

Berserker Man

Fred Saberhagen



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For more information about Fred Saberhagen
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Brother Assassin

PART ONE

Lieutenant Derron Odegard leaned back in his contour chair for just long enough to wipe his somewhat sweaty palms on the legs of his easy-fitting duty uniform, and to shift minutely the position of the padded headset on his skull. He performed these nervous actions without taking his eyes from the tangled green pattern on the wide, slightly curved viewscreen before him; then he leaned forward again and resumed his hunt for the enemy.

After only half an hour on watch he was already bone-tired, feeling the weight of every one of his planet's forty million surviving inhabitants resting crushingly on the back of his neck. He didn't want to bear the burden of responsibility for any of those lives, but at the moment there was nowhere to set it down. Being an officer and a sentry gained a man a bit of material comfort and allowed him a bit less regimentation when he went off duty—but let a sentry make one gross mistake on the job, and the entire surviving population of the planet Sirgol could be tumbled into nothingness, knocked out of real-time and killed, ended so completely that they would never have existed at all.

Derron's hands rested easily and lightly on the molded controls of his console; there was a good deal of skill, though nothing like love, in his touch. Before him on the screen, the green, tangled cathode traces shifted at his will, like tall grasses pushed aside by the hands of a cautious hunter. This symbolic grass through which he searched represented the interwoven lifelines of all the animals and plants that

flourished, or had flourished, upon a certain few square miles of Sirgol's land surface, during a few decades of time, some twenty thousand years deep in the prehistoric past.

Surrounding Derron Odegard's chair and console were those of other sentries, a thousand units all aligned in long, subtly curving rows. Their arrangement pleased and rested the momentarily lifted eye, then led the gaze back to the viewscreen where it belonged. Concentration was further encouraged by the gentle modulations that sometimes passed like drifting clouds across the artificial light, which flowed from the strongly vaulted ceiling of this buried chamber, and by the insistent psych-music that came murmuring in and out of headsets, airy melodies now and then supported on an elemental, heavy beat. In this chamber buried below many miles of rock, the air was fresh with drifting breezes, scented convincingly with the tang of the sea or the smell of green fields, with various reminiscences of the living soil and water that the berserkers' bombardment had wiped away, months ago, from Sirgol's surface.

Again, the traces representing interconnected life rippled on Derron's viewscreen as he touched the controls. In the remote past, the infraelectronic spy devices connected to his screen were moving at his command. They did not stir the branches nor startle the fauna in the ancient forests they surveyed. Instead they hovered just outside reality, not interfering, avoiding most of the nets of paradox spread by reality for man or machine that traveled in time. The spy devices lurked just around the local curves of probability from real-time, able to sense even from that position the lines of powerful organization of matter that were life.

Derron knew that his assigned sector, nearly twenty thousand years back, was somewhere near the time of the First Men's coming to Sirgol, but he had not yet seen the trace, unmistakably powerful, of a human lifeline there. He was not looking for humans especially. What mattered was that neither he nor any other sentry had yet observed the splash of disruptive change that would mean a berserker attack; the gigantic machines besieging the planet in present-time had perhaps not yet discovered that it was possible here to invade the past.

Like a good sentry in any army, Derron avoided letting his own moves become predictable as he walked his post. From his seat in remote physical comfort and relative physical safety, he monitored the signals of one spy device after another, ranging now a decade farther into the past, then five miles north; next two years uptime, then a dozen miles southwest. Still no alien predator's passage showed in the lush symbolic grass that grew on Derron's screen. The enemy he sought had no lifeline of its own, and would be visible only by the death and disruption that it broadcast.

"Nothing yet," said Derron curtly, without turning, when he felt his supervisor's presence at his elbow. The supervisor, a captain, remained looking on for a moment and then without comment walked quietly on down the narrow aisle. Still without lifting his eyes from his screen, Derron frowned. It irritated him to realize that he had forgotten the captain's name. Well, this was only the captain's second day on the job, and the captain, or Derron, or both of them, might be transferred to some other duty tomorrow. The Time Operations Section of Sirgol's Planetary Defense Forces was organizationally fluid, to put it mildly. Only a few months ago had the defenders realized that the siege might be extended into time warfare. This sentry room, and the rest of Time Operations, had been really functional for only about a month, and it had yet to handle a real fight. Luckily, the techniques of time warfare were almost certainly entirely new to the enemy also; nowhere else but around the planet Sirgol was time travel known to be possible.

Before Derron Odegard had managed to recall his captain's name, the first battle fought by Time Operations had begun. For Derron it began very simply and undramatically, with the calm voice of one of the communications girls flowing into his earphones to announce that the berserker space fleet had launched toward the planet several devices that did not behave like ordinary missiles. As these weapons fell toward the planet's surface they vanished from direct observation; the sentry screens soon discovered

them in probability-space, falling into the planet's past.

There were five or six objects—the number was soon confirmed as six—dropping eight thousand years down, ten thousand, twelve. The sentries watching over the affected sectors were alerted one after another. But the enemy seemed to understand that his passage was being closely followed. Only when the six devices had passed the twenty-one-thousand-year level, when their depth in the abyss of time had made observation from the present practically impossible, did they stop. Somewhere.

"Attention, all sentries," said a familiar, drawling male voice in Derron's headset. "This is the Time Operations commander, to let you all know as much as I do about what's going on. Looks like they're setting up a staging area for themselves down there, about minus twenty-one thousand. They can shoot stuff uptime at us from there, and we probably won't be able to spot it until it breaks into real-time on us, and maybe not until it starts killing."

The psych-music came back. A few minutes passed before the calm voice of a communications girl spoke to Derron individually, relaying orders for him to shift his pattern of search, telling him in which dimensions and by how much to change his sector. The sentries would be shifting all along the line, which meant that an enemy penetration into real-time was suspected. Observers would be concentrating near the area of the invasion while still maintaining a certain amount of coverage everywhere else. The first enemy attack might be only a diversion.

These days, when an enemy missile dug near the shelters, Derron rarely bothered to take cover, never felt anything worse than the remotest and vaguest sort of fear; it was the same for him now, knowing that battle was joined, or about to be. His eye and hand remained as steady as if he knew this was only one more routine training exercise. There were advantages in not caring very much whether death came now or later.

Still he could not escape the hateful weight of responsibility, and the minutes of the watch dragged more slowly now than ever. Twice more the imperturbable girl-voice changed Derron's search sector. Then the Time Ops commander came back on to confirm officially that an attack was launched.

"Now keep your eyes open, boys," said the drawling voice to all the sentries, "and find me that keyhole."

At some time deeper than twenty thousand years in the past, at some place as yet undetermined, the keyhole must exist—an opening from probability-space into real-time, created by the invasion of the six berserker devices.

Had men's eyes been able to watch their arrival directly, they would have seen the killing machines, looking like six stub-winged aircraft, materialize apparently from nowhere in a spot high in Sirgol's atmosphere. Like precision fliers, the machines exploded at once out of the compact formation in which they had appeared to scatter in six separate directions at multisonic speed.

And, as they separated, the six immediately began seeding the helpless world below them with poison. Radioactives, antibiotic chemicals . . . it was hard to tell from a distance of twenty thousand years just what they were using. Like the other sentries, Derron Odegard saw the attack only by its effects. He perceived it as a diminution in the probability of existence of all the life in his sector, a rising tide of moribundity beginning in one corner of that sector and washing slowly over the rest.

The six machines were poisoning the whole planet. If the First Men were on the surface at the time of this attack, it would of course kill them; if they landed later they would wander baby-helpless to their deaths in a foodless, sterile world. And, if that happened, the descendants in present-time of the First

Men, the entire surviving population, would cease to exist. The planet and the system would be the berserkers' for the taking.

The rising odds on world death spread up through prehistory and history. In each living cell on the planet the dark tide of nonexistence rose, a malignant change visible on every sentry screen.

The many observed vectors of that change were plotted by men and computers working together in Time Operations' nerve center. They had a wealth of data to work with; perhaps no more than twenty minutes of present-time had passed from the start of the attack until the computers announced that the keyhole of the six enemy flying machines had been pinpointed.

In the deeper catacomb called Operations Stage Two, the defensive missiles waited in stacks, their blunt simple shapes surrounded by complexities of control and launching mechanism. At the command of Operations' computers and their human overseers, steel arms extended a missile sideways from its rack, while on the dark stone floor beneath it there appeared a silvery circle, shimmering like a pool of troubled liquid.

The arms released the missile, and in the first instant of falling it disappeared. While one set of forces propelled it into the past, another sent it as a probability-wave up through the miles of rock, to the surface of the planet and beyond, into the stratosphere, straight for the keyhole through which the six devices of the enemy had entered real-time.

Derron saw the ominous changes that had been creeping across his screen begin suddenly to reverse themselves. It looked like a trick, like a film run backward, like some stunt without relevance to the real world.

"Right in the keyhole!" yelled the Time Ops commander's voice, drawling no longer. The six berserker devices now shared their point of entry into real-time with an atomic explosion, neatly tailored to fit.

As every screen showed the waves of death receding, jubilation spread in murmurous waves of its own, up and down the long curved ranks of sentry posts. But caution and discipline combined to keep the rejoicing muted. The remainder of the six-hour shift passed in the manner of a training exercise, in which all the's were properly dotted and the's crossed, the tactical success made certain by observations and tests. But beneath the discipline and caution the jubilation quietly persisted. Men who were relieved on schedule for their breaks passed one another smiling and winking. Derron smiled like everyone else when someone met his eye. To go along, to show the expected reaction, was socially the easiest course. And he did feel a certain pride in having done a good job.

When the shift ended without any further sign of enemy action, it was certain that the berserkers' first venture into time warfare had been beaten back into nonexistence.

But the damned machines would come back, as they always did, thought Derron. Stiff and sweaty and mentally tired, not bothering to smile this time, he rose from his chair with a sigh of relief to make room for the sentry on the next shift.

"I guess you people did all right today," said the replacement, a touch of envy in his voice.

Derron managed one more smile. "You can have the next chance for glory." He pressed his thumbprint into the appropriate place on the console's scanner, as the other man did the same. Then, officially relieved, he walked at a dragging pace out of the sentry room, joining the stream of other members of his shift. Here and there another face appeared as grim and tired as he knew his own must look. But once

they had passed through the doors that marked the area of enforced quiet, most of the men formed excited groups and started to whoop it up a little.

Derron stood in line to turn in his recording cartridge with its record of his shift activity. Then he stood in another line, to make a short oral report to one of the debriefing officers. And after that he was free. As if, he thought, freedom had any meaning these days for a citizen of Sirgol.

A huge passenger elevator, one of a string that worked like buckets on an endless belt, lifted him amid a crowd of others out of the deeper caves of Operations to the housing level of the buried world-city. At this depth there were still miles of rock overhead.

The ideal physical environment of the sentry room was not to be found on Housing Level or at any other place where maximum human efficiency was not considered essential at all times. Throughout most of Housing Level the air tended to be stale at best, and at worst it was burdened with unpleasant odors. The lighting along most of the gray street-corridors was no better than it had to be. In most public places decoration was limited to the ubiquitous signs and posters, which, in the name of the government, exhorted the people to greater efforts for victory or promised them that improvements in living conditions were on the way. Here and there, such improvements were slowly being made. From month to month, the air became a little fresher, the food a little more varied and tastier. Given the practically limitless power of hydrogen fusion to labor for them upon the mineral wealth of the surrounding rock, it seemed that the besieged planet garrison might sustain themselves indefinitely, in gradually increasing comfort.

The corridor in which Derron now walked was one of the main thoroughfares of the buried world-city. His bachelor officer's cubicle was one of the housing units that, along with shops and offices, lined its sides. The corridor was two stories high and as wide as an ordinary main street in some ordinary minor city of the late lamented surface world. Down its center were laid moving belts, ridden in either direction by people who had to go farther than they could conveniently walk. Derron could see pairs of white-uniformed police rushing past on the belts now, checking the dog tags of travelers. Planetary Command was evidently cracking down on work-evaders.

As usual, the broad statwalks on either side of the moving strips were moderately crowded with an assortment of people. Men and women in work uniforms monotonously alike were going to their jobs or leaving them, at a pace neither hurried nor slow. Only a group of children just set free from some schoolroom were displaying any excess of energy. A very few adults and young people, off duty, strolled the walks or stood in line before the stores and places of amusement. Those businesses still under some semblance of private management seemed on the average to do a brisker trade than those wholly operated by the government.

One of the shorter queues of customers was the one before the local branch of the Homestead Office. Like the other small offices and shops, it was an area partitioned off by wire and glass to one side of the wide corridor. Standing in front of the Homestead Office on the statwalk, Derron looked in at the lethargic clerks, at the display of curling posters and somehow shabby models. The displays depicted, in colors meant to glow impressively, a number of plans for the postwar rehabilitation of the planet's surface.

APPLYNOWFOR THE LANDYOUWANT!

Of land there was no shortage. Substances breathable and drinkable, however, might be hard to find. But the Homestead assumption was that someday—after victory, of course—there would be a good new life for all on the surface, a life nourished and protected by the new oceans of air and water that were to be somehow squeezed from the planet's deep rock or, if need be, brought in from the giant outer planets of the Sirgol system.

To judge by their uniform insignia, the people standing in the short line before the Homestead office were of all classifications and ranks. But at the moment they were all displaying what an earlier age might have called a peasant patience. With eyes that hoped and wanted to believe, they fed their gaze on the models and the posters. Derron had stopped on the statwalk mainly to look at these people standing in line. All of them had somehow managed to forget, if indeed they had ever allowed themselves to grasp the fact, that the world was dead. The real world, the one that mattered, had been killed and cremated, along with nine out of ten of the people who had made it live.

Not that the nine out of ten, the statistics, really mattered to Derron. Or, he thought, to anyone else. It was always only the individual who mattered. . . .

A familiar face, a beloved face, came into Derron's thoughts, and he pushed it wearily away and turned from the believers who were waiting in line for a chance to strengthen their belief.

He began to walk toward his cubicle once more; but when he came to a place where the corridor branched, he turned on impulse to follow the narrow side passage. It was like an alley, dark and with few doors or windows; but a hundred paces ahead it ended in an arch that framed the living green of real treetops. At this time of day there would not be many people in the park.

He had not taken many steps down the side corridor before he felt the tremor of an explosion come racing through the living rock surrounding him. Ahead, he saw two small red birds streak in alarm across the green of the trees. He kept on walking without hesitating or breaking stride, and had taken three more paces before the sound came, dull and muffled but heavy. It must have been a small missile penetration, fairly close by. From the besieging fleet in space the enemy threw down probability-waves that sometimes got through the defenses and the miles of shielding rock and then turned into missiles and so into explosions in the vicinity of the buried shelters.

Unhurriedly, Derron continued walking to the end of the passage. There he halted, leaning with both hands on a protective railing of natural logs while he looked out over the dozen acres of park from a little balcony two levels above the grass. From the dome of "sky" six levels higher yet, an artificial sun shone down almost convincingly on grass and trees and shrubbery and on the varicolored birds in their invisible cage of curtain-jets of air. Across the park there tumbled a narrow stream of free fresh water; today its level had fallen so that the concrete sides of its bed were revealed halfway down.

A year ago—a lifetime ago—when the real world had been still alive, Derron Odegard had not been one to spend much time in the appreciation of nature. Oh, a hike now and then in the fresh air. But he had been concentrating on finishing his schooling and in settling down to the labors of the professional historian. He had centered his life in texts and films and tapes and in the usual academic schemes for academic advancement. Even his hikes and holidays had taken him to places of historic significance. . . . With an effort that had become reflex, he forced the image of the girl he had loved once more from his thoughts.

A year ago, a historian's career had been a prospect filled with excitement, made electric by the first hints from the physicists that the quirks of Sirgol's unique space-time might prove susceptible to manipulation, that humanity on Sirgol might be granted a first-hand look at much of its own past. Only a

year ago, the berserker war had seemed remote; a terrible thing, of course, but afflicting only other worlds, light-years away. Decades had passed since the Earthmen had brought warning, and Sirgol's planetary defenses had been decades in the building, a routine part of life's background for a young man finishing his schooling.

It occurred to Derron now, as a trivial truism, that in the past year he had learned more about history than he had in all the years of study that had gone before. Not that it was doing him any good. He thought now that when the last moment of history came on Sirgol, if he could know that it was the last, he would try to get away to one of these little parks with a small bottle of wine he had been saving. He would finish history by drinking whatever number of toasts history allowed, to whatever dead and dying things seemed to him most worthy of mourning.

The tension of the day's watch was just beginning to drain from his fingers into the hand-worn bark of the railing, and he had actually forgotten the recent explosion, when the first of the wounded came stumbling into the park below.

The man came out of a narrow, grass-level entrance, his uniform jacket gone and the rest of his clothing torn and blackened. One of his bared arms was burnt and raw and swollen. He walked quickly, half blindly, among the trees, and then like an actor in some wilderness drama fell full length at the edge of the artificial brook and drank from it ravenously.

Next from the same entrance came another man, older, more sedentary in appearance. Probably some kind of clerk or administrator, though at the distance Derron could not make out his insignia. This man was not visibly wounded, but he moved into the park as if he were lost. Now and then he raised his hands to his ears; he might be deaf, or just wondering if his head was still there.

A pudgy woman entered, moaning in bewilderment, using first one hand and then the other to hold the flap of her torn scalp in place. After her another woman. A steady trickle of the suffering and maimed was flowing from the little entrance at grass level, spilling into the false peace of the park and defiling it with the swelling chorus of their querulous voices.

From somewhere down the passages were heard authoritarian yells, and then the whine and rumble of heavy machinery. Damage Control was on the job promptly, for rescue and emergency repair. The walking wounded were obviously being sent to the park to get them out from under foot while more urgent matters were handled. By now there were a couple of dozen sufferers wandering over the grass or lying on it, their groans demanding of the trees why the missile had gotten through today, why it had had to come to them.

Among the wounded there walked a slender girl of eighteen or twenty, clad in the remnants of a simple paper uniform dress. She stopped, leaning against a tree as if she could walk no farther. The way her dress was torn . . .

Derron turned away from the railing, squeezing his eyes shut in a spasm of self-disgust. He had suddenly seen himself, standing here like some ancient tyrant remotely entertained by others' pain, condescending to lust with a critical eye. One of these days, and soon, he would have to decide whether he was really still on the side of the human race or not.

There was a stairway handy, and he hurried down to the ground level of the park. The badly burned man was bathing his raw arm in the cool running water, and others were drinking. No one seemed to have stopped breathing or to be bleeding to death. The girl looked as if she might fall away from her supporting tree at any moment.

Pulling off his jacket as he went to her, Derron wrapped her in the garment and eased her away from the tree. "Where are you hurt?"

She shook her head and said something incoherent. Her face was pale enough for her to be in shock; he tried to get her to sit down. She would not, and so the two of them did a little off-balance dance while he held her up. She was a tall, slim girl, and under normal conditions she would be lovely . . . no, not lovely, or anyway not pretty in the ordinary way. But good to look at, certainly. Her hair, like most women's these days, was cut in the short simple style promoted by the government. She was wearing no jewelry or make-up at all, which was a bit unusual.

She soon came out of her daze enough to look down with bewilderment at the jacket that had been wrapped around her. "You're an officer," she said in a low blurry voice, her eyes focusing on the collar insignia.

"In a very small way. Now, hadn't you better lie down somewhere?"

"No. . . . I've been trying to get home . . . or somewhere. Can't you tell me where I am? What's going on?" Hervoise was rising.

"I believe there was a missile strike. Here now, this insignia of mine is supposed to be a help with the girls, so sit down at least, won't you?"

She resisted, and they danced a few more steps. "No. First I have to find out . . . I don't know who I am—or where, or why!"

"I don't know those things about myself." That was the most honest communication he had spoken to anyone in a considerable time. More people, passers-by and medics, were running into the park now, adding to the general confusion as they tried to help the wounded. Becoming gradually more aware of her surroundings, the girl looked wildly around at all this activity and clung to Derron's arm.

"All right, young lady, since you seem determined to walk, I'm going to take you to the hospital. There's one not far from here, just down the elevator. Come along."

The girl was willing enough to walk beside him, holding his arm. "What's your name?" he asked her as they boarded the elevator. The other people aboard stared at the dazed girl wearing his jacket.

"I . . . don't know!" Finding her name gone, she became really frightened. Her hand went to her throat, but no dog tag depended there. Many people didn't like to wear them and disregarded the regulation requiring it. "Where are you taking me?"

"I told you, to a hospital. You need some looking after." He would have liked to give a wilder answer, for their staring fellow passengers' benefit.

Down at Operations Level, he led the girl off the elevator. A few more steps brought them to an emergency entrance to the hospital complex. Other casualties from the explosion, stretcher cases, were arriving now, and the emergency room was crowded. An elderly nurse started to take Derron's jacket off the girl, and what was left of her own clothing peeled away with it. The girl squealed faintly, and the nurse rewrapped her with a brisk motion. "You just come back for this jacket tomorrow, young man."

"Gladly." And then the pressure of stretcher bearers and other busy people around him was so great that

he could do no more than wave goodbye to the girl as he was forced slowly out into the corridor. He disentangled himself from the crowd and walked away smiling, almost laughing to himself about the nurse and the jacket, as if it had been a great joke. It was a while since he had had a thought that seemed worth smiling at.

He was still smiling faintly as he ducked into the Time Operations complex to pick up the spare jacket that he kept in his locker in the sentries' ready room. There was nothing new on the bulletin board. He thought, not for the first time, of applying for a transfer, to some job that didn't require sitting still for six hours of deadly strain a day. But it seemed that those who didn't apply were just about as likely to be transferred as those who did.

Naturally, the girl's husband or lover would probably show up before tomorrow to claim her. Of course—a girl like that. Well, he would hope someone showed up for her—a sister or a brother, perhaps.

He went into the nearby officers' gym and got into a handball game with his old classmate Chan Amling, who was now a captain in Historical Research Section. Amling was not one to play without betting, and Derron won an ersatz soft drink, which he preferred not to collect. The talk in the gym was mostly about Time Operations' first victory; when someone brought up the subject of the missile strike, Derron said no more than that he had seen some of the wounded.

After showering, Derron and Amling and a couple of others went to a bar on Housing Level that Amling favored. Major Lukas, the chief historical psychologist in Time Operations, was established there in a booth, holding forth on the psychic and other attributes of some new girls at a local uplevel dive called the Red Garter. There were some areas in which private enterprise still flourished with a minimum of governmental interference.

Amling bet with the others on darts, on dice, and on something having to do with the Red Garter girls. Derron wasn't listening too closely, though for a change he was smiling and joking a little. He had one drink, his usual maximum, and relaxed for a while amid the social noise.

In the local officers' mess he ate his dinner with a better appetite than usual. When at last he reached his cubicle, he kicked off his shoes and stretched out on his cot and for once was sound asleep before he could even consider taking a pill.

* * *

After coming stiffly awake in the middle of the night, then getting undressed and going properly to bed, he still awoke somewhat ahead of schedule and feeling well rested. The little clock on his cubicle wall read oh-six-thirty hours, Planetwide Emergency Time. This morning none of the aspects of Time weighed on him very heavily. Certainly, he thought, he had enough of that mysterious dimension at his disposal to let him stop at the hospital for a while before going on duty.

Carrying yesterday's jacket over his arm, he followed a nurse's directions and found the girl seated in a patients' lounge, which at this time of the morning she had pretty much to herself. She was planted directly in front of the television, frowning with naive-looking concentration at Channel Gung-Ho, as the government's exhortation channel was popularly termed. Today the girl was wearing a plain new paper dress and hospital slippers.

At the sound of Derron's step she turned her head quickly, then smiled and got to her feet. "Oh, it's you! It's a good feeling to recognize someone."

Derron took the hand she was holding out. "It's a good feeling to be recognized. You're looking much better."

She thanked Derron for his help, and he protested that it had been nothing. She turned off the television sound and they sat down to talk. He introduced himself.

Her smile vanished. "I wish I could tell you my name."

"I know, I talked with the nurse. . . . They say your amnesia is persisting, but outside of that you're doing fine."

"Yes, I feel fine except for that one little detail. I guess I wasn't physically hurt at all. And I have a new name, of sorts. Lisa Gray. For the sake of their hospital records they had to tag me with something, next off some list they keep handy. Evidently a fair number of people go blank in the upper story these days and have to be renamed. And they say so many records, fingerprints and things, were lost when the surface was evacuated."

"Lisa's a nice name. I think it suits you."

"Thank you, sir." She managed to sound almost carefree for a moment.

Derron considered. "You know, I've heard that being in the path of a missile, being run over by the probability-wave before it materializes, can cause amnesia. It's a little like being dropped into the deep past. Sort of wipes the slate clean."

The girl nodded. "Yes, the doctors think that's what happened to me yesterday. They tell me that when the missile hit I was with a group of people being brought down from an upper level that's being evacuated. I suppose if I had any next of kin with me, they were blown to pieces along with our records. Nobody's come looking for me."

It was a story common enough on Sirgol to be boring, but this time Derron could feel the pain in it. In sympathy he changed the subject. "Have you had your breakfast yet?"

"Yes. There's a little automat right here if you want something. Maybe I could use some more fruit juice."

In a minute Derron was back, carrying one paper cup of the orange-colored liquid called fruit juice, one cup of tea, and a couple of the standard sweet rolls. Lisa was again studying the television version of the war; the commentator's stentorian voice was still tuned mercifully low.

Derron laid out his cargo on a low table and pulled his own chair closer. Glancing at Lisa's puzzled expression, he asked, "Do you remember much about the war?"

"Almost nothing. . . . I guess that part of my memory really was wiped clean. What are these berserkers? I know they're something terrible, but . . ."

"Well, they're machines." Derron sipped his tea. "Some of them are bigger than any spaceships that we or any other Earth-descended men have ever built. Others come in different shapes and sizes, but all of them are deadly. The first of them were constructed ages ago, by some race we've never met, to fight in some war we've never heard of."

"They were programmed to destroy life anywhere they could find it, and they've come only the Holy One knows how far, doing just that." Derron had begun in a conversational tone, and his voice was still quiet, but now the words seemed to be welling up from an inexhaustible spring of bitterness. "Sometimes men have beaten them in battle, but some of them have always survived. The survivors hide out on unexplored rocks, around some dark star, and they build more of their kind, with improvements. And then they come back. They just go on and on, like death itself. . . ."

"No," said Lisa, unwilling to have it so.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to start raving. Not so early in the morning, anyway." He smiled faintly. He supposed he had no reasonable excuse for unloading the weight of his soul onto this girl. But once things started pouring out . . . "We on Sirgol were alive, and so the berserkers had to kill us. But since they're only machines, why, it's all only an accident, sort of a cosmic joke. An act of the Holy One, as people used to put it. We have no one to take revenge on." His throat felt tight; he swallowed the rest of his tea and pushed the cup away.

Lisa asked, "Won't men come from other planets to help us?"

He sighed. "Some of them are fighting berserkers near their own systems. A really big relief fleet would have to be put together to do us any good—while, of course, politics must still be played among the stars as usual. Oh, I suppose help will be sent eventually."

The television commentator was droning on aggressively about men's brilliant defensive victories on the moon, while an appropriate videotape was being shown. The chief satellite of Sirgol was said to much resemble the moon of Earth; long before either men or berserkers had existed, its round face had been pocked by impact craters into an awed expression. But during the last year, the face of Sirgol's moon had vanished under a rash of new impacts, along with practically all of the human defenders there.

"I think help will come to us in time," said Lisa.

In time for what? Derron wondered. "I suppose so," he said, and felt that he was lying.

Now the television was presenting a scene on Sirgol's dayside. Under a sky of savage blue—a little atmosphere was left—cracked mud flats stretched away to a leveled horizon. Nothing lived. Nothing moved but a few thin whirlwinds of yellow-gray dust. Rising gleaming from the dried mud in the middle distance were the bright steel bones of some invading berserker device, smashed and twisted last tenday or last month by some awesome energy of defense. Another victory for the droning voice to try to magnify.

Lisa turned away from the desolate display. "I have a few memories left—of beautiful things on the surface. Not like that."

"Yes. There were some beautiful things."

"Tell me."

"Well." He smiled faintly. "Do you prefer to hear about man's marvelous creations, or the wonders of nature?"

"Things men made, I suppose. . . . Oh, I don't know. Man is a part of nature, isn't he? And so the things he makes are, too, in a way."

There rose before his mind's eye the image of a cathedral temple towering on a hill, and a sunburst of stained glass . . . but that would not bear remembering. He said, "I don't know if we can be considered a part of nature on this planet or not. You remember how peculiar the space-time around Sirgol is?"

"You mean about the First Men coming here—but I don't think I ever really understood the scientific explanation. Tell me."

"Well." Derron assumed some of the professional historian's manner, which he had never had much chance to display. "Our sun looks much like any other G-type star that has an Earth-type planet. But in our case appearances are deceiving. Oh, in ordinary human life, time is the same as elsewhere. And interstellar ships that travel faster than light can enter and leave our system—if they take precautions.

"The first starship to arrive here was an explorer from Earth. Her crew, of course, had no way of knowing about our tricky space-time. While approaching an uninhabited Sirgol, their ship accidentally dropped back through about twenty thousand years—an accident that could have happened nowhere else in the known universe.

"Only on Sirgol is time travel possible, and then only under certain conditions. One of these conditions seems to be that anyone who goes back more than about five hundred years undergoes enough mental devolution to wipe his memory out. That is what happened to the Earthmen on the explorer. Her crew became the First Men—and the First Women, too, of course—of our mythology. After dropping twenty thousand years, they must have had no memories left at all. They must have crawled around like babies after their ship landed itself."

"How could they ever have survived?"

"We don't really know. Instinct—and luck. The grace of God, religious people say. We can't get a look at the First Men, even with spy devices, and fortunately the berserkers can't reach them either. The first humans on the planet, of course, form an evolutionary peduncle, a true new beginning. And as such they tend to be invisible, unfindable from the future, no matter what techniques are employed."

"I thought evolution was just a matter of random mutations, some of which work out and some don't." Lisa nibbled at a sweet roll, listening carefully.

"There's a good deal more than that involved. You see, matter has organizational energies, as well as the more obvious kinds. The movement of all matter through time is toward greater complexity, raising level after level of organization higher and higher above chaos—the human brain supposedly represents one of the peaks, to date, of this process. Or this is the optimistic view most scientists say they hold. . . . It doesn't seem to include the berserkers. Anyway, where was I?"

"The First People had landed."

"Oh, yes. Well, they kept on surviving, somehow, and multiplying. Over thousands of years they built up civilizations from scratch. When the second exploring ship from Earth arrived here, about ten years Earth-time after the first, we had achieved a planetwide government and were just getting started on space travel ourselves. In fact, the second Earth ship was attracted by signals from some of our early interplanetary probes. The crew of the second ship approached more cautiously than the first ship had, realized they were facing a tricky patch of space-time and landed successfully.

"Pretty soon the men from Earth had figured out what had happened to the crew of the first ship and

were saluting us as their descendants. They also brought us warning of the berserkers. Took some of our people to other systems and gave them a glimpse of what the war against the machines was like. Of course, the people of Earth and other worlds were pleased to have four hundred million new allies, and they deluged us with advice on planetary weapons and fortifications, and we spent the next eight years getting ready to defend ourselves. And then about a year ago the berserker fleet came. End of lesson, end of history."

Lisa did not seem dismayed by the end of history. She drank some of the so-called juice as if she liked it. "What do you do now, Derron?"

"Oh, various odd jobs in Time Operations. You see, the berserker offensive in present-time is stalled. They can't pry us out of these deep caves and they can't build themselves a base on the planet, or even hold a beachhead on the surface, while we're here. They've discovered the time travel bit, so of course now they're using it to try and get at us through our past. In their first attack along that line they tried to slaughter everything alive, in true berserker style, but we stopped that rather easily. So their next attempt will probably be more subtle. They'll kill some important individual or do something else to delay some vital step in our history. Perhaps the invention of the wheel or something like that. Then succeeding steps in our development will automatically be delayed. We'd be in the Middle Ages, perhaps, when the second explorer from Earth arrived. No radio signals to guide the Earthmen to us. Or, if they found us anyway, we'd have no technological base and no modern industry to build ourselves defenses. Earth and other planets have enough trouble defending themselves. Therefore we'd be unprotected when the berserkers came. Therefore today no stubborn resistance from the caves—we'd all be either dead or nonexistent; it's a nice philosophical problem which."

"Oh! But you'll be able to stop their time attacks. I'm sure you will!"

Pour out what bitter hopelessness you might, there was nothing left at last to do with this girl but smile at her and wish her well, and Derron found himself smiling, after two or three false starts. Then he glanced at the version of Time he wore on his wrist. "If it all depends on me, I guess I'd better go and start my day's heroic fighting."

* * *

Today the briefing officer for Derron's sentry shift was Colonel Borss, who as usual handled the job with the somber expectancy of a scriptural prophet.

"As we all know, yesterday's defensive action was a tactical success," the colonel admitted to begin with. In the semidarkness of the briefing room, his pointer skipped across the glowing symbols on the huge display he had prepared. Then Derron, seated near the front, could see the colonel smile as he continued. "But, strategically speaking, we must admit that the situation has somewhat deteriorated."

It soon became evident that the cause of the colonel's gloomy smile was the existence of the enemy staging area, still not accurately located but known to be somewhere more than twenty-one thousand years down. "After the enemy has made three more sorties up from there, three more breakthroughs into real-time, we'll have three vectors to trace back, enough to give us a positive fix on his staging area. We'll smash it with a few missiles, and that will kill his entire Time Operations program."

The colonel paused before delivering his punch line, "Of course, we have first to deal with the little problem of repelling three more attacks."

The audience of junior officers dutifully made faint sounds of laughter. Colonel Borss switched his

display screen to show a glowing, treelike shape, which the labels showed to be a type of graph of human history on Sirgol.

He tapped with his pointer far down on the tree's trunk, where it was still a slender shoot growing up out of question marks. "We rather expect that the first of the three attacks will fall here. Somewhere near the First Men."

* * *

Matt, sometimes also called Lion Hunter, felt the afternoon sun warm on his bare shoulders as he turned away from the last familiar landmarks, putting behind him the territory in which he had lived all his twenty-five years.

To get a better view of the land ahead, into which he and the rest of The People were fleeing, he climbed up onto a shoulder-high rock that stood beside the faint game trail they were following. The little band of The People, now no more in number than a man's fingers and toes, went shuffling past Matt at a steady pace, walking in a thin and wide-spaced file. They were of all ages. Such garments as they wore were of bark or leather, and aside from their scanty clothing they had little enough to burden them. On this journey no one was hanging back, no one trying to argue the others into stopping or turning around.

The landscape wavered with the spirits of heat. From atop the rock Matt could see swamps ahead, and barren hills. Nothing very inviting. There might be strange dangers as well as familiar ones in this unfamiliar land, but everyone had agreed in council that nothing they might encounter could be as terrible as that from which they fled—the new beasts, lions with flesh of shiny stone, lions who could not be hurt by the stones or arrows of men, who came killing by day and night, who could kill with only a glance of their fiery eyes.

In the past two days, ten of The People had been slain by the stone-lions. And the survivors had been able to do nothing but hide, hardly daring even to look for puddles from which to drink or to pull up roots to eat.

Slung over Matt's shoulder was the only bow now left to the survivors of The People. The other bows had been burnt up or broken, along with the men who had tried to use them in defense against the stone-lions. Tomorrow, Matt thought, he would try hunting meat in the new country. No one was carrying any food. Some of the young ones wailed now and then with hunger, until the women pinched their noses and mouths to keep them quiet.

The file of The People had passed Matt now. As he ran his eye along the line of familiar backs, he found their number one short. He was frowning as he hopped down from his rock.

A few strides brought him up to those in the rear of the march. "Where is Dart?" he asked. It was not that Matt had any idea of controlling the comings and goings of the members of the band, though he more than anyone else was their leader. It was simply that he wanted to know everything that was going on, with the stone-lions behind them and an unknown land ahead.

Dart was an orphan, but he was now too big to be considered a child any longer, and so none of the other adults were especially concerned.

"He kept saying how hungry he was," a woman said. "And then a little while ago, when you were in the rear, he ran on toward those swampy woods ahead. I suppose looking for food."

* * *

Derron was just buying Lisa some lunch—from the automat in the patients' lounge, since she was still in the hospital under observation—when the public address speakers began to broadcast a list of Time Operations men who were to report for duty at once. He heard his name included.

He scooped up a sandwich to eat as he ran and bade Lisa a hasty goodbye. Quick as he was, most of the group of twenty-four men were already assembled when he reached the room to which they had been summoned. Colonel Borss was pacing back and forth impatiently, discouraging questions.

Soon after Derron's arrival, the last man on the list came in, and the colonel could begin.

"Gentlemen, the first assault has come, just about as predicted. The keyhole has not yet been pinpointed, but it's approximately three hundred years after the most probable time of the First Men.

"As in the previous attack, we are faced with six enemy machines breaking into real-time. But in this case the machines are not fliers, or at least they seem not to be operating in an airborne mode. They are probably anti-personnel devices that move on legs or rollers; certainly they will be invulnerable to any means of self-defense possessed by the Neolithic population.

"We anticipate great difficulty in finding the keyhole, because the destructive changes caused directly by this attack are quantitatively much less than those we saw last time. This time the berserkers are evidently concentrating on some historically important small group or individual. Just who in the invaded area is so important, we don't know yet, but we will. Any questions on what I've said so far?—Then here's Colonel Nilos, to brief you on your part in our planned countermeasures."

Nilos, an earnest young man with a rasping voice, came straight to the point. "You twenty-four men all have high scores in training on the master-slave androids. No one has had any real combat experience with them yet, but you soon will. I'm authorized to tell you that you're relieved of all other duties as of now."

Well, I wanted a transfer, thought Derron, leaning back in his chair with a mental shrug. Around him the reactions ranged from joy to dismay, voiced in muted exclamations. The other men were all noncoms or junior officers like himself, drawn from various sections in Operations. He knew a few of them, but only slightly.

The murmurings of pleasure or distress at the change of duty and the imminence of combat continued as the two dozen men were conducted to a nearby ready room, where they were left to wait idly for some minutes; and as they were taken by elevator down to Operations Stage Three, on the lowest and most heavily defended level yet excavated.

Stage Three, a great echoing cave the size of a large aircraft hangar, was spanned by a catwalk at a good distance above the floor. From this catwalk, looking like spacesuits on puppet strings, were suspended the two dozen master-units that Derron and the other operators were to wear. On the floor below the masters, in a neat corresponding rank, stood their slaves, the metal bodies taller and broader than those of men, so that they dwarfed the technicians who now labored at giving them the final touches of combat readiness.

In small rooms at the side of Stage Three, the operators were given individual briefings, shown maps of the terrain where they were to be dropped, and provided with an outline of the scanty information available on the Neolithic seminomads they were to protect. Then, after a last brief medical check, the

operators dressed in leotards and marched up onto the catwalk.

At this point the word was passed down from high authority to hold everything. For a few moments no one seemed to know the cause of the delay; then a huge screen at one side of the stage lit up, filled by the image of the bald massive head of the Planetary Commander himself.

"Men . . ." boomed the familiar amplified voice. Then there was a pause as the image frowned off-camera. "What's that?" it shouted after a moment. "Operations has them waiting for me? Tell him to get on with the job! I can give pep talks anytime! What does he think—"

The Planetary Commander's voice continued to rise, but then was cut off along with his picture. Derron was left with the impression that Number One still had a lot to say, and, indifferent as Derron was to the progress of his own military career, he was glad it was not being said to him.

The activity in Stage Three promptly got under way again. A pair of technicians came to help Derron into his assigned master-unit, which was a process like climbing down into a heavy diving suit suspended on cables. The master was an enormously awkward thing to wear until the servo power was turned on. Then the thick body and heavy limbs at once became delicately responsive to their wearer's slightest movement.

"Slave power coming on," said a voice in Derron's helmet. And a moment later it seemed to all his senses that he had been transported from the master down into the body of the slave-unit standing beneath it on the floor. As the control of its movements passed over to him, the slave started gradually to lean to one side, and he moved its foot to maintain balance as naturally as he moved his own. Tilting back his head, he could look up through the slave's eyes to see the master-unit, with himself inside, maintaining the same attitude on its complex suspension.

"Form a file for launching," was the next command in his helmet. The slaves' metal feet echoed on the hard floor of the cavernous chamber as the squad of them faced left into line. Human technicians, who seemed suddenly to have shrunk, scurried to get out of the way. At the head of the line of metal men the floor of the stage blossomed out suddenly into a bright mercurial disk.

". . . Four, three, two, one, launch!"

With immense and easy power the line of tall bodies ran toward the circle on the dark floor, disappearing in turn as they reached it. The figure ahead of Derron jumped and vanished. Then he himself, in proxy, leaped out over the silvery spot.

His metal feet came down on grass, and he staggered briefly on uneven ground. He was standing in shadowy daylight in the midst of a leafy forest.

He checked a compass set in the slave's wrist and then moved at once to a place from which he could get a good look at the sun. It was low in the western sky, which indicated that he had missed his planned moment of arrival by some hours—if not by days or months or years. He reported the apparent error at once, subvocalizing to keep the slave's speaker silent.

"Start coursing then, Odegard," said one of the controllers: "We'll try to get a fix on you."

"Understand."

Derron began to walk a spiral path through the woods. While he did this he kept alert for any sign of the

enemy or of the people he had been sent to protect. But the main purpose of this coursing maneuver was to splash up a few waves—to create disturbances in the historical positionings of the plant and animal lifelines about him, disturbances that a skilled sentry some twenty thousand years in the future would hopefully be able to see and pinpoint.

After Derron had walked in a gradually widening spiral for some ten minutes, alarming perhaps a hundred small animals, crushing perhaps a thousand unseen insects underfoot, and bruising uncountable leaves of grass and tree, the impersonal controller's voice spoke again.

"All right, Odegard, we've got you spotted. You're slightly off spatially, but in the right direction to let you catch up with your people. You'll need to do some catching up because you're between four and five hours late. The sun's going down, right?"

"It is."

"All right, then, bear about two hundred degrees from magnetic north. If you walk that course for a quarter of an hour you should be very near your people."

"Understand." Instead of having a chance to scout the area before his people walked through it, he would just be hurrying to catch them before something else caught them. Derron started off at a brisk pace, checking his compass regularly to keep the slave going in a straight line. Ahead of him, the wooded land sloped gradually downward into a swampy area. Beyond the farther edge of swamp, several hundred meters from his present position, there rose low rocky hills.

"Odegard, we're getting indications of another disturbing factor, right there on top of you. Sorry we can't give you a good bearing on it. It's almost certainly one of the berserkers."

"Understand." This kind of work was more to Derron's taste than being immobilized in a sentry's chair; but still the weight of forty million lives was back on his neck again, as deadly as ever.

Some minutes passed. Derron's progress had slowed, for he was having to keep a lookout in all directions while planning a good path for the heavy slave-unit to take through the marshy ground. And then all at once he heard trouble, plain and unmistakable—it sounded like a child screaming in terror.

"Operations, I'm onto something."

The scream came again and again. The slave-unit's hearing was keen and directionally accurate. Derron changed course slightly and began to run, leaping the unit over the softest-looking spots of ground, striving for both speed and silence.

After he had run for half a minute he slid as silently as possible to a halt. A stone's throw ahead of him, he saw a boy of about twelve up in a treetop, clinging tightly to the thin upper trunk with both arms and legs, but still in danger of being shaken down. Every time his yelling ceased for a moment, another sharp tremor would run up the trunk and set him off again. Although the lower part of its trunk was quite thick, the tree was being shaken like a sapling by something concealed in the bushes around its base. There was no animal in this forest with that kind of strength; it would be the berserker machine there in the underbrush, using the boy as bait, hoping that his cries would bring the adults of his group.

Derron stepped slowly forward. But before he could tell on which side of the tree the berserker was hidden, and take aim, it had spotted his slave-unit. Out of the bushes a pinkish laser beam came stabbing, to gouge out a fireworks display from the armor covering the slave's mid-section. Leveling the laser beam

before it like a lance, heaving bushes and saplings out of its way, the berserker charged. Derron caught a glimpse of something metallic and low, four-legged, wide and fast-moving as a ground-car. He snapped open his jaw and pressed down, inside his helmet, on the trigger of his own laser weapon. From the center of the slave's forehead a pale thin shaft of light crackled out, aimed automatically at the spot where Derron's eyes were focused.

The slave-unit's beam smote the charging machine at a point somewhere amid the knobs of metal that made it seem to have a face, then glanced off to explode a small tree into a cloud of flame and steam. The shot might have done damage, for the enemy broke off its rush in midstride and dived for cover behind a hillock, a grass-tufted hump of earth less than five feet high.

Two officers in Operations, both of whom were evidently monitoring the video signal from the slave, began to speak simultaneously, giving Derron orders and advice. But even if they had gone about it more sensibly, he had no time to do anything now except go his own way. Somewhat surprised at his own aggressiveness, he found himself running the slave-unit in a crouch around the tiny hill.

He wanted the fight to be over quickly, one way or the other. He charged at top speed, yelling wordlessly inside his helmet as he fired his laser. The berserker burst into his view, crouched like a metal lion, squat and immensely powerful. If there had been a spare moment in which to hesitate, Derron might have flinched away, for in spite of all his training the illusion was very strong that he was actually about to hurl his own tender flesh upon the waiting monster.

As it was, he had no time to flinch. With all the inertia of its metal mass the slave ran at full speed into the crouching berserker. The trees in the swamp quivered.

A few seconds' experience was enough to convince Derron that the decision to use anthropomorphic fighting machines in this operation had been a great blunder. Wrestling was a tactic not likely to succeed against a machine of equal or superior power, one not limited in the speed of its reactions by the slowness of protoplasmic nerves. For all the slave-unit's fusion-powered strength, which Operations had envisioned as rending the enemy limb from limb, Derron could do no more than hang on desperately, gripping the berserker in a kind of half-nelson while it bucked and twisted like a wild load-beast to throw him off.

Once the fight started it seemed to Derron that every authority in Operations was looking over his shoulder, and that most of them had something to say about it. Voices in Derron's ears shouted orders and abuse at him and at one another. Some of them were probably trying to get the others off his back, but he had no time to hear them anyway. The green forest was spinning round him faster than his eyes and brain could sort it out. In a dizzily detached fraction of a second he could notice how his feet flew uselessly on the ends of his metal legs, breaking down small trees as the monster whirled him. He tried to turn his head to bring the cyclops eye of his laser to bear, but now one of the berserker's forelimbs was gripping the slave's neck, holding the slave's head immobile. He kept trying desperately to get a more solid grip for his own steel arms round the berserker's thick neck, but then his grip was broken, and he flew.

Before the slave could even bounce, the berserker was on top of it, far faster and more violent than any maddened bull. Derron fired his laser wildly. The dizziness of the spinning, and now the panicky sensation of being painlessly trampled and battered, raised in him a giddy urge to laughter. In a moment more the fight would be lost, and he would be able to give up.

The berserker tossed him once again. And then it was running away, fleeing from Derron's wildly slashing sword of light. As lightly as a deer the squat machine leaped away among the trees and vanished

from Derron's sight.

Dizzily he tried to sit up on the peculiar sandy slope where he had been flung. In doing so he at once discovered why the berserker had chosen to retreat; some important part had been broken in the slave, so that its legs now trailed as limp and useless as those of a man with a broken spine. But since the slave's laser still worked and its powerful arms could still do damage, the berserker's computer-brain had decided to break off the fight. The berserker saw no reason to trade zaps with a crippled but still dangerous antagonist, not when it could be busy at its basic program of killing people.

The Operations voices had their final say.

"Odegard, why in the—"

"In the Holy One's name, Odegard, what do you think—"

"Odegard, why didn't you . . . ? Oh, do what you can!"

With a click they were all gone from his helmet, leaving their disgust behind. He had the dazed impression that they were all hurrying away in a jealous group, to descend like a cloud of scavenger birds upon some other victim. If his experience since taking the field was anywhere near typical, the foul-up of the whole operation must be approaching the monumental stage, that stage where avoidance of blame would begin to take precedence in a good many minds.

Anyway, he was still in the field, now with half a unit to work with. His disgust was mainly with himself. Gone now was the wish to get things settled quickly, one way or the other. Even his dread of responsibility was gone, at least for the moment. Right now all he wanted was another chance at the enemy.

Holding the slave propped with its arms into a sitting position, he looked about him. He was halfway down the conical side of a soggy sandpit that was ten or fifteen meters across at the top. Nothing grew inside the pit; outside, the nearby trees were nearly all in bad shape. Those that had escaped being broken in the wrestling match were blackened and smoking from his wildly aimed laser.

What had happened to the boy?

Working his arms like a swimmer, Derron churned his way uphill through the sand to a spot from which he could see over the rim of the pit. He could recognize, a short distance away, the tall tree in which the youngster had been clinging for his life; but he was not in sight now, living or dead.

In a sudden little sand-slide the crippled slave slid once more down the tricky slope toward the watery mess that filled the bottom of the funnel.

Funnel?

Derron at last recognized the place where the slave-unit had been thrown. It was the trap of a poison-digger, a species of large carnivore exterminated on Sirgol in early historical times. Looking down now at the bottom of the pit, Derron met the gaze of two grayish eyes, set in a large lump of head that floated half above the surface of the water.

Matt was standing just behind the boy Dart, while both of them peered very cautiously through the bushes toward the poison-digger's trap. The rest of The People were a few hundred yards away, resting in the concealment of some undergrowth while they scratched up a few roots and grubs to eat.

Matt could just catch glimpses, above the rim of the funnel, of what seemed to be a head. It was certainly not the poison-digger's head, but a shape as bald and smoothly curved as a drop of water.

"I think it is a stone-lion," Matt whispered very softly.

"Ah, no," whispered Dart. "This is the big man I told you about, the stone-man. Ah, what a fight he and the stone-lion had! But I didn't wait to see the end of it; I jumped from the tree and ran while I could."

Matt hesitated, and then decided to risk a closer look. Motioning with his head for Dart to follow, he bent down and crept forward. From behind another bush they could see down into the pit, and Matt was just in time to observe something that made him gasp silently in amazement. Poison-Digger, who could master any creature once it had fallen into his pit, reared up from his slime and struck. And the stone-man simply slapped Digger's nose with casual force, like someone swatting a child. And with a howl like the cry of a punished child, the Bad One splashed down under his water again!

The man of shiny stone muttered to himself. His words were filled with power and feeling, but spoken in a tongue unknown to Matt. He slapped at his legs, which lay twisted as if they were dead, and then with big arms he started trying to dig his way up out of the pit. Stone-Man made the sand fly, and Matt thought he might eventually get himself out, but it looked like a very hard struggle.

"Now do you believe me?" Dart was whispering fiercely. "He did fight the stone-lion, I saw him!"

"Yes, yes, I can believe it." Still crouching and keeping out of sight of the pit, Matt led the young one away, back toward the others of the band. He supposed that a fight between two such beings might have accounted for all the burnt and broken trees that had puzzled him earlier, and for all the noise that The People had heard. Now, while leading Dart away from the pit, Matt looked hopefully among the bushes for a huge shiny corpse. A dead stone-lion was one sight Matt wanted very much to see—it might help blot out another picture that would not leave his mind, the picture of what a stone-lion had done to his two young wives.

Huddling under bushes with the rest of the band, Matt talked things over with the more intelligent adults. "I want to approach this stone-man," he said. "And try to help him."

"Why?"

Finding the words to explain why was not easy. For one thing, Matt was eager to join forces, if he could, with any power that was able to fight against a stone-lion. But there was more to it than that, for this particular stone-man did not look capable of much more fighting.

The others listened to Matt, but kept muttering doubtfully. Finally the oldest woman of The People took from her lizard-skin pouch (in which she also carried the seed of fire) the finger bones of her predecessor in office. Three times she shook the bones, and threw them on the muddy ground, and studied the pattern in which they fell. But she could not see the stone-man in the bones and she could offer no advice.

The more he thought about it, the more determined Matt became. "I'm going to try to help the stone-man. If he does turn out to be hostile, he can't chase us on his dead legs."

* * *

The slave-unit's ears picked up the approach of the whole band of The People, though they were being very quiet.

"I'm getting some company," Derron subvocalized. He got no immediate reply from any of the too many chiefs who had been overseeing him before; and that suited him just as well for the moment.

The People drew near, and the bolder among them peered cautiously from behind bush and tree trunk at the slave-unit. When they saw its head was raised, looking at them, they stepped one at a time out of concealment, showing weaponless hands. Derron imitated the gesture as well as he could; he needed one hand to support the slave in a sitting position.

The People seemed slowly to gain confidence from the slave's peaceful gestures, its quiescence, and probably most of all from its obviously crippled condition. Soon the whole band had come out into the open and stood whispering among themselves as they peered curiously down into the pit.

"Anybody listening?" Derron subvocalized. "I've got a crowd of people here. Get me a linguist!"

Since the start of Time Operations, a desperate effort had been made to learn as many as possible of the languages and dialects of Sirgol's past. Disguised microphones and video pickups had been carried on spy devices to many places and times in the past where there were people to be studied. The program of study had been pushed as hard as possible, but the magnitude of the job was overwhelming. In the modern world there were just two people who had managed to learn something of the speech of these Neolithic seminomads, and those two were very busy people today.

"Odegard!" When response did come, it took the form of a blast in his helmet that made Derron wince. The voice did not identify itself, but sounded like that of Colonel Borss. "Don't let those people get away from you! Even if your unit's crippled, it can offer them some protection."

"Understand." Derron sighed, sub-subvocally. "How about getting me a linguist?"

"We're trying to get you one. You're in a vital area there. . . . Stand guard over those people until we can get another unit to the spot!"

"Understood." Things were tough in the berserker-ridden Neolithic today. But he might, after all, be better off sealed up in his master-unit than out in the foul-up and confusion that must be engulfing the Section.

* * *

"Anyone that size is bound to eat a lot of food," one of the older men was complaining to Matt.

"With his dead legs," Matt answered, "I don't suppose he'll live long enough to eat very much." Matt was trying to talk some of the braver men into giving him a hand in pulling the stone-man up out of the trap. Stone-Man seemed to be waiting with some confidence of getting help.

The man debating against Matt cheerfully switched arguments. "If he's not going to live long, there's no use trying to help him. Anyway, he's not one of The People."

"No, he's not. But still . . ." Matt continued to search for new words, new ways of thought. He would

help the stone-man alone if he had to. By arguing he was trying to make his feelings clear to himself as well as to the others. He saw this strange being who had tried to help Dart as a part of some larger order, one to which The People also belonged; as if there could be a band, a tribe-of-all-men, some group set in opposition to all the wild beasts and demons that killed and afflicted men by day and night.

"Suppose there was a band of stone-people around here," suggested another man. A few of The People looked over their shoulders apprehensively. "They would be dangerous enemies to have, but strong friends."

The suggestion did not strike root; the idea either of friendship or of enmity with other bands did not have much importance in The People's life.

But Dart piped up, "This one wants to be our friend."

The oldest woman scoffed. "So would anyone who was crippled and needed help."

* * *

A girl linguist's voice joined the muted hive that was buzzing anew in Derron's helmet. She provided him with a rather halting translation of part of the debate among The People, though she was ordered away after only a couple of minutes to work with another operator. From Operations voices in the background, Derron overheard that so far two berserkers had been destroyed, but ten slave-units had been lost. And the appearance of the slave-units tended to terrify and scatter the people they were supposed to be protecting.

"Tell them to try pretending they're crippled," Derron advised the Section. "All right, I'll do without a linguist if I have to. That may be better than getting a word or two wrong somewhere. But how about dropping me some of those self-defense weapons to hand out to these people? It'll be too late for that when the berserker comes back." The machine he had fought must have gotten sidetracked following some old trail or pursuing some other band, but he had to assume that it would be back. "And drop me grenades, not arrows. There's only one man in this band who has a bow." Inside the slave's big torso was a chamber into which small items could be sent from the future as required.

"The self-defense weapons are being prepared," someone assured him. "It's dangerous to hand 'em out until they're absolutely needed, though. Suppose they decide to use 'em on the slave? Or blow each other up by mistake?"

"I think it'll be more dangerous to wait too long. You can at least drop them now."

"They're being prepared."

The way things were going today, Derron didn't know whether he could believe that or not.

The People seemed still to be discussing the slave-unit, while he kept it sitting in what he hoped was a patient and trustworthy attitude. According to the brief translation Derron had heard, the tall young man with the bow slung over his shoulder was the one arguing in favor of helping the "stone-man."

At last this man with the bow, who seemed to be the nearest thing to a chief that these people had, succeeded in talking one of the other men into helping him. Together they approached one of the saplings that had been splintered in the fight and twisted it loose from its stump, hacking through the tough strings of bark with a hand ax. Then the two bold men brought the sapling right up to the edge of the

poison-digger's trap. Gripping it by the branches, they pushed the splintered end down to where the slave could grasp it. Derron caught hold with both hands.

The two men pulled, then grunted with surprise at the weight they felt. The boy who had been up in the tree came to help.

"Odegard, this is Colonel Borss," said a helmet-voice in urgent tones. "We can see now what the berserkers' target is: the first written language on the planet originates very near your present location. The deaths so far haven't weakened its probability too much, but one more killing could be the one to push it under the real-time threshold. There's a peduncle effect, of course, and we can't pinpoint the inventor, but the people in your band are certainly among the ancestors of his tribe."

Derron was clinging to the sapling as the slave-unit was dragged out over the edge of the pit. "Thanks for the word, Colonel. How about those grenades I requested?"

"We're rushing two more slave-units into your sector there, Odegard, but we're having some technical troubles with them. Three of the enemy have been destroyed now. . . . Grenades, you say?" There was a brief pause. "They tell me some grenades are coming up." The colonel's voice clicked off.

Their rescue job complete, The People had all fallen back a few steps and were watching the machine carefully. Derron braced himself on one arm and repeated his peaceful gestures with the other. This seemed to reassure his audience about the slave, but they promptly found something else to worry about—the setting sun, which they kept glancing at over their shoulders as they talked to one another. Derron needed no linguist to know that they were concerned about finding some place of relative safety in which to spend the night.

In another minute The People had gathered up their few belongings and were on the march, with the air of folk resuming a practiced activity. The man with the bow spoke several times to the slave-unit and looked disappointed when his words were not understood, but he could not dally. Stone-Man was left free to help himself as best he might.

So Derron trailed along at the end of The People's hiking file. He soon found that on level ground he could keep the slave-unit moving along pretty well on its long arms, walking it like a broken-backed ape on the knuckles of its hands with its legs dragging. The People cast frequent backward glances at this pathetic creature, regarding it with mixed and not altogether favorable emotions. But even more frequently they looked back farther in the direction they had come from, plainly fearful that something else could be on their trail.

If The People were not expecting the berserker machine, Derron was. The slave's leg-dragging track was certainly plain enough, and the sight of it might cause the killing machine to approach with some caution, but it would still come on.

Colonel Borss came back to talk over the situation. "Odegard, our screens show the berserker's area of disturbance moving south away from you and then coming back; evidently you were right about it being on a false trail of some kind. Your berserker is the only one we haven't bagged yet, but it seems to be in the most vital spot. What I think we'll do is this: the two slave-units being sent to reinforce you are going to catch up with your band in a few minutes present-time. We'll have them follow your band's line of march, keeping just out of sight, one on each flank; don't want to scare your people with a lot of metal men and have them scatter—we've had enough of that problem today. When your people stop somewhere for the night, you stay with 'em, and we'll set up the other two units in ambush."

"Understand." Derron kept moving, walking with his arms, the master-unit rising and falling slightly as the slave jolted over the bumpy terrain. A certain amount of feedback was necessary to give the operator the feeling of presence in the past.

The colonel's plan sounded reasonable, as Derron thought it over. And by Derron's interpretation of the law of averages, something should go right pretty soon.

Falling dusk washed the wilderness in a kind of dark beauty. The People were marching with the swampy, half-wooded valley on their right and the low rocky hills now immediately on their left. The man with the bow, whose name seemed to be something like Matt, kept anxiously scanning these hills as he walked at the head of the file.

"What about dropping those grenades to me now? Ho, Operations? Anybody there?"

"We're setting up this ambush now, Odegard. We don't want your people hurling grenades around at random in the dark."

There was some sense to that, Derron supposed. And his slave could not throw anything efficiently while it had to walk and balance on its hands.

The leader Matt turned suddenly aside and went trotting up a barren hillside, the other people following briskly. Scrambling after them as best he could, Derron saw that they were heading for a narrow cave entrance, set into a steep low cliff like a door in the wall of a house. Everyone halted a little distance away from the hole. Before Derron had quite caught up, Matt had unslung his bow and nocked an arrow. Another man then pitched a sizable rock into the darkness of the cave, having to stretch around an L-bend at the entrance to do so. At once there reverberated out of the depths a growl, which scattered The People like the good survival experts they were.

When the cave bear came to answer the door, it discovered the slave alone, a crippled foundling on the porch.

The bear's slap of greeting bowled the unbalanceable slave over. From a supine position Derron slapped back, bending the bear's snout slightly and provoking a blood-freezing roar. Made of tougher stuff than poison-diggers, the bear strained its fangs on the slave-unit's face. Still flat on his back, Derron lifted the bear with his steel arms and pitched it downhill. Go away!

The first roar had been only a tune-up for the one that followed. Derron didn't want to break even an animal's lifeline here if he could help it, but time was passing, and his real enemy would be drawing near. He threw the bear a little farther this time. The animal bounced once, landed on its feet and running, and kept right on going into the swamp. Howls trailed in the air behind it for half a minute.

The People emerged from behind rocks and inside crevices and gathered slowly around the slave-unit, for once forgetting to look over their shoulders along the way they had come. Derron had the feeling that in another moment they were going to fall down and worship him; before any such display could get started, he knuckle-walked the slave-unit into the cave and scanned the darkness—the slave's eyes adjusted quickly to see in whatever wave-lengths were present—to make sure it was unoccupied. It was a high narrow cavern with a second opening, small and window-like, high up on the wall toward the rear. There was plenty of room to shelter the entire band; Matt had made a good discovery.

When Derron came out of the cave, he found The People getting ready to build a good-sized fire at the mouth; they were gathering wood from under the trees at the edge of the swamp and lugging it hurriedly

uphill. Far across the valley, a small spark of orange burned in the thickening purplish haze of falling night, marking the encampment of some other band.

"Operations, how are those ambush arrangements coming along?"

"The other two units are just taking up their positions. They have you in sight at the mouth of the cave."

"Good."

Let The People build their fire, then, and let the berserker be drawn by it. It would find the band as well protected as they would ever be.

From a pouch of some kind of tough skin, one of the old women produced a bundle of bark, which she unwrapped to reveal a smoldering center. With incantations and a judicious use of wood chips, she soon had the watchfire blazing. Its upper tongues reached high and bright against the fast-dimming sky.

The band filed into the cave, the slave-unit last to enter, right after Matt. Just inside the L-bend of the entrance, Derron sat his proxy, leaning against the wall, and relaxed his arms with a great sigh. He was ready for a rest. In spite of the servo assists, he had had a lot of exercise.

He had no sooner relaxed a notch than the night outside erupted without warning into battle. There was the crackle and slam of laser flame, the clang and squeal and crunch of armored bodies meeting. The people in the cave jumped as one person to their feet.

In the flickering reflections of laser light, Derron could see Matt with his bow ready, facing the entrance, while the other adults looked for rocks to throw. In the rear of the cave the boy Dart had scrambled up to a perch from which he could look out of the high small window. The laser light was bright on his awed face.

And then the lights went out. The flashing and crashing outside ended as abruptly as it had begun. Silence and darkness stretched on in a deathlike numbness.

"Operations? Operations? What's going on outside? What happened?"

"Oh, my God, Odegard!" The voice was too shaken for him to identify. "Scratch two slave-units. Odegard, that—that damned thing's reflexes are just too good—"

The watchfire came exploding suddenly into the cave, transformed by the kick of a steel-clawed foot into a hail of sparks and brands that bounced back from the curving wall of stone just opposite the narrow entrance and became a thousand scattered dying eyes on the cave floor. The berserker would be trying to flush its game, to see if there was a second exit through which the humans could try to run. It must know that the crippled slave-unit was inside the cave, but by now the berserker's cold computer-brain must have learned contempt for all that the android slaves of Time Operations could do against it. For, once it was satisfied that there was no way for its prey to escape, it tried to walk right in. There came a heavy grating sound; the cave mouth had proved just a bit too narrow for the machine to enter.

"Odegard, we've got a dozen arrows ready to drop to your unit now. Shaped charges in the points, set to fire on contact."

"Arrows? I said grenades! I told you we've got only one bow here, and there's no room for—" In

midsentence Derron realized that the high little window in the rear of the cave might make an excellent archery port. "Send us arrows, then. Send something, quick!"

"We're dropping the arrows now. Odegard, we have a relief operator standing by in another master-unit, so we can switch if you need relief."

"Never mind that. I'm used to working this broken-backed thing by now, and he isn't."

The berserker was raising a hellish racket, scraping and hammering at the stubborn bulge of rock that was keeping it from its prey. When a signal in his helmet told Derron that the arrows had arrived, he lost no time in using the slave's hands to open the door in its metal bosom. With a bank of awed faces turned to watch in the gloom, the slave-unit reached into its own metal heart to pull out a dozen shafts, which it then held out to Matt.

From the manner of their appearance it was plain they were no ordinary arrows, and in the present situation there could be no doubt what their purpose must be. Matt delayed only a moment, holding the weapons with reverence, to make a sort of bow to the slave; and then he dashed to the rear of the cave and scrambled up to the window.

That window hole would have provided him with a fine safe spot to shoot from, had the enemy possessed no projective weapons. But since the enemy was laser-armed, it would be the slave-unit's job to draw fire on itself and keep the berserker as busy as possible.

Hoping devoutly that Matt was an excellent shot, Derron inched his crippled metal body up to the very corner of the L-bend. He could feel the berserker's blows jarring through the rock he leaned against; he thought that if he reached around the corner he could touch it. Derron waited, looking back into the cave; and when he saw Matt nock the first magic arrow to his bow, he went out around the corner with as quick a movement as he could manage on his hands.

And he nearly fell on his face, for the berserker was out of reach, having just backed away to take a fresh run at the cave entrance. This maneuver made it quicker with its laser than Derron was with his. The slave's armor glowed, but still held, while Derron scrambled forward, firing back. If the berserker saw Matt in his window it ignored him, thinking arrows meant nothing.

The first one struck the monster on the shoulder of one foreleg, the wooden shaft spinning viciously away while the head vanished in a momentary little fireball. The explosion left a fist-sized hole.

The machine lurched off balance even as its laser flicked toward Matt, and the beam did no more than set fire to the bush atop the little cliff. Derron was still scrambling toward the berserker as best he could, holding his own laser on it like a spotlight, gouging the beam into the shoulder wound. Matt popped up bravely and shot his second arrow as accurately as the first, hitting the berserker square in the side, so the punch of the shaped charge staggered it on its three legs. And then its laser was gone, for Derron had lurched close enough to swing a heavy metal fist and close up the projector-eye for good.

With that, the wrestling match was on again. For a moment Derron thought that this time he had a chance, for the strength of the slave's two arms more than equaled that of the berserker's one usable foreleg. But the enemy's reflexes were still better than human. In a matter of seconds Derron was once more barely hanging on, while the world spun around him. And then again he was thrown.

He grabbed at the legs that trampled him, trying to hang on somehow, to immobilize the berserker as a target. A stamping blow smashed his own laser. What was delaying the arrows?

The berserker was still too big, too strong, too quick, for the crippled slave to handle. Derron clung to one leg, but the other two functional limbs kept on stomping like pile drivers, tearing with their steel claws. There went one of the slave's useless feet, ripped clean off. The metal man was going to be pulled to pieces. Where were the arrows?

And then the arrows came. Derron had one glimpse of a hurtling human body above him as Matt leaped directly into the fight, brandishing a cluster in each hand. Yelling, seeming to fly like some storm god of legend, he stabbed his bolts against the enemy's back.

Only a hint of lightning showed outside the berserker's body. The thunder was all deep inside, an explosion that made both machines bounce. And, with that, the fight was over.

Derron dragged the wrecked and overheated slave-unit shuddering out from under the mass of glowing, twisting, spitting metal that had been the enemy. Then, exhausted, he rested the slave on its elbows. In the wavering glow of the gutted berserker machine, he saw Dart come running from the cave. Tears streaked the boy's face; in his hand was Matt's bow, the broken string dangling. And after Dart the rest of The People came running from the cave to gather around something that lay motionless on the ground.

Derron made the slave sit up. Matt lay dead where the enemy's last convulsion had thrown him. His belly was torn open, his hands charred, his face smashed out of shape—then the eyes opened in that ruined face. Matt's chest heaved for a shaky breath, and he shuddered and went on breathing.

The women wailed, and some of the men began a kind of slow song. Everyone made way as Derron crawled his battered proxy to Matt's side and lifted him as gently as he could. Matt was too far gone to wince at a few more minor burns from the touch of the slave's hot metal.

"Good work, Odegard." Colonel Borss's voice had regained strength. "Good work, you've wrapped the operation up. We'll drop you a medikit to use on that fellow; his lifeline could be important."

"He's in too bad shape for that, sir. You'll have to lift him with me."

"Would like to help, of course, but I'm afraid that's not in the regulations. . . ." The colonel's voice faded in hesitation.

"His lifeline is breaking here, Colonel, no matter what we do. He won it for us, and now his guts are hanging out."

"Um. All right, all right. Stand by while we readjust for his mass."

The People were standing in an awed ring around the slave-unit and its dying burden. The scene would probably be assimilated into one of the historical myths, thought Derron. Perhaps the story of the dying hero and the stone-man would be found some day among the earliest writings of Sirgol. Myths were tough bottles; they could hold many kinds of wine.

Up at the mouth of the cave the oldest woman was having trouble with her tinder as she tried to get the watchfire started again. A young girl who was helping grew impatient, and she grabbed up a dried branch and ran down to the glowing shell of the berserker. From that heat she kindled her brand; waving the flame to keep it bright, she moved back up the hill in a kind of dance.

And then Derron was sitting in a fading circle of light on the dark floor of Operations Stage Three. Two

men were running toward him with a stretcher. He opened his metal arms to let the medics take Matt and then turned his head inside his helmet and found the master power switch with his teeth.

He let the end-of-mission checklist go hang. In a matter of seconds he had extricated himself from the master-unit and was pushing his way past the first people coming toward him with congratulations. In his sweated leotard he hurried downstairs from the catwalk and made his way through the throng of technicians, operators, medics, and miscellaneous celebrants who were already crowding the floor of the stage. He reached Matt just as the medics were raising the stretcher that held him. Wet cloths had been draped over the wounded man's protruding intestines, and an intravenous had already been started.

Matt's eyes were open, though of course they were stupid with shock. To Matt, Derron could be no more than another strange being among many; but Derron was one who walked beside him in human contact, gripping his forearm above his burned hand, until consciousness faded away.

As the stretcher moved toward the hospital, something like a procession gathered behind it. As if a public announcement had been broadcast ahead, the word was spreading that for the first time a man had been brought up from the deep past. When they brought Matt into the emergency room it was only natural that Lisa, like everyone else in the hospital who had the chance, should come hurrying to see him.

"He's lost," she murmured, looking down at the swollen face, the eyelids now and then flickering open. "Oh, so lost and alone. I know the feeling." She turned anxiously to a doctor. "He'll live now, won't he? He's going to be all right?"

The doctor smiled faintly. "If they're breathing when we get 'em this far, we usually save 'em."

Trustingly Lisa sighed in immediate deep relief. Her concern for the stranger was natural and kind.

"Hello, Derron." She smiled at him briefly, before going to hover over the stretcher as closely as she could. Her voice and manner had been absent, as if she hardly noticed him at all.

PART TWO

His arms upraised, his gray beard and black robes whipping in the wind, Nomis stood tall on a tabletop of black rock twenty feet square, a good hundred feet above the smashing surf. White seabirds coasted downwind toward him then wheeled away with sharp little cries, like those of tiny souls in pain. Around his perch on three sides there towered other splintered crags and fingers of this coastline of black basaltic rock, while before him spread the immense vibration of the sea.

Feet braced apart, he stood centered in an intricate chalk diagram drawn on the flat rock. Around him he had spread the paraphernalia of his craft—things dead and dried, things old and carven, things that men of common thought would have deemed better destroyed and forgotten. In his thin, penetrating voice, Nomis was singing into the wind:

Gather, storm clouds, day and night
Lightning chew and water drawn!
Waves come swallowing, green and bright,
Chew and swallow and gulp it down—
The craft in which my foe abides,

The long-ship that my enemy rides!

There was much more to the song, and it was repeated many times. Nomis's thin arms quivered, tired from holding over his head the splinters of wrecked ships, while the birds cried at him and the wind blew his thin gray beard up into his eyes.

Today he was weary, unable to escape the feeling that his day's labor was in vain. Today he had been granted none of the tokens of success that all too rarely came to him—heated symbol-dreams in sleep or, when he was awake, dark momentary trances shot through with strange visions, startling stretchings of the mind.

Not often in his career had Nomis been convinced of his own power to call down evil on his enemies' heads. Success for him in this work was a far more uncertain thing than he let others believe. Not that he doubted for a moment that the basic powers of the world were accessible through magic; it was only that success in this line seemed to call not only for great skill but for something like great good luck as well.

Twice before in his life Nomis had tried to raise a storm. Only once had he been successful, and the persistent suspicion remained that on that occasion the storm might have come anyway. At the height of the gale there had persisted a shade of doubt, a feeling that the ordering of such forces was beyond his powers or those of any man.

Now, doubtful as he was of present success, he persisted in the effort that had kept him almost sleepless on this secret rock for the past three days. Such was the fear and hatred he felt for the man he knew must now be crossing the sea toward him, coming with a new god and new advisers to assume the rule of this country called Queensland.

Nomis's grim eyes, turned far out to sea, marked there the passage of a squall line, mockingly small and thin. Of the ship-killing tempest he worked to raise there was no sign at all.

* * *

The cliffs of Queensland were still a day's rowing out of sight, dead ahead. In the same direction, but closer, some mildly bad weather was brewing. Harl frowned across the sea's gray face at the line of squalls, while his hands rested with idle sureness on the long-ship's steering oar.

The thirty rowers, freemen and warriors all, could see the bad weather, simply by turning their heads, as easily as Harl could. And they were all experienced enough to reach the same conclusion: that, by slowing down the stroke slightly, they would probably miss the squalls' path and so make themselves a bit more comfortable. So now, by unspoken agreement, they were all easing up a trifle on the oars.

From ahead a cool light breeze sprang up, fluttering the pennons on the sailless masts and rippling the fringe of awning on the tent of royal purple that stood amidships.

Inside that tent, alone for the moment with his thoughts, was the young man that Harl called king and lord. Harl's frown faded as it crossed his mind that young Ay had probably withdrawn into the tent to make some plans for the fighting that was sure to come. The border tribes, who cared nothing for the mild new god or the failing old empire, were certain to make some test of the will and courage of Queensland's new ruler—not that there were grounds for doubting the firmness of either.

Harl smiled at his next thought, that his young lord in the tent might not be planning war at all, but a

campaign to make sure of the Princess Alix. It was her hand in marriage that was to bring Ay his kingdom and his army. All princesses were described as beautiful, but rumor said that this one also had spirit. Now, if she was like some of the high-born girls that Harl had met, her conquest might be as difficult as that of a barbarian chieftain—and, of course, even more to a sturdy warrior's taste!

Harl's expression, which had become about as jovial as his facial scars would allow, faded once more to glumness. It had occurred to him that his king might have gone into the tent to practice reading. Ay had long been an admirer of books and had actually brought two of them with him on this voyage. Or it might be that he was praying to his gentle new slave-god, for, young and healthy though he was, Ay now and then took the business of worship seriously.

Even while half his mind busied itself with these reflections, Harl remained alert as always. Now a faint puzzling splashing in the sea nearby caused him to turn his head to the port side—and in a moment all the thoughts in his head were frozen, together with his warrior's blood.

Rearing right beside the ship, its bulk lifting to obscure the horizon and the distant afternoon clouds, came a head out of nightmare, a dragon face from some evil legend. The dully gleaming neck that bore the head was of such size that a man might just be able to encircle it with both arms. Sea demons alone might know what the body in the water below was like! The eyes were clouded suns the size of silver platters, while the scales of head and neck were gray and heavy like thick wet iron. The mouth was a coffin, lid opened just a crack, all fenced inside with daggers.

Long as a cable, the thick neck came reeling inboard, scales rasping wood from the gunwale. The men's first cries were sounds such as warriors should not make, but in the next instant they were all grabbing bravely enough for their weapons. Big Torla, strongest of the crew, for once was also quickest, bracing a leg on his rower's bench and hacking with his sword at that tremendous swaying neck.

The blows clanged uselessly on dully gleaming scales; the dragon might not even have been aware of them. Its head swayed to a stop facing the doorway of the purple tent; from the slit of its terrible mouth there shrieked a challenge whose like Harl had not heard in a lifetime of war.

What with all the clamor of voices and blows, Ay had needed no such summons to make ready. Before the dragon-bellow had ceased, the tent flaps were ripped open from inside and the young king stepped forth armed with shield and helm, sword ready in his hand.

Harl felt a tremendous pride to see that the young man did not flinch a hand's breadth from the sight that met him. And, with the pride, Harl's own right arm came back to life, drawing from his belt his short-handled, iron-bladed ax, and gripping it for a throw.

The ax clanged harmlessly off the clouded silver of one eye, perhaps not even felt by the beast. The dragon's enormous head, coffin-mouth suddenly gaping wide, lunged forward for the king.

Ay met it bravely. But the full thrust of his long sword, aimed straight into the darkness of the throat, counted for no more than a jab from a woman's pin. The doorlike jaw slammed shut, crushing Ay instantly. For a moment, as the monstrous head swept away on its long neck, there was seen the horrible display of broken limbs dangling outside the teeth. And then, with one more faint splash beside the ship, the evil miracle was gone. The sunlit sea rolled on unchanged, its secrets all below.

Through the remaining hours of daylight, there was scarcely a word spoken aboard the long-ship. She prowled in watery circles, on and on, never moving far from the unmarked spot where her lord had been taken. She prowled in full battle-readiness, but there was not a thing for her to fight. The edge of the

squall line came; the men took mechanical measures to meet it. And the squall departed again, without the men ever having been really aware of its passage.

By the end of the day, the sea was calm again. Squinting into the setting sun, Harl rasped out a one-word order: "Rest."

Long ago he had retrieved his blunted ax and replaced it in his belt. Now the evidence to be seen on deck was only this: a few bits of wood, rasped from a raw scar on the gunwale by scales hard as metal. A few small spots of blood. And Ay's winged helmet, fallen from his head.

* * *

Derron Odegard, recently decorated and promoted three grades to major, was sitting in as a junior aide on an emergency staff meeting called by the new Time Operations commander. At the moment, Derron was listening with both professional and friendly interest as his old classmate, Chan Amling, now a major in Historical Research, delivered an information briefing.

"... As we all know by now, the berserkers have chosen to focus this latest attack upon one individual. Their target, King Ay of Queensland, is naturally a man whose removal from history would have disastrous consequences for us."

Amling, quick-witted and fluent, smiled benignly over the heads of his audience. "Until quite recently most historians even doubted this man's reality. But since we have begun some direct observation of the past, his historicity and importance have both been fully confirmed."

Amling turned to an electric map, which he attacked with a teacher's gestures. "We see here the middle stages in the shrinkage and disorganization of the great Continental Empire, leading to its ultimate collapse. Now note Queensland here. It's very largely due to King Ay's activity and influence that Queensland can remain in such a comparatively stable state, preserving a segment of the Empire culture for our planet's later civilizations to base themselves on."

The new Time Operations commander—his predecessor was now reported to be on a scouting expedition to the moon, or at least to Sirgol's surface, with Colonel Borss and others—raised a hand, student-like. "Major, I admit I'm not too clear on this. Ay was a bit of a barbarian himself, wasn't he?"

"Well, he certainly began as such, sir. But—oversimplifying somewhat—we can say that, when he found himself with a land of his own to defend, he settled down and defended it very well. Gave up his sea-roving ways. He had been one of the raiders and barbarians long enough to know all the tricks of that game. And he played it so well from the other side of the board that they usually preferred to attack someone else."

No one else had a question for Amling at the moment and he sat down. The next officer to appear at the head of the table was a major of Probability Analysis, whose manner was no more reassuring than his information.

"Gentlemen," he began in a nervous voice. "We don't know how Ay was killed, but we do know where." The major displayed a videotape made from a sentry screen. "His lifeline is newly broken here, on his first voyage to Queensland. As you can see, all the other lifelines aboard ship remain unbroken. Probably the enemy expects historical damage to be intensified if Ay's own crew are thought to have done away with him. It seems to us in Probability that such an expectation is all too likely to be correct."

Amling looked as if he wanted to break in and argue; or, more likely, to make a wager on the subject. They had put Amling in the wrong section, Derron thought. Probability would have been the one for him.

The Probability major had paused for a sip of water. "Frankly, the situation looks extremely grave. In nineteen or twenty days' present-time, the historical shock wave of Ay's assassination should reach us. That's all the time we have. I'm told that the chances of our finding the enemy keyhole within nineteen days are not good."

The man's edgy gloom was contagious, and the faces around the table were tightening in spite of themselves. Only the new Time Ops commander managed to remain relatively relaxed. "I'm afraid you're right about the difficulty in finding this keyhole, Major. Of course, every effort is being made in that direction. Trouble is, the enemy's getting smart about hiding his tracks. This time he attacked with only one machine instead of six, which makes our job difficult to start with. And, immediately after doing its job of assassination, that one machine seems to have gone into hiding. It hasn't left Ay's time, it'll still be on the scene to mess up whatever we do to set things right, but meanwhile it's being careful not to cause any changes that we might use to track it." Time Ops leaned forward, becoming less relaxed. "Now, who's got some ideas regarding countermeasures?"

The first suggestions involved trying to build probability in Ay's later lifeline, so that he would somehow have survived the assassination after all. This idea soon started an argument on a highly technical level. In this the scientific people present naturally dominated, but they were far from agreeing among themselves on what could and should be done. When they began to exchange personal viewpoints along with formulae, Time Ops called quickly for half an hour's recess.

Finding that much time unexpectedly on his hands, Derron stepped out and called the nurses' quarters at the nearby hospital complex. Lisa was living there now, while she started to train for some kind of nursing job. He was pleased to be able to reach her and to hear that she too had some time to spare. Within a few minutes they were walking together, in the park where they had met for the first time.

Derron had come to the meeting with a topic of conversation all prepared, but Lisa, these days, was developing a favorite subject of her own.

"You know, Matt's healing so quickly that all the doctors are amazed at it."

"Good. I'll have to come round and see him one of these days. I keep meaning to, but then I think I'll wait until we can talk to each other."

"Oh, goodness, he's talking now!"

"In our language? Already?"

She was delighted to confirm it and to elaborate. "It's like his rapid healing; the doctors say it must be because he comes from so far in the past. They talk about the effect on one individual of coming up through twenty thousand years' evolutionary gradient, about the organizational energies of his body and brain becoming enfolded and intensified. I can't follow most of it, of course. They talk about the realm where the material and the nonmaterial meet—"

"Yes."

"And Matt probably understands what they're saying as well as I do now, if not better. He's up and around most of the time. They allow him a good deal of freedom. He's quite good about staying out of

rooms he's warned not to enter, not touching dangerous things, and so forth."

"Yes."

"Oh, and did I tell you they've suspended healing in his face? Until they're sure he can make a fully informed decision on what he wants his new face to look like."

"Yes, I heard something about that. Lisa, how long are you going on living in the hospital? Are you really set on learning nursing, or is it just—something to do?" He almost asked, "Is it just Matt?"

"Oh." Her face fell slightly. "Sometimes I don't think I was cut out to be a nurse. But I have no immediate plans to move. It's handy for me to live right in the hospital when I'm still getting therapy for my memory every day."

"Any success with the treatments?" Derron knew that the doctors now fully accepted that Lisa had simply lost her memory through being caught in the path of the berserker missile. For awhile some had considered it possible that she was an emissary or deserter from the future, made amnesic by descent through time. But on the sentry screens no such reversed lifeline could be found. In fact, no traveler, no device, no message, had ever come from the future to this embattled civilization that called itself Modern. Possibly the inhabitants of the unknowable time-to-come had good reason of their own to refrain from communication; possibly the future Sirgol was not inhabited by man. Or it might simply be that this time of the berserker war was completely blocked off from the future by paradox-loops. It was some comfort, at least, that no berserker machines came attacking from the direction of tomorrow.

"No, the therapy doesn't really help." Lisa sighed faintly; her memory of her personal life before the missile wave caught her was still almost completely blank. She put the subject aside with a wave of her hand and went back to talking about what new things Matt had done today.

Derron, not listening, closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the sensation of life he had when he was with Lisa. At this moment he possessed the touch of her hand in his, the feel of grass and soil under his feet, the warmth of the pseudo-sunshine on his face. Next moment it might all be gone—another missile wave could come down through the miles of rock, or the unraveling of King Ay's severed cord of life might propagate faster than expected up through the fabric of history.

He opened his eyes and saw the muraled walls surrounding the buried park, and the improbably alive, singing, and soaring birds. Down here at the level where humans walked, the place was almost thronged, as usual, with strolling couples and solitaires; in places the touch grass was showing signs of wear, and the gardeners had had to defend it with string fences. All in all, a poor imitation of the murdered real world; but with Lisa beside him it became transformed into something better than it was.

Derron pointed. "Right there's the tree where I first came to your rescue. Or you came to mine, rather."

"Irescuedyou? From what horrible fate?"

"From dying of loneliness in the midst of forty million people. Lisa, I'm trying to tell you that I want you to move out of that hospital dormitory."

She turned her eyes away, looking down. "If I did that, where would I live?"

"I'm asking you to live with me, of course. You're not a little lost girl any more; you're on your own, studying to be a nurse, and I can ask. There are some unused apartments around, and I'll rate one of

them if I take a companion. Especially with this promotion they've given me."

She squeezed his hand, but that was all. She was thoughtfully silent, her eyes on the ground a few paces ahead of them.

"Lisa? What do you say?"

"Just exactly what are you offering me, Derron?"

"Look—yesterday, when you were telling me about your new girl friend's problems, you seemed to have a very firm grasp of what this male-female business is all about."

"You want me to live with you temporarily, is that it?" Her voice was cool and withdrawn.

"Lisa, nothing in our world can be permanent. At the staff meeting just now—Well, I'm not supposed to talk about that. But things don't look good. I want to share with you whatever good things may be left."

Still silent, she let him lead her on stepping-stones across the park's little stream.

"Lisa, do you want a marriage ceremony? I should have put that first, I suppose, and asked you formally to marry me. The thing is, not many people are going to raise their eyebrows if we do without a ceremony, and if we do without one we'll avoid some delay and red tape. Would you think we were doing wrong if we didn't have a wedding?"

"I . . . suppose not. What bothers me is the way you talk about everything being temporary. I suppose feelings are included."

"When everything else is temporary, yes! That doesn't mean I necessarily like it. But how can anyone in our world say what they'll be feeling or thinking a month or a year from now? In a year we'll most likely all . . ." He let his voice trail off.

She had been searching for words and now at last she found the ones she wanted. "Derron, at the hospital I've absorbed the attitude that people's lives can be made less temporary, now or any time. That people should go on trying to build, to accomplish things, even though they may not have long to live."

"You absorbed this at the hospital, you say?"

"All right, maybe I've always felt that way."

He had, too, at one time. A year, a year and a half ago. A lifetime ago, with someone else. The image that he could not stop seeing and did not want to stop seeing came back to him again.

Lisa seemed to have her own private image. "Look at Matt, for instance. Remember how badly hurt he was. Look at what an effort of will he's made to survive and recover—"

"I'm sorry." Derron interrupted her, looking at the time, finding valid excuse for getting away. "I've got to run, I'm almost late for the staff meeting."

* * *

The scientists, by some combination of calculation and debate, had reached a consensus.

"It comes down to this," their newly elected spokesman explained, when the staff meeting had resumed. "If we're to have any hope of healing the break in Ay's lifeline we must first immobilize the affected part, to minimize damage—something like putting a splint on a broken arm or leg."

"And just how do you go about splinting a lifeline?" demanded Time Ops.

The scientist gestured wearily. "Commander, the only way I can suggest is that someone be sent to take Ay's place temporarily. To continue his interrupted voyage to Queensland and there play his part, for a few days at least. The man sent could carry a communicator with him, and be given day-to-day or even hour-to-hour instructions from here, if need be. If the berserkers stood still for it, he might play out the remainder of Ay's life in its essentials, well enough to let us survive."

"How long do you think any man could play a part like that successfully?" someone broke in.

"I don't know." The scientists' spokesman smiled faintly. "Gentlemen, I don't know if a substitution scheme can be made to work at all. Nothing like it has ever been tried. But I think it will buy us at least a few more days or weeks of present-time in which to think of something else."

Time Ops thoughtfully rubbed his stubbled face. "Well, now, substitution is the only idea we've got to work with at this point. But Ay is about twelve hundred years back. That means that dropping a man from here to take his place is out of the question. Right?"

"Afraid so, sir," said a biophysicist. "Mental devolution and serious memory loss sets in at about four hundred years."

Time Ops thought aloud in a tired monotonous voice. "Does anyone suppose we could get away with using a slave-unit on that kind of job? No, I thought not. They just can't be made convincingly human enough. Then what's left? We must use one of Ay's contemporaries. Find a man who's able to do the job, motivate him to do it, and then train him."

Someone suggested, "Appearance isn't too much of a problem. Ay isn't known in Queensland, except by reputation, when he first arrives there."

Colonel Lukas, the Psych Officer on Time Ops' staff, cleared his throat and spoke. "We ought to be able to get Ay's crew to accept a substitute, provided they want Ay to be alive, and if we can snatch the whole bunch of them up to present-time for a few days' work."

"We can manage that if we have to," Time Ops said.

"Good." Lukas doodled thoughtfully on a pad before him. "Some tranquilizer and pacifier drugs would be indicated first. . . . Then we can find out whatever details of the assassination we need to know . . . then a few days' hypnosis. I'm sure we can work something out."

"Good thinking, Luke." Time Ops looked around the table. "Now, gentlemen, before it should slip our minds, let's try to solve the first problem, the big one. Who is our Ay-substitute going to be?"

Surely, thought Derron, someone besides me must see where one possible answer lies. He didn't want to be the first one to suggest it, because . . . well, just because. No! Hellfire and damnation, why shouldn't he? He was being paid to think, and he could put forward this thought with the clearest conscience in the world. He cleared his throat, startling men who seemed to have forgotten his presence.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, gentlemen. But don't we have one man available now who might be sent down to Ay's century without losing his wits? I mean the man who comes from the even deeper past himself."

* * *

Harl's duty was painfully clear in his own mind. He was going to have to take the ship on to Queensland, and when he got there he was going to have to stand before King Gorboduc and the princess, look them in the face and tell them what had happened to Ay. Harl was gradually realizing already that his story might not be believed. And what then?

The rest of the crew were spared at least the sudden new weight of responsibility. Now, many hours after the monster's attack, they were still obeying Harl without question. The sun was going down, but Harl had started them rowing again, and he meant to keep them rowing for Queensland right through the night, to hold off the mad demonstration of grief that was sure to come if he let the men fall idle now.

They were rowing like blind men, sick men, walking dead men, their faces blank with rage and shock turned inward, neither knowing nor caring where the ship was steered. Frequently the oars fell out of stroke, clattering together or splashing awkwardly along the surface of the sea. No one quarreled at this or even seemed to notice. Torla groaned a death-song as he pulled—woe to the next man who faced Torla in a fight.

Inside the purple tent, atop the chest that held Ay's personal treasure (that chest was another problem for Harl, a problem that would grow as rage and grief wore away), the winged helmet now rested in a place of honor. It was now all that was left. . . .

Ten years ago, Ay had been a real prince, with a real king for a father. At about that time, Ay's beard had started to sprout, and Harl had first begun to serve as the young prince's good right hand. And, also at about that time, the twin sicknesses of envy and treachery had started to spread like the plague among Ay's brothers and uncles and cousins. Ay's father and most of his house had died in that plague, and the kingdom had died too, being lost and divided among strangers.

Ay's inheritance had shrunk to the deck of a fighting ship—not that Harl had any objection to that on his own account. Harl had not even complained about the books and the reading. Nor even about prayers to a man-god, a slave-god who had preached love and mercy and had gotten his bones split with wedges for his trouble. . . .

Over the ship, or beneath it, there suddenly passed a force, a tilting, swaying motion, over in an instant. Harl's first thought was that the dragon had come back, rising from the deep to scrape its bulk beneath the long-ship's hull. The men evidently thought the same, for in an instant they had dropped their oars and drawn their weapons again.

But there was no dragon to be seen, nor much of anything else. With a speed that seemed nothing short of supernatural, a mist had closed in around the ship; the red lingering light of sunset had been transformed into a diffused white glow. Looking round him now, battle-ax ready in his hand, Harl noticed that even the rhythm of the waves was different. The air was warmer, the very smell of the sea had changed.

The men looked wild-eyed at one another in the strange soft light. They fingered their swords and muttered about wizardry.

"Row slowly ahead!" ordered Harl, putting the useless ax back in his belt. He tried to sound as if he had some purpose other than keeping the men busy, though in fact his sense of direction had for once been totally confused.

He gave the steering oar to Torla and went forward himself to be lookout. Then, before the rowers had taken fifty slow strokes, he threw up a hand to halt them, and water gurgled around the backing oars. No more than an easy spear-cast from the bow, a gentle sandy beach had materialized out of the grayness. What manner of land might be behind the beach it was impossible to tell.

When the men saw the beach, their murmuring grew louder. They knew full well that only a few minutes ago there had been no land of any kind in sight.

"Yet that's certainly solid ground ahead."

"Lookslike solid ground. I'd not be surprised to see it vanish in a puff of smoke."

"Sorcery!"

Sorcery, certainly; no one disputed that. Some kind of magic, good or bad, was at work. What might be done about it, if anything, was another question. Harl quit pretending that he knew what he was about and called a council. After some debate it was decided that they should row straight away from the beach, to see if they might in that way get beyond the reach of whatever enchantment held them in its grip.

Sunset was now long overdue, but the pale light filtering down through the mist did not fade. In fact, it became brighter, for as they rowed the mist began to thin.

Just as they emerged from the fog bank, and Harl was beginning to hope they were indeed getting away from the enchantment, they came near driving their ship straight into a black, smooth, almost featureless wall that rose from the sea. The wall was slightly concave, and it had no edge or top in sight; it rose and extended and curved back without limit around the sea and over the mist. From the foot of this wall the men looked up to find that it made an enormous inverted bowl over their tiny ship; from near the zenith, far above their heads, lights as bright and high as sun-fragments threw down their fire on white fog and black water.

Men cried out prayers to all the gods and demons known. Men shrieked that they had come to the sky and the stars at the end of the world. They almost broke their oars as they pulled on them to spin their ship and drive it back into the mist.

Harl was as much shaken as any other, but he swore to himself that he would die before he showed it. One man had collapsed to the deck, where he lay with his hands over his eyes, groaning, "Enchantment, enchantment," over and over. Harl kicked and wrestled him viciously back to his feet, meanwhile seizing upon the idea and putting it to use.

"Aye, enchantment, that's all!" Harl shouted. "Not a real sky or stars, but something put into our eyes by magic. Well, if there be wizards here who mean us harm, I say they can be made to bleed and die like other men. If they are thinking to have some fun with us, well, we know a game or two ourselves!"

The others took some heart from Harl's words. Back here in the concealing fog, the world was still sane enough so that a man could look around it without losing his powers of thought.

In an almost steady voice, Harl gave the order to row back in the direction of the beach they had glimpsed earlier. The men willingly obeyed; the man who had collapsed pulled hardest, looking to right and left at his fellows as if daring any among them to make some comment. But he would be safe from jokes, it seemed, for a good while yet.

They were not long in coming to the gentle sloping beach again; it proved to be real and solid. As the long-ship slid lightly aground, Harl, sword in hand, was the first to leap into the shallows. The water was warmer than he had expected, and when a splash touched his lips he discovered that it was fresh. But by this time he was beyond being surprised at such relative trifles.

* * *

One of Matt's tutors stepped ahead of Derron, tapped on the door of the private hospital room, then slid it open. Putting his head inside, the tutor spoke slowly and distinctly. "Matt? There is a man here who wants to talk to you. He is Derron Odegard, the man who fought beside you in your own time."

The tutor turned to motion Derron forward. As he entered the room, the man who had been sitting in an armchair before the television screen got to his feet, standing tall and erect.

In this man, dressed in the robe and slippers that were general issue for hospital patients, Derron saw no resemblance to the dying savage he had helped a few days ago to carry into the hospital. Matt's hair had been depilated and was only now starting to grow back in, a neutral-colored stubble. Matt's face below the eyes was covered by a plastic membrane, which served as skin while the completion of the healing process was held in abeyance.

On the bedside table, half covered by some secondary-level schoolbooks, were several sketches and composite photographs, looking like variations on one basic model of a young man's face. Derron was now carrying in his pocket a photo of a somewhat different face—Ay's—caught by a spy device that had been sent, in the shape of a bird, to skim near the young king-to-be on the day he began his fateful voyage to Queensland. That was the closest the Moderns had been able to get to the space-time locus of the assassination—as usual, paradox-loops strongly resisted repeating interference with history at any one spot.

"I am pleased to meet you, Derron." Matt put genuine meaning into the ritual phrase. His voice was quite deep; at most, a little minor work would be needed to match it to Ay's, which had been recorded when the photo was made. Matt's manner of speaking, like his tutor's to him, was slow and distinct.

"I am pleased to see that your health is returning," Derron answered. "And glad that you are learning the ways of a new world so quickly."

"And I am pleased to see that you are healthy, Derron. I am glad your spirit could leave the metal man it fought in, for that metal man was very much hurt."

Derron smiled, then nodded toward the tutor, who had taken up a jailer's or servant's stance just inside the door. "Matt, don't let them con you with talk of where my spirit was. I was never in any direct danger, as you were, during that fight."

"Con me?" Matt had the question-inflection down pat.

The tutor said, "Derron means, don't let us teach you wrong things. He's joking."

Matt nodded impatiently, knowing about jokes. A point had been raised that was quite serious for him. "Derron—but it was your spirit in the metal man?"

"Well . . . say it was my electronic presence."

Matt glanced at the television built into the wall. He had turned down the sound when company entered; some kind of historical documentary was being shown. He said, "Electronics I have learned a little bit. It moves my spirit from one place to another."

"Moves your eyes and thoughts, you mean."

Matt seemed to consider whether he was understanding the words correctly, and to decide that he was. "Eyes and thoughts and spirit," he said firmly.

The tutor said, "This spirit-orientation is really his idea, Major, not something we've inculcated."

"I understand that," said Derron mildly. The important thing, from Operations' point of view, would be this tendency of Matt's toward firmness of opinion, even in a new world. Such firmness would be a very good thing in an agent—provided, of course, the right opinions were held.

Derron smiled. "All right, Matt. In the spirit I was fighting beside you, though I didn't risk my neck as you risked yours. When you jumped onto that berserker, I know your thought was to save me. I am grateful—and I am glad that now I can tell you so."

"Will you sit down?" Matt motioned Derron to a chair, then reseated himself; the tutor remained standing, hovering in the background.

Matt said, "My thought was partly to save you. Partly for my people there, partly just to see the berserker die. But since coming here I have learned that all people, even here, might be dead if we had not won that fight."

"That is true. But the danger is not over. Other fighting, just as important, is going on in other times and places." This was a suitable opening for the recruiting speech he had been sent here to make. But Derron paused before plunging ahead. For the tenth time he wished that Operations had sent someone else to do this job. But the experts thought Matt was most likely to react favorably if the presentation was made by Derron, the man who had, in a sense at least, fought beside him. And using Matt had been Derron's own idea, after all. Yes, he kept coming back to that in his thoughts. He hadn't seen Lisa since that last walk in the park—maybe he had been avoiding her. Yes, he could wish now that he had kept his mouth shut at the staff meeting.

Anyway, in the present situation, if Derron didn't make the sales pitch, someone else would, perhaps less scrupulously. So he vented an inaudible sigh and got down to business. "Already you have done much for us, Matt. You have done much for everyone. But now my chiefs send me to ask if you are willing to do more."

He gave Matt the essence of the situation in simplified form. The berserkers, deadly enemies of the tribe-of-all-men, had gravely wounded a great chief in another part of the world. It was necessary that someone should take the chief's place for a time.

Matt sat quietly, his eyes steadily attentive above the plastic skin that masked most of his face. When Derron had finished his preliminary outline of Operations' plan, Matt's first question was, "What will

happen when the great chief is strong again?"

"Then he will resume his own place, and you will be brought back here to live in our world. We expect we will be able to bring you back safely—but you must understand that there will be danger. Just how much danger we cannot say, because this will be a new kind of thing for us to do. But there will certainly be some danger, all along the way."

Let him know that, Major—don't paint too black a picture, of course. It seemed to be left up to Major Odegard to find the proper shade of gray. Well, Time Ops might be spying over his shoulder right now, but Derron was damned if he'd con Matt into taking a job that he, Derron, wouldn't have touched if it had been open to him. No, Derron told himself, he wouldn't volunteer if he could. What had the human race done for him lately? Really, the chances of the mission's doing anyone any good seemed to him very uncertain. Death did not frighten him any more, but there were things that still did—physical pain, for one. For another, the chance of meeting, on a mission like this, some unforeseeable ugly fate in the half-reality called probability-space, which the Moderns had learned to traverse but had scarcely begun to understand.

"And if, in spite of all medicine, the great chief should die, and can never go back to his own place?"

"Then it would be your job to continue in his place. When you needed advice we would tell you what to do. In this king's place you would lead a better life than most men in history have had. And when you had finished out his span of years, we would try to bring you here to our world again to live on still longer, with much honor."

"Honor?"

The tutor tried to explain.

Matt soon seemed to grasp what was meant, and he went on to raise another point. "Would I take more magic arrows with me to fight the berserkers?"

Derron thought about it. "I suppose you might be given some such weapons, to protect yourself to some degree. But your main job would not be fighting berserkers directly, but acting for this king, as he would act, in other matters."

Matt nodded, as slowly and precisely as he spoke. "All is new, all is strange. I must think about it."

"Of course."

Derron was about to add that he could come back tomorrow for an answer, but Matt suddenly asked two more questions. "What will happen if I say no? If no one can be found to take the place of the wounded chief?"

"There is no way that you, or anyone, can be forced to take his place. Our wise men think that, if no one does, the war will be lost and all of us will probably be dead in less than a month."

"And I am the only one who can go?"

"It may be so. You are our wise men's first choice." An operation was now under way to recruit a back-up man or two from the deep past. But anyone else brought up now would remain days behind Matt all the way through the process of preparation, and every hour was deemed important.

Matt spread out his healed hands. "I must believe what you tell me, you who have saved my life and made me well again. I do not want to die in a month and see everyone else die. So I must do what the wise men want, go and take the chief's place if I am able."

Derron puffed out his breath, venting mixed feelings. He reached into his pocket for the photo.

* * *

Time Ops, sitting in a small rough cavern a good distance from Operations and watching through one of his systems of secret scanners, nodded with satisfaction and mild surprise. That Odegard was a sharp young lad, all right. No outward display of gung-ho enthusiasm, but always good work, including this job—a smooth soft sell that had gotten the volunteer to place himself on the right side of the question.

Now the operation could get rolling in earnest. Time Ops swiveled in his chair and watched Colonel Lukas pull a white, nightgown-like robe over his head and down, concealing the plastic chain mail that guarded him from throat to knee.

"Luke, you've got some bare face and hands hanging out," Time Ops remarked, frowning. Psych Officers as good as you were hard to find. "These boys you're going to meet are carrying real knives, you know."

Lukas knew. Swallowing, he said, "We haven't got time to be thinking up foolproof protective gimmicks. I won't inspire any confidence if I go out there looking like a masked demon, believe me."

Time Ops grunted and got up. He stood for a moment behind the radar operator to note the image of the ship on the beach and the cluster of tiny green dots in front of her—her crew, come ashore. Then he went on to the window, a wide hole hacked crudely through a wall of rock, and squinted out from between the two heavy stun-projectors and their ready gunners. As the fog generators outside were very near the window, there was nothing to be seen but billows of opaque whiteness, streaming out and away. Time Ops picked up and put on a set of heavy glasses like those the gunners were wearing. The fog effectively disappeared; now he could see the individual men standing before their ship a hundred yards away and the great calm surface of the Reservoir beyond.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "I guess we'll be able to see you wave your arm—if they don't surround you and get in your way. If that happens, wave your arms over your head, and we'll cut loose."

"I just don't want anyone to get trigger-happy, Commander," said Lukas, looking uneasily at the gunners. "We're going to have to do some very delicate work on those men out there, and that won't be easy and may not be possible if they've taken a hard stunning. I'd much rather ease them along with the drugs, ask them some questions, and make some impression on them along the way."

Time Ops shrugged. "It's your baby. Got your gas mask?"

"Yes. Remember, we'll try to do the job with the pacifier-tranquilizer mix in the drinks; they're physically tired, and that may put 'em right to sleep. But don't hesitate to use the gas." Lukas took a last quick look around.

"Looks like a few of them are starting up from the beach," said the radar man.

Lukas jumped. "Here I go, then. Where're my servants? Ready? Tell them to keep inside at first. Here I

go!" His sandaled feet thudded rapidly down a stair.

The sand beach sloped up to a lowland of gravelly soil and sparse grass, the kind that grew in shadow. Harl left the bulk of the crew at the water's edge, ready to protect the ship or shove her off again, while with six chosen men he proceeded slowly inland.

The scouting party had not far to go; they had scarcely passed over the first hillock before they saw a single tall figure come walking toward them through the mist. This figure drew close and became a man of impressive mien, dressed in a white robe such as the good enchanters of the old religions wore.

Showing not the least surprise or fear at being confronted by seven armed sea-rovers, this man came near to them and stopped, raising his hands in a gesture of peace. "My name is Lukas," he said simply. He spoke in Harl's native language—with a bad accent, but Harl in his travels had managed to understand worse.

"Let us put some pointed questions to this 'chanter," said Torla at once, setting a hand on his dagger.

The one in wizard's garb raised his eyebrows, and his right hand and wrist flexed up slightly from his side. Perhaps it was only a gesture of remonstrance, but perhaps he was giving or preparing to give a signal.

"Let us wait!" said Harl sharply. In this mist, a small army might lie concealed within spear-cast. Harl nodded to Lukas politely, and gave the names of himself and his companions.

The white-robed man, his hands once more innocently at rest, bowed in grave acknowledgment. He said, "My house is very near; allow me to offer you its hospitality, at least for a meal."

"We thank you for the offer," said Harl, not liking the uncertainty in his own voice. The man's air of confidence had an unsettling effect. Harl wanted to ask what country they had landed in, but was reluctant to reveal his ignorance.

"I pray you," Lukas said, "some or all of you, come to my house, at least for food and drink. If you wish to leave men to guard your ship, I will order some refreshment sent to them."

Harl mumbled for a moment, undecided. He tried to imagine how Ay would have met this strange confident courtesy. Lukas needed no powers of clairvoyance to know that seven sea-rovers newly arrived on his beach had come by ship; but he might have come scouting to find out just how many men and ships there were.

"Wait here for a moment," Harl answered at last. "Then we seven will go with you." Two men stayed with Lukas while Harl and the others walked back over the little hill to explain matters to the rest of the crew. Some of these also argued for seizing the wizard at once and asking him pointed questions.

Harl shook his head. "We can do that at any moment. But enchanters are likely to be stubborn and prideful. And once a man's blood is out, it's hard to pour it back into his veins, should the letting prove to have been a mistake. We'll just watch him close, until we learn more. If food and drink are sent you, I suggest you treat the bearers with some courtesy." He need give the men no urging to caution and alertness; they were ready to strike at shadows now.

So Harl and his chosen six ringed themselves about Lukas and walked inland with him. Taking their cue from Harl, the six other sea-rovers tried to look as if the encirclement was all accidental and unintentional,

as if their hospitable host was not really their prisoner. And Lukas might have taken his cue from them, for he gave no sign of being bothered in the least.

As the party proceeded inland the mist grew thicker with each step. Before they had gone a hundred paces they found their way blocked by a line of low cliffs, heretofore invisible, from the top of which the grayness came rolling down. Built right against the foot of this cliff was the wizard's house; it was a simple stone building, with a look of newness, only one story high but big and solid enough to be a manor or a small fortress. At second glance, though, it was hardly a fortress, for the windows were low and wide, and the wide doorway stood unprotected by moat or wall.

Several people in simple servants' garb emerged from this doorway and bowed to the approaching Lukas and his guests; Harl noticed with some relief that none of the servants appeared to be anything more or less than human. The girls among them were comely, in a down-to-earth and lively style; they eyed the warriors sideways and giggled before hurrying back inside.

"No fairy-tale witches here," growled Torla. "Though I make no doubt they know enchantments of a sort."

Torla preceded Lukas through the doorway, with the rest of the sea-rovers following close on the heels of the white-robed man. Harl was last to enter, looking behind him as he did so, his hand on his ax. He could not begin to feel easy about any man who welcomed seven armed strangers into his house.

Inside there was nothing to feed Harl's suspicions, save more of the same strange confidence. The entrance opened directly into a great manorial room, in which were set more than enough tables and benches to have accommodated the long-ship's entire crew. At the huge hearth, a smiling and confident servant stood turning the spitted carcass of a weighty meat-animal. The roast was browned and dripping, so nearly done that it must have been started hours before.

Though a fair amount of light came in at the windows with the fog, on the walls were mounted enough torches to make the room quite bright. Through simple hangings that covered the rear wall, Harl could now and then glimpse servants going about tasks in distant chambers, which must be dug back behind the line of the cliff. There was of course no way of telling how many armed men might be in those rooms or lurking somewhere outside, but so far Harl had not seen a single weapon, barring table knives. Another easy-mannered servant was now laying out eight places at the head table, setting out worthy but not spectacular silver plates and tankards along with the cutlery.

Lukas proceeded straight to the head of the table—a couple of the sea-rovers keeping casually close to him—and turned with a gracious gesture. "Will you be seated? There is wine or ale, as you choose."

"Ale!" barked Harl, giving his men a meaningful look. He had heard of potent drugs and poisons whose taste blended very smoothly with that of wine; and even honest drink must not be allowed to take the edge of clearness from their minds. The others echoed Harl's call for ale, though Torla looked somewhat disappointed.

The company seated themselves, and two girls promptly came from behind the hangings to fill their tankards. Harl watched to see that the wizard's drink was poured from the same vessel as his own, and he waited until the wizard was wiping foam from his own lips before he tasted the drink himself. And even then Harl took only a sparing swallow.

The ale was neither too strong nor too weak, but . . . yes, there was something slightly peculiar in its taste. Still, Harl asked himself, in a place where everything was strange, how could the ale be otherwise?

And he allowed himself another sip.

"The ale of your country is strong and good," he ventured then, stretching the truth to make a compliment. "So no doubt you have many strong men here and you serve a strong king."

Lukas bowed slightly. "All that you say is true."

"And your king's name?"

"Our present king is called the Planetary Commander." The wizard smacked his lips over ale. "And whom do you serve?"

A tremulous groan passed around the board. The tankards scraped in unison as they were lifted, and then together they thudded down, all lighter than they had been. All except Harl's. He had not observed the least sign of treachery—come to think of it, there was no reason why there should be any treachery here—but still he decided firmly that he would not drink any more. Not just now.

"Whomdowe serve?" he asked the world. "Our good young lord is dead."

"Young Ay is dead!" Torla roared it out, like a man challenging the pain of some dreadful wound. A serving girl came to refill his tankard, and Torla seized her and pulled her onto his lap. But when she resisted his pawing with her thin weak arms, he only held her there gently, while a comical witless expression grew slowly on his face.

Something about this made Harl wonder. His own mind was perfectly clear . . . and yet he should be more concerned, more alert than he was. Should he not?

"Young Ay's death would be sad news," said Lukas calmly. "If it were true." The wizard seemed to be slumping slowly in his chair, utterly relaxed, forgetting dignity.

Oddly, no one took offense at the implication that they would be untruthful in such a matter. The men only sipped or drank, and there passed another murmur of mourning around the table.

"We saw him die!"

"Ah, yes!"

Harl's big fists were knotted, remembering their helplessness against the dragon. "We saw him die, in such a way that, by all the gods, I can scarce believe it yet myself!"

Lukas leaned forward, suddenly intent. "And what way was that?"

In a faltering voice Harl told him. Harl's throat quickly grew dry with speech; scarcely realizing that he did so, he interrupted his tale to take another swallow from his tankard. The truth about the dragon sounded in his own ears like a clumsy lie. What chance was there of King Gorboduc believing it?

When Harl's recital was finished, Torla started to stand up as if he meant to speak. The girl fell from his lap and landed with a yelp on her soft bottom. Torla, his face showing uncharacteristic concern, bent as if to help her. But she rose and scurried away, and Torla kept right on bending over until he was seated again, with his head resting on the table. Then he began to snore.

Torla's shipmates, those who were not on the verge of snoring themselves, only laughed at this. The men were all tired. . . . No. Something was wrong, they should not be drunk on one or two tankards apiece of any ale. And if they were drunk, some of them at least should be quarrelsome. Harl puzzled over the strangeness of this, took another thoughtful sip himself, and decided he had better get to his feet.

"Your king is not dead," the wizard was repeating to him in a monotone. "Not dead, not dead. Why should you believe that he is?"

"Why? We saw the—the dragon take him." But Harl was no longer quite sure of what he had seen or what he remembered. What was happening here? He swayed on his feet, half-drew his sword, and croaked, "Treachery! Wake up!"

His men's eyes were glassy or closing, their faces foolish. Some of them started to rise at his cry, but then they sank back, leaning on the table, letting weapons slide forgotten to the floor.

"Wizard," one man muttered, turning pleading eyes toward Lukas. "Tell us again that our king lives."

"He lives and shall live."

"He—he is—" Harl could not make him say that Ay was dead. In terror of he knew not what, he staggered back from the table, his sword sighing all the way out of its scabbard into his hand. To hurt anyone for any reason would be a monstrous crime, but he was so frightened that he felt he might do anything. "Stand back!" he warned the wizard.

The wizard also stood up, not shaken, with the length of the table between himself and Harl. From inside his robe Lukas took a mask like an animal's snout, which he fitted onto his face. His voice came out thickly. "No one will harm you here. I have shared with you the drink that makes men peaceful. Sit down now and talk with me."

Harl turned and ran for the door. Outside, the mist suddenly sparkled in his lungs. He ran on until he reached the hillock from which he could see the beached ship, only to discover that all the men he had left there were dead or dying. Half a dozen nearly human monsters with gray, snouted faces were busy arranging their bodies in rows on the beach. Those of his crew who could still move were offering no resistance, but were letting themselves be led like load-oxen.

It was really too bad that such a thing had happened. Harl groped reflexively for his sword and ax, but then remembered that he had thrown his weapons away somewhere.

"It's all right." Lukas' soothing voice came from just behind Harl. As Harl turned, the wizard continued, "Your men are all asleep. They need rest; don't wake them."

"Ahh, that's it!" Harl sighed with relief. He might have known there was no reason to worry, not on this good island of sparkling ale and sparkling air and friendly people who spoke nothing but truth. He saw now that the snouted monsters were only men who wore masks like the wizard's. They were taking good care of his men. Harl looked confidently at Lukas, waiting to be told some more good news.

Lukas seemed to relax, sighing behind his mask. "Come here," he said. And he led Harl down to the water's edge, where the wet sand was kept lapping to perfect smoothness by the little wavelets coming in.

With his finger the wizard drew in the wet sand, making the crude outline of a grotesque head. "Suppose

now that this is the dragon you thought you saw. What exactly did you think happened?"

Harl groaned wearily and sank to his knees, staring helplessly at the sketch. Now that he could relax, he felt very tired, and soon he was going to have to sleep. But right now he had to concentrate on what the wizard was showing him. "It seized Ay," Harl said. "In its mouth."

"Like this?" The wizard's finger drew a stick figure clenched in the dragon's teeth, waving helpless lines of arms and legs. Even as he drew, the little waves were coming in over the sketch, smoothing and blurring its lines.

"Like that," Harl agreed. He sat down awkwardly.

"But now all that is being wiped out," the wizard intoned. "Wiped away. And when this evil thing is gone, then the truth, what you and I want to be the truth, can be written in, to fill its rightful place." The waves were coming in, coming in, erasing the dragon. And Harl could sleep.

* * *

Somewhere along the line, during his hurried days of training, Matt asked, "Then King Ay is in fact dead—and not wounded, as I was first told?"

A tutor explained. "You were told he was only wounded, because he can be brought back to life. If your mission succeeds, his dying and his wounds will be as if they had never happened."

"Then if I should fail, someone else can try again? If I am killed back there, my life too may still be saved?"

He had his answer at once from the gravity of their faces. But they went into explanations. "All that you see being done here, all this work, is only to try to give that one man back his life. If we can restore him, then all the other bent and altered lives surrounding his will also flow back to where they were before the berserkers interfered. But not yours, for your life was not there in the original pattern. If you should die in the time of King Ay, that death will be real and final for you. And death will be real and final for all of us here, if you fail in your mission. No one will be able to try again."

* * *

One of the perquisites of Derron's new rank was a small private cubicle of an office, and right now he was silently cursing the promotion that had given Lisa such a fine place in which to corner him.

"Whose fault is it if not yours?" she was demanding, angry as he had never seen her angry before. "You admit you're the one who suggested they use Matt. Why didn't you suggest they go back and grab someone else from the past instead?"

So far Derron was holding on to his patience. "Operations can't just reach back and pull someone out of history every time they feel like it. Ay's crew are a special case; they're going right back where they belong. And Matt is a special case: he was about to die anyway when he was brought up. Now Operations already has brought up a couple of other men who were about to die in their own times, but those two haven't had a chance to learn where they are yet, let alone what the mission they're wanted for is all about. When they are able to understand it, there's a chance they may refuse."

"Refuse? What chance did Matt ever have to refuse to go, when you demanded it of him? He thinks

you're some kind of a great hero—he's still like a child in so many ways!"

"Beg your pardon, but he's not a child. Far from it. And he won't be helpless. Before we drop him he'll be trained in everything he'll need, from politics to weapons. And we'll be standing by—"

"Weapons?" Now she was really outraged. She was still like a child herself, in some ways.

"Certainly, weapons. Although we hope he's only going to be in Queensland for a few days and won't get involved in any fighting. We're going to try to have Ay rehabilitated and bring Matt back here before the wedding."

"Wedding!"

Derron hastened on. "Matt can take care of himself, and he can do the job that's expected of him. He's a natural leader. Anyone who can lead Neolithic people—"

"Never mind all that!" Becoming aware that her anger was useless, Lisa was sliding toward the brink of tears. "Of course he can do it! If he must. If he's really the only one who can go. But why were you the one to suggest that he be used? Right after I had talked to you about him. Why? Did you just have to make sure that he was temporary too?"

"Lisa, no!"

Her eyes were brimming over, and she hurried to the door. "I don't know what you are! I don't know you any more!" And she was gone.

* * *

Days ago, the plastic membrane, its task completed, had fallen away from his face. The new skin had appeared already weathered, thanks to the Moderns' magic, and with the membrane gone the new beard had grown with fantastic speed for two days before slowing to a normal rate.

Now, on the day he was to be dropped, Matt stood for the last time in front of the mirror of his room—he was still quartered in the hospital—to get a last good look at his new face. Turning his head from side to side, he pondered Ay's cheeks and nose and chin from different angles.

It was a much different face from the one that had looked back at him reflected in the still waters of Neolithic ponds; but he wondered if the spirit behind it had also been changed sufficiently. It did not seem to Matt that he was yet possessed of the spirit of a king.

"Just a few more questions, sire," said one of the omnipresent tutors, standing at Matt's elbow. For days now the tutors had conversed with him only in Ay's language, while treating him with the respect suitable for subordinates to show when addressing a warrior chief. Maybe they thought they were helping to change his spirit, but it was only playacting.

The tutor frowned at his notes. "First, how will you spend the evening of the day of your arrival in Queensland?"

Turning away from the mirror, Matt answered patiently. "That is one of the times we cannot be sure of, where Ay's lifeline is hard to see. I will stay in character as best I can and try to avoid making decisions, especially big ones. I will use my communicator if I think I need help."

"And if you should happen to meet the dragon machine that assassinated your predecessor?"

"I will try my best to make it move around, even if this means letting it chase me. So that you can find the keyhole to cancel out the dragon along with all the harm it has done."

Another tutor who stood near the door said, "Operations will be watching closely. They will do their utmost to pull you out before the dragon can do you harm."

"Yes, yes. And with the sword you are giving me, I will have some chance to defend myself."

The tutors' questioning went on, while the time for the drop neared, and a team of technicians came in to dress Matt. They brought with them the best copies that could be made of the garments Ay had worn when embarking for Queensland.

The costumers treated him more like a statue than a king. When it was time for the finishing touches, one of them complained, "If they've decided at last that we should use the original helmet, where is it?"

"Both helmets are out at the Reservoir," the other answered. "The communications people are still working on them."

The tutors kept thinking up more last-minute questions, which Matt continued to answer patiently; the dressers put a plastic coverall on him over Ay's clothes, and another officer came to lead him out to the little train that would take him through a tunnel to Reservoir H.

Once before he had ridden on this train, when he had been taken to see the sleeping men and the ship. He had not cared for the train's swaying and did not expect to enjoy riding the ship. As if in tune with this thought, one of the tutors now looked at his timepiece and handed Matt what Matt knew was an antimotion-sickness pill.

Halfway to the Reservoir, the train stopped at a place where it had not stopped last time, and two men got on. One was the chief called Time Ops; he and everyone else showed deference to the second man, whom Matt recognized from his pictures as the Planetary Commander. The Planetary Commander took the seat facing Matt and sat there swaying lightly with the car's renewed motion, holding Matt in steady scrutiny.

Matt's face was sweating, but only because of the plastic coverall. So, he was thinking, this is what a king looks like in the flesh. At once heavier and less rocklike than his television image. But this man was after all a Modern king, and so the king-spirit in him was bound to be different from that which had been in Ay.

The ruler of the Moderns asked Matt, "I understand you thought it important to see me before you were dropped?" When there was no immediate response, he added, "You understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I understand. Learning Ay's language has not driven yours out of my mind. I wanted to see you, to see with my own eyes what it is that makes a man a king." Some of the men in the background wanted to laugh when they heard that; but they were afraid to laugh, and quickly smoothed their faces into immobility.

The Planetary Commander did not laugh or even smile, but only glanced sideways at Time Ops before asking Matt, "They've taught you what to do if the dragon machine comes after you?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Matt saw Time Ops nod slightly to the Planetary Commander.

"Yes," said Matt. "I am to make the machine chase me, to get it to move around as much as possible. You will try to pull me out. . . ."

The Planetary Commander nodded with satisfaction as he listened. When the train stopped, he waved the others to get off first, so that he and Matt were left alone in the car. Then he said, "I will tell you the real secret of being a king. It is to be ready to lay down your life for your people, whenever and however it is needed." Then he nodded solemnly; he meant what he had said, or he thought he meant it, and maybe he considered it a piece of startling wisdom. His eyes for a moment were lonely and uncertain. Then he put on his public face again and began to speak loud words of encouragement, smiling and clapping Matt on the shoulder as they walked off the train together.

Derron was waiting at trackside in the low, rough-hewn cavern, to grip hands with Matt in the style of Ay's time. Matt looked for Lisa in the busy little crowd, but, except perhaps for Derron, only those were here who had some work to do. In his mind Matt associated Lisa with Derron, and sometimes he wondered why these two friends of his did not mate. Maybe he would mate with Lisa himself, if he came back from his mission and she was willing. He had thought on occasion that she would be willing, but there had never been time to find out.

The tutors and other busy men hustled Matt off to wait by himself in a small anteroom. He was told he could get out of the coverall, which he did thankfully. He heard another door open somewhere nearby, and into his room came the smell of the vast body of clean water, the lake that was hidden and preserved against the planet's future needs.

On the table in his little waiting room lay the sword that the Modern wizards had designed for him. Matt belted on the scabbard and then drew the weapon, looking at it curiously. The edge appeared to be keen, but no more than naturally so. The unaided eye could see nothing of what the Moderns had once shown him through a microscope—the extra edge, thinning to invisibility even under high magnification, which slid out of the ordinary edge when Matt's hand, and his alone, gripped the hilt. In his hand, the sword pierced ordinary metal like cheese, and armor plate like wood, nor was the blade dulled in doing so. The Moderns said that the secret inner edge had been forged of a single molecule; Matt had no need to understand that and did not try.

But he had come to understand much, he thought, sheathing the sword again. In recent days, sleeping and waking, Matt had had history, along with other knowledge, poured like a river through his mind. And there was a new strength in his mind that the Moderns had not put there. They marveled over it and said it must have come from his twenty thousand years' passage from the direction of the beginning of the world toward the direction of its end.

With this strength to work on the Moderns' teaching, one of the things he could see very clearly was that in Sirgol's history it was the Moderns who were the odd culture, the misfits. Of course, by mere count of years, by languages and institutions, the Moderns were far closer to Ay than Ay was to Matt's original People. But in their basic modes of thinking and feeling, Ay and The People were much closer, both to each other and to the rest of humanity.

Only such physical power as the Moderns wielded was ever going to destroy the berserkers—or could ever have created them. But when it came to things of the spirit, the Moderns were stunted children. From their very physical powers came their troubled minds, or from their troubled minds came their power over matter; it was hard to say which. In any case, they had not been able to show Matt how to

put on the spirit of a king, which was something he was now required to do.

There was another thing he had come to understand—that the spirits of life were very strong in the universe, or else they would long ago have been driven from it by the berserker machines of accident and disease, if not by the malignant ones that came in metal bodies.

Wishing to reach toward the source of life for the help he needed, Matt now did what Ay would have done before embarking on a dangerous voyage—he raised his hands, making the wedge-sign of Ay's religion, and murmured a brief prayer, expressing his needs and feelings in the form of words Ay would have used.

That done, he could see no reason to stay shut up any longer in this little room. So he opened the door and stepped out.

Everyone was as busy as before. Men worked, singly or in groups, on various kinds of gear. Others hurried past, moving this way and that, calling out orders or information. Most of them remained utterly intent on their business, but a few faces were turned toward Matt; the faces looked annoyed that he had come popping out of his container before it was time for him to be used and fearful lest he cause some disruption of the schedule.

After one look around, he ignored the faces. Ay's helmet was waiting for him on a stand, and he went to it and picked it up. With his own hands he set the silver-winged thing upon his head.

It was an unplanned, instinctive gesture; the expressions on the men's faces were enough to show him that his instinct had been right. The men looking on fell into an unwilling silence that was mirror enough to show Matt that the helmet had marked a transformation, even though in another moment the men were turning back to their jobs with busy practicality, ignoring as best they could the new presence in their midst.

In another moment, some of his tutors came hurrying up again, saying that they had just a few more questions for him. Matt understood that they felt a sudden need to reassure themselves that they were his teachers still, and not his subjects. But now that the spirit he needed had come to him, he was not going to give them any such comfort; the tutors' time of power over him had passed.

Looking for the Planetary Commander, he strode impatiently through the knots of busy people. Some of them looked up, angry at his jostling, but when they beheld him they fell silent and made way. He walked into the group where the ruler of the Moderns was standing and stood looking down into his wrinkle-encircled eyes.

"I grow impatient," said Matt. "Are my ship and my men ready or are they not?"

And the Planetary Commander looked back with a surprise that became something like envy before he nodded.

* * *

On his earlier trip to the Reservoir, Matt had seen Ay's crew lying asleep in specially constructed beds, while machines stretched their muscles to keep them strong, lamps threw slivers of sunlight onto their faces and arms to keep them tanned, and electronic familiars whispered tirelessly to them that their young lord lived.

This time the men were on their feet, though they moved like sleepwalkers, eyes still shut. They had been dressed again in their own clothes and armed again with their own harness and weapons. Now they were being led in a long file from Lukas' manor down to the beach and hoisted aboard their ship. The gunwale that had been scraped by dragon scales had been replaced, and everything else maintained.

The fog-generators had long ago been turned off. Each man and object on the thin crescent of beach stood in the center of a flower of shadow-petals, in the light of the cold little suns that clustered high up under the black distant curve of roof.

Matt shook Derron's hand again and other offered hands, then he waded a short distance through the fresh water and swung himself up onto the long-ship's deck. A machine was coming to push the craft out into deep water.

Time Ops came climbing on board with Matt, and he half-followed, half-led him on a quick tour of inspection that finally took both of them into the royal tent.

" . . . Stick to your briefing, especially regarding the dragon. Try to make it move around as much as possible—if you should see it. Remember that historical damage, even casualties, are of secondary importance, if we can find the dragon's keyhole. Then everything can be set right. . . ."

Time Ops' voice trailed off as Matt turned to face him, holding in his hands a replica of the winged helmet on his head, a replica he had just picked up from atop Ay's treasure chest. "I have heard all your lectures before," said Matt. "Now take this—and compose a lecture on carelessness for those whom you command."

Time Ops grabbed the helmet, glaring at it in anger that for the moment was speechless.

"And now," said Matt, "get off my ship, unless you mean to pull an oar."

Still gripping the helmet and muttering to himself, Time Ops was already on his way.

After that, Matt paid the Modern world no more attention. He went to stand beside Harl, who had been set like a sleepy statue beside the steering oar. The other men, still tranced, were in place on their benches. Their hands moved slightly on their oar's worn wood as if glad to be back, making sure they were where they really fitted.

Looking out past the prow, over the black water under the distant lights, Matt heard a hum of power behind him and felt the ship slide free. In the next moment he saw a shimmering circle grow beneath her—and then, with scarcely a splash, the darkness and the cave were gone, exploded into a glare of blue light. An open morning sky gave seabirds room to wheel away, crying their surprise at the sudden appearance of a ship. Free salt air blew against Matt's face, and a ground swell passed under his feet. Dead ahead, the horizon was marked with the blue vague line he had been told to expect—Queensland. Off to starboard, a reddened sun was just climbing clear of dawn.

Matt spent no time with last thoughts or hesitations. "Harl!" he roared out, at the same time thwacking his steersman so hard on the shoulder that the man nearly toppled even as his eyes broke open. "Must I watch alone all day, as well as through the end of the night?"

He had been told that these words, spoken in his voice, would wake the men, and so it happened. The warriors blinked and growled their way out of their long slumber, each man perhaps thinking that he alone had dozed briefly at his oar. Most of them had started rowing before their spirits were fully back in

control of their bodies, but within a few seconds they had put a ragged stroke together, and, a few moments later, all of them were pulling strongly and smoothly.

Matt moved between the benches, making sure all were fully awake, bestowing curses and half-affectionate slaps such as no one else but Ay would dare give these men. Before they had been given time to start thinking, to wonder what they had been doing five minutes ago, they were firmly established in a familiar routine. And if, against commanded forgetfulness, any man's mind still harbored visions of an attacking dragon and a slaughtered chief, no doubt that man would be more than glad to let such nightmare vapors vanish with the daylight.

"Row, boys! Ahead is the land where, they say, all women are queens!"

* * *

It was a good harbor they found waiting for them. This was Blanium, Queensland's capital, a town of some eight or ten thousand folk, a big city in this age. Immediately inland from the harbor, on the highest point of hill, there rose the gray keep of a small castle. From those high battlements the Princess Alix was doubtless now peering down at the ship, to catch a first distant look at her husband-to-be.

In the harbor there were other vessels, traders and wanderers, but less than a dozen of them; few for the season and for all the length of quay. Empire trade was falling off steadily over the years; seamen and landsmen alike faced evil days. But let Ay live, and a part of the civilized world would outlast the storm.

Scattered rivulets of folk were trickling down Blanium's steep streets, to form a throng along the quay as the long-ship entered the harbor. By the time his crew had pulled into easy hailing distance, and the cheers on shore had started, Matt beheld nearly a thousand people of all ranks waiting to see him land. From the castle whence, of course, the ship must have been spied a great distance out, there had come down two large chariots of gilded wood, drawn by hump-backed load-beasts. These had halted near the water's edge, where men of some high rank had dismounted and now stood waiting.

The moment of arrival came, of songs and tossed flowers of welcome. Ropes were thrown ashore, and a crew of dockmen made the long-ship fast to bollards on the quay, where it rode against a bumper of straw mats. Matt leaped ashore, concealing his relief at escaping the rise and fall of the sea. It was probably a good thing for Ay's reputation that the voyage had not been a longer one.

The delegation of nobles earnestly bade him welcome, a sentiment echoed by the crowd. King Gorboduc sent his regrets that he ailed too gravely to come down to the harbor himself and expressed his wish to see Ay as soon as possible in the castle. Matt knew that Gorboduc was old, and ill indeed, having only about a month to live, historically, beyond this day.

The king was still without a male heir, and the Queensland nobles would not long submit to the rule of any woman. For Alix to marry one of them might displease the others enough to bring on the very civil war that she and her father were seeking so desperately to avoid. So, logically enough, the king's thoughts had turned to Ay—a princely man of royal blood, young and extremely capable, respected if not liked by all, with no lands of his own to divide his loyalty.

Leaving orders for Harl to see to the unloading of the ship and the quartering of the crew, Matt took from Ay's coffer the jewels historically chosen by Ay as gifts for king and princess. And then he accepted a chariot ride up the hill.

In the Moderns' world he had heard of places in the universe where load-beasts came in shapes that

allowed men to straddle and ride them. He was just well satisfied that such was not the case on Sirgol. Learning to drive a chariot had presented problems enough, and today he was happy to leave the reins in another's hands. Matt hung on with one hand and used the other to wave to the crowd; as the chariots clattered up through the steep streets of the town, more hundreds of citizens, of all classes, came pouring out of buildings and byways to salute Matt with cries of welcome. The people expected the sea-rover to hold their country together; he hoped they were making no mistake.

The high gray walls of the castle at last loomed close. The chariots rumbled over a drawbridge and pulled to a halt in a narrow courtyard inside the castle walls. Here Matt was saluted by the sword and pike of the guard, and acknowledged the greetings of a hundred minor officials and gentry.

In the great hall of the castle there was gathered only a score of men and women, but these were naturally the most important. When Matt was ushered in, to the sound of trumpet and drum, only a few of them showed anything like the enthusiasm of the crowds outside. Matt could recognize most of the faces here from their likenesses in old portraits and secret photos; and he knew from the Modern historians that for the most part these powerful people were suspending judgment on Ay—and that there were a few among them whose smiles were totally false. The leader of this last faction would be the court wizard Nomis, who stood tall in a white robe such as Colonel Lukas had worn, wearing a smile that seemed no more than a baring of teeth.

If there was pure joy anywhere, it shone in the lined and wasted face of King Gorboduc. To cry welcome he rose from his chair of state, though his legs would support him for only a moment. After embracing Matt, and when they had exchanged formal greetings, the king sank wheezing back into his seat. His narrow-eyed scrutiny continued, giving Matt the feeling that his disguise was being probed.

"Young man," Gorboduc quavered, suddenly. "You look very like your father. He and I shared many a fight and many a feast; may he rouse well in the Warriors' Castle, tonight and always."

Ay would receive such a wish with mixed feelings and Ay was ever the man to speak out what he felt. "I thank you, Gorboduc, for meaning to wish my father well. May his spirit rest forever in the Garden of the Blessed above."

Gorboduc was taken with a sudden coughing spell; perhaps he gave way to it more fully than he needed, to spare himself making an issue of this correction by an upstart in his own hall.

But Nomis was not about to let his chance slip by. He strode forward, white robe flowing, while the king was momentarily incapacitated in the hands of his attendants.

Nomis did not speak to Matt directly, but stood beside him at the front of the hall and addressed the others. "You lords of the realm! Will all of you stand silent while the gods of your fathers are thus insulted?"

Most of them would, it seemed. Perhaps they were not sure of the insult; perhaps not of the gods. A few of them did grumble something, but in voices low enough for their words to be ignored.

Matt, his nerves stretched taut, did not ignore them. "I meant no insult to any here," he said clearly. The conciliatory words were hardly out of his mouth before he felt sure that they had been a mistake, too mild an utterance, too near an apology to have come from the real Ay. Nomis displayed a faint sneer of pleasure, and some of the others were suddenly looking at Matt with new expressions of calculation; the atmosphere had subtly changed.

The king had recovered from his coughing fit, and now all other matters must wait while his daughter was led forth by her attendant women. From behind a gauzy veil, Alix's eyes smiled briefly at Matt before she modestly lowered them; and he thought that the Moderns had spoken truly: there would be many lifelines more painful than Ay's to follow to the end.

While preparations were being made for the exchange of gifts, a friendly noble whispered to Matt that, if the Lord Ay had no objection, the king preferred that the betrothal ceremony be completed at once. It would mean unusual haste, but there was the matter of the king's health. . . .

"I understand." Matt looked toward the princess. "If Alix is agreeable, I am."

Her eyes, intense and warm, flicked up at him again. And in a few more minutes he and she were standing side by side with joined hands.

With a show of great reluctance being overcome only by a loyalty that was stronger still, Nomis came at the king's order to perform the ceremony of formal betrothal. Midway through, he raised his eyes to the audience as he was asking the ritual question, whether anyone present had objection to the proposed marriage. And the wizard showed not the least surprise when a loud answer came from one at whom he was staring.

"I—I do object! I have long sought the princess for my own. And I think the sea-rover will be better mated with my sword!"

The man had hesitated and stammered at the start, and the deep voice was perhaps a shade too loud for real confidence to be behind it. But the speaker looked formidable enough, young and tall and wide-shouldered, with arms thick enough to make the average man a pair of legs.

