. By now he'd spotted the inevitable ring of faces about them. Like hyenas in the jungle. Spotted. Black, white, yellow, brown. Waiting to see if there'd be spoils. Enjoying the show. "Fuck your momma, nigger," Guccioni grunted out. He'd felt the black fingers slip just a bit more. It was good to sweat like a fucking pig, Guccioni told himself. Greasy sweat. Fucking nigger couldn't hold his grip.

"By the rules," Bailey announced, and abruptly, without warning, his powerful grip released, his fingers flew open. Guccioni fell back, propelled by his own power, the tremendous pressure he'd applied away from Bailey's grasp. For just that moment he stumbled. Just that moment. An instant. No more than that. He started to curse, but the nigger moved so fast! Bailey went forward with Guccioni's stumble, in a single fluid motion a curved blade snapped free, propelled by a spring, from Jube's boot and the suede-wrapped handle leaped into his hand and he went forward like swift shadow, the long curving blade low and coming up. The blade, superbly razor sharp, sliced open the inside of Alfredo Guccioni's thigh, sliced deep and long and continued up into his groin, sliced his right testicle in half, continued into his lower belly, and the blade snapped in deep, came around in a tight skewering motion to rip asunder internal flesh, tore open intestines, and in that same, swift fluid motion, came back down and at a neat angle severed the penis of Guccioni.

He was screaming mindlessly before he hit the floor in a huge spurting, gushing, exploding fury of blood. Bailey stood over him, disdainful, disgusted, watching Guccioni flopping like a gutted, agonized, mindless seal, hurling about incredible founts of blood. Bailey reached out to pull a young con

closer; almost indifferently he wiped the blade clean on his shirt, and replaced it within the boot scabbard. Bailey pointed to a group of men. "Soon as that guinea pile of flesh stops flipping and flopping, haul his ass down to the grinders. Chew him up good. All the meat goes in the cans for dog food. Pulverize the bones in the hydraulic presses and mix it with concrete, understand? Burn the clothes." With that last comment he forgot the existence of Guccioni as if he had never been.

"Now, who was working with him?" Bailey addressed the larger group. A dozen men stepped forward.

"Who's the leader?" Bailey asked his next question. A bearded whitey with a shaved skull raised his hand. "Me, Mr. Bailey, suh."

"Did you get the job done?"

"Yes, suh."

"Short and sweet, uh-you Sweetpea Matthews, ain't you? Thought so. Lay it out, Sweetpea."

"We got seventeen drums of napalm all around the ship, Mr. Bailey. False partitions. You gives the word," said the bearded man, his head gleaming, "the napalm busts out and the igniters work automatically."

"What about underneath?"

"We got a line of anti-tank rockets in cover tubes the length of that whole yard under that ship. They pointing straight up. Delayed fuses to get through the dirt and the concrete before they touch metal and ignite. Them are the new thermal imploders. Fuckers'11 cut into any metal ever put together."

"Where's the firing buttons?"

Sweetpea Matthews smiled. This was the big test. "Right where you ordered, Mr. Bailey." He wasn't about to tell anybody the transmitter for the igniters had been built into the large buckle and belt around the hard stomach of Jubal Bailey. He ever say that out loud and he'd be on the conveyor belt with that fat guinea bastard to make dogfood.

Jake Marden went through the door into the contact room. He danced about him: the old instinctual move. He saw the

cameras and other electrical equipment and nodded to himself. He walked forward slowly and stopped by the table. They'd built this contact room against the side of the ship. Jake studied the flame-swathed metal. Ugly, rough, but obviously incredibly strong. Built to do a job. The hatch to the ship would open so that whoever was coming out would exit the ship into the room. Jake made a special choice for the room.

Everything was wood. The floor, the walls, the ceiling, the table, the two chairs. Beautiful wood. If he judged right, this would have its own effect. There wouldn't-shouldn't-be any wood on that incredible ship before him. A ship that was able to hurtle among the stars but that was also, by his judgement, pure utility. That meant the same inside as well as the exterior.

Stepping into a room of wood would be like walking into a palace, and He heard the faint whine of electrical energy; a motor. He judged it to be a motor. Don't judge anything on your own standards, he warned himself. He stared at the hatch. He couldn't believe it. He was sweating. His hands; he clenched and unclenched his fingers. They felt cramped and wet. He wiped his palms on the sides of his pants. He ignored the beads of sweat he knew were collecting on his upper lip and he silently cursed the trickles down his ribs from his armpits.

Air pressure hissed-no; more of a sigh. He studied the hatch and almost laughed aloud. Common sense was the same anywhere, he judged. It was a plug door, just like you'd find in every exit of every pressurized airliner in the world. Or the very spacecraft of his own world. He had a fleeting mental parade of Apollo and Discovery and Antares and Mir and A large rectangular shape appeared in the curving metal walls of the ship. Damn, they'd snugged that mother tight! The rectangular line became broader. He saw the door move inward to the ship slowly. The sound he'd heard; a thick rotating lock. Spaceship, jetliner, submarine; they all had the same need and the same solutions.

The door slid back and then, almost creaking, with sounds of metal complaining, it moved to the side.

The way into-or

out of--the alien starship stood yawning wide. He saw the glow of lights, the movement of shadows.

A tall figure stood in the door, framed in the light, only the silhouette visible. Time seemed to stand still,

every single grain of sand in the hourglass falling slowly, ponderously.

The alien came forward, details showing slowly as the light of the meeting room took its effect on the approaching being. He moved with a sinuous but powerful grace, feet solid, and now he recognized the dark orange-autumn color of the leathery skin, the thick ridges of brows and the bare skull. No question; Arbok.

A strange, heavy material wrapped about the alien body. For an instant Jake had the feeling the aliens dressed in togas as did ancient Greeks and Romans. But this creature was not comfortable in what he wore and They stood facing one another across the meeting table.

Jake grinned; he felt a tremendous comfort and affection for this being.

Arbok smiled. This alien . . . from the pictures Arbok had studied of so many people and animals from this planet, he saw before him an intelligent being like none other that he had ever known in his life. He looks like a human grizzly . . . but that smile is real.

In the time-tested tradition of his own warrior heritage, in a movement of complete trust, Aktuk san Yangst Arbok of the planet Makk from the star Traik, extended both arms and held out both hands. Jake Marden, he of the planet Terra from the star Sol did not hesitate. His arms lifted, his hands moved forward and the two aliens clasped.

A strange skin; pale, warm. There is strength here.

He's like warm leather. I like the son of a bitch . . .

"Hello, Arbok."

Jake had never before heard alien laughter. Or an alien voice, for that matter. An incredibly momentous instant in the history of mankind.

"Hi, Jake."

They laughed together.

First Contact.

CHAPTER 14

"You look different than I-"

They spoke together, in almost perfect unison, and as quickly as that fact hit them they broke out again in laughter.

"We're both different," Jake said after the tension-breaking laughter. "But you're less different than I expected."

"And you're as different as anything I've seen on the planets of several dozen stars," Arbok told him tolerantly, unable or perhaps unwilling to disguise the smile that went with his words.

"Well, you have me at a disadvantage," Jake said. "You're the first ET I've ever met."

"Eee Tee?"

"Extraterrestrial," Jake explained. "I apologize. Using shorthand in my own language is hardly the wise thing for me to do."

A leathery hand gestured. "Not at all. I-we-need much practice."

Jake kept trying to keep it simple and direct and as easily understood as possible. "I have two immediate and great needs to fulfill," he told Arbok.

The autumn-leave-colored leathery head nodded in response. "Please."

"One, I have enough questions to ask you that would keep us sitting here for a month," Jake told the alien creature across the table from him.

"And I, too," Arbok said. "Your other need?"

"To keep myself from offending you, or breaking whatever code you are accustomed to, when you meet an ... an ..."

"Alien race will do nicely," Arbok said with a chuckle, as he extricated Jake from his own stumbling.

"Thank you," Jake said quickly. "You have needs. You must have certain needs and wants. That is the most important issue of all. If you can tell me what they are we will-"

Arbok's hand went up, palm forward, in an incredibly human gesture to interrupt. "I am grateful. I akpor-sorry; I apologize for the interruption, but some of our needs are, what is the word?"

"Important, immediate, critical, necessary?" Jake offered.

Arbok smiled; Jake noticed a touch of relaxation in that powerful form before him. "All those do well. I ask you to understand that as much as you wish not to offend because of our way of doing things, we are in the same position, my alien friend."

Jake started to respond to that incredible description of himself but clamped down on his jaw before it could open. Listen, you dumb shit. Just listen. Flap your jaw later . . .

"Please," Jake said, nodding to show his agreement. "No one will take offense. Let that be the least of your concerns."

"Thank you. We are-" Arbok groped for the word. "We are uncomfortable. In several ways. With your help, with much help, we may meet our immediate needs. We shall then truly meet one another."

Jake had that old habit of cutting right through the folde-rol. "You're being recorded. Voice and video. Picture. Television-"

"I understand."

"We record what is being said in this meeting," Jake added with an open, friendly smile, "so that those who listen may begin at once to meet your needs."

"Ah. Tight organization. Excellent." Arbok's head moved slowly as he studied the room. "This place. Floor, walls, all of it. This is a natural material? It looks like flen-sorry; it appears to be a natural growth. Not metal. Not plastic. No ... synthetic; that is the word."

"You're right. The walls, floor, ceiling, they are what we call wood. Wood is produced from the trees of-but you must know about tree growth from your own observations?"

"Yes. It has a comfortable . . . feeling. A sense of being home."

"We hoped it would do that."

"Then we thank you."

Again Arbok looked about, his interest at moments as much on the television scanners as the polished woodwork. He ran his hand gently across the table. "Tell me, Jake," he started, paused, then looked directly at Jake Marden. "What is this place? Our ship is concealed. That was very wise. I have memories of great problems and conflict from first landings."

Watch it, buddy boy. This guy Arbok has been through all this before and you're the new kid on the around-the-galaxy block.

"We are," Jake spoke carefully, "an organization, as you have already judged." Arbok nodded. "We are, close to many centers of population, of communities, but we are also-not alone-" His expression brightened. "Isolated. We are isolated."

"By choice?"

Jake was stunned. The last thing he had ever expected was an alien being thinking so swiftly in English and seeing beyond the facade of what was visible to him.

"Absolutely. Yes, by choice," Jake came back, and he added just enough steel in his voice to let this alien of such sensitivity and discernment pick up on it. He was right; he spotted the slight shrug of Arbok's shoulder and watched him ease along in their exchange. Then Jake decided to play a bit of terrestrial poker. By all that was holy he should have been, should be, intensely interested in Arbok's crew. In the others. In the ship. How they got here to Earth. Where they were from. What was their propulsion system, so obviously tremendously far advanced over anything on this planet?

So he ignored every one of those issues. It was a great poker move, as if he'd glanced at his first three out of five cards, left the others face down, and shoved a huge pile of money in the center of the gaming table. He studied Arbok's eyes, the hairless lids moving so subtly, and if he detected anything, Jake would have bet his bottom dollar that poker or its equivalent was anything but alien on the starlanes in the distant, still-mysterious planets all those incomprehensible light years from Earth.

And Jake was playing this psychological trump card for all it was worth. Sequestered in a closed room with an alien being from a culture far more advanced technologically, scientifically and, doubtless, also militarily, Jake had left himself entirely without weapons, crude as they must be against the glittering

gizmos that an unknown galaxy had to offer. Confidence is a physical, real presence between strong men, and Jake Marden sat with all the comfort of a guru on a mighty big heap of confidence.

"You, ah, do not wish to discuss this matter?" Arbok asked, still hanging on to the subject of who, what, and where stood behind Jake in the manner of people, facility, or organization.

"The matter, at this time, is unimportant," Jake stressed. "Arbok, let's get down to basics. What are your primary needs? We can talk later."

The barely perceptible cutting edge was there again. Arbok nodded, as much in recognition of Jake's move as the wisdom of his words. "Thank you," he said slowly. Leather fingers with dark purple nails, but a bit ragged for a being who obviously took pride in his physical presentation, offered up another vital clue for Jake.

"It is clear to me," Jake said slowly, "that you have encountered difficulties, and among them are garments." He fingered his shirt. "Clothes, coverings--"

Arbok smiled. This alien being is quick and he is cunning and he is far more capable than I would have judged. Good; very good. What we began with our long-range contact may yet be brought again to life. But not now. He is right. First things first.

"Thank you. I will come to that shortly," Arbok said. "May I now bear upon impersonal matters?"

"Of course." Jake held out his arms, palms of his hands upward.

"We need water. Urgently," Arbok said, for the first time revealing a sense of very quiet desperation that until now had been concealed by his powerful will and personality.

"You may have all you wish. Do I assume you have tested--"

"Forgive me, Earthman Jake," Arbok spoke in suddenly stilted terms. "Your water is acceptable."

"Not so quick," Jake said, harsher than he wished. Surprise

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showed on Arbok's face. "I mean nothing against you or your systems," Jake went on quickly, "but what may be present in liquid form, water, is not often matched by vapor or mist. There are all manner of organisms in the liquid that could be harmful to you and your, ah," he almost stumbled, "your crew. Our water comes in different forms. There are such things as organisms, sodium, metallic salts, radioactive emissions, many chemicals. What we drink here is water processed for purity--"

"I am familiar with such things," Arbok broke in. "And I apologize for the obvious resentment I showed. May we sample the water your people in this, ah," he offered a thin, fleeting smile, "facility, use for consuming? If your systems accept it, then, with the safeguards our own medical scientists provide all who ever leave their planet, we should have no problems."

"At once." Jake looked up to the main camera facing him. "Maddox, you read?"

Maddox's voice came over a speaker, heard by both Jake and Arbok. "Loud and clear, Jake."

"Get a dozen bottles of distilled water down here right away. Right now. Have them left just outside the door I came through. Tell me when it's done and have the cons back into the main area before I open the door."

"Got it, and they're on the way," Maddox said.

Jake looked back at Arbok. He had a strange, questioning look on his face. Jake wondered just what in the hell he had said to bring on that reaction; not finding an answer, he cleared his mind for what was coming next.

"If the water isn't satisfactory," Jake told Arbok after the sudden hesitation, "we have methods of altering it, hopefully, to your needs. Now, what about food? We've prepared a wide variety of foodstuffs. This is a little tricky for me, Arbok. We not only don't know your tastes, but we don't wish to offend your social or religious standards."

"Strange, friend Jake. You have an incredible skill for avoiding troubles and problems," Arbok said slowly. "Whole planets have torn at each other's throats for offenses never intended, and yet, with all your warlike actions on this planet--no need to explain; one long session of listening to your news reports tells us enough of your wars and from what we understand these are minor conflicts--well, you have a skill for consideration, and I thank you."

"We're prepared to bring you whatever we can."

"About six or seven body lengths-excuse me, I'm still not that familiar with some measurements-"

"Our bodies? You, me?" Jake asked.

"Forty or fifty feet is a good guess, then," Arbok said with satisfaction. "That far back from the door I came through is a cargo hatch. We are being monitored by our ship, as your people do. Listening to us, I know that Barq-"

"Bark?"

"No, no." Arbok tried his best for pronunciation. "Hi name is Barq el Quatrane. A most extraordinary individual He comes from a world that in your language would be known as Sagandrin. It is a world that nearly died from lack of nutrients. Barq is a scientific genius when it comes to foods and their values, as well as any problems they may present Now, about fifty feet back from where we are, we have opened a hatch to a cargo bay. It is well lit and it is otherwise not occupied. If we may ask, foodstuffs left in that cargo bay will be brought within our ship, tested by Barq el Quatrane and we will know immediately what our systems will accept. And, of course, those they will refuse. You do have foodstuffs, growths from your soil or water, that are offensive or dangerous to your own people?"

"We have flora-plants that grow from many sources such as soil, water, well, many sources-of an incredible variety. And you are right, Arbok. Wise, also-"

"Experienced."

"As you wish. But, yes, they are, or can be, irritating, offensive, and quite often, lethal,"

"Let me be certain I understand lethal."

"Fatal, like dead. In fact, like very dead."

Arbok laughed, showing strong teeth in that powerful jaw. "We'll try not to die on you before we know each other better, Jake."

"Next," Jake pushed. "Your power needs." He described vVww for different levels and types of electrical energy

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they would feed into the waybox for their computer to test and select.

"Marvelous!" Arbok exclaimed. "We have great need to shut down our power source. We have been running enormous loads for maneuvering, and I must say, I have never experienced anything like the descent, the approach, and the touchdown as I did here."

"You flew her in, didn't you," Jake said quietly.

"Her?"

"Your ship." Jake nodded at the huge shape behind Arbok.

"You use female gender for such things?"

Jake didn't know if he was being offended or praised. "Yeah," he said, a touch more defensive than he wished.

"That is absolutely astounding," Arbok said, and he was visibly impressed. "Among the pilots of the Eldorn and the Camtok Fleets, it is the same. Not," he amended quickly, "to the, ah, I wish the proper words, to the slugs and the offal and the debris who make up most of the living, I call them cargo, but to the pilots, to the crews. It is always she is a great vessel or she is a rotten ship. And you do the same." His speed of speech slowed. "Which means you are really ..."

"Uh huh." Jake made motions with his hands to represent them on stick and throttle. "Looks like what we thought might be really is. Cut from the same cloth."

"Same cloth?"

"Pilots are their own breed and it looks like we're both jocks."

"You fly, ah, your spacecraft?"

Jake shook his head and he showed a touch of distaste. "Nope. That's reserved for only a few. Most of our spacecraft so far are tin cans. Extremely limited in power, very brief duration, their reliability stinks and they fly centrifugal loops. Except for coming back into atmosphere with the American and the Russian shuttles, and they come zinging in unpow-ered and their pilots pray a lot, the rest of it is shooting fancy tin cans into the air and beyond. No, friend, I fly atmospheric. Wings and things like that. Fixed wing-you understand?"

"Yes." Arbok's eyes gleamed as if lanterns had been lit behind them.

"Fixed, but with different kinds of power. Either piston jobs with propellers-rotating airfoils?" Arbok nodded. "Or pure jets. Lot of air in front, heat and compress, blast it out the ass end. Or, rotors. Those same rotating airfoils on top. Then there's gliders. Sailplanes, really. We take 'em up high and we become birds."

"Sailplanes?"

"Aerodynamic winged craft, very efficient, no power. You fly on atmospheric variations. Convective heat rising. Air currents. You're with the birds. You are a bird."

Arbok's voice was barely audible. "I have never done that. Never. To fly as one to the winged creatures ... a miracle, an absolute miracle. I ... I wish to do this with you, Jake."

"It's a deal."

"A promise?"

"My word as one jock to another."

"How delightful! You have more wonders in store?"

"You ever skydive?"

"I do not understand."

"You dive-you jump, step out of, jump away from-an airplane at high altitude."

"You mean with a flying thruster belt?"

"Nope."

"But . . . but you'd/oH/"

"That's the idea." Jake grinned, his hands pantomiming a skydive. "You come down like a rock, but because of air pressure you can maneuver and modify your descent and it is an absolute gas, a blast, a wonder-one of what you called for: more wonders in store."

"How do you keep from being killed?"

"Parachute. Synthetic material. Like cloth," he fingered his shirt again, "only specialized. It opens when you're ready and it forms a flying wing of cloth with great resistance from the air. It's controllable, maneuverable, and it's one man on one with flight."

"You make it sound . . . what is the word? Rapture?"

"That will do very nicely, friend."

Maddox's voice broke in from the speaker. "If you two aces will come back to Earth, we have work to do."

Arbok and Jake stared at one another and again they broke

out into laughter. "All right, Jeff," Jake called to a room microphone. He grew serious again.

"This may be stepping on your toes," Jake said, "and once again, I don't mean to insult or-"

"It is easy to step on my toes." Arbok lifted a muscled, leathery-skinned foot in the air and wriggled six bare toes. "We can both see clearly that I am woefully missing proper attire."

Jake couldn't help his chuckle. "I wondered what the devil you were doing in bedsheets. Or drapes."

"Whatever you are describing, it is certainly not clothes," Arbok said with a grimace.

"You're right. You sleep on sheets and you hang drapes from the walls for decorations or privacy or both."

"It's been long since I have known either," Arbok said, frowning. "But this matter of clothes. Can you provide for us what-"

"I have a master tailor and a whole crew standing by to provide whatever you want, at least to the best of our ability."

"That is excellent."

"But you present a problem, Arbok. How many of you are there?"

"There is only one of me."

"I don't mean that. How many people aboard your ship?"

"Oh. I see. One handful." Arbok held up a hand with its six digits. Jake made sure to make no reference to the number. "But there is another problem. We are all different sizes, shapes, and weights."

"You have to get together, one by one, with our tailor. When you meet him, by the way, his name is

Selig. Um, are the rest of your crew very different from one another?"

"To the extreme, friend Jake."

"Selig is going to have to measure different parts of their bodies, Arbok. That means his hands will be all over them and they'll have to stand patiently while he measures. But when he's through, whatever he makes for them will fit perfectly."

"Ah, would it be possible, I mean, would we exceed your hospitality, if we, ah, requested more than one set of garments, I mean, one garment for each of us, uh-"

Jake motioned for Arbok to stop. The expression on Jake's face was undisguised questioning as he sought to find quickly the reason for Arbok's sudden discomfiture. "Arbok, the future will hold best for all of us if we are frank with each other."

Arbok shifted in his seat. Another sign of discomfort. And he was nettled by the exchange. Jake watched with the practiced keen eye of the longtime survivor the telltale signs; the arteries in the neck darkening and pulsating, a ridge expanding, just barely visible, down the sides of Arbok's neck. The man-the alien, the --fuck it! the man!-was nettled.

"You will forgive me," Arbok said slowly, his sense of honor wounded. "I do not wish to abuse the language or come to any wrong conclusion, so I will ask you directly. Do you doubt my words as misleading?"

Jake couldn't help the grin. He shook his head. "No, no," he said quickly. He chuckled. "You seem uncomfortable. You seem reluctant to state a condition about clothing-"

"I will explain later, Jake, but," and suddenly Arbok's face opened into a wide grin, "I think I have found the proper way to say this." Both arms went wide, palms of his hands up. "We, ah, come to you as naked as a jaybird."

Jake stared, his face reflecting humor and curiosity. "There's got to be one hell of an explanation for that," he said. "But," again he held up a hand to thwart mistaken impressions, "you can explain, if you wish, later. But in the meantime-" He lifted his eyes to look at the microphone across the room. "Maddox, you read me?" "Five by. Go ahead."

"Tell Selig to get together a bunch of jumpsuits. Work coveralls; whatever the hell we have. At least six in my size-" Arbok was motioning to break in. "Hold it, Jeff," Jake spoke aloud, then looked to Arbok.

"One of our people is very large." "How large is very large?"

"This way," Arbok spread his hands to each side. "Like two of me, maybe three. I have seen pictures of what you call very fat people. This one, Ytram, is not so much a very fat -""!*> v"iit lie is vRi-v large and wide."

"You got that, Jeff?"

"Got it. One tent-size jumpsuit. I'll tell Selig no zippers. Velcro all the way. I'll get those started at once, and then Selig can meet with them for the tailoring and the rest of it."

"Great, Jeff."

Jake nodded to Arbok. "That seems to be enough for now. Let's get you into clothes. You'll feel a hell of a lot more comfortable then. And you can start sampling the various foodstuffs. After you meet the basics-and we'll answer any questions you have about what they are-we'll get down to a steady supply. I know I have one very delicate question about food."

"I am intrigued. Ask, please."

"We have variations among our own people as to food selection," Jake started carefully.

"As do the inhabitants of most worlds," Arbok broke in, making Jake's discomfort ease a bit.

"The foods we're supplying to you right now, as I said, are growth foods. From plants or within the ground. What we call vegetables, fruits, nuts. We're also sending in some processed foods such as cheese, bread-well, we've identified it all and provided you with as much description as possible. But one thing we don't know." Arbok waited.

"Meat. The issue here is meat. The flesh and other products of animals-the lower animals, of course-that are raised primarily as a source of food for us. Meat that is cooked and prepared in certain ways is a

tremendous source of energy, and-

The alien hand rose quickly. "I understand now. Your concern is appreciated, friend Jake. And you are right," Arbok said, nodding. "On some worlds it is considered a horrible thing to do. To eat the flesh, the bodies of animals, but on most worlds it is quite the opposite. Not only are the lower animals genetically bred for their supply, their taste, and their food value, but on some worlds the higher inhabitants are also kept for just that same purpose."

Jake studied Arbok and made the decision to delay as long as possible any discussion of a certain food supply delicately

known as long pig. He had no desire to begin a dissertation on cannibalism.

"All right," Jake said. "We'll hold off on the meat until we've gone through all the other preparations we have discussed."

"That is wise. Thank you."

"When you've had your chance to eat, and Selig gets you the jumpsuits, and you can get squared away-" "Squared away?"

"Eat, drink, dress, rest-whatever you need to do."

"Yes."

"When you've done that we will meet again, here, in this room, Arbok, I'd like to do this slowly and carefully."

"I agree."

"There are six of you. I believe the best thing we can do is to square off in opposite numbers." "I do not-" "I become your opposite number. You mentioned two other names. Barq and Ytram."

He is swift, this alien. And Jake remembers details. He is very, very good . . .

"We'll provide an opposite number, one of us, for each one of you. That way your people will always have someone to deal with for any special needs of preference. That way there will always be an open line of communication." "Excellent! Thank you. A wise move." "And we'll need to talk again, as soon as possible, to try to find out what your medical needs might be. From your own sources, or ours, or because of any accident or injury-" "Also, excellent."

Jake rested both hands on the table. "That seems to do it for now. When you're ready for the next meeting like this, I recommend you bring your second-in-command." "The one directly under my authority?" "Yes."

"And you will do the same?"

"The same or close to it," Jake said. "I share equal authority with another man. His name is Jubal Bailey. We are not superior in authority to one another. We share that position

"That is surprising. And extremely difficult to live with. I'm interested to see how you do this."

"You'll find out soon enough." Jake stood and, following the lead Arbok had shown earlier, held forth both hands. This time Arbok crossed his arms, one over the other, to form an X with his arms. Jake quickly did the same. "The greeting before," Arbok said carefully, "was a greeting of careful courtesy by strangers. We are no longer strangers."

Four powerful hands squeezed briefly and then released. Jake waited for Arbok to leave. The alien started to turn, stopped, studying Jake's shirt. He came back to the table.

"Our business is done, is it not?" he asked.

Jake was puzzled but he nodded. "Yes."

"May I make a very personal inquiry, Jake?"

"Of course."

A leathery hand rose slowly and a single forefinger pointed to Jake's shirt and moved closer. "Is that what I think it may be?"

Jake felt his shirt. He withdrew a cigar tube from his pocket. "It's a cigar," Jake said. "Monte Cristo."

Cuban. The best. Are you familiar with tobacco?"

"May I feel it, please?"

Jake unscrewed the cap and presented the long cigar to Arbok. The alien moved it slowly back and forth beneath his nose. He slid slowly back into his seat.

"May I-I mean, I-"

"Hey, you want it? It's yours. I had no idea-"

"Jake, friend Jake, I would kill a dozen men for such a cigar. It has been unspeakable solar turns since I had ..."

Jake held out a Dunhill. Arbok watched him flip the top and spin the side roller to bring forth the flame. He pushed two more cigars and the Dunhill across the table.

Arbok grinned at him.

Jake didn't doubt that the alien would kill for a good cigar.

/ know I would, Jake thought with a smile.

Jake walked slowly through the corridors on his way back to the master control room underground where he could speak in absolute privacy with Jube and Jeff Maddox, and anyone else they brought within the fold. His head spun

with the incredible turn of events, with the shock of meeting an intelligent creature not merely from another star, but from a world far across the galaxy. A being-a jock!-who'd landed on dozens of worlds. Arbok was the stuff of which incredible dreams and future hopes were made. He was fantasy and fiction and wonder and awesome reality all rolled up in one, and yet, above all else, he was a person. That, above all else, had stunned Jake and still held him in thrall. Without even being aware of what was happening, he and Arbok were fast becoming friends. Trillions upon trillions of miles might separate them, distances so vast that even light had to labor wearily and for millennia to reach from one home world to another; none of this mattered when you looked into a man's eyes and you felt and knew that indefinable something that created the bond between two men. Jake was finding it necessary to force himself to keep uppermost in mind that Arbok was not just an alien, but a being of different stellar material, unknown DNA and UNA and genetic patterns staggeringly different from anything known on Earth. It didn't seem to matter. There was that incredible feeling of being comfortable with Arbok. The same suspicions and craftiness and cynicism that Jake applied to almost everyone he met simply wasn't there in this relationship with Arbok and- Jake stopped in midstride as if he'd been pole-axed. Arbok had never even mentioned, had never offered the slightest hint or reference, to their telepathic communication when Arbok was still far out in the solar system from Earth, An event-to Jake at least-as overwhelming as anything the starship represented in science and technology, had been absolutely ignored. It was too incredible to be accidental. Not the contact they had made, or the awesome ability that somehow they shared, but the deafening silence between them now that they had actually encountered one another in person. For a moment Jake felt his temper flare. Had he been taken? Was Arbok playing his cards so skillfully that Jake had been numbed into his own forgetfulness?

Anger slipped away the more he considered the issue, There was every chance that what had transpired between them was a matter entirely singular to them and to then only. And for Arbok even to mention their ability when the)

were under the scrutiny of cameras and microphones would have been idiotic. His silence, then, was only a matter of proper timing. Jake believed that, somehow knew this was the only right answer. He decided right then to put the matter on hold.

But. . . Jesus, we never once talked about what the whole world would love to know! The ship's drive . . . its propulsion system. It's light years beyond anything we've got anywhere on this planet. There are people, organizations, governments out there that would do absolutely anything to get their hands on that system. They'd trade a billion lives without even blinking ... in one shot whoever has that drive leaps into the future and leaves the rest of the world behind. Or they could develop a space system that would put the rest of this planet at their mercy . . .

And we never even mentioned it. I never even thought to ask about it! Jake laughed aloud at himself. No matter that he'd been lulled, deliberately or otherwise, into such mental silence on his own part. When it

came to exercising power, to understanding muscle no matter what form it could be found, Jubal Bailey took a back seat to no one. He'd be all over the starship drive, even if he seemed cool and laid back about the matter. That was only for the moment. Jube never missed a trick. And even if he was something less than the sharpest on this subject, he had Jeff Maddox and Luther Cogswell breathing right down his neck.

Jake told himself to relax. That kind of stuff was in very capable hands.

Besides, there was yet another matter even more pressing than propulsion systems.

Who, and what, were these aliens?

"That's what the hell I want to know," Jube said harshly. "Don't give me none of that science shit, Jake. I watched you and your space pilot buddy playing kissy-poo and ain't we wonderful. I'm not interested in that crap. Not yet. It was all neat and spit-polish clean, old buddy, but it was choreographed. That mother-fucker knew exactly what he was doing. What the hell was this Arbok? An ambassador? A diplomat? What? He handled you slicker than owl snot on a brass doorknob, Jake."

"Jube's right," Jeff Maddox added, with more than a touch of caution against an angry reaction from Jake. "He really seemed to know what he was doing."

"That's because he does know what he's doing," Jake offered in response. "What the hell's the matter with you two? Did you expect me to make that first meeting a contest? For what? They're not going anywhere. They're not even trying to go anywhere. I don't even know if that ship could lift. They were having problems coming in, remember?"

"Did you see the rest of those things?" Luther Cogswell stood in the doorway to the control room, and if his face could be judged as blanched then he was on his way to a skin-bedsheet pallor. Luther was almost shaking. He carried a bottle of gin in one hand and it was already half-empty.

"You drunk?" Jube asked.

Luther dropped into a chair. "I wish I was, man. I been trying hard enough." He held up the bottle. "Put away half this shit by myself. Just chuga-luggin' all the way. Like drinking pisswater for all the good it's been doin' me."

"You said did we see the rest of them?" Maddox asked. "No. After Jake met with their top man-top alien or top-whatever, or who's supposed to be their lead individual-we've been back here. I thought you were riding shotgun on Selig."

"I was, I was," Luther confirmed, and took a long pull on the bottle until Jube yanked it violently from his hand. "I went with Selig and all his fancy fucking tape measures and that shit. He had them come into that room, or compartment, whatever you call it, one by one. The first one was that Arbok, that Jake met with. That, my friends, is one mean, dangerous, tough fucker, let me tell you."

"What did he do?" Jake asked.

"Do?" Luther echoed. "He didn't have to do shit. He just looked at Selig and I thought the Jewboy was gonna' die, and I wasn't too far behind him. That fucker ain't got a single hair on his head or anywhere on his body. Got a cock that would make a mule smile and he got no more pubic hair than a marble statue. He's . . . Selig said he felt like crocodile skin all over. Tougher than a steel-belted tire. Meanern' shit."

"What the fuck did he do?" Jake shouted.

"I told you!" Luther shouted back. "Nothin'!" He looked at

us. That was all. Devil's eyes. Lucifer in the flesh. No! Not the flesh! In croc skin. Devil's eyes that look right through you. It's like he looks at you and then he's inside you, goin' through your belly and your head and up and down inside your legs, and your dick, it wants to crawl up in your navel and hide."

"What did he say?" Maddox asked.

"He felt different materials that Selig brought. You know, samples. Shit like that. He picked leather and suede. Then he looked at pictures of clothes, I mean, he didn't have to stand there naked for long because Selig brought him that jumpsuit. Fit just right. But he looks through the design catalog Selig has and the next thing, he's giving orders to Selig. He's gonna' look like a nobleman or something like that. Leather jerkin, tunics, boots, big belts, lots of pockets, that sort of shit. Selig tells him he'll also make him

some jackets. He looks at Selig. Make me a pilot's jacket, like Jake Marden wears, he tells Selig, and the Jew likes to shit right there on the floor. Who the hell expects someone to come down from the fuckin' moon and start ordering tailor-made clothes?"

"He was following my instructions," Jake said quietly.

Luther fixed a beady-eyed stare on Jake. "You didn't happen to see the others, did you?"

Jake shook his head. "Lay it on me, Luther. Did you get the video?"

"No one ordered any video." Luther's mouth clamped shut like that of a snapping turtle.

"What the fuck you talkin' about?" Jube demanded. "I ordered a video of everything the space weirdos do. Everything."

"You didn't order no such shit from my brown ass," Luther retorted.

Jube looked to Jeff Maddox. "Senator?"

Maddox shrugged. "I'll take the blame. I was supposed to cover all bases with video."

"All right, damnit," Jube turned back to Luther. "What were they like?"

"Like worse than anything I ever dreamed up in any voodoo spell." Luther shook as a spasm of cold rippled through him. "Not all of them. That one they call Etruck-"

"He's

"There was one alien who helped Arbok fly the ship," Jake said. "Barq. What about him?"

Luther's angry scowl eased. "Glad you mentioned him. He's smaller than the others. He's, well, sort of pink."

"Like Jake and the senator?" Jube queried.

"No, no," Luther said quickly. "Like pink marble. Jake, now, I like him, and the senator's a nice guy, but their skin color is like dried-up white shit, y'know?"

"Thanks," Maddox said.

"Stay with it," Jake ordered.

"Well, this Barq, he's, um, delicate. That's the word for him. Big, big eyes, and they're warm and friendly, and he's got fingers real slim and long and-I don't know what else to say. It, was, it felt good being around him. He speaks real soft and gentle, and, well, I liked him."

"That leaves two more," Jube pushed.

"There's Drong. He looks like he come out of one of them Conan movies. All scarred up. Dark skin. Not black, not nigger, not mulatto. Like five o'clock shadow all over him, but no hair. Skin's like a rasp file. I never seen so many scars on one body in all my life. Looks like his whole world used him for target practice. Never opened his mouth to say a word. Just sorta" growled. Give me the willies, he did. Wouldn't want to meet his ass in a dark alley unless I got me an Uzi or something."

"Last one," Jube prompted.

"That's the scariest one of them all," Luther said, and he was utterly serious.

"Why?" Jake asked.

"Because when Selig put that jumpsuit on him and he wrapped some cloth around his head he looked like any fucking Arab I ever saw in my life. Six feet or so. Name's Grangles; sounds like that, anyway. Skin's the color of leaves when they fall off a tree. Eyes set way back in his head. But I tell you this. That son of a bitch would be right at home in the Sahara. Nobody could tell he wasn't born there."

Silence hung between them for a while, leaving everyone to their own thoughts. Jube went to the bar, came back with four bottles and thumped them on a table in their midst. Maddox brought six glasses. They took their fill and swal lowed hard. Jube hit his a. second and third time, wiped his mouth, settled back in his seat.

"I got a few questions," he said, looking at Jake.

"Hit me, bro."

"For just a little while I'm gonna' be a dumb nigger. I ask you easy questions, you give me easy and fast answers, okay, man?"

"You got it," Jake said.

"How far that ship come to get here? You guessing, you say so."

"When I talked with Arbok-"

"No, Jake," Jube said quietly, his voice soft and his words sharp and clear. "I don't want stories. Answers or educated guesses will do."

"All right. But I need just this much preamble. It didn't come from any stars close to ours. It came a hell of a long way. And because of the manner in which it arrived near our solar system, I judge they used warp drive, or hyperspace; whatever. Measure the distance in thousands of light years."

"That is not an easy and fast answer," Jube said.

"It's what you get," Jake threw back. "The answer is a good part of the way across the galaxy. And our galaxy is a hundred thousand light years from one end to the other."

"So that engine is something Ford or Chrysler would like to have, right?"

The group laughed.

"There is nothing in this world that is more valuable, more powerful, more capable of world domination," Jake said, "than that propul- than that engine. It's the future in your hand."

"That's a good answer. Now, how many of those things are in that ship?"

"Six."

"How the hell do you know that?" Luther burst out.

"Voodoo man," Jube said quietly. "I'll cut out your tongue and your heart if you don't keep quiet."

Luther nodded mutely.

"Again, Jake," Jube said.

"Six."

"How do you know."

"Arbok told me."

"You believe him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"There's absolutely no purpose in his lying. Sooner or later we're going through that ship from one end to the other. Even if they're invisible we'd find them."

"How?"

"Dogs. Gas. Infrared. UV detectors. Photocells. Lasers. Motion detectors and-"

"Enough. Excellent."

"All male," Jake nodded.

"How do you know that?"

"You heard Luther. Six aliens, six dicks:*

"Okay. Good enough for now." Jube thought deeply for several moments.

"How many from the same planet?"

Jake grinned. "Now the fun begins. This is a guess, Jube."

"Guess, then."

"They're all from different planets."

"You sure?" Maddox broke in.

"Hell, no, I'm not sure," Jake said impatiently. "But my guess is that they're not only from different planets, but each planet is from a different star. So they're trillions of miles separated, or, hundreds of light years separated. And I'll tell you something else."

Jake looked about the group. "They didn't want to be aboard that ship."

Jube Bailey smiled. "Ah, the nitty-gritty is upon us. Very good, Jake. Very good, indeed. We move toward the same answers."

Maddox stared at Jubal Bailey. Was this the same foul-mouthed, killer nigger who ran Old Millford like a demented black Napoleon?

"Damn right," Jake said to Jube. "Six aliens. Each different from the others. Each from a different star, from a different solar system. They're on a ship that kicks out of hyperspace like a bad dream and they're zeroed in on our sun. That means Old Sol, which is a solid, stable star, is the kind that hosts planets with good living conditions. The nearest star to us is over four light years away. But these guys, in this ship, drop in on us like we're a homing beacon for

them."

"And they're naked as the day they were born," Jube said. "Whatever Arbok had wrapped about his ass, it was ripped out of equipment on that ship."

"Agreed," Jake said.

Jube turned to Luther Cogswell. "Anything different about those cats when they came in to Selig? I mean, what they were wearing?"

"They weren't wearing anything. They had that crazy stuff wrapped about them. Like you'd wrap a sheet or a blanket about you because you got nothing else," Luther replied.

Jube looked at Jake and they nodded to one another. "How's your history, Jake?" Jube asked.

Jake smiled. "I read you loud and clear, Jube. Slave ships from Africa to the Americas."

"Oh, you bet," Jube said softly. For a moment his thoughts raced back in history, then joined them again.

"And how did they ship those slaves, Jake?" It was obvious he was voicing aloud what he and Jake shared, for the benefit of the others.

"First they stripped them naked," Jake said, "and then they manacled them."

"You are very correct, sir," Jube said, smiling. "And whenever the slaves could manage a revolt, first they killed their guards-"

"Of which there are none aboard this starship," Jake said. "Which means they were there, but now they're gone."

"Overboard," Jube added. "The deepest ocean of all. Space."

"And then," Jake picked it up, "they got rid of their manacles."

"So they had no chains and no clothes," Jube said. "They also had limited food and water. Now, supposing they weren't just slaves. Supposing they were-" He let it hang.

Jake's smile broadened. "Convicts."

"Ah, but your mind moves smoothly," Jube told him. The others listened, hypnotized and awed, by the exchange.

"So all the same conditions prevail," Jube said. "Manacles. Naked. Guards. But when they freed themselves and dumped the guards overboard, they had no place to go in the known world."

"So you need a place to go."

"If you're in a sailing ship your options are limited."

"But if you've got a starship," Jake said, "then you've got an entire galaxy. And your computer has starcharts. And if at least one of your convicts is a pilot-"

"Here they are," Jube finished for him. His eyes locked on his friend. "Jake, how did this Arbok first contact you?"

Jake didn't waste a split-second in his response. Anything else could have spelled his end. Those folks in that ship are aliens. Strange, frightening, dangerous, unknowns; they might have the ability to control a man's mind.

"Some kind of telepathic contact. Crazy brain shit. No direct link. Think of it as pushing your sixth sense. You get a feeling, a hunch that won't go away. You don't know why, but it's there. I had that feeling real faint at first, then it got stronger, and I began to figure what was happening. Arbok was trying to project and the computer was helping. There are plenty of cases right here on Earth like that. Not with the computer, though. But telepathy, well, science says it doesn't exist."

"Fuck science," Luther Cogswell broke in. "It damn well do exist."

"Later, later," Jube said smoothly. "I understand, Jake. It makes sense. You kept getting those feelings, right?" He watched Jake nod. "How'd you steer him here?"

"I tried to project a map. Hell, they could see the earth because they saw the land features. So it was easy to match the tow. As they got closer I tried to zero in on this area and finally on this prison. The signal I tried to give Arbok was that we'd line up an approach light system for him."

"Why didn't you just use a homing beacon?" Maddox asked.

"Because it would have been a dead giveaway," Jake said, turning to the senator. "You know how governments react to something like this. Every radar in the world, every telescope, everything that can see or detect or hear or sniff out anything has been on this. We kick out a strong homing signal that

wasn't there before that thing starts down and-"

"Hold on," Jube broke in. "I saw the news stories, also. Two ships broke out of Earth orbit and headed for Mars. Big ships, as I recall, and the ship they were tracking-"

"All ECM bullshit," Jake broke in. "Electronic counter-measures like we use but only a thousand years or more advanced than our own primitive hardware. They can give any radar echo, any flame, any size they want. It was all bogus, Jube."

Bailey nodded. "Let's get back to our friends in their tin can," he picked up his former trend of thought.

"You're convinced-I'm convinced-they're convicts. For whatever crime; it doesn't matter right now. And if their ship was really as advanced as it seems, then all their guards and safety systems would be run by their computer, right?"

"You got it."

"So their pilot's got to be the smart boy. This Arbok fellow."

"I'd bet on it," Jake told him.

"I don't understand how they knew Old Millford was a prison full of cons like us," Jube said slowly, choosing his words with great care.

Jake smiled. "Old friend, they don't know."

Even Jube was taken aback with that remark. "You're serious?"

Jake nodded. "Absolutely serious."

"But what about your brain-pairing? This mind-to-mind signal stuff?"

"Dead as a doornail once they started down. And it's been that way ever since."

"They really don't know what we are?" Jube was incredulous.

"I haven't let on in any way. Hell, Jube, we could be a factory. A labor camp. Anything. They have a thousand worlds to consider in terms of how people on different planets do different things. All this Arbok had to go by was broadcasting his mental signal in the blind. As luck had it we seemed to be on the same wavelength. You know the rest."

"You ever have this ability before?" Maddox asked.

"I was dead meat on a crap table," Jake told him. "My hunch factor in Vegas, on a scale of ten, was for shit. No. I never had the first inkling of anything like this. I'm just as surprised as anyone else."

"Think Arbok made any other contacts with other people like he did with you?" Jube queried.

Jake shook his head. "I don't know, but-"

"Try a hunch, Jake."

"No."

"You know what happens next?" Jube asked, throwing the question at the group. They waited.

"The first thing is, I'll personally kill the dumb son of a bitch who lets on, to anyone, in or out of this place, what we got here," Bailey said. "I've been sitting back, letting all this unfold around me. We, gentlemen, have this ship. Us. It's ours. And it's not going to be difficult figuring out those aliens."

"That's a big statement to make, Jube," Maddox said, his disbelief apparent.

"Is it? Senator, they're escaped cons. They're hard-timers on the run. They got no place to go except right where they are. And it isn't one ounce too difficult to figure out that they need us." Jube rubbed his hands with delight. "Our guests, gentlemen, are going to want to cut a deal."

"They might want to set the terms," Maddox warned. "With their advanced technology, their weapons-"

"They don't have weapons on that ship, Senator," Jube said.

"How the hell can you know that?"

"You don't give weapons to super robots to control convicts. You don't need them."

"He's right," Jake said to support Jube. "They won't have projectile weapons, anyway. The last thing you'd ever want on a starship is something that'll open a hole in that thing. It's a fast and guaranteed way to die."

"So in a very short time," Jube said, his smile growing broader, "we will sit down to play poker. We're both holding cards, but I do believe we have the jokers in the deck."

"What kind of deal?" Cogswell asked, honestly puzzled.

Jube nodded to Jake to take the question.

"The name of this game," Jake said slowly, "is takeover. They're going to want to join forces with us. To take over. Look," he said, leaning forward, intent on his own thoughts. "Reverse our positions. Put us in that ship. Now suppose we land in this ship, or any advanced machine like it, on some remote island that may be thousands of years behind us in

technical or scientific development and ability. We're stuck; we're at the ass end of a one-way trip. So what do we do? Burn the ship? Cut it up to make pots and pans? Join in with the locals and live in huts and cook our food over cowshit patties? Hell, we cut a deal with their big chief and we take over the goddamned island."

"Wait . . . wait a moment." Cogswell's eyes were huge. "You think they want to takeover? Really, take over?"

"Hell, yes," Jake said, "but they can't do it without us. Especially when they find out that we're convicts just like them. Oh, they'll deal, all right."

"How much do you think they'll want? I mean, how much to take over?" Cogswell persisted. "The whole country?"

"Goddamn!" Maddox burst out. "To hell with just the country! With what that ship has inside it, we can take over the whole goddamned world!"

CHAPTER 15

"What have the Russians got?"

"Ulcers."

"Just like us, I guess."

"Maybe worse. That damn thing came across their territory with a lot of altitude. Too high for their ABM system but they let go a hell of a salvo."

"How many did they fire?"

"At least eighty missiles. The big stuff, too. The missiles Gorbachev kept insisting they didn't have and then they let go this great goddamned barrage."

"Any warheads detonate?"

"No, thank God. Just a lot of booster flame and the missiles. I'd hate to think of what might have happened if they had detonated a warhead anywhere within a thousand miles of that ship. Their protective systems could have set off, well, the good Lord knows what. Anything so advanced it can jump through hyperspace and twist the gravfields of an entire solar system like that thing did when we first saw it, well, a single warhead that's a planet buster is easy enough to produce."

"What about those other two ships?"

"You mean the ones that angled out toward Mars?"

General Avis Barkhorn nodded. He looked up from his console in the heart of North American Aerospace Defense Command, deep within a huge chamber gouged from solid rock in the heart of Cheyenne Mountain. Barkhorn pressed a button and a tracking screen thirty feet wide by twenty feet high glowed into life. Barkhorn worked an electronic mouse on his console. He and General Mike Bitters watched the presentation of the unknown ship spiraling down from the other side of the moon toward Earth, swinging sharply into terrestrial orbit, and then the glows of flame and two sharp pinpoints rushing outward from Earth toward the far reaches of the solar system.

Bitters glanced at the other general. "Want to see where they're going?"

Barkhorn nodded. "Yes."

The two lights faded to dull blinking red. "What's that mean?" Barkhorn asked.

"They were decoys. Some fancy electromagnetic bounce stuff Super hardware but nothing that strange to us. Fooled us for a while, though," General Bitters admitted. "But only for a while. Those ships are now dead. Short lifetimes for a special job and they become so much junk. Here's what they'll do."

He moved the mouse and the screen became active again. Thin green lines curving through the representation of the solar system showed the paths of the now-discarded and useless decoys. "They'll

miss Mars by, um, maybe thirty or forty thousand miles. If they survive the asteroid belt they'll just keep going out like any other chunk of rock headed in the wrong direction. They have just enough velocity not to return to this system." He tapped controls and the screen darkened to inactive status.

Barkhorn eased into a seat. "Tell me more about the Russians. I came here to see you, Mike, because the president said he wanted a no-shit judgment from you. Then we talk to some heavy, heavy brain talent to try to figure out what to do."

Mike Bitters didn't hesitate. "The Russians, like I said, have ulcers over this. That ship made a mockery of the most advanced systems the Russians ever built. It didn't evade them or destroy what the Russians fired. It ignored all of it. All that Russkie firepower didn't amount to a gnat's ass to whoever is inside that ship."

"You're that convinced it's manned? Maybe occupied is a better word."

Avis Barkhorn chuckled. "Watch it. You're going provincial on us. Be just your luck if they're black and you get fingers pointed at you because of racial prejudice."

"Jesus Christ, Mike, I'm black!"

Mike Bitters smiled. "I forgot,"

Avis squeezed his shoulder. "Business, old man. What are the Russians doing now?"

Bitters smiled. "Same thing we're doing. Shoving Turns and Alka-Seltzer down our throats as fast as we can. To say nothing of buckets full of aspirin."

"What are they doing about the ship?"

"Everything they have that crawls, rolls, skids, flies, floats, swims, runs, hovers-well, everything, is hunting for that ship. They've come up with about a thousand reports that are as idiotic as they're empty-"

"Well, we're leading the Russians in idiot reports," Barkhorn said drily. "Multiply what they've got by a factor of ten. The UFO crowd is positively orgasmic."

Bitters smiled. "Can't blame them. The Messiah has done come down among us. He's just hiding right now, that's all."

Barkhorn didn't smile. "Did that ship actually come down?"

Bitter held his eyes. "What's the official word?"

"Official to the public or in the back rooms of the White House and the Pentagon?"

"Back rooms."

"The best brains we have don't know."

"Um."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means they're scared shitless in the Pentagon. And the White House."

Barkhorn offered a humorless laugh. "Why not try London and Paris and Rome and Berlin and-"

"Hold it, old man," Bitters broke in easily. "Those places don't count as much."

"Why?"

"Because they're not keyed up with the nightmares we and the Russians share about destroying the world, that's why. Because we're sicker than the rest of the world," Mike Bitters said. "Because every day and night we have to prove we're superior. So do the Russians. We're paranoid. The Italians can't affect a goddamn thing so they go about their business

as usual. The British? They act a good role. The French tell the world to go fuck itself and act French and I don't blame them. What's Norway going to do about this ship that's got the world standing on its ear? How about Tokyo? Or Athens? Or Caracas, or-"

"I get your point. The truth of it all," Avis Barkhorn reflected, "is that a lot of people in this world don't really believe an alien spaceship has busted out of hyperspace and is now on the surface of this planet. Somewhere."

"Avis, you stubborn old bastard, when will you learn that it doesn't matter one whit, not a single ounce of a gnat's fart, what the people of the world think or say? Not when it comes to something like this. It's way over their head. They can't control it. What they can do is hide behind their fears with lots of mumbo-jumbo. The cults and the religions are all at a fever pitch but no one knows a damn thing." Avis Barkhorn settled deeper into his seat. "This thing gives me the willies, Mike."

"Sure. Because it's ignoring you, it's contemptuous of our political posture and our vaunted military strength and our piss-ant science. Few things get to the white man worse than being ignored. We're not accustomed to such contempt." Mike Bitters smiled. "It's got us by the short hairs, old friend, and we're hopping about very awkwardly."

Avis Barkhorn gestured to take in the huge underground facility. "We are trying everything we can to find it, aren't we?"

Bitters laughed. "Best cooperation we've ever had with the Russians, old man. We know how scared they are because privately they're accusing us of hiding the ship. Of not sharing in what Gorbachev insists belongs to all the world. Jesus, if the Russians had that thing in their hands, or even if it landed in Russia and was cooperating with them, Gorbachev wouldn't be ripping hell out of President Smathers the way he is. Their actions are a dead giveaway that they haven't found a thing and they're scared that we have and we'll have a tremendous upper hand over them."

"What do we do, Mike?"

"We keep trying to find that ship. Contact it in some way.

Because this whole affair stinks. It stinks to high heaven," Bitters said with sudden, intense emphasis.

"Whoa. Back up, boy. What the hell does that mean? You just opened a whole new can of worms, Mike."

"There's a pattern to everything," Mike Bitters answered, his words cold and official. "Intelligence is intelligence no matter what its form. That ship came into space on the far edges of our solar system with a devastating impact on space-time fabric. It screwed up the whole electromagnetic pattern from the sun on out beyond Pluto. That, my friend, is energy on a scale not beyond our ability to measure, but so staggering it's difficult to accept."

"You know how much energy?"

"We ran it through the Cromwell computers, Avis. We'd have to pack one billion gigaton-yield thermonuclear weapons- each weapon having a yield the equivalent of a billion tons of T.N.T.-into an object the size of a walnut and release all its energy in less than one one-hundredth of a second. Now, let that sit in the back of your head and you can have nightmares about it later. What really matters is that ship used that much energy with no more fuss than you or I dipping the paddle of a canoe in a lake."

"But where's the flaw?" Barkhorn persisted.

"With that much juice under your hands, my friend," Bitters went on, a cold smile on his face, "you don't play hide-and-seek with the aborigines of the world where you're so obviously detected by the science of those natives. Especially if it's your intention to land."

Avis Barkhorn came slowly upright. "You say that," he said, measuring his fellow officer, "as if you know they landed."

"They landed."

Barkhorn started to speak, swallowed, shook his head as if finding it impossible to accept what was being said so casually. "Jesus, I need a drink."

Bitters opened a drawer, uncorked a bottle of exceptional white wine and handed the bottle to his friend. Barkhorn took a long swallow, studied the bottle, took another and corked it. He handed it back to Mike Bitters.

"Thanks," Barkhorn said. "Why are you so sure the ship landed?"

"We have a detection system that can't be fooled. Oh, it can be screwed up with decoys, Avis. It can be scrambled. It can be overloaded. But it cannot be ignored. Our system picks up pea-sized meteors coming into our atmosphere. It tracks pieces of junk no bigger than a brick. It tracks them precisely. It picks up changes in all sorts of radiations and energy. You can fuck it up but you cannot hide your existence from it."

Bitters glanced at his consoles across the gargantuan room. "Now, that ship was in space. It was between the moon and the Earth and it got a lot closer to Earth. It is no longer in space." Bitters smiles.

"Presto. It's on home plate." He stamped his foot on the floor. Heads turned to look at him but he ignored them. "It's here. It's on this planet."

"What if they boosted themselves back out the same way they came in?"

"They would have left an energy signature that we couldn't miss."

"What do you mean?"

"Think of a lake. Now I want you to magically take a huge chunk of water out of the middle of that lake, and, still using your magic, transport that water-which is bulk, volume and mass-a thousand miles away. Now forget the water you've teleported or however you did it. What happens in the lake?"

"You'd have a huge volume of nothing-"

Bitters smiled. "Go on."

"Nature abhors a vacuum. The water in the lake would rush in from its own pressure."

"And there'd be an effect throughout the lake. Ripples, vibrations, changing levels, movement, mass shift-need I go on?"

Barkhorn shook his head. "No. I mean, you don't need to. And you're telling me you never detected any such signature in space?"

"Avis, if they'd boosted out with a punch into hyperspace they would have wrecked the orbits of our planets. So they didn't do that. If they used local drive, energy on a much lower scale, it would have left all kinds of signatures. It didn't." He shrugged. "So, it landed."

"But where, damnit!"

Mike Bitters stunned him.

"I have some ideas," he said casually.

"Mike, if you're holding out-"

"You want a bunch of hydrogen bombs going off in this country, Avis?"

"Have you gone crazy? What the hell are you talking about!"

Mike Bitters stabbed a forefinger at Barkhorn. "Let's say the ship landed in this country. Let's say further that we're hiding it from the world. Continue this game of 'let's say' and let's say the Russians either know what we're doing or they believe their fears to be so. Now let's say you're a member of the top gang in the Kremlin. You have a big meeting and you go over all aspects of the situation. And all the comrades agree, because stupid they are not, that the United States, no matter how, has this ship. Everything used as a power source or a propulsion system in all the world, except what's on that ship, is instantly a thousand years behind the times. Add the same for metallurgy, construction, fabrication, synthetics, computer systems, knowledge of time and space and hyperspace, and then throw into the pot all the potential weapons that are involved. Not simply mass destruction but selective destruction. Biological systems beyond imagining. On and on and on. And the longer the Americans have all this to themselves the swifter will be their leap into the future and a position of absolute supremacy. Including, most likely, any number of systems with which the United States can smash Russia like a boot coming down on a caterpillar. And now, Comrade-General Avis Barkhorn, you, who love the Motherland, who has been a great son of Rodina all your life, who is responsible for the safety and existence of all your fellow Russians, must decide what to do, eh? If you do nothing, in a very short time you will be terrifyingly inferior to the Americans. Who, by the way, refuse to cooperate. So you are back facing your worst nightmare."

