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The death-stars had come, and they had kept on coming for hundreds of thousands of years, falling upon the Earth, swept upon it by a vagrant star that had passed through the outer reaches of the solar system. They brought with them a time of unending darkness and cold. It was a thing that happened every twenty-six million years, and there was no turning it aside. But all that was done with now. At last the death-stars had ceased to fall, the sky had cleared of dust and cinders, the sun's warmth again was able to break through the clouds. The glaciers relinquished their hold on the land; the Long Winter ended; the New Springtime began. The world was born anew.

Now each year was warmer than the last. The fair seasons of spring and summer, long lost from the world, came again with increasing power. And the People, having survived the dark time in their sealed cocoons, were spreading rapidly across the fertile land.

But others were already there. The hjjks, the somber cold-eyed insect-folk, had never retreated, even at the time of greatest chill. The world had fallen to them by default, and they had been its

sole masters for seven hundred thousand years. They were not likely to share it gladly now.

1

The Emissary

As he came over the knife-edge summit of the bare rock-strewn hill and turned to descend into the warm green valley that was his destination, Kundalimon felt the wind change. For weeks it had been at his back, hard and dry and biting, as he journeyed from the interior of the continent toward its southwestern coast. But it was blowing from the south, now: a sweet soft wind, almost a caress, carrying a host of strange fragrances toward him out of the city of the flesh-folk down below.

He could only guess at what those fragrances were.

One was a smell that he supposed might be like that of the lust of serpents, and another something like the scent of burning feathers, and there was a third that he imagined was the smell of sea-things that have been brought in nets, angrily thrashing, to the land. And then one that might almost have been the smell of the Nest—the flavor of black root-earth from the deepest passageways below the ground.

But he knew he was deceiving himself. Where he was now could not have been farther from the Nest, its familiar odors and textures.

With a hiss and a jab of his heels Kundalimon signaled his vermilion to halt, and paused a moment, breathing deeply, sucking the city's complex vapors deep down into his lungs in the hope that those strange fragrances would turn him to flesh again. He needed to be flesh, this day. He was hjjk now, in soul if not in body. But today he had to put aside all that was hjjk about himself, and meet these flesh-folk as if he truly were one of them. Which he had been once, long ago.

He would need to speak their language, such few scraps of it as he remembered from his childhood. Eat their foods, however much they nauseated him. And find a way to touch their souls. On him, much depended.

Kundalimon had come here to bring the flesh-folk the gift of Queen-love, the greatest gift he knew. To urge them to open their hearts to Her. Cry out to them to accept Her embrace. Beg them to let Her love flood their souls. Then, only then, could Queen-peace continue in the world. If his mission failed, the peace must end, and there would be warfare at last between flesh-folk and hjjk: strife, waste, needless death, interruption of Nest-plenty.

It was a war that the Queen did not want. War was never an integral and necessary aspect of Nest-plan except as a last resort. But the imperatives of Nest-plan were clear enough. If the flesh-folk refused to embrace the Queen in love, to allow Her joy to bring gladness to their souls, then war would be impossible to avert.

"Onward," he told the vermilion, and the ponderous scarlet beast went shambling forward, down the steep hillside, into the lushly vegetated valley.

In just a few hours now he would reach the City of Dawinno, the great southern capital, the mother-nest of the flesh-folk. Where that race's largest swarm— *his*race, once, but no more—had its home.

Kundalimon stared in mingled wonder and disdain at the scene before him. The richness of it all was awesome; and yet something in him scorned this soft place, felt a dark and potent contempt for its

superabundance. Wherever he glanced, there was such lavishness as made his head throb. All that foliage, dewy and shining in the morning light! Those golden-green vines, madly profligate, climbing tremendous trees with lunatic energy! From the boughs of squat long-armed shrubs there dangled heavy red fruits that looked as though they could quench your thirst for a month. Thick, sultry bushes with furry blue-tinged leaves sprouted absurdly huge clusters of shimmering lavender berries. The grass, close-packed and succulent with bright scarlet blades, seemed to be offering itself eagerly for the delight of hungry wanderers.

And the gaudy flocks of plump noisy birds, pure white with startling bands of crimson on their huge beaks—the small clamorous big-eyed beasts scrambling in the underbrush—the little winged insects flashing wings of rainbow color—

Too much, Kundalimon thought, too much, too much, much much too much. He missed the austerity of his northern homeland, the dry sparse plains where a patch of withered grass was cause for song, and one met one's food with proper reverence, knowing how lucky one was to have this pouchful of hard gray seeds, this strip of dried brown meat.

A land like this, where all manner of provender lay everywhere about for the mere taking, seemed undisciplined and overloving. A sloppy easy place that had the look of a paradise: but in the final truth it must surely do harm to its unsuspecting inhabitants in the guise of benefit. Where the nourishment is too easy, soul-injury is the inevitable result. In a place like this, one can starve faster with a full gut than an empty one.

And yet this very valley was the place where he had been born. But it had had little time to place its imprint on him. He had been taken from it too young. This was Kundalimon's seventeenth summer, and for thirteen of those years he had dwelled among the servants of the Queen in the far north. He was of the Nest now. Nothing was flesh about him except his flesh itself. His thoughts were Nest-thoughts. His soul was a Nest-soul. When he spoke, the sounds that came most readily to his tongue were the harsh clicks and whispers of hjjk speech. Still, much as he would deny it, Kundalimon knew that beneath all that lay the inescapable truth of the flesh. His soul might be of the Nest but his arm was flesh; his heart was flesh; his loins were flesh. And now at last he was returning to this place of flesh where his life had begun.

The flesh-folk city was a maze of white walls and towers, cradled in rounded hills beside an immense ocean, just as Nest-thinker had said. It soared and swooped like some bizarre giant sprawling organism over the high green ridges that flanked the great curving bay.

How strange to live above the ground in that exposed way, in such a dizzying host of separate structures all tangled together. All of them so rigid and hard, so little like the supple corridors of the Nest. And those strange gaping areas of open space between them.

What an alien and repellent place! And yet beautiful, in its fashion. How was that possible, repellent and beautiful both at once? For a moment his courage wavered. He knew himself to be neither flesh nor Nest and he felt suddenly lost, a creature of the indeterminate mid-haze, belonging to neither world.

Only for a moment. His fears passed. Nest-strength reasserted itself in him. He was a true servant of the Queen; how then could he fail?

He threw back his head and filled his lungs with the warm aromatic breeze from the south. Laden as it was with city-smells, with flesh-folk smells, it stirred his body to quick hot response: flesh calling to flesh. That was all right, Kundalimon thought. I am flesh; and yet I am of the Nest.

I am the emissary of the Queen of Queens. I am the speaker of the Nest of Nests. I am the bridge between the worlds.

He made a joyous clicking sound. Calmly he rode forward. After a time he saw tiny figures in the distance, flesh-folk, looking his way, pointing, shouting. Kundalimon nodded and waved to them, and spurred his vermilion onward toward the place called Dawinno.

A day's ride to the south and east, in the swampy lakelands on the far side of the coastal hills that lay inland of the City of Dawinno, the hunters Sipirod, Kaldo Tikret, and Vyrom moved warily through the fields of luminous yellow moss-flower. A heavy golden mist shimmered in the air. It was the pollen of the male moss-flower, rising in thick gusts to seek the female fields farther to the south. A string of long, narrow phosphorescent lakes, choked with stringy blue algae, stretched before them. The time was early morning. Already the day was stiflingly hot.

Old Hresh the chronicler had sent them out here. He wanted them to bring him a pair of caviandis, the lithe quick fish-hunting creatures that lived in watery districts like this.

Caviandis were harmless, inoffensive animals. But not much else in this region was harmless, and the three hunters moved with extreme caution. You could die quickly in these swamps. Hresh had had to promise a thick wad of exchange-units to get them to take on the task at all.

"Does he want to eat them, do you think?" Kaldo Tikret asked. He was stubby and coarse, a crossbreed, with sparse chocolate fur tinged with the gold of the Beng tribe, and dull amber eyes. "I hear that caviandi is tasty stuff."

"Oh, he'll eat them, all right," said Vyrom. "I can see it from here, the whole picture. He and his lady the chieftain, and their crazy daughter, sitting down at table together in their finest robes, yes. Feasting on roast caviandi, cramming it in with both their hands, swilling down the good wine." He laughed and made a broad, comfortably obscene gesture, switching his sensing-organ briskly from side to side. Vyrom was gap-toothed and squint-eyed, but his body was long and powerful. He was the son of the sturdy warrior Orbin, who had died the year before. He still wore a red mourning band on his arm. "That's how they live, those lucky rich ones. Eat and drink, eat and drink, and send poor fools like us out into the lakelands to snare their caviandis for them. We should catch an extra caviandi for ourselves, and roast it on our way back, as long as we've come all this way to get some for Hresh."

"Fools indeed is what you are," Sipirod said, and spat. Sipirod was Vyrom's mate, sinuous and quick-eyed, a better hunter than either of the others. She was of the Mortiril tribe, a small one long since swallowed up in the city. "The two of you. Didn't you hear the chronicler say that he wanted the caviandis for his science? He wants to study them. He wants to talk to them. He wants them to tell him their history."

Vyrom guffawed. "What kind of history can caviandis have? Animals, that's all they are."

"Hush," said Sipirod harshly. "There are other animals here who'd gladly eat your flesh today. Keep your wits on your work, friend. If we're smart, we'll come out of this all right."

"Smart and lucky," Vyrom said.

"I suppose. But smart makes lucky happen. Let's get moving."

She pointed ahead, into the steamy tropical wilderness. Diamond-eyed khut-flies half the size of a man's head buzzed through the yellow air, trapping small birds with lightning swoops of their sticky tendrils and sucking the juices from them. Coiling steptors dangled by their tails from the branches of oily-barked trees, harrowing the black waters of the swampy lakes for fish. A long-beaked round creature with mud-colored fur and eyes like green saucers, standing high on naked stalk-like legs like stilts, waded through the shallows, scooping up struggling gray mud-crawlers with clumsy pouncing grabs of surprising efficiency. Far away, something that must have been of terrible size bellowed again and again, an ominous low rumbling sound.

"Where are all these caviandis?" Vyrom asked.

"By fast-flowing streams," said Sipirod. "Such as feed these filthy sluggish lakes here. We'll see a few of them on the other side."

"I'd be glad to be done with this job in an hour," Kaldo Tikret said, "and get myself back to the city in one piece. What idiocy, risking our lives for a few stinking exchange-units—"

"Not so few," Vyrom said.

"Even so. It's not worth it." On the way out, they had talked of their chances of running into something ugly here. Did it make sense, dying for a few exchange-units? Of course not. But that was how it was: you liked to eat regularly, you went hunting where they told you to hunt, and you caught what they wanted you to catch. That was how it was. They tell us, we do. "Let's get it over with," Kaldo Tikret said.

"Right," said Sipirod. "But first we have to cross the swamp."

She led the way, tiptoeing as if she expected the spongy earth to swallow her if she gave it her full weight. The pollen became thicker as they moved southward toward the nearest of the lakes. It clung to their fur and blocked their nostrils. The air seemed tangible. The heat was oppressive. Even during the bleak days of the Long Winter this must have been a land of mild weather, and here, as the New Springtime surged yearly toward greater warmth, the lake country lay in the grip of an almost unbearable sultriness.

"You see any caviandis yet?" Vyrom asked.

Sipirod shook her head. "Not here. By the streams. The streams."

They went onward. The distant rumbling bellow grew louder.

"A gorynth, sounds like," Kaldo Tikret said moodily. "Maybe we ought to head in some other direction."

"There are caviandis here," said Sipirod.

Kaldo Tikret said, scowling, "And we're risking our lives so the chronicler will have his caviandis to study. By the Five, it must be their coupling he wants to study, don't you think?"

"Not him," said Vyrom, with a laugh. "I'll bet he doesn't care a hjjk's turd for coupling, that one."

"He must have, at least once," Kaldo Tikret said. "There's Nialli Apuilana, after all."

"That wild daughter of his, yes."

"On the other hand, did he have anything to do with the making of her? If you ask me, Nialli Apuilana sprouted in Taniane's womb without any help from Hresh. There's nothing about her that's his. They look like sisters, that pair, not mother and daughter."

"Be quiet," Sipirod said, giving the two men a louring look. "All this chatter does us no good here."

Kaldo Tikret said, "But they say Hresh is too deep in his studies and his spells to spare any time for coupling. What a waste! I tell you, if I could have either one in my bed for an hour, the mother or the daughter—"

"Enough," said Sipirod more sharply. "If you don't have any respect for the chieftain or her daughter, at least show some for your own neck. Those are treasonous words. And we have work to do. See, there?"

"Is that a caviandi?" Vyrom murmured.

She nodded. A hundred paces ahead, where a swift narrow stream flowed into the stagnant algae-fouled lake, a creature the size of a half-grown child crouched by the water's edge, trolling for fish with quick sweeps of its large hands. Its purple body was slender, with a stiff mane of yellow hair standing up along its neck and spine. Sipirod beckoned to the men to be still and began to creep up silently behind it. At the last moment the caviandi, taken altogether by surprise, looked around. It made a soft sighing sound and huddled frozen where it was.

Then, rising on its haunches, the creature held up its hands in what might have been a gesture of submission. The caviandi's arms were short and plump, and its outstretched fingers seemed not very different from those of the hunters. Its eyes were violet-hued and had an unexpected gleam of intelligence in them.

No one moved.

After a long moment the caviandi bolted suddenly and attempted to run for it. But it made the mistake of trying to enter the forest behind it instead of going into the lake, and Sipirod was too quick. She rushed forward, diving and sliding along the muddy ground, leaving a track behind her. Catching the animal by the throat and midsection, she swung it upward, holding it aloft. It squealed and kicked in anguish until Vyrom came up behind her and popped it into a sack. Kaldo Tikret tied the sack shut.

"That's one," said Sipirod with satisfaction. "Female."

"You stay here and guard it," Vyrom said to Kaldo Tikret. "We'll go find us another one. Then we can get out of this place."

Kaldo Tikret wiped a clot of yellow moss-pollen from his shaggy muzzle. "Be quick about it. I don't like standing here by myself."

"No," said Vyrom, jeering. "Some hjjks might sneak up on you and carry you away."

"Hjjks? You think I'm worried about hjjks?" Kaldo Tikret laughed. In quick bold hand-movements he drew the stark outline of one of the insect-men in the air, the towering elongated body, the sharp

constrictions between head and thorax, thorax and abdomen, the long narrow head, the jutting beak, the jointed limbs. “I'd tear the legs right off any hjjk who tried to give me trouble,” he said, acting it out in fierce pantomime, “and stuff them into its bunghole. What would hjjks be doing in country this hot, though? But there are dangers enough. Make it quick, will you?”

“Quick as we can,” said Sipirod.

But their luck had changed. An hour and a half she and Vyrom trudged futilely through the swamps, until their fur was miserably soggy and stained a bright yellow everywhere. The moss-flowers, tirelessly pumping forth their pollen, turned the sky dark with it, and everything that was phosphorescent or luminescent in the jungle began to glow and pulsate. Some lantern-trees lit up like beacons and the moss itself gleamed brightly and somber bluish radiance came from the lakes. Of other caviandis they found none at all.

After a time they turned back. As they neared the place where they had left Kaldo Tikret, they heard a sudden hoarse cry for help, strange and strangled-sounding.

“Hurry!” Vyrom cried. “He's in trouble.”

Sipirod caught her mate by the wrist. “Wait.”

“Wait?”

“If something's wrong, no sense both of us plunging into it together. Let me go up ahead and see what's happening.”

She slipped through the underbrush and stepped out into the clearing. Out of the lake rose a gorynth's black shining neck, perhaps that of the same monster they had heard hooting earlier. The huge creature's body lay submerged. Only its curving upper surface was visible, like a row of sunken barrels; but its neck, five times the length of a man and ornamented by triple rows of blunt black spines, arched up and outward and down again, and at the end of it was Kaldo Tikret, caught in its powerful jaws. He was still calling for help, but more feebly, now. In another moment he would be under the water.

“Vyrom!” she shouted.

He came running, brandishing his spear. But where to hurl it? What little of the gorynth's body could be seen was heavily armored with thick overlapping scales that would send his spear bouncing aside. The long neck was more vulnerable, but a difficult target. Then even that disappeared, and Kaldo Tikret with it, down into the dark turbid water. Black bubbles came upward.

The water churned for a time. They watched in silence, uneasily grooming their fur.

Abruptly Sipirod said, “Look. Another caviandi, over there by the sack. Probably trying to free its mate.”

“Aren't we going to try to do anything for Kaldo Tikret?”

She made a chopping gesture. “What? Jump in after him? He's done for. Don't you understand that? Forget him. We have caviandis to catch. That's what we're paid for. Faster we find the second one, faster we can start getting ourselves out of this wretched place and back to Dawinno.” The black surface of the lake began just then to grow still. “Done for, yes. Just as you said before: smart and lucky, that's

what you have to be."

Vyrom shivered. "Kaldo Tikret wasn't lucky."

"Not very smart, either. Now, if I slip around to the side, while you come up behind me with the other sack—"

* * * *

In central Dawinno, the official sector, a workroom on the second sublevel of the House of Knowledge: bright lights, cluttered laboratory benches, fragments of ancient civilizations scattered around everywhere. Plor Killivash delicately presses the firing-stud on the small cutting tool in his hand. A beam of pale light descends and bathes the foul-smelling, misshapen lump of he-knew-not-what, big as a bushel and tapered like an egg, that he has been brooding over all week. He focuses it and makes a quick shallow cut, and another, and another, slicing a fine line in its outer surface.

A fisherman had brought the thing in the week before, insisting that it was a Great World relic, a treasure-chest of the ancient sea-lord folk. Anything that might be sea-lord material was Plor Killivash's responsibility. Its surface was slimy with a thick accretion of sponges and coral and soft pink algae, and sour dirty sea-water dripped constantly from its interior. When he rapped it with a wrench it gave off a hollow thudding sound. He had no hope for it at all.

Perhaps if Hresh had been around he might have felt less disheartened. But the chronicler was away from the House of Knowledge this day, calling at the villa of his half-brother Thu-Kimnibol. Thu-Kimnibol's mate, the lady Naarinta, was seriously ill; and Plor Killivash, who was one of three assistant chroniclers, was as usual finding it hard to take his work seriously in Hresh's absence. Somehow when he was on the premises Hresh managed to infuse everyone's labors with a sense of important purpose. But the moment he left the building, all this pushing about of the sad shards and scraps of history became a mere absurdity, an empty pointless grubbing in the rubble of a deservedly forgotten antiquity. The study of the ancient days began to seem a meaningless pastime, a miserable airless quest into sealed vaults containing nothing but the stink of death.

Plor Killivash was a sturdy burly man of Koshmar descent. He had been to the University, and was very proud of that. Once he had had some hope of becoming head chronicler himself some day. He was sure he had the inside track, because he was the only Koshmar among the assistants. Io Sangrais was Beng, and Chupitain Stuld belonged to the little Stadrain tribe.

They were University people too, of course; but there were good political reasons for keeping the chroniclership away from a Beng, and nobody imagined that it would ever go to anyone from so trifling a group as the Stadrains. But far as Plor Killivash cared these days, they could have it, either one of them. Let someone else be head chronicler after Hresh, that was how Plor Killivash felt nowadays. Let someone else supervise the task of hacking through these millennia-thick accumulations of rubble.

Once, like Hresh before him, he had felt himself possessed by an almost uncontrollable passion for penetrating and comprehending the mysteries of the vast pedestal of Earthly history atop which this newborn civilization that the People had created sat, like a pea atop a pyramid. Had longed to mine deep, digging beyond the icy barrenness of the Long Winter period into the luxurious wonder of the Great World. Or even—why set limits? why any limits at all?—even into the deepest layers of all, into those wholly unknown empires of the almost infinitely remote era of the humans, who had ruled the Earth before the Great World itself had arisen. Surely there must be human ruins left down there, somewhere far below the debris of the civilizations that had followed theirs.

It had seemed so wonderfully appealing. To live billions of lives extending across millions of years. To stand upon old Earth and feel that you had been present when it was the crossroads of the stars. Flood your mind with strange sights, strange languages, the thoughts of other minds of unspeakable brilliance. Absorb and comprehend everything that had ever been, on this great planet that had seen so very much in its long span, realm piled upon realm back to the dawn of history.

But he had been a boy then. Those were a boy's thoughts, unfettered by practical considerations. Now Plor Killivash was twenty and he knew just how difficult it was to make the lost and buried past come alive. Under the harsh pressures of reality, that fiery passion to uncover ancient secrets was slipping from him, just as you could see it going even from Hresh himself, year by year. Hresh, though, had had the help of miraculous Great World devices, now no longer usable, to give him visions of the worlds that had existed before this world. For one who had never had the advantage of such wondrous things, the work of a chronicler was coming to seem nothing but doleful dreary slogging, carrying with it much frustration, precious little reward.

Somber thoughts on a somber day. And somberly Plor Killivash made ready to cut open the artifact from the sea.

The slim figure of Chupitain Stuld appeared in the doorway. She was smiling, and her dark violet eyes were merry.

"Still drilling? I was sure you'd be inside that thing by now."

"Just another little bit to go. Stick around for the great revelation."

He tried to sound lighthearted about it. It wouldn't do to let his gloom show through.

She had her own frustrations, he knew. She too felt increasingly adrift amidst the mounded-up fragments of crumbled and eroded antiquity that the House of Knowledge contained.

Glancing at her, he said, "What's happening with those artifacts you've been playing with? The ones the farmers found in Senufit Gorge."

Chupitain Stuld laughed darkly. "That box of junk? It's all so much sand and rust."

"I thought you said it was from a pre-Great World level seven or eight million years old."

"Then it's sand and rust seven or eight million years old. I was hoping you were having better luck."

"Some chance."

"You never can tell," Chupitain Stuld said. She came up beside the workbench. "Can I help?"

"Sure. Those tractor clamps over there: bring them into position. I've just about sawed through the last of it now, and then we can lift the top half."

Chupitain Stuld swung the clamps downward and fastened them. Plor Killivash made the final intensity adjustment on his cutter. His fingers felt thick and coarse and clumsy. He found himself wishing Chupitain Stuld had stayed in her own work area. She was lovely to behold, small and delicate and extremely beautiful, with the soft lime-green fur that was common in her tribe. Today she wore a yellow sash and a mantle of royal blue, very elegant. They had been coupling-partners for some months now and even had

twined once or twice. But all the same he didn't want her here now. He was convinced that he was going to bungle things as he made the last incision and he hated the idea that she'd be watching as he did.

Well. No more stalling, he tells himself. Checks his calibrations one last time. Draws his breath in sharply. At last forces himself to press the trigger. The beam licks out, bites into the artifact's shell-like wall. One quick nibble. He cuts the beam off. A dark line of severance has appeared. The upper half of the object moves minutely away from the lower half.

"You want me to pull up on the tractor harness?" Chupitain Stuld asked.

"Yes. Just a little."

"It's giving, Plor Killivash! It's going to lift!"

"Easy, now—easy—"

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if this thing's full of sea-lord amulets and jewels! And maybe a book of history of the Great World. Written on imperishable plates of golden metal."

Plor Killivash chuckled. "Why not a sea-lord himself, fast asleep, waiting to be awakened so he can tell us all about himself? Eh?"

The halves were separating. The weighty upper one rose a finger's-breadth's distance, another, another. A burst of sea-water came cascading out as the last inner seal broke.

For an instant Plor Killivash felt a flicker of the excitement he had felt when he was new here, five or six years before, and it had seemed every day that they were making wondrous new inroads into the mysteries of the past. But the odds were that this thing was worthless. There was very little of the Great World left to find, seven thousand centuries after its downfall. The glaciers grinding back and forth across the face of the land had done their work all too well.

"Can you see?" Chupitain Stuld asked, trying to peer over the top of the opened container.

"It's full of amulets and jewels, all right. And a whole bunch of fantastic machines in perfect preservation."

"Oh, stop it!"

He sighed. "All right. Here—look."

He scooped her up to perch on his arm, and they looked in together.

Inside were nine leathery-looking translucent purplish globes, each the size of a man's head, glued to the wall of the container by taut bands of a rubbery integument. Dim shapes were visible within them. Organs of some kind, looking shrunken and decayed. A fierce stench of rot came forth. Otherwise nothing. Nothing but a coating of moist white sand along the sides of the container, and a shallow layer of opaque water at the bottom.

"Not sea-lord artifacts, I'm afraid," Plor Killivash said.

"No."

"The fisherman thought he saw the broken stone columns of a ruined city sticking out of the sand at the bottom of the bay in the place where he dredged this thing up. He must have had a little too much wine with his lunch that day."

Chupitain Stuld stared into the opened container and shuddered. "What are they? Some kind of eggs?"

Plot Killivash shrugged.

"This whole thing was probably one gigantic egg, and I'd hate to meet the creature that laid it. Those things in there are little sea-monster embryos, I suppose. Dead ones. I'd better make a record of this and get them out of here. They'll begin to reek pretty soon."

There was a sound behind him. Io Sangrais peered in from the hallway. His brilliant red Beng eyes were glittering with amusement. Io Sangrais was sly and playful, a quick easy-spirited young man. Even the tribal helmet that he wore was playful, a close-fitting cap of dark blue metal with three absurd corkscrew spirals of lacquered red reed-stems rising wildly from it.

"Hola! Finally got it open, I see."

"Yes, and it's a wonderful treasure-house, just as I was expecting," Plor Killivash said dourly. "A lot of rotten little unhatched sea-monsters. One more great triumph for the bold investigators of the past. You come to gloat?"

"Why would I want to do that?" Io Sangrais asked. His voice was ripe with mock innocence. "No, I came down here to tell you about the great triumph *I've* just pulled off."

"Ah. Yes. You've finally finished translating that old Beng chronicle of yours, and it's full of spells and enchantments that turn water into wine, or wine into water, whichever you happen to prefer at the moment. Right?"

"Save your sarcasm. It turns out not to be a Beng chronicle, just one from some ninth-rate little tribe that the Bengs swallowed long ago. And what it is is a full and thorough descriptive catalogue of the tribe's collection of sacred pebbles. The pebbles themselves vanished ten thousand years ago, you understand."

Chupitain Stuld giggled. "Much rejoicing in the land. The unraveling of the mysteries of the past by the skilled operatives of the House of Knowledge goes on and on at the customary stupendous pace."

In the Basilica that afternoon it was Husathirn Mueri's turn to have throne-duty under the great central cupola, a task he shared in daily rotation with the princes Thu-Kimnibol and Puit Kjai. He was wearily hearing the petitions of two vociferous grain-merchants seeking redress from a third, who perhaps had cheated them and perhaps had not, when word came to him of the strange visitor who had arrived in the city.

No less a person than the captain of the city guard, Curabayn Bangkea, brought the news: a man of hearty stature and swaggering style, who generally affected a colossal gleaming golden helmet half again the size of his head, bristling with preposterous horns and blades. He was wearing it today. Husathirn Mueri found it both amusing and irritating.

There was nothing wrong with Curabayn Bangkea's wearing a helmet, of course. Most citizens wore them nowadays, whether or not they traced their descent from the old helmet-wearing Beng tribe. And

Curabayn Bangkea was pure Beng. But it seemed to Husathirn Mueri, who was Beng himself on his father's side, though his mother had been of the Koshmars, that the captain of the guards carried the concept a little too far.