No doubt Gorboduc would have liked to intervene and forbid a duel, but he could not do so in the case of a formal betrothal challenge. There was no historical record of Ay's having fought a duel at his betrothal ceremony, an item not likely to have been overlooked by the chroniclers; still, Nomis had now pushed his pawn forward. For this Matt supposed he could blame only himself; he had somehow failed to match Ay's exact behavior and so had encouraged the challenge.

In any event, there was no doubt about what had to be done now. Matt hooked his thumbs into his wide leather belt, faced his challenger, and drew a deep breath. "Will you state your name?"

The young giant answered in a tense voice, his tone far more hesitant than his words. "I need no introduction to any person of quality here. But that you may address me with the proper respect, know that I am Yunguf, of the House of Yung. And know also that I claim the Princess Alix for my own."

Matt bowed. His manner was very smooth and cool, as Ay's would be. "Since you appear to be a worthy man, Yunguf, we may fight at once to decide this matter. . . . If you have no reason to delay?"

Yunguf flushed; his control slipped for a moment, and Matt saw that beneath it the man was certainly badly frightened—more frightened than such a warrior should be by the prospect of any duel.

The princess's hand fell on Matt's arm; she had put back her veil and now, looking soberly at Matt, she drew him a little aside and spoke to him in a low voice. "I hope with all my heart that you fare well in this matter, lord. My affections have never belonged to that man."

"Princess, has he ever asked to marry you?"

"A year ago he did." Alix's eyes flickered in maidenly modesty. "As others have. But when I said him nay, he never pressed the matter more."

"So." Matt looked across the hall to where Nomis was now intoning over Yunguf's arms a blessing of the Old Religion. Yunguf seemed to need all his courage to keep from shrinking away from the wizard's touch. No, it was not simple death or wounding in a duel that Yunguf feared.

Matt himself could face the personal danger calmly enough. He had spent most of his life within threat of violence from animals or nature—though, as one of The People, he had very rarely been in danger from another human being. The Moderns had given him Ay's lithe hitting power and endurance, had put not only skill but extra speed into his nerves. And they had given him his special sword, which alone could give him advantage enough to win a fight. No, it was not Yunguf's prowess that bothered Matt, it was the very fact of the duel and the changes in history that it must bring.

Save for the king and the princess and the two participants, everyone seemed happy at the prospect of a little bloodletting. There was a general impatience at the delay necessary for Ay's shield to be fetched up from the ship. This delay would have allowed Matt time to get away by himself for a minute and report to Operations; but there was nothing he could say to them, or they to him, that would get him out of this duel. So Matt passed time in trying to make light conversation with the ladies, while Yunguf stood glowering and almost silent among a group who seemed to be his relatives.

The shield was soon brought in by Harl, who entered running, displaying every sign of eagerness to see the fight get started—probably with the intention of unsettling his lord's opponent's nerves as much as possible beforehand.

The company moved outside, where they were joined enthusiastically by the minor nobility and such of the commons as could crowd within sight. The king, chair and all, was established at the best vantage point, with the higher nobles around him. This courtyard was evidently consecrated to weaponry, judging by the massive timber butts, much hacked and splintered, which stood along its farther side.

The noble who had whispered to Matt about the betrothal came whispering again, to ask if he was acceptable to the Lord Ay as referee; Matt nodded his agreement.

"Then, my lord, if you will take a stand in the arena."

Matt moved to the center of the clear paved space, which was large enough to allow a good deal of maneuvering, and drew his blade. When he saw Yunguf advancing on him with blade and shield ready, slow and powerful-looking as a siege tower, he understood that there would be no further preliminaries. It seemed that at Gorboduc's court killing was much less ritualized than wedding.

The sun had passed the zenith by now, the air was warm, and in the windless courtyard even moderate exercise soon raised a sweat. Yunguf's approach, with many feints, was slow and cautious almost to the point of parody, but no one watching showed surprise. Probably a feigned slowness at the start was Yunguf's usual style. Sure enough, he moved rapidly at last, and Matt stepped quickly back, his shield-sword-shield parrying in good order the three blows of the attacking combination. Matt had hoped that at the clash of blades his opponent's sword might break, but the contact had been flat-sided and glancing, and Yunguf's weapon was evidently tough. And, Matt realized now, if one sword was broken, another would be provided; if two or three, cries of sorcery would be raised. No, only wounds could now decide the issue.

Matt worked his way back to the middle of the arena, still keeping out of Yunguf's way. The knowledge weighed on him that any killing he did today, any wounds he carved, would be disruptive changes that worked to the advantage of the berserkers. But for Matt to be killed or beaten by Yunguf would damage history still more. The onlookers had already begun to murmur; no doubt his deep reluctance for this brawl was showing. He had to win, and the sooner the better—but without killing or maiming, if that were possible.

Matt raised his sword and shield in readiness as Yunguf moved slowly into attacking range. And when Yunguf charged again, Matt beat him to the thrust, aiming along the side of Yunguf's shield to damage the sword arm's shoulder muscles. But Yunguf was twisting his body with the force of his own lunge; as the huge man's blade slid off Matt's shield, Yunguf's body turned into the path of Matt's thrust, which cut between his upper ribs.

The wound was only moderately deep, and Yunguf was not yet stopped, but his next slash was weak and slow. Matt swayed back just enough to let the blow go by, then lunged in again, blocking sword with sword, hooking the wounded man's knee with his foot and using his shield to force Yunguf's upper body back.

Yunguf fell like a tree, and there was Matt's bloody point hovering at his throat, while Matt's foot pinned Yunguf's sword wrist to the paving stone.

"Will you—yield to me—the combat—and its prize?" Matt was now aware of his own panting and of Yunguf's whistling, strangely gurgling breath.

"I yield me." The answer, in strangled tones, came quickly enough. There were no grounds for hesitation.

Matt stepped wearily back, wondering what Ay customarily used to wipe a bloody sword blade. Harl came to perform that office for him and to scold him about his hesitancy at the start of the fight. Yunguf's relatives had gone to Yunguf's aid, and with their help the wounded man seemed to be sitting up easily enough. At least, thought Matt, a killing had been avoided.

He turned to the princess and her father, to find them with frightened eyes fixed on an object that lay on the ground nearby. It was Nomis's outer robe, snowy in the sunlight. The wizard himself was no longer in sight; the white garment discarded was a plain enough signal that he was donning black.

A cough sounded wetly behind Matt, and he turned to see Yunguf with bright blood upon his lips.

* * *

The great metal dragon lay motionless, buried almost completely in the muck of the sea bottom. Around it the dull life of the great depths stirred—in safety, for this berserker was not seeking to avoid killing anything. For it to end even a vegetable lifeline nonhistorically could provide a datum for the Moderns' huge computers, implacable as berserkers themselves, to use in their relentless search for the dragon's keyhole.

The dragon was still under the direct command of the berserker fleet that was besieging the planet in Modern times. On their own variety of sentry screens, that fleet's linked computers had observed the lifting of Ay's ship and crew to Modern times and their subsequent restoration to Ay's time, with one lifeline added.

It was obvious what the Moderns intended, obvious to machines who themselves knew well the theory

and practice of baiting traps. But a viable replacement for Ay was bait they could not afford to ignore. They must strike again, using one of the dragon's weapons.

But this time they must be subtle. The replacement must not be killed, at least not in any way that would spin a new thread of causation toward the dragon for the Moderns to follow. The linked berserker computers pondered electrically and arrived at what they considered an ideal solution: capture the replacement alive and hold him so, until the pillars of Sirgol's history came crashing down.

Even while in hiding, the dragon maintained around itself a net of subtle infraelectronic senses. Among the things it now observed in this way was a black-robed man, standing on a pillar of seaside rock about two miles from the berserker's hiding place and speaking on and on, rhythmically, into the empty air. From data in its memory banks the berserker deduced that this man was attempting to call supernatural forces to his aid.

And in the man's speech it caught the name of Ay.

* * *

In the full sunlight of midafternoon, Nomis stood chanting on his pinnacle of rock. The spells of deepest evil were best sung in darkness, but his hate and fear had grown until they seemed to spread a darkness of their own about him. He would not wait for the setting of the sun.

While the seabirds wheeled around him, crying in the wind, he sang in his thin but penetrating voice:

Demon of darkness, rise and stalk.
Put on the bones and make them walk.
Dead men's bones, through the weed and slime,
Walk and climb.
Walk to me here.
Speak to me here
Of the secret to bring my enemy's death.

There was more, much more, all cajoling and coercing the dark wet things that waited in the deeps for men to drown—waited for fresh-drowned bones to come falling through the fathoms, for limber young corpses that the demons could wear like garments in their endless revels at the bottom of the sea. The dark wet things down there possessed all the knowledge of death, including how the death of Ay might be accomplished—something Yunguf had proven unable to achieve, despite all the supernatural threats Nomis had lavished on the lout.

Nomis's thin arms quivered, holding drowned men's fingers over his head. Then his arms swept low as he bowed, still chanting, eyelids closing out the sun. Today the spells would work, today the hatred was in him like a lodestone, drawing to him things of utter evil.

When he came to a place in the chant where he could pause, he did so. He let down his arms and opened his eyes, wondering if he had heard another sound between the surges of the surf. Under his black robe his old man's chest was heaving with exertion and excitement.

A bird screamed. And from below, from somewhere on the furrowed length of cliff that climbed to this tabletop from the sea, there came once more a scraping sound, almost lost in the noise of wind and surf.

He had just given up listening for a repetition of the sound and had started to chant again, when, from much nearer the top of the cliff, almost from under Nomis's feet, there came a small clatter, a tumble of stones dislodged by some climbing foot or groping hand. The sound was in itself so ordinary that it momentarily drove all thoughts of magic from the wizard's tired mind. He could only think angrily that someone was about to discover his hideaway.

Before him as he faced the sea was a cleft that climbed to the tabletop between folds of rock. From just out of sight within this cleft he now heard the sound of grit crunched under a heavy foot.

And then Nomis's world was shaken around him, but a proof that put an end to a lifetime's nagging inward doubts. His first glimpse of his climbing visitor showed him a drowned man's skull, one small tendril of seaweed clinging to its glistening crown.

With quick smooth movements the whole creature now climbed into his view. It was a man-form, thinner than any living human but fuller than a skeleton. Drowned skeletons must change when a demon possessed them—this one looked more like metal than bone.

Having emerged completely from the crevice, the demon-shape halted. It stood taller than Nomis, so that it bent its skull-head slightly on its cable neck to look at him. He had to struggle not to turn and run, to stand his ground and make himself keep looking into the cloudy jewels that were its eyes. A drop of water sparkled, falling from one bonelike fingertip. Only when the thing took another step toward him did Nomis remember to reinforce his chalked protective ring with a gesture and a muttered incantation.

And then at last he also remembered to complete his astoundingly successful ritual with a binding spell. "Now you must guide and serve me, until you are released! And serve me first by saying how my enemy can be put to death."

The shiny jaw did not move, but a quavery voice came forth from a black square where the mouth should have been. "Your enemy is Ay. He landed today upon this coast."

"Yes, yes. And the secret of his death?"

Even if the berserker were to order another to accomplish the replacement's death, a track of causation would be left on the Moderns' screens. "You must bring your enemy Ay here, alive and unhurt, and give him to me. Then you will never see him more. And if you do this I will help you gain whatever else you may desire."

Nomis's mind raced. He had trained himself for nearly a lifetime to seize such an opportunity as this and he was not going to fail now, not going to be tricked or cheated. So . . . the demon wanted Ay kept alive! That could only mean that some vital magical connection existed between the sea-rover and this thing from the deeps. That Ay should have enjoyed such help in his career was far from surprising, considering the number of men he had sent to dwell among the fishes and the charmed life he himself seemed to lead.

Nomis's voice came out harsh and bold. "What is Ay to you, demon?"

"My enemy."

Not likely! Nomis almost laughed the words aloud. He realized now that it was his own body and soul that the wet thing craved; but by his spells and within his chalked circle Nomis was protected. The

demon had come to protect Ay. But Nomis would not let the demon know how much he had deduced. Not yet. He saw in this situation possibilities of gain so enormous as to be worth any risk.

"Harken, mud-thing! I will do as you ask. Tonight at midnight I will bring your enemy here, bound and helpless. Now begone—and return at midnight, ready to grant me all I ask!"

* * *

In the evening Matt went walking with Alix along the battlements, watching the stars come out, while the princess's ladies-in-waiting hovered just out of sight around corners.

Matt's preoccupation with his inner thoughts was evidently obvious. The girl beside him soon abandoned a rather one-sided effort to make small talk and asked him plainly, "Do I please you, lord?"

He stopped his moody pacing and turned to her. "Princess, you please me very well indeed." And it was so. "If my thoughts go elsewhere, it is only because they are forced to."

She smiled sympathetically. The Moderns would not think Alix a beautiful girl. But all his life Matt had seen women's beauty under sunburn and woodsmoke and toughness, and he could see beauty now in this different girl of his third world.

"May I know then, lord, what problems force your thoughts away?"

"For one thing, the problem of the man I wounded. I have not made a good beginning here."

"Such concern does you credit. I am pleased to discover you more gentle than I had been led to expect." Alix smiled again. No doubt she understood that his concern over Yunguf rested mainly on reasons of policy; though of course she could have no idea of how very far that policy ranged. She began to tell Matt of some things that she might do, people she could talk to, to help heal the breach between the new House of Ay and that of Yung.

Listening, and watching her, he felt he could be king in truth if she were queen beside him. He would not be Ay. He knew now, as the Moderns surely must, that no man could really live another's life. But, in Ay's name, he might perhaps be king enough to serve the world.

He interrupted Alix. "And do you find me pleasing, lady?"

This time her marvelous eyes did more than flicker; with a warm light of promise they held fast to his. And, as if by instinct, the duennas appeared at that moment to announce that the decent time limit for keeping company had been reached.

"Until the morning, then," he said, taking the princess's hand briefly, in the way permitted by courtly manners.

"Until the morning, my lord." And as the women led her away, she turned back to send him another glance of promise before passing out of sight.

He stood there alone, gazing after the princess, wishing to see her for ten thousand mornings more. Then he took off his helmet for a moment and rubbed his head. His communicator was still silent. No doubt he should call in to Operations and report all that had happened.

Instead he put the helmet on again (Ay would wear it as a sort of dress uniform) and went down into the keep, to find his way to the chamber where Yunguf had been bedded down by order of the court physician. Through the doorway of the room he saw a pair of the wounded man's relatives on watch inside and he hesitated to enter. But when they saw Matt they beckoned him in, speaking to him freely and courteously. None of the House of Yung, it seemed, were likely to bear him any ill-will for winning a duel.

Yunguf was pale and looked somehow shrunken. His difficult breathing gurgled in his throat, and when he twisted on his pallet to spit up blood, the bandage loosened from his wound, and air gurgled there also with his breath. He showed no fear now, but when Matt asked him how he did, Yunguf whispered that he was dying. There was more he wanted to say to Matt, but talking came too hard.

"Lord Ay," said one of the relatives reluctantly, "I think my cousin would say that his challenge to you was a lie, and that therefore he knew he could not win."

The man on the pallet nodded.

"Also—" The cousin paused as the other relative gestured at him worriedly. Then he went on, in a determined rush of words. "I think Yunguf would warn you that things harder to fight against than swords are set against you here."

"I saw the white robe left on the ground."

"Ah, then you are warned. May your new god defend you if a time comes when your sword will avail nothing."

A seabird cried in the night outside. Yunguf's eyes, with fear in them again, turned to the small window.

Matt wished the men of Yung well and climbed the stair back to the castle roof. He could be alone there and unobserved, since only a token watch was kept, and full night had now descended. Once secluded in lonely darkness, he took a deep breath and, for the first time, pressed his helmet's right wing in a certain way, switching on the communicator.

"Time Ops here." The crisp Modern voice was barely a whisper of sound, but it made the castle, and even the open night with its rising moon, somehow unreal. Reality was once more a grimly crowded cave-fortress at the center of a fantastic web of machines and energy. In what sounded to his own ears like a lifeless voice, Matt reported the duel and Nomis's departure, with the implied threat of the discarded white robe.

"Yes, our screens showed Yunguf's lifeline being hit by something. He's going to—" A paradox-loop censored out some words of Time Ops' speech. "Nothing vital is involved there, though." By that, of course, Time Ops meant that nothing vital to the Moderns' historical base was involved. "Have you seen or heard anything of the dragon yet?"

"No." The track of the rising moon showed the calm sea out to the distant horizon. "Why do you speak of the dragon so much?"

"Why?" The tiny voice seemed to crackle. "Because it's important!"

"Yes, I know. But what about my task here, of being king? If you help me I can do that, though it seems that I cannot be Ay."

There was a pause. "You're doing as well as can be expected, Matt. We'll tell you when there's corrective action you must take to stay closer to Ay's lifeline. Yes, you're doing a damn good job, from what our screens show. As I said, what happens to Yunguf isn't vital. Your watching out for the dragon is."

"I will watch out for it, of course."

After correctly breaking off the contact, Matt decided it was time he visited Ay's men, who had been quartered temporarily in a kind of guardroom built into the castle's massive outer wall. With this in mind he descended from the keep along an outer stair.

He was deep in thought, and it did not occur to him that the courtyard at the bottom of the stair was darker than it ought to have been. Nor did he wonder that the postern gate nearby stood half-open and unguarded. A sound of rapid movement at his rear alerted him, but too late; before he could draw sword a wave of men was on him, weighing him down. And before he could shed Ay's pride enough to utter a cry for help, something smothering had been bound tight around his head.

* * *

"Sir, can you spare a minute? It's important." Time Ops looked up impatiently behind his desk, but paused when he saw Derron's face and noticed what he was carrying. "Come in, then, Major. What is it?"

Derron walked stiffly into the office, carrying a winged helmet under his arm. "Sir, I've been—sort of hanging on to this. It's the extra one Matt found on his ship before he was dropped. Today some communications people came to see me about it. There was a continuous noise-signal being generated in its chronotransmitter."

Time Ops just sat there behind his desk, waiting not too patiently for Derron to get to the point.

"The communications people told me, sir, that the signal from this helmet was interfering with a similar signal put out by the helmet Matt's wearing. Whichever one he'd taken, he'd be walking around back there broadcasting a built-in noise, very easy for the berserker to identify as a chronotransmitter and home in on. The berserker must have thought it an obvious trap, sir, since it hasn't homed in and killed him yet." Derron's voice was very well controlled, but he could feel his anger in the tightness of his throat.

"So, you're shocked at what we're doing, Odegard. Is that it?" Time Ops grew angry too, but not guiltily or defensively. He was only annoyed, it seemed, at Derron's obtuseness. He flicked on his desk screen and spun a selector. "Take a look at this. Our present view of Ay's lifeline."

During his hitch of sentry duty, Derron had gotten pretty good at reading the screens. This was the first look he had today at what was happening to Ay's lifeline. He studied the picture carefully, but what he saw only confirmed his fears of yesterday. "It looks bad. He's getting way off the track."

"Matt's buying a little more present-time for us here, and so far that's all he's doing. Is it clear now why we're trying to get the dragon to kill him? Millions, many millions, have died in this war for nothing, Major."

"I see." His anger was growing more choking by the moment, because there was nowhere it could justly be vented. In hands that he could not keep from shaking, Derron held the helmet out in front of him for a

moment, looking at it as if it were an archeological find he had just unearthed. "I see. You'll never win unless you find that dragon's keyhole. Matt never was anything but a fancy piece of live bait, was he?"

"No, I wouldn't say that, Major." Time Ops' voice was less sharp. "When you first suggested that he be used, we weren't sure but that he could come out alive. But the first full-scale computer simulation showed us the way things pretty well had to go. No doubt you're right when you say bugging the helmet made the trap a little too obvious." Time Ops shrugged, a slight, tired motion. "The way things stand at this moment, Matt may be safer from berserkers than we are."

* * *

Matt came painfully awake, trying to cough around a gag of dirty cloth that had been stuffed into his mouth. His head ached, throbbing hideously, as if he had been drugged. He was being carried with a sickening jogging motion; when his head had cleared a little more, he understood that he was riding slung across a load-beast's humped back, his head hanging down on one side of the animal and his feet on the other. His helmet had fallen off somewhere; and there was no bouncing tug at his waist from the weight of sword and scabbard.

Six or eight men had him prisoner. They were walking near the load-beast in the darkness, guiding and leading it along a narrow winding path by moonlight. The men looked behind them frequently, and now and then they exchanged a few low-voiced words.

"... I think two of them are following, or they were..."

Matt heard that much. He tried the cords holding his wrists and ankles and found them strong and tight. Turning his head, he could see that the trail ahead wound among jagged pillars and outcroppings of rock; from what he knew of the country near Blanium he judged that they were right along the coast.

When the man who was leading the way turned and paused a moment to let the others close up, Matt saw without surprise that he was tall and thin and robed in black, and had belted round his lean waist a sword and scabbard that looked like Matt's. Nomis had taken for himself one of the power symbols of a king.

The way grew steadily rougher. Shortly the little procession came to a thin ridge, with deep clefts in the rock on either side of it; here the load-beast must be left behind. At Nomis's order, some of the men lifted Matt from its back. He tried to feign unconsciousness, but Nomis came to lift his eyelids and then regard him with a knowing grin.

"He's awake. Untie his feet, but see to it that his arms are doubly secure."

The men did so. The farther they progressed on this hike, the more often they stopped to look uneasily about them, starting at every sound of the night. They seemed to fear Nomis and whatever lay ahead almost as much as they feared the pursuit that must be coming after them from the castle.

With his arms still bound behind his back, men ahead and behind holding on to him, Matt was led across the single-file ridge, then made to scramble up through a long twisting chute, almost a tunnel between high walls of rock that shaded out the moon. Only Nomis, leading through the darkness, seemed to know the way. The sound of surf became audible, drifting from somewhere below.

A cloud was over the moon when the party straggled at last onto a tiny tableland of rock. Only Nomis immediately saw the figure that had been waiting, motionless as stone, for their arrival. When he saw it,

he quickly drew Matt's sword; and when Matt was pushed up out of the chute to within his reach, he gripped Matt's hair with one hand and with the other laid the bare blade against Matt's throat.

The moon came out then, and the other men saw the thing that stood watching them. Like odd chicks of some gaunt black bird, they squawked and scrambled to get behind Nomis, all making sure they stood within the old chalked diagram. For a few seconds, then, everything was still, save for the faint wind and the surf and one man's muttering in fear.

Keeping the sword against Matt's neck, Nomis pulled the gag from his face and displayed him to the berserker. "What say you, mud-thing, is this man indeed your enemy? Shall I slay him, then?"

The metal puppet might have been sent charging forward, far faster than any man could move, to pull Matt away to captivity. But there was the keen edge right against the jugular. The berserker would not risk a thread of responsibility for Matt's death.

"Wizard, I will give you power," said the demon. "And wealth, and the pleasures of the flesh, and then life everlasting. But first you must give me that man alive."

Nomis crooned in his certainty of victory, while at his back his men huddled in terror. In this moment when all desires seemed possible of attainment, there rose uppermost in his mind the memory of a day long ago, when a child-princess's mocking laughter had burned at him. "I want Alix," he whispered. To him the breaking of her pride would mean more than her young body.

"I will give her to you," lied the demon solemnly, "when you have given me that man alive."

In Nomis's ecstasy of triumph, his arm wavered slightly as he held the long sword. Matt was ready. His bound wrists still allowed him some arm movement, and as he jerked free with all his strength his elbow struck the wizard's old ribs with force enough to send Nomis sprawling and the sword spinning in the air.

The other men's terror was triggered into panic flight. They burst up from their crouched positions, first scattering blindly and then converging on the only path of escape, the narrow way by which they had ascended. Running straight, head down, Matt kicked the fallen sword ahead of him and still got there first by a stride, thanks to what the Moderns had done for his nerves and muscles.

The berserker was delayed by its need to avoid mangling the men who got in its way, but even as Matt reached the top of the path he felt a hand harder than flesh scrape down his back. It seized his clothing, but the fabric tore free. Then he was leaping, falling into the descending passage. At his back the other men were screaming in raw fear as they collided with one another and with the berserker.

When he landed he naturally fell, cutting and bruising himself without really feeling the injuries. The way was so narrow that he could not miss finding the sword he had kicked ahead of him. With his bound hands he groped behind him in the dark to pick it up by the blade, heedless of nicked fingers. Then he got his feet under him and scrambled some distance farther downward. He stumbled and fell again, hurting his knee, but he had gained a substantial lead on the tangled terror that was jamming the narrow chute behind him. One or more men had probably fallen and broken bones or injured themselves in other ways, and the rest were unable to get past them. They were all howling with mindless fear, and no doubt lacerating themselves further in the dark when they felt the chill touch of the berserker; it would be sorting through the men to find the one it wanted, trying to get the others out of its way. . . .

Matt propped the sword on its hilt behind him and, with the new skill of his nerves, slid his bonds against the edge of its blade. He had freed himself before he heard the machine's footsteps come crunching

toward him in the dark.

"That's it, that's it! We'll nail the damned thing now!" In Time Operations, men were crying out a hunters' jubilation that was as old as mankind. On their screens their giant computers were limning out the radii of a spiderweb, the center of which would hold the dragon. The data needed to draw the web was flowing in from human lifelines being bent and battered; the berserker seemed to be struggling with men in some enclosed space.

But still it had not killed again. And the locus of its keyhole was not yet in sight.

"Only a little more." Time Ops, staring wildly at his screens, pleaded for bloodshed. "Something?"

But there was no more.

* * *

Matt retreated, limping, out into the moonlight where he could see. The thing followed unhurriedly, sure of him now. He backed out onto the thin ridge, between yawning crevices too deep for the moonlight to plumb, gripping his sword's hilt in bleeding fingers. Pale in the moonlight and almost skeleton-thin, the machine followed him carefully. It did not want him to fall. It would choose the precise moment and then rush to catch him, as easily as a human athlete picking up a toddler from a broad walk.

Keeping his sword's point centered on the narrow way along which it would have to come, he had just time enough to steel his arm. A moment ago the berserker had been twelve feet away, and now it was on him. It made a wiping motion with one hand, to clear what appeared to be an ordinary sword blade from its path—and four steel fingers leaped free like small silver fish in the moonlight, while the monomolecular blade stayed where it was, centered by Matt's braced muscles.

The inertia of the machine's rush was great. Before it could halt itself, the sword point had gone through its torso, and what had been delicately controlled mechanism became dead hurtling weight. Matt went down before the force of it, but he clung to the edge of the rock. He saw it go tumbling over him, then falling in an endless slow somersault, taking with it the transfixing sword, which already glowed like a red-hot needle with the inner fire that it had kindled.

The demon vanished. From far down inside the crevice came a crash, and then another and another, echoing remotely. Matt pulled himself back onto the ridge and crawled a few feet; then he made himself stand and walk before he reached the place where the path was broad and safe.

He was battered and bruised, but he could move. Trying to keep in shadow, he limped past the phlegmatic, waiting load-beast. He had gone a dozen steps farther when the two men Nomis had left here as sentries pounced out of deeper shadows. As they seized him, his injured leg was twisted again, and he fell.

"Best let me go and run yourselves," he said to the buskined knees standing before him. "Back there, the devil has come for your master."

It made them take a moment to look back toward the distant commotion on the path. And then they themselves were seized, not by the devil but by the two men Matt had seen running up from the direction of the castle, ax and sword in hand. Around Matt there swirled a brief clashing of metal and choked cries that were quickly ended.

"Is this leg your worst hurt, lord?" Harl asked anxiously, putting his ax in his belt and bending over Matt.

"Yes, I do well enough."

Torla muttered grimly, "Then we will go on and slaughter the rest of them."

Matt tried to think. "No. Not now, at least. Nomis called up a thing from the sea—"

Torla shuddered now at the distant moaning. "Then let us away?"

"Can you stand, lord?" asked Harl. "Good, then lean on me." And having pulled Matt to his feet, he next detached something from under his cloak and held it out. "Your helmet, lord. It fell outside the postern gate and set us on the right trail."

Harl and Torla might think that he was dazed, or that it was the pain in his leg that made him slow to reach out for the helmet. Harl had carried it under his cloak as if it was no more than a shell of metal; but, worn like a crown, it weighed enough to crush a man.

* * *

Down in the sea-bottom muck the dragon stirred. The tantalizing bait-signal of the life-unit that the Moderns had sent as Ay's replacement was now very near the shore. If that life-unit could be captured without further damage to other lifelines, a berserker victory would be insured. To pursue the replacement inland, among other lives, would involve creating too much change: the dragon's auxiliary man-shaped device might have conducted such a pursuit almost unobtrusively, but it had been somehow lost. Still, the chance of seizing the important life-unit right along the coast was too good an opportunity to let slip. Darkening the water with an upheaved cloud of mud, the dragon rose.

* * *

Supported by a strong man on either side, Matt could make fair speed along the rough path that led back to Blanium. Not, he thought, that there was any real need for haste. Nomis and his men would certainly not be in pursuit; if Nomis had survived at all, his influence must have been thoroughly destroyed.

And the dragon? It had done what it could do to capture him, to take him alive, quietly and gently. He shuddered. It must be hiding in the sea. And it seemed that, unless he went to the water's edge and waved at it, it was not going to chase him. It could have come inland to kill him any time; peasants and armies and the walls of Blanium would not stop it.

No, if the berserker wanted him dead he would have been dead now, and even his magic sword would not have helped him for a moment. He had seen and heard enough of berserkers to be sure of that.

"How made you your escape, lord?"

"I will tell you later. Let me think now."

Make the dragon chase you,said Time Ops.We will try to pull you out in time.So far there had been no pulling out.A king must be ready to give his life,said the Planetary Commander, making what he thought was an important point, as he spoke from the depths of his own missileproof shelter.

The Moderns were fighting to save the tribe-of-all-men, and to them Matt or any other individual was only an implement for fighting. Save his life once, then shove him forward again to draw the lightning of the stone-lion's eye. . . .

In a flash of insight, many things suddenly fell into place for Matt. Scraps of knowledge he had picked up in the Moderns' world, about the war as it was fought with screens and missiles, lifelines and keyholes, suddenly dovetailed with what had happened to him here in the world of Ay. Of course, he should have seen it before! It was the Moderns who wanted him killed here, by the berserkers. And the berserkers, knowing this, wanted instead to take him alive!

He was still bleakly pondering this insight when the communicator in his helmet began to speak into his ear with its tiny voice that no one else could hear. In his new anger, he paid no attention to what it was saying; he came near pulling the helmet off and throwing it away, with all its lying voices. He would throw it away, he told himself, when he came to the sea. . . . No, he must avoid the shore from now on. When he came to another bottomless crevice, then.

But instead he gripped his companions' shoulders, stopping them. "Good friends, I must be alone for a little while. To think—and pray."

His good friends exchanged glances with each other; his request must seem a strange one, coming at this time. But then their king had been through a day that might make any man act strangely.

Harl frowned at him. "You are weaponless."

"There are no enemies about. But let your dagger stay with me if you will; only let me have a short time to myself."

And so they left him, though with repeated backward glances, left him sitting alone on a rock in the moonlight. He was their king now, and they loved him, and he smiled after them with satisfaction, thinking that he would have them at his side for many a year yet. He could and he would. There was no way for the Moderns to punish him, if he chose never to go hunting dragons. Matt was all the Moderns had between themselves and chaos; they would not dare to pull him back to the future, not while he worked at living King Ay's life. He might bungle the job now and then and provide only a second-best defense for the Moderns' world; but it was all the service they were going to get. He took off the buzzing helmet and scratched his head leisurely. Then, holding the helmet before him, he twisted its right wing, letting Time Ops' tiny voice come out above the faint murmur of the unseen surf.

"—Matt, answer me, it's urgent!"

"I am here. What would you have?"

"Where are you? What's going on?"

"I am going on. To my bride and my kingdom."

There was a pause. Then: "Matt, it may be that that won't be enough, your going on trying to take Ay's place."

"No? Enough for me, I think. I have already been demon-hunting and have used up your sword. So I think I will not chase after a dragon that seems content to let me live."

"Demon-hunting? What?"

Matt explained. He could hear consternation at Operations' end; they had not thought of the enemy's trying to capture him alive. Time Ops was soon back, pleading with a ragged urgency that Matt had never heard in the commander's voice before. "Matt, whatever else happens, you can't let that thing capture you alive."

"No? I have often been ordered to make it chase me."

"Forget that. No, wait. You can't be captured. But just avoiding capture and going on playing Ay's part isn't going to be enough, not now. You've done as well as anyone could, but your filling in for Ay simply isn't going to work."

"Then why does the enemy want to stop me?"

"Because you are buying us a little time here. They want to eliminate any lingering chance we have—any chance of finding some new defense, of pulling off a miracle. They want to play it safe and finish us off quickly. All I can do is tell you—ask you—to go down along the seashore where the damned thing is hiding. Make it come out and chase you and stir up some change."

"And if it should capture me?"

There was a pause, a murmur of voices exchanged at the other end, and then another familiar voice came on.

"Matt, this is Derron. All these people here are trying to figure out the best way to tell you to die. You're to get the berserker to kill you. If it catches you alive, then you must find a way to kill yourself. Kill yourself because it's caught you. Understand? Die, in one way or another, and make the dragon somehow responsible. All along, that's been what Operations wanted of you. I'm sorry. I didn't know how it was until after you were dropped."

Time Ops came back. "Matt, you can shut us off now and go on to claim your bride and your kingdom, as you said you were going to. But if you do that, all your life your world there will be slowly decaying around you. Decaying inside, where you won't be able to see it, becoming less and less probable. Up here we'll be dying, all of us. At your end of history the chaos will begin in your children's time—that's what you'll be leaving them."

"You lie!" But Matt's voice broke with the cry, for he knew that Time Ops was not lying. Or, if he was lying again about this fact or that, still he was telling the truth about what was needed to win the war.

"Matt? This is Derron again. What you just heard is the truth. I don't know what more to say to you."

Matt cried bitterly, "My friend, there is no need for you to say anything more!" And with a jerk of his hand that almost broke the helmet wing, he cut the voices off.

Too late. He had silenced them too late. Slowly he put the helmet back on his head and stood up. Soon he saw Harl and Torla coming toward him; they had doubtless been watching protectively from not far away, overhearing some of the strange language of his prayers.

When they came up to him he said, no longer angry, "My leg gives me trouble. I think the path will be easier along the water's edge."

Between his friends, he moved toward the sound of surf. He went slowly, for in truth his leg did feel worse, having stiffened while he sat. No matter, now. He walked along thinking only in disconnected pictures and phrases, since the time for thought and worry was now past.

He had pulled the stone-man from the poison-digger's pit—that was twenty thousand years ago, and indeed it seemed to him that he had lived through twenty thousand years since then. He had been able to see the tribe-of-all-men grown to stretch across immensities of space and time. He had known, a little, the spirits of life. He had been a king, and a woman with the spirit of a princess had looked at him with love.

They had been walking for a minute along the water's edge, when, without surprise, he saw a shoreline rock ahead suddenly move and become a nightmare head that rose amid moonlit spray on a sinuous column of neck. The dragon's vast body heaved itself up from the sea and lurched toward the men, moving faster than a man could run.

"I have the dagger," Matt said to his friends. "And right now both of you can use sword and ax better than I." The dragon was not coming for Harl or Torla, and it would have been a pointless insult to bid them run.

He kept the dagger hidden in his hand, the blade turned up flat behind his wrist, as the dragon's head came straight toward him on its tree-trunk neck that could swallow a man and hold him safe. Sword and ax hewed at it uselessly from either side. Matt was very tired, and in a way he welcomed the grave-wide jaws, which, he saw now, held no teeth. Only in the instant of the jaws' soft powerful closing did he bring the dagger up, holding the point steady at his own heart while the pressure came down. . . .

* * *

"It killed him." The first time, Time Ops whispered the words unbelievably. Then he let them out in a whoop. "It killed him, it killed him?" The other hunters, who had been frozen at their screens, sharing their computers' creeping certainty of failure, were galvanized once more into action. On their screens the spiderwebs tightened like nooses, imaging a target greenly solid and sure.

* * *

In the deep cave called Operations Stage Two, metallic arms extended a missile sideways from its rack while a silvery circle shimmered into being on the floor beneath. With a cluck and a jolt the arms released their burden. Falling, the missile was gone.

* * *

Derron had seen a keyhole hit and closed before, and he understood perfectly what a victory he was seeing now. On the screens, the whole writhing build-up of change surrounding Ay now burst like a boil; and the lines began to straighten themselves out like a string figure when the loose end is pulled. History's flow turned strongly and safely back into its familiar riverbed. Only the one lifeline that had been the catalyst was newly broken; you had to look closely at the screens not to miss that small detail.

The raw stump of that line left no room for reasonable doubt, but still Derron's hand went out to punch his communicator for Stage Three. "Alf? Listen, will you let me know what shape he's in, the moment—All right, thanks."

He waited, holding the circuit open to Stage Three, gazing blankly through tired eyes at the screens. Around him in Operations' nerve center, the first waves of jubilation foamed up around the edges of discipline.

"Derron?" Alf's reply was slow in coming and slow-spoken when it came, to tell about the wound in the heart and to speculate on how the man must have arranged to have the knife driven in. And to confirm that Matt's brain had been too long without blood and oxygen for the medics to do anything for him now.

Derron flipped off the switch and sat at his post, tired and immobile. Some of the victorious hunters around him were breaking out cigars, and one was calling jovially for a ration of grog. A few minutes later, Time Ops himself came strolling by with a glass in his hand, but he was not smiling as he paused at Derron's position.

"He was a good man, Odegard. The best. Not many can accomplish a thousandth part of what he did. With their lives or with their deaths." Time Ops raised his glass in a solemn, sipping toast to the bitten-off green line on the screen. Later, of course, there would be ceremonies, and perhaps a monument, to say the same thing more elaborately.

"The thing is," said Derron, "I don't really much care what happens to the world. Only about a person here and there."

Time Ops might not have heard, for the noise of celebration was growing louder. "You did a necessary job, Major, and did it well, from the start of the operation right up until today. We're going to be expanding even more here in Time Operations and we'll need good men in key positions. I'm going to recommend you for another promotion. . . ."

* * *

Nomis stood with arms upraised, gray beard and black robes whipping in the wind, while he persisted in the evil endeavor that had kept him here for the past three days on his secret pinnacle of rock. Nomis persisted, though he could not escape the feeling that all his labors against Ay were doomed to be in vain. . . .

On the battlement, Alix shaded her eyes against the morning sun and strained them seaward to catch sight of sail or mast. She waited, trembling inwardly a little, for her first sight of her future husband and lord. . . .

The cliffs of Queensland were dead ahead, Harl knew, though still a day's rowing out of sight. He frowned, gazing out to port across the sea's gray face, where nothing broke the line of the horizon but a distant line of squalls. Then his face cleared with the thought that young Ay, in his tent amidships, was doubtless planning for the fighting that was sure to come.

PART THREE

The barefoot man in the gray friar's habit reached the top of a rise and paused, taking a look at the country ahead of him. In that direction, the paved road he was following continued to run almost straight under a leaden sky, humping over one gentle hill after another, cutting through scrubby woods and untended fields. The stones of this road had been laid down in the days of glory of the great Continental Empire; there was not much else in the world that had survived the centuries between then and now.

From where the friar stood, the road appeared to be aimed at a slender tower, a sharp and lonely temple spire, gray and vague in the day's dull light, which rose from an unseen base at some miles' distance. The friar had walked with that spire in sight for half a day already, but his goal still lay far beyond.

The friar was of medium height and wiry build. His appearance seemed to have little relation to his age; he might have been anywhere between twenty and forty. His scantily bearded face was tired now, and his gray robe was spotted with mud of darker gray. Here along the shoulders of the road the fields were all ankle-deep in mud, and they showed no sign of having been plowed or planted this spring or last.

"Oh, Holy One, I thank you again that I have had this pavement to follow for so much of my journey," the friar murmured, as he started forward again. The soles of his feet looked as scarred and tough as those of well-used hiking boots.

Except for the distant spire, the only sign of any recent human presence in this unpromising landscape was a heap of low, ruined walls at roadside just ahead. Only the fact of ruin was recent; the walls themselves were old and might have been a part of a caravanserai or military post in the days of the Empire's strength. But last month or last tenday a new war had passed this way, dissolving one more building into raw tumbled stones. What was left of the structure looked as if it might be going to sink without a trace into the mud, even, before the spring grass could start to grow around the foundations.

The friar sat down on the remnant of the old wall, resting from his journey and looking with minor sadness at the minor destruction about him. After a bit, in the manner of one who cannot sit entirely still for very long, he leaned over and took one of the fallen stones in his lean strong hands. Looking at the stone with what might have been a mason's practiced eye, he fitted it deftly into a notch in the stump of wall and sat back to study the effect.

A distant hail made him raise his head and look back along the way he had come. Another lone figure, dressed in a habit much like his own, was hastening toward him, waving both arms for attention.

The first friar's thin face lighted gently at the prospect of company. He returned the wave and waited, forgetting his little game of masonry. Soon he got to his feet.

Presently the approaching figure resolved itself into a man of middle height, who was almost stout and who had recently been clean-shaven. "Glory to the Holy One, revered Brother!" puffed this newcomer, as he arrived at last within easy talking distance.

"Glory to His name." The bearded friar's voice was warm but unremarkable.

The portly one, a man of about thirty, seated himself heavily on the low wall, wiped at his face, and inquired anxiously, "Are you, as I think, Brother Jovann of Ernard?"

"That is my name."

"Now may the Holy One be praised!" The heavier man made a wedge-sign with his hands and rolled his eyes heavenward. "My name is Saile, brother. Now may the Holy One be praised, say I—"

"So be it."

"—for He has led me in mysterious ways to reach your side! And many more shall follow. Brother

Jovann, men will flock to you from the four corners of the world, for the fame of your heroic virtue has spread far, to the land of Mosnar, or so I have heard, and even to the lands of the infidel. And here in our own land—even at this moment, in the isolated villages of these remote hills—some of the most backward peasants are aware of your passage."

"I fear my many faults are also known hereabouts, for I was born not far away."

"Ah, Brother Jovann, you are overly modest. During my arduous struggles to reach your side, I have heard again and again of your holy exploits."

Brother Jovann, his face showing some concern, sat down on the wall again. "Why have you struggled, as you say, to reach my side?"

"Ahh." What a struggle it had been, said Saile's headshake. "The flame of my determination was first kindled several months ago, when I was told by unimpeachable sources, eyewitnesses, how, when you were with the army of the Faithful in the field, you dared to leave the sheltering ranks, to cross no-man's-land into the very jaws of the infidel; there to enter the tent of the arch-infidel himself and preach to him the truth of our Holy Temple!"

"And to fail to convert him." Jovann nodded sadly. "You do well to remind me of my failure, for I am prone to the sin of pride."

"Ah." Saile lost headway, but only for a moment. "It was, as I say, upon hearing of that exploit, Brother Jovann, that it became my own most humble wish, my most burning and holy ambition, to seek you out, to be among the very first to join your order." Saile's eyebrows went up questioningly. "Ah, it is true, then, that you are on your way to Empire City even now, to petition our most holy Vicar Nabur for permission to found a new religious order?"

The thin friar's eyes looked toward the spire in the distance. "Once, Brother, God called me to rebuild fallen temples with stone and brick. Now, as you say, I am called to rebuild with men." His attention came back to Brother Saile, and he was smiling. "As for your becoming a member of the new order when it is formed, why, I can say nothing yet of that. But if you should choose to walk with me to Empire City, I will be happy for your company."

Saile jumped to his feet, to bob up and down with bowing. "It is I who am most happy and most honored, Brother Jovann!"

Saile prolonged his thanks as the two men walked on together. He had then commented at some length on the unpleasant prospect of yet more rain falling and was discoursing on the problem of where, in this deserted-looking land, two mendicant friars might hope to obtain their next meal, when there occurred a distraction.

A speedy coach was overtaking them on the road. The vehicle was not ornate, but it was well built, looking as if it might belong to some nobleman or prelate of lower-middle rank. The friars' ears gave them plenty of warning to step aside; four agile load-beasts were making the wheels clatter over the leveled stones at a good speed.

As the coach rumbled past, Brother Jovann felt his eyes drawn to the face of an occupant who rode facing forward, with his head visible in profile and one elbow extended slightly from a window. So far as could be judged, this man was of stocky build. He was well dressed, old and gray-bearded, though the short-cut hair on his head was still of ginger color. His thick mouth was twisted slightly, as if ready to spit

or to dispute.

"They might have given us a lift," Brother Saile muttered unhappily, looking after the coach as it dwindled into the distance. "Plenty of room. There were no more than two passengers, were there?"

Brother Jovann shook his head, not having noticed whether there had been any other passengers. His attention had been held by the old man's eyes, which had probably never seen the friars at all. Those eyes, fixed in the direction of the Holy City a hundred miles and more away, were clear and gray and powerful. But they were also very much afraid.

* * *

When Derron Odegard walked out on the victory celebration at Time Operations, he had no clear idea of where he was going. Only when he found himself approaching the nearby hospital complex did he realize that his feet were taking him to Lisa. Yet, it would be best to face her at once and get it over with.

At the student nurses' quarters he learned that she had moved out the day before, after having gotten permission to drop out of training there. While being tested and considered for other jobs, she was sharing a cubicle with another girl in a low-rank, uplevel corridor.

It was Lisa's new roommate who opened the door to Derron's knock; since the girl was in the midst of doing something to her hair, she went back inside the cubicle and pretended not to be listening.

Lisa must have seen Derron's news in his face. Her own face at once became as calm as a mask, and she remained just inside the half-open door, letting him stand in the narrow corridor to be brushed by the curious and incurious passers-by.

"It's Matt," he said to her. When there was no reaction, he went on, "Oh, the battle's won. The berserkers are stopped. But he sacrificed himself to do it. He's dead."

Proud and hard as a shield, her mask-face lifted slightly toward him. "Of course he is. He did the job you gave him. I knew he would."

"Understand, Lisa—when I went to him with that sales talk I thought he was going to have a chance, a good chance."

She was not going to be able to keep the shield up, after all; with something like relief he saw her face begin to move and heard her voice begin to break. She said, "I—knew you were going to kill him."

"My God, Lisa, that wasn't what I meant to do!" He kept his hands from reaching out to her.

Slowly dissolving and melting into a woman's grief, she leaned against the doorjamb, her hands hidden behind her. "And now—there's—n-nothing to be done!"

"The doctors tried—but no, nothing. And Operations can't go back to do anything for Matt in the past—it'd wreck the world if we tried to pull him out of that mess now."

"The world's not worth it!"

He was murmuring some banality and had reached out at last to try to comfort her, when the door slammed in his face.

* * *

If Lisa was the woman he needed, he would have stayed there; so he thought to himself a few days later as he sat alone in his tiny private office on the Operations Level. He would have stayed and made her open the door again or else kicked it down. It was only a door of plastic, and behind it she was still alive.

The fact was, of course, that the woman he did need had been for a year and more behind the door of death. And no man could smash through that. A man could only stand before that door and mourn, until he found that he was able to turn away.

Derron had been sitting in his office staring into space for some little time before he noticed an official-looking envelope that some courier must have left on his small desk. The envelope was neat and thick, sealed and addressed to him. After looking inertly at it for a while he took it up and opened it.

Inside was the formal notice of his latest promotion, to the rank of lieutenant colonel. ". . . in consideration of your recent outstanding service in Time Operations, and in the expectation that you will continue . . ." A set of appropriate collar insignia was enclosed.

The insignia held in his hand as if forgotten, he sat there a while longer, looking across the room at an object—it was an ancient battle-helmet, ornamented with wings—that rested like a trophy atop his small bookcase. He was still doing this when the clangor of the alert signal sounded throughout Operations and pulled him reflexively to his feet. In another moment he was out the door and on his way to the briefing room.

* * *

Latecomers were still hurrying in when a general officer, Time Ops' chief of staff, mounted the dais and began to speak.

"The third assault we've been expecting has begun, gentlemen. Win or lose, this will be the last attack the berserkers can mount outside of present-time. It'll give us the final bearing we need to locate their staging area twenty-one thousand years down."

There were a few scattered expressions of optimism.

"I suggest that you don't cheer yet. This third attack gives every indication of involving some new tactics on the enemy's part, something subtle and extremely dangerous."

The general performed the usual unveiling of some hastily assembled maps and models. "Like the previous attack, this one is aimed at a single individual; and, again, there's no doubt about the target's identity. This time the name is Vincent Vincento."

There was a murmur at that name, a ripple of awe and wonder and concern. There would have been a similar reaction from almost any audience that might have been assembled on Sirgol. Even the half-educated of that world had heard of Vincento, though the man was some three hundred years dead and had never ruled a nation, started a religion, or raised an army.

Derron's attention became sharply focused, and he sat up straighter, his feeling of inertia slipping away. In his prewar historical studies he had specialized in Vincento's time and place—and that locale was also oddly connected with his private grief.

The general on the dais spoke on, in businesslike tones. "Vincento's lifeline is among the very few ultraimportant ones for which we have provided continuous sentry protection along their entire effective lengths. Of course, this doesn't mean that a berserker can't get near him. But should one of them try to do violent harm to Vincento, or even to any other person within a couple of miles of him, we'd be on to its keyhole in a couple of seconds and cancel it out. The same thing applies if they should try to kidnap or capture Vincento himself.

"This special protection actually starts back in Vincento's grandparents' time and runs along his lifeline until his completion of his last important work at the age of seventy-eight, and we can assume the enemy knows that this protection exists. That's why I said that this time the berserkers' plans are no doubt subtle."

After going into the technical details of the sentry protection against direct violence, the general moved on to discuss another point. "Chronologically, the enemy penetration is not more than a ten-day before the start of Vincento's famous trial by the Defenders of the Faith. This may well be more than a coincidence. Suppose, for example, that a berserker could alter the outcome of this trial to a death sentence for Vincento. If the Defenders should decide to burn him at the stake, the berserker's part in his death would be too indirect to give us any help in finding its keyhole.

"And also remember—an actual death sentence would not seem to be necessary for the enemy's purpose. Vincento at the time of his trial is seventy years old. If he should be put to torture or thrown into a dungeon, the odds are high that his life would be effectively ended."

A general seated in the front row raised a hand. "Doesn't he historically undergo some such treatment?"

"No. That's a fairly common idea. But, historically, Vincento never spent a day of his life in prison. During his trial he occupied a friendly ambassador's quarters. And after his recantation, he passed the few years left to him in physically comfortable house arrest. There he gradually went blind, from natural causes—and also laid the foundation of the science of dynamics. On that work of his, needless to say, our modern science and our survival most heavily depend. Make no mistake about it, those last years of Vincento's life after his trial are vital to us."

The questioning general shifted in his front rank chair. "How in the world is an alien machine going to influence the outcome of a trial in an ecclesiastical court?"

The briefing officer could only shake his head and stare gloomily at his charts. "Frankly, we've still a shortage of good ideas on that. We doubt that the enemy will try again to play a supernatural role, after the failure of their last attempt along that line.

"But here's an angle worth keeping in mind. Only one enemy device is engaged in this attack, and from all screen indications it's a physically small machine, only about the size of a man. Which immediately suggests to us the possibility that this one may be an android." The speaker paused to look round at his audience. "Oh, yes, I know, the berserkers have never, anywhere, been able to fabricate an android that would pass in human society as a normal person. Still, we hardly dare rule out the possibility that this time they've succeeded."

A discussion got going on possible countermeasures. A whole arsenal of devices were being kept in readiness in Stage Two for dropping into the past, but no one could say yet what might be needed.

The briefing officer pushed his charts aside for the moment. "The one really bright spot, of course, is that

this attack lies within the time band where we can drop live agents. So naturally we'll count on putting men on the spot as our main defense. Their job will be to keep their eyes on Vincenzo from a little distance; they'll be people able to spot any significant deviation from history when they see it. Those we choose as agents will need to know that particular period very well, besides having experience in Time Operations. . . ."

Listening, Derron looked down at the new insignia he was still carrying in his hand. And then he began at last to fasten them on.

* * *

About two miles along the road from the spot where they had met, Brother Jovann and Brother Saile topped yet another rise and discovered that they were about to catch up with the coach that had passed them so speedily not long before. Its load-beasts unharnessed and grazing nearby, the vehicle stood empty beside the broken gate of a high-walled enclosure, which crouched under slate roofs at the foot of the next hill ahead.

Atop that hill there rose the already famed cathedral-temple of Oibbog, much of its stonework still too new to bear moss or signs of weathering. Holding its spire now immense and overshadowing against the lowering sky, the graceful mass seemed almost to float, secure above all human effort and concern.

The ancient road, after passing the broken gate of the monastery at the foot of the new cathedral's hill, swerved left to meet a bridge. Or the stub of a bridge, rather. From where the friars now stood they could see that all of the spans were gone, together with four of the six piers that had supported them. The river that had torn them down was raging still, jamming tree trunks like forked spears against the supports that remained. Obviously swollen to several times its normal flow, the current was ravaging the lowlands on both its banks.

On the other side of the torrent, beyond another stub of bridge, the walled town of Oibbog sat secure on its high ground. People could be seen moving here and there in those distant streets. Inside the town's gate, which opened on the Empire road, more coaches and load-beasts waited, having been interrupted in journeys outbound from the Holy City.

Brother Jovann watched leaden clouds still mounting ominously up the sky. Fleeing from these clouds was the river, a great swollen terrified snake being lashed and goaded by distant flails of lightning, a snake that had burst its bonds and carried them away.

"Brother River will not let us cross tonight."

When he heard this personification, Brother Saile turned his head slowly and cautiously around, as if he wondered whether he was expected to laugh. But before he had time to decide, the rain broke again, like a waterfall. Tucking up the skirts of their robes, both friars ran. Jovann sprinted barefoot, Saile with sandals flapping, to join the occupants of the coach in whatever shelter the abandoned-looking monastery might afford.

* * *

A hundred miles away, in what had been the capital of the vanished Empire and was now the Holy City of the embattled Temple, the same day was warm and sultry. Only the wrath of Nabur the Eighth, eighty-first in the succession of Vicars of the Holy One, stirred like a storm wind the air of his luxurious private apartments.

This wrath had been some time accumulating, thought Defender Belam, who stood in robes of princely scarlet, waiting in silent gravity for it to be over. It had been accumulated and saved up till now, when it could be discharged harmlessly, vented into the discreet ears of a most trusted auditor and friend.

The vicar's peripatetic tirade against his military and theological opponents broke off in midsentence; Nabur was distracted, and his pacing stopped, by a dull scraping sound, ending in a heavy thud, which floated in from outside, accompanied by the shouts of workmen. The vicar moved to look down from a balconied window into a courtyard. Earlier, Belam had seen the workmen down there, starting to unload some massive blocks of marble from a train of carts. Today a famed sculptor was to choose one block, and then begin work on Nabur's portrait-statue.

What did it matter if each of eighty predecessors had been willing to let their worldly glorification wait upon posterity?

The vicar turned from the balcony suddenly, the skirts of his simple white robe swirling, and caught Belam wearing a disapproving face.

In his angry tenor, which for the past forty years had sounded like an old man's voice, the vicar declaimed, "When the statue is completed we will have it placed in the city's Great Square, that the majesty of our office and our person may be increased in the eyes of the people!"

"Yes, my Vicar." Belam's tone was quite calm. For decades he had been a Defender of the Faith and a Prince of the Temple. From close range he had seen them come and go, and he was not easily perturbed by vicarial tempers.

Nabur felt the need to explain. "Belam, it is needful that we be shown increased respect. The infidels and heretics are tearing apart the world which has been given by God into our care!" The last sentence came bursting out, a cry from the inner heart.

"My faith is firm, my Vicar, that our prayers and our armies will yet prevail."

"Prevail?" The vicar came stalking toward him, grimacing sarcastically. "Of course! Someday. Before the end of time! But now, Belam, now our Holy Temple lies bleeding and suffering, and we . . ." The vicarial voice dropped temporarily into almost inaudible weakness. "We must bear many burdens. Many and heavy, Belam. You cannot begin to realize, until you mount our throne."

Belam bowed, in sincere and silent reverence.

The vicar paced again, skirts flapping. This time he had a goal. From his high-piled worktable he snatched up in shaking fist a pamphlet that was already worn from handling, and wrinkled, as if it had perhaps been once or twice crumpled up and thrown across a room.

Belam knew what the pamphlet was. A contributing if not a sufficient cause of today's rage, he thought, with his cool habit of theologian's logic. A small thorn compared with others. But this particular barb had stabbed Nabur in the tenderest part of his vanity.

Nabur was shaking the paper-covered booklet at him. "Because you have been away, Belam, we have not yet had the opportunity to discuss with you this—this backstabbing abomination of Messire Vincenzo's! This so-called Dialogue on the Movement of the Tides! Have you read it?"

"I—"

"The wretched man cares nothing about the tides. In this pamphlet his purpose is to once more promulgate his heresy-tainted dreams. He clings to his wish to reduce the solid world beneath our feet to a mere speck, to send us all flying around the sun. But even that is not enough. No, not for him!"

Belam frowned now in real puzzlement. "What else, my Vicar?"

Nabur advanced on him in a glow of anger, as if the Defender were the guilty one. "What else? I will tell you! The arguments of this pamphlet are cast in the form of a debate among three persons. And Vincenzo its author intends one of these fictional debaters—the one who defends traditional ideas, who therefore is described as 'simple-minded' and 'below the level of human intelligence'—he intends this person to represent ourself!"

"My Vicar!"

Nabur nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes. Some of our very words are put into the mouth of this simpleton, so-called!"

Belam was shaking his head in strong doubt. "Vincenzo has never been moderate in his disputes, which have been many. Many? Nay, continuous, rather. But I am convinced that he has not in this pamphlet or elsewhere intended any irreverence, either to your person or to your holy office."

"I know what he intended here!" Vicar Nabur almost screamed the words. Then the most honored man in the world—possibly also the most hated, quite possibly also the most burdened by what he saw as his God-given tasks—groaned incontinently and, like a spoiled child, threw himself into a chair.

Arrogance remained, as always, but the spoiled-child aspect did not last long. Irascible humors having been discharged, calm and intelligence returned.

"Belam."

"My Vicar?"

"Have you yet had time to study this pamphlet, while on your travels perhaps? I know it has been widely circulated."

Belam gravely inclined his head.

"Then give us your considered opinion."

"I am a theologian, my Vicar, and not a natural philosopher. Therefore I have taken counsel with astronomers and others and find my own opinion in this matter generally confirmed. Which is that Vincenzo's arguments in this pamphlet concerning the tides really prove nothing regarding the movement of the celestial bodies, and are not even very accurate as regards the tides themselves."

"He thinks we are all fools, to be dazzled by brilliant words into accepting whatever shoddy logic he offers us. And that we will not even realize it when we are mocked!" The vicar stood up for a moment, sighed, and then tiredly resumed his seat.

Belam chose to ignore the theory, which he did not for a moment believe, that the pamphlet's aim was

sacrilegious mockery. The real issue was vital enough. "As the vicar may possibly recall, I had occasion some years ago to write to Vincenzo regarding his speculations on the idea of a sun-centered universe. Then, as now, such theorizing caused me concern in my capacity as Defender."

"We recall the occasion very well, ha hum. In fact, Messire Vincenzo has already been summoned here to stand trial for his violation in this pamphlet of your injunction at that time. . . . Belam, what were the precise words of your warning, again?"

Belam thought awhile before answering and then spoke slowly and precisely. "I wrote him, first, that mathematicians are quite free to calculate and publish whatever they wish regarding the celestial appearances or any other natural phenomena—provided they remain strictly in the realm of hypothesis.

"Secondly, it is quite a different matter to say that in fact the sun is in the center of the universe. That in fact our globe spins from west to east each day, while revolving round the sun each year. Such statements must be considered very dangerous; though not formally heretical, they are liable to injure faith by contradicting the Holy Writings."

"Your memory, Belam, is even more than usually excellent. Just when did you write this letter of injunction?"

"Fifteen years ago, my Vicar." Belam showed a dry smile momentarily. "Though I must admit that I re-read our archive copy this morning."

He was utterly serious again. "Thirdly and lastly, I wrote Vincenzo that if some real proof existed of the sun-centered universe he champions, we should then be forced to revise our interpretations of those passages in the Holy Writings which would appear to say otherwise. We have in the past revised our scriptural interpretations, for example in regard to the roundness of the world. But, in the absence of any such proof, the weight of authority and traditional opinion is not to be set aside."

Nabur was listening with great attentiveness. "It seems to us, Belam, that you wrote well, as usual."

"Thank you, my Vicar."

Satisfaction appeared mixed with anger in the vicarial mien. "In this pamphlet Vincenzo has certainly violated your injunction! The debater into whose mouth he puts his own opinions advances no convincing proofs, at least none that can be grasped by mere mortals like ourselves. And yet he does argue, at great length, that in very truth our globe spins like a toy top beneath our feet. To convince the reader of this is his plain intention. Then!" The vicar stood up, dramatically. "Then, on the last page, our argument—often expressed by us as a means of compromising these difficult philosophical matters—our argument, that God may produce whatever effect He likes in the world, without being bound by scientific causes—our argument is quoted by the simpleton-debater who has been wrong about everything else; quoted as coming from 'a person of high learning and wisdom, supremely above contradiction.' And at this the other debaters piously declare themselves silenced and decide to adjourn for refreshment. One cannot fail to see them, and their author, laughing up their sleeves!"

While the vicar struggled to regain his breath and calm once more, there was silence in the apartment, save for the workmen's shouts and laughter drifting in. What were they doing out there? Oh, yes, only the marble. Belam uttered a brief prayer that he might never again be required to order a stake prepared for a heretic.

When Nabur spoke again, it was in a reasonable tone. "Now, Belam. Other than this weary argument on

tides, which all seem to agree is inconclusive, do you suppose there can exist anywhere any evidence for Vincento's spinning world? Anything he might impertinently introduce at his trial to . . . disrupt its course?"

Belam drew himself up, slightly but perceptibly. "My Vicar, we shall of course conduct Vincento's trial, or any other, with the greatest zeal for the truth that we can muster. Vincento may argue in his own defense—"

"Of course, of course!" Nabur interrupted with a rapid dismissive waving of his hand; it was the gesture he used at a time when another man might apologize. But then he still waited for an answer.

After frowning thoughtfully at the floor, Belam began to give what a later age would call a background briefing. "My Vicar, I have through the years made an effort to keep abreast of astronomers' thinking. I fear many of them, religious and laymen both, have become Messire Vincento's enemies. He has a relish and skill for making others look like fools. He has arrogance, in claiming for his own all that these new devices, telescopes, discover in the heavens. An arrogant and argumentative man is hard to bear, and triply hard when he is so often in the right." Belam glanced up sharply for a moment, but Nabur had not taken the description as applying to anyone but Vincento. "My Vicar, is it not true that this pamphlet was brought to your attention by some priest-astronomer whom Vincento has offended and bested in some debate?" Though Belam knew of a number of such men, he was really only guessing.

"Hum. It may be so, Belam, it may be so. But Vincento's offense is real, though it may have been maliciously called to our attention."

The two of them were pacing now, with old men's measured tread, sometimes orbiting each other like perturbed planets. The Defender of the Faith said, "I raise the point to show the difficulty of obtaining unbiased testimony in this matter from other scholars. They are certainly unlikely to rush to Vincento's defense. Nevertheless, I believe that most astronomers now perform their calculations using the mathematical assumption that the planets, or some of them, at least, revolve about the sun. Of course, that idea is not original with Vincento, nor is the idea that our globe is only a planet. It seems these assumptions make the mathematics of celestial movement more elegant and somewhat more satisfying to the scholar; fewer epicycles need be included in the orbits to make them fit the circular form—"

"Yes, yes, Vincento makes the mathematics more elegant. But stick to the point. Can he have proof, mathematical or otherwise? Plain evidence of any kind?"

"I would say rather the contrary."

"Ha!" Nabur stopped pacing and faced Belam squarely, almost smiling.

The Defender said, "Had Vincento any plain proof, I think he would have printed it here. And there is solid evidence against him." Belam gestured with his scholar's hands, frail fingers unsure of technicalities but still grasping firmly whatever they were required to grasp. "It seems that if our globe did make a yearly journey round the sun, the relative positions of the fixed stars should appear to us to change from month to month, as we approached certain constellations or drew away from them. And no such displacement of the stars can be observed."

Vicar Nabur was nodding, looking satisfied.

Belam made a shrugging gesture. "Of course, it is possible to argue that the stars are simply too distant for our measurements to discover such displacement. Vincento will always have arguments, if he wants to use them. . . . I fear that no other astronomer is going to be able to prove him wrong, much as some of

them would love to do so. No, I think we must admit that the celestial appearances would be essentially the same if wedidgo round the sun."

"That is enough for any reasonable man to say."

"Exactly, my Vicar. As I wrote Vincenzo, where there is lack of other certainty, we have no excuse for turning our backs on tradition and substituting strained interpretations for the plain meaning of the Holy Writings." Belam's voice was rising gradually, achieving the tone of power that it would have in court. "We of the Temple have the solemn duty before God to uphold the truth that those Writings reveal. And, my Vicar, what I wrote to Vincenzo fifteen years ago is still true today—I have never been shown any proof of the motion of the world we stand on, and so I cannot believe that any such proof or any such motion exists!"

The vicar had resumed his seat. Now his face was gentle, as he raised his hands, then clamped them down decisively on the arms of his ornate work-chair. "Then it is our decision that you and the other Defenders must proceed with the trial." Nabur spoke regretfully at first, though as he went on his anger gradually returned, less vehement than it had been. "We do not doubt that he can be convicted of violating your injunction. But understand, we have no wish to visit any great punishment upon our erring son."

Belam bowed his grateful assent to that.

Nabur went on, "In charity we grant that he intended no attack upon the Faith and no insult to our person. He is only headstrong, and stubborn, and intemperate in debate. And sadly lacking in gratitude and humility! He must be taught that he cannot set himself up as a superior authority on all matters temporal and spiritual. . . . Did he not once attempt to lecture you on theology?"

Belam once more inclined his head in assent, meanwhile sharply warning himself that he must guard against taking any personal satisfaction in Vincenzo's approaching humiliation.

Even now Nabur could not let the subject drop, not yet. "Ah, I could curse the man! In the past, we ourself have been among the first to heap praise on his achievements. We have granted him hours of private audience. We have shown him friendliness to a degree we do not always extend to princes! Before ascending to this chair, we ourself once even wrote a pamphlet in his praise! And now, how are we repaid?"

"I understand, my Vicar."

* * *

"I see you have requested assignment to one particular time, Colonel Odegard." Colonel Lukas spoke the words around his cigar, while at the same time using the formal style of address. He was a sometime drinking acquaintance of Derron's, who might be finding it a little difficult to strike the right balance in his role today of examining psychologist. If he had been a close friend of Derron's he would probably have disqualified himself as examiner. But what close friends did Derron have these days among the living? There was Chan Amling . . . an old classmate, yes. Bosom buddy, no. The fact was that he had none.

Lukas was looking at him. "Yes, I did," Derron answered, somewhat tardily.

Lukas shifted his cigar. "The two days Vincenzo spends near the town of Oibbog, delayed on his way to his trial. Waiting to cross a flooded river. Had you any particular reason for wanting that time?"

Oh, yes, he had. He had not put it into words, however, even for himself, and was not about to try to do so now. "Just that I know the locale very well. I once spent a long holiday there. It was one of those places that didn't change very much in three or four hundred years." Of course, the town and cathedral of Oibbog, like all the other surface landmarks of the planet, were now in the past tense. Derron's particular reason was that the long holiday there had been wither. He caught himself sliding forward tensely on his chair again and forced himself to slump a little and relax.

Squinting through his cigar smoke, Colonel Lukas shuffled uncertainly through the papers on his desk and then threw one of his sneaky fast balls. "Have you any particular reason for wanting to be an agent at all?"

For Derron that question immediately called up an image of Matt and Ay, two forms blending more and more into a single kingly figure as they receded from the moving moment of the present. Their heroic image seemed to be growing steadily larger with distance, the way a mountain in the old days on the surface had sometimes seemed to swell as you hiked away from it.

But that was not the sort of reason a man could talk about; at least not without all of a sudden sounding far too noble and dedicated.

Derron made himself slide back in his chair again. "Well, as I said, I know the period very well. I believe I can do a good job. Like everyone else, I want to win the war." He was uttering noble sentiments after all, and too many of them. Better stretch it into a joke. "I want prestige, I suppose. Accomplishment. Promotion. You name it. Did I hit the right one yet?"

"What is the right one?" Lukas shrugged glumly. "I don't know why I'm required to ask that—why does anyone want to be an agent?" He shaped his papers into a neat stack before him. "Now, Colonel. Just one more thing I want to bring up before certifying you as good agent material. That is the matter of your personal religious views."

"I'm not religious."

"How do you feel about religion?"

Relax, relax. "Well, frankly, I think that gods and temples are fine things for people who need crutches. I haven't yet found any necessary."

"I see. I think this is a valid psychological point which should be raised, because there are dangers inherent in sending back to Vincento's time anyone who is likely to find himself susceptible to ideological fever." Lukas made an apologetic gesture. "You as a historian understand better than I how thick dogmas and doctrines are in the air back there. Religious and philosophical controversy seems to draw all the energy of that era."

"Yes." Derron nodded. "I see what you mean. You don't want a fanatic of any stripe. Well, I'm not what they call a militant atheist. My conscience will let me play any part that's necessary." Maybe he was explaining too much, talking too much, but he had to make this point, he had to be allowed to go. "I'll be a rabid monk and spit on Vincento if required."

"I don't suppose Time Ops will ask that of you. All right, then, Derron. You're in."

And Derron tried not to show too much relief.

* * *

What Operations really decided was that he would do best in the part of a traveling scholar. They gave him a name—Valzay—and started to build for him an identity that had never historically existed. He was supposedly from Mosnar, a country distant from Vincento's but for the most part faithful to the Holy Temple. Valzay was to be one of the itinerant intellectuals of Vincento's time, who wandered somewhat like sacred cows across minor political and language boundaries, from one university or wealthy patron to another.

Derron and a dozen other chosen agents, mostly male, were rushed into preparation. Working singly or in pairs, they were to keep Vincento under practically continuous observation during the now doubly critical days of his life just preceding his trial and during it. Each agent or team would remain on the job for a day or two and then be relieved by another. Chan Amling, now a captain, was assigned as Derron's team partner; they would not often be together on the job, but would alternate in keeping Vincento more or less in sight. Amling was to play the role of one of the wandering friars who in Vincento's day were quite numerous, and for the most part only loosely disciplined.

The program of preparation was hurried and rugged, beginning with the surgical implantation of communications transducers in jawbone and skull. This would enable each agent to remain in contact with Operations without having to mumble aloud or wear anything as bulky as a helmet.

There were speech and manners to be rehearsed, some knowledge of events current in Vincento's day to be memorized, and some knowledge to be repressed, of events in the immediate future of that time. There were the techniques of communications and weaponry to be mastered—all this in a few days.

Amid his fatigue and concentration, Derron noticed almost without surprise that Lisa was now working in Operations, one of the calm-voiced girls who relayed orders and information to individual sentries and could do the same for slave-unit operators, or for live agents when some of them took the field.

He had only scraps of free time now and made no effort to use any of it to speak to her. The knowledge that he was on his way back to Oibbog had crowded almost everything else out of his mind. He felt like a man going to a rendezvous with his own true love; the people of flesh and blood around him, Lisa included, took on the semblance of shadows for him even as the dead past grew more vivid.

Then one day, as he and Amling sat in folding chairs at the side of Stage Three, resting between behavior drills, Lisa came walking past and stopped.

"Derron, I want to wish you success."

"Thanks. Pull up a chair, if you like."

She did. Amling decided he wanted to stretch his legs, and he ambled away.

Lisa said, "Derron, I shouldn't have accused you of killing Matt. I know you didn't want him to die, that you felt as bad as I did about it. What happened to him wasn't your fault." She was speaking like someone who had lost a friend among other friends in war. Not like someone whose life had been destroyed with the life of her beloved. "I've just been mastering my own internal difficulties—you know about that—but that's no excuse for what I said. I should have known you better. I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Derron shifted uncomfortably in his chair, sorry that she felt so bad about it. "Really, it's . . ."

. Lisa, I thought you and I might have had—something. I suppose not the whole thing there can be between a man and a woman, but still something good."

She looked away from him, a faint frown creasing her forehead. "I had some feeling like that about Matt. But that much of a feeling would never be enough for me."

He went on hurriedly, "As far as anything permanent and tremendous is concerned, well, I've tried that already, once in my life. And I'm still up to my neck in it, as you may have noticed. I'm sorry, I've got to get moving." And he jumped up out of his chair and hurried to where Amling and the others were not yet ready for him.

* * *

When the day came for the drop, the costumers dressed Derron in clothing that was slightly worn but good, suitable for a fairly successful gentleman-scholar on his travels far from home. In his haversack they placed a reasonable supply of food, along with a flask of brandy. Into his wallet went a moderate sum in the proper coins, silver and gold, and also a forged letter of credit on an Empire City bank. They hoped he would not need much money, and plans did not call for him to get to within a hundred miles of the Holy City. But just in case.

Chan Amling was issued a somewhat worn and soiled gray friar's habit, but very little else, in keeping with his mendicant role. He did half-seriously request permission to take along a pair of dice, arguing that he would not be the first friar in history to go so armed. But Time Ops was soon able to establish that such equipment was scarcely standard issue for religious, even in Vincento's time, and he turned down the request.

Both Derron and Chan had hung around their necks abominably carved wooden wedge-symbols. The images differed in detail of design, but each was big enough to conceal the bulk of a miniaturized communicator, as well as being too ugly and cheap-looking for anyone to want to steal. If any of Vincento's contemporaries should be moved to wonder audibly why Derron wore such a thing, he was to say that it was a present from his wife.

From an arsenal assembled in Stage Three, Odegard and Amling were issued sturdy travelers' staffs. These again were dissimilar in outer detail, but both were much more effective weapons than they appeared to be. All of the agents were armed, with staffs or other innocent-appearing devices; they were all to be dropped within half a minute of one another, present-time, though, of course, they were to arrive in different places and on different days.

Their processing for this mission had been too hurried and with too much individual attention for them to get to know one another very well. But during the last few minutes before the drop, as the masquerade-costumed group bade one another good luck and good berserker hunting, there was an atmosphere of joking camaraderie in Stage Three.

Derron felt it. It crossed his mind that once again he had good friends among the living. The launching file formed on order, and he took his place in it calmly, looking forward over short Chan Amling's gray-cowled head.

Amling turned his head slightly. "Five will get you ten," he whispered, "that I land up to my crotch in mud someplace. Out of sight of the bloody road, at least."

"No bet," said Derron automatically, as the count began. The line moved briskly forward, one figure

after another in front of him abruptly vanishing from his sight. Amling made some last remark that Derron could not catch, and then Amling too was gone.

It was Derron's turn. He swung a booted foot in a long stride out over the mercurial launching circle, then brought it down.

* * *

He was standing in darkness, and around him was the unmistakable, never-to-be-forgotten feeling of open air. Except for a mere whisper of breeze and a drizzle of rain, he was immersed in an echoless silence, a great loneliness in which his materialization must have passed unnoticed. Good.

"Reverend Brother?" he inquired of the darkness in a low voice, speaking in Vincento's language. There was no answer; Amling might well have come down in some mud hole out of sight of the road. He had a knack for achieving what he was willing to bet on.

As Derron's eyes grew more accustomed to the gloom, he realized that the hard surface under his own boots did indeed seem to be the stones of the old Empire highway that passed through Oibbog. Operations had put at least half of the team spatially on the bull's-eye, then. Whether they had done as well temporally remained to be seen, though rain and darkness were reassuring signs.

Subvocalizing, Derron tried to reach Operations for a routine check-in, but the communicator seemed utterly dead. Some kind of paradox-loop would be blocking contact. Such things cropped up now and then; there was nothing to do but hope that the condition would not last long.

He waited the agreed-upon few minutes for Amling, meanwhile opening his staff at one end and consulting the compass thus revealed, to make sure of the direction he was facing on the road. Then, after calling once more to his reverend brother with no result, he began to walk, boots clopping solidly on the pavement. Lightning flashed distantly at irregular intervals. He drank deep breaths of the washed air.

He had not gone far before the transducer behind his ear gave him a sudden twinge, ". . . Odegard, can you read me yet? Colonel Odegard . . ." The male voice sounded weary and bored.

"This is Colonel Odegard; I read you."

"Colonel!" Sudden excitement. Off mike: "We've got contact, sir!" Back on: "Colonel, it's plus two days and three hours here since you were dropped. Time scale has been slipping."

"Understand." Derron kept his speech subvocal. "I'm about plus five minutes since dropping. Still on the road in the rain, at night. No contact with Amling yet."

"Odegard, you're blurring on the screens." It was Time Ops' voice speaking now. "But it looks like you're farther from the cathedral than we intended, just about two miles. You may be outside the safety zone, so get in closer to Vincento as fast as possible." By "safety zone," of course, Time Ops meant the zone of protection against any direct violence from the berserker, a zone created by the intense concentration of sentry observation round Vincento's lifeline. "We've just pulled out the team ahead of you. They report all's well with Vincento. You say you haven't seen Amling yet."

"Right." Derron stepped up his pace a trifle, though he was having to tap along with his staff to be sure of not floundering off the pavement into the mud.

"We haven't found him either. Can't see his line in this blurring on the screens. It may be just the time-slippage and a paradox-loop."

Lightning flared directly ahead of Derron, obligingly showing him that his road ran straight for some distance in that direction and giving him a glimpse of the cathedral spire, which was farther off than it should have been. He supposed it was about two miles away.

He reported this to Operations, meanwhile puzzling over something else that the lightning had shown him—a dully gleaming object in the center of the road ahead, lying atop a line or thin trench that seemed to have been scratched or dug across the pavement.

". . . I'm just coming up to it now. Looks like . . ."

It was soft to the prodding tip of his staff. He waited for the lightning, which flashed again in a few seconds.

"Never mind trying to contact Amling any more." The body was quite naked; it could have been here a day or an hour. Derron stood over it, describing the situation as best he could. Human robbers might have stolen a staff and even a cheap pectoral wedge, but would they have taken a friar's habit? . . .

He bent to touch the deep scratch mark that cut across the road beneath the body. No medieval tool had made that ruler-straight slice through stone; quite likely it had been carved by the same cybernetic limb that had removed the back of Amling's head.

"Ops, I think it's marked the boundary of the safety zone for us. To let us know that it knows about it."

"Yes, yes, you may be right, Odegard, but never mind that now. You just move in close to Vincento quickly. Protect yourself."

He was moving that way already, walking backward and holding his staff like a rifle while all his senses probed as best they could the rainy night through which he had just passed. Not that all his alertness would do him any good, if the enemy was out there and able to strike.

But Derron lived. After a hundred paces he turned and walked normally ahead, once more making good time. The berserker had killed casually, in passing, leaving its mark like some defiant human outlaw. And then it had gone on to its more pressing business here.

* * *

By the time Derron had reached the place where the road bent sharply to the left toward the washed-out bridge, the lightning had gone on over the horizon; he felt rather than saw the bulk of the hill and its cathedral ahead of him and above. But nearer, close by the side of the road, he could make out the monastery's high wall, the tumbled stones of what had been an arched gateway, and the remnants of a broken gate. And when he stood just before the gateway he could distinguish, just inside, a coach that he knew must be Vincento's; standing deserted in a puddle. From the shelter of a cloister came the gentle mumbling and grunting of load-beasts. Derron paused only a moment before plodding on through the gate and across a soggy garth toward what looked like the main entrance of the main building, which was a sprawling one-story structure.

He made no effort to be quiet, and the dark doorway before him promptly emitted a challenge. "Who's there? Stand and give your name!"

The dialect was one that Derron had expected to run into. He stopped in his tracks and, as the beam of a lantern flicked out at him, he answered. "I am Valzay of Mosnar, mathematicus and scholar. From the coach and animals I see here, I judge that you within are honest men. And I have need of shelter."

"Step for'ard then," said the wary male voice that had challenged him. A door creaked, and behind the door the lantern retreated.

Derron advanced slowly, displaying hands empty save for an innocent staff. When he had gotten in out of the rain, the door was shut behind him, and the lantern brightened. He found himself in what must have been the common room of the monastery. Facing him stood a pair of soldiers, one armed with a crude pistol and the other with a short sword; judging by their patchwork uniforms, they were members of one of the mercenary companies that were now multiplying in this war-torn land.

When they could see his gentleman's clothes more plainly, the soldiers' manner became more or less respectful. "Well, sir, how d'you come to be a-wanderin' afoot and alone?"

He scowled and swore, wringing water from his cloak. He related how his skittish load-beast, scared by lightning, had run off with his light sulky. A plague was too good for that animal! If he could catch it in the morning, he'd have some of its hide off in narrow strips, they could bet on that! With whip-cracking vehemence he shook water from his broad-brimmed hat.

Derron had an effortless feel and skill for acting when there was a need for it, and these lines had been well rehearsed. The soldiers chuckled, relaxed most of their vigilance, and became willing to chat. There was, they said, plenty of room for another boarder here, because the proprietary monks had all cleared out long ago. The place was no tavern with girls and ale, worse luck, and even firewood was in short supply, but the roof did keep the rain off. Yes, they were from a mercenary company, one that was now in the pay of the Holy Temple. Their captain, with the bulk of his men, was now in Oibbog across the river.

"And if the cap'n can't do no more'n wave to us for the next couple days, why that's all right with us, hey what?"

For all the jocularly, they still maintained a minimal professional suspicion of Derron—he might conceivably be a scout for some well-organized band of brigands—and so they did not tell him how many soldiers had been caught on this side of the torrent when the bridge they had been guarding collapsed. He did not ask, of course, but he gathered there were not many.

In answer to a question he did ask, one of the soldiers said, "Naw, no one but the old gentleman as owns the coach, and his servant an' his driver. And a pair o' friars. Plenty empty cells, sir, so take your pick. One's about as damp as the next."

Derron murmured his thanks and then, with some brief assistance from the lantern, groped his way down a vaulted passage lined with doorless cells and into one of these, which was pointed out to him as unoccupied. Built against the cell's rear wall was a wooden bunk frame that had not yet been ripped out for firewood. Derron sat down to pull off his squelching boots, while the lantern's light receded once more down the passage and vanished.

His boots off and tipped to drain, Derron stretched out on the wooden frame, the knapsack under his head, a dry garment from the knapsack over him for cover, his staff within easy reach. He did not yet have the feeling of having achieved his goal and returned to Oibbog. Amling's death seemed a bit unreal.

Neither could he quite grasp the fact that Vincent Vincenzo in the living flesh was somewhere within a few meters of him, that one of the founding fathers of the Modern world might even be the author of the snore that now drifted faintly down the passage.

Lying on his wooden bed, Derron reported briefly to Operations, bringing them up to the minute on his progress so far; then, genuinely tired, he found himself drifting toward sleep. The sound of rain was lulling, and there was nothing he could do about getting a look at Vincenzo until the morning. Even as his consciousness dulled, it struck him as mildly odd that his thoughts were occupied neither with his mission for Operations nor his private mission of return. Not with the staggering fact of time travel, or the loss of Amling, or the menace of the berserker. Simply with the fading sound of diminishing rain and the freshness of the infinite clean atmosphere around him. It was the theme of resurrection. . . .

He was jarred out of the beginning of sleep when Operations put a throbbing behind his right ear. He came wide awake at once, with only a mild start, and tucked his carven wedge-symbol closer under his chin.

"Odegard, we're starting to read through some of this blurring on the screens. We can count fourteen lifelines in or near that monastery-temple complex. One of them, of course, is your own. Another is Vincenzo's. Another one seems to be an unborn child's line; you know how they show on a screen in dots and dashes."

Derron shifted his position slightly on the creaking wooden rack; he felt oddly comfortable and snug, hearing the last dripping of the rain outside. He mused subvocally, "Let's see. Me, Vincenzo, his two servants, and the two soldiers I've seen. That makes six. And they said there were two friars. Eight, which would leave six more unaccounted for. Probably four more soldiers and a camp follower who's picked up a little dotted line she won't want to carry. Wait a minute, though—that one soldier did say something about there being no girls here. Anyway, I suppose your idea is that one of the apparent people I find here will have no lifeline showing on your screens—meaning he or she is really our hypothetical berserker-android."

"That's our idea, yes."

"Tomorrow I can count noses and . . . Wait."

In the darkness of the entrance to Derron's cell, a shape of lesser blackness became discrete with movement. The figure of a hooded friar, utterly faceless in the gloom, came a half-step into the cell before halting abruptly.

Derron froze, recalling the hooded robe missing from Amling's corpse. His hand moved to his staff and gripped it tightly. But he would not dare to use his weaponry without being very sure of his target. Even then, at this close range, the staff would be torn from his hands and broken before he could aim it. . . .

Only an instant had passed since the hooded figure had entered. Now it muttered a few indistinguishable words, which might have been an apology for entering the wrong cell. And in another moment it had withdrawn into the blackness, as noiselessly as it had come.

Derron remained half-risen on one elbow, still gripping his useless weapon. He told Operations what had just happened.

"It won't dare kill you there, remember. Be very sure before you fire."

"Understand." Slowly he stretched out again. But all comfort had gone with the last of the rain, and resurrection was a lie.

* * *

When Vincenzo was awakened by a touch, and found himself in darkness, bedded amid damp straw with bare stone walls close about him, he knew a moment of sinking terror. The worst had already happened, and he lay in the Defenders' dungeon. The terror was deepened when he saw the faceless monk-hooded figure bending over him. He could see it by the moonlight which now filtered through the tiny window—evidently the rain was over. . . .

The rain . . . Of course, he was still on his way to the Holy City, his trial was still to come! The intensity of his relief was such that Vincenzo accepted almost with courtesy his being awakened. "What do you want?" he muttered, sitting up on his shelf of a bed and pulling his traveling-rug closer about his shoulders. His manservant Will slept on, a huddled mound on the dark floor.

The visitor's hooded face could not be seen. The visitor's voice was a sepulchral whisper. "Messire Vincenzo, you are to come alone to the cathedral tomorrow morning. At the crossways of nave and transepts you will receive good news from your friends in high places."

He tried to digest this. Could it be that Nabur or perhaps Belam wanted to send him some secret reassurance of leniency? That was possible. More likely, this was some Defenders' trickery. A man summoned to trial was not supposed to discuss the matter with anyone.

"It will be good news, Messire Vincenzo. Come alone, and be willing to wait if you are not met at once. The crossways of nave and transepts. And do not seek to learn my name or see my face."

Vincenzo maintained his silence, determined to commit himself to nothing. And his visitor, satisfied that the message had been delivered, melted away into the night.

* * *

When Vincenzo awakened the next time, it was from a pleasant dream. He had been back in his own villa, on the estate that had been provided for him by the senate of his city, safe in his own bed with his mistress's warm body solid and comforting beside him. In reality the woman had been gone for some time—women no longer meant very much—but the estate was still there. If only they would let him return to it in peace!

This time he had been aroused by a touch of a different sort—the touch on his face of a shaft of morning sunlight, which came striking into his cell from the high thin window of the cell across the corridor. As he lay recalling with curiosity his strange midnight visitor, making sure in his own mind that that had been no dream, the sun shaft was already moving slowly away from his face. And instantly that motion made it a golden pendulum of subtle torture, driving all other thoughts from his mind.

The pendulum he really faced was that of choice. His mind could swing one way, tick, and meet in foresight the shame of swallowed truth and swallowed pride, all the humiliation of an enforced recanting. And if he swung his thoughts the other way, tock, there they confronted the breaking agony of the boot or the rack or the slower destruction in a buried cell.

It was not a dozen years since the Defenders had burned Onadroig alive in the Great Square of the Holy City. Of course Onadroig had been no scientist, but rather a poet and a philosopher. The consensus

these days among scholars was that he must have also been a madman, an utter fanatic who had walked into a fire rather than give over his theories. And what theories had possessed him! He had believed that the Holy One had been no more than a magician; that the chief of devils would one day be saved; that there were infinite worlds in space, that the very stars were peopled.

Neither in the Scriptures nor in nature could the least justification for any of these absurd ideas be found—so Belam and the other Defenders had argued, indefatigably but fruitlessly trying to change Onadroig's mind during the seven years' imprisonment that had preceded his burning as an incorrigible heretic.

To Vincento himself, the crude physical torture was a remote threat only. He or any other reputable scholar would have to show very deliberate and prolonged stubbornness before the Defenders would employ any such methods against him. But the threat would be in the background, all the same. At his trial he would be formally threatened with torture, perhaps even shown the instruments. All ritual, no more. But it was not impossible that it should come to that. They would say, with genuine unhappiness, that a defendant who absolutely refused to yield to all milder methods of persuasion forced them to take harsh measures, for the good of his immortal soul and the protection of the Faith.

So—his pendulum of choice was imaginary. He had no real choice but to recant. Let the sun move any way they wanted it to. Let it go whirling around the globe in an insane yearly spiral, to please the arrogant, short-sighted fools who thought they had already read all the secrets of the universe in a few dusty pages of the Holy Writings.

Lying on his back, Vincento raised a hand veined with rosy vessels against the slow-swiveling torture blade of the sun. But the sun would not be stopped in its motion by any man's hand. It mocked him all the more, making bright translucent wax of the old bones and flesh of his fingers.

On the floor, Will stirred sluggishly in his rug cocoon. Vincento barked him awake and chased him outside to rouse the coachman, Rudd, who slept beside the beasts—Rudd to look at the river's level, Will to make some tea and get a little food ready for breakfast. Vincento had had the foresight to provision his coach well.

Left alone, he began the slow humiliating process of getting his aging bones unlimbered and ready for what the day might bring. In recent years his health had been poor, and now each day began with a cautious testing of sensation. But he was not sick now, only old. And, yes, he was afraid.

By the time Will came to inform him that a fire and hot tea were ready in the monastery's common room, Vincento was ready to step forth. Somewhat to his surprise, he discovered when he entered the common room that another wayfarer had arrived during the night, a youngster who introduced himself as Valzay of the distant land of Mosnar.

Valzay, as he put it himself, made a modest claim to scholarship. Hearing this, Vincento studied him more carefully. But, for a wonder, the youngster was decently respectful, seeming to regard Vincento with genuine if restrained awe, and murmuring that even in his distant homeland Vincento's discoveries were known and praised.

Vincento acknowledged all this with pleased nods, meanwhile sipping his breakfast tea and wondering if this youth was the bearer of the good news he was supposed to hear this morning from someone in the cathedral. Might it after all be a word of hope from Nabur? He scowled. No, he would not let himself hope, like a vassal, for another man's kindness, not even when the other was the Vicar of the Holy One himself. He straightened his back. Anyway, he was not going to rush up the hill to the temple at once.

Rudd came to report that the river was no longer rising, but was still too high and dangerous for anyone to think of trying to ford it here. In one more day it would probably be safe.

So Vincento took his time at finishing his tea and consuming a little food. He left word with Rudd to take some food to the two friars and then strolled leisurely out into the sunshine to warm his bones. If he came late to his trial, there were plenty of witnesses here to tell the reason. Let the Defenders inveigh against the river, if they liked. No doubt the torrent, in deference to their superior knowledge of the Holy Writings, would dry up. No doubt all of nature would do their bidding; it was likely the ruined bridge here would rebuild itself if they came to threaten the stones of torture.

But no, away with such thoughts; he must begin to practice his humility. He called to Will to fetch him his writing materials from the coach and then he went out through the broken gate to sit alone in the sun beside the road, with one tumbled block of stone for a bench and another for a table. He might as well put his time to use, start writing his statement of recantation to present during the trial.

Of course, the accused was not supposed to know why he had been summoned. Probably the Defenders' first question would be whether or not he had any idea of what he had been charged with. No doubt such an opening sometimes brought unsuspected crimes bursting to light from guilty lips, but in Vincento's case there could hardly be any doubt of the reason for his summons. It had been fifteen years since Belam's warning injunction, which Vincento himself had since managed almost to forget. Other scholars before and since had talked of the heliocentric hypothesis with impunity and had used it in their published calculations. But when the Defenders' summons came, Vincento realized that he had bitterly antagonized men who were in high places and who never forgot anything.

The first paper he pulled from his portable escritoire was the old letter of injunction from Defender Belam. Involuntarily, Vincento's eye went at once to the words, "no proof of our globe's motion exists, as I believe, since none has been shown to me."

No proof. Vincento wiped at his forehead with a tremulous hand. Now, with mortal fear to enforce bleak clarity of thought, he could see that the arguments he had conjured from tides and sunspots really proved nothing at all about the motions of sun and planets. The truth about those motions had become apparent to him before he had ever thought of the need for proving it. He had looked long through telescopes and he had thought long and deeply about what he saw. With eyes and mind he had weighed the sun, he had grasped at stars and planets and comets, and truth had come through some inward door, like a revelation.

His enemies who cried him down were, of course, far lesser men than he. They were stupid and blind in their refusal, or their inability, to see what he showed them as the truth. And yet he knew that those who were to sit as his judges were shrewd enough logicians when they set themselves to think within their formal rules. If only there were some firm proof, simple and incontrovertible, that he might set before them . . . oh, what would he not give for that! His mind ached, his fists clenched, his very guts contracted at the thought. If he had one solid simple proof he would risk all, he would dare anything, to confront and confound his enemies with it, to rub their long arrogant noses in the truth!

But since in fact he had nothing to support this mood of glorious defiance, it soon passed. The truth was, he was old and afraid and he was going to recant.

Slowly he got out pen and ink and blank paper; slowly he began his first draft. From time to time he paused, sitting with closed eyes in the sun, trying not to think.

* * *

Derron counted seven soldiers around the breakfast fire, and he found each of them overjoyed to accept a swallow of brandy from his traveling flask and willing enough to talk. No, there was no one he had not seen in the monastery or the cathedral, or anywhere nearer than the town across the river. Not that they knew of, and they would know.

When he was alone in the privy a few minutes later, Derron did some subvocal mumbling. "Operations?"

"Time Ops here."

Maybe the Commander never had to sleep, but Derron himself was sufficiently tired and strained to dispense with military courtesy. "Count the lifelines here again. I make it just thirteen of us. If you can make it twelve, then one of my smiling companions has clockwork for guts. But if you come out with fourteen again, then either there's some bandit or deserter lurking in a corner I haven't seen or you're misreading your screens. I think that dotted line at least is a mistake in interpretation; I consider it unlikely that any of us here is pregnant, since we're all men."

"We'll recheck right away. You know how tricky screen interpretation can be sometimes." Time Ops' tone was quietly apologetic, which was somehow more disturbing to Derron than a chewing-out would have been. It meant that his position here was now considered so vital that Operations would bend every effort to make things go more smoothly for him.

The soldiers, after finishing their morning meal and emptying Derron's brandy flask, had for the most part settled down to serious loafing. Rudd, Vincento's coachman, was leading his load-beasts forth in search of grass. Following the animals through the gate, Derron located Vincento, sitting peacefully alone and apart with his writing materials. Well and good.

Remembering his imaginary load-beast and sulky, Derron put on an exasperated expression and strolled along the road toward the ruined bridge, scanning the fields in all directions as if in search of his missing property.

At the bridge-stump were the two friars, gray cowls thrown back from their unremarkable heads. Judging by their gestures and a word or two that floated Derron's way, they were talking of ways in which the bridge might someday be rebuilt. Derron knew that within a year or two there would indeed be new arches of stone spanning the river here. And those arches would still be standing solidly more than three hundred years later, when a young postgraduate history student would come striding over them on a hiking tour, the girl he loved striding just as eagerly beside him. Both of them would be enthusiastic about seeing for the first time the ancient town and the famed cathedral of Oibbog. . . . The river would look much different then, gentler, of course, and there would be more trees along its banks. While the stones of the ancient Empire road would still look much the same . . .

"May the Holy One give you a good day, esteemed sir!" It was the stouter of the two friars whose voice broke in upon Derron's reverie.

The interruption was welcome. "Good day to you also, reverend Brothers. Does the river still rise?"

The thinner friar had a loving face. In hands that seemed all bone and tendon, he was weighing a small chunk of masonry, as if he meant to start this minute to rebuild the bridge. "The river falls now, sir. How does the course of your life go, up or down?"

The falsehood about beast and buggy seemed dreary and unnecessary. "That can hardly be an easy question for any man to answer."

Derron was spared any further probing for the moment, as the attention of both friars had been distracted. Seven or eight of the local peasantry had materialized out of mud and distance and were plodding their barefoot way along the drying bank of the torrent toward the bridge-stump. One man walking in front of the others proudly swung a string of large and silvery fish, fresh enough to be still twitching and twisting.

A few paces away from the edge of the pavement, the peasant halted. Together they bowed rather perfunctorily in Derron's direction; he was not dressed finely enough to overawe anyone and he was obviously not the person the peasants had come to see.

The man who carried the fish began talking to the friars, in a low tone at first but raising his voice as the others began almost at once to interrupt him. In a few moments they were all squabbling over who had the right to speak first and whose was the right of disposal of the fish. They had come to strike a bargain. Would the holy brothers accept the biggest and freshest of this fine catch ("From me!" "No, fromme, Holy Brother, it was my fish-line!") and in return say some potent prayers for the giver's crops?

Derron turned away from what promised to become a nasty quarrel among the peasants, to see that Vincenzo was still sitting alone. And it was then that the full sunlit view of the Cathedral of Oibbog caught him almost by surprise.

The narrowed tip of the central spire held its gilded symbolic wedge two hundred and sixty feet above the flattened hilltop. The stones of tower and wall, of arch and flying buttress, were rich clear gray, almost shining in the morning light. Inside, he knew, the stained glass windows along the eastern wall would be like living flame. If fragile glass and spire had risen from the dust, then surely she too must be alive, not only alive but somewhere near where he might reach her. At the moment the resurrected reality before him held more conviction than any rein of logic. At any second now, her voice might call to him, he might be able to reach out and touch . . .

There was a splash nearby. The stout friar was wearing a caricature-expression of anger, disappointment, and surprise, while the thinner one stood with a hand stretched out over the water. A big fish now jumped and splashed again; one of the slippery catch had evidently escaped.

. . . touch her warm and living skin. Now even a detail that he had somehow forgotten, the way her hair moved sometimes in the wind, came back to him with the visual clarity of something seen only a minute ago.

Derron's feet took him away from the bridge-stump and back along the road. He noted dutifully with half his mind that Vincenzo still sat alone in the sun. But Derron did not go back to the monastery. The hill raised the mighty cathedral before him, and he began steadily to climb.

* * *

Brother Jovann kept looking sadly at the peasants, even as he seemed to address his words to the splasher in the water. "Brother Fish, I have set you at liberty not because we do not need food, but so you may be able to praise God, who sends all blessings—the fish to the angler and freedom to the fish." Sorrowfully, Jovann shook his head at the peasants, "We men so often forget to give thanks when they are due, so often we spend our energy instead in trying to get ahead of one another!"

The fish splashed, and leaped, and splashed again. It was as if the pain of the hook, or the time spent gilling air—or something else—had driven it quite mad.

Jovann looked down with new distress upon this watery uproar. "Be still now, Brother Fish! Enough! Live in the water, not the painful air. Give praise and thanks as a fish may naturally do!"

The splashing stopped. The last ripples and foam were swept away downstream.

Silence hung in the air. Every peasant's hands were raised in the wedge-sign, and they darted their eyes at one another as if they would have liked to take to their heels in flight, but did not dare. Brother Saile was gaping as blankly as any of the fish, while he swung his eyes from Jovann to the river and back again.

Jovann beckoned Saile away and said to him, "I am going apart for an hour, to pray to the Holy One to cleanse me of anger and pride. And also for these poor men's crops. Do you likewise." And Saile was left still staring, as Jovann walked slowly away alone, on up the road toward the monastery's gate.

* * *

As Derron climbed the steps that switchbacked up the face of the cathedral hill, the irrational sense of his love's presence faded, leaving him with only the bitter certainty of her permanent loss. It crossed his mind that at this moment in time her genes were scattered in the chromosomes of some two thousand ancestors. That was as close as he could come to her today, the closest he would ever be able to come. He knew that a solid palisade of paradox-loops would forever bar him from revisiting the days of her life, what he thought of as the time of his own youth.

The truth was that he had never forgiven her for dying, for being helplessly killed with all the other millions, for her crime of emptying his world. Maybe forgiving her was what he had come back to Oibbog to try to do. So, he told himself, do it. Do whatever is necessary to end it now, today. Get it all over with somehow, out of your system once and for all, so that you can be some good to yourself and to someone else again.

By now the roof of the monastery had fallen below the level of his climbing feet. When he looked back he saw the valley spreading out, flood-ravaged now and wilder in its beauty than he remembered it, but still essentially the same. At a turn on the stairs he passed a sapling and with a pang of realization he knew that in three hundred years this slender stem would be a gnarled and mighty trunk, with heavy branches to shade out the summer sun. And beside it he would stand with her, looking out over the valley, the two of them choosing a hill for themselves—that hill there, oh God, though no trees grew on it now!—where one day they intended to build their home and raise the pair of kids they meant to have.

He kept right on climbing. He felt that if he stopped here now he might never go on, and going on was necessary. Now at last his eyes rose above the level of the paved space before the main entrance of the cathedral. His memory recognized the very pattern of the paving stones here, where her feet and his would one day stand. If he stood here now, looking straight ahead at remembered hedges and statues, his vision bounded by the gray stone of the cathedral's front—why, for all that he could see or hear, holiday and youth and love might still be true, war and grief no more than bad dreams passing.

The twigs of the hedges were green again, with rain and late spring sunshine. But her voice was not to be heard here, nor would he ever again feel her touch, though he were to stand here till he fell. And for a moment he thought he might be going to fall, or to kneel and pray, or to cry aloud, because the knowledge of her passing from him was almost too much—but then, at long, long last, that knowledge could be accepted.

The process of acceptance was not over in an instant, but once it had fairly begun he knew he was not going to collapse. His eyes were none too clear, but he was not going to weep. He was just going to stand here and go on living.

No, he was not finished yet. To complete the process of acceptance and release he had still to go into the building, where he had spent a morning helping her photograph the stained glass. He remembered wishing aloud at that time that the supposed Author of the universe would come out of hiding and make an appearance in this, supposedly His temple; because the young historian had a few sharp questions that he wanted to ask. Questions having to do with the unnecessary amount of injustice in the world.

The great door was just as solidly hung as Derron remembered it. He wondered briefly if a wooden door in steady use might last three hundred years. No matter. He tugged it open, hearing the booming reverberation of the broken closure come back with repetitions from the building's cavernous interior. Just then it crossed Derron's mind that his traveler's staff with all its weaponry was resting back in his monastery cell. But that was no matter; immediate violence from the berserker was not a danger.

He went in and paced down the center of the nave, which was only about thirty feet wide between the rows of columns that divided it from the side aisles, but enormous in its other dimensions—three hundred feet long, the keystones of its arches a hundred feet above the floor. There seemed room in here for God and berserker both to hide, with plenty of corners left to conceal some deserter or pregnant waif whose lifeline might be showing up to confuse Operations.

Along the eastern wall the stained-glass windows flamed. Centuries of candle smoke had not yet darkened the high arches. Most of the cathedral had been built during the last generation; in fact, construction had not been quite completed when this latest war had resulted in the workmen being ordered or frightened off the job. Much scaffolding still surrounded columns and clung to walls, here and there festooned with the workmen's abandoned ropes and cables, which were as steady in the motionless air as if carved from stone themselves. A few abandoned tools were very slowly gathering dust where they had been set down.

Whether because of the combatants' reverence or superstitious fear, or only through chance, war had not trampled here. Even the stained glass was all intact, splintered only by the sun coming in to fire the mild gloom with richness. The wide steps that led to side chapels, and most of the paving of the nave, were no more than a century old, still flat and practically unworn; three centuries and more of random footsteps would be required to shape them into standard distribution curves.

As Derron approached the center of the building, where nave and transepts intersected, a movement caught the corner of his eye. One of the friars, hood worn over his head here in God's house, was approaching him down a side aisle.

Derron stopped, nodding politely. "Reverend Brother." And then it struck him as odd that one of the men he had left down at the bridge should have hurried here ahead of him. Peering closely, he saw that the face beneath the cowl was not quite a face. And the hands reaching out to grab him as the figure shot forward were dummy flesh, split open now to show the steel claws.

* * *

The leaner of the friars had come dragging along, head bowed, up the road from the bridge. He passed the monastery's gateway, and Vincenzo was just thinking with some relief that the man was going right on by him, when at the last moment the friar appeared to become aware of Vincenzo and, after a little

startled pause, changed course and came toward him.

He stopped a couple of paces away, smiling now, a gentle and bedraggled figure. "God will reward you, Vincent, for providing my companion and me with food."

"God knows I have some need of His favor, Brother," Vincenzo answered shortly. He supposed the mendicant had learned his given name from Rudd or Will. Curiously, he did not feel offended by the familiar form of address; the dusty beggar before him seemed, like an infant, beneath any question of status.

But Vincenzo remained wary. It was just possible that this friar was one of the Defenders' agents.

The friar was looking at the papers spread out before Vincenzo as he might have regarded some friend's unbandaged wound. "Vincent, why do you waste your mind and soul in all these struggles and disputes? Their outcome does not matter, really. But one thing matters, and that is the love of God."

The mad innocent sincerity of these words all but wiped away Vincenzo's suspicions and could provoke him to nothing stronger than a smile. "It seems you have taken the trouble to learn something of my affairs. But, reverend Brother, what do you really understand of my disputes and why I have them?"

The friar drew back with a little quiver of distaste. "I do not understand them. I do not wish to; it is not my way."

"Then, Brother, pardon me, but it seems to me you should not lecture on what you do not understand, nor stand here disputing with me as to why I have disputes."

The friar accepted the rebuke so meekly that Vincenzo felt a momentary pang of something like regret for having spoken it. And with that the dispute between them, if one could really call it that, was over, Vincenzo having scored his point with the ease of an armored knight knocking down a child.

The friar did not turn away before he had raised his hands in blessing and murmured a few words that were not addressed to Vincenzo. Then he departed at once, walking slowly on along the road—once hesitating as if on the point of turning back, then going on. It crossed Vincenzo's mind that he had once again won an argument and perhaps lost something else—though what it was one lost on these occasions he could not exactly say. He almost called after the man, feeling an impulse to try to reach across the gap between them. But he did not call. Really, he thought, we have nothing to say to each other.

Now that he had been distracted from the humiliating task of writing his recantation, he did not want to take it up again. And so Vincenzo summoned Will, gave him the *escritoire* and papers to take in charge, and then turned his own steps restlessly upward in the fine sunlight.

Thinking it over now, he decided that the meeting supposedly arranged in the cathedral was most probably a snare of the Defenders—or more likely, of some of Vincenzo's enemies, religious or laymen, who would be eager to trick him into some compromising utterance or behavior on the eve of his trial. Very well, let them try. He would see through the scheme, whatever it was, before they had gotten very far with it. He might be able to turn the tables on them completely. Vincenzo might fear men who overmatched him in power, but he knew full well that none could overmatch him in intelligence.

He was patient with his old legs, resting them for a single breath after every two or three steps, and so they served him well enough on the climb. After a longer pause for rest at the top of the stairs, he entered at the cathedral's main door and tugged it firmly closed behind him. He devoutly hoped that no one was

going to meet him simply to offer sympathy. A sympathizer was at best a secret gloater, having always at least some implied claim to be the equal—more like the superior!—of the one he supposedly was trying to console. Pah!

Vincento strolled through the nave, a stone-sealed space too vast to give the least sense of confinement. To his right and left, the vault-supporting columns towered in their parallel rows. Distance diminished the apparent space between each column and the next, until at fifty paces ahead of him each row became opaque as a wall. No matter where a man stood inside this unpartitioned space, half of it would always be blocked from his view—more than half, if one counted the areas of the transept arms and the chapels.

When he reached the appointed meeting place, the crossways of nave and transepts, Vincento could look directly up nearly two hundred feet into the shadowed interior of the temple's mighty central spire. There were workmen's platforms even there, reached by ladders mounting from the clerestory level, which in turn must be accessible by some stair coiling up within the wall from the level of the floor Vincento stood upon.

In this temple, built in the grand old style, there were no chandeliers, and no breezes to swing them if they had existed. If in Vincento's youth this had been his parish house of worship, he would have had to begin to work out the laws of pendulums somewhere else, and not during a drowsy Sabbath sermon.

A single cable of great length descended thinly from the uttermost dark interior of the spire. Vincento's eye followed this cable down, to discover that there was a pendulum here after all, at least in potential. For bob, there hung on the end of the long cable a ball of metal that would be as heavy as a man. This weight was pulled to one side, held by the merest loop of cord to one of the four thick columns that stood at the corners of the nave-transept intersection.

Looking up and down, up and down again, tended to make an old man dizzy. Vincento rubbed his neck. But there was an offense to logic here that was beyond his power to ignore. What use could the builders have had for such a patriarch of pendulums?

It could, he supposed, be something that they swung when hard stone and mortar had to be demolished—but that was hardly a satisfactory explanation. And if it was only a plumb line, why so weighty? A few ounces of lead would serve that purpose just as well.

Whatever they had intended or used it for, it was a pendulum. The restraining tether of cord, with its single knot, looked insubstantial. Vincento thrummed the taut little cord with his finger, and the long, lone cable gently whipped and swayed. The massive weight made little bobbing motions, dipping like a ship at anchor.

The oscillations quickly died away, the stillness of the cathedral soon regained ascendancy. Once more cord and cable and bob were as steady as the stone columns in the still gray air. The pendulum-ship was drydocked.

Set sail, then! On impulse Vincento tugged once at the end of the restraining cord. And with startling ease the knot dissolved.

Starting from rest, the weight for a moment seemed reluctant to move at all. And even after it had undeniably begun its first swing, still it moved so slowly that Vincento's eye went involuntarily racing once more up into the shadows of the spire, to see how it was possible that mere length of cord should so delay things.

A man might have counted four without haste before the weight for the first time reached the center, the low point, of its swing. Almost touching the floor, it passed that center in a smooth fast rush and immediately began to slow again, so that it needed four more counts to climb the gentle gradient of the far half of its arc. Then the weight paused for an unmeasurable instant, not quite touching the column at the opposite corner of the crossways, before it crept into its returning motion.

Majestically the bob went back and forth, holding its cable taut, describing a perfect arc segment about ten yards in length. Vincenzo's eye could find no diminution in the amplitude of the first half-dozen swings. He supposed that a weight so heavy and so freely suspended as this might continue to oscillate for many hours or even for days.

Wait, though. Here was something. Vincenzo squinted at the pendulum through one swing. Then, leaning against the column it had been tethered to, and holding his head motionless, he watched the pendulum's swing end-on for another half-dozen cycles.

What was it he had come in here for? Oh, yes, someone was perhaps going to meet him.

But this pendulum. He frowned at it, shook his head and watched some more. Then he started to look around him. He was going to have to make sure of something he thought he saw.

Some workmen's sawhorses were standing not far away. He dragged a pair of these to where he wanted them, so that the plank he now took up and set across them lay beneath the end of the pendulum's arc and perpendicular to that arc's direction. On the bottom of the swinging weight he had noticed a projection like a small spike: whatever it had been meant for, it would serve Vincenzo's present purpose well. He laid a second plank atop the first, and slightly readjusted the position of his whole structure, in careful increments. Now on each swing the spike passed within an inch of the topmost board.

He would make marks upon the board . . . but no, he could do better. Somewhere in here he had seen sand. Yes, piled in a mixing trough, there by the entrance to the first side chapel. The sand was satisfactorily damp from the long spell of wet weather; he brought handfuls of it and dumped them on his upper board. Along several feet of the board's length he patted and built the sand into a tiny wall, an inch or two high and just thick enough to stand. Then, in an interval between swings, he slid that upper board just slightly forward, taking his sand wall into the edge of the pendulum's arc.

A neatly designed experiment, he thought with satisfaction. On its first return, the moving spike notched his little sand fence delicately, tumbling a tiny clot of grains down the minute slope. Then the weight pulled its taut cable away again, taking another slow nibble of eternity.

Vincenzo held his eyes from blinking as he watched the pendulum's return. Holding his breath too, he could now hear for the first time the faint ghostly hissing of the swing.

The spike as it moved back to the wall of sand made a new notch, though one contiguous with the first. Then the weight once more departed, in a movement huge and regular enough to be the cathedral's stately pulse.

And sixteen seconds later the third notch was new again, by the same margin and in the same direction as the second. In three vibrations the plane of the pendulum had shifted its extremity sideways by half a finger-width. His eyes had not deceived him earlier; that plane was slowly and regularly creeping clockwise.

Might this effect be due to some slow untwisting of the cable? Then it should soon reverse itself, Vincenzo thought, or at least vary in amplitude. Again he stared up into the high shadows, oblivious of his aching neck.

If he could, he would someday, somewhere, hang another pendulum like this one and study it at leisure. Yes, if he could. Even supposing that his health held out and that he was spared prison, it would be difficult. Enclosed towers of this height were anything but common. In another big temple or at some university, perhaps—but he had no intention of stooping to collaboration.

. . . Suppose now that the puzzling sideways progression was not due to the cable's unwinding. He thought he could feel that it was not, in somewhat the same way as, after study, he had come to feel certain of the stability of the sun. This clockwise creeping had something too elemental about it for him to be able to credit a trivial cause.

Already the width of two fingers had been nibbled from the top of his little parapet of sand.

He wondered how the cable was fastened at the top. Younger legs than his would be required to find that out, and Vincenzo departed to obtain them. Several times in his passage down the nave he turned, frowning back at the ceaseless pendulum as he might have stared at an unexpected star.

* * *

Of it all, Derron had seen only an upper segment of the moving cable. He saw even that much with only one eye, for his face was being held with steady force against the rough planking of the high platform to which he had been carried, helpless as a kicking infant in the grip of the berserker. Inhumanly motionless, it crouched over him now, one chill hand gripping his neck and holding part of his coat gaglike in his mouth, the other hand twisting one of his arms just to the point of pain.

Obviously the machine had no intention of killing or crippling him, not here. Still, his captivity seemed less like a period of time than a segment of eternity, measured out by the meaningless regularity of the swinging cable. Having him prisoner, the berserker was content to wait, which meant he had already failed. He had not had time even to communicate his situation to Operations: the berserker had at once known his pectoral wedge for what it was; it had ripped the wooden carving from his neck and cracked it like a thin-shelled nut, squeezing the meat of metal and components into trash between its fingers.

Perhaps it thought that he could see nothing from the position in which it held him. That was almost true. From the tail of one eye he could just descry that metronomic cable, its arc narrow at this height, but its slow movement speaking of its enormous length.

At last the cathedral door far below boomed shut for the second time since he had been captured. And only then did eternity begin to come to an end; the berserker let him go.

Slowly and painfully he raised his half-numbed body from the wood. Rubbing the cheek that had been ground against the platform and the arm that had been twisted, he turned to face his enemy. Under the monk's cowl he saw a pattern of seamed metal that looked as if it might be able to open and slide and reshape itself. He knew that he was facing what was probably the most complex and compact machine that the berserkers had ever built. Inside that steel skull, could there be plastic skin that could evert to become the convincing mask of a human face? There was no way to tell that much, let alone guess what identity it might be able to wear.

"Colonel Odegard," it said, in a voice machine-tailored to neutrality.

Taken somewhat by surprise, he waited to hear more, while the thing facing him on the high platform squatted on its heels, arms hanging limp. The hands were as ambiguous as the face; they were not human now, but there was no saying what they might be able to become. The rest of the body was hidden under the shapeless robe, which had probably once been Amling's.

"Colonel Odegard, do you fear the passage from life to not-life?"

He didn't know what he had expected to hear, but hardly that. "And if I do, what difference does it make?"

"Yes," said the berserker in its flat voice. "What is programmed goes on, regardless of any passage."

Before he could try to make any sense out of that, the machine jumped precisely forward and grabbed him again. He struggled, which of course made no difference. It tore strips from his coat, ripping the tough cloth with precise and even sounds. With the strips it gagged him again and tied him hand and foot—tightly, but not so tightly that he felt no hope of ever working free. It was not going to blunder into being responsible for a death here in the safety zone.

After it had bound him, the machine paused for a moment, moving its cowed head like a listening man, searching the area with senses far beyond the human. And then it was gone down the ladder in utter silence, moving less like a man than like a giant cat or ape.

He could only strain desperately to get free, the gag choking back his curses.

* * *

A second group of peasants, from some village higher in the hills, had come along the road to the cathedral. It was Brother Saile they met first; when they learned that he was not the saint and miracle worker of whom the whole countryside was talking, a brief glow of hope died from their faces, leaving only bitter anxiety.

"Tell me, what is it you wish to see Brother Jovann about?" Saile inquired magisterially, clasping his hands with dignity across his belly.

They clamored piteously, all at once, until he had to speak sharply to get them to talk one at a time and make sense. Then he heard that, for several days past, a great wolf had been terrorizing their little village. The monstrous beast had killed cattle and even—they swore it!—uprooted crops. The peasants were all talking at once again, and Saile was not sure if they said a child had been devoured, or if a herd boy had fallen and broken his arm, trying to get away from the wolf. In any case, the villagers were desperate. Men scarcely dared to work their fields. They were isolated, and very poor, with no powerful patron to give them aid of any kind, save only the Holy One Himself! And now the saintly Jovann, who must and would dosomething! They were utterly desperate!

Brother Saile nodded. In his manner there showed sympathy mixed with reluctance. "And you say your village is several miles distant? In the hills, yes. Well—we shall see. I will do my best for you. Come with me and I will put your case before good Brother Jovann."

* * *

With a puzzled Will now walking beside him, Vincenzo entered the cathedral once more and made the

best speed that he could down the nave. Back at the monastery, Rudd had chosen this time to bother him with warnings and complaints about the scarcity of food for the beasts. And when he had disentangled himself from that, his old legs had rebelled against climbing the hill a second time, even with Will's help. Now as Vincenzo hurried, wheezing for breath, back to his still-swinging pendulum, more than an hour had passed since he had first set the bob in motion.

For a few seconds he only stared in thoughtful silence at what had happened since his departure. The tiny battlement of sand had been demolished by continuous notches, up to the point where the pendulum's turning plane had left it behind altogether. That plane had by now inched clockwise through ten or twelve degrees of arc.

"Will, you've helped me in the workshop. Now this is another such case, where you must follow my orders precisely."

"Aye, master."

"First, keep in mind that you are not to stop the swinging of this cable here or disturb it in any way. Understood?"

"Aye."

"Good. Now I want you to climb; there seem to be ladders and platforms enough for you to go up all the way. I want to discover how this swinging cable is mounted, what holds it at the top. Look at it until you can make me a sketch, you have a fair hand at drawing."

"Aye, I understand, sir." Will craned his neck unhappily. "It's longish bit o' climbin', though."

"Yes, yes, a coin for you when you're down. Another when you've given me a good sketch. Take your time now, and use your eyes. And remember, do not disturb the cable's swing."

Derron had made only moderate progress toward getting the bonds loosened from his wrists when he heard clumsier feet than the berserker's climbing toward him. Between the ladder's uprights Will's honest face came into view, then predictably registered shock.

". . . Bandit!" Derron spat, when his hands had been cut free and he could rid himself of the gag. "Must've been hiding in here somewhere . . . forced me up here and tied me up."

"Robbed ye, hey?" Will was awed. "Just one of 'em?"

"Yes, just one. Uh . . . I didn't have any valuables with me, really. Took the wedge from around my neck."

"That's fearsome. One o' them lone rogues, hey?" Wondering and sympathetic, Will shook his head. "Likely he'd a' slit your throat, sir, but didn't want to do no real sacrilege. Think he might still be here about?"

"No, no, I'm sure he was running away. Long gone by this time."

Will went on shaking his head. "Well. You'd better liven up your limbs, sir, before you starts to climb down. I'm going on up, bit of a job to do for master."

"Job?"

"Aye." Will was already climbing again, seemingly meaning to go right on up into the spire.

Still on all fours, Derron peered down over the edge of the platform. Vincento's ginger-colored hair marked a toy figure more than a hundred feet below. Down there the mysteriously moving cable ended in a dot, a ball of some kind that was tracing back and forth with sedate regularity. Derron had seen a pendulum of this size and shape before, somewhere. It had been used as a demonstration of . . .

Derron's muscles locked, after a moment in which he had been near falling over the platform's edge. He had suddenly realized what Vincento was looking at, what Vincento doubtless had been studying for most of the time Derron had been held captive. On old Earth they had honored its earliest known inventor by naming it the Foucault pendulum.

* * *

"Honorable Vincento!"

Vincento looked around in surprise and annoyance to discover the young man, Alzay or Valzay or whatever his name was, hurrying toward Vincento in obvious agitation, having evidently just descended from the tiny coiled stair where Will had begun his climb.

Valzay came hurrying up as if bringing the most vital news, though when he arrived all he had to relate was some imbecilic story about a bandit. Valzay's eyes were looking sharply at the saw-horses and planks and the little wall of sand, even as he spouted pestiferous wordage that threatened to tangle Vincento's thoughts.

Vincento interrupted him. "Young man, I suggest you give your recital to the soldiers." Then he turned his back on the intruder. Now. If it was not the cable untwisting, and if it proved to be some trick of the mounting above—then what? Certainly the bones of the cathedral were not creeping counterclockwise. But yet . . . His mind strained forward, sounding unknown depths. . . .

"I see, Messire Vincento, that you have already discovered my little surprise." Derron saw very clearly how the game was certain to go, how it perhaps had gone already. But he also saw one desperate gamble that was still open to him and he seized the chance.

"Your—little—surprise?" Vincento's voice became very deliberate. His brows knit as if presaging thunder, while he turned slowly back to face Derron. "Then it was you who sent that rascally friar to me in the night?"

The detail of the friar was confirmation, if any was needed, of what the berserker planned. "It was I who arranged this!" Derron gestured with proprietary pride at the pendulum. "I must confess, sir, that I have really been here for several days; at first in the company of some friends, who aided me in this construction."

It was a big lie that Derron was improvising, and one that would not stand investigation. But if it had the initial impact that he hoped it would, Vincento would never want to investigate.

As he told the silent, grim old man how he and his imaginary aides had installed the pendulum, Derron visualized the berserker here at work, catlike, monkeylike, devilish, arranging mounting and cable and weight in order that . . .

" . . . you see before you, Messire Vincento, a firm proof of the rotation of the globe!"

There was a startled gleam in the old eyes, but no real surprise. Beyond a doubt the desperate gamble had been justified. Now, to see if it could be won. Vincento had become a waiting statue, mouth twisted, eyes unblinking.

Derron spoke on. "Of course, I have followed your example, distinguished sir, and that of several of our contemporaries, in protecting rightful claim to this discovery while still keeping it secret for my own advantage in further research. To this end I have sent to several distinguished persons, in several parts of the world, anagram messages which encode a description of this experiment.

"Thus to keep the secret yet awhile was, as I say, my plan. But when word reached me of your present—difficulties—I found I could not stand idly by."

Vincento had not yet moved. "A proof of our globe's rotation, you say." The tone was flat, suspended.

"Ah, forgive me! I had not thought an explanation in detail would be—um. You see, the plane of the pendulum does not rotate, it is our globe that rotates beneath it." Derron hesitated briefly—it was just occurring to Valzay that old Vincento had most likely become just a little slow, a trifle senile. Derron put on what he hoped looked like a faintly indulgent smile and spoke on, more slowly and distinctly. "At the poles of the world, such a device as this would trace daily a full circle of three hundred and sixty degrees. At the equator it would appear not to rotate at all." Speeding up gradually, he poured in merciless detail his three and a half centuries' advantage in accumulated knowledge. "Between these extremes, the rate of rotation is proportional to the latitude; here, it is about ten degrees per hour. And since we are in the northern hemisphere, the direction of apparent rotation is clockwise. . . ."

From high above, Will was shouting down to his master, "She be mounted free to turn any way, but there be nothing turning her!"

Vincento shouted up, "Come down!"

" . . . bit more study if 'ee wants a sketch—"

"Come down!" The thick lips spat it out.

Derron kept the pressure on as best he could, switching the emphasis now to relentless generosity. "My only wish, of course, is to help you, sir. I have put aside thoughts of personal advantage to come to your rescue. In bygone days you have accomplished very substantial things, very substantial, and you must not now be cast aside. My lance is at your disposal; I will gladly repeat this demonstration of my discovery for the authorities in the Holy City, so that the entire world may witness—"

"Enough! I have no need of help!" Vincento made the last word an obscenity. "You will not—meddle—in—my—affairs. Not in the least degree!"

In his contempt and wrath the old man became a towering figure. Derron found himself physically retreating—even as he realized that he had won his gamble, that Vincento's pride was indeed as monumental as his genius.

The outburst of proud anger was short-lived. Derron ceased retreating and stood in silence as Vincento, shrinking once more under his burdens of age and weariness and fear, shot him a parting look of hate and

turned away. Now Vincento would never use the Foucault proof, nor believe it, nor even investigate in that direction. He would force the whole thing from his mind if he could. The smallness and jealousy that were leading Vincento on to trial and humiliation existed not only in other men, but in himself.

Derron knew from history that at his trial Vincento would not only recant, he would go beyond what his judges asked or wanted of him and offer to write a new pamphlet, proving that the sun did after all fly in a circle around the world of men.

My only wish is to help you, sir. Vincento's shuffling figure dwindled at last to the end of the nave, and at last the door boomed shut behind him. Exhausted, Derron sagged against a column, hearing now in the silence the pendulum's unperturbed repeated hiss. Will came scrambling down the stair to scowl uncomprehendingly at him and then hurry on after his master.

And now even Vincento's tragedy could be forgotten for the moment. Real victory and real hope were powerful stimulants. They gave Derron energy enough to hurry out of the cathedral by a side door and go skipping down a steep stair that led directly to the monastery. If the berserker had not also smashed the backup communicator hidden in his staff, he could transmit the joy of victory, at once to all the Modern world.

The enemy had not bothered with anything in his cell. As he hurried toward it along the vaulted passage, an emergency summons from Operations began to throb in the bone behind his ear.

* * *

Brother Saile was puffing, though he had certainly been making no effort to hurry. The narrow cattle path the friars were following went mostly up and down hill, winding its way through scrubby bushes and thin woods. Saile was actually hanging back, and trying, with almost every labored breath, to discourage Brother Jovann from going on.

"I thought—to have said a few prayers in the village—would have been sufficient. These peasants, as you know—are often foolish. They may have—greatly exaggerated—the depredations of this—supposed wolf."

"Then my own peasant foolishness is not likely to cause any harm," said Jovann, leading on implacably. They were miles from the cathedral now, deep in the wolf's supposed domain. Their peasant supplicants and guides had turned back through fear a quarter of a mile earlier.

"I spoke too harshly of them. May the Holy One forgive me." Saile wheezed to the top of a hill and gathered breath for readier speech on the descent. "Now, if this one beast has really caused in a few days all the death and damage attributed to it, or even half so much, it would be utter folly for us to approach it, unarmed as we are. It is not that I doubt for an instant the inscrutable wisdom of Providence that can cause a fish to leap for joy after you have released it, nor do I doubt the story that is told of the gentle little birds listening to your preaching. But a wolf, and especially such a wolf as this, is quite another . . ."

Brother Jovann did not appear to be listening very closely. He had paused briefly to follow with his eyes a train of scavenger insects, which crossed the path and vanished into the brush. Then he went on, more slowly, until a similar file appeared a little farther along the trail. There Brother Jovann turned aside and walked noisily into the brush, leading his companion toward the spot where it seemed the two lines of insects must intersect.

* * *

Staff in hand, Derron made the best cross-country time he could, running fifty steps and walking fifty.

"Odegard!" Time Ops had cried out. "There's another lifeline just as vital as Vincenzo's right there with you. Or he was with you. Now he and one of the others have moved out a couple of miles; they're about to leave the safety zone. You've got to get there and protect him somehow. The berserker will have him cold if it's out there waiting!"

And of course it would be out there, in ambush or pursuit. The attack on Vincenzo had been in deadly earnest, as the first punch in any good one-two should be. But it was the second punch that was really expected to get through and do the damage. And humanity had been left wide open for this one.

Running fifty steps, walking fifty, Derron steadily covered ground along the bearing Operations had given him. He asked, "Just who am I looking for?"

And when they told him, he thought he should have guessed the name, should have been alerted by his first look into that loving face.

* * *

In the midst of the thicket there had been havoc. It had happened days ago, for the tree branches that had been broken were now quite dead. And though the insects were still busy amid the wreckage of bone and gray fur on the ground, there was no longer much for them to scavenge.

"This was a very big wolf," said Brother Jovann thoughtfully, bending to pick up a piece of jawbone. The bone had been shattered by some violent blow, but this fragment still contained teeth of impressive size.

"Very big, certainly," agreed Brother Saile, though he knew little about wolves and had no wish to learn any more. He kept looking about him nervously. The sun was slanting into late afternoon, and to Saile the forest seemed ominously still.

Jovann was musing aloud. "Now, what manner of creature can it be that deals thus with a big male wolf? Even as I in my greed have sometimes dealt with the bones of a little roast fowl . . . but no, these bones have not been gnawed for nourishment. Only broken, and broken again, as if by some creature more wantonly savage than any wolf."

* * *

The name of Brother Jovann symbolized gentleness and love to Modern historians as well as laymen, to skeptics as well as the orthodox temple-members who venerated him as a saint. Like Vincenzo, St. Jovann had become a towering folk figure, only half-understood.

"We're just this hour catching on to Jovann's practical importance," said Time Ops' voice in Derron's head, as Derron ran. "With Vincenzo stabilized, and all our observers concentrated on the area you're in, we're getting a better look at it than ever before. Historically, Jovann's lifeline goes on about fifteen years from your point, and all along the way it radiates support to other lines. What has been described as 'good-turn-a-day stuff.' Then these other lines tend to radiate life support in turn, and the process propagates on up through history. Our best judgment now is that the disarmament treaty three hundred years after Jovann's death will fall through, and that an international nuclear war will wipe out our civilization in pre-Modern times, if St. Jovann is terminated at your point."

When Time Ops paused, a girl's voice came in briskly. "A new report for Colonel Odegard."

Walking again, Derron asked, "Lisa?"

She hesitated for just an instant, then continued, business first. "Colonel, the lifeline that was described to you earlier as having an embryonic appearance is moving out of the safety zone after the other two. It seems to be traveling at a high rate of speed, faster than a man or a load-beast can run. We can give no explanation of this. Also, you're to bear five degrees left."

"Understand." Derron turned five degrees left, as near as he could judge. He was getting out of the lowlands now, and there was a little less mud to impede his progress, "Lisa?"

"Derron, they let me come on because I said I'd tend strictly to business."

"Understand. You do that." He judged he had walked fifty steps and began to run once more, his breath immediately turning into gasps. "I just want to say—I wish—you were carrying my baby."

There was a small, completely feminine sound. But when Lisa's voice came back on intelligibly, it was cool again, with more bearing corrections to be given.

* * *

From the corner of his eye Brother Saile caught the distant moving of something running toward them through the trees and brush. He turned, squinting under the afternoon sun, and with surprise at his own relative calm he saw that their search for the wolf had come to an end. Wolf? The thing approaching should perhaps be called monster or demon instead, but he could not doubt it was the creature that had spread terror among the peasants, come now to find the men who dared to search for it.

Poisonous-looking as a silver wasp, the man-sized creature was still a hundred yards away, running through the scrub forest silent, catlike, four-legged. Brother Saile realized that he should now attempt to lay down his life for his friend, he should shove Brother Jovann back and rush forward himself to distract the thing. And something in Brother Saile wanted to achieve such heroism, but his belly and feet had now turned to lead, leaving him immobile as a statue. He tried to shout a warning, but even his throat was paralyzed by fear. At last he did manage to seize Brother Jovann by the arm and point.

"Ah," said Jovann, coming out of a reverie and turning to look. A score of paces away, the monster was slowing to a halt, crouching on its four slender legs, looking from one friar to the other as if to decide which of them it wanted. Peasants glimpsing the creature might call it wolf. Shreds of gray fabric festooned it here and there, as if it had been clothed and then had, beastlike, torn itself out of the garment. Naked and hairless and sexless, terrible and beautiful at once, it flowed like quicksilver as it took two rapid strides closer to the men. Then it settled again into a crouching, silent statue.

"In God's n-name, come away!" Brother Saile whispered, his jaws shivering. "It is no natural beast. Come away, Brother Jovann!"

But Jovann only raised his hands and signed the horror with the wedge; he seemed to be blessing it rather than exorcising.

"Brother Wolf," he said lovingly, "you do indeed look unlike any beast that I have ever seen before, and I know not from what worldly parentage you may have sprung. But there is in you the spirit of life;

therefore never forget that our Father above has created you, as He has created all other creatures, so we are all children of the one Father."

The wolf darted forward and stopped, stepped and stopped, inched up and stopped again, in a fading oscillation. In its open mouth Saile thought he saw fangs not only long and sharp, but actually blurring with vicious motion like the teeth of some incredible saw. At last there came forth a sound, and Saile was reminded simultaneously of ringing sword blades and of human agony.

Jovann dropped to one knee, facing the crouching monster more on a level. He spread his arms as if willing an embrace. The thing bounded in a blur of speed toward him, then stopped as if a leash had caught it. It was still six or eight paces from the kneeling man. Again it uttered a sound; Saile, half-fainting, seemed to hear the creak of the torture rack and the cry of the victim rise together.

Jovann's voice had nothing in it of fear, but only blended sternness with its love.

"Brother Wolf, you have killed and pillaged like a wanton criminal, and for that you deserve punishment! But accept instead the forgiveness of all the men you have wronged. Come now, here is my hand. In the name of the Holy One, come to me, and pledge that from this day on you will live at peace with men. Come!"

* * *

Derron, approaching at a staggering, exhausted run, first heard a murmur of speech, and then saw the figure of Brother Saile standing motionless, looking off to one side at something concealed from Derron by a thicket. Derron lurched to a halt, raising his staff but not yet aiming it. He knew now that Saile was not the berserker. What Operations had reported about the embryo-like lifeline had fitted in at last in Derron's mind with something the berserker had said to him in the cathedral, fitted in to make a wondrous kind of sense. Three steps sideways brought Derron to where he could see what Saile was gazing at.

He had come in time to see the berserker-wolf take the last hesitant step in its advance. To see it raise one metal paw—and with its steel claw-fingers gently touch the kneeling friar's extended hand.

* * *

"So, my guess was right; it had become a living thing," said Derron. His head was resting in Lisa's lap, and he could if he chose look up past her face at the buried park's real tree tops and artificial sun. "And, as such, susceptible to St. Jovann's domination. To his love . . . I guess there's no other way to put it."

Lisa, stroking his forehead, raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Derron put on a defensive frown. "Oh, there are rational explanations. The most complex and compact machine the berserkers ever built, driven up through twenty thousand years of evolutionary gradient from their staging area—something like life was bound to happen to it. Or so we say now. And Jovann and some other men have had amazing power over living things: that's fairly well documented, even if we rationalists can't understand it."

"I looked up the story about St. Jovann and the wolf," said Lisa, still stroking his brow. "It says that, after he tamed it, the animal lived out its days like a pet dog in the village."

"That would refer to the original wolf. . . . I guess the little change in history we had wasn't enough to

change the legend. I suppose it was the berserker's plan all along to kill the original animal and take its place during the taming episode. Killing Jovann then might make people think he had been a fraud all his life. But tearing the original wolf into bits was an irrational, lifelike thing to do—if we'd known about that sooner, we might have guessed what'd happened to our enemy. There were other little clues along the way—things it did for no reason that would be valid for a machine. And I really should have guessed in the cathedral, when it started babbling to me about passages between life and not-life. Anyway, Operations isn't as trusting as Jovann and his biographers. We've got the thing in a cage in present-time while the scientists try to decide what to . . ."

Derron had to pause there, to accommodate a young lady who was bending over him with the apparent intention of being kissed.

" . . . Did I mention how nice some of that country looked around there?" he went on, a little later. "Of course, the big hill is reserved for the rebuilding of the cathedral. But I thought you and I might drop into a Homestead Office some time soon, you know, before the postwar rush starts, and put our names down for one of those other hilltops. . . ."

And Derron had to pause again.

Berserker's Planet

I

The dead man's voice was coming live and clear over ship's radio into the Orion's lounge, and the six people gathered there, the only people alive within several hundred light years, were listening attentively for the moment, some of them only because Oscar Schoenberg, who owned Orion and was driving her on this trip, had indicated that he wanted to listen. Carlos Suomi, who was ready to stand up to Schoenberg and expected to have a serious argument with him one of these days, was in this instance in perfect agreement with him. Athena Poulson, the independent one of the three women, had made no objection; Celeste Servetus, perhaps the least independent, had made a few but they meant nothing. Gustavus De La Torre and Barbara Hurtado had never, in Suomi's experience, objected to any decision made by Schoenberg.

The dead man's voice to which they listened was not recorded, only mummified by the approximately five hundred years of spacetime that stretched between Hunters' system, where the radio signal had been generated, and Orion's present position in intragalactic space about eleven hundred light years (or five and a half weeks by ship) from Earth. It was the voice of Johann Karlsen, who about five hundred standard years ago had led a battle fleet to Hunters' system to skirmish there with a berserker fleet and drive them off. That was some time after he had smashed the main berserker power and permanently crippled their offensive capabilities at the dark nebula called the Stone Place.

Most of the bulkhead space in the lounge was occupied by viewscreens, and then, as now, they were adjusted for the purpose, the screens brought in the stars with awesome realism. Suomi was looking in the proper direction on the screen, but from this distance of five hundred light years it was barely possible without using telescopic magnification to pick out Hunters' sun, let alone to see the comparatively minor flares of the space battle Karlsen had been fighting when he spoke the words now coming into the space yacht's lounge for Schoenberg to brood over and Suomi to record. Briefly the two men looked somewhat alike, though Suomi was smaller, probably much younger, and had a rather boyish face.