Mike Bitters leaned forward slowly, enjoying the discomfiture of his friend. "Make your decision, you Communist son of a bitch," he hissed. "Do nothing and you assure that Russia becomes a second or third-class nation absolutely at the mercy

of the Americans, who are a warlike, capitalistic, materialistic, God-maniacal country with a history of world expansionism. What do you do, Comrade-General?"

"I, uh-"

"Your duty! Do your duty, you miserable wretch!"

Barkhorn swallowed hard. His voice was faint, a whisper rubbing up his throat. "I'd . . . I'd fire."

Bitters leaned back, laughing harshly. "You're fucking right you'd fire because you'd have to. Not firing guarantees that you're a spineless, egg-sucking, cowardly-well, you get the idea, Avis. You'd let go with every goddamned missile you have. You'd send in every big bomb you have. You'd send your planes on one-way missions. No losses would be too great. You would do everything you could to obliterate the United States of America. If you've got a lick of good Communist sense, that is."

Silence followed his words. Barkhorn rocked back and forth slowly in his seat. "Then," he said finally, "if the situation were reversed-

"You've got it now, buster. Reverse the situation and we would do the same. Goodbye, Motherland. They'll see the fires from the moon."

Barkhorn's face revealed inner agony. "Is that what it comes to?"

Bitters smiled. "It could. It damned well might. But the scenario is a lot tighter than that."

Interest flickered anew in Barkhorn's eyes. "Let's not play hide-and-seek, you bastard."

"The ship is in the United States."

Barkhorn gaped.

"I can't prove it," Mike Bitters said carefully. "And if I could, I wouldn't until I have a better handle on this thing."

"Why?" Barkhorn swallowed air, nearly choking. "In heaven's name," he forced out, "why?"

"Because Washington is a sieve. Whatever I reported would leak out immediately and the Russians would know, or strongly suspect, and I don't want to go kablooney with half the damn world."

"How do you know it's landed? Where is it? Why haven't we found out ourselves? I mean-

"Easy, easy. / can't prove it's landed. But I know it has. Years ago we developed an ionization tracking system to prevent an inadvertent nuclear war. Let's say a bunch of madmen in Africa launch a missile or two against us. They come down and wipe out New York and Chicago. Do we go through a knee-jerk reflex and fire everything we have at the Russians? That's insane. Why would the Russians launch only two or five or even ten missiles and then quit? Any time a ballistic missile comes down through the electrical and then the lower atmosphere, it leaves a trail of violently disturbed ions in its path. Think of it as an electrified wake. It's a signature that's unmistakable. It also works for natural disaster. We might take a thousand-ton meteorite into Atlanta or Phoenix. That's the same as a monster hydrogen bomb. The ionization trail would tell us immediately that it did not originate from here on Earth. In both cases, we know it's not a war. In both cases, we don't fire on the Russians and kick off the last great world war."

"Then . . . this thing did leave such a trail?" Barkhorn asked.

"Sure did."

"How can you be so fucking calm about this!"

"Because getting my balls in an uproar doesn't do any good. Besides," Bitters said with another humorless smile, "we lost the trail."

"You lost the trail?" Barkhorn's voice was an empty echo.

"Yes. The night that damn thing entered our atmosphere there was a huge frontal system covering the eastern third of the United States. It ran from Canada all the way down to Cuba and Jamaica. A real bitch. Thunderstorms all the way up to ninety thousand feet. Lightning like crazy. That ship, Avis, went into that frontal system and that's how we lost it. The ionization trail was ripped to shit by the electrical forces of the storm."

"Where do you think it is? The ship, I mean."

"Somewhere in the eastern third of the United States."

"You're sure?"

"I'm betting my life on it, old friend."

"Do you know where? I mean, specifically?"

"Nope. Someone's hiding it."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Mike-

"Don't come back at me with scientific or Pentagon crap, Avis. I am not guessing. Goddamnit, I told you that everything follows a pattern. That ship came down through a tremendous storm. It was under control. It entered under control. It followed a modified ballistic entry. It went into the storm and it vanished within the electrical maelstrom of the storm. We tried to find anyone who might have seen anything. We did. Sixty-eight tornados. Seven thousand-odd UFO reports. But no starship. It didn't crash. It didn't explode or burn. Four aircraft went down, crashed, in that storm. We've accounted for every one of them. Counted the bodies and their parts down to fingernails and eyeballs and peckers. All

accounted for, sir. All very human and all very dead."

"But no, what did you call it? A starship?"

"Catchy term, don't you think? It did come from the stars. You can bet your life on that, Avis."

"It came from the stars and now it might be hidden in a Georgia cornfield?"

"Twilight Zone, old buddy. Yep."

"Can you find it?"

"General, you know we're trying. We do not want the Pentagon in on this for all the reasons we've discussed. And I recommend you go into the bathroom with the President when you get back and you turn on the shower and the sink and you keep flushing the toilet and play a radio and talk to him so no one there can overhear you telling Smathers what I've been telling you. And you tell him to play it cool. Keep his powder dry and play it cool. I have enough authority to make the search as the commander here of NORAD and not attract too much attention. We've got clues, Avis. Good ones. In a finite space, you cannot hide a load of elephant shit even from a blind man."

Barkhorn nodded slowly. "All right. I'll go with you. But the final decision rests with the President."

"Oh, sure," Bitters said lightly.

Barkhorn stood. "What happens if-what happens when- you find it?"

"I try to communicate with it. With the ship, or its occupants, and the people who are hiding it."

"What if they don't cooperate?"

"Man, but you are full of questions, Avis."

"Answer me, damnit."

"Well, if they don't cooperate, I tell you, and you tell Smathers, and he tells Gorbachev, and then I put a dozen hell bombs right on top of that son of a bitch. That's what."

CHAPTER 16

"In my book," Jeff Maddox told Jubal Bailey, "you're making one hell of a mistake."

Jube Bailey didn't answer immediately. The two men walked through the laundry shop of Old Millford Prison, the location chosen specifically by Jube because of the shattering uproar of the boilers and steam pipes, the shouting of men, clanging of doors and an overbearing grinding clatter of conveyor belts. Jube specifically wanted the clang and smash of the laundry shop. Along with hissing steam and their own random movement through the facility, it would have been impossible for anyone to have picked up for listening to or recording their exchange. Jube Bailey had become a very sensitive individual when it came to the matter of zipped lips and security among their very special group. The explosive arrival of an alien starship in their midst properly impressed Jube. But unlike most of the people who'd come in contact with this shattering presence, Jube was impressed but not awed. He was appreciative of the science and technology but in no manner dominated by what was now linked to their current lives and their future paths. Jube Bailey had that marvelous survival instinct of studying any foreign, alien, or different substance and placing it in proper perspective to his own well-being and future.

To him the great starcraft and its weirdo zoo of inhabitants were two separate and distinct entities. If Jube Bailey could have had his own way the aliens would by now all be dogmeat, and Jube and Jake and a few of their inner-ring cohorts would be plumbing the guts of the alien ship to see what and how it ticked, and then worked to put the ship and all its tremendous advantages, to their own benefit. Jube didn't give a rat's

ass for the aliens. It didn't take mental gymnastics to figure that whatever God played his crapshoot with the firmament he was bound to come up with some real zany critters, and all of them would be even more zany to their opposite numbers than to their Creator.

He chewed on Maddox's criticism. "Am I?" he asked, stopping to face the senator. "A mistake, huh?"

Maddox studied the hard muscled face and the dangerous eyes. "Jube, I'm not out to contest you," he said with as much feeling of openness as he could bring forth. "I'm not out to diminish your authority. But you are the thin-skinned nigger, my friend-

"Am I your friend?" Jube asked as quietly as he could speak against the background of uproar.

"You're goddamned right you are," Maddox snapped. "You and Jake and that's as far as it goes. You're the only two I know in this madhouse with true intelligence. I'm not buttering you up, goddamnit. Luther's shrewd as hell. Carlos and Vasily are automatons programmed to do their jobs and all their thinking goes in that direction. You and Jake don't belong here. / do because I knew that what I was doing would put me behind bars. But I think. Creatively. So do you and Jake. And you, my friend," he poked a forefinger at Jube, "can put on one of the best dumb nigger acts going, and I know it's necessary because if you couldn't turn into the great white shark when you need to- "

"Try a barracuda instead," Jube said, trying not to smile.

"-then you'd lose control of this insane asylum," Maddox went on without a hesitation. "But if you want straight answers from me, Jube, you've got to stop acting like you'll cut my throat any and every time I displease you because you don't like the answers!"

"So it's straight talk all the way, huh?"

"Huh yourself. You know it is."

"Why am I making such a big goddamn mistake by not telling Jake?" Jube demanded.

"First, you took care of that matter with Guccioni. I'm glad to see him gone. He was the one ultimate disease. You had to smear him and you did and you'll recall that Jake wasn't even surprised. He so completely trusts you he'd never give what you did or do a second thought. The man would put his life on the line for you, anytime, anywhere, without giving it a second thought."

"That's a two-way street, Senator."

"Sure. I know it, too. So how the hell do you justify lying to Jake?"

"I didn't lie to him, goddamn you-"

"Hey, don't fuck words with me, Mister Big Black Man," Maddox snorted. "You're trying to con a con man and it don't cut through the mustard." Maddox took a deep breath. "You want me to keep going, Jube? You don't look like you're enjoying any of this."

"Keep talking," Jube growled.

"You lied to Jake. Let's get that out between us. We've got to. You committed the lie of omission. You know the damnec difference. Comission and omission. What I haven't figurec out specifically is why you lied to him. It's not your way o: doing things. It's not you."

"Why do you think I lied to him? No, wait. How did I lie?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Jube, he doesn't know the first thing about the napalm tanks and those rockets under the ship and-"

"Right. Now; why?"

"I don't know, Jube. Unless it's to protect Jake. You know, so that when he's dealing with this Arbok person he won't have a guilty conscience because he's planted hellfire beneath Arbok's ship. If he doesn't know about it, he can't bother trying to hide it."

"You're a smart man, Senator. Why did that ship come here? How did it know to come here?"

"You mean to Earth?" The questions puzzled Maddox.

"Not the fucking planet, you asshole," Jube said with disdain. He cocked his head to study the other man.

"You've got to be faster than that. So don't play dumb."

"All right." Maddox nodded. "You mean how did that ship know to come here to this courtyard in the middle of Old Millford Prison, and, how did Arbok know he would have a friend here in one Jake Marden?"

"Now you're cooking with gas, Mr. Politician."

"You want me to answer the questions I've just voiced?"

"You'll disappoint the shit out of me if you don't."

"Perish the thought, Mr. Black Man. Okay. I've heard the same things you heard. I got the same subtle hints. Some of them not so subtle. I've seen Jake veer away from the subject when you pushed him on knowing what that ship-what its occupants, were doing when they were still zillions of miles out in space."

"Don't quit now."

"So we got the crazy idea, and it was and it is, crazy, to everyone except Jake and the Voodoo Priest, Luther, that there was some sort of mental contact. Between Jake and Arbok. According to the few hints Jake's dropped on us, it wasn't the way we think of telepathy as making a mental phone call and ringing up somebody to talk back and forth."

"That's the best I've heard, Senator. Give me more."

"It was, well, sorry about the big words, Jube, but it was visually impressionistic. Feelings, sensations, hazy pictures and hints that got better and stronger as they kept up the contact. The more familiar they were the better it became."

"They're both pilots, Senator. Pilots are a very special breed all their own. They don't need words half the time to communicate. If they're sitting on the same bench they talk through their asses."

"Well, however it worked, I'm convinced there was that kind of contact, and-"

"Hold it right there. You just walked right into the trap."

Maddox studied the ebony poker face before him, a black statue without visible emotion. "Senator, why'd you use the past tense?"

"What?"

"You said you were convinced there was that land of contact. Was. Past tense. History."

"I, uh-"

"What makes you so fucking sure," Jube spat with almost visible anger in his voice, "that it's behind us? How and why are you so comfortable with this shit that you don't even think about it no more? You dumb son of a bitch, Maddox, the way it's working out I'm the only one around here even gives a shit one way or the other about it. 'You think that's an accident?'"

Jube swung away, fists clenched, glaring at the world, then spun back, a powerful finger jabbed into Maddox's shoulder. "How do you know this alien fuckhead isn't screwing with your brains, mister? Why are you so all-fired fucking comfortable about something we all considered impossible a short while ago, and now we've shoved it into the corners of our minds? Do you understand, white man, that if Arbok can do this he can take over all of us? Do you understand that, goddamnit!"

"Why are you so hot on this, Jube?"

"You think I shouldn't be?" Eyes on the edge of hatred glared at Maddox.

"No, no, that's not what I mean. How come your suspicions aren't turned off? How come whatever lets us rest so easy has you on fire?"

The glare fled and in an instant was replaced with a lopsided grin. "Maybe us hard-headed niggers are immune. Maybe nothing is really happening with this shit and I'm just paranoid. Maybe all my survival instincts are right. Everywhere I turn, man, I get these fucking maybes and could-bes and perhapses and, fuck it, Senator, that space nigger with no hair makes one wrong fucking move and I push that button and I guarantee you the stuff I got under that ship will open it up like a tin can and then the napalm goes in."

"That could end it for us, too, Jube."

"What the fuck, man, you want to live forever? You're off the stumping pulpit, Maddox. You don't have to promise everybody out there a turkey in one hand and a tit in the . other. It ends, it ends. It's gonna' do that sooner or later. Didn't God ever tell you he never loses this game?"

"God or the devil," Maddox murmured.

"But now you understand why I can't tell Jake. If the space nigger can crawl around inside Jake's mind and turn off a bunch of switches he still can't learn what Jake don't know. And somehow, I don't know why, but I know, this Arbok asshole, he can't read into my head. Maybe we just ain't simpatico. I don't know and I don't care, but the first tickle I get between the ears, it's pow!"

They resumed walking, the uproar and fury of sound more than ever a welcoming, protective cloak about them.

"I'm glad we talked this way, Jube."

"I figured you would be, man."

"I was going to come to you about a problem."

"What's that?"

"Our visitors are getting cabin fever."

"You think I don't know that? I been watching people in all kinds of prisons for a hell of a lot of years. They fuck bars of soap, they slam toilet lids on their peckers, they make love to mattresses, they whack off 'til their shlongs are raw hamburger, and they'd kill just to fuck a female, even if it was a sheep or a goat. These boys from way out there, they got the same kind of fever. In simple language, professor," Jube laughed harshly, "they wants to get laid."

"You going to do something about it, Jube?"

"What do you want me to do? Put saltpeter in their fucking food?"

"Well, no, but-"

"Let them lope their lizards a while longer, man. I'll bring in the broads when / think it's time."

Maddox smiled thinly. "Think you'll get women who'll be willing to take on these bozos?"

Jube stopped and rested a powerful hand on Maddox's shoulder. "Friend, I got women who put on shows all over the world. They been fucked by donkeys, leopards, horses, gorillas, dolphins, and moose. They like it. They make a fortune at it. Give them enough of the long green and they'll fuck a crocodile. There's no problem, my man. I've got the talent, never fear."

Maddox nodded. "There's just one problem."

"You got more problems-"

"You ever smell that one they call Ytram? You better find a broad whose nose don't work so good."

Jake Marden stood side by side with Arbok on the main floor of Old Millford Prison. On all sides about them stretched a floor polished three times daily, gleaming from multiple coats of hard wax. The floor didn't interest Arbok. His eyes moved slowly to take in everything before and about him. He studied the long tiers of cells, the banks of television monitors, the massive sliding doors of steel bars. The men in similar uniforms with clubs and guns. His eyes lifted slowly. The second tier. Then the third. And the fourth. Hundreds of cells.

He turned to Jake. Jake looked back at Aktuk san Yangst Arbok who was known in the prison by the name sewn on his prison jumpsuit, which is what he wore at any time he came within eyesight of the cons who made up the regular ranks of prisoners. The name read Lefty fangchen. Above the name-plate over his left chest rose the familiar facial ridges of Arbok, but over that rested a wig of thick black, coarse hair. Beneath his nose sprouted a thick black moustache. Dark glasses covered his eyes. To the prison population he was Lefty Yangchen of Manchuria, a mixed blood of Chinese and Tibetan and Manchurian. A true mongrel of the Mongols, as the word passed swiftly about this stranger whom, it was said, was as much a crazy killer as he looked. On his left shoulder he wore the bright red-and-yellow T of the Trustee. Walking the prison with Jake Marden was within the normal routine of events, and other than interested looks and raucous comments, Arbok. melded within the confined world of the convict.

"You've seen it all," Jake said to break into whatever deep reflection occupied Arbok's thoughts.

"Amazing," Arbok said. "I've only seen one other place like this before. Just one that could match the incredibly dull, stupid, cruel, unthinking madness I see all about me now."

"That's a lot of description," Jake said quietly. "Where was this other place?"

"On a world of misery. A world of abject, stinking misery. I don't even recall its name. Gloomy, dank, horrid, filled with creatures on whom genetics constantly played the most horrible of jokes. Interrupted and twisted evolution. A world of madness, where an incredible number of their population was jammed into horrors like this one. At least, here," Arbok murmured in his own way of recognizing some saving grace, "you are clean."

"The men are fed well," Jake said, playing it all very low-key. "They have excellent medical attention. There time is limited here, most of them. And none of them are here because of some fancy whim outside. Once this world had those kinds of madhouses. That's behind us in a place like this. Would you mind telling me what's so bad about this prison?"

"Of course. Until recently / was a prisoner, friend Jake. So I have clear perspective. It is horrible because it is a prison and that is enough."

Jake was still overwhelmed with the speed with which Arbok had mastered the nuances and the depths of the English language, as much as the manner in which he spoke with such clarity and impact. As he had just done.

"That's enough?" Jake pushed.

"Tell me there are no men here who are innocent, Jake."

"Why would I lie to you? For starters, as far as I'm concerned, I'm innocent."

Arbok offered a smile. "Of what charge, then?"

"Of being a criminal."

The smile developed into a deep laugh. "So! We wear the same badge. You killed?"

"Yes."

"That is not a crime?"

"Our society is convoluted. If we wear a uniform in military service and kill to defend our country, and what it stands for in the home and family, then we commit no criminal act. If we kill in great numbers-including other men who at the time are unarmed and helpless-we become heroes and we're rewarded with medals and the accolades of our nation."

"There is a but in here-"

"If we do not wear that uniform and we kill to defend that same honor or to defend our families or our homes, especially when the law fails to protect us, then we are branded as criminals. Our system invariably results in people like me being here."

"I have the feeling those closely associated with you-this ruling group you have gathered-fit within the same category?"

"They do."

A powerful arm swept wide to take in the prison and its occupants. "And the others?"

"With rare exception, they are here because of stealing, killing, raping, breaking all manners of laws, but with the intent of breaking those laws. Their worst crime was to be

They're priests. They say the elephant god is not of this earth. He's not human. He's a god. They're chanting or praying, I'm not that sure which, to him."

Arbok started to speak but was cut off with a sharp look from Jake. "Thanks, Timmins. Let 'em do their song and dance act. Just don't let it get out of control."

"No, sir. That's the strange part, Mr. Marden. They're real peaceable about it."

"Okay." Jake and Arbok continued back to the underground complex.

"That's Ytram they're talking about!" Arbok exclaimed.

"Sure as shit is," Jake said. He wasn't pleased or amused.

"But how could they know?" Arbok wondered aloud.

"Some of our people-I'm referring to the race now-have the ability to sense things normally never felt or known by most people. They don't care about physical things. Material things. Money, property, luxury. It means nothing to them. They try to look inside themselves. They believe everything is related to everything else. They believe the gods, whoever they are, favor those who believe in this manner. Is all this so strange to you?"

"No," Arbok said, responding slowly. "I've seen such worlds. Entire planets that spend almost all their lives praying to, like you, I don't know. But they see or sense something no one else knows. Mind you, I don't agree with them. I don't agree with what they do. But they mentally blind themselves to pain and, well, yes, I've seen it and it's not strange. But I'm always mystified by it."

"Welcome to Earth," Jake laughed. "Of all the weirdo things I might show you on this planet, that lunkhead Ytram being venerated as an elephant god is about the craziest."

Jake sat with Jube Bailey in the room where they had agreed to spend much of their time together. "If we sit down with these folk and eat with them," Jube told Jake, "we'll probably learn more about them than all the talking between ourselves could ever accomplish. You know why?"

Jake shook his head and smiled. He had an idea what was coming. Jube had an incredible talent for cutting things to the quick.

"You don't get to know other folk by meeting with them in Sunday church when they got on their best duds and their best manners. That's Come To Jesus Meeting time and it don't mean shit. Hell, they even wear clean underwear and some of 'em put on socks. You got to meet people in everyday style, which is what I call get-down time. Then is when you find out what they eat, drink; all that stuff. Let me ask you

something, Jake." Jube looked at Maddox and Cogswell. "This goes for you, too. You been around these alien folk, them star niggers-"

Maddox nearly exploded with sudden mirth. He tried to choke back his laughter at the remark, and finally he managed a strangled echo of "star niggers" before going silent again. Jube winked at him and went on.

"Do these folk stand up or sit down when they piss?" Instead of going on Jube paused deliberately. He was using his skills at bringing people to run headlong into themselves. On so basic an issue not one of his group could offer a knowing answer.

"Hey, that a crazy question," Carlos Martinez shot back at Jube. "Everybody know a man piss he gonna' piss standing on his two legs like a man. If he like a girl he sit down."

"You know that, right?" Jube retorted.

"Of course I know-"

"You been in their crapper watching 'em piss, right?"

"Well, no-"

"Got nothin' better to do than watch some space frog pissing. I'll be damned," Jube chortled. "Always knew the spies had to be good for something. Keeping watch on aliens pissing."

"You not funny, man," Carlos said angrily. Instinctively his muscles bunched as his temper went up.

"Fuck you, spic," Jube told him, still smiling. "That's why I want this whole bunch together. To show you how much you think you know when you don't know shit. Or, in the case of our spic hero, here, you don't piss from up or down. But you sound off. You think you know. You assume. You take for granted. You don't fucking think it through. So we really know shit little about this bunch." Jube's gaze covered them all. "Anybody else want to volunteer inside information on if they piss standing up or sitting down?"

"Maybe they piss lying on their side," Martinez sneered.

"Could be," Jube answered.

"Why not? Maddox offered. "When Ben Franklin was in France, trying to get back to the United States to get our Constitution off and running, he couldn't make the trip. His system was all messed up. The only way he could piss was standing on his head with someone holding his ankles to keep him from falling down."

Jube looked at Maddox and blinked. "Is that the straight skinny?"

"So help me," Maddox told him. "That's the truth."

"Well, then," Jube smiled, "maybe I'm a smarter nigger than I thought."

"How they pick their nose, smart nigger?" Martinez dug at Jube. "They got white or black boogers?"

"Damned if I know," Jube told him pleasantly. "That's my whole point. I don't know and I want to know more. Do they fart?"

"Everybody fart," Vasily Korolov broke in. "Except," he added with a gap-toothed smile, "except my mother. Russian mothers they don't fart. Never. They just go pip. They fart maybe like mouse squeaks. But never admit to fart. But everybody and everything else in whole world, in whole universe, they fart." Jube grinned. "Now there's an expert." He mimicked writing notes in a lobe. "Korolov says it, it's got to be true. There." He dotted the end of an imaginary sentence. "Everybody in all worlds they fart."

"Well, we know what they can eat," Luther Cogswell offered the group. "Fruits, vegetables, grains-"

"Do they drink milk?" Jube broke in. "How do they handle lactose? We know they drink water. We've seen them do that. How about tea, coffee, seltzers, wine, beer, alcohol, fruit juice-anything that's liquid. We don't know."

"What about meat?" Maddox asked. "Do they eat meat?"

"What about utensils?" Jake threw into the question pot. "Do they eat with their fingers? Chopsticks? Knives, forks, spoons-what? I don't know."

"Let's get back to the meat," Maddox pushed. "Jube, I confess to spending a lot of thinking on that issue and I just don't know what to come up with. Think about it. They're all from different worlds-wait a moment, we're not even sure about that!"

Jube smiled. "You're getting the idea. I'm sitting with a bunch of dummies, and the dummies are sitting with another dummy. Me."

"Hey, just a minute." They turned to Cogswell. "Anyone here figure out, when it comes to eating, who cooks?" He looked about the group. "Who prepares the food? Cleans, cooks, boils, broils, bakes, anything."

"Don't look like any cooks in that group," Maddox offered. "But you're right, Luther. So is Jube. We've been taking everything for granted."

"They wouldn't have cooked on their ship," Jake said. Heads turned to him. "That thing over there," he jerked a thumb in the direction of Frarsk behind the concealing walls, "is a prison ship. It means just what it says. The prisoners were being sent on a one-way trip to a prison planet. I have an idea it's more than that."

"What kind of idea?" Jube prodded gently.

"That the penal planet is entirely artificial. That it's honeycombed throughout with laboratories. Stuff for experiments the Camtok Traders, their mucky-mucks who run the commerce between the worlds, don't want anyone ever to know about. So all trips to that place, as far as living creatures are concerned, which is," he tapped his chest, "creatures like me, and," again he pointed in the direction of the starship, "creatures like them. Now, their guards are robots. Super-advanced androids, but still robots. Alive only in the mechanical and the electronic sense. The ship is like a mother or a queen ant and the androids are all brain ganglia extensions of her computer intelligence. Now, what does that mean to the prisoners?"

"I sure hope you tell me quick," Martinez said, struggling to keep up with Marden. "I got one hell headache."

"It gets easier, Carlos," Jake said affably. "It means that the ship, its brain, doesn't let the prisoners anywhere even remotely close to equipment. Mechanical, electrical, robotic, electronic or otherwise. They don't get to play with ovens or fires or microwaves or anything. They're stripped naked so they can't use any clothing or buckles or whatever as weapons or tools. That means that whatever food there is to eat is processed, packaged, long-before prepared and fed to them once or twice a day. Likely it's extremely nutritious with vitamins, minerals, nutrients, and all the good shit they need to stay healthy enough to get to their destination. In other words, those six dudes are tin-canned from the moment they get on that ship until they get off. The ship is a mindless machine and that's all it is. It doesn't matter how capable that computer is. Any computer can be beat."

Vasily banged a fist into his hand. "It true! Proof is right here with us! They beat ship!"

"Who, Jake?" Jube asked the question with deceptive quiet.

"Only one among them could do it," Jake said immediately. "Arbok. He knows computers, machinery, robots, and androids, he's a pilot and he's damned fast on his feet. Whatever happened, and I don't have it all yet, he masterminded it and he controlled it and he did it."

"He did something else, friend," Jube added. He didn't bother waiting for comment. "Six aliens, call them whatever you want, people or space niggers, don't mean a shit, aboard that ship. Nothing gets done without a leader. Arbok took over. Arbok took control. That Drong, he's a mean motherfucker. And Brist? You could stick an axe in his hide and it wouldn't bother him. And Grangles, he'd rather fight than piss or fuck." Jube grinned at Martinez. "Standing up or sitting down."

Carlos Martinez nodded, offered a smiling salute and half bow to Jube. He replied with a finger touch to his forehead.

"There's something else," Maddox said, frowning. He was surprised Jubal Bailey hadn't brought it out. Jube, or, for that matter, Luther Cogswell. Slavery. A black man, or even a mixed blood, in today's world would always respond to the needle if it carried the connotation of slavery with it. The others had turned to him. "Jake called a group the Traders."

"Camtok Traders," Jake confirmed. "They and the Eldorn-"

"What the fuck are the Eldorn?" Jube broke in.

"They're the old timers of the inner stars of the galaxy.

They've been collecting data, details, knowledge, of anything and everything. The Eldorn are powerful but mainly because the Camtok Traders take care of them. Forget the Eldorn for this conversation. What about the Traders, Jeff?" Jake asked the senator.

"It's pretty obvious," Maddox said. "They're slavers."

Jube exchanged a glance with Cogswell. Neither man moved and they held silence for a while. Maddox took that silence for a signal for him to go on.

"They've got to be slavers. The more I've watched this group of weirdos the more convinced I'm right. Ytram was unquestionably a slave. So were those two fighters, Brist and-what's the other one?"

"Grangles," Jake said.

"They were slaves because they were fighters. Arbok and Barq are in different categories. Specialists with skills. But the others? I don't know about Brist, he freaks me out, but those three I mentioned absolutely were slaves."

"You, ah, mean selling and buying?" Jube asked.

"Hell, yes. You want any kind of slave, you got it," Maddox said with conviction. "Look, Jube, you got hundreds of worlds to pick from. Half of their inhabitants are way down on the evolutionary scale. Others have been around as long as anyone else but their brains didn't do so good. Then there are still others who have various things about them appealing to the Traders and their customers, so it's frontal lobotomy time. Why take chances? With the medical science available to people who've been masters of physiology for thousands of years it's an easy job to turn a thinking creature into anything you want. Now, why were these six sent to a penal planet? I don't know. I don't know enough. But from what little I do know it doesn't take genius to figure it out. Ytram, on a scale of high intelligence among the star people, is on a level with a water buffalo. He probably made a lousy slave."

"It sounds like, Mr. Senator," Luther Cogswell said slowly and deliberately, "that it's not a matter of skin color?"

"No way, Luther. With thousands of worlds out there the last thing that matters is skin color. You've got every shade and variety imaginable. Nope; it's like slavery was originally here on our own world. Color didn't matter. Everybody took slaves. The Bible advocated it. According to the biblical teachings, God thought it was a pretty neat idea. Rome traveled on the backs of its slaves. But prejudice because of color or race or ethnic origin? Luther, the world needed slavery and what it needed it took."

"I would have figured, man," Luther came back, "that we outgrew that."

"Mostly we have. Not entirely, but mostly. Don't make the mistake, Voodoo Man, of comparing our standards to alien races," Maddox said.

"And don't forget that these aliens were prisoners and slaves," Jake said, emphasizing every word. "They weren't slavers."

"Then what's all the fuss it's about?" Martinez asked.

"I'm trying to emphasize," Maddox told him, "that this Arbok is an exceptionally skilled, talented, tough, and a very dangerous fellow, and that to underestimate him would be a terrible mistake on our part."

"What the hell we going to do with this alien?" Martinez shot back. "You going to cut a deal? Are we dealing with him? It seems like we got the upper hand, man. We-"

"Oh, shut the hell up, Carlos," Jake snapped. "This isn't a contest, you asshole."

"Then what the fuck it is?" Carlos shouted.

"That ship," Jake said slowly and with all the emphasis he could give to his words, "is the key to everything you could possibly imagine."

"First," Jube broke in with a humorless chuckle, "you got to have imagination." He locked eyes with Martinez. "And imagination seems to be in very short supply here."

"I don't think I like that, man," Martinez said, scowling.

"You want to join Guccioni," Cogswell said quickly, "you keep testing that big nigger. You spic asshole, just listen."

"I take you on anytime, also, you fucking hex bastard," Martinez came back.

"Vasily, tell your asshole buddy to shut up and listen," Jube said to Korolov, "or the both of you get the hell out of here now and go back to your cells with the rest of the dumbshits in this place. And if he don't stop challenging everybody, the both of you will never see the rucking sun come up again." Jube turned to Maddox. "We're supposed to be working out a plan and here I am arguing like any dumb bastard in this joint."

"Human nature," Maddox grinned.

"Who the fuck say he human?" Cogswell spat, glaring at Martinez. "He is I think a blood brother of that fat elephant god they got in that ship." He was baiting Martinez and it came dangerously close to working. Jake and Jube sat without moving, but both were as coiled as any rattler ready to strike. If Martinez had lost his-self control he would have moved perhaps four feet before dying. Jube Bailey always had life insurance. Three laser rifles always tracked the back of Martinez's head in the underground chamber.

"All of you, knock it off," Maddox told the group. Tensions eased, silence fell between them, but Jake's words coursed through their thoughts. "... the key to everything you could possibly imagine."

The problem was, Jake knew, that some men dreamed with their minds and others saw the world through their dicks. They might as well have been on the opposite ends of the world. Jake shook himself free of a mood that threatened him with a dark cloud. He turned to Jube; "I say we come back to this later."

Jube nodded. Maddox caught his glance and offered a barely perceptible head movement. All three men understood each other perfectly. It was stupid to go any further with Martinez and Korolov. They'd stopped imaginative thinking eons ago. They were human, but they were programmed machines. The three men, Jake, Jube, and Jeff, accepted their unspoken agreement.

"I want to take Arbok outside," Jake told Jube Bailey.

Jube studied his best friend. This was dangerous shit, but it also made sense.

"You got good reasons?"

"Yes. For starters, I want to take him flying. I've got a ship set up at Gainesville Airport. Private hangar; big company we control. We drive straight into the hangar and straight into the plane. It's important, Jube. We need to let him get a better feel about us. I can make deep contact with him pilot to pilot. We need the understanding, and I don't for a mo ment believe we'll ever know what makes that ship tick without his full cooperation. Also, he has to want to tie in with us."

"Makes sense," Jube said. He and Jake had just held a long silent conversation understood only between themselves. Maddox and Cogswell could pick up much of it, but Marden and Bailey very often didn't need too many words between them for their messages. "Hey, you got it, bro," Jube went on. "When you gonna' make like a bird?"

"Weather looks good tomorrow."

"It's all yours, bro."

"Right." Marden stood. For him, this session ended well before this moment. Neither Martinez nor Korolov understood the subtleties of what had come down, but then, they didn't much matter anyway. Jake didn't believe Carlos Martinez would even understand the words anti-gravity, let alone its staggering consequences.

CHAPTER 17

They sat within the cockpit of the slim jet fighter-bomber, still behind closed doors, the dual Plexiglass canopies raised above them to bring in the cold feel of the air-conditioned hangar. Jake sat in the forward seat of the tandem cockpit. Behind him, Arbok had "disappeared" as an alien with the brain bucket, the jet helmet, fitted securely to his head. His helmet visor was down, almost completely obscuring his face, and with the lip mike so close to his mouth he was no different than any other pilot in a Magister. She was low and sleek with a great Vee tail, an old but magnificent French jet with all the flight characteristics endearing to a pilot. Jake wanted more than simply flight. He wanted Arbok to gain, even if quickly and at time overwhelming, the elements of numbers and gauges and controls.

They went over and worked the dual controls. The sticks between their legs for pitch control that would let them ascend or dive or, when eased either left or right, would bank the machine with deceptive smoothness and speed. Arbok had flown atmospheric aircraft before and he understood the basic principles of ailerons, elevators, and rudder, the latter operated through foot pedals. Jake went over each

control individually, from the spoiler boards to the throttle and the engine and flight gauges.

"I'll handle the power until you feel her out," he told Arbok. "You forget the engine instruments. I'll take care of those. See the airspeed indicator? I've got the critical speeds marked off in white, yellow, green, and red. Once we're airborne we'll keep her within the green, although being in the yellow band won't hurt."

Arbok took it in swiftly and with as much professionalism as

Jake had ever experienced in another pilot just stepping into a new ship. "We'll be using the metric system for the numbers," Jake explained.

"That is curious," Arbok came back immediately. "In this country, from everything I've seen, you use miles per hour or knots for your speeds, right?"

"Yes."

"But here everything is, as you said, in kilometers. Why?"

"This ship was built in France. A European country. They use the metric system. It wasn't worth changing everything. Doesn't take much to shift from one to the other, and since it's all marked off in both the color bands and in kilometers, that's the way we fly her. Oh, one major change. To your left; the rate of climb gauge that tells us our vertical speed up or down. That's in feet. The French gauge crapped out and since it's a barometric instrument we just put in an American system."

"Barometric?"

"It operates off the pressure of the air at any altitude we may be flying."

Arbok sounded doubtful, but he acknowledged with a simple "Okay," a phrase he'd adopted quickly from Jake.

"If you want, Arbok, I'll call off the numbers and what we're doing as we go through the flight."

"Please. That is how we taught our new pilots. It provides for good anticipation."

Jake smiled to himself. "It doesn't much matter, I suppose, what country or planet you're from," he said.

"Not when it comes to flying. Okay, bring in your arms and watch your head. I'm going to lower the canopies and then we'll have them tow us outside to start up. Your harness feel comfortable?"

"Yes. I'm ready."

Jake closed the canopies on the power from the battery cart. He signalled the line crew waiting at the work station across the hangar. The doors opened wide and a tow cart pulled the low-bellied fighter onto the ramp and turned the ship so the jet exhaust would blow away from the building. Within the closed canopies and wearing their helmets, Jake knew they remained almost totally obscured. He locked the brakes and ran the two Turbomeca engines to start.

the power and heard and felt the tremendous shrill scream of the jets running up to power. A hand signal and the battery cart cables were removed. They were free.

Jake ran the power up with the twin throttles. The temps went to five twenty Centigrade at twenty thousand RPM and everything checked out in the money. He thumbed the speed boards in the wings up and back down to check them visually, went through the full control check, ran the flaps up and down and went quickly through their checklist. It's been a long time but you never forget the touch of a sweetheart . . .

He thumbed the radio from intercom to outside transceiver; he'd arranged Arbok's radio so he could hear both intercom and outside radio work, and his own voice would remain strictly on intercom between himself and Jake.

"Gainesville Tower, November Five Zero Four Delta Mike, Kenn Air, ready to taxi. Over."

Gainesville Tower came back with taxi instructions and they rolled steadily away from the ramp, stopped at the runup area short of Runway One Zero where Jake did another quick but thorough scan and check of the gauges. The tower cleared them to taxi into position and hold on the runway; moments later they had their "Cleared for takeoff and cleared for left turn ..."

Jake stood on the brakes, rechecked the flaps, stick forward, eased the throttles to their stop. He had just under six forty Centigrade for his temps and the engines spooled up to twenty two thousand five hundred RPM; he released the brakes and they kicked free and accelerated swiftly down the runway. At a hundred and eighty kilometers per hour, he called out "Okay, we've got one eighty clicks," on the

intercom, following immediately with a call of "Unstick," gentled back on the stick and lifted her free. For a few moments it was all slick business. He climbed at two twenty indicated, brought up the gear and then the flaps, let her speed up to four hundred clicks and they went upstairs like a magic carpet, Arbok's hands and feet caressing his own controls as he followed through on Jake's movements.

Jake had intended to run through the full drill with Arbok, calling out the numbers and the maneuvers. He glanced in his rear-view mirror. Arbok had pushed up his helmet visor;

Jake could see his eyes and his facial expression and only that one glance changed his mind about rattling conversation with numbers.

Wherever he had come from in that vast black well of space and distances so great they were meaningless to Jake, the alien enjoined with him in the magic of flight was home. The numbers at this moment would largely go unheard. Arbok had no need for them to fly. The details of pressures and temperatures were all within the grasp of Jake. Arbok threw his full receptors into flight itself, a world of different sky and alien clouds and extraordinary landscape.

Jake needed only to feel the whisper touch of Arbok to recognize immediately that this man, this alien, was a flier. Jake kept turning until they headed just south of west, past the northern rim of Gainesville, climbing steadily. They whipped through some scattered clouds, the Magister trembling deliciously with the merest touches of turbulent air, a brush with gentle invisible forces, but that gave them a sense of great speed. And then they were above the scattered clouds stretching in all directions about them. The clouds rested along the plateau of a thin haze layer, but created its own visual impact of another world—men and prosaic everyday beneath, and the great castles and freedom of flight above. In the distance, far south, rose the battlements of isolated thunderstorm cells; from this distance they were rounded and splendid in the midday sun, glorious and pink-golden.

"Arbok, I'm going to go through some maneuvers. I'll call them out first, go through what control motions I'll use. Follow me through on each one until you've got the feel of this thing."

A mere touch on the stick; he knew Arbok's fingers had applied the barest additional authority to the stick to comply with Jake's directions. "Okay, level left turn, left rudder and left stick together and keep the nose level with the horizon. Got it? On my count of three."

"Got it. Okay."

"One, two, three," and Jake brought the stick over hard left and tramped down on the rudder pedal, brought in the barest back pressure on the stick to keep up the nose, and the Magister hauled around in a g-force-punishing tight left

turn. Jake kept her in the turn for two complete swings and as they neared the end of the second turn he sang out, "All right, coming up on rollout, reverse the controls, now," he snapped the ship back into level flight.

"Take it," Jake said, and he was amazed with what happened next. Immediately after his words he felt the stick move barely left and right. The unspoken signal pilots used to denote they had the controls from another pilot, but Jake had never mentioned this to Arbok. Was it possible this same reflex motion was used by pilots anywhere in the whole damned universe?

"Try some turns left and right," Jake said. "Keep a westerly heading."

"Numbers?"

"You recognize the directional gyro? What we also call the DG?"

"Yes."

"Two seven zero is west. That's your general heading. I'll watch for other aircraft. Have fun."

Arbok had fun. He went through gentle turns, climbing and diving turns, hard-racking turns, feeling out the Magis-ter, playing the old tune of "getting to know you" through his controls. In those few minutes they crossed the kst of the land edging the Gulf of Mexico. Before them towered great cumulonimbus clouds, many of them pouring avalanches of water oceanward. But these storms were isolated and of no danger to a machine cavorting between the battlements at four hundred miles an hour. Arbok sped through ravines, lifted the nose and dashed within narrow cloud canyons, and they found themselves within a great bowl of sky, an arena perhaps ten miles on all sides within the circular walling of

the clouds.

"I've got it," Jake said, and Arbok relinquished the controls. All this time he hadn't said a word. The man was lost in reverie, inebriated with the glory and wonder of flight through an air ocean and above a liquid ocean the likes of which he'd never before encountered. Jake had wondered long and deep what might be this alien man's reaction to such flight, if he would find it tame after handling metal monsters weighing tens of thousands of tons down through gravity wells to the surfaces of different worlds.

Then he realized it might not be so. He had his own nation's astronauts by which to judge the true nature of a pilot. Back in the old days of early manned space flight, when Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo were the latest marvels of engineering and science, the government decreed that flying airplanes was a waste of time and money by the astronauts and grounded all the pilots. The same day that decree came down, so did the mass resignations of the astronauts. Every astronaut.

The moon might beckon and starlight might shine, but nothing could replace the touch of the man against the elemental forces of flying.

And Jake Marden had been flying since he was a lad. He had grown up in the heady world of flight in every kind and type of aircraft on which he could place his hands. He'd flown single-engine and multi-engine, seaplanes and landplanes, piston jobs and turboprops and jets. He flew sailplanes and ultralights and the great old warbirds of wars gone by, and then he'd climb into replicas of World War One fighters and go out to throw himself and his machine all over the sky. He flew hang-gliders and he threw himself from airplanes to skydive. He spent pensive and relaxed moments in hotter-than-air balloons. The sky was his element. He earned his commercial rating and got himself type-rated in a dozen different machines, and his greatest fun came in air racing and flying different warbirds and aerobatic ships at airshows before a hundred thousand people or more.

Jake, like the others of his breed, wasn't the kind of commercial pilot who earned his bread-and-butter from a flying job. He considered himself an amateur pilot, but the amateurs of his class handled heavy four-engined bombers with the easy aplomb of chunking about the sky in an old Piper cub or whirling madcap maneuvers in a Pitts or a Christian Eagle.

Now, he had shared with this man from across a galaxy, and the bond was as close as if they'd grown up next door to one another. Jake finally broke the silence that had wrapped about him.

"Arbok?"

"Go ahead."

"I'd like to cut this thing loose. But I don't want you hit with any sudden surprises, and if you don't feel like-

"You mean maneuvering? Aerobatics?"

"Yeah. Sort of. Not the hard competition stuff Nice and easy. Feel. Not work."

"Please. I had hoped you would. I am ready."

Jake smiled. The son of a bitch had wanted it all the time!

"You got it, friend," he told Arbok.

He cleared the sky about them and eased forward on the stick. The Magister trembled again, that delicious embrace of wind and sky as speed built swiftly and then ran the rapids of mild turbulence and chop in the air, and then Jake came back steadily on the stick, back, back and he held her back and the nose came up and the little jet soared skyward with astonishing ease and smoothness, the nose came up through the vertical and they were on their backs, an instant of level inverted flight, still soaring skyward, the sun reflecting dancing shards of light as Jake rolled her along the high arc of the loop. Sun and sky and ocean and horizon and clouds whirled marvelously about them, and then they were inverted again. He gave her a touch of forward stick while they were inverted to round out the comedown slide of the loop, and down they went, wind speed carrying into the cockpit, and he let her round out at the bottom. He came back a touch harder on the stick and the g-forces planted them solidly into their seats and now he went straight up, rolling swiftly through six full turns, and as the speed bled off and she began to shudder from spilled airflow, he tramped in the left rudder to bring the nose about in a perfect hammerhead and with their speed laughingly slow, hanging in the sky, the nose dropped and then they were going straight down and he was rolling again. Back on the stick and a soaring, turning ascent to

come around in a swallow-graceful chandelle.

A single thunderhead loomed before them and Jake cut a right turning corner around the sheer wall of the dark cloud, the Fouga punching and banging from sudden touches of vertical wind shear. Everything flowed; Jake's hands and feet moved almost of their own accord, and it was the kind of flight even the birds might dream of in whatever passed for

bird dreams. He went down around the cloud and a great shaft of sunlight speckled the gulf waters and he saw a freighter on the water, moving laboriously through her course. Jake took the Fouga down to barely six feet high, full power, and they flashed alongside the ship, the crew waving from high above them, and then Jake hauled her high and let her speed play off in the climb and without effort they eased to level flight at six thousand feet.

Jake sighed. He'd brought heaven into the cockpit.

Regretfully, he turned back toward land, his fuel gauges reminding him with a glance that all such miracles of flight are limited by the go-juice in the tanks. They had been easing their way southward off the coastline. Jake pushed the nose forward and they arrowed toward the south of Ocala, descending steadily, feeling the ship rock and tremble in the heated disturbed air of lower altitude. Jake swung south of Ocala Airport and soon he sped just above the smooth grass strip of the Leeward Air Ranch, six thousand feet of billiard-table grass with a hundred private homes alongside the runway, each home with its own taxiway and hangar. His pass down the runway did more than signal other aircraft of his intent to land; it notified the men in the large private home at the south end of the Ranch of their arrival. Jake brought up the nose and kicked her hard over into a vertical left bank for his pitchout. He punched up to twelve hundred feet and reversed course to slip into his downwind leg.

He ran the numbers aloud, an old habit he followed whether or not anyone else was in an airplane with him. "Two hundred fifty clicks, eighteen thousand in the bucket, okay now for gear down, fifteen degrees of flaps, and a touch of the dive boards, and we're in the money." The Magister rumbled loudly now with dive boards, gear and flaps whipping air into turbulence, but it was a welcome and familiar sensation.

"Here we go, around into base, get the boards up slow to two twenty, confirm three in the green and flaps down to thirty, neat-o, and rollout onto final with one ninety and we're a quarter mile out, full flaps to forty five, play the boards, very good, we've got her made, flaps, one sixty clicks, keep the boards at half, whisper back on the stick and-"

She feathered in like a princess on the mains, Jake let her

bleed off speed with full boards and a test of brakes, and he let her run to the south end where the huge hangar door of the grey-and-blue home yawned wide, and he rolled in smoothly, a touch of power to make sure the tail cleared the doors and he killed the engines. They wound down from their shrill scream and the moment power was off the hangar door came down, baffles open to slip free any unexpected jet thrust, and then the baffles closed and there was no sight of the Magister.

Exactly three minutes later a grey-and-burgundy GMC van with Jake at the wheel and Arbok by his side drove from the air ranch into Ocala and headed for the 1-75 highway going north.

Eighteen minutes later the Magister emerged from the hangar. In the two seats were two pilots, the man up front sporting a thick salt-and-pepper beard, and the pilot in back a shaved skull. Both men wore the flight suits and helmets that not long before had been worn by Jake Marden and Arbok. The Magister took the runway, boomed into the air, and six minutes later was in the pattern for Gainesville Airport.

"They" were a hell of a lot closer than even Jake had ever expected. The Magister rolled from Runway One Zero to the taxiway and turned off at Kenn Air Aviation. Neither pilot missed the fire trucks that blocked the taxiway behind them or the other trucks that moved in to prevent the airplane from turning left or right. They shut down, opened the canopies, removed their helmets and climbed from the aircraft to face four FBI agents.

No problem. Their papers were in order, they flew as charter pilots for Magnum Aviation, and they'd gone off for a post-maintenance flight check of the Magister.

The FBI agents never did tell them why the extra precautions to block the Magister off from moving before the questioning began. They just looked puzzled and frustrated.

Dead-end.

The lead agent called in to his operations office in Atlanta to report on their investigation. Tom Wheeler sat with his

feet on his desk in Atlanta, cursing an ulcer silently as he listened to Ben Jamieson in Gainesville.

"You didn't get even the first hint?" Wheeler pressed.

"Sir, nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"I thought that goddamn airplane landed in that ritzy field south of Ocala. Wasn't there anything there?"

"Sir, that house has been there three years. It belongs to Magnum Aviation. They often bring their pilots there for training and meetings. That jet landed, went into the hangar, apparently refueled-we're not sure about that-and then it went back to Gainesville. I guess the pilots had to take a leak or something. We can't find anything out of line."

Wheeler dropped his shoes heavily to the floor. "All right. How's the schedule for checking out the prisons?"

Ben Jamieson didn't respond immediately. Of all the dumb things he'd ever done in his life, going through every prison in Florida and Georgia looking for aliens from outer space was about the dumbest. "Uh, that's next on our schedule, sir. Raiford and then Old Millford."

"Okay, go to it. And when you get to Old Millford and meet the warden, count your fingers if you shake hands with him. That'll be Herbert Spunt. Crookedest son of a bitch in the whole state prison system. He'll steal the rings from your fingers."

"That's terrific, sir," Jamieson said, not concealing the sarcasm in his voice.

Wheeler hung up.

CHAPTER 18

Jake sat in the wide cushioned seat of the starship Frarsk. No matter that to Arbok and other space pilots who flew the routes of the Camtok Traders half a galaxy away this ship was an ungainly, creaking, obsolescent prison barge; to Jake Marden it was an awesome, staggering moment of his life.

He was at the controls of a starship. This thing had energy beyond anything he'd ever dreamed of seeing or touching in his life. With the movement of his two hands he could hurl forth more power than a thousand hydrogen bombs and tear up the fabric of space and time. Frarsk was beyond belief. It would take him time to "Strap in," Arbok told him.

Jake looked up. "Sure. But why? We're not going-"

"I want you to have the feel, Jake. Today a few times when we went over the top we drifted to a zero-g condition?"

""•_." "

Yes.

"And without being strapped in we would have drifted up from our seats. In this thing there are times when we kill the artificial gravity and we go to what we call a null-g condition. This isn't a tight cockpit. You'd be all over the place. And when we kick hard from null to positive and even sometimes to negative, well-"

"I get the picture," Jake said, grinning, sliding into the straps and holding up his arms for Arbok to cinch and lock the body straps. "Arms down, legs against the backstops," Arbok directed. "Then we'll do the headlock."

"You strap down everything?"

"Again I'll use your aircraft for analogy. What happens when-let me change that. Do you ever tumble through all three axes, out of control?"

Jake nodded. "Sure. It's even a competition acrobatic maneuver. A Lomcevak. Ass-end over teakettle."

"I'm not sure of your terms, but I get the idea," Arbok laughed. "Now picture all that happening while you're slamming in and out of a gravity field. If your arms and legs and head weren't secured, in the lockdown, you'd break your bones and most likely your neck as well. Sometimes we get into something I can only describe to you as a high grav spiral. I'm not sure that puts it very well-"

"Gravity whirlpool?"

"That will do. When we get into those we have two choices. Have the pilot try to fly it out, which is almost impossible, or hope the computer will bring it out. Sometimes the computer sounds like it's throwing up. What's actually happening is that it's against the stops. It's exhausted everything it can do and now it's helpless, and if it could it would die. When that happens the pilot has got to fly it out of that condition, or everyone dies. There have been ships caught in those conditions going into or coming out of hyperdrive and they were never seen or heard from again."

"Where do they go?"

Arbok shrugged. "Somewhere. Sometime."

"You ever get caught like that?"

"Eight times. The computer handled it twice. The other six times I brought it out. I would like never to repeat those moments. One time I-when we came out of it, I threw up for, oh, using your time periods, for three weeks. Then / wanted to die, but I had to get better to do it. Fortunately, it doesn't happen often. There are gravity strains between the stars, caused by what you call black holes, or far worse, that are unpredictable. I used to take the most dangerous runs. Because of that and the reputation I built I could get away with almost anything. Until that idiot tried to kill me on the landing run and my ship went in out of control. I found out then I could get away with anything except what the Camtok considered to be murder. Next stop was this barge, but / sure wasn't the pilot."

"Speaking of pilots," Jake said, as his hands caressed the controls and he stared straight ahead at an opaque armored shield, "how do you see out of this thing?"

"Most of the time you don't. The computer runs-"

"No; I mean when you're on the controls yourself. Computer's been shoved aside and it's a manned operation."

Arbok leaned against the panel, resting on one elbow, a curiously familiar human trait, and pointed to the heavy armor shield before them. "In your language, armored glass is the best description. But it's a poor one. That windshield- and talk about your archaic terms! It should be vueshield-is actually a very strong alloy. When we want visual impact directly, what you and I call eyeball flying, we can polarize the magnetic field of the alloy and it becomes transparent."

"It's a hard metal-"

"Consider it to be superhard."

"Okay; real dandy stuff, and it stops meteors and particles and stuff, and it becomes transparent?"

Arbok smiled. "The first time that whole wall in front of you goes transparent it scares the absolute shit out of you. It just about did that to me. Felt as if I were being thrown forward out of the flight deck. Hung on for dear life." He laughed with the memory of a long-ago fright. "Then you get accustomed to it, you like it, and it becomes second-nature and you don't even think about it."

Jake nodded. More and more I come to a truth: that a pilot is a pilot is a pilot . . .

Jake took a deep breath and turned to face Arbok. He uncinched his straps and holddown clamps as he talked. "Arbok, I've got a few million questions to ask you."

"And I you."

"Mind if I start with a few of the larger ones?"

Arbok shrugged and eased into a seat. "I brought an ashtray," he said.

"And I've got the cigars," Jake tagged on. "What about the beer?"

"That is the strangest stuff!" Arbok exclaimed. "I've had all sorts of fermented and synthesized drinks on different worlds, but your beer-what kind is it?"

"Coors. It's made with mountain water. Pure stuff."

"Jake, your worst water would be considered pristine on almost every world I know. Anyway, that beer, well, it puts bubbles inside my skull."

"We were afraid to give you anything. Not knowing what the chemical reactions of your body-you and the others- might be."

"So far the beer's a smashing success. Wait here. I'll get one of your sixpacks."

Jake lit up a cigar. Different brand this time. Jamaican; Macanudo brand, and a Portofino slim, long cigar, every bit as good as the Monte Cristo. He had to force himself back to reality. Sitting in the flight deck of a starship hidden in a Florida state prison, smoking cigars and drinking beer with an alien named Arbok from the planet Makk that circled a star they called Traik, more than halfway across the galaxy. Forty thousand light years or so. He looked up as Arbok returned. Powerful fingers flipped open two cans and they slugged deeply.

"First," Jake said slowly, dragging on his cigar, "your ship's drive. Propulsion system; whatever. Obviously, you have your thrusters, for maneuvering both in orbital condition or in atmosphere. I saw that when you came in. You were having a hell of a time so you were using everything you had. Aircraft atmospheric controls as well as the thrusters-

"The atmospheric stuff is strictly emergency and it's very limited," Arbok broke in. "I used everything. Atmospherics, thrusters, and, even though the computer was offline, I was still able to use the automatic gyro stabilizing system." Arbok tapped the panel and moved across three control handles. "Actually, we've got three separate propulsion systems. The thrusters, here, like you mentioned. The main drive for warp jumps through hyperspace. That's the ultimate. But we have another set of main drive thrusters to kick us away from a planet or a solar system until we reach a point where it's safe to use the hyperdrive. You've got to be a certain minimal distance from any gravitational field with a strong immediate effect. In fact, we got caught in a very violent vertical cloud-

"Tornado?"

"To use your colorful vernacular, Jake, you bet your sweet ass. It really had us in trouble. I hit the, what we call the planetary drive, and we punched through-

"In our propulsion system terms, how much thrust?"

Arbok thought for several moments. "In those terms-you want it in impulse seconds?"

"Pounds thrust would be better. Lets me compare it to stuff like the Saturn Five. That was our big ship to go to the moon. We had a liftoff thrust with that thing at just under eight million pounds. That's, uh, four thousand tons."

"Then the local drive I used to break through the tornado is about a hundred and twenty million tons."

"Tons?"

"Yes."

"And that's tactical, just for screwing around the local neighborhood?"

"Yes."

"Holy shit! You could have punched right through a mountain with that kind of power!"

"We only used it for about two seconds. Jake, that's strictly local engineering stuff. I mean, it helps to get around a planetary system but it's worthless for flight between star systems."

Jake considered everything he'd heard while he finished his beer and crumpled the can in a powerful hand. This was getting more incredible with every moment.

"What kind of velocity do you get with your main drive?" He was desperate to throw questions at Arbok like machine-gun bullets, but then he, Jake, would be hopelessly overwhelmed.

"I want to be certain I understand your question. Do you refer to the planetary drive?"

"Well, I hadn't meant that but I'd like to hear that answer," Jake said hopefully.

"If we're clear of the usual crap and debris that clutters up most solar systems, and we give it full power, um, linear acceleration and all that being considered, we get up to about one-third light speed."

Jake swallowed hard. "That's better than two hundred twenty-five million miles an hour," he said. He knew his voice sounded hollow.

"Admittedly, it's pretty good for tactical engines, but you must remember that this ship wasn't intended for dashing

around systems. As starships go, we're pretty much cheap hardware, Jake. Besides, it's wasteful of fuel."

"What is your fuel?" Jake was almost afraid to ask the question. He was almost certain this entire moment was a mad, mad dream and this alien creature would smile at him and answer, "Chicken soup, of course."

But it wasn't a dream. It was a headache.

"Ever hear of defonzoid radiative outflow?"

"Jesus Christ ..."