He wasn't one to put much stock in high formality. It was a trait he owed, perhaps, to his mother, a gentle and easygoing woman. Nor was he greatly impressed by men like the guardsman, who strutted boisterously through life making a way for themselves by virtue of their size and bluster. He himself was lightly built, with a narrow waist and sloping shoulders. His fur was black and dense, striped a startling white in places and nearly as sleek as a woman's. But his slightness was deceptive: he was quick and agile, with tricky whip-like strength in his body, and in his soul as well.

"Nakhaba favor you," Curabayn Bangkea declared grandly, dipping his head in respect as he approached the throne. For good measure he made the signs of Yissou the Protector and Dawinno the Destroyer. A couple of the Koshmar gods: always useful when dealing with crossbreeds.

Husathirn Mueri, who privately thought that too much of everyone's time was taken up by these benedictions and gesticulations, replied with a perfunctory sign of Yissou and said, "What is it, Curabayn Bangkea? I've got these angry bean-peddlers to deal with, and I'm not looking for more nuisances this afternoon."

"Your pardon, throne-grace. There's a stranger been taken, just outside the city walls."

"A stranger? What kind of stranger?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Curabayn Bangkea, shrugging so broadly he nearly sent his vast helmet clattering to the ground. "A very strange stranger, is what he is. A boy, sixteen, seventeen, skinny as a rail. Looks like he's been starved all his life. Came riding down out of the north on top of the biggest vermilion you ever saw. Some farmers found him crashing around in their fields, out by Emakkis Valley."

"Just now, you say?"

"Two days ago, or thereabouts. Two and a half, actually."

"And he was riding a *vermilion?"*

"A vermilion the size of a house and a half," Curabayn Bangkea said, stretching his arms wide. "But wait. It gets better. The vermilion's got a hjjk banner around its neck and hjjk emblems stitched to its ears. And the boy sits upon them and makes noises at you just like a hjjk." Curabayn Bangkea put both his hands to his throat and uttered dry, throttled rattling sounds: " *Khkhkh. Sjsjsjssss. Gggggggjjjjjk.* You know what kind of ghastly sounds they make. We've been interrogating him ever since the farmers brought him in, and that's about all that comes out of him. Now and then he says a word we can more or less understand. 'Peace,' he says. 'Love,' he says. 'The Queen,' he says."

Husathirn Mueri frowned. "What about his sash? Any tribe we know?"

"He doesn't wear a sash. Or a helmet. Or anything that might indicate he's from the City of Yissou, either. Of course, he might have come from one of the eastern cities, but I doubt that very much. I think it's pretty obvious what he is, sir."

"And what is that?"

"A runaway from the hjjks."

"A runaway," Husathirn Mueri said, musing. "An escaped captive? Is that what you're saying?"

"Why, it stands to reason, sir! There's hjjk all over him! Not just the sounds he makes. He's got a bracelet on that looks like it's made of polished hjjk-shell—bright yellow, it is, one black stripe—and a breastplate of the same stuff. That's all he's wearing, just these pieces of hjjk-shell. What else can he be, your grace, if not a runaway?"

Husathirn Mueri narrowed his eyes, which were amber, a sign of his mixed ancestry, and very keen.

Now and then a wandering band of hjjks came upon some child who had strayed into a place where he should not have gone, and ran off with him, no one knew why. It was a parent's greatest fear, to have a child taken by the hjjks. Most of these children were never seen again, but from time to time one did manage to escape and return, after an absence of days or weeks or even months. When they did come back they seemed profoundly shaken, and changed in some indescribable way, as though their time in captivity had been a horror beyond contemplation. None of them had ever been willing to speak so much as a word about their experiences among the insect-folk. It was considered an unkindness to ask.

To Husathirn Mueri the very thought of hjjks was distasteful. To be forced to live among them was the most miserable torture he could imagine.

He had seen them only once in his life, when he was a small boy growing up among the Bengs in Vengiboneeza, the ancient capital of the sapphire-eyes folk where some tribes of the People had taken up residence at the end of the Long Winter. But that one time had been enough. He would never forget them: gaunt towering insect-creatures larger than any man, strange, frightful, repulsive. Such great swarms of them had come to infest Vengiboneeza that the whole Beng tribe, which had settled there amid the ruined Great World buildings after years of wandering, finally had had to flee. Under great difficulties in a wet and stormy time they had crossed the endless coastal plains and valleys. Eventually they reached Dawinno, the great new city far to the south that the Koshmar tribe had built under Hresh's leadership after making its own exodus from Vengiboneeza; and there they found refuge.

That hard journey still blazed in his memory. He had been five, then, and his sister Catiriil a year younger.

"Why do we have to leave Vengiboneeza?" he had asked, over and over. And from his patient gentle mother Torlyri had come the same answer each time:

"Because the hjjks have decided that they want it for themselves."

He would turn then to his father in fury. "Why don't you and your friends kill them, then?"

And Trei Husathirn would reply: "We would if we could, boy. But there are ten hjjks in Vengiboneeza for every hair on your head. And plenty more where those came from, in the north."

During the interminable weeks of the journey south to Dawinno, Husathirn Mueri had awakened every night from terrible dreams of hjjk encroachment. He saw them standing over him in the dark as he slept, their bristly claws moving, their great beaks clacking, their huge gleaming eyes aglow with malevolence.

That had been twenty-five years ago. Sometimes he dreamed of them even now.

They were an ancient race—the only one of the Six Peoples that had inhabited the world in the blissful days before the Long Winter which had managed to survive that harrowing eon of darkness and cold. Their seniority offended him, coming as he did from so young a stock, from a people whose ancestors had been mere simple animals in the time of the Great World. It reminded him how fragile was the claim to supremacy that the People had attempted to assert; it reminded him that the People held their present territories by mere default, simply because the hjjks appeared to have no use for those places and the other elder peoples of the Great World—the sapphire-eyes, the sea-lords, the vegetals, the mechanicals, the humans—were long gone from the scene.

The hjjks, who had not let the Long Winter of the death-stars displace them, still had possession of most of the world. The entire northland was theirs, and maybe much of the east as well, though tribes of the People had built at least five cities there, places known only by name and rumor to those who lived in Dawinno. Those cities—Gharb, Ghajnsielem, Cignoi, Bornigrayal, Thisthissima—were so far away that contact with them was all but impossible. The hjjks held everything else. They were the chief barrier to the People's further expansion in these constantly warming days of the New Springtime. To Husathirn Mueri they were the enemy, and always would be. He would, if he could, wipe them all from the face of the Earth.

But he knew, as his father Trei Husathirn had known, that that was impossible. The best that the People could hope for against the hjjks was to hold their own with them: to maintain the security and integrity of the territories they already held, to keep the hjjks from encroaching in any way. Perhaps the People might even be able to push them back a little gradually and reach outward a short distance into some of the hjjk-controlled regions that were suitable for their own use. To think the hjjks could be altogether defeated, though—as certain other princes of the city were known to believe—was nothing but folly, Husathirn Mueri realized. They were an invincible enemy. They never would be anything else.

"There's one other possibility," Curabayn Bangkea said.

"And what would that be?"

"That this boy is no simple runaway, but in fact some kind of emissary from the hjjks."

"A what?"

"Only a guess, throne-grace. There's no evidence, you understand. But something about him—the way he holds himself, so polite and quiet and, well, solemn, and the way he tries to tell us things, the way he comes out once in a while with a word like 'peace,' or 'love,' or 'queen'—well, sir, he doesn't seem like your ordinary kind of runaway to me. It came to me all at once that this could be some sort of ambassador, like, sent to us by the wonderful Queen of the bug-folk to bring us some kind of special message. Or so I think, throne-grace. If you pardon me for my presumption."

"An ambassador?" Husathirn Mueri said, shaking his head. "Why in the name of all the gods would they be sending us an ambassador?"

Curabayn Bangkea gazed blandly at him, offering no answer.

Glowering, Husathirn Mueri rose from the justiciary throne and walked to and fro with a sliding gait before it, hands clasped behind his back.

Curabayn Bangkea was no fool; his judgment, however tentatively put forth, was something to respect. And if the hjjks had sent an emissary, someone of People birth, one who had dwelled among the bugs so

long that he had forgotten his own speech and spoke only in harsh grinding hjjk-clatter—

As he paced, one of the merchants, coming up beside him, tugged at his sash of office and begged his attention. Husathirn Mueri, eyes flashing furiously, raised his arm as if to strike the man. The merchant looked at him in astonishment.

At the last moment he checked himself. "Your suit is remanded for further study," he told the merchant. "Return to this court when I am next sitting the throne."

"And when will that be, lordship?"

"Do I know, fool? Watch the boards! Watch the boards!" Husathirn Mueri's fingers trembled. He was losing his poise, and was troubled by that. "It'll be next week, on Friit or Dawinno, I think," he said, more temperately. "Go. Go!"

The merchants fled. Husathirn Mueri turned to the guard-captain. "Where is this hjjk ambassador now?"

"Throne-grace, it was only a guess, calling him an ambassador. I can't say for sure that that's what he really is."

"Be that as it may, where is he?"

"Just outside, in the holding chamber."

"Bring him in."

He resumed his post on the throne. He felt irritated and perplexed and impatient. Some moments went by.

Husathirn Mueri did what he could to regain control of himself, making a calmness at the core of his spirit as his mother Torlyri had taught him to do. Rashness led only to miscalculation and error. She herself—the gods rest her soul, that warm and tender woman!—had not been nearly this high-strung. But Husathirn Mueri was a crossbreed, with a crossbreed's vigor and intensity and a crossbreed's drawbacks of disposition. In his birth he had foreshadowed the eventual union of the two tribes. Torlyri had been the Koshmar tribe's offering-woman and the indomitable Beng warrior Trei Husathirn had swept the Koshmar priestess up into unexpected love and an unlikely mating, long ago, when the Beng people and the Koshmars still dwelled uneasily side by side in Vengiboneeza.

He sat waiting, more calmly now. At length the shadow of Curabayn Bangkea's immense helmet entered the cupola, and then Curabayn Bangkea himself, leading the stranger at the end of a leash of plaited larret-withes. At the sight of him Husathirn Mueri sat to attention, hands tightly grasping the claw-and-ball armrests of the throne.

This was a very strange stranger indeed.

He was young, in late boyhood or early manhood, and painfully slender, with thin hunched shoulders and arms so frail they looked like dried stems. The ornaments he wore, the bracelet and the shining breastplate, did indeed seem to be polished fragments of a hjjk's hard carapace, a grisly touch. His fur was black, but not a deep, rich black, like that of Husathirn Mueri: there was a dull grayish tinge to it, and it was pitiful scruffy fur, thin in places, almost worn through. This young man has been poorly fed all his life, Husathirn Mueri realized. He has suffered.

And his eyes! Those pale, icy, unwavering eyes! They seemed to stare toward the judicial throne across a gulf many worlds wide. Frightful remorseless eyes, an enemy's eyes; but then, as Husathirn Mueri continued to study them, he began to see them more as sad compassionate eyes, the eyes of a prophet and healer.

How could that be? The contradiction bewildered him.

At any rate, whoever and whatever this boy might be, there seemed no reason to keep him tethered this way. "Unleash him," Husathirn Mueri ordered.

"But if he flees, throne-grace—!"

"He came here with a purpose. Fleeing won't serve it. Unleash him."

Curabayn Bangkea undid the knot. The stranger seemed to stand taller, but otherwise did not move.

Husathirn Mueri said, "I am the holder of throne-duty in this court for today. Husathirn Mueri is my name. Who are you, and why have you come to the City of Dawinno?"

The boy gestured, quick tense flutterings of his fingers, and made hoarse chittering hjjk-noises deep down in his chest, as if he meant to spit at Husathirn Mueri's feet.

Husathirn Mueri shivered and drew back. This was the nearest thing to having an actual hjjk here in the throne-room. He felt rising revulsion.

"I speak no hjjk," he said icily.

" *Shhhtkkkk,*" the boy said, or something like it. *"Gggk thhhhhsp shtgggk."* And then he said, wresting the word from his throat as though it were some spiny thing within him that he must expel, "Peace."

"Peace."

The boy nodded. "Peace. Love."

"Love," said Husathirn Mueri, and shook his head slowly.

"It was like this when I interrogated him, too," Curabayn Bangkea murmured.

"Be still." To the boy Husathirn Mueri said, speaking very clearly and loudly, as though that would make any difference, "I ask you again: What is your name?"

"Peace. Love. *Ddddkdd ftshhh.* "

"Your *name,* " Husathirn Mueri repeated. He tapped his chest, where the white swirling streaks that he had inherited from his mother cut diagonally across the deep black fur. "I am Husathirn Mueri. Husathirn Mueri is my name. My name. *His* name"—pointing—"is Curabayn Bangkea. Curabayn Bangkea. And your name—"

*"Shthhhjjk. Vtstsssth. Njnnnk!"*The boy seemed to be struggling in a terrible way to articulate

something. Muscles writhed in his sunken cheeks; his eyes rolled; he clenched his fists and dug his elbows into his hollow sides. Suddenly a complete understandable sentence burst from him: “I come in peace and love, from the Queen.”

“An emissary, do you see?” cried Curabayn Bangkea, grinning triumphantly.

Husathirn Mueri nodded. Curabayn Bangkea began to say something else, but Husathirn Mueri waved him impatiently to silence.

This must indeed be some child the hjjks had stolen in infancy, he thought. Who has lived among them ever since, in their impenetrable northland empire. And has been sent back now to the city of his birth, bearing Yissou only knew what demand from the insect queen.

The purposes of the hjjks were beyond all fathoming. Everyone knew that. But the message that this boy was trying so agonizingly to communicate might portend the opening of some new phase in the uneasy relationship between the People and the insect-folk. Husathirn Mueri, who was only one of several princes of the city and had reached that point in manhood when it was essential to begin thinking of rising to higher things, took it as a lucky omen that the stranger had arrived on a day when he happened to be holding the magistracy. There must be some good use to which all this could be put. First, though, he needed to figure out what the envoy was trying to say.

An obvious interpreter came to his mind. The most celebrated of all the returned captives of the city, the only high-born girl ever to be taken: Nialli Apuilana, daughter of Taniane and Hresh. She'd know some hjjk, if anyone did. Three months in captivity among them, a few years back. Grabbed just outside the city, she was, setting off a vast uproar, and why not, the only child of the chieftain and the chronicler stolen by the bugs! Loud lamentations, much frenzy. Tremendous search of the outlying territory. All to no avail. Then, months later, the girl suddenly reappearing as if she had dropped down from the sky. Looking dazed, but no visible signs of harm. Like all who returned from the hjjks she refused to speak of her captivity; like the others also, she had undergone some alteration of personality, far more moody and remote than she had been before. And she'd been moody enough before.

Was it safe to draw Nialli Apuilana into this? She was self-willed, unpredictable, a dangerous ally. From her powerful mother and mysterious visionary father had come a heritage of many volatile traits. No one could control her. She was some months past the age of sixteen, now, and ran wild in the city, free as a river: so far as Husathirn Mueri knew she had never let anyone couple with her, nor had she been known to twine, either, except of course on her twining-day, with the offering-woman Boldirinthe, but that was just the ritual to mark her coming into womanhood, when she turned thirteen. Everyone had to do that. The hjjks had taken her the very next day. Some people said she hadn't been taken at all, that she had simply run away, because she had found her first twining so upsetting. But Husathirn Mueri suspected not. She had come back too weird; she must really have been among the hjjks.

One other factor figured in Husathirn Mueri's considerations, which was that he desired Nialli Apuilana with a dark fervor that burned at his core like the fires at the heart of the world. He saw her as his key to power in the city, if only she would become his mate. He hadn't yet dared to say anything about that to her, or anyone. But perhaps drawing her into this event today would help him forge the bond that was his keenest hope.

He looked toward Curabayn Bangkea and said, “Tell one of those useless bailiffs lounging in the hallway to go and bring Nialli Apuilana here.”

* * * *

The House of Nakhaba was where Nialli Apuilana lived, in one of the small chambers on the uppermost floor of the north wing of that enormous, sprawling building of spires, towers, and intricately connected hallways. That it was a dormitory for priests and priestesses meant nothing to her. That they were priests and priestesses dedicated to a Beng god, whereas she was of the Koshmar tribe's blood, meant even less. Those old tribal distinctions were breaking down very fast.

When she first chose the House of Nakhaba as her lodging-place, Prince Thu-Kimnibol had wanted to know if she had done it simply as a way of shocking everyone. Smiling in his good-natured way to take the sting out of the question, yes. But it stung all the same.

"Why, are you shocked?" Nialli Apuilana had replied.

Thu-Kimnibol was her father's half-brother, as different from her father as the sun is from the moon. Both the huge, hulking, warlike Thu-Kimnibol and the frail, scholarly, retiring Hresh were the sons of the same mother, Minbain by name. Hresh had been born to her in the cocoon days, when a certain Samnibolon, long dead and forgotten now, had been her mate. Thu-Kimnibol was her child by a different mate of later years, the grim, violent, and quarrelsome warrior Harruel. He had inherited his father's size and strength and some of his intensity of ambition; but not, so Nialli Apuilana had been told, his brooding, troubled soul.

"Nothing you do shocks us," Thu-Kimnibol said. "Not since you came back from the hjjks. But why live with the Beng priests?"

Her eyes flashed with amusement and annoyance. "Kinsman, I live alone!"

"On the top floor of a huge building swarming with Beng acolytes who bow down to Nakhaba."

"I have to live somewhere. I'm a grown woman. There's privacy in the House of Nakhaba. The acolytes pray and chant all day long and half the night, but they leave me to myself."

"It must disturb your sleep."

"I sleep very well," she said. "The singing lulls me. As for their bowing down to Nakhaba, well, what affair is that of mine? Or that they're Bengs. Aren't we all Bengs these days? Look, kinsman, you wear a helmet yourself. And the language we speak—what is it, if it isn't Beng?"

"The language of the People is what it is."

"And is it the same language we spoke when we lived in the cocoon, during the Long Winter?"

Thu-Kimnibol tugged uneasily at the thick red fur, almost like a beard, that grew along his heavy cheeks. "I never lived in the cocoon," he said. "I was born after the Coming Forth."

"You know what I mean. What we speak is as much Beng as it is Koshmar, or more so. We pray to Yissou and we pray to Nakhaba, and there's no difference to us any more, the Koshmar god or the Beng god. A god is a god. Only a handful of the older people still remember that we were two tribes, originally. Or care. Another thirty years and only the chronicler will know. I like where I live, kinsman. I'm not trying to shock anyone, and you know it. I simply want to be off by myself."

That had been more than a year ago, almost two. And after that no one in her family had bothered her about her choice of a place to live. She was of age, after all: past sixteen, old enough to twine and to

mate, even if she didn't choose to twine, and certainly not to mate. She could do as she pleased. Everyone accepted that.

But in fact Thu-Kimnibol had been close to the truth. Her going to the House of Nakhaba had been a protest of some sort: against what, she wasn't sure. Ever since her return from the hjjks there had been a great restlessness in her, an impatience with all the established ways of the city. It seemed to Nialli Apuilana that the People had wandered from the true path. Machines were what they loved now, and comfort, and this new idea called exchange-units, which allowed the rich to buy the poor. Things were wrong here, so she had begun to think; and, since she had no power to change the ways of the city, she often found herself making strange silent rebellions against them. Others thought she was willful and unruly. What they might think was unimportant to her. Her stay among the hjjks had transformed her soul in ways that no one else could comprehend, in ways that she herself was only now beginning to come to terms with.

There was a knock at the door. Nialli Apuilana opened it to a plump, panting official of the Court of Justice, who had obviously found the climb to the top of the House of Nakhaba on this warm afternoon a profound challenge. He was running with sweat. His fur was sticking together in thick bunches, and his nostrils flickered as he struggled to catch his breath. His sashes and badges of rank were soggy and askew.

"Nialli Apuilana?"

"You know that's who I am. What do you want with me?"

A gasp. A wheeze. "Summons to the Basilica." Another gasp. An attempt to smooth the sodden fur. A huff and a puff. "By request of Husathirn Mueri, court-captain of the day."

"To the Basilica? Why, have I done something wrong, then? Is that what his lordship Husathirn Mueri believes? Am I going to be put on trial?"

The bailiff didn't reply. He was peering open-mouthed past her shoulder into her room. Stark as a prisoner's cell: scarcely any furniture at all, just a tiny cot, a little stack of books on the floor, and a single ornament, a star-shaped amulet of woven grass that Nialli Apuilana had brought back from the hjjks, hanging on the whitewashed wall directly opposite the door like a conquest-sign placed there by the insect-folk themselves.

"I said, have I done something wrong?"

"Nothing, lady. Nothing."

"Then why am I summoned?"

"Because—because—"

"What are you *staring* at? Haven't you ever seen a hjjk star before?"

The bailiff looked guiltily away. He began to groom himself with quick uneasy strokes. "His lordship the court-captain wishes your help, that's all," he blurted. "As a translator. A stranger has been brought to the Basilica—a young man, who seems to speak only the language of the hjjks—"

There was a sudden roaring in Nialli Apuilana's soul. Her heart raced painfully, frighteningly.

So stupid. Waiting this long to let her know.

She seized the bailiff by a sash. "Why didn't you say so right away?"

"I had no chance, lady. You—"

"He must be a returning captive. You should have told me."

Images rose from the depths of her mind. Powerful memories, visions of that shattering day that had changed her life.

She saw her younger self, already long-legged and woman-sleek but with her breasts only barely sprouting yet, innocently gathering blue chilly-flowers in the hills beyond the city walls on the day after her first twining. Black-and-yellow six-limbed figures, weird and terrifying, taller than any man of the city, taller even than Thu-Kimnibol, emerging without warning from a deep cleft in the tawny rock. Terror. Disbelief. A sense of the world she had known for thirteen years crumbling to fragments about her. Monstrous sharp-beaked heads, huge many-faceted eyes, jointed arms tipped with horrid claws. The chittering noises of them, the clickings and buzzings. This is not happening to me, she tells herself. Not to me. Do you know whose daughter I am? The words won't leave her lips. They probably *do* know, anyway. All the better, getting someone like her. The pack of them surrounding her, seizing her, touching her. Then the terror unexpectedly disappearing. An eerie dreamlike calmness somehow taking possession of her soul. The hjjks carrying her away, then. A long march, an endless march, through unknown country. And then—the moist hot darkness of the Nest—the strangeness of that other life, which was like some different world, though it was right here on Earth—the power of the Queen impinging, surrounding, engulfing, transforming—

And ever since, the loneliness, the bitter sense that there was no one else at all like her anywhere in the world. But now, at last, another who had experienced what she had experienced. At last. Another who *knew*.

"Where is he?" she demanded. "I have to see him! Quick! Quick!"

"He is at the Basilica, lady. In the throne-chamber, with his lordship Husathirn Mueri."

"Quick, then! Let's go!"

She rushed from her room, not even bothering with her sash. Her nakedness mattered nothing to her. Let them stare, she thought. The bailiff came running along desperately behind her, huffing and wheezing, as she raced down the stairs of the House of Nakhaba. Astonished acolytes in priestly helmets, scattering before her onslaught, turned to glare and mutter, but she paid no attention to them.

On this day in late spring the sun was still high in the western sky, though the afternoon was well consumed. Soft tropic warmth wrapped the city like a cloak. The bailiff had a wagon waiting outside, with two docile gray xlendis in the harness. Nialli Apuilana jumped in beside him, and the placid beasts started down the winding streets toward the Basilica at a steady, unhurried trot.

"Can't you make them go faster?" she asked.

The bailiff shrugged and laid on the whip. It did no good: one of the xlendis twisted its long neck about and looked back over its shoulder with great solemn golden eyes, as if puzzled that anyone would expect

more speed of it than it was providing. Nialli Apuilana forced herself to hold her impatience in check. The returnee, the escaper, whatever he was, the one who had come from the Nest, wasn't going anywhere. He would wait for her.

"Lady, we are here," the bailiff announced.

The wagon halted. The Basilica stood before them now, the high-vaulted five-domed court building on the east side of the city's central plaza. The westering sun lit the green-and-gold mosaics of its facade and kindled them to brilliant flame.

Within the building flickering glowglobes gleamed in dark metal sconces. Court functionaries stood stiffly in the hallway, performing no apparent function except to bow and nod as they went by.

The stranger was the first person whom Nialli Apuilana saw, sharply outlined in a cone of light entering through a triangular window far up near the summit of the lofty central cupola. He stood in a downcast way, shoulders slumped and eyes averted.

There was a Nest-bracelet on his wrist. There was a Nest-guardian hanging from a lanyard on his chest.

Nialli Apuilana's heart went out to him. If she had been alone, she would have run to him and embraced him, and tears of joy would have flowed from her eyes.

But she held herself back. She looked toward the judge's ornate throne under the network of interlaced bronze struts that formed the cupola, where Husathirn Mueri sat, and allowed herself to meet his keen, brooding stare.

Husathirn Mueri seemed rigid and tense. A perceptible odor, something like that of burning wood, came from him. The language of his body was explicit and not at all difficult to decode.

There was hunger for her in his gleaming amber eyes.

That was the only word she could find for it. Not lust, though no doubt lust was there; not the desire for her friendship, though he might well feel that; not anything tender that could readily be called love, either. No, it was *hunger*. Simple but not at all pure, and not so simple, either. He seemed to want to fall upon her and devour her and make her flesh a part of his own. Every time he saw her, which was no more often than she could manage, it was the same thing. Now, as he gazed at her across the vast space of the courtroom, it was almost as though Husathirn Mueri had his face between her thighs, gnawing, consuming. What a strange man! And yet quite appealing physically: slim, elegant, graceful, even beautiful, if a man could be called beautiful. And intelligent, and gentle in his way. But strange. Nialli Apuilana had no liking for him at all.

To the right of the throne stood the great brawny guard-captain, Curabayn Bangkea, half entombed within his gigantic helmet. He was looking at her in a pretty lascivious way also, but she knew it was something much less complex that was on his mind. Nialli Apuilana was accustomed to being stared at by men of all sorts. She realized that she was attractive: everyone said that she was the image of her mother Taniane when Taniane was young, with glossy, silken red-brown fur and long slender legs; and her mother had been the most beautiful woman of her day. Even now she still was splendid. So I am beautiful too, and so they stare at me. An automatic thing, for them. She had some notion also that the air of absolute unapproachability in which she usually wrapped herself might add to her appeal, for some.

Unctuously Husathirn Mueri said, "Dawinno guide you, Nialli Apuilana. Nakhaba preserve and cherish

you."

"Spare me these hypocrisies," she said sharply. "You want my help as a translator, your bailiff says. Translating what?"

He indicated the stranger. "The guards have just brought him in. All he speaks is hjjk, and a few stray words of ours. I thought you might remember enough of the language of the bug-folk to tell me what he's trying to say."

She gave Husathirn Mueri a cool, hostile stare. "The language of the *bug-folk* ?"

"Ah. Sorry. The hjjks, I should have said."

"I find the other term offensive."

"Your pardon, lady. I mean that. I used the term too lightly. I won't use it again." Husathirn Mueri seemed to squirm. He looked genuinely dismayed. "Will you speak with him, now? And see if you can learn why he's here."

"If I can," Nialli Apuilana said icily.

She went to the stranger, taking up a position facing him, so close that she too stood in the cone of light and the tips of her breasts came nearly within touching-distance of the Nest-guardian that dangled on his chest. He raised his eyes and looked into hers.

He was older than she had first thought. At a distance he seemed like no more than a boy, but that was because he was so flimsily built; in fact he must be at least her age, or even a year or two older. But there was no fat on him at all, and precious little muscle.