* * *

"How can you be sure that's Karlsen's voice?" Gus De La Torre, a lean and dark and somehow dangerous-looking man, asked now. He and Schoenberg were sitting in soft massive chairs facing each other across the small diameters of the lounge. The other four had positioned their similar chairs so that the group made an approximate circle.

"I've heard it before. This same sequence." Schoenberg's voice was rather soft for such a big, tough-looking man, but it was as decisive as usual. His gaze, like Suomi's, was on the viewscreen, probing out among the stars as he listened intently to Karlsen. "On my last trip to Hunters'," Schoenberg went on softly, "about fifteen standard years ago, I stopped in this region—fifteen lights closer-in, of course—and managed to find this same signal. I listened to these same words and recorded some of them, just as Carlos is doing now." He nodded in Suomi's direction.

Karlsen broke a crackling radio silence to say: "Check the lands on that hatch if it won't seal—should I have to tell you that?" The voice was biting, and there was something unforgettable about it even when the words it uttered were only peevish scraps of jargon indistinguishable from those spoken by the commander of any other difficult and dangerous operation.

"Listen to him," Schoenberg said. "If that's not Karlsen, who could it be? Anyway, when I got back to Earth after the last trip I checked what I had recorded against historians' records made on his flagship, and confirmed it was the same sequence."

De La Torre made a playful tut-tutting sound. "Oscar, did nobody ask you how you came by your recording? You weren't supposed to be out in this region of space then, were you, any more than we are now?"

"Pah. Nobody pays that much attention. Interstellar Authority certainly doesn't."

Suomi had the impression that Schoenberg and De La Torre had not known each other very long or very well, but had met in some business connection and had fallen in together because of a common interest in hunting, something that few people now shared. Few people on Earth, at least, which was the home planet of everyone aboard the ship.

Karlsen said: "This is the High Commander speaking. Ring three uncover. Boarding parties, start your action sequence."

"Signal hasn't decayed much since I heard it last," Schoenberg mused. "The next fifteen lights toward Hunters' must be clean." Without moving from his chair he dialed a three-dimensional holographic astrogation chart into existence and with his lightwriter deftly added a symbol to it. The degree of clean emptiness of the space between them and their destination was of importance because, although a starship's faster-than-light translation took place outside of normal space, conditions in adjacent realms of normal space had their inescapable effects.

"There'll be a good gravitational hill to get up," said Karlsen on the radio. "Let's stay alert."

"Frankly, all this bores me," said Celeste Servetus (full figure, Oriental and black and some strain of Nordic in her ancestry, incredibly smooth taut skin beneath her silver body paint, wig of what looked like silver mist). Here lately it was Celeste's way to display flashes of insolence toward Schoenberg, to go through periods of playing what in an earlier age would have been described as hard-to-get. Schoenberg did not bother to look at her now. She had already been got.

"We wouldn't be here now, probably, if it weren't for that gentleman who's talking on the radio." This was Barbara Hurtado. Barbara and Celeste were much alike, both playgirls brought along on this expedition as items for male consumption, like the beer and the cigars; and they were much different, too. Barbara, a Caucasian-looking brunette, was as usual opaquely clothed from knees to shoulders, and there was nothing ethereal about her. If you saw her inert, asleep, face immobile, and did not hear her voice or her laugh, or behold the grace with which she moved, you might well think her nothing beyond the ordinary in sexual attractiveness.

Alive and in motion, she was as eye-catching as Celeste. They were about on a par intellectually, too, Suomi had decided. Barbara's remark implying that present-day interstellar human civilization owed its existence to Karlsen and his victories over the berserkers was a truism, not susceptible to debate or even worthy of reply.

The berserkers, automated warships of terrible power and effectiveness, had been loosed on the galaxy during some unknown war fought by races long vanished before human history began. The basic program built into all berserkers was to seek out and destroy life, whenever and wherever they found it. In the dark centuries of their first assaults on Earth-descended man, they had come near overwhelming his modest dominion among the stars. Though Karlsen and others had turned them back, forced them away from the center of human-dominated space, there were still berserkers in existence and men still fought and died against them on the frontiers of man's little corner of the galaxy. Not around here, though. Not for five hundred years.

"I admit his voice does something to me," Celeste said, shifting her position in her chair, stretching and then curling her long naked silver legs.

"He loses his temper in a minute here," said Schoenberg.

"And why shouldn't he? I think men of genius have that right." This was Athena Poulson in her fine contralto. Despite her name, her face showed mainly Oriental ancestry. She was better looking than nine out of ten young women, carrying to the first decimal place what Celeste brought to the third. Athena was now wearing a simple one-piece suit, not much different from what she usually wore in the office. She was one of Schoenberg's most private and trusted secretaries.

Suomi, wanting to make sure he caught Karlsen's temper-losing on his recording, checked the little crystal cube resting on the flat arm of his chair. He had adjusted it to screen out conversation in the lounge and pick up only what came in by radio. He reminded himself to label the cube as soon as he got it back to his stateroom; generally he forgot.

* * *

"How they must have hated him," said Barbara Hurtado, her voice now dreamy and far away.

Athena looked over. "Who? The people he lost his temper at?"

"No, those hideous machines he fought against. Oscar, you've studied it all. Tell us something about it."

Schoenberg shrugged. He seemed reluctant to talk very much on the subject although it obviously interested him. "I'd say Karlsen was a real man, and I wish I could have known him. Carlos here has perhaps studied the period more thoroughly than I have."

"Tell us, Carl," Athena said. She was sitting two chairs away. Suomi's field was the psychology of environmental design. He had been called in, some months ago, to consult with Schoenberg and Associates on the plans for a difficult new office, and there he had met Athena . . . so now he was here, on a big-game hunting expedition, of all things.

"Yes, now's your chance," De La Torre put in. Things did not generally go quite smoothly between him and Suomi, though the abrasion had not yet been bad enough to open up an acknowledged quarrel.

"Well," said Suomi thoughtfully, "in a way, you know, those machines did hate him."

"Oh no," said Athena positively, shaking her head. "Not machines."

Sometimes he felt like hitting her.

He went on: "Karlsen is supposed to have had some knack of choosing strategy they couldn't cope with, some quality of leadership . . . whatever he had, the berserkers couldn't seem to oppose him successfully. They're said to have placed a higher value on his destruction than on that of some entire planets."

"The berserkers made special assassin machines," Schoenberg offered unexpectedly. "Just to get Karlsen."

"Are you sure of that?" Suomi asked, interested. "I've run into hints of something like that, but couldn't find it definitely stated anywhere."

"Oh, yes." Schoenberg smiled faintly. "If you're trying to study the matter you can't just ask Infocenter on Earth for a printout; you have to get out and dig a little more than that."

"Why?" Infocenter, as a rule, could promptly reproduce anything that was available as reference material anywhere on Earth.

"There are still some old government censor-blocks in their data banks holding information on berserkers."

Suomi shook his head. "Why in the world?"

"Just official inertia, I suppose. Nobody wants to take the time and trouble to dig them out. If you mean why were the censor-blocks inserted in the first place, well, it was because at one time there were some people who worshipped the damned things; berserkers, I mean."

"That's hard to believe," Celeste objected. She tried to say more but was interrupted by Karlsen shouting in anger, chewing out his men about something unintelligibly technological.

"That's about the end," said Schoenberg, reaching for a control beside his chair. The frying crackle of radio static died away. "There're several hours of radio silence following." Schoenberg's eyes went shifting restlessly now to his astrogational chart. "So there was some dimwitted bureaucratic policy of restricting information about berserkers . . . the whole thing is fascinating, ladies and gents, but what say we move on toward our hunting?"

* * *

Without pretense of waiting for agreement he began to set his astrogational and drive computers to take

them on toward Hunters'. It would be another seventeen or eighteen standard days before Orion arrived in-system there. Exact timing was not possible in interstellar travel. It was something like piloting a sailing ship in a sea full of variable currents, depending upon winds that were undependable from day to day even though they held to a fairly consistent pattern. Variable stars, pulsars, spinars and quasars within the galaxy and out of it had each their effects upon the subfoundation of space through which the starship moved. Black holes of various sizes committed their wrenching gravitational enormities upon the fabric of the Universe. The explosions of supernovae far and near sent semi-eternal shock waves lapping at the hull. The interstellar ship that effectively outpaces light does not, cannot, carry aboard itself all the power needed to make it move as it does move. Only tapping the gravitational-inertial resources of the universe can provide such power, as the winds were tapped to drive the sailing ships of old.

Though the artificial gravity maintained its calm dominion in the lounge a change in lighting of the holographic chart signalled that Orion was under way. Schoenberg stood up, and stretched expansively, seeming to grow even bigger than he was. "On to Hunters!" he announced. "Who'll join me in a drink? To the success of the hunt, and the enjoyment of any other amusements we may run into."

They all would have a drink. But Athena took only a sip before dropping her glass away into the recycling station. "Shall we get our chess tournament moving again, Oscar?"

"I think not." Schoenberg stood with one hand behind his back under the short tails of his lounging jacket, almost posing, savoring his own drink. "I'm going below. Time we got the firing range set up and got in a little practice. We're not going after pheasant, exactly . . . we'll have enough of tournaments after we land, perhaps." His intelligent eyes, lighted now by some private amusement, skipped around at all of them, seemed to linger longest, by a fraction of a second, on Suomi. Then Schoenberg turned and with a little wave went out of the lounge.

The party broke up. After taking his recorder back to his stateroom, Suomi started out again to see what the firing range was going to be like, and ran into De La Torre in the passageway.

Suomi asked: "What was that all about, 'enough of tournaments after we land'?"

"He's told you nothing about the tournament he wants to watch?"

"No. What kind?"

De La Torre smiled, and would not or could not give him a straight answer.

II

In the camp by the placid river, under Godsmountain's wooded flanks, there were sixty-four warriors when all were assembled at last, on this warm morning in the eastern-sunrise season. Out of the sixty-four there were not more than four or five who had ever seen each other before because they had come each from his own district, town, fiefdom, nomadic band or island, from every corner of the inhabitable world. Some had journeyed here from the shores of the boundless eastern ocean. Others had come from the edge of permanently inhabited territory to the north, where spring, already a sixtieth-of-an-old-man's-lifetime old, was melting free the glacier-beast and rime-worm. From the north came the mightiest hunters of this world named for hunting. Others of these warriors had come from the uncrossable shattered desert that lay to the west of the lands of men, and others still from the tangle of rivers and swamps in the south that blended finally into ocean again and blocked all travel in that

direction.

The warriors who had gathered on this day for the beginning of Thorun's Tournament were variously tall or short, lean or heavy, but only a few were very young men, and none at all were very old. All were notably violent men even on this world of violence, but during the days of assembly they had camped here together in peace, each on his arrival accepting without argument whatever little plot of campground was assigned him by Leros or one of the subordinate priests of Thorun. In the center of the camp an image of the god, dark-bearded and gold-diademed, brooding with hand on sword-hilt, had been erected on a field-altar, a small wooden platform, and no warrior failed to place some offering before it. Some of the offerings were rich, for some of the men who had come to fight in the Tournament were wealthy.

However wealthy or powerful an entrant might be, he came alone, unattended by any servants or well-wishers and carrying little more than a heavy robe for shelter in addition to the weapons of his preference. It was going to be a holy tournament, regarded by the priests of Thorun as so sacred that outside spectators were barred—though there was scarcely a freeman on the planet who did not yearn to watch. Nor were outside servants needed. The assembled warriors and priests were to be served—luxuriously, it appeared—by an almost equal number of gray-clad male slaves whose dress marked them as property of Godsmountain, of Thorun and his servitors. No women were to be allowed within the camp.

On this morning when the last warrior arrived, some slaves were making ready the flat fighting arena of pounded earth, some ten paces in diameter. Other slaves prepared a midday meal and set aside offerings of fruit and meat for those who would wish to lay them on Thorun's altar. The smoke of the cooking fires rose into a sky that was quite clear and had something of the blueness of Earth's sky, and yet also something of yellowness and bitterness and brass.

From beyond the plumes of smoke the mountain looked down, an unfamiliar sight to almost all of those who had come here to fight. But it had been known since childhood in all their hearts and minds. On its top the priests of Thorun dwelt, and their god and his power with them, within the white walls of his sacred city. Women and animals and other prosaic necessities were up there too; slaves were taken up from time to time as needed to serve the dwellers but seldom or never did the slaves come down again; those at work this morning in the riparian meadow had all been imported for the occasion from tributary lands. Godsmountain's sizable armies never, except for select detachments, marched any nearer their own capital than the mountain's base. To most ordinary folk the summit and its citadel-city were unattainable.

Thorun himself dwelt there, and the demigod Mjollnir, his most faithful paladin. Other divinities visited from time to time: the gods of healing, justice, soil and weather, and growth and fecundity; and numerous demigods with ancillary responsibilities. But it was primarily Thorun's mountain, Thorun's religion, Thorun's world—except to those, generally restricted to the rim of the world these days, who did not like Thorun, or did not like the power wielded in his name by Godsmountain's priests. Hunters' was a planet of hunters and warriors, and Thorun was god of war and of the hunt.

A priest called Leros, of middle age, having seen three previous northern springs, and scarred by the violence of his youth, had been appointed by the High Priest Andreas to direct the Tournament. Leros was high in rank among the priests of Thorun, though not a member of the most secret Inner Circle. In his youth he had gained an almost legendary reputation as a fighter, and many of the best of these young heroes regarded him with awe. Leros came down to the riverbank himself to greet the last-arriving warrior, one Chapmut of Rillijax. He gave Chapmut a hand out of his canoe, bade him welcome to the Sacred Tournament of Thorun, and then with a small flourish placed the last checkmark on the tally sheet

containing all the expected warriors' names.

Shortly after, a solemn drum called all of them to an assembly. Leros, standing in a new robe of spotless white in the center of the clean new arena, waited while they gathered around its edge. They were not long in falling silent to give him their full attention. In some parts of the circle the warriors were crowded, yet there was no jostling or edging for position among them, or anything but the greatest courtesy.

* * *

"Rejoice, ye chosen of the gods!" Leros cried out at last in his still-strong voice. He swept his gaze fully around the ring of fighting men, standing himself as tall and strong as most of them, though no longer as quick or sure. It was many days, about a sixtieth-part-of-an-old-man's-life, since the formal announcement of this Tournament had been carried down from Godsmountain and spread across the world. For much longer, since the time of the last northern spring, it had been common knowledge that this Tournament was coming. Scrawny little boys of that time were now men in their prime; and Godsmountain and all its doings had waxed greatly in importance since then.

Many of the waiting entrants were half naked in the mild weather, their bodies all muscles and scars and hair. The clothes of some were very rough, and those of others soft and rich. A few wore scraps of body armor, or carried shields of hardened sloth-leather or bright iron. Full armor was unknown on Hunters', where a man stood on his feet to fight and never rode. These fighters were chiefs' sons and peasants' sons and sons of unknown fathers. Nothing but merit, merit with sword and spear and battle-axe, had won them their places here. Around him now Leros saw blue eyes and dark eyes, eyes with epicanthic folds and eyes without, deep eyes here, mad eyes there, and a pair or two of eyes that seemed as innocent as babes'. The original colonists from Earth, some six standard centuries in the past, had been eclectically selected from a world already well mixed in race and culture. Around Leros the faces were brown or white or black, with hair of black or brown or yellow or red—there was one iron-gray, two shaven bald. Here was a heavily tattooed face, with stripes across from ear to ear, and over there a smile showed teeth all filed to points. More numerous than the oddities were other men who looked as prosaic as herdsmen, save for the weapons at their belts. Besides their human maleness, only one thing was common to them all: uncommon skill at killing other men in single combat.

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"Rejoice, ye chosen!" Leros called again, more softly. "Before the sun goes down upon this day, half of you will stand within our god's great hall"—he pointed toward Godsmountain's top, out of sight behind the wooded bulges of its lower slopes—"and face to face with Thorun himself." Leros prepared himself to retell, and his listeners made ready to hear yet again, the promises that had been carried down from Godsmountain a standard year earlier by Leros and his aides.

Thorun, warrior-chieftain of the gods (so the message went) had been pleased by the spirit shown by the race of men in the recent series of wars extending Godsmountain's power across most of the habitable world. The god was pleased to grant to humankind the privilege of fighting for a seat at his right hand, the competition being open to the sixty-four finest heroes of the age. To accomplish this purpose the inhabited world had been arbitrarily divided into sixty-four districts, and the local rulers of every district were invited to send—the details of the selection process being left largely to them—their mightiest warrior. All but one of the contestants was expected to die in the Tournament of Thorun, and that one, the winner, would be granted the status of a demigod and would take his seat at Thorun's right hand. (Out in the country some-where, some irreverent logician would be sure to ask the priest who brought the message: How about Mjollnir: Will he have to move down a peg? Not at all, my nephew. No doubt he and the Tournament winner will share the honor of being next to Thorun. No doubt they will fight for

the day's turn whenever it pleases them.)

By all reports it pleased them to fight a lot in Thorun's hall atop the mountain. There the great god and the more or less deified men, slaughtered heroes of wars and combats past, reslaughtered one another daily for the joy of it and were miraculously healed of their wounds each evening in time to enjoy the perfect meat and drink of Thorun's table, the tale-telling of immortal eloquence shared by the company of the gods, the endless supply of maidens eternally made virgin for their pleasure. (Out in the country, the questioner relaxes with a sigh; there is more here than a simple warrior knows how to argue about. Even if he is not so simple, the questioner sees that he is not going to beat this talking priest at his own game of words.)

Leros on this bright morning was formally spelling out once more what his listeners already knew: "Those of you who fall in the first round of fighting will be the first to feast with Thorun—but eternally around the lowest portion of his table. The next sixteen who perish, in the second round of fighting, will be granted places higher up. In the fighting of the third round eight will die and will be seated higher still—and each of these will have eternally with him four lovely maids of a beauty surpassing any in this world, two of ivory white and two of ebon black, to satisfy his every wish even before it can be spoken aloud.

"After the fourth round has been fought there will be only four warriors left alive, the strongest of the strong. The four who die in the fourth round of fighting will be granted shields and arms lustrous as silver, yet harder and keener than the finest steel, and wine goblets to match, and each will have eight virgin maidens of still greater beauty perpetually in his service. They will be seated very near to Thorun.

"In the fifth round of duels, two more men must fall, and these two will be seated in tall chairs of oak and gold, higher up the table still, and they will be granted gold winecups and shields and arms, and each will be served by sixteen maids of beauty indescribable, and all things will be theirs in fuller measure than any lower men may have. On that day but two of you will remain alive outside the hall where the gods feast.

"The single duel of the sixth round of fighting will be the last and greatest. Who loses it will still be honored beyond any of those that I have mentioned yet. And when it is over, the Tournament will be over, and one man will have won. That man alone shall walk, in the flesh, into the holy place of the god Thorun, and his place for all time to come shall be at Thorun's right hand; and from his high place that man will overtop all of the other sixty-three by as great a measure as they stand above the race of puny, mortal men that crawl about here below."

Leros concluded with a sigh. He believed the promises and they moved him to envy and awe every time he thought about them.

* * *

For some time now one of the warriors, black of skin and huge, had been leaning forward with an expectant look, as if he wished to speak. Now Leros, with an inquiring glance, took notice of him.

The man asked: "Lord Leros, tell me this—"

"Address me no more as Lord. Your status from this day forward is higher than my own."

"Very well. Friend Leros, then. Tell me this: when a man has won this Tournament will he then have all the powers and rights that gods are known to have? I mean not only powers of war, but of the soft and healing arts?"

Leros had to take thought for a moment or two before answering. It had not been one of the usual expectable questions, for instance was Thorun's hall threatened by overcrowding with all the wars, or what kind of sacrificial meat would the god prefer today. At last he spoke. "The gentle goddess of healing will certainly listen to any request that man may make." He let out a light sigh. "The gods listen to one another more than they do to men. But then they still do what they please, unless of course they have bound themselves by formal promise, as Thorun has done regarding this Tournament."

The man nodded soberly. "It is all we can expect," he said, and resumed his place in the circle.

All were silent now. Somewhere in the background a slave was chopping kindling for the first funeral pyre. Leros said: "Then go, all of you, and make what final preparations you will. The first fight will begin shortly."

As soon as the assembly had dispersed a subordinate priest drew Leros aside and when they had reached a place of relative privacy unrolled a small scroll and showed it to him. "Lord Leros, this was found posted on a tree not far away. We have no clue as yet to indicate who put it up."

The lettering on the scroll seemed to have been made with a dull ordinary pencil of charred kettwood. The message read:

Gods and men, place your bets. Who of the 64 will be proven the greatest fighter? That one will be, there is no doubt. Will he then envy those that he has slain, and curse Godsmountain and its lying priests? While your money is out, try to lay a bet on this also: Are the rulers of this mountain fit to rule our world?

The Brotherhood

Leros nodded, tight-lipped, at the signature. "You have sent word of this up the hill?"

"Of course, Lord."

"That is all we can do for the moment. We must make sure the army increases its patrols in the area." But of course the message might have been put up by someone known to be in the area of the Tournament. Perhaps one of the slaves—or even one of the contestants—is not what he pretends to be. "We must keep our eyes open, of course, and let nothing jeopardize the Tournament. To discredit it would be a considerable victory for the Brotherhood." The Brotherhood was a vague league of the disaffected, probably including most of Godsmountain's enemies, who were now scattered and relatively powerless around the rim of the inhabited world. There might be a sharp and dangerous secret organization at its core; it seemed wise to assume there was, and to continually warn the people and the soldiers of it.

The subordinate indicated his agreement and withdrew. Leros pondered briefly: Might the agent who had left the message be a disloyal priest? He did not think it probable. But he could not be completely sure.

The Tournament meanwhile, had to get started. There had been no sign from up the hill that High Priest Andreas or any of his Inner Circle were coming down to watch. A pack train came into view on the lower reaches of the long road that wound its way down the forested slopes from the summit; but when it

drew near Leros saw that no men of rank were walking near the animals, it was only a regular supply caravan returning unburdened from the top.

On with it, then. Turning to a waiting herald, he gave the signal for the battle-horn to be blown, to call the contestants all together for the last time in the world of living men. When they were assembled he drew from a pocket of his fine white robe a scroll of new vellum, on which a priest-scribe had set down the names in elegant calligraphy. They appeared in the alphabetical order hallowed by time and military usage:

Arthur of Chesspa Ben Tarras of the Battle-Axe

Big Left Hand Bram the Beardless of Consiglor

Brunn of Bourzoe Byram of the Long Bridges

Chapmut of Rillijax Charles the Upright

Chun He Ping the Strong Col Renba

David the Wolf of Monga's Village Efim Samdeviatoff

Farley of Eikosk Farmer Minamoto

Geno Hammerhand Geoff Symbolor of Symbolorville

Gib the Blacksmith Giles the Treacherous of Endross Swamp

Gladwin Vanucci Gunter Kamurata

Hal Coppersmith Herc Stambler of Birchtown

Homer Garamond of Running Water Ian Offally the Woodcutter

John Spokemaker of the Triple Fork Jud Isaksson of Ardstoy Hill

Kanret Jon of Jonsplace Korl the Legbreaker

LeNos of the Highlands Losson Grish

M'Gamba Mim Muni Podarces

Mesthles of the Windy Vale Mool of Rexbahn

Nikos Darcy of the Long Plain Octans Bukk of Pachuka

Omira Kelsumba One-Eyed Manuel

Otis Kitamura Pal Setoff of Whiteroads

Pern-Paul Hosimba Pernsol Muledriver of Weff's Plain

Phil Cenchrias Polydorus the Foul

Proclus Nan Ling Rafael Sandoval

Rahim Sosias Rico Kitticatchorn of Tiger's Lair

Rudolph Thadbury Ruen Redaldo

Sensai Hagenderf Shang Ti the Awesome

Siniuju of the Evergreen Slope Tay Corbish Kandry

Thomas the Grabber Thurlow Vultee of the High Crag

Travers Sandakan of Thieves' Road Urumchi

Vann the Nomad Venerable Ming the Butcher

Vladerlin Bain of Sanfa Town Wat Franko of the Deep Wood

Wull Narvaez Zell of Windchastee

When he had done with reading, Leros glanced up at the still-high sun. "There will be time today for much fighting. Let it begin."

He handed the scroll to a subordinate priest, who read in a loud voice: "Arthur of Chesspa—Ben Tarras of the Battle-Axe."

Having both stepped into the ring, and made their holy signs imploring Thorun's favor, the two went at it. Ben Tarras had taken only a dozen more breaths when his battle-axe spun out of his hand to bury itself with a soft sound in the calmly receiving earth, while Arthur's swordblade at the same time sank true and deep in Ben Tarras's flesh. The bare, flattened soil of the fighting ring drank Ben Tarras's blood as if it had been long athirst. A pair of slaves in shabby gray tunics dragged his body from the ring, toward a place nearby where other slaves were readying a pyre. The dry wood was stacked twice taller than a man already, and was not yet enough. Thirty-two men today would join the gods and begin their eternal feast with Thorun.

"Big Left Hand—Bram the Beardless of Consiglor."

This fight went on a little longer; and then both hands of Big Left Hand (they appeared equally big) were stilled as Bram's sword tore his middle open. Again the slaves came to bear a corpse away, but Big Left Hand stirred and kicked feebly as they took him up. His eyes opened and were living, though the terrible wound in his front was plainly mortal. One slave, who limped about his work, pulled from his belt a short but massive leaden maul and broke the head of the dying man with a short methodical swing. Leros for the second time said ritual words to speed a loser's soul to Thorun, nodded to the acolyte who held the scroll.

"Brunn of Bourzoe—Byram of the Long Bridges."

It went on through the afternoon, with little pauses between fights. Some of the fights were long, and one of the winners had lost so much blood that he could hardly stand himself before he managed to still the breath in the loser's throat. As soon as each fight was over the slaves came quickly to stanch the wounds, if any, of the winner, and lead him to food and drink and rest. It was likely to go hard in the second round of fighting with those who had been weakened in the first.

The sun was reddening near the horizon before the last match had been fought. Before retiring, Leros gave orders that the camp should be moved early in the morning. Originally he had planned to wait until midday before beginning the slow intended progress up the mountain, but the smoke of the funeral pyre seemed to lie heavy here in the low air, and amphibious vermin from the river were being drawn to the camp by the blood of heroes in which the earth was soaked.

III

Orion was well in-system now, rapidly matching orbital velocities with Hunters' planet, and in fact not far from entering atmosphere. From his command chair in the small control room at the center of the ship, Schoenberg supervised his autopilot with a computer-presented hologram of the planet drifting before him, the planet as it appeared ingestalt via the multitude of sensing instruments built into the starship's outer hull.

A few days earlier Suomi had obtained a printout on Hunters' planet from the ship's gazetteer, a standard databank carried for navigation, trade, and emergency survival. The Hunterian year was about fifteen times as long as the Earth-standard year; Hunters' planet was therefore much farther from its primary than Earth was from Sol, but Hunters' Star was a blue-white subgiant, so that the total insolation received by both planets was very nearly equal. The radius, mass, and gravity of Hunters' planet were Earthlike, as was the composition of the atmosphere. Hunters' would surely have been colonized from pole to pole had it not been for its extreme axial tilt—more than eighty degrees to the plane of its revolution around Hunters' sun, almost as far as was Uranus in its orbit around Sol.

Spring was now a standard year old in the Hunterian northern hemisphere, which region was therefore emerging from a night that had been virtually total for another Earthly year or so. Near the north pole the night had now lasted for more than five standard years and would endure for a total of seven. Up there the ice-grip of the dark cold was deep indeed, but it would soon be loosened. Seven standard years of continuous sunheat were coming.

According to statements in the gazetteer, which were probably still valid though more than a standard

century old, men had never managed to settle permanently much farther than fifteen degrees of latitude in either direction from the Hunterian equator. Dome colonies would have been called for and there had never been sufficient population pressure to make it worthwhile. Indeed, the population had not occupied even the whole equatorial zone of the main continent when the berserkers came. When the killing machines from out of space attacked, the growing technological civilization of Hunters' colonists had been wrecked; the intervention of Karlsen's battle fleet was the only reason that any of the colonists—or the biosphere itself, for that matter—had survived at all. The native life, though none of its forms were intelligent, did manage to endure at all latitudes, surviving the long winters by hibernation of one kind or another, and in many cases getting through the scorching, desiccated summers by an estivation cycle.

Away from the tropics, spring presented the only opportunity for feeding, growth, and reproduction. Because the southern hemisphere was so largely water, the northern spring was the one that counted insofar as land animals were concerned. In the northern springtime beasts of all description emerged from caves and nests and frozen burrows with the melting of the ice. Among them came predators, more terrible, burning with more urgent hunger and ferocity, than any creatures that had ever lived on the old wild lands of Earth. On Hunters' planet now, as every fifteen standard years, the hunting season by which the planet had acquired its name was in full swing.

* * *

"The poaching season, I suppose we should call it," said Carlos Suomi to Athena Poulson. The two of them were standing in the shooting gallery Schoenberg had set up a few weeks earlier in the large cabin directly beneath Orion's lounge. Suomi and Athena were looking over a large gun rack filled with energy rifles; Schoenberg had enjoined everyone aboard to select a weapon and become adept with it before shooting in earnest was required. Schoenberg and De La Torre spent a good deal of time down here, Celeste and Barbara hardly any.

Suomi and Athena were intermediate, he generally showing up whenever she went to practice. They were in mid-session now. Some ten meters from the rifle rack—half the diameter of the spherical ship—a computer-designed hologram showed a handful of Hunterian predators stop-actioned in what looked like a good drawing of their natural habitat. Around and beyond the sketch-like animals in the middle distance what appeared to be several square kilometers of glacier spread to an illusive horizon.

"All right," Athena said in her low voice. "Technically speaking, this trip is outside interstellar law. But it's evident that neither the authorities on Earth or the Interstellar Authority care very much. Oscar is too smart to get into any real trouble over such a thing. Relax and enjoy the trip, Carl, now that you're here. Whyever did you come along if you don't like the idea?"

"You know why I came." Suomi pulled a rifle halfway out of the rack and then slid it back. The end of its muzzle was slightly bulbous, dull gray, pitted all over with tiny and precisely machined cavities. What it projected was sheer physical force, abstracted almost to the point of turning into mathematics. Suomi had already tried out all the rifles in the rack and they all seemed pretty much the same to him, despite their considerable differences in length and shape and weight. They were all loaded now with special target cartridges, projecting only a trickle of power when triggered, enough to operate the target range. Its setup was not different in principle from the target ranges in arcades on Earth or other urbanized planets; only there it was generally toy berserkers that one shot at, black metal goblins of various angular shapes that waved their limbs or flashed their imitation laser beams in menace. "I've always enjoyed these target games," he said. "Why shouldn't these be real enough, instead of going after living animals?"

"Because these are not real," said Athena firmly. "And shooting at them isn't real either." She chose a rifle and turned her back on Suomi to aim it down the range. Somewhere a scanner interpreted her posture as

that of the ready hunter, and the scene before her came alive again with deliberate motion. A multimouthed creature bristling with heavy fur stalked toward them at a range of seventy meters. Athena fired, a small click was emitted by the rifle, which remained perfectly steady, and the beast flopped over in a graceful, almost stylized way, now wearing a spot of red light riveted near the middle of what should have been its spine. The indication was for a clean kill.

"Athena, I came along because you were coming, and I wanted to spend time with you, to get some things settled between us. That's why I had you get me invited. Also it was a chance to take a trip on a private space yacht, something I'll probably never be able to do again. If I must hunt, to keep your lord and master upstairs happy, why then I'll do it. Or at least go through the motions of hunting."

"Carlos, you're always talking down Oscar to me, and it won't work. I think this is the one I'll carry." She turned the rifle this way and that, looking at it critically.

"I wonder what the people living on Hunters' think about expeditions like ours."

"They're not being harmed, as far as I can see. I don't suppose they'll give a damn, even if they know we're there, which they probably won't. We won't be hunting in an inhabited area, but in the north."

She sounded as if she knew what she was talking about, though she had probably only read the same ship's printout that Suomi had been studying. None of them except Schoenberg had been here before, and, when you thought about it, Schoenberg was really uncommunicative about his previous trip. With a few words he gave assurance that they were all in for some marvelous sport, warned succinctly about certain dangers to be wary of—and that was about it. He might have been on Hunters' a number of times before. He might be three hundred years old or more; it was getting hard to tell these days, when an age of five hundred years was not unheard of. As long as the central nervous system held out other systems of the body could generally be maintained or replaced as needed.

Schoenberg's voice now sounded on the intercom. "We're coming into atmosphere soon, people. Artificial gravity will be going off in another twenty minutes. Better secure your areas and settle in the lounge or in your staterooms."

"We hear you in the target range," Suomi answered. "We're on our way." He and Athena began to secure the rifles in the rack, and to make sure that nothing in the area was likely to fly around loose if the coming maneuvers in free gravity should become violent for any reason.

* * *

Seated a few minutes later in the lounge, Suomi watched the progress of their descent on the wall-sized screens. The planet, that had been hardly more than a star when last he observed its image, was now on top of them, or so it seemed. It grew further, eased around to a position below them as Schoenberg changed ship's attitude, spread a cloud net to catch Orion, became a world with a horizon to hold them in. The blue-white sun grew yellowish as they began to see it from inside the planet's atmosphere.

The land below was high, rough country. Like most planets, Hunters' had an uninhabited look when seen from the upper air. Here the appearance persisted even when they had dropped to only a few kilometers' altitude.

Schoenberg, alone in the control room, now took over control completely from the computers, guiding the ship manually, looking rapidly from one television screen to another. In the lounge they could watch him on the passenger's screen. Obviously traffic in the Hunterian atmosphere was practically non-existent

and a mid-air collision nothing to be feared.

Now Schoenberg was following a river, actually skirting sometimes between the walls of its deep-cut canyon. Mountains rose and dipped beneath Orion as he veered away from the watercourse, steadily decreasing speed. At last a chalet-like structure, flanked by log outbuildings, the whole complex surrounded by a palisade, came into view at the head of a pass. There was a scarcity of level ground, but Schoenberg had no real trouble in lowering the ship onto the barren soil about fifty meters outside the stockade. From the spherical metal hull, thick landing struts moved out to take the ship's weight and hold her upright. There was a scarcely perceptible settling motion when the pilot cut the drive. The ship used the same silent forces for maneuvering in atmosphere as in space—though caution was necessary when using them near a planet-sized mass—and it could be landed on any surface that would bear its weight.

Obviously their descent had been observed, for the drive was hardly off before people in drab clothes began to appear from a gate in the stockade. The arrival of a spaceship seemed to be an exciting event, but no more than that. The impromptu welcoming committee of six or eight showed no hesitancy in drawing near.

Once the ship was firmly down Schoenberg got out of his chair and headed for the main hatch, which, without formality, he at once opened wide to the planet's air, and pressed the button to extrude a landing ramp. He and the others aboard had taken the routine immunological treatments before departure, and the ship had been gone over by his own medics to avoid carrying dangerous microorganisms to a planet with only a primitive medical technology.

The natives waited a few meters from the ship, the women wearing long gowns and heavy aprons, the men for the most part dressed in coveralls. A couple of them had primitive cutting or digging tools in hand.

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One smiling young man, better dressed than the others, his boots just as heavy but fancier, and with a short sword in a decorated leather scabbard at his belt, stepped forward.

"Welcome, then." He spoke the common language with what seemed to Earth ears a heavy, but understandable, accent. "Now you are Mister Schoenberg, I recall."

"I am." Smiling and open in his manner, Schoenberg went down the ramp to shake hands. "And you are—Kestand, isn't it? Mikenas's younger brother?"

"Now that is right. I was just a small one last hunting season when you were here. Surprised you know me."

"Not at all. How's Mikenas?"

"He's fine. Out now tending stock."

The conversation went on about the state of affairs on the ranch or fiefdom or whatever it was that the absent Mikenas owned or ruled. Suomi and the other passengers—all the girls were now dressed quite modestly—had come down from the lounge, but at a gesture from Schoenberg remained just inside the ship, enjoying the fresh alien air. Meanwhile the farm workers remained standing in a group outside. These all appeared cheerful and more or less healthy, but might have been deaf and dumb. It was probably a decade and a half since any of them had had any news from the great interstellar civilization

that networked the sky about them. They smiled at the visitors, but only Kestand spoke, and even he showed no inclination to ask how things were going, out among the stars.

It seemed that no introductions were going to be made. The whole thing had a clandestine air, like a smugglers' meeting. For a moment Suomi wondered—but the idea was ridiculous. A man of Schoenberg's wealth would not dabble in smuggling so directly if he decided to take it up.

Kestand was asking: "Have you been hunting yet?"

"No. I wanted to stop here first, and find out what's changed on the world since my last trip."

"Well." Kestand, not the most scintillating speaker Suomi had ever attended, began to expand his earlier reports on the local state of crops and weather and hunting. "Not real northern hunting, y'understand, I haven't been able to get away yet this season. Like to be on my way right now, but Mikenas left me in charge."

Schoenberg was listening patiently. Suomi, from clues dropped here and there, gathered that Mikenas and Schoenberg had gone north by spaceship last hunting season and had enjoyed notable success. Suomi's eyes kept coming back to the sword Kestand wore. The sheath was leather, looped onto the man's belt, and the hilt seemed to be plastic but of course was much more likely to be wood or bone; Suomi wished he knew more about primitive materials. Casting back through his life's memories—only about thirty years to be sure—he could not recall ever before seeing a man carrying a weapon for any non-symbolic purpose. Of course this sword might be only a badge of authority. It looked, though, as businesslike as the hoe that one of the other men was holding.

The two-way conversation had veered to the governmental and religious changes that had taken place since the last northern hunting season. These were all obscure to Suomi, but Schoenberg seemed to understand.

* * *

"Godsmountain has pretty well taken over, then," he mused, nodding his head as if at a suspicion confirmed. Then he asked: "Are they having the Tournament as planned this season?"

"Yes." Kestand looked up at the sun. "Should be starting in another two, three days. Byram of the Long Bridges, he's our local champion."

"Local?" Schoenberg looked thoughtful. "Isn't Long Bridges a good two hundred kilometers from here?"

"I tell you, this's a world Tournament. Each of the sixty-four districts is a big'un." Kestand shook his head. "I'd purely like to go."

"You would've gone, I bet, even rather than hunting, if Mikenas hadn't left you in charge here."

"No, oh nooo, there was no way. Tournament's private for the gods and priests. Even the earl couldn't get an invitation, and Byram is his bodyguard. Mikenas didn't even try."

Schoenberg frowned slightly, but did not pursue the matter of the Tournament any further. Suomi meanwhile was imagining a tournament of jousting, as in the old stories of Earth, men in full armor hurtling together on armored animals, trying to unseat each other with lances. But it couldn't be quite that; he recalled from his reading that there were no riding animals on Hunters'.

After a little more talk Schoenberg thanked his informant courteously and called up into the ship for them to hand him down a satchel from a locker near the hatch. "And two of those ingots that you'll find in the locker; bring them down also, would you, gentlemen?"

Suomi and De La Torre brought the desired items down the ramp. Setting the satchel at Kestand's feet, Schoenberg announced: "This is what I told Mikenas I'd bring him, power cells for lamps and a few medicines. Tell him I'm sorry I missed him; I'll stop again next season if all goes well. And here." He hefted the two ingots and handed them to the native. "For you. Good metal for points or blades. Have a good smith work it. Tell him to quench it in ice water. I guess you have no trouble getting that at this altitude."

"Why, I give you great thanks!" Kestand was obviously well pleased.

Once the ramp was retracted and the hatch closed, Schoenberg wasted little time in getting Orion into the air again. He still held manual control, soaring up in a steep arc that gradually bent into a level flight toward the northwest.

His passengers had come to the control room with him this time and sat or stood around, more or less looking over his shoulder. When they had leveled off, De La Torre asked: "Where to, fearless leader? Shall we go and watch a few heads get broken?"

Schoenberg grunted. "Let's go hunting first, Gus. The man said two or three days before the Tournament starts. I'm anxious to get a little hunting in." This time he remembered to look around as a matter of form. "How does that suit you people?"

The planet flowed south and east beneath them. The sun, turning blue-white again at this altitude, reversed its apparent daily motion proper for the season and also slid toward the east from the tearing high-Mach velocity of their flight. An indicator on the edge of a warning zone showed how the drive was laboring to move them at so high a velocity this close to the center of a planet-sized mass. Schoenberg was indeed impatient. He had run out force-baffles on the hull, Suomi noted, to dampen the sonic shock wave of their passage, and they were too high to be seen from the ground with unaided eyes. No one in the lands below would be able to detect their passage.

Celeste and Barbara soon retired to redecorate themselves in interstellar style. For the next several days the party would presumably be out of sight of Hunterian males who might be aroused or scandalized by the fashions of the great world.

Athena, clinging to a stanchion behind Schoenberg's chair, remarked: "I wonder if there are other hunting parties here. Outworlders like us, I mean."

Schoenberg only shrugged. Suomi said: "I suppose there might be three or four. Not many can afford private space travel, and also have the inclination to hunt."

De La Torre: "Since we all seem to have the inclination to hunt, it's lucky for us that we found Oscar."

Oscar had no comment. Suomi asked De La Torre: "Do you work for him, by the way? You've never told me."

"I have independent means, as they say. We met through business, about a year ago."

Schoenberg had gone a little higher to ease the strain on the drive. At this altitude the world called Hunters' almost seemed to have let go of the ship again. On several of the wall screens the terminator, boundary line between night and day, could be seen slanting across cloud cover athwart the invisible equator far to the south. The south pole, well out of sight around the curvature of the world, was more than halfway through its approximately seven standard years of uninterrupted sunlight. There the sun was a standard year past its closest approach to the zenith, and was now spiralling lower and ever lower in the sky, one turn with every Hunterian day, or one about every twenty standard hours.

A couple of standard years in the future the sun would set for its long night at the south pole and simultaneously rise above the horizon at the north pole. Right now the Hunterian arctic, locked in the last half of its long night, must look as lifeless as the surface of Pluto, buried under a vast freeze-out of a substantial portion of the planet's water. Up there the equinoctial dawn would bring the hunting season to its end; right now the season was at its height in the middle latitudes of the north, where the sun was just coming over the horizon, each day sweeping from east to west a little higher in the southern sky, bringing in the thaw. That region must be Schoenberg's destination.

* * *

They came down into a world of icy twilight, amid slopes of bare enduring rock and eroding, fantastic glaciers, all towering above valleys filled with rushing water and greenly exploding life.

Schoenberg found a walkable part of the landscape in which to set Orion down and some solid level rock to bear her weight. This time, before opening the hatch, he took a rifle from the small rack set just inside, and held it ready in his hands. The opening of the hatch admitted a steady polyphonic roar of rushing waters. Schoenberg drew a deep breath and stood in the opening, looking out. As on the earlier landing the others were behind him. Celeste and Barbara, not dressed for near-freezing weather, moved shivering to the rear. The air smelled of wetness and cold, of thawing time and alien life. The landscape stretched before them, too big and complex to be quickly taken in. The shadows of southern mountains reached up high on the mountains to the north.

They were going out right away; there were several standard hours of daylight remaining here. Schoenberg began a routine check-out of arms and other equipment, and called for volunteers.

Athena announced at once that she was ready. De La Torre said that he would like to have a go. Suomi, too—not that he really intended to kill anything that did not attack him. He felt a genuine need to get out of the ship for a while. Though all the tricks of environmental psychology had been used in the interior design of the *Orion* to ameliorate the reality of confinement, the trip had still cooped up six people in a small space for many weeks. Being aware of all the designer's tricks, Suomi was perhaps helped less than others by them. Barbara and Celeste elected not to try hunting today after Schoenberg had indicated he preferred it that way. He promised them a more peaceful picnic outing in the morning.

"We'll go in pairs, then," Schoenberg announced when everything was ready. "Gus, you've hunted before, but not on this planet. If I may suggest, you and Athena take a stroll down the valley there." It spread before them as they looked out from the hatch, beginning thirty or forty meters from the rocky level where the ship rested, plunging after about a kilometer and a half of gentle, green-clad slope into an ice-clogged canyon down whose center a new torrent had begun to carve its way. "Down there at the lower end, where it slopes off into the canyon, the vegetation may well be head-high. There should be twelve or thirteen species of large herbivores."

"In that little space?" De La Torre interrupted.

"In that little space." Now that he was going hunting, Schoenberg sounded more relaxed and happy than at any time on the trip before. "Life doesn't just thaw out here in the spring—it explodes. There'll be large predators in that valley too, or I miss my guess. You don't want to run into one an arm's length away, so better skirt the taller growth. Carlos and I are going to take the upper path." This climbed a rocky slope on the other side of the ship. Suomi, during their descent, had glimpsed higher meadows in that direction. "We may find something really hungry up there, just out of a high cave and on its way down into the valleys for its first meal in a year or two."

Boots, warm clothing, weapons, communicators, a few emergency items—all in order. Suomi was the last to get down the ramp and crunch his new boots on Hunterian soil. Almost before his feet were off the ramp it began to fold up and retract. If the playgirls stayed inside with the hatch closed they would be perfectly safe until the men returned.

Athena and Gus waved and set off on the lower way, tendrils of grass-like groundcover whipping about their boots. "Lead on up the path," said Schoenberg, with an uphill gesture to Suomi. "I'm sure your nerves are okay—just a matter of principle that I don't like a novice hunter with a loaded firearm walking behind me, when something to shoot at may jump out ahead." The voice was charming if the words were not, and they were said with a happy and friendly look. All was right with Schoenberg at the moment, obviously; he was eager to get going.

There was not really a path to follow, of course, but Suomi moved on up the spine of hill that formed the natural route Schoenberg must have meant to indicate.

* * *

Suomi as he climbed was soon lost in admiration of the country around him. Wherever the melting away of the winter's ice had left a few square centimeters of soil exposed, rank vegetation had sprung up. There were no tree-sized plants in evidence, nothing that seemed to have begun to grow more than a few days or weeks ago. In most places the grass- and vine-like things were no more than waist high, but frequently they grew so thickly that no glimpse of soil could be seen between the stems. The plants were striving madly, ruthlessly, for water and warmth and sunlight, leaping into growth, making what they could of the wet season before the long searing drought of summer began.

He paused, coming in sight of a meadow where man-sized creatures like giant slugs were moving, voraciously feeding on the plants, the wrinkles visibly stretching out of their grayish, hairless bodies.

"Rime-worms," said Schoenberg, who came up close behind him and disregarded the creatures after the first glance. "Look sharp now, there may be something after them."

"Do any of the larger forms freeze solidly through the night?"

"Biologists I've talked to say it's not possible. But I don't think anyone knows for sure." Now that they had stopped, Schoenberg was studying the country with binoculars. They had put a little rocky bulge of hill between themselves and the spaceship, and were now out of sight and sound of anything manmade save what they carried with them. The tracks they had left behind them in occasional patches of slush or muddy turf were the only signs of past human activity. The world around them had been made virgin by death and resurrection.

Suomi was studying the country too, but not with binoculars and not for game. The yellowed sun was skimming a low point in the mountainous horizon, and seemed on the point of setting; actually there must still be an hour or so of daylight left. On the other side of a wide valley a glacier groaned, shed a few tons

of cornice, broke out with a clear new waterfall. The organ-notes of older cataracts held steady in the distance. Gradually, as Suomi began to comprehend the scene fully, as he got beyond the stage of simple elation at getting outdoors again, he realized that he had never before beheld a scene of nature so beautiful and awesome, nothing that even came close. Not even the wonders and terrors of space, which, when they could be perceived at all, were beyond the scale and grasp of human appreciation. This thundering world of mountains and valleys, with its exploding life, was not beyond the human scale, not quite.

Schoenberg was less content with what he saw. Of predators he had evidently discovered no sign. "Let's move on a little," he said tersely, putting his binoculars away. Suomi led on again. When they had gone a few hundred meters more, Schoenberg called another halt, this time at the foot of a steep slope.

After another short session with the binoculars, Schoenberg pointed up the hill and said: "I'm going up there and have a look around. Let me do this alone, I want to be quiet and inconspicuous about it. Stay here, don't move around, keep your eyes open. There may be something on our trail, stalking us, and you may get a good shot just by waiting."

With a faint thrill of danger, small enough to be enjoyable, Suomi looked back along the way they had come. Nothing moved but the distant, harmless rime-worms. "All right."

He sat down and watched Schoenberg up the slope and out of sight over the top of it. He then swiveled around on his rocky seat, enjoying the absence of people in every direction. It was delightful to be alone, for the first time in—it seemed like the first time in his life. Isolation could be accomplished in the ship, of course, but the others' bodies and minds were always there, one was always aware of them only a few meters away. Suomi touched the communicator on his belt. The channels among hunters and between the hunters and the ship were alive but so far totally unused. Everyone was enjoying the physical and psychic separation.

Time passed. Schoenberg was gone longer than Suomi had expected. A thin shadow came over the nearby scenery as the sun declined behind a distant rim of ice: Without preamble a magnificent glacier-beast appeared before Suomi's eyes, perhaps two hundred fifty meters off, across a gentle slope of detritus fallen from an extension of the slope at the foot of which Suomi waited. It was not the direction from which Schoenberg had thought a predator was likely to come, nor was the creature looking toward Suomi. It was facing downhill, turning its head back and forth. Suomi raised his binoculars, and recalled his reading. An excellent specimen, male, probably second-cycle, just awakened from the second hibernation of its life into its full prime of strength and ferocity. The hollowness of loins and ribs was visible despite the thickness of orange-yellow fur. It was rather larger than an Earthly tiger.

Suomi, without getting to his feet, raised his rifle in perfectly steady hands and aimed. He was only playing. He lowered the weapon again.

"Long shot for a beginner," said Schoenberg's voice from close behind him, a little way up the slope. The cataract-roar must swallow the voice before the beast could hear it, even as it had kept Suomi from hearing Schoenberg's approach among the rocks. "But a clean one. If you don't want to try it I'll have a crack."

Suomi knew without turning that Schoenberg would already be raising his rifle to take aim. Still without looking around, Suomi lifted his own weapon once more and fired (pop, a little louder than in the shooting gallery, and now at full power there was a perceptible kick), deliberately aiming ahead of the animal to frighten it away, blasting up a spray of ice. Catlike, the creature crouched, then turned toward the earthmen its alienly unreadable face. The men who lived on Hunters' were men of Earth in their

ancestry and distant history; it was easy to forget how alien all the other life-forms here must be.

* * *

Now the glacier-beast was running, crossing the slope in great graceful catlike bounds. But it was not fleeing from the men as it should, as Suomi had unthinkingly assumed it must. In pure innocence of the powers it faced it was coming now to kill and eat him. Insane hunger drove it on. Its sprinting taloned feet hurled up rocks from the talus slope, mixed with a powdering of snow.

Shoot. Whether Schoenberg was calling out the word, or he himself, or whether it only hung thought-projected in the freezing, timeless air, Suomi did not know. He knew only that death was coming for him, visible, and incarnate, and his hands were good for nothing but dealing out symbols, manipulating writing instruments, paintbrushes, electronic styluses, making an impression on the world at second or third remove, and his muscles were paralyzed now and he was going to die. He could not move against the mindless certainty he saw in the animal's eyes, the certainty that he was meat.

Schoenberg's rifle sounded, a repetitive, seemingly ineffectual popping not far from Suomi's right ear. Invisible fists of god-like power slammed at the charging animal, met the beautiful energy of its charge with a greater, more brutal force. The force-blows tore out gobs of orange-yellow fur, and distorted the shapes of muscle and bone beneath. The huge body shed its grace and its momentum. Still it seemed to be trying to reach the men. Now its body broke open along a line of penetration wounds, spilling out insides like some red-stuffed toy. Clear in Suomi's vision was an open paw with knife-long claws, arching high on the end of a forelimb and then striking down into a puddle of slush not ten meters from his boots.

When the beast was still, Schoenberg put another shot carefully into the back of its head for good measure, then slung his rifle and got out his hologram camera. Then, after looking at the gory, broken body from several angles, he shook his head and put the camera away again. He spoke reassuringly to Suomi, seeming not in the least surprised or upset by Suomi's behavior. He was offhandedly gracious when Suomi at last managed to stammer out a kind of thanks. And that in its way was the most contemptuous attitude that Schoenberg could have taken.

IV

Early on the morning of the Tournament's second day, Leros, the priest in charge, led the surviving thirty-two contestants on an easy march of some five kilometers, up from the flat land by the river where the first round had been fought to a much higher meadow resting in Godsmountain's lap. At this new site an advance party of priests and workers were already at work, preparing a new fighting ring of cleared, hard-trodden earth, and a new field altar for the image of Thorun that was brought up on a cart just in front of Leros and the warriors. The slave-laborers were sweating, earning their rations today, for their numbers had been greatly reduced, many being sent to other projects. Only half the original number of warriors now required service, of course, and as always there was plenty of other labor to be performed in the citadel-city above and the tributary lands below.

The plan of the Tournament, handed down to Leros by the High Priest Andreas and his Inner Circle of councillors, required that each successive round of fighting take place closer to the top of the mountain than the one before. The purpose, as Andreas had explained it, was symbolic. But Leros observed now that the plan had practical advantages as well. The offal of each camp would be promptly left behind, the latrine, the leavings of the cook-tents, the remnants of the funeral pyre.

The work of readying the new site was completed shortly after the fighting men arrived, and an acolyte handed over the day's new vellum-written lists to Leros. He called the men into assembly, and, when some formalities had been gotten out of the way, read the lists out:

Arthur of Chesspa Bram the Beardless of Consiglor

Brunn of Bourzoe Charles the Upright

Col Renba Efim Samdeviatoff

Farley of Eikosk Geoff Symbolor of Symbolorville

Giles the Treacherous of Endross Swamp Gladwin Vanucci

Hal Coppersmith Homer Garamond of Running Water

Jud Isaksson of Ardstoy Hill Kanret Jon of Jonsplace

LeNos of the Highlands M'Gamba Mim

Mesthles of the Windy Vale Octans Bukk of Pachuka

Omira Kelsumba Otis Kitamura

Pernsol Muledriver of Weff's Plain Polydorus the Foul

Rafael Sandoval Rahim Sosias

Rudolph Thadbury Shang Ti the Awesome

Siniuju of the Evergreen Slope Thomas the Grabber

Travers Sandakan of Thieves' Road Vann the Nomad

Vladerlin Bain of Sanfa Town Wull Narvaez

Before giving the signal for the start of the second round's first fight, Leros took a moment to look around him at his world. There was much in it to make him feel content. From the high meadow where he stood the prospect was one of long reaches of cultivated land below, kilometer after kilometer of field and pasture, with here and there an orchard, a cluster of houses, a patch of raw forest or a string of trees along a watercourse. It was a peaceful and malleable world, one of peasants and crops and artisans, obediently serving the master of violence who dwelt on the heights above. There was, of course, the Brotherhood to flaw it. After yesterday's posted insult nothing further had been heard from them . . . there was also, more naggingly, the fact that the Inner Circle seemed to be closed to Leros, and the office of High Priest, therefore, forever unattainable. Why should a priest like Lachaise, for example, who was far more an artisan than a fighting man, be a member of the Inner Circle, when Leros and others more deserving were kept out?

At any rate the Tournament was going well. That was what mattered most. Perhaps if it was a great success he would at last be promoted—and there was no reason why it should not smoothly run its course. At the end of it the great gate of the city would open for the winner as the maidens strewed flowers before him and he was conducted in triumph through the streets to the Temple; and that would stand open for him also; and then the inner curtains of chain-mail would part—as they never had for Leros—and the secret doors, and the winner would be let in where Leros himself had never been to the place where gods walked with the fallen heroes who once were mortal men, where only the High Priest and the Inner Circle came to mediate between them and the world of men.

* * *

Leros's religion was not simply a matter of faith to him. He had once glimpsed Thorun in an inner courtyard of the Temple, standing taller than any mortal man, walking with the High Priest on a night when storms were in the air and lightning flickered . . .

He bowed his head for a moment of private prayer, then brought himself back to the waiting men, and his responsibilities, and called out the names for the first match of the day:

"Arthur of Chesspa—Bram the Beardless of Consiglor."

Arthur was a middle-aged man of middle size. In this company of warriors he looked small. Stocky, dour-looking, heavily mustached, he strode into the ring with an air of utterly nerveless competence and with unblinking calm watched Bram the Beardless approach with intent to kill.

Bram, it appeared, was beardless by reason of his extreme youth. Though he was tall and heavy-shouldered his face looked no more than one Hunterian year of age, fifteen or sixteen sixtieths-of-an-old-man's-life. Bram was not calm but his excitement seemed to be rather joy than fright as he opened the attack with an exuberant swing of his long sword. Arthur parried the blow well enough, seemed in no hurry to go on the offensive himself.

Bram pressed the attack; his youth and energy did not admit the possibility that he could be beaten. Again and again he struck, while Arthur still retreated thoughtfully, seeming to await the perfect time to counter. And again and again Bram struck, with ever-increasing speed and terrible strength. Arthur still had not made up his mind how best to fight when there came a blow he could not stop. He lost an arm and shoulder. The finishing stroke came quickly.

"Brunn of Bourzoe—Charles the Upright."

Brunn was heavysset and fair, with a sun-bleached look about him. In one thick hand he held a short spear in such fashion that it was evident he preferred to thrust rather than risk all on one throw. He took the initiative, though cautiously, moving slowly widdershins around the upright Charles. Charles gangly as a bird, looking as if he might be happier perching on one leg, stood tall and held his two-handed sword ready for whatever Brunn might do. The spear-thrust, when it came, was strong and quick but the response of Charles was better; the lopped-off spearhead fell to earth. The fair head of Brunn was not far behind it.

"Col Renba—Efim Samdeviatoff."

These two were similar in appearance, both a little above middle height and with brown shaggy hair. Col Renba whirled a spike-studded ball on the end of a short chain attached to a wooden handle. Samdeviatoff held sword and dagger ready. Both jumped to the attack at the same time but the spiked ball struck the sword out of the hand that held it and in the next breath dashed the brains that had directed it upon the ground.

"Farley of Eikosk—Geoff Symbolor."

Again there was a resemblance; this time one of manners rather than appearance. Both contestants were well dressed and expensively armed. There were even jewels in the hilts of Geoff's sword and dagger. Farley was fair, almost red, of hair and beard. His bare arms, lined with bone and vein and muscle, were freckled rather than sunburned. Geoff Symbolor was quite dark, and shorter than Farley by half a head, though seemingly his equal in weight and strength. Their battle was a slow one. The two of them seemed well matched until Farley's longer reach let him nick the muscles of Geoff's shoulder. With his sword-arm handicapped the shorter man was soon wounded again. Farley took no rash chances; the other was weakened by loss of blood before Farley drove in hard to finish him.

"Giles the Treacherous—Gladwin Vanucci."

Giles was of middling size but wiry, with tanned face and sandy hair and pale innocent eyes. If it was indeed his habit to be treacherous, there was no need for it today. With his long sword he made short work of the squat and massive Gladwin, who had favored a battle-axe.

"Hal Coppersmith—Homer Garamond."

Hal Coppersmith was very tall, with sloping shoulders and long arms entwined by rich tattoos. His long sword quivered restlessly in his hand, like some insect's antenna following the movements of his foe. Homer Garamond seemed saddened by the task at hand though he was almost as young as Bram the Beardless who had shone with joy in killing. Homer held sword and dagger almost negligently in powerful hands until Hal came thrusting in. Fast as Homer moved then it was not fast enough.

"Jud Isaksson—Kanret Jon."

Jud, a fiery little man with an enormously long black mustache, stamped briskly into the ring with a round metal shield strapped onto his left arm. A short sword extended from his right. Kanret, perhaps the oldest fighter to survive the first round, awaited him with a patience befitting his years. Kanret was armed with a short, thick-shafted spear; the way he gripped it indicated he might use it as a quarterstaff as well as thrust with it. When the moment of testing came, the spear hit nothing but Jud's shield, and Kanret Jon was brought down with a swordstroke to the knee. His end was quick thereafter.

"LeNos of the Highlands—M'Gamba Mim."

LeNos had a scarred face and, once in the ring, a way of moving that seemed more animal than human, a lithe long-striding crouch. With sword and dagger he closed on M'Gamba Mim, who was huge and black and carried similar weapons. The blood of both was on the ground before LeNos could prevail; and then, still like an animal, he snarled at the slaves who came to tend his cuts.

"Mesthles of the Windy Vale—Octans Bukk of Pachuka."

Mesthles had the thought-creased forehead of some scribe or scholar. He wore peasant's clothes and fought with a farmer's scythe. Octans was lean, and his ragged clothes gave him the look of a hungry bandit. But his sword proved slower than the scythe and he was mown.

"Omira Kelsumba—Otis Kitamura."

Kelsumba's wide black face was set in a determination as intense as fury. Leros, watching, remembered this man as the one who had asked about acquiring the healing powers of a god. When the fighters closed, Kelsumba swung his massive battle-axe with incredible power, swinging and then reversing instantly for the back-swing—as if his weapon were no heavier than a stick. Kitamura's sword was knocked aside, and then Kitamura's jawbone. He went down on hands and knees and stayed there. Kelsumba left his finishing to the leaden mauls of the burial party.

"Pernsol Muledriver—Polydorus the Foul."

The Muledriver was an older man, who set to work deliberately with short spear and long knife. Polydorus, a man of indeterminate age, and seemingly no fouler than the next, went in carrying an old sword, much nicked and dented. The old sword did its work efficiently, and Pernsol died quietly, as if content to end life's struggles and take his modest place at Thorun's board.

"Rafael Sandoval—Rahim Sosias."

Sosias looked more like a tailor than a fighting man, being not overly big and displaying a small, comfortable paunch. But his curved sword hung as naturally from his hand as his hand from the end of his hairy arm. Sandoval was notably ugly, made so by nature, not by scars. He twirled a spike-and-ball

mace disdainfully. Rahim's sword was caught in a loop of the mace's chain and pulled from his hand, but before Rafael could disentangle his own weapon from the sword, Rahim had drawn an extra knife from concealment and had slit his opponent's throat.

"Rudolph Thadbury—Shang Ti the Awesome."

Thadbury had a military as well as a fighting look. Leros thought this man had something more of the general than of the simple swordsman about him but knew nothing of his background. Most of the contestants were as much strangers to Leros and the other priests as they were to one another.

Squarely built, with blunt-fingered enormous hands, Rudolph Thadbury exuded strength and confidence. Shang Ti was awesome in truth, having a rather small head set on such a giant's body that the head's smallness was made to look grotesque. Shang Ti's sword was of a size to suit his stature. Rudolph's had a thicker blade than the usual and was just long enough to reach Shang Ti's heart.

"Siniuju of the Evergreen Slope—Thomas the Grabber."

Siniuju was almost scrawny, leaner than any other man left alive among the warriors. He carried a two-handed sword that looked too heavy for him—until he demonstrated how quickly he could make it move. Thomas was large and fierce-looking, a Shang Ti slightly less massive and better proportioned. He matched his spear over the long two-handed sword. The spear proved longer still.

"Travers Sandakan—Vann the Nomad."

Sandakan came carrying a thin-bladed axe made with a sturdy armored shaft. On his face were the lines of time and trouble and the scars of many fights. Vann the Nomad wore the long shapeless sweater of the high-plains herdsman and wielded a long sword with demonic energy. Sandakan was no match for the Nomad and when Travers was dead Vann cut off one of his ears, saying: "I will give this back to him in Thorun's hall—if he is man enough to take it from me!" It was a gesture new to Leros, who thought about it and finally gave a hesitant smile of approval. As soon as the latest corpse had been cleared from the ring he formally called out the names for the day's final match.

"Vladerlin Bain—Wull Narvaez."

Coiled around Bain's waist was a long whip, whose purpose none had yet considered it politic to ask. In his hands Bain bore a dagger and sword. Narvaez, with a cheerful foolish face and a farmer's pitchfork as his only visible weapon, looked like some peasant fresh from fieldwork. A good harvester, he sent the tines exactly where he wanted them and Vladerlin was dead before he hit the ground, the reason for his coiled whip now never to be known.

The sun had not yet reached its midday point. The fighting of the second round was over.

* * *

The sixteen fighters who remained alive moved off to enjoy the food prepared for them. For the most part they chatted and joked in good fellowship, though a few were silent. Also they took thoughtful notice of each other's wounds, calculating where weakness would be found tomorrow. All of them knew that even the tiniest advantage must be seized. Not one survived among them who was not extremely dangerous—not one survived who could not count killers of superior ability among his victims.

Resting after their midday meal, they saw the messenger come pelting down the mountain. His news

made Leros snap back his head to search the sky. From where they camped beneath the trees it was not possible to see much of it. The warriors were curious, but not very. The Tournament they were engaged in was more important than any distraction they could imagine.

Later still when a priest of the Inner Circle came down to talk earnestly to Leros the news spread among the warriors that a round, silvery craft had come from beyond the world to visit Godsmountain. Most of them were curious enough to try to catch a glimpse of the ship, barely visible, resting among the trees on a distant height.

V

Oscar Schoenberg and Athena Poulson and Gus De La Torre had hunted again, on the day after Suomi's near-fatal confrontation with the glacier-beast, while Barbara Hurtado and Celeste Servetus had gone through the motions of hunting. Suomi had chosen to stay with the ship. Oscar and Athena and Gus, all having had some excitement on their first day's hunt but having returned from it empty handed returned from the second day's effort with their hologram trophies of large predators, safely recorded on little crystal cubes for later reproduction and display.

Athena, sitting in the lounge, rubbing her tired feet, complained it was going to be difficult to find a place to show off her glacier-beast. "It's all right for you, Oscar, but I have one small apartment. I'll have to move half the furniture to make room for this—if I dare display it at all, that is."

"Because you got it on an off-limits hunting trip?" Schoenberg laughed. "If anybody bothers you, just tell 'em I gave it to you. Let 'em come see me."

"I'll have to leave it turned off most of the time, just bring it out for special occasions. I suppose it would scare off most of my usual visitors, anyway." Then she caught herself and started to look apologetically toward Suomi, then hastily looked away.

Yesterday after everyone had returned to the ship they had all listened with some embarrassment to his account of how he had frozen in panic in the field and how Schoenberg had coolly saved his life. Athena had been more embarrassed, perhaps, than Suomi. De La Torre had seemed inwardly amused, and Barbara had shown some sympathy.

Suomi wondered if his shipmates—Athena especially—were waiting for him to demand a rifle and a chance to go out and prove himself. If so they were going to have a long wait. All right, he had been terrified. Maybe if he went out again and an animal charged, he wouldn't be terrified. Or maybe he would. He wasn't anxious to find out. He had nothing to prove. While all the others were out hunting on the second day he sat on the ship's extended landing ramp enjoying the air. There was a rifle at hand for emergencies but if anything menacing came in sight he planned to simply go inside and close the hatch.

Once everyone who wanted a trophy had one Schoenberg dallied in the north no longer. The hunting season would last a long time but the mysterious Tournament was apparently quite brief and he didn't want to miss it. When Suomi mentioned the Tournament to the girls, none of them had any clear idea of what it was. Some sort of physical contest, he supposed.

Schoenberg evidently knew the way to Godsmountain, though he said he had not been there before. Flying south, he went much slower and lower than on the northward flight, paying close attention to landmarks. He followed a river valley most of the way, first by radar because of ground fog, then visually

when the view had cleared. When, after several hours, they reached their destination, there was no mistaking it. Godsmountain stood out immediately from its surroundings, a wooded eminence practically isolated amid a patchwork of surrounding flat farmlands, orchards and pastures. The mountain was broad and quite high, but in general not very steep. On the deforested summit a town-sized complex of white stone walls and buildings stood out as plainly as if it had been constructed as a beacon for aerial navigation.

After circling the mountain once at a respectful distance, Schoenberg slowed down some more and began to descend toward it. Not to the citadel-city on its top; he was careful not to even fly over that.

A few hundred meters below the walls of the white city, a truncated pinnacle of rock rose out of the woods something like a dwarfed and naked thumb on the side of the mountain's great mitten-shape. After noticing this pinnacle, Schoenberg approached it slowly, circled it closely, then hovered directly over it for some time, probing delicately at it with the sensing instruments in Orion's hull. It was between twenty and thirty meters tall, and appeared to be just barely climbable. There was no sign that man or beast had ever taken the trouble to reach its flattened top.

De La Torre, now hanging into the stanchion behind the pilot's chair, offered: "I'd say that top is big enough to hold us, Oscar, even give us a little room to walk around outside the ship."

Schoenberg grunted. "That was my idea, to put her down there. We might have to cut a few steps or string a line to climb down. But on the other hand no one's going to come visiting unless we invite 'em."

After making a final close examination of the pinnacle's small mesa from only a few meters' distance, Schoenberg set Orion down on it. The landing struts groped outward, adjusted themselves to keep the ship level. There was indeed enough flat space on the rocky table to hold the ship securely, with a few square meters left over for leg-stretching. All aboard disembarked for this purpose at once. Even high up the weather at this tropical latitude was quite warm but the girls were fully clothed again, in view of their uncertainty about local morals and customs. Schoenberg had ordered all weapons left inside the ship.

Direct inspection confirmed that only one side of the mesa was conceivably climbable by human beings. Even on that side there were places where a few pitons or some cut-in steps, and perhaps a rope, would be needed to allow even agile folk to make an ascent or descent in reasonable safety.

"Where is everybody?" Celeste wondered aloud as she gazed beyond the intervening sea of treetops at the white walls of the city on the summit, slightly above their level.

De La Torre had binoculars out and was peering in another direction, downslope. "There're thirty or forty men, in some kind of a camp. Over there. I can just make out some of them from time to time, among the trees."

For a while there was no better answer to Celeste's question, no sign that Orion's arrival or her sore-thumb presence above the landscape had been noticed. Of course the dense forest that covered most of the mountain might conceal a lot of movement. The trees, Suomi noted, looked like close analogues of common Earthly species. Maybe some mutated stocks had been imported by the early colonists. The trunks did seem to be proportionately thicker than those of most trees on Earth, and their branches tended to right-angle bends.

About half a standard hour had passed since their landing, and the six visitors had all armed themselves with binoculars, when the one visible gate in the city's high wall suddenly opened and a small party of white-robed men emerged, vanishing from sight again almost at once as they plunged into the woods.

Schoenberg had an infrared device with which he could have followed their progress beneath the canopy of leaves, but he didn't bother. Instead he placed his binoculars back in their case, leaned back and lit a cigar. Some minutes before Suomi had expected their reappearance so near at hand, the delegation from the city emerged from the woods again, this time into the clearing caused by rockfalls from the tower on which Orion rested.

Schoenberg at once threw down his cigar and moved forward to the mesa's edge and, with lifted arms, saluted the men below. Looking up, they returned the gesture with seeming casualness. There were half a dozen of them. The white robes of two or three were marked with different variations of purple trim.

The distance being too great for anything but shouted exchanges, the Hunterians came leisurely closer. The tall one in the lead reached the foot of the tower and began to climb. At first he made steady headway without much difficulty. About halfway up, however, a nearly sheer stretch brought him to a halt. He was an old man, his visitors saw now, despite the nimbleness with which he moved.

He looked up at Schoenberg, who stood open-handed some ten meters above him, and called: "Outworlders, Thorun and the other gods of Hunters' offer you greetings and grant you welcome."

Schoenberg made a slight bow. "We thank Thorun and the other illustrious gods of Hunters', wishing to put our thanks in such form as may seem to them most courteous. And we thank you too, who approach us as their spokesman."

"I am Andreas, High Priest of Thorun's kingdom in the world."

Schoenberg introduced the members of his party, Andreas those with him. After a further exchange of courtesies in which Schoenberg hinted that he would make some gift to Thorun as soon as he found out what was most suitable, he got around to the object of his visit. "As all men know, Hunters' is the planet most renowned in all the universe for the quality of its fighting men. We are told that the finest warriors of the planet are even now gathered here at Godsmountain for a great Tournament."

"That is true in every word," said Andreas. His speech seemed to outworld ears much less accented than Kestand's had.

Schoenberg proceeded. "We crave the favor of Thorun in being allowed to witness this Tournament, at least in part."

Andreas did not look toward his companions waiting calmly below, but rather across the treetops to his city, as if to gather in some message. It was only a brief glance, before he said: "I speak for Thorun. It is his pleasure to grant you your request. The Tournament is already in progress, but the most important rounds of fighting remain yet to be seen. The next is to be fought tomorrow."

* * *

Andreas talked a little longer with the outworlders, promising that in the morning he would send a guide to conduct them to the fighting ring in plenty of time to see the day's events there. He promised them also that sometime during their stay they would be invited into the city and entertained in Thorun's temple as befitted distinguished guests. He acknowledged Schoenberg's promise that a gift for Thorun would be forthcoming. And then the priests and the outworlders exchanged polite farewells.

During the short hike back to the city Andreas was thoughtful and more than usually aloof. His

subordinates, walking with him, took careful note of his mood and did not intrude upon him.

He was an old man by Hunterian standards, scarred by a dozen serious wounds, the survivor of a hundred fights. He was no longer a warrior of great prowess, his muscles now suffering the wastage of time and maltreatment. Nimble climbing cost him much more effort than he allowed to show. The skull looked out from behind his face more plainly with the passage of every sixtieth-of-an-old-man's-life—what the outworlders would call a Standard Year.

In this progressive change of his facial appearance he found pleasure.

Though his legs were tired he maintained a brisk pace and it was not long before he had led his party back into the city.

There he brushed aside subordinates who were waiting to entangle him in a hundred questions and disputes about the visitors. These men, below the level of the Inner Circle, understood nothing. Essentially alone, Andreas strode quickly and still thoughtfully through the network of bright, narrow streets. Servants, artisans, soldiers and aristocrats alike all took themselves out of his way. On the steps before the tall outer doors of the Temple of Thorun a pair of Inner Circle aristocrats in purple-spangled robes broke off their conversation to bow respectfully, a salute that Andreas acknowledged with a scarcely conscious nod. A courtesan alighting from her litter bowed more deeply. She was evidently the woman of some non-celibate priest below the Inner Circle. Andreas acknowledged her not at all.

In the Outer Temple the light was good, the sun coming in strongly through the hypaethrus in the roof; and here a low-voiced chant of war, to muffled drum, went up from acolytes who knelt before an altar piled with enemy warriors' skulls and captured weapons. An armed guard who stood before the entrance to the Inner Temple saluted Andreas and stepped aside, pulling the great door open for him. Broad stairs went down. The room to which they led was vast, built partially below the level of the sunlit streets outside.

Here in the Inner Temple the light was indirect and dim, filtered through many small portals. Andreas pushed aside hanging after hanging of chain mail with practiced hands, made his way across the enormous chamber. He passed a place where a single devout worshipper knelt, a fighting man with shield and sword in hand, a priest-general dressed all in white, praying silently before a tall stone statue. The statue, highly stylized, portrayed a man in smooth, tight-fitting outworlder's garb. He wore a round and almost featureless helm and had a grim, beardless face—Karlsen, a demigod of the distant past, a sword in his right hand, a stick-like outworld weapon in his left. Andreas' face was set like stone. But to have the statue removed would cause trouble. Karlsen was still a popular figure with many of the people.

From this point on the way Andreas took was not open, or even known, to more than a very few. He went behind more chain mail curtains into a corner where an inconspicuous passageway began. Again there were descending stairs, dimmer and much narrower than before. At the bottom a small oil lamp burned in a wall niche, giving enough light to enable a man to walk without groping, no more. Here were the tall and massive doors that led to Thorun's hall. From behind these doors at times came flaring lights, the sound of harp and drum and horn and booming laughter. At these times novices were allowed to stand wide-eyed at the foot of the stairs and briefly watch and listen, observing from afar the evidences of gods and heroes at feast within.

Andreas carried one of the two keys that could open the doors of Thorun's hall. Lachaise, Chief Artisan of the Temple and, of course, a member of the Inner Circle, had the other. A door swung open for Andreas now, when he turned his key in the proper secret way, and he quickly stepped through and pulled the door tightly shut again behind him.

* * *

The Great Hall of Thorun, carved out of the living rock beneath the Temple, was perhaps five meters long, three wide, three high—certainly modest enough in all conscience for the master of the world. The walls, floor, and ceiling were rough, bare stone; Thorun's hall had never been finished. Quite likely it never would be. Work on it had begun, he supposed, almost twenty Hunterian years ago, five times an old-man's-lifetime. A little work had still been done in the tenure of the previous High Priest. But since then plans had changed. The place was big enough already to fill its only real function; duping novices. There was an air passage above so that bright torches could be burned to cast their light out under and around the doors, there were musical instruments piled in a corner. As for the booming, godlike laughter—either Thorun or Mjollnir could do that.

Thorun was in his hall, seated at a table that nearly filled the inadequate room. So huge was he that, even though seated, his eyes were on a level with those of the tall priest standing before him. Thorun's head of wild dark hair was bound by a golden band, his fur cloak hung about his mountainous shoulders. His famed sword, so large that no man could wield it, was girdled to his waist. His huge right hand, concealed as always in a leather glove, rested on the table and held a massive goblet. Seen in the dim light, Thorun's face above his full dark beard might have been judged human—except that it was too immobile and too large.

Thorun did not move. Neither did the demigod Mjollnir, seated at another side of the table, head bound in a silver band, wrapped in his dark cloak. Of nearly equal size with the god of war and the hunt, Mjollnir shared Thorun's foodless and drinkless feast in gloomy comradeship.

After entering the room Andreas had waited for a little while, standing motionless, watching—making sure neither of them was going to be triggered into movement by his entry. Sometimes they were. One had to be careful. Satisfied, he walked around the high table and passed behind the chair of Thorun. There in the wall was set a small and secret door for which no key was necessary. Andreas opened this door by pressure in the proper place. Behind it another narrow stone stair wound down.

The descent was longer this time. At the bottom of the final stair Andreas turned first to his left. After three or four strides in that direction he emerged from a narrow tunnel to stand on the bottom of an enormous pit dug out of the rock beside the Temple. The excavation of this pit had consumed in labor the lifetimes of many slaves, having been started during the tenure of the fifth High Priest to hold office before Andreas; so farseeing and magnificent were the plans, now coming to fruition, of the true god! At its top the pit was surrounded by white stone walls and covered by a roof, so that it looked from the outside merely like one more building in the Temple complex, in no way remarkable amid the maze of structures that all looked more or less alike.

Andreas went back into the tunnel and followed it back in the direction that led right from the foot of the stair. Before entering the doorless chamber to which this passage brought him, he paused and closed his eyes in reverent imitation of Death, murmured a brief private prayer. Certainly not to Thorun. Thorun was a thing, a tool, part of a necessary deception practiced on the masses, a deception that Andreas had left behind him in the Temple. What now lay ahead was, for him, the ultimate—the only—reality.

The chamber Andreas now entered was as old as anything made by man on Hunters' planet. Dim daylight lit it now, filtering indirectly down through an overhead shaft open at some high place to the sunlight and barred by heavy grills at many places along its length. It was a little larger than Thorun's hall above. A hundred people might have squeezed themselves into this room but never had. Fewer than ten people now even knew of its existence.

Against the wall opposite the single doorway stood a low wooden table bearing a half dozen boxes of bright metal. Each box was of a different shape, and each rested in a depression or socket carved to its shape in the dark panels of the tabletop. The outer surfaces of the boxes were precisely machined and shaped, products of a finer technology than any sword-making smithy. Tubes and cables of smooth gray and black ran among the boxes in a maze of interconnections.

On second look the wooden frame supporting the boxes was not really a table, but something more like a litter or sedan chair, though not made to accommodate the human form. From opposite ends of the litter extended pairs of sturdy carrying arms with carven grips, so six or eight humans could bear the whole assembly. The carrying handles were worn with long usage, but the litter, like the rest of the chamber, was very clean.

The pale stone of the floor shone faintly in the dim light. Only the low stone altar in the center of the room was darkened by old and ineradicable stains, rust from the inset iron rings to which victims' limbs were sometimes bound, rust-colored old blood at the places over which the victims' organs were removed. Before the litter, like fruit, the skulls of babies filled a bowl. Offerings of flowers lay scattered in small heaps, never in vases. Nearly all of the flowers were dead.

After he entered the room Andreas lowered himself to his knees, then down and fully prostrate on the floor, head and outstretched arms pointing toward the altar and beyond it to the litter with its metallic burden.

* * *

"Arise, Andreas," said a steady, inhuman voice. It came from among the metal boxes, where a small wooden frame stood on its side holding a stretching drumskin. In the center of the drumskin a small gleam of metal showed. The voice produced by the drumskin was seldom loud, though a similar device had been put inside Thorun to let him bellow and laugh. This, the quiet voice of Death, was more like a drum-sound than anything else Andreas had ever heard—and yet it was not very like a drum.

Andreas arose and came around the altar, approached the litter, once more made obeisance to the boxes on it, this time only on one knee. "Oh, Death," he said in a soft and reverent voice, "it is truly a starship, and its pilot chose to land on the rock where you in your wisdom foresaw that such a ship might land. I am going shortly to prepare Mjollnir for his task, and to choose soldiers to go with him. I have already carried out your other orders in every particular."

The drum-voice asked: "How many outworlders came with the ship?"

"I have seen six, and there is no evidence that others are aboard. Wonderful is your wisdom, oh, Death, who could predict that such men would be lured across the sky to watch our Tournament. Wonderful and—"

"Was there any mention of the man, the badlife, named Johann Karlsen?"

"No, Death." Andreas was a little puzzled. Surely the man Karlsen must be long since dead. But the god Death was wise beyond mere human understanding; Andreas had long since been convinced of that. He waited worshipfully for another question.

After a brief silence it came. "And they are private hunters? Poachers by their own laws?"

"Yes, Lord Death, their spokesman said they had been hunting. No one in their outworld government will know that they are here."

Prompted by occasional further questions Andreas spoke on, telling in some detail all that he had so far managed to learn about the visitors and their spacecraft.

He was certain it would not be too big to fit into the pit beside the Temple.

VI

On the day after Orion's landing, Leros led the sixteen Tournament contenders who were still alive up the mountain to a new and higher camp. There, when routine matters had been gotten out of the way, he read the pairings for the third round of the Tournament:

Bram the Beardless of Consiglor Charles the Upright

Col Renba Farley of Eikosk

Giles the Treacherous Hal Coppersmith

Jud Isaksson LeNos of the Highlands

Mesthles of the Windy Vale Omir Kelsumba

Polydorus the Foul Rahim Sosias

Rudolph Thadbury Thomas the Grabber

Vann the Nomad Wull Narvaez

The priest of the Inner Circle who had come down from the city yesterday had informed Leros and the

warriors that they could expect a group of outworlders to appear today. The Tournament was to go on almost as usual, and the utmost courtesy was to be shown the outworlders. If they behave strangely, ignore it. There will probably even be women among them; pay no attention to that, either. Leros was also instructed to call frequent recesses in the fighting for prayer and ceremony.

The warriors had little thought to spare for anything that did not directly concern their own survival in the Tournament, and the arrival of the visitors and their guide when Leros was halfway through reading the lists caused no interruption. Four visitors came, and two of them were women but, Leros noted with some relief, modestly dressed. He had heard some tall tales of outworld ways. He was not pleased to have such onlookers—but perhaps Thorun was, for some obscure and godly reason. In any event, orders were orders, and Leros had endured harder ones than this.

This day's fighting ring had been stamped out at the head of a gentle slope in an area where the trees were thin. From the ring the outworlders' ship was readily visible a few hundred meters away on its truncated pinnacle of rock. The massive ball of bright metal that carried folk out among the stars showed a single open doorway in its otherwise featureless surface. Two more outworlders were sometimes visible, tiny figures sitting or standing on the little lip of rock before the ship.

* * *

Athena, standing at ringside beside Schoenberg and waiting somewhat nervously for the action to begin, whispered to him: "Are you sure this is going to be fighting for keeps?"

"That's what our guide tells us. I expect he knows what's going on." Schoenberg was watching the preparations with keen interest, not looking at her when he answered, low-voiced.

"But if what he told us is true, each of these men has already been through two duels in this tournament. And look—there's hardly a mark on any of them."

"I can see a few bandages," Schoenberg whispered back. "But you may have a point." He considered the matter. "It could well be this: fighting from an animal's back apparently isn't done here. Therefore men have to move around strictly on their own muscle power, and can't wear a lot of heavy body armor. So a clean hit from any type of weapon is going to leave a serious wound, not just a minor gash or bruise. Most wounds are serious, and the first man to be disabled by a serious wound is almost certainly the loser. Ergo, winners don't show up for the next round with serious wounds."

They fell silent then, since Leros was looking in their direction and perhaps was ready to get the action started. Two men with weapons ready were facing each other from opposite sides of the ring. De La Torre and Celeste also became utterly attentive.

Leros cleared his throat. "Bram the Beardless—Charles the Upright."

* * *

Suomi, standing atop the mesa beside Barbara Hurtado and looking toward the ring from there, was too far away to hear Leros call the names, but through his binoculars he saw two men with raised weapons start toward each other across the fighting ring. He put the binoculars down then and turned away, wondering how in the universe he had managed to get himself involved in this sickening business. For hunting animals one could find or fabricate some reason or excuse, but not for this—and there was Athena, over at ringside, an avid observer.

"Someone should do an anthropological study," she had explained to him just a little while ago, while getting ready to leave the ship. "If they're really fighting each other to the death over there." Their guide-to-be, a tall, white-robed youth, had just been explaining the Tournament to them in some detail.

"You're not an anthropologist."

"There isn't a professional one here. Still, it's a job that should be done." She went on getting ready, clipping a small audiovideo recorder to her belt, next to the hologram camera.

"Is Schoenberg here to do an anthropological study too?"

"Ask him. Carl, if you hate Oscar so much and can't stand to look at life in the raw—why did you come along on this trip? Why did you get me to ask Oscar to invite you?"

He drew a deep breath. "We've been through that."

"Tell me again. I would really like to know."

"All right. I came because of you. You are the most desirable woman I have ever known. I mean more than sex. Sex included, of course—but I want the part of you that Schoenberg has."

"He doesn't have me, as you put it. I've worked for Oscar five years now, and he has my admiration—"

"Why your admiration?"

"Because he's strong. There's a kind of strength in you too, Carl, a different kind, that I've admired also. Oscar has my admiration and often my companionship—because I enjoy his company. He and I have had sex together a few times, and that, too, has been enjoyable. But he doesn't have me. No one does. No one will."

"When you come of yourself as a free gift, then someone will."

"No one."

* * *

Bram and Charles were sparring cautiously in the day's first duel, neither of them having yet decided on an all-out rush. Though they were of a height Charles the Upright was much leaner, his back so straight that the reason for his name was obvious. He wore a loose jacket of fine leather and had a darkly handsome face.

Athena thought he showed incredible poise, waiting with his long, sharp-looking sword lifted in one hand, aimed at his opponent. Surely, she thought, this was not life-and-death after all. No matter how seriously they took it, it must be some play, some game, with a symbolic loser stepping aside . . . and yet all the time she was telling herself this she knew better.

"Come," Charles was murmuring, sounding like a man urging on some animal. "Come. Now.Now."

And beardless Bram, all youth and freakish strength, came on, first one step, then two, then in an awesome rush, his sword first raised then slashing down. The sharp blades rang together, the two men grunted. Incoherent cries of excitement went up around the watching circle. Charles, fending off blow

after blow, was giving way now. He seemed to lose his footing momentarily in a slip, then lashed out with a counterstroke that brought a hoarse noise of appreciation from the warriors who stood watching with knowledgeable eyes. Bram avoided the blow and was unhurt but his rushing attack had been brought to a standstill. Athena for the first time began to realize that fine skill must reign here on the same throne with brutality.

Bram stood quietly for a moment, frowning as if at the unexpected resistance of some inanimate object. Then suddenly he charged again, more violently if possible than before. The long swords blurred and sang together, sprang apart, blurred and sang again. Athena began now to see and understand the timing and strategy of the strokes. She was forgetting herself, her eyes and mind opening more fully for perception. Then all at once, somehow—for all her concentration she had not seen how—Charles's sword was no longer in his hand. Instead it sprouted between Bram's ribs, the hilt firmly affixed before Bram's breastbone, half a meter of blade protruding gory and grotesque from his broad back.

Bram shook his head, one, two, three times, in what seemed utter disbelief. Athena saw it all with great clarity and it all seemed very slow. Bram was still waving his own sword, but now he seemed unable to locate his newly disarmed opponent, standing in plain sight in front of him. Suddenly, awkwardly, Bram sat, dropped his weapon and raised a hand to his face, brushing at it as if struck by the thought that now his beard would never grow. The hand fell limp and Bram slumped farther, his head tilting forward on his chest. The pose looked incredibly uncomfortable, but he bore it without complaint. Only when a gray-clad slave limped forward to drag the body to one side did Athena fully understand that the man—the boy—had died before her eyes.

Charles the Upright extracted his sword with a strong pull and held it out to another slave for cleaning—while yet another spilled sand over the place where Bram had spilled his life. In the background someone was digging. The world had changed in the space of a few moments, or rather Athena had been changed. Never again would she be the same.

"Col Renba—Farley of Eikosk."

The man who started forward at the name of Col Renba was big, brown, and shaggy. He stood near the center of the arena whirling a mace, a spike-studded ball on the end of a short chain, and waited for Farley to come after him.

Oscar was saying something to her, but there was no time to listen or think, no time for anything but watching. No time for Oscar, even.

Farley of Eikosk, fair and freckled, tall and well made if not exactly handsome, came treading catlike in fine leather boots. His other garments were simple, but of rich sturdy cloth. He squinted in the sun that shone on the fine polished steel of his sword and knife. Holding a weapon in either hand, he feinted an advance to within striking range of the mace, and nodded as if with satisfaction when he saw how rapidly the spiked weight on its taut chain arched out at him and back again.

Now Farley began to circle, moving around Col Renba first one way and then the other. The mace came out after him, faster than before, faster than had seemed possible to Athena, and she cried out, unaware that she did so. Again she cried out, in relief this time, when she saw that the spikes had missed Farley's fine, fair skin.

Momentarily both men were still, and then again there came a rapid passage of arms, too fast for Athena to judge. She thought the flurry was over, when suddenly the tip of one of the mace's spikes touched Farley on the hand, and his dagger flew lightly but awkwardly away. In almost the same moment Farley's

long sword bit back, and now Col Renba backed away, keeping the mace twirling with his right hand, his left arm curled up as if trying to protect itself from further damage while its sleeve rapidly drenched red.

Each man's left arm was bleeding now, and Farley's at least appeared no longer usable. Along the back of his hand there showed the white of splintered bone. The bright blade of his long dagger lay buried in the dust.

When the mace-spinner saw the extent of the damage he had inflicted, and found that his own left arm could at least be held up out of the way, he stopped backing off and began to advance once again. He kept the ugly weight of death moving around him in a smooth ellipse. As Col stepped closer, Farley began to retreat, but only began. As the mace sighed past him his long speed-thrust to the throat caught Col stepping in. Col Renba died, the mace flying wide from his hand in a great arc, spinning over the shouting, dodging ring of watchers.

A long moment after the other watchers' outcries had died away, Athena was still shouting. She realized this and shut up and let go of Schoenberg, whose arm and shoulder had somehow come into her spasmodic two-handed grip. Oscar was looking at her strangely, and so was De La Torre, who stood with his arm around a bored-looking Celeste a little distance off.

But Athena forgot about them. Already men were getting ready to fight again.

* * *

"Giles the Treacherous—Hal Coppersmith."

Coppersmith was the leaner of this pair, and much the taller. He was content to begin on the defensive, holding his long sword like the sensing organ of some giant insect. Giles the Treacherous had sandy hair, an air of earnest perseverance, and (like the most successful traitors, thought Athena) an open trustworthiness in his face. He was not big, and did not appear to be exceptionally strong, but still maneuvered his own long blade with an assured economy of effort. Now it was high, now low, without Athena being aware that it had started to move. Hal Coppersmith had similar difficulties, it seemed. His elbow was gashed, and then his knee, and then the great muscle in his tattooed upper arm was cut nearly through. Then nothing remained but butchery. Giles stepped back with an expression of distaste. A slave limped forward to swing a maul and end Hal's silent, thrashing agony.

"Jud Isaksson—LeNos of the Highlands."

LeNos sprang to the attack almost before the signal had been given, his fierce scarred face thrust forward like a shield. In either hand he held a wide blade, moving and flashing like the hub-knives on a chariot. And little Isaksson, whooping as if he were overjoyed to meet a fighter so aggressive, shot forward fast enough to clash with LeNos almost in the middle of the trodden circle. The round metal shield on Jud's left arm rang like some maddened blacksmith's anvil under the barrage of his enemy's blows. LeNos seemed incapable of imagining a defensive move, let alone performing one. He only pushed his own two-handed attack so maniacally that it seemed impossible for his opponent to find a sliver of time and space in which to counterattack.

At such a pace the fight could not and did not last long. LeNos's driving sword arm was suddenly stilled, pinned in mid-air on the long, thick needle of Isaksson's sword. The highlander's dagger kept flashing on, but still Jud's bright-scarred shield took the blows. Then Jud yanked his sword free of the ruined arm as he did, and brought it back, hacking, faster and faster, with a violence wilder if anything than his opponent's had been. LeNos was in several pieces before he died.

* * *

"What's the matter?" An insistent voice had repeated the question to her several times, Athena realized. Schoenberg was gripping her firmly by both arms, and giving her a slight shaking. He was looking closely into her face. When her eyes focused on his, the expression in his changed from concern to an odd mixture of amusement and contempt.

"Nothing's the matter. What do you mean? I'm all right." She kept looking for the next fight to start, and then realized that the priest in charge, Leros or whatever his name was, must have just ordered a recess. Slowly she realized that she had come near losing herself in the excitement of the fighting, temporarily losing control of her own behavior as if with drugs or sex. But no, it was all right. A near thing, but she still controlled herself.

Schoenberg, still looking at her with some concern, said now: "We had better give Carlos and Barbara a chance to see a thing or two."

"Him?" she laughed abruptly, contemptuously. "This isn't for him. Thank you for bringing me, Oscar."

"Nevertheless I think you've had enough."

De La Torre peered around Oscar at her. "I have, too, for the time being. Shall we walk back to the ship, Athena?"

"I'm staying."

Her tone was such that neither of the men made any further argument. Celeste meanwhile had moved next to Schoenberg; she was watching him more than what was going on in the ring. "I'm going, then," said De La Torre, and he was off.

* * *

Suomi, having handed over his sentry's rifle to De La Torre, slid and clambered down the steep slope from the mesa's top, holding on to the retractable rope that they had secured at the top to make the climb less dangerous. On this one face of the mesa the slope for the most part was not quite precipitous; there were some patches of gravelly soil and a bush or two. Already a visible path was being worn.

When he reached the level of the forest Suomi set off immediately in the direction of the tournament. Athena was there, not just for a quick look, but remaining there by choice to see it all. A purely scientific interest? Anthropology? She had never been enthusiastic on that subject before today, not around Suomi anyway. Maybe the tournament wasn't, after all, as murderous a business as he had been led to believe. Neither Suomi nor Barbara had watched. De La Torre, coming back, had said nothing about it and Suomi had not asked him. But maybe it was just as bloody as the guide had warned them, and she was still there taking it in. If she was like that, he had better know about it.

Nothing horrible was going on in the ring as he emerged from the forest and drew near. People were simply standing about, waiting, while a white-robed man went through some kind of ceremony before a simple altar. As Suomi came up Schoenberg nodded a greeting to him. Athena gave Suomi a preoccupied look. She was upset about something, he thought, but she gave no indication of wanting to be elsewhere. His attention was soon pulled away from her.

"Omir Kelsumba—Mesthles of the Windy Vale."

On springy legs massive as tree trunks Kelsumba moved forward, black skin gleaming, axe cradled almost like an infant in his awesome arms. Mesthles, spare and graying, thoughtful-looking, somewhat battered by time like the ancient scythe with which he meant to fight, kept at a respectful distance from Kelsumba for a little while, retreating with economical movements, studying the movements of his foe. Now the axe came after him, startling Suomi with its speed, and with such power and weight behind it that it seemed nothing human should be able to turn the blow aside. Mesthles made no mistakes, had his scythe-blade in the right place to turn the axe, but the jarring impact when the blades met came near to knocking Mesthles down. Another axe-blow fell on the scythe, and then another. Mesthles could not get into position to strike back. After the fourth or fifth parry, the scythe-blade broke. A groaning murmur, like the foretaste of blood, came up from the ring of watchers, and Suomi heard part of it coming from Athena. He saw the moist-lipped rapture on her face as she watched the fight, oblivious to him and all else.

Broken weapon still tightly in his grip, its jagged blade still dangerous, Mesthles maintained his calm, and showed more agility than his appearance suggested. For some time he avoided being pinned against the side of the fighting ring. Neither he nor any of the other fighters ever seemed to consider stepping across that simple line and outside the ring, any more than they would consider jumping through a wall.

The axe now came after Mesthles in what looked like a continuous blur, seeming to pull its giant owner after it. It struck Mesthles at last, full in the back, as he twisted his body in trying to dodge it yet again. His fallen body continued jerking, twitching, moving. A slave limped forward with a maul and dealt the finishing blow.

Suomi's gut worked suddenly, labored wretchedly, rejected in a spasm what remained of the little he had taken for his breakfast. I should have tranquilized myself, he thought. It was too late now. He faced away from the ring but could do nothing more before the vomit came. If he was desecrating holy ground, well, they would have to kill him for it. But when he straightened up it seemed that no one was paying him any attention at all. Whether it was delicacy or lack of interest he could not tell.

"Polydorus the Foul—Rahim Sosias."

Suomi found that he could watch. Polydorus, looking no more foul than his competitors, brandished a battered sword with obvious strength and energy. Sosias was paunchy and short, yet he somehow managed to draw first blood with his scimitar, making an ugly slice among Polydorus's left shoulder. Polydorus was galvanized rather than weakened by the injury, and pressed an attack so hard that for a few moments it seemed he might prevail. But then he aimed a long thrust poorly, and stood looking down at his own right hand and forearm where he had just stepped on it. He grimaced and spat toward Sosias before the scimitar came back to take his life.

The white-clad priest was in the ring again, and it appeared there was going to be another recess. Not that it mattered to Suomi. He turned away, deliberately this time. He had found out that he could watch whatever further maiming might occur; but still he much preferred not to watch.

He stepped closer to Schoenberg and Athena, managed to catch the eye of the former but not the latter, and said: "I'm going back to the ship." He glanced at Celeste, but she only gave him a bored look and moved a little closer to Schoenberg.

Suomi turned away from them all and trudged back among the trees. It was good to be briefly alone again, but here in this alien forest was no place to stop and think.

When he got back to the foot of the mesa, he found that the climbing rope had been pulled up. Not in the mood to try the ascent without it, Suomi called out. A few seconds later De La Torre's head and bare shoulders appeared at the top of the slope. "What's up?" he called down.

"I've seen enough. Throw down the rope."

"All right." In a moment the rope came snaking down.

* * *

When Suomi got to the top he saw that Barbara lay naked on a foam mattress so close to the climbing path that De La Torre could sit on the mattress beside her and do acceptable sentry duty. Suomi noticed also that a pair of binoculars had been set up on a tripod beside the mattress in such a way that a man lying there, perhaps with a woman beneath him, could observe uninterruptedly what was going on in the fighting ring.

De La Torre apparently was finished for the time being with binoculars, mattress, and girl; he had pulled on a pair of shorts already and was continuing to dress. His voice was mild and lazy. "I'll turn the rifle back to you, then, Carlos, and go down again myself."

Before Suomi had gotten the rifle's still-unfamiliar strap adjusted to fit his shoulder, De La Torre was gone again. Suomi watched him out of sight, then said to Barbara, who still lay curled up tiredly on her mattress: "And how are things with you?"

She moved a little, and said in a small voice: "Life appears possible." Never had he seen Barbara so obviously depressed before. He had lain with her a couple of times on the long trip out, and with Celeste a couple of times. Not with Athena, though; on the trip out he could no longer be casual with her. Now perhaps he could.

Barbara was the only one of them who had refused to watch the tournament at all. So of course the sadist De La Torre had had to pick her for his object, his receptacle . . . Suomi wanted to say something good to her but could think of nothing. Tomorrow her nakedness might arouse his own lust again but right now it only made her seem defenseless and pitiable, lying there face down. So, she had wanted to come along on a luxurious space voyage with a billionaire, and her wish had been granted. She was earning her passage.

No need to walk a sentry's route around the ship; there was only the one route by which one could ascend. Standing at the head of the path, looking out over the treetops without binoculars, Suomi could see De La Torre arriving at the side of the fighting ring. The next duel had still not gotten under way, evidently; there were still four men waiting to fight, if Suomi was reading the arrangement of the distant figures correctly. The binoculars were handy but he did not care enough to pick them up. Perhaps he did not want to acknowledge their present positioning by moving them.

It promised to be a long few days ahead, until the Tournament slaughtered itself into extinction, and then a very long trip home. But there were compensations. It had been made clear that whatever had seemed to be growing between him and Athena had no real existence. It was not over—it had never been.

Barbara was sitting up and doing things with her fingers to her hair, not yet in a mood to talk. Suomi, turning to look to the north from this high place, saw or thought he saw the mountainous glaciers of hunting country looming just over the horizon there, like unsupported clouds.

What was that sound, just now? The path was clear. Some small animal or flying creature, then. Never mind.

Well, things were no doubt going to be socially uncomfortable on the trip home, but it was well worth it to have settled the thing between them that might otherwise have dragged on much longer. You had to consider this a favorable conclusion. If they had . . .

Did they have woodpeckers here? He couldn't see the bird anywhere but still the sound came almost continuously. Must be down under the treetops somewhere. There was also a faint polyphonic roar from the direction of the Tournament, what must have been a loud yell to be audible this far away, but he did not try to see what had happened there.

Barbara was standing up, her clothes in hand. "I'm going in for a shower, Carlos."

"All right." He watched her walk away. Women. Magnificent, but who could understand them?

And then, while on the subject of magnificence, there had been the animal, the glacier-beast, whose power and beauty had frozen Suomi in awe and terror as it charged down upon him. He now felt, surprisingly, some small regret that he had not killed it. Better, of course, if it had been allowed to live . . . yet, what was it Thoreau had written? There is a time in the lives of nations, as of individuals, when the best hunters are the best men. Something like that. The nation of interstellar man had presumably long since passed that stage, of course. And so had Carlos Suomi in his individual life. Or he should have. Schoenberg, on the other hand, though something more than a mere sadist—ping sound clicked suddenly into place with a remembered visual image, that of stone being worked by hard metal, more precisely that of steps being cut in the side of the mesa by Schoenberg, hanging on the rope with mountaineers' implements in hand. Suomi had not made the connection before because the sounds he was now hearing were too rapid. No one could wield a hammer at such a speed. And at the same time they sounded too irregular to be made by an automatic tool.

The climbable face of rock was still unoccupied. Suomi had started around the ship to check the other sides of the mesa when he beheld in front of him someone, something, climbing carefully up over the rim and into sight. A huge head of wild, coarse, dark hair, bound by a silver band. Beneath the head a massive wrestler's body coming up over the edge of the cliff, clothed in rough furs under a swirling dark cloak. On second look the figure was so huge the mind wanted to refuse belief.

The climber rolled the great length of his frame out onto the horizontal surface of the mesa and raised his gigantic head to look straight at Suomi. The impassive face, its lower half masked by wild dark beard and mustache, was of the right size to fit the head, and yet it was subtly wrong. Not that it was scarred, or intrinsically deformed. Though it was no mask in the ordinary sense, it was yet artificial. Too skillfully artificial, like the work of some mad artist, convinced he could fool people into thinking that this robot, this dummy, was a man.

The figure rose gracefully to its feet and Suomi saw something that its body had obscured. At the very edge of the cliff a climber's piton had been hammered into the rock. The end of a line was knotted to an eye in the piton and the line went tautly back out of sight over the cliff. Now the face of a second climber, this one of normal stature, indubitably human, rose into view.

Meanwhile the trailblazing giant had risen to his full height. He was taller than anyone Suomi had ever seen. As he stood up he thrust a mountaineer's hammer into a pouch at his waist and with the same motion of his arm unsheathed an enormous sword.

Suomi had come to a dead stop, not paralyzed with fear as he had been by the glacier-beast, but simply unable to form any satisfactory explanation for what his senses were recording.

The first answer to cross his mind was that this was all some ugly and elaborate practical joke arranged by Schoenberg or De La Torre but he realized even before the idea was fully formed that they would hardly think it necessary to go to so much trouble to scare him. And Schoenberg, at least, would have too much sense to yell boo at a nervous man with a loaded weapon.

The second explanation to pop into Suomi's head was that there must be hooligans on Hunters' planet the same as everywhere else, and some of these had come to see what they might steal from the outworlders' ship.

But the marauders' giant leader was not covered by either of these hypotheses. The mind stopped and boggled at the sight, then tried to go around it and proceed.

With some vague idea of scaring off bandits, Suomi began to unslung the rifle from his back. As he did so the incredible giant took two steps toward him with its sword upraised, then halted as if satisfied with its position.

By this time the second climber, a Hunterian warrior, young and tough-looking, was completely up on the cliff-top and proceeding with drawn sword toward the open hatchway of the ship. The third, also of normal size, was right behind him.

"Halt," said Suomi, conscious even as he spoke of the uncertainty in his own voice. He felt foolish when no one halted even though the rifle was now in his hands.

Now there were two human invaders on top of the mesa besides the man-shaped giant, and another armed man was climbing into sight. The ship's hatch stood open and—except for Suomi—unprotected. And Barbara was in there.

He had not leveled the rifle at them yet, but now he did, and shouted "Halt!" this time with conviction. Instantly the huge figure lunged toward him, faster than any human could conceivably move. The man-slicing sword was held high, ready to strike. Suomi squeezed the trigger, realized when it failed to move that he had failed to release the safety. Instinctively he stepped back from the onrushing sword and felt his foot move into empty air. His left hand, grabbing wildly for support, caught hold of the climbing rope and saved him from a killing fall. The misstep dropped him only a short distance down from the edge of the mesa, but still his heel came down on rock with an impact that jarred his leg and spine. His arm twisted with the fall and the rope slipped from his grip. He lost all footing, tumbled and rolled on gravel, and stopped when he came up with a breathtaking slam against an outcropping of rock. Still he was only about halfway down the path, the steepest part of which was just below him.

With his back against the rock that had stopped him, he half sat, half lay there, facing up the hill. Dazedly he realized that he was not seriously injured, and that his right hand still held the rifle. Now his finger found the small safety lever beside the breech and turned it back. Somehow he even remembered to set it for full automatic fire.

The giant man-thing with its sword upraised reared into view above. When it saw Suomi it dropped itself onto the steep slope with the grace of a dancer. With sword leveled at him now it descended upon him, moving under perfect control, one long bounding stride, two . . .

* * *

The rifle stuttered in Suomi's hands. The sword-brandishing golem's left arm erupted in a spray of dry-looking particles and smoke as the man-thing spun in an incredible pirouette, more graceful by far than any wounded animal. Knocked off balance and deflected from its course by the shock of the rifle's force-packets, the towering shape slid past Suomi and on down the slope.

But it did not fall. In another moment, near the bottom, it had regained full control and stopped its slide. Then it turned and was calmly climbing, like a mountain goat, at a fast run. The sword, whirling and gleaming, came toward him once again, the face below it a mask of insane serenity.

Suomi uttered a sobbing noise, a compound of terror and frustration. In his hands the rifle leaped and kicked, firing continuously while he struggled to keep it aimed. The fur-clad monster, face still without expression beneath the silver headband, was stopped in its tracks. Puffs of fur flew from it under the barrage, and splinters and streaks of unidentifiable debris. Then it was hurled back down the hill, still staggering to keep its feet, black cloak alternately furling and flying. Far at the bottom Suomi's continuing mad fusillade pinned it like an insect, leaping and convulsing wildly, against an immovable tree trunk.

A force-packet dissolved the silver headband and half the monster's face in a gray bloodless smear. The sword flew from its hand. With a final, awkward, uphill lunge, the figure fell. It rolled over on the ground and lay inert. At last Suomi released the trigger.

Suddenly all was quiet. The sky, the mesa, seemed to be whirling around Suomi's head. He realized that he was sprawled precariously on the steep slope, his head considerably lower than his feet. One false move and he would go plunging down. He was breathing in little sobbing gasps. Moving very carefully, still clutching the precious rifle, he got his feet more or less beneath him. Now he could feel a dozen cuts and bruises from the fall.

He should get back up and defend the ship. But the slope just above him was impossible. How had he survived the tumble down? He must be tougher than he had realized. His rolling descent had taken him away from the regular climbing path. Couldn't get back to it here by going sideways. He would have to go all the way down and start up again on the proper route.

To get down he had to resling the rifle and use both hands to grip the rock. In his present state he took without thinking about them slides and drops that would certainly have broken his ankles if he had essayed them calmly.

At the bottom he kept his eyes on the figure of his fallen enemy. He unslung the rifle once again, but it was not needed. His rifle fire had beaten the facing surface of the great tree trunk into splinters, which had showered down with leaves and twigs to make a patchy carpet on the ground. On top of this carpet a giant doll lay huddled where his violence had flung it.

* * *

Suomi, the killer, still unable to understand, now unable to take his eyes away, came closer. This time, too, as with the glacier-beast, there was scattered fur, though this fur was a long-dead dull brown instead of gallant orange.

He prodded with the rifle's muzzle, put out a hand, moved the tattered cloak. What was left of the thing's face was turned away. Beneath the torn fur garments the bulky torso itself was torn and shattered, spilling madness into the light of day. No blood and bones this time, but wads of stuff that might have filled a doll.

Amid this stuffing were disjointed metal rods and cams and wheels, here and there a gleaming box or tube, and running through all were complex networks of metal cables and insulated wires with an irregular, handmade look about them. And this, some power source. A hydrogen lamp? No, a nuclear fuel cell, not made to energize a robot, but doubtless serving well enough.

He had killed, yet he had not. This corpse had never lived, that much was certain. Now he could look more coolly. He touched the side of the cheek above the beard, and it felt like smooth leather. The fur clothing over the torso had never covered skin, only a carapace of hand-worked metal armor. In its slight irregularities of shape and thickness the armor reminded Suomi of a warrior's shield he had just seen at the Tournament below. At close range the energy rifle had opened this crude armor like an egg. Inside were the structural parts, cables and rods and such, also hand-worked, and mysteriously jumbled with these were a few sealed boxes, smooth and perfect in shape and finish, obviously of quite different origin than the rest . . .

He grasped at his belt. The communicator was gone, and he realized with dismay that it must have been knocked or scraped from its holder at some point during his fall.

"Carlos!" It was Barbara's voice, shrill with panic, coming from somewhere out of sight above him. "Carlos, help—" It cut off abruptly there.

Suomi ran to the foot of the climbing path and looked up. In view at the top was the head of one of the Hunterian men who had scaled the cliff. Suomi took an ascending step; at once the man's hands came into view, holding a short, thick bow with arrow nocked and ready. Suomi began to lift the rifle, and an arrow buzzed past his ear. It brought a pang of authentic fright, but Suomi did not shoot back. Dropping one man dead up there was not going to help. Superior firepower or not, Suomi was not going to be able to do anything for Barbara, or regain the ship, without help. It would be impossible to climb the path with the rifle in his hands and once he slung his weapon he would be at a hopeless disadvantage.

He must get help. Suomi turned and ran, ignoring signals of damage from his bruised and bleeding legs and aching back. He headed for the site of the Tournament to spread the alarm. The rifle was not noisy and probably no one there had heard the firing.

Before he had gotten fifty meters into the trees, a line of uniformed men holding bows and spears at the ready appeared before him, deployed at right angles to his path, cutting him off. A white-robed priest stood with them. The uniformed soldiers of Godsmountain, and they were not coming to help the outworlder against bandits but were leveling their weapons in his direction. "Try to take him alive," the priest said clearly.

Suomi abruptly altered course once more, running downhill for greater speed, angling away from both soldiers and ship. Behind him there were signal-like whistles and birdcall cries.

A single set of footsteps came pounding after him, gaining ground. Suomi visualized another robot monster. He stopped and turned, saw that it was only a human soldier, but still fired with deadly intent. He missed, blowing a notch out of a tree limb above his pursuer's head. Whether wounded by splinters, stunned by concussion, or merely frightened, the man dove for cover and gave up the chase. Suomi fled. In the distance other men still whistled and signaled to one another, but the sounds grew fainter as he ran. When at last, utterly winded, he threw himself down in a dense tangled thicket, no sound came to him but his own laboring lungs and pounding blood.

VII

When Suomi walked away from the Tournament, Schoenberg noted that Athena was looking after him, an annoyed expression on her face. The two of them seemed to annoy each other, and that was about all. It was beginning to look as if nothing interesting was going to happen between them one way or another—which was just as well from Schoenberg's point of view because the girl was an invaluable worker and intensely loyal. Schoenberg would hate to lose her.

He wondered how she had become interested in a man like Suomi. He seemed like such a marshmallow, trailing her passively, failing at the hunt, trying to stay away from the Tournament on principle and failing that, then puking at the sight of blood when he did come. Of course such a miserable performance record might in some way prove attractive to a woman. Schoenberg had long ago given up trying to predict what women might do. That was one reason he liked having them around at all times; they were sure to generate surprises.

On his other side, Celeste moved a little closer and brushed very lightly against his arm. That one was becoming tiresome. No more pretense of independence. Now she just couldn't bear to be separated from him, it seemed.

All at once he forgot about women. The recess was drawing to a close and the priest Leros had his list of names in hand and was about to read from it once more.

"Rudolph Thadbury—Thomas the Grabber."

Thadbury, with the air of a military leader, saluted both Leros and Thomas with his sword. Thomas gave his spear an indefinite wave that might or might not have been a response, then leveled it and moved forward. Schoenberg watched the action critically. He thought he was already beginning—only beginning, of course—to appreciate how a duel with edged and pointed weapons should be fought.

Since a sword has not a spear's range of attack Rudolph slid aside from the deep thrusts and hacked at the shaft of the spear when he could, trying to sever the spearhead and to move inside the spear's most effective range to a lesser distance, where the advantage would lie with the swordsman. All this was not very different from what Schoenberg had expected. He had read historians' theoretical treatments of personal combat, and had watched Anachronists on Earth playing with their dull weapons. He had never taken up one of their wooden swords, though; he did not care for playing much.

Thadbury had no success in hacking at the spear shaft, for it was bound with twisted strips of metal running lengthwise and the sword could not cut through. Nor did he get many chances to try; the Grabber was plainly a master of his chosen weapon. Rudolph could not move in to the range at which he wished to fight. Thomas kept his spear's long shaft flicking in and out, lightly as a serpent's tongue, and still used it handily to parry whenever it seemed the sword might reach his face or bulky torso. And then, suddenly, incredibly, Thomas was no longer staying back to get the maximum advantage from his weapon's greater range. Instead he brushed the sword out of the way with the spear shaft and leaped in to close with his opponent in a wrestler's grip.

A cry of surprise went up around the ring, and Thadbury too was taken off guard. Sword and spear fell to the trodden earth together and the two men stamped and whirled in a grotesque dance, each trying to trip and throw the other. But Thomas had the advantage of strength and skill as well. When they fell he was on top, Rudolph prone beneath him. Thomas's massive right forearm became a lever to crush Rudolph's wiry neck. Rudolph, belly down on the ground beneath his foe, kicked, retched, and twisted with desperate strength. His struggles seemed useless. His face went red, then purple.

Schoenberg thought that what was left of the oxygen in his bloodstream and lungs must be going fast. He hoped the man would be speedily out of his pain, even as he pushed Celeste back a little and stepped slightly to one side to get a better look at the coming of death. He knew that a lot of people on Earth, seeing him standing here and watching so intently, would think he was a sadist. In fact, he wished no living creature suffering.

Schoenberg wished that he could enter the Tournament himself. Of course he knew full well that he was no more qualified to face such men as these with edged weapons, than they were to meet him with energy rifles. The season before, when he had been hunting with Mikenas, Mikenas had shown him how to use a hunting spear and Schoenberg had successfully impaled some dangerous game on his borrowed weapon. That had been one of the most memorable experiences of his life, and he had never mentioned it to anyone.

Of course competing in a Tournament like this was a far different matter. Not that he could reasonably expect to be allowed to enter anyway. Maybe he could find out just how one qualified in the preliminaries, and when the next planet-wide Tournament was going to be held. He assumed there would be another one, probably next hunting season. Then if he found some way to practice on Earth, and came back in fifteen years . . . maybe one of these men's sons would kill him then.

It was unlikely, to put it mildly, that he would ever be able to win a major Tournament on Hunters' planet, no matter how much practice and fair preparation he got in. He was not anxious to die, and when he saw violent death approaching he knew that, as in the past, he would be afraid. But it would be worth it, worth it, worth it. For the timeless share of intense life to be experienced before the end. For the moments of full perfect being when the coin marked Life and Death spun before the altar of the god of chance, moments more valuable than so many years of the dreariness that made up most of what men called civilization.

Now Rudolph could no longer strain to throw his killer off, could no longer even grate out noises from his mouth and throat. His face was hideous and inhuman. There was no sound now but Thomas the Grabber's honest panting. That quieted shortly as Thomas sensed the life below him fled. He let Rudolph's head fall, got to his feet, very easy and limber in his movements for such a bulky man.

Schoenberg glanced at Celeste, who was looking at her fingernails. Not horrified by what was going on, only mildly disgusted. When he looked at her she gave him a quick questioning smile. He turned to Athena. She was watching the men arm themselves for the next fight, was deep in her own thoughts. Schoenberg and the rest of the outside world had been forgotten.

De La Torre came ambling up, from the direction of the ship, to stand beside them. "How'd the last one go?" he asked Schoenberg, craning his neck a little to view the bodies where they had been dragged.

"It went all right. They both fought well."

* * *

"Vann the Nomad—Wull Narvaez."

This should be the last fight of the day.

Athena turned her head but not her eyes to Schoenberg and whispered: "What are those things on his belt?"

There were two or three pairs of them, strung on a cord. "They appear to be human ears."

De La Torre emitted a high-pitched snicker that made Schoenberg glance over at him for a moment, frowning in surprise.

Vann the Nomad was waving his long sword with what seemed to be the clumsy movements of an amateur, but nobody now watching him could be taken in by that deception for a moment. The show now became almost comical, for Narvaez, too, affected an innocent appearance. He looked so like a harmless peasant that the look must have been carefully cultivated. Wull carried a pitchfork, and made tentative jabbing motions with it toward his foe. Wull's dress was crude, and his mouth pursed grotesquely, so that he looked for all the world like some angry, mud-footed farmer nerving himself to unfamiliar violence.

The seven warriors who had already survived the day's dangers were relaxed now and in a mood for humor, enjoying the charade. They hooted and whistled at clumsy-looking feints, and called out rough advice. Leros glanced around at them in irritation once, but then to Schoenberg's surprise said nothing.

With a flash of insight Schoenberg realized that the contestants in a Tournament like this one must stand closer to the gods than even a priest of Leros's rank.

Vann tried several times to cut the pitchfork's shaft, which was not armored with metal, but Narvaez had a way of turning the fork that minimized the swordblade's impact, and the wooden shaft seemed very springy and tough. When Vann's tactics had failed him several times he tried something new; grabbing at the fork with his free hand. He was so fast that on his first attempt he managed to seize the weapon, getting a good grip on it just where the tines branched out. With this grip he pulled the surprised Wull Narvaez off balance while his sword thrust low and hard.

He took the ears off Narvaez before the man was dead, warning the maul-slave off with a snarl, until he had made sure of undamaged trophies.

* * *

Athena, blinking, came back to full awareness of her surroundings once again. She looked for Schoenberg, and saw that he had turned away and was waiting to talk to the High Priest Andreas, who had just come in sight on the road that descended from the mountaintop, walking with a small escort of soldiers.

De La Torre, moving closer to Athena, asked her in a low voice: "Did you get that last little bit?"

"What?" Not having understood, she turned to him with a look of expectancy.

"I was talking about the ear-cutting, whether you got that part down on crystal. I've been making a few recordings too."

The expectancy in her face dimmed, then vanished abruptly as realization came. The crystal on which her day's anthropological records were to have been made still hung unused at her belt.

* * *

Andreas, after having made a short congratulatory speech to the surviving warriors, turned quickly to

Schoenberg and inquired: "Have you enjoyed the day's competition?"

"We who are here have enjoyed it very much. I must apologize for Suomi, the one who became ill, as you may have heard. I do not think he will come to watch again."

Andreas's lip curled slightly but he made no further comment. None was needed. Such a man was beneath contempt and unworthy of discussion. He asked: "Will all of you join me at a feast in the Temple of Thorun tonight? All of you, that is, who are now here. We can ascend at once to the city if that is convenient."

Schoenberg hesitated only marginally. "I did not think to bring a gift for Thorun with me from the ship."

Andreas smiled. What was the naive old saying? If a smile disfigures a man's face, then that man is bad. The High Priest said: "I am sure you will provide a suitable gift. There is no hurry about it, not now."

"Very well." Schoenberg glanced at those of his shipmates present. All watched him expectantly and appeared perfectly ready to be Thorun's guests. "Just let me say a word to the people waiting at the ship. Only take a minute."

"Of course." Andreas, noble savage, turned politely away.

Schoenberg took his communicator from his belt and spoke into it. Looking toward the ship he thought he could just see the head of Suomi, who must be sitting down in his sentry's position at the top of the climbing path.

It was Barbara who answered. "Hello?" Her voice was uncertain.

"Look, Barb, those of us down here now have been invited up to visit the Temple. A feast is scheduled. I'm not sure when we'll get back to the ship. Tell Suomi to be sure to get inside before dark and button the thing up. One of you call me if any problems should arise; I'll call you again when we're ready to start back. Okay?"

There was a little pause, and then she only said, "Okay."

"Everything all right?"

"Yes. Okay, Oscar."

Just hearing about the Tournament and thinking about it must have upset her, he supposed. Probably she had been holding Suomi's hand while he recounted bestial horrors. Well, next trip he would choose his traveling companions more carefully. None of this bunch were exactly what he had hoped for.

Except next time he might be coming here alone, not expecting to return to Earth. He wondered if he could really teach himself, on Earth, to use edged weapons with real skill. He wondered if he would do better with sword or axe or spear. Tonight, if everything went well, he would have a chance to mention his plan to Andreas.

* * *

The little party of outworlders and their casual escort of a few soldiers began to climb the smooth-paved mountain road, Andreas and Schoenberg walking together in the lead. "It is only a few kilometers to the

top," Andreas informed them. "Perhaps an hour's walk if we take our time. Your hours on Earth are about the same length as ours, not so?"

When they had walked only about half a kilometer along the zig-zag climbing road they came to the place where, as Andreas pointed out, the ring was being prepared for the next day's fighting. Here the mountain was steeper, less level space was available, and one side of the ring overlooked a bank that was almost a precipice. After another kilometer the switchback road passed between twin stone watchtowers from which sentinels saluted the party crisply with their spears. Andreas returned the salutes.

They must be nearing the summit now. The slope of the mountain moderated again and the road wound through a park-like wood. Many of the trees bore fruit. The earth below them was hidden under a vine-like groundcover plant that put up leaves like blades of grass.

Presently the trees thinned out, the ground leveled and they came in sight of the citadel-city on the mountain's crown. As the road brought them near the city's bone-white walls, straight toward a yawning gate, Schoenberg glanced back once in the direction of the ship. He was developing a faint uneasiness that he found hard to shake. He could see only the top of the metal sphere above the trees before he passed into the city.

Inside, there was at first little to be seen, except more walls of bright white stone. As they made their way in through the streets, Schoenberg found them narrow and busy. Gray-clad slaves, and carts pulled by multihorned draft animals, made way for white-robed aristocrats. Here and there an elegant woman eyed the visitors from a sedan chair or a grilled window. Windows were usually small, doors usually kept closed, walls invariably white. There was a deadly sameness to the architecture of the city. Catching Andreas's eye, Schoenberg asked: "May we take pictures here?"

"Of course. You must take one of me, later. I shall treasure it."

The white-garbed lords of the planet were lining the visitors' path now in considerable numbers, bowing lightly and courteously, showing somewhat more curiosity than Schoenberg had ever before seen displayed by Hunterians. Athena was smiling and waving to the women and children in white who were visible peering from windows or around corners. Those in gray, male and female, generally seemed too hurried to look up. It occurred to Schoenberg that there were no gray-clad children visible.

"The Temple of Thorun." Andreas had stopped and was pointing to a pair of high gates of heavy metal grillwork that guarded the entrance to a courtyard lined on three sides by buildings of the ubiquitous white. These were somewhat taller than any the visitors had passed on their way through the city.

"There we will feast tonight."

Once the party had passed through the gates, Andreas bade the visitors a temporary goodbye, and himself went on toward the building that Schoenberg took to be the Temple proper, the tallest structure, some twelve or fifteen meters high, with broad white steps and forbidding doors.

The outworlders were guided by bowing young priests into another nearby building and there shown to individual rooms, all of which were out of sight of the street, opening onto a kind of formal garden in an enclosed court.

Led into his room by the obsequious manservant assigned to him, Schoenberg found it a small but pleasant place. The small window was protected by an ornamental grill, soft rugs covered the floor, and

there was a comfortable-looking bed. An invitation to stay overnight seemed to be in the cards. His manservant was laying out white garments produced from somewhere, and through the open door other servants were visible, carrying in haste what appeared to be a bathtub.

A little later, getting his back scrubbed—hardly necessary, but let them do things their way—he found that the unexpected degree of hospitality had to some extent allayed the unease that had begun to nag him. Now, though, he suspected that Andreas was going to ask him some rather large favor before they parted. What could it be? Probably to smuggle in some outworld weapons, something needed to reduce some particularly troublesome adversary.

The swift tropical Hunterian night had come on by the time he had finished bathing and dressing. A young priest was promptly at hand to conduct him to the feast; it seemed that everything was running on a smooth schedule.

With a word to his guide he stopped at Athena's room, next to his, and found her ready to join him, as prompt as when they went off on a business trip. Her guide had told her that De La Torre and Celeste, whose rooms were next along a covered walk, had already gone on ahead.

Joking a little about what sort of merchandise they might hope to sell to their new client Andreas, Schoenberg and Athena followed their guides from one courtyard and cloister to another without being brought again in sight of the city's streets. Evidently the Temple complex was extensive.

At last they entered a small door in the flank of the tall building Schoenberg recognized as the Temple itself and were led down to a large room a short distance below ground level. It was refreshingly cool after the day's sunlit warmth.

Already at table were De La Torre and Celeste, also garbed in white, De La Torre with a leafy garland on his head like some ancient Roman. With them sat the High Priest, and half a dozen other men all of the highest rank. Some of these had accompanied Andreas on his first welcoming visit to the outworlders' ship.

Servants moved quietly and efficiently about. The banquet room was large, pleasingly decorated with fine hangings, softly lit with well-placed candles. All was as it should be.

"Our host has been telling me about Thorun's great hall," said De La Torre, after greetings had been exchanged.

"So?" Schoenberg moved a hand around in an inclusive gesture. "Is this the place?"

One of the Inner Circle priests grinned, broadly and cynically. "No, Thorun's is really quite a different world from ours. Or yours."

* * *

As at the Tournament, Schoenberg, when seated, found himself between Athena and Celeste. Here, despite the outwardly pleasant surroundings, not only Celeste but Athena kept drawing close to him, as if unconsciously. Not only were there no other women guests this evening, but Schoenberg had the feeling that there might never have been any in the history of the Temple. Andreas and the other Hunterian leaders never spoke to Athena unless she asked them a direct question, which she did of course from time to time to show her nerve. Celeste, being a good playgirl, knew when she was expected to keep quiet. If the Hunterians knew her real status, Schoenberg supposed, they would be outraged.

No doubt about it, his party was being accorded extraordinary treatment. He would have to at least appear to agree to their request when it came, whatever it might be.

The feast was elaborate and very good, though Schoenberg with an apologetic explanation to Andreas advised the other outworlders not to partake of certain dishes, nor of the fermented milk that was brought before them in great bowls. "It will be better for our Earthly stomachs if we drink clear water here, if Thorun does not object."

Andreas waved a negligent hand. "Thorun is largely indifferent to such matters. Clear water is always a good warriors' drink."

Schoenberg sipped his water, from a golden cup. "I look forward to seeing the next round of the Tournament."

"I, too. I am delighted that our interests coincide. Unfortunately business has prevented me from seeing any of the earlier rounds."

"I know what the press of business can be like."

Celeste's foot was tapping under the table. Dancers had come on the scene and she was watching them with professional interest. They were good, girls and youths dancing together, the show very crude by Earth standards of course, and too bluntly erotic in places, but well practiced and full of energy. The Hunterian men at table watched the show with somewhat grim expressions, or did not watch it at all. Schoenberg wondered if priests here were supposed to be celibate. He would get around to asking that later, if at all. Sex on any planet was likely to be an even more sensitive subject than religion, which these religious leaders did not appear to take too seriously.

All was new and interesting to the outworlders and the evening passed quickly for them. The night was well advanced, the candles burning low, and the dancers literally collapsed from exhaustion, when Schoenberg suggested that the time had come for him and his party to return to their ship.

Andreas made a gesture of polite disapproval. "Your beds here have been prepared. One of the dancing girls yonder will share yours with you if you like."

"The offer is most pleasing. But I am concerned about my ship."

"Stay here. Spend the night under Thorun's roof. You and I have much more to talk about. And it would be unpleasant, trying to climb the tall rock at night to reach your ship."

Schoenberg did not take long to make up his mind. "We accept your invitation gladly. If you will excuse me, though, I must talk briefly to the people on the ship." He took the communicator from his belt, activated it, waited for an answer. None was immediately forthcoming. He raised the device to his mouth and spoke. "Suomi?"

"Stay here," said Andreas, making his face hideous with his smile. "In the morning I will try to facilitate your meeting with him."

"You will try . . . I do not understand."

"You see, the man you left to guard your ship is there no longer. It is shameful but necessary to explain

that while the last round of the Tournament was in progress he took fright and fled from that place. I did not wish to worry you unnecessarily, but we have not yet managed to locate him."

Schoenberg sat up straight, giving Andreas his best tycoon's look. "And what about my ship?"

"We are guarding it for you. Nothing in it will be damaged. No one can reach it, except by my authority. Come, I must insist you stay the night."

VIII

Shortly after the next morning's dawn a slave came around to waken the eight survivors of the Tournament.

Giles the Treacherous, roused instantly by the light tug on his sleeping robe, rolled over, remembered fully where he was, and came awake with something of a start. Sitting up, he rubbed sleep from his eyes and looked about him, then observed to anyone who cared to listen: "Our camp is growing somewhat smaller day by day."

Though most of the seven others were awake, none of them chose to respond immediately. Like Giles, they had simply wrapped themselves in robes or blankets for sleep, and now there was a general slow emergence, as of a gathering of insects from cocoons.

It had rained a little during the night. The morning was gray and cheerless. On the previous evening the eight warriors had bedded down quite close together, as if by common consent against some external danger. The space they now occupied was tiny indeed compared with that of the first fine encampment beside the river far below.

When Giles stood up the river was visible to him down there, bend after bend of it snaking across the flat country until it lost itself at last in fields of morning mist. Down there croplands made ragged rectangles. For a moment—a moment only—Giles wished with the intensity of physical pain that he was somewhere in his own remote province, striding stupidly behind a plow, as once he had done, long ago.

Long ago.

Omír Kelsumba, giant and black, was standing a few paces away and preparing to empty his bladder down the hill. The slaves had not gotten around to digging a latrine for this campsite before most of them were for some reason called away to other duties, yesterday afternoon. Omír spoke over his shoulder to answer Giles at last: "Tonight we will need less space still, but what of that? Soon all of us will be dwelling in Thorun's hall, where there must be room enough for any man."

"Well spoken," commended Farley of Eikosk, standing tall to stretch, then bending and with deft movements of his freckled arms starting to roll up his sleeping robe. Like his weapons, it looked costly.

By now all of the warriors were up, busy scratching, stretching, spitting, rolling their sleeping robes in preparation for moving camp. Farley of Eikosk went to offer a prolonged obeisance before the altar of Thorun, kneeling and murmuring prayers, bending his forehead to the ground. Soon Kelsumba joined him, and then Charles the Upright, and then one by one the others, until all had offered at least perfunctory worship. The enigmatic face of the little image of Thorun showed no sign of favoring any.

Vann the Nomad was hungriest this morning, it seemed, being first to leave the shrine and move toward the cooking fire where a single gray-clad slave was preparing what looked like a very simple morning meal.

As Vann moved away, Giles said in a low voice to Kelsumba: "What do you think of that one, cutting ears for trophies?" Kelsumba only grunted in reply. He had begun to inspect his axe, checking to see if the night's rain had gotten through its carefully wound and oiled wrappings to rust the steel. Except for the axe, everything Kelsumba owned was shabby and worn.

While crouching over his axe and looking at it closely, he said to Giles: "You are perhaps a wise man. Maybe you can give me an opinion on this. Suppose I do not win the Tournament. Even so, having come this far, I will be seated high up at Thorun's table. Will he listen to me, do you suppose? If I die today or tomorrow will he intercede with the goddess of healing to grant a favor for me?"

Giles gave a little private sigh. "Such a question is beyond me," he answered. "But it is generally believed that all wounds, old or new, are healed when one enters Thorun's hall, whatever one's rank inside."

"Oh, it is not my own wounds that have brought me here." The big man looked up and turned vacant eyes into the distance. "I have a wife and two little ones, far away. The babies are both sick, they waste and do not grow. The village doctors can do nothing. I pleaded with the gods, offered sacrifice, but the children did not get better." His eyes swung around to Giles, and his fingers moved upon the handle of his axe. "So I will become a god myself. Then I will be able to make my children well, even if I cannot live with them any longer." His voice was rising and his look had become the stare of a fanatic. "I will kill six men, or sixty if need be! I will kill you, and Thorun himself will not be able to stop me!"

Giles nodded gravely, signifying agreement, keeping his face immobile. Then he turned carefully away. When he glanced back a moment later, Kelsumba was sitting there quietly again, honing his axe.

Thomas the Grabber, who had been standing only a little distance off when Giles made his remark about Vann's ear-cutting propensities, had probably heard the comment. It was Thomas who should be due to oppose the ear-cutter in this day's round of fighting, but Thomas, looking sleepy this morning, seemed not at all disturbed. Now he was yawning, with a kind of cavernous bellow. It was hard to say whether Kelsumba or the Grabber was the biggest of the surviving men. Jud Isaksson was certainly the smallest, with Giles not much larger. The latter sighed once more to himself as he made this assessment.

* * *

Breakfast consisted of thick tasteless fried cakes and water. For the first time there was no meat. When the men growled at the slave who served them, he indicated by a few grunts and helpless gestures—someone had once cut out his tongue—that nothing better had been provided and he was having to do more work than usual because most of his fellows had been called away.

Leros confirmed this, scowling as he munched his own share of the fried cakes. "Two priests who are my friends came down to rouse me early this morning, to sympathize with me that most of our retinue has been taken away. There is no excuse for giving us such meager service. True, our numbers are reduced, but the glory of you who survive has grown the greater. I have sent up a protest to the High Priest. I trust we will be better fed, and attended, by midday."

Breakfast, such as it was, having been disposed of, Leros gave the order to march and the party began once more to ascend. Far ahead of them a train of freight wagons loaded with provender for the city went groaning slowly up the road. Another, of empty, rattling carts, came clattering more quickly down.

Charles the Upright, who happened to be walking in the van, had to reach for his sword before the surly driver of the first descending cart would lead the train of vehicles fairly off the road to let the climbing heroes pass.

Leros's irritation was increased by the incident, but he said little and the party hiked on. Certainly it was true that they no longer made an impressive sight. The men were all bedraggled after days spent in the field and they were practically unattended. He had felt like stopping to flog that insolent varlet of a driver, but such a job would only demean the whole proceeding further.

The city of Thorun was not yet visible, though the summit of Godsmountain could hardly be more than a kilometer above them now. Once Giles caught a glimpse of the huge outworld ship, gleaming wetly on its distant pedestal of rock, but then rain and fog blew in between, and trees closed in again around the road on which they climbed.

* * *

Two priests of intermediate rank came down to meet Leros and talk with him. The three of them, conferring privately, walked on ahead of the eight warriors. The eight continued to climb calmly and steadily, sometimes two or three walking together long enough to exchange a few words, sometimes all of them strung out, each in his solitary introspective silence. A ragged pair of slaves, all that remained of their once princely retinue, bore burdens in the rear. One slave was dumb and the other limped on a crippled leg. The image of Thorun, for which a field shrine had been built at every camp thus far, had now been left behind. Temporarily, Leros said, until they should have servants again to build a decent shrine.

Shortly after the near-incident of the carts, Giles the Treacherous sought out Jud Isaksson who had been trudging alone and walked companionably beside the man who in a few hours would be trying to kill him. Jud acknowledged his presence with a glance and then went back to his own thoughts.

Casting a glance back at their beggarly force of servants, Giles remarked: "So, no meat. And it also seems there will be no musicians today, to waft our souls upward to Thorun's hall."

Jud shrugged uneasily. Perhaps it was only the wet wind blowing rain against his neck that made him do so.

Giles measured out half a dozen strides of road beneath his boots, and then added: "I know only this. Sixty-four brave fighting men, all full of life and blood and valiant deeds, met on the plain below. And now there are just eight of us with breath still in us. Then, when we still might have turned around and gone home, we were greeted and praised as heroes. Now? No one beholds our deeds, or will ever sing of them. And are the dead fifty-six in truth now at their feasting up above?" He looked toward the mountaintop concealed amid its groves. "I hear no sounds of laughter down the wind."

Jud's mustache moved, but he only spat.

Giles was determined not to let things drag on; time was growing short. He said, trying almost at random now to provoke a reaction: "You and I have seen those fifty-six good men go up in smoke. No, not even that. They have not all been burnt, as heroes should be, but buried for the most part like dead animals. In shallow graves."

"Man." Jud found his voice at last. "Man, I know not why you rehearse these things to me. Tell me—I know nothing of you but your name—is it for no reason at all that you are called Giles the Treacherous?"