"No, I guess not. It's difficult to comprehend. The scientists who developed these things, oh, I don't know how long ago, discovered that they could get incredible amounts of energy out of minimal materials if only they could trap that energy in a constantly collapsing electromagnetic field. You see, once you do that, well, the energy's got to come out somewhere, so they built the exit part of the system as an exhaust, so to speak."

"So to speak," Jake murmured.

"We feed an alloy, I can't describe it adequately with your limited technical vocabulary-"

"Of course."

"We feed the alloy in the form of a cable into the energy chamber. The magnetic field interacts with the alloy. Breaks it down to subatomic particles under tremendous acceleration. They're spun about in the confines of the chamber. Don't think of it as a fuel tank or an engine like your systems. It spins ever faster and in tighter and tighter circles, except that it's spinning inward from a complete spherical surface. Well, the mass increases constantly."

"Sure. Anybody knows that." Jake's hand struggled to find a beer.

"What we're creating is a black hole under a very crude arrangement. The trick is to have the enormous mass created by the inward spin whipped away from the ship before it really does become a black hole. So by now, we've got a tremendous gravitational field in our grasp, everything is collapsing inward, and as fast as it collapses we're ejecting it in the direction opposite to the one we want to move. And we get variable thrust by adjusting the intensity of the final outgoing magnetic field. In some ways it's a gravsqueeze

system, but I prefer to think of it as a variation on a gravity fold."

"Uh huh. Right. You got it. This how your secondary drive operates?" Jake took a desperate swallow of beer and ended up choking and coughing before he could regain his voice. "You know, dashing this way and that about the planets?"

Arbok relaxed in his seat and lit a new cigar. He fingered a beer, tore away the tab and drank deeply.

"This isn't too much for you all at once, Jake? It's not easy. I know that. When I went through the Makkian AstroCad I had headaches for months."

"No, no, I'm doing just great," Jake protested vehemently. "This is fascinating. I had some of my own ideas about what kind of engine-no, wait a moment. Let's go back to your lesser drive. This cable of alloy? How long does it last you?"

"The system runs for about a hundred Earth years. Once the power is started, that is. It doesn't consume much energy, Jake. It's in the form of a huge spool and we feed in just what we need. Otherwise, the power functions all the time. Sort of idles."

"Sure. Idling wouldn't burn much of this stuff. I should have known that. How long does your usual supply last?"

"Same as the powerpak. About a hundred years."

Jake felt he was drowning. "Tell me about the stardrive engine," he said desperately.

Arbok studied Jake for several moments. "I need to be careful about this," he said finally.

Jake felt his body stiffen. "Why? State secrets?"

Arbok laughed and gestured his answer at the same time. "No, nothing like that. But this is a totally different concept than anything you've ever known. I don't want to sound like I'm talking down to you, Jake. That would be a mistake on my part and a wrong judgment on yours."

"What makes you say all that?"

"Because I've been to different planets of varying technical and cultural development. It gets very sticky at times. When we hit a world that's had a technology or science or culture a few thousand years older than ours, we feel like the poor kids from the wrong neighborhood. It's not that the beings on this new world are any smarter. They're not. But they have the advantage of enormous time and development on their side, so we come in and we get baffled by certain things they've been accustomed to for years or even centuries."

"So you're warning me that I may feel like an idiot, about this engine?"

"Being absolutely frank, yes. I've been in the same position and I sure don't want a growing relationship to get screwed up because of nuts and bolts."

"It's that complicated and you call it nuts and bolts." Jake shook his head.

"It's not that complicated, Jake. That's the problem! It's so simple it seems impossible. Look," Arbok said, leaning forward and showing a concern and intensity Jake hadn't seen before. "Your culture is based on a mechanistic society. Nuts, bolts, wheels, steam, hydraulics, electricity, a crude form of nuclear energy, chemical rockets that are absolute nightmares to me. You haven't had time to go any further up certain ladders. Note that I didn't say just up the ladder. There's a vast concurrency of developments. I've already seen some aspects of your world I've never seen anywhere else. If planet-hopping from one system to another teaches you anything, Jake, it's that you're guaranteed always to be surprised, one way or another, by every world you greet. The same applies here, but I'll tell you right now I've never run into anything so intertwined and complex, both maniacal and beautiful, as this world."

Jake gestured impatiently. "Later, later. Get back to that engine."

"All right. First, I've studied your latest science plateaus. Astrophysics and philosophy, parts and pieces. I need an example. Not too long ago, the idea of more than three dimensions to your existence was idiotic. Then your society began to develop the concept of time as a factor in your existence. Right so far?"

"Uh huh." Jake didn't want to say anything else. Not yet.

"Then along come some real high-powered brains and they start saying that space and time are really part of the same fabric. This Einstein shakes everything up by insisting that the world you all experience isn't as real as you think it is. He points to mass and he points to energy and tells you

you're all blind, that what you're seeing is really the same thing but in different forms, and you can switch back and forth from one to the other."

"Sure," Jake said easily. "I can walk on water, too."

"I'm trying to be serious," Arbok said, a tone of regret in his voice.

"I am serious. If I freeze water I can walk on it."

Arbok grinned. "One for you. Back to your time, energy, and space concepts. There's the relativistic issues. There's time dilation. There's one of the toughest of all problems, how to slow down what your scientists so quaintly call tachyons."

"Particles that travel only faster than light," Jake said.

"Yes, but it's a crude and all-embracing term," Arbok came back immediately. "And nothing, and I mean nothing, is restricted by any rule or law unless you specify the environment, the conditions, under which those rules or laws are applied."

Jake chewed that over. "You mean you can't get the rules under which you function until you first specify the conditions under which you plan to operate?"

Arbok's face lit up. "Beautiful! That is the fastest I have ever seen that concept visualized! I am amazed."

"I don't see why," Jake said, and he wasn't deprecating himself or his words. "I can't plan to operate a submarine under water the way I would drive a locomotive on rails. If you ask me if I can travel with a ten-thousand-ton load at six hundred miles an hour, I'm pretty sure you're not talking about a sub moving under water. So a specification is issued immediately, and then you continue to refine that specification until you know your environmental conditions, which lets you know your restrictions, and then you set up your trip."

"Jake, if you have a load of, let's say, a hundred tons, and I want you to take it across an ocean, can you do it if you don't have any ships?"

"Sure. If I have an airplane with enough range that can also haul your cargo. Or," Jake brought in as an immediate afterthought, "if I have smaller planes with sufficient range, I can break down your cargo and carry it that way, and then reassemble it when we get on the other side of the ocean."

"Or you can dematerialize your cargo in a defonzoid laser beam," Arbok said, smiling, "fire your beam on a tight pattern to a satellite in geosynchronous orbit and bounce it back down for rematerialization on the

other side of the ocean."

"That's another way," Jake said dryly, "but I'm not familiar with it. But I see your point. Everything depends upon the environment."

"Okay. In our immediate universe-yours and mine-we can't accelerate normal mass to any speed greater than the speed of light."

"Agreed," Jake said. "Once you get up to light velocity, just about all the energy you put into accelerating that mass gets converted to more mass instead of speed. What you end up with is an infinite mass and you can't accelerate an infinite mass."

"True. So you've got a set of conditions and you've got to operate under those conditions. The result is," Arbok concluded, "that you cannot travel faster than light."

"Which, because of stellar distances, closes off the universe to us."

"Which is no longer true," Arbok said with a laugh, "because here I am."

"And you're here because you changed the rules. You changed the conditions."

"Precisely. So the next step is to define the different conditions. You still want to go on with this, Jake?"

"We got cigars and beer. Stay with it, man."

"All right. What we're talking about are the particles that make up our everyday world and everything in it. Subatomic particles your science labels as protons, electrons, neutrons; there are more but those will do. They possess mass and so they must always move at less than the speed of light. In our known, visible, real, we-can-touch-it universe."

"Okay," Jake said.

"Well, what about particles that have what we call a resting mass of zero?"

"Neat question, Arbok. What about them?"

"There's your first paradox of real life. Any object that has a rest mass of zero can never be at rest."

"How do you measure that?"

"Like love and conscience, my friend. You take it on faith. I believe some of your scientists are already changing the term from 'zero mass' to 'proper mass.' It's psychological. It's semantical, but what the hell, Jake, it works. They call it proper mass because if they call it zero mass, or rest mass, it contradicts itself and you want to go out and kick your gnarb."

"What the hell is a gnarb?"

"It's got fangs, claws, a second set of teeth, red eyes, and it's what we have on Makk for dogs. When you kick one you better have steel-toed boots and a very fast leg. But you get the idea."

Jake grinned. "Go on."

"All right." Arbok saluted with his nearly-empty can of beer. "Now, remember, I'm using the terms of your science that I picked out from your science education programs. Our computer's pretty good at this, four computers are poor cousins so they're simple to interrogate. And what do we find? Particles that with a proper mass of zero that must always travel precisely at the speed of light. They're familiar to you as- "

"Photons," Jake said immediately. "Particles of light. Also, neutrinos and gravitons."

"The category is luxons."

"There's one beyond that."

"There are many beyond that," Arbok smiled.

"The one I'm talking about is tachyons. They travel only faster than light."

"Do you have any stories, fables, about the sublime and the ridiculous?"

"That's out of left field," Jake responded. "But, sure we do. Alice in Wonderland. Better yet, Catch 22. To do something you want, you've got to do something that's impossible. But since it's impossible, you can't do it, so you can't do what you want because the doing is impossible, and-"

Arbok gestured wildly with a now-empty beer can. "Enough! I get the idea. Well, that's tachyons. The harder you push them, the slower they move. The closer they come down to just above the speed of light, the more they resist being slowed down. Just the opposite of pushing protons, or neutrons or electrons and all their subclass toward the speed of light. So you can't get the tardyons, which are restricted to movement at less than the speed of light, even to reach the speed of

light. They're the slowpokes. Then there are the luxons and they can't go slower or faster than light. Finally, the tachyons-

"They zip along at better than light speed but never at or below that speed," Jake concluded. "So what has all this shit got to do with how your engine works?"

"Everything. And, nothing."

"That's terrific."

"Well, what happens when you want to walk on water?"

"I change it. It's still water but I've modified its temperature and rearranged its molecules and it resists passage through it and I walk on water, but I'm calling it ice."

"Stay with that trend, that kind of thinking and you get closer to our drive system."

"Arbok, I've noticed you refuse to call it an engine. Why?"

"Because it isn't an engine, that's why."

"Then what-"

"Bear with me just a bit longer, Jake?"

"Why not? I've got a headache and we're almost out of beer."

"We've said you can't accelerate a tardyon faster than light, correct? Well, you can't. And you can't walk on water, at least in your bare feet, unless it's frozen. You've converted from one form to another, from liquid to a solid. Now, stay with me, Jake, and bear in mind that what I'm doing is a theoretical conversion of particles, just as you rearranged water molecules to ice molecules."

"Have at it, man."

"I said you can't move a tardyon faster than light, but that rule applies only if you keep the tardyon in its original state of matter. Like water. Now, you can combine a positron and an electron, and that's just one pairing out of a few hundred possibilities, but let me stay with this one alone; you can combine those two particles and you go from water to ice. In this case, the positrons and electrons become eamma rave Now, gamma rays are right back there with the rest of the luxons, which means they move at the speed of light. And it's possible, with the right equipment and circumstances, to convert the gamma rays back to their original state."

"You're leading to converting everyday matter to a type of tachyon, then. Something that can travel faster than light, as fast as you want, and then be converted back when you get to your destination?"

"You've got it."

"Any limits to the speed?"

"Ten thousand times the speed of light or more, if you want it."

. "Why do you say that? If you can travel that fast, you've got the whole universe open to you."

"It's a very big universe, Jake. And there's another problem."

"I've already figured that one."

"Please," Arbok smiled. "Go ahead."

"When you make the conversion you screw up the trillions of interacting elements and particles and energy fields that make up just one human being. I guess the trick isn't in the conversion. It's reconvertng at the other end."

"It's never been done. Successfully, that is." A shudder ran through Arbok.

"What happened?"

"People go in, I mean, they're in the ship, it's put through a force field, that's the best way I can describe it. A form of particle accelerator using magnetic lines between three artificial moons. This is a clumsy way of saying it, but it's the best I can do. The ship, and everything in it, gets converted into a tachyon form. In the tests that were run, the departure and destination points were calculated down to absolutely exact figures. The ship leaves under acceleration so fast you can't see it with the naked eye. The superfast cameras catch it, and even then it's really weird, a strange sort of twist of energy and that's gone. On a flight that at the speed of light would take a hundred years, this ship does it in two days. Constant acceleration and then deceleration and when it gets to zero acceleration, calculating back to departure, it stops dead in the middle of another tribase, a duplicate of the three great generators, those artificial moons, as I called them."

Arbok went silent for several moments. Jake had to prod him to pick up the description.

"The ship, all its equipment, and the people inside, were all one single living creature. Metal, flesh, plastic, blood, steel, bone, computers, brain, eyeballs, all of it, were a single entity, a single thing that was alive. It was in some kind of incredible torment and it was screaming. Do you understand what I'm saying? It was in vacuum, in open space, and this thing with no mouth that we could ever imagine or understand was screaming, and there's no sound in space, and we all heard it, inside our brains and our teeth and our eyes and it wrenched a man's gut to worms. We couldn't stop it, and it was driving us mad. The only thing that could be done was another conversion, back to tachyons that could go faster than light, and we did that and the screaming got worse and worse. But they made the conversion."

"Did you accelerate the . . . the ship?"

Arbok shook his head. "No. There was nothing left of the propulsion system that would work. The torment, from what had been those people and a ship, and what it was doing to us, just got worse and worse."

"Then you had only one thing to do," Jake said. "Execution."

Arbok nodded. "We took no chances. We put the biggest antimatter charge we had. Like a thousand thantrons-"

"Thantrum?"

"One of those is equal to what you would describe as a ninety megaton bomb. The antimatter charge was a thousand times more powerful. It's like a small sun exploding."

"It did the job?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Everyone went on mental reconditioning for a full year. Everyone and anyone within range of that screaming needed help. Including me."

"Wait a minute, Arbok. Everything you've told me is a dead-end. Everything you've described is what you can't use for your ship. To boost from one star system to another, I mean."

"Exactly. It's a long way around, Jake, but it's the only way to get it deep inside your head that those roads are closed."

"Then give me the straight skinny on_ how you do your song and dance out there."

Arbok blinked, but he got Jake's drift. "We base our ability to shift spatial position by exactly those words. We do not have a drive. It is not an engine. We jump from one space to another, Jake. We leave reality here in order to get to reality there."

"Try me in simple terms, Arbok."

"Visualize a simple photon drive. Think of a container. You pour light into that container."

"And just how the hell do you do that?"

"Go back to the principle of uncertainty. What you see becomes what it is on the basis of your observing it. That's why light can be quanta or wave. It can be a photon quanta or a wave similar to gamma ray or a neutrino. But it will be whatever it is depending upon how you examine it. The so-called stance of the observer determines the observation. The universe is the way it is because that is the way we see it. The universe is here because we are here to observe it. All that philosophical approach is as hard and real as anything you can create in physics. It is physics; the only true physics, We trap light in a container. That's really an electromagnetic matrix. A force field almost beyond comprehension. Then we pour in-we're really driving in light under tremendous acceleration-we pour in light from another source."

"We're talking light?" Jake saw Arbok nod, and went on. "But what kind of light? Quanta or wave?"

Arbok grinned with delight, an alien imp of imposing power. "Take your choice. You're the observer. It will be whatever you see it to be."

Jake's forehead became a furrow of frustration. "I know that's crazy but I also know it's true," he sighed.

"All right, aboard the ship we wish it to be quanta," Arbok continued suddenly. "We 'see' it as quanta.

We've arranged a massive continuing collision of quanta. From the collision we get energy in tremendous turmoil. The electromagnetic field, which is controlled by the computer and fueled by a block of neutron-

"A what?" "Neutron block. Matter from a neutron star. We have huge

biodroid systems that go in under tremendous speed using the system drive; they detonate charges as they skim the neutron star surface and capture whatever they can in the way of mass. It takes an enormous amount of doing, but when you're dealing with a material that's solid neutrons and no space in between, you don't need much in the way of bulk. In the heart of this ship, Jake, there's another electromagnetic bottle, a tiny and violent force field. It runs that tiny bit of neutron star matter in a tight circle, and the energy it emits is run through magnetic fields by the computer to electronic and electrical stepdown fields and converted to what we need to run the ship. Let me stay with the jump system, okay?"

"Sure." Jake's head was splitting.

"Think again of what we're doing with those two streams of light as a quanta. As the streams collide and release energy in a circle, as dictated by the EM matrix, the whole mass undergoes tremendous acceleration. It's then squeezed, so to speak, down through a tight bottle. Or a neck of a bottle. You not only increase the mass when you do this, you get a iluidic effect that accelerates the quanta beyond its own velocity."

"Just a fucking minute," Jake said, almost snarling. "That makes as much sense as Alice running through the Looking Glass!"

"I don't know what that means-" "Never mind. Go on."

"Well, what it means is that to you, to the science of this world that imposes upon itself severe shortcomings of comprehension, it is absolutely impossible to go faster than the speed of light. But why should light observe your puny limitations? When you bring it together in such a mass, it is desperate to escape. We let it do that. We let it escape but we move it along a certain pathway so that it cannot escape." "That's a neat Catch Twenty-Two if I could only figure out what you're saying."

"Do you know what a moebius strip is?" "Yes."

"Did you think that topological mathematics was the province of your science only?" "I hadn't thought about it at all."

"But you can visualize a moebius strip? A surface with only one side."

"Hell, yes. Even kids make those in science classes in school."

"Now visualize that moebius strip in tubular form."

"You can't-no; wait a moment. Are you talking about a Klein Bottle?"

"Precisely. Our computer seemed almost to be enjoying itself when it accessed your systems to come up with what your mathematicians had developed on their own. Wonderful, Jake! A Klein Bottle is precisely what I'm talking about. Our whole system is based on light as quanta moving at velocities faster than itself. To gain this effect we establish the electromagnetic matrix along the form of the tubular moebius strip. That gives us four spatial dimensions, but, and it's a damnably large and tricky but, our confinement system must have only one side."

Jake's head was spinning. "But a Klein Bottle ... I mean, you'd have a bottle with no inside to it!"

"Exactly!" Arbok said with unexpected enthusiasm, as if Jake's words were a signal of triumph. "Look to your own history and your own science, Jake. You'll find the name of Felix Klein-"

"He was a German mathematician," Jake recalled. "I did some topological math studies. He was big in the early nineteen hundreds, oh, about eighty or ninety years ago. And I remember he was real ape about Augustus Moebius and," Jake frowned, "in fact, Moebius had created his one-sided strip nearly a hundred years before that."

"Describe what Klein did," Arbok urged. "I've had our computer stuff that information inside my head. I want a level of understanding with you. Please-"

"Well, Klein postulated that if you use a material that stretches, like a transparent laminate, or in today's materials, a Fiberglas, you mold it in the shape of a tube that's open at both ends. Then you flare one side of the tube. One end, um, becomes the neck and the other end becomes the base." Memories rushed back to Jake; he'd been fascinated with the entire affair. "The neck then goes through the side of the bottle . . . except that it becomes the side of the bottle. Now the base and the neck join, and, and . . . yeah, the inside of the neck becomes continuous with the outside of the base."

Jake looked at Arbok. "So you've got a bottle with no inside but it moves through itself. But that's as ridiculous as it sounds!" Jake protested. "A Klein bottle is strictly a postulate. You can't have a real Klein bottle. How can something pass through itself without the presence of a hole in its side? That's a physical impossibility."

"No, it isn't. Do you know the name of John Wheeler?"

"Yes. He was the Director of Theoretical Physics for some college or university in Texas. Considered one of the best brains of all time."

"Whoever said that was right. Wheeler also said, and when our computer presented this quote to me, I memorized it. It is absolutely beautiful. He said, and I quote: 'Man, by exploring the universe, plays a part in bringing into being something of what he sees.' He also said that, and again I'm quoting your science, 'without an observer, there are no laws of physics.'

"Now, one critical question, Jake. Can you draw a Klein bottle?"

"Of course-"

"Can the computer present a Klein bottle to you?"

"Yes, but it's two-dimensional."

"Can your computer work with lasers and a holographic field presentation so that the Klein bottle appears in three dimensions?"

The questions hammered at Jake. "Yes ..."

"Do you agree that time is represented by duration? If I make a bottle out of glass and that bottle lasts for an hour before I break it, then we can say the bottle existed in time for that one hour?"

"Sure, but-"

"Then it exists, Jake, and if it's a Klein Bottle and that's what we, as the observers, see, then the Klein Bottle is real, and we have an object folding in upon itself in four dimensions." Arbok took a deep breath.

"One last point before we wrap this up, Jake."

Numb, Jake nodded. "Your Einstein presented a very proper model of space. Gravity isn't the property of bodies attracting one another. A body in space has a rest mass which determines its gravitational field. You take the rest mass of the earth and then multiply it by the square of the speed of light. Forget the numbers. What you have is a gravitational field, and that distorts the spacetime geometry near the earth. Or any planet or spatial body. That distortion creates what we imagine as an inward and downward slope, but in our daily lives we see it as the force that pulls us downward or toward the ground. In the reality of physics, we're just sliding down that hill of distortion." Arbok grinned. "It's a life of paradoxes, isn't it?"

"How do you jump from one part of the galaxy to another?" Jake demanded. "Forget the rest of this bullshit!"

"You just answered your own question."

"How the hell did I do that?"

"We don't drive or fly or travel from one point to another through space. We accelerate light quanta in the system I described, and pretty soon we're pushing quanta faster than the speed of light. We go beyond infinite mass, Jake. Let me repeat that. We go beyond infinite mass. The spacetime fabric can't take that. It can't withstand the gravitational field of a black hole, either. And what happens when you create a black hole with an inward gravity that's so great that not even light can escape?"

Jake was at home with that one. "It's impossible in our well, our known universe. It vanishes from all sight. Obviously," Jake added. "If light can't escape from a place, that place is invisible."

"And once you start dropping into a black hole, past what science calls the event horizon, you exceed the velocity of light. You have infinite acceleration. You rip apart the space-time fabric."

Jake stared. A light had begun to dawn and brighten in his head. "You leave this universe ..."

"We leave this spacetime."

"And you're able to compute where you bust out-?"

"Absolutely," Arbok said, "and the computers have been developed to the point where they can bring you back in wherever you want, so long as you're far enough away from gravitational mass so you're not affected by its own spacetime"

geometry. That's why we always appear well beyond any solar system with the jump drive, and then we use the good old-fashioned thrust system of the engines to go the rest of the way."

Jake rose to his feet and walked slowly about the flight deck. He pointed a finger at Arbok. "Is that how you get artificial gravity when you're out in space and not under thrust?"

"Precisely. We can tweak the field, so to speak, so that it permeates the ship and everything in it but without affecting anything in an adverse manner."

"And that would also give you," Jake added, "your force field against anything hitting the ship."

"It's like a gravitational bow wave," Arbok confirmed. "We have the equivalent of a force field that would be generated by a mass the size of a star. As they say in your terms, Jake, pretty neat, huh?"

CHAPTER 19

Jubal Bailey downed the last of his beer, crumpled the can in a powerful black fist and tossed the debris over his shoulder. The usual "girl slave" who always appeared to keep the floor clean when anything hit it from the "masters" failed to appear. No one was surprised. The command post beneath the ground and within its heavy jacket of water was sealed off from the rest of the prison. Jube paused long enough for his discarded can to strike a wall somewhere behind him and reached for another can. He popped the tab with a hiss and spray and pointed the can at Jake Marden.

"This ain't no social gathering, man," he growled. Jake knew from his manner of speaking that Jube had deliberately reverted to the "killer nigger" persona by which he was known throughout Old Millford. Well, Jube never did anything without a reason; Jake went along without commenting on speech mannerisms.

"While you been fucking around the sky with Captain Marvel from outer space," Jube went on, digging deliberately at Jake, "and having a good time, and playing with the toys in that ship, we been having some very important meetings."

"Who with?" Jake asked quietly.

"The space people. Who the fuck you think with?" Jube drank beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He reached forward and pulled a cigar from Jake's shirt pocket. "We had a real good Jesus wool-gathering."

"Who? Which ones?" Jake pursued.

"Two of them," Jeff Maddox offered. "That pink individual-"

"You mean pink alien pussy," Jube said sarcastically, gaining knowing nods and grins from Martinez and Korolov.

"We met with him-"

"That's Barq el Quatrane-"

"How the fuck you remember all them names?" Jube demanded.

"It's a talent," Jake said disarmingly. He began to recognize Jube's system. He had brought the broken parts of their group into a more tightly-knit bunch. That meant that at least two or more of the other five men with him in the room had already expressed misgivings to Bailey about Marden's "pussyfooting with them fuckers from outer space and we don't know what the fuck's going on." So Jube would give Jake a hard time. It was a procedure that worked well. Jake also saw that Maddox wasn't buying any of it, and Luther Cogswell had one eyebrow almost hung up at an angle.

"The other one was that mean cat; Drong," Maddox continued. "I think his full name is Drong the Kurd."

"You mean Drong the turd," Martinez snickered, digging an elbow into Korolov's ribs.

Jube turned slowly to Martinez. "Can the shit. This is a serious meeting. You got that, spic? If anybody makes with the funny lines, it's me. Not you. You keep opening your mouth like that someone's gonna tell your momma the abortion didn't take." Jube didn't wait for reaction but turned back to Jake.

"What about Brist Mullongptu?" Jake asked.

"That radial tire?" Jube said contemptuously. "Look, all my life, whenever I heard about aliens, it's how they're so fucking smarter and superior and all that shit. Now, this Brist comes from a weird fucking

planet, I grant you, and maybe the scientists will have a field day with that walking cactus, because that's all he is, some kind of freak mutation from radiations. He's a plant. A fucking water cactus. That's all he is. Mean, tough, strong. He's the perfect slave and that's just what he was and that's all he is. He don't play no part in any of our plans."

"Agreed," Jake said. His single word had the effect of a bomb. So my judgment was right, Jake concluded to himself, There've been conversations here about my being ass-hok buddy with the aliens. And Jube latched on to what they were thinking. It looks like we're going to have to get rid of a whole lot of people in here before we're through. I

"What about the space Arab?" Jube asked. "That Grangles. He's a fighter but he got no more fucking brains than the warthog, that Ytram."

"Agreed," Jake said, deliberately withholding further comment.

"So what's with the two special ones?" Cogswell eased into the exchange. "What's this Barq so valuable for?"

"You want a simple answer, Luther?"

"It's the kind I understand the best, Jake," Cogswell smiled.

"This planet is desperately short of fresh water," Jake told Cogswell and the others. "Barq comes from a world where their top science has been to bring pure water out of just about anything. What Barq has we can sell. A very special knowledge. He can turn swamps into incredible farms. He can grow new forests ten times faster than anything we know how to do. He can produce plants that churn out oxygen like they were factories. He can do a hell of a lot of things the world-different governments-would pay just about anything to learn."

"You mean we hire out the pinko?" Jube asked. He knew as well as Jake, perhaps much better due to Jube's background in forestry, just how valuable Barq could be.

"In a way. Not just hire him out," Jake explained. "We get him into certain laboratories around the world. He performs on a very limited scale. When he's through with demonstrations, it won't take any geniuses to figure out what he means to them. Then we hit them with a bill for future services."

"What we talking about?" Martinez broke in, his face showing his lack of understanding. "What kind of money?"

"I told you to butt out," Jube said darkly, scowling.

"What the fuck's the matter? All I do is ask a smart question!"

So he's the one Jube's picked out as the most trouble. Martinez, you don't know it yet, but you're one dead spic. Aloud, Jake said to Martinez, "Billions. He's worth billions of dollars to us."

"You crazy, man," Martinez said loftily.

No one expected a word from Vasily Korolov. "No. He right, Carlos. Russia could grow ten times food she grow now. Gorbachev he pay anything to do that."

"Ah, what the fuck do you know? Commie asshole," Martinez scowled.

"It's not that easy," Maddox slipped in from the side, trying to defuse the angry moment. They were all acting as if someone had a silken cord tied around their scrotums and was yanking like mad. "It will take a lot of planning and-

"Fuck that now," Jube broke in. "The real one we want to work with is Drong. I talked with him for a while, and let me tell you mothers, he impressed the shit out of me." Jube looked slowly about their table, one man after the other. "H" is a walking, talking fortune. The Regeneration Man. If only half of what he says is true, we'll open a fucking clinic on some island and start pumping blood and tissue from him into the old rich assholes of the world and-never mind. Let's get with the big plan here so we know where we're going."

Jake smiled to himself. Nobody could touch Jube Bailey for smoothness. He hadn't once mentioned Arbok in terms of the future, which meant he valued Arbok more than all the others and wanted to keep that conclusion away from a few of their group.

"Jube? Mind if I get into this act?" Jube nodded to Luther Cogswell.

"Whatever we do, it's got to be something that gives us enough money, power, and authority so we don't spend the rest of our lives being kings of these four walls." They'd never heard Luther Cogswell speak this way before. Bailey and Marden knew he had it in him, but not so the others. So it was time to cut cards and deal, and Luther knew it. They weren't going anywhere at the moment, and a whole planet out there was starting to really squeeze to find the vanished starship.

"I mean, sure, we got it knocked in here," Cogswell went on, noting the encouragement from Jube Bailey. "And it wasn't so long ago I thought that was great. But I found out I'm a big frog in a pond that's too goddamned small. It was Jake showed me that."

The others looked at Jake and he stared at Cogswell. "Lather, I never told you shit about anything," Jake snapped.

"No, you never told me," Luther agreed. "But I saw your face and the way you walked and a whole lot of things about

you when you came back from that frying. You took up a jet, fighter, didn't you, Jake? Busted free of these walls and the very ground itself. Took that Arbok fellow for a flight, but it was really for you, wasn't it? You came back with a fire in your eyes and a spring in your step like you was a kid again. That told me everything. That told me that everything in the whole world I can fit within these walls is a bunch of little shitballs. So I'm for doing whatever it is that Jake and Jube and the senator have up their sleeve. They're the thinking kind. Planners. They do things. And so long as it's cutting out of here when and where we want, I'm for it. You people want to sally forth down to Hades itself," Luther said fervently, looking from Jube to Jake, "I'll be right there with you, and I do not give a shit whatever it is."

"Let me add to that," Jeff Maddox said after a pause, while they still felt the effect of intensity from Cogswell. "Luther's right. We've got the ultimate lodestone at our fingertips. Either we can stay king of the hill in this concrete dungheap or we can take a shot at becoming a real power. With what a few of these aliens have to offer, and what's inside that ship, and Jake can tell us best of all about that, we can become a force to reckon with. And let me tell you something else, all of you. We don't have any time to waste. They're looking for that ship, out there. They're starting to get panicky. They don't know just what this ship has, but it's hundreds, maybe thousands of years ahead of anything the best of our science has. So I'm with Luther. Do it, do it big, do it fast."

Korolov rumbled deep in his chest. He spoke so rarely that any sound from the Russian captured their immediate attention. "What about aliens? What they want?"

Six words and he encompassed half the problems they still had to solve.

"Well, I'll tell you this much," Jube stepped into the exchange. "Whatever they ever had in the way of a family is behind them. You people ever think of that? They may be aliens and they are some of the weirdest folk I ever seen, but somewhere in their lives there were people they loved and who loved them. You can talk all this technical shit you want, but there's some very big lonely stuff inside that shin Well, no matter what, they got to have a different angle on all this than we have."

He reached for another beer. Cogswell snapped it open for him and Jube took a long pull and went right back to his message. "Now, from everything I know, these people can't go back. Even where they ain't aliens they can't go back. They are escaped convicts. They done pissed all over whatever system slapped them in that floatin' prison. If they go back up and out," he stabbed a black finger in the air, "they really got nowhere to go. I been around people whose equipment is in trouble, and they got troubles with their machinery, more than just a busted landing jack, too. // they ever go up it's got to be with help from the locals, and their best bet is us. This whole affair is cons coming and goin' Except," Jube smiled broadly, "these fuckers is stayiri."

He swigged beer with the can in one hand and pointed his other at Jake. "Take it from there, bro," he told him.

Jake had long thought about this moment. For the first time in his life he faced an element that had never before touched him: a question of loyalty being sundered while he struggled to avoid the self-confrontation. To Jubal Bailey he was a brother and he would never hesitate to lay his life instantly on the line for that man. They had simply been bloodied too deeply, their souls seared and burned, like

laying a white-hot poker onto an open wound to cleanse and seal that wound, Nothing would change that. No price could appeal even for a moment to consider any other course. There's an old saying that every man has his price, Jake mused. But that's bullshit Every man has his price-or a reason.

Jake was unaffected by the others. None of them in the long run really mattered. Maddox was on an intellectual and professional level with him and Jube; Luther Cogswell was more their blood-brother type. Martinez and Korolov had forgotten how to think individually unknown years before; they were exceedingly good at what they did but their value was flimsy and transitory.

So it was a struggle between the burgeoning new friendship with Arbok against the closed, tight, and savagely ufc yielding world he and Jubal Bailey had built around themselves,1

Jake sighed. Arbok offered a dream beyond all wildest dreams, a future of possibilities he couldn't even conceive in its full. Jubal Bailey's my brother and we are blooded. That was that. Jake's eyes passed fleetingly across the features of Jube. Whatever I do, my friend, it witt never be at the expense of what we are to one another. He turned back to the group and went right at the issue they faced.

"Arbok, the pilot of that ship," Jake began, "is the key to everything we hope to do. Barq is real important. The value of Brist, if we can ever learn his genetic and physiological secrets, may be even more valuable. But those are quiet, low-key levels of what we have in mind. They're part of the program. But for the slam-bang, out-in-front, kick-'em-in-the-nuts effect, none of that crowd holds a candle to Arbok."

"Why him over the others?" Luther asked, and his question was serious and echoed in the expressions of the others (except Jube, who knew all along where the real heavy was located). "Is he smarter than the others?"

"It's not a question of smarts," Jake answered quickly, wanting to keep this moving to a fast resolution.

"Arbok couldn't touch Barq when it comes to knowledge of aquatic systems. Their whole background is vastly different. / couldn't touch the skill of an Amazon native in tracking animals or outburning a canoe out of a log. It doesn't make either of us smarter or dumber. We just know different things. Arbok is from a world, a whole bunch of worlds, that is much like our own culture in terms of technology, science, industry, aggressive business-that sort of thing. So he understands us and we get to understand him."

Jake motioned for a beer and Jube tossed it deftly to him; Jake went on talking as he flipped the tab with a hiss. "Arbok should be thought of in terms of that starship. The propulsion systems, the energy source, the sheer raw power of that thing and all the advanced technology it represents, well, that's the dramatic stuff I was talking about. It's what we can use to bring everybody out there, big countries and little ones, that we have something so powerful, so super, so far ahead of anything they've got, that, first, we scare the shit out of them because of the destructive power we have, and second, we get them to want to work with us." Jake turned to Maddox.

"Now, you know better than anyone else the ins and outs of the political scene. And that's all real power is: political control. It takes a politician to know a politician," Jake stressed. "So this becomes your baliwick."

"One thing is for sure," Jube chimed in. "He knows the real political secrets, all right. Tell 'em, Senator. When you got 'em by the balls, their hearts and souls will follow."

Maddox smiled as he nodded. "That's the whole story in a nutshell. If anybody here has the idea that we're going to start taking control of governments because we've got a couple of aliens who can perform agricultural and biological miracles, you're living on laughing gas. It'll never happen."

"The ship. What about the ship?" Cogswell interrupted. "Jake says that thing is thousands of years ahead of anything in this whole world. That sure sounds like a lot of squeeze to me."

"Well, he's right. The problem is how do we use what the ship has as a lever?" Maddox paused. He cracked his knuckles to gain a few moments in which to marshal his thoughts. "Look, if you want to control a kingdom you don't have to start a war with the whole place. All you need to do is to control the king. You become the power behind the throne. Being a visible king is very, very dumb. All you're really doing is painting a bullseye in the center of your forehead. "It's an ego trip. That's all it is. True power doesn't call for chest-beating or press interviews. It means having what you want because you knew how to get it and keep it. If it's fame you want, well, that's so dumb it doesn't need any further comment here."

Jube gestured with a beer can. "I like your style, white man. Keep on truckin'."

"Well, it's really that simple, Jube," Maddox continued, trying to keep away from speechmaking. "We need to control a limited number of key people who are in the right places to control masses of people. We do that by offering them something so incredibly appealing to them it overrides their normal wants and inhibitions, and they're willing to pay the

price by letting us in through a side door to start gathering power."

"Don't take no genius to figure that out," Cogswell said, a touch of superiority to his voice. "What the hell do you think heroin and coke and all that shit is about? You get 'em hooked, man."

"Shut up, Voodoo Man," Jube said quietly. Cogswell nodded and shrugged and went into silence. Jube nodded to Maddox to go on.

"I'm going to repeat something," Maddox said. "This idea of visibly controlling the masses, like some Orwellian bad dream, is just that—a nightmare. It's never worked before except on a limited basis and for a limited time. Even to try means an enormous organization. It means vast logistics, complex political structuring—look, the best engineered governing system in the history of the world was the Roman Empire, and they went down the tubes. The emperors even went so far as to declare themselves gods and a hell of a lot of people believed them, but when the hammer came down, those visibly in power were the first to go. The history of mankind is testimony to that kind of folly. It's never worked." Maddox smiled.

"Now, our situation is unique as hell. We've got something no one ever had before. A ship right from the stars—"

"You don't know that," Jube said, so quietly Maddox seemed to stumble over a verbal rock.

^W-what?"

"Yew don't know this situation hasn't happened before," Jube repeated. "There may have been ships here before. History is full of crazy stories about these geeks from the stars. Maybe some of them are true. Maybe the people then made all the mistakes you been talking about. I don't give a rat's ass, Senator, but don't make out like you know these things. Stick to what you do know or to what you think may happen."

Maddox looked with new appreciation at Jube Bailey. "You're right. I've never considered that before as a serious possibility."

"Well, give it a shot, man. If you do that maybe you can figure what they did wrong a couple thousand or hundred years ago, and keep us from making the same mistakes." Jube

laughed. "One thing's for sure. If them fuckers ever landed on this planet, they didn't bring with them no secrets to longevity. Whoever was here has been long gone."

Luther Cogswell had come straight up in his seat. "Jube, maybe you're closer than you think to the truth."

"What the fuck you talkin' about, you voodoo halfwit?"

"In the Old Testament, Jube. The Bible talks about men who lived six and seven and even nine hundred years, and—"

There was no mistaking the sudden anger in Jube Bailey's eyes. He didn't give Cogswell a chance to go any further. "Voodoo man, do not, repeat, do not give me any of this Bible shit, you understand? Not one fucking word. Next thing you know we'll be holdin' prayer meetings here." He half-turned to Maddox. "Goddamn it, get on with it!"

Maddox nodded. He didn't seem as sure of himself as he had been. "The ship ... if it's got the kind of power Jake indicates, and if it has destructive power, well, that gives us a really enormous one-two punch. The productive stuff we can do with the pink alien, that Barq, and the medical stuff from Drong. Combine what the top people in government and industry and the military will give or what they would do from those sources, along with the ability to knock out any military system, and you don't have to do that, just bring those people to believe it, through a demonstration or whatever, well, you get started on controlling the choke points."

Maddox took a deep breath. Jube Bailey studied him and Jube didn't show a flicker of emotion or reaction. Maddox stared at an unmoving ebony statue that might come uncoiled at any moment. "Uh, the choke points, like I said," he hurried on. "We go after food supplies, medical centers, power, transportation, the political offices, we get into their churches and we get their top people to preach what

we want them to hear. We take control of their key elements in shipping, in nuclear weapons, and-

"That's enough." Jake Marden shook his head. "You disappoint me, Senator. You're smoking the wrong shit in your pipe. Everything you've been saying won't work."

"Why the hell not?" Maddox half-shouted, as angry and frustrated as he was apprehensive about taking an approach neither Jube Bailey nor Jake Marden would even entertain.

"First," Jake held up a single finger, "what you're saying is the political plan for a huge organization. Not just financed and staffed, but staffed with a whole army of specialists who do nothing but work on such a program. It takes manpower to-

"We don't need that kind of manpower," Maddox broke in, his face showing poorly-controlled frustration. "We've got our hands on the throttle-

"It still won't work. Goddamnit," Jake said, his own heat becoming apparent, "to do what you say we should do requires an enormous system of personnel checks and balances. There's no way we've got the corporals and the sergeants to get down there among the field troops, all the people doing what you're saying, and make certain everyone isn't ripping us off. People who don't see or feel the threat or the power from above don't believe in it. That's not an organization! It's a fucking madhouse. And we don't need that kind of shit. We don't want it. We don't have the time or the people-

"Or," Jube held up his fist with forefinger extended, "the fucking desire," he threw into the verbal foray.

"Mind if I ask a question?" They turned a Cogswell and Jake gestured for him to go ahead. Maddox was grateful for getting off the whipping post. He wasn't accustomed to convicts demolishing his proposals or so totally running such an incredible affair. Here they had the greatest energy machine the world had ever imagined and these two, Marden and Bailey, insisted on playing it cozy and cool and tight to the vest, and "Look," Cogswell was saying, "why do we have to go through all this plotting and scheming? I mean, it's like running the distribution of drugs on an international scale. Sure, you got to have the organization, but with three things- money, the shit to sell, and the kind of fear from these guys knowing their asses is dead if they cross the system-it don't matter if someone slices too much cheese every now and then. Lots of dough makes for great loyalty-" "Bullshit," Bailey broke in. "Get to the point." "Well, why don't we go to the people directly?" Luther asked. "I mean, why not wipe out a couple of cities, I mean, really smear them, and let the world know they can't do shit

about it, we can do this any time we want, and the world has to make a decision. They either go with us or-

"You gonna' count the votes?" Luther stared at Jube Bailey as the latter drove hard at him. "You talk like the whole rucking world has got their shit together, man. You know that's a bunch of crap. The world ain't together about nothing. You know what happens if you wipe out a couple of cities? It'd probably be the best relief those people would ever know. They been waiting for forty years for someone to fire off a couple of hydrogen bombs in some cities. Waiting for the other shoe to drop after we nuked Japan. Forty or fifty years of going nuts in the back of their heads, and here you come along with a ship out of nowhere and filled with the snake people, and you know what you're going to give them? Relief, that's what. Holy shit, they'll say, thank God it's finally happened. Then they think about who did it and they'll decide it's worth all the risk and the trouble, and these space snakes are supposed to be more advanced and superior, and nothing gets them going worse than that. Hey, man, you got enough nigger blood in you to remember not so many years back when we started getting uppity. Whitey like to shit bricks day and night because the niggers was startin' to get theirs. Now you gonna' get all the niggers and the whiteys and yellows and browns and all them crazy fuckers on a religious crusade to kill the space snakes and us right along with them, see? And if you get into that kind of mess-

"If that fucking ship is everything Jake says it is," Luther snorted with derision, "we could take 'em all on and whip ass!"

"Then what you got left, you bleached-out chicken-fucker? A world full of radioactive craters and an atmosphere poisoned all to shit? What the hell good that do us?"

"Hey, hold everything, all you hotheads," Jake stepped into the exchange. He held up both arms until they calmed down. "Look, this is actually a good session. Nobody's got a shiv in their ribs yet, either, so the

talking is working just fine." He turned to face Cogswell. "Luther, stick with me a minute. Say we did what you talked about. We make our appearance. Big show in the sky. They send up ten thousand nlanps and we knock 'em down like a video arcade game. Zip, bam, wham. Then they send up their missiles; whatever, and it's more of the same. Snap, pop, crackle, and they're down. You know what we've done? Nothing, really. They'll wait for us. We do what? Bug their crops to starve them? Stop their trains? Turn off their television sets? What? It's all long distance, it's all remote, it's nothing."

Jake lit a cigar, took a deep lungful of tobacco, blew out a cloud; he let the break last just long enough. "Now let's say we do it your way and it works. You know what we got? A world full of fucked-up zombies who are faking it. We'd be like a few people at the top of the Roman Empire and we can't trust a single soul out there. Why? Because you turn everybody into a fanatic. Because the only thing you really leave them with is the hope they can kill us. No planes? Try bullets. No bullets? Try knives. No knives? Use poison. Set off earthquakes. Anything and everything. Right there, in one shot, we become the anti-Christ and most of the world is ready to die in a new holy crusade and they don't have to be white christians to get in that act.

"If we're going to get control, we ignore worship from the masses. We make damned sure we don't get identified. We stay in the background. It's like Maddox said; a few key people here and there. We can get the governors and the senators and the people like that to change a few laws, issue some pardons, and we can be as free as we want to be. All our records disappear. No crimes, no fingerprints, maybe new names; whatever. Hell, man, that's not difficult to do. You of all people know that, Luther. You can be anybody you want to be, and if no one's after your ass, then you really do own the fucking world." Jake took a deep breath and ran on before any interruptions came at him. "Again, the senator was right, Luther. He just went too far. Get to the few men in power. Get the real old bastards who believe they can never again have what they had when they were younger. Sex drive. Live another fifty years! You haven't felt that computer in that starship," he stressed, throwing out an arm toward the ship on the opposite side of the walls. "It's a teaching machine like you won't believe. You combine what that thing can do along with our drugs and hypnosis, and, man, I can take an eighty-year-old and have the son of a bitch absolutely believe he's fucking like a stallion day and night. You get him to believe that and he feels absolutely fucking great and he'll give us his balls and liver and his soul on a silver platter.

"All we have to do is change a few laws and erase a few records and everything else falls into our laps. We get greedy; we lose. We go on an ego trip? Then we don't come back. So we've got to set up a central headquarters-

"No, we don't." Jake and the others turned to Jube Bailey.

"I don't understand," Maddox said, his face reflecting his surprise.

"This. Right here," Jube told him, rapping knuckles in the table. "This is our headquarters. Nothing will ever be better. Nothing new to appear. Nothing new to show up. We're already on the books for all the new computer shit. We've got this place so tight all we need to do is modify some areas. Even build on like you did to bring that ship down and put it under cover. Jake has the computers whistling Dixie as it is. When the time comes, especially when we have the right people in the right places, buying them or bribing them, it don't matter, then we start changing records. New ID's, credit cards, bank accounts, histories, all of it." His eyes flashed to every man. "But we do it here. We are not falling into that trap of fancy shit headquarters anywhere else." His tone changed suddenly and the killer nigger for a moment was gone. "And that, gentlemen, is not a dialogue. You may consider the issue closed." A fog seemed to drape across Jube. "Sorry, bro," he told Jake. "Come on down with the rest of it."

Jake grinned. "Okay, that problem is out of the way. We've got to bring the key people here," Jake continued. "And no one knows better than Maddox and Cogswell how to arrange that. Or to let them believe it's their own decision to come here."

"How you do that?" Martinez rushed to break in. He'd been desperate to get a word in for a long time.

"It's simple," Maddox answered. "It's so simple I'm ashamed of myself for not realizing just how effective is our setup, We, here, are the Garden of Eden. We tell those people tk truth, that we've got an alien

spaceship here and we have tk

secrets of a thousand years in the future. And it's all just for them. They'll believe us. The whole world knows a starship landed somewhere. And we'll deliver what we promise. We not only give them a spring in their step and a stiff dick and a few more years of life, but we can clue them in to power in their own baliwicks. Let them rule, and through their own greed we rule them."

Jube Bailey laughed. "Now that's the kind of politicking I like. Keep goin', Senator."

"I have another idea. From what Jake said-and Jake, correct me if I'm wrong-that computer can teach anyone a new language in just a few days?" Jake nodded and Maddox permitted himself a smile. "Then we pick up one of those alien tongues and we teach these mothers to speak in that language. There isn't anyone outside of the people we pick who'll ever cotton to the lizard lingo. We can communicate with them anytime and we couldn't care less if we're taped or whatever. No one can bust that code because it isn't a code. When we get enough of those people in the right places right in our grip," he held up a hand and closed it into a fist, "we really start putting on the clamps." "How long you figure that takes?"

Cogswell asked. "One year to start becoming effective, three years to really have the straps cinched tight," Maddox replied. "Hey, what the fuck the geeks get outta' this?" They turned to Carlos Martinez.

Jube looked at him in disbelief. "I don't believe it," Jube said to the group. "The goddamn spic can really think." He jabbed a finger at Maddox. "You answer him, Senator. That's a hell of a question."

Maddox surprised them all by turning to Martinez. "Carlos, what do you think they'll want?"

"Hey, what does anyone want? They want cunt. They want their own turf, that's what. I know we ain't gonna' give 'em North America. That's ours. South America is too close. We want Europe for ourselves. So I figure they want their own turf, give 'em China or Africa. China's full of fuckin' Chinese washin' shirts and Africa it's full of niggers what got AIDS and herpes and all that kinda' shit."

"You know," Cogswell stepped in, "he brings up a question I never thought of until now. How long these space fuckers

live? Twenty more years? Five hundred? You think if they live a long time they'll want the whole fucking world after we're all dead?"

Vasily Korolov smiled, enameled and steel teeth gleaming. "Who care? You get job to come back as ghost?"

"What I care about," Jube dropped into their midst, "is just how much we can trust the geeks. We don't know how they really think. We need to find out. We can't play guessing games."

"How are you going to do that?" Luther asked Jube.

"Hey, that kinda' shit, it's easy," Martinez said, beaming.

"I'd kill him," Jube said to the group, "except that he's on to something. All right, spic, how would you do it?"

"Easy! Get the space fuckheads drunk. Man, alien; it don't make a shit when he talks through the bottom of a bottle."

CHAPTER 20

"What was that fucking movie, anyway?" Jubal Bailey held tightly to the neck of a bottle of cognac, already a third emptied in long swallows, and held aloft the bottle for emphasis. "You know," he said to Jake Marden, "in the real old days. Lord and lordesses and dukes and ducks; whatever. They had carriages and wore them crazy clothes. A hell of a picture. Everybody was fucking everybody else when they could, but the real stuff in that movie, I mean, what everybody was talking about, was a big fucking feast. Duck, goose, turkey, chicken, roast pig, steak, beef; everything. Lotsa' whiskey and grapes and all that shit. And they had these closeups of people eatin'. Man, they was stuffin' everything in their mouths and it dripped all over and run down between tits, and they was slobberin' something fucking awful, but they sure was having a grand time. What was that goddamn movie?"

Jake Marden looked about the huge table they'd assembled for their own feast. The sight staggered him. Six human males. Six alien creatures from a high-powered intellect to a grossed-out combination of a hog

and an elephant. Eighteen broads, human type, professional hookers, tougher than nails and like Jube had said, for enough money they'd fuck crocodiles or jaguars. Two broads for each alien. One broad for each human. Jake had absolutely no need or desire for a hooker with a heart of leather and a soul of cast iron, but not to have a woman at his side, despite her reaching for his crotch almost constantly, would have "unbalanced" the arrangement. Jube's words finally penetrated.

"Tom Jones," he said.

"Who the fuck is Tom Jones?"

"That's the name of the movie. The one you asked me about."

"Tom Jones? What kinda' name is that for a great movie?"

"What am I, Jube? A fucking Hollywood agent?"

Jube laughed and punched Jake on the arm. "Hey, don't trash your own name, bro. It really was Tom Jones?"

"Yep." Jake pushed away the groping hand and turned to the woman. Too bad. She was a good looker and had all the right equipment in the right places and she'd been paid to come here to pleasure this man and she was trying to do just that. "Have another drink," he told her. She sat back, pouting, but only for a few moments, as the bizarre nature of the gathering kept reaching out to her.

She had never seen her sisters both fascinated, puzzled and revolted all at the same time by the incredible weirdos Jubal Bailey and Luther Cogswell had gathered for this party. Lucy Halstadt had been to many a party, orgy, fuckathon, perversion or anything else that might be even remotely connected with sex. She'd screwed her way from Hong Kong to Hamburg and had even been smuggled along with several other girls to Moscow for an international festivity of gluttony and hard-ons. That was infinitely safer for the commies who wouldn't have to worry about any women who remained within Russia after the bottles were empty and the dicks flaccid. But she had never seen a bunch like these. She couldn't figure it. It was like being in a Halloween monster movie and the masks were on the normals. Then again, she mused, some of the normals were pretty weird, too. That pair of big galoots; the Latin and the Russian. Huge of girth and bulk. Those were the kind of men you wanted under or behind you when the fucking got serious. If they were on top of you and went wild, you didn't get hurt so much between your legs as you did in the rib cage and your neck when the shitheads came and then collapsed on you. She glanced at her partner for the evening. There was a man. Big, powerful and she loved a beard like that: this Jake had muscle to his beard instead of one of them faggy, wispy, shithair collections. Nothing wrong with the ebony statue who was obviously real tight with him. Jube. She'd heard of him before. The word was out that he was the real power within Old Millford. She believed it. And she would gladly have welcomed either Jake or Jube hard against her belly. My God, I'm supposed to be a heartless, money-grubbing hooker and I'd fuck either one of these two or both of them for the thrill of it. Both dismayed and pleased with her own thoughts, Lucy Halstadt took Jake's advice and poured herself another drink.

Jube pointed to Arbok. "He's cool," Jube announced. "Better than I'd thought he'd be. I mean, what with all that time since he hocked a tomato I figured his hard-on'd be bustin' right through his pants." Jube studied his friend. "He plays it like you, you know that? I been watchin' him and he's been watchin' you so's to know what to do and how to act with the broad. She thinks he's real experienced at this sort of thing and he's got her so hot she's fryin' herself from her belly to her ears."

"Maybe he is cool," Jake said offhandedly.

"He ain't cool. He's calculated. Knows what he's doin' every goddamned minute," Jube retorted. He grinned. "We'll see how he comes around after he's got a real bellyful of good whiskey."

"Going to be interesting," Jake said quietly. "How they all react to the stuff. Alien systems, Jube. No telling."

"Ahh, bullshit. We gave them a couple bottles and they probably shoved it down the throat of their computer to tell them what to expect."

"If they did that, their computer's drunk," Jake said, dismissing the notion of physiological reaction testing.

"Well, maybe it is drunk! It's alien, ain't it?" Jube leaned back in his seat, shoved the high yellow hooker with him under the table until a rounded surface showed her head up against the tablecloth bobbing up

and down between his legs.

"That reminds me. I wanted to ask you something," Jake said.

"Me getting a blowjob makes you think of questions?"

"Uh huh. Speaking of cocksuckers, what happened when those dudes from the FBI came around to question Spunt?"

Jube laughed, then winced as unexpected movement on his part produced a gasp of pain. He rolled his eyes and ignored the pain for the pleasure. "Thought you knew," he

told Jake. "Went like a charm. Government cats think we got a real fine prison here. They even came around to look at me in my cell. Asked me how I liked the new system. I shuffled my feet and said yassuh, massah, I is a real happy nigger."

Jake studied Jube who'd slumped a bit farther down in his chair and every now and then offered an idiot grin to the world. "No problems? With Spunt?"

"Hell, no, man. We had both his kids in separate holding cells out of sight of the world, and the same with his wife, and I had four mean fuckers in each cell with them. Spunt knew the rules. He so much as said-ahhhhh-one word outta' line, and them animals would fuck his kids and his wife until they were basket cases." Jube shifted position very carefully. "In fact, that's what we do from now on. At oB times one of his kids is gonna' be hi a cell with them animals. They won't hurt the kids. They don't wanna' die that slowly. Now leave me the fuck alone. I'm startin' to enjoy this."

The woman with Grangles wasn't enjoying herself. The similarities between the alien from Ishban and the desert nomads of Earth became ever more astonishing. It was almost a doppelganger effect, a mirror image of one world to the other. Grangles wore loose, baggy trousers and he'd ripped his shirt to shreds to tear it from his body. He was wild with liquor racing through his brain and fire in his belly, and it was pretty damned obvious to everyone else in the room that to Grangles the woman existed for only one reason-to please him any way he wanted. Jake tried to remember that Grangles came from a world of constant struggle and death and take whatever you could whenever it was within reach because the planet and everything on it was choking and gagging and dying. Now he was insane with desire, all inhibitions gone, and Jake knew that to Grangles there existed only the female and what he wanted.

It had to bust wide open sooner or later and it happened sooner as Grangles kicked back his chair and his powerful hands tore the clothes completely away from the woman. Laughter, conversation, even the sounds of eating and drinking stopped abruptly, like a movie with its sound track cut off. Even the woman was speechless. Before she could make a sound, before she could curse or scream, Grangles picked her up bodily and slammed her face-down against the table, her pelvis jammed against the edge, and he held her down with one hand and opened his trousers with the other. He was not oversized, but weird. His penis was almost a sliver of white muscle and bone with an angry hooked barb at its tip. There was no question, there couldn't be any, that when he penetrated her vagina any movement to withdraw would create tearing and ripping of vaginal flesh.

He rammed into her violently, the sound of his hard grunting followed instantly by a piercing shriek of pain. She tried to twist away and Grangles grinned broadly, allowing her fierce resistance to claw his penile barb deeper into her soft wet flesh. From pain and rage she exploded into hysterical screaming agony; she thrust madly to rid herself of this savaging weight against her buttocks and a bellow of pleasure exploded from Grangles as the woman's violent rejection slashed deeply within her.

"Holy shit-" Jube Bailey shoved the woman away from him beneath the table, furiously pulling up on his zipper as he came swiftly to his feet. To his side, Jake felt long nails digging deeply into his arm, an unconscious move by Lucy Halstadt as her own terror and revulsion brought her to grip Marden with all her strength.

"Jesus, he's going to kill her," Jube half-shouted. The woman beneath Grangles twisted and spasmed wildly. Blood streamed down her legs, her back muscles were as taut as cords and her shrieking became even louder.

"He's tearing her up inside," Jake said, disbelieving. He glanced at Arbok, face like stone from some unknown world, not moving, showing no emotion. Barq had turned away, face buried in his hands.

Drong and Brist grinned with the sight, revealing their own judgment of females. Ytram's face glowed

with greasy sweat as he licked his ash-gray lips, his eyes glistening with wonder and awe. He had never seen anything to compare with what he saw now.