A diet of seeds and dried meat will do that to you, Nialli Apuilana knew. She had experienced it herself.

Very likely this stranger had lived among the hjjks for years. Long enough for his body to be shaped by the sparseness of their rations, at any rate. He even held himself in a hjjk's stiff, brittle way, as if the fur and flesh that he wore were only a cloak concealing the gaunt insect beneath.

"Go on. Speak with him."

"A moment. Give me a moment!"

She tried to collect herself. The sight of the hjjk talismans on his wrist and breast had stirred deep feelings in her. In her excitement she found herself unable to summon a single syllable of the hjjk language, what little of it she had learned years ago.

Hjjks communicated in many ways. They had a spoken language, the clicks and buzzes and hisses from which the People had coined a name for them. But also they were able to speak with each other—and with such of the People as they encountered—in a silent language of the mind, as if speaking by second sight. And then too they had an elaborate system of communicating by means of chemical secretions, a code of scented signals.

While in the Nest Nialli Apuilana had dealt with the hjjks mainly through the mental language. When they used that, they were able to make themselves perfectly understood to her, and also to understand what

she said. She had managed to learn a few hundred words of their spoken language as well. But she had forgotten most of that by now. The language of the chemical secretions had always been altogether a closed book to her.

To break the interminable silence she raised her hand and lightly touched the stranger's Nest-guardian, leaning forward and smiling warmly at him as she did.

He seemed almost to flinch. But he managed to hold his ground, and said something to her in harsh hjjk tones. His face was solemn. It didn't seem capable of changing expression. It was like something carved of wood.

She touched his Nest-guardian again, and then her own breast.

Some words of hjjk sprang into her mind, then, and she spoke them, shaping them with some difficulty in her throat, as if she were gargling. They were the words for Nest, and Queen, and Nest-plenty.

He drew back his lips in a grimace that was almost a smile. Or perhaps it was a smile that could not help becoming a grimace.

"Love," he said, in the language of the People. "Peace."

A start, at least.

From somewhere more hjjk words came to her, the ones for Nest-strength, for Queen-touch, for Thinker-thoughts.

He brightened.

"Love," he said again. "Queen—love."

He lifted his clenched fists, as if straining to find other words of People-speech long lost in the deeper reaches of his mind. There was anguish on his narrow face.

At length he brought out another hjjk word, which Nialli Apuilana recognized as the one that could be translated as "flesh-folk." It was the term the hjjks used for the People.

"What are you two saying?" Husathirn Mueri asked.

"Nothing very significant. Just making preliminary contact."

"Has he told you his name yet?"

Nialli Apuilana gave Husathirn Mueri a scornful look. "The hjjk language doesn't have a word for *name*. They don't have names themselves."

"Can you ask him why he's here, then?"

"I'm trying," she said. "Can't you see that?"

But it was hopeless. For ten minutes she worked in a steady dogged way at breaking through, without getting anywhere.

She had expected so much of this meeting. She was desperately eager to relive with this stranger her time in the Nest. To speak with him of Queen-love and Egg-plan and Nest-strength and all those other things that she had barely had a chance to experience during her too-brief captivity: things which had shaped her soul as surely as the austere food of the hjjks had shaped this stranger's lean body. But the barriers between them were a maddening obstacle.

There seemed no way to breach them. All they could do was stammer random words at each other, and fragments of ideas. Sometimes they seemed close to a meeting of minds, and the stranger's eyes would grow bright and the ghost of a smile, even, appeared on his face; but then they reached the limits of their understanding, and the walls descended between them once again.

"Are you getting anywhere?" Husathirn Mueri asked, after a while.

"Nowhere. Nowhere at all."

"You can't even guess at what he's saying? Or why he's here?"

"He's here as some sort of an ambassador. That much seems certain."

"Do you have anything to go by, or are you just guessing?"

"You see those pieces of hjjk shell he's wearing? They're tokens of high authority," she said. "The thing on his chest is called a Nest-guardian, and it's made out of the shell of a dead hjjk warrior. They wouldn't have let him take it out of the Nest except as a sign that he's on a special mission. It's something like a chieftain's mask would be among us. The other one, the bracelet, was probably a gift from his Nest-thinker, to help him focus his thoughts. Poor lost soul, it hasn't done him much good, has it?"

"Nest-thinker?"

"His mentor. His teacher. Don't ask me to explain it all now. They're only bug-folk to you, anyway."

"I told you that I regretted—"

"Yes," Nialli Apuilana said. "You told me that you regretted. Anyway, he's surely here with some special message, not just the usual hazy stuff that returnees tell us, if they say anything at all. But he can't speak. He must have lived in the Nest since he was three or four years old, and he can barely remember a word of our language."

Husathirn Mueri moodily stroked his cheek-fur.

"Can you suggest anything?" he asked, after a time.

"Only the obvious. Send for my father."

"Ah," Husathirn Mueri said. "Of course!"

"Does the chronicler speak hjjk?" Curabayn Bangkea asked.

"The chronicler has the Wonderstone, idiot," said Husathirn Mueri. "The Barak Dayir, the Barak Dayir! Of course! One touch of it and all mysteries are solved!"

He clapped his hands. The fat bailiff appeared.

"Find Hresh. Summon him here." He looked around. "Adjourned until Hresh comes."

The chronicler just then was in his garden of natural history, in the western quadrant of the city, supervising the arrival of his caviandis.

Many years earlier, Hresh in a vision of the Vengiboneeza of Great World times had entered a place called the Tree of Life. Here the sapphire-eyes folk had gathered all sorts of wild creatures and placed them in chambers that duplicated their natural surroundings. The dreaming Hresh, to his terrible shame and chagrin, had even found his own ancestors among the animals housed there; and so he had learned beyond question that day that his People, who once had thought of themselves as humans, were no such lofty thing, and in the days of the Great World had been regarded as nothing more than beasts fit for collecting and keeping in cages.

Most of the creatures Hresh had seen on that day of wandering in the remote past had perished in the Long Winter, and their kind was forever gone from the Earth. The Tree of Life itself had long ago crumbled to dust. But Hresh had built a Tree of Life of his own in the City of Dawinno, overlooking the tranquil bay: a maze-like garden where creatures from all parts of the continent had been assembled for him to study. He had water-striders there, and drum-bellies, and dancer-horns, and hosts of the other creatures whom the People had encountered in their migrations across the face of the land since leaving the ancestral cocoon. He had blue-furred long-legged stinchitoles, whose minds were linked in a way he had not begun to fathom. He had bevies of plump-legged red scantrins. He had the pink ropy long-fanged worms, longer than a man was tall, who lived in the steaming mud of the lakelands. He had the kmurs, and crispalls, and stanimanders. He had gabools. He had steptors. He had a band of the mocking green monkey-like tree-dwelling beasts who had pelted the People raucously with wads of dung when first they entered Vengiboneeza.

And now too he had a pair of caviandis, newly brought to him from the lakelands.

He would make a comfortable habitat for them along the stream that ran through the garden, and the stream would be stocked with the fish they most preferred, and they would have room to dig the burrows in which they liked to live. And once they had grown accustomed to life in captivity he would try to reach their minds through second sight, through use of the Wonderstone if necessary. He would touch their souls, if souls they had, and see what depths were to be found in them.

The caviandis, trembling, sat side by side in their carrier, giving him a saucer-eyed look of misery and fear.

Hresh returned that sorry stare with a deep look of curiosity and fascination. They were graceful, elegant beasts, unquestionably intelligent. Just how intelligent was what he meant to find out. The lesson of the ancient Tree of Life, of the Great World itself, was that intelligence was to be found in creatures of many sorts.

There were those among the People, Hresh knew, who hunted caviandis for their flesh. They were said to be tasty things. But that would have to stop, if the brightness of the caviandis' eyes turned out to be matched by a corresponding richness of intellect. Some sort of protective legislation, maybe—unpopular, but necessary—

He was tempted to take a quick peek into their minds now. A bit of preliminary probing. Just to get

some general idea.

He smiled at the trembling animals, and lifted his sensing-organ, thinking to summon his second sight, only for a moment, only for a quick look.

"Lordship? Lord chronicler?"

The interruption was as jarring as a blow in the small of the back. Hresh whirled and saw one of his deputies behind him, and a coarse-looking man with him in the sash of a bailiff of the court of justice.

"What is it?"

The bailiff stumbled forward. "Your pardon, lord chronicler, but I bring a message from the court, from Husathirn Mueri, who sits in judgment today at the Basilica. A stranger has been found, a young man who appears to be returned from captivity among the hjjks, and who speaks no language except the noises of the bug-folk. And Prince Husathirn Mueri respectfully requests—if you could assist him—if you could come to the Basilica to aid in the interrogation—"

They had sent her off to wait in a holding chamber during the adjournment, a sweaty little room, nothing very much different from the cells where criminals were kept while awaiting the attention of the justiciary prince; and they had put the hjjk emissary in a different room of the same sort on the far side of the cupola. Nialli Apuilana had thought it might have been useful for them both to wait for Hresh in the same room, so that they could try to make some further attempts at communication, but no, no, take her to this room, take him to that one. She realized with some surprise that Husathirn Mueri must not trust the two of them together in any unsupervised situation. It was one more illustration of the pettiness and fretful suspiciousness of his soul, the small mean ignobility of it.

Can he possibly sense that there is Nest-bond between us? she wondered. Is he afraid that we'll flange up some sort of treacherous conspiracy, if he gives us a chance to spend an hour or so in the same cell? Or is what he's afraid of simply that we might pass the time with a little sweaty coupling? That was an odd idea. The stranger, all skin and bones, taking advantage of a bit of spare time to jump on her. She wasn't attracted by him at all. But she didn't put it past Husathirn Mueri to suspect such a thing. What does he think I am? she asked herself.

Furiously she paced the little wedge-shaped room until she had counted its measurements out fifty times over. Then she took a seat on a bench of black stone beneath a niche containing an ikon of Dawinno the Transformer, and leaned back, folding her arms across her breasts. A bit more tranquil now. Summoning a little patience. They might have a long wait coming before the bailiff managed to track her father down.

As she grew calmer she felt herself growing dreamy. Something strange arising within her, now. Visions come drifting into her mind. The Nest, is it? Yes. Yes. Increasing in clarity moment by moment, as if layers of filmy cloth are being stripped away. Old memories awaken now, after lying dormant so long. What has stirred them? The sight of those amulets on his wrist and chest, was it? The aura of the Nest that he carried about him, visible only to her?

She hears a rushing, a roaring, in her mind. And then she is there. That other world where she had passed the strangest three months of her life comes vividly to life for her.

They are all around her in the narrow tunnel, welcoming her back after her long absence, rubbing their claws gently against her fur by way of greeting: half a dozen Queen-attendants, and a pair of Egg-makers, and a Nest-thinker, and a couple of Militaries. The dry crisp scent of them tingles in her nostrils. The air

is warm and close; the light is a dim pink glow, the familiar lovely Nest-light, faint but sufficient. She embraces them one by one, savoring the feel of their smooth two-toned carapaces and their black-bristled forearms. It is good to be back, she tells them. I have longed for this moment ever since I left here.

There is a commotion just then at the far end of the long passageway: a procession of young males, it is, jostling and crowding each other. They are on their way to the royal chamber to be aroused into fertility by Queen-touch. It is the last stage in their maturity. They will be allowed to mate, finally, once the Queen has done whatever it is that is done to bring the young to fertility. Nialli Apuilana envies them for that.

But she is ripe herself. Ready for mating, ready for life to be kindled within her, ready to play her proper part in Egg-plan. The Queen must know that. The Queen knows everything. Soon, she thinks, one of these days quite soon, it will be my turn to come before the Queen, and Her love will descend upon me, and my loins will be quickened to life by Her touch, and at long last I too will be—

I too will be—

"Lady, the court is reassembling," came a voice that cut through her like a dull rusty blade.

She opened her eyes. A bailiff stood before her, a different one from before. She glared at him in such rage that it was a wonder it didn't strip the fur from his skin. But he simply stood gaping like a clod. "Lady, they request that you return to—"

"Yes. *Yes!* Don't you think I heard you?"

Hresh did not appear to have arrived yet. Everything was as it had been before, more or less. The stranger stood in the absolute center of the room, wholly motionless, like a statue of himself. He seemed scarcely even to breathe. A hjjk trick, that was. They weren't ones for wasting energy. When they had no reason to be in motion, they didn't move at all.

Husathirn Mueri, though, was in constant motion. He crossed and uncrossed his legs; he shifted about uneasily as if the throne were growing icy cold beneath him, or fiery; he flicked his sensing-organ about, now curling it against his shins, now letting it arch upward behind him until the tip of it peered over his shoulder. His intense amber gaze flickered everywhere around the great room except in Nialli Apuilana's direction; but then suddenly she caught him staring at her again in that hungry fashion of his. As soon as their eyes met, he looked away.

She felt sorry for him, in an odd way. That he was so driven, so edgy. They said that his mother Torlyri had been a saintly loving person, and his father the most valiant of warriors. But Husathirn Mueri seemed not at all saintly, and Nialli Apuilana doubted that he would be of much use on a battlefield, either. Hardly a credit to his forebears. Perhaps it's true, she thought, the thing that the older people like to say, that in this modern era of city life we've become a race of confused, troubled folk, no clear sense of direction in our lives at all. Weaklings, in fact. Decadents.

But, she wondered, is it so? That we've gone from primitivism to decadence and weakness in a single generation? All that time pent up in the cocoon, scarcely changing in any way, and then we erupt and build ourselves a tremendous city, and practically overnight all the old virtues are lost, our godliness, our honor?

Husathirn Mueri may be a decadent, she thought. And probably so am I. But is he really a weakling? Am I?

"The chronicler! Hresh-of-the-answers! All rise for the chronicler Hresh!" came the braying voice of the bailiff who had gone to fetch him.

She looked about and saw her father entering the throne-room.

How long it had been since she had last seen him, she wasn't sure: weeks, certainly, or possibly months. There had never been any formal estrangement between them; but her path and his simply tended rarely to cross, these days. He had his unending research into the world of the past to absorb him, while she, living her isolated and somehow suspended life in the upper reaches of the House of Nakhaba, felt little reason to come down into the central districts of the city.

The moment he entered the room Hresh turned to her, holding out his arms, as if she were the only person there. And Nialli Apuilana went quickly, eagerly to him.

"Father—"

"Nialli—my little Nialli—"

He had aged enormously in just these few months since they last had been together, as though each week had been a year for him. Of course he was at a point in his life when time galloped by. Some years past fifty now: old, as People life-spans went. His fur had long since grayed. Nialli Apuilana, his one child, born to him very late, could not remember a time when it had been any other color. His slender shoulders were bowed, his chest was hollow. Only his huge dark scarlet-flecked eyes, blazing like beacons beneath his wide forehead, still radiated the vitality that must have been his in those long-ago days when, still no more than a boy, he had led the People from the ancestral cocoon across the plains into Vengiboneeza.

They embraced quietly, almost solemnly. Then she stepped back from him and for a moment their eyes met.

Hresh-of-the-answers, the bailiff had called him. Well, that was his full formal name, yes. He had once told her that he had chosen it himself upon reaching his naming-day. Before that, when he was a boy, he had been called Hresh-full-of-questions. They were both good names for him. There was no mind like his anywhere, always probing, always seeking. Truly he must be the wisest man in the world, Nialli Apuilana thought. Everyone said so.

She felt herself drawn in, swallowed up, by those astonishing eyes of his, eyes that had looked upon such miracles and wonders as she could barely comprehend. Hresh had seen the Great World alive: he had held a device in his hand that brought it all back in visions, and showed him the mighty sapphire-eyes people and the sea-lords and the mechanicals and all the rest of those dead races—even the humans, whom the People had called by the name of Dream-Dreamers in the days when they lived in the cocoon—the baffling enigmatic humans, who had been masters of the Earth long before any of the others had come into being, so long ago that the mind was numbed merely to think of it.

Hresh seemed so mild, so ordinary, until you looked into his eyes. And then he became frightening. He had seen so much. He had achieved so much. Everything that the People had become since the Long Winter's end, they were because Hresh had shaped them that way.

He smiled. "I wasn't expecting to see you here, Nialli."

"Husathirn Mueri sent for me. He thought I still knew the language of the hjjks. But of course it's all gone from me now, all but a few words."

Hresh nodded. "You shouldn't be expected to remember. It's been two years, hasn't it?"

"Three, father. Almost four."

"Almost four. Of course." He chuckled indulgently at his own absentmindedness. "And who could blame you for blocking it from your mind? A nightmare like that."

She looked away from him. He had never understood the truth of her stay among the hjjks. No one had. Perhaps no one ever would. Except this silent stranger here, and she was unable to communicate in any useful way with him.

Husathirn Mueri, descending from the throne, led the stranger to Hresh's side. "He was found at midday, in Emakkis Valley, riding a vermilion. He makes hjjk-sounds, and speaks a few words of our language also. Nialli Apuilana says that these are hjjk-amulets on his wrist and breast."

"He looks half starved," Hresh said. "More than half. He's like a walking skeleton."

"Do you remember what I looked like, father, when I came back from the hjjks?" Nialli Apuilana asked. "They eat very little, the hjjks. Sparseness is what they prefer, in eating, in everything. That's their way. I was hungry all the time, when I was with them."

"And looked it when you returned," said Hresh. "I do remember. Well, perhaps we can find some way to talk with this boy. And then he ought to be given something to eat. Eh, Husathirn Mueri? Something to put a little meat on his bones. But let's see what we can do, first."

"Will you use the Wonderstone?" Husathirn Mueri asked.

"The Wonderstone, yes. The Barak Dayir." Hresh drew a worn velvet pouch from a pocket of his sash and tugged at its drawstring. Into the palm of his hand tumbled a tapered bit of polished stone, like a finely made spearhead. It was a mottled purple and brown in color, with a pattern of intricate fine lines inscribed along its edges. "No one must come near me," he said.

Nialli Apuilana trembled. She had seen the Wonderstone no more than five or six times in her life, and not in many years. It was the People's single most prized possession. No one, not even Hresh, knew what it was. They said it was made of star-stuff, whatever that meant. They said it was older even than the Great World, that it was a human-thing, an instrument out of that remote unknown world that had existed before the sapphire-eyes folk began to rule the Earth. Perhaps so. The only thing that was certain was that Hresh had learned how to work miracles with it.

He took it now in the curve of his sensing-organ, grasping it firmly. His expression grew distant and strange. He was summoning his second sight, now, unleashing all the formidable powers of his mind and focusing them through the strange device that was called the Barak Dayir.

The stranger, motionless, stood with his eyes fixed unblinkingly on Hresh. They were unusual eyes, a clear pale green, like the water in the shallows of Dawinno Bay, but much colder. The stranger too seemed to be locked in deep concentration; and once again that odd almost-smile had appeared on his face.

Hresh's eyes were closed. He appeared not even to be breathing. He was lost in his own spell, his mind given up entirely into the power of the Barak Dayir. But after an eternity he could be seen to return. The room was very still.

"His name is Kundalimon," Hresh said.

"Kundalimon," Husathirn Mueri repeated gravely, as though the name had some deep significance.

"At least, that's what he thinks it is. He isn't entirely sure. He isn't entirely sure even of what a name is. He doesn't have one among the hjjks. But the traces of the name *Kundalimon* are still in his mind, like the traces of ancient foundations in a ruined city. He knows that he was born here, seventeen years ago."

Husathirn Mueri said quietly to the bailiff, "Go to the House of Knowledge. See if there's any record of a lost child named Kundalimon."

Hresh shook his head. "No. Let it be. I'll take care of that myself, afterward." He turned to the stranger. "We have to teach you your own name. Everyone in this city has a name, a name that belongs only to himself." And in a clear high tone he said, pointing to the boy, *"Kundalimon."*

"Kundalimon," the stranger repeated, nodding, tapping his chest, smiling something that was close to being an actual smile.

Hresh touched his own breast. *"Hresh."*

"Hresh," said the stranger. "Hresh."

He looked toward Nialli Apuilana.

"He wants to know your name too," Hresh said. "Go on. Tell him."

Nialli Apuilana nodded. But to her horror her voice wasn't there when she called upon it. Nothing would come from her throat but a cough and a tight hoarse rasping that could almost have been a hjjk-sound. Dismayed, embarrassed, she clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Tell him your name," said Hresh again.

Silently Nialli Apuilana tapped her throat with her fingers and shook her head.

Hresh seemed to understand. He nodded to Kundalimon and pointed to her. *"Nialli Apuilana,"* he said, in the same clear high tone as before.

"Nialli—Apuilana," Kundalimon repeated carefully, staring at her. The supple vowels and liquid consonants did not seem to rise easily to his lips. "Nialli—Apuilana—"

She looked away, as if scalded by his gaze.

Hresh took the Barak Dayir and closed his eyes again, and disappeared once more into his trance. Kundalimon stood statue-still before him. There was utter silence in the room.

Shortly Hresh seemed to return, and after a time he said, "How strange his mind is! He's been with the hjjks since he was four. Living in the great main Nest, the Nest of Nests, far in the north."

The Nest of Nests! In the presence of the Queen of Queens Herself! Nialli Apuilana felt a surge of envy.

She found her voice and said softly, "And do you know why he's come here, father?"

In a curious muffled tone Hresh said, "The Queen wants to make a treaty with us."

"A *treaty?"* Husathirn Mueri said.

"A treaty, yes. A treaty of perpetual peace."

Husathirn Mueri looked stunned. "What are the terms? Do you know?"

"They want to draw a line across the continent, somewhere just north of the City of Yissou. Everything north of the line is to be considered hjjk, and everything south of it will remain the territory of the People. No one of either race will be allowed to enter territory belonging to the other."

"A treaty," Husathirn Mueri said again in wonder. "The Queen wants a treaty with us! I can't believe it."

"Nor can I," said Hresh. "Almost too good to be true, isn't it? Hard and fast boundaries. A no-trespass agreement. Everything clear, everything straightforward. In one stroke, an end to the fear of war with them that's been dangling over us all our lives."

"If we can trust them."

"If we can trust them, yes."

"Have they sent an emissary to the City of Yissou also, do you know?" Husathirn Mueri said.

"Yes. They've sent them to each of the Seven Cities, so it appears."

Husathirn Mueri laughed. "I'd like to see King Salaman's face. Out of nowhere, peace breaks out! Perpetual peace with the great insect enemy! What then becomes of the holy war of extermination that he's been aching to launch against them for the past ten or twenty years?"

"Do you think Salaman was ever serious about a war with the hjjks?" Nialli Apuilana asked.

Husathirn Mueri looked at her. "What?"

"It's all politics, isn't it? So he can go on building his great wall higher and higher and higher. He keeps saying the hjjks are about to invade his city, but in fact the last time they did was before most of us were born. When Harruel was king up there, and Yissou had just been founded."

He turned to Hresh. "She has a point. Despite all of Salaman's fretting, there haven't been any real hostilities between the hjjks and the People in years. They have their lands, and we have ours, and nothing worse than a few border skirmishes ever takes place. If all the treaty does is ratify the status quo, what meaning does it have? Or is it some kind of trap?"

"There are other conditions besides the one I spoke of," Hresh said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"That had best be saved for discussion in the Presidium, I think," said Hresh. "Meanwhile we have a weary stranger here. Give the boy a place to stay, Husathirn Mueri. See if you can find something for him that he's willing to eat. And make sure that his vermilion is cared for, also. He's very worried about his vermilion."

Husathirn Mueri signaled to one of the bailiffs, who came lumbering forward.

"No," Nialli Apuilana said. Her voice was a harsh croak again, but she managed to make herself heard. "Not you." She held out her hand to the stranger. "I'll take charge of getting him his food. I know what kinds of things he eats, better than anyone else here. Don't forget I've been in the Nest myself." She glanced defiantly around the room. "Well? Any objections?" But no one spoke.

"Come," she said to Kundalimon. "I'll look after you."

As it should be, she thought.

How could I let anyone else? What do they know, any of them? But we are both of the Nest, you and I. We are both of the Nest.

2

Masks of Several Sorts

Afterward, when he is alone again, Hresh closes his eyes and lets his soul rove forth, imagining it soaring in a dream-vision beyond the bounds of the city, far across the windy northern plains, into that unknown distant realm where the hordes of insect-folk scurry about within their immense subterranean tunnels. They are a total enigma to him. They are the mystery of mysteries. He sees the Queen, or what he imagines to be the Queen, that immense remote inscrutable monarch, lying somnolent in Her heavily guarded chamber, stirring slowly while acolytes chant harsh clicking hjjk-songs of praise: the hjjk of hjjks, the great Queen. What hjjk-dreams of total world domination is She dreaming, even now? How will we ever learn, he wonders, what it is that those creatures want of us?

"Your abdication?" Minguil Komeilt cried, astonished. "Your *abdication,* lady? Who would dare? Let me take this paper to the captain of the guards! We'll find the one who's behind it and we'll see to it that—"

"Peace, woman," Taniane said. This fluttery outburst from her private secretary was more bothersome to her than the actual petition had been. "Do you think this is the first time I've had a note like this? Do you think it'll be the last? It means nothing. *Nothing*. "

"But to throw a stone at you in the streets, with a message like this attached to it—"

Taniane laughed. She glanced again at the scrap of paper in her hand. YOU STAY MUCH TOO LONG, it said, in huge crude lettering. IT'S TIME YOU STEPPED ASIDE AND LET RIGHTFUL FOLK RULE.

The words were Beng, the handwriting was Beng. The stone had come out of nowhere to land at her feet, as she was walking up Koshmar Way from the Chapel of the Interceder to her chambers in the House of Government, as she did almost every morning after she had prayed. It was the third such anonymous note she had received—no, the fourth, she thought—in the last six months. After nearly forty

years of chieftainship.

"You want me to take no action at all?" Minguil Komeilt asked.

"I want you to file this wherever you file outbursts of this sort. And then forget about it. Do you understand me? Forget about it. It means nothing whatsoever."

"But—lady—"

"Nothing whatsoever," said Taniane again.

She entered her chambers. The masks of her predecessors stared down at her from its dark stippled walls.

They were fierce, vivid, strange, barbaric. They were emblems out of a former age. To Taniane they were reminders of how much had changed in the single life-span since the People had come forth from the cocoon.

"Time I stepped aside," she said to them, under her breath. "So I've been told." Rocks thrown at me in the street. Bengs who don't care for the Act of Union. After all this time. Restless fools, that's all they are. They still want one of their own to govern. As if they knew a better system. I should give them what they want, and see how they like it then.

There behind her desk was the Mask of Lirridon, which Koshmar had worn on that long-ago day when the tribe had made its Going Forth into the newly thawed world. It was a frightening thing, harsh and angular and repellent. Surely it was patterned after some old tribal memory of the hjjk-folk, some ancestral nightmare, for it was yellow and black in color, and outfitted with a terrible jutting sharp-edged beak.

Flanking it was Sismoil's mask, bland, enigmatic, with a flat unreadable face and tiny eye-slits. Thekmur's mask, very simple, hung beside it. Farther down the wall was the Mask of Nialli, a truly horrifying one, black and green with a dozen long spikes, red as blood, standing away from its sides at sharp angles. Koshmar had worn the Nialli mask on the day the invading force of Helmet People—Bengs—first had arrived and confronted the People in Vengiboneeza.

And there were Koshmar's own masks: the shining gray one with red eye-slits that she had worn in her lifetime, and the finer one carved in her honor by the craftsman Striinin after her death, with powerful features marked in burnished black wood. Taniane had worn that mask herself, on the day of departure from Vengiboneeza, when the People were setting out on their second migration, the one that would bring them eventually to the place where they would build the City of Dawinno.