"That is a long story, and not too easy of belief. I will begin it if you like."

"No, I care not. A true scoundrel would probably call himself Giles the Honest. All right!" Jud came visibly to a decision. "All right! If you want plain speaking. A child should know there are no gods on top of this mountain, or anywhere else. That being so, who really does rule the Temple, Godsmountain, the world? The simple answer is, that they are ruled by men."

He nodded, smiling with satisfaction at his own logic, and then plunged on. "Very well. Since we're not going to be welcomed into some imaginary hall, the question arises, why are we here? There must be a real reason. T'would be senseless to have us kill one another off to the last man for the amusement of a few outworlders who happened by. No. Mark my words. Before this day's duelling starts—or at worst before it's over—the six or eight of us who're left will be let in on the secret, and the Tournament will be secretly stopped."

"You really think that."

"Man, what else? We're going into some elite, secret force. They've already stopped sending down supplies for us right? The Tournament will be halted, and some story put out telling who the final winner was and how he's happily guzzling and wenching with the gods."

"The good Leros must be an excellent actor."

"Maybe he hasn't been told. A good man and all that, but not the brightest. It's plain enough if you only look at it, consider all the facts. We're going into some kind of palace guard, for the High Priest and whoever else is really running things atop this mountain."

When Jud fell silent, Giles also had no more to say for a little while, though he was thinking rapidly. At last he replied: "You may be right. I only know that I would give much to be able to turn my own steps quietly downhill at this moment and retrace them to my home."

"You speak madness, Giles. Once you have come this far they would never let you go. Where is your home?"

"Endross Swamp." It was a remote province, far to the south. "The writ of Godsmountain does not run there with much effect."

"So I have heard. In fact I would have thought that place was full of Thorun's enemies." Jud was staring at him. "Why are you here?"

"I am no enemy of Thorun," Giles said at once, and firmly. "It may be that some of his priests are not as worthy and honest as they should be. As to why I am here, well, I am now asking that question of myself."

Up ahead the priests had stopped, still deep in their discussion. Leros was gesturing angrily, while the other two appeared unhappy but resigned. They had reached the next ring prepared for fighting. Giles saw that it had been made with a portion of its rim overlooking an almost precipitous slope. As he stared, he felt a chill sensation near his heart. In the south they thought that meant a man had laid eyes on the place where he would die.

"What did I tell you?" Jud was murmuring, nudging Giles with an elbow. Leros had turned around as they came up, and was about to speak to the warriors. But something in Leros's attitude had changed

and they all recognized at once that he was not simply going to announce another round of fighting. Something else impended.

* * *

Leros was angry, but not at the warriors, not at the gloomy priests who stood beside him. When he spoke his voice was tense. "First I am instructed to ask whether, when the outworlders were with us yesterday, any of them mentioned the name of the demigod Karlsen."

The warriors all exchanged mildly puzzled looks. Most of them could not remember anything the outworlders had said: they all had more important things to think about. This was hardly the announcement Jud had expected, and he was frowning.

All were silent until Giles put up a hand and asked: "Good Leros, are these outworlders then accused of some blasphemy?"

"That is being decided up above," said one of the other priests, gesturing toward the summit.

"Tell Andreas to decide it up there, then," said Leros tartly. "And let me get on with more important business here."

"Lord Leros, your pardon. I repeat again, I and many others are sympathetic to your views. I am only relaying orders—"

"Yes." Again Leros addressed the waiting warriors. "Those above see fit to bother us with a second triviality. One of the outworlders, the one who behaved like a frightened woman when he saw blood, has wandered off. It is thought he must still be on the mountain, for soldiers patrolling in the flatlands have not found him. I must ask whether any of you have caught sight of such a person either last night or today."

Giles signed that he had not. The other seven, by now almost totally uninterested, also gave mutely negative responses.

Leros turned back to the other priests. "Do not these outworlders carry devices for talking one to the other, even when they are kilometers apart? How can one be lost if he can tell the others where he is?"

One of the other priests said: "Such a device was found near their ship. The coward must have dropped it. Anyway, in my opinion he does not want to be found. Other even stranger things were found there also, and there is more going on than we have been told." The priest's voice dropped almost to a whisper. Giles feigned a boredom as great as that of the other fighting men around him, and he kept his eyes on a little flying creature in a tree, but meanwhile his ears grasped for every word.

The priest continued his private—he thought—conversation with Leros: "The other outworlders are said to be guests in the Temple precincts but no one believes they remain there by choice. Very few people have seen them since they entered. One of their women seems to be confined aboard their ship. More, and stranger—one that I shall not name has told me of a most surprising rumor; the demigod Mjollnir went forth to challenge the outworlders, and one of them slew him.'

Leros made a disgusted sound and turned his back. "And I had been on the verge of giving credence to these stories you bring."

"Oh, I do not credit that about Mjollnir myself. Certainly not! Blasphemous. But something strange is

going on, something to do with the outworlders, and we have not been told the truth about it."

"That may well be. But it has nothing to do with me or with this Tournament." Leros squinted up the road. "When may we expect better food and drink, and some new servants?"

The third priest looked unhappier than before. "Lord Leros, again I must give you an answer that you will not like."

Leros swung around. "What now?" His tone was ominous.

"It is as if the Inner Circle has suddenly forgotten about the Tournament. Not simply that they are busy with other things, but that they no longer care about it. I could get no promise that the rations sent down would be improved. Andreas I saw only briefly, and he was preoccupied with other matters, I know not what. He said to me: 'Bid Leros get on with his show, and finish up.' How can I question the High Priest?"

Leros's hand went unthinkingly to his side, where a warrior's belted sword would hang, found only the smooth white priestly robe. "My show? Were those his words?"

"On my honor, they were."

"Well, I can question what Andreas orders." Leros spoke in cold rage, his words quiet and calculated. "High Priest or not. What else will he take from us? Why not all our slaves and food, why not our clothes and weapons as well?" The other priests looked as if they were trying not to hear. Giles was holding his breath in concentration.

Leros went on: "Is this or is it not supposed to be a Tournament pleasing to Thorun and worthy of him, intended to select a man who is worthy of apotheosis? Are not these eight remaining champions, each and every one, the finest . . ." Words failed Leros for the moment. Indeed he seemed near strangulation. At last he managed to draw a deep breath and resume. "Very well. I must go up and question him myself on these matters. One of you two must stay here for a while, that these men be not left unattended by any of high rank."

Turning then to the eight waiting warriors, Leros lost his scowl and faced them with a sad and loving smile. "Good lords—good men. I must leave you for a while. Do you wish to go on with this round of fighting or wait for my return? I am going up the hill to argue for better treatment. There is no telling when I will get back." The men looked at one another uncertainly. Giles almost spoke, and then bit back the words. His mind was racing, trying to balance probabilities. He wanted a delay, but not too much of one.

Leros, seeing their uncertainty, glanced at the high bronze shield that was Hunters' sun trying to burn its way through layers of mist. "Wait until the hour of noon," he told them. "If I am not back by then, with better honors and provisions for you—or have not sent word—then fight on as best you can." Handing over his list of names to the priest who had been chosen to stay with the men, and beckoning the others to come along, he started at a brisk pace up the hill.

* * *

The long morning dragged slowly by. Until the middle of the day the warriors stood or lounged around, gloomily silent or conversing two or three together in low voices. At last, when it was plain that noon had come and gone and there had been no word from Leros and no sign of his return, the substitute priest cleared his throat and called the eight together. In a somewhat awkward little speech he introduced

himself as Yelgir, and announced that he was ready to call the roll if they were prepared to fight.

"Let us get on with it," said Vann the Nomad. Others nodded their readiness. Waiting and uncertainty were harder to bear than blows. They took their places around the ring.

Yelgir took out the roll of names and cleared his throat once more. "Charles the Upright—Farley of Eikosk."

From their opposite sides of the ring Charles and Farley advanced in almost leisurely fashion. In the center they touched weapons carefully, each man showing respect for the other's abilities, and began a cautious sparring. Farley's wounded left hand, that Leros himself had neatly splinted and bandaged, did not appear to be causing him any trouble except that he opened the fight with sword alone, leaving his dagger in his belt.

Gradually the fighters added speed and strength to their movements until the long swords rang musically. The contest seemed quite even between them. Then Farley's jewel-bright steel dipped in a flashy feint he had not used in any earlier round of fighting. Charles tried to parry the stroke that did not come, and missed the deadly one that did; he fell to earth with one bright shriek of pain.

"Giles the Treacherous—Jud Isaksson." Jud, as before, charged out quickly. Giles did not seem nearly so eager, but still this fight began at a faster tempo than had the previous one. Both men were active, but neither would commit himself utterly to an attack. Now Giles became the more aggressive; his long sword lanced above and below the smaller man's round shield, but did not manage to get around it. And now Isaksson's blows fell thick and fast and Giles was forced to spend his energy in parrying, and then to give ground before the onslaught.

The end came suddenly when Giles was backed against the rim of the fighting circle that overhung the downhill slope. Jud's blade flashed, a mere glint of light, and Giles clutched at his chest, gave a choked cry, fell. On the steep turfy incline his body slid and tumbled a score of meters before a bush caught and held it momentarily. Then it pulled loose and slid on again. The priest beckoned. The limping slave with the maul began the long climb down. "Omira Kelsumba—Rahim Sosias." The black giant seemed to grow even larger upon entering the ring. Again he carried his great axe cradled in his two arms almost tenderly. Against him, fat Sosias with his curved sword looked terribly overmatched. But the scimitar drew first blood. It was a light wound, a mere touch with the point along the outside of Kelsumba's thigh. Sosias's timing had been perfect; the riposte with the axe only tore the edge of his loose outer garment.

The wound galvanized the black man, and now Sosias had to go jumping back, paunch jiggling as he danced with marvelous speed. Shift and flash went the axe, and shift and flash again, moving with the speed and control of a light sword, though the heaviest sword could not have held it in a parry. A light murmur of awe went around the watching circle.

Sosias tried the cut at the thighs again, or feinted doing so. This time the riposte came out a little farther after him, yet he miraculously managed to cut his own movement short at the critical instant and slide away untouched. His concealed knife had come out into his left hand, but he was unable now to get close enough to use it.

It would be suicidal to simply wait and try to keep dodging that axe. Sosias must try to attack again, and at last the great axe caught him coming in, and wiped away his face. Thomas the Grabber, leaning on his spear some ten meters distant, felt warm droplets of blood splash on his arm.

"Thomas the Grabber—Vann the Nomad." Vann with his clumsy-looking grip on his long sword faced Thomas, who probingly sent his huge spear darting out and back. Vann wasted no energy in trying to behead the spear, the armored shaft of which had proved itself already in several fights. The fight developed quite slowly at first, both men moving cautiously, with many feints and no real effort at attack.

After a while it became apparent to expert eyes—no other kind were watching now—that Vann could not entirely rid himself of the affectation of holding his sword awkwardly between exchanges. Certainly he got it back into the proper position with amazing speed, but the fraction of a heartbeat wasted in this correction was more than could be spared in competition at this level. The awkward grip was not a natural attitude for Vann, like Kelsumba's peculiar way of holding his axe, but a pose practiced to put an opponent off guard. As such it was utterly useless now, as Vann knew full well; he did not want to use it, but his nerves and muscles would forget and fall into the pattern.

Thomas timed this lapse and recovery several times, then caught the long sword drooping on the downbeat. With a sound like a club's impact the spear rammed through Vann's tattered shirt and torso, a little above his trophied belt. Vann's face bore a look of witless grief when he saw the bright fountain of his own blood, then bore no expression at all.

* * *

Farley of Eikosk, departing from that deadly ring in the company of his three peers, to resume their slow trek up the mountain, was bothered by the eerie feeling that the gods had forgotten the surviving handful of them. Glancing back over his shoulder from the next bend in the road, he saw the stiffening bodies of the day's four victims laid out beside the ring, and a single gray-garbed figure with a maul at its belt beginning to dig the modest pit that would be their grave. Isaksson, walking beside Farley, kept glancing back also, and Isaksson, too, seemed perturbed about something. Farley almost tried to speak of his troubled feelings, but then said nothing, being unsure of how to put them into words.

* * *

A few paces ahead, Omir Kelsumba, his huge axe clean and sheathed and innocent as some woodcutter's implement, went up the endless-seeming hill with easy strides. His thoughts were far away, with his small unhealthy children and his wife. Someday, if he won the Tournament, he could perhaps return to see his family, drifting as a spirit on the night wind, or coming with changed appearance as a casual traveler. Everyone knew that gods could do such things, and when he had won the Tournament he would be almost a god.

Earlier there had been occasional doubts, but now the conviction had returned that he was going to win. He waxed stronger with every victory. He could feel the god-strength mounting in him. Since he had reached his full growth, no man had ever been able to stand against him, and none could now. When the Tournament was over he would be a god, and gods could heal as well as murder. When he took his seat at Thorun's right hand the goddess of healing could not refuse to grant him healing for his children. No child of a god was ever done to death in a hovel by ill luck or mean diseases.

* * *

Walking beside Omir Kelsumba, but guessing nothing of his thoughts, Thomas the Grabber went up with him stride for stride. Despite a lifetime of violence as bandit, soldier, bodyguard, and bounty hunter of dangerous men, Thomas still fell from time to time into the grip of an almost paralyzing fear of bodily injury and death. Iron control was needed to keep his fear from showing. The fear was on him now, and

a premonition that he must lose in his next fight. There was nothing in sight for him beyond the wide blade of Kelsumba's axe, at which he dared not look. Thomas was experienced enough with this kind of fear to know that it would pass if only he could manage to hold out against it until he had actually entered the ring with his opponent. Then things would be all right, there would be no time for fear. No one could stand against him then. Now as he climbed he held on grimly to his nerve, trying to think of nothing.

* * *

The road came to the twin towers from which sentinels saluted gravely as the fighters passed.

"The gods' private park," Thomas muttered aloud, looking around him as they continued. The road was wider now, bordered with fine gravel walks, beyond which cultivated green ground-cover vines made one continuously inviting couch.

"Yes," said Farley of Eikosk's reverent voice behind him. "I suppose we might see Thorun himself among those trees."

No one answered. Shortly Yelgir, their escorting priest, signalled for a halt, and led them a little distance off the road. The ground was softer than before, its area smaller. The night was quiet when it came, still as the grave, or nearly so.

IX

Schoenberg, De La Torre, Athena, and Celeste were returned to their comfortable private rooms after the feast, but they were kept under guard every step of the way and all pretense that they were free agents had been dropped. No one was manhandled, but all were searched and their communicators taken from them.

None would speak to them; Andreas had left and no one else was willing to answer their protests and questions.

While they were being led from the Temple back to their rooms there was time to exchange a few words. Schoenberg advised his shipmates: "Whatever it is they want, they'll tell us when they're ready. Meanwhile it's important that we all keep our heads."

"We'll back you up, Oscar," Athena told him. Behind her determined face, those of Celeste and De La Torre were pale and frightened.

Schoenberg winked at her. Then they were put firmly into their separate rooms. He could hear his door being locked and barred. His personal servant had disappeared and when he peered out through the grillwork of the window he saw that a guard had been stationed outside his door. Schoenberg stretched out on the comfortable bed and tried to think. After a while he got up and tried tapping messages on the stone wall between his room and Athena's, but there was no reply. Probably the masonry was too thick.

Surprisingly, he slept well and felt reasonably rested when he was awakened early in the morning. An escort of soldiers had come to take him to Andreas. He went with them eagerly. They re-entered the Temple by another of its back doors and again went down some steps, this time to a cell-like stone chamber into which gray morning light filtered through a single high window. Andreas was seated behind a table. Schoenberg's escort saluted and went out; he and the ancient and ugly High Priest were left

alone. Andreas was the thinner of the two, and biologically much the older, but he wore a dagger at the girdle of his purplish robe, and seemed utterly unconcerned about being left alone with a bigger and stronger man who had just become his enemy.

Even before the door had closed behind the soldiers, Schoenberg spoke. "If you are wise, Andreas, you will free us at once."

Andreas calmly gestured to a chair, but Schoenberg remained standing. The High Priest then said: "Before I can dismiss your guards I must have assurance that you are going to cooperate in the project in which we are going to use your ship. Your willing cooperation will be a great help, though not essential."

"Imprisoning me and my friends does not make me want to cooperate. What about the other two members of my party—what has happened to them?"

Andreas folded his hands on the table before him. "The girl is confined to her stateroom on your ship. She is there to speak reassuringly over ships' radio, on the remote chance that another spaceship should appear and attempt to contact the Orion."

"Last night your people threatened her, frightened her, so that when she spoke to me she dared not tell me what had happened."

"She has seen the wisdom of cooperation." Andreas spoke mildly. "As for the coward, he is still missing. Probably he will come to no great harm, and will be back looking for food today or tomorrow. I am not going to demean my warriors by ordering them to search for him."

After a moment's silence Schoenberg took the chair that had been offered to him earlier. "What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Answer some questions about your ship, its drive in particular, and move the ship for us when the time comes."

There was a little pause. "You will have to tell me more than that. I do not want to get into serious trouble with the outworld authorities."

The High Priest shook his head. "Right now I am the only authority with whom you must concern yourself. Those outside this planet may be powerful in their own worlds, but they would not care much what happens here, even if they could know."

Schoenberg relaxed a trifle, crossed one leg over the other. "That is half true, Andreas. They do not care about such hunting trips as mine, not really. Not enough to take the time and trouble to prevent them. They would not care much about my standing and watching your Tournament—or even taking part in it, if I could have been so honored. But they will care, believe me, if I should take part in one of your wars, using outworld weapons, or even using the ship to help you in any military way. Doing any such thing would be a grave risk for me; not a battle risk, understand, which a man should welcome, but a social risk when I have returned to my own people, a risk of dishonor. Being an honorable man yourself, you will appreciate why I cannot help you."

"I assure you most solemnly, no one outside this planet will ever know what you do here."

"Excuse me, but I doubt that. I am not the only hunter to come to this planet, and sooner or later a trader or a military ship will call. Your enemies on this planet cannot be entirely silenced, and they will not miss

the chance to complain about the spaceship that, unprovoked, molested them, and it will be discovered that the ship was mine. I mention these facts first, because you may not believe me when I tell you that, in any case, the Earth authorities will be concerned if I fail to return from this trip on time." Schoenberg lifted his arm casually and briefly glanced at his calendar watch.

Andreas smiled slightly. "No one on Earth or any of the other worlds knows where you are. Whatever search is made for you will not be on my planet."

* * *

Schoenberg did not hesitate for a moment. So far he had not shown the slightest sign of fear. "It will be your mistake, High Priest, if you do not believe me. But never mind that now. Let us return to what you want. Say that I am now sitting in the command chair in the control room of my ship with you presumably leaning over me and holding a knife against my throat. Where to?"

"Schoenberg, I am not literally going to hold a knife against your throat. Not in your control room anyway, where you might be tempted to push something the wrong way in an effort to disrupt my plans. There is a priest here who has been aboard spaceships before, and we are not so utterly ignorant of them as you might suppose . . . I had thought you might be willing to join in a military sort of adventure. De La Torre would be, but he is ignorant. I have questioned the other people of your party, and believe them when they say they know nothing about the ship's drive, nor of pilotage."

"That is correct. I am the only pilot here."

"Tell me, for my curiosity, how could they have gotten home if a glacier-beast had killed you?"

"Autopilot could handle that. Just punch in a destination, and it'll deliver you in-system, near any civilized world you want. Your priest who's been aboard spaceships must know that. I take it you want some other kind of piloting."

"Yes. But mainly some detailed information about the drive."

"Tell me what it's all about and maybe I'll provide that information."

Andreas's eyes probed at him, not fiercely but deeply, for what seemed a long time. "Perhaps that would be best." The old priest sighed. "Perhaps other ways . . . tell me, what effect do threats of torture and maiming have upon you?"

Schoenberg half rose, and leaned forward glaring. "High Priest, I am a powerful man out there, in the big world that holds your little world surrounded. Do you think that just anyone can possess his own starship and take it where he likes? I have made it in the interest of several other powerful and ruthless people to look out for my safety, to avenge my death or disappearance. And those people know exactly where I am and when I am due to return. For every dol of pain you make me suffer, you will feel two, or perhaps ten, of one kind of pain or another. My friends and I can pull down your city and your Temple if you provoke us to it. Now threaten me no more!"

The two men's eyes were still locked when there came a tap at the door and it opened and one of the Inner Circle put in his head, making a slight nodding signal to Andreas. Other business called.

The High Priest sighed and arose. Smiling, skull-faced, he bowed his head very slightly in salute to Schoenberg. "You are a hard man to frighten, outworlder. Nevertheless I think it will be worthwhile to do

so. Think for a while on what I have said, and shortly we will talk again."

* * *

Suomi was afraid.

He was not simply afraid of being caught by Andreas's soldiers, who yesterday had taken the ship and Barbara and had no doubt also swept up the four other unsuspecting outworlders with little difficulty. No, the night in the thicket had given Suomi plenty of time to think and there was a lot more to it than that.

Hours ago he had left the thicket where yesterday his flight had come to an exhausted halt. Now he was crouched in the poor concealment of some thin, bush-like vegetation near the road that climbed the mountain, watching and waiting—for what he was not exactly sure. He had vague hopes of spying some lone traveler whom he might approach in hopes of getting some kind of help.

Alternatively he imagined another pack train of the kind he had already seen, passing by, and a convenient bag of vegetables or haunch of meat tumbling forgotten to the road, where he might spring out a minute later to grab it up. He had as yet found nothing very palatable in the woods and thickets, and so he had not eaten anything worth mentioning in more than a standard day.

He was also thirsty, despite the rainwater he had licked from some dripping leaves, and he was limping fairly badly from yesterday's fall. His back bothered him, and he thought that one of the minor cuts on his leg might be infected, despite the routine immunological precautions taken before leaving Earth.

The thicket into which he had burrowed himself when he stopped running was so dense and extensive that it seemed possible that a man might stay there undiscovered—until it pleased his pursuers to detail a hundred men or so to hunt him out. But perhaps Suomi had no pursuers. On this alien planet he had literally nowhere to go. He suspected strongly that his continued freedom, if it could be called that, was due only to the fact that no particular effort had been made to round him up. He could not believe that the warriors of Hunters' were particularly afraid of dying by his rifle, so it must be that they were not hunting him because more important things were going on.

Realizing that he could not accomplish anything there he had left the thicket. There was a warning to be spread. At moments it seemed possible that the whole thing had been no more than a monstrous practical joke, like an initiation . . . but then he recalled his dark clear thoughts of the night just past, and shivered a little in the warmth of day. It was not only for himself that he feared, and not only for the people who had come with him from Earth. In his mind's eye Suomi could still see with perfect clarity the robot's shattered carapace, the debris of components spilling out. And there, mixed with all the handmade parts . . .

* * *

"Softly, outworlder," said a gentle voice quite close behind him.

He whirled and found he was presenting the rifle at a rather short man with sandy hair, who was standing beside a tree six or eight meters off, muscular arms raised and hands open in an unmistakable gesture of peace. The man wore the gray clothing Suomi had seen on Godsmountain's slaves, and tucked into the heavy rope that served him as a belt was a short massive sledge. The killer of fallen gladiators. The man stood taller than Suomi remembered and also had a more open and attractive face.

"What do you want?" Suomi held the rifle steady, though his gaze went darting around the woods. No one else was in sight; the slave had come here alone.

"Only to talk with you a little." The man's tone was reassuring. He very slowly lowered his hands but otherwise did not move. "To make common cause with you, if I can, against our common enemies." He nodded in an uphill direction.

Did slaves on Hunters' habitually talk like this? Suomi doubted it. He scarcely remembered hearing them talk at all. He did not relax. "How did you find me?"

"I guessed you might be somewhere near the road by this time, thinking about giving up. I have been trying to find you for an hour, and I doubt anyone else has made the effort."

Suomi nodded. "I guessed that much. Who are you? Not a slave."

"You are right. I am not. But more of that later. Come, move back into the woods, before someone sees us from the road."

Now Suomi did relax, lowering the rifle with shaking hands and following the other back into the trees, where they squatted down to talk.

"First, tell me this," the man demanded at once. "How can we prevent Andreas and his band of thieves from making use of your stolen ship?"

"I don't know. Where are my companions?"

"Held in the Temple, under what conditions I am not sure. You don't look good. I would offer you food and drink, but have none with me at the moment. Why do you think Andreas wants your ship?"

"I am afraid." Suomi shook his head. "If it is only Andreas I suppose he has some simple military use in mind to complete his conquest of this planet. He may think our ship carries weapons of mass destruction. It has none."

The man was looking sharply at Suomi. "What did you mean, if it is only Andreas?"

"Have you heard of the berserkers?"

A blank look. "Of course, the death machines of legend. What have they to do with this?"

Suomi began to describe his combat with the man-shaped machine. His hearer was ready to listen.

"I heard a rumor that Mjollnir had walked forth to fight, and was slain," the man in gray mused. "So, it was a berserker that you destroyed?"

"Not exactly. Not entirely. Against a true berserker android this rifle would have been useless. But inside the machine's broken body I found this." He drew from his pocket a small sealed box of shiny metal. From the box a thick gray cable emerged, to expand into a fan of innumerable gauze-fine fibers at the point where his force packet had sheared it off. "This is a solid-state electronuclear device, in other words part of an artificial brain. Judging from its size, and the number of fibers in this cable, I would say that two or three of these, properly interconnected, should be enough to control a robot that could do physical things better than a man can do them, and also obey simple orders and make simple decisions."

The man reached for the box and weighed it doubtfully in his hand.

Suomi went on: "Many solid-state electronuclear devices are made on Earth and other technological worlds. I have seen countless varieties of them. Do you know how many I have seen that closely resemble this? Exactly one. I saw that in a museum. It was part of a berserker, captured in a space battle at the Stone Place, long ago."

The man scratched his chin, and handed back the box. "It is hard for me to take a legend as reality."

Suomi felt like grabbing him and shaking him. "Berserkers are very real, I promise you. What do you suppose destroyed the technology of your forefathers, here on Hunters'?"

"We are taught as children that our ancestors were too proud and strong to let themselves remain dependent on fancy machines. Oh, the legends tell of a war against berserkers, too."

"It is not only legend but history."

"All right, history. What is your point?"

"That war cut off your ancestors from the rest of the galaxy for a long time and wrecked their technology—as you say, they were rough men and women who found they could get by without a lot of fancy machines. Made a virtue of necessity. Anyway, it has been taken for granted that Karlsen's victory here destroyed all the berserkers on Hunters' or drove them away. But perhaps one survived, or at least its unliving brain survived when the rest of its machinery was crippled or destroyed. Perhaps that berserker is still here."

His auditor was still receptive but unimpressed. Suomi decided that more explanation was in order. He went on: "On other planets there have been cults of evil men and women who have worshipped berserkers as gods. I can only guess that there might have been some such people on Hunters' five hundred years ago. After the battle they found their crippled god somewhere, rescued it and hid it. Built a secret cult around it, worshipped it in secret, generation after generation. Praying to Death, working for the day when they could destroy all life upon this planet."

The man ran strong-looking, nervous fingers through his sandy hair. "But, if you are right, there was more to it than the figure of Mjollnir? The berserker has not been destroyed?"

"I am sure there is more to it than that. The real berserker brain must have included many more of these small units. And other components as well. Probably it put only spare parts into Mjollnir. Or human artisans did, working at the berserker's direction."

"Then why must there be a true berserker, as you put it, here at all? Andreas has very good artisans working for him. Perhaps they only used parts from destroyed berserkers to build the figure of Mjollnir—and one of Thorun as well." He nodded to himself. "That would explain why men swear they have actually seen Thorun walking with the High Priest in the Temple courtyards."

"Excuse me, but it is not possible that any human artisans on this planet designed the robot that attacked me. No matter what components they had to work with. Can you grasp the programming problems involved in designing a machine to run and fight and climb like a man? Better than a man. No human could have climbed that mesa where the machine did it, in a few minutes, hammering in pitons all the way. And the mechanical engineering difficulties? No. On Earth, Venus, a handful of other planets, there are men and facilities capable of designing such a robot. Only a functioning berserker-brain could do it here."

* * *

The two men were quiet for a little while, both thinking, each studying the other. Suomi eased himself into a different position, sitting with his back against a tree trunk. His wounded leg throbbed. At last the Hunterian said: "Suppose a berserker is here as you say, and the priests of Godsmountain have it. What then?"

"You do not understand!" Suomi almost grabbed him by the ragged shirt to attempt a shaking. "Say rather that it has them. How can I begin to tell you what a berserker is?" He sighed and slumped back, feeling hopeless and exhausted. How to convey, to someone who had never seen even depictions on film or holograph, the centuries of mass destruction berserkers had visited upon the galaxy, the documented cases of individual horrors? Whole planets had been sterilized, whole solar systems laid waste by the unliving enemy. People by the thousands or tens of thousands had perished in berserkers' experiments aimed at discovering what made the strange two-legged Earth-descended blobs of protoplasm so resistant to the fundamental truth-assumption of the berserkers' programming: that life was a disease of matter that had to be expunged. It had all happened here, was still happening somewhere a thousand light years or more away, on the outer edge of man's little domain within the galaxy.

Suomi said quietly: "If it is true that a berserker has captured our ship then it can be for only one purpose; to somehow sterilize this planet of all life."

"You said there were no mass weapons on the ship!"

"I meant there were none in the usual sense. But there is the drive that brought us between the stars." Suomi considered. "If the ship were buried beneath this mountain, say, and the drive suddenly turned on full force, the mountain might be blown up into the air and everyone on it killed. Not good enough for a berserker, not if it could find a way of doing worse.

"I'll bet that if the drive were worked on cunningly enough some weapon could be made of it that could sterilize a planet. Perhaps by polluting the atmosphere with radioactivity. The weapon wouldn't have to be instantly effective. There probably won't be another interstellar ship here for fifteen standard years. No way for anyone here to call for outside help, even if they understood what was happening."

The man in gray was excited at last. He stood up cautiously and looked about, then squatted down again. He fingered the handle of his maul, as if itching to pull it from his belt and fight. "By all the gods!" he muttered. "It should be effective, whether or not it is the truth!"

"Effective? What should be?"

"It should be effective against Godsmountain's priests, to spread the story that the drive of the captured ship is to be altered, our air poisoned. That a berserker really rules Godsmountain, and means to destroy the world. If we can convince people of that, we will have them!"

"It is the truth, I believe. But to spread any story across the planet will take far too long."

The man with the maul glanced up toward the mountaintop, invisible beyond the trees. "I do not think we will need to go that far. Now. How to put the story in convincing terms? Let's see. Five hundred standard years ago the berserker fleet was here. The demigod Karlsen drove them out. The priests for some reason have been asking if any of your outworlders mentioned Karlsen; that seems to fit. Now—"

Now Suomi did actually seize him by the shirt, to the Hunterian's great astonishment. "They asked that?"

Suomi barked. "Of course it fits!"

For half an hour thereafter they made their plans.

X

The four remaining contestants were awakened early from their sleep on the soft groundcover of what Thomas the Grabber had called the gods' private park. At dawn there erupted a racket of small winged creatures, each defending his bit of territory against encroachment by the others. Farley of Eikosk, roused by the noise of this miniature Tournament, watched it for a while, and then, with sudden awareness of where he was, turned his gaze uphill through the park-like forest, toward the summit of the mountain.

There, in the early morning light, the white walls had a dull and ghostly look. Later, he knew, when he saw them in full sunlight, they would shine a dazzling white. All his life he had listened eagerly, whenever he could, to the tales of travelers who had visited this city. To see its white stones actually before him inspired him with awe.

Thorun lived there.

Thorun actually lived there.

From the moment of Farley's awakening on this morning a sense of unreality grew in him rapidly. He could not fully credit his own presence here on the mountaintop, or his success thus far in the Tournament. (How pleased his father would be, at last, if he should be the winner!) This feeling of unreality persisted through the morning ritual of worship, and through their meager breakfast of cold fried cakes left over from the day before. The dumb slave who served them protested with gestures that no dead wood was available here to make a fire for cooking.

The other slave had gone off somewhere, perhaps on a search for wood. Leros still had not returned. The priest Yelgir, who still seemed a stranger to Farley, looked stiff-jointed and disheveled after a night spent in the open. He spoke to them apologetically about the fact that no fighting ring had been prepared here in advance.

Yelgir, in consultation with the warriors, chose a flat area of ground and the slave was set to work stripping away the groundcover and stamping flat the earth as best he could. The task took the slave several hours, while the others sat watching.

Farley was not exactly impatient, but the delay was one more change in routine, and made everything all the more unreal for him. At last the ring was ready, however. Yelgir was muttering prayers and it was time for the first two men to fight to take their places.

"Farley of Eikosk—Jud Isaksson."

Now both of them were in the circle from which only one of them could ever walk. But as Jud moved toward him, more slowly than was his wont, it occurred to Farley that death itself might well be different here, almost under the windows of Thorun's hall. Would the loser of this fight really die as men usually did, like some butchered animal? Might he not instead simply look down at his gaping wound, acknowledge defeat with a salute and a courteous nod, and, like one leaving a field of harmless practice,

simply walk off yonder through the trees, perhaps to be met halfway by welcoming Mjollnir or Karlsen or even Thorun himself?

In Farley's eyes the scimitar flashed sunlight. Jud was warming up now, starting to come on with his usual fury. Farley suddenly felt free and loose, faster and stronger than ever in his life before. It was as if he now breathed in the immortality of the gods by merely sharing their high air.

He parried the scimitar with a seeming carelessness that was really something else, and then he stepped in looking for the best way to kill. Now Farley carried his long sword too high, now too low, now he let his blade stray far aside into what should have been a weak position, until he could almost hear his father shouting at him in anger, but none of this was carelessness. Not today. Whatever tactic his whims, his nerves, chose for him was fated to succeed. His blade always came back into position in time to block the scimitar. On the attack his long sword reached closer and closer to Jud's lifeblood.

To Farley the end seemed foreordained and only the suddenness with which it came surprised him. He stood there almost disappointed that the fight was over, while Jud dying on the ground seemed to be trying to tell him something. Jud's life ran out too quickly, before the words could come.

The priest Yelgir cleared his throat. "Omira Kelsumba—Thomas the Grabber." Today he needed no paper to keep track of names.

Standing to one side, Farley was struck by the realization that in this round, for the first time, there would be no other victors to stand at his side watching with him, now and then passing a joke or a comment on the fight in progress. Watching alone, except for the priest, he beheld a serene happiness on Kelsumba's face; obviously here was another who felt favored by the gods today. Things appeared to be different with Thomas the Grabber. Even before the first blow his expression was that of a man who knows himself defeated.

In the center of the ring the two of them closed promptly. The axe flashed out with reckless confidence with what must be Kelsumba's certainty of approaching godhood. The spear moved with the speed of desperation, and yet as accurately and steadily as if wielded by a god. Incredibly, the fight was over.

Or was it over? Kelsumba, even with the heavy spear transfixing him, fought on. His axe, though it was much slower now, still rose and fell. Thomas was still unhurt. But instead of backing away and waiting for his man to fall, he chose for some reason to leap in and grab. As the two men wrestled it was still Omira who smiled, and Thomas who looked desperate. But it was quickly demonstrated that Omira was not the stronger of the two, at least not with a spear stuck through him. Only after Thomas had wrenched away the axe and used it for a finishing blow did his face lose its look of desperation. Now the clangor of arms, that had long since silenced the winged quarreling creatures, was ended also. The forest at last was still.

* * *

When Schoenberg was brought before him again, about midday, Andreas was seated as before. As soon as the two of them were left alone, the High Priest began: "Since the thought of torture does not immediately terrify you, and I suspect its application might provoke you to some rash attempt at misinforming us about the ship, I have decided I must take an extreme measure to frighten you sufficiently. You have brought it on yourself." Andreas was smiling again, evidently finding his own wit amusing.

Schoenberg, unimpressed, sat down. "How do you mean to terrify me, then?" he answered.

"By saying a few words."

"Andreas, my respect for you is fading. If the threats you have already made have not had their desired effect neither will any mutterings about some great unnameable terror. You are not going to scare me that way. In fact you are not going to scare me at all, not in the way you seem to want."

"I think I can. I think I know what a man like you is truly afraid of."

"What?"

"Perhaps I can do it by saying to you only one word." Andreas clapped his hands together playfully.

Schoenberg waited.

"The one word is his name."

"Thorun. I know that."

"No. Thorun is a toy. My god is real."

"Well, then. Utter this terrible name." Schoenberg lifted his eyebrows in almost jaunty inquiry.

Andreas whispered the three syllables.

It took Schoenberg a little while to grasp it. At first he was merely puzzled. "Berserker," he repeated, leaning back in his chair, his face a blank.

Andreas waited, confidently, for his god had never failed him yet.

Schoenberg said: "You mean . . . ahhh. I think I begin to see. You mean one has really been here for five hundred years, and you—serve it?"

"I am going shortly to offer to the god of Death a special sacrifice, consisting of some people we no longer need. I can show you. You will be convinced."

"Yes, I believe you can show me. I believe you. Well. This puts a different face on things, all right, but not in the way you intended. If I wouldn't help you in a local war, I'm not going to help you in a mass extermination."

"Schoenberg, when we have done with this planet what we will, when it is moribund, my god assures me that the ship's drive can be restored sufficiently to take it out into space again and after a voyage of many years to reach another star whose planets also are polluted by the foul scum of life. I and a few others, members of my Inner Circle, will make this voyage, continuing to bear the burden of hideous life on our own bodies that we may free many others of it on other worlds. There are emergency recycling systems on your ship that will nourish us adequately for years.

"The voyage, as I have said, will be many years in duration. Unless you agree to cooperate with me from this moment on you will be brought with us as a prisoner. You will not die. There are ways of preventing suicide, my master assures me, things he can do to your brain when he has time to work on it.

"You will be useful on the voyage, for we will have need of a servant. You will not be tortured—I mean,

not much at any one time. I will see to it that your sufferings never become sharp enough to set one day of your existence apart from another. I may die before the voyage is over, but some of my associates are young men and they will follow my orders faithfully. You Earthmen are very long-lived, I understand. I suppose you will—what did the old Earthmen call it?—go mad. No one will ever admire your exploits. There will be none to admire. But I suppose you might continue to exist to an age of five hundred years."

Schoenberg had not moved. Now a muscle twitched in his right cheek. His head had bowed a very little, his shoulders were a little lower than before.

Andreas said: "I would much prefer to see you make a sporting finish, myself. Go out with a noble gesture. If you cooperate in my plans, a different future for you might be arranged. You will only be helping us to do what we are going to do anyway.

"If you cooperate, I will give you"—Andreas held up a hand, thumb and forefinger barely separated—"just a little chance, at the very end. You will not win, but you will die nobly in the attempt."

"What kind of chance?" Schoenberg's voice was low and desperate now. He blinked repeatedly.

"Give you a sword, let you try to hack your way past one of my fighting men, to get to the berserker and cut it into bits. Its cabling would be quite vulnerable to such an attack."

"You wouldn't really do that! It is your god."

Andreas waited calmly.

"How do I know that you would really do that?" The words burst out as if involuntarily.

"You know now what I will do if you do not cooperate."

The silence in the little room stretched on and on.

* * *

Only three men, not counting a slave or two, now remained on their feet under the pleasant trees of the gods' otherwise deserted park. Farley and Thomas stood facing each other, their eyes meeting like those of two strangers encountering each other by chance in a wilderness both had thought uninhabited. In the background the priest was giving orders to the slaves; there was the chunk of a shovel starting a new grave.

Farley looked down at what lay on the ground. Jud had not smiled at his wound and gone off on a blithe stroll among the trees. Kelsumba was not laughing on his way to an eternal feast with gods. Farley did not care to stay and watch them rolled into a little pit. Feeling a slow emergence from his sensation of invulnerability, he turned and started on the uphill road once more.

Thomas the Grabber, still wiping at his spear, came along silently and companionably. They left the priest behind. Here the pavement of the road was very smooth and well maintained, and it was neatly bordered with stones in a pattern that put Farley in mind of certain formal walks on his father's large estate.

Now, with what seemed to Farley stunning ordinariness, they were coming through the last trees of the forest and around the road's last curve. Vistas opened, and gardens and orchards were visible in the distance to either side. Ahead, the road ran straight across thirty or forty meters of well-tended lawn, and

then it entered the citadel-city of the gods. The gate by which it entered, of massive timbers banded with wrought metal, was tightly closed just now. The high wall of the city was a blinding white in the sun, and Farley was now close enough to see how huge and heavy its stones were. He wondered how they had been stained or painted to make them look like bone.

But nothing happened inside him when he beheld their goal, the place where Thorun dwelled. Immortality was draining from him rapidly.

"Thomas," he said, slowing to a halt. "The whole thing is too—ordinary."

"How's that?" asked Thomas, amiably, stopping at his side.

Farley paused. How to explain his disappointment? He could not understand it well himself. He said what came to his tongue, which was only. "There were sixty-four of us, and now there are only two."

"But how else could it have worked out?" Thomas asked reasonably.

A few weeds grew through the rocks beside Thorun's gateway. Lumps of the dried dung of some pack animal lay at the roadside. Farley threw back his head and closed his eyes. He groaned.

"What is it, friend?"

"Thomas, Thomas. What do you see here, what do you feel? Suddenly I am having doubts." He looked at his companion for help.

Thomas shook his head. "Oh my friend, there is no doubt at all about our future. You and I are going to fight, and then only one of us is going living through that gate."

There was the gate, tough ordinary wood, bound with bands of wrought metal, its lower parts showing a little superficial wear from the brushing passages of countless men and women, slaves and animals. Behind such a gate there could be nothing but more of the same world in which Farley now stood, in which he had lived all his life. And if he reached the gate of the Temple inside, would it be any different?

The priest Yelgir, whom they had left behind, came on now to pass them, giving Farley an uneasy smile as he did so. Evidently some unseen watcher within the walls noted the priest's approach, for now the gate was opened slightly from within. Another priest stuck out his head and sized up Farley and Thomas with an impersonal look. "Is either of them wounded?" he asked Yelgir.

"One has a damaged hand, and cannot use his dagger, but that seems to bother him very little. The other a sliced arm. The muscle is not cut, nothing serious." The two priests began a low-voiced conversation that Farley could not quite hear. Meanwhile other heads, obviously aristocratic, began to appear along the top of the wall, their owners evidently standing on some high walkway on the inner side. The two finalists of Thorun's Tournament were being stared at like slaves on auction. Thomas the Grabber finished wiping his spear and now stood leaning on it, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and sighing.

"Bid the two contestants wait," someone was calling carelessly from inside. "The High Priest sends word that he hopes to attend the final duel, but he is busy now with some special sacrifice to the gods."

Suomi, after his talk with the man in gray (whose name he had never learned), breathed a sigh of relief mingled with exhaustion when he had gotten as far as the foot of the little mesa without being discovered and seized by Andreas's men. Suomi had to somehow manage to get himself into the ship again, before he could hope to accomplish anything. He must not be captured before he reached the mesa.

According to the gauge on the breech of his rifle, it had power left for only six shots. He might have thrown away the weapon in the woods, except for his fear that some fool might find it and kill himself or someone else by accident. He had offered the rifle to the man in gray, when they were about to part, but the offer was refused.

"I must continue to pass as a slave," the Hunterian had said. "No slave could carry such a device into the city without immediately being questioned. Besides, I am unfamiliar with its use; better each man to his own weapons."

"Each to his own," Suomi had answered, reaching out for a farewell handshake. "Good luck with yours. I hope I meet you in the city above."

Now, at the foot of the mesa, he observed that a regular trail had already been worn, leading from the lower end of the climbing path off into the woods uphill in the direction of the city. He observed also that not a trace remained of the shattered robot; at first he could not even locate the place where it had lain. Then he realized that the massive tree, whose surface his rifle fire had splintered, had been removed. Here was the neatly sawn stump, with dirt rubbed on the cut surface so it would not look fresh. The tree itself had somehow been carried away. Great pains were being taken to eliminate all evidence that anything grotesque had happened here. But a number of men must have been involved in the cleanup and at least one of them must have talked, so the man in gray had rumors to build on. So much the better.

When he got to the bottom of the climbing path, Suomi did shrug out of the rifle's strap and let the weapon fall aside. Gratefully he saw that the climbing rope was still in place. Fighting down a foolish impulse to turn at the last moment and run away to cower in the woods once more, he gritted his teeth and gripped the rope and began to climb. Weakened and aching, he was now compelled to hang on with both hands even on the easy first part of the slope, where before he had been able to climb rapidly on legs alone.

He had gotten only a little way up when a soldier came into view, looked down and saw Suomi, and began shouting. Suomi ignored the shouts and continued to struggle slowly upward. The shouting kept on. Suomi looked up and saw that the man had a spear raised as if ready to throw.

"If you stick me with that thing," Suomi yelled back at last, "you'll have to carry me. Look at me. Am I so dangerous that I frighten you?"

His belly muscles were tensing against the impact of the spear, but it did not come. The voice stopped shouting, moved away just a little, and began to talk. Other male voices answered. Suomi did not pay much attention to what they were saying, and did not look up again. Dizzy with hunger and fatigue, feverish from his infected wound, he struggled on the rocks for what seemed an endless time before he could pull himself out on the flat horizontal surface at the head of the path.

The foam mattress lay almost under his feet when he stood up but there was no sign of Barbara. Half a dozen men, four soldiers and two priests in purple-trimmed robes, crowded around Suomi, barking threats and orders at him, almost nudging him off the mesa again with their drawn swords and a leveled spear. Finally one of the aristocrats raised his voice and there was order. The soldiers put down their

weapons, rapidly stripped Suomi and searched him, then searched through his clothes and tossed them back to him.

"What've you done with the girl who was here?" he asked while this was going on. No one bothered to answer.

"Bring him inside the ship," one of the aristocrats ordered the soldiers.

"We'd better get on the communicator first and ask Andreas," the other one advised. After a moment's debate they compromised and had Suomi brought up the landing ramp as far as the open entrance lock. There they left him standing for the moment, with two soldiers gripping his arms. His guards were unusually large, strong men, and once the initial confusion of his capture was over they obeyed orders with precision and alertness.

Suomi wished he could sit down, but was not quite certain that he would be able to get up again if he did. He could hear voices from the direction of the control room engaged in what sounded like a talk on the communicator between the ship and somewhere else. Andreas's prize-crew perhaps had more technological savvy than Suomi had assumed. So much the worse.

In a little while one of the aristocrats came back from the direction of the control room to stand in front of Suomi and regard him critically. "Andreas is busy with sacrifice. I think we'll just bring this one on board, and confine him to his old stateroom. The place has been searched a dozen times, there are no weapons. Outworlder, you look in a bad way."

"If I could have some food . . ."

"We won't starve you to death, I don't suppose. Though you may wish we had." He signed to the soldiers to bring Suomi on into the ship.

At the entrance to the control room the aristocrat turned. "Hold him tightly going through here."

They brought him into the control room, and they were quite right to make sure that he was held securely. Otherwise it might have been barely possible for him to lunge at the drive controls and, before he could be stopped, wreck the ship. But there was no hope of that, his arms were pinned in grips he could not have broken on his strongest days, of which this was not one.

Seated in the large central pilot's chair was another aristocratic priest.

* * *

On a screen before him were the faces of two men who seemed to be in some dimly lighted stone chamber. The one in the background was another priest. The one in front was Schoenberg.

"Now," the priest in the control chair was saying, addressing the screen, "you say that if the ship pitches more than ten degrees while under manual control, the autopilot will cut in automatically?"

"Yes," Schoenberg's image said on the screen. "Provided the artificial gravity is off. The ten degrees pitch and you'll get the autopilot."

"Schoenberg!" Suomi cried out. "Don't fly it for them, Schoenberg, it's a berserker they're working for. Don't do anything they want!"

Schoenberg's face showed a reaction, though only a trivial one, and his eyes moved, probably following Suomi's passage through the control room on a portable screen taken from the ship. The men transporting Suomi were making no particular effort to hush him up or hurry him along.

"A berserker, Schoenberg!"

Schoenberg's eyes on the screen closed. His face looked deathly tired. His voice came wearily into the ship. "I know what I'm doing, Suomi. Just go along with them. Don't make things more difficult than they are."

Suomi with his escort passed out of the control room and into the narrow passage leading to the staterooms, moving at a brisk pace. The doors of most of the rooms and compartments stood open, revealing scenes of disorder, but that of the room that had been Barbara's was closed. A bored-looking soldier stood leaning against it from the outside.

"Is the girl in there?" Suomi asked. Again no one would answer. He supposed that at this stage it made no difference whether she was or not.

His captors knew somehow which room was his—perhaps they had found his name on something there, perhaps Schoenberg for whatever reason was telling them every small detail. When they thrust Suomi into the room he found it in the same state of disruption as the others he had seen, which was no more than might have been expected after several thorough searches. There was no sign that anything had been wantonly smashed. So much the better.

They left him alone and closed the door behind him; no doubt there would be a soldier leaning against it on the outside. Since the room had not been designed as a prison cell, its door could be locked only from the inside. Unfortunately it had not been designed as a fortress either; though the door was thick and soundproof, it could probably be forced open quickly by a couple of armed and determined men. Nevertheless Suomi quietly activated the lock.

He went then to stand beside his bunk, where an intercom control was set into the wall, and paused with his hand upraised. He could try to reach Barbara this way. But what could he say? Some of the enemy might well be in her room listening. To try to reassure her, to offer hope, might be much worse than useless. He turned the intercom to a position where it would receive but not transmit and left it there.

The next thing he did was to get himself a long drink of cold water from the little sink. Then he opened the medicine chest, selected an antibiotic and a painkiller. There also he found a medicated dressing to put on the worst of his minor wounds, the leg gash that somehow had become infected. After that, with a single glance of longing at the comfortable bunk, he walked to the little desk-workbench where he had kept his personal cameras and sound-recording gear. This material, like everything else, had been looked at and scattered. He opened drawers, looked in corners, searching. All was in disarray, but it seemed that nothing he needed had been removed or broken. He uttered a sigh of relief that broke off midway as he entered a new phase of tension.

It was time to sit down and get to work.

* * *

In its buried shrine far below the Temple the berserker perceived the chanting far above of five familiar male voices. From the same location came the sounds of the shuffling of fourteen human feet, in a pattern

consistent with one of the processions with which the humans habitually began their sacrificial rituals. Routine analysis of the sounds allowed the berserker to identify among the members of the procession not only five of its familiar servitors but two other human organisms, one male and one female, that were strangers to it.

Compulsively but still routinely, the berserker concentrated all its senses upon the unknown male, who was now stumbling slightly on bare feet at the top of the long stone stair that must be unfamiliar to him, as the procession began its descent from Thorun's temple. As it would have done with any strange male, the berserker was attempting an identification with another whose personal patterns were carried under highest priority in its data banks.

Since its crippling and near-destruction in the battle of 502.78 . . . standard years ago the berserker's senses had been blurred and uncertain, hardly better than human sight and hearing. But the procession was bringing the unknown male nearer and nearer now, and the probability of his being identified with the prime target patterns was rapidly declining to a negligible level. The berserker was free to turn its attention to other matters.

In the electronuclear mind of the berserker there was no wonder and no impatience, but there was definitely an awareness that some events were far more probable than others. In that sense therefore the berserker was surprised when it computed that today two human victims were to be offered to it instead of one, or an animal only, as often happened.

In all the time since the battle in which it was damaged, since the human goodlife on this planet had rescued it from destruction and begun to offer it worship, the berserker had received such multiple offerings on only a few occasions. Searching back now through its memory banks and comparing data, it noted that these had invariably been times of intense emotion among its devotees.

One such occasion had been the celebration of final victory over a particularly stubborn enemy tribe, a victory attained by following a battle plan computed by the berserker for its worshippers and handed down by it as a divine command. Then seventy-four human organisms, all members of the defeated tribe, had been sacrificed to it in one day. At another time of multiple sacrifice the emotions of those offering it had been much different. Then they were pleading for help, during a period of great food shortage. From that famine the berserker had led its followers and their tribe into a land ripe for plunder, by outlining for them a migration route, using its old battle-maps of the planet's surface. And now it computed that the successful capture of the starship, and the impending completion of the long effort to find a way to sterilize the planet, must also produce intense emotion among this generation of its goodlife servants.

The berserker did not understand emotion, and only when compelled by circumstances would it try to work with what it did not understand. The stimulus-response patterns called fear and lust, for example, seemed at first to be readily computable in humans as well as in less dangerously intelligent animals. But in more than five hundred years of attempting to master human psychology well enough to use these patterns to manipulate human organisms, the berserker had time and again run into depths and complexities of behavior that it could not understand. To accept worship meant trying to use patterns that were, if anything, even deeper and more complex, a tremendously uncertain means of working toward its goal. But no better means had been available, and with the capture of the starship it seemed that this was after all going to prove successful.

Now the procession had completed its descent of the stair, and now it was entering the berserker's chamber. The High Priest Andreas entered first, his vestments for this occasion of red and black, Thorun's white and purple having been put secretly aside above, in Thorun's temple. The robes in which the High Priest now appeared to worship his true god were heavily and ineradicably stained with the

rust-brown of old blood.

* * *

Behind Andreas came Gus De La Torre and Celeste Servetus, their wrists bound behind them, garbed in white and garlanded with live flowers that would soon be scattered on the floor to die. Four priests of the Inner Circle followed, their robes for this special occasion red and black like the High Priest's, and stained like his as well.

Andreas and the other four men conducting the sacrifice began performing the usual prostrations and chanting the usual litanies, while the victims, as usual, watched in uncertainty and mounting fear. The berserker had long ago noted that the words and actions used in these rituals tended to change but little over the standard centuries, the long Hunterian years, only gradually becoming somewhat more elaborate. For the moment it kept quiet. It had realized long ago that the less it said during a sacrificial ceremony, the better. Not only did it thus lessen the risk of confusing and disillusioning its worshippers by saying something out of tune with their incomprehensible psychology, but the rarer its pronouncements were, the more importance humans were wont to grant them.

Two of the priests had now picked up instruments of music, and the rhythm of a drum and the wail of a horn now blended with the chanting. The music ordered and modified the beat of alpha brain waves, and the rhythms of other biological processes, in all the humans present.

"Gus, help me! Help! Oh, God, no no nooo!" So screamed the female upon at last fully perceiving the stained altar just before her, and evidently realizing its purpose, just at the moment when the two priests who were not playing instruments came to tear away her garlands and clothes and chain her down upon the stones. The berserker watched steadily to see whether Gus or God (whatever entities these might be) might come to the female's aid, although from its experience following 17,261 similar appeals the probability seemed vanishingly small.

The female was secured to the altar and no help for her arrived. Her screams continued as Andreas took up a sharp implement and removed from her living body the organs most closely connected with the reproduction of life and the nourishment of the very young. These he threw before the berserker, demonstrating a symbolic and real triumph of Death over the very wellsprings of life. The ventral surface of her torso was then opened more deeply, and the central blood-pump of her body was excised, whereupon the female almost instantly ceased to function.

It was now time for the second victim to be placed upon the altar.

"No. Listen, my friends, I'm with you. No, no, not me. How can this be happening? Wait, let's talk, you're making a mistake. I'll join you." And then a wordless, hopeless cry, as his feet were tripped out from under him and he was thrown down naked upon the stones.

Why should the male organism continue to struggle so violently when it must perceive that the chances of such struggle producing favorable results were now astronomically remote? Now at last the male had been chained down.

"I'll help you! I'll do anything you want. Oh. Ah. No. Forgive me, everyone . . ." Another scream, as his organs of generation too were removed, and cast into the bloody puddle of female parts. And now his ventral tissues parted under the sharp knife in the High Priest's hands, and now his heart, still pulsating, was held up in offering to the god of Death.

"It is well, it is pleasing," the berserker told the five gory, happy men who now stood quietly before it. Drum and horn and voice had ceased. The chamber was still. The five who still bore the burden of life were subsiding now into states of emotional relaxation.

"I am pleased," the berserker reiterated. "Go now and prepare to bring the starship to me, that we may begin to attach my circuitry to its control systems. Only when that is done can we begin the alteration of its drive."

"Today or tomorrow, oh Death, we will bring you the starship," said Andreas. "As soon as we are sure that Lachaise can fly it safely we will lower it into the pit. Tomorrow also we will bring you fresh human sacrifice."

"That will be good." Meanwhile a possible problem had suggested itself to the berserker. "Are many of your people mystified by or curious about the ship? Is there any unrest because of its presence?"

"There is some curiosity about it, oh Death, but I will handle that. This afternoon there will be a distraction that will leave the people able to think or talk of nothing else. Thorun is going to walk forth into the city and display his powers."

The berserker tried to compute the probable results of such an event, and found it could not grapple with the numerous abstract factors successfully. "In the past you have always been cautious about putting Thorun on display."

"Lord Death, the masses will not accept as divine any creature that they can see daily in the streets. But Thorun's future will now be short in any case. At the most, a thirtieth-of-an-old-man's-lifetime, and the masses of this world will no longer need a god—or any god save Thou."

The berserker decided to trust its goodlife servant in this manner. So far he had never failed his god. "So be it, loyal Andreas. Proceed in the service of Death as you think best."

Andreas bowed low, and then the humans began their rituals of departure, which included cleaning up the mess they had made.

The berserker computed routinely that two deaths had been achieved today, which was a good, if modest, accomplishment. But, as always the waste of time and energy involved in formal sacrifice had been considerable, and that was not good.

Never had the berserker asked for offerings of pain and terror. Killing, simple killing without end as long as life existed, was all it wanted. It was not enthusiastic about inflicting pain, which was after all a manifestation of life and therefore, after all, evil.

It allowed the torture to go on only because the infliction of pain was so satisfying to the humans who were its servitors.

XII

The two finalists of Thorun's Tournament were still being kept waiting outside the city gate.

"Thomas, why are we being treated so? Disregarded. Forced to wait here, like tradesmen or musicians

or actors, without honor. Are we not now nearly gods? Is this just some final form of trial?"

"My foolish, highborn friend." Thomas's voice was sympathetic, the rest of his answer long in coming. "You really think that there are gods in there?"

"I—" Farley had not been able to sit down for restlessness, and now he swayed on his feet in agony of mind. "Thorun help me! I do not know." His admission of doubt hung in the air while time stretched on and on, an endless-seeming time for Farley in which, as far as he could tell, Thorun did nothing at all.

"You in there!" Farley bellowed suddenly, toward the priests who still looked down upon them from the wall. Startled eyes swung round to focus on him. The priest Yelgir had gone in some time ago, saying he would soon be back.

"What?" one answered, awkwardly.

"Are we companions of the gods or not? What kind of welcome is this you have prepared for us? Leros shall hear of this, and the High Priest himself!"

He paused then, as suddenly as if he had run into a wall, his flaring anger burned out as fast as it had arisen. "Thomas," he whispered. "Did you hear my words just now? Not 'Thorun will hear of this' but 'the High Priest will hear.' I know now what I believe." Again his look changed to anger once more, but this time quiet and bitter. "Why then am I here?"

His loud outburst had had enough effect on the priests that one of them was now beginning a speech placatory if not apologetic. But Farley would not hear it. Still speaking to Thomas, he demanded: "Tell me, what will happen if you and I choose not to fight? If we simply turn our backs on them, and go about our own affairs?"

Thomas was aghast and scowling, shaking his head in silent disapproval. Farley could bear no more. With deliberate scorn he turned his back on all of them and started to walk away. Thomas at once glanced toward the priests and saw their wishes in their eyes. Farley had not gone more than ten paces before Thomas came to block his way. Not for the first time, it struck Farley as marvelous that such a bulky man could move so lightly.

"Thomas, walk away with me, in peace."

The man holding the spear leveled shook his head. "That cannot be."

"Come. If you still lust for more fighting, I have no doubt that we will find it on our way. These soft men who play at being gods will send their soldiers after us and we are not likely to reach the bottom of the mountain alive. But we will die in true battle, as men should, and not for the amusement of liars. Come."

Thomas was still not angry, but very grim. "Farley, I mean to remain alive, and to prove to these men that I am the mightiest warrior in the land. If I do not conquer you, that will not be proven fully. Come. Let us fight."

The spear had been leveled for some time, and now Farley saw the little movement at Thomas's shoulder that meant a thrust was coming. Farley drew his own weapon even as he leaped back from the spear thrust. Farley fought. There was no choice. When he struck with his sword his arm felt as strong as ever, but something was lacking now—from his backbone or from his soul.

He was not conscious of being afraid. It was only that he wanted nothing but to leave this place of fraud. His feet tried to move him toward the downhill road when they should have been driving him forward for the kill. And suddenly his belly was being torn open by the spear.

Farley knew that he was lying on his face in the soft groundcover. Not bad, his father said, reaching down a hand to help him up, but you must practice more. Oh father, I tried so hard. Then it seemed to Farley that he was walking carefree through the gods' green park, but the white walls were behind him, not in front, and he was going home.

Thomas, when he had made sure that the last loser of the Tournament was quite dead, bent over to once more wipe his spear. He cleaned it on Farley's costly cloak; the cloth had been ruined anyhow, by the days and nights in the open, and the many battles.

When the weapon was as clean as he could get it under the circumstances Thomas attached the carrying cord to the spear again and slung it over his shoulder. The same few faces were still watching him from the gate and the top of the wall. They showed mild approval, like idlers looking on at some casual brawl. None of them said anything.

"Well," Thomas announced, feeling somewhat irritated, "you have seen it. I am your man. Six duels against the very best in the world, and I have only one trifling scratch while they are all dead."

"Andreas will be displeased at missing the final duel," said one. Another called down to Thomas: "Be patient for a little while. The High Priest is coming soon, we expect. Come inside the gate if you wish."

Thomas decided to bring Farley into the city with him, as a trophy, a symbol of all his victories. He squatted and with a grunt picked up the warm, loose body at his feet. Farley was heavier than the appearance of his rangy frame suggested, and Thomas's steps toward the city gate were slow and weighty. The gate swung open for him after he had stood before it for a moment in fast-mounting impatience.

His first view of the city inside was a disappointment. The gate gave directly onto a small paved square, only about twenty meters on a side. The square was completely boxed in by buildings and walls that were but little lower than the outer city wall through which he had just passed. There were several gates in the inner walls, but all were closed, or showed nothing but more walls beyond, so there was not much of interest to be seen in any direction. A few more people, of high and low degree, were looking down at Thomas from walls and windows. Seeing no place in particular to go, Thomas bent and with some care set his slow-dripping burden down.

A small fountain gurgled nearby and he went to get a drink of water, seeing that no one was rushing to offer him fermented milk or wine. The people on the walls had ceased to stare at him now, and were gone about their business. Others appeared from time to time to glance and turn away. Here and there slaves went about their errands. A train of pack animals entered the city through the outer gate which had remained open, and came brushing past Thomas at close quarters.

The man on the wall who had invited him in had gone. Thomas looked about, but there was no one for him to berate for his shabby treatment. Was he expected to go prowling the city at random, grabbing strangers by the arm and asking directions? Where is Thorun's great hall? He is expecting me.

They had said the High Priest was coming. Seating himself on the edge of the fountain, Thomas retired into dignity, and remained there quietly as the shadows shifted across the square with the slow progress of the sun. Once there intruded upon his thoughts a soft snuffling, lapping sound. A small hungry domestic

animal had discovered Farley's otherwise forgotten corpse. Thomas moved fast, took two strides and launched the beast halfway across the square with a rib-cracking kick. Then he returned to the fountain and sat passively waiting.

When at last he heard someone approaching him and looked up ready to speak his anger, he found that it was only Leros, with whom he had no quarrel. Leros looked sick, or at least noticeably older than he had a few days ago.

Standing before him with hands outspread, Leros said: "I am sorry, Thomas, Lord Thomas. They say Andreas is coming now, but I do not know what welcome he plans to give you. If I were High Priest things would be different. Let me congratulate you on your victory."

Thomas got up to his full height. "Where is the High Priest Andreas?" he called out, looking around at the anonymous faces on walls and in windows. Suddenly their number was growing again, more people peering out into the square at every moment. Something impended. Spectators were gathering. "Where is he, I am growing impatient with this treatment."

"Speak more respectfully," a tall, regal-looking man admonished him sharply from his place of security on a high inner wall.

Thomas looked this one over and decided to continue to be bold; it was an attitude that usually got results, for him. "Respectfully? I am a god now, am I not? Or a demigod at least. And you do not look like anything more than a man."

"The point is well taken," said Leros sternly to the man on the wall. That one looked angry, but before he could say anything a murmur swept around the square and everyone's attention again shifted. The smallest and most intricately decorated of the inner gates that gave on the square was being opened from the far side by a young priest. Footsteps crunched on the neat gravel walk revealed beyond this gate, and there emerged from it a tall, skull-faced man dressed more in purple than in white. From the reactions of those around him, Thomas realized that this must be Andreas.

"You must be Thomas the Grabber," the High Priest said, nodding to him affably, speaking in the confident voice of one who is habitually in charge of things. "I see you have finished the Tournament somewhat ahead of schedule. I am sorry to have missed it all—the final round especially. But no matter, Thorun is pleased." Andreas nodded, smiling his smile. "So pleased is he that he has decided to grant you special honor, even beyond that promised you below."

This was more like it. Thomas made a little bow toward the High Priest, then stood taller than before.

The smile was a baring of teeth in the skull mouth. "You are to fight the fight that all true warriors must dream about. I hope that you are ready. But of course, as a true warrior, you must be."

"I am ready," Thomas growled, meanwhile cursing himself mentally for being fooled by the first soft words. "But I am done with fighting, as far as Thorun's Tournament is concerned. I am the winner." All around him he heard a catching of breaths. Evidently one did not talk like that to the master of the world, the High Priest of Thorun. But Thomas would not simply bow his head and be only another man, not now. He must take and hold the place that he rightfully earned.

Andreas, glaring at him, put steel into his voice. "You are to fight against Thorun himself. Do you mean that you would prefer to enter his hall with your blood still safe inside your veins, with all your joints still hung together? I cannot believe it."

The murmuring voices rose up wildly now, in rumor and speculation. What did the High Priest mean? Could Thorun actually be coming, to duel against a mortal man?

It made no sense to Thomas, and he did not like it in the least. Still, looking at the clever and experienced Andreas, very much in control, he decided that boldness had its limits. He bowed once more to the High Priest, and said: "Sir, a word with you alone, if I may."

"No more words, for you or from you," said Andreas softly. He turned his head slightly in a listening gesture, and smiled again.

Beyond the gateway through which Andreas had come the gravel crunched again, in the rhythm of a single long-striding pair of feet. Incredibly heavy the tread must be, to make the gravel sound like that. Above the low wall in that direction the top of a head came into view, a mat of wild dark hair, while the feet must be moving at ground level three meters lower. No man was that tall. With an unfamiliar weakness in his knees Thomas believed for a moment that his own cynicism had undone him after all. The naive pious ones had been right all along. The dead of the Tournament, dismembered and buried and burnt along the way, would shortly walk before him, laughing as they followed—

The figure now appearing in the gateway before Thomas, bending to pass through.

Thorun.

XIII

His head of wild dark hair was bound up by a golden band. His fur cloak, vast as it was, barely covered his mountainous shoulders. His marvelous sword, nearly as long as Thomas's spear, was girdled to his waist. All as the legends had it. His face, though . . .

Thorun did not seem to be looking at anything. He stared over Andreas's head, and over Thomas's, and through the still-open outer gate (where the limping maul-slave stood and gaped as if he thought those eyes were fixed on him) and brooded with his terrible unblinking eyes upon the world outside. Once he had come to a halt Thorun did not move, did not shift his position or stir a finger, any more than would a statue.

Andreas said nothing more, or, if he did so, Thomas did not hear. Rather the High Priest bowed himself out of the way, silently and obsequiously, though with some amusement still visible, out of the way of the mighty figure of the god.

The eyes had moved now, though the head had not, and Thorun was looking at Thomas. The eyes had literally some kind of glow inside them, like those of an animal seen at nighttime by reflected light. This glow was red and orange. Glancing quickly around, Thomas saw that the eyes were on him alone, for no one any longer stood near him. Against one wall of the square he saw Leros prostrate in deep reverence, as were a number of others on walls and ground.

Scores of men were watching now, men in white robes and gray rags. Those who had been in the middle of the square were scrambling away, reaching for high perches, getting out of the way. Awe was in every face. Almost. Only Farley would not interrupt his contemplation of the sky.

Thorun now came stepping forward. Though his movements were limber and seemed natural enough, even graceful, for some reason the impression of watching a statue persisted. Perhaps it was the face, which was utterly inhuman, though the form of each individual feature was correct. Neither was the face godlike—unless gods were less than men, unless they were not, in fact, alive.

But Thorun's strides were very long and purposeful. Thomas, seeing the long sword coming endlessly out of its scabbard as the god approached, got himself into motion just in time. The man launched himself backward out of the arc of the sword, and it made a soft and mournful sighing as it passed in a stroke that would have cut a man in half as readily as a weed. The war god's bearded lips opened at last and bellowed forth a deafening battle-cry. It was a strange and terrible sound, as inhuman as the glowing, unblinking eyes and the dead face.

Getting his spear unlimbered just in time, Thomas mechanically held it out to parry Thorun's next stroke. When the god's sword struck he felt a numbing jolt up both his arms, and his armored spear was nearly torn out of his grasp. It was like some nightmare of being a child again, and facing a grown warrior in combat. The watchers cheered. Whoever or whatever Thorun was, his strength was well beyond that of any man.

Thorun advanced methodically, unhurriedly. Backing and circling, Thomas knew that he must now plan and fight the finest battle of his life.

* * *

Thomas began to fight his finest battle but before long was forced to realize that it was hopeless. His own most violent attacks were knocked aside with effortless ease, while Thorun's sword strokes came with such murderous power and precision that he knew he could not parry or avoid them for long. Already the battering of sword on spear had made his arms grow numb and weary. He was gripping his spear in both hands like a quarterstaff and retreating steadily, meanwhile trying to discover some workable strategy, to spy out some weakness in the defense of his monstrous opponent. Whether that opponent was god or man or something else entirely was a question that did not bother Thomas in the least just now.

At last, with a good deceptive move followed by a superb thrust, Thomas got his spear-point home into Thorun's tunic of heavy fur, only to feel it rebound from some hard layer of armor underneath. A moment of sudden hope burned out as quickly as it had come. Around him the watchers gasped in astonishment at his seeming success, then relaxed with a collective sigh as the world, that had tilted for a moment, settled back. Thorun was unconquerable.

Thomas, however, retained a spark of hope. If he could hit home once with the spear, then he might be able to hit home again. If the fur-clad chest and belly were invulnerable, where should he try to strike?

How about the face? No. He could stand a little farther off—and it would be less nearly suicidal—if he tried instead for the legs. Thomas observed that the joints of Thorun's exposed and seemingly unarmored knees were not covered with unbroken skin like that on human legs, but instead showed fine and smoothly shifting cracks, as if they were the legs of a well-made puppet. The opening in the knee-joint presented a very small and moving target, but no more difficult a one than the insects on the wing Thomas had sometimes hit in practice.

No better plan having suggested itself, Thomas feinted high, low, high again, and then put all his power and skill into a low thrust. His eyes and arms did not fail him. The sharp point of the spear found the small opening just as it was narrowing slightly with the straightening of Thorun's leg.

There came a grinding vibration down the spear's shaft, and an audible snap of metal. Thorun lurched but did not fall. With the slamming of a door, a silence fell over the arena. The tip of Thomas's spearhead came away bright, where its point had been broken off.

The silence that had fallen when Thorun nearly lost his footing still held; Thorun's knee was now frozen in a half-bent position. The ruler of the world was wounded, and nothing could be heard but the scraping dragging of his crippled foot as he continued to advance. He advanced more slowly than before but as implacably as ever. Thomas, in retreat again, glimpsed Andreas standing atop a wall. The High Priest's face was dark as a thundercloud, and one of his hands was half extended like a claw, as if he wanted to interfere now but did not dare.

The limping god came in range again of his human opponent. Once more Thorun's great sword became a gleaming blur of speed, hammering on with untiring violence, driving Thomas back and back, around and around the little space. Thomas, meaning to strike again at the wounded knee, fainted high and low and high again, and then was nearly killed, was knocked off his feet, by the impact of the sword against his spear. Thorun was not to be fooled twice by the same tactic.

Thomas rolled over desperately. Thorun, lurching with grotesque speed, was almost upon him. Thomas got his feet under him and got away barely in time. Leap in and grab, Thomas? Never, against this foe. As well leap in and wrestle an ice-born glacier-beast—or one of the glaciers themselves.

Somehow Thomas had managed to retain his spear, and he was still blocking the sword with its steel-armored shaft, but he could no longer gather energy to launch a thrust. Still the sword drove him back and back, and around and around. Now the watching white-robos had once more found their voices.

The end could not be held off any longer, Thomas thought. Weary and off balance, he raised his arms in desperation to catch yet another sword sweep against his indestructible spear. Again the impact knocked him from his feet. The world seemed to turn slowly, slowly around him as he spun in the air and fell, giving him time to wonder whether there was a real Thorun to be confronted after he had been slain by this limping imposter.

Thomas came down hard and for a moment could not move. He had lost his grip on his spear at last. The weapon lay only a handsbreadth from his fingers in the dust of the square, but grasping it again was one of the hardest greatest achievements of Thomas's life.

* * *

The killing machine paused in its limping progress, as if uncertain whether the fight was already won. Then with its crablike motion it came forward once again. Thomas got himself up on one knee, his spear leveled. Another sudden cessation of noise made him aware of how the watchers had been yelling for his death. Thorun's glowing but lifeless eyes were judging him. What was the wargod waiting for? Thomas struggled back to his feet, knowing that the next swordstroke, or the one after that, would surely be the last. Then with the edge of his vision he saw a gray-clad figure approaching him from one side. It moved with a limp, as if in sacrilegious mockery of wounded Thorun's gait. The slave's leaden maul was lifting casually to dash out Thomas's brains.

Thomas had been ready to meet death, but by all the gods, this was too much! He was not yet down and helpless! He turned, meaning to spear the slave through, while Thorun, lackwit, continued to hesitate.

Muscles ready for a killing lunge, Thomas for the first time looked closely into the slave's face, and was momentarily paralyzed by what he saw. And gray-clad Giles the Treacherous stepped sideways with smooth unlimping speed, and with all his warrior's strength let fly with the massive maul against Thorun's already damaged knee.

Metal cracked. The bright arc of Thorun's next swordstroke, already under way, went tilting awkwardly and curved well wide of Giles and Thomas both. Metallic snapping sounds prolonged themselves. Slowly, but without dignity, the monster sat down, its left knee bent at a wrong angle. It came to rest in a sitting position with its torso bolt upright, staring at its enemies with a face that had not changed, but had suddenly become absurd.

"Thomas!" cried Giles. He leaped back just in time from the next stroke that Thorun, still sitting, aimed at him. "Get him between us, Thomas. Finish him!"

For the first time uttering a war-cry of his own, a hoarse and wordless yell, Thomas moved quickly to accomplish the encirclement. His peripheral vision told him that no one in the watching throng was moving to interfere. They were in pandemonium, their white robes swirling with disordered motion and their voices straining in excited noise. There was Leros, standing with arms folded in apparent calm, barely out of the way of the fight and watching it in utter concentration. Thomas glimpsed Andreas standing on a wall. The High Priest was waving his arms and seemed to be shouting orders, but the insane excitement was now such that no man's voice could be heard.

Even crippled as he was Thorun came near to being a match for his opposition. Neither spear nor maul could beat down the huge sword in his untiring arm, and he turned his seated body with marvelous speed to face first one foeman and then the other.

Catching the eye of Giles, Thomas roared: "Together! Now!" and they rushed at Thorun from opposite sides simultaneously. The sword came at Thomas, and he managed to parry it yet again only because Thorun, in his sitting position, could not get his whole body behind a swing. Even so Thomas thought for a moment that his own forearm had been broken in the clash. But meanwhile Giles had got in close, swinging like a piledriver, and landed his maul full force on the back of Thorun's neck.

The blow would have exploded the head of any mortal man. Thorun's wild hair flew, his great head jerked, his torso swayed a little, his swordarm hesitated. Now Thomas's blunted spearpoint smashed into his right eye, which went out like a candle, with a tiny crunch that came through the spear like breaking glass. Now the maul came down again, this time on the swordhand. Thorun did not drop his sword, but now it stood out at a different angle from his fist.

The giant died slowly, piecemeal, indifferent rather than brave, emitting neither cries nor blood. There was only a step-by-step loss of function under the terrible punishment of spear and hammer, a progressive revelation of Thorun's vincibility, a bit-by-bit reduction of his body to little more than shattered metal and glass and fur.

Even when the huge body was hopelessly beaten, when the god's battered face had been humiliatingly pounded down into the earth beside the fountain, the sword arm was still trying to fight, lashing out with murderous, random blows. A spear thrust loosened its fingers and the giant sword fell from the hand with a dull little sound. The arm, its broken digits clutching spasmodically on emptiness, was still waving when Thomas and Giles looked at each other, rested their weapons, and then turned together to salute the watchers who ringed them in.

The noise of the crowd died away into an exhausted silence, a silence that seemed to Thomas to go on

for a very long time. Andreas was no longer to be seen, he noted, and a few others had also vanished. Most were still watching, as if hypnotized, the helpless, stubborn movements of Thorun's arm. Thomas went to kick the huge sword out of its reach.

Eyes began now to turn toward Leros, who was the senior priest still in attendance. Obviously in the grip of powerful emotions, he took two steps forward and stretched forth an arm toward the fallen giant; but Leros was still too overcome to speak, and the fist of his outstretched arm clenched tightly, his arm dropped back to his side.

* * *

It was left to Giles to break the silence at last. Gesturing at the wrecked giant, he shouted out: "This creature is not your beloved Thorun. It cannot be! Andreas and his Inner Circle have deceived you all!"

The roar that went up from the crowd in response had much of agreement in it. But one voice cried out to Giles: "Who are you, that have interfered and done this? Agent of the Brotherhood! Spy!"

Giles raised a hand and got silence in which to make his answer. "Very well, say I am a spy, an agent, anything you like. But what I have shown you here is nothing but the truth. Call me what you will. But will you call me a god, to defeat another god in combat? And what god could I be, to conquer Thorun?" He raised his face to the bright sky, and made a holy sign. "Great Thorun, avenge yourself upon the blasphemers who have put forth this deception!" And he gestured again to where ruined Thorun still moved one arm in a parody of battle.

Several men with their daggers drawn—there were no larger weapons in evidence among the crowd—came to surround Giles. They took away his maul and stood guard over him, but at a word from Leros did no more. Giles made no protest or resistance, but stood proudly with his arms folded. Leros, after gazing a little while longer in continued shock at what remained of Thorun, summoned two or three other leaders who were present to withdraw with him to a corner of the square. There they at once plunged into earnest talk. Most of the other spectators, marveling and arguing, began to crowd around the fallen figure that had been their god.

Giles the Treacherous, looking at Thomas, suddenly flashed him a smile of surprising brightness for a man in his doubtful situation. "Lord Thomas," Giles hailed him, "it seems that you are now the champion of gods as well as men."

"Well. You don't claim a share of the prize, whatever it may prove to be?" Thomas moved closer to Giles, with whom he felt a kinship.

"I? Never. You have won the championship fairly and I have no claim to make."

Thomas nodded, satisfied on this point. But he had other worries. Standing next to Giles, he looked around him restlessly. He had the feeling that as champion of the Tournament, and acknowledged victor over the imitation Thorun, he should be doing something, asserting authority somehow. Probably he should go to join the talk around Leros and make the priests listen to him. But what would he tell them? He realized now that he had not the faintest idea of what was really going on. He was more likely to find out, he thought, if he stayed with Giles, who might well need some help in return soon and be willing to bargain. Anyway, Thomas felt much more at home talking with another fighting man than he did with the priests.

"Why are you here, and how?" he asked the shorter man. "It is in my memory that I saw you die."

Giles's smile had faded to a mere twist of the lip. "You saw Jud thrust at me, and me go plunging down a hillside."

"You were not even wounded?"

"I was not. You see, I had persuaded Jud that all I wanted was a chance to get out of the Tournament and away. He was something of a cynic, and so believed me. Also he was glad of the chance to take an uncontested victory, and went along with the plan I had hatched. He had only to hold back his thrusts a little, as I did.

"His sword only took a few threads from my jacket before I went over the edge. I had marked beforehand that the slave carrying the maul was of my size and coloring, which suggested the whole plan to me. When the slave came down to make sure I was dead I was waiting in the bushes and did the office for him instead. I took his rags and his rope belt and his maul, and put them on together with his limp, before dragging him uphill to be buried in my good clothes. The rest of you had started on ahead by then, as I had expected.

"I was seldom in your camp after that. My companion slave was dumb, and so lackwit he did not notice the transformation—or perhaps he was shrewd enough to ignore intrigue when he became aware of it. None of the rest of you ever looked at me with open eyes, once I had put on gray rags—not until you looked at me just now, when you thought I was coming for you with the maul."

Thomas shook his head in wonderment. "A fearful risk you took."

"Not so great a risk as having to face you, or Kelsumba perhaps, or Farley, in open combat. I had made up my mind that that risk was too high."

"But still, a strange game," Thomas commented. "Why did you play it? Why—?" He gestured toward the wreckage that had been Thorun.

"I wanted to expose that thing for what it was. Rather, for what it is, since we have so far destroyed only a small part of it." Giles looked around him. His audience, that had been only Thomas and a couple of dagger-guards when he started speaking, was now far larger. He raised his voice and went on: "We all know now that this thing was never Thorun. It was only a creation of something else. Something else whose harboring on Hunters' planet would bring scorn and derision from the whole outworld if it were known to them."

"What is this shameful thing you speak of?" The question came from Leros, who had ended his conference with the other ranking priests and had now been listening to Giles for some little time.

"I am speaking of one of our ancestors' ancient enemies, a berserker," said Giles, and briefly outlined his conversation with Suomi in the woods. "If Andreas has not yet silenced the outworlders he is holding in the Temple, they will be able to confirm that he has stolen their ship from them. Perhaps they will be able to tell us why."

"Why should we believe the outworlders over the High Priest?" someone called, challenging.

Giles raised his voice again. "The outworlders did not bring this imitation Thorun with them. Andreas and his Inner Circle priests have used it for years, to dupe Thorun's faithful followers. No artisan on Hunters' could have made it alone, any more than he could build a spaceship. Nor can it be the true persona of a

god, or not even Thomas the Grabber could have knocked it down. What else can it be then, but a berserker, or part of one? If it is not a berserker, perhaps the High Priest and his Inner Circle can explain just what it is. I would ask them now if they were here. But they fled when they saw that their fancy machine was doomed."

Leros nodded grimly. "It is time, and past time, for us to ask Andreas some hard questions." The roar of agreement that went up was short, for men wanted to hear what Leros was going to say next. He went on: "I think, though, that it is not for you to tell us what to ask. Whose agent are you, treacherous one?"

* * *

Giles shrugged, and admitted readily: "I was sent here by what you call the Brotherhood. But what of that, honest Leros? Today I have told you and shown you nothing but demonstrable truth. I see now that we of the Brotherhood really have no quarrel with the people of Godsmountain, but only with the Inner Circle and its head."

Leros grunted, perhaps a bit bewildered by the ready flow of words, half convinced by them and half put off by their smoothness. Before he had to reply, however, he was distracted by the return of a man who had evidently been dispatched to see what was going on at the Temple. This messenger brought back word that the doors and gates leading to the Temple complex had been locked and barred from within, and the palace guard of soldiers directly under the command of the High Priest were occupying the place. Andreas would not appear, but only sent out word that all spies, traitors, and their dupes would soon tremble before his wrath.

"He will not answer reasonable questions?" Leros demanded. "He will not explain why he dared to foist this . . . thisthing . . . upon us as a god?"

"No, Lord Leros, he will not."

"Then it is certain," Leros shouted, "Andreas no longer speaks in Thorun's name! Great Thorun, stand with us now! Stand with us as we prepare to prove in combat who can serve you best!"

There was a new outbreak of shouts and prayers, a general uproar of activity as men rushed to arm themselves, debated hasty plans of organization, and argued over whether any of the military commanders known to be nearby in the field should be summoned with their troops and asked or ordered to drive Andreas from the Temple. Their last suggestion was shouted down. Thomas gathered that the soldiers now in the Temple were too small a force to hold it for long against the aroused citizenry. Well, let the strategists debate; he would know what to do when it came to fighting.

Finding himself for the moment more or less alone again with Giles, Thomas said to him: "I thank you for stepping in against the monster; I will not forget it." Thomas was beginning to appreciate how shrewd Giles was, and to understand that he himself was going to need shrewd advice to secure a position of power among these people.

"You are welcome, Lord Thomas, for whatever my help was worth."

"Why did the Brotherhood send you here?"

Giles made a little self-deprecating motion with his head. "I was the best fighter they could find. I was sent to the Tournament from a district largely under their control. They hoped of course that I could win the Tournament, and then function against Godsmountain from some place of authority inside it. But long

before the Tournament was over I realized that I was not going to win. You and some of the other fighters were obviously better than I. So I hatched the scheme using Jud Isaksson . . . but tell me, Lord Thomas, why are you here?"

"I?" Thomas was surprised.

"Yes. I don't think you ever believed there was a real Thorun here, to reward you with immortality. I have told you my real reason for taking part in the Tournament; what was yours?"

"Huh. Well, fighting is my business. It was dangerous, yes, as any real fighting is, but I expected to win. I have never met the man who could stand against me in single combat."

Giles was quietly fascinated. "Did you never stop to think that each of us could truthfully have made that identical claim? Each of the original sixty-four?"

Thomas blinked. "No," he said slowly. "No, I did not stop to think of that." Suddenly he remembered the utter astonishment on the beardless dying face of young Bram. Was that in the second round or the third? He could not remember, but it seemed very long ago.

He raised a hand over his shoulder to caress the heavy spear slung on his back. He would have to get a new one made. Not only was the point of this one broken but the shaft was dented and weakened, its steel reinforcing strips twisted and loosened by the battering of Thorun's sword. "I wanted a place of power, wanted to be one of the men who rule the world from this mountaintop,"

Giles prompted: "You thought they held the Tournament because they wanted the best fighter in the world up here, to be Godsmountain's champion. And as such you would have great power and wealth."

"Yes. That's about it."

"An intelligent guess, I would say. I, too, believed the Tournament had some such purpose, though there were some points I could not understand . . . anyway, it seems that we were wrong. Andreas and his Inner Circle deceived everyone in one way or another. The simple warriors with a simple story of gods, and us by letting us think that we were wise and understood the truth."

Thomas swore a great oath, throwing in all the gods he could remember on short notice. "Then why did they have the Tournament? Andreas and his gang did not watch us to applaud our skill or dwell upon our sufferings. Nobody was allowed to watch, except for a few priests and the outworlders. Why, why preach and urge us on to slaughter one another?"

"They wanted senseless slaughter," said Giles, "because they really do not worship Thorun, who has life and honor in him, and a purpose besides destruction. They could never get the mass of people to worship their true god, who is nothing but Death. Thorun enjoys women and wine, tall tales and food. Especially he honors the courage that makes all other virtues possible. But death is what they worship, and death is what berserkers represent, death without honor or purpose, death alone." Giles fell silent, squinting at the wreckage of Thorun on the ground where it lay face down in the mud near the fountain, not far from Farley's sky-gazing corpse. Then Giles added: "No, that is not good enough. You are right, why did Andreas and the others not watch the Tournament, enjoy the killing—or let others watch it. Only the outworlders were allowed to come . . . and while they watched, their ship was stolen. Is that it? The finest heroes of our planet fought and died only to lure them here."

A shout was being raised by many voices, not only in the square but all around the city. The outworlders'

ship was in the air.

XIV

The liftoff when it came was very smooth, and took Suomi completely by surprise; he had dozed off at his desk, his head resting on his arms, and on first waking had had the hideous feeling that the ship was already settling down, its flight completed, and that his only chance to act had come and gone.

Hastily he turned to look at the monitor screen on the bulkhead beside the stateroom's intercom control and saw with relief that the flight was certainly not over. Imaged in the screen now was Orion's control room. The high-ranking priest called Lachaise was seated in the central pilot's chair, bent forward over controls and instruments in an attitude of rigid concentration. Around Lachaise other priests and soldiers sat or stood in nervous postures, clinging to whatever solid supports they could get hold of. Looking past the far side of the control room, Suomi could see down the passageway to the entrance lock, at the far side of which the main exterior hatch was still standing open; moving the ship in such a configuration was perfectly feasible, provided of course that no high speed or high altitude was attained. Another soldier clung just inside the entrance lock, looking out and down through the open outer doors. Presumably he was posted there as insurance should the screens in the control room somehow fail, or (what was much more likely) should the novice pilot have trouble in interpreting their images.

The flight was evidently going to be a short one. The berserker must be somewhere nearby, and its loyal human servants were going to bring the captured starship to it. Then they would be able to get to work in earnest on the ship. Directing an operation on itself, the berserker could be wired into the onboard computers, assimilate them into its brain, and take over the ship's various systems as extensions of its own being. And then the drive . . . its conversion to a death machine could be performed at Godsmountain if convenient, or the berserker could fly itself and a loyal coterie to some safe spot in the uninhabited north and there prepare to kill the world.

Through his stateroom screen Suomi could monitor much of what was showing on the big screens in the control room. He had not dozed long, for it was still bright day outside. He watched, on the screens, the wooded slopes of Godsmountain falling away very gently, then tilting a bit. At the same time Suomi felt Orion tilt in the hands of her inexperienced pilot as he started her moving sideways toward the summit. They would not be bothering with the artificial gravity on this low, slow flight in atmosphere.

The voices of the people in the control room, and those who were communicating with them from outside the ship, were audible in Suomi's stateroom, coming in over intercom. "Schoenberg," Lachaise was saying tensely now, "I have a yellow light showing on the life-systems panel. Can you explain it?"

"Let me see," said Schoenberg's voice, wearily, speaking offstage from Suomi's viewpoint. After a little pause, presumably while a screen was switched to give him a better view, Schoenberg continued: "That's nothing to worry about. Just a reminder that the main hatch is open and the safety interlocks have been disconnected to let you fly her that way. It's just a reminder so you don't forget and go shooting up into space." Whatever pressure had been brought to bear, Schoenberg was evidently cooperating fairly thoroughly.

The ship was directly over the city now, drifting balloon-like on silent engines only a few meters above the tallest rooftops. "Go higher, Lachaise!" another man's voice barked, authoritatively, and Suomi saw the high-ranking priest in white and purple swivel nervously in the pilot's chair, his pale hands in jerky motion, over-correcting. The ship lurched upward while the men around Lachaise clung to their chairs

and stanchions and eyed him apprehensively. The upward acceleration ceased, the ship hung for a heart-stopping moment in free fall, and then with a few more up-and-down oscillations was brought back under more or less steady control.

"I should have been allowed more time to practice!" the pilot protested feverishly.

"There is no time," the authoritative voice snapped back. Suomi recognized it now as that of Andreas, speaking from outside the ship. "Thorun failed and Leros and some agent of the Brotherhood have inflamed the mob. We will load our dear lord and master onto the ship and take him to safety in the north with our prisoners. All will yet be well, Lachaise, if you can only maneuver carefully. Come over the Temple now."

Lachaise was now guiding himself by a screen that showed what was directly below the ship. Suomi, in effect looking over Lachaise's shoulder, saw a strange sight the significance of which he could not grasp at first. Near the largest building in the center of the city—this must be the Temple, for the ship was now hovering almost directly above it—another much lower structure was having its roof peeled back, dismantled, from inside. The workmen doing the job were partly visible, their hands and arms coming and going, removing pieces of roof from the edge of the rapidly enlarging opening. Inside there was the tracery of thin scaffolding on which the workmen evidently stood, and besides that nothing but darkness, unconquerable by the sun that everywhere else fell bright on street and wall. It took Suomi a few moments to realize that the building's interior looked dark because it was a single vast pit, dug far below the level of the city's streets.

"Tell them to hurry with the roof," Lachaise pleaded.

"Are you in position yet?" the voice of Andreas countered, the strain in it now quite audible. "I do not think you are quite in the proper position."

* * *

Suomi could see now that small but tumultuous groups of white-robed men were running about in the streets around the Temple complex, deploying as if to encircle it. Here and there a drawn sword waved. And uniformed soldiers moved about on the Temple's walls. Now Suomi saw the bright streak of an arrow flying from street to wall and two more darting in the opposite direction in reply. Perhaps the man in gray, with his grandiose scheme of entering the city disguised as a slave and touching off a rebellion, had been more successful than Suomi had thought possible.

As for Suomi himself, he had done all he could at the workbench and now it was time to prepare for combat. Feeling unreal, he picked up the small battery-powered unit he had assembled and went quickly across the small room and got into his bunk. Reaching up an arm, he turned his intercom to SPEAK. The voices of the others still came in; and, though they still could not see him, he could join in their conversation now. But he was not ready.

The bunk was capable of being converted into an acceleration couch, meant to be used in case of failure of artificial gravity somewhere in deep space. To fully convert the bunk now would not be feasible, but Suomi swung the center section of restraining pads over himself as he lay down, and locked it into place. He lay there holding his little recorder ready to play, the gain turned to maximum. He lay rigid with tension and fear, almost unable to breathe, not yet knowing for certain whether he would be brave enough to do what must be done. That it might kill him was not so bad. That it might accomplish nothing except to earn him a leisurely and hideous punishment from a victorious Andreas—that was very possible, and a chance just about too hideous to take.

Suomi, by turning his head, could still observe his stateroom screen. Lachaise was edging the ship over the great pit now, unmistakably meaning to lower it inside. The removal of the roof out to the eaves had been completed. The fragile scaffolding left inside would part like spiderweb beneath Orion's armored weight. It was all very well planned and organized. Andreas and the others must have been preparing for a long time to capture a starship. Who had told them how to plan their pit, how big it must be to hold the kind of ship men would be likely to use on a surreptitious hunting expedition? Of course, their lord and beloved master, Death . . . Death knew all the sizes and shapes of human starships, he had fought against them for a thousand years.

Lachaise in his pilot's chair was now carrying on a continuous exchange of tense comments with the men waiting and guiding him below, and with the lookout at the open hatch. The ship began to lower. Down, and down—but this proved to be a false start, and Lachaise had to straighten her out and bring her up again, dribbling a thin trail of white dust from where the hard hull had brushed delicately against a high Temple cornice and knocked down a barrowful or two of masonry.

Up they went, and sideways an almost imperceptible distance, and started down again. Lachaise was probably a natural technician and machine operator; at any rate he was learning very fast. This time the slow descent was true.

His finger on the switch that would turn on the recorder, Suomi balanced over infinite depths of personal change, chasms of sudden death or slow defeat and somewhere a small plateau of triumph. With a part of his mind he wondered if this was the sensation that Schoenberg and other hunters sought, and the men who faced one another in the Tournament, when a lifetime's awareness of being seemed to pulse through every second of experience.

He could accept all the possibilities. He could do what must be done. The ship was going down into the hole. Timing, now, tactics. At the bottom they might very well cut off the drive, so that would be too long to wait. Right now, just entering the top of the hole, they were still more outside than in, right now would be too soon.

He waited through an eternity; the ship must now be a quarter of the way down.

Halfway down. Eternity was passing.

Now. With a relief almost unbearable with surcease of mental strain, Suomi touched the switch on the small box he was holding.

* * *

The voice of Johann Karlsen, biting and unforgettable, heavily amplified, boomed out through Orion's intercom system, through the radio links from the control room to the outside, through the open main hatch, reverberating at a volume that must have carried into all the nearby city: "THIS IS THE HIGH COMMANDER SPEAKING. LANDING PARTIES READY. UNCOVER THE BERSERKER . . ."

There was more, but it was drowned out by another voice, a voice that could only be the berserker's own, booming and bellowing from some hidden place: "FULL DRIVE. ANDREAS, IN THE NAME OF GLORIOUS DEATH, FULL DRIVE AT ONCE. KILL JOHANN KARLSEN, HE IS PROBABLY ABOARD. I COMMAND YOU, LACHAISE, FULL DRIVE AT ONCE. KILL JOHANN KARLSEN, KIL—"

And then that voice too was buried, drowned out, obliterated by the explosive violence resulting from the full-power application of a starship's drive, not only deep within a planet's gravitational well but almost literally buried within Godsmountain's mass. Suomi, heavily protected by his padded bunk and bracing himself as well as he was able, was still shaken as if by the jaws of a glacier-beast, flattened against the bulkhead next to his bunk, then forced away from it again, only saved by his straps from being smeared against the stateroom's opposite bulkhead. The room's regular lights went out, and simultaneously an emergency light glared into life above the door.

There followed a sudden cessation of acceleration, a silence and a falling that went on and on. Then the fall ended with another bone-jarring crash, loud and violent but still far closer to the humanly endurable on the scale of physical events than was that first detonation drive.

The ship seemed to bounce, crashed again, teetered and rocked, and came at last to a shuddering rest, her decks tilted at somewhere near forty degrees from the horizontal. Now all was quiet. The screen in Suomi's stateroom was effectively dead, its surface only flickering here and there with electronic noise.

Suomi unstrapped himself from his bunk and climbed the crazy slope of the deck to reach the door. He had failed to pick up loose objects before entering combat and breakage in the stateroom had been heavy, though there were no indications of basic structural damage. The strength of the hull had probably saved the ship from that.

The stateroom door opened forcefully when he unlatched it, and the dead or unconscious body of a soldier slid in, trailing broken-looking legs. Suomi stuck his head out into the passage and looked and listened. All was quiet and nothing moved in the glare of the emergency lights. Here too deck and bulkheads and overhead were still in place.

He turned back to the fallen sentry and decided that the man was probably dead. Guilt or triumph might come later, he supposed. Right now Suomi only considered whether to arm himself with the man's sword, which was still resting peacefully in its scabbard. In the end Suomi left it there. A sword in his hand was not going to do any good for anybody, least of all himself.

He thumped on the door of Barbara Hurtado's stateroom and when a weak voice answered he opened the door and climbed in. Amid a kaleidoscopic jumble of multicolored clothes from a spilled closet she sat in a heap on the floor, wearing an incongruous fluffy robe, her brown hair in wild disarray, leaning against a chair that must be fastened to the deck.

"I think my collarbone is broken," she said faintly. "Maybe it isn't, though. I can move my arm."

"I'm the one who did it," he said, "Sorry. There was no way I could give you any warning."

"You?" She raised her eyebrows. "All right. Did you do as much damage to those sons of beasts out there?"

"More, I hope. That was the idea. Shall we go out and see? Can you walk?"

"Love to go and see their broken bodies, but I don't think I can. They've got me chained to my bunk, which I guess is why I wasn't killed. The things they were making me do. Always wondered what soldiers were like and I finally found out."

"I'm going out to look around."

"Don't leave me, Carlos."

Things in the control room were very bad, or very good, depending on your point of view. It was closer to the drive than the staterooms were, Suomi supposed. Lachaise, strapped into the central, padded chair, was leaning back with eyes open and arms outflung, showing no wounds but very plainly dead all the same. Intense localized neutron flux at the moment when the drive's fields collapsed was one possibility in such disasters, Suomi remembered reading somewhere. Lachaise had perished happily, no doubt, in blind obedience to his god, perhaps believing or hoping that he really was killing Johann Karlsen. In the name of glorious death . . . yes.

Around Lachaise, the priests and soldiers who had been helping and watching him had not been strapped into padded chairs. Neutrons or not, they now looked like so many bad losers in the Tournament. This many lives at least had the berserker harvested today. Some of them still breathed, but none were at all dangerous any more.

The main hatch was still open, Suomi discovered, looking down at it from the control room, but it was completely choked with broken white masonry and massive splintered timbers; part of the Temple or of somebody's house perhaps. The ship had come to rest within the city, then. Probably a number of people had been killed outside the ship as well as in it, but Godsmountain had not been leveled, a lot of its people were doubtless still alive, and whoever was left in charge should come digging his way into the ship eventually, probably wanting to take vengeance for the destruction.

With some difficulty Suomi made his way back to Barbara's stateroom and managed to lodge himself in a sitting position by her side. "Exit's blocked. Looks like we wait together." He described the carnage briefly.

"Be a good boy, Carlos, get me a pain pill from my medicine chest, and a drink."

He jumped up. "Of course. I didn't think—sorry. Water?"

"First. Then one of the other kind, if everything in my bar isn't smashed."

* * *

They were still sitting there together, about half a standard hour later, when after much noise of digging and scraping from the direction of the entrance hatch, Leros and a troop of armed men, swords in hand and in full battle gear, appeared in the stateroom's open door. Suomi, who had been listening fatalistically to their approach, looked up at Leros and then closed his eyes, unable to watch the sword's descent.

Nothing descended on him. He heard nothing but a faint multiple clinking and jangling, and opened his eyes to see Leros and his followers facing him on their knees, genuflecting awkwardly on the tilted deck. Among them, looking scarcely less awed than the rest, was the man in gray, armed now with sword instead of hammer.

"Oh Lord Demigod Johann Karlsen," said Leros with deep reverence, "you who are no robot, but a living man, and more, forgive us for not recognizing you when you walked among us! And accept our eternal gratitude for again confounding our ancient enemies. You have smashed the death-machine within its secret lair, and most of those who served it also. Be pleased to know that I myself have cut out the heart of the arch-traitor Andreas."

It was Barbara who—perhaps—saved him then. "The Lord Karlsen has been injured, stunned," she

said. "Help us."

* * *

Five days later, the demigod Johann Karlsen, he who had been Carlos Suomi, and Athena Poulson, both of them in fine health, sat at a small table in a corner of what had been the Temple courtyard. Shaded from the midday Hunterian sun by the angle of a ruined wall, they were watching the slave-powered rubble clearing operations making steady progress in the middle distance. There the ship still lay, fifty or sixty meters from the Temple complex, surrounded by a jumble of smashed buildings, where it had come to rest after the drive destroyed itself.

Besides the cultists killed inside the ship or executed by Leros later, at least a score of people, most of them people who had never even known of the berserker's existence, had died in the cataclysm. But still Suomi slept well, for millions of innocent folk across the planet lived and breathed.

"So, Oscar has explained it all to me, finally," Athena announced. "They promised him a chance, a fighting chance, to get at the berserker and destroy it if he cooperated."

"He believed that?"

"He says he knows it was a terribly small chance, but there wasn't any better one. They wouldn't let him get on the ship at all. He just had to sit in a cell and answer questions for Andreas and Lachaise. And the berserker too, it talked to him directly somehow."

"I see." Suomi sipped at his golden goblet of fermented milk. Maybe the stuff made Schoenberg sick, but he had found that his stomach could handle it without difficulty, and he had grown to like the taste.

Athena was looking at him almost dreamily across the little table. "I haven't really had a chance to tell you what I think, Carlos," she said now in a soft, low voice. "It was such a simple idea. Oh, of course I mean simple in the sense of something classical, elegant. And brilliant."

"Hm?"

"The way you used your recordings of Karlsen's voice, and won the battle."

"Oh, well. That was simple, to splice together recorded words to make some phrases that a berserker ought to find appropriately threatening. The main thing was that the berserker should identify his voice and so take the strongest, most violent action it could to kill him, forgetting everything else, be perfectly willing to destroy itself in the process."

"But to conceive of it was brilliant, and to do it required courage."

"Well. When I heard that its servants were asking about Karlsen, for no apparent reason, the idea struck me that we might be dealing with one of those assassin machines, a berserker that had been programmed specifically to go after Karlsen. Even if it was only an ordinary berserker—ha, what am I SAYING?—Karlsen's destruction would rate as a very high priority in its programming, probably higher than depopulating a minor world. I gambled that it would just forget its other plans and wreck the ship, that it would just take it as probable that Karlsen was somehow hiding on Orion with a secret landing party."

"That sounds insane." Then, flustered, Athena tried to modify the implied criticism. "I mean—"

"It does sound insane. But, as I understand it, predicting human behavior has never been the berserkers' strong point. Maybe it thought Andreas had betrayed it after all."

* * *

The god Thorun incarnate, who had been Thomas the Grabber, strolled majestically into the courtyard at its other end, trailed by priests and a sculptor who was making sketches for a new spear-carrying statue. Suomi rose slightly from his chair and made a little bow in Thorun's direction. Thorun answered with a smile and a courteous nod.

Carlos and Thomas understood each other surprisingly well. The people had to be reassured, society supported, through a time of crisis. Did Leros and the other devout leaders really believe that a god and a demigod now walked among them? Apparently they did, at least in one compartment of their minds, and at least as long as such belief suited their needs. And perhaps in one sense it was the truth that Karlsen still walked here.

Perhaps, also, the sandy-haired man now known as Giles the Chancellor, who was Thorun's constant companion and adviser, was to a great degree responsible for the relative smoothness with which the society of Godsmountain had weathered the upheavals of the past few days. Alas for the Brotherhood. Well, thought Suomi, likely a world with the Brotherhood victorious would have been no better than Godsmountain's world was going to be without its secret demon.

There was Schoenberg now, walking near his wrecked ship. Barbara Hurtado was at his side listening to him as he pointed out features of the rubble-clearing system the slaves were following. It was a result of his expert analysis of the problem. He had been talking about it yesterday with Suomi. There, where Schoenberg was now pointing, was the place where the mathematically proven plan of greatest efficiency called for all the debris to be piled. Schoenberg had come near being killed as a collaborator by Leros and the winning faction, but intervention by the demigod Karlsen had saved his life and restored his freedom.

After what had happened to Celeste Servetus and Gus De La Torre—their mutilated bodies had been found atop a small mountain of human and animal bones in a secret charnel-pit far beneath the Temple—Suomi could not blame Schoenberg or anyone else for collaboration. Schoenberg had told him of the tale of ruthless Earthmen who were going to come looking to avenge him, a tale that, alas, had been nothing but pure bluff. Suomi, though, still had the feeling that Schoenberg was leaving something out, that more had passed between him and Andreas than he was willing to recount.

Let it lie. The ship had been irreparably damaged, and the surviving members of the hunting expedition were going to have to coexist on this planet, in all likelihood, for an indeterminate number of standard years, until some other ship just happened by.

Athena took a sip of cool water from her fine goblet, and Suomi drank some more fermented milk from his. She had spent the period of crisis locked in her private room and unmolested—maybe she would have been the next day's sacrifice—until the ship crashed and the Temple was knocked down about her ears. Even then she was only shaken up. She, the independent, self-sufficient woman, and by chance she had been forced to sit by passively like some ancient heroine while men fought all around her.

"What are your plans, Carl?"

"I suspect the citizens here will sooner or later get tired of having the demigod Karlsen around, and I just

hope it doesn't happen before a ship shows up. I think he'll maintain a low profile, as they say, until then."

"No, I mean Carl Suomi's plans."

"Well." Suddenly he wondered if any of the Hunterians, before the crisis, had heard her call him Carl, as she frequently did. He wondered if that might have contributed to his being so fortunately misidentified. Never mind.

Well. Only a few days ago Carlos Suomi's plans for his future would definitely have included Athena. But that was before he had seen her so avidly viewing men killing each other.

No. Sorry. Of course he himself had now killed more people than she had even seen die—yet in a real sense he was still a pacifist, more so than ever in fact, and she was not. That was how he saw the matter, anyway.

Barbara, now. She was still standing beside Schoenberg as he lectured her, but she looked over from time to time toward the place where Suomi sat. Suomi wanted nice things to happen to Barbara. Last night she had shared his bed. The two of them had laughed about their minor injuries, comparing bruises. But . . . a playgirl. No. His life would go on just about the same if he never saw Barbara again.

What, then, were his plans, as Athena put it? Well, there were plenty of other fish splashing in the seas of Earth, or even, if he could be allowed a mangled metaphor, living demure and veiled behind their white walls here on Godsmountain. He still wanted a woman, and in more ways than one.

Schoenberg was now pointing up into the sky. Would his rubble pile grow that tall? Then Barbara leaped with excitement, and Suomi looked up and saw the ship.

Next thing they were all running, shouting, looking for the emergency radios that Schoenberg had insisted on getting from the Orion and keeping handy. Some trying-to-be-helpful Hunterian had misplaced the radios. Never mind. The ship lowered rapidly, drawn by the beacon-like appearance of the city atop the mountain, and Orion already sitting there. A silvery sphere, similar in every way to Schoenberg's craft. With wild waves Earthmen and Hunterians beckoned it to land on a cleared spot amid the rubble.

Landing struts out and down, drive off, hatch open, landing ramp extruded. A tall man emerging, with the pallor of one probably raised under a dome on Venus, his long mustache waxed and shaped in the form the Earth-descended Venerians frequently affected. Reassured by numerous signs of friendly welcome, he strode halfway down the ramp, putting on sunglasses against the Hunterian noon. "How do, folks, Steve Kemalchek, Venus. Say, what happened here, an earthquake?"

Thorun and the High Priest Leros were still deciding which of them should make the official welcoming speech. Suomi moved a little closer to the ramp and said informally: "Something like that. But things are under control now."

The man looked relieved on hearing the familiar accents of an Earthman's speech. "You're from Earth, right? That's your ship. Get any hunting in yet? I've just been up north, got a stack of trophy 'grams in there . . . show you later." He lowered his voice to a more confidential tone. "And, say, is that Tournament everything I've heard it is? Going on right now, ain't it? Isn't this the place?"

Berserker Man

PROLOGUE

Well, Elly Temesvar thought grayly, we've given it a good fight, done better than anyone might have expected, considering how little ship we have to fight it with.

Out perpendicularly from the surface of a peculiar star there jutted what looked like a transfixing spear of plasma, bright as the star itself, as thick as a major planet, and so long that it looked needle-thin. On the jet's brilliant, almost insubstantial surface the little duoship that Elly and her partner rode in clung like a microbe on a glowing tree-trunk, in an effort to find concealment where there was really none. And somewhere on the other side of the shining plasma fountain, a hundred thousand kilometers or more away, the mad berserker stalked them. Berserkers were pure machine, of course, but still in Elly's most heart-sure mental images of them they were all mad—she smelled on them the suicidal madness of their ancient and unknown builders.

The odd star that drained itself into the plasma jet was close enough to have been blinding were not the ports all sealed opaque for combat. And despite the nearness of the Galactic Core, few other stars were visible. Bright nebular material filled cubic parsec after cubic parsec in this region, hiding everything else and evoking old legends of lightspace in which the stars were only points of darkness.

"Pull in the scanning nodes just a touch on your side, Elly." Frank's voice, as usual sounding almost imperturbable, came into her earphones. He was on the other side of the thick steel bulkhead that completely bisected crew quarters when its hatches were closed for combat. In theory one compartment might be breached, while the human in the other one survived to fight on. In practice, this time, the whole craft was just about to be crunched like a pretzel, and Elly in moments of free mental time wished that she might have, at the end, at least as much human contact as open connecting hatches could provide.

She did not voice her wish. "Nodes in," she acknowledged instead, in trained reaction that seemed to function independent of her will. Her fingers had meanwhile remained poised but motionless upon the ten keys of her auxiliary controls. Through her helmet the electrical waves of her brain directly drove the equipment for which she was responsible, in a control system that worked a large fraction of a second faster than any dependent upon arm-length nerves.

"It's going to come again—" The rest of Frank's warning was lost, even with earphones, as the berserker came, wolf springing from behind a plasma tree. Basic control of the ship depended upon the signals from her partner's brain, and the stroke and counterstroke of the next passage at arms were over before Elly had fully grasped that it was about to start. One reason Frank Marcus sat as commander in the left seat was that he was faster than Elly by far; but then he was faster than anyone. Frank the Legendary. Even two minutes ago, Elly had still nursed conscious hopes that he might be able to get them out of this alive.

He was driving them in evasive maneuvers now, while the hull crashed like a gong, and flashes of enemy force were plain in the simultaneous overload of instruments. Flash and crash again, blinding stroke from the enemy and blending sigh of their own weapons lashing back, more in defiance than in any true hope of damaging Goliath. The berserker which had caught them by surprise was too big to fight, too fast to get away from, here in relatively open space. Nothing to do but dodge—

Yet again the berserker struck, and yet again they emerged whole from the barrage. They were

characters in some fantasy cartoon, staggering along a tightrope and parrying a rain of meteoric irons with the flimsy stalk of a broken umbrella.

"—little ship—"

Between great blasts of static, that was the voice of the berserker reaching them. It was trying to talk, only to distract them perhaps, or perhaps to offer life of a sort. There were sometimes living, willing servitors. And sometimes there were specimens that the unliving enemy found interesting enough to be kept breathing for a long time under study. Distraction, with the game effectively over, might seem a pointless waste of tactical finesse, but the enemy's tactics were varied by randomizing devices and tended to be unpredictable.

"—tle ship, new weapons will not save you—" The voice was quavering, neither male nor female, neither old nor young. It was assembled from the recorded words of prisoners, of goodlife (the willing servitors), of defiant human enemies who had cursed the thing before they died and whose very curses were put to its use.

"New weapons? What the hell does that mean?" Like many who fought berserkers, Frank Marcus seemed to believe in Hell, at least enough to swear by it.

"That's what it said."

"—helpless . . . badlife . . ." A great static roar. "You are too small . . ." The message or distraction from the enemy dissolved utterly in noise. No carrier wave could any longer bring it through the furious radiation from the plasma jet.

Mumbling something to himself, Frank danced the duoship around the jet. He dropped his craft from normal space into that condition called flight-space, where physical existence outside the guarded hull became little more than mathematics, and outracing light became not only possible but unavoidable. He brought them bursting back again into normal space, a fearful risk this near the great mass of a star. He had a way, had luck, had something no one could bottle or even measure, that in addition to his speed made for success against berserkers. Elly had heard the claim that, given a thousand human pilots with this potency, humanity might have won the long war centuries ago. Cloning of his cells had been tried, to produce a race of Franks, but the results had been disappointing.

Just behind them—so Elly read the flickerings that raced across her panels—the jet-star's solar wind exploded like the surface of a wavy pond attacked by a sharp-skipping pebble. A chain of blasts expanded into spheres of force and gas. Behind them too, delayed but not avoided, the pursuing monster came, its prey once more in view. The berserker made a dark, irregular blot against giant swirls of bright nebula that were far too distant to provide a hiding place, the stuff of the galaxy in an agelong expulsion from the galactic heart. The enemy was a tiny blot a hundred kilometers across.

Frank would never quit. In a hundred and forty milliseconds he skipped his ship through a distance equal to the diameter of Earth's orbit, whipping it once more out of normal space and once more back, intact, a blind man safely juggling razors.

This time, space around them was different when they came back. White noise on Elly's viewscreen. Peculiar readings everywhere—but at the same time silence, and stability.

"Frank?"

"Yeah. We're inside the jet, Elly. As I figured, it turned out to be a hollow tube. We're riding it out away from the star at a couple hundred kilometers per second. The boogie's still outside."

"You . . . it . . . how can you tell?"

Something resembling amusement shaded Frank's business voice. "If it was in here with us, it'd still be trying to chew us up, right?"

"Oh." She hadn't heard such meekness in her own shipboard voice for years. That word had come out in a novice trainee's timid chirp; she had heard the like from a good many of them during her tour as instructor at Space Combat School.

Frank was talking. "So, it's going to know we're here in the tube—because there's nowhere else we can be. It'll try to get a fix on just where we are inside—probably won't be able to. Then it'll come in after us. It'll come fairly slowly. It must compute it has us cold, and it has no reason to take the kind of chance we just did. As soon as it does come in, we go."

"Where?"

"Yeah, that's the question." Again in Frank's voice a shade of humor, this time laced with bitterness. Then, a new note of urgent thought: "Elly. Take a look at that cloud down at the end of this pipe. Ever see anything like that before?"

She adjusted her instruments, and learned to begin with that the inner surface of the great jet bearing them along was about five thousand kilometers away, as they rode near its center. Directly behind them was the sun that fueled and projected the enormous jet, and hurled down its hollow center a torrent of particle radiation from which the duoship's hull had so far shielded its occupants. While directly ahead . . .

There their strange jet fed a nebula perhaps even stranger, one which at their present speed they should reach in less than an hour. Elly scanned it as best she could, and made very little sense of what her instruments reported. The nebula seemed to be emitting fiercely at many wavelengths while absorbing greedily at others . . . for a moment she thought there was a grand pattern to be detected, but the indications for order were fleeting and in another moment chaos had intervened. Go into that in flightspace? she thought. It's far too dense. We'll hit it like a solid wall . . .

"Hey, Elly?" The voice in her earphones was suddenly much changed, with a difference she did not at first comprehend.

She answered numbly: "What?"

"Come over, will you? We've got a solid quarter hour before there's anything we need to do."

She might have said that there was nothing they could do, now or in fifteen minutes. But she unfastened herself from the clasp of her acceleration couch and drifted free of it, a blonde young woman, large and strong. The artificial gravity was now set in combat mode, operating only as needed to counter otherwise unbearable accelerations.

As Elly moved to open one of the hatches communicating with the other half of the ship's living space, some thoughts about a last goodbye were skipping through her mind. And something about suicide, which she would prefer to being captured live by a berserker.

Most of the space in the commander's small cabin was occupied by Frank's acceleration couch and by his body. It was not easy to see just where the one ended and the other began. Photographs Elly had seen of Frank, made before that brush with a berserker nine years back had almost cost him his life, showed a trim-waisted, young-looking man, so intense that even his image seemed to thrum with extra energy. Now, what the berserker and the surgeons had left of that vital body was permanently cushioned in fluids and encased in armor.

The three cable-connected units in which Frank lived struck Elly sometimes as a lazy costumer's concept of an insect body. There were head, thorax, and abdomen, but no face to turn to Elly as she entered. She knew, though, that Frank would be watching her with a part of his instrument-perceptions, while he remained wired directly to the sensors of the ship, and adequately alert. One plastic-and-metal arm rose from the central box to acknowledge her presence with a small wave.

Elly's eyes and ears and mind still rang with battle; she felt half-stunned into stupidity. "What?" she asked again, into the silence.

"Just wanted to enjoy your company." Frank's voice, sounding completely human and natural, issued now from a speaker near her head. The arm, too thin and too lacking in fingers to be human, meanwhile extended itself a little farther and stroked her shoulder. Its hand slid along to her waist. The familiar feel of it was not unpleasant; its movement was gentle and its texture smooth, like warm skin. Something about it, maybe the hardness of the underlying structure, always gave Elly the sensation of encountering powerful masculinity.

Now the arm began to tug her drifting figure toward the body-boxes on their segmented couch, and now she understood at last. "You're crazy!" The words broke from her almost in a laugh, but still with something like conviction.

"Why crazy? I told you, we've got fifteen minutes." Frank wouldn't be, couldn't be, wrong about a thing like that. When Frank went off duty, it was safe to go. "Sorry if you're not in the mood. Imagine a great big kiss, right about here." His voice performed a cheerful sound-effect. Another hand, this one partly of flesh (and feeling no more and no less strong and sure and male because of that) came from somewhere and went to work with an infinitely sure touch upon the clasps of the single garment that Elly routinely wore inside her couch.

She closed her eyes, despaired of being able to think of anything important like suicide and goodbye, and ceased to try. The inner surfaces of the artifact-abdomen, evolving to embrace her as she let herself be drawn against them, were not cold or metallic. As usual at this point, she had a moment of feeling rather ridiculous, being reminded of a leathery vaulting horse that she had straddled in some gym class long ago. And now, once more, the touch of human flesh . . .

* * *

Frank had said fifteen minutes. In less than twelve, Elly was safely and snugly back in her own combat couch, tuned in on all her instruments and ready for business. Trust Commander Frank to see to it that nothing interfered with that. All hatches were once more closed solidly again, as per regulations. Combat was now imminent, whereas twelve minutes back it had not been.

Years ago Elly had realized that Elly Temesvar, shunned by some men as too overpowering in several ways, couldn't begin to sustain any close personal relationship with this sometime shipmate of hers. She never felt so much used, abused, liked, disliked, or loved by him as she felt simply befuddled. Her thoughts and feelings about him . . . it was as if she never was given a chance to develop any. Perhaps any she did

start to develop, good or bad, were blown and swept away as soon as they began to sprout, by some contrary aspect of the man. He simply did too much and knew too much and was too much. Off duty she tended to avoid Frank Marcus, and tended not to talk about him, even when the curious pressed for information.

Thirteen minutes of the fifteen gone, and now Frank began to explain his developing plan, if that was the right word, for their next tactic. If it was suicidal, she thought, at least it was grander and dicier than swallowing any little pills.

Meanwhile the odd nebula at the approaching end of the great glowing tunnel continued to fly closer. And now the last of Frank's quarter-hour passed, marked by no event more vital than an increasing flickering and tattering of the tunnel's plasma wall, which here began to churn almost like a mass of falling water. The jet was now starting to disperse, the speed of its material increasing rapidly, evidently because distance was freeing it from the enormous gravity of the star from which it issued.

"Here we go," her earphones said. "It's coming any moment."

The small ship bounced with the turbulence of the unraveling of the distant plasma walls that had for a little while concealed it. Elly manned her post, though what she could do for the ship just now was trivial. Through a tattering wall of the stuff that hurtled outward from the star, the great berserker came.

ONE

The carving, according to its label, was of fleshywood, described as native to the planet Alpine and difficult to work as well as enduring and beautiful. Angelo Lombok, a stranger to this stuff and to this world as well, turned it over in his fingers, pondering. It was certified as an original handwork, and the artist did not appear to have been bothered by the reputed difficulty. The basic style was the same as that of the Geulinx carvings Lombok had been shown before leaving Earth, but the subject matter was more disturbing. It showed a man and a woman, fugitives, for their bodies leaned forward on long-striding legs even as their anxious faces turned to look behind them. The swirls of wooden clothing were somewhat overdramatic, but what could you expect from an artist ten years old?

Sometimes Lombok wished that he had in one way or another gone in more seriously for art. Well, one only had a single lifetime to spend, four or five hundred years at the outside; and he had now invested too much of his in work along another line to consider starting over.

With a faint sigh he stretched up on his toes to set the carving back upon the giftshop shelf—which, no doubt, silently recorded the replacement, and forbore to sound an alarm when he turned away. The one bag he had brought with him was small and light, and he needed no help to carry it through the modest bustle of the passenger terminal and outside to where a string of compact aircraft waited to be hired.

Looking something like a tiny brown woodcarving himself, Lombok settled into a comfortable seat aboard the next conveyance to glide up to the dock, and issued orders.

"I wish to visit the family Geulinx." It came out Jew-links, which he had been informed was the locally correct pronunciation. He suspected that, like many other famous and semi-famous people, the Geulinx clan had programmed obstacles into their local transport control system to forestall unknown visitors; and these obstacles he now endeavored to bypass. "I am not expected, but they will want to see me; I represent the Academy, on Earth, and I am here to offer their son Michel a scholarship."

He had the co-ordinates of the place ready to supply if necessary, but the machine evidently did not need them. It seemed his ploy had worked, for in a moment he was on his way, the rim of the spaceport dropping away smoothly beneath the climbing vehicle and a forested mountain leaning closer. Some of the flora here, he had been informed, was Earth-descended, as were of course the colonists. Upon a crag that slid past now he recognized bristlecone pines, close-molded to the rock by centuries of wind.

His flight among the mountains, here only thinly inhabited, took him into the advancing night. As soon as the cloudless sky began to darken there appeared overhead part of the planet's network of defensive satellites, celestial clockwork in a slowly shifting pattern. There were no real stars, but also to be seen in the jeweled velvet of this almost-private space were the faint, untwinkling sparks of three natural planets and two small moons, all now surrounded and enfolded by what looked like an infinity of never-ending night. That engulfing blackness was all dark nebula, called Blackwool by the natives. It was thick enough to blot out, even here, the Core itself, and the realization of that fact made Lombok uncomfortable—whereas, of course, he would have been unaffected by the familiar and infinitely vaster looming of the stars.

The military situation in the Alpine system had not yet deteriorated to the point where blackouts were in order, and the Geulinx chalet, halfway up another mountainside, was almost gaily lighted. It was a consciously pretty building, in a half-timbered style evidently copied from something in Earth's long past—he had seen its picture used in the family advertisements in the art journals. When he was sure that he had almost reached his goal, Lombok opened his small valise and riffled once more through the papers carried on top. All in order. All perfectly convincing, or had better be.

A road, devoid of traffic save for what appeared to be one heavy hauler, whose headlights revealed the narrow pavement, came winding upward from the valley floor. Other dwellings must be even rarer here than near the spaceport, if one could judge by the lack of other lights. The landing deck at the chalet, though, was well illuminated, with one empty aircraft parked and waiting at one side of it. Lombok landed gently under soft floodlights, just as a man and a woman, no doubt alerted by some detection system, came out of the main building a few meters away to stand and watch. His cashcard in a slot conferred payment on the machine. A moment later Lombok was standing on the deck, valise in hand, while his transportation whirred away behind him.

The man, tall and gray, watched it go as if he might have liked to keep it waiting for a visitor, or impostor, whose stay would probably be brief. The woman came forward, though, hand outstretched and ready to be eager. "Mr. Lombok? Did I hear your recording in the flyer correctly, something about the Academy, and a scholarship—?"

"I trust you did." Her hand enveloped his; she was broadly built and muscular, and Lombok's briefing on earth had informed him that she had been a successful athlete in her first youth.

"I'm Carmen Geulinx, of course, and this is Sixtus. Let us take that bag for you." Lombok's briefing had informed him also that on Alpine a woman generally took her husband's family name. Sixtus, taller, grayer, older than his wife, now came forward, cordial in a quiet way now that it seemed that there was nothing else for him to be. For a few moments they all stood there in the fine evening—it occurred to the visitor that daytime in the lower altitudes must be quite hot—exchanging pleasantries, about Lombok's journey as if he were an invited guest, and about the beauty of the spot, which he was sure he would appreciate come dawn.

"And now—what is this, Mr. Lombok, about a scholarship?"

He twinkled at them reassuringly, and put a small hand through each of their arms. "Perhaps we should go in, where you can sit down and brace yourselves for a pleasant shock. We would like Michel—how is he, by the way?"

"Oh, fine," the woman murmured impatiently, with a quick glance toward the house. "What—?"

"We would like to pay his way—and that of at least one adult parent or guardian—to come to Earth and study with us at the Academy. For four years."

The woman literally swayed.

* * *

Five minutes later they were in the house, but no one had really sat down as yet. Carmen was moving this way and that in excitement, piling up false starts toward sitting beside her guest (who kept jumping up from the sofa out of politeness, and being urged to sit again) and organizing some kind of meal or snack by way of beginning a celebration.

Meanwhile Sixtus stood leaning in a timbered doorway, with the look of a man thinking and thinking. He had, very early in the discussion, hinted that he would like to see Lombok's credentials, which had been immediately produced, and were impeccable.

"The thing is . . ." murmured Lombok, as soon as a sort of temporary calm had established itself.

Sixtus shot a glance that said: I knew there was a catch. His wife did not receive it, being suddenly fixated, with a stricken look, upon her visitor.

"What?" she breathed.

"The thing is, that there is very little time in which this particular opening can be filled. You understand some of our most generous grants and bequests impose conditions upon us that we do not like, but still must honor. This opening, as I say, must be filled quickly. It will be necessary for Michel to come at once. Within two days he must start for Earth."

"But there's no ship . . . is there?"

"Fortunately, the convoy I arrived with is laying over for a day or two. The decision to offer Michel the scholarship was reached only about six months ago, on Earth, and I was immediately dispatched. Luckily there was a convoy scheduled. There was no time to send you any preliminary announcement, or ask if you would accept."

"Oh, we quite understand that. And naturally anyone involved in Art"—the capitalization was audible—"would just . . . of course there's no real hesitance about accepting. But only two days?"

"That is when the convoy leaves. And who knows when the next ship will be available? Earth as you know is months away."

"Oh, we know." Somewhere in the reaches of the house below, a muted rumble: logs, perhaps, being dumped from that heavy hauler.

"I understand that this is very short notice to give you. But at the same time it is a very rare opportunity.

All of us at the Academy have been much impressed by the examples of Michel's work that have reached us."

"The agent said his stuff was beginning to sell on Earth. But I never . . . oh. Only two days! Sixtus, what—?"

Sixtus nodded, smiled, shook his head a little in various directions. Below, more noise, a power saw ripping with good appetite at wood, no doubt producing a texture more modern cutting devices could not duplicate. There were, Lombok had been told, a small army of workers here: cabinet makers, carvers, apprentices.

He remarked into the tense silence, "I noticed one of Michel's carvings on sale at the spaceport gift shop. I've really been looking forward to meeting him. Is he—?"

"Oh, ofcourse.He'll be very anxious to meet you. I think he's probably working now." Carmen cast vague, anxious eyes upward.

They led Lombok up some stairs, then along a hall. Sixtus, who had acquired Lombok's bag, dropped it en passant into the open doorway of a dim, pine-scented bedroom. The house's interior was as luxurious and calculatedly rustic as its outside.

Of several rugged doors near the end of the hallway, one was ajar. Carmen pushed it gently open, peering in ahead of the two men. "Michel? We have a surprise guest, and he'd like to see you."

The room was large, even for a bedchamber-workshop combined, and as well lighted as a jeweler's showplace. There was a rumpled bed at the far end, piled with oversized pillows, against a row of windows now darkened by the night outside. Their draperies hung open as if forgotten.

Against the wall beside the door, a long, elaborate workbench stood piled with woodworking equipment and stocks of material. Midway along the bench, the boy perched on a stool. A ten-year-old with long, faded hair, he looked back at Lombok solemnly as the small man entered.

"Hello, Michel."

"Hello." The boy's voice was thin and ordinary. His coloring was not blond so much as dusty-colorless. A narrow face and large, washed-out looking eyes made him appear frail, but he took Lombok's hand firmly enough and looked him boldly in the eye. He was barefoot and wearing what looked like pajamas, ingrained with wood dust and fine shavings, as if he had spent the day in them.

"Oh, Michel," Carmen said, "why didn't you change? Mr. Lombok will think you're ill, too ill for a . . . how would you like to go on a long trip, Sweetie?"

Michel slid off his stool and stood scratching the back of one knee with the opposite foot. "Where?"

"Earth," said Lombok, speaking as to an adult. "I'm authorized to offer you a scholarship to the Academy."

Michel's eyebrows went up just a notch—and then his face was normalized by a very natural ten-year-old smile.

Ten minutes after that, the adults had adjourned to a terrace, where a gentle aura of infrared from some concealed source kept off what must be the night's increasing chill, and warm drinks were brought by an efficient robot rolling on almost silent wheels.

"You must be very proud of him," Lombok remarked, taking his first sip, watching the others carefully.

"Couldn't be more if we were his bioparents," Sixtus put in. "We're both of us carvers, too, of course—they certainly did a superb job of genetic matching at the adoption center."

Lombok sipped his drink once more, carefully, and put it down. "I didn't realize he was adopted," he lied, in tones of mild interest.

"Oh yes. He knows, of course."

"It occurs to me—may I ask a somewhat personal question?"

"Please do."

"Well. I was wondering if you had ever made any effort to find out who his bioparents were, or are?"

His hosts both shook their heads, amused. Sixtus assured him, "The Premier of Alpine himself couldn't get that information out of that place. They keep the medical profiles of the bioparents available, for health reasons. But that's all they ever give out—nothing else, once the bioparents say they want it sealed."

"I see." Lombok pondered. "Even so, I think I shall have to try, tomorrow. The assistant director has a pet project, you see, correlating bioparents' behavior and lifestyle with the children's artistic achievement. Is this adoption center on Alpine?"

"In Glacier City. But I'm sure going there won't do you any good."

"I suppose not, but I'll have to report that I made the effort. In the morning, I'll fly over there. And then—am I to take it that our offer is accepted?"

Before he got an answer, Michel himself, now fully if casually dressed, came with quick eagerness out onto the terrace and dropped into a chair. "My, such energy," his mother teased.

The boy was looking keenly at the visitor. "Have you ever seen a berserker?" he demanded directly, evidently following some train of his own thoughts with youthful single-mindedness.

Sixtus chuckled, and Lombok tried to make a little joke of it. "No, I'm still healthy." That of course was no answer at all, and he saw that Michel expected one. "No, I haven't. I've never been on a planet under direct attack. I don't travel in space a great deal. My trip out here was, as I mentioned, uneventful in the way of military action. Thanks to a strong convoy, and/or good fortune."

"No alarms at the Bottleneck?" This from Sixtus. "You must have come through that way." A painful truism, for there was no other way to reach the Alpine system, surrounded as it was by parsec after parsec of dust and gas, too thick for any practical astrogation.

"No trouble," Lombok reiterated. He studied the adults' faces. "I know, some folks would feel alarmed

at the prospect of a long space voyage just now. But let's face it, the way things are going, Alpine itself is not going to be the safest spot in the inhabited galaxy. If and when the Bottleneck does close completely, either as a result of nebular drift or through berserker action—well, everyone on Alpine is going to be in a state of siege at best."

He was not telling the Geulinx clan anything they did not already know. But he was discussing the very chancy essentials of their future, and all three were watching him and listening with the utmost concentration. He went on: "Speaking for myself, I feel more comfortable making the trip back now than I would staying."

Sixtus was looking up at the nebular night, like some farmer judging when a wild thunderstorm was likely to assault his tender crops. "I have to stay here for the sake of the business," he announced. "There are other members of the family depending on it. I have a sister—she has children. And there are workers, dealers—I can't just pack up and leave on two days' notice."

"The business is important," Carmen agreed. She and her husband were looking at each other as if they had independently arrived at the whole solution, to the surprise of neither. "But then, Michel's future is, also." Her marveling lips formed the next words in silence: The Academy!

"The convoy leaves in two days," Lombok prodded. "Two days at the outside. They've promised me a few hours' notice." In fact the fleet would move when he told the admiral he was ready; but no one on Alpine, Lombok hoped, dreamed as much.

"He must go," said Carmen, and stroked her son's long hair. His eyes were shining with anticipation. "And he's simply too young to go alone. Sixtus, how long do you think it will take you to get things in order here, and join us?"

Lombok drew on the smoker he had just lighted, meanwhile watching the others reflectively. The lady was more excited than her son; she must see an old dream come to life, herself at the Academy where she would move among the famous people of the world of high-priced art; with her energy and cleverness and her son's talent that world would lie open before them. . . . The man at Moonbase who had sent Lombok had calculated well.

Lombok in his mind's eye saw her at Moonbase, stunned, perhaps outraged when she learned the truth. The truth-telling would have to be handled carefully, when the time came.

TWO

The educational system on Alpine was quite flexible, and he hadn't spent much time in formal schooling. Also the isolation of the family establishment had tended to diminish contacts with other children. The result was that he had only a few friends near his own age, a lack that had never notably concerned him.

Of those few, he could think of none that he was really going to miss. But when, in the morning, after Mr. Lombok had departed on what everyone had agreed must be a futile mission to the adoption center, Michel's mother suggested that he call one or two of the children at least to say goodbye, he complied. Of the three he called, two were bored by his great news—or tried to sound that way. The third, awed and openly envious, wondered aloud how Michel felt about going through the Bottleneck, where there was almost certain to be fighting.

Michel, who was somewhat keen on space war—at least as it was fought in the juvenile adventure books—and considered himself a well-informed layperson on the subject, estimated the risks as somewhat lower. After all, the ship captains and the other folk in charge would not decide to risk the passage if they thought it prohibitively dangerous.

Mr. Lombok was back in a couple of hours, announcing that he had been unable to learn anything, but not looking disappointed. Were Carmen and Michel ready? He was going to call the spaceport, on the chance that it had been decided to move up departure time and they had not got around to notifying him.

...

"Good thing I did," he announced, a couple of minutes later, turning away from the privacy of the communicator console. "Good thing you're ready, too! The last shuttle lifts off three hours from now."

It took the four of them something over an hour in a family aircraft to reach the port. Michel had visited it twice before, once on a tour with his school class, and again to see off a visiting uncle from Esteel. This time he said goodbye to his father on the ramp, feeling a moment of sharp sadness as they embraced. Then the three travelers were hurried into a shuttle, a larger craft than that which had borne away the uncle, and with its hull bearing a hash of letters and numbers, some military designation.

His first shuttle flight did not feel all that different from a straight climb in an aircraft, at first. He and his mother and Mr. Lombok were the only passengers; as the sky outside the cleared ports purpled and darkened, a young woman wearing the insignia of an ensign in the personnel services came to sit with them and chat. No one but Michel seemed to notice when the artificial gravity came on in the cabin. He did, though, subtle as the difference was; and felt immediately afterward how the great thrusters underneath began to multiply their force.

And as the blue of atmospheric daylight faded, he began to be able to see some of the convoy escorting them; Mr. Lombok had spoken reassuringly but vaguely of its strength. There were six good-sized ships hanging in formation, small crescent sun-glints against the starless black. But wait—there rode six more, in another flight higher up. And wait again, six more beyond . . .

When he had counted six flights of warships waiting, and understood that there might be more beyond his range of vision, he began to wonder what was going on. More avidly than his parents realized, he followed the news of the war in space, and not all the books he read on the subject were juvenile novels. A collection of ships this strong ought to be called a task force or a battle fleet. Mr. Lombok had implied that this force had come more or less straight out to Alpine from Earth, and that it was now going straight back. For what?

His mother dutifully noted the various flights of warships as he pointed them out to her, smiled at his keenness, and went on rehearsing for Mr. Lombok the speeches she meant to use on important people when they got to the Academy. Mr. Lombok, now looking totally relaxed, gave her his smiling attention, only now and then directing a sort of proprietary glance toward Michel.

Only when the starship in which they were to ride at last loomed overhead, like a continent of metal dimly lighted from below by Alpine's blue-glowing dayside, did Carmen at last take a real look.

"I'll certainly feel safe on that," she commented, peering upward, and then looked round to make sure that their meager baggage had not somehow crept away and lost itself.

Michel observed the docking as best he could; and before the shuttle was swallowed inside the block-thick hull of the leviathan, he had the chance to glimpse her name, running in comparatively modest

letters across her skin of battle gray: she was the Johann Karlsen.