"I'll kill the son of a bitch myself," Jube snarled, and started forward, his right hand reaching for his boot and some unidentified weapon within. Jake spun around and grasped his arm. "Hold it." He had to raise his voice to be heard above the throat-searing shrieks and screams. "Watch Carlos-

Martinez had already exploded into instinctive reaction, a reflex movement triggered by a deep and perhaps genetic revulsion of an alien creature internally flailing and raping an earthwoman. Whatever; there was no time to judge or evaluate. The same man who had raped women on four continents, who used women for pleasure, who had never known the word love for a woman since the day as a youth when he left his mother, became a subconscious prime mover to defend the child-bearer of his race. Martinez gave forth a cry of primal rage, all the more horrible as it mixed with the weakening screams of the torn and slashed woman and the increasing grunts and cries of pleasure from Grangles.

Martinez hit him from behind with both fists raised high and clenched together in an unbreakable fingerlock; he brought down his powerful arms with all his strength into the small of Grangles' back. The Ishbanian plunged forward, penetrating deeper into the woman, and their mutual rebound was the final act for the woman whose name hardly any of the others even knew. Grangles ejaculated, and whatever was contained within his seminal fluids was obviously a substance of terrible acidity to his hapless victim. Her body convulsed wildly, and above all the other clamor her muscles spasmed, her head twisted as if invisible hands had gripped her skull with merciless strength, and everyone within the room heard the hard SNAP! of her neck breaking.

Bellowing now with his own pain, Grangles jerked free, the barbed penis laden with blood and mucous and strips of wet flesh from the now doll-like victim. He spun about to face the powerful figure of Carlos Martinez, standing wide-legged and already into the belly fire of battle to the death, Grangles roared again and taloned fingers shot forward at Martinez's eyes. One taloned hand raked the side of Carlos' cheek, but he had moved fast enough to escape puncture of his eyeball. Carlos weighed just over three hundred pounds' and he'd been a professional fighter and killer in close-order and hand-to-hand combat all his life. He outweighed Grangles by better than a hundred pounds and he was as fast as the!

alien, and Grangles really never saw the great hamlike fist that crashed into his mouth. Whatever this being from Ishban was made of, it snapped and crunched under the power of that blow. Grangles stumbled backward, the upper half of his body bent farther back than his feet and as he fought for balance his legs were apart and his arms out of position. The steel-toed boot from Carlos smashed into Grangles' groin with devastating force, lifting him completely from the floor and turning his face a dark purple from the terrible pain of smashed testes. But the alien was made of stern stuff and as Carlos reached down to drag him to his feet, the taloned fingers came up again, ripping into Carlos' belly and slashing at his throat. Blood spurted; the cry from Carlos, however, was one of rage rather than pain and he followed with a single word. "Vasily!" he cried. Anyone who thought it was a call for help was mistaken. This was a killing team and they swung into a move they had employed for years. Vasily Korolov came forward like a charging rhino and he wrapped his thick arms about Grangles' feet. Before the alien could reach out to slash into Korolov's face, Carlos was on him like a big cat, stepping behind his victim. His two hands clutched each side of Grangles' skull, he pulled his head back against his chest and then he twisted with all his strength to his right.

Vasily threw his own body into the air, twisting in the opposite direction.

They wrenched Grangles' body as if it were a huge piece of saltwater taffy. His spine and neck snapped in a dozen places and he was dead before he thudded to the floor,

Silence. A tableau frozen in the bodies of the others, at the moment unmoving. Carlos' breathing was barely labored. Heads turned first to Jubal Bailey and then to Arbok. Everything balanced precariously for the future of the group, everything hung on what Arbok would say or do.

"He violated your rules, your culture," Arbok said slowly. His face showed his contempt as he looked down at Grangles. "What he received, he deserved."

Arbok looked to Jubal Bailey. "What say you, Earthman?" "You want the body or you want us to

dispose of the irhacrg?"

"We have a matter disintegrator that feeds into the powei syst- "

"I don't give a fuck what you do with him. He's yours."

"We can take the woman, too."

"Nobody touches her!" another woman screamed, throwing herself over the dead woman's body.

"Voodoo man, get that bitch out of the way." Jube nodded. "Garbage is garbage," he said to Arbok.

"She's yours." He turned back to Luther. "Get these broads the fuck outta' here. We got some serious drinking to do and I don't think they're the life of the party any more."

Jube waved away the woman who started to reach for him again; Jake did the same with the hooker still by his side. For several moments they were alone, watching the two bodies being carried from the room toward the starship.

Jake reached for the cognac bottle Jube had left on the table. He poured a tall glass full of the dark liquid and downed half the contents in a long swallow.

He studied his friend. "You don't look very upset," he said to Jube.

The black man laughed and reached for the bottle. "Upset? What the hell for?" He swigged from the bottle and wiped his lips. "Man, a little while ago there was these six aliens, see? Now there is only five." He leaned closer to Jake and the smile broadened. "One down, five to go, and that ship is ours."

CHAPTER 21

"I didn't think we could put the thing together in just one month. I still don't know how you managed it."

Jake shook his head and slapped Jeff Maddox on the shoulder. "Congratulations. I've done some construction in my time and I never could have done it."

"Not as much of a miracle as it looks," Maddox said, leading Jake through a series of security passgates.

"The dome is all prefab construction. Everything worked out by those new computers programmed strictly for just this sort of work. They design it, they fire their instructions to other computers in a few plants that are almost completely automated. It's like a dozen production lines all being run by a single top brain that tells its family of brains what to do. I had some very good people working under me, so that my job was really the ultimate strawboss. Now, these systems we're in right now? All TRW and IBM systems. We simply bought their duplicates that are available on the open market. They're computer operated as well, but we have a really great advantage. Whoever tries to get through these locks by accessing our computers gets stopped right in his tracks. The whole system is tied in to the computer in the ship and you've got to go through a translation of Arbok's language, comparing all sorts of geometrical figures on graphic display, before anyone gains admittance. I hired a special team out of Atlanta, they're the best people in the business in security, and they didn't come close to even making a dent in the system. I hate to call anything foolproof, but right now, this is the best on this whole planet." Jake nodded as they walked and exchanged information, with Jake asking most of the questions. They went through

the security system. "Why us? I mean, the whole rigamarole like we just did," Jake asked. "We're not outsiders."

"Everybody's an outsider," Maddox said firmly. "You, Jube, Luther, me. No exceptions."

"Good. That would have been a really bad weak link if you didn't go that route," Jake told the senator. He gestured to take in the corridor ahead of them. "This goes right to the dome?"

"Sure does. The sloping walls to each side look plastic. They are, on the outside and the inside, but between that new plastic there's a solid inch and a half of carboloy-cemented carbide armor plate. A bazooka won't even scratch it. Usually, in any construction like this, tunnels and corridors are the weak links. Ours aren't."

Moments later they stood at the rim of the great dome. "All alloyed steel girders for the dome. Everything interlocks so that the more pressure that's put on this thing, the stronger it gets. This entire dome, when the doors are sealed and we go to internal air purifiers and conditioning, could take a direct bomb hit."

"Why the emphasis on that kind of strength?"

"Jake, this is tornado country, remember? You see that college campus up in Madison when a twister hit it? Their main building was all steel-reinforced concrete, buttressed like hell, and that funnel sliced it in half like a chainsaw goes through a log. I'd hate to see everything we've been doing going up like that"

"Another gold star," Jake said, smiling.

Maddox led him through the thick, massive structure of gleaming plastisteel. Almost all lighting came through structural glass so that a pleasant glow permeated the areas except where they desired special lights for equipment, or they raised or lowered the intensity of the main lighting banks. "We've got four apartments," Maddox said unnecessarily, since Jake knew the plans for the building as well as he did. Jake had insisted on a run-through as if he were a newcomer, "Each apartment is isolated from the other so that there's never any contact between them. Radio waves won't penetrate through the special baffles within the walls. We also have water layers sandwiched between them. They're electrically resistant, and even if the occupants of one apartment wished to communicate with the occupants of another, they can't even talk by Morse code. You can bang on the walls or hammer the flooring, and the baffles take the sound and either distort it so it's meaningless or they soak it up entirely." They went into the first apartment. "Two bedrooms, one large sitting room, one bathroom each apartment. No windows. No television or radio. Laser disc music if they wish. No books, magazines, newspapers. We do everything but stripsearch the people coming in so they can't bring in cameras or recorders of any kind. No pencils, pens, paper; nothing. The only thing you take out of this place when you leave, that you didn't have when you came in, is what's between your ears." Maddox opened a small refrigerator. "Spring water. No alcohol of any kind. No tools, can openers, bottle openers or the like. We yield to the strict sameness for each apartment only where food is concerned. The food is kept to two meals a day and the only yields we make are for religious or other needs. And you already know the meals are prepared in a special kitchen, the food is tasted twenty-four hours before being served for any poisons or problems of any kind. It's all bland, but then we're not here to entertain. I mean, you can't even put your finger into a light socket because there aren't any. Everything lightwise is controlled from the outside. If someone in here wants to raise or lower the intensity of lighting, it's all photocells. You can interrupt the beams for more or less lighting. It goes up and down a limited scale."

They went from the apartment down another corridor into another security room. "No matter who we bring in here,"

Maddox went on, "they don't get into the Mindmat rooms--"

"Hold it," Jake broke in. "Mindmat? Where'd that come from?"

"Just seemed to evolve," Maddox told him. "I mean, I don't know just how it happened, and I think I was responsible as much as anyone else. It's a nice, short word and people seemed to accept it. I saw no reason to come up with some long technical term for the computer infusion, the computer-to-mind effect."

"I still can't believe how effective that is. It took me three days to learn Arbok's language," Jake said, still in awe of the experience.

"I envy you that kind of speed," Maddox said seriously, and Jake saw he meant every word. "I'm damned good, Jake, and it took me eleven days. Not only that, I majored in linguistics and I speak English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and German, and I still took eleven full days to get that language down pat. I'm glad we're not going for the full course for the people who come in here. They have five days and three of those are spent in language. Then they get two days of hypno--"

"Don't even use that word," Jake said sharply. "Not to me or anyone else from now on. That'll scare off most of the people we want in here. They've absolutely got to accept that they're on an even basis with the training or the indoctrination system, this Mindmat stuff, but never hypno. This is the last time we even discuss this, Jeff, understand?"

"I read you loud and clear."

"You didn't change the program? I mean, nobody else in the cubicle when training is going on?"

"No, sir, not a beat. The, ah, guest comes in here. All instructions are flashed on the screen in the guest's

language. All spoken instructions are computer-originated in any language we need. No one can screw up on us that way. They come in here, they look into that eye tunnel, they grip those handles, and that's it. I don't know much about that doohickey Arbok's got in that ship, but it doesn't need EEG or other connections. Just what you've experienced yourself. They get three hours for any one session, that's as much as they can take, and then, the chairs they're in ease back to a full lounge position and they sleep for at least another eight hours. The way that thing gets between your ears, I believe Arbok when he says that each sleep session after the training continues the training, but without the computer. Anything else-"

"-would overload the brain system," Jake finished for him.

"Right. Five days here, and they're on their way out. What I like best about this program," Maddox said with renewed emphasis, "is that we run it low key all the way. No bugles, bells, whistles or any of that nonsense. I'm not so sure," he hastened to add, "that I like what you've set up with the major drug dealers-"

"Why not?"

The query from Jake Marden came easily enough and it was soft enough, but by now Maddox had come to recognize the danger signs in this man. "It's not a matter of morality, Jake. Jesus, don't get me wrong on that. It's just that those people stand out like a sore thumb. More to the point, we never know when those people have been the subjects of an ongoing investigation that may have existed for years. That means the kind of people we don't want interested in what we're doing could be sniffing around the place. Look," he added hastily, "you told me to consider all aspects of what we do here and come to you when I even think, no matter how thin it might be, when we have a weak spot. I consider this to be a weak spot."

Jake took time to consider what Maddox said. "You know we went through the whole program thoroughly, right?" Maddox nodded. "And the more we got into it, the clearer it became that if we wanted to get immediate cash that couldn't be traced, the international drug lanes were the way. All we're doing is skimming off the top. Luther has the best contacts of all. We bring in different people he selects. Not your common street animal from the States. But the top government people, the religious leaders, the great scholars, from around the world. They're the invisible force in drugs. They handle billions. When they come out of here they're convinced that the only way to go from then on is through the organizations that Luther sets up and that we then control. Luther has no idea of where the money goes, how it's controlled, what banking institutions or governments are involved. We're not playing with assholes like Noriega or Castro or that crowd. We go way, way above that. All business, all clean, all unsuspected. We won't need them later except for control; not for the money, certainly."

They left the great geodesic dome, waited patiently through four separate security checkpoints, including one area where they were sealed in within great sliding barred doors and dogs sniffed suspiciously about them for drugs or any trace of

explosives, a security system to which everybody was subjected both going in and coming out of the Mindmat area.

"By the way, that business school you set up in town was brilliant," Maddox told Jake. "There was that building set up by that insurance company, doing nothing, and you turn it into a real business school. When you bought the motel and tied the two together, well, that was perfect."

"You were the key man on that one," Jake complimented Maddox. "You handled it all like silk."

"Easy enough when you've got all the money you need and I've got the contacts. It fills in the holes about Old Millford getting all the sudden traffic flow and attention, I'll say that much for it."

"We open the security training school in two days," Jake told him. He hadn't planned to say anything yet to Maddox, but the senator was coming through like gangbusters.

"I knew you had it in the planning stage," Maddox said, "but you're ready to open this fast?"

"We have to. We'll fake it for a while with our own selected people attending the courses. And the instructors," Jake emphasized, "will be absolutely bona fide from the word go. Everyone of them will be licensed and with an excellent training record. Security systems for your home and business, for prisons and aircraft; the whole damn works. That also gives us all the cover in the world for the field we're using for all those helicopter operations. There's no way to hide twenty choppers of different sizes, and with the

gunnery ranges blazing away it's going to attract all the attention we want and raise enough dust to cover what we're doing."

"You make your decision on our guards?"

"Yep," Jake nodded. "They go, too. They all get big damn bonuses to take the extra time to attend the school. Seven thousand bucks a man. They're freaking out and as far as they know it's all above board. It's a seven-grand bonus for going and they get a big raise when they come out and return to the Rock. The feds or anybody else can question them all day and all night and if they tell the feds everything they know about the school, why, that's great." Jake laughed. "We'll probably get a couple of ringers from the FBI or some other

outfits in the school as students. In fact, I hope to hell that's just what they do,"

"Didn't you say something about that school not being operated by us?"

"You got it, Jeff. In fact, it's run by an overseas division of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries." "Mitsubishi? Japan?"

"Hell, yes. Why not? We're building Japanese jets and turboprops and cars and trucks in this country, we're adopting Japanese management systems and training, the Japanese are buying into every sector of our business and industry, so why not the security business also? The Nakamura family is handling the whole lot. To make sure we get the kind of free movement we need, the Nakamura group has also bought into the Alpine auto rental company, and we get supplied with everything from motorcycles to the big semi rigs. Every time a vehicle goes out, it's covered with the right names, the ID papers, drivers' licenses-everything. It's all above board. It has the necessary permits, corporate papers, it follows every rule for HEW and IRS and all that shit. We are from start to finish squeaky clean."

They paused in their exchange as they moved back through an underground corridor to the prison yard. Jake made certain that none of them ever disappeared from sight of the convict population. Old Millford, like all such institutions, was a rumor mill, a factory of speculation and gossip-mongering spewing forth as if they were scuttlebutt smokestacks. For the next half hour, he and Maddox moved through the yard, stopping to talk with small groups, listened to requests for favors and granting most of them. They judged their presence having met such needs when Jube and Luther approached from across the yard. They kept it casual, very visible, making certain they were all seen and heard together.

Close by one another, Jube affected the happy-go-lucky nigger who's on the inside and has it made in his world of high walls and favors for pay. He appeared openly to be just what he wished; smart enough to be dangerous and not so smart as to not remain a dumb black son of a bitch. He slapped white skin with black, grinned loosely, and with an

air of utter indifference, nodded to Jake. "Twenty minutes. In the hole."

Jube stood before Jake; a glance showed the latter that his friend was all business. "Do you want to work with the Russians?" Bailey asked without preamble.

"You want an answer right now?"

"Immediately. Or sooner. Or as quickly as you can give me your answer and if it's no, tell me why." Jube turned away, spun back to face Jake and stabbed a finger at him.

"Damn it, don't think on it! Give me your gut reaction, man."

Jake let it hang loose in his head. "No," he said suddenly.

Jube eased into a chair. He slipped a cigarette between his teeth and scratched an old-fashioned wooden match across the bottom of his shoe. For a moment the world was that flaring fire; Jube lit up, tossed away the match.

"Now that you've said no I've got time to listen. Why, Jake?"

"You don't get the Russians without built-in problems. I assume the Russians you mean are the dyed-in-the-wool Russkies out of the motherland itself. What Vasily refers to with a teary blur in his eye as Rodina."

"I don't give a shit if they call it Rosalita. Yes, those Russians. They have a group that knows more about what we're doing here, the special program-"

"Do they call it Mindmat?"

"How the hell did you know that? Yeah, they do."

"Then our security has a leak in it. Someone in this prison, one or more people, has cottoned on to what we're doing in terms of what they think is a brain machine, and they've passed the word on to Moscow. Or Keiv, or Leningrad, or Poltava; wherever, and-

"I'll kill that fucking Korolov with my bare hands-

"It's not him," Jake said quickly. "It would be too obvious, like shooting off flares in a sewer. Uh uh. He's not the one. It's someone else in this prison who's a fervent, loyal, fanatical communist and is being faithful to his special group within the Soviet."

"You mean a special group that's not in the the top seats?" Jube looked doubtful.

"That's exactly what I mean. They're interested in anything that might give them an edge over the Gorbachev bunch. They have a stoolie in here, and it's strictly coincidence that he's here, but who's breached what we thought was an airtight wall around everything we've done." Jake turned to Maddox.

"Mister, I advise you not to lay your head down on a pillow until you find out where you fucked up."

Maddox's face was ashen. He nodded his agreement. "I will find out," he forced out the words.

"How'd they make the contact to you?" Jake asked Jube.

"Not to me. To the voodoo man. It came down through a big drug move. I didn't even know the Russians were into that shit."

"Nobody in big business or government hates money, Jube. They spoke only to Luther?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, then he knows the contact."

"No, he doesn't. Whoever's talking for the boys in red is a shrewd operator. The message was done on a typewriter. It passed through no less than ten sets of hands to get to Luther. None of the men who handled the envelope knows more than the man who gave it to him and the man he gave it to. Big circlejerk, m'man. The word is also out that if anyone in that group opens his yap about pointing fingers, they all go down."

"It seems to me," Maddox said carefully, "working with them could just lead us to who they are. Then we'd know the leak."

"No," Jake said with sudden heat. "It never works that way. You open the floodgates you let in all the water, not just some of it. It's got to be no."

"Maybe they'll pay real big," Jube said to test his own waters.

"Who needs it?" Jake retorted. "We've already got nearly two billion dollars under our direct control. The Japanese alone will pay more than that for our contract."

"What the hell they after, anyway?" Jube asked. "Growing more rice? Growing bigger shrimp? What?"

"China."

"They want China?"

"Yep."

"That's all they want? Just China?" Jube grinned at Jake.

"Back to the Russians," Jake said to steer their exchange back to where it belonged.

"Okay. When you said no it became your ball game," Jube said, dropping the burning coal right in Jake's lap.

"Round 'em up," Jake said coldly. "You listening, Maddox? You are? Then listen better, mister. Round 'em up. Start with the one who gave Luther the message. The last one in the chain. You do whatever you got to do. We need his information fast. Nothing slow and fancy. You stick needles in his eyeballs, you skin him alive, you roast his dick over a sterno fire; I don't care what. Get the names of the others, right on down the trail just like you're chasing ten little Indians."

Maddox didn't want to waste talk or time. "Where do you want them and what do you want done with them?"

"Don't kill them." Jake's restriction brought raised brows from Jube and a startled exclamation from Maddox. "Put them in the hole. Each man in his own solitary cell. The guards are not to talk to them. As soon as you start them down into the holes, have Luther and his boys hook 'em. Full IV's of the strongest

stuff they can take and still stay alive. I want them totally, completely dependent. I want them hooked and skewered. A few days of that and then, when the stuff is their momma and their lover and the devil and God all rolled into one, we hold back. We'll get to the key man. He'll talk. He'll sing and dance like a regular one-man-band. He won't be able to kill himself, and that's what I want. I don't want to see you again, Maddox, until the job is done. Move it."

They watched the senator leave them on a run.

"Hey, that was a neat plan," Jube remarked.

Jake grabbed a beer. "You don't seem worried."

"Why the fuck should I worry? Your plan's beautiful. It'll work."

"Okay." Jake took a long, cold swallow.

"Question," Jube said.

Jake imitated his friend. "Lay it on me, m'man," he said in a singsong voice.

"The Japs. They really gonna drop on us what they said?" "If we carry out our part of the deal; yes."

"How many Nips they bringing in?"

"Just a few of their own. They're bringing in about a dozen Chinese."

"The chinks?" He watched Jake nod. "What in the hell for?"

"They indoctrinate them in the Mindmat and that way they get total, absolute loyalty to their program.

Then the Japs slip the Chinese back into their own country in high places. A lot of them are already there.

They plan to run a hundred, maybe two hundred Chinese in here."

"Shit, man, that could take a year, maybe even two or three!"

"They know. They're patient. They also knew that the bread they're going to lay on us is only a fraction of what a war would cost, and a smaller fraction of what they'll gain."

Jube cocked his head as he studied his friend anew. "Lay it on me, white dude. What's the tab?"

"I'm glad you're sitting down."

"My black ass is against black leather. I'm invisible, babe. Lay it on me."

"Eight to ten billion."

"Ten billion, huh." The words came out flat, intoned without need for the speaker to state it wasn't even worth a query.

"Yep."

"Bullshit."

"Why?"

"You know the routine. We couldn't hide ten billion in cash anywhere in the whole fucking world."

"Three billion cash deposits. Gold, platinum, holdings, cash; whatever we want. Payable in terms of one billion per year for three years consecutive. Bankable anywhere or delivered to our terms. Not enough to cause more than small waves like there are every day of the week."

Jube nodded. "Yeah, that would fit. But that's only three. Three times one don't make ten."

"It's all progressive expenditures. As the boys in Hollywood say, a step deal. We perform on schedule, they pay on

schedule. Payment comes in the form of hotels, airlines, computer companies, silicon chip stocks, shipping lines, petroleum, whatever we want. The main issue here is that this is slipped into everything else so neatly it won't draw attention. If it did, we'd have a load of fresh shit on our hands."

"And that draws flies."

"Right."

Jube stared long and hard at his friend. "I'm thinking," he said finally.

"You got a lot to think about old friend."

"Not what you think, Jake. Fuck the money. Ten bil, ninety bil, what's the difference? No, it's not the bread, Jake. It's this whole incredible fucking dream I'm living. Jake, for God's sake, did you ever forget, even for a single moment, where we came from, you and I?"

"No."

"They were going to hang our asses, dude. Old film style. Black and white. Yours and mine. Crazy fucking killer Jew and a wild-eyed nigger maniac. We keep going the way we are and we're going to be a real power mover in the world."

"Looks that way, Jube."

"Would you believe I don't care that much about it?" Jake smiled. "How'd you know I felt the same way?" "My blood, your blood," Jube answered with his own smile.

"What do you want, Jube?"

"If I had my choice of anything?"

"Uh huh."

"That my sister would have had a good life ahead of her."

Jake stayed with that a few moments. "I can't answer anything to that."

"I know. That ten billion got awful light of a sudden, didn't it." It was a statement; no question there.

A sad smile came to Jake's face. There were a few women in his life he could never forget. Jubal Bailey's sister was one

of those women.

Jube felt the squeeze in Jake's head and he moved quickly "I got the same question for you, Jake. What do you wantf

"Jesus ..."

"None of that honky crap, boy. He's been sent upstairs,"

Jube offered a smile with his remark; he received a wan look in return for his effort. "Come on, man," he said almost in a whisper. "Lay it on me."

"I-I really don't know, Jube." Jake looked up, the light returning to his eyes. "Some things we can't ever have again. We both know that. Nothing in the world touches what we have left between us. White man, black man, different colors; same pain, same burning memories, same shared loss."

"Fuck you, Jake. Turn around. Get the hell out of the past."

"Yeah." Jake took a deep breath; a shudder passed through him as though he were shedding that past so bittersweet to him and Jube. "There are two things. The first is the challenge of doing what you and I've been doing. We beat the system. A few details here and there, but that's chickenshit. The system. We beat it."

"Then how come, m'man, you got such an empty feeling inside you? The others," Jube gestured lazily, "they don't cotton to what's inside your head or mine. They couldn't come within a billion miles of that. Okay. So I'm the only one who knows besides you. Maybe even better than you."

"I wouldn't doubt that."

"Hey, you told me there were two things. The first don't matter beans to you. Now lay the other one on me. I got a hunch I know what it is."

"All right, smartass. You tell me," Jake retorted.

Jube smiled. "Oh, it's easy man. It is so easy."

"I'm waiting."

Jube laughed. Jake had never heard this sound from him. It was a cry from within Jube's soul, from forever away, that said This is my friend and I know what's eating him inside and I am starting to lose him

. . .

"You're hungry. You're so hungry, Jake, it almost cries out from you like a soul in Hell."

"Where's that mean nigger I used to know so-"

"Fuck off, Jake. This one's no game."

Jake Marden nodded slowly.

"You want to fly with the angels, Jake."

Jake didn't answer.

"Or maybe fly beyond that, where the angels have never

been. Maybe God has His own corner of the universe and we're it. Maybe if you went out there and you whipped between the stars like you do the clouds, you'd hear the music again. Do you know I could always hear the music from your soul, Jake?"

Jake's eyes were wide. "W-what?"

"Oh, man, I have heard it. I've heard it when you were with me and when you weren't. Not physically. But there was always a thread, a link, and no matter how distant and tiny the sound, it was there. This is a rotten, stinking world, Jake Marden, and you don't belong in it, doing the things you done. Your hands deserve to be clean, like your soul. Everything a man could ever want on this planet is just about yours for the asking, and it's all turned empty and hollow because you're hearing this new music. And I'm no part of it and I can never be and, my God, I miss you already, because all I can do is stand on my toes and reach up and I can barely brush it, and it's all through you and I can almost see it and-"

Jake's hand reached out instinctively. "Jube-"

"Get the fuck outta here, Jake Marden."

Jube turned away and buried his face in his powerful hands and wept silently, great shuddering sobs wracking his body.

Slowly, quietly, Jake left the room. He closed the door behind him. Two guards stood in the corridor.

"This door is to be opened only from the inside," Jake said. "You read me?"

"Uh, yes, sir."

"You let anybody in there until Jube Bailey comes out, I swear to you I'll kill you both with my bare hands."

Jake walked away down the corridor. He felt lost, drifting, confused. My God, Jube, why didn't you ever tell me all those things I never knew about myself?

"You're out of your goddamned mind!" Jake shouted, pointing his hand with undisguised anger at Arbok.

The tall alien stood quietly in what had become his private compartment aboard Frarsk, a compact stateroom filled with furniture and electronics of special appeal to him. He didn't respond to Jake's explosive reaction at finding the Japanese woman not just with Arbok, but aboard the alien starcraft, which meant she had by some miracle slipped through all the security screens Maddox and the others had so laboriously set up. Jake's emotions ran and tumbled from one subject to another, each heating up his temper. He fought for his self-control. He stretched his arms down by his side, forcing his fists to unclench, splaying out his fingers. The old maneuver worked; it seemed to dispel his inability to speak without turning his words into snarls.

Jake took a deep breath. "All right, Arbok," he said with his control returned, "who is she?" "Ask her, Jake," Arbok parried the question. "That sounds like an admirable idea to me," the woman followed Arbok's words with her own. Jake took a second, long look at her. Diminutive as were most Japanese women; he judged her at five foot two in a slim, athletic body. Jet-black hair, flashing dark eyes, and a surprising, almost shocking alabaster skin rather than the soft brown he'd always known in Japanese. More than all her physical features he took stock of facial expression, stance, her voice and mannerisms, and the way she stood close to Arbok, all but touching. So there was more to this than simply a female in his compartment for pleasure. And Jake had a whole slew of questions waiting to burst forth. "Arbok, what's her name?"

The woman offered a fleeting trace of a smile. "His suggestion, remember? Why don't you ask me?"

"Woman, I'll say this only once," Jake said slowly and with a grating edge to his voice. "You are closer to being dead right now than at any other time in your life. If Arbok were not my friend, and if I did not trust him, you would never have managed a single word."

He ignored her and looked again to Arbok. He saw the harsh, noticeable nod by his alien friend; so Arbok, at least, realized the situation might be more serious than he'd considered.

"Michiko Nakamura," Arbok said, half-strangling the Japanese name. "She is-"

"I recognize the name," Jake broke in. "The Nakamura family. Mitsubishi. She's here as part of the Mindmat program. She's been security cleared into the dome, but not in here." That was the most puzzling part of this whole scene.

Jake knew the woman hadn't been placed in the computer security system. Just trying to get her through the security checkpoints should have set off a whole battery of alarms.

"I took care of that," Arbok said. "There is no harm. What she knows, almost all of it, she knew without my telling her."

"How'd you crack security? I thought we were airtight."

"The ship's computer," Arbok answered with a gesture to the computer buried deep within Frarsk. "Your computers are slaved to our system. And the computers you're using for security are like simple children to Frarsk, and-"

"Never mind. I get the picture. Who else knows how to get through?"

"Who else? Me. No one else, Jake. However, I consider us to have equal position and I will teach you-"

"Later, later," Jake said impatiently. He looked again to Michiko Nakamura, this time with less overt hostility in his eyes. "You've been here for just over a month," Jake said. "How long has, uh, this," he motioned to the both of them, "been-"

"Been going on? From what I've heard and seen of you, Mr. Marden, you disappoint me."

"You flatter yourself and play me short," he countered. "I don't judge men and women nor do I care about affairs or even if they exist. This is obviously a long way beyond an affair. My question was going to be how long have you two been this serious about, well, about you two?"

"There is a wonderful American expression, Mr. Marden," she said, and he understood what people meant when they said some women spoke with the sound of a golden bird. "It is called love at first sight. Are you surprised? Shocked?"

"Surprised, yes. Shocked? Only how easily Arbok rattled our security cage. How do I feel about you two?" The anger was gone now. "I feel terrific. How do you feel living with an alien in a starship with a crowd of offworlders about your ears?"

She laughed. "Stunned. Confused. Very apprehensive at times. Happy. Deliriously, impossibly, irrationally happy."

Soft memories rose up in Jake's mind and he pushed them hastily back down. "Who else knows?"

"You mean among," she clapped her hand to her mouth and giggled, "the earth people?"

It was fanny. "I guess that's as good a description as any. Yes. Among the earth people."

"You, Jake," Arbok said, "are it. You and you only."

"Well, for Christ's sake, let's keep it that way."

"My word, friend Jake."

"That'll do. How about Madame Butterfly?"

"Why, thank you, Mr. Marden! The secrecy is really necessary?"

"It is. If certain people know the extent of your relationship I wouldn't plan on a long life."

"Then I will be silent. And circumspect."

Jake let himself fall into a lounge chair. "Jesus Christ, I need a drink," he said.

"We have some good earth whiskey," Michiko Nakamura told him.

"I'll take it neat, and thank you. The name, by the way, is Jake."

"Mickey."

"Like in Mouse?"

She smiled. "Yes." She brought him the drink and they sat across from him. Once again, that sense of total disbelief at where he was and with whom thudded into his skull. He gulped down the drink, feeling the heat rushing through him, salvaging his sanity.

Mickey studied him for several moments, glancing from Jake to Arbok and back to Jake again. He stirred himself. "I get the feeling you're trying to tell me something," he said.

She nodded. Arbok was clearly enjoying the moment. The woman turned to him. "Arbok, we'll have to tell him."

Jake came straight up in his seat. Tell him what? He'd had enough emotion and surprises and trauma for any one day.

Arbok smiled. "Yes. Of course."

"Whatever it is," Jake said, "keep it tight. Please."

"I'm taking Arbok to Gainesville tonight," Mickey said.

Jake blinked. "The hell you say."

"I'm serious." She faltered over his name, then said with a determined look, "Really, Jake. Tonight, as soon as it's dark. I have my own car. Arbok says he can slip us out of here to the car without anyone knowing."

"Til bet he can," Jake said drily. "But why?"

Michiko Nakamura scuffed one toe on the floor. "Maybe you'll think we're crazy for this ..."

"Spill it," he pushed.

"Well, there's something Arbok wants to hear in Gainesville. It's at a place they call the O'Connell Center. At the university."

"I know it," he told her. "What's he so hot to see? Sorry; you said hear."

She looked at Arbok. He showed no reaction one way or the other. Jake's reaction was still the unknown factor here. "A concert. The Moody Blues. They're really terrific. Arbok likes music, but he's never experienced actually being there."

"The music's different when you're there?"

She clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, yes! Those speakers, and watching the performers, and the laser show . . . and the crowd really gets into it. It's . . . well, it's electric, absolutely electric. It gets into your blood and you get swept up with it and-" Her face took on a more determined look. "If Arbok is to get to know us, not just you and me, but to know what the different people of this world are like, well, I think it's important."

"He'll stand out like a sore thumb. Take another good look at our Makkian friend. I don't mean to be unkind, Mickey, but this man is also my friend, and in a college crowd he's going to look like a freak."

"You haven't seen many college students lately, I can tell that," she retorted. She studied Arbok's profile.

"But you're right." Her face brightened. "But we have the answer."

"Which is?"

"There's a big fraternity party just before the concert. A masquerade party. It's perfect!" She giggled.

"Arbok will go as an alien from outer space!" Her giggles became a peal of laughter. "Compared to what the students will be wearing, Arbok will look normal."

"Jake?"

He looked up to Arbok. "It would be very wise if you came with us. With all those new identification papers you have, for yourself, and me as well, and you explained that the computers will show everything to be proper and, what was that word-?"

"Legal."

"Then we should have no problem. And it will be a great added safety feature."

"And you can go as a fighter pilot!" Mickey added quickly. "If you wore your flight suit, and boots, and," she took a deep breath, "and, your crash helmet, and we'd tie a white scarf around your neck, and-"

"Whoa; hold it. How come you know so much about that stuff?"

"My brother's a fighter pilot in the Japanese air force. Will you do it? Arbok's right. I'll be driving, anyway, and the car is in my name ..." Her voice trailed away. Arbok and Jake had hard eye contact with one another, speaking through feelings.

"Ah, what the hell," Jake said. "Let's do it."

Mickey shrieked and threw her arms about him. Over her shoulder Jake saw Arbok nod, grinning.

Two hours later they were on their way. Jake left a note in Jube's apartment that he'd be gone with Arbok for several hours but would be back later that night.

He hadn't counted on Michiko's unspoken "surprise" for him. And he would recall for years afterward that had he known he would never have gone that night to the concert. The last thing he wanted in his life was the reopening of old and terrible wounds.

Michiko presented her surprise in the parking lot outside the great white dome of the O'Connell Center. They stood beneath the soft amber glow of a high overhead light. All about them the world was filled with people, but they were one of many small islands moving steadily toward the dome.

"Jake, this is my surprise. My best friend, Alison Harper."

She extended her hand. Caught unawares, Jake instinctively took her hand. Cool spring water . . .

Alison's grip was feminine and yet firm. "Hello, Jake."

He said, "Hello, Alison." He didn't want to say anything. He didn't want to meet any woman on a one-on-one like this. He didn't want Don't smile at me like that, woman . . .

High clouds and silvered flight canyons in the moonlight. Quicksilver and sunflowers ...

She kept her hand in his as they walked in a foursome to the dome entrance. For a while Alison didn't speak. Mickey did it for her.

"We've known each other for years, Jake. Alison's got the North American beat for World Press International. None of that dumb television stuff. This girl can write. They call it interpretive reporting. News with guts and meaning to it. We spent a couple of years together in Japan. Don't let her smile fool you. She's got two doctorates and she's as tough as buffalo hide." After a while they didn't hear very much of what Michiko was saying. It didn't matter that much then, of course. Not with the Moody Blues hammering it out, filling the O'Dome with crashing waves of music, thunder and melody, soaring and leaping and thrusting at them.

Jake was astonished with Arbok. Eyes Of A Child, the first number, hit him with the force of a truck. When they went into For My Lady and The Other Side Of Life his foot was tapping. Knights In White Satin held him nearly trance-like, Then the Blues hit it hard and sweet with Voices In The Sfa/ and Arbok was speechless. Spurred on by the avalanche of drumming thunder from the audience, they swept into Tuesday Afternoon and Arbok was oblivious to them all.

Then the Blues hit it with I'm Just A Singer In A Rock and Roll Band, and the beat was wild and the crowd picked it up and went along with it, and Aktuk san Yangst Arbok was on his feet with the people about him, one foot slamming the floorboards and both hands smashing together in time with the music. The scene dumbfounded Jake.

Arbok of the planet Makk of the star Traik, costumed as an alien being from outer space, was the hit of the party.

CHAPTER 22

Two weeks later they lost Barq. If anyone could have anticipated what might have happened, it could only have been Arbok. Jake Marden and Jubal Bailey met in the security area by their underground control room; Jake came into the confrontation puzzled and angry with events beginning to slip away from his control and Jube sat with them with his face set in dark fury.

"Did you know?" Jube asked with the anger undisguised in his voice. "Did you know anything at all?"

Jake studied every motion, every flicker of emotion on Arbok's face. If there was guile there then this man, this alien-no, damnit; this man-was pure expert at covering his thoughts.

"I did not know, Jubal Bailey, because there was nothing to know," Arbok said, his words measured and precise.

"Spell that out, mister," Jube demanded.

Jake kept his fingers crossed that Jube would restrain himself from resorting to his ultimate solution to all such problems: kill the fuckers and be done with it. And he hoped as fervently that Arbok would stay with the absolute truth and not lose his cool to the anger pouring forth against him.

"I couldn't know what Barq el Quatrane might do," Arbok continued in his measured tones, "because it was impossible to predict the situation. Barq had no idea when the experience would strike him, and it was only after his exposure to that television program that he-"

"What program, for Christ's sake!" Jube shouted.

"Barq was watching a program prepared by one of your groups that travels about your planet, providing filmed records of the various life forms. This was on the oceans. Barq,

as you already know, comes from a world where there are no massive continents such as you have on this planet. Sagandrin is a world of floating islands, but their water is shallow everywhere, and life on

Sagandrin is a constant struggle to purify that water and produce flora of all kinds. They literally extract from that water, through advanced forms of genetics and chemical alteration-

"Screw that shit," Jube snapped. "Get to the point, man."

"Think of Sagandrin as a world where the advanced life forms such as Barq are in complete symbiosis with the flora. Do I speak clearly on this?" Arbok asked.

"Yes. What's your point?"

"There are no truly advanced non-human life forms on Barq's world. There are only animals of sluggish intelligence, hardly better than your plants here. Barq watched the program-

"It was National Geographic," Jake broke in.

"I don't give a shit if it was Shirley Temple," Jube said darkly. His eyes narrowed as he studied the others with him. "What you just said," he directed his words to Arbok, "is so much bullshit. You'll never get me to believe there's a huge gap between fancy plants and an advanced life form like Barq. Evolution don't work that way and I don't give a damn what planet is involved. Smart critters evolve from dumb critters. That's the way it works."

Jake almost broke out with open laughter. He had to remind himself that Jubal Bailey was the best one-man-act in the whole place. The "dumb nigger" was not only as swift as a blade and as smart as a whip, he'd been a forest ranger who lived every day with all manner of animals. He'd studied fauna from one end to the other, and his point was absolutely valid. Jake kept his silence and left the query for Arbok to answer.

"You are correct," Arbok said, a bit stiffly. "There were such creatures on Barq's world. What we would call the intermediate evolutionary levels. Most of them apparently died out during a pulse in their stellar radiation. Extreme heat. Only the lower and higher end of the evolutionary scale survived."

"Okay, okay," Jube said, waving him on. "Now, what about that program? Geographic or something?"

"Thank you," Arbok said. "The program was about your great sea mammals. The whales. Barq was fascinated, almost hypnotized with their size and grace and their numbers. Then they played the sound tracks your people made with recordings beneath the sea. When he heard these, Barq acted as if he were stunned. He watched and he listened in complete disbelief. I was there with him. He turned to me and he shook all over like a freezing child. He said to me, 'I don't understand them . . . I know what they are saying. I understand them! I must see these creatures!' He begged me to arrange such an encounter."

"And," Jube said, in a tone much more even than he had used up to this moment, "you did just that?"

"Yes." Arbok looked from one man to the other. "But I made certain not to violate the security terms I promised with you. I went to your person, Maddox, and made Barq's request known to him. It was not much to ask. There is a place on your shores to the east of here, I believe. A place where many sea creatures are kept, including the mammals. Barq spoke especially of the whales. The dolphins, and he spoke of the gladiator orcas-" "Killer whales," Jake interjected.

"I know what the hell they are," Jube growled. "And the place you're talking about is Marineland. On the Atlantic. Did Maddox get him there?"

"Yes. It was arranged to take place late at night. There would be no visitors. Only a few people who tend the animals at night. Barq was dressed so that no one could truly see his face. He wore-Jake, I need your help. A jog suit?"

"That would be jogger sweats," Jake said. "Sure. Loose pants and sweatshirt and a hood. In the dark you couldn't tell him from anyone else. Okay, so he went. Who took him?"

"Maddox sent your man from the far south continent. Carlos. Yes; Carlos Martinez. He said that Barq el Quatrane was dead."

"How?" The word shot like a bullet from Jube. "He spent a little time where the animals are in theft pens. They made many strange sounds. Then, as Martinez told me, he asked to be taken to the beach. It is very close?"

"A hundred yards," Jake said. "What the hell happened, Arbok?"

Barq el Quatrane stood at water's edge, a dusky orange moon low on the horizon. Strange and powerful emotions tugged to and fro within him. Of all the dreams he had ever dreamed, none ever came remotely

close to this wonder. Such magnificent creatures! And they spoke, their voices carrying so far in this strange and wonderful ocean. In the reflected gleam of the moon he saw great dorsal fins slicing the waters. Faint spray moved the fins. He felt, he sensed their call to him, real and deep within his soul. Barq no longer thought of what to do. An instinct far more powerful than anything he had ever known possessed him. He started forward into the gentle breakers. From behind him he heard the man-creature shout to him, but the voice was tinny and meaningless against this incredible wonder. As he moved away from the shore he slipped from his clothes, a creature naked on the land but fully natural in this only real environment. Then the water closed over his head and his sinuous form moved gracefully, swiftly through the all-embracing liquid. The sounds grew louder, the huge shapes rushed to him to surround his form. They bid him welcome and Barq el Quatrane answered them.

He was home.

"You-no, it wasn't you who said he was dead. Martinez; right?" Jube asked Arbok. "It was Martinez who said he was dead."

"Yes."

Jube turned to Jake. "Any police reports of a body? He can't swim forever. The dumb shit must have drowned."

"No."

They both looked at Arbok. "No?" Jube echoed.

"He did not drown, and you will never see him again. Nor will I. Nor will anyone else."

"What makes you say that?" Jake asked, but the faint touches of the answer had already reached his thoughts.

"Barq breathes in either atmosphere or water," Arbok said.

Jube shook his head. "Jesus Christ, are you telling me ..." he let the question trail away.

"Yes, Jubal Bailey. He will live out his life with those wonderful creatures of your ocean. He is now a creature of the sea, like them."

They returned to their control room, Jube silent, chewing over everything he had heard. Together in his apartment finally, he turned to Jake. "That takes care of our great agricultural revolution. Up to his ass and ears in salt water the rest of his life."

Jake nodded. "Sure seems that way."

"Seems that way? What are you going to do? Go after him with a fucking net?"

Jake smiled. "Hardly. But no one else outside of our small group need know he's gone."

Jube stabbed a finger at his friend. "Jake, I don't like this. I mean, that fucking Grangles is dead and that don't matter. He was just an asshole and there's no loss. But the other one, this Barq, we had plans for him. And it's not losing him that bothers me so much. We're starting to lose our tight grip on what we're doing. That I don't like."

"Then we'll tighten up, Jube."

"We got troubles coming, Jake. I can smell them. I got a fanny itch in the back of my head. Like I can feel a lynch party twenty miles down a country road. Only this time the rope is in my hands."

Jube was right. His itch was never wrong. He had a short but meaningful private talk with Carlos Martinez. He made him repeat everything about the events that took place with Barq el Quatrane. To the everlasting relief of the big Argentinian, Jube showed no anger.

"I got something I want you to do, Carlos," Jube told him. "And I want you to keep it to yourself, got it, you spic bastard?"

"Hey, you tells me and I do it, man."

"You got plenty of coke and horse?"

"Yeah. Sure. You want some? I gets you-"

"Shut the fuck up. I want you to get the hook into that alien hippo. The one they call Ytram."

"He's one big pig," Martinez said with satisfaction. "Dumb, dumber than a chicken, he so stupid."

"Hook him, you hear me?"

"Hey, I do it." Martinez scratched his head. "But I don't know how the stuff work on him, you know?"

"Find out. Hit him up with crack, coke, horse; whatever. Put it in his food, his water, whatever. If he likes

what he gets he'll want more. Then you can get to the needle."

"I need big fucking needle, man."

"I don't care if you stick a hose up his ass and pump it in. Just do it. Now. I want him so hooked that if he goes three hours without a fix he'll be bouncing off the walls."

"You got it, man," Martinez grinned. "It going to be funs, fucking up this elephant gods or whatever it is they call him in that wing. You know, that place, all full of them crazy Hindus and-"

"Get lost, Carlos."

Jake Marden watched the city lights of Gainesville float steadily into view through the rounded Plexiglas of the Bell jet helicopter. He kept his height to fifteen hundred feet above the terrain to avoid the necessity for eyeballing the several giant television towers skewering the skies. He flew easily, soaking his feelings of flight with gratitude. Getting off the ground and into the air was a catharsis; the bumps and pressures of his hectic daily life shed from his body and mind like a useless and unnecessary outer skin. He grinned to himself at the thought of reactions the evening would yet bring. He wasn't Jake Marden tonight. That would have been pushing it a tad too much. The jet chopper was registered to their security school at the edge of Old Millford Town and its papers were all in order. So were the papers in Jake's wallet that identified him as Glint Matthews, helicopter flight instructor and weapons specialist for the school training civilian and security agencies in anti-terrorist skills. Neat; pilot and driver licenses, credit cards, social security number, membership in the NRA and a half-dozen other well-known organizations, and his ID card and badge for

Glint Matthews, Deputy Special Agent for the Old Millford Police Department. They virtually owned the town, and they did control access to the computers that made all such identification not only possible but literal.

There was another major change and he laughed aloud with the anticipation of Alison Harper's reaction to what she'd greet when the helicopter landed. The city glittered in that strange twinkling of bejeweled lights; the effect of power lines and tree limbs momentarily blocking view of the lights beneath them to create the twinkling and flashing effect. Far to his left he saw the rotating beacon of the main airport. Almost dead ahead was the swollen hump of the brightly lit O'Connell Center. University Avenue and Thirteenth Street crossed in town center to offer a stream of vehicle lights. Brilliant strobes flashed from the tower farm to the west of the airport. Another stood mighty, far south at the edge of Paynes Prairie, and lesser towers glowed red and white.

He thumbed his transmit button. "Gainesville Approach, this is Security Four, six miles northwest of the airport at one five zero zero feet, and I have landing clearance for the Shands Hospital Heliport. Over." Gainesville Approach cleared him in for a circling approach to the helipad alongside the hospital; helicopters here were a frequent and welcome sight, employed as they were for an almost constant flow of emergency medical flights. Jake called the helipad crew, received clearance to land, and circled the University Center Hotel south of Shands to come around for an approach and touchdown into the wind. He put her down gently on the side of the helipad, to leave the landing area clear for medical flights, shut down his machine, and radioed instructions to the ground crew that he'd be leaving this same night. Then he looked to the passenger area just beyond the helipad. She was waiting for him as she'd promised. Alison Harper with her glowing blonde hair and that trim, hard and yet feminine body that appealed so greatly to him. But what lay behind those hazel eyes was the real attraction. It's been a long, long time since Jill and it's been a long time overdue to bury that past forever . . .

He left the helicopter, walking directly to Alison. She

started forward to greet him, then hesitated with a faltering step. She stopped, studying the stranger moving toward her from the helicopter. He stood before her. Alison stood her ground, her head shaking briefly from side-to-side in response to thoughts of her own.

"I'm sorry," she said aloud. "I, well, I was expecting someone else."

"It's me, Alison."

His voice startled her. Her eyes widened as she stared and studied the man before her. Shaved skull, deeply darkened by the sun. As was the face. No beard. Thick handlebar moustache . . . But that voice! It's Jake . . . and I'll never mistake that damn grin. But . . . what the hell is going on here?

He took her arm firmly but gently. "Let's walk," he said.

"Jake? Is it really you?"

The grin appeared. "It's me."

They walked toward the roadway. Across the street loomed the University Centre Hotel. She had a dinner date with Jake Marden, but this man-

"What in the name of the little green gods happened to you?"

"New me, that's all. The covering, anyway. Decided it was time for a change." He looked up and both ways. "Light's green. Let's cross." They walked briskly to the hotel side of the street and continued on to the hotel entrance.

She stopped, tugging his arm to halt his own walking. "Jake Marden, why? I didn't even recognize you!"

"Which do you like better? The old or the new?"

"I was certainly attracted to the old," she responded, once again her old self. "Mysterious, brash, wildly bearded, tough as nails, gentle as a child, intelligent, and a man with both a love for music and some very strange friends."

"You mean Michiko's-"

"Yes, I mean Mickey's beau. Can't call him a date. They've been living together."

His eyes seemed colder with her words. "She told you that?"

"First of all, it's none of your business what my friend tells me. Second, my big tall stranger, she didn't tell me anything.

But a woman knows. Little signs, little things here and there. She hasn't any idea I know." She hesitated.

"But you knew. I can't understand why you'd be ticked off because / might know."

He continued walking with her. "Would you believe me if I told you I had good reason?"

"Oh, sure, I'd believe you. But that wouldn't make any difference." She squeezed his arm. "Tall, dark, mysterious men with handlebars need more than a casual off-the-cuff dash like you just gave me. You see, it just might not be any of my business and it certainly might not be your business."

"You've got what I have to give," he said, a bit stiffly.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, don't fight me, Jake. What the hell do you think I'm doing here with you? Going out with someone I don't like or want to be with?"

He sighed. "It would be a lot easier to say many things. But that's neither wise nor possible right now."

"You sound like a CIA man in a dark trench coat."

"I don't mean to be-" He cut himself off as they started up the steps to the lobby. "Hold it for later," he said, and she nodded. She surprised him; no nonsensical "let's talk about it now." She simply went with his request.

They rode the elevator with an evening group to the penthouse of the hotel. He'd made dinner reservations in the name of Glint Matthews; that seemed sensible in view of the fact that all his identification carried that name. Alison's brows raised when he gave that name at the reservation desk, but she remained silent until they were seated at a table alongside the wide picture windows that gave them a bird's-eye view of the city lights.

"Who's Glint Matthews?"

"Me."

"What happened to Jake Marden?"

"Oh, he's around. But not right now."

"You're Glint."

"Uhhuh."

"I don't know which name suits you better."

"Glint."

Til try."

They ordered drinks.

"Just what do you do, Mr. Glint Matthews?"

"I'm a helicopter instructor for the security school up at Old Millford."

"Isn't Mickey's outfit the one that owns the school?"

"Yep."

"And that's by Old Millford Prison?"

"Mile or two; yes. That whole part of the state has prisons scattered throughout it. There are a bunch right here in Gainesville. Just drive out to the airport terminal and you pass a bunch of them."

"Then you work for Mickey?"

"No. She's incidental to the business. The night I met you? Moody Blues and all that? Earlier that day was the first time I'd ever met Mickey."

"What does her tall, dark alien do?"

He nearly choked on his drink. He coughed and spluttered. "Alien?" he finally managed, his heart wreathed in ice.

"Well, the only time I've seen him, Arbok, that is, was when he wore that wild outfit to the masquerade. When he gets all that stuff off his face, what does he do?"

"He's a pilot."

"Really?"

He told the absolute truth. "He flies the big stuff."

"What's he doing in a small time burg like Old Millford?"

Again the truth. "Grounded for a while. He had a bad landing a while ago. Needs time to get his thinking cap back on straight."

"Known him long?"

"This sounds like Sixty Minutes, Alison."

"Sorry." She placed her hand over his. "I didn't mean it to be probing. I'm just," she paused and smiled, "insanely inquisitive at this moment. I meet Michiko's date who I've never seen except as an alien. Then my date shows up with a different skull, face, loss of beard, and a different name!"

He offered a lopsided grin. "Yeah, I guess so."

"I'm going to do a story for World Press on that school."

Again he had that sinking feeling. "Where I work?"

"Sure. Between you and Mickey I couldn't have a better seat. Anti-terrorist training is big news, Glint. Jake. Who

ever you are. I'll get the business end through whomever she sets me up with and I'd like to fly the chopper in combat training with you." He paused. "It gets pretty tight sometimes." "Oh, shit, Jake. Glint. I've been in three damned wars already. I jumped from a burning tanker in the Persian Gulf, barely escaped with my life through half of Central America, had my car machine-gunned to junk in Lebanon, I've made over two hundred parachute jumps, and you expect me to be worried about some diddle-doodle flying in Florida?"

He thought that one over. "No, I don't expect that, Alison. I never did."

We can do it and handle her carefully enough. In fact, her story might even be a blessing in disguise. But she is so damned sharp! We'll have to watch her every second to be sure she doesn't cotton on to what's going to be right under her nose.

"You'll do it for me?" "Sure. Let's order dinner." "Why, thank you, Glint."

Within four days of Jake's flight to Gainesville their tight little package really started coming unglued at the seams. Once again the matter wasn't something to be pinpointed ahead of time. Almost everything they were doing with the Mindmat program threaded the needles of unknowns. To this point they'd been completely successful. Not only the Japanese but the select other customers were also more than satisfied, and the bank accounts and other holdings throughout the world grew steadily and purposefully. The Japanese continued to run their people through the Mindmat; a few of their own but mainly their extremely select Chinese. The extent of their plans became more evident when they brought in a Tibetan monk. They should have chosen more carefully. This was no simple spiritual leader who'd spent most of his life babbling by candlelight and dipping his fingers in rancid yak butter for a square meal. This monk had been raised in cruel terrain, high in the mountains, and he'd led a guerrilla band for years against the

Chinese army occupying his homeland. He was more than screaming about talking with God, trying to start a fucking religious revolution in my fucking prison! I'm going to cure him, of course."

Jube looked beyond Arbok to the guard tower. "Bennett! You got your high-power job with the scope?" "Got it!" came the immediate answer.

"Get it here right now."

The guard ran up with a high-powered rifle and a powerful scope. Jube wrapped the carrying sling about his forearm, snapped off the safety, aimed carefully, and squeezed off a single round. The harsh crack! of the rifle echoed about the walls of the courtyard. The Tibetan's arms flew out and high as a hole appeared in the back of his head; on the other side, his forehead and upper part of his nose and eyes exploded in a gory pumpkin-splattering burst of blood, flesh, and bone. He pitched forward violently and went down like a sack of wet oats.

A prisoner wearing a turban bent down by the dead man; on one knee he then looked up, screaming curses and shaking his fist at the men on the wall. Jube smiled. "You want it, bucko, then you got it." Another sharp crack! and the side of the second man's head tore away. He whirled about into a nearby group of men, flailing in that final instant between life and death, splattering them with his blood and collapsing in their midst.

Jube fired again and a third man fell dead, his jaw exploded into fragments. Jube brought the rifle back and rested the stock on the concrete by his feet.

"Why did you kill that third man?" Arbok asked.

Jube smiled, cold and unemotional. "One, he was there, Two, he was an object lesson. Three, it's none of your fucking business."

Jube turned back to Jake. "Get that shit cleaned up down there, man. You, personally. I want to be absolutely sure it's done right. We can't afford this shit. We just can't afford it. Get those bodies, into the incinerator. Take care of all their records. They don't exist now and they never existed. Have the voodoo man pass the word that if anybody, and I mean anybody, breathes a word of what happened to any other person, when I get through with him he'll curse his mother

for giving him birth." He hesitated. "I need this done right, Jake, and you're the only one I can-

"Consider it done," Jake said quickly, turned and was gone.

Jube turned back to Arbok. "From now on, it's a whole new ball game," he said, his words and his physical stance making it clear that given even a hint of justification the fourth round would leave the rifle straight at Arbok. "I've let you and Jake and the others play your little game. Our security isn't worth a rat's ass and I intend to get it back. For us, for you as well, do you understand?" Arbok nodded. "Yes." "We start changing things now. You don't keep your bunch of freakies in the ship where we can't see them or what they're doing. I know, I know," he said, raising his hand to forestall the anticipated interruption. "You've got to be in the ship to run things. Okay, you've got it. But the rest of your people? I'm going to set them up in the west wing of this place. They'll be able to go back and forth when you need them. Between the west wing and your ship. But never more than yourself and one other at any one time."

Arbok was an old hand at recognizing dangerous authority and he knew he was right in the middle of the burning oil with this man. "You sound, Jubal Bailey, as if you do not trust us." "Me? Not trust you?" Jube threw back his head and laughed. "You're fucking right I don't trust you! If I catch anyone, anyone, outside the west wing or your ship, without my say so, he's dead, right then and there. You read me, bucko?" Arbok nodded slowly.

Jube gestured by pointing downward. "Then get the fuck out of sight. You're upsetting my convicts."