Glimmers of a vanished past, the masks were. Spark-trails, leading backward through the muffled swaddlings of time to forgotten days of what now seemed a claustrophobic enclosure.

"Should I go?" Taniane asked, looking at the Koshmar masks. "Are they right? Have I ruled long enough? Is it time to step aside?"

Koshmar had been the last of the old chieftains—the last to rule over a tribe so small that the chieftain knew everyone by name, and adjudicated disputes as though they were mere bickerings between friends.

How much simpler an age that had been! How guileless, how naive!

"Perhaps I should," Taniane said. "Eh? Eh? What do you say? Do the gods require me to spend every remaining minute of my life doing this? Or is it out of pride that I hang on year after year? Or because I wouldn't know what else to do with myself?"

From Koshmar's masks no answers came.

The People had been just a little band, in Koshmar's time, a mere tribe. But now the People were civilized; now they were city-dwellers; now they numbered in the thousands instead of in the handfuls, and they had been compelled to invent one new concept after another, a dizzying profusion of things, in order to be able to function at all in this new and expanded order. They had come to use the thing known as exchange-units instead of simply sharing alike, and they fretted over profits, possessions, the size of their living quarters, the number of workers they employed, tactics of competition in the marketplace, and other such strangenesses. They had begun to divide into classes: rulers, owners, workers, poor. Nor were the old tribal lines completely erased. They were fading, yes. But Koshmars and Bengs had not yet entirely forgotten that they had been Koshmars and Bengs; and then there were all the others, the Hombelions and Debethins and Stadrains and Mortirils and the rest, the proud little tribes gradually disappearing into the bigger ones but still struggling to retain some shred of their old identities.

Each of these things brought new problems, and all of them fell ultimately to the chieftain to solve. And everything had happened so rapidly. The city, powered by Hresh's unceasing inventiveness and his researches into the archives of antiquity, had sprung up like a mushroom in a single generation, in unabashed and hopeful imitation of the Great World cities of the past.

Taniane looked at the masks.

"You never had to worry about census figures and tax rolls, did you? Or minutes of the Presidium, or statistics on the number of exchange-units in current circulation." She riffled through the mound of papers on her desk: petitions of merchants seeking licenses to import goods from the City of Yissou, studies of sanitation problems in outlying neighborhoods, a report on the poor condition of the Thaggoran Bridge on the south side of town. On and on and on. And, right on top, Hresh's little memorandum: *A Report on the Proposed Treaty with the Hjjks*.

"If only you were down here," Taniane said fervently to the masks, "and I were up there on the wall!"

She had never had a mask of her own. At first she was content to wear Koshmar's, on those occasions when wearing a mask was appropriate. And then, after the Bengs had come to Dawinno to merge with the People under the Act of Union, the political compromise that provided for a chieftain of Koshmar blood but a Beng majority on the Presidium, and the city had entered the most spectacular phase of its growth, mask-wearing had begun to seem antiquated to her, a mere foolish custom of the earlier days. It was years now since she had worn one.

Even so, she kept them around her in her office. Partly as decorations, partly as reminders of that darker and more primitive time when ice had covered the land and the People were nothing more than a little band of naked furry creatures huddling in a sealed chamber cut into the side of a mountain. The harsh shapes and bright, slashing colors of those masks were her only link to that other era now.

Seating herself behind the curving block of black onyx, rising on a pedestal of polished pink granite that was her desk, Taniane scooped up a handful of the papers that Minguil Komeilt had left there for her and shuffled somberly through them again and again. Words swam before her eyes. *Census ... taxes ... Thaggoran Bridge ... hjjk treaty ... hjjk treaty ... hjjk treaty...*

She glanced up at Lirridon's mask, the hjjk-faced one with the great hideous beak.

"Would *you* sign a treaty with them?" she asked. "Would you deal with them at all?"

The hjjks! How she despised and dreaded them! From childhood on you were taught to loathe them. They were hideous; they were gigantic frightful nightmare bugs, cold and evil; they were capable of committing any sort of monstrous thing.

There were rumors of them all the time, roving bands of them said to lurk in the open country everywhere to the east and north. In truth there turned out to be no substance behind most of those tales. But all the same they had stolen her only child from her, just outside the city walls; and the fact that Nialli Apuilana had returned after a few months had done nothing to ease Taniane's hatred for them, for the Nialli Apuilana who had returned was something mysteriously different from the girl they had taken. The hjjks were the menace. They were the enemy against whom the People would one day have to contend for supremacy in the world.

And this treaty—these purported messages of love from their ghastly Queen—

Taniane pushed Hresh's report aside.

I've been chieftain so long, she thought. Ever since I was a girl. My whole life, so it seems—nearly forty years—

She had taken the chieftainship when the tribe was tiny, and she just a short time beyond her girlhood. Koshmar was dying, and Taniane the most vigorous and far-seeing of the younger women. They had all acclaimed her. She hadn't hesitated. She knew she was made for the chieftainship, and the chieftainship for her. But she had had no way of seeing as far as *this,* these reports and studies and petitions for import licenses. And ambassadors from the hjjks. No one could have foreseen that. Perhaps not even Hresh.

She picked up another paper, the one on the cracks in the roadbed of the Thaggoran Bridge. That seemed more urgent just now. You are evading the real issue, she told herself. And other words floated before her eyes.

YOU STAY MUCH TOO LONG
TIME YOU STEPPED ASIDE
LET RIGHTFUL FOLK RULE

"Your abdication, lady? Your *abdication* ?"

"It's nothing—nothing whatsoever—"

YOU STAY MUCH TOO LONG

A Report on the Proposed Treaty with the Hjjks

"Your abdication, lady?"

"Would *you* sign a treaty with them?"

"Mother? Mother, are you all right?"

"Your *abdication* ?"

"Can you hear me, mother?"

IT'S TIME YOU STEPPED ASIDE

"Mother? Mother?"

Taniane looked up. There was a figure at the door of her chambers. That door was always open to any of the citizens of Dawinno, though few of them dared to come to it. Taniane struggled to focus her eyes. She had been in some sort of haze, she realized. Minguil Komeilt? No, no, Minguil Komeilt was a soft, round, timid little woman, and this one was tall and athletic, strong and restless.

"Nialli?" she said, after a moment.

"You sent for me."

"Yes. Yes. Of course. Come in, girl!"

But she hovered in the doorway. She wore a green mantle casually over one shoulder and the orange sash of the highborn at her waist. "You look so strange," she said, staring. "I've never seen you look this way. Mother, what's the matter? You aren't ill, are you?"

"No. And nothing is the matter."

"They told me a rock was thrown at you in the street this morning."

"You know about it?"

"Everyone knows. A hundred people saw it, and everyone's talking about it. It makes me so furious, mother! That anyone should dare—should *dare* —"

"So big a city is bound to have a great many fools," Taniane said.

"But to throw a rock, mother—to try to injure you—"

"You have it wrong," Taniane said. "The rock fell well in front of me. It wasn't meant to hit me at all. It was simply carrying a message. Some Beng agitator thinks I ought to abdicate. I've stayed much too long, is what he said. It's time I stepped aside. In favor of a Beng chieftain, I suppose."

"Would anyone really presume to suggest such a thing?"

"People presume to suggest anything and everything, Nialli. What happened this morning is meaningless. Some crank, nothing more. Some agitator. I can tell the difference between an isolated crank letter and the outbreak of a revolution." She shook her head. "Enough of this. There are other things to discuss."

"You dismiss it so lightly, mother."

"Shall I let myself take it seriously? I'd be a fool if I did."

"No," Nialli Apuilana said, and there was heat in her tone. "I don't agree at all. Who knows how far this will spread, if it's not stopped right away? You should find the person who threw that rock and have him

nailed to the city wall."

They stared tensely at each other. A pounding began behind Taniane's eyes, and she felt a tightness in her stomach. Congealing juices roiled there. With anyone else, she thought, this would merely be a discussion; with Nialli it was a battle. They were always at war. Why is that? she wondered. Hresh had said something about their being so similar, that like repels like. He had been doing something with little metal bars then, studying how one of them would attract the other at one end, but nothing would happen at the other. You and Nialli are too much like each other, Hresh had said. And that is why you will never be able to exert any real force over her. Your magnetism won't work on her.

Perhaps so, although Taniane suspected that something else was at work too, some transformation which she had undergone while she was among the hjjks, that made her so difficult. But there was no denying her daughter's likeness to her. The two of them were cast in the same image. It was an eerie and sometimes troubling thing. Looking at Nialli was like looking at a mirror that reflected through time. They could almost have been twins, mysteriously born some three and a half decades apart. Nialli was her one child, the child of her middle years, conceived almost miraculously after she and Hresh had long since given up hope of bringing any into the world; and there seemed to be no imprint of Hresh anywhere upon the girl, except, perhaps, her stubborn, independent mind. In all other ways she was Taniane reborn. Those elegant legs, those strong shoulders and high breasts, that splendid silken red-brown fur—yes, Taniane thought. She looked regal. She carried herself like a chieftain. There was a glory about her. Not always a comforting thing, that. Sometimes, when she saw Nialli, Taniane was all too painfully reminded of her own aging body. She felt herself already drifting downward into the earth, beckoned by the powers of decay, too soon dragged under by the mass of corroding flesh and softening bones. She heard the flutter of moth-wings, she saw trails of gray dust along stone floors. There were days when there was death in the air.

After a long silence Taniane said, "Must we quarrel, Nialli? If I thought there was something to worry about here, I'd take action. But if someone really wanted to overthrow me, it wouldn't be done with rocks tossed in the street. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," said Nialli Apuilana. It was barely more than a whisper. "I understand."

"Good." Taniane closed her eyes a moment. She struggled to cast off fatigue and strain. "Now: if we can get down to the matter I called you here to discuss. Which is this supposed ambassador who has come to us from the hjjks, and the supposed treaty that he supposedly invites us to sign."

"Why all these supposeds, mother?"

"Because everything that we really know about this comes by way of Hresh and the Barak Dayir. The boy himself hasn't said anything coherent at all, has he?"

"Not yet, no."

"You think he will?"

"As our language comes back to him, he may. He's been in the Nest for thirteen years, mother."

"What about your talking to him in *his* language?"

Nialli Apuilana seemed uneasy. "I'm not able to do that."

"You can't speak any hjjk?"

"Only a handful of words, mother. It was years ago—I was with them just a few months—"

"You're the one who brings him his food, aren't you?"

Nialli Apuilana nodded.

"What if you used those occasions to refresh your memories of the hjjk language? Or to teach him a little of ours."

"I suppose I could," Nialli Apuilana said grudgingly.

The obvious reluctance in her tone was maddening. Taniane felt her resistance. The girl is innately contrary, she thought. She said, perhaps a little too sharply, "You're the only person in this city who can serve as an interpreter for us. Your help is essential, Nialli. The Presidium will meet soon to take up this entire treaty thing. I can't rely on Wonderstone trances alone. The Wonderstone is all well and good; but we need to hear actual words from the boy. You'll have to find some way of communicating verbally with him and learn from him what this is all about. And then give me a full report. I want to know everything that he says to you."

Something was wrong. Nialli Apuilana's jaw was set. There was a cold, hard look in the girl's eyes. She stared without speaking, and the silence stretched across too many ticking moments.

"Is there some problem here?" Taniane asked.

Nialli Apuilana glared sullenly. "I don't like acting as a spy, mother."

A spy? Taniane thought. That was unexpected. It hadn't occurred to her that serving as an interpreter on behalf of one's own people could be construed as spying.

Is it because of the hjjks? she wondered.

Yes. Yes. It is because the hjjks are involved in this. And she sat stunned, appalled. For the first time she understood that her daughter might feel an actual conflict of loyalty.

Since Nialli Apuilana's return from captivity she had never said a word to anyone about her experiences among the hjjks: nothing of what they had done to her, nothing of what they had said, not a scrap of information about what life in the Nest was like. She had steadfastly deflected all inquiries, meeting every query with an odd mix of distress and steely ferocity, until the inquiries had ceased altogether. Up till this moment Taniane had assumed that the girl had simply been shielding her privacy, protecting herself against the awakening of painful memories. But if she saw a request to report on her conversations with Kundalimon in terms of spying, then it might well be that it was the privacy of the hjjks, not her own, that she felt a powerful desire to protect. That was worth some further investigation.

Just now, though, such ambiguities of attitude were a luxury the city was unable to afford. An actual hjjk ambassador, tongue-tied and uncommunicative though he might be, was here. Guessing at his message, or relying on Hresh's Wonderstone-assisted ability to read his mind, was insufficient. He had to be made to state his errand in words. Nialli would simply have to yield. Her assistance in this thing was too important.

Brusquely Taniane said, "What kind of foolishness is this? There's no spying involved here. We're talking about service to your city. A stranger comes, bearing news that the Queen wants to negotiate with us. But he can't speak our language and nobody here can speak his, except for one young woman who happens to be the chieftain's daughter, but who also seems to think that there's something unethical about helping us to find out what an ambassador from another race is trying to say."

"You're turning everything your own way, mother. I simply don't want to feel that if I do manage to open some sort of communication with Kundalimon, I'm obliged to report whatever he says to me to you."

Taniane felt the beginnings of despair. Once she had thought Nialli Apuilana would succeed her one day as chieftain; but plainly that could never be. The girl was impossible. She was baffling: volatile, headstrong, unstable. It was clear now that the long line of the chieftainship, which could be traced back into the remote days of cocoon life, was destined to be broken. It was the hjjks that did this to her, Taniane thought. One more reason to despise them. But all the same Nialli Apuilana could not be allowed to win this battle.

Summoning all the force that was within her, she said, "You *have* to do it. It's vital to our security that we understand what this is all about."

"Have to?"

"I want you to. You have to, yes."

There was silence. Inner rebellion knotted Nialli Apuilana's forehead. Taniane stared at her coldly, pitilessly, matching the hardness of her daughter's glare with an even fiercer look, one meant to overpower. To enhance it she allowed her second sight to arise, and Nialli Apuilana looked at her in amazement. Taniane maintained the pressure.

Nialli Apuilana, though, continued to resist.

Then at last she gave ground: or appeared to. Coolly, almost contemptuously, she said, "Well, then. As you wish. I'll do what I can."

Nialli Apuilana's face, so wondrously a reflection of Taniane's own refracted through decades of time, was expressionless, unreadable, a mask void of all feeling. Taniane felt the temptation to reach out at the most intimate level of second sight, to reach with forbidden force and penetrate that sullen mask for once. Was it anger that Nialli Apuilana was hiding, or mere resentment, or something else, some wild rebellious flare?

"Are we finished?" Nialli Apuilana asked. "Do I have permission to leave now?"

Taniane gave her a bleak look. This had all gone so very badly. She had won this little battle, perhaps. But she sensed that she had lost a war.

She had hoped to reach out to Nialli in love and friendship. Instead she had snapped and snarled, and had made use of the blunt strength of her position, and had coldly issued orders, as though Nialli were nothing more than some minor functionary of her staff. She wished she could rise, walk around the desk to her, take her in her arms. But that was beyond her, somehow. Often it seemed to her that a wall higher than King Salaman's stood between her and her daughter.

"Yes," she said. "You can go."

Nialli Apuilana went briskly toward the door. When she reached the hallway, though, she turned and looked back.

"Don't worry," she said, and, to Taniane's surprise, there seemed to be a conciliatory tone in her voice. It sounded almost gentle. "I'll do things the right way. I'll find out everything you need to know, and tell you. And I'll tell it to the Presidium too."

Then she was gone.

Taniane swung around and looked at the masks behind her on the wall. They seemed to be laughing at her. Their faces were implacable.

"What do you know?" she muttered. "None of you ever had mates, or children, did you? Did you?"

"Lady?" a voice called from outside. It was Minguil Komeilt. "Lady, may I come in?"

"What is it?"

"A delegation, lady. From the Guild of Tanners and Dyers of the Northern District, concerning repairs to their main water conduit, which they say has become blocked by sewage that is being illegally released by members of the Guild of Weavers and Wool-Carders, and is causing—"

Taniane groaned.

"Oh, send them to Boldirinthe," she said, half to herself. "This is something the offering woman can handle as well as the chieftain can."

"Lady?"

"Boldirinthe can pray for them. She can ask the gods to unplug the water line. Or bring down vengeance on the Guild of Weavers and—"

"Lady?" Minguil Komeilt said again, with alarm in her voice. "Do I understand you rightly, lady? This is a joke, is it not? This is only a joke?"

"Only a joke, yes," said Taniane. "You mustn't take me seriously." She pressed her fingers against her eyes, and drew three quick deep breaths. "All right. Send in the delegation from the Guild of Tanners and Dyers—"

A veil of hazy heat shrouded the sky as Nialli Apuilana stepped into the street outside the House of Government. She hailed a passing xlendi-wagon.

"The House of Nakhaba," she told the driver. "I'll be there just five minutes or so. Then I'll want you to take me somewhere else."

That would be Mueri House, where the hjjk emissary had been lodged: a hostelry used mostly by strangers to the city, where he could be kept under close watch. Now it was time to bring him his midday meal. She went to Kundalimon twice a day, at noon and twilight. He had a small one-windowed room—it was more like a cell—on the third floor, facing backward into a blind plaza.

Her confrontation with her mother had left her drained and numb. Love warred with fear in her whenever she had to deal with Taniane. There was never any telling, with Taniane, when her powerful sense of the needs of the city was going to override all other considerations, all thought of the messy little private needs and problems of private individuals, whether they happened to be her daughter or some absolute stranger. For her the city always came first. No doubt you got that way, Nialli Apuilana supposed, when you held the chieftainship for forty years: time made you hard, narrow, singleminded. Maybe the Beng who had hurled the rock was right: maybe it *was* time for Taniane to step aside.

Nialli Apuilana wondered whether she really was going to spy for Taniane, as she had so abruptly found herself agreeing to do.

It had been a mistake, perhaps, to put the whole thing in terms of spying. She was, after all, a citizen of Dawinno and the daughter of the chieftain and the chronicler. And she did, after all, have at least a little knowledge of the hjjk language, which was more than anyone else here could claim. Why *not* serve as interpreter, and do it gladly, with pride in being of service? It didn't mean that she'd have to repeat every single word of her conversations with Kundalimon to Taniane and the Presidium, or to open up her whole experience of the hjjks to their probing. She could pick and choose: she could easily enough limit what she reported to them to the basic matters of the negotiation. But it had been so frightening, the thought that they might grill her on everything she knew about the Nest and its ruler. That horrified her, that they would break through the shield of privacy which she had held in place around herself for nearly four years. She meant to cast off that shield herself, when and if she felt it was the proper time. The idea that they might in some way strip her of it before she was ready filled her with terror, though. An overreaction, perhaps. Perhaps.

She stopped off at the House of Nakhaba only long enough to pick up the food for Kundalimon's midday meal. Today she had a stewed loin of vimbor for him. Hjjk-food, mostly, was what she brought him: seeds and nuts and baked meats, nothing moist with sauces, nothing at all rich—but also she tempted him carefully now and then with the heartier fare of the People, a morsel or two at a time. Food could be a language too. The meals they took together were one means they had of learning to communicate with each other.

There was one time—it was the third or fourth time she had brought him his meal—when he spent a long time thoughtfully chewing a mouthful of nuts and fruits without swallowing, and finally spat out a quantity into his hand. This he held out to her. Nialli Apuilana's first response was surprise and disgust. But he continued to press the handful of moist pulp upon her, pointing and nodding.

"What is it?" she asked, bewildered. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"No—food—you—Nialli Apuilana—"

She stared, still not comprehending.

"Take—take—"

Then it came back to her. In the Nest the hjjks shared partly digested food all the time. A mark of solidarity, of Nest-bond; and something more than that, perhaps, having to do with the way the hjjks' bodies processed their food, that she could not understand. She remembered now the sight of her nestmates pressing chewed food on one another. It was a common thing among them, this sharing of food.

Hesitantly she had taken what Kundalimon offered. He smiled and nodded. She forced herself to nibble

at it, though all her instincts recoiled. "Yes," he said. "Oh, yes!"

She got it down somehow, straggling against nausea. He seemed pleased.

By pantomime he had indicated then that she should take some of the People-food she had brought and do the same with it for him. She picked up a haunch of roast gilandrin and bit into it, and when she had chewed it for a time she pulled the whole wad of it from her mouth, taking care to conceal her queasiness, and gave it to him.

He tasted it cautiously. He looked uncertain about the meat itself; but obviously he was gladdened by her having had it in her mouth first. She could feel a flood of warmth and gratitude coming from him. It was almost like feeling Nest-bond once again.

"More," he said.

And so, gradually, because she was willing to adopt the hjjk custom with him, he was able to expand his range of foods. Once it became apparent to him that the things Nialli Apuilana brought him were doing him no harm, he ate them with gusto. There was new flesh on his bones, and his dark fur was thickening and had acquired a little sheen. Those strange green eyes of his no longer seemed so hard and icy.

Communication, of a sort.

He was shy and remote, but he seemed to welcome her visits. Had he figured out yet that she too had been in the Nest? Sometimes it seemed that way; but she wasn't yet sure. Verbal contact between them was still very uncertain. He had picked up a dozen or so words of the language of the city, and she was starting to reconstruct her knowledge of hjjk. But vocabulary was one thing and comprehension was another.

Learn his language, or teach him to speak ours. Those were Taniane's orders, and no maybes about them. *Do it quickly, too. And tell us what you find out.*

The first part, at least, was exactly what Nialli Apuilana intended to achieve. And when she and Kundalimon were able to communicate easily with each other, and had come to know each other better, and he had begun to trust her, perhaps he would talk with her of Nest-matters: of Queen-love, of Thinker-thoughts, of Egg-plan, and all the other things of that nature that lay at the heart of her soul. Taniane didn't need to be told anything about that. The rest, this proposed treaty, the diplomatic negotiations: oh, yes, I'll let her know whatever I might learn about all that, Nialli Apuilana thought. But nothing about the deeper things. Nothing about the things that really matter.

The xlendi-wagon was waiting. She got in.

"Mueri House, now," she told the driver.

* * * *

In Prince Thu-Kimnibol's grand villa in the southwestern quadrant of the city the healers had gathered once again by the bedside of the lady Naarinta. This was the fifth night running that they had come. She had been ill for many months, slipping gradually downward from weakness to weakness. But now she was passing into the critical phase.

Tonight Thu-Kimnibol was keeping watch in the narrow antechamber just outside the sickroom. The healers had refused to let him get any closer. This night only women might enter Naarinta's room. The

smell of medicines and aromatic herbs was in the air. The smell of impending death was in it, too.

His sensing-organ trembled with the awareness of the great loss that was rushing toward him.

In the sickroom the offering-woman Boldirinthe sat beside Naarinta. Whenever spells and potions were needed and the aid of the Five Heavenly Ones had to be invoked, fat old Boldirinthe heaved her vast body into a wagon and obligingly came to be of service. Old Fashinatanda, godmother to the chieftain—there was another one, blind and feeble though she was, who rarely missed an opportunity to minister to the gravely ill. Some Beng herb-doctor was there, too, a little shriveled woman wearing a dark feather-trimmed helmet flecked with rust, and two or three others whom Thu-Kimnibol could not recognize. They were murmuring to one another, chanting in low lilting voices.

Thu-Kimnibol turned away. He couldn't bear to listen. It sounded like a chant for the dead.

Outside, in the hallway, bundles of purple flowers with dark red stalks were stacked like temple offerings. The richness of their perfume made Thu-Kimnibol sputter and cough. He walked quickly past, into the huge high-vaulted room that was his audience-chamber. A little group of men waited there in the dimness: Maliton Diveri, Staip, Si-Belimnion, Kartafirain, Chomrik Hamadel. Gaming partners, hunting companions, friends of many years. They clustered round him, smiling, joking, passing a huge flagon of wine back and forth. This was no time for long faces.

"To happier times," Si-Belimnion said, swirling the wine in his mug. "Happier times past, happier times to come."

"Happier times," Chomrik Hamadel echoed. He was of Beng royal blood, a short blunt-featured man with a piercing scarlet gaze. He drank deep, throwing back his head so vehemently that he came close to sending his helmet flying.

Maliton Diveri and Kartafirain joined the toast, grinning, noisily clinking mugs: two robustly built men, one short, the other tall. Only Staip was quiet. He was older than the others, which accounted in part for his restraint; but also he was Boldirinthe's mate, and no doubt Boldirinthe had told him how little hope there was for Naarinta's life. Staip had never been one for dissembling: a warrior's simplicity, that was his style.

Thu-Kimnibol said, picking up a mug and offering it to Maliton Diveri to be filled, "Happier times, yes. Joy and prosperity to us all, and a swift recovery for my lady."

"Joy and prosperity! A swift recovery!"

It was fifteen years since Thu-Kimnibol had begun to share his life with Naarinta. He had met her not long after he had come from the north to settle in the city that his half-brother Hresh had built; and they had been inseparable ever since. She was of the Debethin tribe, the chieftain's daughter—not a great distinction, perhaps, there having been only fourteen Debethins still alive when the last survivors of that tribe's unhappy wanderings had come marching out of the east to ask for citizenship in Dawinno, but a chieftain was a chieftain nonetheless. She was tall and graceful, with an air of quiet strength about her. They were splendid together: majestic, even, the towering Thu-Kimnibol and his stately lady. The gods had given them no children, which was his greatest regret; but he had been content with Naarinta alone, the partner of his labors, the companion of his days. And then this wasting disease had come upon her, this terrible incomprehensible decree of the Heavenly Ones, against which there seemed to be no appeal.

Chomrik Hamadel said, "Is there news, Thu-Kimnibol?"

"She's very weak. What can I say?"

"News of the envoy from the hjjks, I mean," said Chomrik Hamadel hastily. "They keep him locked up in Mueri House, I hear, and Taniane's daughter runs to him every day. But what's happening? What is this all about, this visitation from the bug-folk?"

"They want a peace treaty, so I understand it," Kartafirain said, and laughed. He was a tall silver-furred man of Koshmar ancestry, nearly shoulder-high to Thu-Kimnibol himself, jovial and belligerent by nature. The warrior Thhrouk had been his father. "Peace! Who are they to talk of peace? They don't know what the word means."

"Perhaps Hresh misunderstood," Si-Belimnion said, and rubbed the rolls of fat beneath his thick blue-gray fur. He was a wealthy man, and well fed. "Perhaps it's a declaration of war that the boy carries, and not a message of peace. Hresh is getting old, I think."

"So are we all," said Chomrik Hamadel. "But do you think Hresh no longer knows the difference between peace and war? He used the Wonderstone to look into the boy's mind, Curabayn Bangkea tells me. You have to trust what the Wonderstone says."

"A treaty of peace," Maliton Diveri said, and shook his head in wonderment. "With the hjjks! What will we do? Fall down on our faces and thank the gods for such mercies, I suppose!"

"Of course," said Thu-Kimnibol gruffly. "And then scurry up and put our signatures on the treaty. I'll be the first, if they'll permit me. We have to show our deep gratitude. The kindness of the bug-folk! They'll condescend to let us keep our city, I hear. And maybe even a little of the farmland outside it."

"Are those the terms?" Si-Belimnion asked. "What I had heard was much more favorable to us: the hjjks will stay back of Vengiboneeza, is what I heard, provided we don't attempt to expand beyond—"

"Whatever it is," said Kartafirain flatly, "we'll be the losers. You can bet your ears on that, and your sensing-organ too. When the Presidium meets, we've got to argue for rejection of this thing."