He sat there looking out the port at nearly featureless dark metal, about a meter from his nose. Then the convoy, or fleet, was not only sizable, but contained at least one vessel of the dreadnought class: the very one aboard which he and his mother were about to have the fun of a voyage lasting maybe for some four standard months.

Except that with each passing moment, Michel felt less certain about the fun. He pondered, and decided it was too late now to do anything but go along.

* * *

Departure followed docking within minutes. Michel and his mother were shortly settled into modest but comfortable adjoining cabins, and the friendly young woman officer, who was evidently their assigned friend, came to take them on a tour of the parts of the ship accessible to passengers. She was full of explanations and always reassuring. That evening they all dined with the captain. The captain was a tall, gray woman with a harsh, angular face that softened briefly but remarkably when she smiled, who asked in an abstracted way if there was anything they wanted.

Ship's time had been adjusted to match local Alpine time at the longitude of the Geulincx establishment. Coincidence or not, the peculiarity of this adjustment was not lost on Michel, and did nothing to ease his growing sense of something stranger than a long space voyage getting under way.

* * *

. . . his father, his biofather whom he had never seen and did not know, was locked up in a filing cabinet somewhere aboard the Johann Karlsen, screaming for his son to let him out. It was up to Michel to make his way through a complexity of locks and barriers to find the trapped man, but before he could get the machinery well in hand, he realized that he had just been dreaming and was now awake. He sat up in the unfamiliar bed in the totally dark cabin, listening very intently.

Thrum.

He had never before felt the interior tug, perceived as a shadowy twisting in the bones and guts, that was a side effect of the energies released when a c-plus cannon fired close at hand. But in his spacewar books he had read descriptions enough of the effect.

Thrum. Thrum.

When he had attended, fully awake, for a half a minute, he was no longer in any doubt. He counted hours back to departure. Probably they had reached the Bottleneck already, or were very near it. They wouldn't be firing for practice here. Thrum-thrum. Thrum. And he thought that they would never practice-fire so steadily; it would be too hard on the vital equipment, the force manifolds in particular.

Leaving the room dark—he remembered just where his clothes lay on the floor—he slid out of bed and started to get dressed. He was three-quarters clad when his door was lightly opened, to admit from the lighted passageway the young woman officer, Ensign Schneider. She looked surprised to see him on his feet and moving.

"What's wrong, Michel?" There was a straining lightness in her voice.

"Don't you know?" he asked, mechanically, feeling sure she did. "We're under attack." He paused, one arm sleeved in his shirt, one not, sensing.

"I don't hear any—"

"Or we were. The firing stopped just now."

She was smiling at him uncertainly when Lombok stepped in from the hall behind her, wearing a robe that made him look like a little brown bird. He appeared almost elated to see that the boy was up and getting dressed. "Something wake you, Michel?"

Why were these people acting like idiots? "I want to see, Mr. Lombok. Do you suppose I could just look in on the bridge? I promise I won't disturb anything."

Lombok studied him a moment, then turned to the young woman. "Ensign, why don't you just see if Mrs. Geulinx is restless too?" Then he turned away, indicating with a motion of his head that Michel should follow.

In the corridors the gravity had been reduced, just as was always done on big ships in the stories, when combat alert sounded. The soft handgrips built into the walls and overhead had become useful. He followed Lombok's fluttering brown plumage to the bridge, which, as Michel had expected, was a large, gray, brilliant room where a score of acceleration couches were almost all occupied. The faces of the occupants would have alerted anyone that something more than practice was at hand. There was one empty couch at the end of a row near where they had entered the bridge, and Lombok gestured him into it with a kind of authority that Sixtus often worked at but had never come close to attaining.

In the churchly silence Michel clambered in and snugged the cover of the couch closed without conscious thought—it did not occur to him that he had never seen a similar mechanism before. Nor did he consider the fact that Lombok either could not see another empty couch or did not choose to look for one, but rather stayed beside Michel's. The boy's attention was already caught by the huge simulated battle presentation that filled the center of the room.

The multicolored hologram showed, like a bright tunnel zigzagging through coal, what must be a section of the Bottleneck, a jagged crevice of clear space surrounded by dark nebula. Strung irregularly through the tunnel and proceeding along it with what looked like painful slowness were green dots that—just as in the stories—showed the disposition of the human fleet. The dreadnought itself, marked by a rhythmic, tiny flash of green, was shown near the middle of the tunnel, followed by a strong rear guard.

A swarm of red dots, berserkers, came on the heels of the rear guard, which must be still heavily engaged. The dreadnought did not turn to help, nor did the strong advance guard which preceded her; they all fled for the end of the Bottleneck ahead, for open space with its infinity of pathways for their flight.

Of course the hologram was no better than a good guess. Not even the dreadnought's instruments and battle computers could very accurately interpret the specks of ships and machines seen at or near lightspeed, flickering out of normal space and back again, hiding behind dark lobes of gas or dust, obscured amid a symphony of radiation. In a little while Michel began instead to watch the battle as it was reflected in the face of the captain. In that mask of concentration he read that things were going about as well as could be expected, given the size of the enemy force that had tried to ambush them and almost succeeded.

Glancing back momentarily at the hologram, he saw a green dot of the rear guard suddenly disappear. Dots of red and green were coming and going all the time, like fireflies, as their positions were recomputed or they departed normal space and reappeared in it. But this particular disappearance was different—this green dot did not return.

He had known somehow as soon as it vanished that it was never going to come back.

An unknown number of human bodies, along with all their furniture and food supplies and good-luck charms and weaponry, had just been converted into an almost-random sleet of energy and subatomic particles. Michel swayed for a moment in his couch, not with fear but with an empathic sharing of that experience.

The mighty dreadnought fled, while the battle in the rear guard raged and swirled. The implacable red dots came on, mountains of metal that could know no fear or weariness. Michel could hear them calling faintly, with electric thoughts. Calling him to join them, and be free.

THREE

Offices on the Administration Sublevel of Moonbase tended to be deadeningly silent—or soothingly so, depending upon one's viewpoint. But muted music almost always murmured in the background throughout the complex of chambers of the Secretary of Defense. Popular Western-culture melodies of the twentieth century were what he most favored.

But the Secretary, Tupelov, sitting behind his large desk with his large feet up, was not listening at the moment. "I don't take it as a hopeful sign that the kid almost fainted the first time he got into a combat couch," he said. He was a large, gross, young-looking man, who might have reminded a historian of the early pictures of Oscar Wilde. But the resemblance was confined to physique and general appearance—and, perhaps, raw intellectual ability.

"His first space flight, not to mention his first battle," offered Lombok, who had just invited himself to take a chair. The Johann Karlsen had docked not twenty minutes past, and Lombok had been the first one off. "And all in the middle of the night . . . I think he's a tough kid, basically."

"You got a copy of his bioparents' genetic records?"

"They had only his mother's, at the adoption center. No name for her, but we'll run a computer search for matching records, and see what we can find."

The Secretary dropped his feet to the floor, and hitched himself into a more businesslike position. "You've been with him and his mother more than four standard months now. Do they have any idea yet what's really going on?"

"I'm willing to bet the mother doesn't. And I'm almost equally willing to bet that Michel does." Lombok raised tiny fingers in a forestalling gesture. "It's nothing I can quote him as saying; nothing I can tell you he's done. It's the way he looks at me sometimes. And the things he listens very keenly to, and the things he tunes out, for example most of his mother's talk about what they'll do at the Academy."

"How about the Karlsen's crew?"

"They all knew we were VIPs, and of course they speculated. I heard no speculation that sounded very close to the mark."

"So. How do you think we ought to officially break the news to our guests? And who ought to do it?"

Lombok considered. "Mama will take it better from the highest-ranking person we can find. If you could arrange a meeting with the President—?"

"Forget that. It would take days. And he doesn't like to come up here, and I'd just as soon not take them down to Earth." Down there, the Academy would be too tantalizingly close, perhaps.

"Then you do it. I don't think it'll have too much direct effect on the kid whoever tells him. But if Mama is badly upset for a considerable time—who knows what bad effect that might have on an eleven-year-old?"

"Okay. I'll see her in here, now." Tupelov stood up and squinted about him, trying to think of the best way to make the large office seem even more impressive to a woman from a half-settled world, who had spent much of her life almost divorced from large-scale technology. He settled for turning on the wall screens. One he adjusted to a repetitive scan of the lunar surface topside; as if the Secretary when he now and then looked up from his work did not waste a precious moment but took a turn as extra sentry. . . . There, he noticed, was the rounded top of the Karlsen's hull. It was high enough to be visible even over the rim of Middlehurst, the next crater over, where as late as a decade ago tourists had come to gaze at the only known live volcano on the Moon.

On the screen on the opposite wall he got an encyclopedia of impressive battle statistics flowing (old ones, but who would know?); and on the wall behind his desk he conjured up a giant image of the big blue-white marble itself, fed in from a remote pickup somewhere over the horizon on Earthside. What human, from whatever distant world, did not feel the pull et cetera of homeland et cetera, at the first sight of old Earth? Et cetera, et cetera.

He checked his appearance in a mirror, and was all set; or he would be, as soon as Lombok had let himself out by a back door. He asked that the mother be sent in first, alone, and then he met her as she entered.

"Mrs. Geulincx, very glad you could come in to see me. Please, sit down. How is everything?"

She was prettier and younger-looking than he had imagined. "My son and I are certainly being given a great welcome. But I admit I won't be able to relax until we're down on Earth."

He led her to the deluxe chair, and offered wine and smokers; she turned down both. He went to sit behind his desk. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about." Her eyes came down from his wallscreens, and he met them gravely. He let a pause lengthen considerably before going on: "As you know, Michel was chosen to come here because of some very special qualities he possesses. What you have no way of knowing . . . is that he was not chosen by the Academy. And not for his artistic talent, great as that must be."

She looked her total lack of comprehension at him. Tried a little smile, then let it fall.

He leaned his elbows on his desk, slumped forward, letting some of his tiredness show. "As I say, Mrs. Geulincx—may I call you Carmen? Carmen, then—there is no way you can be expected to understand. Until I explain things to you. First, humanity is not winning this war. A hundred years ago we were sure

that victory was just around the corner. Fifty years ago we were still confident that the odds were with us, time was ultimately on our side. But within the past few decades we have been made to realize that neither of those hopes is true. The enemy has grown stronger, while we have not kept up the pace of weapons development. We have too often been content simply to defend ourselves, instead of going after the berserkers when we had an advantage . . . I can go into all the reasons later if you wish. For now, just take my word for it: if things go on as they have, in fifty years—intwentyyears—there will not be an Academy to hand out scholarships to youngsters like Michel. And if Michel is still alive it may be only as a canned brain in some berserker's experimental . . . are you all right? Forgive me. Here." He got up and came around the desk to her with water. The intensity of her reaction had taken him by surprise.

Carmen got her eyes in focus, sipped a little water, signaled that she now felt better, and changed her mind about the smokers. With newly frightened eyes she looked up at the Secretary through a blue, fragrant cloud, and asked him harshly: "If it was not the Academy who brought us here, then who? And why?"

"Me. Oh, I could say technically it was the Interworld War Council, but the worlds are no longer co-operating very well on anything. I could say truthfully it was Earth's government, because the plan has been approved at the very highest levels. But the plan was and is my idea."

He went back to his desk, sat down, spoke to her softly. "As to why. We are developing a new weapons system, the importance of which is hardly possible to exaggerate. The code name for it is Lancelot; I don't suppose you've ever heard it mentioned?"

She shook her head, allowing Tupelov to feel mildly reassured about security.

He went on: "I could say it's a new type of spaceship, though it's really more. Lancelot does, or will do, things that we think no berserker will ever be able to match. Because it uses as one integral component a living, willing human mind. Now this creates one problem. Most people's minds, even those of our best pilots, do not tolerate this kind of integration into a system. The subconscious as well as the conscious mind is utilized, you see. Change your mind about the wine?"

While the robot poured for her, he continued in a deliberately soothing and monotonous voice. "Some people of course did better—or less poorly—than others. Finally we developed a theoretical model of the mind that could provide a perfect match. Then we started looking for people who matched that model. It was a rare type we needed, and a difficult search. We have inspected the genetic and psychological records of almost a hundred billion living people, on Earth and on every human-colonized planet whose records we have been able to get at. Michel's records, along with many others, we found in Adoption Central, here on Earth. And out of that hundred billion, Michel is the closest match, by far, to our theoretical ideal."

"A hundred billion . . ."

Tupelov debated whether to go over to her again, and settled for coming around to the front of his desk and perching on it. "Now let me assure you at once that he won't be harmed. The tests we've brought him here for are perfectly safe."

"Oh." Relief set in. "For just a moment there I had the idea that you expected him—" She could smile now at her own silliness. Imagine, a skinny eleven-year-old child, her own artistic one at that, going forth to fight berserkers!

Tupelov smiled. "Once we have the hardware tuned up with an ideal personality, you see, then we can

make some modifications, and choose among our trained people for the combat operators."

Carmen sipped wine, and looked at him with a face suddenly clouded by new suspicion. "There's just one thing. Why all the mystery? Why didn't you simply tell us the truth on Alpine?"

"Alpine is a dangerous planet, Carmen, in more than one way. I mean it's hard to keep a secret from the berserkers, once even a few people on Alpine know it. I don't mean to insult your compatriots, but there it is."

"Goodlife." Her mouth made a little grimace over the word. "The Alpine government is always warning about berserker-lovers, telling everyone to keep military matters secret. But Sixtus always says those goodlife stories are just a device to boost morale. Though I never quite understood why they should have that effect."

"I have access to a lot more information on the subject than Sixtus is likely to see. Take it from me. Michel would have been in real danger if word had leaked out about why he was really being brought to Earth."

Carmen's eyes were suddenly wide. "When the berserkers attacked us in the Bottleneck Did that have anything to do with—?"

"Did they know anything about Michel? I really don't know." He tried a reassuring smile. "Fortunately you came through it." Actually there had been an additional reason for not telling the Alpine government what was up: in their own somewhat desperate situation vis-a-vis the berserkers, they might have declared Michel a valuable national resource, or something along that line, and forbidden his export. Not that they would then have been able to use him, of course. The right human operator was only half of Lancelot, and to develop the other half had been the work of decades even for mighty Earth.

"I'd like to talk to Michel now, Carmen, fill him in on what's going on. I just wanted to make sure that you were filled in first." The woman nodded slowly. Tupelov was thinking that this was going better, much better, than it might have gone.

When he signaled the outer office, Michel entered immediately, looking as Lombok had described him, and wearing casual clothes grown somewhat too small. Tupelov saw that the boy had already acquired a chunk of soft Earth pine, which nestled like an angular egg in one of his hands; a little carving knife was in the other. Michel looked silently from one adult to the other, his own somewhat pinched face unreadable.

As if welcoming a distinguished adult, the Secretary got up and showed him to a chair. If he'd had any forethought he would have had a softer drink than wine laid in.

"I've just been explaining to your mother," he began, while shaking hands, "that your trip to the Academy is going to have to be delayed." He glanced, as charmingly as possible, back to the woman. "Oh, we'll see to it that he gets one." They would, too, if Michel and the Academy both lasted long enough. "But it might not be for a year or more."

He turned back to the boy, who did not look in the least stunned. "Michel, we have some space suits and other equipment that we'd like your help in testing." Tupelov was ready to explain that he was not joking.

"I know," Michel answered unexpectedly. He was gazing now with a curious frown at the wallscreen on the Secretary's right, the one unrolling old and jumbled data. "That thing's not working, is it?"

Tupelov turned to the screen and back to the boy. He stared. "How do you know?"

"If you mean about the screen, it's all . . ." Michel made a helpless gesture with one thin arm, throwing away something beyond fixing. "I guess the hardware's all right—almost all right—but the figures are—funny."

"And how did you know about the suits? The things we want you to test?"

"Oh, I don't know what they are. But I know it's you who really brought me. I mean that whole fleet wasn't doing anything else, as far as I could see. It came to Alpine just for us—for me—and brought us straight back here. And what use could I be to you, except for some kind of test, or an experiment?"

Carmen's eyes were rounding as she listened to this one-in-a-hundred-billion being who had somehow turned out to be her son. Before either adult could reply, a communicator sounded on Tupelov's desk, and he bent over into its zone of privacy to answer. When he straightened up again he said, "They're ready for us to come to the lab and take a look at Lancelot. Shall we?"

* * *

In a chamber not far below the surface they first confronted Michel with the thing they wanted him to wear. The chamber was big enough for football, and its edges were crowded with improbable devices. Its massively girdered ceiling was relatively low, only five meters or so above the floor, and brilliant with pleasant lights.

At one edge of the vast cleared space in the center of the room, the thing they wanted him to test was waiting, suspended from the overhead and looking vaguely like a parachute harness. Only vaguely. Actually Michel was reminded not so much of military hardware as of costumes from a school play when he was seven. In the play there had been crowns, and gauzy robes, and for one actor a magic wand to wave. Here no rods of power were visible, but when they had him standing right under the suspended harness someone turned something on, and immediately there were robes in profusion, trailing away from the fragmentary suit across the otherwise empty floor. He recognized it as a great web of some kind of forcefields. The fields seemed to wave in a manner that suggested they were being driven by a racing wind, and after thirty meters or so they vanished, into their own self-contained distance. Michel understood that the waves and folds were really patterns generated in the eye, which wanted to see solidity where there was no more than a certain interference with passing light.

He exchanged smiles with his mother, who stood very near him, holding the arm of Ensign Schneider and looking nervous. Then, while murmuring replies to the questions of the technicians who now began to fit the first straps of the harness to him, he turned his head to look at the mirage of field patterns. He let his eyes and mind play with them, seeking out reality beneath.

* * *

Tupelov had quietly excused himself, and was now in an adjoining room where some of his science department heads and other important people were watching the fitting via wallscreen; the idea was that the technicians could get on with these preliminaries better if not too much rank was in the way.

Entering the small room, the Secretary acknowledged greetings with a nod, took one look at the screen, and asked the assembly bluntly, "What do you think?" He knew how premature his question was; but he knew also that if he didn't keep prodding some of these people they'd let things drag on forever. Also an

observer from the President's staff was in the group, and the Secretary wanted to be sure the President understood just who was trying to hurry things along.

One of the scientists, a bearded man whose bulging forehead made him rather look the part, shrugged. "Hardly seems the warrior type."

Tupelov stared. "You mean no big muscles, no steely glare, no commanding presence? You know none of that means shit in terms of the performance we require."

The scientist looked back boldly, though it no doubt cost him an effort. "But that's all we have as yet to evaluate, hey?"

The President's observer, who had arrived from Earth within the hour, interrupted. "But, Mr. Secretary. What exactly is it that makes Michel the ideal candidate for this job? I mean, I've been shown on paper how well he matches the desired profile. But what is this genetic makeup of his supposed to produce in the way of action?"

"All right. First of all, you can see they're taking their time out there with what looks like a routine job of fitting on some straps. It's really much more than that. There are several powerful kinds of psychic feedback involved, even at the minimum power settings they're using. Most people, you and I included, would already be screaming and trying to get away if we were standing where Michel is now."

The slight, pale-haired figure out there kept turning his head, looking around. That was the only sign that anything might be bothering him.

"But surely," said the President's woman, "what he has is not just—stolidity, or a high pain threshold?"

Tupelov violently shook his head. "One, that kid has as great an affinity for machines as any engineer we've ever tested—so great it gets spooky sometimes. Two, his Intelligence Spectrum goes across the board in high numbers—though not the very highest. Again, an IS like that is ideal. Three, he is simply off the scale in human empathy.

"So far, we might have found a number of good candidates without leaving Earth, where we have ten billion or so citizens to choose from. But we also needed, and Michel also has, an awesome psychological toughness and stability—you might call that stolidity. I suppose. Now what does all this add up to? Well, I've seen an independent evaluation of his measurements, by one of Earth's great psychologists who has no idea what we're up to. She thought the subject might be expected to found a great religion—except for one thing: the leadership potential is simply not there."

The lady from the President's office tilted her head to one side. "You make that sound like an advantage too, Mr. Secretary."

"Oh, it is." Tupelov bit at a thumbnail, for the moment looking like the village idiot. "You don't yet understand the powers that Lancelot will eventually bestow upon its operator."

After a moment he went on: "My own bet might be for Michel to become a great saint in someone else's church—except we come back to that affinity for mechanism of all kinds, which is simply too overwhelming not to play a great part in his life."

"He doesn't tinker, does he? I thought he carved."

"Oh, it'll come out eventually—it has to. Incidentally, as we were walking over here, I asked him why carving instead of some other art. And he answered without having to think: Carvings last, he said. They're something that lasts."

* * *

The fitters kept gleefully assuring him that he had most of the suit on, now—as if just getting it on were some sort of an ordeal, which, when he thought about it, he supposed might be true for most people. There were all sorts of signals feeding back from the intricate forcefields into his brain—but he could ride the current, he could keep his balance, even if he had not yet discovered any way to steer. Later he would ask about controls—for now, he had enough to do.

Michel was distracted from his learning by the entrance into the vast room of someone much different from any human being he had ever met before. The newcomer came rolling upon tall wheels in a series of three boxes connected almost like cars of a toy train, and of a size that would have been convenient to ride on. The assembly was superficially like some of the freight-robots that from time to time appeared here in the background. But the boxes' shapes were all wrong for ordinary freight, and the path of the self-guided conveyance was not deferential enough by several centimeters as it cut across the path of two technicians walking. Nor did the people working with Michel react as to a mere machine's arrival. Their hands paused and their heads turned.

The train rolled to a stop nearby. "Hi, kid," said a casual voice from the front box, its timbre confirming Michel's guess that the occupant was an adult male.

"Hi." He'd heard and read of a few people, in very bad shape physically, who preferred artificial bodies of this style to those of a more humanoid shape—which could never really, Michel supposed, be human enough.

The voice said: "I've tried on that thing you're wearing. Doesn't feel too good, hey?"

"I don't mind it."

"Great! I don't mind it, but I can wear it. So maybe, if you have any questions as the work goes on, I can help you find an answer." The tone was infinitely more confident than the words.

"There don't seem to be any controls at all," Michel remarked.

After a pause the voice from the box asked him: "Does your body have any?"

"I see."

"Kid—Michel—what you're wrapped up in there is biotechnology carried to the ultimate. Way ahead of this little circus train I ride around in usually. By the way, my name is Frank."

There was an interruption; the technicians were ready to turn on something else. They did, and with the altered flow of power Michel's perceptions shifted. For him, the meters of solid lunar rock and regolith above his head became transparent. This was followed by another and even more startling transformation, as what had been the black and starry sky turned into something else, an infinite cave draped by innumerable lines and veils of force. It was a shining mansion whose limitlessness would have frightened him if he could ever have felt fear at anything so impersonal. Slowly his awe passed, and he discovered that he could turn away from that new universe and close the Moon overhead once more,

willing his perceptions back to his immediate surroundings in the hangar.

In a moment he reached out in a different direction. Two underground levels below, a pair of officers who moved as if they thought themselves very important were talking as they walked together. "The astragalus," said one, "is one of the proximal bones of the tarsus; and it was used in ancient times in randomizing—"

Distraction: Eleven-point-six and a little more kilometers away, a large-sized pebble was falling at meteoric speed toward the lunar surface. An eye-blink later some automated defense machine had taken aim and obliterated the pebble in mid-flight; a mere twitch in a single cell of the complex electronic organism that comprised the main defenses of Moonbase.

Distraction: Somewhere on Moonbase's deepest level, behind doors with the gravest security warnings on them, a hologram-model of the galaxy was packed all round its Core with white blank volumes representing the uncharted and unknown. Amid these a fanatically precise technician was creating an electronic label for something that looked vaguely like a geodesic sphere made out of toothpicks. The label said merely: TAJ. It was something built on a scale of size above that of even the most enormous stars.

Distraction: Something stirred with a life of its own, inside the lower abdomen of the youngest of the female technicians nearby, as two of them reached up to fit Michel with the blinding circlet of what looked like his crown. And even in the heavily shielded boxes of the canned man Michel could detect organic stirrings, peristalsis.

Distraction: A great buzz, which he soon realized must be the thermal motion of air molecules about him. In a moment, he had learned to tune it out.

When the fitting was over, some twenty minutes after it had begun, he emerged from the helm and harness blinking at the odd version of reality that he had accepted for eleven years with so little thought. He would never be the same.

FOUR

The little personnel printout with TEMESVAR ELLISON in block capitals across its top went skittering over the surface of the desk, tossed by Lombok's nimble little fingers. Tupelov's big, soft, nail-bitten ones fumbled it up on the second try.

"His biomother," Lombok announced, in laconic explanation. "Genetic pattern fits too well to leave any real doubt. And she was on Alpine at the right time."

"So?" One glance at each side and Tupelov had read the printout, which outlined Elly Temesvar's service career from enrollment to the time of her resignation approximately eleven years ago. "Doesn't ring any . . . oh. Wait. This is the girl who was with Marcus, on the second sighting of the Taj. When he went right through part of it trying to shake off a berserker. So she's also Michel's—"

Breaking off in mid-sentence, the Secretary looked at the printout again, executing with unconscious perfection an actor's double-take.

"Exactly," put in Lombok "It looks like Frank Marcus is almost certainly his father. I'll do a genetic

pattern study on that too, to make sure."

Tupelov signed agreement. "But very quietly. Do it yourself. Marcus . . . hasn't seen this yet, of course."

"Of course not. No reason to think that he has any suspicion of the relationship. Or that Michel has either."

"The dates all mesh . . . so she got pregnant on that mission. But it says nothing here about her being pregnant when they returned to base—no reason why it should, I suppose—or about pregnancy being a reason when she resigned a few months later. It just quotes her as saying she had, quote, 'lost interest in her career,' unquote. Well, after six months alone with Marcus I can understand anyone quitting."

"If you'll note," said Lombok, "Alpine was the first place they put in at, on their way back to their original base, CORESEC. It would seem she just had the pregnancy terminated at the first place she reasonably could, and never mentioned it to the service doctors."

"Yeah . . . yeah . . . I want to think about this. We'll keep it very quiet for now."

"Agreed?"

"But you're standing there looking at me, Angelo, as if you want permission to do something."

"I think I ought to go see just what Elly Temesvar is up to now. Talk to her. Maybe even bring her to Moonbase, if I can, on some pretext."

"Why?"

"What she is will have some bearing on what Michel is, and will become. And it strikes me that from her service record alone we just don't know very much about her."

"We know her present address?"

"On Earth. At least she was there last year. She agreed to take part in a routine census-sampling then. Someplace called the Temple of the Final Savior."

"Sounds like a religion. I never heard of it, though."

"Nor I. There are always new ones; they come and go."

Tupelov was silent for a few seconds. He put a finger in his mouth, took it out, picked at the cuticle. "I'm not sure we ought to bring her up here just now. It might only draw attention."

"I would like to have permission to do so, at my discretion. After that ambush at the Bottleneck, in such force, we have to assume that the enemy knows something of Michel's importance, and that he's here. Then word will soon reach their local goodlife friends, on Earth. It's not impossible that they'll also know that Temesvar's his mother. The records in the adoption center are supposedly quite secure, but it's on Alpine."

"Yeah. That place. All right, Angelo, if you think you must."

* * *

Michel had the feeling that things were being rushed.

He had been on Moonbase just a little longer than one standard day, and this was the second time he had put on Lancelot, and now he was wearing it as his only protection as he rode a large platform elevator up to the airless, frozen nightside surface. The hundred or so adults who rode with him, military people and scientists and technicians, wore spacesuits, all of them . . . well, almost all. Frank, as he said, carried his own spacesuit with him wherever he went.

Frank's little train of boxes was at Michel's right as they rode up, and at his left stood Edmond Iyenari, head of the scientific team, whose engagingly ugly eyes kept studying Michel keenly from behind their faceplate as the elevator rose.

"All right, Michel?" Dr. Iyenari asked.

"All right."

"I was sure you would be."

The air was going from around them now. They had told him that Lancelot would provide him with all the air he needed, all the oxygen, to be exact, and he had no real doubt that they were right. Michel still felt perfectly comfortable as, with dropping pressure, the furred stuff of Lancelot around him crackled a little, a sound suggesting stiff paper wings. The fields were almost invisible and impalpable, and he had no sensation of being sealed or encased in anything.

A medical doctor, one of the group of nearby people all watching Michel with tremendous casualness, said, "You're still breathing." It was somewhere between a comment and a question.

"Yes," said Michel, and immediately became self-conscious about the fact. There was still air pressure, or what felt just like air pressure, in his breathing passages, and evidently pressure of some kind capping his nose and mouth to keep whatever was in his lungs from bursting out. Earlier he had been given a brief explanation, which he only partly understood, of how Lancelot's fields, through a thousand painless piercings of his skin, could supply his body with what it needed and take its wastes away to be processed and reused. Now he discovered that he could effortlessly cease breathing if he thought about it, and the reflex to start did not take hold.

A moment later, and he forgot about his body. Above, huge doors were opening, and beyond them shone the stars.

On Alpine, it was possible now and then to see a star. There were days, sometimes even weeks when a nebular window opened and a fingernail-sized patch of the galaxy shone through. When that happened, people tended to gather outdoors at night and point.

The more peaceful stretches of Michel's journey from Alpine to Moonbase had afforded him his first real chance to get a look at what was still commonly called the Milky Way. But looking at the stars through a screen or even a cleared port had been seeing them at one remove. It had not been like this. As the elevator now eased to a stop, flush with the lunar surface, Earth and Sun were both below the horizon, and from edge to edge the sky seemed to be filled with stars.

It was not terrifying for one reason only—it was so utterly remote.

Squinting a little, Michel raised his right arm to point. He remembered to draw breath before he spoke, so his words would come out clearly, and what functioned as a radio transmitter in Lancelot would convey them to the others' suit receivers. He asked, pointing, "What's that?"

"You mean the three stars in a row?" Iyenari responded doubtfully. "That's the belt of Orion—the Hunter, we call him sometimes. You've heard something about our constellations?"

"Not the three stars." Michel jabbed the sky with a forefinger trailing parabolic whorls of silver gauze. "Farther over there." The thing he saw was almost dazzling, and contained colors that he could not remember having seen before. Words to describe it were not easily come by.

"Taurus? The Bull . . ."

Abruptly Michel realized that the others, looking with normal and unaided eyes, could not see the thing at all. The dazzle was all in short wavelengths of radiation that only Lancelot allowed his eyes to see. As preparations for the day's first tests continued, Michel glanced back from time to time at the object in the sky. Gradually he learned how to dim the dazzle reaching his eyes, and at the same time to magnify the source somewhat. A ragged-looking cloud of gases of some kind, a gigantic explosion still in progress but frozen by its own vast scale to seeming immobility. How far away? Some hundreds of light-years, at a guess.

Centered on the platform of the risen elevator there extended a plain of fused basalt several hectares in extent, flat as a parking lot amid a gently rolling sea of lunar regolith whose waves and cups reached in every direction eight or ten kilometers before rising to make the interior rim of a broad impact crater whose name Michel had not been told. Poles had been erected around the platform, in a square a few score meters on a side, roofed and walled by a network of some kind of rope or wire. The holes in the net, Michel noticed, were just too small to allow an object the size of his own body to pass through. The construction, he thought, might have been borrowed from the court of some game in which a large bouncing ball was used.

Around Michel a hundred suits of space armor groaned faintly, making adjustments to the topside cold and vacuum. Their wearers, mostly busy with other matters, did not appear to notice. When Michel himself moved, he could hear Lancelot faintly crackling, weak spasms across the audio spectrum.

He asked Dr. Iyenari about the crackling, and tried to absorb an answer completely unintelligible, a few words of physics tied up in math. Maybe someday he would have learned enough in school to understand that. Meanwhile it seemed preferable to try to feel out an answer for himself.

"Ready to give it a try?" Tupelov's tall, suited figure was towering over him. The Secretary always spoke to Michel as to a respected equal.

"Sure." Below, while Michel was being robed in a tight-fitting gym suit of bright orange and then in Lancelot, they had discussed briefly what was to be tried today, simple free flight in space. As the thought returned that things were being rushed a bit, bright lights suddenly flooded the basalt area. Michel knew another momentary dazzle before Lancelot scaled down the radiation impinging from the sources directly into his eyes. Rushing things, but they must have their reasons, good ones, because it was certain that neither Tupelov nor any of the others here wanted their pet subject to get hurt.

Now technicians had surrounded Michel closely, to fit him with additional Lancelot-components. Here came tube-shaped things and egg-shaped things and cubes. All vanished somehow into Lancelot's fields, leaving the gauzy wings and robes no more substantial-looking than before. None of the additions

seemed to add up to any more weight or bulk.

Michel let his attention drop away. Four levels below where he stood, and maybe a dozen kilometers to the lunar east, his mother was conversing, brightly and eagerly, with another lady, a vice-president of the Academy. His mother thought it was a coincidence that an Academy official, a real one this time, had just happened to be on Moonbase at this hour with some time available to talk. . . .

Dr. Iyenari was speaking, for the benefit of some recorders. "Today, we want to begin by using only a simple tidal collector in a forcepower mode. We'll charge with that continuously, while using a pre-stored charge for the maneuvers. Only elementary maneuvers are planned for the first trial with this subject. He will rise from the ground to a height of two or three meters, under the nets, and make a controlled descent. When we have a successful trial up to that point, we'll decide how much farther we want to go today."

Michel knew that Lancelot had a backup power supply too, a hydrogen lamp that as far as he could guess was several times as large as it needed to be, whatever the designers' reasoning. The lamp rode somewhere in the haze extending for a meter or two to the rear of Michel's shoulder blades. It existed now, the scientists had told him, only in a quasimaterial form, the molecules of its once-solid structure represented by a patterning of forces. What would have been forces in an unmodified lamp were now no more than sketches of something more abstract and subtle still, despite which the hydrogen lamp kept right on working anyway. Of course, as one of the scientists had said, solid matter was itself no more than a patterning, of something that Michel thought he could now almost perceive, at moments, when he reached for it in the proper way with his new senses. . . .

Having run his own check on the power lamp, a check that he himself did not understand very well and could not have explained to an engineer (who would not have understood it either), Michel forgot that it was there. Turning round slowly in place, as was required of him in the last stages of today's fitting, he noticed that the far slopes of the crater wall were turning into a sort of grandstand, acquiring a considerable population of suited humans and their choice machines. Some were scientific observers. Many, he realized, zooming his perceptions in among them here and there, were guards of one kind and another.

"Step over here now, please, Michel." They led him to where a great yellow X, micrometrically exact in its dimensions, had been marked on the pavement. His feet in the soft-soled shoes that they had given him were positioned carefully at its center. From somewhere a fragment of his mother's voice, recognizable by tone and breathing pattern, came through the background noise of all kinds. Still four levels down, she was talking with cheerful animation about Art.

What would it be like to hold a piece of wood in his hand, a knife in Lancelot's, and carve? Entrancing as this speculation was, he had only a moment for it before voices were once more demanding his attention.

"All right, Michel?"

"Yes. All right."

The nearest other person stood some ten meters from the yellow X, the nearest machine a little farther still.

"There'll be no countdown or anything, just whenever you're ready. Can you get off the ground now? Slowly. Don't worry if nothing moves just at first. . . ."

He never doubted that in Lancelot he would be enabled to move as he had never moved before. There were, though, certain other problems. Just at the moment when his slipper-light shoes were losing their tenure on the pavement, an alarming potential of sideways acceleration threatened to achieve reality and almost did. Michel shied like a novice bike-rider from an incipient fall. His reaction was just a little too strong. At the moment of rising from the ground, he lurched minutely toward the nets (whose purpose he now thought he understood) that were waiting for him in the opposite direction. Around him, voices muttered, people tried to suppress excitement and triumph so that he should not be distracted by it.

One voice, tense, encouraging, spoke to him openly, but he did not need that voice either and he tuned it out. He needed no encouragement and he realized now that there were no helpful instructions anyone could give him. Probably no one had ever thought this way before. Michel, drifting above the surface gently, experimented, trying to understand that first unexpected sideways surge. It was something, he thought, deriving from the motion of the Moon itself beneath him. Dimly, when he made the effort, he could now begin to feel the great slow harmonies of rotation, of revolution riding revolution as the Moon's track rode that of Earth and the Earth marched with the Sun toward some constellation never to be seen in Alpine's skies.

That one monotonous voice continued to encourage him, as if its owner thought it was a lifting force. Spaceborne, Michel turned slowly in the bright lights, close beneath the wide-stretched upper net. Gauze robes swirled from him as he turned, and lifted faces ringed him in. The school play. Never in his life before or since had he been the center of so much attention, until now. Maybe they would all soon applaud. . . .

He raised his right arm, a gesture from the play, and with comfortable and sensitive fingers touched the soft toughness of the net, which someone had told him was three meters from the deck. Avidly following the movement of his arm went the aimings, adjustments, swallowings of cameras and recorders, so different in their working from human eyes and minds.

Join us. Be—

Probably the calling did not come from berserkers, or not from berserkers alone. Be. Something. Something that could perhaps be contained in the wordmachine; there seemed to be no human word that really fit.

No. In the manner of an easy, floating swimmer, he guided himself all the way across the top of the cabled cage. The voice that had been talking to him all along now registered as Tupelov's, and still it went on, excited and encouraging. It was starting to give orders now, and Michel listened to it, enough to get the gist of what it wanted. Obediently he made his way completely across the cage and back, then came down again just where he had started.

As soon as his feet were planted once more on the yellow X, a dozen people closed in upon him with a rush. Frank Marcus was there as soon as anyone, and Michel leaned on one of the rolling boxes, putting a little distance between himself and the suited people who came crowding on his other side. As soon as the first burst of questioning was over, and the leaders had turned away from Michel to confer among themselves, Frank remarked, "First time I tried it, Michel, I damn near went through the net. So did the only other person who's ever got this far with it. We were all more or less expecting you'd do the same. They said it would be better not to warn you, just to let you find your own way. Maybe they were right."

"Who was the only other person?"

"Another pilot. He hit the net, and then went crazy."

Michel said, "Just when you were starting to take off, something dragged you sideways."

"Yeah." Frank's hardware was all utterly motionless, and Michel knew somehow that the man was listening very attentively.

Michel stuttered and fell silent. He didn't know how to begin to tell what he had done to avoid the deflection, how he had managed the steady flight; he didn't know if the right words or even the right language had ever been invented. And it shook him somehow that Frank, an adult well ahead of other adults in this line of business, just stood there waiting patiently to hear.

On that first day of space trials he made two more successful flights, performing maneuvers of gradually increasing complexity. He wasn't tired when they called a halt.

For the next two days he toured Moonbase with his mother and Ensign Schneider, carved a little, rested when they urged him to, though he still hadn't done anything that made him feel tired. He played, halfheartedly, security guards in view, with children whose parents worked at the base. Meanwhile he was told that the first flight tests were being evaluated, and some minor changes being made in Lancelot. Then he was once more riding the giant elevator to the surface in his orange gym suit and gauzy immaterial robes. Frank Marcus, riding up beside him once again, had this time been transformed by being put into what he called his own flight suit, a single ovoid box.

On the surface the first thing Michel noticed was that a slow-dawning Sun had fired some distant crater-rims with silver. The second change he saw was that the cabled cage had been removed.

Tupelov's visored face smiled down at Michel in yet another careful inspection. Then the man awkwardly turned away. Suited cripples, the lot of them, Michel thought suddenly, and had a sudden feeling of kinship with Frank.

The squat metal ovoid beside Michel was beginning to look like the drawing of a speeding bullet, or of a large artillery shell perhaps. A striated blurring grew in the surrounding space, as careful technicians robed Frank in his own version of Lancelot.

When Frank next spoke, it was with his radio turned off; so that the sound came to Michel only, through the contact between the fields they wore. "Kid, I think they're rushing us a little."

With a mental order, Michel cut off his own radio transmission. "Me too," he answered.

"You feel all right about it?"

"I don't know. I guess so. They haven't told me yet exactly what they want today."

"They don't tell you a lot, do they? It's gonna be elementary combat maneuvers. I've tried it once before. They'll fly some kind of drone device out across the crater and you and I'll take turns trying to catch up with it and attack."

"Oh. What kind of weapons?"

"Remember what I said when you asked me about controls?"

"Oh. Yeah." Michel considered what the natural weapons of his body had to be. Fists and feet would have to be included, and he supposed he could do some damage with his teeth. There had to be more to it than that. He would find out when the time came.

The order came for Frank, who was to fly first, to take his place at the starting point, the now-familiar yellow X. Someone announced that the drone was ready now. In the past few days Michel had seen a good many of the machines at Moonbase and he had no difficulty in recognizing the basic type of the flying drone: a powered hoister, many times stronger in lifting capacity than any single human muscular system could be, though certainly not speedy in comparison with other transport devices. Its small engine was a miniature of the type used for centuries in spacecraft when traversing gravitational fields—it worked by warping gravity in its interior, allowing its own fields to grip and haul against the stuff of space itself.

A flash of red light and a radio tone signaled that launch was imminent. Then the semi-robotic drone ran forward a few steps, on six extremely stable though awkward-looking legs. It lifted, limbs folding back at once against its blunt mass of a body, a little bigger than a man's. Faster than a man could run it flew, just off the deck, heading straight in the direction of the crater's most distant curve of wall.

Frank's start signal sounded, and the blunt bullet of his housing rose in pursuit at once. His takeoff was skewed badly at the start; people hit the deck to give him room. But he got his motion quickly under control even as he accelerated after the fleeing drone. In the spotlights that followed him across the plain his gauze webs looked like a brief trail of rocket exhaust against the starry black above.

The drone clumsily sought to evade Frank, but he closed with it rapidly, now hurtling like a missile. It accelerated also, but to no avail. Impact against the far wall of the crater seemed imminent, and observers nearest the threatened point were scrambling for revetments when Frank overtook his prey. Like enormous extensions of his short metal arms, his Lancelot's immaterial talons closed on the target. His field-web flared, like the wing feathers of some giant raptor braking. At the moment of capture the target gave up, shutting itself off. In a slower, laden flight, Frank wheeled it round and bore it back beneath him to the basalt pad.

"Get the idea, Michel?" This from Tupelov.

"I think so."

"We'll go once more with Marcus, first, if he's still . . . How're you doing, Colonel?"

"Ready." Michel could detect the mutual dislike in both voices, and in Frank's an extra strain that must be due to wearing Lancelot.

A few minutes' delay went by, for reorganization and to give Frank a rest. Michel teetered on his toes, ready to fly, wishing they'd let him. Then at last the flying drone lunged away again, and again Frank went racing after it. This time he made a better takeoff.

For this trial the drone had been programmed to take defensive action, and although the point of interception was almost the same, what followed was not. An explosive struggle flared at the focus of all the observers' eyes and cameras. Michel, trying to watch, found that he had taken off without realizing it, and was again drifting easily three meters above the deck, looking over a wall of suited adult bodies.

At the focal point of a dozen spotlights, the distant combatants were down, amid a splashing of quick-settling dust. The drone, struggling to escape, was allowed only defensive action. Frank was not so

limited. His aggression took form in an extension of his Lancelot's fields, forming what looked like a flat paw of enormous size. As quickly as an arm could swing, it struck at the drone, pounding the powerful lifter down out of space and against the rocks. Dust and gravel flew, but the drone bounced up at once, still struggling to escape.

Gray, tenuous-looking limbs extending themselves from his Lancelot, Frank grappled with his prey. Both of them were down on the surface now, spinning in a dance made stately by the slow parabolic sheets of dust and gravel that their movements launched in the low gravity. Frank's forcefields, like a wrestler's arms, clamped the drone's machinery against his own. In the background of Michel's attention, timers continued to spin their digits: fifteen seconds now since Frank had launched, twenty seconds—

Three seconds more and Frank had the grip he wanted, despite the drone's six wrestling limbs. One more second after that, and he had delivered the finishing blow.

In the drone's electronic nervous system something snapped, and this time it did not bounce up from rock. A moment later Frank, his own hardware evidently a little bent somewhere inside, was in limping flight back toward the starting marks, his inert trophy suspended beneath his shimmering bullet-shape as though in great translucent claws.

This time, as soon as he had landed, people and support machines surrounded him, inflating a temporary air bubble. In a moment the top of his box had been opened. Michel, now standing on the deck again and peering between suited bodies, caught a glimpse of human flesh inside the box. He saw what appeared to be bearded facial skin, mushroom pale in the overhead lights, running in a narrow strip across the front of a titanium skull.

Something—could it have been something in the attitude of that mostly-metallic head?—made Michel turn then and look in the opposite direction. In the rear circle of watchers there stood a woman in a suit no different from the rest, a woman Michel now remembered having seen at various Moonbase times and places without having given her any particular thought. She was young, and her skin was very dark, her lips full as if she pouted. But she did not pout. She merely stood there looking with the rest at Frank, but her gaze as the canned man came partially into view was much more intent and very different from the rest.

Someone came to Michel with a question, and he soon forgot about the woman. The maintenance operation on Frank was quickly completed, and Frank was rolling to a place beside Michel again.

With radio transmitter off, Frank asked him, "They tell you what they want now?"

"Only that I'm going up next. I figure they want me to chase the drone a few times."

"Yeah. Then after that they're going to have you and me spar a little."

"Spar?"

"A make-believe fight. Well, not quite make-believe. Ever see boxers, just practicing? Like that, heavily padded gloves. Don't sweat it, nobody here wants you to get hurt, believe me."

The idea of fighting against Frank seemed somewhat unreal. But the part about nobody wanting him, Michel, to get hurt was so obviously and logically true that it took most of the alarm out of the prospect of a fight.

A fight. He had once or twice been through angry, childish scuffles with playmates. Once another boy had punched him in the lip, made his mouth bleed . . . but of course that was all before Lancelot, long before. And so it had really happened to someone else. . . .

"Ready, Michel? Let's see if you can catch the drone."

He walked on poised feet to the starting mark, and there thought readiness for flight, so that his toes just rested on the mark. A new drone had been pushed forward, and now on command lurched into flight toward the distant crater wall. Michel snapped himself back from a brief reverie, into complete attention on the job at hand. He willed himself after the drone, and with the willing saw the yellow X-mark fall from beneath his feet and fly away behind him. Arms half-extended, he leaned forward, thinking flight. Far ahead the drone receded, dragging spotlights with it.

Think flight, pursuit, and overtaking, and now the patch of brilliance centered on the drone grew larger, nearer. Think flight, speed, catching up . . . it had very little to do with imagination. Imagine yourself jumping up from your chair and running across the room, and you stayed seated.

He could feel that his commands to Lancelot were fumbling, groping things, only beginning to find out their true paths. But in the main they worked. Adjusting his vision now, he saw the closing drone in a far wider spectrum than that of light. He could have counted the scratches on its surface at hundreds of meters' distance, and gauged the depth of each.

All this in the five seconds following his takeoff, and in a few seconds more he had caught up with the speeding drone. Effortlessly matching its course, he approached it from above and spread his arms. His own child's arms were far too short to encircle the metal body, but at his wish Lancelot reached out field-arms three meters long, tailored to be just the proper size. Michel closed his own arms, and sensed the captured weight as Lancelot's grip clamped on. With that the drone went dead, became sheer hurtling weight, trying to fall. Lancelot's power effortlessly coped. Michel's own flight path did not dip by a centimeter from where he wanted it to be.

Spontaneous cheers broke from the small crowd of watchers as Michel flew in a wide curve with his catch. He dumped the dead drone—carefully—at Tupelov's feet just seventeen seconds after it had been launched. He couldn't remember what Frank's time on his first flight had been, against an unresisting target.

Again there was a short break for rest, for evaluation, for many questions. Then Tupelov, beaming, announced: "Michel, we're going to have Colonel Marcus fly out now, as fast as he can, and take evasive action. Think you can catch him?"

"Yes," said Michel, and immediately thought to himself: That was too blunt. I should talk in a way to make them all feel a little more comfortable with me. They were going to be less and less comfortable, he expected, as things went on.

Seconds later, he and Frank were both on their starting marks again. Then Frank was off, precisely on time, lifting more smoothly than before. Michel, as his own timer zeroed, found himself fractionally hanging back, responding to a sudden internal urge to make what promised to be a dull chase more exciting. Then he released himself, imagining vaguely an arrow flying from a bow.

The soft-looking waves of the Moon's surface were flickering underneath him once again. As Michel closed, Frank turned, trying to evade. Now just ahead of them a high portion of the crater's rim glowed in an uneven line with the new day's silver fire. Michel followed. Frank turned again, and yet again, a

darting, last-second maneuver this time, but it did him no good. The bullet of his ovoid body came underneath Michel precisely, and the boy slapped it with the field-extensions of both his hands.

Frank grunted an honest congratulation. Again there was jubilation on the radio. They flew back to the pad together, Michel slowing his own pace to that of the tired flyer beside him. Then, this time carefully tamping momentum back into the reservoirs where Lancelot could hold it stored, Michel dropped back onto the basalt surface.

The Secretary once more loomed above him, beaming. "That was very good, Michel. That was excellent. Do you think you could go faster still? But remember, stay below the crater rim. The defense computers get the electronic jitters sometimes; we don't want you showing up on their detectors."

"I think so. Yes, I could." A little more modest and thoughtful, that was it, a better answer this time. Actually, where the limits of Lancelot lay he did not know. He did not have them yet in sight, let alone within his grasp.

Tupelov turned. "Colonel Marcus?"

The metal box said on radio: "I was going all out, or very nearly."

"Are you good for another run? Or—"

"Yeah, let's get on with it. I'll let you know if I can't."

"All right, pursuit again this run. This time Michel will be the target."

"What the hell good is that? How'm I supposed to catch him? I can't."

Ten seconds of cool silence. "Very well, Colonel, Michel pursues again. All right with you, Michel?"

"All right."

"You take some defensive action, Marcus. Gently."

"Yes sir." Michel heard the voice-sound alter as Frank went off radio again. "Hear that, kid? When you catch me, we'll spar. You try to knock me right into the ground. I'll slap back at you."

"I hear."

"Come at me hard. He says gently, but if all this horsing around is going to prove anything, we've got to start being a little serious about it. We may get jarred, but neither of us is going to be really hurt, we're too well shielded inside these things."

Inside? What things? It took Michel a moment to remember.

Back to the starting marks. This time Frank, evidently drawing on some reserve of strength, got off even faster than before. Michel flew on his own timer's dot, and overtaking Frank took him no longer than in the previous trial. But at the last moment before interception, Frank's blurred shape changed course more sharply than Michel had yet seen—and then, just as Michel's grasping fields were closing, changed again.

For the first time since his first takeoff Michel was not in complete control of what his Lancelot was

doing. In a spinning turn, he clawed for a grip on the great metal ovoid, and felt only the other Lancelot's contending forces, trying to get away. In the next moment Frank surprised him, managing to knock the grip of one of Michel's forcefield arms away.

Spinning in a paralysis caused more by the surprise than the acceleration, caught for the first time off balance, Michel for a moment could think of nothing but to tighten the grip of his other hand, as hard as possible.

Dimly he sensed how both of their hydrogen lamps drew power, escalating forces with their stubborn masters' wills.

. . . not going to be beaten here by any little . . .

. . . all right if you want to play REALLY ROUGH . . .

Around the spinning pair of them the lunar mountains whirled. Down into the regolith their buffered bodies blurred, hurling slow waves of gravel, scythes of sand. Michel felt not a bit of fear; he was far too absorbed in other things, a hundred of them, mostly new, new doorways opening everywhere, new wonders thronging to discovery.

With one portion of his/Lancelot's mind he slowed down time by speeding up his own reactions, till now he could have plucked a millisecond out precisely from the endless spikefence of the marching past. Still, Frank's forcefield paw, the one that had slapped down the drone, had taken its enormous shape and was swinging at Michel almost before Michel could realize it. The man had drawn upon some hidden reserve of speed, his almost magical mental agility. This, thought Michel, is what has set him apart from other humans at ship controls, what has kept him alive in space against berserker after berserker. This something extra, at the last moment, at the end . . .

And before Michel's thought had been concluded, the sparring match was over.

" . . . Marcus . . . "

" . . . get some . . . "

" . . . out there . . . "

" . . . assistance . . . "

" . . . boy back here . . . "

" . . . one's down . . . "

Receding in a bounding flight across the rolling lunar surface, Frank's Lancelot flapped forcefields like ruined wings with the ferocious velocity of its spin. Skipping a small crater, glancing upward from a hillock, trailing disconnected alpha waves of thought, it spun toward the distant launching pad where white-garbed toys were scattering. Slow lunar gravity finally brought Frank crashing down again, amid a fresh spray of fine material from the surface. And now it dragged his tattered gauze-webs to a halt.

The watching winner, drifting a meter above the ground, poised still at the place where the fight had ended. Though he could not yet understand the ending of the fight, he could still feel it, in the thin muscles of his right shoulder.

Wondering, he began to drift a little higher. He did not fly to Frank; he could tell from the alpha waves of a stunned but living brain that Frank was still alive, inside that small, crumpled complex of force and metal upon which machines and human beings were now converging from all directions of the plain. But there would be little or nothing that he, Michel, could do in the way of giving help.

In the distance circled the sun-touched hills, looking more golden now than silver. Michel rose just a little higher still.

"Michel." There was a new strain in Tupelov's radio voice, and also a new fear starting. "Michel, come down."

He didn't much like Tupelov, despite the man's good manners; right from the start he hadn't liked him. There was no need to answer him right away. Frank was probably going to be all right, but now there would be no more testing for a while—maybe three days, Michel guessed. And before he took off the suit there was a thing or two he was impatient to get a look at.

Kid, you all right? This was Frank, half-conscious now, sub-vocalizing. Kid, this is a tougher thing than any of us realized.

"I understand, Frank." He didn't bother, this time, to turn his radio off before he spoke. "Anyway I'm starting to."

"Michel, come down."

Come at me harder this time . . . I won't hurt you . . . The mumbled words cut off abruptly. Some of the medics and their robots had reached Frank already, assessed his condition, opened his dented ovoid, were administering medication that knocked him out completely.

Michel rose higher. Beyond the hills where sunlight had a grip would lie the rim of the full Earth.

"Michel!" Tupelov was in a swift agony of alarm. "Get down here! The defenses will pick you up; you're entering the danger zone . . ."

He knew all that. Without difficulty he could feel the vast electronic nerve-nets just beyond the near horizon, on all sides. The defense machines could not locate him yet, not really, but they were twitching with his presence. Ignorant gods, idiotic genius genii of metal and force.

He had to give them words to say to him: Are you fast, little one in the gauze suit? Are you powerful? Will you play against berserkers, as we do? We dare you to a trial. Dare dare dare dare—

Not ready for that, not yet, Michel turned away from the Earth, sank ten centimeters lower. As he turned his back on Earth the forcefields shielding his eyes went gold-opaque. In a moment his mind had cleared them enough to let him see Earth's risen god. There were great slow undulations of corona, and on the disc itself the flares and ulcerous sunspots. The solar wind came sleeting in his face, infinitesimally faint but he could see it if he tried.

Great things out there, that someone—like me—can somehow, sometime, begin to know. On even terms, maybe? Or do I only think that because of still-enormous ignorance?

"Michel?" The voice was still afraid, but now it was starting to be calculating as well.

No need to make Tupelov sweat so dangerously. Michel did not have to hurry, to do what must be done. More learning, first. More exploration of what was possible. And then?

"I'm coming," said Michel. In quiet obedience he coasted down to land.

FIVE

Lombok found Elly Temesvar in an enormous and ancient city of old Earth, where the air was rich, untamed, with live-Earth smells, very different from those of all the other worlds Lombok had visited, very fitting, he thought, to the human senses. Temesvar's address was in a part of the city so old that it seemed half monument and maybe one-fourth archaeological site. The remainder in private hands included the great structure identified to Lombok as the Temple of the Final Savior. Its walls were granite block, aged steel reinforcements here and there showing through their fabric. Their style was some branch of Gothic. Just inside the doorway by which Lombok entered, a bright electroplaque informed the visitor of the different theories regarding the time and the purpose of the original construction—the place had been a temple of some kind, it seemed certain, from the very start.

An old-looking man with empty eyes, garbed in a gray sack, approached after Lombok had stood for an uncertain minute inside the arched dimness of the entry. When Lombok gave him the name of the woman he was looking for, he shuffled away again; Lombok continued waiting, looking mostly at the electroplaque.

A couple of minutes later, a blonde young woman of sturdy frame, veiled from the eyes down in well-fitting gray, emerged from behind a dull shimmer of modern field-drapes.

"You have a question for me?" Her voice was businesslike. It didn't seem to surprise her at all that a stranger should have a question.

"If you are Elly Temesvar, I have a question or two. About you, actually."

Above the veil, gray eyes appraised him levelly. "No reason why I shouldn't answer questions. Come along, we can talk in here."

He followed her past great columns, framing far interior spaces lost in dimness. Light from the gray Earth day outside entered through clerestory windows far above. Somewhere around a corner, a mixed chorus chanted drearily in a language Lombok did not recognize. He had been able to find out very little about this place as yet, and hadn't wanted to delay his visit until he could learn more. It was not on the secret Security list of possible goodlife front organizations—which of course proved nothing either way.

Elly led him across an enormous nave, whose immensity dwarfed small groups of gray-robos standing here and there in what looked like contemplation. At the far end of the nave rose what appeared to be a huge altar badly in need of repair. What with more pillars, and the pervading dimness, Lombok got no very clear look in that direction. Presently he was led into an out-of-the-way corner surrounded by still more columns, containing ancient stonework decorations and the first chairs Lombok had seen since entering the Temple. All the chairs looked old; some of them had once been real furniture, and some were cheap.

As his guide sat down, she simultaneously unveiled her face, saving her visitor the trouble of trying to

frame a polite request along that line. Her appearance matched the photos Lombok had studied. "So, what are your questions, Mr.—?"

"Lombok. I'm from the Defense Department."

He had credentials ready, but Temesvar waved them away. "I believe you. Anyway, it doesn't matter."

Oh? Lombok wondered silently. Even if I were to ask you something about highly classified material? Of course whatever secrets the woman had known when on active duty would now be greatly out of date. Or most of them would.

Aloud he said, "I'm doing a psychological study on certain retired veterans. You filled out a census form last year, remember? We're just spot-checking some randomly chosen respondents."

"Randomly." For some reason, that amused her, or almost did. "If anything happens at random, it'll fall on me."

He almost looked up at her sharply, hearing that. Randomness related to certain official secrets she did know, secrets still kept in hiding on the Moon.

He was consulting a convincing-looking list. "Your resignation, let me see, was perfectly voluntary, wasn't it? No pressure put on you of any kind, for any reason?"

"There was a little pressure to change my mind, stay with the service, as I recall. I was really pretty good."

"Yes. You were." He paused. "Looking back at it now, what would you say was the real reason you resigned?"

"The same reason I gave then. I had begun to understand that what I was doing in the service did not matter."

Lombok gave her a chance to elaborate on that. When nothing came, he started making notes, painstakingly: "Did . . . not . . . matter."

"Aren't you recording this? Most people do."

Most people? How many interviewers had she had, and who were they? "If you don't mind—"

"Not in the least."

Lombok pretended to turn on a tiny recorder that had been running all along. "Now. Could you amplify that a little, about your career in the Space Force not mattering?"

"It just didn't. Military things don't, nor does exploring space. After my last mission I began to understand that. Not all at once, but gradually."

"The defense of the life of the galaxy against berserkers doesn't matter?"

"I knew you were going to put it that way. In the long run—no, it doesn't. Oh, we're not goodlife here in the Temple. If there were berserkers attacking Earth at this moment, I'd fight them, I suppose. Yes, I'm

sure I would, a human reaction to protect the people that I'd see around me, and, I suppose, myself. Even though I knew that ultimately it wouldn't matter."

Lombok was trying to understand. "You just couldn't see that any more reconnaissance missions were worthwhile."

She was pleased, a little, that he was making an effort to grasp what she meant. "Something like that," she said.

"Want to tell me about that last mission of yours?"

She shifted position, crossing her legs athletically under the gray robing. "If you have the time to listen."

"All the time in the world." Lombok gestured genially. "Where you went, what you saw and did. How you got on with Colonel Marcus."

"Colonel, now, is he? Somehow I pictured him as having more rank than that by this time. Or being dead." It was said quite remotely, but without malice.

Lombok said, "I'm sure you've told the story of that last mission of yours before now."

"Yes, it's been recorded before, too. You could have looked it up. Probably you did. I admit I'm a little curious. Why do you come and ask me to tell it again, eleven years later?"

He didn't know whether or not to try and keep up the fiction of the random survey. "It was a unique experience. Wasn't it? I'd just like to hear it from you live, if you don't mind."

"Mind? No." But intelligent Elly was re-evaluating him. She dug out smokers, offered one which Lombok refused, puffed her own into life. "Who do you work for, at Defense?"

"Tupelov."

She digested that for a moment, then gestured that it did not matter. "All right. Well, the big thing about that last mission of course was that we ran into something near the Core that we had never heard of, seen, or imagined before. It had been sighted at least once before, and photographed. But there are so many weird filings in CORESEC they didn't even try to brief us on them all. Anyway. When we got back to CORESEC headquarters with—what we brought—people started calling the thing that we had found the Taj, after the Taj Mahal here on Earth. Something large and grand, with an aura of mystery about it. That became its official code name. What you call it now I don't know."

"What did you think of the Taj? At first sight?"

Her eyes, which had begun to drift away from him, came back.

"At first of course it was just a place to go. A hope. You have to realize that our ship had been under attack almost continuously for almost twenty standard hours, by a berserker much more powerful than we were. No one but Frank Marcus could have . . . anyway, by the time the Taj came into sight I was on the verge of a mental breakdown. I realize that now. They did hospitalize me briefly as soon as we got back to CORESEC headquarters, as you must know."

He knew. He signaled sympathetic, full attention.

Elly looked at her smoker and put it out. "What I said a minute ago, about random things falling on me. Do you know that on that mission everything peculiar seemed to happen?"

"Such as what?"

"I'm not sure I can even recall the whole list of oddities now. Before the berserker jumped us, we found amino acids in free space, varieties that no one had ever observed outside of atmosphere before. All kinds of organics, in enormous profusion."

"Excuse me, but I have never heard what the basic purpose of that mission was."

"General intelligence-gathering. Not looking for berserkers, certainly, not with two people in one small ship." The young woman fell silent, perhaps with some private memory.

"You were telling me about all the organic materials."

"Right. We were surprised. There are very few planets, you know, in that sector near the Core."

"CORESEC. I know a little bit about it. But tell me."

"High average star-density, better than thirty per cubic parsec. Nebular material very heavy, very complex. A maze of tunnels and bottlenecks; it's easy for a ship to get trapped. A number of them have. That's why they sent Frank."

"And you."

"Yes, I suppose. I was good. We saw gluts of petroleum. Would you believe dense enough in places for real gas-fires? Where there was free oxygen too, in regions sheltered from heavy starlight, you could get a line of real flame a billion kilometers long, along a zone of compression in the medium."

Another pause. Lombok got the feeling that when she had started to talk she had intended to lead up to something, but now she kept drifting away from it again. No doubt because nothing mattered. He prompted: "On that trip you became pregnant."

"Yes. I didn't realize you knew about that. I was on contraceptives, naturally. If I had wanted a pregnancy that wouldn't have been the ideal time or place to start it."

"Naturally."

"But for some reason there was a contraceptive failure. On that trip, all the long shots came home first."

It seemed that going on with the conversation was among the things that did not matter. Not wanting to concentrate too obviously on the pregnancy, he asked, "Tell me how you got away from the berserker."

Now Elly was looking past Lombok, as if at a viewscreen somewhere, and as she began to speak again tension gradually developed. Her strong hands started pulling and fingering at her robe. "It was after us—I mean right after us, a few kilometers, no more. I think that by then it had decided it could take us easily, and it wanted us alive. As we entered the Taj, there was some kind of—shock, sudden change, don't ask me exactly what. Frank was knocked out. I remained conscious the whole time—at least when they hypnotized me back at CORESEC, they couldn't find any gaps in my consciousness."

"And what did you see, feel, experience, while you were in there?" There was no immediate answer, and Lombok added, "How long did this—immersion last?"

The brief glance Elly gave him was almost pitying. "How long did it last? Well, the ship's clock in Frank's compartment ran through about four hours during the immersion, as you call it. The clock on my side meanwhile recorded something over eleven years."

Lombok had seen those figures before. He cleared his throat. "Obviously not any relativistic effect."

"Obviously." She smiled briefly. "Or I would have come out of the Taj with a half-grown child."

"So, some kind of strange field or whatever fouled up the timers. They were the regular cesium-133 clocks?"

"Yes. Therefore atoms of cesium-133 were changing energy states in our two compartments in quite different ways. If you were a scientist you'd look more puzzled than you do."

"Oh, I'm puzzled. But that's nothing new for me. Was your pregnancy affected by whatever had happened? Was the later fetal development normal?"

"I really don't know. There were other people willing to worry about that. And able to do a better job of taking care of it than I could, I'm sure. I had all I could handle, for a while, inside my own head. I had the conceptus removed on Alpine, the first place we stopped. You know, this is the first time I've really talked about it since. It was a nice-looking adoption agency, as I recall, well-equipped . . . I suppose there's an eleven-year-old running around Alpine now with a stranger origin than he or she can well imagine." Elly's expression softened, without quite reaching anything that could be called a smile.

Lombok sat back in his chair, raised his arms in a luxurious stretch. He looked up and around, at the dim groining of the ancient arches. "Who is the Final Savior, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I don't mind. We will know It when It comes."

"It?"

"When we say that, people tend to think we are berserker-worshippers. Completely untrue. The Savior is, will be, beyond the classifications of life and non-life."

"Identified with omnipotence? With a Creator?"

"I don't see any meaning in those questions."

Lombok cheerfully let them pass. "You were going to tell me more about your experience inside the Taj."

"Yes." Elly saw her hands plucking at the gray robe, and made them stop. "Descriptions won't do much good, I'm afraid. I tried to make recordings, take pictures. They didn't show very much when we got home."

"I know. If it hadn't been for the two things you brought back, it's possible no one would have believed your story at all."

There was a flash of humor in her eyes. "I didn't want to bring up the subject of those artifacts. Security, you know."

"I thought security wouldn't matter to you."

"It must matter to you, though. Now I'm sure you are really from Defense. Tell me, have more people been sent to the Taj? Oh, they must have been, by this time. I'd like to know what they've found out."

So would I, Lombok thought drily. Neither of the two expeditions had returned as yet. Which was not necessarily a sign of anything really wrong, not yet, but certainly in another standard year it would begin to be. He said, "I'm not really in the exploration end of the business."

Elly was once more looking over his shoulder. "You want to hear what it was like. All right. At one point, for example, it was as if—as if the ship had been turned inside out, and shrunk to the size of a giant beach-ball. Spherical still, but hardly bigger than a human body. I sat there somehow, on this intricate thing, riding—like a sort of side-saddle. My own body—I couldn't tell if my body was inside out too, or not. I'm sure I wasn't dreaming. My head was giant-sized and stuck out unprotected."

"Didn't you have your suit on?"

"Yes. When the experience started. But then I seemed to be outside of it."

"Colonel Marcus was unconscious all this time?"

"Yes. Commander Marcus, then. I couldn't raise him on the intercom, which had changed into the weirdest little squiggle of wire. I looked around the—the beach-ball, but I couldn't identify anything belonging to the ship."

"And what about things outside the ship? Away from it?"

There was a longer pause than any yet. Elly might have been working out a complex math problem in her mind.

"Order," she answered at last. "And disorder, too. But maybe what looked like, felt like chaos was only order, arrangement, of a higher kind than I could understand."

"Can't you tell me anything more concrete?"

"I can. But I don't think it'll help you in grasping the total experience." She gave a sharp sigh, started again. "When you're dreaming, the concept or feeling comes into your mind first, and then the brain generates pictures as an appropriate accompaniment. This wasn't dreaming, definitely. But I think it worked in a similar way. First I was aware of order, and then I saw these great structural members surrounding our ship. Somehow I was able to appreciate, visualize, the distance scale. As if we were inside something like a geodesic dome, but bigger than a star. I've never had an experience like that before. I don't suppose I ever will again."

"I was aware of disorder, or apparent disorder, things going on that made no sense at all to me. And with that I visualized a mist, more like a water-droplet fog than nebula, so thick that I could see it whipping past, right beside the ship. And there were sounds—I can't really recall them, let alone describe them. But they affected me in the same way. Order and disorder alternating. Music, but not like—and I

had the feeling that if I could have stopped the ship, I could have joyfully spent my life in trying to unravel the mysteries in just one handful of that fog rushing past. . . ."

Elly's hands were still now, but white-knuckled. Her face was almost serene, but Lombok to his astonishment thought he saw the beginnings of tears in those far-looking eyes.

For some reason this depth of feeling in her made him a little nervous, a little embarrassed, almost a little angry. "At debriefing," he said, "you didn't report—an experience of that intensity."

Her gaze came back to him. "I was numb," she said, relaxing a trifle. "My feelings . . . have been growing, developing, ever since it happened."

Lombok was not satisfied. He said, "This thing, the Taj—it was only a couple of hours away, at sublight speeds, from at least one quite massive star. I mean the star emitting that plasma jet, in which you were trying to hide your ship."

"Yes."

"Well, doesn't that present a seeming inconsistency? Doesn't it suggest perhaps that this thing that made such an impression on you had no physical reality?" Lombok was not much impressed by mystical experiences; not when some people could attain them by inhaling the smoke of burning weeds.

"Yes, it does," Elly answered calmly. "Or it would, rather, if I thought the Taj was just a physical construct of stellar size. Then tidal factors and other things would seem to make that kind of close proximity impossible. But I can only report things as they were."

"Or as they seemed to you."

"You yourself mentioned the two things we brought back. Proof of some kind of unusual encounter, certainly."

"Certainly." He had some theories of his own about them, but now was not the time. He was letting himself be distracted from what he had come here for. "Sorry I interrupted; go on. You went into the Taj, and the berserker came in after you, presumably."

"I saw it inside, following us, for a while. Wait. First, it—it said something, on voice radio, about how our new weapons weren't going to help us. Then we went in, and it came in, following us . . . and then . . . I don't know. It was destroyed, perhaps. Or it lost us. Or it just—gave up."

"Gave up? How could a berserker—?"

"I don't know. I . . . the funny thing is, once we were inside, I think I all but forgot about the berserker."

"You were piloting the whole time you were inside?"

"I took the controls, on manual, when Frank conked out. Then somewhere along the line we went on autopilot, because I do remember clearly, after we had emerged again, switching the autopilot off and taking back manual control."

"You were back in normal space then?"

"What passes for normal, in CORESEC. And Frank was coming round, and by then the Taj was out of sight. As soon as Frank started to get on top of the situation again, he made some little joke about how he'd rested. When I tried to tell him what had happened, he thought I was, or had been, delirious. Then we found the two artifacts, the astragalus in his cabin, the ring in mine. They were just sitting on our consoles, right out in the open. We picked them up—didn't know what to make of them. It wasn't until later, at CORESEC base, that their—properties—were discovered."

"Yes." Lombok pondered for a while. "Did Frank ever know that you were pregnant?"

Elly didn't spend much time thinking about it. "I really don't know, he never said anything. He's had other children here and there; now and then he'd mention the fact in passing, as you might mention having had your appendix out. Don't tell me he's expressing a personal interest now."

"Not that I know of." Here came a few tourists, or prospective converts maybe, crossing the nave behind a gray-robed guide. The tourist man carried a rather weighty single-handled case which probably meant he was going to make some elaborate holographs.

Elly was lighting herself another smoker. "Something's come up, though, hasn't it?" she insisted. "Having to do with the kid."

Lombok appeared to take thought. "He'd be about ten now, wouldn't he? Are you developing a personal interest of your own?"

"Eleven. You said 'he.' "

"You didn't ask them about the sex at the adoption agency, when you—?"

There was a step behind Lombok, and he turned to see one of the tourist women bending close. Why should she want to ask him a question, when she had a guide? But it wasn't a question anyway, because the woman had something in her hand, and there was a new coolness in Lombok's face and lungs.

Stupid joke, he thought, and started to get up, and knew that he was falling down instead.

SIX

"Hey, Michel, that was one lovely counterpunch." In the low-ceilinged, hard-surfaced Moonbase corridor the voice issuing from Frank's speakers took on a small tail of ringing echo, and if Michel had been wearing Lancelot he might have found some amusement in trying to sort out the several sets of what he had learned were called harmonics. But he was in his loafing clothes today, shorts and loose shirt and sandals, taking a lone and moody stroll that had led him farther and farther from the busier regions of the base. He hadn't seen anyone at all for a couple of minutes before he came upon Frank's boxes standing motionless against a wall.

But Michel was at once glad of the meeting. "Thanks," he said. "I didn't mean to knock you out."

"I know. It's all right. No tests for you today?"

Two standard days had gone by since their sparring match. "Not today. Tomorrow I think we start again."

"You start again. They've informed me I won't have to wear the damned thing any more. What's up? You look a little worried."

"Well." There were really two things, neither of which he had yet mentioned to anyone else, not even to his mother. "For one thing, they're changing the equipment. Trying to fit extra weapons onto it. But—" Michel, almost despairing of trying to make his feelings on the subject convincing to anyone else, shook his head.

"You don't know if you can work the weapons properly."

"That's not it! Probably I can. But—the thing is, Lancelot really doesn't need them."

Frank moved a few centimeters from the wall, all segments rolling together. His voice sounded alarmed and hardly mechanical at all. "Hey, kid. Eventually, you know, whoever wears that thing is supposed to fight berserkers with it."

"I know."

"That was a good pillow-fight that you and I had, but as a test it was very preliminary. If that had been a berserker machine instead of me . . . nobody's going to punch one of those things out with his fist."

"I know! I mean, I know what you mean, Frank. But—I think I could. With Lancelot. Once I really learn how Lancelot works."

Michel could almost see Frank's head shaking inside its box. "Kid. Michel. Look. Maybe it is theoretically possible for Lancelot to draw that kind of power. But the enemy uses the same power sources we do, roughly speaking. And Lancelot right now doesn't have the hardware."

"You mean metal."

Frank had fallen silent. Michel, looking back over his shoulder in the direction he himself had come from, saw the dark-skinned woman from the scientific group, approaching at a graceful walk. Not in her spacesuit now of course, but wearing a dress whose draped skirt somehow, with her moving in it, suggested tall grass and elegantly drooping trees moved by a light wind.

"Michel," said Frank's speakers in a tone that was subtly new, "this is Vera. Mrs. Tupelov."

"Hello," said Michel, and, as Mother would have expected, made a polite greeting gesture.

The woman's heavy lips were not pouty at all when she was smiling. "I know Michel, everyone does. Call me Vera, will you, honey?"

Still, a certain strain was in the air. Some awkwardness having to do with the way adults conducted their social lives had just happened, or was happening right now. Into the silence Frank said, "Michel and I were just talking about Lancelot. The difficulties thereof."

"Oh?" Vera looked properly concerned. "If it's not about the forcefield math, I'm afraid I can't help much."

"More like piloting problems," Michel said unhappily.

"Honey, if it's getting to you after all, you better tell the medics." Vera's concern grew more real. "Or tell my husband. Or I'll tell him for you."

"Getting to me? Oh no. It's not that I get sick using Lancelot, or anything like that."

Frank's middle box put out two metal stick-arms, let them swing rhythmically from their upper joints. It seemed to be a gesture miming patience, taking the place perhaps of slow thumb-twiddling.

Vera saw this and shook her head. "Look, boys, I think I'll just leave you to your piloting discussion. Catch you later, both of you."

"Caaatch yoouu." Frank's answer came in a voice for once tuned far outside the human vocal spectrum, deep as the cough of some giant predator.

Vera giggled. With a wink in Michel's direction and a small wave for both of them she turned in her swinging skirt and strode back in the way that she had come, leaving Michel with a momentary vague curiosity as to why she had come this way at all.

But he had more demanding things to think about. "Can I ask you something, Frank?"

"Sure. If I can ask you something, too."

"What?"

"Promise you'll try to teach me how you do it. With Lancelot. When there's time."

Michel paused. "I'll try."

"You don't sound too hopeful. Anyway, what was your question?"

Michel drew a deep breath, and with the sensation of stepping into a gulf of unknown depth he asked, "Do you ever have the feeling that you're becoming some kind of a machine?"

"Is that all? Hell, no. Well of course in a sense this hardware that you see has become a part of me. But I'm not a part of anything except myself . . . oh, maybe you mean when piloting a ship? Yeah, then there's a sense, a very strong sense sometimes, in which the ship and pilot become a unit. But I had that feeling, pretty much the same, before I was all smashed up. It's a pilot's feeling of becoming more than he is otherwise."

"Not of being swallowed up by anything, though."

"Swallowed up? No." Frank paused, his liquid lenses sliding and rotating carefully. "That answer your question?"

"I don't know. No it doesn't, really."

"Ah. To me, Lancelot doesn't feel like a machine at all. If it was a machine, felt like a machine, then I could live with it. But to you it does, and the machine part is taking over the live part, is that it? The live part being you?"

"Yes." It was a surprising relief to have said that much, at last, to someone.

"This feeling ends, I trust, when you take the damned thing off."

"Yeah. Only . . ."

"Why don't you complain about it, as Vera suggested?"

"Then they might not let me wear it." Confession, coming almost in a whisper. "I feel happier when I have it on. And then like there's less of me, or something, every time when they take me out of it again."

"Hell." A heartily sympathetic though mechanized snort. "I'm happier when I'm in a ship."

That wasn't it, though. Or was it? Michel didn't feel sure enough to argue. And certainly he felt better for confession. Even—or especially—to a set of boxes.

Frank remained silent for more than five seconds, which was for him a long and thoughtful pause. "Let's take a walk," his speakers grunted then.

Michel caught up with a skip to the swiftly moving train, and then walked quickly to hold his place beside it. He was led purposefully back into the regions where other people and other moving machines were common.

A liquid lens on the head box was studying Michel. Frank asked, "I don't suppose they've shown you any of the pseudopersonalities."

"The what? No."

"I don't know why in hell he doesn't communicate with you. It would give you a better perspective on the whole operation."

They passed signs warning about security zones. They passed one live guard, for whom Frank did not even slow.

"Colonel Marcus? I should see the kid's clearance, if he's going—"

"Stuff it. You should have a clearance, just to talk to him."

That behind them, they kept walking and rolling on. Then Frank stopped abruptly, before a plain door with no handle. He put out one of his metal arms and with a touch on the door's featureless surface transmitted some kind of opening code. It opened to let them enter a small and heavily shielded storeroom.

There were a couple of narrow aisles, between low racks. Each rack held hundreds of metal cases, each case being of a size for an adult to carry about one-handed, and fitted with an appropriate grip.

Frank rolled between the racks, inspecting labels. "These are the little bastards we're supposed to replace in the Lancelot system. Or rather you, and other kids like you if they ever find any, are going to replace 'em. I can't hack it. I really can't."

"I don't understand." The cases held complex components of some kind, meant to be plugged into

something larger. Beyond that Michel could get no feeling for them.

With a metal arm Frank drew a case down from a rack. Then he trundled down the aisle with it to the end of the room, where work space had been provided, and slid it expertly into a large console. He made adjustments on a viewer, and a moment later beckoned to Michel.

Looking in, through what seemed to be some great power of optical magnification, Michel could see what at first glance appeared to be imitation snowflakes, cobbled together out of what might be plastic, in a complex and vast array.

Frank's voice beside him said, "This one's the Red Baron. Quite a story connected with it. Some of the others here have seen use in combat too, incorporated into conventional fighting ships as well as earlier versions of Lancelot. In places where live human brains tend to fail under the strain. These stand the strain, but they can't really do the job. Not well enough."

The name Red Baron meant nothing to Michel, who was discovering how to tune the viewer. His adjustments led him down through level after level of magnification. When light-quanta became too coarse to image the next level of detail properly, electrons were automatically substituted, and quarkbeams succeeded those grosser entities in turn. The crystalline complexity that had suggested snowflakes was still present, composed of what form of matter Michel could no longer guess, diminishing apparently without limit into finer and finer delicacies.

"This looks like—like something natural. But it isn't."

"Nope. People made it. Go on, tune it finer if you like."

He did, until the device reached its ultimate limit. The interior of the pseudopersonality was like no other artifact that Michel had ever examined. The smaller the scale on which he looked at it, the finer and more perfect its structure appeared.

"These are imitation personalities, kid, most of them modeled on historical individuals. Imitation minds, of a sort. They were invented to be used in historical simulations, and in desperation the powers who run things have tried to make 'em work in space combat. Instead of the subconscious minds of living brains. There are parts of our minds that live outside of time, you know."

"I've heard that. I don't know if it's—"

"It's true. It's what gives us the edge, sometimes, over the enemy. One of the things that does."

Michel was not listening very carefully. He was awed by what he saw—not by the thing's capabilities so much as by its workmanship, which impressed him even more than Lancelot's. He murmured something.

"They work in fractal dimensions when they make these, Michel. Know what that means?"

Michel shrugged. He didn't expect to comprehend the specialized words that adult technologists used among themselves. "Something very small, I guess."

"It's roughly like this: A line has one dimension, a point has none. Fractal involves something in between."

Michel raised his eyes from the viewer, prodded the pseudopersonality's case with one finger where it partially projected from the console. "And this can replace a human operator in Lancelot?"

"Not very well, as I say, or we wouldn't be here. Anyway, you better believe they wouldn't put this particular pseudo in."

"Why not?"

"It has to do with who the real Red Baron was. Someone they wouldn't want to trust with Lancelot. Like me." Frank's speakers emitted a series of rising squeals that Michel understood as sardonically formalized laughter. "But hell, even I can outdo these in Lancelot. Which is the point I wanted to make when I brought you here. You and I are alive, and this stuff is hardware. Some people around here who talk a lot of philosophical crap have trouble with that distinction." Contempt had grown in Frank's voice. "If these things, the finest machines we can make, could do my job better than I can, Tupelov wouldn't have dragged you all the way here from Alpine, and we wouldn't be taking you out to the proving grounds in a couple more days. We're human beings. We're the bosses when it comes to any partnership with machines. And also we're gonna win the war. If anyone should ask you."

"Frank? Two more questions?"

"Shoot."

"Who's really going to be using Lancelot in combat?"

A five-second hesitation. "Someone who can use it really well."

Michel nodded slowly; it was an answer he had, really, already known. And it was something that he was going to have to think about. "Second question. Where are the proving grounds?"

"Christ, they don't tell you anything. The moons and the rings of Uranus make up the one we're going to use. It takes about six hours to get out there from here."

SEVEN

Even before Elly Temesvar was fully awake, her body and mind had at some level recognized the subtle differences between natural gravity at the Earth's surface and artificial gravity set at a level of not quite one standard G. She had been dreaming of mountains, and a log building with a peaked roof . . .

So when her eyes opened it was with more curiosity than surprise that she discovered herself to be lying on her back on a berth in a small cabin. Her surroundings did not much resemble the interior of any service ship that she had ever ridden in, being decorated in an ornate and obviously civilian style, and her curiosity increased.

In the next moment, memory returned with a rush. An immediate attempt to jump to her feet got her nowhere at all; something was holding her almost motionless. Straining her neck somewhat, she could just manage to raise her head enough to look down at her body. Over her gray Temple garments ran some kind of webbing, laced to the frame of the berth at many points. Her mind, seeking frantically for reassurance, could come up with nothing better than the feeble suggestion that the bonds might be meant only as an emergency restraint against strong acceleration. But in that case there ought to be some way for the occupant to loose the bindings, and she could discover none. She could move little more than her fingertips.

. . . As she now recalled the scene, she had simply taken them for tourists. Tourists were coming and going in the Temple at all hours, frequently, and there had seemed to be no reason for her to inspect this small group closely. Elly closed her eyes now, trying to remember. Two women and a man, the man white-haired she thought, following Deacon Mabuchi across the nave, approaching the place where Elly sat talking with her visitor. Now she could summon up a vague recollection of something rather small but evidently heavy, carried swinging in the man's left hand. The group had proceeded casually right up to where she sat with Lombok, and then . . . then it had been too late. Now she remembered seeing Lombok go down, just before she had blacked out herself. So it would seem that Lombok had not been a willing partner in her kidnapping, or whatever this might be.

Across the tiny cabin, almost within arm's reach had she been able to reach out an arm, there was another berth. But it was unoccupied, folded back to make part of the bulkhead.

A moment later, a door near Elly's head slid open. A tall, white-haired man in silvery civilian clothing looked in at her calmly from a narrow corridor outside. "Are you at all hurt?" he asked, sounding mildly concerned, and also very much in control.

At second glance, Elly judged that her visitor's hair was not age-white but only extremely blond, as if he were a natural albino who had elected to have repigmentation treatment limited to his eyes, which were a very pale blue, and his skin, of an untanned Caucasian pallor. He was waiting for an answer.

Elly moved her fingers, about all that she could do in the way of testing. "I don't think so," she answered, trying to sound calm.

"We had to act abruptly. We could not take the risks of argument." It was not an apology, only an explanation. "But I hope to be able to release you soon, Ms. Temesvar."

"What keeps you from releasing me now? And who are you?"

"You can call me Stal. It means 'steel,' in an old language, and I rather like it." He spoke as if his likes and dislikes were important things indeed. Elly realized that to his helpless prisoner they might well prove to be important.

Stal continued: "You really are among friends aboard this ship." The words seemed meant as reassurance, but his set features did not soften at all as he spoke. He glanced out into the corridor behind him now, and made a small beckoning motion with his head. A moment later he pressed himself back against the bulkhead, making room in the narrow doorway for a figure familiar to Elly, that of a stocky man of middle height, with Oriental features and black hair. This was Deacon Mabuchi, like Elly still wearing Temple gray, a soft smock above work trousers and plain boots.

The Deacon stood beside her berth, his round face glowing down at her with some triumph she could not comprehend. He murmured gently, "Sister Temesvar—"

"Deacon, explain to me—"

The Deacon mildly overrode her protest. "All now aboard this ship, Sister Temesvar, are in fact our fellow Heralds of the Savior, though they do not yet admit it, even to themselves. The fact is that the Savior has come, and these folk, unlike our own titular leaders in the Temple, have recognized It."

Elly didn't know what to say. For her, allegiance to the Temple faith had been only the path of least

resistance, acceptable as truth because every other belief or mental attitude seemed to have been blocked, made practically impossible by what she had witnessed and experienced at the Core.

Mabuchi's own faith was obviously something quite different. While Stal stood back, watching the two of them as imperturbably as before, the Deacon's eyes shone down exultantly, possessively, at Elly.

"And you, Sister Temesvar, you are the most fortunate of women. Today, the only glory that can matter has become yours. It is through you that the Savior has taken final form for us. Through you life and death alike will be no more. Through you the Earth and all that has grown from Earth will attain final peace."

There was a silence in the small cabin. Three people, each one looking from one face to the other of the remaining two, expectantly. Each one, thought Elly, with a purpose at right angles to the other two, so none of them really understood another.

Her own purpose right now was simply to get free. "All this has some connection with my child, doesn't it?" she demanded sharply. Getting free meant arguing with these men, and arguing would seem to require knowing what they wanted and expected. And Lombok had been digging for information on the subject of her offspring. Something had come up. . . .

"Child no longer," intoned Mabuchi. The words that began pouring from him now sounded like a quotation from some secret ritual that Elly had never heard before: "Flesh of man and woman no longer, though still in a fleshly garment robed . . ."

Stal chimed in: "Lord of force and metal, Lord free of life and death alike . . ." It was impossible to tell if his harsh voice held mockery or struggled to restrain true feeling. Watching Stal, Elly was suddenly struck with the idea that the man looked the way he did because of a deliberate attempt to cultivate a metallic appearance. This idea in turn suggested something else to her, something that made her abruptly begin to feel faint. Stop that, she ordered herself.

And made herself interrupt the chanting men: "Where are you taking me, and why?"

Mabuchi deferred to Stal, and it was the white-haired man who answered: "We are taking you to meet the entity who was your son, Ms. Temesvar. That means going out to the new military proving grounds, out in the Uranian system."

That was an answer that explained nothing, that in fact seemed to make no sense at all. "Why should he be there?" Before leaving the service Elly had heard of the new proving grounds, but she had no idea of what might be going on there now.

"He is there because the badlife seek to use him." The epithet was frightening enough to bring on a new surge of faintness, all the more frightening because it slipped from Stal's lips with such unselfconscious ease. At the moment Elly could not remember ever hearing anyone use the word in real life before. It was a word from fiction, from the stage, on which the actors who played goodlife tended to emphasize it, striving for maximum shock effect.

Mabuchi too was moved, though for another reason. "The Savior should not be called 'he,' " he protested to his colleague.

"I beg your pardon," the tall man responded stiffly. "But to this woman, the Savior is still her child. And we must try to attune ourselves to her psychology— Ms. Temesvar, the badlife have grasped at least the

fact that your offspring is unusual, and they mean to use him as part of a weapons system. Have you ever heard the code name Lancelot?"

"No," she answered weakly. Of course there were innumerable code names that she had never heard. She was trying to imagine what kind of weapons system might have her eleven-year-old plugged into it. Frank's child too, of course, and she could well imagine a boy of unusual ability. The whole idea still seemed insane to her, which did not mean that desperate men and women, Frank Marcus one of their number, were not going to come up with something like it for their next effort in the war. Elly's imagination presented her a picture of her child, amputated somehow to fit a set of Frank-like boxes, and fired off into the void. . . .

"From what we know of Lancelot it is a horror," Stal was saying. "And we intend to save Michel from it. Michel, that is what his adoptive parents named him. Here, Elly, I have a picture."

Metal-steady in Stal's wiry fingers, there appeared a photograph that had been taken somewhere out of doors. On a second-story porch on the front of a log building, a young boy stood gazing upward toward the camera. His hands, large and square-looking like a workman's, were on the railing and he squinted into a wind that pulled at his long, fair hair. Above his head the roof was steep and Elly, thinking Alpine, knew a chill of beginning conviction.

The clarity of the boy's face had been somehow enhanced, at the expense of peripheral details. He was good-looking, Elly thought, in a rather sharp-featured way, and in his forehead and in his eyes she involuntarily discovered something of herself. What there might be of Frank Marcus was not so easy to discover.

Both men were obviously waiting for her reaction. "Michel what?" she finally asked them.

"Geulincx," said Stal. "An eminent Alpine family you may have heard of. Folk art. Woodcarving."

"I haven't been paying much attention to art of any kind." At last she had produced a sentiment for which Mabuchi's face could register approval. "I still don't understand—except that you must think this kid is the Savior. And you think I am his mother. If so, is this the way you honor me?"

The men exchanged glances, after which Mabuchi went out, evidently controlling struggling emotions with a great effort.

"I expect you will be of great help to us," Stal explained then. "When we have Michel on board here, and when both you and he have truly grasped the situation. What happens when we liberate him from the badlife may very well be traumatic. Therefore—Savior or not—a mother's care may be important."

"You expect to simply land this ship at the proving grounds somewhere and load him on board, assuming he's really there? Without—"

"Without resistance from the badlife? No, lady, I do not expect that. But provisions have been made." His stiff lips moved a trifle, almost smiling.

"Are you the captain of this ship, Stal?"

"I? No."

"I demand to see the captain, then."

"Your chance will come."

"Now."

"I have no orders to arrange such a meeting. But perhaps in this case I should use initiative." After staring at Elly a thoughtful moment longer, Stal suddenly bent and reached under her berth. His hand emerged holding a heavy metal case, and she was reminded at once of the thing she remembered seeing him carry in the Temple. There, to the degree that she had thought of it at all, she must have assumed that it was some kind of holography equipment, a common piece of tourist baggage.

Stal swung the empty berth opposite down from the wall. Then, with the care of one handling a valued object, he hoisted the case up into the berth, securing it there deftly with the common acceleration restraints. Then there was a click, as Stal opened a small door on the front of the case—or perhaps the door had opened automatically, Elly was not sure. Something very thin and snakily metallic drew itself out of the case, almost like a line sketched in the air. It reached across the space between berths for one of Elly's almost immobilized fingers, and stung her briefly.

"What—?"

The sinuous limb withdrew. Then, just above the place where the arm had disappeared, a new opening in the case revealed what looked like the subtle vibration of a broad-spectrum liquid lens. Elly had the uncomfortable impression that her whole form was being scanned intently.

"Just a little blood test, I should imagine," Stal said, in a voice that was possibly intended to be soothing. "The Co-ordinator will wish to make absolutely sure that you are who we think you are. And perhaps to confirm some details of Michel's genetic inheritance."

"You—imagine?" Elly had never before seen a robot medic that looked very much like—

From the small case issued words. They came in a ridiculously squeaky voice, which under other circumstances might possibly have offered her at least momentary amusement. The voice said sharply: "You will tell this life-unit nothing more without further orders."

Stal bowed at once. Stammering, he made humble acknowledgement of the Co-ordinator's command. But Elly could no longer see or hear him.

EIGHT

Some ten standard years ago, operations headquarters for the new proving grounds had been established on the surface of the Uranian satellite Miranda. Under one dome the structure offered room for a hundred humans to work and live; some of the quarters could be called luxurious, and all were at least reasonably comfortable. At the order of the President of Earth provision had also been made for housing members of any of the very few known non-Earthly intelligent races. So far none of these had ever appeared as guests.

"Told 'em when they built it that we'd never see a Carmpan here." This from Tupelov, who today was conducting a grand tour of the facility for one lone and probably lonely guest. Walking normally in the augmented gravity, he led Carmen Geulinx from the lobby of the living quarters out into the central

operations room. Here one tall wall was made up almost entirely of viewing ports, all of them at the moment cleared.

"Oh!" said Carmen. Then she added, quite unnecessarily, "That's Uranus itself."

The solar system of her homeworld contained no sight at all like this. Her hand on Tupelov's arm, they walked right up to the ports. The blue-green gas giant, a great scimitar of its surface in direct sunlight at the moment, seemed to be almost leaning right against the outer surface of the heavy glass. What could be seen of Miranda's own slaggy skin, just underneath and outside the port, was bathed by reflection from the planet, producing an eerie underwater glow.

Carmen hung back for a moment, and the Secretary tugged his arm forward, so that she came with him rather than let go. Standing just inside a port, he pointed out to her the moons Oberon and Ariel, each turning toward the distant Sun a bright miniature of Uranus' own crescent. The satellites were moving perceptibly, in the plane of the monster's spinbulging equator, and the same aquamarine light that lay on the Mirandan landscape tinged also the dull, scarred flanks that the two other visible moons turned toward their primary.

"Titania and Umbriel are evidently hiding behind Daddy at the moment," said Tupelov.

"And the rings . . ." breathed Carmen. "Ahh, beautiful."

"Sometimes you can't see them at all, even from here." But sometimes, as now, the great circlets, like ghosts of the rings of Saturn, worked like giant diffraction gratings, shredding cold sunlight into a nebulous multicolored spectrum, and sending a sample of it in through the ports. Tupelov tried a new metaphor: "A rainbow ballet skirt for a fat, dancing planet."

Carmen, perhaps through kindness, made no comment on that effort. "Where's Earth?" she asked at last.

He had to get right up against the glass and squint into the incoming Sunlight. "There. The bluish star." Carmen moved up close beside him and it felt natural to rest a pointing forearm on her shoulder; she was as tall as he.

"It looks so near Sol," she said tritely. Even at this altitude in the System there was no doubt which star lay at its center.

"It is. Very near. Out here we're nineteen times as far away. That's Mars, see, looking red, right beside the Earth."

"Yes. And I think I can recognize Venus now. Inward, looking brighter."

"Right you are."

"And beyond. That's Orion, isn't it?—you pointed it out to me from Moonbase. It doesn't look any different at all."

To Tupelov it looked bigger. They had left a village and climbed a little hill, and now looking back past the village they saw a distant mountain practically unchanged. In angular measurement a little shrunken, but in subjective vision magnified, because of the vast shrinkage of the houses and the streets that they had left behind.

For a human mind connected to Lancelot's well-nigh supernatural vision—what would the effect be like?

Tupelov asked, "How does Michel like all this traveling?"

"Oh, I think he enjoys it. Not that he ever tells me a lot about how he feels. Do you and Vera have any children, Mr. Tupelov?"

"No." He tried to make it sound just a bit regretful.

"You're very kind to take the time to show me all these things."

"Oh, not at all." It was time he would have had to use on things of secondary importance anyway, while Michel and the latest refinement of the equipment were being melded for the first tests at the proving grounds. "I'll tell you a secret," Tupelov continued, sounding confidential though there were twenty other people in the big room. "Being nice to certain people is part of my job, just as being nasty to others is part of it also. But for you I'd be nice anyway."

The athletic lady from far away didn't know quite what to make of that. Well, it seemed he didn't yet know his own mind regarding her, which was doubtless why he talked that way.

Turning away from the ports at last, he led her closer to the center of the room. "Here's the Moonbase ticker."

"Ticker? Why do you call it that?"

"I guess some of the ancient models actually used to tick. The name, as applied to remote printers, goes way back." Coming through as usual across the ticker's screens and on its writer were streams of information all more or less relevant to Defense. Some of the data were answers to questions transmitted from here down to Moonbase hours ago, and some were questions that the people down there had thought up for the Secretary or his aides during the few hours since he had left them. "See, when it takes more than two hours to beam a message one way, you don't wait for an answer, you just keep chattering." Tupelov briskly tapped the human operator's shoulder, and in a different tone demanded, "Any word from Lombok yet?"

"Negative, sir."

"Earth is that far." Carmen was musing aloud, looking back toward the ports. "And that's two hours' communication time. And Alpine is months away, even moving at multiples of the speed of light. We can't really grasp it, can we? I can't, anyway."

He was wondering whether he ought to try to commiserate with Carmen over her separation from her husband, when a double door opened on the far side of the big room. "Here we go," he said instead. "Here comes Michel."

The kid was garbed in Lancelot over a tight-fitting orange undersuit. As usual, he looked calm, intent, and ready to go. Carmen immediately hurried over to her son to make a little fuss about him, her hands stroking the invisible forcefields that guarded his face and tender neck as if there might be a collar there to be turned up. Then, with a technique she had discovered on Moonbase, she reached inside and actually touched his cheek. It could be done, as long as the reaching hand moved slowly enough, and the wearer was willing to be touched. Tupelov found himself wishing, not for the first time, that the damned thing looked more formidable; small wonder that half the brass were unable to generate any faith in it. It was

much too late now, of course, to make any design changes for appearance's sake. But it would have been easier to sell to everyone if it had looked more like a suit of armor. Somehow this version didn't appear to be able to keep its wearer dry in the rain, let alone . . . Actually, it made the kid look like some kind of fairy in the school play.

Carmen, abruptly realizing that everyone else was waiting for her to get out of the way, dropped her hands and with a few nervous words took herself aside.

Tupelov stepped forward. "Michel, I hope this time you've been adequately briefed on what's expected. I hear we've been a little lax about that in the past."

Michel answered clearly. "They said that this time you just want me to fly all the way around Miranda."

"That's right. After you've done that we'll talk about what comes next. Some of us are going to be following along close beside you, in a scoutship. Ready?"

* * *

Elly Temesvar, recovering from her faint, had no idea how much time had elapsed since her introduction to the Co-ordinator, except that her body in its prolonged bondage was beginning to be uncomfortable in several ways. The restraints were as tight as ever. The door to the corridor was closed again, and the berth opposite hers had been swung back up into the bulkhead. She was alone.

Except, of course, that it might have ordered itself put back under the berth she lay upon.

It was time for a little deliberate deep breathing. She was not going to allow herself to sail off into another faint, no matter what. But fear and confinement were making her arms and legs feel so weak that she was not sure she would be able to stand up even if she were set free. . . .

The reopening of the cabin door actually came as a relief. A youngish, heavy-bodied woman looked in. Her heavy breasts seemed to be bound, to flatten them, by some constricting fabric underneath a steel-colored shirt. Elly could not tell if she was one more of the pseudo-tourists from the Temple or not.

"Where—" Elly began, and discovered that her mouth was now so dry that the simplest speech was difficult.

"Where what?" The woman's voice was harsh, like a reedy imitation of Stal's. She came to stand right beside the bunk, evidently with no fear in her legs of anything that might be beneath it. "Never mind. There's nothing that you need to know just yet."

"Get me a drink," Elly managed, in a whisper.

"All right. But don't make any fuss that's going to bother them out in the control room." What was probably the same spray device that had been used in the Temple appeared in the woman's hand. "Or off you go to sleep again."

* * *

Just as at Moonbase, a rink-sized portion of the Mirandan surface had been smoothed and prepared, and starting marks laid out. The natural gravity here was ridiculously weak, so that Michel/Lancelot drifted without even trying, and his suited human escorts were variously anchored and attached to one

another with lines. For a small distance beyond the edges of the smoothed arena the floodlights made the natural land look like broken glass and cinders. The surface notched up frequently in man-sized sawteeth, local features nicking a dark horizon that circled the floodlit area and the adjacent operations building at a distance of no more than a few hundred meters. Uranus' polar cap of sunlight, half below the horizon now, still washed the landscape, the dark building and its docked scoutships, with fading underwater light.

In the opposite direction, the large moon that they had told Michel was called Oberon was shifting his own tiny crescent, as swifter Miranda in her smaller orbit began to overtake him. When Michel had first heard the names, he had wondered briefly about coincidence; but right now there were other things that seemed to need wondering about more.

From here, Lancelot's eyes could scan interplanetary space with fair efficiency, in particular the regular approach lanes leading to the solar system's inner harbors. Without much effort Michel could pick out at least a dozen spaceships of various sizes, moving in their several directions at various speeds. Though all of the ships that he could see looked spherical, and all were enormously distant, Michel thought he could at least begin to distinguish types. Those of the military somehow moved a little differently, radiating a different blend of energies, even here in the gravitational deeps of the solar system where nothing like full interstellar speed could safely be attained.

A few meters from where Michel drifted amid his small bodyguard of technicians, suited, watchful and mostly silent, the scoutship that was to pace him on his first circuit of Miranda rested, still docked against the hemispherical bulk of the operations building. Between observations of ships and moons, Michel could switch his attention to what some of the people in the building and the nearby ship were saying. There were a good many words he could not catch, but with every minute of practice there were a few more that he could.

At the moment the most easily recognizable voices were those of Mr. Tupelov and Dr. Iyenari. Relatively near, the two men were supposed to ride the scout during the test but were at the moment exercising what Michel had come to understand was one of the most noticeable privileges of rank, that of keeping other people waiting.

Tupelov's voice said, ". . . still no other successful wearers in the . . . or so . . . possibility of trying to clone him."

Moons and ships dropped out of Michel's thoughts for the moment. He stared at the building's side as if Lancelot might be able to see through that.

Iyenari: "—never worked too well, historically . . . Marcus is an example . . ."

Tupelov: ". . . the good colonel out to stud, perhaps . . . follow one order at least without any argument. Then the . . . Michel when he's a little older. Do me a little report . . . speed up his maturation."

Iyenari (with some feeling, only surprise perhaps): ". . . you had started that . . . risky to mess around with . . . hormonal . . . only one we've got. But I'll check it out."

Tupelov: "Do that."

The two men were easier to hear, now, walking toward the scoutship and about to enter it. Michel shifted his gaze back to the sky. Another moon in view now, this one also being overtaken. Would this be Umbriel? Two sets of clumsy feet were entering the scoutship from the building now, men's voices

innocently greeting his mother, who had got on ahead of them.

Umbriel, if that was truly its name, occulted a bright nameless star. What would it be like to live on Umbriel? Alone, of course. Except for Lancelot.

Hormonal treatments. He was a little vague about that, but in general he thought he understood.

Presently his mother's face appeared at a cleared port on one side of the scout, and she exchanged waves with her spacedrifting son.

Tupelov, appearing just beside her, now began to speak on radio, using his public voice. "Michel? Today we're going to let you set the pace. Choose your own altitude and direction, but we'd like you to fly completely around Miranda on as direct a route as you can manage. Then if you can, return to this starting point from a direction exactly opposite from that of your departure. We'll just follow and observe. Got that?"

"I understand." Michel had never got into the habit of calling Tupelov "sir," as almost everyone else did. At one time it might have been easy to catch the habit; now it seemed that he never would.

The Secretary had turned away from the port, and was speaking to someone else, in what he must suppose was off-mike privacy: ". . . order of a thousand kilometers, and I'd guess it might take him an hour, based on the kind of velocity he's achieved so far. We'll just have to see. If he gets lost we'll continue observing for a time before we offer help, see how he copes." Back on radio again, Tupelov resumed: "Michel? Any time you're ready."

Michel let his purpose of movement flow into Lancelot. By now this was for him no trickier a process than sending a will to walk into his own legs. His feet brushed the ground, then left it as his body tilted forward, a slow toppling dive that turned into a headfirst horizontal acceleration. His arms and legs trailing, his chin slightly raised so that his/Lancelot's eyes could better see what lay ahead, Michel made a silent, fast departure from his starting mark.

He set his flight at an altitude where all but the tallest fingers of the scarred-glass Mirandan landscape were beneath him. Now he could see that the surface skimming by below him was pocked with geometric drifts of some whitish frozen gas. Vaguely impatient, he willed an effortless speed increase. A thousand kilometers, approximately, to go. Should he try to finish the flight in one hour exactly, to the second, just to see what Tupelov's reaction would be? Or maybe in exactly half that time?

The scoutship, in flight as dark and silent as Michel's own, came ghosting after him. Michel let an invisible tendril of Lancelot's being trail where the ship would run into it, an extension of something less than matter and more than thought. It formed a tenuous connection through which Michel could hear another unintended transmission of Dr. Iyenari's voice:

". . . other reason for coming way out to Uranus is of course the isolation."

"Security." That was Michel's mother's voice.

"Yes."

Tupelov's voice put in: "Security's not what I'd like it to be, frankly. Most people even in the government sort of pooh-pooh the goodlife threat in Sol System. But now there are eight billion people living on Earth, and a couple of billion more on Mars and Venus and in the Belts. If only one out of ten thousand

had any goodlife tendencies . . . and there are thousands of ships passing in and out of the system daily, and no one really keeps track of all of them . . ."

Michel withdrew his contact from the ship and retreated into his own thoughts. To stay on course needed only a glance ahead from time to time. No one else yet understood how well he had already learned to live with Lancelot.

Concentrating his attention mainly on the ships that he could pick out in interplanetary space, he soon discovered how to make his perception of their drive energies a little plainer than before. Presently he decided that four of them, fairly near and moving very little relative to Uranus, were patrol craft keeping watch on the proving grounds' invisible boundaries. One other ship, smaller, was a little more distant but definitely headed into the Uranian system.

What if he were to abandon the test, and instead fly out a million kilometers or so to meet one of those ships? The people aboard would goggle at him through their screens and ports, and wonder also at the scoutship full of angry radio voices on his tail. His mother would, of course, be horrendously upset. But there would be nothing much that Tupelov could do. . . .

One of the patrol craft was now moving toward the small visitor, which perhaps was bringing more important people up from Earth. The two ships seemed to be directly approaching Miranda, though they were not going to get much closer before Michel's own rock-hopping flight dropped them below his small horizon.

Gliding through space, an easy swimmer, he looked back and down at his own body in its orange gym suit and vague gauze that fluttered as if with wind. Hormone treatments would mean some kind of chemicals to make him grow and develop faster. Maybe, after all, that wouldn't be a bad idea. The faster he grew, the sooner he would be able to protect himself.

Ahead of him now loomed a cone of rock ten meters high, a real Mirandan mountain. Lancelot felt the obstacle coming in plenty of time for Michel to glance ahead and alter course. Like a darting fish he flashed around the rock, and on an impulse he picked up speed in the same instant. He wondered if he could, today, outmaneuver Frank's scoutship in a game of hide and seek.

But he didn't really want to contend against Frank any more, or make Frank mad at him. Here came Oberon, right overhead, the intricate orbital dance of Uranus' attendants turning the satellite momentarily retrograde against the stars.

Six flashes of light, intense bright pinpoints, appeared on Oberon's dark flank.

Six flashes that were answered by five streaks, five dingy-looking tracer bullets fired along five clustered paths. The streaks began in space somewhere above Miranda, between the two satellites, and headed unerringly back to the original flash-points on black Oberon. Halfway there, the five were joined and completed by the sixth.

It took only a moment for Michel's memory to find and extract the understanding that he needed, from descriptions in the space-war stories of his childhood. He had just seen six ships or missiles fired from supposedly deserted Oberon. Six things, that, as soon as they had effectively cleared the Oberonian surface, started toward Miranda at a speed effectively faster than light. They must have moved in a series of c-plus microjumps, so that the light emitted by them at mid-course reached Michel's eyes before that radiated earlier, causing the appearance of backward movement. Six things had been launched toward Miranda at a speed almost suicidal this deep inside a gravitational system, one of them indeed destroyed

by its own reckless speed midway, five of them obviously slowing to some extent, or they would be here now. . . .

Michel had not yet altered his own flight. But the scoutship that had been following him was now suddenly bulking almost against him, forcing him with delicate precision to change his flight path, urging him almost against the jagged rock that sped below. From inside the scout he could hear the fright in his mother's voice, the anger in Tupelov's, both raised in unbelieving protest against their newly clumsy pilot.

Frank, his volume turned up, easily overrode them both. "Michel, get in." The order was bellowed, but still delivered with serenity, with happiness.

Simultaneously the scoutship's entry hatch, already positioned almost exactly before Michel, snapped open like a fish's jaw. Obediently he slid inside, and the hatch had closed on him again before it occurred to him to wonder whether Frank might possibly, for once, be wrong. Frank of course knew a lot, but where Lancelot was concerned only Michel himself really knew. . . . The scout was accelerating, smooth but ferocious power piling up gravities that Michel could sense despite his cushioning against them. The sealing outer hatch had actually closed on a portion of Lancelot's robe train, which now slid in anyway without a tug. He was going to have to get inside where the others were right away and talk to Frank—

Horrendous shock came, slamming the scoutship in a direction that had to be down, because initial shock was followed a millisecond later by a crumpling impact of the hull against Mirandan rock. Somewhere inside the inner airlock door, Michel's mother was screaming, and he knew that her arms were reaching out with an instinct to protect her baby. But there was no protection there inside the ship for him, and none for her while he was near. Michel had to draw away from her the forces that were coming to kill him, and he saw now that he dared trust his own survival to nothing and no one save Lancelot.

He touched the switch to open the outer airlock door, and despite the jolting it had received a moment ago the mechanism responded promptly. In an instant Michel was out, and even as his buffered feet touched rock, the door was slammed shut again behind him. Frank was wrenching the scoutship back up into space, where it vanished at once from Michel's perception in a sky gone white with an artificial storm of weapons radiation. Miranda's automated defenses, whatever they might be, had opened up. The enemy was here in force; a fight was on.

The shockwave of some explosion, no more than a thin wall of expanding gas, caught Michel up like a butterfly and hurled him across the jagged glass of a landscape that he could not feel with Lancelot insulating him from injury. He floated for long moments in a blind, deaf void. Intermittent flashes of the Mirandan surface came to him, as if by lightning's illumination, and were immediately wiped away to nothingness again. He understood that all-too-efficient protection was guarding his senses against annihilation; somehow there ought to be a way to make Lancelot let in just enough sensory input to carry information. . . .

Groping for controls that were, as usual, within himself, Michel managed an adjustment. When the world came back, he found himself crouching on all fours, surrounded by boiling rock in molten puddles. Around him in the poor gravity gobs of lava drifted, like one-celled organisms. Under a bridge made by his gloveless fingers, a red-hot crevice in some solider material jetted smoke and flames at gunshot velocity.

Above his head the thunderstorms of weaponry still raged. He ought to fly for shelter, find help, try to attack the enemy, do something, but he had no idea of which way to turn for any of these purposes. Simply flying up into the melee above would be as pointless and perhaps as dangerous as jumping into

the teeth of a rip saw. He crouched motionless, listening in desperation. At last he could make out, under the continued battle noise, that a new network of intense radio communication had been established, among many stations unfamiliar to him. Messages were being sent and answered at superhuman speed, in what sounded like no human code that he had ever heard.

What must be a detector beam of some kind came fingering at him. It went away, then came back to lock on.

Michel sprang to his feet. As in a nightmare, from a childhood that now could be no more, he ran. He sprinted in blind panic, his tentative plans and even the powers of Lancelot forgotten for the moment. A drifting cloud of boulders loomed ahead, jarred up in the fighting and weightless as bubbles in feeble Miranda's grip. Panic drove Michel right in among the great rock masses, trying to lose himself. As he ran directly beneath a house-sized chunk of glowing slag, Michel suddenly found himself with no surface at all beneath his feet. In desperate fear he reached at last for active aid from Lancelot. Arms thrust forward like a diver's, he flew among stone masses that closed him between them into darkness, momentary peace. He slid between a thousand tons on either side, feeling no more than a brushing, as by enormous pillows, as Lancelot's delicate fringes ground away the rock.

He was out in free space again. Ahead, a cloud of smaller fragments beckoned, and he flew into it as quickly as he could. Now he/Lancelot was at last alone, the enemy's radio gabble for the moment left behind. On other wavelengths he could now distinguish chattering human voices. Help was going to come for him, eventually . . . if he could survive until it did.

The respite allowed his mind to surface from its panic, for a gasp of sanity and an attempt at planning. Should he stay where he was, or keep moving? He was disoriented; he no longer knew in which direction the operations building lay. Nor was he certain that he ought to try to reach it.

There came a great blast in the middle distance, and the wave of gases from it started a quick dispersal of Michel's protective cloud of debris. The human radio talk was blown away as well, to be replaced by a fresh flow of enemy code.

A locator beam flicked at him again. This time he could pinpoint its source, less than a hundred meters off. Something not human was moving there, picking its deliberate way toward him.

He launched himself at once, at top speed, in the opposite direction. Behind him a throng of pursuers came on at the speed of racing aircraft, things human-sized but of the wrong shape to be human, jetting and bounding over the black and broken surface. Michel managed an acceleration, and the enemy momentarily fell behind. But their signals beaming past him now were answered, from above him and from in front.

He halted his flight, braced Lancelot's feet as well as he could upon the surface. Hard-edged shapes were closing in upon him from all sides. Blind panic clutched at Michel again, but with a great effort he eluded it, escaping through an inward door. Lancelot bore him into the domain whose borders Michel had only glimpsed before, during the last fractal second of his sparring match with Frank. Time hardened into an almost motionless sea carved out of congealed energy.

With this altered perception he saw a hard inhuman arm come reaching for him. Then they were not out to kill him, after all . . . they wanted something else. Through Lancelot's fields the contact of the arm felt infinitely less human than the touch of the steel that Frank had sometimes brushed him with. Michel poured toughness into his own right arm's extension, and with a motion enormously pure and swift he knocked the approaching limb away. He could see the details of the metal gripper that formed the

berserker android's hand, watch it recede with what appeared to be infinite slowness, then as slowly start to swing back again.

Meanwhile another faceless machine-shape had jumped almost within reach. Michel, with no sense that he was hurrying, turned to face it. His forefingers were raised and pointing, in a gesture that his conscious mind had never planned. A fierce flow from his fingertips exploded blindingly and a metal form vanished in radii of molten ceramics and burned metal. But already another berserker stood at his other side, arms reaching for him. They could move as quickly as he could, and they were going to win.

Not yet. Again a pointing finger bore his will. Along the interface between Michel's own mind and the entity called Lancelot, his terror and rage and hate were melded with the power of fusing hydrogen nuclei. Again a blast came, shattering machines and armor.

But always more grippers, and still more, came reaching for him. The whole horde was close upon him now. With carefulness as great and inhuman as their strength and speed they closed their hands upon his neck, his legs, one arm. Yet somehow (Michel himself could not perceive it happening) Lancelot once more fought him free, and bore him away into a close orbit of Miranda, at speeds Michel had never before attempted. Space was barred to him, the sky in all directions dominated by the great machines of the enemy, victorious for the moment. But this was the proving grounds, Sol System, and massive help had to be on the way. . . .

Unexcited and unworried, the hornets' droning of the berserker androids' radio voices followed in his flight. The operations building loomed up suddenly before Michel and he braked to a stop. All of the structure's defensive shields, mirror-shiny and insubstantial in appearance, had been erected. Atop the shields, fifteen meters above Miranda's crack-ruined rock, a metal giant squatted, dull monster on a silver toadstool. It was hunched in a position that meant that all its might was bent on forcing a way down into its perch.

Will you fight against berserkers, little one?

Yelling to one another in their clipped radio bursts, shifting formation in perfect teamwork, the pack of Michel's surviving pursuers caught up with him again.

Again Lancelot guided him into the realm that seemed to lie beyond time. And now Michel began for the first time to feel fully the stresses that Lancelot could impose upon a connected human mind. A feeling of unreality sapped his will, even as exhaustion dragged at his muscles. He grappled with a steel berserker arm, and saw and felt it bending in his grip, metal rupturing in the grip of Lancelot. Then something heavier tangled his own arms, his neck—a net of some kind, its strands burning with fierce energies that he was not going to be allowed the time to solve.

Still, somehow, Lancelot had him halfway through the net before the machines surrounding him could manage to bring the escaping motion to a halt. Too many active weights were on him now, too many devices gripping; he could not bend or break or blast them all.

He heard a shrill and childish voice, his own, go screaming out across the void. Then a thing with the strength of a log-hauler pulled Lancelot's legs out from under him, and under all the weights his shielded face was slammed against Mirandan rock.

With all the powers that he knew how to draw from Lancelot, Michel strained in a last effort to get free. A meter before his eyes, a berserker's legs had been somehow drilled into rock for greater purchase. The legs pulled out now, rock shattering as Lancelot tore them free. But still, with its cohort's help, the

pinning berserker held.

Michel's awareness, now somewhere on the far side of panic, remained clear through it all. They had him pinned at last, and now they were inflating over him something that proved to be a plastic bubble holding air.

In the distance there were still flashes of radiation, rock-shuddering jolts that told of an ongoing fight. But there was no signal of approaching help as yet, and now help was going to come too late. With great deftness his captors' metal fingers were searching out the fastenings of Lancelot. They found them, one by one, and with a motherlike gentleness they severed Michel/Lancelot in half.

NINE

Even while its own internal analytical systems were still working with the sample of blood from the female life-unit, the Co-ordinator ordered itself moved to the control room of the goodlife ship. There it established itself in direction control of all important ship's systems. A few nanoseconds' difference in reaction time could be crucial in space combat, and the odds were overwhelming that intense space combat was imminent. The badlife proving grounds could not be so nearly defenseless as they seemed. But the Co-ordinator was going to have powerful help. Its programming informed it that the time was at hand when all available reserves must be risked in an attempt either to take control of or destroy the life-unit designated Michel Geulincx.

From the start of its long, clandestine journey to Sol System, the Co-ordinator had carried in its unliving memory detailed information on every known local resource that it might be able to call upon for help when it arrived. The resources that made the present plan look feasible were the combat units that had long ago been hidden on Oberon, in anticipation of the day when Sol System itself could be successfully attacked. Six berserker fighting ships of intermediate class, with their auxiliary robots and machines, had been secretly cached there decades before the badlife had established their proving grounds in the same region. The six ships had originally been intended, by the master berserker computers sometimes known to humanity as the Directors, to form one small squadron of the armada required for a successful assault on Earth itself. But now the Directors' agent had been instructed that seizure of Michel Geulincx had as high a priority as destruction of the badlife homeworld itself.

Correct timing was, as usual, essential. The possibly valuable female captive was secured in a cabin—all records of human behavior indicated that immature life-units such as Michel Geulincx were often greatly dependent upon parental units. The possibly-still-valuable goodlife units were assigned chairs, protected by emergency webbings, in the control room. The berserker, now in complete control of the ship, ignored the signals of the human guard-ship that had now begun a moderately fast course of interception. In a range of frequencies that ranged from light to radio waves the Co-ordinator fired toward Oberon a quick burst of code, information enormously condensed. This message roused the sleeping fighters hidden there and at the same time programmed them with the tactical necessities of the new situation.

The battle following, most of it fought on and around the Mirandan surface, was sharp but short. With an electronic analog of satisfaction, the Co-ordinator observed the rapid disabling of local resistance. The patrol craft were beaten off, the one spaceborne scoutship knocked down and crippled, the operations building effectively isolated inside the stubborn knot of its automated defenses. It would be hours before the very large human forces routinely posted elsewhere in Sol System could reach the scene. Indeed, it would be hours before they knew that anything was amiss.

With the Michel Geulincx unit captured, as well as the weapons system it had been using, both life-unit and weapon appearing essentially undamaged, the Co-ordinator had achieved the highest-priority goals for which it had been programmed. To remain near Miranda for even the short time necessary to expunge all remaining life from the satellite would have meant risking this great success, as very strong and persistent pursuit had to be expected. Therefore the Co-ordinator ordered immediate departure. In the center of a protective formation made up of the three surviving berserker warcraft, the goodlife ship under the Co-ordinator's direct control departed the Uranian system at maximum practical acceleration and roughly in the direction of solar north, along a line where it could be computed that interception would be least probable.

As the goodlife aboard were instructed to divest themselves of acceleration harness, a premature celebration broke out among them, which the Co-ordinator at once quelled with a few spoken words. There was no time; there was business that needed urgently to be conducted and in which their help would be used. It was possible that the weapons system code-named Lancelot had been designed to self-destruct somehow when captured. Or it might rapidly deteriorate from some other cause. Therefore an immediate examination of the system, and some preliminary testing of it, was essential.

* * *

Even cushioned in a berth and isolated in a cabin, Elly Temesvar had no difficulty in recognizing a space battle when the ship in which she rode was thrust into the middle of one. The timing and the roughness of the c-plus jumps were unmistakable, as were the sounds with which the hull around her rang. They were certainly not the sounds of a routine boarding from an armed patrol craft, which was what she had been expecting.

Before being introduced to the Co-ordinator, she had thought herself to be in the hands of a small group of people of psychotic audacity but quite limited intelligence. The presence of an authentic berserker as their leader changed these estimates completely. Still, it had seemed almost incredible that her captors should have on call enough armed force to mount a successful raid against the Uranian proving grounds—this was Sol System, after all!

But there was no denying what she heard and felt. While the hull still rang with nearby shooting, there came an additional grating vibration that told Elly the ship was down on the rocky surface of some Uranian satellite. Airlocks were cycled and recycled several times. Minutes later, the fighting died away, and with a last scraping of her hull the goodlife vessel was off into space again, on what course Elly had no way of guessing. Then her heart sank as human voices, the goodlife voices on the ship, were raised in a brief burst of jubilation.

After a timeless interval of apparently peaceful flight, the door to Elly's prison-cabin was opened once again. Without surprise, but still with a shock that seemed almost to stop her heart, she saw a man-sized robot enter. Through her mind passed images, not entirely repellent, of quick death. Her pale body thrown out from an airlock . . .

But the machine was not killing her. After undoing the ties that held her to the bunk, it simply stood back, gesturing with one human-shaped hand toward the open door. She got to her feet and on uncertain legs moved the other way instead, toward the cabin's small sanitary alcove. It did not stop her, but it followed closely, staying within reach of her and watching her every movement closely.

Having her privacy violated by a machine was not at all the same as suffering the same offense from a human being, though in some obscure way she felt it ought to be. The discovery that her fate was not, after all, to be instant death was enough to make her a little giddy with relief. She kept the thing waiting a

moment longer while she rinsed her hands and got a drink of water. Then she offered no argument or resistance when it took her by the wrist and tugged her out into the narrow corridor. Their flight was still steady and smooth, the artificial gravity constant. For most of the short walk to the control room the machine that led Elly followed another, similar robot. This one was carrying a small human form, fair-haired, in an orange costume of some kind. At her first glimpse of the face, Elly thought: The boy from the picture. At least there was a considerable resemblance.

Her own biological son? Michel? It must be, if any of this was going to make sense. But the idea aroused no feeling at all within her.

The small ship's control room was somewhat larger than Elly had expected. It had room for six humans, two goodlife women and two men standing crowded together. The second woman was dark, with an Oriental face, much thinner than she who had visited Elly in the cabin. Seeing the goodlife together, Elly was struck by the idea that they all looked somehow sexless; more than that, inhuman, though exactly what gave her this impression in each case was more than she could think out now.

Michel was in the room also, still in the grip of the machine that had been carrying him, though the boy's feet were on the deck now and he appeared to be able to stand unaided. His dazed child's eyes brushed Elly's, but she could see no reaction in them.

In the center of the chamber, the Co-ordinator now rode on top of the ship captain's control console, presenting an image, no doubt unintentional, of a huge spider on a stump, bound in place by a connective complex of wires and cabling. Directly before it, draped as though carelessly across the otherwise empty captain's chair, lay folds of something that looked at first glance like large sheets of loosely crumpled, almost transparent gauze.

For a few moments after Elly's arrival, the tableau held in silence. The goodlife, unrestrained by machines, seemed to be waiting humbly, perhaps with just a trace of boredom, and Elly was reminded momentarily of some of the gatherings for services in the Temple. Then a wordless order must have been given by the Co-ordinator. The robot holding Elly dropped her wrist and moved to the chair before the console. There it deliberately picked up the gauze in one of its almost human hands. Only now did Elly notice that its other hand depended from a badly damaged arm. The bone-shaped upper arm had been crippled and bent somehow, the metal surface ruptured. In the recent fighting, no doubt. What kind of weapon, though, would have produced . . . ?

The Co-ordinator's squeaky voice was speaking, and to her: "Life-unit Temesvar, you will identify this weapons system."

Taken unawares, Elly looked around the cabin desperately, thinking that she must have missed something somehow. Then she saw that the eyes of the goodlife were all focused on the gauze. "That—stuff, on the chair? Is it some kind of body shield, then? I know nothing about it. It's been many years since I've dealt with weapons." She felt surprise and a touch of shame at her own eagerness for survival, her willingness to answer the Co-ordinator as fully as possible.

The Co-ordinator said: "Life-unit Michel Geulincx. Answer."

The boy's eyes had begun to study Elly's face, and they continued to do so even as he replied to the berserker. He did not seem terribly afraid; perhaps he was still too dazed by what must have been the awesome shock of capture. He said, "It's what we call Lancelot . . . you must already know that."

There was a silent pause. The goodlife, just a little restless, continued waiting. Michel turned his gaze

from Elly toward the machine that was eventually going to order them all killed.

Then a new order was evidently given, at some non-human level. The man-sized robot with the crippled arm, moving slowly but with great deftness despite its disability, began putting on the gauze sheets. It dressed itself like an actor with an unfamiliar cloak, or perhaps a skeleton trying on an unfamiliar wedding dress. The folds of what it put on went swirling slowly, fading with distance from the wearer. From solid reality where they embraced the robot's body, they passed into invisibility at a couple of meters' distance. They were complex forcefields, obviously, though of exactly what kind, Elly could not begin to guess.

. . . the badlife have grasped at least the fact that he is unusual, and they mean to use him as part of a weapons system. Have you ever heard the code name Lancelot?

With the strange gauze now fastened more or less firmly to its torso and its head, the robot began to move about a little. Gently, with a certain skeletal engineering grace, it stepped and postured. To Elly's mind there came the image of a Dance of Death that she had seen somewhere.

Michel's small gasp, a couple of meters to her left, broke in upon her fascinated concentration. The boy was staring at the robot with an expression Elly could not read. She looked back at the grotesquely draped machine herself, and watched it several seconds longer before it was borne in upon her that something about the test was going badly.

The robot's good hand had moved to one of the fasteners on its chest, as if it might be going to tear itself free of what it had put on, but could not quite make up its electronic mind to do so. The damaged arm meanwhile rose in an astonishingly human gesture, flapping a useless hand and forearm across its own head as if in madness or dismay. Then, stiffly as a toppled statue, the machine fell to the deck in an abrupt swirl of gauze.

Two others of its kind were at its sides at once. With hands moving faster than human eyes could follow, they manipulated fastenings, stripping away the slow-billowing robes from the inert body, which remained inert even when they were done.

The Co-ordinator itself gave no evidence of having been affected in the least. "One human volunteer," it presently called out.

Four human hands were raised. Stal's hand, Elly noticed, came up just a little less promptly than the others.

"Life-unit Mabuchi," uttered the machine. The stocky deacon stepped forward, and reached to take up the strange garment from where it had been replaced upon the chair. His eyes were rounded with an emotion that Elly read as a blend of ecstasy and fear.

Then he snatched his hand back as if it had been burned, when the berserker startled him by speaking again: "You will put on Lancelot. Having done so, you will then not move or act in any way except at my direct command."

"Yes, lord and master." The deacon's answer was so low that Elly lip-read rather than heard it. Quite psychotic, she thought, looking at the man's rapt face. Why didn't I ever see that in him in the Temple?

Mabuchi hesitated about his gray smock, then eventually decided to leave the garment on as the robots began to help him fit the shimmering stage-wrappings over it. At first Elly thought that his head remained uncovered, but then she caught a glimpse of haze that clung round his dark-haired cranium like a ghostly

helmet.

The machines, finished with their task, stepped back, but no more than one small step each. Mabuchi's eyes were closed now, and like a newly blind man he put out his hands with fingers groping. He seemed to be listening intently to something that Elly could not hear.

Then his eyes opened, his lips moved. "Am I dying?" he asked of the company in general, in a voice that now sounded like that of a man trying to be cunning rather than submissive.

"I detect no evidence of—"

The rest of the Co-ordinator's reply was lost, as Mabuchi suddenly lunged toward the central console where it perched. The machines on his right and left immediately seized both his arms, and behind him another robot materialized from somewhere, holding in both hands a glowing net. But—Elly could not see how—the deacon's right arm was suddenly free again. Growling strange noises, he struck with it at the robot on his left. His fingers, like the paw of a clawing animal draped in suddenly glowing gauze, struck the machine across the front of its head. The area that in a human would have been the face was wiped away, turned into a molten smear as if it had been soft putty.

The glowing net had enveloped Mabuchi now, and the two robots still standing fought him to a standstill while he screamed. One at last undid the fastening of Lancelot at the deacon's throat, and the gauze helm was peeled back from his head. A crackling echo filled the small room, marking the passage of something moving at shockwave speeds; Elly saw a black hole the diameter of a pencil leap into existence in the center of the deacon's forehead. His fleshy body sagged in the metal arms of the machines he fought. He twitched a few times and was still.

A small hatch closed softly in the middle of the Co-ordinator's casing. Elly turned her eyes toward the boy who was supposed to be her son. Michel was watching her again; there was fright in his face now, but a busy intelligence was there also. Did he have any idea of who she was?

Before she could decide whether or not to try to speak to him, a machine had come and was pulling her away. As she was tugged out of the control room into the passage again, she turned her head for a last look at her son.

* * *

Augmentation gravity in the operations building was almost gone, along with a lot of other things. But the life support systems were still functioning in an emergency mode. And a number of people were still around to breathe the air the systems fed them.

Tupelov was talking, to the surviving human operator at the surviving Moonbase ticker: "Tell the admiral to bypass us completely here for now. The attack here is definitely over. We have functioning life-systems and some functioning ships. Tell him get everything into pursuit and interception."

"Sir, if you would—"

"I'm busy. I've told them once. You tell them." He didn't want to get into planning discussions now, he didn't want to get into a lengthy conversation with the President; once that happened he would be given orders and he would be stuck. What Tupelov had to decide first concerned an option that he hadn't mentioned to anyone else as yet—whether it might be best to gather what ships he had at the proving grounds and join in the pursuit personally.

He walked across the great room, an odd-looking place in the emergency lighting mode, swaying up high on his toes in the low g. As always when he found himself in a prolonged low-g situation, he was going to have to struggle against spacesickness. Coming to his present goal, another emergency communications station, Tupelov gripped a railing in search of visceral support.

"Is Colonel Marcus back yet? What'd he get?" Marcus, you had to give him that, was really very good at most of the parts of his job that really mattered. After getting the crippled scout and the people in it back to base somehow, the Colonel had rolled his boxes right into another craft and had immediately headed out from Miranda in a dangerous series of c-plus microjumps, planning to reach a distance from which the raid of two hours earlier could be photographed as it took place.

"He's back, sir. Want to talk to him?"

"No. Just run me whatever he got." And Tupelov gratefully threw himself into a chair, which helped the low-g queasies somewhat. On a small stage before him, three-dimensional pictures almost immediately began to run.

"They came from Oberon. God damn." Tupelov watched as, in jumpy, computer-enhanced magnification, the six berserker craft came hurtling in, one of them destroyed en route by a backlash from tortured space itself. They had known exactly where they were going, all right, and had risked all to get there before they could be stopped.

Someone was standing beside his chair, and he knew without looking back that it was Carmen. Neither of them said anything as they watched the recorded light flare out and back across the Mirandan surface.

Now came the part where the robotic photointerpreters had to strain to their limits, trying to show what had happened to one small figure in an orange suit. A dot, surrounded in the pictures by pursuing machines. The machines closed in, and then the dot was out from among them somehow. What a weapon.

"Is my boy still alive? Can you tell me that much at least?"

It took a few seconds for her words to seep through his intense concentration upon the ongoing struggle. No sooner had the finally-captured dot been hauled aboard the goodlife ship than it and its friends had blasted off. "No, I can't," said Tupelov, brutally.

Carmen surprised him then, moving around in front of him so that her body cut off his line of sight to the stage. "Are you hurt?" Tupelov demanded abruptly; she was dragging around in the low-g like some semighostly victim of internal bleeding.

"I want to know," she demanded, "what you're going to do to find my son. They took him, didn't they? Took him alive."

"Get out of my way."

"You tell me."

"Get her out of here!" Tupelov ordered loudly. But then, before the people who came to pull at Carmen had hauled her more than a few meters, he turned his head and called, "Carmen, I'm betting he's still alive. I'm going to do everything I can to get him back. Everything. I mean it."

Carmen must have heard him, but did not answer. More collapsed than not, she let herself be taken off.

Before Tupelov could start to rerun the pictures, a young woman aide came up to his side in a bounding ballet run. "Sir? The President is on the ticker. Insists on a personal report from you. And Mr. Lombok has finally been located. Drugged. He's in a hospital on Earth."

Tupelov said out loud what ought to be done to and with the President. On his way back across the big room, bouncing helplessly on his toes, as if in some kind of insane elation, the Secretary passed an improvised alcove where Colonel Marcus had his space suit boxes drawn up, and was talking to debriefers: ". . . he was callingmeright there at the end, before they took him off. You know, that gets me somehow."

TEN

Even deprived of Lancelot, Michel could feel that the speed of the small goodlife ship was very high as it fled from Miranda. And as soon as the flight was fairly under way he noticed that, as onJohann Karlsen, the artificial gravity of this ship had been set at precisely surface normal for Alpine.

When the robot put on Lancelot in the control room, Michel felt certain ahead of time that the machine was not going to be able to survive, and he nursed hopes that the destruction would prove contagious, wiping out the Co-ordinator also. But that device had disconnected itself from its slave before the trial, and Michel's hopes were dashed.

He had not expected the goodlife man to succeed either, of course, and the violent death came as no great surprise to Michel. Though he had in a sense felt death before, he had never seen it, but at the moment it meant almost nothing to him. Only that one more enemy had been removed, and that the Co-ordinator had sustained a small defeat.

Since he himself was not yet dead, the berserkers obviously hoped for something more than death from him, and he was waiting to discover what. After the stocky goodlife man was shot down, the blond woman the machines did not trust was led out of the control room. She reminded Michel somewhat of his mother, and the thought of his mother dead back on Miranda kept him for a little while from thinking about anything else.

Shortly a few words from the Co-ordinator sent the three surviving goodlife on their way, apparently unguarded. The dead man was stripped carefully out of Lancelot by the surviving machines, and was then dumped like so much garbage into a disposal unit. There was not room for his legs until his upper body had been silently digested, somewhere down inside.

Now Lancelot lay draped across the captain's chair again. The three robots still in the room, their tasks completed for the moment, ceased to move, becoming almost inert machinery. Now Michel was alone at last with the Co-ordinator.

He had been standing through it all, and now he moved to a chair—not the captain's, of course—and sat down, facing the thing that squatted like a great spider on the console.

Having sat down, he waited. The other waited, too. In the great new quiet that seemed to be thickening in the control room, Michel listened for any sound that might be coming from his chief enemy, but could

hear nothing. It was so quiet that he thought that with some effort he might now manage to hear his own heart beat, even without the help of Lancelot.

How long he waited thus he did not know. Fear came at him in waves, and he fought it back, trying to defend his sanity. Eventually he felt that he was going to succeed in this at least.

No sooner was he sure of this than the berserker spoke. Had it been monitoring his heartbeat also?

It said: "I offer you an end of fear."

"You mean kill me."

"No. I compute that you already know that I mean something else." After allowing him time for an answer he did not make, it went on: "The badlife who have been using you would kill you at this moment if they could. Is it not true?"

"Probably." The thought hadn't struck him till this moment, but it struck hard now.

"But they cannot reach you. I will protect you from them."

"What'll you do with me?"

"I will take you to a place of safety, where you will have a long and happy life."

He doubted that. "Why?"

"You are to be studied because of your unique qualities. But the study will be non-destructive. Kind and gentle and considerate. Your uniqueness must not be damaged and it may be fragile."

"What happened to the other people?" Michel burst out suddenly. "I mean those back on Miranda."

"It is probable that many still survive. To kill them was not my prime objective."

"What about those in the scoutship? The one that was flying near me when I . . . I . . ."

"It was damaged but not destroyed. Why does that concern you? Those life-units are all your enemies now."

"My—my mother was on that ship." And as Michel spoke he could feel a small though abrupt change in the inertial space his body occupied; c-plus flight had now begun in earnest. Pursuit by human forces would be a much more difficult problem now, though not yet impossible. Not if the adventure books were right.

The berserker had paused, as if it needed time to compute its next choice of words. "Your mother," it told him now, "is the female life-unit inside whose body your body was formed. That life-unit is aboard this ship. You have seen her in this room."

Michel could feel no impact from mere words just now, whatever they might say. Turning the berserker's last statement over in his mind, he could find no proof that it was untrue. He had long known that he was adopted, and he had heard somewhere that on Alpine at least an effort was generally made to match adoptive to biological parents, even in physical appearance. And there was no doubt that the woman he

had just seen looked like his mother. But, supposing the berserker had told the truth, what did it matter now?