Jube met with Luther Cogswell. "Voodoo man, when I finish talking with you I want to see your ass leaving here on a dead run. Now, here's what I want you to do. Seal off the west wing. Get everybody out of there. Leave all the cell blocks open. Cover all windows going in there and weld the fucking gates and doors shut. The only way out of that place when you get through is from that wing to the freako's ship, got it?" Luther nodded. "Bring in all the supplies and stuff

they may need. Anything and everything. I don't want them having no urges to go traipsing off for something they want bad at four in the morning. And don't forget refrigeration equipment. The more stuff we can keep in cold storage until they eat it, the better. Any questions before you run for your life?"

"I have a question," Luther told him. "A mystery of some kind, maybe."

"Spill it fast, you geek, and get the hell out of here!"

"These space people, whatever they are, they're big meat eaters, you know?"

"Jesus Christ, so what?"

"No meat for a week." Luther saw the anger stirring in Jube. "I mean, they haven't asked for any meat for a week. That's not like them."

"You asshole, maybe they saw that movie *The Thing*. Maybe they're growing their own. How the fuck do I know if they're eating meat or not, and what the fuck do I care? Move it, high yellow!"

CHAPTER 23

Tom Wheeler knew he was in this thing way over his head. The director of the southeast region of the United States for the Federal Bureau of Investigation would gladly have yielded his on-high position right now for a slot in the lower ranks, for there seemed no way he could ever emerge from this case with his hide still in one piece. Wheeler cinched up his belt, absent-mindedly tucking his shirt in tighter. His back ached and he desperately wanted a cigarette. He wanted to smoke three cigarettes at once. Goddamned airheads in HEW, and especially that freak-bearded Koop and all their bullshit on smoking. Well, they might have cut down some on lung cancer, but the incidence of ulcers and stress-related physical and psychiatric diseases was shooting skyhigh, and Tom Wheeler felt like a candidate for all of them. Right now if smoking cigarettes would whack six months to a year off his life-span he'd have made the trade gladly. All that nicotine chewing gum was a bunch of Madison Avenue shit to make another bunch of lying sons of bitches rich. Wheeler had just watched a late-late movie on television a few nights before, a good-enough hack job on the second world war, and the pleas of government officials and USO directors and Red Cross girls to "send a GI a carton of cigarettes for Christmas," stuck in his craw. All those goddamned trendy slogans of the day. The green in Lucky Strike has gone off to war . . . and more and more of that bullshit. But in those days every military ration kit, every Red Cross parcel, every morsel from the troop entertainment groups, showered cigarettes on the GI's like confetti coming down on Times Square during New Year's Eve. Now that same government that had lauded, praised, price-supported, manufactured, advertised sh

and distributed cigarettes as the solution to battlefield trauma and the homesick blues was telling everyone that they'd get cancer, fallen arches, warts, deformed children, bloated pancreas and What the hell's the matter with me? If it would have helped, Wheeler would have whacked himself on the side of his head to keep his thinking where it belonged. "Oh, fuck it," he snarled aloud and grabbed a cigarette pack from a side pocket and lit up. A cheer went up from the gathered agents of a half-dozen different government outfits. Cigarettes appeared, lighters and matches flared, and good-natured calls of "Fuck you and your health club shit," rang out among the group.

Cigarette dangling from one side of his mouth, wagging up and down with tremendous satisfaction as he talked, Tom Wheeler stood at the edge of the small stage in the meeting room and held up both hands. "Settle down!" he sang out, feeling immensely better than he had a few moments before. The conversational buzz faded away, Tom Wheeler began to speak, and the topic brought back in a rush that same sinking feeling. He looked to his left at Ben Jamieson, his best field agent who'd been out for week after week hunting a missing UFO. Jamieson brought up a hand to cover a cough and slipped Wheeler the finger.

Wheeler turned back to the army agents and specialists arrayed before him. For the moment he eschewed the charts, slide projections, and other visual aids gathered from many sources. He needed to talk. He needed to express his own feelings. Because he sure as hell didn't agree with Washington or anyone else, for that matter, on the wild goose chase eating up the man-hours of his own staff, as well as

many other field agencies. The DEA crowd was pissed almost to the point of mutiny as they were pulled from their drug-chasing missions, the Coast Guard was sending as many ships up coastal waterways and rivers as they dared, and-well, it was a boondoggle from the word go.

"Okay, okay, let's go into it," he said with a normal tone to his voice. "I want you all to understand from the outset of this special session, I want every last one of you people to be aware of one fact above all, and that is I do not believe this meeting is necessary, I don't believe it has any real substance to it, I think the people in Washington smoke them funny brown cigarettes-do you people get the idea?"

"Yeah, they made you manager of the banana farm," an agent called out.

Wheeler craned his neck to identify the heckler. "Simp-son? That you? Bernie Simpson? Stand up so I can see you." Simpson, chagrined, rose to his feet, and gestured in apology. "Uh, sorry about that, Mr. Wheeler. I didn't mean anything personal, but-

"Simpson, don't apologize. Sit down." He saw the surprise on the faces in the room; everyone had expected him to rip a little skin from Simpson's ass. "Bernie," Wheeler went on, "I couldn't agree with you more. You understand me? This is a banana farm and we're all animals in the zoo."

He looked around for an ashtray that wasn't there, cursed under his breath, and ground out his cigarette butt beneath his shoe, and then lit up a fresh cigarette. "All right, get something else straight. At any time during this session, if you have something to say, sing out. Hear me? Just sing it out. There are no experts in the room on this subject. Some of the NASA people in here think they're experts, but they're as full of crap as Madame Zagora in the crystal ball palace down the street."

Seven NASA scientists and technicians shifted uncomfortably, but Tom Wheeler didn't care how they felt. He was building a swift dislike for all that ilk. "Anybody have any questions as to why we're here?" he called out suddenly.

The men looked at one another and about the room; there was largely silence or shrugs. A new agent stood in the back and Wheeler nodded for him to proceed.

"Sir, I've read the call notice and I've heard a lot about today, but from the way you've been firing off warning flares and trying to keep us on our toes, would you spell it out in your own terms?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Wheeler said satisfyingly. "We're here because the United States government is on an official hunt for a UFO. You're all familiar, if you're breathing and capable of watching television news or readint* n*>"/"r>a(tm)".~

and magazines, that our scientific community is convinced that not too long ago an alien spacecraft of some kind, what they were calling a starship, appeared suddenly outside our solar system. It screwed up the stock market and turned all Tampax boxes orange and stuff like that. This is the same scientific community, I remind you, that not so long ago said rocks never fell from the sky, but now we have meteorites. They said man couldn't fly, but you know what happened at Kitty Hawk. Then they said you couldn't go faster than thirty or forty miles an hour or the air would be sucked from your lungs. Then you couldn't go faster than sound because there was a big wall in the sky, and you couldn't go to the moon, and you couldn't transplant a heart, and you couldn't do beans because they said so. They also said that when Jupiter and the other planets all lined up in a row some years ago, the earth would be wrecked by earthquakes and volcanos and God knew what else. You get the idea. Now they say something warped space and it could only have been a ship, but they have no idea what a space warp is or how that ship got here."

Wheeler felt great. "These are the same scientists who are so sure of themselves that the radar they developed once told us the Russians were at war and had fired over a thousand missiles at us and it turned out their radar beams were bouncing off the moon. They also said radar waves couldn't bend in our atmosphere, then told us how smart they were by bending them even if it was impossible. All right, I could go on all day like this but I don't want to do that because there's a great difference between what I feel and believe and what is the official stance of your government and mine."

He took a long drag on his cigarette and coughed satisfy-ingly. "Now," he began with an enormous burden free of his mind and shoulders, "we may pursue the official government course of action. They are

paying me and they are paying you to function as if you absolutely believe we have a spaceship or a starship or a warpy-doo or a wheelie-dealie, or whatever, that has emerged into our spacetime from somewhere or somewhen that nobody can describe, that this thing is not only here on the earth, but it has landed somewhere in the

southeastern area of the United States of America on the continent of North America, Planet Earth."

He smiled. "I have said what I am paid to say. Almost. The next message is that you people," his fingers stabbed again and again about the room, "are to find said spacebased wheelie-dealie. You are to bend every effort, leave no stone unturned, to find that mother."

An agent stood. "And if we find it?"

Wheeler recognized the man. "Then, Jackson, I advise you to hang onto it for dear life while you send us signals that the banana farm has suddenly become acceptable in our society. If you do find said vehicle in our midst, you will receive a very fat bonus, not from the Bureau but nevertheless with the Bureau's blessing, and a vacation, and a promotion. That should spur you on sufficiently."

Another man rose. "Are they really serious about this in Washington?"

"I will now proceed on the basis that it is real, that everything they've said is real," Wheeler specified, "and I will save the nasty comments and pithy remarks for some other occasion." His voice, posture and attitude shifted gears smoothly.

"For the record, then. Washington believes it's real. They also believe, I repeat, it's in our area. Agent Jamieson and his teams have been out in the field, especially Florida and Georgia, tracking down any and all leads. They have not been successful in unearthing what we are looking for. So," Wheeler said as he ground out his next cigarette, "we go back to square one." He looked across the room and motioned to two men. "Will the people from NASA please take over this briefing and proceed with your explanatory video?"

The NASA team gave a brain-numbing video explanation of space, time, astrophysics, anthropic principles, various concepts of spacecraft, Einstein's Theory of Relativity and a brilliant dissertation on Time Dilation that most of the highly intelligent and capable select audience regarded as a crashing bore. The three blue-suiters from the Air Force then took stage center and picked up where NASA left off. Computer graphics had become the latest rage in briefings and update sessions. Wheeler felt a great stab of disgust at the two federal agencies. You had to be dumb and blind not to recognize that each agency was doing its best with expensive, dramatic, complicated and outlandish video computer graphic presentations. The Air Force tapes picked up where NASA's tracking had left off, and not without a dagger shove to the ribs of NASA by flat statement that the space tracking system out of NORAD in Colorado was infinitely superior to NASA's hodgepodge of civilian contractor programs. That out of the way, the presentation actually got interesting. What helped was that they'd run out of graphics and had to go human.

Colonel Peter Harkness kept the video running on a big screen behind him and used a laser arrow pointer to emphasize those issues he felt were most important. "When the object descended toward the sensible atmosphere of our planet," Harkness speechified in a church minister roll of voice, "and sensible atmosphere means that point where air drag becomes sufficient to, one, cause a microgravity effect upon the vehicle, two, establish a definite onset of deceleration and, three, commence the start of an ionization trail through violent disturbance of the electrical atmosphere at extreme altitudes. As an example of how accurate this system is we have recorded in one twenty-four hour period, covering no more than a thirty degree span of the sky, more than one million two hundred sixty-three thousand four hundred and twenty-five meteoritic particles."

A voice sang out. "Was that final number twenty-five or thirty-five, colonel?"

Harkness responded before realizing the deliberate idiocy of the question. "That was twenty-five, sir," he said.

"Thank you. For a few moments there you had me really worried. Please do go on. I feel much better now."

Harkness, under the dimmed lights of the stage, could still be seen turning purple. He didn't bother to hold down his temper. "You smartasses and your trench coats and dark glasses don't impress us one

goddamn bit," he snapped, "We're here just like Tom Wheeler said: government orders. I wouldn't waste a bottle of piss on any of you, but I am

following out my orders and you will goddamned well go through this with me. Do you read me, people?"

Wheeler stood to face his group. "Knock it off," he said easily. "Keep your heads up, gentlemen."

Harkness went on to describe what their supersensitive radar tracking system told them. "It's this ionization trail," he said, the laser arrow following the computer graphics on the screen. "It is not a meteor. It is not a reentering spacecraft nor any such debris. It is something totally foreign to anything we have ever tracked since the Russians put up their first satellite way back in 'fifty-seven."

The screen illustrated his serious approach. "To get this kind of ionization trail you need at least this much mass in a ship," the arrows flashed through the numbers on the screen, "and you need this much speed, or velocity, to combine all the other factors for this final result." The arrow kept dancing. "Now, we estimated reentry-"

A voice called out. "Colonel, I'm not razzing at you. If this is an alien ship, like you're saying, why do you keep calling it reentry? Shouldn't it be entry?"

"Thank you," Harkness responded immediately. "You're absolutely right. Habit, I'm afraid. All right, we estimated entry along a ballistic path. That mistake almost lost us our tracking. If we knew the mass and velocity, and basically the size, which we would extrapolate from the other data, we could tell you a lot about what was coming down. The reason we're so certain this was an artifact of some kind is that it did not follow a ballistic entry. It altered velocity under control. It altered its descent path in a manner that could be accomplished only by automatic, computed flight path, or, a manual system."

Silence followed. Harkness knew just what he was doing by permitting the silence to continue. He knew that someone would burst out with the obvious question at any moment. He wasn't wrong. "Well, what happened to the damn thing?"

"We tracked the ionization trail-heat pulse and disturbed electrical atmosphere-from the ground, from high-flying aircraft and through the lookdown capability of our surveillance satellites. And I am telling you now that the trail led across

Russia and Europe, that it turned under control to bend southward, crossed the Atlantic and went into the North Carolina area. Then we lost it."

"You what?" "How the hell could you lose it!" "Jesus Christ!"

The comments exploded from the group. Harkness was through with videos and computer graphics. He signalled for the room lights. "We lost it because it decelerated to low Mach numbers and then it entered an area of an enormous squall line punching through the east central coast area and the southeast. I mean, we had the granddaddy of storm systems. Cloud tops to eighty or ninety thousand feet. We counted, and that's a confirmed count, no less than seventy-eight large and dangerous funnel clouds. A lot of people died and were hurt. There was no way in the electrical maelstrom of that storm system, which extended for hundreds of miles, to track our unknown any more."

"But you're sure it landed in the southeast region?"

"No. We are not sure. Its track, velocity, descent arc, and maneuvers gave us reason to believe this is the most likely answer."

"You didn't track it to the surface?"

"No."

"Did you ever see it again?"

"No."

"I mean, could it have taken off without your knowing it?"

"If it was in the midst of a severe thunderstorm, and it stayed low while it departed the southeast, yes, it could have avoided radar and other detection."

"Didn't anyone see it or report it?"

"Yes."

"Well, what happened?"

"We investigated ten thousand seven hundred and twelve such reports. None of them held up under investigation."

"What are your personal conclusions, Colonel?"

"One-I'm crazy and so is NORAD and all our radar operators and computers, and if that's true you might as well give up to the Russians right now. So discount that. Two-it flew low and for whatever reason we absolutely cannot explain, it

continued its flight and under cover of the storm departed the southeast and returned to space. Three-it was caught in a violent storm, perhaps struck by lightning, perhaps hit by a major killer tornado and it crashed and somehow has disappeared after such a crash, which seems unlikely considering the search we carried out and the fact that no anomalous radiation readings have turned up. Fourth-that the crew knew what it was doing, and the crew could be either human or computer, and the ship landed and has somehow avoided everyone's attempts to find it. That includes us and all of you."

Two hours later they'd squeezed everything they were going to milk from the scientific reports. By now jackets were off, shoes were off, people smoked cigarettes or cigars while their fellow workers coughed miserably but yielded to the pressure of the moment, and they were consuming large vats of constantly-renewed coffee. Tom Wheeler had them down to the nitty-gritty of their jobs.

"First," one agent tossed the question at the group, "we ought to know how big this thing was. Is," he corrected himself quickly. "If we know the size then we'll know you can't hide something two hundred feet long in a shed that's only a hundred feet long."

"Maybe you were right when you said was," another man offered. "Like the colonel said, it could have crashed."

"Then they would have found the wreckage," another voice complained.

"Sure," came a sarcastic voice. "Especially if it went into a big lake or a river or the ocean. Just like those five torpedo bombers and that big damn flying boat that disappeared in 1945 in the Bermuda Triangle."

"Well, this mother wasn't that far off. It could have gone down in that same area, and-"

"Knock it off!" Wheeler barked at the group. "You're doing just what I do not want you to do. Chasing after every goddamned butterfly idea that pops into your head. Assume that it's not at the bottom of the ocean or a lake or a river or lost in a swamp. Assume that, for Christ's sake, will you?"

Assume that it made a landing, somewhere in the southeastern region of the United States, at the bottom of the descent arc that Colonel Harkness gave you, and that the son of a bitch is in one piece, that it landed under control, and that it is still somewhere on the ground. Now all you need to do is find it."

"That's all?" came another sarcastic call. "Just find a ship that disappeared?"

Wheeler spun about to the man and jabbed a finger at him. "Son, nothing disappears. You got that? Nothing ever just disappears. Everything goes somewhere. Specifically somewhere, even if we're having fits finding that particular somewhere. But don't throw your horseshit in all directions that it vanished. Things don't work that way, got it?" Wheeler looked around. "All of you, accept what I said. Accept what the colonel told you. It landed in this area. I know it's big, but it's defined. It has borders. It has limitations."

He picked up a folder. "Now, sometimes we do our best looking by looking for something else-something other than what we're looking for. Does that make sense? To any good agent, of course it does. If you search for a car that's gone from sight, you don't just keep looking for the car. You look for certain tire tracks. You interrogate people. You try to pick up a trail. That's what we do now. We look for things that are out of the everyday normal. We start scouring the underbrush instead of just looking through the treetops."

Ben Jamieson leaned close to his fellow agent. "You know, I think maybe I've been wrong about old Wheeler. All this time I thought he was a stiff-necked asshole, and he just made a hell of a lot of sense."

"Jamieson! If you're going to talk that much," Wheeler called out so everybody could hear, "why not share it with us? You got some ideas?"

Jamieson caught him by surprise. "Yes, sir," he said with a courtesy that Wheeler hadn't experienced in months, "I do."

"Share it with us."

"Sir, it's pretty crazy."

"I don't care if it's Mary Poppins getting laid on a trapeze. Share it with us."

"Yes, sir." Jamieson picked up the hand signal from Wheeler to get to his feet. He rose slowly, opening a file folder and looked out across the group.

"On the basis of what you've just heard," he started, "we sent out teams to cover what seemed the most likely areas to land a spacecraft. That would include any long open areas, but," he stressed, "that's german only if they need a long open area. Both the air force and NASA agree it's most unlikely, that whatever busted into our solar system had enough power to let down vertically. And it didn't make sense for it to land in an open field just for the hell of it. If that ship did land, it would likely go for cover."

"Only," one agent called out, and he was serious, "if it's visible to normal light rays, or even to ultraviolet or infrared. It could be invisible to us. You know, some sort of energy field that bends light rays."

Jamieson nodded. "We thought of those things, too, and when we got through we had headaches from the almost limitless number of possibilities. So we restricted ourselves. We assumed, and I know that when you spell assume it means it makes an ass out of you and me, but we did because we had no other way to go. Well, we hit every airfield and landing area in all of Georgia and Florida and Alabama. We found some of the most incredible stuff you can imagine, but-

"No spaceship," came another call.

"You got it, Charlie. No spaceship."

"What did you do next?"

"We decided to fall back and regroup and go to that old standby called playing detective. Scientific detective. You dig. Knock on doors. Look in barns. Any large buildings. We came up zip. So the next thing to do was to get into all government and contractor buildings. We even crawled through the Kennedy Space Center and Cape Canaveral-

"I bet NASA loved that!" came the catcall.

"Not really," Jamieson recalled with a wry smile. "But we had the authority. Guess what we found?"

"Zippo!" came a chorus of voices.

"You got it. Next we hit the big prisons. These states are filled with them-

"Why the prisons?"

"Large buildings. They include factories, gymnasiums, all sorts of things, and also because it's the last place anyone would think to look."

"And what did you find?" came another chorus.

"Lots of prisoners," Jamieson called back. "But we did latch on to some anomalies. Messina Prison in Alabama was the damnedest hotbed of vice you can imagine. It had a huge drug factory in the place and it was the drop-off and resupply center for a hell of a drug ring. We busted it. Well, the same sort of thing in a couple of places. Move enough rocks and you always find some scum underneath."

Jamieson opened and closed the folder. "But the strangest anomaly was in north central Florida. Old Millford Prison. What got our attention there, and I personally went through the joint, is that it was too good to be true."

An agent stood. "Ben, isn't that where the state set up that all-electronic control system?"

"You got it. And it works. That prison was nothing but a viper's pit. The warden, Spunt, has always been a miserable little weasel, and now he wears silk suits and looks like he spends every other week in the Bahamas. For a long time Old Millford was the murder capital of the prison system. It was pure poison. They averaged a murder a week and that doesn't include the beatings, rapes, knifings, and other assorted mayhem. Now, turning a prison into a model system does not stop that sort of stuff overnight. It simply doesn't work that way. We went through the place. We met with the warden. He showed us the new solitary holding cells to take care of the incorrigibles, explained how the computers run the place. Everybody was on their best behavior. Cons who would cut your throat for a nickel smiled at us. No cursing, spitting."

Jamieson took a long breath. "Gentlemen, I've worked the prison system. Something stinks in Old Millford. We don't even get complaints. No one has filed a legal brief in their own behalf to get out of that place or demand a new trial; nothing, for about a year. In my book that's a red flag."

Another agent stood. "Ben, you did go through the place?"

"Top to bottom," Ben confirmed. "Squeaky clean."

"Well, maybe the new system is working."

"Sure, and I've got some great oceanfront property in Arizona with your name on it."

"Do they still have visitors?"

"Yes. We even spoke to some of the families. Guess what? They're happy about their men being in Old Millford. It's had some sort of religious revival. Not just the Born Again crowd, but the Moslems and the Hindus as well have formed powerful cliques. Maybe that's how they control the men. I don't know. But I don't believe it. There's something else unexpected. One of the giant Japanese industrial firms, Mitsubishi, has bought into the town. They started an anti-terrorist school there. A lot of money. Full firing ranges, helicopters; everything. And don't even bother to ask; yes, it's all absolutely legal. Schools and motels and the town is getting real fat on the business. The place is a regular center for joy."

He closed his file folder. "It stinks."

Another man rose. "We send in any blinds?"

"We put in six men. Not one has been harmed, but two of them have vanished. I mean, we can't find them. No one knows anything. There's no record of those two men. Which leaves the conclusion that the computers are having some very advanced tampering with the personnel records."

"What about overhead surveillance?"

"We've got the works trained on the place. We thought we were pretty smart-then that anti-terrorist school invited us to send some of our own agents through the school, gratis, and then they picked out every scope, distance microphone, and surveillance system we had to demonstrate how to find them-to their students."

Silence followed that revelation. Finally an old-timer stood up. "What are you doing now, Ben?"

"Both NASA and the blue-suiters are working with us. They've got high-flying reconaissance planes going over at about seventy to a hundred thousand feet. We've used every detector on our satellites. And what we've found so far are heat patterns that don't belong there. The infrared pickups are yelling foul. But they don't make sense and we can't pinpoint anything. We're getting electromagnetic fields we never expected, but I'm told that's from new factory installations using computer-run machines as well as the computers themselves. We're having all that checked out now."

"Ben, why don't you use the old standby? Send in dogs? They don't need a science degree to find out if something's not kosher."

"We did. They sit back on their haunches and they howl like wolves. They act like the devil himself is after them. I've never seen our attack dogs turn tail and run, but I've seen it now. We can't find anything that might cause that. We've run the scale from way down low at infrasound all the way up to the highest sonics and everything is normal."

"Why don't we just go in and move everybody out of there and take the place apart?"

"Tough to do. We have to go through the legal system. The rights of prisoners, due process and all that. We can't pin anything on them-"

"Condemn the place. It's old."

"It's been entirely rebuilt. It's perfect."

"Then what are you going to do?"

Ben Jamieson turned to Harkness. "Colonel?"

The air force officer moved forward. "We think we're on to something. It's not that much yet, but we have a puzzle we can't solve. Our recon planes, and a few of the satellites, have picked up on a very minor scale what's similar to the Kursk Anomaly."

"What the hell is that?"

"The city of Kursk in Russia. It's got an enormous iron ore mountain buried beneath the city area. Massive. It spins magnetic compasses. It drives instruments crazy. We and the Russians have known about it for a long time. We can detect it from space. It's similar to those lunar mascons-"

He stopped as groans met his last words. "A mascon on the moon means a mass concentration, an area of unusually heavy density beneath the surface. It's so great it made the Apollo spacecraft dip in their orbits when they went overhead. That's, why, on the first lunar landing with Neil Armstrong, NASA. didn't even know where those guys were on the moon. It took a couple hours to pinpoint them. Now,

we're going to send over our most sensitive equipment. Over Old Millford, that is. We've had some mildly freakish activity with compasses and other equipment. According to the records of the FAA, there's nothing like that ever reported before in that area. It deserves our attention and we're going to study it very carefully."

"What do you expect to find, Colonel?"

"Hey, what else?" came a catcall. The FBI agents didn't think much of the military mind. "They're going to find little green men from Mars. And then they'll invite them to dinner at the White House."

CHAPTER 24

"I say we kill them all except that Arbok. We need his ass alive because of what he knows about the ship. He's the only one who can run the computers and fly that thing. Right, Jake?"

Jake Marden nodded to Jubal Bailey. Not in agreement about slaughtering the other three aliens still within Old Millford, but the indispensable value of Arbok.

"We don't need the others," Jube went on. "Even Arbok don't really give a shit about them. Ytram is a dumb fucking warthog and the sooner we're rid of that asshole the better. That mob of Moslems and Hindus still think he's some kind of elephant god and the son of a bitch is getting real powerful in this place. He's too dumb to know it or even to know what to do with it, but they worship the bastard and give him everything he wants."

"Which is what?" Jeff Maddox queried.

"You deaf, dumb, and blind?" Jube retorted in scathing tones. "He's on a nonstop orgy, and those other two, Drong and Brist, they're getting ass day and night along with him."

"So what's the bitch?" Maddox shot back, not yielding his disagreement. "What's so special about rape in any prison? Cons have been gang-raping people as far back as they built the first prison."

"Yeah, but they ain't space geeks," Carlos Martinez broke in, his face grim. "Hey, Jube, you right, man. There is big trouble coming. Like everyone, they choosing up sides. It ain't gonna be too long before we gots a war on our hands because of what them aliens, they doing."

Maddox turned to face Martinez. "And just what the hell would that be?" he demanded.

"You supposed to be pretty smart man," Martinez sneered, "but you talk like asshole, too. You know human nature? You a senator, right? Big politician. You don' know shit about people. Those geeks, they not just raping broads and them young boys. They doing it in front of the cons, you know? That crazy religious bunch, they bringing in the broads and they giving them the boys, and the geeks fucking them like crazy rights in front of everybody in their wing. It likes to drive them crazy, man. They watching all that stuff and they gets real hot between their legs, and the stuff builds in their balls and in their heads and they like crazy. They want what them three aliens getting for free, man, and all they can handle. And it's not just that. The big one, that hippo? He got a dork it's like a donkey, big and long and fat and ugly. Every time he fuck a womans, and it worse when he does a boy, they is blood everywhere. So you gots women screaming and it makes the mens all excited like crazy, and they splitting the boys open and ripping them up in the ass."

Martinez looked from Maddox and Jube and back again to the senator. "Lets me tell you something. It's not the same as us screwing somebody. We is all the same. Don' matter we white or black or brown. We is human, man. Those three, they not human. They don't care. So it's more than just all that fuckin' and making the women and the boys blow them. That Drong and Brist, they pretty mean. They love what they doing. They choke a couple of people to death, they make them give them head so bad. So the cons are hot balls, man, and they also fightin' mad, because it's like the womens and the boys them religion people bring, they like slaves."

"Oh, shit," Maddox retorted, but he seemed uneasy about what Martinez had said. "You're just uptight because the aliens are different, that's all. Half those men are behind bars because of rapes, assaults, gang rapes, torture, perversion and God knows what else. Now they're high and mighty. Big deal. Listen, my friend, what's going on here with the aliens doesn't come even remotely close to what the Nazis and the

Japs did all through the second world war. Rape? That was a parlor game compared to the medical experiments, the deliberate slow tortures-Jesus, Martinez, didn't you ever hear of the Spanish Inquisition? Or haven't you heard about the blacks in Africa and all their slaughtering? The rapes, butchering, torture of literally millions of people? Rape and torture, my friend, are grand old earth customs. Read your Bible, Martinez. Everything you're talking about has been with us for thousands of years, and it's also going on right now in prisons all over the world."

"Makes no difference," Martinez said stonily. "We talking about right here, now," he stabbed a finger at the floor. "We talking about-"

"Hold it; I'm not through," Maddox broke in. "You're not reaching me one goddamn bit about them poor convicts out there," he said angrily, gesturing. "Since when did how those bastards behave dictate what we do? Or how? Or when? They're not running this goddamned prison." His hand stabbed toward Jube. "He is. The man right there. He runs it. Not you, me or anybody else. And any time those turnip heads out there in the wings get to demanding things or using you for their spokesman-"

"Hey, you waits a minute!"

"Fuck you, Martinez! You're butting in where your nose doesn't belong. You come in here with your song and dance about the poor cons who are all hot and bothered. They're trouble? Close them in! Back in their cells they go and we slam the doors and Jube, here, holds the only key. They get bread and water and then can holler all they want. They don't behave, they get doses of drugs that'll turn them into zombies as long as we want, and nobody gets out until it's hearts and flowers time and Jube says to let 'em out!"

"How comes you so smart you don't do nothing, then?" Martinez demanded.

"Because I don't run the joint! Jube does. But I sure as hell know how to take care of all those idiots out there. You want them calmed down? All it takes is some drugs in their food and they got the Montezuma sidestep so bad, they'll be squirting liquid shit like it was coming out of a firehose. That'll soften their dicks for sure. And-"

"Jesus, man, that's enough." They deferred to Jube. "It's like I said with Jake. Arbok runs the computers and he's the only one can fly that ship. Jake, how's his repairs coming along on the main drive of that thing?"

"Done. He can't run it up where it is, of course, but that computer is so advanced that Arbok accepts whatever it reports on the status of equipment. Consider the main drive mechanism fixed."

"The computer stuff? All the connections through the ship?"

"They're okay. It has tremendous fallback capability. Arbok studied day and night, in fact, he used the Mindmat system and we hooked into the IBM and TRW data terminals, and everything they had on our latest computer systems, including how to modify existing systems and even build new ones, went into the memory banks. During that time the computer got replacements of all damaged systems. They're integrated into the main center of the ship and, hey, Jube, according to Arbok it's in great shape."

"Jake, tell me something," Luther Cogswell broke in. "How can one man, and I don't care if he's human or alien, have time to do all that stuff, which would take MS years, and all the other things he's been doing. I know he's a pilot but you never said anything about his being an engineer or a technician, I mean, someone who does it with his own hands."

Jake paused. He really didn't know if he wanted to answer this one truthfully or not, but not opening up could cause a lot more harm. "Arbok doesn't do it," Jake said.

Jube struck like a barracuda. "Then who does?"

Jake didn't respond to the sudden dark, angry thrust. Not in a defensive manner as he knew Jube expected. "The computer does it all," Jake answered finally.

"The computer repairs itself?" Jube pressed for reconfirmation.

"Sure. That's not so unusual," Jake told him. "We've got computers that do that right now. I agree our computers hardly can scratch their own asses when it comes to this sort of stuff, compared to theirs, but the principle's the same."

"And the new computer systems?" Jube said, ever so softly.

"Same thing," Jake answered immediately. A pause would have led Jube to consider he wasn't being told

everything about that electronic madman within the alien ship.

"You're telling me the computer repairs itself, then decides what it needs or wants in the way of all-new designs and equipment, then designs it and builds it and sticks the new gizmos into the old system so we have a whole new super package on our hands?"

Jake debated his answer, decided this was the moment for brevity. He hadn't a shred of doubt that Jube had been doing his own homework, especially with Luther Cogswell available to steer him quickly to whatever answers he sought. Which also told Jake that this snapping-turtle session against him by Jube wasn't for Jake at all, but their private audience.

"That's right. And since the computer's got a power source that's greater than a dozen fusion reactors of the kind we haven't even built yet, there's no way we could pull the plug to shut it down, //we could do that," Jake emphasized, "then we could likely reprogram the mother and bend it to our direct commands." Jube's head tilted ever so slightly. "But we can't do that, can we?" he asked in a voice barely above a whisper, bringing the group in the room leaning forward to hear him clearly.

"Nope," Jake replied.

"There's another way," Maddox said after his own long silence.

"Don't keep it a secret, Senator," Jube told him.

"We'd have to get rid of Arbok first," Maddox went on, then hesitated, glancing rapidly from Jube to Jake and back again to Jube.

"So?" Jube asked.

"Well, I, uh, I mean, I don't believe that would go over very well with Jake," Maddox came back, his face slightly flushed, aware he might have made a mortal enemy in Jake Marden. That could easily be tantamount to a death sentence.

"You're goddamn right it wouldn't," Jake said heatedly. "But not for the reasons running around in that stupid head of yours. How the hell did a man get into the office with so little common sense, Maddox? You've got it all worked out that I'm asshole buddies with Arbok and that's why we don't try to take over the computer and the ship. That's it, isn't it?"

"Not really, Jake, I-"

"You're a lying son of a bitch. That's it, isn't it!"

Maddox nodded in silence.

"You're a flaming asshole, Maddox. Did it ever occur to you that no matter what we did to get control of the computer, even if we were completely successful, that the only way to get that ship up and out of atmosphere is to both use the computer and hand-fly the damn thing? And there's no school around here for flight lessons in an alien starship!" A look of utter disgust appeared on Jake's face. "You also haven't considered things from Arbok's position. He's a bit more than just another smart cat from across the galaxy. He's a fighter jock and he's been in these kind of brawls and situations all his life. If there's one thing I can guarantee you, because sure as hell if I were in his position it's exactly what I'd do, is to encode that computer with a preliminary command in some alien language that we've never even dreamed of, and if you attempt to control the computer without first going through that drill, then most likely it will go into automode and detonate its own power source, and where there was a southeast part of the United States the people who survive that explosion, all of them from far up north, I might add, would come down here to find the biggest goddamn lake you ever saw."

Jake turned to Jube. "Man, I don't want to go through any more of this crap. It's like talking to children. Now, you brought us together for a reason. Why not lay it on us? Now?"

Jube nodded. He walked slowly to the bar and returned with cognac in one hand and a bowl of caviar and French bread in the other. He didn't speak as he heaped caviar onto a big chunk of bread and poured a water glass full of cognac. Still silently, he pushed the goods toward Jake, and then bit into his bread and caviar, washing it down with a long pull on the cognac. He kept silent until Jake had finished repeating everything Jube had done and was on his long pull of the fiery drink.

Jube settled back in a lounge chair, lit a cigar, dipped the end in the cognac and took a long draw. "All right," he said finally, the group with him sitting on knife-edge. Except for Jake, who didn't seem to care one way or the other. "I've changed our plans," Jube said. He blew out more cigar smoke and locked

eye contact with each man in the room- Maddox, Martinez, Cogswell, and Marden. Korolov had been absent through the meeting.

"In fact, we're pulling in our horns," Jube went on. "I been just settin' back watching what's going on. We're way over our heads. We got this shit into our brains that just because we got this ship, and especially the Mindmat gimmick, we're going to take over the fucking world. And we done pretty good so far, especially with the slopeheads. The Japs like what they're getting and they're paying. But I got a hunch that when they have enough of what they want, they're going to meet secretly with the boys in Moscow, and we're going to be on the receiving end of some very big honkers in missile warheads, and nothing is gonna' keep us from gettin' zeroed out. That's one scenario I been dreaming about, and it ain't no wet dream. There are plenty more. The long and the short of it, people, is that we extended ourselves too far. You dummies know what a secret is? It's a secret only when you keep your yaps shut about it. And there are lots of ways of figuring out things without someone having it spelled out for them. Them Japs is pretty sharp when it comes to this computer shit. They don't got to be geniuses to figure we got something with the Mindmat that's far ahead of anything else on this whole fucking planet. And why are we dealing with them? I mean, we love slopeheads or something? Bull-sheet. And why all the secrecy? I could go on and on and on but there's no use talking forever and saying the same old shit over and over again. They already suspect we got the alien ship."

He flicked ashes and relit the cigar. "Besides, we lost that swamp pinko who's out there fuckin' dolphins or whatever. I don't know and I don't care. But we had this supremo plan, right, to start an agricultural revolution and all we got is seaweed and a memory. So that's out. What we really have is all that dough from the Japs. And an organization that the voodoo man, here, put together that's worth a fortune. And the computer system that Jake has, and that is fucking enough" Jube leaned forward, tossing aside the lit cigar without bothering to see where it landed. "I want you all to listen to what I got to say. We are shutting down this international shit except for what I already said that Luther and Jake has put together. Jake," he turned to his friend, "starting tomorrow you have troubles with that Mindmat shit. It has glitches in it. It fucks up the heads of the people using it. It just plain don't work right no more. We give the gooks back whatever dough they want, we just don't want no fucking waves, and then I want that goddamn stuff to disappear. Bust it up, melt it down; I don't give a shit. Turn that dome into a fucking movie house or a machine shop. It don't matter. Get rid of the heavy security shit and go to what matches the rest of this place. You got all that, Jake?"

Jake lowered the cognac glass and nodded. "Got it."

"That's it?" Maddox asked in total disbelief. "Just like that, Marden, you buy everything he says?"

Jake looked up slowly to Maddox. "Uh huh," he told him. "He says it, I buy it, I do it. Any more questions?"

"But . . . but we could take over the whole country the way we were going!" Maddox shouted. "It's everything we've all wanted!"

Jube came to his feet almost as if seeking the confrontation with Maddox. "No it ain't, man. We wanted a lot of control. You wanted to take over the whole fucking country and then the whole fucking world. And this was your way to do it. But the world isn't going to just lay back while you kick it in the nuts and set up all your new rules. It just do not work like that. For a while, just for a while, we all got blinded with this crapola. But that's behind us, understand?"

"Sure, sure," Maddox said hastily. "But what are you going to do with the other ones? You got three more aliens, remember? And Arbok might not take kindly to seeing them disappear. I know how you think and how you work, Jube, and if you kill those three you might just find out that you don't get any more cooperation from Arbok. Then where will you be?"

"Number One, Senator, we'll be wherever I want us to be. Do you read me, man?"

"Well, of course, but I-"

"Number Two, whatever I do with those three pence wackos is none of your fucking business except for what I tell you to do. You read me on that one, too?"

"Uh, yes, but-"

"Number Three, you have given me your advice. When I want any more, I will ask for it. From now on,

until you hear me ask for it, you butt the fuck out. Got it?"

Maddox recognized just how close he was to the razor's edge if he gave Jube Bailey any static. To Jube this was the confrontation. He either prevailed absolutely or his own position weakened, and before that happened the place would run slippery with blood.

Maddox stuffed his ego tightly into the side of his mind. "I got it, Jube. No sweat. No trouble. I-"

* * A

The entry alarm sounded. They turned to see Korolov's face in the monitors. "It is Vasily," the Russian's voice came through the security speakers. "Let me in. We got a problem."

"Luther, check him out. Full security before he comes through the doors. And only him," Jube ordered.

"Done," Cogswell said and went to the security controls.

Vasily Korolov planted himself directly before Jube. "Trouble in the wing, Meester Jube. I think answer it must come from you."

"You want me to guess or you gonna tell me?" Jube said impatiently.

"I tell you, all right. Big fight with elephant god."

"Jesus," Jube spat with disgust. "You mean the hippo? Ytram?"

Korolov nodded fiercely. "That him. I no understand who got what religion, but elephant god is having party with three little womans. Them Shiver or Buddhars, whatever, they cheer and holler. Hippo god, he's crazy drunk. He go into little girl from behind and then he run while he stuck in her. Right into cell bars, jam her head in like crazy. Blood everywhere from how he tear her from behind. Much screaming, Rip off one ear when he run into bars. He make much laugh and then he twist and break her neck."

"What about the goddamned fight?" Jube shouted.

"Two men from different wing. Hairy Christians. They slip past crazy people around hippo god and they attack him with knives. One stabs hippo god but knife is too short to kill. The hippo god, he throws away body of girl and he covered with blood and he fight the two men. He kill one by hitting him over head. Man fell and hippo god jump up and drop on him hard. Cannot breathe and hippo thing take ears, like this," Korolov demonstrated, "and break skull on floor. Very dead."

"And the other one?"

"The crazy people, maybe they are Moslems, I do not know, they kill second man. Whole bunch punch and kick him until he is also very dead."

"Luther, punch in the security coverage there. Get me the lead guard there."

They looked at a dozen different TV monitors of the area. A face with a badged cap appeared on number three. "This is Mahoney. My receiver's open."

"Mahoney; Bailey. Nice and neat. What's the scene now?"

"We've got them in lockup. Lot of wailing from the cells but it's under control."

"Where's the fat space wacko?"

"Best I can tell he returned to his quarters, sir."

"You got three dead, Mahoney?"

"Yes sir, we-"

"Get a camera on them."

"Yes, sir." Camera monitors seven, eight, and nine closed in on the dead girl and the two dead convicts.

"We'll remove the bodies, Mr. Bailey, and-"

"No. Leave them right where they are. Mahoney, keep everyone bottled up. Leave those bodies lay. Bring in another dozen guards. I want them armed to the teeth. Do it now and wait there for us. I'll be coming up myself with some other people. When you check me out in security you let us in."

"Yes, sir."

Jube turned to look at Jake. "Opportunity knocks. Get hold of Arbok. Tell him, briefly, what happened. Tell him the whole damn prison's about to explode. Tell him the only way to keep things calm is the old-fashioned way. A gladiator's contest. The space fucker against one of ours. All the way to the death. Don't matter which one wins or loses. Do it quick, Jake. We got to grab this shot."

Jake left immediately. Jube turned to the others. He pointed first to Carlos Martinez and then to Vasily Korolov. "Spic, you talk a lot. You think you can take the meathead from the moon?"

Martinez grinned broadly, spread his massive arms wide and flexed rippling muscles. "Any time."

"Korolov? Think you can take the hippo?" "I take. Break in half."

"I'm warning the both of you. He weighs over five hundred." "Who gives a shit," Martinez sneered. "Let me take him!" "Okay with you, Russkie?" "Sure. No matter who kill him."

"Let's go, then," Jube said. "Senator, you stay here and monitor what comes down and you run this place." "Right," Maddox answered. "Let's do it," Jube told the others.

They gathered in the exercise yard in the hot afternoon sun. Jake accompanied Arbok; the alien was dressed in leather and suede that fitted him perfectly and brought to him a feint medieval air, except for his boots. Those were modified engineer boots with steel toes and metal studs affected by many riders with biker groups. As he always did away from his ship or apartment built nearby, Arbok wore a wide-brimmed thick leather hat, an Aussie version of a floppy Stetson in dark brown. Touching it off with dark pilot's sunglasses would have let Arbok pass with little more than a second glance anywhere.

Not so the other aliens. Ytram weaved and wobbled in a drunken stance, eyes glazed, massive head glistening with his usual sheen of greasy sweat, Blood covered the heavy jumpsuit he always wore to accomodate his huge size. The Ytram they'd first encountered was no longer among them. He was still stupid, but the dullness that had always shown in his eyes had given way to at least a hint of cunning.

Being venerated as some insane god of these crazy people, feted and worshipped, plied with food and drink beyond his wildest dreams, and with sexual appetite cultivated to a pitch he had never even dreamed could exist, had all combined to present to them a greedy, selfish, insane ego-a sloshed combination of sloth and stupidity within his huge and powerful frame.

Jubal Bailey leaned closer to Luther Cogswell. "He's wired?" he whispered in the ear of the voodoo man.

"Hooked, man. He's got more coke than whatever passes for blood in his veins, or whatever he has."

"He don't look like no junkie," Jube said doubtfully.

"Jesus, man, how do I know what a space freak hooked on the stuff looks like?" Cogswell complained.

"What's it done to him?"

"He's like stone. I mean, like, well, desensitized. Hardly feels anything except when he's fucking or eating."

Jube nodded slowly, beginning to understand. "So that's why he didn't come apart when he got the shiv in him. The fucker probably didn't even feel it." Jube's eyes narrowed. "That ain't good. The spic's got more to handle than I thought. But we'll-" he cut himself short as Jake and Arbok approached. Across the exercise yard, wearing work coveralls and slouch hats, leaning against a concrete wall, were the other two aliens, Brist and Drong.

Around the perimeter of the rough dirt area Jube had selected was a ring of heavily armed guards led by Mahoney. They stood well back, MAC submachine guns held loosely at their sides.

Arbok nodded to Jube. "Your man, Marden, has told me of what happened. I must apologize for what this fool," he pointed to Ytram, "has done, and I will-"

"Never mind that shit," Jube broke in. "What's done is done. What needs to be done now; is what counts."

"Marden tells me you wish a gladiator's battle to the death. One man against one man. No weapons. Is this true?"

"If it ain't then Marden's a liar, right?" Jube shot back. "You calling him a liar?"

Arbok ignored the obvious belligerence. "Never. But why do you wish this?"

"Arbok, you told me you did a lot of studying of our history."

"Yes."

"You bone up on the Roman Empire? The coliseum in Rome?"

"Yes."

"Then you know we're talking about a very old and honorable earth custom. A lot of armies would settle their wars this way. Each bunch sends out one champion and they kick the shit out of each other until only one is left alive. That settles the contest and the war's over. That's what I want for us. I got a whole fucking prison full of people who want blood. Win, lose, or draw, they'll be satisfied."

Arbok nodded slowly. "Ytram is huge, much bigger than a human man. It would not be fair."

"Sure, sure, but maybe you ought to read up on David and Goliath."

"They had weapons. Marden says you wish no weapons. The men fight only with their hands."

"That's close. Hands, feet, teeth, elbows, knees, whatever they got."

"And when it is over?"

"Then it's over. One of the two is dead and there's no more argument between us."

Arbok glanced at Marden. Jake offered no comment and kept his expression frozen. Arbok returned his eyes to Jubal Bailey. "I do not wish an argument or a fight of any kind. To you, Man Bailey, it is a human against an alien. But it is not. It is alien against alien."

"So much the better," Jube smiled.

"And if Ytram wins? If he kills your gladiator?"

The smile broadened. "Then he's the better man, right? Look, we're wasting time. Talk to your boy, over there. Tell him the rules. He meets our boy in the middle of this dirt area. No running. No rules. No time outs. They start and it don't end until only one of the two can move."

"As you wish. Who is your champion, Man Bailey?"

Jube pointed. "The spic. He's about three hundred pounds, maybe three-fifty. So it's better than a fair fight for your boy. I figure the hippo weighs in at five hundred or so. Tell him and let's get to it."

Every cell save the solitary cubicles had a television monitor for messages, announcements, and general communications. While Arbok spoke with Ytram, Luther Cogswell had a security camera trained on the area chosen for the fight. "Mahoney, use your radio. Tell the boys in comm to pick up on that camera and pipe it in to all cells." He smiled. They might as well enjoy the show.

"Hey, spic!" Jube called to Martinez, who trotted over. He had already removed his shirt, he was hyped for battle, and his muscles rolled like steel cables beneath his skin. "Listen to me good, you asshole," Jube told him. "The space prick's wired on coke. Got me? He's stuffed to the gills with it. So he's not fast but he's strong."

"I don't care. I-"

"Shut the fuck up. He don't feel much pain. He had a blade pushed into him and he hardly felt it. You understand? Go for the nerve centers, Carlos. Anything else is gonna be wasted."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Martinez grinned. "It's like fightin' a nigger. You hit him in the head you busts up your hand. I knows what you means."

"Then get out there and kill that son of a bitch."

Jake returned with Arbok. "He wants one more condition," Jake told Jube.

"Which is?"

"Gladiator rules, Man Bailey."

"I already agreed to that. What the fuck else you want?"

"Gladiator rules means they must fight as did the gladiators. Naked."

"Spic, do it."

"You don't say nothing about-"

"Do it."

Fighting to the death naked was a custom of many more nations and tribes and contests than had been handed down by Rome. Sparta and Greece sent their best out to fight in such a manner. So did the African warriors, both in their homeland and when they were slaves in early America. There could be no concealed weapons, no unfair advantage.

Ytram was hairless. Martinez shaved his skull. No advantage there. Ytram was bigger by more than a hundred and fifty pounds than his terrestrial opponent; Carlos Martinez was faster and a skilled and experienced battler in hand-to-hand combat.

At first it went as expected. Ytram advanced ponderously, menacing in his huge bulk and outstretched arms, fingers clenching and unclenching to grasp and squeeze and crush. Martinez let him lumber by with an adroit sidestep and as Ytram went past him Martinez came up fast from behind to land a high foot against the ear of his opponent. Martinez had

been both a professional wrestler and a trained killer and his feet were like boards; skin tore and blood, dark and red-blue, spattered onto the dirt beneath them.

Ytram turned slowly. No pain showed in his face. He moved stolidly back toward Martinez, who kept constantly on the move, knowing he must use guile, speed, and experience to overcome a mass that Jube had warned him would not feel pain. And he must not let himself be hammered down by the great bulk and strength he faced.

Martinez went in fast and low, hit the ground rolling beneath an enormous arm swinging at him, and leg-tripped Ytram. The alien went down with a crash. Before he could move, Martinez dropped all his weight behind his knee against the back of Ytram's neck, a blow powerful enough to stun an ox. Ytram rose slowly and inexorably.

It went like that for twenty minutes, Martinez chopping, slashing, cutting, punching, kicking, tearing open skin, battering the massive dumb brute. Dust rose and fell back with blood. Martinez grabbed a handful of dirt and hurled it into Ytram's eyes. The alien bellowed, not from pain, but from the momentary blindness. Martinez went in fast with three tremendous kicks to the groin of Ytram. Alien vomit spewed onto the ground. Martinez grinned, came in from the side, one thumb extended like a chisel, and his thumb went in deep and hard to the side of an eyeball. Moments later the eyeball came out, torn free by Martinez's powerful hand, the eye trailing nerves and quivering tendrils behind it.

Martinez circled and came in with a rush to repeat his attack against the remaining eye. An alien hand, groping blindly, gripped Martinez's ankle. But the human's thumb was already stabbing at the alien's eye, trying to get through the soft flesh at the side of the socket. Ytram pulled wildly. It would have been to no avail except that Martinez's other foot skidded clumsily on the mixture of vomit, blood, and dust beneath him. He fought for balance, relieving the pressure on the eyeball, and the two battlers twisted and rolled in a cloud of dust and sweat and blood.

They must have heard Martinez's scream for a mile as the huge teeth of Ytram closed on the human's testicles. Blinded, battered, gushing blood, his body torn but strangely pain-free, clutching entrails and shredded skin.

Carlos Martinez twitched and convulsed violently, maddened with pain, but refusing to die. Ytram stumbled back, still numb, hand clutching pieces of organs of Martinez. He staggered away, the battle gone from his mind.

Jubal Bailey called out to Mahoney. "Kill him," he said.

Arbok started forward in a rage; Jake's hand held him back.

Mahoney lifted his weapon and put ten rounds into the tormented brain of Carlos Martinez.

Rules are rules.

Something bothered Luther Cogswell. He remained behind. They carted what was left of Carlos Martinez off" to the crematorium; the bones would be dissolved in acid and the last shred of existence of the Argentinian would be gone. Arbok refused to allow the prison medicis to work on Ytram; they gave Drong a medicine kit and a load of different medicines and wished him good luck. Luther Cogswell didn't give a shit about that either.

He signalled for a maintenance worker. "Don't talk to a single person or I'll call up your dead mother and turn her over to the niggers, understand?" Terrified eyes nodded to the voodoo man. "Get me a garden rake, pronto."

The man rushed back with a rake. "Now get the hell away from here," Luther ordered. When he was alone, he began raking carefully along the churned surface of the area of combat.

To anyone who watched from a distance, the voodoo man was doing what he did best. Collecting what he needed for his terrible spells. They believed what Luther wanted them to believe. He paid such matters no attention. He was looking for something else.

Two hours later, empty-handed, the awful truth grew to terrible stature in his mind.

CHAPTER 25

"You've gone crazy." Jubal Bailey stared in disbelief at Jake Marden. "You have really lost your mind," he continued, grinding out every word as if he had to pull them through his teeth. "You brought a nicking

newspaper reporter into this place? Here? In ..." He almost spluttered in disbelief and anger. "In this-" Words failed him and he gestured wildly to take in the elaborate computer consoles and long banks of electronic and communications equipment.

Alison Harper looked wide-eyed at Bailey. It was all happening with a rush that threatened to overload her ability to keep up with the situation and retain its perspective. She looked about her, stunned with the massive arrays in all directions. She knew this sort of equipment, she knew her electronics. She expected to find a place like this in the Pentagon or at NORAD or a spacenet facility or even IBM, but here, in a prison in northern Florida? It made not an ounce of sense. The security system had thrown her off. Jake's explanation that Old Millford was an advanced test of the future of prisons with computers controlling men and machines even made sense. Old Millford was a keystone for the future. If it worked, well, then all over the country She forced errant thoughts from her mind. Once they'd gotten inside this tremendous headquarters deep underground -and there wasn't any reason for that-she knew she'd crossed the threshold of normalcy and that she was way over her head. So she acted stupidly with this enigmatic black man of such obvious power. "I'm not a newspaper reporter," she blurted out. "I'm in electronic media, world television coverage in thirty languages, and-"

"Shut up," the black man told her, his eyes those of a python uncaring of whatever torment he might inflict upon the prey he was about to devour.

Her mouth seemed to open of its own accord and she forced it closed. She thought desperately, swiftly to try to place the relationship between Marden and this man in some sort of balance that would make sense to her. Why had Jake brought her in here? Not to just the prison. She'd been through the anti-terrorist training school and she had a whing-ding of a story that was being flashed by satellites throughout the world. "I'd like to go through that prison," she told Jake, still knowing only that he was a helicopter instructor for the school. "It could make a great followup story. You know, what's good for Old Millford might be the model for much of the world. Can you arrange it?"

"I'll try," he told her, and they went off to dinner in the town, sitting in a booth at the far back of a small Italian restaurant. No one came to their table unless and until Jake pressed a button that summoned their waiter; and the waiter never tarried or made the usual stupid small talk so coveted by the help in small Italian spaghetti joints.

Their conversation drifted easily until she brought up a report she had seen that day in a capsulization of news. "It's about that alien spaceship, you know what I'm talking about, Jake? The big UFO flap."

"I thought that died down," he told her.

"Oh, as far as the public is concerned, it has. But rumors persist among our home office that Washington is still snarling over the whole thing and that the UFO wasn't a big nothing at all."

"What was it?" He toyed with his wine glass.

"They're convinced it really was-is-a ship from the stars and that it landed, right here on the earth."

"Or crashed," he said. "From what I hear they haven't any idea where it came down. If it came down."

"That's just the point," she said with the excitement that so appealed to him. "They haven't dropped it.

Washington, I mean. Jake, they're bringing in special teams from everywhere to tighten up the search, and the word is out that somewhere in the southeast is where they expect to find it. They sound really hot about this."

"Would you tell a friend of mine whatever you know about this story? The way they're-how'd you say it? The way they're tightening up the hunt for this UFO or whatever the hell it is?"

"Of course. Who is he?"

"He's the man who can get you into Old Millford for the story you want."

"Tell him it's a deal," she laughed. "I tell him about the search for a UFO and he lets me have the story I want."

"Hang loose, love. I'll be right back."

He made his telephone call, obviously, and he was back in a few minutes, and he told her to finish her meal. "I arranged for security to let you through with me. It's not easy getting into or out of that place, and they're fanatics about their security system."

"I can understand that," she said.

The hell I did, she thought later. Fort Knox must be a tent city compared to this place . . .

Now she stood before this terrible black man who was dressed in prison fatigues and yet seemed imbued with an awesome power and authority. Jake Marden sighed audibly and gestured to the black man.

"Jube, this is Alison Harper. Alison, Jubal Bailey."

They stared coldly at one another.

"Jube, goddamnit it, she's here for a reason!" Jake shouted suddenly at the man he'd introduced as Bailey. Fear gripped her. She was afraid of a sudden explosive outburst between these two; moments later she was aware that both men carried that same sense of power and authority.

"Okay, I understand!" Bailey shouted back. "I know you must have a reason. A damned good one, in fact. But why in this particular place? Why not somewhere else out there in that fucking zoo?"

"Listen to her and you'll know why."

She watched the animal-like intensity in that dark face fade swiftly. Whatever was this animal ferocity between the two men simmered down to raw power but without conflict. She thanked whatever private gods looked after her.

"First I got to know something," Bailey was telling Jake.

"Go."

"Is she your woman?"

Jake didn't turn to look at her. He kept eye contact with Bailey. "Yes. She's my woman."

Alison didn't move a muscle. She didn't understand what was happening, but her innate sixth sense warned her not to disturb or to contest whatever Jake Marden was saying to this man.

Bailey turned to face her again. "There's a condition to all this and I've got to have your word on it. You break your word once you give it to me, you're dead, and so is Jake." He paused as her heart went cold.

"And so am I," he added with words that rocked her back. "As crazy as all that sounds, it's true."

"What. . . kind of conditions?" she forced out.

"Whatever you learn here you do not say or breathe a word about to the outside world. To no one. Absolutely no one. Is it a deal?"

"Wait ... I don't understand. How can the prison have such secrets?"

"Harper, fuck the prison. Say anything you want to about that. You're not in the prison now."

"Then-"

"You're under it. Deep beneath Old Millford. Now, we're wasting time. Do we have a deal? Remember, your life, his," he pointed to Jake, "and mine, all depend on your word. Do I have it?"

She looked to Jake. No expression; no help there. Time to decide, Alison . . .

"Yes," she said firmly, her voice strong and clear.

Bailey dropped back into his lounge chair and motioned her to a seat. "All right. Let's have it, please."

Again he caught her off balance, nearly throwing her into a spin. Of a sudden, almost as if with a crash, he seemed strong but gentle, powerful but kind. She shook off the torrent of thoughts again assailing her mind and returned to what Jake had asked her to do. "At dinner tonight-"

"Please," he interrupted, and she saw the weariness in his eyes. "Skip the menu, Harper."