"And when will that be?" asked Chomrik Hamadel.

"A week, ten days, maybe sooner. While Taniane's daughter is tending this Kundalimon, she's supposed to question him about the details of the treaty in his own language. She can speak it, you know. She picked it up while she was living with the bugs herself. She'll tell Taniane what she finds out and then it all goes to the Presidium for general discussion, after which—"

Just then Staip, who had not said a word all the time, went suddenly from the room, holding his sensing-organ high. It was as though the old warrior had been called by some summons that no one else could hear. A strained silence fell.

Kartafirain ponderously got the conversation going again after a moment. "I don't see the sense of involving Nialli Apuilana in this at all." He looked toward Thu-Kimnibol. "What help can she possibly be?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because she's so strange. Friend, you know better than any of us what sort of creature she is. Do you

think she's likely to find out anything worthwhile? Or tell us if she does? Has that girl ever been willing to cooperate with anyone? Has she revealed so much as one syllable of whatever took place between her and the hjjks while she was their prisoner?"

Thu-Kimnibol said, "Be a little more charitable. She's intelligent and serious. And she's not a girl any more. She's capable of changing. Perhaps the arrival of the envoy will help her start to develop a bit of a sense of responsibility to her city, or at least to her own family. If anyone can get any information out of this stranger from the north, she's the one. And—"

He halted abruptly. Staip had come back into the room. He held himself stiffly and his expression was grim.

To Thu-Kimnibol he said quietly, "Boldirinthe wants a word with you."

The offering-woman had left the sickroom and was sitting in the antechamber. Boldirinthe's huge fleshy form overflowed a wickerwork chair that seemed hard pressed to sustain her. She gestured as if to rise, but it was only a gesture, and she subsided the instant Thu-Kimnibol signaled her to remain where she was. She seemed subdued of mood, uncharacteristically so, for she was one who bubbled with life and jollity at even the darkest of times.

"Is this the end, then?" Thu-Kimnibol asked bluntly.

"It will be very soon. The gods are calling her."

"There's nothing you can do?"

"Everything has been done. You know that. Against the will of the Five we are helpless."

"Yes. So we are." Thu-Kimnibol took the offering-woman's hand in his. Now that the news had come he was calm. He felt an obscure desire to console Boldirinthe for having failed in her lifesaving task, even as she was seeking to give consolation to him. For a moment they both were silent. Then he asked, "How much longer?"

"You should make your farewells to her now," said Boldirinthe. "There'll be no chance later."

He nodded and went past her, into the room where Naarinta lay. She seemed tranquil, and very beautiful, strangely so, as though the long struggle had burned all fleshly impurities from her. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing very faintly, but she was still conscious. Old blind Fashinatanda sat beside her, chanting. As Thu-Kimnibol entered she broke off her chant and, without a word, rose and left the room.

For a little while he talked quietly with Naarinta, though her words were cloudy and disconnected and he couldn't be sure that she understood anything he said. Then they fell silent. She seemed to have traveled more than half the distance into the next world. After a time Thu-Kimnibol saw that the unearthly beauty was beginning to go from her as the final moments approached. Softly he spoke to her again, telling her what she had meant to him; and he took her hand, and held it until everything was over. He kissed her cheek. The fur of it already seemed strangely changed, less soft than it had been. One sob, only one, broke from him. He was surprised his reaction was no more vehement. But the pain was real and strong all the same.

He left then and returned to the audience-chamber, where his friends stood in a little knotted group, no

one speaking. He loomed over them like a wall, feeling suddenly cut off from them, set apart by the loss that he had suffered and the new solitude that was descending on him, falling so unexpectedly into a life that until this time had been marked only by happiness and accomplishment and the favor of the gods. He felt hollow, and knew that this strange calmness that possessed him now was that of exhaustion. A powerful sense came over him then that the life that had been his until today had ended with Naarinta, that he must now undergo transformation and rebirth. But into what? What?

He put such thoughts aside for now. Time enough later to let the new life begin to enter the drained vessel that was his soul.

"She's gone," he said simply. "Kartafirain, pour me more wine. And then let us sit for a while, and talk of politics, or hunting, or the benevolence of the hjjks. But first the wine, Kartafirain. If you please."

At the service Hresh spoke first, words he had spoken often enough before, the words of the Consolation of Dawinno: that death and life are two halves of one thing, for everything that lives arises out of all that once had lived but lives no longer, and in time must yield up its life so that new life may come forth. Boldirinthe then spoke the words of the service for the dead; Taniane spoke also, just a quiet sentence or two, and then Thu-Kimnibol, holding the body of Naarinta in his arms as though it were a doll, laid her cloth-wrapped form at the edge of the pyre. The flames engulfed her and in that fierce brightness she was lost to sight.

Time now for the mourners to return to the city from the Place of the Dead. Taniane and Hresh rode together in the chieftain's ornate wagon. "I've decreed seven days of public mourning," she told him. "That gives us a little time to think about this scheme of the hjjks, before we have to take it to the Presidium."

"The hjjks, yes," said Hresh softly. "The Presidium."

His spirit was still with Thu-Kimnibol and Naarinta. Taniane's words seemed to him at first like mere empty sounds, tinny and meaningless. They seemed to be coming to him across a vast distance. Presidium? Hjjks? Yes. *This scheme of the hjjks,* she had said. What was that? The hjjks, the hjjks, the hjjks. He felt strangeness whispering at his mind, as it so often did when the thought of the hjjks came into it. The rustling of bristly claws. The clicking of great beaks.

She said, breaking in on him sharply, "Where have you gone, Hresh?"

"What?"

"You seem to be on the far side of the moon, all of a sudden."

"Ah. You were saying—" He looked at her vaguely.

"I was speaking of the hjjks. Of the offer of a treaty. I need to know what you make of it, Hresh. Can we possibly abide by it? To let the hjjks isolate us in our own little province? To cut ourselves off from everything else in the world?"

"That is unthinkable, yes," he said.

"So it is. But you seem to take it very calmly. It hardly seems to matter to you at all."

"Must we talk about these things now? It's a sad day, Taniane. I've just seen my brother's beloved mate

lowered into the fire."

She seemed to stiffen. "By the Five, Hresh, we'll see everyone we know lowered into that fire. And then someday our turns will come, and it won't be as pretty as it is in that little sermon you always preach! But the dead are dead, and we're still here, with plenty of trouble to cope with. This request for a peace treaty, Hresh: there's nothing innocent or friendly about it. It has to be a maneuver in some larger game that we aren't able at this time to comprehend. For us to sign it—"

"Please, Taniane."

She ignored him. "—would indeed be unthinkable, just as you say. Hresh, they want to take three-quarters of the world away from us under the guise of a treaty of friendship, and you won't even raise your voice?"

He said, after a while, "You know I won't ever give my support to a surrender to the hjjks. But before I take a public position there's more I need to learn. The hjjks are complete mysteries to me. To everyone. Our ignorance affects our dealings with them. What are they, really? Nothing more than oversized ants? A vast swarm of soulless bugs? If that's all that they are, how could they have been part of the Great World? There may be much more to them than we think. I want to know."

"You always want to know! But how will you find out? You've spent your whole life studying everything that there ever was in this world and the worlds that went before it, and the best you can say after all that is that the hjjks are total mysteries to you!"

"Perhaps Nialli—"

"Nialli, yes. I've ordered her to speak with the envoy and bring me whatever she can discover. But will she? Will she, do you think? Who can say? She wears a mask, that girl. That girl is more mysterious than the hjjks themselves!"

"Nialli's difficult, yes. But I think she'll be of great help to us in this."

"Perhaps so," said Taniane. But there wasn't much conviction in her voice.

The center of the city: the familiar confines of the House of Knowledge. A good place of refuge on a difficult day. Hresh found his assistants Chupitain Stuld and Plor Killivash there, huddling over some bits of rubble in one of the ground-floor offices. They seemed surprised to see him. "Will you be working today?" Plor Killivash asked. "We thought—"

"No, not working," he said. "I simply want to be here. I'll be upstairs. I won't want to be disturbed."

The House of Knowledge was a white slender spear of a tower, hardly a stone's throw wide but many stories high—the tallest building in the city, in fact. Its narrow circular galleries, in which Hresh had stored the fruits of a lifetime of inquiry, coiled around and around, narrowing as they rose, like a great serpent coiled within the tower's walls. At the summit of the whole structure was a parapet completely encircling the tip of the building to form a lofty balcony. From there Hresh could see virtually the whole of the great city that he had envisioned and laid out and brought into being.

A warm sultry wind was blowing. In his right hand he held a small silvery sphere that he had found long ago in the ruins of Vengiboneeza. With it, once, he had been able to conjure visions of the ancient magnificent epochs of the Great World. In his left lay a similar metal ball, golden bronze in color. It was

the master control instrument that governed the Great World construction machines he had used to build Dawinno, in a place where nothing at all had existed but marshes and swamps and tropical forests.

Both these globes, the silver one and the golden bronze one, had long since burned out. They were of no value to him, or anyone, now. Within its translucent skin Hresh could see the master control's core of shining quicksilver stained and blackened by corrosion.

As he hefted the two dead instruments thoughts of the Great World came into his mind. He was swept by powerful envy for the people of that vanished era. How stable their world had been, how tranquil, how serene! The various parts of that grand civilization had meshed like the gears of some instrument designed by the gods. Sapphire-eyes and humans, hjjks and sea-lords, vegetals and mechanicals, they all had lived together in harmony and unity, and discord was unknown. Surely it was the happiest time the world had ever known.

But there was something paradoxical about that; for the Great World had been doomed, and its people had lived under the knowledge of that impending doom for a million years. How then could they have been happy?

Still, he thought, a million years is a long time. For the people of the Great World there must have been much joy along the way to the inevitable end. Whereas our world has the precariousness of a newly born thing. Nothing is secure yet, nothing has real solidity, and we have no assurance that our fledgling civilization will last so much as a million hours, or even a million minutes.

Somber thoughts. He tries to brush them aside.

From the parapet's edge he looked out over Dawinno. Night was beginning to descend. The last swirling purples and greens of sunset were fading in the west. The lights of the city were coming on. It was very grand, yes, as cities of the New Springtime went. But yet tonight everything about it seemed dreamlike and insubstantial. The buildings that he had long thought were so majestic appeared to him suddenly to be nothing more than hollow facades made of molded paper and held up by wooden struts. It was all only the mere pretense of a city, he thought dismally. They had improvised everything, making it look as they thought it should. But had they done it the right way? Had they done anything at all that was right?

Stop this, he tells himself.

He closed his eyes and almost at once he saw Vengiboneeza once again, Vengiboneeza as it had been when it was the living capital of the Great World. Those great shining towers of many colors, the swarming docks, the busy markets, the peoples of six vastly different races existing peacefully side by side, the shimmering vessels arriving from the far stars with their cargoes of strange beings and strange produce—the grandeur of it all, the richness, the complexity, the torrent of profound ideas, the poetry, the philosophy, the dreams and schemes, the immense vitality—

For a moment its beauty delighted him, as it always had. But only for a moment; and then he was lost in gloom again.

How small we are, Hresh thinks bitterly.

What a pathetic imitation of the lost greatness we've created here! And we're so proud of what we have done. But in truth we've done so little—only to copy, like the monkeys that we are. What we have copied is the appearance, not the substance. And we could lose it all, such as it is, in the twinkling of an eye.

A dark night, this. The darkest of the dark. Moon and stars, yes, shining as they always had. But very dark within, eh, Hresh? You've thrown a cloak over your soul. Stumbling around in unyielding blackness, are you, Hresh?

For a moment he thought of tossing the useless globes over the side of the parapet. But no. No. Dead as they were, they were still able to summon lost worlds of life in his mind. Talismans, they were. They would lead him out of this bleakness. He caresses their silken-smooth surfaces and the endless past opens to him. And at last he begins to extract himself a little way from this smothering weight of clamoring misery that has engulfed him. Some perspective returns. Today, yesterday, the day before the day before yesterday: what do they matter, against the vast sweep of time? He has a sense of millions of years of history behind him: not only the Great World but a world even older than that, lost empires, lost kings, lost creatures, a world that had had no People in it, nor even the hjjks and sapphire-eyes, but only humans. And there might have been a world even before that, though his mind swims to think of it. World upon world, each arising and thriving and declining and vanishing: it is the way of the gods, that nothing can be perfect and nothing will last forever. What had all his studies of the past taught him, if not that? And there is powerful consolation in that.

He had been devouring the world all his life, hungrily gobbling its perplexing wonders. Hresh-full-of-questions: that was what they had called him when he was a boy. Cockily he had renamed himself Hresh-of-the-answers, once. He was that too. But the earlier name was truer. Every answer holds the next question, throbbing impatiently within it.

His thoughts wander back to the day when he was eight years old, in the time before the Time of Going Forth, when he had bolted through the hatch of the cocoon to see what lay outside.

Where was that boy now? Still here, a little worn and frayed. Hresh-full-of-questions. Dear Torlyri had grabbed him then, the gentle offering-woman, long since dead. It was almost fifty years ago, now. But for her, he too would have been long since dead, and long forgotten too, trapped outside when she closed the hatch after her morning prayers, and before nightfall eaten by rat-wolves, or carried off by hjjks, or simply perished of the chill of that forlorn era.

But Torlyri had caught him by the leg and yanked him back as he tried to scramble down the ledge into the open world. And when the chieftain Koshmar had sentenced him to death for his impiety, it was Torlyri who had successfully interceded on his behalf.

Long ago, long long ago. In what seems to him now like some other life. Or some other world.

But there was a continuity all the same. That unending desire to see, to do, to learn, had never left him. *You always want to know,* Taniane had said.

He shrugged. And went inside, and set the two globes down on his desk. The darkness was threatening to invade him again.

This was his private chamber. No one else was permitted to enter it. Here Hresh kept the Barak Dayir and the other instruments of divination handed down to him by his predecessors. His manuscripts, too: his essays on the past, thoughts on the meaning of life and the destiny of the People. He had told the story of the greatness and the downfall of the sapphire-eyes folk, as well as he understood it. He had written of the humans, who were even greater mysteries to him. He had speculated on the nature of the gods.

He had never shown any of these writings to anyone. Sometimes he feared that they were nothing but a

jumble of lofty-minded nonsense. Often he thought of burning them. Why not? Give these dead pages to the flames, as Thu-Kimnibol had given Naarinta to them a few hours before.

"You will burn nothing," said a voice out of the shadows. "You have no right to destroy knowledge."

In the darkest of the dark moments visions often came to him—Thaggoran, sometimes, long-dead old Thaggoran who had been chronicler before him, or sometimes the wise man Noum om Beng of the Helmet People, or even one of the gods. Hresh never doubted these visions. Figments they might be; but he knew they spoke only truth.

To Thaggoran now he says, "But is it knowledge? What if I've assembled nothing but a compilation of lies here?"

"You don't know what it is to lie, boy. Errors, maybe: lies, never. Spare your books. Write other ones. Preserve the past for those who follow after."

"The past! What good is preserving the past? The past is only a burden!"

"What are you saying, boy?"

"There's no point in looking back. The past is lost. The past is beyond preserving. The past slips away from us every hour of our lives, and good riddance to it. The future is what we need to think about."

"No," Thaggoran says. "The past is the mirror in which we see that which is to come. You know that. You have always known that. What ails you today, boy?"

"I've been at the Place of the Dead today. I've seen my brother's mate become ashes and dust."

Thaggoran laughs. "Whole worlds have become ashes and dust. New worlds come forth from them. Why should I have to remind you of such things? You were telling the others that only this day, at the Place of the Dead."

"Yes," Hresh says, in sudden shame. "Yes, I was."

"Is it not the will of the gods that death should come from life, and life from death?"

"Yes. But—"

"But nothing. The gods decree, and we obey."

"The gods are mockers," Hresh says.

"Are they, do you think?" says Thaggoran coolly.

"The gods gave the Great World happiness beyond all understanding, and then dropped the death-stars down on them. Wouldn't you call that mockery? And then the gods brought us forth out of the Long Winter to inherit the world, though we are nothing at all. Isn't that mockery also?"

"The gods never mock," says Thaggoran. "The gods are beyond our understanding, but I tell you this: what they decree, they decree for reasons that are true and deep. They are mysterious in their ways, but they are never merely whimsical."

"Ah, but can I believe that?"

"Ah," says Thaggoran, "what else is there to believe?"

Faith, yes. The last refuge of the desperate. Hresh is willing to accept that. He is almost pacified now. But even in matters of faith he still clings to logic. Not yet fully comfortable with what the old man is trying to get him to see, he says:

"But tell me this, then—if we are to be the masters of the world, as our ancient books promise us, then why have the gods left the hjjks here to stand against us? Suppose the hjjks cut us off before we've barely begun to grow. What becomes of the plan of the gods then, Thaggoran? Tell me that!"

There was no answer. Thaggoran was gone, if indeed he had ever been there.

Hresh slipped into his worn familiar chair, and put his hands to the smooth wood of his desk. The vision had not carried him quite as far as he had needed to go, but it had done its work nevertheless. Somehow his mood had shifted. The past, the future: both of them darkness, all darkness, he thought. And under cover of darkness despair finds a good place to hide. But then he asked himself: Is it all truly so bad? What else can the future be, but unknowable, a darkness? And the past: we cast our little lights backward into it and illuminate it, after a fashion, and what we learn guides us onward into the other great unknown. Our knowledge is our comfort and our shield.

Yet I know so little, Hresh thought. I need to know so much more.

You always want to know, Taniane had said.

Yes. Yes. Yes, I do.

Even now. Although I am so tired. Even now.

* * * *

"We've looked up your name in the records at the House of Knowledge," Nialli Apuilana told Kundalimon. "You were born here, all right. In Year 30. That makes you seventeen, now. I was born in 31. Do you understand?"

"I understand," he said, smiling. Perhaps he did, a little.

"Your mother was Marsalforn and your father was Ramla."

"Marsalforn. Ramla."

"You were taken by the hjjks in 35. It's in the city records. Captured by a raiding party outside the walls, just like me. Marsalforn disappeared while searching for you in the hills. Her body was never found. Your father left the city soon afterward and no one knows where he is now."

"Marsalforn," he said again. "Ramla." The rest of what she had said seemed lost on him.

"Do you follow what I'm telling you? Those are the names of your mother and father."

"Mother. Father." Blankly. Her words didn't seem to hold meaning for him at all.

"Do you know what I want to do with you?" she said in a low, urgent voice, with her face close to his. "I want to talk about life in the Nest. I want you to make it come alive for me again. The smell of it, the colors, the sounds. The things that Nest-thinker says. Whether you ever went marching with the Militaries, or had to stay behind with the Egg-makers. Whether they let you go near the Queen. I want to hear all about it. Everything."

"Marsalforn," he said again. "Mother. Father. Ramla. Marsalforn is Ramla. Mother is Father."

"You aren't really getting much of what I'm saying, are you? Are you, Kundalimon?"

He smiled, the warmest smile she had seen from him yet. It was like the sun emerging from behind a cloud. But he shook his head.

She had to try something else. This was too slow.

Her heart began to pound.

"What we ought to do is twine," Nialli Apuilana said, suddenly audacious.

Did he know what she meant? No. He made no response, simply maintained the same fixed smile.

"Twine. I want to twine with you, Kundalimon. You don't know what that is, either, do you? *Twine.* It's something that People do with their sensing-organs. Do you even know what a sensing-organ is? This thing here, hanging down behind you like a tail. It is a tail, I suppose. But much more than that. It's full of perceptors that run up into your spine and connect right to your brain."

He was still smiling, smiling, obviously comprehending nothing.

She persisted. "One of the things we use the sensing-organ for is to make contact with other people. Deep, intense, intimate contact, mind to mind. We aren't even allowed to try it until we're thirteen, and then the offering-woman shows us how, and after that we can go looking for twining-partners."

He looked at her blankly. Shook his head.

She took his hand. "Any two people can be twining-partners—a man and a woman, a man and a man, a woman and a woman, anyone. It's not like coupling or mating, you see. It's a union of souls. You twine with anyone whose soul you want to share."

"Twine," he said, and smiled even harder.

"Twine, yes. I've done it only once. On my twining-day—when I was thirteen, you know—with Boldirinthe the offering-woman. Since then, never. Nobody here interests me that way. But if I could twine with you, Kundalimon—"

"Twine?"

"We'd make contact such as we've never known in our lives. We could share Nest-truths and we wouldn't need even to try to speak each other's languages, because there's a language of twining that goes beyond any mere words." She looked around to see if the door was latched. Yes. A kind of fever was on her now. Her fur was damp, her breasts were rising and falling swiftly. Her own scent was rank

and musky in her nostrils, an animal reek.

He might be beginning to comprehend.

Gingerly she lifted her sensing-organ and brought it forward, and let it slide lightly across his.

For an instant there was contact. It was like a shock of lightning. She felt his soul with astonishing clarity: a smooth pale parchment, on which strange inscriptions had been written in a dark, bold, alien hand. There was great sweetness in it, and tenderness, and also strangeness. The dark cloistered mystery of the Nest was everywhere in it. He was open to her, entirely vulnerable, and there would be no difficulty about completing the twining and linking their spirits in the keenest of intimacies. Relief, joy, even something that might have been love, flooded her soul.

But then, after that first stunning moment, he whipped his sensing-organ back out of her reach, breaking the contact with jarring suddenness. Uttering a hoarse ragged sound, midway between a growl and a hjjk's chittering insect-noise, he beat frantically at her for a moment using both his arms at once, the way a hjjk would. His eyes flared wildly with fright. Then he hopped backward and crouched in a defensive stance in the corner, pressed tight up against the walls of the room, panting in terror. His face was a frozen mask of fear and shock, nostrils wide, lips drawn back rigidly, both rows of teeth bared.

Nialli Apuilana looked at him wide-eyed, horror-stricken at what she had done.

"Kundalimon?"

"No! Away! No!"

"I didn't mean to frighten you. I only—"

"No. *No!*"

He began to tremble. He muttered incomprehensibly in hjjk. Nialli Apuilana held out her arms to him, but he turned away from her, huddling close to the wall. In shame and anguish she fled from him.

"Are you making any progress?" Taniane asked.

Nialli Apuilana gave her a quick uneasy look. "A little. Not as much as I'd like."

"Can he speak our language yet?"

"He's learning."

"And the hjjk words? Are they coming back to you?"

"We don't use the hjjk words," Nialli Apuilana said in a low, husky tone. "He's trying to put the Nest behind him. He wants to be flesh again."

"Flesh," Taniane said. Her daughter's strange choice of words sent a chill through her. "You mean, to be part of the People?"

"That's what I mean, yes."

Taniane peered close. As always she wished she could see behind the mask that hid her daughter's soul from her. For the millionth time she wondered what had happened to Nialli Apuilana during the months she had spent below the surface of the Earth in the dark mysterious labyrinth of the Nest.

She said, "What about the treaty?"

"Not a word. Not yet. We don't understand each other well enough to talk about anything but the simplest things."

"The Presidium will be meeting next week."

"I'm going as fast as I can, mother. As fast as he'll let me. I've tried to go more quickly, but there are—problems.

"What sort of problems?"

"Problems," Nialli Apuilana repeated, looking away. "Oh, mother, let me be! Do you think this is easy?"

For three days she couldn't bring herself to see him. A guardsman had been sent with his food in her place. Then she went, bringing a tray of edible seeds and the small reddish insects known as rubies, which she had gathered that morning in the torrid drylands on the northeastern slope of the hills. These she offered timidly, without a word. He took the tray from her just as wordlessly, and fell upon the rubies as if he had not eaten in weeks, sweeping the little ruddy carcasses into his mouth with broad avid motions of his hand.

He looked up afterward and smiled. But he kept a wary distance from her throughout that day's visit.

So the damage wasn't irreparable. Still, the breach would be some time in healing. She knew that her attempt at twining with him had been too hasty, too bold. Perhaps his sensing-organ itself was something he barely understood. Perhaps the fleeting touch of intimacy he had shared with her had been too powerful a sensation for him, raised as he had been among a species that had emotions of quite a different kind; perhaps it had begun to undermine his already uncertain sense of which race he belonged to.

He must regard himself as a hjjk in flesh-folk flesh, Nialli Apuilana thought. Such intimacy with a flesh-folk person would seem a disgusting obscenity to him, then. And yet some part of him had reached out eagerly and lovingly to her. Some part of him had yearned to let their souls rush together and become one. She was sure of that. But it had terrified him even while it tempted him; and he had pulled back in agonizing confusion.

That day she remained with him only a little while, and spent the time trying to break through the linguistic barrier. She ran through her short list of hjjk words, and told him the People equivalents, using pantomime and sketches to aid her. Kundalimon seemed to make progress. She sensed that he was deeply frustrated by his inability to make himself understood. There were things he wanted to say, amplifications of the message that Hresh had extracted from him by means of the Barak Dayir. But he had no way of expressing them.

Briefly she considered attempting to reach him by second sight. That was the next best thing to twining. She could send her soul's vision forth and try to touch his soul with it.

But most likely Kundalimon would become aware of what she was doing and see it as another intrusion,

another violation of his soul's inner space: as offensive, or as frightening, as her attempt to twine with him had been. She couldn't risk it. The relationship would have to be rebuilt more slowly.

"What can you tell us?" Taniane asked her that evening. Brusquely getting right to it, all business as usual. Chieftain-mode, not mother-mode. Almost never mother-mode. "Have you started to talk about the treaty with him?"

"He still doesn't have the vocabulary." She saw the suspicion in Taniane's eyes, and in distress she said, "Don't you believe that I've been trying, mother?"

"Yes. I do believe it, Nialli."

"But I can't do miracles. I'm not like father."

"No," said Taniane. "Of course not."

On the evening of the meeting of the Presidium, at the sixth hour after midday, the leaders of Dawinno began to assemble in their noble meeting-room of dark arching beams and rough granite walls.

Taniane took her place at the high table of mirror-bright red ksutwood, beneath the great spiral that represented Nakhaba of the Bengs and the five gods of the Koshmar tribe entwined in divine unity. Hresh sat at her left. The various princes of the city were arrayed along the curving rows of benches before them.

In the front row, the three princes of the justiciary: the dapper, elegant Husathirn Mueri, with the massive figure of Thu-Kimnibol looming beside him, still clad in his flame-red mantle and sash of mourning, and Puit Kjai, the Beng, sitting upright and rigid. Next to them Chomrik Hamadel, the son of the last independent Beng chieftain before the Union. In the row behind them the old warrior Staip, and his mate Boldirinthe the offering-woman, and Simthala Honginda, their eldest son, with his mate Catiriil, who was Husathirn Mueri's sister. Around them, half a dozen of the wealthy merchants and manufacturers who held seats on the Presidium, and various members of the nobility, the heads of some of the founding families of the city: Si-Belimnion, Maliton Diveri, Kartafirain, Lespar Thone. Lesser figures—representatives of the smaller tribes, and of the craftsmen's guilds—were in the row to the rear.

Everyone was mantled and robed in finest cloth. And all were grandly helmeted also, in accordance with the formal custom of the day, a congregation of intricate, lofty head-pieces everywhere in the great room. Chomrik Hamadel's helmet was easily the most conspicuous, a towering agglomeration of metal and sparkling gems that rose above him to an improbable height; but Puit Kjai, wearing one of red bronze with huge silver projections flaring fore and aft, was scarcely to be outdone.

That these Beng princes would be so splendidly outfitted was no surprise. The Bengs were the original helmet-wearers. Nor was it startling that Husathirn Mueri, who was half Beng, should have donned a grand golden dome with crimson spikes.