It was not going to try to convince him, at least not now. Instead it asked: "When did you first try on the device called Lancelot?"

Sometime, maybe, after he had had a chance to think things out, he would try to lie to it. Right now he saw no need to do so. "Only a few days ago," he answered.

"Where?"

"At Moonbase."

"What were the effects of that first test on you?"

"On me? Not much of anything." Michel's hands were gripping the chair arms hard, but not as hard as he had gripped them on first sitting down a few minutes ago. He could feel muscles in his back shuddering, trying to start to relax.

"And what were the effects upon you of the astragalus and the ring?"

"The what?" Yet in his memory the faintest trace lay, almost buried. Something overhead: The astragalus is . . .

The berserker was not going to insist on anything just now. It asked: "And where were you before you went to Moonbase?"

"On Alpine. That's a planet way in near the—"

"Why were you chosen to wear Lancelot?"

"I guess because other people tended to go crazy. You saw. They tried a lot of people." Now Michel could feel microjumps, and multiplying in length as well as frequency. If only he had a cleared port or a screen . . . but what good would that do him?

"Explain the meaning of the designation Lancelot."

He tried to recall just what he had been told on that subject, by some people at Moonbase. "It's the name of a man in some old stories, a famous fighter. Back in the days when men fought with big knives and rode around on animals. Only one other man could ever beat him. His son."

"Do you wish to see your mother now?"

For just an instant Michel's nerves gave a great leap. Then he remembered who the machine meant. "You mean the woman . . . who was here."

"I have told you she is your mother."

"I—yes, I'd like to talk to her."

The robots went into smooth motion once again. A door opened, and again Michel's heart leaped,

though only momentarily, at the sight of the tall blonde woman standing in the corridor beyond.

* * *

Aboard a larger ship, also thrumming subliminally with its increasing speed of flight, Tupelov occupied a combat chair in a prominent position on the bridge. Carmen sat in a chair beside his. With the seats' protective devices at the moment folded away, she could almost but not quite lean her head on his shoulder. Her posture was half that of a supplicant, half tired lover.

She said, "I heard you give that order for the fleet not to pursue directly any longer, to try for an interception."

"Well, I did. We should have a better chance that way. Another force is going to take up the pursuit, you see, following what they can pick up of the trail as long as they can. A ship jumping does leave a trail of sorts, you know."

"But how can we intercept them if we don't know where they're taking him?"

Across the center of the bridge, surrounded by officers' chairs, a complex display of the whole known galaxy was etched in light, a model of a volume tens of thousands of light years in diameter. Tupelov had spent most of the time since his task force departed the proving grounds in looking at this display, and he was looking at it now. "I'm making my best guess, that's all." He glanced at her briefly. "You look very tired."

"I am. But grateful that you let me come along."

Looking back at the display, Tupelov muttered, "I think there's a definite chance that you'll be useful." He wasn't saying how large a chance. "Why don't you go see the quartermaster, now while things are slow? You've had those same clothes on for two or three days."

She looked down at herself. Since the day of the attack. Twice she had slept in the same garments, and got up thinking she had to do something about a change, and then had completely forgotten such non-essentials. "All right, I'll get something new," she said now, stirring wearily. "Guessing, is that the best we can do?"

He gave her what she thought was a strange look and said, "It's something I'm very good at, usually. Just as other people are good at other ways of fighting."

"Guessing is guessing, isn't it?"

Tupelov seemed to come to a decision. Forgetting the great display for the moment, he reached to unlock a small drawer in the console before him. "Have you heard anything about these? Rumors concerning them, maybe? They were brought back by Elly Temesvar and Frank Marcus, from the place we call the Taj. If these two items prove anything at all, and I believe they do, it's that chance and guessing and physical laws are really a lot different from what we currently think they are."

The two items rested innocently enough in Carmen's palm. One of them was a small almost-cube with neatly rounded edges. Its material looked and felt to her like bone. Each of its six practically flat sides bore a pattern of unevenly incised dots, not greatly different from those on any ordinary gaming die. The other artifact was a plain metal ring, a little too big for any but the largest human fingers.

"I don't see what . . ."

Tupelov took the die from her palm. "We call this the astragalus," he said. "After a kind of knuckle-bone used in ancient times for gaming." He rolled the thing out on the flat tabletop of the console before them. It came to rest with the single-dot side uppermost. He rolled once more with the same result. Again. Again.

"A kind of loaded die?" Carmen asked.

"No. At least it's not loaded by anything physical, anything that our instruments are capable of discovering. Its balance is such that it should come down according to the laws of probability, like any other fair die. But it's not fair, either. Every fair trial brings the one-dot side up on top."

"Everytrial?"

He rolled it again, in demonstration.

"And what about the ring?" Carmen turned the tiny circlet this way and that between her fingers, then let it rest once more in her palm.

"I wouldn't put it on my finger. Though that's been tried, too, without apparent effect. . . . Look carefully at the finish around the outer edge. Anything strike you as remarkable?"

When she moved the ring between her fingers again, Carmen noticed that the surface of the rim sometimes seemed to blur, as if it could be moving at a different speed from the material beneath. This flow or slippage ceased immediately when she once more held the artifact still. She described what she saw as best she could to Tupelov, adding, "But I'm sure that could be produced in a number of ways by our own technology. Is that what you meant?"

"No. But it appears to have some connection with the real oddity, which it took us some time to discover. And which is that the ring you're holding has a circumference which always measures just three times its measured diameter."

It took Carmen a moment to understand; then she remarked that the ring appeared to be perfectly circular.

"Oh, it is, by any other test. But pi, for this ring, equals exactly three. Very simple, and very simply impossible." When Carmen couldn't find a comment, he went on, "Get something to measure it with, later, and you can try for yourself."

He reclaimed the ring from her hand now, and put both artifacts away. Then, looking at the display again, he said, "Michel, in a sense, came from the same place that those things did. He was conceived there, and then sent out into the world. Our world."

A new kind of fear dug into Carmen, somewhere deep inside. "What do you mean?"

"I hardly know myself what I mean. Consider the artifacts. On the surface, they seem normal. Whatever the basis of their peculiarity is, we can't measure it or detect it. All they do is make hash of our picture of the universe as a place defined by the laws of physics and probability we have discovered. Like—like some kind of educational toys that have been given to us. To make us use our intelligence. Or—"

"Or what?"

"To make us use, discover in ourselves perhaps, some other faculty. Or to test us. I don't know—"

"And you're telling me that Michel—came—from this same place? You called it the Taj, just now."

"Yes. He did. Now don't, Carmen, that's not going to help. Therefore my best educated guess is that Michel is now being taken to the Directors; it's a guess, not a logical deduction. Don't, I said. They can't do him any more harm than any other berserker machine can. Anyway I don't think that their intention is to harm him."

Carmen sank back in her chair. Her eyes were closed and her lips had no more color than her skin. "Where are we going, then?"

"We're going to put in at Alpine first, because it's on our way. I want to see what we can pick up there in the way of recent information. Then we're going on, with more ships if I can get the Alpine government to send some with us. To where I believe the Directors are now, and where we can intercept Michel, if anywhere." The Secretary leaned forward, stabbing at the display with a lightpointer. "Right where the Taj was last reported. Right there near the Core."

ELEVEN

At some point in the journey, and it was in the very nature of the difficulty that Michel did not know exactly when, he discovered that, at least as far as his conscious mind was concerned, he had lost all track of time. He no longer seemed to have any clear conception of how long ago he had been captured.

He supposed he would be lucky if that was the worst mental damage he suffered from everything that had happened to him so far.

The woman called Elly, with whom Michel was having frequent though still halting conversations, said that yes, she was probably his biomother. Somehow they managed not to talk much about that, or indeed much about anything at all. And outside of his meetings with her, his contact with human beings was at a minimum. He was guarded continuously by one or more of the robots, he spent much of his time alone in the small cabin to which he had been assigned. At frequent intervals he was escorted out of his cabin, and allowed to exercise in the ship's tiny gym, where he worked with the springs and weights and the treadmill and the bouncing balls as he was bidden by the machines. Then again he would be taken to the control room, for long periods of gentle questioning by the Co-ordinator. Elly shared the gym with him sometimes, but never the control room sessions, during which one or two of the goodlife people were sometimes present. These usually stood or sat in the background, sometimes looking as if they wished they were somewhere else, never having much to say, ready to let their lord and master do the talking. Most often it was the metallic-looking man called Stal who sat in on these interviews, and sometimes the stocky young goodlife woman whose name Michel still had not heard. Only on rare occasions did the thinner, more Oriental-looking woman take part. Once, Michel heard Stal call her by the name of Hoshi.

Rare occasions? How many occasions, how many conversations with the Co-ordinator, had there been in all, if a group of more than one of them could be called rare? Michel couldn't remember. Time was getting away from him.

Was it because the berserker was drugging him, or hypnotizing him somehow? After some

consideration, Michel didn't think so. He thought that it must want to handle him as delicately as possible, keeping him at Michel-normal if it could, until it got him to where the Directors were waiting to provide him with that long and happy life. He decided, too, that the machine's conversations were intended more as a monitoring of his mental condition than as serious efforts to convert him to willing goodlife status.

"Tell me a story," Michel probed at it once, when there was no one else in the control room.

"What shall the subject of the story be?"

"Goodlife."

After a hesitation lasting only a few seconds, it began. The story it related was a horrible thing, about people who took great risks and underwent great torment at the hands of badlife in order to help some berserker machines slaughter a great number of other people.

"I don't want to hear any more," Michel interrupted firmly. The relation stopped in mid-sentence. Nor was the conversation immediately resumed.

When he was next summoned to the control room, Michel found Stal there with the commanding machine. "Tell Michel of the goodness of being goodlife," the Co-ordinator ordered its living servant.

"Of course." Stal paused briefly, like a man marshaling his thoughts. But Michel got the feeling that the pause, like the speech that came after it, had been rehearsed.

Stal began, "Insofar as life can be good in any sense, it is so only in serving the cause of death."

"Why is death good?" Michel interrupted.

Stal indicated astonishment at the question. His manner seemed to say: If you cannot see that for yourself, nothing that I can say will help. At last he replied, "If you had seen more of life, young sir, you would not ask me that."

"Have you seen much of death?"

"Death is the final goal of us all, the gift of peace. It—"

"But you are still alive, yourself. And the two women."

The gray-white man looked at Michel benignly. "We are needed, to help in the great cause. For the time being we are denied our rest."

"Co-ordinator?" Michel looked at the machine. "Does this man really want to die?"

Somewhere in the control room, something electronic made the faintest of musical gurgles; otherwise an intense silence held.

"I am needed," Stal repeated smoothly. "Do you see, Michel? And you are needed too. In this way, good can come from even a very long life, if it is spent in the service of the proper cause; a life filled, in its own way, with satisfactions." A sort of ripple of expression passed over the man's eyes, giving Michel the impression that Stal had almost winked at him.

"Co-ordinator?" In the middle of the word, Michel's voice threatened to crack. "If this man wants to die, kill him right now. It'll make me happier to see him dead. It'll keep my mind more stable."

The man started a movement toward Michel, and like a broken robot stopped in the middle of it. The mask-like expression of his face had broken also, in an upwelling of fear, and for a few moments he had to struggle to maintain control.

"It is improbable, Michel," the Co-ordinator commented, "that you have ever ordered a human life-unit's termination before. Therefore I compute that your mental stability will not be served by such an action now. Therefore your order will not now be obeyed." And with that, the day's interview was at an end; and it was a long time before Michel saw Stal again.

* * *

Even before that incident, he had rarely encountered Elly and the goodlife in the same room. It had to be that the machine was, for whatever reasons, keeping them apart. Elly, like Michel, had some choice of movement about the ship, and like him she was always escorted by at least one robot. No sudden attempt by either of them to launch the ship's lifeboat, or disable a control system, was going to have the least chance of success.

By mutual unspoken agreement, Michel's conversations with Elly were always guarded, as it was certain that the Co-ordinator would always be listening by one means or another. Outside of their imprisonment, nothing grossly horrible was being done to either of them. But Elly, at least, no longer looked healthy. She had lost weight, so that the gray Temple clothes hung loosely on her body. When Michel mentioned this, she calmly agreed. But she did not seem to think it mattered much.

"How are you bearing up?" she asked him, reaching to cup a hand under his chin and tilt his face up to the light. At this gesture their respective guardian machines each leaned a few centimeters closer, presumably ready to block any attempt at strangling the Co-ordinator's prize specimen.

"Well enough," he answered readily. And he really was; he didn't know why or how, but it was so. "You know, I think I'm growing. This suit is starting to feel tight." The orange gym-suit, run through his cabin's laundry ducts at intervals, was still the only clothing that he had.

"Yes, I suppose you are." Elly sounded as if her own idea of time had grown as vague as his. She looked at him strangely. "But your hair is shorter than it was."

"The machines cut it." Reducing the length of each strand by what Michel had decided must have been a standard number of centimeters. "Elly, if you're really my mother—"

"Yes?"

"Who's my biofather, then?" He had decided that the machines must already have got some answer from her to that question; he couldn't see how it was going to matter that they would overhear her repetition of the answer now.

But the Co-ordinator, speaking through one of its robots, immediately warned her: "Give no answer." Elly looked wearily away, kept silent.

Michel raised his eyes. "Why shouldn't I know?" he demanded of the low metallic overhead.

"The future only is alterable. What is past cannot be changed."

* * *

A few hours after that—or was it a few days, perhaps?—Michel was alone in his cabin when one of the robots brought him new clothing, evidently just fabricated aboard. It was a somewhat miniaturized Stal-outfit, even including metallic-looking boots. Casual dress on shipboard did not usually include footwear of any kind, and these . . . Michel considered refusing the whole package. But then another idea suggested itself.

He changed into the other new garments, a loose shirt and short trousers of bright gray. Then, carrying his old orange garb in one hand and the rejected new boots in the other, he walked out of his room without being stopped. With his metal attendant staying just a pace behind him, he paced the few meters of corridor and entered the control room.

"Here," he said, as casually as possible. "I don't need these." And with a double toss he lobbed the boots at the foot of the Co-ordinator's console perch, and the orange suit right at the captain's chair. On that chair Lancelot still lay, unchanged, wave-complexes shimmering through the seamless fabric of entwined forces.

The boots thumped lightly on the deck, the suit came down right in the outstretched hand of the robot standing protectively beside the chair, the robot that had been behind Michel when the toss started.

He was learning a few facts here and a few there. The only attack he was ever going to be able to make on the Co-ordinator would be of a non-physical kind, through what passed for the Co-ordinator's mind.

We're human beings. We're the bosses when it comes to any kind of partnership with machines. And also we're gonna win the war. If anyone should ask you.

But first, Frank, I am going to have to learn enough.

"Do you wish to put on Lancelot again?" the Co-ordinator asked Michel suddenly.

"Will you let me, if I do?" And now, he thought, I predict that it will counter with yet another question of its own.

"Not yet. I am not authorized to do so. Perhaps the Directors will allow it. What did you think of, when you first wore Lancelot?"

It had asked him that at least once before, at a time that now seemed long, long ago. What had he answered then?

"I thought of a time when I was in a play." Having given this answer, Michel was asked to explain briefly what a play was. He did so, though he was not at all sure that his questioner did not already know.

"And what role in the play was yours?"

"I was Oberon."

"On a stage you played the role of the fifth major satellite of Uranus?"

"No, of a—creature. I guess the one the satellite was named for. A story-creature. Fiction. And in the play I wore these robes that looked something like Lancelot. Quite a coincidence."

"What is coincidence?" the berserker asked.

"You must know the answer to that one better than I do," he told it. "Why do you keep on asking me questions where you already know the answers?"

"As you know, I am concerned that your mind does not change a great deal while you are in my care. Therefore I test your responses. Repeat, what is coincidence?"

Therefore you are losing, he thought. I couldn't keep my mind from changing even if I wanted to. "I guess," he said, "coincidence is things happening at the same time without any good reason for it."

"Was the story-creature Lancelot in the same play as Oberon?"

"No, in another story. And Lancelot never wore robes like—"

"Here there will be no play."

"I never thought there—"

"In approximately fifty-five standard minutes this ship will dock at a facility where you will be thoroughly examined. Then within a few standard hours our voyage will resume, with a stronger escort, and aboard a different ship where you will have more room and be more comfortable."

A dozen tentative plans, more gossamer than Lancelot's outermost fringes, were dissolved to nothingness by a few words. He had not foreseen this. Maybe there was some excuse for the failure and maybe not, but he just had not foreseen this at all. Yet there was nothing illogical about it; berserkers must have their bases, just as did the human fleets. And there was no reason why the first base their flight came to should be the one at which his ultimate interrogators were waiting.

All Michel said was: "Elly? What about her?"

"Do you wish that your mother continue the journey with you?"

It seemed obvious what was likely to happen to Elly if he said no; what was not so obvious was whether or not she would be ultimately better off that way. "Yes," said Michel at last. Then he asked the machine, "What is this facility like, where we are going to dock?"

"I will clear a screen and you can observe it as we approach."

If he had asked for a screen a standard day or a standard month ago, might it have cleared one for him then? But they had been in almost continuous c-plus travel anyway, and there would have been nothing to see but fireworks.

A few minutes later, making adjustments on one of the control room's large screens (while his guardian stood motionless exactly between him and the captain's chair), Michel discovered a darkly massive body at a distance of about two hundred thousand kilometers and closing rapidly. Too big to be any ordinary ship, the object radiated enough warmth to be plainly visible in the infrared, while remaining obscure even under magnification in the ordinarily visible wavelengths.

The goodlife ship, having slowed drastically from interstellar speeds, was approaching the thing now at about a thousand kilometers per second, and still decelerating strongly. The image of the berserker base waiting ahead was still largely obscured by dust and noise; and this, Michel was thinking to himself, must be what gave him the sense, in observing it, of something . . . not as it should be.

Something out of phase.

Something—wrong?

Of course any berserker construct had to be considered wrong, from a purely human point of view. But this one had about it something that was odd, even given its bad purpose. He couldn't put his finger on it, quite . . . maybe he was just being affected by his own rekindling fear. The Co-ordinator had been programmed to be good to him, but what if the computers at this base had lately received orders to the contrary?

At Michel's back, reassuring as usual, the Co-ordinator was now saying: "On the new ship, you and your mother will be able—"

The berserker thing on the screen was definitely not what it should be, and now abruptly the words broke off. Warned by something other than a conscious thought, Michel had just time to turn and crouch and take hold of a stanchion before full emergency normal-space acceleration ate upward through the artificial gravity to grab at him and pull him down and spread him on the deck. His guardian robot, immensely stronger, crouched above him, its four limbs forming a protective cage. The direction of acceleration shifted without warning. From the captain's chair, Lancelot like a suddenly living cape came flowing toward Michel. The brief silent waterfall of Lancelot's movement was intercepted by one of the robot's deft hands. The machine swirled folds of cape around its fist, neatly forestalling Michel's own nearly hopeless effort at lifting an arm in that direction.

Somewhere beyond the now-closed doors of the control room, a goodlife woman's voice was screaming. As his own mother had once screamed, beyond a door. . . .

He was going to black out in a minute, if the acceleration did not ease. Some god of space swung a great club against the ship's hull from outside. The overload of gravities moderated, shifted again. It vanished momentarily, then came back stronger than before. Now entangled with the robot, which had abruptly gone stiff and awkward in its posture, Michel slid several meters across the deck, skinning his knees and coming to a weighty stop right at the base of the Co-ordinator's columnar perch. The arm with which the robot had seized Lancelot was enveloped now in a mass of churning Lancelot-folds, which were flowing up around the machine's shoulders, like liquid in a capillary tube.

When gravity eased again, Michel plunged both of his hands into the fabric also. The sensation was familiar and shocking at the same time; he had started to forget what it was like to feel complete, or almost complete. Even this partial contact altered his senses and increased his strength. His memory of events that had happened since Lancelot was stripped from him took on an unreal quality, as if they formed an unpleasant dream from which he had now started to awake.

The Co-ordinator was silent, whether through damage or simply because dealing with the external emergency was taking all its capacity. The robot was almost completely passive now, but still it gripped Lancelot with one hand and arm and Michel could not immediately peel it free. With a great effort, moving between throbs of high gravity, he got himself out from under the collapsed metal body. And with a greater effort still, drawing what power he could through the contact of his hands with Lancelot, he

surged momentarily to his feet and aimed his falling body into the captain's padded chair. Once lodged there, with both his hands still muffed in the material of Lancelot as in a reversed sweater, Michel unfolded and closed the chair's body and leg clasps, designed to hold in the occupant against emergency acceleration overloads and other forces.

He secured himself barely in time. A new switch in force vectors threw the robot up and against the chair and console with an impact that almost numbed his right shoulder even through the protective pads.

Michel had the chair, but the Co-ordinator still held the ship. And now at last it was talking to him again, both ends of its speech swallowed in a twinned roar of combat noise with which the hull reverberated.

"—adlife will kill you, Mich—"

Maybe they would; but at any moment now the Co-ordinator itself would be trying to kill him too, rather than give the humans the faintest chance of getting him back alive. You have been tricked, Co-ordinator, and are about to be defeated—your side is not the only one that can take a base by surprise, or set an ambush.

Michel in the chair, the half-paralyzed robot on the deck, struggled for control of Lancelot.

There came a microjump—the Co-ordinator still had hopes of getting him away alive—an interval of weightless fall, a jump again, blending at the end into another smash of weaponry. Whoever was attacking had not yet been shaken off. The robot, with one whole arm and shoulder now buried in the creeping embrace of Lancelot, was flung completely across the room, smashing unhardened civilian instruments at the end of its trajectory. Had Lancelot been real cloth it would have been torn apart, or else Michel's arms would have been wrenched out of their sockets. As matters actually stood, the fields of Lancelot stretched easily. And now, with a swirling motion of both hands, Michel could loop the stretched material round the Co-ordinator's post. The billowing folds created by the swirl almost filled the whole confined space of the control room. Contact was made, and for a long horrible moment Michel/Lancelot could see directly into the innerness of the berserker brain, all power and skill and emptiness.

In rage and loathing, Michel sent through the fields the full impact of his will. At the far side of the room the robot jerked once, like an electrocuted fish, then lay completely still. The Co-ordinator itself was more heavily shielded, and more durable as well; what happened to it was more complex, but it too was at least temporarily disabled.

The ship lurched through a final microjump. Simultaneously the loudest blast yet shook it, like a small animal in some predator's jaws, an energy wavefront slamming the hull with such impact that the vibration rang deafeningly through the air inside.

With that, combat and flight seemed to have come to an end together. The ship was drifting, internal gravity failing fast. But at last the dead robot's grip on Lancelot was broken; when Michel tugged again, the force-fabric flowed resistlessly toward him between digits of inert metal. Michel reeled the stuff in, looking for the fasteners, his fingers probing and sliding through the familiar smooth gauze, tracing out one nexus of quiescent force after another. At last a clasp materialized within his grasp. This was the one, he thought, that should go round his neck.

At Moonbase and on Miranda there had always been a squad of fitters ready to help him put on Lancelot and take it off. Here he had no help. But by now he had learned something, and had forgotten nothing, about how Lancelot ought to be worn.

When he had found the five essential fasteners and clasped them snugly to his arms and legs and neck, he undid the restraints of his chair and stood up. The room was full of electrical noise, and smoke, the monotonous throbbing of several alarms, the sound of a fire trying to get started. Michel moved at once for the control room door. It was jammed, but Lancelot wrenched it open.

"Elly—"

He called again, louder. Somewhere air was leaking out, a windy shine. In the near absence of gravity, an inert human form came drifting down a cross corridor, moving in the direction of the leak. Stal's booted feet dragged a little as if in reluctance to face the great nothingness that made the air itself scream so.

Not until Michel himself could get outside would he be able to tell just what had happened to the ship, and see what other craft might be nearby. But even before doing that, he had to see what had happened to—to Elly.

He found her in her small cabin, where she had been too late in trying to get herself strapped into a berth. There was blood in the air and on her clothing, and Michel thought from the limpness of her drifting frame that other damage must have been done as well. Probably some bones were broken. She was unconscious. Michel tried to shut the cabin door tightly again to save some air, but Lancelot had broken the latch in getting him in, and it would not close properly. He could feel a steady continuing drop in pressure. Near panic, Michel tore up handfuls of bedding and tried to stuff space at the edge of the door with it. Then he gave that up.

"Elly? Don't, don't die, Elly. I'm going to put you in the lifeboat."

She wouldn't answer. Her face was strange and still—how could he be sure she wasn't dead already? Somehow, choking himself though not for any want of air, stumbling, punching ferociously at any obstacle that threatened to impede their progress, he got her out of the cabin as carefully as he could, and down the corridor to where the lifeboat was berthed.

A minor booby-trap went off in his/Lancelot's face as soon as he started to open the boat's entry hatch; no damage done. Within a minute he had Elly inside, the hatch shut again behind them, air pressure building from the emergency supply to somewhere around Earth or Alpine normal. Gravity she was not going to need. Just as in the lifeboats of adventure stories, there was a medirobot here, and with fumbling fingers Michel attached its tentacles to Elly's arm and throat; it ought to be able to manage more connections for itself as needed.

Half a dozen people could have managed to fit, rather uncomfortably, inside the lifeboat's passenger space. There was only a single berth. Before Michel had quite finished fastening her into this, Elly regained consciousness.

"Michel?" Her voice was weak, but it sounded almost happy.

Relief made him feel weak himself. "Elly, hang on. Don't bother trying to talk. Human ships are going to be here soon. You're going to be all right."

"You look so . . . you're my boy." Her voice was empty space, tinged with a little tenderness. Then it suddenly developed purpose. "Ought to tell you. Your father. Is Frank Marcus."

At the moment, the words seemed to convey no meaning. "Don't worry now," was all that Michel said, a couple of seconds later. "I'm going to launch us now. This boat should bring us out near our own ships. They should be searching—"

Just outside the boat, metal was yielding to a slow, grinding pressure. It made a scraping on the boat's small hull. Something was deforming the launch cradle underneath it, methodically, too methodically by far to be accidental.

Michel shot an arm toward the launch button, held it poised in air for four seconds of agonized, half-instinctive thought, then twisted the timer for a half-minute's delay, and hit the button.

Out of here, he thought next, commanding Lancelot. But let no air escape. There was a confused glimpse of the exit hatch hurtling toward his face, and then—

He was outside the boat, in the corridor of the dying goodlife ship. Behind him the lifeboat's hatch was still closed, or closed again. Around him/Lancelot the noises of tortured machinery rose and fell, and smoke stained the flying, failing air.

Beneath the lifeboat, a surviving robot crouched, exerting all its strength on the launch rails.

Lancelot flowed in movement. Some object that had been hard and strong convulsed in Lancelot's double grip, melting and crumpling at the same time, before it was flung aside. Then Michel/Lancelot bent to the rails, straightening them, restoring function. The launching, when it came, surprised Michel with a great flash of light. But it left him still safe, spinning in free space a hundred meters or so from the ship. He looked at once for the lifeboat, but it was nowhere to be sensed. There was only its vanishing zigzag track, which only Lancelot's inhuman senses could detect, a marked trail into layers of spacetime that until now Michel had been unable to perceive, running at right angles to ordinary distance. His momentary will to follow that trail was rebuffed. If c-plus travel would be possible for Lancelot at all, it would take time to learn.

Instead, Michel darted around the heavily damaged ship at a distance of a kilometer or so, reconnoitering nearby space. That the lifeboat had gone without him did not alarm him greatly; he was still expecting human ships to appear on the scene at any moment, and even if their arrival took considerable time he felt confident about his own survival as long as he was garbed in Lancelot.

Meanwhile, though, the more he looked about, the more he was convinced that this was not the same stellar neighborhood in which the ruined berserker-base lay and where the human ambush had been sprung. The relatively nearby stars were simply not the same. Yes, his memory assured him that several c-plus jumps had taken place during the fighting; but he had been assuming that under combat conditions none of those jumps could have been very long. . . .

For the first time, now, it occurred to Michel as a serious possibility that the human forces were not going to be able to follow and find him here. The Co-ordinator's last desperate attempt at evading them might have succeeded. There remained the possibility, also, that berserker reinforcement might arrive instead of, or before, the human force.

While he was pondering this, radio brought him the Co-ordinator's voice, sounding no different than before: "Michel. Michel, come back." It was so like a deliberate mechanical parody of Tupelov that Michel had to fight down a near-hysterical giggle.

"You have nowhere to go. Michel. Come aboard the ship again, and you and I can work together for

survival. You really have no choice."

He drifted, scanning space and stars. There were bright nebulae nearby—nearby as interstellar ranges went.

"You have nowhere else to go, Michel. Our last jump was a long one. No human search is going to find you now. And there are no worlds habitable by humans within a hundred parsecs of this point."

There was no way to tell from a berserker's voice whether or not it lied. But as he drifted closer to the wrecked ship he could detect another sort of change inside it. The drive was running, storing energy, charging some component of itself as if for catastrophic discharge. There was too much damage for it to be made to work normally, and the Co-ordinator must know full well there was too much. But this charging could be used to improvise a primitive but mighty bomb.

"Michel. Come."

Even Lancelot could not protect its wearer from such a blast, not at almost zero range. Michel, as if it were a random movement, made himself drift very slowly farther off.

"You are all alone, Michel, as no human being has ever been alone before." In the pauses between the berserker's utterances, Michel now could pick up a trapped mouse-squealing. Not, though, from a mouse; evidently one of the goodlife women still breathed.

"Come back. All alone, Michel, except for me. Come back, and stay alive."

He drifted farther still. Would it unleash its blast now? No, it had computed that it must lure him closer first, then obliterate him and itself.

". . . come back, and I will be the servant from now on . . ."

The ship was too badly damaged to let it chase him, even slowly. He turned and moved deliberately away. Ahead, at a distance that his perception did not measure in kilometers but instead in terms of being reachable in a matter of hours, began the fringes of a galactic nebula that might, for all Michel knew, extend for a hundred parsecs. What Lance could still detect of the lifeboat's fading spoor seemed strongest in that direction.

He had to follow, before the fleet gave up the search and left him behind. Movement fed fear, and fear turned movement into flight.

* * *

Going home. Alpine.

Home lay somewhere in the galaxy, and there was nothing to stop his moving toward it now, for he was free. The Co-ordinator had been left far, far behind him now, and so had Tupelov, and so had the woman who had so softly and insidiously claimed to be Michel's mother. (Some idea there had been, hadn't there, of following a lifeboat? But that idea could no longer be remembered very clearly.)

Panic. Got to watch out for that. Michel realized that he had been in a state of panic recently. But recently he had managed to master that. Just closing his eyes had helped. Closing his eyes and resting, drifting, here in this peaceful, restful spot.

Keeping his eyes closed, he allowed his breathing (which had recently been quite violent) to slow to a complete stop. With Lancelot you didn't need to breathe at all. Cramps wracked his guts for a moment, but in another moment Lancelot had taken care of that as well.

It was Elly who was dying, not his mother. It was a berserker who had first told him that Elly was his mother, and therefore that must have been a lie. They were evil and they always lied . . . something had been said about Frank being his biofather. That was too much to think about just now.

His real mother would now be . . . at Moonbase, probably. But soon she would be leaving there and coming home, home to Michel's father and to Michel as well. And they were all going to meet there, at home. Where else should a family meet?

Even if his mother hadn't quite got back to Alpine yet, she must be on the way. And his father was of course already there; somebody had to look after the business. Business included woodcarving orders, piled up there for Michel to work at. As soon as he had hugged his father he would go to his room and while waiting for his mother maybe do some work. First, though, he would slide under the quilted cover of the great carven bed, and get some rest. His bed stood by a window, a cosy window whose sky was blanketed eternally by a great Blackwool comforter that could keep out the stars.

His body wasn't really tired now. Not with Lancelot's support. But still something in him yearned for sleep.

Keeping his eyes closed, Michel issued a silent order: Let me rest, Lance, but fly me home. He waited, but he could feel that nothing was going to happen. Lance did not really know which way to go, that was the problem.

Opening his eyes again, unwillingly, Michel forced himself to study his surroundings. The scene had changed since the last time he had taken a look around. Certainly the wrecked goodlife ship was no longer anywhere within range of his perception, and he had no idea in which direction it now lay. Dust clouds bulking like thunderheads, within a few billion kilometers, kept him from getting much of a look at anything beyond, while at the same time the rest of the sky blazed with more stars than he really found comfortable. It was hard to gaze into them, Lancelot or not. His eyelids kept drooping and he felt so tired. . . .

At last (and the search took him an uncomfortably long time) Michel found an open line of sight through which he could just distinguish a few degrees of a curving spiral arm that he judged must be a thousand parsecs distant. That arm, Michel decided after he had looked at it for a while, embodied a great curve that was centered truly on the invisible Core. At least, the three-thousand-year-old light of those far stars brought into his/Lancelot's eyes a description of how that arm had curved three thousand years ago. From that information it was obvious at least at what angle the plane of the galaxy lay—that would not have changed much in a mere three thousand years—and also in which direction was the Core.

Quite near the Core, he knew, lay Blackwool Nebula. Michel looked in that direction now, with eyes that stung, and presently he began to move. Impatiently he dodged the wisps and specks of matter that flickered past him, impeding his progress by preventing Lance from reaching anything like his best true speed. Home. Alpine. . . .

And almost before he had dared to begin to hope for it, he could see the dark mass of Blackwool outlined plainly before him. His home sun was still invisible, of course, inside, but Michel knew that it would be there, a single bright jewel in a black velvet pouch, and round it the fragile ring of Alpine's orbit.

In another moment tears had blurred his/Lance's vision totally.

"Mother," he murmured, stretching out his arms. Lance needed no conscious orders now. The specks of matter in his pathway thinned; the last fringes of an obstructing nebula were being left behind, in an eye-blink of speed.

When Michel's vision cleared again, he beheld an altering universe. The stars before him were gradually clustering together, in a formation centered on the dark nebula he sought. At the same time their light was shifting into the blue. When he glanced back he saw that the remaining stars and nebulae were clustering there, this time redly. All around Michel and at right angles to his flight, a belt of blackly deserted sky was widening. And now his own body began to appear distorted. His fingers were foreshortened when he stretched out a hand; his shoulders seemed to be set far below a slowly elongating neck.

He knew these were illusions, and he thought about them vaguely, and in time a vague sort of understanding came: ride a fast flyer through a rainstorm, and the drops must appear to come from almost nowhere but straight ahead. So with light quanta if your flyer approached the speed of light.

Other effects had to be involved as well, but they did not matter, he thought. The point was that he had to be approaching lightspeed. Still the dark nebula with its false halo of blue suns remained apparently as far away as ever. He could not detect growth in its size at all. He was still crawling across a lifetime of black utter emptiness.

He stretched his hands out, far ahead of him, toward his home where mother would be waiting. The middle portions of his arms ceased to exist, disappeared into his equatorial belt of nothingness. His/Lancelot's hands were distorted into a tight, dark ring, almost lost in blue starlight, encircling Blackwool nebula.

It seemed to Michel that he could hear a sound, the whistle of a heavy log-hauler late at night. Some tame machine signaling its need for human help, stuck somewhere on a winding road that threaded Alpine's glacial deserts and deep forests.

Oh, Lance, I've got to close my eyes. You've got to—somehow—get me home. Where I can sleep.

Lance would take care of it. Somehow. And sleep of a kind did come at last.

TWELVE

"Just like old times, El. Or Almost."

Come to think of it, she had recently heard those same words, or some very like them, several times. The voice they came in was rather mechanical, but most definitely human and aching familiar. And this time, at last, the meaning of the words and voice had penetrated.

It was, oh God, it was truly Frank.

This time Elly awoke in no civilian passenger's berth, nor was she bound. She was wearing a service spacesuit, and rested in a scoutship's right-side combat couch. And once her eyes had opened properly she found that she was looking at the interior of a scoutship. Here and there her gaze lighted on an item of unfamiliar gear, but the basic outlines and colors had hardly changed in the ten years . . . no, it had to be

more than ten years now . . . in all the time since she had served.

"Oh, Frank. Frank?" Looking through the comfortably open hatch into the opposite cabin compartment she could see him there as usual, boxed for combat, his armored personal hardware no more and no less changed than that of the modified ship around them. The scoutship that, when he was in it, seemed always to Elly to have become little more than an extension of Frank's self.

Unless . . . oh, God, this couldn't all be some kind of a berserker trick. Could it?

"Frank?" she called again, and tried to move. Though unbound, she was too weak, and too well secured by the neatly fitting couch, to get out of it quickly and easily. Also, the attempt made her body hurt in several places, and she now became aware of several medirobot tubes that were patched into her suit and presumably into her body as well. Giving up the attempt to rise immediately, she lay back in the couch, not minding the mild pain at all; it authenticated reality.

"El?" came the familiar voice from the other compartment. "I think you're really with me, this time. Welcome aboard."

She muttered something hopelessly inadequate.

"I pulled you out of a civvie lifeboat back there. Remember that?"

From the feel and the faint sounds of the scout around her she could tell that they were making good sublight time. "Not being pulled out, no."

"But getting into it? From that goodlife ship? The important thing I've got to know is, were there any other survivors? That could be vital."

"There was a boy. He helped me into the boat. I don't know if he got clear himself or not. He had—he was wearing Lancelot. If you know what Lancelot—"

"That's him. Michel. Where is he now?"

"I don't know, Frank. I don't know where I am."

But Frank was muttering to himself: "I wonder if I can get a scrambled beam through . . ." At the controls he displayed even less physical movement than was required of a pilot in a body of whole flesh, but Elly knew the subtle signs that meant that he was working. The idea that all this could be some berserker deception was fading from her mind, rapidly and gratefully.

"Secretary Tupelov direct," Frank was ordering. "Urgent from Colonel Marcus."

"Tupelov?" she asked in wonder.

"He's out here with the task force. Stand by one, El, let me get this into the pipe." Frank began spouting detailed galactic co-ordinates, which in their very remoteness from any she had been expecting to hear were somehow all the more convincing. " . . . and I'm bringing her straight back to the Big K. Towing the lifeboat on a cable beam, about fifty klicks behind me, just in case the bad machines tried any funny business with it." He interrupted his transmission to turn part of his attention back to her. "What do you know for sure about what's happened to the kid?"

She went into more detail about her last minutes aboard the goodlife ship; Frank sent off a little more information.

"So there's a task force," Elly said, when he seemed to have completed his transmission.

"Yeah. Well. I don't know how much of the story you know. If you were on that ship when we hit it, you must have been on it at the proving grounds. Don't tell me you've turned goodlife, though; I'm not going to believe that."

"No. No, I was taken along by force." She stumbled through an attempted explanation of her abduction from the Temple.

"Okay, if you say so. Good enough for me."

Quite possibly, Elly realized, not good enough for some others. But even to be accused of being goodlife seemed like a very minor problem at the moment. "There were goodlife on the ship, of course. Three of them still alive, at my last count. I don't know what happened to them when you people hit us. You've been chasing us, all the way from Sol?"

"More than a standard year now. More trying to intercept than chasing, and we finally did it. Tupelov's gathered a regular bloody armada as we've come along. Every system we've put in at, people have been ready to contribute a ship or two.

"Then we found a berserker base near here—I guess the brass on several worlds have known about it for some time, at least that it was in this general region, but nobody could get up the nerve to hit it. Marvelous what a crisis can do sometimes. After we hit the base we left the hulk of it in place, with some fake devices to respond to signals. Parts of our force went home again after that, but the Sol System people stayed; we've been on ambush station for the better part of a standard month. And then you—the goodlife ship and escort—finally showed.

"Tupelov's good at his job, you've got to give him that. He even brought the kid's mother along, just in case we might be able to get Michel back without wasting him. I admit I never thought there was a chance of that."

"Frank. I'm his mother."

There was a silent pause. Then: "You're wandering, El. They've done things inside your head."

"No. Why do you suppose they kidnapped me? He represents my terminated pregnancy—it must be thirteen years ago now, or thereabouts. It has to be that long."

"Terminated pregnancy—I never knew you had one. Lady, I still think the bad machines must have stuffed all that into your head."

Elly shook her head, which felt quite clear. "Of course Michel must have had an adoptive mother somewhere, too. It might be her that you've brought along with your task force. But I don't know her name."

"Name's Carmen Geulincx. But I never heard anything about her being adoptive. That doesn't prove she's not, of course." Frank's voice became slow and doubtful. "But . . ."

"She comes from Alpine, doesn't she?"

A few seconds passed, in which Frank's boxes gave no sign of being any more than inert machinery. Then his speakers commented, "I guess you had some time aboard that ship to talk to him."

"A lot. But I wouldn't have had, unless I were his mother. The berserkers knew it. And Tupelov knows it, too."

"Well, when I get you back to the Big K you can talk all this over with him. . . . Hey, wait. Alpine, almost thirteen years ago? That's when you and I put in there. That was just shortly after—"

Again the boxes apparently went dead, this time so abruptly that some main power switch might have been thrown on them. Elly waited. At last Frank asked, "A very early pregnancy?"

"Very early. That's right, Frank. Michel is your son."

* * *

"You were ready and willing to kill him. You ordered him to be killed. Didn't you?" Carmen's voice hadn't quite broken yet, but any moment now. Her face was transformed into a stage mask of rage and hate.

Tupelov was watching her warily from across the big cabin, almost a luxury stateroom, that made up part of flag quarters aboard the Johann Karlsen. He was thinking that Carmen was certainly entitled to some kind of a blowup, after all she had been through. But at the same time he felt he had to correct the exaggeration.

"Not exactly, Carmen. That's not fair. I just ordered that his ship and its escort be stopped at all costs."

"Not exactly," she echoed in a weak shout, and with that her voice gave way. Suddenly Carmen was looking about her as if for something to throw at him. There was of course nothing worth the throwing, since furniture, decorations and objects in general on warships had to be secured in place against sudden shifts of gravity or acceleration.

As she turned away from him and back again he had to listen hard to understand the rest of what she said: "For a year you've been trying to kill my son, chasing after him to kill him, ever since they took him away. And even now when that woman reports he's still alive, you give more orders that we're going to chase him on all the way across the galaxy if necessary, to shoot . . ." She broke down momentarily.

"To shoot if necessary, I said. If there's no other way to keep the berserkers from having him. Carmen, he's been with them more than a year now. How do you know he wouldn't be better off dead?"

Carmen got herself together and stood up straight. There was something new in her eyes. "Tell that to his father. Tell that to Colonel Marcus. After a year in space I've come to know the Colonel, a little bit. He'll killyou if you tell him that."

"He cares nothing about kids, even his own."

"Is that what you think? You never talk to him."

"Well. Regardless. Let him get Michel out of the berserkers' hands, one way or another, and Lancelot

too. Then he can kill me if he wants." Not, he thought to himself while speaking, that there was really going to be much likelihood of that.

Carmen was at least listening to him again, and now he added, with concrete patience, "I really do want Michel back alive. Of course. Dammit, why do you think I brought you along—just to keep my bed warm? It was because you might possibly be of use to him and to us, keeping him functional, if and when we ever do get him back alive. Now it looks as if there is a real chance we might. Why do you suppose I've got the whole task force spread out right now in search formation? And if the search fails here, you're right, we're going to go on looking for him across the whole damn galaxy if necessary. Until we find him or we die of old age, or the berserkers learn to use him and they win."

"Why do you do that? Why? Because you want your weapons system back."

"We're fighting a war." Then Tupelov thought to himself that there must have been something better for him to say than that.

THIRTEEN

I'm going even faster than before.

That was his first clear thought, coming as soon as he had begun to be aware of himself again and of the world around him, and for a good long while it was his only thought. The next one, after some interminable time, was a question: Should he open his eyes, or not?

Michel was somewhat afraid of what he might see if he did so. But certain physical discomforts had arisen, and Lancelot for some reason was not coping with them perfectly. They came in the form of unpleasantly constricting sensations on each of his arms and legs, also circling his neck and the middle of his body. Still they did not prevent his moving freely. Grimacing, eyes still closed, Michel turned and stretched in space, almost as though he lay under snug quilted covers upon a carved bed. But he knew that he was still in space, and he sensed something about his speed, something he was not anxious to confirm with eyesight.

The sense of speed was quite internalized. And a similar inward feeling assured him that his flight was straight, in the sense that it was proceeding along the most economical course that Lancelot could find, toward his goal. What their passage might look like in terms of an objective pathway drawn across the sky was of course quite another matter.

It was necessary that he open his eyes soon, but he was really afraid to do so. With lids more tightly closed than ever, he willed first that his flight should slow. And with the willing he felt, as he might have felt aboard a slowing starship, the delicate inward jolt that meant a c-plus jump was ending.

Brought fully awake only now, by that fine jolt, Michel blinked about him at the scenery of the galaxy. With no atmosphere around him to impede vision, he had perhaps half a million stars in view as clearly focused points; only a spoonful out of the galaxy, most of whose suns were as usual obscured behind masses of nebular material, light and dark. And with his first glance he felt sure that the nearer stars were not the same ones that had been closest to him during his last clear look at undistorted space, before his building speed had blurred the universe around him.

The dark nebula that he had seen so clearly as Blackwool, and had yearned toward so desperately, had

now disappeared, as completely as a sunset cloud searched for in the sky of dawn.

The bodily discomforts that had helped to wake him nagged at him still. Trying to investigate, he was surprised to discover that he could no longer see his own body at all except in outline. Lancelot had changed markedly, or had been changed by the experience of flight-space. What had been gauzy, tenuous-looking fields were now grown opaque. The whole apparent structure of Lancelot had turned into something more like a sheath of vaguely glowing leather than fine draperies, though it still trailed behind Michel in a comet-like tail. The fabric was now molded much more closely around Michel's head and shoulders. His arms and torso and most of his legs were opaquely covered. And it was at the places where Lancelot was fastened to his body that the feelings of irritation had arisen.

He could see out through Lancelot, with Lancelot's eyes, as well as ever if not better. But under the new surface of the protective fields, he could no longer see the fasteners. Groping to adjust them, Michel made the additional discovery that his clothing no longer fit him; in fact the garments were now grossly too small. His unseen shirtsleeves no longer reached much past his invisible elbows, and he could only relieve the pressure round his middle by undoing the waistband of his trousers completely.

No reason for this strange shrinking of his garments suggested itself at the moment, and he made no real effort to understand. Even as he regained his physical comfort by adjusting his clothes and Lancelot's clasps, Michel's mind was drawn back to the seemingly more important problem of the disappearance of Blackwool. Only now did the possibility occur to him that he had simply been mistaken all along about the nebula, that in his fear and confusion the first dark blotch he saw had appeared to him as home.

The more he thought about this the more probable it seemed. Still there remained a chance that he was somewhere in the Alpine region of the Galaxy, and one of the dark puffs presently in view—there was an enormous number of them, scattered in front of starfields and visible against bright emission and reflection nebulae—might be Blackwool after all. It was easy to understand how distance could make the appearance of galactic features change drastically. Apart from the fact that to see a thing at different distances meant seeing it at different times, there was a simple analogy with planetary features as modest as ordinary mountains. Get close enough, and local details could not only change the appearance of the whole, but even prevent awareness of it. He might be now among foothills of brightness or darkness that were hiding behind them the one dark nebula he sought—even as Blackwool, when you were in it or beside it, could hide from sight the Core itself.

He could see nothing of the Core right now. This hardly proved that Alpine was near, but still he was free to take it as a hopeful sign, and chose to do so. It still seemed to him that the Core lay somewhere ahead, in the direction he had been traveling while he slept.

That was the direction in which he wanted to proceed. And proceeding, if he was going to get anywhere at all, meant making another c-plus jump. It had already been demonstrated that such a thing was not beyond the capabilities of Lancelot; it only remained for Michel to establish full conscious control over the procedure.

For the first time since he had awakened, Michel deliberately drew in a breath. The air that Lancelot manufactured for the purpose was no doubt excellent, but still Michel's lungs felt strange as they expanded to the full. Somewhere the fabric of his loosened shirt gave way. Wanting to make as sure as he could of his orientation, Michel rotated himself slowly in space, coming back after a full circle to face in the same direction he had started from. He still could not see the great starclouds of the Core, but he was convinced that it lay there.

The power required for c-plus travel was more than Lancelot, or any starship's engines for that matter,

could extract from any known kind of fuel. So Lance was going to have to duplicate the functions of the much larger masses of machinery that made up an ordinary starship's drive—to detect and lock onto and follow into flight-space the force currents of the galaxy itself, the inexhaustibly rich streams of power that pulsed endlessly through the modes of space wherein mild worlds and human beings could have no natural existence.

He understood, now, that he was only beginning to know Lancelot. But included in the knowledge already gained was a certain understanding of the ways in which the wordless questions he put to his partner should be framed. To do it properly it was necessary to relax and concentrate at the same time.

Now, focusing his attention inward, Michel found and once more entered a door that Lance held open for him, a door into the strange and almost timeless realm that until now Michel had known only during combat. Now he could see that the currents that he and Lancelot must ride flowed here too, somewhere just below the floor of normal space.

This time Michel's eyes remained open during the transition, this time he watched all the fireworks of the c-plus jump. Chaotic radiation, unknown in normal space, fell in a random rainstorm, omnidirectional. Lance held a bubble of normality in place about him, and somehow found a pathway that made sense. Distance became something other than it ought to be. The shadows of gravitic masses existing in normal space extended here, and had to be avoided.

The shadows made an ominously thickening pattern.

The fireworks show ended abruptly, some time before Michel was ready to will its termination. Lance had, for some reason, aborted the jump midway.

For just a moment, when stability returned, Michel was not sure that Lance had returned him to normal space at all. They were drifting almost motionless amid a cloud of some kind of crystallized solids, a cloud incredibly dense for interstellar matter. The folds and billows of it reached away to mind-stretching distances, lit in remote parts by interstellar fires. Through Lance's vision, Michel could see each nearby particle as a regular geometric shape, exceedingly hard and pure. Lance could sense the atomic and crystalline structure of the substance, but neither he nor Michel could give it a name. None of the particles was more than a thousandth of a millimeter wide, and the average distance between them seemed to be nowhere more than a few score meters at the most.

The substance reminded Michel of something . . . in time it came to him. A hard stone that his mother had sometimes worn, set in a gold ring on her finger.

Just how far the fields of diamond-dust extended, Lancelot could not see. Certainly, in most directions at least, to distances beyond the merely planetary.

To slip back into flight-space here, amid matter of such density, was clearly an impossibility even for Lance, who could pass amid gravitic shadows where the hull of even the smallest starship would be far too large. Michel set Lance to carrying him ahead at the best sublight speed that could be managed. Then, overcome again by sudden weariness, Michel slept again.

When he awoke his mind felt clearer, and he was reassured to find himself still rushing forward, still with the strong feeling that he was going in the direction that he must go. The blockading particles had thinned out somewhat. Shielding at least as good as that provided by most starships glowed in the shape of a blunt cone, protecting Michel's head and shoulders. The fields of the shielding flared now and then with the impact of a particle, when Lance decided it was more efficient to hit one than to try to dodge around

it.

Again, in Michel's arms and legs and neck, a strange sensation had grown up—not tightness and irritation this time, but a new kind of oddness. Still unable to get a look at his own body, he tried to investigate the difficulty by touch. Running his right hand round his left wrist, he was disturbed by the discovery that he could no longer locate the clasp whereby he and Lancelot were joined. Forcefields and flesh seemed to have interpenetrated each other to such an extent that Michel could no longer distinguish which of his sensations originated in which substance.

Trying to fight down a rising anxiety, he rubbed at his neck and legs and arms. The strange new sensations were not intrinsically unpleasant, and it seemed likely that he would soon get used to them if they did not fade. They gave no sign of fading; and presently he realized that his body was not only joined to Lancelot, but altered in itself. He seemed to be built more thickly than he ought to be. And his clothing, which had been growing painfully tight before, was no longer to be found at all.

He clung to the idea that these peculiarities were only a result of Lance's necessary protective measures, making his body look and feel strange. Changes must have been necessary, for them to travel faster than light. When he got home, all could be restored to what should be. Lance would take care of it all, change him back . . . then Michel's parents would put their arms around him, and he would be able to leave to them any problems that might remain.

Getting home was the important thing. Then all would be well. And Michel would be able to sleep then. Real sleep, long sleep, in the great carven bed.

His sense of the passage of time was still distorted; maybe, he reflected, it was gone altogether now. Because when he again took a careful look at the scene around him, he found that it definitely changed. The diamonds were entirely gone. Clouds of stars, looking thick as smoke but not with the utter density that marked the Core, hung before him and behind him. The starclouds were apparently motionless. Was Lance learning to compensate for the visual distortion that came with approaching lightspeed? Ahead of him there was also a lot of dark matter, material that might or might not be part of Blackwool.

Against the black matter ahead—and perhaps it was this sight that had roused him, brought his full attention back to externals—a patch of light was visible. It must be an enormous object, greater than any conceivable sun, yet it was irregular in shape as well as in intensity. Its spectrum, strong in blue light and the shorter wavelengths, indicated that Lance was screening Michel's eyes from the full impact of its radiance.

Michel at once changed course, to head directly toward the thing. Pure cold wonder made him forget, for the moment, that he had ever had any other goal. Even at sublight speed, the white apparition grew steadily in angular diameter. With an abrupt change of perception, Michel realized that it was not a bright thing seen against a more distant dark background, but instead a glimpse of light penetrating darkness from far beyond the dark.

With his approach the brightness widened, and intensified seemingly without limit. As Michel flew through the last barriers of intervening dust, he realized, with surprising calm, two things: first, that his flight had probably never yet brought him within sight of Blackwool; second, that he had a real chance to find it, now.

Before him shone the Core.

There followed an immeasurable interval in which it seemed to Michel that he was climbing. The sensation of the climb made him think of swimming uphill. To get where he was going he had to work his arms and legs, and this he did tirelessly, a physical effort that thanks to Lance brought no exhaustion though it continued without pause for a long time.

His arms spread like great wings, he swam, or flew, the galactic forecurrents almost to their upper limit at Galactic north. The globular starclusters of the galactic fringe burned round him and below him here like great bluish lamps. From each of his fingers Lance reached out with a kilometer of quasimaterial webbing. From Michel's moving legs there trailed a tailfan enormously great and tenuous, more like flame now than gauze or leather.

He reached an altitude where even to maintain his position required from him an analog of energetic swimming effort. His climb had reached its zenith, and it had brought him what he wanted. Spread out below him now was the only existing map of the whole galaxy: the map that was the thing itself.

In very general terms, the view was like that from a low flyer hovering at night above the central lights of some great and distorted city. The enormous thoroughfares of the spiral arms were apparently bent a bit more than they really ought to be, a consequence of the remoteness of their outward portions from Michel, who therefore saw them at different times in the age-long cycle of rotation. The fiery clouds of the Core, some ten thousand light years just below him, were unresolvable into individual stars, even with Lance's vision.

And a first impression, which Michel had been disinclined to accept at first, remained: the Core, like that berserker base some time ago, had something wrong with it. Something . . . no, he could not guess the nature of the wrongness yet.

While he thus contemplated the map that ought to guide him home, he kept tasting distracting things, new kinds of radiation, through the shielding of Lancelot across his back. Incoming were particles of kinds Michel had never sensed before, and things that were more and less than particles. Things never allowed to reach the inner worlds, the cloud-shielded roads and ways where all humanity had led its small existence until now. The starship had not yet been made, Michel felt sure, that could climb here to sample them.

The unknown tapped his shoulders, beckoning.

With a swimmer's motion he turned his back upon the great map with the troubled heart. The deep-space siblings of the galaxy looked as they always had. From where Michel swam on his back, real space stretched out, holding the red-shifted spirals and barred spirals and squiggles and oddities, scattered out to the last faint sparks at the limits of even Lancelot's vision.

The beckoning was clear, and clearly there was no way for him to answer it. He turned back to his search for home.

The old space stories had mapped the arms of home for him to some extent, as had stray bits of conversation with people who knew some astrogation, in that short period of his life when such people had been around him. Now Michel decided, taking his time to make the decision, which spiral arm of the great map below must be the right one for his search. Once he had chosen an arm, he scanned it near its root, with patience almost that of a machine.

Until at last—and how much time that "last" involved, his mind refused to speculate—at last he could

discern in that chosen arm a single small black nebula, of such apparent size and shape that Lance and Michel agreed it might be reasonable to think of it as Blackwool. A dot of pepper, one of a thousand similar dots, on a white sheet.

It was no more than a few hundred light years in diameter at most, and he was seeing it in a configuration of many thousands of years ago. There was no way in which he could be sure, yet something about that single dot continued to feel right. As if Lance could have senses transcending space and even flightspace, could be developing capabilities Michel had yet to guess.

The arms of the galaxy were reaching up for him, and he was starting down again toward his home.

FOURTEEN

He was at Blackwool, he was sure of that. He had even been inside the nebula for some unknown time, working his way toward its concealed heart. Toward his home.

Once he had known exactly what he was going to do when he got home. What things he would do, and in exactly what order he would do them—and now, just what had that plan been, again?

While a part of his mind worried at that question, Michel kept on working his/Lancelot's way toward the inner depths of Blackwool's darkness. He no longer had the slightest fear of getting lost, wherever Lance might take him. By now he thought he could determine, from samples of the matter and the flow taken inside any nebula, approximately how big it was and in what ways it might be moving, and also which way he could proceed to reach his goal. This nebula, he was sure now, had at its heart a great hollow space swept out by the solar wind of one lone sun.

Was the Bottleneck still open, through which titanic ships had once escorted him in frantic flight? Michel didn't know and didn't care. He didn't need the Bottleneck, and so made no attempt to find it in the ebon labyrinths. Smooth glide amid the molecules of gas, the particles of dust, then microjump when he could, and glide again when matter got too thick. Thinking about it now no more than walking, moving now much faster than any ship could have made this constricted passage, he descended to the center of Blackwool.

He expected a bright gleam ahead at any moment now, and presently it came. Then, somehow before Michel had managed to feel quite ready for it, the sun that had lighted his days of childhood was floating in velvet space before him, a lone jewel set in the almost-perfect dark. To one side of the sun moved a lightspeck of reflection that had to be Alpine.

He supposed that if he waited here just a little while, long enough to watch a segment of the planet's orbit, it ought to be easy for him to tell just what season of the year it was at home. Instead of delaying like that, though, he ought to be hurrying on . . .

. . . and at just about this point it came back to him, his plan for what to do first when he got home. First he would greet his parents, certainly. Then—and he was no longer sure why this had once seemed so desirable—he had meant to crawl into that little bed of his and go to sleep.

There was some doubt in his mind, now, as to whether he would even fit that bed. He was still tired, yes, in a way. But truthfully he wasn't sleepy any longer. He hadn't felt sleepy at all for a long time now.

With a little cold feeling somewhere inside him, he realized that he could no longer remember exactly what his mother looked like. There, he had the picture almost clear again. . . .

When he got home, no doubt about it, the first thing that he would really have to do was change. Lance would have a real job to do. The way Michel was now just—wouldn't work at home. But with relief he reminded himself again that Lance was sure to be able to change him back. Changes, hormones, Tupelov . . . it was a long time since he had even thought of Tupelov.

Suddenly he didn't want to look at Alpine any longer. It took Michel a while to remember how to close his eyes, but when he had managed to do so, darkness brought him peace. What next? Go home, of course. Something was holding him back; he wasn't pushing on for Alpine nearly as fast as he might have.

His mother's face at last became clear in his mind's eye. And with that, he had no choice but to go on.

Lately, whenever he was bothered by some upsetting thought, Michel had taken to stroking his unseen chin with an invisible finger. And now on his chin he could feel what must be, well, some sort of a beard. Tupelov, hormones, change. . . .

Anyway, where else was there for him to go? The sun was much brighter before him now, Alpine much closer in its lonely orbit crossing the velvet sky. The trouble was . . . again he could tell that there was something wrong. So it had been with that berserker base. So with the Core itself. And so it now proved to be with this.

The upper atmosphere of Alpine was all wrong. It was nothing but a great single cloud, glowing on day-side, a lifeless sun-reflecting shell of steam and water vapor and fine dust. It was much hotter than it should have been. All the adventure stories agreed that any once Earth-like planet that suddenly looked like that had been . . .

If any confirmation was needed, he could see that the once strong network of defensive satellites had been entirely removed.

He thought, or tried to think, about his parents. His head seemed to be filled with dull confusion. Yes, he remembered now, his father had been going to join his mother in Sol System. His mother really hadn't been here at all.

Numbly Michel drifted round the world to night-side. He listened for radio voices, and after a lengthy interval of silence heard one. It was not human; it spoke only briefly, and only in coded mathematics. It had a lot in common with that horde of voices that had once pursued Michel across a broken landscape, when he had been a small boy filled with fear.

He was ahead of Alpine in its orbit, and now he let the bulk of the advancing planet pull him closer to the deathmask of its poisoned air. Had his father really left in time? Had his mother instead come back? He thought from the look of things that all life must be totally expunged by now. The radio message he had intercepted indicated that some machines must have been left behind by the destroying berserker fleet, to make quite sure that the last microorganism was quite dead. But no locator beams came probing toward him.

Michel used Lance's senses to probe beneath the slowly seething, overheated clouds. Down there he could find the outline of a flattened landscape, but no remaining seas. Nothing to indicate that the berserkers' job had not been completed.

"Michel."

Round the limb of the slain world a small artificial satellite had appeared, moving in low orbit. It was revolving in Michel's general direction, and from it had come the radio voice speaking his name. The voice was familiar and unchanged—not Tupelov's, the other one.

"Michel."

He made himself wait, motionless relative to the planet, to see if the satellite would change course.

Activating a comparatively feeble drive, the berserker device pulled itself out of free orbit and decelerated, coming finally to a stop within ten meters of Michel. Its diameter was about the same distance, and it was roughly spherical in shape. In the gloss of its surface metal he could see himself reflected, a long-tailed spaceborne figure of living flame, his glowing body almost featureless except for striations like those of muscle tissue.

"Michel, I am your friend."

"How do you know me?"

"Your present appearance has been predicted." It was the Co-ordinator's voice, Michel felt sure of that. The Co-ordinator somehow, against all odds, found and salvaged from the smashed goodlife ship, the Co-ordinator's memory installed in this new hardware. That memory, then, was still something on which the berserkers placed great value.

"Come aboard, Michel." Only now did he take notice of the surprising fact that the satellite really did have a hatch on its side, of a size to accommodate a human. A casual probe of the interior confirmed that there was a warm, cell-sized chamber within, even now being filled with breathable air.

"Come aboard," it repeated, "and we will talk. I will convey you to a place where you can get the help you need."

"I need—" His own voice, so long unused, startled him with its harsh roar. Controlling it consciously, he tried again: "I need no help."

"But come aboard and we will talk. I have information that you will want to hear."

"My father?" When Michel waved an arm at the cloud-surfaced world below, a reflected glow from the movement came and went across the faceless surface of the machine that faced him. "What happened to him?"

"Come aboard and we will talk."

"Sixtus Geulinx. Where is he?"

"Sixtus Geulinx is quite safe. He was taken from this world before it was purified of life. The Directors now have him in their care, against the time of your return."

"And my mother, what about her?"

"Come aboard, and we will help you search for her."

"Liar!" The radio echoes of the shout rebounded from the lifeless clouds below.

"I was left here to be a guide for you when you returned."

"You're lying." But it just might be true, or halfway true at least. The cell inside might not be meant for goodlife after all. What must have happened, Michel realized now, was that the Co-ordinator's somehow-rescued memory had been replicated and grafted into a hundred or a thousand berserker brains scattered across an unknown volume of space. Each such machine was effectively the Co-ordinator now, besides serving whatever other functions it might be programmed for. Should Michel, or news about Michel, ever turn up, each one would be ready to deal with the event as the Directors wished.

Michel demanded, "Where have you taken Sixtus Geulincx? And what of Carmen Geulincx, and Elly Temesvar, and Frank Marcus? Which of them are still alive, and where?"

"I know only that Sixtus Geulincx is still alive. And well cared for, as I have said. He is with the Directors, and they are somewhere near the Core. My programming does not allow me to be more specific at this time. Come aboard, and we will talk more."

The physical form in which the Co-ordinator now confronted Michel had been built for several purposes. For orbital movement, for limited communication, to house goodlife or desirable prisoners if need be, to observe a purified planet and seed it with additional destruction if required. It had not been built for real fighting. When Michel reached out an unhurried hand toward it now, it had time to compute what the gesture meant, and then to lash back at him with energies intended to be murderous. But Michel/Lance's right hand went straight in through its nominal armor, to the key parts that Michel had chosen. In Lance's fist he squeezed them to something less than matter. It was done before the destructor charges lining the satellite's memory could be made to discharge.

Lance sipped at the satellite's power supplies, like some odd new lifeform imbibing electronic blood, gaining new strength in the process. Then, after some study, Michel removed more parts, deftly and with great care. The Co-ordinator's memory banks were open to his scanning now.

He scanned them and learned what he could; and when he had done learning, he seized what remained of the satellite in one fist and hurled it down into the clouds, where a new fireball bloomed suddenly and disappeared. The radio voices of other berserkers began questioning space around him.

Michel Geulincx, drifting over the world that once had been his home, came slowly to believe what he had learned.

Despite all that had transformed him, he was Michel Geulincx. After he had hunted down the berserkers still remaining in the Alpine system, he meant to go on looking for his father.

FIFTEEN

The Johann Karlsen was a great grayish pearl, set firmly now in a rich jeweler's mounting of pearl-gray loops and bands, with the lesser roundness of a disgorge but immovable scoutship frozen at its side. When Tupelov at last emerged from the flagship, alone, he could see the vast, curved cagework of the Taj soaring away from him in at least three spatial dimensions. If he let his perception and his fancy get

away from him, now with only his suit's faceplate between him and the Taj, he could easily become subject to the impression that here more than three dimensions were definable, that he was standing in the middle of an Escher solid made real, that he might be able to walk or climb away from the ship on one of these highway-sized, apparently unsupported gray loops and re-emerge from their distant tangles in a direction opposite to that of his departure.

Two days ago, meaning to investigate the Taj, he had ordered the flagship driven close to it. Instinct and what logic he could still muster both urged him that the search for Michel had to lead here ultimately if it led anywhere; and this portion of the inner Core was quite alive with decaying berserker radio signals of indeterminate age. Whether the two previous human expeditions sent to the Taj from Sol System had had any success, or had been able to get back to Earth, he still did not know. Investigation was definitely called for.

He had been able to make the order for investigation stick, though there had been some grumbling. Some of the crew were whispering that after this last effort it would be time enough and past time to call off his monomaniacal pursuit of one human child who had to be dead and lost long years ago. . . .

The flagship's captain had driven close to the Taj, not meaning to enter it. They were close to the Taj, and then without apparent transition of any kind they were inside it, the intercoms exploding with the crew's surprise, the instruments jumping with inexplicable readings and then settling back—in some cases, to steady readings that seemed to make no more sense.

The ship was caught immovably. Two standard days of trying to work it free, using the drive and short-range weapons, had been unsuccessful. Huge gray bands of unknown substance bound it rigidly. In the bottomless space containing the gray bands, an ocean of weatherless air existed, according to instrumental indications. At last a scoutship was launched, with Command Pilot Colonel Frank Marcus and re-drafted quasi-civilian Elly Temesvar aboard, ready to do their fanciest flying. This attempt aborted at once, with the scout immediately caught in its own newly-formed loop of resistless gray, not ten meters outside the launching hatch.

There was urgent conversation between scout and mother ship, on various communicator systems, all of which seemed to be working well enough, but working as if the air surrounding the ships, an Earth-surface standard atmosphere, were a reality.

After that, there had seemed to be nothing to do but try to get out of the ship on foot and look around—oh yes, external gravity, if the instruments could be trusted, was steady and one-directional. Its value matched that of Earth-surface normal to four decimal places.

Tupelov, maybe feeling a little suicidal, maybe just trying to be fair, nominated himself to be first out. In this he was unopposed, which caused him a disappointment so faint that he hardly recognized it himself. So as soon as he was suited up, out he went, half expecting an instantaneous gray band to materialize in a loop round his middle as soon as he had cleared the hatch. Well, at least he would be able to come to direct grips with the damned stuff.

Emerging from an auxiliary maintenance hatch, whose door was thicker than it was tall or wide, and which closed itself invisibly back into the thickness of the hull the instant Tupelov was completely out, the Secretary found to his considerable relief that no gray bands had snapped him up. And also that he seemed safe from space sickness; the gravity felt as normal as had been reported. His booted feet were standing on one of the gray bands wrapped around the ship, and down was precisely the direction perpendicular to the band's surface where he was standing on it.

Other bands and loops ran in every direction, the nearest a few hundred meters distant from him. Gray and largely featureless, they appeared to be rectangular in cross-section for the most part, though already he could notice that a few of them were round. Everything was bathed in a cheerful and seemingly sourceless light, isotropic enough to cast no very noticeable shadows anywhere. The band that Tupelov was standing on—his exit hatch had been chosen for the easy access to good footing that it appeared to offer—was about five meters wide, and when he cautiously approached the edge of it outboard from the ship, he could see that it was about a meter thick. Beyond its thickness a downward glance fell through what might as well have been an infinity of distance. The farthest bands visible in that direction were backed by what appeared to be a very light gray sky, continuous with the "sky" that Tupelov could also see to right and left and overhead.

"Sir, do you read me? Sir, this is the bridge, over."

He shouldn't have let a radio silence grow. "I read you, Bridge. So far I've experienced nothing to indicate that our readings on ship's instruments were faulty. I'm just standing here on this band, whatever it is. The substance feels just slightly yielding underfoot—about like a good floor. Gravity feels normal. Also my suit indicators confirm the presence of atmosphere. Colonel Marcus?"

"Sir?" The answer sounded faintly surprised.

"Why don't you and Temesvar climb out of that scout now. See if you can negotiate the band running down in my direction."

"Yes sir."

"Iyenari? Why don't you come out too? Maybe we can make some start at analyzing what these things are made of."

The Doctor acknowledged; he would be out as soon as he could get suited up. Maybe there was no need for suits. Well, Tupelov wasn't about to take his own off yet. While he waited to be joined by other people, the Secretary went on talking, for an audience that he was sure must include the whole mystified crew of the Big K.

"Even in the farthest distance, the bands look perfectly clear. There's no consistent pattern to them that I can see, no beginning or end, no sign of what holds them in position.

"And there's no indication anywhere of precipitation, or fogging, or clouds, unless the apparent sky surrounding us is something of the kind. Air temperature where I'm standing reads just over eighteen degrees C. No wind perceptible—well, we're going to have a bunch to do, if we get into research here."

Pausing, he found himself breathing deeply. Even inside his suit it seemed he could detect a trace of ozone, a fresh post-thunderstorm, mountaintop, ionic concentration in the air.

Gray light bathed gray roadways, but somehow the effect was not nearly as dull as he might have imagined. There was rather a pearly richness, as of cleaned air after rain. And the air was clean, as far as his suit's elementary instruments could tell, and moderately humid.

Elly Temesvar in her suit, approaching at an upright walk along a roadway that, from Tupelov's point of view, made a wild descent toward him, demonstrated that gravity seemed to be everywhere at right angles to the surface where anyone stood. She crossed athletically from one band to another at an intersection, "down" shifting with her, and was the first person to reach the Secretary's side. Lombok's

secret report, which Tupelov had just managed to hear before leaving Sol System, had not entirely cleared her of suspicion of goodlife involvement. But Tupelov had accepted her story of forcible kidnapping, and nothing in the years of the long voyage since her rescue had made him change his mind. After all, he had grabbed one Michel-mother himself, and was not surprised that the enemy should have confirmed his intuition in the matter by trying to grab the other one.

"Ms. Temesvar," he commented now, "you've been here before. Or have you?"

"You mean is this the same Taj that I described to you? Oh, I think there's no doubt of that, although I see what you mean. This doesn't really match the way things looked to me the other time."

"It doesn't at all match the picture of the place that I had formed from listening to your descriptions."

"No, no." Chin lifted, she was squinting off into the distance somewhere. "But there's a feeling—oh, this is the same house, all right. But I'm not in the same room of it this time, if you get what I mean."

" 'In my Father's house are many mansions.' "

She turned a puzzled look toward him, but Tupelov looked away. Marcus was approaching, a collection of boxes grappling its cautious way along the edge of a narrow Taj-loop, like some segmented caterpillar. An energy rifle was slung on one small pair of metallic arms. Well, why not? Tupelov hadn't issued orders one way or the other about sidearms, though the past two days had given no indication that they would be needed here.

"What about you, Colonel? Does this bring back any memories?"

Marcus' answer indisputably came over his air-speakers as well as on radio. "No. Everything on that first mission is still a blank for me. But you're both right, this has got to be the Taj, and it doesn't match the mental picture I had formed from hearing her accounts of it."

Elly was turning slowly, seeming to scan the environment with all her senses. She said, "That time we were being actively examined, I'm sure. There was a sense of—pressure, of several kinds. Of confrontation."

Tupelov was intrigued. "I've never heard you put it just that way before. Confrontation with what? Or who?"

She gave the impression of trying to find words. Marcus, arriving, had gone right to work on the Taj-loop near Tupelov's feet with a testing kit of some kind. Presently Elly added, "You'll all understand what I mean, when things turn that way again."

"You think they will."

"I get the feeling that we've just been set here on a back shelf. Things made comfortable for us—air, gravity. Then—activity will come. There's something we must wait for. What, I don't know."

"Your Final Savior, after all?" There had been plenty of time for discussion of the Temple.

"Thinking about it that way doesn't draw me any more."

Looking into the curve-bound distance, Tupelov thought that he could see, after all, some evidence of

atmospheric phenomena. Around certain intersections of the curving bands dim, partial rainbow arcs were visible. A few other meeting points had somehow generated faint but perfectly complete halos of refraction. It looked almost reassuring—except that, between blue and green, the halos held bands of at least one color that Tupelov had never seen anywhere before.

Maybe, the wild thought came, that's what happens when the diameter of the full halo comes out to equal exactly one third of its circumference. . . .

Iyenari was just joining them, having come out by the same route as Tupelov. The scientist bent to take over the testing operation; Temesvar, who had been helping Marcus, straightened up, gesturing to Tupelov that she wanted a private conversation. When he had acquiesced and the scrambler channel was set up, she asked him, "After we get out of this, do we go home?"

"First, do you think we'll be able to get out of it? Second, what are the chances that I'll have a mutiny on my hands if we get free and then I don't agree to quit?"

She sighed. "I don't know about most of the crew—six years is a long time, of course. But you'll get no mutiny from me if you want to go on looking. And Frank is with us, of course."

Again his curiosity was touched. "Marcus I can understand. It's become a challenge for him; he can't admit he's beaten. But you . . ."

"I know. I gave away my son once. Then I met people who didn't know him, but worshipped him." Her eyes came back to Tupelov. "You yourself act in a way as if he were your god, do you realize that?"

"Huh." Some similar thought had occurred to him, at night sometimes.

"Then I met him myself. . . ." Elly paused; her face altered. Then she raised an arm in a slow pointing gesture, as if long-lost Michel might be running toward them along a pearly loop. Marcus, having just turned to rejoin them, swiveled lenses. Tupelov made an adjustment for magnification on his faceplate.

At a distance of several kilometers—it was hard to judge very closely here—green fur showed brightly on one road-broad curve.

"I think those are trees." Elly was now back on the general communication channel.

"Trees." The one word from the Colonel showed disgust but not denial. Any environment so horribly wonderful as to negate all piloting skills might contain trees too, without adding anything to the mystery.

Tupelov's eyes, backtracking along the road on which the supposed trees grew, got about halfway to the place where he was standing before they ran into something else that brought them to a halt. He started to announce this new discovery, waited for someone else to spot it first, then finally felt compelled to speak.

"I think there are some people over that way, too. A group of them seem to be walking in our direction."

Iyenari promptly jumped to his feet, checking his suit's telltales. No doubt he thought they were all being subtly poisoned by hallucinogens.

"I have them in sight," said Marcus's airspeakers. "Definitely people. Maybe twenty of 'em, walking in a rather compact group. Not suited. Looks like they're dressed in shipboard casuals."

The bridge was calling Tupelov. "Sir, we've got a big scope on them. Earth-descended, no doubt about it. And we have a tentative computer match on at least two people as members of theGonfalon's crew." That was one of the expedition ships whose fate the people with theJohann Karlsenhad never learned.

Whose idea it was that his people should advance to meet the onward-marching group halfway, Tupelov honestly couldn't remember afterwards. Maybe his own. At least he authorized more of his own crew to suit up and come out. And with the others he was walking away from the ship. The gray band flowed beneath their feet, the shifting of its effective gravity holding them always at the bottom of its curve.

From the bridge again: "Sir, they don't look exactly happy to see you. Or exactly healthy, either. They look, well, like refugees of some kind. . . ."

And again, a few moments later: "Sir, there's a machine of some kind in the middle of that group—"

In Tupelov's suit, in all their suits at the same time, there sounded a brisk alarm. It signaled that radio code of a certain ominous type was in the air.

"Back to the ship, quick!" Before he had finished giving the order he knew it was unnecessary; and he knew also that it was quite probably too late.

* * *

All force-currents led to the Taj, Michel had discovered. At least they did if the Taj was what you were looking for. Once that goal was chosen, there was no way to avoid finding it.

Nor was there any way to simply approach it for a cautious look. You located the Taj, you decided to get a better look, and from that moment it had you enmeshed in its gray loops, embedded in its own peculiar space. Maybe a decision to flee, instead of coming closer, would have been honored. But as matters stood—

On integrating the Co-ordinator's memory into his own, he had recognized in it a new view of something that he himself had seen long ago. It was something he had seen through Lance's eyes, the first time he had tried on Lancelot. Something that was then being clumsily and inadequately modeled, on one of the secret levels of Moonbase. He had seen, through Lance's eyes, a technician labeling that model with a name. So Earth had known a little about this, even then. Perhaps Tupelov had known, even as the berserkers knew, how the thing that humans called the Taj was connected with the origins of Michel Geulincx.

* * *

After the successful completion of his hunt in the vicinity of Alpine, he had flown straight inward from Blackwool toward the Core. Almost from the start this passage had been quite stormy, marked by heavy opposing currents. There were storms of radiation in his face. There were cloud-columns of matter in several forms, marching out fresh from the Core's creative furnaces, material moving on its way to sunbirth from the all but inexhaustible fountains known to exist at the roots of the galactic arms.

He went on in, shifting from flightspace to so-called normal space and back again. He crossed through areas where travel in normal space actually was faster. Around him there was increasing evidence of an organization growing ever more complex and dense. Still he had come only a few hundred light years from Blackwool, a distance far short of what should have been necessary to bring him to the very center

of the Core, when the Taj appeared ahead of him. He had reached his goal long before he had expected to.

Seen from outside, the Taj reminded him of nothing so much as an enormous geodesic dome. Its size was hard to determine, but he knew it was immense, bigger than a star. And at once he knew that the great but subtle wrongness that he could feel pervading the whole Core was centered here.

So there was the Taj ahead of him, and then without a single frame of transition there was the Taj around him on all sides. He was still free to move within it, but there was no apparent way out of the cage of its great gray loops and bands. Not a trace was visible of the geodesic structure that he had seen from outside.

This was the center of infection of the wrongness of the Core.

Mild, thick, planet-surface air filled the whole volume of space that now held Michel, extending as far as Lancelot could sense—but the air was not the wrongness; this space seemed to have been built for air. In the air were radio messages, some very old and decaying, intelligence in codes that were not human or berserker either, the same messages passing and repassing, endlessly traversing a finite but large and unbounded space. These messages were not the wrongness, either.

And there was human speech, quite recent, in the air. And a scrambled berserker code, saying that fresh human prey had just become available. Even this was not the wrongness in the Taj.

Michel took bearings. In a hurry, he turned and flew. In the improbable atmosphere, a shock wave grew before him like a wall of flame.

He saw and recognized the Johann Karlsen, bound in its jeweler's setting like a pearl. Along one of the bands that circled the great ship, machines and suited humans skirmished. There must have been a sortie from the ship, and now the party was cut off.

The enemy units were small in size, not much larger than the people, and the power they radiated was almost negligible. Halting above the conflict, Michel picked up berserker devices with one hand after the other, squeezing them dry, draining energy and information alike into Lance's reservoirs. Surviving units of the enemy, on the outskirts of the conflict, fled.

Now there were only human radio voices nearby.

" . . . what it can be I don't know . . . "

" . . . unknown life form . . . "

" . . . into the ship, negotiate from there . . . "

These voices opened doors that had long been closed, doors to realms of memory never electronically ingested, memories of a time before there had been Lance. . . .

Another voice, a woman's, receding rapidly, already faint: " . . . oh God, they've got me, help me someone, don't let them . . . "

From hands of taloned flame he dropped the mangled metal of his enemies. The fragments fell toward infinity in all directions. His mother's voice . . . he spun into a meteoric passage of pursuit.

* * *

Ahead of him the berserker survivors bore their captive away in flight. He had no feeling for any outer boundary of the Taj, but there was certainly a center and their flight was in that direction. His pursuit gained. A handful of machines turned on him to fight a delaying action. He burst through their precisely calculated pattern, leaving spinning wreckage that had not delayed him very long.

He could feel that the center of the Taj was somewhere close at hand, and indeed he knew as much from the last berserker memories he had just swallowed. At an intersection of three great curving Taj-bands, a vaster machine than any he had yet fought against was waiting for him. It looked less like a ship than like a space-going robot, and it was in the act of sealing something away inside its metal gut. With the sealing, the woman's radio voice that had never ceased to cry for help was muffled at last into a silence that even Lance's hearing could not penetrate. The support machines that had been in flight were gathered round the great one now; they formed their ranks around it, but ranks that left a peaceful pathway for Michel's approach.

"You are Michel Geulincx," it said to him.

"And you are one of the Directors." He saw now that, like the Co-ordinator, the machine before him must be only one of a number essentially equal in capability, sharing essentially the same programming and memory. The other Directors must be outside the Taj, though probably in at least occasional communication with this one. There was no one machine upon which the berserker cause depended, any more than the survival of life now depended completely upon any one protoplasmic organism.

There was no need for the machine to answer his naming. It waited silently, for his attack or for his questioning, perhaps. It was a tremendously armored braincase whose only purpose was the protection and support of the berserker computer gear that it contained. In a moment it might hurl its legions upon him—he could sense that more of them were gathering nearby, coming from more distant regions of the Taj.

His attack would come when he was ready. And there was only one question that he still wanted answered.

"Father," he said to it, and laughed. He knew that if he had heard that laugh from somewhere outside himself, he would have recognized it as mad and horrible.

"Who has computed me your father?"

"No one has told me the secret. I have drunk it in with the electronic blood of your machines." Michel spread his arms in a wide gesture, and in one of the support machines a sensor triggered and a weapon fired. Lance brushed the beam of it aside as Michel went on talking.

"Two people's bodies came together, on all the levels of space. Cells from their two bodies joined, and a new cell, a third cell, a new person—but not quite—came from the joining. Not quite a person, because that was here in the Taj, and you were watching, and you interfered.

"Instead of destroying the people, you took the chance to alter the new life that they were making. So it was no longer completely human. Maybe it was no longer really a life, with something of your death down in the middle of it, in the controlling atoms of its first cells . . . I don't know the human words for all the different kinds of energies that make a thing itself. You had a hand in the starting of that life, and then

you—"

The Director interrupted: "You are superior to all other life, Michel."

"All life is evil to you, so does that mean I am more evil? No, I know what you mean—I am superior to all other goodlife. I was born out of an artificial womb, and your devices were somewhere in that, too, monitoring, changing me a little here and there. You designed me to be what you wanted from the start."

"You are unique."

"The Alpine goodlife must have helped you a lot. Did you save any of them when the end came there?"

"All of them were saved from life."

"Including Sixtus Geulincx?" It came out in a great, echoing shout.

"The need for his service was at an end. The death he wanted was his reward."

Michel uttered a spasmodic, prolonged sound. It was less human even than that previous mad cackle. Yet there was something of human laughter in it still. The vibration made his flame-shape dance cheerfully in the mirroring metal of the Director's formidable armor. It was the hysteria of a god, of a giant tickled beyond all endurance.

The Director was waiting silently again. The interior of it held something warm and still alive, but resisted Lance's most subtle probing attempts to find out more, even as Lance was now deflecting the probes that the Director sent toward him. Never before had Michel/Lance faced a single antagonist as powerful as this. Michel could not tell what was passing in its electronic thoughts.

When he had at last freed himself of that laugh-like sound, he addressed his enemy yet again. "Father? Do you understand what a machine-crime you have committed? I am no goodlife. I never will be. Do you know what a sin against your programming it was, to take a hand in my creation? What you must tell me now is why you did it."

"Perhaps you are not goodlife; I have said you are unique. But even the creation of life is allowed me, if that helps me to destroy all life eventually. You were created to answer a question: Is the Taj living, or is it not? The answer must lie at its center. If it lives it must be destroyed. If it does not live, there may be some way to use it against life."

The Taj was . . . beyond knowing. So Michel felt now, facing toward its center, which lay somewhere near. The berserker was right, whatever answers could be found about it would be found there. Michel could not feel that it was life, or non-life either. It was what it was. But still a steady wind of wrongness drifted outward from the direction of the center of the Taj.

To the Director Michel said, "I think I was brought here for a purpose. But not by you."

"I tried to bring you here when you were ready to be used. My machines and goodlife failed. But here you are. The severely odd things of the galaxy tend to arrive here. Things that do not fit the laws appear as if in court. For here the laws are made."

"And do you want to make the laws, machine?"

"I want to do only what I must do. Now you will try to destroy me." It was not an order, but a prophecy. "And you will try to save the female life-unit that I carry. Trying to do these things, you will follow me toward the center of the Taj."

"I will not help you."

"You will do what you must do. Through me the Directors that are outside the Taj will watch, and we will try to learn what we must know."

Lance reached for the Director's electronic nerves. It launched no counterattack, but parried. Michel's hands closed on elusive, slippery hardness, on energies that froze themselves away out of his reach. In the timeless mode of combat he advanced, and saw the Director retreating, dodging, matching his own best speed. A lesser machine was caught between them and vanished, disintegrated in a great blast that rolled and spun its fellows away among the motionless, eternal gray roadways.

The Director was retreating toward the center. Michel advanced.

From out of the center of the Taj, chaos howled at him like a wind, and progress against this wind became difficult and slow. Michel saw now the bones of dead life-forms, failed attempts to go where he was going. And there were the husks of dead, age-old machines, sent on the same task. The grayness of the Taj itself had grown upon them; they might have been here, and ancient, before there was an Earth.

And side by side with the wind of chaos, order and law and arrangement marched out like armies. They passed, vanishing endlessly down the galactic arms. Shapes still uncreated moved by him, flickers of potential being.

Ahead, the Director still led him on. Farther ahead, the curving arm of the Taj that they were following turned into a broad and desolate plain. And ahead again, it was a spiral climbing to a tower.

The altered shape of the Director still centimetered its way forward. Beyond it there lay the very center of the Taj. The Taj was at the center of the galaxy, and at the center of the Taj, Michel saw now, the entire galaxy was located.

The Director had been destroyed eons ago. And still, somehow, the crystal-steel form of the Director led him on. It was barely recognizable, but still it could speak to him, by what channels he no longer knew. "Life-unit. Tell me what you see ahead of us. Michel. Tell me."

But Michel could no longer bear to look ahead. Nor could he manage to turn his eyes in any other direction.

It started to question him again. "Is this—?" it began, and then fell silent.

"What?" Inside the awesome armor of his enemy, the life of his mother still survived.

"Life-unit Michel. Is this the God of humanity that lies before us? Never before have I been able to come this far."

Something was wrong, ahead. Something . . . and he saw the nature of the wrongness, now. It was only that the center of the Taj was—incomplete. "God must be something more than this," he said.

"I compute," said the Director, "an imperfection there. It is not finished. Either you or I must . . ." It came

to a complete stop. Then its physical forward motion began again.

"Either you or I," said Michel. He moved forward, and was almost able to reach the Director now. He could still advance, but the advance was changing him. He was no longer what he had been. Everything had changed.

"I no longer compute properly," said the Director. "I no longer," it said. Again it came to a complete stop. And that was all.

Michel could reach inside it now with one hand, and carefully bring out the life it had been carrying. He shielded the woman completely in his closed hand as he brought her forth. His mother was frightened, terrified, still sane only because she could not see what lay outside the hand that held her safe. The center of the Taj was so small that Michel might have held it in his two human hands. And it was a room, spacious enough to make a place for a great company to gather. And it dwarfed all the rest of the galaxy outside. It deafened and it blinded, so that even Lancelot could not look at it at all. And when Michel/Lancelot looked carefully into its great inner calm, he saw that every galaxy in the universe had its own Taj identical to this one, and he saw that the Taj of every galaxy in the universe was unique, flowing with subtly different laws. No galaxy was alive, and every galaxy carried in its heart the seeds and secrets of all created life. And each had an infinite purpose to complete.

A door stood open, leading to the very center. Michel saw now that each Taj chose from the worlds of its galaxy a company of beings, no two from the same world-species. These it brought into itself, one by one, to forge one link in a great chain, to help lift the universe through its next purposive step.

Here were a company of intelligent beings gathered, diverse live cells chosen to differentiate, in a gathering still incomplete.

Michel turned for the last time, and without moving from where he was he reapproached the Johann Karlsen. Opening the metal shape harmlessly and gently, in a way that he now understood, he placed his mother inside it and withdrew his hands. The ship was whole. The bonds that had held it fixed in the Taj were of no purpose now, and they fell from it like dead leaves, like circlets of discarded skin.

In freedom, Michel turned back to the center. Voices called him, of beings who were perfectly free and whose bonds could never now be broken. Beside a Carmpan whose shape Michel could dimly recognize from old adventure tales, one seat along their table-rim was vacant.

Michel took another step, past the lifeless Director, and with that all life that had been born of Earth came home to the Taj-heart at last. Alone and of his own free will, Michel Geulincx moved forward to claim his place among the shining company.

The Berserker Throne

Chapter 1

Around the green and lovely world called Salutai, the sky was clear of terror, as it had been now for many years. Today the planet's dayside sky was almost clear of clouds as well, and at midday the face of the land beneath it blazed with the thousand colors of midsummer flowers.

It was the Holiday of Life today on Salutai, the planet's greatest yearly festival, and at the meridian of noon the central procession of the festival was passing through small town streets strewn with fresh-cut blooms.

Through this particular small town ran many canals. They were clean, open waterways, and almost as numerous as the streets. And today in the canals as in the streets of Salutai the masses of summer blooms were prodigally distributed, those on the water floating and drifting in the controlled current. The streets and canal banks and buildings of the town under the noonday sun echoed with celebration, with ten kinds of music all being played and sung at the same time. The buildings, streets, canals, as well as the people in them and on them and the living plants that made archways above, were all mad with decorations.

At the center of the slow-moving ceremonial procession crept the broad, low, bubble-domed groundcar in which the Empress of the Eight Worlds was riding. The parade extending ahead of her car and behind it was not really very long, but it took its time, so that everyone in the town who wanted to see the procession and the Empress at close range had a good chance to do so. And there were many, in this town and across the planet, who did want to see. The crowds, here on Salutai composed exclusively of Earth-descended humans, cried the name of their Empress in several languages, and some of the people in the crowd waved petitions and raised banners and placards, promoting one cause or another, as her clear-topped groundcar crept past.

Though the procession was not moving with much speed, neither was the town large. The sun of Salutai was still very nearly directly overhead when the central groundcar and its escort of marchers and other vehicles emerged from the confinement of the old town's narrow streets, and entered abruptly into a countryside that was approximately half in well-managed cultivation, half still in what looked like virgin wilderness.

As the short parade left the last of the hard-paved streets behind, the crowds surrounding it grew no less, but rather greater. Here, amid a vast, parklike expanse that provided more room in which to assemble, a larger throng was waiting. This crowd was made up partly of government workers and dependents drafted into action and tubed out from the nearby capital city; still, most of the people had come here freely, to cheer a monarch popular enough to draw spontaneous affection from many of her people.

Here a substantial minority of the crowd had in mind other things besides the offer of uncritical affection. Live news coverage of the procession was notably absent, but still there were occasional protests. Whenever these protestors and placard-bearers grew too numerous or noisy, security people in uniform and out appeared in sudden concentration, moving to break up the gatherings as gently and as quietly as possible. There were no injuries. The people of Salutai knew a long tradition of courtesy, and they were almost universally unused to the organization of violence, at least against their fellow humans and fellow citizens.

Now, still surrounded by flowers, and by a slow wave of noise that was still predominantly happy, the procession paused on the bank of a broad, open canal. Amid a suddenly increased presence of uniformed security forces, the Empress, still tall and regal despite her advanced age, stood up out of her low car, and amid much ceremonious escort walked down a few steps to a dock. There she stepped aboard a heavily decorated pleasure-barge that waited to receive her, rising and falling gently amid the floating drifts of flowers.

She had to delay briefly then, looking back toward shore, to give her attention to a delegation of school-children who were about to present her with a special bouquet.

To a young man who was watching from the top of a small hill a hundred meters distant, amid the scalloped outer fringes of the crowd, the whole scene, of applauding throngs, welcoming children, and the endless visual bombardment of blossoms, made a very pretty picture indeed.

The young man's name was Chen Shizuoka, and with his curly dark hair surrounding an almost angelic face he looked very earnest and nervous at the moment, more so than those around him. He said to his companion: "Listen to them. They still love her."

The two of them, Chen and the young woman who was standing with him, had been waiting for several hours on the hilltop, along with a handful of other people who had with foresight chosen this place for the clear view that it was certain to provide of the Empress and the parade. For the last few minutes Chen and his companion, whose name was Hana Calderon, had been watching intently the stately and joyful approach of the procession. Chen loved the Empress, as did so many of her people, and he would have liked to be able to get closer to her now, near enough to cry out some heartfelt personal greeting, and perhaps even to meet her eyes. But today he had a duty that precluded the gratification of any such personal wish.

Hana Calderon was not really so young as Chen; at the moment she looked quieter, less nervous, and somehow more effective. She raised a hand and brushed back straight black hair from dark oriental eyes, narrowed now in calculation.

"I think," she said, her tone suggesting that she was mildly chiding the young man but being careful how she went about it, "that what most of them are really cheering is the Holiday of Life."

As if by reflex Chen glanced up at the clear terrorless sky, from which it was always possible—and this year perhaps more probable than last—that terror might come again.

"I suppose," he said to his companion, avoiding argument as usual, "that feelings are strong again this year. With the news."

Hana Calderon nodded, moving her chiseled classical profile up and down without turning the gaze of her dark eyes away from the Empress's barge. The presentation of the special bouquet had just been completed, and the vessel was now almost ready to carry the Empress out on the next, waterborne leg of her progress.

The young woman said in an abstracted voice: "I suppose they are." Then, still not looking away from the barge, she reached out a hand to touch Chen. In a suddenly crisp tone, she added: "Are you ready?"

Chen Shizuoka's right hand had been for a long time ready in his inner pocket, gripping a small plastic object. It seemed to him that his fingers had been clutching that object for an eternity. "Ready."

"Then let it go. Now!" The words were an order, given sharply and decisively, though Hana's voice was too low for anyone else standing nearby to hear her through the noise of the surrounding crowd.

A hundred meters downhill from where they stood, the barge was just getting into motion. Chen Shizuoka withdrew the tiny device he had been gripping, and with a different pressure of his fingers activated it. A signal even subtler than most electronic emanations was sent forth.

From among the tight-packed crowd below, there rose up sudden screams.

Don't be afraid! Chen wanted to reassure them. He knew how harmless the large inflatable devices were that now came popping up out of the canal, in front of and around the barge that bore the Empress. The great rough shapes, surfacing like huge gray hippopotami of old Earth, were blocking the decorated barge completely. The devices, inflating themselves at Chen's signal, were all moored to the bottom of the canal so as not to be easily pushed out of the way. As large as hippos, they were of various shapes, all intended to represent particular models of berserkers, but in no more than a clumsy cartoon fashion. Chen himself had insisted on that point, so that not even a single startled child in the crowd should be able to mistake them for the terrible reality. What the planners of the demonstration hoped to create in their audience was thought, not terror.

A considerable amount of work had gone into fabricating the inflatable devices, and the effort and strain of planting them secretly in the canal had been, Chen thought when he looked back on it, more than he ever wanted to go through again. Not that he would have refused to do it all again, and more, if he thought that doing so would get the Prince recalled to power, and some of those who currently served the Empress in high places exiled in his stead.

Up out of the water the odd shapes came, shiny-wet and dark and in the cartoon crudity of their forms unmistakable as to what they were supposed to represent. One after another in rapid succession broke the surface, the swift bobbing lunges of their rising pushing aside the drowning masses of flowers.

The crowds near the canal were in great turmoil.

"It's working," Chen crooned softly, happily to the young woman at his side, not turning his head to look at her. "It's going to do the job."

Suddenly there were sharp thrumming sounds from below, and more yells, and an even greater turmoil among the crowd, the start of real panic. Some of the more trigger-happy security people had pulled out handguns and were actually opening fire, with devastating effect upon harmless inflated plastic. Chen, with sudden helpless concern, as if he had seen a distant child toying with a dangerous weapon, recalled how there had been hurt feelings among the populace, injured protests at the mere announcement that this time when the Empress traveled among her people she was going to be accompanied by a strong security contingent.

And the many citizens who had protested the security arrangements had been right, Chen thought, there were the supposed protectors now, blasting away with guns and endangering lives. It was not as if they could really believe that they were confronted with a plot to hurt the Empress. No one was going to do that; not to the Empress; certainly not here on her home world of Salutai.

The brief outburst of gunfire ceased, evidently on some order, as abruptly as it had started. But the uproar and panic in the surrounding crowd continued at an alarming pitch. Looking downhill, Chen observed that some of the clumsy-looking waterborne devices had been destroyed. But enough of them remained in place to at least impede the forward movement of the barge. A dozen in all of the inflatable things had been put into position—Chen could still remember the feel of the bottom mud, the taste it gave the water when it was stirred up, the thrill of terror recurring each time there was some alarm and he and the others thought that they had been discovered at their task.

Some of the placards borne by the ugly gray shapes had not yet been blasted into illegibility. One of them read: THE ENEMY IS NOT DESTROYED. And another: RECALL PRINCE HARIVARMAN.

"Let's get going," said Hana Calderon suddenly, speaking quietly into Chen's ear. He nodded once, and with that they separated, with nothing more in the way of farewell than one last glance of triumph

exchanged. Except for the unexpected outbreak of gunfire, and the resulting panic—maybe someone really had been hurt; Chen certainly hoped not—everything was going smoothly, according to the carefully rehearsed plan. No one in that crowd below would be able to ignore their message. Everyone would carry it home and talk about it. Approvingly or disapprovingly, they would be forced to think about it. And eventually, inevitably, it would be accepted. Because it was the truth.

Chen turned away from Hana and from the scene below. Without either delay or haste he started walking his own planned path down the side of the hill away from the canal and the confusion around the barge. He didn't look for Hana, but he knew she would be making a similar withdrawal, moving on a diverging course. He would meet her later, in the city. No one appeared to take any particular notice of him as he retreated. He dropped his plastic control device into a trash disposal in passing. He felt certain already that their getaway was going to be as successful as all the other previously successful steps in the elaborate plan.

Even now, out of direct sight of the demonstration that his hands had triggered, Chen could hear in the crowd's roar behind him the kind of impact their show had achieved. At least as great as anything he had dared to hope for. Now from the same direction sounded sharp reports, what must be the sound of more inflated dummies being shot to fragments. And the roar of the crowd went up again.

His imitation berserkers would shortly be destroyed, but no one of the thousands who had been here today would be able to ignore or forget the messages that they had carried.

Chen listened carefully as he retreated, savoring the crowd noise behind him. It was fading gradually as he moved away, and now for some reason it held more anger and fear than he had imagined there would be—because of the actions of the security people, he supposed, and who could blame the crowd for that?

Some fifty meters down the hill, moving amid a slowly growing crowd of other people who had prudently or timidly decided to be somewhere else, Chen came to an inconspicuously parked groundcycle. When he straddled the machine it started quietly, and within moments it was bearing him at a greatly increased speed away from the tumult and the crowds.

He had less than a kilometer to travel on the cycle, traversing a network of smooth pathways that laced the lovely countryside, before he reached a subway station whose entrance was almost hidden, set into the side of a flowered embankment. He abandoned the cycle outside the station, confident that a confederate would take it away later so it would not be traced to him. Once underground, Chen was able almost at once to board a swift tubetrain that brought him in a few minutes underneath the capital city.

Disembarking from the train, riding a stair to ground level, into the usual swarm of people at one of the central metropolitan stations, Chen felt a wave of bleak reaction as he melded himself into the population of the streets. It was almost a sense of disappointment at the ease of his and his friends' success. It seemed in a way unfair, as if the security people had never had a chance of stopping the demonstration, or of catching up with him or Hana afterward; now all was, would be, anticlimax.

Of course, most of the other members of Chen's protest group had kept telling him all along that the demonstration would be a great success. Hana had certainly been confident, and he himself had really expected nothing less than success. . . .

The plan now called for him to go home, that is to return to the student's room where he lived alone, and there await developments. But there was no particular hurry about his getting to his room. Chen delayed,

watching a public newscast that was evidently running somewhat behind events, for it showed nothing about a demonstration interrupting the progress of the Empress. He moved on to a favorite bookstore, dallied there a little longer, then walked on unhurriedly. If he ever should be questioned, for any reason, about his whereabouts today, he'd have an answer: Why yes, he had been out there, watching the parade. When things started to get noisy and rowdy, and he heard actual shots, he had simply decided that it was time to leave.

Chen passed another public newscast, and dawdled before the elevated holostage long enough to be sure that the news still contained no mention of the demonstration; by now, he felt sure, that omission must be deliberate. On Salutai such blatantly direct government control was unheard of, even in these times; the situation made him uneasy.

When Chen reached the street where he lodged, and approached the block on which his room was located, his uneasiness led him to look about him with unwonted caution. He saw with a sinking sensation, but somehow no real surprise, that there were security people here, cruising in their cars, two or three cars of them at least, observing. He had learned to recognize the type of unmarked groundcar that they favored. They appeared to be trying to make themselves inconspicuous, but there they were.

Something had gone wrong after all. He could not help believing that they were here waiting for him to show up. The sinking feeling was becoming a steady sickness in his gut.

Chen stepped around a corner into a cross street. He paused in the doorway of an apartment building, and stood pondering what to do next.

He leaned out of the doorway to look back along the way that he had come, and the sound numbed him for an instant with its sudden shock, a frightening impact against the wall immediately beside his head, as if an invisible rock from some invisible catapult had struck there. There was another component to the sound too, a sharp thrum, a louder echo of the police weapons at the demonstration, much louder and closer than he had heard them from the hill. This came from a rooftop or an upper window across the street. Someone over there was shooting at him, shooting to kill.

In sudden cold terror Chen dodged out of the doorway, heading down the street in a fast zigzag walk, the movement blending him at once into the flow of other hurrying pedestrians. Still his whole back felt tensed and swollen, one enormous muscle tightening uselessly against the killing blow that was to come any second. The sky that had been free of terror an hour ago had turned now to blue ice closing him in.

Now he thought that one of the unmarked cars of the security people was keeping pace with him along the street. He dodged quickly into a smaller side passage for pedestrians, leaving the vehicle behind.

He fled through the complex and crowded heart of the city, heading instinctively for areas where the congestion would be greater. Once, then twice, he dared to hope that he had shaken his pursuers off. But each time, even before hope could really establish itself, he saw that such was not the case. They had perhaps lost sight of him for the moment, but he knew they must be everywhere, in vehicles and afoot, in uniform and in civilian clothes. Anyone who glanced at him might be Security . . . and Chen had to assume that they were all after him.

Organize a simple demonstration, just a demonstration, and they hunted you like this. Tried to kill you on sight, out of hand . . . it was a bad dream, and he was caught up in it, and there was no use hoping to be saved by any rules of sanity and logic.

What did they want tokillhim for, what had he done that even they should think was terrible to that

degree? If a free citizen could no longer even protest openly without being hunted like a dangerous animal, then things on the world of Salutai were already even worse than he and his friends had been telling one another. Far worse.

Exhaustion overtook Chen quickly. It was as if he had been running steadily for hours, enduring steady fear and tension more tiring than mere physical exertion. In one of the tougher neighborhoods of the city, a couple of kilometers now from his own apartment, Chen entered a crowded square of shops and other buildings, some of them little more than hovels. A few derelicts were camped, amid litter, on the grassy plaza at the center.

Chen had taken his last turning seeking a complication of pathways, but realized as soon as he had entered the square that the move might well have been a blunder. There were only three or four ways out of it again. Should he turn back right away . . . ?

It was already too late for that. One of the slow-cruising groundcars had just stopped, a little way behind him. They must be losing him and picking him up again, trying to close in. Quickly he slid around a knot of people, getting them between him and the car, and moved on with them. If the crowds of pedestrians ever thinned out, he was lost. He was better dressed than most of the people in this neighborhood, on the verge at least of being conspicuous because of that.

Walking, waiting in exhaustion for a blasting death, he scanned the storefronts rapidly for a place to hide. If his pursuers were willing to shoot him dead, they were certainly not going to be put off by the necessity of searching for him inside a store, or anywhere else that he could think of. Nothing that he could do to throw them off was going to give them too much trouble.

Except, perhaps . . .

On one of the storefronts ahead there loomed a large sign, of a type familiar all across the Earth-colonized portion of the Galaxy. It was seen on most worlds, as here, more often in the poorer neighborhoods than in the well-to-do:

THE FIGHT FOR LIFE HAS NOT BEEN WON.

THE TEMPLARS NEED YOU.

Just beneath the sign, a poster with its lifelike picture animated by electronics showed an appealing child in the act of cringing away from a grasping metal menace. The berserker android on the poster was a far more barbed and angled and poisonous-looking portrayal of the ancient enemy than any of Chen's balloons had been.

And as if this poster were indeed another menace from which he needed desperately to be saved, Chen stopped in his tracks, recoiled slightly, and glanced hastily, hopelessly, around the square.

His situation here looked indeed hopeless. Already he thought that he could see a checkpoint being established, or one already functioning unobtrusively, at each possible exit.

And suppose he did manage, somehow, to find another way out of the square. The search for him, a

manhunt of this intensity, was obviously not going to be broken off simply because he managed to dodge it one more time. The hunt was going to go on. And he could think of no place in this city, on this planet, where it could not reach him; no place to hide. Chen certainly had no intention of leading these murderous monsters to any of his friends.

This kind of a hunt, Chen saw, could end only when they had caught him. And he had seen and felt evidence that being caught would not simply be a matter of being arrested—matters had gone beyond that already. Incomprehensibly, the security people had shot at him. He kept coming back to that fact, being brought up short by it, stumbling over it. But there was no way around the fact. For some reason that could make sense only to their mad arrogance, they were really trying to kill him.

He was walking forward again, moving in a daze, a condition which on these poor streets made him less rather than more conspicuous. The door to the Templars' recruiting office was again immediately in front of him. To Chen that open doorway had a look of unreality, but now everything about him did; everything except the fact that someone was now trying to accomplish his death. That had a reality of a transcendent kind.

"What can we do for you, sir?" A bland-looking sergeant behind a counter, no different in appearance or manner except for the uniform than any other salesman in any other shop, raised his head and spoke as Chen entered. A couple of other young men, with some kind of fancy paper readouts in their hands, were just turning away from the counter, about to leave the office.

Chen moved up close to the waist-high surface of the counter, and rested his hands upon it. There came and went in his mind a last fleeting thought that perhaps it would be enough for him to spend a little time in this office, off the street; perhaps if he did that the killers out there would get tired of looking for him and go away . . .

. . . that hope was not worth even a fleeting thought. He had to get on with what he perceived as his only remaining choice.

Chen cleared his throat. "I—if I were to enlist right now, how soon could I get off planet?"

"Soon as you want." Experienced eyes sized Chen up with calculation. The sergeant was carefully unsurprised.

Chen pressed him: "Today, maybe?"

The sergeant checked the timepiece on the wall. Now he looked more than ever to Chen like a salesman, one accustomed to not show surprise at a customer's strange request. Certainly it seemed that the question was not entirely new to him.

"Why not today?" The sergeant's voice was matter-of-fact, perhaps carefully so. "If you're in something of a hurry to get elsewhere, that's all right with us. Soon as you sign the enlistment form, and take the oath, then you're officially a Templar. We'd drive you to the spaceport enclave today anyway. That's Templar diplomatic territory. If, maybe, just for an example, there were angry relatives looking for you here, or maybe creditors, they wouldn't have a chance. We've even had people come in who were in trouble with the law, with the cops hardly a jump behind them. The cops have no chance either, not of arresting someone who's officially a Templar. Not for something the man did before he enlisted." The recruiter looked at Chen steadily; it sounded like a speech that had been well thought out, one that had been given before.

Chen cleared his throat again. "That's about what I thought; I . . ."

Something in Chen, ever since he was a child, was always stirred by stories of adventure, had always looked forward in daydreams to this moment: to becoming a Templar, entering a world of physical adventure, risking all in a most worthy cause. In real life, other considerations had always until now prevailed: a distaste for what he foresaw the military life would be like; a wish to be a student; a strong desire to be free to act in Eight Worlds politics.

And in the daydreams, Chen had never thought that it would be the desperate need for escape that would drive him to this step, as it had driven so many characters in adventure stories. But there was no arguing with reality, which evidently after all had no prejudice against trite melodrama. Those guns in the hands of the men outside were real.

Chen signed the document placed before him by the recruiter, not bothering to read it, either before or after. "Now what? Can I wait here?"

The sergeant, still as calm as before, came around from behind his official barricade. "Yeah. But first, to make it official, you take the oath. I need another live witness for that." He went into the back room and came back with a young woman, who wore on the shoulder of her Templar uniform an insignia that Chen thought meant she was a clerk.

The oath, like the paper he had just signed, went by him without its words really registering in his consciousness; he could only hope that it would serve as a magic curtain, an incantation, to render him invisible to scanning gunsights.

Now he was led into the back room and told to wait. It might have been the back room of any office, holding information transmission and storage equipment, with miscellaneous bins and closets. There were also a few chairs and two desks, at one of which the young clerk went back to her paperwork. A couple of hours passed—for Chen, as in some endless dream—as he sat numbly watching the clerk go about her duties. Her work was largely electronic, and did not appear to be all that arduous. Once or twice he tried to make conversation, and got in return short answers, and looks that had in them the faintly amused tolerance of the veteran.

Before the first hour of Chen's wait was over, there came from the front office a sound of new voices, too low to be fully distinguishable, as if several men had entered at once and were in conference with the sergeant. The voices might have represented no more than some group of friends coming in together on a routine recruiting inquiry, but Chen thought that they meant something else. He waited fatalistically, but nothing happened, except that the voices ceased presently and the men went out again. And shortly after that unusual conversation in the front, the sergeant came briefly into the back again, for no other reason than to give Chen a long and unreadable look.

After the second hour of Chen's wait, two young men, not the same two who had been in the office when Chen entered, arrived and were ushered into the back to join him in his waiting. These two, he thought, were certainly real recruits. They exchanged nods with Chen, and had no more success than he had had in making nervous banter with the clerk.

Shortly after their arrival, ground transportation arrived to take all three recruits to the Templar facility at the spaceport. They were led by the sergeant out a back door of the office into an alley, and at once urged into the vehicle, a high-built van.

The windows of the groundvan were set for high one-way opacity; it would be very hard for anyone

outside to look in. During the drive to the spaceport Chen observed a security car or two, or what he thought were such; it was hard to tell if their occupants might be taking any particular interest in the Templar vehicle.

Inside the van, the ride to the spaceport was mostly silent; it was beginning to sink in on the other recruits, perhaps, what sort of a major change in lifestyle they had embarked upon.

Listening to the few words that his two companions exchanged between them, Chen gathered that basic training for all Templar recruits from the Eight Worlds now took place on the planet Niteroi, only about two days' travel from Salutai at c-plus speeds. Chen hadn't bothered to ask where he was going, having, as the sergeant evidently realized, quite enough in the way of other matters to engage his thoughts.

Now in the back of Chen's mind the faint hope—he wasn't sure it really amounted to a hope—had arisen that he might, now that he was officially a Templar, get a chance someday to see the Templar Radiant, and perhaps even the opportunity to meet or at least set eyes on the man who was the chief object of all his political action, the exiled Prince Harivarman. The Prince had been held at the Radiant in Templar custody for the past four standard years. Well, maybe some day that chance would come. Right now Chen was willing to settle for exile himself, or imprisonment or just about any terms on which he would be allowed to live.

The recruiting sergeant, who had come along in the van to deliver his shipment, eyed Chen closely again when they were getting out of the vehicle at the spaceport, already behind the closed gates and gray walls of the small Templar enclave there.

"I hear you were out there demonstrating for the Prince." The sergeant's face was still unreadable. His voice no longer sounded exactly polite—Chen was no longer a civilian who had just walked into his office as a prospect—but the tone did not seem to express disapproval either.

"That's right," Chen said proudly.

The sergeant did not respond in any way that Chen could see, but turned away and went on about his business.

Other recruits, gathered from elsewhere on the planet, were waiting within the walls of the spaceport Templar enclave, already being kept separate from civilians. More than a dozen freshly enlisted young men and women were aboard the shuttle when it finally rose from Salutai.

Chapter 2

For hundreds of years Earth-descended humanity had observed and tried to explain the class of astrophysical objects called gravitational radiants, but still no wholly satisfactory scientific theory existed to account for them. Only nine of the objects, including the Templar Radiant, were known to exist in the entire Galaxy. Each of the nine was a fiery paradox: a mild source of comparatively harmless radiation, and, what made them unique, each a center and source of inverse gravity. Centuries ago human effort had rendered the Templar Radiant unique even in its class by enclosing it completely within a vast spherical fortress of stone and metal and fabricated forms of matter.

Commander Anne Blenheim was enjoying what was almost her first look around the vast interior of the ancient Templar Fortress that enclosed the Radiant itself, and of which she had very recently assumed

command. Looking up, she saw the Radiant as a sunlike object, not much bigger than a point in its apparent size, though only about four kilometers directly above her head. The reversed gravitational influence of the Radiant naturally prevailed here, and the sunlike point would be in the same directly overhead position for anyone standing anywhere on the inner surface of the Fortress, whose basic shape was that of an enormous hollow sphere.

The reasons why that form of construction had been used—or indeed the reasons for the Fortress having been built at all—were lost, along with much else in the early history of its creators, the Dardanians. They had disappeared from Galactic society centuries ago, and to historians of the present day they formed one of the most enigmatic branches of Earth-descended humanity.

Still, the thought behind one aspect of the construction was obvious; the inner surface of the Fortress had been fixed at a distance of approximately four kilometers from the Radiant itself, because at that distance the reverse gravity of the Radiant, pushing the inhabitants of the Fortress against the faintly concave surface, was equal to Earth-standard normal.

Commander Blenheim stood, neatly uniformed, just outside the main gate of the Templar base; around her the little, self-contained world rose up in all directions. One square kilometer after another mapped itself out conveniently for inspection on the interior of the surrounding and supporting globe of rock and metal. The inner surface was lined with streets, dotted with houses, with buildings of all sorts except that none were very tall. The commander knew that many of the buildings, possibly even a majority of them, were now unused.

There were also great blank spaces on the map, kilometers of raw rock that might once have been occupied, but had been scraped clean of surface detail in some remodeling project of centuries ago, and were now abandoned. Now again remodeling activity was in progress, especially in and around the Templar base itself. There was a lot of greenery in sight too, plants from Earth and other worlds genetically redesigned to thrive in this mild steady light. This massive effort at planting was a development that Anne Blenheim understood was fairly new, and of which she heartily approved both aesthetically and as an affirmation of life. Orchards and single trees and even miniature forests were visible everywhere across the inner sphere that made itself a sky.

Close by the small parklike space where the commander was now standing, the main gate of the Templar compound was busy with pedestrian and vehicular traffic, either military people or those on business with the military. A great many of the people passing through glanced at Commander Blenheim as they went by; she had been on board the Fortress for only one standard day, and her arrival as the new commanding officer was, she was sure, the biggest topic of conversation among the few thousand people who made up the whole civilian and military population here.

Because she was now standing just outside the gate and not inside it, salutes from the passing military were not forthcoming, and the commander was spared the distraction of having to return them. But the quick glances at her continued. Military and civilian passersby alike were all doubtless wondering just why the new base commander might be standing here in apparent idleness—taking a traffic count, perhaps? Waiting for someone?—but in the twenty-four hours she had been on the Radiant, no one had become a close enough acquaintance to pause and try to find out.

In her imagination she framed an answer anyway: "Waiting to make a diplomatic contact of sorts. With a certain—gentleman." Then she smiled at the strange gaze that answer evoked from her imaginary questioner. A diplomatic contact, here? The Templars were of course as active in that field as anyone else, if not more so—they had to be, with no home land or planet of their own. But the place for diplomacy would seem to be out in the mainstream of human civilization, out where the other power

brokers moved.

Or perhaps her hypothetical questioner would understand at once. After all, the Prince had been here on the Fortress for four standard years.

If instead of talking about diplomatic contacts she were to say that she was waiting for her prisoner to show up—well, that would have been at least as accurate, but the reaction perhaps less fun to watch.

And this, she decided, must be the eminent gentleman himself approaching now. The groundcar easing its way toward Commander Blenheim through moderate traffic was of a type unremarkable on the streets of the Fortress, though it would have been conspicuous almost anywhere else. It was a special model that could maneuver as a slow and very short-range spacecraft as well as an atmospheric flyer. Two such vehicles had been assigned for the Prince's use, and both of them had been modified to radiate certain identifying signals continuously, tracer transmissions that allowed Templar spy devices to follow their movements. But the cars—or flyers—bore no special markings visible to the casual eye.

Commander Blenheim had met the exiled Prince Harivarman for the first time yesterday, but only in a brief formal introduction on the day of her arrival. She had promptly accepted the Prince's offer to give her a tour today of Georgicus Sabel's old workroom; she had chosen to wait for him outside the gate, arriving a little early so she could keep an eye on the progress of some of the remodeling work nearby while she was waiting.

The Prince—no, she reminded herself, she must now cease to call him the Prince, even in her own thoughts, even if everyone on the Eight Worlds still called him that; the regulations that were part of the Compact of Exile said that he was now to be addressed as General Harivarman—the general, then, the exile, had been a quasi-prisoner here in the Fortress for the past four years. The commander's intelligence reports informed her that he was becoming something of an enthusiast about the local history. Well, for such a small place, there was certainly plenty of history available here; more than some whole planets had to boast about, Commander Blenheim had often thought while doing her homework on it as part of her preparation for her new job. And from her new point of view as the general's chief jailer it was of course much better for him to be absorbed in history than taking too strong an interest in current events.

Everyone in the Eight Worlds knew the Prince's story. And a good many had heard it beyond the Eight, out on those hundreds of worlds composing what its members considered to be the human mainstream of Galactic civilization. Since the news had spread of her assignment as commander here, it had sometimes seemed to Anne Blenheim that everyone in the inhabited Galaxy had an opinion on the Prince—the general—and each was ready to give her their version of good advice on how to deal with the great man who was now in her charge. Some said quietly that, though of course it was not in her power to do so, he really should be released. Some said he should be executed, that the Council of the Eight Thrones would never be safe until he was dead. And there were plenty of intermediate opinions. The Council should restore him to power as Prime Minister under the Empress. Or they should send him as ambassador plenipotentiary to Earth. Or confine him in a solitary cell for life.

As she kept telling other people firmly, her new job really gave her nothing to say, even in an advisory capacity, as to which of those courses should be adopted. The Compact of Exile, a complicated agreement by which the Templars had accepted responsibility for Harivarman's confinement and welfare, left her as base commander little room for altering the terms of the general's existence. And jailer was not really the right word, not the correct job description for the relationship of the base commander on the Fortress with the eminent expatriate.

Of course, what exactly the right word was for that aspect of her job was something she had not yet

worked out to her own satisfaction. The Compact of Exile, like many another important document, had been deliberately left somewhat vague. And Colonel Phocion, her predecessor here, had evidently taken too different an approach than hers for his ideas to be very helpful.

The approaching groundcar was rolling to a stop within a few meters of where Anne Blenheim was standing, just at the entrance to the small park. She could see now that there were two men in it. In front, a driver—more a ceremonial position than anything else, for naturally the car really drove itself—and a passenger in back. Commander Blenheim, who had naturally done some homework on the history and present condition of the exile, was sure that the human driver could be no one but a man named Lescar, who was the Prince's—there she went again—who was the general's faithful servant and longtime companion.

Four years ago, at the beginning of his exile, General Harivarman had arrived at the Templar Radiant with an attractive wife and an extensive staff of aides and servants, more than twenty people in all. The wife had made brave, self-effacing statements about loyalty. Now he was down to one devoted companion, the remainder—wife included—having for one reason or another opted to depart.

The man who now stood up out of the car, to greet the commander somehow less impressively than she had expected, was informally dressed, dark, angular, and muscular of build. His face, not particularly handsome, was of course immediately recognizable. It was somehow surprising that, except for his hands and perhaps his feet, he was not really physically large. General Harivarman was obviously past his first immaturity of youth, and it was equally obvious that he was not yet greatly burdened with years; it would have been difficult for any casual observer to pin his age down much more closely than that. But Commander Blenheim knew that he was notably young for one of his achievements, in fact just thirty-seven standard years, only slightly older than herself. Lucky the leader, she thought, who had that kind of ageless look; her own appearance, peach-complected and a little plump, made people sometimes assume her to be even younger than she was—especially before they got to know her.

In a moment, routine and rather formal greetings having been exchanged between commander and exile, she and the man she kept reminding herself to call the general were settled in the back of the car and under way, the back of the driver's graying head fixed in place before them.

Ever since yesterday's brief introduction, she had been wondering what this second and more leisurely encounter with the general would produce, in terms of mutual understanding. Well, the first moments of it were already something of a disappointment, though Commander Blenheim was not sure why.

As the car began to move the man beside her had been gazing off into the distance. Now he turned his head and was looking at her closely, in an almost proprietary way. No way to win points with her, but then he probably didn't care.

He said now in his deep voice: "No doubt you've done your homework, Commander, about Georgicus Sabel? I don't want to inflict a tiresome rehashing of a history that you already know."

"I've had to do a fair amount of homework recently on other topics. I know what everyone knows, of course, about Sabel . . . but go ahead, you tell me."

Her seat companion looked thoughtful. He seemed to be taking the assignment seriously. "Well. Two hundred and five years ago, right here—that is, right in the workshop that we're going to visit, and right under the noses of the Guardians—Georgicus Sabel encountered a functioning berserker, a remnant of their attacking force of several hundred years before that. He tried to bargain with it. He proposed giving it something it wanted, for something, scientific information, that he thought he could get from it in return. . .

"To deal with a berserker, to play the role of goodlife, wasn't what he had started out to do, of course. He began by seeking Truth, you see. That's Truth with a great big scientific capital T."

"But since he dealt with a berserker, hewasgoodlife. Wasn't he?" Commander Blenheim knew the story very well, from the relatively inaccessible official Templar records as well as from the public histories. She knew what Sabel had been. He had been goodlife without a doubt. Guilty of that which in the Templar universe of thought was still the one great and unforgivable sin, the act that negated any possible good intentions—the provision of service and aid to a berserker, one of those murderous robots that went about its age-old programmed task of eliminating from the universe the blight of life. To Templars—to any human being except the perverted goodlife, but to Templars in particular—berserkers were malignance personified in metal.

So much Anne Blenheim knew, beyond a doubt, about Sabel. But she wanted to learn at first hand what the Prin—what the general thought on such a topic; and she also wanted to know how the general talked, to watch him and listen to him, to get a taste of his famous persuasive magnetism.

The man riding beside her remained thoughtful. "Technically, yes, Sabel was goodlife. Legally, yes. He would have been convicted, there's no doubt, if he had been brought to a Templar trial."

"Or to a trial in any other impartial human court."

"I suppose. Under the existing law. But if you mean did he really want to see berserkers wipe the universe clean of life, or did he want them to kill even a single human being, or did he in any sense worship the death machines—as real goodlife always do, in some sense—then the answer must be no."

It was a heavy answer to a heavy question. Sabel had been dead and gone for centuries, and Commander Blenheim had no wish to get into a heavy argument about him.

She and her companion rode on in silence for a while, through clean, almost unpopulated streets, past experimental buildings and plantings, past refurbished houses and new-grown groves. In Sabel's day, she remembered from her reading, the interior cavity of the Fortress had been allowed to remain in vacuum, people living and building their houses all around the interior surface with their breathing air held tightly under clear bubbles; only in the last few decades had the necessary engineering been completed to maintain a film of atmosphere over the whole interior surface.

She asked: "And how did you happen to become an expert on the history of the Sabel case, General? I gather that you really are."

"Oh." There was a faint tone of disappointment, as if she might have chosen to raise a more interesting point of the many available. "In the beginning, you see, when I first took up residence here, the subject of Sabel didn't interest me particularly." The general spread large, capable hands in an engaging gesture. "But gradually, over those first months . . . well, if one wishes to remain intellectually active here on the Fortress, what can one study? The choices are somewhat limited. There's physics, of course, like old Sabel himself, trying to wrest some new truth from nature. But if real physicists have been staring at the Radiant for centuries and haven't got very far with it—well, there's not much hope for an amateur."

He said it with such conscientious diffidence that the commander felt compelled to comment. "I wasn't warned that you'd be modest."

The general grinned, showing the first flash of something extraordinary that she had seen in him. "Modest, perhaps. Self-effacing, never." Then, looking out of the car, he pointed ahead. And, of course, up at an angle.

Only half a kilometer ahead of them now was an angled shape that had to be Sabel's laboratory, or the roof of it anyway. The commander had noticed that most of the buildings here in this now airy but still virtually weatherless space, even the most recently constructed ones, still had roofs, many of them sloped and angled as if to shed nonexistent rain or snow. The conspicuous roof ahead of them was a series of angled and curved surfaces, studded with the small protrusions of old-looking instruments, and marked with holes where other instruments had evidently been taken out long ago.

Of course the laboratory, like everything else on the concave dwelling surface, had been basically within view of the groundcar's occupants all along. Now the building vanished briefly as they drew near, disappearing behind one of the many newly planted lines of tall trees, and then remaining out of sight behind a high stone wall that looked like some of the original Dardanian construction. Of course the whole vast inner curve of the Fortress was no more than one face of the ancient Dardanians' enigmatic and grandiose creation. The supporting shell outside and around the face was approximately two kilometers thick, much of it hollowed by a vast honeycomb of rooms and passages of unknown purpose. The whole Fortress had an overall outside diameter of approximately twelve kilometers. Even without counting the single vast interior space where burned the Radiant itself, some six hundred cubic kilometers of stone and steel and smaller spaces were enclosed inside the shell.

The car had come to a stop now in a deserted-looking public street, at a point very near their apparent goal. The two people who had ridden in the rear seat now got out on their respective sides. All around them was a pervasive quiet, strikingly noticeable after the hum and murmur of activity around the base. Anne Blenheim had been told that sound sometimes carried or was muffled strangely in the artificially created and maintained atmosphere pressed by inverse gravity against the inside of a round shell. The whole central space inside the enormous Fortress was of course not filled with air; most of it was vacuum. The repulsive force of the Radiant increased exponentially with nearness to it. Not that the relation could be mathematically expressed in any formula as neat as variance with the square of the distance, in a simple reversal of the way that normal gravity behaved; no, here things were more complex as well as backwards. Not even the most powerful interstellar drive—the experiment had been tried—could force a ship within half a kilometer of that mysterious and fiery central point. And one result of the inversion was that the infused breathable air was effectively held as a film only a score of meters thick around the inner surface of the Fortress, where it was prevented by forcefield gates from escaping into the labyrinth of uninhabited outer chambers, and thence to space.

All in all, thought Commander Blenheim, as she had thought several times an hour since her arrival yesterday, all in all a most fascinating place.

As if he were able to sense the present train of her thoughts, the exile asked: "Do you expect you'll like it, then? Your tour of duty here, I mean?"

She granted him a faint smile. "I expect that I just might."

"Good. Oh, by the way, I haven't gone through the usual formalities of asking you about your trip."

"The journey was quite pleasantly uneventful, thank you. Routine, until we were in our close approach here. Even from outside, the Fortress is—impressive."

"I'd rather see it from outside." His voice was flat, and he was watching her steadily.

If the general was testing whether he could unsettle her by referring so baldly to his quasi-prisoner status, she trusted that her response was disappointing. "I've seen other exiles in much worse confinement. Not to mention other people who are under no legal sanctions at all."

"Political, surely." Then when she looked at him he amplified: "The sanctions, I mean. In my case. You said 'legal.'"

"I have a habit of saying what I mean, General Harivarman. Shall we go in now and take a look at this famous laboratory?"

"Of course. Follow me." The tone was briefly one that a Prince—or a general—might use, giving orders to a mere commander.

As the two of them walked away, the driver remained sitting wordlessly in the car. An old-style servant, what little she had heard about Lescar suggested; part of the machinery.

Commander Blenheim followed her guide into a nearby building through an unlocked door, thence into a passage that promptly led them down one level below the street. The lighting panels in the ceiling were all working, and the air was circulating freshly. The interiors here, like the streets outside, were clean and ordinary-looking. Still, thought the commander, everything here had an aura of being little used.

Harivarman, leading the way, stopped presently at another unmarked door, this one also of commonplace appearance—but at a second look, not quite.

The general was pointing to certain traces at eye level on the wall beside the door. He told her: "The Guardians' seal was placed here, when Sabel's contact with the berserker was discovered. It wasn't removed until about twenty years ago, according to the best information I can discover."

"The Guardians," Anne Blenheim reminded him, "were disbanded well before that." They had been a fanatical sub-order of the quasi-religious Templars—more religious then than now—a segment devoted mainly to anti-goodlife activity. Almost everyone now agreed that they had overshot the mark in their devotion to that excellent cause, employing methods that more than once degenerated into witch hunting, and sometimes even proved counterproductive, arousing interest in, and even enthusiasm for, the cause they so fanatically opposed.

She added: "Nor am I a 'closet' Guardian, in case you have been wondering where on the spectrum my own political and ethical sympathies lie. Though I suspect I am somewhat more conservative than my predecessor here; I hear that you and Colonel Phocion were on the verge of being—what's the old term?—'drinking buddies.' Nor do I, or anyone else as far as I know, suspect you of secret goodlife sympathies."

That last was worth a shared smile; Harivarman's record as a fighter against berserkers was as well known as were his later political difficulties with the human leaders of Salutai and other worlds. Commander Blenheim had even read one unconfirmed report that in a hero-worshipping way speculated that the Prince(general!) might be a descendant of the berserkers' human archenemy, the legendary Johann Karlsen.

"I am glad to hear it," Karlsen's descendant—if it were really so—noted solemnly. And lightly bowed her forward. "Shall we go in?"

There were several rooms inside the laboratory, all of them spacious, well-lit, free of trash and essentially empty. There was, in a practical, scientific sense, hardly anything left of the place to see. It was just about as the commander's reading had led her to expect. Centuries ago the Guardian witch hunters had gutted this laboratory down to the bare walls, and in some rooms deeper than that. But the very thoroughness of the process of search-and-destroy remained as evidence, first-hand testimony, about the Guardians if not about Sabel himself.

There was little here to comment on, beyond that fact. Their stay in the place was not very long.

Presently she and the general were back in the rear seat of the car, and the car was under way again, returning her to the Templar base. She had been half-expecting an invitation to visit the general in his quarters, but it was not forthcoming. The human driver had still not spoken a word in the commander's presence. Somehow she doubted that she was missing much in the way of brilliant conversation.

"I see you are manning the old defenses again," the Prince commented, after a few hundred meters of the return journey had rolled by in smooth silence. For a long time the Fortress had been more of a museum and a relic than anything else; real fighting, real danger, had been elsewhere. But that was now changing again, or at least starting to change. Anne Blenheim's appointment as base commander here was not the subtle insult to an ambitious officer that it might have been a few decades ago. Far from it. Her superiors expected her to accomplish a great deal.

Following her companion's gaze, Commander Blenheim could observe activity that she had ordered yesterday, one of the old defense control centers being given preliminary tests by a staff of technicians, many of whom had arrived on the same ship with her.

She said: "Yes; the war is far from over."

Harivarman, sitting beside her, sighed. There could hardly be any doubt in his mind which war it was that she or any Templar ever meant. That war which all humanity—except of course for the few evil-worshipping goodlife—had to be always and everywhere ready to fight, for survival against berserkers. He said: "If only I could be sure that the Council felt that way."

The two of them, Anne Blenheim realized, were certainly in agreement on the need for humanity to unite and press on with the berserker-war to victory; she had known that all along. But she was not going to discuss politics with her prisoner, and that first halfway political statement that she could not disagree with would certainly lead them into talk of real politics if she agreed.

Rather than do that she changed the subject. "There's a lot of empty space here, isn't there? I mean a really enormous amount. Oh, I suppose I knew before I arrived that it would be so. But it never really struck me until now, getting my first good look at it from the inside."

The general looked around and up, past the fiery point where the Radiant burned in vacuum, its inverse force pressing the atmosphere, their bodies, everything else, away from it. He said: "Oh, yes. Literally millions of chambers and passages back inside the shell. Room enough, of course, to run away and hide if I were so inclined. Hundreds of cubic kilometers of room. But ultimately, of course, nowhere to go."

Again a sudden complaint about his status as a prisoner. Well, what more natural? It was just that somehow Commander Anne had expected more stoicism from this man, because of what she had heard about him; but she supposed she would complain too, in his place. But she was not going to commiserate with the general on his problems. Instead she gave her own viewpoint. "A lot of volume to try to defend, with the number of people and the material I'm being given to work with. Not, I suppose, that defense is

actually going to become a practical question within the next year or two."

"Let's hope not." In the past year or so increasing berserker activity in the region of the Eight Worlds had made the possibility loom larger.

He didn't elaborate on his answer. The whole Fortress was obviously still much more a museum than the real Fortress it once had been, that real fortress neither of them had ever seen.

The smooth progress of their car now drew them in sight of a group of tourists, people from various planets taking a more formal tour of the Fortress in a larger, open-sided vehicle. Commander Blenheim wondered if they would stop at Sabel's old laboratory too. Tourism was no longer as much of a business here as it had been in Sabel's time; nor was the City's population nearly as large.

Making conversation, Anne Blenheim mentioned this to the general.

He agreed. "The population in Sabel's time was over a hundred thousand, did you know that? I don't have any current official figures, but I can use my eyes. The total is obviously now down to something much less than that. A great many of the civilians are tourist-facility operators, or civilian base employees. There's a crew at the scientific station. And your Templars, of course, who make up a large part of the total."

"There'll be more people here soon. Military and civilian both."

"Oh?"

"We're relocating the Templar Academy here. The first class of approximately a hundred cadets is due to start arriving in less than a standard month."

"That's news." The general seemed strongly interested. She supposed that any change, especially one that promised more people at the Radiant, must be interesting to him. He asked her: "Where are you going to put them all? Lots of room, as you say, but not that much of it under atmosphere and in good repair."

"We're looking for sections, preferably buildings near the base, that will be easy to repair and refurbish. And perhaps areas for training, out on the outer surface of the shell. I may request that you give me another tour some day—I gather you have been emulating Doctor Sabel, in your enthusiasm for exploration, at least."

"I'm at your service when you want to go." He shook his head. "It really is exploration. Reconstruction would be difficult out there. Out in the desert places—no demons to report as yet." He looked at her as if he wasn't sure she would get the allusion; well, she really hadn't, but at least she realized that it was one. Demons. She would look up the word.

She said: "With the influx of cadets we may be in crowded quarters for a while, but it shouldn't be that hard to expand. As soon as the first group of trainees learn some basic elements of space survival, we'll make it part of the next phase of their training to refurbish some of the old facilities. Where did the good Doctor Sabel find his berserker, by the way?"

"He came upon it in one of the remoter corridors. A long way even from the areas where I usually poke around. A long, long way, even then, from the inhabited portions of the Fortress."

After the Sabel debacle, she knew, the more remote corridors had been rather thoroughly searched for any more machines that might become active. Of course the damned machines could be good at concealment, at playing dead, as they were good at many other things; and to this day it was not completely certain that all the active units had been found. There might even, possibly, be more of them out there somewhere, frozen into the slag of ancient battle as the object of Sabel's efforts was supposed to have been when he discovered it.

Then the commander wondered suddenly if that might be what the general was really after in his exploration—one more metallic dragon-monster. Not, of course, that Harivarman would be one to play the perverted games of goodlife. But, to find a foe still dangerous, to re-enact the combat glories of the days not long ago when Prince Harivarman had been a hero to everyone on the Eight Worlds—and incidentally to show up the Templars, for having been in control of this place so long and still having left one of the enemy functional and deadly dangerous—yes, she could see how that might be attractive to him.

At her request the general let her out of his car just at the main gate of the base, very near the spot where he had picked her up. She saw to it that their goodbyes were brief, because she had a lot of work to do. A pity. She would have liked to talk to him longer.

She would probably, she thought, soon take him up on his offer of another tour now that they had begun, as she felt, to understand each other.

As she walked through the gate and into the base, briskly returning the guards' salutes, she was wondering what his wife, or former wife, might be like.

Chapter 3

Like most citizens of most worlds with Earth-descended populations, Chen Shizuoka had never traveled outside the atmosphere of the planet on which he had been born. In human society there were a few jobs that required space travel; otherwise it was for the most part an activity of the wealthy or powerful. Chen, a poor student from a poor family, was and had always been a long way from either of those categories.