"We were talking, / was talking about the word coming down through World Press and other contacts we have in Washington, the military, our usual inside sources, and I told Jake that the public has been led to just forget about that strange ship, that UFO, that was all headline news for weeks."

He studied her carefully. "You didn't say it just dropped from the news. You said the public is being led to forget it, right?"

"Yes. The government ridicules the whole thing now. The same scientists who were tearing out their hair to find that vessel, or whatever it is, now say it was an instrument glitch, or an exploding comet, or a collision of matter with antimatter-in fact, the anti-matter bit is the official explanation now. That an anti-matter particle exploded with such violence that it twisted gravity and space-time and it was a wonderful thing to witness, but it's all over now."

"They believe that?"

She looked straight at Bailey. "Not for an instant. You see, Mr. Bailey-"

"Jube."

"Then-there are many ways I won't go into now, but we know they don't cotton to that story. In fact, their denials are so vehement it's a dead giveaway to us. So we put some of our best people quietly into what was really happening. Then, the top news crowd gets together privately. Coffee Matches; that sort of thing. We trade off leads with one another. And the biggest thing among our group is that not only did an alien craft reach the earth, but that it did land. The big computer companies were told to run all the factors into their heuristics systems-

"Hunch seeking?"

"You surprise me," she said, and she was surprised at this instant recognition of a word that left most people blinking. "Yes; the electronic hunch. Feeding everything into open-feedback and closed-loop systems, and the word from the electronic oracles is that the odds for the ship landing are better than eighty-seven percent."

"That's better than Vegas," Jube murmured. "Like ten times better."

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"Washington decided to give everything it had to finding that ship. Again I won't go into the background details unless you ask me for them, but the final consensus of all factors was that the alien ship, again, all things being equal, descended within the southeastern region of the United States. The government has assigned a massive force to find it. Biggest manhunt in history. Every scientific and security agency is involved from NASA to the FAA and the FBI and NSA and, well, all of them. It isn't just a search. They're scouring everything. Why, every day and every night they've got their latest reconnaissance planes crisscrossing the whole area. They've maneuvered all kinds of military satellites from the Big Birds through the Ferrets to dip down over the region for electronic, photographic, spectral, and other studies. They are really giving it their all."

Jube held up his hand to stem the flow of words. He wanted several minutes to digest what he had just heard and fit it within the embrace of all that had gone before, including his own deep-rooted misgivings that led him to tell everyone they were "pulling in their horns." He left his chair and came back with a coffee pot and three mugs and poured for them all. "You smoke?" he asked finally.

"Yes, but I didn't light up in here," she said, gesturing to the electronic equipment. "With all that stuff I didn't think you'd want-

"Light up, Harper. I got some more to ask."

She'd been desperate for a cigarette since she walked into this place. She dragged deeply, blew out smoke and nodded. "Please. Ask away."

"What's driving them the hardest?" Jube asked.

"Now, that's one hell of a question," she countered.

"Don't compliment me, lady. Just answer it."

She saluted him with a forefinger to her forehead. God, he was fast. "Two things. The obvious is that if it's a ship that came from the stars it must represent a culture, a technology, a civilization much further along development than whatever heights we've reached. It could be similar to our present technology compared to the world at the time of Christ. Or that of even the Neanderthal as a rough comparison."

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"Christ is better. People were already building things in those days," Jube said. "The Roman Empire was a hell of an engineering machine and as much as they were impressed they'd be able to understand the nature, if not the details, of what they faced."

She felt stunned. Who was this black genius from nowhere? "Well, the obvious advantages are military. Then there's the propulsion system. Possibly a gravity control system. The consensus is that the advantages of this alien race are strictly those of much more time to get further up the ladder. That if we, the earth sciences and our government, had that kind of technological and scientific grip on things, we'd be on our way to the stars tomorrow. That's worth anything. That realization has finally managed to sink in beyond the scientists and the military, and where the government was using kid gloves before in handling their search, from now on it's going to be raw power. Their motto is screw the search warrants, to hell with individual rights, This is war!" Alison Harper's right arm shot up, hand clenched in a fist.

"That's their attitude now. Stop at nothing."

Jube looked at Jake Marden through narrowed eyes. "You gettin' the message, whitey?"

"I had that message a long time ago, black momma. But you've been playing your psych games with our people so deep sometimes you almost lost me as well."

"You can't keep up with the niggers, get your white ass outta the kitchen."

"That'll be the day. Look, Jube, she's not finished."

"Oh, I figured there was more. What we've heard so far from the lady is power through technology. Propulsion, gravity, science, weapons, superiority. All that stuff is shit against the real issue. They just don't like to talk about it except behind closed doors when the inferiors aren't around."

"You're very perceptive, Jubal Bailey," Alison told him.

"Sensitive skin," he smiled. "Not ego, you understand. Just the skin. It's been scraped a few times. Do go on, Harper."

"Well, you just hit it. The emotional and racial issues."

"Not just black and white this time," Jube grinned. "What we got is a bunch of WASPS trying to get up and out there in space."

Alison clapped her hand to her mouth to stifle a burst of laughter. "I've never said it better," she tagged on to her muffled laughing. "But that sums it up. It's all a matter of raw emotion."

"This time the scenario's changed. Before if the black man rose up it was a matter of mongrelizing the races. Inferior genes and all that. Miscegenation running amok. Now it's the white man who may be on the bottom of the genetic totem pole. White genes may prove to be inferior. After all, the aliens could be green or spotted brown or yellow. Who the hell knows?" He smiled at her.

"The word is monster, Jube."

"That the official word?"

"Strange to say, yes. The whole idea behind their search, to justify anything they do, no matter who or what they trample beneath them, is monster. Slavery of all the earth's people. They've even brought in the top church leaders and the new wave of television evangelists to Washington for secret meetings, briefing them on what may be happening, but above all to lead the nation on a new crusade against the beings from outer space who'll rape our daughters and wives and bring forth inferior-well, you're more familiar with that than 7 am."

"You speak truth, white woman. Red man here first," Jube said with a straight face.

"The long and short of it, from everything I've learned, is that sanity, rationality, well, none of it will count."

"Alison Harper," Jube said, "let me put it briefly to you. If they ever find that ship they'll be all over it like starving flies on fresh horseshit."

"A bit colorful, but accurate."

Jube looked to Jake. "You know what I'd do if I had those aliens within my reach, Jake?"

"Lay it on me, man."

"I'd make us heroes overnight. Shoot the slugs down wherever we found them. Blow them all to hell, then call in all the television cameras, give Miss Lois Lane of the Daily Planet,

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here, first shot for a world exclusive, and put the bodies on world television. And just like that we become saviors of the world. We've saved our women's virtue from the slaving monsters, killed the goddess, captured their ship, and we all walk off hand-in-hand into the setting sun."

"That's one way," Jake allowed.

"You're smiling," Alison told him. "You find that funny?"

"Sure. Don't you?"

"I do not. It's stupid beyond all belief. We're more monsters in our so-called civilized world than I believe anyone else ever could be!" Alison was heating up and she showed it. "Just fire off a few rounds and lose what they can teach us? Perhaps how to prevent the nuclear war we seem so determined to have against each other? Give up whatever their ship has to offer? Would you land on a strange planet, obviously psychotic and dangerous, without a self-destruct button handy? Our own ships and planes and missiles have those!"

"I like your style, Harper," Jube told her.

"Just who the hell are you, Jubal Bailey! Look at you! Prison fatigues and yet you absolutely reek of power and authority!"

"I'se a good man, massah lady. I sweeps da floors and keeps mah head down and I don' give the white boss no troubles, ma'am."

"And you're as full of crap as a Christmas turkey," she snapped.

"Tell her, Jube."

"You crazy, Marden?"

"You got her word, remember?"

Jube studied Alison Harper. "Yeah, I do that, all right. You want it straight, lady?"

"Whatever it is; yes. You're both starting to drive me crazy. I'm in a prison. A prisoner is totally comfortable and at home and behind that shuffling nigger bullshit you've been giving me I find an incredible brain. You'd have to be blind not to see that you two are very good and old friends-"

"He's a prisoner, too."

She gaped. "Jake?"

"Uh huh," he said.

"But-"

"When this place went electronic we took over," Jake told her. "It's a very long story, Alison, and it can hold until later. All you need to know now is that the warden's a front and a group of us absolutely control and run this place."

"But . . . but . . . why?"

"Dye your skin black and spend a couple years in the average prison and you'll never ask that question again," Jube said.

"I'm sorry. That was stupid of me."

"Not stupid. Unthinking. But now you know. We have our own tight little island here, Harper. In fact, I think you know one of our people. If you don't know him personally you sure know of him."

"Who?"

"Senator Jeff Maddox."

"Here?"

"You look constantly surprised, Harper. Why do you want me to keep repeating everything I say?"

She shook her head before answering Bailey. "Because all this is ... is so incredible!"

"We haven't started yet."

"My God, what could you-"

"You see, we don't really trust Maddox. A politician is a politician first, last, and always. Carpetbagger, scumbag; name it and he's it. Maddox would like to get a full pardon, turn himself into a hero and make it all the way to the White House. If he could pull off this caper he'll be an eighteen-karat hero the world over."

"How could he possibly do all that?"

"Kill the aliens, that's how. We just got through talking about that," Jube said.

"But that means he'd have to know where they are!" she shouted, almost shrieking.

"You pick up things quickly," Jube said, smiling.

"Now wait just a minute-"

"For what?"

"You're asking me to believe-"

"Believe what you want. One of the reasons Maddox won't

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get away with it is that the captain of that starship has the experience of dealing with dozens of different races from different planets that dance around different stars. He's sharp, he's fast, he's tough, and he's dealt with scummy people like Maddox from one end of the galaxy to the other. Or half of the galaxy; shit, I don't know where he's been, but it's been plenty."

"This is incredible ..." She was fighting for air as her head reeled. "You said that was one reason."

"Right."

"What's another?"

"We won't let him," Jake answered.

"You won't let him," she echoed, no longer caring about how dumb she might sound. "By you, you mean-"

"Right. The both of us," Jube answered.

"But how can you stop him?"

Jube made a gun of his hand and his upraised thumb went back and forth. "Bang, bang, he's dead. That's how."

"Wait. . . please; wait. How would he even find that alien ship? If it is an alien ship, that is. I-I don't know, you two have me so confused!"

"The truth will do that to you sometimes, Harper," Jube said.

"Does he really know where the ship is?"

"Yes," Jake said.

"And he can get to it?"

"Sure can," Jube tagged along.

"But where, I mean, do you know where it is?"

"Uh huh," they chorused.

"Where?" she shouted, feeling she was going mad.

"Take a deep breath, Harper," Jube said.

"Where's the goddamn ship!" This time she did shout.

Jake took her hand and held it between his. She felt like a child in that enormous grip. "Alison, it's a lot closer than you realize."

She closed her eyes, hoping the nightmare would be gone when she opened them. But no; there she was, in an underground bunker in a state prison with a giant holding her hand gently between his. She refused to ask any more questions.

/•on

She'd wait them out. Instantly she knew she was lying to herself. She'd explode if she didn't find out.

"How close?" she asked in a voice so calm she almost failed to recognize herself.

"About a hundred yards from here."

She didn't want to, she hated it, but she gaped. She tried to speak but it was all too much, too bizarre, overwhelming.

"Close her mouth, Jake. Any minute now she'll be catching flies."

Allison snapped her mouth shut. "A hundred yards," she said.

"There she goes again. Repeating everything we say."

"You two think this is funny?"

"No way. But you look funny with those wild eyes and your jaw hanging down to your boobs."

She held out her cup. "Screw the coffee. I need a drink; desperately."

"Cognac?"

"I don't care if it's kerosene!"

Jube half-filled the cup. She took it straight, sputtering and coughing. "At this moment I hate myself," she said finally.

"I figured," Jube told her.

"How the hell could you know?"

"You gave us your word that you wouldn't give anyone else the words we gave to you."

"Oh, God," she moaned, lifting the cup again. It was empty. Jake took it from her and poured in another hefty dose. This time she sipped.

"Do I get to see that ship?" she asked, peering over the rim of the cup. "I have got to see it. I'll go mad if I don't."

"You get to see it," Jake said. "You get to go inside. If you want, that is."

"The aliens ..." She let her words hang in midair.

"They're in there."

"You're talking with them."

"Hell, yes," Jube said. "Think we're using hand signals?"

"What . . . what are they like?" she whispered.

"Aliens." The two men grinned at one another.

"I'll kill the both of you."

"I like her," Jube told Jake. "Spirit and brains."

Alison stabbed herself in the mouth trying to get a cigarette between her lips. She flicked flame from her lighter but her hand shook so badly she might as well have been in a windstorm. Jake steadied her hand until she lit up and dragged deeply. She held out both hands. "Bear with me a moment. Everything you've told me, I can't tell anyone else. Does this mean I'm now part of your little madcap group?"

"You're his woman, Harper," Jake told her. "He spoke for you, which is good enough for me to have put our lives in your hands. Does that answer your question?"

"Uh, certainly, and-" She stopped short. "How do you get to their ship?"

"Tunnels. Security blocks. Regular stuff but a lot better than anything you've ever seen. The ship's computer ties in with ours. Takes both sides to let anyone through in either direction," Jake answered.

"Can I see it now?"

"Why not?" Jake said. "Anything else on the burner first, Jube?"

"No. Go ahead. And when it all sinks in, Harper, come back and talk with me. You can do us a lot of good," Jube said to her.

"I will."

"Then welcome aboard, Alison Harper." Jube extended his hand and when she took the dark skin she could almost feel the electrical thrill of power flowing into hers.

They went through two security blocks. "After this, there's an observation area. Armored glass that would stop a bazooka. You can see most of the ship, or at least, one side of it, from there. It's best to get the outside view first. It makes one hell of an impact on all those neurons stuffed into your brain."

"Please; let's do it."

They went through the final security system before the observation area. Behind the armored glass loomed a huge dark shape. Jake hit a series of switches, and floodlights snatched the ship from darkness. She gasped, felt hot and cold all over as disbelief and belief mixed in a surging tide of emotions that threatened to blow all her sensory fuses. "How . . . how big is it?" she asked, speaking in a hoarse whisper.

"About ninety yards in length. Seventy yards up and down and the same in width."

"I don't know ... I mean, I didn't know what to expect ... I thought it would be, you know, so huge. The energy it must have to travel the way it does-"

"Alison, it's got more power in a unit the size of a refrigerator than we have in every nuclear reactor in the world combined."

"Oh." That was all she could think to say.

"Don't try to absorb too much so quickly, Alison. Give it some slack."

She pointed. "It's . . . it's not what I expected, you know, sleek, streamlined. It looks, well, like it's been used so much. Battered . . . it's got scorch marks and the metal's taken a lot of punishment, and I guess looks are deceiving; it must be so strong."

"You can't imagine," he said. "Not yet, anyway."

She fell silent, walking along the glass, drinking in the awesome sight of an alien starship. Jake had several times started to tell her that she already knew the master of this vessel, but she had been so stunned and overwhelmed so many times he judged it best to delay that little scenario as long as possible. Then, there'd be Michiko to help out at that time. Jake figured Alison would hang desperately to the Japanese girl and that would help.

They were through the last security block. Alison's heart beat madly. Directly before her yawned the open hatchway to the most incredible moment of her life. When she stepped through that hatch she would be in a ship from the stars. She felt terribly naked, frightened; her feet stumbled beneath her. Yet

she was wildly thrilled and almost breathless.

Behind them a red light flashed brilliantly and a loudspeaker came alive. A beeper went off on Jake's belt. He squeezed a control on the beeper and the loudspeaker crackled.

"Marden, this is Security. Bailey wants you to drop whatever you're doing and get to control immediately. Acknowledge, please."

He yanked the beeper radio to his mouth. "This is Marden and I copy. I'm on my way. What's happened?"

"It's Senator Maddox, sir. He's disappeared. Bailey thinks he split from here and went over to the government side."

"I'm moving. Tell Bailey. Marden out."

He grasped Alison's wrist and yanked her behind him as he started back on the run. She half-turned, looking desperately at the starship. "But... but I was almost there!" she wailed.

"We'll come back. We've got to get to Maddox before he talks to those same people you warned us about, or we're all going to be very dead. Damn it, woman, run!"

CHAPTER 26

In their underground control room he led Alison to a communications desk, pushing her gently into the seat before a wide array of equipment. "Alison, I don't have to tell you what not to say. But we need every contact you have. Call your office at World. Call your friends in the newspaper game, in Washington; anywhere. Everywhere. Whatever you people have for a network, see if anyone has the slightest hint of Senator Jeff Maddox either being heard of, heard from, or seen. Anything. If you need any callbacks, give them that number by the yellow phone. That's strictly incoming and it's got a four-number rollover. But whatever you do, help us find that son of a bitch. You need me I'll be right over there," he pointed to another console. "Get to it, girl."

As he started for his own work center, she saw Jubal Bailey and another man enter the room and walk immediately to Jake where an intense conversation took place without any preamble. She wanted to watch, to listen to what they were saying, but she understood what was needed of her. She went to a headset and lip mike lying on the panel before her, and tapped in the private number to her research office at the studios.

Jake and Luther Cogswell activated their private "search net." "If that son of a bitch is above ground anywhere, we'll nail him," Luther vowed. And he believed his system would work that well. They'd designed it to keep tabs on every major drug dealer and distributor in the business, including the head shops and all the police and politicians tied in with the intricate web and network throughout the country. Luther Cogswell had infiltrated almost every major office and gov eminent building, every hotel and motel, every train, bus and airplane connection, private or commercial. Maddox was an imposing figure and tough to hide. If he took a cab, they'd have him. The hackies didn't need to know who he was or why he was sought, nor did they have to play cop.

If they found him, or saw him, try to find out where he was staying or where he was going. Who's going to turn down ten thousand in cash and off the record?

And with Alison Harper's far-flung news contacts, and the "private" all-points-bulletins for the various law enforcement agencies in the web, Jeff Maddox didn't stand a chance of evading detection.

But he did during those first few hours. "He's good," Jake told Alison. "Very, very good. And he knows how intricate and thorough our system is and how it works. He should. He helped set it up and he's worked it enough himself. So it's not just someone eluding detection who doesn't know what's going on. He knows, and that means he's going to be a very tough target."

"He could have reached where he planned to go," Alison reminded Jake. Unnecessarily, she knew, but facing up to reality was the only way to punch through to a conclusion, good or bad.

Jake stretched. "We can't do any good here any more. Let's hit my apartment and grab some sleep. You hungry?"

She shook her head. "No. A shower and shuteye sounds delicious."

Jake motioned to Luther. "Voodoo man, we'll be in my place. Asleep, I hope. Anything breaks, get to me right away."

Luther looked strangely at Alison.

"Voodoo man, what the hell's wrong with you?"

Luther turned abruptly back to Jake. "I just realized," Luther said. "I don't even know this woman. Who is she? And what's she doing here?"

"She's my woman and that's all you need to know. You read me, voodoo man?"

Luther smiled; Alison saw hyena and python all at once. "That wasn't what I was looking for, Jake. My question was all business."

AQfi

"This is Alison Harper. Alison, this here's the voodoo man. Also known as Cyclops because he's supposed to have an eye in the middle of his forehead. Invisible. His real handle is Luther Cogswell and if you give him a handful of chicken bones and some lizard gizzards he'll cast a spell and scare the bejesus out of you."

Alison nodded. "If I need a sleeping potion I'll know where to go. Hello, Luther Cogswell."

His eyes lit up. "I can hardly believe what I'm seeing. A lady. An honest-to-God lady!"

"Thank you, Luther, but how can you tell?"

"I told you," Jake answered. "Third eye. Middle of the forehead. Pure blue, but invisible. Let's hit it, honest-to-God lady."

In his apartment, Jake left Alison to her shower in the bedroom, the door closed behind her. He sprawled on the couch. If they needed him there were bells, alarms, and always someone to bang on his door. He had no need to stay alert. If there was anything he needed now it was a tight, hard sleep.

Twenty minutes would salvage his ability to think, an hour would rest him, two hours would have him ready to fight a bear with his fingernails. He doubled the pillow beneath his head and forced his body to relax. In moments he began to slip through the fog of one level of conscious to another.

Jake.

He forced his eyes open to slits. Had Alison called? No; the shower still ran. Too tired; his head was trying to regroup everything inside.

Jake Marden.

Someone was calling his name.

"What the hell!" he said aloud.

No answer in the room. But that voice; it was familiar. He'd heard it before, inside his head. He closed his eyes again.

Hello, Jake.

Holy shit! It's Yes. Arbok.

Man, I never expected this. I mean, we had that contact

when you were on the way in but nothing since then and-Am I just imagining this? Are you picking me up also?

fes.

But how ... if you can read my mind No! I cannot do that, Jake. Never for a moment believe I read your thoughts. I cannot enter your mind. I send to you and you send to me but that is how we can communicate directly. There is no intrusion if either one of us wishes to block the input.

I understand. I think I understand; yes, I do.

It appears that way.

I don't understand this silence ever since you landed. If you can do this now, why did you wait so long?

/* would have been unwise. Suspicion of everything fitted the world about us. The presence of aliens and of alien minds and all the deep fears of your race made it too dangerous. Had this ability been confirmed, you and I were in immediate grave danger. I also wished to be certain that neither of us could intrude upon the other.

That I understand. Boy, do I! Can you imagine what would happen if one of us was sending while he was

having a nightmare? You could tear the other mind apart.

Precisely, Jake. Which is why nature does not permit unrestricted contact in this manner. It must be mutual. If you wish not to hear it blocks out all receiving. The same for me.

I think we'd better keep this to ourselves.

Absolutely. No one must know. That includes your woman and my woman.

Arbok, I must know something. Do you have this contact ability with anyone else?

No.

Have you had it before? I mean, before coming here?

Whispers. Ghosts of thought. But almost all the higher races experience that. Rarely does it go beyond that level.

Why?

fou already have the answer. Nature prohibits unrestricted development in this manner. I would call it the Nightmare Effect. Lack of development is the protection.

How come we have it so strongly?

Only the Highest One may know that. I lack the wisdom

AQR

for the answer, as do you. Our minds have hundreds of thousands of vastly complicated connections and signals every second. I lack the answer, and I have only the reality. TOM and I match our minds.

Distance and racial origin obviously mean nothing. We are the ultimate in brothers. But put aU that aside for now, Jake.

Okay.

We can do this only for limited periods. Otherwise it feels like your brain begins to boil.

Hit me with why you chose now to make the contact.

We are both in grave danger.

Hell, I know that much . . .

fou must trust me as I do you.

Jesus, Arbok, if you can read my mind then you know I cannot do that!

Sorry.

Yo'r whole race is heuristic, Jake.

Spell that out.

Your logic is false, four rationales are facades. Everything is emotional. Conclusions are based on hunches; that is the heuristic element. It is dangerous, explosive.

No argument, Arbok.

Then understand this. Once it is known an alien is among you, with superior technology, your planet will become an explosive frenzy screaming to kill. It is inevitable, four people- earth people--will do everything they can to destroy me and this ship. They consider me to be an implacable enemy of your world. Not even Frarsk can withstand super gigaton bombs, four people will go to any cost for our destruction, four world is sick, sick, sick, Jake. It wul commit suicide before it wul even consider alien rule, even if none is intended.

Yeah, we're a real party bunch.

Earth is the only world I know that worships war. Here it is a religious experience, the crusade without end. And I tell you now, Jake, be prepared to leave this world with me, very soon, or stay behind to die.

Badly.

Why would I die?

He felt the touch of a sad smile. Because they will torture you horribly to drain every drop of knowledge you may have about me, this vessel or anything to do with us.

4QQ

Yeah, I see what you mean. What do you want me to do?

Michiko prepared a list of supplies. I will get the list to you. If you can get them, through Michiko's company or your own sources, they will be accepted by the computer through Bays Five, Six, and Seven. I . . .

Pain; a wave of pain. A sense of heat. What had Arbok said? . . . it feels like your brain begins to boil. He lay in the dark and fell asleep, exhausted and dreamless. But Arbok's words that had appeared so strong and vibrant in his mind drifted on the edges between conscious and subconscious. One thought prevailed above all others. . . . be prepared to leave this world with me, very soon . . .

He came out of his sleep with his hands clenched in fists and a wild angry red haze before his eyes. In a moment he had calmed himself, aided by the silhouette in the bedroom doorway of Alison in one of his shirts. He swung his feet to the floor, his head pounding madly atop his shoulders.

"Jake, are you all right?" she called softly from the doorway.

"Yeah. Soon as I mainline some coffee." He rubbed his scalp. It was a whole new world up there since he shaved his head. Bristles, itching, but he liked the feel of rubbing hard knuckles into his head. And rubbing the bristles on his chin as well. He'd almost forgot shaving.

"You have the goods in your kitchen?"

"It's all there. Would you mind? I need to think a while."

"I'll take care of it," she said and disappeared.

He had to speak with Arbok openly on their viewscreen system. Back and forth without any reference to prior information. If Jube had an ounce of sense, and he had a couple of tons of the stuff, he'd monitor every transmission of everybody within, to and from Old Millford, and most especially from their secret underground center. He thought about talking to Arbok and viewing him simultaneously and realized that Michiko might show in the screen, and that could easily set Jube off on a tear. It wouldn't do to have it as an unexpected reaction like that.

Jake went to his comm panel across the living room, punched in a contact direct for Jube. The small monitor lit up. Jube looked tired but still angry enough to be fully alert. "Jube, I

passed out for a couple of hours. Anything on our missing star?"

"Zip. Your girl get anything?"

"No. Not a single callback and they were told to do that only if they had something."

"Nobody has nothing. In one way that may not be too bad. I mean, if he's really vanished it could be literal. Don't seem possible for someone like Maddox, who's got to get to government, to just disappear like this."

"Don't bet on it, Jube."

"I only bet on sure things."

"I'm going to be talking with Arbok." ., ^

"Why tell me?" •

"Because there may be something you don't know. He's had company with him for a while."

"I know. I wasn't sure if you knew."

"I did and I was waiting to tell you. The moment never seemed to arrive. But how the hell did you know, Jube?"

"Sniffers, m'man, sniffers."

"Jube, what the hell are you talking about?"

"The nose knows, babe. Women like to wear toilet water and perfume. Ain't the same as human sweat and alien stink. It came into the chemical detectors-those sniffers?-like a bomb and set off silent alarms through the whole system. We thought it was a fucking gas attack. The rest was easy to figure, Jake."

"I'll be damned. And here I figured I had a hot surprise for you."

"No way, dude."

"You're not worried about her in that ship with him?"

"Hell, no. Like the man says on MAD, what? Me worry? That little lady is the perfect hostage as far as her daddy and the company is concerned. As far as they'll never know, we're holding her. She'll never bust our cover."

"Why not?"

"You think she'll tell her daddy she's getting dicked by an alien from outer space?" Jube laughed. "There goes the family honor and the old man's intestines when he guts himself to save face, or his ass, or

whatever it is when they can't stand the heat no more."

501

"Sounds like it's all under control."

"Sure is."

"Arbok said something the day before yesterday about supplies. Because of what's been going on, I don't deliver anything without your knowing about it first."

"What's he want?"

Jake shrugged. "Don't know. Same old crap, I guess."

"Hell, give him anything he wants."

"Got it. I'll be in soon."

"You have a nice night with your lady?"

"Would you believe separate bedrooms? I passed out on the couch."

"I believe you. Always said you were a dumb honky, remember?" Jube cut the switch.

He poured the third cup of coffee down his throat. Alison watched him in amazement. "Do you always dump that stuff down your throat like that?"

"Uh uh. Today's a pretty good day. Usually I stand naked with my feet in the toilet bowl and pour it over my head. Not a drop hits the bowl or the floor. Skin just sucks it all in."

"Strangely enough," she sighed, "I believe you." She shifted conversational gears. "Anything new on the home front? With Maddox? I get any calls?"

"Nothing."

"Damn. I thought we'd pick up something."

"You won't do that if he's not moving too much."

"I know, I know, but I really wanted to help."

"Look, I have to call someone on our viewscreen. Videophone. I'd like you to listen in and watch the screen, but I want you out of sight of the camera that picks me up."

"Okay."

"Not so easy. I don't care if you stuff one of my socks in your mouth, but I don't want a sound out of you."

"That sounds pretty kinky-"

"It's not and you'll know why when I finish with the call. Can you handle it?"

"If you don't mind, I prefer a handkerchief."

"Get it."

When Alison returned and took a seat where she could see the screen, and listen to the speakerphone, Jake tapped in to notify Arbok to open contact audio and visual. A few moments passed, a green light glowed and the viewscreen brightened.

"This is Jake," he said to Arbok. "You have sound and picture?"

Arbok kept it all business. "Yes. What may I do for you?"

Jake hit the automatic slow zoom and focus. Arbok was stripped to the waist, his powerful head uncovered to show the muscled features and the ridged skull and the back of his neck. He was a mass of bunched and scarred muscle beneath the tough leathery skin. Large piercing eyes stabbed out from the screen. Jake barely heard the muffled sharp cry from behind and to his side; he didn't believe it would go over the line, and Arbok showed no sign of anything to bother him.

"You had a list of supplies you wanted me to get for you. I thought I'd save time by taking them down on the printer. If you'll feed them into your fax machine I'll have it printed out and get it in the works right away. Oh, by the way, it's all cleared by Bailey as well."

Arbok didn't miss a beat. "That will be helpful. While we talk, Mickey will send the list."

Jake didn't know how Alison managed not to make at least a strangled sound. She must have stuffed the handkerchief halfway down her throat not to comment as Michiko Nakamura came into the scene.

"Jake, I have a list that Mickey has been having filled. It comes to thirty-seven cartons, and they're being delivered by truck to the regular loading docks. Can they be sent through? It's mainly electronics, recording equipment. Stuff for the computer and some subsystems."

"No problem. Soon as I get the first list I'll get it under way. Can you have the computer open up Bay's Five, Six, and Seven for loading?"

"Of course."

"We have something else to talk about."

"Go ahead, please."

"One of our people, Maddox-you remember him?"

"Yes."

"He's flipped out."

503

"I do not understand."

"He's gone wacko. He split from us and he's trying to reach top authority to tell them all about you and the ship being here."

Jake had never seen so swift a change of expression in Arbok before. "Can you stop him?"

"Hell, we're trying, man. So far no sign of him anywhere. But even if he gets where he wants, it's gong to take a while for him to get the right kind of audience to listen to him. He'll be an escaped convict with a crazy story. That will have to go up the political ladder step by step and they'll drill his ass day and night, and only then will they start to check it out. So we have a real chance of getting to him before he gets to wherever he wants to go. But it could be real trouble."

"I will tell you what kind of trouble, Jake Marden. What you call the hydrogen bomb. Many of them. Not even Frarsh can handle being in the heart of an exploding sun. It is poor consolation that we shall all be vaporized together."

"It won't happen quite that fast, Arbok. Our people, if it ever gets to that, will do everything they can to get this ship intact. And you with it to teach them how to run things. That means they'll want to negotiate. And negotiation means a lot of time. So there's a lot of water to pass under this bridge before it gets down to punching the strike buttons."

"From everything you just said, which I'm not certain I understand, then there is no need for me to be concerned in terms of haste?"

Jake almost laughed aloud. Arbok had made that statement with ambassadorial finesse. It was beautiful. He knew Jube and at least one more man, likely Luther, would be going over every word, and that last remark would ease a lot of sharp edges beneath anyone's ass.

"Yeah, that's the size of it," Jake replied.

"Is there anything else you need? Have you received the faxed list?"

Jake glanced to his side. "Yep. It's here. I'll get it going right away."

"Thank you."

"By the way, how's your gladiator doing?"

"Ah, Ytram. He took a terrible beating from your man. He lives, not much more, but we tend him. For a primitive world, your medicines are really remarkable."

"Thanks a heap," Jake said drily. "I'll chisel that in stone when I get back to my cave." "I do not understand, Jake."

"Forget it," Jake snapped. "Over and out." He cut the connection. It wasn't a bad idea to end the exchange on a bit of a sour note.

Jake turned to the wide-eyed Alison, removing the handkerchief she really had stuffed into her mouth. He held his forefinger before his lips. "Time for that morning shower, lover. Let's go do it." He grasped her arm firmly but gently to steer her with him and, in the bedroom, hit the CD player for loud music. He slipped off his clothes and stood before her naked, motioning for her to do the same. Eyes wide again she went along with him, following him into the shower. He turned the water on full and when they had as much noise going from the shower and loud talking and laughing, and the music, their bodies pressed together, she tilted his head down to talk directly into his ear.

"Was I going crazy in there? Was that the same Arbok--"

"The one and the same with Michiko in Gainesville."

"But. . . but he's an alien! I mean, from outer space! From out there," her hand gestured wildly as he held

her tightly, "from all those stars!"

"Keep your voice down. That's right. He's also the master of that vessel. He's the big honcho aboard that thing."

"You told me he was a pilot-"

"Sure did. The truth."

"That he flew the big stuff-"

"You ever see a bigger starship?"

"And that he was grounded for a while ..." Her voice trailed away; Jake had told her the absolute truth.

"Tell me I'm still not crazy. That was my best friend with him, right?"

"Michiko. Right."

"But what, I mean-"

"The word is lovers."

"Mickey's sleeping with him?"

"I imagine they're doing more than sleeping. Their word for it is lifemates."

"You're not serious!"

"Okay, I'm lying."

"But you're not, are you?"

"No."

"My God, I can't believe all this-"

"Believe it. It's true."

"But . . . why?"

"Guess she loves him. And he, her."

"I can't believe it."

"Don't, then."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Okay."

"If Maddox gets to Washington, to the Pentagon, what happens?"

"Like I told Arbok, first they'll try to deal. They want the ship intact and its pilot alive and well. That gives us some time."

"To do what?"

"Everybody else will deal. Me, I don't like that. I feel like I'm thinking like an alien. There's no one more treacherous than the white man when it comes to deals. Ask the American Indian about the word of the white man. Nothing's changed."

"What do you plan to do?"

"You've got to seal those lovely lips."

"For God's sake, Marden, what the hell do you think I'm doing in here with you? Looking for Mr. Goodbar?"

"You with me all the way?"

"Yes, damn you."

"I want to be sitting alongside Arbok when we lift ship."

She gaped, started to speak, spluttered and choked on water in her mouth from the shower. "My God, you're serious."

"Sure am."

"You'd really go?"

"Nothing here on this planet to keep me here. It's all new and huge out there. You can't beat infinity for a new chance. Besides, it won't be lonely. You're going with me."

"I am?"

"You want to be left standing at the altar alone back on Earth?"

"I-An alarm bell clamored. "Shit," Jake spat. He turned off the water, stepped out of the shower stall and hit a button on the wall. "This is Marden. What gives?"

"Jube here. You in the shower? Your voice echoes."

"Yes."

"The both of you, get on some duds and get down here to center as fast as you can. Don't stop to look pretty. I mean it, Jake. Hustle."

"You got it."

He dragged Alison from the shower. "Get dressed; fast," he snapped.

They cleared security in record time and walked into center. Jube Bailey and Luther Cogswell stood together on the far side of the room in deep conversation, heads together. Several other men working at the consoles seemed as tight as virgins about to be gang-raped. Electric tension in the air could almost be felt. Jake and Alison joined the two men.

Luther cast a cold eye over Alison. "She listens in?" he asked Jube.

"Yes," he was told. No further explanations were necessary.

Jube turned to Jake and Alison. "It's Maddox. The senator won't be talking to anyone for a while. And he won't be doing much traveling, either."

"That's the kind of news I want to hear," Jake said with a sense of triumph that they'd averted a disaster.

"Alison, call off your dogs," he said to her. "Just cancel the-"

"No. Hold it," Jube said quickly, holding out his arm. "Not yet. Let the people out there keep passing the word we're looking for him. That the news lady is looking for him. We've left the APB stand. I want everyone to be looking for that son of a bitch. And to keep looking until we confirm his ass is dead."

"Where'd you find him?" Jake asked.

"I didn't. Luther, here, found him," Jube said, a trace of a smile refusing to leave his face.

Jake turned to Cogswell. "Luther?" No answer came for several moments. Jake took a long look at Luther. He'd never

seen the voodoo man shaking like one of his scared-shitless subjects. "What the hell's the matter with you?" Jake demanded.

Luther looked up, lower lip trembling slightly, and his face showed a mixture of disgust and hatred. "I'll show you what's the matter," Luther snarled.

Luther turned to Jube. "Full security. Jube, I want every guard armed to the teeth. All weapons load and lock and wherever we go I want everything sealed behind us." He turned to Jake. "That ship open at the main hatch?"

"As far as I know."

"All right, I want it to stay open."

"I'll call down to Arbok and tell him and-"

"No! Don't say a word to the son of a bitch!"

Jake bristled at Luther's tone to him. "Back it off, voodoo man," he said quietly. "I don't know what's eating you but you don't have that big a bite to come on to me like that."

"Easy, easy," Jube said from the side, his hand lightly touching Jake's arm. "Let him have some slack, Jake." He hesitated, then added, "For me, man."

Jake nodded.

"Come with me," Luther bid them. They followed him from center through the security blocks along the corridors leading toward the ship. Behind them heavy steel gates thudded shut with ominous booms.

"Where we going, Luther?" Jake asked, following Jube's request and keeping his tone easy.

"You know the room where we ship their food?"

"Yes."

"Well, the space geeks don't know it, but one of the walls of that room is polarized glass. It's opaque in ordinary light but it becomes transparent through infrared light. We're going to the room the wierdos know nothing about. It's an observation room. We've used it to see how they eat, how they behave, what they say when they're relaxed."

They turned a corner and stopped before a heavy door. Luther tapped in an entry code in the electronic lock and the door slid aside noiselessly. "No noise. Keep your talking down to whispers. Come on."

They went inside. The room was dark except for several overhead lights in strong blue. "Jube, the door?" Bailey closed the door behind them, brought it soundlessly back to its seal. "Step up against the wall. No

noise. When you're in position I'll kill the blue and go to infrared and you can see inside. It's also infrared in there," He spoke in a hushed whisper. He watched until the other three people with him had their faces against the wall. "Okay, now," Luther announced, still whispering.

The blue light winked out. For a moment they were in darkness and then a dusky red light grew about them. The wall seemed to fade away as it became transparent and they could see through the thickness between them and the other room.

Alison sank slowly to her knees, retching violently with gagging sounds muffled by both hands pressed hard against her mouth.

CHAPTER 27

Alison Harper never again looked through the window brought to transparency by the touch of glowing infrared light. She sat huddled on the floor of the observation room, her shoulder pressed hard against the leg of Jake Marden. Through that contact he felt her convulsive shuddering, the uncontrollable surges of gagging that wracked her body. He was surprised, and no less impressed, with her tremendous self-control that kept her almost completely silent as first she threw up violently into her hands, then pulled her blouse from her skirt to contain her vomitus and try to wipe her mouth clear of the reeking stench of her own insides. The convulsions subsided slowly, replaced with spontaneous dry heaves tearing at her, and at such moments he knew she was stuffing the blouse into her mouth to keep her suffering as silent as possible.

Jake held no fault with the woman.

There had been two times in all his life, through explosions ripping through bodies, through savage gun battles, knifings and machete slashings, through roaring flames, through the thudding impact of bodies hurled into propellers or helicopter tail rotors, to men smashed by speeding autos or torn open by brass knuckles and sharpened chains. He had been through all this and more, and only those two times in his life had he lost the contents of his stomach.

He almost did it again, feeling the growing ball of bittersweet stink of his guts struggling desperately to spew upward, into and through his throat, and away from his body. He fought it back, he tasted salt from his own blood as his teeth clamped down on his lip, and he forced his eyes to return to that other room. They had built a table to their own design and specifications. Not your normal table at which to dine or even to eat voraciously. No flat surface. A table seven feet long by three feet wide, bowed high in a curving arch through its middle, a single curve starting upward from each long end and peaking through its center.

A human form on that table on his or her back, buttocks against the curving wood, would thus have his feet at one end and his head at the other considerably lower than his up-thrust stomach and loins. It would be a position of great discomfort, and with each passing minute growing ever more uncomfortable until real pain came to visit and remain with whoever was kept forcibly on the table.

"Whoever" was on the table in savage and unremitting agony. It wouldn't have been so bad had the senator been capable of twisting or kicking or throwing about his body in any kind of physical movement to block or divert or even deaden the terrible pain that was so obviously searing him inside and external to his body. Jeff Maddox was stretched across and along and arched on that table, worse than naked, his face a ghastly mass of horror. His teeth were extruded almost as if he were a living corpse filled with succulent sweets and fluids so that a dessicated form might have been pumped full and bulging, as would a huge and savory pudding, shaped and prodded and patted lovingly into a human form.

Jeff Maddox would gladly, wildly with joy have hurled himself into any open fire to burn to death slowly, flesh curling and crackling like fat-dripping bacon, rather than be restrained where he was at this moment. But he could not twist, or turn, or even try to wrench his own body so violently that the Fates might be kind enough for him to so distort his structure so that he might somehow fracture or break his spinal cord to give him, if not death, surcease from pain through a crushing or break in his spinal nerves. It was

difficult to see with any clarity in the room through the walls become transparent from one side only, for the lighting in the room where Jeff Maddox hung in that calamitous abyss between life and death, and where even madness was yet denied him, offered only light in the infrared band of the spectrum. A scene of dull, murky redness hung before them. They squinted as hard as they might to pierce this veil that left them frantic to see more clearly, even as they wished they were not seeing at all what lay before them.

Yet, beyond the thick gauze of the one-way see-through wall and the dull blood-red fog of light, there was illumination sufficient to see the devices that would have done proud the grand torturers of the Spanish Inquisition. Not for their crude pincers and mashers, their squeezers and cutters, the things that gouged and raked and stripped. Oh, no; not here, for torture was not their intent in this room, pain was not their purpose, and they sought no evil. Their purpose was totally self-contained, and it was in their own sense, delicate and aromatic, and whatever pain, horror, agony, and edge-of-madness that prevailed, that stalked every cubic inch of that room was incidental.

Which, perhaps, because of its indifference to the subject at hand, Senator Jeff Maddox, lately of the world of free will and sanity, seemed only to inject into and squeeze from the moment even greater sweet hell.

Long needles, silvery and gleaming with a dull sheen, perhaps with some form of energy from within, had pierced his palms, and his arms were stretched tight between his head and behind and down along the arch of the table. So that the needles, for want of a better description, were at the very end of the table, and they went down through the palms of Maddox's hands, and into the table itself.

"Why the hell doesn't he just pull free? Yank his goddamn hands loose?" Jake Marden spoke in a hoarse, ragged whisper to the others, but especially to Jubal Bailey, who had, for him, remained completely quiet to this point. Jake did not concern himself with what Alison heard or felt or endured; the worst of what she might experience was visual, no matter how it hurtled like a blazing fireball within her brain. So long as she lay on that floor, back to the wall, shoulder against his muscled leg, her arms clinging to one of his legs for support, he need not concern himself with her welfare or mental state.

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If she had spoken to him he would have told her, and not unkindly, that there is no Easter Bunny, that the world is a bad neighborhood at three o'clock in the morning, and in a hundred years of trying she couldn't even begin to describe the many voracious, incredible, stomach-tearing manners of one form of life ingesting another form. Nor would Alison Harper have given a damn. None of this mattered to her as she fought her largely silent struggle to keep her own intestines from hurtling violently from her own body. Jube didn't respond to Jake's remarks. "Goddamnit," Jake hissed at him, "just look at those needles or whatever they are. A man can yank free of those-"

"No," Luther Cogswell answered, his head turned to Jake. "He can't do that."

Anger welled up in Jake, a mixture of emotions from what was going on within the room to which their attention was riveted, the seeming helplessness or willingness to be savaged by Maddox, and what he judged wrongly to be a know-it-all attitude by Luther.

"Why the hell not?" Jake snarled.

"I watched this for a while before," Luther admitted. "Now, I know maybe I should have done something, but, I don't know, Jesus, it was like being hypnotized. I've seen men cut up and sliced and diced before, Jake. There's a lot of that in the voodoo rites, and they kill chickens and goats and pigs, and they stick needles and spikes into people, and slice open their arms and bellies, but the people they do that to don't feel no pain. It ain't just drugs, man, though there's plenty of that. They get whipped up into a fit and they just don't hurt none, and so, when I saw this, and I remembered all those things, it seemed a lot more important to have you and Jube down here to see it with your own eyes, because sure as hell

I couldn't describe-"

"Shut the fuck up," Jube growled, an animal warning issuing from his throat.

Luther swallowed hard, aware he sounded like an asshole with a runaway mouth, but Holy Mother of Christ, he couldn't help himself, this thrust into a surrealism that made a paltry mockery of any voodoo

rite he had ever seen or known, seemed to overload his capacity to handle the situation. He knew he babbled now like a brain-damaged child but there was "Don't you think for a moment, not one goddamned second," Jube continued, his voice still an animal sound, a mixture of distress and growing ferocity, "that the senator is feeling nothing. You look at that quivering, the way them muscles is snapping like giant rubber bands, and," his voice faltered, "his eyes, the way they whippin' back and forth like they was in hell trying to get out, or kill themselves to stop what's going on-holy fucking shit, see them needles? They're through his ankles also, right into the table ..."

They squeezed their eyes, squinting and blinking, to see better in that murky bloodlight. Then Jake saw what they'd missed until this moment. "The needles," he said, his voice husky with strain. "Can you see the wires running from them? They're not just pins sticking him to the table. They've got a current of some kind running through them. They paralyze the muscles or the tendons but they keep them loose so he can't jerk 'em out by reflex. Move your head slightly and the light barely reflects the wires so you can see them."

"Holy Jesus, look at his throat," Luther said, swallowing hard between his words. "Another wire. It's around his throat. I guess it's doing the same thing."

Alison moaned from the floor. "Why don't you bastards shut the hell up and go in there and kill him! There's got to be an ounce of mercy between the three of you ..."

Luther looked first to Jake and then to Jube on his other side. He was totally out of character as he spoke softly to the shaking, agonized woman. "He's sealed in, ma'am. I checked it out before. They've got the doors bolted from the other side. This wall is solid metal. We'd need a power drill that would take hours, or a torch, maybe a rocket ..." Luther looked again through the wall. "And they wouldn't change a thing they were doing."

They heard a tiny thin scream, no louder than a mosquito's buzz, but shrill and piercing and hateful mad, from the other room, the sound waves vibrating ghostlike through the wall.

"Holy shit, look at his heart," Jube said, as fascinated as he was repelled. "Looks like the damn thing's trying to jump

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right outta his chest." Jube glanced at Alison, faced pressed hard against Jake's leg. Well, too fucking bad. She can always crawl outta here on her goddamn hands and knees . . .

"Can't you do anything?" Alison gasped, half-choking on her own bile.

"Sure we can," Jube told her. "What we can do, little lady, is to watch what's going on in there. Watch it real good, and every minute we watch I want all you fuckers to burn into your skulls what we're watching, and who's doing what to who. Those are fucking aliens we're watching. So look at it good and never forget it, and you'll never forget what the hell we're dealing with."

He gestured to the scene. "Voodoo man, see them wires going into his chin? Is that to keep him from biting his tongue?"

Luther Cogswell nodded slowly. "Yes; yes, it is. We would use a rag tied around a stick in the religious rites. But I think you're right. Maybe; I can't be sure."

"I'll tell you one thing for sure," Jake said suddenly. "At the end of the table. See it? It's an IV bottle and tube they're using to pump some fluid into his body. And that's to keep him alive no matter what they do to him."

"Who the hell would do that?" Jube asked.

"It's Drong. Goddamn, I should have figured this long ago," Jake swore. "It's Drong's own blood. It's got that incredible power to heal, to regrow tissue, even full arms and legs. It's a force of life itself and they're dripping it into Maddox to keep him from dying."

"They're going to a lot of trouble," Jube noted, as much from curiosity as keeping his mental notes never to forget this scene. "Why would they-"

He reached the same conclusion at the same moment as did Jake. Jake looked at Jube and the two held eye contact for the moment. "You know what time it is?" Jube asked.

"Dinnertime," Jake said.

Alison dry-heaved violently, gagging from her raw throat.

"See how the stuff keeps him alive like that? Holy shit," Luther said with a sudden exclamation. Maddox had shifted his body slightly, and now they could see that he was slit open down through his chest, his heart leaping and thrusting

about madly, his arteries and veins acting like shock cords to keep the heart from tearing free. It pumped and jumped and twisted and turned, tearing about in a wild frenzy within the gaping chest wound, restrained and imprisoned by its own connections to its body.

The slit ran down from his chest and along his stomach, and he was peeled back like a long banana, neatly and surgically, the blood bubbling up slowly, glistening in the murky light from froth and foam easing upward and pulsating from the perfectly sliced flesh. Behind a coil of intestine that had ruptured upward from the belly slash, they saw the grinning face of Ytram, huge and red-glistening, a monstrous bloated toad with a purple tongue licking swollen lips. Even unable to hear the sounds, they knew he was smacking his lips and making guttural sounds of pleasure. They watched Ytram move his hands carefully along the table, invisible for the moment behind the quivering, trembling body of Maddox, and he lifted up a long section of intestine, examining it closely as if it were a delectable sausage prepared with loving care. Ytram lifted the intestine higher and as he bent forward, his fat tongue darting in and out then slowly running the length of the pulsating tube still alive from the man, licking around and around, but not biting or chewing, licking whatever appealed to his aroused sense of taste.

A large shadowy form moved behind Ytram toward Maddox's head. They recognized Drong, the higher creature that could not die from the wounds that would scavenge any ordinary mortal. Drong's eyes gleamed, his mouth hung open, saliva dribbling along his chin. He leaned over Maddox, staring into the tormented human's eyes, eyes that could not close no matter how fiercely Maddox fought to shut out the sights" about him. Drong smiled and leaned down and slowly brought his leathery, harsh lips against those of Maddox and kissed him violently, mashing their faces together, holding the long and disgusting embrace while one hand moved up toward Maddox's forehead, stroking the forehead gently, and as Drong lifted his own head his forefinger, bony and long and hard with a sharp point, slipped into the soft flesh of Maddox's eye socket, curved down behind the eyeball and pulled slowly and steadily upward. Blood spurted as clear liquid spilled out

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onto Maddox's cheek, gleaming in the dull light, and Drong moved his head slightly, upward from the lips, his tongue licking the eyeball. He opened his mouth wider as if tasting a huge grape, his teeth closing about the eyeball, as he bit down in a savage, grinding tear of powerful teeth.

"He bit his fucking eyeball in half," Luther said in a dead monotone. "He's eating his fucking eyes!"

It was the beginning and only the beginning, the signal for Drong and Ytram to tear into their meal. They could barely see within the room now as steam from Maddox's opened belly and guts and chest and his flailing heart and screaming throat began to heat the room and create a misty sheen on the inside wall.

They caught a glimpse of Brist, but it was all shadowy forms and their features dulled even as they tried to see the faces more clearly.

Ytram lifted the intestine that had so fascinated him, gave a long final lick and sucked the intestine into his huge mouth and clamped down his teeth. The severed ends of intestine flailed away, spewing forth their contents, splashing against Ytram's face. He smiled and smeared the steaming mess across his face, pushing pieces and slivers within his mouth, and abruptly he shoved his face downward with fury into Maddox's stomach, teeth ripping and tearing like a dull-toothed shark.

The shadows moved, light seemed to increase for a long and terrible moment, so they could see the wires that were attached to Maddox's scrotum, stretching out the flesh that had been sliced perfectly to open the bag and reveal the tender contents within. The wires stretched the scrotal sac taut and exposed his testicles to the air, twisted and turned, rolling about within the limits of the sensitive tendrils and tubes, and then they saw Brist move upward between his legs, and he held apart the scrotum to push up a testicle. Never before had they seen Brist's front lips fold back, his grinding flat teeth moving down to his chin and

the upper teeth behind his palate, and the sharp needle teeth behind closed on a testicle, not hard or clumsily, but with exquisite biting action. Nibbling, chopping tiny pieces as his mouth worked, he tore the testicle into shards and little tubes that convulsed wildly as he chewed and sucked and consumed.

Brist's left hand came across Maddox's body, who they would not yet permit to die, and he grasped the base of Maddox's penis, shoved down hard to create an instant full erection until the penis stood hard and dominant, and the sharp teeth went into the base of the penis, cutting and slashing in tiny, swift bites toward the pulpy head, now swollen so terribly that blood seeped through the skin and turned the penis a ghastly crimson. Brist's hand thrust suddenly into Maddox's lower belly, found the organ he sought and squeezed, and there burst from the head of the penis a violent stream of white and bloody froth that showered across the rest of the body. There came a final crushing closing of those terrible teeth and as Brist moved his head down to rip loose a thigh tendon, blood continued pulsating and pumping from the gory stump of what had been the manhood of Jeff Maddox.

"He's completely mad now," Luther said in a hoarse whisper. "I mean, he's alive but he doesn't really know what's happening to him any-"

"He knows," Jake said in a monotone of death. "If there is anything I live for now, it's to kill those motherfuckers in there."

"Oh, you will," Jube said softly. "I promise you that, my friend, you will, I will, we will."

Alison lay unconscious by Jake's feet. "I don't want to see any more of this," Jake said.

"Look at it, my friend," Jube told him, "look at it and never stop looking from inside your mind, so you'll never forget-"

Luther's fists suddenly, without warning, beat madly against the wall. "That's enough!" he screamed.

"Goddamn alien motherfucker, that's enough, you hear!" Blood burst from his skin where he slammed and smashed his fists against the wall.

On the other side they could hear the dull pounding. Ytram lifted his head from within Maddox's stomach, a mass of gore and pulp and blood, looking dumbly, stupidly about him. Drong hovered over the man's chest, his teeth still capturing long shreds and filaments of lung alveoli like flattened spaghetti and seaweed soaked in gore. Brist had

reached deep within a leg bone; splinters of pale white protruded from his teeth in death's mask grin, and pieces of marrow fell slowly, as if in slow motion, back to the body pinned to the table.

"He's, uh, oh, Christ, he's still alive," Luther choked out.

"No. No, he isn't," Jake told him softly.

"But . . . but, look, he's kicking, you know, twitching-"

"He's dead, voodoo man. That's the current running through him. Like sticking an electrical wire into a frog. Man, didn't you ever cut up any frogs in school? You know, biology and all that shit?"

"No, I didn't cut up no fucking frogs in no fucking school," Luther spat. "Where I come from you ate what you could catch. You didn't do shit for science with somethin' you could cook!"

"Well, mister voodoo man," Jube said with a grin that was ghastly and surrealistic in the blood glow of light, "just what the fuck do you think they're doing in there? It's frog-eatin' time, m'man."

Luther seemed to sag.

"This too much for you, voodoo man? You been ripping the heads off chickens and roosters all your life, and cuttin' throats of sheep and goats and pigs for your black-ass sacrifices, and I seen them people of yours, geeks, bitin' the heads off live snakes and chickens, right?" For whatever reasons he had, almost as if whipping Luther could alleviate the effect of what they witnessed on himself, Jube assailed the other man. "So what's so different," Jube jerked a thumb toward the other room, "about what they doin' in there? Huh? What's the dif, man?"

"That's a man in there, you bastard!" Luther howled.

Jube laughed, a grating cackle of stones tumbling down a dry well. "Not to them. Not to them, m'man. That's a big goddamned frog on that table in there, voodoo man. A big goddamn fucking frog. Know what genus it is? Know what kind of frog it is? It's a Maddox frog, that's what! Succulent, fresh, juicy and plump, although, I gotta admit," Jube laughed without a trace of humor, "he'd probably taste a whole lot better if them dumb fucking aliens had cooked his ass first."

"Are you crazy?" Luther said in a half-whisper, half-gurgle. "They just ate a fellow human being alive-"
"And that's the only difference between them eatin' one of us," Jube said defiantly, "and a bunch of us eating one of ourselves. We cook 'em first."

"You're mad," Luther said.

"And you're a fucking pussy, you little shit," Jube snarled. "You mean to tell me you never heard of long pig?"

Luther's jaw dropped.

"That's right, voodoo man. Long pig. They say it makes some of the finest and tastiest barbecue you ever ate. Long pig. Human being. A favorite of the natives in the South Seas. A favorite in dark Africa, right? It's been a favorite all over the fucking world for fucking ever, and you know what, all we do is cook 'em first."

"Not always," Jake said, breaking his own long silence.

"What the hell you mean?" Luther forced out.

"You ever hear of Guam?" Jake asked. "Island in the Marianas, you know, Guam, Tinian, Saipan. Way out in the Pacific. They had a war crimes trial there after the second world war. Seems like the Japanese officers there tied up a bunch of American prisoners of war, tied them with barbed wire, stretched them out on the ground, all alive and kicking, and they sliced open their bellies with samurai swords, and cut out their liver, and while they were still alive and watching what was going on, those gentle, smiling, flower-loving Japanese ate those livers, and then they went after the hearts, and some other organs, and only after they ate what they wanted, you know, a special ceremony with their sake and white flowers, then they cut off the heads of those prisoners, some of them still kicking and screaming."

Luther slumped slowly down to the floor, trembling. "N-now I know what happened before," he said slowly, staring vacantly into space.

"What the hell you talking about, man?" Jube demanded.

"Remember I told you, I didn't understand what was happening, but these fuckhead aliens, they stopped bringing in meat, even though they was meat-eaters? And how the kids they raped, and they tore them up and killed them raping them, we never saw them again. Holy Sweet Jesus, you fucking Christ!" he screamed, "they been eatin' them! They been eating them!" He shook his fist madly at the ceiling, and his voice droned on, now in low monotone. "I shoulda known better. I shoulda known all the time. After that fight when Ytram, when he killed Carlos, when he tore up his nuts with his teeth and killed him, I went back over where they had the fight, and I got a rake and I raked that whole fucking place from one end to the other looking for Carlos' balls and you know what?"

"Sure I know what," Jube said, showing no sympathy. "The space pig ate them. Florida oysters, maybe he thought they were."

Jake had all he wanted. He leaned down carefully, and he lifted Alison, and carried her unconscious form from the horror.