But even those of pure Koshmar birth—Thu-Kimnibol, Kartafirain, Staip, Boldirinthe—were wearing their most magnificent headgear. More unusual still, Hresh, who wore a helmet perhaps once every five years, had one on now: a small one, some cleverly interwoven strips of dark bristly fiber bound by a single golden band, but a helmet nevertheless.

Only Taniane wore no helmet. But one of the bizarre old masks of the former chieftains that usually hung on her office wall was resting on the high table beside her.

Husathirn Mueri said, as the hour called for starting the meeting came and went, “What are we waiting for?”

Thu-Kimnibol seemed amused. “Are you in such a hurry, cousin?”

“We've been sitting here for hours.”

“It only seems that way,” Thu-Kimnibol said. “We waited much longer than this in the cocoon before we were allowed to make the Coming Forth. Seven hundred thousand years, wasn't it? This is only the flicker of an eye.”

Husathirn Mueri grinned sourly and turned away.

Then, astonishingly, Nialli Apuilana came bursting into the chamber, breathless, her sash and mantle in disarray.

She seemed amazed to find herself here. Blinking, fighting to catch her breath, she stood for a moment staring at the assembled notables in unconcealed awe. Then she scurried into a vacant place in the front row, next to Puit Kjai.

“Her?” Husathirn Mueri said. “We've been waiting for *her* all this time? I don't understand this.”

“Hush, cousin.”

“But—”

“Hush,” said Thu-Kimnibol more sharply.

Taniane, rising, brushed her hands lightly across the chieftain's mask on the high table before her. “We are ready now to begin. This is the final session of deliberations on the proposal of a treaty of mutual territorial respect that the hjjks have made. I call upon Hresh the chronicler.”

The chronicler got slowly to his feet.

Hresh cleared his throat, looked around the room, let his keen, piercing gaze rest on this highborn one and that. And said, finally, “I'll begin by recapitulating the terms of the hjjk offer, as I received it by way of the Barak Dayir from the mind of the hjjk emissary Kundalimon.” He held up a broad sheet of sleek yellow parchment on which a map had been sketched in bold brown lines. “This is the City of Dawinno down here, where the edge of the continent curves out to meet the sea. Here is the City of Yissou, to our north. Here, beyond Yissou, is Vengiboneeza. Everything from Vengiboneeza northward is undisputed hjjk territory.”

Hresh paused. Looked around again, as if taking the roll.

Then he continued. “The Queen proposes that we set a line passing between Vengiboneeza and the City of Yissou, extending from the seacoast across the northern half of the continent, past the great central river once known as the Hallimalla, and onward to the coast of the other sea that we believe touches the land at the eastern edge of the continent. Can you all see the line?”

“We know where the line goes, Hresh,” said Thu-Kimnibol.

The chronicler's scarlet-flecked eyes brightened with annoyance. “Of course. Of course. Pardon me, brother.” A quick smile, pro forma. “To continue: the line is drawn in such a way as to confirm the present territorial division of the land. What the hjjks now hold is to be forever theirs, without dispute. What is ours will remain ours. The Queen promises to prohibit all hjjks under Her control—and as I understand it She controls all the hjjks in the world—from entering, the territory of the People except by our specific invitation and consent. And no member of the People is to go north of the City of Yissou into hjjk territory without permission of the Queen. That's the first condition.

“There are others.

“First, the Queen offers us spiritual guidance, that is, instruction in the concepts loosely known as Nest-truth and Queen-love. These seem to be hjjk philosophical or religious ideas. Why the Queen thinks they'd be of interest to us, I can't imagine. But it's proposed that instructors in Nest-truth and Queen-love will take up residence in our city—in each of the Seven Cities—to teach us their meaning.”

“Some sort of joke?” Kartafirain boomed. “Hjjk missionaries living right here among us, spouting their lunatic mumbo-jumbo? Hjjk spies, I should say. Right in the middle of our city! Does the Queen think we're that foolish?”

“There's more,” Hresh said calmly, raising a hand to signal for silence. “A third proviso. The Queen further stipulates that we must also agree to confine ourselves to the territories we now hold. That is, permanently to relinquish our right to venture into any other continent, whether simply to explore or for actual settlement.”

"What?" This time it was Si-Belimnion who cried out in disbelief. “Absurd,” said Maliton Diveri, rising, shaking his arms in fury. Lespar Thone let forth peals of ringing laughter.

Hresh looked flustered. Taniane rapped for order. When the noise subsided she looked toward the chronicler and said, “Hresh, you still have the floor. Is that the complete report on the treaty terms?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what do you make of it all?”

“I'm of two minds,” he said. “On the one hand, we'll be given undisputed possession of the warmest and most fertile half of the continent. And be freed forever from the danger and destructiveness of war.”

“Provided the hjjks honor their treaty!” Thu-Kimnibol said.

“Provided they honor it, yes. But I think they will. They have much more to gain from it than we do,” said Hresh. “I mean by keeping us away from the other continents. Of course we don't have any idea of what's on those continents. Nor do we have any way at present of getting across the tremendous oceans that separate us from them. But I do know this: there could be ruined Great World cities out there, and some of them may be as full of treasure as Vengiboneeza was.” Again his eyes scanned the room. “Back when we were still living in Vengiboneeza,” he said, “I came upon an instrument that let me see a vision of all the four continents of the world, and all the cities that once existed on them: cities with names like Mikkimord, and Tham, and Steenizale. Very likely the ruins of those cities are waiting for us, even as Vengiboneeza was. Maybe they're buried under hundreds of thousands of years of debris, or perhaps, as in Vengiboneeza, repair machines have kept them almost intact. You all know how useful the tools we found in Vengiboneeza were to us. These other ancient cities—and I don't doubt that they're

there—might hold things that are even more valuable. If we sign this treaty, we sign away forever our right to go searching for them."

"What if we stand no more chance of getting to these places than we do of swimming to the Moon?" Puit Kjai asked. "Or if we do reach them somehow, at the cost of the gods only know how many lives, and they turn out not to hold anything worthwhile? I say give them to the hjjks, wonders and all. This treaty lets us keep the lands that are already ours without risk of challenge. That seems more important."

"You're speaking out of turn," said Taniane briskly. "The chronicler still has the floor." Looking toward Hresh, she said, "Is it the chronicler's opinion, then, that we should reject the hjjk treaty outright?"

Hresh stared at her as though answering so direct a question gave him keen pain.

At length he said, "The first clause of the treaty, the setting of boundaries, is acceptable to me. The second, the one sending us teachers of Nest-truth, I don't understand at all. But the third—" He shook his head. "The thought of surrendering those treasure-troves to the hjjks forever isn't to my liking at all."

Taniane said, "Should we ratify the treaty or not, Hresh?"

He shrugged. "That's for the Presidium to decide. I've stated my views." And he sat down.

There was hubbub again. Everyone talking at once, helmets waggling, arms waving about.

"Let me speak!" Taniane cried, once more rapping the high table.

Over the diminishing voices of the unruly assembly she said, "If the chronicler won't take a clear stand on this issue, the chieftain will!"

She leaned forward, staring fiercely down at the front rows. Casually, almost as though unaware of what she was doing, she scooped up the chieftain's mask that lay beside her, and held it clasped against her breast, face outward. It was a monstrous glossy yellow mask tipped with black, with a great savage beak and jagged swooping projections along its periphery: almost a hjjk-face mask. The effect was much as if a hjjk were gnawing its way out of her from within and had burst forth suddenly, face foremost, upon her breast.

She stood in silence just a moment too long. There was more murmuring and then louder disputes began.

"Will you allow me to speak?" Taniane cried. And then, with anger in her voice: "Let me speak! Let me speak!"

"Gods! Will you let her speak?" Thu-Kimnibol roared ferociously, rising halfway to his full great height, and in moments the hall grew silent.

"Thank you," said Taniane, looking furious. Her fingers ran busily over the rim of the mask that she held clutched to her bosom. "There is only one question that we need to address," she said. "What do we actually gain from this treaty, at the price of handing away our claim to three-quarters of the world?"

"Peace," said Puit Kjai.

"Peace? We *have* peace. The hjjks are no threat to us. The one time they made war on us, we slaughtered them. Have you forgotten? It was when they attacked the City of Yissou, which Harruel had

only just founded then, and we all came to his aid. You were there, Staip, and you, Boldirinthe. And Thu-Kimnibol—you were just a boy, but I saw you killing hjjks by the dozen that day, fighting by the side of your father Harruel. At the end of the day the field was covered with the corpses of the hjjks, and the city was saved."

"It was Hresh that killed them," Staip said. "With that magic of his, that he found in the Great World city. It swallowed them up. I was there. I saw it."

"That was part of it, yes," said Taniane. "But only a part. They were unable to stand before our warriors. We had nothing to fear from them that day. We have nothing to fear from them now. They hover up north like angry buzzing bees, but we know that they have no real power over us. They are hateful, yes. They are foul and repellent creatures. But they no longer go raiding in any number. The occasional small scouting party does go forth, and these"—she glanced significantly at Nialli Apuilana—"do cause us some distress. But such occasions, Yissou be thanked, have become very rare. If we encounter three hjjks in our province in a single year, that's unusual. So we mustn't cringe in terror before them. They are our enemy, but we can withstand them if ever they dare to challenge us. If they descend upon us, we can and will drive them back. So why allow them to dictate to us? Now they grandly offer to let us keep our own lands, if we'll simply turn the rest of the world over to them. What kind of offer is that? Which of you sees merit in it? Which of you sees advantage for us?"

"I do," said Puit Kjai.

Taniane beckoned, and Puit Kjai arose and came to the speaker's podium. He was a lean, angular man of more than middle years, with the lustrous golden fur and brilliant sunset-red eyes of a pure Beng. He had succeeded his father, wizened old Noum om Beng, as keeper of the Beng chronicles. But after the union of the tribes he had turned that responsibility over to Hresh, taking a post on the justiciary in return. He was a proud and stubborn man, with passionately held opinions.

"I am not one to advocate cowardly surrender or timid withdrawal," he began, turning slightly so that his majestic bronze-and-silver helmet caught the light from above to best effect. "I believe, as most of you do, that it is our destiny someday to rule all the world. And, like Hresh, I would not casually sign away our right to explore the Great World cities of the other continents. But I believe in reason, too. I believe in prudence." He glanced toward Taniane. "You say the hjjks are no danger to us. You say that the warriors of the Koshmar tribe slew them easily at the battle of the City of Yissou. Well, I was not at that battle. But I've studied it, and I know it well. I know that many hjjks died that day—but also that there were casualties among the People, too, that King Harruel of Yissou himself was one of those who fell. And I know that Staip tells the truth when he says that it was the magical Great World device that Hresh employed against the hjjks which carried the day for the People. But for that they would have destroyed you all. But for that there would be no City of Dawinno, today."

"These are lies," Thu-Kimnibol muttered hoarsely. "By the Five, I was there! There was no magic in our victory. We fought like heroes. I killed more hjjks that day than he's ever seen, and I was only a child. Samnibolon was my name then, my child-name. Who will deny that Samnibolon son of Harruel was at that battle?"

Puit Kjai brushed the outburst aside with a grand sweep of his arm. "The hjjks number in the millions. We are only thousands, even now. And I have experienced more of hjjk aggression than most of you. I am Beng, you know. I was among those who lived in Vengiboneeza after the Koshmar folk left it. I ask you to recall that we had the city to ourselves ten years, and then the hjjks came in, first fifty, then a hundred and fifty, and then many hundreds. And then we couldn't count them at all, there were so many. There were hjjks everywhere we turned. They never raised a hand against us, but they pushed us out all

the same, by sheer force of numbers. So it is when the hjjks are peaceful. And when they aren't ... Well, you who fought at Yissou saw the hjjks in more warlike mode. You drove them off, yes. But the next time they choose to make war against us, we may not have Hresh's Great World weapons to serve us."

"What are you saying?" Taniane asked. "That we should beg them to let us keep our own lands?"

"I say that we should sign this treaty, and bide our time," said Puit Kjai. "By signing it we win ourselves a guarantee against hjjk interference in the territories we presently have, until we are stronger, strong enough to defend ourselves against any hjjk army, no matter how large. We can always think about expanding our territory at that time. We can give some thought then to these other continents and the wonders they may hold, which at present we have no means of reaching in any case. Treaties can always be broken, you know. We aren't signing anything away forever. This treaty buys time for us—it keeps the hjjks away from our frontier—"

"Pah!" Thu-Kimnibol bellowed. "Let me have the floor, will you? Let me say a thing or two!"

"Are you done, Puit Kjai?" Taniane asked. "Will you yield?"

Puit Kjai shrugged and gave Thu-Kimnibol a contemptuous look.

"I may as well. I relinquish my place to the God of War."

"Let me get by," said Thu-Kimnibol, pushing brusquely toward the aisle and nearly stumbling over Husathirn Mueri's legs as he went past. He advanced in quick angry strides to the front of the room and stood hunched over the podium, grasping it with both his hands. So huge was he that he made it seem to be no more than a child's toy table.

His mourning mantle encompassed his great shoulders like a corona of fire. This was his first appearance in public since Naarinta's death. He seemed vastly changed, more aloof, more somber, much less the easy lighthearted warrior. Many that day had remarked on it. He visibly bore the weight of his position as one of the princes of the city. His eyes seemed darker and more deeply set now, and he studied the assembly with a slow, searching gaze.

When he began to speak it was in a ponderously sardonic manner.

"Puit Kjai says he is no coward. Puit Kjai says that what he advocates is mere prudence. But who can believe that? We all know what Puit Kjai is really saying: that he shivers with dread at the very thought of the hjjks. That he imagines them lurking outside our walls in enormous swarms, poised to burst into the city and tear him— *him,* the unique and irreplaceable Puit Kjai, never mind the rest of us—to tiny shreds. He awakens in cold sweats, seeing hjjk warriors hovering above his bed eager to rip chunks of his flesh loose from his body and devour them. That's all that matters to Puit Kjai. To sign a paper, any paper, that will keep the terrible hjjks at a safe distance while he is still alive. Is that not so? I ask you? Is that not so?"

Thu-Kimnibol's voice echoed resonantly through the hall. He leaned across the podium and looked around with a swaggering, defiant glare.

"This treaty," he continued after a moment, "is nothing but a trap. This treaty is a measure of the contempt with which the hjjks regard us. And Puit Kjai urges us to sign it! Puit Kjai pines for peace! Break the treaty some other time when it is more convenient for us, the honorable Puit Kjai tells us! But for now, let us crawl on our bellies before the hjjks, because they are many and we are few, and peace is

more important than anything else. Is this not so, Puit Kjai? Am I not stating your point of view fairly?"

Around the room there were murmurs again: of surprise, this time, for this was a new Thu-Kimnibol they were hearing. He had never spoken in the Presidium with such eloquence before, such flash and fury. Of course Thu-Kimnibol was a great warrior, almost godlike in his size and energy, a fiery giant, warlike, flamboyantly belligerent. His name itself proclaimed it: for although, as he had just said, he had been born Samnibolon, on his naming-day at the age of nine when the time came under Koshmar custom to choose his adult name, he had renamed himself Thu-Kimnibol, which meant "Sword of the Gods." Other men flocked around him, eager for his advice and approval. But some—like Husathirn Mueri, who saw Thu-Kimnibol as his great rival for power in the city—tended to credit his powers of leadership to his immense physical strength alone, thinking there was no wit or subtlety to his soul. Now they found themselves unexpectedly forced to revise that appraisal.

"Let me tell you what I believe, now," Thu-Kimnibol said. "I believe the world is rightfully ours—the *entire* world—by virtue of our descent from the humans who once ruled it. I believe it is our destiny to go forth, ever farther afield, until we have mastered every horizon. And I think that the hjjks, those ghastly and hideous survivors from a former world, must be eradicated like the vermin that they are."

"Boldly spoken, Thu-Kimnibol," said Puit Kjai with deep contempt. "We'll make rafts of their dead bodies, and paddle ourselves across the sea to the other continents."

Thu-Kimnibol shot him a murderous glance. "I hold the floor now, Puit Kjai."

Puit Kjai threw up his hands in a comic gesture of surrender.

"I yield. I yield."

"Here is what I say," Thu-Kimnibol went on. "Send the hjjk messenger back with our rejection of the treaty stitched to his hide. At the same time, send word to our cousin Salaman of Yissou that we will do what he has long implored us to do, which is to join forces with him and launch a war of extermination against the roving bands of hjjks who threaten his borders. Then let us send our army north, every able-bodied man and woman we have—you needn't trouble yourself to go, Puit Kjai—and together with King Salaman we'll smash our way into the great Nest of Nests before the hjjks understand what is happening to them, and slay their Queen of Queens like the loathsome thing She is, and scatter their forces on the winds. That is how I say we should reply to this offer of love and peace from the hjjks."

And with those words Thu-Kimnibol resumed his seat.

There was a stunned silence in the chamber.

Then, as though in a dream, Husathirn Mueri found himself rising and making his way toward the podium. He was not at all sure what he meant to say. He had not prepared a clear position. But he knew that if he failed to speak now, in the aftermath of Thu-Kimnibol's astonishing outburst, he would spend all the rest of his days in the shadow of the other man, and it would be Thu-Kimnibol and not Husathirn Mueri who came to rule the city when Taniane's time was done.

As he took his stance before the Presidium he asked the gods in whom he did not believe to give him words; and the gods were generous with him, and the words were there.

Quietly he said, looking out at the still astounded faces before him, "Prince Thu-Kimnibol has spoken just now with great force and vision. Permit me to say that I share his view of the ultimate destiny of our

race. And I tell you also that I agree with Prince Thu-Kimnibol's belief that we cannot avoid, sooner or later, an apocalyptic confrontation with the hjjks. It is the warrior within me who responds to Thu-Kimnibol's stirring words, for I am Trei Husathirn's son, whom some of you remember. But my mother Torlyri, whom you may also remember, and who was beloved by all, instilled in me a hatred of strife where strife was not needed. And in this instance I think strife is not only uncalled for, but profoundly dangerous to our purposes."

Husathirn Mueri took a deep breath. His mind was suddenly awhirl with ideas.

"I offer you a position midway between those of Puit Kjai and Prince Thu-Kimnibol. Let us accept this treaty with the hjjks, as Puit Kjai suggests, in order to buy ourselves some time. But let us also send an envoy to King Salaman of Yissou, yes, and enter into an alliance with him, so that we will be all the stronger when the time to make war against the hjjks finally is at hand."

"And when will that time be?" Thu-Kimnibol demanded.

Husathirn Mueri smiled. "The hjjks fight with swords and spears and beaks and claws," he said. "Although they are an ancient race, actual survivors of the Great World, that is the best they can do. They have fallen away from whatever greatness must have been theirs in those ancient times, because the sapphire-eyes and the humans are no longer here to teach them what to do. Today they have no science. They have no machinery. They have only the most primitive of weapons. And why is that? Because they are nothing but insects! Because they are mere mindless soulless *bugs!"*

He heard an angry intake of breath from somewhere directly in front of him. Nialli Apuilana, of course.

"We are different," he said. "We are discovering—or rediscovering," he amended, with a diplomatic glance toward Hresh—"new things every day, new devices, new secrets of the ancient world. You have already seen, those of you who remember the battle of the City of Yissou, how vulnerable the hjjks are to such scientific weapons. There will be others. We will bide our time, yes; and in that time, we will devise some means of slaying a thousand hjjks at a single stroke—ten thousand, a hundred thousand! And then at last we will carry the war to them. When that day finally comes, we will hold the lightning in our hands. And how then can they stand against us, no matter how much greater than ours their numbers may be? Sign the treaty now, I say—and make war later!"

There was another uproar. Everyone was standing, shouting, gesticulating.

"A vote!" Husathirn Mueri shouted. "I call for a vote!"

"A vote, yes!" This from Thu-Kimnibol. And Puit Kjai, too, was calling out for a decision.

"There will be one more speaker, first," said Taniane, her voice cutting through the clamor like a blade.

Husathirn Mueri stared at her, amazed. Somewhere in the last few moments Taniane had actually placed the Mask of Lirridon over her head; and now the chieftain stood beside him at the high table like some figure out of nightmare, stiff and solemn and erect, with that appalling hjjk-face commanding the attention of everyone. She looked both foolish and frightening, all at once: but rather more frightening than foolish, a weary aging woman no longer but now some supernal being of tremendous imperious force.

For a moment, though he had no more to say, Husathirn Mueri held his place at the podium as though he were rooted to the floor. Then Taniane gestured commandingly, a gesture that could hardly be disobeyed. With that mask on, she was unanswerable, a fount of power. He went numbly from the

seen a man of the People before. It was preparing to strike again.

"Go ahead," Salaman said. "What does it matter?"

"Father! Get back!"

Chham, that was. Salaman laughed. He pointed to his two fallen sons. "Do you see?" he said. "Biterulve was fighting in the front line. And then Athimin—Athimin—"

He felt himself being pushed aside. A sword cleaved the air in front of him. The hjjk fell back. Chham's face was close up against his own, now. The same face as his: it was like looking into a mirror that reflected back through time.

"Father, you've been wounded."

"Biterulve—Athimin—"

"Here—let me help you—"

"Biterulve—"

* * * *

Thu-Kimnibol said, "What? Salaman here? And his army?"

"What's left of them," said Esperasagiot. "It's a fearful sight, sir. You'd best ride out to meet them. They hardly seem to have the strength to come the rest of the way to us."

"Can this be some sort of trick?" Nialli Apuilana asked. "Does he hate us so much that he means to draw us out of our camp and attack us?"

Esperasagiot laughed. "No, lady, there's no hatred left in him. If you saw them, you'd know. They're a beaten bunch. It's a wonder any of them made it here alive."

"How far are they?" Thu-Kimnibol asked.

"Half an hour's ride."

"Get my xlendi ready. You, Dumanka, Kartafirain to accompany me, and ten warriors."

"Shall I go also?" Nialli Apuilana asked.

Thu-Kimnibol glanced at her. "You ought to stay with your father. They tell me he's very weak this morning. One of us should be with him if the end comes."

"Yes," she said softly, and turned away.

What remained of the army of the City of Yissou had made camp, more or less, beside a small stream in the open country a little way north of Thu-Kimnibol's encampment. Esperasagiot had not exaggerated: it was a fearful sight. Only a few hundred warriors, of the great horde that had set forth from Yissou, were there, and every one of them seemed to bear wounds. They were sprawled here and there like a scattering of cast-off garments on the ground, with three ragged tents behind them. As Thu-Kimnibol

approached, a grim-faced man whom he recognized as Salaman's son Chham came limping out to greet him.

"A sad and sorry reunion this is, Prince Thu-Kimnibol. It shames me to come before you like this."

Thu-Kimnibol sought for words and did not find any. After a moment he reached down and embraced the other in silence, doing it gingerly, for fear of opening some wound.

"Can we do anything for you?" he asked.

"Healers. Medicines. Food. What we need most of all is rest. We've been in retreat for—I couldn't tell you how long. A week, two weeks? We kept no count."

"I'm saddened to see how badly things have gone for you."

Chham managed a momentary flare of vigor. "They went well enough at first. We beat them again and again. We killed them without mercy. My father fought like a god. Nothing could stand before his attack. But then—" He looked away. "Then the bug-folk used tricks against us. Wonderstone illusions, magical fantasies, things out of dreams. You'll see: they'll come at you the same way, when you next encounter them."

"So there was a battle of dreams. And a great defeat."

"Yes. A very great defeat."

"And your father the king?"

Chham jerked his hand over his shoulder, toward the largest of the tents. "He lives. But not so as you'd know him. My brother Athimin was killed, and Biterulve also."

"Ah. Biterulve too!"

"And my father was gravely wounded. But also he's changed within, very much changed. You'll see. We escaped by mere luck. A sudden windstorm came up. The air was full of sand. No way for the hjjks to see where we were. We crept away unnoticed. And here we are, Prince Thu-Kimnibol. Here we are."

"Where is the king?"

"Come: I'll take you to him."

The withered, feeble man who lay on the pallet within the tent was not much like the Salaman that Thu-Kimnibol had known. His white fur was matted and dull. In places it had fallen out completely. His eyes too were dull, those wide-set gray eyes that had pierced once like augers. Bandages swathed his upper body, which seemed shrunken and frail. He didn't appear to notice as Thu-Kimnibol entered. A thin old woman whom Thu-Kimnibol recognized as the chief offering-woman of the City of Yissou sat beside him, and holy talismans were piled up all around him.

"Is he awake?" Thu-Kimnibol whispered.

"He's like this all the time." Chham stepped forward. "Father, Prince Thu-Kimnibol has come."

"Thu-Kimnibol?" A faint papery whisper. "Who?"

"Harruel's son," Thu-Kimnibol said quietly.

"Ah. Harruel's boy. Samnibolon, that's his name. Does he call himself something else now? Where is he? Tell him to come nearer."

Thu-Kimnibol looked down at him. He could hardly bear to meet that burned-out gaze.

Salaman smiled. In the same faint voice he said, "And how is your father, boy? The good king, the great warrior Harruel?"

"My father is long dead, cousin," said Thu-Kimnibol gently.

"Ah. Ah, so he is." A flicker of brightness came into Salaman's eyes for a moment, and he tried to sit up. "They beat us, did Chham tell you? I left two sons on the field, and thousands of others. They cut us to bits. No more than we deserved, that's the truth. What a foolishness it was, making war on them, marching like idiots into their own land! It was madness and nothing but madness. I see that now. And perhaps you do too, Samnibolon. Eh? Eh?"

"I've been called Thu-Kimnibol these many years."

"Ah. Of course. Thu-Kimnibol." Salaman managed a kind of smile. "Will you continue the war, Thu-Kimnibol?"

"Until victory is ours, yes."

"There'll never be any victory. The hjjks will drive you back the way they did me. They'll drown you in dreams." Slowly, with obvious effort, Salaman shook his head. "The war was a mistake. We should have taken their treaty and drawn a line across the world. I see that now, but now's too late. Too late for Biterulve, too late for Athimin, too late for me." He laughed hollowly. "But do as you wish. For me the war's over. All I want now is the forgiveness of the gods."

"Forgiveness? For what?" Thu-Kimnibol said, his voice rising suddenly above a sickroom murmur for the first time.

Chham tugged at Thu-Kimnibol's arm, as though to tell him that the king did not have the strength for such discussions. But Salaman said, his voice louder now too, "For what? For leading my warriors off to be cut to pieces in this filthy land. And for sending my Acknowledgers to their doom, and the army that followed them also, all for the sake of stirring up a war that should never have been fought. The gods didn't mean us to strike at the hjjks. The hjjks are the gods' creatures as much as we are. I have no doubt of that now. So I have sinned; and for that I will undertake a purification, and by the grace of Mueri and Friit I will have it before I die. I should ask the forgiveness of the Queen as well, I suppose. But how would I do that?" Salaman reached up and caught Thu-Kimnibol by the wrist with surprising strength. "Will you give me an escort home, Thu-Kimnibol? A few dozen of your troops, to help us retrace our steps across all this miserable wasteland that we've crossed at such cost. To bring me back to my city, so that I can go before the gods in the shrine that I built for them long ago, and pray them give me peace. That's all I ask of you."

"If you wish it, yes. Of course."

"And will you pray for me, also, as you go onward toward the Nest? Pray for the repose of my spirit, Thu-Kimnibol. And I'll do the same for yours."

He closed his eyes. Chham gestured, beckoning Thu-Kimnibol from the tent.