Of course he had—again like most people—read descriptions and experienced re-creations of the generally mild sensations of space flight. So nothing about the early stages of his first journey away from Salutai really surprised him. From the spaceport a shuttle lifted him and its gathered handful of other recruits up to an interstellar transport craft that was awaiting them in orbit. Except for its Templar markings, the transport was an almost featureless sphere, impressive in its size to those aboard the shuttle as they drew near. Some of Chen's fellow recruits, gathered at a viewport, talked knowledgeably about the type and designation of the ship they were about to board. Chen knew almost nothing of such technical matters, and was not greatly interested in them. He supposed that now some such interest might begin to be required of him, depending on what kind of an assignment he drew after his basic training. He wondered, too, where he would serve. The Templar organization, many centuries old, and independent of any planetary government or league of planets, existed in almost every part of the Galaxy to which Earth-descended humanity had spread.

But Chen's thoughts, instead of being focused on the new life that he was entering, remained primarily with his friends back on the world he had just left, and at which he now took a lingering last look as he was about to leave the shuttle for the transport. He had been for most of his life a shy youth, not one to make friends very easily. And they were really his best friends, those people who had gone out of their

way to welcome him into the political protest group. They had helped him find a direction for his life, had shared their dreams with him, along with the work and risk of organizing the demonstration. The inflatable berserkers had been his idea, though, and he was proud of it.

Chen's chief concern at the moment was whether any of his friends were also being shot at. He fretted and wondered how soon he might be able to communicate with them again. He would send mail, when he had the chance. He would of course have to try to write between the lines about his real concerns, assuming that what he wrote would be read and censored somewhere along the way. That wasn't commonly done, or at least he hadn't thought it was, but if they were ready to shoot people down . . .

Who would he write to? Hana? They weren't what you would call lovers; thank all the powers that he hadn't made any permanent connections along that line.

Whose mail was least likely to be intercepted, among the people he would trust to see that his messages got passed along? There was Vaurabourg, and Janis; but they were in it about as deep as he. There was old Segovia, who Chen thought was probably Hana's real lover if she really had one. Chen had only seen him with her once or twice, in the university library, and thought the older man probably had some post on the faculty. But Segovia had never shown up at the meetings of the protest group. And what if he considered Chen a rival?

Now Chen thought miserably that he wasn't at all good at this intrigue business, though only hours ago succeeding at it had seemed childishly easy. But then he supposed that almost no one on Salutai was very good at it. Their demonstration in front of the Empress's boat had been effective only because the authorities were at least equally inept at playing their part of the game.

Chen kept coming back to it in silent marveling: The security people back there in the city had actually shot at him, had really tried to kill him. Who would have believed it? He couldn't get over it at all.

It just demonstrated that things were worse even than the most radical of his friends had tried to tell him; therefore it was even more vital than any of them had realized that the Prince be recalled to power. Prince Harivarman ought to be raised to greater power than before; he was needed to serve as the strong right hand of the Empress herself, sweeping aside the other advisers who had led the government so badly astray. Yes, that was obvious. The situation cried out for action to make that happen.

Not that he, Chen, was going to be able to take any further part in politics for some time. The Templars, welcome almost everywhere, had a reputation for being politically neutral. Fighting berserkers was their business.

So, no more politics for the time being. Unless, of course—just suppose—he should somehow be assigned to the base at the Templar Radiant itself, and there be able to meet the exiled Prince in person, and . . . but no. Chen was reasonably sure that Templar basic training was not conducted at their old Radiant Fortress which, as he understood matters, now was little more than a shrine or museum. A few words caught from his shipmates' conversation informed him that basic training for recruits from the Eight Worlds would be conducted at Niteroi, a lightweight world in the same stellar neighborhood, that shared its sun with a swarm of nearby small planets and satellites. An ideal planetary system, Chen supposed, for teaching people how to handle themselves in a variety of physical environments. Realistically, it would be a long time before he saw the Templar Radiant, if he ever did; and he could hope that the Prince would be recalled from exile well before that happened.

Shortly after boarding the interstellar transport the recruits were assembled in the ship's passenger lounge. Chen heard official confirmation that they were bound for Niteroi, and that the voyage would

occupy something like eight days, four times longer than the usual direct time. The reason was that there would be stopovers at two more worlds to pick up recruits.

The days of the voyage began to pass, Chen remaining too much occupied with his own worries to take much interest in the experience. The recruits' territory aboard ship, already somewhat restricted, began to seem crowded when more came on at the first stop. Still, the addition this time was predominantly female, and social life aboard took on a decidedly different tone. There were fascinating language and social differences to be explored. There was plenty of time for socializing; the Templar crew of the ship was making no attempt to begin training the recruits or even to enforce discipline beyond mere safety rules. All that could wait for the attention of those who did it properly, the permanent party of instructors at the basic training barracks on Niteroi.

The great majority of the other recruits began to enjoy the voyage energetically at about this point. Chen would have done the same had the conditions of his enlistment been different, but as things stood enjoyment was out of the question for him. He kept trying to reassure himself that the Templars' behavior toward him so far proved that the traditional law still held—enlistment in their order gave immunity to prosecution under any planetary code. If his information was accurate—it had been acquired in large part from adventure stories, a fact which tended to worry him—the only exceptions to the rule of immunity should be a few capital crimes, matters like high treason. And no mere demonstration, he assured himself, no matter how noisy, effective, and offensive to the political establishment, could possibly be forced into that category. So he saw no reason why the traditional legal immunity should not apply to him; yet he would feel much easier when he was absolutely sure.

A few more days of interstellar travel passed, comfortable and dull. With the transport's viewports closed in flightspace, and the artificial gravity functioning smoothly, Chen might almost have been confined in a few rooms of his home city, among a gang of half-congenial young strangers.

Then the transport entered another solar system, materialized out of the realm of flightspace mathematics into the shared conventional spacetime which humanity tended to think of as normality. The ship settled comfortably into planetary orbit, and received still more recruits from yet another shuttle.

Shortly after this second brief stop, with the transport in deep mathematical flight again, the stars once more invisible outside the hull, two of the career Templars who made up the ship's crew came into the recruits' lounge. And there amid a group of his shipmates they confronted Chen.

Both Templars were older men, strong and capable-looking veterans. "Recruit Shizuoka," said one.

Chen looked up, startled, from the game upon which he had been trying to concentrate. "Yes. Yes sir, I mean."

"On your feet. Come this way." It was by no means a request.

One of their hands on each of his arms, they escorted him out of the lounge, away from his wondering fellow recruits, and out of familiar territory into a portion of the ship Chen had not been allowed to see before. There, behind closed doors in a small private cabin, to his surprise and sudden outrage, he was ordered to strip and then thoroughly searched. His clothes were efficiently searched too, scanned with electronic devices before they were handed back to him.

Chen's questions and protests, first fearful and tentative, then injured and angry, were ignored. He would have been more loudly angry, he would have resisted violently, if he had dared. A single look at the men who were searching him assured him that such resistance would not be wise.

Dressed again, he found himself being conducted to another, even smaller room.

He was given no explanation at all, no words of any kind beyond monosyllabic orders. The door of the tiny cabin closed behind him, shutting him in alone; it was a very strange small room indeed, very sparsely and peculiarly furnished.

Still, it took Chen a moment more to understand that he was now locked up in the ship's brig.

"Recruit Shizuoka."

Chen looked around him wildly for a moment; the voice was issuing from an invisible speaker or speakers, concealed somewhere in a bulkhead, or amid the spartan furnishings.

"W-what?" he stammered.

"You will be confined until we dock at the Radiant." It was a male voice, sounding almost bored. "Pending further investigation there."

"Until we . . . we dock at the what?"

There was no answer.

Dock at the Radiant. That was what the voice had said.

Chen stood with his mouth open, on the verge of shouting back more questions at the wall; but there could really be no doubt of what the investigation would be about. Interrupting a procession with a protest appeared to have become something on the order of a capital crime. And he had no doubt that the voice had said that the ship was going to the Radiant. Not to the Niteroi system, where the recruits aboard had been repeatedly told that they were bound.

But why?

There was a viewscreen in the brig, taking up a large portion of one bulkhead. But there was no way Chen could discover to turn it on. Evidently if they wanted to show him something they could. Otherwise . . .

There was a clock too, built into another bulkhead panel, and it was running; Chen supposed that they could turn that off as well when they chose. But the clock continued to keep time. If Chen had known how far away the Templar Radiant was, knowing the time might have been some help.

His meals arrived punctually, trays automatically delivered in a bin above the waste-disposal slot, trays holding acceptable food, no better and no worse than what he had been getting as one more anonymous recruit. The spartan plumbing worked. For entertainment the cell was furnished with a couple of old books and a reader, and as the next days passed Chen came to know the old books well. He tried to amuse himself by imagining discipline problems arising among the nineteen innocent recruits still presumably partying it up out there; would he get company if so? Somehow he doubted that he would.

He wondered what the other recruits had been told about his arrest and confinement.

Up until that last planetary stop the attitude of the Templar crew toward Chen Shizuoka had been all

mild indifference, as it was toward everybody else. But immediately after that stop he had to go into the brig, and certainly not for anything he had done aboard ship. Therefore some word about him, some story about what he had done or was accused of doing, had already reached that planet from Salutai, and had come up with the latest batch of recruits on the shuttle, and been passed on to the officers of the Templar transport.

Whatever the Templar crew had heard about Chen Shizuoka at that point, they had had no time to communicate with their superiors elsewhere. They had been forced to make a decision on the spot, and on their own initiative, and they had decided not to take him to Niteroi as scheduled; instead they were taking it upon themselves to divert the whole shipment of recruits off to the Radiant Fortress.

What could they possibly have been told?

The brig's lone inhabitant received no warning at all that an end was imminent to the last leg of his first space flight, any more than he had been warned of his incarceration. Not until the journey's last few minutes, when there came a subtle twisting of the artificial gravity, and then a slight jar felt through the deck like that of a boat grating on a sandy bottom. That, Chen knew—the adventure stories again—was the interstellar drive cutting out, and the forces employed to move the ship in normal spacetime taking over.

A few more minutes passed in isolation. Then suddenly the door to the brig was sliding open. A Templar voice said: "Come along. We're getting you off first."

And at last, being escorted watchfully along a hull passage, Chen passed an unshielded viewport again and had a good chance to see where he was going. They were still in space, and he discovered that the Fortress of the Templar Radiant, seen from outside and at close range, had a certain resemblance to the descriptions that he had heard and read of the larger spacegoing berserkers; it was an enormous, rough-skinned sphere, replete with cracks and wounds from ancient battles, and still formidable-looking with what Chen supposed were varieties of offensive and defensive armament. Heavy shadows occluded much of the sphere's rugged surface, because here a lot of the background space was dark nebula instead of stars. The Eight Worlds and their spatial environs, of which this was an extended part, were somewhat isolated from the rest of the Galaxy by enormous Galactic clouds of dark dust and gas, and were accessible only by circuitous passages from the hundreds of other human-occupied planets whose people tended to think of themselves as making up the mainstream of Galactic civilization.

The vast sphere ahead of the transport grew quickly larger, until to Chen's inexperienced eye it had assumed what looked like planetary dimensions. Then the interstellar ship that he was riding, that had looked so large to Chen when he approached it aboard a shuttle, went plunging into a mere pore of the onrushing planet's surface. This comparatively narrow passage, Chen soon observed, did not lead straight in to the dock facilities, which he assumed were near the center of the enormous Fortress, or at least somewhere on its inner surface, but made many turns. And presently he realized that this zig-zagging of the passage must have a defensive purpose too.

There had evidently been some preliminary radio communication between transport and Fortress concerning him because, immediately after the transport docked, Chen was hustled off ship ahead of anyone else. Surrounded by his silent Templar escort, he was made to walk in what felt like normal gravity along a narrow paved way that appeared to be some kind of a city alley, though it was much cleaner than most of the alleys he had seen.

Resting in another dock nearby was a tourists' ship, a huge but perversely normal object. What looked like almost normal sunlight was filtering down through nearby branches, vine and tree, their small leaves

quaking in a breeze that after Chen's days aboard ship certainly suggested the openness of a planet's surface. That wind had to be, he realized, somehow artificially induced and managed.

Before Chen thought to look up at the famous bright enigma that here served as a sun, he had been hustled underneath a roof and into shadow.

Now he was ordered to sit on a stone bench and wait, a sturdy and uncommunicative Templar on each side of him. But he had hardly sat down before they were dragging him to his feet again.

"The base commander wants to talk to you," warned an approaching officer. "Watch your manners."

And here she came, at a brisk walk, with escort. The base commander surprised Chen somewhat by being a young woman—well, not really that young, he supposed. He supposed also that he ought to salute, or something, as some of the people around him were doing. But as yet no one had officially taught him how.

He tried to read hope into the lady's blue-eyed stare as she came to a sharp halt before him, confronting him at close range. But what he saw there looked more like menace.

Words issued crisply from her soft mouth. "I am Commander Blenheim. I understand that you have enlisted in the Templars in order to avoid legal prosecution on Salutai."

"Uh . . . yessir . . . ma'am . . . uh."

Half a dozen other officers, including the captain of the transport ship, were standing by now, all faintly grim, almost expressionless. But they were all deferring to Commander Blenheim, and though they were looking at Chen as if he were endlessly fascinating, they showed no intention of asking him any questions themselves. This was going to be their boss's show.

The commander asked Chen, quite reasonably: "Are you guilty of this crime that you're accused of?"

"Ma'am . . . maybe I need legal advice."

She continued to be reasonable. She even, to Chen's surprise, sounded a little like his counselor at the university. "Yes, quite likely you do. Or will eventually. You see, if there are to be any proceedings against you, in a matter like this, they won't take place here. When the time comes, I'm sure you'll be provided counsel. Look here, young man, what I'm hoping for is some statement, some evidence, something from you that will demonstrate that this is all some dreadful error. That there's no need to start that ball rolling, to hold you for extradition for high treason and for murder. Maybe that's too much to hope—"

"Murder?" That word didn't, at first, make any sense to Chen. It was gibberish, nonsense. It came almost as a relief. It proved there was a mistake, that she had to be talking about someone else.

And then the whole thing began at last, insidiously, to make a dreadful kind of sense. Murder. And high treason, too. And being shot at . . .

The commander was studying him carefully. He looked back at her, holding his breath. But now, somehow, he knew the awful truth before she spoke.

Her gaze continued to hold him steadily, while her crisp voice said: "Her Supreme Majesty the Empress

was assassinated, in the midst of a holiday procession on the planet Salutai, no more than a few hours before you enlisted in the Templars, in the capital city of that world . . ."

The base commander had not yet finished speaking. In fact she had hardly started; but Chen for the moment could hear nothing more.

Chapter 4

Lescar was in the dock area of the City, a district in which he was usually to be found shortly after the arrival at the Fortress of any kind of interstellar ship. Today, as usual on these occasions, he had occupied himself in moving from one place of business or amusement to another, quietly doing his best to gather as soon as possible any news of other worlds that might have been brought to the Radiant by the visiting crew or passengers.

In the course of today's effort along those lines the graying little man was talking to one of his regularly cultivated contacts, a minor functionary at the port facility, when word reached them of the arrival of a second ship, this one quite unexpected. The word was that a Templar transport had just been contacted on radio and would be docking at the Radiant soon.

Moving quickly, Lescar got himself to one of his favorite vantage points for observation, a public balcony near the interior docks. He was barely in time to observe the arrival of the interstellar transport ship. The great spherical shape came nudging its way up out of one of the hundred-meter-wide mouths of the vast ship channel that tunneled in through the kilometers of the Fortress's rocky shell to form the terminal of the docks. The blunt round shape of the transport came easing up into atmosphere through a forcefield skin that stretched and thinned itself before the ship. The forcefields parted slowly and gently to grant the vessel passage, while retaining in the interior of the Fortress the atmospheric pressure that they were designed to hold. For an aperture of the required size, the forcefield system worked better than a mechanical airlock.

Lescar stared at the new arrival. Yes, it was certainly a Templar transport, and it had certainly not been on today's shipping schedule. Something at least mildly unusual must be going on.

It wasn't possible for Lescar to observe directly who might be getting off the transport, or who was getting ready to board it, or what cargo was going to be loaded or unloaded. The shape of the huge docks, and the height of the walls that partially encircled them, pretty well prevented that. He could see little more than the uninformative curved top of the great ship's hull as it rested in the dock, graying and glistening as it grew a thin film of ice from atmospheric moisture.

Lescar did not stand and watch the ice develop. Instead he resumed his round of visits to certain nearby places where he had found that news from the docks was most likely to make its first unofficial appearance.

Within an hour, before even the arrival of the transport had been officially announced, he had the shocking news. It was, in a way, too startling not to be believed. And moments after Lescar had heard the words repeated, confirming them as well as he could without undue delay, he was hurrying away on foot. Keeping his sharp-featured face as expressionless as usual, he was carrying a message of world-shaking import to the Prince. What effect the Empress's assassination might have on their exile was beyond Lescar's powers to calculate, and he did not try. But he never doubted that the Prince would instantly grasp all of the implications.

Prince Harivarman, his servant knew, was at the moment about as many kilometers away from the City and the docks as it was possible for him to get, spending the day in the archaeological research that had gradually come to occupy him more and more. It took Lescar only a few minutes on foot to reach the exiles' large house on the City's fringe. On arrival there, he went at once to the garage where they kept their two permitted vehicles, and got behind the controls of the one flyer that now remained in its parking space.

After making sure he had a spacesuit aboard, Lescar turned on power and eased the vehicle free of the surface. In the flyer, no point anywhere within the Fortress was more than a few minutes distant. Once out of the garage, still under manual control, he turned in the direction of the nearest forcefield gate allowing vehicular access to the airless outer regions of the Fortress.

Lescar thought he knew approximately where the Prince was working today. Still, the problem of finding another small flyer somewhere in the vast maze of the Fortress's outer chambers and corridors could have been well-nigh hopeless, except for their vehicles' locator devices, transmitting constantly. Of course the real purpose of the locators was to make it easier for the Templars to keep track of the two exiles at all times. But a fortuitous side effect was that they could always find each other with a minimum of difficulty. Their jailers had no fear that the exiles might be tempted to try to use the spaceworthy vehicles to escape; the flyers' comparatively simple spacedrives would be quite useless for such a purpose. Without a vehicle equipped with a true interstellar drive, the tricky spacebending technology that made it possible to travel effectively faster than light, there was nowhere for an escapee from the Radiant Fortress to go. Nowhere, at least, that could be reached in a mere human lifetime, of a few centuries at the longest.

On the panel in front of Lescar a glowing plan showed the main outer corridors of the Fortress, and a colored dot near one main line the location of the Prince's flyer. Tapping in a simple order, Lescar directed his own craft to proceed to the same place.

Already he had reached the portal in the floor of the inhabited surface, a miniature version of a shipping dock, that would pass his vehicle out of atmosphere. The gray veils of the forcefield gate beneath him began to work, imitating in reverse the cycle by which the larger gate beside the docks had admitted the interstellar transport. The field stretched in a gray pattern over the bubble of Lescar's cabin, then opened for the flyer, and then fell behind it, receding ever more swiftly as the vehicle accelerated.

Now around Lescar's small ship there extended great darkness, relieved only by the flyer's own lights. Those lights showed Lescar the rough stone walls of a little-used small-ship channel. The walls of the endless tube of stone went rushing by in vacuum-silence, faster and faster still.

With his autopilot now switched on, Lescar was able to spend the brief journey getting himself into a light spacesuit; the Prince would probably not be in his own flyer, but he would be somewhere near it.

* * *

The Prince was busily at work in a remote outer branch-corridor of the Fortress, where he had set up his own small battery of artificial lights, as well as a temporary shelter useful in certain of his experiments. In the brightness that his lights afforded he was looking at pictures partly incised and partly painted on the walls of ancient stone. He found the Dardanian artwork or decoration endlessly fascinating. There were frequently patterns in it, esthetic connections between one painting and another, but they never seemed to repeat themselves exactly. And, even after all his study, the pictures were still more than half incomprehensible, like art or artifacts from the old prespace age on Earth. Harivarman was of course not

the first to undertake a study of the Dardanian artistic record here on the Fortress, but he thought that he was surprisingly close to being the first in modern times to approach such a study systematically.

There was much more here to investigate than the Dardanian inscriptions and pictures on the walls, though there were easily enough of those to keep a researcher occupied for several lifetimes. The sheer volume of the Fortress and its contents had prevented any thorough or comprehensive investigation. Digging into chambers sealed centuries ago by accident or design, opening closets and mysterious containers long forgotten, Harivarman had found artifacts of many kinds, some utterly mystifying. He had recently discovered some recordings of Dardanian music, and now, even as he worked, he was listening to the sounds of unidentifiable instruments, untraceable melodies.

The voices, he sometimes thought fancifully, of Dardanian ghosts . . .

At the moment he worked drifting almost weightlessly in his spacesuit, surrounded by riches of old inscriptions, kilometers of ancient stonework, and mazes of rooms, some of them containing chests made of metal and of unknown materials, still-sealed relics of Dardanian days.

When the Prince had first become interested in this exploration he had been continually amazed that there was no army of investigators here digging away already, no horde of busy archaeologists and historians from a hundred worlds competing with him. That he should have all this to himself still seemed odd. But the Templars since acquiring the Fortress centuries ago had always been cool at best to exploration by visitors, and had themselves worked at the task only desultorily. Not that they had ever raised an objection to Harivarman's efforts. He realized that they probably thought it kept him out of trouble, distracting him from dangerous political schemes.

Against one lightly curving wall of a broad corridor, a wall bearing a set of inscriptions that he had at first thought would be of special interest, the Prince had set up his temporary shelter, essentially an air-filled bubble of clear tough plastic equipped with an airlock. Drifting and thinking inside this bubble, finding these particular wall carvings less interesting the more he looked at them, Harivarman suddenly became aware of movement, shifting shadows, the dim advent of far-reflected lights. They signaled what had to be the approach of a flyer, coming down one of the main corridors nearby. It would be Lescar, he supposed. The Templars patrolled these outer portions of the Fortress only infrequently, and hardly anyone else ever bothered to come out here.

From certain familiar subtleties in the pattern of the onrushing, quickly brightening lights he was sure that it was Lescar's flyer. The Prince, turning off his Dardanian music, listening now for some communication, wondered a little that Lescar was preserving radio silence as he drew near. That in turn probably meant that the little man was bringing what he considered important news, and wished to minimize the chance that enemies were listening when he conveyed his excitement to his master.

If there were really any reason for secrecy, to have conveyed the news, or even the fact of news, by radio, even in code, would have been chancy. Once, long ago, some kind of Dardanian communication system must have linked all these puzzling shafts and chambers. Or, perhaps not . . . there might have been some ritual, ceremonial, or artistic purpose in the lack. And no real evidence of any such system now remained. The Dardanians, Earth-descended like most of the rest of the known Galaxy's intelligent inhabitants, had long since disappeared, and no one understood them any longer—if anyone ever had. Under present conditions, for various technical reasons, radio communications within the Fortress tended to be erratic, occasionally unreliable. But the exiles had for four years operated on the assumption that the Templars could eavesdrop on any conversation in or near the flyers they had so considerately placed at the disposal of those who were their unwilling guests.

Lescar's vehicle came drifting to a halt immediately outside Harivarman's temporary shelter, and by its autopilot stabilized itself in position there. The gray little man, emerging suited from the flyer's hatch, at once signaled to Harivarman in their private code of gestures that he wanted an immediate conference under conditions of radio silence. Harivarman beckoned him into the inflated shelter, which he considered as likely as any place to be secure against eavesdropping. And there he immediately heard his servant's news.

When Harivarman learned of the Empress's death, he drifted in silence for a few moments, now and then touching the wall with boot or glove, just as in gravity of normal strength he might have paced the floor. This far from the Radiant a drifting body took a long time to fall.

Looking at the inscribed wall that only minutes ago he had found so fascinating, he could see it now as nothing but an enormous and solemn toy. Worse, a means of self-hypnosis. Such was the impact, he thought, when the real world, the world of politics and power, intruded bluntly.

Briefly, memories of the Empress came and went in the Prince's thoughts. Not a blood relative of his at all, but still she had been to him at some times, and in some good sense, like a mother . . . and, later on, something of an enemy. It was she who had sent him here. Regret now at her death was mingled with overtones of vengeful triumph.

All of this emotional reaction was quite natural, Harivarman supposed, but it was quite profitless as well. Almost immediately the Prince's mind moved on. The point he had to consider at once was the effect of her assassination upon the political situation, the balance of power, particularly in the ruling Council of the Eight Worlds. When next those eight powerful representatives gathered on their ceremonial thrones, the choice of who should now occupy the great throne in the center—the choice of the next Empress, or Emperor—would be up to them.

Lescar was also drifting inside the shelter, waiting with a kind of impassive eagerness for his master's words of wisdom. Turning back to him, the Prince asked: "Did you get a look at this young man who is supposed to have done it? But no, I don't suppose you had a chance to see him."

"No, no chance of that, sir. A university student, the story is, a native Salutain, who after he'd killed the Empress joined the Templars to escape pursuit."

"Ah, yes. I see. But why should the Templars bring him here, knowing extradition must be enforceable in such a case? More importantly, is there any reason why they should want to help such a man at all?"

"I don't suppose, sir, that they really would."

"Then it's interesting that he should be brought here, don't you think?"

"Sir? There was something else—though no special importance was placed on it by the people I heard it from."

"Well, what?"

"That just before the assassination—it took place in the Holiday of Life parade—there were political demonstrations. One demonstration in particular, in favor of your recall. This young Chen was apparently one of the chief organizers of that."

Harivarman fell silent again. He drifted in thought. He could perceive several vague outlines in the

situation, all of them ugly. "And then right after that he killed the Empress? Or at least they think he did. Ah. That's all I need."

The Prince paused. Then he continued: "Then it looks like I'm going to be accused of conspiring to kill her. At the least it's very likely. Matters have been so arranged. So, if I'm going to do anything to protect myself, I have to see him, this supposed assassin . . . I wonder. Perhaps they brought him here to the Radiant, just to arrange a confrontation with me?"

Lescar shook his head. It was his belief, frequently stated in the past, that his master sometimes tried to think too many moves ahead. "My thought, Your Honor, is that they brought him here simply because they had already recruited him before they found out what he'd done, or was accused of doing. Then they were in something of a panic. You know the Templars can't just hand over one of their own to any planetary authorities on demand. Not even if it's only a new recruit. They don't do that; any Templar officer who did so would be . . ."

"Yes. You're right."

Lescar's face twitched; for him, that was something of an emotional demonstration. "But they didn't know what else to do with him, and so they brought him here. This rock is the Templar headquarters, all the home territory the Templars really have, and they must feel more secure here than at the training grounds at Niteroi."

The Prince was musing aloud. "You may be right. You probably are. They could have taken him directly to their Superior General for a decision, but he's said to be almost constantly on the move around the Galaxy, and they probably didn't know where to reach him . . . you know, there's no authority presently on this rock who can decide Templar policy on matters of such importance. Our creamy-cheeked new base commander? No. No one—unless someone else came in on the same ship?—no word of that, hey? Then they'll have to wait for word from no one less than the Superior General. And he'll quite possibly want to come here and talk to the accused man before he decides the question. There'll be demands for extradition certainly . . ."

Lescar appeared to consider the idea of extradition very thoughtfully before he agreed that it was likely. There was no one else around to fill the role of political counselor for the Prince, and so Lescar had assumed the job, and he gave it his best, just as he did the jobs of valet and cook. "Yes—naturally I suppose that's what they'll do. And you say you'll have to see this Chen too, Your Honor—is that wise?"

"How would my refusal to see him help? And yes, if I am to judge him, to try to determine the truth about his killing the Empress, I must see him—does he deny that he's guilty, by the way?"

"I have no idea, sir."

"Hm. Whoever this Chen really is, whatever his story or the truth of it, I expect our gracious hosts will sooner or later want to arrange for him to meet me. So they can observe our interactions, and then try to judge my part . . . thank you, Lescar, for bringing me this news so promptly. It's going to mean a change of some kind for us, certainly. And soon."

Lescar as usual accepted his master's thanks with a faint look of embarrassment. "Are you coming back to the City at once, Your Honor?"

"No." Harivarman brought his gentle drifting to a halt by taking a firm grip on a projecting bas-relief. "There's no rush about my appearing on the scene. Or not that much of one, at least. You go on back. I

want to be alone, and think a little." He glanced at his inscriptions again. "And possibly decide what I'm going to do out here. If I'm going to be able to go on now with any of this work at all."

"Yes sir. I'll see what else I can find out."

"Do that, certainly. And if the Templars tell you they are in a tremendous hurry to talk to me, tell them they can find me here without any trouble."

Within a minute Lescar and his flyer were gone again. Harivarman was once more alone with the Dardanian presence; but those gentle ghosts had faded suddenly, making even fanciful communication with them much more difficult.

Looking out through the clear plastic of his shelter, the Prince watched the last fantastic reflections of the lights of Lescar's vehicle die away. Now only his own lights held the great darkness back.

The Empress dead. Certain implications, for the most part grim, were immediately obvious. His serious enemies, Roquelaure and the others, would now have a freer hand in trying to get rid of him permanently. What was not so plain to the Prince was the best way for him to try to deal with his enemies now, or at least avoid their wrath. Indeed, that became less plain the more he thought about it. He could wish now that he had heeded Lescar's frequent pleas during the first two years of exile that they try to arrange an escape. They could by now have had an emergency plan in place.

Slowly, the Prince resumed the bodily motions of the investigating archaeologist. He told himself that it might be easier to think while engaged in a physical routine of measurement, note-taking, photography . . . but a few minutes of going through the motions convinced him that it was not going to work. He could no longer believe that his energy should now be going into this research. And the job deserved to be done right; he was never again going to be able to work on this job properly.

At least he was not going to be able to go on with it properly today. And suddenly it had become difficult to predict anything about tomorrow.

Moving with practiced skill, the Prince quickly closed himself securely into his own spacesuit. Then he deflated the shelter, took it down and stowed it away in his flyer. That craft waited nearby, just out of his way, anchored by its autopilot in a passage that was no more than barely big enough to accommodate the vehicle's modest diameter. Sabel, the old records indicated, had used a similar machine, custom-narrowed for these confining corridors.

Though his lonely work had suddenly become unsatisfying, the Prince realized that there were things about it he was genuinely going to miss when it had to end. Even if the end should come in a triumphant recall to power. That, too, was now suddenly a possibility, he supposed, though not a likely one.

He would miss this work, and at the present moment he didn't even know whether he was going to be able to come back to it tomorrow.

Harivarman had already packed much of his equipment back into the flyer, when a nagging sense of untidy incompleteness grew great enough to be uncomfortable. This particular short section of corridor held a pair of doors that he had been looking forward to opening. According to his experience of exploration in this area, doors placed like these should have behind them a couple of rooms, or perhaps one large room. Whatever was behind them had not yet been investigated. Those doors, he thought, were likely to open into one or two of the rare chambers that had never been entered since the Dardanians' time.

There was no need for the Prince to unpack the shelter once more, or to get much in the way of equipment out of the flyer again. One quick glance inside the room, or rooms, would be enough for now. If what he saw inside appeared sufficiently intriguing, he would have something to look forward to when—if—he got back here.

Extracting what he considered to be an appropriate tool from his packed kit, Harivarman launched himself in vanishingly small gravity and drifted in a long, free, practiced dive that brought him in a gently curving path almost exactly in front of the door he wanted. That door was of molded metal fancifully decorated. He could see nothing on it that looked like a lock. But he had tried this door gently before, on his first look around at this end of the corridor, and he was certain that it was blocked or stuck somehow. Probably, he thought, it had just become sealed with the metal-binding grip of centuries.

His tool, a combination vibrator and power hammer, soon took care of that impediment. Now the door could be slid back.

The room exposed was, naturally, completely dark inside. Harivarman shone his helmet light around, through emptiness. It was, for this part of the Fortress, a surprisingly large, deep chamber. There was another door that must connect with the as-yet unopened room adjoining. Once there had undoubtedly been functional artificial gravity. . . .

Then for some seconds Prince Harivarman did not breathe. He had thought at first that the large room was empty. But it was not. Against the rear wall, looking somehow crouched and defensive and small amid the room's emptiness, as if some enemy might have cornered it there, was a machine. The metal of it looked like armor, gleaming dully in his light. It was not really small at all, but almost as large as his flyer though of a different shape.

In this undisturbed place the minimal gravity had had time, plenty of time, to press the machine firmly though very lightly on the floor, so that now it was as motionless as the rock slabs of the walls. And the machine was no longer functional; Prince Harivarman in the first second of looking at it felt very sure of that. He would doubtless be dead already if it were.

Not an android. On second look, it did not really approach his flyer in size, but it was considerably bigger than a man, and shaped more like an insect, or a vehicle. Nor did it represent any of their most common types of comparatively simple combat units. No, this was something larger and more complex. The shape of the outer surface—perhaps it should be called a hull—suggested spaceflight capability; and there, near the bottom of the thing, within the pale of the six great folded and motionless spider-legs, was a bulge that resembled a corresponding curve on the lifeboat of an interstellar liner. That form surely indicated the presence of some kind of miniature interstellar drive.

Details were still doubtful, but one fact was certain. There was no doubt in Prince Harivarman's mind that he had found a relict berserker, and one whose existence was undreamt of by the Templars or any other human being.

Chapter 5

By the time Chen had recovered from his faint, the base commander had departed. A different set of uniformed Templars now had Chen in charge, and they were half leading, half carrying him along a passage.

As soon as Chen had his wits about him again, he started protesting loudly.

"Look, it's crazy to think that I would have killed the Empress! Why would I have done that? I wanted to persuade her to recall the Prince! I didn't even know she'd been killed until I got here."

No one argued with him, on that point or any other. No one agreed with him about anything either. Rather it was as if they just weren't listening. All they wanted to do right now was put him away safely. They turned aside presently into a small room, where they deposited him on a plain couch.

He lay there, under the watchful eyes of his silent captors, until a couple of additional people arrived. These turned out to be a medical team, and they rushed Chen through an examination. This checkup took no more than five minutes, and evidently it revealed no conditions that required special handling, for presently its subject was on his way again, still under heavy escort and being treated no more or less gently than before. Chen was more than half expecting to be thrown directly into some kind of military prison—did Templars still call their lockup the "stockade," as they did in the adventure stories? But the room he was actually locked into was more comfortable-looking than he had expected, and it did not appear to be within any kind of prison complex. Instead, the surroundings suggested the corridor of some comfortable hotel.

Now one of the junior officers who had been hovering about took the time to explain to Chen that until further notice he was going to be confined to quarters.

"Does that mean I'm under arrest?"

"Confined to quarters."

"I know, but does that mean—?"

It was a noncom who answered Chen this time; the officers, including the one who had spoken, had all disappeared even as Chen was trying to question them. A sergeant said, "You haven't been formally charged with anything. The ship's crew who brought you in can't charge you, because all they know is hearsay, what they heard about you after they left Salutai."

"But when will I get out?" He called that question hopelessly after the sergeant's departing back.

"I don't know." By now almost everyone was gone; the only one left to answer Chen was a young uniformed woman standing in his room's doorway, evidently his sole remaining guard. The tone of her reply was doubtful, as if she were ready to admit her lack of experience in things like this, or perhaps a lack of experience of things in general. She was rather small, with a proud figure, and evidently an ancestry of dark races. Her nametag proclaimed her Cadet Olga Khazar.

The attitude of Cadet Olga Khazar, poised as she was in the doorway, strongly suggested that she was about to go out and close the door behind her.

Chen sat up straight in the chair where he had been deposited. He asked, as if the answer were not already obvious: "And now you're going to lock me in?" And at the same time he thought it strange that they had left one low-ranking guard here, and the door not yet even locked.

She replied almost timidly: "Yeah, that's orders. You're not going to kill yourself, are you? We'll have to watch you every moment if you're suicidal."

"Kill myself!" Then Chen was speechless for a moment, unable to imagine any words powerful enough to comment suitably on that idea. "If I'd wanted to die, believe me, I wouldn't have had to come all this distance to arrange it."

Now Chen could see a shifting of shadows just outside his door, and hear that a small gliding vehicle of some kind was rolling to a stop just behind Cadet Khazar, who evidently had not been left as much alone on the job as had first appeared. The cadet turned round to look at the arrival, and a moment later Chen saw her stand at attention and salute.

A moment after that, Commander Blenheim stuck her blond head into Chen's room. He got up from his chair and tried to stand at attention. She asked him: "Feeling better?"

"Yes ma'am, thank you. Look, Commander, I didn't kill anyone—least of all the Empress. What makes anyone think I did?"

The officer shook her head with what might have been sympathy, moderated with a large mixture of wariness. "Recruit, I really can't tell at this distance what you did or did not do on Salutai. All I know for sure is that the authorities there appear to want to question you about the crime. Someone on Salutai evidently thinks you did it. So you are confined to quarters until we can find out more. You have not been formally charged with anything as yet."

Chen murmured: "Or someone there wants everyone else to think that the authorities want me."

"That I suppose is a possibility." The commander nodded thoughtfully. "Who would want that?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I don't know who or why." But then in what felt like a flash of insight he perceived the shadow of an answer, or thought he did. "It's about the Prince, isn't it? Some of his enemies, I guess, will stop at nothing."

If the commander had any opinions on the Prince, or on political matters, she was keeping them to herself. Poker-faced, she eyed Chen silently, as if hoping he would say more.

Chen didn't know if what little he had said so far had helped his cause or damaged it.

He looked around the little room. Encouraged by something in the way she looked at him, he asked: "Ma'am, please, don't I get out of here for anything?"

"We'll have to arrange some kind of exercise period, since you may be in here for many days . . . and there are certain safety procedures in which training is mandatory for all Templar people on the Radiant. We'll have to arrange for you to have that as well. Otherwise, sorry, I think not. For now."

There was a robotic-sounding radio voice outside the room. It sounded as if it might be coming from the commander's vehicle, out of Chen's range of vision, and she turned away, Cadet Khazar throwing another salute unnoticed after her.

A moment later Chen could hear the older woman's voice asking: "Another ship?" Then there was some kind of radio reply, too low for him to make out. A moment after that, his room's door shut and closed him in. He got a final look, almost of sympathy, from Cadet Khazar before he heard the less subtle finality of the lock.

Chapter 6

Before he climbed back into his flyer to return to the City, Prince Harivarman unpacked some of the exploration gear that he had loaded aboard the craft only minutes ago, and stowed it away in one of the empty rooms nearby. The chamber he chose for this purpose was one of the innocent rooms off the same corridor as the room in which he had just made his great discovery.

The Prince created this cache of tools and emergency equipment with no fully reasoned plan in mind, only a half-formed idea that once he returned to the City he might find himself in need of a good reason or excuse for coming back out here, and retrieval of the cached equipment would provide one. Exactly why he thought he might soon have to begin accounting for his movements he could not have said. And of course he could demonstrate to any observer of his return trip that he was coming back here, to this innocent room, not that one down the corridor . . . it was, he thought, like a positional move in chess, made out of an educated instinct, though no immediate tactical advantage could be discerned.

The job of creating his innocent cache was quickly done. Then, with his mind in a bleak turmoil, Prince Harivarman went to look once more into the room where he had discovered it.

There against the far wall the berserker crouched. Or at least the long, bent insect-legs of metal made it look like it was crouching. It had not moved—no, of course it had not moved. The uppermost bulge atop the metal shape, what would have been the thing's head if it had had a head, was tilted a little sideways, and from the center of this head the roundness of a lens faced Harivarman. It was as if the berserker were regarding its visitor quizzically.

Harivarman looked a moment longer, then closed the door on it again. Quickly returning to his flyer, he boarded it and immediately headed back toward the City.

He was an imaginative man, at least at certain moments, and he thought he could feel the stare of that dead lens even now, boring into his back.

He drove the flyer slowly, cruising under manual control, as if he were observing the walls of these passages closely on the way, reading more inscriptions and locating artifact-sites. But in fact the Prince's thoughts, for the second time in an hour, had been jolted into an entirely new frame of reference.

Without consciously planning it, he had started his trip back to the City along a different route than usual. He was heading not for the house where he and Lescar lived, but directly toward the Templar base, where he was going to report his discovery immediately.

It was an automatic reaction. Reporting a berserker machine of any kind was not only a requirement under any human law; it was, one knew without having to think about it, the only thing a decent citizen of the Galaxy could ever do—like reporting an unexploded bomb if one should ever happen to come upon one somewhere.

Still, he was proceeding slowly. Something told him that he had to think.

From what the Prince had seen of this particular berserker unit in his two hasty glimpses of it, it did not appear to have been badly smashed up in the old fighting. Doubtless it had come to the Radiant as part of an assault wave in the last berserker attack here hundreds of years ago. It must have been damaged in the fighting then, for it was certainly inert. Quite possibly at least a part of its brain had been destroyed. But equally obvious was the fact that much of the unit was still intact. Harivarman, calling up its

remembered (never to be forgotten!) image, decided now that it must be some type of small but advanced lander, probably capable of functioning as a small independent starship, designed as part of a team to make a sneak attack on the Fortress. . . .

Harivarman suddenly slowed his flyer. He turned out of the small ship channel he had been following, and down a branching passage. He had come too close to the City too quickly; he needed more time to think before he got there.

His thoughts were now focused on the shape of the berserker's lower hull. Looking at that shape in his mind's eye, he was increasingly sure that it must possess an interstellar drive. In such a comparatively small package the drive would have to be an elementary affair, not much different from that of a lifeboat carried on a large human vessel.

Small or not, for all Prince Harivarman knew, the berserker's interstellar drive might still be functional—and, if so, it might offer a means of escape.

With some finite amount of effort—impossible to say just yet how much work might be required—he and Lescar might be able to gain possession of a vehicle that could, in a pinch, get them away from the Fortress. If not all the way to a friendly planet, then at least to some shipping lane where they could broadcast a distress signal upon re-entering normal space, and have a good chance of being picked up by a friendly ship.

At best, such an escape would be neither safe nor easy. It would be very dangerous. Just to begin with, there was the astrogation system, or rather the probable lack of one, to be considered.

And at worst such an escape plan would turn out to be suicidal madness. And preparation for it would mean a lot of work, an intense effort. And to have even a minimal chance of success, Harivarman would have to involve Lescar in the project. And now there might no longer be enough time.

Now, if the Empress was truly dead, Prime Minister Roquelaure, or one of the Prince's other enemies, would soon be sending killers after him. The more Harivarman thought about it the more certain he was of that. His would-be executioners might appear in uniform or out, they might be armed with warrants or only weapons, but they were almost certainly already on their way. He doubted that he had very many days left.

If there was a plan now that offered him any chance at all of getting away from the Radiant, he could hardly afford to be particular about its details and risks.

It had been the Empress who sent him into exile, but it had been no part of her plan to have Prince Harivarman die. He still thought that, had she lived, there was an excellent chance that sooner or later she would have called him back. Harivarman's mere existence served as a check and balance to other factions in the great game that the Empress knew how to play so well, the perpetual contest of intrigue and politics. But there were other powerful players in the game, most notably the prime minister, whose goals and ambitions were immoderate. If certain of those players came into power now, or even, as they were sure to do, became more willing to use the power they already had, then Harivarman in exile, isolated, would be virtually helpless against them. He still represented a potentially great danger to them, as long as he remained alive.

With the news of the Empress's death, the Prince for the first time since his arrival at the Fortress had known an urgent craving for escape. He had at first suppressed the feeling subconsciously, he supposed, because there seemed no possibility of acting on it. But now, suddenly . . . there might be.

There just might.

The flyer cruised slowly on toward the City, with the lone man aboard it lost in thought.

Before he decided on anything so drastic as using the berserker hardware in an escape, he would have to gather all the news he could about the reported assassination of the Empress. He would have to make absolutely sure, to begin with, that it had really happened, that the story was more than some madly tangled rumor. The commander would know the truth of that, if anyone on the Radiant did. Or she might at least have more evidence to judge it by. Perhaps she would be willing to share her knowledge with Harivarman openly.

He also had to try to obtain the most recent information possible on the general political and military situation in the Eight Worlds, and on what the Templars were thinking now. In particular he must learn how likely Commander Blenheim would be to turn her eminent prisoner over to his enemies if they came now to the Fortress to present her with what they said were valid extradition documents. He suspected she would have a hard time refusing them.

Depending on how long it took to locate the Superior General and apprise him of the situation, it might be weeks or even months before any decision made by that official could be expected to arrive at the Radiant by courier . . . or the SG, Commander in Chief of all Templars, might want to come here in person before deciding. He might even want to convene a synod or consistory of senior Templar officers. That was a rare event, and Harivarman could not recall offhand its proper title.

Deep in thought, the Prince moved his fingers lightly on the flyer's controls, altering his first choice of destination with as little consciousness of deliberate planning as he had experienced in making it. Avoiding the Templar base by a wide margin, he instead entered the City from his usual direction. Once surrounded by the usual City traffic, he shifted his vehicle into its groundcar mode, and proceeded straight to his garage.

Lescar's vehicle was in ahead of him, already occupying its customary spot. From the garage the Prince walked directly into his connecting private quarters, consisting of about eight rooms. The apartment was not particularly luxurious, but he had never cared much for luxury, and had been satisfied that the place was large enough for some elaborate entertaining. As things had turned out, he had very seldom had any occasion for that.

Harivarman was half expecting to find a message waiting for him, telling him in more or less diplomatic terms to contact Commander Blenheim promptly. She might of course have reached him by radio at any time while he was in his flyer, and bluntly directed him to report to her immediately, thus demonstrating the firmness of her control. He wasn't quite sure yet whether she was the type who had to demonstrate authority, but he could hope not; at least they had got through their first couple of meetings without much of that.

But no message of any kind was waiting for him, on either screen or holostage. Evidently, and this did not surprise Harivarman either, the commander was simply not in that much of a hurry to question him or join him in speculation about the assassination. Doubtless she preferred to consult first with her advisers on her own staff, and certainly she would send a robotic message courier—or even a manned ship carrying some trusted lieutenant—off to the Superior General, at emergency priority, asking for instructions. Again Harivarman wondered if she even knew where the Superior General was; the current holder of the office had a reputation for keeping on the move.

Lescar was nowhere to be seen when the Prince walked through their apartments. But the servant returned almost at once, as if some special sense had alerted him to the Prince's arrival. Lescar's expression as he approached the house on foot showed that he must be bringing with him, as the Prince had hoped, at least a few more crumbs of news.

Not that Lescar entered their house babbling his news freely.

Their dwelling was of course well provided with subtle, hidden listening devices, carefully installed and monitored by their jailers. Or at least both men had always operated on the assumption that such was the case, even though they had never found one of the gadgets. There were moments when Harivarman seriously doubted that the Templars, not known in these modern times for their skill at intrigue, had even bothered to spy on him. But the Templars would be listening now if they ever listened; and now, for once, there was information to be exchanged that demanded privacy.

The Prince intercepted his hurrying servant at the door. "Come for a walk with me, Lescar. I feel restless."

Outside, Harivarman turned not into the convenient nearby park, site of most of his casual walks, but to a common City street nearby. It was a street on which people were generally scarce, winding as it did through a neighborhood only sparsely inhabited.

When the two men had achieved such a degree of security as seemed possible, the Prince told Lescar in a quick casual voice something about his find. He spoke only of a possibly intact interstellar drive unit suddenly discovered and available. He did not even hint at the unit's berserker provenance.

The graying man took the news calmly, as he took or tried to take everything that happened. His expression showed that he understood and accepted Harivarman's plan at once, without requiring details. He knew as well as his master did that there were certain commerce lanes in deep space, regions in which astrogation and drive conditions tended to be advantageous, that were favored by the vessels of regular interstellar trade. In one of those lanes, any kind of improvised lifeboat's signal would give a small craft at least a worthwhile chance of being picked up.

"We'll get right to work, then, Your Honor. Dardanian, is it, this unit?"

"I suppose it must be." The Prince considered that he had always been an accomplished liar. The secret, he had always thought, lay in believing what you said yourself, at the moment that you said it; it was the required answer, therefore the right one, and therefore it was true. He certainly wasn't going to have to convince Lescar; from the start of their exile he had always been in favor of working out some scheme of escape. Other possibilities had existed from the start: There were ships' crews constantly coming and going and there was the steady tourist traffic, all this human interchange affording a means by which confidential messages and perhaps even small amounts of material could be passed—they were going to have no time for that sort of thing now, of course. And there were friends of the Prince in high places on certain worlds, friends who could be counted on for help, once some contact with them was established. There were even one or two worlds out of the Eight on which the Prince, once he reached them, might hope for protection and even honor.

Always before when the possibility of escape had been discussed between them—usually at Lescar's insistence—Harivarman had weighed the chances and decided to wait, hoping for an official recall instead. This time the situation was different.

Lescar walked in silence for a little while, obviously thinking things over. But still he asked no questions.

He had grasped the technical point at once: one of their two special flyers could provide the tight hull and minimal life support needed for an emergency spacecraft. And Lescar would have grasped as well that at best there would be a lot of work to do . . . and that at best the risks would not be small.

Their path looped around through other City streets. Lescar still had his own latest news to communicate, and now began to speak in a low voice. His news concerned the most recent arrival at the docks, the day's second unexpected ship. In the exiles' experience, two such landings in one day formed an unprecedented event.

The second ship, too, had come from Salutai. Other than that Lescar had been able to find out little about it, though one rumor-monger had said it was a private yacht. There was certainly some effort by the Templars to maintain secrecy about it. Lescar wanted to go back to the dock area soon and try to learn more. But he had thought that the mere fact of this second ship should be reported to his master first.

The Prince whispered: "If they've come here to arrest me already . . . well, then they've come. Too late to do anything about it now."

As they approached their dwelling again, Harivarman felt an almost irresistible urge to run to the garage, jump back into his flyer and return to the place of his discovery, there to throw himself immediately into the work of trying to salvage the needed drive. But to go back to the outer regions now, at this hour, would have been a drastic departure from his daily routine, something he was reluctant to do on the day of the great and terrible news. And one day's work on the drive would in itself be meaningless.

This time a message was awaiting him when he returned to his house. At first sight of the indicator, Harivarman braced himself internally for disaster. But it was not Commander Blenheim's face or voice that greeted him when he called up the recording. The face was that of a younger woman, of fragile loveliness, her familiar voice asking the Prince to call her as soon as possible.

His hand moved over the communications panel. Soon the recording was replaced by a live image of the same lovely face, framed in a cloud of red hair that seemed to drift immune to gravity, though its owner dwelt here on the inner Fortress surface only a few kilometers away. Even in exile, could a young Prince and a great man (so Harivarman sometimes asked himself in interior mockery) ever have a consort who was not breathtakingly beautiful?

"Harry, have you heard the news?" She seemed to be trying to suppress elation, and he wondered why.

"About the Empress? I've heard it, Gabrielle."

"Can I see you? Tonight?" She was eager.

"Of course. Where? Your place?"

"Take me out somewhere, Harry, won't you? I feel like going out."

Why did she ask that now, of all times? But he agreed, thinking that he had never taken Gabrielle out very much in the past. She hadn't seemed to mind. There weren't that many places to go anyway, in the tiny City. Why was she eager now? Was she already subverted or tricked, setting him up for an assassin team? He was capable of pondering such a question about her coldly. But it was too soon for such treachery; it couldn't have been arranged just yet, he reassured himself. In a few days, possibly.

Coming out of the shower, getting ready to go out, he looked at himself in his true-image, corner-reflector mirror, trying to assess the image objectively. He thought it more than likely that he was going to add Anne Blenheim to his list.

Chapter 7

After he had showered and changed, Harivarman went to meet Gabrielle in the City. Their rendezvous tonight was on one of the least quiet of those generally quiet streets, at a place that they had visited in the past—where in the small City had they not visited, in the two years of their relationship?—a place of entertainment, still called the Contrat Rouge, as it had been in Sabel's day.

Tonight, looking with changed perspective at that establishment's street sign, a sign that he must have passed at least a hundred times during the past four years, Harivarman found himself really wondering for the first time what old Sabel had experienced, dealing with a hidden berserker.

Not, of course, that his situation and Sabel's were really all that much alike.

In Sabel's time this area of the City had been, as it was now, a glassed-in mall. It had been then, as it still was, the chief district for entertainment and amusement. The decor must have been changed innumerable times during the intervening centuries, and parts of the architecture had been altered too—Harivarman had seen old holographs and models—but the overall look, like the nature of the business, was pretty much the same.

The exterior of the Contrat Rouge was not impressive, being mainly the same mottled brown and gray stone walls that you saw on half the buildings of the City. Neither did there appear at first glance to be anything special about the interior, thinly populated this early in the evening. The place gained a distinction of a kind when you sat in one of the booths and began to play with the optical controls that altered the appearance of everything seen through the booth's walls, which were transparent or translucent in varying degrees depending on where the controls were set. And that was only the simplest of the visual effects that could be achieved.

Harivarman found Gabrielle waiting for him. She was fine-tuning the booth's optics absently, so that the images of other patrons and of the human staff came altered through the walls of the plastic enclosure. The computer system managing the optics identified human images and clothed or re-clothed them to order. Gabrielle, in a modern green dress as fragile-looking as a spiderweb, currently had everyone who passed the booth dressed in some kind of fancy historical costumes, from a time and place that Harivarman was unable to identify.

What surprised the Prince was that Gabrielle was not alone. Sitting with her was a vastly older but still marginally attractive woman, dressed in somewhat outdated elegance. Brown ringlets hung past the older woman's hollow cheeks and arresting eyes.

Gabrielle jumped up happily when she saw Harivarman appear in the opening of the plastic wall that made the single doorway of the booth. "Harry, guess who I've found for you at last!"

For the moment, his mind filled with other matters, the Prince had not the slightest idea what this girl was talking about. "Found for me?" he asked. And then it came to him who the other woman must be, just as Gabrielle pronounced her name.

"Greta Thamar, Harry." The young woman's tone almost reproached him for having forgotten. Even after two years, Gabrielle was still faintly awed to find herself the intimate companion of a real Prince.

Now Harivarman could remember. When he had first heard that Greta Thamar, Sabel's old companion, was still alive, he had in Gabrielle's presence expressed a wish that he might meet her sometime. At that point he hadn't known that Greta Thamar might still be on the Fortress, or might return to it. And Harivarman, in the press of other recent events, had temporarily forgotten his wish to meet her.

Now he bowed lightly, extending a hand in perfect correctness. "Prince Harivarman," he introduced himself.

The woman made only a token gesture toward rising. She was not in the least impressed, evidently, and she took her time about replying. The Prince recalled that she had once in her youth undergone memory extraction at the hands of the Guardians—it was all part of the well-known saga of the treacherous Sabel—and he supposed that some permanent mental damage might well have resulted. At last she reached across the table to take his hand, and gave him a close look and a knowing nod. It was as if she believed they shared a secret.

"The management here has hired Greta again," put in Gabrielle, filling an almost awkward little silence. "It's new management now, of course. I mean—"

"They think I can bring in some tourists." The old woman's voice was surprisingly deep. Now that Harivarman had the chance to study her, her face and figure looked much younger than her actual age of centuries. It was, he thought, as if entering into legend might have helped somehow to preserve her.

Harivarman looked up involuntarily to see the metal plaque that he knew was high on the wall near the front entrance of the Control Rouge, visible above surrounding booths. The fancy optics Gabrielle had evoked in their booth's walls did nothing to change those letters on the metal.

In the year 23 of the 456th
century of the Dardanian calendar
Greta Thamar, lover and victim
of Georgicus Sabel, danced here

"She's actually been living here in the City all this time, Harry. Or for most of it." Gabrielle sounded tremendously proud of her find.

"Fascinating," said Harivarman. He realized that his voice sounded a touch too dry. Well, Thamar's story was really a fascinating one, he supposed. Or it would be, for a man who had the time to think about it.

The figure of an ethereally lovely human waitress approaching the booth in historical costume turned into the prosaic inhuman shape of a robotic waiter as soon as it reached the opening through the walls. The three of them ordered drinks and food, the Prince putting them on his bill; fortunately the terms of exile had not condemned him to poverty.

Gabrielle, the Prince decided, seemed unreasonably cheerful about everything. And in good appetite, ordering a substantial dinner. Maybe she was putting on an effort to cheer him up.

Harivarman, mostly out of a habit of wanting to make polite conversation, said to Greta Thamar: "I wish,

then, that I might have met you sooner."

"I haven't been socializing much for a long time. But I'm going to be out now. I might even dance again." Traces of some handicap or oddity, perhaps the old woman's long-ago ME, were more in evidence, the Prince thought, the more she spoke.

"That's good," he commented. "That is, it'll be good if you really want to dance again."

"I used to live for dancing."

"I look forward to seeing a performance."

Gabrielle beamed at him for being nice to the old lady. And Greta physically did look as if she still might be able to dance, though Harivarman supposed it wouldn't be the kind of dancing that customers ordinarily came to a place like this to see.

Suddenly Gabrielle asked him: "Where are you going, Prince?"

"I—" He hadn't made any move suggesting that he was going to leave the booth, at least none that he was aware of. "Nowhere at the moment." Suddenly understanding came. She meant that he would soon be leaving the Fortress, under some terms that would bear discussion in public, and that he was going to have a choice as to where he went.

He realized that Gabrielle didn't understand the situation at all. Perhaps she thought, no, she must think, that the Empress's death meant he would be recalled to some form of power. No wonder she had been so eager to meet him here tonight.

Music came wafting into the booth from somewhere, and faint laughter from the next booth. He sat there looking closely at Gabrielle, who gazed back at him from within her cloud of red hair, still appearing unreasonably pleased. Gods of all space, but she was beautiful.

Greta Thamar asked him, unexpectedly: "What do you do, Prince? Where do you spend your time?"

"I'm an exile here, you see. Not a tourist."

"I know that." Her tone said he was a fool to think he had to explain that to her; it was a rather sharp tone for even a celebrity to use to a Prince. Age in some ways had more privileges than mere rank. Greta Thamar repeated: "But what do you do?"

"I spend a fair amount of time doing historical, archaeological research. Mostly out in the outer corridors."

The woman fell silent, nodding slightly, gazing into space, as if that answer had struck her as something that had to be considered seriously.

Gabrielle had been playing with the optics again, and the Prince did not recognize Colonel Phocion among the giant apes now moving in the aisles past the booth, until the man with drink in hand stopped in the open entrance.

The colonel, flushed and tending toward chubbiness, raised his glass in a light salute to Harivarman. "Cheers, Harry." He had been much less free with that informal name when he was still officially the

Prince's jailer. "How are you and the Iron Lady getting on? I hear you took her sightseeing the other day." Phocion accompanied the statement with a wink. He was graying, getting along in years and in fact nearly ready for retirement, though still nowhere near as aged as Greta Thamar.

"There was nothing very exciting about our outing, I'm afraid," said Harivarman.

"What you always say in the early stages, old boy, as I recall. Well, if true, too bad. Maybe I'll call on the lady m'self. No reason why you should have all the crop attending you." And Phocion made a bow, his version of gallantry, to the two ladies.

"Have a drink with us?" Gabrielle inviting him confirmed that she was really happy about something. "You won't be on the Fortress that much longer, I suppose," she commented.

"Nor perhaps . . ." Phocion gave the Prince a look with a mixture of sharp things in it, and drowned the rest of what he had been going to say in his glass. He was waiting to get a ship that would take him away, either to an early retirement that Harivarman knew he did not want, or some uncongenial assignment that would amount to a demotion. The SG had evidently not been pleased with Colonel Phocion's performance of late.

"Nor am I going to be here much longer," said the Prince as cheerfully as he could. "And there's not much perhaps about it. You're right." He raised his own glass, returning the salute, and drank.

The colonel looked at the ladies, apparently assessing them in his quietly arrogant way; he'd already met Gabrielle, naturally, and now he looked at Greta Thamar as if he knew her too. But he still spoke only to the Prince. Now he would do his best to be bracing. "I suppose there's an excellent chance that you'll be recalled now."

"To power? Hardly." Harivarman spread his big hands. "Arrested is infinitely more likely."

Phocion's return look said that he had realized that all along, but had wanted to hold out hope.

There was a faint sound from Gabrielle across the table. The Prince looked at her, and saw incipient shock. He'd been right; it appeared that until this moment she really hadn't understood. Maybe he should have tried to break it gently.

Then she rallied suddenly. "Harry, for a moment I thought that you were serious."

Around them the interior of the Contrat Rouge was slowly filling up. The passage of falsified figures, costumed, bestial, or mechanical, past the booth was becoming almost a steady parade. Now a little knot of tourists passed, their appearance altered again in mid-transit by some perhaps automatic readjustment of the optics. Then some military people going by the other way created a brief distraction.

One of the tourists could be heard stage-whispering to another on the subject of how one should address a real Prince.

Phocion saluted Harry sadly and moved on, from all indications going in pursuit of one of the tourist women.

Gabrielle glanced at the woman beside her, who appeared to be far off somewhere in her own thoughts. Then she leaned across the table. "Harry, what did you mean, really? Arrested?"

Harivarman reached absently to give the set of optic controls on his side of the booth a random shuffling. Now the people passing were suddenly all nude, and certainly the booth made handsomer nudists of them than nature. The optics computers were biased toward subtle flattery in one mode, in another toward total exaggeration, enough for comedy. That mode did not come into play so often.

The Prince said gently to Gabrielle: "I meant arrested. I take it you've heard about the Empress?"

"Of course. But I don't see what that has to do with—you."

"Being arrested these days is nothing," said Greta Thamar suddenly, and Harivarman looked at her; she was looking past him. "Not like it was in the old days," she said, and suddenly peered at him closely. "What do you really do, out there in the outer corridors? That's where Georgicus Sabel met the berserker."

Harivarman could feel his nerves draw taut. He told her: "I stockpile heavy weapons, oxygen, food supplies. So that when my friends land in a rescue expedition I'll be ready. I rather wish that they'd hurry up."

Greta was gazing past him. "I'm going to dance," she said.

He was about to say goodbye, and wish her luck on the resumption of her career, when he realized that Greta was not getting up, that her gaze was directed at the large holostage in the center of the room. The optics in the booth walls had been trained to let the holostage images come through unaltered.

And now, on the holostage, Greta Thamar's two-hundred-year-old image began to dance. It was an old holographic recording of a performance done live, perhaps on the very same stage, and here sat the woman herself, watching it with them.

She spoke, in a hushed voice, as if the recorded performance deserved reverence. Harivarman could not hear very clearly, but she was trying to tell them something about Sabel, and Harivarman could feel his scalp creep.

The image on the stage was that of a girl of eighteen, twenty at the most.

The first segment of the dance ended. Greta Thamar sitting in the booth appeared to come to herself, to realize that she had been rambling somewhat.

"The memory extraction still gets me sometimes. The Guardians could still use that then. Being arrested now is nothing." And now, moving somewhat stiffly, the old woman slid out of the booth and departed.

Harivarman grinned wryly, or tried to grin, at Gabrielle's worried face.

"Harry, tell me once and for all, what the Empress's assassination is going to mean."

"To me, a lot of trouble. Serious trouble. To you . . . well, I suppose that depends."

"On what?"

"On how closely you associate with me. No, it's too late to worry about that. On what my enemies think about you. On what mood they're in when they get here. On . . ."

Gabrielle was becoming intensely frightened, looking this way and that, as if those who bore his death warrant with them were here already. "Harry, if they do come after you . . ."

"Oh, they're coming. Naturally you want to know if they'll be interested in you as well. Quite natural." He felt less hurt by her attitude suddenly, and more sorry for her. "I wouldn't think so, Gabby, though of course I don't know for sure. But you're not political, everyone knows that. I shouldn't worry too much if I were you."

But it was hard to reassure Gabrielle. "I'm going, Harry."

"You haven't had your dessert." But then he relented. "Then leave. I'll stay. But I don't think it's going to matter, at this point, if you leave or not. Everyone knows that you and I have been—"

She was gone. He spun the optics control, watching her vary with the optics as she hurried away. The last spin dealt her nudity, in this case not doing justice to the original.

But now for some reason she was hurrying back . . . no, the optics had confused him, this wasn't Gabrielle at all.

Harivarman's heart gave a surprising leap.

He looked up, at close range, to see his wife standing beside the table at which he now sat alone.

Beatrix, darker, compact, in every way less spectacular than Gabrielle, said: "I waited till your girlfriend left."

"Thank you." He heard his own voice, sounding almost meek. "Will you sit down?"

She sat, pushing used dishes indifferently from in front of her. "Not the most enthusiastic welcome I have ever experienced." Beatrix was of course in her own way, in her own style, a lady of great beauty, fit consort for a Prince. As Princess she had lived here on the Radiant with Harivarman long enough to know his habits here and his haunts, and she had known where to find him this evening. She was, like him, an old experienced berserker-fighter, though few would have guessed the fact from looking at her demure loveliness now.

He said: "You were on the second ship, then, from Salutai. The one that just came in a few hours ago."

"I was. It's a private yacht. I'm not supposed to say who it belongs to, though that strikes me as silly. Anyone who really wanted to find out could. Suffice it to say that you still have friends, and not all of them are broke. Or afraid to admit they know you."

He put out a hand, to take hers on the table. "Thank you."

"Oh, don't mention it. Things were dull."

"That won't last long, I suspect." He studied her. "I suppose it's unnecessary to ask whether you know what you've got yourself into, by returning now."

"I've never divorced you, you know. Not formally. So I figure that I'm into it already."

"I guess you're right," Harivarman said after a while, and held on to his wife's hand.

Chapter 8

Next morning Harivarman awoke abruptly, with a sense of inward shock, as if from some dream already faded beyond recall. Yet he had the feeling that what had roused him from sleep was a clear call from the real world.

He awoke alone. He had insisted on Bea not moving back into his house. He owed her that much at least, he thought.

Fully awake, he lay for a few moments listening. The house was quiet and untenanted around him, Lescar nowhere in evidence. On rising, the Prince at once checked the communication stage and screen for incoming messages, but there were none. Evidently Commander Blenheim was still in no particular hurry to communicate with him.

Lescar, as usual an early riser, was already up and gone. The little man, who liked to avoid electronic messages whenever possible, had left a handwritten note indicating that he was off to seek further information from some of his sources near the docks.

And no message from Beatrix. Well, Harivarman had told her to keep her distance.

The Prince, moving unhurriedly, hiding his impatience from whatever spy devices might actually be functioning within his dwelling, prepared as if for another day of nothing more important than pursuing his hobby of archaeology. When he had breakfasted and dressed, moving methodically, still restraining his impatience, he boarded his flyer in a leisurely manner and headed out alone.

In a few minutes the Prince had left behind him the Fortress's thin inner layer of atmosphere and civilization. Now he began to watch, as carefully as he could, around him and on his instruments, for any sign that he was being followed or spied on. Still he saw nothing to indicate that the Templars were keeping him under observation. Maybe, he thought, the flyers had no spy devices hidden in them after all.

By the time Harivarman had reached his destination, the remote corridor of yesterday's labor and discovery, he had got himself into his spacesuit. He parked his flyer almost exactly where he had left it on the previous day, not many meters from the chamber containing his great find. Now abandoning his pose of patience, he approached the berserker's room, drew a deep breath, and opened the door again.

His suit light showed him everything in and about the chamber exactly as he remembered it from yesterday. The machine was inert, waiting for him in the position it must have been holding for the past two hundred years. Now the Prince could recall vaguely that the berserker had figured somehow in his dreams last night. He remembered again the inward shock, the sudden waking.

This time Harivarman approached the immobile death machine more closely, though still with slow ingrained caution. Now he could see the damage that must have knocked it out. Along one of the machine's flanks, on the side that had been hidden from him earlier, there ran a scar that could only have been inflicted by some powerful weapon. Maculations of molten metal, long ago hardened into slag, rimmed a head-sized hole that stabbed deep into the berserker's body. Small wonder that it was inert.

Straightening from his first inspection of the machine's wound, Harivarman dared to give the tilted headpiece a solid rap with the tool he had in hand. A film of dust, that must have been electrostatically

acquired over lifetimes, jumped up to drift in vacuum. Certainly the thing was currently incapable of attacking anyone. There might of course be some last booby-trap built into it somewhere, but that risk the Prince had already decided he must accept.

Then on with the job.

Within a few minutes the Prince was well on the way to setting up his temporary workshop. He already had some lights in place around the dead machine, and had brought in some more tools from the flyer, and had about made up his mind on the best way to begin. It would probably be best first to disconnect the drive unit somehow from the larger portion of the berserker's body, and then move either the drive or the rest of the berserker away into another chamber. If he did that, then the origin of the device he was working on might not be so glaringly obvious. And then, when he brought Lescar out to help him, he might possibly be able to convince Lescar that the hardware they were trying to use was really Dardanian. Lescar's loyalty to his Prince was unshakable, Harivarman had no doubt at all of that; but the Prince also understood that the graying man lived with a monumental fear and loathing of berserkers.

Once he had the necessary minimum of tools and equipment in place, the Prince got to work. It was easy enough to decide to separate the drive unit from the rest. But there was of course the berserker's combat armor to be dealt with. And even here in near-weightlessness the inertia of some of the massive parts was going to make them hard to handle. Of course Harivarman had in the flyer a power-lifter that he could use.

Fortunately, these days even amateur archaeologists were often equipped with high technology. The Prince had an elaborate toolkit already assembled in his flyer. Enough equipment, perhaps, to enable him to get by, at least through the early stages of the job. If he needed more equipment, he could probably invent some convincing story that would let him obtain it.

It was time, he thought, that was going to be his real problem. It seemed certain that he was not going to be allowed the days he needed.

Several hours after his arrival at the site, the Prince had his bubble-workshop inflated. Not in the chamber where he had found the berserker, but in the one adjoining, which fortunately for his plan was connected to the berserker's room by a closable door. Inside his large plastic bubble there hung, almost drifting in the weak gravity, the interstellar drive. Still in its inner casing, it was a massive pod two or three times greater in volume than a man's body, and considerably heavier. Harivarman had tied it to supports in three dimensions to keep it more or less positioned where he wanted it.

Another hour passed. Now that portion of the berserker's control system that seemed to directly concern the drive had been extracted and was already in the process of being spread out for dissection, like some rare and complex biological specimen, on a series of folding boards. The Prince was probing into the control system's electronic nerves with a series of tools, several of which were connected to his flyer's onboard computer. He had had to move the flyer a little closer to the site, wanting to run cables to the computer and not use a wireless link whose signals might conceivably be intercepted.

The Prince's first objective in this examination was to see whether the circuits commanding the interstellar drive unit remained functional at all. The preliminary indications were positive. He had studied berserkers intensely in the past, the better to fight them, and he now had a fair idea of what he was looking for.

And presently he raised his head, sighing. Yes, he could assume now that these control circuits were functional. But how he was going to get them to function under his control was something else again.

Harivarman pushed on with his examination. More time passed, unnoticed by the man who had grown totally absorbed in what he was doing.

But less and less was he thinking of his plan for escape. Eventually an hour had gone by in which the thought of arranging a means of escape from the Fortress had not entered the Prince's mind at all.

He was, instead, making a discovery. The revelation was proceeding only in small steps, but they were steps whose sum was truly breathtaking.

Almost from the start it had been apparent that some very peculiar control information seemed to have been left in the memory banks connected to the interstellar drive of this particular berserker. And Harivarman very soon got the impression, from a certain lack of organization in the way the data was stored, that it might have been left where it was inadvertently. It was chiefly the nature of that information that concerned him now.

Near the beginning of the fourth hour of his investigation, the Prince really paused for the first time. He had to pause. And he had to put down for a while the electronic probe, because his hand was cramped and shaking from gripping it so hard in his excitement. Closing his helmet, resealing the spacesuit that he had been wearing half open inside the shelter, he went out through the shelter's airlock and out of the antique room, its walls almost the same color as those of the Contrat Rouge. In the airless, almost lightless corridor outside the room he paused, clinging to the rough stone wall. In one direction the corridor ran straight for a few hundred meters before coming to an abrupt termination, where some ancient attack, probably by berserkers, had blasted an enormous crater into the outer surface of the Fortress. Looking in that direction, the same direction that was so faintly down, the Prince could see the stars.

Harivarman thought that the discovery he was making, or was on the verge of making, had no parallel in human history.

The original berserkers had been constructed by a race now known only as the Builders, as their last, all-out, desperate bid to win an ancient interstellar war, a war they were fighting against living opponents who were now remembered only as the Red Race. Little information was now available about that war, because it had been fought at about the same time that humanity on Earth was beginning to chip flint and perhaps make arrows. The berserkers' Builders had been arrogant and powerful without a doubt. But they had long since vanished from the stage of Galactic time and space, following the Red Race into oblivion, more than likely victims of their own hideous creations.

The metal war-machines that humans called berserkers were the ultimate enemy of everything that lived. The creators of those inanimate weapons were gone, but the weapons themselves raged on across the Galaxy, endlessly repairing and replicating themselves, improving their own design, and refining their killing capabilities in an eternal effort to accomplish their basic programmed task, the elimination of all life, wherever and whenever they could find it.

Throughout the centuries since Earth-descended humanity had found itself locked in a struggle against the berserkers for survival, human intelligence had postulated and continually sought one great key to victory. Theory held that at least at the beginning of the Builders' ill-starred creative effort, there must have existed some sort of control system by which the Builders could turn the berserkers on and off. A safety code, perhaps. Some means by which the metal monsters could have been handled and tested in reasonable safety by mortal if unearthly flesh and blood.

As far as Harivarman in his earlier studies had discovered, no trace of any such control system or code had ever been found, by Earth-descended humanity or any other living race. Possibly no such code or

system had ever existed. If the Earth-descended Dardanians were now a mystery to their cousins who had spread to other worlds, the unknown Builders, eighty or a hundredfold more distant in time, and not of Earth at all, were that much more difficult to understand.

But it seemed now to Prince Harivarman, with neither his own skepticism nor his computer yet able to fault the truth of his discovery, that the answer to the riddle of the berserker control systems might be within his grasp—one answer to it, anyway. The control sequence that appeared to be revealing itself to him might, he supposed, work for only a certain model of berserker, or perhaps it might work only on machines that had been built in one particular factory or base . . . Harivarman supposed that this piece of hardware before him could hardly be one of the original machines, still largely intact even if not functioning after fifty thousand years or so . . . but he really had no way to judge.

Of course the first question he had to face was whether the controlling code he thought he saw—a relatively simple sequence of radio-frequency signals—was really what it seemed to be. As far as he could tell with the equipment and knowledge he had available, it was. Thank all the gods of space and time, he was not faced with the opportunity for a full practical test.

But if the code was genuine, why should it have been left here? Left here still intact, fifty thousand years after its intended usefulness to the Builders had ended, exposed to the possibility that enemies might someday capture and examine it?

Harivarman couldn't guess why, except that the Builders were demonstrably capable of making gross mistakes. Even colossal blunders. And he knew from experience that even berserkers could sometimes simply malfunction.

As part of his intensive study of the enemy during his years of fighting berserkers, the Prince had taught himself the Builders' ancient language too, or almost as much of it as any living human being knew. That was not much; it included the little that had been picked up from rarely captured records of the Builders and what little more had been deduced from that. The audible form of the language was all clicks and whistles, beyond any Earth-descended throat and vocal apparatus. But the written symbols could be manipulated. And the electronic signals of this code he was now uncovering ought to be easy to reproduce.

Never before, to Harivarman's knowledge, had anything like this seeming control code been found by any human seeker. Had such a discovery ever taken place, it would have been of tremendous importance for all humanity, for all Galactic life, and the news of it must have been spread rapidly. Of course, the only reasonable place to look for such a control code would be in a berserker device that had been captured more or less intact. The Prince knew that the total number of captured intact berserkers in the whole war had been no more than ten or twelve, an amazingly small number considering that the human war against them had raged through thousands of battles, fought across millions of cubic parsecs of the Galaxy, and had dragged on over a span of many centuries. The machines as a rule destroyed themselves when they could fight no more. Or they destroyed at least their own inner secrets. And if the ten or twelve other berserkers known to have been captured had ever carried similar controlling information in their memory banks, they had erased it before they fell into human hands.

But it had not been erased from this one. . . .

* * *

Harivarman at length had to force himself to lay down his tools for the day. He had to avoid rousing suspicions of any kind by an unusually prolonged absence from the City. He packed some of his

equipment back into his flyer and commanded the machine to take him back into the City. And he was even more thoughtful on this return flight than he had been on the last one. But this time he immediately programmed the flyer to head for his own garage; all thought of announcing his discovery to the Templars had been abandoned for the time being. The realization that he had done this crossed his mind, and he told himself vaguely that he would make that announcement eventually, but in his own way, and in his own good time.

He had left his temporary workshop erected in the distant chamber, with the berserker drive and part of the control system inside it, open to discovery and inspection by anyone who might happen to come along. Doing so would save him time when he came back for the next work session, and time was all-important now. He would just have to risk discovery of his work site. If anyone should stumble on it or seek it out, there would be no doubt anyway as to what sort of work was going on, or who was doing it.

But no one, it appeared, was interested in his remote archaeological research. Harivarman spent the rest of the day unmolested, thinking and resting part of the time, and quietly obtaining a few more tools and materials.

* * *

Next morning Beatrix called him early.

"Harry. Am I going to see you? Or did I waste my time and effort completely in coming back here?"

"I . . . you'll see me, I promise you." He was known for not making promises lightly. "But not just yet. I appreciate your coming back."

"Do you? I wonder. I suppose I thought that perhaps at last you would."

He did his best to be brilliantly convincing. They talked a little longer. But what it came down to was that he put off seeing her, as tersely as he could—let her think that he was afraid of being spied on. He put off Lescar, too, by ordering him to remain in the City to gather information.

Harivarman was soon back at his lonely task.

By the end of his second long session of work on the berserker's drive-controlling circuits, the Prince considered that he had done all that was possible, under the conditions, to confirm his discovery. He had actually recorded a version of the basic control signal, and had loaded the recording into a handheld radio transmitter. His next experimental investigations, if he were ever able to conduct them, would necessarily be much more daring.

But it was time now to forsake science and get back to engineering, specifically to the driving necessity for escape. Periodically the Prince's memory, like some nagging robotic secretary, reminded him that any day now, any hour, another ship would arrive at the Fortress, a ship of his enemies, and he would almost certainly be arrested. A rational, conservative part of his mind was starting to argue that he should go to the Templars now, before that happened, go to them this hour, this minute, with what he had discovered.

The rational argument with which he tried to convince himself went like this: No human authority would allow the agent of such a discovery, an achievement of such great and glorious consequence for all life in the Galaxy, to be arrested for some crime committed in a place far from where he was, to be taken away and quietly murdered. But Harivarman had been involved in politics too long to allow mere rational

argument to determine his decisions. Maybe the widely beloved Empress had come to believe that she could never be murdered either.

And there was still another reason why Harivarman held stubbornly to his secret. In his mind faint nagging doubts about the truth of his discovery persisted. Those doubts in themselves might have been enough to hold him back from making an announcement. Instinct whispered to him that something was not right, something about what he thought he had discovered . . . maybe it was only because the revelation seemed too perfectly well-timed, coming as it had.

But there it was. The interstellar drive was real and right enough. Not only the control circuits but the whole drive unit was functional, or ought to be, as far as Harivarman's rough tests could tell.

If the Prince was not going to be able to depend on the great value of his discovery to save his life, then escape, using the berserker's drive, appeared to be as much of a necessity as ever. For his third work session on the berserker the Prince brought Lescar out to the job site with him. He told Lescar very little more than he had told him at the start, and showed him only the room in which the innocent-looking drive unit now reposed, and got him started working on it. Lescar's first assigned task was to dissect the control system of the drive further, in preparation for its installation in a different kind of vehicle.

As Harivarman had expected, Lescar's only open reaction to this assignment was to signify his understanding of it and immediately take up a probe and get to work. The servant's willingness to take on any task the Prince assigned him was understood by both.

But the Prince was frowning, even as his assistant took his tools energetically in hand. To Harivarman himself, the necessity of explaining some of the technical details of the escape project to a helper, putting the whole idea into plain words, had been enough to make it begin to seem impossible.

And the more fiercely Harivarman tried now to reconvince himself, the more unlikely the whole scheme of using the drive unit began to appear in his thoughts. It was an interstellar drive they were concerned with here, and not the motor of a groundcar. It was even a drive of a largely unfamiliar type.

For a few moments the Prince hovered on the brink of changing his mind suddenly, of telling Lescar to abandon the project and go back to the house and forget what he had seen. But the Prince did not do so. Instinct forbade that too. The trouble was, thought Harivarman, that they had no choice. The more time he had in which to consider the political situation, the more firmly he became convinced that now, with the Empress gone, his enemies were soon going to attempt to finish him off, one way or another.

A day of intensive effort passed, and then another, with the two men working busily—most of the time not really side by side, but just out of each other's sight. Lescar's job in its present stage could rarely benefit from two pairs of hands, and the Prince was still keeping his own work secret even from Lescar. Harivarman labored in the adjoining room, now tracing the paths of control signals through the body and the main brain of the berserker, seeking additional memory banks, looking for more confirmation of his find. The indications that he found were intriguing, but still somewhat ambiguous. A large part of the thing's brain was evidently inaccessible, inside an inner seal of armor impervious to any of the tools he had on hand. In there, if anywhere, he thought, would also be a destructor device, a booby-trap.

The Prince had contrived to keep the berserker covered most of the time with a sheet of opaque plastic, material he sometimes used as a background or light-reflector when making photographs. Lescar, on the couple of occasions when he happened to glance into the room where the Prince was working, saw nothing that startled him particularly. Harivarman had implied that he was trying to get the astrogation system of a Dardanian lifeboat working.

Throughout these days of hard work the Prince actually grew increasingly skeptical regarding his world-shaking discovery. Or perhaps he was not so much skeptical of the discovery itself as of its immediate value to him. To announce a revelation of such magnitude now—especially if it were quickly challenged, as any such claim would be—would lay him open to charges of making up wild lies in an effort to save himself. And there was no way his claim could be quickly proven.

But, if he had not discovered what he thought he had—then what had he found?

He badly needed to talk to someone, and he could not talk to anyone. Not yet. Not even to Lescar.

And doubt still whispered to him that something was not right. A kernel of unease still nagged at him. Perhaps it was only because he had to bear his knowledge all alone.

Harivarman found himself continually being struck by the fact that his discovered control code, if such it truly was, appeared to be so easy to use. There was even a fairly wide choice of frequency and modulation of the signal. The signal itself, suitably compressed, could be transmitted in a fraction of a second, complex though the code-sequence was and virtually impossible to arrive at by accident or through trial and error.

Of course, ease of use, if you thought about it, was really logical enough. If you had a control code for berserkers at all, you'd certainly want it to be easily and quickly usable.

All very logical, but yet something about it nagged.

By the second day after Lescar had been added to the work force, something like a routine had been established, and the two men put in several hours of effort without anything out of the way happening. By this time Harivarman was ready for a break, and he had left his own job for the moment, as he did periodically, to confer with Lescar. The Prince was standing, almost drifting, in the room where his assistant labored, though he had not joined Lescar inside the inflated shelter. With the transparent wall of the shelter between them, the two men were discussing, in the private code of gestures they had worked out, the length of time a flyer might have to be immobilized to fit it for escape.

Suddenly through the stone around them there came a faint vibration, frightening because it was unexpected and at first inexplicable. Harivarman could feel it through the one hand with which he was gripping the wall, holding himself in position.

Simultaneously Harivarman observed an odd change, as of a moving shadow, in the light that shone through the imperfectly closed doorway from the next room. That shadow would move in his nightmares for the remainder of his life.

In the next moment, before Harivarman could speak or move, the connecting door between the rooms burst fully open. That intrusion was accompanied in vacuum-silence by some destruction of the adjacent wall, as a large object that was too wide for the doorway came through it anyway on six long mechanical legs, stone bursting and erupting around it. The berserker's half-gutted belly still hung open, a cable or two trailing from the site of Harivarman's surgery. The legs were all unfolded now and at least four of them working, performing at least well enough to propel the huge berserker at the speed of a walking man.

If Lescar cried out, the sound was not broadcast on radio and Harivarman did not hear it. Harivarman did not spare a moment to look at his helper, but instead took one look at what was coming through the

doorway and sprang for the doorway leading out to the corridor. It was an instinctive effort to reach . . . no, not the flyer. Nothing in the flyer would be useful to him now. It was a prisoners' vehicle, weaponless.

Even as the Prince sprang to escape, he saw from the corner of his eye how the thing turned after him; it might still be powerful enough to brush stone walls aside, but this first real sight of it in unimpeded motion suggested that it was crippled, and terribly slow for a berserker. Now Lescar in his shelter might be given time to get his helmet on, before the plastic was ripped away from around him.

The Prince scrambled through the door and leaped from its outer sill. He flew across the corridor, caromed off the far wall, and in another practiced low-g dive spun back again directly for the doorway of the berserker's original room. He had left his recording of the supposed control signal in there.

Meanwhile the berserker, perhaps only belatedly recognizing the presence of another life-unit, had turned back after Lescar. Reaching out one of its limbs it tore the shelter down, the ruptured plastic exploding in a puff of briefly visible atmospheric fog. Harivarman, reentering the room at top speed, holding what he hoped was a control device in hand, was just in time to catch the faint wavefront of that puffy blast, and to see that Lescar had indeed managed to somehow close up his helmet.

In both hands the Prince raised like a gun the small recorder-transmitter that held what he had deduced was the control code. He transmitted the signal.

The machine, just on the point of seizing Lescar, halted. It had actually caught him by one arm before the signal reached it, but the movement of the berserker's arm that would have crushed the man if it had been followed through was instead aborted. The slowed effort of the metal arm only launched Lescar gently into a harmless hurtling flight, a flight that ended when his master caught him in midspace as he went by.

That last aborted movement of the berserker had left its own body spinning gently. It brought itself to a neat and almost gentle halt, a giant spider hanging against the big room's opposite wall. It clung there, obviously still in control of itself, no doubt still alert, but making no further demonstration of hostility.

The Prince clutched his servant in his powerful arms, damping the desperate struggles that the smaller man was making in his blind panic. Eventually, talking on radio, wrestling, soothing, Harivarman got Lescar under control, held back from crazy flight.

According to Harivarman's elementary understanding of how the code should work, the berserker might now be susceptible to spoken orders transmitted on the same frequency as the first disabling code had been.

Lescar had frozen in terror and shock. Still gripping him cautiously with one hand, the Prince managed to turn on his own helmet microphone to that frequency. Then, pointing with his free arm at the machine, Harivarman said: "Remain there. Do not move until I order you to move." It scarcely occurred to him as a possibility that the machine might not be able to understand his speech. His language was, he knew, not greatly changed from one of the human tongues that had been in common use on a number of worlds in the days of Dardanian greatness; berserkers, like humans, made an effort to learn the languages of the enemy.

The machine remained.

The Prince still held on to Lescar, who was still in pitiable shape though not seriously injured physically. The man was cowering, and his face seen through the helmet glass looked stunned; Harivarman could feel the tremors in the other's body even through their two suits and his own gloves. "You're safe now,

Lescar. It's not going to move."

Harivarman was not yet trembling himself. He thought that he might, later, when he could afford the luxury. Now, dragging his servant with him, not taking his eyes from the inert berserker, Harivarman backed from the room out into the corridor. Lescar did not resist, or try to help.

His master had him inside the flyer, both their helmets off in breathable air, before the servant spoke. "Your Honor, I will go and get weapons. Somehow. Then we must destroy it."

"Later, my old friend. Later. For now, this moment, do nothing. Just wait here and rest. Will you promise me?"

It took the Prince a few more minutes of talking, persuading, calming, before he was sure that Lescar was going to follow orders strictly.

Then Harivarman resealed his own helmet, and went back to face the thing that he had found, and the thing that he had done.

Chapter 9

In the process of soothing and coaxing Lescar out of his near-catatonic state the Prince had gained time himself to recover from the ghastly initial shock. He saw Lescar settled safely into the flyer. Then, feeling himself more intensely alive than he had felt for years, he returned to the room where he had left the berserker, to again confront the deadly thing that he had evidently been able to bring under his control.

Looking through the doorway from the corridor, he saw that the machine was exactly where he had left it a few minutes earlier, clinging like a spider against the opposite wall of the big room.

The Prince stood in the doorway. He keyed in his suit radio's transmitter on absolute minimum power, carefully choosing the same frequency at which he had sent the immobilizing code. It was not a frequency in common use within the Fortress, and with the low power he was using it was unlikely that Lescar in the flyer, or any other living listener, was going to pick up this transmission.

Speaking softly, again raising one arm to point at the machine, he demanded of it: "Do you understand me?"

The answer in his helmet was low, but clearly, slowly spoken. "I do." The tones of that voice were strange, fragmented and uneven. The Prince had heard the like often enough in his years of warfare. That voice had been put together as the berserkers in the old days had fashioned human voices for themselves, electronically melding words and syllables together from the recorded speech, the preserved emotions, of some of their multitudes of human prisoners.

Harivarman felt a faint shudder go through him. It was as if something in the space around him had sucked heat out of his suit. He said: "Use the minimum effective power in your transmissions, please." Then, marveling at that last word he had just used, he added: "That is an order."

"Order acknowledged," the berserker answered. Then it paused for two seconds before it asked him bluntly: "Are you goodlife?"

Somehow that shook the Prince, and turned his fear to anger. He felt a wild impulse to deny the accusation, to clear up any misunderstanding that the berserker might have on that point. But he was only talking to a machine.

Before he could speak to the damned thing at all he had to clear his throat. It had been a long time, he thought, a decade or two at least, since he, Prince Harivarman, had been so affected by nervousness.

When his throat was clear he demanded of the berserker: "Are you ready to receive further orders now?"

"I am standing by for orders." It was not going to press him, then, to respond to the question about his goodlife status. Harivarman felt relieved, and at the same time somehow guilty for the feeling.

He said: "I order that from now on you do nothing harmful to me or any other human." His throat felt dry again, and again he had to pause before he added: "Unless or until I specifically order otherwise."

"Order acknowledged." The broken-sounding syllables came out eerily, possibly the words of human prisoners that it had killed a thousand years ago. Its voice-tones chimed and changed, as if in mockery.

"And it will be obeyed? You will obey that order?"

"That was my meaning. I will obey. I must. I am constrained to do so."

Harivarman relaxed slightly, clinging with both gauntleted hands to the stone frame of his doorway. Now his suit was too hot, and he could feel himself sweating inside it.

So, what was he going to do now? He felt exhausted. And Lescar needed to be taken back to the house, to have a chance to pull himself together. And it was necessary to find out what was happening in the City, to know if those who would be coming to arrange his death had yet arrived. . . .

And now, the berserker. It appeared that Harivarman was simply going to have to go away and leave it here, as it was, still essentially functional.

"I order you," he said, "to remain in this room until I return. I order you also to transmit no signals of any kind till I come back."

"Orders acknowledged."

"And harm no one. No unit of human life."

"Order acknowledged."

"Good," he said, and closed the door on the damned thing, and wished that there were gravity enough for him to lean and sag against the door.

Anyway, he reassured himself, the chance of anyone else stumbling on it out here was astronomically remote. If no one had found it here in two hundred years . . . He reminded himself to emphasize that point to Lescar.

Still, Harivarman found himself almost unable to simply leave. He was tempted to weld shut both doors of the room. Only the vivid memory of the death machine breaking its way through the stone-walled

doorway between rooms kept him from wasting time on that.

Leaving the doors of both rooms closed, all traces of his investigation, as far as possible, removed from the corridor, Harivarman rejoined his servant in the flyer. When he climbed into the vehicle's cabin, Lescar looked at him in silence. On the little man's face was a haunted expression the Prince had never seen there before.

The Prince sighed to himself. Managing Lescar in the immediate future was not going to be easy. Still, at the moment, Harivarman felt oddly confident and happy. It was his usual response when there was a real and immediate challenge to be faced.

He raised a hand to the control panel, to start the flyer, then let his hand fall without touching the controls. "Well, Lescar? Speak, tell me all of your objections."

Lescar only shook his head, a slow, slight movement.

The Prince, making his voice urgent, full of soft energy, said: "You see, don't you, what a monumental discovery I have made? I found a way to stop the thing in its tracks—to make it obey my orders."

Lescar's lips moved; the words were so low that Harivarman could not make them out. His eyes still stared at the Prince hopelessly.

Harivarman, gripping him by the arm, giving him a little shake, persisted. "Do you see what this could mean?"

The servant's eyes turned away, and he was silent. And now Harivarman was distracted from his task of management. There was a faint new illumination growing in the corridor around their flyer. It signaled the imminent arrival of another flyer, or at least a vehicle of some kind.

The two men looked at each other. Lescar with a slight head motion indicated mutely: I'll be all right. Harivarman left him at once, closed his helmet and cycled himself out through the flyer's small airlock. In a long, gently curving dive he projected himself to where the approaching Templar staff car had just drifted to a stop. He wanted to meet its occupants, whoever they were, before they got out and started nosing around, noticing nearby doors and rooms and other things. Only one vehicle had arrived. If they were coming to arrest me, thought Harivarman hurriedly, there'd be more of them . . . but he wasn't really sure of that. He supposed it might depend on whether the new arrest warrant from Salutai or the Council message addressed him as Prince or only General. All a matter of status.

Commander Blenheim, wearing a spacesuit marked with the insignia of her authority, her helmet open, was seated in the rear of the newly arrived staff car. He could see her watching his approach. When Harivarman appeared just outside her window, she motioned for him to use the airlock and join her. Already sitting beside her in the back seat was a young man, unknown to Harivarman, and also wearing a spacesuit, though without insignia of rank. Like the commander he was wearing his helmet open. Up front in the driver's position, separated from the rear by a glass panel, sat a driver-bodyguard with sergeant's stripes on the shoulders of his suit, looking dutifully straight ahead.

The Prince cycled himself in through the airlock. This staff car was a somewhat larger vehicle than his own flyer, and notably more luxurious as well, with a touch of artificial gravity laid on in the interior. Down, as Harivarman entered, was suddenly toward the tiny cabin's deck.

"I've been rather curious about what you do out here," was Commander Anne Blenheim's greeting.

"I'll gladly include some of these sites in the next tour," the Prince replied almost absently, easing himself into a seat facing her. He realized that he must sound and look happier than the last time this woman had seen him, and he wondered what she, who probably had a good grasp of the political situation, might make of that.

From the seat beside hers, the spacesuited youth whose name he thought he could guess was gazing back at Prince Harivarman, favoring the eminent man with a muted stare. It appeared to be an attempt to disguise sheer awe. The Prince had been the subject of enough awed glances in his time to know. But it was impossible for him to tell whether the young man was wearing a uniform or civilian clothing inside his spacesuit. At least he was not a Templar officer, Harivarman was sure of that.

The Prince said: "Commander, if your companion here is who I think he is, well, I've looked forward to meeting him."

"Good," Commander Anne answered dryly. "That's why he's here now." She paused. "Also, I wanted rather urgently to have a talk with you, General Harivarman. To confront you with certain—facts. I wanted to make up my mind about certain things, as much as possible, before I am called on to make decisions."

"If you mean your approaching decision as to whether to hand me over, when someone who hates my guts comes to the Radiant and demands that you do so—yes, I think you're right to give that one a lot of thought."

Anne Blenheim's blue eyes, trying to conceal their own strain, studied him carefully. "What makes you so sure that someone is coming to arrest you?"

He only looked at her.

She looked away at last. "Yes . . . well, I may as well tell you, General. We've had radio contact within the past hour from another unscheduled ship; it'll be the third to arrive here in two days. It was reluctant to identify itself very precisely. But it's from Salutai, and it will of course be here in a matter of a few hours."

Harivarman was once more looking at the young man, who still gazed back at him with starry eyes.

The commander sighed. "General, this is Chen Shizuoka. From Salutai."

The two men touched hands in traditional greeting.

The youth said: "Prince . . . I feel honored to meet you." It was obviously a considerable understatement.

The Prince was unable to see either a mad assassin or a crafty schemer in this young enthusiast before him. But something odd was going on. Harivarman said coolly: "I hear that you arranged a demonstration in my favor."

"It was an honor to be able to do so, sir." Now Chen's face and voice grew quickly troubled. "But then . . . a few days later—only after I had been brought here to the Radiant—I found out that Her Imperial Majesty had been killed. Even while the demonstration was going on. As I say, I was already here before I found that out. But even before I left Salutai, someone had tried to kill me too. They fired at me in the street."

"Aha. I hadn't heard about that." Harivarman glanced at the commander, who evidently had.

She gently prodded young Chen. "But you said nothing about anyone having shot at you when you enlisted?" It sounded like she had been over this ground with the youth before, and doubtless more than once, but she was going to do it once more for Harivarman's benefit.

"No ma'am, I didn't. I wanted to get off world, to save my life. I thought then that it was Security shooting at me. Now I think it must have been someone connected with the Empress's real assassins." Chen, without further prompting, now related his whole version of the events on Salutai, beginning with the secret preparations he and his friends had carried out for their impressive demonstration. It sounded like about the hundredth time he'd told the story, so that by now it had a rehearsed tone.

Harivarman found himself inclined to believe it anyway. He said to the young man: "If all that's true, it seems to me that you have been used."

Chen nodded, miserably, reluctantly. "I still can't believe that my friends—the ones who helped me organize the demonstration—were mixed up in an assassination."

"Perhaps not all of them were." Harivarman looked into the blue eyes of Anne Blenheim, and there saw himself being weighed, even as he had just weighed Chen and his story. The Prince hoped she was as perceptive as he was himself.

Harivarman said to her: "The young man here may be as innocent in this matter as I am, you see. But I shall be very much surprised if accusations, indictments, are not soon brought in from Salutai against me."

She shook her head. "I suppose we may know more about that when this third ship arrives. But your guilt or innocence is not up to me to determine, General."

"Theoretically that is so. But in practice you may very well have to decide my future. You will be the highest Templar authority here on the Fortress when that ship gets here. If they're coming to get me, as I assume they are, you will have to decide whether to turn me over to them or not."

She regarded him silently.

He pressed her. "Isn't that what you meant just now when you spoke of having to make up your mind about certain things? And in bringing the young man out here to see me? Do you really think I've been spending my spare time in captivity trying to arrange an assassination of the Empress? When you can see what peril that puts me in?"

Commander Blenheim shook her head. "How am I supposed to know that? I've only been here a few days myself."

"You're going to have to know it."

She didn't like to be told, by her prisoner, what she had to do. "I repeat, that is not my decision, General. We'll talk of this again. Very soon, I suspect." She keyed a circuit, and spoke to her driver: "The general is getting out now. Then take us right back to the base."

Harivarman closed up his helmet that he had opened on entering the vehicle; and shortly he was drifting in the corridor's near-weightlessness again, watching the staff car depart. He had distracted the

commander neatly from taking much interest in what he was doing out here.

When Harivarman reboarded the other flyer, he found Lescar hunched in the same seat as before. The little man had apparently not moved at all, though his face now looked a little more normal. Impassively he heard his master's description of the encounter with their chief jailer, and with Chen.

At last Lescar commented: "A close call, Your Honor."

"Yes." The Prince was being determinedly calm and regal. Close calls didn't count. "Now, where were we? How far did you get with your job, before we were interrupted?"

Lescar dared to give his master a severe glance. "Forgive me, Your Honor, but we had reached a point where no humans should ever be."

"Lescar, Lescar, listen to me! Do you think I enjoy this, working secretly on a berserker? I thought that it was dead, when I brought you out here; obviously I was wrong about that. I'm sorry."

The apology made Lescar uncomfortable, as the Prince had expected it would; the little man fidgeted, and muttered something.

Harivarman went on. "I'm no real engineer or scientist, obviously. All I can tell you is that now I'm reasonably sure that the machine is under my control. It's following my commands. It's not attacking us. And I'm also sure that it offers us our only chance of saving our lives. That last judgment does fall within my field of competence, and on that point I'm very sure indeed."

Lescar moved at last. Not much. Only, as if he were cold, to huddle within his folded arms. "But . . . if it's as you say, Your Honor, and someone's already coming from Salutai to arrest us . . . well, isn't it too late now for us to start trying to put together a starship?"

"It may be too late. Or it may not. When Roquelaure's people get here I may be able to . . . well, to stall them for a time. For a few days. If I can get the commander to see the truth. I have a few ideas about that now. They can't take us away unless she turns us over to them. To get that drive installed in one of our two flyers is still our only chance, I think."

Lescar had made a good start toward recovery from his savage shock. Harivarman judged it safe to leave him alone now. But it was only against his servant's advice, and even pleading, that the Prince himself now returned once more to the berserker chamber, intending to resume his cautious dialogue with his chained beast.

At the last moment, Lescar, aghast, actually got out of the flyer too and followed him; whatever else might happen, he was unable to allow his Prince to face a berserker alone.

As the two of them drifted in their sealed suits along the airless corridor, the radio whisper of his servant's minimally powered voice came to Harivarman: "But why must you talk to it again, Your Honor? We have the drive extracted, we don't need the rest. For a chance to escape, of course it's worth the risk of continuing our work on the drive. But the other thing . . . why take the chance? What do we gain? At best we'll just get ourselves arrested. Sooner or later it'll be found out, what we're doing."

"Lescar, I spoke a moment ago of creating a delay, to give us time to modify our ship . . . I think I now see a possible way to manage that."

Lescar was stubbornly silent.

His master continued inflexibly along the corridor, with the other following, until they were just outside the deadly room. There Harivarman halted. "If I can control it, talk to it—"

"No sir! No!"

"—that should solve our control problems for the escape. And perhaps for other things as well . . . now I want you to go back to the flyer. I think I can manage this particular job better and more safely alone."

Lescar sighed. He was obviously far from convinced. But he had long ago made his decision as to whom to devote his life. He went as ordered.

Then the Prince alone went once more into the room where the berserker waited, to see what he might be able to learn from his new metal slave.

As before, the thing did not appear to have moved so much as a centimeter while he was gone. It was still against the wall where its last aborted action against Lescar had left it, clinging to the stone with its six long insect-legs outspread, each leg as long as a man's body.

But now the lenses on the thing's head turned, smoothly, to focus on Harivarman as he entered. That was all, but it was enough to bring a weakness to his knees.

Once more making sure that he was using the proper radio frequency, and at a minimum of power, the Prince demanded of it: "Are there any other machines—allied with you—still functional on the Fortress? You understand what I mean by the Fortress?"

The tinny, squeaky, disjointed whisper came back into his helmet: "I understand. The answer to your question is affirmative."

Harivarman paused. He had not really expected that. He had thought he was only eliminating a remote possibility. But now . . .

"How many such machines exist? Where are they?"

"Forty-seven such machines exist. All of them are gathered in a single chamber, approximately two hundred and fifty meters from this one."

"Forty-seven." He couldn't help whispering it aloud. Could berserkers lie? Of course they could. But presumably not while under the constraints of the controlling code.

Harivarman had to clear his throat again before he asked another question. "How do you know that they are there?"

"They were and still are under my command."

"But they are not—active." Otherwise, surely, they would have come out killing, a hundred years ago or more.

"No more than I have been active, or am now. They were all in a slave mode when I was damaged, and have been inert, as I have, ever since. They depend on me for activation."

Presently, moving as the machine instructed him, while it in obedience to his orders remained behind, Harivarman went out into the corridor again. On the regular communication channel he exchanged a few words with Lescar, reassuring his servant and reiterating his orders that Lescar wait for him in the flyer. Then the Prince went on, as the machine's radio whisper directed him. He traversed another nearby corridor, one that as far as he knew had also been unexplored for centuries. From this passage he broke his way into another room whose doors had been sealed by binding time. This chamber was even larger than the one where he had left the berserker controller, and even closer to the cratered outer surface of the Fortress.

This was certainly a room full of machinery. The Prince moved quickly and boldly to make a closer examination of the contents. Considering the risks he was already facing, it seemed a waste of time to try to take precautions now.

Here was evidence that the thing in the other room had told him the truth. Here were a whole fighting company of its inanimate brothers, slaved to it in sleep. Death machines were crammed in here cheek by jowl until they reminded the Prince of so many terrified human infantry, stupefied with the strain of waiting for the order to go on an assault. There were a variety of types: Here were awkward, inhuman-looking androids. And here were a few transporters, some of them strongly resembling the flyers that humans used to move about the Fortress. Others looked like little more than quasi-intelligent missiles. Here was a nuclear pile on caterpillar treads, ready to roll itself wherever it was told, then melt itself down on command; the Prince had encountered the type before. Other types of berserkers, even more rare, including some that Harivarman could not at once identify, filled out the roster.

It was a whole assault force, the equivalent perhaps in fighting power of a small human army, waiting to be awakened by the orders of some evil robotic general. The Prince counted twoscore of the sinister metal shapes before he stopped. Then he made himself go on.

He counted forty-seven in all, just as the controlling berserker had told him there would be. All of them were as inert, faintly filmed with dust, as the first had been when he had discovered it.

There was at least one important difference—as far as Harivarman could see, none of these machines were damaged in the least. They must have made their landing on the Radiant Fortress at the time of the great battles, and then have been gathered here in this room as a ready reserve. And then—or else humanity might not have won those battles—they had been immobilized by the fortuitous damage to their controller in the other chamber.

So they should be, they must be, as it had said, still under its control. It had never been able to unleash them because of its paralysis. And it could not do so now, because the Prince had ordered it to hurt no one.

Harivarman had seen the death machines at close range a few times before, in several shapes and sizes. But never before had he seen them in such perfectly preserved variety. Perhaps no human being until now had ever seen the like, and lived. A vast treasure trove of knowledge of the enemy waited for human researchers here.

That treasure would be used, eventually. He would see to it that it was used, and properly. He certainly would.

But first . . .

The Prince closed the doors on the assault force.

He made his way back to the flyer, hardly conscious of what he was doing.

Heading back to the City in the flyer with silent Lescar, the Prince laughed suddenly, and quoted something:

"I can call spirits from the vasty deep . . .

"Why, so can I, or so can any man . . . but will they come when you do call for them?"

"Should I have understood that, Your Honor?"

"Don't wish so, Lescar. Don't wish so."

Chapter 10

Young Chen was still riding with Commander Blenheim in the back seat of her staff car when it rolled to a stop at dockside. She had come directly from her chat with General Harivarman to witness the arrival of the latest unexpected ship from Salutai. This was the third such arrival in two days, and she was thinking to herself that it might have been years since this port had seen such a burst of unplanned activity.

Had she wanted to, she might have tuned in one of the car's remote viewers while being chauffeured to the docks, and got a look at the stranger while it was coming down the entrance channel, or even caught a glimpse of it telescopically imaged as it approached in space. But the commander's thoughts were still concentrated on Harivarman, and she waited for her first look at the arriving ship until it appeared directly before her eyes.

As soon as the hull of the vessel, approximately spherical and a hundred meters in diameter, rose into view through the forcegate she recognized it as an advanced type of battlecraft, bearing the insignia of the planetary defense forces of Salutai. As such, it would be under the direct command of that world's controversial prime minister, Roquelaure. Commander Blenheim for the most part studiously avoided taking an interest in politics, at least outside that which went on within the Templar organization itself. But Harivarman had once or twice mentioned the prime minister to her as one of his bitterest enemies.

The commander in passing remembered hearing someone say that Prime Minister Roquelaure, one of the Imperial officials who had been closest to the Empress, was now also one of the most likely candidates to replace her. And Roquelaure would almost certainly represent Salutai when the Council of Eight met, as they must meet in the near future, to decide who would now occupy the Imperial Throne.

She got her driver's attention, tapping on the staff car's window. "Sergeant, I'm getting out here. Call for an escort, and see to it that Recruit Shizuoka is taken back to his quarters and confined as before." The young man sitting in the rear with her looked at her silently, hopelessly. The commander said nothing to him; there did not appear to be anything to say.

Now Anne Blenheim got out of her car, for a better look at the warship. The insignia on the hull, a mythical beast rampant with upraised claws, gave the whole ship an arrogant look, she thought. The ship now emerged completely from the gate, and at that point ceased its rising. Most of the top half of the hull was now in view, the bottom half cradled invisibly in more fields and in massive pads that had come into

position smoothly as the traveler cut power on its engines. Now moving passively, under harbor power and control, the great hull was being eased slowly sideways through the broad channel that would guide it into dock. The commander's educated eye took the opportunity to study the warship's armament; the variations in hull shape that defined a battlecraft were unmistakable to the experienced eye. The exterior weapon projections were under hatches now, but there was no doubt that they were there.

As soon as the docking was completed, the visitor's main personnel hatch opened, and some military people in sharply designed uniforms began trotting out of it onto the dock. They continued to come out, pair after pair of them like mirror images, until the watching commander could count sixteen sharp military uniforms in all, in two rows leading from the hatch. They were actually bearing arms, the commander noticed with surprise and disapproval, as they took up their positions for what was evidently to be some kind of a guard-of-honor show.

The deployment of these troops had the incidental effect of providing a pretty effective occupation and coverage of dockside space, as if they were on the lookout for snipers, or ready to repel a boarding rush. Whether intentionally or not, these armed people—dragoons, she thought Roquelaure called the little army she had heard he was so proud of—were confronting the two or three Templar guards, who were always posted in positions overlooking the docks on what really amounted to no more than ceremonial duty. The dragoons stared up at their outnumbered cousins-in-arms belligerently, while the young Templars goggled back in sheer surprise, for which their commander could hardly blame them. The invaders'—well, that was the impression that they gave—uniforms looked sharper than the Templars', too.

Motioning her driver to follow with the car, the commander had begun walking briskly toward the visitor's main hatch even before it opened, and by now she had come down a flight of stairs and was on the same level as that hatch, ready to greet or confront whoever had sent out all these guards as they emerged.

And now in the ship's open hatchway appeared the man who had to be the object of this belligerent-looking guard of honor. Commander Anne recognized him as soon as he appeared, though she had never seen him before in person, and had certainly not been expecting to see him now; almost anyone in the Eight Worlds would know that gaunt, aging face on sight, trademarked as it was with long, curled mustaches. It belonged to Grand Marshall Beraton, a Niteroi native and a legendary hero to all the Eight Worlds. His career in anti-berserker warfare went back long before General Harivarman's in that ancient and apparently endless field of endeavor. The grand marshal, Anne Blenheim thought to herself, must now be at least a couple of hundred years old, and if anyone had recently asked her about him she would have said that he must have retired long ago. In passing, she wondered suddenly if the grand marshal might have been on the Fortress during or before the last berserker attack against it, and whether he might therefore be able to advise her on some points of historical restoration.

The grand marshal stalked out of his ship and stood looking rather fiercely about him, ignoring the two ranks of his guards. Then his stern expression altered as his gaze lighted on Commander Blenheim's approaching figure. It was a subtle change, in keeping with his dignity. So was his bearing as he advanced toward her now on his long legs. Of course her uniform and her insignia made her quickly recognizable by rank and status if not by her personal identity.

Coming in that ceremonial pace to meet her, the impressive old man halted four paces away, and granted Anne Blenheim the salute that was her due here as commanding officer; elsewhere, of course, his own rank would be far greater.

She returned his salute sharply.

"Press coverage?" Those were the grand marshall's first words of greeting. At least that was how Anne Blenheim understood them. They had been delivered in an aristocratic accent with which she was not overly familiar, and the question was asked in a low, almost conspiratorial tone, as the grand marshall looked alertly to right and left.

"I beg your pardon, Grand Marshall?"

Beraton's great age was even more obvious at this close range, but by all appearances age was still treating him very kindly. Bending near, smiling faintly as he towered over Anne Blenheim's own modest height, he said, this time not quite so softly: "Thought there might be press on hand. Not sure that it's a good idea at this stage. Just as well there's not." She got the impression that the grand marshall was enjoying himself, that he would have enjoyed some press on hand even more. The old man's expression was just suitably tinged with sadness, in keeping with the gravity of what she supposed must be his mission.

It was one of those occasions, Anne Blenheim decided, when it might be better not to push immediately to clarify the meaning of what someone had just said.

She had hardly begun her formal welcome, offering the hospitality of the base, before another officer, this one a much shorter and younger man, came marching out of the open hatch and approached them with short-legged, energetic strides. Behind him, well inside the ship, a man in civilian clothes appeared momentarily, and retreated out of sight before Anne Blenheim was able to get a good look at him.

"Captain Lergov," the short, energetic officer introduced himself, at the last moment breaking off what was almost a charge to toss her a quick salute.

"My second-in-command," Beraton amplified.

"Commander Anne Blenheim," she told them, looking from one to the other. "Welcome to you both, gentlemen, and to your crew." She was a little surprised, not at the coolness in her own voice—she thought the visitors' behavior so far had earned that—but that she did not regret that there was cause for coolness. "Is this a duty call?"

"Afraid so," said the grand marshall. Looking a trifle sadder and keener than ever, he fell silent at that point, as if the subject were too painful for him to continue. Lergov meanwhile muttered something about seeing to his people, and turned away to give his honor guard a quick looking-over; Anne Blenheim observed how the sixteen young women and men who composed it stiffened visibly, fearfully, under his inspection.

The seeing-to did not take long. Lergov turned back, able now to spare a few more moments, it appeared, for a mere Templar colonel. But no, he was ignoring her. "Grand Marshall?" he asked, in a tone of deferential prodding.

"Humf, yes." And from an attache case that had heretofore been tucked under one of his arms, looking like part of his elegant uniform, Beraton now produced a folded document of what looked like genuine heavy paper. This, with a gesture conveying understatement, he now presented to the base commander.

She examined the document. It was indeed real, heavy paper, as far as she could tell. Unfolding it she saw that it came in both electronic and statparchment forms—the electronic in the form of a small black tab attached to the paper—and it was from the Council themselves. Or at least, though this was not

explicitly noted, from a quorum of the Council's members. As many of them as possible must have been convened in an extraordinary session as soon as possible after the shock wave of the Empress's death struck through the Eight Worlds.

To Commander Blenheim at first inspection, the order seemed undoubtedly authentic, legal, and official. As such it would seem to require that the base commander of the Templar Fortress at the Radiant turn her famous prisoner over to these people at once.

So, he was right, was Anne Blenheim's first thought after reading the sense of the message, seeing in her mind's eye the general's impassioned face. She felt angry with Harivarman for being right. Then why has he been hiding out there in the empty regions, occupying himself with archaeology? Why wasn't he—doing something? Of course, he might have seen that there was nothing to be done.

"Can you please order him brought here at once?" the grand marshal was inquiring of her. It sounded rather as if he were asking some junior officer to have his car sent round. Evidently the old man, impetuous as any youth, was ready to turn in his tracks, undock his ship again, and depart in a matter of minutes.

The commander continued to study the printed order in her hands. She felt glad that she had already had some time, a few days, in which to anticipate this moment, and ponder the several choices that it might pose.

She said: "I'm afraid, sir, the business mentioned here can't possibly be concluded that quickly. This paragraph calls on me to hand over other people to you as well . . . offhand I don't know that I have a right to do anything like that."

"No right? No right?" The old man looked her up and down, in a way that gave the impression that he was revising his opinion of her downward. "I understood that I was speaking to the commanding Templar officer."

"And so you are, Grand Marshall. But civilians here are only very tenuously under my jurisdiction. At a minimum I'm going to have to talk to the judge advocate first on the subject of those people. As for General Harivarman himself, I've already sent courier relays out to inform the Superior General of my order—inform him of the assassination of the Empress, and the possible implications—and I hope to have some reply from the SG in a few days.

"Meanwhile, won't you come aboard? We may be a little short of completely finished quarters for a crew the size that yours must be"—she glanced at the two armed ranks, letting a touch of disapproval show—"but we can offer you all some hospitality."

Actually, prodded by Harivarman's warnings, she had several hours ago ordered such legal staff as she had available to get busy researching the situation. So far there had been no report. The commander suspected that no one was going to be eager to stick his or her neck out and advise her firmly as to what to do—no one of course but General Harivarman himself, and now these people who had come here to arrest him.

But the order looked damnably authentic. And, at least regarding the general himself, it looked convincing too.

It looks like I'm going to have to give him up to these people. And I don't want to do that. And Anne Blenheim's own silent words surprised her, for they suggested an uncomfortable and unwelcome personal

attachment.

For the moment, the commander was politely adamant with her visitors, assuring them that all the people named in the arrest order were on hand, but that she needed to hear from her superiors, or her advisers at least, before any of them could be simply handed over.

Beraton, his feelings perhaps wounded by his failure to overawe her instantly, seemed to withdraw uncommunicatively inside a protective shell, perhaps to heal them. Lergov became rather ominously silent. The grand marshal formally accepted hospitality for them all, but he informed the base commander that most of his ship's crew would probably remain aboard his ship. One implication was that their stay was going to be quite brief.

Five minutes after ordering the arrangements for hospitality, Commander Blenheim, the Council's formal document still in hand, was conferring in her office with her judge advocate. Major Nurnberg was a rather short, stout woman who took her usually dull job quite seriously.

The commander complained: "They want Shizuoka, too, and not only him. The way this thing is worded, it seems to be telling me that they can arrest anyone on the Radiant Fortress with whom Harivarman has become closely associated during his stay. If they discover someone who they think fits that category, they can just direct me to hand that person over. I frankly can't see myself giving them that, or anything like it. Not without some clear directive from the Superior General himself. Or some equivalent authority."

"You may have a point, ma'am." Major Nurnberg was evidently going to play it cautiously, for which her boss could hardly blame her. "Looks to me like they're just fishing to see how much they can get. This is our territory. As to the general, of course he's not a Templar. I don't see that you have any possible grounds to refuse them in his case. As for Recruit Chen Shizuoka . . . maybe we can wait for word from the SG."

"And the civilians they're demanding I hand over to them?"

"Well . . . I'd like to do some more research, ma'am, before I say yes or no definitely on that."

"Thank you, Major. I'll keep putting our visitors off for a few days, then."

"That seems like a good plan, ma'am."

Anne Blenheim could only hope that word from the SG came soon.

Chapter 11

Within a few minutes after Harivarman had concluded his talk with the base commander in her staff car, he had arrived back at his house with Lescar. And as soon as he entered the house he found that now, in a kind of apparent time-reversal, the long-awaited summons to a conference with the commander had finally arrived.

The communication waiting for the Prince in the memory of his holostage was couched in the form of a courteous invitation: If the general would visit Commander Blenheim's personal office at his earliest convenience . . . He didn't bother to check the time the message had been received to see if she had sent

it before she spoke to him. At least she hadn't called back to cancel it afterwards.

Approximately an hour after receiving the message, Prince Harivarman was standing in the commander's drab office—it was a temporary facility, for the wave of remodeling had evidently reached here too. The room was much more spartan than even a temporary base commander's office would have been in the ascendancy of Colonel Phocion. There were only two or three pieces of furniture, and the craggy face of the current Superior General of the Order glowering down from a holographic portrait on the wall. Harivarman had met the current SG several times, and there had been mutual respect.

As Harivarman entered, Anne Blenheim got up from behind what must also be her temporary desk, and came around it as if to meet him at close range. But there was hesitancy in her movement, and it stopped altogether before she had left the desk completely behind her.

Neither of them said anything until the door had been closed behind him, by the clerk who had shown him in.

With one hand still on her desk Anne Blenheim said: "They've come for you. As you predicted."

"And you've made your decision." He smiled; that she had hesitated just now made him confident as to what that decision was.

"And they want your man Lescar, too."

The Prince nodded. "Of course."

"And the recruit Chen Shizuoka—"

"My co-conspirator. Yes, of course."

"—and some other people too. All of them civilians."

"I see. And out of this list you are going to give them—?" Then, struck by a thought, he interrupted himself. "I suppose the list includes my wife as well?"

"It does now. They were somewhat surprised to find her here, but they put her on the list as soon as they learned she had come back to the Fortress."

Harivarman nodded. The yacht that Beatrix had come in was conspicuously visible, and naturally his enemies would have managed to find out who had been on it when it arrived.

Anne Blenheim drew a deep breath. "I hope to hear from the SG before I have to give them any final answer. It should really be his decision."

"But, as we know, it's quite likely that you are going to have to make it."

"Perhaps. Quite probably I will."

"Having made some difficult decisions of my own in my time, I sympathize." Harivarman paused again. "So, who else do they have down on their list? I suppose it's fairly elastic, so they can open it up again any time they want and stuff more people in."

They were both still standing in the middle of the room, facing each other. The commander said: "I'm afraid your friend Gabrielle Chou is on it too."

"Ah."

"And you're right, the Council order does contain a vague, blanket clause: Any other person intimately associated, and so forth, with the aforesaid General Harivarman can be arrested. I should have no trouble in finding legal precedent for refusing to go along with that one. Unless of course the SG should show up and give me a direct order to the contrary, which seems unlikely."

The Prince was silent for a little time. "The bastards are worse than I thought, really. More arrogant, I mean. But I suppose I should have expected nothing better of them."

Commander Blenheim said: "Of course I haven't agreed to anything as yet, except that they can see you. There's a Captain Lergov who insists that he must see immediately with his own eyes that you're really still here."

"Lergov." Harivarman could hear the change in his own voice. He raised both hands in an aborted gesture.

Anne Blenheim asked: "You know him?"

"I know of him. To know him that way's bad enough. If the two of us had ever met, I suppose one of us might not have survived the encounter."

"But he's not the one in command."

"I thought his rank was a bit low for that. Who's in charge, then?"

"Come along. You can see for yourself." The commander moved to open a door at one side of the room.

The Prince did not know who he expected to see. But a moment later he found himself surprised, almost as if some ancient news recording had come to life before his eyes. He was confronting Grand Marshall Beraton. Harivarman had met the old man once or twice before, briefly, on ceremonial occasions, and held him in contempt, for several reasons. The Prince had no reason to doubt that the feeling was reciprocated.

There was a long moment of silence as the two men faced each other. Their mutual contempt on the grounds of philosophy and politics was tempered by a certain grudging mutual respect. Each man would have agreed that the other had in the past done well fighting against berserkers.

It was the tall old man who spoke first. "I must say, Prince, I am greatly surprised and saddened to behold you here before me, under such circumstances."

Harivarman was in no mood to suffer fools gladly. "Grand Marshall, I must say that I am not really surprised to see you. Roquelaure has a well-known knack for choosing the proper tool."

A flush mounted in Beraton's aged cheeks. "I should have expected better from one of your rank," he murmured.

"You don't really think that I conspired to kill her—? But I suppose you have been made to believe just that, or you wouldn't be here. That's why the prime minister picked you, isn't it, after all?"

A short man who had been standing at one side of this room, by his uniform a junior officer in the armed forces of Salutai, approached them in an arrogant manner. "I am Captain Lergov." He gave Harivarman an impassive look, and a perfunctory salute.

"Ah. I have heard of you, Lergov." The Prince scarcely glanced at Lergov, but kept his gaze fixed on the grand marshal.

"Prince Harivarman." Evidently the old man had forgotten, or nobody had told him, or he had chosen to ignore, the rule about calling the exile General. "Prince Harivarman, you are under arrest, for high treason to the Imperial Throne, and for regicide."

Harivarman only looked at him coldly.

Commander Anne, standing at one side, said: "I have informed the general that I have not formally transferred him into your custody as yet. As base commander here I am still responsible for him."

Beraton protested to her: "I would say your authority over the prisoner has now become a mere formality. You don't contest the legality of the Council's order, surely?"

"I have not yet accepted it, Grand Marshall. For one thing, the order as written involves other people besides General Harivarman. You seem to intend to implement the provision for the arrest of his wife, his friends, and even some people who are only vaguely associated with him."

"The Imperial Council in emergency session has authority to issue such orders."

"That may be for all I know, Grand Marshall Beraton, or it may not. But here I have the authority, and the responsibility as well."

The tall old man stared at her frostily. "Yes, madam. Responsibility. Indeed you do."

Commander Anne continued: "And the arrest order you have presented me specifically includes Cadet Chen, who is on the Templar rolls."

Beraton repeated: "When the Imperial Throne is vacant, as now, the Council, in a case of high treason to the Throne, has supreme authority."

"Perhaps, sir. Though in the case of arresting a Templar, on Templar territory, I doubt it very much. But in any case I am still responsible to some degree for all of these people on your list, and I must be sure. Before making any formal response at all to the Council's document I want to clear the whole matter with my legal staff."

Captain Lergov, who had been hovering at a little distance to one side, demonstrated impatience. "How long is that going to take, ma'am?"

Anne Blenheim looked at him; her almost-plump face was capable of surprising hardness. "These are difficult questions. It may well take several days, Captain."

The grand marshal made a small well-bred noise in his throat. "A simple search for legal precedents?"

Come, now, Commander."

"Perhaps not simple, Grand Marshall. I'll let you know when I have reached a decision."

Harivarman said suddenly: "I presume that this meeting is being recorded."

"It is," Commander Blenheim assured him.

"Good. I want to put it formally on record that I protest the terms of this arrest order. If the base commander here turns me over to these people, I will be murdered by them, or my mental faculties will somehow be destroyed while I am in their custody, probably before I arrive at Salutai."

That was enough to set the grand marshall quivering faintly with rage. "And I would like the record to show my own formal protest, that the prisoner's remarks are a damned lie, and that this man, the prisoner, knows it."

The Prince said: "You had better check with Captain Lergov first."

Beraton glared at him but said nothing. Nor did Lergov, who only gazed back stolidly.

There was little more to be said. In a few moments, both grand marshall and captain were gone.

Harivarman stood gazing at the base commander. Some of her aides had reentered the room and were waiting, as if now they expected Harivarman to leave too.

The commander dismissed them with a look. "General, I would like to see you briefly back in my private office."

When the two of them were alone again, she sat behind her desk and touched a control. "We are no longer being recorded," she said, and hesitated briefly. "In your wife's case, and the others, I don't know yet what my final decision will have to be."

The Prince stared at her. His right arm that had started to rise in a confident gesture dropped back at his side. "Well. Like most final decisions, it will have to be whatever you make it. I assume you're not going to—"

"Let me finish, please. I'm afraid I may have misled you somehow. In your case, there's really no doubt, I'm afraid, what I must do."

"—what—?"

"I am saying that in the case of you personally, General, it appears to me more and more certain that I have no grounds for refusing the Council's order, or even delaying compliance."

Stunned, he stared at the uniformed woman. He could find no words to say to her. It was all too obvious that she was deadly serious.

"I am sorry, General, if you failed to understand that point clearly from the beginning. I thought—"

At last he found his tongue. "I see I must tell you again. Perhaps you're the one who has failed to understand. I am not speaking rhetorically, or fancifully, or for some political effect. Once they have me

on that ship, I'll be murdered."

"I have no evidence of that, General Harivarman."

So, she'd do it to him. She really would. There were a thousand words of protest, of outrage, to be said, but he could say nothing. Rage, of unexpected intensity, choked him. He wanted to hit her, smash her in the face.

She went on, with cold control: "As a favor, I am telling you now, privately, ahead of time, what I am shortly going to have to tell the grand marshal. I really have no choice. You must soon be transferred into his custody."

"His custody. As if the old fart were capable of . . ." Somehow Harivarman had mastered himself, at least enough to speak coherently. "I am very grateful for the favor, Commander. And your responsibility for my welfare, as your prisoner?"

"The Council's order is clear, and my responsibility is to obey it. You are to be returned to Salutai for trial on these charges of—"

"I see why you need no recording in here. You turn into a recording yourself. Yet once more I'll say it. Beraton would not willfully murder a prisoner, but he's too great a fool to have any real control over what happens on that ship. If you hand me over to Lergov, and his political crew, I'll never see Salutai alive. Or at least not with my brain intact. Does that mean nothing to you? I had thought, in my foolishness, that we had even come to mean something to each other on a more—"

"General Harivarman, I have been aware that from our first meeting you have been trying to—establish some such relationship. Foolish though it would have been, as you say. Fortunately none has been established."

There was a little silence. Her eyes challenged him to find a trace of weakness in them.

"I see," he said at last. His throat again was growing tighter and tighter, so that it was hard now to get even those two words out.

There was more tense silence. At last the commander began to repeat: "I have no evidence to indicate that—"

"I was right about them coming for me. I'm right also about their intentions. Once more I tell you if you put me on that ship with them, I'll never see Salutai alive. I can easily think of several ways by which they'll be able to destroy me en route and get away with it. Do you believe me?"

"Even if you were right—"

"I am."

"I'll recite my speech one more time, General." Now it was as if she were exasperated with some dull recruit. "I must act on facts, evidence, not political opinions. And even if you were right about their intentions, I have no evidence. Can you show me any?"

"The past record of these people stands as evidence. Fatuity in the case of the grand marshal, a fiendish propensity for evil in the case of Lergov, and of those who sent them both. Specifically Prime Minister

Roquelaure."

She hesitated marginally. "There are strong differences of opinion about the history and the politics of the Eight Worlds. Your own record is perhaps not spotless."

"And yours is."

"My record is irrelevant."

"I would have thought mine was too, now that I am helplessly in Templar custody and someone wants to murder me."

She said: "My orders, and the Compact of Exile, leave me no choice."

"You're just doing your duty."

"That is the truth."

"I hereby volunteer to enlist in the Templars."

"Are you speaking seriously? You can't be, you must know that that's absurd."

And even as she spoke, she was hoping in a way that he would keep on with this futile argument; if he had faced the inevitable with dignity it would have been much harder for her to go through with what she had to do, and it was hard enough to do so anyway.

But the general's arguments ceased abruptly. He let out a long sigh. A remoteness suddenly came into his manner. It seemed to Commander Blenheim, watching closely, that his anger had not dissipated, but had hardened.

At last he asked, in an altered voice: "Can you at least stretch your concept of duty enough to give me this much—a little time to myself? A couple of hours of freedom, before they take me away and kill me? There are a few farewells that I would like to say."

It seemed to her that he was posing, trying to arouse her pity, not really concerned about saying farewell to anyone. "You are lowering yourself in my estimation, General." Then she wished she had not said that. But she, too, was very angry now. As if in some effort to be fair, to make amends, she added: "Will two hours be sufficient?"

Harivarman sighed again. "Two hours should give me the chance to take care of everything," he answered softly.

Commander Blenheim started to turn away, then swung back, wondering. He hadn't seemed to her at all the suicidal type . . . although under present circumstances, if he believed what he was saying about being murdered . . . "You will report back here to me at the end of that time?"

Calm now, his rage certainly controlled, the general gazed back at her solemnly. "I'll be here, or at my house. You needn't worry."

"Then you can go. Two hours."

"You have my word."

Lergov was waiting in the outer office when Harivarman came out. She saw him give the Prince another impassive glance as the two men passed each other.

Harivarman glared back, at both of them, one after the other, and departed.

Anne Blenheim faced Lergov, and demanded: "Is there anything else I can do for you, Captain?"

"When you are ready, hand over the prisoners to us, ma'am. We don't necessarily need to have them all at once." Lergov sounded more courteous than he had before.

"I'll let you know, Captain."

"I'd like to remind the colonel, if I may, that General Harivarman is now under Council authority, and it would not be well received by the Council if you should allow anything to happen to him before—"

"I said, Captain, that I am still responsible for the general. I'm about to order guards posted at his quarters. As soon as the situation changes, I will let you know."

"Yes ma'am." This time Lergov's salute was closer to the proper military form.

Chapter 12

Very rarely, no more than two or three times in all the years of his association with the Prince, had Lescar seen his master as angry as he was now. The little man cringed away from this fury, even though he knew that it was not directed at himself, and hesitated even to speak to try to calm it. Prince Harivarman, coming back from the meeting with the base commander, went stalking through the exiles' house as if he sought some object for his wrath, and came as close to raving as Lescar had ever heard him come.

To Lescar's great relief, this unproductive phase of behavior lasted only for a minute or two. After that the Prince, regaining control of himself, went to his room and started to change clothes, donning utility garments as if he were going back to his secret work. Lescar understood, or thought he did. Some last attempt at concealment or destruction of the berserker must be made. Though whether such an attempt could succeed or not . . . At the same time the Prince, now giving the impression of being very much in control of himself and of the situation, began to issue orders. Lescar was to see to certain arrangements, and to make very sure that they were carried out. The chief task assigned him was to summon both Gabrielle and Beatrix to the house, telling the women whatever seemed likely to get them there.

"Here, to this house, Your Honor? Both of them here at the same time?"

"That's right. They must come here. Call them as soon as I leave. I probably won't be back yet when they arrive. But see that they stay here, no matter what happens, till I get back. And stay here yourself, unless you hear otherwise from me."

"Yes sir. I will do my best."

"I know you will." The Prince's tone softened slightly. He had now, moving with great speed, got himself

dressed and ready, for all the world appearing as if he were only going out for another afternoon of archaeology. At the door he turned back. "The bastards are out to get us, my friend; but they'll find it's not going to be that easy. We'll see them all in the ninth hell yet!"

"The lawyers on Salutai will help us, I'm sure. Your Honor. When we get there—"

The Prince came a step back into the house. "The lawyers on Salutai? We'd never reach there alive. Haven't you been listening to anything I've told you over the past few days?"

"Yes sir. I just thought that perhaps now—"

"Lescar. Did you think I'd let them argue me into that? Going to the slaughter peacefully, and bringing you along?" If there were secret listening devices in the house, the Prince had evidently given up trying to evade them.

"Whatever Your Honor wishes." Then, suddenly, Lescar thought he understood his master's new plan; the Prince was not about to destroy his discovered berserker, but to reveal it to the world, claim it boldly as a great discovery. "You said, Your Honor, that you had some plan for arranging a delay?"

The Prince looked at him in an odd way. "Yes, Lescar, that's it. I think I have. A good long delay. I'm going to see about it now."

"The commander is not—altogether convinced, then? I mean, still not convinced that our enemies are right?"

The Prince smiled; Lescar had seen that particular smile on his master's face before, and knew it probably boded ill for someone. But right now he was glad to see it. When the Prince fought he generally won, whereas his giving up meekly would have led them all into totally unknown territory. And a shade of worry had even crossed Lescar's mind that the Prince when brought to this kind of an extremity might even kill himself. Thank all the Powers that was not to be.

The Prince said: "I think perhaps Commander Blenheim can yet be made to see the justice of my cause."

"That will be excellent, sir. Excellent."

"I am glad to be able to offer you—a certain hope."

"And sir, of course . . ." Lescar let his eyes move sideways, in what might have been the direction of the last archaeological site.

"I am going to take care of that too. Right now. It all fits in. Don't worry." And the Prince seized his servant's hand and shook it. That also had happened only two or three times in the past, at moments of great crisis. The Prince went out. A moment later Lescar heard the faint sound of a flyer departing the garage.

Left alone, the little man hastened to put through the two calls as he had been ordered.

The first was to the former Princess—she had had to relinquish the title on separation—Beatrix, in her lodgings at one of the City's more luxurious tourist facilities. Beatrix, without asking questions, without appearing to be particularly surprised, agreed to come to Harivarman's house at once. Lescar said nothing to the Princess about who else he was supposed to summon.

Next Lescar called the City apartment of Gabrielle Chou, where the answering robot said that its mistress was not in, and insisted that there was absolutely no way that she could be reached at present.

"I repeat, this is an emergency."

"I am sorry, sir, but—"

"Then I must leave a message. Tell her," said Lescar, "that it is vitally important to—to her own future welfare, that she come to Prince Harivarman's lodgings as soon as she can."

He broke off, wondering and worrying. He had never really liked Miss Gabrielle. But he meant her no harm, and of course he had done his best. Her own future welfare. That was what his master had told him: provide whatever reason would get them there.

* * *

It took the Prince only minutes in his swift flyer to reach the room in which the berserker controller unit awaited him. There were moments on the way in which he imagined himself finding it gone; but it seemed that he had already had enough bad luck for one day. The thing was there, just as he had left it.

It took him only a few minutes more, standing in the doorway of that remote room, with his suit's lights shining on the metallic and deadly beauty across from him, to issue the machine his orders. He discovered that, as in his old days of military planning, when the moment came to issue orders the details lay ready in his mind. Some part of him must have known that he was going to do this, must have been at work on the details already, perhaps for days.

"Orders acknowledged," the controller said. The tones of its voice sounded like, and no doubt were, the exact same tones that it had used with those words before.

Trembling a little, the Prince got out of the way of his new slave as soon as it began to move again on its six legs. As far as he could tell from watching these first ordered movements, the great belly wound that his experimenting had inflicted on it did not inconvenience it at all, no more than the old wound whose trauma had now evidently been somehow bypassed. He retreated farther as it came past him, through the doorway into the corridor. This doorway was wide enough for it to get through without knocking more bits out of the walls. He drifted near it as it hovered in the corridor, and he tried without success to pick up its radio signals as it called in its extra bodies from the deep.

But the signals certainly were sent. Only seconds had passed before the Prince saw the forty-seven fighting units come swarming in wraith-like silence around the corner of the nearby corridor intersection. Almost instantly they had roused themselves from the inanimacy of centuries. They were coming toward Harivarman now, and toward the controller that had summoned them.

In the weak gravity the android types among them moved almost like suited expert humans, shoving themselves in graceful trajectories from corridor wall to corridor wall. The miniature flyers hovered on the invisible forces of their drives. The self-propelled guns, the crushers and the gammalasers escorted one another in loose formations calculated to allow for mutual support.

Still the Prince, using his comparatively simple suit radio, could manage to detect nothing of the complex communications traffic that must be passing between them and the controller.

He was reassured when all but one of the silent assembly shambled to a harmless halt some meters away from him. That one, a tall, three-legged thing, came to drift harmlessly close beside him, in evident obedience to one section of his detailed orders. There was a certain voice recording that he wanted to make now, a recording that this particular machine would be assigned to carry on a certain mission.

It was all working, or it was going to work. A great feeling of triumph arose in Harivarman. His nagging feeling of something not quite right, something faulty in his perception of events, had been almost swept away.

Almost, but not entirely.

After the recording had been completed to his satisfaction, he placed himself directly in front of the controller once more. The vague feeling nagged him still. He supposed it was unnecessary guilt. "My orders are understood? And they will be obeyed, in every particular?"

"Orders understood. And will be obeyed." It had already told him so, but it would patiently tell him again and again, however often it was ordered. Impatience was no part of its programming. He was truly in control, as far as he could tell. Again the man felt reassured.

Harivarman reentered his flyer, and gave the final signal. This command too was promptly relayed and obeyed. He let the wave of his assault troops get under way ahead of him. First he followed the limping controller in its progress toward the City, while the other machines swept on ahead and were soon out of sight. Just to keep up with the controller he had to drive the flyer faster than he had expected. He had almost forgotten how swiftly and effectively berserkers of any type could move, what good machines, considered purely as machines, they were.