CHAPTER 28

"You must listen to me, Jake! Please," Arbok pleaded with the one man on this planet he called friend. He reached out to touch Jake's arm for greater emphasis. "It is very-"

Jake shook off the touch of open friendship. He knew this took a tremendous effort on the part of Arbok, a yielding of his personal defenses he might never again let down in such a fashion. But there was no other way. Jake spun about from his communications panel in the master control room, his face as hard as granite, his eyes piercing.

"No! Just shut up, damnit!"

"It's important, you fool!" Arbok shouted.

"It still waits!" Jake snarled. "Whatever it is, whatever it's about, it waits, and you wait so I can keep us alive, until I-" He cut himself off in mid-sentence and whirled about back to his microphone.

"This is a Code Four. I repeat, this is a Code Four." He paused a moment, aware that his voice carried

through the entire prison, from the lowest sublevels to the warden's office. Just the dreaded words Code Four were enough to stiffen bodies and bring listening attention to its full. "We are now into Code Four," he repeated. "This is Security. We are now going to maximum security immediately throughout this entire facility. This affects everyone. There are no exceptions. Any prisoner who violates the rules of Code Four will immediately be manacled. Any resistance by any prisoner to a guard or a trustee will be considered an attempted breakout."

He took a deep breath, bit off the end of a cigar and spat out the chunk of tobacco. "All guards and corrections officers are to be fully armed. All trustees are to be armed with riot guns. Everyone with weapons, you will chamber a round and your safety will be off. Watch towers and security posts, I want all machine guns loaded, chambered and safeties off. Take this moment right now to carry out that order."

He used the pause to light the cigar and blew away the smoke in a minor lung explosion. "Until you receive further orders, no one is to leave this prison. Those orders are from the warden personally and are now verified by Security. Those are the orders for all armed personnel. No one leaves this prison." He stopped again for a moment, knowing his voice carried to every loudspeaker, every radio, every announcement box everywhere in Old Millford. Dangerous and frightening words echoing down long corridors, racing past prison cell bars, bouncing off cement and steel walls.

"Your orders are to shoot to kill anyone-" Again he stopped himself in mid-sentence, a momentary falter, and then went on. "You will shoot anyone, or, anything. Listen up now. All guards, corrections officers, and trustees in the area of the West Wing, seal off that Wing. I repeat, seal off the West Wing. Nobody goes in and nobody comes out. If anyone, or anything," again he stressed the anything, knowing full well it would be received as specifically any of the "strange visitors" in Old Millford, "tries to leave West Wing, shoot to MI"

He paused, chewing the cigar, refusing to turn to look at Arbok, then continued: "Red Team, Red Team, load up with gas canisters and throw launchers. Cover all the ways in and out of West Wing. All security teams, bring out your dogs. Listen up, listen up. All security teams, bring out your dogs and position them to cover all entry and exit points of West Wing. You have your orders. Anyone or anything tries to get in or out, shoot to kill. This facility is now in full lockdown. We are in full lockdown. Get to it. Security out." Jake Marden turned slowly on his swivel chair, brushing ashes from his knee. He held eye contact with Arbok, who evidently had decided it wasn't worth the effort of unleashing an emotional, fiery response from Jake. Marden kept turning slowly, chewing his cigar end, studying the others. And there was the voodoo man himself, dissheveled, eyes bloodshot from a bout with the bottle. And God knows what else he's swallowed or mainlined, Jake mused.

"You look like shit," Jake told Cogswell. "Go clean up your act."

"Don't fuckin' tell me what to do," Luther retorted angrily, hurling forth as much spittle as he did words.

"After what we've been watching what the hell do you care what I look like? Hey, remember, buddy, old boy? Looka' me, Jake! Compared to what you been watchin', I'm a fucking saint."

"I don't have time for this shit," Jake said, his tone menacing. But Luther Cogswell was too far gone into whiskey and drugs and loathing and a sense of unremitted outrage even to notice if Jake had unfurled a red flag of warning.

"Fuckin' cannibals," Luther cursed. He leaned forward from his seat, weaving precariously, and spat a disgusting oyster and mess by the feet of Arbok. The tall Makkian neither moved nor flinched. Steely eyes held Luther in open contempt.

"You're all fuckin' cannibals," Luther growled, trying to suck up another load from his throat.

"Oh, shut up," Jake said wearily. "He wasn't even there, for Christ's sake."

"What the fuck's the difference?" Luther threw back at him. "Does he hafta be at every fuckin' meal to be guilty like the rest of them? He's the fuckin' same!"

"Luther, I am warning you," Jake said in measured, icy tones. "I don't talk to any shithead who looks at the world through the bottom of a bottle. Now straighten up your act or-"

"You're threatening me?" Luther was incredulous. "Me?" he repeated. "Your nendP" Luther looked about him, searching for Jubal Bailey. "Where the hell's Jube? I wish't he could hear this shit from you, Jake!"

This fuckin' cannibal's standin' here big as day and you're takin' off on my ass!" He kept looking for Bailey.

"That's it," Jake snapped, coming out of his seat in a low and angry move.

Arbok's outstretched hand lifted before him. "Let me answer him, Jake."

"He's drunk, man. He's flat pissed. What's the use?" Jake said quickly.

"He is not that drunk," Arbok said in a flat monotone.

"This type is found on most worlds. He is out of his element. He would like to strike out at me, but his own knowledge confuses him. He is not so badly wounded in either his heart or his head, Jake."

"You callin' me a fuckin' fake?" Luther yelled.

"I call you nothing," Arbok intoned. "There is to be no doubt. You are aware of your world, Luther Cogswell. You are sly and cunning, a man who moves through the underworld of this planet's society as easily as a bird flies through the air. You lie because you cannot stand the truth about the men of this world."

Jake returned to his seat, grinning. "This could just be a beaut," he chuckled. "Okay, you two, have at it. Think you can handle an alien talking in your own language, voodoo man?"

Drunkenness seemed to evaporate from Luther Cogswell and the haze swept from his eyes as his posture straightened and his tongue gained clarity. "No problem," he said softly, speaking to both men. "What's your excuse, lizard?" he said to Arbok.

"For talking to a man who knows he lies?" The words caught Luther Cogswell by surprise, and his physical reaction, a slight backward defensive move in his posture, spoke loudly both to his chosen adversary, Arbok, and their bemused observer, Jake Marden.

"No. For making cannibalism an ordinary way of life," Luther said angrily. "Sure, we ain't perfect, but you been around to a whole bunch of worlds out there, and I bet you haven't found one that's perfect!"

"Perfection, man Cogswell, is wholly a state of mind. It has nothing to do with the physical world." Arbok smiled at his own words. "With any physical world."

"You make a habit of eating your friends?" Luther demanded.

"No."

"No? Well, maybe it's not a habit, then. Maybe it's a religious rite. Some ringed planet with alien voodoo rites. How about that?"

"No."

"Is that all the fuck you can say? No?"

"No."

"Then say somefuckin' thing else, damnit!"

"Do you know what a cannibal is, man Cogswell?"

"Fucking A, man-no; I didn't mean that. You ain't no man, that's for sure, and-"

"Tell me, then, what is a cannibal."

"Huh? Oh, well, sure I will. You know damned well. Someone who eats his own kind. A human eating another human, and ..."

The smile on Arbok's face drained away Luther's words. Arbok read his face clearly. "That is right. A being who eats another being of his own kind. That was not what happened with Maddox. What took place is regrettable and it is wrong. Not for the taking of the flesh, but because it was unforgivable manners to violate the accepted social customs of the vast majority of this world."

"What the fuck does all that mean?"

"You know well, Luther Cogswell. What those beings from different worlds did was unfortunate, but normal behavior. It is acceptable throughout this galaxy and likely a thousand more. I do not know of a single humanoid race other than your own that consumes the flesh of its own species. I have never found a world of cannibalism except on this planet you call Earth."

"That's crazy!" Luther shouted, gesturing wildly with both arms. "They ate Maddox! They ate him while he was still alive! And they enjoyed it!"

"Of course they did. Otherwise they would never have performed their act. But they did not consume one of their own kind."

"Well, then they ate one of their betters! Because sure as shit you fuckers got a hell of a lot of country miles to go before you're equal with us."

"Luther," Jake said from the side, "I think he'd be hysterical with laughter if your remark wasn't so fucking stupid."

"You mean-"

Arbok's patience had thinned. "Those three," he said in a no-nonsense tone, "did what is commonplace on the very long space flights where warp is not possible. There is no way on an extended journey to carry all the food to last a large crew for many years. So the superiors, those capable of S9Q

performing deeds of science, philosophy, technology, artistry, whatever is their chosen, are permitted to bring with them the sluebrains." "Sluebrains?"

"The cerebral inferiors. Ytram is one such, for example. These creatures are carried aboard the great starship explorers, and they are worked until meat is required, and then they are butchered for their food value to the superior crews. They are butchered just as you good humans on this world butcher your helpless little animals, your child-cuddly little rabbits and your lambs and sheep and goats and steers, your birds and squirrels and all those-"

"They're dumb animals raised for food!" "You lie, man Cogswell. Do not your Chinese, your dominant human species on this world, eat their pet dogs? Or the pet dogs and cats of their friends and neighbors? Do they not butcher the animals who give them love, faith, loyalty, and are then slashed and ripped and hurled into the cooking pot? Tell me this is not so, man Cogswell. Tell me!"

Luther turned to Marden. "What's he trying to do, Jake?" "Answer him, Voodoo Man."

"He cannot," Arbok said with the voice of a high justice castigating a groveling criminal at his feet. "For your species also has some of the most disgusting eating habits I have ever had the misfortune to witness. You consume vermin, rats and mice, eels and spiders; you eat roaches and locusts and ants and termites of every kind. You revel in grubs and worms and-" Arbok took a deep breath.

"I overstate my case when there is no need," he said to Jake, "and I apologize. But I cannot end this without saying to all who can hear me that there is no world I have ever known or know about as mad to kill and slaughter and eat as do you humans on this Earth. And those three aliens, as you wallow in your descriptions, do no more than follow the natural law of a vast galactic civilization!"

"Well, maybe some of that is true," Luther protested feebly, "but at least when we do that we're killing dumb animals that don't know no better! Can't say the same for-"

Arbok leaned forward, his physical presence almost removed but his eyes blazing. "You do not know the language

of those glorious creatures you slaughter with such vile and uncaring appetite? The dolphins and the whales, that whole marvelous and incredible family that once was of man, creatures of caring and emotion and loving, and you slaughter them wholesale for cosmetics and perfume and to run your machinery and light your lamps, and you do not consider yourselves worse than cannibals for killing creatures who for thousands of years have loved and trusted man?"

Arbok drew himself erect. "Anywhere I know, on the worst of all the worlds I know, the men of this planet would be considered to be unmatched in bestial behavior and depravity. That is enough of this matter." Arbok ignored Luther Cogswell as if he were a bug not worth squashing. He looked straight at Jake Marden.

"There is another matter. On this world my crewmates have committed what you consider a barbarous crime and so it is that. They have eaten of the dominant life form. That is not the crime. They have been discovered doing what so many of your own Earth types have considered to be their own holy privilege, and for that, they are guilty."

"Well, not just barbarous," Jake added. "Don't forget disgusting."

Arbok stared in disbelief. "Let's see, there's repugnant," Jake added. "Also pukey. That seems to fit-"

"You mock me."

"No way, Arbok. I'm trying to get you to understand something called backlash. The word is already out through this whole prison. The cons, the guards, their families; all of them. They've heard of what

happened to Maddox, and I'm sure that the voodoo man, here, managed to embellish a good part of it, and I have no idea of what Luther is saying to whip up a real hatred of-

"Does Jubal Bailey hate us that much?"

"You bet your ass he does," Luther said with grating satisfaction.

"Shut up, Luther," Jake said offhandedly. "Once the word is really out, and let's keep it within these walls for the moment, there's nothing going to satisfy this whole mob less than a bloodbath. And that's just for starters, my friend. Once the word gets out on television in this country, hell, to the whole world, that we're harboring a bunch of evil creatures from space, real get-down-to-it BEM's-"

"BEM's?"

Jake grinned. "Bug-eyed monsters, man."

"Thank you," Arbok said drily.

"Well, when they all get word we got us a bunch of satanic aliens who eat people alive because they make good eating, let me tell you, whoo-ee, man ..." Jake shook his head and offered a cold, humorless smile. "Arbok, were you ever on the receiving end of the absolute, naked, raw, unmitigated hate of five billion people?"

"Not lately."

"You're about to find out what it's like, old buddy."

Luther Cogswell pushed himself to his feet and showed open disgust of Jake Marden. "I don't see how the hell you can stand there talking to this fucking lizard or . . . or whatever the hell he is, after what his kind done."

Arbok remained silent when he saw Jake barely shake his head. They watched Luther lurch to a door, stumble through the security procedures to free himself, and disappear beyond. The door closed with a thud. They were alone.

"Five billion people is a great gob of hate, Jake."

"Where the hell did you get all those slang terms?" Jake asked the question with admiration, a touch of nonsense in a situation of madness.

"Practice, practice."

"Glad you got it in while you had the chance, old buddy. You know we're finished, don't you."

"That does not sound like a question."

"Ain't one."

"It's also incorrect. You mean I'm finished," Arbok said.

Jake shook his head. "You don't understand us yet, Arbok. You see, you're now the enemy. Unidentified until now, but they're about to point the finger straight at you. And, what you don't yet see is that as far as all those five billion out there are concerned, I'm the one who gave aid and comfort to the enemy. It's a grand old phrase, that is. Aid and comfort to the enemy, and that is you, Arby, old buddy."

Jake laughed; a short and harsh sound of a man facing his own doom. "To our people, what it all means is that I'm even

worse than you. You're alien, strange, bewitching, frightening, scary, a genuine monster-

"BEM."

"Right on. BEM. But me? Hey, I'm the turncoat, the traitor to his own land, and-

"Jake, I'm not comfortable here," Arbok broke in. "May we return to the ship? I have the feeling there's an enormous tidal wave beyond those walls," he pointed toward the prison, "and I will feel much better and far more secure once I am within the ship and the hatches are closed."

"Let's go, man."

They related everything that had happened, everything they'd learned, to Michiko and Alison. The women listened stoically until both Jake and Arbok had their say. Jake studied Alison. "You look a lot better than death warmed over slightly," he said.

"I was pretty much out of it, wasn't I?" Her eyes still seemed hollow.

"You were. Can't blame you, though. That was rough. But how come it all seems to have settled down so well? You took a real kick to the belly when we looked into that room."

"Mickey talked to me. I think I was even greener when she got through."

"Must have been a hell of a conversation. Michiko, what'd you tell her?"

"I spoke to her of the Kempei Tai. Of the Knights of Bushido," Michiko said gravely. "And of what they did not only to Japan's prisoners during the terrible war between our countries, but of the things so much worse and unspeakable they committed to their own people. To us, the Japanese. By the Japanese. I believe it helps Alison to understand."

"The beast is in all of us," Jake said to Alison. "If you can understand that, you can live with it. Good and evil, black and white, love and hate-"

Alison nodded. "I'll be all right." She shuddered. "I think," she added in a whisper.

Of a sudden, Jake ignored Alison and Michiko as he turned to Arbok. "We're being stupid," he said harshly. "Personal

emotions aren't the issue right now. The security of this ship is. I never thought to double-check you when we came in."

Arbok showed a thin trace of a smile. "Experience is an old friend and teacher, Jake. Unless I personally open doors or hatches to Frarsk once I am inside, the computer accepts my presence in this vessel as an unbreakable command to seal off the ship from the outside world."

"Are they secure?"

"Do you mean will they stop the frightened and the insane?"

"That's a good way of putting it."

"Yes. Oh, sooner or later, depending upon what they use, any door or hatch or hull will be breached."

The smile showed again. "But not for some time."

Jake chewed his lip. Even the thought of going against something Jube had kept secret went against his grain, but now there was no choice. An old and sworn friendship was already shredding through forces not of their own fault or making. "Arbok," Jake said carefully, "your ship is booby-trapped from beneath. It has been since the first few days you set down."

It was the single most dramatic stroke of emotion Jake had yet seen on the face of the alien-become-friend. A smile that came from deep within, that told Jake more of Arbok's emotions than any word. He seemed actually to beam with Jake's words.

"I know," he said, and Jake's surprise matched that of Arbok's pleasure. "I have known from the beginning."

"But . . . but how? We kept it absolutely quiet. Jube had a battery of tank-killer rockets lined up beneath this ship to fire upward. The kind of stuff that goes through steel like it was butter. And there's that gasoline or napalm or whatever the hell mixture he made up that will absolutely envelop the ship."

"Trifles, Jake; trifles."

"Trifles?"

"Jake, consider the mission profile of Frarsk. We have a surface coating of an alloy, well, the closest I can come to in your language would be neutronium. Consider it a bond of neutrons brought together in a single layered matrix. The electrons and protons are rammed into the nucleus. It's as if

we obtained our raw materials from a neutron star. Indeed, in some cases that is precisely what is done." He shook his massive head. "Forgive me. I lecture when you need information quickly. The surface of this ship can withstand a direct meteoric strike at better than several hundred thousand miles an hour. The object is instantaneously pulverized and flash-heated to incandescent gas. Sometimes it scratches the surface where it hits. Those tank missiles, and I know they are shaped charges-the ship detectors can sniff out any explosive material within a hundred yards of our outer surface; that's how I knew-well, to stop all this confusion, those warheads won't even scratch our surface."

"And the napalm? Or gasoline?"

"We can withstand the frictional heat generated by entry into thick atmosphere at better than a hundred thousand miles an hour. I have been in an envelope of flaming gases hotter than your sun. No; it will be spectacular, but harmless. Frarsk, remember, was built as-well, consider the ship itself as a biodroid, built to function entirely through the computer with its assigned mission. Heat, projectiles, poisonous

gases, mass impact-under normal and even extreme conditions, Frarsk is hardly bothered."

"What do you consider an out-of-normal condition?"

"Let us put it this way. Being at the point of direct detonation of a thermonuclear device is like being placed in the interior of a star. At the stellar core. There is only one true consolation to such an event."

"I can figure that one myself. We'd be free-floating subatomic particles before we knew it," Jake said.

"In your own idiom," Arbok laughed, "no sweat, no pain."

"Will you two stop chattering like old women for a moment so we can get in a word or two?" Both men turned in surprise to the women; it was Michiko who had spoken, fists propped angrily on her hips.

Arbok bowed slightly, a tolerant smile on his face. Jake didn't hide his amusement at the intensity of the diminutive Michiko challenging the two men, huge and dangerous in comparison to their female challenger.

"You two seem to have forgotten something," Michiko said, not concealing a mixture of displeasure, anger and no

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small fear. "We are in the same boat with Jake. I do not know what you two have discussed about our future, but I do know my own people. Not merely the Japanese, but the human person."

Alison pointed in the general direction of the prison and the outside world. "We've talked about this. I would be lying not to admit we're frightened. All three of us, Jake and ourselves, are going to be condemned as traitors to the human race."

Arbok turned to Jake. "Amazing. The words are almost the same as you spoke to me." "Then you agree with us?" Michiko asked, hope showing on her face.

"Yeah, Mickey, we agree," Jake told her. "We're all sort of caught in the same frying pan."

"No, it is worse for me," she said stubbornly. "You are a man who has befriended an alien being. I am a woman who treacherously loves that same alien, who shares his heart and his bed. You, they may understand. Me, they will forever condemn."

"Yep," Jake agreed.

Michiko was astonished and Alison showed the same reaction. "Is that all you can say to her?" Alison said sharply. "Just, 'Yep'?"

"Will uh-huh do better?"

"Jake Marden, I'll be damned if I understand you-" "Do you want agreement or a goddamned speech?"

he said harshly, "What the hell is this? An ego-patting party? The facts are as plain as they can be. The three of us don't really have any distinctions between us." He couldn't help his own grin. "You can expect a lot of hate mail from now on."

Arbok had moved to an improvised security panel, a control board of sensors and television monitors placed strategically throughout Old Millford. All connections had been carried out between the computers; no record existed indicating that within the ship Arbok could survey almost all of the prison interior and exterior. "Jake, you'd better look at this," he called out.

They gathered before the panels, staring at the dozen different scenes displayed on the monitors. "Well, that answers all questions," Jake said quietly. "The mob is gathering for the kill. You know that lockdown I ordered not too long ago? Jube's rescinded it. Jube or whoever might have taken over from him. It doesn't really matter." They saw prisoners armed with metal bars, knives, guns, anything that could batter or kill, moving along corridors and hallways, filing down the stairwells, gathering in the meeting halls and the messhall and beginning to spill out into the exercise yards. "Just look at them," Jake went on. "They've been fired up, like they've got hot whiskey racing through their veins. I think the voodoo man's been whipping up a lynch mob."

"They're coming after us, aren't they?" Alison asked. Jake turned to look at her and he was openly surprised and impressed with a woman who had every right to be terrified, but was instead cool and

calm. Well, what the hell, like she'd said herself, there's nothing like a few wars and insurrections behind you to hone your steel.

"We're number one on their unpopularity poll, Alison."

"I heard what Arbok said," Alison went on. "Can this ship really hold them off?"

"For a while," Jake answered. He turned to Arbok. For a long moment they looked at one another in silence, yet each was sharing the thoughts of the others. They needed neither words nor messages between them to understand the starkly obvious. Finally Arbok nodded, as if verbalizing what they both knew long before this moment must be brought from conclusion to action.

"It is time, my friend," Arbok said.

"Yeah, it sure is," Jake agreed.

"Time for what?" Michiko asked.

"Cutting bait is behind us," Jake told her. "Now it's time to go fishing."

"And what does that mean? Sometimes, Jake, you speak a strange language," Michiko complained.

"It means," Alison broke in, "that it's time to get the hell out of here. They're going to leave."

"What the hell do you mean we're going to leave?" Jake demanded. "You mean me and Arbok?" He pointed to Michiko. "She's with Arbok. She's a part of him. She stays behind and they'll skin her alive and take a year to do it. She goes. And

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what do you think you're going to do? Stay behind and take her place on the skinning post?"

She couldn't hide her astonished reaction. "Are you suggesting that I'm going in this ship with you three?"

Her eyes went wide with even the thought of such a move.

"Hell, you don't have to go," Jake said harshly. "Just look at what's going on out there," he gestured to the TV monitors. "Those are all your fans just dying to get their hands on you. You stay here, you're their party."

"I can't believe this," she said, faltering. "Leave the Earth?

In-in this?"

"Any port in a storm, babe," Jake said lightly. He tilted his head upward, a gesture toward space. "And they got a lot of ports out there."

Emotions worked her face and she took a long, deep breath to regain her composure. "There's no easy way to say this. I don't want to say it, I never wanted to say it, because of Mickey, here, but now I don't have any choice. You know what you're offering me, Jake Marden? Not just a ride out of trouble. Not just a dash into that great black yonder out there. I go with you people and you know what I dream about? What I'll have nightmares about?"

She stabbed a finger directly at Arbok. "There's no need to repeat what we saw happen to Jeff Maddox. But I haven't stopped thinking about it for an instant. I go with you, and we're out ... out, there, and I haven't any place to run or any place to hide, and so I have to think about being eaten by him." She let out her breath with an angry gesture. "You'll have to do a hell of a lot better than that."

Michiko gasped, angry and hurt at Alison's words. Arbok started to answer, but Jake cut him off with an angry gesture. His face seemed to turn to stone as he locked eyes with Alison.

"I'm not going to repeat what I say now. Woman, I ha1 been taken with you ever since we met. For the first time more years than I want to remember, I began to think of th future with a woman, just one woman, with me. That's ym Alison. But there's no time right now for the hearts or tfo flowers or the courtship. I can't help the world being cut an dried at this moment. Staying alive is a hell of a lot mo important than the romance. I don't know if I love you. I guess I do. I haven't had the time to find out but I know I want to. Now, you can trust me, all the way, or you can refuse to do that. I want you with me. But if you decide to stay, make that decision right now, damnit, so I won't waste time trying to figure you out instead of trying to keep us alive and help us get the hell out of here. And let me add this, Alison Harper. You stay here and you'll be begging for dying. You'll be raped and torn up by a hundred men and they'll keep you alive to torment and rip you up again and again because you've been with the alien.

You see, they hate him," he pointed to Arbok, "because he just might be superior to them. And if there's one thing the human race absolutely cannot bear to see live, it's a superior being."

He took a deep breath. "End of speech, woman. If it's with me, you have my sworn word to have all the protection and love I have to give. And whether you believe it now or not, and for reasons I can't say right now because there isn't time, you'll have Arbok's protection as well."

"This is crazy," Alison said, bewildered.

"We're out of time. Yes or no."

Alison looked from Jake to Arbok and her eyes rested finally on Michiko. She seems so sure, so confident. She knows things I don't know and she's not even hesitating . . .

Alison stepped forward toward Jake and held out her hand. His powerful hand gripped hers with that great but gentle strength.

"Yes."

He grabbed her in a bear hug, nearly squeezing the breath out of her. "We'll pick this up later," he said, flashing a wide grin at her. He released her and turned to Arbok.

"Let's get to work. Is the ship loaded?"

"Almost. We were still loading when everything began to fall apart."

"Can you still load through your cargo bays without compromising this ship's security?"

"Yes. Bay Six."

"Then get to it, and be prepared to shut down at a moment's notice. If you have any orders to give to the work crews in the prison, use the computer printer. No voice, no audio. Use my name."

"I will do what you say," Arbok replied stiffly. He knew that Jake would be exposing himself to last-moment dangers and he knew also that anything could go wrong and he'd never again see this man friend. "Where will you be, Jake?"

"Me?" Jake grinned. "We need some diversions. A whole bunch of diversions. Remember, those cons out there haven't been told yet that I'm a baddie. Jube isn't that dumb. He'd split his forces in two if he did that. So I've still got the authority I had before, and I'm going to use it."

"Wait-" Arbok gestured suddenly. "I must ask you. Why does the man Bailey hate me so badly?"

Jake laughed. "You mean you haven't figured that one out yet? Arbok, old buddy, you're the uppity nigger!"

CHAPTER 29

"In here, quickly," Jake prompted Alison. "This is my inner sanctum within my sanctum." He ushered her into his apartment and through a doorway, turned to pull a heavy steel door closed and then dropped a steel bar in place to lock them within. "I never thought I'd need this," he shrugged, "but the time's come. Whoever comes after me, us, is going to try to come through that door and it's going to take a hell of a shaped charge or a welder's torch to get through. Either way, it's going to keep whoever's on the other side busy for a long time."

Alison looked about her. She had slipped back to her days covering wars and revolutions; hard, fast, capable. "Where's your other exit?" she asked.

"Behind the refrigerator. Turn the door handle to the left three times and it swings out of the way into a tunnel. Made of steel pipe. I had it built very privately. It doesn't even show on any blueprints of this place. Check it out, woman. I've got calls to make."

Jake had it all set up. Any phone number he wanted took no more than pressing a coded three-letter sequence, and his first call went to a private number in Daytona Beach. Directly into the heavily guarded home turf of the Merlins, one of the nastiest and best-organized biker gangs in the entire southeast. He listened to the phone ring on the other end and a gravelly voice answered.

"What the fuck ya want?"

"Put the Wizard on the phone."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Put him on or you're dead."

That usually did it. And it did, now. The Wizard, aka Pike Morrell, took the call. "Tell me a bedtime story," he said.

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"You got it, Wiz. This is Jake."

The voice brightened. "Hey, Jake, man! How you been, baby? What's happening?"

"Let's do the romance later," Jake said quickly. "This is business."

"Lay it on me."

"How about an even thousand pounds of snow, Wiz?"

"How many people you want killed?"

"I want better than that, man. I want performance."

"For a half-ton of the Christmas stuff you got anything you want. Where's the shit, man?"

"Hold off, Wiz. We always trusted each other, right?"

"Sure, sure. Where is it?"

"Old Millford Prison."

"In the fucking prison? Jesus, you crazy. How the-"

"Shut up, Pike. Goddamnit, listen to me. It's in the warden's office. In his safe. You ready to copy the combo?"

"Go."

"Three turns to the right, stop at twenty-one, two full to the left and beyond to forty-eight, three times to the right to six, once again to the left two turns to thirty-two and the stuff is yours."

"And how the fuck do we get in there?" "There's a riot about to start up here. The warden's office is on the north side of the prison. Second floor and there's a fire escape to it. You get up there and bust in. Everybody else is going to have their hands full and they won't give a shit about the warden or his office."

"This straight, man?" "How far back to we go, Pike?" "Forever, man. Tell me what you want." "I want you to turn all your goons loose. Call in your favors from the Sharks, the Platoon Leaders, the Blood Brothers, everyone you can. I want you guys to tear up every towii near Old Millford Prison. Set the fucking places on fire; I don't give a shit. But it's real important you mess up a few of the major airports like Jacksonville, Gainesville, Daytona Beach; you know the scene." "Yeah. Sounds like fun." "Use some firebombs. Get some trucks on the bridges and

blow the fuckers. Tie up the local law and bottle up the county mounties and the troopers. Shit, Pike, you know the scene."

"Hey, how about Disney World? I got a new bunch down there. The Barracudas. They look like 'em, too."

"Even better." Jake thought as fast as he could. Of course! Disney World was a perfect target. There's nothing like a few thousand screaming and terrified tourists to bring all the law for miles around to the rescue. "Hey, Pike. Turn a bunch loose down at the space center. They're already fucking paranoid about their shuttles down there."

"You got it. Why am I wasting time talking with you?"

"Because I got a present for you. Hit Old Millford with all the firepower you got. Mix it up real good. When you get into that safe you'll also find a list of a bunch of other stuff, where it's kept, shit like that."

"Have a good day, man." The line went dead. Jake knew that within minutes a couple of hundred bikers would be howling down highways and country roads, every one of them hellbent for leather. The word would hit every club. Rumors would spring up like fires in a dry wheatfield and nomads who didn't even belong to any clubs would join the spreading melee. Within minutes the chaos would begin.

Traffic accidents, blazing trucks and cars on the roads. Bricks hurled through store windows in a dozen towns, setting off alarms. In every town where there were fire alarm boxes, the handles would be yanked down and there'd be fire and rescue trucks tearing about in every direction. Traffic would back up behind jammed bridges and overpasses. And if those bikers were as good as Jake remembered from his old

days of ripping the highways, the small towns and villages and the cities would instantly snarl every lawman who was on duty or would be called to duty. Mayhem and turmoil, fear and flame, panic at Disney World, and a killing instinct of self-defense at the space center.

And that was just for starters. A few explosions and fires at the major airports and they'd be sending airliners to alternate fields all over and out of the state. The local and federal lawmen wouldn't know which way to move. Jake grinned at the images in his mind and then he kicked his computer in the slats and tied in their private lines to every prison in the state and a half-dozen more in Georgia. His code word was hardly subtle.

Bustup.

Raise hell. Set anything you can reach on fire. Bust up the joints. Rio*.

And in the meantime an army of roaring, snorting mechanical hogs were thundering directly for Old Millford Prison, now the "private property" of Pike Morrell and the hundred-odd madmen riding with him and howling into the wind. And no one would really give a crap that Old Millford Prison was having a shitfit with its own riot. Why bother sending in reinforcements to a model prison that hadn't given anyone any trouble for over a year? The maximum security prisons would get whatever attention the law could send out. Besides, there wasn't a cop anywhere in north or central Florida who'd have a spare moment to take a piss.

It was a simple enough plan and executed with even more elegant simplicity. Jake was creating vortexes of violence that would suck up all the police energy there was available-and it wouldn't be half enough to contain the maelstrom of confusion and violence-for fifty miles in every direction from Old Millford.

Equally important to Jake's plans was that he'd overload the normal communications channels of public and military authority. The phone lines would be swamped. Computer communications would drown beneath the sudden overload. Radio frequencies would jam with shouted messages and cross-transceiving. And when Camp Blanding got the screams for help that would be coming from every direction, they wouldn't give a shit about Old Millford. Let the damn cons kill themselves.

That was the plan and its execution, and Jake knew it would work to accomplish his primary goal: isolate Old Millford from the power of outside law enforcement and possibly military assistance. Cut off Old Millford from the rest of the state. Why bother with an isolated bonfire when the fuel farms are ablaze? From the beginning of his tenure at Old Millford, Jake had an absolutely trustworthy confidant in Joe Wyckowski. When

Jake came on the scene Wyckowski was just another guard on Level One. He'd worked with and for Jake, established his unquestioned loyalty, and gained both power and riches in the process. Now it was time to put Wyckowski to his most important task. Jake needed to kick a series of parallel events into motion all at approximately the same time.

He got Wyckowski on the private line into his office as Head Guard. "Holy shit, Mr. Marden, the whole place is going crazy! Someone's screwed up the computers and the cons are out of their cells and-" "Hold it, hold it, Joe!" Jake watched the video picture of Wyckowski and saw that the man was gaining a grip on himself. "Now, listen to me, Joe, and listen up good. I need you to take care of a couple of things fast. You got that? I don't care what the cons are doing. Let 'em tear the place apart. You do what I tell you, and as soon as you're down, you split from this joint. There's a cool fifty grand in it for you. You listening?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good man, Joe. Get about a half dozen of your best trustees together and get down to the supply section. I want thirty cases of every different kind of canned food, meats, vegetables, fruits, everything, on a conveyor belt set up to feed into that ship. Set it up at Bay Six. The hatch will be open for you. Just load it on the conveyor belt and lack all that stuff into the cargo bay. Now, add thirty complete medical kits along with that stuff. Got it? One last thing, Joe. A dozen of those new Marlin Mark Fours? Got that? One dozen of the Mark Four super autos and a couple thousand rounds of ammo. That stuff is right next to supply. If the place is locked, shoot the fucking locks off. Shit, I almost forgot. I want those new Ruger automatics, the nine millimeters. A dozen of them and a couple cases of ammo to go with them. Get everything down to that loading bay and when you're done, remove the conveyor belt and lock all

the doors and gates that lead to that area. Seal it tighter than a frog's ass. And keep your mouth shut. That goes for the trustees. And, Joe, you can tell them that one month from today, if they do what they're told and they shut their yaps, they'll all walk out of this place as free men. You got it all?"

"Damn right, sir! Got it!"

"Do it, then, and do it fast."

He cut the contact. Alison stood by his side, shaking her head in wonder. "I've heard it all, I've seen it all, but what I'm watching you do now beats all. You're incredible. Will everything I heard really take place the way you want?"

"Well, if not the way I want, then it'll be better. Oh, they'll load the ship just the way I told Joe. They've done it before, but this time it's got some strain and sweat to it. The moment they get that cargo bay full, Arbok will close it off and we'll block all the ways down to supply and weapons lockup. And while that's going on I can assure you all hell is busting loose across the state. All Pike has to do is sniff the chance to get his hands on a heavy load of snow and he'd kill his own mother. Slowly, I might add." He glanced at his watch. "And they're on their way right now."

"Are we going back to the ship now?"

Jake shook his head. "Uh uh. Not yet. The real mess here in this joint hasn't even started yet. Look, I've got to take care of a couple of things. These walls are steel. No one gets inside unless you let them in, and you don't let anyone in except me, and you don't even let me in unless you hear me use the word, Monkeywrench. Got that?"

"You're leaving me here by myself?"

"I'll be back. Just listen in to any calls, news stuff; whatever. We've got the police and fire and emergency bands over there. Don't answer any phones, no matter what. Got it?"

He grabbed her by both arms and kissed her hard. "Lock up behind me."

She stared at the steel door closing behind him.

I don't believe this ...

Jake hit the first guard room at a dead run. They turned, startled, as he ran up, a .44 magnum revolver on his hip, a flak vest on his body and a MAC submachine gun in one hand. "I need two men to move fast with me to cover me!" he ordered. "You two, Smitty and Beckwith, come with me!"

"Sir, we're supposed to stay here to-"

"Move your goddamned ass!" He punctuated his sudden

roar with the MAC taking a round in its chamber. They swung in immediately, one on each side. "Smitty, you keep one eyeball peeled behind us. Beckwith, you do the same front and to the sides. If anyone shows up in front or behind us and they're pointing hardware at us, let fly. Don't even hesitate a second." He turned down corridors, took seldom-used stairwells, all at a steady run. "Where we headed, sir?" Smitty called out.

"The generator plant," Jake answered, running steadily. He didn't waste any more words at the moment, but concentrated on using the corridors and stairwells he knew weren't frequented by, or even known to, most of the guards, let alone the cons.

He also knew he'd have to do some of the fastest and fanciest lying in his life. Well, I sure got a headstart on that tonight, he reminded himself. His life, that of Alison as well as Arbok and Michiko depended upon just how well he could pull off this next coup. It demanded the cooperation of the men in the generator room as well as precision timing on his own part. They turned the final corridor to a side door of the generator room. "Open it," Jake ordered Smitty.

He tried the handle to the steel door. "It's locked," he called out, still struggling with the handle. Jake slapped his palm against the emergency door signal. A small panel opened and a convict peered out at them. "We're closed down to anyone from outside," he said. "I'm not supposed to-"

"Smitty, don't argue. Kill the stupid son of a bitch." Jake made certain he could be heard within the generator plant. "There's a goddamned riot going on and if we don't get in there they'll blow every transformer in the joint."

"Hey, wait! Why didn't you say that in the first place? We knew something was wrong, but down here we're always the last to-"

"Open it," Smitty snapped, "or I'll do as he says."

The door swung open; Jake and the two guards went in fast. "Lock it," Jake told the man at the door.

"You open it only on my orders."

"Got it. Yes, sir." The door slammed shut and a bolt rammed into its locking slot.

Jake's future lay before him enmeshed in huge equipment

and power generators, and if he worked it as he planned there might just be a tomorrow in which to find a new life. He forced such thoughts from his mind to concentrate on the moment.

The generator plant supplied not only the electrical power for all of Old Millford Prison but also ran the experimental cryogenic refrigeration system brought in as part of the "massive revamping" of the facility.

When Old Millford was rebuilt with all its computers and electronics gadgetry, it also gained a pilot program to "instant freeze" perishable foods for longterm storage for the entire prison. It was one more of those bureaucratic programs that made little sense to Jake when it was implemented, more gadgetry than sense, but one for which at this moment he was grateful.

The refrigeration system used supercold cryogenics in the form of liquid oxygen. It was a bitch to work with if anything went wrong. The liquid oxygen, or lox, was the same stuff they used to start men to the moon in the huge rocket boosters at the space center. It was so cold that it boiled at nearly three hundred degrees below zero. If you poured a dollop of the stuff on a snake and tapped the snake with a stick it would break into solid chunks that fell apart from one another. At Old Millford the cryogenic systems were ear-shattering. The work crews called them The Screamers. Liquid oxygen moving through room-temperature pipes literally "screamed" in a shrill, shrieking cry from the tremendous temperature differentials as the stuff flowed from the liquifiers to the refrigeration units.

It was a sound familiar to the launch crews of every rocket center in the world. But now it filled a

purpose never conceived by its designers. "Move those holding lines!" Jake shouted to the workmen on duty. "That's it! Take the lines from the circulators and pump the stuff into the storage canisters outside!"

Easy enough; the still empty pipes swung about on cables and when they were connected to the storage vessels, the crews simply closed off one set of valves and opened others. A ghastly howl tore through the long generator room as supercold lox tumbled and surged through warm pipes.

"How's it moving?" Jake called out.

"Just like the doc ordered, Mr. Marden!" the supervisor

called back. The storage canisters now filling with liquid oxygen were lined up outside in a recreation area, but restricted from yard access by a high electrified cyclone fence topped with barbed wire. The canisters were critical to Jake. Each canister was fitted with a sling cable and a single attach point, with a clamp doghook at its end where the cables came together.

"Fill those mothers all the way," Jake instructed the crews. "Make sure the boil-off valves are cracked open so we don't exceed critical pressure. You know what happens if we forget that."

They knew. Each canister, when filled, was a massive energy bomb if the pressure ran too high; it would burst open the canister walls and the violence of that rupture would set off the contents. It was much the same as detonating a two-thousand-pound bomb.

"Keep the pressure up to the safe point," Jake sang out. "Make sure the topside clamps and hooks are free. I've got to move a few of these babies away from here. Stay with these things. I'll be back with a chopper, maybe two or three, to carry them out of here. When you hear us coming, kill the oxy feed and close the valves. Then hook the canisters up beneath the chopper slings and get the hell out of the way.

You got all that?"

"Yes, sir!"

CHAPTER 30

Jake had timed everything to come apart at the seams at the first light of dawn. As quickly as he finished his tasks in getting materials directed to the loading bay of Frarsk and making certain his work teams would load the liquid-oxygen as he directed-the biker gangs were already well on their way to exercising

their mayhem-he made arrangements for two heavy-duty helicopters to appear at the prison wall outside the generator room just before first light. One ship was to be guarded but left without its pilot. The second would wait a short distance away, engine and rotor idling, as Jake's backup. There were other details, not the least of which was to keep a few thousand prisoners milling about rather than coming together as a cohesive force. He still needed the cons to remain a beast without its head until dawn broke, and to meet this need he ordered his men to break into the private storehouse where they had stacked hundreds of cases of good whiskey. That word spread immediately through the prison yards as the cons set down the cases and men jostled and cursed one another as they grabbed for bottles and began passing around long slugs of the fiery liquid.

The Great Drunk was on, and the sporadic gunfire of drunken cons shooting into the air or blazing away carelessly into their own ranks grew slowly but steadily as the first hint of pink tinged the eastern horizon. Drunken hilarity shifted slowly but steadily to a mean and ominous disposition that affected the men everywhere; the laughing sloppy smiles yielded to grim faces and black hearts as the deeper urges for bloodlust began to surface.

The deep shadows lightened within the courtyards and exercise yards and playing fields as bright floods seemed

to dim with the coming day. Angry shouts spilled and tumbled through and among the men. Rifles raised high and heads turned to the West Wing, the now hateful West Wing where the evil creatures had holed up, the messengers of horror and death and depravity from the stars. Luther Cogswell had gone mad, convinced he'd been betrayed in heart and soul and body by Jake Marden, and barely less so by Jubal Bailey in their sickening-sweet relationship with the aliens. That Jube's own hatred for these men of other races, of other worlds, went far deeper and with greater meaning than Luther's surface-slamming emotional frenzy never occurred to him. He slipped into an old routine of leading the believers in the ancient rites. A magnificent combination of good whiskey and cocaine tinged with acid, and his own hysteria, toppled Luther Cogswell over the edge. He no longer acted the voodoo man; he was the Ultimate Priest, and as the drugs sank their fangs deeper into his besodden mind, his voice shrieked and howled like a mad dog to whip the cons into a growing frenzy. First they would kill the aliens cowering like the misbegotten and abandoned sons of Lucifer in the West Wing, and then they would turn their final justice against Jake Marden and his heathen woman and whoever else might be found in that scummy alien vessel, reeking from the stink of young boys and young women and their own friends, shredded from the slashing and grinding of their bodies by alien teeth.

Enter onto this scene of expanding madness, like a series of bubbles bursting outward in waves within the prison yards, rebounding to confuse and muddle more minds with every silent explosion of whiskey hate and sudden power of guns, a new thunder. The roar and bellow of exhaust pipes as more than a hundred chopped hogs pounded onto the scene behind the leadership of Pike Morrell, himself well into the bag after emptying a flask on the madhouse rush to reach Old Millford where half a ton of cocaine awaited his grasp, and the promise of much more to be found.

"You know what to do!" he bellowed at his grinning, happy, lustful men. "You assholes cover all the exits of that goddamned prison. I want ten men to go with me and ten more to cover us. Where the fuck is that van? I-" He waved as a van roared up behind the bikes and skidded to a stop along 551

side the prison wall that reared high to the warden's office. Men moved swiftly and with precision. A strong ladder went up immediately; Pike and three other men clambered up, Uzi submachine guns in one hand, grenades clipped to their leather jackets, and everyone prepared to surround Pike with a fire curtain of lead so that he might, undisturbed, work the magic numbers to open the safe to reach the snow joys within.

It wasn't that easy to bust either the warden's office or the prison safe. Ordinarily, that is. Spunt's window was double-paned with steel-wire netting within and it could survive a hundred hammer blows. But not a slop of plastique against the surface with a wire running to a battery, press a button, and boom goes the window. Within the office, the flash heat kicked in the fire sprinkler system and the fire alarms went off. The four guards assigned to protect the office, and whoever might be within, rushed inside and within

seconds they were all dead or dying from the point-blank ravaging of Uzis blazing away into their jerking, reeling bodies.

No other guards came. The monitors showed a fire, a possible break-in. But there were a hundred other fires blazing and the guards were barricading themselves everywhere against the locust horde of convicts with heavy weapons and murder in their eyes. They never gave the warden or his office more than a fleeting thought, and Pike was busy twiddling numbers.

Face streaked with ritualistic paint, arms dripping blood where he'd made shallow incisions to produce the blood he displayed to a screaming mob of fellow convicts, Luther Cogswell led the charge against the West Wing where the aliens waited. Luther knew there were three of them, at least. Three against three hundred. Three hundred slow-witted men whose brains were fried on whiskey and drugs and their own stupor from years behind bars. Too dumb and whipped up to know they had thrown away even a sliver of possibility of surprise. They didn't care. Three against three hundred.

Luther didn't count on the deep-hewn survivability of Drong,

nor had he ever known that Drong sprang from a fierce warrior race from a planet that, in Earth language, would translate as Asgard. Nor had he anticipated that the lasers aboard Frarsk, intended to blast rocks or other impediments to travel or landing, could easily be turned against men as well as stone. Ytram stood by Drong and Brist and the hippo creature smiled. "Look," he pointed, "they come." He felt very good. He was not alone. And they were not merely the "three of them." For Ytram was to the Hindus and to many Moslems their chosen "elephant god" because of his entirely coincidental but startling twin-similarity to a statue, of which many copies had been made, in Asian temples. Fifty devout "true believers" with their own weapons, mostly long knives and machetes made from bedsprings and metal stolen from the machine shop, waited to die to protect their dim-witted, clumsy but nonetheless remarkable godhead.

Drong nodded. "I am fortunate. I have given up hope for the battle. Now it is here. If only I had my fire sword of my home. Not even the great Tantra beasts could withstand the blade that burned."

"It is true, then," Brist told him. "Your kind truly are mad."

Drong took no insult from the only friend he had within his sight. Water creature that Brist might be, he was still powerful, tough-skinned, deadly, and intelligent. Ytram mattered only because he was here. That he was strong was an asset diminished by his utter stupidity; that he was gross and unable to fight as part of a team was made up in the small horde of followers who for reasons baffling both to Drong and Brist were prepared to die for their god.

"Mad?" Drong queried.

"Yes. We are to engage in battle. What weapons we have, we have. Our enemy approaches. We both feel the heat and the lust, yet you moon like some blartz for a weapon you will never again see in this life."

"Ah, true, but longing for weapons past, fires one's blood for battles present." He gestured suddenly.

"Speaking of which, as they say on this insane world, here they come."

Yelling, screaming curses, following the garishly-bedecked

Luther Cogswell, the cons swept against the entrance to the West Wing. As if some unknown force had erased all memory from their minds, none seemed to recall that the West Wing had been cut off from all power from the rest of Old Millbrd; nor did they consider the possibility that the aliens might have added a few fillips of their own.

Several hundred rounds fired from pistols and rifles and automatic weapons screeched and spanged and ricocheted harmlessly from the steel doors barring entry to the West Wing. The men piled up one against the other, milling about stupidly. They could not go forward, no one fired back at them, and their fury became so much escaping steam. "Fall back!" screamed Luther Cogswell. "Step aside! Open the way!" Luther was in the bag but hardly stupid. He had anticipated such a moment. He hadn't believed it but, then, he was a pragmatist who felt all possible dangers should be considered. His men opened a wedge, and a garbage truck roared out, gears snarling, from the yard. At full speed it accelerated toward the steel barriers of the West Wing and crashed on through, Luther and his followers screaming anew and

pouring into the gap.

To face another steel wall. This one was different. It had carefully designed ports through which poked the firing barrels of lasers designed for pulverizing rock and metal. A series of blinding flashes erupted from several points of the steel. Wherever the lasers struck human bodies, the beams penetrated as if those bodies of flesh and bone were so much thin air. Arms, torsos, heads, and other assorted parts whirled and tumbled as they fell, having been severed by an intense light flash from their previous all-together state.

Luther was not to be denied. He signalled frantically and several men took cover behind the now-still garbage truck, stepped out with long tubes atop their shoulders, and squeezed triggers. More flame appeared, this time propelling anti-tank charges at great speed toward the second barrier.

The explosions tore gaps in the steel, the men surged forward again with banshee-like cries, and again the lasers flashed. The horde did not falter, not even when a laser sliced with surgical precision through the throat of Luther

Cogswell, sending his head rolling slowly, impossibly, down the length of his body, and then rolling about in a circle determined by the bumps of his ears.

"Ytram, send out your men!" Drong shouted to the elephant god. Ytram yelled unintelligibly in his own language and led the charge. Only for a moment, as Drong struck him a terrible blow against his ear and Brist grabbed an arm to drag him away. "No, you fool!" Brist shouted. "They die. You come with us. That laserpak; pick it up, carry it with you. Follow us ... this way!"

The three aliens turned from the surging struggle now behind them. Ytram's followers hurled themselves into the midst of the men armed with guns and in that tight, close-quarter battle, they shot as many of their own as they did of die religious zealots. The spears stabbed and sharp blades whirred wickedly into flesh and bone and within moments the floor beneath was a slippery mass of blood and fleshy chunks, sending men tumbling to that floor to continue their battle to the death.

Drong roared with the stink of spilled guts and the smell of blood; he hadn't known such thrilling pleasure since that moment so long ago when he had killed the Trader, the moment that subsequently resulted in Drong's life sentence. He cared nothing for Me or death so long as it was fulfilled and at this moment ancient cries of battle sounded lustily in his heart and his mind.

The three aliens stumbled against a wall. "We must get through here," Brist announced in his flat monotone. "On the other side is a field. At the end of the field, that way," he pointed, "there is the opening to the secret tunnel to Frarsk. We get there, we drop into the tunnel and we make our way back to the ship. No one can harm us then."

"Bah! A coward's way," Drong spat. "The tunnel by that wall, therel It goes directly to our vessel!"

"Look, then," Brist told him.

A solid phalanx of seven hundred heavily-armed men was moving steadily toward the tunnels that would bring them to the spacecraft buried deep beneath the ground. "Do you want to live and fight again, Drong? Or die stupidly?"

Drong smiled coldly. "Always to fight again; always!"

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"Then we go through. Stand away," Brist ordered, and turned his laserpak up to full power. Savage light tore into the thick steel-reinforced concrete wall that rose twenty feet above the ground.

Jake ran full tilt from the generator room back toward his quarters adjacent to the underground master control center. He had memorized every secret passage, tunnel, and vertical bore beneath Old Millford Prison. Several times he abandoned his dash along a corridor to take a bypass tunnel that paralleled the corridor within which men were searching for him or any of the aliens. He knew they must be under Jube's direct control, for the word had still not spread to gun down Jake Marden. Jube wanted no faltering among the ranks of men who would not only hesitate to take up their weapons against Jake, but might flatly refuse to do so. Close to his quarters he heard shouting and cursing; the babble of sound from many men.

He swore to himself. If he tried to make it through any of the known corridors he'd be trapped helplessly. He searched the corridor walls; there, a mark only he and one other man would recognize. He pushed

against a metal beam, a counterbalance fell away and the slab opened wide. Jake moved into a vertical bore, through which a fireman's pole stood clear. He hit the pole without slowing, dropping two stories straight down. Now he moved forward, feeling his way until round metal came within his grasp. He spun a hatch wheel, yanked it open, and slipped into the secret corridor behind, of all things, the refrigerator in his quarters.

He banged on the false wall. No answer. The sound of men shouting, of rifle butts clanging against the steel doors of his quarters, told him everything. "Open up, goddamnit!" he yelled, his mouth almost against the wall.

He heard Alison's voice thinly. "W-who is it?" she called out.

"Monkeywrench!" he yelled. "It's fucking monkeywrench!" He heard the handle bang three times to the left and, as quickly as the wall with the refrigerator attached began to move, he hauled it fully open.

Alison started to collapse into his arms but he swept by her with a rush, stopped before a cabinet and yanked open the doors. She gaped at him as he turned, tossing a vest at her. "Bulletproof. Sling it on, kid. It's party time."

"What . . . what happened out there? What the hell is going on?"

"You got a story to file or something?" he said, mocking her. "You want some personal interviews? I'll tell you what's happening out-goddamnit, hook up that vest! You can do things with your hands, and your ears will still work-what's happening is that there's about a thousand people out there who'd like to see us dead and just about all of them are armed and they'd shoot us on sight. How's that grab you, lady?"

Her hands tightened the flak vest. He tossed her a Ruger automatic. "Fifteen rounds. Here's two more clips," he said, extending them to her. "You know how to use one of those things?"

By way of answer she shoved the clips in the flak vest pocket, grasped the weapon and a shell slammed into the chamber. "Good girl," he said. "Stick that thing in your belt and grab this. It's a two twenty three and that banana clip holds a hundred and twenty rounds. Use that up first if you have to; save the Ruger for last."

He was loading more weapons onto his own body. "And, Alison," he said suddenly, his voice serious, "if I go down, babe, my advice to you is to save the last round or two from the Ruger for yourself."

She was amazingly resilient to changing situations. "In your own words, lover, that's enough of that shit. You ready to rumble?"

"Ready to-?" He cut himself off in mid-sentence with a roar of laughter. "By God, that's my girl!" he sang out as he slung plastique packs over his left shoulder. He raised his voice over the sound of the battering to the apartment quarters. "Let's move it," he told her, serious again. "I'm closing this behind us. It won't take even a dummy too long to figure that we had another way out of here, but if everything looks normal it'll slow them down a bit." They went through the space and he pushed the heavy door with the refrigerator back into place. He led the way along the concealed tunnel.

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"This thing curves back toward the main corridor that takes us to the ship. There's no way we can use the regular passageway. And that means we can't take a direct route to the ship, either."

"What about the corridor from the West Wing?"

"I guarantee you that's a pile of rubble. Jube figures that if he blocks that passageway, then the rest of Arbok's bunch will have to make it the long way around. That means going topside, getting outside where they'll be vulnerable."

She ran faster to get closer to him. "It sounds to me," she called out as she ran, "that you just described the problem we have."

"Yeah. You win a cigar for figuring that out." He gestured for her to stop as he looked about them.

"Okay, here it is. This hatch leads to a tube that goes straight up to ground level. It's got a fireman's pole and a ladder. Get in there and start up right now. I'll be coming after you like Hogan's goat. Go up two levels and stop by the hatch. Don't open it. I'll be right behind you."

She nodded, but hesitated. "What are you going to do?"

"Slow down our fans, babe." He made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "I'll blow this tunnel. Ought to bring a couple tons of rock down right where we are. That's going to bottle them up long enough to give

us the break we need. They'll go back and come around another way, but I think we'll- never mind; get going."

He turned from her, packed plastique against the top and sides of the tunnel walls, jammed in the electrical wires, switched the battery to TIMER and set it for ninety seconds. He went through the hatch, slammed it shut and whirled the wheel to secure it tightly. Enough to dampen any blast that might come after them. Damn; that took twenty seconds. Gotta move!

He scrambled up the ladder, feet ringing on the metal rungs. He had just caught up with Alison as she reached the hatch when the tunnel system shook crazily and the ladder to which they clung vibrated like a harp, trying to throw them off. Dust swirled about them and debris showered from above, loosened by the shock wave of the explosion. Jake spit out dust. "Open that hatch and then swing to the side," he

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ordered. "I'm going out first. You come right after me and be ready to shoot. Okay, open it!"

He went through, rolling swiftly to the side, the machine gun in his hands, ready for anything. He saw daylight through broken windows in the wall to his left. Alison came rolling behind him, following his example, weapon at the ready.

No one was in the room. They heard shots and shouting and screams through the broken windows. Jake moved cautiously to the window to see what was happening. At that moment, he brought his eyes up high enough to see a blinding flash erupt through the prison courtyard. The walls in the room about them stood out garishly as if a strobe bomb had exploded.

"My God!" Alison cried out. "What. . . what was that?"

"Laser," Jake told her. "It's got to be Drong, maybe the others also. Oh, shit, did they ever take a wrong turn!"

Drong stopped as if he'd run into a tree trunk. He stared in disbelief. No open field stretched before them that would gain them entry to the hidden tunnel leading to the starship. The three aliens of different worlds stared at hundreds of men caught as unaware of what had happened as were Drong, Brist, and Ytram.

"Idiot!" Drong shouted at Brist, "we hit the wrong wall!" His hand stabbed to his right. "That's the way to the tunnel!"

"Hold them off!" Brist said immediately. "Set your laserpak to full power. You'll need the range. Both of you, do it, quickly. I'll blow an opening through the right wall."

Drong glanced at the men moving toward them, the weapons being raised and pointed in their direction.

"You better do it fast, my friend. At this range, the lasers may not kill-"

"But they'll make a mess," Brist said, already running. "Open fire, you fools!"

Ytram stood like a two-legged hippo, the heavy laserpak like a feather in his massive arms. By his side, Drong had dropped to one knee, cradling the powerpak. He pushed the energy lever to maximum output and snapped out three laser blasts.

He and Brist were both right. The range was too great for an industrial laser to function as a killing machine, but it still

shone with an eye-searing light of terrible intensity, and where it struck skin it burned flesh, and where it struck clothing the material smoked instantly and a second later began to burn. Drong grinned as he saw the effect. Those who'd found the laser directed into their eyes screamed as they were struck blind; they pawed madly at their eyes, their weapons flung aside, staggering about and flailing their way into other men yet unharmed.

Drong turned to Ytram. "Damn wafong! Use that thing!" he shouted.