Outside Chham said, "He's beside himself with guilt for my brothers' deaths. His soul is flooded with remorse, for that, for everything in his life that he sees now as a sin. I never knew a man could be so changed in a single moment."

"He'll have his escort home, you can be sure of that."

Chham smiled sadly. "He'll never see Yissou again. Two, three days—that's all he has, so the healer tells me. We'll put him to rest in hjjk country. As for those of us that remain—" He shrugged. "We're willing to put ourselves under your command for the rest of the war. If you'll have us, broken as we are. Or if you won't, we'll limp back to our city and wait to hear how you've fared."

"Join us, of course," Thu-Kimnibol said. "Join us and fight alongside us, if you have the strength to go on. Why would we refuse you? We are meant to be allies always, your city and mine."

* * * *

Darkness was coming quickly on. Nialli Apuilana knelt beside her father. Thu-Kimnibol stood well back from them, in the shadows where the glowglobes couldn't reach.

"Take this amulet from around my throat," Hresh whispered. "Put it on."

Nialli Apuilana's hands tightened into fists. She knew what must be in Hresh's mind. He had worn that amulet all his life: she had never seen him without it. To give it to her now—

She glanced toward Thu-Kimnibol. He nodded. Do it, he said silently. Do it.

Unfastening the cord that held the amulet, she drew it gently free. It was a little thing, just a bit of smooth green glass, or so it seemed, with signs inscribed on it that were much too small for her to decipher. It seemed very old and worn. She felt an odd chill coming from it; but when she tied it around her neck she was aware of a faint tingling, and a distant warmth.

She stared at it, resting between her breasts.

"What does it do, father?"

"Very little, I think. But it was Thaggoran's, who was chronicler before me. A piece of the Great World, is what he told me. It's the chronicler's badge of office, I suppose. Sometimes it summons Thaggoran for me, when I need him. You have to wear it now."

"But I—"

"You are chronicler now," Hresh said.

"What? Father, I have no training! And the chronicler has never been a woman."

Hresh managed the bare outlines of a smile. "All that's changing now. Everything is. Chupitain Stuld will work with you. And Io Sangrais and Plor Killivash, if they live through the war. The chronicles must stay

in our family." He reached for her hand and clutched it tightly. His fingers seemed tiny, she thought. He was becoming a child again. He opened his eyes for a moment and said, "I never expected to have a daughter, you know. To have any child at all."

"And to think, father, how much grief I've caused you!"

"Never. Only joy, child. You must believe that." His hand grew even tighter on hers. "I've always loved you, Nialli. And I always will. You'll send my love to Taniane, won't you? My partner all these years. My mate. How sad she'll be. But she mustn't be. I'll be sitting beside Dawinno, asking him so many things." He paused. "Is my brother here?"

"Yes."

"I thought he was. Send him to me."

But Thu-Kimnibol was already on his way to Hresh's side. He knelt and reached out his hand, and Hresh touched it, very lightly, fingertips to fingertips. "Brother," he murmured. "I'll carry your love to Minbain for you. And now you must go out. What follows must be just for Nialli and me. She can tell you afterward, if she likes."

Thu-Kimnibol nodded. Lightly, lovingly, he let his hand rest a moment on Hresh's forehead, as though he hoped the wisdom would pass into him at a touch. Then he rose, and left the tent without looking back.

Hresh said, "At my side, under my sash, you'll find a little velvet pouch."

"Father—"

"Take it. Open it."

She let the small piece of polished stone tumble into her palm and stared at it in wonder. She had never handled it before. No one, so far as she knew, was permitted to touch it but Hresh. She had hardly ever been allowed even to see it. In some ways it was like the amulet he had just given her, for it was very smooth, and along its edges a pattern of lines had been carved into it, lines so fine that she couldn't clearly make out the pattern. It gave off a barely perceptible warmth. But the amulet had little mass or weight, and seemed only a flimsy thing. The Wonderstone, though scarcely any larger, felt as weighty as a world to Nialli Apuilana. It made her uneasy to hold it. The power that it contained was frightening.

Hresh said, "Do you know what that is?"

"The Barak Dayir, father."

"Yes. The Barak Dayir. But what the Barak Dayir is, not even I can say. The old Beng prophet told me that it is an amplifier, which means that which makes something greater than it is. As I told you once, it was the humans who once ruled the Earth that made it, before the Great World ever was. And gave it to us, to protect us when they would no longer be here. That's all I know of it. You must keep it, now. And master the art of using it."

"But how will I—"

"Twine with me, Nialli."

Her eyes widened. "Twine—with—you, father?"

"You must. No harm can come of it, and much good. And when we are joined, take the Barak Dayir and place it by the tip of your sensing-organ, and seize it and grasp it tightly. You'll hear a music, then. And I'll help you after that. Will you do that, Nialli?"

"Of course I will."

"Come closer, then."

She cradled him in her arms. He weighs almost nothing now, she thought. All that remains of him now is the husk, and the mind that burns within it.

"Your sensing-organ, close to mine—"

"Yes. Yes."

It was a communion Nialli Apuilana had never expected to have. But the moment her sensing-organ touched his, all fear and uncertainty went from her; and it was with almost unimaginable joy that she felt the rich torrent of his spirit come flooding into hers. It was a joy so great that it dizzied her and for a moment it swept her away; but then she remembered the Wonderstone, and carefully she curled the tip of her sensing-organ around it and gripped it with all her strength. The world turned to mist. A column of music rose beneath her. A great overwhelming chord of love buoyed her upward, carrying her soul toward the sky.

But Hresh was beside her, smiling at her tenderly, serenely, holding her, steadying her, guiding her. Together they soared across the vault of the heavens. A great golden glow was streaming from the west, a brilliant outpouring of dazzling radiance, darkening now into a stunning crimson, and then into rich deep scarlet, and then to silky purple. The darkness was beginning to reach out for him. But as they journeyed toward that waiting realm, he offered her a final sharing, the girl of his light, his love, his wisdom. He told her in a single unbroken flow all that she must know, until he could tell her no more.

So now it begins, Hresh thinks. The last journey of all. The world is growing dark around him.

Nialli, he thinks. Minbain. Taniane.

The vortex comes whirling up to claim him. He stares into it.

Is that where I'm going? What will it be like? Will I feel anything? Will I be able to taste and smell? If only I could see a little more clearly—

Ah. That's better, now. But how strange it looks in there. Is that you, Torlyri? Thaggoran? How strange it all is!

Mother. Nialli. Taniane.

Oh, look, Taniane! Look!

* * * *

When she emerged from the tent she found Thu-Kimnibol with Chham. The two men broke off their conversation as she approached, and looked at her strangely, as though she had been transformed into

some unworldly creature of a kind they had never before beheld.

"How is it with your father?" Thu-Kimnibol asked.

"He's with Dawinno now." She was dry-eyed and oddly calm.

"Ah." A shiver passed through Thu-Kimnibol's massive frame, and he made the Five Heavenly Signs, slowly and deliberately, twice through, and Dawinno's sign a third time afterward. "There was no one like him ever," he said after a while, in a splintered voice. "We had the same mother, but I tell you I never truly felt myself his brother, because he was what he was. His mind was almost like a god's. How will it be for us without him, I wonder?"

Nialli Apuilana held out her hand to show him the Barak Dayir in it in its pouch.

"I have the Wonderstone," she said. "And I have much of Hresh within me now too. You heard him say that I'm to be the chronicler? I am to be Hresh for us now, if I can. I'll say the words for him tonight, and we'll put what remains of him to rest. But he is already with Dawinno."

"He was always with Dawinno, lady," said Chham suddenly. "Or so it was reported of him, that he walked with the gods from the day of his birth. Surely it was so. I wouldn't doubt it, though I never knew him myself. What a day of great losses this has been!"

Thu-Kimnibol said, "King Salaman has died this day also. Prince Chham—King Chham, is it now?—has just come from him."

"Then we mourn together," Nialli Apuilana said. "When I say the words for my father, I'll say them also for yours."

"If you will, lady. It would please me greatly."

"We will lay them here side by side, in this forlorn place," said Thu-Kimnibol. "Which will be forlorn no more, because Salaman and Hresh were buried here. They were the two wisest men in all the world."

* * * *

Taniane, resting her left hand on the Mask of Koshmar and her right on that of Lirridon, fought back the numbness that had been growing in her soul all afternoon, a strange disagreeable coldness behind her breastbone; and with such strength as she could muster she compelled herself to follow what Puit Kjai was trying to tell her.

"An insurrection, you say? Against me?"

"Against us all, lady. An uprising that's meant to sweep away all those who hold power in the City of Dawinno."

She gave him a weary, skeptical look. "Does anyone hold power any more in the City of Dawinno, Puit Kjai?"

"Lady! Lady, what are you saying?"

Taniane glanced away. The eerie force of Puit Kjai's intense scarlet eyes was more than she wanted to meet this day. She had lived with this weariness of soul for what seemed like years, but today it seemed

to have deepened almost to paralysis.

She stroked the masks. Once they had hung on the wall behind her; but some time back, not long after the departure of Nialli Apuilana to the war and the disappearance of Hresh, she had taken them down and put them on the desk beside her, where she could see them easily and touch them when she wished. They gave her comfort and, she thought, strength. In the time of the cocoon, Boldirinthe once had told her, there had been a certain black stone mounted in the wall of the central chamber that had been sacred to the memory of the tribe's former chieftains. Koshmar used to touch that stone and pray to her predecessors when she was facing difficulties. That black stone had remained behind in the cocoon when the tribe made its Coming Forth. Taniane wished she had it now. But at least she had the masks.

To Puit Kjai she said, after a little while, "All right, go on. Who are the ringleaders of this insurrection?"

"That I cannot say."

"But you're certain that one is being planned."

Puit Kjai shrugged. "The word comes out of the chapels, from the common people. It reaches me from the daughter of the nephew of an old groom in my son's stables, who worships in the chapel of Tikharein Tourb."

"The daughter of the nephew of a groom—"

"A tenuous chain, yes. What I'm told is that they mean to kill Thu-Kimnibol when he returns from the wars, unless the hjjks do it first, and that they will put you to death also, and me, and most of the rest of the Presidium, except those who they'll keep alive to go before the city as rulers in their name. And then they'll make peace with the hjjks and beg their forgiveness."

"You say this as though you never wanted peace with the hjjks yourself, Puit Kjai."

"Not this way. Not by a violent purging of the highborn. And this is no fantasy, lady, this talk of a conspiracy. They may already, I suspect, have done away with Hresh."

"No," Taniane said at once. "Hresh still lives."

"Does he? Where is he, then?"

"Far from here, I think. But I know that he lives. There's a bond between us, Puit Kjai, that transcends all distance. I feel him close beside me no matter how far away he may be. No harm has come to Hresh. Of that I'm certain."

"Nakhaba grant that it be so," Puit Kjai said.

They faced each other in silence for a time. The powerful old Beng leader stood so tall that his helmeted head neared the ceiling. He was gaunt and thin, but there was a majesty about his very gauntness. Dimly Taniane remembered Puit Kjai's father, the ancient wise one of the Helmet People, Noum om Beng, to whom Hresh had gone for wisdom. Puit Kjai was coming to look like him now: that same frail but stern bearing, his great height compensating for the slenderness of his frame. His helmet today was a black one, with gnarled golden antlers rising from it.

At length Taniane said, "I'll look into these rumors. If you hear anything more, come to me immediately."

"You have my word on it, lady."

He offered her a blessing of Nakhaba, and went out.

She sat quietly, her hands resting on the masks.

No doubt there was truth to the story he had brought to her. The Kundalimon creed ran wild in the city these days: why shouldn't its leaders attempt to force an end to the war? There was no one to oppose them here. Thu-Kimnibol and the rest of his faction were off at the battlefront, Hresh had disappeared, the younger men of the city seemed all to have entered the chapels. She herself no longer even pretended to exercise authority. It seemed to her that the world had passed her by, that events had gone on far beyond her understanding. Truly it was time for her to step aside, she thought. Just as the rock-throwers had told her even before the war. But in favor of whom? Give the city over to the Kundalimon priests? She wished Thu-Kimnibol would return. But he was off killing hjjks, or perhaps being killed by them himself. And Nialli Apuilana was with him.

Taniane shook her head. She was tired of living in this chaos. She was eager for rest.

And this other thing, this strange numbness that had entered her breast today—what was that? As though she were being hollowed out from within. Some illness, was it? She remembered how in Vengiboneeza Koshmar had begun suddenly to seem easily tired, had admitted to Hresh that there was a burning in her chest, pain, fever; and soon afterward she was dead. Now her own hour might be coming around, Taniane thought. She wondered if she should go to Boldirinthe for a healing; and then she remembered that Boldirinthe was dead. One by one they were all dying. Koshmar, Torlyri, Boldirinthe—

All she felt was a numbness, though, not a burning, not a pain. She couldn't understand it. She turned her gaze inward, searching for the cause of it.

But just in that moment it went from her, all at once: that numbness, that deepening ache that had plagued her since daybreak. She felt it go, a sudden startling cessation of discomfort, like the snapping of a tight bond. Then in its place was something even more troublesome: an absence, a bleak emptiness, sharp and painful, a terrible black void. She understood immediately what it was, and a chill ran through her that set her fur on end. Helplessly she began to weep. Wave after wave of grief swept over her. For the first time in more than forty years she could not feel the presence of Hresh within her. He was gone. Gone forever.

* * * *

Under a glittering pockmarked moon the battlefield had the icy serene look of an immense glacier, even where the ground was cratered and upturned by the most recent round of fighting. Thu-Kimnibol's warriors crept about warily on the broken earth, collecting the bodies of those who had fallen that day. Nialli Apuilana looked past them to the horizon, where she could see the bonfires of the hjjk camp. There was a respite now; but in the morning it would all begin again.

Thu-Kimnibol laughed harshly. "A war of nightmares," he said. "We hurl flame and turbulence at them. They throw illusions at us. We return counterillusions of our own. Enemies who can't see one another, blindly stumbling around."

She could feel his fatigue. He had fought ferociously this day, rallying his troops in every part of the field as phantom after phantom came toward them, even as Salaman had warned. Repeatedly he had led his forces through some field of spurting fire, or some onrushing horde of sinister monsters, through flood and

avalanche, through a rain of blood, through a hail of daggers. His goal was to maneuver himself into a position where he could work real damage against the hjjks with his Great World weapons; but they understood that now, and danced about him, hiding themselves behind illusions and nibbling at his forces from ambush. She had done what she could, wielding the Wonderstone to cut through the screen of hjjk hallucinations and to confuse them with projected phantoms of her own. But it had been a difficult day, an inconclusive day. And tomorrow promised more of the same.

"Were our losses very bad today?" Nialli Apuilana asked.

"Not as bad as it seemed at first. A dozen killed, perhaps fifty wounded. Some of those who died were Chham's people, of the few that remain. The City of Yissou will be a broken place for years. A whole generation has been destroyed."

"And the City of Dawinno?"

"We haven't suffered the way Yissou has. They lost virtually an entire army in a single day."

"Whereas we're losing ours a few at a time. But in the end it'll be the same, won't it, Thu-Kimnibol?"

He gave her an enigmatic look. "Shall we surrender, then?"

"What do you say?"

"I say that if we fight, they'll whittle us away to nothing no matter how much injury we inflict on them, and if we don't fight, we'll lose our souls. I say that time is against us, and that I find myself lost in confusions and mysteries as never before in my life." He looked away from her, and stared into his open hands as though he hoped to read oracles in them. When he spoke again, it was clear he had not found them. "It seems to me, Nialli, that I lead this campaign in two directions at once. I go rushing forward eager to blast the hjjks before me as we blasted Vengiboneeza, and go riding onward to destroy the Nest and everything it contains. And yet at the same time a part of me is pulling back, urging retreat, praying for an end to the war before I harm the Queen. Can you understand what it's like to be torn in such a way?"

"I felt it myself, once. The spell of the Nest is very powerful."

"Is that why Hresh took me there, do you think? To hand me over to the Queen?"

Nialli Apuilana shook her head. "He only wanted you to see every side of the conflict. To understand that the hjjks are dangerous but not evil, that there's greatness in them, but of a kind very far from anything we can comprehend. But when you touch the Nest it makes itself a part of you, and you a part of it. I know. It was like that for me, far more deeply, even, than I think it is for you. Remember, I was of the Nest myself."

"Yes. I know."

"And freed myself. But not completely. I'll never free myself completely. The Queen will always be within me."

Thu-Kimnibol's eyes flashed. "And is She within me also?" he cried, with anguish in his voice.

"I think that She is."

“Then how can I fight this war, if my enemy is part of me, and I'm part of Her?”

She hesitated a moment. “There's no way that you can.”

“I despise the hjjks. I mean to destroy them!”

“Yes, you do. But you'll never allow yourself to do it.”

“Then I'm lost, Nialli! All of us are!”

She looked off into the shadows. “This is the great test that the gods have sent us, do you see? There's no easy resolution. My father thought that we and the hjjks could enter into some sort of unity, that we could live harmoniously with them, side by side, as the sapphire-eyes and the rest lived with them in the Great World. But he was wrong, wise as he was. As I freed myself from the Queen's spell he was starting to fall under it; and he was swallowed up in it. This isn't the Great World, though. Assimilation of two such alien races is impossible. It's the natural desire of the hjjks to achieve absorption, domination. The best we can hope for is to hold them at bay, as perhaps they were held at bay by the other races in the time of the Great World.”

“Why not destroy them altogether?”

“Because it's probably beyond us to do any such thing. And because if somehow we did, it would be at a terrible cost to our own souls.”

He shook his head. “Is the best we can hope for a mere stand-off, then? A line drawn across the world, hjjks here, People there?”

“Yes.”

“As the Queen originally proposed. Why did we resist it, then? We could simply have accepted Her treaty, and spared ourselves all this outlay of lives and toil.”

“Not so,” said Nialli Apuilana. “You forget an important thing. She proposed not just a division of territory, but also to send Nest-thinkers to live among us and spread Her truths and Her plan. In time they would bring us to embrace Queen-love; and that would deliver us forever into Her power. She'd control us all, as She controlled Kundalimon, as She controlled me. She'd regulate our rate of population increase, so there'd never be so many of us that we interfered with Her designs. She would designate the acceptable locations of any new cities we might build, to keep most of the world free for Her people. That was what the treaty would have done. What we must have is the boundary line, but not the infiltration of Nest-thinkers into our lives. There has already been too much of that.”

“Then the war must go on until She is beaten. And then we have to eradicate every trace of Queen-worship in our city.” He turned away from her and began to pace the tent. “Gods! Will there ever be an end to all this?”

Nialli Apuilana smiled. “We can make an end to it for tonight, at least.”

“What do you mean?”

She moved closer to him in the darkness. “This night we can allow ourselves a little time out of war, just for each other.” Her sensing-organ rose and moved tentatively against his. He shivered and seemed

almost to draw back from her, as though unable to free himself from the doubts and turmoil that had engulfed him; but she stayed close by him, easing him gently out of his disquiet and apprehension. After a moment she could feel the tension begin to leave him. He came close to her, rising like a mountain above her, and encircled her with his arms. She took his hands and placed them over her breasts. They stood that way for a time, allowing the communion to build; and then they sank down slowly together, entwined in body and soul, and lay in each other's arms through the rest of the night.

* * * *

It's the hour before dawn, now. Thu-Kimnibol is still deep in dreams. His massive chest rises and falls evenly, his sword-arm is flung casually across his face. Nialli Apuilana kisses him lightly and slips away from his side, going to the opposite end of the tent they share.

There she kneels and whispers the name of Yissou the Protector, and makes his sign, and then says the name of Dawinno the Destroyer, who is also Dawinno the Transformer, and makes his sign as well. She feels their presence entering her and gives thanks for it.

She touches then the amulet that nestles in the thick fur between her breasts, and calls upon her father; and after a while she sees him, shining in the darkness before her, the familiar smile on his familiar sharp-chinned face. There's someone else behind him, a much older man, white-furred and sunken-chested. Nialli Apuilana doesn't know him, but his presence seems benign. And deeper in the darkness is still another venerable stranger, a withered old Beng so thin and tall that he seems nothing more than an elongated straw that any breeze might blow away.

Now she draws the Barak Dayir from its pouch and touches it briefly to her forehead in a sign of respect, and grips it firmly with her sensing-organ.

The music rises within her. It carries her toward the heights of the world.

She climbs easily, confidently, fearing nothing: for isn't Yissou with her, and Dawinno, and her father also? Only when she's aloft, and the world is no more than a speck beneath her, does she feel the first tremor of concern. It would be so easy to go on and on from here, forever upward into that sphere of the unknown that surrounds the world, outward and outward and outward among the comets and the moons and the stars: and never to return. All she has to do is cut the mooring that binds her to the Earth. But that's not what she's about to do.

What she seeks is the Queen: the Queen of Queens, indeed, in Her lair at the Nest of Nests, in the cold bleak northlands.

She focuses her mind and propels it forward. At first she feels a moment of uncertainty, a curious doubleness of destination. The Queen seems to be in two places at once, one of them distant and one very close at hand. Nialli Apuilana doesn't know what to make of that. But then she understands. The memory arises in her of that terrible time after Kundalimon's death and her own flight into the wilderness, when she had hidden herself in her room and struggled with all that possessed her spirit. The Queen had been within her then; and the Queen has remained within her to this day. That dark presence had never relinquished its place at the heart of her soul.

But that Queen within her is only the shadow of the true one. It's the Queen Herself, and not the shadow, with whom she has to deal today.

“Do you know me?” she calls. “I am Nialli Apuilana, daughter of Hresh.”

And out of the depths of the Nest of Nests comes an answer from the great motionless pallid thing that lies hidden there.

"I know you. What do you want with Me?"

"To negotiate with you."

Derisive laughter rings down upon her like a hail of fire. "Only equals can negotiate, little one." And from the Queen comes a storm of power that makes the air shiver and bend upon itself, so that Nialli Apuilana can see the roots of the world showing through the fabric of the atmosphere.

But she will not let herself be swayed.

"You have a Wonderstone," Nialli Apuilana says. "I have a Wonderstone. We are equals, therefore."

"Are we?"

"Can You harm me?"

"Can you harm Me?" the Queen says.

Bolts of blue flame arch upward from the Nest. They dance and swirl about Nialli Apuilana in frenzied weaving motions, looking for a vulnerable place. She brushes them away as though they're gnats.

The Queen sends a storm of boulders. The Queen sends a wall of fire. The Queen sends a cloud of searing mist.

"You waste Your time. Do You think I'm a child, who can be frightened this way? What the Wonderstone sends, the Wonderstone can turn aside. We can spend all day threatening each other like this, and nothing will be achieved."

"What is it that you hope to achieve?"

"Let me show You a vision," says Nialli Apuilana.

From the Queen, after a moment, comes grudging assent.

From Nialli Apuilana to the Queen goes an image of the terrain that surrounds the Nest of Nests, as she knows it must be, though she had never seen it with her own eyes: hard sparse plains, broad endless grayness under an unforgiving sky. She draws it from the soul of Kundalimon that is still within her. Kundalimon had lived in the Nest of Nests. She shows the Queen the dry puckered soil, the pitiless saw-edged grass, the small vicious creatures that scrabble fiercely for their livelihoods in that remote and dreadful land.

And then she shows Her the dark mouths of the Nest gaping here and there in the plain, and the barely perceptible rise of the Nest itself, a faint humped swelling beneath the surface of the land, myriad corridors running off in every direction.

"Do You recognize this place?" Nialli Apuilana asks.

"Go on."

Now Nialli Apuilana shows the Queen the armies of the People advancing from east and west and south: not merely the force that Thu-Kimnibol had brought with him from Dawinno, but the warriors of all the Seven Cities of the continent, from Yissou and Thisthissima and Gharb, from Ghajnsielem, from Cignoi, from Bornigrayal, every tribe of every land, all of them united here in one cataclysmic outpouring of joined strength. And there, rising above that multitude like the tallest tree of the forest, is Thu-Kimnibol of Dawinno; and in his hand is one of the weapons of the Great World. The chieftain of Gharb has a similar weapon, and that of Cignoi, and all the others; and they hold them trained on the Nest of Nests.

Hjjks come streaming now from the Nest, the finest of the Queen's Militaries; and as they rush toward the invaders Thu-Kimnibol and the other chieftains raise their weapons high, and bright light flares and a clap like the sound of the world's final thunder sounds, and the plains are swept by fire and the Militaries fall, crisped like twigs in a firestorm. And the armies of the Seven Cities move onward toward the Nest.

They surround it now. They peer down into each of its many mouths. They raise their weapons high once again and touch the studs that bring them to life.

And force leaps from those gleaming ancient devices, an invincible force that rips the earth apart and lifts the roof from the Nest, stripping it bare, revealing the corridors and passages and channels so painstakingly constructed over so many hundreds of thousands of years. In that terrible glare all the Egg-layers and the Life-kindlers stand revealed, and the Nest-thinkers, and the uncountable hordes of workers; and they perish in the first blasts. Then the deadly power descends into deeper, more tender places, where the Nourishment-givers are holding the newborn to their mouths to give them food; and they die also, Nourishment-givers and newborn both, in the next wave of the onslaught.

And then, deeper yet, to the deepest cavern of all—

To the place where the Queen Herself lies hidden, but hidden no longer, for a flick of force has stripped the roof of Her chamber away and Her pale immense body is exposed and defenseless, while desperate Queen-attendants cluster close about Her and frantically brandish their weapons in vain. Thu-Kimnibol looms above Her, grasping a small sphere of shining metal from which a sudden amber light comes forth. And the Queen quivers and convulses and pulls away from that hot probing pressure. But where can She go, in that close chamber? Remorselessly the amber light plays up and down the length of Her. Huge bubbles and blisters begin to appear on the charred and blackening surface of Her. Black smoke rises from Her as She sizzles and crisps under that merciless amber beam. Until—

Until—

"This could never occur," comes the cold voice of the Queen.

"Are You so certain? Vengiboneeza lies in ashes. The dead bodies of the insect-folk litter the plains already for hundreds of leagues. And we have only begun."

"You are small-souled creatures. You would turn away in terror long before you reached us."

"Are You absolutely certain of that?" asks Nialli Apuilana. "Could small-souled creatures have built our cities? Could small-souled creatures have fought You as we've fought You thus far? I tell You: we have only begun."

There is a silence.

The Queen says at length, "I know you. You are of the Nest, girl. You were one of us, and then I sent you from the Nest, back to your own kind: but I meant to have you serve Me there, not to oppose Me. Why these threats? How can you utter such things? Queen-love is still within you."

"Is it?"

"I know that it is. You are mine, child. You are of the Nest, and you can never do harm to it."

Nialli Apuilana doesn't reply. By way of answer she looks within herself, to that secret place in her soul where the Queen had placed a part of Herself long ago. And seizes it, and draws it out as though it were no more than a shallow splinter in her flesh, and hurls it from her. Down it tumbles through the many layers of the sky. And as it nears the surface of the world it bursts into flames and is consumed.

"Do You still think I am of the Nest?" Nialli Apuilana asks.

There's another great silence.

Once again now Nialli Apuilana shows the Queen the vision of the final war: the Nest ripped open, its inhabitants consumed by flames, the royal chamber despoiled, the vast charred body, split apart and ruined, dead in the smoking depths.

"You know nothing of what it is to die," says Nialli Apuilana. "You know nothing of pain. You know nothing of loss. You know nothing of defeat. But You'll learn. You'll perish in flame and agony; and the worst agony of all will be the knowledge that there is no way You can take revenge upon those who did this to You."