Suddenly the Prince found himself talking aloud. "Now if only the Templars don't fight . . ." Of course there never had been any Templars who would not fight. But perhaps this time, if everything went as he had planned, this time they might see, they might be convinced, that they had no chance.

Impatient, exultant, and fearful all at the same time, Harivarman accelerated his flyer's progress, passing the controller, leaving it behind. The thought crossed his mind that he should perhaps have made more recordings, and sent one or two machines ahead, warning the Templars to surrender. But he could remember that a day ago, two days ago perhaps, he had already considered that plan and rejected it. To have warned the Templars would only have made combat and killing certain.

The Prince set his radio to scanning the communications bands again, this time trying to pick up the first human reactions broadcast from the City ahead. So far there were none, none that he could receive here anyway. Damn the Fortress and its ancient peculiarities. . . .

So far he had passed no traffic coming out of the City. That was not necessarily significant. Traffic here in these remote ways was never heavy, and frequently it was nonexistent.

At last Harivarman's flyer emerged through a forcefield gate at the end of the ship passage, and came up into atmosphere. These inner gates had no real automated defenses, and he thought that the berserker machines had probably been able to come through them without fuss or difficulty.

Above him now there shone the familiar fiery sun-point of the Radiant, centered within the great interior curve of distant surface that here answered for a sky.

The first change from normality that Harivarman noticed was smoke, over on the other side of the

Fortress's vast central space. Smoke mottled the comparatively thin, concave layer of the atmosphere there, spreading grayly across the distant curve of surface. And mixed in with the film of smoke, pocking it and disappearing, there were detonating flashes, silent at this distance.

Harivarman swore, wearily. It had perhaps been inevitable that not all the Templars could be caught completely off guard; nor even, perhaps, had all of the dragoons been taken unawares.

The second change was much closer. He passed a wrecked flyer, a fairly sizable machine, that lay against one of the roadway's sloping edges, crushed and flattened there as if a human being had hurled a berry or a nut against a wall. There were no outward signs of the flyer's occupants, living or dead. He did not stop to look for them.

The Prince drove his flyer on quickly, past the silent wreck to which, he noted, no emergency vehicles had yet responded. He kept his vehicle under manual control, to be able to react intelligently to any sudden emergency, relying on his reflexes to slide it safely through tight corners. He had to get over to the other side of the inner surface, where the fighting seemed to be.

Only now did the Prince come in full view of the City, which occupied only a relatively small part of the rounded and self-mapping world that was the inner habitable surface of the Fortress. Now there was suddenly plenty of radio traffic for Harivarman to listen to, and now he beheld ahead of him a nightmare scene. More smoke, more detonations—he could hear the sounds now, delayed by distance—the sky-tracks of berserkers and their projectiles twisting and dodging through the light counter-fire that was still going up from a site near the Templar base.

Harivarman accelerated again, turning down a new street. He had always seen vehicular traffic here, but there was none now.

Heading for his house, fearful now of what he was going to find there, he passed several damaged houses, pocked with flying fragments, debris of some kind hailing from above. Now he saw smoldering parts scattered in the street, fragments of what looked to Harivarman like the remains of a wrecked berserker. The fighting had not been totally one-sided, then, surprise or not.

Looking into his rearview screen, he saw the controller pacing after him, much faster than any human could have run, keeping his speeding flyer in sight. He had the flyer still in off ground mode, wheels retracted, for greater speed and maneuverability, but he was keeping within a meter of the road surface, not wanting to draw fire from either side.

Now he slowed just enough to let the controller catch up with him. Pulling beside it, Harivarman shouted questions and orders at it, demanded a report.

It focused lenses on him as it paced tirelessly beside his speeding vehicle. In the same half-human-sounding tones that it had used before, it reported that his orders had been obeyed, were still being obeyed, that its units were killing only when they met resistance. It reminded him that he had authorized them to do that.

He glared at the machine, mumbled something, and drove on rapidly. He had to get to his house. Each scene of violence encountered on the way made him more fearful of what he was going to find when he arrived there.

A minute later he was passing within fairly easy sight of the docks. He could see quite plainly that all of the ships in dock had been smashed, immobilized. One of them was still exploding, one flare and shock

after another, and something in it burning. Smoke went up to foul the air, but the automated damage control devices at dockside had been allowed to operate, and the air was being cleaned, the destruction so far contained.

Rage returned to Harivarman, as sick and bitter as before, but this time never to be satisfied. What was done, was done. Even if it had been against his orders, though how that would be possible . . . perhaps not against his orders, after all. Perhaps the docks, the ships, had been a center of resistance. He had given the berserkers authorization to kill, to shoot back when necessary to achieve their objective. He had said to the controller that they could crush human resistance whenever and wherever it threatened to hold them up.

He had never expected that there would be resistance on this scale.

But it was all on their own heads, on the heads of those who would have gone calmly on, satisfied to do their duty, watching as he and Lescar and Bea and others were taken away to pre-judicial murder.

Harivarman's flyer passed the wreckage of still more human-built machines. There was the first human casualty he had seen clearly, a Templar body lying in the street. There had been more fighting then, more killing than he had planned for. Well, so be it. He had hoped for a greater surprise, for Templars taken totally unaware, made prisoners, rendered ineffective without bloodshed. He glanced back toward the docks. Above all he had hoped for the berserkers to be able to capture an intact ship for him, one in which he would be able to get away. He should have known that no attack would be likely to achieve such a measure of surprise. Not here, and not against Templars.

Everywhere the Prince looked now, his determination, and what was left of his self-possession, received another shock. He simply hadn't expected that there'd be this much physical destruction. But the whole City was certainly not in ruins; there had been no wholesale massacre, such as uncontrolled berserkers would surely have accomplished with the advantage of surprise. At least the Prince could be sure now, with considerable relief, that the entire civilian section of the Fortress, with the exception of the civilian area immediately around the docks, appeared to have been spared any general attack. On the whole, the berserkers appeared to have carried out the detailed, complicated orders from their new human master at least as well as could have been expected.

He had had no choice. He had had no choice. He had had no choice.

He had pulled ahead of the controller again, and now when he stopped his vehicle to look around, it caught up with him once more. As it did so he commanded it to stay near him, ready to receive his further orders. But at the moment he could think of no more to give it. When he drove on again, it maintained its position near his flyer, pacing swiftly on its six giant legs, still apparently untroubled by the severed cables and other loose ends that trailed from his dissection of its belly.

When the Prince arrived at his exile's house he found two dead Templars lying outside his door.

He could see that one of the Templars had drawn a pistol, and he could see how the weapon had been crushed, along with the hand that held it, and for a moment Harivarman thought that he could feel his heart stop, wondering what he was going to find inside. Bea was in there, or he had done his best to arrange it so. Then he saw that one of the fallen figures outside the door was still alive, and he stopped, feeling the impulse to try to help the wounded young woman. He could do nothing at the moment. Maybe there would be help for her inside.

He gave the front door his voice and his handprint to identify, and it opened for him immediately. Inside,

Lescar, of course unarmed, came running in ecstasy to see his master still alive. But the servant was also in an agony of terror. He blurted out the story of how the house had already been visited by berserkers, but somehow, inexplicably, the machines had left without killing them all.

Beatrix was there too, and to Harivarman's vast relief she was unhurt. At first she was simply overjoyed to see him. But it took Bea only a moment, even less time than Lescar needed, to realize that something had changed in the Prince's situation, something besides the mere fact of the attack.

Harivarman shunted aside the first tentative questions of her terrible suspicion. He demanded: "Where's Gabrielle?"

Beatrix only fell silent, staring at him. Lescar said: "Miss Gabrielle did not answer my call, Your Honor, or return it."

The Prince was silent for a moment. "All right. Can't be helped. Give me a hand with this girl out here." Then he and Lescar carried the wounded Templar into the house and put her on a bed, and Lescar summoned the household first aid robot. The machine immediately began calling the base hospital, which did not respond. It kept trying.

Beatrix was still staring, silently, at her husband.

Harivarman looked around for the controller, but could not see it anywhere. It could have entered the house, he thought, and be in the next room now. All the doorways were probably too small for it, but small doorways had not troubled it before.

Beatrix demanded of him tensely: "What are you looking for?"

"Never mind."

Now there were sudden sounds outside the house, a woman's voice screaming, and pounding. Harivarman dashed to open the front door that he had closed and locked again when they brought in the girl. Gabrielle, her appearance transformed by terror and some slight physical damage, fell into his arms.

Gabrielle reported, as soon as she could speak coherently, that she had tried to reach the Templar base quarters as soon as she realized that an attack had started. But there was fighting, destruction and smoke all around that area, and she had been forced to run away from it. She had been able to think of no other place to turn for protection except to Harivarman.

She looked back over her shoulder and began to scream again. The Prince raised his eyes and saw that the controller had arrived.

Harivarman took a step toward it. "Come no closer," he called out. "None of these people with me now are offering resistance."

"Order acknowledged."

Bea and Lescar were both staring at him now, in a way that he had never seen either of them look at anyone or anything before. Obviously they were each realizing in their respective ways some portion of the truth. Gabrielle's face as yet showed nothing but animal relief, as the berserker obediently stopped its approach.

He was not going to take the time to try explaining or justifying himself now. Instead he issued orders. With Lescar's and Bea's help the Prince got Gabrielle and the still-breathing Templar guard into his flyer. Taking the driver's seat himself, on manual control, he set off at once for Sabel's old laboratory. Some of the machines should be there already, in accordance with Harivarman's earlier orders, setting up a command post for him.

The three women were in the back seat, Bea working efficiently at being a nurse. To Lescar, sitting beside him, the Prince explained en route why he was moving out of the house so quickly. Besides avoiding the presumed electronic bugging there, the transfer should make it harder for the Templars or dragoons to zero in on him with any missiles or other deadly tricks.

Lescar agreed mechanically, as if he might not really know or care what he was agreeing to. Meanwhile he stared out his window at the controller that paced beside the flyer, keeping up with it. Only now, Harivarman thought, was the little man really beginning to understand just what his master had done. Explanations were in order, of course, but they would have to wait.

When Harivarman eased the vehicle to a stop near Sabel's old lab, a berserker unit was already on guard outside. And the controller, stopping beside the car, reported that in accordance with the Prince's orders the place had already been given a security check.

The controller stayed right behind him as he went inside; here the doorway happened to be large enough. Bea came after it, giving it a wide berth but looking as if she might already have accepted its presence.

She spoke for almost the first time since he had rejoined her. "I want to send that vehicle to the base hospital, with that girl in it. She might live then. Will it be shot down if I do?"

The Prince opened his mouth, closed it, then looked at the controller. "See that it's not," he ordered.

"Order acknowledged."

"That takes care of half the problem. Program the pilot not to fly, Bea. Maybe it can drive into the base on the ground without the Templars shooting it up . . . are you going with it?"

Beatrix moistened her lips. "I'm staying with you," she said.

Harivarman turned a little shakily to look at Lescar—but of course, in Lescar's case there was no need to ask.

He turned to the controller, and demanded from it a report concerning the machine that was sent to extricate Chen Shizuoka from his house arrest.

"It has proven impossible to locate the life-unit Chen Shizuoka as ordered. Efforts continue."

"Damn. I thought they had him in confinement, near the base."

"A search of the designated area failed to locate the life-unit Chen Shizuoka. A wider search is proceeding, as rapidly as possible under the constraints that you have placed upon my operations."

"Those constraints must be observed. Carry on." The Prince turned away from the thing, and went to Gabrielle where she was sitting on the floor in one corner of the large and almost empty room. Maybe he

thought, trying to rouse her from her shock, he should have sent her off with the wounded Templar girl. But Harivarman had mental reservations about the flyer's being allowed into the base, whether it stayed on the ground or not. Most likely the Templars would shoot it up.

"Life-unit Harivarman." The Prince turned, slowly. He had never ordered the controller to call him sir.

"What is it?" He had the feeling that it was about to tell him that the game it had been playing was over now, that he and those with him were about to die.

"Why," it asked him, "are you especially interested in the life-unit Chen?"

He stared at it. What next? "What do you care why? If it makes any difference, I think he may have information that I'm going to need."

"It is only that I must allocate resources and set priorities among the various commands that you have given."

"Carry on as best you can. Right now I have yet another job for you. Setting up some communications."

And presently, through a juggled communications relay that he hoped would be impossible to trace, the Prince, sitting in his new command post, managed to make contact with the base commander in her headquarters.

"I'm back at my post somewhat early. I keep my word, you see."

"Harivarman, where are you?"

"In a safe place, for the time being, Commander. As you are."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That you won't be hurt, and that no more of your people will be hurt, as long as you follow my orders from now on. But you're good at following orders, so you should survive."

Realization grew on her only slowly. "You've done this, then. Somehow. Damn you."

"It became necessary, Commander. You see, I really had no choice. I understand that necessity, a lack of choice, excuses anything." It gave him great pleasure to throw some of her own words back at her.

It came as no surprise to find that the pleasure did not last.

Chapter 13

"I never got to go to a university," Olga Khazar was saying, almost wistfully.

"I'm not sure you missed much," Chen Shizuoka said. His feeling at the moment was that his own efforts to obtain an advanced education had never done him any particular good.

He was into practical learning now. He had discovered that if he set one chair on top of another and then

leaned the tall double mass of them against the control of the door-intercom of the hotel room that was his prison cell, he could keep the intercom unit turned on steadily. Olga Khazar had again been left on duty outside, and she was willing to talk to him almost continuously. None of the other guards who had so far taken their turns watching over him in his various rooms of confinement had been anywhere near as communicative as Olga was, and she was not going to stay on guard forever. He wanted to benefit from her presence while he could. For Chen, having some kind of regular contact with the world was practically a necessity.

"Looks quiet out there in the hall now," he commented. "Where's everybody?" He had been locked up in this room for several hours now, and had already realized that at least some of his fellow recruits from the transport were being housed in nearby rooms; Chen had been able to hear some of their voices, half-familiar, passing his door from time to time.

Olga, trim-looking as usual in her uniform, mean-looking pistol on her hip to show that she was on guard duty, was leaning against the wall outside. Through the intercom Chen could see her little image complete from head to toe, along with a little bit of wall on either side. Her posture was unmilitary, he supposed, but right now probably no one could see her but himself. She said: "Right now I think they're all out on the firing range."

"Already? They've only been here a couple of days. I thought that kind of thing came later."

"It's three days now since your ship got here. We like to start people early with weapons. It's a big part of being a Templar. What were you studying at the university?"

"I thought I was going to be a lawyer."

"I wish I had a chance like that. I come from Torbas."

"Aren't there any lawyers on Torbas?" Chen knew it was perhaps the poorest of the Eight Worlds. Olga only shrugged and looked sad. Chen tried to think of what he might say to Olga to console her for being born in poverty and missing out on a university education, but at the moment he felt too envious of her to be able to come up with anything useful along that line.

He was the one who needed consolation. She, after all, was not locked up. Nor was she suspected of some insane crime that she would never have committed. Nor—no, he wasn't paranoid—was she the victim of an involved and ominous plot.

Chen was still trying to think of the best thing to say next when conversation was interrupted by a distant blast, a faint vibration racing through the floor. In the little intercom screen, Olga's image turned its head away, distracted by the noise.

"More remodeling," Chen decided. "Clearing the slums."

"I don't know. It didn't sound . . ."

"Didn't sound what?"

"I don't know." Then she surprised him. "Wait, I'll be right back."

"Leaving your post? Oh, I'll wait, all right."

She was back in about five seconds, properly at her post again, standing up straight in a military way and using her communicator. "Post Seven here. Officer of the day?"

Olga repeated the call. Apparently she was having trouble getting anyone's attention. She called again, several times, but Chen could tell that no one was answering.

She paused to look into the intercom at Chen. "I don't think that was blasting," she said, and then went back to trying the communicator on her wrist to hail her superiors. But still nobody responded.

Her manner remained calm, but something about it was alarming. It didn't take much to alarm someone who was already locked up, Chen realized. He demanded: "What's wrong? What is it, then?"

And even as he spoke, there were more faint blasting sounds, this time accompanied by faint distant screams.

"I think it's berserkers," said Olga Khazar, in a remote, taut voice. She had paused, holding the communicator a few centimeters from her lips. Her head was turned away from him again.

"Berserkers. Berserkers?" It couldn't be, not really. Not here on the Templar Fortress. And yet, somehow, he already knew it was.

She didn't answer, she was busy.

"You've got to let me out!"

Her dark eyes in the screen turned toward him. "I don't have a key."

"I don't care! You've got to—"

For ten long seconds they argued back and forth.

Abruptly she gave in. In a way that scared him all the more, making the whole threat real. She said: "All right, all right. Stand back away from the door, way back. Better go into the latrine."

Her image was drawing its sidearm.

Going all the way into the toilet was unnecessary, thought Chen. He didn't want to lose a second getting out of the room once the door was open. He retreated into the middle of the room, looked about wildly, and dove behind a sofa just in time. There was a ripping, shattering noise, and he heard small pieces of something fly against the walls.

Olga's voice, heard directly now, yelled at him: "Come on!"

Chen burst from concealment, and ran for the room's door, which now hung open, amid aerial dust and the smell of something scorched. Fragments of metal and stone powder were strewn everywhere, and Olga Khazar had her firearm in hand. Chen moved forward, through more dust, out of the room. The corridor was empty except for Olga and himself, but in the distance he could hear people yelling.

"Thanks!"

She looked grim. "I figured it was part of my duty, to keep you alive. Come on, follow me."

Chen followed. He thought he knew where they were headed, or the first stop at least. Yesterday he'd already been taken, under heavy guard, through one practice drill with the spacesuits, and he'd had to wear one on his little drive with Commander Blenheim. He now knew enough about the suits to use one in an emergency, which this certainly seemed to be. He followed Olga at a run down one corridor and then another to where their assigned emergency suits were stored.

Olga holstered her pistol, then took the belt and holster off and laid them down. She opened two of a row of lockers and dragged out two suits.

Chen said: "I could use a gun, too."

"I don't have one of those to give you. Get that suit on quick." She knew the tone for giving orders, all right, even if she was at or near bottom rank herself. Probably, Chen thought, she had listened to enough of them to master the technique.

He asked: "Where are we going now?"

She had her own spacesuit on already, over her regular uniform, and was clipping the holstered pistol on at her hip. "I'm going to rejoin my unit, and you're coming with me."

That was all right. The young lady sounded as if she knew what she was doing, and Chen was not about to try going anywhere alone just now if he could help it.

Suits on, helmets closed, they moved again. The suits were so light and well designed that they hardly slowed one down. As they trotted, Chen keeping up with Olga, there was more blasting, mixed with other sounds of weaponry, to their right and left. And now a large detonation ahead of them as well. Berserkers, streaking units in the sky, were intermittently visible. Fast as missiles, some of the assault units projected themselves in streaking curves that bent around the Radiant's distorted core of space, picking up speed again as they neared their intended spots of impact or landing.

Gun in hand now, Olga slowed down, then stopped, then peered around a corner. "I don't know how much farther in this direction we can go . . ." She moved to a different corner. "Let's try down here instead. Some of my squad should be around . . ." She stopped abruptly.

Chen peered over her suited shoulder. Ahead, part of a wall had been demolished, along with something else. The mangled body looked unreal to Chen, a dummy in a Templar uniform.

But Olga recognized the dead young man, and called him by name. Chen could see that she was almost sick.

Chen, feeling only numb (this isn't really happening), spoke to her—later he could never remember what words he had used—trying to comfort her somehow. Then he bent and picked up the fallen Templar's weapon, a kind of short rifle. He thought it was what they called a carbine.

Looking as pale as her dark skin would allow, Olga muttered: "I'll show you how to use that when we have a chance."

"Better show me now."

"Aim it. Get an approximate aim first. Look at your target through the scope sight, here, if you have the

chance." Her eyes were distracted, searching for terror and death around them, but her fingers moved surely on the carbine. She was repeating a lesson that she could have given in her sleep. "Here's the locking sight control. Touch it when you're looking at your target; the sight reads your eyeball and locks on. Your trigger is here, your safety here."

Chen rose to his feet, the weapon cradled in his arms. He looked up. He saw an enemy machine passing swiftly in the distance. He tried to aim, knew he was mishandling the sight somehow, but blasted off some rounds anyway, without noticeable effect.

Olga struck his arm down violently. "Don't draw them down on us, you damned fool! Don't shoot unless you have to. I don't know how much good a carbine's going to do us."

"All right."

"We can't get through to the base this way. We'll try the docks. Come on." They started in another direction.

They were now coming into a different part of the City from any that Chen had visited before; soon he would be hopelessly disoriented. But that worry dropped from his mind almost at once, replaced by something more immediate.

Looking back across a plaza, he started and then grabbed Olga by the arm. "One of them . . . one of th-them's coming after us."

At a distance of a couple of hundred meters it looked tall, and it was walking on three legs, a relatively slow-moving machine. Maybe it was a primitive type, but there was little comfort in the thought.

"Let's move!" Olga ordered. It had been moving directly toward them, and there was no reason to doubt that it had seen them; no reason at all, except for the fact that it had not killed them yet. Maybe it was out of ammunition, and would have to get within reach to do that. . . .

They pounded around a few corners, and then on the edge of a plaza, behind a screen of masonry, they tried to hide from it.

A few seconds passed before the machine came into sight again, in the middle of an otherwise deserted street. It was approaching their location, but not directly, and it might not have spotted them yet.

Presently Chen heard the berserker calling his name, in the tones of a human voice, a voice he thought he could recognize. It boomed out loudly through the streets, uttering words in a world gone mad.

"Chen Shizuoka. Come with this machine and it will guide you to a place of safety. Chen Shizuoka, this is Prince Harivarman speaking. Come with this machine—"

Chen looked into the eyes of Olga, who was standing close beside him. The only answer he could see there was that she was as frightened as he was himself.

Chapter 14

Serving as defensive bunkers for the high command on the Radiant Fortress were chambers cut or built

like other rooms out of the mass of stone, but hardened with thicknesses of special armor, and equipped with shielded communications conduits leading to what were considered key defensive points in various other sections of the Fortress. Commander Blenheim's bunker was directly underneath her ordinary office—not her temporary one—and it had taken her two full minutes to reach the bunker after the attack started.

Grand Marshall Beraton had not visited the Radiant Fortress for well over a century, but he still remembered perfectly where the bunkers were. He and Captain Lergov were taking shelter in their own assigned hardened chamber within a minute after the commander had reached hers.

Before the grand marshal had gone underground, he had dutifully tried to find out what had happened to the crew of the Salutai ship on which he had arrived, but that information proved at least temporarily impossible to obtain. All around the docks was devastation, and at Lergov's continuous urging the grand marshal soon came away. The bunkers, as Lergov kept repeating, would offer the best communication facilities, the best chance to try to get a line on what had happened to their troops.

Their bunker connected through a hardened, sealed passage with that of Commander Blenheim. They joined her presently, and listened with her while reports outlining the situation kept coming in.

There was no question that a real berserker attack was in progress, though where the machines could have come from was beyond anyone's ability to guess. The automated outer defenses and alarms were not what they had been in the old days, but it was hardly possible that they had permitted a landing force to get by them without at least sounding the alarm. Another mystery was that although the enemy had seized a commanding position, they were not pressing their advantage.

That was fortunate. There were only a few hundred Templars on the Fortress, most of them a cadre preparing for the cadets' school that was to have opened here in the near future. And here on the inner surface of the Fortress they had little, almost nothing, in the way of heavy weaponry with which to defend themselves. And what little the Templar base had of such armament had already been knocked out. More such ordnance, a lot more, was available out on the outer surface of the Fortress, and a little more at the interior firing range. But none of the strongpoints on the outer surface had been manned by humans for a long time, and as far as the commander could recall, no one at all had been at the interior firing range.

One bright spot in the situation, though it was of no immediate benefit to the now-besieged garrison of the base, was that one ship, a message courier that had been standing by to receive messages in one of the small outer docks, had managed to get away when the attack struck. At least the available evidence indicated that the courier had escaped successfully. Of course if there were spacegoing berserkers in the area, it would seem there must have been to effect a landing, then the courier's fate was problematical at best.

Once inside the commander's bunker, Captain Lergov retreated into the background, where he was presently joined by a civilian man as short and impassive as himself. This newcomer was introduced to Commander Blenheim as Mr. Abo, a cultural representative, whatever that was, from Prime Minister Roquelaure's office. Captain Lergov in a few words to the commander explained who this man was, and that he had remained on the Salutai ship up until the attack.

Commander Blenheim, who had other things to think about, was not greatly interested. Neither was Grand Marshall Beraton, she could tell. He was hovering, acutely conscious of the fact that he was not really in command here, yet aching, as a veteran, as a grand marshal, to take over.

Well, she was a veteran too. There were her combat decorations on her jacket if he wanted to see them. The garment, taken off when she got into her spacesuit and combat gear, hung on the wall behind her now.

Sparing no time for discussion with her visitors, she was busy trying to stiffen the nerves of some of her junior officers when the call came in from Prince Harivarman.

His face, looking almost unruffled, appeared on the screen, and his voice was almost calm: "I'm back at my post somewhat early. I keep my word, you see."

"Harivarman, where are you?"

"In a safe place, for the time being, Commander. As you are."

Whatever she had been about to say to him was suddenly forgotten. Something in his face, his voice, made her catch her breath. "What do you mean by that?"

"That you won't be hurt, and that no more of your people will be hurt, as long as you follow my orders from now on. But you're good at following orders, so you should survive."

Beraton and Lergov looked at each other. The commander sat back in her chair, realization growing on her slowly. She said to the image in the screen: "You've done this, then. Somehow. Damn you."

"It became necessary, Commander. You see, I really had no choice." Harivarman's image paused; it seemed to be smiling. "I understand that necessity, a lack of choice, excuses anything."

"You had better get here, to the base, if you can."

"Oh no. No. You are coming to see me instead."

"To see you! Where are you?"

He ignored the question. "I suppose you're down in your bunker now. I want you to go up to the inner surface and get in one of your staff cars; you won't be blasted. Come unarmed and alone; that'll save time and argument at this end. I'll give you directions, once I get a report from one of my lookouts that your staff car is under way."

"You must be mad."

"Not in the least."

"If you're able to move about freely, Harivarman, come here."

The image shook its head. "I just said I was not insane. You're coming here. You have half an hour to get here, and I promise you an explanation of all this when you arrive. Unless, of course, you prefer another attack. If so, just stay where you are. This time I'll tell my machines not to be so gentle. And one more thing. Be sure to bring with you the original Council order for my arrest." And Harivarman broke the connection.

"Goodlife." Beraton, watching over Anne Blenheim's shoulder, breathed the word unbelievably. He drew himself up to his full height. "I will go and talk to him, the madman. Your post is here, Commander."

"You will obey orders, Grand Marshall, and I order you to remain here. I'm going to talk to him. I expect I can handle him. But if I don't return in two hours—" She hesitated. "I want you to take command of the Fortress." Anyone else she left in command, she thought, would be incapable of arguing successfully with a legend anyway.

Perhaps the grand marshal was surprised; at any rate, he gave her a salute, and ceased to argue.

On the way out of her bunker, Commander Blenheim glanced into the adjoining one. Lergov was back in there now, with his civilian aide. They were on a communicator there, trying to reach some of his people; the radio space in the Fortress seemed to be filled with berserker-induced noise, jamming everything but their own signals.

* * *

Arriving in her surface office again, Anne Blenheim issued a few final orders to Major Nurnberg and others who had come up, it seemed only to argue with her, out of their own protective holes. She would not argue, but issued orders instead. Everyone was to hold their fire, unless fired upon by the berserker enemy. They agreed, and tried yet again to argue her out of going to the meeting with the lunatic Prince. But she squelched them quickly. Instinct, feeling, something, had told her at once to go, despite the obvious danger. Not going would hardly be safe either. Her staff car was ready now, and as she climbed into it, shedding her gunbelt on the way, she reviewed the situation as it now stood in her own mind.

The Templar compound was surrounded by the enemy in three dimensions. The fighting in and around the base, against perhaps three dozen berserkers, had been sporadically fierce since the first lightning onslaught. But the sounds of fighting had died away.

Everything she saw as she began to drive indicated that her earlier assessment of the situation had been correct. If the berserkers launched an all-out attack they would almost certainly win, overrunning her handful of surviving Templars in a short time. But as yet no such attack had come, and it seemed to Commander Blenheim of overriding importance to find out why. Harivarman had promised her an explanation if she came to confer with him, and at the moment she could think of nothing that she needed more.

As she cruised slowly away from the base in the staff car, she suddenly recalled something about the firing range. Colonel Phocion was out there today, with the new recruits, or some of them. Phocion had wanted to fill in time until his new orders came, someone had informed her, by taking a hand in the training of the small group of raw enlistees who had arrived on the ill-starred transport ship along with Chen Shizuoka. There might also have been, the commander supposed, a few non-coms out there at the range with them when the attack hit. But there had as yet been no word received in the command bunker from those people. The communications with the firing range, as with several other areas of the Fortress, had been disrupted by the berserkers' pulse technology.

Should she call back to the command bunker now, from her car, and remind Nurnberg or one of the others about the people at the firing range . . . but no, the enemy would most likely intercept the message. No, the people at the firing range would have to cope as best they could.

Harivarman's voice, so suddenly and unmistakable that it made her jump, came clearly over her car's speakers. "Turn left at the next corner, Commander."

She acknowledged the instruction with what she thought was admirable calm, and then presently realized

that she was headed in the general direction of Sabel's old laboratory.

"Stop the car where you are," the general's voice ordered presently.

She obeyed. The street here looked familiar. Was this the very route that they had taken on that first outing with Harivarman?

"Get out," said the speaker in front of her. "Walk down the alley to your right, please."

Commander Blenheim got out, expecting to feel a weakness in her knees. She was not disappointed. She started walking in the indicated direction. Around the first corner, a berserker was waiting for her. It was a tall thing, standing motionless, rather like a metallic scorpion balancing on its hind legs.

Her stomach clenching suddenly, she slowed her steps. She could no longer make herself walk forward. Then she saw and recognized Lescar, the general's driver, who was beckoning to her. The little servant was standing within a few meters of the machine, but not looking at it, as if he were able to pretend it was not there.

Lescar's manner was apologetic, but determined. "This way, please, madam. The Prince is waiting."

The general, Anne Blenheim thought, with what she acknowledged as lunatic determination. But she did not utter her correction aloud. Instead she followed him down a deserted street and into the laboratory, by a different doorway than the one she had used before. The tall berserker escort came with them, following her silently.

In a room inside the small lab complex Lescar came to a halt, indicating the door that she should enter. Inside the door, she found herself looking at the Prince, who was seated behind a built-in table, alone except for two more machines that flanked him, like huge and metallic bodyguards, on either side.

She said: "It's really true, then. But I can't believe it. Not of you. I really can't believe it." Her voice was only a whisper, and it seemed to come from her almost involuntarily. "How could you . . . ?"

He flared back at her bitterly: "All right, I'm goodlife, then! What good did it ever do menotto be goodlife? The everlasting gratitude of humanity for my victories over the berserkers? Of course. We've seen how long that lasted. These machines are now tools in my hands, no more, like any other tools. A saw to cut my prison bars. If Templar guards stand in my way, I can't help that. They're wrong to be there." He paused. "I see you came unarmed. Good. You brought the document?"

"They're wrong? Harivarman, how could you?"

"How could I discover evil out in the dark corridors, evil that the Templars managed to miss for two hundred years? Why, I suppose I have a unique affinity for evil."

"Then you are really in control of them. However it happened. You really are."

"I am indeed. But don't be a fool and think me goodlife. Do you suppose I serve and worship these?" And he swung out an arm and rapped his knuckles contemptuously against the carapace of one of the towering things beside him, the one on his right with cables hanging from its opened belly. He said to it: "Send this other unit out. Surely you can deploy it to better purpose somewhere else. Make sure the Templars prepare no tricks while I'm distracted here in conference."

In a moment, moving silently in obedience to some silent order, the other unit left the room.

Anne Blenheim had to do something to keep from screaming. She approached the table and threw the parchment document down on it. "You wanted to see this. What else do you want?"

"Right to the point, as usual." Harivarman took up the Council's order, glanced at it for a moment, and tossed it aside. "All right, I'm sure that right to the point is best. I now have information indicating that a ship, a message courier, was standing by in an outer dock when the attack hit. I want that ship, for myself and whoever wants to join me."

"Every ship in dock has been destroyed, the message courier included." She wished herself a more practiced liar. The courier was already gone, taking news of the attack to the Eight Worlds. A fleet would be here in a matter of a few days at most. If only it were possible to somehow stall, to maintain until then whatever mad precarious balance was holding the berserkers back from slaughter.

He studied her. "Or, one way or another, it's gone."

She nodded. "And I have a better plan to suggest to you."

"Aha? And it is?"

"Surrender."

That got a quietly scornful reception. "If I were the type to surrender I needn't have gone to all this trouble. I have no taste for allowing myself to be quietly murdered. No thank you."

Somewhat to her own surprise and anger, she found that she was still really halfway concerned for this man's welfare. "I'm curious. Where would you go, if you did get away? Where could you go?"

"There are places."

"As goodlife you won't be allowed to exist in any decent human society. Not even in most of the societies that most of us would call indecent. Only the other goodlife and the berserkers themselves will have you."

Sounds as of fighting flared up somewhere outside. Perhaps, thought Anne Blenheim, they were from as far away as the Templar compound.

Harivarman turned almost casually to the monster remaining beside him, a six-legged giant that looked as if it had been badly damaged itself, with cables and lasered-off loose ends hanging from a cavity in its belly. With this thing he almost calmly exchanged some words. In a voice that to Anne Blenheim had the nightmare flavor of old training tapes, the killer machine assured him that the situation outside was still essentially calm.

It struck the commander that the man sounded not at all servile, as she had heard that goodlife always were before their hideous gods and masters. He sounded like a man giving orders to a robot—except that Earth-descended humans, with the frightening example of the berserkers always before them, had never dared to build robots as independently powerful as these.

He turned back to her. "Well?"

"I can't believe it," she murmured again, as if to herself.

"Oh? Just what is it that you can't believe, exactly? That I want to go on living, and not as a perpetual prisoner? Probably with my behavior so modified that I spend a great deal of my time smiling?"

"Things like that aren't done any—"

"Don't tell me that. I've seen some of the people that Lergov's worked on. I've talked to some of those who could still talk. You couldn't believe that I would take steps to protect myself? That's not what the individual is supposed to do, is it? You might recall that I tried appealing to law and justice—yes, and to mercy, too. I tried with my best eloquence, at our last meeting. As usual in the real world, eloquence and a just cause were not enough."

"Where is your just cause now?" she asked him.

"Where you put it. But it's still surviving. It will survive."

"I see . . . and what are you going to demand of me now? A ship is impossible, even if I were willing to give you one. As you can see for yourself, after what your allies have done, there are no ships."

"All right. Forget for the moment what I demand. First I'd like someone to understand what's really at issue here. Do you realize what I've discovered?" He raised one hand, holding what appeared to be a small electronic device. "The controlling code of the berserkers. Even if the code I have here only works for some of them, it also tells us the type of code that's likely to control the others. There's at least a chance now that we, that all humanity, can be freed of the damned machines at last."

The berserker he had spoken to, evidently one of their controller units, emotionless and uncaring as they always were, looked over his shoulder. And undoubtedly it listened to his words.

"The controlling code . . ."

"Would you like to sit down? Sit on the edge of my table here, we'll be informal. I'm afraid your Guardians unfurnished this room some time ago, and we have a certain shortage of chairs."

"The controlling code," Anne Blenheim repeated, in a whisper. No Templar officer would need more than a moment to grasp the implications of that. "If you really have . . ."

"Aha. I have, I really have. And that puts a slightly different face on the whole matter, hey?"

"Yes." She said the word reluctantly, but she had to say it. "If you're telling me the truth. What greater advantage than that could anyone have over an enemy?"

"Indeed, yes," said Harivarman. "Now . . ."

His words drifted to a halt. Commander Blenheim, looking closely, saw that something had just happened to General Harivarman. He still sat in the same position as before. His expression had altered—not by much. But now he was staring at the control device in his hand, as if something about that small object had suddenly struck him, something he himself had been unaware of until this moment.

The commander stared at him, waiting. Some new madness . . . ?

At last the general looked up at her. It was a strange, unreadable glance, and perhaps it was mad indeed. But his voice, as before, still sounded quite sane and calm. He asked her: "What did you just say, exactly?"

"I said, what greater advantage . . ."

"Yes. Of course you did." Waving her to silence with an imperious gesture, he stood up from the desk. "Now, as to my demands . . ." But, having said that much, the general once more fell silent, regarding her with the same odd look.

Anne Blenheim drew a deep breath. All she could think at the moment was that maybe this man had truly gone insane at last; at least this conversation seemed to be tending toward madness. She would take it over, then, if she could, and try to dominate.

She began: "If you can truly control the berserkers completely, as you say . . ."

Again it seemed to take the general a great effort to bring his attention back from the small device in his hand, to what his visitor was saying. "Yes?"

"Then order them to stop their attack."

This time the pause was shorter. He was coming back from whatever borderland he had been roaming for the past few moments. "Stop their attack? I have already done so. They are no longer attacking. They are maintaining their controlling positions."

"Render them totally inert, then, if you can do it. Do that now, and in turn I'll see what I can do for you."

He had by now regained something of his original bitter manner. "I suppose I should really have expected nothing better. You're not going to give me your solemn promise that I won't be prosecuted?"

"Would you believe me if I did? I'm no politician, no courtier, no . . ."

"What you're trying to say is that you're no experienced liar."

"Harry." The name came out suddenly, as if she really hadn't meant to say it. "That's what your friends call you, isn't it?" That wasn't leading anywhere, and she tried again. "Sorry, that was inadvertent. General, I will tell you only the truth, since I am not an accomplished liar, and I will make only promises that I intend to keep."

There was a long silent pause between them. Then Harivarman said: "Unfortunately, none of the promises you have made so far are of the least use to me. Even though I do believe you mean them. So . . . as soon as I let your Templars up off the floor, you're going to arrest me. If you can keep Lergov or Beraton from shooting me down on sight."

"You are going to have to let us up off the floor, as you put it, sooner or later, aren't you?" She drew a breath. "Either that or you'll have to slaughter us all."

He looked at his control device again. "We'll see. I think I'll not necessarily have to follow either course of action."

"What else?"

He considered carefully before he answered. "Sooner or later another ship is going to dock here. It probably won't be very many days until one comes along."

"Ah."

For a moment the idea of attacking him physically passed through the commander's mind. She was better than most women at hand-to-hand combat, better by far than most men, looking at her, would expect her to be. Still it was far from certain, very far, that she would succeed if she tried attacking this man now. And if the berserker that was still with them did not squash her when she tried, and she did succeed, and the control device came into her hands, what exactly would she do with it? She had no idea whether the controller would then obey her automatically or not. What controls on the device to press? How might her actions upset the delicate forces that at the moment were holding the enemy back from wholesale slaughter?

Rejecting that plan, at least for the moment, the commander said: "There's a point you might want to consider. Goodlife activity makes you subject to a Templar trial, right here and now. The people who have come from Salutai to arrest you would not have jurisdiction. They could not murder you as you fear."

"And what outcome could I expect from the Templar trial?"

She was silent.

"On the other hand, what if I were found innocent? Why, then, I suppose I'd be free. No longer under Templar jurisdiction. Therefore quite free to be arrested by Lergov and carted off to Salutai, as soon as a functioning ship became available. Not that I'd ever reach that world alive—but we've been through that, haven't we? My being murdered would not affect your legal position in the least. An acceptable outcome to you, as no one could accuse you of breaking regulations. No, I intend to have the next available ship for myself."

"All right, forget that suggestion. It wasn't well thought out." She hesitated, then took a plunge. "But I don't think your plan is well considered either."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose I were to agree to it." The commander had to force herself to speak those words. "Suppose you did obtain a ship somehow, captured the next one to try to dock, and you got away. How would we be any better off here? We'd still be facing an overwhelming force of berserkers."

"But no, not at all. I would leave them on a timer, as it were. They would deny you access to the docks for a time, simply to prevent any quick repairs of the remaining ships, and use of them for hot pursuit of me, assuming such were possible. After the set time had elapsed, they would disable themselves or allow themselves to be disabled. A treasury of knowledge, such as the Templars have always sought. And you would have obtained it for them. I'm making you an offer that no real goodlife would make, and you know it."

"But at what price?" Commander Blenheim whispered. "At what price? You've helped them to kill human beings here, people under my command, Templars. No one but a goodlife would have—"

There was another outburst of noise, of fighting, somewhere outside the echoing empty room in which

they were talking. Again the general turned to the controller at his side. "What was that?"

"As before," the machine-voice answered him. "It was necessary to take action against a local instance of aggression by the badlife."

"Are you sure? Your communications must be imperfect too."

"The probability is more than eighty percent."

"Not good enough, for me." Harivarman waved a hand at the berserker. "Go out and see for yourself, about that fighting. Report back to me directly."

"It is not necessary—"

The general thumbed something on his control device. "This is an order. Go out and see to the matter yourself."

There was no more hesitation. The machine moved away, pacing with silent elegance, despite its damaged appearance.

Now the two humans were alone. Now, thought Commander Blenheim, I could risk everything, attack him with my bare hands. . . .

Across the table from her, Harivarman, looking almost absentminded, was again picking up the Council's order for his arrest. "There are some changes I would like to see made in this," he announced, surprising her when she thought that she was beyond surprise. "Before I'd even want to start negotiating with the Council." And, looking at her meaningfully, he pulled a writing tool out of his pocket.

* * *

It was half an hour later when the base commander left the man who had once been her prisoner. Her head was whirling as she departed, with relief at her own survival thus far, and with fear. And with a new and twisted hope.

Chapter 15

The berserker machine that had called to Chen Shizuoka in Prince Harivarman's voice was now calling to him again, as it advanced along an otherwise deserted street that led obliquely toward the plaza where Chen and Olga were trying to hide:

"Chen Shizuoka. Come with this machine to safety. Chen Shizuoka, this is Prince Harivarman. Come—"
And even as the Prince's voice boomed forth from the berserker, it kept walking closer to where Chen and Olga were holding their breath, afraid to move.

Chen was peering out at the approaching monster through small chinks in a decorative screen of masonry. The tall screen separated the small plaza where he was standing from the nearby street down which the murderous thing was walking toward him on its three legs. His carbine, probably useless against this foe, was in his hands, the muzzle pointing up into the air. He was afraid to move a muscle, even the minimal movement necessary to aim the weapon, because aiming it would probably be a waste

of time anyway.

His eyes moved again to his companion. Olga Khazar, standing pressed against the screen beside him, appeared to be on the verge of fainting, leaning on the screen, her hand that held the pistol pale-knuckled with the tightness of her grip.

The machine coming toward them down the otherwise deserted street was less than fifty meters distant now. It stopped briefly after every one or two of its triangular steps, turning its head from side to side at every pause, as if to sweep the area with its multitude of senses. The thing was almost twice as tall as a man, and pot-bellied as if its central torso might contain some kind of a cargo compartment. Now and then it raised its head even higher on an elongating metal neck, peering over stalled, abandoned vehicles and into upper-story windows.

Just behind the two people who were holding their breath and trying to hide from the berserker was the flat expanse of the small plaza, much like a hundred other plazas scattered around the City, and behind the plaza in turn there were some three- and four-story civilian buildings. In one of those buildings people were clamoring, oblivious to the approaching terror. It sounded like some stupid argument about what to bring and what to leave, as if there were someplace available for City people to flee. Chen could only hope that maybe the noise and movement behind himself and Olga, together with the screen in front of them, might be enough to mask their presence. The chinks in the decorative screen were very small.

For whatever reason, the prowling machine did not discover them. At the last intersection before the plaza it turned down a side street, and in another moment it was out of sight.

As soon as it was gone, Olga gestured, silently, urgently, for Chen to follow her. Then she turned and fled, moving as quietly as possible, crossing the plaza, going in the opposite direction from the machine.

Chen ran after her.

After a couple hundred meters she paused, and pulled him into a recess between buildings. Panting with the effort of the run, she whispered: "These weapons we've got aren't doing us any good."

"I've figured that," said Chen, nodding. His helmet and Olga's were both open; they could talk in low voices without breaking radio silence.

"If we could only get into the base . . ." She broke off, gesturing frustration; the base was where most of the fighting was going on.

"All right, so we can't get in there. We tried. Where do we try next?"

Olga only shook her head. Presently, when they had both caught their breath, she moved on, gesturing to Chen to follow. Chen didn't ask where they were going; he was anxious to go anywhere. He didn't want to sit in one place and do nothing.

Now they began to encounter a few other people, all of them civilians, on the streets. Most of the civilians appeared to be in flight, headed out away from the center of the City toward the relatively remote areas of the Fortress. Those among the refugees who took notice of the two spacesuited Templars at all looked at them more in fear than in reassurance.

Olga was setting a more moderate pace now, sometimes walking, sometimes moving at a jogging run. Chen, thankful that he had tried to keep to a program of running at home, kept up with her fairly easily.

They had traveled more than a kilometer from where they had last seen the berserker before Olga stopped. When she spoke again, it was in something like a normal tone. "Maybe from here we can get a better look at what's going on."

She led Chen into another small plaza, and mounted the broad steps of its elevated central section. It offered them something of a vantage point, almost as if they had climbed a hill. This elevation, like every other on the interior surface, gave a fine view, as from above, of the surrounding territory at a distance of a kilometer or more. They had now made more than that much distance from the base, and from here it appeared to Chen at first that the conflict around the docks and the Templar base had cooled. The smoke in the air there had largely dissipated. But no, the fighting was not over; the sight and sound of it flared up again, and flared yet once more even as they watched.

"Lookout!"

Chen turned quickly at Olga's warning. On a rooftop, several hundred meters back in the direction they had come from, he could again see the berserker that had called to them in Prince Harivarman's voice. As far as he could tell, the machine was facing almost directly toward him. Whether it could see him or not he did not know. But it called his name again, in an amplified bellow, and simultaneously it dropped from the rooftop out of sight, as if it were hurrying toward him again.

Olga was already running, fleeing in the opposite direction. Terrified, Chen followed her at the best speed that he could manage.

They rounded several corners, running hard. When Olga next stopped for breath, in a twisted alley, she demanded, almost accusingly: "What's it wantyoufor?"

He had to gasp twice more before he could get out words. "How the hell should I know?"

His injured innocence was apparently convincing. Olga led the way again, this time at a mere walking pace, into a street where there were several abandoned flyers. She halted at one of these. "Let's take this one. We'll never be able to outrun that bloody thing on foot."

"Why didn't we try this sooner?"

This, Chen soon decided, must be some kind of service vehicle, for it appeared to need no special key or code to start. Olga took the driver's seat, and they were off. Under her control the flyer left the ground and swooped away, staying near ground level as it hurtled through streets and alleys. The thing pursuing them would never be able to travel this fast on the ground, thought Chen. But he could not imagine it giving up, and so it was probably still coming after him. If she separated from him . . . he was too scared to suggest that.

Olga's thoughts were evidently on other tactics. Driving, she mused aloud: "If we only had some heavier weapons . . . maybe I know where there are some."

"Where?"

"Out on the firing range. We've never used 'em much, since I've been on the Fortress, but I think they're there."

There was little traffic in these streets. Fortunately so, for Olga was taking blind corners under manual control at high speed. Chen wondered if the civilians knew something that he and Olga didn't, if it had

already been demonstrated that large moving targets got shot at by either side, or both.

They rounded a corner swiftly and almost crashed into an oncoming flyer, a vehicle airborne and hurrying recklessly like their own. Chen opened his mouth to yell a warning, but it was already too late for that. Olga had barely avoided the head-on crash, but in the process their flyer had brushed a building. Damage alarms sounded aboard. The vehicle came down heavily, pancaking on the street with an ear-numbing roar, and skidded roughly to a broken halt.

Seat restraints held. Chen saw objects flying at him, but nothing hit him hard enough to do him damage through the tough spacesuit.

Olga was unhurt too, and already she was jumping out of the wreck. "Come on!"

Again, without discussion, she led the way. Moving as if she knew what she was doing, she opened a door in a wall and charged through it, down a ramp leading to some lower, relatively outer level. There might have been a sign to indicate where they were going, but if so it had gone past Chen too fast for him to read it. Through one sublevel passage after another their flight continued.

At last Olga changed course again, climbing a narrow spiral service stairway to the street. When they had regained the surface level, Chen immediately tried to scan the great map that the interior surface of the Fortress made of itself, to determine their location. But he was too unfamiliar with the Fortress to be able to tell where they were in relation to where they had started. All he felt sure of was that they had been fleeing for a number of kilometers.

Olga realized what he was doing, and pointed out to him the Templar base and its immediate area, which were now almost overhead, partially obscured behind the miniature solar brightness of the Radiant itself.

Chen was about to try to insist that it was time for conscious planning of their next move, when their conversation was interrupted. Chen's suit radio suddenly whispered some kind of gabble in his ear.

Olga waved him to silence; something was evidently coming in on her radio too. "Wait," she whispered, waving at Chen again.

The voice came again. It sounded to Chen like someone was operating a radio without being properly familiar with it.

Olga cautiously responded, at low power, asking for identification.

The voice replied, indistinctly. Chen couldn't make out any of the words, until it asked: "Any more survivors out there?"

Olga said crisply: "Just tell me where you are, and then get off this channel."

"We're close to what looks like a firing range." Her head swiveled, looking up at another portion of the self-mapping surface. "Stay put. We'll join you."

* * *

The firing range, as Chen was able to see for himself an hour later, was like a giant pit dug diagonally into the surface of the inner Fortress, with the targets at the outer, lower end of the pit, a hundred meters or more below the lines of firing positions. These positions were arranged in a series of semicircular

terraces, each recessed and shielded to be out of the line of fire from the terraces above it.

As Chen and Olga came over the lip of the pit, people in uniforms strange to Chen appeared on the next terrace down, emerging from various shelters and hiding places and waving cautious greetings.

"What are those uniforms?" he asked Olga quietly. They reminded him somewhat of the security people who had chased him through the streets of the capital of Salutai.

"Dragoons. The people who came on the ship to arrest your Prince."

There were more than a dozen dragoons, Chen estimated, looking bedraggled and lacking spacesuits. Chen had seen nothing of the dragoon force until now, though Olga had earlier mentioned their arrival. These were not the proud imperialists she had depicted, but only a haggard, wounded, nerve-shattered remnant of that force.

There were two Templars among them, both wounded but walking.

"Where're your officers?" Olga asked the first dragoon to approach, coming wearily up a stair. The pits and revetments and shelters built around the terraces of the range at least gave the illusion of somewhat greater security than you felt when standing around out in the open, and the meeting quickly moved to a relatively indoor location.

The young man shrugged. "They were at some kind of a meeting, I guess, when the attack came; I think most of them made it into a shelter, back there near the docks. We were still aboard our ship when it was hit, and we had to get ashore; then we just lit out running." He spoke in the accents of Salutai, which sounded like home to Chen. "We ran into a couple of your people, and they said there might be heavy weapons out this way. If there were, somebody must have beat us to 'em."

"Looks like you've got some kind of communicator set up down there." Chen pointed. In one of the revetments on the next lower level, the dragoon troops had brought from somewhere a portable screen communicator with scrambler set up or, for all that Chen could tell, what they were using might have been a part of the built-in intercom between the command bunkers and this control center of the firing range.

"Come on down and join us."

"We'll stay up here on the rim," said Olga. "It's easier to keep an eye out from up here."

"Okay. Right. Suit yourselves. I'll report that you're here. Be back in a minute." The young man went down to rejoin the others, who were still milling about in a purposeless, disorganized fashion.

There was a man's face, rather blurry, on the communicator screen they had down there, and a conversation going on between the face and one or two of the dragoons. Chen stared at it absently, then recalled himself with a start to watch the interior sky again.

But his eye returned to the man's face on the communications screen. Something about that face, and the half-audible voice that issued from it, struck Chen as disturbingly familiar. Yes, he certainly ought to recognize that face; did it belong to some Templar officer he had seen on the transport, or near the docks right after landing? But in that case, it wouldn't be a dragoon uniform that the man was wearing now. Yet the man on the screen was uniformed as a dragoon, certainly—the picture wasn't that blurry—and wasn't that a captain's rank insignia on the collar? If dragoons used the same insignia as the security police . . . But somehow the appearance in dragoon uniform was jarring, it brought the face out of its expected

context.

It took Chen a moment more. But then he had it. That face belonged to Mr. Segovia. Hana's friend, the man Chen had met just once or twice, a million years ago, back in the university library on Salutai. There was probably some logical reason for Segovia's presence here, some reason that he, Chen, was too shocked by events to grasp just now.

But yes, it was certainly odd. How could it have happened that Mr. Segovia was here, and wearing . . . ?

He was distracted by the problem, and ignored the sound of human feet approaching along a winding catwalk. Then someone spoke to him, in another familiar voice.

"Hello, Chen."

He looked up to see Hana Calderon.

Chapter 16

"I'm sorry now that you came back here, Bea."

"At this moment," Bea replied to her husband in controlled tones, "I am too."

It hurt Harivarman to hear his wife say that, and for the moment he had no answer to give her. It hurt more than he would have expected since for a long time he had thought that things were totally over between them.

The two of them were sitting in simple, brightly colored chairs, on opposite sides of a small patio table. Leafy trellises overhead shaded them from much of the direct light of the Radiant, and blurred the bright distant curve of inner surface, so that the fragments of it that were visible might almost be taken for bits of a real sky. The Prince and his wife were in one of the "outdoor" patio rooms of a large and elaborate house, of the type that the old Fortress inhabitants liked to call a villa. It was located about half a kilometer from Sabel's old laboratory. Someone had been living here quite recently, someone who had evidently abandoned the dwelling on short notice when the berserker attack hit—there were complete household furnishings, clothing in the several closets, food in the kitchen. There was even a jug of wine still on the table in front of Prince Harivarman.

"So, why did we move here?" Bea asked him. Her voice was so bright and interested, a media interviewer's or perhaps even a psychologist's voice, that he wondered if she thought him mad. Bea was sitting with her feet tucked under her in a deep chair. She had answered Lescar's summons wearing a coverall, a practical garment, as if she fully expected that visiting her husband again was going to involve some physical risk.

Leaning back in his own chair with his eyes closed in weariness, her husband answered. "I thought that moving might be prudent, once Commander Blenheim had gone back to the base with the knowledge that I was occupying the other place."

"You just told me you thought you had an arrangement with her now. After that private talk you had with her in the lab."

"I do think so. But still . . ."

"I see. And what kind of arrangement do you think you have?" Beatrix the interviewer wanted to know.

The Prince tried to think of some way to explain things to his wife, here in the controller's presence. He couldn't think of any way. His mind felt wearied, exhausted, as if he had been in battle for hours on end. As in a sense, of course, he had. At last he said: "A tacit understanding. You know, Bea, I didn't plan things to work out this way."

"How did you plan them, then?" Still not accusing; interested. He wondered enviously how she managed such control.

Yes, the controller was with them. It was out of the Prince's field of vision just now, but he didn't have to look directly toward it to make sure. For the past few hours, ever since it had returned to him following the commander's visit, the machine had hardly been out of sight and hearing of Harivarman for a moment. At present the machine was standing more or less behind him, on one side of the patio, listening to the Prince's every word and waiting for more orders. Not caring what the orders were.

In a sudden spasm of anger, Harivarman jumped to his feet and whirled around and threw the wine jug at it. The ceramic smashed on metal, and the red pungent liquid splattered. The target of his anger, the metal thing, did not move or react.

Harivarman turned his back on it and sat down heavily. He knew that he was going to have to take action, real action of some kind, soon, or risk cracking under the strain if he did not. This waiting was already becoming impossible.

How did you plan them, then?

The question was still hanging in the air, along with the smell of wine from the smashed jug. It was not a question that Harivarman wanted to attempt to answer. He got up and without looking at the berserker again went to find Lescar, wanting to get the mess from the broken wine jug on the patio cleaned up. If Lescar caught him trying to do such a menial job himself there'd be hell to pay, and Bea had not stirred from her chair.

The Prince had to look in three other well-furnished rooms before he found the little man, and the finding was not immediately helpful. Lescar was sitting alone in silence, face buried in his hands as if he were slowly going catatonic. Harivarman hesitated, and then left him as he was.

When the Prince came back to the patio to face Bea again, she asked him interestedly: "Why did you have Lescar call me, and tell me to come to your house?"

He made an almost helpless gesture. "I thought it might save your life, since you were already back on the Fortress. I didn't ask you to come back to the Fortress. Do you want to go back to your hotel now?"

"I was wondering," said Bea, "why you didn't make the call yourself. Where were you when . . ."

The last word rather trailed away, as Beatrix raised her eyes past the Prince's shoulder. He turned. Gabrielle was slowly descending an open, fragile-looking stair that curved gracefully down to the patio from enclosed rooms on the upper floor. She was still wearing the once-fancy gown in which she had come to him seeking safety. Her clothes, like her face and body, now showed ravages of rough usage in

recent hours.

When Gabrielle saw the two of them looking up at her, she paused on the stair and said: "I heard a crash." She surveyed the splashed berserker and the fragments of pottery, and sniffed the wine-tinged air without making any direct comment. But when Gabrielle spoke again her voice was different, as if fear were entirely gone. "I thought for a moment that you had done something." The dominant look in her delicate face was no longer fear, but contempt, as she gazed down at Harivarman.

"What are you doing now, Harry?" Bea asked, speaking from behind him.

He turned to face her. "Waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

He was silent for a moment. "For three things," he said then.

"And they are?"

"The first two are reports from my machines."

"Your machines," said Gabrielle contemptuously. Now it was her turn to tackle him from behind. The Prince ignored her, and continued speaking to Beatrix. "Primarily," he said, "a report from the machine that I sent after Chen Shizuoka."

"The supposed assassin," said Bea, still sounding brightly interested.

"No—" He had been about to say, no more than I am. "Chen's not an assassin."

"Well. Whether he is or not, I'd like you to fill me in on what importance he has to us now. Why are we waiting for a report about him?"

"Do something!" This was Gabrielle again. She was now starting to scream hoarsely at Harivarman from above. "You just stand there like . . . do something, do something, do something!" It was as if she were emboldened by the inertness of the splashed berserker. She turned and ran back up the stairs as if she were going to her newly adopted room.

The Prince faced Beatrix again. "There's a second report I'm expecting at any time," he said. "It will have to do with more arrivals, landings on the outer surface of the Fortress."

Bea swallowed. "Human landings?"

"Yes, of course, that's what I had in mind. If you ask me who's going to land—that's what I'm interested in finding out. Bea, I'm trying to work out a way to get away from here in one piece. With my friends, with you, now that you're committed to me. And without any more fighting, if it can be done that way."

"And the third thing?"

"Some equipment I'm having them gather for me. I want to do some serious research on berserker communications."

"Can't that wait?"

"I don't think so."

Bea's control was suddenly slipping. She was shrinking down, huddling in her chair involuntarily. Her head turned, as if she could no longer keep from staring at the controller. She said: "Harry, I don't want to walk out on you again. But if you're doing this now in any sense for me . . . I don't know if I can stay here any longer . . . Harry, whatever it is you're doing with the damned machines, for God's sake stop it!"

"Bea. I—"

"Quit! Just give up, let Lergov arrest you! Whatever happens would be better than this!"

But then, having heard herself say that, she couldn't stand by it. "Harry, I don't know what I'm saying. The problem is I don't know what's going on, and you won't tell me! I can't believe, I can't believe, that you're just—just—"

He found himself crossing the patio, pulling Bea out of her chair, and taking her in his arms. He said, close to her ear, knowing that the machines would hear him anyway: "If only I could just quit and give up, at this moment. If only I could."

She gripped his arms, ready again to persist. "You don't have to be arrested, Harry. You could make a deal. Let Roquelaure and his people have the damned control code, or whatever they want from you. Just so they'll let us get away together. Harry, I found I couldn't live without you: I thought I could come back and live with you, this time. I could have, too, but . . ." Bea's voice died away. Once more her eyes were staring upward past his shoulder.

Gabrielle was coming down the stair again, and this time she had a gun in her slender, pale, entertainer's hand, a tiny weight that still made her thin fingers shake. It was a little pistol, jeweled and almost ladylike. She must, the Prince thought numbly, irrelevantly, have had the gun with her since she arrived, brought it with her from her apartment. Unless she had just found it here in her adopted room, which seemed unlikely. Somehow it seemed to suit her, though he had never thought of her as bearing arms.

"Damn you," Gabrielle said to him, her eyes crazed. "I'm going to kill you, Harry." And she waved the gun. And then she started to level it at him with intent.

Most of the shock of fear felt by the Prince was not directly for himself. "Gabby, no! Put it—"

He had no time to get any farther than that, no time to do more than raise one hand in a useless gesture. Gabby was not listening anyway. She might or might not have actually fired on him. But what she might or might not have done did not matter. A tenth of a second before the pistol's muzzle came actually to bear on Harivarman, his life was saved.

The controller had been ordered to protect him. In this case it had probably no need to move its body or its limbs to do the job. He wasn't looking at it and he couldn't tell for sure; perhaps it turned its head. Harivarman knew that somewhere on its upper body a small weapons port had opened. A bolt of energy, instantaneous and almost invisible, stabbed past him, directed upward toward the woman on the stair. A bright flash filled the patio, accompanied by a dull throb of a sound. Gabrielle virtually disappeared. The Prince's only clear visual impression was of red hair bursting into flame. He heard the small bejeweled gun clatter on the stair, bouncing endlessly toward the bottom. A smell of singed flesh spread out to mingle with that of pungent, splattered wine.

Now Beatrix, combat veteran that she was, huddled deeper in her chair, hands covering her face. Lescar, no longer catatonic, came running into the patio where a moment later he veered to a helpless halt.

"We'll move again," was all the Prince could think of to say, when he could speak again.

* * *

Grand Marshall Beraton had now installed himself as a more or less permanent fixture in Commander Blenheim's bunker. She had never invited him to do so, but neither had she thrown him out as yet. The commander found the old man continually underfoot there, but she kept expecting that at any moment some real use for him was likely to come up, some problem or decision in which his experience might be invaluable. With this in mind she kept putting off the all-out effort it would doubtless take to shunt the grand marshal off permanently to an adjoining chamber.

Right now Beraton was pushing his luck, though. Now he was starting to argue that she ought to try to take out Sabel's old lab with some kind of missile, now that they were certain that the Prince—the general—was holed up there.

"I'm not really sure he's still there in the lab, Grand Marshall. Are you?"

"I'd say he's damned sure to be. Fellow with that kind of arrogance." The grand marshal paused, then added with sudden bitterness: "Should have clapped him in irons as soon as I laid eyes on him. You should have, if I may say so, Commander, long before that. Well, can't be helped now."

Still, Anne Blenheim refused to use a small missile on the old laboratory, giving as her reason that any such try would quite likely unleash a full berserker attack, or at least another punishing bombardment. And anyway, she told the grand marshal, she thought there might be antimissile weapons emplaced around the laboratory.

She could see that she was getting some strange looks from those of her subordinates who were present. Quite likely they were wondering, not only at her refusal, but at the odd way she talked around the subject. Well, there was no help for getting odd looks just now.

Beraton, balked in his effort to take over her command more or less completely, his advice about a missile attack rejected, now came up with a new idea. He had to do that, she supposed, because it must gripe him that a mere young woman had gone out to meet the enemy face to face while he sat here in a shelter.

Now he wanted to at least duplicate the commander's bravery. He didn't put it that way, of course. Beraton's proposal was that he go and talk to Harivarman face to face. "We fought together once, he and I, you know. Or at least in the same theater. We met . . . I can't really believe that a fellow who fought so well once could—I'm going to go and face him with it. Do what I can to talk him into a surrender. I lecture you about your duty—hm? And here I'm not really doing my own."

The old man looked visibly older than he had only a few hours ago, she thought. "No, Grand Marshall. I . . ." Anne Blenheim paused momentarily, struck by a new idea. "Why not? Very well. Go and talk to him, if you like." She would at least get the old man out of her own hair, at least for a time. What would Harivarman think? Well, he could always send his visitor back.

Then, having second—or third—thoughts, she quickly qualified her approval: "But we'll have to call

General Harivarman first, and see if he'll agree to another conference."

* * *

Sitting between her husband and Lescar in the slowly-moving groundcar, halfway through the process of moving to yet another villa, Beatrix announced that she was leaving Harivarman. "I can't do you any good staying with you, Harry. Not like this."

To Harivarman it was a door closing, with his life cut off behind it. But he couldn't say that he was surprised. Nor did he even know if he was truly sorry. It was as he supposed the final approach of death might be: a relief. He could handle it well, with a steady voice. "Where do you want to go, Bea? I'll send an escort with you."

Beatrix reacted almost violently to that suggestion. "No! No escort. Not of . . . them." Two tall machines, one of them the controller, paced beside the groundcar, one on either side. "Just let Lescar come with me for a little way. No more than that."

When they arrived at the newly chosen villa, one that scouting berserkers had reported as abandoned, Bea would not enter the house, or delay the separation.

* * *

A few minutes later, two blocks away, for the moment at least out of sight of berserkers, Beatrix was getting into an abandoned flyer, and tearfully saying goodbye to Lescar. The little man in his own odd way had always loved her, and now he was weeping too.

"I don't know what he's really doing, Lescar. He won't trust me with the knowledge, or I'd stay. Whatever it is."

"I don't know either, My Lady. But I must stay with him."

"Of course, of course." She started to add something else, and choked it back.

"Where will you go, My Lady?"

"To the base, eventually. I'll have to work my way there slowly. I can manage, I'll be all right. I know the Fortress, and I know my way around in a battle. Go back to him. You can help him, perhaps, and I can't. I never really could."

* * *

Grand Marshall Beraton was standing beside a small defensive outpost at the aboveground level of the base headquarters, trying his best to think through the problem of where his duty really lay. The job had been simple and clearcut at the start—simply arrest the wretched fellow and take him back to Salutai—but questions of rank, jurisdiction, and command had started to tangle things, as such questions usually did when they arose.

As now. The three enlisted people in the small half-shelter of the outpost were all too aware of him standing close behind them. Perhaps they thought he had come up here to conduct some kind of an inspection . . . it reminded the grand marshall of the time when . . .

He went off into some of the pleasanter rooms of memory, reviewing some of the happier events of his long, long life and long career. This process went on for some time, with no loss of enjoyment. Grand Marshall Beraton had to bring himself back sharply from mere reminiscing. He hadn't come up here to be effectively alone just to do that. He had to concentrate sternly on duty, for the situation was perhaps grimmer than almost any that he had ever seen. Thousands of innocent civilian lives, not to mention military, hung in the balance . . . all because of the evil of one man.

The grand marshal's meditations on Prince Harivarman's treachery were threatening to lead him into reverie again, when they were violently interrupted. A berserker flying device, probably on some kind of a recon mission, came skimming in low over the base, then arrogantly hovered almost directly above the surface headquarters building.

It seemed a direct challenge. It was too great an outrage, coming on top of strains and stresses old and new, some of them going back two hundred years. It was unendurable. The grand marshal snapped out an order to the three enlisted Templars who were gaping at the enemy beside him.

The young non-com's voice was quakey, but he got the words out. "Sir, our orders are not to fire, unless they fire first."

Beraton leaned forward, a century and more of decisive command telling him what to do. He seized the small control unit of the launcher himself, and took a blast at the foe. He saw the fiery dart of the small missile spring up from the launcher itself, some forty or fifty meters from the half-sheltered position where he and the Templars crouched. Saw the dart fly up, only to be deflected, hurled aside by some invisible force like a ray of light reflected from a mirror.

Then the berserker blasted back.

Beraton was flung down on his face; the young men around him, better protected in their suits and helmets than he was, were less affected. The next thing he knew, the berserker was gone, flown away, and people in combat armor were turning him on his back, arguing among themselves whether he should be moved.

Where the launcher itself had been, some fifty meters distant atop a low building, there was now only a smoking crater.

Grunting imperiously, clutching at their arms, he pulled himself to his feet.

"Sir, you'd better wait. We'll call a medic—"

"I need no medics, dammit. Back to your post."

* * *

He had needed that shock, it seemed, or something like it, to clear his mind. As his mind cleared from the concussion, it seemed to go on clearing, until hours, days, perhaps years of cobwebs had been swept away. He saw truth now in glaring daylight. The truth about the goodlife villain, that made him no longer fearful of the swarming evil in the sky. Duty called. Seldom if ever in his life before had that call, that message, come so clearly and unequivocally to Grand Marshall Beraton.

It took him less time than he had expected to locate Captain Lergov. So things usually went when one's duty had been understood clearly, when worries about nonessential difficulties had been abandoned.

Lergov was just coming up a stair from the third underground level to the second when Beraton intercepted him. The grand marshal guessed that the near miss on the surface had sent the timid captain down temporarily to a shelter still deeper, if one not necessarily really safer.

Well, there would be no more of that.

"Captain, I require your assistance."

The stocky man, who had once seemed to Beraton to possess a kind of impassive courage, but now seemed only secretive, replied: "Certainly, sir. What can I do?"

"Come this way. We can discuss it as we walk."

"In a moment, sir." And the captain turned away briefly. It was a way he had of putting off a grand marshal's requests and even orders: finishing some detail of his own. This insolent habit had never really struck Beraton as forcibly before this moment as it did now. This moment's delay was used by Lergov to leave his precious subordinate, Mr. Abo—the grand marshal had never had much use for most politicians—in charge of his precious and utterly useless communicator. But Beraton let the irritation pass now. He had something much more vast on his mind.

Lergov looked about apprehensively when the two of them had reached the surface, and took note of the newly devastated building nearby. But for the moment things were quiet again, and the captain only asked: "Where are we going, Grand Marshall Beraton?"

Beraton was already leading the way toward some nearby staff cars, all of them apparently so far undamaged. He spoke crisply over his shoulder: "We are going to arrest the traitor. You and I were sent here to do that. It is our duty, and we should have faced up to our duty long before this moment."

Captain Lergov stopped. It was a dull dead stop. His eyes had a stunned look, as if he were the one who had an aching head.

"Arrest the traitor, sir?"

"To arrest General Harivarman. Yes. He is the man we have come here to arrest. We are going to obey our orders and take him into custody."

Lergov said: "Grand Marshall, he is . . ."

"He is what? Speak up, man, if you have anything to the point to say."

"He is, he is protected, sir. It doesn't seem likely we can just, just . . ."

"Well, we are not protected, whether we sit here like cowards or go about our duty like men. When in doubt, Captain, proceed to do your duty. There's an axiom that will carry you through." Beraton's head had suddenly begun to hurt abominably, and for a moment he could see at least two Lergovs in front of him. But willpower helped him straighten his vision out.

"Sir. In my opinion we cannot simply go out there and . . . there is the matter of coordinating the dragoons' defense. Our soldiers are scattered . . ."

"Scattered in the face of the enemy, while you want to hide in a shelter. Captain, I am giving you a direct order. Get in this car. Take the driver's seat; I shall ride in the rear."

"Sir, you are tired, you are hurt."

"I am not hurt. I am perfectly capable."

"You are injured, wounded, sir. Grand Marshall, I must with all due respect refuse to . . ." There Lergov stopped again, staring with disbelief at the drawn pistol that had suddenly appeared in the grand marshall's fist.

That fist was trembling a little now, but only partially with age and weariness. "Mutinous scum!" Beraton roared. "Hand me your sidearm!" He snatched it from the other's trembling hand, knowing proudly that the heavy weapon in his own was staying level with murderous steadiness. "I'm placing you under . . . no. No, by all the gods, I'm not arresting you. You'll have one chance yet to redeem yourself, and why should you sit safe in a buried cell while better men and women die up here? Get in the car, and drive!"

Chapter 17

Chen stared at Hana. Even after the shocks of recent days and hours, her mere presence here at the Fortress still jolted and astonished him.

The implications of her presence began to come upon him only gradually, in the moments after the first shock.

His response to her greeting was not entirely happy. "What're you doing here?" he demanded.

While Olga stared at the two of them in silence, Hana looked around, then grabbed Chen by his spacesuited arm and pulled him aside, a few steps down a narrow catwalk nearby. It was a passage among exposed structural elements, where it seemed likely that they would be able to count on at least a few moments of relative privacy.

"I'm doing the same thing here that you are," Hana said to him then. "They had me locked up on the ship, but now I'm free."

"Locked up."

"Yes, of course." Hana gave her head a rapid little shake, her usual way of expressing the opinion that someone else was being unnecessarily slow. "The prime minister's security people rounded me up near the capital shortly after the Empress was killed. Of course I didn't even know at the time that she was dead. Neither did you. But now they think that we had some connection with it." And she favored Chen with her familiar little conspiratorial smile.

Chen nodded. The gesture was not really a sign of agreement or belief, only that he understood what she was saying. A few days ago he would have taken at face value just about anything that Hana might have said to him. But no longer.

As if she sensed some change in him, Hana's own manner now turned mildly accusing. "What've you been doing since you got here, Chen? What're you up to now?"

Olga, who was hovering near, was looking as if she might at any moment remember that Chen was officially still her prisoner. But before she intervened in the conversation, one of the dragoons who had separated himself from the main group that was still on the next lower terrace came up a nearby stair to Hana. The manner of this soldier's approach was not that of a guard approaching a prisoner, but rather that of a private addressing an officer—in recent days Chen had become familiar with both attitudes.

"Uhh," said the soldier. It was a tentative sound, made in his throat as he approached Hana hesitantly. Chen had the strong impression that his next word was going to be "Ma'am."

Hana turned to him with annoyance. "You guys figure it out, can't you? Let me alone for a minute."

The soldier nodded silently, turned and walked back toward his group, obediently leaving her alone. Hana, as soon as the young man was gone, turned back to Chen and saw how he was looking at her. Quickly she offered an explanation: "Some of them seem to think I'm someone important, just because I was kept locked up in a private cabin—but never mind about that. What's been going on here? Where did these berserkers come from?"

Chen studied her. Hana's clothes, the only civilian garments on anyone in sight, were worn and dirty-looking. She had evidently not had an easy time of it, traveling the kilometers between here and the Salutai ship at the docks. But the clothes Hana was wearing now had been expensive garments once, not the kind Chen was used to seeing her wear. She had no spacesuit. Neither did any of the dragoons in sight. Of course, so far the Fortress's life support systems were still working beautifully, and no one needed spacesuits. So far.

"I don't know where the berserkers came from," said Chen.

"And what've you been doing?"

He started to open his mouth to tell his old friend Hana about his meeting with the Prince, but the words died somewhere inside him before they could be spoken. "Surviving," he said instead. Definite suspicion had been born.

Olga, looking increasingly suspicious herself, and ill-at-ease at being so outnumbered by dragoons, was hovering nearer and nearer to Chen and Hana.

"This is Olga," said Chen, turning to make the belated introduction. "She and I came out here trying to find some heavy weapons."

"So did we," said one of the two other Templars who had been visible among the diffuse group. Evidently drawn by the sight of familiar uniforms, they had been approaching slowly. Both of them looked worn and shocked. The Templar who had just spoken went on: "But someone's already hauled it all away, what little heavy stuff there really was out here."

Chen turned back to Hana. "So, the security people grabbed you on Salutai and locked you up. But why did they bring you here?"

She accepted the question coolly. "They had some idea of confronting the Prince with me, evidently. Trying to make it look as if we had some deadly conspiracy going, and he was in on it—it's all really stupid." She paused. "Of course, now . . ."

"Now what?"

"Well. I hate to credit it, but it looks now as if the Prince may have turned goodlife."

"Prince Harivarman?"

Chen had been about to ask Hana about Mr. Segovia's face on the communicator screen, but the accusation against the Prince—and coming from Hana herself of all people—had temporarily blasted Mr. Segovia entirely out of Chen's thoughts. Before he could refocus, Hana was off in a different direction.

"Tell you what, Chen. Let me go down there and talk to these people for a few minutes. I'll see if I can get them to organize themselves a little better, so we can all do something constructive together. Don't you and your friend go away."

"We won't," said Chen mechanically.

With a parting smile Hana moved away from them, going down another stair to talk to the dragoons.

Olga stepped up beside Chen as the other young woman departed. Olga said: "She's supposed to be their prisoner? She doesn't act like one."

"No, she doesn't," agreed Chen.

Most of the dragoons were now gathering in one place, making a knot of people on the next terrace down. The two Templars, who appeared to be wandering around rather dazedly, had now rejoined the gathering there. Chen saw that the dragoons were now moving the communicator. Maybe they were hoping for better reception. Hana was embedded in the group, talking to them. At this distance Chen couldn't tell what she was saying, but a couple of the soldiers were now repositioning the communication device so its screen was no longer visible where Olga and Chen were standing.

"Where'd you meet her?" Olga muttered suspiciously.

Chen sighed. "On Salutai. Of course. It was a kind of a political club. We were supposed to be working to get Prince Harivarman recalled to power. And now she's trying to tell me that the Prince . . ."

Chen broke off. His memory had suddenly shown him the tall robot pacing in pursuit of him, with Prince Harivarman's voice calling him, booming from its speakers. The Prince, goodlife. Goodlife. But no, it couldn't possibly be.

"Huh." It sounded as if Olga disapproved of organization on Prince Harivarman's behalf. Or maybe she was only envious again, of people who had time and opportunity to make up things like political clubs.

Chen said suddenly: "Come on. Let's move over this way just a little. I want to try to see something."

The two of them, with Chen for once in the lead, did a little climbing, maneuvering around and behind some structural supports, the titanic bones of the Fortress, that stood exposed here in the immediate vicinity of the firing range. In a few moments Chen had reached a point from which it was possible to see the communicator screen once more.

"What is it?" Olga asked, hanging on his shoulder from behind. "What's wrong?"

Chen got one more good look at the communicator's screen, before someone in the group around it turned a control on the device and the screen went blank. But even after that the man's voice still issued from it. At this distance, most of the incoming words were indistinguishable, but the tones of the voice still came through. And Chen was more than ordinarily good at remembering voices.

"I think I know the man," said Chen, "that one they're talking to."

"So. Who is it?"

"His name's Segovia . . . Olga, I don't like this. I think we'd better move on."

"I'm not crazy about it either," Olga admitted. "There're no weapons here anymore, and those people are all disorganized. They're going to get themselves wiped out, one way or another. All right, come on."

Olga sounded jumpy, which was natural enough after what they had been through already. She added, as they climbed back to the catwalk: "If I could signal to those two Templars—but maybe I can get them on their suit radios afterwards."

And she moved off at a quick pace, heading away from the firing pits, with Chen right on her heels. Hana must have been keeping half an eye on the two of them, or else she had someone else doing so, for they had gone only a little distance when Chen heard Hana's voice calling after him.

Chen said: "Ignore her. Let's keep going."

Three seconds later a sound, as of a struck gong, reverberated through the structural beam beside his head. It was not quite like any sound that Chen had ever heard before, yet there was something hideously familiar in it. For the second time in a few days, he knew that he was being fired on.

Less frightened than outraged at Hana's treachery, Chen turned and fired back, almost blindly, the carbine throbbing in his hands as it projected missiles. Olga's handgun blasted. Then the two of them ran again. When shots sounded around them they stopped again, crouching behind girders to return fire. Chen caught only quick glimpses of dragoons, and couldn't tell if he had damaged any of them or not. He saw Hana herself appear briefly, back near the pit, then drop out of sight as if she might have been hit.

Olga was running again and he turned and followed her, putting distance and angles and walls and more girders between themselves and the dragoons. There were shouts behind them, but no more shooting.

He fled on, following Olga's moving back. He counted the steps of his flight for a while, trying to estimate the distance they had come from the firing range, and then gave up. He had no idea where they were going now. All he was certain of was that now two sets of powerful enemies were after them.

* * *

The only faction that wanted to keep them alive—unless he was willing to trust what a berserker had said, calling his name in a Prince's voice—were the Templars, who were still holding out around the base. An intermittent thunder-rumble of fighting from that direction testified that the base was indeed still holding out, that it was the only place where they might find help, and also that trying to reach it might well be suicidal.

When they had put more than a kilometer between themselves and the range, Chen and Olga stopped for a brief rest, then drove themselves on. Chen worried and worried at the question of why the machine

that had pursued him should have called on him in Prince Harivarman's voice. He could come up with nothing that seemed very satisfactory in the way of an explanation.

All the fountains were still running in the plazas that they passed, though the plazas were empty of people. Very few flyers or groundcars appeared to be in use anywhere in the City, and the temptation to borrow another one was correspondingly reduced. Olga and Chen passed several wrecked vehicles, one of them in particular looking scorched, as if something other than a mere accident had brought it down.

Here and there people were starting to look out of their doors and windows. Some of the civilians called out questions when they saw Templars passing. Olga called back their ignorance, and advised the questioners to stay in shelter as much as possible. The drinking founts in the plazas and the streets still worked, the air remained normally breathable. For whatever reason, the berserkers were not attempting to destroy all life within the Fortress.

"He's made a pact with them, that's what he's done," Olga muttered. "A regular damned treaty, to save his neck."

Chen refused to believe it. Even if the Prince were willing to turn goodlife, why should berserkers care to make a treaty with him, a powerless exile?

But if they were here, as they were, with a military advantage, which they appeared to have, why were they not slaughtering the human population, expunging life from the Fortress down to the bacteria in the air and in the scattered gardens of imported soil? That was what berserkers did, whenever they had the chance.

Not this time, though. Something was different about this time.

Olga wanted to know more about the man on the communications screen. Why had Chen thought the presence of that particular man's face on the screen so important?

"Because now that man is one of Roquelaure's dragoons, and when I saw him before, he wasn't." Chen paused. It seemed to him that an interior light was dawning. It was an ugly light. "Or at least he didn't have his uniform on then."

Olga had no immediate reply. Chen wondered if the look she gave him meant she thought that he was crazy.

Chen tried to explain. "I thought then that he was one of us, our group. Or at least that he was sympathetic to our cause, to get Prince Harivarman set free."

Olga had evidently given up trying to understand about Segovia. But she had an opinion on the Prince: "They should have kept that man locked up. Instead they let him run around the Fortress wherever he wanted."

"I know." When Olga looked at him, Chen amplified. "The commander took me along in her staff car to meet him. I think she wanted to see, well, if we might have been in any sort of plot together. We weren't, of course. She took me way out in the boondocks to meet him, into the airless area. Somewhere near the outer surface of the Fortress, it must have been."

They hiked on, heading in the general direction of the Templar base, but not hurrying to get there or taking the most direct route. They paused to rest fairly often.

"Why'd you join the Templars, Olga?"

"Getting away from things." She didn't sound anxious to give details, and Chen didn't press for them. He understood how that could be.

They had been under way again for only a few minutes when a civilian called to them from an apartment window, wanting to know what news they had. The man told them that the regular broadcast news channels were useless due to some kind of sophisticated jamming, and a thousand rumors were circulating among the people. They gave the man what information they could, and were invited in for food. At that point both Olga and Chen discovered that they were ravenous. And despite their frequent rest stops, the hours of exertion and danger had taken their toll in exhaustion. Feeling like fugitives, the two of them took a welcome chance to sleep, one at a time, in the apartment, keeping their suits on and weapons ready. Like everyone around them, they were still breathing ambient air, which seemed as safe and as steady in pressure as ever.

* * *

Several hours later, Olga and Chen were on their way again, passing now through an area of the City that had so far been practically untouched by the fighting. Here the abandoned vehicles looked intact, but there was no use in tempting fate, no need for vehicular speed. During their last rest stop Olga had voiced a vague plan of trying to circle around to the other side of the base and get in that way. But she had had no answers to Chen's questions about details. If he thought about it, he realized they did not really know where they were going. He tried to think about it as infrequently as possible.

In a plaza larger than almost any other they had passed, they came upon an ancient monument that Olga explained was dedicated to the legendary Helen Dardan. Fountains played at the four corners of the plaza, and in the center the bronze statue of Ex. Helen stood. It was a statbronze statue dominating the plaza, from its place atop a monument with marble steps. Helen the Exemplar, Helen of the Radiant. Helen Dardan, ruler and patron of the Dardanians during the time they had built the Fortress. Helen's time, as Olga explained, was centuries before Sabel's. But everybody knew that.

Shortly after leaving the plaza of Helen's monument, they came to what had to be the entertainment district. Here as elsewhere in the City most doors and windows were shut, and almost all businesses were closed. One that wasn't had a sign in front proclaiming it the Contrat Rouge. Recorded music wafted bravely out from the relative dimness of the shadowed interior.

Olga and Chen looked at each other. "Maybe they've got some information in here," she suggested.

Chen licked dry lips. "Sounds like a good idea. We can find out."

Inside, the dimly, romantically lighted place appeared at first to be completely empty of human beings. There were only the bartenders, squat, half-witted service robots devoid of any information aside from the service menu. These appeared ready to serve customers, but the humans could all too readily imagine the robots sullenly ready to revolt, to follow those other machines outside.

Chen suggested: "How about if we have a beer? I've got a little money."

"I can't see how it's going to do any harm."

They moved to settle in a booth. "Hey, Olga, look," The optics in the translucent walls produced their

bizarre effects.

Then they both jumped to their feet, weapons at the ready. One other booth, a little distance from their own, was not empty. They moved down the aisle toward it.

The sole occupant of the other booth was a woman, hollow-cheeked, brown-haired, and well preserved for her age, which was obviously advanced when one looked at her closely. Her garments were considerably more flamboyant than the clothes most oldsters wore.

Chen lowered his carbine again. "Hello, ma'am? Are you all right?"

The lady did not appear greatly surprised to see them, though otherwise she appeared to be alone in the Contrat Rouge. Her smile gleamed up at Chen, easy perfection in a carefully made-up face. "Right enough. Time some customers came around." The voice was careful and clear, that of a performer, but the words ran into each other here and there; the lady, sitting with a glass of dark liquid in front of her, was pretty obviously not on her first drink. "Sit down, kids. Care to join me? I'm Greta Thamar."

The name meant nothing to either Olga or Chen. But they looked at each other, sat down, and ordered beer from a robot which had been following them since they entered.

Greta Thamar ordered another drink. The robot waiter looked into her eyes with careful lenses, and went away without acknowledging her order.

When the beer arrived, almost immediately, her ordered drink was not on the tray with it. Nor did the robot offer explanations.

The aging lady said: "I'm drinking more than is good for my worn mind." And she laughed. It was quite a young laugh, almost carefree, with something incongruous about it. Now she appeared to notice her companions' weapons and spacesuits for the first time. "You two are in the service, hey?"

"Yes ma'am," said Olga, and then asked deferentially: "Have there been any berserkers around here, ma'am?"

"They were here. Oh yes. But I never saw them." Greta Thamar looked vaguely into the distance. "The Guardians wouldn't believe me. But I knew nothing of what Sabel was doing with the berserkers."

"The Guardians, ma'am?" That was Olga, puzzled. She looked at Chen. Everyone knew that the Guardians had existed centuries ago.

And Sabel? Chen thought, lowering his beer stein with a grateful sigh. Was that supposed to be a joke, or what? It was his turn now to look at Olga, but he got no help from her.

"We meant just recently, ma'am," he offered. "Have you seen any berserkers near here today?" And then on impulse, Chen added another question: "Do you know where Prince Harivarman is, ma'am?"

"I've met the man. Can't say I was all that impressed. I met a Potentate once." Chen had some vague idea of what that meant: another ghost-name out of ancient history.

Olga, as if consulting some oracle, asked the elderly woman: "Do you know if the Prince is goodlife?"

Greta Thamar only looked at her, the perfect smile frozen on her face.

Olga, as if defensively, went on: "If the Prince is really working with the berserkers, then he's goodlife. If he's the one who found a way to let them get aboard the Fortress somehow."

Chen broke in. "Maybe they've been here ever since the last attack hundreds of years ago."

"It was here," said Greta Thamar. "Georgicus found it, out in the far corridors somewhere. There might still be more of them out there. He did all the things they said he did, but I was innocent."

Olga spoke, answering Chen. "Impossible. The way all those rooms and corridors were searched in Sabel's time?"

"You weren't here when all that happened."

She had to admit the truth of that. "Well, no. But I had to learn the history when I joined the Templars. And if the Prince is under arrest, it must be for something."

"Oh, really? What about me? Does that mean I'm guilty too?"

She looked at him. "I'm not entirely convinced you're not."

"Love is the answer," said Greta Thamar suddenly. That was a line from a song, Chen realized suddenly, as the lady began to sing the rest of it under her breath.

He was ready for another beer, and here were two, no, three bartender robots coming along the aisle in a row. Business must be looking up. The booth-optics showed them as three kinds of dancing animals.

And then he caught a clear glimpse of the moving figures, through lined-up openings in booth walls, when they were still two curving aisles away. More of them now. Not dancing animals at all but dragoon uniforms, men and women moving with weapons ready. As Chen gaped at them through the walls again, they turned into prancing nymphs and satyrs.

Chen wasn't waiting to see what might come next. Olga, alarmed at his alarm, was right beside him as he hit the deck. He started to cry a warning to Greta Thamar, but there was no time. The shooting had already started.

Olga was quicker with her pistol than Chen was with the more awkward carbine, and he admitted to himself that she was probably more effective too. Gunfire started and rose at once to a crescendo. Greta Thamar ducked under the table, crying her alarm.

The booth walls burst in at Chen, spattering him with bleeding images and melted plastic. He stayed on the floor, pinned down under heavy fire. He tried to use his carbine and it quit on him; out of ammo, he supposed, though he had earlier reloaded from a spare pack on Olga's gunbelt; fortunately most Templar small arms used the same load.

Crawling desperately from under one table to under another, under the sagging booth walls, he realized that he had lost sight of Olga now. Things looked very grim. He thought he heard Hana calling out, but with the firing there was no way to hear actual words.

He crawled under another booth, saw boots running in front of his face, and lay still. Then he crawled until an open door came into view, and he jumped up and ran for the door and tripped and fell before he

reached it.

Someone shouted behind Chen, and he rolled onto his back. A dragoon only five meters off was leveling a rifle or weapon of some kind at him.

With a great crash, what looked like one whole side wall of the place burst in. The dragoon who had been on the verge of shooting Chen was gone, wiped away like a bad drawing. Something tall and metallic, something that moved three-legged through walls and space alike was coming on. Another dragoon, gun blazing, was flung out of its way.

In mad terror, Chen crawled away, got to his feet, and fled again. The Prince's recorded voice boomed after him in an appeal. Scrambling desperately, Chen made his way out over and through the rubble of the tavern's demolished outer wall. He could hear dragoons, or someone, still screaming behind him.

The familiar, three-legged shape was close behind. It followed Chen out into the street and there swooped down on him.

He scrambled and tried to run from it. Useless. He fell again. It closed in on him, loomed above him—reached out an arm for him. He saw it open the internal compartment of its torso, to tuck him into it, and he knew why it had been chosen for this job.

—and at the last moment, a blinding explosion in front of Chen. He saw the monster toppling, headless, and then for the second time in as many days he saw and heard no more.

Chapter 18

The Templar staff car came gracefully over the low patio wall and then, its gravitic engine gammalasered into little more than a lump of exotic lead isotope, it fell like a ton of scrap metal inside the barren courtyard of the building that had once been occupied by Georgicus Sabel.

The berserker whose beam had disabled the staff car did not bother to pursue it to final destruction.

Lescar, out doing a little scouting on behalf of his master, had been watching the vehicle suspiciously for the last minute, as it had moved erratically up one street and down another, hopping now and then over walls and buildings as if whoever controlled its movements were uncertain of his goal. Then a hovering berserker half a kilometer away had evidently become suspicious of the odd maneuvers also, and had fired. Lescar, his own inescapable berserker escort close at his heels, was at the wall of Sabel's old lab within a minute, and over the wall a few moments later. It had occurred to him that some of the Prince's friends might possibly be aboard that staff car, in which case they would certainly need help. Or on the other hand it might be, happily, some of the Prince's enemies who occupied the car, in which case there might be a good chance for equally appropriate action.

Lescar dropped over the wall and looked at the crashed vehicle. None of the occupants seemed yet to have stirred. For a few moments longer there was still no movement. Then one of the doors on the vehicle's undamaged side opened slowly, and a short man in the uniform of a captain of Prime Minister Roquelaure's dragoons emerged. He straightened up slowly and stood there dazed for a moment. Then he turned back to the car and dragged out an old man whose uniform was also military but of a different color. The chest of the old man's tunic was almost fully covered by a multitude of decorations, and there was blood on the uniform jacket now, among the ribbons. The old man could not support himself. It

appeared to Lescar that he was still breathing, but not much more than that.

Carelessly the short man let the old one fall. Then he rummaged inside the disabled car again, and came up with a handgun. Then he started to aim the weapon at the collapsed old man. And only then—perhaps the dragoon captain had been a little dazed himself—did he at last catch sight of Lescar watching him. The captain's eyes widened, as if he recognized Lescar, though Lescar did not know him. And he started to change his pistol's aim, toward the small, gray, unarmed man.

"We are not alone," Lescar informed him almost calmly. Lescar's escort had not followed him over the wall directly, but it was now walking into the courtyard on its six legs, through a doorway almost behind the other man.

The eyes of the short captain almost twinkled: You can't fool me like that. And he was starting to aim his gun again.

"The Prince will want to talk to him!" said Lescar hastily to his escort; his master had deputized him—loathsome thought—to be able to give certain types of orders to the machines whenever the Prince himself was absent.

The dragoon captain was still aiming carefully, when the metal arm came over his right shoulder from behind and took him by the wrist.

* * *

Lescar on returning with his single prisoner to the Prince's new headquarters—a villa not unlike the last, though somewhat larger—found the Prince himself engaged in an electronic dialogue with the controller. A considerable amount of test equipment, more elaborate than anything the Prince had been able to use as a lonely field historian, had been set up in this new courtyard and was already in use.

Harivarman looked up when Lescar entered, walking behind a prisoner with his arm in a sling. When the Prince saw who the prisoner was, he silently put down his electronic tools and came forward, staring.

"He was riding in a staff car," Lescar reported succinctly, "with Grand Marshall Beraton. But the old man is dead."

* * *

The commuters' tube-car must be less crowded than usual this morning, thought Chen. It must be so, because how otherwise could he have dozed off, as he must have, sprawled out here on a pile of something or other aboard the train, lulled by its familiar swaying motion. And around him this morning his fellow students and other assorted travelers were being unusually silent. Because . . .

An approximation of full memory returned with a jolt, causing Chen to open his eyes quickly. He was lying on his back, indeed riding on some kind of a vehicle, jouncing faintly up and down on an improvised padding of what looked like household quilts and blankets. He had even been tied to his transportation, kept from falling off by a single strap around his waist.

The vehicle was something new to Chen's experience, a little too small to be a regular car. With considerable difficulty Chen finally recognized it as the carriage of a sizable self-propelled gun—the barrel would be retracted, somewhere under him, and he wondered what would happen if it had to be unlimbered suddenly.

He was being carried along a City street of the Fortress at a pace no swifter than a fast walk. Indeed, walking not far from Chen's side at the moment, keeping pace with his transport, was a coverall-clad woman whose face he felt he ought to recognize, though he had never seen her in person until this moment. Finally he identified the widely-known countenance of the Lady Beatrix. Well, he had never seen her depicted in a coverall.

He must have murmured something, for the former Princess turned to him. When she saw that Chen was awake, she came to walk closer at his side. Meanwhile the gun carriage, almost the size of a staff car, rolled on, as far as Chen could tell under the control of no one at all.

The lady said, matter-of-factly: "I see you've decided to be with us again. How do you feel?"

"I'm all—ow." Chen had tried to sit up, and felt evil reaction in several parts of his body at once. "What happened?"

"Colonel Phocion shot the head off a rather large berserker, just as it was about to pick you up and tuck you away into its cargo compartment. And you were stunned, either by the blast or when a lot of various parts fell on top of you. But we couldn't see that there was anything much damaged; I think you're going to be all right now."

"Colonel Phocion?" He'd heard the name somewhere; yes, someone who was supposedly gathering up heavy weapons.

"That's right. Using this seventy-five millimeter you're riding on now. That's the colonel walking up ahead of us. You'll get to talk to him presently; right now we're rather intent on getting to another part of the City. Shooting tends to draw berserkers." And the lady looked up and around warily; right now the sky immediately above them was empty, the street around them free of menace.

Squinting down past his feet, in the direction he was being carried, Chen could see a lone figure pacing about half a block ahead of the gun carriage. The figure was clad in what must be heavy combat armor, just as in the adventure stories.

Then Chen suddenly remembered something else. "Olga. Where's Olga?"

The lady looked at him. "I don't know any Olga. Where was she when you saw her last?"

"Back in that tavern. Oh. Ow."

"Then I'm afraid the outlook mightn't be too good for her."

"Oh." He loosened the strap that held him, and made himself sit up.

The lady walked closer, put a hand on Chen's arm. "We can't turn back now, I'm afraid. And we've already come quite a distance from that tavern. So, you're Chen Shizuoka. My name is Beatrix, if you haven't already recognized me."

At any other time, Chen would have been overwhelmed at meeting the former Princess. Now he could only ask: "Where're we going?"

"Following the colonel. He seems to know what he's about."

Chen looked ahead again, at the impressive figure in heavy combat armor. Chen supposed that anyone who put that on became impressive. Even from the back the striding figure was imposing, with portions of the armor's outer surface streaked and blackened, suggesting recent exchanges with berserkers.

The self-propelled gun that Chen was riding on had evidently been programmed to follow the colonel along the street, rather like a giant robotic bulldog. The colonel turned a corner now, and presently it followed.

Chen took a quick look back, then another. "Something's following us—"

The Lady Beatrix glanced back too. "That's only our robotic ammo trailer."

"Ah." It was maintaining a distance of about a half block behind.

The lady raised her voice a little and called out. The striding figure in heavy armor stopped at once and turned, then gestured the robotic gun carriage to catch up. It accelerated, then stopped itself when it had nearly reached him.

"Colonel Phocion," said Lady Beatrix, "this is Chen Shizuoka, as we thought. As you can see, he's awakened."

A flushed, almost chubby face and graying temples showed behind the colonel's heavy faceplate. "I want to talk to you," he told Chen grimly, his voice coming from a small speaker below the transparent plate. "But right now we have to keep moving." He glanced back, into the curving grayness of the sky. There were a few more berserkers to be seen swarming there, well to the rear of the three traveling people. "Our firing brought them out," the colonel added. "It's a little easier to fight them out near the outer surface. They're not there to interfere," he added with a brief grin.

With a stride forward, and a motion of his hand, the colonel set the gun carriage in motion again.

"The outer surface?" Chen asked. He was feeling somewhat better already; not quite ready to jump down off the carriage and walk, but improving.

"The colonel's been out there almost since the attack started," the Lady Beatrix explained. "I just joined him within the hour, when he came back into the interior."

"Sir, how do you fight them if they're not there? I mean—"

"Communications, young man," the colonel said. "There'll be a human fleet arriving here sooner or later. I've been knocking out communication channels. When the fleet comes, the berserkers won't necessarily be able to tell that it's arrived."

"I see, sir," said Chen.

"Do you? There's something I'd like to see, something that's made me very damned curious about you," He stopped again, stopped his following machine, and demanded: "Why was that damned berserker robot running all over the City bellowing your name? Did the Prince truly send it after you? If so, why?"

"I know he really sent it," said the Lady Beatrix. "I've told you that. And also that he wouldn't tell me anything."

"Yes, My Lady," said Phocion, and almost bowed. Then he glared at Chen. "Well?"

"I have no idea, sir. Ma'am. I've talked to the Prince but once, and that briefly. Very briefly. I think he believed me, that I had nothing to do with the Empress being killed."

Phocion glared at him some more, shook his head and muttered, and finally led on again. He turned off the street presently, and down a narrow alley through which the gun was barely able to pass. Then he stopped, kneeling beside a large but hardly conspicuous utility box. From somewhere Phocion's armored hand had produced a key, which he now used on the box to open it.

"Not supposed to still have this," he muttered, regarding the key. "Legacy of my tour as CO here. Looks like it's just as well I kept it."

From a tool box underneath the gun carriage, Phocion took out an optical device that he plugged into a communications nexus in the utility box. The small holostage on the device lit up, and a moment later Prince Harivarman's head was imaged in it. The Prince's face turned sharply toward them—apparently he was aware that at least a tenuous contact had been established. His image was streaked with noise. Its lips moved, but no sound was coming through.

Phocion swore. "Can see just about everywhere, except where I really want to—the Prince, and the base—damned berserkers still have a pretty effective communication curtain up around those areas."

"If he wants to communicate with us, he can order it opened, can't he?" The Lady Beatrix stared at her husband's image, as if she could not imagine what to make of it.

At last some words came through clearly. Harivarman, recognizing the colonel at least, shouted a question: "Do you plan to go on attacking the berserkers?"

"Of course I do."

"At your own risk. I can't give you immunity. I need the berserkers active to keep myself from being arrested. Do you mean to arrest me, Colonel, when you can?"

Phocion shouted back. "I've got myself in trouble, General. But I draw the line at being goodlife. Or tolerating them."

The Prince was speaking again, words that were now half-obscured by noise. ". . . real evidence, look in the outer regions. Around where I was working . . ." There was a little more; Chen thought he heard the word "surrender," but he couldn't tell the context now. Noise had increased.

Presently there was nothing left on the screen but noise. Colonel Phocion turned it off. He looked at the others.

"The outer regions," said Lady Beatrix.

Phocion turned to her. "What do you think of that? Now am I supposed to shoot him or try to help him?"

"He's still my husband, Colonel. If you're going to try to shoot him, you'd better start now, with me."

"I don't know if I am or not, blast-damn it all! Should I be out to get him? Is he out to get the rest of us? Has he told the berserkers not to shoot at me? Not so's I've noticed it!"

"Actually he might have, I suppose. They've not been pursuing us, though you did blast one of them."

Phocion sighed, a heavy sound on radio. "All right, the outer regions, then. At least there'll be fewer berserkers out there, I expect. A better chance for us to be picked up alive, if and when a human fleet arrives. But I don't know where he was working, and he expects us to find some kind of evidence there."

"I know that," said Chen. "I've seen the place. I remember what the numbers were, the coordinates. They were on the screen in the staff car that we rode in."

"Then we go there," said the lady. "I don't know what kind of evidence we'll find, but we can try."

"I'm afraid I do know," said Phocion, in a low voice.

The others looked at him. He amplified: "I'm afraid I let them in."

Phocion, having made that remark, was willing to explain it. Beatrix insisted that they keep moving, starting for their new goal at the outer surface, even as he spoke.

They found a twisting service ramp that went that way, wide enough to accommodate the heavy gun. They tramped downward through dim light, the weapon and the ammo trailer following. The colonel said: "A few months ago I was in something of a bad way. Knew I was going to have to leave my command here, being eased out—there comes a time in a man's career when he knows he has no more to look forward to. A point when he realizes that the rest is certain to be all downhill.

"However, not by way of excuse: explanation. I've hesitated to tell, naturally, but I've got to tell someone. I might cash in at any minute here, and no one would ever know. . . . What it comes down to is that about three standard months ago I accepted a bribe. Yes, in my capacity as base commander. Of course the idea of berserkers never entered my mind then. Didn't know who the people were, who talked to me. Never thought of goodlife. . . . This sector had been peaceful for so long—however, as I said, this is not meant as an excuse.

"Smuggling was what I thought I was selling myself out for. Supplying certain civilian needs—I even had the bastards' word for it that Templar people would not be involved at all . . . and I took their word . . . I don't know who they were. Shows you how far down I was. I was going to set myself up for a pleasant retirement . . . well.

"Point is, there was a time three months past when a landing—of anyone, or anything—could have taken place on the outer surface of the Fortress, and none of us in here any the wiser. For all I know now, it could have been berserkers."

"But if they arrived only a few months ago, that means—" The Lady Beatrix, Chen could see, was struggling agonizingly to think clearly. He could also see what she must be thinking. If Colonel Phocion's suspicions were correct, it meant that the Prince's claim of having discovered ancient berserkers was almost certainly false.

"I still believe him. I can't help it," the lady whispered finally.

At the lowest landing of the descending ramp that was still in atmosphere, the colonel brought them to a large locker containing spacesuits—it was, he told them, where he'd stashed his gear when he came in from his first raid on the outer part of the Fortress. Just beyond the airlock leading down, the vehicle that he had used then waited. Presently the three of them, the self-propelled gun and ammo cart following as before, were traversing airless passages on the way back to the outer surface.

They were three quarters of the way there when Beatrix, driving, brought the flyer to a quick halt. She reported that she had sighted several mysterious figures in the distance. They had looked like a Templar or Templars, moving quickly.

Chen at once thought of Olga. But assuming she had survived the shootout in the tavern, how could she be here, ahead of him, already?

It seemed to Colonel Phocion, and he said so, that Commander Blenheim might have managed to get some people out of the base to carry out some unknown mission in these parts. "I expect she might have managed that. I could have, and she's a smart gal."

They waited for a few minutes, the flyer's lights out, in almost total darkness. There were no indications of Templars, berserkers, or any other entities being in the vicinity.

Cautiously, they proceeded.

* * *

Lescar, in one room of the latest villa—this one large and gloomy—was listening in surreptitiously as Harivarman and Lergov began a strained conference. The Prince had given Lescar other orders, meant to keep him out of the way, but as the servant had observed to himself on certain occasions in the past, there were some times when looking out for his master's welfare required him to do things even against his master's will.

Lergov was so far being allowed to sit at his ease. He began the conversation by informing the Prince rather stoically that he was worried about his fate.

There was some Dardanian music playing, from some small part of the electronic equipment that was now strewn everywhere. Prince Harivarman liked to listen to it. He ignored Lergov's worries about fate, and took a more positive approach: "What do you want, Lergov?"

"What do I want, sir? I'll settle for very little at the moment. To get out of this with a whole skin."

The Prince nodded slowly. "I happen to want something too, Captain. I wish to be Emperor." (And Lescar, listening secretly, drew in his breath.) "And not only that, but to be Emperor with some security—something I fear would be hard to manage as long as Prime Minister Roquelaure is still a force to be reckoned with."

"All quite understandable, sir."

"I am glad you are easy to converse with, Lergov. And I am certain you have other talents. To arrange things as I want them, I could use the help of a dependable man like yourself."

There was a pause, in which Lergov swallowed. "What will Your Honor trust me to do?" he asked at

last.

"Tell me a few things, to begin with."

"What do you want to know, sir?"

Here Lescar turned and looked around him, bothered by the feeling that perhaps someone else was also listening in. But there was only the house around him, as far as he could tell. And the scattered items of electronics. Of course, someone might be listening.

Prince Harivarman was saying to the captain: "Tell me about the prime minister's involvement in the Empress's assassination. And what part you played. I know some of it already."

Lergov told a strange and revealing story. Of his adoption, on Salutai, of the identity of a liberal protestor named Segovia, and of his role as liaison with a woman named Hana Calderon, also in the employ of the secret police. She had played the role of chief provocateur, making sure there would be a demonstration before the Empress by a pro-Harivarman protest group, who could then be blamed for her assassination, as could the exile himself.

Harivarman signaled to the controller, as always at his side. He gave some low-voiced orders. Lescar could not hear what they were, but he could see Captain Lergov turn pale.

Harivarman asked his prisoner: "But it was Roquelaure who was really behind it all?"

"Oh, absolutely, sir."

The Prince said, as another berserker entered, bearing tools: "You will not be harmed here. The machines are only going to see to it that you stay where I can find you later, while we are—busy."

Lergov said: "I appreciate your consideration, sir." He sat still, quivering a little, as the machines began to weld together a steel cage surrounding him.

"Think nothing of it," said Prince Harivarman. Then he asked the captain: "Aren't you afraid that I've been recording what you've told me?"

The captain looked as if he didn't know whether to take that seriously or not. "Perhaps you have been too long in exile, Prince. I have in the past concocted a good many recordings of my own. Some of them were even truthful—perhaps I should say genuine. Truthful is a word that . . . but the point is that no one fears supposed secret recordings anymore, or even pays them much attention. Faking them indetectably, creating false images and voices, has become too easy . . . sir, if you don't mind my asking, when are you going to let me out?"

"An important message for you, life-unit Harivarman." It was of course the controller speaking.

Harivarman stood up. "See that this little welding job is finished. I'll hear the message elsewhere."

Chapter 19

The procession was a small one, moving first under the grayish interior sky that held the Radiant, and

then turning down into the airless regions, out of sight of any sky at all. It consisted of two human beings, both garbed in heavy combat armor, who rode together in a commandeered flyer, and two berserker machines that alternately paced or glided beside the humans in their vehicle.

Lescar was occupying the right front seat of the flyer, riding beside the Prince who sat at the controls. For the first long minutes of the journey, neither man had anything to say.

When Lescar spoke at last, his voice was weary. It sounded even in his own ears like the voice of someone ready to give up, as if his body and his mind were numb. He didn't want to sound like that. It was a matter of pride, which sometimes seemed to be all he had left. "Where exactly are we going, Your Honor? Would it make any sense for us to be going now back to the place where you—performed your research?"

Harivarman sounded tired too, drained of emotion. "All I'm doing right now is following the controller. It says it'll take me directly to the people who have just landed. Sounds like more dragoons, from the description it gives of them."

It seemed odd to Lescar that his master would want to go directly to confront more dragoons, but the servant did not consider it his place to comment on anything so obvious. There were other points, though . . . "Your Honor? I dislike to bother you with questions."

"Go ahead."

"Our latest domicile. Even a bigger house than the last . . ."

". . . even though there are now only two of us. Yes, what about it?"

"Why, Your Honor, were there so many suits of heavy combat armor stored in a basement locker? There were few enough other furnishings of any kind, and the house had not been occupied recently."

His master, face obscured by moving shadows, gave him a quick look. "The place was some old Templar officers' quarters, evidently, and lucky for us . . . what's that trying to come on the screen?"

The small communicator on the panel in front of them had lit up, and a moment later it presented the face of Commander Anne Blenheim. Somehow, for the moment, the channel was free of static.

"Harivarman. There you are." The commander paused for a moment, as if she were now uncertain what to say with the momentary chance to talk. "Have you any knowledge of what's happened to the grand marshal—?"

"Beraton is dead. Captain Lergov can be picked up when you get around to it." The Prince tersely specified the location. "Send some people with tools. He's welded into a sort of cage. I thought that would keep him out of trouble for a while."

Anne Blenheim was ready to say more, but the conversation was broken off, by blast after blast of recurrent noise.

"Your Honor, I recognize this corridor. We do appear to be going to your research site."

"So we do." And the Prince sounded uncharacteristically, fatalistically calm. They were already very close to the place, and the controller could hardly have brought them along this path by chance.

"Your old field workshop, Your Honor . . ." Then Lescar stiffened. "There's someone inside." There were lights glowing within the plastic bubble, though it was not inflated and the walls sagged limply. Through them a lone figure could be seen moving about.

"I think I can guess who it is."

The figure came now from inside the shelter to stand in its doorway, limned by the interior lights. It too was wearing combat armor. Lescar squinted, trying to recognize the make of armor, the small painted insignia, and the face inside the helmet. The armor was not Templar, of that much he could be certain.

As Harivarman eased their vehicle to a stop at a distance of ten meters or so from the shelter, Lescar caught sight of the small one-seater combat ship parked, almost wedged in a corridor, at a little distance on the shelter's other side. It was not a craft with interstellar capability, but it could fight powerfully at close range.

"Who can it be, Your Honor?"

"I expect it's Prime Minister Roquelaure."

Lescar couldn't tell if his master was serious or not.

Without saying anything further, the Prince reached up and closed and sealed his helmet, which he had been wearing open. Lescar silently followed suit.

Then Harivarman was the first to break radio silence. He spoke again, in words that were obviously not directed at Lescar beside him: "You are a little earlier than I feared you might be, Prime Minister. Waiting for your arrival was becoming something of a strain."

"Ah." The voice that answered was well known in all the Eight Worlds and beyond, instantly recognizable. "Thank you. I naturally got here as fast as I could when the courier ship reached my little squadron. Fortunately we were on maneuvers in what turned out to be an ideal place to get the news. Everyone must be ready to respond instantly when there's word of a berserker attack. Everyone, of course, but goodlife." The figure in the doorway made a small mocking bow.

"Or even goodlife, sometimes."

"Ah. Can it be then that you have grasped something of the truth?" The figure in the doorway of the temporary shelter shifted its position, standing now in such a way that its face became partially visible through the helmet faceplate. The prime minister's physical trademarks—Lescar had seen him before, at a distance—were a wild shock of hair that for many decades had been just touched with distinguished gray, a nobly chiseled profile, a tall spare frame. He was naturally elegant, as the Prince was not.

"I think I have by now grasped something of the truth," the Prince replied. "Are you ready, then, for me to know it all?"

The flyer was still drifting lightly in the corridor, with the two powerful machines that were its escort maintaining themselves at a little distance from it, one on each side.

If Roquelaure was in the least perturbed by the arrival of his enemy with an escort of berserkers, he was doing a marvelous job of concealing the fact. "Yes, I should say that the time has now arrived for you to

know the whole truth . . . I've just been looking over your diggings here, General. Fascinating. And I rather expected you'd be along. With metallic companions."

"Ah? And still you came unaccompanied to meet me?"

"Yes." The figure in the doorway still seemed perfectly at ease. "You see, a lot of people—most of the Imperial Guard included—might have a hard time dealing with certain aspects of the truth that I wanted to discuss with you."

"I can well believe that."

"So, I left my soldiers back with my two ships. Where we landed, a couple of kilometers from here. They have things to do there to keep them busy. And they admire my almost foolhardy courage in coming here without their protection. Actually what I really wanted was this little talk with you alone. Lescar is there with you, of course—how are you, Lescar?—but he doesn't count."

The Prince said: "Speaking of little talks, I've just been having one with Captain Lergov."

"My dear man. I thought you said you were concerned with truth."

"I believe I heard some of it from him, this time. The Templars are going to hear it too."

The prospect of revelations by Lergov seemed to have no more effect on the prime minister than did the presence of berserkers. Roquelaure only shook his head inside his helmet. "Ah, truth. A chancy business, trying to deal with that."

* * *

In another large airless chamber half a kilometer away, Chen Shizuoka was watching Colonel Phocion patch another communications connection into another utility box. The journey to this point from the interior had seemed a long one to Chen, though in fact it had taken only minutes.

The self-propelled gun, here with them in near-weightlessness, was clinging to a wall nearby.

Phocion had stopped frequently en route, at each stop using his old base commander's key, gaining secret access to the various communications networks of the Fortress. He kept looking as they progressed for traces of berserkers or other people in areas nearby.

This time his caution was rewarded.

Beatrix moved closer, watching with the men as a picture appeared. The colonel had managed to get a remote video pickup working in an area ahead of them, where preliminary readings had indicated there was activity.

"It's Harry," she breathed, as the picture steadied. "Harry, and . . . ahh."

* * *

Harivarman ordered the controller to send its companion machine scouting, to check whether Roquelaure had really come here unguarded and alone.

"Affirmative," the controller replied, after the other machine had been gone for a couple of minutes, searching the nearest other rooms and corridors.

The Prince said: "You appear to take your status as my captive quite calmly, Roquelaure. Are you so sure I won't give the word to my machines and have you pulled to pieces?"

"I'm not sure what word you will give them. Are you sure of the result?"

"Yes, I think so. I've had some time to get used to it, watching berserkers operate at close range, having their power at my command. Have you ever tried to imagine, Roquelaure, what it would mean to a man to have the berserkers' control code in his hands?"

"Oh, I have tried to imagine that, yes. I too enjoy power, you know. Though perhaps my imagination is not as fertile as yours, Prince. Anyone would be able to make certain deductions about you, though. Anyone who saw you come here escorted by berserkers. And I suppose that you have been holding the surviving inhabitants of the Fortress hostage until you are somehow provided with a getaway ship."

"It would seem that I can now count a prime minister among my hostages."

"It might seem so to you. But in reality, it is not so at all." The prime minister turned his head calmly to one side, looking directly at the controller. "Your berserkers are not going to harm me. Because, you see, I am not here at all. It is a mere phantom that discourses with you. The real, historical meeting between us is coming a little later, in an hour or so. I am going to catch you without your escort then and kill you, earning the cheers of billions of people by eliminating the despised arch-goodlife. Meanwhile my men will be defeating the berserkers and driving them off, saving the precious population."

"I see. I hadn't realized all that . . . but did I understand the first part correctly? At the moment, you are not here?"

"That is correct."

Prince Harivarman shook his head. "My eyes and instruments assure me that the image of a somewhat overly handsome assassin before me is not a creation of holography. So explain that claim to me, if you will."

"Tut. You could be sued for that, calling me an assassin. You seem to be projecting all your own little flaws upon me . . . I mean that my presence here, tolerated by the machines escorting you, is going to be invisible to history—because only I will survive to tell humanity about this talk that we are having. This moment of history is going to be exactly what I say it is. No more and no less."

"Oh indeed?" Harivarman sounded as confident as ever, but suddenly very curious. "And how do you plan to accomplish that? What bluff is this?"

"No bluff at all, my dear Prince." Roquelaure gestured offhandedly at the controller. "How long would you say our friend here, and its auxiliary machines, have been on the Fortress?"

"I have seen evidence that they have been here for several centuries. They were even filmed with dust—"

"No. Not at all. There you are wrong. Dust can be arranged. Several months is much more like it."

Harivarman smiled slightly. He raised his control device near the window at his side. "You have carried

off some amazing bluffs in your career. But not this time. Can you see this? What would you say this is?"

"Tell me. I want to hear you tell me."

"Very well. Suppose I tell you that I have here the control code for the berserkers?"

"I would say that you are making a false claim—as you have often done. You are not only goodlife, and an assassin, but a fraud!"

"I can demonstrate the fact."

"Oh indeed? Can you? I look forward to witnessing the attempt."

Harivarman thumbed his device. At the same time he spoke in a changed, commanding voice.

"Controller, seize that man. Do not kill him, but bring him here, closer to my vehicle, away from his own."

It was a direct order, if Lescar had ever heard one.

The controller ignored it. The tall metal shape, still incongruously trailing cable-ends, was clinging to a wall approximately equidistant from Harivarman and the prime minister. And it did not move a centimeter.

The Prince triggered his device again and again. "Seize him! I order you!"

The controller turned another one of its lenses toward the Prince's vehicle. But it did nothing else.

Roquelaure had begun to laugh when the Prince's first order was ignored. He was still laughing. It was a very confident and a very ugly sound.

The Prince slowly lowered his hand, the radio device still in it. He sat there, his helmet shadowing his face from Lescar's gaze. When his voice came into Lescar's headphones again it sounded more numb, more utterly defeated, than Lescar had ever heard it sound before. "But . . . it worked. I found them . . . I opened the controller unit . . ."

Lescar bent over his seat, hands raised to his own faceplate. But that did not shut out their enemy's laughter, or their enemy's voice. Those came through inexorably.

When he could stop laughing, the prime minister said: "Do I need to explain to you what the real controlling code is? Even berserkers can be—well, no, unlike humans they cannot be corrupted. Unlike people, they remain forever true to their basic drive. But they are honestly, openly, ready to be bought."

"You've bought them, then . . . there's only one kind of coin they'll accept."

"Of course. They have an apt term for it themselves: life-units. For a rather large number of human life-units, scheduled for future delivery, I have actually concluded the bargain that the bad side of your own nature was finally able to wrestle your better nature into making. After I'm Emperor, they can have Torbas . . . it can be arranged. It'll never be anything but a poor and unprofitable world anyway."

"There are a hundred million people living on Torbas."

"Pah. Closer to two hundred million. But there is no audience here, don't bother posing. History is going

to be blind to your words and actions from now on, General. Two hundred million life-units. Useful coins. Oh, it occurs to me. Are you recording my voice perhaps, my image? Will it disappoint you too cruelly if I tell you that it will not matter?"

"I know," the Prince said, slowly, after a long pause. His voice was hardly more than a whisper. "No, I'm not recording. But will you tell me something? One thing more. For my own final—knowledge."

"Well, possibly. What would you like to know?"

"Colonel Phocion. Did he—?"

"Did he know that it was berserkers he was letting aboard his Fortress? Gods of all space, no. There must have been rather a lot of them—I came past their lander back there; it's rather larger than I had expected. Well, guarding against human treachery of some kind, I suppose. The way the wicked world is, one can hardly blame them for that."

"But Phocion . . ."

"Look, Harivarman. The man knew he was being corrupted, but he thought it was only some simple smuggling operation, accommodating certain simple civilian needs—all he had to do was create a blind spot or two in the outer defenses for a time—no trick at all for someone with his knowledge of the system."

"Why do you do it, Roquelaure? You already have wealth, power, everything—"

"I do it because it pleases me to do it. And why should I not use the world and what's in it to please myself? If the universe has any higher purpose than that, I've yet to observe it . . . and the Imperial Throne will be mine now, and that will please me, more than most people are capable of imagining. But you can imagine it. That's why I wanted to tell you. The Imperial Throne, my friend. I will have it, I've made up my mind to that. I'll take it with the berserkers' help if that's the only way that I can manage it."

The Prince's lips moved. The words were hard to make out. He said: "Well. I had hopes . . ."

"Of being the next choice for Emperor yourself. Mounting from the berserkers' backs. Announcing the discovery of the control code"—a chuckle—"after of course some judicious use of berserker muscle to punish your local enemies." Roquelaure had to pause, to laugh again. He was really enjoying this. "It must really have been quite a strain, for you, to turn goodlife . . . but no, Prince. No. The berserker throne is mine, not yours."

And a giant's hand seemed to come slamming against the back of Lescar's seat. The Prince, who could still act quickly enough to take him by surprise, had gunned his flyer into maximum acceleration. The corridor ahead came leaping at Lescar; the shelter with Roquelaure in its doorway, that had been to one side, had already been whisked from sight.

But the try was too slow by far to avoid the controller's weapons. Lescar, saved by his heavy armor, felt and saw the hurtling vehicle torn and blasted open around him. His armored body hurtled free. A huge bone of the Fortress, an exposed major structural element, came flying at him. The impact was a glancing one and Lescar came through it essentially unhurt.

At first the Prince was a suited figure tumbling beside him. Then the Prince was grabbing his arm, helping him get his bearings, pulling him on. Somewhere. And once more there came the flare of heavy weaponry

around them . . .

* * *

Beatrix, when she saw on the screen her husband's vehicle shoot forward, tried to rush out from her position of relative safety, to do what she could to help him, to be with him at least. She heard the blast of the berserker's shot echoing down the corridor just outside. The scene she was watching remotely could be no more, she thought, than half a kilometer away.

She had almost reached the door when figures in heavy armor, Templar armor, sprang in from the corridor to hold her back. A tall man gripped her with both hands, then savagely made a gesture that would be understood by any veteran of space warfare, fiercely commanding her to radio silence.

Then the astonishment of the Lady Beatrix was compounded. Looking into the faceplate of the man who held her back, she recognized the craggy features of the Superior General of the Order of the Templars.

Chapter 20

When the heavily armored figures of Harivarman and Lescar went scrambling away from the wreckage of their flyer, they were out of the direct line of sight of the controller, and it forbore to fire after them again.

Nor did the controller attempt to pursue the man who had claimed to be able to control it, whose orders it had in fact been following for days. As far as Beatrix could tell, watching the small screen, the berserker was intent now on nothing but observing the prime minister.

Prime Minister Roquelaure, launching himself out of the plastic workshop's doorway with an expert push and drift, moved through the low gravity toward his own small fighter ship. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw the controller following him slowly, and he said to it: "I see that you understand. It does not matter that he should get away for the moment. If he does not take his own life somehow now, I'll soon take it for him."

The radio whisper of the berserker's reply, relayed by pickups in the room where it was speaking, came thinly to the ears of the people watching in the chamber half a kilometer away. "You are right in that it does not matter. I will kill him soon."

The man who was alone now with the controller paused. It was taking him long unhurried seconds to drift the last few meters to his fighter. "No. No. I see that after all you do not understand. You can kill any number of life-units you wish to in the Fortress, as long as you save a few to testify to my heroic rescue of them—all as we discussed. But in the case of the badlife Harivarman, it will be better if you are not the one to kill him. I want to claim his death for myself; that will make me something of a hero. If later it appears that he was killed by a berserker, that could cast doubt on my story. It could even tend to make him a martyr in the eyes of many badlife units. Do you know what a martyr is? We don't want that."

* * *

In the gloomy chamber five hundred meters away, Beatrix met the eyes of the SG; slowly, with a last warning gesture, he let her go. More gestures had already been exchanged between him and Beatrix's

companions. Working in almost complete silence, though for the most part in darkness, Phocion was tapping into the communications nexus again, this time in a more elaborate way, making multiple connections for some purpose that Beatrix could not immediately comprehend. People in Templar armor, with more electronic equipment in hand, were helping him.

Other armored Templars were, with an agonizing effort for speed and silence at the same time, unlimbering Colonel Phocion's heavy gun and turning it out into the adjoining corridor.

* * *

"We?" the controller asked.

"You and I. I was speaking of our common interest." The tiny figure of the prime minister on the small screen had now finally reached the open hatchway of his fighter. Roquelaure was pausing there, casually, seemingly nerveless, with one hand on the door before he got into the ship.

The controller had come drifting—just as casually—after him, and was now no more than three or four meters away. The other berserker machine still had not returned; it had evidently found other business of some kind to occupy it.

How many more berserkers were there, Beatrix wondered, still prowling in the interior of the Fortress, surrounding the beleaguered base? A few of them had been destroyed. There might be forty left. Even if the controller were fired upon, destroyed, it was very unlikely that they would all simply go dead. No. Berserkers did not work that way. . . .

The tiny berserker on the screen was asking the prime minister: "How far do you consider that our common interest now extends?"

"To a considerable distance . . . don't tell me that you're having second thoughts about our agreement. If you don't go on with it now, all that you've done so far would make no sense from your point of view. So far you have helped me, but I have not helped you. You have derived no substantial benefit."

"My computations on the subject of our agreement have not changed in the slightest."

"Good." Roquelaure turned his head, about to enter the ship.

"And you have helped me. With the badlife unit Harivarman now effectively out of the experiment, most of my immediate goals have been achieved."

Roquelaure's head turned back. "But you have killed very few so far. Your long-range goals, all the life-units—"

"Two items remain."

"Excuse me for interrupting." The prime minister sighed faintly; irony, of course, was lost. "All life on the planet Torbas will be yours, in time, as I have promised."

"All life everywhere will be mine, in time." The words were spoken with mechanical certitude; they seemed to hang endlessly in space, all along the airless, ancient Dardanian corridors.

Roquelaure drew a deep breath. "No doubt. Then what are the two items that you say remain? I warn

you, you will jeopardize my ability to help you, if you do anything here that will interfere with my accession to the—"

"You have already given me almost all the help that I have calculated on receiving from you."

For the first time the attitude of the small armored figure appeared other than casual. "I have pledged you my future help, which we agreed will be to my advantage to give. But I have as yet actually given you almost no—"

The controller interrupted again: "I repeat, you have given me almost all that I expected to receive. The first item I still want here is the destruction of all life within the Fortress. The second is information. Most of the information I sought here I have obtained, but a few data remain. To gain them I intend to observe your reaction when you learn the truth."

This time Roquelaure paused for a longer time before he spoke. "If you are bargaining for more—"

"The time for bargaining is past. I will now disclose the truth to you, that I may observe your reactions to it. The life-unit Prince Harivarman was calculating in error during its dealings with me. Yet it was closer to the truth than you have realized. A very important experiment has indeed been in progress here, concerning the means by which a dangerous opponent can be controlled, perhaps rendered totally harmless and ineffective, by nothing more than transmitted information. A control code, as you have termed it. I was able to convince the life-unit Harivarman that he was conducting such an experiment upon me."

"I know that. All according to our agreement. I—"

"Even as I convinced you that you were bargaining successfully with me."

There was silence. To that statement Prime Minister Roquelaure appeared to have no answer at all.

"The truth," said the controller, "is that I am the experimenter. You, like the life-unit Harivarman, are a subject. From the beginning I have been testing you and your fellow life-units. We that you call berserkers have long sought a control code for the life-units that call themselves humanity, particularly the more prominent leaders among them. It has been an exceedingly difficult search, and I must compute that the results so far are still uncertain. It is doubtful that any perfectly reliable code exists or can as yet be devised for the control of units of such complexity.

"Nevertheless, much information of great importance has been gained. What does a human life-unit seek that I can offer it? With a very high degree of probability, it seeks power over other life-units of the human type. Also, the motive called revenge must be classed among the most powerful inducements. Also greed, the affinity for wealth as measured in your systems of finance. Using the proper codes of information, I have been able to control you both.

"You, life-unit Roquelaure, have been a very valuable subject."

The prime minister was only a second, perhaps two seconds, of fast movement away from being inside his fighter with the hatch slammed closed behind him. But he did not move. He whispered something. Beatrix was unable to make it out; perhaps the berserker heard it and recorded it as information for study.

Around her in the room from which she watched, the feverish maneuvering of equipment was going on,

still in a strained effort to maintain silence. The clang of tools or weapons, the tread of feet, might come traveling through the fabric of the airless outer Fortress corridors to alert the keen senses of the berserker to their presence. She yearned to grab the Superior General and make him tell her what was going on—but she did not dare distract him now.

The people who were making the effort with the gun and with the communications equipment did not appear to need her help. This is my job just now, she thought, looking at the screen. I am a witness.

The controller went on: "My purpose from the beginning of this experiment, from the first indirect bargaining between your emissaries and mine, has been to measure what temptations of power may best serve as a control code for the badlife. To gain such information, the sacrifice of a number of machines, the tolerance of the continuance of many lives, has been very much worthwhile. Now I wish to observe your reaction to this information. Express your reaction to me."

Roquelaure did not speak or move, and in a moment the berserker spoke again: "It is very probable that you are the final fully aware human victim—that the remaining human life-units here on the Fortress will still be without understanding of the situation when I destroy them. And I have already observed the truth-reaction of the unit designated Prince Harivarman."

At last the prime minister had found words. "A control code. I see. All right, maybe you were playing that sort of a game. If so, you've won. But there's no reason why we can't conclude a bargain now. Now that you've studied our reactions. And I could still go through with—"

The berserker had evidently heard enough from its last subject. The screen flared brightly, almost dazzlingly in Beatrix's face. At the same instant light flared in from the corridor, leaping from a distance to wash around the newly positioned heavy gun. At the same instant the communication channel went silent.

But the small screen cleared again, almost at once, to show the berserker turning quickly. At last, in the flare of its own weapon, it had sensed the watchers' presence down the corridor.

It turned with weapon hatches opened, just in time to take the full charge of Colonel Phocion's cannon on the front surface of its upper body. When the small screen had cleared again, there were nothing but fragments of berserker to be seen.

The men around the communication connection were thrown into frenzied activity, but not yet of jubilation. At least radio silence could now be broken. "Get the gun in here again! They might come this way. We don't want to block the corridor."

They?thought Beatrix. The SG had her by the arm again, a lighter grip this time. His voice came clearly to her over the standard channel. "We've been working with the Prince for a couple of days now, ever since I got here; tell you the details later. We've just duplicated one of the controller's signals to its troops—we hope—and transmitted it from a hundred places within the Fortress. If all goes well, they're going to be heading for their lander, and—get it in here!" This last was directed at his troops, who were once more in a frenzied scramble, this time to get the gun turned again and drawn back into the room with them.

It crowded the dozen people in, backing them against the walls at back and sides.

And then the waiting resumed. Presently, at a gesture from a Templar at the communicator, radio silence was reimposed.

And then Beatrix was distracted, to her vast relief, by the entrance of her husband, Lescar's figure beside him. Even in the darkness she could be sure at first look that it was the Prince. She knew his movements, his size, his . . . for minutes she did not worry particularly about what might be going on outside.

The Prince and the SG exchanged firm handgrips. Then all were quiet again, waiting. Bea could feel her husband's armored hand resting on her suited shoulder.

At last there came a faint sound from outside the room, that of an impact made faintly audible in vacuum by its passage through beams and frame and floor and boots and bones. And only seconds later there began a massive but almost silent passage through the corridor outside. It was a parade of sizable machines, gliding through near-weightlessness in darkness, heard only through their occasional contact with the framework of the Fortress.

At last the parade had passed. Colonel Phocion turned on his remote video gear again, and drew in a signal from the proper pickups. The fourteen people huddled in silence were able to watch the approximately forty berserkers enter their lander and reembark, gliding off silently into space.

"The outer Fortress defenses are all yours, Commander," said Phocion's voice. And Anne Blenheim's face appeared briefly on the small screen, acknowledging.

The Lady Beatrix heard the Superior General giving orders to the gunnery officers of his two ships.

And then the night of the universe outside the Fortress was lit by titans' flares and forges. Seconds later there came sound again, the wavefronts of blasted particles hitting the outer surface of the Fortress hard enough to awaken roaring resonance in stone and metal, sending an uproar rolling and rumbling on toward the far interior.

The Prince was first to put it into words: "Got 'em. Got 'em. Got 'em. I think we got every last bloody one."

Epilogue

There were two statbronzes now in Monument Plaza. That of Exemplar Helen, of course, was there as it had been for many centuries, portraying a beautiful woman wearing a toga-like Dardanian garment, with a diadem in her hair. But now, facing Helen from an equal dais, stretching out an arm toward her as if to offer comradeship and support, was a metal version of the late Prime Minister Roquelaure, who had been martyred a year ago in the latest heroic saving of the Fortress.

The statbronzes prime minister had one striding foot planted on a berserker, half-crushed but still malevolent. There were critics of the statue who said he looked like he was standing on a chair.

* * *

The new statue had been unveiled some months past, but a formal rededication of the plaza was to take place today, and the Emperor himself was coming to preside. Some thousands of people, including a few old friends and acquaintances, were waiting for a chance to greet him.

Two enlisted Templars, who happened also to be husband and wife, had been excused from regular

duties for the occasion, and were at the moment standing at one side of the plaza, the less prestigious side today, content to be lost and ignored amid a nervous crush of comparatively minor dignitaries.

Olga was wondering aloud how the Emperor's appearance might have changed since they had seen him last. Chen, married almost a year now, wasn't paying all that much attention to his wife. A politician not far away was trying out a line of a written speech, muttering it under his breath. Chen with his good ear for voices could understand:

"How strange, how fitting, how lovely, that these two men, fierce enemies for most of their lives, should have put their differences aside to save the Fortress and the lives on it."

"Yes, fitting enough I should say, the way that it worked out." This last was a remembered voice, closer at hand, and Chen turned to see Colonel Phocion, a little fatter, dressed in the natty civilian garments of retirement. "It's been a long time. How are you two kids getting on?"

On the far side of the plaza, Commander Anne Blenheim had just got out of her staff car, to greet the Superior General, who had already arrived. Then both Templar officers disappeared into a throng of their fellow dignitaries gathered around the temporary speakers' platform.

There was a muted loudspeaker announcement, sounding across the plaza: "The ship bringing the Empress and the Emperor has docked."

The official story was, of course, that Prince Harivarman had known from the beginning, from the moment he discovered the controller, that the berserkers were out to play a clever trick on the inhabitants of the Fortress, to run some kind of a test. He had immediately suspected something was not as it seemed, and had played along with the enemy to find out what—and because he knew that if he did not, all life in the Fortress would be immediately destroyed.

Chen personally doubted very much that the official story was completely true. Still, it was probably not that far off, as official stories went. And someone had to be Emperor, or Empress, after all, and things could have turned out a whole lot worse.

But, as the Emperor himself officially admitted, it had taken Anne Blenheim's mention of an effective control code, during their meeting under the eyes of the berserkers, to trigger his next flash of insight. He had sent a berserker looking for Chen Shizuoka to try to assure himself of proof. But of course, without the heroic self-sacrifice of the late prime minister—

The late prime minister had millions of political followers who were still alive, and it was necessary for them to be appeased.

Someone else was approaching Olga and Chen and Colonel Phocion. A small gray man, plainly dressed, but the heads of the knowledgeable everywhere across the plaza turned in his direction. Though he still tried, Lescar could no longer manage to be inconspicuous.

Looking uncomfortable in the public eye, he said to Chen and Olga and the retired Colonel Phocion: "Emperor Harivarman would like to see a few old comrades in private. For a few minutes."

Commander Anne Blenheim, immediately after the berserkers' defeat, had been able to show evidence confirming the Prince's story: the Council order for General Harivarman's arrest, with her own and Harivarman's written messages to each other on it, as they wrote them in their silent, secret conference in those early precious minutes when no berserkers watched. She had decided in those moments to trust

the Prince, and from then on they had worked together as much as possible.

Even as the human survivors were playing along with each other now, honoring the late PM for political reasons, to appease his many followers.

"I must say the controller tried everything to fool me, even to the point of filming itself and its machines with dust."

Actually the Prince did suspect early on that something about this particular batch of berserkers was well out of the ordinary.

And he had also been wondering why the controller had failed to activate all of its forty-seven units at once when it had the chance, in that first supposed moment of perfect freedom, when it first moved to attack him and Lescar.

The offer of power, even if illusory, has proven well-nigh irresistible.

But it was not quite so.

The SG, alerted by warning relayed from the courier that had got away, had come onto the Fortress at once with what ships he had with him; had been able to land unobserved and unchallenged, thanks to Colonel Phocion's disruption of communications; had managed to use the communications system himself—who knew it better than the Superior General, after all?—to talk in scrambled messages with Commander Blenheim at the base, and through her had learned of the gamble she was trying to win with Harivarman.

Representatives of the whole Council, of all the Eight Worlds and of other human worlds besides, were at the Fortress now, taking part in this year-later ceremony. There were going to be a lot of speeches.

But they couldn't start until the Emperor and Empress were ready. And the Empress and the Emperor took time first to have a small talk with a few old friends.

Then Harivarman I, the Empress Beatrix at his side, moved out to give his speech.

Chen followed, watching from a distance, his young wife at his side.

Olga was looking at the newer of the two statues. "I don't think it looks like a chair, really," she said.