Ytram nodded in his usual sodden manner but remembered to squeeze the thick firing handle. He had the aiming ability of his terrestrial namesake; a clumsy hippo clawing frantically for balance on thin ice. And that made his laser firing all the more effective. He lacked aim; instead he kept squeezing the laser trigger and moving the beam outlet from side to side. The laser tool had its greatest effect on its prey at this moment in time and distance by blinding those who even chanced a quick look directly into the beam.

Whoever it touched reeled back or stumbled from the fiery blast of heat. Hair aflame, clothes smoldering and then burning, even partially blinded, their screams rose in a chorus of the damned as they fell or whirled or clutched anyone near them. Rifle fire ripped the air in a blind rage and fear of reflex

trigger jerking.

Had there been a plan the convicts would have fallen back in some semblance of order; there was none. Frenzied emotions, hard liquor, a lack of discipline and now suddenly this terrible heat-slashing of their ranks by aliens from outer space overwhelmed the last gasp of defense. Ytram stood wide-legged, blazing away, uncaring or perhaps unknowing that the laserpak had a finite lifetime of its battery power and that such indiscriminate use would only hasten that moment when the only value in the laserpak would be how he might swing it as a bludgeon. Drong, all his attention riveted to the tool-become-weapon, fought in the manner of the true warrior, on one knee, aiming at the greatest concentrations of human targets before him, striking at any group that emerged from the mob to keep them well back. And off to their side, Brist had set his laserpak for full blast and was busy ripping a wide hole in a wall that was itself six feet thick of steel rods and superhardened rock and concrete.

The moment would have gone with total triumph to these three had it not been for the stolid courage and loyalty of Vasily Korolov. It was the Russian who struggled to convert the ragged, drunken mob into some kind of functioning force, and he was achieving some small success, hoping to lead his men into the far end of the prison where they could surge like tumbling water through the tunnels and corridors to join up with Jubal Bailey and then hurl themselves with every rocket and antitank weapon they had at the starship.

Korolov needed no explanation of what was happening behind him in the courtyard. The laser blasts flashed brighter than any strobe might reflect garishly from the walls to splash back with both light and heat. The laser reflections and then the shrieks and screams, the shouting and fearful cries of men and the aimless shooting told him immediately what had shattered his never-solid ranks.

Clutching a heavy caliber machine gun, Korolov ran like a madman back toward the source of the laser blasts. He hurled men aside like tenpins, waving with one arm, shouting as loudly as he could. "Follow me! Follow me! Fucking Americanski cowards, follow me!" He plunged through the men and then he was surrounded with other men ablaze from head to foot, their clothing spattering flame and smoke and ashes in whorls and sudden eddies from their own movement. Other men staggered about, shrieking in agony from their sudden blindness, arms outstretched, groping helplessly and in gibbering fear.

Vasily Korolov saw Ytram and Drong and before a laser blast could catch him unawares, he dropped to the ground. In prone position, he turned back to those who had followed him. "Down! Down on your bellies! Open fire on those two over there!" He turned again, risked a single glance to aim directly at the two aliens, then covered his eyes and his face with his left arm, firing with his right. No time for fancy short bursts or careful aiming. He had a banana clip with forty rounds and he fired steadily, moving the muzzle slightly from side to side, and he kept firing until heat fell on him like a blazing canvas. He had protected his eyes well enough, but

his forehead and the forward upper half of his shaved skull took the laser beam dead-on. Vasily Korolov felt as if a giant wearing superheated cleats on a massive boot stomped into his forehead and skull. The taut skin went instantly to pink to red to bright cherry red and skin blackened and shriveled and began to glisten as the skull liquids beneath steamed, and his own skin ran liquid and agonizing down his face and into his eyes.

Vasily smiled through the pain. On each side of him automatic weapons were firing in controlled, disciplined bursts.

Ytram felt a sting in his left shoulder. He looked down and to his side stupidly, his thick neck barely permitting his head to move at this awkward angle. Thick red blood oozed from a hole that had appeared magically where none had been before. Several hornets buzzed angrily past his face; bullets too swift for his eyes ever to see. Something kicked him in his right thigh, forcing him backward. Ytram had never in his life faced projectile weapons and he had no concept of the deadly firepower aimed in his direction. A third round tore into his fleshy midsection below his right ribcage; the high-velocity bullet went in cleanly and left a hole two inches wide where it emerged to the lower right of his spinal column. Other than tearing flesh and spraying the dark red blood outward, and bringing pain slowly to his thick-skulled brain, it affected him little. He looked down at Drong. "What is happening? Things bite me." Part of his ear vanished as another round clipped its edge.

Drong knew; he knew all too well. He had taken a bullet into his left thigh, another along the rim of his left shoulder, and yet another that grazed the side of his skull. As quickly as the blood flowed from the Asgardian, his miraculous powers of healing slowed the drain of his life fluids and the wounds began to close. Yet he knew that to remain where they were any longer was to die. Too many of the man-things were dropping to the ground and firing. Drong set his laserpak on full fire and placed it on the ground. He grabbed the laser from Ytram and did the same. Both lasers would fire for another minute or a little less before their power ran out. That was all they needed.

He shoved Ytram about, pointing him in the direction of Brist who stood by a gaping hole in the prison's outer wall. The open field stretched beyond. "Run!" he shouted to Ytram above the roar and pounding of the guns. He winced as a round slammed into his arm. "Run, you fool!" He crouched low and ran for his life, the huge Skringian lumbering by his side.

The men firing at them continued to blast away, but at the lasers. Shielded by that dazzling light, Drong and Ytram were invisible as they dashed to momentary safety. The three aliens pushed through the gaping space in the wall and ran for their lives to the tunnel entrance across the field.

Jake dropped down from the window. "Whatever happened out there, it's slowed down the biggest mob trying to get to the ship. But those three from the ship-

"The aliens?" Alison asked.

"They made it out of the yard. They used lasers and the last I saw of them, they left a mess of people behind them and they took off through the wall. Blasted a hole clean through it. They'll try for the tunnel entrance on the other side of that large field. We'll go the other way. We'll double back through those tubes no one else knows about and we can get to the ship that way and-

The world vibrated and shook before their eyes. Deep, dull explosions boomed through the structures about them kicking up a fury of dust and plaster. "What ..." Alison looked about her with wide eyes.

"What was that?"

She saw that Jake wasn't smiling.

"It's Jube. The son of a bitch figured out exactly what I'd planned to do. He knows about those damned tunnels! We can't go back the way we came."

Alison raised herself along the wall to peer outside through the shattered windows. "Well, we can't go back. AH the tunnels between us and the ship are blocked now. And we sure can't go through there," she gestured to the courtyard. "They'd nail us before we took a do/en steps. So what's left?"

"That tunnel from outside the prison. That small stone building. You can see it from here. That's where we've got to go."

"Oh, sure," she said, sarcasm not quite hiding her fear. "We can't go through any tunnels, we can't cross the courtyard and you've already got three desperate aliens heading for that tunnel. How do we get there?"

He hauled her to her feet and started running. "We go this way," he said, releasing her wrist and leading the way.

"We're going to run there? It's the other way!" she shouted.

"There's another way," he said, running steadily, Alison keeping up with him as they rushed into another building.

"How?" she yelled.

He offered her a crooked grin. "Like Peter Pan. We fly."

CHAPTER 31

Jake and Alison ran steadily through long corridors. To each side stretched rows of cells with open doors. Not a man was in sight. Their feet pounding on the hard floor echoed eerily about them as if they were the only people left in all of Old Millford Prison. They reached the corridor's end. For the first time they heard voices, men shouting and yelling. Smoke rolled down a side corridor toward them in a thick, choking blanket. A sudden explosion sent the smoke whipping between and past them. Suddenly they

could see down the corridor. Men were smashing equipment, setting mattresses afire and throwing them in all directions.

"Shit! They've seen us!" Jake cursed. "Keep that damn weapon ready and when I say fire, you shoot to kill. Come on!" They started running again along the same corridor that had brought them here and that led to the workshops and, beyond that, to the helicopter Jake hoped was waiting for them.

"It's a woman! It's a goddamn woman!"

"Let's get her!"

Brandishing pipes, bars, and knives a mob of convicts raced after them. Frenzied, lustful, blood-mad, the runners at the head of the pack began to close the distance between them. "The steam plant . . . just ahead . . . we've got to get in there . . . can bar the door ..." Jake forced out the words as they ran. His heart went cold as he realized they weren't going to make it.

"Jake!"

Her scream stabbed into him as a wild-eyed man grabbed at Alison's arm, half-spinning her about. She was too close for Jake to shoot. He went in fast with the butt of his rifle, slamming it straight into the man's face. Blood and teeth splattered Alison as the man fell back. But there were more. White-faced, Alison stumbled away. Jake stepped to the side and opened up on full automatic, his machine gun echoing explosively through the corridor.

"Goddamnit, shoot!" he snarled at Alison. She emerged from her sudden daze and fear and suddenly her own weapon fired in short, steady bursts. A dozen men tumbled and crashed against the walls and to the corridor floor. "Run for it!" Jake yelled. "I'll be right behind you!"

Alison turned and ran. Jake dropped low, firing another long burst. The sudden onslaught of death had slowed their pursuers just long enough for him to grab a plastique pack. He turned the timer down to six seconds and in a single sweeping motion hurled it over the heads of the leaders of the group still rushing him. The pack sailed over them and fell in their midst. Jake went flat on the deck, his arm covering his face and at the same moment the tremendous explosion of the plastique hammered him. Chunks of flesh and bone rained about him. He didn't bother looking back but was on his feet, running madly to catch up with Alison. She leaned against a heavy door she'd opened. "The laundry," she gasped.

"Let's go." He shoved her through the doorway, turned to throw the locking bar. For a moment he stared in disbelief. The bar was gone, the locking mechanism smashed. He spun about and pointed toward the maze of boilers and vats. "That way!" he said, pointing. "Just keep running."

They ran, spurred on by the shouts of rage from behind as still more men raced after them. They'd killed twenty, maybe fifty, maybe even a hundred. It didn't matter. There were too many of them to be stopped. All sanity was gone; the men had become wild-eyed, unthinking berserkers. If any of them had a weapon, all they needed to do was to fire down the long corridors along which Jake and Alison ran.

"Keep going!" he shouted. He lurched to a stop by a huge boiler, slapped a plastique pack against its side, twisted the dial to twenty seconds, and ran with all his strength after Alison. The shouting voices were closer and at least one of those men had a weapon. Bullets screeched off metal. How fucking long is twenty seconds! Jake raged to himself, and as the last words flashed into his mind, the explosion behind him tore open the huge boiler. The blast swept the lead pursuers into a screaming tumble, but no sooner had their screams reached Jake and Alison when a thousand banshees howled as the boiler let go. Scalding steam under thousands of pounds per square inch pressure geysered into the laundry room behind them, ripping men to shreds and down to bone.

"Keep going, keep going," he told her. "They won't be following us any more, but keep a sharp eye out for what's ahead."

Moments later they were at the entrance to the generator room. "It's locked," Alison said in a hollow voice.

"Yeah, it sure is," Jake agreed. "Get the hell out of the way." He fired a long burst into the locking mechanism and the door sprang open. "Go!" He grabbed her wrist and pulled her through. Ahead of them stretched a long grating platform. At its end was the door to the outside ramp. He expected another wave of madmen but the generator room was empty. They ran along the metal grating. "Easy, easy," he cautioned. He stepped through the door leading outside, machine gun at the ready.

An Augusta heavy-duty helicopter sat on a ramp, engine idling, rotors turning slowly. Two men stood by the base of the ramp, holding a cable from a canister covered with white ice. "Alison! Get up that ladder into that chopper! Take the left seat! If anybody comes up there besides me, blow their fucking head off!"

He turned to the men. "She ready?" He had to shout above the screaming of the lox pipes in the hot morning sun.

"She's all set, Mr. Marden! Ready to go!"

He had one foot on the ladder. "Close off the vent and boil-off valves!" He watched the men turn, disconnect an ice-encrusted feed line, lower it carefully to the ground. They twisted two valves on the spherical canister.

"That's it!" one shouted.

"Good job!" Jake called out. "Now, get in that truck of yours and get the hell out of here. Whatever you do, don't come back!"

The two men hit their pickup truck running, spun dirt in a Sfi7

wild rooster tail behind them and the truck swung wide around the corner of the building and was gone. Jake bounded up the ladder and climbed into the helicopter. He slammed his door behind him. "Open that window on your side," he ordered Alison. "Keep that damn weapon ready." His eyes flew across the gauges. What the hell; it didn't matter what they read. He brought in power and the jet engine howled. Not too fast, not too fast. Got to bring in the slack slowly, feel her steady on the cables. Easy does it, man, easy, easy. The Augusta rocked gently as she rose. He looked down through the sighting window, saw the cables coming up and as they began to pull taut beneath him he twisted in another touch of power to meet the resistance from below. Then the cables were taut. It was now or never, but he couldn't rush it with all that weight beneath them.

Steady, steady . . . that's it, more power now, we've got it, she's lifting, balls to the wall, Marden!

As they rose, the canister beneath them swaying, demanding all his skill in the turbulence of the rotors smashing air downward and boiling outward in all directions, the full expanse of the field they had to cross came clearly into view. "Can you see them?" he shouted to Alison.

"Yes! They're almost across the field!"

"Goddamn, we've got to get to them before-"

"Jake! Motorcycles! There's a whole bunch of bikers and they're cutting them off!"

Jake chanced a swift look. It was all he needed to see what was happening. Alison was right. At least twenty or thirty riders from Pike's biker club roared behind the three running aliens. No mistaking that huge lumbering form of Ytram. The three aliens stopped, turning to face their attackers as the bikers roared in, swinging chains and flails at the startling figures before them.

Beyond them, visible from their height of a hundred feet, appeared flashing red and blue lights Jake never expected to see. Pike's people hadn't done their job as thoroughly as he'd believed they would. A dozen sheriff's cars, trailing clouds of dust, raced toward the prison-straight for the field over which Jake was flying so carefully.

He forced his eyes back to the bikers and their harried

prey. It was too early to count out the aliens. Ytram and Drong were without any weapons. But Brist still carried his laserpak and as the bikers closed on them, narrowing their circle, Brist squeezed his firing handle. Jake blinked at the incredible burst of light flashing outward. The bikers were in close now and the laser hit the first group with full fury. A dozen bikers burst into flames, clothes and hair wreathed in fire and moments later their fuel tanks exploded, torn open by the tremendous power of the laser beam and its devastating heat. One moment the aliens were helpless; the next, half the bikers were roaring fountains of fire and screaming, writhing bodies. The survivors hunkered low over their machines and raced away as fast as they could go.

There was no surcease for the three aliens. No sooner were the remaining motorcycles roaring into the distance when the swarm of sheriff's cars skidded to a stop in their own clouds of dust. Uniformed deputies poured out, pointing automatic weapons at Ytram, Brist, and Drong. Jake and Alison couldn't

hear any voices but there was no mistaking what was happening; the deputies were shouting orders for them to halt where they were.

Brist let loose another blazing beam of laser energy. Four cars exploded in flames and more men were burning alive. But there could be no ignoring the lawmen who remained. They opened up in a barrage of firepower. Ytram reeled about, arms wide, and began running toward the waiting building with the tunnel that led to the ship he must reach to survive. They could see bullets hitting him with little effect. From the last three cars, six huge German shepherds hit the ground, running around the cars directly at the aliens. Another blast of the laser and two more cars exploded.

The dogs went after Ytram; he was a huge target running away and they were trained to pursue. Three dogs hit the huge alien in a blur of chopping fangs. One animal sank his teeth into the side of Ytram's face, ripping away a huge chunk of flesh. Another ripped into a leg. Ytram faltered; the dogs, working as a team, savaged him at once. He went down, slowly, beating at the animals but helpless before their furious assault. Jake had a final glimpse of a huge dog sinking his

fangs into Ytram's groin while another ripped away at his throat. Scratch one alien . . .

But Brist still had power left in that laser and he was firing everything he had at the deputies and their cars. Gasoline tanks exploded one after the other; between the laser beams and their own blasting explosions, Brist decimated their ranks.

And gave Jake the exact moment he needed. He came down with full power and just short of Brist and Drong, who turned suddenly to stare upward, Brist raising the laser; Jake yanked the cable release. The huge sphere plummeted swiftly. It didn't hit the two aliens but it shattered upon impact with the ground. A huge wave of frozen air and supercold liquid oxygen inundated the two aliens. In an instant, thick ice snapped about them from head to foot; in split seconds more the intense cold permeated their bodies. They slowed from swift body movement to jerky motions, freezing to death where they stood, automatons helpless beneath the cryogenic death sentence.

"My God, are they dead?" The question burst from Alison as she watched the incredible sight.

"If they're not," Jake said grimly, "they will be in moments. Here come the other dogs."

The German shepherds hit them with full fury. The dogs bit fiercely into their targets and suddenly the dogs recoiled madly with terrible pain as their teeth sank into supercold frozen meat.

Chunks of white and green and red fell away from the two bodies. The pieces of Brist and Drong tumbled to the ground.

Jake raced for the building, swinging into the wind for a madcap landing, desperate to lift off from the charnel house about them.

On the flight deck, Arbok and Michiko counted every second, feeling a desperate helplessness as the battles raged above them and through the tunnels leading to the starship. Arbok had brought in full power to all his engine drives and the attitude thrusters and was poised to seal the ship. Michiko, face twisted in her own torment, grasped his arm.

"Why can't we tell what's happening? Why can't we help them?" She hesitated as explosions thudded heavily against the flanks of Frarsk; Jubal Bailey leading his final teams through the tunnels and corridors to reach the ship, readying all the antitank firepower he could bring to bear.

"I can't do anything," Arbok told Michiko. "All the visuals are down. The television monitors; everything is dead." He squeezed his head with his hands, brow furrowed. "I... I'm trying to get ... a message . . . something ..." He looked up, startled, staring at Michiko.

"I can feel him . . . they're getting closer . . . they're coming! He's going for the cargo bay! Be ready, Michiko, be ready!"

CHAPTER 32

The helicopter hit hard; he'd decided to hell with landing into the wind and a sudden gust tipped the

Augusta, threatening to whip the rotors into the ground. Jake fought the controls skillfully and with as much cursing as pilot technique; the instant the gear was solidly on the ground he yanked back on the power and shouted at Alison. "Out! Get the hell out! Head for that building!"

She scrambled from her door, ducking instinctively to keep her head away from the rotor blades above, and started for the building that covered the downward tube and tunnel to reach the starship. Jake was right behind her and almost crashed into her body as she turned at the entry door, staring up helplessly at him. Locked. Was everything in the goddamned world locked? He heard a savage snarl behind him and spun about swiftly, barely in time to see the big dog lunging at his throat. Without time to shoot, Jake ducked to the side and as the animal flashed past his face, he brought up the gun to ram it against the animal's ribs. The dog howled in pain before it hit the wall; Jake stepped in and caught the dog a tremendous kick in the side of its head. The animal flopped unconscious or dead, tongue lolling out. Jake paid it no more attention.

"Cover me!" he snapped. "Anything that comes close-kill it." He turned, firing pointblank at the lock, then kicked the door. It didn't open. Alison screamed and the next moment he heard her weapon explode in fury. He glimpsed a sheriff tumbling backward, his chest torn open. He turned back, firing again at the lock, then ramming the butt of his heavy machine gun against the metal bar. It fell away with heated, torn metal. Jake kicked the door in, reached back to grab

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Alison by her jacket shoulder. He lifted her bodily into the air and swung her into the small building.

"Through that swinging hatch!" he ordered. "It's a slide that goes down to the loading ramp below. Go down feet first . . . move it, goddamnit!"

She climbed halfway to the ledge of the steep drop and hesitated, uncertain, frightened. He couldn't blame her but neither did he have time to tell bedtime stories or give instructions. Alison shrieked as a hand rammed into the small of her back and propelled her the rest of the way through the door. The hatch flew up over her head and she plunged into darkness, trying at the same time to catch her breath and not to scream. Then the slide began to level out and turn and she tumbled from the chute against a wall. She came to her feet, groggy and aching, a pale yellow light helping her to see the curving wall and it was the side of the ship. The flank of the starship. And the hatch was closed; sealed.

She heard heavy weapons firing above her, voices shouting and cursing and the snarls of angry attack dogs. Still by the building entrance, Jake was fighting desperately for his life. If he turned to dive through the swinging hatch and drop down the supply chute, he left himself open for the deputies to take dead aim against him, or suffer a raging animal sinking its powerful teeth into his leg. He knew he couldn't hold them off much longer and he sure as hell couldn't outshoot the men and kill those damn dogs. He brought up his weapon and fired a burst into a group running toward him from the side, and then cursed himself for a fool. His weapon moved slightly to the right and he ripped off a long burst, directly into the fuel tank of the helicopter with its engine running and rotors still turning.

A huge ball of flame erupted from the tank; before the explosion reached the small building, Jake dove headfirst against the swinging door and was on his way down the chute. He flew off the end of the chute like a greased pig to slam into the conveyor belt with a sharp burst of pain. For a moment he sat dazed, shaking his head to clear the fog and shining lights. He felt Alison's hands against his face, staring with fear into his eyes. "Thank God," she burst out. "I thought you were dead."

"Maybe," he grunted, his senses stabilizing, "but if I am, don't tell me." Another explosion from above.

Men's angry voices sounding louder; closer. Jake stared at the curving supply chute and scrambled to his feet, almost knocking Alison painfully against the conveyor belt. Before she could get back her breath to ask what he was doing, he grabbed the bottom frame of the aluminum chute and with all his strength dragged it toward him, pulling and yanking as hard as he could. Metal screeched and groaned but the chute began to twist and bend. Jake came around to the other side of the chute end and put his shoulder against the metal; Alison ran to him and threw all her weight and strength into the effort. Screeching metal and the sudden free movement of the chute brought a grin from Jake.

"It's free. We busted it loose from above."

"I'm going after that son of a bitch!" a voice called out from above. "Cover me!"

A deputy hurled himself through the swinging door. His shout changed to a horrified scream as he plunged downward through thin air because the supply drop chute was gone. The scream ended abruptly as they heard the thud of two hundred pounds of body slamming, head-first, into unyielding concrete. Alison winced; Jake's response was a grim smile. "There'll be another one before they understand." As quickly as the words were spoken, another body hurled down and again they heard the wet smack of impact.

"Screw them," Jake snarled, turning to the great rounded metal shape. "How the hell do we let him know-"

"I'll try anything to get away from this insanity," Alison said loudly, grunting with effort as she slammed the butt of her machine gun repeatedly against the curving metal wall. Jake grabbed his own weapon to join her when they heard the sound of machinery from within the rounded shape.

"Get back," he warned Alison, grabbing her by the arm as a safety measure.

A pinpoint opening appeared, started to spread, then stopped. "State your name," a robot voice intoned.

"Fuck your games!" Jake yelled. "It's us! Jake and Alison!"

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Open up, you asshole!" He heard a rope ladder dropping into place behind them. "Do it fast, Arby!" he shouted again. "They're still coming after us!"

The small opening whipped to a circle six feet across. They heard Arbok's voice. "Welcome to Disney World. As you say, Jake, move your asses."

They were through the opening in seconds. "Clear?" they heard from a speaker.

"Clear, clear!" Jake looked through the iris opening, saw deputies with weapons at the ready. "Close the fucking thing!"

Air gushed against them. The iris closed faster than their eyes could follow. They heard and felt the vibrations of bullets spanging off the hull. Arbok's voice came through the still-unseen speaker. "Jake.

The manual locking system. I'd appreciate a backup in case some of our systems were damaged."

"Got it," Jake announced to whatever was picking up their voices. He turned a handle and side massive bars scissored into place. Jake brought the handle down and grabslots surrounded the bars. A sharp pneumatic hiss followed, within the flanks of the ship they heard and felt a deep thunk and a soft glow appeared around the hatch, the sign Jake had already learned that meant the area was sealed.

"You're in the green," Jake called out.

Arbok's voice came back with unmistakable concern. "Green?"

"Sorry about that. I'll explain later. Your hatch indicates full pressure seal and you're triple-hulled all the way."

"Thank you. My instruments indicate the same. I-" He hesitated as heavy explosions sounded in the distance and a tremor ran through the ship, like an enormous whale shivering along its flanks. "Jake, we've no time to waste. Both of you come to the flight bridge immediately. You know the way?"

"Hell, no! I don't know this ship, Arbok. We'd be lost in thirty sec-"

The deck and walls and overhead to Jake's left glowed a deep orange. "Move toward the light, Jake."

He took a hesitant step forward and the orange ring, glowing steadily,

moved away from him. "Just follow that light. It will bring you up here as fast as you two can move."

"We're on the way." He grabbed Alison's hand and they walked briskly, then began to run as the heavy explosions came closer and louder. Already Jake was getting that sense of unreality. Running behind a silent glowing ring of light through an alien starship under attack from terrestrial forces! This is crazy . . .

Spielberg would go completely out of his gourd if he could see this scene . . .

They moved rapidly through a chamber that glowed with many colors, emitting an aura of tremendous energy they felt through their bodies. A force they couldn't see or touch or even define, but yet they knew was the kind of energy to be found in the heart of a star. It was at once overwhelming, yet so powerful that its very force gave them a sense of comfort. The beast, whatever it was in this power chamber, was either docile by nature or superbly tamed. They swept on behind the light that always maintained the same distance before them. The corridor along which they moved suddenly banked or turned sharply but always with those same curving lines that made everything seem soft. Alison looked about her with rapid

head movements.

"Know something, Jake?" she asked as they trotted along.

"Depends."

"No; I mean about right here and now."

"What?"

"Outside of that bit of orange magic before us I haven't seen a single light in here. No lamps, no bulbs, no spots, or floods. Nothing. But it's light in here and I don't know where it comes from. There's just . . . light."

"Hey, you're right."

"What do you think it is?"

"Probably intense radioactivity. When your hair and teeth fall out in a couple of days, you'll know for sure."

She swung wildly at his arm with a closed fist. He laughed as she struck his arm and winced. "What the hell are you made of? Marble?"

"Close. My daddy always said my head was full of rocks. Maybe they slipped down. I-"

They emerged from the corridor, the orange light vanished

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and they saw Arbok and Michiko looking at them. Arbok gestured anxiously. "Quickly, Jake! I need you to fly this ship with me! Take this seat by me, and, Alison, take the seat by Michiko. Strap in, please, and quickly. Mickey, show her how to secure the head straps."

Alison slipped into the contoured, yielding mass alongside Michiko. "Head straps?" she asked her friend. Michiko's hands moved a band across her forehead to hold her securely against cushioned padding. The entire seat felt as if it were molding to her body for maximum cradling.

"Mickey, this damn seat's alive."

"Yes, I know. But it isn't really," Michiko answered as she secured her own straps. "It's biosynthetic.

Responds to body pressure and temperatures. It, um, it flows so that it feels like it's a part of you. That way you're protected."

"Against what?"

"Acceleration, deceleration, turbulence ... I don't know that much yet. But we're supposed to go through some crazy gravity fields and-later, Alison."

They watched the two men at the expansive flight control panel. Somehow they seem like two men who've flown together all their lives, Alison thought, amazed with the impression she received of Arbok and Jake sitting side-by-side. She concentrated on hearing what they said, what controls they moved. A luminescent panel began to glow at its left end; the panel stretched from one side of the flight control consoles to the other. "Mickey, what's that light?"

"The main power drive for the ship. Arbok can feed it into any of the thrust systems. The more light appears, you see? From left to right, the more energy he's drawing."

Alison showed her surprise. "I thought I knew you well. When did you start learning this kind of stuff?"

Michiko Nakamura laughed. "You forget my father. He never wanted a daughter. All boys, he always said. All real men. So when I came along my mother made sure that there was nothing my brothers could do I couldn't do better."

"But you're in sports, I mean, the Olympics-"

"And I can drive anything from a sports car to a bulldozer, I've raced speedboats, I'm a pilot, and a licensed mechanic."

"You amaze me."

"You should have seen my father! He- Look! Something's going to happen any second now-"

The power indicator glowed brightly, more and more of the panel coming to life. A deep hum sprang up within the ship, seeming to emanate from every inch of the structure. They felt the ship lurch forward slightly, then back, and suddenly rock from side to side. Arbok kept increasing power.

"This is crazy!" Alison called out to Michiko. "We're under forty feet of rock and solid concrete and-what's he trying to do? Fly us out of here?"

Arbok glanced back with a crazy half-grin. "Of course!" he said brightly. "First we give us some room with the laserpaks for rock drilling-"

The front vueshield darkened as he fired a long blast with the lasers pointing directly ahead of Frarsk. Dull explosions slammed the ship's hull as the lasers pulverized and melted rock, sending temperatures about them soaring. Molten mud dripped across the vuescreen. "Now," Arbok told Jake, "we open things up a bit more." As he spoke he fired a momentary blast from the rear thrusters. Frarsk lurched forward and slammed to a stop.

"Well, that's terrific," Jake said. "We must have set a record. At least six feet."

"It's all we need at this moment," Arbok explained. "I'm going to fire the upthrusters now-"

"You mean the ones that fire upward?" Jake shot back.

"Of course."

"But that will drive us down."

"There's no place to go, Jake. It's almost solid bedrock beneath us."

"That's what I mean! We-"

"Those thrusters are intense flame, Jake."

He understood then. "Go get 'em, man!"

The thrusters came alive with a terrible roar and a deep-throated cry of caged energy. Shocking flame stabbed upward. Frarsk normally would have moved in a direction opposite to the upward thrust, but not through solid rock. And Arbok kept the thrusters blasting, burning huge holes in the dirt and the concrete above. Molten soil splashed about

the vuescreens. Arbok moved the thrusters in their gimbals, in small circles where the flame exited the nuzzles, creating a much wider arc of flame above the ship.

"Run for your lives! Run!"

Sheriff's deputies and their dogs stumbled, scrabbling for balance as the earth shook ominously beneath them. They fled from the small building into which the man and woman had disappeared; the ground shook with stronger jolts and heavy concrete cracked. "Look! The prison walls!"

Huge cracks appeared in the outer walls of Old Millford as the world began to shake and rumble with increasing shock waves. Halfway up its length a great smokestack spilled bricks in an increasing shower and then began to topple as it might in a strong earthquake. The walls between the open field and the prison courtyard within cracked wider and huge chunks of concrete spilled down. A deafening roar burst upon the field and smashed back and forth within the collapsing walls of Old Millford. Glass shattered and exploded from the powerful shock waves as goutts of dazzling flame shot upward from the ground. Men fell where they were, arms outstretched on the ground, fingers trying to grab dirt or concrete for balance where there was none.

"Holy shit! It's a volcano!"

"Hang on, friend Jake. I'm going to the downthrusters now. If I have computed properly we should be able to take full advantage of breaking up the heavy weight above us."

"What the hell do you mean if? Don't you know?"

"Have you ever flown a ship under these conditions before, Jake?"

"Hell, no!"

"Well, my friend, neither have I. Keep your hands on those power levers, ah, those in red. Squeeze the left one and the engines will push us forward. The right one fires the nose thrusters to move us back. I'll operate the vertical thrusters, and you must operate by feel with me. Together, Jake-"

"I know, I know, there's always a first time for everything!"

R7Q

"How do you say it?" Arbok laughed. "You bet your sweet ass there is."

"They're crazy!" Alison shouted to Michiko. "Yes, yes, I know! Isn't it wonderful?" Then their voices faded away beneath the shattering blows of the engine drive and the thrusters. Arbok's hands moved slightly but with positive authority. The flame above them snapped away and they felt a tremendous surge of power from beneath them, pushing the ship straight up through its length, jamming them into their seats. But Frarsk was still trapped and still had to struggle free of its chains of dirt and concrete and gravity.

The ship vibrated madly.

That was all. Thrumming, hammering vibration that moved them about like a great wild hog wrapped in chains and that could only move scant fractions of an inch within its massive bonds. The look on Arbok's face told Jake more than words might ever convey. They were trapped. If Arbok went to the full thrust of the ship he could blast them free but they'd be torn to pieces. So that was out. They had to keep punching back and forth and a terrifying explosion rammed them upward. Jake barely heard the shriek of the women behind them. A spluttered sound of mixed pain and surprise burst from Arbok, and Jake tasted blood as his teeth rammed against his tongue. Another violent blast hammered them from below. "That's not us!" Arbok yelled. "What the hell is happening?!" Jake remembered as a third explosion tore at the belly of Frarsk. The rockets! The rockets Jube Bailey had buried beneath the ship right after it landed. Jube's safety margin. The invisible handshake to keep control. If ever the aliens got out of hand he'd let loose with massive firepower and gut the ship above the anti-tank armor-piercing rockets. Before Jake could explain Arbok shouted in triumph. "Whatever it is, it's breaking us free! We're starting to move!" Another shattering blast. "It's rockets from below us!" Jake shouted.

"Great!" Arbok called back. They'll never cut through a neutronium hull!"

"Then hit it, man, hit it!" Jake yelled above the roar. "Back thrust!" Arbok shouted.

"You got it!" Jake sang out and squeezed his right hand. Flame stabbed forward, the starship jerked and bumped backwards, Arbok increased the power pushing them up. "Forward thrust and back again!" he called.

Jake worked the fore and aft thrusters and each time he shifted power, Arbok slammed in additional thrust. Frarsk rocked and struggled but pushed up with greater feel and authority than before, smashing and punching its way free. With every second of blasting flame, the loads on the ship decreased.

Arbok scanned his instruments. "Jake! I'm going to punch her out completely. The moment we're clear hit the aft thrusters! I want to move this thing away from here!"

"Go! Go!"

"The second we're clear I'll go on the controls with you and- "

"Man, stop talking and do it!"

Arbok grinned, his hand squeezed and rotated his control lever and the world became shocking pandemonium. Hammer blows ripped through the ship at their bodies, but there was no questioning now what was happening as the starship, moving straight up, burst free of the earth in a huge shower of blazing mud and burning cement, hurling its flaming debris in all directions. The world about Frarsk was molten slag raining down on the terrified men close to the ship that appeared to fill all the world above them. Jake heard a thin cry from behind him. In a single lapse of screaming thunder there was no mistaking Alison's voice. "Dear God, what am I doing here?"

"It's an E ticket ride!" Michiko shrieked, and then their voices faded beneath rumbling thunder.

"Let's go!" Arbok called. "We've got to use the upthrusters for lift right now . . . we can't use the antigrav this close to the surface, and-"

"Arbok!" Jake pointed up and to their left, into the sun. Arbok could barely see them, the sun reflecting off a swarm of shiny metal objects.

"I see them," he said quietly. "Military?"

"Oh, baby, you better believe it. Looks like a bunch of fighters with some heavy stuff beneath them."

Contrails snaked

SRI

thinly, even higher than the reflecting metal. "Ain't no question about it. The word's out. About who we are. Who you are, what this ship really is. You don't put this thing down, nice and easy, they'll be all over us."

He turned to Arbok. "Can you fly this thing straight and level? High speed?"

"Yes." Arbok's hand hit a lever. "Look back, Jake." Jake looked through his side viewscreen and saw the edge of a delta wing that had snapped out from the midsection of the ship. "Sometimes we had to fly

through atmosphere long distances. All these ships have those wings for-" "Never mind the lecture! Move it!" "What will they attack us with?"

"Missiles. Downward firing. Homers and laser-directed missiles."

"What weapons? Quickly, Jake!"

"Nukes. No question. Anywhere from a kiloton up to a megaton for those things. Maybe a lot bigger from those ships all the way up, the ones making contrails."

Arbok's face set in a grim mask. "They do not know what this ship can do," he said fiercely. "We'll climb out. Straight up and out under full power, and-"

"No! That's exactly what they expect you to do! You take this thing straight up or anything like that and they'll nail us every mile of the way with a crossbrace of nuclear warheads!" For a moment Arbok hesitated. "Name it, then!" "You said this ship could take atmospheric entry at a hundred thousand miles an hour?" "Yes, it can, but-"

"Hit it, Arby! Goose this son of a bitch! Straight ahead and keep her on the deck!"

"Get on the atmospheric controls with me, Jake." Arbok pressed a console button, panels snapped away, and Jake had a maneuvering stick by his right hand and rudder pedals beneath his feet. He had just time to set himself when Arbok hit the main drive.

They couldn't call it acceleration. Frask exploded forward with savage, crushing thrust. A vast fireball spread out behind the starship, punching ahead so swiftly and with so great a rate of increasing speed that they were mashed back in

their seats, almost helpless, and even Jake was barely able to move his controls.

"Ease off! Ease off!" Jake yelled. "I won't be able to control her!"

Arbok squeezed off some thrust, but they still smashed ahead with far greater speed than a high-velocity rifle bullet. The air burned in a wild shock wave spreading out in a huge bow shock before them. Beneath and behind Frask the sonic boom leveled almost every building it touched, pounded down the roofs of cars and trucks, blew boats over in the waterways.

The world rushed toward them in a terrifying blur. "Holy Jesus! What are we doing?" Jake yelled.

"Who cares?" Arbok shouted as they tore past an airliner banking madly to escape the blazing meteor plunging in level flight low over the Earth. "About . . . about six thousand miles an hour!"

The roar of the drive, the howling shock waves, were gone. The ship was incredibly, strangely quiet.

They'd long since outrun their own sound.

Jake heard both women scream as the world suddenly turned green as Frask tore into the treetops of the Ocala National Forest.

CHAPTER 33

One instant their world was a flashing green blur beneath them, a carpet of trees and fields ribboning toward them faster than their eyes could follow; above the green line there appeared a mass of blue fleeced with the white of higher clouds, and then everything went streaked greenish gauze. Frask ripped a huge gouge for thirty miles through the Ocala forests; the mighty ship never trembled. Jake squeezed his controls carefully, carefully, begging her to ease up her nose just a hair, no more than a fraction of an inch. Any sudden backward movement to lift the nose to climb away at this speed would have crushed them all with well over a hundred times the force of gravity. The ship would have howled upward through atmosphere thinning swiftly and then into vacuum with four crushed, bleeding, and very dead beings in the flight deck.

The shock wave punching directly before and surrounding the bow of the starship was air burning fiercely; the free-flowing shock waves and supersonic blows remained constantly behind. Jake hardly breathed, remaining intensely devoted to the controls. He kept his eyes straight ahead as the world screamed silently beneath them. "We're heading at an angle for the coast. Holy shit, we're going to go right over the space center! Ease back on the power, ease her back, I need some height. The buildings at Kennedy . . . the TV towers ... at Bithlo they go up nearly two thousand feet..." As he spoke Arbok was

coming back gently, slowly on the power, but even this minor difference was enough to bring them down to a bare crawl compared to moments before. Their speed dropped to less than four times the speed of sound, and Jake judged their height at just over two thousand feet, enough to clear any obstacles before them, and his heart froze as he remembered the great unmanned radar balloon they flew over the Cape and that tremendous cable with its antenna and power systems stretching down from fifteen thousand feet to ground level. His whole world became only his hopes of catching sight of the balloon, and there it was! A blob of white on the horizon, and they were going to be too close; he tried to squeeze his toes in his right foot so his boot would move the smallest fraction of an inch to ease them to the right, and he squeezed the stick, his right thumb applying a hair more pressure than before. Even that gentlest of maneuvers that brought Frarsk into a slightly banked climbing right turn was enough to bring blood flowing from the noses and mouths of the women behind them.

The Kennedy Space Center and Cape Canaveral existed as a montage racing toward and then beneath and behind them at nearly three thousand miles an hour, and the huge balloon, the terrible tethered blimp with its mocking name of Fat Albert, was a streak of white flashing past Arbok's side of the starship. Jake eased from the turn, had her flying straight ahead, climbing slowly over the Atlantic, punching southeast toward the Bahamas and Cuba.

"Arbok! Take her up as steeply as you can, but watch any turning acceleration. You'll kill the women . . . ease her up and then let's have linear acceleration. Just straightline this mother up and out and the hell away from here. And keep punching. We've got more company."

He didn't have to tell Arbok to look for the telltale signs of shining motes in the sky and thin contrails where fighters and bombers were rushing to head them off, to embrace them in a crossfire of swift missiles and nuclear warheads. If they could not have the ship and its contents, the military were doing everything they could to destroy the vessel from the stars. Fear rode in the cockpits of every fighter and bomber, and men worked their controls frantically to compute distance and speed and time and vectoring for their missiles and warheads.

Jake saw the first flashes of bright fire. "Missiles! Give it everything you've got, Arbok!"

Arbok punched their main drive. Crushing acceleration

slammed them all back in their seats. Arbok and Jake were old hands at this kind of flight; the women were not and almost at once they were unconscious, their bodies and heads held securely by their straps. Jake felt himself fading quickly. His peripheral vision was turning gray and he saw down a long tunnel of fading sight as his blood became as lead and oxygen faltered in its struggle to reach his brain. Arbok did no better. He knew what he must do. He set his power lever timer to sixty seconds; the ship would accelerate with its tremendous speed for that amount of time, and then the computer would ease off on the power, cut back on the brutal acceleration, let their blood again become blood instead of mercury in their arteries and veins.

If the computer failed them, they would stab out of Earth's atmosphere-dead.

Jake knew they weren't going to make it. That one streak of flame and gleaming metal coming into his narrowing tunnel vision told him everything. One missile was going to get close to them. It wouldn't hit Frarsk but it didn't need to. When that atomic warhead exploded it would The world snapped dark.

Dark? A nuke doesn't go off dark. What the hell . . . salt.

Where's the salt from? Holy Jesus, I hurt . . . that dark. How?

Vision returned. The terrible pressure of acceleration was gone. He could turn his head. He saw Arbok; saw him clearly. But ahead of them. Dark.

"What the hell happened?" he asked through the sledgehammer pounding against his skull. He tasted blood where a tooth had sliced his lip. Good old blood; he was alive!

"The computer ... it saved us," Arbok gasped through his own shortness of breath and pain. He sucked in air slowly and steadily. "How are the women?"

Jake turned about, every move a slice of pain. There was more blood from their mouths but both were stirring. Alison and Michiko stared at them through pain-glazed eyes. Alison nodded to Jake. Her

message was clear. Do what you have to do. We'll be all right . . . Michiko raised an arm and dropped it slowly and wearily back to her side. Jake wondered where she'd gotten the strength to do that.

He looked at Arbok. "They're . . . okay. How did it go so dark? I saw that missile-

"It exploded," Arbok said, his words clipped but with his voice becoming stronger as he spoke. "When it went off, it emitted that terrible light you always get from an atomic blast. That light reached us before the shock wave or the radiation. The computer? It's always on autoprotection for this ship. Nothing else pulses like that nuke and when the sensors picked it up, the computer instantly polarized the transarmor shield in front of us. The matter shield, the one we keep on for any meteoric debris, for anything, at high velocity in normspace . . . that set up the force field against the radiation. And we just punched right through the shock wave."

"Punched through, hell," Jake said. "I think we outran it." He gestured. "The shield. I mean the vuescreen. Can you open it up again?"

"Yes." But Arbok hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Jake pressed him.

"Our main drive is off." Arbok gestured at the instruments. Jake didn't need that to tell they weren't accelerating madly any more. No vibration. No thrumming. No power sweeping through his teeth and his guts and his skull.

"Relax your arms, Jake."

He studied Arbok for a moment and then followed his instructions. His arms floated freely before him. He was weightless. He stared at Arbok, turned to look at Alison. Michiko had freed her head and arm straps and she was experiencing the same incredible sensation as Jake.

"When we reached orbital velocity the computer brought back the power. I had programmed us for orbit with a low point of six thousand miles."

"You mean-"

"Yes. We're in orbit. Six thousand miles above your world."

"I've got to see that!" Alison shouted from behind them.

"Let me release your straps first," Arbok said. He eased off his own restraints and floated freely above his seat, as comfortable and controlled in zero gravity as he had been walking on earth. He pushed away from his control panel with one hand and floated back to the women, releasing their straps.

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Alison lifted gently from her seat and began a slow tumble, her arms and legs seeking some support where there was none. "Relax, relax," Arbok told Alison and Michiko. "It takes getting used to. Go with it. Don't fight it."

Michiko's eyes were wide. "It's . . . it's like free fall when you're skydiving . . . only it's much, much more wonderful!"

"Alison, hold my leg," Arbok told her. "I'm taking you forward to Jake. Mickey, think you can handle your first swim without gravity?"

"Watch me!" She tumbled wildly across the flight deck toward the control panel. Jake reached up to grasp her arm and hold her gently, bobbing and weaving magically in the air above him. Arbok came up, eased back into his own seat and brought Michiko down to him.

"Jake, hold Alison. This is going to be a shock."

"What is?" Alison asked.

Arbok switched off the armorglass polarization.

They saw a planet they had never seen before. Stunning, brilliant, an orange-red-yellow sweep of fire making the dawn rushing across the world so far below. Perfectly spherical, gleaming, suspended against an infinity of black velvet.

For the first time they saw Earth.

Alison wept. Quietly, with deep sobs. Jake held her tight, wiping the blood from her lips, the tears that collected on her cheeks, some of them breaking free as quivering globules of salty liquid. "What's wrong, babe?" he asked as gently as he could.

She shook her head. "N-nothing. I can't help it."

"It's my fault," Arbok told him. "I did not think. You are all groundlings. Alison feels awe and wonder, disbelief, what you would call a rhapsody of emotions. Those are her tears, Jake. It is all too much, too soon."

"Yeah, I guess so." He drew Alison closer. A moment later she pushed herself away from him to arm's length. "I'm fine. It's just not every day in your life you see the painting that God's been working on for so long."

"There are more surprises in store for you. For all of you," Arbok said. "Not just in what you see or feel about you from now on. But inside yourselves."

"Man, you are losing me," Jake told him.

"Jake, from now on it's everything the other way around."

Jake blinked; he looked at Alison and then Michiko and finally back to Arbok, to those powerful features, the muscular head and frame and "Oh, Jesus," he said softly.

Arbok smiled. "That's right, Jake. From now on, you three are the aliens."

Michiko worked her way close to the vuescreen. The heavens lay suspended forever before her, stars shining steadily, the moon a distant crescent. Off to her left, hidden just beneath the curve of a world that seemed cleansed of all the misdeeds of man, the sun waited to greet them with a rush. She turned to look the other way, into the dark infinity beyond.

"It is as the gods have always told us," she said quietly, as much to herself, and her ancestors, as to them.

"When the time is right, then the world of men will be but a single pearl in the necklace of the heavens."

She turned back to her lover; his acceptance of her as lifemate. She smiled. "I am ready to go anywhere, out there," she gestured, "with you."

Arbok laughed and made his own sweeping gesture. "Take your pick, my lady. You have only a few billion worlds from which to choose."

"I have a concern, Jake," Arbok said.

"Shoot."

"We are too close to your world of angry little men. Six thousand miles is nothing if they wish to assemble quickly a crude machine to reach us."

"Well, what's keeping us here?"

"There are so many things to speak about, friend Jake, and-"

"Hell, man, we've got an eternity to do that. If the bar's getting crowded and you don't like the company, let's shove off."

Arbok grimaced. "By that I hope you mean we should leave this area of space?"

"Uh huh."

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"Sometimes I fail to understand you. When something is so important you respond with grunts and animal sounds rather than your very capable speech."

"You want a speech?"

"Well, not-"

"Move your ass, alien."

Alison had asked the favor and Jake took it to Arbok. "Before we punch all the way out of here," he told Arbok. "There's something she'd like to see. And so would I, when you get down to it. If we asked Mickey I don't doubt she'd agree. We-"

"Say no more. It will be your first and, I can assure you, almost certainly the last time you will ever have this chance."

"We have enough juice in the tanks to do this sort of thing? I know, Z know," Jake said hurriedly.

"You've told me all about that cockamamie power system in the belly of this thing, but it takes a lot of doing to accept between my ears that we have the same as unlimited endurance."

"Far more than that, Jake. When we leave this system, when your star becomes a memory, we must go into hyperspace. What I have heard in your language as warp drive. It is appropriate, and even light will become an ant crawling around a huge ball compared to how we shall cross the oceans of galaxies."

"You're trying to tell me something, old buddy."

"Perhaps you have forgotten we will travel in time as well as in space. That we shall sail the oceans of both, and there is a clock that may never be wound in the direction from which we come."

Jake's try at sarcasm faded. "Which means we can't come back to here because the now will be gone forever."

"That is simplistic but true. At least, it will do for now. Whatever you know, here and now, in these planes of dimension and existence, will no longer be. It is perhaps a cruel rule of our universe, but," he shrugged, "neither you nor I make the rules."

"Then we will ask the favor."

"It is yours. Where are the women?"

"They're working with the ship's computer."

Arbok blinked. "They do what?"

"They're making a kitchen." He studied Arbok. "You know, hot food? Coffee? Cold beer? That sort of stuff we like so much? When the kitchen's done they're going to teach the computer to cook."

Arbok laughed. "What a task for a mighty brain!"

"Don't be so quick to knock it. Even the best computer can screw up a good meal."

"Later, later. Bring them up here."

They floated past the moon barely twenty miles above the airless, lifeless surface of dust and molten glass and time-frozen lava, across the huge cratered walls and across the valleys and over the rounded peaks and ranges. And it was not entirely a world that had not known life.

They looked down and saw the glittering reflections of three of the Apollo landing craft that had carried men here years before. One crater held their attention especially; it had been blasted out of lunar rock by a great Saturn upper stage booster directed to smash into the moon and gouge out that crater, so instruments left on that barren surface might record the shock waves resounding like gongs through the brittle mantle.

And then the moon was behind them, and Arbok played with the maestro's touch with power and gravitational slings, and he taught Jake, and the two men shared the beginnings of a voyage that none could imagine. But there was yet more of the promise to keep, and they fell into orbit about the red planet, and looked down on the wispy clouds and the huge volcanic mounts of Mars, and they drifted in formation with the rocky little moons staring through eye sockets of huge rounded craters back at them. They slid into a huge cloud of ancient debris from the formation of the solar system, the incredible asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, and they drifted within a fog of rock and between mountains of ice that had failed to condense enough to become a planet, lashed as was that ancient time by the massive gravity of Jupiter.

The Jovian world sped beneath their swing past the largest

KQI

planet of this, their solar system, and they looked down in wonder at the brilliant colors and the raging storms that could swallow a hundred Earths, and they saw the moons floating by and they almost touched the thin rings. Onward half across the solar system to the giant gas ball of heavily ringed Saturn and its family of moons, some with atmospheres as strange and alien as any that might be found anywhere in the galaxy.

"It is so beautiful," Alison said finally. "I would like to end it here. This is how I wish to remember our planetary family."

Arbok had reached back into Earth's history and folklore. He bowed as best he could in zero gravity and made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "Your wish is my command, lady." He raised his head and his eyes to meet hers. "Bid it farewell. Once we leave it is gone forever in the mists of time."

She seemed stricken. "No, no," Arbok said quickly. "Remember what you see here so you may compare with where we go, to all those new wonders—"

"Only he hasn't the faintest damn idea of where that is," Jake broke in.

"True," Arbok said. "Jake, come with me. We prepare for the jump."

They gathered together for a meal and a meeting. The solar system was far behind them and now they pushed on to reach beyond even the last vestiges of cometary dust and debris from those moments when even Time was young.

"We will make a hyperspace jump," he explained in terms as simple as he might find for the women. "Let me keep it brief. Space and time will bend. The computer seeks out spectral signs for us. What we're looking for is a sun much like yours, or what was once mine. The G-type sun, your astronomers call it. It is about such suns that we're most likely to find life forms such as ourselves. And each time we jump we move, well, think of it as moving sideways, in time. We become the true voyagers without a point of return, behind or ahead of us."

"And then what?" Alison asked. "Do we go through on another world what you just went through back on ours? Hate, killing, prejudice, murder-"

"No, no," Arbok protested. He looked with exasperation at Jake. "Haven't you told her?"

"Not yet. I wanted us to be together."

"Then I'll tell her," Arbok said with sudden emphasis.

"Tell me what?" Alison protested.

"Why, what we've become!"

"You are at times very difficult, Arbok," Michiko told him.

"Merchants."

"What?" Alison said.

"We are to become merchants," Arbok repeated with rising enthusiasm. "Do you recall when we were at that amazing music gathering in that city, under the great dome?"

"Yes, of course. That was the concert by the Moody Blues," Alison said.

"Then I will tell you something. I had never heard, on any world, the music that is everywhere on your Earth. It is the most fantastic, most wonderful, most exciting of all the sounds that music might ever present. Alison, the merchants who ply the many worlds-what do you think they offer other planets? Money is worthless, so they barter. Rare spices. Rare gems. Medicine and medical techniques. Sometimes baubles, sometimes true riches, but all riches are only in the eyes of those who covet them. But there is one thing above all that is in demand on every planet, on every world, within every species, and that is music. The Moody Blues? I know of worlds where men would kill just to hear that sound but once. There are planets where the beat of your boogie-woogie would sweep every land, every people. Your symphonies. Rock music. Operas. Chants and choirs and choruses."

Arbok took a deep breath. "In all the galaxy, in all the worlds I have known, there are no riches, no wonders, greater than we have in the cargo bays of this vessel."

Jake stared at Arbok. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Do you remember, Jake, when I asked you to have shipments of boxes and cartons, many, many dozens of them, shipped from the Japanese to this ship? Right here, loaded aboard FrarskP"

"Yes, I do, but-"

"That was music, Jake. Tapes, discs, records; recordings of every kind. The sheet music, all kinds of it and most of it

reduced to the form that our computer has been storing all this time. We have the players, the speakers, we are building a computer for just that music. It will study every world where we go, analyze its atmosphere, its gases, its pressure, and it will immediately modify the great, powerful speaker systems we are building for this ship."

He threw out both arms. "We, my friends, are to become the first Music Merchants the galaxy has ever known, and we shall grow famous and mighty as we bring such wonder to countless worlds!"

"Holy Jesus, he really believes all this," Jake said softly.

Arbok laughed and delivered a tremendous slam to Jake's shoulder.

"You bet your sweet ass I do!"

"They don't realize how much of a risk we may be taking, Jake. We've got to be sure the computer's rebuilt those five-dimensional matrix charts of the inner galactic worlds. I'd hate to come out on the edge of a star when we make the

jump."

Jake shrugged. "No guts, no glory."

"You are both a simple and a complex being, Jake."

"You ain't no rose, either, chum," Jake told Arbok.

"I'm glad we have many years ahead of us. It will likely take me all of them to understand your speech."

"Well never be bored then, will we?"

"All right. Let's set the coordinates for the first jump."

"Hit it, man."

"Where are we, Jake?" Alison snuggled tightly within Jake's arms. "I mean, we can't see anything out there. No stars, no moons. Just . . . that crazy grey that twists your eyes." She shuddered. "It makes me feel like something's behind my eyeballs and scratching to get out."

"Jesus. Another poet."

"Don't make fun of me, Jake. Please."

"Okay, okay."

"Can you tell me where we're going?"

He gestured idly. "Everywhere, nowhere. Out there. Here. Somewhere. Somewhen. I can't tell you more than that, but

it's going to be one hell of a ride." He grinned. "Me; a music merchant! Ain't that a hell of a gas?"

"I guess so." She seemed suddenly withdrawn.

"You guess so? What the hell does that mean?"

She tried to fit deeper into his arms. He stopped his attempts at light humor. "Hey, you're scared, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Of where we're going?"

"No. No; it's not that. The future doesn't frighten me. We should have been killed, back on Earth, I mean, a dozen times. It's as if we were meant to be alive, here and now. The future doesn't frighten me, Jake. It's not having a future that scares me."

"What frightens you, then?"

She bit her lip, not wanting to talk, turning her head away.

"Oh, hell, Alison, we can't start off on a trip halfway across the galaxy and not be able to talk to one another!"

"It's ... I mean, well-"

"Spit it out, girl."

"It's Arbok."

"What about him?"

"He scares me." She shuddered anew. "In fact, he scares the hell out of me." Her eyes showed pleading.

"Jake, every time I think of, I remember that horrible scene in the prison, when they were eating that man while he was still alive, tearing that human flesh with those teeth . . . ugh; horrible, horrible, horrible!" She shook her head. "I've had such nightmares about that. And now, now I'm trapped, yes, trapped, daninit, in an alien spaceship with an alien creature, and I know he's your friend, but he's still an alien who eats . . . living things . . . people," her voice trailed off, barely audible.

"Living people," she forced out, her eyes showing an inner torment. "Like me."

He stared at her, not speaking.

"For God's sake, say something to me!" she shouted.

"Well, there isn't a hell of a lot to say-"

"Say anything, you son of a bitch!"

"It's going to be a long trip."

"Ill kill you, Jake Marden. So help me, I'll-you know that's not what I mean!"

HQS

"You're worried about ending up as dinner. Is that plain enough?" He was almost smirking.

"You bastard! You know it is." She grabbed him. "Jake, I am really frightened!"

He drew her close and kissed her forehead gently. He might as well have kissed a wildcat. She fought him off with nails and punches. "You rotten . . . how can you just ignore what I'm saying when you know how scared I really am-"

"Not to worry, pet."

"You're crazy! You're ignoring everything I say!"

"No, I'm not. It's just not to worry, love. We're going to have a marvelous time, visit a thousand worlds, be the Johnny Appleseeds of the whole damned galaxy, lighten up worlds where they've never really heard music, make them listen to the beat, beat, beat of the tom-toms-"

"You rotten son of a bitch!" Her eyes blazed at him.

"Why? I said not to worry, didn't I?"

"How can you say that?" she screamed.

"I thought you knew."

"I'll kill you! Know what?"

He was amazed and he showed it. "You mean you really don't know? Didn't Michiko even tell you?"

She screamed again out of pure frustration.

He thought of Arbok and he laughed deeply and quietly.

She fought for self-control. "What in the name of God can be so funny?"

"Arbok. And you," he said.

The silence hung between them in a long, pregnant pause.

Jake sighed. "I suppose you want me to tell you, then."

"Yes. Or I'll kill you, Jake Marden. Tell me."

"Like I said, not to worry."

He laughed again.

"Arbok's a vegetarian."

Biography

Insert here the Author's Biography

Insert Here your Cover Page Image

Prison Ship

Martin Caidin