The Queen doesn't respond.

"It will happen," Nialli Apuilana says. "We are a determined people. The gods have shaped us to be what we are."

Silence.

"Well?" Nialli Apuilana says. "Is that Your answer? Is this what You'd have us do? Because I tell You that we will do it, if You won't give us what we ask."

Silence. Silence.

The Queen says at length, "What is it, then, that you want?"

"An end to the war. A truce between our peoples. A line drawn between Your lands and ours, never to be violated."

"These are your only terms?"

"Our only terms, yes," says Nialli Apuilana.

"And the alternative?"

"War to the death. With no quarter given."

"You deceive yourself if you think there can ever be peace between us," says the Queen.

"But there can be an absence of war."

There is one last silence. It seems to stretch on forever.

"Yes," replies the Queen finally. "There can be an absence of war. So be it. I grant you what you ask. There will be an absence of war."

It was done. Nialli Apuilana bade the Queen farewell, and in a single moment withdrew from the high realm, sweeping swiftly downward toward the breast of the land, where dawn now had begun to glow. She relinquished her grasp on the Barak Dayir and sat up. She was back in the tent that she shared with Thu-Kimnibol.

He was just beginning to stir. He looked over at her and smiled.

"How strange. I slept like a child, lost to the world. And I dreamed the war was over. That a truce had been agreed on between ourselves and the Queen."

"It was no dream," said Nialli Apuilana.

10

The Queen of Springtime

The day was bright and fair, with a cool pleasant wind blowing out of the west, a sea-breeze, always a good omen. Taniane arose early, and went to the Temple of the Five to express her gratitude for the safe return of the army and to ask the gods' blessings for the time to come; and then, for she was the chieftain of all the people, she went also to the Temple of Nakhaba and made her obeisance to the god of the Bengs. Afterward she called for her wagon of state, with four fine white xlendis to draw it, and made ready to ride out to the Emakkis Gate at the northern end of the city, where a great reviewing stand had been erected so that the chieftain and the Presidium could properly greet the troops as they arrived. She had the Mask of Koshmar with her, the shining black one that she sometimes wore on high occasions of state. This day seemed worthy of Koshmar's mask.

Runners had been carrying word of the return for four days, now, stumbling breathless into the city with reports of the army's southward progress. "They're in Tik-haleret now!" came the cry, and almost at once, "They've reached Banarak," and then, "No! They're approaching Ghomino!" Thu-Kimnibol, the messengers said, rode proudly at the head of the column, with Nialli Apuilana beside him, and all the troops stretching on and on behind them as far as anyone could see.

Thu-Kimnibol had sent messengers of his own ahead as well, announcing the truce that had brought the war to its end. From the messengers, too, came the first official word of the death of Hresh. Which only confirmed what Taniane already knew, for she had not felt the presence of Hresh in the world since that day of strange numbness when Puit Kjai had come to her with his tales of insurrection; but it was hard news all the same. King Salaman also was dead, they said, dead of grief and weariness, after a great loss at the hands of the hjjks.

Taniane wondered what Hresh had been doing up there in hjjk country at the battlefront. That was the last place where she would have expected him to go. But evidently Hresh had remained Hresh to the very end, a law unto himself. Perhaps she would get the explanation of his mysterious final journey from

Nialli Apuilana later.

Old Staip, trembling and unsteady, stood to Taniane's left as she took her position on the reviewing stand. Simthala Honginda and Catiriil were beside him. Puit Kjai was at her right, and Chomrik Hamadel next to him, both of them grandly helmeted. Before them, occupying the outer rim of the stand's lower level, was an array of city guardsmen led by Chevkija Aim.

One by one the other members of the Presidium mounted the stand. Taniane greeted them as they appeared. A crowd was gathering below.

Puit Kjai leaned his head toward hers and said quietly, "Be on your guard, lady. I think your enemies may well choose this day to make trouble."

"Have you any proof of that?"

"Whisperings, only."

Taniane shrugged. "Whisperings!"

"Such whisperings very often carry truth, lady."

She pointed into the distance, where she thought she saw a far-off cloud of gray dust rising over the highway. "In a little while Thu-Kimnibol will be here," she said. "And my daughter, and an army of their loyal followers. No one's going to dare to make trouble with a force like that heading this way."

"Be on your guard all the same."

"I'm always on my guard," Taniane said, running her fingers uneasily over the smooth shining surface of Koshmar's mask. She glanced around. "Husathirn Mueri isn't here. He's the only one. Why is that?"

"I think he's likely to get very little joy from Thu-Kimnibol's triumphant return."

"He's a prince of the Presidium, all the same. His place is here among us." She turned and beckoned to Catiriil. "Your brother!" she called sharply. "Where is he?"

"He said he'd be going to his chapel first. But he'll be here in time. I'm sure that he will."

"He'd better be," Taniane said.

Husathirn Mueri had risen early that day also. It had been a long night for him, fitful rest at best, and he was glad enough to leave his bed at dawn. His dreams, when he'd been able to sleep at all, had been oppressive ones: chanting hjjk warriors filing round and round him in the darkness and the Queen's crushing bulk, monstrous and bloated and pale, hovering over him like a titanic weight slowly falling from the sky.

The early service was already under way at the chapel when he arrived. Tikharein Tourb was presiding, with Chhia Kreun beside him at the altar. Husathirn Mueri slipped into the seat at the rear that he usually occupied. Chevkija Aim, deep in his devotions, gave him a perfunctory nod. The others nearby took no notice. By now it was no extraordinary thing to have a prince of the city present in a chapel.

"This is the day of revelation," the boy-priest was saying. "This is the day when the seals are broken and

the book is opened, and the secrets are brought forth, and the depths give up their mystery. This is the day of the Queen; and She is our comfort and our joy."

"She is our comfort and our *joy,* " the congregation replied automatically, and Husathirn Mueri said it with them.

"She is the light and the way," cried Tikharein Tourb, making hjjk-clicks as he spoke, and the congregation, clicking in response, echoed his words.

"She is the essence and the substance."

"She is the essence and the substance."

"She is the beginning and the end."

"She is the beginning and the end."

Chhia Kreun brought green boughs forward, and Tikharein Tourb held them aloft.

"This is the day, dear friends, when the will of the Queen is made known. This is the day when Her love will be made manifest upon us all. This is the day when the dragon devours the dark stars, and brightness is reborn. And She will be among us; and She is our comfort and our joy."

"She is our comfort and our joy."

"She is the light and the way—"

Husathirn Mueri responded with the others, dutifully repeating the phrases when he heard the cues; but the words were no more than empty formulas for him today. Perhaps they had never been more than that. This supposed religious conversion of his: he'd never fully understood it himself. Somehow he'd tricked himself into thinking he felt a glimmer of something greater than himself, something he could lose himself in. That must have been it. In any event his mind and soul were elsewhere now. He could think of nothing but Thu-Kimnibol, riding in glory through the farmlands north of the city, coming back from the war with some sort of victory to proclaim.

Victory? What had he done? Beaten the hjjks? Slain the Queen? None of that seemed remotely possible. Yet the word had preceded him: the war was over, peace had been achieved. By the heroic efforts of Thu-Kimnibol and Nialli Apuilana, and so forth and so forth—

That galled Husathirn Mueri more than anything: that by some strange trick of fate the unattainable Nialli Apuilana had been taken in mating by her own father's half-brother, the man Husathirn Mueri most loathed in all of Dawinno. He choked on the thought of that mating. Her sleek silken body against his huge coarse bulk. His hands on her thighs, her breasts. Their sensing-organs touching in the most intimate of—

No. Stop it.

He ordered himself not to think about them. All he was achieving was self-torture and despair. He fought to regain his inner equilibrium. But however he struggled to calm himself, no calmness would come. His mind was aswirl. Bad enough to have given herself to the hjjk ambassador, but then to go from Kundalimon to Thu-Kimnibol—! It was unthinkable. It was monstrous. That great lumbering vimbor.

And her own kinsman, too.

Husathirn Mueri closed his eyes and tried to let thoughts of the Queen, the all-loving benevolent Queen, drive these tormenting visions of Nialli and Thu-Kimnibol from his mind. But there was no way he could pay attention to what the boy-priest was saying. Only empty noise, that was what it seemed like now. Hollow mumblings, weird magical nonsense.

Perhaps I never believed any of this, he thought. Love the Queen? What kind of madness is that, anyway?

What if I've been coming here only out of some sort of feeling of guilt? An expiation, perhaps, for what I did to Kundalimon?

The thought startled him. Could it be? He began to tremble.

Then Chevkija Aim leaned over and murmured, "Tikharein Tourb wants you to stay after the service."

Husathirn Mueri blinked and looked up. "What for?"

The guard-captain offered only a shrug. "He didn't say. But we aren't supposed to take part in the twining when the service ends. We're just supposed to wait."

"She is the essence and the substance," Tikharein Tourb called out.

" *She is the essence and the substance,*" the congregation replied. Husathirn Mueri forced himself to bellow forth the response with them.

He felt a little calmer now. Chevkija Aim, breaking in on him like that, had managed to pull him back from his feverish brooding. But he fidgeted as the string of litanies went on and on. He was due at the welcoming ceremony in a little while: the whole Presidium had to be there to hail the returning heroes. Much as he loathed the idea, he didn't dare to stay away, or it would seem he was too embittered to attend, and that would create trouble for him. But if Tikharein Tourb didn't hurry it up—

At last, though, the service was over, ending with the usual mass twinings. The faithful, when the intensity of their communions had lifted from them, filed silently out of the hall.

Husathirn Mueri and Chevkija Aim rose and went to the altar, where Tikharein Tourb waited for them.

The boy's eyes seemed more fiery even than usual today. His fur bristled with tension.

"It is just as I said in the service," he told Husathirn Mueri. "This is the day of the breaking of the seals. This is the day of the Queen. And you two are to be Her instruments."

Husathirn Mueri frowned. "I don't understand."

"The prince Thu-Kimnibol has brought shame upon the Queen. His life is already forfeit for the slaying of the holy Kundalimon; but now also he has intruded on the sanctity of the Nest of Nests and attempted to impose his will on Hers. For these and many other misdeeds the Queen has pronounced sentence of death on him, which you will carry out this day, Husathirn Mueri."

His breath left him as though he had been punched.

"You will strike him to the heart when he comes forth to be acclaimed. And you, Chevkija Aim—you will strike down Taniane in the same moment."

It was impossible to believe that this little demon was only a boy of ten or twelve.

"On the reviewing stand?" Husathirn Mueri said, astounded.

"In full view of everyone, yes. It will be the signal. The people then will rise up and slay the rest of the highborn ones before they can comprehend what is happening to them. The entire ruling caste must go, all the oppressors, all the enemies of the Queen—Staip, Chomrik Hamadel, Puit Kjai, Nialli Apuilana, all of them. In one quick moment. You alone will remain of all the Presidium, Husathirn Mueri." Tikharein Tourb grinned savagely. "In the new order of things you will become Nest-king here. Chevkija Aim will be Nest-warden."

"Nest-king?" Husathirn Mueri repeated dully. "I'll become Nest-king?"

"That is how we will call the worldly ruler, yes. And his chief of staff will be the Nest-warden. And I," said Tikharein Tourb, "will be your Nest-thinker, the voice of the Queen in the city called Dawinno." He laughed. "In the new order of things. Which you two will serve to bring into being, this very day."

Husathirn Mueri said, as they left the chapel, "You go on ahead. I need to change into my official robes."

Chevkija Aim nodded. "I'll see you on the reviewing stand, then."

"Yes." Reaching out, Husathirn Mueri caught Chevkija by the wrist and held him a moment. "One thing. Despite what Tikharein Tourb said just now, I want you to understand this: Nialli Apuilana is to be spared."

"But Tikharein Tourb specifically wants—"

"I don't give a gorynth's toenail for what he specifically wants. The whole crew of them can be slaughtered, for all I care. I'll be glad to wield the knife myself. But she lives. Is that understood, Chevkija Aim? If she turns out to be difficult afterward, she can always be killed then. But she's not to be touched when the killing starts. Have your guardsmen protect her. Or, by the Five, I'll see to it that any harm that comes to her is repaid fifty times over. Is that understood, Chevkija Aim?"

* * * *

It seemed to Thu-Kimnibol that the entire population of the city had turned out to greet his homecoming warriors. They had built a huge wooden stand right in front of Emakkis Gate, big enough to hold all the members of the Presidium and many others besides. And all around it were hundreds, thousands, of citizens, a gigantic horde of them, just about everyone in Dawinno who hadn't gone off to the war.

His hand tightened on Nialli Apuilana's arm. "There's Taniane up there, do you see? And Staip, and Chomrik Hamadel, and that's Puit Kjai, I suppose, in the enormous helmet—"

"Simthala Honginda and Catiriil, too, over there on the right, with Staip. And isn't that Husathirn Mueri? I can hardly make him out, with that guardsman blocking the view, but those bright white stripes, that black fur—it has to be him."

"So it is. I think he'll be wearing a long face today."

"Where's Boldirinthe? She's not there, is she?"

"We'd see her if she were. But it would be a job, hauling her up on top of that platform."

"If she's still alive at all."

"Do you think—"

"She was old. She was ill."

"I pray that it's not so," Thu-Kimnibol said. But in his heart he suspected that Nialli Apuilana was right. This had been a season for the falling away of the great old ones.

A helmeted figure on a noble-looking gray xlendi came riding out toward them now, carrying the banner of the city. Thu-Kimnibol recognized him after a moment as the young highborn warrior Pelithhrouk, Simthala Honginda's protégé, who had been in his entourage during the embassy to King Salaman, what seemed like a million years ago. The memory drifted back to him now of the time Dumanka had killed and roasted the caviandis, and Pelithhrouk had spoken out so idealistically on the theme of the oneness of all intelligent creatures. To have Pelithhrouk, one of those who had argued most strongly for peace, ride out now as the official bearer of welcome was a good sign for the reconciliation that must now be brought about.

Pelithhrouk dismounted and looked up toward them.

"The chieftain sends her greetings. She bids me to escort you to the place of honor."

Thu-Kimnibol nodded to Nialli Apuilana. Together they stepped down from their wagon. Pelithhrouk smiled and spread his arms wide, and solemnly embraced them, Thu-Kimnibol first, then Nialli Apuilana, in a formal gesture of salute.

"What a fine day this is," Thu-Kimnibol murmured, as they followed Pelithhrouk toward the reviewing stand. Guardsmen kept the crowds back on either side. Banners fluttered everywhere. The sun, bright and warm, was high overhead. As they started up the steps to the platform above Nialli Apuilana reached for Thu-Kimnibol's hand. They interlaced their fingers.

A row of guardsmen waited there. Behind them were Taniane and all the city's notables in formal array. Time had dealt with them in a heavy way. The chieftain seemed no more than a gray ember of herself now, and Staip looked withered and ancient beyond belief, and the others too had aged startlingly, Puit Kjai, Chomrik Hamadel, Lespar Thone. Thu-Kimnibol wondered how he must look to them, after the long months of marching through distant bleak lands, the battles, the wounds he had taken.

But his mood was buoyant despite all that. The battles were done for now; he was returning with victory. And more than that. Often in days gone by he had felt himself oppressed by the great weight of the world's past, the vastness of it. Now, though, what he sensed was the exhilarating vastness of the future: its infinite possibilities, more to come than lay behind, world without end, many difficulties, many triumphs, many wonders not yet dreamed of, never imagined even in the greatest eras of the past. The world might be ancient but also it was ever new and young. The best was still to come.

He reached the top of the platform and halted there, facing the great ones of the city.

There was a moment when everyone stood utterly still, frozen in a solemn ceremonial tableau. Thu-Kimnibol, still holding Nialli Apuilana's hand, bowed his head toward them all. Were they waiting for him to speak first? Surely the first word belonged to the chieftain. He remained silent. Taniane held the burnished, gleaming Mask of Koshmar in her hands. She appeared to be about to don it. No one else moved.

Finally Taniane began to speak, her voice faltering a little: "The gods have brought you safely home. We rejoice, Thu-Kimnibol, in your victorious—"

An eruption of frantic action then, sudden, bewildering. The figure of Husathirn Mueri burst into view, emerging from behind Taniane and rushing toward Thu-Kimnibol. A knife gleamed in his upraised left hand.

In that same moment Chevkija Aim, sprinting up the three steps that separated the lower platform from the one where the notables stood, came running toward Husathirn Mueri from the side. He too carried a drawn blade.

"Lady, watch out!" the guard-captain shouted. "He's a traitor!"

And an instant later Husathirn Mueri and Chevkija Aim were tangled up together in a desperate struggle at the center of the platform. Thu-Kimnibol, too astonished to move, saw weapons flashing in the sun. There was a grunting sound of pain. A startling gout of blood spurted from Chevkija Aim's chest and ran down over his thick golden Beng fur. The guard-captain lurched forward, his arms jerking convulsively, his knife skittering across the platform and landing practically at Taniane's feet as he fell. Husathirn Mueri, his face contorted and wild, swung around a second time toward Thu-Kimnibol. But Nialli Apuilana stepped swiftly between them just as Husathirn Mueri raised his blade.

He gaped at her, aghast, and checked his blow before it could strike her. His eyes glazed as though he had been smitten by the gods. Recoiling from her with a moaning outcry of despair, he lowered his arm and let his weapon drop from suddenly nerveless fingers. By now Thu-Kimnibol had managed to make his way around Nialli Apuilana in the confusion and started toward him. But Husathirn Mueri had already turned and was staggering crazily toward the rear of the platform, heading for Taniane, who had picked up Chevkija Aim's knife and was studying it in wonder.

"Lady—" he muttered thickly. "Lady—lady—forgive me, lady—"

Thu-Kimnibol reached for him. Taniane waved him back. She stared at Husathirn Mueri as though he were an apparition.

In a dark anguished voice he said, "Kundalimon's death was my doing. And Curabayn Bangkea's as well, and all the grief that followed."

With a desperate sob he threw himself upon her as if to embrace her. Unhesitatingly Taniane's arm came forward, rising swiftly toward Husathirn Mueri's rib cage in a single sharp jab. He stiffened and gasped. Clutching his middle, he took a couple of reeling steps back from her. For a moment he stood utterly motionless, rearing up on the tips of his toes. Blood trickled out over his lips. He took one tottering step toward Nialli Apuilana. Then he fell sprawling, landing beside the body of Chevkija Aim. He quivered once and was still.

"Guards! Guards!" Thu-Kimnibol roared.

Seizing Nialli Apuilana with one hand and Taniane with the other, he pulled them behind him and swung about to see what was happening below the platform. Some kind of disturbance was going on down there. The guardsmen were moving in to quell it. Further in the distance the warriors of Thu-Kimnibol's own army, aware now of the strange struggle on the platform, had left their wagons and were rushing forward. At the center of everything Thu-Kimnibol saw the figure of a bright-robed boy of ten or twelve years, holding his hands high in the midst of the crowd and screaming curses of some sort in a terrifying furious voice sharp as a dagger.

"Look," Nialli Apuilana said. "He has Kundalimon's Nest-guardian! His Nest-bracelet, too!" Her eyes were gleaming as fiercely as the boy's. "By the gods, I'll deal with him! Leave him to me!"

The Barak Dayir was suddenly in her hand. Deftly she seized it with her sensing-organ. Thu-Kimnibol stared at her in bewilderment as the Wonderstone instantly worked some bizarre transformation on her: she seemed to grow in size, to turn into something huge and strange.

"I see the Queen within you," cried Nialli Apuilana in a dark frightful tone, looking down with blazing eyes at the boy in bright robes. "But I call Her out! I cast Her forth! Now! Now! Now! *Out!* "

For a moment all was silent. Time itself hung, frozen, still, suspended by a heartbeat.

Then the boy staggered as if he had been struck. He twisted about and made a dry chittering sound, a sound almost like one a hjjk would make, and his face turned gray and then black; and he fell forward and was lost to sight in the surging crowd.

Calmly Nialli Apuilana restored the Barak Dayir to its pouch.

"All's well now," she said, taking Thu-Kimnibol once more by the hand.

* * * *

It was hours later, after general quiet had been restored. They were in the great chamber of the Presidium.

Taniane said, "So there is to be peace, of a sort. Out of the madness of the war comes a kind of victory. Or at any rate a truce. But what have we accomplished? At any time, at the Queen's mere whim, it could all begin again."

Thu-Kimnibol shook his head. "I think not, sister. The Queen knows better now what we're like, and what we're capable of doing. The world will be divided now. The hjjks will leave us alone, I promise you that. They'll keep to their present territory, and we to ours, and there'll be no more talk of Nest-thinkers setting up shop in our cities."

"And how will it be in territories that are neither theirs nor ours? That was what troubled Hresh so much, that the hjjks would keep us from the rest."

"The rest of the world will remain open, mother," said Nialli Apuilana. "We can explore it as we choose, whenever we're ready. And who knows what things we will find? There may be great cities of the People on the other continents. Or the humans themselves may have returned to the world from wherever it is they went when the Great World died, and are living there now, for all we know. Who can say? But we'll find out. We'll go wherever we want, and discover everything that is to be discovered, just as my father hoped we would. The Queen understands now that there'll be no penning us up in our little strip of coastline. If anyone has been penned up, it's the hjjks, in the godforsaken lands they've always

inhabited."

"So it is a victory, then," Taniane said. "Of a kind." She did not sound jubilant.

"A victory, sister," said Thu-Kimnibol sternly. "Make no mistake about that. We'll be at peace. What else is that but victory?"

"Yes. Perhaps it is." After a moment Taniane said, "And Hresh? You were with him when he died, Thu-Kimnibol has told me. What was it like for him, at the end?"

"He was at peace," said Nialli Apuilana simply.

"I'll want you to tell me more about that later. Now we have other matters to deal with." Turning, she took the dark, gleaming Mask of Koshmar from the high table of the Presidium, where she had placed it when they entered. She held it forth. It was boldly carved: a powerful, indomitable face with strong full lips, a jutting jaw, wide flaring cheekbones. To Nialli Apuilana she said, "This was Koshmar, the greatest woman of our tribe. Without her vision and strength none of us would be here today. Without her we would have been nothing. Take her mask, Nialli."

"What am I to do with it, mother?"

"Put it on."

"Put it on?"

"It's the mask of chieftainship."

"I don't understand you."

"This is the last day of my forty years of rule. They've been telling me for a long while now that it's time I stepped aside, and they're right. Today I resign my office. Take the mask, Nialli."

Amazement and uncertainty flared in Nialli Apuilana's eyes.

"Mother, this can't be. My father has already named me chronicler. That's what I'll be now. Not chieftain."

Now it was Taniane's turn to look amazed.

"Chronicler?"

"So he told me, in his last moments. It was his special wish. I have the Wonderstone. I know how to use it."

Taniane was silent a long while, as if she had withdrawn into some distant world.

Then in a quiet voice she said, "If you are to be chronicler and not chieftain, then the old way is at its end. I felt that you were ready, that at last it would be possible for you to succeed me. But you will not have it; and there's no one else to whom I would give this mask. Very well. There will be no more chieftains among the People."

She looked away.

Thu-Kimnibol said, “Is there no way you could be chronicler and chieftain both, Nialli?”

“Both?”

“Why can't the titles be joined? You'd have the mask and the Barak Dayir also. The mask makes you chieftain, the Wonderstone makes you chronicler. You'll hold both and you'll rule with both.”

“But the chronicles—the work of the House of knowledge—it's too much, Thu-Kimnibol.”

“Chupitain Stuld can have charge of the House of Knowledge. She'll do the work, but she'll report to you.”

“No,” Nialli Apuilana said. “I see a different way. I'll keep the Wonderstone, yes, because my father intended it that way. But I'm not the one who should sit at the head of the Presidium. Mother, give him the mask. He's won the right to wear it.”

Thu-Kimnibol laughed. “I, wear Koshmar's mask? Go before the Presidium in it, and call myself chieftain? This is a fine strong face, Nialli, but it's a woman's face!”

“Then make do without the mask,” said Taniane suddenly. “And without the title, also. All things are new now. If you won't be chieftain, Thu-Kimnibol, call yourself king!”

"King?"

“Your father was a king in Yissou. You will be a king now too.”

He stared at Taniane in wonder. “Do you mean this?”

“Yours was the victory. Yours is the right. You are of the same blood as Hresh; and Nialli Apuilana has chosen you to rule. Can you refuse?”

“There's never been a king over the Koshmar tribe.”

“This is not the Koshmar tribe,” said Taniane. “This is the City of Dawinno, and it'll be without a ruler after today. Will you be king here, or do you mean to leave us leaderless, Thu-Kimnibol?”

He paced back and forth before the high table. Then he halted and whirled and pointed at Nialli Apuilana.

“If I'm to be king, then you'll be queen!”

She looked at him in alarm. “Queen? What are you saying? Do you think I'm a hjjk, Thu-Kimnibol? They're the only ones who have queens.”

Laughing, he said, “They have queens, yes, but why should that matter to us? In this city you are the king's mate; and what's the king's mate, if not a queen? So the hjjks will have their queen, and we'll have one too. Queen of Dawinno, you'll be. And when we go to the unknown lands, you'll be queen of those also, eh? Queen of everything that grows and flourishes on the face of this reborn world. The Queen of the New Springtime.” He took her hand in his. “What do you say to that, Nialli? The Queen of

Springtime!" His voice went booming through the great room with overwhelming exuberance. "And when that other and far less beautiful queen sends another ambassador to us, bringing some new and troublesome proposition, which she will surely do before we are old, why, you can reply to her as her equal, one queen to another! What do you say, Nialli? Queen Nialli, is it? And King Thu-Kimnibol?"

* * * *

Nialli Apuilana sits quietly, staring at the blank page in front of her. Her fingers hover above it. Chronicler? Her? And queen, too? How strange that seems! But for the moment, chronicler only. She is in Hresh's study on the highest level of the House of Knowledge. All around her are Hresh's things, the treasures he collected. The past is everywhere in this room.

She must set it all down, these wondrous bewildering events. What shall she say? She can barely comprehend it. Is this where she has been heading all along, all through this difficult voyage of hers? What shall she say, what shall she say?

Lightly she touches the amulet at her breast. A flicker of faint warmth goes through her hand. And it seems to her that a slight ghostly figure has passed swiftly through the room at that moment, one who is lithe and wiry, with great dark eyes in which luminous intelligence blazes forth, and that in the moment of his passage he turned to her, and smiled, and nodded, and shaped the word "queen" with his lips. The Queen of Springtime, yes. Yes. To whom will fall the task her father had begun, of attempting to discover who we really are, and what it is we must do to fulfill the intentions of the gods, how it is that we are meant to conduct ourselves in the world into which we came forth when the Long Winter ended. She smiles. She puts her fingers to the page at last, and the letters begin to form. She is entering it in the chronicles, finally, on the topmost blank page, that on the day such-and-such in the year such-and-such of the Coming Forth great changes came about, for on that day the revered chieftain Taniane resigned her office and with her the chieftainship of ancient days at last was brought to an end for all time, and the first of the kings and queens of the city were chosen, who would preside over all that must be done in the aftermath of the great and terrible war with the hjjks. In which the People had acquitted themselves honorably and won a mighty victory.

She pauses. Looks up. Searches through the room by the faint glow of lamplight, seeking Hresh. But now she is alone. She glances back at what she has written. The chieftain, the king, the queen, the victory. She must say something about the change of chroniclers now, too. Another great change.

Many great changes, yes. With greater ones no doubt yet to come. For we are deep into the New Springtime now, and the springtime is the season of unfolding and growth. In springtime the world is born anew.

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